

Inside the Mind: *Manas Tiger Reserve*- A Photo Essay

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<http://www.ourstories.org.in/vivid/inside-the-mind-manas-tiger-reserve-a-photo-essay/> March 29 2018

Before civilisation, there was only Nature and man was a part of Nature, struggling and toiling like all her children. There was no memory either, only fear and some primal desire. Then sorrow and happiness were born together. Then desire and fear, sorrow and happiness, all blended together and became memory, and memory separated man from nature. Memory became man and man became the mind – Manas.



A driveway in the Manas Tiger Reserve in Assam

Mind is a river that meanders through the wilderness of our life or what we make of it- little islets of happiness strewn across countless eddies –eddies of bitter disappointments, unfulfilled desires, unrealised dreams, unkept promises, unrequited love. Manas is not a place, it is an emblem. An emblem that turns life into desires, desires into dreams, and dreams into memories. Memories that draw you again and again into their labyrinth like the crisscrossing pathways of the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary. In these winding paths and their intersections one can watch, from the safety of a safari vehicle, herds of elephants and rhinos gliding majestically without haste, the hispid hares, sambars and wild boars hurrying by, and if one is lucky, cheetas and tigers walking gracefully, oblivious of all the cares of life.

Situated in the sloping foothills of the Himalayas, where wooded hills gently transform themselves into alluvial grasslands and tropical forests, the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary of Assam covering 39000 hectares is a world in itself. The crystal clear waters of the Manas river flow through its thick forests marking the

international border with Bhutan, well into the territory of which the thick forest cover extends. At stretches, the forest cover is so dense that even sunlight cannot penetrate it. Areas adjoining the river often get inundated during the rainy season erasing the roads and making pedestrian as well as vehicular movements impossible. Partly because of this, it became a safe haven for insurgents during the 1980s and 1990s, driving away the tourists who are now returning. The forest has a long history – parts of it were declared as reserve forests between 1907 and 1927 before the entire area was declared as a Sanctuary in 1928. The Sanctuary formed the core of the 283,700 hectares of Manas Tiger Reserve from April 1973 and entered the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1985, and was declared a National Park in 1990. Its wet grasslands are home to about 500 species of birds, 40 species of reptiles and 60 species of mammals, 22 of them endangered. Some of them are rare, such as the golden langur, found nowhere else in India, and the beautiful red panda.



Manas river flowing from Bhutan through the Manas Reserve to merge into the mighty Brahmaputra

Nature is always intuitive, and hides its innermost secrets underneath the veil of beauty to distract us from touching the heights of spirituality which it embodies in the flaming flowers of its trees and the tranquil flow of its rivers. In the interplay of light and shade, in the slow turning of the seasons, in the jubilation of the mornings and the celebration of the day, in the serenity of the evening and the ecstasy of the night when the forests come alive, Nature sketches the patterns of eternity. One who has the wisdom to decipher and fathom these patterns becomes one with Nature. Mountains become his soul, and trees his spirit. He turns unto Nature tenderly, laying bare before her his worsted life, to be embraced by her comforting solace.

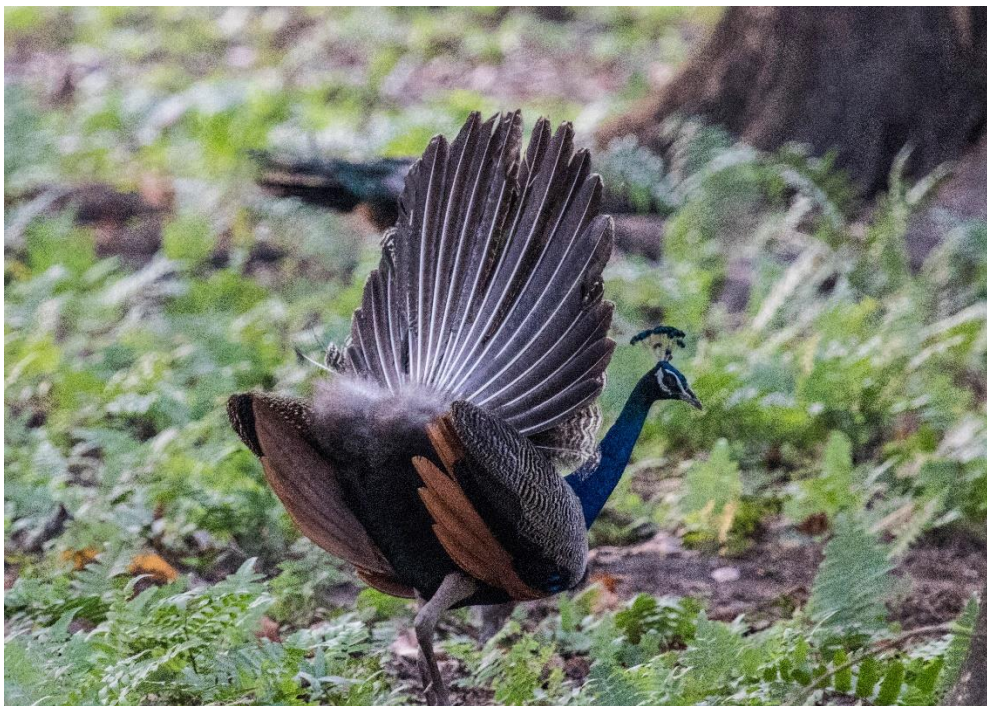


A Shimul tree is full blossom inside the forest of Manas

The few gems that we collect through life we put in the cells of the honeycomb of our memories; some lie deep within its layers; we dare not touch them lest they evaporate. We can only catch fleeting glimpses of their beauty. They are only to be looked at, and not for too long, otherwise you lose them forever. Some others are very fragile, they are to be treated very gently, or else they melt into tears. Alas, all these soon depart into the realm of dreams, not to be recalled at our will.



Perched on a tree, a peacock answers to the call of its mate



On the ground another peacock has seen his mate



And he starts dancing in joy

The wayfarer has but a brief sojourn in every station of life but is never allowed to rest. It is his curse and his blessing to keep on travelling. Nights of longing turn into the despair of the day. He passes by the lakes of his childhood whose waters reflect his lost innocence. The fierce winds around blow his voice and hopes away. The harsh sun burns his skin. The travails of the journey toughens him and drains his soul. He travels through the fog of life trying to come to terms with his fragility and mortality. Sometimes, for a brief fleeting moment, the haze lifts and he sees the glorious sight of a magnificent city that beckons him irresistibly. But no sooner he is able gather his strength to run towards it than it disappears again into the mist. He will never reach it. He is made and unmade by the forces of wind, water, sun and the earth. At the end, he is humbled by the realization that there is nothing beyond yearning and it is this yearning that breaks upon the shores of his mind convincing him that the vast ocean of life is made only of the surfs of yearning.



An elephant family returning to the forest after all the toils of the day



A wild bison taking a well-deserved rest



An angry rhino ready to strike

The forests are fierce but there is mercy in every place. Creatures of nature have the power to move us immensely and lift our souls to give us a brief glimpse of the joy we had abandoned when we separated ourselves from Nature. Maybe the soul is not entirely dead, somewhere it still lives and retains its pristine purity. Maybe it will survive our greed, our networked mind and our technology driven being.



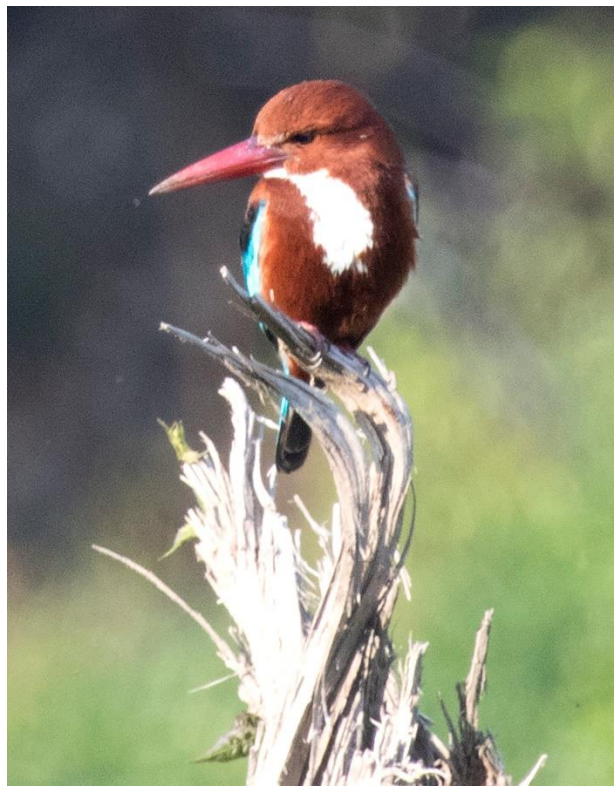
A sambar expecting its mate?



A Malayan giant squirrel resting on a tree



A pair of Brahmini ducks flying over the river Manas while the day is quietly dreaming



The kingfisher never tires of waiting