

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



## Tour Report

## Birds & Big Cats of India

10 - 24 November 2018

Collared falconet



Great pied hornbill



Tiger



Red- whiskered bulbul



Compiled by: Varun Narain Mathur

## Varun Mathur with nine Travelling Naturalists

### Day-to-day itinerary:

#### Day 1: Arrive Delhi

**Sunday 11 November 2018**

After arriving in Delhi, we transferred to our hotel - the Vivanta by Taj – and the rest of the day was free. We met again early evening for a brief orientation about the country and our itinerary, and enjoyed a drink in the bar before dinner.

*Weather: Hazy (post Diwali), 25 degrees (daytime)*

#### Day 2: Birding in Delhi

**Monday 12 November 2018**

We met early for breakfast at 0630 and then left for Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary, the drive taking around 40 minutes. Sultanpur proved to be an excellent start to the trip with us finding close to 65 species in the first few hours. We spent a total of four hours in the park and then made our way back to Delhi.

After a stop for lunch at Khan Market in central Delhi, we continued to Okhla Bird Park where we spent around an hour and a half and added another ten species to our list of birds, taking the total to 75 species seen on the first day of birding.

*Weather: Hazy (post Diwali), 25 degrees (daytime)*

#### Day 3: Transfer to Corbett

**Tuesday 13 November 2018**

We checked out of hotel early morning and were on the road heading to Corbett by 0700. After two and a half hours we took a break at a midway point and, after a cup of coffee and a quick bite to eat, we continued our journey to Corbett. After a quick lunch we took our first drive into Corbett Tiger Reserve. We explored Jhirna Zone this evening; birding here was great, and we even found a very good alarm call of grey langurs as there was a mating pair of tigers in the thick foliage (seen by some other jeeps). However, the tigers didn't give us an appearance. 33 species of birds were added to our list on this day.

*Weather: Clear day, 20 degrees (daytime) and dropped another 5 degrees by the time we exited the park.*

#### Day 4: Exploring Corbett

**Wednesday 14 November 2018**

We had two safaris today – Dhela Zone in the morning and Bijrani Zone in the afternoon. We sighted our first great pied hornbill this morning, along with a small herd of Asian elephants. It is unusual to see elephants at this time of the year as they migrate to Rajaji National Park, however some small herds decided to stay back and we had a great sighting.

As we exited the park, one of our jeeps with Wendy, Martin and Mr. Joshi spotted five species of different woodpeckers in one spot! Unfortunately, by the time others pulled up they had flown away. It was after this point that Wendy & Martin became people who attracted woodpeckers and eventually spotted ten species in Corbett alone!



In the afternoon we explored Bijrani Zone (known for good tiger movement), however, the tigers eluded us. Among our highlights this afternoon were Egyptian vulture and blue-bearded bee-eater.

Note: Each day in between the safaris we went birding in and around the lodge. Today, among many others, we found Asian koel, common tailorbird and the collared falconet – one of the smallest birds of prey in the world.

*Weather: Clear day, 20 degrees (daytime) and dropped another 5 degrees by the time we exited the park.*

#### **Day 5: Exploring Corbett**

**Thursday 15 November 2018**

This morning the temperature dipped a little, and some of us took blankets from the lodge for extra warmth. We explored Dhela in the morning and Jhirna in the evening. Dhela has large grasslands and gave us the opportunity to see many farmland bird species. We also saw a big number of coppersmith barbets along with lineated barbets. The highlight, however, was spotting a jungle cat – our first wildcat species. At Jhirna this evening, just as we were exiting the park, we had very strong alarm calls from the langurs and from the call and the direction that they were looking in we couldn't have been more than three and five metres from the tiger. However, the fading light, along with the limited time we had, meant we were unable to wait long enough to wait for the tiger to show itself and we had to leave the park.

*Weather: Clear day, early mornings and evenings were about 13-15 degrees.*

#### **Day 6: Exploring Corbett**

**Friday 16 November 2018**

With the stress of not seeing the tiger mounting, we managed to get another safari in Bijrani Zone where the tiger had been seen the previous evening. Although there were lots of tiger tracks all over the park, we didn't find one. Some of us did manage to see and photograph a crested kingfisher, while others found another small herd of elephants. Birding of course was good, with close to 46 species sighted.

While returning from the morning safari, we saw at a distance some 90-100 vultures and decided that we would go there in the afternoon en route to Durga Devi Zone (north Corbett). Durga Devi zone is about 45 kilometres from our lodge but, as it is at higher altitude, it offered a different landscape, birdlife and gave us the opportunity to explore another part of the park. However, when we left for the safari, two of the three jeeps decided that they would prefer to visit Kosi River to find kingfishers and other riverine birds than vultures. Lynda, Martin and I visited the buffalo kill where we found six different species of vultures. We were able to get as close as five metres from the vultures and their meal and got amazing photographs of them fighting.

En route to the safari all jeeps got together, and we had some excellent birding in the foothills where we found yellow-bellied fantail, grey-capped pygmy woodpecker, velvet-fronted nuthatch, chestnut-bellied nuthatch and a tawny fish-owl. We drove through an amazing landscape that was lush green after the monsoons. We also found two young tuskers, one of which gave us a mock charge and kept the group's spirits up. A couple of jeeps found a brown dipper and a little forktail, which were also highlights as they are relatively hard to find. Unfortunately, the tiger was still escaping us, though other guests in the lodge had had good sightings of the elusive big cat.

*Weather: Clear day, early mornings and evenings were about 13-15 degrees.*

#### **Day 7: Exploring Corbett**

**Saturday 17 November 2018**

Today we took our last drive in Corbett. By now we all wanted was to see the tiger, so that is what we focused on as we explored Jhirna Zone once again. Once again, all we got were lots of alarm calls and paw prints but no tiger. On returning, the guests who had missed the vultures the other day went to see them. Not so many were there, and mostly they were griffon and Himalayan vultures. After brunch we made our way back to Delhi and, after updating our bird lists and eating dinner, we called it a day.





*Weather: Clear day, early mornings and evenings were about 13-15 degrees.*

#### **Day 8: Agra**

**Sunday 18 November 2018**

After a week of safari and early starts we decided to have a more leisurely start to the day. After breakfast we departed for Agra by 0900 stopping twice en route for some farmland birding. Among the key species that we found here were sarus crane, Eurasian spoonbill, common greenshank, common redshank, common sandpiper, comb duck and black-headed ibis. We arrived at Agra by 1330 and enjoyed lunch while the hotel ensured our rooms were ready.

We then visited the Taj Mahal and, by the time we left, the sun had gone down and the other monuments closed. We considered visiting Agra Fort the next morning before we left for Bharatpur, however the group preferred to spend more time exploring Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary.

*Weather: Clear day, 25-27 degrees.*

#### **Day 9: Bharatpur**

**Monday 19 November 2018**

We left Agra at 0630 and arrived at Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary (Bharatpur) at 0740. Although only one visit was planned for the sanctuary, in fact we managed two visits: one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Everyone enjoyed walking and exploring, after quite a few days of sitting in vehicles! Highlights for the day included Egyptian vulture, great white pelican, oriental darter, Eurasian spoonbill, a painted stork colony, Indian scops owl, spotted owlet, purple sunbird and black bittern. We used a battery-powered golf cart to get us into the park and out of the park.



*Weather: Clear day, 27 degrees.*

#### **Day 10: Ranthambhore**

**Tuesday 20 November 2018**

With the possibility of seeing the tiger this evening, everyone was happy to leave Bharatpur at 0630. We arrived at our lodge in Ranthambhore at about 1300. En route, our driver Bhagwan Singh pulled over as he had spotted a flock of about 75 greater flamingos. Along with the flamingos there were migratory ducks and another great white pelican. After lunch the shared canter picked us up. We had managed to procure a permit for Zone 3 where the tigress named Arrowhead was being seen, however we scouted the zone and later heard that the tigress had left the zone and was walking on the main road leading from the fort to the entrance of Zone 4. Although we tried to catch up with her, she had already moved into Zone 4. Nevertheless, we saw lots of birds, soft shell turtles and huge mugger crocodiles from quite a close distance.

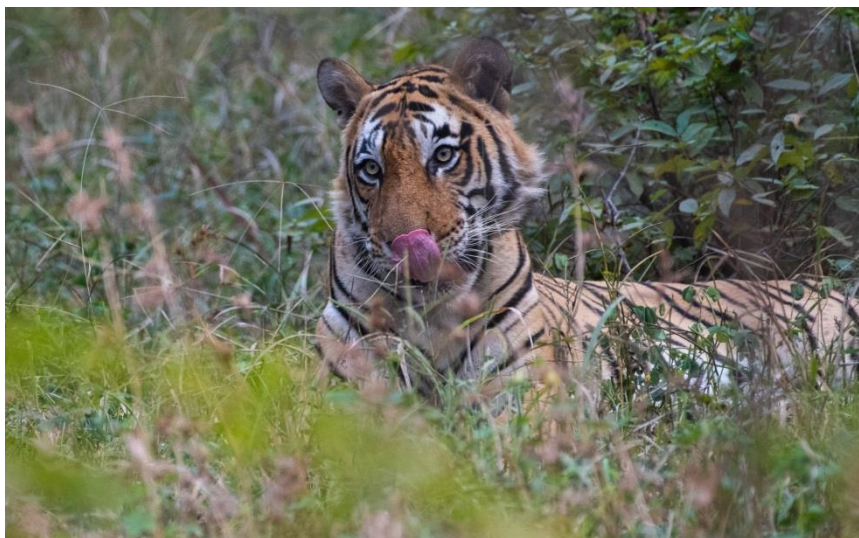
*Weather: Clear day, 27 degrees.*

#### **Day 11: Ranthambhore**

**Wednesday 21 November 2018**

This morning we were in three exclusive jeeps. Our zone for this morning was Zone 10 (again specially arranged as tiger movement in the area was very high). Zone 10 is on the far boundary of the park and getting to it took time (especially since the highway leading to the area was being constructed). However, the zone proved to be lucky and we were able to break our jinx of ten days.

The tigress was sleeping beyond the embankment of a waterhole which was not accessible. However, once most of the jeeps had left we managed to get a much closer look at her, and realised there were actually two tigers. The group was able to see both animals, and Ronald even got some great shots of her as she walked further away into the bush. With the sighting of the tiger, everyone felt quite relaxed and at ease. This afternoon all three jeeps were in different zones (all good zones – 2, 4 and 5). In Zone 2 (Donna, Sarah and Joanne) got a 40-minute long sighting of a tiger plus a sloth bear only six to eight metres away. They in fact got to see two sloth bears (the next one while leaving the park). In Zone 4 (Ronald, Anthony and Lynda) they managed to find two tigers – a mother and her sub-adult cub.



The mother was sitting in a water body and Ronald got great shots (although the cub was in the bush, so not the best for photography, however, it was a tiger sighting, and all were extremely happy. In Zone 5 (Martin, Wendy and I) we were not so lucky, but we had some great birding. We also found ruddy mongoose and other lesser fauna. It was a great day !

*Weather: Clear day, 27 degrees.*

## Day 12: Ranthambhore

**Thursday 22 November 2018**

Since there was good tiger movement in Zones 2 and 4 we were happy that two of our three vehicles were going there. The third was in Zone 6 which had two sub-adult male tigers and their parents who were seen regularly. Since Martin and Wendy missed seeing a tiger last evening, I decide to send them to Zone 4 with Ronald, while Anthony and Lynda were accompanied by Mr. Joshi in Zone 2. I accompanied the rest in Zone 6. There were no tiger sightings this morning although our Zone 2 jeep saw a sloth bear. In the afternoon Martin, Wendy and Ronald were sent to Zone 2, Anthony and Lynda went to Zone 5 as they had already seen the other zones and the third jeep went to Zone 4. There was a sighting of a tiger in Zone 4. It was a male sub-adult cub that was sleeping in some tall grass and the place was crawling with jeeps and canterers.



So, we decided to wait till everyone left. We were hoping that the tiger would move, and we would be able to get some pictures. Luckily the tiger obliged, and we raced our way out of the park.

Since the train timings were changed by the Indian railways, our train timing was brought forward to 0850 in the morning, making it impossible to do the

morning safari if we had to catch the train. I gave the group and option of driving back to Delhi (a long drive close to eight hours) in order to do our last drive. The group decided that they wanted to take another chance at seeing the tiger.

*Weather: Clear day, 27 degrees.*

**Day 13: Ranthambhore - Delhi**

**Friday 23 November 2018**

We took our last safari this morning in zones two and four. No more tigers were sighted however, we were looking for just a few more bird species in order to surpass 200 species of birds on the trip and we were happy to find brown-capped pygmy woodpecker and painted spurfowl. After a late breakfast we checked out and made our journey back to Delhi, taking us almost ten hours to get back.

*Weather: Clear day, 27 degrees.*

**Day 14: Flight back**

**Friday 24 November 2018**

This morning the group travelled to the airport from where they caught their flight back home.

*Weather: Clear day, 27 degrees.*



## CHECKLIST

### MAMMALS:

1. Indian Flying Fox (*Pteropus giganteus*)
2. Indian Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus coromandra*)
3. Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)
4. Northern Plains Grey Langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*)
5. Asiatic Golden Jackal (*Canis aureus*)
6. Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus*)
7. Small Indian Mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus auropunctatus*)
8. Indian Grey Mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*)
9. Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*)
10. Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*)
11. Tiger (*Panthera tigris*)
12. Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*)
13. Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)
14. Spotted Deer (*Axis axis*)
15. Sambar Deer (*Rusa unicolor*)
16. Barking Deer (*Muntiacus muntjac*)
17. Nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*)
18. Indian Gazelle (*Gazella bennettii*)
19. Indian Hare (*Lepus nigricollis*)
20. Northern Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus pennantii*)

### REPTILES:

1. Indian Garden Lizard (*Calotes versicolor*)
2. Northern Indian Flap-shelled Turtle (*Lissemys punctata*)
3. Mugger Crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*)

### BIRDS:

1. Ashy Prinia
2. Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark
3. Asian Brown Flycatcher
4. Asian Koel
5. Asian Openbill
6. Asian Palm Swift
7. Asian Pied Starling
8. Bank Myna
9. Bar-headed Goose
10. Barn Swallow
11. Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike
12. Black Bittern
13. Black Drongo
14. Black Eagle
15. Black Kite
16. Black Redstart
17. Black Stork
18. Black-crested Bulbul
19. Black-crowned Night-Heron
20. Black-headed Ibis
21. Black-hooded Oriole
22. Black-necked Stork



23. Black-tailed Godwit
24. Black-throated Tit
25. Black-winged Kite
26. Black-winged Stilt
27. Black-winged Cuckooshrike
28. Blue Whistling Thrush
29. Blue-bearded Bee-eater
30. Blue-throated Barbet
31. Bluethroat
32. Brahminy Starling
33. Bronze-winged Jacana
34. Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker
35. Brown Dipper
36. Cattle Egret
37. Changeable Hawk Eagle
38. Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch
39. Chestnut-shouldered Petronia
40. Cinereous Vulture
41. Collared Falconet
42. Common Babbler
43. Common Buzzard
44. Common Greenshank
45. Common Hawk Cuckoo
46. Common Hoopoe
47. Common Iora
48. Common Kestrel
49. Common Kingfisher
50. Common Moorhen
51. Common Myna
52. Common Pigeon
53. Common Pochard
54. Common Redshank
55. Common Sandpiper
56. Common Stonechat
57. Common Tailorbird
58. Common Teal
59. Common Woodshrike
60. Coppersmith Barbet
61. Crested Bunting
62. Crested Kingfisher
63. Crested Serpent Eagle
64. Crested Treeswift
65. Crimson Sunbird
66. Darter
67. Egyptian Vulture
68. Eurasian Collared Dove
69. Eurasian Coot
70. Eurasian Hobby
71. Eurasian Marsh Harrier
72. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
73. Eurasian Spoonbill
74. Eurasian Wryneck





75. Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker
76. Gadwall
77. Glossy Ibis
78. Golden-fronted Leafbird
79. Great Cormorant
80. Great Egret
81. Great Pied Hornbill
82. Great Slaty Woodpecker
83. Great Thick-knee
84. Great Tit
85. Great White Pelican
86. Greater Coucal
87. Greater Goldenback (Greater Flameback)
88. Greater Racket-tailed Drongo
89. Greater Yellownape
90. Green Bee-eater
91. Grey Bushchat
92. Grey Francolin
93. Grey Heron
94. Grey Wagtail
95. Grey-breasted Prinia
96. Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker
97. Grey-headed Woodpecker
98. Griffon Vulture
99. Himalayan Bulbul
100. Himalayan Goldenback (Himalayan Flameback)
101. Himalayan Vulture
102. House Crow
103. House Sparrow
104. Hume's Leaf Warbler
105. Indian Cormorant
106. Indian Grey Hornbill
107. Indian Jungle Crow
108. Indian Peafowl
109. Indian Pond Heron
110. Indian Robin
111. Indian Roller
112. Indian Scops Owl
113. Indian Silverbill
114. Indian Spot-billed Duck
115. Indian Spotted Eagle
116. Intermediate Egret
117. Jungle Bush Quail
118. Jungle Owlet
119. Kalij Pheasant
120. Knob-billed Duck (Comb Duck)
121. Large Grey Babbler
122. Large-billed Crow
123. Laughing Dove
124. Lesser Coucal
125. Lesser Goldenback (Black-rumped Flameback)
126. Lesser Whistling-Duck



127. Lesser Yellownappe
128. Lineated Barbet
129. Little Cormorant
130. Little Egret
131. Little Forktail
132. Little Grebe
133. Long-billed Pipit
134. Long-tailed Minivet
135. Long-tailed Shrike
136. Maroon Oriole
137. Marsh Sandpiper
138. Northern Shoveler
139. Orange-headed Thrush
140. Oriental Honey Buzzard
141. Oriental Magpie Robin
142. Oriental Pied Hornbill
143. Oriental Scops Owl
144. Oriental White-eye
145. Painted Spurfowl
146. Painted Stork
147. Peregrine Falcon
148. Pied Bushchat
149. Pied Kingfisher
150. Plain Martin
151. Plain Prinia
152. Plum-headed Parakeet
153. Plumbeous Water Redstart
154. Purple Heron
155. Purple Swampphen
156. Purple Sunbird
157. Red Avadavat
158. Red Jungle Fowl
159. Red-headed Vulture
160. Red-naped Ibis (Black Ibis)
161. Red-rumped Swallow
162. Red-vented Bulbul
163. Red-wattled Lapwing
164. River Tern
165. Rose-ringed Parakeet
166. Ruddy Shelduck
167. Rufous Treepie
168. Rufous-bellied Niltava
169. Rufous-tailed Lark
170. Sarus Crane
171. Scaly-bellied Woodpecker
172. Scaly-breasted Munia
173. Scarlet Minivet
174. Shikra
175. Short-toed Snake Eagle
176. Slender-billed Vulture
177. Small Minivet
178. Spangled Drongo



- 179. Spotted Dove
- 180. Spotted Owlet
- 181. Streak-throated Woodpecker
- 182. Striated Heron
- 183. Tawny Fish-Owl
- 184. Tickell's Blue Flycatcher
- 185. Variable Wheatear
- 186. Velvet-fronted Nuthatch
- 187. Verditer Flycatcher
- 188. White Wagtail
- 189. White-bellied Drongo
- 190. White-breasted Waterhen
- 191. White-browed Fantail
- 192. White-browed Wagtail
- 193. White-capped Redstart
- 194. White-crested Laughingthrush
- 195. White-eared Bulbul
- 196. White-rumped Vulture
- 197. White-throated Fantail
- 198. White-throated Laughingthrush
- 199. White-throated Kingfisher
- 200. Woolly-necked Stork
- 201. Yellow Wagtail
- 202. Yellow-bellied Fantail
- 203. Yellow-footed Green Pigeon

