

Gujarat & Maharashtra, India, 23 November - 8 December 2013 Trip Report

I organised a mammal and bird watching trip for myself and a friend, Dave Knight, using Individual & Group Tours (IGT) as the ground agents. IGT are based in India and were extremely efficient and very helpful. I would have no problem using them again and can recommend their services (<http://www.ourindiantours.com>). They worked on an itinerary with me once I told them where we wanted to go and what we wanted to see. They booked in advance the internal flights, airport pick-ups, accommodation, park entrance fees and jeep drives within the parks, and drivers to get us from A to B.

Dave and I have both been birding in Goa (India) and Nepal so we didn't go all out for a big bird list but concentrated on regional specialities; compromises are inevitable when combining a trip to see both birds and mammals.

Itinerary Overview: Gujarat: Little Rann of Kutch, Great Rann of Kutch, Gir, Velavadar. Maharashtra: Tadoba.

Saturday 23 November: Arrived New Delhi, after overnight flight from London Heathrow, flew to Ahmadabad, drove to Rann Riders Safari Resort, Dasada, Little Rann of Kutch.

We didn't see anything significant wildlife wise en route just a few Five-Striped Palm Squirrels and the usual common 'roadside' Indian birds - herons, egrets, storks, shrikes etc. We arrived at Rann Riders about 17:00 too late to do anything other than a walk around a large lake on the opposite side of the road to Rann Riders.

Sun 24 Nov: Rann Riders: am and pm jeep safaris in the Dhrangadhara Wild Life Sanctuary (the Wild Ass Sanctuary), Little Rann of Kutch.

07:00 start with the driver/guide supplied by Rann Riders. Soon after entering the Wild Ass Sanctuary we had no trouble in finding the Asiatic Wild Ass and by the end of the morning we had seen around 55 of them. We had good views but they always kept their distance. The hundreds of Common Cranes were also a fine sight. We got back to Rann Riders at 11:30. A walk around the grounds produced a few Five-Striped Palm Squirrels.

The afternoon jeep Safari began at 15:30 and we drove to a different area of the Wild Ass Sanctuary from the area on our morning visit. We drove around this vast area of seasonally flooded dried saltpans checking the grassland, thorn and acacia scrub as we looked for birds and mammals. We came across a group of Nilgai followed by more Wild Ass and then the desert form of Red Fox which showed quite nicely. Not far away we found an Indian Hare lying quietly in some scrub. We stayed in the general area until it got dark and slowly spotlighted our way back towards Rann Riders finding two groups of Wild Boar - a sow with 4 young in the reserve and a sow with 6 young in farmland outside the reserve. Other than that all we saw were a few Indian Field Mice and a few rodents sp. We got back to Rann Riders at 19:45.



Wild Ass, Little Rann of Kutch

Dave Knight

Monday 25 November: Rann Riders. 07:00 start. We didn't go to the Wild Ass Sanctuary this morning instead we drove around the surrounding countryside doing some general birding. But we did see 2 Grey Mongoose run across the road in front of our vehicle. We got back to Rann Riders at 10:30 and watched a small party of Five-Striped Palm Squirrels in the camp. As we had plenty of time before lunch we went birding again around the lake opposite. A rodent emerged from some cover and started nibbling at some grass seeds before scuttling off; I believe it was a Sand-coloured Rat but was minus its tail!

For the afternoon jeep safari, at 15:30, we went back to the Wild Ass Sanctuary, although we were in a different area from the day before. Throughout the afternoon we must have seen about 50 Wild Ass and some of these were more accustomed to vehicles as they didn't gallop off at our approach and in fact posed quite nicely for photos - even for my small camera! At 17:00 we found an Indian (Bengal) Fox sitting outside its den, unfortunately it didn't hang around instead it trotted off but stopped and looked back at us before going into some thorn scrub. We went looking for it on foot but failed to find it. A bit further on and 40 minutes later we were parked up scanning an area of grass near some thick scrub when I got a quick view of a cat. It disappeared all too quickly behind some bushes before a proper look could be had. But it soon appeared again and this time I could see that it was a rather dark coloured cat but it was a bit too far away to clinch an id. We moved closer and this time I could see it had spots - were we watching a Desert Cat! The guide certainly seemed to think so. The cat kept walking through the grass but was aware of us and moved towards the scrub where it sat and looked at us for a few minutes before moving out of sight. Although I have never seen a Desert Cat (desert form of Asian Wildcat) the overall coat colour was far too dark and wasn't the sandy brown I would expect. So, even with the spots/stripes that could clearly be seen when we got closer to it I think it was a Desert Cat x Domestic Cat hybrid.

We then spotlit our way back to Rann Riders coming across 5 Indian Hares and 7 Wild Boar - a sow with 5 young and a solitary adult. We arrived back at Rann Riders at 20:00.



Indian Hare, Little Rann of Kutch

Dave Knight

Tuesday 26 November: CEDO, Moti Virani, Great Rann of Kutch: After breakfast we departed Rann Riders and drove to Moti Virani and stayed at the Centre for Desert & Ocean camp (CEDO) arriving just after 13:00

Our afternoon jeep excursion began at 15:00 with a first stop at the nearby Forestry Office to have a look at a Caracal that had been hit by a car a couple of days earlier approx 8k from CEDO. It had an injured left foreleg but other than that it appeared ok. It was released back where it was found on the 28th as it was deemed to have recovered sufficiently enough to be released. It is heartening to see that people still care enough to take the trouble to help an injured animal particularly something as rare as a Caracal. It is also good to know that Caracals are still in the area. The rest of the afternoon was spent in an area known as Fotmahadev where we turned up some good birds and decent views of an Indian Gazelle (Chinkara) and an Indian Gerbil which ran across the track in front of us.

Wednesday 27 November: CEDO, 06:30 start, Chari Fulay farmlands and the Banni grasslands. Some excellent birding today, including a male Grey Hypocolius which was in a rocky and thorn scrub area someway away from the well known stake out in the Fulay

farmlands. Unfortunately the area is still suffering from an excess of, poorly controlled, charcoal production. Back for lunch at CEDO at 12:30.

After lunch we went back to the Banni grasslands at 15:00. Again some good birding but quiet as far as finding any mammals. In fact all we saw, although very nice, when we did some early evening spotlighting on our way back to CEDO was a pair of Asiatic Jackals and a brief view of a rodent, that was probably an Indian Gerbil. Arrived back at CEDO at 19:45.

Thurs 28 Nov: CEDO, Out all day, 06:30 start to the Naliya grasslands and then the coast at Modhva near Mandvi in the late afternoon for Crab Plovers. Another great day birding but quiet for mammals with only an Indian Gazelle being seen in the Naliya grasslands. Drove directly back to CEDO from the coast and didn't do any spotlighting.

Friday 29 November: Sasan Gir: We departed CEDO at 04:00 for the long drive to Sasan Gir. En route and not too far from CEDO we had a Jungle Cat briefly lit up in our headlights. We arrived at our hotel, the Taj Gateway, early afternoon.

Our first jeep safari into Gir National Park began at 15:30. Spotted Deer and Sambar were common and we also saw Hanuman/Grey Langurs. The highlight, of course, was what we went to Gir for - Asiatic Lions, 2 lionesses and 3 cubs of about 3 months old. They were just on the side of the track, the adults snoozing and the cubs playing. After watching them for about 15 minutes we moved on and came across another lioness dozing close to the track. We exited the park at 18:00 very happy after a very successful first drive. In the hotel grounds in the evening an Indian Flying Fox flew over.



Lioness, Gir

Dave Knight



Sambar, Gir

Dave Knight



Lioness, Gir

Dave Knight



Lion cubs, Gir

Dave Knight

Saturday 30 November: Gir 06:30 jeep safari into the park.

Lots of Spotted Deer, smaller numbers of Sambar plus Langurs and a single Nilgai. We exited at 09:00. For the rest of the morning we had a short walk along the river behind our hotel and along with some good birds we watched a couple of Five-Striped Palm Squirrels travelling with a feeding flock of birds.

15:30 jeep safari: Again Spotted Deer, Sambar, Langurs, Nilgai. Word had got out that a male lion was sleeping in a clearing a little way off one of the tracks so we made our way to it. When we arrived there was about eight other jeeps waiting so we joined the queue. When it was our turn we drove off road about 100 metres and come across the sleeping male Lion. During our allotted few minutes it stayed asleep just occasionally twitching its ears and tail but that was it. The other jeep passengers were soon bored and left the area whilst we waited patiently and thus were able to go back to the Lion on our own and for longer. All of which was very nice but it still remained asleep throughout. We moved on and came across the 2 Lionesses with the 3 cubs again which put on a great show as they were a little more active than the day before. What was also good was that there was only four other jeeps watching the lions with us.

Sunday 01 December: Gir/Velavadar: 06:30 start for our final jeep safari. Usual Spotted Deer and Sambar plus a Grey Mongoose, superb views of an Asiatic Jackal and close views of another Lioness this being our eighth lion in three days. This meant we had seen all the members of that particular pride whose territory encompassed that area of the park. During the morning we also saw 9 Wild Boar a sow with 3 young and a sow with 4 young. We left the park at 09:15.



Wild Boar

Dave Knight



Grey Mongoose

Dave Knight



Jackal, Gir

Dave Knight

After breakfast we left Sasan Gir and drove for about 6 hours to the Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar, and stayed at the Blackbuck Lodge. On arrival we quickly dumped our bags, noting the ubiquitous Five-Striped Palm Squirrels around our Chalet. We then went straight out for a 16:00 jeep safari into the Velavadar Blackbuck Sanctuary. We were driven by the lodge's resident naturalist and had to take a park ranger with us who was picked up at the reserves reception/entrance gate. This grassland sanctuary held hundreds of Blackbuck (naturally!) and good numbers of Nilgai and we also saw 3 Wild Boar. The hundreds of harriers, mainly Montague's but also Pallid and Marsh, were very impressive. We exited the sanctuary at 18:00.



Blackbuck, Velavadar

Dave Knight

Monday 2 December: Velavadar: Before our 07:00 jeep ride into the park I did some spotlighting in the fields around the lodge. I found 2 India Hares and had a good view of a Jungle Cat for 5 minutes from just after 06:00.

Once in the park we of course saw hundreds of Blackbuck and lots of Nilgai as well as two groups of Wild Boar - a sow with 2 young and a sow with 4 young. However, the best was when we were up a viewing tower and a Wolf was spotted laying half hidden on top of an embankment. Most of the time you could only see its head and shoulders but it did eventually get up and walk down the far side of the embankment and out of sight giving decent telescope views as it went. It was noted that it had a limp. After about 15 minutes I picked up another Wolf walking through the grass, about 400 metres to the right of the embankment, setting the Blackbuck off in a panic. This second wolf gave good views as it walked through the grass all the way to the embankment, where the first wolf had been, before moving out of sight. We left the tower and drove along the tracks to get a different viewing angle of the

embankment. This proved to be a good move as we soon picked up two Wolves harassing the Blackbuck with a third wolf, the one with the limp, also in the picture but not after the Blackbuck. After about five minutes they had all melted away into the long grass but what a superb sighting. About an hour later on our way out of the sanctuary we had a quick stop and looked at the embankment and couldn't believe our luck when we found a Wolf snoozing on the top! Whether this was one of the previous three or a fourth wolf we shall never know for sure and by then we had to leave the park as it was 10:30.

The afternoon jeep ride into the sanctuary began at 16:00. It started off as expected with the usual Blackbuck, Nilgai and a sow Wild Boar with 2 young. It then got a lot better when we disturbed a Spotted Hyena from some vegetation at the side of the track. It shuffled off huffing as it went probably annoyed that we had disturbed its afternoon siesta. A good view was had and we were obviously delighted at the sighting. We exited at 18:00. A quick walk at dusk back at the lodge produced 2 Indian Hares.



Nilgai, with Cattle Egrets, Velavadar

Dave Knight

Tuesday 3 December: I did a bit of spotlighting around the grounds of the lodge from 05:00 - 06:15 but only found 4 Indian Hares, Blackbuck and Nilgai. Before entering the park at 07:00 we spent 10 minutes up the public viewing tower opposite the reception/gate of the park. This tower gives a commanding view of the southern section of the park (the park is split by a road) and is well worth a look from as apparently wolves and striped hyenas are seen from it from time to time. We saw 3 adult Wild Boar and a good view of a Jungle Cat in the open, so time well spent before the park was open. The rest of the morning in the park was uneventful with Blackbuck, Nilgai and 9 Wild Boar - a solitary adult and a sow with 8 young. We left the park at 10:15.

In the afternoon we entered the park at 16:00 for our final jeep ride. Usual stuff seen to start with - Blackbuck, Nilgai and a Wild Boar - a sow with 6 young. Then a Jungle Cat crossed the track in front of us so we brought the vehicle to a stop near where it had crossed and waited. Before long it was walking through the grass at the side of the track giving super views. We then went up the central viewing tower where we had seen the wolves from the day before. Before long a Wolf was spotted walking in the open along the edge of the grass and it wasn't one of the ones we had seen before as this was altogether a skinnier individual. It got close enough to see that it was a male before it disappeared in the long grass. So feeling very pleased with our fourth or maybe our fifth wolf we made our way to the exit gate as it was now 18:00. On an early evening spotlight walk in the lodge grounds and surrounding fields we came across 2 Indian Hares, Blackbuck and Nilgai.

Wednesday 4 December: Velavadar/Ahmadabad/flew to Nagpur/Tadoba: After breakfast, we drove for about 4 hour to Ahmadabad airport for an internal flight to Nagpur. The only thing of note en route was a flock of 20 Sarus Cranes in a wetland on the outskirts of Ahmadabad. From Nagpur we were driven the three hours to Tadoba reaching there at 20:00. Overnight at Svasara Safari Resort, located by the side of the Kolara Gate in the north of the reserve. We were introduced to the lodge's naturalist who was to be our guide in the reserve. We also had a driver and a forestry guide with us on the jeep rides.



Spotted Deer

Dave Knight

Thursday 5 December: Tadoba 06:00 entrance into the reserve putting up 7 Indian Nightjars from the track as we went (on one morning we put up 10!). We arrived at the core area by first light. The first mammal we saw was a female Tiger walking on the track ahead of us. We followed at a discreet distance for about a kilometre before she wandered off the

track into the forest but still giving excellent views before finally disappearing into thick forest. During the rest of the morning drive an Indian Muntjac crossed the track in front of us, we saw a female Grey Mongoose with 3 young, small groups of Hanuman/Grey Langurs an adult Wild Boar and many Spotted Deer and Sambar. We also came across a huge bull Gaur feeding alongside the track, what a magnificent and impressive animal that is. We found some fresh droppings and urine on the track left by Dholes and were very unlucky not to see them. We exited the reserve at 11:00. In the grounds of Svasara lodge there were Five-Striped Palm Squirrels.

The afternoon drive started at 15:00 and we soon came across a Nilgai which turned out to be the only one we saw in the reserve, followed by a brief view of a Ruddy Mongoose. A short while later we found a male Tiger but unfortunately it was only on view for a minute or two but nevertheless a fabulous sighting. We also saw Langurs, Spotted Deer and Sambar before exiting the reserve at 18:00.

Friday 6 December: Tadoba 06:00 start into the reserve. The usual Spotted Deer, Sambar and Langurs were all seen. We then came across a female Tiger, a different female than the day before, strolling along a track before moving into deep cover. But after about 15 minutes she emerged again and started walking towards us which had our driver quickly putting the jeep into reverse so not to hinder her progress along the track. After watching her for at least 10 minutes she moved off the track and disappeared amongst the trees. You could follow her progress through the trees by listening to the warning calls of the deer. Driving on we came upon a herd of 19 Guar mainly females with calves but also a few young bulls feeding in an open area of forest. We were out of the park by 11:00.



Tiger, female 1, Tadoba

Dave Knight



Tiger, female 2, Tadoba

Dave Knight

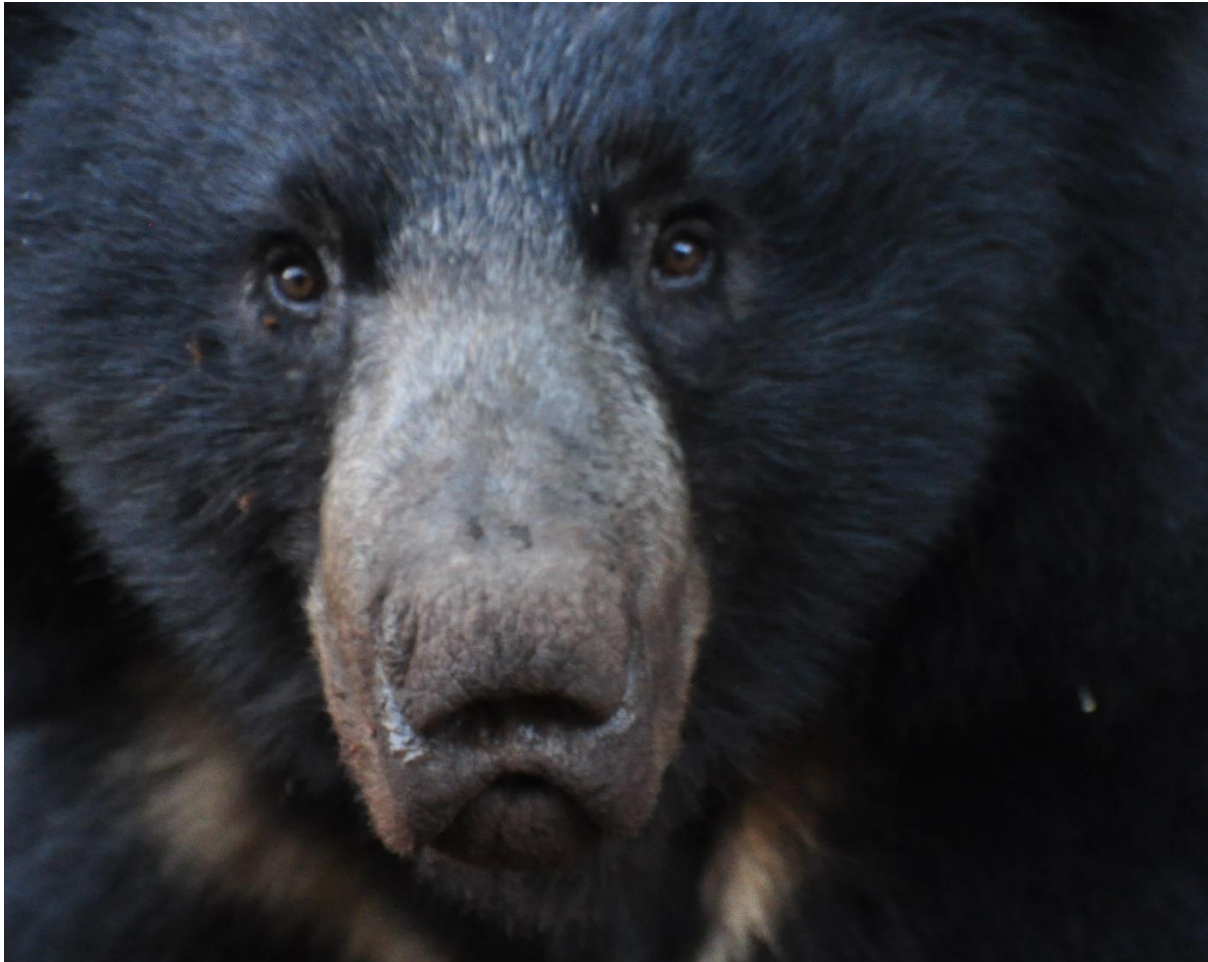


Gaur, Tadoba

John Wright

Our afternoon drive began at 15:00. Relatively quiet to start with just the usual Spotted Deer, Sambar and Langurs. But then at 17:30 we chanced upon a Sloth Bear at the side of the track busily tearing and splintering a rotten log to bits to get at the tasty morsels within. It

was just amazing, at first we didn't go too close in case we frightened it off but eventually drove along side and switched off the engine and enjoyed the spectacle. In fact so unconcerned was the bear that the driver switched on the engine a couple of times so that it would put its head up for better photo opportunities! After 15 minutes we had to leave the bear as we were in danger of not exiting the reserve by 18:00. I never thought my first view of a Sloth Bear would be that good.



Sloth Bear, close encounters, Tadoba

Dave Knight

Saturday 7 December: Tadoba 06:00 entrance into the reserve. A tiger was heard roaring so we parked alongside a lake and waited. Before long a big male Tiger walked along the lake side and laid down on the bank opposite us. It stayed for around 10 minutes before getting up and wandering off into the forest. Our 4th tiger and another super wildlife encounter. Continuing to drive around we came across Spotted Deer, Sambar, Langurs and a boar Wild Boar before exiting the reserve at 11:00.

We entered the reserve at 15:00 for our afternoon drive. Usual Spotted Deer, Sambar, Langurs plus a single Wild Boar and a couple of Three-Striped Palm Squirrels which were new for the trip. Things were a bit quiet as we loitered at some crossroads, the guides nattering to their colleagues in two other jeeps also loitering. Suddenly 2 Sloth Bears crossed the track in front of us and disappeared into the trees, we waited where we were predicting that they might cut the corner and come out on the other track - and they did! They strolled

across the track stopped briefly to look at us and then went on their way through the trees - super views of a female with a near full grown cub - we couldn't believe our luck. The rest of the drive was uneventful but we did come across 3 female Guars before exiting at 18:00.



Sloth Bear, Tadoba

Dave Knight

Sunday 8 December: Tadoba/Nagpur/fly to New Delhi: Entered the reserve at 06:00 for our last jeep ride. This turned out to be our quietest drive with just Spotted Deer, Sambar and a herd of 17 Gaur. The Gaur were in the same area as the herd of 19 we saw on the 6th and so presumably most of the same animals involved. We left the reserve at 11:00.

In the early afternoon we left Svasara Lodge and drove to Nagpur airport in time to board a flight leaving at 1800 hours for New Delhi where we stayed overnight in a local hotel before flying back to the UK the following morning.

Trip Notes:

Weather: It was light around 06:30 in the mornings and was dark by about 18:30. The days were hot and sunny, the nights cool, early mornings chilly. A fleece/coat and hat was definitely needed on the early morning jeep rides especially so at Tadoba.

Mammals: We saw 28 species of mammals: Hanuman Langur (Northern Plains Grey Langur?), Sambar, Indian Muntjac, Spotted Deer, Nilgai, Blackbuck, Indian Gazelle (Chinkara), Gaur, Wild Boar, Asiatic Wild Ass, Sloth Bear, Asiatic Jackal, Striped Hyena,

Asian Wolf, Indian (Bengal) Fox, Red Fox, Tiger, Lion, Jungle Cat, Grey Mongoose, Ruddy Mongoose, Indian hare, Three-Striped Palm Squirrel, Five-Striped Palm Squirrel, Indian Gerbil, Sand-coloured Rat, Little Indian Field Mouse, Indian Flying Fox.

Plus the Caracal in temporary captivity and a presumed Desert Cat x Domestic Cat hybrid.

Birds: We saw 221 species of birds with the highlights being: Collared Scops Owl, Sykes's Nightjar, Sarus Crane, Macqueen's Bustard, Crab Plover, Great Thick-knee, Indian Courser, Great Black-headed Gull, River Tern, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Indian Spotted Eagle, Egyptian, White-rumped and Red-headed Vultures, Lesser Flamingo, Black-necked Stork, Marshall's Iora, Stoliczka's Bushchat, Brown Rock-chat, Rufous-tailed and Variable Wheatears, White-naped Tit, Grey Hypocolius, Rufous-fronted Prinia, Asian Desert Warbler, Sykes's Lark, Bimaculated Lark, Long-billed Pipit, Grey-necked Bunting, Striolated Bunting.

Reptiles/Amphibians: Common Garden Lizard, Monitor Lizard, Marsh Mugger (Crocodile), House Gecko, Indian Flapshell Turtle, Indian Edible Frog.

Locations: Rann Riders, (<http://www.rannriders.com/>), (Dasada, Little Rann of Kutch. Very nice accommodation, good food. You use the camp's jeep and driver/guide who knew the best areas to find birds and did put in a lot of effort to find the mammal targets we wanted. Had a decent spotlight mainly for nightjars but was happy to use it for mammals in the early evening. Jeep safari times: 07:00-11:30(ish) and 15:30-till dark.

CEDO (<http://www.cedobirding.com/>) , Moti Virani, Great Rann of Kutch. Basic but comfortable accommodation, lovely food. You use their vehicle plus driver and the camp's naturalist/guide. We used the services of Vaibhav Misha known as "Veer" on our jeep safaris and very good he was too he knew his stuff and always tried hard to find good birds and was happy to spotlight for mammals early evening. Jeep drives are flexible depending on your needs/wishes. We went out at first light or before, back mid to late morning for lunch or took a packed lunch with us, back in the evenings when dark. As others have found CEDO is a fabulous place to stay and ideally located to explore the Great Rann of Kutch. It is still run enthusiastically and efficiently by Jugal Tiwari and staff.

Gir National Park (<http://www.girnationalpark.com/>), Sasan Gir. We stayed at the Taj Gateway a luxury hotel, great accommodation and food and nicely located. But a bit over the top and not really necessary for the everyday birder/mammal watcher! Use of the hotel's jeep plus driver and forestry guide, usual bureaucratic paper work before even entering the park. Jeep safari times: 06:30-09:00 and 15:00-18:00. Ensure your ground agent has all the park entry permits sorted out in advance or you will have even more messing around. Lots of hotels in the area and more being built which means lots of vehicles and very busy. It was good to visit and see the lions but it was a relief to move on.

Velavadar National Park (<http://www.velvadar.com/>), also known as Blackbuck National Park. The Blackbuck Lodge (<http://www.theblackbucklodge.com/>). A luxury camp with very comfortable chalet accommodation, good food, superbly located just 3 minutes drive from

park entrance and reception. Use of camp's jeep and naturalist/guide plus a park guide who you pick up at the park entrance gate/reception. Jeep safari times: 07:00-10:00(ish) and 16:00-18:00. The Blackbuck lodge is surrounded by fields that adjoin the southern section of the park/sanctuary, wolves and hyenas are seen occasionally near the chalets and there is no restriction from walking out into the fields and scrub day or night. We watched Blackbuck and Nilgai from our chalet and Jungle Cat not far away. I great place to stay for a few nights.

Tadoba-Andhari National Park and Tiger Reserve (<http://www.mahatadobatiger.com/>), Chandrapur district, Maharashtra. Note the reserve is closed on Tuesdays. Jeep safari times: 06:00- 11:00 and 15:00-18:00. Usually referred to just as Tadoba it is a superb park for seeing tigers at the moment with apparently at least 40 inhabiting the reserve. A couple of years ago you could stay in the reserve all day but now you have to stick to the specified times and only 20% of the reserve is accessible to visitors. However, there is at present at least 6 tigers in that 20%. The drivers and guides are geared up to look for tigers and a great effort is made to find them. They are well versed in the areas individual tigers are usually located and know the different tigers by sight. The reserve was by no means crowded (compared to other tiger reserves) but new lodges are in the planning stages, so go there soon before things change too much. We stayed at the Svasara Jungle Lodge (<http://www.svasararesorts.com/>) which is located right next to the Kolara Gate in the north of the reserve and an excellent place to stay, well run, friendly, helpful and with good food.

General: If possible avoid the parks/reserves at weekends when there are more vehicles/people visiting them. However, it was good to see a lot of locals visiting the parks which hopefully bodes well for the future. The busiest times for the parks/reserves is over the Christmas holidays and the first 3 months of the year. During our trip (November/December) it was nice and quiet relatively speaking, with us often being the only Europeans in the parks and the only visitors staying at, for example, CEDO and the Blackbuck Lodge on some nights.

Cameras: Gir, Velavadar, Tadoba all charged for cameras in some way or another. One camera only was allowed for 'free' at Gir and Velavadar as part of the entry permit but you had to pay (500 rupees I think) for any other camera (excluding phone cameras) on every visit into a park not per day, so it soon adds up. At Tadoba cameras were included in the entry permit but you are charged extra (again 500 rupees I think) if the lens was 200mm or above and again that is every visit into the reserve not per day. Rules/regulations and charges change so try and find out about camera fees from your lodges/hotels before you go so there are no surprises - but don't bank on it!

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Tadoba, early morning.

Dave Knight