

Epic India: February – March 2024 Trip Report



My partner, Tracey, and I recently returned from a trip to India. I lived in India for four years as a child and had been back briefly in 1995, whilst Tracey had not been previously. To be honest, my last India trip hadn't been great. I had diarrhea seemingly starting from the moment I got off the plane, and found the hassle and hustle considerable. So I approached this trip with a degree of trepidation. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised, as there have been enormous developments in India over the past decade or two. Some challenges remain – the fascination with inane bureaucracy makes France look efficient, the air in Delhi consistently ranks as the worst in the world, and open-air defecation remains popular. However, it is easily one of the world's most diverse and interesting countries and we enjoyed the trip immensely.

We flew via Seattle and Doha to Delhi, arriving about 3:00 am. We were quickly accosted at Delhi airport by touts offering us a taxi ride downtown for 2500 rupees. We ended up paying 700, which was the most expensive Delhi airport taxi ride of the trip. We later learned that Uber cost about 300 rupees to locations in south Delhi. After a few hours sleep and a bit of quick sight-seeing, we were back to the airport for a SpiceJet flight to Khajuraho. From Khajuraho we taxied to a hotel just outside Panna Tiger Reserve, had a delicious dinner, and went to bed early, still very jet-lagged. We had the first mammals of the trip – Northern Plains Langurs by the road and a Little Indian Field Mouse in a gully by the grounds of the hotel. I had chosen Aryan Camp in part because reviews mentioned how quiet it was. About 12:45 am we heard loud explosions like cannon being fired followed by music which continued throughout the night. It turned out there was a wedding in progress in a nearby village.

Thankful the night was over, we were up, breakfasted and in a safari jeep by 6:00 am the next morning for the short drive to the reserve gates, to join the cluster of other vehicles waiting for the reserve to open at 6:30. As is generally the case in India, we were assigned a park guide and entered the park just as it opened. Panna Tiger Reserve consists of teak forest with patches of acacia and was cold and dry. Chital were numerous, as in most Indian parks, and Sambar and Nilgai were easily found. We heard some alarm calls and, waiting in place, soon saw a large male Leopard walking through the brush before crossing the road. Rhesus Macaques were waiting for us at what is presumably a regular breakfast spot, accompanied by some Northern Plains Langurs. Driving through a grassland area, we saved the life of a Ruddy Mongoose. A Crested Hawk Eagle was swooping down to grab it, but aborted the attack as we drove up. We waited about 5 km from the main gate at a popular Tiger viewing spot, but saw no signs of Tiger or much of anything else. We left the park about 11:30 and drove back to Aryan Camp for lunch, to be greeted by more langurs in trees at the back of the property.





After a lengthy nap, we were up for an evening safari in the buffer zone of Panna, leaving at about 5:45 pm. Our first mammal sighting was of a Eurasian Wild Pig, followed by a pair of Golden Jackals, then Chital and Nilgai. We saw two Common Palm Civets, multiple Indian Hares, a Small Indian Civet, a Leopard close to the village and, after leaving the main part of the buffer zone, a Sloth Bear very close to a village. We returned about 9:30 pm for chicken biriyani and bed, cranking the heater on full blast both for warmth and to help drown out any potential human noises.



The night was much quieter than the previous one, but the morning was just as cold. Tracey donned the down parka she had brought for Ladakh. In one of the other jeeps, people were shrouded in huge white duvets which they had undoubtedly borrowed from their hotel. Given the dustiness of the roads, I'm not sure the hotels were pleased with this arrangement. Mammals seen were the same as the previous day with the exception of Leopard. We left the park about 11:00 for lunch and a nap. The night drive, again in the buffer zone, produced Indian Gerbil and Indian Fox in addition to species seen the previous night, including another Leopard and another Sloth Bear which crossed the road just in front of the jeep.

After a quiet night, we had a leisurely breakfast enlivened by watching a Northern (Five-striped) Palm Squirrel on the roof of one of the buildings. The day's itinerary was a visit to the temples of Khajuraho. At the entrance we had one of those fascinating situations in which India excels. Tickets have to be purchased on-line; I suppose to decrease opportunities for graft at the entrance, but foreign credit cards don't appear to be accepted. Since we hadn't purchased them on-line, there were folks at the gate who would order the tickets for us at a slightly discounted price and then send the tickets to us via WhatsApp while we paid the regular cash price to another chap whose job appeared to be doing a minimal bit of gardening and mostly holding money for foreigners. We could then enter the temples. Not surprisingly, Khajuraho's temples are celebrated more for their erotic sculptures than for the bats roosting inside, but we managed to find Greater and Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats and another species still awaiting identification. In addition, the temple grounds were full of birdlife.







We left for Orchha the following day. Orchha is a small town with a couple of stupendous Mughal palaces, one of them built for a visit by Shah Jahan. Clearly people really knew how to lay on the hospitality in those days. Not knowing exactly where our hotel was located, we drove through all the narrowest lanes in town, congested with vehicles, auto-rickshaws, and cows. Eventually we found a place with spectacular views over the town and its palaces. Visiting the temples revealed the usual array of langurs, palm squirrels and macaques. Entertainment on the return from the palace was provided by a cow sidling up to a stall selling sweets and grabbing a mouthful of treats before being chased away. The proprietor carefully restacked any sweets that could be salvaged. Tracey and I skipped dessert after supper. The village's soundtrack that night consisted of Hare Krishnas chanting loudly and sound bites from Bollywood movies, but we were so tired we slept regardless.

We were at the Jhansi train station early the next morning and ended up chatting with an Indian guy now living in Brampton, Canada. During the conversation, Tracey remarked how clean she found India, which occasioned a look of disbelief from our new friend and the suggestion we visit Chhaturbhai, his hometown, so we could see how disgustingly dirty India could be. We politely declined.

We pulled into Agra and were surrounded by the usual hustle. At the fixed price taxi stand, the attendant quoted a price to Taj Ganj quite different from the posted price on the wall. I remarked that I was surprised someone working there was unaware of the taxi fare, which at least elicited a laugh. We had banana pancakes on the rooftop patio of Hotel Kamal overlooking the Taj while keeping an eye on roaming Rhesus Macaques, then headed into the Taj itself. I had visited before, but this truly is one site

which never loses its wonder. We had selfies taken with so many people that I think we might currently have more exposure in India than Taylor Swift.

The next morning, we took the train back to Delhi, dropped our bags off at a hotel and headed out to the Qutab Minar. An autorickshaw driver offered us a low price, but kept talking about how he would take us to the Lotus Temple and shopping for no extra charge. We were so tired we were on the verge of relenting and taking it, but the poor chap seemingly couldn't help himself and kept mentioning shopping, so we steeled ourselves and walked to the Metro instead. Walking by Mehrauli Park, we saw Nilgai, Rhesus Macaques, Northern Plains Langurs, Northern Striped Palm Squirrels and, best of all, a Small Indian Mongoose on the grounds of Qutab Minar, which turned out to be the only one we saw on the whole trip.

We were up and at the airport early the next morning. Indian airport security is orders of magnitude more thorough than I have experienced elsewhere. This morning, the soldier examining my carry-on quizzed me at length as to why I needed so many batteries. Our IndiGo flight to Bengaluru was right on time and we were greeted at the airport by Mr. Kumaraswamy, our driver for the next leg of the journey. Bengaluru sprawls enormously and the airport is at the north end of the city. As I settled into the comfy Toyota Innova, I noticed that the GPS was indicating a 6-hour journey to Kabini River Lodge and that it was already 8:45 am. Thanks to Kumaraswamy's past life as a Formula One driver, we were able to make up time despite the Bengaluru traffic and arrive at the lodge just after 1:30 pm and the start of the buffet lunch. As Tracey will attest, I am perhaps the world's fastest eater, so I managed to eat an enormous meal and still be on time for our departure. The afternoon safari revealed Black-footed (Malabar) Sacred Langur, Indian Giant Squirrel, Bonnet Macaque, Three-striped (Indian) Palm Squirrel and Asian Elephant, as well as the previously-seen species Chital, Sambar and Eurasian Wild Pig. Our jeep driver had the unfortunate technique of accelerating as quickly as possible, then slamming on the brakes as soon as anything was sighted, a technique highly effective at generating maximal dust on the dry roads of the park. Back at the lodge, we found a roost of Indian Flying Foxes and then had a delicious dinner, including the best tandoori chicken of my life. I had a look around the lodge grounds but didn't see any wildlife.

The next morning's safari produced three Gaur just inside the park entrance, followed by Bonnet Macaques, Black-footed Sacred Langurs and Elephant. While we were parked by a shallow body of water, Tracey called out "Tiger", which triggered the driver to immediately start swinging the vehicle around so he could see it, ruining others' chances of seeing the Tiger before it disappeared into the bushes across the lake. Arghh. We heard some alarm calls which led us to a Leopard with a six-month old cub which provided prolonged views. A few Three-lined Palm Squirrels and Sambar rounded out the sightings for the morning. We packed up and departed after breakfast. Shortly after leaving Kabini, we spotted an Indian Gray Mongoose by the side of the road, noticeably larger and heavier than the Small Indian Mongoose seen previously.



We arrived at Bandipur Safari Lodge in time for another lavish buffet meal, then gathered for the afternoon safari, on which we were partnered with a Dutch couple and a family from Bengaluru who visit at least a couple of times a year. In fact, we met domestic tourists from Bengaluru throughout India thanks to the explosive growth of the IT industry there. We saw the same species as in Kabini with the notable difference of Tufted Grey Langurs rather than Black-footed ones. The highlight for me was a female Chowsingha by the side of the road which quickly bounded off down the hill. The driver said he sees Chowsingha about once a month and was pleased that I was so delighted by the sighting, as people's interests in Bandipur, as in many Indian parks, tend to be quite tiger-centric.





The next morning's drive consisted of a mad rush to a pool where we had waited unsuccessfully for a Tiger the previous day only to have one show up first thing that morning. Unfortunately, it had departed by the time we arrived. The highlight of the morning for me was a Stripe-necked Mongoose near another water source. Upon returning to the lodge, we were asked if we wanted to visit a nearby temple, Himavad Gopalaswamy. This temple is situated on the highest hill in Bandipur National Park, and, if nothing else, I thought it might provide some wildlife-spotting opportunities on the way. Rather than being the canned tourist experience I was expecting, the other two Indian tourists on the excursion were there to receive a blessing at the temple and provided a detailed explanation of the rituals. I requested a tiger sighting of the priest and was rewarded with a sighting at close range of a magnificent male Tiger lying by the side of the road on the safari that afternoon, tempting me to convert to Hinduism.









Our last safari in Bandipur produced our first sighting of the trip of Indian (Red) Muntjac as well as two Ruddy Mongooses, two Indian Gray Mongooses and the usual Chital and monkeys. We left Bandipur about 10:15 for the drive through Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve and across the plains to Pollachi. Here we met up with Ravi Kailas, whose name will be familiar to many readers on this site. We had originally planned this trip with Ravi, but he was initially unable to join us due to some family issues. Fortunately, he was eventually able to join us for a week in south India. After a thali lunch, we entered the Annamalai Tiger Reserve and soon saw Gaur, Wild Pig, and Bonnet Macaques. Our first Western Ghats specialty was Nilgiri Langur, followed soon after by Jungle Striped Squirrel. We drove past the entrance to our hotel so that we could do a bit of night driving and were rewarded with sightings of a Lion-tailed Macaque settling down for the night, followed by several Indian Giant Flying Squirrels and an Indian Mouse Deer (Chevrotain) which crossed the road just in front of the vehicle. We arrived at Monica Bungalow shortly after 8:00 pm for dinner. After dinner, I investigated the garbage tip behind the hotel which was seething with rodents, a significant plus in my mind although I realize not all guests might see it that way. Black Rats, Brown Rats and Lesser Bandicoot Rats were all present in significant numbers, as well as something larger which I found in the thermal scope but which disappeared before I could identify it visually.



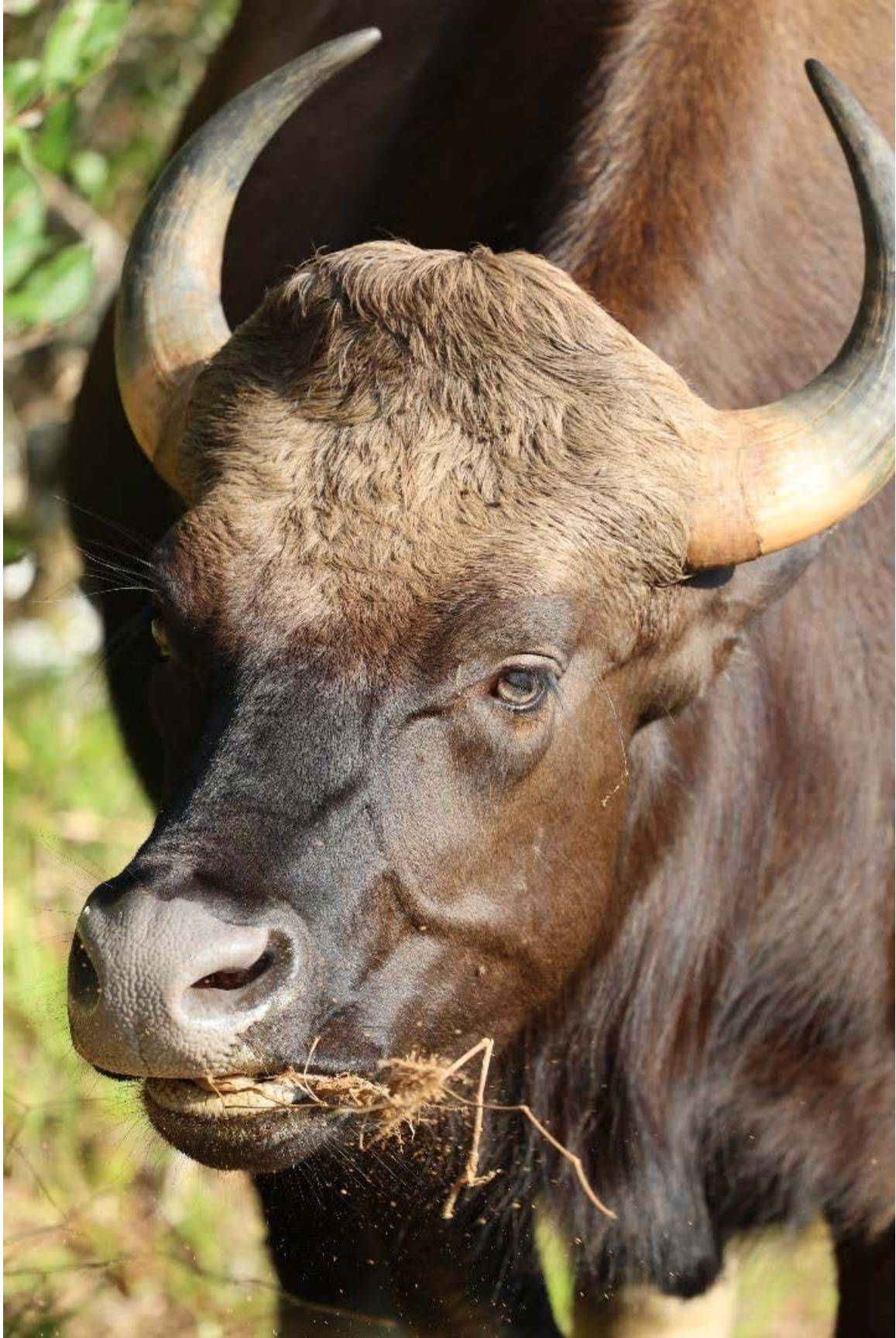
We left on a drive about 6:30 the next morning and quickly found an Indian Muntjac, two Stripe-necked Mongooses, Gaur, Indian Giant Squirrels, Bonnet Macaques and Nilgiri Langurs. Close to the town of Valparai we came across a large troop of Lion-tailed Macaques which afforded close views. After breakfast we moved on to Moulmein House, one of Sinna Dorai's tea plantation bungalows which has been converted to a guest house. This was easily one of our favourite places to stay on the trip. Moulmein House has four spacious bedrooms, but we were the only guests at the time. Surbhi, the hostess, was genuinely excited by the wildlife and the staff of three in the house provided opulent meals that a sports team would have had difficulty finishing.















After lunch, we returned to the hairpin bends we had come up the previous day and spotted several Nilgiri Tahr close to the road. After dinner, we did a further drive around Valparai. The driver of another car noticed our spotlights and stopped us to warn that the Forestry Service took a dim view of people looking for wildlife at night in the area. We crossed paths with him a little later down the road, when he pointed out a Leopard on the road and suggested we follow it for closer views. We thanked him and didn't point out the obvious inconsistency in his advice.



We had a leisurely morning the next day, wandering through the area around Moulmein House. Down the driveway we found a group of Nilgiri Langurs, which have a remarkable ability to stay behind branches and leaves when they are at risk of being photographed. A troop of Lion-tailed Macaques moved through the property so that one could recline in a comfy chair with a drink while observing them - mammal-watching at its finest. That afternoon, we drove to another bungalow at higher elevation owned by the same company, for a walk to a small and picturesque, but sadly mammal-less, stream. After dark, we drove with one of the plantation staff through the plantation grounds, finding a Brown Palm Civet in a tree as well as a number of previously-seen species. Back on the main road, the worker mentioned that Leopards were sometimes seen by the dump. Sure enough, at the dump on the edge of town, steps from a busy road, a large Leopard was sitting on a stone fence with paws crossed. Back at Moulmein House, I went to check on the small rubbish tip at the back of the property and was rewarded with a prolonged view of a Mainland Leopard Cat, which allowed me time to go back and collect my camera from the room for photographs.







The next day was largely a travel day, through Munnar and up into the High Ranges. We stopped at a couple of bridges to check for Grizzled Giant Squirrels in the surrounding trees, but without success. Entering Pampadum Shola National Park entailed the usual bureaucracy – forms had to be completed at the entrance, then we had to drive the length of the park to complete further forms at the station there, before returning to the Log Huts where we were staying within the park. The drive through the park



revealed Gaur, one Stripe-necked Mongoose, Sambar, Nilgiri Langur and Bonnet Macaques, as well as Muntjac which were heard but not seen.

After an early morning drive, Tracey saw two Nilgiri (Dusky) Striped Squirrels which I managed to miss while we were walking back to the huts. We returned to a trail near the entrance gate for a lengthy and scenic hike, the highlight of which was a beautiful Guenther's Vine Snake. Further walking eventually produced a sighting of a Nilgiri Striped Squirrel for me, accompanied by an expression of relief from Tracey that I had finally seen "that shitty little squirrel". A Brown Palm Civet appeared after dinner to scavenge leftovers, providing an entertaining distraction.



Our last morning in Pampadum Shola started with an early morning drive. We returned for breakfast, after which I caught up on notes at the hut while Tracey took pictures of the light in a gap in the forest at the start of a trail nearby. I heard a shout and quickly joined her, to learn that she had just seen a Nilgiri Marten dash across the forest opening. Both Ravi and I took off in hot pursuit but saw nothing. We drove down to the other side of the grassland hoping the marten might reappear. I had a moment of palpitations when I saw movement, then realized I was just seeing a Stripe-necked Mongoose in the grass. We did another hike along the trail by the entrance but saw nothing new and packed up for the drive to Hornbill Camp in Thattekad. Arriving before dusk, we picked up a local guide to visit a couple of patches of forest, then went for a boat ride on the Periyar River. We saw eyeshine which might well have belonged to a Slender Loris but were unable to find the animal when we got close to shore. We did



see Sambar, Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bats, Indian Giant Flying Squirrel and two Common Palm Civets. Back at Hornbill Camp, Asian Elephants were visible across the river.

I had coffee the following morning on the tranquil elevated platform of Hornbill Camp, looking out on the Periyar River with the Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary on the far side. Ravi and I went for an early morning walk and saw a nice diversity of birds but no mammals. We parted with Ravi and continued on to Kochi for our flight to Ahmedabad. From Ahmedabad we took a taxi to the Little Rann Resort, arriving about 7:00 pm. The taxi driver was quite knowledgeable about local wildlife and stated that the Little Rann had become very degraded, which aligned with what Ravi had told us.

We left for the Little Rann about 7:00 am, passing ponds with abundant birdlife and villages with abundant garbage. The driver pointed out various crops – castor bean, cotton, cumin. Tracey clearly acted too interested, as the driver stopped to show us the crops at close range and had to be gently persuaded that we were really more interested in the wildlife than the fields. Shortly after entering the reserve, we found a group of seven Asiatic Wild Asses, then a solitary male followed by a couple of smaller groups. We also saw several Nilgai and Wild Pig. We staked out a spot where a fox was known to have a burrow but saw nothing, probably because it was now too late in the day. We did stop to observe the grueling work of salt production – salty water is pumped out of the ground and allowed to dry for six or seven months before being transported away for further processing.





We left early the next morning for Velavadar and arrived at the Blackbuck Safari Lodge by lunch time. The road to the lodge actually goes through the park, so we had our first views of Blackbuck before reaching the lodge. As planned, we met up with our friend Phil Telfer and his daughter Angie at the lodge and had a chance to reconnect over lunch before heading out at 3:00 pm on safari. After seeing Blackbuck, Nilgai and Wild Pig, we scored a great view of a Jungle Cat by the side of the road, followed shortly afterwards by another on the other side of the vehicle which allowed us to watch it for several minutes. We waited at a vantage point for Striped Hyena which didn't appear, but a third Jungle Cat did. On the way back to the lodge we stopped at a spot where a pair of foxes were denning, but three feral dogs were prowling around so the foxes wisely didn't make an appearance.







The next morning's safari produced the same species as the previous day, with the exception of distant views of a Gray Wolf near the wetland area. That afternoon we returned to the same area but saw no sign of the wolf, although we did see an Indian Gray Mongoose in addition to the usual ungulates. A female Lesser Frigatebird, which I'm told is a very exciting bird, flew overhead. We crossed the road to the other portion of the park and saw a Gray Wolf hunting a lone female Blackbuck unsuccessfully, then received a call that a Striped Hyena had been sighted. Off we went, to be rewarded by a great viewing of the hyena getting up and jumping around while presumably biting at insects before jogging off. We drove back to the wolf and managed to get some closer photographs. After supper Phil and I went out with Phil's driver and found a Jungle Cat, an Indian Fox, Blackbuck, two Indian Hares and either another Indian Fox or a Golden Jackal in the open areas outside the park.

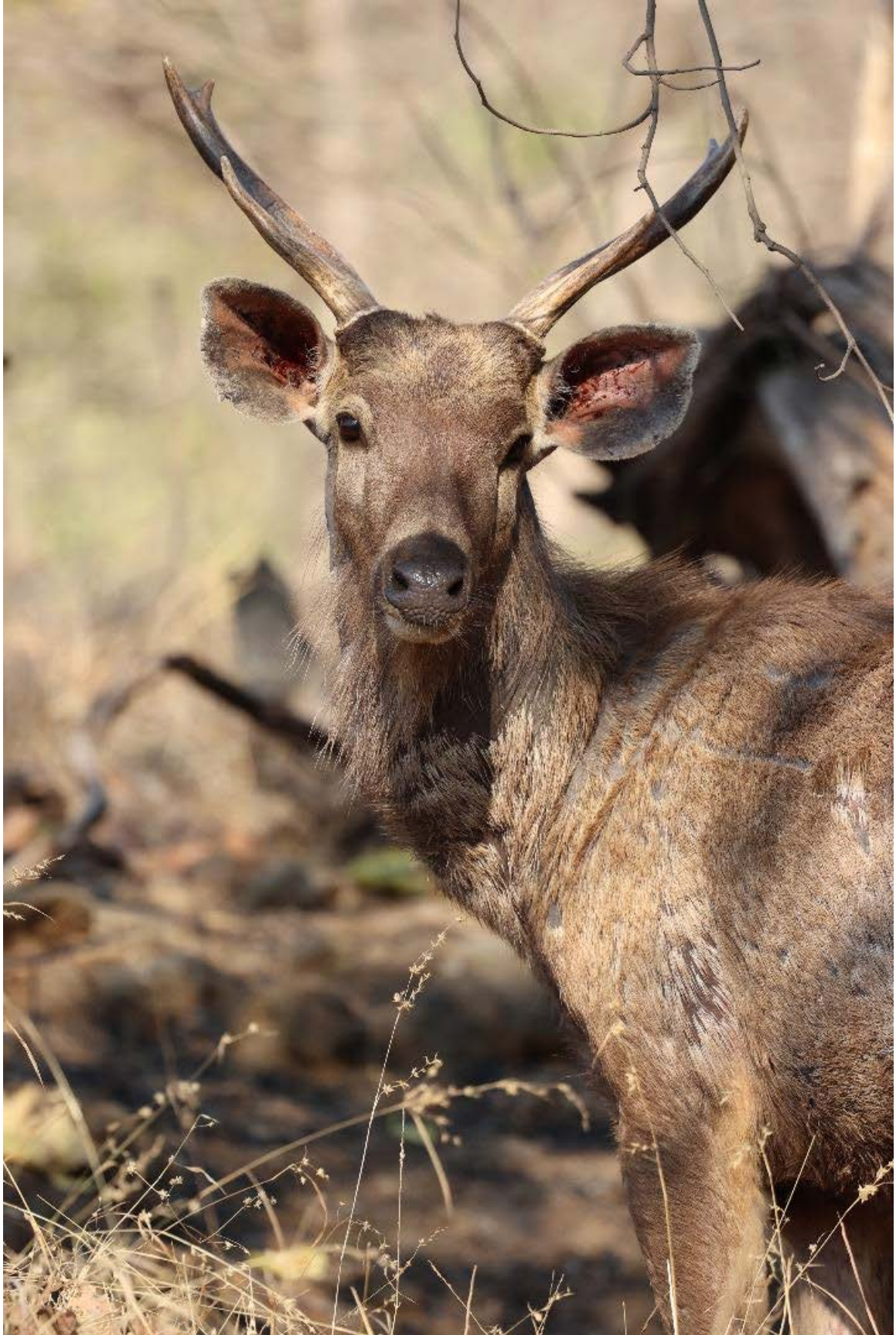




After breakfast the following day we said bye to Phil and Angie and headed towards Gir National Park. After about four hours of driving, we entered the park on a rough dirt road which took us an hour to traverse the 20 km to the park gate. Chital and Northern Plains Langurs were the only mammals seen, unsurprising given that we were driving at mid-day. We emerged onto a paved road at Sasan Gir and drove to the Hotel Anil Farmhouse, a sizable property situated on the edge of a river with extensive groves of mango trees and a welcoming pool.

Because we are firm believers that “more is more”, and we didn’t have a safari scheduled for this afternoon, we ate lunch and then inquired about a taxi to take us to Junagadh, a mid-sized city about 50 km away. A taxi was quickly procured and we headed off. Apart from a motorcyclist running into the side mirror of the vehicle as we were passing through a village, the drive was uneventful and we arrived at Uparkot Fort just before last entry. The fort is spectacular, with giant step wells and a large mosque and mausoleum. It also contains the world’s greatest density of Five-lined Palm Squirrels in its gardens. Afterwards, we stopped at a bank to use the ATM but I couldn’t get it to work. Although it was 6:30 pm and the bank was closed, one of the bank employees came out, showed me what I was doing wrong, and then invited us into the bank for a photo and a request that we post it on social media and say something positive about the bank. So here it is – SBI bank in Junagadh is fantastic! Please patronize it if you are in the vicinity. I had hoped we might see something on the nocturnal drive back to Gir but it was sadly mammal-less.

We entered Gir National Park at 6:30 the next morning and soon had a Lioness in front of the car, followed by a further four Lions down the road. The afternoon safari produced seven Lions and a Ruddy Mongoose, as well as three species of owls (Brown Fish Owl, Indian Scops Owl and Spotted Owlet) and an Indian Flapshell Turtle, in addition to the usual mammals seen previously.



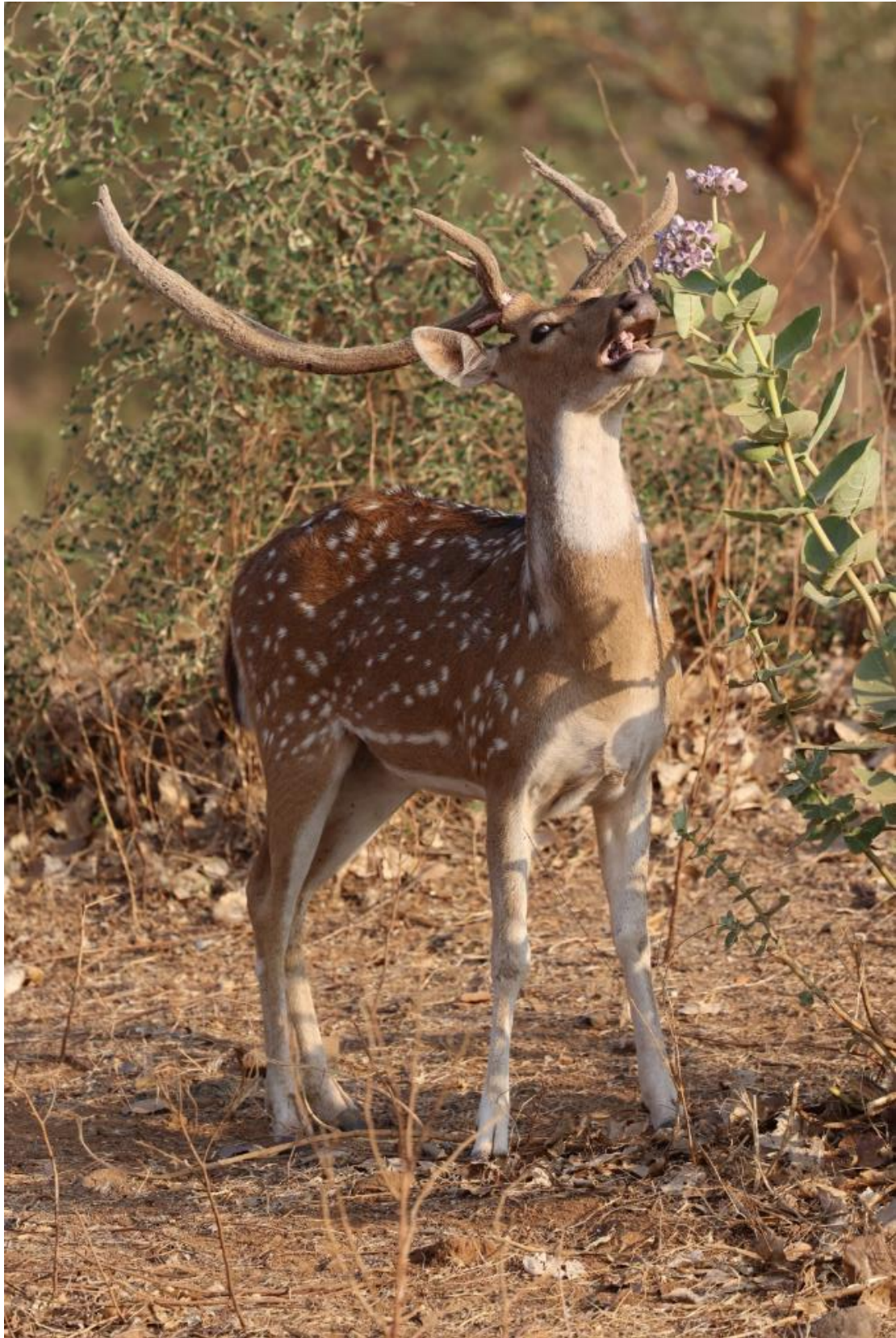




The next morning's safari followed Route 1, the longest route in Gir. We saw a solitary Lioness, then a second Lioness with two cubs at a kill. In addition to the usual Sambar, Chital, Wild Pig and langurs, we also had a nice view of a pair of Leopards on the road, our eight and ninth Leopards of the trip. The afternoon safari was a bit chaotic. Apparently, the appointed driver hadn't shown up, so a last-minute substitute driver was found, who quickly distinguished himself by driving into the open door of another jeep. While this matter was being settled, we watched two other jeeps at the park administration building collide. Fortunately, no one appeared to be hurt. The safari was very quiet. Eventually we came across one adult male Lion lying down, providing poor views. The guide claimed at one point to have seen a Leopard which disappeared back into the bush, but I was looking in the same direction he was and saw nothing.













As arranged, our taxi arrived the next morning for the trip to Junagadh to catch the train to Ahmedabad. Arriving at the station, things were preternaturally quiet, which made sense when we discovered the train had been cancelled. The chap in the train station booth said that I should “go that way”, waving his hand to indicate much of the subcontinent. I followed a guy from the station with a big bag thinking he might also be off to buy a replacement ticket. He jumped on a bus for Rajkot, I think indicating he was taking a train from there. Fortunately, I remembered that Rajkot was miles away and jumped off the bus before it had accelerated much. Eventually I found a building just across the courtyard from the station where I could purchase replacement tickets. I was told that our previous tickets were already cancelled and I would automatically be receiving a refund, which turned out to be true despite my scepticism. We purchased tickets for a train later that morning and went over to Geeta Lodge restaurant for their delicious all-you-can-eat thali lunch. Back at the train station, we chatted with a young teacher who works with tribal groups in Dahab, and then had a conversation with a security detail equipped with a dog and mine sweeper device who were preparing for a festival on the weekend and also for the wedding of Mukesh Ambani’s son at which Rihanna would be performing. Indian train stations are rarely boring. We pulled into Ahmedabad that evening, had great tandoori chicken at the “Hotel Goodnight” and went to bed exhausted.

Screening at the airport the next morning was less onerous than usual and the flight left on time. In the air, the pilot announced that the Delhi airport was congested and we would have to circle for twenty to thirty minutes before landing. Given that we had 55 minutes scheduled between flights, this was concerning. We landed at 9:45 am, taxied until 9:55, and then raced off the flight. A kindly Air India employee called the gate to stay open while running alongside us. Indira Gandhi Airport must be one of the world’s largest and, despite us having arrived on a domestic flight, we had to pass through another boarding pass check and security screening station. Tracey kept running like Forrest Gump even after she passed our gate, Gate 51, which necessitated me yelling at the top of my lungs while gasping for breath and hoping that I wouldn’t be arrested for disruptive behaviour. Fortunately, Indians tend to be a tolerant lot, so our boarding the 10:25 flight at 10:24 generated more smiles than hostile glances.

We arrived in Guwahati and, not knowing where Lord’s Hotel was, hired an autorickshaw. It turned out to be immediately outside the airport, about a three-minute walk away. We dropped our stuff and headed downtown to enjoy the urban delights of Guwahati, the most interesting of which is the Assam State Museum.

The next morning, we were picked up by our driver for the northern leg of our trip and headed off to Manas National Park. We arrived at Thobgang Jungle Tourist Camp about 10:15 am. Thobgang consists of lovely wooden chalets on the edge of the park. Our guide, Rustom, was instrumental in founding the tourism project here after most of the wildlife in this area of the park had been poached about 20 years ago. He stated that poaching had significantly decreased since 2003 when the project was initiated. We picked up a local warden and headed into the park, initially driving through a forested area in which little wildlife was seen, although we did find a couple of Sambar and our first troop of Capped Langurs. Entering a grassland area, the sightings picked up. Asian Elephant was followed by a couple of Wild Water Buffalo, a Greater One-horned Rhinoceros mother and calf, several Swamp Deer (Barasingha) and a Hog Deer. We left the park about 5:40 via a different gate and were back at the lodge about an hour later.

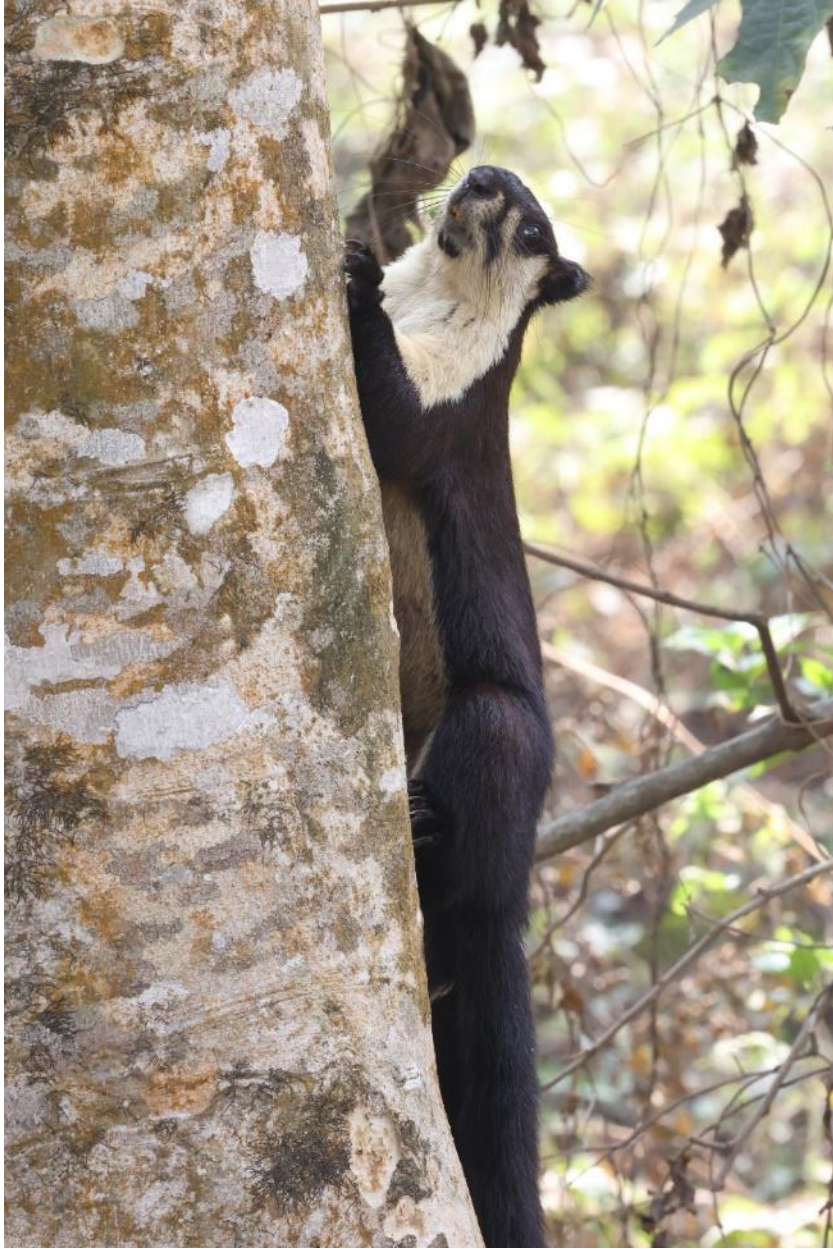












The next morning, we entered the park through the same gate as the previous day and saw the same species, with the addition of a couple of Hoary-bellied Squirrels and an Indian (Red) Muntjac. We left the park for lunch at the Smiling Tusker Elephant Camp, then re-entered through the Bansbari entrance. Apart from previously seen species, we saw a total of five Malay (Black) Giant Squirrels. We drove up to the border with Bhutan and had a short walk over the border before heading back.



The following morning, we drove to Orang National Park and our hotel for the night, the Green Planet Resort, which turned out to be the nastiest place we stayed on the trip, with holes in the ceiling and roof and no screens on the windows. We picked up our park guide, Sita, who had worked at the park for about eight months. Part of the reason for visiting Orang is that we had been informed that it is “reputedly a good spot for Pygmy Hog”. This statement is similar in nature to “Washington State is reputedly a good place for Bigfoot” – sort of true, but not practically useful for wildlife enthusiasts. Captive-bred Pygmy Hogs are released into the wild in Orang, and we saw several of the enclosures where they are kept prior to release. Sita told us that she had seen several Pygmy Hogs dash across the road, but I suspect this may have occurred after the release of captives as they were still getting the lay of the land. There are extensive areas of long grass where Pygmy Hogs could easily hide from the eyes of keen wildlife spotters. We did see lots of Hog Deer, a rhino which was wallowing in a pond but emerged when the driver made loud noises, whether due to curiosity or annoyance I don’t know, then more Hog Deer, Asian Elephant, Wild Pig and two Hoary-bellied Squirrels. Orang is little visited and provides a nice sense of tranquility which is absent in some of the larger and busier Indian parks.





The night was filled with someone playing house music until about 1:00 am, which made for poor sleep, so we were happy to get up early and go for a walk around town. The morning safari provided sightings of the same species as yesterday and we left town about 10:30. Driving through Tezpur, we picked up Raju's daughter, who was on school holidays, then continued through Nameri National Park. In the park, we saw both Assamese Macaques and Rhesus Macaques, as well as some individuals which appeared to be hybrids. Eventually we arrived at the Arunachal Pradesh border town of Bhalukpong, a typical border town with an amazing diversity of peoples, bringing to mind the Mos Eisley Cantina in Tatooine. Eventually Raju was able to track down "the guy" who could allow us into Arunachal Pradesh, only to discover that we were missing the second page of our permit and the dates on it were wrong and, in fact, already past. With the usual flurry of calls, this got resolved and we were on our way, climbing the steep road between Pakke Tiger Reserve and Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary. The town of Tenga was notable for the enormous Indian Army presence and the fact that the one gas station in town was closed, but fortunately we were able to get to the next town, where a sizable line-up for gas had formed. Eventually we were on our way to Lama Camp, first stopping at Raju's wife's family's place, to drop off his daughter and pick up our guide, Nocti. By this time, it was dark, so our first nocturnal drive in Eaglenest was the three-hour drive from Lama Camp to Bompou Camp. We had a very fleeting sighting of a Mainland Leopard Cat on the way, but little else. Bompou Camp is quite basic – canvas tents with some of the hardest beds I have encountered anywhere. After the first night I requested an additional mattress, feeling a bit like the princess and the pea, only to discover that the hardness was built into the mattresses, so adding an extra one didn't actually result in any improvement.

We spent a week at Eaglenest, during which time we saw Pallas's Squirrel, Orange-bellied Squirrel, Himalayan Striped Squirrel, Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel, Particolored Flying Squirrel, Gray-headed Giant Flying Squirrel, Arunachal Macaque, Northern Tree Shrew, Himalayan Brown Goral and a Himalayan Rat as well as previously seen species such as Red Muntjac, Asiatic Elephant and Mainland Leopard Cat. As others have reported, mammals are thin on the ground here – one can drive for hours at night seeing only one or two mammals. The allure lies in the possibility of rarities – Asiatic Golden Cat, Marbled Cat and so on. One of the guides had seen a Marbled Cat the day prior to our arrival, and another guide showed us a picture of a serow which had stepped out onto the road a few days previously. I think the best approach may be to appreciate that there are few places in India where one can walk on a road nearly devoid of traffic through intact forest and treat any mammal sightings as a bonus. Unfortunately, I'm not Zen enough to think that way. The birdlife at Eaglenest is stunning, and sightings of Gray Peacock Pheasant, Beautiful Nuthatch, Himalayan Cutia and Blyth's Tragopan were a welcome addition to the mammals. The one doable mammal which we didn't manage to see was Yellow-throated Marten, which are common around Bompu. Birders would report seeing one and we would run off to the spot indicated, only to miss it and return to camp to be told that one had just been seen somewhere else. A couple of birders became incredulous that we hadn't seen the martens they were bumping into regularly to the point that I was tempted to say I wasn't interested in mammals and was only there to observe bamboo and rhododendrons. To have a good chance of seeing the rarities I think a stay longer than a week would be required, but be forewarned that you may want to go there alone. I'm not confident many relationships would survive a longer stay apart from those involving masochists who enjoy very cold nights, long bumpy drives and an absence of bathing opportunities.







Our last morning, we left at 5:30 am, stopping for a packed breakfast at Sunderview on the way out. Raju, although having said the previous day he was dropping his daughter in Tezpur, today announced that she would be joining us for the rest of the trip. I said I thought this was a bit unusual, but he replied “not unusual”. Tracey was on the verge of pointing out the various other vehicles on the roads, none of which had the driver’s children in them, when the ground agent called. He asked whether there was a problem with Raju bringing his daughter along, to which I replied that there wasn’t a problem, but it would have been appropriate to ask and not presume. Given that wasn’t the case, I suggested that Raju could decide whether he wanted to bring his daughter on the rest of the trip and forego a tip or drop his daughter off with her mother. As is often the case in India when money enters the discussion, the issue instantly resolved itself and Raju announced he would drop his daughter off with her mother in Tezpur. Shortly afterwards, the daughter started vomiting in the car, which wasn’t pleasant for any of us. We arrived at the meeting point in Tezpur and dropped off his daughter, Raju looking somewhat relieved as I’m not sure he had been a fan of the plan either.

We drove along NH715 which runs along the southern border of Kaziranga National Park, observing Greater One-horned Rhinos, Asiatic Elephants, Hog Deer, Sambar and Swamp Deer. The fact that one can observe rhinos from a national highway in India warrants a great deal of credit. We arrived mid-afternoon at the Bonhabi Resort in Kohora near the main Kaziranga gate and had a relaxing afternoon and a delicious dinner. Asia boasts the largest bathroom spiders in the world and we were not disappointed by the specimen in our bathroom that night.

We entered the western gate just as it opened the next morning and observed the same species as yesterday with the addition of Wild Water Buffalo, Red Muntjac, Wild Pig and Rhesus Macaques, as well as some spectacular birdlife. The near miss of the morning occurred when the folks on the vehicle just ahead of us saw two Malayan (Indian Crestless) Porcupines cross the road and enter the forest just before we arrived. The highlight of the afternoon safari was a family of eight Smooth-coated Otters seen by a pond just before closing time. During the drive, our guide had mentioned that nocturnal animals were sometimes seen around Wild Grass, an older resort on the outskirts of Kohora. Needless to say, we headed there after dark but unfortunately didn't see any mammals. The resort had a sort of half-abandoned "The Shining" kind of vibe, which might have frightened off any wildlife tempted to live there.







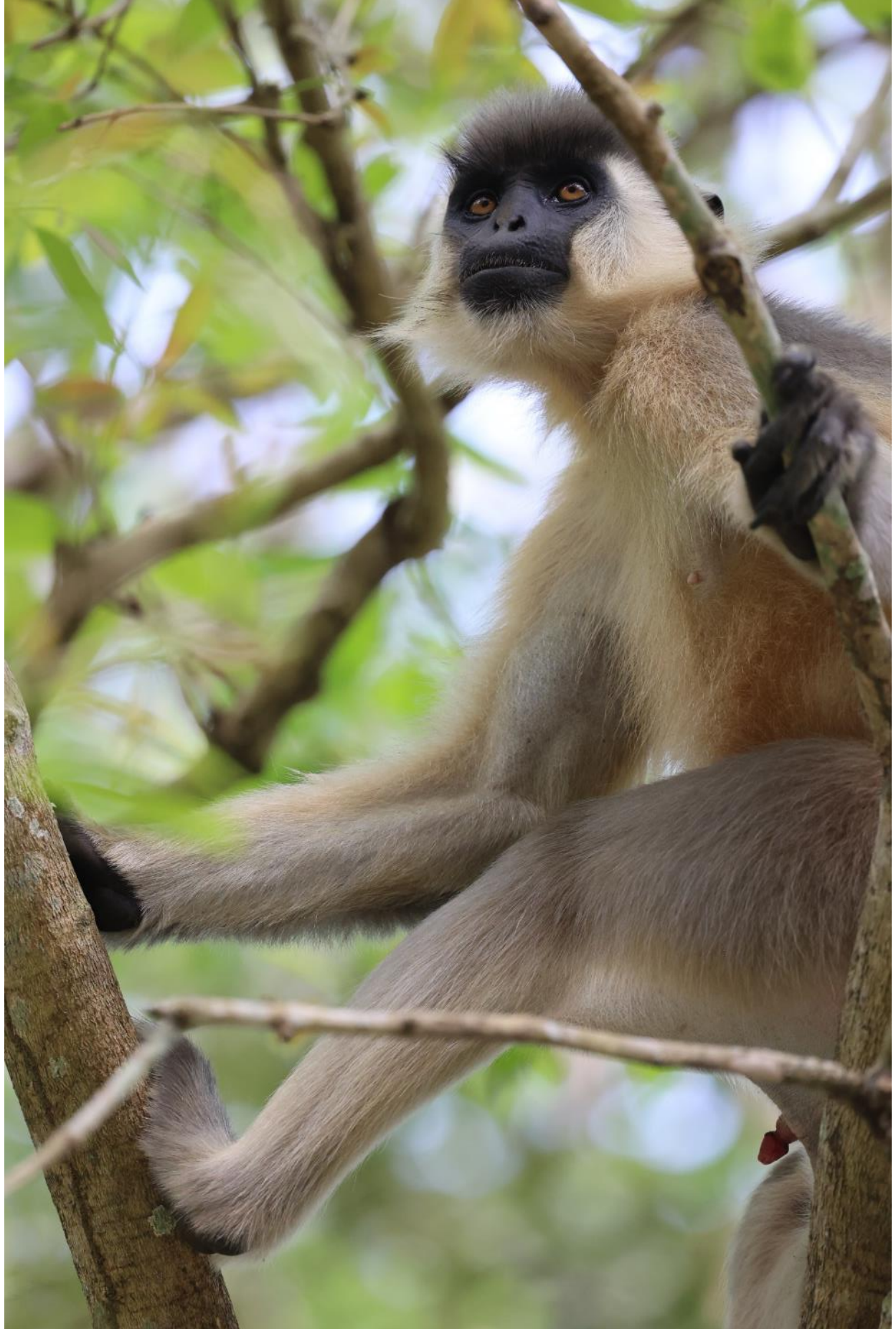
The night was punctuated by dogs barking. I went out about 1:00 am to discover that they were barking senselessly at a plastic bag trapped on the fence. The removal of the bag didn't result in a cessation of the barking, so I finally went out about 3:00 and threw a stone, which bounced off a metal pole and startled them away. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no other nocturnal mammals were observed that night. After breakfast we headed for the Gibbon Homestay near the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary. We were welcomed by the owner, Diganta, with tea and a glass of the local spirits. Diganta announced that we would go out at 3:00 pm. At 3:00 pm, we drove around the village to a roost of Indian Flying Foxes, then got back into the car and returned to the homestay. When I said, "aren't we going into the reserve", Diganta told me that the ground agent had only indicated the two safaris for the following day, even though our itinerary clearly indicated a sanctuary visit today also. I called the ground agent, who blamed the issue on "miscommunication", although I found it interesting that all miscommunications seemed to be in the agent's favour and not ours. Diganta was outraged on our behalf, but the reserve is closed to visitors after mid-afternoon, so we were unable to visit. Instead, we went for a walk around the village and admired the fireflies as they emerged.



The following morning, we were at the reserve at 6:00 am and picked up our guide, smelling strongly of alcohol, and a park warden with a gun. There were a number of Rhesus Macaques around the office and a troop of Capped Langurs a short distance down the path. We then came across a family group of Western Hoolock Gibbons, followed by a couple more family groups further along the path. Back near the office we found some tolerant Capped Langurs which finally allowed for decent photos. On the early afternoon visit to the reserve we walked a different route across the park looking for Northern Pig-tailed Macaques but without success, although we did find a couple of new gibbon families and more Capped Langurs.









We left early for the drive back to Guwahati, passing by Kaziranga Park for a final view of the megafauna there, then an uneventful flight to Delhi. After a brief night in Delhi, we were up at 3:00 am to return to the airport. A young guy from Nagaland checking in to the hotel used his Uber app to book an airport ride for us, resulting in the cheapest ride to the airport yet. Airport security insisted on confiscating a small Allen key in my camera bag, unmoved by the fact that it had been allowed on seven previous domestic flights in India as well as countless international ones.

We were met at the airport in Leh by Phunchok and his assistant and taken to the Mahey Retreat, our home for the next two nights of acclimatization. A group of French photographers there had just returned from Rumbak with stunning Snow Leopard photos which we admired over a second breakfast. We ventured downtown to pick up long johns, crampons and a toque, but otherwise took it fairly easy. Leh sits at 3500 metres and any significant exertion left us gasping for air.

We headed out with Phunchok at 9:00 the next morning to look for Urial, but without success. Phunchok remarked that the recent growth in Leh, accompanied by increased fencing, buildings and dogs, has made it harder to view wildlife close to town. I was struck by the weird juxtaposition of military aircraft flying low over the many temples and shrines of the town. We stopped to visit Thiksey monastery and then continued about 45 km out of town to a spot where a Eurasian Lynx with two kittens had been seen a couple of days previously. We were able to ascend to about 4300 metres before Phunchok's Suzuki Swift became stuck in the snow but didn't find the lynx. We did have close views of a Woolly Hare by the side of the road and stopped to watch a Solitary Snipe in a stream close to Leh. Personally, I think the snipes are solitary because not a lot of company wants to join them in the cold, desolate spots where they apparently choose to live.

We packed up early for the drive to Rumbak. About 9:30 we came across a group of six Urial by the side of the road a couple of hundred metres away. We would have stayed longer, but Phunchok advised us that a Snow Leopard had been sighted on a kill close to the village of Rumbak. The Snow Leopard was easy to find, as there was a crowd of probably fifty people in Rumbak with scopes and enormous camera lenses trained on a spot up the hill. Apparently, folks staying in lodges several hours away had come into Rumbak for the sighting. The Snow Leopard was about 450 metres away and would lift its head on occasion allowing for good, albeit distant, views. Numerous Bharal/Blue Sheep were also visible in small groups on the surrounding hillsides.



The homestay in Rumbak was a pleasant surprise, a large comfy room with windows on the south and east sides affording expansive views of the surrounding mountains. The toilet was a long drop located outside, which made for cold nocturnal excursions.

Early the next morning we tried to climb to a higher vantage point for improved views, but the Snow Leopard had finished eating the kill and disappeared. We walked down through the village, seeing a Woolly Hare, Chukar, Tibetan Partridge and Himalayan Snowcock, the last at some distance. We spent the morning at the main watching point, about a kilometre downhill from the village, returned for lunch and a brief nap, then returned to the watching area. Phunchok was leaving to guide another group and introduced us to our new guide and spotter, Sonam and Tashi. Tashi quickly pointed out a Red Fox lounging beneath the mouth of a cave, which impressed me immensely until he admitted that it was almost always to be found there. Shortly afterwards, he spotted two adolescent Snow Leopards ascending a distant ridge, the offspring of the Snow Leopard we had seen the previous day which had recently been chased away by their mother to live on their own. I met a young Dutch fellow, Jeroen, who had seen pikas close to the village, so that became the planned target for the next day.

Initially I couldn't find any pikas, but fortuitously I bumped into Jeroen again, who showed me the spot next to a stone wall where he had seen them, and within minutes a Large-eared Pika scurried between some prickly plants and into a hole in the stone wall. That afternoon, we wandered back down to the main watching point. About 5:00 pm the Blue Sheep suddenly became attentive and we heard the plaintive call of a Snow Leopard. Tashi quickly sighted it and we were able to watch it contour across the landscape until it was out of sight.





The next morning, I went down to the pika spot before breakfast to get some photos. During breakfast we got a call that Tashi had seen a Snow Leopard, so we rushed down to the watching point but arrived too late to see it. We then hiked up the Yurutse Valley to what may be the world's most isolated homestay, a single house about two hours' walk away, which astoundingly had Wi-Fi. We left about 4:30 pm and stopped to scan about an hour later. Tracey said, "Is that a fox", indicating a spot on the opposite side of the river valley. On closer examination, it turned out to be a Eurasian Lynx sitting between two bushes. It eventually got up, limped along a short distance and then briefly chased a Woolly Hare, which was reassuring to see. Back at the watching point, we heard a Snow Leopard calling and were able to see it on a distant ridge. A truly exceptional day.



The next day was fairly uneventful, although we did see two Snow Leopards on a distant ridge. The following day, Tashi suggested we walk down the entry road in the afternoon. I didn't think that was likely to be productive but went along anyway. About a kilometre down the road, Tashi gesticulated vigorously. Thirty metres away, just across a narrow river, was a Snow Leopard on a kill. It looked at us for a few minutes, then started climbing away. Magic!

The next day we returned to Leh after an uneventful morning. I can't remember the last time a hot shower was so appreciated. We spent the afternoon at Leh Palace, returned to Delhi the following day for a bit of shopping and urban sightseeing and then were on our way back to Canada.

Some words of thanks are in order, particularly to Ravi, Venugopal (our ground agent in south India) and Kumaraswamy for their assistance in south India, to Raju and Nocti in the northeast and to Phunchok, Sonam and Tashi in Ladakh. We had a fantastic time and are already thinking of places we missed to be seen on a return visit to India.

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List of Mammals seen:

1. Asian Elephant – *Elephas maximus*
2. Northern Treeshrew – *Tupaia belangeri*
3. Lion-tailed Macaque – *Macaca silenus*
4. Bonnet Macaque – *Macaca radiata*
5. Assamese Macaque – *Macaca assamensis*
6. Arunachal Macque – *Macaca munzala*
7. Rhesus Macaque – *Macaca mulatta*
8. Bengal Sacred Langur/Northern Plains Gray Langur – *Semnopithecus entellus*
9. Malabar Sacred Langur/Black-footed Gray Langur – *Semnopithecus hypoleucos*
10. Madras Gray Langur/Tufted Gray Langur – *Semnopithecus priam*
11. Nilgiri Langur – *Semnopithecus johnii*
12. Capped Langur – *Trachypithecus pileatus*
13. Western Hoolock Gibbon – *Hoolock hoolock*
14. Large-eared Pika – *Ochotona macrotis*
15. Indian Hare – *Lepus nigricollis*
16. Woolly Hare – *Lepus oiostolus*
17. Indian Gerbil – *Tatera indica*
18. Little Indian Field Mouse – *Mus booduga*
19. Lesser Bandicoot Rat – *Bandicota bengalensis*
20. Brown Rat – *Rattus norvegicus*
21. Roof Rat/Black Rat – *Rattus rattus*
22. Himalayan Rat – *Rattus pyctoris*
23. Malay/Black Giant Squirrel – *Ratufa bicolor*
24. Indian Giant Squirrel – *Ratufa indica*
25. Northern/Five-striped Palm Squirrel – *Funambulus pennantii*
26. Indian/Three-striped Palm Squirrel – *Funambulus palmarum*
27. Jungle Palm/Striped Squirrel – *Funambulus tristriatus*
28. Nilgiri/Dusky Palm/Striped Squirrel – *Funambulus sublineatus*
29. Himalayan Striped Squirrel – *Tamiops maclellandii*
30. Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel – *Dremomys lokriah*
31. Pallas's Squirrel – *Callosciurus erythraeus*
32. Hoary-bellied/Irrawaddy Squirrel – *Callosciurus pygerythrus*
33. Particolored Flying Squirrel – *Hylopetes alboniger*
34. Indian Giant Flying Squirrel – *Petaurista philippensis*
35. Gray-headed Giant Flying Squirrel – *Petaurista caniceps*
36. Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel – *Petaurista nobilis*
37. Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bat – *Cynopterus sphinx*
38. Indian Flying Fox – *Pteropus medius*
39. Greater Mouse-tailed Bat – *Rhinopoma microphyllum*
40. Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat – *Rhinopoma hardwickii*
41. Eurasian Wild Pig – *Sus scrofa*
42. Indian Chevrotain/Mouse Deer – *Moschiola indica*
43. Red/Indian Muntjac – *Muntiacus muntjac*

44. Chital – *Axis axis*
45. Hog Deer – *Axis porcinus*
46. Sambar – *Rusa unicolor*
47. Barasingha/Swamp Deer – *Rucervus duvaucelii*
48. Gaur – *Bos gaurus*
49. Asian Wild Buffalo – *Bubalus arnee*
50. Nilgai – *Boselaphus tragocamelus*
51. Chowsingha – *Tetracerus quadricornis*
52. Blackbuck – *Antilope cervicapra*
53. Greater Blue Sheep – *Pseudois nayaur*
54. Nilgari Tahr – *Nilgiritragus hylocrius*
55. (Ladakh) Urial – *Ovis vignei*
56. Himalayan Brown Goral – *Nemorhaedus goral*
57. Asiatic Wild Ass – *Equus hemionus*
58. Greater One-horned Rhinoceros – *Rhinoceros unicornis*
59. Tiger – *Panthera tigris*
60. Lion – *Panthera leo*
61. Leopard – *Panthera pardus*
62. Snow Leopard – *Panthera uncia*
63. Eurasian Lynx – *Lynx lynx*
64. Mainland Leopard Cat – *Prionailurus bengalensis*
65. Jungle Cat – *Felis chaus*
66. Small Indian Civet – *Viverricula indica*
67. Common Palm Civet – *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*
68. Brown Palm Civet – *Paradoxurus jerdoni*
69. Small Indian Mongoose – *Herpestes auropunctatus*
70. Indian Gray Mongoose – *Herpestes edwardsii*
71. Ruddy Mongoose – *Herpestes smithii*
72. Stripe-necked Mongoose – *Herpestes vitticollis*
73. Striped Hyena – *Hyaena hyaena*
74. Gray Wolf – *Canis lupus*
75. Golden Jackal – *Canis aureus*
76. Red Fox – *Vulpes vulpes*
77. Indian Fox – *Vulpes bengalensis*
78. Sloth Bear – *Melursus ursinus*
79. Nilgiri Marten – *Martes gwatkinsii* (Tracey only)
80. Smooth-coated Otter – *Lutrogale perspicillata*



