



Wild India

Painted Storks and Blue Bulls

December 1st – 21st 2001

A Greentours Trip Report

Lead by Fiona Dunbar and Ian Green

Daily Report by Fiona Dunbar and Ian Green

Day 1 December 1st Departure

We left Heathrow just a little late but caught the onward flight in Kuwait without a problem.

Day 2 December 2nd Journey to Jaipur

We arrived into Delhi Airport on time at about five thirty in the morning. Some were through customs with almost indecent haste (something that the occupants of our plane seemed to have got down to a fine art) whilst others had to endure something of a wait for the baggage. We were on the road soon after dawn and picked Andy up from a nearby hotel. The journey to Jaipur is a wonderful introduction to India - both modern and ancient. Sights ranged from beautifully groomed camels pulling carts to super-modern 'glass' office buildings, and from lots of workers tilling the fields by hand to huge machinery laden factories. The road itself was a revelation. The tarmac lasted all the way to Jaipur and for the majority of the way it was dual carriageway! And not so busy too!

As soon as we left the airport the number of birds was noticeable. Pigeons, whether feral or wild, lined the wires and sat in droves upon the freshly sprouting fields. Laughing Doves were few and there were two flocks of Yellow-footed Green Pigeons, but there were numerous Collared Doves. Black Drongos, Southern Grey Shrikes and Black-shouldered Kites appeared from time to time but it was the abundance of brilliant green Ring-necked Parakeets and tame Mynas that was most noticeable. The latter included plenty of Common and Bank as well as a

few Asian Pieds. Other birds of note were Peafowl, White-eared Bulbuls, Indian Rollers, White-breasted Kingfisher and a rather out-of-place looking Bluethroat sitting upon a telegraph wire by a tax stop! There were at least two groups of Nilgai, both with one magnificent blue bull and a harem. We made a breakfast stop at 'Midpoint' and spent a few productive moments in the garden yielding sightings of male Shikra, Plain Prinia, Lesser Whitethroats and a Plain Tiger butterfly. We passed old Rajput Forts and then the wonderful Amber Fort itself before descending through the spectacular city gates and thence into the Pink City of Jaipur itself. Our hotel was soon reached and after a pleasant lunch we enjoyed a quick stroll in the garden. This proved very good and aside from the more common species (which were there too) we spotted Brahminy Mynas, Red-throated (Red-breasted) Flycatcher, Green Bee-eater, a male Shikra and a male Black Redstart. The highlight though was probably the Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher. We were soon back in town to enjoy the marvels of Sawai Jai Singh's Jantar Mantar or Astronomical Observatory. Here we wandered through the marvellously accurate and varied 'instruments' (or perhaps 'buildings') that recorded in such detail the movements and timings of things star-ward. Next up was a visit to the City Museum in the City Palace, a fantastic building which housed collections of textiles, saris, weapons and paintings.

Two of us went off for a brief visit to the Lake Palace – well to the lake rather than the palace! This proved to be thronging with birds including an excellent variety of waders – at least a dozen Marsh Sandpipers, plentiful Little Stints, Black-winged Stilts, Black-tailed Godwits and Wood Sandpipers. Many Citrine Wagtail scoured the water-hyacinth infested perimeter along with a few Yellow Wagtails. A Bluethroat, several Plain Prinias, lots of Little Grebes, Shoveler, Gadwall and several Hoopoes were also great.

Day 3 December 3rd Jaipur

By 7am there was sufficient light in the grounds to see various inhabitants - not bad for a little patch of green in a city of 2 million inhabitants! We watched Grey-breasted Prinias, Oriental White-eyes and a Black Redstart amid purple bougainvillea and in the trees above were Purple Sunbirds, a Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher and Lesser Whitethroats. Grey Francolins called in the background as we admired Green Bee-eaters, White-breasted (Smyrna) Kingfishers and both Ring-necked and Plum-headed Parakeets.

After a fine and substantial breakfast we were off to do some 'culture'. The busy streets of Jaipur were mind-boggling. Every square metre of space was taken up with life. We collected our excellent guide TK at the Palace of the Winds where we had a short stop to photograph this marvellous structure. TK pointed out barbers and primitive dentists plying their trade on the pavements and the local milk market was in full swing. Cyclists careered right across in front of our bus and the driver skilfully and nonchalantly steered the bus this way and that.

At the base of the hill that the fort stands on we were mounted on Elephants and carried upwards. The fort is centred on a fine old palace with fabulous carved pillars, Mogul and Hindu style arches, and walls decorated with beautifully carved and inlaid panels. The architects managed impressive climate control with flowing water used to cool courtyards and rooms, or create cooling breezes. There was even a little wildlife to be seen - Hanuman Langurs sat atop the castle walls as we entered and a bold Brown Rock-Chat gave the photographers something to go at. A superb immature Bonelli's Eagle was at first distant but then gave us a tremendous show overhead.

Back to the hotel to collect our gear, and then the journey to Ranthambhor began. There was plenty of interest in an increasingly rural scene. Some distance the other side of Tonk we stopped to look at a pair of young Sarus Cranes - as we approached slowly they were joined by the two parent birds as well. These are the tallest flying birds in the world, and made a spectacular sight. We passed Large Grey Babblers, Indian Rollers, Long-tailed and Southern Grey Shrikes before pulling over by a couple of bunds. These are earth banks that hold back seasonal rain waters, and are very popular with water birds. We enjoyed a group of Painted Storks actively feeding, a couple of Asian Openbills, groups of Spoonbills a fine Black-necked Ibis and plenty of other typical waterbirds - Little, Intermediate and Great Egrets, Black-tailed Godwits, Black-winged Stilts, Ruff, a River Lapwing, Little-ringed and Kentish Plovers, Indian River and Whiskered Terns, Little Cormorants, Paddybirds and a few ducks - Wigeon, Garganey, Teal, Red-crested Pochard etc. At the last stop we were treated to the sight of thirty or more Bar-winged Geese in the evening light with two Ruddy Shelducks, a Marsh Harrier and two Sarus Cranes for company. The villagers were enthralled by us and the excited jabberings of the kids and a few adults surrounded us as they practised their English and passed on the latest cricket scores.

We arrived at the Jhumar Baori at dusk, just in time to see an Eagle Owl fly over.

Day 4 December 4th Ranthambhor

Up before dawn we had tea, toast and bananas before boarding our cantar at six-thirty. Well insulated against the surprisingly chilly air we drove towards the park gates, spotting a Spotted Owlet at roost before we got there. We were on route seven, and not long after passing through the ancient tenth-century gateway we were passing through the dramatic landscape of open, rocky grasslands and shady forest overlooked by the rocky escarpment topped by the thousand year old walls of Ranthambhor's Rajput fort. At the inner gate there is a temple to the God Hanuman, where it is traditional to put food out for animals and birds. The ground was covered with wild peacocks, Spotted and Laughing Doves, and innumerable Blossom-headed Parakeets. Two young orphaned Nilgai wandered around also! Other common and beautiful birds were elegant Rufous Treebies, Black Redstarts, and Ring-necked Parakeets. Our very excellent guide Pankaj had arranged for us to do only part of the usual circuit (usually one was expected to complete the given route to avoid too much disturbance for the tigers) so we could spend lots of time quietly sitting by various of the reserves watering holes, watching the activities of storks and other waterfowl as well as a good number of mammals. There were Pygmy Cotton Geese, Ruddy Shelduck, Teal in good plumage, Shovelers, lots of White-breasted Kingfishers, Painted Storks and Great Egrets feeding, all very close. All of this with a background of families of Wild Boar (with a very fine tusker at the head of the family), Sambar and Chital drinking and a half dozen mugger crocodiles basking on the banks with mouths agape. All the bodies of water are quite small so nothing was very far away. On the way back Christine spotted a Ruddy Mongoose trotting down a dry river course and there was a fine Imperial Eagle perched in a tree. The local guides knew where to look for Spotted Owlets and Collared Scops Owls, so daily we had great views of both roosting in small trees by the road.

Back at the castle we ate a second breakfast, rested or watched circling vultures (Long-billed, Egyptian and Red-headed) from the roof terrace of this historic hunting lodge. A late lunch prepared us for the afternoon jaunt, and we were on our way to the reserve again, pausing for

two perched Egyptian Vultures near the road and two Ruddy Mongooses crossing it. Once inside the reserve we spent some time with a magnificent Sambar stag industriously scraping the velvet from his horns about ten feet away from the cantar. There were a lot of sleek Chital or Spotted Deer, some with very small fawns, all barely looking up as we stopped to watch them. There were also numerous Sambar hinds with young fawns, and a few very fine Nilgai, the males with inky blue-black pelts and all with neat white spots on ankles and throat.

We moved round the track reasonably quickly as Pankaj wanted us to get to the area where two tigresses had territories. Both tigresses had two cubs, one set about 21 months old, the other only a few months. At a narrow pool in a river valley Pankaj stopped and imitated the call of a Stork-billed Kingfisher. Two birds replied and both of these shy birds came out into full view to investigate. We left this pleasant spot on hearing the alarm call of a Sambar. Sambar, being large animals, only give warning calls for very big predators! About a minute later we spotted a tigress padding down the slope towards us! We could hardly have had better views as she crossed the road twice in front of us and walked parallel to the road by the edge of the river, pausing twice, powerful shoulders hunched, as she drank. After a stunning half hour, during which we also glimpsed a Jungle Cat about twenty feet away, it was regrettably time to leave the tigress and head to the gate - the vehicles must be out of the reserve before 6pm. However, entering the territory of the second tigress we caught up with a couple of jeeps watching something - the two sub-adult cubs. We glimpsed movement in the grass very nearby, but could not make out anything definite. Moving a few hundred yards along to the edge of a pool we stopped again, and Fi spotted a tiger resting in a stream bed, all but the head partly hidden by straw-coloured grass. Shortly after the two sub-adult cubs walked out into the open at the edge of the lake before fading once again into the long grass. It really was time to go now and we high-tailed it back to the gate. Outside the reserve we stopped at a tiny pool where sandgrouse come to drink. There were indeed about a dozen of these gorgeous birds at the edge of the pool, but we could not give them our full attention because of the Leopard that was also drinking there! We followed it with our binoculars through the rapidly gathering dusk, before it was swallowed completely by encroaching darkness and we finally headed for home.

Ian went out for a night walk after supper, and saw a Desert Cat - not unlike our Wild Cat. I (Fi) was roused from my slumbers at around midnight and went out to see the beast, who was still sitting in the same place, letting us get fantastic torch lit views from all angles.

Day 5 December 5th Ranthambhor and the Blackbuck area

This morning we had a full breakfast before going on our morning trip into the park. We stopped off by the first of the lakes where the cormorant tree provided its usual centre-piece. In the background were Purple Herons, Paddybirds and Whistling Ducks. A flock of geese appeared, these with dark heads and wings contrasting with the pale neck – these can only have been Bean Geese, a species that only occurs as a vagrant to India. During the next half an hour or so we encountered two or three flocks of Greylag Geese too, though these may have all been the same ones! We moved on slowly, stopping to admire the many Chital and a number of Sambar too before spending a good long time down by the last of the 'waterholes'. This one was heaving with life. There were numerous Wild Boar and both of the deer species paid regular visits. Muger Crocodiles patrolled the shore and several others slept on the banks. There were numerous ducks and a peacock which waded through the water. Storks were a real treat in the

shape of a single Black Stork, a couple of Woolly-necked Storks and several beautiful Painted Storks too.

Several of us stopped off in the arid area near the gates on the way back. Blue Pansies, Common Gulls and several grass blue types fluttered over the dry sandy soil. Tawny Pipits and a few Desert Wheatears ran hither and thither and we found a little party of pretty little Ashy-crowned Finch-larks. Rufous-fronted Prinias and Graceful Prinias were both new birds and we also saw a gorgeous Variable Wheatear. Green Bee-eaters sat upon the wires and Southern Grey Shrikes on the stunted acacia bushes and overhead there were raptors. We noted Shikra, Egyptian and Long-billed Vulture and a Kestrel - the latter confirmed by a glimpse of its black toe nails! Back at base the vultures had taken the eye too – Red-headed was seen and Christine saw a Black Vulture – a rarity in the area.

We took an early lunch and headed off through the back country north of Sawai Madhopur. The fields were green with mustard and in places wheat and a little rice. Everywhere people were busy. Fertilizer was being applied liberally by hand or people were weeding or ploughing with oxen. Though they must see very few westerners out here the greetings were very friendly and of course there was interest in what we were doing – others of course had passed this way before us and one person wished us 'happy birding' though they might not have spoken much more English! The birdlife even in this intensively farmed area was both varied and abundant. There were numerous mynas including all the usual species plus Rosy Starling. We found Blue Rock Thrush, plenty of Indian Silverbills, plenty of Tawny Pipits, the odd Hoopoe and Indian Roller and lots of Purple Sunbirds, Long-tailed and Southern Grey Shrikes as well as a few Bay-backed Shrikes. After asking a few locals the whereabouts of our mammalian quarry we were pointed in the direction of a herd of a dozen Blackbuck. These included the herd matriarch and a young male with small horns. These moved off with a brief show of their 'pronking' run. Our first larks proved to be a pair of Oriental Skylarks though latter we saw Rufous-tailed, Greater Short-toed and at least fifty Bimaculated Larks. These latter were by two of the day's best birds – the gorgeous Red Collared Doves and a couple of Sociable Plovers (Lapwings). Palm trees and Babul Trees held hanging Baya Weaver nests.

Lake Soorwhal hove into view as the track meandered from the last village. We stopped and walked across a mustard field and thence over some very dry hillsides to near the lake shore. From the hilltop we could see the flocks of birds out on the water and had already picked out a large group of Demoiselle Cranes as well as Dalmatian Pelicans. The last were to prove common and we saw them at reasonably close range too. Also down on the shore were Painted Storks, Black-headed Ibis, various herons and egrets and a tight little flock of Avocets. The occasional Whiskered Tern flew past and there was a single Gull-billed Tern whilst amongst the gulls we identified Pallas's, Brown-headed and several Yellow-legged Herring Gulls. Brahminy Ducks and assorted *anatidae* were backed up by a Red-necked Grebe, seemingly a surprising bird this far south but apparently quite a frequent wintering species in Rajasthan. Several rather gorgeous and ungainly looking Great Thick-knees stood near the shoreline and other birds noted along here were Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, Marsh Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilts, Ruff and a group of five Sarus Cranes. Back on the surrounding drylands were several Tawny Pipits and a little group of Ashy-crowned Finch-larks which stayed put even when we were just three metres away. We walked to the bund (the earth dam) upon which the road was built. Hundreds of egrets were flying in to roost in a tree by the lake's outlet turning a perfectly respectable banyan into a whiter shade of green. The journey took us back through the busy streets of Sawai Madhopur which already seemed much like civilisation after the very rural villages we'd been through!

Day 6

December 6th Ranthambhor

Just outside the inner gate we waited for some time as the warning calls of Sambar and Langurs were indicating that a tiger was moving through the vicinity. We did not see her and moved on. We were greeted by the mixed flock of parakeets again at the temple, as a pair of Painted Spurfowl walked along the ramparts and make our way from lake to lake, watching the waterfowl and waders feeding and interacting. An osprey sat overseeing the goings on, and in addition to the Woolly-necked Storks, Painted Storks and other usual suspects there was a great view of a Common Snipe. Five White-backed Vultures flopped around in the top of a tree across the water. The only Nilgai we saw this morning were the two orphans being fed at the temple, but there were numerous Chital, and Wild Boar and Sambar sporting in the water. A female Sambar came to drink just in front of the cantar, closely followed by her calf. We stopped to watch a troupe of Langurs with lots of young feeding playing and suckling in a sunlit tree. Individuals came down to drink at a particular log, one at a time and in strict rotation, the rest of the party keeping a close eye out. We saw several Ruddy Mongooses, including a particularly relaxed and well lit one on the way back out of the fort.

We returned for our second breakfast, and Ian took a few brave souls back out to the arid area where they had fantastic close views of Painted Sandgrouse. Two of these beautiful birds were spotted when a Tawny Pipit we were following landed in front of them. The photographers were able to get pretty close. There were several prinias here too with both Graceful and Rufous-fronted present. We made a sortie between some fields and had fun with Ashy and Plain Prinias making a total of four prinia species in an hour. Stonechats were numerous and a family of Common Babblers appeared. Perhaps most beautiful was the Brahminy Myna which sat still upon the hedgetop. As we approached our transport a Black-naped Hare was flushed from the undergrowth and in the same bushes Roger S. located a single Common Guava Blue, a most beautiful large lycaenid butterfly with twin tails that are designed to look like antennae.

At two-fifteen we were back in the cantar and on our way back into the park. We drove to a checkpoint, stopping on the way for photos of Chital, some of the huge strangling figs, tiger claw marks on the trees etc. We could get out at the checkpoint, and from a vantage point on a dam we saw two species of turtle – Flap-shelled and a Deccan Saw-back. Meanwhile, Treepies inspected the cantar for any crumbs. We met two cantars doing the reverse route to ours who had seen a male tiger, but we could not find him. At this point a family of Jungle Bush Quail, beautiful little birds, the females with distinctive pinky breasts, hopped and trotted by at the edge of the track. Moving on we passed some fine male Sambar. As we approached a small lake, we could see half a dozen female Sambar standing in the water, all intently looking the same way. There were other vehicles there, and we manoeuvred ourselves to find a spot where we could see through the trees on the bank of the water. On the opposite side of the water lay one of the 21 month old male tiger cubs we had seen two days before. Even at 21 months it was already about 9 foot long from nose to tail tip. It lay on the bank, reflected beautifully in the water. After ten minutes or so we had to leave him to get back to the gate on time. Back on the main road, we stopped where some people in a jeep were watching something in a field – a Jungle Cat. We watched this lovely little beast stalk and catch a small mammal in a field of short dry grass – a really great sight. Practically back at base, Fi was scanning the sides of the road with a torch and spotted a second Jungle Cat – a really large male, which walked unconcerned parallel to the road until out of sight.

Day 7 December 7th Ranthambhor and Lake Mansarover

For the first time we went into the park in three jeeps rather than the cantar. Fi's cantar had a fantastic time. There was a Sambar stag wallowing in mud right at the edge of the road. He got up, clearly rather excited, and reached up to his full height standing on his hind legs – Pankaj told us this was to spray urine on his chin – before stalking two of the females in his harem. There were a pair of distant Chinkara. We were passing through open, golden grassland with Dhok trees, along the top of a long ridge. Lima shouted Tiger! And there indeed was a male tiger, 20 yards off the track, and we had stopped right in his path. He was a big animal, and it was quite late in the morning to see a tiger, so the light really emphasised the stronger colour typical of a male. He wrinkled his nose at us a couple of times, and then strode round the back of the jeep and on through the grass on the other side of the track, disappearing down the side of the gorge. A little further on we stopped to listen for warning calls. Fi spotted a Red-headed Vulture perched quite nearby, which obligingly spread his wings and showed us his white thighs. After a few minutes it hopped down to the ground, and hopped about, still with wings spread. Babblers and Treepies suddenly started up a lot of noise – and a Jungle Cat appeared below the vulture. It climbed the rocks heading for the vulture, watched it in classic crouch with twitching tail, and then pounced, we presume in search of whatever the vulture had hopped down to the ground for. Vinod had provided us with a superb picnic breakfast including hot omelettes, tea and coffee, which we ate at a pleasant spot just out of the main park. Afterwards most of the group headed up to the fort with Pankaj. There are some beautiful old palace buildings, pools and temples. The group went into the famous Ganesh temple and were blessed and given a garland of marigolds. The remainder walked along the entrance road, where there were Tawny-bellied Babblers and various flycatchers and bulbuls. More excitedly there were warning calls from Chital very near the path, but the cause of excitement was never in view.

In the afternoon we set off for Mansarover Lake. The road there took us through the new and old towns of Sawai Madupur, which are interesting if rather fume-y in places. I particularly liked the huge stone elephants guarding the entrance to the temple of the rat god, and the lines of camels waiting to a) fill up drums at the petrol station and b) be shaved with geometric designs by the camel barber. High red stone outcrops glowed in the sun, and leaving the town we were in dhok woodland that was part of a reserve which abuts Ranthambhor Reserve. There were Rhesus Macaques with enormous red testicles, Nilgai and a lovely pair of Chinkara with a fawn. Approaching the bund or earth dam of the lake we passed through fields of cucumbers and chillis. Once on the bund itself we could look out over the lake, watching various birds through the scope. It was a quiet and scenic spot. Ian found a feather from a Yellow-legged Button Quail.

Dinner was served out of doors this evening, with Rajastani dancers for entertainment.

Day 8 December 8th Ranthambhor to Bharatpur

Our last trip into the park. We had some really good looks at Nilgai, wallowing Sambar bucks, very close Chinkara. We could tell at one point that we were close to a tiger or big cat, but it stayed deep in the vegetation. There were Painted Spurfowls, Shikras and a brightly coloured Coppersmith Barbet perched on top of a bush. At the end of the morning we gave Pankaj a pair of binoculars - his had been stolen some time before.

Ian and the two Rogers went off to Lake Soorwal. Their account; En route we passed by a couple of sizeable flocks of Demoiselle Cranes. The calls of these magnificent birds resounded

across the flat landscape. We arrived at the southern edge of the lake but there was little to see here - just a few Ruff, Wigeon and some Ruddy Shelducks flying over so then it was on towards the northern part passing Gull-billed Tern on the way. Out on the water were plenty of Teal and a Red-necked Grebe and further afield we could see groups of Dalmatian Pelicans and Spoonbills and further yet were Bar-headed Geese and Avocets. On the dry lake shore we watched a couple of Citrine Wagtails before several children approached. One held a cricket bat and seemed more intent on getting his friends to play the game rather than pester us. He was not disappointed for after a little inquisitiveness we passed an imaginary line that was clearly not passable for the children for though we stopped to birdwatch just metres past it the children dutifully stood the other side – it was a mystery that we had no language to bridge! Back to the birds and we found a variety of waders on the shoreline - Marsh Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper and River Lapwing being the best. Desert Wheatears and Tawny Pipits were quite common and we encountered a small group of pipits that was some puzzlement – these turned out to be Buff-bellied Pipits. Larks were numerous and we found a large flock of Greater Short-toed as well as several Oriental, Bimaculated, Crested and Ashy-Crowned Finch-Larks. Several Greater Thick-knees had moved back from the shore to a large area of arid hillside and we walked back through these to the bus. Roger F. flushed a pair of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse as we walked

Back at the castle there was time to pack after our second breakfast before saying our goodbyes and driving to the train station. Train buffs examined the various engines, the rest of us people-watched or chatted to Pankaj who had come to see us off. The train arrived and there was a flurry of activity to get ourselves and our baggage into the air-conditioned carriages we had booked, during which Pankaj nearly ended up coming with us as the train only stops for four minutes! Two and a half hours later we were in Bharatpur. Taxis took us to the Forest Lodge, and shortly after we walked out on Rambund, one of the raised brick walkways that bisected the reserve. On either side of the track was level grassland and pools – with raised earth islands on which one or two trees grew. These islands are man-made from the time when the Maharaja created this flooded area to attract birds in for hunting. There were lots of birds about – water birds and forest birds. There was a Black-throated Thrush, lots of Chiffchaffs, Black-rumped Flamebacks (woodpeckers), Pied Stonechats, Long-tailed Shrikes and hordes of Ring-necked Parakeets, Brahminy Mynas and Pied Mynas. On the wet areas ducks were plentiful – we saw our first Spot-billed Ducks amongst a host of commoner species, and there were plenty of herons and egrets too. Painted Storks had a few nests with well grown chicks and our first Black-necked Stork flew over. As the sun was setting we headed back.

Day 9 December 9th The Main Track and Rambund

Our favourite rickshaw wallah from previous years, Rattan Singh, met us within several other rickshaws and pedalled us off two by two into Keoladeo National Park (Bharatpur). Two Jackals trotted parallel to the track through sunlit grass. The amount of birdlife is hard to describe but included White-breasted Kingfishers, Grey and Purple Herons, Purple Gallinules, Painted Storks, Bronze-winged Jacanas, Teal, Spot-billed Ducks, Little and Great Cormorants, Great Egrets, Anhingas, Pintail, Greylag Geese and Bar-headed Geese. Many of them were very close to the track and many photographs were taken, particularly of the Painted Stork colonies with adults and well-grown juveniles in the tops of small tree. We took a footpath into one of the dryer areas, where we had a fantastic time with Black-shouldered Kites, Red Avadavats, Yellow-footed Green Pigeons, Bay-backed, Great Grey and Brown Shrikes and a magnificent female Dusky Horned Owl peered at us over the top of her nest. We found a stack of feathers from

Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Painted Snipe and Koel under what was presumably the owl's plucking post. There were several Greater and one Lesser Spotted Eagles and a Crested Serpent Eagle. We saw several Black-rumped Flamebacks and a Wryneck sitting out in the open. A pack of Jackals were harassing Wild Boar, there were Sambar and Nilgai as well. In the trees lining the track were Grey Hornbills, lots of Chiffchaffs, gorgeous Brahminy and Pied Mynas, and more Ring-necked Parakeets than you can shake a stick at.

In the afternoon we were out again, this time walking along Rambund. There were several Bluethroats including at least one fine male, and more Grey Hornbills. A man was wandering out amongst the wildfowl in the distance, and two reserve staff went to bring him back to order, but in the meantime we got an idea of how many thousand of ducks and geese there were as they took flight to avoid him. Sambar stags sparred with a background of Bar-headed Geese and Pintail. It was quite magical, with flights of White Pelicans in the afternoon light.

A nightwalk after the birdlist initially produced nothing more than a couple of Golden Jackals and a very loud dog near the barrier but over by the temple things livened up with some rather flighty Chital, a couple more Jackals and somewhat distant but clear views of a Toddy Cat otherwise known as Palm Civet. On the way back we again saw the jackals and just before and just after them were Black-naped Hares.

Day 10 December 10th Mansarover and a Boat Trip

With some difficulty we rickshaw-ed along the main track with a minimum of stops. Approaching Keoladeo Temple there was a roost of Night Herons, and in the gardens there were very approachable Hoopoes and Jungle Babblers. Taking the Mansarover track we walked with huge numbers of ducks and geese stretching off into the distance on either side. Purple Herons and Gallinules glowed in the sunlight. One incredible sight was a Black-necked Stork killing and eating a Moorhen. Further along the last two Siberian Cranes fed on a knoll surrounded by Bar-headed and Greylag Geese. There was time to study all the large eagles with Imperial, Lesser Spotted and Greater Spotted in the same area, with both adults and immatures present. Bluethroats were again common, and we all saw a beautiful pair of Barred Button Quail. At the pool by the temple there were Anhingas and Pied Kingfishers catching tiny silver fish, and two different species of terrapin were surfacing – Flap-Shell and Indian Sawback. There were also two superb Rock Pythons basking in the sun, one about six feet long, the other around eight feet. The holy man of the temple to Shiva blessed anyone who wanted it and provided cups of masala chai too. We stopped on the return rickshaw ride for a pair of brilliantly lit Black-necked Storks and a Collared Scops Owl with only its face visible as it looked out of a small hole.

For the afternoon we were punted round in an area known as 'the boating area'. There were lots of Bronze-winged Jacanas, White-tailed Plovers, Woolly-necked and Painted Storks. Black-headed Ibises and Spoonbills flew over. We got particularly close to the Painted Storks which were stacked in a couple of shrubby trees with their nests and youngsters. Roger and one boat driver liberated some silky pink tail feathers from beneath the tree. It was a good chance to look at some of the aquatic vegetation including Woolfsia, which looks like a green grain of sand and is one of the smallest flowering plants in the world. We also got very close to a Crested Serpent Eagle, and watched the sun get redder and redder as it went down – a large sun spot was clearly visible.

Ian popped out for a late nightwalk. After the usual Spotted Owlet and Golden Jackal it was quiet until a very close encounter with a male Blue Bull at the boat landing. Then a Collared Scops Owl perched unafraid right by the road near the little temple. Out in the grassy field there was a couple of Chital and later good close-up views of a Toddy Cat.

Day 11 December 11th Agra – the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort

Several of us made an early morning sortie out towards Shanti Kutir. It was still very dark when we left at six forty but the light slowly improved. The first bird we saw was a stunning male Orange-headed Ground Thrush. This didn't stay for long so we moved across to the other side of the headquarters and looked at the fruiting fig above us. This was full of busily feeding Rhesus Macaques. A Koel flew in and as is usual for this species, managed to keep mostly out of sight for a while until we got a good look at it in the next tree over. Meanwhile a superb adult female Besra appeared and perched in the first tree. We searched the undergrowth for the thrush again but succeeded only in flushing a couple of disgruntled Nilgai!

The journey to the Taj Mahal was punctuated by a stop for what turned out to be about 8 or so Black Ibis feeding in ploughed fields at the side of the road, and also by the coach's fan belt breaking. We limped along for a bit until met by a second coach which came out from Agra to meet us, and reached our destination at 12, having dropped Fiona off in search of glasses to replace the two pairs she had dropped in all the excitement at Ranthambhor. One cannot see the Taj Mahal until through the outer, magnificent gates and, then, on turning the corner, the timeless view is ahead. There is something about this monument that sends a pleasurable shiver down the back of the neck that cannot be appreciated from a photograph. Wildlife wise, there were three Small Indian Mongooses.

Lunch was on the top floor of Clarke's Hotel, with a view of the Taj. The food was very good and just kept coming.

Agra Fort was our next stop. There is public access to about 1/5th of the huge complex, the rest is still used by the Indian Army. Our cultural guide for the day continued his good work as we examined the various palaces, with fabulous mogul arches and carved marble panels. The final stop was a place where marble is inlaid with semiprecious stones, with the same techniques used in the Taj Mahal and Agra Palace. There was a very interesting demonstration of the work involved, and then a less than subtle hard-sell, out of which we at least got a cup of tea and chance to see some very beautiful and very expensive marble inlay! After supper those with any energy left joined Ian for a night walk. There were several Jackals and Spotted Owlets. Two Palm Civets stared down at us from the fork of a tree, and we watched them climb down to the ground. A little way off we saw a young Palm Civet out in the open.

Day 12 December 12th The Nursery, Lala Pyare Ka Kund & Entrance Area

Half the group were out before breakfast on a walk down to the nursery. Daylight was just filtering through the trees in said nursery when we heard a flock of white-eyes flying through and we heard an Ashy Drongo. This sat by its congener, the Black Drongo, atop a dead tree. We went to look for nightjars but these had been largely absent in the past month so it was no surprise that we didn't see them, though the presence of a couple of tail feathers in immaculate

condition suggested that they might just be around. As Rattan Singh searched for the nightjars Rajveer let out a shout – he'd found the Orange-headed Ground-Thrush. Most of us had a look at this beautiful bird but few were able to see it well. A huge fig tree on the edge of the nursery was attracting plenty of pretty Coppersmiths as well as a couple of the much larger Brown-headed Barbets. Other species seen before we retired for breakfast included Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Red-throated Flycatcher, a group of Small Minivets and a Hume's Warbler.

After breakfast we were rickshawed out along the main track. The idea was not to stop until reaching Sapan Mori from where we were to walk a circular route round Lala Pyare Ka Kund, but we failed miserably to ignore photographic opportunities offered by beautifully lit and very close Spot-billed Ducks, Purple Gallinules, Anhingas, kingfishers etc etc... Having made it to the start of the walk we had got all of a couple of hundred yards before a pair of Grey Nightjars held us back for some time. They were only about twelve feet up on horizontal, greyish barked branches that they perfectly blended with. It was a good walk for shrikes and there were numerous individuals of Great Grey, Bay-backed and Long-tailed to observe. A Dusky Eagle Owl stared back at us from her nest. Rattan Singh took us off the main path at one point and lead us to an open area where we saw half a dozen European Thick-knees. As we approached the wetter areas, a pair of Nilgai were seen jousting with each other, and several Indian Rollers flew from perch to perch. Black-necked Storks towered above a selection of waterfowl. The rickshaws were waiting and amazingly we were actually back at the hotel on time at one o'clock for lunch.

In the afternoon we drove a short distance out of the reserve and stopped at an area of dusty grassland between new brick houses and saw around a dozen Yellow-wattled lapwings at close range as well as Ashy-crowned Finch Larks. Pat unfortunately was feeling unwell and we dropped her back at the hotel. On returning to Keoladeo Reserve we waited at dusk for a Brown Hawk Owl, which put in a very brief appearance along with a Dusky Eagle Owl. We had a meeting arranged with a holy man, and at six-thirty half the group walked down to his temple. This holy man likes his wildlife very much and feeds all manner of wild creatures. Having taken our shoes off we sat on a bench beneath the central banyan tree. A feral cat with suspiciously fishing cat-like spots was curled up in a tree. Having waited only about a minute, Babu pointed to the roof, where a dark shape was moving. In torchlight we could see a large adult Palm Civet creeping along in search of scraps of bread and fish. He was joined by an adult female and three half grown youngsters. We watched for some time as they climbed up and down near vertical tree trunks with ease and frisked, nay, fossicked on the roof.

Day 13 December 13th Bharatpur – Jatoli Canal

Once again into the park and along the main track. This time the large numbers of raptors kept stopping us as they posed near the track. A Crested Honey Buzzard initially caused us some confusion before we worked out its identity. A young Imperial Eagle and a young Greater Spotted Eagle both interested in a kill were handy for comparison of one to another, the Imperial Eagle replacing a Steppe Eagle that was enjoying the feast when we first arrived! We walked out along a bund parallel with the Jatoli Canal. Black Bittern and Brown Crake were located by the ever vigilant Rattan Singh (who definitely doesn't have a thing about bitterns, honest!). In the same shady recesses we spotted lots of little warblers hopping about – these proved to be Dusky Warblers and we saw at least thirty of them!

Further along the track was one of the highlights of our visit. We watched entranced as a pair of Crested Honey Buzzards fed on a large fan-shaped bees nest in a tree above us. The bees didn't seem to do a great deal about it as the buzzards literally dismantled their home! Soon after came another highlight as Rattan Singh took us to an area of large burrows occupied by pythons. Three of these great snakes were out in the sun and we were able to approach very closely – a magical sight. In the dry bushlands around the holes we counted at least thirty European Thick-knees.

After lunch back at the hotel (Ian watched three Common Grey Mongooses hunting out back) we went for a boat ride. This was a very pleasant way to spend the afternoon and took us close to many of the by now familiar waterbirds we'd been seeing all week. It was particularly good for Painted Storks! Rather less obviously it was good for Wrynecks and we also saw two Pheasant-tailed Jacanas. In the evening we headed again for the Brown Hawk Owl perch and tonight, just as it got quite dark, we did manage slightly better than fleeting views.

Day 14 December 14th The Journey to Delhi and on to Nainital

Pre breakfast was spent round at Shanti Kotur looking at Tickell's and Orange-headed Ground Thrushes as well as a python and a Slaty-Blue Flycatcher. After breakfast some of us walked round Rambund where we saw all the usual waterbirds out on the lake as well as Andy and Adrian who'd elected to take a boat out for a spot of photography. In the trees were minivets, warblers and a beautiful Golden Oriole, our first of the trip. Some of the group opted to visit Fatipur Sikri, an abandoned fort and city, before we all met again for the journey to Delhi. Rattan Singh turned up to see us off - it was sad to leave Bharatpur after having had such a wonderful time there.

En route Rajveer showed us an excellent little birding spot – though hardly the prettiest place in India! Two superb male Greater Painted Snipe sat still, confident in their camouflage and we also saw a Jack Snipe here. A flock of Streaked Weavers was yet another new species for us.

We enjoyed an evening meal and showers at the Park Hotel in Delhi before saying good bye to Pat and Christine, for we'd reached the end of the main tour. They were spending the night at the hotel before flying back to the UK the next day (in theory!). The rest of us headed for the railway station in Old Delhi and caught the evening train to Kathgodam.

Day 15 December 15th Nainital and the Mangoli Valley

Our train pulled into Kathgodam station an hour and a half late. We were met by Mr Ramani and Karan, a local guide, who were to look after us for the next few days. Our driver had taken on the onerous task of crossing the indo-gangetic plain with bus and our luggage in an eventually futile attempt to pick us up at the station – the fog had done for him. The poor fellow ended up arriving in Nainital late in the evening due to a combination of bad weather, road blockages and Nainital's environmentally enlightened town council banning buses for most of the day. Of course this affected us little as we were immediately whisked away from the lowlands in a group of little van taxis. These are in fact ideal vehicles for the twisting narrow roads of the Kumaon Hills, roads that are amazingly free of potholes too!

We had had barely time to take in the rapidly changing habitats around us when the first stop saw us amidst a fine stand of rather lush looking roadside trees. We had stopped because Karan had spotted a little flock of rather comical White-crested Laughingthrushes. These beautiful birds forage in rather vociferous groups which make entrancing watching. Of course there was more here too – several smart Himalayan Bulbuls sat atop treetops and a group of brilliant Scarlet Minivets passed by with Velvet-fronted Nuthatches and single Grey-headed and Brown-fronted Woodpeckers too. As we continued northwards the landscape opened up a little to reveal a mixed open woodland of pines, spruces and oaks with an understory of Poinsettia and ferns. Once at Nainital we took a quick cup of tea before some wandered up the road seeing Black-throated Tit, Rufous Sibia and Lemon-rumped Warbler before gathering in the carpark to watch assorted Himalayan Griffon and Black Vultures soar overhead, these with the odd Steppe Eagle and the *intermedius* or *tibetosinensis* race of Jungle Crow.

After lunch and a rest we made a short journey up to the Snow View Ridge. Snow View itself was off for today as cloud obscured its magnificence. This didn't stop an endless stream of vultures passing us with many Himalayan Griffons the pre-dominant species. A couple of Lammergeiers were a magnificent site. We took a walk along the track that follows the ridge and in highland oak and pine woodland, with an understory of rubbish (!) we found some quite wonderful birds. Several laughingthrushes included many Streaked and several of the beautiful Chestnut-crowned. The former were exceptionally tame and were easy to miss as they fossicked just a yard or two away from us. Hill Partridges were elusive on the slopes below though most of us at least glimpsed them. In the trees were our first wonderful Red-billed Himalayan Blue Magpies and a whole panoply of paridae including Spot-winged, Green-backed and beautiful Black-throated Tits. With these were Bar-tailed Treecreepers and White-tailed Nuthatches. A fantastic afternoon's birdwatching.

Day 16 December 16th Sat Tal

It dawned cool and clear and the light was already passable by six forty-five. Several of us set out to an area of rough fields and large boulder scree not far from the hotel. En route we unearthed our first Orange-flanked Bush-Robin of the trip and encountered the early morning fossickings of the inimitable Streaked Laughingthrushes. Down in the fields themselves we found both Scaly-bellied and Brown-fronted Woodpeckers as well as a host of small brown and not so brown jobs. Our first accentors of the trip appeared – a good size group of perhaps ten birds including at least one Black-throated – the rest were Rufous-breasted. Nearby were several Lemon-rumped Warblers and Adrian found what may well have been a Buff-barred Warbler.

After a substantial breakfast we drove up to snow view which this time lived up to its name. As we turned the corner before the viewpoint there were audible gasps for the view to the north was really quite incredible. In the clear morning light we could see range after range of snow-clad mountains disappearing away towards the east. These mountains were separated from us by no less than one hundred and twenty kilometres of hill country, itself very beautiful with mists hanging in the valleys. There were several massifs that stood out above the rest and the large bulk of glacier-clad mountains that surrounded 26,000 feet tall Nanda Devi was most impressive.

We continued on to Sat Tal driving along the windy but smooth surfaced mountain roads through pine and oak forests and down into the colourful and lively town of Bhowali. A few miles on and we set down next to some fields. We were immediately admiring new birds as Russet Sparrows arrived in numbers. A day full of flycatchers started with a gorgeous little female Little Pied Flycatcher – almost wren-like in the undergrowth next to us. Then there were three blue flycatchers in quick succession in the form of a pair of Slaty-Blues, an Ultramarine that no-one other than Ian saw, and a gorgeous pair of Small Niltavas. Hopping around the bushes by field edges we came across Long-tailed Shrike, Grey Bushchats, Lemon-rumped Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Lesser Whitethroats and both White-capped and Rock Buntings – the combination emphasising the varied origins of Nainital's wintering birds. There were even both accentor species seen earlier in the morning again!

Just down the road we stopped by a gully and spent awhile checking out the inhabitants. Small Niltava and Rufous-breasted Accentor fed amongst some sparrows whilst overhead flew a mixed group of Nepal House Martins, Red-rumped Swallows and Alpine Swifts. Raptors appeared in the form of a few Steppe Eagles, a couple of Black-shouldered Kites and one or two Himalayan Griffon Vultures. A man waded through the gully putting to flight a little group of Common Rosefinches. As we searched for these we came across a party of Black-chinned Babblers and Karan saw a couple of Yellow-breasted Greenfinches. A brilliant flash of blue revealed a Rufous-bellied Niltava. A Scaly-bellied Woodpecker drew people round the corner where Fi found a cute little Asian Barred Owlet perched right out in the open by the roadside. We watched this beautiful creature for a while – it was fully awake and swivelling its head regularly to follow this sound and that – before moving on down the road a way. Here we took a walk for forty minutes or so down through forest whose major constituent appeared to be *Bauhinia variegata*, all in seed. By a house was a flowering tree which hosted a male and female Black-throated Sunbird, the male a picture in iridescent purples, maroon and blue. The vans picked us up and we had our picnic by a small modern shrine, and Mr Ramani brought us chai from a nearby tea stall. In the trees below us there were a number of small birds including a Golden-spectacled Warbler, and only a few yards away we stood watching a gorgeous Spotted Forktail feeding in a nearly dry stream, just where some Red Junglefowl had also been. We took a track along a wooded slope, through which moved a large flock of Red-billed Blue Magpies, Black-headed and Eurasian Jays and White-throated Laughingthrushes, which gave us a wonderful opportunity to get good looks at all of these. There was also a gorgeous Greater Yellowthroat (Woodpecker). In the valley bottom we had an amazing time with Pink-browed Rosefinch in the bush in front of us and a Scaly-breasted Wren-babbler hopping unconcernedly in the leaf litter a few feet away. Ian and Roger flushed an Orange-flanked Bush-Robin and a fabulous Golden Bush-Robin. There were numerous flycatchers – Rufous-gorgetted, Red-throated and Slaty-Blue as well as Small Niltavas. Two vans headed up to Snow View to photograph the sunset on the Himalayas, and the other two vans headed back to Nainital. We stopped for an Imperial Eagle in a tree, and spent the last daylight looking round an abandoned churchyard. The last graves dated to the end of the second world war and included one officer who died of injuries from the polo field. The sunset vans were rewarded by fantastically pink mountains.

Day 17 December 17th Mongoli Valley, The Barrage and Quality Inn

A few of us had an excellent walk out to the low fields before breakfast. There were good numbers of Rufous-fronted Accentors, and a flock of Dark-rumped Rosefinches. A little further down was a flock of various rosefinches, and two Kalij Pheasants walked across the road. Back in Nainital we spotted four gorgeous Hill Barbets feeding in a palm tree with Striated Laughing Thrushes.

Breakfast and then off to the Mongoli Valley. We had a superb morning with Black Bulbuls, a difficult to identify woodpecker (almost certainly a Himalayan Woodpecker), Red-fronted Serins, a fantastic Spot-winged Grosbeak, eight Kalij Pheasants crossing the road, a pair of Hill Barbets, glorious views of several Black-headed Jays burying nuts in an earth bank and a gorgeous pair of Spotted Forktails. All of this in a peaceful valley surrounded with steep wooded outcrops, and terraced fields running down the centre. The woodland is mixed oak and pine, and many of the trees carried a good amount of epiphytic orchids and mistletoes. The small village here seemed comparatively prosperous and one farmer stopped ploughing a small field with two Oxen to offer us a bunch of carrots just out of the ground and washed in the stream. The butterflies were flocking round flowers growing in the fields, Indian Red Admirals amongst them, and we compared Grey-backed and Long-tailed Shrikes. We drove a few kilometres further down the road through excellent woodland to a place with a few tea stalls and tables and chairs to have our packed lunch.

The drive to the Quality Inn was punctuated with a stop to look for Ibisbill – which we did not see, although we did find River Lapwings, Plumbeous Water Redstarts, Crested Kingfisher and Crested Tree Swifts. We also stopped for a Green Magpie. We had time for a half hour of looking round the grounds and over the river after meeting the resident Golden Retriever and getting into our rooms. A tiny little Yellow-bellied Fantail sat on a fence a few feet away, there was a Barred Owlet, and a pair of Kalij Pheasants. As dusk fell, there were owls and a leopard was heard roaring...

Mrs Ramani prepared barbecued appetizers which we indulged in before supper at the usual time.

Day 18 December 18th Quality Inn

Pre-breakfast saw us out on the track down to the beautifully clear stony river. A Brown Dipper was feeding under water, and a Crested Kingfisher hovered and flew up and down river. Ian spotted a pair of metre-long, dark-furred Yellow-throated Martins on the slope above us. Plumbeous Water Redstarts disputed territories and a Spotted Forktail and White-capped Water Redstarts fed at the edge of the water. In the trees we saw Blue-throated Barbet and lots of Blue Whistling Thrushes. Slaty-headed Parakeets flew in small swift flocks up and down the valley, their yellow tails standing out clearly. As usual there was the odd woodpecker to be seen – this time Fulvous-bellied and Grey-headed. Walking back up the track there were Grey-hooded and Golden Spectacled Warblers, and flycatchers included a Rufous-bellied Niltava. Two Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches seemed to be storing some foodstuff in a haystack right by the working elephant who resides just outside the hotel gate. The males of this nuthatch are stunningly bright when compared with the same species further south in the subcontinent. Other birds noted on this walk were Black-chinned Babblers, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Grey-headed

Canary Flycatchers. A beautiful male Crimson Sunbird male fed on the Bottlebrush tree outside the restaurant.

After breakfast we walked towards a tributary stream valley. Almost immediately there was an Orange-bellied Leafbird in a eucalyptus tree. We entered the valley accompanied by a quiet little boy who was very proud of his wire wheeled contraption, and Marshall, the hotel's Golden Retriever. The young lad had an amusing little encounter with a Brown Fish Owl which he recounted to the group each in turn – there was no need for language to understand it! There was a big flock of Black Bulbuls and White-throated Laughingthrushes, amongst which was a Green Magpie. There were several woodpeckers – Grey-capped Pygmy, Fulvous-bellied and a glorious Greater Flameback. A superb Mountain Hawk-Eagle flew down the valley at tree top height giving us a good chance to confirm its identity as separate from Changeable Hawk-Eagle. We walked as far as the small village – the track we were on was marked with white paint on the stones and is the only access to it. A female sunbird remained unidentified but we did see plenty of Black-chinned Babblers, Velvet-fronted Nuthatches and various warblers. We had more great views of White-capped Water Redstarts, female Plumbeous Water Redstarts (females seem to prefer smaller streams) and a very obliging Spotted Forktail. Whilst trying to look at a bushbrown butterfly Ian put up a much more spectacular beast in the shape of a Great Egg-fly, a butterfly with four large pale iridescent purple suffused spots. There were also Common Evening Browns in the leaf litter. Hanuman Langurs were frequent in the trees higher up the sides of the narrow valley, and we think they were responsible for putting up the fabulous Brown Fish Owl which flew low overhead and landed on a sunlit branch. The stream took us back down to the road, where a party of Oriental White-eyes included a Puff-throated Babbler and several cute little Blue-winged Minlas. The sun on the lantana bushes had attracted a good variety of butterflies – Blue and Yellow Pansy, Glassy Tiger, several orange, cream and black Rustics and closer to the hotel, the Wanderer. Roger had spotted some birds in the eucalyptus trees near the lodge - these further delayed our lunch – Golded-fronted Leafbirds as well as Orange-bellied Leafbird, Crow-billed Drongo and Ashy Drongo. We took lunch on the lawn with Crested Tree Swifts and a Black Kite overhead. Common Jezebels, a stunning pierid butterfly dressed in whites, reds and yellows, were common as was the pale blue Wanderer. The male Crimson Sunbird sat amidst the bottlebrush flowers. By the entrance we found Olive-backed Pipits and a male Tickell's Blue Flycatcher as well as a couple of new butterflies in the shape of Common Castor and Common Pierrot.

In the afternoon most took a couple of jeeps along the main road to Mohan in the company of Mr Ramani and Karan. A local guide in the jeeps soon pointed out a pair of Tawny Fish Owls. These were impressive birds – over half a metre long and rich tawny brown all over. The face pattern is quite different from the Brown Fish Owl – and the belly patterning too. Yet this was no more than two hundred metres from where we'd encountered the Brown Fish Owl in the morning! Further along the road we stopped to take a look at a couple of Lesser Yellownapes and later a very distant Pallas's Fish Eagle feeding her chicks on the nest. Nearby was a glorious male Green-tailed Sunbird that sat still in a roadside tree and sang heartily. We encountered several bird parties with drongos seemingly predominant. Ashy and Bronzed Drongos were numerous and we found a Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo. This wonderful bird hawked through the trees above us showing off its amazing long outer tail feathers with the rackets several inches beyond the main part of the tail! Other goodies included our first Red-whiskered Bulbuls, a wonderful selection of barbets including one little tree replete with several Lineated and one Hill Barbet, and above us were Himalayan Swiftlets. As dusk fell we turned our attention to mammals as we returned along the mostly quiet road – several Sambar came

down to drink in the river and in the middle of the road we encountered two Yellow-throated Martins who cavorted off up a little nullah – an entrancing sight!

After dinner several of us braved the cold and did a night drive along the same bit of road. Not much was seen – just a couple of Barking Deer and both Chital and Sambar, though as we arrived back at the Inn there were two Wild Boar right by the entrance.

Day 19 December 19th Corbett National Park

We left the Quality Inn after a hearty breakfast and surprise rain storm. Travelling in jeeps we made our way in to Corbett, stopping along the main road for numerous mixed feeding flocks of birds (various drongos, minivets, barbets and of course babblers and bulbuls). There were plentiful woodpeckers – we had fine views of no less than six species before we'd even reached Corbett's gate. One roadside tree alone held Lesser Yellownape, Himalayan Flameback and a Grey-headed Woodpecker and we also saw Fulvous-breasted, Grey-crowned Pygmy and Greater Yellownape. Inside the park there were numerous Chital and a large family of glossy Wild Boar, all with well developed manes, which crossed the road in front of us and foraged in the woodland by the track. This particular group had white sideburns giving them a curiously refined appearance. As we sat overlooking a beautiful mixed grassland and woodland in a river valley a Chital down below started to bark its alarm call insistently and fixed its gaze on the bushes on a bank behind. We watched and listened awhile with baited breath but eventually the deer relaxed and whatever had caused her concern was not to be revealed. A fine male Red Junglefowl crossed the track also, and a few Barking Deer were seen. We drove through woodland bisected at intervals by the wide stony bed of the river Ramganga. At one open area of riverbed there was a Wallcreeper hopping around the boulders, the directions to find said bird used a stunning male White-capped Water-Redstart as the marker! At another a Collared Falconet hawked for dragonflies. Other birds along this stretch included a group of Blue-throated and Lineated Barbets feeding in a tree frequented by both Ashy Bulbuls and our only Black-crested Bulbul of the holiday. From a vantage point overlooking the clear, deep river we could see catfish up to four feet long and thousands of Gold-striped Mahseer – a fish famed for its fighting abilities in the manner of the best salmon. Resting on the bank were two large Ghariel, one male with an inflated end to the snout and one female. We had our picnic at a building which is a café when open, or sat by the river on a log with a family of Pied Kingfishers hovering and fishing in front of us. Several butterflies along the riverside included the Common Cerulean. Overhead a Pallas's Eagle soared, its curiously shaped head and beak (rather like a 1950's cartoon eagle) were easily seen. Just downstream sat two Lesser Fish-Eagles. We motored rapidly on towards Dhikala and just outside the compound Keith spotted a large Monitor Lizard, rather cold and sluggish, at the side of the track.

After settling into our rooms at Dhikala, there was a short time to rest, drink tea and scan the open grassy area and lake that the compound overlooks. There were two wild Indian Elephants, Black Storks and numerous Rhesus Macaques. One each of Hen Harrier, Pied Harrier and Marsh Harrier quartered the grassland and in the trees by us in the compound we saw Black-hooded Oriole and a gorgeous Collared Falconet – and two Red-headed Vultures sailed over!

Keith and Lilian opted to go out on Elephant back for the afternoon, the rest of us returned to our jeeps. The jeeps did not all follow the same route, but most people saw the huge flocks of Blossom-headed Parakeets and the gorgeous pair of Yellow-throated Martins that played in and

out of the trees by the trackside for ten minutes or so. There seemed to be male Red Junglefowl everywhere. One thing we all saw for sure was the herd of twenty-eight wild Elephants grazing at the side of a lake. One young male came quite close to one of the jeeps, and the echoes of another individual trumpeting added to the atmosphere. At the same spot were several hundred Chital and a Pallas's Fish Eagle on a fish. Other highlights included Barking Deer and Hog Deer, several Black Francolins, an immature Lesser Coucal, a Streak-throated Woodpecker and amongst the many smaller birds, two Hodgson's Stonechats. We returned at dusk, pausing just outside the compound to move the now even more sluggish Monitor Lizard that had moved into the middle of the track.

Alcohol is not served at Dhikala, so we gathered in an annex for, er, orange juice and tea. (The staff serving said drinks produced a bottle opener from a side cupboard – we were not the first.) Adrian showed those still around after the bird list Saturn and its rings in the telescope, and Ian saw a Porcupine inside the compound. This prompts me to mention the Chital, Sambar, Wild Boar and Jackals that were also trotting round the buildings at various times of day and night.

Day 20 December 20th Corbett and on to Delhi

After a reasonably warm night we were off in jeeps again at first light, although the powercut at 6.30 ish did make finding clothes rather more technical in some rooms. Again jeeps did not all follow the same route, though I think all headed for the area where a tigress made a kill the afternoon before – in sight of the compound. Fi's jeep headed through areas of elephant grass and to a beautiful part of the river which we crossed on two plank and boulder bridges that are washed out and rebuilt annually. There was a tree full of Lineated and Blue-throated Barbets, and lots of kingfishers – Eurasian, Pied, Crested and White-breasted. A White-tailed Eagle perched in a tree, looking huge in the slight mist. The other jeeps went up into the forests to the south of Dhikala. These were very beautiful but also very quiet – the sun had yet to penetrate the cool woodlands. Soon some very fresh tiger prints were found – so fresh that they overlaid the tyre tracks of a jeep that had gone out in front just ten minutes before. These were followed carefully by the drivers but the Tiger had eventually left the track and headed down to the grassland where she would have been difficult to find. Later various woodpeckers were seen including both Brown-capped Pygmy and Grey-capped Pygmy, Himalayan Flameback, Grey-headed and Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers – Corbett is an extraordinarily good place for this family. There were some fine views of Red Junglefowl and Kalij Pheasant as well as close-up encounters with Barking Deer, Chital and Sambar. Several Common Rosefinches sat in some tall trees amidst the grasslands by a river where we were allowed out of the jeeps at one spot. Here there were Grey-crowned Prinias, Stonechats and a male Slaty-blue Flycatcher amidst the bushes and amongst all the bulbuls in the trees was an adult plumaged Dark-throated Thrush. In the grass a flock of dapper black and chestnut Crested Buntings were found and back in the trees we had brief but very good views of three Oriental Pied Hornbills. It was at this point that one of the local 'green' pigeons flew past – we weren't able to be sure about the identity but it was probably a Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon.

Breakfast, and it was time to be on our way. One jeep hared off for another try for Ibisbill, the rest followed at a more sedate pace. Sightings on the way out of the park included some beautiful Kalij Pheasants. Those who went ahead in search of the Ibisbills were destined not to see this enigmatic bird but did see Ruddy Shelducks, Common Merganser and a male Pochard by the Kosi River. There were also several vultures drifting over including a White-rumped

Vulture, and there was a single Long-billed Pipit on the bouldery riverbed. En route they had passed a couple of flocks of Slaty-headed Parakeets and many Muntjac, some of which stayed put right by the roadside.

All vehicles met up at Ramnagar, we said our goodbyes to Mr Ramani and Karan, and boarded our faithful bus for the journey to Delhi. This journey was long, and, shall we say, punctuated with moments of interest - sunset over the River Ganges, numerous examples of Indian driving, a traffic jam that held us up in the city of Moradabad for an hour and the driver's unfailingly accurate judgement! We arrived at the Centaur Hotel next to the airport in Delhi a little later than expected and had a superb last dinner with Vinod before turning in.

Day 21 December 21st Flying home

And then it was time to fly home!