

# India's Crazy Bear

By GRANCEL FITZ

*He's mixed up, this sloth bear. He mauls men, feeds on flowers, grows eight-inch hair in a hot climate. Even his name is wrong*



**F**ROM ONE viewpoint, my hunt for the sloth bears of India began almost a century ago. At least, my first interest in these peculiar animals was kindled by adventures which took place at that time. They were experienced by

Sir Samuel Baker, a hunter and explorer whose high standards of sportsmanship set him apart from the game hogs so typical of his generation. Beyond that, he was a careful observer of wildlife who didn't dramatize his encounters with animals. He certainly met his share of them, having lived mainly in Asia from 1847 to 1861.

Some years have passed since I read, in Baker's book, *Wild Beasts and Their Ways*, his report of two instances when the elephant he rode in India was attacked and stampeded by a sloth bear. One bear came charging across an open space for 100 yards, with no provocation at all. The elephant spoiled Baker's shot by bolting, leaving the bear to wander away. On the other occasion, when a bear was wounded at 35 yards in heavy cover, it promptly charged with such a terrifying combination of howls and roars that again the elephant fled into the jungle, crashing through the lower branches at such speed that its riders were in great danger of injury. Sir Samuel added that sloth bears attacked natives more often than any other ani-

mal, and when I read his book it struck me that such aggressive beasts would be interesting to meet.

I had no idea, then, that I'd ever get the opportunity, but you never can tell where game trails may eventually lead you. After I'd hunted all the legal big-game species of North America, I was ready last spring to try for some of the Asian trophies. Hyderabad, in central India, was my first stop. The Nawabzada Fazluddin Khan had just started taking out visiting sportsmen, through a firm which he calls Shikarees, and I was confident that both his territory and his reasonable scale of prices would be hard to beat.

My shoot in central India began in the Singaram forest block, where I hunted under remarkably enjoyable conditions. A few weeks later, in Indo-China, I slept in a native hut with pigs running around under my bed. But in Hyderabad I shared a servant-staffed rest house with the Nawabzada, whom I soon came to know by his family nickname of Kutub. It was the most luxurious camp I ever saw anywhere. In addition to the personal servants, we had two head shikaris, or professional hunters.

The prince himself is only 29 years old, but he's a dedicated sportsman with a wide knowledge of all kinds of Indian game. Generations of know-how were behind the hunting plans Kutub and his aides made and we had plenty of action from the start.

The author waiting for shot on the Hill of the Sloth Bears



Opposite side of same hill is smoothed by an old lava flow





Fitz, right, and outfitter Kutub with sloth bears. They got one piece. Helper killed third as it charged

By the end of the first week I'd accounted for a tiger and two leopards, and had gained some experience with horned and antlered species. Except for the tiger beats, we went out only in the very early mornings and late afternoons.

The jungle animals usually vanish into their coolest retreats during the sizzling midday hours, and we did the same. Usually we had only some tea before leaving camp at daybreak. Breakfast was served when we came back from the morning hunt. Soon after that, the camp boys hung heavy matting to enclose the upstairs veranda from roof to floor. These mats were kept soaking wet, and the evaporation cooled the air. Taking advantage of this novel (continued on page 113)



Volunteer helpers haul the sloth bears down to jeep trail

Villagers, eager to help, point out sloth-bear tracks



# CRAZY BEAR

(continued from page 61)

air-conditioning. Kutub and I spent a lot of time on the veranda. We were lounging there while my second leopard was being skinned.

"What would you like to hunt next?" Kutub asked me.

"How about sloth bears?"

"Sloth bears it will be," he agreed, and outlined a try for them that was based on the mid-April weather.

April and May are the hottest months of the year in India, for June marks the beginning of the four-month rainy season, when the monsoons cool things off a bit. But the heat and drought before the rains have their compensations for the hunter. Foliage withers in the teak and mixed hardwood forests so the jungle cover is much easier to see through. The animals concentrate around permanent water instead of roving over the whole region.

With this in mind, the prince and I and our professional hunters, William Caesar and Khairuddin Hafiz Pasha, drove one of the hunting jeeps to a waterhole that afternoon. This waterhole was half a dozen miles from our camp. Only half an hour of shooting light was left when we arrived, but it would have been pointless to have been there any earlier.

The place turned out to be a cuplike depression about 100 yards wide. It was lined with huge rocks, and the only remaining water was several feet down in a narrow, steep-sided natural tank. Swarms of insects buzzing around made it seem like a beehive. I don't think that this particular waterhole struck any of us as a good bet. Even if we'd wanted to watch it all night, there was no good place for a machan, or elevated shooting platform, nor could we have built a blind close enough for night shooting without having it too conspicuous.

As things were, we moved downwind a respectful distance and watched until dark. Nothing showed up. We never went back, to this or any other waterhole, and I mention them only to note

how these bears are sometimes taken.

To me, the feature event of that evening came when we stopped at the village of Khamam Palli on our way back to camp. The jeep pulled up in a space that seemed to be the center of the tiny village, and our shikaris began a conversation in the Urdu language with an ever-growing number of the natives. When this had gone on for five minutes or so, torches were produced to light up the proceedings. A native bed was brought out, on which the prince and I were invited to sit while the conference went on. Before it broke up, at least 20 minutes later, it struck me that every inhabitant of the place had made some comment. Without having understood a word, I was sure that we'd been given enough khubber, or hunting information, to last us for quite a while. When we started back to camp I asked what we'd learned.

"Oh, nothing," I was told. "We were only trying to buy two chickens for the larder."

I'd seen the chickens put into the jeep without giving them a thought. But that whole show had been concerned with whose chickens should be sold, and what we should pay for them. To break the monotony of their lives, the villagers had simply extracted maximum mileage from an unusual event.

We didn't do any bear hunting in the next couple of days, as I had some unfinished business with horned game, but I bedeviled my companions for all the information they could give me about sloth bears. This turned out to be plenty, and the picture that emerged was of an animal that's just about the last word in wacky characteristics.

For instance, this stampeder of elephants eats flowers. They supplement his diet of wild and cultivated fruit, white ants, berries, honey, and different types of vegetation. In a few reported cases, sloth bears have eaten a bit of carrion or fresh meat, including chunks of their human victims, but it's certain that the majority of them never think of tasting meat in any form. At the same time, I'm convinced that they make more unprovoked attacks on humans than all other kinds of bears put together. Why? It may be that they're less respectful of men because they normally deal with unarmed natives who can't fight back. It also seems that sloth bears are simply hard to get along with.

**T**he flowers sloth bears especially love to eat are those of the mowha tree. Had I been in India in February, when one of these trees may produce 200 pounds of perfumed blossoms with a high sugar content, the bears could have been found feasting on the fallen blossoms which cover the ground under the branches. The flowers are also gathered by natives, who dry and press them for food and use them to make a fermented drink. Blossom-collecting villagers sometimes drive the bears away; sometimes the bears do the driving.

The name of the sloth bear, which probably came from his mixed-up appearance, is as crazy as everything else

about him. He isn't exactly a true bear, for the scientists class him in a separate genus by himself. On the other hand, he surely is no relative of the real South American sloths, which hang upside down from tree limbs and move so slowly on the ground that their name is a synonym for laziness.

The sloth bear is neither slow nor lazy. He goes to bed at sunrise, but he gets up early by jungle standards. Often he comes out when the sun is still hot, an hour or two before dark, and this in itself is peculiar. His shaggy black coat of hair is as much as eight inches long in places. Yet he can stand heat better than short-coated tigers.

**F**rom what I was told, sloth bears are careless about the noise they make when traveling through the forest. This sounds reasonable. They don't have to worry about scaring their own food, and they are rarely threatened by any other creatures, including man. So while our American bears can vanish as silently as the big jungle cats of Asia, taking full advantage of concealing cover, any ideas of stealth are foreign to a sloth bear's nature. When he meets a man he either bolts or charges. And when he charges, his yells and grunts of rage give plenty of warning that he's coming.

The sloth bear is no larger than an American black bear; in fact, some of our blacks are bigger. Comparative giants are sometimes taken—all bears are highly variable in size—but the average full-grown male sloth bear weighs a bit less than 300 pounds. A nose-to-tail length of six feet is exceptional. Only a huge one would stand three feet high at the shoulder, and most would be about four inches less. However, they appear bigger because the mane of hair is especially long above the shoulders, and this makes them look something like wild boars. They carry white horseshoe-shaped marks on their chests, and have long, grayish faces with loose, protruding lips. I wouldn't call them handsome.

For a novel reason, females often look bigger than males when you get just a quick glimpse of them through the brush. They mate every three years, instead of every other year as our American bears do, and the sloth-bear cubs, which stay with mama for two years, frequently ride on her back. A couple of well-grown cubs can make their mother look really tall. Natives seldom wait around to learn why, either, for sows with cubs are very dangerous.

I was much interested in how they attack. In an unprovoked charge, a sloth bear rarely bites. He's powerful, and the blunt claws on his front feet are often four inches long, much like those of the grizzly. As a rule, after a man is knocked down when the bear runs into him, he has his scalp ripped off by these claws. Many natives have survived these maulings. The bear is much more inclined to bite when he's wounded or trying to defend himself. I was told that when one of them is wounded when two are together, the bear that's hit is likely to attack his companion.

Sloth bears don't hibernate, and the

only really dependable thing about them is their inconsistency. All bears are unpredictable, and this is as true of sloths as of any other.

The Singaram forest block had been selected mainly for our tiger shoot. There wasn't much point in staying there when that was over, so we decided to move about 70 miles to the Public Works Department inspection bungalow in the village of Huzerabad, which is close to a much better area for bears. This is another in the great system of rest houses for travelers, built all over India in the days of British occupation. But the equipment in our base camp was so elaborate that moving was a big job. So the prince and I spent one night in a little tent camp, with only a few servants and one head shikari, on the open plains beyond the forest reserve. There we had a good blackbuck hunt while the new base was made ready.

The Huzerabad bungalow, on a main road to the city of Warangal, was in a much less primitive region than our jungle camp at Singaram, where the picturesque, thatch-roofed rest house was built on high stilts in the Burma style. The bungalow had been just as luxuriously fixed up by our large staff, but the building itself was of thick-walled, neatly painted stucco. Here, again, Kutub and I had our separate rooms and baths. These were equipped with punkaha, or large rectangles of carpet suspended from the ceiling. These swing back and forth and serve as fans in the heat of the day. They are operated by hand-pulled ropes from outside the building, and are kept wet. Curious about the punkah-wallah who kept my fan going, I looked out and saw a very small boy.

"These fans don't need big motors," I remarked to the prince.

"No," he said. "The smaller the motor, the more active the fan. But you have to change them often."

Willie Caesar, our Eurasian shikari, had come ahead of us with the main camp crew, in time to get some reports on a place where bears were unusually plentiful. The news was encouraging, but on the first morning we did nothing about it. We'd arrived at the bungalow so late that we needed sleep, and our day's hunt was started in late afternoon. As usual, Kutub drove the jeep, and Willie and Hafiz, our other shikari, came with us.

**W**hen we turned off the highway, I saw that we were in a new kind of country. Shimmering under a hot sun, the wide plains stretching ahead were dotted with herds of cattle and goats. The flat expanse was also broken by giant outcroppings of bare volcanic rock. They weren't more than a few hundred feet high, but some of the broken faces of these rocks were extremely steep.

Willie pointed to one fortreslike formation several miles to the southwest.

"That has always been a good place for leopards," he told me. "All of these hills are full of caves and big holes under rock piles that bears and leopards use for dens. This evening we'll try our luck on the one farther to the right.

It's only eight or nine miles from the bungalow."

We drove to the hut of a goatherd, close to this miniature mountain. The shikaris chatted with him briefly in Urdu. Then, as the sun was setting under spectacularly tinted clouds, we began to scout around quietly. We kept just far enough from the base of the hill to get a good view of the towering slopes. These featured a jumble of huge rocks, with only a few small patches of brush.

Looking back, there was a point about shooting in India that especially impressed me. The time spent in actual hunting was short, for nearly all game shuns daytime heat. But when we were out in those brief, magic hours of dawn and evening twilight, we almost invariably found animals of some kind, and that evening at the Hill of the Sloth Bears was no exception. We hadn't been hunting fifteen minutes before my companions spotted a bear, and immediately agreed that it was a big one.

"Shoot," Hafiz urged, "before he gets up in those rocks."

"Hold low, sir. Remember all that hair," Willie cautioned.

There was only one trouble with the advice. I couldn't see any bear to shoot at. This was surprising, as the sun had been down for only a few minutes. It wasn't really dark, but this particular twilight seemed unaccountably dim. (Before long I was to learn why.)

Now, though I used my binoculars to inspect the steep slope, I saw no sign of game. The minute that followed was a hectic one in which everybody talked at once. I gathered that the bear had just gone behind a rock.

In the same way, a Canadian guide once told me that a deer was "looking at us from behind that tree," when there were thousands of trees in front of me. For years I thought that was funny, until I found myself saying the same thing when I tried to show a deer to a friend. Anyhow, here there were so many rocks I couldn't have counted them in a long day.

Finally I managed to spot the bear. He was coming out from behind a rock, and about to move out of sight behind another. By this time he was angling up toward my right, and getting close to the skyline, a good 200 yards away. My first impression was that he looked very different from any kind of bear in North America. He appeared bigger than I'd expected, and not so black. The thought flashed through my mind that he might recently have rolled in dust. It was a case of now you see him and now you don't. I wanted no part of such snap-shooting at long range.

I spotted a more open place, just under the crest, and was ready when the bear walked into it. When I squeezed off the shot, he dropped in his tracks, then rolled over the edge of an almost vertical rock. He landed a dozen feet below in the only clump of brush in that whole area big enough to hide him.

For half a minute there was no sign of life on the hillside. Then, as if a giant loud-speaker had been turned on, the invisible bear cut loose with a har-

rowing outburst of sound. The volume and variety of these roars, grunts, moans, and howls amazed me.

I later was told that this nearly always happens when a sloth bear is hit. They have extraordinary vitality, and they yell until they expire. I'd never heard anything like it, for the tremendous shock of a high-power bullet usually acts like an anesthetic, so far as a hard-hit animal's capacity for pain is concerned. Even with a superficial wound, the average beast seems to have an instinct to hide which keeps it from making any noise.

But this sloth bear's clamor was so distressing I wanted to rush up to the brush patch and finish things at once. That was hardly practical. The face of the hill was so steep not even an alpine climber could have gone straight up to the tiny thicket in a hurry. So we waited, and after a long minute the outcries stopped. Meantime, I reflected that while these bears make loud objection to punishment, they often have no hesitation about dishing it out. The thought made me feel better.

Willie and Hafiz took off their shoes before starting out to roll the supposedly dead bear down to the bottom of the slope. They explained that the rocks were too smooth to climb with shoes on. I felt confident my crepe-rubber soles would have been safe enough. But I realized that they could get up there faster, and since it was already too dark to take pictures, there seemed little point in going along. Kutub and I stayed where we were. The others skirted the foot of the hill for 200 yards before starting to climb a little ridge leading to the skyline.

The first of the unexpected developments came almost at once. Another bear showed up, heading to our left as it crossed a rock slide, about two thirds of the way to the top. It appeared to be very black. There was no legal limit to the number I could bag, but this bear was clearly smaller than the one I'd shot. Since I had no use for more than a single trophy specimen, we let it go undisturbed.

A few minutes later the shikaris arrived at the spot where the big one had been when I dropped it. They peered over the rock into the brush where it had fallen, and clambered down to where we had heard it dying. Then, when they appeared in front of the thicket, their gestures told the story. Our "dead" bear had gone.

**I**n the brief time they followed the blood trail, which led about 50 yards in the direction the smaller bear had taken, the men were mostly behind the crags. They came into view as they crossed the slide—Kutub and I must have been watching their climb to the skyline when the big bear crossed that way—and quickly reached the mouth of a cave.

It was too dark to do any more, and this emphasized another aspect of shooting in India. If an animal can travel any distance after it has been shot in the evening, the follow-up must often be postponed until next day. After a minute or two of shouted conversation, the shikaris came down.



We thought our evening's hunting was over, but our way to camp led us around the hill, and there was more action in store for us. We'd gone only a short way when we saw another bear. Actually, there probably were two, though they didn't show up together as they appeared and vanished, halfway up to the rugged skyline.

"That looks like a good one," Kutub said. "Why don't you take him?"

"I don't want him. You shoot him," I suggested.

Here, again, I'd noticed that this bear was smaller than the first, which I was sure we'd recover. It also seemed to me that the shooting light was too far gone. So the prince took his first shot of the trip, with results almost identical with mine. The bear fell, rolled out of sight, and started the same kind of yelling.

The difference was that it didn't stay down so long. We soon saw it again, prowling among the rocks. Kutub shot whenever it appeared, until he'd used all the cartridges he had. Lack of light made this the hardest kind of shooting, and while the bear's yells got steadily weaker, we couldn't tell how many shots took effect.

To me, there was something mysterious about this whole business. Though I've always had excellent night vision, I hadn't seen the bear once throughout the last half of these proceedings. My companions spotted it promptly whenever it came out. They could still see it when Kutub found that he was out of ammunition, and asked me to finish the show if I could.

"I can hardly see the hillside, let alone anything smaller," I said.

"Do you see the dark spot near the center of that big light patch of slide rock, halfway up? That's the bear," he explained.

"Now it's moving," somebody remarked. "It's about to disappear behind those big rocks."

When I said that I still couldn't see it, Kutub turned to me in surprise. Suddenly he started to laugh. "Maybe you'd better try your other glasses," he advised me gently.

An instant later I was laughing too, though I felt like the biggest jackass in Asia. In the daytime glare I'd started out with a pair of dark sunglasses, which I'd forgotten to change. They had almost blindfolded me. As soon as I took them off, I had no trouble seeing the slide where the sloth bear had been.

After that we called it a day. There was no doubt in anybody's mind that we'd find two dead bears in the morning, but as we headed for the bungalow I thought over what had happened. I'd used the same rifle I'd used to kill big grizzly, Alaska brown, and polar bears of North America—a Griffin & Howe .30/06 with a Model 30 Remington action. I didn't feel that I was undergunned for sloth bears. Kutub's rifle was even more powerful—a Rigby of .350 Magnum caliber. In the bad light, we simply hadn't hit those bears in precisely the right spots.

When we went back, half an hour

(continued on page 165)

(continued from page 119)

after sunrise next morning, we took a trailer to carry our sloth bears to camp. We also had a couple of extra men to help with the work. We knew that no pictures could be made in the cave my bear had entered, and this whole west side of the hill was still in shadow. So Kutub and I waited for the men to bring the carcasses down to where we could get some better picture light on them. This was done, but not before one adventure the prince and I missed.

Willie and Hafiz discovered that the little cave had another outlet through which my sloth bear had gone. In what must have been a tough tracking job, they found it and Kutub's trophy as well. By that time, to keep in touch with them, Kutub and I had shifted to the base of a sun-baked face of the hill where the rocks were already hot enough to discourage us from making what seemed a pointless climb, and when our men shouted down that more help was needed to get the bears out, it was quickly forthcoming. Some natives who'd arrived from a nearby village started up the hillside, and it was then I learned how efficient the sole of a bare human foot can be. Those fellows walked like lizards up rocks so steep and smooth that I'd have detoured them with any footgear made.

They hadn't quite reached the top when we heard two shots. Hafiz, going into a cave where one of the dead bears lay, had promptly been charged by another one he'd known nothing about. He had the cream of all the sport when he managed to shoot it in time to escape a mauling, and that, I reflected later, was a lesson worth remembering. If I hadn't been quite so lazy that morning, I might have been in on this part of the show. But when we'd inspected the three fine specimens after they had been brought down, we knew that no complaints were in order. The Hill of the Sloth Bears had produced beyond all my expectations.

THE END