



# Wild India

## *Bengal tigers and Indian skimmers*

### A Greentours Trip Report

December 1<sup>st</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> 2007

Led by Ian Green and Phil Benstead

Daily report by Phil Benstead and Ian Green

#### **Day 1 / 1<sup>st</sup> December Travel to Delhi**

Most of us met up at the gate at Heathrow's Terminal 4 and boarded the flight for the 'overnight' flight to Delhi. The flight went smoothly enough, but most of us failed to sleep!

#### **Day 2 / 2<sup>nd</sup> December      Delhi to Chambal, via Kheetam Lake**

Bleary-eyed we hit Delhi in the early morning. Once we had cleared immigration, picked up our bags and changed some money we got out of the building. Vinod met us as usual and then we settled down for the long drive to Chambal.

First time travellers in this part of the world marvelled at the fantastic sights, constant sounds and redolent smells of India. We stopped briefly for comfort breaks and had a chance to catch up with the common wayside birds that we had been glimpsing from the bus. Common and bank mynahs squabbled for scraps. Ashy and plain prinia appeared side by side for comparison. Black kites wheeled overhead. Driving on we immersed our selves in the chaos of the Indian road system. Traffic seemed to miraculously avoid contact, but we did see one accident involving a pedestrian (fortunately not serious). The variety of traffic was astonishing from huge bulging chaff transporting oxen-powered carts to the latest 4WDs.

We made one lengthy stop en route at Kheetam Lake. Here we spent a pleasant 45 minutes sorting through some common wetland species and also had a pair of scarce black-necked storks. Other highlights included our first bar-headed geese, bluethroat, red-breasted flycatcher and two species of dragonfly (*Orthetrum sabina* and *Brachythemis contaminata*). The first butterflies also appeared with plain tiger and two species of emigrant being noted.

Moving on we slogged into Agra for a lunch stop and after an enormous lunch we drove on through increasingly rural areas until we found ourselves on the dirt track leading to the pleasantly located Chambal Safari Lodge. Here we settled in to our rooms and sorted ourselves out before dinner. During dinner Ken and Margaret arrived having spent a successful week doing the extension before the tour. Despite a thirteen hour drive they looked very fresh compared to us and we soon headed for an early night in a bid to catch up on lost sleep.

### **Day 3 / 3<sup>rd</sup> December                      Chambal River and surroundings**

This morning saw most of us up at 0700 for a short walk before breakfast. Birds featured heavily in this amble through the agricultural fields that surround the lodge garden. We spotted many new species including some excellently photogenic spotted owlets, our first weavers (mostly black-throated but some Baya) and the splendid Indian robin. Grey francolins picked their way through the crops and gave their characteristic loud calls. 'Bactrian' house sparrows (of the migrant race that breeds in central Asia) stunned us all with their pristine plumage. Eventually we had to return for breakfast which we ate *al fresco*.

After breakfast on the lawn we headed out in the bus to take the 45 minute drive to the river. En route we stopped in some likely looking agricultural fields and quickly found some very good-looking crested buntings, a flock of tree pipits, a lone female ashy-crowned sparrow-lark and a fine male common rosefinch. Also here we had our first black ibis, but these were to become almost commonplace later in the day. Moving on we finally reached the river and went for a short walk. First up was a nice flying adult Bonelli's eagle and other birds here included a pair of common woodshrike, a bay-backed shrike and a flushed buttonquail (probably yellow-legged). Walking down onto the flats by the river we searched for larks but found other things instead. Kentish plovers zipped about. More black ibis appeared and gave excellent views and a variety of other wading birds were present.

We took lunch by the river and watched the occasional waterbird. At two-thirty we all climbed aboard the boat for a trip upstream. The skipper occasionally had to coax the outboard back into action but we passed a pleasant couple of hours cruising. The banks and occasional sandy islands yielded a plethora of reptilia. Several terrapins including both Red-crowned Roofbacks and Indian Sawbacks rested on the bank alongside a big Mugger Crocodile. Most obvious were the large number of often big gharial that favoured the sand banks in midstream. These fish-eating crocodiles were very photogenic and took up a lot of our time. Resting next to them on one sandbank was an avian gem in the form of the Indian skimmer. This is a tricky species to get and we were very happy with our eventual total of 37. Plenty of terrapins were also hauled out enjoying the winter sun - at least three species were involved and we hoped to discover a fourth with a good read of the fieldguide! Chugging along we had excellent close views of black

ibis, our guide pulled out a few great thick-knees and terns were well represented with both river and black-bellied being present. Ducks appeared but only lesser whistling duck was recorded in good numbers. Bonelli's eagles were recorded again and obviously bred along the low riverine cliffs. Sadly the main target of the boat trip – the Ganges River dolphin – failed to materialise. Turning for home as the sun dipped towards the horizon we watched a number of hirundines low overhead that included a fine adult wire-tailed swallow.

Driving back in the bus, many of us dozed (still under the influence of jetlag) but we all rallied for our first checklist session and dinner. Yet another early night beckoned though with the prospect of an early checkout and a big day of culture in Agra and Fatepur Sikri ahead of us.

## **Day 4 / 4<sup>th</sup> December                      Chambal, Agra and Fatepur Sikri**

Today we braced ourselves for a day of culture in Agra and Fatepur Sikri. It meant an early start but it was worth it. We said our goodbyes to the manager and staff of Chambal and drove off in the bus. The journey passed swiftly and we arrived in Agra at nine o'clock. After picking up our guide (the incomparable Rajiv – a mine of local information and excellent for Test match updates too!) we headed straight for the Taj Mahal. Rajiv then gave the group the full tour of this wonderful monument and this was taken up by them all. The Moghul rulers were a colourful bunch who could have sold the TV rights to a reality soap about their lives for huge sums of money. Phil and Ian meanwhile skulked around the back checking out the birds on the river and Ian relocated his favourite family of small Indian mongooses (they live handily near the toilet and were last seen five years ago in the same spot!). Birds on the river included the first marsh sandpiper, and whiskered and gull-billed terns for the trip. Overhead large numbers of black kite and Egyptian vultures soared. Nearby trees held coppersmith barbet and hoopoes flopped about languorously. After a brief bit of free time for photographs and the obligatory visit to the 'mongooses' we headed off to the Agra Fort.

Rajiv gave us an excellent tour of this remarkable edifice too before delivering the news that England had once again snatched a draw from the jaws of victory. After a pleasant hour here we split into two groups. The hard-core shoppers accompanied the Indian part of the team on a spree to look at and purchase marble-inlaid products and pashminas. The other 'half' went with Ian and Phil to the delightful sewage outfall. Here we passed an all too quick half hour during which we had great views of a variety of waders and saw our first citrine wagtails and brown-hooded gull. The highlight was Ian finding a superb jack snipe sitting next to a common snipe for comparison – quite a difficult bird to catch up with in India. Eventually we had to leave and walked back to the bus and started the long process of extracting the shoppers from various shops before heading for lunch.

After a breath-taking morning we had a breather on the bus whilst we travelled to the next World Heritage site – Fatepur Sikri. Here we spent another happy hour wandering the site and listening once again to the commentary of the excellent Rajiv. As dusk drew around us a huge swirling mass of house swifts filled the sky above us. Culture done for now, we said goodbye to the Agra team and headed off in the gathering darkness for the 45 minute journey to Bharatpur and our new home – The Bagh.

Arriving in the dark after a long day gave the grounds of the Bagh a slightly fairytale feel and we all enjoyed settling into our rooms and heading for the bar and dinner. Not much wildlife but an enjoyable day nonetheless.

## **Day 5 / 5<sup>th</sup> December                      Bharatpur**

After breakfast many of us gathered around the fruiting fig in the garden and enjoyed superb views of up to five coppersmith barbets as well as visitations by a multitude of Oriental white-eyes and a single Asian koel.

Today saw us heading into the Bharatpur wetland complex. We had been warned that it would be largely dry due to ongoing disputes over water resources and indeed it was pitifully parched. The day was not without its moments of excitement however and we finished feeling more than a little satisfied.

Ansar took us on a short walk around the nursery and temple first. In the nursery he found us an excellent roosting Indian jungle nightjar and a nest containing a fierce looking dusky eagle-owl. Below the nest tree and in the surrounding area Ian catalogued a wide range of birds that had been taken by the adult owls including a number of ducks and even species such as Indian scops-owl and rufous treepie. We also spent some time searching in vain for various thrushes. A quick visit to the temple produced a very young orphaned nilgai being bottle-fed by the priest that was rather appealing. Wandering on we got caught up photographing tame hoopoes and enjoying a tree full of little green bee-eaters.

Next we walked into a python lair and searched for a basking individual but maybe condition were a little on the chilly side and we could not find one. Finally taking to our cycle rickshaws, we worked our way down the main track. Numerous stops were made en route, invariably to look out over the few patches of pump-maintained water. A Bengal monitor peeped out of a small tree hole. Spotted deer, sambar and nilgai started to become commonplace and familiar. Huge flap-shell turtles hauled themselves about in the shallow water. A bird highlight was a chance sighting of a female barred buttonquail, scuffing about dust-bathing and anting in the sun. We also had a small flock of birds that included common woodshrike, brown-capped pygmy woodpecker and yellow-crowned woodpecker.

Time had got the better of us though and after an enjoyable morning it was time to ride the last stretch to the temple and have some lunch. The men from the Bagh had laid out quite a spread for us and we all ate a hearty meal whilst fending off a rather rapacious tame female nilgai. After a suitable rest we headed out once more. We did not get far before Ansar pointed out two roosting Indian scops-owls, high in a palm tree. A short distance away we had another look at Indian jungle nightjar before heading down to a sure fire spot for large-tailed nightjar. Racing the Tropical Birding crew to the site we just beat them to it but were happy to share the bird with them. Ansar located it under the usual tree and we got views and photographs down to a couple of metres.

The last walk of the day took us along the Sapan Mori bund. At the start we had a splendid encounter with a fine jungle cat that we followed along for some time and got some great

photographs. A nice little cat. Other highlights of this walk included plenty of encounters with golden jackal (including many 'singing' groups), a very photogenic bay-backed shrike and just one Indian pond heron. Not a bad day, which ended up in a nearby book shop where a huge number of books were bought.

## **Day 6 / 6<sup>th</sup> December                      Bund Bhareta**

With Bharatpur being so dry we decided to visit the nearby reservoir of Bund Bhareta to fill in a few gaps. The bus journey through rural India to the reservoir is always interesting and we punctuated the journey with many stops for birds spotted en route. During these stops we frequently became the object of much interest, especially for school boys on their way to school. Birds recorded in agricultural land en route included the splendid strawberry confection that is the red avadavat, some Spanish sparrows, red-headed bunting and a small group of plum-headed parakeets. Wet roadside areas produced purple swamphens and a variety of waders.

Eventually we reached the dam end of the reservoir and climbing up we looked out over the vast expanse of water. The light was poor but by walking up towards the outflow we were able to look through quite a large mass of ducks and coots. Highlights here included a splendid immature imperial eagle, at least five ferruginous duck and a host of other duck. Amongst these the diminutive cotton pygmy goose was a firm favourite, but many of the Palearctic migrants were also looking good. Amongst the duck a few little grebes and even one great crested grebe could be found. A small roosting flock of Eurasian spoonbills were long overdue. Three species of kingfisher, including our first common kingfishers were hunting the margins of the reservoir. Ian patrolled around and brought news of a nearby common rose (a swallowtail) and whilst we watched this majestic beast, a small Indian leopard (a fritillary) was spotted basking on a shrub. We found a most beautiful small tree, the Sickie Bush, *Dichrostachys cinerea*. The flowers are surreal – hanging columns of yellow with a large fluffy pink base. Good enough to eat. The large white flowered herb, *Adhatoda zeylanica*, or Common Cough Cure, was common along the roadside.

We took lunch at the government guest house and split our time between watching an ongoing government function (was it a workshop or the local magistrate on a visit?) and enjoying the large flying-fox roost. Afterwards we walked in the small garden and found a fruiting tree with more brown-headed barbets and a single Tickell's blue flycatcher. Driving on Ashok took us some way up the track to the palace before we all got out and walked the last kilometre. On the way we enjoyed great views of both species of jacana. Ansar located four painted sandgrouse which gave reasonable flight views. The palace area was full of birds as usual and we all got excellent views of chestnut-shouldered petronia. The views from this lofty position over the reservoir revealed a huge raft of coot which included smaller numbers of common pochard and tufted duck. A single peregrine sat out on an island in the distance. Walking back we spotted a gecko on a low wall.

Last stop of a full day in the field was the vulture breeding cliffs at Bayana. A short walk here revealed two rock-climbing ruddy mongooses that entertained us all with their antics. Whilst

watching these we also spotted two house buntings and a superb sirkeer malkoha. As dusk fell we headed for home and a late dinner.

## **Day 7 / 7<sup>th</sup> December      Bharatpur**

An early morning walk around the canal zone was excellent for birds and a great start to the day. An undoubted highlight was the pair of red-necked falcon that screamed down the canal scattering the waders. During our two hour walk we also had fantastic views of all five of the wagtail species found in this part of the world. The swallows also put on a show and at one point we had red-rumped, wire-tailed, streak-throated and barn swallow in front of us. Waders featured too with occasional spotted redshanks in amongst the commoner species. A great morning walk. Afterwards we headed back to the Bagh to pick up those who had elected for a lie-in.

On the way to the park we stopped off at another canal area and Ansar showed us nine spectacular painted snipe just sitting out in plain view. Also here we had great views of a garden lizard. Our first stop once inside the park was a re-visit to the python lair. This time after a short wait we were rewarded with not one but two pythons. First out was a small six-footer which emerged blinking into the sun and hauled itself into a U-shape for a 10-minute sunbath. Next Ken spotted a huge 12-footer emerging which did not stray far from its burrow and really was rather spectacular. Many photographs were taken and we felt rather pleased with ourselves for persevering.

By this time we were feeling rather peckish and so we headed for the visitor centre and another Bagh lunch which was laid out for us in the garden. The centrepiece of the visitor centre remains the rhinestone cranes created by the sponsor Swarovski – unbelievable.

After lunch we took to the electric bus. First stop was for a recently discovered oriental scops-owl along the main track. It was a rufous phase bird and was very difficult to spot amongst the dry, dead leaves that it was perched amongst. Moving into the 'dry' area of the park we stopped briefly by the atmospheric and decaying old hunting lodge at Khadam Kunj. Here we searched dry areas for coursers but could not dig one out. Whilst driving these dusty tracks we did get good views of a splendid and eventually rather tame black francolin and amazing views of the holy grail of Indian birds the near mythical spotted creeper. Superb. Also here we finally got good views of the black-rumped flameback, which had been heard frequently up to this point but had refused to show itself. At the end of the day we took a pleasant walk through a grassland area and along new canal. Here we had zitting cisticola, eurasian sparrowhawk and great views of pallid and pied harriers. A small pool of water held a huge number of frogs, presumably refugees from the usually wet areas inside the park.

Some of us opted for a night walk as dusk gathered and this produced views of Indian jungle nightjar and brief views of a jumpy common palm civet. A visit to the temple produced much better views of 2-3 common palm civets and some rhesus macaques with bad table manners. A large overly friendly nilgai female was also in attendance. A search for porcupine in the grounds of the nearby hotel drew a blank so we headed back for dinner.

## **Day 8 / 8<sup>th</sup> December**

## **Bagh area and Ranthambhore (Zone 3)**

Today we had a leisurely start and headed for the train station in good time to catch our train to Sawai Madhopur. We had plenty of time to drink in the quintessentially India atmosphere of this bustling station and many had their shoes shined for good measure. Considerably spruced up we finally boarded the train (it was just 20 minutes late) and settled down to our 2.5 hour journey. We rattled along through the dusty plains and eventually after a packed lunch we started to see the start of the Aravilli Hills and the boundary of the park.

Jumping off at Sawai Madhopur junction we were met by a huge reception committee and escorted to a waiting canter (open-topped bus). Stopping briefly to drop some of the team at a medical centre we headed on up to the hotel. Situated on the top of a low hill, the first sight of the Jhoomer Baori is always a stirring moment. Pretty soon we were being welcomed by the friendly staff and shown to our rooms. We did not have long to pull ourselves together before the first of our drives into the park.

For this visit in the park we were all in one canter and this proved to be very fortuitous. We drew a good Zone at the entrance gate and Pankaj seemed confident that we would score a tiger. Whilst we searched we had time to take in the incredible scenery of the park. The lakes and dry forest covered slopes dotted with innumerable run-down buildings from a bygone era. The lakes held many muggers (crocs) and we recorded a number of new birds including the stately woolly-necked stork. A pair of ruddy mongoose diverted us briefly from the job in hand, but mostly we kept at it. We worked areas where tiger cubs were known to be lurking and also followed up alarm calls. Eventually just as our confidence was ebbing we saw some people evidently watching a tiger and headed for them. By the time we got there the tiger had vanished into the grass and we waited patiently for some time but with no joy. Finally time got away from us and we resigned ourselves to having to try again the next day. But as we drove out we lucked in on a female walking by the road. As we watched she went into a charge and knocked down a previously unnoticed spotted deer calf. There was no struggle and now we were watching a large adult tiger carrying a feebly kicking deer by the head. Astonishing – Ian and Phil, with over 50 tiger sightings between them, were amazed. Staying late to watch this animal for just a few minutes meant we had to fly out of the park and we rattled along the roads and squeaked through the gate bang on time.

Before heading home we visited a nearby pool for the evening sandgrouse drinking session. Whilst we watched at least ten birds came in (in pairs) and gave very close views. A nice end to a great day.

## **Day 9 / 9<sup>th</sup> December**

## **Ranthambhore (Zones 1,2,3 &4)**

This morning we were up bright and early for breakfast and wrapped up warm we took to the jeeps. We got good zones again and enjoyed a perfect morning in the park. Because we were

necessarily split into three groups we all saw different things but by the end of the morning session most of us had seen the same things. For the zone 3 contingent the undoubted highlight was the two female tiger cubs that we viewed through dense foliage resting up in the shade. Female cubs always tend to be a bit shy than males and these were obviously intent on staying out of general view. The scope allowed us to get reasonable views though. Nearby the ranger tracking these cubs stood nonchalantly by, armed with just a big stick and a radio!

During the drive we bumped into mixed species feeding flocks that included small minivet, white-bellied drongo, grey-headed and red-breasted flycatcher and great tit. Around the fort one jeep got a fleeting glimpse of a painted spurfowl. The lakes produced plenty of water birds and as the sun slowly built up some warmth many of the muggers started to come out onto the bank to bask. Views of the fort from the lake area were superb.

In the afternoon we all drew different zones and had wildly different experiences. Phil's jeep cruised zone 2 and spotted one of the cubs that we had seen in the morning. Large numbers of rutting sambar were evident and we motored along a picturesque gorge scattered with flaky-barked gum trees (the racily named naked-lady-of-the-woods). A highlight was a fine male hen harrier hunting over a nearby grassy ridge – a real rarity in these parts. On the way out we bumped into the mother of the cubs, which caused a huge traffic jam on the main road into the park and not a little unseemly language. She walked away ignoring us all, secure in the knowledge that soon the park would be hers for the night.

Meeting the others we heard tales of mongooses fighting monitors and close-but-not-quite encounters with leopards. The evening checklist revealed a rich combined haul of species.

## **Day 10 / 10<sup>th</sup> December     Soorwal Lake and Ranthambhore (Zone 4)**

Another early start saw us bumping through the town of Sawai Madhopur on our way to Lake Soorwal, a large reservoir. The streets were coming alive, cooking fires were being kindled and everyone was brushing their teeth like crazy. Outside town things quickly got very rural and we stopped briefly to enjoy a large roost of Eurasian stone-curlew.

Walking the dam of the reservoir we enjoyed a pleasant couple of hours, mostly looking at birds. Plenty of shrikes were evident and we found three species, including our first good views of the southern grey. Huge flocks of ruff left their roosts and headed out into the wider countryside to feed. Bobbing about a small flock of pelicans fished hectically before being scared away by firecracker wielding fishermen. Huge great black-headed gulls were present in good numbers this year and smaller numbers of the more prosaic black-headed gull. New waders included dunlin, avocet and curlew.

The dry area at the back of the dam produced numerous bluethroats, stonechats and other passerines, many giving close views. Ian found a wryneck at long range and a small group of jungle bush-quail showed really well. A few fantastic roosting great thick-knees were found. Reaching the end of the dam we took to the jeeps and travelled a short distance to a spot where we tucked into a tasty mid-morning snack of puris and delicately spiced potatoes. Afterwards

we took a short walk and Ian found us three excellent chestnut-bellied sandgrouse and a fine blue pansy. Time was pressing us on however and we drove off in order to get to the blackbuck area.

En route we stopped at a few locations picking up some great larks, wheatears and two excellent yellow-wattled plovers. This drive takes us through numerous small villages and gives us a snapshot of life in this part of rural India. Everyone is smiling and inviting us in for bread and tea but we have to keep moving. Arriving at the blackbuck area we find that for the first time in many years the crops are just sprouting. Seeing blackbuck takes no time at all and before long we are sitting down to enjoy three superb males. Nearby Phil locates three Indian coursers – the icing on the cake of a very enjoyable morning.

After lunch we head out into the park in a canter. We draw zone 4 and enjoy a rather bumpy ride through some stunning scenery. Tiger was not to be on this trip, but it was not without its compensations. Pankaj took us to a stream running through a gorge and here we found a stunning brown-fish-owl. It was perched on a low cliff and as we watched it, it called and swooped onto a nearby ruddy mongoose. Great stuff. Other highlights included an educational immature crested serpent-eagle and a variety of pipits. A perched shikra was watched through the scope dispatching a huge cicada and showed a curious short white supercilium. Bumping out we heard alarm calls behind us as a tiger started its day but for us it was too late and we had to leave the park.

A sparsely attended night drive produced our first Indian fox, two jungle cats, several rufous-tailed hares, and a porcupine. A savannah nightjar located in a ploughed field allowed a close approach and was caught and examined in the hand.

## **Day 11 / 11<sup>th</sup> December     Ranthambhore (Zones 1, 4 & 5) and fort**

Today another early start saw us taking to the jeeps for another drive around the park. We had two jeeps in zone 1 and the other in zone 5. The zone 1 jeeps saw each other every now and again and helped each other out. The highlight in this zone was the location of a rather shy female Tiger just beside the road. Helen and Ruth reacted quite well when they discovered this large female just a few metres from their side of the jeep, although we all experienced a rush of adrenaline being so close to this top predator. The tigress crossed the road and went down into a small gully, but was evidently keen to return to the road. Skillful management of the situation by Dinesh and driver eventually saw the beast return to the road where she proceeded to lie down. Cameras out! The second jeep arrived after ten minutes and saw her just as she was walking away. We were on cloud nine and not much else penetrated through the euphoria – although a nice perched short-toed eagle did not go unnoticed.

Zone 5 reported a rather quiet drive with plenty of signs and tracks but nothing concrete. So it goes... Marvellous scenery though! We all met up at the gate by the fort steps and got a guided tour of this impressive structure by Pankaj. Entering through a series of huge gates we climbed up onto the plateau. The view was (as ever) stunning – looking out into the park with the lake in the foreground. Our target was the Ganesh temple and after half an hour we were there.

Many of us took offerings to Ganesh, rang the bell and received an orange bindi on the forehead. From there it was straight back to the waiting canter and a late lunch.

The afternoon was more of the same, with us drawing Zones 1, 4 and 5 out of the hat. All zones were reported to be quiet during an overcast afternoon. Zone 1 produced a fleeting glimpse of a tiger (the same one as in the morning) for Josh and Pankaj – the undoubted highlight. Those in Zone 5 scored black stork and common buzzard. After the drive two of the jeeps converged on the Tiger Moon pool and watched a good number of painted sandgrouse arrive to drink and a single female savannah nightjar. After dinner some of us went for a short walk in the grounds locating two porcupines and a cute Indian field mouse.

## **Day 12 / 12<sup>th</sup> December Ranthambhore (Zones 1,2 & 5) and Amlidhe**

This morning we were back in the park for early morning jeep safaris. We all picked different zones but the weather was cool and overcast and try as we might we could not find a tiger. One group heard one and we all chased tracks and followed up alarm calls but to no avail. In the end no-one in the park including ourselves saw a tiger – Ranthambhore is like that sometimes. On the way back we stopped off at a local shop to buy more textiles and Christmas presents.

In the afternoon we visited Amlidhe, the drive taking us through more of rural India. Gangs of children greeted us at every village and at many points in between. We stopped briefly to buy some splendid spicy pakoras in a small village and snacked on the drive. In the end we reached the banks of the mostly dry Banas River and motored through the sand and forded the shallow river. Driving up onto the floodplain we started to see some interesting birds including rosy starling, Indian bushlark and more ashy-crowned sparrow-larks. Driving on we headed for the deep pool in the river and spent a peaceful half an hour here having a cup of masala chai and watching the birds. Stars of the show were two black-bellied terns and an excellent fishing green heron. Next we searched the floodplain again hoping for a wolf. No sign and as dusk gathered we split into a team going back to the hotel and another which was staying out to spotlight on the way.

The spotlight team stayed on in the gathering gloom and when it got dark enough we started to look about. The moon was new and it was a lovely dark night and we were more than a little optimistic. This optimism was fully deserved as we had the best spot-lighting session imaginable. First up was 2-3 Indian foxes and the first of eight jackals. Ian found us a splendid striped hyena next and this fantastic animal just walked past us giving superb views. Stunning. Crossing the river again we headed out on the road back. Things got interesting here and first we spotted a splendid jungle cat that showed well and allowed a reasonably close approach. Next up incredibly was another cat species – the wildcat or Desert cat. It was just sitting out in the middle of a field and was most welcome. Could it get any better – well yes it could. Ian spotted a typically shy porcupine and then Phil spots some eyeshine that turns out to be a hunting leopard. Ian's spotlight reveals a superb tableau – a leopard stalking a wild boar. What a night. We watch the leopard through the scope and get good views of its head as it watches us from the ridge. Exciting stuff.

## **Day 13 / 13<sup>th</sup> December      transfer to Jaipur and a tour of the town**

Today we bade farewell to the Joomer Baori after an enjoyable stay. The five-hour bus ride to Jaipur was punctuated with occasional stops but the light was appalling and several of our regular stops were dry (and others were too wet!). Arriving at the Hilton in Jaipur we had a few moments to settle in before heading for the buffet. After lunch the team headed into Jaipur for a short cultural afternoon with Ajay (our guide for the time we were in Jaipur). We visited the Jantar Mantar, an observatory. Here we tried our best to take in the finer points of the various solar time-pieces. Then it was on to the city palace which had an excellent museum and some quite stunning buildings.

Some night stuff from other days –

1 night - After dinner we went out for a night drive. Good countryside but little to see. Just two Rufous-naped Hares, two still to be identified Rats (closest to Chestnut Rat) and several Large-tailed Nightjars.

1 night – a night of deer sightings with Sambar, Spotted Deer and Muntjac all seen. Tawny Fish Owl was the highlight though!

## **Day 14 / 14<sup>th</sup> December                      Jaipur and transfer to Delhi**

This morning the sun was out fully, and there was no haze at all, perhaps for the first time all trip. As a consequence it felt a little warmer! A little pre breakfast walk by the lake opposite the hotel produced only fine views of the water palace and a small selection of waders including Ruff, Temminck's and Little Stints, Wood Sandpiper and of course, the ubiquitous Black-winged Stilts.

After breakfast we departed at a leisurely nine o'clock for the Ambar Fort. Ajay took us through a bit of the history of the four hundred and fifty year old fort before we drove up the well wooded valley to the bottom of the fort. The place looked stunning in the morning light so we stopped to take a few pictures. Then it was on to the elephants for the ten minute ride up to the fort itself. I think all enjoyed their rides thoroughly, it's a jolly occasion with many elephants passing back down for the next load of foreign tourists. All are gaily painted and the mahouts have a little fun with everyone. The elephants enjoy a little snack at the end – mine took an apple with enthusiasm. Then it was over to Ajay again as he toured us through the ladies quarters, the maharani's apartment, the twelve queen's apartment, the Maharajah's too, and then to the piece de la resistance of Ambar, the hall of mirrors, an extraordinary place. Of course we didn't entirely ignore the wildlife (nor the hawkers). A Greater Mouse-tailed Bat was a good find on the ceiling of one of the apartments whilst overhead was an immature Long-legged Buzzard and an immature Bonelli's Eagle. We descended by jeep and returned the short distance into town and the luxurious surroundings of the Trident for lunch.

The journey to Delhi took us through much obviously affluent agricultural land with everything looking neat and tidy. As we neared Delhi the glossy world of large corporations with brand new offices (and call centers!) took hold – it was really quite a startling sight and a recent phenomenon. We braved some traffic jams before eventually reaching the Vasant Hotel by seven. We all met up for the last evening meal before several of the group headed for a midnight trip to the airport and the rest of us a somewhat earlier departure for Old Delhi station. Here we made the acquaintance of the Ranikhet Express and after some confusion over which carriage we were in settled in for our overnight train journey.

## Day 15 / 15<sup>th</sup> December

## Nainital area

We arrived a little over an hour late into Kathgodam station. Sudeep met us with his tempo traveller and we were soon off into the hills. The combination of brilliant unpolluted morning light, lovely forest and some colourful birds and flowers soon stopped us. We allowed two brief stops but could have spent the day here! The flowers were beautiful and there were two pretty *Adiantum* fern species. After Black and Ashy Bulbuls, Bronzed Drongos and Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike we enjoyed the brilliant red and yellows of Long-tailed Minivets, and two green woodpeckers in the shape of Grey-headed and Greater Yellownape. Soon though it was the turn of magnificent Red-billed Blue Magpies – wonderful stuff. Then we negotiated the remaining few thousand feet to Nainital noting many Himalayan Griffons and Steppe Eagles as we neared town. Large vehicle curfew totally missed, we left Sudeep on the edge of town (for the day!) and took a jeep with our luggage up to the Vikram. This elegant old Raj style hotel welcomed us well though it was extremely cold with frost still showing under nearby trees. After settling in and partaking of a very choice breakfast we headed out again, this time in another jeep.

We stopped above town and walked up to Snow View. The views there were all they should be, crystal clear even at midday and with only the very beginnings of clouds producing some grey shadows on the vast snow and icefields. It was difficult in a way to appreciate the size of these mountains for the closest point of the vast ridge we could see was eighty kilometres away. Spectacular it certainly was though. Indian Red Admiral and Indian Tortoiseshell were the only butterflies and the only mammals were the decidedly furry looking local variety of Hanuman Langur. Birds were a different matter though and we saw many. This was our first encounter with Laughingthrushes – abundant White-throated. There were wonderful, all cuddly and chatty, and very unafraid. Both Eurasian and Black-headed Jay were seen and more of those fabulous Red-billed Blue Magpies. A flock contained many Black-throated Tits and Green-backed Tits as well as Grey-hooded and Buff-barred Warblers and a Bar-tailed Treecreeper. A bunch of female Kalij Pheasants were sadly only seen by me. Our first Rufous Sibia was much appreciated.

Then it was on down the Pangot road. The forest of oaks *Quercus leucotrichophora* are memorable down here as are the precipitous slopes and views. Roadside cliffs held abundant ferns including more *adiantums* and *polystichums* and there was a pretty little violet and an architectural *rosularia* too. Highlight of the afternoon was probably the Yellow-throated Marten, an impressively large and furry beast, however the two woodpeckers, Himalayan and Rufous-

bellied, probably came close. A large flock of Black-faced Warblers also contained White-tailed Nuthatches and Yellow-browed Tits. More Rufous Sibilas were seen and plenty of Blue Whistling Thrushes. We pulled into the little community of Pangot and visited the Jungle Lodge. As the owner served up tea and really very good pakoras we were able to enjoy the birds they feed. A large flock of those White-throated Laughingthrushes were the mainstay with just one absolutely stunning Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush with them. Behind the building was another laughingthrush, this time Streaked. We pottered about the local fields as dusk fell. A stunning male Blue-fronted Redstart was probably the highlight though Striated Prinia, Mistle Thrush and Russet Sparrows were also enjoyed. We wound our way back up to Nainital as a purple and rose sun set behind us and the mountains in the distance took on an icy blue hue.

## **Day 16 / 16<sup>th</sup> December**

## **Sat Tal**

A pre-breakfast visit (IG only) to the High Fields up a short but steep hill from the Vikram was very productive. Highlights were Scaly-bellied Woodpecker, Blue-capped Redstart, Rufous-breasted Accentors, Pink-browed Rosefinches, Rock Buntings, Ash-throated Warbler, Striated and Streaked Laughingthrushes, and some gorgeous little Fire-capped Tits.

After breakfast we headed for Sat Tal. It's so full of birds up here that we had hardly left town before we stopped. It was for a group of raptors overhead. First was a superb Mountain Hawk-Eagle and then several Steppe Eagles, some of whom perched on the cliff above. Meanwhile nearer at hand were Blue-capped Redstart and a superb Scaly-bellied Woodpecker. Further down the road were numerous Himalayan Griffons with one or two coming very close! As we neared Sat Tal we started seeing Alpine Swifts.

First stop at Sat Tal was by the upper fields where we soon found Rosy Pipit and Grey Bushchats. A little down the road we noted Nepal House Martins flying over and our first superb White-headed Water Redstart. A Rufous-breasted Accentor gave us all a chance to see its finer points then in a gully we encountered a flock of pretty Himalayan Greenfinches. And then it started to get lively as we found, in quick succession, Speckled Piculet, Chestnut-crowned Bush-Warbler, Grey-backed Shrike and Spotted Forktails. In the trees by the temple were both Blackbird (male) and a female Grey-winged Blackbird.

We headed down to the lake and had our picnic by the dam with Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher and Small Niltava for company. The afternoon saw us wondering very slowly down the trail beyond. Very slowly is the very best way to do this and the results were superb with many exceptional birds. We started with the rather more mundane Red-throated Flycatcher and Blue Whistling Thrush. Soon though it was the turn of Slaty-headed Parakeets, Eurasian Kingfishers and both White-capped Water and Plumbeous Water Redstarts. Then we hit a very large though almost entirely hidden flock of undergrowth specialists. Some patient observation yielded some great birds. Red-billed Leiothrix and Blue-tailed Minla were joined by the rather more brazen Rufous Sibia and Green-tailed Sunbird. Black-chinned Babblers and a superb Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush were seen and so too Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler. In the clearing were abundant Himalayan Crested Bulbuls and a couple of Orange-flanked Bush Robins with the

briefest views of what may have been a male Golden Bushchat. A Sambar stag was seen briefly and many Hanuman Langurs. The trees were festooned with mosses and some ferns and orchids too.

En route back to Nainital we made brief stops for Dark-throated Thrush and a well-photographed immature Steppe Eagle. After dinner some of us elected to try a night walk down towards Pangot. A Sambar stag and calling Brown Wood Owl was all most got though lucky me saw a fantastic Mainland Serow!

## **Day 17 / 17<sup>th</sup> December      Bajun Valley, Ramnagar and Quality Inn**

Another cold night meant a crystal-clear dawn. A brief telescope search of the crags above the hotel revealed nothing though a Brown-fronted Woodpecker did appear in the tree by the back door!

After breakfast we left the Vikram and headed downhill. The road took us through some quite extraordinary countryside with the perfect tarmac surface wending ('sharp bend, carefully wend') its way across precipitous ridges. After a dozen or so kilometres we pulled up at the entrance to the Bajun (Mangoli) Valley. A Sailor butterfly enjoyed the morning sun in our parking area. We spent the entire morning in this magical valley, enjoying the human landscape and its inhabitants as well as the many birds. The latter started with a Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler by the temple on the pass. Then we were on to the long path through woods of oak and pine, descending slowly to the village. Children were on their way to school and the younger ones were on their way in to school too. Men passed on their way to work and ladies to the school or off to gather wood. It was still perishing under the trees so we tried to stop in sunny patches, an idea the birds seemed to have too though their sunny patches were always some distance from us. Not so the monkeys which were very close. Best birds on the way down were a great male Grey-winged Blackbird, a flock of Black Bulbuls, White-tailed Nuthatches, Brown-fronted Woodpecker, Grey-hooded Warblers, female sunbirds, and a stunning male Blue-throated Flycatcher.

Down past the school we studied a stream for a while. Kingfishers and Grey Wagtail were there but more unusual inhabitants included Striated Prinia, Aberrant Bush Warbler, Long-tailed Shrikes and the perhaps more expected White-capped Water Redstart. High above a Lammergeier gave great but short-lived views and a Peregrine perched atop the ridge. There were some fine flowers in the area with a large *Ranunculus* prominent and an even larger *Cardamine*. Indian Tortoiseshells were common and so too Large Whites, David found a blue with long tails. More birds followed in the shape of Grey Bushchat, Streaked Laughingthrush and Black-chinned Babbler before we hit a rich seam in the corner of some arable land. Here several Black Francolins were pottering about with two accentors, one a fine Black-throated, the other the lovely Rufous-breasted. Two noisy Striated Laughingthrushes sat in the bushes. Further back towards the road we encountered more laughingthrushes, this time a mixed flock of White-throated and Chestnut-crowned. Marcia spotted a fabulous Jungle Owlet sat out in the open. An easy target, and some Black-throated Tits and White-throated Fantails were taking no

prisoners. As we took this in a male Kalij Pheasant sped past. Best though was the bright red male Scarlet Finch that unfortunately sat right against the light!

After lunch we descended to Ramnagar and the Koshi River where we met up with Karan. We studied the barrage but found only lots of White-capped Water Redstarts and Plumbeous Water Redstarts. Upstream were flocks of Ruddy Shelduck, Little Egrets and both Little and Great Cormorants. Karan then took us northwards alongside the Corbett NP as we headed for the Quality Inn. A brief stop was allowed for Pallas's Fish Eagle and whilst there we notched Besra, Mountain Hawk-Eagle, Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrikes, Yellow-bellied Fantails, Golden-spectacled Warblers and Large Cuckoo-Shrikes.

Once settled into the Quality Inn we spent the remainder of the daylight time down a path and by the Koshi River. Birds on the way down included Grey-headed and Grey-crowned Pygmy Woodpeckers, Puff-throated Babblers and Crested Tree-Swifts. The river proved superb. Two flocks of Common Merganser sped downstream as we enjoyed several of both species of water redstart, Spotted Forktail and the lovely Little Forktail. A Pied Kingfisher sped past and as dusk approached a Brown Fish, rapidly followed by another one, flapped lazily through the hawking Bronze Drongos and bats!

## **Day 18 / 18<sup>th</sup> December**

## **Quality Inn area**

Dawn was a little cloudy and distinctly warmer than up at Nainital! Marcia and Kent were about in the garden early on and found a White-rumped Sharma and were bullied into stepping backwards by a flock of warblers.

After breakfast we potted down to the river with Karan though not before making the acquaintance of one of India's most charismatic birds, the White-crested Laughingthrush. No need to peer into the undergrowth for these stunners, they were in the carpark. Heading down the track, past numerous macaques and langurs we noted footprints of a Tigress. These overlay our own from the dusk return the night before. Not difficult to work out when she'd been down that way. Down by the river we had a marvellous hour admiring the very fine birds that live in these large bouldery rivers as they near the foot of the Himalaya. Brown Dippers and Spotted Forktails joined the many Plumbeous and White-capped Water Redstarts on little rocks in the river. A superb Crested Kingfisher appeared and we saw, all too briefly, a superb Wallcreeper which sadly flew off down stream in haste. Returning we saw a nice little borage in flower and a lovely pale looking caerulean.

We now headed uphill from Mohan towards the hills. We explored some ravines and roadsides by a small hamlet. Karan's suggestion of searching the crags for Goral was taken only partially seriously by all except Sudeep our driver who, after we'd walked on a bit, promptly spotted an animal that could only have been this species. Though he shouted his discovery none of us could see it! Water redstarts of both species were in the streams and we watched many Grey-hooded Warblers as well as Golden-spectacled Warbler and Blue-capped Redstart. Back by the village we stared for some time into a rather unpleasantly messy gully whilst macaques did some spectacular chasing and falling out of trees generally scaring the birds out. This had the

advantage that we saw White-crested Laughingthrushes again and a number of other birds came out but it probably meant that the remaining population of rare skulking birds was flattened by falling monkey! That is except for the White-tailed Rubythroat that only Karan saw.

Back for lunch. Beautiful sky-blue Common Wanderers flew around the garden along with a Common Crow and the Australian Bottlebrush had a Thick-billed Flowerpecker in residence. Nepal House Martins hawked over the river.

The afternoon was spent in the vicinity of Mohan and if the morning held some quite wonderful birds then the afternoon was even better! Woodpeckers were a target and though we actually saw few species we did manage four Great Slaty Woodpeckers flying over. Others seen included Greater Flameback, Grey-headed and Grey-crowned Pygmy Woodpeckers. Blue-throated Barbets gave great views and so did both Rufous-bellied and Small Niltavas. Very surprisingly all got great looks at Emerald Dove during a few minutes when all we seemed to see was that normally elusive species. Kalij Pheasant, an obliging Crested Kingfisher, Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher and Velvet-fronted Nuthatches were other highlights. The best though was saved for the end when a magnificent Spot-bellied Eagle Owl was found just inside the forest and we all had extended and excellent views of this rare and impressive beast. A Muntjac was the only mammal seen during the afternoon and butterflies were represented only by a very pale White-disc Hedge Blue.

## **Day 19 / 19<sup>th</sup> December      Drive into Dhikala and jeep safaris**

This morning we all met up before dawn. Cold again! Tea and breakfast soon warmed us up and once all the bags were packed into the jeep we were off at six thirty. We went covered to start with because of the cold but soon elected to remove the cover once it became clear that we were passing plenty of interest. Difficult to imagine that on day 19 of a tour one could see twenty-one new species of bird for the tour but that's exactly what happened, and it all started with a flurry of woodpeckers. Of the eight species seen during the day (Corbett is monumentally good for woodpeckers!) Fulvous-breasted and Streak-throated Woodpeckers and both Himalayan Flameback and Lesser Yellownappe were all new and all seen before we made the gate. We heard alarm calls down by the koshi river and stopped to see what was happening. The sight of a Sambar stag crossing the large river in the dawn light was really something. Further down we found a vast flock of birds. There were all sorts in this – highlights were good views of both Velvet-fronted and Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches, Blue-winged Minlas, White-crested Laughingthrushes, Black-chinned Babblers, Thick-billed Flowerpecker, and all sorts of bulbuls and warblers.

We stopped at the entrance gate to complete formalities and then were on our way into the stunning scenery and varied habitats of Corbett National Park. The valleys of wide rocky rivers and narrows streams were backed by patches of tall grass and scrub and then various forest types, including areas dominated by Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and others by *Terminalia*. We pulled up under a leafless tree and were treated to a barbet spectacular as Lineated, Blue-throated and Coppersmith, with at least five of each, sat in the bright sun. Later we saw another tree with lots

of Hill Barbets! Woodpeckers continued to be everywhere with Greater and Lesser Yellownapes, Himalayan Flamebacks and Grey-crowned Pygmy Woodpeckers prominent. A large flock of birds belted through the tree tops but the brilliant hues of Scarlet and Long-tailed Minivets stopped long enough to be enjoyed. A fantastic Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo trailed its tail streamers and called raucously above us.

We stopped for tea but not before Karan had found us a superb little Collared Falconet, and regaled us with tales of its ferocity. Then it was to the Ramganga River where we watched both Pallas's and Lesser Fish Eagles along with Crested Kingfisher. Overhead flew Silver-rumped Spinetails. In the water were some truly huge fish. One was a kind of catfish but the most impressive was a leviathan named the Golden Mahseer, a sleek and powerful six-footer! The Muggar and the Gharial (or at least one of the latter) were just a bit bigger! Further along we saw Changeable Hawk-Eagle and then descended again to the Ramganga at High Bank. More of the same river birds here along with a large flock of Great Cormorants. We espied two otters in the distance and watched them for some time – they are such great fun. These appeared (to me) to be European Otters but opinion was divided. Then as we were setting off a shout – 'Tiger'. We returned to the bank and in the minute we'd been away a tiger had come down to just where the otters had been, swum for a few seconds, and then returned to the forest! We never saw it!

Onwards though we were starting to see mammals. Sambar and Spotted Deer as well as the odd Muntjac. A Yellow-throated Marten sped across the road, only Karan seeing it. Then it was time to speed on and reach Dikhala which we did around 12.40. A brief pre-lunch potter around the grounds revealed some staggeringly good birds. Perhaps best was the Blue-bearded Bee-eater which liked the elephant area. Running it close though were male Little Pied Flycatcher, male White-tailed Rubythroat, immature White-tailed Eagle and an adult *peregrinator* race Peregrine.

We went for an elephant ride in the afternoon. This is an experience not to be missed though in truth it is not great for photography nor birdwatching, especially when nearly the whole time was spent trying to locate a tiger evidenced by warning calls. Of course more success in this department would have been great but it was not to be. We saw plenty of deer, a Wild Boar or two and, a real highlight, just as we were re-entering the compound, a Porcupine. This at one point had a monkey in its way so it went into big quill mode and walked straight at the monkey who judiciously moved to one side. There were birds too, the highlight here definitely being very many Red Junglefowl, seen and heard – it sounded like a barnyard out there! Cinereous Vulture, male Pied Harrier and Grey-backed Shrikes were other good birds. And our mahout showed us a terrapin in pond!

## **Day 20 / 20<sup>th</sup> December      transfer to Delhi including the Ganges**

The early morning trip for one jeep was curtailed when Kent suffered a horrible dislocation of the hip. It happened in a jeep just a few hundred yards from the Dhikala compound so we gently returned there to decide what to do. After a deal of fulmination we again set forth, this time aiming for Ramnagar. We progressed very slowly to try and keep the pain to a minimum

though there were rough moments. Pin-tailed Green Pigeon was seen en route! Kent was incredibly brave throughout and many hours later we emerged from the forest into bustling Ramnagar. The doctors at the hospital here soon sent us on the Kazipur an hour down (a thankfully tarmac) road. Here we entered a tiny clinic where an orthopaedic surgeon soon took Kent under his wing. An operation soon followed and a rather euphoric Kent was seen shortly afterwards! Against the doctors advice but with their willing help at dusk we were kitting out a van to take Kent and Marcia to Delhi. They arrived several hours later.

## **Day 21 / 21<sup>st</sup> December**

## **flight home**

I gather all, including Kent and Marcia, made their flight the next morning!

## **Day 21 / 21<sup>st</sup> December**

## **Bijrani, Corbett National Park**

I spent the whole day exploring the Bijrani area of Corbett with Karan. This proved an area of equal beauty and diversity to Dhikala though quite different in character. Wide bouldery river courses cut cliffs out of the alluvial hills. The forest was drier and more varied and the many little streams winding along nullahs were a delight. Many of the same species that were seen in Dhikala or Quality Inn were seen here but there was an abundance of the new. Though Sal was again dominant here we found *Terminalia tomentosa*, *Adina cordifolia*, *Albizia procera* and *Mitragyna parviflora*. The lantana had 'suffered' management here and had been cleared from areas, even the roots, with an opening of the landscape.

Grasslands were frequent but small in size but nevertheless we managed to find some cracking grassland birds starting with Lesser Coucal and Bright-headed Cisticola. Later we were to see the bright heads with Zitting Cisticolas for comparison. Chats were frequent in this habitat with Grey Bushchats throughout, Stonechats here and there, a single female Hodgson's Bushchat, and at least one White-tailed Stonechat – this seemingly a rarity in the park. Variable Wheatear was also seen and Indian Robins, Grey-breasted Prinia and shrikes, Long-tailed and Brown, were common. Seedeaters were varied. We saw several groups of buntings, their winter garb making them very confusing. Several White-capped and Chestnut-eared Buntings were seen and there were also Little and possibly Grey-necked too. Red Avadavats flew about with both Scaly-breasted and White-rumped Munias too. Though we failed to find the grassland specialist Red-capped Babbler here we found something much rarer, the Tawny-bellied Babbler, a new bird for Karan within the park.

Mammals were quite good in this area. Spotted Deer and Sambar appeared at regular intervals and Langurs and Macaques were much commoner than in Dhikala. A single Muntjac scurried past. Without doubt the highlight of the day was a female Tiger who wandered down the track in front of us and crossed a wide bouldery river. We had her in sight for around fifteen minutes and watched her spray marking, and then having found something interesting in the nullah she sniffed it and rolled in it. Karan and co surmised that it was the male's marker as by now she'd started uttering her mating call. This deep throaty not really a roar but ... sound was so deep it

almost seemed to come from within one! Eventually she disappeared towards the ridge where, judging from the alarm calls, the male she sought, was waiting. Needless to say we went and tried to find the latter. Fresh footprints of said male were along the track with another female's pugmarks joining his – but we couldn't see them.

We stopped for lunch in a little nullah with a stream running down it. The sun was now warm and the butterflies were out. Blue Glassy Tiger was common and here we also saw the stunning brilliant blue Blue-spotted Crow. Also seen during the day were Tiny Grass Blue, Lemon Emigrant, Lemon Pansy, Common Crow and Chocolate Pansy. There were dragonflies too with an Orthetrum and a pretty little damselfly joined by the Indigo Dropwing.

Meanwhile more birds were being seen. A fig tree held Great Indian Hornbill, a magnificent sight. In the morning we'd seen Oriental Pied Hornbill at the entrance gate. In the trees Pin-tailed Green Pigeon, Black-headed Orioles, various minivets and barbets, and abundant woodpeckers with Streak-throated and Black-rumped Flameback the most common. Collared Falconet, Eurasian Griffon and Rufous-bellied Hawk-Eagle soared overhead whilst parked in the trees were Changeable Hawk-Eagles. Swifts occupied the sky with Crested Tree Swifts common and Silver-rumped Needletails and White-throated Needletails common. Late afternoon we stopped by the Bijrani Guesthouse after more "close but no cigar" encounters with Tigers, and a brief glimpse of a crocodile, we walked about for a few minutes enjoying the Long-billed and Olive-backed Pipits, River and Red-wattled Lapwings and a Variable Wheatear. On the way out we saw a female Elephant and a White-bellied Redstart.

Late on I went for a night drive uphill. Porcupine was the first and then a Muntjac, then in some fields a group of seven Wild Boar. Further up we found a large male by the roadside. Then, on some crags, we spotted a Goral – a kind of goat-antelope.

## **Day 22 / 22<sup>nd</sup> December**

## **Quality Inn**

Early morning I ventured along the main road towards the first nullah past the teak plantation. There was a large flock of birds in the trees and low bushes including many warblers and nuthatches. Walking up the sandy track by the nullah Leopard pugmarks were evident and so too along the stream itself where the tiny but perfectly formed prints of Leopard Cat were obvious. Under the trees were several flycatchers including Little Pied and Rufous-gorgetted. A male Black-throated Sunbird was a glorious shimmering thing and an Aberrant Bush Warbler was a nice find. Back in the Quality Inn I sat outside for breakfast by the Australian Bottlebrush tree. A very good spot to watch the comings and goings of a Crimson Sunbird and its hassles with the Oriental White-eyes!

I walked down to the river with the intention of photographing some of the wonderful birds found in winter along the large rivers that drop through the Himalayan foothills. There were Brown Dippers and Crested Kingfishers but I ignored these seeking the fantastic Spotted Forktails which proved quite a lot more accommodating than the Wallcreeper that I spent half an hour walking patiently after as it fossicked in the riverbed. Overhead two Slender-billed Vultures soared. Walking down the track I watched a brilliant orange and blue Rufous-bellied

Niltava at close range whilst a pack of White-crested Laughingthrushes allowed very close approach. A Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike was higher in the trees.

I waded across the river – it doesn't look deep and didn't get far above the knee though the current was strong – if you try it yourself, take care! A sandy scrubby area looked interesting and sure enough there was a Dark-throated Thrush there along with lots of flycatchers, warblers, bulbuls and the like. The place was full of birds. I moved over to the irrigation channel and followed it slowly back downstream. A marvellous place this. What surely must have been a Long-billed Thrush scuttled away whilst Emerald Doves were hardly easier to see. Finding a spot with massive bird activity I sat and watched where a little stream allowed some light into the thick lantana. Sure enough a fabulous male Chestnut-headed Tesia hopped into view, later another male too. Perhaps more rarely seen were the Spotted Bush-Warbler and the Grey-sided Bush-Warbler both of which allowed cracking prolonged close-up views. Whistler's Warblers, Grey-hooded Warblers and many Blue-winged Minlas dropped in for a drink and a bathe and Black-chinned Babblers were abundant. At another little stream a White-tailed Rubythroat posed briefly. Bronzed Drongos were abundant and a female Black-naped Monarch was a new bird for the trip. It was very hard to tear oneself away and go back for lunch!

A Collared Falconet sat in a tree in the garden as I left the Quality Inn and soaring above with the many Crested Tree-Swifts was an Oriental Honey Buzzard. Then it was a long drive back to Delhi where I settled in for the night.