

TADOBA-ANDHARI, SULTANPUR, ASSAM & ARUNACHAL PRADESH
A BIRDWATCHING & MAMMAL TRIP
7 – 26 April 2014

This trip was organised by Jo Thomas at Wild About Travel (www.wildabouttravel.co.uk) and the arrangements throughout were excellent. There were just the two of us plus a guide and driver, so we had undivided attention throughout. We also did the trip for a very reasonable cost – less than going with a group tour with a big UK company.

Flight costs weren't included, but these were booked easily via the internet. We used Jet Airways for the international flights, and IndiGo for the internal flights. IndiGo were superb and I can recommend them highly if you are travelling within India. We'd flown with Jet before and were happy with their service.

We flew from Heathrow to Delhi where we were collected from the airport, and stayed overnight in a nearby hotel. We were last in Delhi in 2008 and this new international airport was built in 2010 for the Commonwealth Games, so quite a change.

An early start the next day when we were taken to Delhi's domestic airport and flew to Nagpur where we were collected and were taken to the Svasara Lodge near the Tadoba-Andhari Reserve. This part of the trip was an 'add-on' for me to achieve a long wished-for ambition – to see a tiger in the wild. This Park had been recommended by Jo, rather than the more crowded reserves at Bandhavgarh or Kanna. The driver didn't stop which was a little frustrating, but we were still able to identify House Sparrow, Black Drongo, Red-collared Dove, Cattle Egret, Indian Roller and Bank Myna en-route to the Lodge.

We arrived on a Tuesday when the Park is closed, so we had arranged an afternoon jeep ride to the buffer zone. This was very productive with birds such as Plain Prinia, Laughing Dove, Ashy Prinia, Pied Bushchat, Brahminy Starling, Indian Pond Heron, Jungle Babbler, Openbill Stork, Lesser Coucal and Magpie Robin. Mammals were good too with Wild Boar, Nilgai and **4-horned Antelope** – a very rare beast - our guide had only seen 2 in the last year. The highlight for us was very unexpected – a superb **Leopard** just lying in the



grass not far from the road.

We watched him for some time, and took many photos before he casually got up and disappeared into the trees – what a treat! It was now getting dark, so we started back to the Lodge and suddenly in the gloom, a Jungle Cat crossed the road and disappeared into the field next to us. A welcome shower, dinner and beer awaited, and feeling pleased with a good start, we went to bed looking forward to the next day.

Tadoba was very hot and dusty, but it was pleasant having a coffee at 0530 the next morning, before boarding our jeep to get to the Park gates which opened at 0600. 80% of the Park is closed to the public and there are 75 tigers present in total with 15 in the accessible part of the park. It was with this sobering information in mind that we set off with tiger as the main target. I couldn't believe our luck when we saw a wonderful male within an hour - we were so lucky, particularly as we also had good views of another male (the dominant one in the area) on the far side of the bank!

Altogether, we had 6 tiger sightings as well as Sloth Bear, Dhole (wild dog), Gaur and lots of antelopes. Birds weren't easy as you can't get out of the jeeps due to large mammals, but managed some including Indian Grey Hornbill, Black-rumped Flameback, Grey Junglefowl, Rose-ringed Parakeets, Rosy Starlings, Shikra, Sirkeer Malkoha, Black-hooded Oriole, Indian Darter, Peafowl, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Indian Thick-knee, Changeable Hawk Eagle, Common Hawk Cuckoo, Asian Pied Starling, Plum-headed Parakeets, Black-headed Ibis, White-eyed Buzzard and Jungle Babblers.



Our first tiger – Tadoba!

Dhole (wild dog) Tadoba

After 4 days, we had a night in Nagpur in a fantastically luxurious hotel – we had to have room service, as we daren't go down to the restaurant in our birdwatching gear as neither of us had brought 'normal clothes' with us!

The next morning we flew back to Delhi and were taken to Sultanpur a nearby park. This looked to be more of a picnic site, but once we got away from where families were enjoying themselves and children were playing cricket and football, there was a substantial wetland area bordered by trees.

We were delighted to see a large gathering of waterfowl, so it took some time to identify them all. Most prominent were about 50 Comb Ducks together with Intermediate Egret, Black-necked Stork, Black-winged Stilt, Purple Heron, Purple Swamphen, Common Moorhen, Spotted Redshank, Eurasian Spoonbill, Ruff, Great Egret, Greenshank, Grey Heron, Redshank, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Shoveler, Garganey and Black-tailed Godwit. We continued on to another part of the wetland, seeing Black Redstart, Purple Sunbird, **Sind Sparrow**, Tree Pipit, Eurasian Hoopoe and an elusive, but eventually-seen Large Grey Babbler. Lovely butterflies floated on the still air, and there were plenty of Sand Martins flying around.

As we carried on to the furthestmost part of the Park, the birds still kept coming: Citrine Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Siberian Chiffchaff, Grey Francolin, Orphean Warbler, Asian Koel, Eurasian Thick-knee (Stone Curlew) Indian Golden Oriole, Red-breasted Flycatcher, White-capped Bunting, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Olive-backed Pipit, Bay-backed Shrike and lots of Green Bee-eaters. We reached the last section of wetland, and in many ways the best – not holding lots of birds, but present were two beautiful **Sarus Cranes** – we'd hoped to see these, and we had great views of these special birds. A Marsh Harrier and Temminck's Stints were also present. . On our way back to the car we found two Spotted Owlets and Common Quail.

By now it was late afternoon, so we were tired and hot and pleased to get back to our room in Delhi for a welcome shower and dinner.

The following morning we flew from Delhi to Guwahati where we were met by Abid, our guide for the rest of the trip. We were taken to Nameri Eco Camp via the rubbish dump at Guwahati to see **Greater Adjutant Storks** in case we didn't see them again. I did feel rather uncomfortable here – I had expected to see people scavenging the site, but hadn't expected them to be living on it. The sight and smell were really overwhelming and it felt like something from Dante's inferno. Huge numbers of Black Kites were wheeling overhead and small numbers of Lesser Adjutant Storks also perched on the rubbish.



Greater Adjutant Storks, Guwahati

Anyway, storks 'ticked' we headed on to Nameri Eco Camp. Nameri was lovely and we birded down the road nearby where we found Blue-throated Barbet, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, Emerald Dove, Black-billed Roller, Oriental Turtle Dove, Oriental Hobby, Thick-billed Warbler and **Abbott's Babbler**. Later, we went

on a gentle river trip where we saw River Lapwing, Crested Kingfisher, Greater Thick-knee and masses of Small Pratincoles amongst others. After dinner, we went searching for owls and had a great view of a Brown Hawk Owl, but no luck with any others.

The next day, we did some birding in the nearby forest, where we had to be escorted by an armed guard due to the forest elephants in the area which can be unpredictable and dangerous. This was a fairly long, hot walk, but we found Golden-fronted Leafbird, White-vented Myna, Large Cuckoo Shrike, Dollarbird, Red-breasted Parakeet and Chestnut-headed Bee-eater.

We left Nameri the next morning, heading for our next base in Dirang, Arunachal Pradesh. However, there was still good birding to be had, and we made several stops en-route. Common Hill Myna, Greater Flameback, Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Bengal Bushlark, Striated Yuhina, Streaked Spiderhunter, Pintailed Green Pigeon, Bronzed Drongo, Mountain Imperial Pigeon and Crested Serpent Eagle. Another stop by a waterfall produced a pair of lovely Little Forktails, along with White-capped Water Redstart, Common Green Magpie and Long-tailed Sibia. Our last stop before crossing the state line into Arunachal Pradesh gave us Spot-winged Grosbeak, Maroon Oriole, Streaked Laughingthrush, Verditer Flycatcher, Rusty-throated Barwing, Yellow-bellied Warbler, Silver-eared Mesia, **Slaty-bellied Tesia**, **Black-headed Shrike-babbler**, Rusty-throated Barwing and **Brown Bullfinch**. It was also good to see a number of **Arunachal Macaques**.

It was time to leave Assam for Arunachal Pradesh - you have to have a permit to enter as the area is so sensitive (I've never seen so many soldiers or army bases in my life). The state borders Tibet (China) and the Chinese invaded the area in 1962. It is very different to other areas of India with the people of Nepalese/Tibetan appearance. As the area is predominantly Buddhist, prayer flags and shrines were everywhere, and in the most unexpected places. The army units all had very gung-ho (or inspiring whichever way you look at it) names – the Ball of Fire Brigade was a favourite along with the 'Excellent Eleventh'. I'm sure there is a 'Terrific Twelfth' somewhere, but didn't see it. There are also rather amusing warnings along the roads 'After whisky, driving's risky' 'Better to be Mr Late than Late Mr' and 'Speed is a knife that cuts life'. I don't think anyone takes a blind bit of notice and Indian roads are not for the faint-hearted driver or passenger!

We stayed at Dirang for three nights, which was fairly cold as we were now at altitude and would be for some time. We got a puncture approaching the hotel, so our poor driver had to take out all the luggage to get to the spare tyre, so we hovered around rather hopelessly whilst he made pretty quick work of putting on a the tyre. Merv was gazing around and noticed a small bird nearby – Abid was quite excited by this as it was a Rufous-breasted Accentor, a winter visitor which had usually left by now.

Tyre duly changed, we carried on to the Hotel Pemaling which was fine and the staff very helpful, and despite regular power cuts, they would arrange for the generator to provide hot water for the shower. We also had extra blankets and slept in thermal underwear as there was no heating in the rooms. The next morning, the mist had cleared and we had our first glimpse of the Himalayas in the distance – fantastic!

The next day we were due to go to the Sela Pass, but the weather forecast wasn't great, so it was decided to spend the day birding between Dirang and Mandala along the forested roads – and superb birding it was. We were now about 2,500 – 3,000 metres above sea level, so we felt a bit breathless, but that was all - luckily we have never suffered from altitude sickness. The area yielded such gems as **Scarlet Finch**, Red-tailed Minla, Bar-winged Wren Babbler, **Fire-tailed Myzornis**, Great Barbet, Red-billed Leothrix, Blue-winged Minla, Bar-throated Minla, Nepal Fulvetta, Tickell's Thrush, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Black-throated Thrush, Blue-fronted Redstart, Mrs Gould's Sunbird (stunning) Black-throated and Yellow-browed Tit, Long-tailed Minivet (wow!) the stunning **Spotted Laughingthrush** (two flew across my path and one landed in a tree about ten feet away) and **Collared Grosbeak**. Abid was very excited by this last bird, as they are increasingly rare, and he only sees them a couple of times a year. After lunch in a welcoming little dwelling, we continued birding and found Grey-winged Blackbird, White-tailed Nuthatch, **Green Shrike Babbler**, Green-tailed Sunbird, Rufous-vented Yuhina, Brown-throated Fulvetta and **Golden Bush Robin**.

Later in the day we drove to the Sangti Valley, and after much searching by Abid found **Long-billed Plover** and a couple of very flighty **Black-tailed Crakes**. This used to be a good site for Black-necked Crane, but sadly these hadn't been seen for some time.

The following day the moment had arrived - the visit to the Sela Pass which meant getting up at 2.20am in order to be at the Pass by 5.00! The journey was particularly hairy - terrible roads(!) with landslides, vertiginous drops over the side and massive potholes and ruts. We reached Sela Pass which is 13,700 feet above sea-level - breathtaking in all senses of the word. However, it was worth the trip to see some high-altitude specialities - **Himalayan Monal, Blood Pheasant, Himalayan Bluetail**, White-collared Blackbird and Brandt's Mountain Finches. . Boy, was it cold - but it was great to have our breakfast at 6.30 with lovely hot porridge mixed with fruit plus coffee which went down a treat! Merv and I had five layers of clothing together with thermal tights and thermal trousers - our driver, who was from Nepal barely wore any warm clothing and he certainly looked warmer than we did! On the way back from the Pass, Merv noticed a flock of pale-coloured birds – **Snow Pigeons!** Another good bird for the morning.



Collared Blackbird, Sela Pass



Sela Pass area

After lunch in a small eatery – lovely hot soup followed by vegetable rice and lime pickle, it was decided to carry on birding. We had already been up for 10 hours, and it was only 1200! “Of course” we said trying to look alert and perky. We were also feeling rather hot in our thermal gear, so stripped off as much as was decent, but we were still left feeling a bit toasty. We summoned up enough energy to enjoy a charming Bar-winged Wren Babbler, Spotted Nutcracker and the beautiful Fire-tailed Myzornis. We got back to the hotel, and could barely stay awake to eat – it was shower, and bed at around 2000!



Bar-winged Wren-babbler

The following day, it was then off to Eaglenest and a six night stay. We stopped en-route in Tenga, the nearest town where we stocked up on bottled water, beer and crisps. There were many soldiers doing their shopping, and it is evident that this area relies on the military, and as a consequence, there seemed to be no shortage of provisions.

We stayed at two camps: Lama which is about 2,500m and Bompou which is just under 2,000m. This was under canvas - no heat, running water or electricity and separate toilets and a 'shower room' which consisted of a cubicle with a plastic seat. We had to order warm water which you sloshed over you with a jug and got dried and dressed as quickly as you could - by torchlight! Needless to say, we did not attempt this ritual every day! We also had solar torches provided and hot water bottles if needed. I have to say, we slept really well (albeit in thermals) and felt very cosy until it was time to get up. It was then clothes on as quickly as possible in the icy mornings. The friendly staff were fantastic, really helpful and hard-working and the food was excellent. Most importantly, the birding was also everything we hoped it would be.

As soon as we arrived, we started birding down the road – Common Rosefinch, Whistler’s Warbler, **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler**, **Pygmy Blue Flycatcher**, **Pygmy Wren Babbler**, Striated Laughingthrush and Golden Babbler. Abid then told us we would stay for a while to look out for Rusty-fronted Barwings. A little group eventually came into view and amongst them was the bird of the trip – a **Bugun Liocichla**! “There it is!” shouted Merv in a state of high excitement – phew! With that iconic bird now on the list, we could feel relaxed (possibly) about looking for everything else.

We were joined at Eaglenest by three UK birders, on a similar itinerary to us, and guided by the same company Abid worked for. We also met Abid’s boss, Peter Lobo, who was great company with lots of tales to tell. He was guiding Josep del Hoyo and his wife – Josep is editor of the ‘Handbook of the Birds of the World’ and we spent an afternoon in their company which we really enjoyed.

The rest of our stay followed a pattern: up at 0315, tea/coffee and a biscuit at 0345 and out birding at 0400. Breakfast at 0630, lunch at 1200 – both in the field apart from the last day – and dinner at 1900.



Rufous-necked Hornbill



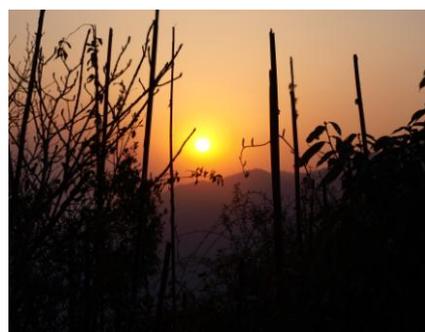
Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbill

So many species, too many to mention in what is supposed to be a brief trip report, but highlights beside the Bugun Liocichla were the **Beautiful Nuthatch**, **Ward's Trogon**, **Temminck's Tragopan**, **Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler**, Brown-throated Treecreeper, **Brown, Black-throated and Rufous-headed Parrotbills**, **Rufous-necked Hornbill**, **Golden-breasted Fulvetta**, Large and Small Niltavas, Khalij Pheasant, Crested Goshawk, Great Barbet, **Long-tailed Broadbill**, Mountain Tailorbird, **Rufous-throated Partridge**, Red-faced Liocichla, **Green Cochoa**, **Golden-throated Barbet**, **Wedge-billed Wren Babbler**, **Himalayan Cutia**, **Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler** and Himalayan Buzzard. It was also good to see an impressive **Yellow-bellied Marten**. We also got to see a bird which had eluded us before in India, China and Thailand – the lovely **Sultan Tit**.

We were really sad to leave Eaglenest – the area is wonderful and I hope it will be preserved for the amazing diversity of flora and fauna currently found there. Someone had written in the visitor’s book that ‘the facilities need upgrading’. I really hope they aren’t – then only people who appreciate the wonders this place has to offer will go there, happy to miss out on their creature comforts for a few days in exchange for fantastic rewards.



Our tent at Eaglenest – loos to the left!



Sunrise over Eaglenest

We had to sadly move on, and back into Assam and to Kaziranga National Park where we stayed in a lovely Lodge (with electricity (usually) a loo and shower thank goodness). We were a little way from the other accommodation, and had plenty of birds in the trees outside our cabin – notably a lovely Lesser Yellownappe much to the consternation of the two Brahminy Starlings present. We also had to say ‘goodbye’ to our wonderful driver, who would be returning to his family nearby. He was fantastic – working incredibly long hours, driving over awful roads and setting out our breakfasts and lunches in the field.

It was very hot in Kaziranga, such a contrast to the higher elevations. It was also very dusty and windy, and took some adjusting to after days of cold and frosty weather. We went out each day in jeeps, but unlike Tadoba, we were allowed to get out of them at certain points. This was a great Park - it is home to the largest number of **Indian one-horned rhinos** and we saw many of these. The Park was a mixture of grassland, some sparse shrubby trees and water, giving quite a diversity of birds and animals. Also seen were **Asian elephants**, **wild buffalo** and smooth-coated otters – we spent some time watching the otters ducking and diving and catching fish. The bird life was also excellent including Blossom-headed Parakeet, **Spot-billed Pelican**, Greater Painted and Pintail Snipes, Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, River Terns, Bengal Bush Lark, **Striated Babbler**, **Pied Harrier** and **Yellow-billed Blue Magpie**. Several Greater and Lesser Adjutant Storks were present, and it was good to see them in this environment rather than on a rubbish dump!



Indian One-horned Rhino, Kaziranga



Smooth-coated Otters, Kaziranga

We also had an elephant ride, which I found dreadfully uncomfortable due to my bad back, but thankfully it was only for an hour. Unfortunately no sign of the Bengal Florican on any of our visits, nor Swamp Francolin.

After two days in Kaziranga, we were taken to Guwahati airport where we flew back to Delhi. Abid came with us to the airport, and we had a cup of lemon tea together before saying fond farewells. He was great company and is a superb birder. We had an overnight stay in Delhi, flying home the next day.

This was a wonderful trip and our guide, Abid, was superb. He worked really hard for the birds to ensure we both saw as many as possible. The days were long but fantastically rewarding. With just Merv and I, a guide and driver, we were given all the attention, and saw things several others missed. We saw 396 birds of which 179 were new to us.

Huge thanks to Jo at Wild About Travel for her fantastic organisation and very helpful suggestions – her knowledge and contacts are a real bonus, and I can recommend travelling with this company without reservation – we certainly hope to do so again.

I can really recommend all locations we visited and Eaglenest in particular - it is a fascinating part of India and the wildlife is wonderful - we missed seeing a Clouded Leopard by under an hour when we arrived at Bompou Camp, but that's wildlife!

Ann & Mervyn de Winter
April 2014