

GOOD EARTH

One night in the jungle

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The jungle at night can be exciting and frightening too, as this writer finds out.

PHOTO: K.R. DEEPAK



AT THE KAMBALKONDA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY: The forests are full of surprises.

The moon rose above the trees, filling the valley with ghostly white light. The same light, which appeared beautiful and romantic in the city, had an eerie quality in the jungle. I had my eyes fixed on the water hole, waiting for movement indicating the presence of an animal. I was at Bhimashankar Wildlife Reserve, near Pune in Maharashtra, for a nightlong waterhole census. After a three-hour trek through evergreen forests, I reached the assigned water hole, accompanied by a person from the Forest Department. After a struggle, I managed to enter the hide prepared for us and in the process got an inch-long thorn embedded in my big toe. My companion slithered easily into the hide, as if he habitually did this.

Darkness deepens

The light levels dropped rapidly. A lone imperial pigeon drank cautiously at the water hole. A nightjar called from the west. He called through the night. After keeping a strict vigil till about 11 p.m., my companion decided that the animals had no intentions of visiting. He got out of the hide, unfolded his mattress on a rocky patch behind the hide, and in a matter of minutes was soon sound asleep.

This left me in a predicament. Being of very nervous temperament, every rustle left me convinced that a man-eating leopard was about to pounce into the hide, choosing me, for no rational reason, over the sleeping form a few feet away. But I couldn't very well wake up my companion and tell him this. As a result I was in the state as a langur that sees a panther circling the tree he is on. At one point, hearing a loud rustle a few feet from me, I shouted and woke up my companion who tried rather unsuccessfully to convince me that it was just a hare.

The moon soon crossed over from the eastern to the western horizon, and the faint tinkling of cattle bells from a distant village reached my ears. I woke my companion, and we started back, as the rising sun painted the eastern skies. We hadn't seen anything, but I had experienced the jungle at night. Something I always wanted to do since reading Jim Corbett's accounts of the Indian jungles at night.

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group