



Wild India

Painted Storks and Blue Bulls

November 28th – December 19th, 2003

Greentours Trip Report

Lead by Phil Benstead and Adrian Binns

Daily Report by Phil Benstead

29th November

Travel to Delhi

We all met up in the baggage reclaim in Delhi at midnight after an assortment of flights from six different locations in the UK and US! Unfortunately June's bag had not arrived at our current location and she had to spend her first hour in India filling in forms and shuttling between desks. When all this had been sorted out we met up with Vinod and got into the bus for the short ride to the Centaur and some much needed sleep.

30th November

Delhi to Jaipur – The Amber Fort [check]

After an early breakfast we headed for the bus and began the drive to Jaipur. We were immediately catapulted into the mayhem of the Indian road system. Our bus driver vying for space with an unlikely assortment of transportational devices. There always seemed to be enough space but those sitting at the front seemed to be slightly less relaxed during the journey. During the drive we became familiar with many of the common roadside birds of this part of India. A pair of bank mynas hitch-hiking on top of a lorry through a toll-station caused much amusement. We broke the journey at a motel for a quick cup of tea and a chance to have a look at some passerines and butterflies. Driving on we eventually arrived in Jaipur in perfect time for a very pleasant lunch at the Trident Hotel and a meeting with our local guide – Jay.

Lunch was digested on board a brace of elephants as the group journeyed in style up to the Amber Fort. Here we spent an interesting two hours taking in the superb architecture of this 16th – 18th century edifice, culminating in the impressive "Hall of Mirrors". Making our way through the Sunday crowds we boarded the jeeps which whisked us back to the bus and the drive through town to the Observatory. Here we tried our best to take in the finer points of the various solar time-pieces but Adrian swiftly diverted our attention by finding a splendid fruiting banyan that was jam-packed with birds including Indian grey hornbill, yellow-footed green pigeon and a very confiding Asian koel. Other birds here included the ever-splendid Brahminy starling, a glorious little green bee-eater and a brace of tiny red collared doves. Very quickly we were being politely herded out by security and we all elected to end the day there and get back to the hotel for an early dinner.

1st December

Jaipur to Ranthambore

We spent the morning pottering around Jaipur taking in the photogenic frontage of the Palace of Winds before heading for the City Palace. En route it was evident that polling for the national elections was underway with open air polling booths doing a brisk trade. The city palace was packed with interesting features including an art gallery and we spent an enjoyable 2 hours here before heading off on the six hour journey to Ranthambore. After a couple of hours we stopped at a restaurant to eat our packed lunches and satisfy our growing addiction to chai marsala. In a nearby ditch we found a number of nice birds at very close range including a fine bluethroat and our first green sandpiper.

Continuing on we eventually stopped in a small village which had a large waterfowl -filled reservoir but sadly we were received in a rather robust manner by the local children. We lasted about 20 minutes before we had had enough attention but in that time managed to see many new birds. The reservoir was covered in coot and dabbling duck. Wigeon, pintail, gadwall and teal abounded and in amongst these were a few ferruginous duck, red-crested pochard, pochard and tufted duck. Around the margins we spotted river lapwing and other shorebirds as well as a large Indian mud turtle sunning itself. Driving on a little further we found a splendid muddy area just before Sawai Madhopur. This was also near a small village but here we were treated with respect and enjoyed the company of the small group of children and adults who came to see what we were up to. Allowed space to bird we were soon watching a variety of waders including some lovely spotted redshank, wood sandpipers, black-tailed godwit, little ringed plover and Temminck's stint. Nearby pools allowed us to get to grips with the identification of the three egret species, great, intermediate and little. But before long it was time to continue on to the hotel which we reached just before dusk and were met by the friendly staff. This fine hotel is perched on a ridge and afforded views over the plain and into the buffer zone of the park.

Over dinner we talked over the plans for the next few days and looked forward with considerable excitement to getting into the park and having a crack at Sher Khan.

2nd December

Ranthambore NP

After an early breakfast we wrapped up warm for the surprisingly chilly drive to the park. We split into two jeeps, each hoping (rather uncharitably) that the other would not see a tiger first! After our routes had been allotted we headed off and starting searching. Straight away we found pugmarks and heard the alarm calling of nilgai and sambar but it was distant and we failed to convert this into a more solid encounter. Also here we found the pugmarks of the sloth bear and hoped fervently to see it too during our stay here. After this early bit of excitement the morning settled down into a leisurely examination of the tiger food in the park, we encountered several large groups of chital (spotted deer), many sambar and nilgai and a few of the gorgeous chinkara (Indian gazelle). Other mammals included a splendid ruddy mongoose, boisterous groups of langurs and herds of wild boar.

Naturally our attention was not exclusively on mammals during the morning and we also saw many good birds. In the early morning many raptors were just sitting around in the tops of trees and we had excellent views of crested serpent-eagle and crested honey-buzzard. Hume's warblers and olive-backed pipits called from the forest but were hard to track down confined as we were to the jeep. But some birds did appear beside the track including a covey of grey francolin, a spotted owlet peeping from its roost hole and a flock of lovely small minivets. Halfway round we stopped for a break and stretched our legs near one of the guardposts. There was a small pool here and we had brown crake here as well as our first views of olive-backed pipit. Continuing on the two jeeps diverged, we went on to see two fantastic brown fish-owls and as time was running out briefly visited a lake that was packed with birds including lesser whistling duck, cotton pygmy-goose, purple heron, the peculiar darter and many other wetland species. Before long however it was time to leave the park and we headed back to the hotel.

Before an early lunch many of us spent a pleasant hour checking out raptors from the second floor roof-top. We were pleased to note both white-rumped and long-billed vultures, albeit in small numbers, the recent crash in the populations of both these species being of enormous concern. Also flying from here we had red-headed vulture, short-toed eagle and crested honey-buzzard. Garden birds noted during this period included great tit, common iora and white-browed fantail.

After lunch it was back into the jeeps for the afternoon session, this time we did a different route. We spent about two hours carefully scanning the forest floor for big cats before coming round a bend and finding a large female tiger lying on the road in front of an oncoming stationary jeep! Easy! We could not believe our good fortune as this relaxed beast ambled off the road and then moved parallel to the track just metres from the jeep. Pretty soon there were many more vehicles involved but the tiger remained unfazed by it all and went about its everyday business drinking from a riverbed pool, scent-marking and dunging. We were over-joyed but immediately concerned that the other jeep may not have seen one. In fact when we met up with them they had seen two! They had encountered two cubs so we had managed to see three tigers between us on the first day! On a high we left the park and headed for the sandgrouse pool where 6 dutiful painted sandgrouse performed for us at dusk. Fantastic birds and a great end to our first day at Ranthambore.

Just when we thought things could not get better ,we got back to the hotel to see June finally re-united with her bag. What a relief - it had been a long two days wait and tomorrow she would not have to wear Adrian's silly hat!

3rd December

Ranthambore National Park

Up bright and early again and into the jeeps for another drive into the park. Back on route 1 & 2 this morning. It was great to be in the park without the worry of having to see tiger – we could all relax. Those in Phil's jeep enjoyed good views of perched raptors including shikra, white-eyed buzzard and yet another crested serpent-eagle. Other birds included small minivet, chestnut-shouldered petronia and white-bellied drongo. Adrian's jeep encountered one of the tiger cubs from yesterday, resting in front of a palm tree. After watching her for a short time, she got up and stretched herself as far up the trunk as she could before walking away into the forest. Continuing around our assigned track we encountered small groups of Nilgai, almost always with a blue bull; Indian gazelle, wild boar and a pair of golden jackals whom we disturbed while having their mid morning siesta. Before too long though it was time once again to get out of the park.

Today though instead of going back to the hotel we were to climb up to the fort. Parking by the gate we walked through the gang of langurs, carefully hiding the bag of sandwiches away from their greedy stares and grabbing hands. The walk uphill to the fort was surprisingly gentle and we stopped halfway to eat our sandwiches and enjoy the view of the park and the nearby lake. Around the lake were many muggers taking the sun, and a pair of woolly-necked storks. Continuing on we climbed to the fort gate and slowly walked to the temple. Along the way we got our first chance to study some of the butterflies that we had only previously seen as fly-bys including plain tiger, lemon pansy, and common gull as well as two blue species side by side, cerulean and zebra blue. There was much excitement here because a tiger had been spotted walking along an adjacent ridge earlier on. The Ganesh temple here was a hive of activity – it is visited from all over India. Erica and Roberta went in with offerings and came out with flower garlands around their necks which were promptly stolen and eaten by a passing cow and a langur! The walk back down was quick and we were soon all aboard an open-topped bus (canter) and whisked back to the hotel for lunch before heading out yet again into the park.

Phil's jeep took route 7 and had a fabulous time, seeing black-backed flameback, jungle cat and right at the end of the day a stunningly located adult female tiger. It was sitting in grass in the late afternoon sun beside a lake and looked fantastic in this classic setting. It alternated bouts of intense concentration (fish-watching?) with some pretty impressive yawning. Big teeth. Meeting up with Adrian at the end we discovered that they had got very close to the two cubs again during their drive. We also heard the news that many people had seen sloth bear during the afternoon

kingfisher, more great thick-knee and a single brown shrike but pride of place went to the bird spotted by Tony as we left the place – a superb and very obliging male painted snipe.

We drove back through the gathering dusk seeing many roadside spotted owlets and enjoying the spectacle of the evening traffic which comprised of every form of road transport imaginable.

6th December 6th Ranthambore to Bharatpur

Well we ended our stay at Ranthambore with a belter. We drove the access track stopping occasionally and walking. First stop was for a roadside brown fish-owl which flew on slowly up the river occasionally giving excellent views. We also had excellent views of common kingfisher, white-throated kingfisher and yellow-eyed babbler around a small pond. As we walked along the road we heard various animals alarm calling and considered it prudent to get back into the canter. We never saw the culprit! As we approached the first guard-post Pankaj beckoned us forward. A leopard had been spotted on a nearby ridge! It took some time for us to spot it but eventually it looked up and then sat and even walked along the ridge a short distance. What an impressive sight! We all had plenty of time to take in this impressive animal and could not believe our good fortune. We were eventually joined by the Birdquest group and the appreciative audience grew even larger.

Eventually we had to tear ourselves away however and headed out to look for white-naped woodpecker. Sadly we failed to find it but did find our first yellow-crowned woodpecker, sulphur-bellied warbler and had more good view of spotted owl. Regretfully we left and returned back to the hotel to pack and prepare for the railway journey to Bharatpur. After packing and saying thanks to the cheerful staff of the Joomer Baori hotel we all boarded a canter for the journey to the station. After a short wait the train pulled in and we found our carriage and settled down for the two and a half hour journey to Bharatpur.

As we watched rural India go by we ate our packed lunches and reflected on the many splendid animals we had seen at Ranthambore and looked forward to the delights of Bharatpur. Before long we arrived at the station and met up with Divanker and our trusty bus crew and were quickly whisked off to the hotel. We got our rooms and selves sorted out and had a hour in the park along a nearby trail. It was an excellent introduction to the place with large numbers of waterbirds covering the jheels and small colonies of storks and ibises dotted around. As dusk all too quickly fell we heard the eerie call of the dusky eagle owl.

7th December Bharatpur

Over breakfast we met Rattan Singh who was to be our guide whilst we stayed in the Park. We all managed to get assembled outside the hotel by 8 o'clock and were bundled into the waiting rickshaws. We repeatedly stopped for new birds, white-eared bulbul, roosting spotted owl and so on. The number of birds to look at was monstrous. In an area of tall tree we quickly saw Tickell's thrush and orange-headed ground thrush – things were going well. As bodies of open water opened up around us we started to see plenty of wetland birds all occasionally flying up as the resident eagles tried there luck. We did not see any kills but it was exciting stuff. Rattan Singh pointed out a roosting pair of collared scops-owl and a partially concealed dusky eagle-owl. By now the rickshaws were redundant as we ambled from one bird spectacle to another – we saw three black bitterns, stately pairs of sarus crane, the fantastic black-necked stork, masses of pintail and other duck, perched eagles and many in flight including greater spotted, Indian spotted and imperial.

It was not all birds though we saw small numbers of nilgai, spotted deer and jackal and also common garden lizard and Indian saw-back (a turtle). When we reached an intersection we met back up with our rickshaw drivers and were peddled back for lunch after a great mornings birding.

The afternoon started with a quick visit to a brace of pythons that had been located by Rattan Singh during our lunch break. We 'rick-shawed' the short distance to the first of these impressive reptiles and watched it as it travelled

picked Rajiv's brain about various aspects of Indian culture that had puzzled us so far and he was once again a fount of information. Next we split into two as Phil, Erica and Rattan headed for the River Yamuna below the fort and the rest went off to visit a marble factory. The birders saw a selection of great birds despite the less than salubrious surroundings including sand lark, rufous-winged lark and black-bellied tern. The shoppers made various purchases and seemed to enjoy themselves. We all met up again to drive to the Trident and lunch.

After a splendid lunch we headed for the high point of the day – the Taj Mahal. Even if you have been before the first real view of the place through the gate is an electric moment. Rajiv sat us all down and filled us in on the history of the place and exploded a few popular myths whilst he was at it. Then those that wished accompanied him inside whilst the birders gathered round the back (philistines all) and checked out the river hoping for a new bird (in vain although we enjoyed watching the hovering technique of pied kingfishers). Before we left the grounds though we had time to find a fruiting banyan tree which held a couple of rather comical brown-headed barbets. And so back to Bharatpur, pleasantly tired after a great day.

10th December Bharatpur & Fatephur Sikri

Adrian stayed abed in the morning but the rest of us headed off with Rattan Singh to the nursery where we had fantastic views of large-tailed nightjar (which patiently dealt with the blizzard of flash photography) and we also saw brown-headed barbet and long-tailed minivet here too. We walked on through some nice forested areas of the park, we searched in vain for some time for better views of dusky eagle-owl but had to settle for views of the female hunched over the nest. We also successfully checked out a number of python lairs all of which had pythons close-by. We saw six in total. In the same area we searched in vain for the 200-odd flock of stone-curlews – Rattan could not believe it! It was just one of those days!

Because the cold weather had yet to arrive there were very few wintering forest birds in these woodlands but we did manage brief views of a verditer flycatcher and prolonged views of a gorgeous calling chestnut-headed nuthatch. Walking on towards Sapan Mari (and the waiting rickshaws) we entered the wetland zone again and wandered along enjoying the spectacle of painted stork colonies and close perched kingfishers. Then it was off to lunch and we were joined by Adrian who was starting to look a bit more human!

After lunch we had two choices birding with Rattan or a side trip to nearby Fatephur Sikri. Erica and Adrian opted to go out with Rattan, whilst the rest headed for the abandoned city. Well it is definitely not abandoned now! We had a splendid two hours here, wandering the place with our guide and enjoying all the various palaces and tombs. The high-diving boy who jumped into the tank on request was a truly magnificent end to the day. During our rambles a number of birds were evident including Egyptian vulture, brown rock-chat and a calling coppersmith barbet. But it was those that went with Rattan that had the lionshare their afternoon walk produced more views of large-tailed nightjar in the nursery, and by walking around outside the park they found Brooke's leaf-warbler but no yellow-wattled lapwing.

After dinner we were treated to a slide show by Bholui-ji who showed us some great slides of the classic birds of the park and told us a bit about the seasonal changes through the year.

11th December Bharatpur (Python Point and the boat ride)

Breakfast was a splendid affair this morning. Roberta was inadvertently given a cereal bowl with a hole in it and chatted away as she poured milk all over the table! It had dawned foggy though and it did not clear until after lunch. This certainly affected our birding but allowed us to concentrate on birds in the margins along the bund and we got views of black bittern, Tickell's blue flycatcher and water rail and flushed a number of large-tailed nightjars. We searched another area for stone-curlew but again drew a blank, although we did see another two rock pythons. Here at Python Point we found the pugmarks of a tiger which added a frisson of danger to the walk and reminded us that

there was indeed a female tiger in the Park. On the way back to the hotel we stopped off at the small shop by the checkpoint and made a few purchases.

After lunch we headed for the boats to try and get close to some of the waterbirds we had been seeing during the week. There followed a very pleasant two hours floating about getting fantastic views of spotted and lesser spotted eagles and a host of water birds. True to form we had a fleeting encounter with another dusky eagle-owl a bird we seem fated not to get a good look at. There were plenty of opportunities for photography as we cruised past trees filled with storks, ibises and herons and the camera shutters and other digital-type noises filled the air. As the sun fell the boatman positioned us for the cliched 'sunset behind stork colony shot' and we were all happy. As we were poled back one of the boatmen treated us to some excellent animal impressions which had us in fits of laughter.

12th December Bharatpur to Delhi and beyond

In the early morning we headed out up the Ram Bund for one last birding session. There was a little mist but nothing like yesterday's pea-souper. The undoubted highlight was finally getting to grips with smoky warbler and the photographers enjoyed a couple of trees festooned with yellow-footed green pigeons. Before long though it was time to get back to the hotel to pack and say our goodbyes. Rattan sent us off in fine style with garlands of flowers, petal confetti and tasty indian sweets.

We stopped en route to Delhi at a wetland which produced a number of good birds including our first baya weavers. We also stopped for lunch and saw red-headed vulture and a close immature shikra. Before long though we were in the outskirts of Delhi and travelling slowly through this bustling metropolis. The Park Hotel provided a pleasant respite, a shower and some outstanding food – the red snapper was fantastic. During dinner we said our heartfelt goodbyes to Erica who was flying back to the States. We however were off on another week of adventure starting with the much-discussed overnight train ride from Old Delhi railway station. The traffic had calmed down and the bus made good time to the railway station – an enormous building filled with people sleeping and waiting for trains. We picked our way through the crowds and as we reached platform 3 the Ranikhet Express pulled into the station. After eventually locating our carriages we settled everyone into their berths and said goodbye once again to Vinod.

13th December Kathgodam to Nainital, "Low Fields" and Snow View

We awoke at dawn to find the train trailing behind its timetabled arrival time. In the ned we had a bit of a lie-in. Most agreed that they had spent a comfortable night. Eventually we pulled into Kathgodam at 0720 and met up with Sirdar and Bahadur who had driven through the night and arrived at 0230. Running late we headed straight for Nainital because buses are not allowed inside town after 0830. On the drive up it was immediately apparent that we had left the plains behind, the air was clear and new birds appeared beside the road including red-billed blue-magpie, blue whistling-thrush and Himalayan bulbul. Arriving at the Vikram our home for the next two days we quickly settled into our rooms and headed for breakfast.

Before long we had re-assembled and walked up and then down to the 'low fields'. On the way down we saw our first Himalayan griffon vultures and two splendid lammergeiers and called in some excellent flocks which added many new birds to the trip list. These included the splendid array of tits available at this altitude; black-lored, spot-winged, green-backed and black-throated. We also saw our first rosefinch (pink-browed), the fantastic white-capped water redstart, and a flock containing at least 20 buff-barred warblers. There were birds everywhere, which made pointing out individuals rather difficult in the milling melee. Knowing we would have more chances to see these species we climbed aboard the bus and headed for lunch.

After lunch we took the bus up to near Snow View and walked along the ridge, by now the temperature had dropped and bird activity slowed to a standstill, we found one small flock which included a single yellow-browed tit and as we walked back down the ridge we saw five Oriental turtle doves. Birding the Kalbari road was eventually abandoned due to rain which allowed us to head into town and do a bit of shopping before dinner.

14th December

Snow View and Sat Tal

We decided to start early this morning in order to be up at Snow View as the sun hit the Himalayas. The weather did not let us down and we were treated to a fantastic 45 minute show as the rising sun slowly picked out the mountain range that spread out in front of us – the impressive centrepiece being Nanda Devi. The nearest peak was 75 miles away but it looked much closer in the fine weather. Walking back to the van we had a large flock of fantastic white-throated laughingthrushs.

The next stop was the fields en route to Sat Tal where we saw black-chinned babbler, rusty-cheeked scimitar-babbler, Himalayan rubythroat, common rosefinch, russet sparrow and white-capped bunting whilst searching for black-throated accentor. The birding here was very good and there was plenty to look at including stacks of Himalayan bulbuls! Moving on we headed down to the lake to have an early lunch and enjoy the sun. Afterwards we walked down through the campsite and along a small stream which held a spotted forktail and we called in a massive flock of birds with several new species for us including yellow-bellied fantail and small niltava. The birding here was also superb and we had a number of great birds as we wandered along including red-billed leiothrix, slaty-headed parakeet, scaly-breasted wren-babbler and grey-sided bush-warbler. The butterflies here were also rather special and included the Rustic, Common Leopard, Sailor, Indian Tortoiseshell and a Common banded Awl.

On the way home we stopped by the church where we were amazed to find a brown-fronted woodpecker on a bird table, as well as more red-billed leiothrix and black-throated sunbird. Before heading home finally we stopped for one more look at the fields but despite seeing a large flock of white-capped bunting, our first grey treepies and more black-chinned babblers, we failed to see the accentor.

15th December

Naini Tal, Ramnagar and Quality Inn

This morning we had a leisurely start, said our goodbyes and got into the van for the two hour drive to the barrage at Ramnagar. The drive down into the lowlands wound through good forest before we reached the plain. We stopped for half an hour at the barrage and quickly got to grips with our first wallcreeper, crested kingfisher and plumbeous water redstart. The skies overhead held Egyptian vulture, crested honey-buzzard and black stork. After this pleasant interlude we drove on for 45 minutes to the delightful Quality Inn and were quickly settled into our bungalows and having another enormous and very tasty Indian lunch.

Afterwards we worked two sections of the Kosi trying to find the wintering ibisbill but to no avail. We did have plenty of great views of other riparian birds though including spotted and little forktail, plumbeous redstart, white-capped water-redstart, crested kingfisher and another wall creeper at very close range. The bordering woodland revealed ashy bulbul and grey-capped pygmy-woodpecker, lineated barbet and a large number of grey treepies. At dusk we called it a day and headed back to the Quality Inn.

After dinner some of us headed out for a short nightwalk and we managed to see a barking deer, a jungle owlet and a rather loudly stridulating grasshopper. The sky was clear and we had a good look at a few constellations and planets before heading for our beds.

16th December

Quality Inn area

Today we all awoke at dawn to the sound of rain drumming on the roof and this grey rain dogged us for the rest of the day finally clearing up in mid-afternoon. Because of these inclement conditions some elected to enjoy the comforts of hotel whilst the rest went off birding. We drove off in the van to a nearby road that followed a small stream and en route we had views of red junglefowl (prototype chicken) and a big flock of kalij pheasants crossed the road in front of us. Roadside stops produced our first, rather bedraggled jezebel butterfly and large, fast-moving canopy flocks of minivets, flycatcher-shrikes, woodpeckers and nuthatches.

Delhi. We reached the outskirts at dusk and were staggered by the number of black kites around a large landfill site. They were uncountable but certainly numbered in the tens of thousands. A huge flock wheeled over the tip itself and countless other festooned every tree for about a kilometre. Still more crossed the road on their way to more distant roosts. It was amazing – didn't smell that good though. Soon after we were mired in the Delhi traffic and making our way slowly towards the hotel. Here we had a shower and packed for the flight before eating and saying our goodbyes to Roberta and Ramani. Then it was all aboard the bus for one last trip to the airport and more goodbyes and thanks to the driver (Sudir) and assistant (Bahadur) and of course the unstoppably helpful Vinod.

We all survived the immigrations, customs and security measures at the airport and met up on the other side to say goodbye to the US contingent before finally sitting down to wait for our flight.