

Forest watchman helps keep tigers safe



The image of a curious tiger captured by a camera trap in India. The date and time of the snapshot were also recorded. [Photo: Dasdhriman]

SUMI THOMAS brings you the story of a dedicated protector of the endangered big cats.

His excellent skill in spotting tigers has earned tiger watcher Sreenivasan K an award in India. Mr Sreenivasan, better known as “Tiger Sreeni”, is among the heroes who safeguard the tiger reserves in India. Researchers and wildlife photographers seek him for information on tigers, and sometimes to just spot a tiger.

“I have worked in many forest ranges, but I have never seen someone as well-informed as Sreeni. Once we spotted a tiger at Parambikulam and I felt like it knows Sreeni,” says prominent wildlife filmmaker Suresh Elamon.

Forest adventures

Hailing from the Malasar tribe, 38-year-old Mr Sreenivasan was born and raised in the Parambikulam forests. As a child, he followed his father, a **mahout**, to explore the forests. He has spent all his life studying the wildlife there. With his exceptional knowledge of the landscape, it was only natural for him to become a forest watcher in 2000.

Mr Sreenivasan begins his tiger expeditions by collecting **pugmarks** in the forest. He considers walking in the forest an art and enjoys observing wild animals from a distance without disturbing them.

A wildlife photographer, Shefiq Basheer Ahammed, was saved from an elephant due to Mr Sreenivasan's keen observation and timely warning. Mr Ahammed recalls, "... it was very quiet but Sreeni sensed the animal and asked me to step away. Had I not paid heed, I would not be alive."

While Mr Sreenivasan has recorded about 2,000 official tiger sightings across the forests in Kerala, he has unofficially seen many more. He says that there was a time when people did not believe him. "It was a forest officer who gifted me a camera and I started taking pictures of my sightings. After that, many started believing me," he adds. Mr Sreenivasan even shot a very rare picture of five tigers in a single frame.

These photographs and videos prompted the authorities to declare Parambikulam as a tiger reserve in 2010. Mr Sreenivasan's risky adventures and keen observations have helped him to acquire valuable knowledge and skills on tiger monitoring and the landscape. The forest department invited him to be a part of a tiger monitoring team that year.

REWARDING WORK

For Mr Sreenivasan's significant contribution to tiger conservation efforts, India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, and National Tiger Conservation Authority awarded him 100,000 Indian rupees (about S\$1,800) and a certificate. He is passionate about protecting the forest and animals. That is why he was **undeterred** from returning to work even after a hard kick by an Indian bison, which left him bedridden for three months. "Nothing gives me more peace than the rustling of trees and sounds of animals," Mr Sreenivasan says.

Counting tigers

It is an arduous task collecting pugmarks and studying the tigers' footprints to estimate the number of tigers in an area. Mr Sreenivasan explains, "(The) pugmark of the same tiger may vary according to the soil and also the pace of the tiger. It was important to find the correct set of pugmarks, which was humanly difficult. But, things have now changed with technology."

The team has adopted another method to determine tiger populations. An entire forest is divided into grids. Camera traps are set up at places based on pugmarks and urine smell. Mr Sreenivasan's expertise on reading the landscape and tiger monitoring has been very helpful in this process. The team also places camera traps where the tigers' prey are found. Camera traps will snap photographs when they sense an animal's movement or a difference in temperature.

The team then sorts the photographs — sometimes as many as 200,000 — according to the animals in them. They scrutinise the stripe patterns on about 1,500 photographs of tigers. After further classification, the team confirms the number of tigers in the tiger reserve.

Using this method, they were able to provide evidence for the rise in tiger population in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve from 19 tigers in 2014 to 30 tigers in 2020.

Mr Sreenivasan teaches students and tourists about the endangered tigers and the forest. As a master trainer in camera trapping, he has guided forest officials across Kerala. He has become an accomplished photographer too. Yet, he humbly says, "I never thought I would get an award. I am definitely happy, but I am happier when others spot tigers and animals in the forest."

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VOCAB BUILDER

mahout (say "ma-hoot"; noun) = a person who works with and takes care of an elephant.

pugmarks (say "pug marks"; noun) = the footprints of an animal on the ground.

undeterred (say "un-di-ter'd"; adjective) = persevering despite setbacks.



Although tigers are found in many zoos, most people have never seen one in the wild. [Photo: Derrick Brutel]