

## **From Kaziranga to Bhutan: crossing without a “COW walk”**

For many globetrotting mammal watchers crossing an international border is not an on-the-ground experience. Typically, it happens in homogenized international airports and features a forced march through a gauntlet of duty-free shops; for example, where Swarovski promotes their diamonds, but not binoculars. I have come to call this the COW walk, as in Conspicuous, Obscene Wealth.

In this report I briefly describe a March-April 2026 trip that linked Kaziranga National Park in India and the nation of Bhutan using a border crossing that had no COW walk. If the overall arc of the trip—flying into Guwathi, India and driving across most of Bhutan to Paro and a flight out—might appeal to you, then read on. For detailed reports on either Bhutan or Kaziranga you will find more information in other Mammal Watching reports such as those from [Mike Hoit](#) or [Flemming Versloot](#). The “we” referenced below is sometimes my wife, Aram Calhoun, and me, but usually includes our companions on this trip, Sally Stockwell (who had never visited Asia before) and Judy Blake (who like us, had not been to eastern India or Bhutan).

### **Kaziranga National Park**

Guwathi can be reached from many airports (notably Delhi, Bangkok, Singapore) and a new airport terminal is almost finished, featuring life-size statues of one-horned rhinoceros. Our 5-hour drive to Kaziranga NP included 20 minutes for a side trip to the city dump and a view of greater adjutant storks (google them for an inspiring conservation story). Most of the drive is on a divided highway and feels quite safe although the last 40 kilometers along the edge of the park is barely two lanes and filled with trucks, buses, and cows. After half a world of travel the Infinity Eco-resort was a quiet oasis where we were happy to spend four nights. It is a mid-level resort and we were very happy with food, accommodations, and our six guided safaris.

Visiting Kaziranga is all about the four entrances so this report is structured around the three that we visited.

**The Western Range** has superb opportunities for viewing **one-horned rhinos**, dozens of them at close range, grazing on “rhino lawns.” This may be the best rhino watching anywhere in the world, especially if one of your metrics is number of rhinos seen per rupee or dollar expenditure.

**The Central Range** seems to be the epicenter of tiger-seeking with vehicles staking out key points with long sight-lines. Our **tiger** experience was typical in some ways, extraordinary in others. We were at the far end of the out-and-back road when our guide got a phone call that “the golden tiger” had been spotted. We raced back as fast as feasible; <30 kph given that the roads are quite rough, perhaps deliberately so to limit speeds. We arrived at a riverside where

five vehicles were gathered and everyone was pointing to the southern shore about 300 m away where a large male tiger with very faint stripes was walking down to the river. During the time it took to swim across the river at least 20 more vehicles arrived and lined up along the road. He emerged and turned toward the road, walking slowly (limping a bit) toward us, mostly in view, and ultimately passed through the line of vehicles then off into high grass. We had enjoyed about 20 minutes of memorable tiger watching; more than the collective duration of about a dozen previous tiger encounters for me. Sharing it with over 150 other people was less than ideal from a selfish perspective, but all those people went away very happy ecotourists, and that is a good thing.



All of our **wild elephant** sightings took place in the Central Range, plus a few “whoops” when domestic elephants were seen to be sporting chain bracelets. And our only **barking deer** (aka **southern red muntjac**) was seen here.

**The Eastern Range** was our favorite in large part because we shared it with just 12 and 2 other vehicles during our two visits. It also helped that our main target species for Kaziranga was **wild buffalo** and we saw hundreds of them here. The **hog deer** were even more abundant and with a few dozen rhinos and **barashinga (swamp deer)** for frosting, this was an amazing display of mammalian biomass. In our experience, surpassed only by migratory herds of wildebeest and caribou.

Four of our five sightings of **smooth coated otter** occurred here and one will linger in our memories: an otter dragging a huge fish, roughly 3/4s of its own length, about 300 m across the riverside grasslands to the river channel. It was attacked by a Pallas’s fish eagle but avoided losing its fish by slipping into a hyacinth-covered pool. For the rest of its journey it kept stopping to stand up and monitor the eagle. Presumably all this hard work was motivated by a den full of pups awaiting their lunch. And as an extra bonus, the dead fish proved to be an Indian

knifefish, from a family of fishes we had never seen, so a nice tick in our goal to see the world's vertebrate families.

## **The Crossing**

Some of my on-the-ground border crossings have been very memorable (e.g., coming down the Khyber Pass on the roof of a truck, enroute from Afghanistan to Pakistan in 1975), but the majority are very routine because we live near the Maine-Canada border and cross dozens of times per year. I will long remember crossing from India to Bhutan where the incomparable Indian bureaucracy required detailed passport inspection at three sites (e.g., at one they handwrote our details into a ledger) and a huge truck was stalled, blocking the narrow street between the 1st and 2nd station. Fortunately, we were the only foreigners exiting India and all this took less than an hour. In contrast, getting into Bhutan was actually a pleasure, mainly because we spent the minutes reading the inspiring words that capture Bhutan's perspective on the four pillars of national happiness: environmental conservation, sustainable development, cultural preservation, and good governance.

In my experience, most land borders are gray transitions with lots of culture spilling over. The divide between Bhutan and India is the sharpest I have experienced. As our guide, Hishey Tsering, said: "Relax, you are in Bhutan now. Everything is peaceful." And he was right; we were soon walking through an attractive town admiring the striking Bhutanese architecture, often strolling down the middle of the street for lack of traffic, exchanging smiles with the local pedestrians.

## **Bhutan**

You have probably heard that Bhutan is a very special place: spectacular scenery, fascinating culture, very comfortable lodgings for tourists, a diverse fauna and flora, and more. It **really is** a wonderful place. In particular, for a country of about 38,000 square kilometers (a bit smaller than the Netherlands or Switzerland), the number of "A-list" mammals is very impressive, from tigers and elephants to snow leopards and takins and much, much more. However, as explained by previous Mammal Watching reports, actually seeing this menagerie is a different matter. Having studied the reports we visited with both reasonable expectations and super-optimistic dreams. The reasonable expectations were:

**Bhutan giant squirrel**, which we found in Phrumshingla National Park. We found only one individual and no other species despite having two night excursions with a thermoscope and two strong spotlights.

**Golden langur:** We found about a dozen next to the road and at eye level about 2 km south of Trongsa on the road to Gelephu.



Our super optimistic dreams were to see representatives of two new mammal families: specifically, Himalayan musk deer and spotted linsang. Hishey (owner of Bhutan Birding and Heritage Tours; who has been a guide and professional conservationist for three decades) was not encouraging—he has had only four sightings of Himalayan musk deer and one of a captured linsang.

We did have daily sightings of mammals in almost all locations but they were dominated by squirrels and monkeys: **Assamese macaque, capped langur, Himalayan striped squirrel, hoary-bellied squirrel, black giant squirrel, and orange-bellied squirrel.** The adrenalin was pumping for three excellent views of **yellow-throated martens.** And our most numerous views were of abundant pikas during two trips to Pele La, one of the main highway's major passes, presumably the recently described **Sikkim pika.** We also had two sightings of **gaurs,** but judging by their nonchalant behavior they were apparently tame and kept for breeding with cattle to produce the gaur-cattle hybrid called mithun or gayal, although we saw nothing that matched the on-line photos of these.

To spare the sensitivities of the ornithophobic among us I will not dwell on the birds. But for those of you, like us, with divided loyalties, suffice it to say that the parade of tragopans, trogons, hornbills, and far more was breathtaking.

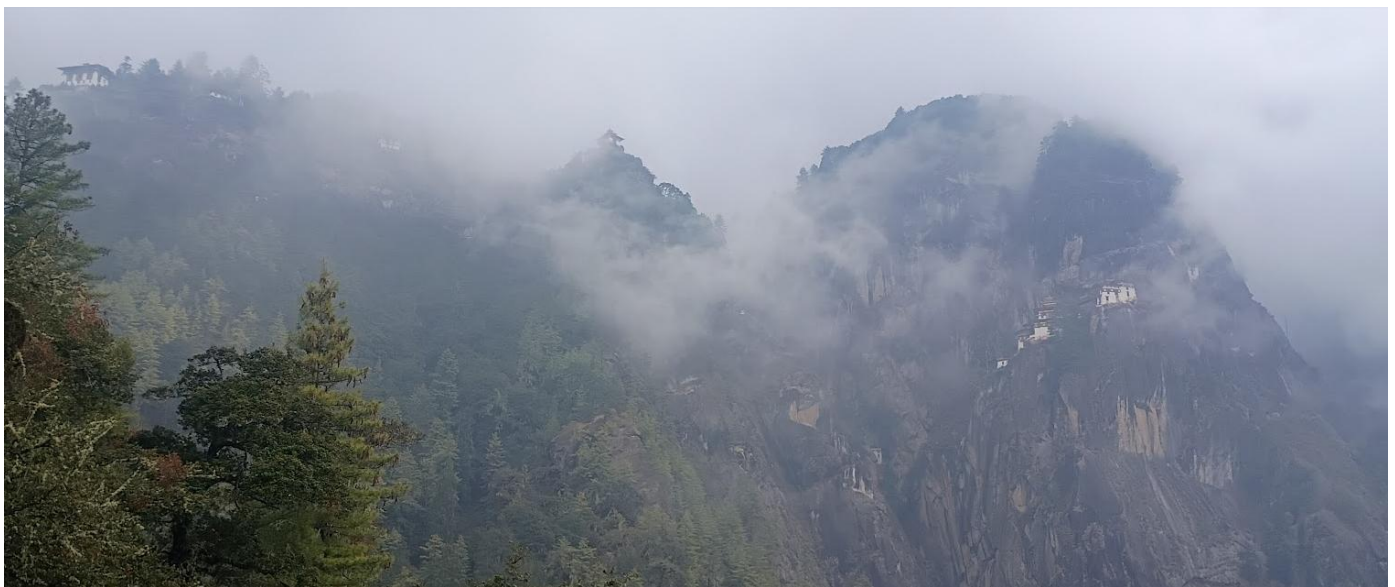
A typical day had us driving for 3-5 hours and spending a similar amount of time walking along the highway, scanning for critters. It is hard to imagine a national artery where rush hour traffic

was a dozen vehicles passing in 15 minutes, one vehicle per 5-15 minutes passed at most times, and none at all when we were out at night. Traffic increased as we traveled west but was always modest. Simply put, our route mostly followed the national highway from east to west, from Samdrup Jongkhar to Paro; for details see the itinerary below.

Bhutan has a reputation for being expensive but our daily Sustainable Development Fee was “only” \$100/day, bringing our total cost to \$300/person/day. This seemed very reasonable given the quality of our tour: superior service from three people (Hishey, Pala, and Khandu) who were amazingly attentive to our needs; a 20-passenger bus; and superior accommodations.

We thought Bhutan had some of the most beautiful forests we have ever seen; steep hillsides of many hues. It helped that our visit fell near the height of deciduous trees growing their spring foliage. Early April is on the early side of the spring peak of tourism. Our weather was quite cloudy—no views of the Himalayan peaks—but we were rarely inconvenienced by rain.

Lastly, I would mention that Bhutan would be good place to share a trip with a spouse who leans toward cultural diversity. We passed many splendid examples of Tibetan dzongs and thoroughly enjoyed a few afternoons focused on Bhutanese culture and history. And the culture of Bhutan is always with you because the people are so warm and hospitable, from our fabulous guides and driver to every shopkeeper and porter. The wonderful Bhutanese architecture is also omnipresent, persisting right into the international airport, where even the ubiquitous COW walk described above is a thin shadow of its usual prominence. In short, for us Bhutan exceeded its marvelous reputation.



## Daily itinerary:

- 26-Mar Fly Boston – Istanbul
- 27-Mar Arrive Istanbul and overnight
- 28-Mar Fly to Delhi
- 29-Mar Arrive Delhi, then fly to Gauwathi & drive to Kaziranga, Infinity Lodge
- 30-Mar Kaziranga
- 31-Mar Kaziranga
- 1-Apr Kaziranga
- 2-Apr Drive from Kaziranga to Samdrup Jongkhar
- 3-Apr Trek to Tragopan Mt o/n camping
- 4-Apr Tragopan Mt o/n camping
- 5-Apr Tragopan Mt hike out, drive to Trashingang
- 6-Apr Drive to Yongkhola o/n Trogon Lodge
- 7-Apr Trogon Lodge
- 8-Apr Trogon Lodge
- 9-Apr Drive to near Trongsa 
- 10-Apr Drive to Phobjikha over Pele La o/n Phobjikha
- 11-Apr Hike around the Phobjikha valley. o/n Phobjikha
- 12-Apr Return to Pele La then drive to Punakha with visit Dzong; o/n Punakha
- 13-Apr Drive downriver for white-bellied heron o/n Punakha
- 14-Apr Drive to Paro o/n Paro
- 15-Apr Hike to Tiger's Nest monastery o/n Paro
- 16-Apr Depart Bhutan to Delhi o/n Delhi
- 17-Apr Fly Delhi to Boston