

## On the trail of the wild buffalo

By Kishor Rithe and Ashish Fernandes  
August 2002

*Kishor Rithe of the Satpuda Foundation and Ashish Fernandes  
of Sanctuary travel to central India in search of the last wild buffalo.*

The air was moist and humid and sweat poured off us as we climbed the rough dirt road that wound up the thickly forested hill. We had been walking for a little over an hour and were now deep into the forest. Tall bamboo clumps towered 15 m. above us, interspersed with the gnarled trunks of ancient forest giants. Tiger scat in the middle of the road drew our attention and, as we started to move on, there was a flash of brown in the canopy... a giant squirrel, leaping nimbly from branch to branch until it reached the sanctuary of its nest. That was to be the first of eight giant squirrel sightings in the Kolamarkha forest, one of India's richest and least protected, in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra.

Together with Vishal Bansod and Nishikant Kale of the Nature Conservation Society, Amravati, we were on an expedition to ascertain the status of the wild buffalo *Bubalus bubalis* in the border areas of Chattisgarh and Maharashtra near the Indravati river. Experts have been bemoaning the plight of central India's wild buffalo for over three decades now. The animal's numbers continue to plummet, with the latest estimates placing their population at less than 75, in the Udanti Sanctuary and the Indravati National Park. Indravati is estimated to hold about 40 of these animals in three separate clusters. The animal is now believed to be extinct from the Bhairamgadh and Pamed Sanctuaries in Chattisgarh, and unless immediate protective action is taken, its eventual extinction is only a matter of time.

We had left the Indravati Tiger Reserve, on the opposite bank of the river, the previous day, after interacting with the forest department team, led by Mr. Dongaonker and Mr. Dwivedi, the energetic Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCF). Indravati has been one of India's most neglected tiger reserves and high biotic pressure combined with hunting has severely reduced animal densities, to the point where sighting even three chital was a rarity and langurs are not seen any more. We were relieved to learn that the Naxalites, who use the forest as a refuge and training ground, had recently declared a ban on hunting and felling, with strict fines for offenders. The forest staff say that the ban has made a difference, with larger groups of chital and nilgai more easily visible now. We ourselves saw a herd of about 15 chital near the Sallepalli *maidan*, as well as a group of seven nilgai near Pillur. Hopefully, these numbers will continue to rise and in a wonderful habitat like Indravati, it should be possible to see much larger herds.

The Naxalite presence and their capacity for violence does pose a constraint on patrolling and management. While we would have been perfectly safe on our own, the forest staff suggested that because we were with forest personnel, it was not advisable to enter the Sendra range, where the wild buffalo are found. We regretfully decided therefore to cross the river and explore the Maharashtra bank of the Indravati, in the Kamlapur, Dechli and Aseralli ranges of the Sironcha division instead, particularly the area on the Maharashtra side of the river corresponding to the Sendra range. This area has hitherto been ignored by researchers and conservationists alike and there is consequently very little data on the status of wildlife here.

The nearest river crossing was at Bhopalpatnam, where our Gypsy strained its way across the 500 m. wide sandy bed of the river and through knee-deep water. We halted that evening at the quarters of the Kamlapur Range Forest Officer. Early the next morning we set out for the Kolamarkha Elephant Camp in the forest department jeep. Mr. V.T. Patki, Conservator of Forests, South Chandrapur, offered us the use of the forest

department jeep and assured us of all the help we needed from the local staff. This offer was backed up by DCF Yashveer Singh, who ensured that we were well looked after.

Though there have been sporadic reports of wild buffalo in the forests on the Maharashtra side of the border with the Indravati National Park, there is very little information on these areas. The same is true for much of Gadchiroli's forests, the "Naxalite problem" being quoted as the reason for the absence of conservationists and researchers. With so little focus on the area, it is hardly surprising that despite being Maharashtra's most heavily forested district, it has only two tiny, poorly-equipped sanctuaries, namely Bhamragadh and Chaprala.

We set off on our trek into the hills as soon as we reached the Elephant Camp. As we climbed, the vegetation underwent changes. There are three different species of bamboo in these forests. The densest bamboo was in the middle elevations, replaced at a higher elevation by mixed tree species comprising *sag*, *ain*, *salai* and *tendu*. These were interspersed with fruit trees such as *mahua*, mango and *charoli*. The trail we followed led to a plateau, where the tree cover thinned out and was interspersed with productive meadows. In places, the grass was two metres high and had a wonderful fragrance, like biscuits being baked... a reminder that we hadn't eaten since the previous night!

There was plentiful evidence of gaur and sambar and we also found some old hyaena scats. We had stopped to examine some gaur hoof marks when a short, sharp, bark-like call echoed through the forest... Laxman, the *mahout*, said it was the call of the mouse deer. Sceptical, we asked him for a description, and were pleasantly surprised when it tallied with the real size and features of the secretive deer. There was definitely no dearth of large girth trees, in which the creature often makes its home. As the hours passed, Laxman turned out to be a veritable mine of information, having spent his whole life there. He had often seen wild buffalo on the river banks, but fewer now than in the early days. They visit the forests in Maharashtra frequently, grazing up to two or three kilometres from the river. A year ago, he said, a tiger had been sighted at the Elephant Camp itself. With every step, the area seemed to get richer. The guards confirmed that giant squirrels were commonplace and they also reported seeing flying squirrels. A diversity of fruit trees obviously provides a rich feeding ground for these furry denizens of the tree-tops. The birdlife was also rich, though somewhat thin when we were there, thanks to the steady drizzle. Even so, we saw Paradise Flycatchers, pittas, Brahminy Mynahs, Malabar Pied Hornbills and that fabulous forest hawk, the shikra. The forest was richly watered, with several perennial water sources, which would account for the diversity of faunal life despite the high hunting pressure.

We returned to the Elephant Camp by the mid-afternoon, exhausted, wet but in high spirits. The camp is situated at an old forest outpost of British vintage, ringed by thickly forested hills. No one comes here, the *mahouts* told us, except for occasional roving groups of *junglewallahs* – Naxalites. After a snooze on the bamboo cots (that might as well have been feather beds for the way we slept!), we decided to visit the giant squirrel nest in the hope of spotting it again. By the time we reached the spot, however, it was almost dark and we saw nothing. On our return, we came across dozens of nocturnal spiders scurrying across the path, so many that we had to take great care not to tread on them!

The next morning, we started early for the Garewada camp on the banks of the Indravati. We split up to scout both banks of the river, for two kilometres up and downstream. The soft sand made it difficult to distinguish hoof marks clearly, but we did come across several tracks of varying ages, which by their size and depth indicated wild buffalo (much larger and deeper than domestic cattle). We discussed the possibility that they might all be

from the same group of about four or five individuals but could not be sure. We came across one spot on the Maharashtra side of the river that was frequented by the animals. Here, the sand was littered with characteristic huge dung heaps. However, the spot was disturbed on account of the transportation of *tendu* leaves and the dung was at least a week old.

We set up camp on the river bed itself, at the junction where a tributary flowed into the Indravati. The beauty of the place was quite over-powering... the river bed was vast, in some places well over half a kilometre wide, with beautiful white sandy banks interspersed with rock-edged blue-green pools and ringed by thickly forested hills. According to the local *Gonds*, muggers and otters are found in the river. Most experts believe this to be one of the most remote and isolated riverine stretches anywhere in peninsular India, but if 'developers' have their way, that will not last long.

The infamous Bhopalpatnam dam is slated to come up bang in the centre of this stretch. If it does, it will mean the certain extinction of the wild buffalo. In addition, the proposed Bhopalpatnam bridge across the Indravati would also pose a grave threat to this forest as it would provide increased access to professional poachers, timber smugglers and other merchants of doom.

That afternoon, after a crunchy meal (sand in the food!), we chalked out our plan of action. Buddhakar and More, the two foresters with us, agreed that it would be better to scout further downstream, beyond Penkasa, where human disturbance was less. Our spirits were low by now, it seemed as if we were only destined to see the animals' dung and hoof marks!

As evening approached, we set off for Penkasa, where we had seen hoof marks of the buffalo a month ago on a recce. To our dismay, on our arrival, we saw a group of *tendu* labourers trampling all over the area. We learned from them that a group of five buffalo had been sighted four days earlier at a spot further south.

We headed in that direction, following a rapidly vanishing track. We had to stop several times to drag branches and bamboo off the road and had to chop our way through fallen trunks on three occasions. Our slow progress had us worried because there was an ominous build up of grey clouds on the southeastern horizon and we were racing against the setting sun. Eventually, we came to a point where a deep *nullah* made further progress in a vehicle impossible, so we left it there and began to walk.

The track climbed gradually. Just as we were beginning to give up hope, the trees cleared and we caught a glimpse of the river to our left... and directly opposite us were four black shapes, almost totally submerged in a serene pool in the riverbed! Hardly believing our luck, we verified through the binoculars that these were indeed wild and not domestic buffalo. The massive spreading horns of the male left no room for doubt. As we watched, he moved aside, revealing a young calf!

After motioning the rest of the party to be quiet and stay put, we attempted to find a good spot from where we could take a few pictures. Rapidly fading light and an overcast sky did not permit us to obtain any reproducible pictures, but it was enough for us to know that the wild buffalo of Bastar had a home in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district as well.

After about half an hour, we thought it is best to leave so as not to disturb the herd, in the hope that they would return the next day. Almost as though they had read our minds, the group stirred and began to clamber out of the river. They walked up the sandy bank in single file, with the massive male in the lead.

The ride back was harrowing. The heavens opened up and the deluge that followed was as heavy as they come. Our driver Ashok had to exercise all his considerable driving skills as we

skidded down slippery slopes and crossed flowing *nullahs* that had been bone dry only a few hours ago. We decided to return to the Kolamarkha camp, as there was no shelter at Garewada.

The next morning, we set out early to return to the site, hoping for a sighting in bright light. The sky had cleared, but after a fruitless two-hour vigil on the hillside above the river (only one false alarm as a herd of domestic buffalo showed up!), we descended to the bank to scout for suitable hoof imprints and to prepare plaster casts. The presence of domestic buffalo in the area is not a good sign, as it raises the possibility of inter-breeding and a loss of genetic purity among the wild buffalo.

That evening was our last in the area and we hoped to sight the animals somehow. But fate was against us this time. When we reached the spot, we were greeted by the sight of more than 30 dogs, squabbling with each other for the bloody entrails of what was probably a sambar. The dogs were with a group of about 10 *shikaris* at the very spot where we had seen the wild buffalo the previous day! This brought home to us the danger that unchecked hunting poses to this species. There was no chance of the animals showing up that day. We called it a day and headed back to Kolamarkha and then Allepalli.

What trick of fate has allowed this area to remain relatively intact and undisturbed? And what must we now do to ensure it stays that way? These were the questions that confronted us as we sped back to 'civilisation'. Protecting these forests by granting them sanctuary status (see box on page 48) will not only help provide a habitat for the endangered wild buffalo, it will also benefit the tiger, giant squirrel, mouse deer and all the other creatures fighting for survival. This requires the collaborative effort of forest officers, bureaucrats, politicians and NGOs in Maharashtra. We hope to work with them all in the coming months in defence of the wild buffalo of the Indravati.

Box:

#### Saving the wild buffalo

A proposal has been drawn up asking for the Kamlapur, Dechli and Aseralli ranges of Sironcha division to be declared a Wild Buffalo Sanctuary keeping in mind their biodiversity values. *Sanctuary* readers can write in support of this proposal to:

The Chief Wildlife Warden, Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Bhavan, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, M.E.C.L. Building, Seminary Hills Campus, Nagpur – 440 006, Maharashtra. Tel.: 510758.

Send a copy to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Mantralaya, Mumbai – 400 032 and to us at *Sanctuary*.

Make the following points:

- Gadchiroli is Maharashtra's most forested district, but has the least area under PA status, just 237 sq. km. under the Bhamragadh and Chaprala sanctuaries.
- The National Wildlife Action Plan has set a goal of increasing the area under PA status to 10 per cent of the landmass, from its present figure of about three per cent.
- The wild buffalo is on the verge of extinction from central India and creating a protected habitat for it on the Maharashtra side of the Indravati will help save it.
- These forests are home to an array of other species too, which will also benefit from protection.