

Nepal, November-December 2023

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Joining a [Red Panda Network](#) trip in eastern Nepal had been vaguely on my radar for quite some time. In autumn 2023 I was finally kicking around the idea of going the following March, when an opportunity presented itself: there was a last minute vacancy on their upcoming Zoo Ecotrip. These tours are generally reserved for those who work directly with Red Pandas (particularly in zoos), and essentially operate at a discounted rate: twelve days (including travel from and to Kathmandu) for the same price as the eight day 'regular' Ecotrip. On this occasion, they were happy (at the start of the trip, at least) to allow a general ecologist join the group. Generally, I'm a little wary of joining up with a bunch of strangers for a tour, but took a punt given this one was aimed at conservationists. And as it turned out, there was no need to worry: you couldn't ask for a better bunch of easy-going animal nerds to spend two weeks in the Himalayas with. Thanks guys! Some of them were even happy to look at birds (although that may have just been so we could pause on the uphill treks occasionally).

Once that aspect of the trip was sorted, I decided that it was about time I saw Indian – or Greater One-horned - Rhinoceros. So I flew out a week ahead of the RPN trip to visit Chitwan National Park, one of the world's great wildlife locations.

Logistics

I flew from London with Turkish Airlines who – again – proved excellent (my chance upgrade to Business Class from Istanbul to Kathmandu may or may not influence my opinion); compared to Qatar Airways, they had a less tedious layover time between flights and arrived and departed at nicer times.

Arrival in Tribhuvan was fairly straightforward. The visa on arrival was efficient: just make sure you have a completed form, passport photo and the fee in cash (and go to the visa desk before getting in the immigration queue).

I bought a thirty day plan SIM with 30Gb of data for a very cheap 700Rs (GBP 4.20/USD 5.20); at the advice of RPN, I went for NCell, but this gave only patchy signal in many areas in the east. Locals recommended NTC instead, although at that price you could just get both. We found that changing a

good wedge of money into Nepal rupees is the best approach; kiosks for both these bits of admin are after baggage claim.

Bird sightings from the trip (with mammals and other wildlife in the individual checklist notes when seen) are in my [eBird trip report](#).

Chitwan National Park, 29th November – 1st December and 3rd – 4th December

My targets for Chitwan district were twofold. One, **Indian Rhino** (relatively easy); and two, brown, skulky, very localised birds (namely Spiny and Slender-billed Babblers, bush-warblers, Grey-crowned Prinia – easy enough with the help of a local expert). On the advice of a couple of friends, I contacted Tikaram Giri to arrange this portion of the trip. Tika is, fair to say, a legend of Nepali birding and conservation, and owns the very pleasant (comfy beds, WiFi, plentiful and delicious food) Chitwan Gaida Lodge in Sauraha – the main gateway to Chitwan NP. After a bit of back-and-forth messaging, Tika had me sold on a slightly more extensive itinerary than I originally planned, comprising both the national park, and some nearby hill forest “to see what we can find”. This was all brilliant, and highly recommend getting in touch with Tika if you’re visiting with specific targets in mind. He doesn’t do a great deal of guiding nowadays, but would be a great option to arrange the logistics, having an intimate knowledge of the park and knowing the best local guides (many of whom he trained) and drivers.

Late November is not the best time for mammal spotting in Chitwan, as the grass is very tall (it is cut a couple of months later) and there’s an abundance of fruit in the riverine forests for rhinos to eat. Despite not being peak **Indian Rhino** sighting season, there was no stress about seeing them: one ambled down the road outside Gaida Lodge before dawn on my first morning! After the first of many excellent meals at Gaida Lodge, the whole day was spent walking through the grasslands on the opposite bank of the Rapti River (an unthinkable activity in India!); the second Rhino of the day, an immense individual, gave awesome views as it crossed the river after a night on the town as we boarded canoes. We had two more sightings that day, a rather belligerent battle-scared male that the guides were a little wary of, and a female that paid us no attention whatsoever. Seeing these incredible animals while on foot is a brilliant experience – particularly keeping half an eye on a grumpy rhino, while watching Slender-billed Babblers, just as a male Tiger starts giving territorial calls! – but there is talk that this sort of excursion might eventually be prohibited. It’s also worth noting that we met people on walking safaris who didn’t see a single Rhino that day! Apart from a few wary, evening-grazing **Chital**, the other mammal sightings were fairly fleeting, due to the limited viewing in the grasslands: a couple of **Eurasian Wild Pigs** and a **Hog Deer** crossing the paths. Gharials, Marsh Muggers Crocodiles and Indian Softshell turtles were somewhat more accommodating, being visible while enjoying a beer from Suaraha embankment.



On the second day, we employed Tika's preferred jeep driver to head west into the park to bird the sal forests. En route we enjoyed a close look at a browsing **rhino** near a checkpoint (at least until all the other vehicles arrived and parked in the way), plus a **Hog Deer**. Once in the forests, we found a scatter of **Terai Grey Langur**, **Rhesus Macaque**, **Sambar**, **Chital** and a couple of **Indian Red Muntjac**, but these were very hard to spot without using the thermal – Chitwan at this time of year isn't like many of the Indian National Parks, with lots of common animals to be seen. Our rather sedate morning got a jolt when we encountered a jeepful of visitors who had just seen a female Tiger, a narrow miss for us. The decision was made to stop and wait to see if she came back through, but excitement in the gang of parked vehicles preceded the appearance of a huge male **Tiger** coming



from the other way! It moved very quickly through the undergrowth and was hard to follow without the thermal: a thrilling moment but not the best view. Some expert reading of the situation by the guides improved this though. After all the other jeeps departed the scene, we waited, looped back around, and just as hoped, the male had returned. We were able to follow him from a respectful distance for several minutes as he was on the prowl for the female, pausing to mark his territory, before melting back into the forest, all with zero other tourists and

zero unnecessarily loud camera shutter sounds. What a way to see my first tiger since 2006! On the way back through the grasslands late afternoon, we were treated to further superb rhino sightings: a rather tame newly-independent young female, and a mother with a five month old calf.

On my first night at Gaida Lodge, I was woken by a commotion caused by a wild bull **Asian Elephant**, who was apparently *very* keen to get to know the national park compound's female domestic elephants – apparently a fairly regular occurrence. Although I didn't see him, it certainly sounded close enough; the streets of Sauraha are clearly well-trodden by charismatic megafauna. Tika used to see Common Palm Civet fairly regularly at the lodge, but less so recently. My only other mammal sighting was a large **noctule bat** sp. foraging high over the forest opposite Sauraha embankment; *Nyctalus plancyi labiatus* seems to be the only likely candidate. Surprisingly, this was the only bat of the entire trip.

Uppardang Gadhi, 1st-3rd December

From Sauraha, a drive of about an hour and a half on increasingly 'interesting' roads took us from the warm lowlands to the Gadhi Siraichuli Important Bird Area at 1200m above sea level. Some reasonable quality temperate broadleaf hill forest still exists along the road here, in addition to the more degraded, scrubby landscape favoured by Spiny Babbler (Nepal's sole endemic bird). We stayed in a basic homestay – Gadi Hill Cottage – in the village here, and explored on foot, when not enjoying the incredible views towards the high Himalayas. Birding, butterfly watching, scenery and food were all fantastic; mammals weren't easy to



come by. The highlight was **Assamese Macaque**, with a great view of a rather serene, lustrously-furred adult male basking in the early morning sun one day, and a troop scoped foraging in the forest canopy the next morning. **Hoary-bellied Squirrel** was also seen a couple of times. Nocturnal wildlife-watching opportunities were limited by an overabundance of dogs around the village, and limited to one cheeky **Roof Rat**. On the second night I managed to sneak off along the round without any canines tagging along, hoping for one of the small carnivores known from the area or maybe a flying squirrel, but the only mammal I found in the thermal was a smallish *Niviventer* rat – It looks like a couple of species are possible here.

Ilam District, 5th – 15th December

Zoo Ecotrips visit areas with Red Panda populations rather than just one, although it turned out there was much more to it than that. We actually got to see the full scope of RPNs work, both on a social and ecological level, which was absolutely fantastic. It did make for a pretty in-depth trip though, and not a purely mammalwatching one. If you were just interested in visiting for long enough to see Red Pandas, this probably isn't be the ideal trip; if – like me – you're happy to spend a good bit of time exploring Himalayan forests and seeing what you can find, it definitely is. The locations seem to vary trip-to-trip, but always use community homestays as accommodation. These were on the basic side – don't expect a hotel room with an en-suite toilet – but perfectly comfortable, and run by some of the friendliest people in the world. The food was plentiful and delicious, but be prepared for a lot of dal bhat (rice, soupy lentils, some vegetable curries) and possibly an overwhelming quantity of momo (dumplings).

Everything ran impeccably. Our ground team consisted of Ramesh Chaudhary,(main guide), Wangchu Bhatia (one of the most inspiring conservationist I've ever met), Sonamla Sherpa (all-round diamond of a human), all of whom worked tirelessly to make sure we had a good time and were great company. On top of that, teams of panda trackers and forest guardians - people who really know and care about these places - are employed to find the animals while us punters huff and puff up the hills. As you might guess, I really can't say enough good things about Red Panda Network, though I'll try... Kelly and Jen, two of the trip participants, speak about all the good stuff in depth [here](#).

Red Panda Network run trips at two seasons. In March-April, the animals are apparently very active, but less predictable (and this is better season for birding, although opportunities for this are dictated by the search for pandas). In November and December, Red Pandas can be found foraging on berries as well as bamboo, and the year's young are on the cusp of independence. I can certainly vouch for the latter providing some incredible sightings!



In December, it can be cold, to say the least. This was compounded by the fact that at this time of year cloud generally rolls uphill during the day so afternoons (and even late mornings at times) are often chilly and gloomy. It at the higher elevations it was bitterly cold at night, and the first snows of the winter arrived during our trip. In Jaubari, the combination of a windy night and draughty guesthouse was a memorable experience... First thing it was usually bright and clear, ideal for scanning the more open areas with a scope.

Getting to and from the areas in which Red Panda Network work with local communities is not quick. A late morning flight took us to Chandragdi (Bhadrapur) Airport in the hot lowlands of southeast

Nepal, from where waiting vehicles took us (via lunch) up into the foothills. On this trip we stayed overnight at Kanyam, before being collected by even sturdier vehicles the next day; after a short drive to the border town of Pashupatingar, we left paved roads behind and it was dirt tracks (at best) until it was time to start the journey back to Kathmandu. A few hours of bumping along and we were at the tiny settlement of Thumke, settling into two utterly charming homestays for four nights.

First impressions were of some surprisingly degraded habitat. I had assumed that our days would be spent in pristine Himalayan forest, but the Gorkhe area in particular suffer from overgrazing, deforestation, and (as a result of both) erosion. That's not to say that there wasn't plenty to look at around Thumke, but it meant that the plan for each of our three full days was to trek uphill, gaining about 500 metres in altitude, to the best current area for Red Pandas. This was a pretty strenuous endeavour! Reaching the higher elevations, the border between Nepal and the Indian state of West Bengal is, let's say, a little opaque. Here it was really obvious why the work of RPN is needed: east of a paved road just inside Indian territory is the intact forest habitat of Singalila National Park, and to the west is a partially-denuded, overgrazed landscape

By day three and after some great sightings, I decided on a change of scenery and to explore the slightly lower reaches of the broadleaf forest, seeing plenty of wildlife but also being able to appreciate why pandas aren't regular in this area! I also made some short nocturnal forays, both in the village 'clearing' and back along the road in, but activity (both mine and other mammals) was limited by the very cold nighttime temperatures.

Species recorded around Thumke:



Western Red Panda – on the first day, the rangers located a mother and two juveniles quite early on, necessitating a quicker-than-ideal ascent. Once we could breathe and see straight, we had astonishing eye-level views of the trio loafing on branches, and later the adult foraging, right next to the main trail. Absolutely incredible stuff. The following afternoon a different individual was watched snoozing in the mist in the same area – nice views in the scope. On day three the rest of the group saw a fifth animal (after a bit of a tough off-piste effort) while I was exploring lower down.



civet sp. – one seen foraging in fields distantly using the thermal one night, but had disappeared by the time I got near enough to get a light on it. Probably Masked Palm Civet.

Eurasian Wild Pig– two scoped very distantly at dawn one day on the cleared slope high above the village; the others had a close sighting on the trail when I was birding elsewhere.

Northern Red Muntjac – I saw one while birding in the forest near the village, heard on a few other occasions.

Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel– seen a few times in the forests above the village

Northern Palm Squirrel– seen occasionally in the forest.

Asian Grey Shrew– an individual assumed to be this species (a mid-sized to largish shrew with sleek dark grey fur and a longish tail) on a bank in a cleared area at around 2550m above sea level on one day.

Abundant Leopard scat and some fresh droppings of Leopard Cat were found on the trails.



From Thumke, we trekked to the ridge on the Indian border, taking most of the day at relaxed pace to reach Tumling (staying at the lovely [Shikhar Lodge](#)), then a short hike to stay at [Jaubari Bazaar](#) for the second night. In very open and sadly degraded habitat, wildlife was in shorter supply up here (especially when you can gaze longingly into the rhododendron and oak forest in Singalila). However it was great to see the extensive replanting programmes run by RPN, and the regenerating bamboo patches – some really inspiring restoration ecology that will ultimately create panda habitat corridors.

Only two mammals were recorded here:

Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* – a great view of a hunting animal that came in to squeaking on the slope above Shikhar Lodge.

Woolly Hare *Lepus oiostolus* – one flushed in the RPN habitat restoration enclosure above Jaubari.

At Jaubari, we also got to check some camera traps in the regenerating bamboo plots, finding photos of Red Panda and a large, ground-travelling flying squirrel (presumably Grey-headed). Many other species have been recorded by the cameras here, including a melanistic Leopard.

The final Red Panda location was at Dobate. While some of the group had a relaxed day travelling by car, the rest of us spent a day hiking here along the border trail from Jaubari, including a lunchtime stop at Habre's Nest. We stayed two nights at Dobate, including a dawn trip to Sandakhpu. The

forest here seems in better condition, particularly on the slopes up to Habre's Nest, and the walk up from the homestay is considerably easier; I would have preferred having slightly more time here and a little less at Thumke. Despite the limited time at Dobate, the forest guardians and trackers were determined to find some pandas, and boy did they deliver! One RPN ecologist, Nigma, seems to have a particular bond with the forest and its wildlife; he lives in a house in panda habitat, and gave me some invaluable spots for birds. It seems a shame to single out any one of the community, but he really is a self-effacing legend of an ecologist.



Mammals seen on this section:

Western Red Panda – our best sighting was saved till last. The trackers located another mother-and-cubs-combo on the forested ridge near Kalapokhari, tracking them through dense bamboo until we arrived. After feeding for a while at close range, they departed, with the mother calling the young down, trotting past us at [basically arm's length](#). Magic.

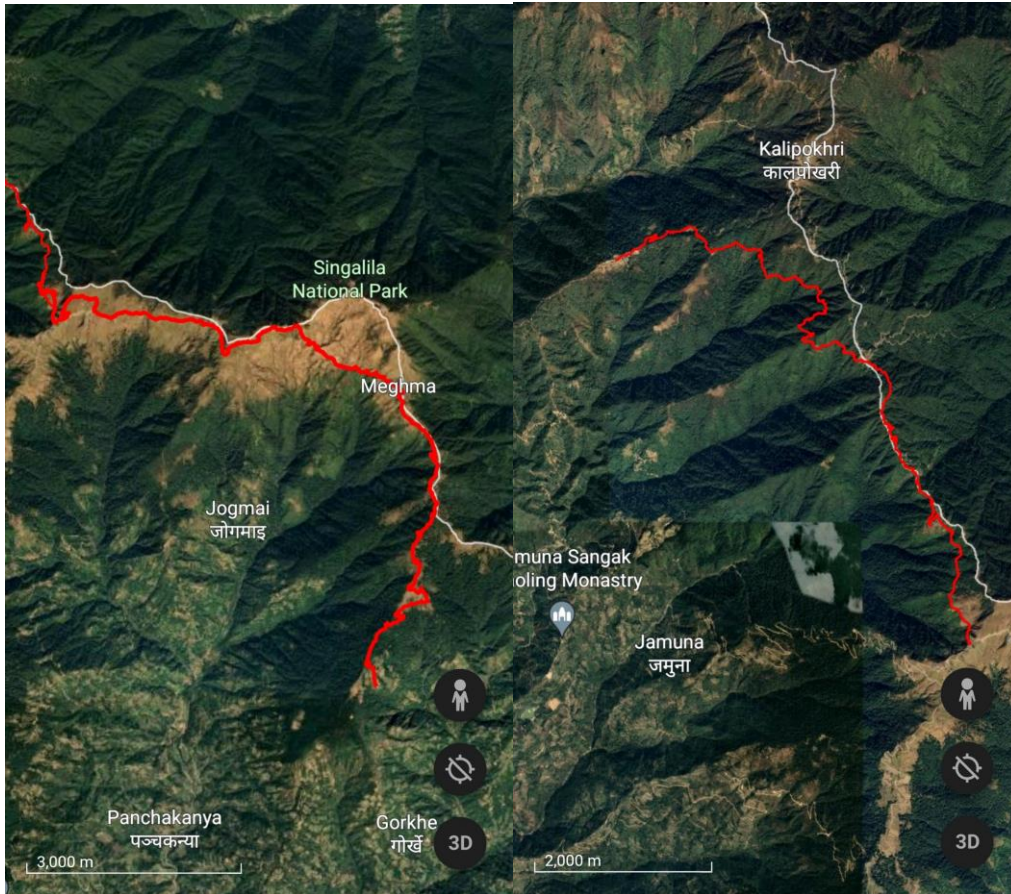
Sikkim Mountain Vole – at least one rather typical-looking vole at the feeding station at Habre's Nest; no other confusion species seem likely here.

Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel – seen once.

Again, plenty of droppings of Leopard and Leopard Cat were seen, along with those of Yellow-throated Marten and a civet of some kind. Himalayan Goral is often seen at Sandakphu, though not when we visited.

Kathmandu, 28th November, 4th-5th and 16th December

Casual sightings around Kathmandu included lots of **Rhesus Macaques** and **Northern Palm Squirrels**. Apparently there is a camp of Indian Flying Foxes near Narayanhiti Palace, but I didn't get around to visiting.



Our hiking routes, from Thumke to Jaubari (left), and Jaubari to Dobate (right).