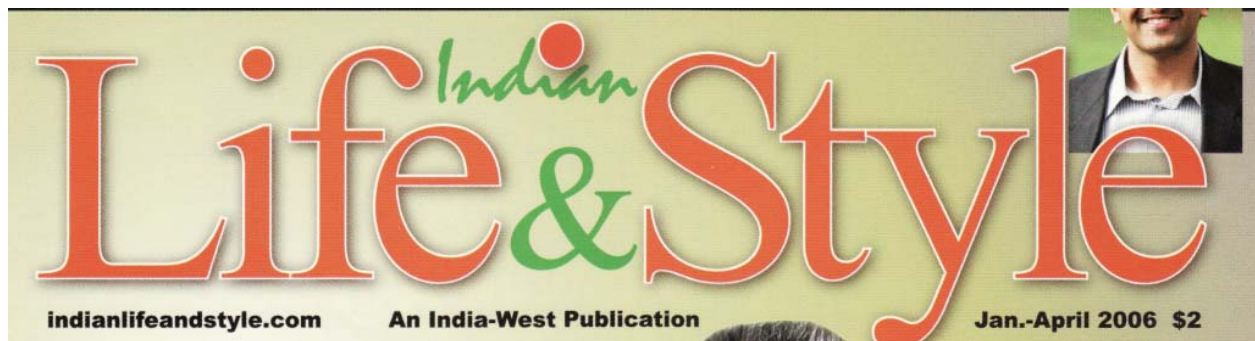


Article on Corbett National Park, India

All photos taken by and © Bruce G. Marcot

“A Magical Jungle,” Indian Life & Style,
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Corbett National Park is still one of the most pristine wildernesses in India. JESSI KAUR takes a ride into the foothills of the Himalayas.

A Magical Jungle

In the twilight hour of a cold November morning, bundled up in three layers of clothing with a shawl around my face, I find myself in the foothills of the Himalayas, sitting next to the driver of a rickety old jeep to avoid the bite of the sharp morning air. My friends are enjoying the ride in the back of an open-air Maruti 'Gypsy'. It is not quite 5:00 a.m. and we are on our way to Bijrani, where the gates open at six in the morning to enter the majestic Corbett National Park, but you have to wait in line for nearly an hour to complete the formalities to procure a pass.

Nestled in the picturesque Patlihan Valley of the Kumaon Range in Uttaranchal, Corbett National Park attracts tens of thousands of tourists from all over the world each year. For the longest time, I have wanted to visit India's first national park that abounds in diverse flora and fauna and is teeming with wildlife. I get the opportunity when my friend, Mala Bawa, an architectural and interior designer of the Corbett Hideaway, has to make her bi-monthly visit to the Leisure Hotels resort

while I am visiting her. She invites me to join her and I seize the prospect with delight and tag along.

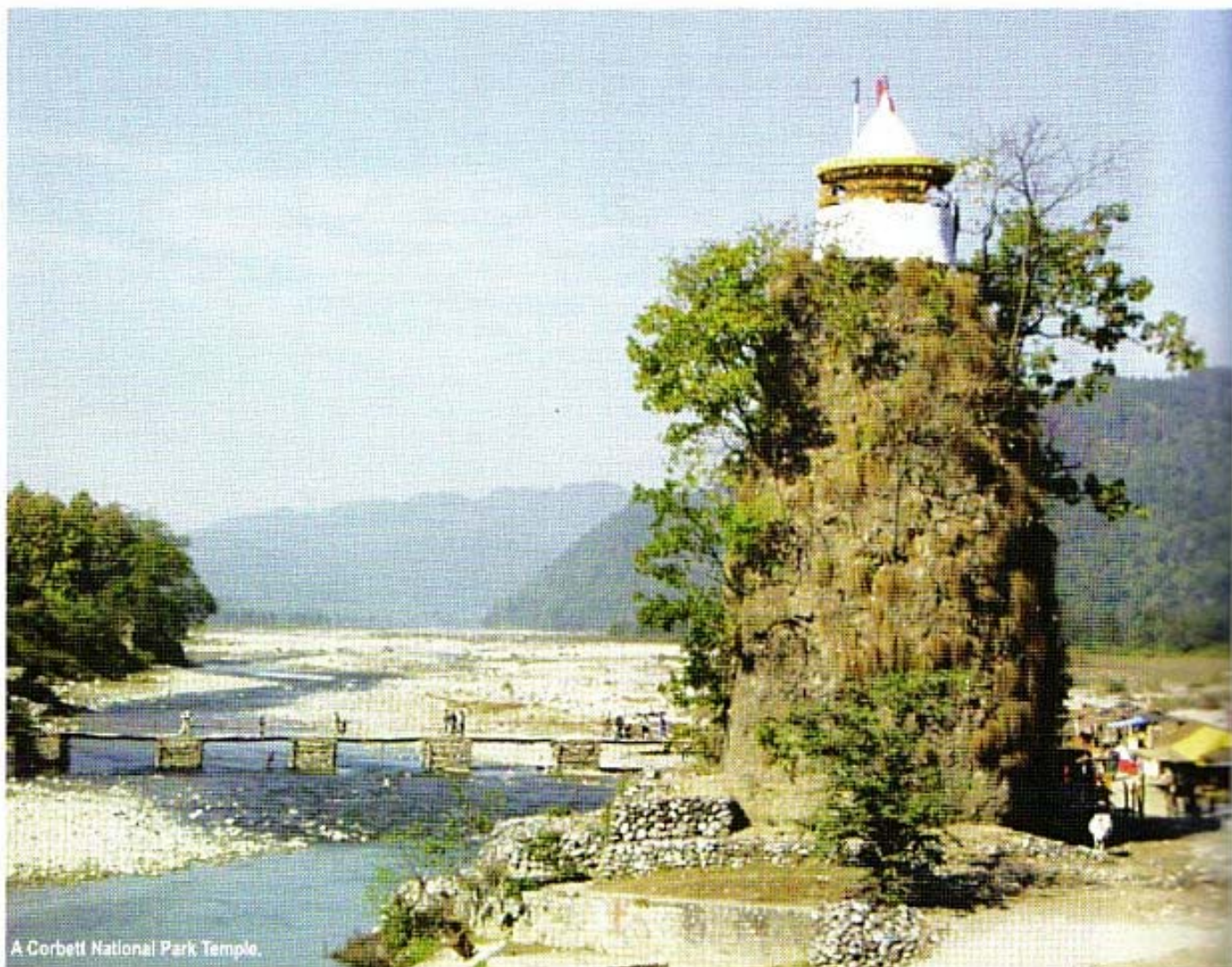
We take the night train from New Delhi to Ram Nagar station, the gateway to Corbett country, and reach our destination while the sky is still pitch dark. To my utter surprise, as we pass through the town, it is buzzing with life as though it is the middle of the evening rather than the end of night. The hustle and bustle has started as businesses are gearing up to cater to the tourists. We leave the bazaar behind and head towards Garjiya village. There, amidst a large mango grove, Leisure Hotels has built a gem of a resort, The Corbett Hideaway.

Our resort cottage is comfortable and inviting with throw rugs and thick, plush comforters. Pictures of Jim Corbett are hung in strategic places to evoke legendary memories of the local hero. Corbett was a legendary hunter-turned-conservator and best known for killing a number of man-eating tigers and leopards in the region in the first half of the 20th century. His legends inspired the park's conservation efforts and lent the namesake to the region.

After a quick hot shower and a cup of coffee, I am ready to explore the verdant surroundings. A pebbled

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Corbett National Park attracts tens of thousands of tourists each year.



A Corbett National Park Temple.

© Bruce G. Warratt

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 pathway leads me to Gurney House, named after the place that Corbett lived in for many years. The deck faces the foothills of the lower Shivalik range; below, the Kosi River flowing picturesquely creates a dramatic postcard for memory. No live music sounds sweeter than the soothing movement of the river. We sumptuously devour a smorgasbord of fresh fruits, continental, South Indian and made-to-order breakfast. I would have been content to sit there and soak up the serenity but there was more to explore.

My friend and I found out that the morning jeep safari excursion (one of many) had already left and the ones in the afternoon were already booked. Now, we had ample time to spend on the natu-

ral trails. The path along the Kosi is utterly rewarding. Luckily, I wore my walking shoes because this river stretches out for almost a mile, running just behind the Corbett Hideaway. Also, watch out as parts of the riverbed are dry and the polished pebbles can get quite slippery if you want to walk in the river or find a boulder to perch on for a few tranquil moments. The river abounds in mahseer, a fresh water fish that is very popular with anglers because of its large size. Fishing permits are available between October and May.

A few miles up river, on a huge rock that sits in the middle of the Kosi River, is the famous Garjiya Temple. A rope bridge takes us across the river to the steep



This large spotted deer (Chital) makes his home at Corbett National

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Above, lush forest lines the banks of one of Corbett's famous riverbeds, Ramganga River. At right, a bright orange sunset over Corbett National Park.



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incline of steps that reach up to the legendary temple that has withstood many floods. Hundreds of devotees of Garjiya Devi as well as bird lovers visit the temple with equal zeal. We spot a couple of mountain hawk eagles cruising the crystal blue skies. The region is home to upwards of 200 species of rare and beautiful birds. A pair of good binoculars is as essential as broken-in walking shoes. The hills are taking on the indigo shadows of dusk so we head back to the resort. Both of us want to tuck in early because we have to be up at the crack of dawn to catch the next safari. But we first take the time to enjoy the tandoori freshwater fish at the Gol Ghar, a thatched roof, open-air restaurant. Their 'mocktails' are tantalizingly tempting and it is hard to stop at one. We peacefully retire on a full stomach.

Another day has arrived. As our jeep chugs its way to Bijrani, one of the five entrances to the park, I remember reading that the Corbett reserve has been called the land of "trumpet, roar and song." I find this to be an apt description. The jungle casts its philharmonic spell on me from the moment we enter it. Its pleasures, however, are not just auditory. The naturalist, one Mr. Sahai, who accompanies us on the trip, makes the scenic canvas of a thousand shades of green richer and more enjoyable for us. I move to the back of the jeep to hear him name every tree and shrub while keeping my ears tuned to the jungle sounds and signs.

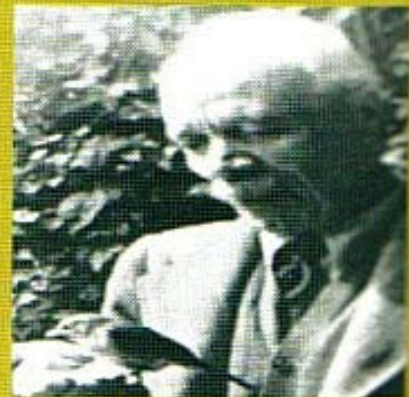
The lush vegetation is made up of a variety of mixed deciduous trees, the steely sal that dominates the region, a smattering of fragrant pine, the sprawling banyan,

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Jungle Jim

Edward James Corbett was born in 1875 of English ancestry in Kumaon, in the picturesque foothills of the Himalayas. His father, the postmaster in Naini Tal, died when Jim was four. It fell to Corbett's mother to raise and educate 12 children on a widow's meager pension. Corbett remembered his boyhood as a sort of forest idyll. Lying in his bed at night, he would listen to the sounds of the jungle. He learned to imitate the cries and calls of the animals so precisely that once, when he impersonated a leopard, a British hunter and a leopard crept toward him simultaneously.

Corbett began hunting to help feed his family. He had to make every shell count. Corbett's shooting skill and encyclopedic knowledge of the surrounding jungle soon became well known. As early as 1906, requests come to him, begging that he track down a tiger or leopard that had



Edward James Corbett

preyed on humans.

Corbett believed that animals that had struck under special conditions, such as protecting cubs or disturbed at a kill, should be given the benefit of doubt. He was only interested in habitual man-killers and consented to come only after two conditions had been met: that all offers of a reward were withdrawn, and that all other hunters had to leave the area. He wrote, "I am sure all sportsmen share my aversion to being classed as a reward-hunter and are as anxious as I to avoid being shot."

Between 1906 and 1941, Corbett hunted down at least a dozen man-eaters. It is estimated that the combined total of men, women and children those 12 animals are thought to have killed before he stopped.

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mango which is lush with fruit in the summer, the bael and the neem known for the medicinal virtues of their leaves, and the silk cotton, amongst others. The undergrowth is made up of wildly spreading lantana and elephant grass that provide a thick cover for the animals to prowl in privacy. And throughout this rich vegetation flows the Ramganga River, which nourishes the jungle and its inhabitants.

With so much food and water available in abundance, Corbett National Park is a paradise for some of the most beautiful birds in the world that have either made the park their permanent home or return to it year after year. We spy a few blue thrushes and white breasted kingfisher, hear the cooing of doves and mynas. Far away, a wooded owl hoots. There is peace and harmony in the jungle and tigers are nowhere

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Below, the dusty dirt road at Corbett National Park allows vehicles to pass but clearly discourages off-road driving and speeding. This road is used for sightseeing.

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them was more than 1,500. In the 1920s, Corbett became appalled at the ever-increasing number of hunters, British and Indian, in the forests. He was concerned about the view of jungles as a source of profit from timber rather than a sanctuary for wildlife. He began speaking to groups of school-children about their natural heritage - electrifying blasé students by concluding his speech with the full-throated roar of a tiger. He helped create the Association for the Preservation of Game in the United Provinces, and the All-India Conference for the Preservation of Wild Life, and he established India's first national park, inaugurated in 1934 in the Kumaon Hills.

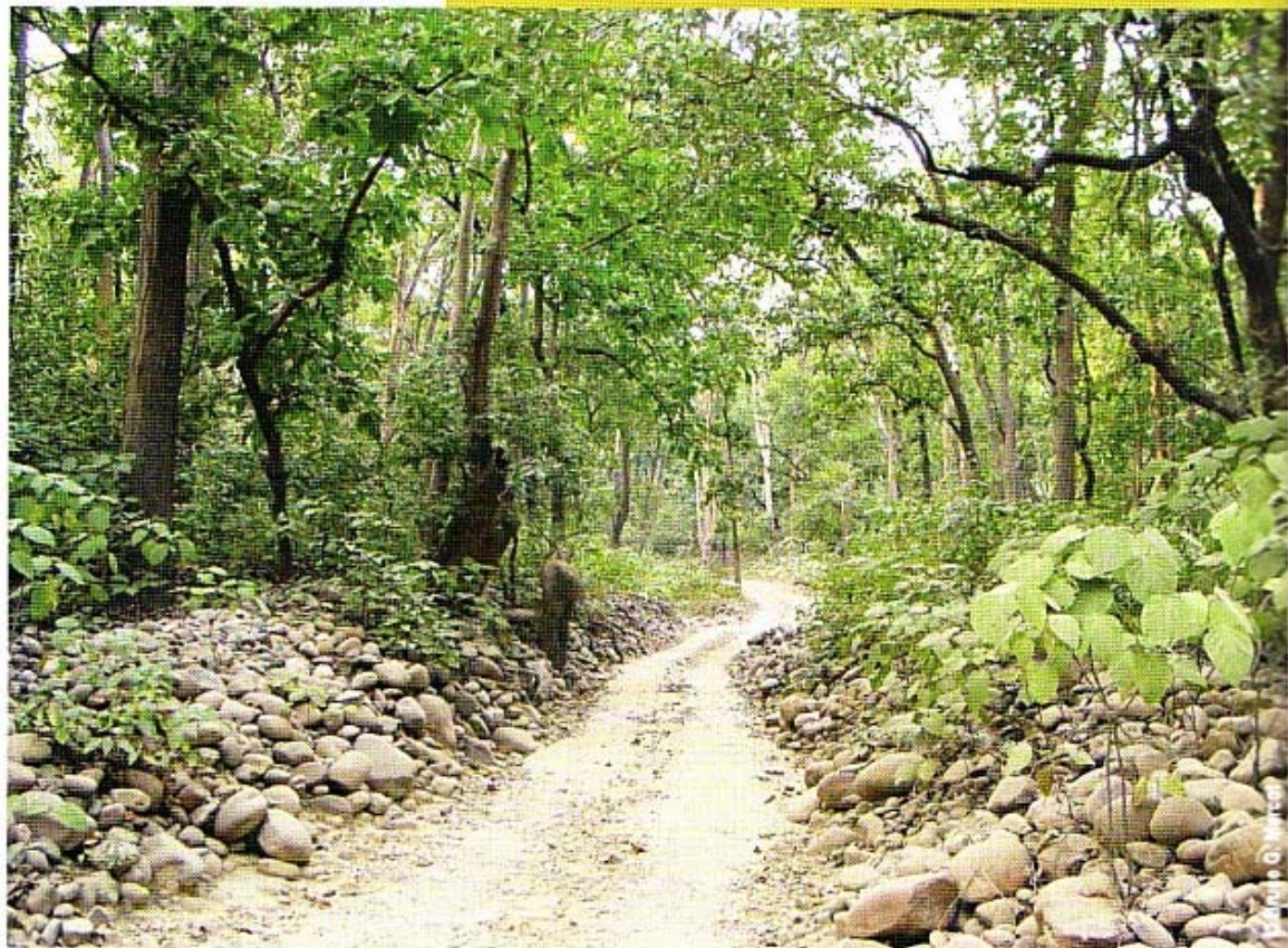
By the mid-thirties, Corbett had almost entirely abandoned hunting and turned his attention to the challenge of capturing tigers on motion-picture film. When he found that the camera's whirr was disturbing the tigers, he dammed a stream so its gurgle would cover up the sound of the camera. He sat there every day for four months until

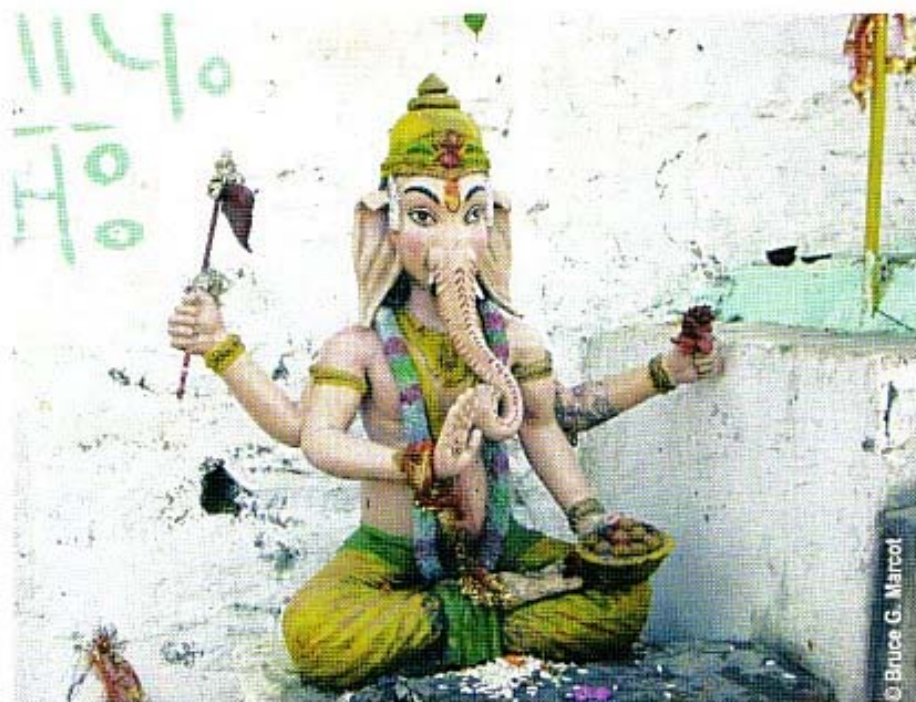
he was rewarded with the appearance of seven tigers, which he caught on film.

Corbett was 64 years old when World War II broke out. He volunteered to train Allied troops in the techniques of jungle survival, but the strain proved too much and he became very ill. Recuperating, he wrote "Man-eaters of Kumaon," which became an international best-seller, was translated into 27 languages, and was almost universally praised by critics.

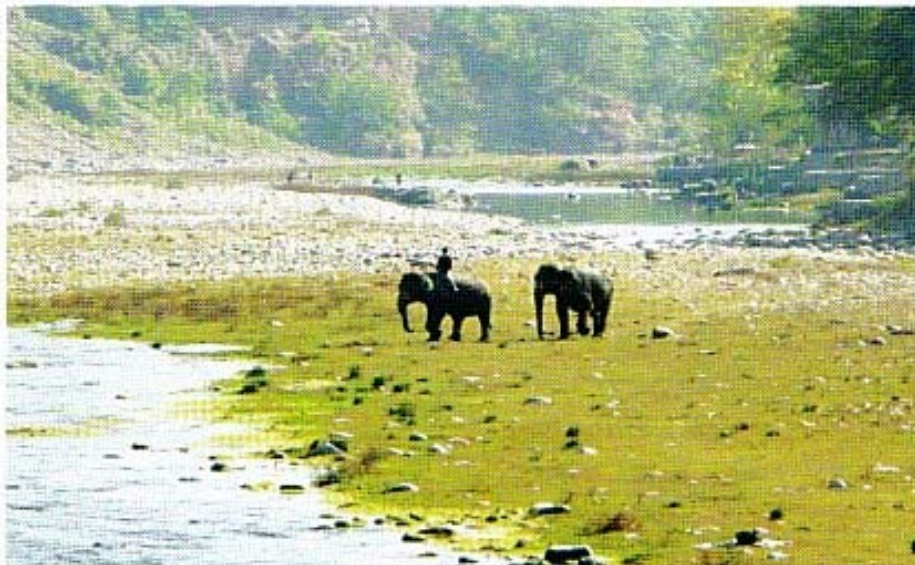
After 1947, Corbett and his sister Maggie, to whom he had been devoted all his life, retired to Kenya, where he continued to write and sound the alarm about declining numbers of tigers and other wildlife. Jim Corbett died of a heart attack in 1955 and is buried in Africa. The national park he fought to establish in India was renamed in his honor two years later, and is now nearly twice its original size. It is a favored place for visitors hoping to see a tiger. Corbett also provided the narrative for the film, "India: Kingdom of the Tiger."

- National Wildlife Federation





Above, a Ganesh statue welcomes visitors to the Garjiya Temple located in the park area.



Above, riding elephants in the Ramganga Riverbed saves visitors' feet from the harsh riverbed rocks and provides a wonderful place to view the nature at Corbett National Park.

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in sight. The langur monkeys are jumping playfully from one tree to another; several families of spotted deer have ambled out to greet the new day. Across the open marshland, we see a herd of elephants passing. All conversation idles as we are enveloped in the hush of the early morning in one of the most majestic places in the world – a pristine jungle.

Then, lo and behold, what is this? It is a set of fresh animal footprints trailing straight into a thicket. Are we going to be in luck and see the king of the land? We find a vantage point and wait in silence. There is rustling in the distance. The cameras come out and we wait with bated breath. No one moves, not even the 12-year-old who has constantly been stepping on my toes for the last hour. Several minutes pass. A likely encounter with a tiger takes on the excitement of a tryst with a beloved.

The rustle abates, everyone sighs, and the jeep comes back to life. We decide to go to a local machhan, an open-air wooden lookout tower, to better our chances of catching a glimpse of the tiger. Two teenage girls, who are already up in the machhan, are chatting away the quietude. No elusive, striped cat is going to come anywhere near this babble. We leave disappointed about missing the chance to see these elegant jungle predators in their natural environment.

The journey back is replete with more sights and sounds. The jungle has indeed woken up and is awash with life. The sun is casting dappled shadows on the trails. Myriads of birds are chirping their prerogative over the land. The deer give us ample opportunity to capture them in digital image format. Even a mongoose crosses our path leisurely for a photo opportunity. Corbett National Park, the legacy of a hunter-turned-conservationist, has to be a must on every nature lover's itinerary.

Essential Facts 'n' Tips

Corbett National Park

Established: 1936

Conservation Efforts: In conjunction with The World Wildlife Fund, The Project Tiger was launched in 1972 as a conservation program for saving the Indian tiger population. Besides habitat deterioration from human presence, poaching of otter and its prey (fish) still remain the major threats in the Corbett region.

Wildlife: Tigers and its prey are the leading inhabitants of the park. However, due to outstanding conservation efforts, you

might see a hog deer, which has been virtually saved from extinction.

Corbett is also the only home of the rare Indian pagolin, and you might even see the rare fish-eating, long-snouted gharial. **Must See:** Crocodile Pool, Dhikala Machaan, Corbett Museum (Dhangadi gate), Corbett Falls, and Garjiya Temple. **Size:** 201 square miles.

Location: Corbett is approximately 300 kms from Delhi.

Season: The park is open annually from October to June, with Nov. 15-June 15 the best time to visit.

Nearest Train Station: Ram Nagar

Nearest Airport: PantNagar

Reservations: Jeep and elephant safaris should be made in advance.

Transportation: You can arrive by bus, train, plane and private car.

Do: Wear dull clothes in forest, respect all signs and local customs, wear protective clothes so the sunrays and bugs won't harm you.

Don't: Litter, smoke in the forest, walk by yourself, collect anything from the forest, carry strong smelling food, feed the animals.