

Encounters with Kabini's black panther

The covid-19 pandemic has taught us just how interconnected we are to the wild world



For those waiting and watching, it was another good moment. For me, it was an unforgettable one.

For years, I had been on a pilgrimage to find one elusive, unique animal in the Kabini forest of Karnataka—the world's most famous black panther, known locally as Karia or Blackie. During this past pandemic year, I was fortunate to spend weeks in the jungle. But I found neither hair nor hide of my quarry.

On 13 December, I went public about my joyful obsession

with a talk titled *Romancing The Black Panther*, at the Bangalore Literature Festival. And suddenly, the jinx was broken. Exactly five years after I began my search, and exactly five days after my talk, I got a *darshan* of Karia.

There he was, simply draped on a tree, 30ft from our jeep, 30ft above the ground, a little too far for my human eyes, but just right for the powerful camera lenses pointed at him.

Several people have asked me about what that moment was like. It is hard to explain it without being self-conscious. As I peered through my binoculars at the black silhouette, the lenses were clouded with my tears.

Then I realised that everyone around was watching me watch Blackie. My face split into the broadest grin, I joined my hands in a *namaskar* and put both my thumbs up. Thank you, I whispered to the sky. Thank you, I said to wildlife filmmaker Sandesh Kadur and other well-wishers who had brought me to this point. Thank you, I said to my favourite forest. *Dhanyavaad*, I said to the black cat, who by now had turned his head to gaze down imperiously at us.

What a moment! To me, it felt, simply, like the essence of happiness.

My quest has taught me personal lessons of patience and humility. It has also deepened my understanding of the complex connectedness of the forests and our future. I

have renewed my resolve to work towards the regeneration of India's amazing biodiversity, and our culture of conservation.

I am grateful that I just got to sit with this black leopard for a while that day. I kept returning to Kabini, and Karia kept turning up in tandem.

Then, on 6 March, we witnessed an epic encounter between him and his long-time adversary, a leopard that wildlife filmmaker Shaaz Jung calls Scarface. Karia decided to challenge him in the open, high on a teak tree that had shed its leaves in Kabini's dry season, giving tourists in a dozen jeeps the sighting of a lifetime. Both cats were fighting for the affections of Mist, a small blue-green-eyed female leopard, who was nearby, but grieving for a lost cub.

This saga has just begun. As the female comes into oestrus again, no doubt there will be many leopards sniffing around Karia's territory, forcing him to defend it. He may only add to his many battle scars, and Karia groupies will be watching anxiously that he returns triumphant and healthy again.

Karia's frequent sightings in the past few weeks have sent a buzz through the world of wildlife photographers and tourists. More enthusiasts from around the globe are planning a getaway to Kabini, hoping to catch a glimpse of its beloved Karia. He is the only black panther in the world

whose territory overlaps a tourist zone. He appears just enough to keep appetites whetted. But Karia is about nine years old, and leopards have an average life span of 12 years. No wonder so many of us keep returning, almost greedily, to catch him while we can.

But Kabini has so much more to offer. As is usual at this time of the year, when there is little water, and the deciduous forest is bare, it is easier to sight animals, especially the big cats.

There are many who prefer the majestic tigers to the leopards. This season, they could have a treat like none other. There is a tigress in Kabini whose family is becoming the focus of researchers and photographers. This backwater female has had two litters of three cubs each in the past three years. One or the other of her cubs from the previous litter is often seen with the three little ones and the mother. It is quite *The Baby-Sitters Club*. While tigers do have litters of four or more cubs, it is rare for the entire litter to survive. At Kabini, if you are really lucky, you can see five tigers together—the magnificent mother, her three one-year-old cubs, and one babysitter.

It is most unusual for tigers from a previous litter to bond in this way with younger siblings, or stay so peacefully with their mother. To watch these tigers of Kabini cohabit and cooperate is truly extraordinary.

No doubt Kabini will have a sizzling summer. People will

flock to this and other forests to find what the poet Wendell Berry calls *The Peace Of Wild Things*. The forest allows us to practise mindfulness, to remain in the moment, to heighten our sensory perception. Much research has emerged that correlates human well-being with time spent in nature.

Conservationists caution us not to get carried away by our natural attraction to the charismatic species. They would not survive without the role played by the smallest of creatures in the food chain, many of whom are spectacular in their own right. Maybe this summer, having internalised the critical importance of a tiny virus, we can let our eyes stray past the big animals to sweep across the entire ecoscape.

It is easy in Kabini. Unlike other parks, sightseeing in Kabini is managed through the state government's Jungle Lodges and Resorts. The carrying capacity of the forest is calculated conservatively, and there is no mad rush of jeeps. Tourist behaviour is largely restrained, and the sanctuary is kept free of trash through the strenuous efforts of the forest department and many volunteer groups.

Kabini is more than just a magical forest bringing renewed wonders to visitors at each turn—it is home to much biodiversity, a forest part man-made and part natural, teeming with wildlife beside the gleaming backwaters of the Kabini reservoir. This paradise calls for eternal

vigilance. Tourists need to become trustees, not mere consumers of the safari sightings. Can we go into the forest with curiosity and humility, and can we emerge embracing its grace? We are on the road to recovery from a pandemic that has taught us just how interconnected we are to the wild world. What better time for us to reflect on how—and how quickly—we can renew our broken relationship with the natural world?

As for me, I continue to aspire to such trusteeship. People ask me if I would be quite such a regular now that I have sighted Karia. If anything, he beckons more, urging me to look beyond him into the heart of the forest where, surely, our human heart may be discovered.

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