



BY SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI

THE LONG WAITS, THE SILENCE AND THE ETERNAL BEAUTY OF THE WILD MAKE THE REALM OF WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY EQUALLY ADDICTIVE AND AWE-INSPIRING. AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHER, SUDHIR SHIVARAM SHARES HIS STORY



Sudhir Shivaram often speaks of a personal zone of safety that protects an animal in the wild. This works in the dimensions of both space and time – any sudden move by an outsider

into this zone can trigger an animal's fight or flight response. He calls this the Circle of Fear.

'If you enter this zone suddenly, chances are it may either run away, or, in the worst case scenario, it will charge at you. I take my time. Once an animal gets used to me, I slowly enter the zone where it continues to exhibit its natural behaviour and take my shots. Once you are able to break that circle of fear and the animal knows you are not a threat, it will continue its normal business and that helps to capture behavioural aspects.'

And this law of the jungle that would have made Kipling proud is what gives Sudhir's signature images a credibility that goes beyond the obvious. They draw you into the frame within intimate distance of the subject in its habitat. They capture nuances in animal behaviour that we don't often see, that can only be the handiwork by someone privy to their habits, an inside man who is willing to wait for his presence to be accepted into that Circle of Fear.

A self-taught photographer ('what I know is from reading books on photography'), Sudhir quit his IT career to pursue photography full-time. 'Even while I was in the IT field, I was into photography. My seriousness in the field of wildlife photography actually grew parallel to my responsibilities at work. During my workshops and photography-related travel, my mind was occupied with what was happening at work and while I was at work I thought constantly about photography. At one point, I felt that I was not doing justice to either role. I had a long discussion with my wife and we decided it would be a worthwhile risk to move full-time into pursuing my passion for photography and teaching, and so here I am,' he says.

Sudhir invests an immense amount of background research on the subjects he photographs and it shows. It's almost as if he brings in the algorithm of logic into the unpredictability of creativity and the result is a photograph that is at once spontaneous and conscious. He also conducts wildlife photography workshops and photo-tours where he teaches the craft in wildlife sanctuaries and reserves, including at the Masai Mara migration.

Sudhir Shivaram talks to us on a break during one such tour in Bandhavgarh National Park, where he has been waiting for days on end for two tiger cubs to grant him an audience.





EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW -

**The ethics of wildlife photography is a subject that is close to your heart. Why is it of importance today?**

One of the major issues we face today is lack of awareness. Photography has become an affordable pastime. Every other person picks up a camera, goes into the wild, takes a few shots and calls himself a wildlife photographer. In the process, the most basic tenet of wildlife photography is ignored – respect the animal and give it space in its own territory. Take birds, for example. They are most vulnerable when they are nesting. But photographers try to get in close proximity and disturb a nesting bird just to get a good picture. That is why for beginners who attend my workshop and in my posts on social media, I bring up the critical aspect of ethics hoping people will understand and follow them.

**Wildlife photography typically involves long waits. How do these moments actually pan out?**

In December, when I was here at Bandhavgarh, I captured on camera three-month old tiger cubs. In early May, again, I was here and was able to get some amazing videos and images of the same cubs playing in water. Now on this visit, I want to see them again and show them to my group but the cubs have been elusive. Every morning over the past four days, we have been spending time in the particular zone where they were last seen. We wonder where the cubs are, what they may be doing and why they do not emerge. While we sit there waiting for them, we don't move around a lot. The predominant worry is whether we will sight and photograph them before the safari time ends. When we get to the closing time of the safari we plan the strategy for the next safari.

On this visit, in fact, we have given up other tiger sightings for these cubs. This morning, while driving, we came across a particular tiger and got a few shots. We knew that it would come up to a specific waterhole. Every other vehicle went ahead there and had excellent sightings for nearly thirty minutes. We skipped it because that was not the image we had in mind. We are still waiting for the cubs.







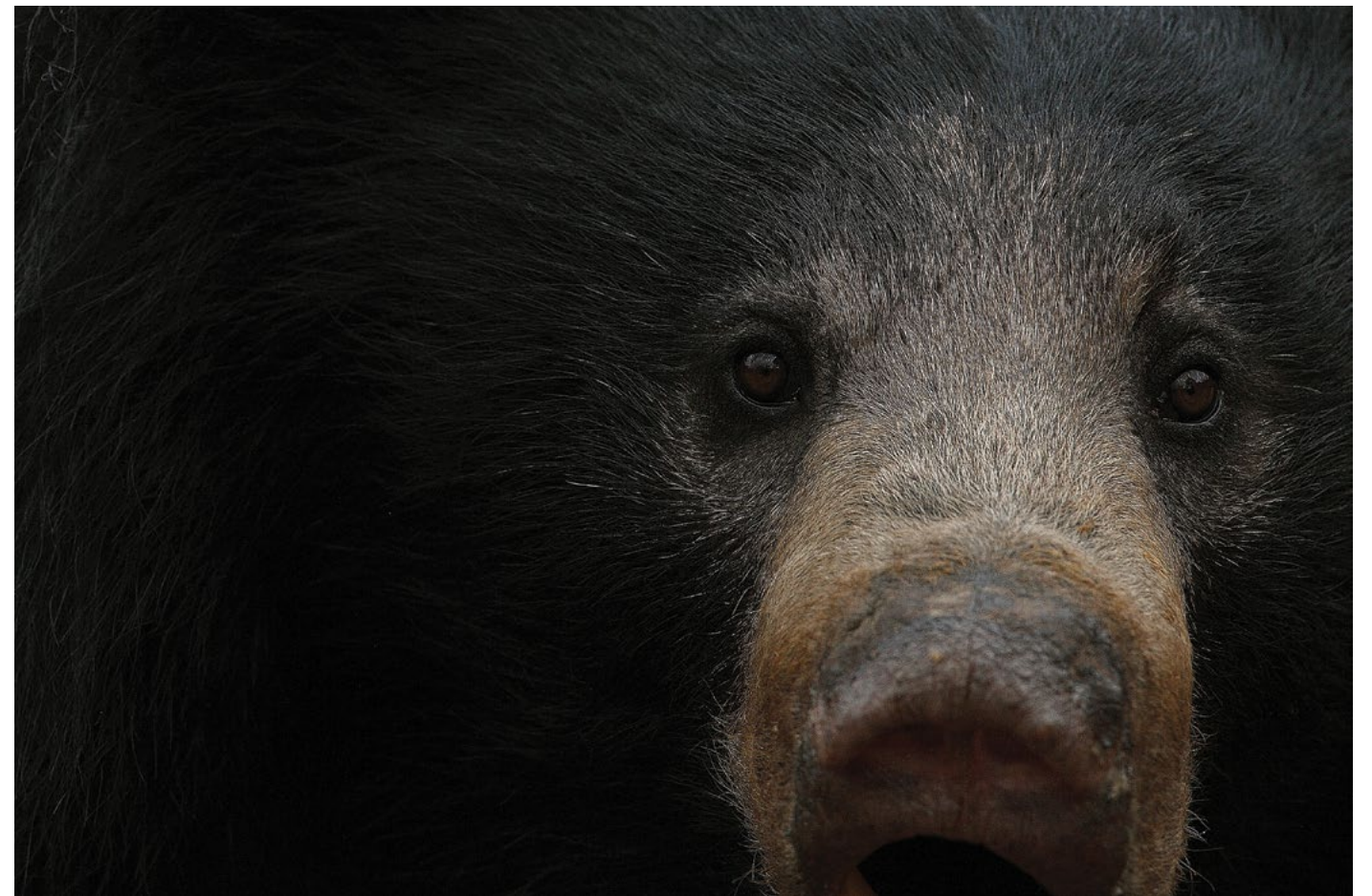
**Which have been some of your most challenging images to shoot and how much of pre-visualisation and long waits went into them?**

The image of the two tigers looking at the Gaur depicts the longest wait of my life – it took ten years! I started wildlife photography in 1996. Every single month since, on alternate weeks, I used to visit the forests of Karnataka. But I was yet to see a tiger in the wild. In 2006, I visited the Bhadra Tiger Reserve, where, because of certain issues, wildlife was at its lowest. When we were driving down, I saw a herd of Gaur or the Indian Bison crossing the path in front of us. I was excited and began shooting my images. Then my driver told me to forget the Gaur and look at the two tigers nearby. It was my first tiger shot and the image went on to be shortlisted for the finals of the BBC Wildlife Photographer that year. Another time at Nagarhole, I spotted this leopard on a branch with its kill. After taking some shots, I returned

the following morning, to find it still there, on the same branch, sleeping off the meal. It stayed up there for a whole twelve hours. This image won me Sanctuary's Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2012.

The image of pelicans and darters was taken early one morning in Bharatpur. It was also a pre-visualised shot where I saw two darters on a tree in the backdrop and two pelicans in the foreground. When I looked at the whole scene through my 800 mm lens, I pre-visualised the shot as one where the pelicans swim in and turn in my direction. When I took the shot and saw it on playback mode, the first thought that came to my mind was that this was a National Geographic cover shot. And it did make it to the cover of National Geographic's September 2013 issue! That was one of my proudest moments as a wildlife photographer. The cover went on to win the Yellow Border Award for the best cover across 14 language editions of the magazine worldwide.









**What is the one aspect of wildlife or nature that makes you want to return to the forest again and again? Is it a search that is urgent and immediate, or a journey that is slow and long?**

I think, the latter, because my current profession is to travel to the same destination often, I like to watch a particular animal and observe a particular individual's growth. It's a personal connection, built over time. There is a tigress I have observed since the last season and she has given us some amazing images. This season, from the time I have come, I have been disappointed about not spotting her. Yesterday morning I had a 30-second glimpse of her and I was excited to see that she was fine and healthy.

The cubs I referred to earlier, I have watched them grow. Even though we can't identify them immediately, if we see them in their typical territory, we know they could be the same individuals. We even have nicknames for each of them.

**Have you felt a specific moment of awe and a certain oneness with nature when you chose to put away the camera?**

Yes, several times. There is a set of images of cubs playing in water. Once I got my shots I kept the camera aside and watched these cubs play. We wildlife photographers can sometimes get so engrossed in getting so much right that we lose the enjoyment of what we see before us. Instead of cribbing about the shots we can't take, we need to enjoy the scene as it happens.