

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

We send you all our very best wishes for the festive season and for a successful 2012.

Looking back on 2011, it's been another exciting twelve months with some beneficial changes to tell you about and to share our best moments from the most enjoyable holiday to Panama ever.

This Christmas and New Year why not take a little time out to think about future travel plans? Whether you fancy a long-haul trip or one night away it is great to have something to look forward to. Inspired by our clients and friends, Jacquie and Dave Bridges, who have their annual travel plans mapped out with us till Spring 2015, we thought we'd encourage you to do a little forward planning!

A few ideas follow: as always, we are happy to discuss options that best suit what you'd like to achieve on your holiday. Feel free to call or email any time.

Future travel ideas for 2012 and beyond

India is still proving to be our best-selling destination. Several of you have explored different parts of India three or four times now, so you know how India's charm works its magic and encourages you to return.

Give us a call if you'd like to explore the **deserts of Rajasthan** and less well-known **Gujarat** in the far west, where speciality wildlife includes the incredibly rare **Asiatic Lion** and the scarce **Great Indian Bustard**. Or journey through the **tropical South** to see the obscure **Ceylon Frogmouth** and the harmonious and gaudy **Malabar Whistling Thrush**. Discover the stunning landscapes of **Ladakh** and other fascinating places in the mighty Himalayas.

And of course we can whole-heartedly recommend Panama and Ecuador as two other destinations with equally fascinating wildlife and some 'not to be missed' cultural sites. Follow the **Inca trail at Yanacocha**, near Quito (Ecuador) where you can see **Oscellated Tapaculo** and look for the very rare and endemic **Black-breasted Puffleg** hummingbird. Take a boat trip on **Lake Gatun** which forms part of the **Panama Canal** and visit the fascinating Miraflores Visitor Centre and Locks for a historical journey from creation to present day.

We hope you'll be assured by the fact that nothing gives us more pleasure and job satisfaction than helping you have experiences that will stay with you a life-time.

New partners and new itineraries

To keep our prices keen at a time when cost matters even more than usual, we are working with two new Indian partners and they are doing a great job, providing a fast and efficient behind-the-scenes service. We now have more Indian itineraries on our website, with even more to be added in the new year for India, Panama and Ecuador. These new partnerships have helped us to flourish in 2011 – our busiest year yet!

Season's greetings

Jo Thomas

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A perfect present

Don't forget you can still order this photographic book "Wildlife of Northern and Central India" for Christmas

Preview and purchase the book at <http://www.blurb.com/books/1814099>

Wildlife of Northern and Central India

Explore nature and culture at its best
with Wild About Travel
Compiled by Jo Thomas and Kathie Clouston



Red-legged Honeycreeper visiting a bird table in Panama © C Simpson

[Read more about Panama over the page](#)

Panama in Spring 2011- A trip to remember

For all of us, it was our first birding tour to Panama and we hoped there would be a chance of seeing some good mammals and other wildlife too. Alison had been to Panama before, but her previous trip had been more cultural, so she was as keen as the rest of us to explore tracts of fabulous tropical rainforest along the famous Pipeline Road, other habitats close to the Panama Canal and then experience different birds in the Highlands with a day exploring the Pacific Coastal grasslands and paddy fields.

Our appetite to visit Panama had been whetted by attending a slide show at the British Birdwatching Fair and from recommendations of others (thanks Adrian). We knew we were going to have a fabulous time. In fact, everyone agreed the trip exceeded all expectations, both on the birding and the mammal front. We managed to see some fabulous butterflies and other insects too.

Except for one night on the outskirts of Panama City in a comfortable and well located B&B, it was relaxing to stay at just two locations – Canopy Tower in the Soberania National Park and Canopy Lodge at El Valle in the Highlands. There was plenty to see – literally on the doorstep of each lodge and most birding was within 15 - 30 minutes drive. On two or three days there was a little more driving involved, but the very most was just 1 hour and 15 minutes away. Therefore we felt we had much more time to explore 'wild habitat' rather than being on the road all the time.

With the help of our fabulous guides we thoroughly enjoyed every day, so much so that it's difficult to pick out the most memorable moments from this tour. A few of them include: -

Every male Manakin sighting was special – there were **five species of Manakin** we might encounter in the areas visited and we saw them all (Red-capped, Golden-collared, Blue-crowned, Lance-tailed and White-ruffed).

The feeling of being in **Trogon heaven** – **six species** possible (White-tailed, Violaceous, Orange-bellied, Black-throated, Black-tailed and Slaty-tailed) and all of them seen extremely well. We had seven Trogon-watching days with nine seen on one day alone! So many of them were right next to the track, some sitting on telegraph wires!

A night drive from Canopy Tower where we had superb views of **Rothschild's Porcupine**, considered by some to be endemic to Panama. I'm not sure who was more startled, the porcupine or us, at seeing a porcupine up a tree. It's an arboreal species, but it looked so odd stood on a branch above the road!

Catching up with the '**Greenshank of the tropical forest** – Green Shrike-Vireo. Well, it sounds similar to a Greenshank, but is a fine example of a passerine, often heard but much more difficult to see.

Seeing **Rufous Nighthawk with two chicks** followed shortly after by great views of a wonderful **Spectacled Owl**.

A **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth** crossing the road. We saw Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth as well.

Watching a **Blue-throated (Emerald) Toucanet**. Just half an hour later, four **Swallow-tailed Kites** graced the skies with their effortless flying aerobatics and unique silhouettes.

A **Nine-banded Armadillo** snuffling along the roadside at Semaphore Hill.

Treasured moments observing a **Purplish-backed Quail-Dove** through the telescope. The book doesn't do justice to this beautiful little dove with such an exquisite face pattern – made all the more special due to the patience needed to see it and perseverance of our guide to even find it in the dense undergrowth.



Canopy Tower © C Simpson



♂ & ♀ Slaty-tailed Trogon © M O'Dell



♀ Black-throated Trogon © C Simpson



Rothschild's Porcupine © M O'Dell

A pair of **Tody Motmots** at Valle Chiquito with tails swinging from side to side like a pendulum. Then a little later a fine **Bay-headed Tanager** in the 'scope and perhaps the bird of the afternoon for me – **Masked Tityra** of which we saw three. Watching a Little Tinamou was a special moment, too.

Seeing several species with rather **wacky names**: **Southern Bentbill** and a **Brownish Twistwing** along the Rainforest Centre trail; an **Olivaceous Flatbill** and **Golden-crowned Spadebill** along Plantation Trail and a **White-throated Spadebill** at Cerro Gaital in the Highlands. When someone mentions 'Spadebill' there is a strong desire to see one! Then there was Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet – can someone help with the name? Why 'beardless' when it doesn't seem that any of them have beards!

Actually, there is just too much to mention here. More in a future issue perhaps. Alternatively, if you'd like us to email you the final trip report, please get in touch and we'll happily send the full version as a pdf.

We should add that species mentioned above are not necessarily rare, but they gave us a great deal of pleasure watching them.

Writing this trip report was a real pleasure; going through notes and checklist, dipping back into the field guide and reliving each day as it happened. Hope you'll request the final thing and enjoy reading it!

Snow Leopards in Ladakh by Peter Pilbeam

There are estimated to be about 40 Snow Leopards in Ladakh's Hemis National Park – that's where I went in October 2010. The campsites used were in perfect Snow Leopard habitat, and in their immediate area (the Husing, Tarbung, Kharlung and Rumbak valleys) there are normally some 4 Snow Leopards resident. When we were there signs of the leopards were much in evidence – within 100m of the camp we found very recent (24 hours old or less) scrapes and dung. Scrapes are made with the hind feet as signposts or markers for other leopards and/or to cover their droppings. Other signs are rubbing and scent spray points on rocky outcrops overhanging narrow trails – these show small amounts of fur and urine and again are signposts for other leopards, and useful for people looking for leopards! Pug marks abounded – again very near the campsites and very recent.

From all the signs our guide was able to work out the movements of the local leopards and to some extent where and how far away they were. One of our group did see one for a few seconds through a telescope, but it had moved out of sight before the rest of us got a glimpse! Even so, we were in one of the best places in the world and with excellent guides.

Other mammals – the main prey species (lunch for Snow Leopards) is Bharal (Blue Sheep) – we saw lots of those (very close on occasions) plus Mountain Weasel, Yak, Red Fox and Ladakh Pika (they look like big mice). At that time of year, not very many birds, but great views of Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Black Redstart, Wallcreeper, Brown Dipper, Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs, Himalayan Snowcock, Chukar, and quite a few LBJs (Little Brown Jobs) – we had an excellent bird guide as well as a National Park guide.

The scenery – absolutely spectacular – mountains, snow, rocky valleys, streams and rivers – all as you might expect in the (trans-)Himalayas. Plus of course the unnatural (human-related) stuff too – tiny villages, parachute cafes(!), Buddhist shrines and monasteries, subsistence agriculture, and so on.

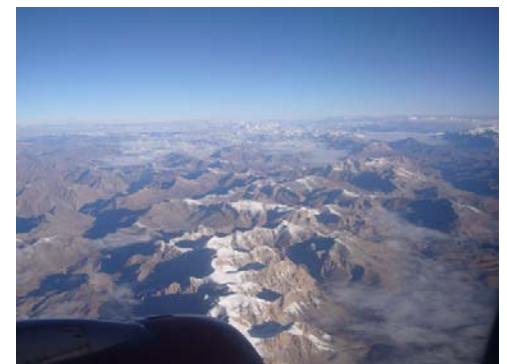
In case you didn't know, Ladakh is in the northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, which borders on China and Pakistan. Originally an independent kingdom, Ladakh is in the trans-Himalayas – generally at an altitude of



Whooping Motmot © M O'Dell



Rufous Nightjar with chick © J Thomas



From the plane © P Pilbeam



Typical Ladakh scenery © P Pilbeam



Bharal © P Pilbeam

3500m up to 5500m but with a few peaks at around 7000m. Its climate is very dry (same rainfall as the Sahara Desert) because it's in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, and its temperature ranges from about 15 degrees Celsius in summer to about -12 degrees Celsius in winter, but it does of course get colder (and windier) the higher you go!

The trip we're talking about happens in late autumn/early winter, when it's a good temperature for mountain walking, but since some time is spent staying still trying to see the target species through binoculars and telescopes it pays to dress very warmly. Waterproofing isn't much of an issue, but windproofing is important. Good walking boots with good tread are vital, and if you normally use a walking pole – bring that along. You need to be pretty fit and familiar with hill walking – having said that, some days were quite a bit easier than others, and how far and how high we walked was very dependent on signs of Snow Leopard and the weather. We camped at about 3600m and (once) walked up to about 4500m.

Camping in the area is fairly basic, but the meals were excellent and lunch (believe it or not) was delivered to us wherever we were and was usually hot! No showers, but hot water was delivered to the tents for washing (and we had to put up with hot water bottles every night). Quite strange camping at times – overnight temperatures a bit below zero but no frost in the mornings (as there's no water in the atmosphere). And, with the total lack of extraneous light at night, the stars were (like the scenery) absolutely spectacular!

I'll soon be writing another report as I've just returned from another Ladakh trip! My blow-by-blow account from 2010 is on the web at: [http://www.wildabouttravel.co.uk/trip-reports/Snow Leopard Tour report Ladakh %202010 P Pilbeam.pdf](http://www.wildabouttravel.co.uk/trip-reports/Snow_Leopard_Tour_report_Ladakh_%202010_P_Pilbeam.pdf) If you're interested in doing this kind of trip and want to ask me about it contact Jo at: Jo@wildabouttravel.co.uk

Peter Pilbeam



You guessed right – Snow Leopard poo and more stunning views © P Pilbeam



India update – tiger safaris, ADF, lodges and hotels

Book early for Tiger safaris

If you would like to include tiger safaris within your holiday plans, we recommend you book your holiday at least eight months in advance of your dates. Jeep numbers are limited in the prime zones of the best National Parks for Tiger. For late bookings at peak times it can be difficult to book jeeps at Ranthambhore.

Airport Development Fee

With effect from 01 Dec 2011 the authorities are now charging Airport Development Fees for flights departing from Delhi airport. Expect a fee of around INR 221 (£2.80) for internal flights and 1434 INR (£18.30) for international flights. While this charge should be included in all the fresh tickets, it will be collected directly at the airport for tickets already issued. This fee will be collected by the concerned airlines at the time of check in. We recommend you retain extra rupees to pay for it. If it is possible to pay it in advance, this would be helpful, but if not please allow extra time to queue at the airport.

Some fabulous lodges and hotels

In June we visited some different hotels and new lodges in various parts of North and Central India. We have competitive rates at Earth Lodge, Kanha <http://kanhaearthlodge.com/> and Justa hotels, Delhi <http://justahotels.com/>.

That's it from me, till the next issue. **Have a lovely Christmas and New Year.**

Jo

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Sambar & Ruddy Mongoose © J Thomas