

KANHA NATIONAL PARK

Madhya Pradesh, India



Ride the Blue Elephant!

Area: 940 sq km core area.

Best Time to Visit: February to June

Altitude: 600-900 m above sea level

Closed: 1 July to 30 September



*The herds are shut in byre and hut
For loosed till dawn are we.
This is the hour of pride and power,
Talon and tush and claw.
Oh, hear the call!- Good hunting all
That keep the Jungle Law!*

- Rudyard Kipling, Jungle Book

Kipling sure had a way with words. And if you want to see where he got the inspiration for those words, come to Kanha. The largest wildlife sanctuary in Asia, Kanha National Park was one of the first Project Tiger reserves in India. It is, in many ways, Project Tiger's biggest success story, with the tiger population having doubled since 1976. Over 1,945 sq km of bamboo thickets, extensive grasslands and dense sal forests make up Kanha- a series of plateaus which stretch across the eastern segment of the Satpura ranges in Madhya Pradesh. This is the land of the tiger, the leopard, and the wolves which inhabit the pages of Jungle Book.

Kanha is a region immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his Jungle Books and thought by many to be the definitive tiger reserve in India. The physical beauty of Kanha adds to its mystique. Trails wind through dense bamboo forests and vast grassy meadows, home to the exotic Barasinga (swamp deer), which were saved here over the last 30 years from human-inflicted extinction. The grasslands are also favorite hunting grounds for tigers.

Kanha has the most diverse and frequent wildlife viewing any wildlife trip. Here, you'll encounter wild boars, jackals, blackbucks and countless exotic birds, and the largest numbers of wild cats, tigers and leopards.

On a morning trip, watch on elephant-back as an elegant tigress calmly shades herself beneath a tree. Because elephants and tigers have a mutual respect — neither benefits from tangling with the other — it is on elephant-back that enthusiasts can view tigers in the closest and most unobtrusive proximity. Watch in awe as the tigress gazes frankly at you for a moment, and then closes her eyes, peaceful as a house cat snoozing on a windowsill.

Seeing a wild tiger so close that you could observe her markings, her breathing, even the size of her monstrous teeth, might be a once-in-a-lifetime thrill. When she finally saunters back into the jungle you'll feel that you have just witnessed a private miracle.

A symbol of beauty, strength and sanctity in India since the times when Hindu deities are said to have trod the fertile subcontinental soil, the tiger holds an undisputed place in history. For the future, the role the stately monarch will play depends on the vassals who serve him, and who have the awesome potential of either strengthening — or silencing — his reign forever.

If the natural splendour at Kanha is to be fully enjoyed, a visitor may have to stay there at least for four days. The best time for visit is from Feb to Jun.



A brief respite



The best way to discover the park

HISTORY

The area that is now the Kanha National Park, was once a sportsman's paradise, as borne out by Dunbar Brander who wrote in his epic book, Wild Animals in Central India: "This tract contained as much game as any tract I ever saw in the best parts of Africa in 1908... I have seen 1,500 head consisting of eleven species in an evening's stroll."

Both the Banjar and Halon valleys used to be the exclusive hunting grounds of the British. The area then supported the swamp deer or hardground barasingha in such large numbers that they virtually dominated the landscape. Over hunting led to the forests being closed to shikar in 1931 and it was gazetted as a sanctuary in 1933. In 1955 a 250 sq. km. area was declared the Kanha National Park, primarily to save the hardground barasingha, exclusive only to India and severely threatened with extinction (numbers had fallen to 550).

By now Kanha was fairly well known and administrators were always on the lookout to expand its protected area. Consequently land from surrounding areas was continually added and today the Kanha Tiger Reserve is a 1,945 sq. km. park and a prime breeding habitat for the endangered cats. In the hot and dry summers all water sources dry up except for a few perennial streams or ponds. One such is a lake near the main meadow called Shraavan Tal.

Legend has it that Raja Dasrath of Ayodhya shot an arrow while hunting deer and accidentally killed a young man called Shraavan, who was out collecting water for his aged, blind parents. The good king had mistaken him for a deer drinking at the lake. When the king sorrowfully carried Shraavan's body to his parents they both died instantly of shock and grief. According to the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, much of what followed in the Kings' life was governed by the death of Shraavan, for which he and his family paid a heavy personal price.

If you're lucky



Tiger at the river

Tiger being chased by an Elephant



Wild Boar family

WILDLIFE

There is every chance of seeing a tiger on early morning elephant rides, or from vehicles both in the morning or evening. Barasingha deer, star attraction of Kanha, often adorn their antlers with tufts of grass in the rutting season. They are not exactly easy to see, but sightings are possible. Once restricted to the Kanha meadows the deer can now be seen in other meadows as well.

Mammals such as the leopard, jungle cat, sloth bear, wild dog (dhole) and the mongoose are usually encountered by sheer chance. Jackals are more frequently seen patrolling their turf, usually in search of fawns or other small prey. Gaurs prefer highlands and the most reliable sightings are to be had in the Mukki range. Only the largest tigers will try to bring down a bull gaur. Chital deer can be seen in herds numbering hundreds. Wildboar, preyed upon by leopards and tigers, are common almost everywhere.

Four-horned antelope or chausingha, blackbuck and nilgai can also be seen, but less frequently. The Hanuman langur (a primate) and palm squirrels are ubiquitous. Some animals are difficult to sight. These include the hyena, blackbuck, chevrotain (mouse deer, only 300 cm. tall!), porcupines, sambar and barking deer (or muntjac), (found in small numbers). Pythons and cobras, though common, are difficult to spot.

Kanha is a birdwatchers dream come true. Dabchicks, Egrets, Whitenecked Storks, Lesser Adjutants, Black Ibis and Blackwinged Stilts are among the more common species to be seen near waterbodies or streams near Kanha, Sonph, Kisli and Mukki. Resident raptors such as the Crested Serpent Eagle, Crested Hawk Eagle, Crested Honey buzzard, Shikra and Kestrel can be sighted hunting and nesting in magnificent, tall trees. Nocturnal birds including Nightjars, Barn Owls and Brown Fish Owls may also be spotted.



WHAT YOU GET TO SEE

As with other wildlife areas, early mornings are the most rewarding. Silent rounds on elephant back provide you with an incomparable feel of the forest, its smells and sounds. Tiger trackers locate elephants and the park authorities offer to take tourists to the spot when one is sighted. But in recent years this practice has come in for considerable criticism from conservationists and animal rights activists who rightly point to the cruelty and danger to the tiger, which is often kept away from water or food sources for hours by a phalanx of elephants.

The tiger tends to stay quiet to conserve its energy during the day. But it patrols its territory at dawn and dusk, which is when you stand the best chance to spot it from a vehicle.

Tracking tigers on elephant back can be an exhilarating experience. One sets out early in the morning from Kisli, Kanha or Mukki to a flat nullah or a grassy glade.

Anticipation is nine-tenths of the pleasure of being out in the forest and visitors very often come across such rare and delightful sights as a leopard striding across a road in broad daylight, or a monitor lizard or python basking in the early morning sun.

Gaur, the world's largest ox, prefer to keep to hilly tracts watered by perennial springs. In the evenings they normally come out to graze in nearby meadows.

Mukki, is probably the best area for gaur. Sambar, chausingha and nilgai also frequent the areas and sloth bear too. Birds like the Marsh Harrier are also found at these elevations.

For a breathtaking view of the Kanha expanse and the Banjar Valley, a late afternoon drive out to Bahmnidadar (850 m.) makes for an unforgettable outing.

The famous Shraavan Tal, an ancient earthen tank in the central Kanha meadows, is a very good spot to birdwatch and is a vital and well-frequented water source.



Kanha deer herd



Black Bisons in combat



Indian Cormorant