

UNIT 4

The Magnificent Tiger

1. Crouching at the edge of a clearing in an Indian jungle/Ranjit Singh/a veteran tiger hunter/raised his rifle as beaters drove his quarry nearer. Suddenly a beautiful male tiger burst out of the high grass/loping straight across the open corridor only 30 yards away.

2. In the morning sunlight its striped reddish coat gleamed so splendidly/and its muscular body rippled with such liquid grace/that Singh gazed spellbound. In a moment the animal vanished. "I wanted to kill that tiger"/recalls the hunter/now an expert wildlife photographer/"but it was simply too beautiful to kill. And I will never shoot another". That promise was a fitting tribute to one of the most fascinating and graceful of all animals.

3. Though tigers are large animals they are seldom seen. On exposed terrain the tiger's camouflaged body can enable it to vanish before the observers' eyes. Sometimes a mere 10-inch tuft of grass can serve as "cover".

4. A tiger possesses phenomenal hearing and sight which compensate for a mediocre sense of smell. Sher Jung reports that a tiger's ears register more than the seven octaves normal for humans. As for its vision, night-time hunters know that a tiger will see even the slightest movement.

5. Tigers sleep or catnap by day; it is not till evening that they start their hunting. An hour or two before dusk they start their rounds roving up to 10 to 15 miles nightly. An adult tiger devours 40 to 70 pounds at a single meal, yet may top that off with several additional snacks the same night. But it may not eat again for several days.

Man-eating tigers?

6. The popular conception of the tiger as savagely aggressive applies only to the man-eating individuals. Although few in number, India's man-eaters took a toll of more than 1,000 persons annually until well into this century. Most man-eaters had been disabled—usually by being wounded by a hunter—and were unable to catch their normal prey.

7. The average tiger tends to give man as wide a berth as possible even in face-to-face confrontations. A forest ranger was cycling round a bend on a woodland track one day when he nearly collided with a tigress. Twice she reared up, snarling and growling, but the ranger remembered the standard instructions for such encounters: "Never panic; stare the beast down". He did just that, and the tigress grumbled off.

8. Tigers are generally solitary creatures except during the brief mating season. Two or more suitors may fight for the female in bloody battles. The female takes no part in the fray. The winner drives off his competitors, and mating ensues. Shortly thereafter the male and female part company. About 16 weeks after conceiving, the tigress bears her cubs (each weighing $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 pounds). The usual litter size is two to four, though litters of five or six sometimes occur. Fewer than half of the cubs ever reach maturity. Predators (chiefly hyenas, wild dogs, and crocodiles) and disease are the major causes of this high mortality rate.

9. Frolicsome as kittens, the cubs tumble, grapple, and pounce at shadows, including their own. They display affection for their mothers, readily shifting from play to caresses. American zoologist George Schaller watched one take its mother's head between its forepaws and smother her face with fervent licks.

10. At first they learn to stalk and kill small creatures. Trailing her on hunting forays, they imitate her moves. In the first 4 weeks the cubs quadruple in size; in another few weeks, still unweaned, they begin to eat chewed meat disgorged by the mother. Gradually they progress to assaults on deer, buffalo calves and larger game, until at the age of 2 they have become fully independent of their mother. Then, when the cubs are about 6 months old, the mother initiates them in the skills of the hunt.