



My Big Cat Year – Visit to India for a diverse set of Wild Cat Species – 27/03/26 to 29/04/26

As part of The Big Cat Year we made a visit to India, organized together with Vana Safaris. Originally, it was 42 days but due to the sudden passing of my beloved mother, we had to shorten it with 10 days. We focused in the Northeast of India at Kaziranga NP, Manas NP, Kokaijani, Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Mandala and Sela Pass as the key areas. We then flew to the Northwest for Kalaidevi Wildlife Sanctuary, Bera, Desert National Park, Little Rann of Kutch, Velavadar NP, Gir Forest NP and Tadoba NP. Many thanks to Vana Safaris and Nehal Gurung who has led the trip.

All in all, we managed to see close to **60 mammal species** and around **370 bird species**. With regard to the Wild Cat species, we managed to observe **Bengal Tiger, Asiatic Lion, Leopard, Jungle Cat, Afro-asiatic Wild Cat** and **Rusty-spotted Cat**.

Please find below the journals and pictures as shown in the Blogs in chronological order on the website www.mybigcatyear.com . The complete mammal list is included at the end.

Great start of the Indian part of the Big Cat Year and my first Tiger!!

India has always been an important part of The Big Cat Year as it is the country with the most Wild Cat species in the world. It contains **15 Wild Cat species** of which the Tiger is obviously the most famous.

Originally, I would travel on the 18th of March to India for a long trip until the end of April. And prior to India I would have a 10-day trip in Uganda for the African Golden Cat. However, as my mother suddenly passed away, I had to reschedule and had to cancel the Uganda trip. Many thanks to **Harriet Kemigisha** from [Harrier Tours](http://HarrierTours.com) as she has been extremely helpful and really helped me out. Thanks Harriet, it is greatly appreciated!! The trip to India with [Vana Safaris](http://VanaSafaris.com) had to be postponed for 10 days and we skipped part of the itinerary.

So, on the 27th of March I travelled from Amsterdam to Delhi where I met Nehal Gurung from [Vana Safaris](http://VanaSafaris.com) and we boarded the flight to Guwahati for the first part of our 30-day trip together. The **first part** would focus on the Northeast part of India, especially the Assam and Arunachal Pradesh regions. It has some great National Parks, and we would visit **Kaziranga NP, Manas NP, Eaglenest Sanctuary** and finish at Dirang for **Sela Pass**. In terms of the wild cats, focus would be for the **Tiger at Kaziranga and Manas and Mainland Leopard Cat, Marbled Cat, Asiatic Golden Cat and Mainland Clouded Leopard at Eaglenest Sanctuary**.





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At the airport of Guwahati, we were met by local guide Amit and his driver Deep. We drove for another 6 hours to Kaziranga where we stayed at a homestay. Next morning we went into **Kaziranga NP** with the local used jeep (gypsy it is called). We would spend the day at the eastern part of the park. It is famous for the population of the **Indian Rhino's**. It had some problems in the past with poaching, but the numbers are thriving with more than 3000 Indian Rhino's in the

NP, I have never seen so many Rhinos. The park is also well known for its Tiger sightings. As a result, many, many jeeps in the park and the whole area lives of tourism, my perception is 99% Indian tourists and a very small percentage foreign tourists of which I was one of them. We saw some great wildlife, lots of mammals and a nice set of birds, however no cats. Also, it was far too busy for me, it's not my cup of tea.

As Amit was fully aware of My Bug Cat Year, in the evening he drove off to a place in the border of the NP where supposedly a **Fishing Cat** regularly roams. That would be a real bonus for me as I did expect to have a chance to see it in the Northeast part of India. With thermals and spotlights we stayed until 22:00. Nehal did spot a cat size mammal with the Thermal but we could not identify it. We decided to return the next night with a different strategy.

Next day, we entered the Western entrance and that was much better, few jeeps and we were once or twice close to a **Tiger** sighting. The alarm calls of the hog deer give away the presence of predators, in many cases a tiger. In the afternoon, we went into the Central entrance, again too busy for me, despite the great habitat and wildlife. In the evening again a long session in the border of the park for the **Fishing Cat** but unfortunately no success.

All in all, Kaziranga is a great but also very busy NP with amazing wildlife, we saw the **Asian Water Buffalo, Asian Elephant, Indian Rhino, Barasingha or Swamp Deer, Sambar, Hog Deer, Rhesus Macaque, Capped Langur, Smooth-coated Otter, Wild Boar and a few Squirrel Species**. Bird wise we had a list of close to 100 species with some nice ones like the **Pallas Fish Eagle, Brown Fish Owl, Great Hornbill, Dusky Eagle Owl and Slender-billed Vulture**.





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After two days Kaziranga, we left for **Manas NP** but first we tried to get a glimpse of the endangered **western Hoolock Gibbon**. And we managed to observe a small family. A great sighting as Gibbons all over the world are being threatened. Early evening we finally arrived at the Eastern site of Manas NP where we stayed at a basic but great ecolodge, very close to the Eastern entrance. I managed to be on time at the ecolodge as I had a Team session to attend and luckily the Wifi worked well and we managed to get a good session. After a quick dinner, we left for the night drive in the borders of the park. Except for some Indian Hares and a greater painted-snipe, we did not see that much except for an Asian Elephant. Remarkably close to some small farmhouses. Our local guide Rustam tried to scare of the Elephant. It did not work out as when we returned at 23:00 at the Eco Lodge, some people were gathering in cars to try to scare of the elephant with fire crackers, etc. I was too late to join as it would have been an interesting experience to see how they try to do this.



Next morning we were off at 6 Am and entered the **Western Entrance of Manas NP**. It turned out to be **one of the great wildlife experiences** I have ever had. We drove slowly for 4 hours through dense forests before arriving at the flatlands. During those hours in the forest we had some great sightings, a group of **elephants** crossing the road and disappearing in the forest, a **Yellow-throated Marten** which showed well, a **Crab-eating Mongoose**, two huge male **Gaurs**, **Barking Deer** and a **Malayan Giant Squirrel**. Bird life was great with a **Kalij Pheasant**, **Blue-bearded Bee-eater** and a playful family of **Asian Emerald Cuckoo's!** Arriving at the grasslands we managed to have good views of the threatened **Bengal Florican**. Best of all was that we did not encounter any other jeep or tourists the whole morning, that made it magic!!

The second morning we left early morning to arrive at 6 Am at the Eastern Entrance at Manas NP, in time for the morning drive with local guide PJ. So, we were with Nehal, Amit, local guide PJ, the driver and myself in the Jeep. Morning session was good and we ended for a short break at the northern part of the park which borders Bhutan and where the park continuous into Royal Manas NP of Bhutan. We had a great breakfast on top of one of the watchtowers. Again, good wildlife but no Tiger yet.





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I was getting a bit nervous as Manas would be the last place to spot a **Tiger**, only other place would be at the far end of the trip at Tadoba. I knew Tiger sightings were infrequent in the NP as it has also dense forests and that makes it very difficult. A decade or more ago, the Tiger population in India really struggled due to major poaching schemes, affecting Tiger numbers all over India. Since then, a lot of actions have been taken, and Tiger numbers are on the rise again. PJ told me that at the lowest point in time, the Tiger Numbers were around 10 to 12, now they are close to 50 again. Just like Amit, PJ was also aware of the Big Cat Year so he knew the pressure was on and he really tried all he could. However, it was time for lunch at the Musa's Jungle retreat where we stayed, a great place bordering the park. We had lunch at the top of the building, and we could see the Rhinos grazing in the NP, what a treat!



After lunch, we had our afternoon game drive with PJ again. We would start at 14 PM, however Amit was 15 minutes late, so we left a bit later. After a km into the park, we passed the grasslands where we stopped and watched a Changeable Hawk-Eagle. We continued and 70 meters before entering the forest, we saw a **huge male**

Tiger crossing the road!!! My first Tiger ever and what a sight. With its huge body it covered the whole width of the road. I managed to get a few photos. Unfortunately, only half its body, however, who cares, I managed to see this magnificent mammal! After crossing the road, it disappeared into the forest. We waited for 45 minutes to see if it would return as PJ explained that it was very likely that the Tiger was heading for the river to get some water.

Since my childhood I have been fascinated by the Tiger. In my view the most iconic mammal. When a good population of Tigers exists in an area, it is a sign for a true wild place with some good, protected habitat and a sufficient prey base. Its behavior, strength, beauty contributes to this. But also, its history is tragic and fascinating at the same time. From over 100,000 Tigers at around 1900 to around 5500 today. Previously 8 subspecies of which the





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Bali Tiger, Javan Tiger and Caspian Tiger have gone extinct, while the South Chinese Tiger has gone extinct in the wild. Let's hope we can protect this majestic mammal and its habitat. For more info on the Tiger, please go to the [IUCN website](#).



After seeing the Tiger, we had another great wildlife experience where we encountered a herd of Gaur at an open space in the forest. On the opposite side of the herd, a Mother Rhino with its calf was grazing. Suddenly, an elephant emerged out of the forest at the backside of the Rhinos, what a sighting!!!

Asian Golden Cats in Eaglenest Sanctuary

After leaving Manas NP, we went on our way to **Eaglenest Sanctuary**. We left at 04:30 AM to arrive at 06:00 AM at Kokajjani to look for the **Golden Langur**, an endemic species with a very limited distribution range. Through the local guide there, who does tremendous work with regard to protecting these magnificent species, we could go through the gardens of some local houses and had some great views of the Golden Langur.



We continued to **Bhalukpong** where we would stay for one night. Approaching Bhalukpong, the road was closed off for a few hours because of a political rally. This is something that happens often in India. Amit made some calls and we drove to the **Nameri Ecolodge**. A nice place where we could rest for a few hours. Very nice also because I had a problem with logging in to my laptop and luckily with some

help I could solve it and log in again. They prepared a nice meal and at around 20:00 we drove to Bhalukpong.





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Next day we drove to **Tenga**, the entry point toward **Eaglenest Sanctuary**. The final place to buy some extra food, etc. We also picked up our local guide Bikram, a 25-year-old guy who started as a cook in the camps but developed a passion for nature and its wildlife and with the help and guidance of other guides, he progressed into a wildlife guide. During the 6 days we spent together, I got to know Bikram and I realized he had a tough life, so well done Bikram. A great achievement to become a wildlife guide!!



Eaglenest Sanctuary lies at around 2800 meters height and is especially well known in the birding community as it has some very special and enigmatic birds which are extremely difficult to observe. I am very much interested in birds (although I do not consider myself to be a birder) but even more so in mammals. And obviously the wild cat species! **There are four of them who inhabit this huge and impressive forest: Mainland**

Leopard Cat, Marbled Cat, Asiatic Golden Cat, and Mainland Clouded Leopard. Especially the last two are extremely difficult and can only be found in a limited range on mainland Asia. The Marbled Cat has a bigger distribution range and is also found in Indonesia and Malaysia. My hopes were to find a Mainland Leopard Cat and with extreme luck, hopefully one of the other three species.



We stayed in the tented camp in Eaglenest Sanctuary. It is a very basic place but with some great people taking care of the kitchen. It is a seasonal camp, so it is set up at the beginning of the season in September and at the end of the season in April, everything is removed. During the monsoon period, it is empty and desolate. When we were there, there was a group of English birders and 2 groups of Indian birders, all in all 10

people, so a very small camp.

In my view, a **good example of low-impact, high-income eco-tourism**. Very low impact to the environment as there are very small numbers of people. But at the same time, generating revenue, income, and good employment for the local community. As such, it protects the habitat and its wildlife. While speaking to the guides, one of my questions always was: 'How





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did it all look here 20 years ago and what has changed?' In almost all cases, the answer was positive, i.e., better protected forest, less cutting of forest, and less poaching. That's what good and sustainable eco-tourism can do!



In Eaglenest Sanctuary, we went out every day from 03:30 AM in the morning, thermal and spotlighting for mammals, continued with birding until 10:00 AM. Tea and cookies. Rest and then lunch at 13:00, rest and out again from 15:00 to 19:00, back for dinner. And out again from 21:00 until 24:00. After three days, we were all exhausted. Mammal-watching-wise, it was very hard, with very little activity.

Only **Common and Masked Palm Civets** at night, one **Elephant** (named Tarzan), and 2 **Yellow-throated Martens** (during the day).

With regard to the **Elephant named Tarzan**, this needs some elaboration. The Asian Elephants in those forests are not easy and can be very aggressive. And there is one single bull, named Tarzan, who is extremely aggressive and thus dangerous. I was already warned by Nehal and Vana Safaris to be extremely cautious. This was confirmed by all the local guides; they were afraid as well. And then you know it is serious! The advice was to always use thermals as they move very quietly and you cannot always discover them with spotlighting.

The quest [Sebastian and Rachel Kennerknecht](#) have taken on to photograph all 40 Wild Cat species in the world is impressive. They have just finished their second episode of Chasing Cats, focusing on the secretive cats in Malaysia, focusing on the Mainland Leopard Cat, Mainland Clouded Leopard and the Asian Golden Cat. It shows, even with the aid of rangers and researchers and camera traps, it is extremely difficult and they only managed the Mainland Leopard Cat. Watch this episode on YouTube, it is impressive; [Searching for Malaysia's Elusive Cats of the Jungle](#)

So, one night, Nehal, Bikram, and myself were walking over the forest road. Nehal was using his thermal and suddenly his behavior changed; he was on to something. We walked further for 30 meters and suddenly he changed direction and started walking quickly backwards to the car. After arriving at the car, he explained. He saw a big white blot in the





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thermal but he couldn't identify what it was. Only when it moved its trunk, he knew directly: it was an elephant. All the time he was looking at half the backside of the animal's body as it was in a bend in the road... We decided to walk back quietly to see from a distance if we could find it with the thermal. So we went back but never found it again; the elephant must have moved upwards into the forest. From the fact that it was a big solitary bull and from its location, it must have been the famous Tarzan! Quite a bit of adrenaline and excitement!!

So on the cat side, it was disappointing; I hoped for at least a Mainland Leopard Cat, as it is seen there regularly. One of the other cats would obviously have been a tremendous bonus. Despite all the long hours and hard work, it was not meant to be.

But the special cats are there! Our guide Bikram told the story that on 4 December 2023 he was guiding at Eaglenest. He got the message that his mother was seriously ill and that he needed to come down to Tenga. He left at 07:00 AM in the morning and arrived at 22:00 in Tenga. While walking on the road he saw an **Asiatic Golden Cat** far away in front of him. He took his phone and filmed it. I have asked Bikram if I could share this story and clip and he was okay. I have added the clip to this blog.

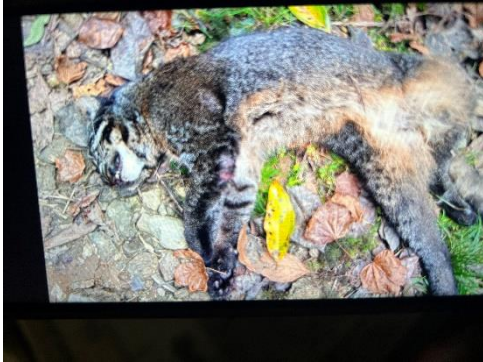
One remarkable story I need to add. At our first evening/night at Eaglenest, I was in the kitchen/restaurant area ready to have dinner. Nehal joined me and asked if it was oke if he did not join me for diner as he had diner with the staff. I explained him that it was totally allright and Nehal left. I felt something was wrong, some things you feel. After diner it became clear. Late afternoon, while getting some stuff at the car and make it ready for the night drive, they left the keys in the car and the car locked it self Many people in the camp were involved but it was impossible to open the camp. One of the staff members did have connection, so the driver Deep called Amit, the guide for the first week and owner of the car. Amit was still at Balukpong, 6 hours away. He told Deep that he would ask one of his people to come from Karizanga with the spare key, pickup Amit in Balukpong, and drive to Eaglenest. And so, the next day, Amit's gury took of from Kaziranga in a Gypsy (open Jeep), drove to Balukpong, picked up Amit and arrived at 15:00 hours at Eaglenest. What a great guy Amit! He even took some diner with him, local food from Kaziranga, and prepared food fos us, Thanks Amit!!! We managed that night and morning with long walks, 3 to 4 at night and 5 tot 6 hours in the morning.





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On the last day, in Lamacamp, I met a guide called Pappu. He saw my cap which said 'Birding Breaks'; he mentioned he knew Laurens Steijn from one of the trips he guided for them. We spoke further and also about the cats and he told me that this January he found a **dead Golden Cat**. At a place where we had seen the Ward's Trogon. There are no signs in the forest but the guides do have their stakeouts for specific birds so while speaking, we realized where he had found the dead Asiatic Golden Cat. He told us it was found under a dead huge tree, about 150 feet tall, and next to the body a part of a big trunk of the tree was found. While analyzing the tree and the circumstances they concluded that the cat was hunting on one of the higher branches which was full of a parasitic plant with flowers. It must have made a jump towards a potential prey on that branch with flowers and as it was a rotten tree, the branch must have broken down, causing the cat to fall from a huge height. I have asked Pappu if I could share the photos and that was okay. The pictures are added.



Although the focus has been on felines, of course we were also looking out for other mammals and birds. Despite having spent quite a few nights with thermals and spotlights, in the northeastern part of India I have only been able to observe the tiger in Manas NP and also about **26 other mammals and more than 250 bird species**. Bird highlights were the **Temminck's and Blyth's Tragopan, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Bengal Florican, Himalayan Monal, Blood Pheasant, Bugun Liocichla, Ward's Trogon, Green Cochoa, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, Asian Emerald Cuckoo and Kalij Pheasant**. The story surrounding the **Bugun** is of course fascinating, see Bugun Liocichla: [A Quest to See this Rare Gem of the Northeast](#)

Kaleidevi Wildlife Sanctuary, what a great place ... and three Cat species in one drive!!

After leaving the Northeastern part of India, we flew from Guwahati to Jaipur. And from there we went by car, I think it must have been a 6 hour drive, to **Kaleidevi Wildlife Sanctuary**, the first part of the Northwestern Part of India where we would stay for three nights and have enough time to experience the area.





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We stayed at an old fort which is owned by the Chandrapal family who reign over the whole area for 11 generations already. As such it is a private area and they provide work for their people, take care of the water supply (they have created a huge man-made lake) and they invest in reforestation (basically stop grazing) and control the nature in the area. **Udit Chandrapal**, who is the 11th generation, takes care of the wildlife side of things and as such he is in charge of the Safaris. He is a true admirer of wildlife, both mammals and birds, is a conservationist and he really went the extra mile to show us the area and what's in there, with great respect for its wildlife, always leaving enough distance and respect for the animals.

Kaleidevi is basically bordering Ranthambore NP, which is one of the most famous Tiger reserves of India. However, as the habitat in Kaleidevi is very different (very dry and rocky), it does not harbour any Tiger Population (although they sometimes traverse through the area). We went out every morning from 6 to 10 and from 17 to 20 hours. We managed to see some great mammals which are very difficult to observe in other parts of India; **Striped Hyenas, Indian (Grey) Wolves, Golden Jackals, Bengal Fox, Small Indian Civet, Small Indian Mongoose, Indian Grey Mongoose, Chinkara Antelope, Nilgai, Wild Boar, Indian Desert Jird and Indian Hairy-footed Gerbil**. Especially the multiple sightings of the Striped Hyenas and the Grey Wolves were impressive. Bird wise it was okay and especially the sighting of the **Sirkeer Malkoha** and a soaring **Bonelli's Eagle** out of the window at the fort was majestic!

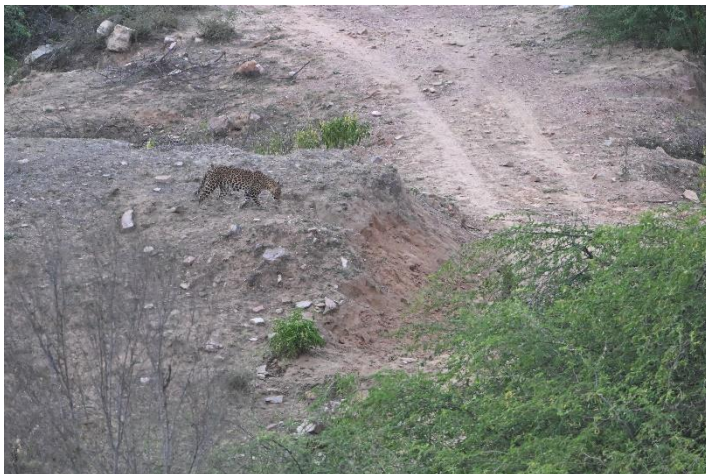




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That morning on the second game drive, Udit mentioned that one of his people had seen a **Leopard killing a Wild Boar** from the top of the Fort in the forest adjacent to the Fort. Udit asked if we would like to join him to look for tracks and perhaps the kill so that he could place camera traps. Obviously, I replied, yes, that's great! So directly after the morning game drive we continued to the place where the kill was made. We could see tracks and Udit said he would follow the tracks uphill so see if he could find the kill. I followed him but after a while I returned, the thicket was too dense and thorny for me. Udit continued. After an hour he returned, he said he lost the tracks but while he was on the hill side, he could hear a crow very loudly. Many times, crows are close to the kill so that they can scavenge remains of the kill. Eventually he found the remainder of the kill, the wild boar's head, and also other parts of goats, etc... He showed it me on the phone as he videoed it. He had placed the camera traps and explained to us that a family of leopard probably had their den on the hill side, a place where previously Striped Hyenas were hiding. What a great experience and nice adventure! Especially to know that the Leopards were so close to the fort was thrilling. **I actually recorded a video in which I mentioned how cool it must be to see the Leopard from the Fort, see below. How little did I know then what would happen in the afternoon ...**

However, after 3 game drives, we still had seen no cats while the place is supposedly good for Jungle Cat, Afro-asiatic Wild cat and Rusty-spotted Cat. While having lunch with Nehal on the second day, he expressed his concerns. I agreed with him but mentioned that in one game drive everything can change!



So, we had one game drive left and we decided earlier that we had to make it later, after dinner, so that the temperature had cooled down more and the animals are more active. So, we would start at 21 hours, after dinner. However, at 18 hours, just 20 minutes before sunset, Udit invited us up to the top of the fort, also to see thousands of bats leaving the roost place in the fort, an impressive sight!!





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While overlooking the really small patch of forest next to the fort and going up the hill, we could hear the male Leopard roaring, what an impressive sound. We were looking at the forest below and we could see two **Wild Boar** next to one of the water holes and some **Nilgai** in an open space. The Nilgai were looking at one direction. Suddenly Udit said, there it is!! The mother Leopard and her young. Nehal also saw it. I had problems with the direction and could not immediately see it. But then half a minute later, Udit said, it is out on the open, on the sand road (where we walked this morning and saw the tracks), and **there it was, a Mother Leopard and its cub!!!** I could make some pictures and video, what a thrill! The pair was answering the calls of the male and made their way into the forest up the hill, what a sight and a memorable experience!! Many thanks Udit!!!!

So, we saw the Leopard and we still had the last game drive left!! So, after dinner, we left at 21:00 hours with the last game drive. And what a great game drive it would become, epic!!



We picked up the mammals one after the other; Small Indian Civet which showed nicely, Bengal Fox, Golden Jackals, two Striped Hyenas, another Indian (Grey) Wolf pack of at least four animals, Nilgai, Chinkara. What a good start. But then at around 23 hours in a harvested corn

field, two small eyes ... we went in with the car to get closer and there it was, a Jungle Cat!! My first one. A minute later, it turned out it was a **pair of two Jungle Cats**, nice. We continued and in a field a few minutes later, again two small eyes. **Now it was an Afro-asiatic Wild Cat!** A species which Udit explained they saw it previously very often, however lately not, so were very lucky. It was already after 01:30 when we even saw a **young Sloth Bear!** At 02:00 we returned just in time to get 3 hours of sleep before continuing the next morning for an early departure to Bera.

Thanks again Udit for a great experience in a truly unique place, Kaleidevi Wildlife sanctuary. It is home to a great set of mammals difficult to observe in another place. But at Kaleidevi, you do have a good chance of spotting them. There is no hunting and the place is quiet, so mammals can be observed really well. Also, it has a great number of different cat species. Udit told us that because of the camera traps, he knows sometimes Tigers do cross





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the sanctuary, especially in the Gorges which are dense. One day, two years ago, he was out on a game drive with one elder lady, and they were out for 15 minutes and there it stood on the road, a Tiger! The first and only one he has seen himself in the 7 years he is doing this. **That specific game drive became an epic one for him and his guest ... after the Tiger, they spotted all cats, the Leopard, Jungle Cat, Afro-asiatic Wild Cat, Rusty-spotted Cat and the Caracal!!** Occasionally they see the Caracal which is very rare in India. Again, the Leopards, Jungle Cat, Afro-asiatic Wild Cat and Rusty-spotted Cat are seen often (as we had three of those in one evening), however, **to see on that specific day also a Tiger and a Caracal is truly epic. That makes six cats.** I know of one trip report in Bolivia in Jaguarland with Nick's Adventures and Royle Safari's of five cats in one day (Jaguar, Ocelot, Jaguarundi, Puma and Geoffrey's cat) which is already heroic ... but six is truly exceptional and that must have been awesome!!!

From Kaleidevi Wildlife Sanctuary, we drove almost a full day to **Bera, a place with a unique landscape with great rocks and well known for its Leopards** as they seem to live together in harmony with the local community. Some time ago, the BBC made a documentary showing the Leopards on top of the rocks and since then the place is well known and became a bit famous. It is not a National Park so there is the opportunity for night drives. When we arrived, we had dinner and after dinner headed out for our first drive. We explained the two guides that Rusty-spotted cat was a big target and one of them said, Okay, I know where I can



find it, I know where it hangs out. I looked at Nehal and we both thought this guy is a bit arrogant but let's see. 30 Minutes later, driving a kind of moon like landscape, and scanning all the rocks with the spotlight, he said; **There is it, high up the rock. And he was right!! I filmed it and could see the Rusty-spotted cat, slowly moving down.** Then he

asked If I would like to climb the rock. I immediately replied, let's go. So, we went. When we were at the base of the rock, he asked me to take off my shoes for better grip. I consented but later I realized I have western feet, and I don't have enough hard skin on them as they do. However, I realized too late, so it was a risky and painful climb.

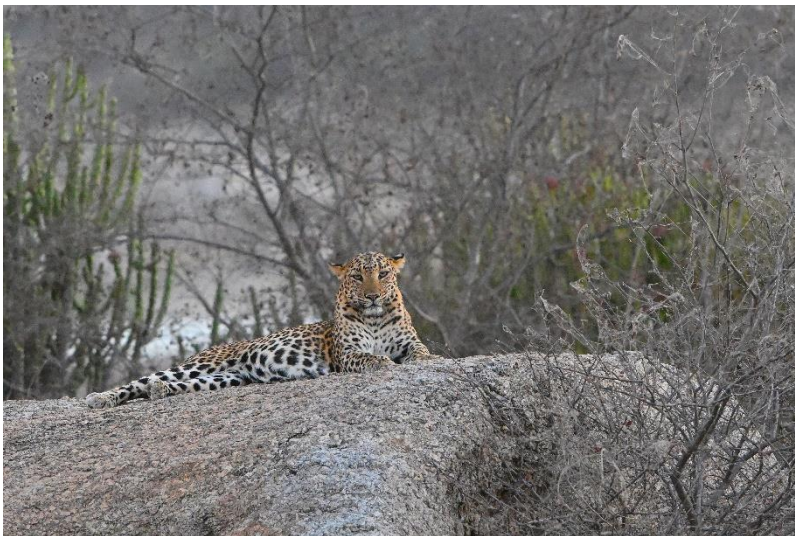




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One of the guides stayed behind in the Gypsy (Jeep) and could locate the Cat so that we knew where to go. So, 100 meters up the hill we were at 20 meters from the location and the guide started to make some Cat noises and made some noise with grass, i.e. rustling grass. Just to ease the Cat and to make clear we do not form a threat. After 15 minutes of searching, there it was, it popped out its head out of a space in the rocks where it was hiding. Totally at ease and indifferent to our presence. What a privilege to see this rarely seen and very small cat. After a few minutes we left and made our way down.

The guide who managed to find the Rusty-spotted Cat was a real character; when trying to find Leopards in the evening game drive, he mimicked the call of a goat, the key prey species there for the Leopard. Both Nehal and I had to be careful not to start laughing. At the moment this guide was not a real wildlife guide but somebody who grew up in the villages and knows all about the animals and how to find them. Not always in a good way, hope he progresses and becomes somebody who really cares for the animals. But that is also part of the culture, and these people are also out there so for me it was good to experience this.



Next day, morning and afternoon/evening games drives we were out for the Leopards. In the afternoon, our guide got a message that one was seen. With horrendous speed we went to this spot. From there we drove the Gypsy up a steep rock 50 meters high. Difficult to believe but what they do with the Gypsies is incredible. Unfortunately, it will only

stop once when a serious accident happens and people die. It was a matter of time before Gypsies were up there, and we counted over 30. Although **we had a great view of a male Leopard in a unique setting**, for me the whole crowd offset the whole experience. Since a few years a few lodges have been built and the number of (Indian) tourists is overwhelming. There is no control and it is a kind of wild west. I really hope they will be able to change this, control it, reduce the numbers and conserve the place. It deserves better!





My Big Cat Year – Visit to India for a diverse set of Wild Cat Species – 27/03/26 to 29/04/26

From Bera, we drove a full day to Jaisalmer, close to the border with Pakistan. Again 45 degrees. It is famous for its fort but also for **Desert National Park**. This Park harbours a significant population of the remnants of the **Great Indian Bustard**. A critically endangered bird of which there are around 200 left and 120 of these live in DNP, as they locally call it. First afternoon/evening game drive, we had a nice drive, managed to see the **Indian Hedgehog** and the **Indian Long-eared Hedgehog**. The latter at a farmer's place in the evening where a resident Hedgehog lives and we could search. It was fun and at the end they found it for us. Obviously, we had to drink tea with them, and I had to chat with the boss of the family. He had two wives and 10 children, most of them sleeping outside on beds at 30 centimeters height. As many people sleep outside on those structures, ingenious. It was a nice and authentic experience.

Next morning we went out again but in DNP, the car failed us ... Another car fetched us after 60 minutes and we had a good drive, especially seeing some **Egyptian Vultures** up close, a **Tawny** and a **Steppe Eagle**. However, no GIBs (as the Great Indian Bustards are called). So,



during the afternoon Game drive it had to happen. But after two hours still nothing, except a **very nice Afro-asiatic Wild Cat** who crossed the path in front of us, climbed a pool and jumped over the high fence and disappeared in the high grass. We waited and waited and after 10 minutes or so, it came out and we could observe it nicely. We continued in our search for the **GIBs**.

Finally, just before sunset we found a pair, close to the watch tower, overlooking part of DNP. Fortunately, the pair was in the free area on the other side so we could approach it a bit (while always keeping a good distance) and managed to have good views. What a stunning bird and hope they survive!!





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Superb Tiger sightings at Tadoba NP and completing the Indian trip!

After Rajasthan state, we headed towards Gujarat state for three well known National Parks; **Little Rann of Kutch NP, Velavadar NP and Gir Forest NP.**

We left Desert National Park, in the Northeast of India, close to the Pakistan Border, by 00:30 in order to catch the 2 am Night train from Jaisalmer to Jaipur (the pink city). I had done this leg before, back in 1994 with Bea, so I know how to sleep in these Indian trains. It worked out well for me and I got some rest. Nehal ordered some breakfast from outside (the system really works well) and they delivered it to us at a certain train station somewhere around 08:30 am. We arrived in Jaipur by 14:30 hours and we quickly got out of the station into the car which was waiting for us. It was a tight schedule as we needed to be in time at the airport for the 17:00 flight to Ahmedabad. We managed and arrived around 21:00 hours in Ahmedabad and stayed in a hotel close to the airport. Nice to have a meal and an early evening for some good rest!!



Next morning we headed at 08:00 AM to the **Little Rann of Kutch** in the Gujarat state where we arrived around lunch time at the **Rann Riders**, a great place with nice rooms, lots of green and good food. The Little Rann of Kutch is again a very dry area, a kind of salt flats. It is famous for the **last remaining population of Asiatic Wild Ass**. In the afternoon until the early evening, we went out for games drives, just as the following morning and afternoon. In between, you just hide in your room with fan and aircon as the temperatures got up to 45 degrees.



I loved the place and we had great views of the **Asiatic Wild Ass** which is well protected and doing well now. Also, good observations of **Nilgai, Wild Boar, Bengal Fox, Golden Jackal** and some very playful **Desert (Red) Foxes**. We even managed to flush an **Indian (Grey) Wolf**, a rare sighting there. The last evening, on our way back to Rann Riders, we even had a **Jungle Cat** near one of the pools. Birdlife was good with an amazing abundance of **Collared Pratincoles** and **Rosy Starlings**. The **Red-naped Ibis** were stunning and the **Tibetan Sand Plover** was a nice bonus.





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From the Little Rann of Kutch we drove one morning to **Velavadar NP**, one of the **last strongholds for the Blackbuck**. An endangered beautiful antelope which can only be seen in a few places in India, and this is the most famous one. During the 20th century, blackbuck numbers declined sharply due to excessive hunting, deforestation and habitat destruction. Long ago it

was also hunted by the Royal's with trained Asian Cheetahs. Unfortunately, the **Asian Cheetah is on the brink of extinction** and only about 20 seem to survive in Iran. It seems there is no hope left for them. On mammalwatching.com there is an [insightful podcast](#) about the Asian Cheetah. With regard to the Blackbuck, due to good protection the numbers have increased strongly and in Velavadar NP it is thriving well.

We stayed at a nice homestay, basically eat in their living room and had a great view of the property, all its family members and the way they live. Very nice.



We had one afternoon game drive, and two morning game drives. In between, again to hot, nearly 45 degrees, so you flee to your room and try to get some rest and do some work. The NP is quite small, and the habitat is very monotonous, i.e. grasslands, and the biodiversity is limited. Still, we had great sightings of especially **Striped Hyena's during daytime!** We could even see the behaviour of a mother and its five subadult pups and one Striped Hyena taking a bathing. Sighting an **Indian (grey) Wolf** was a bonus and seeing **11 Jungle Cats was just amazing!!** They were everywhere!!



Birdlife highlights were a stunning **Painted Francolin** and four **Sarus Cranes**.





My Big Cat Year – Visit to India for a diverse set of Wild Cat Species – 27/03/26 to 29/04/26

Two days at Velavadar NP was more than sufficient so we were pleased to continue to **Gir Forest NP**, a place famous for the **only population in the world of the Asiatic Lion, a subspecies of Lion**. We stayed at the Gir Birding Lodge, a nice place, bordering the NP. Gir



Forest NP is probably one of the most touristic NP's in India, well run and managed, so it generates lots of revenue and employs many people. Downside is, it is too busy for me, too many people, too many gypsy's (Jeeps). Still, I had to go there because of the Asiatic Lion, and we managed on 3 game drives to have some superb views. Especially, **a single male lion passing our**

vehicle at a meter was a great sight. Bird wise, we did not see many new species although the **Painted Sandgrouse** and the **Mottled Wood-owls** were a highlight to me.

The story of the Asiatic Lion is interesting. Historically, the Asiatic lion (*Panthera Leo persica*) boasted a massive range from the Mediterranean region, across the Middle East, and through to central India until the 19th century. They were found in modern-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and throughout northern and central India. By the early 20th century, hunting and habitat loss reduced their population to a single, small group in India's Gir Forest. Today, the population has recovered from **fewer than 20 in 1893 to over 890 individuals (latest census)**. A great conservation success!!

Getting from Gir Forest NP in Gujarat State to **Tadoba NP in Maharashtra State**, the last leg of the trip, took a full day of traveling. We left at 02 AM in the morning to get a flight at 09 AM in Rajkot to Mumbai. There we had to wait (and work) for 5 hours and then we took the flight to Nagpur where we arrived at 19:00 hours. By car we drove to Tadoba Jungle Camp where we arrived at 23:00 hours. I did not feel well that day and during the night I did not sleep. The morning tea prior to the game drive at 05:00 AM helped a bit and took me through the day. I think my body was saying, 'take it easy and you need some rest'. After the morning game drive I took some hours of rest and that helped and I was oke.





My Big Cat Year – Visit to India for a diverse set of Wild Cat Species – 27/03/26 to 29/04/26

Tadoba NP is one of the more touristic Indian NP's focused on Tigers. It has a core area (625 sq. kms) and a buffer zone (1100 sq. kms). It works with sloth times, and it is all strictly managed. Mobile phones are forbidden since a year or two (Excellent!!) and you put in into a metal box and they close it off. In the core area, there is only one way traffic, so no gypsy's turning around, etc, etc. It works. Luckily, I was a bit outside of the season and there were not that many cars. We had one full day in the Core area and the next day in the Buffer zone. Especially, the Buffer zone I liked, still healthy forests and almost no cars.



Sightings in Tadoba NP were just excellent!! A naturalist called Pallavi from the Jungle Camp accompanied us and she was great, she loves Tigers!! The Tigers and their behaviour are well known so there is good chance of multiple sightings. **We managed to see 7**

individual Tigers, a family of 5 (male, female and 3 sub adult cubs which we saw a few times near a lake) and 2 individual tigers, one crossing the road and another one taking a cool bath in the Buffer zone in one the pools. In the Gallery section, a [photo and video selection is shown](#).





My Big Cat Year – Visit to India for a diverse set of Wild Cat Species – 27/03/26 to 29/04/26

We managed to find the crossing the road tiger on our own. Listening to the alarm calls of the Sambar and the Chital we knew it was nearby. We waited along the road, and three more cars joined us. We were all staring into the dense bush. Suddenly, I saw the movement and the colouring of a Tiger in the dense bush and I pointed it out. All cars were looking and when it came out of the bush, it was visible to everyone. Always nice when your spotting skills are confirmed once and a while, good for confidence!

The Tiger population in Tadoba has gone up from 19 in 2010 to probably just over 100 by now. The local community benefits, many people do have a job related to the park and the habitat and all its wildlife are good protected. An incredible successful story!



Other memorable sightings were a **Leopard on the road** which we could watch for over 5 minutes and a **Sloth bear walking over the road** towards us. With regard to the birds, it was nice to see the **white morph of the Indian Paradise-flycatcher** as we missed it earlier.





My Big Cat Year – Visit to India for a diverse set of Wild Cat Species – 27/03/26 to 29/04/26

After Tadoba, we drove to Nagpur again and took the flight to Delhi. There I said goodbye to **wildlife guide Nehal Gurung** from **Vana Safaris** who accompanied me for the last 30 days and led the whole trip. A great guy, very intelligent, experienced and a great travel companion! We covered great distances together, visited 6 different states, 13 different National Parks, many different habitats, observed 60 mammal and 370 bird species and met some great people among the way. Thanks Nehal for a great trip!!!

For more photo's and video's, please see the [Gallery section on the website](#).

For now, one full day of rest in Delhi to get some work done and the Big Cat Year continues to **Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, to the Altai Mountains**. For the **Snow Leopard**, hopefully the **Pallas Cat** and if we are very, very lucky the **Eurasian Lynx**. Also, some other interesting mammals, birds and especially some stunning landscapes.

The Big Cat Year is not just about spotting wild cats. It is also about habitat and wildlife conservation. The aim is to support a project/organization in every country visited, hence a considerable donation to the Hornbill Nest Adoption Program, see [Hornbill Nest Adoption Program](#)

Would you like to contribute to supporting these important projects and/or organizations in the world with regard to conservation and protection of nature and wildlife, please have a look at the [funding page, https://mybigcatyear.com/funding](https://mybigcatyear.com/funding). All help is appreciated! Big and small, it all counts. You can already help by buying the projects a coffee, <https://buymeacoffee.com/mybigcatyear>





My Big Cat Year – Visit to India for a diverse set of Wild Cat Species – 27/03/26 to 29/04/26

	Country	Seen	Jorhat and Kaziranga	Manas	Nameri and Eaglesnest	Dirang and Sela Pass	Kailadevi Wildlife Sanctuary	Bera	Desert National Park and Jaisalmer	Little Rahn of Kutch	Velavadar NP	Gir Forest	New Delhi and Tadoba
Mammal													
Sloth Bear	India	1	v				1x						1x
Asiatic Black Bear	India												
Leopard	India	1					1x(2)	2x	v	v			1x
Rusty-spotted Cat	India	1						1x	v				
Fishing Cat	India												
Jungle Cat	India	1	v				1x(2)			1x	11x	v	v
Indochinese Clouded Leopard	India			v									
Tiger	India	1	v	1x									3x (5-2-1)
Lion	India	1						v		v		4x (3-1-1-3)	
Marbled Cat	India			v									
Asian Golden Cat	India												
Caracal	India												
Leopard Cat	India				v								
Afro-asiatic Wild Cat	India	1					1x		1x			v	
Indian Chrevotain	India												
Small Indian Civet	India	1					3x	1x		v		v	
Common Palm Civet	India	1			3x1								1x dead
Masked Palm Civet	India	1			1x2								
Chital	India	1						v		v		v	v
Sambar	India	1	v	v				v		v		v	v
Barking Deer (Red Muntjac)	India	1		v	v								v
Hog Deer	India	1	v	v									
Barasingha	India	1	v	v									
Golden Jackal	India	1	v				> 30	v		1x(2)	1x		2x(2-1)
Gray Wolf	India	1					2x(3-4)			1x	1x	v	
Dhole	India												v
Red Fox	India	1							7x	4x(1-1-1-2)		v	
Indian Fox	India	1					> 15			2x		v	
Asian Elephant	India	1	v	v	v								
Indian Gerbil	India	1					1x						
Western Hoolock Gibbon	India	1	Family of 3										
Northern Palm Squirrel	India	1	v	v			v	v		v	v	v	v
Indian Hare	India	1		v			v	v	v	v	v	v	v
Indian Hedgehog	India	1							1x			v	
Long-eared Hedgehog	India	1							1x			v	
Gaur	India	1	v	3x(2-1-15)									8x(1-10-1-1-1-2-1)
Asian Wild Buffalo	India	1	v	v									
Nilgai	India	1					v		v	v	v	v	v
Blackbuck	India	1									v	v	
Gujarat Chinkara	India	1					v		v			v	
Asiatic Wild Ass	India	1								v		v	
Striped Hyena	India	1					4x	v		v	1x3+3x1	v	
Indian Gray Mongoose	India	1	v				3x	v		v		v	2x
Ruddy Mongoose	India	1							v	v		1x	3x
Small Indian Mongoose	India	1	v				1x						
Crab-eating Mongoose	India	1		1x									
Asian House Shrew	India	1								v			
Aruchanal Macaque	India	1			v	1x							
Assamese Macaque	India	1	1x										
Rhesus Macaque	India	1	v	v	v								v
Bengal Sacred Langur (Hanuman Langur)	India	1						v				v	v
Golden Langur	India	1		1x									
Capped Langur	India	1	v	v									
Eurasian Wild Pig	India	1	v	v			2x	v	v	v		v	v
Cutch rat	India	1								v			
Greater One-horned Rhinoceros	India	1	v	v									
Black Giant Squirrel	India	1		v	v								
Pallas's Squirrel	India	1			v								
Irrawaddy Squirrel	India	1	v	v	v								
Himalayan Striped Squirrel	India	1	v		v								
Yellow-throated Marten	India	1		1x	2x								
Smooth-coated Otter	India	1	1x10										
Indian Flying fox	India	1	1x										
Greater Mouse-tail Bat	India	1					1x						
Indian Hairy-footed Gerbill	India	1					1x						
Indian Desert Jird	India	1					1x						
Dromedary Camel	India	1							v				
Lesser Short Nosed Fruit bat (likely)	India	1											v

