



A tornado's no excuse for holding up a tiger hunt, Singh

insisted politely. You must do first things first, and . . .

Tigers Won't Wait

By LESLIE E. TASSELL

THE PUG MARKS in the dry sand were as round as a full moon. Though I'd never seen such tracks before, nobody had to tell me what had made them. The shape spelled cat, and there was only one kind of cat in India big enough to make such prints.

They led down into the thick tangles of a ravine, or nullah. Everything down there was green and cool and dense, in contrast with the parched plain on both sides. There were rocky caves along the steep walls of the nullah, and thickets that even a buffalo would have trouble barging through. Somewhere down in that jungle the tiger was lying up, perhaps less than 300 yards from where we stood.

I shivered a little, but I was also delighted, for I figured I had that tiger as good as wrapped up. I could see his great striped pelt on the wall of my trophy room back home in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

I knew exactly how it would go. We'd buy a buffalo and tie it out; the tiger would kill it; then we'd sit up in a machan the next night and shoot the tiger. Just like that. Simple, but terrific. In a couple of days I'd be ready to hunt panthers or blackbucks, or go sight-seeing. I should have known better.

Stripes is nobody's pushover, and in hunting him, or any other big game that's worth a trip halfway around the world, there's many a slip 'twixt track and trophy. I'd relearn that lesson several times in the next 10 days.

Two days before we spotted these tiger tracks, I'd stepped down from the Bilaspur-Katni train at the hill station of Satna, more than 600 miles northeast of Bombay. Upendra Singh, my outfitter and shikari, and Arthur Reiffer, the white hunter who was to be my guide, were waiting for me. We climbed into Singh's jeep and drove off toward Nagod, along a rutted road teeming with people and cattle and carts.

AS WE bounded over the road, the jeep's wheels kicked up clouds of choking dust. Along the roadside, even the goats were taking shelter in patches of shade under the banyan and mango trees. Away from both sides of the road stretched rocky plains, dry and gray as parchment. It was only the end of April, but the thermometer stood at 112°.

Singh blasted the horn almost continuously to clear the way through the foot-and-cart traffic, and between blasts he was dressing me down politely. "Tigers have

killed four buffaloes in your block while we waited for you," he complained. "They have hunted at the edge of a village, and the villagers are terrified."

I pleaded guilty. But even though I was three weeks late, I felt I had a good alibi. "It was April 3," I told them, "and I was all set to leave for India the next morning." I had one good African safari under my belt (described in "Tick Birds Are Trescherous" and "Africa's Meanest" in *OUTDOOR LIFE* for May and June of 1956), but since this was my first trip for tigers, I was naturally pretty well keyed up.

SO THERE I was 12 hours before take-off," I went on, "when a tornado ripped through western Michigan. It killed 18 people, injured 200 more, and just about wiped out Standale, a suburb of my home city of Grand Rapids. The factory where I manufacture hardware wasn't directly in the tornado's path, but was half demolished. Naturally I postponed my tiger hunt."

Then I explained how, by driving myself and everybody else day and night, the plant was rebuilt and back in operation in a record-breaking two weeks. I didn't even wait for the insurance adjustment. On the morning of April 22, 1956, and 18 days late, I was flying to India by way of Paris, Rome, and Cairo.

From Bombay I took an overnight train upcountry to Vindhya Pradesh, formerly the state of Nagod, about 200 miles south of the Nepal border. Here a shooting block had been reserved for me.

Now that I'd finally arrived, I gave Upendra Singh a song and dance about how everybody in my country is dauntless and young in spirit and I emphasized that we get things done in spite of tornadoes or anything else.

He listened politely, and smiled when I got through. But it was plain that he felt a man should take care of first things first. Repairing a factory, he implied tactfully, would wait. Tigers wouldn't.

We stayed overnight in Nagod and left the next morning for a forest bungalow 45 miles north to set up our headquarters. We got comfortably established, with Reiffer's brother Hubert in charge, and at sunup the next day went looking for tiger sign. From reports reaching us from nearby villages, we had a pretty good idea where to look. So I wasn't surprised at midmorning when we found those pug marks in the dry sands along the edge of the nullah.

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Now that we knew where the tiger was lurking, our next step was to stake out a buffalo. This sounds simple, but you can go through a lot of trouble to buy an Indian buffalo for tiger bait.

We drove to the nearest village. We shouldn't have had any difficulty, for any sort of buffalo will do, and half a dozen old beasts were lying around, more dead than alive. But when we found the ragged herdsman and made an offer, he raised a question. "Do you want my buffalo for milk or breeding?"

"Neither," Reiffer replied. "For tiger bait. To tie out."

That fouled everything up. The man wouldn't sell for fear that the tiger might acquire a taste for his beasts and kill them all.

"But a tiger killed near this village last night and may kill again tonight," Reiffer reminded him. "Sell us a buffalo and we will destroy the tiger."

The man shook his head emphatically. "It is not my buffalo he has killed," he said. He wasn't taking any chances. We couldn't budge him, so we went looking for another owner.

We finally found one willing to make a deal. But when Reiffer started to give him instructions for staking out the bait, we hit another snag. Because of a religious taboo, he couldn't tie out a buffalo to be killed. But in the next village he knew a man of another caste who could do such chores. So we paid for the buffalo, climbed into the jeep, and went to find the other man. Finally Reiffer left instructions for staking out the buffalo near the nullah, using a chain or heavy rope so the tiger couldn't drag the bait away. Reiffer also left instructions for getting word to us if stripes killed. Then we went back to the bungalow to sleep through the unbearable midday heat.

Now that we finally had everything arranged, the tiger wouldn't co-operate. Our old buffalo got through the night unmolested, and was returned to his herd to graze. Again that evening he was staked out. This went on for three nights. Finally Upendra Singh and Reiffer just about concluded that all the tigers had left the block. Then on the fourth night we got a kill, but the tiger didn't feed, and although we built a machan and sat up over the bait, the tiger never came back.

By the following night, the blazing heat of the Indian spring would have made the bait too ripe to please stripes, so we bought a second buffalo and started all over again. We got a kill the first night this time, but again the tiger ate none of the bait. He came back the next night, and we caught a shadowy glimpse of him, but he left without feeding, and that was that. And of course you can't shine a light on stripes before he starts to feed, or you spook him. We kept buffaloes tied out for the next three or four nights, but apparently no tiger even looked at them.

Singh blamed our bad luck on my inattention. But Reiffer, who's lived all his 48 years in India and hunted since he was old enough, had another explana-

tion. He laid our trouble to the peacock feather I'd stuck in my hat the first morning. "I told you that would bring bad luck," he grumbled.

Whatever the reason, one thing was certain. Our tiger hunt was going sour. I wasn't kidding myself any more about knocking off a trophy in a couple of days. It began to dawn on me that I might not even see a tiger.

When no more of our buffaloes were killed Singh and Reiffer suggested that I put in a few days trying to get a panther, so we staked out a live goat and sat up over it. A big panther finally came to the bait but didn't kill. I fired a snapshot at him with my .257 Roberts as he moved out of the beam of our light, but inflicted only a flesh wound. The next day we used half a dozen buffaloes to drive him out of a thicket but the panther slipped away without giving us another shot. He pulled out of the area and didn't come back.

That wound up the panther hunt and we went back to tigers. After we'd waited two more nights without a kill, Reiffer made a moody suggestion. "Maybe we better get you a blackbuck."

"Maybe we had," I agreed just as moodily, for my time was running out. And when you travel about 10,000 miles to kill a tiger, after dreaming about it for a year or more, you're bound to take a skunking pretty seriously. I was about resigned to going home with no more than a few pieces of carved ivory for trophies.

Next morning, right after sunrise, we left camp to look for a blackbuck. We found a good one and I knocked him over within an hour, but my heart wasn't in it. Then, as we drove up to the bungalow with the buck in the back of the jeep, a villager ran panting up to us. Our buffalo, he reported, was finally killed. A tigress had done it—a tigress with three half-grown cubs. Checking at first light, he had surprised the four of them on the kill.

Hunting a lady tiger with cubs posed some special problems, so Upendra Singh went to his father for advice. That fine old aristocrat is a half brother to the Maharajah of Nagod, and his former prime minister, boasting the impressive name and title of Lal Sahib Lal Bhargavendra Singh. A lifelong hunter, he knows the jungle beasts and their ways about as well as any man is likely to know them, and he strongly advised us not to wait for night. The tigress and her cubs had already finished most of the buffalo, he pointed out, so they weren't likely to come back to the kill. If they did, he predicted, they wouldn't wait till dark. They'd slip in by daylight, polish off what was left, and move on at nightfall to kill again. For this tigress, the elder Singh urged a haka, an old-time beat.

I wouldn't have missed that drive for all the curry in India. The old gentleman set it up in the traditional way, as he had so often done for Indian princes and other dignitaries. At a village not far from the nullah where the tigers were, a crew of about 100 beaters was rounded up. We met them there.

The beaters were a colorful lot,

dressed in rags and tatters and armed with stout clubs, hand-forged axes, and a few muzzle-loading muskets. Bhargavendra Singh walked with dignity at their head, making a ceremony of the affair. He wore a flowing green turban, smartly fitted mauve jacket, and gray jodhpurs. In one hand he carried an ancient, symbolic tiger-hunting ax, which he swung briskly like a riding crop. Flanking him were two assistants, native shikaris in green turbans and tunics, their legs covered with old-style British puttees, and wearing handmade shoes with curled-up toes that reminded me of something out of *The Arabian Nights*. Bhargavendra Singh greeted me solemnly in Indian fashion, bringing his hands together in front of his forehead. His two shikaris saluted smartly. Our tiger hunt was ready to begin.

The gracious master of ceremonies gave me the place of honor in the lineup, directly behind him, with Reiffer and the two shikaris bringing up the rear. We started up a craggy slope toward the nullah while the younger Singh took the beaters off on another trail, to station them on the far side of the tiger and get the drive started.

It was roaring hot, and the hill was steeper than it looked. Before we were halfway up, I'd have given a tubful of rupees for a breathing spell. But my high-caste guide climbed steadily, breathing lightly as a youngster, and since I knew he was past 70, my pride wouldn't let me ask for quarter.

When we finally reached the head of the nullah, I noticed that a low machan had already been built about six feet off the ground. Reiffer and I climbed onto the platform and faced down into the ravine, which dropped steeply between broken rocky walls. Bhargavendra Singh took a position 100 yards to our left. His son came along and posted himself about the same distance to our right. Their job was to turn the tigress if she tried to break from the ravine out of my sight. Now all we needed was the tigress.

Down at the far end of the ravine I could hear shouting and a faint whacking as the beaters pounded on tree trunks with their clubs. Whatever was going to happen, we wouldn't have to wait long.

But even a short wait of this kind puts a tough strain on me. I can't truthfully say that I'm afraid of the animal I'm hunting, although common sense naturally warns me there's some danger. But what I dread, and dread greatly, is that I might miss and muck things up. When I know that a once-in-a-lifetime trophy is about to break out of the bush, I can never quite shake off the feeling that maybe I'm in the wrong league.

I felt it strongly now, knowing that the first hint of movement in the grass would mean tiger. I'd never have a more desirable prize in my sights.

I was counting on my Winchester Model 70, .375 H. & H. Magnum, loaded with 300-grain Silvertip ammunition. That's a powerful dose of medicine, but none too much for a cat nearly as big

as a small horse. My rifle was scoped with a 4X Lyman All-American, so at least I knew my equipment was equal to the job, and the beaters were doing their work well. The rest would be up to me.

Down in the nullah, the jungle was green and dense, but in the open area in front of me the trees had lost their leaves, and the only cover was dead, waist-high grass. I'd have no trouble seeing the tiger if she showed herself here.

I was telling myself she'd break out in another five minutes, maybe 10, when off to the left I heard a sudden savage snarl, followed by a mighty roar of rage and defiance, then the crash of a muzzle-loader. The tigress had tangled with one of the beaters and he had proved himself a brave man by trying to turn her. We could only hope that he was still alive.

The echoes of his shot died away and the jungle was as still as a grave. The beaters had stopped shouting and it seemed that there wasn't a living soul



Bhargavendra Singh, who led royal-style drive, checks dead marauder with author

down in the nullah. Reiffer leaned close to me and whispered, "Everybody has climbed. They don't want to run into a wounded tiger on the ground."

Time ticked away, agonizingly slow. I feared the tigress must have broken out of the beat and our hunt was finished. Then, at the end of five minutes that seemed like half an hour, a beater whooped "Ha-cha," less than 300 yards in front of us. Others joined him and the thud of clubs on tree trunks resumed. The noise came nearer. As the fan-shaped beat closed in, Reiffer whispered, "To your left!" In that same instant I saw her, coming through the dead grass.

She was bigger than I'd expected, and for a second she took my breath away. She was walking, not running, carrying her head low and swinging it arrogantly from side to side. Her great striped body cleared the top of the grass and she was all black-and-gold satin,

rippling in the bright sun. She was the most beautiful animal I'd ever seen, and for a moment I forgot her countless cruel kills. I suppose I might have even forgotten to shoot, but just then she swung her head my way, her great savage eyes glaring straight at me, and she jolted me back to reality.

She was only 25 yards off by the time I found her chest over the top of the post in my scope, and I drove a 300-grain Silvertip into her.

It ripped a sliver off her jaw and shattered her right shoulder. But it wasn't a knockdown shot, not on a tiger, although it would have killed her ultimately and must have hurt like blazes. She leaped straight into the air with a hair-raising roar that was half cough, half scream. Then, standing erect, she spun around, cuffing and clawing savagely at whatever had belted her.

I slammed a second shell into the breech, and my next shot caught her in the spine as she stood erect with her back to me. This one flattened her and she thrashed and rolled in the grass, snarling horribly. I glanced at Reiffer and he nodded. "Better give her another," he said. "Some beaters are down there near her."

I put the third one in her chest. She tried to get up but couldn't. Clawing weakly at the grass, she twitched a few times, and then snarled no more. I'd killed my first tiger.

We still had to reckon with the three half-grown cubs. I hoped to get pictures when they broke out, so we stayed on the machas. My shooting had put the beaters up the nearest trees again, but in about five minutes they came down. Then we heard another musket blast, and one of the shikaris shouted that the cubs had broken past him and were gone.

We climbed down, and Reiffer and I slapped each other on the back. He told me I'd shot very well—which was a little more than I deserved.

The tigress measured nine feet three inches, which is good for a lady tiger. When we skinned her we found a clue to why tigers sometimes turn man-eater.

Just under the skin of her neck we dug out a big lead slug, drilled into her some time ago from the muzzle-loader. Beneath the skin of her other shoulder, we found an almost identical slug. They were at least .75 caliber, hammered by hand from a thick sheet of lead. With the light load of powder that was behind them, these slugs couldn't possibly have killed the tigress unless an extremely lucky shot had put them into a vital area at very close range.

They must have given her a bad time for a while, and left her with a lasting grudge against men. After this kind of provocation, it's no wonder that stripes sometimes decides to hunt men.

Before I left India, I made Upendra Singh a promise. If I go tiger hunting with him again, I'll do my best to steer clear of tornadoes and be on time. Because next time, maybe even the last tiger won't wait.

Oh, yes, I also made Reiffer a promise. Next time no peacock feather. THE END