



Wild India

Sociable plovers and solitary cats

November 30th – December 20th 2005

A Greentours Trip Report

Led by Phil Benstead

30th November

Travel to Delhi

We all finally met up on the flight after enduring the chaos of Terminal 4 at Heathrow. The flight as usual was uneventful and before long we were landing in Delhi, queuing at immigration and trying to find where our bags has been hidden around the carousel. Vinod met us on the other side and a short ride took us to the nearby Centaur Hotel. We were quickly into our rooms but jetlag meant that sleep was elusive for many of us.

1st December

Delhi to Bharatpur

After a late breakfast (0830) we headed for the bus and began the long drive to Bharatpur. Apart from a short rest break for samosas and soft drinks we just kept on going through often dense traffic and crawling along at a snails pace. India was all around us though and we drank in the many strange sights, smells and sounds. We also got the bird and mammal lists going with a few common open country birds and the odd group of rhesus macaques.

Just after three we pulled into the Bagh and quickly sorted out the room allocations and headed straight for the restaurant for the first of many impressive meals. Those with the energy spent some time birding in the garden but we were all rather tired and after a quick dinner we all collapsed gratefully.

2nd December

Bharatpur (main track, Temple area and Mansarovar)

A 7 o'clock breakfast meant jetlag all round but we all made it and tucked in before leaving at 0730. We picked up Rattan Singh at the gate and drove straight down to the second checkpoint. Here we disembarked and took the short track to the Nursery which was heaving with birds. Parakeets screeched all around and Rattan pulled out all the stops showing us orange-headed thrush, Tickell's thrush and two very confiding roosting large-tailed nightjars. The eucalypts here were full of purple sunbirds and fruiting trees nearby held our first brown-headed barbets. Black-rumped flamebacks called all around us

and a yellow-crowned woodpecker proved too elusive for general viewing. Returning to the checkpoint we met up with our team of rickshaw men and headed down the main track into the park.

We did not get very far before Rattan called a halt and dug out a stunning Indian scops owl at its roost site. We all got great views through the scope and then left the bird in peace. Next stop was for the even more impressive dusky eagle owl. A pair at a nest site tucked safely away on an island in the wetland. It pays to have the local knowledge! Pretty soon the wetland made itself felt and we walked along the road marvelling at the flooded jheels that heaved with life. Large rafts of coot rotated as they fed in the distance. Big colonies of painted storks bustled with late-season activity as the full-grown chicks squabbled for their share of food. Palm squirrels caught the early morning sun as they clung to palm trunks upside down. As the day warmed up butterflies became more apparent and included a number of showy species including common rose, plain tiger and common tiger. The more subtle delights of the salmon arab and chocolate pansy were enjoyed. Occasionally we chanced upon huge basking flap-shell turtles – really ugly beasts. A garden lizard and our first spotted owlet provided a very photogenic montage that could not be resisted. This wealth of wildlife left us reeling and before we knew it we were late for lunch so headed off down the road to take our lunch by the temple.

After a very pleasant lunch on the shade we checked out a nearby python lair and found a fairly small individual at home. Then we wandered slowly down the track to Mansarovar. On the way we spotted a small flock of Dalmatian pelicans. Mansarovar was alive with birds including our first bar-headed and greylag geese and a variety of waders including Temminck's and little stint, black-tailed godwit, redshank and common snipe. A river tern put in an appearance and along the back a small flock of common crane could be seen. Craig Robson (leading a Birdquest tour) kindly put us onto two superb sociable plovers on the dry area at the back of the jheel but these were rather distant for most of us but were easily the most exciting birds we saw today. Their speed of decline in recent years has almost matched that of the Indian vulture population and there is grave concern that they may face imminent extinction. The sun was getting low now and we all enjoyed the splendid evening light as we watched the many birds of Mansarovar go about their business. From here though we climbed aboard the rickshaws and stopped only once as we headed out of the park and back to base. Before dinner we went through our checklists for the first time and then surrendered to the hunger pangs.

3rd December

Bharatpur (Rambund, Sapan Mori and Mansarovar)

Our morning walk took us past Shantir Kutir and onto Ram Bund, first through a wet area and then through some drier thorn scrub. We shared the walk for most of the way with not one but two other groups of birdwatchers but we managed not to get in each other's way fairly successfully. Highlights birds during this session included lesser whistling-duck, garganey, two tiny brown-capped pygmy-woodpeckers, much better views of yellow-crowned woodpecker, trees festooned with yellow-footed green pigeons, black-headed gull (!), Brahminy kite, an adult imperial eagle, long-tailed shrike, grey-headed flycatcher, grotty views of a lumbering clamorous reed warbler and good views of Indian silverbill. A highlight for Linda was the first good jackal sighting in the dry grass areas around the jheels here. As usual there were so many birds to look at that progress along the brick-paved paths was predictably slow. Arriving back on the tarmac we headed for lunch at the temple – only to find that it had been laid out on the roadside about a kilometre away! WE eventually got there and wolfed down some more excellent grub.

After lunch we took the rickshaws down to the trailhead for the walk to python point. Here we walked out through the dry overgrazed thorn scrub seeing very little in the heat of the day. A diversion into a dry jheel area with scattered pools produced excellent views of wild boar and jackal as well as a few new birds including southern grey shrike, isabelline wheatear and northern lapwing, as well as good views of

citrine wagtail and sarus crane. Before long though the sun started dipping to the horizon again and we took to the rickshaws again for the long pull out of the park. En route we had a very nice *fulvescens* greater spotted eagle close to the path and also finally saw our first mallard. As dusk fell we started to hear the dusky eagle owls calling and greater coucals started 'booting' in the distance. The last bird of the day was a splendid and very close orange-headed thrush by the side of the road. The hotel grounds produced a large owl flying out of roost at dusk – a bird that was almost certainly a mottled wood owl.

4th December

Bund Bhareta

Today should have been the day we visited the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort but the group unanimously decided that this was not necessary! Of the six on tour, four people had been before and no amount of persuasion could persuade the other two that they wanted to go! So instead we headed to the nearby Bund Bhareta for a day trip away from Bharatpur.

The 40 km drive took an age, as we were constantly stopping and searching for birds. At the first stop we got excellent views of our first wryneck, and chased elusive red avadavat. Although these smart little birds kept giving us the slip by the end of the day everyone had managed great views of the dapper males. Roadside trees held proof of the presence of baya weavers in the form of their beautifully constructed nests and we did not have to wait too long before the seeding grass by the roadside yielded a very tame example. We also had excellent close views of its cousin the black-throated weaver, feeding just metres away by the side of the road. Despite searching hard along the roadside wetlands we failed to find our target bird the painted snipe and eventually headed off towards the reservoir. We did not get far though before a dry field with a wet margin grabbed our attention. Here we found our first yellow wagtails and a few citrines for comparison and also our first *personata* race white wagtails. Spotted owlets provided their usual charming distraction as they bobbed and weaved in trees.

Just before the dam we stopped off at the government rest house to enjoy the lively and noisy Indian flying fox colony. Most hung upside down fast asleep but occasionally individuals would fly about demonstrating just how big they were. Whilst here we also fleetingly glimpsed an Asian paradise flycatcher. Rattan secured tea and soft drinks from nearby so we stayed a while to enjoy the ambience. Climbing up to the dam we noted the very high water levels and there seemed to be few waterfowl, in fact most of the birds were up the far end of the large expanse of water. Just before lunch we had time to spot a couple of long-billed pipit on a nearby, rocky hillside and enjoyed a few fantastic dragonflies including *Trithemis aurora* and *Trithemis festiva*. A large exciting looking *Aeshna* also zoomed along the irrigation canal at one point. Butterflies were also evident and included common rose and common leopard.

Lunch was taken in the shade at a little picnic spot with a couple of grey-headed flycatchers for company. As we walked back to the vans from here we had the first of two sulphur-bellied warblers, although this one was not very obliging. We were shuttled the short distance to the other end of the dam and walked on round the reservoir to the impressive derelict hunting lodge. En route Hebe spotted our first covey of jungle bush quail and one froze in the middle of a thorn bush and using the scope we could look at just its head (it was very close) – luckily the diagnostic features were all there. Walking on Rattan spotted our first bronze-winged jacanas – curiously scarce this year – and white-capped buntings chirped in the thorn trees. At the hunting lodge the chowkidar kindly made us a yet another cup of tea and we enjoyed the view over the reservoir from this elevated position. Nearby bushes held chestnut-shouldered petronias and laughing doves but try as we might we could not spot an osprey and the water levels were sadly way too high for Indian skimmers, which like lots of exposed sand bars. Before we knew it we had to head back and get back in time to look for the wood owl in the hotel grounds together with the Birdquest crew. They played a tape but bar a few stone-curlew nothing else was abroad.

5th December

Bharatpur (canal, Nursery, Sapan Mori and Ram Bund)

At 0730 we all gathered by the gate and waved Chris and Linda off as they were going solo this morning hoping for close views of jackals and other critters. Hebe opted for a lie in leaving the rest of us to head to the canal zone near the hotel in search of painted snipe. We were dropped off by the bus at the Maharajahs Bharatpur residence and from here had excellent close views of perched wire-tailed swallow and also a couple of more distant Oriental honey buzzards. Walking up the canal we enjoyed close views of a number of waders and wagtails but it was apparent that the monsoon had washed away the dense mats of water hyacinth that are favoured by painted snipe. Hawking over this wetland were yet more wire-tailed swallows and even a few streak-throated swallow. Back in the bus we headed back to the hotel to pick up Hebe.

Before we got into the park, Rattan took us to another painted snipe site that was right beside a busy road. Plenty of water hyacinth here and sure enough it was not long before Rattan had spotted a fine female. We all enjoyed this special bird and marvelled that it could survive in the outskirts of such a busy town. Heading in the park finally we met up with our rickshaw men and headed down to the nursery for another photographic session with the large-tailed nightjar. Sure enough he was in the usual spot and we all blazed away again. Next we headed down the main road, searching hard for black bitterns but only finding two little green bitterns for our troubles. We continued this search on and off for the rest of the day with out getting a squeak of one sadly. A great highlight here was a very close booted eagle 'mantling' a coot it had just caught and looking decidedly sheepish (as only raptors can when they have made a kill).

A short walk up one side of Sapan Mori produced some great sightings including; a close family of sarus cranes, a white-throated kingfisher catching and dispatching a frog in the most violent manner possible and a fine pair of black-necked storks. Here we crossed paths with Linda and Chris who had had several close encounters with jackals and were pleased with their morning.

Pretty soon though it was time to head back to the main road for lunch by the temple and a well-earned rest. The temple garden produced a few interesting insects in the sunny spots including a nice *Hemianax ephippiger* and a number of butterflies including blue pansy and lemon pansy. Whilst we digested our meal we pottered from bench to bench nearby and spotted our first whiskered terns and watched an immature black-necked stork fishing in an erratic rather hit-and-miss fashion.

Riding up to Shantir Cutir we stopped on many occasion hoping for black bittern and saw the first of two Indian monitors. The late afternoon saw us taking a short and gentle stroll up the Ram Bund. Highlights here included large numbers of wire-tailed swallows, a clamorous reed warbler and typically (after spending a couple of hours searching for them this morning) another fine pair of pair of painted snipe. Last stop before the hotel saw us walking a maze of paths through the thorn forest in search of a roosting brown hawk owl – which was in residence and enjoyed by all.

6th December

Bharatpur (Khadam Kunj area, main road and boat ride)

This morning the photographers elected to go solo, each with their adopted rickshaw driver. Phil, Rattan, Chris and Linda headed off into the Khadam Kunj area for a crack at some plovers. To get there we had to circumnavigate Mansarovar, which held even more birds than two days ago. The colder weather was probably driving birds slowly south. The numbers of coot were amazing and were often the target of attack by various raptors. The noise of the flocks "steam-paddling away in confusion was tremendous and carried long distances. Working through the duck we spotted a few tufted duck, our first great

crested grebe and a huge (for Bharatpur) flock of 29 curlew. Dragging our selves away we tramped off towards Khadam Kunj.

Our first plovers were Northern lapwing but eventually we found a large open area that held about 20 yellow-wattled lapwing and 6 sociable plover. We spent a pleasant fifteen minutes watching these critically endangered birds before leaving them in peace. Also here we had both tawny and paddyfield pipit. Taking a circuitous route back to the rickshaws we tramped on and crossed over the same area that we had visited a couple of days before. The same isabelline wheatear was present and we watched the southern grey shrike working away at his larder before barging in and examining his butchery skills. Surprisingly considering this was a rather dry area he had been working on a pair of frogs legs, each hung gruesomely from a different thorn. Walking on we had a large flock of ruff and best of all a splendid female orphean warbler.

Before we all knew it though it was time to head back to the temple to meet up and have lunch. The photographers had had a splendid time; their drivers proving capable guides had found them Indian nightjars and a variety of owls. Brian and Gill made everyone green with envy by spotting a jungle cat as it skulked off. After lunch it was more of the same. Phil, Rattan, Chris and Linda headed up the main track to search out the nightjar that had been seen by everyone else. Stopping at the spot Chris quickly spotted the bird and we settled down to watch it at leisure and discuss the finer points of its plumage and identity. Moving on we could not resist another peek at the pair of dusky eagle owls – the female still fiercely incubating the eggs and the male standing guard nearby. Walking on slowly we also had great views of orange-headed thrush and watched a very relaxed troupe of macaques and they loafed in deep shade. Plenty of desultory grooming and quite a few nursing mothers. The alpha male also glared at us as he strolled past us on the road.

The last part of the day was a boat ride out into a painted stork colony. We all clambered into one boat and were punted out down a narrow channel. Just before we got to the end of this channel Rattan hopped out to check a python burrow. He whistled to us that the python was out so we all disembarked to look at this impressive creature. It was not the longest of pythons (just! 3.5 m) but had eaten well recently. It surged towards us as we watched and popped down a hole almost at our feet. Fantastic. Resuming the boat ride we headed out over the jheel and scarcely bothered the assembled storks as we cruised amongst them. Cameras rolled and clicked. After getting back we headed to the nearby Bharatpur hotel to have a quick look for Siberian rubythroat but despite hearing one sing we could not convert it. A good day.

7th December

Bagh area and Ranthambhore (Routes 4 & 5)

Today was the transfer day to Ranthambhore so most elected to take it easy in the morning. Those who fancied a short walk after breakfast came out with Phil and Rattan. We walked along another part of the canal zone searching for yellow-wattled lapwing but without success. We did see another wryneck and our first red turtle dove and attracted a small group of curious boys. Heading back to the hotel we finished our packing, paid our bills and got into the bus for the short hop to the station. Here we settled in and waited for the train which arrived 35 minute late. Climbing aboard we entered a world of torpid long distance Indians. This train – the Golden Temple Express – takes 36 hours to cover the distance between Amritsar and Bombay. All our seats were still in bed mode but we quickly worked out how to convert them back to seats and settled back to while away the 2.5-hour journey. Some of us had clean windows and measured our progress on maps and took in the scenery.

When we finally got to Sawai Madhopur we were met by Bahadur and whisked off in an open topped bus or canter. The hotel had been extensively re-modelled and looked fantastic. It is hard to imagine a more delightful setting. Settling into our rooms quickly we grabbed a quick hot lunch before heading out

into the park in two jeeps. Phil, Chris and Linda went out on long drive along route 4 that produced the usual close views of deer and nilgai. We also had a close encounter with a frisky looking ruddy mongoose and had great views of a pair of painted spurfowl – a very beautiful game bird. Meeting back up with the other four at the checkpoint we were both crestfallen and pleased to discover that they had scored a tiger on the first attempt. All boded well for tomorrow. Arriving back at the hotel we were also pleased to see that our luggage had safely arrived and so it was back to the rooms for a rest before checklists and dinner.

8th December

Ranthambhore (Routes 1,2, 6 & 7)

We were up bright and early this morning for breakfast at 6 o'clock and a swift departure at half past. Barrelling off in the jeeps we were cut to the bone by the cold, but we were well prepared and fully toggled up. This morning both jeeps were on the same route so Phil, Hebe and Graham followed the others into the park. First stop was for a pair of Indian scops-owl nestled close to each other in a tree cavity. The jeeps split up just after but converged again on two tiger cubs. The female was rather shy but the male put on a bit of a show before they both slipped away into the grass. We could hear deer alarm calling in the distance as the mother searched for prey.

By moving round the lake we were able to spot the cubs again, sitting on the edge of the grassland, perfectly hidden from prying eyes on the road nearby but offering a great scope view for us. Eventually we dragged ourselves away from these compelling cats and continued on our way. The lake had the usual array of waterfowl, some feeding almost by the side of the jeep. We caught up with Alexandrine and plum-headed parakeets, white-bellied drongos and great tits! As we left the park we stopped in the canyon to view the few Indian vultures that remain in the park. This species, along with white-backed vulture, has suffered a terrible decline in the last decade, but it was good to see that some still hang on here. The outlook for white-backed vulture looks grim though, we did not see any today. A small feeding flock here contained white-browed fantail, common tailorbird, common iora and Oriental white-eye. Then it was back for an early lunch and a quick scan from the roof produced short-toed eagle and red-headed vulture.

The afternoon session was a game of two halves. One jeep containing Phil, Brian and Gill did rather well (seeing an adult male tiger) whilst the others had to be content with the parks birdlife and a new mammal in the shape of common Indian mongoose. Phil, Brian and Gill had a quiet start before VJ spotted an excellent close roosting brown fish owl. Route 1 is always good for Indian gazelle and sure enough we found at least seven in the usual spot, including two females with half-grown young. We also found our first real blue bull, a strapping male. After a short rest-stop were we watched various birds coming to drink at the ranger post pond we headed on. VJ heard some alarm calling so we headed in the right direction and pretty soon were deafened by a sambar 'belling' right beside the track. Sure enough a huge male tiger emerged onto the track just metres in front of the jeep. A great sight, this male was checking the scent markings of the female tiger in this part of the forest. Two canters arrived as if by magic and the tiger slowly drifted away from the road. On leaving the park we stopped for ten minutes at dusk by the roadside pool to watch the delightful painted sandgrouse come into to drink. Sure enough at the allotted time they winged in, and strutted about before quickly drinking their fill and loafing at the waters edge. A great end to a good first days effort in the park.

After dinner Phil, Chris and Linda went for a short walk in the hotel grounds. It was rather quiet but at the causeway a jungle cat put in an appearance to save the day.

9th December

Soorwal Lake and Ranthambhore (Route 4)

Taking a break from tiger spotting we headed out at the crack of dawn through Sawai Madhopur to the nearby Soorwal Lake (actually a large reservoir). Before we reached the dam we stopped at a roost of Eurasian stone curlews, finally catching up with the bird that had eluded us at Bharatpur.

Climbing down at the start of the dam wall we walked its length picking up some excellent birds amongst the myriad wildfowl and waders available. As the day slowly warmed up it was apparent that there were no large numbers of waders present this year but gull and tern numbers were high. At least four great black-headed of Pallas' gulls were present and we saw our first brown-headed gull, herring gull and gull-billed tern. A pair of great thick-knee and a pair of river lapwing were equally well received. A large flock of Dalmatian pelican included at least two great white pelicans.

Away from the lake on the other side of the bund we were able to watch wryneck, bluethroat, common starling, a selection of shrikes and get really good views of confiding Indian robins and little green bee-eaters. We managed our first lark – a dapper pair of crested larks. Wet pools held a number of wetland species including a lost looking comb duck. At the end of the bund we climbed down the steppes into rocky semi-desert and immediately found a small flock of ashy-crowned finch-larks and a pair of desert wheatear

Our last walk took us to the top of a nearby low hill, amazingly considering how dry it was there were a number of flowering plants here and blue pansies flitted around. Highlights during this short walk were long-billed pipit and rufous-tailed lark. After a brief paratha stop in the jeeps we headed onwards through an eye-opening rural landscape. Negotiating tiny street through small villages. At one an entire school shouted hello in unison as we bumped past. The field, pools and dry open areas en route yielded some new birds including variable wheatear, avocet, black-headed bunting and short-toed lark. A dry open area, under some pylons also produced a couple of yellow-wattled lapwings – a bonus for those that did not see them at Bharatpur. Eventually we emerged onto the tarmac again but the crops in the blackbuck area were too high and the search was abandoned fairly quickly. Phil took those interested in shopping into town but most of the good shops were shut sadly, still we managed to stock up on biscuits and chocolate. On the way a fine male Indian gazelle was present in the hotel grounds.

The afternoon session was spent in a canter rattling around a very quiet route 4. We saw many of the common mammals of the park at close range but we could not find any sign of tiger. No fresh pugmarks or alarm calls. We did find the tracks of leopard, jungle cat and hyena at one spot though – a busy intersection. The highlight of the drive was a fine female dusky eagle owl that flew alongside the canter and then after we chased it perched in full view in a bare tree. The male could be heard calling nearby. And so ended another day at Ranthambhore.

10th December

Ranthambhore (Routes 4& 5)

A quiet day for all. Phil, Linda and Chris headed into the park at the crack of dawn in a canter for a chance of more tigers on Route 5. Pankaj worked hard for us getting us close to alarm calls on three occasions but the tigers were not moving on or near the roads. We saw no fresh pugmarks all morning but did get good looks at hyena tracks. At one point we stopped to chat with the forest guards undertaking the current census. Whilst their pug casts were drying in the sun they told us of their close encounter with a three-year old male tiger the day before.

Heading back to the fort entrance we met up with most of the rest of the group who had opted for a lie-in and a leisurely start to the day. The climb up to the fort is not too strenuous and passes through a series of heavy gates until you reach the plateau and find yourself amongst a sprawling complex of ancient

buildings. Temples representing the Hindu, Jain and Muslim faiths are all present. The Ganesh temple, which we visited briefly is still very much active and a hive of activity. All over the fort bands of langurs rove looking for unguarded food and the wary stall-holders at the temple are all armed with sticks to beat them off the garlands of flowers and other edible offerings on sale to the devotees of Ganesh. Dropping back down to the bus we headed back to the hotel for lunch.

After lunch, Chris and Linda headed back into the park in the canter with Pankaj and had an enjoyable although once again tiger-free afternoon on Route 4. Phil, Graham and Gill went for a walk in the dry areas around the park entrance road. We were hoping for a glimpse of the white-naped woodpecker but were denied. We did however get great views of brown-capped pygmy woodpecker. Purple sunbirds were numerous here and some were even purple! At a small pool we found some more avocet and a small selection of waders and wildfowl. Moving onto the small dam by a temple we hoped for a Siberian rubythroat but Phil pished until hyperventilation threatened and only produced a succession of chiffchaff and some Oriental white-eyes.

After that we walked back down the access track hoping of an encounter with brown fish owl but despite seeing some tempting looking freshwater crabs (a favourite prey item of this species) we could not find him. So it was back to the hotel for dinner before a night drive around the dry areas and arable fields outside the park. Under a half-full moon things were tough but we eventually produced a fine black-naped hare and Phil squeaked in a nice little Indian fox. The latter came in to about 50 metres before realising that something was wrong and running off.

11th December

Ranthambhore (Routes 4 & 6) or Imlidhe

Phil was up bright and early to wave off the die-hard tiger spotters as they headed into the Park for the first of two jeep drives on the dreaded Route 4. The remainder had a more leisurely start leaving at 0830 for a new site recommended by Pankaj. In fact we had two starts as we had to turn back after a kilometre to get the packed lunches we had left behind! Heading out past the Park entrance we whizzed through the dry countryside, always with the reserve to our right.

The first thing to catch our attention was a small flock of rose-coloured starlings in a roadside tree – a good start, and interesting if you have not seen these arresting birds in their more subtle winter plumage. Moving on we started going through a series of increasingly more remote and rural villages. All with kids eager to wave at us and shout greetings as we passed. After an hour we reached the Banas River – a shallow affair with abundant birdlife. Plenty to look at here, with some splendid river lapwing taking centre stage, three species of kingfisher and a variety of waders, including a couple of ruff. Driving on often axle deep in the river we headed for a small sand dune area. Here we marvelled at the myriad of tiny tracks, mostly insect but including hedgehog and small mice and maybe jerboas too. Overhead a small flock of chestnut-bellied sandgrouse appeared but did not tarry.

Moving on from here we bumped on back through the river and then onto a dry grassland area that held desert and variable wheatear, Richard's pipit, rufous-tailed lark and best of all a confiding flock of 17 chestnut-bellied sandgrouse. The latter were watched at close range, and once they had got used to our presence fed in a very unconcerned manner. Lovely birds. Eventually driving on through riverine sand, much of which was under water melon cultivation, we came across a tiny little compound. Here we saw our first black ibis and an osprey drifted downstream. Resting in the shade we drank marsala chai and before we knew it was time for lunch. After lunch we got into some small boats and were ferried across the river to view some shallow pools. It was rather birdy here. Plenty of waders and ducks. Highlights included good views of great thick-knee, black ibis and black-bellied tern. The boats picked us up again

and ferried us back to the jeep and we were soon on our way back. We stopped for the occasional bird en route, including a small covey of rock bush quail along the boundary of the park.

The tiger crew (Hebe, Linda and Chris) arrived back at dusk and told tales of a 20 minute sighting of a female tiger on Route 4 in the morning. They were elated. The afternoon session had been quieter apparently but the jackals made up for it, passing nonchalantly past the jeep at one point. It sounded like a special day to me.

12th December Transfer to Jaipur and a tour of the town

After a fairly relaxed latish breakfast we headed away from the Joomer Baori after a very pleasant stay. The drive to bustling Jaipur took five and a half hours and was punctuated by a couple of birding stops, which proved fruitful. We stopped at the usual reservoir area to find it much drier than usual. Another stop later had a great dry area that finally produced yellow-wattled lapwing for Graham. We also stopped halfway at a roadside restaurant where we tucked into the local spicy samosas, which were great. Afterwards we continued on taking a much busier road that took us into the bustling city of Jaipur and the Trident hotel.

After lunch we managed to track down our guide (Abi) and finally met up with him at the City Palace. The group then either took the one and a half hour guided tour of the Palace and the Observatory or went shopping in town.

13th December Jaipur and transfer to Delhi

After a leisurely start we headed straight to the Ambar Fort with Abi for the jeep ride to the top of the hill and a tour of this impressive building. Then it was straight into a carpet shop for a quick demo of hand-made carpet production and a cup of marsala chai whilst some of us did some shopping. Most of us bought something and the pashmina shawls were a big hit. After twenty minutes though we had to head over to the Trident for an excellent buffet lunch before the long drive to Delhi.

The journey to Delhi was eventful – a small electrical fire under the dashboard had us practicing our evacuation technique – but all was rapidly fixed and we were on our way. The journey went smoothly until 50 km from Delhi when we got snarled in a major traffic jam that seems to be a permanent fixture on this road. Eventually we arrived at the Centaur and met up with Vinod with enough time to wash and eat a meal at the restaurant before bidding farewell to Chris and Linda and heading for Old Delhi and our rendezvous with the Kathgodam Express. The train was to take us to the Himalayan foothills and the next leg of our journey.

14th December Naini Tal area

The train arrived on time at 0630. Our luggage and driver had arrived and we met Nirankar Singh our guide for this leg of the trip. We drove the 35 km to Naini Tal without stopping. It was obvious from the landscape flashing by that we were in the foothills and had left the plains behind. After breakfast we headed for the snow view along the Kilberry road, the day was clear and bright and we could easily see the 80 miles that fell between us and Nanda Devi (India's second highest peak) and the rest of the Himalayan chain that is visible from here.

Afterwards we continued driving for 10 km towards Pangot for a walk down the valley towards the village, it was a bit late in the day but we bumped into a number of bird flocks, which contained many new birds for the trip. White-tailed nuthatches searched for food on the trunks of trees and delicate grey-hooded warblers slipped through the foliage. Reaching the village we sat in the garden of the small but perfectly formed *Jungle Lore Lodge* and were served tea by Rattan Singh's son! Later after a short walk

nearby we actually bumped into Rattan himself – he was happy we had done so well at Ranthambhore and we were all pleased to have met again.

Nearing town we parked up and we headed back to walk the ridge to the proper snow view and had a large flock of white-throated laughingthrushes and a couple of grey-winged blackbirds. Last thing we did a short walk near the hotel to enjoy the last rays of sun and marvel at the hessian tented horse-camp parked along the track.

15th December

Sat Tal

Today we headed down towards Sat Tal bright and early. Our first stop was by the old Eureka Forbes factory. The fields here were alive with birds. Flocks of slaty-headed parakeets shot about, occasionally alighting in fruiting trees. We found two species of accentor – the beautiful rufous-breasted and the slightly drabber black-throated. Grey bushchats sat about and looked on unconcerned as we passed. Brian spotted a fine pair of rusty-cheeked scimitar-babblers, which showed very well for a short time. A pair of red-flanked bluetail put in a brief appearance. After a thorough wander we headed back to the van and headed down hill towards Sat Tal. About 2 km before we stopped again and got out for another wander in good woodland. Here we saw our first muntjac deer and some big flocks converged on us – we saw our first velvet-fronted and chestnut-bellied nuthatch, the diminutive speckled piculet, buff-barred warbler, ashy bulbul and many others appeared in a flurry of activity.

Moving on we headed down to the lake and walked the path below the dam – the small pond here held both white-capped water redstart and plumbeous redstart. Bird flocks here produced fleeting views of blue-winged minla and red-billed leiothrix. Deep in the undergrowth a small group of rufous-chinned laughingthrushes lurked. Some of us got very close views of a Nepal wren-babbler here as it hopped along beside the path. Lunch beckoned though so we headed back and drove up to a chai stall for some tea whilst we ate. En route we saw a fine Indian red admiral basking on the dam wall. From here we walked around some terraced land near the lake and bumped into a first-winter dark-throated thrush for our troubles. From here we worked our way back adding a few new birds including blue-capped redstart and scaly-breasted munia. Last stop of the day was back at the fields around the factory and here we had good views of a variety of plumages of white-capped bunting.

We eventually called an early end to the day and went shopping in Naini Tal, checking out some very high quality pashminas and looking in the book-stores. A pleasant end to the day.

16th December

Bajun Valley, Ramnagar and Quality Inn

Another early start saw us saying goodbye to the Vintage hotel and heading for the Bajun Valley. We stopped at the waterfall below the Low Fields briefly to search for spotted fork-tail and we quickly found two of these splendid birds. The Bajun Valley was very picturesque and provided us with some excellent birds in the form of two spectacular male scarlet finches, striated laughingthrushes, whiskered yuhinas and a dapper little slaty-backed fork-tail. This pleasant walk took us through forested areas, streamsides and through a small hamlet set in a cultivated area. We arrived back at the van in time for a welcome cup of tea and set off towards Ramnagar, stopping to take photos of the attractive hillside terracing before hitting the rather duller lowlands and skirting the boundary of the park.

An hour and a half of driving saw us at the barrage at Ramnagar where we stopped for lunch. Walking the barrage afterwards we found a single wallcreeper searching for food on the concrete structures of the barrage. A quick stop was made in town by those keen to purchase anti-biotics! Continuing on we headed for Quality Inn and there was time to have a few fresh lime sodas before heading out to the river for a

quick look around. Here we had a pair of brown dippers feeding young in the nest and another spotted forktail and a tiny little forktail. Bronzed drongos hawked overhead as we headed back for dinner.

17th December

Quality Inn area

Today we split into two groups to pursue our solo careers. Hebe, Graham and Phil made the most of the early morning birding in the valley up behind Mohan and Brian, Gill and Nirankar birded the hotel grounds and then took their jeep out to look for butterflies. The valley behind Mohan was great birding as usual and produced some great flock action. Here we got great views of a flock pushed in by Phil that included a number of species that we had been struggling to get good views of. Highlights here included great views of slaty-blue flycatcher, white-rumped shama, black-chinned babbler and red-billed leiothrix.

Wandering back to the road we heard a group of green magpie and searched them out and discovered that they were feeding in association with a large group of white-crested laughingthrushes. From the ford we wandered on down to the village, enjoying the peace and tranquillity of this special place. After a cup of marsala chai there was still time for another walk so we headed up to the Dhangiri Gate and walked towards Ramnagar. Here we quickly found a small group of red junglefowl picking their way through the teak plantation by the side of the road. Walking on we bumped into yet another bird flock that seemed to consist of large numbers of velvet-fronted nuthatches but which also contained grey-capped pygmy woodpecker, fulvous-breasted woodpecker and black-lored tit amongst others. From here we drove back to the hotel stopping briefly to walk through the area after Mohan as the butterflies were on the wing and included some great species such as lime butterfly, common mormon and common jezebel.

After a solid lunch we all headed our separate ways again, Graham and Phil looked in vain for tawny fish-owls at the usual spot before walking back and picking up Hebe for a walk down by the river. Here we watched two local men catching fish seemingly with their feet! The usual birds graced the river – the flycatching antics of the male plumbeous redstarts painting a pretty picture.

18th December

Drive into Dhikala and jeep safaris

Today we were up bright and early as usual for the jeep ride into the park. Heading slowly towards Dhikala and our overnight accommodation we stopped frequently to look at birds and mammals. At the park gate we stopped awhile to perform some bureaucratic formalities and have another cup of tea. Stops inside the park produced our first black-hooded oriole, a huge flock of white-throated laughingthrushes and various alarm calls that had us searching for big cats. Stopping at view points we were able to survey the river and had great views of a smooth otter as it hunted past us and then climbed out onto a sandy area and started rolling about and generally enjoying the sun. We too at this point were feeling the chill of the morning and welcomed the bright sunshine in the more open areas. One viewpoint produced our first gharial as well as some stupendously large river catfish, which must have been related to some sort of mini-submarine. Eventually just as we were starting to feel peckish the Dhikala clearing hove into view. The new electric fence – recently erected after a spate of non-fatal tiger attacks inside the compound – added to the prison camp allure!

After a tasty lunch we repaired to the viewpoint that looks over the reservoir (very full this year). From here we could see a pair of black-necked stork and a variety of other waterbirds in an area that is normally grassland. Overhead we saw Eurasian griffon vulture, Pallas' fish-eagle and Eurasian hobby. At three we reported to the elephant office but they were in short supply this year (only two were working) and many people including Hebe were disappointed. So it was into two jeeps for a quick safari around the camp. Phil, Hebe and Graham headed out and saw a number of good birds including mountain and changeable hawk-eagle, black francolin, cinereous vulture, Eurasian hobby and white-throated bush-chat. Brian, Gill and Nirankar patiently stalked a tiger eventually getting brief views.

19th December

Transfer to Delhi including the Ganges

Today we made another early start to fit in another short jeep safari before breakfast. It was very cold but the morning mist made the drives rather scenic and we bumped into a few good things. Four fishing otters passed by and crested bunting made a last minute entry onto the trip list. After a very welcome breakfast we headed into the van for the drive out of the park. At the gate we said goodbye to Nirankar and headed onwards for the long drive into Delhi. We broke the journey at various points for lunch and tea stops before eventually reaching The Vikram where we dropped off Hebe and Graham. Then it was another hour out to the Centaur on the outskirts near the airport.

20th December

flight home

Vinod met us after breakfast, having travelled through the night to see us off. The airport check-in was quick and efficient and soon we were on our way home.