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The Journey of a Lifetime Trust (JoLt)

Expanding horizons, enriching young lives

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All Women Fundraising Elephant Trek in aid of The JoLt Trust

A rare and unique opportunity to trek across Nepal on elephants: March 2005 for three weeks

The expedition has now been completed. What follows below is a journal of the trip written by one of the participants - Sue Fenn.

MY JOURNAL OF THE ELEPHANT TREK FOR JOLT

CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK, NEPAL , MARCH 12 - APRIL 3 2005

by Sue Fenn

Cast of characters

The eight women on the trek: Dorothy Dalton, Susan Day, Olivia Hussey, Lindsay Driscoll, Denise Bolland, Challis Stokes, Jackie Wilkinson and me, Sue Fenn.

The Tiger Tops team (guessing the spelling):

- Dhan, Chief Guide, naturalist and expedition leader
- Sukram Kamal, second naturalist, Celina our Chaperone, and the elephants with their keepers (phanits and mahouts):
 1. Hirakali, with Bhim and Sukman
 2. Ramkali, with Sunni and Krishna
 3. Gulabkali, with Rami and Lakhsman Choudry
 4. Pawankali , with Gani and Bharat
- Jeep drivers : Bhim, Tilak (Sukram's son) and Bishum
- Our Cooks: Bhagat Rai , and Tshering Sherpa
- Men's cooks: Babu Rasum and Sukram
- Steward: Rekh Gurung

Saturday, March 12

Eight intrepid women meet at 8.30 am at Heathrow (Terminal 3). On the flight to Kathmandu we are almost the only women, most passengers being Nepali workers returning home from the Gulf.

Sunday, March 13

Arrive on time in an almost empty international airport. Met by Gauri (of Tiger Mountain Travel) with two mini buses so we and our bags are soon chugging through the crowded, polluted streets to the Kathmandu Guest House in Thamel - the hippy mecca. Challis arrives from New Zealand in time for a late lunch, then we walk slowly through the old city down to the Durbar Square. There are few other tourists but lots of eager young men offering to guide us round. Again and again we are told that tourist numbers have not picked up since "9/11" and that the recent political crisis has made the bad situation much worse.

Monday, March 14

A very small Twin-otter plane takes us south west about 75 miles to the little airstrip serving Tiger Tops. Meghauli is much as I remember it, a grassy runway with a fence trying unsuccessfully to keep animals away, and thatched houses lined up along the edge of the field. When the plane leaves Kathmandu, a siren sounds to warn the villagers to drive the cows and goats away. The army does an ambling sweep of the runway. A delicious meal is ready for us - vegetarian curries and salad, under a thatched shelter provided by Tiger Tops. We pile into a small bus which lurches along a track to the edge of the Rapti river. We cross it in a small wooden boat poled across to a waiting Landrover, watched by a crocodile sunning itself on the shore, and Brahminy (or Ruddy Shelduck) duck, heron and cormorant. About 45 minutes drive through jungle across a wide river with safe passage marked by stakes, and we arrive to a warm welcome at the Lodge. As we look across the wide lawn, three elephants sail across our view against a backdrop of the shimmering white Himalayas. My heart misses a beat - it is all so beautiful and exciting - green parakeets scream through the trees!

At 3.30 we go to visit the elephant lines (where on my last visit a male elephant had been born in the night to the noisy trumpeting of all his aunts!) All the animals are out working, so we go on with Harry to the Bird Blind. This a shady platform beside a lagoon not far from the lodge. We hear and see jungle fowl for the first time and equally colourful bee-eaters, red-vented barbets, drongos and an orange-headed thrush. But the oddest and most extraordinary sight is a huge crocodile, a Marsh Mugger, fighting a twelve-foot python!

Tuesday, March 15

5am first call, after a night full of jungle noises. Tigers have been very close during the night. At 6am four go out on an elephant for a short safari, at 7am a second group. We see several one-horned rhino, black ibis, peacocks, spotted deer, hog deer and flame of the forest trees. After packing up, we walk through the trees and start our first lessons on the flora and fauna. We are told the uses of each plant and how to recognise tracks in the sand, and marks on the trees. A tigress with two cubs has walked this way and then chased a sambar deer. In the tall sal trees languor monkeys and their young are watching us and jumping from branch to branch overhead.

At 2.45 we pile into a Landrover and head for the river. A rosewood dug-out takes us downstream for a couple of hours, steered by a man front and back. The river is wide and fast-flowing and along the banks are small encampments of fisherfolk. We learn that the dam lower down stream in India is preventing many fish from coming back to their spawning grounds and stocks are very low. At the biggest rapid we walk round while the men steer the boat round various obstacles, but through smaller rapids we bounce along quickly and safely. As the sun sets we reach Camp 1 for our first night under canvas. It is set out along a high bank on a wide bend of the Narayani river. Our five tents (one for Celina who is our official chaperone!) are in line along the top of the bank facing into the sunset. A table is set for dinner under the

stars. Elephants are bringing in big logs for the camp fire. There is an open dining tent, a cooking tent, tents for the cooks, for the guides, for all eight elephant keepers - phanits and mahouts - and for the three driver/mechanics, not forgetting the two demure little toilet tents. What an establishment!

Wednesday, March 16

At 0815 we have ceremonial introductions to our elephants and presentation of our rather battered bananas from Kathmandu. It's a five-hour trek to the next camp. Pit-stops, or as they are called here "marking territory", involve asking the elephant to kneel down so we can climb down her backside. Someone holds the tail up to form a stirrup and we soon learn the knack. Elephants only like standing and can injure internal organs if they lie down too long, but they get up and down fairly willingly.

All morning we push through tall elephant grass disturbing numerous rhino and often look up into tall stands of flowering silk cotton trees with their huge waxy red flowers. We find a rather hot camp beside a shallow silvery-sand stream. After a short hot nap, Lindsay, Sue Day and I sit in the stream - in our bathing costumes - washing ourselves, hair and clothes. The elephants hobbled with chains forage nearby. The remnant go for a walk with Sukhram along the stream, spotting tracks of a small (civet?) cat and mongoose, an Indian Robin, green pigeons, and a brilliant bee-eater busy at our feet. On the return walk two nightjars rise up from the path ahead of us. After an early supper we go to bed early, warned of a very early start next morning.

Thursday, March 17

Yes, despite it being St Patrick's day we are woken at 4am, and riding along a track by 5am - in the dark! We hear sambar barking and see spotted and hog deer and lots of rhino. Peacocks are still roosting in tall trees and nightjars on the move. As it gets lighter I spot a cougal and, in turning for a better look, knock my water bottle off the howdah. Luckily there is an elephant just behind ours and she picks it up and returns it. As we cross the Rewa river, nearing the base at Tiger Tops we see another elephant carrying tourists and also a big turtle swimming downstream. There are fresh tiger tracks so we spread out to hunt. It was fun but fruitless! We walk through areas where forest fires are still burning. We find the camp after searching for half an hour, and it is still only 11am: but already very hot. The site by an ox-bow lake is disappointingly dull. The elephants plunge into the muddy water as soon as the howdahs are taken off, then choose tall trees to rub their backs against.

Dhan advises us to spray feet and ankles thoroughly with DEET against ticks, and to zip up our tents at night in case wild boar wander through the camp. Every night at dusk a dozen hurricane lamps are trimmed and lit and placed around the camp: one outside each tent, lighting the way to the loo tents and wherever they are needed. It makes the camp look rather romantic, even snug in the middle of the jungle.

Cooking dinner the cooks have a gas blow-out which burns the eyebrows and nose of Tshering Sherpa. Livvy sprays his face with a medication which temporarily turns his face black. This upsets him more than the burns and he is persuaded to return to Tiger Tops to see the doctor.

Friday, March 18

6.30 breakfast for 7.10 departure and another photo opportunity with the elephants all lined up. We all plunge, four abreast, into tall grass and then on into mixed forest. We are learning which plants the elephants like to eat as well as grass: cardamon and pipul leaves, and the Left-handed or Strangler vine - the juice of which is bright red like blood and used to treat high blood pressure. While pulling some of this down, our elephant reverses suddenly into a tree, crushing Celina's hand between the howdah and a tree trunk. Doctor Livvy to the rescue! Five of us ask to walk with the elephants as the route is now along a pleasant track instead of impenetrable jungle. We walk into camp as the tents are going up and offer to help, but the men firmly place the howdah cushions on a bank above a stream. The elephants drink deeply from the stream, then stir up a nice mud bath and, once covered with mud squirted over themselves, find a patch of dry sand which they use as talcum powder! Through the open tent we can see rhesus monkeys

playing on the ground and langur in the trees.

We nap and read till it's cool enough for a trip to the river to wash hair and clothes, and then the elephants join us for a splashy frolic! Children from a village across the river come to stare - we think it must be at us but soon realise, rather shame-faced, that it's the elephants they want to watch. Very few come to this side of the park. Our evening walk is in the rain, welcome in the oppressive heat. We hear a tiger close by and languor overhead chatter excitedly but our guides do not want to go any closer! It may be leopard. It is still raining during dinner, with thunder and lightning, and Lindsay notices a huge black scorpion crawling out of a hole, washed out by the downpour. Rekh takes it away on a stick. We go to search our tents and shoes for more, finding none we zip up carefully and from then on only unzip the doors to go in and out. It is still raining and a chorus of frogs lulls us to sleep.

Saturday March 19

It has been a good camp for us, but not enough food for the elephants: chewing vines, however tasty, is no substitute for a pile of elephant grass or elephant sandwiches - which contain paddy and molasses. We leave just after 7am, returning to the main track we soon see a big herd of spotted deer and a wild boar runs across our path. As the jeeps catch up and pass us we move to one side and Dhan orders the elephants to trumpet. The huge noise is triumphant! Later one of them carefully picks up a desiccated tortoise and passes it to her keeper. The undergrowth is full of wild jasmine so the air is heady with its perfume. We walk for an hour in the middle of the morning and only reach camp well after midday.

We take an hour's siesta before a swim in the river below the camp. On our evening walk we see monkeys, the Brainfever bird, and crimson-breasted parakeets mating high up in a sal tree! The jeep returns that evening with the cook, fit and well and grinning happily from ear to ear - obviously delighted to be back.

The campsite - the best since Camp 1 - is on several levels and the team work so enthusiastically to make it convenient for us. They sweep the paths and make wash stands for the hand-washing water beside the loo tents, and by our tents, and cut steps down to the river. So we are all sleeping on different levels when an army platoon visit us. The first I know is that a torch is shining into our tent and I peer out at perhaps a dozen young soldiers with rifles. I'm not sure who is more astonished, but as other heads come out of the tents they ask in bewilderment "Where are your brothers"? Sue is very firm with them (as an army nurse she soon sizes them up!) and sends them down to Dhan's tent. Dhan sends them packing and then comes to reassure us. He's abashed that we've been disturbed and assures us that they only came to see if we are alright!

Palm Sunday, March 20

Wake 6am, breakfast 6.30, and 7.00 off. The keepers keep hitting hard on the elephants' heads with a stick and it is some time before I realise they are killing biting flies. We follow the track to the army post (where the soldiers came from last night) and Dhan goes in to make contact. We join a wider track and meet a lorry heavily laden with smiling people and paddy, and then a tractor pulling a wagon of paddy sacks - it's like Piccadilly Circus! There are lots of streams to cross in culsi or wadis. Most have good water so the elephants stop often to drink. We are now in sal forrest so we don't see many signs of wildlife except for the diggings of sloth bear into the numerous termite mounds.

After two hours we turn north up a wide river bed following the marks of the jeep tyres. A long way up we spy our new camp high on a bluff above the widest stretch of water. The lads are busy setting up the camp, which in this heat is very hard work. Rather than sit idly by we set about damming the river to make a bathing pool and immediately the elephant keepers come and help. After lunch we rest in our tents which have been set up on a terrace high enough to catch a little breeze. On our evening walk Dhan points out small round termite balls, football size, which he says the locals collect for their hens. There are also lots of different ants in black nests high up in trees. For dinner we carry our chairs up to the highest level and sit round a big bonfire under an almost full moon. It is chilly enough for fleeces. Frogs, cicadas and

an owl serenade us as we sleep.

Monday, March 21

Breakfast is early and I treat myself to fried eggs and French toast (egg-bread) as well as my usual porridge, because this is going to be a long day. We are going to cross the Churia hills.

Saying goodbye to what has definitely been the most beautiful camp so far, we set off up river. We are distracted immediately by very fresh tiger tracks - they were certainly very near the camp last night. All eyes down we follow them till they disappear into the jungle. Dhan, Bhim and Rekh are climbing about on the western bank looking for the track for crossing the mountain. Eventually Dhan sends us back to the camp while they hunt some more. Suddenly a shout urges us to mount quickly - they've found the track! The elephants have gone off foraging but hasten back and we are soon on our way eleven hours late and with six hours trek ahead of us! The elusive path is just opposite the camp but we were all too busy tracking the tiger to see it.

It's an easy path at first even for elephants but we reach a steep very narrow section which is quite a challenge. Then on up and up, sometimes cutting through where the vines are too low for an elephant, and sometimes they push a small tree to one side. When they have to descend a very steep bit they place their two front feet together like a plough in front of them and then, making a slope as they go, slither down. The last bit before the summit is very steep and it is getting dark. At seven o'clock we see a little gorge above with only dull light beyond it. We are at the top at approximately 2,500 feet. We let out a cry of triumph! Slipping and sliding down the other side is just as difficult for the elephants but after another hour we finally reach a river bed. We still have a long way to go - another three hours - and the stones are painful for elephant feet. But the moon rises above the trees and thousands of fireflies light the way. We hear frogs, owls and nightjars and even a Brainfever bird calling "brainfever, brainfever, brainfever" in a tone of increasing urgency! We occasionally use head torches when we have to cut through undergrowth but the stones are white in the moonlight and even with sore feet the elephants press steadily on.

When we get to the bottom we find Dhan and Bhim sitting on a tree trunk showing, for the first time, their exhaustion. They are also daunted because they failed to find the track and feel they've let us down. We keep repeating that we wouldn't have missed the moonlit ride for anything! Ganni soon plunges off on his own pushing through the jungle. Whatever he has said to the others they follow and after another 15 minutes he discovers the jeep tracks. As we turn up the track we see a bright light set in the middle of the path to guide us home. Coming into the waiting camp we are greeted with shouts of relief: they had begun to really worry about us several hours ago. It is just after 11pm.

Tuesday March 23

We agree to rest the elephants and have a pottering day in camp. Looking north-west through the trees we have a magical view of the Himalayas and in the foreground there is a tiny white-washed temple in the middle of deserted paddy fields.

After lunch Ganni gives us lessons in making bowls from sal leaves. For the big plates for rice ten leaves, like huge beech leaves, are "sewn" together in a back-to-back pattern using fine strips he has made from a piece of bamboo. You can make smaller dishes with only four or even two leaves and we all have a go. Later we go for a drive and meet wild boar, first one then two and finally a group of five. There is another thunderstorm during dinner but all is quiet by bedtime.

Wednesday, March 23

All wake about 6 for a 7.30 departure. Dhan says it'll be a 3-4 hour trek. We reach camp at 12.30! On the way we have seen lots of wild boar, deer and signs of wild elephant. Dhan's a bit worried because he knows there are five wild bulls in the area and one is in musth. We find their mud bath and where they have rubbed against trees, signs of browsing as well as lots of clear tracks. We find a leopard kill and the

remains of a road workers' camp, a ruined temple in a glade and an old grave. We find tracks of gaur (wild oxen) and porcupine and several kusum trees ablaze with new red foliage. Blue ageratum is everywhere forming a carpet under trees, and blue, yellow and white bindweed on the ground. Pawankali picks up my camera case which I hadn't noticed I'd dropped, and then side-steps to pull pipul branches of another tree.

The men have cut a long flight of steps in the sandy cliff up to the level of the tents in our camp. Our evening walk takes us quite a long way along a track and Dhan gets nervous about sloth bear this time! After a really sweaty day the evening is cool and we put on sweaters and fleeces to sit round the fire. The jeeps are parked in a protective semi-circle around our tents at the top of the steep river bank. The elephants are also tethered very close to us. But the only noises during a rather tense night are barking deer, gaur, owls and our own elephants.

Thursday, March 24

We wake early and enjoy a substantial breakfast. From mixed forest we emerge into grassland and turn north towards the Rapti River. We follow the river bank and then cross to some islands and sandbanks through quite deep channels. Dorothy is standing up on the back of Pawankali and says it is more comfortable than sitting. There are lots of peacocks, woolly-necked storks, bee-eaters, drongos, lapwings and eagles. Then back to the south bank and hog deer, rhino, samber, tracks of wild elephants and humans. Finally we turn up another river bed, following jeep tracks into the jungle again. We come into a delightful ferny glade above a pretty rushing stream, and everywhere the camp has a bright green carpet of ferns.

At 2.30 we set off, Indian file, to bathe with the elephants in the big river. We have great fun together splashing each other and rubbing the elephants' skin (which have many fly bites) and Jackie and Lindsay have a go at riding bareback. A crowd of villagers watch from a sandbank in the middle of the river. We leave the elephants munching on their favourite tree, ficus benjaminii, which is scarce in the Tiger Tops area of the Park. We walk later through the sal forest with riverine forest on a lower level beside us. We all sniff a tree where a tiger has recently sprayed - quite a strong smell! Then we find a deserted army post that has been looted by the villagers, but still has orange, lemon, mango and guava trees around it, and lots of herbs.

Friday, March 25 Good Friday

After the usual morning routine we follow the trail we'd explored on foot last night. Barking deer, a herd of samber (including a mother with twin fawns), and wild boar, enliven the ride and then we meet a mother elephant with her one-year old calf. The scene which follows reminds me of mothers at a supermarket when they see a new baby! All our elephants crowd round the little one, making low cooing sounds and touching her gently with their trunks. The baby is still covered with golden brown fur, very small and very curious. She moves around quite confidently inspecting us while proud mother looks on indulgently. Eventually we tear ourselves away, after the keepers have exchanged news about animal movements recorded by their lodge. When we emerge from the forest onto a wide river bed we see the tracks of our jeeps and follow down towards the big Rapti river. Our camp is roasting on this open shore of sand and pebbles but the view across the river and into the foothills is stunning. To the east the foothills of the Himalayas come to meet the Chuia hills, where the river winds through.

As we emerge a mischievous Dhan with a box of red Powder starts to "play Holi"! When we are thoroughly covered with the dye, he and Celina provide us with more to chase the men. Rami and Sunni try to hide in their tent but are dragged out by Livvy and Lindsay and soon even Bhim (Hira's keeper) and Dhan are bright red. Exhausted with chasing and laughter, it's back to the river to clean up! Towards evening Dhan leads a party to visit Patapur village and they find some youths completely covered in coloured powder. Only the very old and very young are spared. Piglets, ducks and a volleyball court are admired and TV aerials and solar panels. One girl speaks English and they are invited to look round the village brewery and sample the rice wine. Against the red sunset the elephants are having dust baths and a

full moon rises to bless the scene.

Saturday, March 26

Woke after a restless night to learn that Gulabkali had run off dragging her chain. She is easily followed and found grazing on the other side of the river where earlier she had refused to cross. We ride from seven till twelve. At many little bridges the elephants test the planks with the tips of their trunks and chose to go the long way round instead.

Eventually as we come out into grassland there is a sloth bear in the middle of the track staring at us. We approach slowly with cameras poised but before we get near enough it turns and runs away leading us, as we discover too late, into boggy marshland. Our chase turns into a struggle through deep mud following the trail of wild elephants. Dhan has told me how difficult it is to extract an elephant from just this kind of terrain. They cannot be pulled for that would kill them. So logs must be piled up in front of them as they are encouraged to pull themselves out. However it is soon clear that the elephants, especially Hiralakali, are having a great time. She wallows in glee and the others, despite the huge effort needed to pull each foot out of the sucking mud, are happy. So I relax and enjoy getting splattered with stinking mud! When finally we return to the track we find we are near the camp. After tea we walk through rather nasty burnt undergrowth and cross streams on perilous tree trunks, pick wild asparagus and listen to familiar birds. After dinner round the fire, we learn the words of a Nepali trekking song.

Easter Sunday, March 27

We are all awake by 5.30 and find the tents covered in sal flowers. The smell is intoxicating! At breakfast I produce my little bag of Traidcraft Easter Eggs. The team agrees I must give them to the men so I go round presenting the eggs and wishing everyone "Happy Easter". We follow the track for a while and then plunge into riverine forest with thick clumps of tall grass - good tiger country. Bhim spots a tree with half a dozen beautiful pink orchids, the flowers about 12-15 inches long and three to four inches across. They are spectacular and he picks them for us. There are rhesus monkeys overhead and suddenly Hiralakali stops having nearly trodden on a wild boar's "nest". It looks like a huge upside down nest and after she's recovered from the shock, Hiralakali gently blows at the piglets till they run out. They are about ten inches long with striped backs - perhaps a dozen. Dhan assures us the sow will round them up again as soon as we have gone.

Only sambar and hog deer in the forest but when we come out into an area of deserted paddy fields we see the tiny barking deer. Villagers used to cultivate these fields but are only allowed back once a year, officially, to cut thatch for their homes. Where there used to be houses we find fruit trees; mangos, guava, lychee, limes, jack fruit, papaya, figs, pears, banana and pineapple. And cultivated flowers such as hibiscus, cana lilies, and purple-flowered shrubs which are maybe cistus. There are lots of birds to see: racktailed drongos, bee-eaters, black ibis, black shouldered shrike, honey buzzard, scarlet minivet, orange-headed and yellow-eyed babblers, parakeets and our friend the crested serpent eagle that we see so frequently, we wonder if he's following us!

We cross many, many streams and culsis, which is hard work for all of us. Not long afterwards we stop to gather yellow stalactites of resin hanging from the trunk of a sal tree. It makes fragrant incense and is very expensive to buy. The tree leans over a muddy creek and Pawan sprays us all with cool mud! Further along our route in bright sunshine what appears to be yellow string or fishing nets heaped beside the path to dry. It is a useful medicine for treating parasites. A very pretty shrub with delicate red flowers is good for dysentery. Better than Imodium?

We only catch up with the others at the next camp. They had wondered if we were alright so, we are told, Bhim asked Hiralakali where the missing elephant is. By some code rumbled through the ground the message comes back that we are quite close. A few minutes later we walk in! It is a beautiful camp in a cathedral-like glade of tall flowering sal trees. During tea there is another explosion in the cooking tent. We rush to help but nobody is hurt. Bharat climbs a very tall tree to collect resin to offer to the gods.

Others are making elephant sandwiches of green grass baskets filled with paddy.

Monday, March 28th Easter Monday

It is a cool quiet night but we are told a big sloth bear wandered through the camp at 5am. and upset the elephants. A short walk is planned for this morning, starting at 7am. "Only two and a half hours" - to arrive at 11am! We set off hopefully, determined to see tiger. We plunge into the jungle with the elephants four abreast just ramming their passage through the undergrowth. We find where a tigress and two cubs have entered the jungle and then where they have lain down but then we lose the trail. On an open track the elephants are pushing to get in front; they all like leading. So Dhan encourages them to race and all four thunder along the tracks to whoops of joy from us! Then we come to an area full of streams and bridges that the animals don't trust, so we make a detour round each one despite urging from the keepers. Finally we reach camp 13 - not a good one. No shade and only a trickle of water, and no food for the animals. The still air is hot, hot, hot with lots of flies.

Dhan organises a jeep to take us to a proper river to bathe. We bounce down a track round another deserted army post (they were there to deter poachers) and slither down into a splendid stream. When we get out Dhan shows us a crocodile just up stream! Another had been coming towards us but turned back. Perhaps it heard us rehearsing our songs! It is still very, very hot after tea and we go out on the elephants instead of walking. The highlight for us all is the magical sight of paradise fly-catchers flitting through tall grass trailing their almost luminous white tails behind them. We return to camp at sunset through crackling fires.

Tuesday, March 29

Woken at 5am by a very noisy dawn chorus. We leave camp before 7am and head off determined to find tiger. Coming out into a wide open track the elephants race each other again and then are so hot they spray themselves and us with saliva! Once more we spread out and comb the grass four abreast but still no tiger! Camp 15 is on a wide river bank and we are greeted with ice-cold coke. Sukhram and Tilak have done puja to thank the gods for a successful journey and safe return. Tilak puts a tika on our foreheads and Sukhram puts strips of white and red cloth, called dhajas, round our necks "for protection". The programme for the afternoon is: bathe, jeep ride and then party! We bathe with the elephants in the Rewa river and wash them. We go for a jeep ride as the sun is setting through the sal forest. We pass two lakes (tal) one with open-billed storks, egrets and whistling teal. By the other we sit entranced again by paradise flycatchers as they flit through the tall lakeside grasses. And so back to change for the party.

A big circle of jungle has been cleared behind the cooking tent and the bright blue canvas sheets, usually used to cover the equipment piled up in the back of the open jeep as they move camp, have been rolled up and placed around this space to form seats. We troop in wearing JoLt T-shirts and sarongs. The cooks go round ladling out chicken curry, goat curry, rice and dahl. There is a cauliflower curry for the vegetarians. We drink local rice wine or San Miguel beer. Pudding is a huge chocolate birthday cake for Sue. After singing "Happy Birthday" we try to sing our own versions of "The First Day of Christmas" rewritten to mention all the guides, elephants, keepers and memorable events of the trek. And then a version of "There were twelve in the jeep and I heard Bhim say: Move over" which mentions all the drivers and cooks. They are naturally bemused but when we start "Kee, ree, ree" they join in lustily!

Dorothy makes a short charming speech thanking all our friends and then she and Jackie go round the circle and present each one with a new JoLt T-shirt and an envelope. On it is written in English and Nepali (Celine has translated) a personal message. Inside are tips in dollars - we hope we have been generous. Then the dancing gets going, aided by the local spirit, rakzi, and some improvise a band with pots, pans, plastic jerry cans, buckets and bowls! We all clap to the rhythm and dance round the fire singing. At ten o'clock there's a grand finale by the men. At first each one mimics a different wild or domestic animal - including a drunk man! - and ending with all the noises and gestures together. It is hilarious and deafening!

Wednesday, March 30

We muster for a final group photo as today the elephants will accompany Challis and Jackie to the airport. They are marked with red tikas and draped with golden silk scarves onto which Celina has sewn wild flowers. For an hour we ride four abreast through riverine forest and grassland, disturbing many rhino, hog and spotted deer. There are jungle mynas on the rhino using their backs as a perch from which to hunt flies. Our friend the crested serpent eagle is waiting for us and many brilliant blue rollers, bee-eaters and open-billed stork. On the approach to the airfield we cross a small lake full of blue flowering water hyacinths and enter thatched "waiting room". Jackie and Challis say a fond farewell to the elephants who set off for our last camp while we wait for the plane. When the plane takes off towards the mountains, shrouded in mist, we take the bus, then boat and jeep to our last camp.

It is on a splendid site, a high bluff above the fast-flowing Rapti and lunch is laid under flowering sal trees overlooking the water. After tea we set out on the elephants for another search for tiger. (The guests from the Lodge had all seen one, and cubs!) We find the remains of a spotted deer - a tiger kill, and tracks to where a tigress had rested with her cubs. Otherwise only beautiful birds, rhino, deer and a small brown water snake. It is warm enough to have dinner in the open with a noisy gas lamp to light the table. After dinner Dhan calls us to see Gulabkali, Susan's favourite elephant. She is decorated all over with "Happy Birthday Susan", "God bless you" and flowers. Susan (it really is her birthday today) is crowned by Celina with a wreath of wild flowers, and, sitting on top of Gulabkali, Rami is holding a birthday cake covered with burning candles. All the men stand in a circle grinning and wearing their spotless white JoLt T-shirts! We sing, she cuts the cake and everyone has a piece with a glass of rice wine.

Thursday, March 31

Awake at 5am for a cup of tea and farewells to all the camp-followers. More tikas and scarves from Dhan, Bhim and company. Denise rides Hiralali, Livvy on Ramkali, with Dorothy standing at the back, Susan on Gulab and Lindsay and me on Pawan with Dhan standing up behind the howdah. There is mist rising over the grassland as for one last time we set out to hunt tiger. We start where we saw tracks last night. Then we do a big sweep round the lodge through ugly burnt grass and across many creeks and paths well trodden by other elephant, rhino and deer. As we approach Tiger Tops we see three other elephants with tourists photographing a tall kapok tree. Nearer we see two young leopards, one lying along a branch with legs dangling, the other sitting up on the branch on the other side of the tree. We all crowd round and they gaze down placidly blinking, as cats do, in the sunshine. At last we have to say goodbye and thank-you to the keepers. Then it's into a jeep to return to the airport, through one river and across the next and finally in the airport bus with others also leaving for Kathmandu. When the little twin-otter plane (Yeti Airlines) lands it brings Jim Edwards, chairman of Tiger Tops Mountain travel. He greets us warmly and says we deserve medals for what we've done.

Back in Kathmandu, we walk to Rum Doodle, a popular rendezvous for mountaineers. The restaurant is crowded and service very slow, but the food is good and we enjoy the ambiance - two groups are celebrating the ascent of Everest - and the walls are covered with large cut-outs of human footprints on which messages of all sorts have been written. Dorothy says the Tiger Tops men have sent a message to say that we have left our footprints in their hearts.

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