

Northern India Trip November 2005

It may have been tempting fate to title this tour *Taj, Tigers and Birds* but, ever optimistic, 12 SBBO members lifted off into the London night on November 5th, with seasonal fireworks flashing below. Several of us had experienced the subcontinent before on trips to Goa, Nepal and Sri Lanka, but this was somehow different. The impressions we had gleaned were largely second hand, from friends who had returned from India enthralled, yet affected by something that remained largely unexplained, perhaps inexplicable. So, as we touched down on to Indian soil eight hours later, we were aware that the sights and sounds that we passed on our stuttering ride into Delhi were just the beginning.

And so it proved to be. From the dry, dusty semi-deserts of Rajasthan, to the oases of Sultanpur and Bharatpur, the teeming streets of Agra, the beauty of the Taj Mahal, the calm of the Corbett grasslands and the stillness of the Kumaon Hills, only a hundred kilometres from the great peaks of the western Himalaya, this remarkable place continually captivated, thrilled and challenged our senses.

Between us we saw more than 370 bird species, including gems such as Indian Courser, Tawny Fish Owl, Wallcreeper, Lammergeier, Pallas's Fish Eagle, Sarus Crane, Indian Skimmer, Crested Kingfisher and Great Hornbill. We saw 14 woodpecker species, gangs of cackling laughing thrushes, seldom-seen alpine birds like Altai Accentor and Pink-browed Rosefinch and flickering parties of warblers, tits, creepers and nuthatches in lichen-draped forests, with jagged snow-clad peaks often in view. Nevertheless, this was not just a bird tour, if there is such a thing.

To say we were fortunate with mammals would be an understatement. Apart from the ubiquitous Palm Squirrels, langurs and macaques, we were treated to numerous Nilgai, Chital and Sambar; antelopes that inhabit forest and lake fringes. We also saw delicate Indian Gazelles, secretive Muntjacs, rare Hog Deer, Indian and Ruddy Mongooses and wildlife as varied as Flying Fox, Indian Hare, Jungle Cat and the diminutive golden Indian Desert Jird, a rodent that is found more or less only in the arid plains of Rajasthan. And as for the animal we had hoped so much to see, none of us will ever forget the female Tiger with two cubs that passed our jeep only 40 metres away on our first afternoon in Ranthambhor or, indeed, how this amazing experience was bettered on our last afternoon in Corbett. Only three minutes from the park entrance, literally our last chance, a magnificent male ambled along a river bed, into some patches of coarse grass and out into the open, paws the size of cats, tasting the air and gazing fearsomely about, melting into the forest after a full five minutes.

Add a 15 foot long Indian Rock Python, Gharial and Marsh Muggler crocodiles, excellent food, few health problems, good accommodation and two memorable overnight train journeys and you have an impression of our trip. To give more is impossible; the only way to begin to understand India is to visit her, and then to return, for you will want to.

Should anyone wish to see a copy of the Indian tour diary, or the itinerary for our forthcoming trip to Peru in October/November 2006, please contact John Van der Dol on john.vanderdol1@btinternet.com or me on iphodgson@tiscali.co.uk and we'll be happy to e-mail a copy to you.

Ian Hodgson, December 2005