

*Bushy fur
and mighty*
CLAWS

Long shaggy hair—covering even the ears—is one of the features that distinguishes the Sloth bear from the other seven species of big bears. It uses its long claws to dig up termite hills.

Across some of India's remotest interiors wanders an animal that science knows little about: the Sloth bear. Axel Gomille (text and photos) travelled to the hills of Karnataka to study the family life of this secretive creature at close quarters.

The unknown
SLOTH BEAR



Once the cubs leave the shelter of the cave with their mother, they enjoy exploring the world around them—preferably riding piggyback. Soon they will feed on ants and termites, sucking out the insects with their highly mobile lips.

SAFE
on mother's back



A peacock strutting by arouses the interest of the young ones. Their mother is never very far away and, at the first sign of danger, the cubs quickly return to the safety of her back—a pattern of behaviour not observed in any other species of bear. Here, in India, the mother's back has proved to be a safe refuge against tigers and leopards.

Curiosity overcomes
FEAR

A close-up photograph of two black bears on a rocky ledge. The bear on the left is shown in profile, roaring with its mouth wide open, revealing its teeth and tongue. The bear on the right is also shown in profile, facing the first bear, with its mouth open as if roaring back. The background is a blurred, natural outdoor setting with warm, golden light.

The presence of a male bear appears to threaten the safety of the cubs and so the mother charges at him with a mighty roar. Normally, humans have little to fear from Sloth bears—unless they accidentally come too close to the animals.

Knowing when to keep your
DISTANCE

A wide-angle photograph of a rocky landscape under a clear blue sky. The foreground and middle ground are dominated by large, rounded, reddish-brown boulders of varying sizes, some stacked on top of each other. Sparse, dry vegetation and a few small trees are scattered among the rocks. In the background, more rocky hills and mountains are visible under the bright sky. The overall scene is arid and rugged.

A landscape full of **CAVES**

Sloth bears prefer thickly forested habitats, but they are also comfortable among the rock-strewn hillocks of Karnataka, where food and shelter are easy to find.

I am no stranger to the forests of India. I once spent four months in the tiger reserves in the central part of the country and tramped through the jungle day after day. Over the years, I have extensively observed all the big mammals of this subcontinent; all except the Sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*). Encountering a tiger was easy compared to trying to catch a glimpse of this elusive beast.

Very little is known about the life of Sloth bears. They have long been overshadowed—as far as scientific interest is concerned—by the tiger and the elephant. Rudyard Kipling based his endearing character Baloo in *Jungle Book* on a Sloth bear, although few know it.

Because these bears are primarily nocturnal, they are difficult to spot and so little is known about them. However, if you are lucky enough to chance upon a Sloth bear, what strikes you immediately is its long, shaggy hair that covers even the ears—a characteristic that sets it apart from the seven other species of big bears in the world. The Sloth bear is 150 to 180cm

long and weighs between 60 and 150kg—females tend to be smaller, though its shaggy coat makes both sexes appear larger than they actually are.

Though Sloth bears eat a variety of fruit depending on the season, their basic diet consists of ants and termites that they sniff out with their extremely sensitive noses. Termite mounds can become almost rock-hard under the scorching sun of the tropics, but the bears have powerful claws to dig them up, and suck up the insects with their highly mobile lips—and the noise can often be heard even from 100m away.

After lengthy preparations, I finally travel to the Daroji Bear Sanctuary and move into my bamboo hideout. Daroji is a small reserve in Karnataka. Though a mere 56km² in size, it is an ideal habitat for the bears. It is rich in food and the numerous caves in the hills provide the animals a safe refuge.

Sloth bears once used to be found all over the Indian subcontinent, from the southern foothills of the Himalayas right down to Sri Lanka: now, only

a few scattered pockets remain. These fragments are confined primarily to a few remaining pockets of forests and even this limited habitat faces encroachment and destruction. Apart from forests, Sloth bears sometimes also inhabit grasslands and rocky hills, like here in Karnataka.

A MOTHER WITH TWO CUBS lives near my hideout. Contrary to the usual behaviour of Sloth bears, she is often out during the day. She has had to give up her customary retiring and nocturnal lifestyle because she needs to hunt for food. During the initial stages of their life, the cubs feed on nothing but mother's milk and so she needs a lot of energy to produce an adequate supply for them. The cubs live with the mother till they are two-and-a-half years old. They are totally helpless at birth; their eyes are shut and they spend the first two to three months of their life in a cave. When the baby bears finally leave their protective haven, the mother carries them around

on her back till they are about nine months old. This behaviour is extremely unusual, for in no other species of bears do young ones regularly piggyback on their elders. On sensing danger, Slothbear cubs don't run up a tree, like other bears; they cling to their mother's back—an effective strategy that protects them from tigers and leopards.

It's not just big cats that spurs the young ones to seek shelter on their mother's back—even totally harmless animals can frighten the cubs. And in confronting a variety of such situations it becomes evident that the two youngsters romping around my hideout have totally different personalities.

One of them is perpetually scared and hardly ever ventures away from his mother's side, while the other is a real daredevil, constantly wanting to explore the world around him. For instance, when a mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*) suddenly emerges from a hole and clambers down the rocks, the shy one goes charging back to his mother. His brother, on the other hand,



Life is still CHILD'S PLAY

Sloth bears are unique in many respects, but one thing they have in common with many animals: their cubs too develop their strength and skill through boisterous horseplay.

watches the small predator with great interest.

Another time, a wild boar crosses their path. The cubs don't yet know quite what to make of this self-assured neighbour, so both the little ones are equally frightened. They run as fast as they can and cling to their mother's fur. The mother moves away slowly as the youngsters look fearfully back at the monster and squeal pathetically. This hullabaloo does not bother the boar in the slightest; he simply trots on at a leisurely pace.

It appears that birds are the only creatures that don't count as dangerous. The young cubs are fascinated by the Jungle babblers (*Turdoides striatus*) and the Brahminy mynas (*Sturnus pagodarum*) fluttering in the trees. Occasionally, the bolder of the two even dares a somewhat wobbly climb up into the branches. But clearly he feels more secure on the ground. So when a peacock struts by, he rushes straight towards it. Even the shy one seems to pluck up enough courage to follow his brother—although a few paces behind.

THE MOTHER, HOWEVER, is not disturbed by the presence of other animals. She remains calm even when she encounters other members of her own

species—at least when these are females. But very little is really known about the social behaviour of Sloth bears. During my weeks in the hideout I watch four females with offspring of different ages. Their area of activities seems to overlap in many cases and when they do come upon each other, they show no aggression whatsoever. But the situation changes dramatically when an adult male bear appears.

A few days later I observe a mother bear with two youngsters that were born in the spring and are therefore now almost too big to ride piggyback. As they cross a rocky cliff, they see a male bear at the foot of the hill. Although he is still quite a distance away, the mother immediately tenses. She begins to pace to and fro and refuses to move her gaze away from the intruder. Then all of a sudden she charges at him with bared fangs and a bloodcurdling roar—and succeeds in scaring the interloper away.

The frightened youngsters don't have the courage to leave their mother's side and reluctantly follow her around, though they do try to remain in the background. There is no evidence so far of Sloth bears killing cubs. The strong reaction of the mother, however, does point towards this and indicates that

males could present a real and definite threat to young bears. Many species of animals are known to kill cubs sired by other males. After the loss of offspring, females quickly become receptive to mating again and males thus have a better chance of propagating their own genes. Such 'infanticide' has often been observed amongst tigers, lions and grizzlies, for example.

In most cases, a mock assault is enough to clear up a misunderstanding, although when need arises Sloth bears can make serious use of their fangs. And their claws are not only efficient tools for breaking up termite hills but also serve as sharp weapons.

Naturally this makes the animals potentially dangerous to man as well. Thus, for reasons of safety, my hideout is built on sturdy bamboo stilts five metres high. This does not mean that I am out of reach, for Sloth bears are much better climbers than you might think. Should a tempting enough smell reach their nose, they can clamber right to the top of a tree with amazing agility. Nonetheless, my hideout offers security because it prevents chance encounters—and in principle the animals are not interested in me.

However, an ever increasing number of clashes between man and Sloth bear are taking place in India. Some of these are basically accidental encounters that occur in the springtime when the mahua trees (*Madhuca longifolia*) are in full bloom. The bears love the taste of the flowers while the humans collect them for distilling liquor. In such circumstances, when men and bears chance upon each other, the villagers do sometimes get assaulted.

Sloth bears also feed on agricultural crops such as sugarcane, sweet potatoes and groundnuts—for which they are killed by farmers. The animals may also fall victim to poachers, for body parts of bears are greatly valued in eastern medicine. Young cubs are also sold in the black market to be trained as dancing bears or used in dog fights. Though exact figures are difficult to estimate, Sloth bears are now considered to be endangered.

THE NEXT DAY, a new female appears near my hideout, one I have never seen before. She is carrying two tiny helpless babies on her back—it is probably the first time that the three have left the cave together.

Something seems to be in the air. She can smell it, though I cannot figure out what is making her so restless.

Suddenly, a male bear appears in the distance. Alarmed, the mother swings herself around, throwing off one of her cubs in the process. The startled cub crawls away into the thicket and bumps into a rock. The mother scrambles after the little one and the youngster tries desperately to get back to safety on her back. But she doesn't stand still long enough, she keeps moving here and there and nervously glancing around to see whether the old male is approaching.

Finally the cub manages to grab hold of one of her legs, but before he can actually climb up, she starts running towards the cave. It is no safe piggyback ride for him this time. Hanging on for dear life, the terrified cub manages to make it back.

A few days later I happen to see the family again. The mother is again calm and the youngster who fell off seems to be healthy and sound.

And also seems to be inviting his brother to another round of playful antics—right there on his mother's back. ■



■ ■ ■ Axel Gomille, 39, biologist, photographer, author and television editor, is an expert on the wildlife of India. As part of his science education, he spent many months in the tiger sanctuaries of Kanha and Bandhavgarh—though he maintained a far greater distance from the objects of his study there than he does with this langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*).



These pictures were taken at the Daroji Bear Sanctuary, established in Karnataka in 1994. The domain of the Sloth bears (darker shading) is shrinking into increasingly smaller pockets.