

BONES of the **TIGER**

Protecting the

MAN-EATERS OF NEPAL

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(1922–1949). In addition to the British aristocracy, he invited Greek and Russian royalty to hunt tigers. In early 1961 Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth shot two tigers in the maharaja's facilities in Ranthambore. The queen was the guest of his celebrity wife, Maharani Gyatri Devi. But the queen's feat pales in comparison to the maharajah's counterparts in other parts of India.

The Maharaja of Udaipur, a city 250 miles south of Jaipur, shot more than a thousand tigers during his reign (1930–1955). Likewise, in the first five decades of the twentieth century, the Maharaja of Vijayanagaram killed 325 tigers in southern India. The Maharajas of Rewa (central India) and of Gauripur in Assam (northeastern India) each have five hundred tigers in his tally. But the highest record goes to the Maharaja of Surguja in central India. He shot more than 1,710 tigers in a twenty-five-year period ending in 1956.

Nepal was not behind India when it came to tiger hunts. As Briton, E. A. Smythies described it in his book *Big Game Shooting in Nepal*, tiger hunting in India was a mundane affair compared with the gala events within its neighbor's boundaries.

In December 1911 King George V went big-game hunting in Bikhna Thori Forest on the southern side of Chitwan's Churia Hills. The British monarch was the guest of Maharaja Chandra Shamsheer. On this particular hunt, the Rana prime minister, who ruled Nepal from 1901 to 1929 with an iron fist, mobilized six hundred elephants, twelve thousand porters, and two thousand palace attendants to entertain King George and his eighteen-member entourage. During a ten-day hunt, the king shot thirty-nine tigers, eighteen rhinos, and large numbers of leopards, sloth bears, and deer.

King George's tiger tally was surmounted in 1939 by Victor Alexander John Hope, the second Marquess of Linlithgow and Viceroy of India. But no one could match the carnage of Nepal's own son—Maharaja Juddha Shamsheer. He shot 433 tigers in a period of seven years, between 1933 and 1940, averaging sixty-three tigers per hunt.

Unlike the Chinese, the maharajas of Nepal of the early twentieth century did not believe that tiger meat or bones or any of the animal's body parts had medicinal or restorative properties. Except for keeping the skin as a hunting trophy, they discarded the rest of the tiger's body.

History has recognized the Chitwan Valley as one of the best shikar sites since the first Rana ruler of Nepal, Jang Bahadur, shot thirty-one tigers in a single hunt in 1850. Even in modern times, state guests ranging from the deposed King Zahir Shah of Afghanistan to Queen Elizabeth II, the reigning sovereign of Great Britain, have hunted tigers in Chitwan.

In 1961 the queen made a state visit to Nepal. Like her grandfather fifty years before her, she too went tiger hunting in Chitwan. But her hunt was different from her grandfather's 1911 shikar. Her host was not a Rana prime minister but her Nepalese counterpart King Mahendra, the all-powerful Shah King of Nepal.

Mahendra's father, King Tribhuvan, had sided with the commoners to overthrow the Ranas in 1951 and introduce a multiparty democracy. Ten years later, Mahendra seized power in a bloodless coup in March 1961 to become absolute ruler of Nepal. Queen Elizabeth was his first state guest. A tiger-hunting safari in Chitwan topped the events of her visit.

At the time, the queen's hunt was the biggest spectacle on Earth. The French writer Michel Peissel describes this lavish display in his book *Tiger for Breakfast: The Story of Boris of Kathmandu*.

Nowhere else, even in Great Britain or the British colonies in Africa, had the queen's subjects matched such grandeur of pomp and pageantry. King Mahendra mobilized the Royal Nepal Army, the Nepal Police Force, and the Nepal Civil Service for the queen's visit. Thousands of laborers cleared a patch of dense forest in Megauli in western Chitwan to establish a royal hunting camp. A road was bulldozed through thick subtropical forests to connect Megauli with Bharatpur, the district capital of Chitwan. The

Nepalese Army constructed a four-thousand-foot airstrip in the heart of the jungle to land the royal aircraft. Working from sunrise to sunset, laborers removed a layer of soil one foot deep and then carpeted the dug-out ground with turfs of evergreen *dubo* or Bermuda grass to create a lawn in the middle of the forests. They also killed millions of insects, scorpions, and a few snakes. The military liberally sprayed insecticides to eradicate mosquitoes and other lesser creatures from the royal camp, and the Kathmandu Fire Brigade dispatched three engines to water the lawn to keep it green and well manicured.

Within a month, the hardworking Nepalese created a tented city covering two square miles of forest on the banks of the Rapti River. A big sand-and-mortar replica of Mount Everest stood in the center of the royal camp. A wide avenue stemming from the replica divided the tented city in two parts. One side was reserved for the Nepalese and the other for their distinguished British guests. Arches constructed from moss, bamboo, banana plants, and red cloth lined the avenues leading to Queen Elizabeth's tented suite. Huge brass vessels decorated with red vermilion, flowers, and yogurt in large oval pottery decorated the royal walkways. A huge board displaying the colorful insignia of both the British and Nepalese monarchs stood at the opposite ends of the Mount Everest model.

Queen Elizabeth had an eleven-room tented suite. Two of the rooms were bedrooms—one for the queen and one for her husband, Prince Philip. Consequently, the Nepalese knew long before her subjects did that the British queen and her husband slept separately. This information spread like wildfire and raised eyebrows among the Nepalese courtiers, but no one dared say a word. Tongues could be cut out for talking about the bedding habits of the royals.

The queen's suite also included a huge tent in front of her bedroom. This functioned as her living room, where Her Majesty could have her afternoon tea or evening cocktails. The queen and

her consort's bedroom tents had attached European-style bathrooms with flush toilets and hot and cold running water. In addition to tents for dressing rooms, meetings, and storerooms, the royal suite included two more huge tents, connected to the royal bedroom tents by a canvas corridor. One of the tents was reserved for Queen Elizabeth's lady-in-waiting. The other was for Prince Philip's aide-de-camp. Colorful woolen rugs and upscale furniture from the Nepalese royal palace lavishly furnished the regal suites.

The quarters of the king and queen of Nepal were similar but decorated less extravagantly. Tents of the entourage were lined up outside the monarchs' tents. Their size and furnishings varied according to the pecking-order protocol of the royal household: The higher the rank, the bigger the tent.

Meals were gastronomical events unprecedented anywhere for a two-day hunting event. They included more than twenty-five delicacies of Nepalese game animals and birds, including the Bengal florican—a rare and endangered species in Chitwan. The choicest aperitifs, wine, champagne, and after dinner liqueurs were served. Smokers had a choice of English cigarettes, Cuban cigars, or Burmese cheroots. But smoking was permitted only after Her Britannic Majesty announced, "Gentlemen, you may smoke." There were two feasting areas. Lunch was served outdoors on the scenic banks of the Rapti River. Dinner was served in a large tent that was superbly decorated to match any of the regal banquet halls in the Narayanhiti Royal Palace in Kathmandu.

A fleet of four hundred elephants assembled for Queen Elizabeth's shikar, providing the biggest show on Earth. The pachyderms were colorfully decorated with traditional Nepalese painted designs and the British royal coat of arms. The elephants had been trained to raise their trunks and trumpet a salute to the British queen.

The setting, the site, and the sounds of the jungle, synchronized with the chorus of four hundred elephants, enthralled the Britons, who had never had such an experience. During a safari deep into

the tall grasslands and riverine forests, the royals and their entourage relaxed languidly on their howdahs, cushioned wooden platforms fixed on top of their elephants. Some elephants served as a mobile jungle bar, their howdahs fully stocked with the choicest drinks—chilled champagne, beer, and gin and tonic water, the favorite of the English. Sequestered from the glaring eyes and ears of the media, the British royals were totally relaxed in the enchanting jungles of Chitwan—and they had the greatest adventure of their lives.

The British media claimed that their queen shot not with her gun but with her movie camera. Apparently Her Majesty filmed the birds and animals of Chitwan from atop her elephant, while the members of her entourage did the hunting. Her husband, Prince Philip, was offered a choice but also declined the opportunity to shoot a tiger. He wanted to be seen as a preserver, not a killer, of wildlife.

Prince Philip had a strong incentive not to hunt on this trip. The prince, who had shot tigers with his wife in India, was detested by the British press. A story in *Time* magazine reported that the English media called him the “Grim Reaper” after he shot hundreds of birds and a tiger during a visit to India and Pakistan in the late 1950s. This time the London tabloids were anxiously waiting for opportunities to prove that their queen’s consort was the biggest hypocrite in Britain.

Earlier in 1961 Prince Philip and Prince Bernhard, the consort of Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, had vowed to give up hunting to help preserve the world’s diminishing wildlife. In collaboration with several European intellectuals such as Sir Peter Scott, Julian Huxley, Edward Max Nicholson, Victor Stolan, and Guy Mountfort, the princes had just created the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The mission of the WWF was not to shoot but to save the world’s wildlife. As a founding father of the newly born WWF, Prince Philip could not afford to be seen shooting rhinos and tigers in Nepal.

But the prince faced another dilemma. As a guest of honor, it would not be diplomatic for him to change his program at the last minute and refuse King Mahendra’s invitation to have the honor of shooting a tiger. He needed a solid pretext to decline the king’s offer.

Philip was a canny man. During the morning of his scheduled tiger hunt, he walked out of his tent with a huge dressing on his trigger finger. He showed his bandaged finger to King Mahendra and explained his inability to use his badly infected finger to shoot his rifle. The king, who had attended the opening meetings of the World Wildlife Fund in Switzerland, was not a fool. With a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, he graciously accepted Prince Philip’s alleged wound. The king knew that Philip would have had no qualms about shooting a tiger had it not been for the presence of British media representatives in Kathmandu. Even if Chitwan was kept out of bounds for news hounds by the Nepalese police, some members of the hunting party could leak the news to an English reporter.

King Mahendra offered Philip’s wild tiger to Lord Home—the British Foreign Secretary. Lord Home was delighted by the offer, but he was a terrible shot. With the white cloth keeping the tiger at bay, four hundred elephants encircled the tiger and drove it to Lord Hume. The jungle thundered as he fired his rifle. In his edginess, he missed his shot. The tiger dashed into the bush roaring in anger. The sight and sound of the tiger heightened Lord Home’s anxiety. The tiger could easily jump at him. He previously had seen tigers only in zoos in England. The sight of a roaring wild tiger unnerved him.

The elephants again rounded up the tiger and drove it toward Lord Hume. He fired—and missed again. The tiger roared and dashed to cover, crouching in a thick bush. But the ring of elephants and the wall of white cloth kept the tiger from escaping. Missing his second shot, Lord Home became even more nervous. The elephant drivers reorganized their elephants and again drove

the tiger to Lord Home. He fired his rifle when the beast was about twenty yards from his elephant—and missed for the third time. Lord Home was embarrassed. He was losing face. He gave up on the tiger and moved his elephant to Rear Admiral Christopher Bonham-Carter and Sir Michael Adeane—two members of Queen Elizabeth's entourage. The trio consulted and decided that Lord Home needed additional guns.

The elephant drivers rounded up the tiger again, driving the beast toward the three Britons perched atop their elephants. The jungle again thundered as Admiral Bonham-Carter and Sir Michael fired simultaneously and on target. The big male tiger dropped dead about fifteen yards from the hunters. Lord Home, who did not fire his gun, sighed with relief. But he could not claim the tiger as his trophy. The prize would be shared with the admiral and Sir Michael.

King Mahendra felt sorry for Lord Home. He did not want the British Foreign Secretary to leave Nepal without a trophy. He offered him the biggest beast of Chitwan—the rare and endangered greater one-horned rhinoceros, the pride of Nepal. Lord Home's rhino was a two-ton female. (A female was chosen because they have bigger and shapelier horns.) Even a child should not be able to miss a target as huge as a rhino. But Lord Home had never before hunted from the back of an elephant; for that matter, he had never even ridden an elephant. His reputation would be ruined if he missed a two-ton rhino. He would be a laughing stock.

Again he asked Admiral Bonham-Carter and Sir Michael for their backup, even though his target was humongous and barely fifteen yards from his high-powered rifle. The trio fired simultaneously. The poor rhino had no chance. She collapsed and died in a pool of blood that oozed from her chest. Lord Home claimed the head and horn as his trophy. The admiral and Sir Michael chose the legs and the thick, armored shoulder skins to be made into wastepaper baskets back home in England. None of the Britons,

not even Prince Philip, one of the founders of the WWF, said anything about wasting a breeding-age female of a species that the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the scientific wing of the WWF, had listed as one of the world's most threatened.

Queen Elizabeth's shikar in Chitwan was controversial. The wildlife-adoring British were appalled to learn from the media about their royals' participation in a blood sport in one of the world's poorest countries. The queen's shikar was a big, expensive, and glamorous event of unsurpassed pomp and pageantry, doubtful to be repeated. For years, the lavish tiger hunt of the British monarch remained the talk of the town in Nepal.

Even as late as 1988, many Nepalese knew and talked a lot about the 1961 hunt of Her Britannic Majesty. They also took the liberty of spicing their stories with juicy rumors about what happened behind the scenes during the royal hunt. They gossiped about the sex and size of the tiger shot by the queen's Foreign Secretary. Yet only a handful knew or cared about the plight of Chitwan's remaining tigers. Jogi Pothi, prowling hungrily in the Madi Valley, less than ten miles southeast as the crow flies from the British queen's 1961 playground, was no exception.