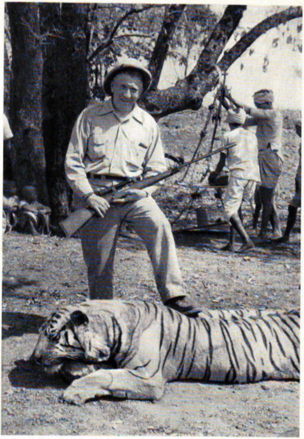
The Tiger Stalked Me

by

HERB KLEIN

O'Connor's safari partner moves on to India, where he experiences one of the most priceless thrills of all his big-game hunting



Author and tiger that had terrible halitosis—no friends. Natives tinker with scales

Have you ever crouched in the dark on a flimsy platform of twigs and rickety limbs tied together with bark and vines and heard the approach of a cattle-killing tiger almost as big as a horse? The mosquitoes drive you nuts, and you listen to the weird sounds of the jungle with ears made keen by jittery apprehension—the bark of the axis deer, the yap-yap of the jackal, the hoarse cry of a peacock, the rustle of leaves—and you smell the heavy, rancid dampness of the Indian jungle.

Then you hear the heavy, padded feet of the great cat approaching from the wrong, or blind, direction. You sit there still as a rock, oozing chill sweat, while the tiger looks you over from behind a bush a few feet away—so close you could spit in his eye, hear him breathing, and smell the warm, fetid waves of his breath.

That's the way it was with me—one of the most priceless thrills of all big-game hunting. The tiger is not terribly rare, not too difficult to bag, nor remarkably tenacious of life, but he's big and powerful enough to tear you apart with one swipe of his paw, or to snap off half of a hunter's haunch with one bite.

The time I heard the tiger stalking *me*, when I listened to his breathing and got a whiff of his halitosis, was last spring. I was in Madhya Pradesh province of India not too far from the city of Nagpur. My outfitter was a firm called Allwyn Cooper, Ltd. The name is vedy, vedy British, and when you hear it spoken you see visions of a Colonel Blimp type, a chap sipping gin and tonic, wearing a handlebar mustache, and fulminating against socialism. Actually there isn't any Allwyn Cooper. The name was cooked up by Vidya C. Shukla, a very intelligent young Indian who runs the outfit.

Vidya is one fine guy, runs a first-class outfitting operation, and is most anxious to please. I had cooks and as-

Herb and his bull gaur, or wild ox, a bad actor when wounded

sistant cooks, jeep drivers and assistant jeep drivers, sock washers and assistant sock washers, personal boys and assistant personal boys, skinners, camp managers—16 people to feed me, wash my clothes, and pick up my loot. In addition, and most important of all, were my grand guide Rao and my assistant guide Jamid, plus four excellent native shikaris, or hunters.

In India if the hunting party wants to make a drive, or a haka as it is called in Hindustani, they pick up from 50 to 200 natives from near-by villages and pay them a rupee (about 22¢) apiece to barge through the brush whooping and hollering. They are all armed with narrow-bladed, long-handled axes. Every now and then a beater or a stopper gets killed or chewed up by a tiger, but each always thinks it's going to be the other guy.

Tigers are hunted here both by driving and by shooting from an elephant or from a machan. A tiger haka is a lot like a drive for white-tail deer in Pennsylvania or in South Carolina. One simply puts a semicircular line of beaters through a patch of forest where the tiger is supposed to be while hunters wait where the tiger is supposed to come out. A line of stoppers fans out a couple of hundred yards on either side, forming a V. Sometimes the tiger comes by the gun, as the British call the hunter, but often an old, experienced cat will slip by unseen in the brush and tall grass, or he may even double back through the beater line or crash the line of stoppers like an American fullback.

Sometimes a tiger takes refuge in dense brush or high elephant grass. Then it's handy to have trained elephants to flush old stripes out. I didn't get to try that type of hunting, but it must be something. The shooting is done at short range, but from what they tell me the elephant usually isn't too happy to be cheek-by-jowl with a tiger. He's likely to bounce and rear around trying to keep his delicate trunk away from the cat's sharp teeth and claws. The hunter has to hang onto the howdah somehow and yet plug the tiger—like shooting skeet from the back of a bucking bronco. If it's all the same to you, I'd like to be included out.

My first tiger shooting came by the haka method. We flushed a big tigress and two half-grown cubs. The old girl apparently knew a thing or two about a haka. When she sensed that she was headed for a man with a rifle, she whirled and charged through the line of stoppers. She knocked one down, left him with a claw cut, and put several others up a tree. I heard the screams of the beaters and stoppers, saw the tigress take three or four long jumps like an impala through a patch of tall grass, and that was the last I saw of her.

I was still swallowing my disappointment when I heard leaves crackle and saw one of the young tigers, all black and gold, slipping through the bush like an evil dream. As I slowly lifted my .300 Weatherby, I saw the other youngster right behind him, both only 30 yards from me. I got the two tigers with two shots.

The tigress stayed around the neighborhood and made several cattle kills, but she was shrewd. Although we built machans and sat up for her, she never returned to a single gara, or kill. Apparently she'd not only heard of drives, but also of hunters sitting up and shooting at night over a gara.

Hunting in the scrub jungles of India is quite an experience for the guy used to going after game in wilderness country. The land is thickly populated by the poorest people I have ever seen. It's overrun with sacred cows that tigers prey on—cows that eat everything in sight and produce only a little blue milk and dung which is used for fuel. But the cattle owners are very philosophical about it all. If they can raise "one for me and one for the tiger," they're doing real well.

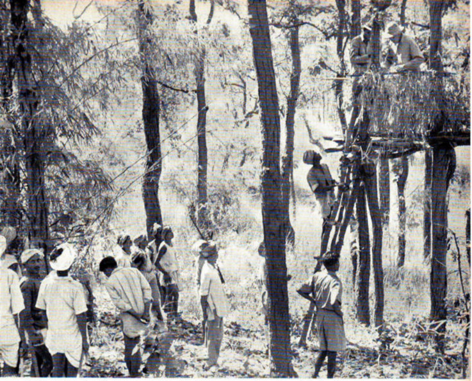
Except for his whiskers, a tiger is of little value to the natives. His skin is too thick and too hard to work for clothing, and the meat is not edible, though the fat is used for cooking. But the whiskers—ah, that's different! No guns or rat poison are available to the natives; so if you catch someone fooling around with your wife, you may consider feeding the offender a dose of chopped tiger whiskers. They work just like ground glass—after a week or two, a quiet funeral for the man who swallows them.

Next I got a beautiful nine-foot three-inch tigress and a big cub by shooting over a kill one stormy night out of a natural blind on the high bank of a dry stream. "Like shooting fish in a barrel," I told myself.

But what I had come halfway around the world for was a big he-tiger, a mean, snarling king of the jungle with a head the size of a bushel basket. I wanted to go home to Dallas, Texas, with a cat the size of a small horse. As long as I was tiger shooting, I wanted to catch myself a real bragging tiger.

So when I heard that the very king tiger of the entire region, a monster that had killed a reported 400 cows (probably closer to a thousand), had made a kill in my Motinalla shooting block, I was as happy as a debutante at

Driver with Herb's big tom. Ax is standard native armament



A high machan, like this one, seemed better after Herb's ordeal with the "bragging" tiger. His guides and beaters look on

her first dance. The natives called him the wild killer of Pakriwala, and they and the forest officer had hunted him for nine years. The victim this time was a domesticated buffalo, a big black animal with the long, backswept horns which Americans usually call a water buffalo.

So we went to the place where the gara had been found. The set-up was perfect, I was told. The carcass lay in the bottom of a nullah, or ravine. My boys built the machan on the side of the ravine so that one edge was about seven feet high and right over the kill and the other was level with the bank. As they worked, they tracked the whole place up, whooped and yelled, examined the kill, gossiped and quarreled, and spat over everything. I thought, even then, that tigers must be very different from grizzly bears. Many a time in Wyoming I have waited in blinds for black and grizzly bears to come to baits, and I knew that no self-respecting grizzly would return to a bait where the East Side Chowder and Marching Society had held a picnic.

But my half-felt misgivings were right. My shikari, Rao, and a forest officer, who was to man the electric spotlight, and I were perched on that miserable, shaking machan that very night when we heard the tiger approaching.

He came clumping noisily through the ravine's dry leaves, just as Rao had thought he would, but when he began to sniff the evidence of the picnic, he stopped cold. He didn't move for what seemed like 10 minutes. It was so still we could hear his breathing. Then he circled. A slight breeze sprang up, stirring the grass and leaves.

Then the wind died down and we could hear the tiger right behind us. He came closer, closer, sneaking, stalking us through the dry leaves. When he got to the edge of the machan, on the bank right behind us with only a bush between us, he stopped. It was as dark as the inside of a black cow, but I felt that he must have spotted us. I sat there with my companions, afraid to breathe, and too scared to move. His breathing sounded as if it were within inches of me, and I could actually smell his breath. I'll testify that this particular tiger had a very bad breath—so bad none of his best friends could possibly have dared to tell him about it—if he *had* any friends.

Finally he turned and went off. The sound of his footsteps died away, I found that the hands that clutched my .375 Weatherby Magnum were shaking and numb. Cold drops of perspiration that felt like snowballs were streaming down my back. Scared? Brother, what do you think? I don't believe my spotlight-operator breathed at all while the tiger was looking us over, and when the tiger departed, he let out his breath with an explosion that almost blew me off the machan. Only Rao was halfway calm. He thought that tigers preferred beef to men.

We waited for an hour, thinking the cattle-killer might come back—almost hoping that he wouldn't. As we sat there, I made plans. I was going to apply grizzly-bear methods to Indian tiger hunting. I'd get this one that left footprints as big as a dishpan, and I wouldn't be sitting on the ground overworking my *(continued on page 99)*

THE TIGER STALKED *ME*

(continued from page 35)

adrenal glands when I did it, either.

The tiger didn't come back that night. We knew he'd be extremely wary and that we'd have to let him alone for a while. Meantime I decided to do a bit of general hunting while the tiger forgot his fright—and I mine—and got back to killing cattle.

India is not like Africa, where I hunted last year with Jack O'Connor and Red Earley. During the day, most of India's game is in heavy brush and simply is not seen. Almost all the shooting for nondangerous game takes place in the early evening or very early in the morning. A lot, too, is shot from open jeeps at night by flashlight or by searchlight. There is a surprising variety of game in India. I shot spotted axis deer, or chital, barking deer, chikara, and big sambar, which are as large as American elk and are closely related to them since they both come from genus *Cervus*. I also took gorgeous peacocks with tails six feet long, and found them as good to eat as turkey or pheasant.

I shot the same sort of striped hyenas I had seen on the Somaliland frontier of Kenya, in Africa, and in Iran when I hunted there. India also has jackals, foxes, jungle cats, wild boars, no end of beautiful pigeons, and little jungle fowl—ancestors of our domestic chickens—that look just like gamecocks.

It was during this interval between tigers that I got my gaur (pronounced gower), an enormous wild ox which is one of the world's great trophies. Like its cousin, the big cape buffalo of East Africa, the gaur has a reputation for being a very bad actor when wounded. He has the habit of back-tracking you, waylaying you, and then grinding you into the ground until only a red splotch marks the spot. But unlike the cape buffalo, often seen in thin brush or even on open plains in daylight, the gaur is both nocturnal and a creature of heavy forest. He comes out into clearings and fields at night to feed and drink, but daylight sends him back into heavy bamboo.

But if I built up a lot of suspense about my gaur hunt—made a real cliff-hanger out of it—I wouldn't be leveling. One of my native scouts found a place where a herd of the handsome wild cattle was feeding and drinking at night. The grass was so high that the only sure way anyone could get a shot at a gaur there would be to shoot down from a machan. So we proceeded to build one 30 feet up in a tree on the side of the field where we had seen the most sign.

The plan was to sit in the machan during the night and shoot by the spotlight if the opportunity offered, but definitely to be there at the first gray of dawn. Soon a storm came up, and cool winds rushed through the branches and rocked the machan like a swinging hammock. Rain pelted us. Now and then a bright stab of lightning lit up the field. It was a night of rattling raindrops and moaning wind, and I'd rather have had mosquitoes. About 4 o'clock in the morning, when all three of us were good and seasick from the constant swaying, the storm died down. The darkness faded to gray.

At 5:30 Rao and the forest officer who was to shine the light suggested that, as we say in Texas, we'd drilled a dry hole—might as well go home and catch up on our sleep. The deputy climbed part way down the rope ladder, then reached up so I could hand him my rifle. I was about to do it when I saw a movement 200 yards across the clearing. There were four big black blobs coming out of the forest into the tall grass—gaurs.

Hastily I pulled my rifle back, got into the best position I could manage, and steadied my chilled and cramped muscles. When I could see that jet-black Lee dot in my scope sight against the dark body of the largest gaur, I eased off the shot. I heard the bullet slap, saw the animal go down. A moment later it struggled to its feet, but before I could throw another .375 solid into the creature, it collapsed. The other gaurs faded into the forest.

"Good shot," yelled Rao, and he kissed my hand—a ritual he always performed whenever I made good.

My animal was a fine bull. I guessed him to weigh from 1,600 to 1,800 pounds. A little smaller than a grown African buffalo, which will weigh more than a ton. He was as tall as a big moose—six feet nine inches at the withers, and thirteen feet six inches from his nose to the end of his tail. He was jet black except for his white stockings and a yellowish-gray forehead. The natives feasted on him that night.

But there was to be no sleep when we got back to our main camp. Our cattle-killing tiger had claimed another victim—this time a young sacred cow. The big cat had drunk the blood, eaten a hindquarter, and then dragged the carcass into a creek bottom. I was sure that if we didn't leave our scent all over the place I would have a chance of getting a shot at that old boy.

So I took charge and made arrangements just as I would if I were going after a grizzly bear. Instead of building a low machan right over the kill, we built a high one 40 yards away. Instead of tracking up the whole area around the kill, we stayed away from it. We took only four boys with us, made them work quietly, and made the rest of our staff stay in camp—much to their disgust, because it seems that everyone always wants to get in on a tiger hunt.

I had a lucky feeling when we climbed into the machan that night. We waited for hours. We listened to the whisper of the wind, the rustle of the leaves, and the cries of small creatures in the forest.

"I don't believe he's coming," my shikari whispered.

"Wait," I said, somehow sure of my luck.

Mosquitoes as big as wild ducks were biting bleeding chunks out of me, and then my belly started aching from too many dried figs I'd eaten in the afternoon.

There were no facilities in that machan for a man to do what I needed to do, and I was about to say "Let's go," when we heard the warning bark of a chital about half a mile away. Presently another barked nearer. My muscles tensed and I began to feel it difficult to breathe. Then my belly started rumbling like a sleeping elephant's, and I felt sure a tiger could hear me a mile.

Herb got chital stag between tiger hunts

Presently I heard heavy footfalls coming up the dry creek—nearer, nearer. There was a quarter-moon that night, but much of the time it was obscured by clouds. Now the moon broke through, and in the dim glow I could see a tiger moving toward the kill. He came power-gliding through the brush, as big as a truck. Then he stopped.

I trained my rifle in the direction of the big cat and nudged the forest officer to turn on the light. I knew I'd have about three seconds to shoot—if I got the chance.

The light blazed. The cat was looking right at us, and as long as I live I'll never forget the outraged look on his face. The Lee dot rested right where the thick neck joined the body. The big gun roared, and the tiger went down. For a moment we could hear him threshing around, then a long silence that started me sweating snowballs again and caused the hair on the back of my neck to bristle.

"Good shot," yelled Rao.

He was a bragging tiger, 10 feet two inches from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail—a good deal larger than the lion I shot in East Africa. That beef diet had made him husky as a wrestler, and he weighed well over 500 pounds. His head measured 37 inches in circumference just above the eyes, and his whiskers, so help me, were over five inches long—enough for four or five quiet funerals.

I was really in tall cotton, and this time when Rao kissed my hand I sure felt like kissing him back. Bellyache? Who had a bellyache? THE END