

## India wildlife trip report

March 28-April 7, 2008

Parks Visited: Kanha National Park and Bandhavgarh National Park

Well I wanted to see tigers in the wild and had always read that India was the best place to do so, so I planned a trip. Once in India my wife and I couldn't pass up on the chance to see the Taj Mahal so we took a two hour express train from New Delhi to Agra. The Taj Mahal didn't disappoint. From there it was a bit of work to reach Kanha. 12 hours on an overnight train landed us in Jabalpur and from there it was a rough 4 hour drive to our lodge outside Kanha. Most tourists enter through the Kislga gate on the Western edge of the park, but we stayed outside the Mikka gate on the South side.

Each morning there were 5-8 other jeeps waiting to gain entrance when the gate opened at 6 AM. Given the size of the park and the number of roads available for driving, this was very little traffic. The number of vehicles is much larger on the other side of the park. We were in the park from 6-12 each morning and then again from 3-6:30 in the afternoon. The best times for viewing wildlife are of course early morning and late afternoon. There are no official visits after dark and all of my requests were met with simple "No's". Each vehicle must be accompanied by a park guide/ranger. We had 5 different guides in our 6 drives, two of whom spoke enough English to converse with. They all appeared quite knowledgeable, but without someone to speak English it was difficult to get more from them than pointing out animals spotted. Our driver, employed/hired by our lodge was intimately familiar with the park, but again spoke little English. There were no other guests at the lodge during our stay and so after the first drive we were joined by the chef or manager on each drive. Having someone to translate enriched the experience tremendously, though it didn't necessarily contribute to more sightings.

Kanha is the only remaining place to see the Barren Ground Barasingha (12 horned (antlered) swamp deer). They were quite commonly seen in the meadows near the visitors' center 15 minutes inside the Mikka gate. I was surprised how frequently we saw the enormous Gaur (Indian Bison). I was told that a month earlier they were nowhere to be seen and had only recently descended from the hills and deeper forests. Much of the 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> park remains inaccessible to the public. Even though it was the beginning of the dry summer season, we got rain the first afternoon. That sent wildlife for cover, but we did see 4 ruddy mongooses cross the roads that first drive. We didn't see another at Kanha—I was told two different reasons for that, that they are more active when it rains, and that we were driving that afternoon in a new section of roads just opened to the public. Perhaps the most fascinating part of the park experience is the wealth of sound. The guides knew the calls of dozens of birds, but the most anticipated calls are the warning of the Cheetal (Spotted Deer) and Hanuman Langur. These are the most commonly seen mammals throughout the park and these monkeys and deer often work in tandem in the perpetual search for predators. Whenever we heard their distinctive warning calls we would speed off in that direction. Such alarms led to a couple of near

misses. My wife glimpsed a leopard disappearing into the forest at the edge of a meadow after we heard Langur calls. Another time Cheetal calls led us to a spot where we heard a tiger call numerous times from the forest, but he did not emerge.

We saw more than 30 wild pigs including boars and piglets. They rarely seemed to hold still but were seen up close crossing roads and foraging in the underbrush. One morning we watched an Indian hare scamper out of the forest and then bound down the road for 50 yards. We saw Sambar every couple of hours, but rarely in open, and never in large groups like the Cheetal and Barasingha. We caught a brief glimpse of the reclusive Muntjac or Barking deer. On the way to the park one morning we saw a lone jackal—they are almost always seen in pairs, but we only saw one. They frequent the forest edges and the easy meals found near the villages. A tiger had killed a Cheetal less than a mile from our lodge one evening and the villagers burned the carcass to prevent the tiger from returning and poachers from poisoning the carcass. We could see the smoke rising from the road to the park gate. We identified at least 50 species of birds, and probably saw at least a dozen more that we did not identify.

In Central Indian forests, most of the tree species drop their leaves in advance of the hot dry summer, however, the Sal trees get their bright new green leaves about the same time others are dropping theirs. The effect was magnificent. The Sal trees seemed to glow framed between blue skies above, yellowed grass and brown leaves below. About 65% of the Kanha forest is Sal trees, so there was still plenty of color. The barren trees increased visibility which otherwise would have been quite limited in the forest. The dirt roads crisscross the park and intersect dozens of times. Each time we crossed a road we would look in every direction in hopes of catching animals on the roads. Tigers in particular use the roads as easy ways to travel through the forest. Late one afternoon we backed up after crossing a road and our guide said “Look down there, is that something lying in the road?” I took a picture zoomed at 500mm and only after further enlargement on my view finder did we confirm that there were 2 tigers lounging on the road. What happened next shocked me. There was another jeep approaching the intersection so our driver stepped on the gas and sped directly after the tigers. I’m not sure if they were already leaving, but if they had not been, we likely would have scared them away with the commotion that we made in an effort to arrive first.

The following morning, our last in Kanha, we resorted to a more traditional approach to see a tiger—on elephant back. Each morning elephants are dispatched into the park directed by their Mahouts (driver/caretaker) to track and find tigers. When they have located a tiger, which happens frequently, but not always, the other elephants converge (along with a few tourists) and you can take a number to ride the elephant to see the tiger. You check in at a ranger station to learn if a tiger has been located and to get a number. We were in luck. 30 minutes later it was our turn to ride the elephants. My wife and I climbed to the platform on the elephant’s back via a wooden ladder and off we went into the forest. We heard the tigress before we saw her. She was clearly agitated by the elephants’ (and our) presence. She was lying under some brush but clearly visible. The elephants don’t exactly stand still and trample a bit of vegetation as they adjust positions. There was another elephant between us and the tigress when she suddenly erupted from

the brush. She stopped 10-15 feet in front of the other elephant and growled her disapproval. Having seen the youtube videos where the tiger jumps on the elephant's back we were a bit uneasy at this point, I can only imagine the anxiety of those on the elephant in front. After a few moments the tigress calmed down and returned to the brush where she lay down again.

Our most unusual sighting at Kanha was a 10-12 foot python with a knot in its stomach evidencing a recent meal. We saw a couple of jeeps stopped so we pulled up as well. It took several minutes to spot the snake in the tall grass. We waited impatiently and were rewarded when 20 minutes later it emerged into shorter grass and we were able to see its full length.

Our biggest disappointment was missing out on Dhole (Wild Dogs), though I spoke with another tourist who saw them on back to back days during their stay. The other predators that we missed are nocturnal and hence rarely seen include the striped hyena, sloth bear, and Indian wolf. Other mammals we missed that are relatively common in the park, though not often seen include the Nilgai and Chowsingha, two antelope species.

From Kanha we had a 6 hour drive Northeast to Bandhavgarh National Park. Bandhavgarh is famous for tigers, ruins, and possibly for tourists as well. The park is only 1/3 the size of Kanha, but has about the same number of tigers, around 100. Tourists typically only drive the common roads in a small area of the park with high tiger density and animals accustomed to vehicles and people. We tried to arrange a trip to the less visited areas of the park, but a communication gaffe and the arrival of additional tourists who were to share our vehicle derailed those plans. The tigers of Bandhavgarh did not disappoint. In hindsight it may have been better to visit Bandhavgarh first to see tigers and then to have spent more time in Kanha focused on other species without the worry of whether or not we would see a tiger. We twice saw a tigress with two year-old cubs deep in the forest. The sightings were real, but momentary. Due to the large number of visitors in a small space each car is assigned one of 5 routes to travel on the morning drive. More than 20 vehicles were waiting for the gates to open each morning. One morning we got lucky—the large male tiger named B2 crossed the road directly in front of our vehicle. He walked nonchalantly past us, refusing to turn his head and then walked into the underbrush where he laid down. In a matter of minutes there were 10 other vehicles clambering to get in position to view him as he rolled on his back, but it was just a matter of luck that we were the jeep he chose to cross in front of.

That afternoon our driver took us directly a rock ledge on the side of the road that overlooked a small rock basin with water runoff. He had been told that the male tiger B2 had entered this little canyon late in the morning and he was confident that he would still be resting directly below us in the shade of the ledge. I had my doubts, but was once again proven wrong. In the afternoon there are no set routes, so we drove quickly to reach the point first and position our jeep for the best view. Our driver in Bandhavgarh was superb, much more informed and insightful than the park guides (he had been a guide for 8 years and then purchased his own vehicle and become a driver). The clouds rolled in and we were caught exposed in a 10 minute downpour that cooled things off

nicely. Other vehicles soon congregated and there were again 20 vehicles waiting and hoping for a tiger to emerge. Shortly we heard leaves rustle below us, confirming his presence and minutes later he emerged. We were looking almost directly down on him. He leapt across the rocks, up a small hill and laid down in plain sight. A moment later he stood up and then walked between several jeeps across the road and back into the forest. He would disappear and reappear 3 more times from the forest in the next 20 minutes as cars jockeyed for position to see him. He seemed entirely unperturbed by our presence and the obvious commotion of 20 jeeps and an elephant trying to track him down. It was the most natural setting to see this magnificent animal, but it was spectacular nonetheless.

In Bandhavgarh we also had nice sightings of Sambar, Cheetal, Hanuman Langur, Rhesus Macaque, another Muntjac, a pair of jackals, wild pigs, an Indian hare, a brief sighting of a Jungle Cat, a lone Ruddy Mongoose, numerous 3-striped palm squirrels, and 3 Nilgai. The Nilgai sightings were a nice surprise. We saw a lone mature male with the distinctive iron blue coat and then two adolescent males with the lighter coats and striking blank and white striped "socks." We also saw a few bats in a cave, but I do not know what kind they were. Animals were abundant in Bandhavgarh, but there seemed to be almost as many people, so I much preferred to setting in Kanha. The high plateaus amidst the valleys are the prominent geographic features of Bandhavgarh. There are ancient ruins of a temple and fort atop one of the plateaus but we chose not to pay the \$130 and sacrifice a game drive to visit them. The Sal trees are less common in Bandhavgarh than Kanha which reduced the visual splendor of the forest, but made it easier to spot birds.

From Kanha we drove to Khajuraho to see the ancient Hindu temples and then proceeded to New Delhi and returned home to the USA.

















