

May 2017

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INDIAN

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Reader's section

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The Feathered Wonderland of Managalajodi

by Arindam Saha

For far too long the wetlands of Magalajodi in the state of Orissa in Eastern India remained under the shadows of their bigger and more illustrious cousin the famous Chilika Lake which also happens to be the largest brackish water lake in Asia. However gone are those days when Mangalajodi wetlands used to play second fiddle to Chilika, over the past decade slowly but steadily the wetlands of Mangalajodi have carved a special niche in the hearts of birders from all over India and even the world. Located in the Khordha district of Orissa, the quaint village of Mangalajodi is centred on the wetlands. The Mangalajodi wetlands lie along the north-eastern fringes of the Chilika Lake. At a first glimpse the village of Mangalajodi fails to spring any surprises to the unaccustomed eyes. The village resembles thousands of other villages in rural India. The real gems can be found in and around the waters of Mangalajodi which make this place so special and worthy of paying a visit. The marshes and reeds of these wetlands carefully nest one of the most diverse avifauna populations. The feathered residents of Magalajodi are the ones who have played the most crucial role in putting this rural landscape on the global map. To add further colour to the existing colourful tapestry of Managalajodi wetlands, the waters attract thousands of migratory birds during the winters. The first flock of feathered migrants arrive in these wetlands by the middle of October. They are soon followed by thousands of



The golden hues of the setting Mangalajodi sun paint this beautiful Black-winged stilt in the best possible colours. These widely distributed wader birds easily identifiable by their black wings, white underparts and slender long pink legs are one of the most commonly found waders in these wetlands. Being waders they spend their entire lifetime on the fringes of marshes, swamps or backwaters while feeding on insects and crustaceans.

others. The long channels of calm water interspersed with marshy reeds provide the ideal shelter to these visitors. The waters offer a rich bounty of food; the marshes provide the ideal shelter to these visitors for the next few months until they fly out towards their breeding grounds by late February or early March. Keeping the visitor company during their 3-4 month long stay are the native species. The ecology of the place is perfectly suited for the wader birds such as the lapwings, the sandpipers, the herons, the moorhens among many others. The first rays of the rising sun bring the marshes and swamps to life amidst the squeaks and grunts and chatters of the marsh dwellers. As the day progresses the winged residents of these marshes set about their daily business, depending on the time of the year some are busy gathering food, while others may be looking after the new born chicks while some others might be busy preparing a suitable nest for their mates. It is this incredible diversity which sets Mangalajodi apart from any other birding destination. Mangalajodi scores heavily over other wetlands in the country in terms of the richness in the habitat and the sheer number and diversity of the species of birds which can be found here. Such sentiments have been echoed by almost every birder who has been to this little oasis.

Mangalajodi, 20 years ago was a far cry from the success story that it is today. The



Mangalajodi wetlands boast of a healthy population of Black-tailed godwits. Black-tailed godwits are large wading birds with a distinctive long and straight bill. The long and straight bills help these waders bird to pick up insects, beetles, grasshoppers, small snails from the murky waters of these marshes and swamps with surgical precision. These birds make good use of their bills to settle any territorial disputes as can be seen in this photograph. Males and females of this species are similar in appearance however during the breeding season adult males develop a brighter orange-reddish colouration on the breast than the female.

wetlands were almost unknown to the rest of the world, and hidden far away from public glare used to be happy hunting grounds quite literally for the poachers. The sheer number of birds found in these marshes meant there was plenty to go by for the poachers and almost the entire village was involved in hunting the birds and selling their meat to the local dhabas or even nearby cities. This high demand of exotic bird meat coupled with such large populations of birds meant a steady and healthy income for the villagers from selling these birds' meat. Also since these wetlands are not under the jurisdiction of the forest department there was little that the enforcement agencies could have done to curb down the killing of these birds. Soon the birds felt the threat and realised these brackish waters were no longer safe for them, this resulted in a steady decrease in the number of winter migrants. The population of native species also kept on dwindling at an alarming rate. Just when the fate of the birds in these wetlands was hanging in the balance a non-profit organisation Wild Orissa took a stock of the situation and decided to intervene to combat the rampant and mindless cruelty inflicted upon the waterfowls of Mangalajodi. The concerned authorities soon realised how grave the danger faced by the resident and migratory birds was and as a counter measure decided to set up Sri Sri Mahavir Pakshi Suraksha Samiti of Mangalajodi



(below) The sight of a Northern pintail either taking off from the water's edge or making a perfect landing is one of the most common scenes in Magalajodi during the winter months. The male Northern pintails, the one seen in this picture can be easily identified by their chocolate brown heads, white neck and underparts and very long black central tail feathers. The longish pointed appearance of its tail resembles the sharp pointed end of a needle or a pin thereby earning it the name "pintail". The females are primarily light brownish in appearance with spots all over them and the pointed appearance of the tail is not as pronounced and obvious as the males. These ducks usually breed in the northern parts of Europe, Asia and North America making them one of the most widely distributed duck species. The pintails visit the waters of Mangalajodi with the onset of winter and make it their home for the next 2-3 months to escape the brutal northern winter. By the end of February or early May these birds start leaving for their breeding grounds up north. During the winter months the waters of Mangalajodi are dotted with these northern visitors, a sight which has become all too familiar over the last decade.

(above) Another familiar sight from Mangalajodi during the winter months is that of Ruddy shelducks in flight. In India these birds are better known as Brahminy ducks. At the first glance the bright orange coloured plumage of these ducks make a lasting impression. Males and females are almost similar in appearance with the females being slightly paler in appearance. Their loud honking calls fill up the air of Mangalajodi from dawn to dusk. These birds prefer cooler climate and usually fly in flocks in search of cooler places. Male and female Brahminy ducks often pair up for their entire lifetime and during each breeding season carefully pick a nesting spot usually far from the water's edge where the females usually lay a clutch of 6-8 eggs. Over the years these beautiful birds have staged a remarkable comeback and their numbers are on a steady rise across central and eastern Asia which even compensated for a decline in their population in Europe putting it in the Least Concern category by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.



(SSMPSS) in the year 2000. The group was formed mainly of local villagers and consisted of some of the most famed bird hunters from the villages. Among the group members a certain Nanda Kishore Bhujabal, a onetime poacher became the most prominent and influential figure in ushering in the change which Mangalajodi wetlands were about to witness. Other famed hunters, the likes of Madhava Behera, Rama Hari followed Nanda Kishore's footsteps and soon became part of this bird protection committee. The efforts of this committee were primarily aimed at educating the local villagers about the importance of conserving these birds and the wetlands and eventually transform it into an eco-tourism hub which would give the local economy a major boost without jeopardising the future of the birds. It goes without saying the committee was faced with an uphill task. The villagers were incredibly reluctant to let go of their excess income through selling of bird meat. Also the promises of turning the place into an eco-tourism hub bore no significant assurance which made the poachers even more hesitant to give up hunting what by then had become their daily job. Bhajubal and his accomplices however didn't lose hope and kept engaging the local villagers in long discussions and debates until finally they were successful in making the villagers realise the proposed plan of turning Magalajodi into a birding destination was a much more sustainable one which in the

long run would ensure an overall development of the region and most importantly an approach which is devoid of the cruelty which was being meted out to these birds. Sensing the shift in the mind-set of the local people Wild Orissa partnered with the Forest Department of the Government of Orissa, Royal Bank of Scotland and Indian Grameen Services to chalk out schemes for providing alternative livelihoods for these people. This was a shot in the arm for the entire project. As a part of this scheme the local villagers were provided with boats which would take visitors and birder around the wetlands for a much coveted sighting of their favourite birds. The villagers were also made knowledgeable about the different species of birds found in these wetlands and their behaviours so that they can perform the roles of tour guides. As the killings stopped the birds started staging a remarkable comeback in a short period of time, which in turn started attracting visitors from all over the country. The local people sooner than they had expected started reaping the benefits of this approach. The entire economy of the region got a massive boost. More and more people figured out ways to carve out a livelihood which was centred on their feathered neighbours. Small time private businesses such as eateries, places to stay, transportation to the village or the birding site started flourishing in the region. The villagers had moved on to a dignified way



Citrine wagtails are small songbirds reaching a length of 15-17 cm with their characteristic wagging tail. The term citrine refers to the bright yellow colour of their plumage. These small birds feed mainly on insects and prefer to stay near open water where insects are plentiful. They can be readily recognised by the characteristic wagging of their tails whenever they are walking or running briskly on the ground. During the breeding season the males assume bright yellow plumage on its head and underparts. The females are paler and duller in comparison to the males.

of life leaving their ignominious days as poachers far behind them. The birds have been here for a long time, but this was probably for the first time Mangalajodi truly embraced them. With the aim of further developing the region as an eco-tourism hub and also the overall development of the region Wild Orissa organised an interaction with stakeholders of the bird habitat. They were determined in maintaining the sanctity of the breeding areas of the birds. Designated routes were chalked out along the waterways which would not affect the mating or nesting behaviours of the birds. Special care was taken to lay down ecologically sustainable tourism practice guidelines; stricter enforcement norms by wildlife officials were implemented. The interaction also resolved to request the district administration for providing improved sanitation facilities, manned railway crossing, designated parking area for vehicles and strengthening earthen embankment, etc. Mangalajodi is one such success story which can be adopted as a model for conservation where human beings interact closely with wild species or an entire eco-system. The poachers turned conservationists of Mangalajodi can play an extremely crucial role in setting a precedent which can be followed elsewhere in the world. The seemingly unassuming villages bordering these vast expanses of waters have been a part of a



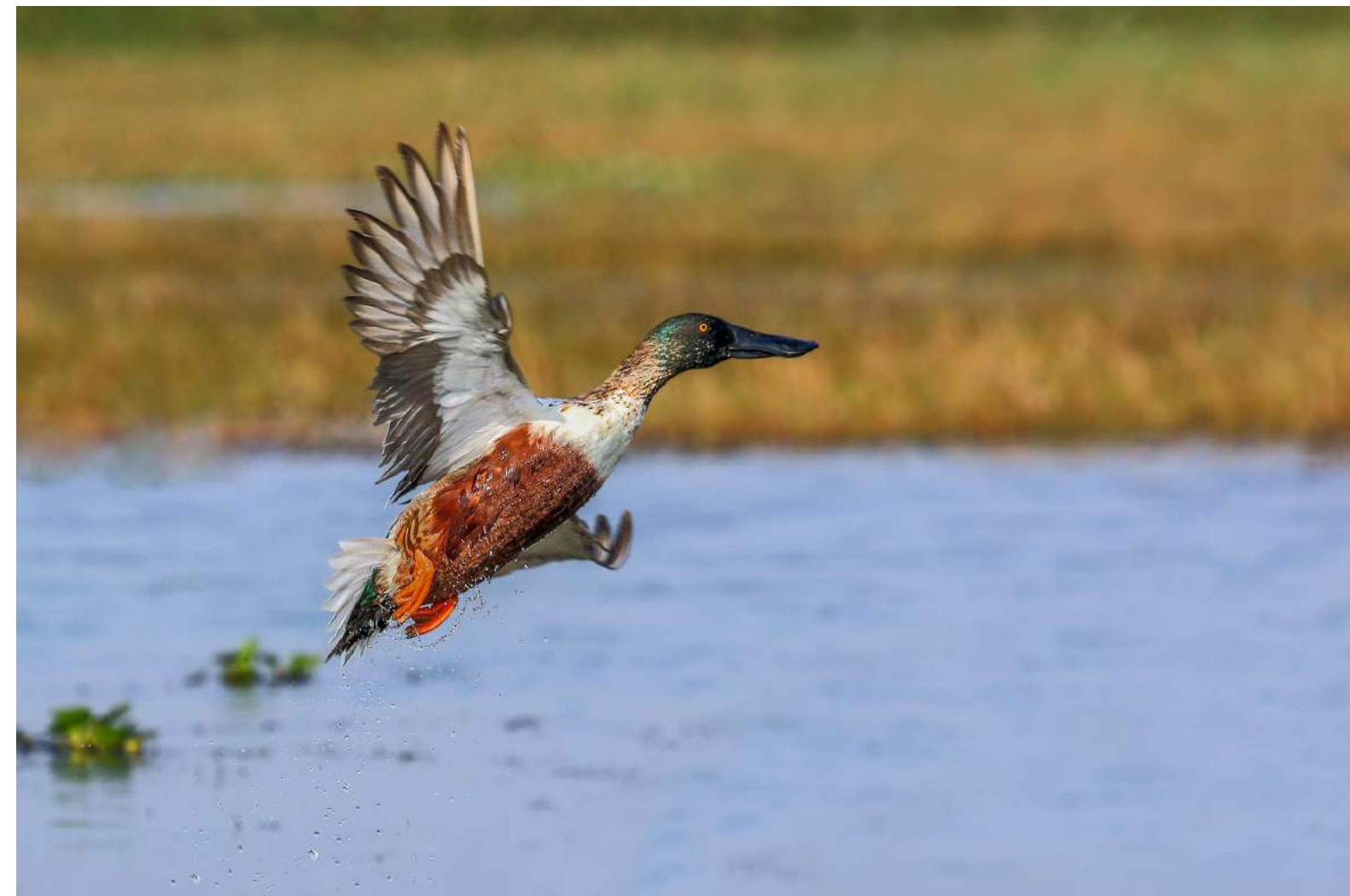
The Ruff is another wader which finds itself perfectly at home in the waters of Mangalajodi. These long necked birds with their distinctive pot bellies breed in marshes and meadows. These birds are migratory in nature and prefer to spend the harsh winters of the north in the tropical environment of Mangalajodi. During their breeding season which falls within May to June they fly off to their breeding grounds in the colder northern parts of Eurasia. During migration they fly in huge flocks and even nest together in their breeding grounds sometimes forming a colony consisting of a hundreds of thousands individuals resembling a lek in open grassy waters. The male Ruff is much larger than the female and during the breeding season exhibits elaborate plumage and tufts of feather which may vary slightly from one individual to the other. Mangalajodi usually doesn't witness the breeding behaviours of these visitors but surely they add some bright feathers to the already illustrious cap of Mangalajodi.

remarkably successful conservation story, one which can inspire thousand others across the country and even the globe. Despite all the success stories and the commitment of the villagers towards safeguarding the birds' future there remains this lingering doubt regarding the future of this place and the ultimate fate of it. The uncomfortable question whether the income from different tourism related activities is enough keeps popping up every now and then. There is absolutely no doubt the increase in the number of birders to this place will definitely give the economy a further push in the right direction. However the villagers are well aware of the fact this place is not ideal for becoming a commercialised mass tourism destination, which in turn will be counter-productive as far as the future of the birds is concerned. As of now there are no definite answers to these questions, in a delicate situation like this it will be rather wise to not dawn the hat of a soothsayer, probably it will be best to have faith in the hardworking villagers committed at protecting the birds and help their cause, and if we keep doing that there is every reason to believe the rest will take care of itself. For now let us doff our hats to the peaceful co-existence of the wonderful people and the beautiful birds of Managalajodi and hope they will continue to enthrall us for many more years to come.



(left) Staying true to its reputation of being a favourite among birds Mangalajodi provides the perfect home to another species of duck, the Spot billed duck. Spot-billed ducks find themselves at home in both inland and coastal wetlands such as ponds, lakes, pools, streams, creeks, estuaries, tidal flats and marshes and the waters of Mangalajodi are ideally suited for them. They earn their name from the bright yellow spot at the top of their bills. Their feeding behaviour is similar to their winged relatives from the north, like the pintails and the shovelers these ducks dabble in water to feed on aquatic vegetation, mainly grasses. The breeding season varies according to the local rainy season. The birds in Northern India breed during July to October and those in South India breed during November and December. The nest is built near water and is concealed in vegetation. Eight to twelve eggs may be seen in the nest.

(right) The wetlands of Mangalajodi have been a winter destination for countless species of birds however the ducks seem to prefer this eco-system more than any other family of birds. The Northern shoveler is no exception to this existing trend among the ducks visiting from the north. The Northern shoveler placed in the Least Concern category by the IUCN is a widespread duck and breeds in the northern parts of Europe, Asia and across North America. The males are brightly coloured with their trademark stipulated bills. The male Northern shoveler, the one in this picture has a dark green head, white chest and chestnut coloured belly. The female is a drab mottled brown with plumage but easily distinguished by the long broad bill similar to the male. Compared to their northern relatives, the pintails, Northern shovelers are a quite species and spend most of their day dabbling in the water looking for plant food, a behaviour exhibited by the pintails as well.



(below) Widely distributed across Asia and Africa the Pied kingfisher makes the waters of Mangalajodi its home throughout the year. The distinctive black and white plumage with the crest on its head makes it one of the most easily recognisable birds. Fish, small crustaceans and large aquatic insects mainly constitute its diet. They apply a unique method to track and hunt their prey. They keep hovering over the water bodies until they spot an unassuming prey near the water surface. Once they have a clear sight of their prey they dive vertically down bill first at an incredible speed and get hold of their prey like a master harpooner. During the breeding season like many other species of Kingfishers they make their nests in small holes along the vertical mud banks of the river or water bodies. Undoubtedly this one is another little gem in the treasure chest of Mangalajodi.



(above) The most unusual thing about the Greater painted snipe, a medium sized wader, is unlike other birds the female is larger and brightly coloured than the male. The females display distinct white patches around their eyes and dark colouration on their head and neck. The upperparts of the female are dark bronze-green in colour. The males too exhibit a distinct golden eye patch (as can be seen in this picture) but lack the bright dark red colouration on their neck and head. Instead the males display a grey-brown head, ash-grey neck, and white streaked throat. The upperparts and wings are embroidered with gold, brown and black.

How to reach there:

By road: Mangalajodi is about 75 km. south-west of Bhubaneswar off NH 5 on route to Chennai. The nearest well-known place is Chandpur. The nearest bus stop is Chandpur Tangi. Visitors can get down at Chandipur Tangi and opt for an autorickshaw which will take them to Mangalajodi. Taxi services on a rental basis are also available from Bhubaneswar.

By rail: Train services are available from Bhubaneswar. Mangalajodi is approximately 30 kilometres from Khurda Road railway station. The nearest railheads are Kalupadaghat and Mukteswar.

Best time to visit: Winter months provide the ideal scenario to visit the waters of Mangalajodi. The largest congregation of birds including the migratory birds takes place from mid-December to end-January. It is advisable to check local listings to be aware of those two days in the early part of January during which the forest department conducts an annual census of birds, during which the waterways remain closed to visitors.

Accommodation: As part of Mangalajodi eco-tourism venture eco-cottages and dormitories offering basic facilities have come up in the region which are suitable for an overnight stay.

About the Author

My first DSLR camera, a Canon 1100D which was a gift from my wife, kick started my photographic ventures. With my first digital SLR I graduated from being just another photography enthusiast to a serious photographer. Behind all of this my biggest source of inspiration and support all throughout has been my wife, who also happens to be my biggest critic and my best friend.

In my short venture until now as a photographer my photographs have made it to many photography groups/ organization/ national/ international digital salons and recognitions such as these provided me with the much needed motivation to improve my craft and educate myself more about the nuances of photography.

Photography is a vast subject, and everybody has their own favourite subjects to photograph. My favourite subjects are birds. My love for nature from my childhood days probably made me appreciate the beauty of birds more than anything else through the viewfinder. I believe birds are the most incredible creation of nature and it has always been a pleasure documenting them through my camera.

More of my work is available at :

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/124243007@N05/albums>





Dusshera, a carnival of the virtuous
by Vignesh Snaper

Festivals in India are as diverse as the country itself and play a major role in spreading a sense of unity amidst this diversity, with a particular emphasis on creating an air of communal harmony. These festivals are being observed since time immemorial and some of them hold the key to the understanding of the evolution of a particular community or even decoding the past history of our society too. Some of these celebrations are regional while some transcend the boundaries of individual states or cultures and become a pan Indian affair. Dusshera is one such festival which is celebrated across the length and breadth of the country. While the whole of India celebrates Dusshera with a lot of pomp, there is one small town in the southern state of Tamil Nadu which stands out among the rest courtesy some unique features associated with the celebration. This quaint town springs to life during the 10 days of Navaratri leading to Dusshera and produces an amazing spectacle of lights, colours and celebrations which definitely comes as a pleasant surprise from such a humble source.

The 300 year old ancient temple of Sri Mutharamman is located in one of the pilgrimage town of Kulasekharapattinam near Thiruchendur in the Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu. Mutharamman temple and in turn the town of Kulasekharapattinam is known for the fervour with which it celebrates the festival

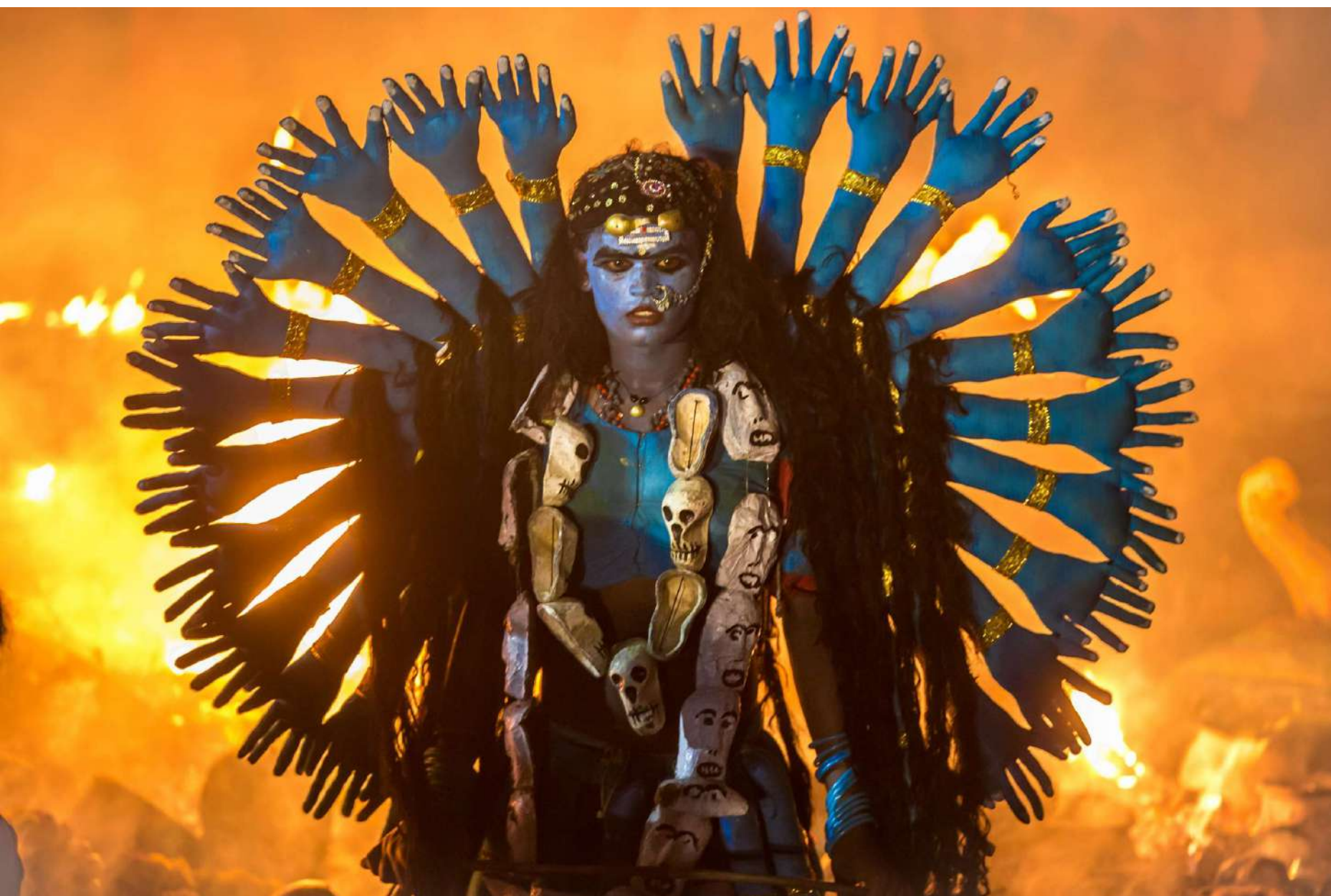
of Navaratri. The festival of Navaratri is the biggest and grandest religious festival which is being celebrated in this town for a long time now. On this occasion the town witnesses a footfall of more than 1,500,000 devotees who from all over the state throng the premises of Mutharamman temple to offer their prayers and seek divine blessings.

The remote coastal village of Kulasekharapattinam had a pretty humble beginning. The small coastal village used to carry out small trades with the neighbouring country of Sri Lanka through the water ways centuries ago. The town was named after the Maharaja or King Kulasekarapandian. According to legends when Maharaja Kulasekarapandian was the ruler of the region he had a vision or “darshan” of the Goddess in his sleep. It is widely believed the town ever since has been named after him. The temple of Mutharamman ever since its inception has been an integral part of the way of life in this town. The temple itself is 300 years old and has many history and tradition associated with it. In this 300 years old temple generally, only Swayambu idols are chosen for worship. Swayambu idols are considered to be those which are self-manifested and not created by human efforts. It is believed the God or the Goddess self-manifests themselves from the earth at the place of worship so that their devotees can worship them in the form of such Swayambu idols. As per

legend the Goddess appeared in the dream of a worker, asking him to sculpt an idol of her and send it through an archaka-priest coming from Kulasai. The Goddess appeared in the dream of the priest too and informed him about the instructions which she had given to the sculptor and advised the priest to install her idol which was sculpted by the worker near the Sawayambu idol. Thus goes the story that the Goddess Mutharamman herself chose her idol form. Since its early days the temple has been an extremely popular place among the devotees. Over the years their faith in Goddess Mutharamma has increased manifold. People who lost their properties, who have been incurring losses in business, have recovered their assets after praying to the Goddess. They firmly believe that Mutharamman is the guardian of their welfare. It is a strong belief among the devotees that divine intervention from the Goddess can go a long way in curing diseases like small pox or even leprosy. It is a common practice to store water around the Goddess to bring relief to a person suffering from the boils caused due to small pox. The boils which appear like pearls or “muthu” in local language can be cured by seeking blessings from the goddess. Hence the name of the mother in the temple is Muthu (pearl) Attru (treating) and Amman (Goddess) – Muthattruamman or Mutharamman. They also pray for child boon. People suffering from leprosy seek blessings from the Goddess to put an end

to their sufferings. It is a strong belief among them they can ask for divine intervention after fasting for 41 days. Some of the devotees visit the temple and pray for child boon as well. Those who are mentally challenged and have been ostracized by the society seek asylum and peace in the temple under the patronage of Goddess Mutharamman.

The festival of Navaratri is the biggest religious festival which this town experiences and it is celebrated with a lot of pomp and grandeur in the temple of Mutharamman. The festival of Navaratri is a 10 day long festival reaching its climax on the day of Dusshera which marks the end of the festival. Dusshera is considered the most auspicious day of the festival. It is a time-honoured belief among the Hindus that if any new venture is taken up on this day, it is bound to be successful. Hence the auspicious day of Dusshera also marks the beginning of everything that is new. It could mark the beginning of a new business venture, the laying down of the foundation stone for any building or even introducing a young child to the world of education and academics. A flag hoisting session marks the beginning of this festival, which is followed by various rituals and finally concludes with “Soorasamharam” taking place on the 10th day. The day of “Soorasamharam” or the 10th day signifies the triumph of good over evil forces and is the day of the festival which enjoys the maximum



A devotee dressed as Hindu Goddess Kali during Dusshera celebrations.



All the rituals embedded in the celebrations form an important part of the festival of Dusshera and devotees are expected to perform them with honesty and sincerity.

footfall. Usually the celebrations of the tenth day are held at the Kulasekharapattinam beach. Goddess Mutharamman is carried all the way to the beach in a huge procession in “Simha Vahanam” (the Goddess sits atop her lion) for the “samharam” or termination of four demons, including Mahishasuran who became all powerful by achieving boons from Gods through his devotions and persuasions. The devotees, who have been fasting for the previous 41 days, dress themselves resembling Gods and Goddesses from Hindu mythologies. Their elaborate make up and costumes and the enthusiasm to look the part over the years have become one of the major talking points of this festival. The celebrations of Dusshera remain incomplete without the local people dressed up as various Gods and Goddesses. In their colourful and elaborate costumes, make up and head gears the long processions of demi gods’ march towards the temple from the neighbouring villages. They lose themselves in the fervour and celebrations of the festival and maybe the feeling of being able to impersonate their worshipped figures sends them into a trance like state. More than 1.5 million people gather near temple year after year on the tenth day after new moon day. While dressed as Gods and Goddesses the devotees beg for alms to meet the expenses of performing the rituals and other celebrations related to the festival.



The history behind the festival of Dusshera is as interesting as the festival itself. The history of this festival and the background story associated with it has been described in details in various Hindu scriptures and mythologies. According to those scriptures one saint Varamuni through his deeds offended saint Agathiyar. As a consequence of which Varamuni was subject to the wrath of Agathiyar and his curse turned Varamuni into a man with a buffalo head. Consequently Varamuni came to be known as “Magisasuran” since the term “Magisam” means buffalo. Magisasuran, blinded by anger and his lust for revenge plunged into deep meditation and resorted to arduous methods to please the Gods. Having succeeded in his endeavour Magisasuran gained unmatched power as boons and established his dominance on heaven and earth. To put an end to the domination of the Magisasuran and the unmatched cruelties inflicted by him and his followers on the saints, the saints approached the Gods and Goddesses and asked for their divine intervention. Troubled by such news and foreseeing the imminent dangers which were staring them in their faces the Gods and Goddesses manifested a female baby from their powers. The baby was named as Lalithambigai. The baby



grew up within 9 days of her birth and on the 10th day she grew as Annai Parasakthi Lalithambigai and encountered Magisasuran. A fierce battle ensued between the two of them, at the end of which Annai Parasakthi Lalithambigai emerged victorious by defeating Magisasuran and putting an end to his reign of terror. Since then the 10th day is being celebrated as Dusshera which marks the triumph of good over everything which is evil. The transformation of the baby girl from her birth to Annai Parasakthi Lalithambigai during the first 9 days of her birth came to be known as Navaratri. The first three days for Malaimagal, the second three days as Alaimagal, and the last three days as Kalaimagal. After her triumph over Magisasuran, Goddess Annai Parasakthi came to be known as Magisasura Marthini or slayer of the demon Magisasuran. At last the Goddess came to this city and settled and showered her blessing to all the devotees. Following the rituals of these



The amount of effort which goes into creating the perfect impersonation of any God or Goddess can be mind boggling and certainly deserves a lot of credit.



Dusshera marks the final day of the Navaratri festival. On the day of Dusshera the beaches of Kulasekharapattinam witness a flurry of activities and celebrations as the devotees take a dip in the sea.

festivals is not simple. The devotees who wish to perform the rituals in accordance with the guidelines laid out by the scriptures should fast for 41 days leading up to the festival. Once the festival commences on the day of Dusshera they are supposed to dress up as Gods and Goddesses from Hindu mythologies. During the period when they are dressed as Gods and Goddesses their behaviours should be befitting of a higher power. They should refrain from all vices; they are not supposed to indulge in any illegal or immoral activities. They are also expected to lead a life of austerity and cleanse their body and soul before they become a part of the celebrations. The festival of Navaratri capped off with the celebration of Dusshera together infuse this coastal town with a fresh lease of energy during these 10 days.





The elaborate costumes impersonating Gods and Goddesses from Hindu mythologies are as much a part of Dusshera celebrations as the traditional customs and rituals.



Fire is an essential component in these celebrations; devotees can be seen carrying fires in pots even performing stunts with fire. Fire signifies purity and new beginnings.



Another devotee dressed as Goddess Kali. Most of the devotees can be seen carrying fire in pots; fire is an essential component of these festivities as fire signifies purity and new beginnings.

Once the celebrations get over people go back to their daily lives and everyday business. However the 10 days of Navaratri and Dusshera is a time for celebration, meeting new people, having friends and family over, a time to rejoice and soak up the spirit of good triumphing over evil. The beaches of Kulasekharapattinam perfectly encapsulate this spirit on the day of Dusshera. The sense of optimism lingering in the air is palpable. For each and every one present on these beaches Dusshera is a festival of hope, a momentous occasion which they hope will usher in an era of new beginnings full of positivity. Perhaps it is this sense of hope which adds to the fervour of this festival, the pomp and grandeur aside, the celebrations of Dusshera in this small coastal town transcend the barriers of religious beliefs or rituals or traditions and become a true celebration of human spirit and provide the ideal grounds for our hopes to bloom.

Vignesh Snaper is a 21 year old photography enthusiast and a resident of Tamil Nadu. He has recently earned his B.Sc. degree and is presently actively pursuing his long cherished dream of becoming a photographer. He has a keen interest in portrait and street photography. Over the past 3 years he has been spending a lot of time documenting some of the major festivals in India and has successfully captured the essence of festivals such as Dusshera, Holi, Ganpathy Puja, Koovagam and some of the folk and street arts of Tamil Nadu.

More of his work is available at:

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About the Author



A full-page landscape photograph of a high-altitude valley. In the foreground, a lush green meadow is dotted with rocks. Three horses are grazing: a brown horse on the left, a white horse in the center, and a dark brown horse on the right. Behind them is a vibrant turquoise lake. The background features steep, rocky mountains with patches of green and snow, partially shrouded in mist. The sky is filled with dramatic, heavy clouds, with sunlight breaking through on the right side, creating a strong lens flare effect.

The Great Lakes of Kashmir

by Sayan Chakravarty

The state of Jammu and Kashmir is one of those rare places on this planet where the contrast between the surreal natural beauty and the ugly face of political and civil unrest is ever so deeply engraved in every nook and corner of the region. The ever present threat of strikes which brings life to a standstill, the presence of security personnel all around, the simmering grievances of the local population regarding a lot of issues, the palpable tension which grips every young mind are manifestations of the turbulent socio-political situation of the valley. Everyday occurrences of violence, law and order disruption, political unrest in the valley are the ones to make headlines in the media. Even when the valley witnesses a phase or relative calm and peace there is still a lingering sense of uneasiness in the air, it is like the lull before the storm. While the unrest in the valleys of Kashmir has dented the reputation of the state, Kashmir is still best known for something which is far removed from the turbulent nature of the state's politics, Kashmir still bears the mantle of "paradise on earth" among the hearts of millions of Indians and people from all over the globe. One look at the snow-capped mountains, the lush green valleys, the clear blue lakes, the never ending canopies of pine and chinar and it becomes evident why the twin threats of civil and political unrest are yet to sabotage the true identity of Kashmir. Nature probably couldn't have unleashed all its glory at a better place in an attempt

to salvage the pride and glory of a region under siege from mindless human conflicts. It is nearly impossible to articulate the beauties of these mountains, streams, valleys and lakes. It doesn't seem to fade, every bend along the mountain roads springs a new surprise and the horizons resemble the works of the greatest artists, the changing colours with the changing seasons drench the valleys in myriad hues which challenge even the most creative mind. One extraordinary, almost unearthly element in this ethereally beautiful tapestry of nature is the lakes of Kashmir. The most prominent of them all being the Satsar Lake or Sat Sar, which is a combination of seven Alpine lakes in the Ganderbal district of Jammu and Kashmir. The Satsar Lake is a combination of seven small lakes which are connected together forming a cascade of lakes. The lakes adorned with various hues of blue grace an emerald green alpine valley which stretches from north to south spread over 4 kilometres. Two of its illustrious cousins the lake of Gangabal and Nundkol are situated on the opposite side of Zajibal pass the highest point in this region located at an altitude of a little more than 4,000 meters. The lakes are glacial in origin and are fed by the melting snow of the mountains during summer. By the end of summer or with the onset of autumn two to three of these lakes are usually reduced to small tracts of water or even dry up, although such phenomenon is directly related to the amount of rainfall

received during that particular season. During the summer months the lush green meadows surrounding these lakes become home to shepherds with their flocks of sheep. These local people depend largely on these animals for their livelihoods and the green pastures around the lakes provide the perfect grazing turfs for these animals. The popularity of these lakes is not restricted among shepherds only. Over the years slowly but steadily the Sat Sar has turned into one of the major tourist destinations in Jammu and Kashmir. Trekkers and adventure enthusiasts embark on the beautiful trek across this region. The experience is ideally suited for those who want to spend some time away from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives and witness the majesty of nature from an extremely close quarter. The waters of these lakes are teeming with trout and other fish, which makes them a mouth-watering destination for serious anglers. Apart from Satsar Lake, Ganderbal district is home to another high altitude alpine lake, the Gangabal Lake. About forty miles from Srinagar the Gangabal Lake is situated at the foothills of Mount Harmukh. Apart from being the second highest mountain peak at an altitude of 5,142 metres in the Kashmir valley, Mount Harmukh holds a special place in the hearts of religious Hindus. There is a strong belief among the local Hindu population that Mount Harmukh used to be the abode of Lord Shiva. There is a strong religious sentiment

associated with the Gangabal Lake as well. The Local Hindu people believe Gangabal Lake which they refer to as Harmukut Ganga is a region as pious as Haridwar. The Kashmiri Pandits believe the water of this lake is as sacred as that of the Ganga. It is believed Kashmiri Pandits have been embarking on this pilgrimage since the 6th or the 7th century A.D. Kashmiri Pandits have been visiting Gangabal Lake to perform the last rites of their dead relatives or family members including immersing their mortal remains and performing the ritual of Shraddha. The route is dotted with several other lakes and temples. There is the black water lake known as Bramsaar, Sukhnag, a hot water lake, and Dukhnag where pilgrims take holy dip. Apart from performing the last rites and rituals, Kashmiri Pandits go on a pilgrimage to this lake on the occasion of "Ganga Ashtami" in the month of "Bhadrapada", a month in the Hindu calendar which coincides with late August or early September. The lofty snow clad mountain peaks in the horizon, the clear blue waters of the lake and the emerald green meadows surrounding it together bewitch any observer. Irrespective of one's faith or religious belief the scenic beauty of this region invokes a sense of reverence and brings to life the portrayal of heaven in different religious scriptures or mythologies. The Gadsar Lake is another significant water body in this region. Like its cousins Gadsar Lake also happens to



The 5th among the seven lakes of Sat Sar. Lush green meadows pouring into crystal clear waters of these lakes are the most common sight around the lakes in the Ganderbal district of Jammu and Kashmir.



The Gangabal Lake which is also known as Harmukut Ganga is situated at the foothills of Mt. Harmukh. The religious significance of this place is far reaching among the Kashmiri Pandits. The water of this lake is believed to be as pious as that of the holy Ganga. Kashmiri Pandits take embark upon arduous journeys to reach this lake where they usually perform the last rites of their dead relatives or immerse their mortal remains.

be a high altitude alpine oligotrophic lake situated at an elevation of 3600 metres. The Gadsar Lake like other lakes in this region freezes during the winter months, however during the summer months the meadows around this lake are wrapped in a flowery carpet dotted with the thousands of colourful flowers which grow in these meadows. This incredible spectacle during the months of summer has earned the Gadsar the label of “the lake of flowers”. As the snow melts with the arrival of summer revealing the crystal clear waters of Gadsar, it also reveals the treasure that lies in the depths of these waters. The huge bounty of trout and other fishes is a gift of this lake to the local people. It comes as little surprise the word Gadsar in Kashmiri language literally translates into “the lake of fishes”. Along with these the Gadsar has also developed an ominous reputation among the local people. The local shepherds and anglers believe the water of Gadsar is home to a river monster, a giant octopus which preys upon its unassuming victim who ventures to close to the shore. There is no scientific evidence to back these claims however the local shepherds take no chances while grazing their flocks of sheep. Usually they steer clear of the shore. Even those attracted by the huge bounty of trout and other fishes do not venture close to the water of Gadsar; their efforts are mainly concentrated around a small stream of water which flows out of the lake.



The confluence of Gangabal Lake and Nandkool Lake takes place at the foothills of the Harmukh peak. The Sacred Harmukh Peak which according to the legend of “Hurmukhuk Gosoni”, is considered among Kashmiri Pandits to be the abode of Lord Shiva, the house of God!

The valley around Vishansar Lake presents a beautiful picture like this one. Vishansar is another high altitude alpine lake situated at an elevation of 3710 metres.



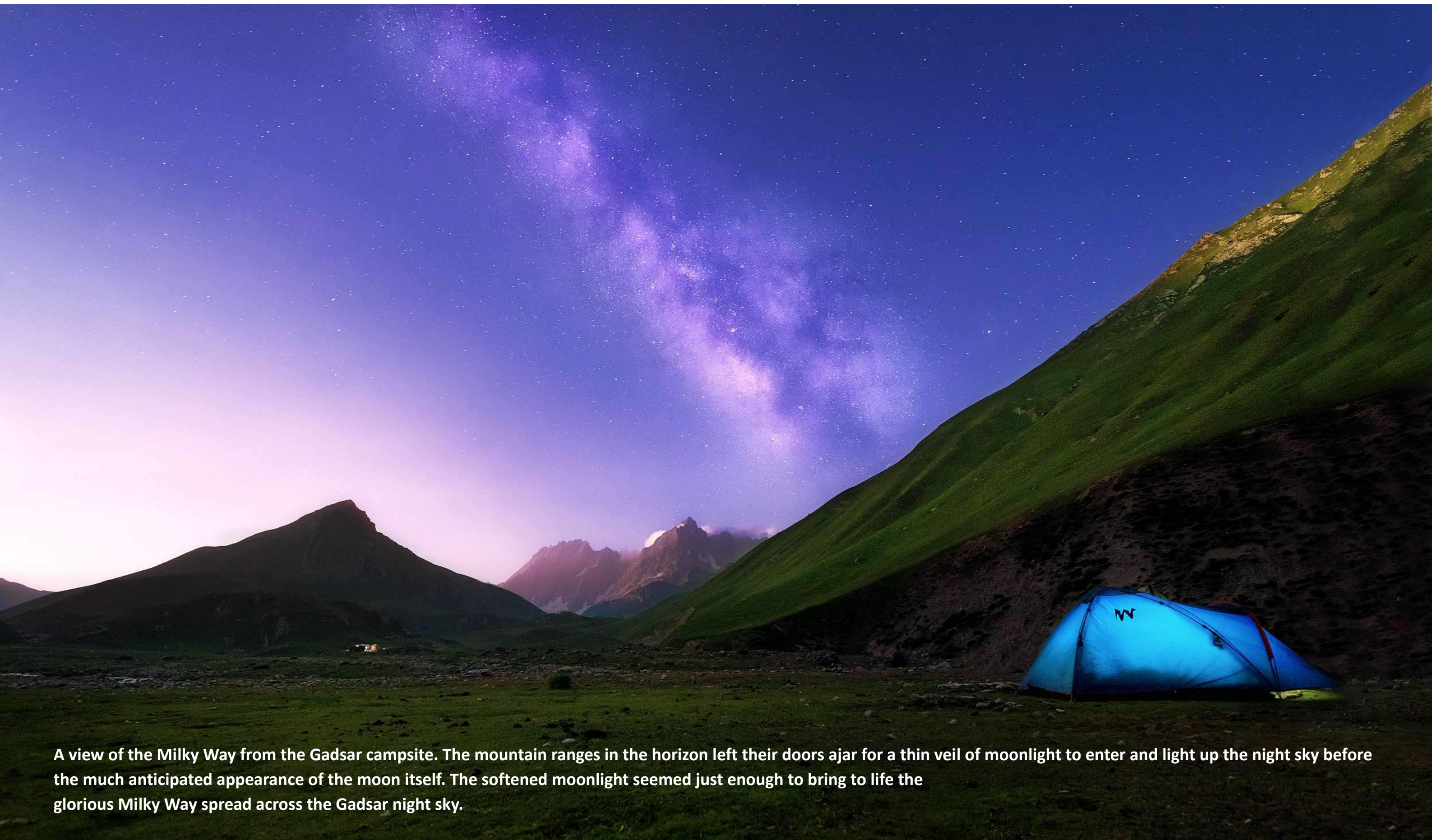


The Gadsar Lake at 3600 metres is another high altitude oligotrophic lake in the Ganderbal district of Jammu and Kashmir. This picturesque lake goes by many names such as, “the lake of flowers” signifying the natural beauty of the place, again Gadsar in Kashmiri language means “the lake of fishes” which refers to the rich population of trout and other fishes in these waters, also something as ominous as Yemsar, which means “the lake of demons” referring to a monster, typically a fresh water octopus which preys on anyone venturing too close to the shores of the lake. It is largely believed to be a myth and there is no evidence concluding the presence of any such creature.

The beauty of these great lakes of Kashmir valley is no longer a mystery to the rest of the world courtesy the regular trekking expeditions which are now being conducted by local tourism agencies. The influx of tourists from different parts of the country and also from all over the globe has contributed significantly towards the economy of this region. Many local people are relying on tourism for an alternate or extra source of income. All of this has contributed significantly towards the overall economic development of this region. The lakes of Ganderbal district in Jammu and Kashmir are a reminder that the elements of nature which enthrall us come in varied aspects and shapes. The lakes are surrounded by the green charming hills, the snow-capped mountains stand tall in the horizon like watchful sentinels, and the rising and setting sun paints the waters of these lakes in its varied and unforgettable glory. The silvery moon and the twinkling stars bedeck the sky. One glimpse of the Milky Way goes a long way in bringing a semblance of peace during the troubled times in the valley. One can certainly hope these elements of nature will emerge triumphant over the man-made conflicts in the valley and will be the frontrunner in healing the Kashmir valley riddled with bullets and violence.



Such scenes are extremely common during the summer months. The shepherds with their flocks of sheep move to these meadows along the lakes. The lush green meadows provide the ideal grazing grounds for their flocks. They need to make the most of this bounty while it lasts. With the onset of winter, the greenery disappears and the entire region gets covered in a thick white blanket of snow. The shepherds belong to certain communities and they are completely dependent on their animals for their livelihoods.



A view of the Milky Way from the Gadsar campsite. The mountain ranges in the horizon left their doors ajar for a thin veil of moonlight to enter and light up the night sky before the much anticipated appearance of the moon itself. The softened moonlight seemed just enough to bring to life the glorious Milky Way spread across the Gadsar night sky.

About the Author



In spite of his busy work schedule as banking official Mr. Sayan Chakravarty's love for nature takes him to some of the most beautiful places on this planet. It is this love for nature which he has harboured in his heart for a long time prompted him to embark upon his journey across the great lakes of Kashmir Valley. His journey took him to some of the most beautiful places in the Kashmir valley and he was a witness to some of the most unearthly spectacles which would stay in his heart for the rest of his life. Mr. Chakravarty was kind enough to share his experience with us and we cannot thank him enough. We sincerely wish that him many more such memorable journeys and such beautiful documentations in the future.

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The Giants of Kamchatka

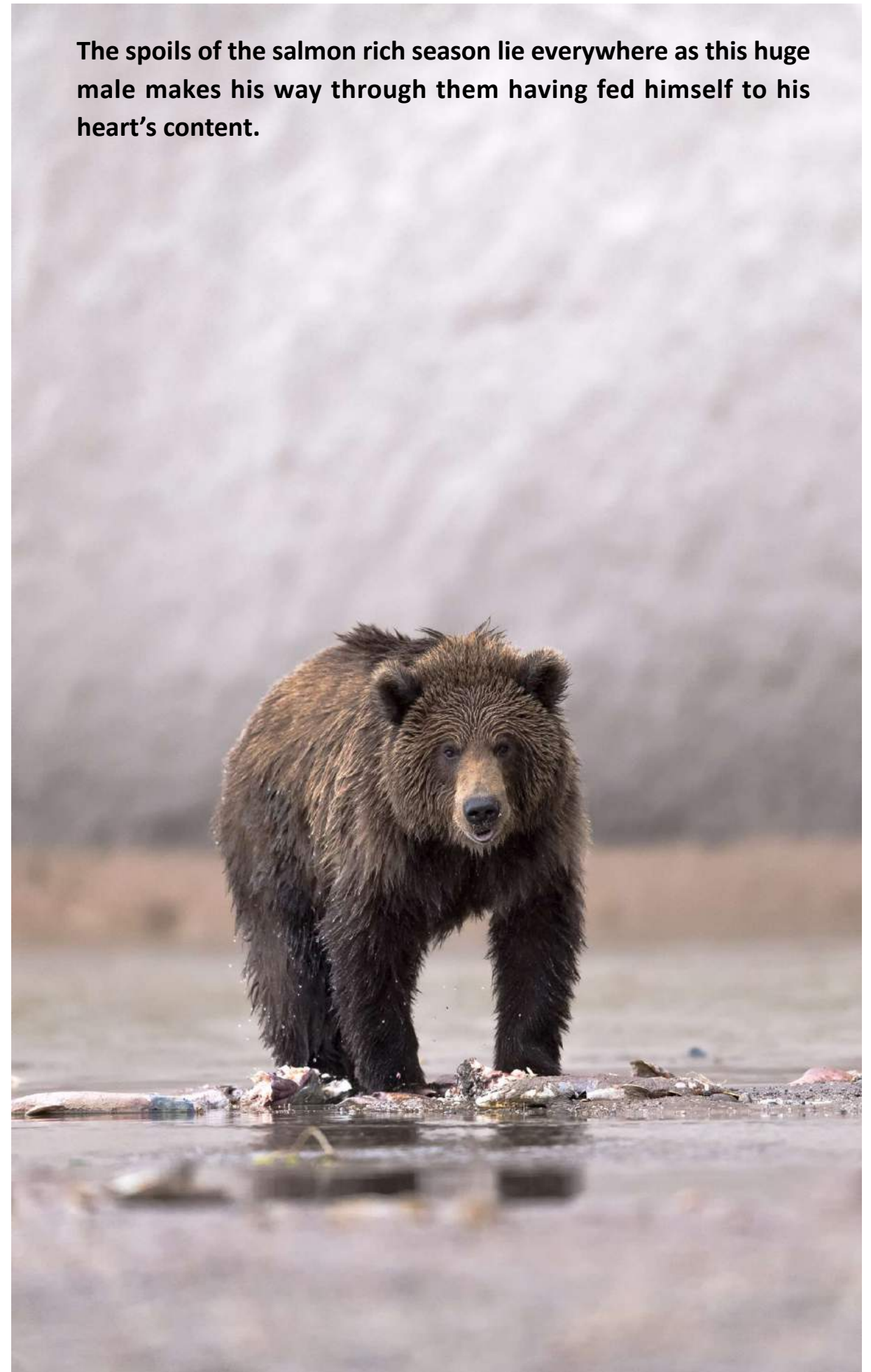
by Vinaya Mohan

Tucked away in one remote far east corner of Russia, the mystical peninsular land of Kamchatka stands out among the vast Russian landscape courtesy some of its unique features. Spread approximately over an area of 270,000 square kilometres the peninsula of Kamchatka lies between the Pacific Ocean to the east and the Sea of Okhotsk to the west. The incredibly beautiful landscape is centred on the Kamchatka River which undoubtedly is the lifeline of this peninsular landscape. The Kamchatka River valley and some of the surrounding valleys together constitute one of the most active volcanic belts in the whole of Europe. The lush green of the valleys spreads as far as the eyes can see only to be interrupted by the active volcanoes which over the years have carved the most distinct and most recognisable features of this particular landscape. The volcanic belt of Kamchatka is home to 160 volcanoes of which 29 are still active. The peninsula which is home to such a high density of volcanoes is a regular witness to the associated volcanic phenomena. Among the 29 active volcanoes 19 have been included in the six UNESCO World Heritage List sites most of which are on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

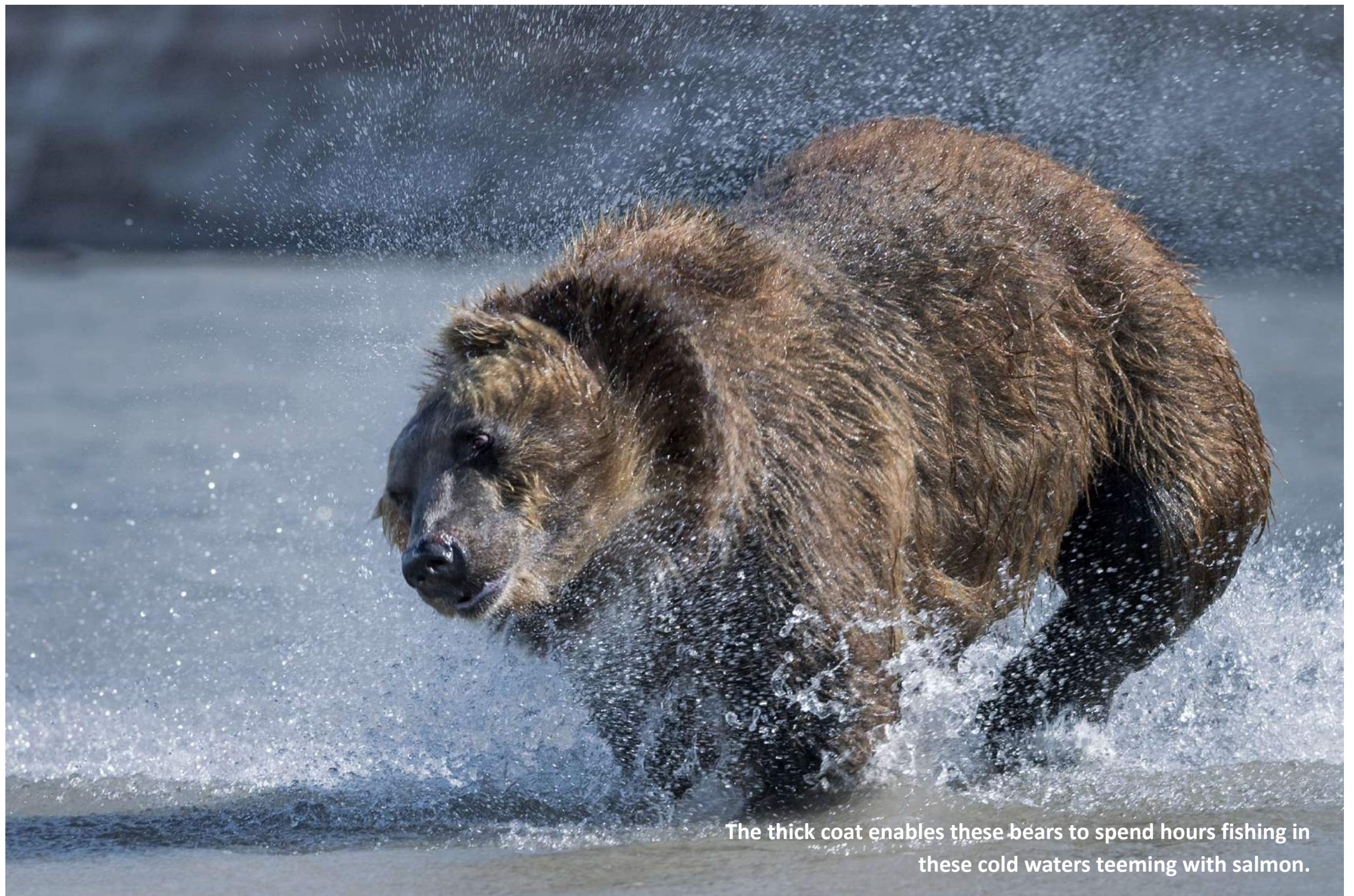
The land of volcanoes which many refer to as the “land of fire and ice” over the years has carefully treasured what many would call a gem of the natural world, which only adds to the already illustrious and unique profile of this remote stretch of landscape.

Kamchatka peninsula is home to arguably the densest population of brown bears in the world. The Kamchatka brown bear also known as the far Eastern brown bear boasts of being the largest carnivore in Eurasia, and these gigantic creatures are very much at home in the Kamchatka peninsula. These bears are considered to be the ancestors of the Kodiak brown bears which are found in the Kodiak Archipelago off the southern coast of mainland Alaska. These giants of Kamchatka boast of a massive frame which grows to a length of 2-2.5 meters, quite often weighing up to 650 kilograms. These giants while standing tall on their hind legs can attain an imposing height of 3 meters or even more in some cases. The most distinct feature regarding the appearance of these bears is their broad foreheads which steeply elevate over their relatively short noses due to their enormous sinuses. These giants are almost of the same size as their descendants, the Kodiak brown bears but once again it is the breadth of their giant forehead which gives these bears their distinct appearance. Compared to that of the Kodiak bear, the breadth of the skull is much greater in proportion to its length. Their large physical size is a result of their access to a diverse range of food sources rich in nutrients like salmon, pine nuts and different varieties of berries among others. It is no mean task maintaining a body weight in excess of 600 kilograms or even more, something which the bears need to be extremely aware of.

The spoils of the salmon rich season lie everywhere as this huge male makes his way through them having fed himself to his heart's content.



The harsh winters of Kamchatka cover the entire peninsula in a thick blanket of snow during the winter months when the temperatures drop sufficiently rendering the entire peninsular land almost barren and lifeless. Kamchatka experiences such harsh winters almost for six months every year. There is little or no food available during this period and very few animals dare to venture out in the severe cold leaving the comforts of their winter retreats which typically are underground burrows or caves deep into the mountains which are capable of weathering the wrath of winter. The bears like most other creatures spend these harsh months sleeping in their winter refuges; however they need to ensure their bodies are stacked with enough caloric reserves to serve their physiological needs during the months of winters when they will not get a bite to eat. Understandably with the departure of winter the bears are concerned with one and one thing only, which is to make up for the weight they lost during the winter due to starvation. The bears are not picky eaters, something which no creature can afford to be when they have to battle out the harsh elements of nature for one half of the year. The bears when hungry will gladly dive into any source of available food including feeding off carrions. However they still have their favourites which are mainly dictated by the taste and the nutritional value of the



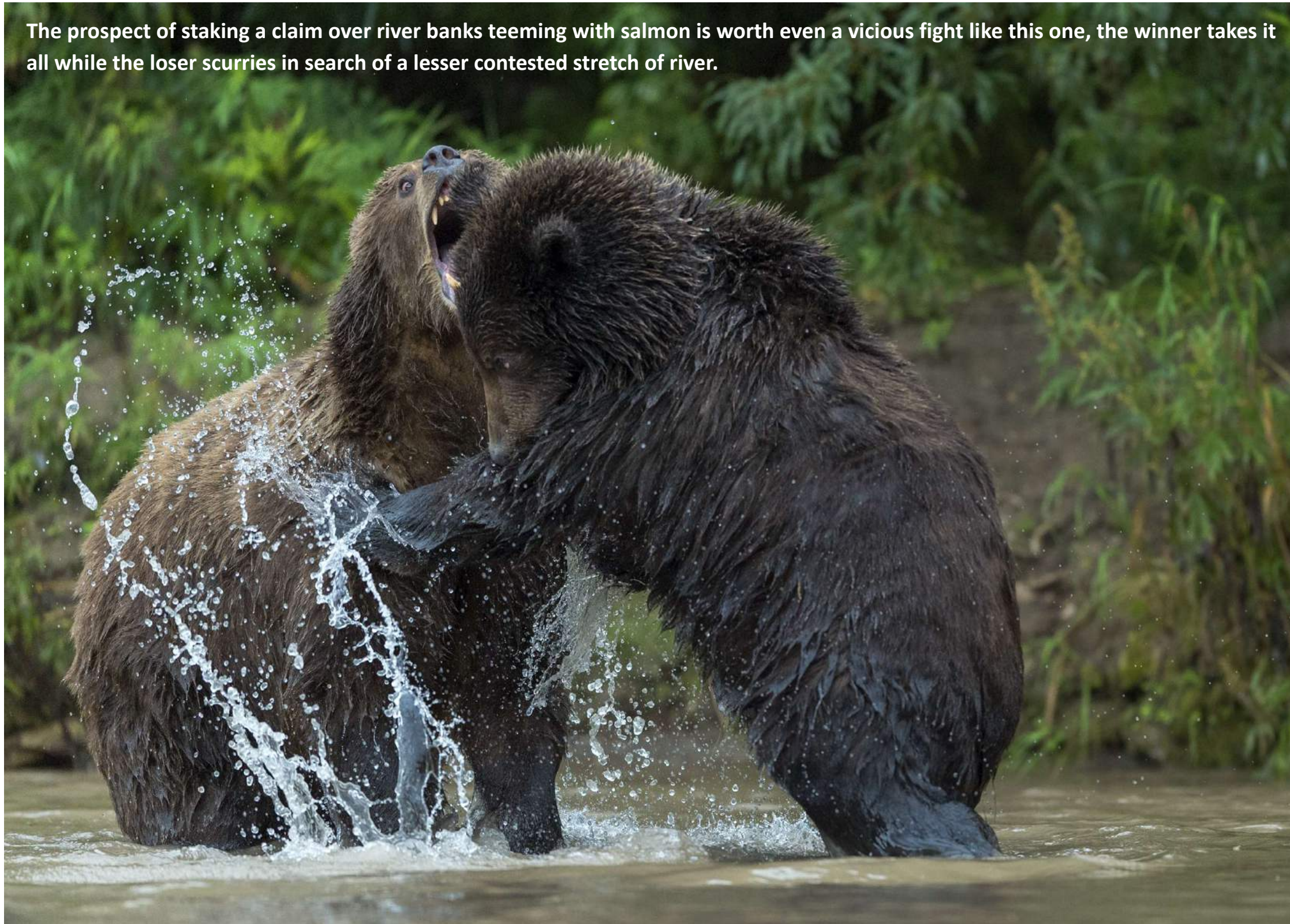
The thick coat enables these bears to spend hours fishing in these cold waters teeming with salmon.

offerings. The bears are always mindful of stacking up some excess fat reserve before the onset of winter. Berries and nuts along with other small vegetation during the summer and the autumn months are easy sources of food. The bears eat up berries and other soft fruit that fall from the trees, shrubs and vines by circling around fruiting trees. Fallen cones form an integral and important part of these bears' diet. During the favourable months with the abundance of fallen cones the bears often rake them in heaps and then pick the nuts out of the cones at their leisure. During the snowy season (spring or late autumn) the bears have been known to dig up cones from under the snow using their muzzles and long and sharp claws. Although cones, berries, nuts form a part of their diet the bears need meat to survive since meat

For the young cubs this is a season for exploring the neighbourhood before winter forces them inside their burrows, this young cub spends the days without a care in the world under the watchful eyes of its mother.



The prospect of staking a claim over river banks teeming with salmon is worth even a vicious fight like this one, the winner takes it all while the loser scurries in search of a lesser contested stretch of river.



constitutes a significantly large portion of their diet. These giants are excellent hunters and on a regular basis hunt down antelopes and wild boars which are found in this region. In spite of being excellent hunters these bears never let go off an opportunity to get hold of an easy meal. These animals are no strangers to feast of carrions and often resort to strategies like running away with a kill made by some other predators. The massive proportions of these bears even embolden them to challenge any other predator with its kill and eventually chase it off. In order to track down a kill made by some other animal or to successfully track down a dead animal the bears rely on their excellent sense of smell. With the onset of spring, effectively marking the departure of winter, as the snow starts to melt the bears set out sniffing the air which often bears the smell of animals which were casualties of the harsh winter or preys of other animals buried in the snow. The bears methodically patrol the trails along the floodplain of a river or a creek, often leaving the path to examine places of interests, sniffing the air at regular intervals to keep track of any smell in the air which might be of any

significance to them. The bears are blessed with excellent olfactory lobes which enable them to pick up the odour of the remains of an animal at a distance of 250 meters at a temperature below 0 °Celsius. The bears sometimes follow the footsteps of other bears hoping to stumble upon any uneaten remains of carrion, an approach some would say a not so dignified one but one which surely reaps rich reward out of minimum effort when it comes out good. Although these bears are voracious eaters and will almost never let go off an opportunity to feed themselves, there is one particular item which firmly rests at the top of their eating wish list. The bears over the years have developed a serious taste and appetite for Pacific salmon. Every year millions upon millions of salmon swim up the rivers of the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Russian far east to spawn and then eventually die. Close to 2,000 rivers flowing over roughly 26,000 miles, cut through the length and breadth of Kamchatka peninsula. Such a huge network of rivers attracts the world's greatest concentration and diversity of salmon which amounts to a quarter of the entire Pacific population resulting in one of the largest spawning sites of salmons. This huge congregation of salmons sustain dozens of aquatic and terrestrial mammals including sea otters, giant Steller's sea eagles, brown bears, and humans. The salmon needless to say are a keystone species to this ecosystem.

Kamchatka's harsh climate results in an incredibly short period of growth and abundance. Winter departs leaving behind a sizeable population of hungry starving bears who need to pile on the pounds to build reserves to survive the next brutal winter. In times like these nothing packs more punch than salmon. Consuming salmon offers about ten times more calories than eating berries or nuts or other plant products. Some of the adults need to eat a salmon every twenty minutes in order to make up for the lost weight. It comes as a little surprise stretches of rivers with the maximum density of salmon population attract the most number of bears. In their quest to stake a claim on that particular stretch of the river teeming with salmon the bears often face stiff challenges from their counterparts. These confrontations can turn violent and in some cases may prove to be fatal for the lesser individual. It is no surprise the biggest and the largest claim their ownership on some of the best hunting grounds along the rivers. In times when salmon are abundant the bears are generally relaxed even in the presence of another bear; however the fights over hunting grounds are far more common and brutal as the salmon population starts dwindling. The end of winter and the onset of Spring signal the beginning of another remarkable phenomenon-the emergence of the next generation of Kamchatka brown bears. The young bear cubs emerge out of their winter burrows or caves accompanied by their

As the salmon congregate in huge number the bears cannot seem to have enough of them, some feed on them as frequently as one in every 20 minutes.



mother. The mothers are wary of any ensuing confrontation over salmon with other bears when her young ones are around. This means the family has to settle down for lesser nutritious sources of food such as berries, nuts but this ensures the cubs' safety. The cubs usually stay with their mother for the next 2-4 years, after which they go their separate ways when the female becomes ready to breed again. During the mating season which usually lasts from May to July the plains of Kamchatka turn into fierce battlegrounds. The male bears engage in fierce rivalry among themselves over females and these vicious face offs can often be fatal. The male bears usually maintain their own territories and will not shy away from an

encounter if an intruder enters his territory with the idea of challenging him. These turf wars are a common cause of death among these creatures. Although these vicious fights may prompt one to think of these animals as bloodthirsty ones, they do however try and avoid these encounters, in fact engaging in a combat is the last option they resort to. In order to avoid such face offs which can turn fatal these bears mark their territories so each individual steers clear of the other and their paths don't cross. Trees are the main marking objects of bears. Among the various modes of communication among themselves the most common ones are when they leave their marks on a tree by biting the bark of the tree or scuffing it,

rubbing their backs against the tree trunk or sometimes by breaking the branches or the trunk of a tree. Sometimes as mode of communication the bears use their massive bodyweight to create a hole on the ground by rolling on it and leave their hair in that hollow. Brown bear marking activities are a means of intrapopulation communication. Marking trees reduces the possibility of undesirable meetings with other individuals which can be beneficial for both the individuals on a collision course, sends out a clear message to other bears about the marking animal's social status, and creates a favourable environment for interested sexual partners to pick up each other's scents and other clues which eventually leads to their meeting during the mating season. Bears' marking activities have complex biological meaning. Some tree-marking behaviours such as rubbing or scratching can be comforting or playful in nature rather than social while some can be a warning sign to intruders whereas some are laden with sexual innuendos to lure in a member of the opposite sex.

It would be perfectly logical for anyone to assume such massive and powerful creatures are above any kind of threats.



When there is plenty to go by they might be tolerant towards each other but when it gets too close to comfort the dominant ones make it a point to firmly lay down the ground rules.

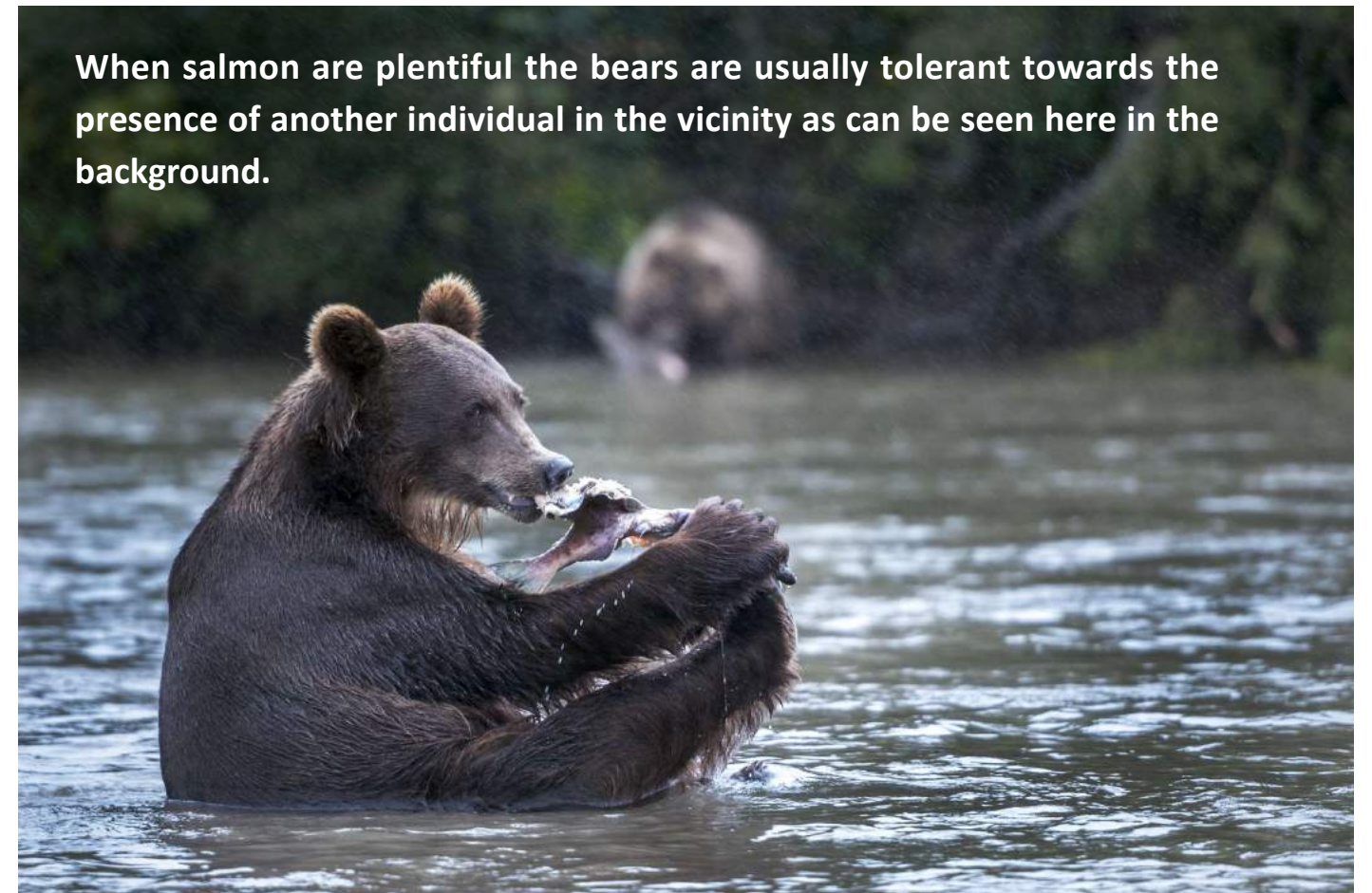
While it is true these animals have almost no one to fear in their natural habitat however the existence of these animals is under serious threat due to a number of factors. The main threats plaguing the existence of Kamchatka brown bears include poaching, overharvest during the trophy season and habitat loss due to unmonitored mining and oil exploration activities. Like so many other animals the Kamchatka brown bears face the greatest threat from poachers. Anti-poaching laws have done little to deter the poachers who take advantage of the vast landscape and the limited resources available at the disposal of the enforcement agencies. During the Soviet era when the entire landscape was under the management of the army the wildlife agencies were not cash crunched. The peninsula boasted of a healthy population of as many as 20,000 bears. After the disintegration of Soviet Union this peninsular landscape provided new and lucrative opportunities to oil explorers, gold miners and brought about an end to the long search for natural gas reserves. Along with all of these came the lure of trophy hunting. All these factors combined together resulted in a steep decline in the population of brown bears which shrunk to a little more than 12,000. It is not only the poaching of the animals itself which affected their population but uncontrolled and illegal fishing of salmon by the local population has also contributed significantly towards the dwindling bear population. Salmon are a rich source of

protein for the human settlements in this region too, and even the people battling the harsh Kamchatka natural elements want to make the most during the short season of plenty. Many scientists fear in the near future if one of the primary food sources for these animals dry up this entire wilderness can come under the serious threat of an ecological meltdown. In the recent past newspaper reports have referred to hungry bears invading human settlements in search of food, which brings them on a collision course with human beings giving rise to the dreaded situation of man-animal conflict. Kamchatka's local administration has failed to get to grips with the endemic poaching. Although it has established a poaching committee, officials admit they are powerless to stop illegal fishing. The local authorities permit hunting of brown bears under a quota system, which even though is a source of much needed funds for the wildlife agencies unfortunately is poorly enforced. Typically the game season lasts from April to May during which hunters using helicopters and snowmobiles are permitted to hunt down the stipulated number of 300 bears. The cost of \$10,000 per dead bear adds to the exchequer but opens up more avenues for illegal hunting without proper permit which claims around 600 more dead bears every season. Besides all of this the trophy hunters have their eyes set on bringing down the largest dominant males in the region which adversely affects the entire population and their social

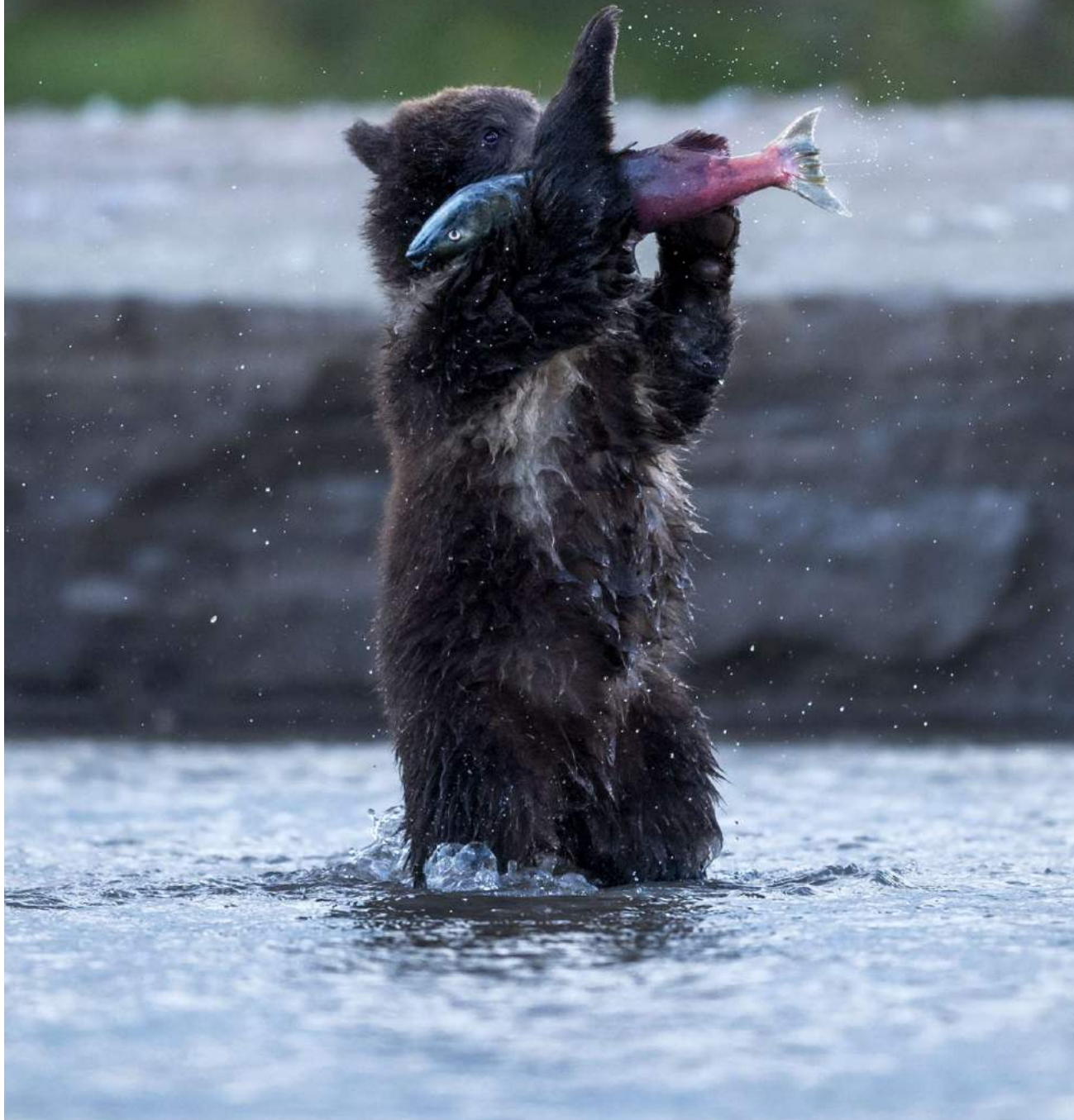
Even while they are busy feeding them the bears keep a close watch on the surroundings, the younger ones particularly are wary of any approaching dominant male.



When salmon are plentiful the bears are usually tolerant towards the presence of another individual in the vicinity as can be seen here in the background.



It is never too early to start. The young cubs must learn the necessary skills so that they can make it on their own in this harsh and unforgiving wilderness. This young cub battles with a full grown salmon and seems to have got it just right.



dynamics. Many scientists have raised concerns over this systemic elimination of the best genes from the gene pool which will only result in a genetically less equipped future generation which can never augur well for any species and their survival. While a potential source of income for conservation, trophy hunting remains largely uncontrolled beyond the realms of rules and regulations, and most profits leave the region. Local hunters often target bears as a source of meat for dog food. The Kamchatka peninsula is rich in natural resources such as natural gas, oil, minerals. In the quest to extract these valuable resources from the heart of these wilderness our eagerness and overzealous nature of approach is causing irreversible damage to this wild landscape and even the mighty bears are feeling the heat of it. Illegal oil, gas and mineral are increasingly threatening wildlife habitat on Kamchatka. Moreover, exploitation of Kamchatka's mineral resources is allowing poachers to access previously inaccessible areas of the peninsula, leaving in their wake streams devoid of salmon and therefore bears as well. In the face of such adversities the bears have still managed to hold their own but one only wonders for how long. It is all too natural to think these creatures are already on their borrowed time. The natural world can ill afford to lose another magnificent creature which fell prey to human's greed. The bears have forged a bond with this great wilderness, this unique landscape over hundreds of years. In a way

they have been one of the premier architects to have shaped this vast landscape. The fate of the forest and the fate of the bear are intertwined, a relationship which rests firmly on a platform of mutual respect, the only thing we can do is let that relationship unfold in front of us and admire its nuances, its subtleties, its complexities. Our greed has already wrecked so much of this planet and the natural world, being a part of the same natural world which witnesses extinction of some species on a daily basis it will be nothing less than criminal on our part to let another magnificent creature become nothing more than an anecdote in the natural history museums of the world.

About the Author



I have been living in Dubai for the past 21 years and I used to have a very hectic job schedule. Due to my work pressure I was so frustrated that my wife thought of distracting me and introducing me to some hobbies. During that period my brother in law used to show me some photographs clicked by some of the well-known photographers which inspired me to try photography during one of my vacation trip. With the help of my brother in law and some friends I started learning the basics of photography and I realized that it helped me to overcome the stress and pressure of my job. Now it's going to be more than 10 years that I am enjoying my life and work at the same time! I split my vacation and travel to different places to take the best of my shot. The most memorable trips of my life have been to Varanasi in India, Kamchatka in Russia & Masai Mara in Kenya.

My visit to Kamchatka in Russia happened during September 2016. It was a long journey to reach Kamchatka. From Dubai I took a flight to Moscow. From Moscow there was a connecting flight to Petropavlovsk Kamchatka City and from there we took a passenger helicopter to reach Kurilskoye Lake (also known as Kurile Lake). We stayed in a small wooden lodge in Grassy Point. The temperature was approximately 0 degree and it was freezing cold, rainy and windy. Another amazing fact about this lake is that there is no mode for any type of communication. No internet, no mobile, no telephone. I was on my own with my camera for four days!! We went for an evening trip to see the brown bears and I got some fantastic shots on the first day itself. We could see the mother bear and its cub playing, bears fishing the salmon, bear cubs playing near the lake shore and many other amazing scenes which were like dreams for any photographer. Most of the time it was really a challenge to capture these moments as I went so close, may be just 3 meters away from the scene and the bears got furious seeing my presence near him. We had a body guard and I put all my trust on him and went ahead!! Sometimes I had to wade into the ice cold water, sometimes I had to lay down on the wet ground to get the shots I always wanted.

More of my work is available at- **1x.com** <https://1x.com/member/vinayan>

A close-up photograph of a snake with a brown and yellow patterned body, coiled around a dark, moss-covered branch. The background is a blurred forest floor with green leaves and brown soil.

Editorial

A Trail Greeted By Life

by Rahul Bera

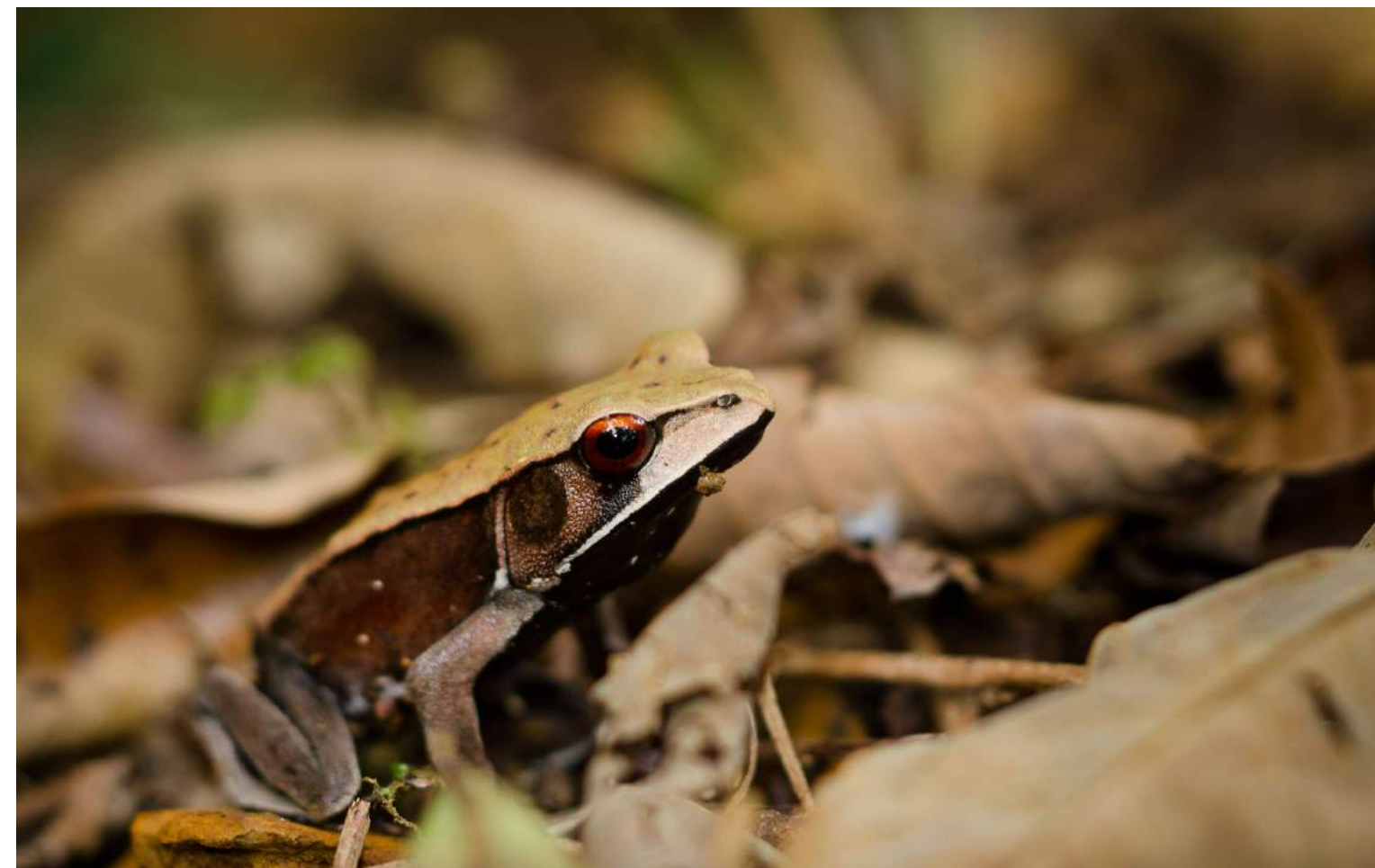
A mountain range far more ancient than the Himalayas, home to over 300 globally threatened species, a UNESCO world heritage site, and an absolute wonderland for zoologists, a place which witnesses the explosion of life almost on a daily basis, where countless organisms ranging from the micro to the macro scale compete with each other every single minute to claim their rights, where the secrets which the deep dark forests so far unexplored hold in their realms can put the most creative mind to shame- these are a few facts which are merely the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that the Western Ghats is. These facts allowed me to form a picture of the Ghats in my head but I was never under any illusion that the true picture would make my wildest imagination look like an amateurish effort. Being a living being I didn't need any further invitation than –“witness life at play” to set foot on the slopes and curves of the Ghats. One key element of this puzzle exists in the form of the Malabar Pit Viper, a venomous snake species endemic to the Western Ghats. So far my association with this magnificent creature was restricted to the television set and the internet, but all of that was about to change.

My travels in the Ghats centred on the sleepy little town of Agumbe, located in the Shimoga district, some 100 odd kilometres from the city of Mangalore in Karnataka. Placed in the lap of the Sahyadris, Agumbe is known as the

"Cherrapunji of the south" for the heavy rainfall this place receives every year. However Agumbe is still best known as the village where the once popular TV series "Malgudi Days" was shot. This small village town with its old fashioned houses, traditional households and the quiet and easy way of life slips gently into the lap of nature and blends in beautifully with the Western Ghats without making much of a fuss. I could not have picked a better location, as a 10 minutes' walk from the village along a muddy trail led me into the forests of the Western Ghats. Monsoon is the best time to experience these pristine forests and be a witness to the explosion of life all around. When I took my first step on the forest floor monsoon was nearing an end but had its mind firmly set on making one last long lasting impression. Hence it was an overcast day, with a chill in the air and the mountain peaks in the background seemed to be wearing necklaces of mist. The forest along with its inhabitants made it very clear to me from the onset that I was treading into uncharted waters. There would be rustling on the forest floor, some close to where I was standing, some a few meters ahead or behind me, at times there would be trails so silent that I could hear my own heart beating again at times the forest would break into a chorus made up of sounds mostly unheard by me till then. Throughout the trail I was accompanied by my faithful companions the leeches, at



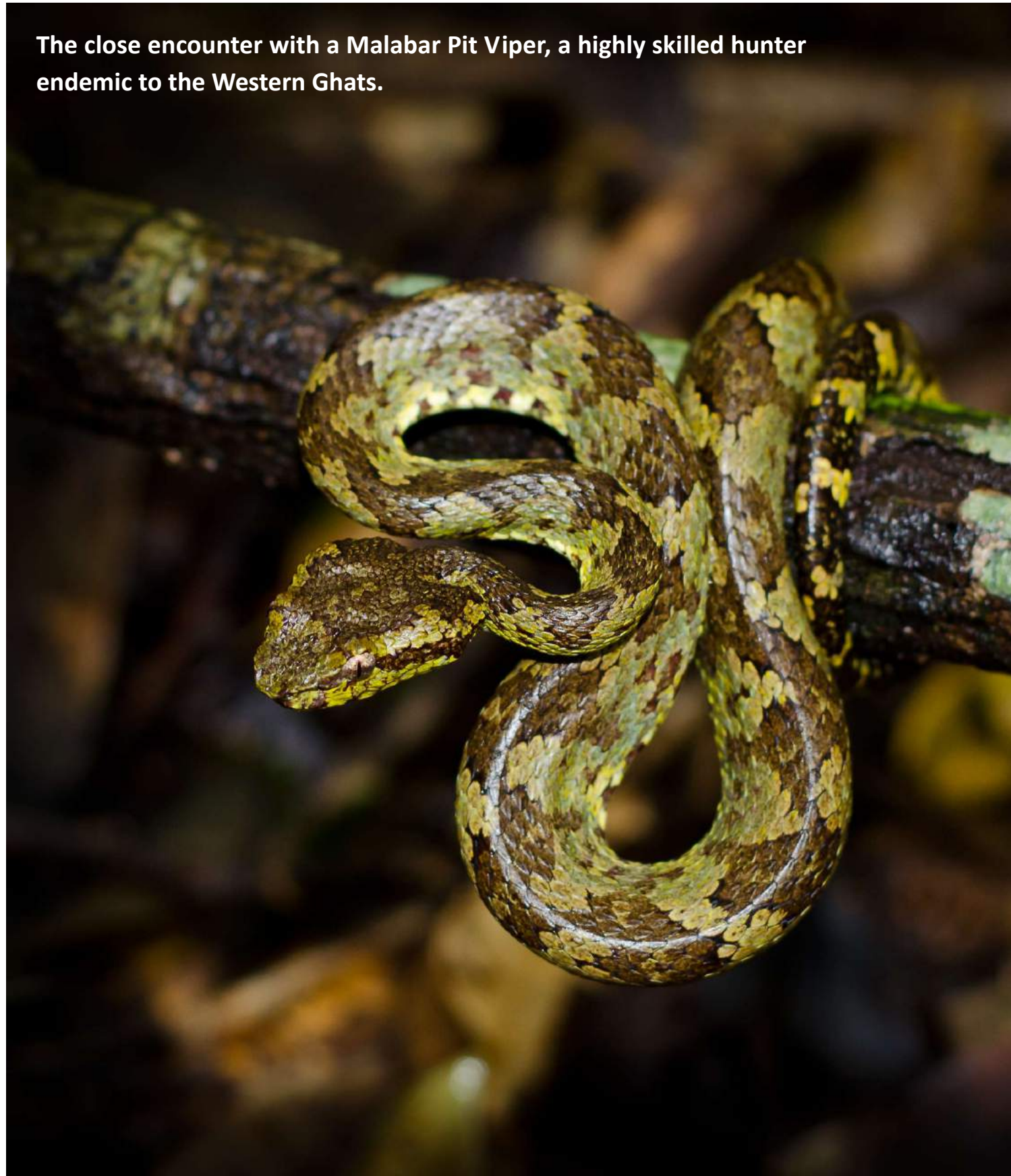
A Skink Lizard, another forest floor dweller, they are often mistaken for snakes at the first glance.



The forest floor is home to a wide range of frog species some as tiny as the one at the top right which appears no bigger than a house fly

times so faithful that shrugging them off literally became a huge problem! Leeches can be found aplenty during the monsoon, as the young ones are born by late July and are busy claiming their rights on the forest floor. Unlike other forests and national parks across India the beauty of Agumbe lies with its micro fauna: insects, reptiles and amphibians. The first forest dweller to greet me was a beautiful Bronzed Frog. This beautiful individual was soon followed by its relatives like the Indian Burrowing frog, the Indian Cricket frog and many other frog species, the occasional Skink Lizard which can be easily mistaken for a snake. As I ventured deeper into the forest the topography began to change as well. Such is the magnitude of the monsoons in Agumbe that just in the first few showers fairly deep streams gushing with water cut through the length and breadth of the forest floor. In order to advance along my trail I had no other choice but take my shoes off and wade into these streams, where at times I would be up to my waist in water in no time. Following one such stream I made my way to the Jogigundi falls. Unlike other waterfalls this one has water flowing through a rocky cave and pouring into a small lake. It seemed like an elaborate arrangement to preserve some precious secret in the heart of the forest. As I resumed my walk along my chosen trail through the forest an uprooted tree blocked my path leaving me with no other

The close encounter with a Malabar Pit Viper, a highly skilled hunter endemic to the Western Ghats.



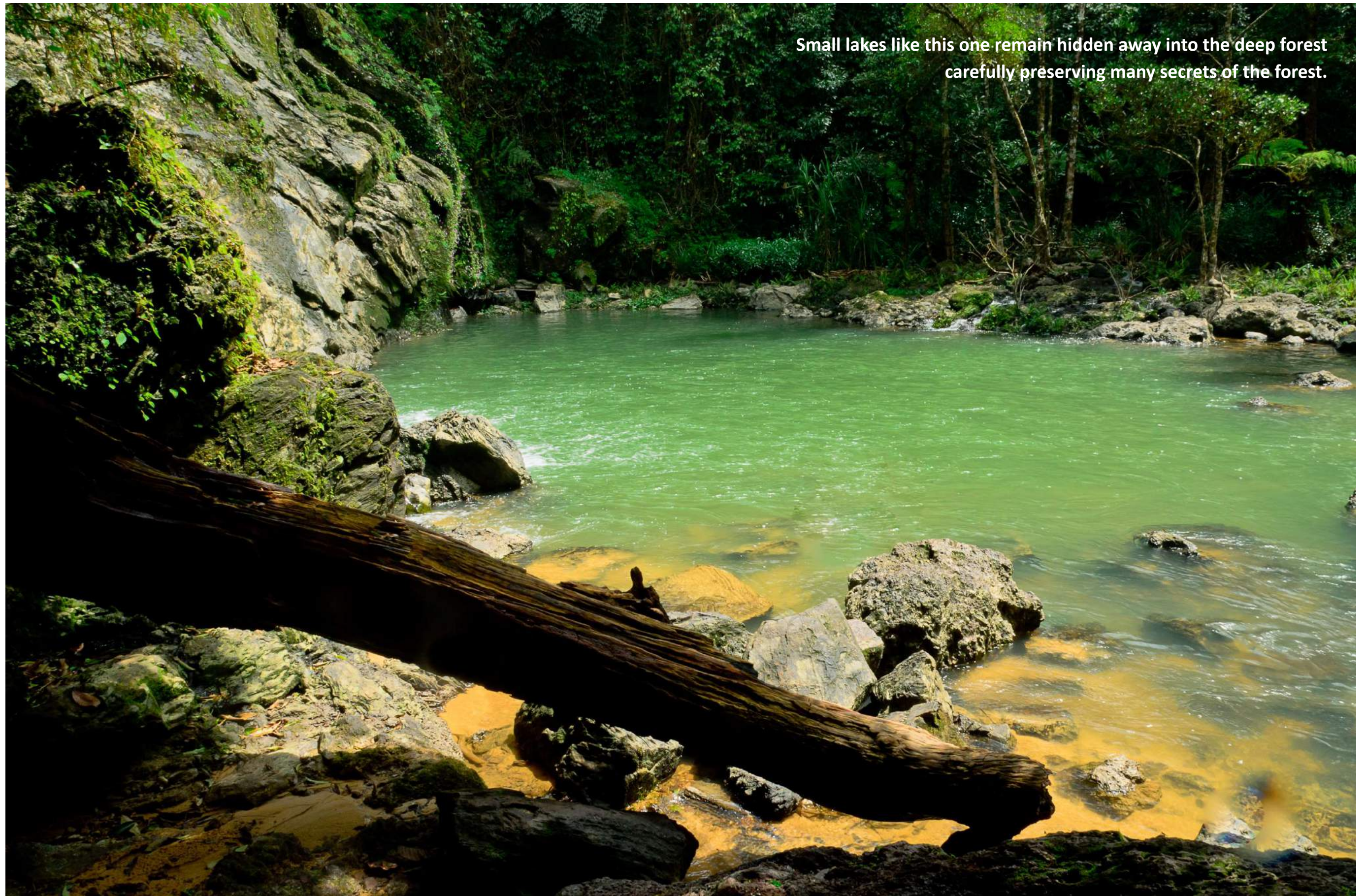
choice than cutting through the deep dense forest. To be honest it wasn't the ideal scenario for walking through the forest, a rainforest floor can kill in a hundred different ways. But little did I know at that time that the uprooted tree was in fact a blessing in disguise. I was carefully making my way through the dark and dense forest leaving my chosen trail behind, trying to be wary of every step that I was taking and clearing with my hands the branches, twigs, cobwebs which blocked my path ahead. I had barely taken 15-20 odd steps when I noticed a patch of greenish-yellow on a small branch which was hanging barely 2 meters above the ground. More than anything else the beautiful pattern of green and brown caught my attention. I froze in my path and within a second realised I was staring at a Malabar Pit Viper. These venomous snakes are endemic to the Western Ghats and grow up to a length of 2-3 feet. This particular individual, about a foot in length, had taken a keen interest in my camera lens by that time. Over the next 5 odd minutes as I observed this marvel of nature from a distance of barely two feet, I realised how misunderstood these magnificent creatures are. Being a wildlife enthusiast I never thought of snakes as some kind of evil creature but I had no idea at times they can be extremely easy creature to deal with. This crown jewel of the Ghats stayed still and confident, giving me ample opportunity to take a good look

at those famed pits at the top of its head, these heat sensitive pits allow these vipers to produce a thermal image of their surroundings which enable them to hunt down warm blooded preys with surgical precision even in the dark. Hence the name Pit Viper. All this while I was amazed by the supremely confident and assured presence of this beautiful reptile, it didn't try to run away, didn't try to hide itself, instead stood its ground curious of my presence. By the end of those 5 most fascinating minutes of my life, the snake lost interest in me or maybe by that time it came to know everything that was there to be known about me and slithered away along the branch and slowly disappeared into the dense forest floor. The graceful manner in which it moved, the non-hurried manner in which it disappeared made me realise once again these creatures own the forest, it is their turf, they have survived the test of time and they deserve nothing but the utmost respect.

Over the next few days I explored other trails along the forest, observed some magnificent creatures which can be found only here, every time there was a rustling nearby my heart would light up with the hope of seeing a King Cobra but sadly it never happened. While inside the forest I experienced diverse sights and sounds, witnessed nature in its most pristine form. But at the end of all this I couldn't help but shiver at the thought of what will



As a result of the torrential downpour meandering streams like this one cuts through the heart of the forest floor.



Small lakes like this one remain hidden away into the deep forest
carefully preserving many secrets of the forest.

happen if a day comes when none of this is left. Like all other forests and ecosystems the rainforest dwellers of the Western Ghats have been severely affected by the rapid loss of habitat. As a result of which some species which used to roam and rule these forests are now living on borrowed time, some have already gone extinct. Irresponsible mining, diverting the courses of certain rivers for hydroelectric projects, the huge demand from the timber industry are some of the key factors which have played a huge role in causing a permanent damage to this fragile eco-system. There can be no argument regarding the need for power or minerals or other natural resources which the Ghats have to offer. But we should be using up those resources in such a way which will allow nature to recuperate and regenerate. If we let our greed and overzealousness get the better of us and by doing so threaten the balance of nature, it will find a way to restore that balance at whatever cost. We are dealing with forces the magnitude of which is far beyond our comprehension. Let us pledge that all of us will work in our own way to devise a sustainable model for our development and growth which will let these marvels of nature rule their turfs without facing any outside threat thereby providing us with the opportunity to learn the secret lives of these forests and ecosystems. All the creatures ranging from the tiniest of frog to the mighty King Cobra



Located in the laps of the Western Ghats the forests often get covered in a thick veil of fog and mist.

or the highly skilled hunters in the form of the Pit Vipers have made these forests their home through millions of years of evolution, the same evolution which transformed us from Homo habilis to today's Homo sapiens, let us respect that journey of so many millions of years, let us respect life.



Most of the forest dwellers are masters of camouflage and blend in perfectly with their surroundings.

Natural craters like this one can be found in the hills of the Western Ghats making it a geological hotspot as well

