



Tripreport India

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Introduction

If there were only five countries I could visit in the world, India would be one of them. There is no shortage to the number of interesting animals India has to offer. Obviously it is a very large country, but also very variable in landscape which results in some of the most spectacular mammals on the planet all together in one country. Being especially interested in cats I knew I had to visit India at some point because several species are quite easy here while being very difficult in other countries. I am certain that from a mammal watcher's point of view we still have barely scratched the surface of the country and that many other tough mammals might be possible here. Especially the foothills of the Himalayas could do with some further exploration for mammals. Unfortunately India's policy on mammal watching at night makes this difficult and it's not moving in the right direction, but I'm sure there will be more areas brought to our attention in the future. Perhaps one day we will have a decent chance for that Mainland Clouded Leopard!

So obviously India had been on my radar for quite some time, but I didn't have any concrete plans to visit until I heard from Andreas Jonsson's plans to go back to Eaglenest to try once more for Asiatic Golden Cat. This immediately got my attention as I had read about Andreas' earlier trip with a lot of interest and I also knew about the sighting of Stuart Chapman in the same area. Furthermore Andreas wanted to go to Hemis to try for Snow Leopard. Snow Leopard has been on my wish list ever since I saw a documentary about it in high school and this seemed as good as any time to try and look for it. Janco van Gelderen with whom I had travelled before had already made plans with Andreas for Eaglenest and in quite a short time we had worked out that I would join Andreas in the high Himalayas, we would all go to Eaglenest together and after that I would go with Janco to Pench to try for a melanistic Leopard that had been seen there, but also for Tiger. I didn't want to leave India without this big cat. With a bit of luck I would be able to see my remaining Panthera cats now: Snow Leopard and Tiger.

Andreas and Janco have both already written trip reports for mammalwatching.com earlier so I will keep mine a bit shorter. You can find Andreas' trip report [here](#) and Janco's trip report [here](#). Since they had together already covered pretty much my whole trip, I didn't hurry with posting something from my end, but since I have a bit more time now, I did want to share more pictures with you guys. Especially since I have been working on the flying squirrels with Daan Drukker (or basically he has been working on it and I have been accepting his suggestions). Since some of these species are barely covered with good quality pictures I thought it couldn't hurt to use this platform to bring my pictures to more peoples attention. If anyone has any comments on any of the species or pictures I really appreciate them.

But first I will ponder a bit more in general about the trip and the country which you can skip if you want :). In many ways India was as I had expected it to be. It's the only country where I've been to so far in which I wouldn't dare drive my own car. I was surprised by the lack of people speaking English of a reasonable level. I had always thought most people in India would be able to speak it as a second language, same as French in many African countries, but I was wrong. I really liked the attitude of the people in the Tibetan highlands and found them to be quite different from people in the other parts. They seemed more sincere and were certainly less driven by tips as the rest of the people operating in the service business. In Pench I think I got the best taste of what regular tourists must experience

and while it is also quite straightforward that a tip is the way to get what you want, this also makes the relationship with the driver and guide a bit more businesslike than what I have experienced in other parts of the world where it feels like you are more 'in it together' if that makes sense. Still, I haven't had really bad experiences in the country and I wouldn't mind revisiting.

The one thing I did not like is that airport security required me to get all my electronics out every single time. Getting enough trays and putting the small stuff in the one at the bottom is the way to go if you want to minimize your chances of your headlight or other small valuable items making it into the pocket of an opportunistic neighbor. It was also quite funny that my big batteries always elicited some kind of comment, or looks of concern from the security staff, but in the end I was always allowed to take them with me. I really appreciated that the domestic flights always ran exactly on time and we never had any delays. I always travelled with IndiGo and they seem to have a modern fleet with good service.

In fact I had the most problems right at the start of my trip with Swiss. I had a transfer in Zurich while flying from Amsterdam. My flight was in fact not that late (about half an hour), but waiting an extra 15 minutes before a 10-hour flight to Delhi was apparently too much to ask from Swiss. This gave me a lot of stress as I had another separately booked domestic flight waiting for me in Delhi to take me to Leh. I have to give credit to the local staff in Swiss though, because they did do their best to get me on the best available flight, but it soon turned out that my flight on Thursday morning to Leh was going to turn into a flight on Saturday morning to Leh. This completely ruined my plans to go for a pre-trip for Pallas' Cat by myself before joining Andreas, however we had amazing luck with the Snow Leopards and in hindsight the delay at the beginning made my trip even better although it certainly wasn't fun when it happened.

But enough talk! For more details I recommend reading Andreas' and Janco's tripreports as well. Oh, and thanks for the great trip together guys! I will put my itinerary down here as well so you have at least some idea of the time spent in different places without having to skip back and forth between trip reports and after that I will go straight to the species list with many pictures and some additional comments. I hope you enjoy the tripreport!

Lennart Verheuel

To go directly to some stories from the trip, click on the links below. You will also find them in the species list.

- Watching Snow Leopards in the Himalayas (naturebylennart.com);
- Watching a Pallas' Cat on the Tibetan Plateau (naturebylennart.com);
- Birds and mammals from Eaglenest (naturebylennart.com);
- Watching the largest and smallest cat on the same day (naturebylennart.com).

Itinerary

March 1	Flight Amsterdam – Zurich, Zurich – Milan, Milan - Delhi
March 2	Arrival in New Delhi With taxi to Agra, visiting Taj Mahal
March 3	Visiting Keoladeo Bird Sanctuary in the morning, drive back to Delhi in the afternoon
March 4	Flight Delhi – Leh early in the morning, exploring the area around Leh
March 5	Birding around Leh, after a reported Snow Leopard driving for 2 hours to another valley and watching our first Snow Leopard!
March 6	Departure for Rumbak, arriving in our Rumbak homestay and watching for Snow Leopard in the late afternoon
March 7	Walking to the village Urité, when we are back we are able to watch a pair of Snow Leopards calling to each other
March 8	Watching mating Snow Leopards close to Rumbak
March 9	Departure for our homestay in the town Nyoma
March 10	Early drive from Nyoma to the town of Hanle (it was not possible for foreigners to spend the night in Hanle). Meeting up with the local guide to watch for Pallas' Cat. We find one very late in the afternoon
March 11	Another day spend at Hanle with more Pallas' Cats
March 12	Drive back to Leh
March 13	Flights Leh – Delhi, Delhi – Guwahati
March 14	Drive Guwahati – Lama Camp Eaglenest, night drive at the Lama Camp area
March 15	Early morning drive at Lama Camp area, crossing the pass to Bompu Camp, night drive in Bompu Camp area
March 16-19	Night drives at Bompu Camp area looking for Golden Cat. During the day mostly exploring on foot.
March 20	Drive back early in the night from Bompu Camp to Lama Camp (with a Mainland Leopard Cat in the rain), having breakfast at Lama Camp, drive back to Guwahati, boarding our flight Guwahati – Leh
March 21	Early in the morning our flight Leh – Nagpur, drive Nagpur to our lodge near Pench National Park, afternoon drive in the Madhya Pradesh side of the park
March 22	Morning drive in the Madhya Pradesh side, afternoon drive in Maharashtra side of the park, night drive in the bufferzone of the national park
March 23	Morning and afternoon drive in the Madhya Pradesh side of Pench
March 24	Morning drive in Madhya Pradesh side of Pench, then drive from Pench back to Nagpur, flight Nagpur - Delhi
March 25	Flight Delhi – Zurich, Zurich - Amsterdam

Species list

1. Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus ssp indicus*)

On our way back from our only night drive at the Lama side of Eaglenest we had an elephant running on the road in front of us. It stayed on the road a while and eventually went to the side (which looked like it should send something as big as an elephant like a big grey wrecking ball down the slope, but the lack of panicked trumpeting and snapping trees suggested that the elephant stayed on its feet).



2. Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)

Basically organized crime. Very common in many villages in India. Also common in Pench.







3. Arunachal Macaque (*Macaca munzala*)

Watched a few in the mist one moment near the pass between Lama and Bompou Camp at Eaglenest. Too fast for a picture.

4. Bengal Sacred Langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*)

Very common at Pench.





5. Indian Hare (*Lepus nigricollis*)

Easy to see in the bufferzone of Pench at night. We had one night drive of 2 hours and saw plenty.



6. Woolly Hare (*Lepus oiostolus*)

Seen a couple around Rumbak village.



7. Stoliczka's Mountain Vole (*Alticola stoliczkanus*)

The most common rodent on the Tibetan Plateau around Hanle. We mistakenly took them for pika's initially.



8. Pallas's Squirrel (*Callosciurus erythraeus*)

Quite common at Eaglenest. We watched one very well on a branch.



9. Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel (*Dremomys lokriah*)

Most common squirrel at Eaglenest, but not easy to get good pictures from for some reason.



10. Indian Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*)

Common at our lodge near Pench and around the entrance gates.





11. Northern Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus pennantii* ssp *argentescens*)

Common in Keoleado Bird Sanctuary. I think this is also the species that is very common around the Taj Mahal since both areas are so close to each other, I don't have good pictures of those.



12. Particolored Flying Squirrel (*Hylopetes alboniger*)

Seen a few times at night on the Bompu side of Eaglenest. The only small flying squirrel we saw over there. Apparently Hairy Footed Flying Squirrel is also seen at Eaglenest, but not by us. I have put down a sequence of two separate sightings. Interesting is that the second one appear to have a mask. If anyone has anything to say about the ID, please let me know!

Sighting 1 (I edited in the eyes, but they were actually already too blown up, so it doesn't look very natural)



Sighting 2



13. Grey-headed Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista caniceps*)

According to the literature a rarely seen flying squirrel. This one is split from *elegans*. We had one individual at the Lama side which is the first one I put down below. At the Bompu side we had several sightings of another individual which might all actually be the same. Notice the difference in head color? I'm curious if there might be some genetic diversity going on between both sides of the pass.

Sighting 1 on the Lama side



Sighting 2 on the Bompu side







Hodgon's Giant Flying Squirrel (Petaurista magnificus) / Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel (Petaurista nobilis)

Daan thought the animal below might be a *magnificus*, but in the end he concluded that it was not possible to separate the two based on my pictures. It seems like a lot of misidentification is going on with *magnificus* even up to museum collections. In the field the easiest way to separate them seems to be that *magnificus* has a completely dark forehead and back where *nobilis* has a bright spot between the eyes and a bright dorsal stripe. So for a certain ID I think you need to have at least a good observation of the forehead.



14. Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista nobilis*)

The most common flying squirrel at Eaglenest. We had no less than 7 of them on our first night at the Lama side. Also seen on most nights at the Bompou side. A magnificent enormous flying squirrel.







Sighting of one at the Bompou side





15. Himalayan Striped Squirrel (*Tamiops maclellandii*)

Observed one at the Lama side of Eaglenest on our first morning.



16. Indian Flying Fox (*Pteropus giganteus*)

Saw a big number of them sleeping at Keoleado Bird Sanctuary. Also saw them flying early in the evening on our way back from the afternoon drives in Pench.



17. Pallas' Cat (*Octoclobus manual*)

The one that almost got away! Because of my flight trouble I hadn't expected this one anymore, but our very good fortune with the Snow Leopards gave me another shot and even with a day more than I would have had with my initial itinerary. I've understood that they are more easy in the summer when they have cubs. Then they are more easy to approach for photography. In winter the best time to look for them is early during the day (be there at first light) and late in the afternoon. However we never got lucky very early in the morning. On our first day we finally watched one hunting late in the afternoon. On our second day we found one around 10 o'clock which was so busy hunting that it allowed us to sneak up on it. Great sighting, just too bad about the heat haze... More of this sighting [here](#).

We had another one running on the rocks when we drove another route a bit later in the morning, but I didn't see it. Then another one that day late in the afternoon, but far away. It seems like this is a great opportunity now to get both Pallas' Cat and Snow Leopard. However be aware that Hanle is an important place from a military point of view which can result in it being closed off for foreigners. If you can't sleep there you can sleep in Nyoma which is 1,5 hours away, but it's also possible that it is closed off completely.







18. Leopard (*Panthera pardus ssp fusca*)

We had 4 sightings in Pench. First one on our first afternoon. Then another one 2 days after that in the morning, then 2 together in the afternoon and one of the 2 of the afternoon we watch again the next morning. Too bad 'blacky' the melanistic Leopard wasn't seen anymore when we were there. This was initially even our main reason to go to this park, but we go more than well compensated for missing it with the Rusty-spotted Cat.







19. Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*)

We had a great sighting on the Maharashtra side of Pench. Note that Pench is divided between two states. We went to Maharashtra because Madhya Pradesh was closed for the afternoon that day. However it seemed to me that this side was a lot better because of the strategically placed waterholes. The area on the Madhya Pradesh side is more pleasing on the eye though, in my opinion. Our first Tiger we picked-up just in time. Our driver deserves a spot in the next Fast and Furious movie. When we arrived it was annoying to deal with all the other cars. We were pretty fine until one of them went off the road and parked directly in front of us, right when the tiger stepped out of the forest. After a mixed usage of the more colorful words in both the English and Dutch language, they backed up a bit, just in time for us to get a few good pictures.

That same evening we had a very unexpected sighting of a Rusty-spotted Cat which means we saw the largest and the smallest cat in the world on the same day with both of them lifers for me! More on this [here](#).

We had another Tiger the next day late in the afternoon at the Madhya Pradesh side, walking through the forest.







20. Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*)

We 'twitched' our first one from Leh. This might actually be the way to do it if you want a more certain 'tick'. It was reported and we went for it. We were just in time though. We had a much better sighting in Rumbak Valley. We walked back over the ice of the river when we heard a Snow Leopard calling. We couldn't find it, but did see a lot of people back at the village. We started running and

found a male and a female calling to each other. The female eventually came down and showed itself brilliantly.

More on this [here](#).

The next day we watched them mate. I think they eventually stopped at a total of 15 times! It was very interesting to watch the dynamics between them. They slept the next day.







21. Marbled Cat (*Pardofelis marmorata* ssp *longicaudata*)

Only watched by me at Eaglenest on our final night there after 5 empty nights for Golden Cat. Really a shame how this went, because I had seen it before on Borneo and Janco and Andreas hadn't. I picked up eyeshine on the rocks close to the pass at the Bompou side of Eaglenest. When we drove over there we eventually stopped right in front of the spot where I had seen the eyeshine. We then were about 5 meters away. I looked around with the torch and then suddenly saw a cat looking back at me! It was lying flat on the rocks, I only saw the head unobscured and I was very confused at that moment. It went away very quickly in the vegetation. I thought I had seen a Golden Cat, but then remembered that it is supposed to have white stripes on the cheeks. A Leopard Cat is supposed to have much more white and prominent vertical striped on the forehead. Then I remembered that Marbled Cat also occurs here and that fitted perfectly with what I saw and noted down at the time: Uniformly brown-looking head with speckles on both cheeks. Color was quite a pale brown looking gray, but that was probably because the flashlight was shining on it from such a close distance. Quite plump round cheeks. Fairly broad head. It actually reminded me of the way I saw the Marbled Cat on Borneo looking at me at a one point during our sighting there. The excitement of the sighting was toned down a lot by the way it went though. But that's mammalwatching for you sometimes.

22. Mainland Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)

When you think it's all over then something like this happens: we drove back around 3 o'clock in heavy rains from Bompou to Lama. This is about a 2 hour (bumpy) drive. We kept looking on the road, but didn't really spotlight anymore. Then suddenly a cat was in our head lights and it walked off the road very quickly. I only saw a small pale cat with a relatively short tail, which couldn't have been anything else than a Mainland Leopard Cat. Not the way I wanted to see a lifer though. Glad I got it better in China last Christmas.

23. Rusty-spotted Cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus* ssp. *rubiginosus*)

The unexpected gift of the trip! We decided to go on a 2 hour night drive in the bufferzone of Pench. I had very little confidence we would get anything good and we hadn't expected this species in this area anyway. Another difficult factor was that it is forbidden to spotlight here which means everything has to be picked up by the headlights of the car. Naturally this is a disaster for finding 90% of the mammals, but my thermal saved us. We had an understanding with our guides that we could put the torch on the stuff we found first with the thermal. So after an hour or so we suddenly looked at a stunning Rusty-spotted cat from 15 meters away. I could only believe it after I had checked out every single characteristic for myself.

And the link to the story of that day you can find [here](#).





24. Masked Palm Civet (*Paguma larvata*)

We had a nice sighting of two fighting on the Bompu side on one night.





25. Indian Grey Mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*)

Seen a few at Pench.





26. Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*)

Seen a bit more than the Indian Grey at Pench. Their curled up tail is very distinctive.



27. Golden Jackal (*Canis aureus*)

Easily seen at Pench. We even had a mom with 3 very small cubs.



28. Wolf (*Canis lupus ssp chanco*)

Tibetan Wolves we watched on the ice of the Indus river on our ride from Leh to Nyoma. I thought I might have seen dogs, but wanted to check out for sure. It turned out to be two regular wolves and one melanistic! We also had another individual on the ice of Tso Kar lake, very far away.



29. Dhole (*Cuon alpinus*)

Watch a nice pack at the Maharashtra side of Pench. Apparently quite rare at the Madhya Pradesh side with only individual animals. So we felt very fortunate when we ran into another pack with cubs in our final hours in Pench.



30. Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

Watched on the Tibetan Plateau. A very scraggy animal.



31. Tibetan Fox (*Vulpes ferrilata*)

Not watched by me, but Andreas saw one with our guides. Not easy in this area it seems.

32. Yellow-throated Marten (*Martes flavigula*)

A nice day time sighting on the same tree as where we would watch the Masked Palm Civets later. They were licking from some liquid leaking out of the tree. Seen at the Bompou side of Eaglenest.







33. Kiang (*Equus kiang*)

Very common on the Tibetan Plateau.



34. Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa cristatus*)

Common in Pench.



35. Chital (*Axis axis*)

Very common in Pench.



36. Northern Red Muntjac (*Muntiacus vaginalis*)

Seen a few times at night on the Bompou side of Pench. Not uncommon, but it seems like non-arboreal animals are quite difficult to see in Pench in general.



37. Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*)

Quite common in Pench, but much less than the Chitals.



38. Gaur (*Bos gaurus*)

Quite common in Pench.



39. Nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*)

Watched 3 in the fields from the highway on my way from Delhi to Agra. Watched a few more close to the river in Pench.



40. Siberian Ibex (*Capra sibirica*)

Watched two at the site near our first Snow Leopard. We were not very lucky with the wild sheep and missed both Argali and Urial.

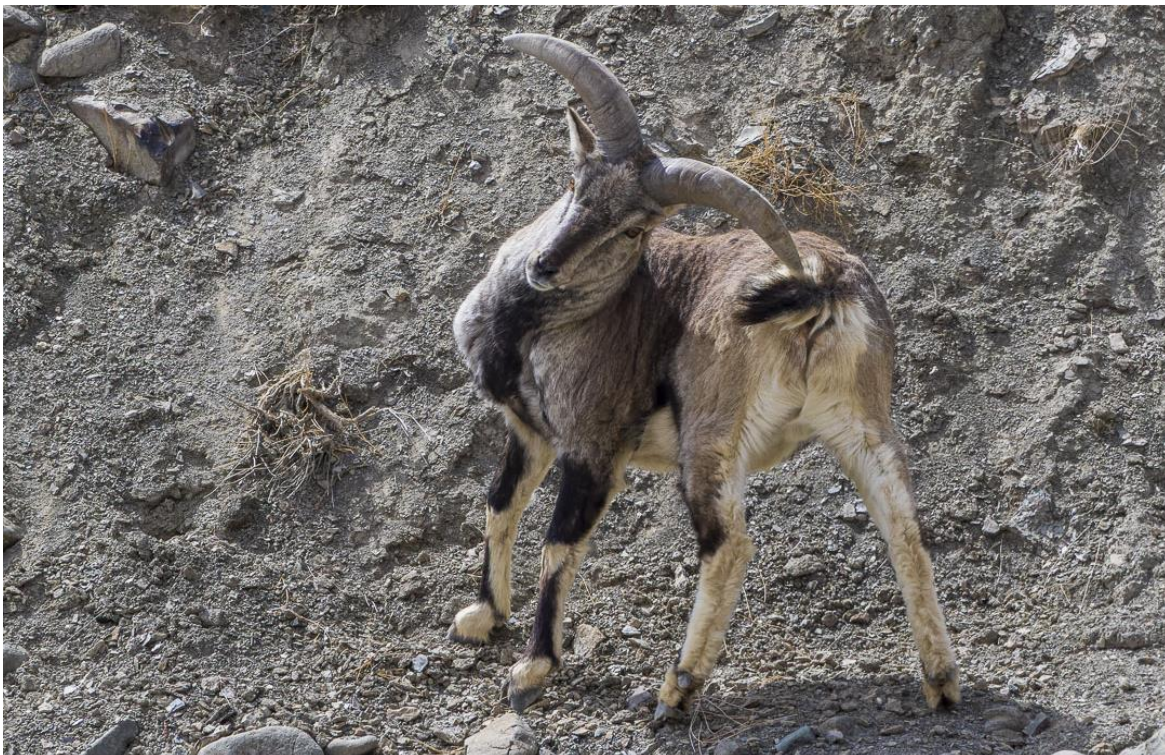
41. Tibetan Gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*)

Watched a single individual on the Tibetan Plateau. Not easy to find and very skittish, stayed far away. Heat haze didn't help.



42. Blue Sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*)

Common in Ladakh.



Some unidentified animals were a couple of rodents. One rodent of note was a really big rat (body about 30cm or so) in the forest in Eaglenest. It seemed like there were too many options to choose from so we left them unidentified. Also a rat came visiting while we recharged our batteries in Bompu Camp. If you are keen on getting a few more species out, you might have some success with traps.