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Spots in spotlight

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Anjali and Jaisal Singh with their book | shekhar yadav

Nestled around 654 km from Delhi, Jawai, the land of leopards, makes for an interesting travel destination for wildlife enthusiasts and holidayers alike.

The region in Rajasthan's Pali district is home to an astonishing array of wildlife, especially leopards, peacefully co-existing with humans. It took Anjali and Jaisal Singh three years to explore the wildcat habitat that pans across 20,000 sq km. In their book

Jawai: Land of the Leopard, the photography-enthusiastic couple brings together varied flora and fauna, and most importantly, the book portrays how for over 160 years leopards and the Rabari community have peacefully coexisted.



A wildcat peeps through his hideout. Leopards are usually adaptable but territorial disputes are not uncommon.

Jaisal says, "The semi-pastoral landscape with granite rock formation and the Aravalli Range as the backdrop make Jawai a pictorial treat. To top it all, the place has no record of any serious man-animal conflict." The place draws its name from a seasonal river and the Jawai dam, which was built in 1946 by Maharaja Umaid Singh of Jodhpur. For Anjali Singh, a design graduate, living amid villagers and shooting wildlife was not a novel thing. At Jawai, she first spotted a leopard in 2013 and since then there was no looking back. "From caves to fields, from trees to temples, I have been lucky to spot a leopard almost everywhere. Leopards tread past even when the villagers are working on the fields or herding their cattle. Animals don't attack until they are threatened. There is a sense of mutual respect and distance."

They use binoculars, click using tele lens and operate with best possible ethics. They also provide binoculars and cameras to their guests at their luxury hotel. Jawai is a new concept for India. It's a park but not a designated park. The community is an integral part of Jawai and that is what protects the area. "The villagers here can choose between farming and giving off a piece of their land to the government for a bush for the leopard. The community benefits and in this case, the villagers are earning more from not farming the arid land. They can also go to the nearest town and get a job for some extra income, knowing that their land is being taken care of," says Jaisal.

The granite rock formations that Jawai boasts of keep changing colours with season. So no two pictures clicked at the same spot will look the same.

When asked how do they identify the leopards, Jaisal says, "We have counted 42 leopards but my field team insists that there are 48. The 42 are checked for spots by scientists and we have named them as well. Leopards are easily identifiable with the help of spots and the colour of their eyes. Also, they have their favourite hillock and you will usually find them there. Leopards the world over are considered solitary cats.

However, the behaviour of Jawai's leopards contradicts the notion. Once, we spotted 14 leopards at one rock."

Not only leopards, the biodiversity of the area supports wolves, striped hyenas, foxes, jungle cats, crocodiles, birds, monkeys, snakes, wild boars, jackals, nilgais, among others.

The wildlife, the community and their guests keep the entrepreneur couple very busy and they love what they do. As Anjali puts it, "We believe whatever we do, we should do well. And more than anything, it should benefit the people and the wildlife and hence, the book and the awareness about the land."

Jaisal says their most memorable moment was when they first discovered leopard cubs. "We saw a cub with her mother once. In fact, she is now our resident female breeder. Everytime we find a new cub, it's exciting. Because only then we get to know that the animals are thriving and reproducing."