

# UNTAMED BEAUTIES

Kerala based conservation photographer and fellow International league of Conservation Photographers, **BALAN MADHAVAN'S** eloquent pictures tells us stories of his tryst with nature

## B A L A N M A D H A V A N

In November 2009, Balan's trip to the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico with friend Claudio, was an unforgettable experience. This was a trip for which Balan was the only photographer chosen from Asia amongst 30 others from the world over to record the unique bio-diversity of the region. "Claudio had stopped his SUV in the middle of the jungle, Yucatan is devoid of lakes, ponds and rivers, almost like

a desert, but almost 70 per cent of it is still under forest cover, teeming with wildlife and heavy rainfall. He says, no water remains, for the rainwater is sucked immediately by the sandstone and clay surface, and here was a well only four feet wide. I descended into the pitch dark well. Suddenly the sun broke through the clouds and a shaft of light entered the cave through the opening, hitting the clear water below. It seemed like a thousand silver sparkles

were thrown up from the water surface, lighting up the entire cave. It was magnificent, for the cave was huge with stalagmites and limestone formations all around, and a pool of crystal clear water below. It was my first sight of a Cenote, the underground pool or lake. The beauty and magnificence had left me spell bound"

The International League of Conservation Photographers is the highest body of wildlife and





conservation photographers of the world and Balan is the Indian and one of the two FELLOWS from the whole of Asia admitted to this prestigious world body. ILCP uses strong and arresting visual images for communicating the message of conservation and has been closely working with world organisations like Conservation International, National Geographic and WILD. Their patented “RAVE” which stands for Rapid

Assessment Visual Expedition” is a brilliant communication initiative in which a dozen or more of world’s top photographers assemble in a particular place of critical environmental significance and one that is undergoing degeneration due to various human developmental activity. The photographers capture the Good, Bad and Ugly side of the habitat and human interference and use these images for effective lobbying for conservation.  
[www.balan.in](http://www.balan.in)

**Periyar, 2005**

**Waiting for the Monsoon:** This cormorant, with its open beak set against the backdrop of the patch of clouds is one of my favourite pictures. For me, it represents the global warming and related climate change. Birds are the first victims of climate change as their success of mating and nest building depends on weather and availability of food material for the chicks.

## II jade PHOTO FEATURE



### **LEFT- Tailor Bird:**

This photograph, shot in the suburbs of Thiruvananthapuram won me the Dr. Kiezo Yamaji Special Prize in the Canon-UNEP Int. photo contest. The picture was chosen from over 34,000 entries worldwide. Tailor Birds are nature's best tailors. They bring fine cotton from surroundings and stitch leaves to make nests. Quite often, poisonous insects are fed to the chicks; as poison is a very concentrated form of protein and thus speeding up the process of growth.

### **RIGHT- Elephants:**

Mighty Elephants are simply amazing. We humans can learn more "human values" from them. The way they keep the family, take care of the young ones, and guard the herd. I was watching this small herd in Periyar when suddenly all four adults came together and posed in front of me. They have spotted an intruder, in this case, me. It is very difficult to get such a tight shot of wild elephants and to have all animals in focus. It was a great moment.







### USA 2008

Thunderstorm over Yellowstone: The landscape was spectacular and the visibility, truly amazing. As I was shooting like mad at Yellowstone, the world's first National Park in the USA, a storm formed in the horizon and suddenly the heavens opened up. The scene was truly heavenly. The volcanic landscape of Yellowstone complemented beautifully by the downpour.



**TOP:** Karnataka, 2010- Sloth bears are dangerous. In fact the argument is still on among naturalists as to whether the bear or the elephant is more dangerous to the humans. With their weak sense of hearing and sight, the encounters with humans are quite close and if at all you come across a bear in close proximity, pray to god and he alone can save you. I was a bit adventurous stalking this bear in the jungles of Karnataka. She was walking away from me and I thought she could not feel my presence. At around 50 feet distance, suddenly she turned around and charged straight at me with a wild growl. I still don't know how I managed to fire away a couple of shots before making a very quick exit.

**BELOW:** My most celebrated Nilgiri Tahr picture ever, this picture was shot in Eravikulam National Park in 1994. I was doing a long photo-documentation of the endangered flora and fauna of the national park for the Kerala Forest Dept. One day, as I was lying inside the interpretation centre, a tahr took a peep inside, but I was not ready as I was tucked away inside my sleeping bag. I was so disappointed that I missed this great shot. However, I got up, got my camera ready and waited. Exactly after 10 minutes, the tahr came back, and this time I was ready. To me this image is very personal as this is the picture that made me quit my banking career to pursue wildlife and conservation photography full-time. It was as if the tahr came to me asking me to save him and his kind.



## II jade PHOTO FEATURE



**LEFT- Gavi, Kerala, 2008**

Capturing action in the wild is the most difficult challenge. We have no control over the subject, its positioning and the direction of movement. However, anticipation is a virtue of a good wildlife photographer. I saw this Nilgiri langur in a playful mood running from one branch to another. Hoping for the best, I composed my frame with the two trees and the blue sky in between and waited. Then after some time I was rewarded, when the monkey took the giant flight from one tree to another.

**RIGHT- Eravikulam National Park, 1993**

Like Mother Nature, I have always been an imperfectionist. Very rarely have I shot “the perfect shot” in my long career as a wildlife photographer. And this is one of them. The mother and child, set against the backdrop of layers of mountains, the backlighting, the highlight on the skin and the catch-light on the eyes and the gentle light on the moss on rocks... rarely do we come across such great picture opportunities in our lives. One of my all-time favourites.



