

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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Tour Report

India – Birds & Tigers in Central India

23 November - 9 December 2018

Collared falconet



Great Indian hornbill



Black-throated tit



Red Whiskered bulbul



Compiled by: Sunny Patil

Tour Leader: Sunny Patil with seven participants

Day 2: Arrive Delhi

Saturday 24 November 2018

After arriving in Delhi the group transferred to their hotel. The rest of the day was free for relaxing.

Overnight Delhi, Radisson Blu Hotel

Day 3: Bharatpur

Sunday 25 November 2018

In the morning we drove to Bharatpur, where we visited Keoladeo Ghana National Park, a bird sanctuary that is both a RAMSAR and UNESCO World Heritage Site. Among the species spotted during our early morning and afternoon guided excursions were black-necked stork, Pallas's sea eagle, comb duck, white ibis and the elusive spotted creeper, while Siberian crane is one of the park's main attractions. Only a few individuals of this threatened species make the long, 5,000km trip from Siberia, crossing the high barrier of the Himalayas to winter here, as the majority of this species prefers to spend winter in the Yangtze River region in China.

Although renowned for its birds, the park also boasts an interesting range of animals which may be seen in the forests and grassland surrounding the lakes. These include sambar deer, chital (spotted deer), nilgai antelope (or blue bull), fishing cat, Asiatic jackal, hyena, mongoose and fox.

Overnight Bharatpur

Days 4-6: Chambal

Monday 26 - Wednesday 28 November 2018

We left Bharatpur and drove south-east to Mela Kothi and the fantastic wetland bird reserve of Chambal. National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS) is a wide swathe of protected land along a 400km stretch of the Chambal River in northern India, covering a total area of 1,235 square kilometres. On either side of the river the Chambal Ravines form an incredible maze of intertwining mud cliffs, interspersed with tropical dry scrub forest. The river's pristine condition is largely due to the fact that sacred texts describe it as unholy; it is now one of the last remaining habitats of the Gangetic river dolphin.

NCS also provides protection for 1,200 gharials (a species previously decimated by poaching), 300 marsh crocodiles, eight species of turtle, and smooth-coated otter. It boasts an impressive and rapidly increasing list of birds with over 290 species of resident and migratory birds, and is gaining something of a reputation as one of the most reliable places to see the Indian skimmer.

From a boat safari on the Chambal River, accompanied by a local naturalist expert, to nature walks through the National Chambal Sanctuary, or a jeep safari in the Chambal Ravines to see blackbuck, we had plenty of time to explore the rich diversity Chambal has to offer.

Three nights Chambal

Day 7: Agra

Thursday 29 November 2018

This morning we left Chambal and drove north-west to Agra and our hotel there. After lunch we visited the majestic, unsurpassable Taj Mahal and Agra Fort.

Overnight Agra

Days 8-11: Satpura National Park/Pachmarhi**Friday 30 November - Monday 3 December 2018**

From Agra we took an express train south to Bhopal Junction (a journey of around 6 hours), where we met our vehicle and continued by road to Satpura. Located in Madhya Pradesh state, 210 kilometres (i.e. some four hours' drive) from Bhopal, the state capital, central India's least-known national park was established in 1981, and covers an area of 524 square kilometres. This area is trebled by the adjoining sanctuaries of Bori and Pachmarhi, and together they create a unique highland ecosystem. The rugged terrain consists of sandstone peaks, narrow gorges, ravines and dense forests that range in altitude from 300 to 1,352m.

After checking into our lodge, we took an evening drive into the buffer zone, which gave us our first taste of this unique reserve. We spent the next three days in Satpura and Pachmarhi, alternating between birdwatching activities, wildlife walks and boat safaris within the national park, to jeep safaris in search of mammals such as the elusive leopard or sloth bear.

Satpura National Park is rich in biodiversity – sightings of sloth bear, leopard, gaur (bison) and wild dog are particularly good, and there is a wide array of flora plus other fauna. The park is starting to emerge as one of India's most rewarding wildlife destinations, although not many travellers venture here yet. You can enjoy watching wildlife from hides around the park. Tiger stalk the park's terrain, along with prey species such as nilgai and sambar; however, these animals are less habituated to human presence than in other reserves, so they are shy and harder to see. Other possible sightings include: chital, bhedki (muntjac or barking deer), four-horned antelope, chinkara (Indian gazelle), wild boar, blackbuck, fox, porcupine, flying squirrel, mouse deer and Indian giant squirrel. Among the various birds, hornbills and peafowl are common. The flora consists mainly of sal, teak, tendu (whose leaves are used to wrap India's famed *bidi* cigarettes), Indian gooseberry, mahua and bel trees, stands of bamboo, plus a variety of grasses and medicinal plants.

On one night we headed to a different area of the national park where an overnight stay in simple accommodation allowed us to explore a contrasting part of the park. The next day we returned to our comfortable lodge for a final night before departure.

Four nights Satpura

Days 12-13: Pench National Park**Tuesday 4 - Wednesday 5 December 2018**

In the early morning we continued by road to Pench National Park (a drive of 5-6 hours), a lesser known wildlife sanctuary that covers an area of 757 square kilometres and is dominated by hills, forests and valleys. We aimed to arrive in time for lunch, allowing the afternoon for wildlife activities. As we stayed at the only lodge in the remote northern part of the park, we had this area of the park pretty much to ourselves, giving us scope for rewarding wildlife encounters.

Running from north to south, the Pench River divides the park into two almost equal halves, western and eastern: the well-forested areas of Chhindwara and Seoni districts, respectively. The highest summit in the park, the hill of Kala Pahar, reaches 650m above sea level. Pench's typical dry deciduous forest of teak trees supports a rich variety of wildlife. In addition to tiger, leopard, dhole (Indian wild dog), gaur (Indian bison), sambar, chital and sloth bear are all seen here. The birdlife is also first class. The open habitat lends itself to wildlife viewing, but also offers striking views of the area's natural beauty. The landscape and its creatures inspired Rudyard Kipling and appear in his classic tale, the Jungle Book.

Two nights Pench

Days 14-15: Tadoba**Thursday 6 - Friday 7 December 2018**

On the morning of day 14 we left Pench for the drive to Tadoba National Park (5-6 hours), where we checked in for lunch before an afternoon jeep safari. The next day we had a full day of wildlife activities and a last chance for a grand tiger finale.

Maharashtra's largest and oldest national park, created in 1955, and one of India's 25 Project Tiger reserves, Tadoba covers 623 square kilometres and consists of the two forested rectangles of the Tadoba and Andhari range. Thickly clad hills form the northern and western boundaries, and to the south-west is the huge Irai Lake – home to the marsh crocodile that was once common all over Maharashtra – which acts as buffer between the park's forest and the extensive farmland that extends right up to the lake. On passing through the entrance gate at Mohurli, we are instantly transported into one of the last remnants of the great swathe of forest that once stretched from west to east, right across central India. With its forested hills, glistening lakes and open grasslands, the park is elemental in its beauty and provides a home to one of central India's healthier tiger populations (estimated at around 60 individuals).

Together with the tigers, the reserve is home to rare Indian wildlife such as leopard, sloth bear, gaur, wild dog, hyena, and many species of Indian deer: sambar, chital, nilgai, and muntjac. The area is also an ornithologist's paradise with a varied diversity of aquatic birdlife and many raptors. An undisturbed forest, the park is not visited by many tourists and consequently, once a carnivore is sighted, either on drives, or from machans, we can spend undisturbed hours observing it.

*Two nights Tadoba***Day 16: Delhi****Saturday 8 December 2018**

This morning we transferred by road to Nagpur, where we ate lunch before our flight back to Delhi. We then transferred to our overnight hotel and the rest of the day was free for a city tour, exploring the art and craft markets, or just relaxing by the pool. In the evening we had a farewell dinner and reflected on our recent incredible encounters.

*Overnight Delhi***Day 17: Return flight to the UK****Sunday 9 December 2018**

We transferred to the airport and boarded our day flight back to London.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

MAMMALS:

1. Tiger
2. Leopard
3. Golden jackal
4. Wild dog
5. Grey mongoose
6. Ruddy mongoose
7. Indian hare
8. Sloth bear
9. Wild boar
10. Spotted deer
11. Sambhar deer
12. Nilgai/blue bull
13. Indian gaur
14. Rhesus macaque
15. Common/Hanuman langur
16. Indian giant squirrel
17. Five-striped palm squirrel
18. Indian flying fox
19. Indian pipistrelle

REPTILES:

1. Gharial (gavial)
2. Marsh crocodile
3. Indian softshell turtle

BIRDS:

1. Lesser whistling duck
2. Bar-headed goose
3. Greylag goose
4. Knob-billed duck
5. Ruddy shelduck
6. Garganey
7. Northern shoveler
8. Gadwall
9. Indian spot-billed duck
10. Mallard
11. Northern pintail
12. Eurasian teal
13. Grey francolin
14. Red junglefowl
15. Grey junglefowl
16. Indian peafowl
17. Little grebe
18. Painted stork
19. Asian openbill
20. Black stork
21. Woolly-necked stork
22. Black-headed ibis

23. Red-naped ibis
24. Eurasian spoonbill
25. Black-crowned night heron
26. Indian pond heron
27. Western cattle egret
28. Grey heron
29. Purple heron
30. Great egret
31. Intermediate egret
32. Little egret
33. Great white pelican
34. Indian cormorant
35. Oriental darter
36. Black-winged kite
37. Egyptian vulture
38. Crested honey buzzard
39. White-rumped vulture
40. Indian vulture
41. Crested serpent eagle
42. Crested hawk eagle
43. Shikra
44. Western marsh harrier
45. Black kite
46. Black-eared kite
47. Grey-headed fish eagle
48. White-eyed buzzard
49. White-breasted waterhen
50. Common moorhen
51. Eurasian coot
52. Sarus crane
53. Black-winged stilt
54. River lapwing
55. Red-wattled lapwing
56. Pheasant-tailed jacana
57. Bronze-winged jacana
58. Black-tailed godwit
59. Common sandpiper
60. Common redshank
61. Common greenshank
62. Indian skimmer
63. River tern
64. Black-bellied tern
65. Eurasian collared dove
66. Spotted dove
67. Common emerald dove
68. Yellow-footed green pigeon
69. Sirkeer malkoha
70. Common hawk-cuckoo
71. Indian cuckoo
72. Indian scops owl
73. Dusky eagle-owl
74. Brown fish owl
75. Mottled wood owl

76. Jungle owlet
77. Spotted owlet
78. Savanna nightjar
79. Asian palm swift
80. Indian roller
81. Stork-billed kingfisher
82. White-throated kingfisher
83. Common kingfisher
84. Pied kingfisher
85. Green bee-eater
86. Eurasian hoopoe
87. Malabar pied hornbill
88. Indian grey hornbill
89. Brown-headed barbet
90. Coppersmith barbet
91. Plum-headed parakeet
92. Rose-ringed parakeet
93. Common woodshrike
94. Common iora
95. Scarlet minivet
96. Long-tailed shrike
97. Black-hooded oriole
98. Black drongo
99. Greater racket-tailed drongo
100. Spangled drongo
101. White-browed fantail
102. Rufous treepie
103. House crow
104. Great tit
105. Crested lark
106. Red-whiskered bulbul
107. Red-vented bulbul
108. Wire-tailed swallow
109. Common chiffchaff
110. Zitting cisticola
111. Grey-breasted prinia
112. Jungle prinia
113. Ashy prinia
114. Common tailorbird
115. Common babbler
116. Large grey babbler
117. Jungle babbler
118. Oriental white-eye
119. Velvet-fronted nuthatch
120. Bank myna
121. Common myna
122. Pied myna
123. Brahminy starling
124. Orange-headed thrush
125. Indian robin
126. Tickell's blue flycatcher
127. Black redstart
128. Pied bush chat



129. Golden-fronted leafbird
130. Purple sunbird
131. House sparrow
132. Baya weaver
133. Indian silverbill
134. Scaly-breasted munia
135. Grey wagtail
136. White-browed wagtail
137. Paddyfield pipit
138. Richard's pipit

Butterflies:

1. Common mime
2. Common rose
3. Crimson rose
4. Lime butterfly
5. Yellow orange tip
6. White orange tip
7. Common jezebel
8. Mottled emigrant
9. Common emigrant
10. Small grass yellow
11. Common grass yellow
12. Common pierrot
13. Blue tiger
14. Striped tiger
15. Plain tiger
16. Common crow
17. Common evening brown
18. Common sailor
19. Baronet
20. Lemon pansy