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# TRAVELLER

OCTOBER 2018 // £4.60 // UK EDITION // NATGEOTRAVELLER.CO.UK

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## BARASINGHA DEER

KANHA NATIONAL PARK, MADHYA PRADESH

The sun is starting to set over Kanha National Park. We weave through the forest, tall *sal* trees lining roads covered in crunchy orange leaves. We're within a kilometre of the Mukki Gate when my guide, Raj, points out a *barasingha* family standing beside a water hole, the sun striking the swamp deer's golden backs. Suddenly, a doe bounds towards the water and wades in so deep she's practically swimming. The others follow one by one, a fawn hesitating at the water's edge before taking the plunge. This park may be a hotspot for tigers, but it's also famed for its *barasinghas*, and since I've arrived guests and guides alike have been talking about how numbers of the endangered deer are rising.

I grew up in Central Texas, where white-tailed deer are so prolific I became immune to their elegance. It never occurred to me that I'd get my camera out for deer, particularly when visiting a country that boasts big cats. But *barasinghas* are special; males are adorned with enviable horns — the animal's name means '12-horned' in Hindi, although some antlers possess 15 points. More importantly, the southern subspecies only lives in Kanha. *Barasinghas* nearly became extinct in the 1960s, but conservation efforts brought them back from the brink.

Ranjitsinh Jhala, the former chairman of Wildlife Trust of India, counted just 64 individuals in Kanha in 1967 when he began efforts to protect them. The population had plummeted because of hunting and habitat loss. As communities adopted more intensive forms of agriculture, grasslands became croplands, which decimated *barasingha* habitat.

"*Barasinghas* are overly specialised," says Ranjitsinh. "They only live in grasslands and can't adapt to forests." The conservationist was determined to save the *barasingha*, even

if it meant moving tigers out of Kanha. It didn't come to that; instead, Ranjitsinh's efforts led the park to stop the practice of leaving bait for tigers — then a popular tactic to guarantee sightings for tourists. Kanha also increased in size, and authorities began relocating villages from Kanha's centre to its perimeter. These days, no villagers reside in the 'core zone'. No lodges are permitted there, either. Gradually, the area of grassland increased, helping Kanha's prized deer to thrive again; 750 individuals now call the park home.

The air is crisp during the next morning's game drive. At 6.15, the cars at Khatia Gate stream into the park like ants searching for food. We peel off from the others and find ourselves in a meadow. Wrapped in blankets, I scan the landscape for signs of life but see nothing besides the occasional flapping of wings. Raj tells us to look out for *barasinghas*, and we soon come upon a herd grazing, but the animals have their heads down and their coats blend into the heather.

All morning, I struggle to tell them apart from India's largest deer, the *sambar*, which is also facing extinction. Over dinner that evening, my other guide, Mohan, shares some tips: unlike the *sambar*'s brown coat, the *barasingha*'s has a red or golden hue and its ears are shaped like leaves. The *sambar*'s, meanwhile, are rounded, and they're solitary forest-dwellers, whereas *barasingha* herds are usually found in grasslands or at water holes.

After dinner, we sit around a crackling fire, and Mohan muses about his favourite time of year. "In October, sugarcane grasses are at their peak, and *barasingha* stags get new antlers that come in a velvety pink," he tells me. "Seeing them against the tall grasses is a beautiful sight." **MK**

### ABERCROMBIE & KENT

offers a 10-night trip to India from £3,330 per person including all flights, private transfers, sightseeing and accommodation, with three nights at Flame of the Forest Safari Lodge in Kanha National Park, full board. Visit in winter, when daytime temperatures are moderate. Kanha National Park is only open between October and June, so it's best to book early as a limited number of park entry permits are issued. [abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)

**RIGHT:** Barasingha, Kanha National Park



