

# passage to India

Most of the tales were about animals, for the jungle was always at their door. — Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*

**T**hese days, it is not the jungle coming to the door but the door coming to the jungle as civilization slowly, perhaps inexorably, intrudes on India's wild terrain. How different from the exotic world of romantic adventure envisioned by Kipling. As photographer Joan Myers points out in her new book, *The Jungle at the Door: A Glimpse of Wild India* (George F. Thompson Publishing), the plentiful beasts who roamed the forests in Kipling's day are rapidly dying out. Documenting wildlife on excursions through four of India's national parks — Orang, Kaziranga, Bandhavgarh, and Kanha — and along India's Brahmaputra River, Myers captures the

intimate closeness of the jungle's emerald canopy as morning mists rise and the jungle denizens — elephants, langurs, spotted deer, and boars among them — emerge from the shadows.

Myers' previous book, *Wondrous Cold: An Antarctic Journey*, published by Smithsonian Books in 2006, was a funded project, years in the making, but *The Jungle at the Door* began simply as a family vacation. "I had done all this work in Antarctica, and my husband finally said, That's it. No more ice," Myers told *Pasatiempo* at her studio. "We had an opportunity to go to India on a fairly short trip. He wanted to do it more than I. I was always a little afraid of India — all the people and so much activity. I wasn't sure how I would relate to it." Myers and William deBuys,

an author and conservationist who wrote the book's essay, sign copies and read from the book at Collected Works Bookstore on Friday, Sept. 28. An exhibition of Myers' photographs from the book is on view at Andrew Smith Gallery.

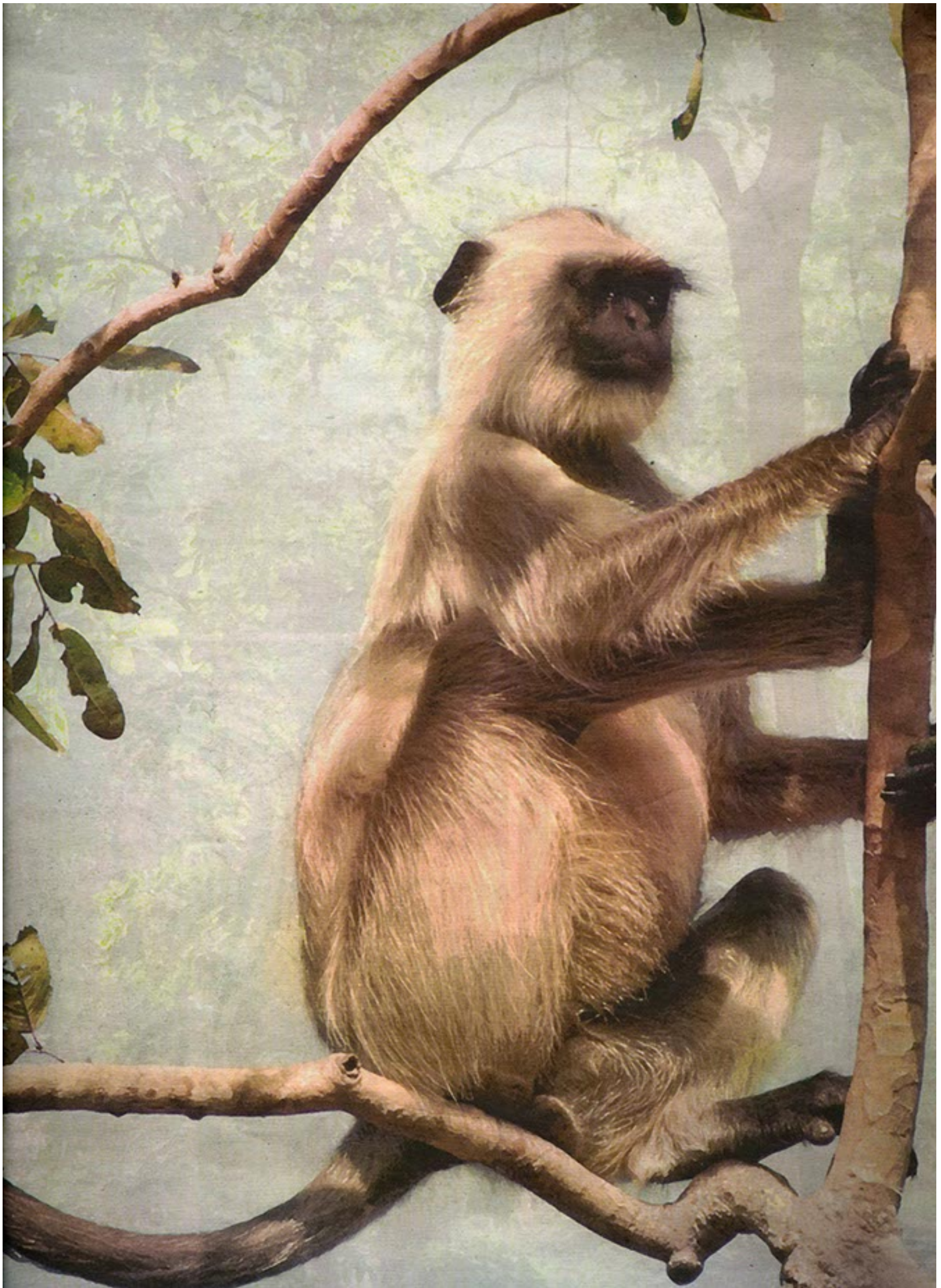
"We went with a little birding group," Myers said. "I looked on it as a vacation, so I did not take an ultra-long lens. To really shoot wildlife you have those major lenses, so you can get the whites of their eyes. I didn't have that. I was really unprepared, but I was there. I had a camera. These birders liked to stop whenever they'd see another bird. They saw more than 300 birds in the space of a couple of weeks. Every time we stopped, I

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Gahesh Pahar, a village along the Brahmaputra River; opposite page, a Hanuman langur in Bandhavgarh National Park, photos by Joan Myers from *The Jungle at the Door*









The Jungle  
at the Door

Clockwise from top: "The back of an elephant is the best way to get close to tigers, rhinoceros, and other animals," writes Joan Myers; a Bengal tiger in Bandhavgarh National Park; an Indian elephant



## Joan Myers' India, continued from Page 46

would take a picture. I put the camera up to my eye, and it would just be jungle, a chaos of trees and blinds. All of the sudden there would be this snap of something in the frame."

Occasionally, Myers' camera caught a rare glimpse of the endangered Bengal tiger. "There are fewer than 2,000 wild tigers left in all of India at this point. The ones that are left are in a really dangerous position. There are wildlife refuges, but there are villages all around, and there are no fences per se. So villagers walk through; poachers can get in. The rangers do their best to protect the animals, but what can you do? You have a large area with easy access in and out, and you have this enormous demand for the tiger. Tiger bones are supposed to be this incredible aphrodisiac and are supposed to cure all sorts of stuff. Rhinos are also highly endangered. There are very few of them, even in zoos. We're certainly losing the battle to protect them. When they're gone, they're gone. Our grandkids are really not going to have an opportunity to see these animals."

"Tigers are extinct in ninety-three percent of their historical habitat," deBuys writes in the book's essay "A Glimpse of the Wild." He explains that "of the 3,200 wild tigers believed to still exist, approximately half survive in India. Consequently, the conservation of tigers in India must be central to any plan to save the species from extinction in the wild." Hindering efforts to curb the tiger's demise is the continued demand for their body parts, particularly for use in traditional Chinese medicine. The demand is so great that poachers even kill African lions and pass the counterfeit material off as authentic tiger parts.

Getting a glimpse of a rare species such as a tiger or the equally threatened Indian rhinoceros requires patience. "The most amazing thing to me was to be in the jungle with these animals. You don't see them very often. You only see them at daybreak when they're hunting, and only if you're with somebody who knows where they are and can help you get close to them in some fashion. When you actually see a tiger in the wild, it's enormous. It looks so strong and healthy, really powerful looking. You would not want to be on foot on your own with a tiger.

"You have to get up very early and enter these refuges at five-thirty, six in the morning," Myers said. "You don't really get a lot of light until about eight o'clock. So it's cold. This was late November. We were bundled up with everything we had until daybreak. Then there would be this beautiful light as the sun came up — glowing and translucent. Midday you wouldn't see a whole lot."

Even in the jungle, India's throngs of traffic and people make themselves felt. The jungle's beautiful morning light is an atmospheric effect of urban smog. "When you arrive in Delhi, there are all these people and activity. You just have this sense of a culture that's expanding at this incredible rate. It's enormous. Even when you get to these wildlife refuges, the encroaching civilization is coming in from all sides. There's not a lot of boundaries. The jungle is diminishing."

Then there are the photographs: elephants disappearing into morning mists, villages along the Brahmaputra River, water buffalo, frolicking Hanuman langurs named for the Hindu monkey god, and moss-covered ruins, their stones long ago overcome by the surrounding jungle. It is in these photographs, serendipitous moments captured by her lens, that Myers' work evokes that long-ago world of Shere Khan, the tiger; Mowgli, the "man cub" raised by wolves; and other characters from Kipling's classic. "The whole set of images has a feeling that's magical. It's not the *National Geographic* natural look at the tiger, eating its prey. It wasn't until I came home and saw all these pictures and saw how they work together that I realized there was something unusual. It was a way for me to share this look at the jungle that I never expected to have. It was a gift to be there." ◀

### details

- ▼ *The Jungle at the Door*, photos by Joan Myers  
Opening reception 4 p.m. Friday, Sept. 28; exhibit through Oct. 15  
Andrew Smith Gallery, 122 Grant Ave., 984-1234
- ▼ Book signing with reading by Joan Myers & William deBuys

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