



NORTHERN INDIA - TRIP REPORT Jan 5 - 26, 2014

By Adrian Binns

Pre-trip / Jan 5 - Sultanpur NP; Delhi

I had planned to get an early start on the Northern India trip, but was thwarted by the blizzard "Hercules" which blasted through the northeast U.S. and grounded flights everywhere. Instead of being the first arrival of our group, I was the last! The group was in good spirits, having arrived without incident, rested and already sightseeing.

I caught up with Joy, Ann and Elise in Sultanpur National Park, southwest of Delhi in Haryana. Being the weekend, the small park was crowded with families enjoying a pleasant day out, despite dense fog. We spent the afternoon with park bird guide Sanjay, who pointed out avian highlights of the *jheel* (lake) and surrounding acacia woodlands; these accessible habitats provided great introduction to the fauna of our trip.

Low water levels in the *jheel* exposed mounds where Indian Spot-billed Duck, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal, Northern Pintail and Greylag Geese rested. Eurasian Coots, a few Ferruginous Ducks and Common Pochards paddled around. Along the water's edges Purple Swamphens cautiously stepped over fallen reeds, and young Painted Storks squawked and begged for food from stands of acacias. Not counting the free-roaming cattle, we spotted our first mammals in the park, several Nilgai, India's largest antelope, including an impressive male Blue Bull.

A winding path around the *jheel* meanders through an open dry acacia woodland. The high-pitched, two-noted call of a Hume's Leaf-Warbler accented plenty of avian activity in the acacia trees, including Common Chiffchaff, Greenish Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Tailorbird, along with a Brook's Leaf-Warbler that Sanjay found. Red-breasted Flycatchers actively moved from perch to perch, and a single Taiga Flycatcher appeared for comparison. We made our first acquaintance with the large and colourful Rufous Treepies, and Sanjay was very excited to show us a Brown Shrike, an unexpected species at this location. Amongst the stands of golden grasses foraged small groups of Red Avadavats, as well as both Plain and Ashy Prinia. We ended our visit with a large flock of Large Grey Babblers roaming the grounds, three roosting Spotted Owlets, and an Indian Hare.

At dinner I met the rest of the group, Ellie, Mary, Jean and Bob, who had returned from visiting the Jama Masjid, Raj Ghat, Humayun's Tomb and Qutub Minar in Delhi. We shared a delicious meal and discussed the itinerary for the next three weeks of our tour.

Day 1 / Jan 6 - Delhi to Jaipur

Thick fog blanketed the region, but not our spirits as we set out on our journey. We could hear Red-whiskered Bulbuls chirping in the hotel grounds as we loaded up. Our journey this morning took us along the main highway from Delhi to Jaipur, during which we encountered halfway-decent roads, construction detours, and through bustling towns and villages. We witnessed the fascinating negotiation of myriad transportation vehicles on the road, all jostling for position in typical Indian fashion! From tractors to semi-trailer trucks, and drivers of all abilities, horns blared constantly in a dizzying experience. There are four things one needs when driving in this country: Good Brakes, Good Horn, Good Luck and a Sense of Humour!

At toll booths we were amused by the antics of dozens of Bank Mynas as they darted amongst traffic looking for any source of food on the road. Through the foggy shroud, we could make out Black Drongos, Indian Rollers and White-throated Kingfishers on the roadside wires, and see just the edges of vast mustard fields that cover an extensive area of Rajasthan!

It was early afternoon by the time we reached Jaipur. Following a delicious lunch down a back alley at Surabhi where we were serenaded by a Rajastani musician. We began a tour of the Pink City with our guide Govind, aka gg.com. While that seemed to be an odd moniker, it was easy to remember and he cleverly interspersed references to the web in his oracles.

In the heart of the walled city, the Jantar Mantar, the outdoor Observatory, features an astonishing array of giant-sized astrological time pieces. This collection is the fifth and final architectural set of huge instruments built by the Rajput king Sawai Singh, designed to precisely measure time and predict eclipses. Adjacent to the Observatory is the City Palace complex also built by Maharaja Sawai Singh in 1729. We viewed the Mubarak Mahal with its museum of royal costumes; a portion of the Chandra Mahal, which is still part royal residence, as well as the impressive Hall of Private Audience with its two colossal sterling urns. Following our tour, we visited a textile factory where we enjoyed a demonstration of block printing and carpet weaving, the latter included watching the world record holder tie 72 knots a minutes! For Ann, Jean and Elise this would be the first of their shopping experiences as Govind took them to various boutiques within the city, while the rest of us headed to our hotel.

Day 2 / Jan 7 - Jaipur to Sawai Madhophur

We spent the morning exploring some of the city sights of Jaipur and nearby Amber. We reached the Hawa Mahal as the sun was beginning to shine on the orange facade. The street was relatively quiet this morning making it easy to negotiate the road to get our photos of the five storey facade also known as the Palace of the Winds. Govind liked to call it the chit-chat palace, as this was where royal women could watch from the small port holes that make up the facade, the everyday life of the street below; camels, cows, soldiers and regular city folk wandering about below them without being noticed.

On the outskirts of Jaipur lies the original capital city, Amber, with its late 16th century fort sitting prominently on the highest hill. Two to an elephant, we rocked from side to side as we rode up the steep serpentine walkway to the entrance courtyard of the Amber Fort. Govind gave us a tour of the lovely fort that included the Hall of Public Audience, Mirror Palace and the ornate Ganesh Pol entrance all of which overlooked the Maatha Lake below.

Returning to Jaipur, the Jal Mahal is an attractive early 18th century water palace 'floating' on the Man Sagar Lake that sits besides the main road. Great Cormorants were roosting on small islands of trees as dozens of Indian Pond Herons and Black-winged Stilts, that were at home in any body of water no matter how disgusting it looked, patrolled the waters edge.

Shopping was a high priority for some in the group and Govind took us into a multi level shop that offered something or everyone - a sari for Ellie, a beautiful framed drawing of a Tiger for Ann and silk prints for others.

Following an excellent lunch in the heart of the old city, we began the 6 hour journey by road to Sawai Madhophur, the gateway to Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve. The journey was punctuated with a few birding stops along the way. A large roadside pond near Tonk was full of avian activity and kept us busy for three quarters of an hour. A lone Greater Flamingo stood out amongst Pied Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit and many Ruffs. Several Common Snipe were spotted hunkered down on a narrow strip of exposed dirt with the pond. A group of Marsh Sandpipers walked the shallow parts of the water as Temminck's Stint, Citrine, Yellow and White-browed Wagtails worked the wet mud along the waters edge. Two kingfishers, White-throated and Common were a hit with the group as were the River Terns that were quartering over the pond and diving for fish.

For me the highlight of the ride was a Bengal Fox just after dusk that wandered down the pothole-riddle road providing a long look. Having negotiated the ancient town of Sawai Madhophur and all its bustling evening activity we checked into the Tiger Den for the first of a five night stay.

Day 3 / Jan 8 - Ranthambhore National Park: Zone 3 and Zone 1

With our master tracker, the exuberant and cheerful Pankaj, we embarked on the first of seven game drive into Ranthambhore National Park also known as a Tiger Reserve. Once through the formalities and endless paper work at the entrance gate we were on our way along the long, and under re-construction, entrance road that leads to 10th century Ranthambhore Fort.

As luck would have it, one of the harder birds to encounter, Painted Spurrow, were surprising easy on this day as they fed along the road. Each Canter (open 20 seater) and Gypsy (6 seater Jeep) is assigned one of the five zones that make up the core of this extensive 392 sq. km park, which comprises of dry deciduous forests sprawling over the undulating terrain of the Aravalli and Vindhyan ranges.

There is always excitement when one is assigned Zone 3, as it encompasses two of the three lakes that are found within the core of the park, and once home to the famous tigress known as the "Lady of the Lake." The entrance gate to the zone is an orange-red archway at the base of the fort. Plum-headed Parakeets and Jungle Babblers feed on the scattered seed that had been provided for their morning feast. Indian Peafowl were a common sight roaming the area and fort walls as were a multitude of mischievous Langurs. A White-bellied Drongo sat atop a bare tree and Yellow-footed Green Pigeons waited for the sun's ray to warm them up.

It is only a short drive through the forest and past our first massive banyan tree to the opening grasslands that abut Padam Lake. Greenshanks, White-breasted Water-Hens and a Black Stork stalked the waters edge. Sitting in trees on the small island were Asian Openbill, Little Cormorants, Oriental Darter and Osprey. Overhead a Long-legged Buzzard flew by while Eurasian Crag Martins and the smaller darker Dusky's intermingled making for easy comparison. Coppersmith Barbets were surprisingly quiet and inconspicuous during our trip, in spite of beginning with three in perfect light that were joined by a Plum-headed Parakeet - what a splash of colour! Soon we would see Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher and White-browed Fantail. Around Rajbagh Lake a Woolly-necked Stork landed close to where we were watching a Bluethroat and Southern Coucal both prowling the moist ground. Though the morning game drive failed to produce Tiger, we saw plenty of mammals, prey for them, Chital (Spotted Deer), Sambar, Nilgai (Blue Bull) and Wild Boar. There was a clever Langur that had mastered getting a free drink of water from a pump at the entrance archway, by pulling down on the handle and taking a drink, having obviously learnt this from studying his human relatives.

Returning to the Tiger Den we went for a late morning walk behind the lodge. At the adjacent small ponds we were able to study the differences between Common, Wood and Green Sandpipers as well as get a close up encounter with a Common Redshank. In the surrounding arid area, much of which was being dug up for dirt to be used in construction, Tawny Pipits were the most commonly encountered bird. An Indian Roller put on an impressive show with splashes of vivid blue each time it took to the air. Indian Robin, Stonechat, Desert Wheatear, Southern Grey Shrike and Common Babbler rounded out our hour walk.

The afternoon safari on very rough Zone 1 track was relatively quiet. The closest we came to a tiger was a very distant Chital alarm call that we heard once we were almost back at the exit gate. One of the Gypsies (Jeep) coming towards us had mentioned a Tiger was on the move, so we turned the Canter around and made a bumpy beeline back down the track to almost as far as we had originally gone, but on this occasion in record time! Once there, the word was it was a false alarm! As luck plays a great part in seeing Tiger, being in the right place at the right time could not have been more obvious than when we exited the park at 5.30pm, and later found out that the Gypsy that was a minute or two behind us came across Tiger crossing the road!

Back at the Tiger Den a few of us ventured out on the road at dusk to view a dozen Painted Sandgrouse coming in to drink from the two small roadside ponds.

Day 4 / Jan 9 - Ranthambhore National Park: Zone 3 and Zone 2

A short overnight rain storm was totally unexpected and aided in keeping the dust down during our morning game drive. We began by quickly doing the short loop at the beginning of Zone 2 as there was word a Tiger was in the vicinity but without any sign of it we moved over to Zone 3 and worked our way away from the lakes. Birds, especially new ones, were few and far between. A lone Alexandrine Parakeet atop a bare tree gave us our first look at this large *psittacidae* eventually showing its burgundy shoulder patch that readily separates it from the common Rose-ringed. A Crested Serpent Eagle was in a similar location as the parakeet, but being that it was backlit, made it hard to see any detail other than a bit of crest. We came to a screeching halt when Pankaj spotted a pair of roosting Spotted Owlets all cozy filling a cavity in the trunk of a tree. No sooner had we stopped, the alarm calls of a Chital alerted us that a Tiger was within its sight. Leaving the owlets behind, we hastily made our way back towards Padam Lake and the vicinity of the beginning of the third zone. Several Gypsy's were already there, neither of which had seen the cat. The Chital smartly must have moved away, but we knew the tiger was close as a Peafowl and Indian Jungle Crow kept giving their alarms. The Tiger was in a small section of dense forest between the beginning of zone 2 and 3. The birds could see T64, a 3 year male who has been in this area since taking over from his father and driving his brother out of what was now his territory. As we waited patiently for the cat to move, a Jungle Crow was cutting up skinny twigs to take back to build its nest, and we had the pleasure of listening to a very chatty Rose-winged Parakeet overhead. The tiger never appeared!

The narrowest point of the drive along the entrance road is where the archway spans the width of the road and the stream. The adjacent cliffs have a small population of Indian Vultures that nest on them, and we were able to, surprisingly, only find one of them.

After returning to the Tiger Den, Bob, Ellie, Jean and Mary joined me for a walk through the arid scrub outside the lodge. While Tawny Pipits once again were the most numerous bird, we did have a few excellent sightings including a group of three Greater Short-toed Larks and half a dozen striking Indian Coursers. There were wonderful scope views of Indian Roller, Green Bee-eater, Long-tailed Shrike and Brahminy Starlings, all brilliant colourful birds. We finished by almost stepping on three Painted Sandgrouse, one of which was seen well after it flushed and landed within sight.

Knowing that the tiger we could not see this morning was in the vicinity of zone 3 and 2, we lucked out when we were assigned zone 2 for the afternoon game drive. It was only a short distance down the track before we came across Gypsies and canters huddled together looking at a sleeping tiger. This was indeed T64, the young male, that was just beginning to lay claim to his territory. He lifted his head a few times to see what all the fuss was about and fell back to sleep. Once, he sniffed the air sensing something was around, before dropping his head to the ground. As we watched in awe and delight at our luck having this sighting for so long and in the open, there was a piercing alarm call from a close by Chital. Sher Khan woke up and began to run over in the direction of the alarm. We later found out a Leopard had crossed the track a couple of hundred meters away and that is what alarmed the Chital. With that commotion so close, the tiger was either eager to see what it was all about, or, to see if he would be lucky enough to surprise a Chital running to escape the smaller predator. We tried to follow the tiger by headed to where the Chitals were calling, and could see them looking at where the tiger was sitting down about 20 meters away, but it was barely in sight for us. Unfortunately for us it then wandered off away from us, giving some of the Gypsies another excellent view. Thrilled with our encounter with Sher Khan we continued down zone 2. A few Sambar and a confiding stag Chital posed for photographs while the best bird sighting was undoubtedly a Stork-billed Kingfisher that we watched making short dives off its perch to bathe.

Back at the Tiger Den a male Asian Koel was feeding on a fruiting shrub as we pulled in, and, Elise and Joy joined me in going to the nearby pond to watch pairs of Painted Sandgrouse coming in to drink.

Day 5 / Jan 10 - Ranthambhore Fort and Lake Soorwal

What started out as very dense fog turned into a beautiful morning. Taking a break from tracking tigers we spent the morning exploring the 10th century Ranthambhore Fort. The walls of the fort circumvent the top of

the hill that overlooks the three lakes, encompassing a total 7 1/2 square kilometers. At its peak in the 12th and 13th century 25,000 people inhabited the fort. Seven gates lead to the top, beginning with the archway several kilometers back on the entrance road to the park, and the six that we walked through as we wound our way up the almost vertical cliff face. It was certainly enjoyable to be on foot, stopping for new birds such as Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, Spotted Dove, Great Tit and a gorgeous male Crested Bunting. Once we passed through the seventh gate we were mostly on level ground paying a visit to the 32 Pillar Chatri with Lord Shiva's secret temple below. The birding in the fort was quiet good with a wonderful view of an Alexandrine Parakeet, a pair of Southern Coucals, three prinias, Plain, Jungle and Grey-breasted and a small flock of juvenile Scaly-breasted Munias. We walked as far as the Ganesh Temple where most of the group paid a visit while Joy and I checked out the surroundings, coming up with a pair of Indian Vultures circling above the fort. Being a very popular destination with food stalls, and an abundance of offerings in the way of marigold garlands, Langurs by the hundreds congregate. Mary had the misfortune of having one charge her as she reached into my backpack for a bottle of water. The langur was hoping to steal some food. By the time we were working our way back the fog had greatly dissipated giving us a wonderful view of the park that stretched for miles below us.

Driving out the entrance road we stopped to look at a stunning Tickell's Blue Flycatcher and a rather docile immature Common Cuckoo Hawk.

Shortly after lunch we got back into the canter and headed towards Lake Soorwal about 30 kilometers away. Winding our way through Sawai Madhopur and endless fields of wheat and yellow mustard interspersed with bustling villages, we certainly got a taste of rural life in Rajasthan. In one ploughed field we were delighted to see Green Bee-eaters actively catching bees, returning to their perch and beating the daylights out of them until the sting was out, before flicking it up and swallowing it. Pankaj spotted a Wryneck on a post along an acacia hedgerow. This would be the first of three this afternoon. Four Red-headed Buntings feeding in the short grass along the road was a surprise, one of which was still in breeding plumage, as was a Rosy Starling. A number of Red-collared Doves were amongst the more common Eurasian Collared and Laughing Doves. Driving through a large area of short grass and extensive dirt patches looking for Yellow-wattled Lapwing we encountered Desert and Isabelline Wheatear and well as an Indian Bushlark. By the time we reached Lake Soorwal the fog was beginning to encompass the area and we had a hard time with visibility at a distance. A few Great Thick-knees were settling into an arid area away from the lakes edge while many River and Whiskered Terns could not decide whether they wanted to stay along the muddy edge or head to a roost spot elsewhere. Amongst them we found an Indian Skimmer and a Gull-billed Tern. A couple of gulls patrolled the shoreline, notably Pallas', Caspian and Brown-headed, and a pair of Pied Avocets flew by. On a distant narrow island we could make out three Dalmatian Pelican and scores of Great White Pelicans. Pied Kingfishers hovered over a channel, and a lone River Lapwing and Kentish Plover rounded out a lovely afternoon.

Day 6 / Jan 11 - Ranthambhore National Park: Zone 4

Drawn on Zone 4, we would have several opportunities to come across a tiger on our morning game drive. While this track has the third of the three lakes, Milak, (Zone 3 having the other two Padam and Rajbagh), we never had the time to do it justice. There were a couple of stops for Ruddy Mongoose, Crested Serpent Eagle and White-bellied Drongo before we watched a Large Cuckoo-Shrike land on a perch near the worker-restroom quarter. While being entertained by the countless Rufous Treepies that descend upon any vehicle that shows up there was word a tiger had just been spotted. Racing as fast as we could towards the end of the track we could hear distant alarm calls from a Chital, and determined any feline must be nearer to Zone 5 than our zone. After several attempts to negotiate a steep slope and help from Vinod and Pankaj in the form of some road repairs our Canter made it up the hill. This track was certain good for Sambar and while we stopped to photograph two does, we heard the alarm call of another Sambar. Heading towards the sounds we soon found several vehicles one of which was looking through their pictures of a Tiger that had walked on through. Being in a good vantage point we opted to wait and see if the Tiger would reappear. Then alarm calls came from a little further up the track. We drove the short distance to find a mother and calf Sambar staring in a direction on high alert. In front of them was a gully we could not see down and on the other side a buck and two female Sambar, the former two facing in the direction of the mother and calf. Somewhere between them was a Tiger, likely laying down. With our allotted game drive time coming to a end, and being so far from the exit gate, we had no time to visit Milak Lake. It was a rush to get out of the park, and failure to be out on time meant severe penalties for the drivers and guides. Along the home stretch, we encountered two stopped

Gypsies looking at a large male Tiger, T-25. This gave us a quick chance to watch it as it walked away into the forest. We made it to the gate just in time, and there saw a Canter full of children that had been ahead of us, which gave them a good 10 minutes with the Tiger, must to the delight of the kids, who were very eager to show us their photos.

Our pre-lunch walk around the back of the Tiger Den was a great success with those that did not join me a couple of days ago, catching up with Indian Courser. An Indian Roller put on another wonderful display of colour flying from one mound to another. The female Variable Wheatear that we had only briefly glimpsed previously showed exceptional well as did a male Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark. There was flock of Greater Short-toed Larks that flew passed us without stopping within sight, while a smaller group of Rufous-tailed Larks did land on a berm where we could watch them in the scope. Walking back to the lodge we had to contend with a herd of cows and two tractors with stereo systems blaring along the narrowest stretch of road. Back at the lodge the midday sun brought out a few butterflies to the marigolds; Danaid Eggfly, Small Orange Tip, Spotless Grass Yellow and Lemon Pansy.

Zone 1 was relatively quiet for the afternoon game drive. As it turned out no-one on any of the zones saw Tiger, however we did spend some time watching Sambar and Chital at a watering hole. Being the rutting season the males of each species were following females around. While the Chitals may not have reached their peak, the Sambar on the other hand were in full swing. Males would approach the muddy edge of the pond and lay down in it, rubbing their faces and neck in the mud as well as their antlers which they used to spread mud on their backs. This mud bathing behavior was done to cool down during the heat of the rut, and undoubtedly is attractive to the females.

During the dinner hour Pankaj gave us an excellent lecture on the history of tigers and status of the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve with a message that we must continue to educate the next generation to the marvels of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

Day 7 / Jan 12 - Ranthambhore National Park: Zone 5; transfer by train to Bharatpur

This morning would be our final visit into Ranthambhore in search of one more tiger. Zone 5 was a new track for us, and certainly one of the prettiest and smoother ones, as it followed a shallow stream a good distance into the park to a section known as Baggda. Our first Striated Heron was seen stalking the stream edge, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk glided overhead and Black Storks could be seen flying high along the water course.

There was to be a Brown Crake bonanza along this track, beginning at the dam breast at Kachida where one was spotted walking across one of the pools, and followed by a pair at the Baggda bridge. It was while parked on the short narrow bridge that we had a wonderful opportunity to study three wagtail species, White-browed, Grey and both varieties of Pied Wagtail, white and black!

Several stops on the return produced Common Kingfisher, a female Grey Bushchat, Lesser Goldenback, Great Tit and a party of Small Minivets. While looking at a tiger paw print along the track a Sambar alarm call rang out from the open forest very close to us. Several more would follow, but Pankaj assured us the tigress, known as the Lady of the Lakes, was moving away from us.

Back at the Tiger Den we took care of any necessities, said our goodbyes to the staff, and headed out at midday to Sawai Madhopur Railway Station. Our bus, with our luggage, left during the breakfast hour, and would meet us at Bharatpur. This saved us the long road ride!

Only a few minutes behind schedule we boarded The Golden Temple train at Sawai Madhopur for the three hour ride to Bharatpur. Even with train tickets and Pankaj with us there was plenty of confusion as we figured out where we were to sit in the sleeper section! Fifteen minutes after departure we had found our seats, and though we were in three separate sections we managed to consolidate into two compartments. All the custom boxed lunches were made to order, and before we knew it, we had arrived in Bharatpur where Sunil, our guide at Keoladeo National Park met us. We said our goodbyes to Pankaj on the platform and followed Sunil to our waiting bus.

We made one stop in town, to a sewage channel that held half a dozen Greater Painted-Snipe including one beautiful female. Beauty certainly does not describe this disgusting, smelly, trash spewn body of water. In spite of that, the birds seemed to love it with both Common and Spotted Redshank, Ruff's including a white headed male, ubiquitous Black-winged Stilt and Indian Pond Herons. Amongst the shrubs on the far bank Chiffchaff, Plain Prinias and a Bluethroat.

It was only a short ride through town to The Bagh, where we settled in for the start of our five night stay that would be centered around visits to Keoladeo National Park.

Day 8 / Jan 13 - Keoladeo National Park

Unfortunately it was another very foggy start to the day. Sunil met us at The Bagh and we made the short drive to the entrance gate at Keoladeo National Park. A short distance beyond that we alighted to spend the remainder of the day within the park. Beginning at the Lemon Grass Nature Trail the fog made it hard to see anything much beyond 100 feet, however we did find three Eurasian Thick-knees.

Once on the Ram Bund we worked our way around the jheel that was full of water. The acacia lined bund was full of Lesser Whitethroats, Bluethroats, Chiffchaffs, Red-breasted Flycatchers, Ashy Prinias and Tailorbirds. Many Hume's Leaf Warblers were calling and we did see a Greenish Warbler for comparison. The hanging beehives and a large rat snake skin generated much discussion. A gorgeous Indian Golden Oriole showed well as it moved between acacias and there were good looks at Grey Hornbill, Bay-backed Shrike, Southern Coucal and Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher. On the jheel, multitudes of waterfowl gave us plenty to work our way through. While Eurasian Coot and Moorhen outnumbered other species it was not hard to find migrant Ferruginous Duck, Common Teal, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and Common Pochard as well as the resident Indian Spot-billed Duck.

The morning walk certainly worked up an appetite and the Bagh's Mobile Catering Unit set up a delicious lunch on the lawn of the Interpretive Center which everyone thoroughly enjoyed.

For an hour after lunch we took two boats and had a very pleasant punt on the jheel adjacent to Shanti Kutir. The water levels were the highest I had ever seen consequently shorebirds and jacanas were not evident in the section our boatman took us through. Sunil was keen to show us a Jungle (Grey) Nightjar roosting in the open on a snag. The jheel was dotted with many exposed mounds that each had a acacia tree on it. Raptors took advantage of the trees. Along with a Crested Serpent Eagle there were three eagles, an Indian Spotted and two Greater Spotted. While watching a curled up Checkered Keelback (snake) on an overhanging branch low to the water a Booted Eagle circled overhead.

Splitting up into five rickshaws we began our trek up the central track where it was impossible not to stop often. Indian Scops Owl and Crested Serpent Eagle were followed by a plethora of waterfowl and Painted Storks. At Sappan Mori there was a tremendous concentration of Lesser Whistling-Ducks along with Purple and Grey Heron, Intermediate and Great Egret, Purple Swamphens, Moorhens, Eurasian Coots and a lone Glossy Ibis. In the distance we could see a Black-necked Stork and Greylag Geese, with a Comb Duck asleep on a mound. Along the Jatoli Canal track we had a pair of Dusky Eagle Owls on their nest teed up in the scope and we found a very cooperative Clamorous Reed Warbler amongst the embankment vegetation. The day ended with us watching Golden Jackals marking their territory before they headed out to hunt.

Day 9 / Jan 14 - Keoladeo National Park

It was such a foggy start to the day that we never really had a chance to see what was not very close! At least there was a couple of good ones - quality over quantity! A half hour stake out at the Barrier was rewarded with an excellent view of a Siberian Rubythroat. For the photographers it was a shame the conditions were far from perfect. In the Nursery, which has lost much of its understory, we found a couple Orange-headed Thrushes, one in a tree and another very cooperative stunner on the ground busily flicking over leaves. Though the fig trees were in fruit it was impossible to see any bird in the tops of the trees. At eye level a small group of Yellow-eyed

Babblers moved through and we would later get even better looks at these small babblers as we walked along the eastern edge of the park.

By late morning we were heading west along the track that leads from the boundary to Keoladeo Temple. The fog had lifted enough to see into Mansarovar and the adjacent jheel. Amongst the numerous Lesser Whistling-Ducks and Eurasian Coots, there were a couple of pairs of Red-headed Pochards. Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans could be seen floating on the shallow body of water and at one stage a flotilla of two dozen Great Whites flew by. Several Eurasian Spoonbills were resting on an island mound. Raptors numbers were increasing as the day warmed up and viewing conditions got better, with a handful of Eurasian Marsh Harriers, Greater and Indian Spotted Eagle and two Booted Eagle, one of each morph.

After our long all-morning walk it felt good to sit down to lunch. Our Mobile Catering Unit produced another stellar meal adjacent to the Temple. There were signs the sun might show but it wouldn't be until late afternoon and even at that it was only a courtesy appearance. There are three steel observation towers in the area of the Temple. At the one, at the end of the main track, we scoped a group of Indian Cormorants before walking along the Ghana Canal track. Sunil quickly found a Black Bittern hunkered down along the edge of the jheel. In spite of it moving several times we all got a wonderful look at this secretive bird.

The return journey to the Barrier was on rickshaw stopping often to witness the comings and goings of the Painted Stork colony. There was also a small group of Cotton Pygmy-Goose that showed well. At Sappan Mori three Asian Openbills were busy preening at the top of an acacia and the jheel was covered in Lesser Whistling-Duck and Purple Swamphens. Since the fog had lifted enough to see the tops of trees we went back into the Nursery and soon found a Brown-headed Barbet and Ashy Drongo. Our day ended with a visit to the souvenir shop before returning to the Bagh.

Day 10 / Jan 15 - Bund Baretta and Bayana

It was an all day excursion out of the park to Bund Baretta and Bayana, 45 kms south west of Bharatpur. The fog that has been uncharacteristically so thick and with us for many days kept the temperatures down in the 50's making this our coldest day of the trip. Though the distance to Bund Baretta is not long the drive is filled with potholes and speed bumps making it slow. This at least gave us a wonderful experience of rural Rajasthan as we drove through small villages and towns bustling with people. While it was women doing a great deal of the labour, making dung patties, carrying water and firewater, the only obvious men at work were those in the small shops and at the sandstone quarry, while the remainder of them idling the day away one way or another.

We would make many stops along the way for Indian Silverbills, Red Avadats and a Crested Lark which Ellie spotted from the bus. Southern Coucals were numerous, many sitting in shrubs trying to warm up! At the Government Rest House a very productive hour had a dozen Indian Flying Foxes (bats) sharing the stage with Common Hawk Cuckoo, Verditer Flycatcher, Orange-headed Thrush and four Tickell's Thrush.

The fog at the Bund Baretta dam breast was so thick we could only see a few hundred feet out, where the only birds in view was a raft of Common Pochards. Across the road a narrow track led between a water channel and a pond where we hoped to find jacanas but instead found a Moustached Warbler working the overhanging vegetation along the channel bank as Streak-throated Swallows caught insects as they patrolled over the water. A lone Egyptian Vulture flew over.

A large flock of non-breeding Baya Weavers caught our attention as we headed along the southern side of the reservoir. It is here that we had a lovely walk along the track that leads to the old Maharaja's palace in our quest to find a Pheasant-tailed Jacana. A pair of Bronzed-winged Jacana showed well followed by Clamorous Reed Warbler and a female Barred Buttonquail feeding on the sandstone slope. A young Great Crested Grebe swam by us and sadly the fog meant we could not see very far into the water. Returning to our bus we would pause for brilliantly coloured White-throated and Common Kingfisher, Yellow-eyed Babblers and a Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, the latter which we all needed a better look at.

A half hours drive away from Bund Baretta is the old town of Bayana, that dates back 500 years. Though picturesque, our walk along the base of the boulder and sandstone rock outcropping at Bayana was rather slow with common species such as Indian Robin, Ashy and Plain Prinias being the only passerines. On the cliff face there was only one Indian Vulture on its nest and the only new bird here was a Common Kestrel seen flying along the ridge top.

The return journey to Bharatpur was fascinating going through the various villages and towns, seeing rural life in its purest form. There would be one stop for a Woolly-necked Stork in a wheat field.

Day 11 / Jan 16 - Keoladeo National Park

It was yet another foggy start to the day as we began our all morning walk around Ram Bund to Sapan Mori. There were several birds that we were targeting for the day and the first of them, Tufted Duck we found rather quickly amongst Northern Pintail and Gadwall. Three Eurasian Spoonbills flew over our heads, these being the first of many seen today.

Though the weather conditions kept most of the passerines quiet and out of sight we did come across a half dozen Red Avadavats on reed stalks. Being close to the waters edge we would encounter many Bluethroats much to Jean's delight when she saw the blue on the throat. We all caught up with Brown-headed Barbet when one was seen in a sparsely leafed tree. While watching a Wryneck, a Common Woodshrike alighted in the same tree and a calling Zitting Cisticola was pinpointed doing the splits while hanging on to two grass stems. The highlight of the walk was first hearing Sarus Cranes, and then coming across a pair feeding at the intersection of the narrow tree-lined brick path and the Sapan Mori track. This was followed by watching an Asian Openbill cracking open and eating a large snail. As we neared the Main Track a male Black-necked Stork was busy feeding close to our track. Once on the Main Track we were nearing the end of our three and a half mile walk, and one of the rickshaw drivers was waving to us to come quickly. He had a Black Bittern hunkered down in a shrub on the water's edge, this being the first of four, an astonishing number, seen today.

Walking towards the Temple, the Mobile Catering Crew overtook us on a rickshaw and had lunch laid out for us next to the Temple by the time we arrived. It was another excellent meal that was eaten in the company of a young Blue Bull (Nilgai) who took over one of our mats and then was rather belligerent going after food. Jean and Mary opted to return to the Bagh, while the rest of the group climbed two of the towers around the Temple before working our way around the Mansarover jheel. Beginning on foot we scanned the jheels on either side of the track looking for Pheasant-tailed Jacanas. There was the expected assortment of waterfowl with a Few Red-headed Pochards being the standouts. Pelican numbers had increased since we last walked this stretch a few days earlier. A robust Monitor Lizard was straddling his termite mound home no doubt wondering, as we did, if the sun was ever going to show.

For the leg going round the southern part of Mansarover we hopped on rickshaws which was a welcome relief having been on our feet most of the day. All Pheasant-tailed Jacana's eluded us, but we did get close to both Bar-headed and Greylag Geese. At Python Point Sunil checked all the known python holes to see if any had ventured up, but it was a futile effort, giving the conditions. The day was rounded out with a Bay-backed Shrike, Brown Crake, three Spotted Owlets huddled together and wonderful scope views of a Crested Serpent Eagle.

Day 12 / Jan 17 - Keoladeo National Park and Fatehpur Sikri

There was an optimistic start to the day, but it soon turned into heavy mist. All we had was a few hours in Keoladeo this morning so we opted to take a boat ride and look for Pheasant-tailed Jacana. Our search was successful when we found four birds well out in the marsh. Our skilled boatman got us close to them for some excellent looks, some even in flight. All the birds were in non-breeding plumage and lacking the long tail. The Jungle (Grey) Nightjar was on its usual roost giving us another chance to study it. As we returned along the channel to the dock, an Olive-backed Pipit alighted in a tree, walked up a branch and flew off. Bob, Ellie, Joy and I searched the adjacent scrub for it but to no avail, our only consolation being a Paddyfield Pipit. While we were doing that, Ann, Jean, Mary and Elise went to the Interpretative Center which they enjoyed.

Back at the Bagh, we said our goodbyes to Sunil, and packed up before heading to an early lunch. After lunch we boarded our bus for the short ride to Fatehpur Sikri, the 16th century fort built by the 3rd Mughal Emperor Akbar. Though the sandstone fort was never finished, since Akbar only lived there for 14 years, it is a stunning example of Mughal architecture. At its height 3500 people lived within its walls. Our guide Mukesh was a wonderful story teller giving us a history lesson of the Mughal dynasty punctuated with a good sense of humour.

We all piled into a tuk-tuk including Mukesh who hung on the back, for a ride from the exit gate to the Buland Gate (entrance to the mosque) and down to our waiting bus. Our visit was timed nicely as the rains began shortly after. The journey to Agra took considerably longer than it took us to get to Fatehpur Sikri. The rain, a stop to look at a pair of Red-naped Ibis, the traffic in Agra including traversing flooded streets and a stop at the Wine and Beer shop, all contributed.

Day 13 / Jan 18 - Dholpur and Chambal River

The drive from Agra to Dholpur was punctuated with an assortment of stops for various road taxes as we crossed the border of three states; Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. In Dholpur we picked up Bablu, the local birding guide, who took us out of the bustling city and into the countryside culminating at Talab Sahi, Akbar's waterfowl hunting lodge.

Numerous stops at various sized ponds along the narrow bumpy road produced a nice variety of ducks including Tufted Duck, Ferruginous Duck, a group of four female Garganey and a stunning looking partially leucistic Common Teal with a white head. There were four Greater Flamingo that took to the air as soon as we got out the bus to view them. One pool held four Common Snipe feeding out in the open and gave us a chance to differentiate between Little and Temminck's Stint. Common Sandpiper, Ruff, Wood Sandpiper and a Marsh Sandpiper rounded out the smaller waders. Having spent time at Keoladeo National Park searching for Pheasant-tailed Jacana, we had no problem viewing half a dozen as well as an immature Bronze-winged Jacana in one pond. Bablu found a Greater Painted-Snipe tucked into the edge of a reedbed.

The surrounding area was mainly open fields of shawn grass, courtesy of sheep based upon the carpet of droppings, strewn with small rocks. A large flock of House Sparrows included a handful of Spanish Sparrows. As we began a walk through the fields 30 Rosy Starlings alighted near us to feed, many being in bright plumage. It was not long before we were watching an assortment of larks, pipits and wheatears; Greater Short-toed Lark, Tawny and Tree Pipit, Isabelline and Desert Wheatear and we would later add Variable. A few small flocks of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse were seen in flight landing close by. Scope views showed how well camouflaged these birds can be when they hunker down.

At the Talab Sahi, a considerable amount of rainwater had raised the level of the tank, consequently spoonbills, pelicans, waterfowl and waders were on the shallower far side of this body of water. Our consolation was a good one, a Black-bellied Tern quartering along our side.

Back in Dholpur we had lunch at the Raj Niwas Palace before heading the short distance south of the city to the Chambal River. Here we split up into two boats, Elise, Ann, Jean, Vinod and Bablu in one, Mary, Joy, Bob and I in the other, for a two hour river boat cruise up the river. We began with loafing Indian Sawback turtles and got to see a handful of Gangetic River Dolphins breaching as well as Muggar Crocodiles and two young Gharials. Birdwise yesterday's rains apparently meant that the Indian Skimmers had temporarily moved elsewhere. There was a good showing of Lesser Whistling-Ducks and Bar-headed Geese and along the sandier sections of river bank River Lapwing, Kentish Plover, Little Stint and Greenshank. Only Black-bellied Tern was seen on the ride, this being one of the rarest of the world's terns. We finished with an immature Bonelli's Eagle soaring over the river in the mist!

Day 14 / Jan 19 - Agra and transfer to Delhi

We spent the morning visiting some of Agra's most impressive cultural sites beginning at the 16th century Agra Fort. Built by Akbar, this red sandstone fort looks out over the Yamuna River and up river to the Taj Mahal. The Taj was built by Akbar's son Shah Jahan and it constructed entirely of white marble. Within the Agra Fort there is a section that is marble, which was an addition Shah Jahan constructed. It is in this area that Akbar spent the last years of his life held by his son under house arrest. By mid-morning the fog had eased a bit allowing for a good view of the spectacular Taj Mahal. The walk from the main archway along the treelined watercourse to the base of the Taj revealing more details as we got closer, until we were at the entrance to the mausoleum, where the intricate inlay in the marble could be studied and admired.

After lunch we drove along the new Yamuna Expressway to Delhi which meant not have to avoid cattle, people and vehicles driving the wrong way towards you, at least until we got to the outskirts of Delhi! Following dinner we said goodbye to Ann and Jean who were heading back to the US. The remainder of us would head to the Old Delhi train station for our 10.35pm overnight train to Kathgodam. Once we got settled into our AC First Class(!) compartments, the train for once, left on time!

Day 15 / Jan 20 - Nainital Rocky Fields and Sat Tal

For the first time in my experience the Ranikhet Express arrived in Kathgodam early, at 5am, and we were unprepared having been woken up upon our arrival. It is the end of the line and being dark there was no rush. Having now reached the foothills of the Himalayas, the drop in temperature was noticeable as soon as we stepped off the train. Karen, our local guide met us at the station and we were soon on our way, an hour and quarter of winding through the foothills and around many hairpin bends as we climbed to Nainital. The remains of recent snowfall was evident especially when a truck was stuck on a patch of ice covered road about 1 km from where we were staying, blocking the way. Since snowplows or salting are not options in this part of the country we opted to walk the rest of the way to the Vikram Hotel. Daylight gave us our first birds, Rufous Sibia and Blue Whistling Thrush.

Following breakfast we birded behind the hotel, just a short climb through the village where patches of vegetation held Pink-browed Rosefinch, Himalayan Bluetail (Orange-flanked Bush-Robin), a flock of Black-throated Tits along with more common species such as Streaked Laughingthrush, Himalayan Bulbul and Green-backed Tit.

A local vehicle had managed to retrieve our bags from the bus, but it would not be until early afternoon before the ice had melted enough for vehicles to make it up the hill. With no available vehicle we opted to walk up the steep hill to the Rocky Fields. Shaded spots had snow and ice that we had to negotiate but we all made it without any problem. It was a clear sunny day for which we were most grateful. Himalayan Vultures and Long-billed Crows were flying along the tops of the rocky hills. A mixed flock at the apex of our walk produced Lemon-rumped Warbler, Black-lored Tit, Grey-hooded Warbler, Bar-tailed Treecreeper and Russet Sparrow, as well as Brown-fronted Woodpecker and Yellow-browed Tit which would be the only ones of these species that we would encounter.

As we began our decent down the hill, the village was to our left and the rocky fields stretch up the slope to our right. Over the outcropping at the top a number of immature Steppe Eagles, readily identifiable by their underwing pattern, circled. Over the course of the next hour, as we looked up to see what was flying overhead, there would be Peregrine, Black-eared Kite, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and a Eurasian Vulture.

While we could hear the lovely loud tropical calls of Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babblers it would not be until we reached Corbett (later in the trip) that we got to see one. Large wide paved stones made the walk down easier stopping for Blue-capped Redstart low to the ground, an Ash-throated Warbler at head height, Bronzed Drongo and a Black-headed Jay foraging for seeds. A pair of White-tailed Nuthatches were upset at a Grey-headed Woodpecker being so close to their nest hole, which incidentally was probably created by the woodpecker.

With the sun shining brightly the Nepal Grey Langurs were busy feeding in the trees and scurrying about the boulders. An Indian Tortoiseshell (butterfly) took advantage of the warmth to warm its wings. There were brief sightings of Rufous-breasted Accentor, and more cooperative ones of Rock Buntings as they fed on the

pathway. On the return, we watched and immature Maroon Oriole and Ellie found a Great Barbet before making it back to the Vikram for lunch.

Our options for the afternoon were limited, the roads above Nainital were closed due to heavy snowfall, so Karen suggested we head down hill to Sat Tal, an area with multiple lakes, though we would only go by one. There would be many stops along the road beginning near the new University, which incidentally was built over a field we used to find very productive while birding. Looking down a nearby shallow ravine for half an hour there was a flurry of activity with Dark-throated Thrush, Grey-winged Blackbird, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Slaty-blue Flycatcher, Long-tailed Minivet, Red-billed Leothrix, Spotted Forktail, Common Rosefinch, a few Red-billed Blue Magpies and the first of many Slaty-headed Parakeets.

Further down the road yielded Yellow-breasted Greenfinch, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Asian Barred Owlet and Cinereous Vulture. Another stop was made when a Bonelli's Eagle was spotted. This led to finding a Greater Yellownape near the top of a bare tree, that was soaking wet having just had a bath, Black-throated Sunbird, Spot-winged Tit and Blue-throated Barbet.

Reaching our destination at the bottom of the hill, Grey Treepies were noticeable around the lake while White-capped Redstart and Plumbeous Redstarts were common sights around any body of water here in the foothills. Walking along a narrow path below the dam through the Sal forest we encountered numerous Black-lored Tits and Striated Laughingthrush, heard a Collared Owlet and had good looks at a pair of Mountain Bulbuls and Spotted Forktails.

Day 16 / Jan 21 - Sat-Tal, Snow View and Mongoli Valley

With the road conditions still being a bit dodgy, we got into two SUV's and headed back towards Sat Tal. The overcast morning along the Sat-Tal road was not as productive as yesterday. There were many Oriental White-eyes, and an assortment of the common species, including a lovely flock of Black-throated Tits that act and sound like bushtits. Our looks at Yellow-breasted Greenfinch and a female Black-throated Sunbird feeding on bottlebrush were far better than the ones yesterday and Ellie got a look at a Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush.

Along the river at Chafi, we watched a Brown Dipper swimming, and from our vantage point well above him we could see him walking around under water. As expected there were Plumbeous and White-capped Redstarts along the watercourse along with a pair of Spotted Forktails. In the trees along the road four Black Bulbul showed well as did Blue-fronted Redstarts, Greater Flameback and a Rusty-tailed Flycatcher.

A brief stop at the Nainital dump to look for vultures produced both Black and Black-eared Kite along with Large-billed Crows and many Steppe Eagles. With various roads around Nainital closed due to snow and ice we took the five minute cable car ride from the center of town to the top of Snow View (7500'). There was an Oriental Turtle Dove in a tree on the way up and at the top, a flock of White-throated Laughingthrush and a White-tailed Nuthatch. The panoramic view of the Himalayas, including India's second highest peak Nanda Devi (25,646 ft) some 120 kms away, was spectacular this morning, with the sun catching the snow capped range and the foothills in clear view.

For our afternoon session we headed down to the Mongoli Valley, beginning at Char Khet, which had we continued down from the Rocky Fields yesterday would have eventually lead to here. Russet Sparrows were numerous moving between feeding on seeds on the ground to chilling out in shrubs. As we watched Kalij Pheasants walking cautiously amongst shrubs below us, the male occasionally showing his brilliant colour, Grey-hooded Warblers, Himalayan Bluetails and a Pink-browed Rosefinch took our eyes away from the task at hand.

At Bajun we walked along the rough dirt road, down the hill all the way to the stream crossing, a distance of several miles. The vegetation is sparser than I previously recall. Trees have been striped and patches of undergrowth bare. It should not come as a surprise given the number of people that inhabit this part of the world. We began with a Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and Blue-capped Redstart and quickly walked into a mixed flock; Black-lored and Black-throated Tit, Grey-hooded Warbler, the three similar looking warblers, Buff-

barred, Lemon-rumped and Ashy-throated; White-throated Fantail and Red-billed Leothrix coming to drink at a pool on the road. Across the stream, on the far side of the forest slope a group of six Grey Treepie attracted Oriental White-eyes, two Striated Laughingthrushes and amongst them a Blue-winged Siva and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. Having taken two hours to walk down the hill we lucked out when an empty work truck came by as we contemplated the long long walk back uphill. We piled into the back, along with the remains of building materials, and 15 minutes later were back at the bus relieved not to have had to make the walk!

Day 17 / Jan 22 - Nainital to Corbett National Park, via Ramnagar

We would leave Nainital this morning and begin the 70 kms journey to Ramnagar, the first half taking the longest as we wound our way down the mountain hills. A number of vultures were roosting in pine trees, these being both Slender-billed and Himalayan Griffin. While studying the vultures a small flock of four Black-chinned Babblers worked their way through roadside shrubs showing exceptionally well. Karen had a spot for Thick-billed Flowerpecker and sure enough it was there on queue. A pair of Chestnut-bellied Thrushes and a White-throated Fantail rounded out that stop.

Being in the front cab of the bus, Karen spotted a flock of Scarlet Minivets. Stopping we soon found Lesser Racquet-tailed Drongos, Lesser Yellownape and Common Woodshrikes to go along with the minivets. Once out of the mountains we made a bathroom break at the Jim Corbett Museum where a flowering eucalyptus was covered in Red-vented, Himalayan and Red-whiskered Bulbuls as well as half a dozen Spangled Drongos. From there, the flatter and straighter road through sugar cane fields quickly lead us into Ramnagar, the gateway to Corbett National Park. On the Kosi River at Gargiea Temple we meet Devandra, one of Karen's naturalist guides, whom promptly lead us along the river rock bed to watch three male Ibisbills, a unique shorebird only found in the Himalayas. Crested Kingfisher and the expected Plumbeous and White-capped Redstarts also put in appearances with a male Blue Rock Thrush.

From the Kosi River, we transferred into two Gypsies (open top Jeeps) and drove the short distance to the Dhangari entrance gate to Corbett National Park, making one stop for three Himalayan Flamebacks, Alexandrine and Red-breasted Parakeets.

Once the paperwork formalities were completed at the gate we began the 32 kms journey to Dhikala in the heart of the park. There was certainly plenty to see along the way, Lineated Barbet, Besra, a flock of Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, Ashy Bulbuls coming down to the stream to drink, a Blue-throated Barbet drinking from a stump and Fulvous Woodpecker all before we reached the 6km mark at Sultan where we would have our picnic lunch. Olive-backed Pipits and a Dark-throated Thrush worked the short grasses as we ate our samosas and parathas. Rain began to fall as we were packing up so we covered the vehicles which unfortunately limited our ability to bird our way into the park. One stop at a known Brown Fish Owl roost produced one soaked bird facing away from us.

We reached Dhikala at 3pm, where it took an hour to do the government formalities, for the second time in three hours! With the rain continuing we went in search of a Tigress and her three cubs that had made a Chital kill earlier in the day. There would be plenty of mammals about to see, many close to the fenced Dhikala compound; Golden Jackal, Wild Boar with Jungle Mynas on their backs, Muntjac (Barking Deer) and Hog Deer to go along with the ubiquitous Chital. The tiger kill was well within the grassland and out of sight to all but those on elephant back, but still it was close enough that a tiger on its way to or from the kill would come into view. Driving the tracks through the grassland a confiding Black Francolin was feeding on the track and a male Hen Harrier was quartering over the golden grasses.

As we neared the end of the afternoon session, (having to be back in the compound by 5.30) we spotted a Tigress walking towards us, on the same track that we had been watching the Black Francolin. She was followed by two of her cubs which were seen briefly before they slipped into the grass. She continued walking toward us before veering into the grasses. In spite of the rain it was an excellent afternoon. Though Corbett may hold the largest concentration of tigers, they are still very elusive, and it has only been in recent years that sightings have become more frequent near Dhikala.

Day 18 / Jan 23 - Corbett National Park

Low lying fog quickly gave way to a beautiful day. As we drove the track between the grasslands and the Sal forest for any sign of tiger, we encountered Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Fulvous Woodpecker, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and Common Iora. A few Red Junglefowl were very skittish and vanished deeper into the forest as soon as they saw us. Kalij Pheasants on the other hand were far more co-operative and over the course of our extension in the foothills we would see more than I ever had on any previous trip. Our streak of woodpeckers continued with Lesser Yellownappe, Himalayan Flameback and Streak-throated Woodpecker and we encountered a mixed flock of Long-tailed Minivets, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Yellow-bellied Fantail as well as Maroon and Black-headed Oriole.

In the grasslands a Lesser Coucal was drying itself with wings drooping, but the real excitement was having a herd of nine Asian Elephants, including a baby, feeding close to the track. With the reservoir full and abundant recent rain, we never expected to see the elephants out in the open - they would normally at this time of year be deep within the forest. An Oriental Skylark flew passed the Gypsy and landed out of sight in the grasses while a Golden-headed Cisticola showed on a grass stalk long enough to make it out. Though neither cisticola was common there were a few more Zitting Cisticolas sighted. Of note was a female White-tailed Stonechat amongst many Stonechats.

Working our way eastwards, away from the compound along the river track, we had a distant Collared Falconet and would add Greater Flameback and Grey-headed Woodpecker. The most common raptor was Changeable Hawk-Eagle often seen perched in the shade near the top of a small tree. We made a first crack for the diminutive Chestnut-headed Tesia with only Bob and Elise in the lead Gypsy getting to see it as it skulked in the damp undergrowth. Aberrant Bush-Warblers were easier to see! Overhead, a plethora of swifts included White-rumped Needletail, Alpine Swift, Crested Treeswift and Himalayan Swiftlet, while Eurasian Griffon, Cinereous and Red-headed made up the vulture contingents.

Elise, Mary, Joy and Bob went on the afternoon Elephant ride. The mahout took them through the grasslands to the tiger kill which by now was already finished. It doesn't take long for a family of four hungry tigers to go through a Chital. She would need to kill on a daily basis to keep the well grown cubs happy! They never did see a tiger, though they did see Smooth Otters and flushed a Short-eared Owl.

Ellie and I went on a game drive beginning through the woods along the river where Pallas and Lesser Fish Eagles were readily visible. While it was nice to see the Brown Fish Owl in better light and in the open, our best bird was a pair of Black-crested Bulbul.

Day 19 / Jan 24 - Corbett National Park transfer to the Den

Before we got into our Gypsies to head out into the park for our last game drive in Corbett there was a mixed party consisting of Long-tailed Minivets, Grey-headed Warbler, Common Woodshrike, Oriental White-eye and Bar-winged Shrike Flycatchers that kept us enthralled. A large flock of Red-breasted Parakeets took off from their roost in the stand of eucalyptus on the edge of the compound and flew over us and away deep into the park.

The morning mist over the reservoir gave way to golden grasses as we went in search of Tiger. The elephants were in the same section of grassland as yesterday. The rich tropical oriole-like call of Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babblers led to a good sighting. A Chital alarm call, very close to our vehicle, gave us a ray of hope that we would get to see Tiger once again before we left the park. We waited in the right place but not long enough! It turned out that about an hour after we left a Tiger killed a Chital besides the track - one lucky vehicle had the patience to wait and got a lifetime memory.

Woodpecker sightings continued to be excellent with a pair of Rufous Woodpeckers as well as Streak-throated Woodpecker. As we worked our way through the Sal forest we got to watch a group of Chital and Langurs feeding symbiotically, the latter in the trees feeding, and dropping leaves for the Chital to eat. Both species keeping an eye and ear out for Tiger, and ready to alert the other to danger should it present itself.

We returned to the compound by late morning to check out and have an early lunch before heading out of the park. One of our drivers alerted us to a Jungle Owlet that was perched in the open where Slaty-blue Flycatchers could be seen flitting about low in shrubs.

The 32 km drive back out of the park from Dhikala was quiet in the early afternoon hours. We had hoped for Great Slaty Woodpecker, Tawny Fish Owl or Green Magpie but struck out on all three. Lesser and Pallas Fish Eagle put on a good show including vocalizing while in flight above us. Joy got her Chestnut-headed Tesia and everyone caught up with Black-crested Bulbuls when two were found feeding near the track. Our last bird in the park was a Stork-billed Kingfisher.

At the Dhangari Gate, Mary, Elise and Bob visited the new Museum, while the rest of us helped transfer the luggage to the bus. Our destination was the Den, our final lodge of the trip and only half an hour away, set on the Kosi River within the Kumeria Forest Reserve.

After checking into the Den, and with an hour of daylight remaining we made the short walk from the lodge down towards the Kosi River. At the top of a tree we scoped an Orange-bellied Leafbird. The most common bird was without a doubt Bronzed Drongos that numbered a couple of dozen, all hawking insects from the upper stratus of the trees. A nice find was our second Verditer Flycatcher of the trip. We watched a Fulvous Woodpecker return to its nest hole and had a Grey-headed Woodpecker within the Den's thick mango grove, which was where Ellie found a Jungle Owlet.

Day 20 / Jan 25 - Kumeria Forest

It was a wonderful start to a beautiful day above the Den, our last full day in the foothills. The windy drive, with switchback after switchback produced a few hair-raising close encounters with other vehicles. If it were not for folding side mirrors, and horns, there would be plenty of evidence as to just how narrow these roads are. At one bend a truck had met its demise, head on with another - what do you expect when you are in the wrong lane! We managed to squeeze through and parked at a bend where a stream flowed down the hill. White-crested Laughingthrushes could be seen on the far side of the road and there was a massive flock of hundreds of Red-breasted Parakeets, reminiscent of a murmuration of starlings. Vinod found the Little Forktail we were after which showed very well in the scope. Much to our surprise a White-tailed Rubythroat appeared on a ledge near the bus. We could not have asked for a better view as it hung around for the better part of half an hour before we moved on. Karen found a Goral, a mountain goat, on top of the ridge, there would be three more. We continued walking back down the hill where we got to see Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, a few Black Bulbuls, an Emerald Dove and a Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush.

We returned to the Den mid-morning for a brief break before heading down to Mohaan, the small village 8 kms to the south. We walked along the road leading through the Sal forest away from the village where we had a mixed flock consisting of Yellow-bellied Fantail, White-tailed Nuthatch, Lemon-rumped Warbler and Grey-hooded Warbler. The stream which seemed to have lost most of its luster held a Spotted Forktail, and there was a flock of almost 20 Large Woodshrikes moving through the trees. Nearby Karen called us over when he found two Yellow-throated Martens frolicking about the understory.

On the north side of Mohaan we walked back up the road through the Teak forest, encountering a mixed flock that included Bar-tailed Treecreeper, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, eight female Scarlet Minivets, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrikes along with Himalayan Flamebacks and Grey-headed Woodpecker. Back at the Den, Orange-bellied Leafbirds and Crimson Sunbirds were visiting the mimosa and bottlebrush trees.

For the afternoon we opted to walk down the road through the Teak forest to search for Tawny Fish Owl along one of the streams that flows down the hillside to the Kosi River. This species along with Green Magpie, Great Slaty Woodpecker or either large hornbill would elude us. To everyone's surprise no matter where we went, and we covered a great deal of ground by foot, the Kumeria forest was eerily silent. The most excitement came when we were walking a stretch of road south of Mohaan, when a motorcyclist Karen knew stopped to tell him that they had just seen Tiger on the side of the road near the Gargiea Temple!! Needless to say there were many vehicles that stopped to watch it. For us, it was not long after being told that, that when we heard the alarm calls of two Chital from within a large patch of forest that formed an island in the Kosi riverbed.

Somewhere in there, and not far from where we stood, lurked a Tiger! The Chital would eventually quieten down and exited the patch in the spot where we had hoped the Tiger would show itself. Alas, no tiger, today!

Day 21 / Jan 26 - Kumeria Forest; Ramnagar to Delhi

This was the last day of the trip. We began with a stop along the eastern boundary of Corbett National Park where Grey Treepies and a Scaly-bellied Woodpecker were feeding on the ground, and Lineated and Blue-fronted Barbet could be seen low in the trees. It was a relief to see a pair of White-rumped Vultures on their nest near Bijrani. Since many nested in trees close to villages and fed upon the dead cattle, there was a terrible and catastrophic loss about a decade ago when diclofenic (an anti-inflammatory drug given to cattle) all but wiped them out. I hope that they continue to rebound from the terrible and catastrophic consequences of the a decade ago.

At the Ramnagar Dam a pair of Wallcreepers performed exceptionally well for all of us and was a wonderful way to end the our trip. It was samosas all round to celebrate this bird! We said goodbye to Karen and began the long journey to Delhi. The first half to Moradabad was slow and bumpy with poor roads while the second half had considerably better roads. We made a stop at the Ganges River and were delighted to have a pair of Sarus Cranes on either side of the road before the bridge. Walking across the bridge we could see funeral pyres on the banks and relatives in boats that come to the river from further afield to scatter ashes.

Nearing Delhi the sheer concentration of Black and Black-eared Kites around the landfill boggles the mind, numbering in the tens of thousands. Today was Republic Day and in spite of that, the official festivities within the city were over and traffic was relatively smooth.