

ASSAM and MANIPUR (INDIA 2017)

Januray 17th to February 13th

After a first trip 18 years ago in Assam I have always wanted to go back to visit Manas National Park. During my first trip Manas was invaded by Bodos people fighting for independence.

India is always tiring, smelly, dirty, but you meet (outside of Rajasthan and Baratspur) often very, very nice and helpful people. Even some bus drivers take care of you. It is incredible. I think at the opposite side is Indonesia where people try to overcharge you a lot for everything. I have been more than 6 times in both countries and I have always seen the difference. But my main problem in India is to eat as I can't eat spicy food and it is always difficult for local to understand what is not spicy. I got very good and unspicy food at Florican Lodge near MANAS and Wild Grass Lodge near KAZIARANGA. NAMERI Camp was the exception with bad food and unhelpful people (a big difference with the manager I met 18 years ago).

In Assam I visited Kaziranga national park, Hollongapar wildlife sanctuary, Orang National Park, Manas national park and Bongaigaon (for Golden Langur).

In Manipur I visited only Keibul Lamjao national park. Keibul Lamjao had always been on my wished list because it is the only place where to see Brow Antlered Deer in India, but until recently it was impossible to get a permit without being in a group, with a travel agent arranging car, driver and accommodation. When last year I realized it seemed to be possible I contacted people in Assam, Manipur and several Indian Embassies. All told me it was possible. Only the Indian Tourist Office in Paris told me the contrary: 3 days in Kolkata to get a permit, compulsory use of travel agent with guide and driver, no online visa accepted.... Nevertheless I bought an e visa, then the flight to Manipur(cheap) as I knew it has always been a problem to travel by road in the north east states (except Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Megalaya) and that for security reason.

ASSAM

KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK:

I stayed only 2 days visiting the central, western and eastern part of the park. It is now impossible to visit Bansbari reserve (1 american being killed by an elephant). I remember I saw Hoolock Gibbon there. Kaziranga is said to be crowded by tourists, it was not the case (even no other car in the eastern part).

In the park I saw:

-Indian rhinoceros: at least 50

-Asian Elephant: only 15

--Wild Buffalo: 40+

-Barasingha: 50+

-Hog deer: 600+

-Red Muntjac: heard only

Wild Boar: a lot

Tiger: 1 (Central part)

Smooth Coated Otter: 6 (eastern part)

Rhesus Macaques: common outside of the park

Hoary Bellied Squirrel: several at Wild Grass Lodge

Himalayan striped Squirrel: 3

HOLLONGAPAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Hollongapar is close to Jorhat and easy to reach.

I went there after Kaziranga, sleeping at the rest house 1 night (unfortunately it was fully booked the following night). It is apparently not any more possible to spotlight in the reserve due to elephants. Nevertheless I did it for a short time inside and then after along the access road. The rangers told me having seen once a Flying Squirrel and that the Slow (Bengal) Loris is common. I didn't see any Loris, but just a Common Palm Civet.

The following morning I went with 2 rangers looking for wildlife. But one of them was quite lazy. Seeing different times Hoolock Gibbons, Malayan Giant Squirrels and Capped Langurs was easy. We saw only one Pallas's Squirrel, twice Northern Pig tailed Macaques (always in the trees), heard several Elephants, Red Muntjacs and saw footprints of Leopards and Wild Boars. But I was specially interested to see Assamese and Stump Tailed Macaques. The former is quite rare with only 1 group of 22 or 24 in the reserve. The second has more than 400 animals in 3 groups (a group count 190). One of the ranger showed me small trees that the Stump Tailed had pulled off the soil to eat the roots. The strong smell of this monkeys was still present. But the 2 rangers explained me that the Stump Tailed feed mainly on the ground and move a lot. It is why they are rarely seen. WILD GRASS offered me to send trackers, a cook, a driver....but it was expensive and I always like to participate to find animals. I took the phone number of 1 ranger and I explained him that I will come back to see this species.

And I did it by the end of my stay in Assam. I stayed again 1 night at the rest house (very basic). The ranger I had contacted told me he had seen the Stump Tailed 3 days ago along the road in the reserve. In the evening I spotlighted again along the access road but didn't see anything. The following morning I started early with the ranger. He looked hard to find the Stump Tailed. We walked 7 hours and it took 6h30 to find the large group of 190 animals. We had to crawl below lianas and bamboos to approach them. They are really ugly but I enjoyed the search, seeing the scats (and smelling them where they had passed), the tree where they had spent the last night and the many small trees they had pulled off the soil to eat. An interesting experience. Of course we saw again Rhesus Macaques (at the camp only), Hoolock Gibbons and Capped Langurs and heard Elephants, Red Muntjacs, Wild boar and Pallas's Squirrels.

BONGAIGAON:

I knew that in India Golden Langur are easy to see at Ultaplani and Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary. But the manager of Florican Lodge gave me another place easier and closer to reach. It is near Bongaigaon. I saw three with a local guide Sanjeev Ray (9859141261 or 9435314156). But they are all around this area and easy to find by yourself. Local people showed a place where to see them. Take the road east of Bongaigaon to Barpeta Road, then turn right to North Salmara, stop at Kokaijana and turn right (they are on a hill just 2km away). Sanjeev showed me a large colony of Indian Flying Foxes.

TEZPUR and the BRAMAPUTHRA RIVER

I went twice there to see Ganges Dolphins and went with a local boatman used to carry local tourist. Both times I saw dolphins (at least five). Once I got 1 completely outside of the water. Jon HALL reported to have seen them there. During my first trip I saw them in Guwahati. An Indian photographer gave me another place: Chulsi river west of Guwahati.

ORANG National Park

This park close to Tezpur is rarely visited by foreigners. I did only one safari. I didn't see any tourist. I saw plenty of mammals during my first trip, including a Tiger. This time, the grass being still very tall, I saw very little:

- Indian Rhinoceros: 1 (I was told they are more than 100 in the park)
- Wild Boar: 3
- Hog deer: 35+
- Rhesus Macaque: 1 group

NAMERI NATIONAL PARK

I stayed 2 nights at the Eco Camp that I won't recommend: unhelpful and lying staff including the manager.

The park is famous for White Winged Wood Duck that I saw twice. I also saw:

- Hog deer: 1.
- Wild Boar: 3
- Gaurs: 4
- Sambar: 2
- Rhesus Macaques (beware that most guides in Assam claim Assamese Macaques when they see Rhesus Macaques. Assamese Macaques are rare in Assam.)

-Capped Langurs : only 1 group at the headquarters.

I heard also Red Muntjac and Asian Elephants.

Close to the headquarters is a breeding centre for Pygmy Hog. They have 32 and I saw them.

MANAS NATIONAL PARK

I had not booked anything in advance but found easily a nice place where to stay close to Manas Gate: Florican Lodge.

Manas is a large park with few tourists. Driving by night in the evening was permitted but I didn't see anything by night except nightjars.

During 2 days I saw:

Asian Elephants: at least 30

Indian Rhinoceros: 2 (they are very few in the park; 36 if I remember well).

Wild boars: 6+

Sambar: 4

Red Muntjac: 1

Barasingha: 8 only

-Wild Buffalo: 30+

Gaur: 30+

Hog deers: at least 15

Capped Langurs: 20+ (common near Mothanguri)

Rhesus Macaques

Malayan Giant Squirrel: at least 3.

No chance with the Pygmy Hog (March or April would have been better). I saw also footprints of Tiger and Leopard and 1 male Bengal Florican .

From Mothanguri Lodge along the Manas River which is the border with Bhutan it is sometimes possible to see Golden Langur in Bhutan and I was lucky to see one. In fact 18 years ago when I wanted to come here it was the easiest place to see this species which has a very small distribution.

GUWAHATI ZOO

During all my life I said I won't visit a zoo. But now I regret I would have seen some rare species like Sumatran Rhinoceros at Sepilok. It is too late now. So I had decided if I had time to visit Guwahati (for the Pygmy Hog that I saw at Nameri) and Manipur Zoos.

Of special interest In Guwahati I saw 1 Pygmy Hog, 9 Sangais (Indian Brow Antlered Deer subspecies), 1 or 2 "Red" Serows. In North East India the Serow are black or dark grey north of the Bramaputra and red south of this river. Some scientists say they the latter are Red Serow like in Myanmar and others say it is a different species or subspecies from the Himalayan Serow. Anyway it was a sad experience: staff exciting a buffalo, children throwing stone to a lion, serow walking way and back all the time trying to find a way to go out...

There were several free Red Muntjacs (coming from the adjacent forest reserve) and 2 Small Indian Mongooses.

MANIPUR

In 2016 I found on the net a trip report from Indian Birdwatchers who had visited Keibul Lamjao and seen Brow Antlered Deers from a hillock among the floating vegetation of the southern part of Loktak lake. They wrote they are 3 hillocks you can reach by canoe and if you arrive early morning you can see the Sangais which are very shy and it was what I wanted to do.

After flying to Imphal I went to Keibul Lamjao National Park specially to see Brow Antlered Deer. On arrival at the park headquarters I met a scientist who told me that they are around 260 in the park and that to see them I had to go to a watchtower 500m away where they are guaranteed early morning. It was 11am but I rushed there, but saw only many Hog deers. By 12h30 the place was crowded with very noisy people and I went back to my room (I stayed at the rest house that the Wildlife Warden, M. PRASAD had booked for me. I am very grateful to M. PRASAD who arranged my stay).

In the middle of the afternoon one ranger came with me to the tower but we saw again only Hog deers. Earlier I had seen the Range Officer to whom I had asked to go next morning (to be sure to see the Sangais) to one of the hillocks. I was so afraid to miss them. And the ranger acting as guide told me he would find a car and pick me up next morning by 5. By 5 and 5h30 he was not here. I jumped above the fence around the rest house and I was arriving at the watch-tower the ranger with the car arrived. I was angry, but went with him. It was less than 10km to reach a place where another ranger was waiting for us close to a canoe. The 4 of us went in a canoe, the 2 rangers pushing the floating vegetation to arrive to a hillock where there is a watchtower. During the canoe ride I saw nothing special except 50 Ferruginous Pochards. Arriving at the hillock, we climbed to the top, then to the top of the watchtower and saw 2 females and a young Sangais, but they had heard and smelt us and slowly disappeared in the tall grass. It was a little foggy. But by scanning I saw at least 9 Brow Antlered Deers including 2 males, one coming very close to us. I was so glad. Hog Deers were plentiful (it is the only place where they are in Manipur).

Brow Antlered Deer is a rare species. They are several subspecies

-eldii in Manipur, restricted to the floating vegetation of Lake Loktak. Locally it is called Sangais. They are Sangai Restaurants, Sangais shops, Sangais hotels... in Manipur. It is the emblematic mammal of Manipur. They are around 260 and are increasing. In 1951 they were declared extinct. In 1975 14 were seen from a plane. Then the park was founded and their number steadily increased. It is the rarest of the 3 subspecies.

-thamin in Myanmar, reintroduced in Thailand with apparently little success.

-siamensis in Vietnam (apparently extinct), Cambodia (where I saw it twice), Laos and China (Hainan Island mainly in fenced areas).

MANIPUR ZOO:

I had 2 hours to kill in Manipur and visited the zoo where the most interesting was an Asian Golden Cat.

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