



The colour, chaos and complexity of India are hard to absorb on any trip there, no matter the length. Tracey and I had visited for almost eight weeks in 2024 and felt we had barely scratched the surface. It was time for a return visit.

We landed in New Delhi about 9:00 in the evening, made our way through customs and immigration, and walked over to the domestic airport terminal. Delhi air can be almost chewy at times, laden as it is with some of the world's highest urban levels of particulate air pollution. We had a flight on to Madurai at 5:20 am, so we figured we wouldn't bother leaving the airport. We couldn't pass through check-in and into the main part of the domestic terminal until midnight, after which we found a patch of carpet and had a brief nap on the floor of the terminal building. The IndiGo flight departed on time and we were in Madurai, deep in south India, by 8:30 am. Our initial hotel, booked on Booking.com, turned out not to be licensed for foreign tourists, a fact which was not evident on the booking page and a situation that always puzzles me, although I guess there is enough domestic demand that it still makes sense for hotels to be listed there anyway. We quickly found another hotel and had a five-hour nap. We wandered over to Madurai's signature attraction, the Meenakshi Amman Temple, a six-hectare temple complex filled with an incredible array of gopurams and sculptures. Scandinavian minimalism has never been a popular aesthetic in India. Our first Three-lined Palm Squirrels of the trip made an appearance and Indian Flying Foxes flew overhead as night fell.



We awoke surprisingly early the next morning and had a delicious idli and sambar breakfast at a nearby café. This was to become Tracey's standard breakfast in India and she expressed unbridled delight when, upon returning to Canada, she found idli powder at our local grocery store. I'm generally more into bacon and eggs but this is not a common find in India, so my standard breakfast became puri and aloo bhaji. Delicious and ubiquitous, although not something one's cardiologist would recommend.

When we were in India in 2024, we stayed at a gorgeous place called Moulmein House, a tea estate now turned into a small hotel. There Tracey had found a book about the Chettiars, traders from south India who had prospered in the early years of the 20th century and spent their fortunes building extravagant mansions in their rural homeland. Thousands of these mansions have fallen into disrepair, but some have been restored and converted into guest houses, and Tracey wanted to visit some. We took a bus to Karaikuddi and checked into the Bangala, adorned with historic photographs on the walls and exuding a sense of tranquility. South India is hot in March, so we had a lengthy nap and then set out to explore the town, finding other ancestral houses in varying states of repair and our first Bonnet Macaques of the trip. The Bangala is known for its Chettiar wedding feast- inspired meals and did not disappoint, although the food was so rich that our after-dinner walk was noticeably unambitious. A variety of small bats flew overhead as we lounged in the pool.



Athangudi Palace is apparently a popular film set, with gorgeous painted wood-carved ceilings. We visited the next morning, then took a bus to Tiruchirappalli Fort to catch a sleeper train to Bangalore. We had dinner beneath the Rock Fort Temple, situated on a huge rock outcrop over the south end of town, one of the myriad unheralded but truly spectacular sights in India.

One of the great things about Indian trains is that you inevitably get involved in discussions with other passengers. On this ride, we discovered that the station to which we were headed, Bengaluru Cantt, had no left luggage facilities and was a long distance from the station from which we would depart that evening, separated by perhaps 25 km of Bangalore's infamously terrible traffic. On the advice of our neighbour, we stayed on the train until the main Bangalore station and, sure enough, found a spot for left luggage there, allowing us to explore the city unencumbered with our bags. After yet another idli and puri bhaji breakfast, we wandered through Cubbon Park and past the state government buildings of

Vidhana Soudha, then made our way to the National Gallery of Modern Art. The permanent collection didn't make much of an impression on me, but Asha Thadani's "I to Eye: Shades of Humanity" photographic exhibit focusing on marginalized groups in India was worth a visit all on its own. Afterwards we wandered over to Bangalore Palace. While walking up the entrance drive, a driver started honking and gesticulating at me, a not-uncommon situation in India, but I found his persistence unusual. It turned out to be Kumarswamy, our driver from the south India leg of our trip to India two years ago. The fact that we had bumped into the one person we knew in Karnataka, a state of more than 60 million people, confirmed to me that coincidence is the most powerful force in the universe, although perhaps karma would be the more culturally appropriate explanation.

One of the people I had most been looking forward to meeting in India was Rohit Chakravarty, a bat expert who had shown Jon Hall around in Pune years ago. He had invited us to join him after work to look for some bats, so Tracey and I Ubered over to his place after we had toured the palace. Rohit appeared, bursting with energy and enthusiasm. We hopped into his car, picked up a student of his, and then drove to Jain University in the northern part of Bangalore. Rajesh, a colleague of Rohit's, had found a colony of Leschenault's Rousettes in the basement of one of the university buildings here. We entered the building and searched a couple of spots, but without success. Then the dean, Dr. Sujay Nair, appeared, greeted not just Rohit but myself by name, and invited us into his office. It turned out that Rajesh had let the dean know we might be visiting. After tea and a discussion about the university, Dr. Nair said he could not accompany us, but assigned a staffer to show us around. We were joined by other curious onlookers, and wandered through the basement and other nooks and crannies of the building. The Leschenault's Rousette colony had decreased in size, perhaps due to disturbances, but we found a few of them as well as Dobson's Roundleaf Bats, now a species split endemic to India, and a species of pipistrelle still awaiting identification.

After a vigorous search of the university, we said goodbye to our entourage and went for a dinner of chicken cafreal and prawn curry at a Goan restaurant. I was starting to get nervous about the time, which turned out to be a justified anxiety, as our Uber driver, trying to avoid a traffic jam, got lost on the way back to the train station and we took more than an hour to traverse 15 km. We hopped out at the far side of the train station, ran across the overhead walkways, retrieved our bags and made it to our train not long before it departed. Thank goodness we had not tried to catch the train at the other station as we had planned originally.

The train pulled into Hosapete Junction at 7:00 in the morning and we found an autorickshaw to our homestay at Hampi. Hampi was the site of the capital of Vijayanagar, one of the largest Hindu empires in Indian history, which flourished from 1336 until it was razed by a confederacy of neighbouring sultanates in 1565. As well as being a UNESCO World Heritage site, and a genuinely spectacular and atmospheric set of temples and ruins, Hampi was reputed to have some interesting bats, a fact which I might have neglected to mention to Tracey while extolling all the reasons we should visit.

After settling in to our homestay, which kindly let us check in at 7:40 am, we walked down the road to the monolithic statue of Lakshmi Narasimha, seeing the first South-eastern Gray Langurs of the trip by the roadside. Our next stop was the Krishna Temple, which contained Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats and what appeared to be a species of pipistrelle. After an afternoon nap, we returned to Virupaksha Temple, Hampi's only remaining working temple and site of a temple elephant which receives offerings from devotees with her trunk, blesses them and then passes the banknotes on to her trainer.



We climbed Hemakuta Hill behind the temple to watch the sunset while Bonnet Macaques and South-eastern Langurs swarmed around looking for food. After a delicious dinner at the Happy Hampi Café we headed back for an early night.

The following day we visited Vittala Temple, with its elaborately carved monumental stone chariot featured on the 50-rupee note. The site was full of Five-lined Palm Squirrels and several buildings contained additional Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats. The afternoon was hot and devolved into a lengthy nap rather than the planned sightseeing before another delicious dinner at the Happy Hampi Café.



We awoke the next morning to langurs swarming around the homestay. After tea, we took a rickshaw to the Virupaksha Temple, then walked over to Achyutaraya Temple, one of the last great monuments built before the fall of Hampi. The temple is quite rarely visited and the grounds were full of langurs and palm squirrels. Some bats were present in cracks in the roof of the temple and I managed to get some poor photos of what appeared to be a Greater Asiatic Yellow Bat. After a leisurely breakfast we went to the Royal Centre, another group of monuments a couple of kilometres away. The highlight for me were colonies of bats in the Shiva Temple, whose entrance was partially flooded and consequently surely saw few visitors. At least two species of *Hipposideros* were present. We had a leisurely lunch, retrieved our bags and went to the train station to find our train first to Hubli and then on to Goa. The “High class waiting room” at the station had obviously relaxed its standards, as we were allowed to enter and enjoy the air-conditioned comfort.



I have a photo of me, age 3, playing on the beach in Goa with my dad and brother. There are no other people in the photo. Clearly that was a long time ago, because, between the number of Indian tourists and the size of the abundant Russian tourists, there is now an incredible amount of human biomass on the beaches of Goa. The beach was a spectacle – someone walking their favourite bull, a group of white Hare Krishnas chanting and dancing while being filmed by middle-class Indian tourists, folks contorting themselves into uncomfortable-looking yoga poses. We spent a couple of days just enjoying the beach and the people-watching. The third day we went into Panjim and to old Goa to marvel at the huge cathedral and the ruins of St. Augustine. The one bit of wildlife observation we did, apart from seeing the expected South-western Gray Langurs and Rhesus Macaques, occurred on our fourth day, when we went out on an early morning dolphin-watching boat. Anthony, the boatman, had told me dolphins were guaranteed because Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins there have learned to raid fisherman's nets. We motored out to a set of nets offshore and, sure enough, several family groups of dolphins arrived to help themselves to this captive smorgasbord.



The rise of domestic discount airlines has been a boon to people travelling in India. Rather than a series of lengthy train journeys we flew from Dabolim airport in Goa to Aurangabad, now renamed Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar, a name that took me several days to learn how to pronounce. We landed at 4:00 pm, checked in to a hotel and immediately headed out again to the Bibi-qa-Magbara, also known as the poor man's Taj. Built by Azam Khan in 1679 as a mausoleum for his mother, the mausoleum was to have been covered in white marble but Azam's frugal father vetoed this, so the dome and plinth are cloaked in marble while the rest of the structure is covered in lime mortar. It was the end of Eid and the grounds were absolutely packed with people, most of whom wanted to have their picture taken with us, perhaps because they had never seen such dusty and tired-looking foreigners before. Because of the crush of

people, I offered to walk behind Tracey to protect her from any groping attempts, which resulted in me having my bum pinched a few times instead.

The next morning, we hired a vehicle, picked up Jake, a Brit we had met in Goa, and drove out to Ajanta, a UNESCO World Heritage-listed series of cave temples dating from the 2nd century BCE to the 6th century CE, located about 100 km northeast of Aurangabad. Gray Langurs and palm squirrels were everywhere, set against extraordinary carvings in a beautiful river valley setting. We spent the day wandering through the site before heading back to Aurangabad for dinner.

The next day's excursion was to Ellora, which was even more spectacular. One enters the site at the Kailasa Temple, one of the world's truly wonderful monuments, carved from top to bottom into a rocky slope by an estimated 7000 labourers over a period of 150 years. Some of the caves held Greater Mouse-tailed Bats and the site was overrun with the ubiquitous palm squirrels.



We made it back to Aurangabad bus station, just as a bus to Jalgaon was departing. All the seats were full, so we foolishly made the decision to wait for the next bus. It arrived at 12:30 and was besieged by an incredible crush of humanity. Having a train to catch that evening, we dispensed with niceties and managed to make our way through the scrum. We arrived in Jalgaon by 4:00 pm and tried to leave our bags at the railway cloakroom. The attendant told us we would have to lock them and my argument that anyone could just slash through the fabric regardless went unheeded. We walked around the block looking for a recommended restaurant called Arya, which was always 2 minutes away according to anyone we asked, until eventually we found it after about 20 minutes. It was worth the search, particularly as we hadn't eaten all day and it was now 5:00 pm. A House Mouse scurried around,

allowing us to add a species to the trip list without moving from the dinner table. After dinner we wandered past a park with a large colony of Indian Flying Foxes and posed for photos with a sizable percentage of the city's inhabitants. The information counter at the station said our train would be leaving from platform 6, as did the reservation app. We waited there until 7:20, managing to add Black Rat to our trip list, when an announcement was made that the train would be arriving at platform 3, triggering a mad rush and us running in the wrong direction along the platform so that we had to jump onto the moving train just before it departed the station. The man occupying my berth vacated it and I settled down for a bit of sleep. Unfortunately, the woman in the neighbouring berth started belching appreciatively for a surprising length of time after her meal and the chap in the berth above appeared to be an all-India snoring champion, so sleep remained elusive.

We arrived at Gondia Junction at 4:00 am and a driver, Pappu, was waiting for us. After quick cups of tea we left for the three-hour drive to Khatia Gate of Kanha National Park. We saw a Golden Jackal and various Rhesus Macaques and Northern Plains Langurs along the way, as well as abundant birdlife. We arrived at Motel Chandan about 7:15 for more tea and the usual paperwork. Motel Chandan receives a glowing review in the Lonely Planet guidebook but was a bit more dilapidated than I was expecting, although largely redeemed by its lovely pool, welcome in the 35-degree heat of Madhya Pradesh in late March. We had a lengthy nap, then went for a short walk in the forest just outside the park fence. After dinner I walked the same area, seeing some Chital but initially little else. Suddenly, I noticed eyeshine close to the ground, which turned out to be a Rusty-spotted Cat, one of my most desired species for the trip. It ducked away, but I was able to relocate it and get some adequate photos. Additional Chital and an Indian Hare rounded out the evening's sightings.

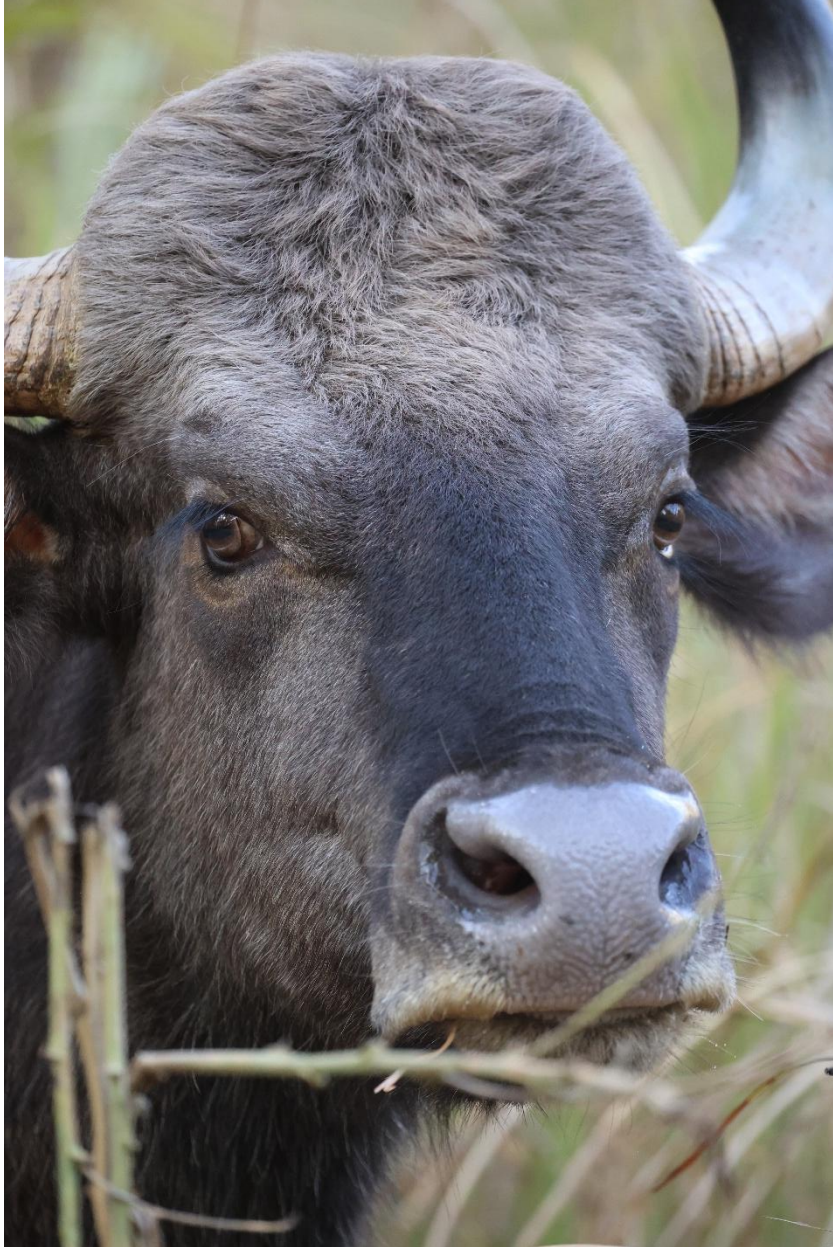


The next morning, we had tea at 5:30 and then walked the 200 metres to the park gate. We found Northern Plains Langur, Chital, Golden Jackals, Wild Boar, Gaur, Sambar, Barasingha and Three-lined Palm Squirrels on the morning drive. The highlight for me was the sighting of a pair of Dhole, a species I had only seen once before. The core area of Kanha is closed on Wednesday afternoons so we did a safari in the buffer zone instead, seeing several Nilgai and three Red Muntjacs as well as the usual Chital, langurs and Sambar. Both of us were so tired that we didn't do a night walk, going to bed early instead.



The following morning's safari revealed the same species as the day before, minus the Dhole. A large male Tiger had been seen by a couple of jeeps, so we went over to the spot it had been sighted, but it had wandered behind a low ridge, perhaps for shade, and was no longer visible. We tried the same spot a little later but unfortunately with the same results. After a swim and a nap, we did a second safari in the park. Heading back to the gate just after 6:00 pm, the jeep ahead of us stopped and indicated that a Tiger was present off to the left side of the track. We backed up a little and a large animal took shape half-hidden in the bamboo. It then walked out just behind our jeep and crossed the track, to the delight of all of us.





We had trouble sleeping that night and awoke at 1:00 am, long before we needed to for our 3:00 am drive to Raipur to catch a flight to Bhubaneswar. The drive was initially a high-speed safari through the forest around Kanha. A Common Palm Civet appeared by the side of the road along with numerous Chital. Several Earth-coloured Mice and a couple of Indian Bush Rats were seen, along with an Indian Hare and a Golden Jackal. Once we reached built-up areas, I fell asleep. We arrived at Raipur airport about 7:30 for a straightforward check-in and breakfast before our 11:00 am flight.

We arrived in Bhubaneswar at noon as scheduled, to find that there was no driver or vehicle there as promised. After scrutinizing every car in front of the airport for half an hour, our driver turned up and we headed off to Mangrove Pitta Homestay in Dangamala on the outskirts of Bhitarkanika National Park. The drive took about four and a half hours, along increasingly narrow and obscure roads. Eventually we arrived, to be greeted by Mr. Bijay Kumar Das, our host, a couple of friendly dogs, and a wall of noise

emanating from the temple next door. Conversation in the courtyard of the homestay was impossible, so we moved into the dining room at the back where Bijay laid out the plan for the evening. He immediately endeared himself to me by saying that people who didn't see a Fishing Cat were generally not willing to put in the time required and he was quite happy to keep going for as long as it took.

Another elderly couple at the homestay had been out the night before, but had come back early without seeing a cat and so were joining us for a second try. They had been successful in their quest for a Mangrove Pitta that morning. Apparently, this is a difficult bird to see, so Mangrove Pitta Homestay attracts a steady stream of pittaphiles from all over the world to try their luck.

We drove down to the riverbank and a short while later a boat appeared. I had been expecting a small skiff, but this was a massive boat with an enclosed cabin that appeared ready to tackle the world's oceans. We cast off and headed out into the estuary without any lights. Whether this was to avoid disturbing cats or to avoid attention I was never able to discover. We cruised out around a large island, with Bijay shining his light around and soon he said, "cat". Sure enough, a Fishing Cat or, in the local parlance, "Fissing Cat" was in the reeds by the water's edge. It was quite shy and soon retreated deeper into the vegetation. A short while later, another Fishing Cat appeared briefly, followed by a pair of Fishing Cats a short way further along the shore. Unfortunately, the driver of the boat appeared to be in training, as he was having difficulty steering the boat close to shore and into position for optimal photos. This engendered yells from Bijay at the front of the boat and a whole lot more noise than is usually ideal for wildlife viewing. Bijay took my flashlight in addition to his own, yelling "wait, wait" while shining the lights around erratically. It was not clear for what we were supposed to be waiting. To add to the chaos, he accidentally turned on the strobe light function on my flashlight. My terse comment, "that's not helping much", triggered a shushing from Tracey.



We went below for a delicious dinner of fish and chicken curries. Back on deck, we saw Chital, several Greater Bandicoot Rats and a number of smaller unidentified rodents. About 9:45, we headed back the way we had come and I assumed the night's excursion was over. Instead, we turned and did another pass along the edge of the island. Just as we were off the eastern end of the island, a strong wind suddenly arose, accompanied by waves and driving rain. Bijay and the captain steered to shore and tied up alongside a large tree while the other boatman battened down the hatches. The wind and rain eased up about midnight, only to reveal the next problem. The tide had turned, and we were now firmly beached in the sand. I thought Bijay might be annoyed by this, but instead he recounted to me a time when he had been out with a Dutch tourist, had lost track of time watching a Fishing Cat and their boat had gotten stranded for six hours, laughing and implying it was all part of the experience. We were told the tide would turn about 1:30 am and settled down for a brief nap.

By 2:40 we could free the boat and I assumed we would head back home. Wrong again. The water was calm and we made another pass along the shore. Another Fishing Cat appeared, sauntering along the water's edge and allowing us to follow it for half an hour or so. Unfortunately, whenever it sat for a moment, the boatman would try, generally unsuccessfully, to maneuver closer while Bijay shone both flashlights at it and yelled at the boatman. Eventually the cat became tired of this and moved inland. Amazingly, we soon found a Mainland Leopard Cat, in vegetation so dense that our photos of it were some of the worst of the trip. We departed about 4:30 am and returned to our departure point where the driver was waiting. A Jungle Cat in a field was the last sighting of the evening and we arrived back at the homestay about 5:00 am.



The temple next door erupted with noise at 7:00 am. I remember as a child reading a Tintin cartoon about a sonic weapon and thinking, "really, how bad could that be"? As I was quickly learning, it could be terrible. We decided that we couldn't stay another night without the possibility of sleep during the day. I asked Bijay about the noise and he acted surprised that this would be an issue, despite his awareness

that it made conversation impossible in most of the house. Given that we had booked two days there, we eventually negotiated a payment that both of us could live with, had a meal and departed. A bus took us to Cuttack where a helpful woman advised us to continue on to Puri, then helped us find the requisite bus. Arrival in Puri was not reassuring. The city was swarming with people and noise levels equaled the temple from which we had just escaped. I did a quick review on Booking.com and directed the rickshaw driver to Tavasmi, which had sterling reviews. Tavasmi turned out to be an ashram, which normally I would have found off-putting, but I was too tired to care. We were given a quick lecture about the importance of God and then shown to a room which smelled slightly of gas or oil but was deliciously quiet. We immediately fell asleep.

We awoke so rested we immediately decided to stay an extra night. We wandered over to the Dreamland Hotel for a disappointing breakfast of boiled eggs and dry white toast. In a country with a proud tradition of tasty rotis, puris, chapattis, parathas, and naan, how anyone could think people would want to eat Wonder Bread is an enduring mystery to me. We walked down Lighthouse Beach enjoying the parade of people, horses, and camels, then caught a bus to Konark, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The bus attendant asked me for 200 rupees for the fare, which I thought high, but I noticed that he asked the same of the well-dressed passenger beside me, so I handed over the fare. An older gentleman at the back of the bus began loudly berating the bus attendant, who then started returning money to people. A young woman standing next to Tracey remarked, "Crazy folks arguing about the bus fare. That's my father."

The Sun Temple was truly spectacular, although I couldn't find any *Hipposiderus ater*, this site being mentioned in Vivek Menon's [Indian Mammals: A Field Guide](#), as a good place to find them. Tracey and I again became India-famous, being photographed in selfies with dozens of tourists from elsewhere in India. One young woman told Tracey that she was living her dream, travelling the world with her partner, a line I have repeated a number of times since when it appeared Tracey might be feeling somewhat differently.

We were up early the next morning and on our way to Chilika Lake, getting a brief view of a Small Indian Mongoose as it crossed the road. We arrived at the Dolphin Co-op about 9:00 am and signed up for a two-hour tour of the lake. The Irrawaddy Dolphins, the reason for our quest to Chilika, turned out to be more elusive than I had expected. We had a brief glimpse of one's head and nothing more until the ride back to the pier when suddenly other boats appeared beside us and we saw a small group of dolphins ahead. We managed to get a couple of terrible photos, then headed back to the pier and drove to Puri to catch a bus to Bhubaneswar for pizza and an early night.



Originally, we had been booked on a direct flight from Bhubaneswar to Dehradun, but this got cancelled and was replaced with a five hour stop in Delhi. The flight from Delhi was one of the most turbulent flights I can recall and I think we were all happy to be out of the plane. I hadn't been sure how we were going to get from Dehradun to Makkumath but it turned out to be easier than I had imagined. Despite it being 4:00 pm, the chap at the fixed price taxi-stand at the airport said of course we could get a ride to the village, called over a driver and we were on our way for the six-hour trip over increasingly narrow and twisting roads. At one point we were stopped to let traffic pass the other way when a large rock tumbled down the embankment and struck our car. The driver did a quick assessment of damage and drove on. Nearing the homestay, Google maps offered a route which was a few minutes quicker which we took. This took us through sections of washed-out road but the Suzuki handled it surprisingly well and we arrived about 10:30 pm. Our host, Mr. Negi, was still up and introduced us to Bharat, a birding guide who would guide us for the next couple of days.

We were up at 5:00 the next morning and departed at 6:00 for Chopta, which was only 25 km away, but that 25 km was via narrow switchbacks. We briefly saw several Himalayan Brown Goral by the road along with numerous Kalij Pheasants. Chopta was a surprise – I had pictured a small quiet town, but instead was confronted with a long line of cars parked on the nearly non-existent verge of the road and swarms of Indian tourists taking selfies on the road. We continued on to Monal Point just past the village of Bhulkhand and suddenly found a group of Himalayan Tahr by the roadside. Several Himalayan Monals were visible on the slope above the road and a Royle's Pika posed for photos just in front of us. Past the village we found a Koklass Pheasant, called in by Bharat. We returned to Bhulkhand for a breakfast of puris, aloo and omelet. Rhesus Macaques and Himalayan/Nepal Sacred Langurs wandered around the village looking for scraps. After a short hike, we went to the Neel Kanth Hotel for a basic rice and dal

lunch, then back to the homestay for a nap, followed by a walk close to the village and a bit of bird-watching.







After dinner we drove past the turn to Chopta and down to a lower elevation to the Bunker Hotel. Rice is left out in front for animals, but extremely bright lights were also on. I asked the manager the reason for the lights and he told me that a group of students from the Doon School were visiting and they were afraid of wild animals, so the lights were on to reassure them. I walked up the road with a thermal imager and found a Red Muntjac and a sounder of Wild Pigs. Eventually, the hotel floodlights were turned off and a pair of Masked/Himalayan Palm Civets appeared at the plate of rice. I wandered back up the road and noticed a large hot spot in the thermal. This turned out to be an Asiatic Black Bear wandering through the woods. Back at the bait, an Indian Porcupine was visible in amongst the rocks nearby. We departed the site about 10:30 pm and saw two large Sambar stags on the drive home.



The next morning followed a similar plan. We drove up to Chopta, getting nice views of a Red Muntjac along the way. Near Bhulkhand we hiked up to the top of a ridge where we met two British paragliders who had done a four-hour return flight to the Kedernath Temple the previous day and had impressive footage to prove it. Breakfast in Bhulkhand was again accompanied by macaques and langurs. Bharat saw one tahr in the distance but otherwise Monal Point was quiet. We stopped for tea at a roadside restaurant. I was still getting gear out of the car when Bharat came out yelling, "Leopard." On the other side of the ravine a Leopard was making its way through the undergrowth towards the river. We walked down to the river on our side of the ravine but were unable to relocate it. After a basic lunch it was back to the homestay for a bucket shower and a pre-dinner walk.

For the night drive we returned to the Bunker Hotel and again saw Masked Palm Civet, Indian Porcupine and Sambar. A drive to a different site at higher elevation revealed a Red Fox in the forest close to the road but little else.

Our drive the next morning started with a lift into town, followed by a bus to Rudraprayag and another bus to Hardwar. Lunch was at a roadside dhaba with the most disgusting toilet facilities in India, an unenviable distinction, to say the least.

Rishikesh is world-renowned as a place to meditate and rejuvenate. How this can be the case in a town with the worst traffic anywhere is beyond me. We were stuck for more than two hours just trying to drive through town, while a parade of other vehicles, ranging from rickshaws to Rolls-Royces, created three lanes of traffic coming the other direction despite there only being space for one. Our driver's assistant had to continually jump off the bus to try to clear space in the roadway, pull back overhanging

tree branches and so on. Eventually the police opened up an alternative route near Chilla, running through Rajaji National Park, and we were able to resume forward progress, even getting to see some Terai Langurs and Rhesus Macaques along the way. We eventually crawled in to Hardwar about 6:30 pm, which felt like an improvement despite also being packed with most of humanity. Desperate for a beer, Tracey and I headed to Big Ben restaurant, which sounded promising, only to discover that the whole city appeared to be vegetarian only and alcohol-free. A walk along the ghats provided fascinating people-watching – pilgrims, beggars, sadhus, and tourists, while dozens of bats flew overhead.

We went back to Big Ben for breakfast and had another walk along the ghats before catching a bus to Ramnagar. A rickshaw then brought us to Jim Corbett Guest House, a lovely spacious place with a big balcony in a small village between Jhirna and Dhela gates to the park. I had been in contact with Pawan Bhatt, the owner, a number of times prior to the trip and he had been extremely helpful and responsive.

Our morning safari was supposed to enter the park through Dhela Gate, but our driver took us to Phanto instead. Fortunately, Pawan was able to rearrange the permit and we entered the park shortly after 6:30. Chital, Terai Langurs, Rhesus Macaques, Sambar and Wild Pigs were all present, but the highlight was a group of 11 Asian Elephants, including three very young ones, at a waterhole.



The afternoon's safari was generally fairly quiet, until near the end, when the motioning of people in the jeep in front caused us to stop. A tigress and a half-grown cub ran across the road, followed a short while later by the second cub, which hissed at us as he dashed across the road. We also saw our first Indian Gray Mongoose of the trip. Our guide for the safari kept barking out orders to “take a photo, take a

photo”, which got rather annoying as I was clearly trying to take photos and being continuously yelled at wasn’t really helping the matter.



Back at the guest house a couple from Delhi invited us to go for a night drive with them on the road edging the park. I got ready to go, but Pawan said that foreigners weren’t allowed to drive around at night. Whether this is true or not I don’t know, but it was certainly a bit disappointing.

Our guide the next morning was much calmer. No new species were seen but it was lovely to drive around in the Indian bush and enjoy the peacefulness. In the afternoon we did a safari in the hilly buffer zone of the park, which I had hoped might produce a few different species, but the drive was very quiet and no new species were found. Returning at 6:00 pm, a driver coming the other way was yelling “hati, hati” to our driver. Sure enough, a sizable group of elephants was visible at the bottom of the hillside to the left of our jeep.





We arrived back at the guest house just before 7:00 pm and I went for a short walk through the village to a dry riverbed we had driven over. Looking around with the thermal, I noticed several Chital and then another animal which was clearly different. A quick look with a flashlight and binoculars revealed a large Tiger walking along the far side of the riverbank, ignoring both me and the Chital. I ran back to the guesthouse to retrieve Tracey to come and look, but the gate had been locked and, after being let in, realized I wasn't going to be allowed to go back out unfortunately.

Having waited until the day before, we were unable to get train tickets from Ramnagar to Delhi. An air-conditioned bus ran from Haldwani to Delhi, so we took a taxi there and caught the 12:30 bus with time to spare. A tasty meal in the Pacific Mall by the Anand Vihar bus station, a metro ride out to the airport and our trip to India was at an end.

India produces strong emotions in visitors. As I sit here in Victoria writing this, I'm appreciating the fresh air and calm, but missing the vibrancy and energy. India engages you in ways that few other countries do. Years ago, I was involved in a minor motorcycle accident in Vietnam. All the bystanders were clearly on the side of the Vietnamese drivers involved despite the fact they had been responsible for the accident. That wouldn't likely happen in India. Some people would have supported them, some would have supported us, some would have enjoyed the opportunity for debate regardless of outcome. Stopping for a minute in an Indian railway station guarantees that someone will approach you to offer assistance, while a question to a stranger often leads to effusive offers of hospitality. From a wildlife perspective, I know of nowhere else where one can see rhinos in the wild while driving down a national highway, or go for a walk in a village and see a Tiger walking down a dry riverbed. There really is no other country like it.

Profuse thanks to Rohit for showing us bats in Bangalore, Bijay for a memorable and cat-filled night, Bharat for his guiding around Chopta and Pawan for all of his help in Corbett National Park. And thanks to Tracey, whose tolerance and enthusiasm knows few bounds.

Ian Thompson

Victoria, B.C.

ibtson@yahoo.com

List of Mammal Species seen:

1. Asian Elephant – *Elephas maximus*
2. Bonnet Macaque – *Macaca radiata*
3. Rhesus Macaque – *Macaca mulatta*
4. Bengal Sacred Langur/Northern Plains Gray Langur – *Semnopithecus entellus*
5. Terai Sacred Langur – *Semnopithecus hector*
6. Nepal Sacred Langur/Himalayan Gray Langur – *Semnopithecus schistaceus*
7. Malabar Sacred Langur/South-western Gray Langur – *Semnopithecus hypoleucus*
8. Tufted Gray Langur/South-eastern Gray Langur – *Semnopithecus priam*
9. Royle's Pika – *Ochotona royllii*
10. Indian Hare – *Lepus nigricollis*
11. Indian Bush Rat – *Golunda ellioti*
12. Earth-coloured Mouse – *Mus terricolor*
13. Greater Bandicoot Rat – *Bandicota indica*
14. Brown Rat – *Rattus norvegicus*
15. Black Rat/Roof Rat – *Rattus rattus*
16. House Mouse – *Mus musculus*
17. Indian Crested Porcupine – *Hystrix indica*
18. Northern Palm Squirrel/Five-lined Palm Squirrel – *Funambulus pennantii*
19. Indian Palm Squirrel/Three-lined Palm Squirrel – *Funambulus palmarum*
20. Leschenault's Rousette/Fulvous Fruit Bat – *Rousettus leschenaultii*
21. Indian Flying Fox – *Pteropus medius*
22. Dobson's Leaf-nosed/Roundleaf Bat - *Hipposideros brachyotus*
23. Indian/Kelaart's Leaf-nosed/Roundleaf Bat – *Hipposideros lankadiva*
24. Schneider's Leaf-nosed/Roundleaf Bat – *Hipposideros speoris*
25. Greater Asiatic Yellow Bat – *Scotophilus heathii*
26. Pipistrelle sp.
27. Greater Mouse-tailed Bat – *Rhinopoma microphyllum*
28. Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat – *Rhinopoma hardwickii*
29. Irrawaddy Dolphin – *Orcaella brevirostris*
30. Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin – *Sousa chinensis*
31. Eurasian Wild Pig – *Sus scrofa*
32. Red/Indian Muntjac – *Muntiacus muntjak*
33. Chital – *Axis axis*

34. Sambar – *Rusa unicolor*
35. Barasingha – *Rucervus duvaucelii*
36. Gaur – *Bos gaurus*
37. Nilgai – *Boselaphus tragocamelus*
38. Himalayan Tahr – *Hemitragus jemlahicus*
39. Himalayan Brown Goral – *Nemorhaedus goral*
40. Tiger – *Panthera tigris*
41. Leopard – *Panthera pardus*
42. Rusty-spotted Cat – *Prionailurus rubiginosus*
43. Fishing Cat – *Prionailurus viverrinus*
44. Leopard Cat – *Prionailurus bengalensis*
45. Jungle Cat – *Felis chaus*
46. Masked/Himalayan Palm Civet – *Paguma larvata*
47. Common Palm Civet – *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*
48. Small Indian Mongoose – *Herpestes auropunctatus*
49. Indian Gray Mongoose – *Herpestes edwardsii*
50. Golden Jackal – *Canis aureus*
51. Dhole – *Cuon alpinus*
52. Red Fox – *Vulpes vulpes*
53. Asiatic Black Bear – *Ursus thibetanus*