

Vana Safaris & Naturalist Journeys Big Cats of India - Expedition 2026

Dates: 9 March - 1 April 2026

Agency: VANA SAFARIS PVT LTD

Tour Leader: Saurabh Sawant & Peg (Margaret) Abbott

Text & Images: Saurabh Sawant; Ladakh mountain range from flight - © Nancy



Introduction

In 2025 - Avijit (Avi) Sarkhel and Margaret (Peg) Abbott developed this itinerary for Naturalist Journeys based in Arizona, USA. The first edition was led by Tina Greenawalt and Avi himself and was an instant hit with all four Big Cats of India sighted well along with three small cats - Eurasian Lynx, Pallas' Cat and the Jungle Cat. That apart a no of interesting canids and ungulates and a no of interesting birds and a few reptiles made the trip a great experience for the 9 people who signed up for the first edition. In 2026 we returned with the same itinerary and this time Saurabh Sawant and Margaret (Peg) Abbott led the tour. The report below highlights the tour and the amazing experiences it offers.

Trip Diary

From the tiger forests of Central India and lion country in Gujarat to the snowbound mountains of Ladakh and the windswept cold deserts of Hanle, the 2026 Big Cats of India expedition was an ambitious traverse across some of India's most iconic predator landscapes.

Over the course of nearly a month, our group journeyed through a remarkable diversity of habitats in search of some of Asia's most charismatic and elusive felids—Tiger, Asiatic Lion, Snow Leopard, and Pallas's Cat—while also experiencing the ecological richness, landscapes, and supporting wildlife that make each of these ecosystems unique.

This was an especially memorable group to lead. Comprising a wonderfully accomplished and widely travelled set of guests—including doctors, educators, writers, professors, engineers, and more—every participant had visited all seven continents, a first even for Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys, who has led and organised tours around the globe for many years. Many in the group had travelled together before, bringing with them an easy camaraderie that made the journey all the more enjoyable. In total, eleven of us set out, united by a shared passion for wildlife and high expectations—not only for the big cats, but also for smaller felids, birds, dholes, bears, and every wild surprise in between.

The Expedition Begins - Delhi to Tadoba



Our group assembled in Delhi on the evening of 9 March, where introductions, a welcome dinner, and the first expedition briefing set the tone for the journey ahead.



The following morning, we boarded an early flight to Nagpur before continuing overland to Tadoba Tiger Reserve—our first major wilderness destination.

Tadoba, one of India's premier tiger reserves, is renowned for its high tiger density, excellent visibility, and thriving dry deciduous forest ecosystem. Dominated by bamboo brakes, teak forests, and perennial water bodies, it remains one of the finest places in India to observe wild tigers in a truly natural setting.



And Tadoba wasted absolutely no time.

Our very first safari itself delivered an extraordinary start to the expedition as we encountered the famed tigress Junabai with her four playful cubs. The family remained visible long enough for everyone to absorb the moment fully—watching the cubs tumble, play, and interact around their mother in what was for many an emotional and unforgettable first tiger sighting.



Over the course of our Tadoba stay, the reserve exceeded even our high expectations. Across our safaris, we collectively recorded approximately sixteen tiger sightings, including multiple males, females, subadults, and one particularly remarkable scene involving three tigers sharing an old gaur kill. Watching the tension, hierarchy, and subtle interactions as they took turns feeding was one of the most dramatic wildlife moments of the trip.

The reserve continued to produce at an exceptional level. We enjoyed prolonged sightings of dholes, a sloth bear digging vigorously before eventually cooling itself in a muddy waterhole, and an excellent leopard sighting in fading light on our very first evening safari. Many of the tiger encounters were breathtakingly close, with individuals



walking unconcerned past our vehicles, leaving several guests momentarily speechless.



Beyond the big cats, Tadoba's rich supporting cast added to the experience—langurs, crocodiles, abundant deer and gaur, and excellent birdlife throughout the reserve



and lodge grounds. Much of the thrill lay not just in the sightings themselves, but in the process: listening to alarm calls, tracking fresh signs, and slowly piecing together the movements of predators through the forest.

Our lodge stay complemented the experience beautifully. Evenings were spent sharing stories over dinner, reviewing photographs, watching wildlife documentaries, and reliving

the day's sightings. For many in the group, Tadoba had already surpassed expectations—and the expedition was only just beginning.

As always, Tadoba did not disappoint.

Across the Grasslands - Velavadar

Leaving the forests of Central India behind, we flew westward into Gujarat and entered a completely different ecosystem—Velavadar Blackbuck National Park.

Velavadar protects one of India's last remaining native grassland ecosystems—among the country's most threatened and least appreciated habitats. Though reduced drastically from their historic extent, these grasslands remain extraordinarily productive and support a specialised suite of wildlife found nowhere else.



Even before entering the park, the shift in atmosphere was immediately evident. Blackbuck were visible right from the lodge grounds, and the beautiful setting of

Blackbuck Lodge offered one of the most scenic stays of the expedition.

Our time in Velavadar produced excellent birding and mammal sightings alike. The surrounding wetlands and grasslands teemed with waterbirds, raptors, and grassland specialists, while roadside agricultural fields even produced a fine pair of Sarus Cranes en route—always a special sight.



Large herds of blackbuck animated the plains, and our safaris yielded multiple excellent views of Indian wolves and striped hyena. The skies above were filled with harriers and raptors, much to the delight of the birders in the group, with Indian Spotted Eagles and Greater Spotted Eagles proving particular favourites.

A Short-eared Owl gave us a memorable evening performance after lifting from its roost in beautiful light.



Yet perhaps the true showstopper of Velavadar came in the form of a Jungle Cat. After considerable searching and patient waiting, we were rewarded with thrilling close views as the cat emerged and walked boldly in front of us, actively hunting through the grasslands. For many, it was one of the most exciting and unexpected sightings of the entire expedition.



Land of the Asiatic Lion - Gir

From grasslands, the expedition continued deeper into Gujarat toward the dry teak and scrub forests of Gir National Park—the final refuge of the Asiatic Lion.

Gir stands as one of the world's great conservation success stories, safeguarding the only remaining wild population of Asiatic Lions, a subspecies once widespread across much of Southwest Asia. Today, through decades of protection and coexistence with local communities,



the lion population has rebounded dramatically and expanded across the wider Saurashtra landscape.

And true to its reputation—if not here, then where?



Our Gir safaris delivered lion sightings to the brim. We encountered multiple prides and family groups across different sectors of the reserve, including females with cubs of various ages, subadults, and impressive adult males. We witnessed beautiful social



interactions, playful cub behaviour, territorial displays, and prolonged resting observations that allowed us to appreciate the lions' behaviour in detail.

For those who had previously seen lions in Africa, Gir offered a fascinating contrast. The lions here felt different—slightly smaller and more lightly built, adapted to a scrub-forest landscape rather than open savannah, and often exhibiting more secretive, forest-oriented behaviour. Observing lions threading through teak forest and dry riverbeds rather



than open plains made for a uniquely Indian lion experience.

Gir also produced excellent leopard sightings for some who had missed the species in Tadoba, much to their relief. Birding continued to be rewarding, with notable additions including Mottled Wood Owl and Indian Scops Owl, both highly appreciated by the group.

One morning, we also took a riverside walk that added several bird species to our lists and offered a refreshing slower-paced interlude amidst the safari

schedule.

Equally striking was the human dimension of Gir. Throughout the landscape, lions live in close proximity to farms, villages, and Maldhari pastoralist settlements—a remarkable coexistence story that remains one of the defining characteristics of this ecosystem.



From Plains to Peaks - Arrival in Ladakh



After the heat and dust of western India, the expedition shifted dramatically northward into the Himalaya. Following a brief overnight stop in Delhi to rest, reorganise baggage, and prepare for the cold, we flew into Leh and entered the stark, high-altitude world of Ladakh.

Often called the “Land of High Passes,” Ladakh is one of the most visually dramatic and climatically extreme regions of the Indian subcontinent—a cold desert of immense valleys, barren mountains, frozen rivers, and snow-clad peaks. Despite its harshness, this landscape supports some of Asia’s most iconic mountain wildlife.

Having briefed the group extensively on acute mountain sickness and acclimatisation protocols throughout the journey, I was pleased that everyone adapted exceptionally well to the altitude. With acclimatisation progressing smoothly, we even managed some local exploration and shopping in Leh before moving deeper into snow leopard country.

Tracking the Ghost of the Mountains - Ulley Valley

The focus of our Ladakh leg centred on the legendary Snow Leopard.

Our base for this phase was the celebrated village of Ulley, one of India’s best-known snow leopard landscapes and home to the excellent local conservation-and-tourism initiative led by Norbu and the team at Shan at Uley.



Snow leopard tracking in Ladakh is unlike any other wildlife experience. It is a process built on patience, teamwork, and local knowledge—where community spotters stationed

across valleys communicate sightings and movements in real time, often turning what would seem an impossible search into a remarkably coordinated effort.

We also had the privilege of visiting Norbu's family home, learning more about local Ladakhi life, hearing the story of how community conservation transformed the valley, and sharing traditional chang with the family—an experience that added valuable cultural depth to the wildlife journey.

The snow leopard action began almost immediately.



After a successful acclimatisation phase, we decided to venture to Saspochey—and on just our second day in Ladakh we struck gold. We had initially gone in search of a known leopard that had just moved off, but moments later a yowl rang through the valley. To our amazement, we were greeted by not one but two snow leopards—a mating pair—who proceeded to put on an extraordinary show. Watching a pair interact in such dramatic mountain scenery was a truly special experience and an exceptional early reward.



As weather deteriorated, we moved strategically between valleys over the following days and were rewarded repeatedly with further snow leopard sightings across multiple sectors.

Our time in the Ulley landscape also produced superb supporting wildlife—excellent wolf sightings, including one spectacular early morning encounter while scanning from the lodge deck over coffee, plus Himalayan Ibex, Bharal, Urial, Golden Eagles, Himalayan

Snowcock, and Red Fox.



One especially memorable scene involved a Red Fox attempting to sneak toward a snow leopard kill while the leopard remained watchful nearby, though no confrontation ensued.

Another unexpected delight was the constant presence of Black-billed Magpies, whose noisy quarrels around resting snow leopards often betrayed the cats' locations. Their antics quickly made them a group favourite—our unofficial leopard finders.

Despite concerns about relatively poor snowfall and challenging weather conditions this season, Ladakh delivered beyond expectation. Remarkably, everyone handled the altitude and physical conditions exceptionally well, and morale remained high throughout.

Eventually, the time came for part of the group to return home, departing for Delhi with full hearts, tired legs, and extraordinary memories.

Into the Cold Desert - Hanle & the Search for Pallas's Cat

(Extension)



For five of us continuing onward, the expedition was not yet over.

After farewelling the departing group, we spent one final relaxed day in Leh birding locally, visiting Thiksey Monastery, enjoying a café lunch, shopping, and adding species such as Ibisbill, pipits, redstarts, and other local specialties.

Then came the final challenge: the search for Pallas's Cat in the remote high-altitude plains of Hanle.



Hanle and the broader Changthang Plateau represent one of India's most remote and



extreme wildlife landscapes—a vast cold desert of rolling plains, barren ridges, and endless wind-swept horizons perched above 14,000 feet. Reaching Hanle requires a long

and spectacular drive across one of the highest inhabited plateaus on Earth.



The journey itself produced excellent wildlife: wolf sightings, Bharal, our first Kiang of the trip, Black-necked Cranes, Wallcreeper, dippers, Lammergeier, and Upland Buzzards among many others.

The following morning, our persistence paid off.



We located our first Pallas's Cat—initially distant but eventually close enough for prolonged and satisfying views as it moved through the terrain, displaying its characteristic hunting behaviour. The grumpy-faced little predator instantly won everyone over.



More Pallas's Cat sightings followed over the next days, making for an extraordinarily successful extension.

Additional highlights included Tibetan Gazelles, pikas, Blanford's Snowfinch, Hume's Ground Tit, spectacular raptors, and the surreal beauty of the Changthang landscape itself.

Though conditions were windy, weather overall remained favourable, allowing for comfortable scanning and productive search effort throughout.

An Improvised Finale - Return to Rumbak

With the extension progressing so well, we made an impromptu decision to leave Hanle a day early and return via Rumbak to attempt one final snow leopard search and experience another valley of Hemis National Park. But on the way we did not lose the opportunity to scan and try our luck one final time for the Tibetan Sand Fox. And, alas! We got one the very last moment we were to leave its home. Although distant we saw it pretty well through scope for some time wandering about.

The spontaneous change proved a fitting final adventure—adding one more beautiful valley, one more mountain landscape, and one last flourish to an already unforgettable expedition.



Closing Reflections

As the expedition concluded and everyone eventually dispersed homeward, it was clear that this journey had delivered far more than a checklist of cats.

Over the course of several weeks, we had traversed forests, grasslands, scrublands, mountains, and cold deserts—witnessing not only India’s extraordinary predator diversity, but also the ecological and cultural richness of the landscapes that sustain them.

From playful tiger cubs in Tadoba and wolves on the grasslands of Velavadar to mating snow leopards in Ladakh and hunting Pallas’s Cats in Hanle, the expedition consistently exceeded expectations and delivered moments few wildlife enthusiasts ever get to experience in a single journey.

Perhaps most importantly, the trip was made special by the people who shared it—an exceptional group whose enthusiasm, patience, curiosity, humour, and camaraderie elevated every sighting and every challenge.

It was, in every sense, a journey to remember.

Mammal Checklist

Common Name	Scientific Name	Other Common Names	IUCN Status
Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	Rhesus Monkey	LC
Bengal Sacred Langur	<i>Semnopithecus entellus</i>	Bengal Gray Langur, Bengal Hanuman Langur, Common Langur, Entellus Langur, Hanuman Langur, North Indian Langur, Northern Plains Gray Langur	LC
Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	Black-napped Hare, Indian Desert Hare, Rufous-tailed Hare	LC
Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>		LC
Plateau Pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>	Black-lipped Pika	LC
Ladak Pika	<i>Ochotona ladacensis</i>		LC
Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	Common Palm Squirrel, Three-striped Palm Squirrel	LC
Northern Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennantii</i>	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	LC
Silver Mountain Vole	<i>Alticola argentatus</i>		LC
Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>	Honey Bear, Lip Bear	VU
Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	Asiatic Jackal, Common Jackal	LC
Gray Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Wolf, Timber Wolf, Tundra Wolf, Arctic Wolf	LC
Dhole	<i>Cuon alpinus</i>	Asiatic Wild Dog	EN
Indian Fox	<i>Vulpes bengalensis</i>	Bengal Fox	LC
Tibetan Fox	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>	Sand Fox, Tibetan Sand Fox	LC
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Silver Fox, Cross Fox	LC
Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>	Swamp Cat, Reed Cat	LC
Pallas's Cat	<i>Otocolobus manul</i>	Manul, Steppe Cat	LC
Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>		VU
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	Panther	VU
Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>		EN
Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Ounce	VU
Small Indian Mongoose	<i>Urva auropunctata</i>		LC
Indian Gray Mongoose	<i>Urva edwardsii</i>		LC
Striped Hyena	<i>Hyaena hyaena</i>		NT
Northern Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	Common Palm Civet	LC
Kiang	<i>Equus kiang</i>	Tibetan Wild Ass, Eastern Kiang, Southern Kiang, Western Kiang	LC
Blackbuck	<i>Antilope cervicapra</i>	Indian Antelope	LC

Tibetan Gazelle	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>	Goa	NT
Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>	Asiatic Ibex, Himalayan Ibex	NT
Urial	<i>Ovis vignei</i>	Shapo, Arkars, Shapu, Ladakh Urial, Transcaspian Urial, Blandford's Urial, Baluchistan Urial, Bukhara Urial, Afghan Urial, Turkmenian Sheep, Punjab Urial	VU
Blue Sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>	Bharal, Chinese Blue Sheep, Himalayan Blue Sheep, Tibetan Blue Sheep, Greater Blue Sheep, Lesser Blue Sheep, Dwarf Bharal, Sichuan Blue Sheep	LC
Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	Blue Bull, Bluebuck, White-footed Antelope	LC
Gaur	<i>Bos gaurus</i>	Indian Bison, Guar	VU
Chital	<i>Axis axis</i>	Axis Deer, Indian Spotted Deer	LC
Sambar	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>		VU
Eurasian Wild Pig	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Wild Boar, Indochinese Pig, Indonesian Banded Pig	LC

Bird Checklist

Main Trip Report: Tadoba, Velavadar, Gir, Ladakh

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/486981>

Extension Trip Report: Ladakh Extension Leh & Hanle

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/512131>