

Southern India, January 2023

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Mudumalai Tiger Reserve

Having not visited India for a good number of years, this was my second trip to the subcontinent in less than six months. This was mainly because – due to the frequent tit-for-tat between our respective governments – India had decided UK residents had to get a one-year, multi-entry visa in order to visit. This reverted to the eVisa system in December 2022, but any inconvenience/expense incurred was balanced by the fact that a) it motivated me to sort an overdue trip to southern India and b) there were very few British tourists. This part of the world had been on my radar since visiting Goa in the early 2000s, and I'm glad I finally got there. It's a wonderful part of India, with friendly people, great food and abundant wildlife in some impressively extensive protected areas.

Logistics & miscellaneous

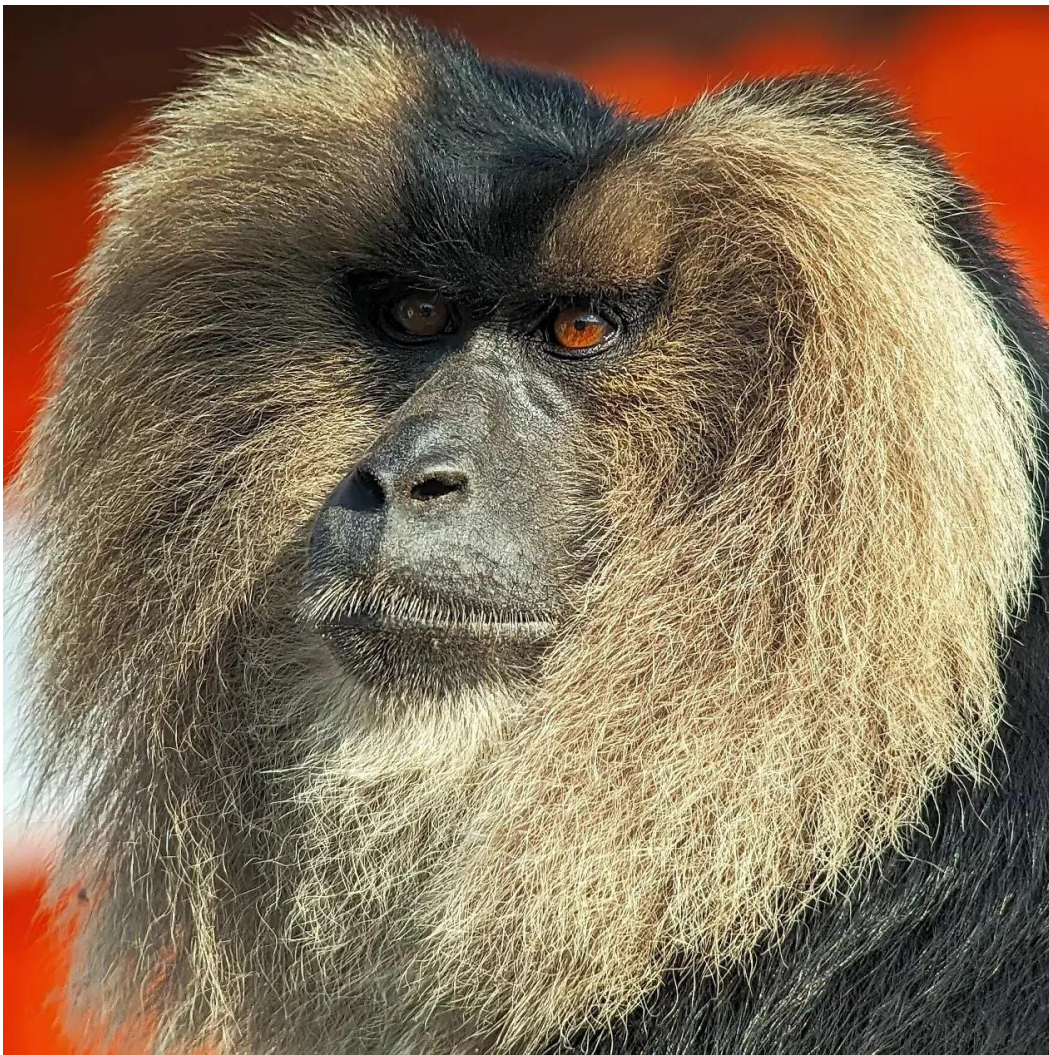
As this was quite a last-minute trip with limited time to spare around work, I got almost everything arranged for me. Several people recommended [Kalypso Adventures](#), so I contacted them to arrange an itinerary that suited my aims for the trip: namely, catch up with the endemic bird species, see Dhole and Lion-tailed Macaque, have a good crack at the smaller carnivores and small mammals endemic to the Western Ghats, and in any leftover time see as much cool stuff as possible. This

essentially meant combining parts of their [South India endemic bird](#) and [mammal](#) tours, which worked near-perfectly in the timeframe available. A couple of slight changes I would make are under the site details. Kalypso have yet another happy punter here. Thomas Zacharias was my contact in arranging the trip and was brilliant – quick to come up with an itinerary and get things booked, proactive, and prompt at replying to emails. The guide and driver I was assigned were exemplary: Jijo Mathew is an outstanding naturalist, with a wealth of knowledge to share, and always determined to get excellent views of all species; Joji was one of the safest and most reliable drivers I've encountered in India. On top of that, they were available at whatever daft hours I wanted to go out looking for wildlife, always punctual and excellent company with some good chat on the drives.

My impression is that southern India is nowhere near as bad for bureaucracy and general frustrations that can plague trips to the north of the country; it's possible these things were just minimised by the lads, but either way I found it much more pleasurable place to travel around. Most travelling distances are relatively short, and the traffic pretty tolerable.

Temperatures were pleasant; up to 30c-ish by day in the Keralan lowlands, low 20s and cool to chilly at night in the hills, and mid-to-high 20s but surprisingly cool at night around Masinagudi and Bandipur.

Bird sightings from the trip (with mammals noted for most sites) are detailed [here](#).



Alpha male Lion-tailed Macaque, Valparai

Kochi, 31st December – 1st January

My flight (via Dubai) landed into Kochi at 8am, so I stayed overnight in the city to adjust to local time; definitely worth doing, not least because it's a really nice city. A friend of mine as seen Indian Humpback Dolphins from [Fort Kochi](#), so I thought I'd try for those on a sedate touristy afternoon. Being New Year's Eve, however, the foot ferry over from Marine Drive, Ernakulam had a queue the size of which I've rarely seen, so plan B was to hop on a boat that went round the harbour and stopped at Fort Vypin. This was a pleasant way to spend an hour and a half, but didn't produce any dolphins.

Thattekad Bird Sanctuary, 1st-3rd January



A fantastic area of moist-deciduous lowland forest, Thattekad holds a high proportion of the avian specialities of the Western Ghats, plus a decent selection of mammals. The problem with seeing the latter is access. In the last few years, elephant activity has apparently increased dramatically, so – understandably – the authorities are not keen on tourists making nocturnal forays, and guides are – also understandably – not keen on breaking these rules, meaning the good forest is off limits at night. As the reserve is quite small, there are opportunities for nocturnal forays around the fringes, although I'm not sure this habitat is much good for e.g. Travancore Flying Squirrel.

I hoped to stay at Hornbill Camp, but unfortunately this had some building work going on, so was moved to its sister setup, Birds Murmur Camp. While the latter was in a lovely spot by a river with forest on the opposite bank, it was surrounded by rubber and pineapple plantations; Hornbill Camp seems to be set in nicer habitat so may hold more interesting small mammals. Around Birds Murmur I found a female **Golden Jackal** with two small pups, and (at night) **Little Indian Field Mouse**, while a large **Asian Elephant** was crashing around on the opposite bank of the river the first couple of nights, clearly visible at times.

The best mammal species here was '**Malabar**' **Grey Slender Loris**. The local guides around [Urulanthanni](#) know the spots where they snooze away the day, and I was shown a couple, one of which could be seen pretty well. The forest-dwelling animals here look quite different to those I've seen in dry habitats in northern Sri Lanka, and given the (over)splitting of primates I'm a little surprised there hasn't been some taxonomic rearrangement... Another was heard but not seen after dark near Nellimattom, where a couple of **Jungle Striped Squirrels** were observed the afternoon, and several species of microbat at dusk. I also saw a couple of Cynopterus bats (probably *C. sphinx*) one evening near the reserve entrance. '**Malabar**' **Red Muntjac** was encountered a few times, and **Bonnet Macaques** and **Malabar Giant Squirrels** (a dark taxon here, with an entirely blackish tail) were common. Elephants were heard distantly while in the forest a couple of times – and there was plenty of fresh dung around – and we also found fresh prints of a smallish Leopard.

Periyar Tiger Reserve, 4th January

I only spent one afternoon in this fantastic reserve, with the targets of **Nilgiri (Dusky) Striped Squirrel** and Wayanad Laughingthrush; having seen these the first afternoon, I opted against another morning walk in order to crack on to other sites. Access (via the park office in Kumily) is fairly restricted, and must always be in the company of a ranger, again with good cause; the one walk only went a relatively short way into the forest, but we still saw **Gaur** and **Asian Elephant** at

impressively close range while on foot –superb. The forest is dominated by clumps of *Ochlandra* bamboo – often confusingly called Indian reed –which is the favoured habitat of both the laughingthrush and the squirrel. The latter is quite different from others in the genus *Funambulus*, being very small with quick jerky movements, rapid high-pitched squeaking vocalisations, and it generally sticks to cover; a really nice animal. **Jungle Striped** and **Malabar Giant Squirrels** were also seen in this area. I stayed in the pleasant Abad Green Forest resort, the grounds of which held my first **Nilgiri Langurs** (seen from the pool) and **Indian Palm Squirrel** and were a good vantage point to watch the many **Indian Flying Foxes** over Kumily itself. A bunch of mid-sized microbats emerged from roost in the eaves above my hotel room balcony, although what species they were I do not know.

Many people take a boat trip with hordes of tourists on Lake Periyar, which seems to be good for the large mammals Smooth Otter, and sometimes Dhole. It is possible to join a ‘night patrol’ with rangers, which advertises sighting of various nocturnal animals, but I’m not sure how good they would be for serious mammallers. A friend once had a close daytime sighting of Nilgiri Marten here while leading a birding tour group along one of the trails here!

Munnar, 5th-7th January



Bonnet Macaque, Bodi Gap

Heading back north and into the highlands, my next stop was the old hill station of Munnar. We actually took the long (but quicker route) east into the lowlands and back up via Yellow-throated Bulbuls at Bodi Ghat, but saw no mammals other than **Bonnet Macaques**. The main reason to visit Munnar is for the near-guaranteed Nilgiri Tahrs, and those Western Ghats endemic birds found only south of the Palghat Gap. After the previous two sites, this area was a shock to the system: it’s an ecological disaster zone. The rolling hills are almost entirely deforested, replaced by tea plantations, and the vast majority of ‘forest’ patches you see are plantation of one kind or another, usually eucalyptus. All with roadsides thick with the detritus from urbanisation. Most of the birds still seem thrive in this scrappy edge habitat, but it doesn’t seem much kop for mammals. Due to the slightly last minute trip, I had to stay in the town rather than anywhere close to remnant habitat. The Tea Country Inn was at least quiet and had a beer lounge; the only mammal I saw in the grounds was a **shrew** species I located with the thermal; I couldn’t tell if it was a *Crocidura* species or a juvenile Asian House Shrew though.

To reach good habitat, you need to get higher. At Eravikulam NP, a tourist bus ferries visitors from the [HQ](#) to Rajmalai; at present you cannot take a private vehicle to the remnant shola/grassland habitat. The first bus leaves annoyingly late (8am), so it’s best to arrive by 7.30am to ensure you beat most of the tourists up. One at Rajmalai, follow the paved zigzag road until you see **Nilgiri Tahr**; it’s only 1.5km until the end, but it took a surprisingly long time to find some close animals! Apparently they are so tame as to walk among the crowds, at times... Also bear in mind that Rajmalai is needlessly closed for the two month period that tahr calves are born, in February and March each year. The birding is very good up here, but no other mammals were seen. Brown Mongoose has been seen in the gully below the café where you disembark the bus at Rajmalai (also a good spot for endemic birds such as Palani Chilappan and White-bellied Sholakili).

Roughly 4.5km east of the entrance to Eravikulam is a decent-quality patch of accessible shola forest, with [a track leading from the road to 8th mile camping](#). I decided to check this out late and so

arranged a taxi with the hotel; both driver and staff seemed bemused by me going to walk along a misty roadside in the dark. After an hour, I was starting to agree, having seen no signs of life, let alone a Brown Palm Civet or Nilgiri Marten; it may repay more extensive attention though. Birding this rather nice forest the following morning produced what appears to be a **Sahydris Forest Rat** (*Rattus satara*). Identification is based on the large ears, very long tail and distinctly border between the rufous-toned dorsal and white ventral surfaces. The forest form of Asian House Rat in the region I saw later looked quite different, and a couple of Jijo's colleagues agreed with the ID. Some very nice views of **Nilgiri Langur** were also had here.



Nilgiri Langur, Munnar

presumed Sahydris Forest Rat, Munnar

Chinnar, 7th January

Continuing down the hills onto the drier eastern slopes, we made a stop in the middle of the day at Chinnar WLS to try to get Grizzled Giant Squirrel on the trip list. A couple of hours stroll in the lovely riparian woodland along the Chinnar River failed to produce a sighting; fortunately I've also seen the locally occurring taxon (*dandolena*) in northern Sri Lanka. Several **Malabar Giant Squirrels** were seen, along with a number of **Tufted Grey Langurs**. The latter were also seen from the roadside on the drive to Chinnar, along with several **Gaur**. The **Bonnet Macaques** in the car park are particularly bold here!

Valparai, 7th-8th January

I only spent one night in Valparai, but could easily have stayed longer. For an area that is mostly tea plantation with just scattered remnant forest, the number and diversity of mammals is remarkable. The drive up is incredibly scenic, with forty-six switchbacks on the road up onto the plateau. This is another spot for **Nilgiri Tahr**; a couple were grazing on the verges on both journeys. Getting out of the vehicle is tricky (well, technically prohibited) so a less relaxing viewing experience than at Eravikulam. At the top of the hill, the area around Attakatti has some tame roadside **Eurasian Wild Pigs**. The main draw here, though, is **Lion-tailed Macaque**. I spent quality time with two troops – one in forest at [Puthu Tottham](#), the other in less natural surrounds near [Iyerpadi](#). Absolutely wonderful animals. Around Puthu Tottham I also had great views of a large herd of **Gaur** grazing among the tea bushes, plus **Nilgiri Langurs**, **Sambar**, and both **Malabar Giant** and **Jungle Striped Squirrels**.



Lion-tailed Macaques, Valparai

I was hoping to stay at Monica Garden Bungalow, but it was already booked out; I had to settle for the really very nice [Sirikundra Bungalow](#). Access (particularly on foot) is severely limited in the Valparai area due to an abundance of elephants (which I surprisingly didn't see) and Gaur, so it's best to find some accommodation that might produce nocturnal mammal sightings on site. I was concerned about the seemingly limited habitat around Sirikundra, but needn't have worried. Courtesy of the manager, a short drive and watch from the roadside in woodland/plantation to [the north of Sirikundra](#) after dark produced one of my main targets: a fantastic view of a **Brown Palm Civet**. A mouse species (with a relatively short tail) was also seen foraging on the ground here, and I heard some vocalisations in the canopy which probably belonged to **Indian Giant Flying Squirrel**, but I couldn't locate anything with the thermal.



Apparent Salim Ali's Fruit Bat, Sirikundra

In the grounds of the bungalow itself, some apparent **Salim Ali's Fruit Bats** were feeding on figs; I had good views through a telescope (even if the photos are poor), and these appeared all dark and plushly furred (unlike *Rousettus*), lacking the contrasting pale ear rims and fingers of *Cynopterus* species and with a broad muzzle. I am however very open to being corrected on the identification! Skulking around the property in the evening and again a couple of times through the night also produced **Indian Crested Porcupine**, **Indian Muntjac**, **Black-naped Hare**, a pipistrellus sp., and a frankly impressive profusion of **House Rats**, plus a group of five **Gaur** in the surrounding tea plantations.

Brown and Stripe-necked Mongoose are regularly seen in the area, and I suspect I'd have seen at least one of them with a bit more time.



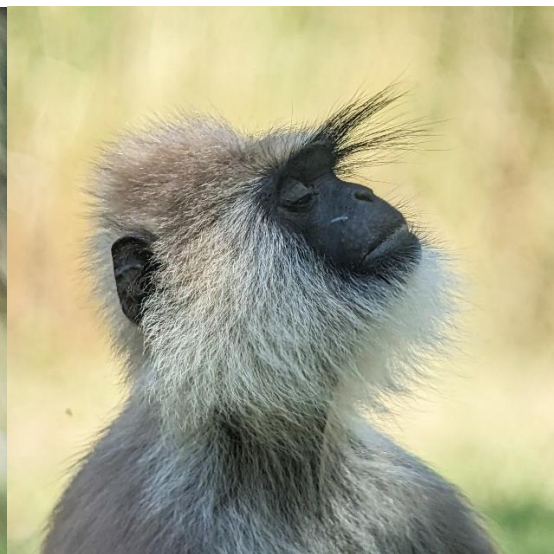
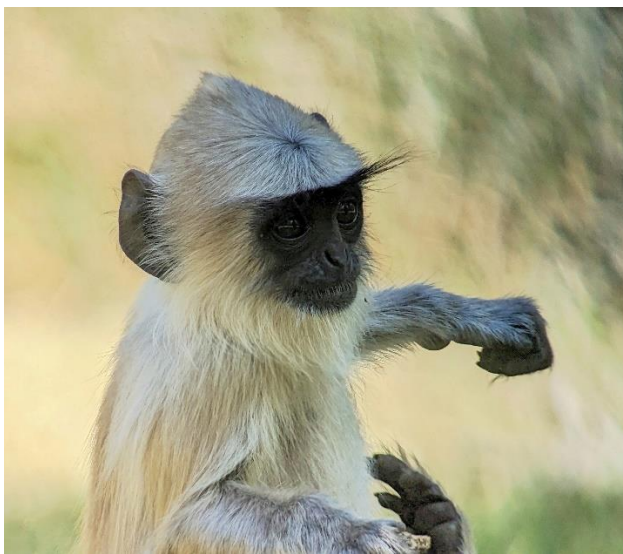
Nilgiri Tahr, Valparai ascent road



Nilgiri Spiny Lizard, Ooty

Ooty, 8th-9th January

From Valparai it was a fairly long drive down and then back up to another rather bleak (in terms of natural vegetation) hill station. This journey involved crossing the ecologically-significant Palakkad Gap, which forms a lowland barrier between the montane species of the northern and southern parts of the Western Ghats. Again, this is mostly a place to stop of the endemic birds of the Nilgiris, but like the Valparai plateau a feature is the number of **Gaur** that wander unconcerned by humans. Several disconcerting large individuals (with a shoulder height taller than the roof of our 4x4) were at the roadside, and a small herd with a very cute calf were in the meadow next to my hotel. At night the vicinity of the Accord Highland Hotel also produced **Black-naped Hare**, a presumed **Nilgiri Shrew** which I almost tripped over, and a fast-moving, mystery mid-sized arboreal mammal in the thermal. I'm at a loss as to whether it was a flying squirrel, a mustelid, a civet or other. A definite **Nilgiri Shrew** was foraging in the grim, garbage-strewn ditch (along with endemic birds...) by the car park at [Doddapetta Peak](#) the next morning. This spot can be viewed by looking back behind the stalls from just before the 'No plastic plates' sign in the southern end of the car park. An excellent Nilgiri Spiny Lizard (the genus *Salea* is endemic to the Western Ghats) was also in the woodland here.



Tufted Grey Langurs, Jungle Hut

Mudumalai/Masinagudi, 9th-11th January

From Ooty it was a relatively short drive down into the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. I stayed near Masinagudi at [Jungle Hut](#), easily my favourite accommodation of the whole trip. Nice rooms, great hosts, delicious food, and **Bonnet Macaque, Tufted Grey Langur, Eurasian Wild Pig, Spotted Deer, Large Grey Mongoose, Malabar Giant** and **Indian Palm Squirrels** making it onto my “Mammals Seen From The Swimming Pool” list. Again, this is an area where exploring on foot is strictly limited; there are even parts of the Jungle Hut property where you aren’t allowed to wander at night. **Indian Elephants** were present right outside the gate, and could be heard moving through the giant bamboo within the compound one night. On the other night, the macaques and langurs on site went, ahem, bananas: despite accompanying a guide to a likely viewpoint, we couldn’t quite see the Leopard that was moving through and causing the consternation. Nocturnal explorations of the permitted areas of Jungle Hut at night produced a fantastic **Indian Spotted Chevrotain**, a cool **White-tailed Woodrat, Black-naped Hare**, and several **house Rats** (here looking more ‘standard’ than the nicely-marked, pale-bellied animals at Valparai). I saw a large Spectacled Cobra on the road nearby at night, so tread carefully...

One of my main targets in Mudumalai was **Dhole**. A well-known stakeout close to Jungle Hut let us down on the first evening (despite closely watching the den area), but the next morning we eventually tracked - on foot – a group of nine, which were totally relaxed despite the short viewing distance. This group’s territory is adjacent to a village, but conflict is essentially zero and the Dholes have little to no fear of humans. Stunning views of stunning animals. This area also produced two (not very black) **Blackbuck** and abundant Spotted Deer, the main prey of the local Dholes.



Dholes, Mudumalai

Malabar Giant Squirrel, Jungle Hut

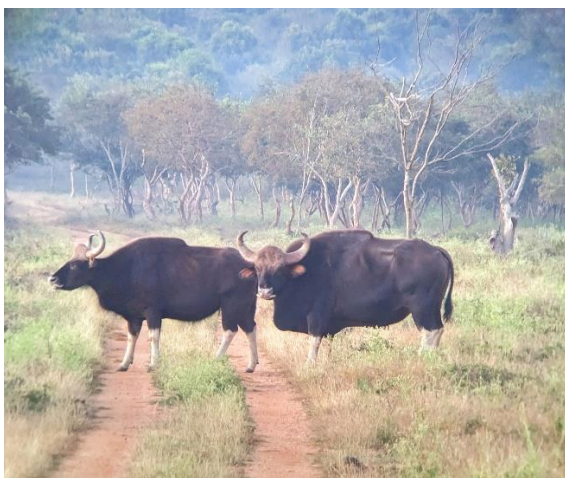
One afternoon we took a drive around along the public roads of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve; local regulations mean no walking and, technically, no stopping in the car, but it is a good way as any to see the local wildlife. Game drives are available in Masinagudi, but apparently also mainly use the highways. As well as a few nice **Indian Elephant** sightings, we managed a spectacular sighting of a **Sloth Bear** along the roadside north of Masinagudi town, which only ambled off after about five minutes when too many cars had stopped to watch.

Jijo and Joji stayed in a [guesthouse in Masinagudi](#) which had a **Common Palm Civet** living in the [outbuildings](#). The owner was happy for me to visit and after baiting the yard with bananas the civet emerged for some nice views just after dark. Several **Leschenault's Rousettes** were flying around pre-dusk.

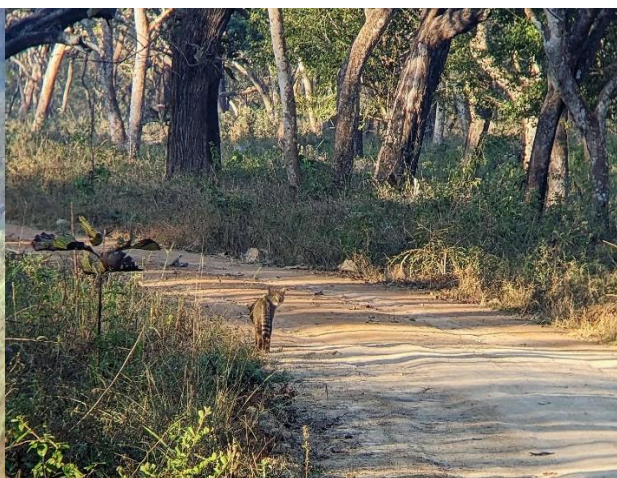
Bandipur NP 11th-12th January

Bandipur National Park actually forms a contiguous expanse of habitat with Mudumalai, as well as Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (and almost joins with Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. As such, the fauna is pretty similar, and I had several sightings of **Indian Elephant** on the journeys. My visit here was planned around it being a decent site for Dhole, before I knew how good the chances were at Masinagudi. With that knowledge - and the news during my trip that sightings of Leopard and Tiger had recently been atypically good in Nagarhole – this is the only part of the trip I might have done differently. Which isn't to say Bandipur wasn't a very nice time indeed! I stayed at Bandipur Safari Lodge; both accommodation and game drives in the national parks were administered through the authorities, so times of meals and wildlife-watching were strictly controlled. Not absolutely ideal, but neither was it the worst set-up I've experienced in India. The lodge itself has decent rooms and food, and backs on to some fields and open scrubby country – perfect for someone with a thermal and a desire to see Rusty-spotted Cat to explore, I thought. As it happens I wimped out of my solo night walk after about a kilometre, as a trio of large **Eurasian Wild Pigs** exploded out of a bush just metres away from me and nearly induced a heart attack. A good reminder that heat scopes sometimes can't detect large mammals buried in vegetation... by this stage I'd already seen an **Indian Fox** in the fields, and several **Black-naped Hares**; it might be worth persuading your guide to take a drive at night. Around the lodge grounds, I spent quite a bit of time watching and getting terrible digi-binned photos of an **Asiatic Long-tailed Climbing Mouse**, and – even better – I got the torch on foraging **Painted Bat** a couple of times by the dining area, a species I've wanted to see for a long time.

Without any major targets, both jeep drives into the national park were fairly relaxing, even if a big cat would have been nice. I had lovely prolonged encounters of groups of elephants on both the afternoon and morning safaris, as well as **Gaur** (better numbers and views in the morning), **Sambar**, **Spotted Deer**, and **Malabar Giant Squirrel**. The morning drive was the best: as well as the common species, I had my best-ever sighting of **Jungle Cat** (one watched on and off for ten minutes, once at very close range), a brief **Dhole**, and two **Stripe-necked Mongooses**.



Gaur, Bandipur NP



Jungle Cat, Bandipur NP

Mysuru-Bengaluru, 12th-13th January

The last couple of days were spent gradually heading north to fly home from Bengaluru, making birding stops for a couple of species (with partial success). No mammals of note made an appearance, apart from some big numbers of **Indian Flying Foxes** at a few spots (and any day seeing massive bats is a good day really) and **Lesser Bandicoot Rats** along the [Varuna Canal](#) east of Mysuru. With hindsight, it might have been better to spend this time at Nagarhole or similar.