

## INDIA APRIL 2010 – Derek and Stephanie

For the past few years we have been taking our annual holiday in areas where we can watch wildlife. We are not dedicated watchers (we do not trap or use spotlights!) but do like to see whatever wildlife we can. This report does not just focus on nature but notes other aspects of the trip as well. This trip was actually organized as our wedding anniversary gift to ourselves. It was the first time that we had been on an organized trip. We were not part of a group but the itinerary was arranged for us by Wild About India.

The holiday was essentially in three parts: A visit to the Taj Mahal, on our wedding anniversary; a couple of days on safari in Corbett National Park followed by a few days in the Himalayan foothills in rural India.

April 4<sup>TH</sup>. We caught the 11.00 train and after a couple of connection problems reached Heathrow at 3.00. The flight took off more-or-less on time

April 5<sup>th</sup>. The BA flight landed on time at Delhi at 6.20. After changing some money at the Airport, (It is probably not advisable to change all of your money at once at the airport as it costs more but as we were moving around mainly in the country we concluded that it was worth it) we soon met our driver, Suraj, who was to stay with us for the whole trip.

Tales of driving in India are legendary! Everyone has heard them. They are all true! If you are considering driving in India – forget it! Every junction is a battle; road markings-what are they?; most cars have dents. Cows and goats have to be avoided – even in Delhi! Families of three or four travel together on motorbikes. The most important item on an Indian car is the horn! It is used constantly. Birds seen on the journey were Common Mynah, Black kite and feral pigeons.

We headed to Agra for our first night and a visit to the Taj Mahal and arrived about 1.00. We changed and met our guide at 2.30. It was hot! The Taj Mahal is excellent and really worth a visit. Photo opportunities are endless. One major problem is the hawkers outside. We wanted to buy a souvenir but there was so much hassle that we did not. One price dropped from 800 to 100 rupees but we were so fed up that we just wanted to get away. Very few people were actually buying anything!

There have been reports of Mongoose seen at the Taj, but we did not see any. We did see several **Three Stripe Ground Squirrels** around the grounds. Birds seen included Black Kites, A couple of Griffon Vultures and Rose Ringed Parakeets. There is a river at the back of the Taj which is worth checking out for birds. (More later!) We had also seen some **Rhesus Macaques** on the road side in several places from Delhi to Agra. A Laughing Dove was seen from our hotel room window. An excellent meal at the Hotel revolving restaurant was enjoyed before going to bed. It had been a long day!



Rose Ringed Parakeet at Taj Mahal



Three Striped Ground Squirrel at Taj Mahal

April 6<sup>th</sup>. We asked our driver to show us around the main sites in Agra and he was happy to do this. We drove around the Red Fort, stopping for photos in several places, before heading across the river and round the back of the Taj. This gives really good views of the Taj across the river. Birds on the river included Painted Stork, Black Necked Stork, Cattle Egret, Spoonbills, Grey Heron, and Ruddy Shelduck. A Black Drongo was seen when walking back to the car. Ravens and crows were seen around Agra.

Next stop was Sikandra Palace where we spent half an hour wandering around the grounds. Lot more three striped ground squirrels. Good views of a Hoopoe and a Red Wattled Lapwing, also a lot of butterflies.

Started the journey back towards Delhi . We stopped at several roadside birding spots known to Suraj, our driver. Sarus cranes were a highlight which also included Purple Swamp hen, Great Egret, Black Winged Stilt, Little Cormorant, Little Grebe, Spot Billed Ducks and Bank Swallows.

We arrived at our hotel in Delhi late afternoon. We went for a short walk before having a meal and getting to bed, as we had to be up early tomorrow morning.

April 7<sup>th</sup>. Up, packed and on the road by 6.30. The hotel had packed breakfast to take with us. We had been advised to leave Delhi early to avoid the traffic. It worked! There was very little traffic around. It was the only time that I could have driven anywhere in India! Our guide, Ghanshyam, joined us this morning. He was to stay with us for the remainder of the trip. We stopped several times en-route to Tiger Camp. Birds seen included Black Ibis, White Breasted Kingfisher, Cattle Egret and Indian Roller. We passed over the river Ganges.

We arrived at Tiger Camp, just outside Corbett National Park, in Ramnagar, at about 1.30. We had a quick lunch and walked to the river. There was not much about; it was too hot, although we did see some butterflies.

After a short break, we met our Guides at 4.30 for some early evening bird watching. We drove back through Ramnagar to a quiet road on the outskirts of the Park. It was not only birds that we saw. As well as Rhesus Macaques, we also had our best views on the trip, of **Hanuman Langurs**. Birds seen include: Red crested Bulbul, Spotted Turtle Dove, Chestnut, White Wagtail, Plum Headed Parakeet, Asian Pied Starling, Honey Buzzard, Small Green Bee Eater, Jungle Fowl, Grey Hornbill, Oriental Magpie Robin, Red Vented Bulbul, Lineated Barbet, Long Tailed Shrike, Yellow Eyed Warbler, Spotted Owlet, Brahminy Starling, Common Kingfisher and Pied Hornbill. There was also a possible sighting of a Peacock, but only very briefly, and not confirmed.



Hanuman Langur near road from Ramnagar



Small Green Bee Eater near road to Ramnagar

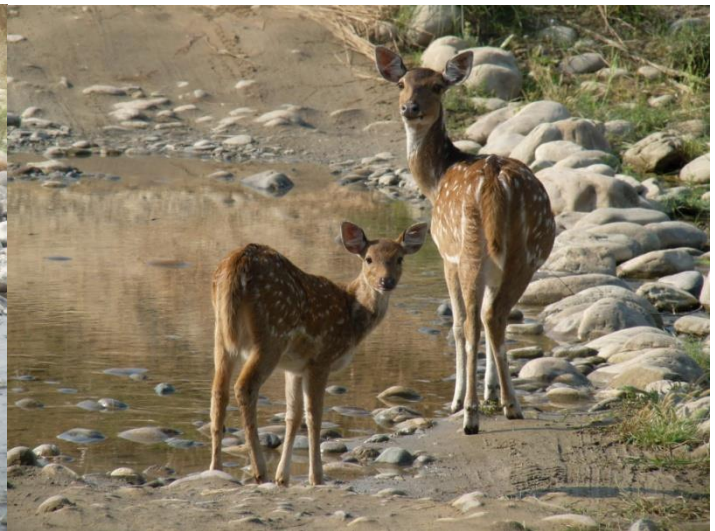


April 8<sup>th</sup>. Breakfast at 7.45 for an 8.15 getaway. Suraj was having a break for a couple of days and we were picked up in a gypsy which was to be our transport for the next few days. Most of our luggage was left at Tiger Camp as we took only that which was necessary into the park. We entered Corbett National Park, and headed for Dhikala. The first mammal that we saw was a **Muntjac** deer. The Chinese version of these has become fairly common in England and we see them regularly on our walks. However, the Indian ones are slightly different. They are the same height and have the same facial features. However, those in England are much stockier and generally darker coloured. This was followed by a few **Spotted Deer**, the most common deer in the park. A beautiful male with full antlers was seen first, then a female with young. We stopped at Crocodile Point, which is a lookout across the river. No crocodiles but there were three Gharials. However, the excitement here was not on the river but near to it. A **Tiger** had been spotted in the long grass. Stephanie glimpsed it briefly for a second or two, but I stood in the wrong place. It was not seen again. We drove back down the road to try another view. We saw footprints across the road and up the hill, which were not there when we had passed previously. Despite searching for an hour we did not see it again. Corbett Park is famous for it's birds; quite rightly so. There are birds of all shapes and sizes everywhere. New birds seen on the drive into Corbett include Spangle Tailed Drongo, Peahen, Crested Tree Swift, Crested Serpent Eagle (Good photo opportunity), White Crested Laughing Thrush, Crested Kingfisher, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Brown Fronted Woodpecker, White Capped Water Redstart, White Browed Wagtail, Lesser Fish Eagle, White Browed Fantail and Eurasian Sparrowhawk.

We booked in at Dhikala. We had safari drives booked morning and evening for the next two days. Our first late afternoon drive was out across the grasslands. There was a Muntjac just outside the camp gate and we found a **Hog Deer**, hiding in the shorter grass. Many more Spotted Deer were seen before we moved to the river where we saw some great views of four **Elephants** at the water's edge. There were two adult and two young elephants spraying themselves with water and then covering themselves with dust. A couple of **Samba Deer** were seen in the distance. New birds seen included Pied Winchat, Peacock, Shikra, Stonechat, Chestnut Bellied Bee Eater, Osprey, Black Shouldered Kite, River Tern and Pied Kingfisher.



Elephants at the river in Corbett



Spotted Deer in Corbett

April 9<sup>th</sup>. Early Morning. Up at 5.00 for our 5.45 morning drive. An alarm call was heard as soon as we left the gate but no result. There was a lone elephant just outside the gate. This morning we went straight for the river where a tiger had been seen the previous evening. We waited, with several other vehicles, knowing that when the Mahouts arrived with the elephants, the tiger would be flushed out. This time it was me that got the brief glimpse. The elephants got very close to the tiger; there was a huge roar! The tiger leaped high to get away. Only it's back could be seen as the grass is about ten feet tall! However, it was a tiger! There was a mad few minutes as all of the drivers moved towards the bridge where it seemed the tiger was headed. It never re-appeared! It seems amazing that such a large animal can just

disappear, but they can. The tiger's camouflage and the tall grass combine to make spotting them very difficult. Mammals seen during the drive include Spotted, Sambar and Muntjac deer. Birds seen include displaying Peacock, Blue Rock Thrush, River Lapwing, Pallas's Fish Eagle, Red Avadavit (Female), Cinereous Vulture, Chesnut bellied Nuthatch, Red Whiskered Bulbul, Bar Winged Flycatcher Shrike, Lesser Coucal, Streak Throated Woodpecker, Brown Fish Owl, Collared Dove and White Breasted Laughing Thrush.

We returned to camp for breakfast at 9.30, followed by a walk around camp during which Purple Sunbird, Himalayan Bulbul and Red Whiskered Bulbul were seen, as well as Wild Boar on the grasslands.

Tonight, it was our turn for an elephant ride. We hoped to have the views of the tiger that people had this morning. It turned out to be very disappointing. None of the four elephants saw any sign of a tiger and very little else besides. Two Sambar deer, a turtle and a River Lapwings nest were the sum total of the fauna on view.



River Lapwing's nest



Changeable Hawk Eagle

April 10th. Our last day in Corbett. The early morning safari produced no new mammals, although good views were had of Hog deer, Sambar deer and elephants. Birds included Black Francolin, Changeable Hawk Eagle, Common Rosefinch, Black Hooded Oriole, Kalij Pheasant, Ashy drongo and Black Bulbul.

We returned to camp to have a last walk around before packing to leave at 12.00, as we had been told. At 10.15, we were asked if we were ready to leave. Half an hour later there was a knock on the door telling us that we had to be out by 11.00! All that we could do was pack quickly. We left about 11.15. Rather than hang around for lunch at 1.00 we left Dhikala for a more leisurely drive out of the Park. No more tigers but we saw the usual deer and the three gharials were still at the watch point.

We arrived back at Tiger Camp about 4.00. We decided not to go birding this evening because we wanted to buy a few souvenirs. Also we had email for the first time for three days so we emailed home to update them on our progress.

April 11th. We left Tiger camp about 9.00 for our final three nights at Pangot, a small village in the foothills of the Himalayas, which has recently become famous for birding. Crossing the Kosi river we saw Great and Little Cormorants and Ruddy Shelduck. Moving into the foothills, Great Hornbill and red-billed Blue Magpie were spotted. Great Hornbill flew away just as the camera was focused! We booked in at Pangot and had a short rest before heading out along a track in the hills for a couple of hours. Birds seen: Streaked Whistling Thrush, Blue Whistling Thrush, Grey Bushchat, Jungle Babbler, Sulphur bellied warbler, Large Billed Crow, Russet Sparrow, Greenish Warbler, Grey Hooded Warbler, Black faced warbler(?), Blue capped Rock Thrush, Dark Throated Thrush, Bronzed Drongo, Slaty headed Parakeet,



Oriental turtle Dove, Great Tit, Brown Fronted Woodpecker, Spot winged Starling, White browed Fantail, Grey headed woodpecker and Oriental White Eye.

Chicken and chips for evening meal, then bed.

April 12th. We visited SatTal, another well known local birding area, this morning. Excellent views were had of a Steppe Eagle en-route. We stopped at a small temple by a stream for some birding. (Sorry, do not know name, and cannot find it on a map!) It was obviously well known to the guides. Stephanie visited the temple while we checked the stream. White capped water Redstart, Plumbeous water Redstart, Blue Whistling Thrush, Jungle Mynah, Crested Kingfisher, Grey Bushchat and Long Billed Thrush were among the birds seen. We moved onto Sat Tal where we birded in a small valley. Birds seen were Red billed Leotrix, Blue Winged Minia, Yellow Wagtail, Grey headed Canary Flycatcher, Lesser Yellownappe, Verditer Flycatcher, White Throated Laughing Thrush, Black Bulbul, Bronzed Drongo, Chestnut Thrush, White tailed Nuthatch, Chesnut Bellied Nuthatch, Brown Fronted Woodpecker, Tree Pipit and Grey Headed Woodpecker.

We had lunch at Sat Tal, before heading back to Nanital for some souvenir shopping. The bird of the day was seen en-route. A scream from the guide, a sudden stop and we all jumped out. It was a Lammergeier, soaring over the mountains beside the road. We could clearly see the colouration of the bird as it drifted overhead.

Nanital is basically a holiday town nestling beside a lake. There is boating on the lake and horse riding on the edge of town. We managed to get all of the souvenirs that we wanted. It is worth a visit, certainly for a day, maybe more if you like boating.



Steppe Eagle near road to Sat Tal



Verditer Flycatcher – Sat Tal

April 13<sup>th</sup>. Our last full day in India. Up early for birding before breakfast. We headed further into the mountains hoping for mammals as well as birds. The visitor's book at Pangot noted that the Mountain Goats are seen, but not today. Grey winged Blackbird, Maroon Oriole and Eurasian Jay were seen en-route. We stopped at a known look-out point. It was very quiet. Two Himalayan Griffon Vultures kept our attention by taking off and landing, eventually, landing on a rocky outcrop on the opposite side of the road. However, Ghanshyam, our guide was intent on finding one bird only. Although, not small. It was the same colour as the grass and therefore very difficult to see. He knew that they were around. We would never have found it on our own. It took about an hour before he spotted a pair of Cheer Pheasants. The views were good and we managed some reasonable photos.

Back to base, for breakfast and an afternoon of doing not very much. A Black headed Jay visited the water at the Lodge. We were out again at 4.30 for an early evening walk in the forest. There was evidence of Wild boar on the ground but none were seen. The denseness of the forest made birding difficult but we did manage to see Rufus bellied Munia, Bar tailed Treecreeper, Rufous Sibia, Green backed Tit, Spot winged Tit and White Browed Shrike Babbler.



Cheer Pheasant



Grey Bushchat

April 14<sup>th</sup>. Long journey back to Delhi, and a bit of last minute shopping before going to the airport. We did some birding for the first part of the trip, seeing House Swift, Long tailed Minuet and White tailed Nuthatch. Dilli Haat is a good place to visit for crafts and handmade goods.

Delhi airport was chaotic. We were not allowed in one door but tried another and got in without a problem. We were searched, searched and searched again. They scratched their heads about my case full of watching equipment (scope, cameras, connectors, chargers etc) but decided that I was harmless and let us through.

The flight was on time, at 2.00 in the morning, which was good news as all flights into Heathrow were stopped a few hours later because of the Volcano.

## SUMMARY

Excellent trip, well organized. A few more mammals, particularly a good view of a tiger, would have been nice but we did get some good views of those that we did see. At least we did see glimpses of a tiger. Some people don't even manage that. Corbett is not the best place to see them but we knew that before we went. However, the Himalayan foothills are wonderful for all nature lovers, be it mammals, birds, flora or views.

