



WILDLIFE WATCHING EXPEDITIONS

Tigers on foot in Nepal's lowland forests

An action-packed expedition tracking one of the most charismatic big cats on foot and so much more.

This trip was done by three friends (Jillian, Mark & Martijn) who share a passion for wildlife and all have a lot of experience tracking down carnivores and other wildlife. While Jillian and Mark are mostly interested in carnivores, Martijn is more of a generalist which made for a wide variety of observed species during this trip. During this trip we focused on Nepal's Terai Arc Landscape. We first went to the country's oldest NP and its surroundings. After a short delay in Kathmandu, we managed to hire our own Hilux which would be our main form of transport for the next four weeks. While it was sometimes a challenge to drive this rather large vehicle through the chaotic and sometimes narrow streets of Nepal's cities. The vehicle gave us a lot of freedom to explore this small but extremely biodiverse country. After a long but smooth drive towards the lowland forests of Nepal we arrived at our accommodation near Chitwan NP. We used the next 2 days to explore the NP and its surroundings both on our own at night and during the day with a local guide who accompanied us in the NP.



Female tiger cooling down in a waterhole in Bardia NP.

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Chitwan

While there were many highlights one of the most memorable must have been our morning drive with an insane amount of sloth bears. Martijn was really keen to see sloth bears and we asked our local guide if we could focus on finding this species. We couldn't have imagined how successful this trip would become for this species. Apart from the knowledge of our local guide we used thermal cameras and carefully listened for alarm calls to increase our odds of finding our target species. After seeing a **sloth bear** on the first full day in Chitwan NP we were already very happy with our observation, but things got crazy the next morning. While driving through the tall grassland habitat Mark suddenly spotted three dark shapes on the road in the distance, we quickly identified them as a female sloth bear with two cubs. Unfortunately, they were rather shy. While trying to relocate them we managed to find a different bear with a much older cub. Suddenly the posture of the mother bear changed and she became very alert; we couldn't believe our eyes when a lone male bear approached them from within the forest. He had a stand-off with the female and sub adult. We were lucky to observe amazing social interactions ranging from the male standing on its hind legs and vocalizations back and forth trying to intimidate each other. The area in which we were had a lot of termite activity (one of the main sources of food in this area for sloth bear) but it still came as a big surprise when yet another female sloth bear showed up behind our vehicle. What made this sighting extra special was that she carried her two tiny cubs on her back while crossing the road and vanishing behind us into the forest.



To finish off this amazing bear themed morning we find another large male bear a few kilometers down the road. We ended up seeing 10 different bears in one morning, a record for our guide who has been guiding in this area for 27 years. Apart from the bears we saw an amazing diversity of species inside the National Park with as a definite highlight a female **Bengal tiger** that we found after Jillian picked up on alarm calls made by chital deer.

Other highlights were the many **greater one-horned rhinos** (including two individuals chasing each other), the highly endangered **gharial**, a massive bull **gaur**, a huge bull **Asian elephant**, **sambar deer**, **spotted deer**, **Terai grey langur**, **rhesus macaque** and **five-striped palm squirrel**.



While the local guide was very knowledgeable about the area they don't have a lot of experience with driving around at night. We later found that this was the case in the entire country, so we had to use our own skills to observe nocturnal species and their behaviour during this trip. Really high on the wish list for Mark was to see Nepal's leopards, a species that has adapted remarkably well to changing landscapes and is now mostly hunting feral dogs in some areas. While leopards are still widespread in Nepal the species doesn't receive the same protection and attention as tigers and the population is thought to be declining. We quickly discovered that hunting feral dogs is not easy for these leopards since they have to be very stealthy and make a swift kill. Otherwise, the dogs start barking and alert other feral dogs who subsequently turn the tables by ganging up on the leopard in large numbers to chase it away.



In this photo (a sighting from later this trip) you can see a young female leopard that's missing half of its tail, retreating back into the forest after a failed hunting attempt on feral dogs in the village. If you look closely, you can also see fresh wounds on the front and hind legs.

It was the second night of driving around the outskirts of the village when Jillian picked up a large cat shaped animal in his thermal camera. At first there was a bit of confusion as the cat was literally behind a picnic table with chairs, but Jillian was confident that it must be a **leopard**. The spotlight revealed a beautiful adult female on the hunt. We all got out of the vehicle and followed the leopard a bit on foot (on our flip flops) until she disappeared into a field of maize.



As Mark headed towards the road because he heard dogs barking frantically, Jillian and Martijn spotted a cat in their thermals on the other side of a large stream and wanted to check if this was the leopard. While they were identifying the cat species Mark was observing the sighting of a lifetime; the female leopard had made her way out of the cornfield and pounced on an unsuspecting dog, she didn't get a good grip on the dog and it started whining and barking, after which more dogs rushed in from all different sides. This all happened in the middle of a tarred road and we were able to observe it in both the thermal and with the naked eye because of the dimmed street lights. The dogs managed to chase the leopard off before Jillian and Martijn made it to the scene. While this all happened, they managed to identify the mystery cat species as a **jungle cat**.



When we regrouped, we tried to relocate the female leopard. But instead of finding her we found a leopard cub (approximately 3 months old). We suspected the cub was stashed by the female we had seen before. She cleverly hid the cub on a concrete wall out of reach of the village dogs. Because we didn't want to draw attention to the cub, we quickly left the cub after taking a record shot. On the night drives around Chitwan NP and surrounding villages we had great sightings of leopards, jungle cats, **golden jackals**, greater one-horned rhinos, **barking deer**, sambar deer, spotted deer, **wild boar**, greater black krait and multiple small owl species.

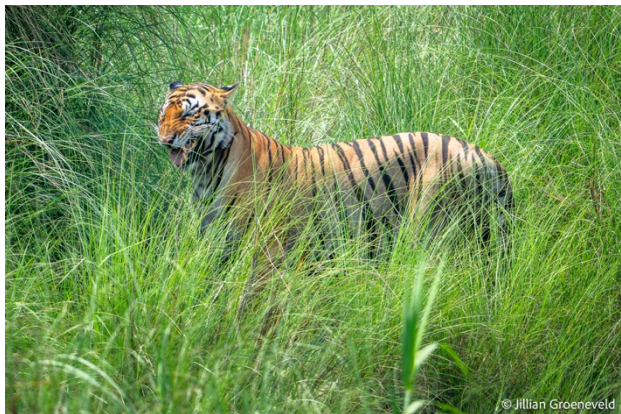
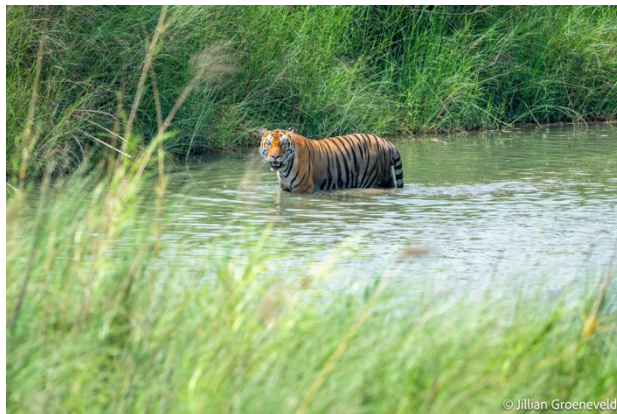


Bardia

After this a brief but successful stay in Chitwan we headed west towards our main destination Bardia National Park and surrounding areas. Here we planned to meet up with conservationists, guides and friends of us who would take us deep into the jungle near their home village. The next 12 days were a mix of insane wildlife encounters on foot, long night drives, great local cuisine and beers around the fireplace.

On most days we started tracking tigers early in the morning. We tracked tigers on foot (armed with a bamboo walking stick) and dependent on tracks and recent activity we explored different parts of the National Park. Occasionally, we alternated these long hikes with more comfortable but less adventurous jeep safaris.

While we saw tigers almost daily, one particularly memorable day we hiked along an overgrown river when we heard tigers vocalizing. Because the vegetation was extremely high, we decided to climb a 5-meter-high tree that gave us a good overview of the river and reeds next to us. It wasn't long before a female tiger showed up on the edge of the river. We all got good views, but she was rather shy and disappeared quickly into the high grass. a large male appeared out of the reeds seemingly following her scent trail, but not before cooling off in the river for a while. We got amazing views of this male who slowly made his way towards us through the chest-deep water. When he disappeared into the same thickets as the female, we could hear sounds of mating tigers no more than 30 meters away.



At the same time a small drama unfolded in one of the villages outside of the park where a young male leopard found himself in trouble. The young male had stayed too long on a goat kill, caught by his mom during the night. While his sister and mom made their way back into the forest before dawn, he stuck around for too long and found himself stuck in a small patch of woodland in the middle of a busy village. A huge crowd gathered around the leopard; this triggered the young male to attack three people and an elephant. Even though the situation was tense, the forest department never considered shooting the leopard, but instead tried darting the young male for many hours. They eventually succeeded after 9 hours of chaos and released the leopard back into the forest.

While we were on our way out of the forest to experience and to possibly assist with the leopard capture, we heard deer alarming frantically. Because we were in a rush, we quickly scanned the open fields near the forest edge when Mark discovered a tail sticking out of the grass. We stealthily stalked towards the cat and discovered a massive male tiger on the move.



Other highlights that we observed during daytime hours were a large herd of (up to 50) Asian elephants, greater one-horned rhinos, **blackbuck**, **Indian grey mongoose**, roosting site of **Indian flying foxes**, spotted deer, barking deer, sambar deer, **hog deer**, **swamp deer**, Terai grey langur, rhesus macaque and golden jackals. Although not our priority, many birds of prey, woodpecker, hornbill, owl, kingfisher and other bird species were also observed during the trip. Some of our avian highlights were great slaty woodpecker, great hornbill and brown fish owl.

One of the childhood dreams of our local friend and guide was to observe a tiger at night and we thought we could make this wish come true. While the National Park is inaccessible during the night the buffer zone and community forest around the National Park are accessible with special permission from the locals. We went to a community forest where we had placed a camera trap and where locals had reported recent tiger activity. The thermal cameras came in clutch when we heard alarm calls in the distance. Jillian picked up on a huge cat-like shape in the thermal. As it came closer and closer we decided to be patient for it to come out in the open before turning on the spotlight. What followed was a close encounter with a massive male tiger in the dead of the night. This brought tears of joy to our friend who had seen tigers thousands of times before during the day.



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Leopard looking up as an owl flies right over its head.

Just like in Chitwan, the leopards stole the show during the night. We observed multiple individuals and very interesting behavior. One encounter was especially memorable; we found a female with two subadult cubs. The leopards were relaxed and they allowed us to approach them closely on foot. We got amazing views of all of them and could follow them for a while, while they were staking out the edge of the village. On another night we spotted a small cat that seemed to have a weird shape. When we quickly checked with the spotlight to rule out a domestic cat, we were surprised to find a **mainland leopard cat** just on the outskirts of town. Other nocturnal species we encountered during our night drives were **nilgai**, **Indian crested porcupine**, **masked palm civet**, **small Indian civet**, **Indian hare**, **hispid hare**, wild boars and jungle cats.



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Koshi Tappu

As a bit of a spontaneous extension to the trip we decided to drive 19 hours east towards Koshi Tappu National Park to try our luck for fishing cat. We decided we could do some literature research on striped hyena occurrence in Nepal before we drove off as Mark had spotted what seemed like excellent habitat on our way from Chitwan to Bardia. The actual expectations on finding striped hyena were low since we could only find very limited information about the species in Nepal. Two outdated research papers gave us a relatively broad area to search in. But this in combination with our own skills and knowledge of the species made us decide to give it a go. We were all pretty shocked that after only a few hours of driving Mark was very confident that he had found a hyena in his thermal. When we put the spotlight on the animal, we got the confirmation that we indeed found a **striped hyena** and we managed to follow it while it went back and forth towards a chicken dump site from a local chicken farm. Much to Martijn's delight we spotted a **Hodgson's giant flying squirrel** while watching the hyena. Furthermore, golden jackals and jungle cats were ever present and quite common while driving through the countryside.



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After traversing almost the entire Terai-Arc valley from west to east, we finally arrived in a hot and humid Koshi Tappu. The area was much more open and species diversity was rather low in the countryside around the park. However, the first night drive we immediately yielded a host of mammals including **Malayan porcupine**, golden jackals, **water buffalo**, jungle cat, nilgai. We felt like we saw every single mammal species in the area apart from the one we were looking for. Not finding the elusive fishing cat turned out to be our biggest problem of the first night as we briefly got detained by the army after a misunderstanding.

After a short while we were released to continue our search. Not long after we spotted something in the thermal walking alongside a waterbody that looked interesting. We stopped the car to check with the spotlight and the binoculars and we quickly identified we had found our first **fishing cat**. The large male was hunting for fish and we followed for a while on foot.



The next night we found another fishing cat on foot, only a mere 5 meters away. We spent the next afternoon observing a pod of **Gangetic River dolphins** in the Koshi river while enjoying the sunset with an ice-cold beer. This was the end of a very successful trip and we decided to treat ourselves to a night in a nice hotel in Kathmandu and drank some more beers in a rooftop pool.

