

TIGER WARS.

TADOBA TIGER RESERVE.

MAHARASHTRA, INDIA. MARCH 2023.

We first visited Tadoba N.P. (Tiger Reserve) in February 2020 just prior to the start of the pandemic. (see INDIA February 9th – March 10th 2020. A Report of our First Visit to this Wonderful Country. Archived on this site). We stayed at Svasara Jungle Lodge which is a very comfortable lodge and is located only 300 yards from the Kolara Gate, which gives access to the Tadoba North Zone from the east, this zone is deemed by many to be the best tiger sighting zone in the reserve. We stayed for 3 nights which gave us 5 half day safaris and one full day safari. All would be in Tadoba North which is part of the core area. This turned out to be unfortunate as during our visit the reserve's world-famous female tiger was rearing 3 cubs in the adjacent buffer zone and all those with permits to enter this zone were getting outstanding sightings and images, unfortunately we were not allowed to enter this zone or purchase a permit as they had all been sold well in advance of our visit. I would make the point very strongly that before visiting a tiger reserve to check on the zoning system employed and ensure, if possible, that you book permits for those zones (including buffer zones) deemed to be of interest. In other words, do your research. Buffer zones can be very productive as well as the core zones, particularly at night. Core zone permit allocations at the different reserves can vary from year to year, for example at the time of this visit Ranthambore was issuing no all-day permits and each half day (4 hours) safari was allocated randomly by the park staff so it was possible to be allocated to the same zone for several safaris. Some zones are more productive with regard to tiger sightings than others so at our lodge (Ranthambore) we met several enthusiasts who had not seen any tigers during their stay. Full day permits which are offered in several reserves are very expensive and, in my opinion, are not worth the significant financial outlay, as wildlife activity tends to be reduced across the midday hours also the extra 15 minutes at the beginning and end of the day did not for us produce any great benefits.

In 2020 we observed 3 individual tigers in Tadoba, two well and one from distance preparing to hunt. I admit to being disappointed with this as Tadoba has a reputation for outstanding tiger sightings. Therefore, I decided to give Tadoba another go and included a visit to the reserve in our extended 2023 itinerary. Like many enthusiasts I tend to target species on a trip, so capturing better tiger images along with sightings of several larger mammals we had not seen in 2020 were our main targets on this trip to several wildlife locations in India.

In March 2023 we stayed for 3 nights at Wagahoba Eco Lodge, a modern lodge which opened late 2021 and consists of 14 cottages, it is part of the Pugdundee Safaris Group. The lodge is excellent in all aspects, my only concern initially was that it was quite a distance from the Khutwanda Gate, however this didn't prove to be an issue as we just adjusted our timings. We were always at the head of the short queue (much quieter than the Kolara Gate infact we appeared to be the only lodge using this gate), this gate gave us entry again to the Tadoba Zone but we were entering from the opposite side of the park (west), we did appear to visit some areas which we clearly visited in 2020. Tadoba consists of 3 main zones in the

core area, during both our visits we only visited Tadoba North Zone, in 2023 we had 5 drives in this zone and one night drive in one of the several buffer zones, entering at the Junona Gate (south west), which is a 50-minute drive from the lodge.

Our 2023 visit to Tadoba certainly provided us with some significantly better tiger sightings and images and also a wildlife viewing experience we will never forget.

SATURDAY 11TH MARCH 2023 (06.30-10.30)

This was our first safari drive in Tadoba, we entered the park at 06.30 and around 08.00 arrived at the Hill Top area. This area consists of a large grassy plain surrounded by trees. Just about visible in the distance resting in the grass at the edge of the forest was a pair of adult tigers.



The tiger on the left is Balram (T1) he is 8 years old and is the dominant male in this central area, to the right just visible lying in the grass is a female tiger, Maya (T2), she is 12 years old and the undisputed Queen of Tadoba. She is possibly one of the most photographed tigers in India, tiger enthusiasts flock to Tadoba from all over the world to see her. For several years she has reliably produced cubs, however it is debatable whether any have survived to maturity. During our 2020 visit she had 3 cubs. At the time of this visit she had one cub (7-8 months old) which had been seen two days before our visit, we never saw the cub. (The tiger codes i.e. T1 are my own, to simplify the narrative). T2 apparently has been credited with 3 fatal attacks on humans in the park. She has developed over the years a strategy of mating with multiple males probably in an attempt to keep her cubs safe, unfortunately it doesn't seem to have worked. T1 is thought to be the father of T2's single 2022/23 cub. T1 is a very large and powerfully built tiger in excellent physical condition.



T1 briefly stood up whilst T2 seemed quite content to spend time resting in the grass. The pair appeared quite comfortable in each other's company. We watched them for about 20 minutes and then decided to move on. During our period of observation initially there were 3 other vehicles by the time we left that number had risen to about 12, which was reasonable and everyone had a good view. After a short drive having just passed Tadoba Lake another tiger was spotted moving through the forest relatively close to the track leading to Pandharpouni Lakes.



This our third tiger of the day was Rudra (T3), a 7-8 year old male, in prime condition, he had a small puncture wound on his right front leg. We had observed T3 during our 2020 visit.



T3 2023, he appeared to be heavier built than in 2020.



T3 2020, 3-4 years old.

We spent 20 minutes in his company, he crossed the track twice, we followed him for about ½ mile during this time there were very few vehicles about, he appeared to prefer to walk in the fringe forest than down the track.



T3 (08.35), the image clearly shows the wound to his right front leg which he had received during a fight with another male tiger two days earlier. (pers. comm. guide).



T3, throughout the sighting he was constantly calling and made several stops to scent mark, he appeared to be very agitated and moving very purposefully. We eventually decided to leave him, he was heading in the direction of a waterhole which we thought he would use, however he never showed up, possibly he had other things on his mind. 09.00 no sooner had we left T3 than another male tiger was seen heading down an adjacent track towards us. He approached very close to our vehicle, once again he was calling, marking and moving with purpose.



This is Mowgli (T4), he is a similar age to T3, he is heavily built, a very big tiger. I am not too keen on tiger walking down the track images, however sometimes it is unavoidable, I prefer more natural images like the next one. T3 had some damage to his lower jaw. (right-hand

side). The wound looked to be quite recent, we were unable to get any further information. He is not normally seen in this area. He was heading in the direction of T3. Several guides were saying that T3 had been mating with T2 in recent days, despite T1 being in the area and T2 having a cub. Probably not a good idea.



T4, the damage to his lower jaw is just visible. He vanished into the forest for several minutes this image was taken as he re-emerged, he then came back on to the track, headed for a small bridge and scent marked it. We left as the traffic was starting to get heavy.



T4 scent marking.

SATURDAY 11TH MARCH (14.30-18.00)

After lunch we went back to the same general area in the park, and very quickly were rewarded with another tiger sighting, it turned out to be T4 again heading away from the central part of the reserve. We watched with several other vehicles as he failed to stop at any of the waterholes and remained in the cover of the forest, affording us brief glimpses before leaving the area. Both the images below are of T4 passing the waterholes.



Further down the track (16.30) heading towards Navegaon Gate at Pandharpauni Lake 1 another tiger was sighted half submerged in the water. This was our fifth adult tiger of the day. (4M, 1F).



This is Bajrang / T-49, T5. He is generally seen in The Moharli Zone, but does spend time in Tadoba North. He is nursing at least one puncture wound at the bottom of his back (left). This is the tiger that fought with T3 two days earlier. He is around 12 years old.



For the rest of the afternoon, we went in search of other mammals and birds. (see mammal lists at the end of the article).

SUNDAY 12TH MARCH A.M.

Having driven around for a while we were alerted at 09.30 to an apparent commotion at Hill Top, the area where we had originally observed the 'Happy Couple' T1 and T2 yesterday. We were the second vehicle to arrive to the sound of very loud tiger roar, from two individuals, in the woodland beyond the grass area. There was also the sound of repeated thuds which were so powerful that from a distance of 250 yards you could almost feel the impact. It was like sitting in front of a bass guitarist's amplifier at a rock concert. I have experienced lions roaring at very close quarters, what we were hearing was significantly louder and more aggressive than anything I have witnessed before. Clearly two tigers were fighting to secure territorial supremacy, the battle continued on and off for about ten minutes although I am sure they had been fighting for a while before we arrived, the roaring continued throughout, and then fell silent.



After ten minutes T1 emerged from the woodland in an extremely agitated state, at pace he wandered around the grassy area repeatedly scent marking. He was constantly roaring, he was very 'pumped up'. His chest was covered in blood and he was limping badly, his front leg and paw were lacerated. At this stage we were unsure exactly what had happened or which other tiger had been involved, we watched him for about 10 minutes before he vanished into the forest.



T1 inspects his territory carrying his damaged front right paw, otherwise he appears relatively unscathed.



T1 despite being injured continues to demonstrate that this is his territory and he is in charge.

We hadn't realised at this stage that another tiger had appeared out of the woodland and was lying down down, we were unsure which tiger it was.



This was the other tiger involved in the fight, initially he looked unscathed but as he got up to move away it was clear he had suffered serious facial damage.



I tend to use facial patterns to identify tigers, in this case it was going to be difficult. The Tiger was eventually confirmed at the lodge as T3. We exited the reserve after this dramatic encounter.

SUNDAY MARCH 12TH P.M.

During the afternoon we came across a tiger with a lot of facial damage, resting in long grass, quite a distance from where the fight had taken place. It was indeed T3.



He struggled to his feet before laying down in a very open area, he had severe right side facial lacerations and was limping badly with both his front and back legs causing him clearly acute discomfort. He virtually collapsed before our eyes.



This was T3 24 hours earlier, it is hard to believe it is the same tiger.



This was our last sighting of T3 we left the area with heavy hearts, understanding fully however we had experienced completely natural tiger behaviour. T3 apparently took a severe beating last year as well. On our return home his fate would pray on our minds for several weeks.



Later that afternoon approaching Waterhole 97 several vehicles were gathering, a tiger could be heard approaching it clearly was distressed and was calling loudly. When it emerged it was T2, everyone thought she was searching for her cub which had not been seen by anyone for at least two days. (16.15).





Despite her age T2 is still a beautiful cat. She has a broken her lower left canine which could become an issue for her as she enters old age.

MONDAY 13TH MARCH. A.M.

This was to be our last drive in the park, so we decided to try for a female tiger with two young cubs we had not seen before, around Jamni Lake. She had been seen in some very tall grass briefly, as we arrived. We decided at 07.45 to sit it out and after an hour's wait Bijli T6 decided to oblige and give us a glimpse of her two very shy cubs. T7 & T8.





T7 male. The cubs were 3-4 months old, and one was much more adventurous than the other. We hoped they could avoid the turmoil going on in the central area of the reserve. Any one of several male tigers would certainly kill the cubs if they hadn't fathered them. Is the significant number of males vying to dominate the central area causing problems with regard to the success rate of cubs reaching maturity? Certainly, T2 has lost a large number of cubs over the years. I guess what I am saying is, is the reserve big enough for the number of tigers that live there, particularly the number of breeding age males?

HEALTH WARNING: Tiger watching is highly addictive and can seriously damage your bank balance.

Good news, at the beginning of May I had correspondence from both our guide and the lodge manager regarding the Tigers we had seen.

T3 had made a full recovery, I expected to hear he had either died or been killed by another male Tiger whilst he was vulnerable. His recovery was supported by T2 who was seen licking his wounds. He is still in the same area that T1 dominates. T2 never found her single cub, it is thought it was killed by another male, will she continue to have more cubs? her reign as 'Queen of Tadoba' at the age of 12 cannot be far from coming to an end. T6 and her two cubs T7 & T8 are all healthy and thriving. We found Tadoba busy but not as congested as some other reserves, we have visited nine and found Kanha at the time of our visit to be the busiest.

Whilst we were at Nagpur Airport waiting for a flight to Bengaluru I picked up a copy of The Indian Times (13/5/2023) and to my amazement it was carrying an article with images about the battle for territorial domination between T1 and 3 we had witnessed in Tadoba.

BATTLE ROYALE

In a thrilling sighting, tourists in Hill Top area of Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) were lucky to witness a battle on Sunday morning between the two dominating male tigers, **Balram** and **Rudra** (both 7-8 years). Deputy director (buffer) **Kushagra Pathak** shared some photos with the **TOI**. In the fight over supremacy in the territory, and to win the heart of Tadoba's tigress queen Maya, Balram was the winner, though both tigers were injured in the fierce fight. Later, Balram moved to the Panchdhara area, while Rudra went towards Yenbodi, where Maya was sighted with the latter in the evening round. The tigress has a seven-month-old cub from Balram. Eyewitness Nikhil Abhyankar said, **"It is a unique situation. Ideally, Maya should have worried about her young cub, but she chose to go with Rudra. In the days to come, there can be more surprises."**



MAMMAL SPECIES LIST, TADOBA N.P. (Combined 2020, 2023)

Spotted Deer	Both
Northern Plains Grey Langur	Both
Tiger	Both
Sloth Bear	2020
Northern Red Muntjac	2020
Gaur	Both
Ruddy Mongoose	Both
Grey Mongoose	2020
Sambar	Both
Common Palm Civet	2020
Indian Boar	Both
Nilgai	2020
Small Indian Civet	2023
Jungle Cat	2023
Indian Wild Dog	2023
Leopard	2023
Madras / Southern Tree Shrew	2023
Indian Gerbil	2023

18 Species

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This report is based purely on my own observations and conversations with several guides and lodge staff.

Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve encompasses both Tadoba National Park and Andhari Wildlife Sabnctuary.