

CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK, NEPAL

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On foot with Greater One-horned Rhino, Chitwan National Park (John Van Niel)



One of two tigers seen, Chitwan NP (JVN)



N. Red Muntjac, Chitwan NP (JVN)

Summary: 21 species of mammals (five lifers for me!), 178 species of birds and endangered Gharial crocodile were wildlife highlights

We spent 9 days in Chitwan National Park, one day in community run buffer zone and a day driving in both agricultural fields (mostly for birds) and through a different buffer zone.

In Chitwan, we split our time between walking and traditional safari vehicle touring. Being on foot in an area with so many big mammals was amazing. I also have a keen interest in track and sign identification so that added another huge dimension to the walks for me.

All arrangements excluding international flights were made through **Nepal Dynamic Eco Tours**. I recommend them highly. Our specific guides (you must have at least two guides present while on foot in the Park) were **Bishnu** and **Suk**. We had a few different drivers, boatmen, etc.

Quality of sighting key: SS = Single Sighting, MS = Multiple Sightings / SI = Single Individual. MI = Multiple Individuals / Photography rating assumes basic competence and a telephoto lens P0 = No reasonable chance to capture an image, P1 = Reasonable chance to capture an image of low quality due to distance, lighting, etc that shows at least some identifying characteristics, P2 = reasonable chance to capture an image of “usable” quality that is well lit and shows identifying features, P3 = Reasonable chance to capture one or more image of high quality with good light and close distance

Species	Quality of sighting	Notes
N. Plains Gray Langur	MS/MI/P3	Many
Rhesus Macaque	MS/MI/P3	Many
Greater One-horned Rhino	MS/MI/P3	Over 35 sighted
Asian Elephant*	SS/SI/P3	*See report for details
Spotted Deer	MS/MI/P3	Common & accomodating
Red Muntjac/Barking Deer	MS/MI/P2	Uncommon & skittish
Sambar Deer	MS/MI/P3	
Hog Deer	MS/MI/P3	
Wild Boar	MS/MI/P3	Close encounters
Gaur/Indian Bison	MS/MI/P2	Two groups sighted
Tiger	MS/MI/P3	Two individuals briefly
Leopard	MS/MI/P3	Three individuals
Sloth Bear	SS/MI/P1	Sow with two cubs
Golden Jackal	MS/MI/P2	Farm fields only
Crab-eating Mongoose	MS/MI/P3	Two sightings
Small Indian Mongoose	MS/MI/P0	Farm fields
Indian Grey Mongoose	MS/MI/P1	
Large Indian Civet	SS/SI/P1	Night visit at Tower
N. Palm Squirrel	MS/MI/P3	
Hoary-bellied Squirrel	SS/SI/P3	Mobile phone pics
Small bat sp.	SS/MI/P0	Unidentified

TRIP REPORT

When it comes to mammal watching, I prioritize photo opportunities over a larger mammal list. We did not search out roosting bats and conducted almost no infrared scanning. So I imagine there were untapped opportunities for a more serious lister. I also made the decision to stay essentially in one location rather than trying to get to other habitats or take an internal flight to try for Red Panda, etc. Greater One-horned Rhino was THE target of the trip, with everything else being a bonus.

I was prepared to book this tour as an individual but was grateful when my brother Tom was able to get time away from work to join me. We met up in Kathmandu after my long flights from Toronto Canada and his shorter journey from Perth Australia. Nepal Dynamic Eco Tours arranged a private car for us to make the five-hour drive to Sauraha. I enjoyed the drive, largely because I was able to catch up with my brother face-to-face but I do enjoy the scenery and chances to see villages and other snippets of local life. If you are prone to motion sickness, take precautions as there was no such thing as a straight line on this journey. Quick views of **Northern Plains Grey Langur** and **Rhesus Macaque** troops were the only mammals spotted along the drive.

We were met at our hotel by Raj, manager at Nepal Dynamic Eco Tours, and our two guides Bishnu and Suk. After a quick tea and some photo of Oriental Pied Hornbills on the grounds, we set off in search of a **rhino** that is essentially a resident of the town. We found him in no time, and just like that my target species was in the books. This particular rhino hangs out near the river most days and feeds most nights in the agricultural fields on the far side of town. When we caught up to him, he was napping. But I decided then and there that I wanted to see a rhino walking through town. Spoiler alert, it took until our very last morning but I did get to witness that interesting behavior.

We also got views of Gharial Crocodiles from the boardwalk at the end of town. Bird species started piling up too with Ruddy Shelduck, Alexandria Parakeet, Long-tailed Shrike, Hoopoe and Brown Crake all seen and photographed well.

Before dinner, we all climbed aboard a tuk-tuk to visit an elephant breeding facility. There, we encountered our only wild **Asian Elephant** of the trip, an older male named Renaldo. Renaldo was free to come and go as he pleased. We were told that he hangs out at the breeding center often for a few reasons. First, he gets some treats in the form of grass balls with a rice center. Second, he will mate with any of the females that are ready to breed and finally, he drives off other males that may wish to take advantage of the food or females. I have seen Asian Elephants before in Sabah and Sri Lanka, otherwise this sighting would

have been less than satisfying. I will not go into a discussion here about the pros and cons of elephants in captivity but am open to comments to this posting.



Ronaldo, a wild but habituated Asian Elephant

Our Second Day began at 8am after a nice and varied breakfast at the hotel. We climbed into what I would call a flat-bottom boat but was often referred to as a canoe locally and poled down river for about two hours. The wildlife seemed plentiful with many species of birds, heaps of Gharials, both primates and **Spotted Deer**.



We were dropped on the far side of the river and into Chitwan National Park. Tom and I carried our own clothes and a day's worth of water. Suk and Bishnu had to carry their own gear and our food as well. We walked along dirt roads with light traffic of safari vehicles, ranger vehicles and government elephants. It was a great feeling walking in a place with wild tigers and their track and sign were plentiful. We had our first “good” rhino encounter. We emerged from the forest into an open grassy field and found a rhino grazing. Seeing one up and active was fantastic. The light was perfect and I could have watched this rhino for hours. We continued on to a small observation tower or “machaan”. From there we saw another rhino and had our only **Sloth Bear** sighting: a distant sow and her two cubs. As the sun started to get low on the horizon, we climbed down and headed to the river only to have a **Sambar Deer** give an alarm call behind us followed soon after by a **Tiger** vocalization.



Male Sambar Deer

That night we were poled back across the river (so we were outside of the Park) to a nice family run hotel in Ghatgai. It was here that we were introduced to the Nepal custom of “snacks” before dinner. As we were waiting for dinner, we grilled small chunks of meat on an open fire (typically chicken). Snacks can be lighter, but our guides were always interested in heavy snacks. We tried to introduce them to the term “tailgating”. In the morning, we were up before dawn and I was able to locate a few rhinos and dozens of Spotted Deer with the thermal camera.

Day Three (December 25th) saw us getting into a taxi and crossing a bridge to get into a different park of the National Park. Along the way we tallied five **Golden (Common) Jackals** in a short hedgerow among some farm fields. We were dropped off at the entrance and continued on foot. It was a cool and foggy morning. We set up at a crossroad and I just happened to be the first person to inspect the road to our left and spotted two distant **Leopards** walking towards us. When they headed down a side road we quickly moved towards them and were able to get fairly close before they headed in the brush. We were able to track their progress through a combination of alarm calls from **Red Muntjac (Barking Deer)** and leopard vocalizations, but we never did see them again.

We headed to a location that was good for Burmese Pythons but instead found rhinos. By lunch, we were up to 14 individual rhinos spotted for the trip. Our lunch stop was at a different cross road to take advantage of the views. As I was enjoying my fried rice with chicken and box of “Mango and Glucose”, I heard a distinctive scratching noise that was different than a bird on a branch. Sure enough, I raised my eyes to find a **Northern Palm Squirrel** in nice sunlight not too far away.



The rest of the afternoon was largely spent sitting and waiting. No new mammal sightings to note but some nice bird photography opportunities kept me busy. We hiked out to a main road and then took a bus for about 20 minutes where our taxi was meeting us. I sat next to some very curious people, including two young children. I took out my camera and showed them some images on the back of the camera screen. The girl knew all the animal names in

English but refused to say any other words for some reason. It was fun. I should note that every single place we went we found friendly people that seemed genuinely pleased that we were enjoying their natural world. Once I was photographing a bird and a woman carrying a large load of firewood on her head thought I was taking photos of her. She did not get upset but asked the guide why I was so interested in her. He cleared up the situation and when he told me what she said, I asked him to tell her I would not have taken her photo without asking permission.

Our lodging for the next two nights was a place outside of a village that my notes list as “Madi”. Madi covers a fairly large area and actually borders India. We were very close to the Reu River and were to spend most of the next two days overlooking the river and waiting for the wildlife to come to us. Tom and I had our own hut with a bedroom and a Western style toilet. Food was excellent and dinners were always preceded by a round of grilled meat snacks.

On the way to our river overlook (Day four), we spent time examining tracks in several different substrates (mud, deep mud, sand, deep sand). What a thrill to put my hands into fresh Tiger and rhino tracks. We saw heaps of Spotted Deer, several rhinos (some with calves), a single **Wild Boar**, our only **Hoary-bellied Squirrel** of the trip and our first **Hog Deer** of the trip.



Hog Deer minus one antler

Day Five was largely the same but with better sightings of Hog Deer and a much closer rhino river crossing. I wrote in my journal that I was feeling my age this day. A bit sore, tired and slow moving.

On Day Six (December 28th) we said good bye to Madi and headed out in a proper safari vehicle. This proved to be a day to remember! Eleven species of mammals, including a lifer for me plus Great Hornbills.



Crab-eating Mongoose

The lifer was a **Crab-eating Mongoose** that I spotted as we were crossing a small river. The sighting was quick but diagnostic. The highlight came later in the day when we stopped at an abandoned lodge set overlooking a river. With our driver, we were now a group of five. Four of us were over 50 and the need to stop and “drain the tank” were frequent for me. This was one of those stops where we all got out and headed off in our own direction for some relief. My brother and I happened to be the first ones done and headed to a clearing. I saw movement on the far side of the river and assumed it would be yet another Spotted Deer. But the body was way too long. It only took a moment to realize what I was looking at. “Tigertigertigertigertigertigertiger” I hoarsely whispered as I lifted my camera and fired off five photos before he disappeared back into the tall elephant grass. Neither of the guides or the driver saw it and a mini-legend was born. By the next day we were encountering other vehicles that all knew the story of the Tiger sighting that only the guests saw while the guides were peeing in the bushes. They all wanted to see the photos. I don’t think Tiger sightings are all that rare but they are far from guaranteed. I also got the sense that they enjoyed teasing our guides in a completely good-natured way and the guides equally enjoyed being the butt of the joke. In fact, when we returned to Sauraha several days later, everyone associated with the tour company wanted to hear the story first and see the photos. It was good fun.

The bird of the day was Great Hornbill. The guides heard them vocalizing and it took a bit of jockeying the jeep back and forth until I could see one between all the trees. What an amazing bird!

Lost in the day’s account were some amazing close sightings of rhinos, Leopard, Wild Boar, Sambar and Hog Deer and the only other new species for the trip, **Gaur**. And my first missed mammal of the trip: An **Indian Grey Mongoose** quickly crossed the road and was seen by everyone but me.

Day Seven and Eight were full days of driving. Our guides went out of there way to take us to different habitats in search of new mammals. But it was not to be. Amazing views of rhinos and the deer species. And birds of course to keep me busy in between. The night of Day Eight was spent back in Sauraha where we had an unidentified **Bat sp.** flying around in the courtyard of our hotel.

If I did my math right, this brings us to December 31. We had an early breakfast followed by a safari drive within a community-run buffer zone. The birds here proved much more cooperative than the mammals and my notes indicated deer were the only mammals we spotted. After lunch, we returned to the boundary of the Park by tuk-tuk and took a short hike to one of the towers built for overnight stay (highlight was encountering two male rhinos in a brief but close and contentious interaction). The tower felt secluded and

overlooked the river. As the sun was setting we watched a rhino feeding on a large island close to shore and spied our second tiger of the trip. This sighting was just a bit farther than the last and in much poorer light. But it was great none the less.

After dinner, the guides threw the bones onto the ground in hopes of attracting a civet or two. I guess both Large and Small Indian Civet are seen here. Just around midnight, a **Large Indian Civet** showed up but left before the guides could wake us. In the morning, we hiked out and found fresh Sloth Bear tracks on top of our inbound tracks, so that was interesting. Who knows what could have been seen if I had traded sleep for thermal spotting that night.

We hiked out on January 1st and spent the day touring a different buffer zone run by a different community and driving around agricultural fields in search largely of birds. We did encounter a few mongoose including members of all three species that are reasonably expected, making **Indian Grey Mongoose** our last mammal species of the trip.

Bird List: 178 species that I will not list here. Email me if you want the list!



