

In search of the Grey Ghost- Ladakh and Tadoba, India

Jo Dale

Introduction

First of all, I should say this was not a trip I was looking forward to. In fact I was, to put it another way, bricking it! It didn't help that we'd heard that sightings had been down and a recently returned group had failed to see our main target species.

But it was a trip that I felt I had to do, a trek to look for the Grey Ghost.... the Snow Leopard... that most elusive of cats.

I don't like the cold, struggle with altitude, don't do hills and am not that much a fan of camping to be honest and this trek had all of those elements in spades! But I had to try and tick a snow leopard, so off I went...

My friend Jo Thomas who runs <http://www.wildabouttravel.co.uk/> regularly runs tailor made treks to Ladakh and organised for me to join a group of seven birders on a private tour. As insurance against dipping the leopard, I and one other participant added a week in Tadoba for some much needed R,R and T (Rest, Recuperation and Tigers).

13th February 2016- UK to Delhi

I arrived in Heathrow and heard from Jo that one of the other participants had been refused boarding on his flight and his mate had decided to stay behind with him for moral support. Jo was busily trying to sort out his issue, which was basically that he's got his e-visa but had applied with an out of date passport and had only brought his replacement passport to the airport with him. Doh! I and one other participant, Peter flew Air India from Heathrow to Delhi on flight AI 112, departing at around 2100 on a Boeing 787 Dreamliner. I must say it had the clearest in-flight entertainment system I have ever experienced, the sound quality of the provided headphones and visibility of the viewing screens was excellent.

I found the air stewards to be particularly generous with the alcoholic beverages, which was nice and the food was okay, but nothing special! The selection of movies was up to date with some recent cinema releases available in both directions (different selection on the way back, including Star Wars: The Force Awakens).

14th February 2016- Sultanpur

We arrived into Delhi on time, around 11.20. After collecting our bags we picked up a bottle of JD from duty free for one of Jo's local guys, Praveen and changed money before being met in arrivals by Praveen and our driver. We were taken to Hotel Lohmod to drop our bags and freshen up before we then headed out to Sultanpur Jeel, a local bird sanctuary about 2 hours drive from Delhi. As we were arriving there, the rest of the guys in our group were heading back to the hotel so we missed them.

We met our guide and first stopped at the on-site restaurant to have a light lunch of dhal and butter nan. Then we headed out into the park for an afternoon of birding. A good range of birds was seen. List in annex A. Plus **Nilgai** and **Palm Squirrels**.



Nilgai

We met the rest of the group back at the hotel, had dinner and got a reasonable early night as we had an early flight the following morning to Leh.

15th February 2016- Delhi - Leh (3,500m)

We were advised to take a transfer to the airport at the ungodly hour of 0230. Check in is usually 2 hours before, but as this flight can be overbooked we were being safe and so we reached the airport 3 hours before our flight which departed at 0555 hours and arrive in Leh at 0725 hours.

Jo told us this must be one of the most sensational flights in the world, so we all asked for a window seat. On a clear day the peaks of K2, Nanga Parbat and Gasherbrum can be seen in the distance and on the other side of the aircraft, so close that you feel you could reach out and touch it, is the Nun Kun massif. I'm not entirely sure which peaks were visible on the day we arrived as dawn was only just breaking as we flew over the most breathtaking scenery, but it was certainly impressive, as was the approach to the airport.

Upon arrival we were met by Stanzin and Gurmet (one of our guides) and were transferred to Hotel Mahey Retreat. We had a nice lunch and Stanzin organised with us to check all our gear that afternoon, as Leh is the last town that we could feasibly buy more kit if needed.

One cannot simply walk into Hemis national Park where the leopards are without first resting and acclimatising to the rarified air, so we were under strict instructions to take it easy for the two nights we were in Leh. We were also advised to drink plenty of water and avoid alcohol.

16th February 2016 Leh

We had another full day of taking it easy to acclimatise to the rarefied air, but we were still up reasonably early to do a spot of birding along the Indus river. We didn't see any of our targets at the first stop, but a street dog was licking out a tin of pineapple and the scenery was beautiful. At our second stop we found our main target- five ibisbills! This pleased the birders in the group and we also saw goosander.

We then drove to another place and crossed a bridge that was covered in prayer flags to look for solitary snipe, which we sadly dipped, and white-winged redstart which we saw hundreds of. We also visited Leh town, where there are many souvenir shops and camping gear places as well as a monastery. The Tibetan influence is very marked, it felt more like being in Ruoergai than it did India.



Ibisbill

We were relieved to find that Andy and Olly had made it out to Leh after Andy's visa hiccup at Heathrow and they joined us for lunch before we headed out to Leh village in the afternoon. Upon our return we rested up for a few hours and I made use of the wifi (when it dained to work) and watched a bit of TV.

The only English language channels I could find were Fox, which seemed to show only four programmes, Lost, House, a programme called "Louie" which was *allegedly* a comedy, "Scare Tactics", which was the oddest hidden camera show I have ever seen (given the title I'll let you all conclude the premise of this ill-advised show) and Walking Dead. I would only have watched House by choice out of the scant choice available.

At dinner we got talking to another group, who had just got back to Leh. They had been lucky enough to see three snow leopards on their trek at Rumbak, which raised our spirits somewhat.

17th February 2016- Leh – Husing camp

Some of the group met early to revisit the solitary snipe site. I decided not to join them and rest up ready for the trek to Husing Camp. They were lucky enough to see both **otter** and **mountain weasel** (the latter would have been a lifer for me so I was a bit sad not to have seen it) but not a solitary snipe was to be seen.

We had breakfast and departed at 8 am for the drop off point. We drove to Zingchen and Hemis National Park. From there we walked approx. 1½ hrs to the campsite at Husing located at approximately 3700m. The actual walk is not far and the track isn't steep, but it was pretty tiring due to the altitude! Husing is situated in a corridor linking three valleys. Depending on activity, some groups only stay at this camp and don't go any further into the national park. But at the time we went there had not been productive as the weather had been too mild and there was no snow. This meant that the Bharal, the main prey of the leopard, were grazing at higher altitudes.

After lunch at the camp we had a really difficult steep hike up the side of a mountain to look for snow leopards. Some of us hired porters to carry our gear and I was very grateful for the support, because I needed my hands free in order to manage to get up and back down the steep slope. Unsurprisingly we did not see any snow leopards from here. We did see our first Golden Eagle, Lammergeier, Himalayan Snowcock, Brown Accentor, Alpine Chough, Chough as well as White-winged Redstart and Red-fronted Serin. We also spotted a distant group of **Bharal (Blue Sheep)**.

We had a nice meal and then retired to our tents with hot water bottles. Most of us had hired military grade sleeping bags, which were pretty essential considering the temperature.

18th February 2016- Husing to Rumbak camp

I could say we were awoken with sweet, black bed tea at 0730, however considering I had barely slept, that wouldn't be too accurate! We pulled ourselves together and convened in the mess tent for breakfast. This would be a regular ritual throughout our stay. Most breakfasts consisted of porridge or cornflakes and hot milk, toast and omlettes. Occasionally we would be treated to pancakes!

Camp was packed up soon after and we set out on a much more strenuous hike up the valley through a pretty spectacular gorge to Rumbak camp. Just outside camp we had to cross a frozen river to reach our campsite.

We had to wait for camp to be set up so we climbed up to our viewpoint and started scanning. This was far easier to get up to than the Husing watchpoint. Whilst scanning we counted c20 **Bharal**, c20 Chukar, 3 Himalayan Snowcock and occasional Lammergeir and Himalayan Griffon vulture.

Lunch was served at our watchpoint and was excellent, as was all the food we had on the trek. I should say that our crew were first class, K.C. and Gurmet were our guides. They are the same team that worked with the BBC on their upcoming Planet Earth 2. So we know we were in safe hands.

Towards the end of the day we were scanning hard as this is the time that sightings normally happen. We met some people who had been trying to film a pair of wolves further up the valley as they returned to camp. It was starting to get very cold as we lost the sun behind the mountain. K.C. took his scope and got a bit of height by scaling a nearby hill. At around 4pm, all of a sudden he starts shouting and pointing at a far away mountain top. He'd spotted a **snow leopard**!

He was shouting instructions to the guys on the ground and Stanzin rapidly put his scope on the right area and then started getting others set up. When it was my turn to look through the scope I initially couldn't see anything. it was literally the furthest visible peak that we could see from camp.

As I adjusted to the view and with direction from Stanzin I finally made out the tiny head moving from side to side just above the brow of the ridge. Just its head and shoulders were visible as it loafed on a rounded, partially snow-covered peak. It would look our way with a perfectly symmetrical, 'feline' profile and look to the right, then showing the classic leopard head shape. It yawned a few times, stood up and turned round once and then, after 45 mins, in the gloaming of dusk it stood, stretched and ambled across the ridge showing a lithe profile and enormous tail. It walked in front of a large dark rock at one point briefly revealing the pale, mottled coat and then it was gone.

19th February 2016- Rumbak camp

We scanned from the watchpoint early AM, other than a few birds, nothing was seen of note. We then hiked up the valley towards Urutse, crossing more frozen rivers. We turned left at the junction between the two valleys and continued on at pace. K.C. was on a mission! He had spotted a kill. The hike was arduous, as we scrambled along loose scree slopes overlooking the frozen river valley.

After what seemed like an age, with breath heavy in my chest we reached a scree slope where scopes were being set up. It was an awkward spot to view comfortably from, but we made it work as a **Tibetan wolf** was hiding in the bushes beside a dead Bharal. The guides believed it was a Snow Leopard that had made the kill and that the wolves had most likely muscled in. There was one wolf at the kill, which briefly popped it's head up now and then.

Eventually it became bolder and emerged to feed on the carcass. We spent at least an hour watching the wolf feeding. Another wolf was resting up on a rock higher up the valley. When the first one finished eating, we hoped that it would leave and that the Snow leopard might return to reclaim the carcass.



Tibetan Wolf. Copyright Mike Edgecombe.

Unfortunately the patient partner wolf had other ideas. He raced down the side of the mountain and with great strength, picked up the carcass in it's mouth and dragged it away back up the mountain. It seemed to vanish behind a ridge and I couldn't see it after that, but my video camera actually picked up both wolves further to the left as they headed up the mountain.

A golden eagle descended to feed on the remnants. Lunch arrived soon after and we then began our return to camp. Coming down seemed much less strenuous than getting up there, but near disaster befell me as I slipped on some hidden ice and fell badly on my backside against a dagger-like rock! I had to stop and try to compose myself such was the pain of the injury. I suffered for the rest of the trip- lying down was particularly uncomfortable, as was sitting on the camp chairs and at the watchpoints. But it wasn't until I got back to Leh and examined myself in a mirror that I realised how badly bruised I was. If I'd landed anywhere else I surely would have broken something!

We scanned from camp for the remainder of the day but did not see any other mammals. As darkness approached we were pleased to see that clouds were gathering and it was starting to snow. We were hopeful that this could be a good omen for the next day...

20th February 2016- Rumbak camp

The snow became more persistent overnight and we woke to a few inches on our tents and white-out conditions which continued into mid morning. We waited it out patiently in the mess tent with copious tea and coffee. Once the snow finally lifted we set out for a hike up to Rumbak village.

A few birds were seen around the stands of trees and buildings, including the red-breasted robin accentor, Great tit, 3+ Brandt's mountain finch, 3+ rosefinches around the village, these were heavily streaked, dark female-type birds only, no males. They were also seen a few days later at the same place. After a lot of discussion during and after the trip, consulting various birding experts, the group finally settled on Streaked rosefinch as the ID for these birds. The other candidates, as I understand were Brandt's and Great. Flocks of horned larks stuck to the mountainsides and a few Hill pigeons could be found perched on the Tibetan architecture. Himalayan snowcock were seen in small numbers unlike Chukar which were pretty common. We returned to camp to scan after lunch.

We were scanning from the watch point above camp for the remainder of the afternoon and all of a sudden our guide begins to get very animated! He's spotted a **Snow Leopard!!**

It was getting on in the afternoon and he managed to pick it out on a massive craggy escarpment at about 750m from the Rumbak watch point. Everyone was scrambling to get onto it, but thankfully the guides were really efficient.

The leopard was making it's way down the face of the rocky escarpment, a good zoom on the scope was definitely needed to make it out. It moved down the slope, in and out of gullies, across ridges and around massive shoulders of rock. Very agile and powerful, a simply beautiful animal, the tail being very long and broadening at the darker tip.

A few times, we'd lose it in the rocks and then relocate it by spotting the huge tail waving from behind a rock or crag... As it went, it regularly scent marked, dropped scat and rubbed it's face up against rocks by jumping up slightly just as a domestic cat does. Half way down, it lounged on a flat rock for 10 mins surveying the surroundings, when its massive paws and aloof facial expression were obvious. It was enough time to be able to get my camcorder set up. Even at the furthest range of the zoom, it still looked tiny in the frame.



Snow Leopard

The Snow leopard eventually descended the escarpment and vanished behind the ridge in front after about 30 minute. Looking in the opposite direction, the guides spotted three very distant **woolly hares**, frolicking in the snow, but they were way too far for any photos, not even a record shot!

Dusk began to take a grip on the valley and we eventually got so cold that we needed to retire to the mess tent. But no sooner had we served up some celebratory hot chocolate complete with a wee drop of rum, than we were called out to see the Grey Ghost had reappeared! We watched it cross a neighbouring snowfield from the camp site (the mountain to the left in the picture posted above). It was closer, visible to the naked eye but the light had gone and it soon disappeared over the ridge.

With that little encore over, we retired again to the mess tent to celebrate our good fortune!

21st February 2016- Rumbak camp

By now I hadn't been sleeping at all well, I could not get used to being enclosed in the double sleeping bags- it was just really uncomfortable! I developed a really terrible stiff neck which stayed with me throughout the rest of the trip.

We scanned from the watchpoint for some time. One of the guys spotted what was believed to be a Saker falcon, at long range perched on a ridge. It dropped off to fly away and immediately was out of view. This time we headed to Urutse mid morning. Around 20 Black-winged snow finches were seen en route to Urutse and a few more were seen over the week. We watched Bharal feeding on the hillside before the camp staff arrived with lunch.

We were just about to have our soup starters when one of the guides spotted an **Eurasian Lynx**! It was at a very great distance and took quite a while for me to work out exactly where I was meant to be looking in the telescope view, but I finally made out the form of a cat with tufty ears. The lynx was loafing at great distance on a snowy hillside with some rocky and bushy cover. At one point it got up, had a stretch, a scratch and relieved itself and had a little walk but soon sat back down apparently enjoying the sunshine. 10+ Tibetan Partridge also showed well in the valley below the house at Urutse.

After lunch we hiked back to the viewpoint at camp. No more cats were seen but I enjoyed

watching an adult lammergeier pursuing a smaller golden eagle and harassing it into dropping it's dinner, which appeared to be one of the legs of a bharal. Overnight I visited the long drop and spotted a small **mouse** with a pointy nose, hairless ears, greyish fur and an average length tail. I didn't take photos because one does not linger in the smallest room on a frosty night!

22nd February 2016- Rumbak camp

Today I decided to take it easy and so when the others went off on a hike to Stok-la I stayed behind and scanned with some others from the watchpoint at Rumbak. I didn't see anything other than Bharal and birds that we'd seen before and thankfully only missed a pika, which I think the guys decided was **Royle's Pika**. I was glad to have had a day off and I actually spent some time taking pictures.

23rd February 2016- Rumbak camp

We had the usual morning ritual of bed tea and breakfast followed by scanning from the watchpoint. No further snow leopards were seen, but we did sight another distant **lynx**. It was perhaps the same animal as 21st but was still not close enough to get any images as it seemed to be close to Urutse junction. It still spent most of its time loafing but also walked across a small snowfield, dropped scat and seemed to start stalking presumed Woolly Hares. The coat colour could be seen to be warm brown, the ears were very obviously pointed and long, and the shortish bob-tail was clear. It appeared to possess long, strong back legs.

Around mid morning we hiked down the Rumbak valley back towards Husing. We came across a small flock of Bharal which were really close and managed to get some lovely images.



Bharal

As a lover of anything bunny related, I was keen to see some pikas, especially as I hadn't seen any to date on this trip. I was therefore looking forward to getting to "pika point". Thankfully the pikas cooperated and we were able to observe at least three **large-eared pikas** scrambling around in the

scree field.



Large-eared pika

After lunch, we had the more arduous task of hiking back up to camp. We later scanned from the watchpoint again but did not see any cats. Hope for another sighting of the grey ghost was melting away with the rapidly receding snow. Conversation had by now turned to the possibility of cutting a day in favour of some extra time birding in Leh as everyone was by now getting a little tired of the constant cold..But we continued to tough it out at Rumbak for our last night.

As it was our last night with the whole camp team, the guys baked us a cake to celebrate seeing the big three (Leopard, Lynx and Wolf)

How they made it I have no idea as they didn't have an oven!

Overnight many of us were awoken by the eerie howling of the wolves who must have been making their way along the ridge above camp. two individuals were calling close to the camp, the classic single long howl. Several single calls were also heard and at one point, 2 animals howled together.

24th February 2016- Rumbak camp to Saspoche

We were leaving today so after clearing out our tents and packing everything ready for the donkeys and having breakfast we scanned one final time from the watchpoint, sadly seeing nothing new, other than a couple of great rosefinches. We then began to make our way back down the valley to the pick up point. It took us most of the morning to reach the cars. the river valley held fresh wolf tracks.

Another large eared pika was seen on the way down. We drove on towards Saspoche. The guys stopped to scan periodically and soon found us a herd of **Ladakh urial**. We stopped for a lunch of noodles in a local town.



Ladakh Urial

We checked into our homestays when we arrived at Saspoche. The home stays provide much-needed income to the local villagers, who provide not only food and lodging, but also sell local handicraft needle-felt animals (mainly snow leopards and ibex). As they can make more money hosting tourists than from their regular pastoral lifestyle, this initiative helps to reduce conflict with the leopards as the villagers can see they have value to them - which helps to protect them. Of course, the camps and homestays can only host so many people and certainly in Hemis the numbers of visitors are controlled by a permit system.

The group was split between a number of different families dotted around the village. Our rooms were basic but compared to the camping quite luxurious as we at least had some form of heating. In my case this was an electric fire others had wood burners. A mattress and blankets were provided for sleeping on and flasks of sweet black tea were served with a small pot of biscuits and/or some rather dry home made bread. There were also some freaky looking decorations in my room, enough to give a small child nightmares.

Later on we took a fairly short hike up the valley above the village and found a small herd of **Ibex**, too distant for photos but no predators. In the evening we all convened for a communal dinner at the

most central, and largest homestay.

25th February 2016- Saspoche

Tea was brought to our rooms in the morning, in my case this was my porter who was also staying in the homestay. There is a concrete area for washing and an outhouse long-drop composting toilet (basically just a hole in the floor that you have to shovel dirt down after doing your business). We were served breakfast which consisted of wilted spinach, omlettes and fresh chapatis in the kitchen of our home stays before all convening for a hike up the valley from the centre of the village.

It was quite a long hike and we were able to see the ibex again (about half a dozen) and also a lovely pair of wallcreepers. These birds were flying in a dramatic butterfly display above the gorge and, just like butterflies, settled briefly on the rocks before launching themselves off again to chase each other. For a few of the group these birds were another lifer. I have seen them in other parts of the world but they are always a joy to see!

Fresh tracks betrayed the presence of a nocturnal prowling wolf but we did not manage to find the owner this time. Snow leopard proved elusive. There is a female with cubs whose range covers this valley but she was elsewhere when we were looking. All the walking was starting to catch up with some of us.

We had dinner at the largest homestay upon our return. every other homestay owner brought something to the table, whether this was rice, dhal, other vegetarian dishes etc. Then the little animals came out and a few more of the group made some purchases.

Afterwards, I retired to my room, which was easier said than done because to get to our home stay in the dark you have to cross a little stream.

26th February 2016- Saspoche to Leh

We left Saspoche for Leh after a final unsuccessful scan for Snow leopard. On our way out of the valley we crossed a boulder-strewn plateau when Gurmit shouted to our driver to halt the vehicle. He'd spotted a pair of wolves tracking away from the road up towards some hills! One was a blackish variant and his companion was a very pale 'white' wolf. They trotted through an arid valley below Saspoche. We had lovely, although fleeting views of these two impressive animals. The dark one was relocated at distance a bit lower down as it slept in the sun.



Tibetan Wolves- Copyright Mike Edgecombe

We also stopped at the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers, this is a truly amazing sight as the royal blue water of the Zaskar meets the muddy grey-green of the Indus amid the backdrop of spectacular mountain vistas. The ubiquitous prayer flags were strewn along the crash barrier overlooking the valley.

We passed a large number of military bases on our way back to Leh and arrived in time for lunch. We relaxed for a while before we headed out into town to visit the Snow Leopard Conservancy. According to the researcher Jigmet, we may well have seen the only two snow leopards in the whole of the Rumbak area. It might have been the case at the time we were there but I think people who arrived in the following weeks had better luck so I'm not sure if he was just trying to make us feel good.

We did a bit of shopping in the town afterwards and then returned to the hotel for dinner. We had a final night here before heading back to Delhi.

27th February 2016 Leh to Delhi & Sultanpur

We were up at 0545 for our 0630 check in to fly back to Delhi. One of the Group, Mike had a lot of problems getting his cameras through security and then had further problems locating his bag. The security here is tight, I guess because we're in Kashmir. They do the usual check of your ticket before entry to the airport, then your hand luggage is scanned, then you check in, then you have to get your hand luggage through security, which they insist on searching and pulling all your camera gear out to repack and have that stamped.

You get the full body scan with the wand (women stand on a stool behind a curtain). Finally when you make it through all that, you then have to go outside, identify your checked bag to the guard, before it's then loaded onto the flight. Poor Mike couldn't find his checked bag for a while but all was sorted eventually. The airport was also crowded with soldiers all waiting to board different flight.

Another wonderful chance to appreciate the majestic Himalayas followed.

On arrival in Delhi we were picked up by Ghani and we checked back into Hotel Lohmod before returning to Sultanpur Jeel for lunch and an afternoon of birding.

We had lunch and then enjoyed a few hours around the park wetlands. A good list of birds was seen, see Annex B.

After our trip to Sultanpur we drove back to our hotel for an early dinner and most of us said our farewells as everyone had different flights to catch in the next few hours. Peter and I had booked an additional week at Tadoba and so I got my head down for a short time before our next flight to Nagpur.



Indian Palm Squirrel

Tadoba Extension- Serai Lodge

28th February 2016 – Moharli Gate

Not much sleep was had as we were up at 0230 for our 3am car to take us back to the airport or our 0535 flight to Nagpur. It was a three hour drive from there to Serai lodge located about 20 mins drive from Moharli gate. This is a fairly central position, close to Telia lake. Each brick built chalet had a canvas roof and these were arranged in a horseshoe around the garden. Reception and a restaurant were positioned at the entrance to the resort. There is a central lapa and a watchtower overlooking a pond. In the distance is Irai lake that forms part of the buffer zone. The lodge is well positioned not just for access to the main park but also affords access to the buffer zone, enabling one to have a more varied safari experience.

A standard buffet lunch was served at 1200 and we set off to Moharli gate at 1330. Gate opens at 1400 so there was time to sort out camera permits and shop for snacks before entering the park. There is a small souvenir shop here too.

We covered most of the areas that were familiar to me from my last trip. Telia lake was much reduced compared to last time and did not yield any tiger sightings in stark contrast to the Girl Gang of Telia who put on such a great show last time. A Sirkeer Malkoha was a nice surprise.

The action whilst we were there was centred on two families of tigers. Maya, who was located at a waterhole north of the central checkpoint near Panderpauni and Sonam, who was one of the original girl gang of Telia with her cubs who was generally to be found at a waterhole closer to where we entered the park.

We tried for Maya but she and her cubs were resting up in dense thickets of bamboo and were not playing ball, so after trying some other areas, such as Panderpauni and Tadoba lake. We ended up at Sonam's place but she too proved elusive that afternoon. We did have the unexpected pleasure of watching first one, and then a second, sloth bear.



Sloth Bear

Unfortunately they stuck to thick cover most of the time. The second sloth bear was seen to rub himself like old Baloo against a rough tree.

As it got dark we exited the park and travelled back to our lodge for dinner and a much-needed early night.

29th February 2016- Moharli gate

The owner of the Lodge is called Dev (pronounced "Dave"). For most of our stay we had the company of the lodge naturalist, Ani. Now I should mention that Serai Lodge has fewer western clients than some of the better known lodges and he may not have been fully comfortable with English guests.

That said, I would say that this lodge naturalist needs some development in terms of his communication skills and enthusiasm. He spent a lot of his time on his iphone, tended to mumble to us and was not particularly forthcoming in terms of pointing out other wildlife such as birds. We had the same forest guard and driver for each of the drives we had in the main reserve and I would say that Ani did not really add much to this partnership. His English, however, was better than the forest guard, easier to understand despite his mumbling, but the forest guard showed more enthusiasm and volunteered much more information about the wildlife. The driver did not really say an awful lot.

We arose early and had a quick cup of tea before heading to the car. It was still dark and in the headlights we spotted a **black-naped hare**. **Sambar** were much in evidence. A nice herd of **Gaur** were seen as we entered the park.

We were more focused on searching for tiger than accumulating a large list of birds, but a few lingered long enough to be clicked. We tried for both Tigress mums but both proved elusive so overall it was a quiet morning drive.

We headed out again in the afternoon. We headed up around Jamni, where we had really distant views of a resting **tigress**, Chotti Tara. She was facing us but so far away that we couldn't really get any record shots and there was a lot of heat haze.

A mottled wood owl was found resting in the fork of a tree and a Hoopoe was seen feeding on the ground. We waited a long time for Maya to appear. Ani was getting increasingly restless and suggested we move on but as Maya was known to be in the area still, we waited some more and were eventually rewarded with a very brief sighting of one of her cubs at approximately 1715.

Annoyingly we had to leave to get back beyond the check point about five minutes later and we then spent some time fruitlessly searching for Sonam and her cubs. As we headed out of the park we met another group who'd had the pleasure of a male tiger crossing the road in front of them. We also heard that another group saw Sonam and her cubs at around 1745, so just after we left her waterhole and another car saw a leopard cross the road. Well at least we got brief views of one of Maya's cubs.

A family at the lodge had been there for a few days and had only distant views of a tiger. We hoped we might be a bit luckier than that. Later that evening there was a bit of a commotion when one of the staff found what they thought was a cobra lurking outside the back of the chalet next to mine. They managed to catch and remove the serpent from the lodge and Ani believed it was actually a harmless rat snake, although it's hood seemed quite convincing to me.

1st March 2016- Buffer Zone

I was rudely awoken by a **rat** running across my head just before my alarm was due to go off! The tented roof may be romantic and reminiscent of safari camping but it does come with it's drawbacks too as the wildlife can easily make a home in the canopy. Whilst waiting for our car I spotted some more rodents clambering about in the bamboo. Not sure exactly what this one is.



Mystery rodent

Today the main park was closed so we had our drives in the buffer zone. Pugmarks betrayed the presence of Lara and her cubs but sadly we didn't find them. A crested serpent eagle peered at us inquisitively from a high branch. We spotted a lovely herd of **Gaur** in nice light, including a young one and an adolescent.

Quite a few birds were seen down by the lake, including cotton pygmy goose, black-headed and glossy ibis, openbill stork, white-throated and common kingfishers, Osprey, jungle mynah, rosy, pied and brahminy starlings, Indian Coucal, grey jungle fowl and grey spurfowl.

In the afternoon, lots of game had moved into the area that we'd be searching, including our gaur family, sambar and **chital**. There was still no sign of Lara, but another vehicle spotted a **tigress** called Madhuri crossing a track and so we joined the search to relocate her. We eventually connected with her but the view was obscured as she was travelling through long grass heading down towards the lake. She has four very young cubs who must have been stashed away out of sight as we didn't see them, sadly. Unfortunately we lost sight of her fairly quickly and were not able to relocate her again. As we waited, we spotted a white morph Asian paradise flycatcher, orange-headed thrush, rufous treepie, and jungle babblers.

2nd March 2016 Moharli Gate

An **Indian black-naped hare** was seen on the drive to the gate and another was spotted soon after we entered before dawn. **Wild boar**, **Sambar** and **chital** were seen as were a pair of **Indian muntjac** in male/female pairs. One male sported the most impressive antlers.

We first tried for Sonam, but had no luck seeing her at her waterhole, we searched around Telia lake, the surrounding forest with no luck. The mottled wood owl was roosting in his tree again.

We stopped at the checkpoint for a loo break and carried on up to Maya's place. The area was crowded with vehicles. But there had been no sighting that morning. We spotted a large-tailed nightjar and we spotted a nice group of **Langurs**.

Then we continued on to Jamni where we'd seen Chotti Tara before. But she wasn't around either. We carried on down to the scenic Tadoba lake, where the water was like glass with log-mimicking mugger crocodiles gliding effortlessly across the mirrored surface. We saw another group of langurs on the way back.

When we arrived back at the lodge we heard some tragic news. The lodge naturalist named Chirag Roy, of Svasara lodge, where I'd stayed last time, had been out snake catching and was bitten five times by a cobra. I don't know if he was embarrassed but from what we were told he did not immediately alert anyone to the event and by the time he asked for help the venom had already taken effect. Although he was rushed to hospital he sadly didn't pull through. A few birds were seen around the lodge.

In the afternoon we first tried for Sonam again but again had no luck there. We tried Maya's place, but the queue was long and she wasn't showing either. We headed to Tadoba lake and got word that Chotti Tara had been spotted close to the road along a supposed one way route. We joined the long queue to view her as she was asleep in a dry streambed so only a few cars could see her at the time.

We waited patiently for our turn, but just as we were about to reach a position where we could see her there was an unexpected mad scramble as a second tiger was spotted further along, so with only a brief glimpse of Chotti we found ourselves holding on for dear life as the gypsy jerked forward up the other side of the concrete ford in the stream bed. We were able to see the silhouette of a male tiger spraying against the golden afternoon light in front of a stand of reeds before he quickly vanished from sight.

We re-positioned in the queue to get a rather obscured view of Chotti Tara before we moved on, stopping at strategic points in the hope that the wandering male might reappear. No surprise, he didn't!



Bengal Tiger Chotti Tara

After half an hour we were on the move back the way we had come, which was surprising as we had been told initially that it was a one way system. We rejoined the now smaller queue and were able to get a better view of the sleeping tigress. When we'd finished soaking up the sighting of her sleeping, stretching her huge paws and occasionally raising her head we moved forward out of the queue.

As we returned back via Maya's place, things had hotted up. A crowd had gathered to watch Maya and her cubs who were active, but obscured behind stands of bamboo. Maya had three seven month old cubs at the time we were there and we were able to catch obscured views of them as they cavorted in the gaps in the bamboo. Photographic opportunities were sadly limited.

As we were watching the tiger family a **sloth bear** caused a minor commotion as it crossed the road behind the traffic jam some distance away.

Time was getting on and eventually we had to think about leaving, which was easier said than done. As we crawled towards the more open area which gives a view of the waterhole, one of the cubs came into view and clambered up the bank and we were able to see him clearly, although briefly! We saw nothing more of note on our way out, but one can't really grumble at six tigers and a sloth bear on one drive!



Tiger cub of Maya

3rd March 2016- Kolsa range AM, Moharli Gate PM.

I mentioned in this [post](#), that on the information provided by a safaritalk.com member we re-booked two drives in Kolsa range, on the belief that Maya had moved into that area as we didn't want to risk not having any chance of seeing her and the cubs. But as it turned out I think this information was not accurate. It is a long drive to the Kolsa zone gate and the routes in the zone were restricted so I would not really recommend making the journey there, given that both the buffer zone and the main park from Moharli gate were delivering good sightings.

We had an early start at 0430 to leave at 5am to get to Kolsa gate. We were taken by car, not gypsy to the gate. The drive there was productive in that we saw a herd of **nilgai**, two **black-naped hares**, **sambar** and several nightjars. The route takes you right at Moharli village, past the entrances to the buffer zone and then through a small town.

We transferred to a gypsy at the gate for our drive in the park. This area of the park is more open with more human habitation in evidence. We searched for a tigress with four cubs that had been seen the previous day but we had no luck there. We saw three black stork, a little group of jungle bush quail, Indian roller, wild boar, langaurs and a few stone curlew. On the way out we stopped at a large tree that hosted a roost of **Indian fruit bats**.

We were back in the main park in the afternoon and had a great drive! Our forest guide spotted fresh pugmarks which led to Sonam's waterhole and one of her cubs was relaxing out in the open by the water. She rested for a good, with her elbow resting on a rock, at one point she shifted her weight

and dislodged the rock which tumbled into the pond. Eventually she left the bank to rejoin mum who was resting under some bushes above the waterhole.

We went on to look for Maya but we didn't stay long. We carried on to Panderpauni and a sloth bear was seen foraging below a tree containing a large colony of bees. Sloth bears are notoriously difficult to photograph, they seem to keep their heads constantly low to the ground and their black fur seems to absorb any light that hits it making them look like big shaggy lumps!

As the closest tigress to our gate we naturally returned to Sonam's waterhole on the way back. The crowds had grown substantially. But the tigress and her cubs did not grace us with their presence. Sonam had three eight month old cubs when we were there. We spotted a **mongoose** on the way.

A **wild boar** was desperate for a drink but the scent of tiger must be in the air and he was naturally wary of making an approach. He appeared twice, but bottled his nerve both times. On the third approach he plucked up the courage to finally take a swift drink before trotting off back to the forest.

It was getting on for 6 pm, as the light began to wane, with storm clouds gathering, a **sloth bear** also approached the water hole.

When the sloth bear left, so did we. It was a mad scramble to get back to the gate before the park closed. Thankfully the road back is tar and in good condition.

4th March 2016- Buffer Zone AM, Moharli gate PM

We were due to go to Kolsa range again but we swapped out our drive in favour of returning to the buffer zone where Madhuri and her tiny cubs had been seen the previous day by another group staying at Serai lodge. Two black-naped hares were seen on the way to the gate. We went into the right hand compartment and searched for Madhuri but to no avail.

Back to the gate, and we crossed into the left hand compartment where the "largest **tiger** in India," the magnificent Waghdoh male was found resting in thick bamboo cover. His origins are unknown but he had been in the southern range of Kolsa for a number of years in his youth but somehow never quite made it there, finding it hard to exist in this region.

It is quite possible that his main prey, spotted deer and sambar were in too low numbers for him, even though it should be good habitat for herbivores. However it has been known for sometime that there is heavy bush meat poaching coming in from the south-east. It was in the buffer forest area bordering Kolsa that two tigers were found caught in deadly jaw traps in 2012.

By late 2010 the Waghdoh male, now of immense bulk and with huge paws, was beginning to challenge the resident males further north in the richer feeding grounds of Moharli and even Tadoba, squeezing north his rivals Crooked tail and the Hilltop Male. However, what the Waghdoh male did learn in Kolsa in his youth was to hunt gaur, and it was while trying to bring down a large male in the early summer of 2011, that he got his eye blinded by his victim's horn, before finally overcoming his battling prey. This how he also gained the nickname "Scarface". He continued to feast on his hard won carcass for days while his injury healed, but by now his good looks had deserted him and his vision had been badly impaired.

For all his grumpiness as a dominant tiger, he is though, immensely caring to the females under his protection, and will often be seen being affectionate around them, at meal times or sharing a waterhole. As with most dominant males he is prone to laziness and often indulges in his tigress's

most recent meals, but this maybe a feint and the price paid by his females for his protection.

With the largest territory in Tadoba he will be covering immense distances mostly at night keep other rivals off his newly established territory and his harem of tigresses, and their boisterous families. He moves between Waghdoh, Telia lake to Tank no 2 in the Mohurli range and then all the way to up to Vasant Bandara in Tadoba.

He eventually rose to grace us with his presence as he headed to his private pool, a location known



as at junona buffer aategaon chowki waterhole comp. no. 175, for a mid morning dip. He drank and bathed for quite a while, so whilst he soaked up the cooling water, we soaked up our views of him!

Waghdoh Male Bengal tiger

When we got back at lunchtime we were excited to hear the news that Sonam had a kill out in the open, so of course we headed straight for her waterhole in the afternoon and were not disappointed!

It was our first and only stop. Sonam appeared and bathed in the pool for a while before heading up the bank to rest in the shade of the bushes.

One of her cubs joined her briefly, then later either that cub or another one, came down to the pond to bathe. Later on Sonam reappeared and started tugging the carcass up the bank. The same cub reappeared and fed briefly before heading off to the bushes.



Sonam on a kill

Soon after the storm clouds gathered and the wind and rain whipped up around us. One of the other groups of tourist had a nasty surprise when an overhanging branch cracked and fell on the bonnet of their car, raining twigs and debris on the occupants.

We sheltered under the plastic rain cover that was hastily brought out and made sure we positioned ourselves out of danger of falling branches. When the rain and wind finally died down, there were no further sightings and soon it was time to leave for the gate.

5th March 2016 Moharli gate

It was our last drive this morning before we had to catch our flight to Mumbai. Maya had been seen with the cubs at Panderpauni the night before along with a male tiger. So we made a beeline for that area. A lovely **Sambar** was seen en route.

When we got to Panderpauni but did not find Maya or the male tiger. There was a thin layer of mist reflecting the golden light as a herd of chital made their way through the long grass.

We tried some newly opened routes, but did not see anything of note. We returned to Sonam who showed soon after we arrived, taking a bath before retiring to the bushes. The sambar had been moved further back and there was much less interest compared to the previous day. Her bold little cub reappeared after mum had departed and took a dip as well.

The little cub grabbed a piece of offal before heading off to eat with her mother and siblings. We met a couple of mahouts who told us that Sonam and the other two cubs were asleep. We tried some more new routes, and found a gorgeous white-eyed buzzard.

Afterwards, we returned to Sonam but there was not further action before we had to leave, we took a packed lunch with us for the journey, leaving at 11.30 for our transfer to Nagpur for our Jet Airways flight no. 9W7134 which departed Nagpur at 1710 hours and arrived in Mumbai at 1835 hours. We had a few hours to rest up at the Suba Galaxy Hotel before we had to leave for our early flight the next morning. The hotel had a well-stocked minibar, which was useful as the restaurant was closed due to a function. We didn't look elsewhere for dinner as we'd had plenty of snacks at the airport and en route so neither of us felt particularly hungry.

6th March 2016- Mumbai to home.

Our driver met us at the hotel reception at 0345 hours to transfer us to Mumbai International Airport in time to check in at 0400 hours for our international flight home with Air India flight no. AI 131 departing at 0700 hours arriving at London Heathrow at 1130 hours the same day. Peter got us into one of the airport lounges, so it was an odd breakfast of scrambled egg on toast with a rum and coke chaser!

The flight back was comfortable and uneventful.

And so ended a rather successful trip!

Annex A: Sultanpur bird list

Greylag goose
bar-headed goose
Teal
Shoveler
Spot-billed duck
Gadwall
Pintail
Ferruginous duck
Tufted duck
Grey francolin
Indian peafowl
Little grebe
Indian darter
Great cormorant
Indian cormorant
Little cormorant
Little egret
Intermediate egret
Indian pond heron
Grey heron
Purple heron
Black-necked stork
Painted Stork
Glossy Ibis
Eurasian Spoonbill
Lesser flamingo
Black Kite

Indian spotted eagle
Imperial eagle
Moorhen
Coot
Purple swamphen
Snipe
redshank
Wood sandpiper
Black-winged stilt
Red-wattled lapwing
White-tailed plover
Rock dove
Collared dove
Ring-necked parakeet
Spotted owlet
Hoopoe
White-throated kingfisher
Coppersmith barbet
Black-rumped flameback
House crow
Large-billed crow
Rufous treepie
Black drongo
Long-tailed shrike
Bluethroat
Black redstart
Oriental magpie robin
Indian robin
Spotted flycatcher
Red-breasted flycatcher
Bank mynah
Common mynah
Plain prinia
Chiffchaff
Hume's leaf warbler
Green-crowned warbler (referred to as Whistler's by the guide we had)
Whitethroat
Large grey babbler

Annex B second trip to Sultanpur bird list

Painted Stork
Glossy Ibis
Ferruginous Duck
Gadwall
Garganey
Pintail
Shoveler
Spot-billed Duck
Teal
Tufted Duck
Wigeon

Black Kite
Bonelli's Eagle
Shikra
White-rumped Vulture
Coot
Moorhen
Purple Swamphen
Red-wattled Lapwing
Snipe
Spotted Redshank
White-tailed Lapwing
Wood Sandpiper
Yellow-wattled Lapwing
Collared Dove
Ring-necked Parakeet
Greater Coucal
Spotted Owlet
White-breasted Kingfisher
Green Bee-eater
Brown-headed Barbet
Sand Martin
Black Drongo
House Crow
Large Grey Babbler
Red-vented Bulbul
Red-breasted Flycatcher
Black Redstart
Indian Black Robin
Magpie Robin
Pied Bushchat
Ashy Prinia
Plain Prinia
Chiffchaff
Hume's Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Common Myna
Purple Sunbird