

CAT NEWS

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A Glimpse of Tiger Family Life

Tigers, like most cats, have had the reputation of being asocial, and especially of males hostile to cubs, to the extent even of killing them. Protection has led to tigers disregarding people and thus providing glimpses of unsuspected sociality. Last December, Belinda Wright, who with her husband Stanley Breeden made the acclaimed film "Land of the Tiger" witnessed what she describes as "the most extraordinary encounter with tigers we have ever had" in Kanha National Park in central India. In a letter to her Mother, Cat Group member Anne Wright, Belinda said:

"We went (on elephant) towards the hills opposite Kisli Rest House. Sitting half-hidden in a patch of dense undergrowth we found the two shaggy young male cubs (about 12 months old) of an old tigress friend of our's called Phoolan Devi. There was no sign of Mum, and we left the two agitated cubs to search for her. Half an hour later we found the cubs again, some distance from where we had originally seen them. They were sitting on top of a huge pile of rocks beside a nullah. From further up the ravine, the tigress started calling to her cubs with long, low yowls. The cubs answered with short, sharp mews and moved tentatively in the direction of her calls. Just then the forest shook with an awesome roar to our right - it was the call of a male tiger.

As the tigress was obviously some distance away, we decided to leave the cubs and go in search of the male. In a clearing nearby we found a beautiful young male tiger (Phoolan Devi's three-year-old cub from a previous litter, who seems to spend most of his time with the family). He roared, but it was a higher-pitched, yelpy roar, and I was convinced that it wasn't the same tiger that

had shook the forest earlier. We followed him for a while until he disappeared into thick bamboo. Then came a third roar - another deep-throated, more mature thunder. We headed into the thick bamboo and found tiger number 5 - a huge male. As we watched, the huge male and the younger male met. The younger one crouched down submissively, and then the two tigers circled each other rubbing their bodies together. They then faced each other and rubbed their heads and necks together. The younger male tentatively put his paws on the side of the male. Then they separated and both lay down about nine feet apart. From behind them, the two male cubs bounded up the rise and rushed towards the larger male. They too rubbed faces with him while he made gentle prr-prr noises. The two cubs looked delighted to have company at last and nestled and played with each other besides the larger male tiger. To our astonishment, the tigress then appeared from the opposite direction and called the cubs. They rushed towards her (and us) with happy yelps and clambered all over her. The younger male followed and greeted her with equal enthusiasm - stroking her head and neck and yelping. The four tigers were all over each other. A few yards away the larger male looked on. Then he got up, joined the others, and all five tigers walked off together down the hills. We left - absolutely breathless (ed. I'll bet!) - as it was getting dark. No pictures I'm afraid (not enough light) but what an incredible thing to see."

Anne Wright says that Belinda is thought by the local tribal people to be a witch where tigers are concerned and they think she is related to them.

Cats Around Calcutta

Fishing cats *Felis viverrina* and jungle cats *F. chaus* are common in wetlands around Calcutta, reports Pranabes Sanyal, Assistant Chief Conservator of Forests, West Bengal.

The wetlands vary from aquaculture areas with marginal *Colochesia* spp. of vegetation, to brackish water inundations with *Typha-Imperata* associations, and fresh waters with *Typha-Phragmites* association. Sanyal says *Typha-Imperata* areas in Howrah District appear to provide the best habitat for the two cats.

The fishing cats drop their litters in February on relatively high ground formed by graveyards etc. One orphan kitten was rescued in such a place this year.

The fishing cats sometimes kill goats and in response local villagers killed four fishing cats in the past two years in Howrah

District. However, the Forest Department stepped in with cagetraps to catch problem animals. Three adult fishing have been caught and moved to Haliday and Lothian Island Sanctuaries in the Sundarbans. A jungle cat, which was a problem at a poultry farm, was trapped and taken to Calcutta Zoo.

A private Calcutta organisation, the Indian Society for Wildlife Research, has launched a public education programme, which includes audio-visual shows in villages. The Society has also been paying token compensation to villagers suffering losses.

Sanyal says these efforts have already shown signs of success in spreading conservation awareness in Calcutta's "Catland". A sample area of four km² is now being studied in detail.

Revision of Cheetah Status in Zimbabwe

Safari hunting of cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* is likely to be authorised in revised wildlife legislation in Zimbabwe, according to ZIMBABWE WILDLIFE, the journal of the Wildlife Society.

The change is an attempt to deal with the conflicting problems of livestock predation by cheetah and longterm conservation. Cheetah will be given a new "Restricted" status instead of being "Specially Protected" in a revision of the 1975 Parks and Wild Life Act.

Hunting of "Restricted Species" will be permitted if the Minister "is satisfied that the hunting is not contrary to the interest of the conservation of the species or animal concerned."

ZIMBABWE WILDLIFE states: "The changing of the cheetah's status from Specially Protected to Restricted is likely to be one of the more controversial aspects of the revised legisla-

tion. Many people perceive cheetah as highly endangered both locally and elsewhere. However, there are indications that its numbers are increasing, and it has been implicated in many cases of stock theft, especially in southern Zimbabwe. Numerous cheetah are killed each year in terms of the present section 37 of the Act (which authorises the Minister to permit taking of a Specially Protected species), but no commercial use can be made of them.

"The Wildlife Producers recently requested that cheetah should be taken off the Specially Protected list 'in areas where they are problematical' - thus enabling problem animals to be shot by trophy hunters in return for payment. One ecologist has also recommended that the species should be removed from the list for conservation reasons. Rather than protect the cheetah in