

FOREST NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

(I)

PANTHERS OF SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN: MY OBSERVATIONS OF 65 YEARS

The cat may have nine lifetimes. In the single one that I will ever have, it has been a delight to observe the panther: melting into shadows, striking like a flash of lightening, moving like a ripple in the forest and ruling, not with an army, but with a rasping cough.

I have spent more than seven decades in the jungles of Mewar region in the Rajasthan State of India. Before independence the population of panthers, like other fauna, was quite thick in this region of the Aravalis, one of the oldest hill ranges of the world. After independence, it dwindled like waters of a famine inflicted lake. Stanley Jepson had written in *Big Game Encounters*, "Were the Taj Mahal to be allowed to fall into ruins...a cry of indignation would rise from north to south and east to west...Yet several equally beautiful works of the Creator, rare species in the rich and varied fauna of India are threatened with complete extinction and the hand of no man can recreate them. No howl of indignation arises."

In the year 1955, the government auctioned Mewar military's muzzle loader guns to anyone who was interested. Majority of these guns were purchased by the tribals. Around five thousand muzzle loaders of British make were purchased by the tribals of Panarwa. The jungles of Panarwa, the densest forest of the region, were teeming with wild animals. Within a short period almost all the animals of this impenetrable jungle were accounted for, including tigers. Some injured carnivores became man eaters. The commercial poaching and arming the populace with weapons after independence led to uncontrolled massacres until much later, in 1972, the Wildlife Protection Act came into force.

The first Chief Minister of Rajasthan used to repeatedly implore people in his speeches to hunt down wild boars and antelopes, projecting them as the enemy of farmers. Within a very short span of time a major part of Mewar was denuded of antelopes and wild boars. Panthers of the region started killing more domestic animals. This led people to kill more panthers. And so went the vicious cycle. The government occasionally requested my father T. H. Tehsin, and in the later years me, to cull the cattle lifters.

As a child I accompanied my father on most of his expeditions and observed kills and other habits of panthers very keenly. Thereafter I continued my study in the behaviour of the animals in the wild intimately, especially that of the habit of panthers. There have been

plentiful kills of panthers that I've come across in the last 70 years.

The below observations are the result of either actual sightings or examining the kill critically over a period of decades. Cats, who were worshipped in the ancient Egypt as Gods, do not reveal their habits easily. It requires decades of patience, almost meditative, to get a glimpse of their private, wild lives.

I. Techniques Adapted by Panther to Kill its Prey

By Twisting (Master Killer)

A large sized panther is capable to use this technique, which is masterly and inspires awe in us lesser mortals. It runs along the prey on its right side. When it is parallel to the prey, it catches hold of the prey's nape with its mouth and flings its right leg over the prey's neck. Now it twists the neck with force towards the prey's left side. Simultaneously, it pushes the muzzle of the prey with its left leg towards the left side. It also shoves the prey's rear by two of its hind legs that are resting on the ground in clockwise direction, exerting bodily force. This results in breaking the neck of the prey, twisting it towards its tail.

In the summer of 1957, I witnessed this way of killing. One fine evening we were driving inside the Jaisamand Wildlife sanctuary. Suddenly we caught sight of a large panther chasing a female cheetal. We clearly and distinctly saw this technique of securing the prey.

By Suffocation

The panther runs parallel to its prey on the right side (of the prey). It ducks and catches hold of its neck by its mouth just near the junction of head and neck with lightning speed. It then strangulates the prey to death.

By Pinning the Neck to the Ground

Running along the right side of the prey, the panther ducks and catches hold of its neck pushing the animal to the ground by exerting pressure with its body. It firmly pins the prey's neck to the ground. The prey tries to get up by revolving its body. This results in the breaking of the prey's neck, killing it instantly.

By Head-crushing

This method has been observed by me only once. I saw a medium sized goat killed by a panther. It attacked the goat from the front and caught hold of its head, crushing it. Within moments the goat was dead.

By Hamstringing

This method is used by panther to kill larger animals. I have examined several large buffaloes killed by panthers. Some of them were so large that even a tiger would hesitate to attack. Seven of them were hamstrung in one leg and killed. Others were killed by strangulation.

Dromedary (*Camelus dromedarius*) killing

I have examined 22 kills of Indian camels or Dromedaries by panthers in the Mewar region of Rajasthan. Two of them were killed while sitting on the ground. The other 20 were killed by the panther by hamstringing both the hind legs of the dromedary. When this is done, the dromedary can't stand any longer and has to sit down. The panther then goes for its throat and kills it by suffocation.

I have examined these kills and found four punctures on the throat where the neck and head join. The front paws cause deep claw marks on the neck of the prey. Some distance down the neck there are deep claw marks caused by the hind paws showing that the panther hung onto the dromedary's neck with its all four legs so that it couldn't throw it off by vigorously shaking its long neck.

By Attacking the dewlap

I have examined the kill of an adolescent, not fully trained panther, restoring to this technique.

Around 15km from Udaipur there is high hill with steep slopes. A pantheress with two cubs was residing on this hill. Unfortunately, the pantheress was hunted down by poachers but the sub-adult cubs escaped. After a few days, villagers reported a panther kill to me lying about 100m from the summit of the hill. I examined the carcass and found there were twenty eight punctures, all along the dewlap of the kill, which was a fair sized cow. Not a single canine had reached up to the trachea. It seemed the cub had repeatedly attacked the cow. I presume that the cow died by falling several times on the steep slope. The cub had devoured a part of its hard earned meal.

By Trapping

At times, especially when a pair is hunting together, the panthers operate with a plan.

Instance 1

One late evening (around 2100 hours) in the early 1950s we were returning to Udaipur from the village of Chandesara. Udaipur was a walled city then, accessible only through a gate. During monarchy the gate used to remain closed at night. But after independence it remained open all through the night and there was a small municipal outpost (*Chunginaka*) situated near it. There was a steep upward slope while entering the gate and it

continued for a while. The road here was divided into two parts to avoid head-on collision of vehicles entering or leaving the gate. The bifurcated roads merged into one after 200m. The oval-shaped space between the two bifurcated roads was overgrown with bushes. After entering the gate, 50m ahead towards the right was a *bawri* (open well). That night, as soon as we crossed the gate, there came into view of the car's headlight a large panther stretched out on the parapet of the *bawri*. We stopped the car to admire the animal. There were three dogs barking at the panther but it ignored them completely. At times the dogs would advance and then retreat again. When they realised that the panther was not reacting to their barking, they became bolder and drew closer. At this moment, with lightning speed, a pantheress which was hiding in the bushes in between the bifurcated road dashed out and lifted one of the dogs. Both the panthers went off with the prey. It was a perfect trap.

Instance 2

I recall another similar instance. About 60km from Udaipur there is a place called Parshad. The hill range of Seesa Magra stands in this region. On a summer afternoon of 1959, we were strolling at the base of Seesa Magra. We were enamoured by the warning calls of langurs (*Presbytes entellus*) and advanced in the direction of the call cautiously. Suddenly we caught sight of a panther and froze where we were, taking cover. There were several langurs on a big tree at a distance, jumping from branch to branch. The panther came near the tree and began climbing up. When it reached the point where the tree branched, langurs jumped off the tree one by one and ran towards another big tree about 70 yards away. A pantheress lay hidden between these two trees. As soon as any langur neared the pantheress, it darted and killed it on the spot and hid it behind the bush, taking its position behind another bush. The panther climbed further up, scaring more langurs to jump down the tree. When another would reach near the pantheress, it would kill it with surprise attack. In this way, four langurs were killed. Witnessing the whole performance left us breathless.

A panther hunting its prey can be naïve at times like a cub left to fend for itself or a gent showing off to impress a lady (aren't we all a bit daft at times like these?) Generally, a panther's hunt is art in motion. Sharp like an icicle and lithe like moon's reflection on a lake.

II. Eating habits of panther

The prince's royal palate deserves a special section.

When a panther kills its prey, it drags it to a safe place. If the prey is female it goes for its udder. If the prey is male, it goes for its testicles. If the prey is hairy, then the

panther cuts the hair near the udder or testicles by its incisors and opens up the stomach. It takes out the stomach and intestines and throws them about a few feet away from the kill.

High meat

It was presumed that this habit of panther (to throw the stomach away) was to keep the flesh fresh for a longer time. I don't think that's the reason. One rainy evening while crossing a ravine I saw a carcass of a cow which had died a natural death. Fortunately, it was in a deep shade and had escaped the sight of vultures. The carcass was four or five days old crawling with maggots and stinking like dragon breath. Just then I heard a sawing call of a panther up the ravine. As the carcass was lying near the game path, I took up my position around 100 yards away to see what would be the reaction of the panther if it came across it. After half an hour, when the light was still sufficient to see, I saw the panther approach the rotting dead. It sat down and lapped all the maggots as if it were skimming cream from milk. Then it started tearing its flesh from the buttocks. Once it was dark, I left the place.

This shows that high meat didn't have any effect on the panther. I think that the panther leaves the stomach and intestines away from the kill to avoid confrontation with a hyena. On several occasions I have seen a hyena on the kill of a panther. It doesn't move away from the kill. Whenever the panther charges, it goes a little away, sits down and starts howling. Thrice I've observed kills of small panthers where a hyena drove the panther away and started dining. Size matters, after all.

Un-wasteful consumption

After opening the stomach, panther eats the prey's liver, kidneys, heart and lungs. Then it starts eating the kill from its buttocks. On seven occasions I have observed the panther start eating the prey from its chest.

When a panther kills a medium sized prey, say a cow or bullock or small buffalo, on the first sitting it gorges itself heavily. In the morning if you cover the kill with thrones so that vultures do not prey (vultures in the bygone days, of course. Now they're found mainly in story books and myths) on it and in the evening just before sunset if you remove the thrones, and if you continue doing so every day, then the panther continues to come for six to seven nights on the kill. Sometimes eating a small portion and at others licking up the bones.

Wonton killing

Panther hardly kills wantonly. I have once observed a dog killed by a panther a day before. There were hardly any remains of the dog except its legs, paws, head and a

few bones. We tied a goat about 25 feet away from the kill and took up our positions on a *machaan*. At around 2100 hours, the panther returned to the kill and started gnawing at the bones of the dog. It didn't pay any attention to the goat.

When the panther has killed an animal, it generally retreats to its resting place for the day after eating some of the kill. On rare occasions, if an animal comes close to the panther while it is resting and the panther kills it, then it doesn't return to the first kill.

A panther rarely kills more than one animal. The circumstance under which it may kill more than one animal may happen if it has just left its mother and is starting an independent life. In this case, sometimes, if a herd of goat or sheep comes near it, it can kill more than one goat or sheep as they are unable to run very fast. Or it may happen when it manages to enter the pen where the animals are herded. It is just to establish its killing technique.

Sometimes, a young panther accompanied by a female may kill more than one animal to show his prowess.

Locating the prey

Panther pinpoints the prey by its voice. Once we have experimented by hiding a tape recorder in a bush playing the bleating of a goat. We took up our position on a *machaan* with a wire and battery attached to the recorder to play it at our will. This was a remote area and we had seen fresh pugmarks of a panther going up the ravine for its daytime retreat. At 0700 hours we placed this device and started playing it periodically. After 45 minutes or so, we saw a panther 200 yards above the ravine. It was heading towards the voice at a brisk pace without casting a glance elsewhere. When it was about 50 yards from the bush where we'd hidden the tape recorder, we stopped playing it. It came precisely to the bush and for about 5 minutes it looked around standing on the exact spot. When it didn't find the goat, it retreated.

A strange friendship

I've once observed a female panther come to the kill along with a hyena. She started eating the kill from the buttocks and the hyena sat near the chest and started eating it. A rare example of friendship between natural adversaries.

Food preferences

The panthers of Southern Rajasthan are very partial to pig, porcupine and pony. If you're going into the jungle and come across a panther protecting or feeding any of the above mentioned kills, it will leave it with reluctance. Either it'll demonstrate or growl at you. A panther on the

kill of any other animal like cow, buffalo, cheetal, sambar etc. will slink away if you approach the kill.

I have limited experience of man eating panthers. I have seen only two kills. One was a seven year old girl and another a twelve year old boy. Both the kills were not detected in the night but in the morning. I was a part of the search teams in both the cases. The panther, as it was not chased in the night, had devoured the corpses leisurely. When we reached the spot in both the cases, we found palms, feet, head and a few bones remaining. Everything else was devoured – even intestine and stomachs. The palm and feet were left by the panther because its instinct suggested it to be similar to hoofs.

A panther, who is not a man eater, can also attack a human. But not to kill and eat it. It is just caught by surprise by a tall stranger with a ridiculously flappy, colourful outer skin walking right inside its home not caring if the panther is having a snooze, pining for a sweetheart or just emptying its bowels.

III. Mode of attack by panther on human beings

I've been attacked a couple of times by panthers.

On the first occasion the panther didn't come straight towards me, but it came slightly towards my right. This suggests that it attacks human beings in a clockwise direction.

When a panther (not a man-eater) attacks a human, the vital organs are out of reach of the attacker as it is a quadruped and we are biped. It generally stops momentarily at a distance of 6-7 feet away from the target, preparing to jump and catch the throat. In my case it jumped towards my right shoulder so I assumed it attacked clockwise. If you fall down to the ground your throat is away from its reach. It crawls towards your throat injuring other parts of your body with its bare claws. If you're able to ward it off from reaching your throat, it will maul you for 2-3 minutes and run away. It does not usually 'fight to finish' like tigers (*Panthera tigris*) do.

Females with cubs are unpredictable. Sometimes they pass by very close to you without paying you any attention. At other times they attack to defend their offspring without any provocation from 100-150 yards away.

The second instance of attack on me was when I was crossing a jungle in Panarwa, unarmed. I spotted a pantheress with three cubs about 150 yards from me. She looked towards me and charged instantly. I stood rooted to the ground. She stopped abruptly about 10 feet from me, but her momentum dragged her at least two more feet towards me. For how long she remained in this position is

difficult to say but for at least two more minutes she lashed her tail from side to side, crouching and growling menacingly. Then she turned her head towards her right, jumped and went off to accompany her cubs who were hiding behind a small bush and looking curiously towards their mother. She led them to safety inside the jungle.

It seems that in this duration, which seemed endless, when she was confronting me again, the safety of her cubs might have flashed in her mind. This is what led her to leave me unharmed (though at my wit's end).

On sixty occasions I have observed panther and pantheress with sub-adult cubs on kills eating together without fighting and on two occasions I saw a tiger, tigress and two of their sub adult cubs eating together on a kill.

Although we've placed *homo sapiens sapiens* (the wise, wise ones) at the top of the pyramid, one encounter with a big cat, face to face, shows who's at the top by far.

IV. Additional Notes

Warding off by powerful animals

Many a time panther finds its match, and it is generally not a self-claimed wise biped.

Instance

A big castigated goat was tied as bait for panther. We were sitting on a *machaan*. At about 2300 hours a small pantheress came near the bait and attacked it. But it was ward off by the goat. Through the night the pantheress attempted nine times to kill the goat but every time it was deflected by it. In the morning when we examined the goat, it just had some minor scratches and no major injury.

Game Killer and cattle lifter

The hunters of bygone days distinguished two types of panthers – game killers and cattle lifters. The game killer lives in dense forests and entirely depends upon wild animals. The cattle lifter roams near the villages and kills mostly domestic animals. The game killer is thin and long as it has to work hard to secure its prey whereas the cattle lifter is bulky.

Instance

There used to be large tracks of uninhabited or sparsely populated forests teeming with wild animals. One of the large forests near Udaipur was that of Panarwa. At the Khokhariya ki Naal forest of Panarwa jungle we tied a goat in a ravine. We took our positions on a jutting rock away from the goat in the morning. At about 0900 hours two panthers approached. The female came through a circuitous route and took up her position behind a bush on the game path leading away from the ravine. The male panther then exposed itself and advanced boldly towards

the goat. He was puzzled to find the goat not run away, as it was tethered. The panther jumped hither and tither to make it run towards its mate. When it didn't succeed in making it run, it dashed towards the goat and seized its neck.

The pair was a game killer. They'd never come across a tethered animal.

Measurement of panthers

I have witnessed the measurement of several panthers. The biggest male panther I saw was 8 feet 2 inches and 8 feet 5 inches between pegs. The largest pantheress measured between pegs was 7 feet 3 inches.

Grinding of teeth

I have observed this phenomenon twice.

Instance 1

In the summer of 1961 a kill was reported to us. It was a considerably large cow killed by a panther. The panther had already consumed a big portion of this cow. We took up our position 50 yards from the kill at dusk. At about 2100 hours the panther approached the kill. Having gorged on it day before it stretched itself around 70 yards away from the dead cow. After a lapse of 5 minutes the panther started grinding its teeth. The loud sound resembled the breaking of large bones by a carnivore. This bone rattling noise lasted for no less than 15 minutes by my watch. The panther then rose up and approached the kill.

Instance 2

In the summer of 1964, a kill was reported to us. This time it was a large bullock. We took up our position about 40 yards from the one-day-old kill just before sunset. At about 2030 hours, the panther turned up and stretched at some distance away from the kill. It had also stuffed itself the day before. And then it started grinding its teeth. The sound was similar to the one described above but it lasted

for 7 minutes as per my watch.

Some noises, some smells, some sensations and some sights are unforgettable in one's life. The grinding of a leopard's teeth is one such utterly enduring memory of a noise.

V. Concluding thoughts

The adaptability of a panther and its lack of ego (it can even hunt and survive on a rat) has made it a survivor, unlike other big cats. Humans have an uncanny capability to cut any other survivor to size except rats and cockroaches, of course. We're not in fine company, if I may say so.

In the last 30 years I have examined scores of panther kills in the jungles of Mewar but didn't come across any large animals like pigs, buffaloes, dromedaries or large bullocks killed by panther, as was the case in the earlier decades, although the population of large buffaloes and bullocks have increased manifolds since the 1950s. This is indicative that perhaps the size of the panther is reducing.

The tribals of the olden times believed there were two types of panthers – *Cheetra* and *Teebrio*. *Cheetra* was supposed to be a short haired, lighter coloured big animal capable of killing large animals. *Teebrio* was a smaller animal of a brighter and darker coat with longish hair. *Teebrio* was categorised as a dog lifter and hardly capable of tackling bigger animals. It would lurk near the villages. There may have existed a sub-species of panther in Mewar region. Now it seems that *Cheetra* is almost wiped out and *Teebrio* is prevailing. Further research in this matter can lead to interesting findings.

It has been an un-paralleled honour to have had a chance to get a peek into the life, times and ways of this graceful cat, who only reveals itself to the wind and the night.

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