



A spiny-tailed lizard with young in summer

A Salt County Almanac

An ode to the stark beauty and vastness of a special landscape, through the seasons on the Western frontier.

Text & images: Kadambari Devarajan

In the arid salt flats that extend endlessly in every direction, all is not what meets the eye. There exists a landscape so unique and unusual that if it were not for a few security outposts one would be hard-pressed to figure out where India ends and Pakistan begins. These desolate badlands are what I would like to refer to as “India’s Wild West”. Anybody visiting Kutch cannot but be overwhelmed by the stark beauty and vastness of the place. This is my ode to a special landscape and an attempt at deciphering a salt desert through the year with folktales, legends, and anecdotes for each season.

Spread across more than 40,000 sq km, Kutch is unquestionably the largest district in India. It is in the north-western part of Gujarat, beyond the upper borders of which lies Pakistan. The land, its people, and their culture are shaped and moulded by the area’s extremities and the climate, and so are the organisms that inhabit this incredible landscape. Situated at the confluence of different cultures, these influences exist today for all to see – in the clothes, traditions, food, lifestyle, and beliefs of the people.

It is a unique landscape, for where else in the world can you find a desert ecosystem with three distinct seasons (summer, monsoon, and winter), pockets of which transform into wetlands for a third of a year, is almost an island surrounded by two Gulfs and a salt desert, and for a few months in a year metamorphoses into one of Asia’s largest grasslands? It is hard to imagine such an arid area being rich in biodiversity



A man herds his goats when there is grass aplenty during the monsoon

but it is surprisingly chock-full of organisms. While it may be hard to compete with a rainforest in terms of biomass, acre for acre, deserts do have their own unique faunal and floral compositions, and communities and assemblages of organisms that have superbly adapted to the arid conditions.

SUMMER (APRIL TO JULY)

Legend has it that impressed by the prayers of a pious monk, a spiritual teacher granted him the wish that when the monk opened his eyes whatever he looked at would be consumed by flames. The monk happened to be somewhere in Kutch and it is said that when he opened his eyes the land in front of him became desiccated. Although there are many variants to this tale, local lore and belief dictates that the land continues to burn once a year as a consequence of the wish granted to this monk, only to resurrect every year to turn into a grassland after the rains.

The heat is sweltering and dry, unlike anything one might have experienced before. I landed in Kutch in the peak of summer with a few suitcases full of camera traps, sincerely hoping I wouldn’t be accosted by border security folks, all the while bracing for a long enquiry in the midday heat. On hindsight, this should have been the least of my worries. As it turns out, nothing could prepare me for the heat. The daytime temperatures hovered around 55°C. It was just my luck that three days before I was at the gateway to Antarctica and a pleasant winter in the southern hemisphere at -20°C! If nothing else, the stark contrast certainly taught me to appreciate the complexity and resilience of the human body.

Summer in Kutch caught me off guard. My stay in the village of Hodka – closer to the Pakistan border than the nearest Indian city of Bhuj – was a culture shock for all parties involved. It was exciting, frustrating, and resulted in field stories and friendships that could fill an

entire book. The stories were brought to life with a clutch of characters and situations straight out of a Wodehouse novel – eccentric, engaging, and witty. Character building, as a wise person would call it.

My field assistants for that summer were Rasool, the brash but charming prankster, and Mutthalib, the poised teenager who was always ready with a question. Things got interesting right from the start. Like most people in Kutch, the duo are pastoralists – some nomadic, some seasonally nomadic, and some (for the lack of a better word) settled. While fairly well-travelled, intelligent, and quick to grasp things, they were totally stumped as to why someone will spend more money (“... than is worth several heads of good cattle”) on cameras. Who on earth spends good money on studying pesky jackals and foxes and dogs? To say they were amused would be an understatement, but they attributed the cameras to the idiosyncrasies of city folk who can’t appreciate livestock (“Are you sure you do not want to study the grazing patterns of cattle?”) and tagged along to help me.

Armed with shiny new trail cameras, we set out trying to identify the different mammals found in the area. While nearly all bird life disappears from Kutch during summer, mammals become easier to spot. I shortlisted a few locations to set up the cameras and off we went in a brand new four-wheel drive Bolero – a recent acquisition and an integral part of the field station that was being set up.

Since Kutch is by and large bereft of woody vegetation or trees, I had come armed with a custom stand designed for such situations, built on short notice by a magician when it comes to metal, who otherwise works with the likes of Bollywood royalty and builds fancy gizmos for movie cameras in Bhuj. He considered this penniless conservationist his charity of the year and generously didn’t charge Bollywood rates, something I am still grateful for. These stands naturally



A village grove in Kutch



Indian long-eared hedgehog



A cream-colored courser in the Banni grasslands of Kutch



A golden jackal in the Banni grasslands

had pros and cons. While they handled the problem of having no trees to tie the cameras to, they could easily be removed, stolen, or damaged. They stood out like a sore thumb in the terrain, not to mention the perils of setting up cameras in Border Security Force area – a veritable no man's land.

Tourism had started booming in Kutch and many families were building traditional circular mud houses (called *bhungas*) to earn parallel income as a home stay, especially during winter when tourists arrive in droves. I was staying in Hodka with a large family that was happy to have a visitor during the off-season. I realised fairly early why no one in their right mind would come to a hot desert during summer!

My tiny room had no electricity. After tossing and turning through my first night there, I decided enough was enough. I politely and apologetically woke my host up at 3 a.m., requested a spare cot to be plonked outside the room in the courtyard, and managed to catch up on sleep. I had to wake up at 5 a.m. to get work done before the scorching sun set the sky ablaze. The following night I improvised – I filled a mug with water, kept it by my cot, dipped my thin *khadi* towel in the water, covered myself using the wet towel as a blanket, and fell asleep finally able to appreciate the spectacular night sky in Kutch with a shooting star or two thrown in as bonus. If I woke up after the towel dried up, rinse and repeat.

MONSOON (AUGUST TO OCTOBER)

After a few days of setting up camera traps close to the village, I decided to venture further afield. After travelling far and wide in the dry, sweltering heat to set up trail cameras, I returned to Hodka, calling it a day well after twilight, and noticed a change in the wind. Ominous clouds built up at a distance and all eyes were on them. Everyone rejoiced as large drops of rain fell, and I finally slept well that night to the heady and sweet smell of petrichor.

A dreamy night was followed by a nightmarish morning; the land had completely transformed from hard, caked up, solid earth, to marshy sludge. It became

nearly impossible to retrieve the camera traps that were painstakingly set up. It took us nearly all morning to retrieve just one of the dozen cameras. The white-coloured 4WD was covered in blobs of wet, brown mud and the weather got worse with every inch we moved in the marshy terrain. Mutthalib *bhai* and I were knee-deep in grime, trying to remove sludge from the tyres so that the vehicle would move. After a point, we just stopped the vehicle, jumped off, and waded our way to retrieve the camera.

Despite how the morning had turned out, I was over the moon as I got close to the first camera trap. Just minutes before we'd seen a desert fox streak past us. It had come from the direction of the camera, but we weren't sure. However, I was overjoyed to see fox pugmarks all around the camera and was rewarded with my first-ever camera trap video of a desert fox.

Things went downhill after that though. The usually amiable Rasool *bhai* decided to revolt. He suddenly stopped driving and wanted to head back home, worried that my relentless quest to retrieve all camera traps could end in all of us getting stranded in a quagmire. No amount of reassurance would budge him. Finally a quick conversation with the coordinator back in Bhuj resulted in a promise to Rasool *bhai* that we will be rescued by a helicopter if it comes to that. Over the next two days, we managed to retrieve every single trail camera.

The parched earth drinks up every drop of rain until the dehydrated land becomes marshy and flooded. During the transition, the monsoon marks a shift in colour in the Banni grasslands. White and dusty tracts erupt into green grasslands, a veritable smorgasbord of grass and vegetation that keep the cycle of life going. It is a time of plenty not only for the wildlife in Kutch but also for the livestock and people living here.

Salim *mama* is the respected and wise headman of the tiny village of Sargu in the Banni grasslands. His love and knowledge for all creatures, especially livestock, is legendary and herders from far and wide flock to him for any problems their cattle may have. Salim *mama* is their very own James Herriot, albeit without formal veterinary training. No school or degree can compete with practical

training and a life spent in caring for animals. He is also a treasure trove of legends and stories from everywhere.

I used to look forward to working in the vicinity of Sargu and not without reason. Protocol demanded that while working near a village (there were more than 50 villages in the Banni grasslands alone), one has to respectfully meet the headman and inform him of the plan. This could be done over the telephone since they are busy people and sometimes hard to reach. In the case of Sargu, there was no question about a telephone call – I wasn't missing a conversation with Salim *mama* at any cost.

Being around him would suddenly transform me into this little girl badgering her grandfather for stories. And he did patiently oblige and belt out tales, amused at the starry-eyed wonder of this overgrown kid. One of the first stories I heard from him was set in the monsoon in Kutch and goes thus:

One monsoon, a female baya weaver was in her little nest in a forest when there was a sudden, heavy downpour. The animals of the forest started taking cover under trees. A lion took refuge under the tree in which the baya weaver's nest was. The baya weaver did not want to be disturbed, and tauntingly said, "Hey, mighty lion, why is a powerful creature like you hiding under my tiny house? Don't you have any other tree in the forest to stay under?" Hearing this, the lion felt ashamed and walked away. Soon after, a troop of monkeys came and sat in the shelter of the tree, creating mayhem in their own special merry way, and thereby hangs a tale.

WINTER (NOVEMBER TO MARCH)

It's the cold season in the salt desert, when everything springs alive in Kutch. Winged winter visitors flock to this incongruous land – a pitstop on their annual migratory routes from freezing temperate areas to tropical paradises with plenty of food. This is the most exciting season in the Salt County almanac. The air is rife with the cacophony of a thousand demoiselle cranes. There are raptors all around, and Kutch becomes one of the best places to watch diverse birds of prey. Species such as the grey hypocolius, Stolickza's bushchat and the sociable lapwing can be spotted if one is patient and lucky. The MacQueen's bustard can be seen crisscrossing the dusty plains in pairs, while the great Indian bustard becomes more elusive with each passing season.

As is true in any region with an interesting culture and history, Kutch too has a number of folktales involving the animals found here. The region has been a melting pot of cultures and traditions and from my interactions with the people of the area I think it has a rich oral history waiting to be explored. For example, this quest for folktales has already generated some interesting stories and, much to my delight, these feature Canidae as the protagonists!

Take the instance of the fox. Locals consider the Indian fox (*laukdi* in *Kutchi*, the regional language) to be wily, clever and capable of deception in the face of danger, quite similar to many other cultures. The story goes that foxes escape from tricky situations with simply a swish of their bushy tail. They are also thought to be proud creatures. Such is their pride that when winter arrives, the male fox is forced to walk on three legs, lest the earth is unable to bear the full weight of the proud fox.

Children here listen to a host of bedtime stories that run along the lines of Aesop's Fables. Like that of the fox and the dog. Locals state that when a dog chases a desert fox, the latter is so clever that it will sprint away with its tail horizontal to the ground. After a while the dog will focus only on the distinctly coloured tip of the tail, almost hypnotised by the white fluff. At an opportune moment, the wily fox will point its tail in a direction in a sudden movement and sprint in the opposite direction while the dog will end up following the tail's direction. This is how the clever fox will outsmart the dog.

Cold and hot deserts around the world are special places to see evolution in action. The desert is a lesson in adaptation and the resilience of life. The arid and semi-arid landscapes, including seasonal grasslands of Kutch, are a prime example. The vast open plains are amphitheatres for marauding wolves, jackals, hyenas and foxes. The sand dunes and salt pans are odes to the complexity of life forms and the grasslands are lessons on the fragility and interactive quality of natural systems.

A winter in Kutch is incomplete without some music and merrymaking around a bonfire. This is when stories of *djinn*s in the Dargah of Sarada village or politics from Bhirandiyara and the mysterious ghost lights or *chir batti* of the Banni grasslands will make the rounds. Huddled in a shawl around a bonfire under the starry skies of Kutch, reminiscing about stories in the sands, is one of my happy places. ◉



Camels in Chhari Dhand Wetland Reserve