

**SAMPLE CONTENT**

# Deer Tales

**Atul Dhamankar**



## PREFACE

I have now spent almost 23 years studying wildlife in the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra and various other jungles of India. I was always fascinated by the sheer beauty of deer and antelopes. Their body shape, colours, swiftness, social life, fights, feeding, breeding, behaviour, everything attracted me towards them. I love to observe these herbivorous animals for hours.

When I started studying deer in Tadoba in the 90s, I would spend entire days sitting on a small wooden machan or on a tree to observe these animals. In Tadoba I spent hundreds of hours watching Chital, Sambar and Barking Deer from superb machans of the Panchadhara waterhole, Anicut, Vasant bandhara, Kala Aamba, Jamunbodi, and Tadoba reservoir. These areas are covered with thick jamun, mango, teak, tendu, Arjun, mahua, haldu, bhera trees and dense bamboo. Similarly, I spent many hours on the Ambathira and Katezari machans

for watching Chowsingha and Nilgai, who came to the water on very hot days.

Barking Deer and Chowsingha are very shy and run away, even if they get a slight smell. So it's a very difficult task to observe and study their natural behaviour. But for that purpose, I sat on dense jamun trees which were close to waterholes or lakes. So many times I got some excellent observations of these ever shy animals.

I spent more than half my life observing these animals in the jungle. So definitely they are very close to my heart. I love these animals, but never mixed my emotions with them or in their natural behaviour. I tried to hide somewhere near them, so they were free to do all their natural things which they wanted. Even when I saw a tiger killing a sambar, or a leopard stalking a Barking Deer, or a pack of wild dogs tearing a live chital male into pieces, I only watched that scene quietly from distance, but never interrupted them. I thought as a wildlife researcher, and separated my emotions from wildlife and nature. These animals have been here for millions of years and these things have happened regularly in the jungle with them, even when we were not there.

Studying deer and antelopes was always a good experience for me. I watched them in chilly winter mornings, hot summer afternoons or in pouring rain. Those are my unforgettable precious memories with these fantastic herbivores.

These animals are not much attracted to people like the tiger, but they have their own elegance. Herbivorous animals are the main prey base of predators like tigers, leopards, wild dogs, jackals, striped hyenas, and grey wolves. So the presence of these herbivores is an assurance of the existence of predators. Every predator has its own choice. The tiger mainly hunts big deer like sambar and chital. Sometimes it kills Nilgai, but

because this antelope mainly lives in open grasslands, secondary forests, the tiger gets very less chance to kill Nilgai. Leopards mainly catch prey like chital, sambar fawn, and Barking Deer. But sometimes a big male has even caught a male sambar. Wild dogs normally chase chital and sambar females and fawns in Tadoba. So it is very essential that these herbivorous animals breed in large numbers. The breeding of chital is very fast and after every six months the female is seen with a new fawn. So their numbers in any forest are big. In Tadoba their population has increased in the last few years. Their study can be used in wildlife management and conservation, so it's a very important aspect for every forest.

I would appreciate and be happy if any reader wants to ask any questions regarding wildlife, their behaviour, the Tadoba jungle, etc. Just email or call me on my cell number for any queries.

I am really happy to present my book in front of readers. I am very thankful to Anand Limaye and Soniya Khare of Inking Innovations and all those who helped to publish this book in such a nice form.

- ATUL DHAMANKAR

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## MOUSE DEER

**I**T WAS AN afternoon in early June. We were returning from a search expedition for the rare bird Jerdon's Courser. We had travelled across some excellent forests in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Though we hadn't seen the bird, we were satisfied because we saw some signs of its existence. As we were returning, we couldn't take our eyes off the lush jungle of the moist, deciduous trees. We reached a place called Allapalli. Since we were ravenous, we decided to have a meal in one of the hotels there.

As we were eating, Ajay said, "Bhamragad is not very far from here. If you don't mind we can visit Dr Prakash Amte at Hemalkasa. I want to see the wildlife collection there. It is just afternoon, so if we leave immediately we can visit Bhamragad and return to Chandrapur by night."

All of us were eager to see the confluence of three rivers at Bhamragad, its dense forests and the Gondia Bhils living in

primitive conditions but what attracted us the most was run on Hemalkasa which has an 'orphanage' for wildlife. Dr Prakash Amte has been serving the adivasis for many years. Out of gratitude they would get the young ones of wild animals for him and Dr Amte has looked after these young ones. Some of these are rare specimens. The doctor was an old acquaintance. A book had been written on our stay in Hemalkasa earlier. So I readily agreed to go.

After lunch we immediately left for Bhamragad. We reached Hemalkasa at about two in the afternoon and parked our car near the hospital. We came to know that that Dr Prakash Amte was not around but his son and Mr Vilas Manohar welcomed us warmly. After talking about our search expedition, Dr Amte's son Digant said, "Come, let's see the wildlife we have here. I am sure you will like it." We were waiting for just that.

We were shown a Serpent Eagle with a punctured eye, chital, sambar and nilgai all together, lion, the king of the jungle, growling leopards, a snarling bear, porcupine, langurs, a Small Indian Civet, an owl, giant squirrel, and many other animals and birds which had been housed in various cages. Some were fit and healthy while others were disabled. Here, all of them were looked after lovingly. In the end, we came towards a cage. Inside was a smallish animal which looked like a deer yet was quite different. It was continuously running around the cage. None of us could identify the animal. We had not seen such an animal before. Everyone had a puzzled look on their face. The animal came out as soon as the cage was opened. It was a small animal, muddy brown-greenish in colour. It had white spots as well as white lines on its back. Its hooves were pointed and slender. It had a small mouth like a mouse. Suddenly it struck me that its appearance was similar to a picture I had seen in a wildlife book and I said, "mouse deer".

“Right, it’s a mouse deer,” Digant said. “It was brought by an adivasi from a remote area. That adivasi had been cured by us. As a token of gratitude, he brought this rare deer for us. Though this deer is rare in the Bhamragad area, it can be seen in the dense forest of the interiors. This deer is not easily seen because it stays in dense forests which are its favourite habitat.”

“In Vidarbha in Maharashtra, it is seen in very few jungles. Some time back it was seen in the dense interior of the Melghat forest by a group conducting a survey there. But there are no records of the deer having been seen elsewhere,” Ajay said.

This deer was very rare. I quickly clicked a photograph.

Among the Indian deer, mouse deer is the smallest deer. It must have got its name because of its small size like the mouse. It is also known as the Indian chevrotain. Its scientific name is *Tragulus meminna*.

This extremely small-sized deer measures about ten to twelve inches up to the shoulders. Sometimes it is mistaken for a rabbit due to its small size. It is greenish-brown in colour. The upper portion of the body is very dark. This colour has a tinge of yellow in it. This dark colour has whitish spots on it. Most of the dots are longish and so they look like stripes. The lower portion of the body is white in colour. There are three white lines on its neck. Its ears are very tiny like that of a mouse and they do not protrude. The skin around the eyes is white. This mouse-like deer appears a little stooped.

Mouse deer belong to the deer family. But still they are different from the other members of the deer family because of certain characteristics. One of the main reasons is that they are very small in size. Mouse deer do not have big teeth in the upper jaw like the other deer. Their teeth are a little different. Their stomach is not made up of four parts like the

other animals but of three parts. Each of their legs has a well-developed hoof. The bones at their side are well grown and so these are easily noticeable. Some members of the deer family do not have this well-developed hoof and bone.

The horns of the mouse deer are quite different from the other deer. Actually, its horns are not well developed and so they do not protrude enough to be seen. One can see two small protrusions in place of horns. Also, because it has no horns, the mouse deer looks more like a mouse than a deer. It is difficult to differentiate between males and females as neither have horns. They look almost the same.

The mouse deer has teeth in the upper jaw like the barking deer. Its long teeth can be seen protruding from the upper jaw. The teeth can be seen only if the mouse deer is observed carefully. The female mouse deer have smaller teeth in the upper jaw. Though the teeth seem to be only for show, they are useful during the mating season. The male mouse deer fights with other males with the help of his big protruding teeth to win females during the mating season. Since the male mouse deer does not have horns, the teeth are its main weapon. Though these teeth do not make any fatal wounds, sometimes these wounds can be quite serious in a decisive fight.

Though the mouse deer belongs to the deer family, it has two subclasses. These two classes are the Indian mouse deer and the Malay mouse deer. Both animals are more or less of the same size. The animals are named according to the geographical locations where they are found. The Indian mouse deer is found in the forests of India while the Malay mouse deer is found in Malaya. There is some difference in the two animals. The Asian mouse deer is taller than the African mouse deer.

The mouse deer's habitat is the forest. It is mainly found in dense jungles. It also prefers hillocks surrounded by meadows. Such places are a great favourite with them. The mouse deer is never found on meadows or clearings. It is possible to find it only on hillocks with a lot of grass. But it is very difficult to see him or observe him. It is not easily sighted because of its small size and its habit of grazing in the grass. Its brownish green colour provides an excellent camouflage and helps it to hide in the grasslands. The mouse deer has a peculiar way of grazing. It always grazes near boulders and rocks so it is very difficult to spot him. If it senses anyone approaching, it immediately hides behind the rocks.

The mouse deer has been observed to defend itself in ways that are different from other deer. As soon as it perceives any danger, it prefers to hide. At times, if a dog or any other predator is on its trail, then it climbs up the hollow of a tree. It is a wonder how it manages to do that. This idea and ability of the mouse deer to protect itself is amazing. But its colour helps it to move about in grass and on rocks without being seen.

Its sense organs are very well-developed and sharp. It always has to be alert and cautious to protect itself as it does not stay in a herd like other deer. So its sense organs are very sharp. Its sense of smell is very well developed. It can smell danger instantly. Its sense of hearing and eyesight is also good. So even if it is grazing alone, it is always alert and constantly looks around for any kind of danger. Most of the times, it is not possible for the predators to go very close to a mouse deer without its knowledge and kill it.

Like the others of the deer family, the mouse deer also definitely fears human beings. Frightened easily, the mouse deer is a very timid animal. Due to its small size, in a way, it needs to be easily scared so that it immediately protects itself. It

hides instantly if it senses an animal or a human approaching. The mouse deer is careful to ensure that no animal or man spots him and so moves about furtively. Its small size like that of the mouse and its colour help it in this respect.

The mouse deer is a herbivore and its main food is grass. As it lives on rocky pastures, grass is available in plenty. It also eats the leaves of small bushes and some small fruits. It generally grazes very early in the morning. It prefers grazing when it is still dark. As the sun gets brighter, the mouse deer returns to its hiding places. In the evenings also, it grazes only after dusk. This makes it very difficult to observe it. It never grazes in open places, and always grazes in the shelter of a rock or some such. Even when they graze in open grasslands, the mouse deer remain at the edge, near a rock or a boulder or remain hidden behind grass.

Its mating season is generally in the summer. The male mouse deer make use of strong secretions from their glands to attract the females. As they live alone and also because of their small size, the mouse deer have very active glands; these help the males to send out a signal when they are in heat. The secretions from the glands near the hooves leave behind a trail of smell which helps the male to follow and locate the female mouse deer. Sometimes two males go after the same female and then a fight ensues. In these fights, the males make use of their teeth. The winner drives out the loser and sees that no other male ventures near the female during the mating season and a pair is thus formed. After this mating takes place. Generally, the males and the females wander alone and it is only during the mating season that we see them in pairs.

The female mouse deer gives birth at the end of the monsoon or at the beginning of winter. The female finds a suitable shelter and a good patch of grass in advance. She gives

birth to two young ones at a time. The fawns gain strength soon after birth and they start running around immediately. The shelter selected by the female to give birth is used by the mother to keep her fawns safe. The fawns stay with their mother. They separate from the mother only after they are fully grown. At times a family of three could consist of a mother and two fawns.

If the mouse deer perceives any danger, it gives out a peculiar call. It smells danger instantly because of its sharp sense of smell. If the danger is close by, the mouse deer either runs or hides behind a rock or some other shelter. Its small size helps it to hide easily. Its colour helps it to merge with the surroundings and it is difficult to spot it. Such a well-hidden mouse deer is sometimes not seen even by a predator passing close by and thus the mouse deer is protected.

There are some predators in the jungle which hunt the mouse deer. Mainly leopards and wild dogs hunt them. Sometimes foxes and wolves also hunt mouse deer. Their small size and their ability to hide quickly anywhere makes it very difficult for any predator to kill them easily. At times, the mouse deer are killed by pythons. But this is possible only because the python has the ability to merge with the grass and rocks because of its colour and this enables it to go close to the mouse deer and trap it. The mouse deer can be easily domesticated. If domesticated at an early age, it mingles with humans quickly.



Atul Dhamankar has spent 23 years studying wildlife in the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra and various other jungles of India. He was always fascinated by the sheer beauty of deer and antelopes. Their body shape, colours, swiftness, social life, fights, feeding, breeding, behaviour, everything attracted him towards them. He has observed these herbivorous animals for hours together. These animals are not much attracted to people like the tiger, but they have their own elegance. Herbivorous animals are the main prey base of predators like tigers, leopards, wild dogs, jackals, striped hyenas, and grey wolves. So the presence of these herbivores is an assurance of the existence of predators. This book is based on his study of the deer and antelopes and includes some of his precious memories with these fantastic herbivores.



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