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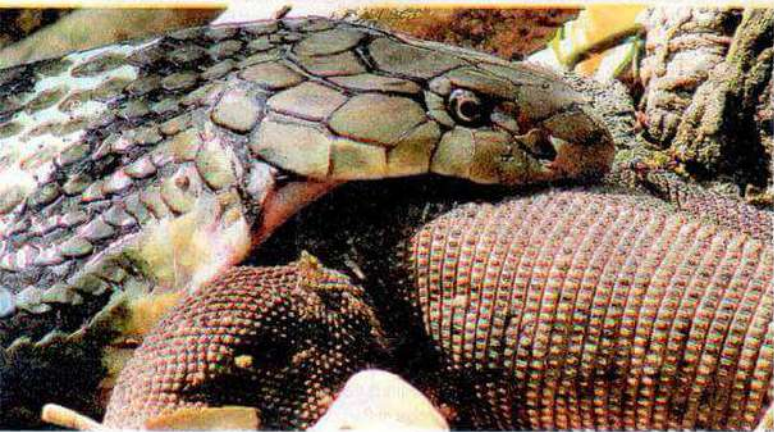
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WILD THINGS IN CORBETT



AN OLD lithograph hangs on the wall of our home titled *Hors de combat*, meaning literally, outside the fight. In sepia tones, a tiger and a tusked wild boar are locked in a menacing contest, but to the onlooker it's unclear who'll be victorious in this battle of life and death.

A tiger and a wild boar! That's an easy one. Why, the tiger can crush the boar! It's certainly the larger and more ferocious animal – a fact hardwired into us through childhood stories and documentaries. That picture fascinated me as a child, the tiger dominant with its fangs bared beneath an angry snarl; the boar ready to thrust its tusks into the tiger's underbelly; I'd imagine a hundred possible outcomes from this deadly encounter.

In nearly all of my imagined scenarios, the tiger would emerge victorious. With swift successive blows, the tiger's claws would puncture through the thick, hairy coat of the boar, while its canines would dig into the boar's jugular, dealing it a deathly blow.

Fortunately, I was privileged to witness several such encounters through my adolescent years at the majestic tiger reserve of Corbett

tail are in perfect alignment for that perfect leap, paired with the judgement of timing, distance and speed, a skill honed with years of practice and several unsuccessful attempts.

The boar in question this time, as if providence had provided it a premonition, turned just as the tiger had leapt into the air. Not enough time to turn and make a run for its life, the boar stuck to its ground, and with a stomp of its hoof and a snort through its nostrils, charged with its head smashing into the tiger's belly. His tusks had connected and the female tiger, about two times larger than the boar, roared in agony as she slumped onto the ground. The boar, sensed an opportunity and charged once again into the tiger, now sprawled on the forest floor. With another determined thrust it tore into the tiger's belly, mauling the shocked creature into submission and agony. Then it turned, tail up in the air and off it disappeared into the thick lantana undergrowth.

As onlookers, we were in shock. This had happened so quickly and now the tiger lay on the mud road atop



FOREST ESSENTIALS

Snapshots from Jim's Jungle Retreat, one of the most exclusive resorts in Uttarakhand; (Facing page) Personal wildlife pictures taken at the Corbett National Park by the writer



The forest road was well shaded by the overhanging branches of Jamun and Haldu, offering some respite from the heat that had been threatening to turn the day into a scorcher. The jeep contained four passengers: the driver, a naturalist and two camera-laden ladies from Delhi, all of them with zoomed lenses focused and fingers ready on the clicker.

A right turn from the Bijrani forest rest house crossing and soon they were upon a road veering into a jungle thicket. They had travelled for about 10 minutes when the party found itself upon a sight so strange that none could form words nor express their horror at what was unfolding before them.

On the side of the road, by the exposed roots of a tree, lay a giant cobra convulsing, its scales moving to expand around the body of a prey now unable to offer any resistance. The troupe of four looked on as though in a trance, unable to peel away from this exhibition of incredible motion: the body of the snake in a vice-like grip, swirling about a reptile now limp, its oxygen depleted, its body emasculated.

Monitor lizards stalk and successfully kill snakes, but this time around, it itself had fallen into the squeezing scales of a larger-than-life cobra. The photo series reveals how the cobra swallowed an entire monitor lizard, nose to tail, in not more than 15 minutes!

The lizard-snake encounter was not the only excitement their adventure was to offer. The guests also witnessed an incident just as unusual and strange on a different day and in a different part of the forest. Another unusual display of jungle behaviour was chanced upon when they found themselves in front of a cobra successfully trapping its predator, a serpent eagle, which had just dropped from the sky to airlift it for a treetop meal.

It was possibly the biggest shock the eagle could receive, its character so used to piercing a writhing serpent with its talons. That the tables would turn so suddenly and decisively was indeed an important lesson for the bird, even if it was its last. Just one delayed piercing by the eagle's claws left an opening for the cobra to press an advantage it didn't have over the bird earlier. And with the eagle's momentary lapse in judgement, the snake, which a few minutes ago was to be its meal, found itself a bird for supper instead.

The jungles offer this and so much more. One just needs to make time to get there and wait. And be at the right place at the right time. With our forests disappearing fast, our children need to witness such primal instincts before they're lost forever. For, in these are life's lessons more fulfilling than I've ever learned elsewhere.

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Daleep Shumshere S Akoi is a Delhi resident who also calls the Corbett National Park his home. He runs the exclusive Jim's Jungle Retreat in Uttarakhand that recently hosted glamorous evenings of Kumaon Lit Fest.

Being witness to primal instincts of wild beasts is an education every traveller must have

Text and photos by Daleep Shumshere S Akoi

National Park, in Uttarakhand. Our parents would take my sister and me to Corbett every year; in fact, three times a year, and the variety of wild engagements not only brought about awe in our developing minds, but a unique understanding of the jungle world with its in-your-face display of life and death, decay and renewal, relationships and family.

BLOODY ENCOUNTER

One incident though, of a tiger and a boar, didn't pan out the way I dreamed. And it was that day I realised how capricious life could be, how preconceived notions were to be chucked out; and from then on, I would accept life as it unveiled itself.

The encounter began as it normally does in a jungle. A silent stillness prevails in the forest when a tiger is out on hunt – the tiger pensive, steadily stalking its prey; the prey oblivious to its fate, foraging through the undergrowth. When a tiger is close enough and the prey hasn't been warned by the alarm call of a saboteur, the tail rises as the tiger readies itself to leap onto its target. Its head, shoulders, back and

fallen Sal leaves, which slowly soaked up the blood that now streamed out of the tiger. I still don't know if she survived the night.

Years later, after my sojourn in the jungles of New York City, I returned to New Delhi and to Corbett, to help set up a jungle lodge my father had always hoped to create. And some years back, one of our guests had a tale to tell that for me was as enthralling as the one I had witnessed of the tiger and the boar.

SNAKE ALONG

This time, it was the curious incident of two reptiles entwined in a death match: that of a full grown monitor lizard, measuring about 4.5 feet and a king cobra, possibly one of the largest specimens recorded in Corbett Tiger Reserve, nearing 20 feet. One sizzling summer afternoon, the retreat's naturalist and guests set out on a jungle safari into the Bijrani tourism zone of the reserve.

With forests disappearing fast, our children need to encounter such primal instincts before they're lost