



A Bengal tiger keeps a close eye on things from a riverbank.

GETTY IMAGES

Away with a roar

With help from an elephant, **Greg Roughan** finally tracks down his quarry.

YOU KNOW you're a long way from home when you bump into a tree and a cluster of iridescent green beetles plop on to you, clambering over your clothes like jewelled tanks before flying away with a clatter.

This is Bardia National Park in the steaming lowland jungles of Nepal and the contrast to the eerie emptiness of the New Zealand bush is striking.

For that matter Nepal's jungles have little in common with the mountain landscapes for which the country is famous. Here, monkeys scold from the canopy, rhinos blink shortsightedly in the undergrowth, and somewhere — close, but invisible — is the animal we've come to find, the beast that keeps every other jungle resident in a state of nervous tension: the royal Bengal tiger.

Our big cat fever began on a fortnight's trek high in the Everest region. I'd always dreamed of glimpsing



that fanged enigma, the silvery snow leopard, and asked every Sherpa we met if they'd seen one. Oh sure, said the toothless old gaffers sitting in the sun, look carefully in the rhododendron forests and watch the high mountain flanks. After two weeks of following their advice I was able to deduce:

● If you spot, far in the distance and about a kilometre above you, a shape on the lofty Himalayan pastures, it's a yak.



From his elephant perch Greg Roughan photographs a well-camouflaged lizard and a deer. GREG ROUGHAN

Major threat

- Poaching is one of the greatest threats faced by Nepal's tigers. In China, tiger parts are used in traditional medicines and the high prices are a big temptation to impoverished Nepalese farmers.
- Tiger tourism is one of the best defences against poaching. The steady income generated by live tigers helps counter their dollar value when dead and it also keeps rangers and naturalists in the field, which protects wild populations.
- Go with an environmentally responsible lodge such as Tiger Mountain.
- As recently as 2006, Nepal's civil war enabled poachers to exploit animals. But the wildlife population is recovering.



improve our chances of seeing a big cat, my girlfriend and I decided to visit one of the tiger-haunted jungles in the south.

Two days later, and in 39C heat, we arrive at Karnali Lodge at the edge of the Royal Bardia National Park. With the monsoon approaching we're the lodge's last guests, says our guide, and have the whole place to ourselves. Would we like to go tiger-hunting by boat or by elephant?

Elephant please.

For those who have never gone plodding on a pachyderm, it's something to be experienced. As the big shoulder blades work beneath you, your seat pitches like a boat on a slow sea. Low branches are carefully lifted over your head by the mahout and the occasional shower of jewelled beetles is a bonus, if you're in the right frame of mind. And if any small trees block the way, up comes the elephant's trunk and with a crack, down comes the tree.

This seems like an un-ecological and noisy way to sneak up on tigers, but we quickly realise that our impact is normal for this environment when we stumble across a herd of wild elephants.

Suddenly the tension is palpable. They are bigger, stronger and faster than us and highly dangerous, and our own mount backs away nervously. We retreat to a safe distance and are rewarded with a perfect view of two young bulls wading across a river. The cameras get a workout, then we turn away and follow the water's edge.

There are deer all over the riverbanks feeding on the young green grass. And someone else has come for a snack, too because within minutes we find the clear paw-prints of a large tiger crossing the sand. Suddenly our lofty perch on the elephant seems far too low. Shouldn't there be a safety fence or something? Is this really so wise? But the excited mahout follows the trail.

Soon we find more prints — then a fresher set, still — until, just when the tension seems unbearable, our elephant comes to an abrupt halt and the guide grips my shoulder urgently, stabbing a finger at the thicket we were about to cross.

There, not 3m in front of us, is an enormous flame-coloured cat. Its furious eyes glare into our own — you forget how a tiger can look absolutely psychotic — then it pulls its lips off its fangs in a silent snarl and disappears.

Over the next three days we have three more breathtaking tiger encounters — both from elephant-back and rubber raft — and see rhinos, crocodiles, otters, eagles and perhaps most charmingly, millions of fireflies around our cabin at night.

Sadly we don't see a leopard, although we come close.

On the last day, while walking back to camp, our guide hears monkeys scolding a predator. Quietly he beckons us to follow him and picks up a stick (so it can pick its teeth after it eats us?) and for a heart-hammering 20 minutes we creep through the jungle on foot.

Finally our guide gives up. "It must have been a leopard, not a tiger," he says, "to have snuck away without us seeing." That makes sense. After an incredible month in Nepal, we know all about spotting no leopards.

Greg Roughan paid his own way to Nepal.

i Tourism Nepal: www.nepaltourism.info
Tiger Mountain: www.tigermountain.com
For up-to-date travel safety information visit <http://www.safetravel.govt.nz> for information.

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www.lets-cruise.co.nz
info@lets-cruise.co.nz