











Tigers & Temples & Taj Mahal Extension

Destination: Agra & Bandhavgarh NP, India **Duration:** 12 Days **Dates:** 17th-27th Feb

-  Finding and watching a total of 6 different Bengal tigers throughout the tour
-  Seeing a common palm civet on the side of the road in broad daylight!
-  Exploring the wonderful ancient Hindu temples of the Khajuraho Western Group
-  Walking up to around 100 vultures in a feeding frenzy in the buffer zone
-  Having a sighting (albeit very brief) of the elusive sloth bear
-  Having the sites of Delhi, Agra & Khajuraho brought back to life by expert guides
-  Finding a mother and 3 cubs on a nilgai kill as well as a male on a cattle carcass
-  Spotting a total of 16 different species of mammals from Bandhavgarh NP
-  Seeing the impressive male Blue Eyes as he crossed the road in front of us
-  Exploring the world wonder that is the incredible Taj Mahal in Agra



Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
 Jatu (Agra Tour Guide)
 Diru (Delhi Tour Guide)
 Pankaj (Khajuraho Temples Tour Guide)
 Mantesh, Ragul & Pradeep (Transfer drivers)
 Deepak, Ravij, (Bandhavgarh Jeep Drivers)
 Pravind, Ajeet, Raj Kumar, Tahil, Avi & Maneesh (Bandhavgarh National Park Guides)

Participants

Mr. Joe Boyer
 Mrs. Rhoda Boyer
 Mr. David Roberts
 Ms. Samantha Voss
 Mr. Stephen Voss

Overview

Day 1:	Delhi
Day 2:	Agra
Day 3:	Delhi
Day 4:	Khajuraho
Days 5-8:	Bandhavgarh
Day 9:	Khajuraho
Day 10:	Delhi
Day 10:	Home



Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

It is hard to imagine a world without wild tigers, a world without the largest species of cat, a world without the majestic beauty of the orange and black predator. Unfortunately it is just as hard to imagine a world where tigers roamed from Turkey to Korea, Iran to Indonesia, a world where there were around 40,000 tigers in India alone! But this was the world only 100 years ago. For the vast majority of people alive today the tiger has always been a rare and endangered species. To try and think of the tiger as common or widespread is to think of a time that we have probably lost for ever!

We missed the boat with tiger conservation, no country took any steps to ensure their continued survival until a survey in the 1970's brought back worrying findings. With a population in India of only around 1,500 and extermination from 50% of their historic range the fate of the tiger was firmly hanging in the balance. India started the conservation work by initiating Project Tiger and by creating numerous Tiger Reserves around the country, fully guarding the parks and ploughing millions of dollars into the project the numbers increased. In fact the numbers peaked in 1989 to 4,334 in India. The project was working and tigers were coming back strong. This was of little surprise to scientists who predicted that with protection and an adequate prey base the tigers fast breeding, relatively large litters and high survival rate would mean they would repopulate quickly; but it was a great relief that the tigers were doing so well.

However the project and for the most part the conservation world took their eye off the ball and the flow of money to the parks and guards began to waiver and the same people who were once employed to protect the tiger were now having their heads turned by Chinese smugglers offering massive paydays for dead tigers. A survey in 2006 found that the number of tigers had fallen to 1,411 a 60% decline since 2002, this data coupled with the fact that several 'Tiger Reserves' had no tigers left inside them and an independent study finding that the tiger's habitat globally had continued to decrease and was only 7% of its former range; left Project Tiger with no choice. The project began to plough money into the project again and in effect had to start from scratch. This time international agencies like WWF and TOFT were more heavily involved and the most recent survey (2011) suggests a 12% increase and tiger numbers of 1,706 in India.

The news for tigers is also good elsewhere with the Russian Far East increasing its population from 40 to over 500 since the 1940's, with tiger conservation in Burma, Thailand and Indonesia taking centre stage with large tiger preserves opening up as well increasing numbers in Nepal and the ambitious Terai Arc Landscape project (Tiger Corridor) in the Himalayan foothills taking form quickly.

The plight of the tiger is still precarious but at least things seem to be looking up. If we can get China on board then the fate of the tiger could be ensured for many more generations yet.

This tour would take us to one of the best (if not the best place in the world) to see tigers. Being one of Project Tiger's original 9 reserves and one of the highest densities of tigers in the world, the national park of Bandhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh is a remarkable and beautiful place. But we arrived at a time where tiger conservation is in a state of flux, there have been massive rule changes in the last 12 months to the way the Indian Tiger Reserves are run and there is a silent war going on between conservationists who see eco-tourism as the best and most sustainable way to conserve tigers by providing money and awareness and the Indian Forest Department who would rather see tourism banned and the parks closed forever. However idyllic it would be to have areas of protected forest where tigers are left completely on their own, it is not practical and around the world sustainable eco-tourism is the basis of most great conservation work. So for the first time going to Bandhavgarh we did not know 100% of what we would see or how the park would function as many of the hotels, lodges and guides are still getting used to the new regulations. But this is still the best place in the world for tigers and with around 23 tigers known from the area open to tourists and with counts of up to 11 cubs in the surrounding areas we were full of expectation as we headed into the park. Royle Safaris boasts an impressive 100% success rate with tiger sightings here in Bandhavgarh and we were all looking to keep that record going on this tiger tour.

But the natural heritage of India is not the only thing on offer on this tour, as we would also be visiting some of Northern India's most incredible man-made monuments, including Old Delhi's sites, the Taj Mahal and the ancient Hindu temples of Khajuraho. One of the beauties of India is that it is so easy to combine cultural and natural highlights in a short tour. To fully understand the conservation issues and pressures facing the wildlife in India you have to understand the culture and history of the country and there are few better places to experience the cultural history of India than Old Delhi, Agra and Khajuraho. There are many religions in India and all have influenced the country in every way, this tour will give everyone the chance to experience the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain influences as well as gaining an understanding of the future faced by the tigers and other wildlife here as they have incredible populations and human pressures facing them throughout India.

Below is a breakdown of the highlights on a day by day basis, there is also a sightings log at the back of this trip report that details the different species that we saw throughout the tour and hopefully this will help you identify some of the birds and other animals that you may have pictures of.



Day 1 **Delhi**

Arrival & Sightseeing

Today was kept free from any major activities as Samantha and Stephen arrived very early in the morning and with Rhoda and Joe arriving late the night before, Martin was unsure on how much people would want to do today. We have a long day arranged for tomorrow as we would visit the incredible Taj Mahal in Agra; so today was spent at a relaxed pace and the only activity that we completed was making the short trip to the tourist hub of Delhi the Paranganj, we purchased some last minute bits and pieces such as batteries and then went for an early lunch at the great Metropolis Hotel and Restaurant (this rooftop restaurant is a hidden gem in Delhi and is home to one of the best tandoori ovens Martin has tried anywhere in India). After this we headed back to the hotel to rest and pack day packs for our trip to Agra and after dinner in the hotel's restaurant we got some sleep ahead of tomorrow's early start.

Day 2 **Agra**

Travelling & Sightseeing

This morning we left the hotel early to catch the 6am Taj Express from New Delhi train station, the fog was not too bad at all and the train was on time and we were not delayed on arrival in Agra. The journey took around 2 hours 20 minutes and once we disembarked the train we met our local guide and driver and were taken to the Taj Gateway hotel to freshen up, toilet and wait for our local sightseeing guide Jatu. We then made the plans for the rest of the day, whilst here we wanted to visit Itimad Ud Daula, Agra Fort and of course the Taj Mahal. As the fog had now set in we decided to leave the Taj until the afternoon when hopefully the sun would be out and the true spectacle of the monument. So we first visited the impressive Agra Fort. Agra Fort was a long history beginning in 1080AD but it was not until 1488 when the Sultan of Delhi, Sikandar Lodi moved the capital of the country from Delhi to Agra and in particular Agra Fort. It was then taken by the Mughal Empire and it is during this period of India's history when Agra shot to prominence and became the one of the richest and most important cities in Asia. We then entered the huge walled city and were guided around the courtyards, Royal courts and the residential quarters of the emperors and their many concubines. The entrance to the fort is over an old draw bridge that once spanned a crocodile infested moat, just in case the huge double walls and resident army were not enough to put people off the crocodiles would have put off anyone trying to swim across. The intricate carving, elegance and opulence shows off the power that this empire once had, and along with the beautiful architecture of the palaces, baths and courts we were introduced to some of north India's most common urban wildlife. Black kites, rock pigeons, rose-ringed parakeets, five-lined palm squirrels and rhesus macaques all live in the grounds and add an exotic feel to the fort. After exploring the fort and learning about the different influences seen through the building (such as the change from the sandstone dominated buildings made during the reign of Akbar to the white marble favoured by Shah Jahan) we left and travelled the short distance to Itimad Ud Daula (sometimes called the Baby Taj). This tomb was built to honour the grandfather of Mumtaz Mahal (who was the wife of Shah Jahan who the Taj Mahal is dedicated to) and many people regard this to be the draft for the Taj Mahal. This tomb showcases the changes in architecture during the Mughal Empire better than any other monument in India; the start of the tomb was built on the red sandstone that was the stone of choice for over 200 years in India but the second phase of the construction is in white marble that is preferred by Emperor Shah Jahan and is most exquisitely seen in the Taj Mahal. After walking around these gardens built on the banks of the Yamuna River we left for lunch, we ate at a nice local restaurant and waited for the sun and blue sky to break through the fog. Once we had eaten and the fog had cleared we left to visit the highlight of Agra and the whole Mughal Empire. One of the first things that hits anyone visiting the Taj Mahal for the first time is the size of it, it is always much larger than people realise. Built between 1632 – 1653 by over 20,000 skilled artisans this is the ultimate monument of love, the emperor Shah Jahan built this as a mausoleum to his wife Mumtaz Mahal and had the very ambitious plans to build a second Taj opposite this one on the other side of the Yamuna for himself. It would be an exact replica but in black marble with white decoration, so that there would have been a negative version to complement this incredible structure. However the cost of the construction and the length of time taken to complete it meant that he did not live long enough to see the end of his own tomb and his son Aurangzeb (who imprisoned Shah Jahan) refused to complete it and so the only unsymmetrical part of the Taj Mahal now is the larger tomb of Shah Jahan that lies off centre next to his beloved wife. Not only is the Taj Mahal widely regarded as the jewel in the crown of Indian, Mughal and Islamic art and skill, it is undeniably one of the greatest pieces of human achievements that the world has ever seen. We spent a couple of hours here exploring the gardens before entering the Taj Mahal and seeing the incredible carving up close, most of the carving completed on single pieces of marble often meters across and up to 15cm thick. The skills involved to make this now with our modern tools and construction equipment would be mind boggling, to think that this was made during an age without electricity, cranes or any modern construction equipment is just impossible to behold. After leaving the Taj Mahal we headed back to



Delhi (via a private vehicle as our train had been delayed throughout the day and would mean a very late return to Delhi), during the transfer back to Delhi we were all very excited about seeing tigers; the natural world's stunning version of the Taj Mahal. We would also be meeting the final guest joining us for the tiger tour, David tomorrow before enjoying a city tour of Old Delhi.

Day 3 **Delhi**

Sightseeing

After picking up David at the airport and having breakfast at the hotel we left for some sightseeing around this ancient and incredible city. Old Delhi was the walled city of Delhi constructed by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (constructor of the famous Taj Mahal) in 1639. It was made the capital of the Empire and over took Agra as a result. The city was once filled with opulent mansions and elegant gardens but now most of these have disappeared and the manic craziness of the rest of Delhi has invaded. This all adds its own charm to the place and certainly gives you an 'Indian city experience' whilst exploring some of the most beautiful and culturally significant monuments in India. We first arrived at the Jama Masjid, this is India's largest mosque and one of the largest in the world. Also constructed during Shah Jahan the mosque is capable of supporting up to 25,000 worshippers. Luckily we arrived on a Tuesday and the mosque was not over crowded with worshippers. We explored the outside courtyard and inside the prayer hall, we then climbed one of the minarets, this huge tower stretches 41m into the Delhi skyline and offers incredible views out over the sprawling city. It was quite windy and hazy today and the view was not as good as possible but we could make out the Lotus Temple, Feroz Shah Kotla Cricket Stadium and the new Akshardham Hindu temple complex. After climbing down the 130 steps twisting inside the narrow minaret we walked the old market streets of Chandni Chowk. This market is one of the busiest areas in Delhi and an experience in its self, we also found a small side street here with some exquisite Jain temples, the intricate carving into solid marble is incredible to behold; but the most startling aspect of this small row of temples was the instant calm and tranquillity that hit you once you stepped off the narrow and busy market street and into the Jain temples. We then continued walking until we came to the Sikh Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib, this is one of the most historical and impressive Gurdwaras in Delhi. Established in 1783 to commemorate the martyrdom of the 9th Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. We were first briefed on the history of the Gurdwara and then entered the prayer room with the singing priests and the holy book. We then visited the enormous kitchen here; one of the best aspects of Sikhism is their encompassing of all religions and races in their belief of providing food and accommodation to anyone of any background for free. It is very inspiring to see people giving up their time to work hard in the kitchens for free in order to provide food for over 70,000 people per week! We then continued our walk down the Chandni Chowk towards the imposing Red Fort, this section of road is one of the most religiously tolerant in the world, in a very short distance we passed a Muslim Mosque, Sikh Gurdwara, Hindu Kovli, Jain Temple, Christian Church and Buddhist temple all of which are used daily with no tension or hate evoked. Then arriving at the huge Red Fort we had a walk around, first visiting the museum filled with artefacts, weapons, papers, painting and clothes from the Mughal occupation of the city and fort. We then continued into the old market street, Royal court and the private chambers of the Emperor and his concubines. After an hour or so of exploring this 254 acre residence built in 1648, we left and went to a more modern but no less important monument; Raj Ghat. This is the final resting place of the father of modern, independent India Mahatma Ghandi. This is just about the most quiet and relaxing area in Delhi and a place of reflection and contemplation. We then returned to the hotel and spent the rest of the day preparing for tomorrow's trip to Khajuraho. This is our last stop before we hit the national park and hopefully tiger sightings as well as being one of the most incredible locations due to its ancient sandstone Hindu temples.



Day 4 **Khajuraho**

Travelling & Sightseeing

Today after breakfast we travelled to the Terminal 3 at New Delhi's International airport to catch our flight to Khajuraho via Varanasi. The check in process was as comprehensive as ever but there were no dramas with the flight and we got off pretty much on time. The flight too was ok and on arrival in Khajuraho we met our local guide Vijay Singh and off we went to the hotel. After checking in freshening up we headed out to lunch at a nearby restaurant before heading to the temples which make this small rural town so popular. First up we visited the Western Group. This is the largest and most complete set of temples here and home to some magnificent examples of Hindu architecture. They were all built between 950 – 1050AD by the 'Moon followers' the Chandela Dynasty. To help us understand the intricacies of the carvings we were in the expert hands of Pankaj. He is an expert in the temples here and he brought to life the various carving and building techniques that created the thousands of exquisite carvings. These carvings are incredible and diverse, from large mythical beasts polished from centuries of people paying respect by rubbing its sides, to the six inch high depictions of Ganesh, Siva or Parvati to the war scenes with elephants and soldiers to the stories of everyday life such as putting make up on, removing thorns from



feet and of course the sexual desires of men and women. The temples here are probably most famous for the erotic carvings showcasing some of the Karma Sutra however they only account for around 5% of the total carvings; and it is often the subtleties of other carvings which catch the eye more. For example the lace trim of a see-through sari wrapping its way around the legs of a dancing girl or the facial expressions on children and servants. All in all the temples here are beautiful reminders that even 1000 years ago everyday human life was just as mundane, complex and full of chores and jobs as ours are today. As well as exploring some of the 15 temples of the Western Group we got a good introduction to the more common species of birds. With a couple of colourful Indian rollers taking centre stage, with a supporting cast of tiny common tailorbirds, numerous Asian pied starlings, common mynahs, brahminy starlings, Indian grey-hornbills, noisy Alexandrine parakeets, rose-ringed parakeets and nice close up views of a male and female plum-headed parakeet. After these temples we left the Western Group and headed around to the other side of Khajuraho and the Eastern Group, this group was built in the same era but has since been taken over by Jains (as opposed to continued Hindu worship of the Western Group) so there were some nice differences to notice amongst the temples and carvings. The most obvious difference is the presence of the multi-coloured Jainism flag mounted on top of each temple. Another key difference is that when the temples have been reconstructed (as most of the remaining temples have been reconstructed to some degree), as Jainism was established by Hindu priests (Brahmin) who began to worship prophets as opposed to gods they did not see the need in carving the detailed statues in tribute to the gods, instead the newer temples are whitewashed with very small symbols located around the doorways of each temple. These symbols are all different and represent one of the 24 prophets who are worshipped by the Jains. For example a bull represents the 1st prophet and a lion the 24th. As the prophets are identical these symbols are the only way of identifying the individual prophets and their temples. We then headed to a local craft house before reaching the hotel for dinner before tomorrow's last journey towards the home of tigers.

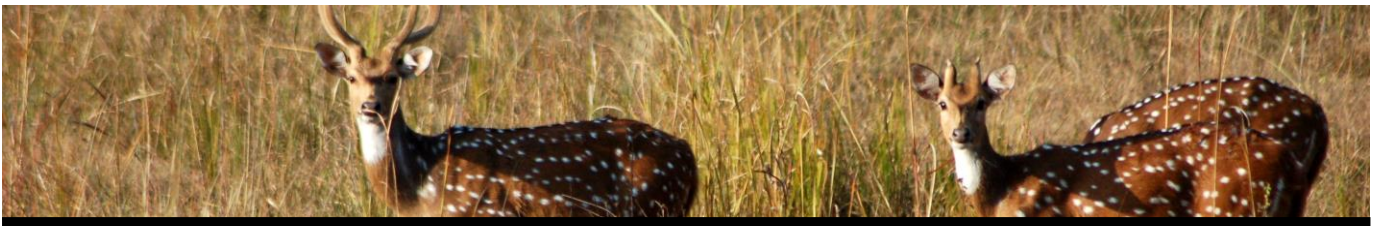
Day 5 **Bandhavgarh National Park**

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we had a rose early so to get to Bandhavgarh (5-6 hours) in time for our afternoon safari and first chance to see tigers. The journey takes us through rural central India and showcases the mixture of rice paddies and wheat fields interspersed with mustard fields, yellow lentils, assorted vegetables as well as brick factories with their many firing kilns and small villages built close to the side of the roads. Not long after leaving Khajuraho we drive through the buffer zone of Panna National Park (recently devoid of tigers there is now a reintroduced breeding population that have all bred and the population is now around 17). There is no chance of seeing a tiger whilst passing through the small section of buffer zone that we did but we did see many southern-plains langur monkeys and a large troop (100 plus) Rhesus macaques on both sides of the road. These two groups of primate (langur and macaque) being amongst the most commonly seen mammals in all of the Indian Subcontinent and most of South East Asia too. We also saw a small group of female nilgai as well, this large antelope is the largest species outside of Africa and very common in the drier and more open areas of central India. Continuing onward with the plains of the Deccan Plateau sprawling out either side of the road leave little to look at in the distance; which makes the large flat topped hills and hillocks as we approached Bandhavgarh all the more impressive. Their sides heavily eroding away with thousands of years of monsoon run off leaving the tops looking like oversized table tops precariously placed on top of tables too small to support their weight. Other than the odd spectacular geological wonder to look at the rest of the journey was spent trying to spot some of the various birds who make the telegraph wires over the cultivated land their home. The lizards, mice, insects and other small creatures feeding off the grasses, seeds and roots make a veritable banquet for the dozens of Indian rollers, black drongos, paddyfield pipits, jungle babblers, common stonechats and pied bushchats which we spotted along the way. But by far the most impressive bird sightings we had were of a couple of Egyptian vultures. This species was once thought immune to the diclafenic epidemic which has reduced the Old World Vulture population in the Indian Subcontinent by 99% in the last 30 years, but they have now suffering a 40% decline since 1990. The vultures in some parts of India are beginning to come back a little and in Bandhavgarh the numbers are increasing rapidly. As we got closer to Bandhavgarh we started noticing a subtle change in the birdlife, less and less Indian rollers and black drongos and more and more spotted doves, black ibis, cattle & intermediate egrets and laughing doves. The reason for this shift in species may be nothing more than an anomalous observation or it may be a sign of changing agricultural use of the land as the buffer zones of the park only permit subsistence and traditional farming techniques. Further into the sal forests of the buffer zone and we spotted our first large mammal, a very brave female barking deer (or Indian muntjac), this hard to see species just stood on the side of the road and allowed for some great pictures. We then arrived at the lodge and had a quick snack before loading up into the two jeeps we have and entered the park for our first safari. Our drivers were Deepak and Ravi, they would be our drivers for all of our safaris but as is practise here we are allocated national park guides at the entrance of the park, so we first went to the park offices to collect our allocated guides (Pravind and JP) and entered the park at the Kithauli gate. There are 4 zones in the park, one of which (Panpatti) has since been closed to tourists, leaving three zones where tigers are commonly seen. The most popular is the Tala zone but this area was currently having extensive work (grass cutting, road widening and controlled fires) done inside. So Martin decided to try the other two zones (Kithauli and Magadi) which tigers are commonly seen and the human disturbance will not affect the tigers behaviour and reduce sighting chances. We spent the majority of the time in the territory of a female who has 3 cubs aged around 4-5 months old at the moment. We didn't manage to see any of these tigers this afternoon but we did see large herds of chital (this is the



most common species of deer in India and they make up the most commonly taken prey species for tigers) and big troops of langur monkeys as well as a very good sighting of a changeable hawk eagle perched on a bare tree close to the road. We then went to a waterhole and waited and listened for alarm calls, whilst we didn't hear any ourselves we heard that a couple of other jeeps had heard sambar alarm calls close by and so headed to where they were heard. We spotted a female sambar and heard her alarming very close to the road, however it all went quiet and the alarm calls stopped and the sambar relaxed and began to feed again. One of the main reasons why spotting tigers at the moment would prove to be quite difficult is that there had been lots of heavy rain a few days back (rain at this time of year is very unusual) and this meant that there was available water all over and nowhere in particular that the tigers would have to be to get a drink in the heat of the day. But we did have some other good sightings as the afternoon drew on, we saw both species of common mongoose in the park the ruddy mongoose and Indian grey mongoose, many nilgai, lots of peafowl and another barking deer. We were also shown some of the common plant species here, such as flowering bamboo (that flowers once before dying), Indian gooseberries (used in chutneys and pickles) and muhwa which is the local wine tree, villagers collect the flowers quickly before the sloth bears eat them all and make a strong alcoholic drink with them. We then began to leave the park via a village, there is a few small villages still located inside the park (most of them have been relocated to other areas outside of Tiger Reserves) and these villages still practise traditional ways of life. Including dairy farming where the cattleman will follow the herd all day and night as they graze the land. This existence leads to conflicts with tigers as they see the cattle as very easy prey. We are trying to combat this by offering the local villagers that currently still live inside the parks a percentage of the park revenues, as well as offering large compensation schemes for relocations. Nowhere else in India is the human-tiger conflict so obvious, as when you are leaving the park after being on a tiger safari (in a park that has the highest concentration of tigers in world) you pass through a village without proper fencing protecting houses and livestock and you see farmers following their herds through the park. It is hard to believe that in this day and age there are still people that deal with the possible threat of tigers every day. Only by understanding the needs of people who live alongside tigers and in their ecosystems can we adequately protect the tigers whilst developing sustainable practices for the local people. Most conservation efforts are now concerned with integrating local people with the cause and the fine line of this balance is so evident in Bandhavgarh. We would see and hear further examples of this during the next few days but for now we left the park at sunset and once back at the hotel we had dinner and rested.



Day 6 Bandhavgarh National Park

Wildlife Watching

Today we only had a morning safari booked and the afternoon would be spent on a nature walk in the buffer zone forest the resort. The morning safaris start at dawn and so we were at the gate before sunrise to collect our guides, today we would have Ajeet and Raj Kumar to help us find wildlife and we headed to Kithauli gate. On the way to the gate we heard many male chital bugling, this high pitch call is the signal that the male is ready to mate and to fight other males for the rights to mate. Once we entered the park one of the first sightings we had was of a mother barking deer with a fawn, the fawn was very young, possibly just a day or two old. We quickly found some female tiger tracks from last night and closer to the village inside the park we saw male tiger tracks moving the same direction as the females. Whilst we couldn't see any cub tracks it was a safe bet that this female and male were a mating pair and we listened out for the tell tale sounds of mating tigers in the jungle. As if by design right next to the male's tracks was a set of jungle cat tracks, giving us a fantastic contrast between the two different sized tracks. It wasn't long after this when we heard strong sambar and chital alarm calls from the same place, we waited around the area and could clearly hear a very agitated sambar within 50m of us but the bamboo here was very thick so we couldn't see the sambar at first. But as we were all looking on this side of the road we were taken by surprise when a sloth bear made an appearance (albeit one of the quickest appearances) before delving deep into the thick forest. We followed the general direction of the sloth bear but it didn't come back out into view however we need hear from another jeep that shortly before the bear was spotted another jeep nearby heard a tiger growling. So we went back to the area we had heard the alarm calls and the tiger was heard and saw the sambar that was alarm calling, he was now very calm and no longer alarming. We stayed for a little while but the tiger didn't emerge and we travelled around searching for another tiger or more wildlife. As the sun was rising our guides showed us more of the common trees around here such as ebony, teak and the aptly named crocodile-bark tree. Before we left the park we heard further sambar alarm calling as well as nice herd of nilgai including a very impressive male. Continuing towards the gate a large troop of langurs lay sunbathing along with a couple of rhesus macaques playfully grooming each other. Both jeeps also had some unusual birding sights before leaving the park this morning, with Joe, Rhoda & David spotting a pied kingfisher next to the road (whilst not a rare bird by any stretch of the imagination, in these small ponds inside Bandhavgarh they are seldom seen) and Stephen and Samantha saw a black-hooded oriole and jungle owlet and its two chicks perched next to their nest hole.



Once we returned to the lodge we had brunch and then rested for a few hours before meeting with Tahil the local naturalist for the lodge and being taken on a short nature walk around the buffer zone that surrounds the park. This area is a very dry and sparsely vegetated forest, mostly due to over use by people and their livestock and this is one of the biggest problems facing Bandhavgarh. The difference between the lush and largely untouched national park and the desolate buffer zone that is home to a staggering 30,000 people! It is no wonder that the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department are planning on reducing the core area of the park to increase the forest cover in the buffer zone. The reason for the buffer zone is two fold, firstly to give animals the chance of leaving the core zone and not being thrown straight into a village or town, but have some means of surviving undiscovered and moving from one protected area to another and secondly to provide the local people with a means of still utilising the forest in a subsistent, sustainable and traditional way. But for all of the problems facing a large mammal in this part of the forest (or lack of forest) we did hear that there were many bears that used this area after the monsoon when the mahua tree is in flower and we also heard the tragic story of a young girl who was killed by a tiger last year. These are further examples of the problems facing the people and wildlife here as there is a constant threat of conflict in this part of the world. We also saw tracks of jackals, Indian foxes and mongooses here which is further sign that wildlife still holds out here despite the ever-present exploitation of people. But during this couple of hours we walking around here birds were high on our agenda and we had some excellent views of white-eyed buzzards, plum-headed parakeets, common woodshrikes, rufous treepies, large cuckooshrike, small minivets, Indian yellow tits and a nice viewing of Indian nuthatches and a brown-capped pygmy woodpecker. We then arrived back at the lodge in time for dinner.

Day 7 Bandhavgarh National Park

Wildlife Watching

This morning we arrived at the park gate and were allocated our guides and we headed to the Magadi zone this morning, hoping that a change of zone would lead to some better luck on the tiger front. We had heard that another jeep had seen a tiger cross the road, they had heard the same sambar and chital alarm calls that we had too, but they stayed on the opposite side of the section of jungle where the alarm calls were coming from. They were further away from the sambar but had guessed right as the tiger came out and walked across the road in front of them. Before we even reached the gate we had a huge male sambar cross the road heading back into the park after spending the night foraging in the agricultural land on the other side of the road. Then once we entered the park we very quickly saw fresh tracks from a female and her 3 cubs (this is the mother that has 3 cubs aged around 3-4 months old) and we followed these tracks. We heard chital alarm calls but it wasn't a strong call, there were just a couple of high pitched calls that were probably sparked by a jackal or jungle cat as they didn't last and were not repeated. We carried on further and saw tracks of another female and her 4 cubs, but they disappeared off the road and we couldn't find them again. We did however come across a very fresh carcass of a chital fawn; the animal had clear puncture wounds to the throat and had been partially eaten on the thigh and torso. It was so fresh that the eyes were still there (these are usually the first part of an animal to be scavenged as they are soft and very high in water content) and there was no smell at all. Martin guessed that it was a leopard kill from this morning and the leopard had probably abandoned the carcass on hearing the sounds of the jeeps as they arrived for the safaris this morning. The leopard was probably still in the vicinity as it would be unusual for any predator to leave a half eaten carcass for no reason. It wasn't far from here that we saw a couple of the tiger monitoring mahouts close to the road, these men are employed by the Forest Department to track and monitor the tigers as well as help tourists to see them (this practise was taken to the extreme in a couple of days time and is something that Martin has contacted the park authorities and several international conservation and tiger research NGO's to stop it from happening again – we do not explain the events we saw in detail as they are currently being investigated at the request of Martin). But on this occasion we arrived on the road opposite a section of jungle where the two elephants were, there were a couple of other jeeps here and we had managed to position ourselves perfectly next to a small game trail when out of the blue a huge female tiger came bounding of the jungle and up the trail and away from us. We waited and positioned ourselves at the other end of this section of jungle but to no avail. The tiger didn't come out again but we did meet one of the mahouts and his elephant, they came over the jeep and allowed Stephen and Samantha to get nice pictures of the elephant up close and interact with largest anti-poaching weapon in the park. We then left this area to go in search of a tiger somewhere else and close to the elephant – ranger station we heard chital alarm calls, but once again this alarm calmed down and we moved on. Before we left the park we did see two large male chital rutting as well as a large troop of langurs foraging and a regularly used scratching tree. This tree clearly showing the size, power and strength that the tiger have, some of the claw marks entering the trunk at 3m high and going nearly 10cm deep into the wood.

We then all returned to the accommodation for brunch and in the afternoon would be trying Kithauli zone for the last time (as our remaining safaris would all be in the Magadi zone), whilst we have had no luck in this zone, we did hear that a female was seen on the road close to the entrance gate this morning. So there were tigers active in this zone even if they were hiding from us! Unfortunately the afternoon safari was very quiet and not helped at all by the thunderous downpour half way through. We seemed to avoid the worst of the rain but the thunder and lightning continued around us for most of the afternoon. Another example of the odd weather that has afflicted Central India recently and another reason why we would struggle to see tigers with so much standing water around. The only highlight of note from this afternoon's safari was a very nice view of a large male nilgai close to the road and



allowing for a nice photograph, they are usually quite shy and do not hang around for pictures but he posed very nicely for us. Then on leaving the park and heading back to the lodge we saw three different golden jackals crossing the road and then one of the most unusual sightings to have during the day; a common palm civet. This mostly nocturnal species was seen on the side of the road in the tree line, the elongated black cat like face with a whitish face mask unmistakable. Presumably the darkened skies and rain showers had combined to wake this seldom seen species from his roost and force him down to the ground in the daylight. This is the first time Royle Safaris had seen a common palm civet during the daytime in India and as night safaris are not standard practice in India they are very seldom seen here. Closer to the lodge we saw an Indian pipistrelle as well as many cattle egrets, the pipistrelle beginning its night and the cattle egrets returning to roost in the trees and rooftops of the houses around the small village of Tala on the outskirts of Bandhavgarh.



Day 8 **Bandhavgarh National Park**

Wildlife Watching

Last night the passing storm had kept some of us up most of the night and this morning we entered Magadi zone the occasional distant flash of lightning and rumble of thunder entertaining us. As soon as we entered the park we found fresh tracks of a female tiger (only 2-3 hours old), we could age these tracks well because the rain had been falling until a few hours ago and these tracks were completely dry with no rain marks inside them. We followed these prints and came across a nice view of 4 Indian grey hornbills in a tree close to the road as well as a large herd of chital on the forest edge, there were many males in this group including some mature males who were rubbing their antlers against the tree trunks to remove the velvet from them. A sign that these males will be ready for mating and rutting in the very near future. As these deer have a near constant supply of food year around they do not have a clearly defined mating season like deer species in temperate climates. This means that it is not uncommon to see males with antlers in all different stages of development and also why we can find fawns at all ages at almost any time of year. We moved on and to an area where we spent some time yesterday, there is a kill of a few days old here and yesterday we didn't see anything here, but today we arrived just as the imposing figure of Blue Eyes walked away from us into the forest. Blue Eyes is the second dominant male tiger in the park and a beautiful and massive example of a male tiger. He had been feeding on the bull carcass over night and not leaving much left had decided to head into the jungle to probably find some shade to sleep away the hottest part of the day. He was limping heavily on his front right paw, an injury that he could have sustained during capturing the bull or more likely during an altercation with Barnera the dominant male in the park and a direct ancestor of the famous Charger. He stayed in view for 3-4 minutes as he walked parallel to the road around 50m back in between vegetation. As we watched him walk further and further into the dense jungle and out of sight we noticed 2 golden jackals approaching down the road in front of us, we watched as these two jackals were joined by a third from inside the jungle. By now Blue Eyes had disappeared into the jungle and we just watched as the jackals interacted with each other. It was great to see the third jackal being so submissive, his tail firmly between his legs, hackles raised and baring his teeth with his back and neck arched back. This made him look more aggressive to us but in the jackal world this is a very submissive behaviour and one that showed that the two other jackals were defiantly in charge of the situation. However they didn't assert their dominance around the carcass, it must have been that the scent of Blue Eyes was still so prominent around the carcass because none of the jackals would approach to feed from the carcass even though the tiger was long gone from view. We also saw two different vultures very close, they were the cinerous vulture and red-headed vulture. These are the two species that are harder to see in Central India and you do not usually get as close as we did to these incredible and huge birds. We then left this area and went to scout out some other areas including a couple of large meadows where we spotted a hunting black-winged kite scanning, hovering over and swooping into the grassland after unseen lizards and rodents. Then further around and into the grounds of a local village in the buffer zone we saw two stray dogs, one of which had a baby langur in its mouth and the other one was barking aggressively up a tree at a trapped langur (presumably the mother of the baby hanging limp in the jaws of the feral dog). Yet again another example of the human influenced problems facing local wildlife throughout India. We then arrived back in the same area of forest with the bull kill and where we had seen Blue Eyes earlier and we saw fresh tracks of a female and 4 cubs crossing the road. When she did this we cannot be sure but it could have been just when we were sat watching Blue Eyes walk away of maybe when we watched the jackals. But the omens were good that we had 6 tigers in the local area. We waited for a while back around the kill, by now a small group of wild boar had shown up to scavenge from the carcass. We hung around this area for a while longer and heard a group of langurs, all looking down into the jungle and at the tigers that were still hidden from our view. As we waited around here the two tiger monitoring mahouts arrived on the scene and confirmed that the tiger was here, then very suddenly the female tiger came into view for a split second and then back into the jungle. We waited for 10-15 minutes and then she came out again and walked parallel to the road for around 40m as it walked away from the carcass and back into the dense jungle. The mahouts then confirmed that



they had lost her and it was getting towards the time to leave the park, on our way out we had a fantastic view of a mother wild boar and her 6 nearly fully grown piglets crossing the road right in front of our jeeps. We then left the park and had a celebratory brunch after a couple of great sightings this morning. During the afternoon we headed back to the park and into the Magadi zone. On entering the park we decided to head direct to the same area we saw the tigers this morning and hoped that they would still be in the same area. As soon as we arrived there the two elephants were there and most of this afternoon's jeeps were being to congregate here. The mahouts confirmed that there was still a male and female in the area and that this was the female with 4 cubs. The mother and cubs were all sleeping in dense bushes on one side of the road with the male on the other side of the road. What happened next was quite unbelievable for all of the wrong reasons and is what has lead Martin to contact the director of national parks in the state of Madhya Pradesh (who is currently based in the national park of Kanha), the David Sheppard Wildlife Foundation, Tour Operators for Tigers and a couple of other organisations that will investigate this and ensure that it doesn't happen again. At first we were completely unaware of what was going on and when the mahouts signalled that the male was about to cross the road, so all of the jeeps positioned themselves in the area, we were quite a ways back and only got a fleeting view as big Blue Eyes limped across the road and towards the female and cubs. After he went into the forest the jeeps moved around again and got into a position to see if he made another appearance. A few minutes later the mahouts signalled that the tiger would be coming out again, this time we got a better view but were still a little far away from the action. We couldn't quite see the tiger and felt that it must have been the female as she may be moving the cubs away from the male after he crossed the road. So in the hope that the cubs would quickly follow we managed to get to the front of the jeeps and in the perfect position to see all of the most likely crossing points and sat back and waited for the cubs to emerge in front of us. We then saw the mahouts re-enter the forest on the side of the road that the tiger had just walked over to and as we watched stunning, the elephants charged towards the road a little way into the forest. Low and behold shortly after this Blue Eyes came limping out of the forest and back across the road (crossing this same bit of road for the third time in only 20 minutes). We did get excellent views of Blue Eyes as he walked right in front of us, but the means to which the mahouts were going now to make money (through tips) was barbaric and not what we had come here to experience. We then saw the mahouts go to each jeep in turn and accept tips from the tourists. When they came over to us we told them in no uncertain terms that this was unacceptable and if we had been informed that this was what was happening we would have left long ago. This new 'enterprise' has surely come about since the Forest Department has banned the short elephant safaris that used to operate in the park and provide the mahouts with extra income. But even if the mahouts were just looking at collecting a little extra money that they need and were used to receiving from tourists, it does not condone their actions and clearly shows some of the shortages in their training and lack of discipline by the authorities and their complete lack of interest they have about their jobs. As some of the jeeps and mahouts got ready to no doubt cause more discomfort to this already injured animal we left and began to slowly head out of the park. We didn't see any other major sightings but heard chital and langur alarm calls but they seemed to be getting more and more distant away from the road. Just as we reached the gate we paid a brief visit to Charger Point, this area of the park is where the legendary tiger Charger was laid to rest. He dominated the park for a decade and lived in Bandhavgarh for an amazing 17 years, dying of old age in 2000. Famed (and named) for his habit of charging elephants, tourist and jeeps (without ever killing anyone) he was a huge tiger and mated numerous times with one of the most famous and most photographed tigers in the world, Sita. Their offspring have dominated the park since and Barnera is a relative of the great Charger and still dominates the park. We then left the park as the sun was lost behind the clouds and then sunk below the horizon.



Day 9 Bandhavgarh National Park

Wildlife Watching

This morning was our last safari into the park and our last chance to see tigers before heading back to Khajuraho. We entered the Magadi zone and even before we entered we heard strong sambar alarm calls from outside of the park, however there is no road here and no way of finding out more. Quickly after entering the park our jeep got a puncture (a huge 15cm iron nail going right through the tyre, the ends coming out of both sides), so we changed the tyre as quickly as possible, as we were doing this we heard chital alarm calls nearby, but no tigers approached us! As we had stopped to change the tyre we were well and truly at the back of the convoy of jeeps that entered the park and headed straight to the kill site, where we saw the tigers yesterday. As a result we were in a perfect position to see very fresh tracks of a male tiger on top of the jeep tracks from this morning. We followed these tracks (made within the last hour or so) and headed towards a large meadow where we also saw fresh female tracks. We entered the meadow and waited watching the forest edge. It was very quiet in the meadow despite the numerous tracks (mostly of the female) from all over the roads around here. We then heard strong chital alarm calls and so we



staked out an area of bamboo. It was very dense and we couldn't see any way inside. As we couldn't see anything here we left to speak to the forest wardens at a nearby watch camp to see if they had any news on sightings this morning. They had not yet heard back from the mahouts this morning and so we carried on and eventually heard news that there was a tiger spotted close to the road in another area of the park. We quickly drove around to this point and arrived close to where a few jeeps were, including the director of the park in his own private vehicle (possibly due to hearing about the fiasco with the mahout yesterday?), but whatever the reason for his presence this morning it ensured that the two mahouts here (who were different from yesterdays) behaved accordingly around the tigers. We found out that it was a female with 3 cubs that were sleeping close to a nilgai carcass that had been killed last night. As we waited he was got some views of the mother in the dense bamboo as she lay down, at this point the cubs were out of sight and we waited for around 20 minutes until one of the cubs came walking out of the bamboo thicket and across an open area and back into dense jungle, this cubs was then followed by another cub, this time running at breakneck speed in the same direction. We managed to get pictures and a video of this cub and then the mother as she followed the two cubs and disappeared out of view. We waited for the third cub, but it never came into view. We tried a different position but didn't see the tigers again, we also couldn't push our time in the park this morning as the park director was here and making sure that all of the jeeps left the park on time. We then arrived back to the lodge and finished packing our bags and had a large brunch as we had a 5-6 hour journey back to Khajuraho ahead of us.

But our wildlife viewing was not quite finished yet, as we left the lodge grounds and headed to the main road we saw a huge feeding frenzy of around 100 vultures on a cow carcass. As we hadn't seen the carcass before it was a good bet the cow died last night and the vultures had made very short work of it. There was not very much left of the carcass as we walked up to the loud and busy mass of feathers and beaks. Most of the vultures were Oriental white-backed vultures and a smaller amount of Indian long-billed vultures, the long-billed out competing the white-backed as they are significantly larger and more aggressive. There was also a stunning looking red-headed vulture on the periphery of the mob. We stayed here and approached to around 10m away and got some great close up pictures of the vultures, it is great to see this many vultures back in India and thriving, as long as the carcass is not laced with diclafenic this is a big victory for the vultures. After leaving this and getting onto the main road we didn't have any other sightings of note, just the usual roadside bird species, until we reached the hotel and checked in. We then had dinner here before a few games of pool and a good nights sleep.



Day 10 **Delhi**

Travelling & Rest

This morning we had a lie in and rested before having to catch our internal flight back to Delhi via Varanasi. The flight was uneventful and once we arrived back in Delhi we headed straight to the hotel and had the afternoon free. Stephen and Samantha were due to fly out in the early hours and so would be heading to the airport in a few short hours and with David flying just a few hours later we just relaxed and had an early dinner this evening.

Day 11 **Home**

Departure

With Stephen, Samantha and David all departing without a hitch in the early hours of the morning Martin, Joe and Rhoda were left in the hotel and with a couple of bits and pieces to complete in Delhi we went about these chores before Joe and Rhoda left for the airport in the late afternoon.

Species List

Tigers & Temples and Taj Mahal Extension February 2012

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Chital	<i>Axis axis</i>
2	Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>
3	Golden jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>
4	Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>
5	Jungle cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>
6	Northern palm squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennantii</i>
7	Chinkara	<i>Gazella bennettii</i>
8	Indian grey mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>
9	Ruddy mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>
10	Rhesus macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>
11	Indian crested porcupine	<i>Hystrix indica</i>
12	Sloth bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>
13	Indian muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>
14	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>
15	Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>
16	Common palm civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>
17	Indian pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus coromandra</i>
18	Southern plains langur	<i>Semnopithecus dussumieri</i>
19	Wild boar	<i>Sus scofra</i>
20	Indian fox	<i>Vulpes benghalensis</i>

February										
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
				133	53	340	416	127		
				7	5	30				
						3	10			
				1	4	12	4	5		
					*					
3	32	6	4	1			1		4	1
				1	1					
				1	*			1		
				1		1				
	131	4		35	52	65	46		7	
				*				*		
					1					
				3	6	1				
						*				
				*	*	1	3	3		
						1				
						1	1			
				115	17	117	57	58		
				9	10	6	14	1		
					*					

Birds (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>
2	Eurasian kingfisher	<i>Acledo atthis</i>

February										
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
			1							
					1					

3	Bank mynah	<i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i>
4	Common mynah	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
5	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
6	Cinereous vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
7	Asian openbill stork	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>
8	House swift	<i>Apus affinus</i>
9	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
10	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
11	Indian pond heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>
12	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
13	White-eyed buzzard	<i>Butastur teesa</i>
14	Greater coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>
15	Pied kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
16	Emerald dove	<i>Chalcophaps indica</i>
17	Greater flameback	<i>Chrysocolaptes lucidus</i>
18	Woolly-necked stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>
19	Rock (feral) pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
20	Oriental magpie robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
21	Indian roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>
22	Large cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina macei</i>
23	Jungle crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchus</i>
24	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
25	Tickell's blue flycatcher	<i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>
26	Rufous treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>
27	Brown-capped pygmy woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos nanus</i>
28	White-bellied drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>
29	Black drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>
30	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
31	Black-winged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
32	Dollarbird	<i>Eurystomus orientalis</i>
33	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
34	Red jungle fowl	<i>Gallus gallus</i>
35	Jungle owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>
36	Asian pied starling	<i>Gracupica contra</i>
37	Indian white-rumped vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>
38	Indian long-billed vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>
39	White-throated kingfisher	<i>Halycon smymensis</i>
40	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>

	~70	4	8	~10				2	4	13
100's	100's	100's	100's	100's		3	2	100's	100's	~50
	6				1					
							1			
				1						
			~30				~25			
				3			1	1		
	1						1			
				2			1			
21	18	3		25	6			91	11	
				1	2		1	1		
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					1		1			
				1						
					3	2	1	1		
								1		
100's	100's	100's	100's	100's				100's	100's	32
				2	1					
			1	22		1	4	21	1	
					2					
				59	3	24	31	~160	7	
100's	100's	100's	100's	~100				100's	100's	17
				1	1			1		
				2	3	1	*			
					2					
				1		2				
			1	18	2	3	3	11	3	
				16			1	~25		
							1	2		
								2		
							1			
				1	8	2	3	2		
					3					
			2							
								~60		
					3			~55		
				3			2	4		
	~130			20						

79	Pied bushchat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>
80	Indian robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicatus</i>
81	Indian nuthatch	<i>Sitta castanea</i>
82	Spotted dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>
83	Crested serpent eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>
84	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
85	Oriental turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>
86	Red-collared dove	<i>Streptopelia tranquebarica</i>
87	Brahminy starling	<i>Sturnia pagodarum</i>
88	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
89	Common woodshrike	<i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>
90	Yellow-footed green pigeon	<i>Treron phoenicoptera</i>
91	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
92	Jungle babbler	<i>Turdoides striata</i>
93	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
94	Red-wattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus indica</i>
95	Orange-headed thrush	<i>Zoothera citrina</i>

				1				1		
				1	4					
					1					
				181	53	16	14	~55		
					1					
	11			2			3			
	1			1	1					
	1									
					3					
							3			
					1					
								1		
	3									
	2		5	93	75	46	43	4		
				1			1			
	6			3	1	3	12	3		
					1	1				

Reptiles (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Asian house gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>

February										
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
							1			

Amphibians (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Common Indian tree frog	<i>Polypedates maculatus</i>

February										
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
					1	1				