

CORBETT NATIONAL PARK

Uttarakhand, India



Area: 600 sq km (core area of 322 km)

Temperature range: 4°C in winter to 42°C during summer

Altitude: 400 - 1200 meter above the sea level

Best Time to Visit: February to May



Death rules supreme in the woods. Thick cover of sal trees, unabated growth of lantana bushes, and dense long grass - nowhere does life sit as precariously as it does here. There are patches, which even daylight cannot penetrate, the vision is minimal, and one has to rely on instincts alone. One slip of toe, single faulty step, or one bad judgment can send you reeling into the jaws of death. Even predators can become the prey. But, is there no possibility for the man to watch these mysteries of wildlife unfold, from a self-inflicted periphery.

Welcome to the wild stretches of Jim Corbett National Park, the first wildlife reserve of India, extending over an area of more than 500 sq km in the Himalayan foothills. Thanks to trained guides and State tourism department, you need not be too adventurous to stay in the middle of jungle - now strewn with tourist lodges - and witness the wildlife in jeep/elephant safari.

And a brief stay here should remain a fond memory for the years to come. For, to spot a leopard perched licking his paws atop a tree; to watch a regiment of pachyderms frolicking in muddy water; or to even hear a tiger growl late in the night, indeed make a gripping bedtime story for your grandchildren.

The tourist season begins in November every year and closes in June. The first two-three months are ideal for bird watching. During this season, one can spot over 500 species of winged creatures here; prominent among them being greylag, barheaded goose, grebe, snipe, sandpiper, gull, great pied hornbills, warblers, finches, and various wagtails. Besides these, the birdlife here includes parakeets, flycatchers, babblers, cuckoos, robins, and bulbuls.

The onset of March is best suited for animal viewing. Corbett has the highest density of Tiger in the country, approximately one every 10 sq km. Nonetheless, tiger is an elusive cat, and its sighting is rare for amateurs. In Corbett, too, one often may come across alarm calls made by birds and monkeys, indicating the presence of a predator in the vicinity, but to spot the majestic animal can still remain an ambition.

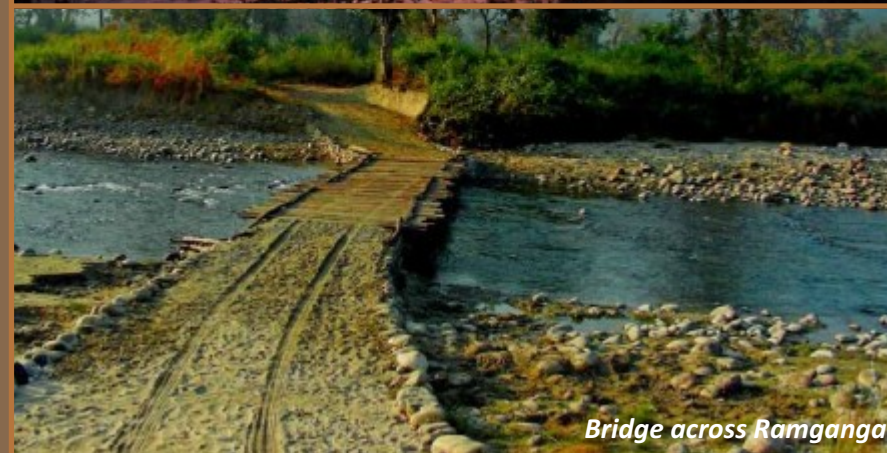
Even those groups who camp overnight near a waterhole on full moon nights, lament that the closest they came to a tiger was its growling voice in the dead of night. But guides believe that normally, most groups become too excited after seeing as much as a fresh set of pugmarks. One should be very patient and quiet to outwit the king of jungle. Not every pugmark can lead you home. It is only in Ranthambhor that tigers are well acquainted with jeep and other vehicles, and can be spotted even on the road. A different set of rules applies in Corbett, where incidence of poaching is on the rise. This advice is worth considering for those planning a visit to Corbett.



On safari in the mist



Sunrise over Ramganga



Bridge across Ramganga

Elephant herds on the other hand are far easier to spot. In a pachyderm family, calves are the most enjoyable to watch. Here one should not forget that an elephant herd with calves is perhaps the most dangerous encounter in the wild, for elephants are possessive of their young. There have been many instances when they charge at the jeep. So a safe distance from the herd is always advisable.

To spot a leopard, one needs to be more adventurous, and go a little higher on the hilly terrain. Leopards in Corbett are well fed, thanks to a regular supply of the simian prey, but just as elusive as tigers. Other feline species found in the Park are jungle cats and caracal. Wild boars, bears, wild dogs, jackals, spotted deer, hog deer can also be spotted.

Reptiles basking in the swampy banks of the Ramganga are also a delight to watch. Crocodiles, gharials (*Gavialis gangeticus*), and sometimes rock pythons are spotted easily. Among venomous reptiles, vipers, cobras, and kraits inhabit the park.

Shisham (*Dalbergia sissoo*) and khair (*Acacia katechu*) trees are found in the middle reaches, while the upper reaches of the mountains are full of bakli (*Anogeissus latifolia*), chir (*Pinus roxburghii*), gurail (*Bauhinia racemosa*) and bamboo trees. The Park is dotted with lantana shrubs, a species that is a great cause for concern. Imported years ago from America, the lantana shrub ensures that nothing else grows near it.

The Ramganga river flows through the entire length of the park and little forest streams and rivulets tumble through the ravines. The Ramganga is rich in the magnificent mahaseer-- a fine sporting fish prized by anglers, though angling inside the park is not permitted. It is also rife with gharials (a long-nosed species of crocodile) that can kill human beings. One notice at Ghairal that warns against swimming in the Ramganga needs a mention here. It says: "Survivors will be prosecuted".



Sambars quenching thirst



Elephant Herd



A lone tiger at the river