

As the title suggests this story is about our family's quest to see Asiatic Lions, Snow Leopards, Tigers, Leopards and as many birds as possible on a month long trip to India in February and March this year. The genesis of this trip started in 2010 when Peter, Gavin and I went on a 23 day self organised tour to India. We amassed a relatively respectable total of just over 400 species. The focus of that holiday was all about the birds – well *almost, because* as long as any of us can remember, we have always wanted to see Tigers in the wild, so we dedicated 3 days to doing just that. Everyone we spoke to were unanimous with where we should go and we lost count of the times we were told that if you go to Bandhavgarh *'you will definitely see tigers'!!*

To cut a long story short, we did not! We spent over 20 hours doing jeep safaris in the premium zone in the park under freezing conditions. There were many, many sightings by just about everyone else; we heard them; we smelt them; we watched deer alarming as *they* could see tigers in the grass in front of them, but we got nary a glimpse! The whole experience changed us. We are not defeatists, but now if we *reeeaally* want to see something and anyone mentions the 'definitely' word, we roll our eyes and gnash our teeth! So I urge anyone reading this to delete that word from their vocabulary – please!

Our failure to see a Tiger left us inconsolable! And from the day we left, we always knew that we would have to come back for another go. Then late in 2011 we got a hold of a Snow Leopard Tour outline. We were a bit concerned – the outline spoke of a 100% success rate in seeing this enigmatic animal (aarghh!) – but as soon as we realised that there was actually a possibility that we could see Snow Leopards we knew we would have to give it a shot!

It was then a relatively short bow to draw to decide that a jaunt into Gujarat for the Asiatic Lion was a must, not to mention the possibility of Leopards in Gir and Bandhavgarh. For the first time I found myself planning a holiday that did not have birds in centre stage. Our Big Cat Tour was born! Well OK, that may be a bit of an exaggeration, when we weren't looking for cats we would be birding, but if there was a feline to be seen, then birds would be pushed aside!

Snow Leopards tours operate out of Leh in Ladakh. The Snow Leopard season starts in February and runs to about the last week in March. There are trips in October too, but success rates at this time of the year can vary. We opted for a tour dates of 4 – 17 March. We decided to go to Gujarat first and to tag on Madhya Pradesh on the end for the Tiger.

Then we found out that our flight was going via Bangkok...at the end of February. Isn't that the best time to see Spoon-billed Sandpipers? Well, yes it is, so we added 2 days onto our holiday to try and see the bird that was *numero uno* on our 'must see' list! We were lucky enough to have Siriya Sripanomyon agree to be our guide. Siriya is *the only* local scientist in all of Thailand that studies shorebirds. I will let you digest the significance of that fact in your own time!.

The location of the salt works that is frequented by the Spoonies lies about an hour's drive from Bangkok airport. It is well known. The place is jam packed with shorebirds! Heaven! It was not hard to find the Spoonies - we just had to find what the people with the \$10,000 camera lenses were watching! How magical is this tiny bird. How tragic that there are now an estimated 600 left in the wild! The Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge in the UK has a captive breeding program. The ongoing loss of habitat bodes ill for Spoonies. Time will tell if this bird becomes yet another shameful extinction statistic!!

We spent several hours at the site before moving to the coast where Siriya pulled 13 Nordmann's Greenshanks out of the hat – again another rarity that we were thrilled to see!



Digitised images of two Spoon-billed Sandpipers. A Broad-billed Sandpiper stands to the left of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in the lower image

The next day we headed out to Khao Yai National Park. This was much further away, but we were rewarded with great views of Green-eared and Blue-eared Barbets and some very confiding Spectacled Leaf Monkeys. Gold-crested Myna's were new for us. The bird of the day was a Silver Pheasant (Sub species *lineata*) which ambled across the road in front of the car.

At the end of two days in Thailand, we had realised a long held dream and, on top of that, we saw (or heard) a total of 87 species of birds (42 of which were seen again in India), 1 primate and 1 monkey.

India

Firstly, some logistics. Gavin describes India as "Asia on Steroids"! An apt description. There are two categories of visitors in India: those that love it, and those that loathe it! This country polarises people. I describe India thus: wonderful/awful, fantastic/dreadful, beautiful/ugly. Every superlative has to be followed by its antonym! But for reasons that even I cannot always fathom, we love it!! The people are friendly and birding is really special and extremely varied. Non-avian wildlife is fascinating and, with one caveat, places are really accessible. Air travel is a breeze, accommodation is easily sourced. It does help if you like Indian food. We tend to stick to vegetarian options and avoid salads and fruits that cannot be peeled. Malaria is endemic throughout India, so some form of anti-

malarial prophylaxis is required. We also go with a variety of medications to cover most situations, but on both trips needed none of them.

Organising your own itinerary is easy, provided you have time to do the research, and is a great way to save a lot of money! However, things will run more smoothly if you have a trusted agent on the ground over there. For example, train travel is possible to self book, but the system is complicated with many tickets being allocated to agents so that tickets are available for trains that come up as fully booked - just not directly to visitors. However, try and deal directly with the owners of your accommodation / lodge as rates for guides and local car hire can be a lot cheaper than that quoted by agents.

Despite what you may read to the contrary, tipping is expected in India. We found it hard to work out what was acceptable on our first visit but had a better idea this time around. In general we tipped our bird and safari guides 1000INR per day (approx \$17.50)/500INR per half day, and our drivers 100 – 500INR depending on the duration of the drive. Tipping hotel/lodge staff was more flexible, and depended on the duration of our stay and level of service.

Now for the caveat I mentioned. Driving, or more accurately, being driven. If you are of a nervous disposition in anything with 2, 3 or 4 wheels, then do not go to India! On both our trips we spent many hours in cars with more than a few trips of 8 – 10 hours duration. This is the norm. It is also the norm that there are no road rules in India. It would be a bit of a push to say that there were even any road guidelines!

A two lane road will have at least 3 cars, a truck, bus, 2 bikes, a tuk tuk (perhaps with 10 people and a goat on board), several cows and multiple dogs all side by side, going in opposite directions. Overtaking on crests and blind corners is a form of sport; people congregate and sit on the road; children play on the road. If there is a line down the middle, drivers straddle this and use it as a guide, especially in fog or at night. Obeying red lights is an option that most choose to ignore.

Dual carriageways are common but trucks in particular think these are a total waste of time! They do not believe in U Turns and if one is required then their solution is to drive down the wrong side of the carriageway! Horn blowing is a national pastime, and seems to be a requirement with “Horn Please” notices on the back of most trucks. Seat belts are usually absent in the back and some drivers get offended if the person sitting on their left puts on their seat belt.

The truly amazing thing is that amid all this chaos things seems to happen – people get to where they need to be mostly intact. Yes, there are 130,000 deaths per annum in India. This equates to a rate of 11.1 per 100,000 people **BUT** our death rate per 100,000 is 5.71. Given the order and regulation in this country in comparison to the total bedlam in India, one would expect the rate to be 10 times higher! And whilst we did have a few moments that lead to elevated adrenalin levels, and whilst we would never drive anywhere ourselves in India, in the main we became very relaxed about the whole driving experience!

Gujarat – The Great Rann of Kutch, Gir and Little Rann of Kutch

After a single night in Mumbai, we flew out to Bhuj, met our driver for the next 8 days and headed for Cedo Camp – Centre for Ocean and Desert Research - a small family operation offering basic, clean accommodation and expert local bird guides. This is a strictly vegetarian facility and alcohol is not allowed. Indeed, we were to discover that Gujarat is a ‘dry’ state. All places we visited were alcohol free, though some places will arrange to have beer available with enough notice.



Sykes's Lark – wondering which way to fly!

Veer was to be our guide for our 3 days here, and very good he was too! Our first afternoon drive through thorny acacia woodlands was wonderful! Highlight birds were Sykes's Larks, Marshall's Iora and White-naped Tits. We ventured out into the Banni grasslands in the late afternoon looking for nightjars. This vast area has a massive ephemeral lake – the Chari-Dhand wetland conservation reserve located on the southern boundary of the Banni. Although we heard an Indian Nightjar, it remained unseen and the Sykes's Nightjar was even more uncooperative as it failed to call.

But the main reason we had chosen this location is that we knew that this was a great place to see the Grey Hypercolius, and that Sandgrouse were common. On top of that Crab Plovers and Greater Flamingos were a certainty (mmm...) on the coast nearby at Mandvi. The next two days are up there on our 'best birding experiences' ever shortlist. The desert scenery is spectacular! The Arabian Sea suitably exotic! In our 3 days in the area we saw 171 species.



Greater Flamingos Fly Along the Shoreline.

Four Grey Hypercolius were undisturbed by our presence. Pallid and Montague Harriers quartered paddocks in front of us. Black Francolins put on a show. Desert, Variable and Red-tailed Wheatears were obliging. Chestnut-bellied and Painted Sandgrouse thrilled us. We were treated to confiding views of 21 Sociable Plovers. Stoliczka's Bushchats were cooperative and Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans were impressively huge. We saw thousands of Demoiselle Cranes and watched at least 50,000 Common Cranes coming to roost at sunset to the lake in Banni, where we also saw two Indian Eagle Owls, plus a Sykes's Nightjar. And we paddled in the Arabian Sea with Greater Flamingos and had wonderful confiding views of Crab Plovers.



Crab Plovers on Mandvi Beach

Our last evening in the Banni, on the way back from seeing the Sociable Plovers, brought us into contact with a group of Maldharis and a their herd of camels. Maldharis are descendants of nomadic tribes from Pakistan,

Rajasthan and Gujarat who finally settled in the Banni. Veer was very fond of fresh camels milk and was determined that we would too! Before I knew it I had a cup of frothing hot camels milk in my hand. A quick trawl of my memory banks for likely zoonoses transmitted via unpasteurised camels milk brought up things like TB and brucellosis, but it seemed churlish to decline tuck in, so I very gamely downed the lot. I can report that it beats butter milk for taste hands down! I then watched in horror as the bowl that the milk came to us in was 'cleaned' with a combination of dirt and camel dung!! The list of possible zoonoses sky rocketed, but short of a bit of impolite 'reverse peristalsis' there was nothing to be done about it. I am resisting the urge to research incubation periods and am happy to report that I am still none the worse for wear for the experience.

Our three days at Cedo were up. Next stop Gir Birding Lodge in Sassan Gir. Lions here we come! But first a 9 to 10 hour drive with all the excitement that entails! The Gir Birding Lodge, run by Asian Adventures, sits next to one of the gated entrances into the park. The cabins nestle in a mango orchard; bird life is reasonably abundant and waking up to the sound of roaring Lions is a big plus. We were nervous though. We had only allowed time for two safaris. We had been told we would 'definitely' see Asiatic Lions.....!

We arrived late in the afternoon so had to wait until the following morning. The first 40 minutes were anxiety ridden. Feelings of *Déjà vu* were surfacing! We had seen hundreds of Spotted Deer and dozens of Sambar Deer in Bandhavgarh on our previous trip; ditto all the birds the guide kept stopping to show us. But when we arrived at the lake, 5 lions were on the dried out lake bed. We then rounded a corner to find our way blocked by a very gravid and very large lioness! Oh joy!



Above: A gravid female. Below: Pelican 1: Lion 0. Aftermath of an unsuccessful hunt!



Our afternoon safari bought even closer views with a lioness walking up to and around our jeep. There followed a standoff between a tiny man on a bike and the Lion. The man on the bike won, and she wandered off. We then came upon a pair mating within metres of us – a short affair followed by much roaring by the male and much cuffing of the male by the female. We saw a total of 13 of these wonderful beasts. The Leopards that had been seen the day before did not cooperate and show themselves, but we had seen our first Big Cat – a positive start to our quest! In addition, our optimism was buoyed when we met a group of Dutch birders staying at the Lodge who had just come back from a successful Snow Leopard trip in Ladakh. They were going from Gir to Kanha and Bandhavgarh. We then met an English couple doing the same thing. Big Cat trips are de rigueur it seems!

Next stop the Little Rann of Kutch and a stay at Rann Riders. The Wild Ass were great and the Desert Fox was a cutie but if we did this trip again, we would have missed out these two days. The swamp opposite the resort was a little jewel, but generally the area was in the grip of a drought and the birding was disappointing; a prolonged search for the Greater Hoopoe Lark was fruitless and it was the wrong time of the year for Macqueen's Bustard. Our visit could also have been coloured by the fact that I was viciously attacked by the resort's Peacock which came as a bit of a shock! We were watching a pair of Shikras when I was almost bowled over by this bird which I was told usually attacks people wearing white. They were most surprised it picked on me – no apologies offered! I was badly bruised and scratched and have now taken Peacocks off my list of birds that I like!

Ladakh: Leh, Hemis National Park and Ulley, Leh

Now for the Snow Leopard part of our trip. Hemis National Park, which lies on the western boundary of the Tibetan plateau, is the only place where trips are organised for the sole purpose of seeing these cats. The estimated population of Snow Leopards in India is 200 – 600. In the area surrounding the camp the population was thought to be 7 individuals occupying the territory of 3 converging valleys.

Multiple companies use the same camping area and the trips are becoming increasingly popular, and at times crowded. There is talk about establishing quotas on the number of visitors allowed. We chose Wild World India for our tour. We found their service faultless and would highly recommend them. The owner of the company, Vikram Singh, spent 5 days with us and was most affable host. Our schedule allowed for 2 days in Leh, 8 days camping in Hemis, although this could be extended by an extra night if required, with a final night in Ulley at the homestay of one of our guides, with a night in Dehli at either end of the trip.

Leh lies at an altitude of 3,600 metres. It is the summer capital of Ladakh and is a hive of activity in the late spring and summer as it is a major hub for trekking groups. In March things are very quiet. As it lies in the strategic state of Kashmir – Jammu, there is a strong military presence. The culture is Tibetan and the people are extremely friendly and open. Shop keepers play cricket in the main street and Peter was quick to join in. One of his shots hit a passing car. A gun wielding policeman walked up....to give Peter advice on his footwork!

We spent two nights acclimatizing in the town. Our accommodation was comfortable, though like most places there is no running hot water and, when the pipes freeze, no water in the bathrooms at all. Buckets of hot water are provided for ablutions.

The camp lies an hours' drive from Leh, with a further relatively easy walk to the camp which takes about an hour and a half. The scenery is stunning. The camp was basic but very well run. There are no luxuries here! Good quality 3 man dome tents (mind you, I always wonder where the third person would fit!), pit toilets, no power, no showers, boiled water from the stream. The food is plentiful, and tasty. The camp staff were wonderful – always singing and happy. Even after running up onto the ridges to deliver our lunch!

Our group, which numbered 5, were allocated Manla and Norbu as our guides. Manla is regarded as the 'best of the best' when it comes to spotting Snow Leopards. Both worked tirelessly for us. They were up before dawn scouting the local area for tracks and signs and scanned the ridges all day, every day.

For us, the average day involved walking up onto the ridges at about 08:30 returning to camp between 5 and 6 pm. Peter was a devotee of scanning – spending hours each day glued to the scope. But now I must be honest. We decided that we would stick to our guides like glue until we saw a Snow Leopard and, as we were not to be blessed

with a sighting on the first day, there was *an awful lot* of sitting around. Although I contributed to the scanning effort (honestly!) I found it especially difficult to stay awake in the mornings – age and altitude I guess! You learn to find some amazing ‘comfy spots’ on rocks and in the snow and I managed 2 hours sleep most mornings!



Peter (in foreground) and Manla scanning the ridges



A comfy spot for a sleep!

Although there were very few birds – our total list for the tour was 16 species! – there were some wonderful ornithological compensations. Golden Eagles soared overhead and Lammergeiers were common. A highlight was seeing a Lammergeier perform its ‘bone dropping’ behaviour. Very exciting to watch at close quarters! We saw Himalayan Snow Cock, White-browed Tit-warblers and Robin Accentors. Chukar Partridges behaved like camp chickens. Red billed Choughs were common and we had a scattering of Yellow-billed Choughs to keep us happy. On top of that, we saw a lone Tibetan Wolf climbing a distant ridge, lots of Blue Sheep demonstrating dazzling mountain climbing skills, and had a close encounter with a Woolly Hare.



Robin Accentor



Chukar Partridges were common in camp



Blue Sheep are common and the main prey for Snow Leopards



This Woolly Hare thought it was invisible!

The fourth day was a bit of a shocker! Very cold, snowing with an icy wind. We stayed in our tent having decided to let discretion be the better part of valour! Then Manla came banging on the tent. Both guides had spent the morning up on the ridge. Manla received a call on the 2 way that Norbu had seen a Snow Leopard quite close by. We shot off at high speed. After two hours, Peter decided to go back to camp. Then the unthinkable happened. The Leopard came up on to the ridge and Gavin saw it, but I did not!! I still do not know how I missed it, but sometimes you can *look* but just cannot see. We were all thrilled for Gavin – at least one of us had been lucky!

On the morning of the fifth day, I woke up looking like a haggard old woman! No showers, the effects of the cold, altitude and goodness knows what else were taking their toll. Things were tough – *exactly* as I had expected - but tough none the less. There was a despondent voice talking inside me: What if Peter and I failed to see a Snow Leopard – could I/we really come and do this all again....? Breakfast was a sombre affair as the two of us struggled to face a growing sense of doom.

That morning we walked up Rumbak Valley. A wonderful experience. Breathtaking views! Late in the afternoon, we were just about to call it a day when a monk came down and told Manla that three Snow Leopards had been seen near Rumbak Village, just over a kilometre away. That was a 'call to arms' and we all raced off – or staggered along as fast as possible in my case - to try and find them.

We knew things were good when Manla started to have a apoplectic fit of happiness! He had found 3 Snow Leopards – a mother and her two grown cubs - on a ridge. These animals are so well camouflaged that, even though everyone was looking, it took the keen eye of an expert to find them. Everyone in our group was ecstatic! Tears were shed! None more so that by Peter Coe. He was now into his 19th day of searching for Snow Leopards. Day 9 of this trip after spending 10 days here the previous October when he had been the *only* one of his group not to see them. Then out of nowhere, a villager appeared with a tray of china cups filled with tea for us all – how good can things get. Snow Leopards and a hot cup of warming tea to celebrate!

This sighting was followed by a seeing two more the following morning from the camp - on a distant ridge. This was even better news for someone who had come to the camp the evening before. This was his third attempt to see Snow Leopards! This was capped off on the same day, late in the afternoon when another 3 were seen, including a very small cub. These sightings were also special because the two other people in our group had not come to Rumbak the day before. Given the distance between the sightings and the times between them, it was agreed that there were 9 Snow Leopards occupying the territory around the camp – 2 more than previously thought.



Our first three Snow Leopards

Photo Courtesy Peter Coe

After 7 days in camp we said our farewells and travelled with Norbu to his village of Ulley, approximately 3 hours to the west of Leh. Ulley, an isolated, traditional village of 7 houses, lies at 4,000 metres in the most spectacular scenery imaginable. Apart from the wonderful experience of staying with Norbu and his family, this part of the trip allowed us to see Ibex and Urial Sheep. Tibetan Wolves are common and the property is the territory of at least one Snow Leopard. The 15 cm gash on the side of one of the family's cows is testament to that. Norbu rescued the animal as it was being attacked inside the yard of the house. It is comforting to know that, in an effort to conserve Snow Leopards throughout their habitat in India, landholders are compensated for all stock losses associated with such attacks.

As our time to leave approached we still hoped for a close up view though this was not to be. All our Snow Leopard views were distant views and thank goodness we had a scope. It really was a wonderful, extreme, once in a lifetime experience. Something we will cherish forever and I would not have missed one minute of it!

If this has stimulated you to go to Hemis, I just want to close off this part by making the point (if you have not already got it), that you need to be well prepared before going into this area in winter! Just before we left I rang Trevor Ford, who had done the trip a couple of years ago, to make sure my expectations matched reality so we were not disappointed, but it is clear that expectations can be put to the test for those unprepared for the of the trip. So here are some final tips:

- At present, the trips are relatively cheap but, as it is *very cold*, the kit is not, even though we purchased all our gear in the post Christmas sales! We bought 700 loft sleeping bags, 650 loft down jackets, layers and layers of merino, good walking boots etc. We needed every bit of it. Expect minus 10 to minus 25 at night, and extreme cold during the day on the ridges if it is windy. At minus 25 everything freezes – tooth paste, moisturiser, sun block.
- Women feel the cold more than men, so make sure you allow for this – I took a thermal sleeping bag liner and wore more layers than the men.
- Be prepared to wear the same clothes for the duration of your holiday. Everyone does!
- In February when there is more ice around, clip on crampons make it safer to cross frozen streams.
- If balance is an issue, a walking pole is a must. Gavin and Peter did not use theirs, but I would have been lost without one.
- **Not everyone sees Snow Leopards!**

- There are very few birds. As mentioned, we only saw 16 species in 2 weeks. To put this in perspective, our list for the entire 4 week trip was 315 species.
- The ridges can get crowded. We had a few quiet days, but often there were up to 15 people, travelling with various groups, congregating on whichever ridge was chosen for the day's vigil all scanning for Snow Leopards. Two weeks prior, there were about 40! Do not expect this to be a solitary experience!
- High altitude is hard work! We have been to Tibet and went as high as 5,200 metres, but camping adds a different dimension. The camp at Hemis is at 3,800 metres with daily walks onto ridges above the camp. You do not have to be super fit. Gavin's exercise philosophy, for example, is to lie down until the need for it passes! But some of our party could not make it up on to the ridges or face the walk out to Rumbak and it almost cost them seeing Snow Leopards. I would have been on 'struggle street' had I not prepared for the trip by starting an exercise program and losing 11kgs prior to going.
- Finally, check the Smart Travel website for Travel Advisory information. Ladakh is the only district of Kashmir-Jammu that does not have a 'Do Not Travel' advisory, but that can change and travel insurance could be voided if you decide to visit in these circumstances.

A Ibisbill Post Script

We have seen Ibisbill in Tibet and on a previous visit to India. On the basis you cannot see too many Ibisbill we wanted to see them again in Leh. Our first attempt at finding them, at a well known spot on the Indus River, was unsuccessful so we went back on our last afternoon and tried again. This time we had wonderful views of two birds. As I was watching them through the scope, 3 workmen approached me. When I showed them the bird they told me that we had found a Tring-ta-Ling. With that the bird took flight, calling as it did so, and I realised that this was the most beautiful onomatopoeic name for a bird that I have ever heard!



A 'Tring-ta-Ling' takes flight from the Indus River, Leh

Madyah Pradesh and the \$64,000 Question!

Back to Dehli then another early morning flight to Jabalpur. We were off to Kanha! Those of you who are observant will note that I started this whole tale talking about Bandhavgarh as being the best spot to see Tiger. But we had hit a glitch. The whole Tiger tourist industry was thrown into flux in July 2012 when the Supreme Court issued a temporary order banning tourism in the parks' "core areas", i.e. the zones with most tigers. Many thought the order would be ratified permanently.

This order devastated the tourism industry in places like Bandhavgarh and Kanha. People just stopped coming. This was a massive blow to people who relied on 'Tiger Tourism' – which is just about everyone in the villages

surrounding the parks. Added to this, there was anecdotal evidence that the lack of visitors had resulted in an increase in poaching opportunities.

I think we can learn much from the approach taken to resolve the tension between protecting the Tiger whilst maintaining tourism. The system already dictates that all infrastructure to support the industry (mainly accommodation) must be outside the park. The free for all system, where as many jeeps that were needed to cope with the demand for bookings were allowed into the parks has been replaced. Strict adherence to allocated routes and quotas on the number of vehicles have been imposed. This has reduced the number of visitors to a 'sustainable' level. Finally, access to core areas has been reduced from the previous figure of 30% to 20% - 80% of the core areas receive no visitors at all. I should point out that the same system operates in Gir.

Reducing the quotas has had two impacts as far as visitors are concerned. Firstly, safari costs have doubled (the price we have to pay to maintain the Tiger in the wild). Secondly, all safaris must be pre-booked. This means that you can no longer book in for one and just keep adding safaris during your stay. Unless you are content with a safari outside these 'premium zones' (where you definitely can still see Tigers), you are forced into a position of booking as many as possible, even though you might see the Tiger on the first trip. As a result, bookings for the premium zones fill up fast. Which is all a long way of getting round to us going to Kanha – all the premium safaris were booked in Bandhavgarh, so we did a last minute itinerary change. Thanks to Asian Adventures for facilitating that!



Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker with a head the size of a grape!

We stayed at Wild Chalet Resort on the banks of Banjar River. A truly delightful spot. Fireflies at night; Savannah Nightjars and Jungle Owlets calling at dawn and dusk; nesting Brown –capped Pygmy Woodpeckers; Black-naped Monarchs -all sorts of good things! We had timed our arrival to allow us to go on an afternoon safari. Off we went with an agreement that we would not say we were bird watchers as that always resulted in the guides showing us birds when *we wanted to see a Tiger!* If you have been to Kanha, whether you like birds or not, you will all have seen the Spotted Owl near the main entrance that stands sentinel in its hollow, morning and afternoon. Surely the most viewed owl in all the world as every vehicle stops to see it! Not far off a Collared Scops Owl, also obligingly sat in its hollow.

Enough of this birding stuff! We approached a bridge and slowed down as the jeep in front of us stopped momentarily before going on. How glad are we that it had done so because in that short time our guide spotted what the other had missed – a Tiger sitting in the shade close to the bridge. This was a seminal, spiritual moment. We were not only seeing what must surely be the Apexiest of all the Apex cats, but it was sitting 25 metres from us!

What followed was an hour long close encounter. She sat and we watched her watching us. Then we realised that a small herd of Spotted Deer was approaching her, oblivious of the danger lurking on the other side of the bushes.

They were unaware of her, but she did not return the favour: we watched as she stalked them and charged! Unsuccessful in the end, but heart in mouth stuff to be sure!



Resting in the afternoon sun

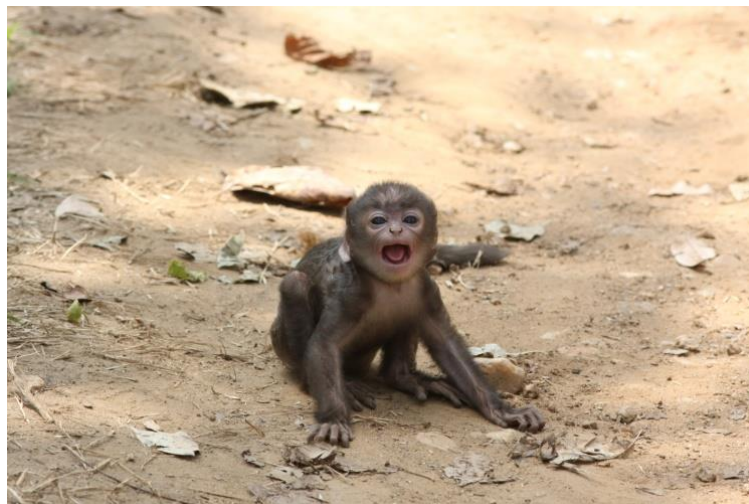


Stalking a herd of Spotted Deer



The hunt is over!

We celebrated back at the lodge. We had 4 safaris to go and still hoped to see a Leopard, but we had seen our 3 big cats! Mission Accomplished! Our talk turned to what other Tiger encounters were awaiting us. Over the next two days we spent another 20 hours in jeeps and saw heaps of birds, hundreds of Spotted Deer, Samba Deer, Barasingha Deer (a rare and highly restricted species found in Nepal, Assam and Kanha National Park), Wild Hog, Indian Bison (Gaur), Jackals, Langur Monkeys but we did not see a Leopard and, although we came very close, *we saw not one more Tiger*. Nor did anyone else. We had not realised it at the time, but had the driver in front of us not stopped, our guide would not have seen our Tiger and it would have been Bandhavgarh all over again! I still shudder at how close we were to this outcome!



An infant Langur is momentarily separated from Mum!

The up side was that we found the birding to be much more varied in Kanha, so there was plenty to see apart from elusive felines. We saw 95 species during our 3 day stay. Common birds found in the park were Green Bee-eaters, Oriental Honey-buzzards, Shikras, Indian Rollers, White-eyed Buzzards, White-rumped Shamas, Racket-tail Drongos and Brown-headed Fulvettas, to name a few. The Large Hawk-Cuckoo that we looked for everywhere finally popped up for a photograph – and turned out to be a Common Hawk-Cuckoo. Birds seen only once included Grey Wagtail, Sirkeer Malkoha, Painted Francolin and Black Stork. A snipe had us a bit perplexed for a while, but we settled on a Pin-tailed Snipe – though we could stand to be corrected.



Green Bee-eaters posing for the shot



Black Storks are uncommon but regular visitors



A Pin-tailed Snipe??

Our month in India was over. When you revisit a country for a second time, the chance of disappointment is a reality. We had such a wonderful trip the first time, how could anything be as good? Well it certainly was! Although I would not have admitted this prior to going, mixing birding with 'something else' actually made it better. Certainly, going somewhere so far outside our normal comfort zone was part of the 'critical success factor'. We had some wonderful guides: Manla and Norbu will never be forgotten. And our happy camp attendant, Tsering, was the sort of person you wanted to bring home with you! For birds, Veer at Cedo Camp and Rajan from Wild World India, who joined us for a day in Kanha, were stand outs. Thanks to each and all of them!

www.wildworldindia.com Unable to fault this company for service and value for money. In 2013, 100% of their visitors did see Snow Leopards! Their Kanha guide, Rajan Jharia, was excellent.

www.cedobirding.com The place to go for birding in the Greater Rann of Kutch. Ask for Veer as your guide.

www.asianadventures.net Another company that provides good 'on the ground advice' and service. They operate and run the Gir Birding Lodge at Sassan Gir.

www.cheapflights.com.au International and domestic airfares. www.makemytrip.co.in Internal flights, trains, buses, hotel accommodation in India.