

Quest for Asiatic Lion

The Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*), also known as the Indian lion or Persian lion, is a lion subspecies that exists as a single population in India's Gujarat state. It is listed as **Endangered by IUCN** due its small population size. Since 2010, the lion population in the Gir Forest National Park has steadily increased. In May 2015, the 14th Asiatic Lion Census was conducted over an area of about 20,000 km² (7,700 sq mi); the lion population was estimated at 523 individuals, comprising 109 males, 201 females and 213 cubs. The Gir National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary in Western Gujarat is the only habitat for the Asiatic lion where an area of 1,412.1 km² (545.2 sq mi) was declared as a sanctuary for their conservation in 1965. Later, a national park covering an area of 258.71 km² (99.89 sq mi) was established where no human activity is allowed. In the surrounding sanctuary only *Maldharis* have the right to graze their livestock.



Photo 36: A Female Lion of Gir; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh
[60D/Canon/2400 mm/F/5.6]

Altogether **seven (7) lions** were spotted by the explorers, **two (2) sub-male** during morning safari of 25th May and **one (1) male** and **three (3) females** during afternoon safari of the same day.

The Asiatic lion is one of five big cat species found in India, apart from Bengal tiger, Indian leopard, snow leopard and clouded leopard. It formerly occurred in Persia, Israel, Mesopotamia, Baluchistan, from Sindh in the

west to Bengal in the east, and from Rampur and Rohilkund in the north to Nerbudda in the south. It differs from the African lion by less inflated auditory bullae, a larger tail tuft and a less developed mane. The Asiatic lions used to live in West, Southwest, South and Central regions of Asia in historic times. Now the population of the lions currently exists in Western India's Gir Forest National Park. The type specimen of the Asiatic lion was first described from Persia in 1826, followed by descriptions of specimens from Haryana and Basra. Asiatic lions formerly occurred in Persia, Arabia, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Baluchistan.

Asiatic lions live in prides. Mean pride size, measured by the number of adult females, tends to be smaller than for African lions: most Gir prides contain just two adult females, with the largest having five. Coalitions of males defend home ranges containing one or more groups of females; but, unlike African lions, Gir males generally associate with their pride females only when mating or on a large kill. **However, during exploration, it**

was very conspicuously noticed by both the explorers that lions were moving or living outside of their pride. A lesser degree of sociability in the Gir lions may be a function of the smaller prey available to them: the most commonly taken species (45%



Photo 37: Carcass of cattle stalk; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh
[60D/Canon/2400 mm/F/5.6]

of known kills), the chital, weighs only around 50 kg (110 lb). **As per Forest guide Tamsi, Gir lion's common preys are Chital, Sambar and sometimes Cattles of local tribes.** In 2012, an Asiatic lion dragged a man from his house and killed him near the Gir forest, Amreli, India. This was the second attack in the area after a man was attacked and killed in Dhodadar.



Photo 38: Skeleton of cattle stalk; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh
[60D/Canon/2400 mm/F/5.6]

In general, lions prefer large prey species within a weight range of 190 to 550 kg (420 to 1,210 lb) irrespective of their availability. Yet they predominately take prey substantially smaller than this, reflecting their opportunistic hunting behaviour. Within this range, they prefer species that weigh 350 kg (770 lb), which is much larger than the largest recorded weight of lion. The group hunting strategy of lions enables exceptionally large prey

items to be taken. Hunting success in lions is influenced by hunting-group size and composition, the hunting method used and by environmental factors such as grass and shrub cover, time of day, moon presence and terrain. Domestic cattle have historically been a major component of the Gir lions' diet. **During exploration few carcass and skeletons of domestic buffaloes were found near the Rabari settlement.**

The Quest:

The journey to spot Asiatic Lion started at 6:00 AM of 25th May, through route number 6 of National Park. The explorers were accompanied by Forest guide Abu bhai and driver Mehboob. **Immediately after entering the forest, fresh pug marks were observed.** The full exploration contingent started following the foot prints – male and female with cubs were quite prominent among other pug marks. The trail was suggesting



Photo 39: Pug mark of lioness and cub; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh
[60D/Canon/2400 mm/F/5.6]

a small pride was probably shifting from one location to another. Strong smell of carcass was also felt by the explorers and team, but no vultures or other scavengers were observed. After two hours of trailing and covering around 20-25 Km distance, **finally**



Photo 40: Two sub-male lions; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh
[60D/Canon/2400 mm/F/5.6]

two sub-males were spotted from around 60 meter distance under shades of trees at the crossing point of route number 5 and 6. They were found lying under the shades of trees. Forest guide and other forest officials informed that, early in the morning both of them hunted together and after eating they had started moving to find a cool place to take rest for the whole day.

One of the explorers, Dwaipayan told that his jinx for not being able to shoot big cat had ended now, that was the first time he spotted big cat in wild. On a lighter note, explorers correlated their good fortune with not spotting male Nilgai to begin the safari. In most of the previous occasions, whenever there were potential opportunities to spot big cat, they encountered male Nilgai at the beginning, and lady luck didn't show up. In the present case it was different – a female Nilgai was spotted for a change at the beginning of safari.

Explorers begin the second safari of the day at 3:00 PM, with lot of enthusiasm. But first two hours were not productive from the point of view of spotting big cat. No fresh pug marks were noticed. **Around 5:00 PM, at route number 5, a female lion was observed lying on her back in shrubs, sleeping in a precarious way by lifting her both hind legs.** The distance between explorers and the lioness was not less than 200 meters.



Photo 41: One female lion lying in deep forest; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh [60D/Canon/400 mm/F/5.6]

Fifteen minutes later one adult male was observed in the same route, at least 10 Km away from the previous location, resting under trees. The animal seemed quite exhausted in the scorching summer heat (reportedly around 35-40°C). He was spotted from 40-50 meters distance.



Photo 42: Adult male within 50 meters; photography by Arnab Basu [600D/Canon/200-500 mm/F/5-6.3]

Around 5:30 PM, at approximately 5 km from previous location, **another female lion was found seating under shades near a Forest department made water tank**. The distance between explorers and lioness was around 20-30 meters.



Photo 43: Female lion within 30 meters; photography by Arnab Basu [600D/Canon/200-500 mm/F/5-6.3]

The forest guide told that, the typical behavior of Asiatic lion is finishing hunting and eating in night and start moving to find cool place and shades at early morning. With dawn they go to sleep and again start getting ready for whole night between 5:00 to 6:00 PM, before dusk. That was why the best time to spot lions in Gir would be 5:00 to 6:00 PM, the last hour of the last safari of the day.



Photo 44: Female lion within 15 meters; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh [60D/Canon/400 mm/F/5.6]

Safari of the day was almost over for the explorers, but the climax of the day was yet to come. Around 10 km away from the previous location at the end of route number 5, **another full grown adult lioness were spotted seating in a relatively less dense patch of the forest**. The distance this time was just 15 meters from the explorers. To surprise both the explorers the lioness got up and started moving in a particular direction and

started coming into open land where explorers' jip was standing. Couple of forest department officials warned them and asked to take their vehicle further away; they indicated that the lioness was going to drink water to a close by water body. Within few minutes the lioness came in open and the distance was about 5 meters from the jip, she was completely indifferent and ignorant about others presence and with a royal, strong and fierce movement she reached at the waterbody to drink water. Finished her drinking and went back to her previous place. The entire cat walk show was captured by both the explorers and the safari of the day ended for them with a great feeling of respect, fear and adorability for the animal. The feeling of a successful exploration also filled their mind with happiness and sense of achievements.

The Asiatic lion currently exists as a single subpopulation, and is thus vulnerable to extinction from unpredictable events, such as an epidemic or large forest fire. There are indications of poaching incidents in recent years. There are reports that organised gangs have switched attention from tigers to these lions. There have also been a number of drowning incidents after lions fell into wells.

The Big Cat-Walk Show



Photo 44: Female lion walking towards water body; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh [60D/Canon/400 mm/F/5.6]



Photo 45: Female lion 5 meters away; photography by Arnab Basu [600D/Canon/200-500 mm/F/5-6.3]



Photo 46: Female lion drinking water; photography by Dwaipayan Ghosh [60D/Canon/400 mm/F/5.6]