



VANA SAFARIS

# Small Cats and Other Mammals of North-Western & Eastern India

A Wildlife Expedition Through Desert Sands, Rocky  
Terrains, and Mangrove Mysteries

**Dates:** November 10 to November 22, 2024

**Agency:** Vana Safaris Pvt Ltd.

Website: [www.vanasafaris.com](http://www.vanasafaris.com)

Instagram: @vanasafaris

**Tour Leader:** Saurabh Sawant

Participants: Dr. Martin Daniel & Ms. Natascha Daniel

Images © Saurabh Sawant

The tour was planned after Avijit the chief planner for Vana Safaris had been discussing infrequently about small cats with Dr. Martin Daniel over 4 years now. The discussions were interesting but somehow the discussions never formed into a tour - though the intent was always there. And so when Avijit heard from Dr. Martin again this year - the discussions started with the possibility of sighting the elusive Clouded Leopard in the deep dark forests of north-eastern forests of India. But the time frame that Dr. Martin had, and the month did not suite an expedition to the north-east.

So based on the idea of Martin and experience of Avijit - a tour was designed focusing on 6 small cats - Jungle Cat, Asiatic Wild Cat, the smallest wild cat - Rusty Spotted Cat, the rarest wild small cat in western India - the Caracal, the elusive Fishing Cat and the Leopard Cat. Since the habitats support at least one wild big cat in abundance - the

Leopard was expected to be sighted. A Bengal Tiger was not impossible but was not expected to be sighted. On the other hand a number of other carnivores like the Asiatic Gray Wolf, Asiatic Jackal, Bengal or Indian Fox and the White-footed or Desert Fox and the Striped Hyena was also expected to be sighted. Also one had a decent chance to find at least two civets - the Northern Palm Civet and the Small Indian Civet and the nocturnal Indian Crested Porcupine. At its best one could expect about 30 species of mammals in the tour. A number of rare and grand birds were expected with none more rare than the Great Indian Bustard. Apart from that - one would expect a number of raptors like the Steppe Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, Imperial Eagle, the endangered Indian Vulture, Red-headed or King Vulture and in the eastern part of India a number of kingfishers like the Black-capped Kingfisher, Brown-winged and Stork-billed Kingfisher, the Pied Kingfisher and the mangrove specialist White-collared Kingfisher.

Avijit needed a very good leader and he decided to ask his old friend and a fine field naturalist Saurabh Sawant to lead the tour. Saurabh has the patience that is needed to lead a mammal tour, he is knowledgeable and is lucky too. He has sighted most of the wild cats of India in the wild and even sighted a wild mainland Clouded Leopard in Arunachal Pradesh. So Avijit knew that Martin and Natascha were in good hands.

Now let's go through Saurabh's trip diary to see how the trip went through.

## **10-11 November 2024**

### **Jaisalmer: Secrets of the Desert and the Great Indian Bustard**

The journey began with anticipation as I arrived in New Delhi to welcome Martin and Natascha. They arrived in the early hours of November 10th, ready to dive into the wild wonders India had to offer. After a hearty breakfast, we flew to Jaisalmer, Rajasthan—a city of golden sands and timeless beauty. By mid-afternoon, we reached **Musa's Desert Nest**, a cozy haven in the heart of the **Desert National Park**.

That evening, the desert revealed one of its rarest treasures: the **Great Indian Bustard** (*Ardeotis nigriceps*), a critically endangered bird. Towering and graceful, two bustards strode across the arid landscape, their presence a poignant reminder of the fragility of this ecosystem. Just as the golden light began to fade, two more joined them in flight, their powerful wings cutting through the desert sky in a breathtaking display. It was a sight so rare and fleeting that it felt like witnessing a secret meant only for us.

The desert had more to offer. On our way back, a **Desert Cat** (*Felis lybica*) emerged from the shadows, its sandy coat blending perfectly with the terrain. Martin, quick with his camera, captured the intensity of its gaze. Nearby, a **Desert Fox** (*Vulpes vulpes pusilla*) paused momentarily, its large ears and bushy tail illuminated by the vehicle's headlights.



Griffon Vulture, Cinereous Vulture & Steppe Eagles

Dinner that night was simple and tasty—a perfect end to an exhilarating day.

The next morning brought even clearer views of the **Bustards**. Their slow, deliberate movements exuded an air of regality, as though they knew they were among the last of their kind. **Chinkaras** (*Gazella bennettii*), their delicate forms bounding effortlessly across the desert, provided a striking contrast. **Blue Bulls** (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), or **Nilgai**, wandered in the



Great Indian Bustard at Desert National Park

distance, their massive frames a reminder of the desert's surprising capacity to sustain life. In the evening we explored another far off area where the scrub was dominated by Raptors: **Steppe Eagles** (*Aquila nipalensis*), **Cinereous Vulture** (*Aegypius monachus*), and **Griffon Vultures** (*Gyps fulvus*) perched together, perhaps tired after scanning the sands for carrion.

As we sped across the vast desert in the evening, a **Desert Fox** caught my eye, its ears twitching above the bushes where it lay camouflaged. The sunset painted the horizon with fiery hues, and we stopped to admire a herd of camels silhouetted against the glowing sky. Their herder, dressed in traditional attire, added a timeless charm to the scene.

**12-13 November 2024**  
**Bera: Where Leopards Roam Free**

Leaving the desert behind, we embarked on a long drive to **Bera**, a place renowned for its leopards and rocky landscapes. The journey was punctuated by an unexpected stop for roadside tea and a simple breakfast of hot parathas that seemed to taste better amidst the open countryside. Bera welcomed us with its rugged beauty.



The rugged Jawai Landscape

On our first evening safari, a young **Leopard Cub** darted across the track, vanishing into the rocky outcrops as quickly as it appeared. It was a brief yet thrilling glimpse of this magnificent predator.

The following morning, the Jawai Hills came alive with a display that will stay with us forever. A **mating pair of leopards** emerged from their rocky sanctuary; their interactions playful yet commanding. For over 30 minutes, they moved with effortless grace across the granite, their every step a reminder of their agility and power. The drive itself was an adventure, as our vehicle navigated the precarious paths of the rocky terrain, adding to the excitement of the encounter.





Mating Leopard Pair

Later that evening, we shifted focus to small cats, searching for the elusive **Rusty-spotted Cat** (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*), the world's smallest wild cat. Though the cat eluded us, we encountered another leopard, this one lounging regally on a sunlit rock. The warm hues of the setting sun lit up its golden coat, making it one of the most striking images of the trip.

### **14-18 November 2024**

#### **Ramathra: A Fort in the Wild and the Call of the Wolves**

Arriving at **Ramathra Fort**, perched majestically on the edge of the **Kailadevi Wildlife Sanctuary**, felt like stepping into a page from history. The fort, with its commanding views of grasslands and farmlands, became our home for three days of exploration. Its ancient walls, steeped in stories of heritage, provided a stark contrast to the untamed wilderness surrounding it.

The sanctuary's scrublands came alive with a rich tapestry of life. On our very first drive, a pack of **Asiatic Wolves** (*Canis lupus pallipes*) emerged, their purposeful strides and amber eyes betraying a keen intelligence. These wolves, smaller and

more lightly built than their northern counterparts, are superbly adapted to India's arid landscapes. Watching them move with such calculated precision was mesmerizing, as if they were choreographing a hunt.

Nearby, a **Striped Hyena** (*Hyaena hyaena*) was spotted scavenging on an old carcass. Often misunderstood as mere scavengers, hyenas are remarkable creatures with powerful jaws capable of crushing bone. Their eerie, whooping calls lend an air of mystery to India's nocturnal landscapes. This individual entertained us as it gnawed persistently, its hunched frame silhouetted against the grasslands.



Indian Fox



Jungle Cat



Striped Hyena



Asiatic Wildcat / Desert Cat

The early mornings here were magical. One day, a **Jungle Cat** (*Felis chaus*) emerged from the scrub, its tawny coat glowing in the soft light. Known for their adaptability, Jungle Cats are often found near wetlands and agricultural fields, where they hunt rodents, birds, and even snakes. Shortly after, an **Indian Fox** (*Vulpes bengalensis*), with its slender form and bushy tail, darted through the grasslands. This species, endemic to the Indian subcontinent, is a keystone predator in these ecosystems, keeping rodent



populations in check. The **Jackals** were in plenty on all days scuttling around the scrub and grass.



Chinkara

A visit to the cliffs revealed critically endangered **Indian Vultures** (*Gyps indicus*), their massive forms roosting in the safety of rocky ledges. These vultures, once widespread, have seen catastrophic declines due to the use of diclofenac in cattle, a drug toxic to vultures feeding on carcasses. Their presence here was both a marvel and a poignant reminder of the fragility of life.

The nights at Ramathra brought a mix of adventure and introspection. Candlelit dinners in the fort's courtyard sparked lively conversations. We discussed Martin's photographic techniques, Natascha's keen observations on animal behavior, and the quirks of tracking elusive cats. Over laughter and shared stories, these moments became as memorable as the wildlife itself.



Indian Wolf

The elusive **Caracal** (*Caracal caracal*), known for its striking black ear tufts and incredible leaping ability, continued to evade us. But the sanctuary had one last surprise: a **Rusty-spotted Cat** (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*), the smallest wild cat in the world, no larger than a domestic kitten. Its diminutive size belied its fierce hunting prowess, and we watched in awe as it sat near the roots of a bushy tree and then moved stealthily through the grass.



Rusty Spotted Cat

**19-22 November 2024**

**Bhitarkanika: The Mangrove's Hidden Gems**



Fishing Cat



Leaving Rajasthan behind, we flew east to Odisha and entered the lush world of **Bhitarkanika National Park**. This UNESCO-recognized wetland is a haven for aquatic



life, mangrove forests, and elusive predators. The shift from arid scrublands to tidal waterways was striking, and Bhitarkanika's unique ecosystem offered a refreshing change of pace.

Our first boat ride through the park's intricate canals was a sensory delight.

Towering **Saltwater Crocodiles** (*Crocodylus porosus*) basked along the muddy banks, their

## Saltwater Crocodile

prehistoric forms radiating an aura of quiet dominance. The largest reptiles on Earth, these crocodiles are apex predators, capable of taking down prey as large as deer or wild boar. Seeing them in their natural habitat, their massive jaws agape in a cooling posture, was both thrilling and humbling. The mangroves were alive with the calls of kingfishers. Among the seven species we encountered, the **Black-capped Kingfisher** (*Halcyon pileata*) and the **Brown-winged Kingfisher** (*Pelargopsis amauroptera*) stood out for their vibrant colors and darting movements. Their fishing techniques, characterized by precision dives, were a joy to watch.



Brown-winged Kingfisher



Water Monitor



Fishing Cat on the prowl

The star of Bhitarkanika, however, was the **Fishing Cat** (*Prionailurus viverrinus*). Adapted to life in wetlands, these cats are excellent swimmers and rely heavily on fish for sustenance. On two memorable evenings, we found a Fishing Cat perched on the bank, its piercing eyes scanning the water. For nearly half an hour, we observed it foraging, eating, grooming and more, its every movement a masterclass in stealth and patience. Watching it consume successfully caught fish was one of the trip's most rewarding experiences.



Walking through the mangroves revealed more wonders. While we didn't encounter a live **King Cobra**, we did find its shed skin—an eerie yet exciting reminder of its presence. The **Water Monitors** (*Varanus salvator*) added a prehistoric touch as they lumbered through the undergrowth, while **Indian Chameleons** (*Chamaeleo zeylanicus*) clung to branches, their color-changing skin a marvel of adaptation.



Lesser Adjutant

On our final evening, as we patrolled the edges of the mangroves, a shy **Leopard Cat** (*Prionailurus bengalensis*) emerged. Smaller than a Fishing Cat but equally captivating, it moved with feline grace, blending seamlessly into the foliage. This sighting felt like a culmination of our efforts—a fitting farewell gift from the wild.



Leopard Cat looking for prey

**A Bittersweet Goodbye**

As we returned to Delhi, the reality of parting ways set in. Martin and Natascha, with their boundless enthusiasm and thoughtful questions, had become more than just guests—they were companions on a journey of discovery. Bidding them farewell at the airport was bittersweet. While the joy of shared experiences lingered, there was a tinge of sadness knowing our adventure had come to an end.

Reflecting on the journey, I realized it wasn't just about ticking species off a checklist. It was about connection—to the wilderness, to the intricate web of life, and to the people who share in its wonder. The stories we now carry—of leopards on granite rocks, crocodiles in tidal waters, and the laughter around dinner tables—are an evidence to the transformative power of nature.



L to R Back: Dr. Martin Daniel & Ms. Natascha Daniel  
Center front: Mr. Saurabh Sawant



## Mammal Checklist

	<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>	<b>Other Common Names</b>	<b>IUCN Status</b>
	Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	Rhesus Monkey	LC
	Bengal Sacred Langur	<i>Semnopithecus entellus</i>	Bengal Gray Langur, Hanuman Langur	LC
	Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	Black-napped Hare, Rufous-tailed Hare	LC
	Indian Crested Porcupine	<i>Hystrix indica</i>	White-tailed Porcupine	LC
	Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	Three-striped Palm Squirrel	LC
	Northern Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennantii</i>	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	LC
	Indian Desert Jird	<i>Meriones hurrianae</i>	Indian Desert Gerbil	LC
	Indian Gerbil	<i>Tatera indica</i>	Antelope Rat	LC
	Indian Bush Rat	<i>Golunda ellioti</i>		LC
	Little Indian Field Mouse	<i>Mus booduga</i>		LC
	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	Asiatic Jackal, Common Jackal	LC
	Gray Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Wolf, Timber Wolf	LC
	Indian Fox	<i>Vulpes bengalensis</i>	Bengal Fox	LC
	Desert Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	White-footed Fox	LC
	Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>	Swamp Cat, Reed Cat	LC
	Asiatic Wildcat	<i>Felis lybica</i>	Desert Cat, Asiatic Steppe Wildcat	LC
	Mainland Leopard Cat	<i>Prionailurus bengalensis</i>		LC
	Rusty-spotted Cat	<i>Prionailurus rubiginosus</i>		NT
	Fishing Cat	<i>Prionailurus viverrinus</i>		VU
	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	Panther	VU
	Indian Gray Mongoose	<i>Urva edwardsii</i>		LC
	Striped Hyena	<i>Hyaena hyaena</i>		NT
	Northern Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	Common Palm Civet	LC
	Small Indian Civet	<i>Viverricula indica</i>	Lesser Oriental Civet	LC
	Chinkara	<i>Gazella bennettii</i>	Indian Gazelle	LC
	Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	Blue Bull	LC
	Chital	<i>Axis axis</i>	Axis Deer, Spotted Deer	LC
	Sambar	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>		VU
	Eurasian Wild Pig	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Wild Boar	LC

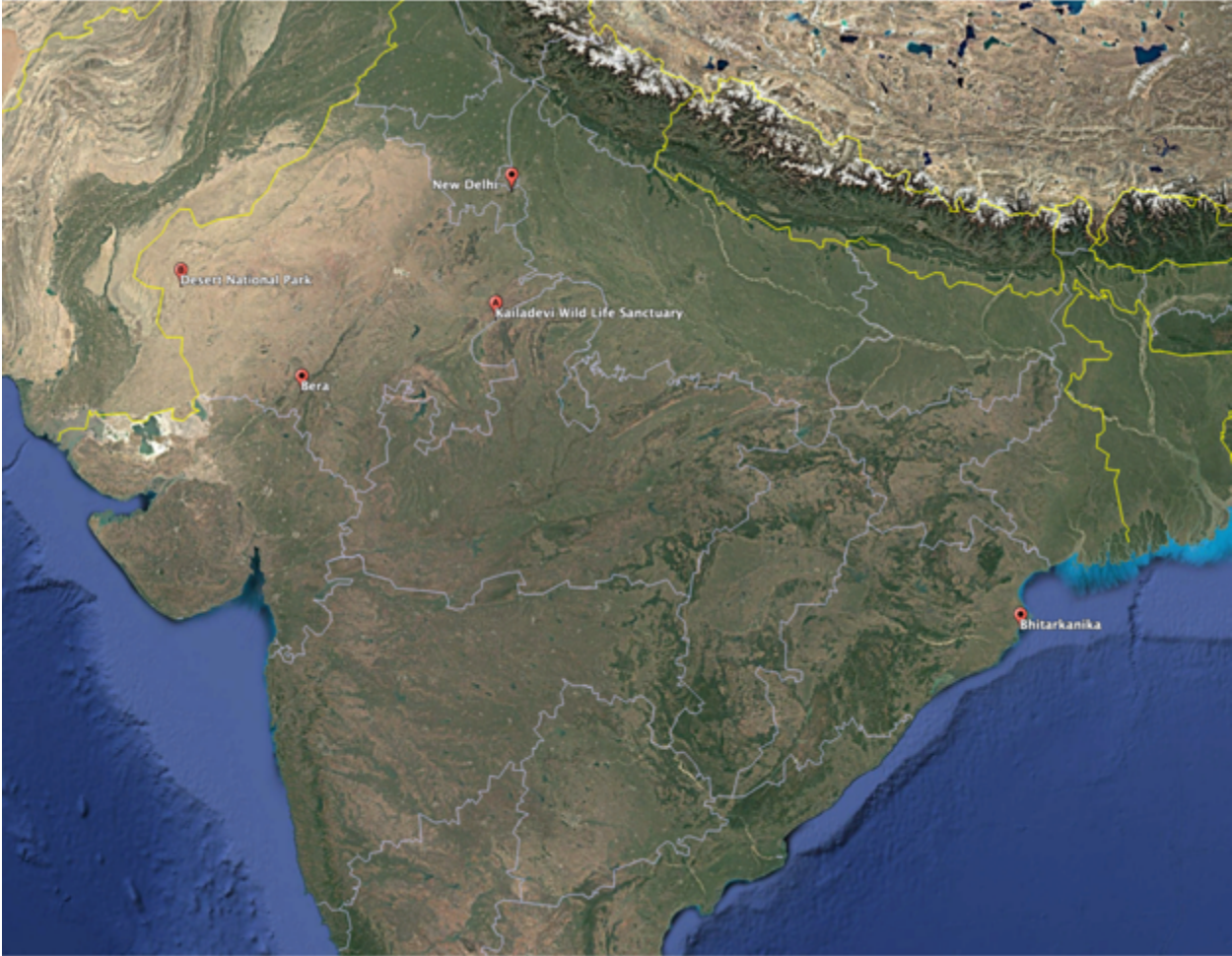
## Notable Bird Sightings

<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>
Great Indian Bustard	<i>Ardeotis nigriceps</i>
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Indian Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
Eurasian Griffon (Griffon Vulture)	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>
Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>
Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>
Pallid Scops Owl	<i>Otus brucei</i>
Black-capped Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon pileata</i>
Brown-winged Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis amauroptera</i>
Lesser Adjutant Stork	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>
Collared Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus chloris</i>
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>

## Reptile Checklist

<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>
Saltwater Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus porosus</i>
Hardwick's Spiny-tailed Lizard	<i>Saara hardwickii</i>
Indian Chameleon	<i>Chamaeleo zeylanicus</i>
Common Water Monitor	<i>Varanus salvator</i>

# Map of visited locations



Images from the trip:



Asiatic Jackal



The Indian Crested Porcupine





Black Capped Kingfisher



Bhitarkanika mangrove

The