



Tigers of the Raj

And Bharatpur's Fabulous Wildlife

A Greentours Natural History Holiday

18th November to 9th December 2000

Lead by Fiona Dunbar and Ian Green

Daily reports compiled by Fiona Dunbar

Day 1 / Sat 18th Nov

Departure from the UK

We departed just a little late from Heathrow and arrived into Delhi more or less on time.

Day 2 / Sun 19th Nov

Delhi to Bharatpur

After a hearty breakfast and a stroll round the grounds – our first White-browed Wagtail, Ring-necked and Alexandrine Parakeets, a Common Tailorbird and Common Mynahs, Purple Sunbirds, and a lovely White-throated (or Smyrna) Kingfisher – and then into the Tempo Traveller. Driving out through Delhi was full of interest, roadside markets selling saris, fruit, flowers and spices, cattle wandering the roads unconcerned amongst the dense and erratically driven traffic. Common roadside birds were Black Kite, House Crow, Common and Bank Mynahs and there were a couple of Coppersmith Barbets. As more agricultural land appeared, so did White-throated (or Smyrna) Kingfishers, Paddybirds, Little Egrets and lots of Ring-necked Parakeets. A pleasant lunch stop had us watching White-browed Wagtails, Egyptian Vultures and Purple Sunbirds from beneath a shady awning. Moving on we passed through villages and small towns, into more and more rural areas, where water buffalo, camel-drawn carts and fields with Painted Storks, Purple Gallinules, Red-wattled Lapwings and various egrets were more common.

We arrived at Keoladeo National Park around four and went out for a walk at five after settling into our rooms with balconies looking into the park. Rattan Singh, a very knowledgeable naturalist had met us and we walked towards the park headquarters. A Golden Jackal crossed our path, and a chatty bunch of Jungle Babblers. A lovely view of a Grey Hornbill followed, along with Pied Bush Chats, Indian Robins and Magpie Robins. A Woolly-necked Stork was very nice, and we had great views of a pair of preening Collared Scops Owls. As the light faded we headed back, with the sound of Dusky Eagle Owls calling around us. Over dinner there was a family of Five-striped Palm Squirrels catching moths around the lights. Ian saw five species of mammals on his night wanderings – Common Toddy Cat, Nilgai, Chital, Golden Jackal and Black-naped Hare!

Day 3 / Mon 20th Nov Bharatpur: The Main Track and Jatoli Canal

The staff kindly did us an early breakfast and we were on our way by six-thirty. We were soon clocking up the common but nonetheless beautiful species like Brahminy and Pied Mynah, Magpie Robin and Rose-ringed Parakeets by the dozen. Walking off the main track we were surrounded by Common Wood Shrikes, Hoopoes, Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, Plain and Ashy Prinias, and a pair of gorgeous Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches. We got fantastic views of three owl species – five Spotted Owlets sitting together, a pair of Collared Scops Owls and a pair of huge Dusky Eagle Owls on their enormous nest! Rattan Singh found us a fantastic pair of what were probably Indian Nightjars sitting immobile in a tree, and we had gorgeous scope-filling views of them.

Back on the main track it just kept getting better, with lots of White-throated (or Smyrna) and Pied Kingfishers and a new species for the reserve, spotted by Jane, a juvenile Blue-eared Kingfisher, which allowed us to get some great photographs. The herons were also great with Purple, Grey, and Little as well as Indian Pond Heron and one Black Bittern. There were Intermediate Egrets mixed with Black-headed Ibises and Purple Gallinules, all very close to the track. One pool was covered in Glossy Ibises, Black-winged Stilts, Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon, Gadwall and Pintail, and both overhead and perched we saw numerous raptors such as Honey Buzzard, Crested Serpent Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, Imperial Eagle and Bonelli's Eagle. Also in the air were Woolly-necked and Painted Storks, with distant Black-necked Storks and Sarus Cranes. We had fantastic views also of Black-rumped Flameback (we often called this woodpecker Lesser Goldenback – one of its old names), Yellow-crowned and Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers within a few minutes of each other! What with stops for the grazing Nilgai, Golden Orioles and both Brown-headed (also known as Large Green!) and Coppersmith Barbets we did not make it to the temple for tea but returned to the lodge for lunch.

At three we headed out again to where we had left off before, stopping at a pool to watch Pied Kingfishers, cormorants and egrets fishing in a pool thick with fish – the largest ones could be seen thrashing about in the shallows. There was also a lovely view of a Common Kingfisher for comparison to the morning's Blue-eared one. A large Common Grey Mongoose trotted down the

path unconcerned by other traffic and a troupe of Rhesus Macaques, Nilgai and Grey Francolins all crossed the path. We walked down the side of the Jatoli Canal, watching numerous Night Herons by the track, Spot-billed Ducks, several Crested Serpent and Greater Spotted Eagles. There was a lovely pair of Black-necked Storks displaying atop a small tree, the yellow eyes of the female and the blue of the male visible through the scope. Heading back on the rickshaws as dusk was approaching we saw several large male Blue Bulls or Nilgai quite near the track, a very approachable Barred Buttonquail and finally a silhouetted Dusky Eagle Owl.

Most of us went out on a night walk – well worthwhile with a group of five Golden Jackals, three Nilgai and eight or so Chital being seen – it is quite surprising how unconcerned the animals are, and we watched all for some time. Ian got a look at an Indian Gerbille, very cute, and we all finished with a huge Crested Porcupine just outside the lodge.

Day 4 / Tues 21st Nov Bharatpur: Ram Bund to Sapan Mori & Mansarover

A second early start, this time on foot, as we walked round a circuit taking in Ram Bund then to Sapan Mori. From near the start we had a mixture of wetland and forest birding, walking along raised brick-surfaced walkways lined with trees between areas of grassland and shallow pools. Usually more of the grasslands would have been lakes, but the monsoon had been poor and the area was very dry. This did have the effect of concentrating all the waterfowl close to the path in wet areas. There were Little, Great and Intermediate Egrets, Little and Great Cormorants, Teal, Lesser Whistling Duck, Cotton Pygmy Goose, beautifully plumaged Pintails, Purple Gallinules, Bronze-winged Jacanas, three species of Kingfisher, and ten or so Black-necked Storks. There were also a hundred or so Common Cranes overhead, and a couple of Sarus Cranes and Woolly-necked Storks in the fields. In the trees and grasslands were Clamorous Warblers, numerous beautifully lit Spotted Owlets and Collared Scops Owls and even a lovely pair of Dusky Eagle Owls. Pied Mynahs were very tame, as were Plain Prinias. There was a fruiting tree with Long-tailed and Small Minivets, Coppersmiths and Brown-headed Barbets and White-browed Fantail. We saw numbers of Nilgai, the males with their little devil's horns and bluish coats, and Chitals with branched horns covered still with velvet. Particularly nice was a Plum-headed Parakeet, good views of a Grey Nightjar and a beautiful Wryneck and several Long-tailed Shrikes. Rickshaws awaited us on the main trail and we were peddled back to the lodge, pausing for an attractive family of Grey Francolins next to the path, a snake (Checkered Keelback) killed by a mongoose and a lovely Black-rumped Flameback.

After lunch I saw a Golden Jackal in the back garden of the lodge, and we met up again at 3 to head out in rickshaws to the Mansarover part of the reserve, where we hoped to find cranes. As we were peddled along, something ran across the road – at first I thought toddy cat, but that wasn't right. We stopped and looked for it. There was a wide canal behind the trees it had headed into, so it could not have moved too far. Amazingly we did catch sight of it again about ten feet in front of us next to the water – a cat with a short, black banded tail and sandy colouring, later positively id'd as a Jungle Cat. At the same spot Rattan Singh found a brown morph Collared

Scops Owl and a slim, olive-coloured snake (Common Kukri Snake) glided along very near where the cat went into hiding in a hollow log. We could see the cats ear poking out of a hole in the log! On the other side of the track was a plain of grass and water, Nilgai and Sarus Cranes.

We took a side track and headed out beside this plain. Someone had spotted a large Indian Rock Python and after a little searching we saw it coiled up on a tree branch in an egret roosting site. As we walked along the path, the sound of thousands of chuntering wildfowl got louder, until we came out along a small promontory overlooking a watery plain filled with ducks, geese, cranes and many other things. A large group of Spoonbills were close to us beyond the ubiquitous selection of herons and gallinules, and beyond them were thousands of ducks and geese including Red-crested Pochard, Pochard, Bar-headed Geese, Cotton Pygmy Goose and many more. Painted Storks and Common Cranes circled overhead and in the mid-distance stood a pair of Siberian Cranes - two of the nine remaining of the Western race. Finally it was time to leave all these and the fine group of Sambar and head back. As we were leaving, a harem of Nilgai got very agitated, with the male standing guard and staring back towards where we had come from – a researcher was catching Sarus Cranes – no easy task as we observed!

Day 5 / Wed 22nd Nov The Taj Mahal and Agra Fort

Our Tempo Traveller and driver met us at 8 and we drove for an hour to the Taj Mahal. En route SD, our local guide for the cultural bit, who had really quite a good knowledge of birds, spotted a couple of Black Ibises which we stopped to look at, along with the Indian Roller that was sat above it. Shortly after our first glimpse of the Taj Mahal in all its glory, we spotted a tiny Small Indian Mongoose running around the buildings, the first of several we were to see today. On the way back to the main gate we walked through the gardens, looking at a surprising number of birds, which included Grey Hornbill and Coppersmith and Brown-headed Barbets in the labeled trees.

After a very good lunch at the Opal Restaurant, with much experimentation in the nan/paratha / roti/chappati department we headed for nearby Agra Fort. Once inside the imposing red stone fortifications one is quite taken aback by the delicately carved red stone and white marble palace buildings, with flamboyant arches and more delicate depictions of flowers and vines picked out in semi-precious stones – cornelian, jade, coral, lapis lazuli. In the evening, a local naturalist and photographer called Bolu gave us an excellent slide show of birds and animals he had photographed in the park. Bolu at present has the job of daily looking for signs of the Tigress (who has recently colonised Bharatpur – quite a surprise when she arrived) to monitor her movements – nice work if you can get it.

Day 6 / Thurs 23rd Nov Bharatpur: Mansarover, Forest Nursery & Temple

A slow start to the day due to thick fog! Despite this we had good looks at Black-rumped Flameback, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Plain and Ashy Prinias and a flock of Oriental White-eyes. On reaching the Keoladeo Temple at the centre-point we had cups of masala chai and biscuits which the Jungle Babblers took a great interest in. Two Black-rumped Flamebacks and a Hoopoe were also in attendance. As we walked on from the temple the mist started to lift and the flocks of ducks and geese and herds of Sambar came into view. Butterflies started to come out with the sun, Salmon Arab, Yellow and White Orange-tips, and Peacock, Lemon, Grey and Blue Pansies. We worked our way past the Shoveler, Pintail, lone Dalmatian Pelican, Bar-headed Geese, Cotton Pygmy Goose, Red-crested Pochard, Tufted Duck and Ferruginous Duck towards where the cranes could be heard. Rounding a corner, we came across them feeding about thirty yards off the path – a pair of Sarus Cranes and the pair of Siberian Cranes. They were only a few yards apart, and several times one or other would begin displaying to protect its territory, wings unfurled, neck and head held vertical and calling loudly – there should be some good photographs from this morning! On the way back some of us stopped for a good look at some White-tailed Plovers, and saw Monitor Lizard and a very bright Bluethroat. Ian and Steve stayed out with the cranes and saw Siberian Rubythroat, Pallid Harrier, Paddyfield Pipit and Red-headed Vultures.

After lunch and a couple of hours rest we set out on foot towards the Forest Nursery. We had an excellent couple of hours watching a variety of birds from basically the same spot, with particularly good views of Orange-headed Ground Thrush, Ashy Drongo, Small Minivets, Brown-headed and Coppermith Barbet and Verditer and Grey-headed Flycatchers. We all watched the Orange-headed Ground Thrush out in the open for several minutes, and Ian was particularly pleased when Rattan Singh found the tail feathers of a female Long-tailed Nightjar, although we failed to see the original owner.

From here we walked on towards the little temple. Bolu went past on his motorbike and stopped to tell us about the latest activities of the Tigress. Outside the temple, the younger of the two orphaned Chital that live there was standing companionably with two men sat watching the grassy hollow where a resting Golden Jackal and later a large male Nilgai could be seen. Baloo, the nice young hindu monk in charge of the temple invited us in to see the python he had in his kitchen. We followed in, not quite knowing what to expect, and curled up on top of the lit wood-burning stove, was a baby (two foot long) python. Apparently it had made its home there and caught rats and mice that were also attracted to the kitchen. To demonstrate this fact Baloo knocked on the side of a cardboard box on a shelf and out ran four rats and several House Mice!

On the way back to the lodge we saw an Indian Nightjar flying. Tirath Singh met us at 6.30 and took us (lots of jackals in the headlights) to his small restaurant and hotel for drinks before dinner. It was a very pleasant evening.

We set out with Rattan Singh on the start of the circuit we had walked three days previously. The birds were again excellent and we were photographing Pied Mynahs, Bronze-winged Jacanas, Purple Gallinules, a Lagger Falcon, Imperial Eagle, Bluethroats, Ring-necked Parakeets. . There were several Flamebacks and a couple of Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and a Wryneck, Bay-backed Shrike and Common Woodshrike. A *Phylloscopus* warbler with a strange call bemused us – it still remains unidentified - and an Oriental Reed Warbler was a good find. On the water were all the duck and geese species we had seen before with Comb (or Knob-billed) Ducks, Sarus Cranes with young, Black-necked and Lesser Adjutant Storks. Raptors were everywhere in the trees – Greater Spotted and Crested Serpent Eagles being most common, with a beautiful female Marsh Harrier, several Shikras and a Peregrine Falcon of the northern ‘*calidus*’ race. In the dry area by Rattan Singh’s village we saw a bird party of Little and Long-tailed Minivets with a Fan-tailed Warbler and Coppersmiths. In the same area were very photographable Spotted Owlets and a Brown-headed Barbet. Three Wild Boar made a hasty retreat. On the return leg of the walk we found a Lesser Spotted Eagle, too, as well as great views of Shikra and Marsh Harrier.

In the afternoon at three the rickshaws met us and took us to Sapan Mori along the main track. En route we stopped for Temminck's Stints, and five species of wagtail – White, White-browed, Grey, Yellow and Citrine. At the start of Sapan Mori we spent quite some time looking at the goings-on in the tiny pool there – Spoonbills feeding actively, Purple Herons fishing, an elegant River Tern flying overhead, three species of kingfisher hunting and calling, beautiful Spot-billed Ducks and egrets picked out in the afternoon sunlight. On one side of the track was a grassy field covered in Great and Intermediate Egrets, Spoonbills and Black-headed Ibis, with Glossy Ibis and Purple Gallinules in some numbers in the foreground. In the bushes at the edge we watched Black Bittern and Little Herons hunting, and an Indian Sawback (a terrapin) waded out into the water. There was a selection of raptors perched in trees – Great Spotted and Imperial Eagles included. At the far point of our walk we saw four species of vulture gathered in two trees – Egyptian, Long-billed, White-backed and Red-headed. At ten to seven we met for a quick visit to the temple. Baloo met us and after a quick check of the walls for Toddy Cats (also known as Common Palm Civet) we sat down and waited, looking at photos that people had sent to Baloo of the wild animals they had photographed in the temple – Fishing Cat, Jungle Cat, Toddy Cat, Porcupine, Chital, Python and Cobra. Fi spotted two eyes shining green/orange in the enormous Peepal tree in the centre of the temple – a Toddy Cat. We could see its face and an area of fur, and after a few minutes spotted two more. Climbing the steps to the roof gave us a much better vantage point and we watched two adults and a youngster resting in the branches or clambering about for some time. At one point one of them approached a bundle of fur on a branch – a sleeping Langur Monkey, sniffed, and beat a hasty retreat! We waited for ten minutes or so after that for the Toddy Cats to come down to have their evening roti, but they were probably waiting for us to go, so we did, to supper.

Day 8 / Sat 25th Nov

Journey to Ranthambhor & ‘Game Drive’

There was time for a quick walk for those who wanted before a late breakfast this morning. At nine-thirty Ratan Singh came to see us off, giving us garlands of marigolds and roses and some special bengali sweets for the journey. At the train station a shoeshine boy did an incredible job on Ian’s scruffy boots, mending unraveling stitching into the bargain, and we watched Indian life with as much interest as they watched us. The journey was very comfortable in our second-class air-conditioned carriage, and two and a half hours later, after eating our picnic lunches on the train, we arrived at Sawai Madhopur. Our friend Ashlish was there to meet us and we were in the hotel ten minutes later. The old hunting lodge is set on the top of an outcrop near the entrance to the reserve, and the rooftop balconies are great! Very shortly we were out in the jeep for our first trip into Ranthambhor. There were huge numbers of Chital and Sambar. Many of the latter were magnificent males with huge horns, and we saw two younger males sparring. Stopping by several waterholes the wildlife was particularly dense, Chital, Sambar, Wild Boar, and Mugger Crocodiles being most noticeable. There were some very large crocs, one basking on the bank quite near us had huge yellow teeth. There were good numbers of water birds, Little Ringed Plover, a good number of Painted Storks, Woolly-necked Storks, Darters, Shoveler and Lesser Whistling Ducks, Black-tailed Godwits, Temminck's Stints, Whiskered and Indian River Terns. There were some gorgeously coloured Alexandrine Parakeets and a lovely Stork-billed Kingfisher perched by a favourite pool. A new mammal was a Ruddy Mongoose leisurely searching the river edge. An excellent introduction to Ranthambhor

Day 9 / Sun 26th Nov

Ranthambhor: ‘Game Drives’ and Jhoomar Baori

I stayed back and spent the morning with the langurs on the roof top terrace, watching Plum-headed Parakeets, Treepies and Chestnut-shouldered Petronias in the trees next to me. So, Ian reports on the morning - on the morning drive there were plenty of the usual Chital and Sambar and lots of Wild Boar. Birdwise we came across plenty of variety with Hoopoes, White-throated (or Smyrna) Kingfishers, a Spotted Owlet and lots of Plum-headed Parakeets. An excellent Crested Serpent Eagle sat with his wings spread in a most odd-looking pose. At one point we heard a group of Jungle Babblers babbling much more loudly than normal. They were in a gully below the track and as we peered to see what they were making so much fuss about, a superb Jungle Cat trotted out into the open and crossed the road in front of us only some twenty yards away. As we hurriedly reached for our cameras it slipped out of the brilliantly lit grasses and into the woods and then was gone – a really magical experience.

After a light lunch we set off again. Ian got out of the jeep to walk round some of the dry land outside the reserve. Inside the reserve there was a report of one of the two-year-old cubs just having been seen on our track, so we concentrated our efforts on that area. We could still see the fresh pugmarks of the young female where she had just walked down the track. At one waterhole there were Little and Intermediate Egrets, and two impressive young male Chital with horns still in velvet came down to drink while we watched. We got out of the jeep for a few minutes near

one of the ranger stations, where there were Red-breasted Flycatchers, Black Redstarts, Grey Francolins and also some beautiful Painted Francolins. Shortly after, we returned to the same spot as Ashlish had heard Peacock and Langur warning calls, and found a Golden Jackal trotting around. Tirath came past with his canter full of WWFN people – they had just seen the cub, but it had gone by the time we got there. On the way out of the park we picked up Ian walking back down the road. He had seen lots of different dry land species – Rufous-fronted Prinia, Grey-necked Bunting, Indian Bushlark, Tawny Pipits, Stone Curlew and Painted Sandgrouse. A group of beautiful Rock Bush Quails afforded good views and a Black-shouldered Kite sat atop a tree watching his peering at all the smaller birds! There were still more – Stoliczka's Bushchat, Rufous-tailed Shrike and Red-tailed Wheatear being three of the most unusual. He also found a colony of Indian Desert Gerbilles in the middle of one of the arable fields. Ashlish stopped to say hello to the park director, who was walking down the track to the hotel, 'inspecting' the buffer zone of the park. He has been here three years and had got a reputation for being very good for the park and being positive about conservation of Tigers and their habitat.

Day 10 / Mon 27th Nov Ranthambhor: 'Game Drives' and Arid Area

Ian took the group in in the morning. I wandered over the hillside below the hotel and saw lots of Small Minivets, Common Woodshrikes and Green Bee-eaters.

(Over to Ian for the next bit). We drove past some Nilgai as we neared the park entrance and then it was into cool woodlands of Flame of the Forest and Dhok. We drove past a few Langurs and Chital but there was little about this early and we soon saw why – there were innumerable Tiger tracks along the track – a female and two cubs. Their spoor was rather confusing to us uninitiated and was going in all directions. We stopped and listened to see if any warning calls would give her position away but there was little to help us until Ashlish pointed out the crow which was calling in a forceful and continuous fashion a little way up the slope from us. We peered through the trees for some time but were unable to see anything and so after a while we continued. At the next guard post we got out and walked across the rock to a pool on the far side of which were numerous Chital grazing. There were several striking White-browed Wagtails near the water's edge and Jane found two Brown Crakes below a dam. We moved on into a pretty valley where several Langurs, Peacocks and another Brown Crake appeared and a Stork-billed Kingfisher just before we left. Another guard post and here were Chital, Peacocks, vast numbers of Red-vented Bulbuls and a few Indian Silverbills by a drinking pool. In the distance were lots of Yellow-legged Green Pigeons on a treetop. After a couple of Black-rumped Flamebacks and a group of Grey Francolins we made a decision to head for the lakes. En route we noted Crested Honey Buzzard (and we could see the rather puny crest too!) and a Crested Serpent Eagle as well as a single Chinkara. By the lakes were the usual variety of waterbirds with Painted Stork, Purple Heron, Lesser Whistling Duck, Indian River Tern, Temminck's Stint, Black-tailed Godwit and an assortment of widespread common species. There were also plenty of Crocodiles – there must have been a dozen. Sambar were plentiful and there were also a goodly number of Wild Boar,

these enjoying the plant-rich shallows where their damp faces and snouts draped in vegetation showed their delight at this beautiful spot!

At ten we all met up at the fort, where a dozen or so very uninhibited Treepies and a large troupe of Langurs were in attendance. There was a Black-shouldered Kite in a tree as we started up the stone track into the fort, passing through archways and vast wooded spiked doors en route. Once through the third gate we could admire the fantastic views over the rocky, scrub covered hills, and lakes edged with Chital, Wild Boar, Painted Storks, Crocodiles and happy, wallowing Sambar. Brown Rock Chats were common, a couple of Blue Rock Thrushes flew over, and White-backed and Long-billed Vultures circled overhead. Jane saw a Common Iora and an interesting sounding blue and orange bird. The assorted temples and palaces were very atmospheric, and Fi found a Brown Fish Owl's feather. After lunch Ashlish arrived with a jeep with forward-facing seats – what luxury!. We dropped Ian off to investigate the dry area and headed for route three. Even as we were waiting for the gates to be opened, Mary spotted a small snake by the feet of one of the guards. It was small but strikingly marked, and the guides called it 'viper' though we later identified it from photos as a harmless Trinket Snake. It reared up most convincingly showing a flattened neck, apparently a typically aggressive feature of this snake.

Soon after we had started we reached a junction and Ashlish and the driver could not decide which route to take, so they tossed a coin. We went left. Good job too, as a minute or so later we came across a jeep, the passengers of which were staring intently off to the right. They were watching a Tiger about sixty metres away resting in the undergrowth. We could see her face beautifully as she yawned and cleaned her front paws, lying stretched out like a cat in front of a fire. After a few minutes she got up and walked off, following a route parallel to the road, but just out of sight. We waited in a few spots to see if we could see her, but only heard the warning calls of the langurs. Moving on, we passed through some incredible scenery, with majestic cliffs, open, dry grassland and pools backed by ancient temples. There were innumerable Chital with some very small fawns. Sambar were all over the place, several of the heavily horned males had had recent mud baths. At one waterhole a Sambar buck sat contentedly as a Treepie pecked at its ears and nose, while on our opposite side a fine Nilgai bull and three females drank at the water's edge. We saw a couple of families of Wild Boar with fearsome looking tusked males. There were Plum-headed Parakeets and a White-bellied Drongo. Towards the end of our circuit we were near some animal that was being followed by a noisy and agitated flock of birds, but we did not see it.

Meanwhile Ian was out pottering in the arid zone, this time to the west of the Tiger Den. He saw an awful lot of Tawny Pipits and this time three Long-billed Pipits too. A Sirkeer Malkoha was a good find and other birds of note were Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Desert and Eastern Pied (or Variable) Wheatears, Rufous-fronted Prinias and Graceful Warblers, a couple of small flocks of Painted Sandgrouse and a pair of Black-shouldered Kites that flew in a synchronized display flight.

Ian and I went on a night walk that turned into a night drive when the man from the shop drove past us on his way home. From the car we saw a single Chinkara and a Black-naped Hare.

Day 11 / Tues 28th Nov Ranthambhor: Soorwhal Lake and pm ‘Game Drive’

We followed a track alongside the railway line. It was great for birds – Pied, Common, Brahminy and Bank Mynahs, as well as Rose-coloured Starlings, were everywhere. There were lots of Hoopoes, Indian Rollers, Common Woodshrikes, Bay-backed Shrikes, Green Bee-eaters, Collared and Red Collared Doves on wires and bushes. When we stopped to look at these we spotted Yellow-eyed Babblers, Alexandrine Parakeets and Black-breasted Weavers in the fields. In the drier places were dozens of larks and pipits, the former including Greater Short-toed, Oriental Skylark and large groups of Bimaculated Larks. And there were wheatears too with both Desert and Isabelline present. We passed though several small villages. Many of the small huts had decorated the outside walls with paintings of peacocks and animals in cream paint on the red mud walls, and the children waved and shouted “da da, da da” as we passed. Ashlish started scanning the flat horizon as we entered an area of larger fields, some with crops of mustard flowering, and almost the first area he tried we saw a group of Blackbuck. There were four or five females with one magnificent, spiral horned black, tan and white male. As we approached closer on foot we disturbed a beautiful Short-eared Owl, who settled on the other side of a little field and allowed us to get a really good look at him. In the background huge flocks of Demoiselle Cranes were flying around and calling noisily. We watched the Blackbuck male herding his harem, and more females emerged, and two younger males. Finally they ‘pronged’ off into the next field and we left them to it. We found our way through the maze of dirt tracks to Soorwhal Lake, passing dry areas covered with larks and wheatears. Here we had breakfast, watched by a small and polite group of children. In front of us was the lake, with many waders on the shore next to us, and behind on the rocky grasslands were Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks and Kentish Plovers. Further out on the other shore were several hundred Demoiselle Cranes and large flocks of geese – it was really thronging with activity. After breakfast we checked out a dry hillside and saw two Great Thick-knees and Streak-throated Swallows overhead. Our return route went along the top of the dam, with lots of River Lapwings and Curlews at the water’s edge about ten feet below. One jeep got a flat tire, so we got out and watched the multitudinous birds in the distance – these including hordes of Ruff and smaller waders, River and Whiskered Terns and no less than four species of gull with Pallas’s (otherwise known as Great Black-headed) Gull the best.

After lunch Ashlish turned up with a mini-canter, which was very spacious and was higher than the jeeps so we could see very well. We had a great trip with loads of Sambar, Chital and Wild Boar. At one waterhole we saw a White-throated (or Smyrna) Kingfisher catch and eat a small snake, and at another we watched a Ruddy Mongoose ferreting about for some time in front of a group of boar. On the return journey, though some very scenic parts of the reserve that we had not seen before, we saw a Chinkara on a grassy, bouldery slope. Here we disturbed two Jungle Bush Quail and found some very fresh Sloth Bear dung complete with large square pugmarks. Finally, as we approached the end of the circuit and our time, we came upon a jeep and a canter – they were watching a Tiger. We drew up to them and saw the Tiger approaching us in the vegetation at the side of the track. It came right out onto the track behind us. We were now in pole position and had an amazing view of the Tigress walking slowly down the track a few

metres in front of us. The vehicles then took it in turns to go in front, so everyone got great views. Ashlish let us stay after the other vehicles had headed off, so we had a couple minutes quality time with the tigress before heading very rapidly for the gate – we had to be out by five-thirty. This Tigress was a five-year-old mother with two adolescent cubs, but was considerably smaller than the four-year-old Tigress we saw yesterday – she was the second largest in the park.

Day 12 / Wed 29th Nov Ranthambhor: ‘Game Drives’ and Mansarover Lake

We were on route seven today, which took in four or five waterholes and we had great photographic opportunities at them for all sorts of things, from huge Sambar bucks to ancient temples glowing in the morning sun. We heard warning calls and could see Chital looking back at the forest, where a Black Ibis had flown up noisily calling from the ground into a tree – almost certainly this would be the resident Tigress and her 4½ month old cubs, whose tracks we saw heading that way shortly after. Waterbirds today included Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Snipe (Jack and Common), and lots of Brown Crakes. Ducks were represented by all the commoner species along with several Cotton Pygmy Goose, Comb Duck, Bar-headed Geese, Ruddy Shelduck and Lesser Whistling Duck. After passing the last checkpoint we came across a jeep that had heard warning calls and were waiting in case the Tiger crossed a sidetrack. We positioned ourselves and a few seconds later a large, dark-pelted Tiger strode across the gap. We were in the right place at the right time – we saw this Tiger for a mere second or so but the image will no doubt be etched on the memories of all who glimpsed her as she strode under the dappled light afforded by the Flame of the Forest trees – just how you imagine a Tiger!

At the outer gate we stopped and had our picnic breakfast with Long-billed Vultures collecting nesting material not very far above us on the cliffs. In the trees were Common Ioras, Oriental White-eyes, Jungle Babblers and White-bellied Drongos. In the pool by the gate, with the marble cows head spewing water, there was a small croc and a Flap-shell Turtle. Walking down the valley we found White-capped Buntings and Tree Pipits amidst lively flocks of Small Minivets. A small reservoir was very nice with Brown Crake, two large crocs, and a very obliging Crested Serpent Eagle. Ashlish met us just before twelve and we had a drive round the dry areas by the heli-pad on the way back, where we saw Yellow-wattled Lapwing and Tawny Pipits.

After lunch Ian, Steve and Mary headed over to Mansarover Lake. The journey took them through the lively and fascinating town of Sawai Madhopur and thence up through the hills and the wonderful scenery that lies between Ranthambhor and the reserve to the west (forgotten the name!). The road was potholed and slow but we didn't care as the landscape was stunning and we made regular stops to look at birds – a Goshawk cruised along the hills and a group of Griffon Vultures soared over a high hill. Once at the lake we found a wonderful variety to keep us occupied. There were many beautifully lit Ruddy Shelduck in the near part of the lake and around the edge an assortment of waders. Peering closer we started to find some good passerines – in bushes around the dam were Booted Warblers, Orphean Warbler, Yellow-eyed Babblers and a pair of Common Ioras whilst out on the flats were various wagtails and a pair of Ashy-crowned

Sparrow Larks feeding young. Steve had found these and he went one better with the next lark – a Rufous-tailed Lark, this relative of the Desert Lark being our first of the trip. In the distance were flocks of Bar-headed Geese and an assortment of egrets, herons, wildfowl and waders and then Steve came up with another surprise, a single Greater Flamingo, glowing in the light against the stunning forest-covered hills that surround Mansarovar. A Jack Snipe and Great Thick-knee were excellent finds but in the nearby prosopis bushes was a surprise – a single Yellow-legged Buttonquail which we spent some time following as it scurried from cover to cover, occasionally showing itself well!

Jane and I had one last drive into the park. For some reason we ended up in a VIP jeep, and had our pick of the routes. We tarried by the waterholes, checked out a small pool where one of the Tigers regularly drinks, watched Ruddy Mongooses scurrying and Woolly-necked Storks displaying. We watched a pair of Sambar stags sparring for some time, and a troupe of thirty Wild Boar foraging for fallen fruit next to the track. On the final stretch of tarmac back to the hotel we had a real bonus – a Striped Hyena about fifty metres away. It lolled for a while by a boulder before loping off across the hill – putting up a Chinkara and a Black-naped Hare.

Day 13 / Thurs 30th Nov To Jaipur. Afternoon City Tour

We set off in a for Jaipur at nine. The journey, particularly the first third, and Jaipur itself, was great for snaps of Indian life – the camels queuing at the petrol station, the pair of ladies whose job it was to re-apply dust to the newly steam-rolled tarmac surface (not to mention the guy who had to apply water to the front of the steam-roller every few seconds!), tractors decorated with tinsel pulling trailers packed with ladies in their best saris on the way to the temple. Once in Jaipur, we drove through the Pink City with its mixture of beautiful, fret-work covered shops and wide roads jammed with bicycle rickshaws, cows, tractors and cars. We settled in to the excellent Trident Hotel which overlooks the beautiful abandoned summer palace (Jal Mahal) set in the middle of a large ‘Tank’.

After an excellent buffet lunch at the hotel we were back out, visiting the Observatory, which has the largest sun-dial in the world, accurate to twenty seconds, and boat-sized curved stone objects for calculating the exact horoscope of new-born children. It looks strangely like a funfair petrified in stone. Next was the excellent textiles part of the city museum – I liked the historic saris with 14lbs of gold thread, and then we split, going both into the weapons display (very impressive) and the museum shop (very, very good quality miniatures for sale. Finally the art display in which one could spend all day. We finished the day with a spot of bartering in the tiny shops along the main street outside the elegant, seven story façade of the palace of the winds, for everything from stuffed elephants on strings to pashmina shawls and hand-made leather shoes, and loose semi-precious stones. Meanwhile Ian had been pottering around the Tank by the Jal Mahal and noting Dusky Warblers and Osprey along with an assortment of wetland birds.

Day 14 / Fri 1st Dec The Amber Fort and to Delhi

We drove to the Palace of the Winds, which was glowing in the morning light, and then on to the Amber Fort. We mounted our elephants for a swaying but enjoyable ride to the upper parts of the fort. GS, our guide, was excellent and we had a great tour round the winter and summer palaces, with whole halls decorated in silvery pieces of mirror in intricate designs. There was time for an hours shopping back by the Palace of the Winds, and then back for lunch at the Trident Hotel.

The drive to Delhi was on the slow side because of unending road works, but our driver got us to the Ashok Country Retreat only half an hour after the expected arrival time. En route we noted many of the commoner birds associated with this part of lowland India as well as a group of Nilgai which perhaps unwisely took on the task of crossing the Jaipur to Delhi highway – with success of course!

Day 15 / Sat 2nd Dec Back to the UK

Morning departures saw the group leaving for their return trip to the UK.

Or...on to Corbett National Park by first class sleeper

Day 16 / Sun 3rd Dec Quality Inn

Having arrived at about six, we had a cup of tea and toast and went for a gentle stroll outside. The first bird was Red-billed Blue Magpie, followed by Blue Whistling Thrush. We met up with our guide, Mr. Ramani, and strolled down towards the river – the lodge is sited in forest on top of a cliff, at the bottom of which is the crystal clear Kosi River. In the trees by the track were large numbers of birds, the commonest being White-throated and Yellow-bellied Fantails, Chestnut-bellied and Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, and Himalayan Bulbuls and Jungle Babbler. Nearing the bottom of the path there were two Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babblers. Down by the river, every other boulder had a Brown Dipper (we watched two displaying), or gorgeous Plumbeous or White-capped Water Redstarts. Two magnificent Himalayan Crested Kingfishers called loudly as they flew up and down the river. A strange noise came from the other side of the river – but we could see nothing. We heard it again some time later, but it was only as we returned that we realised that a group of four village men were watching something. They had tried to cross the river to unblock the small canal that runs there, but had been unable to get to work because of the pair of leopards, one lounging on a tree, just by said canal! Back by the lodge we saw more fantastic birds, a Grey-headed Woodpecker, a Rufous-bellied Niltava – a glorious orange-bellied bird with an iridescent blue crown and back, and then a White-rumped Shama. There were numerous flycatchers about, Grey-headed, Red-breasted and Slaty-blue being three of them.

Back to the lodge for another cup of tea, and then Karan and Mr. Ramani drove us a couple of kilometres to see a Pallas's Fish Eagle on the nest. As we watched the adult sitting on the nest,

Ian spotted a Jungle Cat walking along the bank of the river below. This we watched for some time as it made its way upstream. A couple of other stops on the way back found us Blue Whistling Thrush, and some great butterflies – The Rustic, Wanderers, Glassy Tigers, and Jezebels. Crested Tree-Swifts circled overhead and the local guide flushed a Wallcreeper from the riverbank ahead of us though we were too busy watching something else to notice!

Tea in the gardens was accompanied by hoards of Jezebels, Wanderers and an Indian Red Admiral, and a circling Mountain Hawk Eagle. Afterwards we strolled again towards the river, only getting as far as our room before a bird party caught our attention – Grey-hooded Warblers (actually mostly bright yellow), Brown-headed Pygmy Woodpecker, two species of Nuthatch and Grey-headed Flycatchers being the main part. Further on, there was a lovely, obliging Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker, Grey-breasted Prinias and Puff-throated Babblers, and a couple of American birders pointed out a fabulous Spotted Forktail on the river. They also spotted a spectacular Tawny Fish Owl on the way back up the track, which we all watched through the scope.

Day 17 / Mon 4th Dec

Corbett National Park

At first light there was a flock of White-crested Laughingthrushes outside the room exhibiting where they get that family name from – they would all burst into manic laughter at the same time, and it is loud! We had tea, and then walked off on a trail by the Borunda River. It was too early for the birds to be active, but we wanted to check it out before we left. We saw few birds but those that were present were of the highest quality, with Red-billed Blue Magpie and fantastic views of Little Forktail. Back near the hotel there was a lovely Orange-bellied Leafbird, and over breakfast in the garden there was a Crimson Sunbird and a Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher as well as Grey Bushchat. It was then time to set off for Corbett National Park, with plenty of time for stopping for birds like Green Magpie (wow!), Grey-headed, Fulvous-breasted, Grey-capped Pygmy and Himalayan Flameback Woodpeckers; Ashy, Red-whiskered, Himalayan, Black-crested and Black Bulbuls, Red-billed Leothrix and Small Niltava. We started to see the odd Chital and Muntjac, and stopped for lunch at a restaurant in the middle of the reserve. The scenery was striking, steep hills covered in Sal forest either side of a bouldery, clear river. A kilometre or so further in, we stopped at a viewpoint over the Ramganga River, from which we could see five Gharial, the long-nosed fish-eating crocodiles, either basking or swimming in the crystal clear water. Also visible in the clear water were shoals of large Mahseer and vast catfish, nearly as big as the Gharials. Further on we saw leopard tracks in the dust, and very fresh Tiger tracks – the Tiger moved off the track just ahead of us and was only a few metres into the undergrowth, but although we could see movement, we could not really see the animal.

On arrival at Dhikala, we checked into our rooms and then were straight out on an Elephant ride through a large area of Elephant grass next to a large lake. As the Elephant moved slowly through the grass, fat Hog Deer and Chital bounded out of cover. We saw one particularly fine Hog Deer stag, and had very good views of a huge twelve-foot long Rock Python by the edge of

the water. Osprey, Hen Harrier and Black-shouldered Kite were all hunting and there were smaller birds such as Red Avadavats, Chestnut-eared and Crested Buntings (both gorgeous) in the grassland. Around the buildings were some strikingly marked Golden Jackals and several Wild Boar.

Day 18 / Tues 17th Dec Corbett National Park and drive to Nainital

A jeep game drive at six forty-five. The scenery in Corbett was at first hidden by mist but this soon cleared. First were a pair of roosting Brown Fish Owls and some White-crested Laughingthrushes. There were fresh Tiger pugmarks everywhere, and the only other jeep we saw had had great views of a large Tiger right next to them. There are no set routes in Corbett so we could go as quick or as slowly as we liked, and stopped for birdwatching at will. A Greater Yellownape appeared all too briefly and a female Red Junglefowl was extremely perturbed by something in the bushes near her – we had great views of her but never saw whatever was causing her agitation! We turned left and went to a viewpoint where we could get out and look over the river. Driving back to the main track, there was a Jungle Cat walking along in front of us, only about thirty yards away – a beautiful sight. Possibly an even rarer sighting was a Lanceolated Warbler that crawled along grass stems like a mouse and seemed unaware that it was actually in the open by the edge of the track! Other stars of the morning were two Collared Falconets – the size of a Chaffinch and boldly marked in black and white and red. Back for breakfast and packing, and then we began a leisurely drive out of the park. We stopped to photograph Chital and a Grey-backed Shrike, and anything else that was next to the track and well lit. We headed for a watchtower with a view over the river. We did not have long to stop, but anything could be seen from up there – perhaps Leopard, Tiger or Otter, for example, although during our few minutes all we noted were Osprey and Changeable Hawk-Eagle. The butterflies, once the sun was on the bushes, were great. There were numerous Jezebels, Peacock and Blue Pansies, Great Eggfly and iridescent blue members of the crow family such as Blue-spotted Crow. Walking back to the jeep there were a pair of Himalayan Flamebacks, and Lineated and Coppersmith Barbets. We stopped for several bird parties. The first consisted mostly of twenty or so Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, and woodpeckers – a real mixture with Grey-headed, Fulvous-breasted and Streak-throated Woodpeckers along with Himalayan Flamebacks and a superb Lesser Yellownape. A Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker and a Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker added yet more ‘woodpecker’ variety. In all on this drive we had really good views of eight different woodpecker species! Amongst all this variety was a wonderfully elegant Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo called loudly and a superb Large Cuckoo-Shrike too. At another stop by the river where we could get out, Ian took some good photos of Ghariel and disturbed a Little Heron from the bank. Behind us a flock of Black-throated Thrushes called as they flew into the top of some dead trees. We had spent so much time stopping that we ate lunch in the Gairel (no relation of the fish-eating croc!) Restaurant at three pm. Even after that we could not ignore the pair of magnificent Kalij Pheasants in the road, or the Jungle and Indian Barred Owlets perched in trees by the roadside.

Once out of the park we drove straight up to Nainital, reaching the hotel by seven fifteen.

A lovely relaxed eight-thirty start – the sun does not get into the valleys ‘til late here! Woolly hatted, we took the road up to Kilbury, stopping frequently to admire the amazing vertiginous, wooded, rocky mountainsides surrounding the town of Nainital, itself surrounding a lake. Almost every bird we saw was a new bird – there being a totally different avifauna here compared to even Corbett. There were roving flocks consisting of Spot-winged Tit, Black-lored Tit, the beautiful Black-throated Tit, White-tailed Nuthatch, Rufous Sibia and Green-backed Tit, all of which were little stunners except the latter which looked remarkably like a Great Tit. More Great Tit-like than the Great Tit which we saw occasionally in the area! On the leaf litter were Blue Whistling Thrushes, Streaked Laughingthrushes and my favourite, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes. Coming round one hairpin bend we were met by an incredible sight – the snow-capped ranges of the Himalayas shining one hundred and twenty kilometres away. Some of the more impressive peaks were Nanda Devi (about 26’000 feet) and Nanda Kot, but the whole range seemed to spread out before us. All around were vultures – there were Himalayan Griffons everywhere – often very close above us in the brilliant blue sky – and there were Griffons and Black Vultures too.

The endpoint of our journey were the fields around the ‘Himalayan Quail Outdoor Camp.’ At first we could see little, apart from the ubiquitous wonderful view, but after a few minutes we found a flock of Plain Mountain Finches, Rock Buntings, gorgeous Russet Sparrows, a pretty little Black-throated Accentor, and a beautiful Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush, amongst others. As we came back towards Nainital I spotted a Wallcreeper which first flew in and landed on a roadside cliff then proceeded to show its best features off in a series of circles as it fluttered above us!

After a nice lunch (and spot of shopping) in Nainital town, we headed for the Mongoli Valley, supposedly driving straight there but in fact stopping for Black-headed Jay, Lammergeiers, Red-billed Blue Magpies, mixed tit flocks.....

The entrance to the valley (which was in fact the Bajun Valley) was past a tiny Hindu temple hung with hundreds of bells from two inches to six inches across. The old and well-made stone track headed gently down the side of a steep valley, the bottom of which was terraced with fields surrounding a small stone built village. Here a cheerful wedding was taken place. Have we mentioned the weddings so far? This is the time of year for weddings and we have seen numerous grooms mounted on white horses leading processions to the bride’s house, and a number of convoys of cars and buses with signs in the windows stating, for example, ‘Veeta weds Sanjay’.

Woodland birds on the valley side included a really lovely Brown-fronted Woodpecker, Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher and Orange-flanked Bush Robin. There was a massive tit flock with Pallas’s and Buff-barred Warblers and Bar-tailed Treecreeper as well as the tit species already mentioned. We did not have time to stop in the fields at the valley bottom, but are reliably informed that it is

great birding there. On the track back up the other side of the valley we saw seventy or more White-throated Laughingthrushes, a wonderful, wonderful, Hill Barbet and a female Grey-headed Woodpecker.

Back to the hotel for a very fine supper.

Day 20 / Thurs 7th Dec Nainital, Sat Tal and journey to Kathgodam

Our last day dawned, as did the previous day, stunningly clear but also very (if you went outside too early!) cool. Temperatures are at around freezing at night here and it takes a bit of sunshine to reach the heady heights of a plus figure on the thermomemeter. A late change of plan saw us and our baggage heading out beyond Nainital on the road towards Sat Tal. We had barely left the confines of town before we stopped as a bird party was crossing the road. As well as the usual suspects there were some stunning pink rosefinches here – they proved difficult to get a good look at but when we did we found that we were looking at Pink-browed Rosefinches. Above us the raptors were enjoying the sun and this seemed an ideal spot so low did many of the Steppe Eagles come. Himalayan Griffon Vultures also soared past – the period between nine and eleven in the morning offers incredible photographic opportunities here for those that like their raptors!

We moved along the road but halted soon – this time it was a marvellous flock of Slaty-headed Parakeets which were alternately feeding in a roadside tree and flying round in a fast tight-knit flock flashing their brilliant yellow tails. Only a kilometre further and there were birds everywhere. Here we found a group of Long-tailed Minivets sporting their brilliant reds and yellows by the roadside.

We decided that we should get to our destination and so drove through the fascinating little town of Bhowali where aside from a fantastic-looking market there was also a school where a couple of hundred schoolgirls were taking their exams out of doors. Once near Sat Tal we stopped by the blue and cream factory and spent an hour pottering by the roadside where little fields and gullies and scrubby wooded areas held a variety of birds. Streaked Laughingthrushes were frequent and Fi came up with several Common Rosefinches. Further along the road a fruiting tree attracted lots of the Red-billed Blue Magpies and these were noisily flying back and forth collecting the little round twin fruits. With them were a few Black-headed Jays and lots of Grey Treepies and along the track a Himalayan Barbet.

We drove slowly down through the oak forest to the lakes that are Sat Tal. An excellent dahl and rice lunch provided us with fuel to continue, though the next birds were found in the less than salubrious bushes at the back of the cafes – a stunning Rufous-bellied Niltava and a Slaty-blue Flycatcher. The early afternoon was spent wandering down the track from the dam. A Spotted Forktail and some Golden-spectacled Warblers were the early highlights and later we encountered Black-chinned Babblers, Rufous-gorgetted Flycatchers, more of those stunning Hill Babblers and

a little flock of variegated Rufous-chinned Laughingthrushes. A Muntjac called in alarm and later we found some of the clearest Leopard footprints that we've ever seen in the mud by the stream.

It was time to move on and descend to lower levels. As we moved down we stopped occasionally seeing a wide variety of birds including Striated Babbler, some more unidentified rosefinches and some Yellow-breasted Greenfinches. We stopped at Bhimtal and Karan and Mahinder took us to visit two brothers who had an amazing butterfly collection – we spent an hour examining what appeared to a more or less complete collection of the butterflies of most of India – the series of Blue Oak Leaf butterflies were quite extraordinary, as too were the many moths and some sensational coleptera. As we left we encountered the day's final bird party – this one containing, amongst others, some Fire-capped Tits and at least four superb Greater Yellownapes! Then it was down to Kathgodam and a very nice meal before we caught our overnight sleeper to Delhi.

Day 21 / Fri 8th Dec and Sat 9th Dec

Delhi & Departure

We awoke at a quarter to five and soon after chugged into Old Delhi's huge station. Mr Rao was there to meet us and took us to the Park Hotel where we were to stay until we left for the UK. After some sleep and a relaxed breakfast (and some cricket on TV) we went into the Chandni Chowk markets and in particular to the Kinari Bazaar where we shopped for a good few hours. The next morning we were on our flight back to the UK.