

The bone crushing scavengers - Hyena

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Every year, once in a while, around Ranthambore, there comes information that a tiger has been killed near a railway track or road. The forest guards are 'despatched' to these spots to confirm reports, only to find a killed hyena. The forest officials, we can presume, must have heaved a sigh of relief that it was 'just a hyena' and not a tiger.

The media, however, must be disappointed. The question therefore is: do tigers and leopards hold a more splendid seat in the animal kingdom, or is the hyena usually perceived as the satanic ugly beast, or is it both?

In the Indian countryside, hyena is one of the largest animals, which coexists around human settlements. However, it is slowly losing its ground and vanishing

from the face of the earth; not many know this and most would not care. The apathy for wild animals in lay persons is explicable as they have incomplete or incorrect information of them. But the fact that scientists and wildlife experts are not conversant about this animal is indication of lack of any considerable research, documentary films, or books on the hyena.



Surroundings that Hyenas like best are bare open plains, deserts, rocky scrub-covered hills and nullahs, grass or open jungles



Hyena cubs are covered with silky white hair and have the usual stripes, but have no mane, which is the adornment of the adult



Hyenas though courageous, sometimes when attacked by a rival, lie motionless to escape predators

Of the four hyena species found in the world, only one — the Striped Hyena, is found in India; the other three species — the Brown Hyena, the Aardwolf, and the mighty Spotted Hyena are found only in the African continent. Although, a hyena looks more like a dog, taxonomically it is close to the cat family. Hyenas have, however, been categorised as Hyaenidae, a different family altogether. In India, the distribution of Striped Hyena is wide. Apart from the north-east, the western fraction of the Western Ghats and Jammu & Kashmir, the hyena is found in all regions.

Like vultures and jackals, hyenas too are scavengers, but a hyena's work begins after that of a vulture and jackal is over. Hyenas are skilled in breaking the bones