

India's Panna and Kaziranga: Cats and Primates

Simon van der Meulen / February 2023



Below a brief report on the highlights of my trip to India together with my wife. This was my 14th visit to India since my first visit in 1978 and the 4th of my wife; evidently, we are fascinated by this country. I also visited many of the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries across the subcontinent for birdwatching. All those times I only once had a brief glimpse of a leopard that leapt across the road in front of our jeep (Chitwan N.P. in Nepal). Never, ever did I see a Tiger. Many birds though.

This 3-week holiday had a mix of culture (Delhi, Varanasi, Khajuraho, and Kolkata) and wildlife (Panna N.P. in north-eastern Madhya Pradesh and Kaziranga N.P. in Assam). The latter I had visited previously as part of a birdwatching trip. Panna N.P. was new to me and is only a 40 minutes easy drive from the famous temple complex of Khajuraho and the nearby airport. It had been on my radar previously, but always dismissed it due to the absence of tigers at the time (rampant poaching caused by mismanagement), which led me to believe the rest was nothing either. That has all radically changed for the better; the park now boasts over 80 tigers. What's more, in terms of landscape I found Panna to be one of the most attractive parks of India and the number of visitors is still very manageable (compared to Ranthambore, Corbett and Kaziranga, for example).

We stayed 6 nights near Panna N.P. in the charming country lodge The Serai at Toria which comes highly recommended (idyllic setting along the peaceful Ken river, superb food, excellent hosts that really take care of their guests and with a genuine and proven commitment to nature conservation and social development of the rural population surrounding the lodge). The lodge also employs the services of a naturalist guide (Jaypal Singh) and a driver (Davendra Pratap) who are both excellent, good companions and much in demand

We subsequently stayed 5 nights near Kaziranga N.P. at the Diphlu River Lodge situated along a small stream that flows into the Brahmaputra river. Its entrance is directly on the main artery road that runs alongside the park and despite the heavy traffic, the riverside cottages of the lodge are situated in such a way that you don't hear traffic at all.

Both lodges do not come cheap. But notably The Serai at Toria does offer premium value for all your money, and so much more. We do intend to come back there.

Panna N.P.

On the second day we started our daily morning and afternoon safaris into the park. Especially when arriving at the gate just before dawn, the atmosphere amongst the drivers and guides is boisterous and most inspiring. Everyone is looking forward to what the day will bring. Totally different from the entry gates of other parks in India, where it all looks much more commercial and business-as-usual. When entering the park, one is obliged to take on board a guide assigned by the park administration; regardless of bringing your own guide. The park guides all seem to be at various initial stages of a long learning curve ahead, but they are all very kind and when you point out that your own guide is in the lead, they understand and will not interfere.

There is a single access road into the park which will be quite busy at first, but after some 3 kms the road splits-up into three and it's quite easy to be almost on your own thereafter.

On our very first morning drive, it took perhaps one hour when our guide learned by phone of a **Tiger** sighting. It turned out to be the tigress that had very recently given birth to an unknown number of cubs not yet seen by anyone. A number of jeeps had already gathered at the spot, but no tiger in sight yet. Our driver smartly positioned the jeep in what turned out to become the most advantageous position. It is difficult to explain, but to me the sighting of a tiger is completely different experience from an encounter with a Lion. My very first sighting of a lion (in fact, two huge males resting near a buffalo carcass, in Greater Kruger, South Africa), I will surely never forget. But... a tiger moving through the forest, incidental glimpses through the foliage at first, the orange and white colouration and the stripes, then slowly coming into full view; it is literally breath-taking. She walked right towards our jeep, crossed the dirt road and vanished into the forest. Both me and my wife were gasping for air. We saw the tigress again on another drive. Just 15 minutes later, we encountered a male **Leopard** that was steadily moving through the bushes, half-hidden by the foliage and seemingly oblivious of our presence when we started slowly following him. His continuous sniffing of the ground and focused determination clearly meant he was following the scent trail of a female nearby. Unfortunately, we lost him soon after. Another hour passed by and then we spotted 2 **Jungle Cats** right next to the road. A male was next to the car looking up at me with its fierce yellow eyes for a few seconds and then leapt away into the high grass. Three very close encounters with three different cat species within just over an hour. A great start indeed.



On another drive, we went along the Ken river deeper into the park along the Ken river down to a small bridge beyond which public access is not allowed. Just before we wanted to turn the car, a large **Jungle Cat** was seen right ahead of us with a fresh kill in its mouth (the prey looked like a Gerbil) and it continued walking in sight for some 10 minutes as we slowly followed it.

Another 5 minutes later, we took a sharp turn and Jaypal, our guide, spotted a small cat moving fast out of the shadow of a tree. When it approached the high grass it briefly turned its head towards us: a **Rusty-spotted Cat**! The small cat's posture at that very moment was absolutely ideal for a photo opportunity. Just a few strands of grass in-between me and the cat. Unfortunately, I took too long fumbling with my new camera lens when trying to switch to manual focus and then it turned out too late for any decent photo. Alas! But still, the 4th cat species in just 2 days. And not just any other 4th: a Rusty-spotted in bright

sunlight!! Rusty-spotted Cats are seen in and around Panna from time-to-time. Even at our lodge, so we were told.



As I mentioned, the landscape of Panna is gorgeous. Plains with soft grass with **Chinkara gazelles**, river beds, heavily forested hillocks and a stunning waterfall.

The waterfall sheds its water into an abyss, some 100meters lower which is inaccessible. The lodge proprietress later told me she and her husband (a distinguished biologist) used to be allowed to enter the forest below the waterfall and she explained the wonders of a small untouched ecosystem of dense, moist

forest. At the viewpoint of the waterfall, one is allowed to disembark from the jeep and wander around a bit. There we had excellent views of a pair of **Ruddy Mongooses**. A few days after we had left Panna, our driver sent me a small movie he'd made of a male Tiger strolling at the very same spot.

On the 3rd day, we took a steep track that led us into the hills and at a sudden point a large, very large **Sloth Bear** crossed the road and went straight into the bush. After we halted the car and peered through our bins, we saw it hidden. It stayed put for a while. Although it was not possible to see the entire animal, we had good looks of its massive head. I had seen one previously in Chitwan N.P., Nepal, but not as good as this time.



The lodge offered us a short tour by rowing boat across the tranquil Ken River. When we were about to return the boatman softly spoke: a cat. Along the banks, a **Jungle Cat** was casually strolling and allowed us another extended look (and the cat did the same in response).

I undertook one night drive, which is only allowed in the buffer zone of Panna. Here as well, a park guide is obligatory and time-wise it is confined from 19:30-22:00PM.

Fortunately, this park guide proved to be a very capable young man. After clearing two successive guard posts we finally entered the buffer zone. Another car had overtaken us and we later found them parked. They had just seen a Sloth

Bear with a cub. When we stopped at an open area, we got ourselves a good view of an **Indian Fox**. Later we encountered **Indian Hares**, **Golden Jackals**, a **Small Indian Civet** as well as an **Asian Palm Civet**.

Kaziranga N.P.

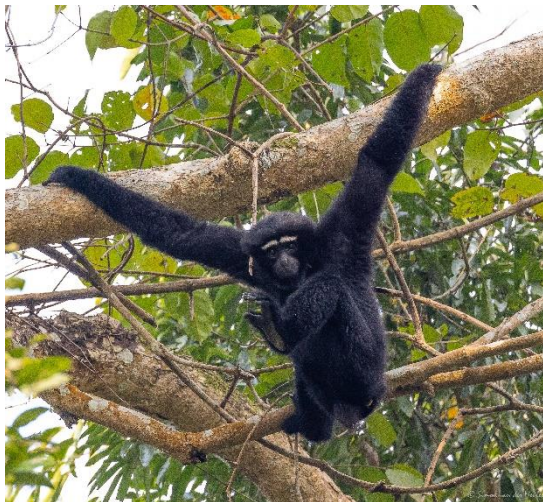
This park is known for its huge population of **Indian Rhino**. That population number is now some 2600 individuals in a park that is "only" 900 sq.km large. So, it goes without saying that any drive in the park will surely get you multiple views of this beautiful animal. Actually, you need not enter the park; they can easily be seen from the main road that has become much more busier than when I first visited the park in 2015. There are various sections, each with their own entry gate. Park management attempts to ensure that visitors are more or less equally allocated across the various

sectors. Nevertheless, it can be quite crowded at times. In Kaziranga, we were treated with multiple sightings of **different tigers**, all male and each time we were in awe.



When a tiger emerges from the high grass and shows itself, its head lifted and after a majestic glance proceeds, your adrenaline level has jumped to almost critical levels.

On multiple occasions, we saw fresh tracks of Fishing Cat, but we failed to come across any of them cats.



At the edge of the most western section; actually right next to that busy road our guide stopped the jeep and went looking for the **Western Hoolock gibbon**. After a few minutes, a small group including some juveniles started to show themselves and we enjoyed everything that makes gibbons such a delight to watch: swinging fast from branch to branch and that comical walk across a thick branch with long strong arms half lifted for balance. We were thrilled! Shortly thereafter we drove into the park and a family of **Black-capped Langurs** showed itself in the canopy; another great encounter. In this section one gets closest to the Brahmaputra river. At a viewpoint we looked across the wide expanse of

sandbars interspersed with tributaries. As I was scanning the steep banks a few hundred meters across, I noticed a huge male **Tiger** that slowly came down to the river and went backwards into the water for a short rest. So typical!

On another occasion we were treated with a group of **Smooth-coated Otters**, relaxing on a sandbank.



It goes without saying that after so many failed attempts, the multiple sightings of a tiger during this trip was such a relief: the spell has finally been broken. And the Rusty-spotted Cat was more than just a bonus; rarely seen let alone at daylight.

Mammal species list (* = lifer):

		Panna N.P.	Kaziranga N.P.
Tiger *	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	X	X
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	X	
Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>	X	
Rusty-spotted Cat *	<i>Prionailurus rubiginosus</i>	X	
Smooth-coated Otter	<i>Lutrogale perspicillata</i>		X
Small Indian Mongoose	<i>Urva auro-punctata</i>	Delhi	
Ruddy Mongoose *	<i>Urva smithii</i>	X	
Indian fox *	<i>Vulpes bengalensis</i>	X	
Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	X	
Small Indian Civet	<i>Viverricula indica</i>	X	
Asian Palm Civet *	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	X	
Asian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>		X
Indian Rhinoceros	<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>		X
Chinkara/Indian Gazelle *	<i>Gazella bennettii</i>	X	
Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	X	X
Indian Muntjac/Barking Deer	<i>Muntiacus vaginalis</i>		X
Sambar Deer	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>	X	X
Chital/Indian Spotted Deer	<i>Axis axis</i>	X	X
Barasingha/Swamp Deer	<i>Rucervus duvaucelii</i>		X
Hog Deer	<i>Axis porcinus</i>		X
Asiatic Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus arnee</i>		X
Indian Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa cristatus</i>		X
Western Hoolock Gibbon *	Hoolock hoolock		X
Black-capped Langur *	<i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i>		X
Northern Plains Gray Langur	<i>Semnopithecus entellus</i>	X	X
Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulacca</i>	X	X
Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	X	
Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	X	X
Northern Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambukus pennantii</i>	Delhi	
Malayan Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa bicolor</i>		X