

CHUKA MAN-EATER KILLING DATE

There is a well known controversy about the date of the penultimate man-eater killed by Jim Corbett – so called “Chuka man-eater”. Some sources claim that Corbett killed the tiger in 1937, and other sources claim that killing happened in 1938. D.C. Kala does not mention the killing date of Chuka man-eater at all. Martin Booth mentions the date 1938 without explaining any of the controversies in Corbett dates. Jerry Jaleel claimed Chuka tiger was killed in 1937, as it is indicated in the beginning of Corbett story on this hunt. Peter Byrne also took for granted Corbett’s writing that the Chuka tiger was killed in 1937. Peter Byrne was actually the only author who noticed discrepancy in the dates. We can all agree, that the tiger could not kill two boys in June 1937, if he was killed by Corbett in April 1937.

Most importantly for all the biographers of Corbett, there is an obvious confusion in Corbett’s writings about the Chuka killing date. This chapter has been written to analyze these confusions, to settle the question when was the Chuka man-eater killed, and more widely, to raise a question about reliability of Corbett’s dates and his memory.

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For the beginning let us all agree that out of these two of Corbett’s sentences one must be wrong:

(1) “It was early afternoon on a sweltering hot day in April 1937 that Ibbi, his wife Jane, and I...” (this citation comes from the Chuka man-eater story from the book “Temple Tiger and the More Man-eaters of Kumaon”, OUP, 1954. With this phrase Corbett starts describing his successful hunt for Chuka tiger).

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And here is the second phrase:

(2) "...it was in this valley that six months earlier [in 1938] the Chuka man-eater had been shot." This phrase comes from the Thak man-eater story from the book "Man-eaters of Kumaon" (OUP, 1944).

We all have to agree, that these sentences cannot be both correct. So Chuka tiger was killed either in 1937, or in 1938. It is obvious, that Corbett made at least one mistake (most likely, accidentally, because of memory failure) in dating his hunt. The problem is to find out which of them was the mistake. Many things of the Corbett stories change with the change of this single date. For example, the question when Chuka tiger started attacking humans, how old was the surviving cub during the Thak man-eater hunt, or who was the "big tiger" Corbett fired at in April 1938, mentioned in Thak story.

Possibly the surest way to come to the solution of this contradiction is to analyze both possible versions of the Chuka killing date, 1937 and 1938, and see which of them fits better the existing facts.

So, what happens if the Chuka tiger was killed in 1937.

If the real date of the kill is 1937, then we must accept that Corbett made several serious mistakes in his writings. These mistakes are:

(1) His writing that the Chuka tiger's first unsuccessful attack was in winter 1936 must be wrong (and the correct date must be winter of 1935),

(2) His writing that the tiger killed two boys in June 1937 must be another mistake (must be June 1936),

(3) Writing that the Thak tigress killed Corbett's buffalo in April in 1938 must be wrong (must be April 1937),

(4) His writing (just after killing the Thak tigress) that during his three visits in this region during the last eight months he walked many times on the Thak-Chuka path, always in fear and with loaded gun (for the fear of man-eaters) must be wrong.

(5) Corbett words in Thak story "...it was in this valley that six months earlier [in 1938] the Chuka man-eater had been shot" must be wrong, instead must be '18 months' earlier.

So, in case if we assume that Corbett killed Chuka tiger in 1937, there are plenty of serious mistakes in his stories.

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What happens if the Chuka tiger was killed in 1938

If we assume that the tiger was killed in 1938, there will be only one contradiction in Corbett's writings. This is Corbett mentioning "sweltering hot day was April of 1937" at the beginning of the Chuka story. So if this date is corrected into 1938, not a single other contradictions will be found in Corbett's stories. Let me address the details:

(1) All the dates of the Chuka tiger attack (including unsuccessful attacks in 1936, and then killing two boys in June 1937), will be correct.

(2) Corbett mentioning killing the Chuka tiger "six month before" the October 1938 will be correct,

(3) Corbett mentioning several times about his hunt in April will be correct, and him mentioning after killing the Thak tigress that he was during the last 8 months three times in this path, always with loaded gun and the feel of fear, will be correct,

(4) Corbett writing that tigress killed a buffalo in April 1938 will be correct.

So the only contradiction in Corbett writings to the date 1938, as the Chuka man-eater killing date, is the mentioning in the beginning of the Chuka story the April of 1937. I suggest and will try to prove that mentioning of "April of 1937" was a single mechanical mistake that Corbett made in writings about two related stories: Chuka and Thak man-eaters.

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Possibly the most important factor for us to believe that Corbett was more likely to make mistake in his Chuka story (than in Thak story) is that these two stories were written in very different periods of Corbett's life. According to D.C.Kala, Corbett wrote Thak story in 1942, when he was 67. He was still in India and had fresh memories of the hunt that happened only 4 years before (when he was 63). As we may remember, Thak story was a concluding story of his first book "Man-eaters of Kumaon" (was submitted to publisher in August 1943, and was published in August 1944).

Chuka story was written in 1953, ten years later of writing of the first book, and fifteen years after his last hunt of a man-eater. By this time Corbett was 78 years old. His health was shaken particularly after suffering a very serious bout of malaria in the jungles (which almost killed him). In 1942 Corbett spent three months with serious bout of tick typhus, and in 1945-46 he was so ill with malaria (plus pneumonia) that according to Jim's dedicated sister Maggie, doctors were seriously afraid for his life. Although Jim recovered, his health was seriously broken after this illness. The story about Chuka tiger appeared in the book "Temple Tiger and More Man-eaters of Kumaon" (1954). It would be natural to assume that Corbett was more likely to make mistakes in 1953, after serious illness, and only two years before his death, than in 1942, when he was a still strong man, who was preparing military corps for jungle warfare during the Second World War.

Another important detail, often missed by Corbett biographers, is the startling difference in the number of precise dates mentioned in Corbett 1944 and 1953 books. For example, have a look how many precise dates are provided in Thak man-eater story:

- (1) October 12, 1938, the date when Ibbotson and Jane Ibbotsons started their trip;
- (2) October 13th, Corbett joined Ibbotsons;
- (3) October 23rd, Corbett and Ibbotsons arrived in village Sem.
- (4) October 26th, a men from the village Thak is killed by the tigress,
- (5) October 27th, Corbett, Ibbotson and Tewari follow the tigress but she escapes;
- (6) October 28th, two mail runners escape tigress attack;
- (7) October 29th, tigress killed a bullock from village Thak;
- (8) November 1st, tigress escapes Corbett when drinking a water at the pool;
- (9) November 2nd, Corbett and Ibbotson follow the tigress, and then in the dark the tigress follows them back to camp;
- (10) November 3nd, Ibbotson's party leaves;
- (11) November 7th, Corbett leaves his camp for a break;
- (12) November 12th, tigress kills a man in Thak (the last victim);
- (13) November 22nd, Corbett leaves Kaladhungi for the second hunting trip;

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- (14) November 24th, in the morning Corbett arrives to Chuka for second hunting trip. Thak is deserted and tigress follows Corbett unseen;
- (15) November 25^h, Corbett ties two buffaloes to bait the tigress;
- (16) November 26th, Thak villagers ask Corbett to accompany them to the deserted village;
- (17) November 28th, while sitting on a kill at a killed and partially eaten caw, Corbett hears mysterious human scream from the deserted Thak village;
- (18) November 29th, Corbett asks Thak headman about the scream of the tigress human victim on November 12th; Tigress comes to worker's place roaring and coves them into silence;
- (19) November 30th, Corbett calls up and shots the tigress about 6.00 pm. (This was the last day of Corbett's last hunt after a man-eater.)

As we can see, the whole story is filled with precise dates. Now let us have a look to see how many precise dates are mentioned in the Chuka man-eater story. The answer is very precise: none. There is not a single event that is precisely dated by Corbett. Even the date of killing the Chuka man-eater from the ficus tree is not precisely dated.

Chuka and Thak tigers were killed very close to each other, so it might seem hard to explain why Corbett remembered Thak dates so well, and had no memory of any dates of Chuka tiger hunt. The obvious explanation is that Corbett wrote these two storied 11 years apart, and his memory was most likely failing two years before his death, when he was writing a Chuka story. Of course, when writing Chuka story, Corbett could have easily make a guess and write that the tiger was killed, for example, the April 25, and no one would have ever find out if this was not correct. But for a person with such integrity as Corbett this was totally unacceptable. As he did not remember the precise date by the time he was writing a story in 1953, he did not start guessing and making up the date of killing of his penultimate man-eater. Unfortunately, unlike some of fellow humans, Corbett never had a habit of writing diaries.

We know that Corbett received some criticism from fellow tiger hunters who were accusing him of dramatizing details of his hunt, but most likely this accusation came from a general belief that hunters always make up details to dramatize the stories of their hunts. Corbett was very different from most of hunters, and did not possess the "hunter virus" of dramatizing of hunting stories. There are many indications that Corbett was writing his stories without a slightest dramatization of the real events, and not a single person was able to prove without any reasonable doubt that something was obviously made up by Corbett.

Corbett had another problem. Some of the details of his hunts were so incredible that he was reluctant to tell them as he knew he would be accused of dramatizing. Instead of taking away the details that could have caused suspicion of the readers, he was delaying the release of these stories. Story of Tala Desh tiger is one of such incredible stories, when sick,

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partly deafened and half blinded Corbett, instead of being in a hospital, was following a man-eater tiger at night.

Sorry for this deviation. I mentioned this just to propose, that all the possible mistakes that a readers might find in Corbett stories, are there not from his desire to cover the truth, or dramatize the real events, but because of his memory failings. The mistake with the Chuka killing year (1937 instead of correct 1938) was such a mistake. It is quite evident that Corbett memory was not as sharp in 1953, as it was in 1943.

As a matter of fact, Corbett has very few precise dates of his hunts in his books, even the dates some of his most memorable hunts are not clear, like the date of killing of the Champawat tigress, the most prolific man-eater in recorded human history. Actually, only killing of three of his man-eaters are dated precisely in his books: (1) Thak tigress, (2) Rudraprayag leopard, and (3) Chowgarh tigress.

Thak tigress, killed on November 30th, 1938, was the most recent kill by the time of writing a story about it and the story is undoubtedly the by far the most detailed story out of all Corbett writings.

Rudraprayag leopard was killed on the night of May 1st-2nd, 1926. This was by far the best known man-eater killed by Corbett. It was granted an unprecedented media coverage and was even discussed in British Parliament. This was the only man-eater that merited a separate book from Corbett.

Chowgarh tigress killing date is April 11th, 1930. How could this date survive so well in Corbett memory? From the story we know that Corbett had a map of the region with the precise dates and the names of villages of all reported kills on it. After killing the tigress, Corbett added a final note on the map, indicating the place and date of killing.

Another reason for remembering Rudraprayag and Chowgarh man-eater hunts was that they were the most difficult hunts that lasted many months, and the dates stayed in Corbett memory better than many other hunts.

Taking into attention the incredibly detailed descriptions of the many hunting scenes it might seem unbelievable that Corbett could remember such vivid details of the hunt and not remember the dates of the kills of the man-eaters, but in fact this is quite natural for human memory. Many of us might have incredibly detailed memory of some emotional moments of our lives without the memory of the precise dates. It is certainly pity that a person with such an incredible life and adventures did not have a diary¹.

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¹ For another confirmation that Chuka tiger was killed in 1938, see the letter written by Ibbotson on January 13th, 1939. The letter text is presented to the wider audience for the first time in this book. The original of the is kept in the National Archives of India.

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Apart from the dates, there are some other details of Chuka and Thak story that must be clarified as well.

WHO WAS THE "BIG TIGER"?

Corbett mentions in Thak story that he shot at a "big tiger" in April 1938. Was the "big tiger" Corbett mentions the Chuka tiger? Or it was another, normal (non-man-eater) tiger that Corbett hunted for trophy in 1938?

Let us read Corbett precise words on this account (from Thak story):

". . . into the ravine in which I had fired at and missed the big tiger in April."

I believe Corbett was referring to Chuka man-eater, but there can be a doubt that Corbett could not had been referring to the Chuka tiger as he was only referring to the tigers as "big" if the tiger was more than 10 feet long. Also, he could have simply mentioned that it was a Chuka man-eater.

Now, if we check the end of the Chuka tiger story, when Corbett speaks about the size of Chuka tiger, he refers to Chuka man-eater as "big male". His precise words are "he was a fine **big male** in the prime of his life and in perfect condition, and would have measured - if we had had anything to measure him with - nine feet six inches between pegs, or nine feet ten over the curves". Not quite 10 feet, I agree, but close, and most importantly, the word "big male" to the Chuka tiger was used by Corbett himself.

Apart from the size, let us pay attention, that when Corbett mentions "big tiger" in the story, he mentions him firing and missing his shot to this "big tiger" in April in a ravine. If we check the story of Chuka man-eater, we will easily find the place where Corbett writes about shooting at the man-eater **in April in a ravine**, and describes how his bullet **missed the tiger**. According to Corbett words, bullet "went through the ruff on his [Chuka man-eater's] neck and striking a rock splintered back, making him spring straight up into the air . . ." Later he examined the place and confirmed he missed the tiger and that there was no blood, and that he only found tiger hair shaved from his neck. So, everything is pointing that Corbett mentioning of the "big tiger" was the Chuka tiger: the name "big tiger" used by Corbett, time - in April, place - in ravine, and the occasion - missing his shot.

So I believe there is no need to suggest that Corbett went to this region specially to hunt a normal, non-man-eater "big" tiger as a trophy, in April 1938. Besides, we know that Corbett completely abandoned trophy hunting of tigers in the 1930s.

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HOW OLD WAS THE YOUNG MALE TIGER?

Another important topic of Chuka and Thak stories is how old was the living cub Corbett mentions in Thak story – about 9-10 month old (if born in 1938), or about 20-21 month old (of born in 1937). We know that Corbett saw two cubs of the future Thak man-eating tigress (who was the mate of the Chuka tiger) first time when hunting the Chuka tiger, and later he saw the pugmarks of one of the surviving cubs when hunting the Thak tigress.

If Chuka tiger was killed in 1937 and Corbett saw the tigress with her cubs in April 1937, in November 1938 the young male tiger must have been about 21-22 months old.

If Chuka tiger was killed in 1938 and Corbett saw the tigress with cubs in April 1938, in November 1938 the young male tiger must be about 9-10 months old.

Now, let us pay attention how Corbett refers to the young tiger. In one place he refers to the cub as “young male tiger”, but most importantly, in another place he writes “small male tiger crossed and recrossed the Ladhya many times during the past week...” I think the word “small male tiger” can not be said about a male tiger that is 21-22 months old. At this age male tigers are larger than fully grown female tigers. Corbett would never proposed this was a “small male tiger” if this was 21-22 months old male tiger.

So the words “small male tiger” also indicates that the Chuka killing date was 1938 and the abandoned cub was about 9-10 months old.

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Possibly more difficult problem is why the tigress was in heat, and was calling for a mate in October-November 1938, if she still had a 9-10 months old cub.

We know that tigresses sometimes abandon their cubs, so possibly the Thak tigress was another “bad mother”, who abandoned her cub? I believe there is a strong possibility that the Thak tigress undergone a character change from April to October. We know that the tigress was a good mother when Corbett saw her with cubs for the first time in April. She was teaching her cubs a proper behavior of tigers in the wild. After April the tigress undergone life-changing stresses: she was twice wounded, one of her cubs died (possibly while she was incapacitated from hunting her natural prey), and finally she became a man-eater, totally fearless of humans, cowing into silence even thousands of workers shouting at her. So I believe it would be natural to conclude that under these stresses the tigress behavior changed and she actually abandoned her cub.

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Could the cub survive? According to George Schaller², tiger cubs show first elements of independence at 6.5 months old. Males start hunting earlier than females. 11 month male cub "became semi-independent and occasionally begun to hunt on his own" (Schaller, 1984:270). Schaller also cites Sanderson (1912) who mentions two cubs, born in 1875 November. They started hunting in June 1876, 7 months old, although stayed with mother (Schaller, 1984:270). Schaller (1984:234) also writes that males become independent earlier and are often killed as they are not very skilled hunters yet.

Most likely the 10 months old cub of the Thak tigress, left on his own, was surviving by scavenging, and there is a very little chance he would survive after November 30th when the troubled tigress was finally put at rest by Corbett.

So after studying the problem of Chuka tiger killing date in detail, I came to the following conclusions:

- (a) killing of Chuka tiger happened in April of 1938,
- (b) the "big tiger" Corbett mentions in Thak story was the Chuka man-eater,
- (c) the young male cub was most likely the 9-10 months old cub, one of the cubs that Corbett saw with the future Thak man-eater in April 1938 when he was hunting Chuka tiger.
- (d) Because of Corbett mentioning of the "sweltering hot day in April 1937", the other mistake came out, like the writing under the Chuka mounted head of the date "1937",
- (e) The existing writing in Forest department documents in 1937 must be more about killing two boys by the Chuka man-eater rather than Corbett killing the man-eater,
- (f) The idea that Corbett was killing other tigers just for trophy in 1938, after establishing the first protected areas for the tigers (that became later Corbett Park) is wrong.

At the end, let us have a look at Corbett writing at the end of Thak story. After killing the Thak tigress on November 30th, 1938, unarmed Corbett, very happy because of the sudden cease of the fear connected to the man-eater, writes:

"In my three visits to Chuka during the past eight months I had been along this path many times by day and always with a loaded rifle in my hands, and now I was stumbling down in the dark, unarmed, my only anxiety being to avoid a fall. If the greatest happiness one can experience is the sudden cessation of great pain, then the second greatest happiness is undoubtedly the sudden cessation of great fear."

² Schaller, George B. (1984). *The Deer and the Tiger (Midway Reprint)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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What does these words mean? I think from these words we can conclude that:

- Corbett's three visits (in eight months, all in 1938) that he mentions was to kill the two of his last man-eaters, Chuka and Thak tigers. Chuka needed one visit (in April), and Thak needed two visits (October and November, together three visits). It was because of the presence of the man-eaters that he had the "feel of fear" until this moment, and that's why he had to walk with the "loaded gun" all the time.

- In case if the first of these three visits, mentioned by Corbett, was for another, non-man-eater tiger, mentioned as "big tiger", then it is impossible to understand his referring to the feeling of fear during all these three visits, as Corbett was never afraid to walk jungles if there were only "normal" tigers, as he knew non-man-eaters do not stalk and attack people.

One additional point. There is another, very small contradiction between Chuka and Thak stories. Corbett wrote in a Thak story about the tigress killing one of his buffaloes in April (the one that she fed to her small cubs as Corbett watched them from a tree). In Chuka story he mentions the same kill not as "buffalo" but as a "caw". Of course, this is not an important mistake, but this still confirms that Corbett's memory was not 100% in his later years. I believe buffalo must be correct, as Thak story was written only 3-4 years later after the events described, and Chuka story was written 13-14 years later.

And finally one methodologically important claim: I would suggest, that if there are any contradictions found between the details of the two Corbett books, "Man-eater of Kumaon" (1944), and the "Temple Tiger and More Man-eaters of Kumaon" (1954), we should assume that it is most likely that the mistakes were made by Corbett in his book "Temple Tiger and More Man-eaters of Kumaon", as this book was written much later, and after his devastating illness, so in his later years Corbett's memory most likely was not as sharp as before.

So I am coming to the conclusion that the biggest mistake Corbett made in his writings about the Chuka man-eater was that he wrote about a "sweltering hot day in April 1937", as the start of his hunt for Chuka man-eater. If we correct this one single date, 1937 into 1938, everything falls on its place.

Therefore, we can finally correct the existing controversy in the text of the book "Temple Tiger and More Man-eater of Kumaon." Chuka man-eater was killed in April 1938.

According to the currently published text by the Oxford University Press, although the man-eater was killed in April of 1937, the tiger still miraculously managed to kill two boys in June of 1937. I suggest it will be a sensible idea for the Oxford University Press to add a note from an editor about the correct killing date of the Chuka man-eating tiger in the continuing new publications of Corbett's classic books.