

# *MYSTERIOUS NIGHT SCREAM FROM THE DESERTED VILLAGE*

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One of the best known mysterious experiences that Corbett shares with the readers of his classic book “Men-Eaters of Kumaon” was hearing the sound of the agonizing screams of a dying human from the deserted mountain village Thak on the night of November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1938<sup>1</sup>.

Here is how Corbett describes the event. In this scene Corbett is sitting concealed in a machan up in a tree in the hope of shooting a man-eater, using the carcass of a buffalo as bait. His machan is close to the totally deserted Thak village, where two weeks ago the man-eating tigress killed a villager. As every detail of Corbett’s description is potentially important, here is the full text describing this event from the story “Thak man-eater”:

“There was still sufficient daylight to shoot by when the moon, a day off the full, rose over the Nepal hills behind me and flooded the hillside with brilliant light.”...“The moon had been up two hours, and the sambur had approached to within fifty yards of my tree, when a kakar started barking on the hill just above the village. The kakar had been barking for some minutes when suddenly a scream which I can only very inadequately describe as 'Ar-Ar-Arr' dying away on a long-drawn-out note, came from the direction of the village. So sudden and so unexpected had the scream been that I involuntarily stood up with the intention of slipping down from the tree and dashing up to the village, for the thought flashed through my mind that the man-eater was killing one of my men. Then in a second flash of thought I remembered I had counted them one by one as they had passed my tree, and that I had watched them out of sight on their way back to camp to see if they were obeying my instructions to keep close together.”

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<sup>1</sup> According to Martin Booth, this happened in “September 1938” (pg. 141), which cannot be correct, as Corbett went to Thak in November. Corbett is very precise with the dates in Thak story, and according to him, the scream was heard two days before killing the tigress.

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"The scream had been the despairing cry of a human being in mortal agony, and reason questioned how such a sound could have come from a deserted village. It was not a thing of my imagination, for the kakar had heard it and had abruptly stopped barking, and the sambur had dashed away across the fields closely followed by her young one. Two days previously, when I had escorted the men to the village, I had remarked that they appeared to be very confiding to leave their property behind doors that were not even shut or latched, and the Headman had answered that even if their village remained untenanted for years their property would be quite safe, for they were priests of Purnagiri and no one would dream of robbing them; he added that as long as the tigress lived she was a better guard of their property if guard were needed than any hundred men could be, for no one in all that countryside would dare to approach the village for any purpose, through the dense forests that surrounded it, unless escorted by me as they had been."

"The screams were not repeated, and as there appeared to be nothing that I could do I settled down again on my rope seat. At 10 p.m. a kakar that was feeding on the young wheat crop at the lower end of the fields dashed away barking, and a minute later the tigress called twice. She had now left the village and was on the move, and even if she did not fancy having another meal off the buffalo there was every hope of her coming along the path which she had used twice every day for the past few days. With finger on trigger and eyes straining on the path I sat hour after hour until daylight succeeded moonlight, and when the sun had been up an hour, my men returned. Very thoughtfully they had brought a bundle of dry wood with them, and in a surprisingly short time I was sitting down to a hot cup of tea. The tigress may have been lurking in the bushes close to us, or she may have been miles away, for after she had called at 10 p.m. the jungles had been silent."

"When I got back to camp I found a number of men sitting near my tent. Some of these men had come to inquire what luck I had had the previous night, and others had come to tell me that the tigress had called from midnight to a little before sunrise at the foot of the hill, and that all the labourers engaged in the forests and on the new export road were too frightened to go to work. I had already heard about the tigress from my men, who had informed me that, together with the thousands of men who were camped round Chuka, they had sat up all night to keep big fires going.

"Among the men collected near my tent was the Headman of Thak, and when the others had gone I questioned him about the kill at Thak on the 12th of the month when he so narrowly escaped falling a victim to the man-eater.

"Once again the Headman told me in great detail how he had gone to his fields to dig ginger, taking his grandchild with him, and how on hearing his wife calling he had caught the child's hand and run back to the house where his wife had said a word or two to him about not keeping his ears open and thereby endangering his own and the child's wife and how a few minutes later the tigress had killed a man while he was cutting leaves off a tree in a field above his house.

"All this part of the story I had heard before, and I now asked him if he had actually seen the tigress killing the man. His answer was, no; and he added that the tree was not visible from where he had been standing. I then asked him how he knew the man had been killed, and he said, because he had heard him. In reply to further questions he said the man

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had not called for help but had cried out; and when asked if he had cried out once he said, 'No, three times', and then at my request he gave an imitation of the man's cry. It was the same but a very modified rendering as the screams I had heard the previous night."

"I then told him what I had heard and asked him if it was possible for anyone to have arrived at the village accidentally, and his answer was an emphatic negative. There were only two paths leading to Thak, and every man, woman, and child in the villages through which these two paths passed knew that Thak was deserted and the reason for its being so. It was known throughout the district that it was dangerous to go near Thak in daylight, and it was therefore quite impossible for anyone to have been in the village at eight o'clock the previous night.

"When asked if he could give any explanation for screams having come from a village in which there could not according to him have been any human beings, his answer was that he could not. And as I could do no better than the Headman it were best to assume that neither the kakar, the sambur, nor I heard those very real screams, the screams of a human being in mortal agony."

This chapter is devoted to the search of the possible source of this mysterious sound Corbett heard some 75 years ago.

Before we try to explain what could have been the source of the mysterious scream from the deserted village, let us agree on several premises:

1. We cannot speculate that Corbett did not hear the agonizing scream. Corbett was revered for his legendary honesty, and he has never been known to make up details of his hunts in order to dramatize his stories. Also, as the scream was heard by other animals as well (sambhar, kakar), there is no chance of considering that the scream was a result of Corbett's imagination;
2. We cannot accept any supernatural explanations of the origin of these screams either;
3. The scream was a close (or even precise) copy of the agonizing scream produced by a man killed two weeks before (on November 12<sup>th</sup>) by a man-eating tigress;
4. The scream was not made by a human being, as not a single human was in the village when the scream was heard;
5. The scream did not belong to any animal species of Kumaon. Corbett was a brilliant expert in the animal and bird sounds of Kumaon and he could have identified the sound if it resembled any of the usual sounds made by Kumaon animals or birds;

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6. The tiger (the actual man-eater, whose victim made the scream two weeks before) was in the vicinity where the scream came from, as is obvious from the kakar barks and tiger calls from the excerpt cited above.

Analyzing all the information provided by Corbett, the only conclusion we can draw is that the scream was made by some animal. The question is which animal, and why Corbett, brilliant expert in animal sounds of the region, was unable to identify the sound of the animal?

First let us briefly discuss whether there have been any attempts to explain the source of the mysterious sound heard by Corbett from the deserted village.

We are not aware of any published research into the mysterious scream aiming to explain the source of the scream heard by Corbett, but some ideas have been expressed on associated topics. For example, Kenneth Anderson once suggested, that tigers can sometimes mimic the calls of some of their prey. As a tiger (actual man-eater) was present at the scene where the scream was heard, we should discuss this possibility as well. Here is the extract from Kenneth Anderson's story "The striped tiger of the Chamala village" (From the book "Nine Man-eaters and One Rogue", 1954, Allen & Unwin, 1954). Anderson is seating concealed in a tree in South Indian jungles, also at night:

"I will not weary my readers by recounting how the hours dragged by until 6.30pm., when the fowl and day-birds of the forest had gone to roost, and the langurs had long since moved away from the hated presence of their two enemies, tiger and man. I was alone, except for an occasional night-jar that flitted, chirping, around my tree. At 6.45 p.m. it was almost dark. The night-jar had now settled below me, and commenced its squatting call of 'Chuckoo-huckoo-chuckoo', when I met one of the strange experiences that sometimes, but very rarely, fall to the lot of a wanderer in the Indian forests.

"I had been told stories by jungle men, and had also read, that tigers, in particular localities only, imitate sambar and emit the belling call of a stag, presumably to decoy other animals of the same species to them, particularly the does. I had never placed much credence in this story, and never experienced it myself. That evening, shortly after 6.45, the sudden solitary 'Dhank' of a sambar stag rang out from a thicket in the waning light, in the space still visible between the branch against which my rifle rested before me, and that immediately to the right, and from out of this thicket almost simultaneously stepped the tiger.

"Now there could not have been any sambar stag in that thicket, along with or just in front of the tiger, for I could not have missed its hoof beats as it ran from the spot. No Sambar would have stood there and allowed the tiger practically to touch it in passing. Beyond that one 'Dhank' there was no other sound, when, as I have said, the tiger stepped into the open, and there was no possible doubt that the tiger had made the sound. Why it did so is a mystery, as it was not hunting. It had fed well earlier that morning and was now returning to another repast, so that there could have been no thought in its mind of decoying a sambar by imitating its call. I can only recount what actually happened, and what I experienced, and the fact that, beyond doubt, there was no sambar in that thicket when the tiger stepped out. I leave the rest to your own conjecture and conclusion. For my part,

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having heard it with my own ears, I have no alternative but to believe the old tales I had read and heard of a tiger's ability to mimic this sound.”

To comment on Anderson’s proposal, we need to state that thousands of tigers have lived in hundreds of zoos and even in private enclosures, in very close proximity to humans, for many decades (if not centuries), and there is not a single credible case of tigers mimicking animal (or human) sounds. Although tigers have a wide range of sounds to communicate with each other, their vocal apparatus is not flexible to be able to mimic other animal sounds. Later we will discuss where the sound of a sambhar stag could come from, but now let us come back to Corbett’s experience.

Peter Byrne, professional hunter and author of books on Corbett, in a response to the letter from one of the authors of this text, wrote that the mysterious sound heard by Corbett could have been made by a Himalayan bear. Here are the excerpts from his letters from June 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>:

**(Letter of June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012):** “POSSIBLY IT WAS A HIMALAYAN BEAR. FROM TIME TO TIME, FOR REASONS THAT DO NOT SEEM TO BE CLEARLY KNOWN, THESE ANIMALS WILL MAKE POWERFUL ROARING SCREAMS... THE AMERICAN BLACK BEAR DOES THE SAME THING... I HAVE HEARD BOTH.

**(From the letter of June 18<sup>th</sup>: 2012):** I AM OF COURSE NOT CERTAIN THAT WHAT CORBETT HEARD WAS A BEAR. IF IT WAS [A BEAR], IT WOULD HAVE BEEN ONE OF TWO SPECIES FOUND IN THE TERAJ: THE HIMALAYAN BEAR OR THE SLOTH [BEAR]. OF THE TWO, THE SLOTH IS MORE COMMON IN THE TERAJ FORESTS. THERE ARE A FEW HIMALAYAN ENCOUNTERED FROM TIME TO TIME BUT THEY TEND TO STAY HIGHER.

IN THE HIMALAYA, IN THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES, FROM TIME TO TIME WE HEARD SOME STRANGE CALLS AT NIGHT. OUR SHERPAS SAID THEY WERE MADE BY THE YETI. SO WE DID SOME CAREFUL RESEARCH AND FOUND OUT THAT THERE WERE TWO ANIMALS UP THERE THAT MADE STRANGE NOCTURNAL CALLS. ONE, WHICH WE HEARD ON A REGULAR BASIS, (MOSTLY ABOVE 10,000 FEET) WAS THE KASTURI – THE MUSK DEER. THE OTHER, HEARD LESS OFTEN (FOR ME THREE TIMES OVER THE YEARS) WAS THE HIMALAYAN BLACK BEAR.

IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST HERE, WHERE I LIVE, BEAR ARE HEARD CALLING FROM TIME TO TIME. I HAVE HEARD THIS SOUND TWICE IN THE TIME I HAVE BEEN HERE AND AT ONE TIME, WITH OTHERS, ATTRIBUTED IT TO THE CREATURE KNOWN HERE AS THE SASQUATCH, OR BIGFOOT. THEN I WAS ABLE TO PINPOINT THE SOUND PRECISELY.

THE SOUND IS BEST DESCRIBED AS A SCREAMING ROAR. STARING OFF AS A DEEP, POWERFUL, GUTTURAL ROAR AND THEN CLIMBING INTO A HIGH PITCHED SHRIEK. EACH SET OF CALLS LAST ABOUT FIVE SECONDS AND THERE SEEM TO BE, USUALLY, TWO TO THREE CALLS IN THE SET, EACH TIME...”

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Another experts (who prefers to remain anonymous) of Jim Corbett hunts and life, and an expert in the wildlife of the Kumaon region, independently from Peter Byrne also proposed in an informal communication with one of the authors of this chapter, that that this sound could have been produced by a bear.

The suggestion of bear making the human-like sounds is of course much more serious than a possibility of a tiger making such sounds, but there are still questions remaining with this suggestion. Firstly, same as in the case of tiger, bears have been in close proximity with humans and have never been known to imitate human sounds (or sounds of any other animals). Secondly, it is hard to imagine that Corbett, brilliant expert of the wildlife of Kumaon, did not know about the bear ability to make such sounds, and could not distinguish bear sounds from human sounds. Also, if we read Corbett words carefully it is easy to notice that the scream was not only a sound that sounded like a human scream, but it was the **exact copy of the agonizing scream** made by the unfortunate man, killed about two weeks ago, scream made in the moment when he was attacked and killed by the man eater.

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It is understandable that those who try to interpret the loud scream, heard by Corbett, think of some big-bodied animals (tiger, bear), as a big sound should come from a big body. But possibly the animal which made the sound was not big at all?

To interpret the mysterious scream that Corbett heard on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1938, we suggest that **birds** must be our prime suspects. Let us explain.

Of course, birds are very small, compared to humans, tigers or bears, but they are prodigious singers and among the loudest animal species on our planet. Some of their sounds are extremely loud and can be heard miles away. And finally and possibly most importantly for our topic, a number of birds are masters of imitation and can produce novel sounds that are totally alien to the audio repertoire of their species.

We need to take into account in the most serious way the fact that the ability to mimic different sounds is chiefly connected to the ability to sing. Singing needs a very flexible vocal apparatus, and this is the reason why some singing species are able to mimic other species' sounds. Corbett himself killed the man-eating tigress two days after hearing the above-mentioned scream by imitating the mating call of the male tiger. Corbett was able to imitate the sound of other species because he was a human, and humans can sing.

Experts in animal singing and the origins of human musicality somehow neglected the fascinating fact that singing, as a phenomenon, is virtually absent among ground-living species of animals. Out of about 5400 species which are known to sing, most live on tree branches (for example, birds and gibbons), and few of the singing species live in the water (seals, whales, dolphins, sea lions). The only species which lives on the ground and sings, is us, humans. Why ground living animals do not sing is a complex issue (mostly it is connected to the differences in security of three-dimensional environment in the trees and the two-dimensional environment of the ground)<sup>2</sup>. Basically, tree-living species are much noisier than ground-living species, and the fact that singing occurs in tree-living species makes sense. Therefore, if you need to interpret any unusual sounds coming from a forest, or a jungle, we suggest you should think first of what kind of birds could produce (or copy) such sounds.

So, here are the first tentative conclusions of our research: (1) the most realistic possibility, from the biological point of view is that it was a bird that made a call on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1938; and also, (2) the scream was not a natural call for a bird. Instead the bird copied the agonizing scream of the tiger's human victim, heard several days before. (3) This must have been the reason why Corbett, brilliant expert in animal and bird sounds of Kumaon could not identify the source of the scream – this was not a natural sound made by a bird. That was the reason why Corbett was sure that the scream was made by a human in mortal agony.

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<sup>2</sup> If the reader is interested in getting more information on this topic, we suggest reading “Why do People Sing? Music in Human Evolution”, Logos, 2011 (by J. Jordania)

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The next important step of our research is to check if birds can imitate sounds from hearing the original sound only once. Basically this is a question of how fast birds are in learning new sounds.

Let us listen to the German scholar Konrad Lorenz, the winner of a Nobel Prize, and one of the founders of the study of animal communication:

"First of all, birds can learn sounds that are totally unrelated to their species' vocabulary: 'Mocking' consists of sounds, learned by imitation, which are not innate and are uttered only while the bird is singing; they have no 'meaning' and bear no relation whatsoever to the inborn 'vocabulary' of the species"<sup>3</sup>.

After these encouraging words comes some disappointment, as Lorenz writes about the difficulty of teaching birds novel sounds: "Everyone who has tried to drum a new word into the brain of starling or a parrot knows with what patience one must apply oneself to this end, and how untiringly one must again and again repeat the word."

According to these words of the Nobel Laureate, it takes many repetitions and sheer patience to teach a new phrase or a word to a talking bird. This virtually overrules the possibility that a bird could have learned the agonizing human cry, which the bird could hear only once.

Remarkably, the case is not as lost as it might seem after reading these words. Let us continue citing Lorenz's words in the next paragraph:

"Nevertheless, such a bird can, in exceptional case, learn to imitate a word which they have heard seldom, perhaps only once. However this apparently only succeeds when a bird is in an exceptional state of excitement". After these intriguing words the scholar tells the details of two cases when birds learned complex phrases in one (or very few) repetitions, and which, very importantly, he witnessed himself.

In the first case Lorenz tells us a hilarious story of Papagallo, blue-fronted Amazon parrot, who belonged to Konrad's brother.

"As long as he lived with us in Altenberg, Papagallo flew just as freely around as most of my other birds. A talking parrot that flies from tree to tree and at the same time says human words, gives a much more comical effect than one that sits in a cage and does the same thing. When Papagallo, with loud cries "Where is the doc?" flew about the district, sometimes in a genuine search for his master, it was positively irresistible.

"Still funnier, but also remarkable from a scientific point of view, was the following performance of the bird; Papagallo feared nothing and nobody, with the exception of the chimney-sweep. Birds are very apt to fear things that are above. And this tendency, associated with the innate dread of the bird of prey swooping down from the heights. So

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<sup>3</sup> Konrad Lorenz. 1961. *King Solomon's Ring*, Thomas Y, Crowell Company, New York, Apolo Edition, pg 84. The book can be accessed online: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/39533656/Konrad-Lorenz-King-Solomon-s-Ring>

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everything that appears against the sky, has for them something of the meaning of "bird of prey." As the black man, already sinister in his darkness, stood up in the chimney stack and became outlined against the sky, Papagallo fell into a panic of fear and flew, loudly screaming, so far away that we feared he might not come back. Months later, when the chimney-sweep came again, Papagallo was seated on the weathervane, squabbling with the jackdaws who wanted to sit there too. All at once, I saw him grow long and thin and peer down anxiously in the village street; then he flew up and away, shrieking in raucous tones, again and again, "The chimney-sweep is coming! The chimney-sweep is coming!" The next moment, the black man walked through the doorway of the yard!

"Unfortunately, I was unable to find out how often Papagallo had seen the chimney-sweep before and how often he had heard the excited cry of our cook which heralded his approach. It was, without a doubt, the voice and intonation of this lady which the bird reproduced. But he had not certainly heard it more than three times at the most and, each time, only once and with an interval of months."

The second case cited in Lorenz's book "King Solomon's Ring" is more dramatic. This is a story of a pet hooded crow, known as Hansl. Hansl belonged to another owner, but for some time Lorenz looked after him when the crow was unable to fly. When Hansl was healed and started to fly, the crow found himself attached to the German scholar, so he would often give him "flying visits". After this background, the actual story line unfolds:

"Once he [Hansl] was missing for several weeks and when returned, I noticed that he had, on one foot, a broken digit which had healed crooked. And this is the whole point of the history of Hansl, the hooded crow. For we know just how he came by this little defect. And from whom do we know it? Believe it or not, Hansl told us himself! When he suddenly reappeared, after his long absence, he knew a new sentence. With the accent of true street urchin, he said, in lower Austrian dialect, a short sentence which, translated in broad Lancashire, would sound like "Got 'im in t'bloomin' trap!" There was no doubt about the truth of this statement. Just as in case of Papagallo, a sentence which he had certainly not heard often, had stuck in Hansl's memory because he had it in a moment of great apprehension that is immediately after he had been caught. How he got away again, unfortunately, Hansl did not tell us"<sup>4</sup>.

As we can see, according to Konrad Lorenz, there is credible evidence (witnessed by the scholar himself) that a singing bird can learn a completely new and very complex sentence by hearing it only once. Now, if we compare the two articulated phrases, remembered and flawlessly pronounced with all the details, including personalized voice imitation and the dialect by a parrot and a hooded crow on one side, and the agonizing scream of a tiger victim on the other side, it is obvious that for a talented bird copying a human scream must have been much easier than copying articulated phrases.

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<sup>4</sup> Lorenz, King Solomon's Ring, pg 87-88. See also Edward Armstrong, A Study of Bird Song. 1963. Oxford University Press, section "Factors affecting the learning and reproduction of mimics", pg. 81.

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Another important detail that must be taken into consideration when discussing this issue is that the scream was heard at night. This suggests that the bird that copied the scream must have been active at night (unless we allow the possibility that daytime birds can vocalize at night, possibly in their dream). This narrows our search for the possible species of the birds that could have produced a copy of the novel sound, as most of the singing birds are active during the day.

There are still a few singing birds active at night in India, including the Kumaon region, and we are going to discuss them next.

One of them is the nightjar. As a night species, the nightjar tries to stay immobile and unnoticed during the day. For this the nightjar is colored in cryptic colors to match the colors of the tree branches and bushes. It nests on the ground, and prefers dense bushes in which to hide from the possible predators during the daytime.

Could a nightjar have learned the agonizing scream of the tigress victim after just one hearing? According to Lorenz, the birds can learn new sounds immediately if the experience is accompanied by dramatic events, or at least events that seems dramatic to the bird. As we know, the bird was not a victim of the tiger attack, but in the same way we can say that the chimney-sweep was not endangering the life of Papagallo, but nevertheless the parrot was dead scared by the black human figure. The sudden scream and the scene of the violent attack must have been quite shocking for the bird if the bird was only a few metres away from the actual attack site. As we know from Corbett's description, the tiger attack occurred not far from the "dense brushwood bordering the field", and the nightjar, as we know, is a night species which tries to stay unnoticed during the day on tree branches or the ground among bushes. Therefore there is a good chance that the bird could have been concealed very close to the attack scene and was subsequently shocked by the sudden scream and violent attack.

Therefore, here is a preliminary reconstruction of the tiger attack scene and the resulting night scream from the deserted village:

On the 12<sup>th</sup> November, during the daytime, a nightjar was concealed in the thick bushes near the village lands. The tigress attack on a Thak villager happened very close to the place where the bird was hiding during the daytime. The loud scream and possibly the scene of the fatal violence was a shock for the concealed bird, and as a result, the loud scream was imprinted in the memory of the bird. It is difficult to speculate whether the bird repeated the mortal scream again between November 12<sup>th</sup> and November 28<sup>th</sup>. On November 28<sup>th</sup>, at night, as Corbett was sitting up in the tree, waiting for the tigress, the bird, who, according to its lifestyle, was active at night, most likely saw the tigress (who, from Corbett's words we know was in the village and was on the move), and gave the sound that was associated with the bird's experience of seeing the tiger.

But the "nightjar hypothesis" has one serious problem if it is to be seriously considered as a candidate for the author of the mysterious night scream. According to our current knowledge, nightjars belong to an order of birds known as Caprimulgiformes, and there is no evidence that they can learn novel sounds and imitate other species' sounds. They can sing, but they can not copy novel sounds.

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Therefore, either we should assume that (1) ornithologists are not aware of all the audio abilities of nightjars, or that (2) the scream was made by another bird species.

Is it possible that scholars are not aware of the vocal learning abilities of the nightjar?

That is unlikely. But we still need to remember that according to the information available about this bird, the nightjar is one of the most secretive birds, and many of its behaviors are still shrouded in mystery. No nightjar has been kept as a pet either. We know for sure that they have a peculiar song, which resembles the sound of a motorbike heard from a distance, and we also know that they can sing using more usual bird-like whistling (and yodeling) sounds. On rare occasions they also sing during the day. Because of their secretive lifestyle the nightjar's identity was connected with superstitions. Ancient Greeks believed that nightjars could milk the goats, and their Latin name "kaprimulgus" means "goat sucker". The Russian name for the nightjar is "kozodoi" - meaning the same "goat sucker". Apart from this erroneous belief, there was also an often-repeated unconfirmed report that nightjars can transport their eggs from their nests to more secure places carrying the eggs in their mouths. For a bird, active in the dark, and not kept in captivity, it should not be surprising that the nightjar has prompted a few superstitions and false beliefs.

So, if we believe that the audio repertoire of the nightjar is exhaustively known to ornithologists, then the scream could not have been made by a nightjar. On the other hand, if we still have some doubts about the behavior of this secretive bird, there still might a possibility of a nightjar learning novel sounds in exceptional circumstances.

Hardly anyone would disagree that most of the currently available information on the bird's ability to mimic different sounds (particularly human voices) comes from studies of captive birds. Unless nightjars are observed in captivity, in close everyday contact with humans, we should not conclude that we know all the potential repertoire of this secretive bird.

Unfortunately, the advantages of animals mimicking the ability of other species' sounds is often neglected, although it is obvious that well-mimicked sounds can profoundly confuse an intended listener and give a crucial advantage to the mimicking animal. We can all agree that the Thak man-eating tigress was shocked when, following the call of a male tiger, she suddenly found herself facing her mortal enemy - a hunter with a loaded heavy gun. Unlike the tigress, for whom this confusion was the last thing that happened in her short and troubled life, Corbett lived many years after hearing the mysterious night scream from the deserted village and shared his experience with millions of the readers of his books in dozens of languages.

Anyway, we should look at the possibility that a nightjar made the mysterious night scream at best with a great deal of suspicion. And, of course, we should remember that the nightjar is by no means the only candidate for the role of author of the night scream that almost sent Corbett running to the deserted village. There are several other and much more talented singers and mimics from the Himalayan foothills in Kumaon. Let us briefly discuss some of them:

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- The Common Hawk-Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx varius*), popularly known as the *Brainfever bird*, is a medium-sized cuckoo resident in South Asia. In India it is called Papiha. It is active during the day, and also in the dark. The species-specific call of this bird, resembling the phrase "brain fever"; can be often heard in India, including the Himalaya foothills. As a matter of fact, one of these birds was so active and so loud at night, that some of the members of our party, camped in the deserted village Thak (the place where Corbett heard the mysterious scream) in April 8-12, 2012, had problems going to sleep. The downside of this candidate is that cuckoos are not known for learning songs and novel sounds.

- A more realistic suspect for the night scream is the Greater Racket-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*). This is a medium-sized beautiful bird, widely spread in Asia. It is particularly important for us that drongos are widely known for their imitative abilities regarding many different species of birds (Corbett also mentions this). They are mostly diurnal but are active well before dawn and late at dusk. Owing to their widespread distribution, they have plenty of variations. Himalayan drongo is known as *grandis*. This is the largest subspecies, with long glossy neck hackles. The downside of this suggestion is that although they are good mimics, they have not been known to scholars for mimicking human speech and human voices<sup>5</sup>. Although the agonizing scream would not qualify as speech and would have been easier for the drongo to mimic.

- And finally, the best candidate for the role of the author of the mysterious night scream at Thak seems to be the Common Hill Myna (*Gracula religiosa*). This is a very loud bird, able to produce an amazing variety of vocal signals. The bird is most vocal at dawn and dusk when it is found in small groups in forest clearings high in the canopy. According to Wikipedia: "Both sexes can produce an extraordinarily wide range of loud calls – whistles, wails, screeches, and gurgles, sometimes melodious and often very human-like in quality." They rarely use their imitative abilities in the wild, but in captivity Common Hill Mynas are among the most renowned mimics, challenging even the African Grey Parrot in imitating human speech and human sounds with amazing accuracy and clarity. (see the photo #35)

In conclusion we can say that the Common Hill Myna seems to be the best candidate as the source of the mysterious night scream from the deserted Thak village that shocked Corbett on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1938. Although not everyone might agree on the identity of the bird species (and there can be other candidates), it is almost certain that the scream was made, or more precisely, copied, from the original scream on November 12<sup>th</sup>, by a mimicking singing bird.

Now we would like to come back once again to the mysterious sambhar stag sound heard by Kenneth Anderson in the South Indian jungles, and propose that the sound that Anderson heard was most likely produced by a singing bird. A nightjar (which, according to Anderson, was present at the scene) would have been perfect, but as nightjars are not known

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<sup>5</sup> Goodale, E. & Kotagama, S. W. 2006. Context dependent vocal mimicry in a passerine bird. *Proc. Roy. Soc. Lond. Ser. B*, 273, 875-880

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to learn novel sounds, we need to search for the imitator among other bird species. The identity of the actual bird might remain a mystery, but for the possibility that it was a bird, who imitated a sound of a sambhar stag, seems quite strong. Was it Common Hill Mynah? Possibly.

Therefore we suggest that both cases, described by two of the possibly most famous hunters of the Indian jungles, with Corbett hearing the human scream in mortal agony, and Anderson hearing the call of a stag sambhar, were most likely produced by mimicking birds, active at night (or dusk). We could also speculate that in the same way as the image of the much-feared chimney-sweep prompted Papagallo to produce the human words associated with his fear of the dark figure of the chimney-sweep, the same way seeing a tiger could have prompted the talented mimicking bird to produce the sounds most likely connected to the bird's previous audio experiences. According to Armstrong, "Birds not only learn sounds but also establish associations between them and persons, animals, or contemporaneous events."<sup>6</sup>

And finally, we should remember that the night when Corbett heard the scream from a deserted village was brilliantly lit with moonlight: "There was still sufficient daylight to shoot by when the moon, a day off the full, rose over the Nepal hills behind me and flooded the hillside with brilliant light." This fact is also extremely important, as the bright moonlight is well-known to trigger higher bird singing activity (see, for example, Mills, 1986)<sup>7</sup>.

And a critical note at the end: it seems that Corbett's memory was not precise about one detail: in November 1938, the full moon was seen on November 8 and then on December 7. So on November 28 the moon could not be full, it was the first quarter. Most likely the moonlight was very bright on that night, and the air was very clear, and gave Corbett the impression of the full moon. Let us one more time remember how Corbett describes the clear air on that evening: "the rain of the previous night had cleared the atmosphere of dust and smoke and after the moon had been up for a few minutes the light was so good I was able to see a sambhar and her young one in a field of wheat a hundred and fifty yards away." Also, apart from the clear air, we should remember that the first quarter moon has its pick time at around 9pm, almost exactly the time when Corbett heard the agonizing scream.

## Conclusion

So we can conclude that on the night of 28<sup>th</sup> November 1938 Corbett heard the perfect copy, the virtual "audio-recording" of the dramatic story of the tiger fatal attack on a Thank villager, that happened on November 12<sup>th</sup>, more than two weeks before, re-told to Corbett by a talented witness to the attack, a singing bird (most likely the Common Hill Myna). The scene of lethal violence, witnessed by the Myna (possibly from a very close range) stayed in

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Armstrong, *A Study of Bird Song*. 1963. Oxford University Press, section "Factors affecting the learning and reproduction of mimics", pg. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Mills, A.M. 1986. The influence of moonlight on the behavior of goatsuckers (*Caprimulgidae*). *Auk* 103:370-378.

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the memory of the bird, and later the bird reproduced the loud scream, associated with the appearance of the source of violence – the tiger.

It is symbolic that after two days of hearing the mysterious agonizing human scream from the deserted village, most likely produced by a mimicking bird, Corbett himself concluded the last hunt of his illustrious career as a slayer of man-eating tigers and leopards by mimicking himself the mating call of a tiger. And who knows, possibly hearing the deceptive night scream from the deserted village was responsible for the idea that came to Corbett two days later, on the last day of his long hunting career of man-eaters: the idea to lure the clever and elusive tigress by imitating the call of her mate.



**Photo #35.** Common Hill Mynah, usual dweller of Kumaon hills (photo from Wikipedia). We propose it was this bird, famous for its mimicking ability of human voice that copied the agonizing scream of the last victim of the Thak tigress and produced it on the night of November 28<sup>th</sup> to the horror of Jim Corbett, who was waiting for the man-eater, knowing that the village Thak was totally deserted.

#### **Note from the authors**

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