

Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

Predator or Prey

by Jeff Currier

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The Ramganga was the clearest it had been since we arrived. I could see the bottom, six feet down. I stalked cautiously upstream, staying 50 feet from the river's edge. I was on the hunt for a mahseer. Creeping upstream I saw an enormous gold shape. Trembling with excitement, I belly-crawled into position and presented my fly down and across current. When my sculpin pattern landed, the fish eased from its lie then surged to devour what it thought was lunch.

I was fly fishing in northern India for Himalayan golden mahseer, one of the world's most challenging fish. You don't just fly fish for mahseers, you have to hunt them. I was on a rarely fished beat bordering Corbett National Park, home to leopards and tigers and bears – literally – and boars, and pythons, and crocodiles ...

After a tippet-stressing headshake on the surface, the fish bolted downstream. The fight was on. My heart dropped as the fish sawed my tippet against a rock, but I managed to lift its head away from the danger. Fifteen minutes later, and with little fight left, I led the Himalayan monster to shore. I dropped my rod and corralled the golden giant. It was 47

inches and topped my Boga at 27 pounds.

It was soon time to leave, and being in a rush to get out of the park before dark, I chose an elephant trail straight through the jungle rather than hike along the winding Ramganga.

Shortly into the trek, my instincts sounded an alarm. In the jungle, the hunch of a threat can't be taken lightly. Well ahead of Alum, my local guide, I stood alone on the trail surrounded by thick undercover. I waited for something to attack; maybe a snake as the area crawls with cobras and pythons, some as long as 18 feet. I stood perfectly still, praying not to be eaten. Nonchalantly, Alum appeared behind me. Obviously my imagination was overactive. Once again, I took off.

But soon my apprehension returned. I halted and listened, but the jungle was silent. Could it be an elephant? It seemed logical. I was on an elephant trail. It's surprising how elusive an animal the size of a small dinosaur can be. I stopped, stared ahead, and listened. In the jungles of India, the ground is covered with dry leaves; even the tiniest critter makes enough noise to send a warning. But the jungle was silent, and again, relaxed as could be, Alum appeared behind me. Reluctantly, I pushed forward. Soon the beauty of the hike distracted my uneasiness.

Then an external alarm went off: a herd of barking deer. I strained to see them. Instead, 40 feet ahead and slightly above, hidden behind some bright green leaves, I spotted an eye looking right at me. It was the spookiest thing I've ever seen. And it was directly above my path. Looking harder, I spotted the other eye, and out of the leaves I made out a tiger's head the size of a beach ball. My eyes continued to uncover the incredibly

camouflaged cat. Most unfortunate was the position of the tiger: a full crouch, ready to pounce in an instant.

I stared helplessly at this tiger that was sure to eat me. After what seemed like a lifetime, the motionless cat shifted its eyes over my shoulder, hearing Alum about to arrive. At that second my voice returned: "Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!" Shocked and wide-eyed, Alum ran to my side in time to see seven feet of the magnificent striped cat turn in disgust and slip into the jungle. Lucky for me, I had spoiled another lunch.