

Later such excursions become daily events but they are not allowed to enter water till they are about 10-12 weeks old. At this age, the cubs begin to nibble fish, they wean completely at the age of 18-20 weeks.

In conclusion, I would simply wish to add that this paper makes no pretensions of being comprehensive as it touches upon only the key factors involved in breeding the species in captivity and it is presumed that once these basic requirements are met, the Otters in most cases would respond favourably.

VIPERINE ENCOUNTERS

RAVI CHELLAM

Monsoon of 1986. Gir had received continuous heavy showers for nearly ten days from June fifteenth. During these days, clouds darkened the skies and lightning streaked across with dazzling intensity to the accompaniment of deafening thunder. The drenching that the jungles had received, transformed it magically. From a hot, dry, brown dust bowl to a cool, humid, sea of green. This was remarkable. The ability of NATURE to recuperate!

Overnight grass grew to cover the forest floor and hill slopes with a velvety carpet. The trees and shrubs put forth a flush of leaves in various shades of green which was soon followed by blossoms in various colours, dull yellow of Randia, white of Carissa, the vivid yellow of Cassia... Jamun came into fruit. It was a pleasure to walk

along the Hiran river, to pick and devour the Plump luscious fruits, fallen on the leaf litter.

Insects were visible in hordes. The delicate pink, velvet bugs, scorpions in various metallic hues and not to forget the ever bothersome mosquitoes. Mosquitoes which gave me three malarial attacks in less than six weeks.

The reptiles were also visible and energetic. Muggers frolicked in the muddy brown waters of Kamaleshwar reservoir, Star tortoises appeared and went about their business in a stately fashion, huge rat snakes moved ever so swiftly with their glistening coats and perky little Sitana lizards darted around, flashing their nuchal pouches.

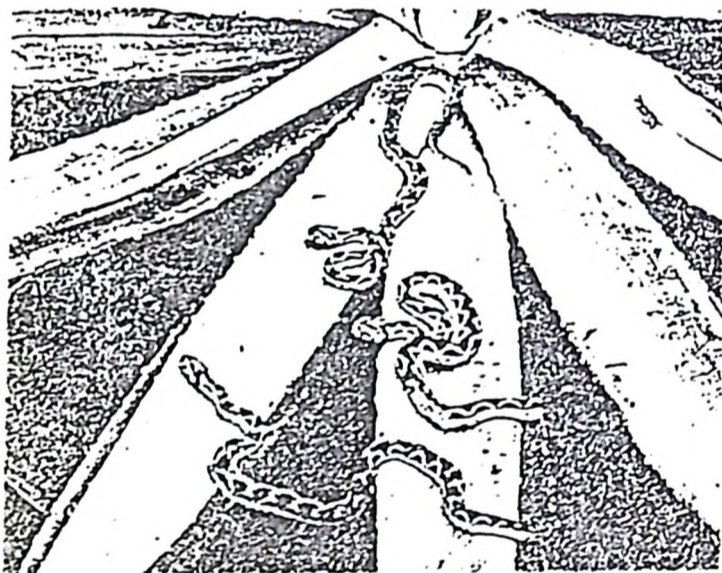
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It was a totally new and an extremely profound experience for me. This tremendous resurgence of life. I had read about it, but to actually feel the grass grow under your feet: it is difficult to put it down in words!

I enjoyed myself thoroughly. Walking extensively through the forest. After the enervating heat of the summer, working in the monsoon was a real pleasure. I used to walk right from dawn to dusk, eating the fruits that were available and drinking the cold water from the fast flowing streams. But large mammal sightings dropped drastically, that was a major disappointment.

It was another morning's work that I was completing. I was walking along a narrow nullah after having caught sight of a chousingha. Stepping gingerly on the wet slippery rocks, jumping across to avoid the marshy bits and enjoying the soft feel of the moist sands, I was lost to the world. Little did I know that I would be so rudely awakened out of my reverie.



I had met the "BIG ONE". The "BIG ONE" inspires more fear in a jungle fearing Indian than even the tiger. The "BIG ONE" is Vipera russelli, the Russell's viper.

Hardly 2 mtrs. away, all curled up and basking in the patchy sunlight was this

snake. I knew that it occurred in Gir but had been lulled into a sense of complacency as I had not seen it during the 20 weeks that I had been working. I stopped immediately and cautiously retreated. Wazir, my tracker shot a quizzical look at me. After I had retreated 5 or 6 long steps, I pointed out the immobile snake and brought out my camera to photograph it.

As I approached it cautiously, this rather small specimen (around 75 cms. long) uncurled itself in a typical yet peculiar serpentine fashion and crawled into the nearby vegetation, thwarting my photographic ambitions. A brief but heart stopping introduction. Since then I have met the "BIG ONE" on four more occasions.

Mid November '86. Winter was creeping in on us. I was searching the Hiran riverine forest for lion kills and lions. At a certain point the vegetation gets to be extremely thick and the bank too slushy to be able to proceed. So I decided to climb up and walk along the high bank for 200 mtrs. before descending down to the river. The river bank was covered with tall grasses and with Helicteres and Carissa bushes. Bending and crawling through the thorny thicket was the most efficient way of perambulation. As I knelt down and put my left palm ahead on the forest floor, I noticed a slight movement in the leaf litter hardly six inches away.

This was a really large viper. Nearly 150 cms. long. I had put my hand right next to it's head. I froze, to stay absolutely still as the entire snake moved slowly past my extremely vulnerable hand. To observe the snake at such close quarters was a thrilling yet chillingly frightening experience. It's magnificent chainlink markings gleamed in the morning light. The snake never showed even the slightest sign of aggression.

Winter 1987. Late January and it was

very nearly dusk. I was walking along a road, trying to track some lions. I flushed a jungle cat from a nearby Acacia thicket which seemed to have triggered a vague but loud hissing noise. I searched desperately to locate the source of this sound. Eventually I located the viper curled up on the earth under a prostrate Acacia tree. The heaving of the snake's body with each inhalation and exhalation was a remarkable spectacle. The snake had probably been disturbed by the jungle cat and my close presence and the torch light did not help it to calm down. This loud noise was a warning rather than a threat. In snake's language, it probably meant "Move off, I am frightened" rather than "I am dangerous and I can do plenty of harm".

Late October 1987. I was sitting in the back of the open jeep and driving along the expansive flats between Banej and Chodavadi. It had been a tiring night's work, tracking a pair of male lions, purely based on their roars and pug marks. It was late morning and the fatigue, heat and the bumpy ride was getting the better of me. Suddenly the driver brought the jeep to a screeching halt and a cloud of dust enveloped us. Reversing, he pointed out to a short toed eagle feeding on a freshly killed viper. The raptor anchored the serpent with its talons and was feeding from its ventral side. Disturbed by the human intrusion the eagle flew away. Its flight rather slow and deliberate as it climbed up, above the trees and disappeared.

The snake lay in the dry grass. The broken grass stems and the scattered down feathers bore testimony to the vain struggle of the serpent. I was surprised to find that the snake was still alive, it moved its body but after a few minutes everything ceased. The eagle had used its claws to pierce through the neck and the head of the viper and this had most effectively dealt with the snake. This viper was nearly 150 cms. long. A gravid female.

The eagle seemed to have been picking out the young snakes still in their yolk sacs. I counted eight, one of which was deformed.

The latest encounter occurred around 2000 hrs. on 26/6/88. I was driving back to Sasan from Kankai, feeling rather triumphant at having been able to locate the sub-adult radio-collared male lion after a gap of five months. The headlights picked out about half a dozen red wattled lapwings sitting on the roads and calling away to glory. As I dipped the headlights I noticed a large snake moving across the road and the lapwings took off and flew above it in a threatening fashion. I quickly turned the jeep around to get a better look, for the snake did look like a viper. Sure enough it was. The snake was in all probabilities trying to steal the lapwing eggs off their ground nests, and the lapwings in turn were mobbing it. The snake slithered away into the darkness.

Gir also has the much smaller Saw-scaled viper, which I have seen only once amongst the rocks near Kamaleshwar.

Hailing from the south I have fairly good experience of the rain forests where we have the pit vipers-Bamboo, Malabar and Rock. All three are strikingly coloured, the Bamboopit viper a lovely shade of green and yellow while the Malabar pit viper is largely brown and the Rock pit viper is largely blue. The most striking feature of these pit vipers is the prominent pair of pits in the front of their heads.

The various encounters that I have had with vipers and other snakes have only convinced me that if we are careful and do no harm there is nothing to fear. I must admit that I have been frightened, venomous snakes are potentially very dangerous. It is incumbent that everyone of us who ventures into the forests should be careful. Then close serpentine encounters can also be enjoyable and fascinating experiences.