

# Trip Report

A VISIT TO INDIA'S GIR NATIONAL PARK

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## LIONS OF LEGEND

A delightfully personal and direct narration revealing all the joys and frustrations one faces when looking for iconic species in India's National Parks





**Asiatic lion** *Panthera leo persica*

The Asiatic lion *Panthera leo persica*, also known as the Indian lion, is a lion subspecies that exists as a single isolated population in Northern India's Gujarat State. Although presumed to be extinct in Persia (today's Iran), it is also known as the Persian lion.





**Spotted deer or Chital** *Axis axis*

The Spotted deer is the most commonly taken species (45% of known kills) by the Asiatic lions of Gir National Park. Adult Chitals weigh only around 50 kg.

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
BY DR.SANGEETA DHANUKA

I am just back from a week long visit to the Gir National Park, the land of lions. We were a team of 4 - Dev Anand Paul, Vaithiya Nathan, Sanjivani Vaze and me. This trip was one hell of a roller-coaster, right from the planning to the safaris. The planning began in July, between Dev and me, who till then were only Facebook friends, knowing each other through a common friend. The plan was to visit Bera to see leopards, as I am yet to see a leopard after 15 yrs of wildlife trips. A lot of gathering info and talking to people and we decided to drop it, for reasons we were not comfortable with. What then? At that time the SC had banned all tiger safaris and nobody knew when they would start if at all. Nov first week is too early for birding trips as well.....where can we go then? I was speaking to some friends for suggestions and then somebody said Gir. Dev jumped at the suggestion and bingo, we were on the Indian Railways website. Only 4 seats available! Hell with it we thought, lets block our tickets and we can then ask others if anyone wants to join. Later, Vaithi (Dev's friend) and Sanjivani (a co-birder from Mumbai) agreed to join, but both had to finally travel sleeper 3 tier for one way of the journey. Next started the

hunt for lodging, boarding and safari bookings. Some friends helped and passed on contact details of the forest rest house 'Sinh Sadan', supposedly the best place to stay if you want to be sure you don't miss the safaris. Yes, only 30 vehicles are let in for a safari at Gir and the ones who stay at Sinh Sadan stand a better chance. Called up Sinh Sadan - 'Madam, we take bookings only 15 days in advance. If you want to come on 5th Nov, call up after 20th Oct'. We didn't do anything in Aug, Sept and until 12th Oct. I called up on 12th, to be given more and more phone nos and after 10 calls to various nos, I was told that no bookings will be accepted till 25th Dec as ministers had blocked all accommodation due to elections! How we finally managed a economical hotel booking is another long story in itself which I will skip here. The day arrived.....3rd Nov. Dev and Vaithi flew in from Chennai and we started our journey from Mumbai together. The journey ensured we got very familiar and comfortable with each other's company. 4th noon we arrived, very skeptical of how the hotel would be. We were lucky, it turned out to be good. 6 pm in the evening we were informed that we didn't get lucky with the advance bookings

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**Asiatic lion** *Panthera leo persica*

The Asiatic lion is listed as Endangered by IUCN based on its small population size, which has steadily increased in Gir Forest National Park, more than doubling from a low of 180 individuals in 1974 to a level of 411 individuals consisting of 97 adult males, 162 adult females, 75 sub-adults, and 77 cubs as of April 2010.





**Soft-shelled turtle** *Nilssonina sp.*

The Gir National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary in Western Gujarat is the only habitat for the Asiatic lion where an area of 1,412.1 km<sup>2</sup> (545.2 sq mi) was declared as a sanctuary for their conservation in 1965. Later, a National Park covering an area of 258.71 km<sup>2</sup> (99.89 sq mi) was established where no human activity is allowed.





**Asiatic lion** *Panthera leo persica*

Asiatic lions are slightly smaller than African ones. Adult males weigh 160 to 190 kg (350 to 420 lb), while females weigh 110 to 120 kg (240 to 260 lb).

and one of us has to spend the night in the queue to get the morning safari bookings. At Gir, the tourist himself has to go for the current bookings. It was decided that someone from the hotel would stand at night and Dev and Vaithi would go at 4.30 am to replace him and we would rotate turns between the 4 of us for the remaining bookings on all days. Not a good omen to begin with...nevertheless...Suddenly at 8 pm we were told, the bookings for day one had been done. What, where, how we don't know and we were all raring to go. 1st safari : 6.30 am, 5th Nov: We were all under the impression that lion sightings are much easier than tiger sightings, more-so as we have been reading for years that Gir is overpopulated with lions. Its cold and we set out, all excited. Soon we see the elusive jungle cat which stays in front of us for a good 2-3 mins. The excitement further builds and we are convinced lady luck is on our side. We drive on and after sometime come upon a tracker who is informing the Gypsies (Indian jeeps) about a lioness lying close by. Wow...the first adrenalin rush. We too go in, only to see the belly. I don't even make the effort of picking up my camera, but we are amused to see people in other Gypsies falling over each other to click a pic, some even with their iPads! We decide to back out immediately. The tracker then tells us, there is a lion too some metres away and we are up again. Alas, again

just a belly. He then raises his head to give us a glimpse for a second and the action is over. Nothing more during the safari. The guide tells us we should take a 9.30 rather than 6.30 safari next day for better sightings and we decide to give it a try. We are then told we could do some birding for the noon at the river side. Not knowing the spot we are dependent on the driver and the guide and we agree for a pre-decided amount, only to realize our folly later, on reaching the spot. Anyway, we console ourselves saying we have become wiser now and won't fall into the trap again. 2nd safari: 3.30 pm, 5th Nov: a new pair of driver and guide. This fellow seemed to be far better and we were more hopeful. Nothing till 5 pm: ( and we are casting dejected glances at each other, Dev trying to cheer us up by "opening the bar" as he would call it - the chocolate bar. At 5 pm we see the guide tell us reassuringly that we will see a lion - and in 5 minutes we do! But only the back is visible. No good. Then the lion turns its head and we manage our first few shots of the lion, against a green background. Vaithi says, "Ah, at least we have got the passing marks now". By now it is loud and clear to us that sighting a lion is in fact more difficult than a tiger sighting. At least a tiger does not sleep for 18 hrs a day and you might chance upon it walking about in the forest. Not so with the lions. 3rd safari: 9.30 am

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**Purple Sunbird** *Cinnyris asiaticus*

Gir is rich in bird species. The scavenger group has 6 recorded species of Vultures. Some of the other typical species include Crested Serpent Eagle, the endangered Bonelli's Eagle, Crested Hawk-eagle, Brown Fish Owl, Indian Eagle-Owl, Rock Bush-Quail, Pygmy Woodpecker, Black-headed Oriole, Crested Treeswift and Indian Pitta.





**Asiatic lion** *Panthera leo persica*

This subspecies occurred in Persia, Mesopotamia, Baluchistan, from Sind in the west to Bengal in the east, and from Rampur in the north to Nerbudda in the south.

6th Nov: nothing to write about. Forget lions, we did not see anything. There were loud alarm calls very close by indicating a leopard was around us. We waited for a few mins and then the driver and guide decided it was not worth waiting, for reasons known to them. For the rest of the safari, neither they both spoke nor we. By 11 am we were looking forward to the safari getting over. But we decided one thing for sure. No more 9.30 am safaris, 6.30 am it would be. 4th safari: 3.30 pm 6th Nov : another new pair of driver and guide. The driver looked to be a very motivated chap and something about him told us he was the man we needed. He told us just one thing...have patience and trust me. We had no choices anyway. It was 5.30 pm, we had just 30 mins before we had to start back and we thought another safari lost. Then he said, "Now I will show you what I promised". In 10 minutes we were upon a lioness. Click, click, click, click. This man knew the movements of the animals and kept himself well informed, we realized. And then she got up and walked towards us. She then came and sat barely a few feet from us. I sat down on the floor of the Gypsy to make eye contact with her. She sat about 5 m from me. I wanted to jump out of the Gypsy and hug her as my eyes locked with hers. The lioness proved lucky for us and we saw another female and male some metres ahead. That evening

we came back on cloud nine and Vaithi said, "From pass class we have moved to B+ grade". We told the driver, you are our lucky man. Can't you join us for the remaining 5? He said "Madam, you try talking in the booking office but they don't easily accept it". I tried doing that, but they said "We can give you the same guide but not the same driver. We will try". Fair enough, lets wait and watch. 5th safari: 6.30 am 7th Nov. Just a drive. Only saw a few peacocks. 6th safari: 3.30 pm 7th Nov: once again, nothing to write. 7th safari :6.30 am, 8th Nov. We only clicked some bulbuls and bee-eaters. We were at the restaurant having lunch when our favorite driver walked in to ask how it has been going. We said "Forget lions, even birds and other animals have forsaken us after the safari with you". He said "How many more to go?". "2" we said. "Ok" he replied, "let me use my good offices to see if I can join you again". 3.30 pm 8th Nov, 8th safari: we step out of the hotel to see our driver waiting with the Gypsy. Suddenly we are all gleeful. "Madam, now the Gir pride is at stake. I will not let you all go back dejected like this. My promise. I have seen a lioness with 4 cubs in the morning. I know the territory and I think I know where she will move in the evening. But once again, patience and leave the rest to me". 5 pm, he starts driving with single minded focus and we are holding onto the edges of the

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**Asiatic lion** *Panthera leo persica*

The Indian lion population occupies remnant forest habitats in the hill systems of Gir and Girnar that comprise Gujarat's largest tracts of dry deciduous forest, thorny forest and savanna.



**Nilgai** *Boselaphus tragocamelus*

As per 2010 approximately 105 lions - 35 males, 35 females, 19 sub-adults, and 16 cubs - lived in the satellite areas outside the Gir forest.





Gypsy. He stops - and we see a pride of six lions and lionesses. Click, click,click ,click for 30 mins. Apparently, one female of the pride had 4 tiny cubs too. We waited, but by then the news of this pride of 6 had spread and there were Gypsies lined up. No chance the cubs would be brought out. And then one of the pride came a little forward. Again, I was squatting on the floor of the vehicle, for that eye level shot. And then news came of a male lion on the road, a few kms ahead. Quietly and without showing any visible excitement, we moved away from the pride, to be the first ones to reach the spot. We did! And there he was. Once again I was on the floor of the Gypsy. Checked the distance reading on my lens...7 metres. Wow! This close...I waited for him to look at me. And then it came...the moment, as our eyes locked. Time was running out and this was my last image. Eight safaris done, one more to go. We convinced our driver to join us again next morning for our final safari. Vaithi now promoted us to A+ grade. Final safari: 6.30 am, 9th Nov: the lion was still there where we left him last night. He then walked for a good 15-20 min. Then he vanished into the forest. We completed our route and were returning when he was found again, at a different spot, in beautiful light and giving some stunning poses and expressions. The hair looked liked threads of gold. And the moment we soooo wanted to capture. The giant yawn...Thus ended our roller-coaster trip to Gir. ●

**Asiatic lion** *Panthera leo persica*

The advent of firearms led to the extinction of this subspecies over large areas. By the late 19th century, lions had been eradicated in Turkey. During the Indian Rebellion of 1857, a British officer alone shot and killed 300 lions, and by 1963 the last five had all been killed in Iran.





**Asiatic lion** *Panthera leo persica*

A morphological character seen in Asiatic lions - but rarely in African ones - is a longitudinal fold of skin running along the belly. According to the IUCN Red List, the Asiatic lion is listed as "endangered" as it currently exists as a single subpopulation, and is thus vulnerable to extinction from unpredictable events, such as an epidemic or large forest fire.





**Intermediate egret** *Mesophoyx intermedia*  
 The abundant avifauna in Gir National Park numbers more than 300 bird species, most of which are resident.



**Spotted owlet** *Athene brama*  
 In the surrounding Sanctuary only Maldharis (a local population of wildlife-loving herdsman) have the right to graze their livestock.





**Rose-ringed parakeet** *Psittacula krameri*

Prior to the resettlement of the peaceful Maldharis, the Gir forest was heavily degraded and used by livestock, which competed with and restricted the population sizes of native ungulates. Various studies have revealed tremendous habitat recovery and increases in wild ungulate populations following the Maldhari resettlement during the last four decades.