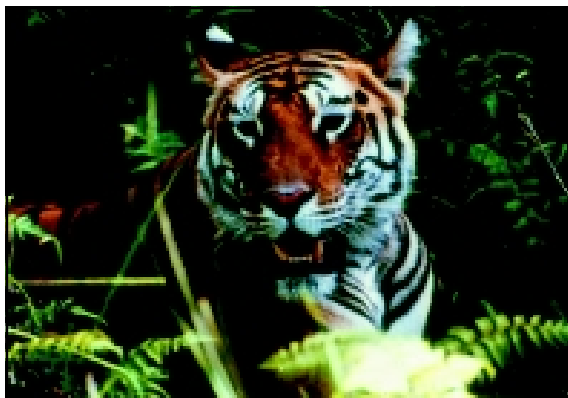




India's first wildlife park, Jim Corbett National Park, was formed in 1936. Once a popular hunting ground among the British, the park was named in honour of the late Jim Corbett, a legendary hunter-naturalist turned author and photographer who helped in demarcating the park's boundaries. Today India has dozens of national parks and hundreds of wildlife sanctuaries. The preserves are committed to maintaining the delicate ecosystems necessary to ensure the survival of both flora and fauna.

India's national parks teem with an astounding variety of animal and plant life. Ranthambor encompasses nearly 152 square miles of dry deciduous forest in South Western Rajasthan, where the landscape is dotted with ancient banyan trees, dhok and pipal trees, clusters of mango trees and evergreens. The diversity of flora there includes 300 trees and 50 aquatic plants. The park derives its name from the fort of Ranthambor, which sits on a rocky outcrop in the forest. The fort dates back to the 11th century when it was a vital citadel for the control of central India. In 1981 Ranthambor was awarded National Park status and though overrun by vegetation, remnants of the summer palaces, temples and guard stones within the fort still remain. Ranthambor is also famous for its tigers and is a favourite with photographers. With strict tiger preservation measures, tigers have become more active during the day and can be encountered by visitors in broad daylight. Sighting a tiger can never be a sure shot, but here one comes as close to it as is possible.

India's parks play an enormously significant role in the protection of India's wild animals, including its tiger population. The parks provide a safe haven for tigers, which outside the parks are forced to compete with about 100 million humans who make their



livelihood from India's forests. Indian tigers were once threatened by the shooting safaris of the Maharajas and British colonists, but today an even greater threat is posed by the demand for tiger bones and other body parts demanded by the practitioners of "traditional" medicine in certain regions of Asia. India's parks protect other species of wildlife, too.

For example, Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat, situated in the Thar Desert, is a sanctuary for the last population of Indian wild ass, and India's greatest bird sanctuary can be found in Keoladeo Ghana National Park, more commonly known by its old name, Bharatpur. Formerly the shooting preserve of the Maharaja of Bharatpur, where in 1938 the Viceroy of India's party shot 4,273 birds in one day, today the park protects 3,000 species of bird.

Some of the rarest wildlife on the planet can be found in India's national parks, such as the Golden Langur, the world's rarest monkey. (pictured right) Golden Langurs can be found only in a small patch of forest on the Manas River, which forms the border between the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary in Bhutan and the Manas National Park in India.



Gir Forest holds the last surviving population of Asiatic lion in the world, and Kaziranga National Park in Assam is home to a large population of one-horned rhinoceroses and wild buffalo. For those eager to observe elephants, Bandipur, in the shadow of the Western Ghats, is one of the finest habitats of the Asian elephant. The parks also are rich in history.

In the Vindhya Hills of Madhya Pradesh, is Bandhavgarh National Park, where stands Bandhavgarh Fort. Though no records remain to show when the fort was constructed, it is believed to be about 2000 years old. Several dynasties have ruled the fort: for example, the Maghas from the 1st century A.D, the Vakatakas from the 3rd century; the Sengars from the 5th century, and the Kalachuris from the 10th century. The oldest signs of habitation are the caves dug into the sandstone, near the fort. Several of these contain Brahmi inscriptions dating from the 1st century B.C. Prior to becoming a National Park, the forest range around the region had been maintained as a Shikargarh, or game preserve, of the Maharajahs of Rewa. It was only in 1968, that the area was declared as a National Park. Madhya Pradesh's forests were immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his Jungle Books.



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