



NORTHERN INDIA - TRIP REPORT Jan 7-28, 2006

**By Adrian Binns
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Pre-tour Day 1 / Jan 7 – Okhla; Sultanpur NP

Colin, Jane and I spent the morning working the Yamuna River around Okhla making numerous stops in fields, on embankments and at ponds to get a good taste of the riverine bird community. Indian Pond Herons also known as paddybirds were everywhere as were Red-wattled Lapwings, Black-winged Stilts and Rose-ringed Parakeets. On the water, large rafts of Eurasian Wigeon and Shovelers were common along with a few Pintails, Ruddy Shelducks, Little Grebes and Spot-billed Ducks. Along the mudflats we found our first Purple Heron, Green and Common Sandpipers and River Lapwings, both Brown-headed and their smaller cousins Black-headed Gulls, while in the far distance we could see a large group of Greater Flamingos. The embankment vegetation held what would be the first of many White-breasted Kingfishers and Little Cormorants.

Heading south, working our way along dirt tracks through the agricultural fields we came across Ashy Prinia, Large Grey Babblers, a Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Eurasian Hoopoes, Egyptian Vultures, Pied Bushchats, Lesser Whitethroats, Yellow and Citrine Wagtails while on the shorebanks we had Little and Temminck's Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Greenshank, Ruff, Eurasian Spoonbill, Common Redshank and River Lapwings. In a short grass field we had Eurasian Starling (not a common sight), Black-breasted Weavers, both Greater Short-toed and Sand Lark as well as Tawny Pipits and a Wryneck.

A check of one pond near an embankment that was jutting out towards the river produced several hundred Black-tailed Godwits, a few White-tailed Lapwings, Bluethroats as well as great comparisons of Marsh and Wood Sandpiper.

Following lunch back at the hotel we headed southwest fighting our way through the traffic, a few accidents and many u-turns later because the roads we wanted were closed, we arrived at Sultanpur National Reserve a mini Keoladeo National Park. On arrival, we first checked the short dry grass areas with great success picking up Eurasian Hoopoe, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Paddyfield, Tawny and Long-billed Pipit along with numerous Eurasian Collared Doves and a couple of Red-collared Doves. Inside the park things were hopping with Plain and Ashy Prinias, Bluethroats, Red-breasted Flycatchers, Hume's Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat in amongst the path vegetation. The jheel held a multitude of waterfowl, cormorants, herons and a few storks. We bumped into Sanjay an enthusiastic local guide that took great pride in telling us that he could show us Indian Courser and Eurasian Eagle Owl, but it required a decent trek to the back of the park - we said "lead the way." One hour later we were rewarded with great views of a Red Avadavats, a couple of large flocks of Common Cranes flying into roost and a couple of Sarus Cranes, but in spite of scouring the open short grass no coursers. He insisted that the morning was best, telling us how he showed a German 11 coursers this morning, and begged us to return in the morning.

The evening jaunt to the airport for three separate arrivals was not as bad as it could have been in spite of Jack and Marie arriving in the wee hours of the morning.

Pre-tour Day 2 / Jan 8 – Sultanpur NP; Hotel grounds

All but 2 opted to join us on the chase for courser – Warren and Diane headed out for a day in the city with a friend of theirs. The journey to the National Preserve was very smooth and quicker than yesterday, due to a more direct route and being Sunday morning, less congested traffic. We passed numerous makeshift cricket games, most of which had found a shrub or a concrete electric pylon or a stack of red clay bricks to use as a wicket – such is the ingenuity of those bought up in the British Empire. With 4 of the group experiencing the Asian avifauna for the first time, we watched Lesser Whitethroats, the stunning male Black Redstart, Red-breasted Flycatcher, several Bluethroats, Plain Prinia's, White-throated Kingfisher, Rose-ringed Parakeets, Red-vented Bulbuls, a gorgeous male Black-rumped Flameback and Yellow-crowned Woodpecker as we slowly walked the brick path towards the southern end of the reserve. We knew our local guide Sanjay would not let us down and of course he did show to show us the courser. Meeting him near the end of the path we dropped down into the acacia thickets and small woodland where some of the group had an excellent though brief look at a Eurasian Eagle Owl while the rest of us watched this huge owl fly away just as we were lifting our binoculars. Once in the open savannah, dotted with patches of elephant grass, we came across a small flock of Red Avadavats, large roving flocks of Indian Silverbills, a few Crested Larks and a Hume's Short-toed Lark and well as 3 shrike species, Long-tailed, Rufous-tailed and Bay-backed. Sure enough the Indian Courser's were there as Sanjay promised us all that they would be. In all, 11 of them provided some excellent views as they moved about the short grass in search of food. A Red-necked Falcon put on wonderful show flying back and forth at an amazing speed for a lark – literally! It then perched on a fence post for some cracking views. This was soon followed by a Peregrine and Oriental Honey Buzzard – a nice little raptor show in a short period of time. A pair of Sarus Cranes worked the far edge of an agricultural plot before taking off, bugling as they flew away. We then had the next largest species, a Black-necked Stork fly into the field we were about to walk into where it wondered about aimlessly before taking off for greener pastures. We worked our way back picking up several Purple Sunbirds and a Greater Coucal before heading back to the hotel for lunch.

The butterflies on the marigolds in the hotel grounds produced a nice variety including Lemon and Blue Pansy, Common Emigrant, Plain Tiger, Striped Tiger, Common Grass Yellow, Indian Cabbage White and several Blues. An afternoon stroll around the hotel began slow with a few of the usual suspects, Hume's Warbler, Indian Robin, Purple Sunbird, Shikra on the hunt for unwary pigeons, White and Yellow Wagtail, a tree top full of Yellow-footed Green Pigeons, House Swifts, Dusky Crag martin, Brown Rock Chat, Ashy Prinia and a few Temminck's Stints on the edge of a pool of water adjacent to the grounds.

Day 1 / Jan 9 – Delhi to Bharatpur; Bharatpur Canal

We woke to find the headlines in the Delhi Express saying that yesterday was the coldest day on record in Delhi, with the low barely making it over 32 degrees Fahrenheit. It was so cold they ordered schools to be closed for 3 days. One of the headlines read, "White Winter", the translation being they had a covering of frost. Anyway it certainly was not much warmer this morning. The drive south was at times slow and often amusing and astonishing as we took in the sights of suburbia. There always seemed to be something that kept us enthralled as we watched vehicles head towards us on the wrong side of the road, oblivious to the fact that they actually had a safer road of their own on the other side of the median strip specifically designated for northbound traffic! As the road sign stated, "Driving on your side of the road is safe driving". We even had a tractor pulling a very heavy load. How heavy was it? So heavy that the weight at the front of the trailer tilted the tractor 40 degrees, lifting the front wheels - somehow it still managed to drive on the rear wheels. I'm not sure which was the least of his problems, the fact that one had the ordacity to pull something like that or that he was driving down the road the wrong way. The motorbike helmet up a tree in the middle of the road was a novel way to acknowledge the death of a motorcyclist. Speaking of accidents, a beauty which we did not witness could easily have been straight out of a 'Battle of the Giants' contest. One large truck decided to take on an even larger truck filled with gravel as it was crossing the road, and plowed straight into the side of it, rending both vehicles obsolete. We'll call that a draw. There were no winners when we witnessed some kind of multi purpose maintenance vehicle that looked like a cross between a cement truck and wagon with a chimney stack that spewed out enough smoke to make the smoke that comes out of power plants seem inconsequential. Anyway what was that vehicle's purpose? Could it have been roasting peanuts for the multitude of peanut vendors seen at every street corner? Sad as it is, nothing is done to stop the trapping of Sloth Bears

which are paraded for tourists at intersections in the hopes of earning a few rupees. Purchasing young cubs for next to nothing, training them and taking them on the road may seem like a bad investment, but in reality when the time comes they will fetch beaucoup bucks on the black market for 'medicinal' concoctions in the Far East. As one can imagine, the future of this wonderful species is by no means certain, especially having just read that in the last 8 years the numbers of bears in and around Ranthambhore has dropped from over 400 to 50. And then there is the snake charmer and his 5 foot Spectacled Cobra weaving his musical knowledge at the precise pitch in order to keep the snake hypnotized making him fearless of it striking him. Following the 'show' and realizing that we were not about to cough up any cash, he put the lid on the basket and kept insisting "Very good the next song, very good the next song". I would have hated to pay and then find out the next song was a country and western one. They weren't the only animals; Elephants and Camels were used as means of transport; wild pigs, sacred cows and buffalos scavenged mainly in the villages while Rhesus Macaques patrolled the roadside soft shoulder. Once out of the city it was rice field after rice field occasionally with an Indian Roller or Black Drongo on the telephone wire or an Egyptian Vulture overhead. The Black Kites really should not be mentioned anymore as they are everywhere, as are the dung pies neatly laid out and stacked to dry (fuel) in every village.

Following a quick break mid morning we checked out a roadside pond for Brown Crake, Purple Swamphen, Moorhen, Little Grebe and Bluethroat. A little further on we found Woolly-necked Storks and Black-headed Ibis overhead. The final 40km into Bharatpur was on a very rough road that at least gave us a chance to break up the journey to scan various ponds. Pied Kingfisher was a nice find as was a Bronze-winged Jacana and a Purple Heron less than 50 feet way. There were loads of Swamphens and Black-winged Stilts, a couple of River Terns, Grey Heron; side by side Ruff, Marsh Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank. Along one semi dried out channel we spotted a Greater Coucal that was tackling a 3 foot Checkered Keelback for lunch which was very exciting as we watched it pull bits of meat off the head. A pair of Sarus Cranes, the world tallest flying bird, was spotted in a field besides the road. Stopping to admire them they went the extra mile, calling and displaying – the male half raising his wings into a bowed position and lifting his head to bugle while the female just pointed her bill skywards in acknowledging the male. We finally made it the Bagh (a dual meaning in Hindi for Tiger and Garden) at 1:30PM and much needed food that proved to be excellent.

The very quick walk around the grounds produced a dozen Indian Grey Hornbills, Rufous Treepie, Lesser Whitethroat, Tailorbird and 4 soaring Egyptian Vultures. Our afternoon destination was only a very short distance away to the canal. We proceeded to walk a mile along the track scanning the water with great success. White-breasted Water Hens were now very common and we had great side by side comparisons of Marsh, Green and Wood Sandpiper as well as Common and Spotted Redshank. Amongst the ubiquitous stilts a solitary female Pied Avocet was feeding and a Darter was seen successfully fishing though the size of the fish were barely anything to boast about, but then again I'm sure even birds can tell fish stories. On the cricket pitch several Paddyfield Pipits dodged the ball while White-browed, Yellow, Citrine and White Wagtails could be seen amongst the hyacinth. In the vegetation along the track, both Ashy and Plain Prinias, White-eared Bulbuls, a Red-breasted Flycatcher and an Olive-backed Pipit were seen, while on distant wires Brahminy Starling and Red-collared Dove perched. We finished up with cracking views of a Coppersmith, a small barbet, perched on top of a dead snag.

Day 2 / Jan 10 – Keoledeo National Park: Nursery, Main Track to Keoladeo Temple

A few minutes spent after breakfast around one of the Bagh's many fruiting trees produced Oriental White-eyes, an immature female Asian Koel, Indian Grey Hornbill, Common Tailorbird and an assortment of starlings. It is only a very short drive to Keoledeo National Park named after the Shiva Temple in the middle of the park, where we picked up our wonderful guide Sohan Lal and headed for the Nursery area. Soon he had located a very well camouflaged roosting Large-tailed Nightjar on the ground. The next one was even nicer being right out in the open – what looks. With screeching and streaking parakeets overhead we also saw Yellow-browed, Sulphur-bellied and Hume's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Red-breasted Flycatcher (again a female) Black-rumped Flamebacks, Ashy Drongo's, White-browed Fantail, brief looks at a Tickell's Thrush and an Oriental Honey Buzzard near a hanging beehive.

No sooner had we begun our walk down the Main Track, we found the first of two Monitor Lizards basking in the sun besides their hole. We then veered off into the savannah for Common Woodshrikes, Bay-backed Shrikes, Grey Franklins and a roosting pair of Spotted Owlets catching the early morning rays in a dead tree while a stunning male Black Redstart flitted about the open area. A major highlight was a very cold Orange-headed Ground Thrush that Sohan almost stepped on. The photographers were in heaven as the bird spent most of the time posing for all of us. We were accompanied down the track for most of the day by the *seven sisters*, a group of noisy Jungle Babblers, and kept running into Oriental Magpie Robins, White-eared Bulbuls, Greenish Warblers, a Hume's Warbler, Lesser Whitethroats, Blyth's Reed Warblers and an Orphean Warbler.

As we reached the first of the jheels (man made ponds with scattered mounds of acacias) we found an enormous variety of waterfowl before us - Eurasian Coots in large rafts occasionally batting their wings on the water to take off for a short flight; Northern Shovelers spinning in small groups stirring up the invertebrates just like phalaropes do; Common Teal, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Ruddy Shelduck, Purple Swamphen and Greylag Geese; great comparisons of Little, Intermediate and Great Egrets and well as Little, Indian and Great Cormorants....everywhere one looked their was activity, it was endless. We also saw a Dusky Eagle Owl sitting on her nest in a Kadam tree on a mound in the jheel.

Sohan caught the tail end of a Checkered Keelback as it slide down a hole on the embankment and proceeded to do his best Steve Irwin imitation for a growing group of inquisitive folks. The raptor show was very good with a handful of Greater Spotted Eagles both perched and in flight, 3 Booted Eagles, one Steppe Eagle and an immature Brahminy Kite. Aerial specialists also included a small group of Wire-tailed Swallows.

At the bench near Sapanmori we met up with our mobile catering unit (chef on a rickshaw) and found our picnic lunch laid out for us. It was rather nice to sit down and watch all the activity before us in the jheel as well as the having Black-necked and Painted Storks, Bar-headed Geese and raptors fly over the main track. A few butterflies put in an appearance that included a Glassy Tiger, White Orange Tip, The Psyche, Lemon Emigrant, Common Grassland Yellow and a Plain Tiger which landed on Marie's ear.

One of the most beautiful ducks is the Spot-billed and we had wonderful views of a mating pair while sorting through a small group of dozing pelicans which turned out to be Great Whites and then had fly over and swimming Dalmatians to clean up the 2 most likely species. The cacophony of noise coming from the Painted Stork colonies as we approached grew louder, certainly a testimony to a very successful season with as many as 5 youngsters being tended to at a nest.

All are now fully grown immatures pushing their luck, but some where successful as a parent returned to the nest to regurgitate the best of what was on the menu. A lone Open-billed Stork was in the colony looking very peculiar with a short stubby billed in comparison to its almost fully grown size. While looking at a Chital with a full rack which was feeding on a close mound in the jheel and more in the distance Nilgai, a group of Whiskered Terns flew over the track.

By the end of the afternoon a tired group had reached the temple where Sohan found a 6 foot Indian Rock Python coiled up at the base of a tree and a pair of Indian Collared Scops Owls roosting in a palm tree. Here along the Mansarovar track are the tablets that lay testament to the hunting records of the British Viceroy and Maharajas in the early twentieth century, including a more than staggering 4000 waterfowl shot in a day. Opposite the tablet where one could sit and watch paddybirds, White-throated Kingfishers, Little Herons and Black-crowned Night Herons fish the edge of the jheel. A female Yellow-crowned Woodpecker was working her way up and down the dead branches of the tree besides the bench, and we spotted two intertwined Common Rat Snakes overhanging the water and got some light hearted amusement when a group of well dressed young gentlemen took the opportunity to look through a 'free' scope, totally oblivious that as they took turns to see through it, that they were in fact looking through the wrong end of the scope! It was a nice and relaxing way to end a very successful day by making the return journey to the barrier by rickshaw.

Day 3 / Jan 11 – Agra: Taj Mahal, Agra Red Fort, Yamuna River; Agricultural Fields between Agra and Bharatpur

The fruiting tree outside our rooms proved to be a smorgasbord for avian species once again with two male Asian Koels, Yellow-rumped Warbler, three Oriental White-eyes, both bulbuls, hornbill, Jungle Babblers and a Thick-billed Flowerpecker.

With minimal traffic on the road, other than finding a quarter full trailer of broken bricks that had fallen off the back of a truck strewn across the middle of the road, we made good time into Agra. One the Seven Wonders of the World was completed in 1653 (after 22 years), that being the Taj Mahal on the banks of the Yamuna River. We arrived just as the masses were coming out of morning prayers from the adjacent red sandstone mosque, which actually gave us a good perspective of the size of the white marble structure with its large inverted lotus bulbous dome and the central water course that leads to the raised base of the Taj. Named after Shah Jahan's wife Mumtaz Mahal, Taj means "Crown" and Mahal "Palace". The Mughal King Jahan's grave, in the center of the Taj, which is about the size of a large room, is the only thing that breaks the symmetry of the structure. The marble inlay is simple amazing - Jasper (brown), Onyx (black), Malachite (green), Opal (trans bluish), Lapus lazuli (blue), Carmelian (translucent orange) and Narce (iridescent Mother of Pearl) were all embedded into White Marble that was hauled from Marabec about 350km west of Agra. We also went into a workshop where this craft has been passed down through the generations of families of those that built the Taj.

Following a very pleasant outdoor lunch in Agra, we headed a short distance to look around the remains of the Agra Red Fort which happened to be the Mughal Palace, and once inhabited by Shah Jahan. As one of his son's rose to power he imprisoned his father here until his death in a rather ornate room that over looked the Yamuna and directly at the Taj about one mile away. Since the majority of this Red Sandstone fort is used by the Indian Army we were only allowed in the about a fifth of the property.

A stroll through the very wide sandy floodplain of the Yamuna to the shallow flowing river was a success, with good numbers of expected shorebirds and waders including a large flock of Little Stints. Egyptian Vultures of all ages scavenged the rubbish along the banks; the brightly colored Indian Roller flew across the river and we found both Oriental and Eurasian Skylark, which allowed for a nice comparison of overall color. There was great excitement shortly after asking Sohan why there were no Small Pranticoles about, when a group of about 30 flew onto elevated sand bar and hunkered down in shallow hollows. We did manage with some patience to locate them with a few showing well enough to distinguish them.

The traffic was very different on our return home, with a couple of crashed motor cycles (in the middle of the road) being the only minor accident we witnessed. Everyone was out and about, fires had been lit in front of houses and stores along the road to cook the evenings meals before it became too dark; pigs, cows and water buffalo had as much right to be on the road as we did, and we did pass a 2 person rickshaw with a small family party of 10 aboard! Once through the outskirts of Agra we checked the agricultural fields for Black (Red-headed) Ibis and quickly found a pair which gave us great looks as they fed on a narrow strip of bare ground between two paddy fields. If fact continuing on towards Bharatpur we found an additional 6 birds in a very short stretch along with numerous Indian Peafowl (Peacocks).

Day 4 / Jan 12 – Keoladeo NP: Mansarvar, E Block, Nursery, Besa Mori Track

With each passing morning the temperatures are rising back towards normal. Once the sunlight hit our fruiting tree in the Bagh, the activity was feverish with all the usual gang plus a Coppersmith. At Keoladeo we headed straight up the Main Track stopping occasionally to look for a Black Bittern under the dense overhanging undergrowth besides the jheels without any luck. We marveled at all the activity on the water while checking each eagle to find something other than a Greater Spotted and Colin found a Curlew Sandpiper which was not that cooperative. At the temple we bared right for a short distance and at the first vantage point watched a large flock of Great White Pelicans fishing in a tightly knit group; had a few Dalmatian's fly overhead; juvenile Black-crowned Night Herons, paddybirds and egrets patiently stood on the edge of the bunds while Eurasian Spoonbills were actively feeding in the shallows moving their bills from side to side feeling for crustaceans along the top of the mud; Whiskered Terns were seen in good numbers along with one River Tern; a small flock of Common Pochards flew circles in front of us before

landing. In the distance we had a great view of a juvenile Imperial Eagle, a rather dapper looking *aquila*. Continuing along the bund a young gentleman on a bicycle casually point out a Black Bittern which most of us got to see well even if some of us only got it in bits and pieces. We dropped down on the flat short grass in E Block to search for coursers and lapwings. Once we got the light behind us we had some excellent views at Indian Roller, Eurasian Kestrel, Rufous-tailed Shrike, Paddyfield and Richard's Pipits, a pair of Indian Coursers and four Sociable Lapwings along with a female Marsh Harrier. On the return journey we had a nicely perched accipiter which gave us a chance to work out the difference between a Besra, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and this particular individual, a Shikra. Butterflies were out and about including a Blue Glassy Tiger, Striped Tiger and Lemon Pansy but the major find was a male Greater Painted Snipe that Sohan picked out. The rickshaws were waiting for us to take us back to the bus some 2 miles away.

Arriving at the Bagh for lunch we found a new butterfly for the list an Angled Castor and enjoy a relaxed few hours before heading back to the park. The Brown Hawk Owl had been relocated so we headed to the Nursery and with our necks stretched upwards had a good look at this rather unique species well camouflaged amongst the leaves. Four Grey-headed Canary Flycatchers put on a nice little show for some 10 minutes before we turned our attention to the thrushes - first a female Dark-throated, and then a pair of Tickell's. While all this was going on we realized that we had a pair of Brown-headed Barbets amongst the foliage overhead and watched the male fly to its nest hole to examine it. From here we walked the Besa Mori Track along western edge of the park, passed a large group of women collecting water from the well to take back to the adjoining village which happens to be where Sohan lives and through open woodland. While we stopped to scope a Golden Jackal catching the afternoon rays in the middle of the track we found a gorgeous Red-breasted Flycatcher and shortly thereafter a Red-throated Flycatcher. Sohan had another bird up his sleeve, this time a roosting Indian Nightjar on a short branch seemingly perfectly made for it about twelve feet up a tree.

Day 5 / Jan 13 – Keoladeo NP: Temple, Kadam Kunj Trail; E Block

It was all day in the park today with rickshaw rides to the Temple where the High Priest blessed us and placed an orange powered dot on our foreheads (for a fee of course), obviously a good omen on this Friday the 13th. After checking in on the endearing Indian Collared Scops Owls and doing our best to get as good a look as one possibly could of a Black Bittern well placed in a tangle, Colin found our first Pheasant-tailed Jacana of the trip along the Kadam Kunje Trail. From here we took our time and walked the majority of the way round the long trail. It was another gorgeous morning with wonderful light especially looking northwards over some of the *azolla* cover jheel at Nilgai and Chital dotted in between the egrets, herons and waterfowl. An adult Imperial Eagle was perched with his back to us so that we could see the white blotches on his back as well as his lighter head; we came across a second Black Bittern, this time giving us all better views; a single male Red-crested Pochard stood out amongst the commoner Common's while Eurasian Wigeon were in amongst Pochards, Pintails and the masses of coots. Nearing the end of the first jheel we had both Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas. On the drier sections of grassland Sohan located 2 Grey-headed Lapwings walking amongst White-tailed and Red-wattled Lapwings, a great find. About eight Egyptian Vultures were seen either in the air or at the remains of a cattle carcass. On the small grassy mounds in the jheel we found both River and Whiskered Tern, the later in a large flock while there was one adult breeding plumaged River Tern. Wood Sandpipers were seen in good numbers today along with Temminck's Stints and a single Little Ringed Plover. In another dry section a scan between the low thorny acacias soon revealed three Yellow-wattled Lapwings for a four lapwing morning.

Our Mobile Catering Unit caught up with us right on time, but our progress had been slowed due to all the activity, so instead of having lunch at about the half way point the carpets were laid out for us along the side of the bund where we could watch a large Flap-shell Turtle surface at regular intervals as well as a beautiful female Garganey. Following a pleasant lunch we continued on having 3 Common Cranes fly over our heads and picking out two Common Shelducks amongst a large mixed group of mostly sleeping waterfowl that included Ruddy Shelducks. Woolly-necked Stork and distant Comb Ducks were added before a debate ensued as to whether two resting birds were in fact Pygmy Cotton Goose - they turned out to be Black-necked Stilts! After locating a small group of Red-crested Pochards and watching a large feeding flock of Bar-headed Geese we decided to take a short cut across E Block, this time coming in

from the opposite side from the way we entered yesterday. A lone Indian Courser was spotted a good distance away followed by several Bluethroats. This particular Block was excellent for raptors with an adult and immature Red-headed Vulture, Imperial Eagle and Greater-spotted Eagle being seen, most of which were at the last sitting of a goose. Indian Rollers with their brilliant cobalt and dark blue plumage in flight were spectacular and made up for the more drab Paddyfield Pipits. Back on the bund heading towards the Temple a little ahead of our scheduled appointed time with our rickshaws, we sat at the point overlooking Mansarovar jheel watching workers complete a very flimsy bamboo roof over 4 matchstick sized posts that were being held up with a cross wire, for a dual purpose shelter / hide. The supervisor showed up on his Enfield 1950's British motorbike and gave his stamp of approval. The workers were certainly busy throughout the park getting everything ready for the Presidents arrival in a few days. Scanning through the waterfowl, in particular all the Coots, three Ferruginous Ducks were found, though distant, once they would surface from diving, one could clearly see their chocolate coloration as well as their white butts.

Day 6 / Jan 14 – Keoladeo NP: Shanti Katur, Ram Bund, Nursery, Boat Ride

This morning we began at Shanti Katur picking up distant Long-tailed Minivets flitting about near a Brown-headed Barbet and a couple of Indian Hornbills before dropping down into the scrub grassland. By the time most of us noticed a *buteo* flying through it was gone, likely a Common Buzzard. Our first of what would be many Lesser Whitethroats today miraculous appeared and as luck would have we did find another *Sylvia* warbler, an Orphean, which Jack and Marie appreciated having missed the last one, but then Jack proceeded to call it an unmentionable name. A Wryneck showed well on several occasions as did a Eurasian Thick-knee and we all enjoyed the family of Spotted Owlets. A weary Golden Jackal could not resist the dead calf and as soon as we turned our backs trotted in with a gleam in his eye.

Heading along the Ram Bund, the small body of woodland water, dense undergrowth and trees at the start of the brick path held Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Grey Wagtail, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Bluethroat which was nice start to this semi shaded tree lined walk. Ram Bund held the usual plethora of waterfowl, geese, herons, cormorants and kingfishers. A most impressive Imperial Eagle sat in a dead tree near to the bund; three Greater Painted Snipe were found sleeping under vegetation on a small island mound, with a male in full view and everyone getting most of the female between several stops for it. Marsh Harriers would quarter the jheel, inevitably flushing coots and we picked up three female Garganey at close range. Sohan found a Booted Warbler in dense tangles just over the water surface which everyone got to see very well and we all cleaned up the Black Bittern with far better looks of this particular individual.

Following a nice picnic lunch on the shaded lawns of Shanti Katur and a visit to the bookshop, we walked towards the Nursery, whose stock has been greatly depleted to the point this area is now known as the Nursery in name only, which is a shame because the additional habitat would certainly have been to our benefit not to mention the birds. There was a steady stream of butterflies along the road that included the tigers and whites as well as Large and Small Salmon Arabs as well as Yellow Orange Tip, Large and Small White Orange-Tip.

In the Nursery the Brown Hawk Owl was roosting in the same tree; Colin and Margie caught up with a Tickell's Thrush; the Large-tailed Nightjar was in a different position, head on and less than ten feet from the wall and we all got wonderful looks and there was a mixed flock of brightly colored Long-tail and Small Minivets, the later males one of my all time favorites species.

Splitting up into three boats we had a very pleasant relaxing boat ride that produced some wonderful views of Ruddy Shelduck, Bar-headed Geese, Common and Pied Kingfisher, Imperial Eagle, Booted Eagle and Comb Duck. One of the boats managed to get very distant looks at a family of Sarus Cranes - the high water levels keeping them far from view and another boat had views of two dark morph Booted Eagles. A large mixed group of noisy crows alerted us to a female Dusky Eagle Owl on a nest whom I'm sure would have loved to have gotten her talons on more than one of them and we could not have asked for a more cooperative Crested Serpent Eagle.

Day 7 / Jan 15 – Keoladeo NP: Shanti Kutir, Ram Bund; Train from Bharatpur to Sawai Madhopur; Ranthambhore NP

Colin and I opted to take the early breakfast special and head to the park for one last crack at anything new. A round dozen Yellow-footed Green Pigeons some making exotic tropical calls were perched in the taller bare branches of the canopy trees at Shanti Kutir along with what was no doubt the same Brown-headed Barbet we saw yesterday. A stroll along Ram Bund gave us another chance to sort through the very high pitched two-note calls of certain *phylloscopus* warblers and see some of the subtle difference between Greenish and Hume's, both of which were identified. We caught up with a party of Small Minivets, again being captivated by the colorful males. The Greater Painted Snipe put on a slightly better show giving us our best looks at the female. That brute of a boy, the Clamorous Reed Warbler was sulking in the overhanging vegetation inches from the water surface and we finished with great looks at a Common Hawk Cuckoo.

Returning back to the Bagh, we found that everyone had taken a late breakfast, strolled the gardens, packed and were grateful for the leisurely start to the morning. After saying our farewell's to the excellent staff it was off to the train station where it came as no surprise that it was late. Colin past the time adding species to his platform list including Brown Rock Chat, Grey Francolin and Black-shouldered Kite in between ticking off train numbers from the orient. Once aboard it took a little while before we all got situated where upon we took in the sights of the Rajasthan countryside while regularly being reminded by the tea seller that chai was readily available. Two and a half hours later we pulled into Sawai Madhopur and were whisked off in our canter to the Castle Jhoomar Baori for lunch. How often does one show up at a castle and head straight for the dump? Well that is exactly what we did. A quick peek produced Great Tit, many Jungle Babblers and Rufous Treepies and a Black Redstart. Due to the late arrival of the train we were unable to get onto any of the tracks at Ranthambhore National Park but did make our way to the fort with a couple of spectacular birds on the way - Brown Fish Owl in full view on a large horizontal branch over a small pool and a pair of Painted Spurfowl feeding on the road. Making the steady climb up the twists and turns to the top of the fort we paused often to take in the stunning scenery that makes up this park with the large Rajbagh lake below us. In that magical late afternoon sunlight Plum-headed Parakeets lit up the bare branches. White-browed Fantails and White-bellied Drongo's flew many sorties in search of a final meal before settling in for the night and we came face to face with a large flock of Oriental White-eyes. Once we made it to the top of the fort Brown Rock Chats were all over the place and both Purple Sunbirds and a Grey-breasted Prinia worked the flowers on a section of bank while a small group of Indian Silverbills foraged in the mowed grass. Walking back down we all were kept amused by the cheeky Common Langurs as they loafed and bounced about all around us. Leaving the park we checked in once again with the fish owl and stopped at a small pool of water besides the road and waited till it was almost dark for sandgrouse to arrive. Sure enough a pair of Painted Sandgrouse put in an appearance before it was too dark for us to see. After dinner I took a stroll around the grounds in search of cats coming up trumps with a Jungle Cat.

Day 8 / Jan 16 – Ranthambhore NP: Track 6 (AM), Track 6 (PM)

Chandra, our tracker, met us bright and early and we were assigned Route 6 which cut through the territory of a Tigress and her two cubs. The hawkers were out in full force at the ticket office -hats, playing cards, fleeces and t-shirts being their merchandise of choice. I kept hearing "me MK" and made contact him for a t-shirt but sizes on shirts here seem to be at the discretion of the laborer and often comical when trying them on. I asked him to dig up a 4XL hoping it would fit if I skipped a weeks worth of meals, and told him I'd be back. Seemingly worried that he might lose his sale, I promised him he was 'my man', much to the chagrin of one of his competitor who promised me he had the right goods. We left the office to those immortal words repeated as often as a calling Coppersmith, "MK. Good luck Tiger", "MK. Good luck Tiger". It was uncharacteristically warm this morning which made the ride very pleasant in spite of not coming across a Tiger. However we did follow many pug marks along the sand tracks. Scanning the lake we came across small groups of Pygmy Cotton Teal as well as numerous Eurasian Wigeon, Pintails and Common Teal. Three tern species were about in small numbers including five Gull-billed. One large pond contained many Black-tailed Godwits, Wood Sandpipers and both stints along with basking Muggers. Large flocks of Yellow-footed Green Pigeons lit up the tops of trees; a very confiding Indian Roller perched in a tree besides the track; every so often we would come across a White-browed Fantail and

saw many Black-rumped Flamebacks. A pair of roosting Indian Collared Scops Owls in the open certainly made up for the half hidden ones we had seen to date. The park is wonderful for mammals and there are no shortage of Chitals, Sambar and Wild Boar. Once it warmed up we came across a pair of Indian Long-billed Vultures gliding along the escarpment; a Blue Rock Thrush on the escarpment and Grey Wagtails flittering about the stream.

The remainder of the morning was spent on the rooftop watching Dusky and Eurasian Crag Martins, Red-rumped Swallows, House Swifts and a couple of flyby Painted Sandgrouse while Grey Francolin visited the dump below us. At mid day the first vultures appeared with a steady stream of about eight Long-billed and a single adult Red-headed. Where were the White-rumped Vultures? Their decline in the last several years due to digestion of the antibiotic diclofenic, given to cattle, has been so severe that they may well be on the verge of extinction.

This afternoon we were assigned the same route as this morning but ventured deeper into the park, though in reality we only touch a very small percentage of this tiger reserve. The scenery was stunning, as we wound our way around and up and down the hills through the golden savannah dotted with Dhok trees. Indian Gazelles were seen well as a Ruddy Mongoose and one could not have asked for better views of Black-shouldered Kite some thirty feet away. A group of Rufous-fronted Prinia worked their way from shrub to shrub eventually crossing right in front of our canter. Still no tiger, but none the less it was a wonderful day.

Day 9 / Jan 17 – Ranthambhore NP: Track 2; Semi-desert west of the RNP; Track 7 (PM)

Sure enough MK found us in the dark and produced a nice looking t-shirt, marked 2XL – needless to say it was tight. His rival had an unmarked one and sure enough this actually fit, the only problem being that it had a fourth hole! He couldn't convince me that it was of the highest quality though, so we were back to square one, but at least we had time on our side. "MK. Good luck Tiger"... We were assigned Route 2 this morning but first checked the area around the lakes that we did yesterday morning as the Tigress and her two cubs had been seen again in the evening. We meet we the same amount of luck! Slowing down to negotiate our way over a dry river bed four Black Storks were roosting next to a small pool. We did look at Leopard tracks and Sloth Bear footprints, which look an awful lot like human prints. Other than five Long-billed Vultures and an Egyptian on a steep rock face our best birding was at the guard post where a small pool of water attracted Chestnut-shouldered Petronia's, Great Tit's, Spotted and Laughing Doves, Oriental White-eyes and Chiffchaffs. A small flock of Small Minivets moved from tree to tree above the first pool while Rufous Treepies and Jungle Babblers landed on the canter for handouts.

While a few opted to relax during the late morning hours the rest us spent an hour and a half combing the scrub desert between the park and the castle coming up trumps with such goodies as Variable Wheatear, Tawny Pipit, Rufous-fronted Prinias, Indian Bushlark and a pair of Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks. Prior to boarding the bus, Jack wanted to know if we had five minutes to spare so he could ride a camel. There was no problem other than it took him all that time to negotiate the bargain price of 50 rupees. The camel was not amused, growled and snarled for the whole time Jack was aboard, which for 50 rupees was only a very short distance - but long enough for all of us to get photos - Jack of India just doesn't sound as good as Lawrence of Arabia, but you get the picture. There will be stories told about this one. Little Bee-eater was added to the list, finally, when four were spotted and seen hawking insects once we got inside the castle grounds.

After lunch we headed back into the park this time on Route 7. By the end of the session we had logged thirteen hours and still no tiger. In a small hole half way up a tree we found a Monitor Lizard peeking out; a Crested Serpent Eagle seemed oblivious to our presence as we crossed a stream bed; Marsh Sandpiper, Muggers, Brown Crake and Grey Wagtail were in a large pond adjacent to one of the guard houses and we finished up with a pair of Brown Fish Owls mating, Painted Sandgrouse at the usual watering hole at dusk and a couple of Indian Nightjars on the road.

Day 10 / Jan 18 – Ranthambhor NP: Track R7 (AM), Scrub Area, Track F6 (PM); Lake Soorwal

Perched birds were much in evidence this morning with Shikras and Oriental Honey Buzzards, a really out of place Tawny Pipit 20 feet off the ground in scrubby habitat, four Common Babblers (it was nice to finally catch up to these birds), and Indian Peafowl keeping a lookout after sounding their alarm calls. We hoped it was for Tiger, but more likely it was for a Jungle Cat. The star of this morning's session was a Stork-billed Kingfisher posing for us thirty feet away over the water on its roost perch. At the junction of Route 2, 6 and 7 we waited besides the large pool for Tiger to show while a Coppersmith called, which reminded me of the seconds ticking away on a clock. We stopped for an eight point Chital watching him chew away on dropped antlers to get his calcium. The scops owls were in their usual roost and soon joined by an angry mob consisting of a Red-vented Bulbul, White-browed Fantail and three female Long-tailed Minivets. They put up with them but something made them drop down into their hole in unison faster than.....

Diane, Marie, Jack, Colin and I opted to walk the scrub area just outside the park seeing many Green Bee-eaters and having close views of a pair of Red-headed and a Long-billed Vulture. Plum-headed Parakeets lit up some of the bare trees while we checked a Flameback to make sure that it was not White-naped - it was not! While searching for a pygmy woodpecker we came across a Spotted Creeper an often very elusive and uncommon bird and had marvelous looks as it worked sections of various trees in a small area. Somehow out here MK and his brother VK found us and Marie made her buy in the bush.

After lunch, Warren, Diane, Margie, Linda, Jane and Vinod set off again in the hunt for the elusive cat! On the road up to the park we were met with many people walking, riding tractors and taking taxis to the fort. Today was the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi and they were coming to go the temple from as far a field as 200km. Everyone waved to us and seemed to enjoy having their photos taken. We were assigned track 6F. The driver this afternoon drove at a slower pace but it was still a very bumpy ride. We had nice looks at Brown Fish Owl, a Crested Serpent Eagle but our goal was to find the tiger so we did not spend much time birding. We are now 0/6 on our attempts to find the tiger and we were feeling disillusioned. Maybe tomorrow.....

Jack, Marie, Colin and I headed for Lake Soorwal taking various back tracks through small villages in our open Gypsy, where we were warmly welcomed by everyone with hellos, and waves. A few u-turns, four-wheeling and "oops it's a dead end", and before we knew it the dam and much depleted lake were before us. Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks were very confiding as well as beginning the most common lark. A couple of Tawny and Paddyfield Pipits were seen and a pair of Desert Wheatears obligingly sat for us only meters away. As the water levels dropped the locals took advantage of the rich soil and most of the exposed surface was under cultivation which did not help in locating a thick-knee. The lake held a wide assortment of water birds including hundreds of reeves as well several Pallas's Gull and our first Osprey. Our return took us through mustard fields that stretched as far as the eye could see and made elephant grass look short in comparison. Along the road a small open patch of bare dirt proved to be a bonanza for four dozen Black-breasted Weavers. In a small town we noticed the engine of truck-trailer had a rather unique grill - a metal bed headboard! We had to get a photo of that, but some miscommunication with our driver led to us being stalled in the middle of the road with horns blaring and traffic going either side of us. The commotion quickly led to being swarmed by young boys. We managed to turn around, get our shots and high tailed it out of there. The driver pulled out all the stops taking us through the back alleys of Sawai Madhopur and by the railway station which had thousands of people sitting on the tracks waiting for the next train (all having come from the temple), down back alleys to see a slice of life most do not get to see and out to some cultivated fields where 4 Barred Button Quail walked across the track and into a ditch where we could view them. Back on the main road next to the Castle the road was full of people and armed soldiers which was slightly unusual. All the commotion had to do with illegal stores that had been condemned and just bulldozed - they had popped up in an agricultural zone. It now meant that the ladies shopping spree scheduled for tomorrow would be cancelled.

Day 11 / Jan 19 – Ranthambhore NP: Track R4; Scrub Area; Track 7; Mansorover Reservoir

Our seventh trip did not fare much better especially as we ventured off our assigned track only to find Langur alarm calls awfully close by the lake, which no doubt meant the Tigress and her two cubs were

within striking distance. Unfortunately we had to move on - if we had been caught the driver would have lost his job in the park. Everyone gypsy or canter we passed this morning had a group of smiling people....and all we could do was laugh at our bad luck. Meeting up with one such vehicle to hear their tale of success gave us a chance to look at a flock of Yellow-footed Green Pigeons coming into to drink as well as giving us our first Osprey in the park. We watched a Shikra bathing on the edge of a pool, wondering why such a raptor would be skiddish, only to find a small Mugger strike at it. Again we came across Small Minivets and our streak of Long-billed Vultures continued with half a dozen being seen.

The scrub area outside the park gave us White-capped Bunting and great looks at Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers as well as a close up pair of Black-rumped Flamebacks working a fallen tree and stump along with the seven sisters.

Colin and I opted to go to Masarover Reservoir to watch a multitude of geese, waterfowl, waders, gulls including Brown-headed and Pallas, River Terns, Asian Openbills and catch up with Eurasian Griffon Vultures gliding over the rocky hills, but the highlight came with a Leopard running down the road on the Castle grounds at dusk and into the grass where the Langurs immediately raised the alarm. With Warren giving shorter odds of not seeing the tiger the more cracks it was given, the diehards venture back into the park where they got to hear a Brown Fish Owl calling. The ride was very dusty as we got stuck behind a canter that was not very obliging. At the guard post Chandra tried to get them to move the canter so we could get by as they had parked it to block us overtaking them. He decided against doing it and eventually they stopped to look at something and we were able to get on through. We returned to the area by the lake where the tigers had been seen in the morning and waited hoping and praying to get alarm calls to signal that the tiger was close but sadly no such luck. We even extended our time in the park – leaving late but to no avail. It did allow us to do some birding and watch the baby chitals that were near the canter and the langurs above us in the trees. A flock of Yellow footed Green pigeons were close in a tree overhead allowing for good looks. We left the park deflated we were 0 for 8.

When we returned from Mansarover and heard the Tiger was not sighted we did not have the heart to tell them that we got Leopard.

The evening's entertainment with a family group of Rajasthani folk musicians and dancers was very well received. Everyone got up and joined in the dances led by a brilliant young nine year old and his older sister.

Day 12 / Jan 20 – Ranthambhore NP: Route 1; Transfer to Jaipur via Unieyara Dam

We had a date with Sher Khan this morning and all the stops were pulled out. Time was not on our side but Warren assured us that the odds were greater. Following a frantic hour of exhilarating tracking that kept most of us holding onto our seats for dear life, we got on the scent of a tiger. The only problem was that it was headed in the opposite direction around the fort. No problem at all for our diver Mario Ashoketti and it no time we had gates open and a clear path to the anticipated spot. Within seconds Gypsy's joined us, and we listened to Peacock alarm calls, which raised the hair on our necks. The anticipation built and one could sense it was so close. One Gypsy headed down the hill to see if it was tracking that way and within seconds they called they had it within sight. We knew the drill in the hopes that this moment would come, quickly sat down and held on for dear life as Mario put the Canter into reverse and floored it having one of the trackers shift gears for him as he leaned out the side to see where he was headed. No man could have covered such a distance in such a short time, stopping right where the Tigress was resting. Everyone was standing on their seats watching her stare at us through a light cover of shrubbery. Then her two fourteen month old cubs, almost her size appeared. She walked to within ten feet of the canter and then away leading her playful cubs in full view for a couple of minutes before she crossed the road behind us. No one expected such a sighting or could believe our good fortune after twenty-seven hours. Finally we were the ones with broad smiles on our faces.

It was back to the castle, pack, say our thank-you's and good byes and head for the pink city, Jaipur. The journey continued to give us a great look at a slice of rural life across Rajasthan and we all remarked how fascinating this part of the world is. Mad dashes to be at the head of the queue at a railway crossing; overly decorated trucks better known as goods or public carriers; kids in what could certainly pass as a sewage pond fishing with their hands for dinner; brightly colored women sorting through vast areas of

freshly picked chili and peppers; skinny elder statesman in white garments and turbans sitting around no doubt discussing how they were going to change the world; camels, cows, people everywhere....

Margie got to see a Variable Wheatear besides the road as we headed westwards and a raptor soaring over a village turned out to be a Short-toed Eagle. A dry field yielded a couple of Yellow-wattled Lapwings at close range which made up for our previous sighting. A new stop on the trip was to Unieyara Dam a kilometer or so off the main road, which proved to be a wonderful spot with far more water and activity than Lake Soorwal. Marie picked out four Greater Flamingos at a considerable distance, we caught up with our target bird the Greater Thick-knee and found a Grey Plover (Black-bellied) as well as half a dozen Dunlin. For most, the Kentish Plover was a new bird and we had several to keep everyone happy.

On arrival in Jaipur we picked up our guide Venna and headed to the Observatory, a fascinating place, with different structures of extraordinary shapes and sizes, all of which are sundials with very accurate timings. Some birding was done and we saw an Alexandrian Parakeet perch at its entrance hole in one of the sundial walls. We headed next to the City Palace Complex where we visited the museum with a wide array of royal costumes that included shawls, embroideries, silk sarees, Maharaja's pyjamas and the Maharajin's wedding gown. All the palace guards were smartly dressed in their uniforms consisting of a blue jacket and pants and the traditional Rajasthani head dress known as a Red Chunri Saf - which was a turban with a long sash down the back. We proceeded on to the art gallery which we had to zip through as they were getting ready to close - we had spent a little too much time shopping!!

Luckily we found the tigers early this morning because it gave us some time to do some more shopping! We were all disappointed that the shop we had wanted to visit in Ranthambhore had been demolished. Vinod was very good in getting us postcards but everyone was happy to be able to buy some gifts to take home. We visited an area for artisans in the palace and had a wonderful demonstration of the very fine detailed paintings with gold leaf and semi-precious stones that the artists did with a brush that had one squirrel hair and colors acquired from rocks. Margie got a demonstration on a post card that was a nice memento for her to take home.

We were greeted in the parking lot by the usual hawkers and some good deals were made. On the way back to the hotel we stopped at a silk and textile store where many of us purchased items in silk and ordered clothes to be custom made. We were measured and assured that they would all be delivered to the hotel in the morning before we leave for Delhi.

Day 13 / Jan 21 – Jaipur: Palace of the Winds; Amber Fort; transfer to Delhi

While waiting for the sun to light up the facade of the Palace of the Winds there were bargains to be had at the shoe and gift shops with most of the group purchasing bracelets, puppets, slippers, and elephants. Once the facade was in full color and all the photos taken, we drove on up to the Amber Fort and all got to ride an elephant up to the fort. The number of people on each elephant has now been limited to 2 - it used to be 4. Our guide Veena gave us an excellent guided tour of the fort. The views from the top are stunning. We all crammed into taxis to return back down to the bus having to negotiate our way through some very persistent hawkers selling elephant key chains, carved elephants and photos of us that they had taken while we rode up the fort. The longer one waited to purchase the photos the cheaper they became. By the time one reached the bottom of the hill they could be had for ten rupees each.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped for a great photo opportunity of the summer palace in the middle of the lake. It was also used as a waterfowl hunting blind by the Marajahs. The plans are to turn this into a restaurant. We returned to the hotel to pack our bags, collect our custom made silk garments, eat lunch and make the long haul to Delhi.

After saying our goodbyes to Linda and Margie we headed to the Delhi train station to catch the Kathgodam Express. The traffic was very heavy and we were detoured around the station causing us to arrive later than expected. We had to make a mad dash across the street and Jane almost got run down by a taxi. We raced through the station over and around people, burlap bags, up and down 60 or so steps to get to the platform only to find out the train was delayed an hour which was duly spent watching luggage being loaded on a train and people scrambling for any space they could find in a compartment.

We got on the train and located our sleeper compartment. A pillow, sheets and blanket are provided and you have a bunk that you can close off with a curtain to sleep. Colin seemed to have had a good night and he also had a visit from a little 4 legged furry friend on his bunk!

Day 14 / Jan 22 – Kathgodam to Nainital; Upper section of the Low Fields; Kilberry Road and Forest House; Pangot

We awoke at 6.30am and we got to Kathgodam station about forty-five minutes behind schedule at 7.15am. Karan met us at the station and we headed straight for our hotel on the newly paved winding road with about a dozen switchbacks. Red-billed Blue Magpies were certainly a great way to start this section of the trip. Blue Whistling Thrushes could be seen along the edge of the road along with the occasional Himalayan Bulbul. An hour later we had covered the 35km journey to Nainital and quickly settled into our rooms. Breakfast followed but without Jack who had come down with something that kept him in for the day.

On the ridge above the hotel Steppe Eagles, Himalayan and Eurasian Griffons soared along with the Himalayan race of Long-billed Crows and a few Ravens, the first time I had seen them there. We walked up the hill making the steady climb on the road coming across a mixed flock consisting mainly of tits that included Black-throated, Green-backed and Spot-winged, a pair of Brown-fronted Woodpeckers, Bar-tailed Treecreeper, White-tailed Nuthatch, Grey-hooded and Lemon-rumped Warbler. A magical start that unfortunately was not to be really duplicated the rest of the day. Continuing down towards the Low Fields we came across many Streaked Laughingthrushes, two Rusty-tailed Flycatchers and a female Blue-capped Redstart as well a few Lemon-rumps. By now Colin had taken a turn for the worse and it looked as though he had a case of the Delhi belly. Somehow he managed to soldier on.

After lunch we climbed up the Kilberry Road stopping to take in the tremendous view across the foothills of the Himalayas. Continuing down the other side we stopped in at the Forest House and walked several hundred yards along the forest path getting the briefest glimpse of a Eurasian Jay. A small flock of Black-throated Tits, acting just like bushtits, moved through but all the action turned out to be around the house. A stunning Orange-flanked Bush Robin was first up followed by three Rufous Sibia's, more Green-backed Tits and a White-tailed Nuthatch. A short distance further down the road we entered the tiny village of Pangot and checked out the terraces, and hedgerows and forest. The later was dead but the hedgerows held a few goodies with a couple of stunning Pink-browed Rosefinches, Black-throated and Rufous-breasted Accentor, many Russet Sparrows and the very pretty Striated Prinia. Walking away from the village, flocks of six to fifteen Black Bultuls came across the valley to roost on the far side which meant we need better views of this species.

Day 15 / Jan 23 – Snow View; Eureka Fields; Sat Tal

As we walked up the hill to Snow View White-throated Laughingthrushes woke up and exploded from their roosts and moved around us before disappearing into the forest. A Greater Yellownappe began to tap and once located showed well. Looking downhill as we searched the rubbish area for Hill Partridge we found a Grey-winged Blackbird rummaging about and everyone who got the briefest of glimpses at a Eurasian Jay yesterday was delighted with the three we had. Dawn over the Uttaranchal Himalayas was truly spectacular this morning. Being very clear we could easily see the wind blown snow on the peaks even from 70 miles away. Returning back down the hill Dark-throated Thrushes, Red-billed Blue Magpies and Oriental Turtle Turtles were all seen very well and we did find a couple of Hill Partridges much to the delight of everyone. Above the van both Bar-tailed Treecreeper and White-tailed Nuthatch were busy checking every nook and cranny. On the way back for breakfast a Great Barbet was perched besides the road which was nice as we did not have to get out the van!

After breakfast we headed for Sat Tal, stopping for vultures that included many Himalayan including wonderful looks at a very close circling one, several Eurasian Griffons and a Lammergier while Steppe Eagles also joined in. Our second stop was to search the fields and hedgerows around the old Eureka Forbes Factory which gave us many Himalayan and a few Red-vented Bultuls, Grey Bush Chats,

Common Stonechats, Long-tailed and Grey-backed Shrike, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, Rufous Sibilias, Buff-barred Warbler, Grey-hooded Warbler, Small Niltava and great looks at the spiffy Rufous-breasted and slightly drabber Black-throated Accentor.

We decided to walk the last 2 miles to Sat Tal lake for lunch, beginning with two very confiding Red-billed Leothrix, the first of what would be many seen today and then taking in hordes of Black Bulbuls, several Great Barbets, 4 Black-headed Jays and Olive-backed Pipits. In a brushy area three White-rumped Munia played more hide than seek while a male Blue-capped Redstart was far more cooperative. A small flock in a pine trees included Great Tits, more Grey-hooded Warblers and the beautiful Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch.

After lunch we walked along the lake finding a gorgeous and well camouflaged Scaly Thrush right out in the open. What a pattern and hues this bird has! A female Plumbeous Water Redstart was perched on a branch over the water and we soon found her cousin, another spectacular bird, the White-capped Water Redstart around the camp area at the beginning of the trail through the forest. A Mallard, our only one of the trip to date, was on the pond along with the usual kingfishers, a Little Heron and drinking Muntjac's (Barking Deer). A female Orange-flanked Bush Robin was flitting about the path while more Buff-barred Warblers were overhead amongst the leaves. We eventually got good looks at a pair of Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers and soon after a Grey-capped Pygmy-Woodpecker. A little movement in the undergrowth alerted us to the presence of two beautifully patterned Rufous-chinned Laughingthrushes and though the looks were tough we did get great looks of about half a dozen in the open later. A Rufous-bellied Niltava was a little bit of a tease for some while the diminutive and colorful Chestnut-headed Tesia was for others. As we were about to leave the trail a couple of Great Barbets began calling and did not stop for the remainder of the time we were there. We checked the small pond and had very close looks at White-capped Water Redstart and a Spotted Forktail, white legs and all, while some got to see a Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher and we all watched Bronzed Drongos hawk insects over the lake. Heading back up the hill to our hotel a Grey-headed Woodpecker alighted briefly on a tree. Getting out to locate it, we were rewarded with a Blue-throated Barbet perched on its roost, as well as a Great Barbet and brief looks at Black-chinned Babbler and White-crested Laughingthrushes - a great way to end the day.

Day 16 / Jan 24 – Char Kat; Mongoli Valley; Ramnagar Dam; Quality Inn; Kosi River

We left Nainital shortly after breakfast stopping to search the fields and scrub at Char Kat for Red-fronted Serin, which unfortunately eluded us. White-capped Buntings flew between shrubs and a pair of Kalij Pheasants (our only ones of the trip) showed well while Yellow-breasted Greenfinches, Common Rosefinch and Pink-browed Rosefinch all perched atop bare trees. Once we located a Eurasian Sparrowhawk it moved from perch to perch getting further away each time. A large flock of Slaty-headed Parakeets with their long yellow tails greeted us as soon as we stepped out the van in the Mongoli valley. The long walk down the valley to the school was interrupted numerous times with laborers hauling wood, pots and heavy bags up the trail and mules with bells carrying an assortment of materials to a job site. Other than that it was rather quite though we did get a flurry of activity in one section with Buff-barred, Lemon-rumped and Grey-hooded Warblers; Great, Black-throated and Black-lored Tits; Bar-tailed Treecreeper, White-tailed Nuthatch and a superb Mountain Bulbul. Other individuals along the trail included Orange-flanked Bush Robin, Black-headed Jays, Red-billed Blue Magpies, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher and a Grey Treepie.

By late morning we had descended from the foothills and reached Ramnagar Dam where Wallcreeper was soon located. We watched it creep along a ledge and stretch its crimson wing coverts but never did get to see it crawl up the concrete wall. The Kosi River held many Ruddy Shelducks, a few Great and Little Cormorants, Common, Pied and White-throated Kingfishers and many Black Kites along with two young Egyptian Vultures.

A short distance from the Quality Inn, Karan spotted a Tawny Fish Owl which pleased everyone as it was out in the open in full view. A second one was nearby and Crested Tree Swifts flew overhead. Following an excellent lunch we wandered the grounds finding Yellow-bellied Fantail, a female Little Pied Flycatcher, Crimson Sunbird, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Olive-backed Pipit and seeing a Mountain Hawk Eagle glide overhead.

The remainder for the afternoon was spent walking down to the Kosi stopping for Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Grey-headed Woodpecker and White-crested Laughingthrushes, the later two most everyone wanted better views of. A White-browed Fantail was seen very well and we had a flock of Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrikes. The Kosi riverbed is wide and covered with round rocks and boulders on both sides of the fast moving river. Plumbeous Water Redstarts were dotted along the rivers edge at regular intervals interspersed with White-capped Water Redstarts. A Brown Dipper was seen preening on a boulder and we got to see it fly up river making its buzzy call as it wound its way around the bend and out of view. Can there be any finer kingfisher than the Crested? The markings on it along with its majestic crest kept us all enthralled. A small group of vultures circling overhead included Red-headed and Eurasian Griffon and there were several Steppe Eagles gliding past. A Pallas Fish Eagle was heard but we could not locate it. A female flameback flew onto a bare tree trunk which allowed us to work out the finer points of Himalayan and Greater. I turned out to be a Greater. Karan checked the overhanging vegetation of a seep amongst the rocky bank on the far side of the river and somehow pulled out a Little Forktail, which obliged by coming out of the dark area and down the edge of the water. As with the spotted it also had white legs. With the sun well down behind the hills, a pair of Brown Fish Owls had come off their roost and landed in the row of trees between the path and riverbed allowing us to make comparisons with the Tawny that we saw a few hours earlier. To cap off a wonderful day, as we reached our rooms a Grey-headed Woodpecker was calling and located near the top of tree for all those who missed it early.

Day 17 / Jan 25 – Bornala; Quality Inn; Forktail Creek / Mohan

It was a long walk up and down narrow forested paths and along the stony river beds that was punctuated with some really nice species. The uncommon Maroon Oriole was a wonderful find feeding at the top of a large tree shortly after we began our walk. Early on as well as nearing the end of the day noisy Red-breasted Parakeets could be heard and seen screaming overhead but no one could get a good look at them or find one perched. Close to the trail we found a female Slaty-blue Flycatcher and the gorgeous Snowy-browed Flycatcher sitting out in the open. Once we dropped down to the river bed the obligatory water redstarts where about - Plumbeous females being seen on streams while the males (as well as the females) are usually found on the larger bodies of water. The first of many Grey-breasted Prinias appeared, usually in good sized groups; the well named Plain Mountain Finch, a Long-tailed Shrike, four or five Common Wood Shrikes and a Common Iora all showed well, but the highlight may well have been a couple of raptors. Mountain Hawk Eagles were seen above the hillside ridge and later in the valley very close to us eating a Blue-headed Barbet! Why could it not have chosen something a little less exotic? We watched a Collared Falconet flap and glide along the ridge and land in the tallest bare tree where we were able to get good scope views of this smallest of raptors. On the path back, women in the saris heading into the woods to work obligingly posed for photos and were delighted to see their pictures instantly shown on the digital screen. A White-tailed Rubythroat without a tail worked back and forth across the trail, but with people and dogs about we did not get to spend as much as we would have liked with it. After negotiating many stream crossings of varying degrees of difficulty we were back on the main road; had a quick look at the Tawny Fish Owls and proceed up to a Silk Cotton or Samal tree at the top of the trail leading to the bridge across the Kosi, where its red flowers proved to be a great nectar source for a pair of Lineated Barbets and Spangled Drongos. Over head a pair of Crested Serpent Eagles circled.

Back in the grounds of the hotel the butterflies were alive and all over the marigolds in particular with Common Crows being the most abundant along with a few Lemon Emigrants, Common Wanderers, Striped Tigers, the Rustic, Common Mormon and a Leopard. Eagles were heard calling and a pair of Lesser Fish Eagles was soon located above the trees providing great looks as they circled around.

The afternoon's foray was down to Mohan and began with a Pallas Fish Eagle over the Kosi River not far from her nest and good looks at Nepal House Martins over the water. Reaching Camp Forktail Creek we spent a good amount of time in one spot getting to see Small Niltava, many Golden-spectacled Warblers, hearing but not being able to catch up with a Chestnut-headed Tesia, Yellow-browed Fantail, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, Spotted Forktail and followed Black-chinned Babblers as they worked their way along the river bank. We got off the road and took a steep trail up into the forest where the final one hour was very exhilarating with an astonishing six species of woodpecker and a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl. It began with a Grey-headed Woodpecker in a tree across the valley, followed by great views of Himalayan Flameback possibly at his nest hole, which kicked off a tremendous amount of activity on the edge of a Teak forest.

Seemingly oblivious to the amount of noise that we made as we stepped on giant teak leaves carpeting the forest floor, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, Rufous-bellied Niltava, all three nuthatches including the jaw-dropping Velvet-fronted, White-throated Fantail and three or four Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers feverishly tapping away where all seen at very close range. A pair of Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers worked the upper elevations of the trees while two Lesser Yellownapes showed well once we were all able to get on them. Walking towards the main road we heard our van pass by but could not stop it. As it turned out this was the best thing that could have happened. Karan went south in search of the van and we walked north a short distance before having a pair of Greater Flambaks fly up and down the road. Hearing a lot of calls from inside the forest we soon located the culprits, a pair of Spangled Drongos, upset about something. Marie then spotted an owl sitting close to the trunk less than ten feet off the ground, no doubt the reason for all the commotion. It was a rarely seen Spot-bellied Eagle Owl and negotiating the scope around a large leaf covering most of its face we got to see this stunning owl. While looked at the owl Red Junglefowls crossed the road some eighty yards away in small groups numbering about a dozen in all. Sometimes being a minute late really pays off. The van with Karan in it caught up to us and Karan got to see the owl before it flew across the road with two unhappy drongos in hot pursuit.

Day 18 / Jan 26 – Quality Inn to Corbett Tiger Reserve

A short walk after breakfast to look for sunbirds only produced a Green-tailed that Karan was the only one to see, along with a Crimson Sunbird. Grey-breasted Prinias and few Black-chinned Babblers worked their way through the undergrowth as did a Golden spectacled Warbler. Two Himalayan Yellow-throated Martens put on a nice show scurrying about the hillside and we had a female White-rumped Shama move about the garden and come down to the road by the elephant pen to feed.

We all separated in three Gypsy's (think small open Jeep) for the drive from Quality Inn to Corbett which was punctuated with a few stops for a Pallas Fish Eagle on the nest, a pair of Oriental Pied Hornbills, Rufous-bellied Niltavas, Linneated Barbet and quick passing flock of Black Bulbuls. We quickly found out that Jane's Gypsy played *Easter Parade* as a warning every time the vehicle backed up! By 10am we had arrived at the main gate and after stopping to get the correct paperwork, peeling off a few layers and checking out the small shop we headed the 30 odd kilometers to Dhikala. Highlights of the drive included finally catching up with Red-breasted Parakeets; a small group of Ashy Bulbuls; hearing Sambar and Langur alarm calls which always bring about the chance of a Tiger sighting; Red-headed Vulture and Himalayan Griffon in flight together and a Wallcreeper, all before getting to Gharial Point. Here, we are allowed out of our vehicles and had two adults and 4 young Gharials, a very rather thin snouted crocodile, basking on the river bank within feet of a large school of trout and catfish, some of which were over 5 feet in length. With stomachs grumbling we legged it into Dhikala only stopping for a close flying Pallas Fish Eagle and some White-rumped Needletails.

From the overlook at the compound Velvet-fronted and White-tailed Nuthatches were joined by a pair of Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers. On the mudflats below us were a number of Common Teal and Mallards and a pair of Indian Smooth Otters basking amongst the waterfowl, Muggers and more Gharials. Black Storks, Woolly-necked and Black-necked Storks posed on the bank along with River Lapwings and a Great Thick-knee. In the tall elephant grass we found a pair of Hog Deer, the male with fine looking pale antlers. River Terns flew along the river channels and an Osprey was seen catching a fish.

Mid afternoon we all piled into our Gypsy's along with park guides and worked the grasslands. First up was a Hodgson's Bushchat a specialty of the area that's looks very similar to a Stonechat, of which there were many out there. A Yellow-eyed Babbler eluded most of us while a couple of Zitting Cistocolas were not that much more obliging, but the Black Francolins certainly were with excellent views of this beautiful game bird. A couple of small flocks of Red Avadavats allowed Diane and Warren to get to see them as this was the first time we had come across them since the second day of the pre-tour, which they missed. Tawny and Long-billed Pipits were in the tracks and both Marsh and Hen Harriers quartered the marsh. We heard an elephant trumpet from in the woods and soon heard a familiar sound, *Easter Parade* coming from area. Laughing, we could see Jane's Gypsy backing up along the edge of the woods to see if they could locate the large beast. Needless to say the guide asked the driver to dismantle the alarm! We did spot Asian Elephants down by the reservoir and headed towards them to get a closer look which allowed

us to see a youngster probably about six months old along with his mother and an older sibling. Though there are over six hundred elephants in the park, it is not a guarantee that one can see them at this time of the year, when they tend to spend their time in the forest.

Day 19 / Jan 27 – Corbett Tiger Reserve

The entranceway to the compound turned out to be a bonanza and delayed the start to the day. A large flock of roosting Red-breasted Parakeets kept as enthralled as they made a forays around the compound and landed back in their roost tree. A chattering call alerted us to a Jungle Owlet above our heads and then a second one flew in to join it. Within five minutes the pair were snuggling which was a prelude to mating. When it was all over they went their separate ways and we enjoyed a couple of Black-hooded Orioles that fed at the top of the eucalyptus along with Oriental White-eyes, Chiffchaffs and Greenish Warblers.

The remainder of the morning was spent along the tracks bordering the Ramganga River with crippling views of Collared Falconet, each time closer than the previous until we were within ten meters. Marie caught sight of a large red bird in the canopy but we could not relocate it - more than likely it was a Scarlet Minivet. We came across a Changeable Hawk Eagle on a nest and watched her for a short while before she flew onto an open branch which allowed us a better look. An extraordinary sight was a dozen Lineated Barbets perched on several dead trees with Plum-headed parakeets below them and Red-whiskered Bulbuls on the lower limbs. At a bush break an Alexandrine Parakeet sat out in the open as did a Lesser Fish Eagle and our first Black or Cinereous Vulture of the day flew over. More Jungle Owlets were spotted taking in the morning rays and better looks at Red-whiskered Bulbuls were had. A Crested Bunting teased the front Gypsy as it crossed in front of them. Crossing the river Black, Red-headed and a lone Long-billed Vulture were standing on the stony river bank which made for a nice comparison of sizes, bill and head shapes while River Lapwings worked the sandy shoreline. We crossed paths with Jane who told us of a White-tailed Eagle and Lesser Coucal sighting, neither of which we could catch up to, but we did make up for the poor view we had yesterday of Yellow-eyed Babbler with over half a dozen showing well. While searching for the eagle at the rivers edge we picked out Himalayan Swiflets flying above Plain Martins and finished an outstanding few hours with a Eurasian Hobby amongst the circling vultures.

Shortly before our scheduled afternoon meeting time, Karan came running with word that a Tiger had been sighted a short distance away and that we had a good chance of seeing it. Scrambling to get everything together we quickly made it over to the watchtower to find out it had settled into the elephant grass for an afternoon repose. The view from three stories up was spectacular being able to see up and down the river bed for a considerable distance. A large group of Hog Deer could be seen along with many Chitals and a Wild Boar that obviously did not realize that it was within the Tigers striking distance. After half an hour we decided not to wait it out and headed into the Sal forest in search of a few goodies, but other than calling Lesser Racquet-tailed Drongos it was quite. As we exited the edge of the forest and into the grassland track our vehicle stopped for a pair of Lesser Flamebacks while the lead vehicle continued on. A minute later a quiet whisper came over the walkie talkie that they had "Tiger, come quickly". By the time we got there it had slipped back into the bush. They had had it feet away from them resting on the bank. We located it in the deep brush but could only make out the orange, black and white markings - enough but not good enough! Since we were so close we decided to wait it out along the track. We persuaded a mahout to take his elephant with a family on board into the forest to track it down but he seemed to head straight for where we thought the tiger was and consequently pushed it further away. Hearing deer alarm calls we raced round the corner and got into position. By now three elephants joined in the hunt and as they came around we got further glimpses, but somehow it slipped deeper into the forest. We went back to our original position and within minutes it dashed across the road and into the grassland, where we were able to get some nice views of it. After scratching a tree trunk it moved away from us calling for her two well grown cubs. She cut back onto the track a hundred yards down and walked towards another group of vehicles before turning back into the grass. It was great way to end the trip that left everyone delighted with the encounter.

Day 20 / Jan 28 – Corbett NP to Delhi via Ganges River

An early start saw us hop into our Gypsies and head towards the main gate making a few stops for Changeable Hawk Eagle at an overlook and several dozen Scarlet Minivets alighting at the tops of trees along the way. Checking the streams that run along side the road unfortunately we could not muster another forktail species. It took an hour and three quarters to reach the gate where we piled into the van and began the ten hour journey to Delhi which as one could imagine was never boring. We dropped Karan off in Ramangar and worked our way through countryside fields of sugar cane which were in the process of being harvested. Nearing Moradabad, the traffic slowed considerably but most of this was due to overloaded lorries full of cane. We even saw one that had toppled over onto its side. The local, especially the kids where delighted as they helped themselves to the sweet stuff. A stop to pay a state vehicle tax lasted some 20 minutes longer than was expected which delayed our 1pm lunch appointment in Gajrula. Following a little confusion we were served a meal and then it was onto the Ganges. It was a quick visit because we were running late but we got to see a large funeral procession make its way along the track and down to the river and the pyre lit. The banks and sand banks seemed to have moved since the last time I was here making the viewing a little easier, but the locals had all the available sandy areas covered with agricultural plants and the sugar cane line bunds had been cut down which made finding a Yellow-breasted Prinia fultile. However the river did yield four species of gull including Brown-headed, Pallas's and Yellow-legged along the ubiquitous Black-headed along with a nice pair of Black-bellied River Terns. Colin spotted a white morph Western Reef Heron on a sand spit was an exceedingly good find for this far inland. The final leg into Delhi was colorful and eventful with a wide assortment of transportation jostling for whichever position they could get an advantage in, even if it meant driving on the wrong side of the side. Vinod was there to greet us at the hotel. Following a shower and wonderful final meal it was time to say our goodbyes and head to the airport for the midnight flights out of Delhi.