

THE LEOPARDS OF NORTH BENGAL TEA GARDENS

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Were leopards coming from the forests into the estates to have their young, as the tea companies and forest department believed? | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStock

More people are injured by leopards in the tea gardens of north Bengal than anywhere else in the world. Until 2016, the average stood at over 50 a year. As a conservation biologist, Aritra Kshetry felt duty-bound to help people tackle the crisis. But first, he had to understand the circumstances.

Since wild herbivorous mammals find tea leaves distasteful, they can't survive in the vast acreages of tea plantations. They do, however, make their way through them as they go from one patch of forest to another. If a predator were to rely on these occasional ungulates, it would starve. Were leopards coming from the forests into the estates to have their young, as the tea companies and forest department believed? What was it about the caffeine-rich plants that made them ideal leopard crèches?

North Bengal is a patchwork of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, degraded chunks of forest, and tea estates. In this landscape, researchers and forest authorities considered the reserves to be the best habitat for leopards and tea acreage, the worst. The researcher set out 30 camera traps in 15 locations at a time, collected leopard scats, and collared two cats. But one collar fell off the very next day. Since the collar on Babulal, the hefty handsome leopard, held fast, he became the Rosetta Stone to unravel the ecological mystery of the spotted cats of the area.

Although leopards are nocturnal cats, people encountered them during the day. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStock

Just as leopards live in sugarcane fields in Maharashtra and other parts of India (See *Ajoba, a Leopard in Mumbai*, Sept 7, 2018), Babulal and his kind aren't strictly animals of the jungle. The densely planted three-foot-high tea bushes may seem like a jungle of bonsai trees, but they offer adequate cover. After all, as animals of the night, the cats lie asleep during the day when humans are about. They also have ready meat on the hoof close at hand, as livestock graze on weeds along the edges of the plantations and their rickety night enclosures are easy to breach. The living is clearly easy in the vast plantations. By identifying individual leopards from their unique arrangement of rosettes, Kshetry estimated about 13 animals resided in every 100 sq km of tea garden, not all that different from nearby Gorumara National Park, where 11 lived per 100 sq km.

The tea companies and forest authorities must have found these findings disquieting at first. But then a new question emerged. If leopards were full-time residents, stashing their cubs and hunting livestock amongst the tea bushes, what should be done to keep workers safe?

Unlike sugarcane fields which need little tending during the growing period, tea gardens require maintenance all the time, from picking leaves and pruning the bushes to spraying pesticides and weedicides. Although these are nocturnal cats, people encountered them during the day.

One garden reduced confrontations between its labour force and the cats by resorting to the colonial British-era exercise of beating drums before workers entered the garden. The loud racket alerted any slumbering cats of human presence, giving them ample time to exit. Without such warning, they reacted violently when suddenly woken from their sleep. Kshetry saw the effectiveness of drumming in real time. The slow, regular pulse of radio signals indicated Babulal was fast asleep when the beaters started raising a racket. Within a few minutes, the faster, receding signals implied he had slunk away from the area. Leopards were also keen to avoid confrontations.

“Coexistence is hard-wired into their nature,” says the researcher. He promoted the practice of drum beating in other gardens. Tea companies that made rousing leopards a part of their routine reported zero encounters.

Leopards also observe humans and draw their own conclusions. Workers get either Tuesdays or Thursdays as their weekly day off. On these days, the cats start prowling in the afternoon instead of waiting for nightfall. Siren blasts regulate work in tea gardens, announcing the start of work, lunch break, and the end of the day. Perhaps the silence on the off-days signals the absence of humans, and the animals make use of the opportunity.

In the minds of the workers, leopards went from being animals of the jungle to cats of the garden.

Janaki Lenin is not a conservationista but many creatures share her home for reasons she is yet to discover.

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