

Leopards of Bera



With the last light of the day gradually fading, we were mesmerised as we watched Heera, the dominant male leopard, languidly stretch himself. It was time for his night hunting foray into the surrounding landscape. Through the day he had been resting in his cave on this rocky granite outcrop. The resident leopards use these outcrops, peppered with fissures and caves, as their day time refuge. Food is available only in the surrounding chequered plains below them. The typically arboreal leopards find these rocks serving the same purpose as elevated tree branches elsewhere. Of a safe refuge ensconced on which they can survey the landscape below for potential threats and prey.



This scene is unfolding itself near the village of Bera, lying midway between Udaipur and Jodhpur, the capitals of the Mewar and Marwar regions of Rajasthan, respectively. Part of a group of nondescript villages in the Pali district, Bera has in recent times gained prominence among wildlife enthusiasts for its pretty much-assured sightings of this otherwise elusive cat. Unlike elsewhere, the typically solitary leopard is occasionally sighted on the Bera rocks in small groups of several grown-up adults together on the same rocky perch. Hectic construction activity is underway in the vicinity to cater to the increasing number of incoming tourists. The leopard safaris organised here are also a source of supplementary incomes from tracking and hospitality-related services for the local villagers.



Forty-odd local wild leopards inhabit this 50 square kilometre expanse of several small villages, their agricultural fields and the wasteland between them overgrown with desert scrub vegetation. The resident leopards, it is believed, are descended from a dozen-odd leopards that had drifted in from the degraded Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary to its south east. Settling here some four decades back, the leopards have adapted to a unique lifestyle of living in harmony with the local human-dominated landscape. The hospitable terrain has also permitted an increase in the number of the local leopards leading to frequent clashes amongst them. Male competition for territory and breeding rights, however traumatic it may appear at the moment, is genetically beneficial for the leopards in the long run. Fratricide in the Bera area is keeping the population of the resident leopards relatively young and healthy.

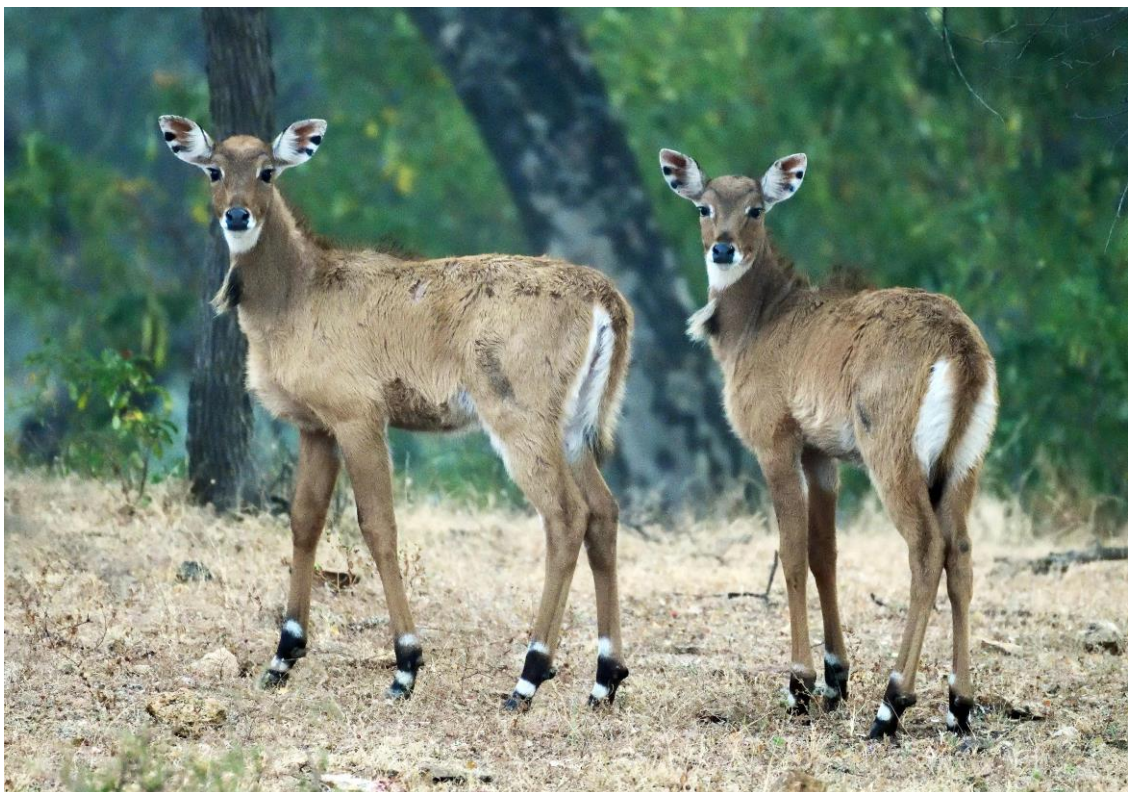


The local people have no reason to climb these rocky outcrops common across the landscape except to visit the few small temples perched up there. The leopards calmly watch the devotees, and the noisy aarti performed every day, from a safe distance. There appears to be a vertical territorial divide, with the zone of the leopards confined to their elevated rocky outcrops during the day. At that time the people are busy with their crops and livestock in the surrounding plains. There have been no incidents of any leopard attacking a human here as against more than 4,000 leopard attacks over the last 20 years elsewhere in the country. In Bera, they bask on the rocks during the day time in full view and unmindful of the gypsies carrying their load of tourists armed with their long telephoto camera lenses.



The area has scanty wild prey consisting of nilgai, chinkara, wild boar, langur and peacock. Being highly adaptive predators, the leopards come down in the night to hunt for them and other small game. However, the bulk of their diet consists of the feral village dogs, goats and sheep, calves and stray cattle. The co-predators in the area include the rarely sighted striped hyena, wolf and the jackal. The local Rajputs, mostly decommissioned soldiers, are at present

engaged in agriculture, while the resident though semi-nomadic Rabari tribals tend to their herds of livestock. The Rajputs may even be happy with the presence of the leopards that keeps the crop-raiding wild herbivores in check. The ritual and social superiority of the Rajputs ensures that their sentiments prevail in the local milieu.



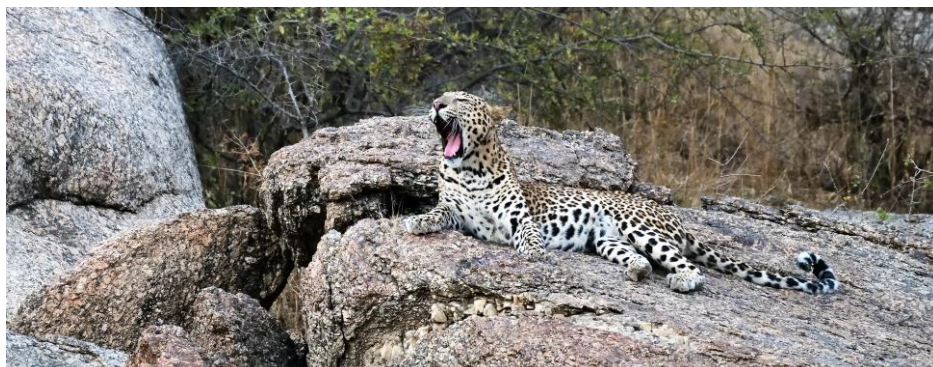
In contrast to the Rajput farmers, the depredations by the leopards adversely affect the Rabari herdsmen the most. They have, however, exhibited great forbearance towards their periodic losses, till now. The efficient compensation system run by the government under the Van Dhan Yojana that grants Rs. 2,000 for the loss of sheep and goats, Rs. 5,000 for calves and Rs. 20,000 for grown-up cattle also helps. The financial compensation is, however, only about half the value of the loss suffered by them. There is apparently more at play here, that underpins the existing harmony.



The answer lies, perhaps, in the remarkable belief system of the Rabaris. They have a reverence towards the leopards that are associated with Amba Devi, the local deity. The Rabaris recognise the fact that the leopard must eat too. They perceive the occasional loss of livestock as a sacrificial offering to their gods. If a leopard enters the thorn lined livestock fences in the night, the Rabaris believe that the remaining animals get divine protection from disease after that. The new births in the well-tended domestic herds are adequate for the overall number to remain steady in spite of the occasional losses to the leopards.



The Rabaris closely monitor the livestock taken out to the rich grazing grounds along the foot of the rocky outcrops. The resident leopards have learnt to associate the Rabaris with the bright red turbans that they wear and remain apprehensive of them. Right from the time that they were cubs, they have been driven off by the protective Rabaris. The leopards rarely attack the livestock while the herdsmen are around and stray or lost animals alone are typically taken. Most of the hunting, in any case, happens in the dead of night. Photographers may at times be disappointed by a leopard, nonchalantly basking on the rocks, inexplicably slinking off out of sight into its cave. The culprit is often a red-turbaned Rabari walking into the scene.



Another unique attribute of the Bera landscape is that, though declared a Leopard Conservation Area in 2003, it is still not under the administration of the Forest Department. It remains an example of a community-led wildlife conservation effort. Peaceful coexistence comes from a delicate balance of giving and taking between the local community and the leopards with whom they share their habitat. The harmony achieved in Bera and its surrounding villages is an excellent model of wildlife conservation in a human-dominated landscape. Certain elements helping in maintaining the fine balance are worth emulating in many other places plagued by human-wildlife conflicts. The Bera experience also renews our faith in the possibility that people and wildlife can coexist peacefully.



- Mahendra Singh