THE TERRIFIC TRIUMVIRATE

Pawprints in Khandar Fort

Following in the footsteps of a tigress, the author is surprised by exciting and unforeseen revelations on the grounds of the historic Khandar Fort in Ranthambore.

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The field team uses pugmarks to track wildlife across an arid landscape

It was four in the morning and the scrubby landscape bounced in and out of my vision as our jeep made its way through the dark Rajasthan forest. The headlamps, never very powerful, were our only chance at getting to the base of the steep hill going up to Khandar Qila. The *qila* (fort, in Hindi/Urdu) was an aristocratic stony structure with impenetrable walls and dark cavernous halls, located at the edge of Ranthambhore National Park, Rajasthan. From the foothills, on the terrace of our small field station in Khandar village, we gazed up at the massive structure, excited at the prospect of finally breaching its walls. When the morning dawned (well, it was pre-dawn), I hastily pulled on my hiking boots and tied a rain jacket around my waist. My daypack was filled with water bottles and electrolytes, along with my first aid kit, spare socks, binoculars, camera, and field notebook.

The jeep halted at the base of Khandar Hill and my two field assistants and I jumped out of the vehicle. One of the assistants, a local, warily studied the rocky slopes ahead of us. "Madam, there are leopards here, and bears too," he warned. "And our cameras have picked up a tigress in the fort as well."

"That's why we have to go there to survey," I replied, my voice confidently echoing in the dark landscape. A bush stirred nearby and my assistants both jumped; it turned out to be a black-naped hare (*Lepus nigricollis*). My field assistant's worry about leopards was not out of place, however, given the time of day and the setting.

We chose a relatively rocky goat path; it later joined the path taken by visitors to the fort. That was

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Khandar Qila (fort) is known to be the haunt of a tigress, a leopard, and the occasional passing hyena

necessary, because there was only one real entrance to the fort that was scalable by people – the walls were far too high and smooth. Up the path we scrambled, occasionally tripping over rocks and our own feet.

At last, we found ourselves at the base of the soaring watchtowers and imposing stone-and-sand walls of Khandar Qila. The fort, much like others of its time, was built to be impenetrable by forces opposing the Sisodia kings of Mewar, who ruled Sawai Madhopur until it was conquered by the Mughals. Post-Mughal rule, the fort and surrounding lands came under the jurisdiction of the Maharajas of Jaipur in the 18th century. There were three entrances to the fort, all of which had sustained heavy damage over the years. It was no wonder that a regal tigress had made her home here, in the battlements high above the rest of the park.

In comparison to other forts in Rajasthan, Khandar Qila was positively toy-like. Yet its pillars stood strong and its walls overlooked a gorgeous view of scrub forest and tiny wetlands. Brightly painted village houses dotted the sparse scenery, and tiny flocks of livestock could be seen kicking up dust devils in the landscape. Parts of the fort was crumbling, but the various quarters were clearly visible: the king's court, the queen's residential quarters, the elephant and horse stables, and many more. It also housed a stone temple, frequented by pilgrims and cared for by a priest and his wife, who lived in one of the renovated rooms beside the temple. We wandered about the ruined pillars of the stables absorbing the historical significance of the land we trod upon, until my second field assistant let out a hiss and pointed at the ground.

"What's this?" he asked, pitching his voice loud enough to get our attention over the expansive area.

I jumped over a fallen pillar, taking care to not damage the valuable artefact, and approached his side. He was pointing at a faded print in the dust, barely noticeable but, once noticed, hard to miss.

"Pugmark?" he asked. I squatted on my haunches to better survey the imprint.

"Leopard," was my response. Both field assistants exchanged a look over my head, but I was too busy photographing the pugmark for my record book. "Let's keep moving. Best not to stay in one place for too long. Stay alert." I was reluctant to tell them my educated guess – the leopard was very much still present on the hillside. The pugmark, although slightly windblown and made on loose dust, was fresh. Scanning the surroundings (although leopards were typically difficult to spot; they were easier, in fact, to smell), I led my tiny troupe forward, towards the towering living quarters of the fort.

We soon found our first camera trap. One of my assistants, whose job involved setting up the regular monitoring traps for our office, quickly offloaded the SD card from the camera and replaced it with a new card, sliding the old card into his waist pouch. I quickly

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The fort was the stronghold of the kings of Sawai Madhopur and hosts two large water tanks that draw numerous wild animals in the hot summer month

checked that the camera was undamaged and fluffed up the sparse grasses around it to hide the glint of the equipment from nosy tourists or drunkards. Deserted forts in India are a favourite hangout for amorous couples, men seeking a quiet place to lose themselves in alcohol, and tourists who want to take risky selfies.

"Madam, come here and see," my assistant called. I hurried to where he stood, facing the cavernous quarters of kings and queens past, and he pointed into the dark depths of the room. "This is a good place for wildlife. Shall we flash our torches and see if we spot any eyeshine?"

My instincts told me that whatever animal was taking shelter in those rooms, if any, would be highly displeased to be disturbed by flashing torches. I was about to tell my assistant the same when he pulled out a bright torch and took a few steps into the dark interior, flashing it around the walls in a dazzling display of light.

I cursed to myself and took a step towards him when I heard it. A low rumbling sound echoed through the premises. I froze and flung up my arm to get my assistant's attention. He turned to me, and I motioned for him to come back. The rumbling sound was still persistent, like the beginnings of a landslide on the hills. As I sharpened each of my senses, I became aware of two tell-tale things. One: the sound of a rope lightly thumping a stone. No, not a rope, a tail. Big cats lash their tails side-to-side when agitated, and I had seen enough animals exhibit this behaviour. Two: there was a strong odour, the stink of rotten meat. How had I not noticed it before? My senses on heightened alert now, I grabbed my assistant firmly by the arm and began backpedalling. I had no intentions of confronting an angry leopard (all my senses told me it was not the larger tiger) in the dark interiors of Khandar Qila. As we stepped into a pool of dappled sunlight, my second field assistant asked anxiously, "What did you find? The tigress?"

I shook my head and proceeded to describe the odour and sound that were still vivid in my mind. He looked exceedingly worried.

"We should get off this mountain before sunset," he said "Leopards hunt at sunset."

"Idiot, we will be at home long before sunset," snapped my other assistant. "It's only morning."

I led the squabbling men down another path, towards our second camera trap, lost in thought. A leopard and a tigress coexisting in the fort was a rare scenario, given the size of Khandar Qila. Unlike Ranthambhore Qila, where tigresses were often spotted preening on the stone walls and suckling their cubs inside the shady interiors, Khandar Qila was relatively isolated from a steady prey base. What were these carnivores eating, and how far did they range each day in their quest to find prey?

That was when we saw the next set of pugmarks. These, like that of the leopard, were also fresh, and accompanied by a still-steaming pile of scat. I dropped to my haunches excitedly, ignoring the rancid odour

of the faeces; scat and pellet collection was the highlight of a wildlife scientist's fieldwork, granting immediate insight into the identity and diet of the unsuspecting animal. Using a plastic baggie, I delicately scooped up the scat and sealed the cover without staining my hands (a skill mastered after many mishaps). Both the scat and the pugmarks were easy to identify. "There's a hyena up here as well," I said excitedly. Neither of my assistants looked half as pleased as I sounded.

"Madam, should we keep moving?" one asked, glancing around the dense grass nervously.

"Hyenas aren't a threat to humans," I said easily, stowing the baggie in the empty field pack I had brought for this explicit purpose. "They are very shy, unlike how movies and books portray them."

The men looked highly unconvinced. "Don't they eat animals while they are still alive and trying to escape?" one asked.

I considered this. "So do dholes, though," I pointed out. "And besides, who are we to judge the way animals eat? They must think we are even more barbarian, as we hunt for sport, not just to feed ourselves." I clicked a photograph of the pugmarks and we progressed down the path towards one of the two tanks – Ramkunda and Lakshmankunda – that were the main sources of potable water for wildlife.

We approached Ramkunda cautiously, our senses peeled for any movement or sound. But the waterside was calm, devoid of large wildlife. Three peacocks pecked at the grass by the water, while a pigeon splashed in the shallows covering one of the steps leading down into the tank. The scene was peaceful and untainted by human presence. My assistant, who had a strong liking for peacock feathers, looked longingly at the magnificent birds and I glared at him, shaking my head. He sighed gustily and looked up at the sun. The midday sun in Rajasthan was a particularly vicious one, beaming down upon the arid landscape with no reprieve. It happened to be a cloudless day, adding to the dry heat in the atmosphere. We would need to leave the fort before it rose much higher so that we could make it to our field station to rest during the hot afternoon. The evening, with its cool breeze and lengthening shadows, would bring more fieldwork for us.

Beside Ramkunda was our second camera trap, which my other assistant was busily unloading as we looked at the birds. He switched the SD cards and patted the camera fondly. "This is our oldest camera, madam. I have been setting it around the park for many years now. It never fails to give good images."

I smiled at his obvious love for his job. Despite the harsh working conditions and threat of stumbling across an annoyed tiger, my field assistants were dedicated to their work and to the wildlife that they helped to protect. The three of us walked single file down the rocky path towards the next gate leading out of the fort.

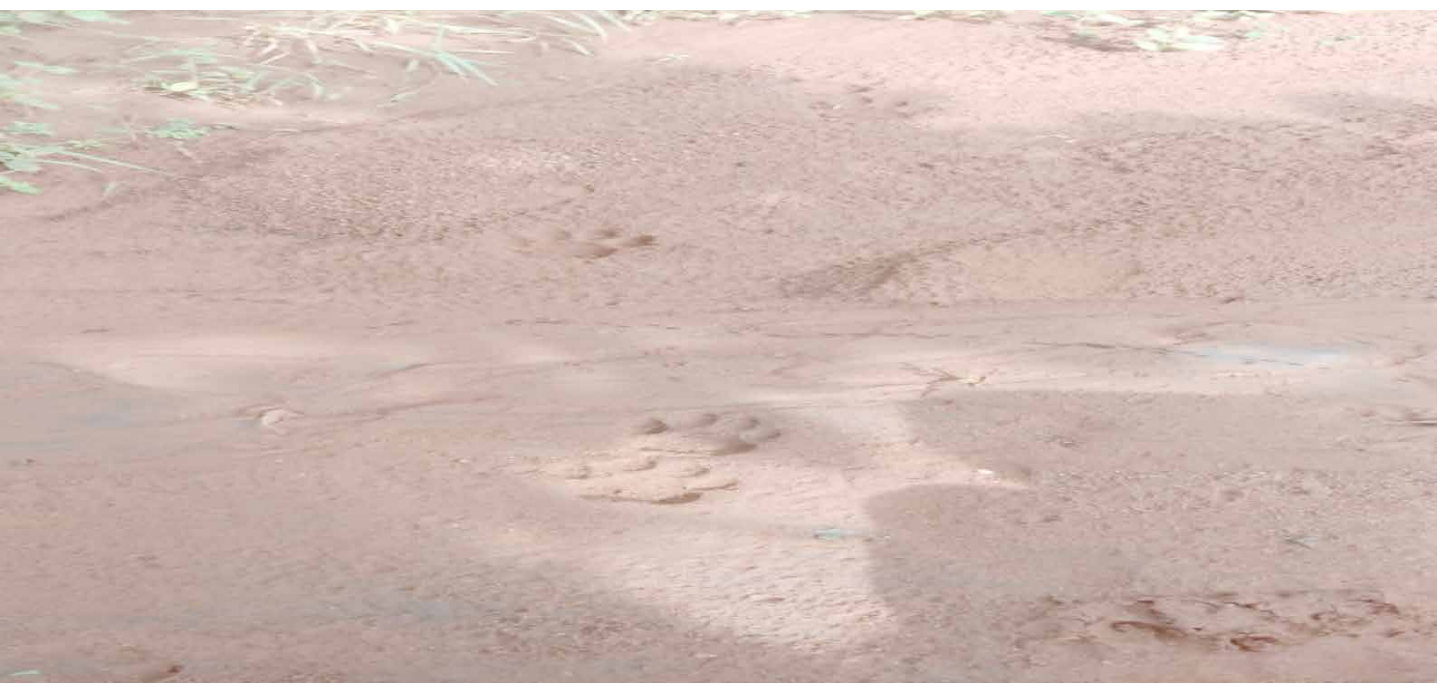
Just as I was about to place my foot on the first stone step leading to the path, I froze. My eyes focused on a depression in the soil beside the step. Slowly, I bent at the waist to take a closer look.

The fresh pugmark of a large tigress was imprinted in the still-moist soil, toes facing the fort.

It appeared that the queen of Khandar Qila was back to reclaim her territory.

I grinned to myself, clicked a photograph of the pugmark, and skipped down the path in pursuit of my assistants. I couldn't wait to unload the SD cards of the camera traps on my laptop and formally meet our three carnivores.

Stumbling across signs of multiple predators, the researchers decided to return to the safety of Khandar, leaving behind the secrets of the ancient fort



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