

INDIA MARCH/APRIL 2017

ENDANGERED MAMMAL TOUR



Participants Val Berry and Lawrence Penheiro, Jan Dodd, Jackie Downing, Stuart Jones and Sandra Roach, Keith and Jan Raes and Rob and Sue Wallis.

John van der Dol (Sandwich Bird Tours)

Guides: Shyam Sharma (Agra), Mahendra Singh (Gujarat) Nikeb (Assam)

March 18/19

Six of us left Worth on the bus to Heathrow where we met up with Rob and Sue. We caught the evening flight to Delhi arriving at our destination roughly on time at about 10.30 the next morning. After the somewhat arduous immigration we eventually collected our luggage and met up with Shyam and our driver and set off for Agra. Another 4 1/2 hours travelling on top of the flight was a bit much. However we arrived at the beautiful Jaypee Palace Hotel, the biggest of its kind in the city, and were made very welcome with a second garland of African marigolds having received one in Delhi already. I felt and smelt like a walking greenhouse. En route we did see quite a bit of excellent birdlife including 5 Sarus Cranes, a pair of the endangered Black-necked Storks, and wildfowl included quite a number of Comb Duck and some Shoveler whilst 29 Black Ibis and a Purple Heron were of interest too. Our first mammals of the trip consisted of a small group of female Nilgai and a couple of single Bulls.

The accommodation was first class as was the food but I think most of us were too tired to really appreciate it. An early night was called for.

March 19

Lovely breakfast was followed by a swift visit to the Taj Mahal and judging by the number of photographs taken this was much appreciated by all. We did not have that long as we wanted to visit the Red Fort as well which was very interesting too. We had a brief stop at the government run marble factory but nobody was parted with any cash. Most of this truly beautiful stuff would look out of place in our homes.



Interesting birds this morning included a few Egyptian Vultures which appear to be breeding on the Taj and about four Common Serotene Bats were found on the Red Fort.

We returned to the hotel and checked out about 12.30 before driving to a nearby restaurant, which I have visited on numerous occasions, and then set off for the long journey back to Delhi. We arrived teatime and met up with Jackie, Val and Lawrence who had arrived today from London. We sat down to dinner but we did not really have much time to get to know each other as we were all pretty whacked by now and retired early. Hotel Shanti Palace which is near the airport which with the Delhi traffic is now a must if you have an early flight.

March 20

Early flight to Ahmedabad so we had to be at the airport by about 6 am. An 80 minute flight later and we had reached our destination. We met up with Mahendra who was to be our guide for the next week whilst in Gujarat. Our driver too was ready for the 4 hour drive to Bhavnagar where the staff at the Narayani Heritage were awaiting our arrival. We immediately set off for lunch in the Neelambaug Palace after which we went for a walk in the local park for our first real birding of the trip.

Black Winged Kite, more Nilgai and a male Blackbuck were noted en route and quite a few Ashy- crowned Sparrowlarks were found along the roadside.

Birds in the park were good and included Great White Pelican, Spoonbill, Black Ibis, Anhinga, Comb Ducks, a few waders including Temminck's Stint and Spotted Redshank, a couple of River Terns, a Sykes' Warbler, several Koel and Silverbills. Ashy Prinia and the breeding plumage of Plain Prinia gave us a puzzle to sort out as it is not illustrated in the old field guide. The updated version solved the problem. We normally see them in non-breeding plumage in winter.

March 21

Another early start was preceded by me oversleeping after having asked the group to keep to strict timings. How embarrassing was that. No excuse other than I was very tired, my alarm did not go off probably because I set it wrong, again because I was tired and I did not need an early morning call, actually I forgot to ask because I was tired. Enough of that.

We set off only a few minutes later than planned and arrived at the "Velavadar Blackbuck Sanctuary in good time. We paid our extortionate camera fees and set off in two open vehicles to drive the grasslands of the reserve. Interesting sightings included a glimpse of a Black-naped Hare, a Jungle Cat and of course many Blackbuck and Nilgai.

Birds of note included a Steppe Eagle, an Indian Spotted Eagle, Marsh and Pallid Harriers and a Shikra. Larks were represented by Sykes', Crested, Greater Short-toed and Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks.

We had a long siesta after which we did a second drive but did not really add much else.



March 22

An early start and off to Gir. A long 4-5 hour drive after which we eventually arrived having broken the gearbox luckily just 10 km from the lodge. Stuck in second gear we drove the remaining miles at 20 km per hour. Not much difference then.

It was great to see the old place again although there have been some changes with new cottages and a large dining hall. We were greeted by Alum who I last saw at Pangot.

We were in time for lunch and our first safari. Amazingly a female Lion crossed the road in front of our vehicle, but unfortunately the other two jeeps did not see it. No pressure then for tomorrow.

A Jungle Nightjar was new for the list but not a lot different was noted.

March 23

An early start again and despite all the bureaucracy we were able to get into the park shortly after opening. It was quite chilly until the sun appeared and warmed the place up. A Jackal was seen but not really worthy of a photograph as it appeared entangled in a load of brush. Then we noticed a few jeeps parked up and we were just in time to see an adult male Lion disappearing into the bush. Fortunately the other guests managed a better view and even a few photos.

At least everybody had now seen the target species.

A pair of Mottled Wood Owls were seen but they were mostly obscured by foliage so photography was impossible. There were quite a few birds around this morning and obvious ones were Black Redstarts of the eastern race, many Magpie and Indian Robins, Black-rumped Flameback, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, more Indian Thick-knees, Tickel's Blue and Brown Flycatchers, Plum-headed Parakeets, and a couple of Woolly-necked Storks. A Honey Buzzard was noted and White-eye and Common Buzzards were photographed.

We returned for a sumptuous breakfast, so nice in fact that many of us struggled with the lunch which was served not long after.

The afternoon ride began at 3.30 and was rather uneventful but the raptors were good as the heat increased and the thermals did their job. Rob photographed a rather splendid Besra while probably two dark phase Booted Eagles were noted, one of which circling together with an Indian Spotted Eagle. Two or three Honey Buzzards along with White-eyed Buzzards, an Osprey and Crested Serpent Eagle, the latter two by the lake added to a wonderful selection of birds of prey.

A lovely Hoopoe was found next to the road, another Jungle Nightjar on a branch and a Savanna Nightjar on the deck made for more variety.

We now had no more than 40 minutes left in the park when the guide said that birding must stop and we must look for cats only. Of course he knew that two sub-adult males were sitting close to the road a little further on. Excellent photo opportunities were had for 10-15 minutes of these amazingly obliging cats. Everybody was really happy now as you could not get better views and our aims had been achieved. Let's hope the stripy cousins do the same next week.



Well pleased with today's proceedings we returned for a quick shower after which we were treated to a show from a tribal dance group, the likes of which I have never seen before. They were excellent. These peoples are originally of African descent and came to Gujarat some 1400 years ago but still have their culture alive while living in the park.

Another lovely dinner before retiring a little later than normal and anticipating yet another early start for tomorrow's run to the Little Rann of Kutch and Rann Riders

March 24

On the road by 06.10 for a long journey to the Rann. We made good time and arrived at lunchtime to be welcomed by Rizwan, the manager, and a superb lunch. About an hour to settle in and have a rest and we were on the road again to look for the Asiatic Asses which we duly found and photographed. They really are beautiful creatures and well worth the effort of trying to get here. The drivers knew of a Desert Fox den (subsp of Red Fox) and we spent about 45 minutes watching the four pups play and interacting with their mother while the male just sat close by keeping a loose eye on proceedings. It was an amazing experience and as the light faded into the "golden hour" we were able to get some lovely photographs.



Pallid and Marsh Harriers were noted during the safari.

A late dinner and rather late to bed. Gone 10 pm with an early start planned again for the morning.

March 25

This morning was earmarked for a visit to a local lake and en route a small pond by the side of the road held several hundred Ruff resting on their way north.

The lake was stuffed with both Greater and Lesser Flamingos, a Great White Pelican, a Common Crane and lots of Spoonbills. Migration here was clearly in full swing.

Waders included lots of Black-tailed Godwits, Black-winged Stilts, Avocets and smaller numbers of Ruff, Temminck's Stint, Marsh and Green Sandpiper. The odd Spotted Redshank was noted and Terns included Gull-billed and River Tern whilst the gulls were represented by three Pallas's Gulls, one on which was in splendid breeding plumage.

We spent quite a while at this site which also held a lovely adult male Citrine Wagtail and a couple of Yellow Wagtails.

We left to look for Indian Courser of which at least three were found as were good numbers of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and a Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over the road as were coming back.



We had quite a long siesta before going out again at 4.30 to an agricultural/desert area where the target was the Indian Eagle Owl. The pair was present at the nest site. Apparently they failed with their first attempt hence their rather late in the season second attempt to bring off a new generation.

We had good success in getting some photos after which we drove round looking for Short-eared Owl but these appeared to have departed as they are only winter visitors.

Although Sykes' Nightjar was seen, they never settled, hence no views or photos by most.

A very dusty affair and we returned covered in the stuff. We were late and went straight to dinner before showering and bed and packing as we had an early start the next day. No rest for the wicked.

March 26

As usual an early start long before it got light in order to get to Ahmedabad airport. Our flight left roughly on time to Mumbai but after a few hours wait there we were told there was a delay of another 45 minutes. Never mind, the flights were uneventful and we landed in Nagpur just a little later than expected. The luggage came quite quickly and we were met by three drivers who took us on some interesting roads to our lodge, The Tuli Tiger Corridor at Pench. A lovely place where we immediately had dinner before retiring. Not a terribly exciting day but necessary.

March 27

Tea and biscuits at 5 and out on safari at 5.30. The park gates opened at 6 and off we went. Two jeeps followed zone 2 and unfortunately did not see too much other than some great Jackals, one mother and cub. However the birds were good and included Red-headed Vulture, Black-hooded Oriole, several Indian Rollers, Rufous Treepie, three Malabar Pied Hornbills, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and Black-rumped Flamebacks. Two Jungle Crows had a set to with an Indian Spotted Eagle which was good to watch.



The third jeep was given route 1 and how lucky were they? They watched and photographed two Leopards on a rock playing and canoodling with each other for 20 minutes. At the breakfast stop we were told where they had seen them so breakfast was postponed and off we set again just as all the jeeps were returning, I knew we were going to be too late and so it proved to be. Better luck next time.

All we had were some very close alarm calls of Chital and Langurs but nobody could see the closeby Leopard. Try again this afternoon.

Rob, Sue and I were very lucky to and photograph a Giant Flying Squirrel which are not that common and certainly not seen much during the day. We even had it flying which was great to see. A new mammal species for me.

An Asian Barred Owlet sat in the garden of my cottage when we got back from safari. The afternoon safari was a little quiet but we did have a distant male tiger but just for a few seconds as it disappeared into the long grass. It's in the bag, but only just.

The evening proved interesting particularly in relation to gin and tonics. We had to resort to them as a large group had commandeered our table and some of us had to wait some time before we could have our evening meal. We exchanged digital images, messed with iPads and phones as if we were teenagers. I don't know why us older generation refer to teenagers when it comes to digital devices, I think we might be worse, and it takes us longer.

March 28

An early cup of coffee and biscuits again preceded another dusty affair. Lots of alarm calls but no sightings until after breakfast which was over three hours into the safari. Eventually an adult female came close to a large waterhole but not close enough as this one too found refuge in thick brush. A brief walk-by gave some of us good but brief views but still far too distant to my liking. No serious photos possible.

Try again this afternoon.

Most of the afternoon was spent by the water hole where the female called Langdi was still present but refused to come out to drink.

About half an hour before we had to leave we heard four Chital and a single Sambar alarm call behind us. The guide told us that this was for a 12 year old male called Rayakassa who hopefully would be arriving at the waterhole shortly. This proved to be the case as we spotted him from afar and he eventually walked right behind our jeep about 10 yards away. What an amazing experience. He was the male paired with Langdi and who between them had the four cubs we never saw.

A great ending to the day.





March 29

Our last drive in Pench. It has been good so far. What more could we expect?

The three jeeps set out as usual all in different directions but the forest appeared quiet. Eventually on the grassland area we found a pack of about 7 wild Dogs (Dhole) which were a little distant but great to see nevertheless. As we were about to leave another jeep told us about a pair of Leopards so we set off in order to see if we could see them. It was not long before we found a pile of jeeps whose passengers were all looking at a rocky outcrop. One and then two Leopard cubs gave stunning views enabling us to take some fine pictures.



A late breakfast and back to the lodge for showering, packing, lunch and checking out.

Our cars were waiting for our three hour ride to the next Tiger Reserve, Tadoba.

We arrived in good time, met up with Mohit from Asian Adventures who was joining us for a couple of days and had some refreshments on the lawn before dinner. Very nice indeed.

March 30

Today started in the same vein as Pench with a 5.30 start and in this instance a 7 km ride on an incredibly bumpy and dusty road to the gate. We drove around a bit collecting more dust until we came to a grassland area with a river in the background. It was not long before a female tiger appeared with her two five month cubs. Her name was Choti Tara. It was lovely to watch her and the playful cubs messing about in the mucky water and returning to their mother intent on annoying her. They all disappeared into the long grass. We moved on to another waterhole where we found the famous Maya out in the open stalking a Wild Boar. Needless to say she was unsuccessful and she then decided to rest under a tree in the shade but out of sight. It was getting late and we needed to return before the park closed. A Brown Fish Owl was seen and photographed nearby.

The afternoon was even more exciting. Maya was still present at the same waterhole but when we arrived we found her swimming across to the island. She then started on her mile long walk along the road followed by about 30 jeeps and despite it looking like a harassing circus, which I find very annoying, the tiger seemed totally unperturbed. She could very easily have turned into the jungle but she just kept on walking totally ignoring all around. This allowed excellent photo opportunities.

We then lost her and the guides took us to a small water hole where they suspected she would turn up. Indeed she did eventually but not before Brown Fish Owl and Crested Hawk Eagle were seen.



It had been a very hot but very productive afternoon.

More refreshments on the lawn followed by a nice dinner and another early night.



March 31

Again a 5.30 start after saying goodbye to Mohit who had to return to Delhi. It was nice to spend the day with him on the jeep.

This morning Maya was found again asleep in the bamboo next to the road. She was accompanied by her partner Matkashur who is a giant of a tiger. Several jeeps were present. They eventually woke up and crossed the road and back into the jungle. It was a short but very nice sighting.

One of the jeeps saw a Wild Dog, but apart from that the jungle appeared rather quiet this morning.

This afternoon was really quiet but Choti Tara with her two cubs were seen by some of us but rather distantly. A pair of Black-naped Monarchs were seen at the small waterhole.

As we were leaving the park just before dusk we noted a Jungle Cat right next to the road and several photos were taken. It was quite a small one, perhaps a female or a kitten.

Our last night at the 'Tiger' Heaven lodge was celebrated with some refreshments and a plate of French fries.



April 1

This morning was our last safari and after looking round the usual places without success we started off on a long ride to some lake where different jeeps had different degrees of success. A Wild Dog was again seen and one of the jeeps was lucky enough to have a Sloth Bear cross the road. Nice photos by Lawrence were good to see.

We did find a Lesser Adjutant Stork at the lake accompanied by a load of Lesser Whistling Ducks and I had a brief view of a Sirkeer Malkoa which is always a good bird to find.

Time was getting on, so on the way back another cursory look at the large waterhole found Maya and Matkashur again. Apparently they had just had a mating session and both looked exhausted. Cubs to come soon perhaps? Great views though and yet more Tiger photos.

We returned to base to shower, pack, luncheon and off to the airport for our flight to Kolkata.

After saying our goodbyes to Val and Lawrence who were staying on for a few more days before flying to Mumbai for a short stay, we set off to the airport in Nagpur.

It wasn't long before we arrived in Kolkata where a bus awaited our arrival. We were taken to yet another posh hotel where we had a splendid dinner.

I must admit, that this being my first visit to Kolkata, that I was very surprised at the amazing street lighting and sculptures on the roadside. A very modern and interesting place and very different from the “Black Hole of Kolkata” I was expecting.

April 2

We left so early that breakfast in this nice hotel was not possible. A little disappointing so we were given a take-away breakfast. Kolkata airport is a very modern place and so breakfast was consumed there before our flight to Guwahati.

A short flight, luggage collected quickly and we were met by Nekeb, our guide for this week, and were taken to our vehicles. There were three cars and drivers, one of whom was Bobby who has driven me on at least three occasions in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and also in Bhutan.

It was great to see him again even I did not recognise him straight away with his newly sprouted beard.

It was a long 5 hour drive to Kaziranga but we eventually arrived at, Wild Grass Lodge having stopped for lunch along the way.

Quite a few things were seen en route, such as Hog Deer, Rhino, Swamp Deer, Black-necked Stork and many Open-billed Storks. We were held up a little by a lorry which had left the road and was being hauled back up the bank by a couple of cranes.

April 3

Two trips into the park today were highly successful with a total of 48 Rhino being seen.

On two occasions a mother and calf crossed the road between our vehicles giving stunning views. About a dozen Elephants were photographed and many birds seen. Pallas' and Grey-headed Fish Eagles were perhaps the most impressive and cute little Spotted and Asian Barred Owlets were noted.

The morning ride was in the central zone and the afternoon ride in the western zone.



April 4

This morning started well with a pair of Great Hornbills in the garden followed by two pairs of Oriental Pied Hornbills. Unfortunately the light was atrocious and so photography was really difficult with extreme settings on the camera having to be used.

After breakfast we set off again in our trusty jeeps to the eastern zone. This area is much more forested and proved to be quite interesting especially for birds. Many Fish Eagles, storks, herons and egrets on the lakes and water flashes. Not many Rhinos or Elephants this morning.

Blue-tailed and Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters were great to see. Tickell's Warbler, Streak-throated Woodpecker, Golden-fronted Leafbirds were new to the list.

Elephants were feeding close to the road and one particular young bull appeared to take exception to our presence and showing his disdain by flapping his ears and lifting his trunk. He eventually crossed the road giving great uninterrupted views.



April 5

Today was rather different. The weather had changed to warm and sunny and we set off for the 130 km ride in cars to the Hoolongpar Gibbon Sanctuary in the district of Jorhat east of Kaziranga. It was not long before we were shown a pair of Capped Langurs with a baby clutched to its mother.

Very soon after in the dense forest we were treated to our main target of two male and one female Western Hoolock Gibbons and at the same place an adult with small young Pig-tailed Macaque. Stunning views of all were had and lots of photo opportunities. We were lucky that they came down quite low as often they stay high in the canopy.



Lots of beautiful butterflies were out too after two dull days with intermittent rain.

We returned to the lodge for a sumptuous Chinese lunch which everybody agreed was preferable to the local cuisine which is very different from Central India.

The afternoon the party split up. One group went culture vulturing in a tea plantation coupled with some souvenir shopping while three of us had a final drive in the central zone of the park. We hoped to see a tiger and although alarm calls were heard, only Nekeb had a brief view of a tiger's back before it disappeared into the long grass never to be seen again.

More views of Great Hornbill at the same nest site I photographed it some 4-5 years earlier and with the same foliage obstructing clear views. Three Green-billed Malkoas were seen but otherwise much the same as before.

April 6

The long drive back to Guwahati and a flight direct to Delhi.

We arrived teatime, had dinner and were told that alcohol is now banned in any establishment with 500 m of the highway. Well, that went down like a lead balloon. Another Indian law that will probably only last a few weeks and by next year it will all be different again.

No trip has ever gone by without some crazy thing happening. Last trip some bank notes were made illegal during our stay. One just has to laugh!

April 7

We were picked up at 10am from the hotel, driven to the airport and we set off one hour late for London. We said our goodbyes to Jackie, Rob and Sue and eventually found our bus to take us back to Sandwich. Got home a bit late, but considering we were within two yards of a tiger at one stage, we were in one piece.

A fabulous trip with a great group.

John

Sandwich Bird Tours

April 2017

Sandwich Bird Tours





LARGE CAT SIGHTINGS

LIONS (Gir)

March 22 female crossed the road

March 23 Adult male seen briefly (am) Two sub adult males sat by road. Watched for 20 minutes by which time we had to leave.

LEOPARDS (Pench)

March 27 Two watched together for some time

March 29 Two cubs together seen well for 20 minutes

TIGERS (Pench)

March 27 Distant brief view of a male

March 28 (am) Distant Langdi female. Brief view. (pm) Langdi seen again at waterhole but mostly hidden in grass. Male (her partner) Rayakassa seen coming out of forest to waterhole to within 10 yards of jeep

TIGERS (Tadoba)

March 30 Female Choti Tara with two 5 month cubs (am) 30 minutes

Maya female stalking Wild Boar (am) watched for 20 minutes

(pm) Maya swimming and then followed for about a mile along the road and also by small waterhole just yards from jeeps. May seen for about 1 hour

March 31 Maya and partner Matkashur in the bamboo before crossing road (am). 15 minutes. Choti Tara with two cubs again but a little distant. Left them to it.

April 1 Maya and Matkashur again. Close views by waterhole after mating. Watched for 20 minutes. Had to leave.