

Asian Odyssey

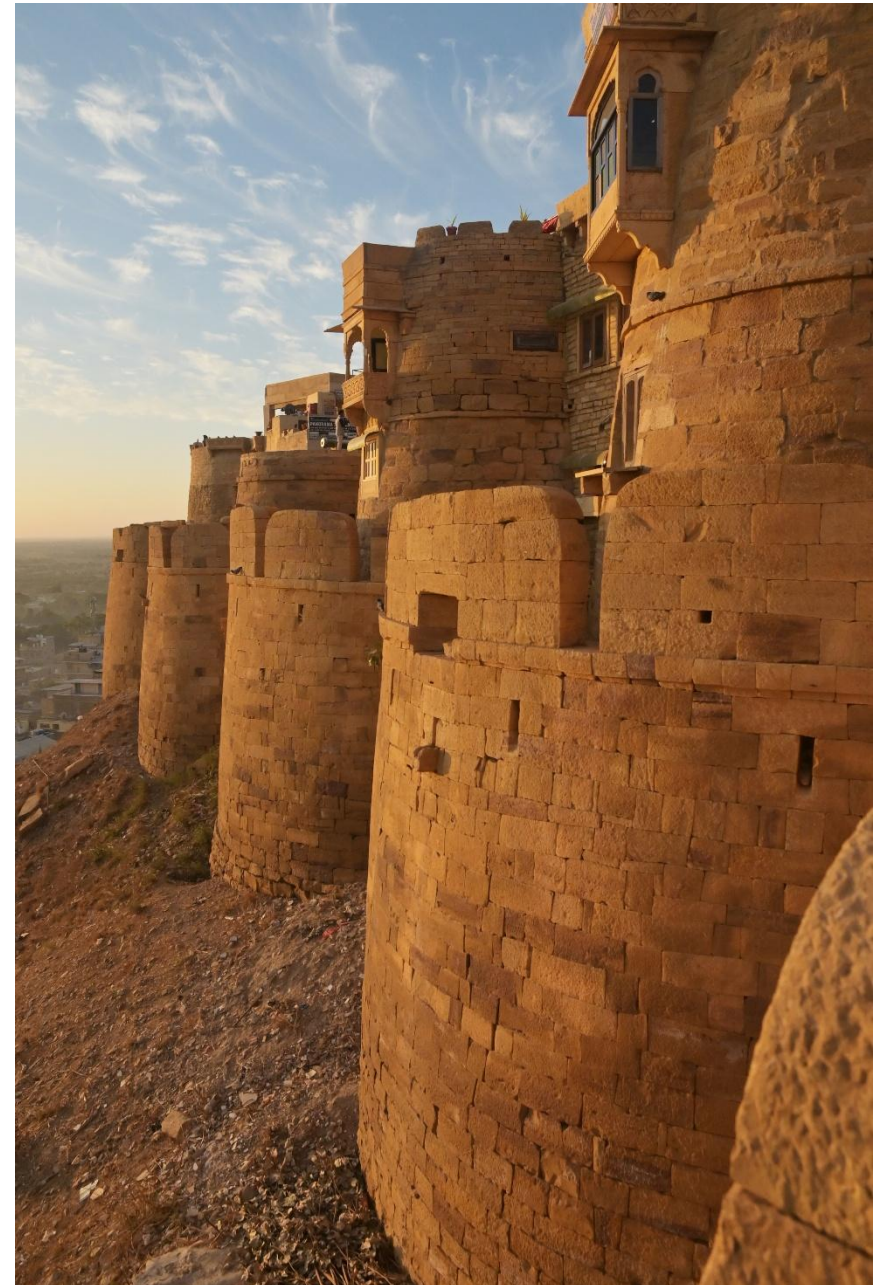
A naturalist's journey across the Himalayas, the Western Ghats, Borneo and Wallacea - by train, scooter, boat and trail

Wildlife trip report · December 2024 to July 2025 · India · Malaysia · Indonesia

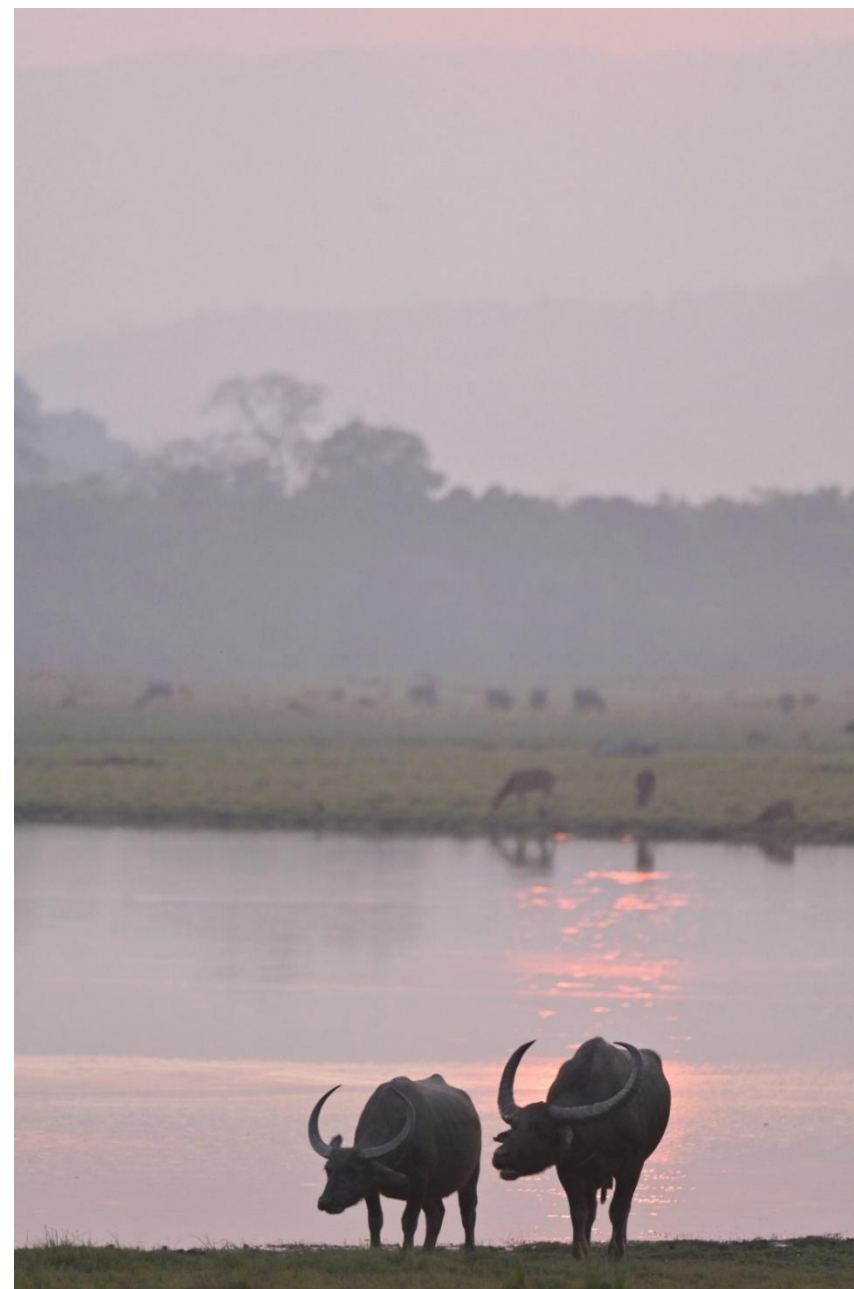


Antoine Rabussier

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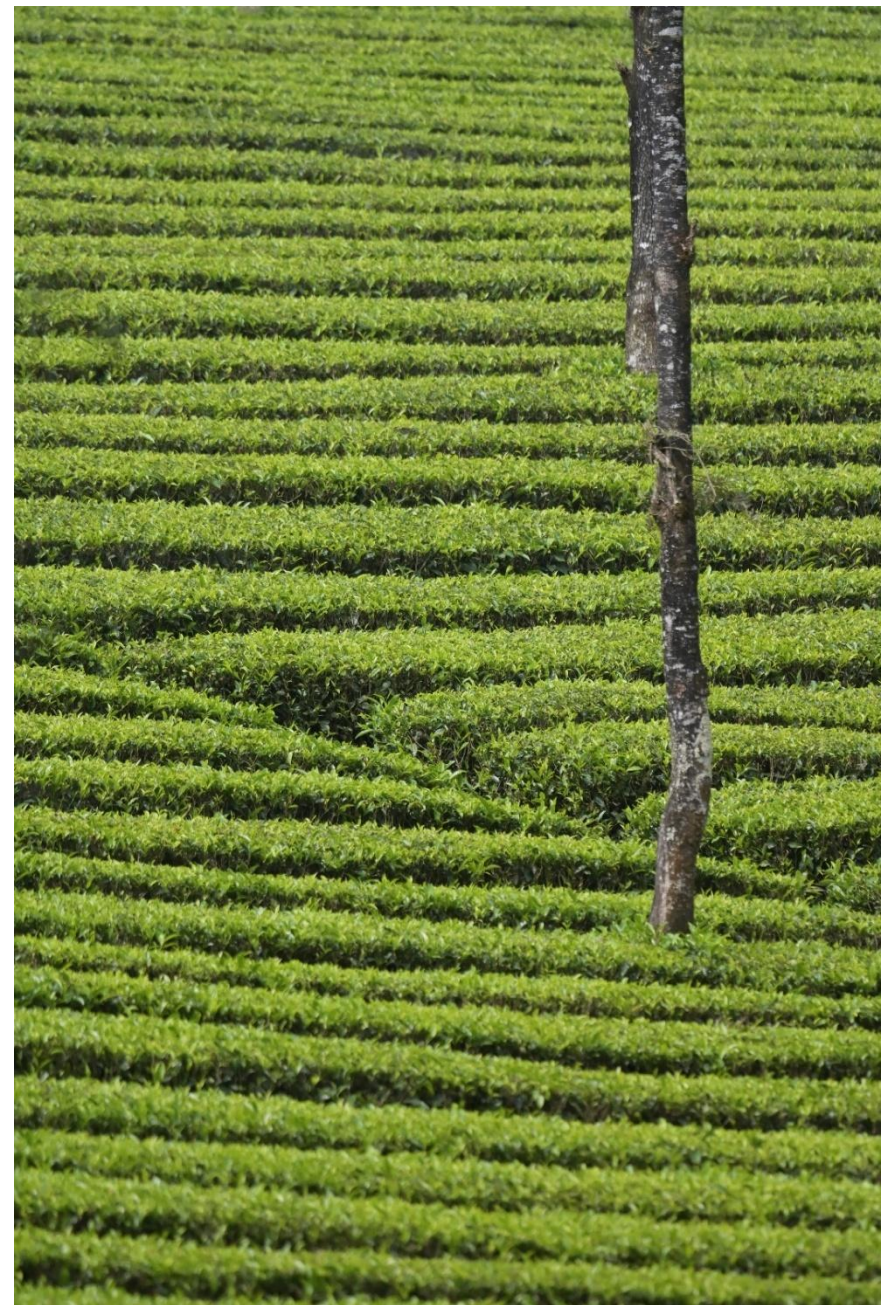
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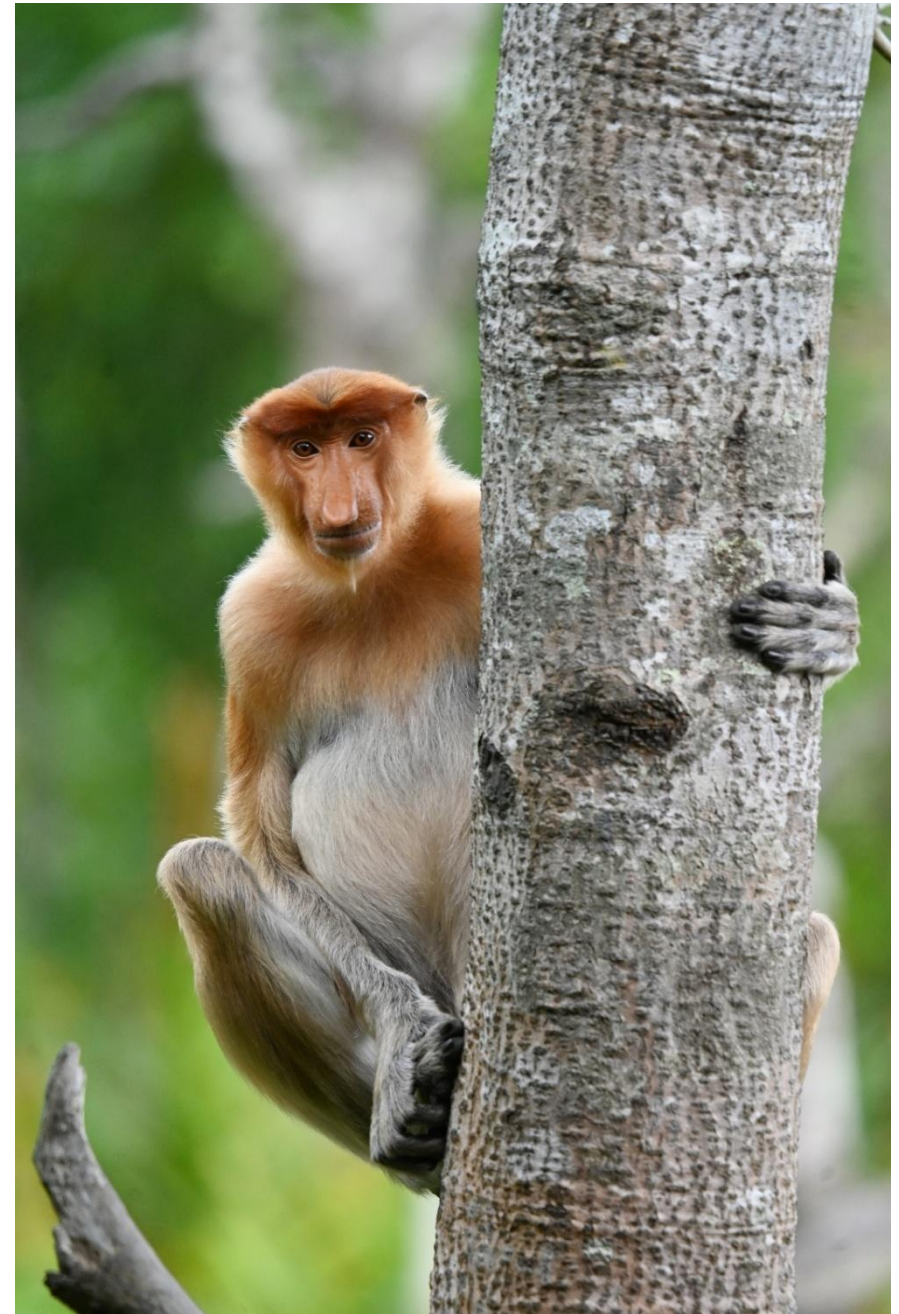
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1. Introduction

Travelling for several consecutive months to explore a continent had long been a dream of mine, and a way to keep exploring in a more responsible manner by avoiding several intercontinental flights and it didn't take much to get my partner on board with the adventure. Since she is Brazilian and we regularly return to Latin America, I was keen to explore another continent. Africa felt difficult to approach as a backpacker, whereas Asia, which I had never visited, offered many options.

While flipping through a book borrowed from the library listing all UNESCO World Heritage sites, I was struck by the number and splendour of sites in India. The idea took root, and the more I thought about it, the more India seemed to offer everything we were looking for: exotic, spiritually very different from what we were used to, as rich culturally as it is in wildlife-viewing opportunities, not overly touristy, with a strong vegetarian culinary tradition, a great diversity of landscapes, and the ease of getting around by public transport—especially by train. It was decided: we would devote nearly five months to India.

Jonas Livet, a friend who is both a zoo enthusiast and a wildlife watcher, also began talking to me about Borneo. Together with his wife Ruta, they really wanted to see wild orangutans. Borneo had long been on my bucket list, but it is relatively expensive and hard to justify for travellers who are not especially interested in wildlife. This was my chance to travel with like-minded companions and share the fixed costs over a few intense days.

Finally, I hesitated between two destinations to complete the trip. The prospect of visiting Angkor and observing the threatened and endemic wildlife of Vietnam and Cambodia was very appealing. However, the period from May to July was not ideal, and I had the impression of some redundancy with India—forests, mountains, temples, and busy cities. I eventually opted for Indonesia instead: it would be the dry season, and the country offered a very different set of landscapes, with its volcanic islands and idyllic beaches.

Four and a half months in India and two months in Indonesia may sound like plenty of time to travel widely and observe many species. However, these are vast countries with complex geography, requiring much more time to explore in depth. Three key important caveats need to be considered:

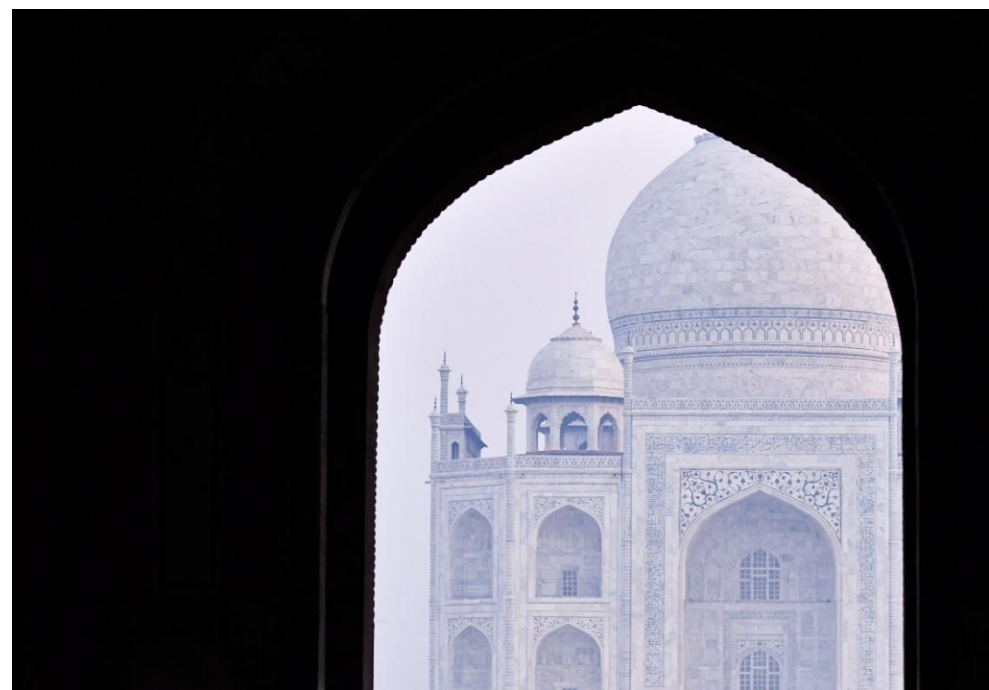
- This was not a trip solely focused on wildlife; cultural aspects were equally important, and my partner is not a specialist. Even so, she put up with a great deal because of my passion, for which I am very grateful.
- Over several weeks away from home, both curiosity and endurance are put to the test. Early mornings and repeated night outings are exhausting, especially when wildlife observation is not the sole purpose of the trip.
- Travelling for several months also means keeping costs down and therefore doing without guides or agencies for extended periods (with a few exceptions), private transfers, and domestic flights (also for obvious environmental reasons).

I do not consider myself a hardcore mammalwatcher or a list-focused birder; I try to photograph the species I encounter whenever possible. I do not make dedicated efforts to search for micro-mammals or bats. Since one must sleep at some point, the time allocated to night outings were (except in Borneo) very limited. A mammal-focused observer equipped with a thermal camera would certainly see far more than I did.

In India, it is also quite difficult to go out at night to observe wildlife. Even if it is not strictly forbidden, you will often be prevented from going out alone at night for safety reasons—sometimes justified, often exaggerated.

1.1. Overall itinerary

Start date	End date	Main section
21/12/2024	26/12/2024	Uttarakhand
27/12/2024	16/01/2025	Rajasthan
18/01/2025	31/01/2025	Assam and Meghalaya
01/02/2025	16/02/2025	Sikkim and West Bengal Himalayas
16/02/2025	24/02/2025	Varanasi, Khajuraho and Central India
25/02/2025	11/03/2025	Rajasthan revisits
15/03/2025	25/03/2025	Ladakh
25/03/2025	25/04/2025	Southern India
26/04/2025	11/05/2025	Malaysia - Sabah
11/05/2025	14/05/2025	Malaysia - Peninsular
15/05/2025	24/05/2025	Bali
25/05/2025	04/06/2025	Eastern Java
05/06/2025	09/06/2025	Sulawesi
10/06/2025	15/06/2025	Karimunjawa and Bromo
16/06/2025	01/07/2025	Flores and Komodo
01/07/2025	05/07/2025	Western Java and departure



1.2. Report structure

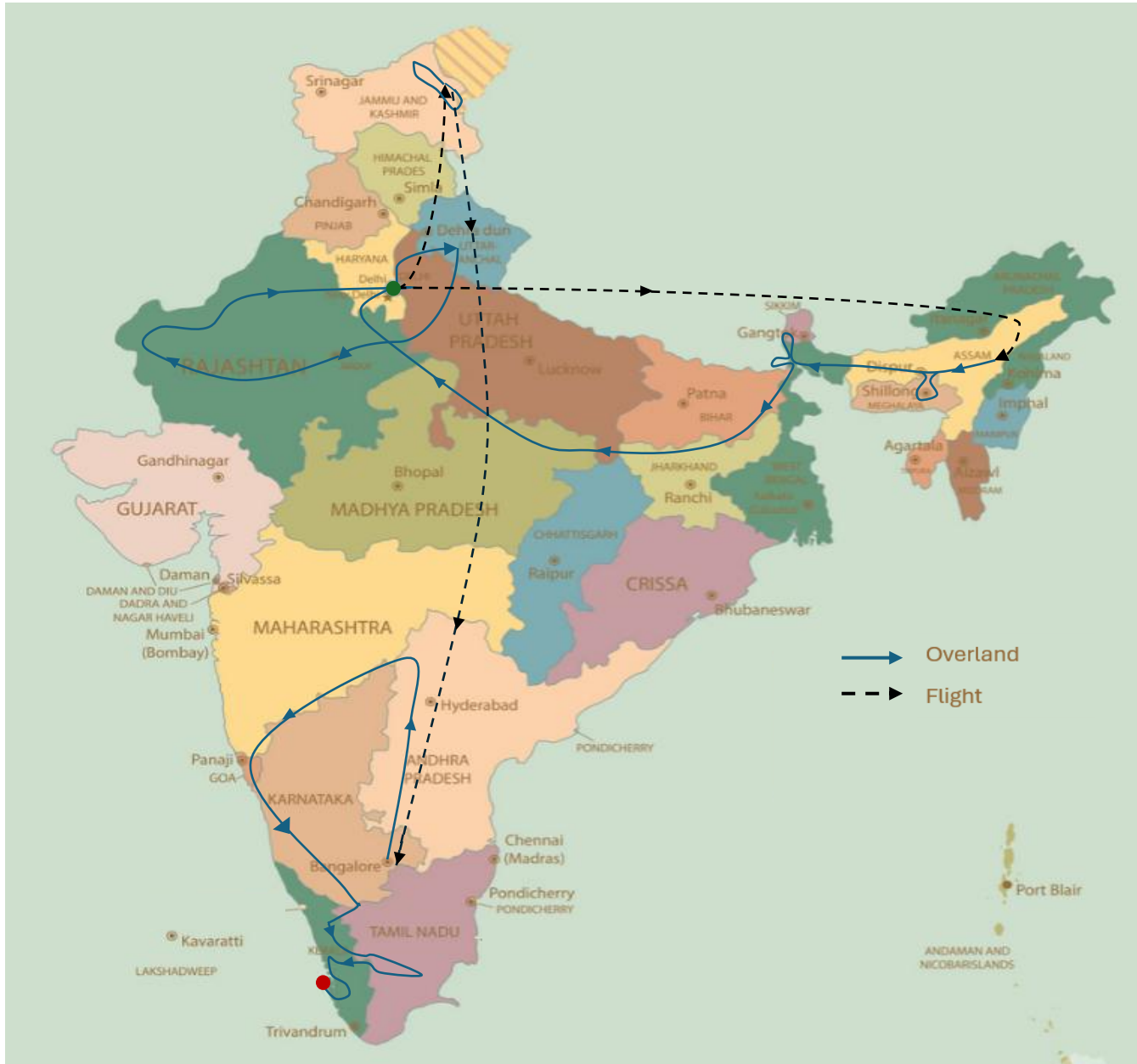
The report is organised into sections covering broad geographical areas. For India, I mainly followed state boundaries, while in Malaysia and Indonesia it made more sense to use physical or island boundaries.

Animals observed are marked with a colour code: **mammals**, **birds**, and **other taxa**. Species not highlighted with this colour code were not observed and are only mentioned as additional information for independent travellers.

For each section, I have tried to explain why we chose the area and to give an overview of the logistics involved as independent travellers. I do not list detailed costs, as they are time-consuming to compile and quickly become outdated. However, I added a budget section at the end of the report so that you can have a rough idea of the money spent. Accommodation is only mentioned when I felt it added additional value as a naturalist. We used booking.com during most of the trip to find good deals but Agoda sometimes had better offers.

2. India





2.1. Delhi

For many travellers, the first contact with India is New Delhi. Chaotic, dirty, noisy, and full of tourist scams—especially around the airport hotels.

Visiting Delhi straight after the flight, with my two backpacks, made for an exhausting day and a brutal but immediate immersion into Indian culture. In the evening, I made my way to the train station to catch a night train to Haldwani, at the foothills of the Himalayas, where I would spend roughly a week.

2.2. Uttarakhand

I visited twice and will therefore treat both parts here.

2.2.1. January visit

This first week, travelling alone while my partner attended a yoga retreat, was largely focused on birding. I was nonetheless hoping to observe a few mammals.

2.2.1.1. Organisation and logistics

Uttarakhand is a mountainous state located just north of Delhi, which makes it popular with birders from the capital who can easily go there for a long weekend. A night train allows you to reach Haldwani, in the plains, before dawn. If the idea of spending a night on an Indian

train fills you with dread, first class, with its private compartments for two or four people, really allows you to arrive well rested after a good night's sleep, without being disturbed by vendors or locals staring at you for long periods.

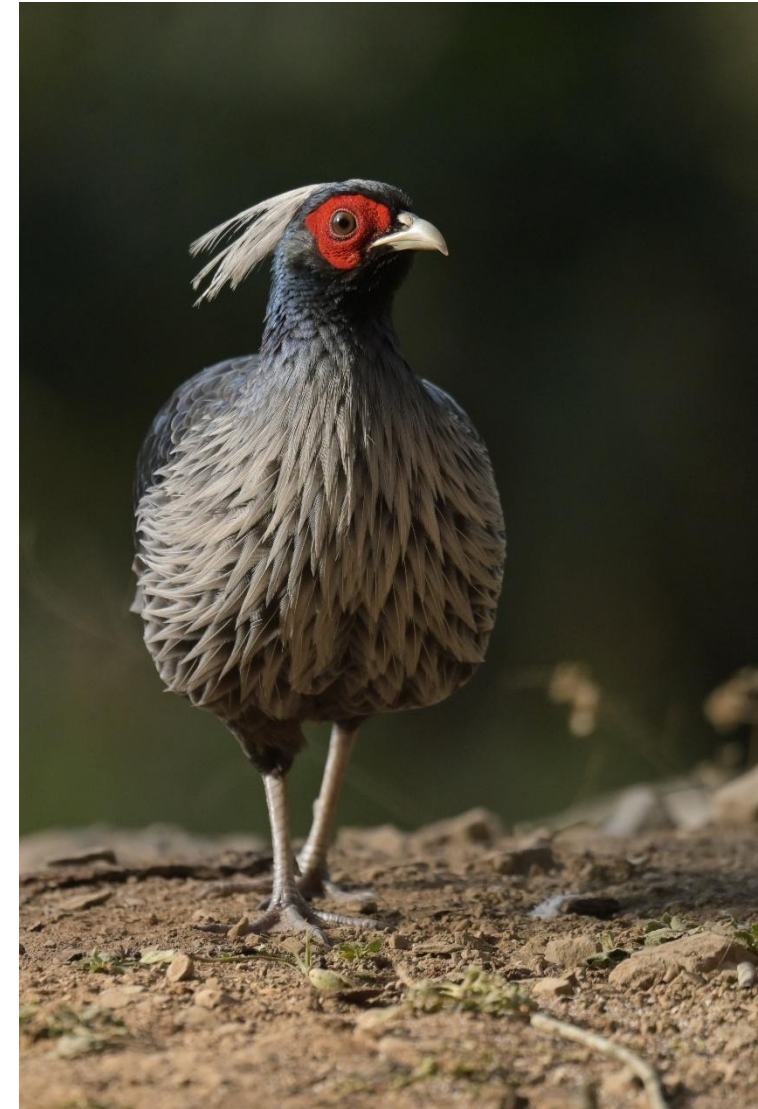
During my first one-week visit, I went with Hari Lama, an experienced and well-established guide who was among the least expensive and most recognised. I chose to do a 4-day / 3-night organised tour, followed by two days independently before leaving with a night train to Jaipur. I had spotted several hides on Google Maps beforehand and this is not something for which a guide brings much added value if you are familiar with the birds. Each hide offers different photographic opportunities, and doing several sessions increases the range of species you are likely to see, while also hoping for a visit from Yellow-throated Marten (*Martes flavigula*). Only two hides really seemed operational: a small one run by the owners of Nature Sparch Homestay and the main one, the Methodist Birding Hide, visited every morning during winter by around ten photographers (more details below).

I was not personally guided by Hari Lama but was assigned Hariom together with a private driver. Having a car is around the Sattal area, though perhaps not strictly necessary every day (some sites are relatively close to accommodation), especially if you are alone with a tight budget, as I was. In a group, the time saved seems well worth the expense. Hariom knows his birds well and has reliable locations for key species, but his communication and organisational skills were more limited, and I would therefore not recommend going directly through him. Himalayan Birding, an agency run by two young brothers I met in the field, seemed far more reliable and of higher quality, although also more expensive. If you can, I strongly recommend them.

I stayed in several lodges:

- Wild Kumaon Lodge: pleasant lodge with good food but freezing rooms in winter;
- Pinewood Cottage Pangot: simple cabins but with a great view and superb food;
- Incredible Birding Camp: close to the hide and several sites but not very welcoming to independent visitors not taking a guided tour, fairly comfortable rooms but more average food;

Nature Sparch Homestay, a new lodge opened by the owners of Himalayanbirding. Excellent service. For the latter, a car is necessary as it is somewhat isolated from the main birding sites. However, in its immediate vicinity, the dry slopes are one of the few locations for Gray-crowned Prinia (*Prinia cinereocapilla*). At night, nightjars and Mountain Scops Owl can be heard. I also briefly observed a Yellow-throated Marten (*Martes flavigula*) there.



2.2.1.2. Itinerary and observations

111 bird species were recorded and can be seen on eBird trip report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/396689>

21/12/2024 Haldwani - Sattal
22/12/2024 Sattal
23/12/2024 Sattal - Pangot
24/12/2024 Pangot - Sattal
25/12/2024 Sattal
26/12/2024 Sattal - Jaipur

2.2.1.3. Sattal

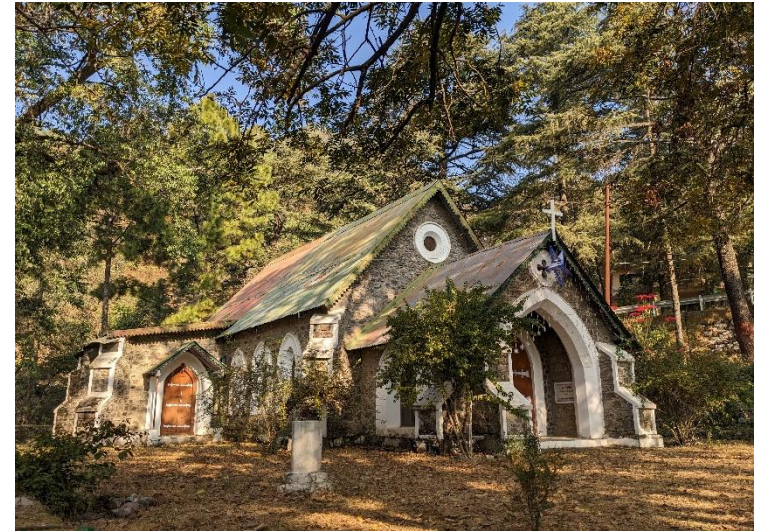
The areas visited can be grouped into three main clusters, each offering different opportunities: the Methodist Church hide and the surroundings of the lodges; Sattal Studio and Sattal Lake; the Chanfi riverbed and Pandaychore Road-Gaula River (29.370170, 79.571455).

2.2.1.4. Around the lodges and hides

The road linking Sattal Lake to the Bhimtal campus offers various roadside birding opportunities. The slope sometimes allows views into the canopy, and the undergrowth holds many passerines. Among the more notable species, **Black-throated Accentor** (*Prunella atrogularis*) and **Rufous-breasted Accentor** (*Prunella strophiata*), **Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler** (*Pomatorhinus ruficollis*) and **Himalayan Rubythroat** (*Calliope pectoralis*) can be mentioned. The langurs regularly observed at this altitude, clearly belong to the *schistaceus* form, called **Nepal Grey Langur**. However, the distinction with hector is not very clear and the individuals seen along the road descending towards Haldwani increasingly resembled this phenotype although I was unable to conclude with certainty whether they belonged to the Terai form rather than the Nepal one.

During my second visit, on the slopes above Sattal, a **Yellow-throated Marten** (*Martes flavigula*) crossed my path and quickly disappeared into the grassy slope.

The first hide I visited was the one located near Wild Kumaon. Positioned in a more open and scrubby area, it hosts fewer species than the others but has the advantage of offering a view over the valley. It is regularly visited by nuthatches, tits, sparrows and woodpeckers. In the middle of the afternoon, I surprised a **Mountain Hawk-Eagle** (*Nisaetus nipalensis*) there. I mainly used this hide during midday breaks; perhaps more exciting species come in the morning.



The second hide I visited was by far the busiest. Located below a small picturesque church (if only I had had such surroundings during my catechism...), it attracts some of the most attractive species in the region such as **Rufous-throated Partridge** (*Arborophila rufogularis*), **Great Barbet** (*Psilopogon virens*), a profusion of woodpeckers, **Black-headed Jay** (*Garrulus lanceolatus*), **Red-billed Blue-Magpie** (*Urocissa erythroryncha*) and **Common Green-Magpie** (*Cissa chinensis*). Laughingthrushes and other passerines are also abundant. Perches sometimes lack aesthetics or arranged with care.

The Himalayanbirding hide, located near the Butterfly Research Centre, was much more attractive. I only went there for one afternoon, but it was very busy (28 species) and notably offered good photographic opportunities for **Blue-throated Barbet** (*Psilopogon asiaticus*) and **Black-chinned Babbler** (*Cyanoderma pyrrhops*).

2.2.1.5. Sattal Studio

The bottom of the valley is occupied by Sattal Lake reached by a winding road. Once at the lake, near a small landing stage, a small protected natural area has been renamed "the studio". It is in reality a narrow stream, often covered by vegetation, which flows into Purna Tal (Purna Lake). Near this lake, the stream forms small pools that are much appreciated by birds that come to drink and bathe. However, I found this spot somewhat disappointing, as observation distances were never very close and fewer species than I had expected. Upstream, the dense vegetation shelters very discreet birds such as **Pygmy Cupwing** (*Phoenicurus pusilla*), **Russet-headed Tesia** (*Tesia castaneocoronata*) or **Spotted Forktail** (*Enicurus maculatus*). **Small Niltava** (*Niltava macgrigoriae*) was, however, quite confiding.

The walk beyond Purna Lake did not yield anything particularly interesting, even though the forest is beautiful.

2.2.1.6. Chanfi River

From Sattal, the Chanfi riverbed can be reached via Pandaychore Road. In addition to the nice views from the road, I was lucky to observe two species of forktails (**Slaty-backed** (*Enicurus schistaceus*) and **Little** (*Enicurus scouleri*)) as well as two species of **fish owls** (**Brown** (*Ketupa zeylonensis*) and **Tawny** (*Ketupa flavipes*)). After leaving the forest, we explored the rocky riverbed covered with large boulders fallen from the mountains. During our two afternoon visits, we notably observed **Crested Kingfisher** (*Megaceryle lugubris*), **Brown Dipper** (*Cinclus pallasii*) and a rather confiding **Wallcreeper** (*Tichodroma muraria*). On a first visit, it seems worth dedicating at least half a day to this area, as the species are fundamentally different.

2.2.1.1. Pangot and Nainital

Syamkhat or Syamkhet (29°23'22.6"N 79°32'24.7"E)

On the way to Pangot, we made a brief stop in the morning to target a few new species such as **Maroon Oriole** (*Oriolus traillii*), **Himalayan Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos himalayensis*) or **Pink-browed Rosefinch** (*Carpodacus rodochroa*). We also came across a **Northern Red Muntjac** (*Muntiacus vaginalis*).

Nainital Land End's Trail (29°23'30.8"N 79°26'15.2"E)

Further along, near Nainital, I did not expect much from a stop close to a fairly busy village, but it turned out to be quite productive despite the activity and the late hour. More generally, I noticed that in the Himalayas in winter, bird activity tends to peak late in the morning when the sun is already higher, while dawn is not particularly productive.

Pangot

In Pangot, birding sessions mainly took place around the lodge. Nothing exceptional, but several new species and nice photographic opportunities, particularly with **Rufous Sibia** (*Heterophasia capistrata*). The afternoon session was slower, taking us from beautiful mossy oak forest to high-altitude grasslands where many small passerines, especially finches, could be seen. Key species at this elevation include **White-collared Blackbird** (*Turdus albocinctus*), accentors and **Blue-capped Redstart** (*Phoenicurus coeruleocephala*), which has a very specific habitat.

If Pangot appears on birders' maps, it is mainly for its pheasants, particularly Wallich's Pheasant (*Catreus wallichii*), an endangered species endemic to the western Himalayas. However, sightings there are rare and other sites are more reliable. Careful scanning of the slopes at Wallich Point failed to produce the target species, but a fine male **Koklass pheasant** (*Pucrasia macrolopha*) and a group of **Himalayan Goral** (*Naemorhedus goral*) were still very rewarding observations.



Left: Sattal lake



Right: Pangot forest



Great Barbet, Blue-throated barbet and White-cheeked Laughingthrush



Common Green Magpie



Common Green Magpie



Red Junglefowl, Rufous-throated Partridge, White-crested Laughingthrush and Red-billed Leiothrix



Greater Yellowthroat



Brown-fronted Woodpecker



Brown Dipper, Spotted Forktail, Wallcreeper, White-capped Redstart



Blue-fronted Redstart, Rufous Sibia, Koklass Pheasant, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush



Himalayan Bulbul, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Himalayan Black-lored tit, Yellow-bellied Fairy-Fantail



Plum-headed Parakeet, Slaty-headed Parakeet, Lesser Yellownape, Grey-headed Woodpecker



Blue Whistling Thrush, Crested Kingfisher, Red-billed Magpie

2.2.2. March visit

I returned to the state of Uttarakhand in March with my parents for a week. The main motivation was to show them mountain landscapes and reach Munsyari to look for alpine species, including musk deer and Himalayan Monal.

2.2.2.1. Organisation and logistics

This time, we hired the services of a taxi agency based in Kathgodam, Guru Kripa. The booking process via WhatsApp as well as the driver were entirely satisfactory, and all for a very reasonable price. The driver did not speak good English but understood enough, and the itinerary was more or less known in advance. I strongly recommend this option, especially since public transport can be uncomfortable and very slow.

I had initially planned to reach the region again by train, but the connection through Delhi caused me to miss the train we had booked. In a rush, I booked a taxi from Delhi to Corbett via Uber and the fare was actually quite affordable for such a long journey (nearly 7 hours). The experience was, however, far less pleasant than by train.

2.2.2.2. Itinerary and observations

60 bird species were recorded. A summary of the observations is available on eBird: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/396832>

2.2.2.2.1. Corbett National Park

This week was organised rather late, and as I had still not seen a tiger, I was trying to include every possible detour that might give me a chance of doing a safari in a tiger reserve. I therefore modified my initial itinerary to include half a day at Corbett.

We stayed at Corbett Comfort Lodge, which was indeed very comfortable. We only had time for one safari, which the lodge arranged for us in the Bijrani zone. No tigers unfortunately, and the Yellow-throated Marten (*Martes flavigula*) escaped our jeep by just a few seconds.

We observed a few common birds and mammals such as the Terai Grey Langur (*Semnopithecus hector*) but nothing particularly remarkable, and I had already seen all the bird species recorded during that safari. The landscape was nevertheless very pleasant, and the habitat seemed perfectly suitable for supporting a tiger population.

In the afternoon, I took my parents to visit the Girija Devi Temple, located in the middle of the Kosi riverbed, hoping to observe Ibisbill or get better photographic opportunities with Crested Kingfisher (*Megaceryle lugubris*), a specialist of fast-flowing mountain rivers. However, there were many pilgrims around the temple.



Caption: clockwise from top left, Sambar deer, Common Kingfisher, Green-backed Tit, Black Stork

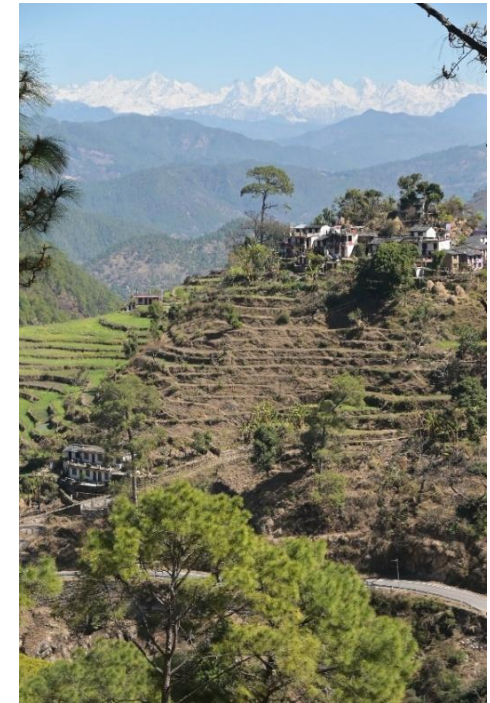
2.2.2.2.2. *Ranikhet*

I had missed Wallich's Pheasant (*Catreus wallichii*) during my January visit to Pangot and I really wanted to try again. I therefore arranged with Hariom to visit Ranikhet, where the species is said to be reliable.

Whether because of miscommunication or a lack of proper oversight, I will never know, but Hariom was not on site as agreed and I therefore missed a good opportunity. I did a morning walk around my hotel instead, where I still found a few nice lifers.

Towards the end of the stay, I tried to organise another last-minute morning attempt at the site from Nainital. This meant a very early start, but this time the driver let us down and arrived more than an hour late, ruining any chance of reaching the site at the optimal time and giving ourselves a fair chance to observe this charismatic and endangered endemic... that's India.

The views over the Himalayas from the ridge where our hotel (Alpine Rhapsody) was located were absolutely fantastic.



2.2.2.3. Munsyari



We stayed three nights in Munsyari, which is located near the border with Nepal and China. The station offers genuinely spectacular views of the surrounding mountain ranges.

I chose Munsyari instead of Chopta because of its better-developed hiking trails, which would allow my parents to walk independently rather than being surrounded by hundreds of pilgrims heading to the temple at Chopta. In hindsight, that crowd does bring one major advantage: wildlife there is perhaps more accustomed to humans (or even attracted), whereas in Munsyari, the experience feels much wilder.

Above all, a heavy snowstorm occurred the day before our arrival, blocking the road for a full day and leaving behind 1.5 metres of fresh snow. Most of the trails normally used to search for wildlife were impractical without snowshoes or crampons, and I therefore had to search along the road or lower down in the valley.

In Munsyari, I used the services of Himalayan Shepherd (+91 99 902 41 904), who was professional and did not use playback. Thanks to him, I was able to observe fairly closely a female **Himalayan Monal** (*Lophophorus impejanus*) perched in a tree, although the brightly coloured male remained hidden. I did see males flying off in the distance as soon as I became visible from the ridge, which led me to conclude that the birds are very shy in Munsyari, unlike what seems to be the case in Chopta. Both **Rhesus Macaques** (*Macaca mulatta*) and **Nepal Grey Langur** (*Semnopithecus schistaceus*) are common around the village which is amazing at such a high altitude.

Despite these constraints, the stay remained productive, with several high-altitude specialities including **Himalayan Vulture** (*Gyps himalayensis*), Snow Pigeon (*Columba leuconota*), **Rufous-bellied Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos hyperythrus*), **Yellow-billed Blue-Magpie** (*Urocissa flavirostris*) and **Variegated Laughingthrush** (*Trochalopteron variegatum*).

My timing was probably slightly early in the season, although seeing rhododendrons in bloom in the snow was spectacular.

2.2.2.4. Nainital

On the way back, we had one night near Sattal which acted as a buffer in case of issues on the long road from Munsyari. We stayed close to Nature Sparch Homestay (mentioned above) and explored the immediate surroundings looking for a few species still not observed, despite the failure of my final attempt for Wallich's Pheasant.

2.2.3. Missed opportunities in Uttarakhand

Apart from Wallich's Pheasant, which I regret missing, several other notable species could have been observed. Despite the use of playback, the Collared Owlet (*Taenioptynx brodiei*) remained silent.

Night searches would likely have produced several observation of several flying squirrels and above all the Himalayan Musk Deer in Munsyari (see [Peron, 2023](#)). Some localities also offer the possibility of observing Himalayan Tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*).

As for larger mammals, Asiatic black bear and leopard are present in forested areas, sometimes even near human settlements, but are obviously difficult to encounter.



Himalayan Goral



Himalayan Woodpecker



Nepal Gray Langur, Koklass pheasant and Large-billed crow



Grey-headed Woodpecker, Himalayan Nuthatch, Rufous Sibia

2.3. Rajasthan

Rajasthan is probably the most touristic state in Northern India, thanks to its rich architectural and cultural heritage. It is also the largest state in the entire federation by size. It is home to some of the most famous national parks, such as Ranthambore and Keoladeo Ghana, and offers opportunities to observe species of the western desert. This diversity is reflected in our itinerary, which combined dedicated wildlife stops with cultural locations not usually included in specialist wildlife circuits. In short, all the cultural sites included in this itinerary are well worth visiting.

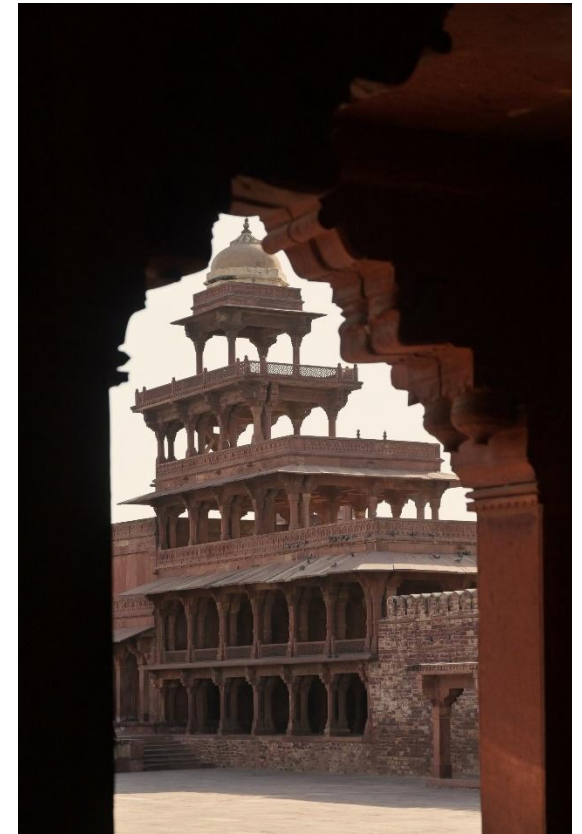


2.3.1. Itinerary and logistics

2.3.1.1. First visit in December and January

During this first 17-day itinerary, I recorded 135 bird species, summarised in the following eBird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/399468>

27/12/2024	Jaipur
28/12/2024	Jaipur - Ranthambore
29/12/2024	Ranthambore
30/12/2024	Ranthambore - Bundi
31/12/2024	Bundi
01/01/2025	Chittorgarh
02/01/2025	Udaipur
03/01/2025	Udaipur (Ranakpur et Kumbhalgarh Fort)
04/01/2025	Udaipur - Jodhpur
05/01/2025	Jodhpur
06/01/2025	Jodhpur - Sam
07/01/2025	Sam
08/01/2025	Sam
09/01/2025	Jaisalmer
10/01/2025	Jaisalmer - Bikaner
11/01/2025	Bikaner (Camel Festival)
12/01/2025	Bikaner - Tal Chappar
13/01/2025	Tal Chappar
14/01/2025	Mahansar
15/01/2025	Mahansar - Delhi



Most travel was by train, usually in second or third class, or by night bus. Buses in India are not the most pleasant experience (few stops, constant honking, questionable safety), but they make up for the lack of train connections on certain routes, and in Rajasthan the roads are relatively straight, which at least limits how much you are thrown around.

In winter, trains in winter are regularly delayed by several hours due to fog (a natural phenomenon different from pollution). The start of the Maha Kumbh Mela, a Hindu pilgrimage (over 500 million pilgrims), an event that takes place every 144 years, completely disrupted the transport network for both goods and people in most India.

When public transport options were particularly poor, we occasionally asked our accommodation to arrange transfers to the next station or hotel. I strongly recommend doing this in India: there is almost always a solution, and it is often cheaper to arrange it locally than to book in advance from home.

2.3.1.2. Second visit in February and March

Taking advantage of a gap before my parents' arrived in New Delhi, I managed to fit in three full days at the world-famous Keoladeo park in February. We then returned to Rajasthan with my parents for a mainly cultural week in the Golden Triangle (Jaipur - Agra - Delhi). We hired the services of a driver agency (Rajasthantrips4u, +91 98185 68319) for the week, mainly for comfort and independence. The solution is perfect for this region, but I strongly advise against this particular agency: they provided us with an inexperienced and careless driver and offered no compensation for the inconvenience.

25/02/2025 Bharatpur

26/02/2025 Bharatpur

27/02/2025 Bharatpur

...

10/03/2025 Afternoon safari at Jhalana (Jaipur)

11/03/2025 Morning safari at Jhalana (Jaipur)

2.3.2. Ranthambore

Ranthambore is often cited as one of the best places in the world to observe Bengal Tigers. However, it is also one of the most heavily visited parks. Its accessibility with rail connections from Agra and Jaipur and the presence of affordable accommodation led us to choose this park to try our luck.

We stayed two nights at Hotel Tiger Haveli, which was inexpensive, clean, and offered good quality food. More luxurious lodges are located outside the town and probably offer more interesting surroundings than the crowded town of Sawai Madhopur. However, proximity to the park is relative, as the nine zones open to tourism have entrances on both sides of the town. Depending on the zone allocated, you may be among the first or the last to be picked up by safari vehicles.

Booking a safari independently at Ranthambore is extremely complicated. The system feels deliberately opaque and discourage independent reservations. We entrusted this task to our hotel several months in advance but still ended up with less reputed zones (zone 10 twice, then zones 1 and 5). Among the nine zones, two or three seem more promising. Elsewhere, the chances of seeing a tiger are broadly similar.

During our four safaris (including three in canters, the large noisy trucks), only three or four tiger sightings occurred across all zones combined. While tiger sightings at Ranthambore seem relatively easy just before the monsoon (February to April), they are much less likely in winter. The choice of zones therefore did not seem to be the main factor behind our lack of success. That said, securing a jeep (or even a seat in a truck) in the best zones appears difficult, and I imagine that higher-end lodges book the best areas well in advance for their clients.

Jeeps offer a more pleasant experience than canters, but in practice you do not see significantly more animals, although for certain sightings, the speed and flexibility of positioning can make a big difference, especially for photographers. The guides were not very engaged, mostly repeating jokes aimed at entertaining casual tourists. The landscape, while typical of Rajasthan, is not particularly remarkable. Apart from large carnivores (tigers, leopards, sloth bears), wildlife can be observed elsewhere under similar and less expensive conditions. Overall, we did not particularly enjoy our safaris in the park.

Depending on the type of traveller you identify with, I would recommend:

- For dedicated naturalists or photographers: favour the reserves of central India such as Bandhavgarh, Pench or Tadoba, which are truly focused on wildlife observation.
- For general travellers: only visit during the favourable season (February to April), book early through a quality lodge, or limit yourself to a single safari for the experience.

Among mammals, we saw many [Chital](#) (*Axis axis*), [Nilgai](#) (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), a few [Sambar](#) (*Rusa unicolour*), [Northern Plains Grey Langur](#) (*Semnopithecus entellus*) and [Rhesus Macaque](#) (*Macaca mulatta*). Less commonly, we briefly encountered a pair of [Indian Grey Mongoose](#) (*Urva edwardsii*) and an [Indian Hare](#) (*Lepus nigricollis*).

Among notable birds, I would mention [Black Stork](#) (*Ciconia nigra*), [Woolly-necked Stork](#) (*Ciconia episcopus*) and the striking [Rufous Treepie](#) (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*). Most other species can also be seen elsewhere.



Rufous treepie

2.3.3. Jodhpur

Close to the impressive fort that dominates the old city of Jodhpur and its blue-painted houses, the small Rao Jodha Desert Park protects both natural and geological heritage while providing a superb setting for the Jaswant Thada temple. I strongly recommend it to anyone touring the city and interested in birds. However, I would not include it as a standalone stop if you are not already planning to visit Jodhpur.

A pair of [Bonelli's Eagle](#) (*Aquila fasciata*) nesting on the telecommunications tower was the most interesting sighting. A small water body also offers opportunities to observe several wintering waterfowl.

I highly recommend the services of Denzil, a guide at the park (+91 95712 71000). The one-hour outing cost me only 200 rupees!

2.3.4. Desert NP and surroundings

Desert National Park is located near Sam, close to the Pakistani border and beyond Jaisalmer. It is one of the last remaining strongholds of the Great Indian Bustard, which was my main motivation for visiting this region.

Captive breeding efforts are underway to establish a safety-net population in case conservation efforts in the park would fail. Large enclosures have been created to protect the birds from predators, mainly stray dogs, as well as from poaching. I observed numerous holes in the fences and a high number of pastoralists and their herds inside the park.

The experience within the “park” is somewhat strange, its boundaries are very unclear, and a significant amount of time is probably spent outside official limits in order to reach other microhabitats and specialised species. In the core zone, where conservation efforts are concentrated, you mostly drive along the fence hoping to spot a bustard in the distance. Having been hunted for centuries, they tend to walk away as soon as a vehicle stops, disappearing almost instantly into the vegetation.

We organised our stay in Sam through Musa's Desert Nest. There are not many guides in the area, and I found the price high relative to the quality of accommodation and safaris. The guide spoke limited English and did not ask what we were looking for, nor did he provide information about animal behaviour or daily plans (despite foreigners being charged more than locals). We did not observe any desert cats, only the very shy [Chinkara](#) (*Gazella bennetti*), a very brief [Bengal Fox](#) (*Vulpes bengalensis*) and several [Desert Red Fox](#) (*Vulpes vulpes pusilla*).

Our search for the [bustard](#) (*Ardeotis nigriceps*) was nevertheless successful, which probably makes this stop a success given how rare the species is. We also managed to observe most of the desert specialities, including White-browed Bushchat (*Saxicola macrorhynchus*), [Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse](#) (*Pterocles exustus*), [Cream-coloured Courser](#) (*Cursorius cursor*), [Greater Hoopoe-Lark](#) (*Alaemon alaudipes*), [Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark](#) (*Eremopterix nigriceps*), Sind Sparrow (*Passer pyrrhonotus*), and

Asian Desert Warbler (*Curruca nana*). The area is also excellent for raptors, with **Cinereous Vulture** (*Aegypius monachus*), **Egyptian Vulture** (*Neophron percnopterus*), **Laggar Falcon** (*Falco jugger*), Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), Tawny Eagle (*Aquila rapax*) and **Steppe Eagle** (*Aquila nipalensis*).

If I were to return to this region as a naturalist, I would use the services of Atul from Raptor's Inn (see Tal Chappar) for a multi-day tour. Bustards also seem to occur around Pokharan.

2.3.5. Bikaner and Jorbeer

We went to Bikaner primarily to attend the Camel Festival, a rather of tourist-oriented event centred on camelids. A rather unusual and surprising experience!

About fifteen kilometres away, the Jorbeer reserve is a carcass dumping site, which attracts many raptors (but also a large number of stray dogs; we were advised to always stay together and carry sticks). People in the city did not seem familiar with the place, and we had to guide our tuk-tuk driver there ourselves. We asked him to wait for an hour while we explored. The fog was very dense and I did not observe the site's main speciality, the Yellow-eyed Pigeon (*Columba eversmanni*), not particularly exotic in appearance but rare and threatened. The vultures tended to take off from quite a distance, but their numbers were high and it is possible to observe up to four species there in winter.

On the road between Bikaner and Jaisalmer, Khichan is known for its impressive gatherings of Demoiselle Cranes, but the site is difficult to reach without having your own vehicle.

2.3.6. Tal Chappar and surroundings

After our stop in Bikaner, we took a taxi to the Tal Chappar sanctuary and our accommodation, Raptors' Inn. Atul, the owner, is an excellent bird guide and speaks very good English. Although he was busy with other clients on the first day, we had the pleasure of spending a full day with him the following day. His associate guide was knowledgeable about birds, although less comfortable in English.

Tal Chappar appears on birders' maps because of the presence of a very localised species, the **Indian Spotted Creeper** (*Salpornis spilonota*). However, the area has much more to offer. One can observe a wide range of western Indian bird species there before exploring more remote sites for more desert-specialised species (such as bustards or White-browed Bushchat). From a mammal perspective, large groups of **Blackbuck** (*Antelope cervicapra*) can easily be seen without even entering the sanctuary (which we did not visit), making it a much less expensive and more accessible alternative to Blackbuck National Park near Delhi. Obviously, wolves and striped hyenas are absent compared to the Gujarat park, but **Nilgai** (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*) and **Chinkara** (*Gazella bennetti*) are also well present. Desert Cat and Bengal Fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*) can also be observed.

The month of March is particularly favourable, as Indian Spiny-tailed Lizards (*Saara hardwicki*) are in the breeding season and constitute a major prey item for many migrating raptors, as well as terrestrial carnivores that have just given birth.

Notable birds observed included **Painted Sandgrouse** (*Pterocles indicus*), **Black-winged Kite** (*Elanus caeruleus*), **Red-necked Falcon** (*Falco chicquera*) and wintering groups of **Bar-headed Goose** (*Anser indicus*).

I strongly recommend birders who do not need to stop in cities to use Atul's services to cover the wildlife of the Thar desert over a week (+91 88269 07085).



Blackbuck in the mist

2.3.7. Jhalana Safari Park

In March, I had the opportunity to do two safaris in Jhalana Safari Park, located in the immediate vicinity of Jaipur, together with my family. Seeing leopards in India is generally more difficult than spotting tigers, especially in national parks where both species coexist. Leopards, being more discreet and cautious in the presence of their dangerous cousins, favour rugged and rocky areas less frequented by tigers, and adopt a largely nocturnal behaviour.

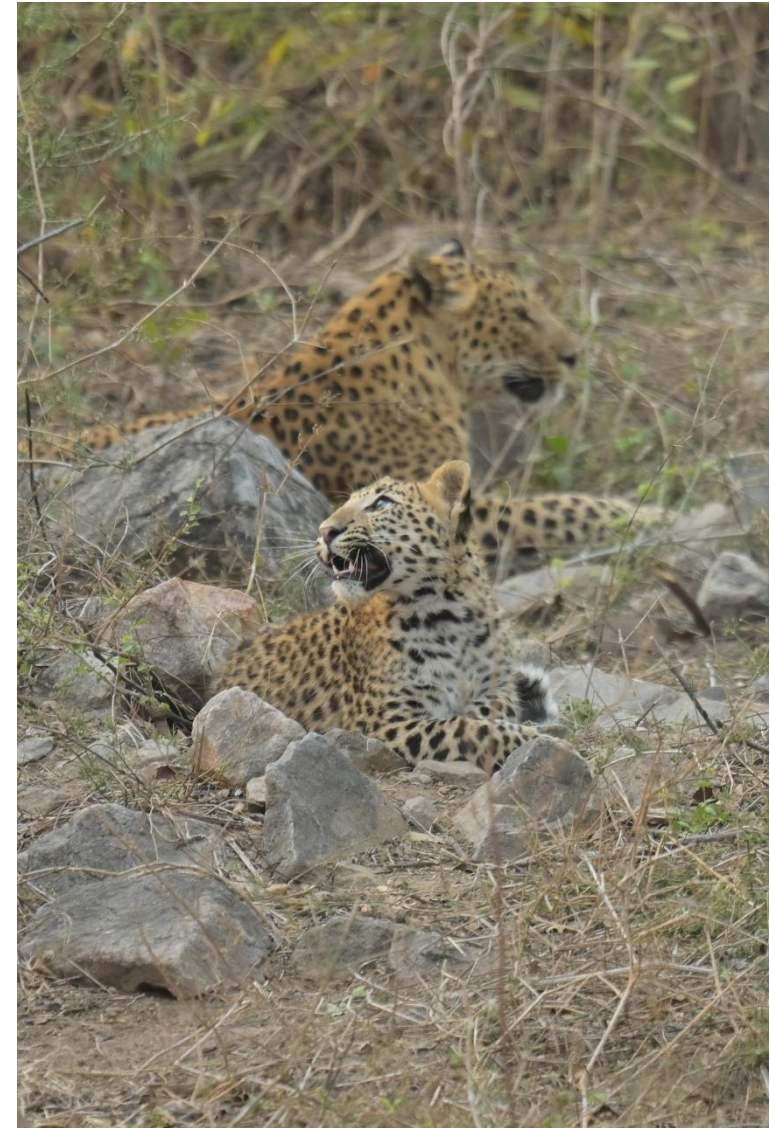
Rajaji National Park, near Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, is one of the few national parks offering relatively good chances of seeing leopards. The Bera region, also in Rajasthan, is well known for its leopard population, but involves more complex logistics and higher costs.

However, leopards are so adaptable that they can thrive in habitats that seem, at first sight, rather unfavourable. This is particularly the case in the remaining forest patches surrounding the imposing city of Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan. Just a few kilometres from the city centre, valleys shaded by the surrounding hills have been preserved from rapid urban expansion almost miraculously, once serving as hunting grounds for the maharajahs. These forest areas now form like ecological islands, largely cut off from the rest of the Aravalli range, which separates the Thar Desert from the rest of India. Until the 1940s, tigers still lived here, in immediate proximity to the city.

Because of this geographical situation, but also due to the high availability of both wild prey (water sources and grasslands are maintained to support and increase herbivore densities) and “domestic” prey (cattle, goats and especially dogs are regularly preyed upon by leopards), leopard density is extremely high: around 30 individuals within 20 square kilometres. This does not make it the wildest experience, but it represents a remarkable opportunity for independent travellers to observe this feline in a natural environment.

During one of our two safaris, we were lucky to find a female with her cub in the scrub. We were not initially in the right zone and arrived among the last vehicles but eventually managed to get good views. The leopards (*Panthera pardus*) did not seem disturbed by the twenty or so vehicles tightly packed along the narrow sandy track.

A single visit is enough to get a good sense of this dry thorn forest landscape and its inhabitants, but for those who have already visited other areas in India, there is nothing particularly exceptional.



2.3.8. Bharatpur

Bharatpur is another protected area inherited from the hunting passion of the maharajahs. It is worth noting that before British colonisation, nobles did not condescend to hunt birds; only large animals and big cats were considered worthy quarry. However, after travelling to the United Kingdom and being invited to a duck shoot, local rulers found it highly entertaining to shoot waterfowl by the hundreds.

Bharatpur lies in a relatively dry region and is not a natural habitat. Its 29 km² of wetlands and savanna are in fact the result of man-made hydraulic infrastructures developed in the early 20th century to attract migratory birds. Even today, the park is at its most visited in winter, when it attracts numerous migratory species from Central Asia. Among them, the unfortunate fate of the Siberian Crane deserves particular mention. Its western population is now extinct while it used to winter largely in Bharatpur. The causes of its disappearance are probably multiple, but I was surprised to learn that the removal of domestic buffalo from the park may have had a negative impact on the young shoots on which the cranes fed. There are still quite a few cows in the park, as well as packs of stray dogs hunting herbivores. No one seems particularly concerned about this, as is often the case in the region.

Keoladeo, the other name of the sanctuary, is very easy to visit independently. Its main advantage is that no vehicle is required and you can walk as much as you wish. I must have covered around thirty kilometres on my first day, so I rented a bicycle on the following days. Observing wildlife from a bicycle is more difficult and when you flush a bird, taking a photograph becomes almost impossible by the time you stop and get your camera ready. However, it allows you to move quickly from one area to another at very low cost. On the second day, I hired a guide for the morning at the park entrance (there are many). Although he showed me a few target species, I did not feel he brought tremendous added value. Perhaps I was simply unlucky. It seems that the drivers of electric rickshaws are also very skilled observers.

My accommodation was Iora Guesthouse, whose owner is also a bird guide. I can recommend it, although other guesthouses also seem very good.

Overall, I really enjoyed visiting this park, which is so different from other national parks in India thanks to a much more pleasant experience and a lower cost compared to a safari. It should be noted that several temples are located within the park and locals frequently visit them. Some are more discreet than others, and a foreigner with a camera is an irresistible source of fascination for groups of children.

Keoladeo is not particularly interesting for strict mammalwatchers. However, [Golden Jackal](#) (*Canis aureus*) can be seen quite easily (every day in my case). Striped Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) occurs in the deeper parts of the park but seems almost impossible to observe given that the park is closed at night. A colony of [Indian flying fox](#) (*Pteropus medius*) is easily observed from the main track.

Bharatpur is an absolute feast of new species for someone visiting India for the first time. Diversity is of course high, but what is especially striking is the impressive number of birds that can be observed quite easily, making it a fantastic place to practise wildlife photography. I still missed a few target species, which seemed

either absent or simply too discreet during my visit (rails, bitterns, Dusky Eagle-Owl seen only distantly...). The summary list on eBird is probably more useful than a long list here: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/399765>

Playback is theoretically prohibited, but park guides themselves occasionally use it. A few GPS points nevertheless proved useful for observing certain specific species:

- 27°10'16.1"N 77°30'32.8"E: distant Dusky Eagle-Owl (*Ketupa coromanda*) nest
- 27°10'08.5"N 77°30'42.8"E: Siberian Rubythroat (*Calliope calliope*) and Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*)
- 27°09'48.6"N 77°30'37.7"E: Indian Thick-knee (*Burhinus indicus*)
- 27°09'57.9"N 77°31'29.6"E: Indian Flying Fox (*Pteropus medius*) colony
- 27°09'41.1"N 77°31'21.5"E: best spot for Sarus Crane (*Antigone antigone*)
- 27°08'54.9"N 77°32'43.6"E: Yellow-eyed Babbler (*Chrysomma sinense*)
- 27°12'09.0"N 77°30'38.1"E: Greater Painted-Snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*)
- 27°11'25.9"N 77°30'58.9"E: impressive Indian softshell turtle (*Nilssonia gangetica*) fed at the temple and forest birds (hornbills, barbets...)



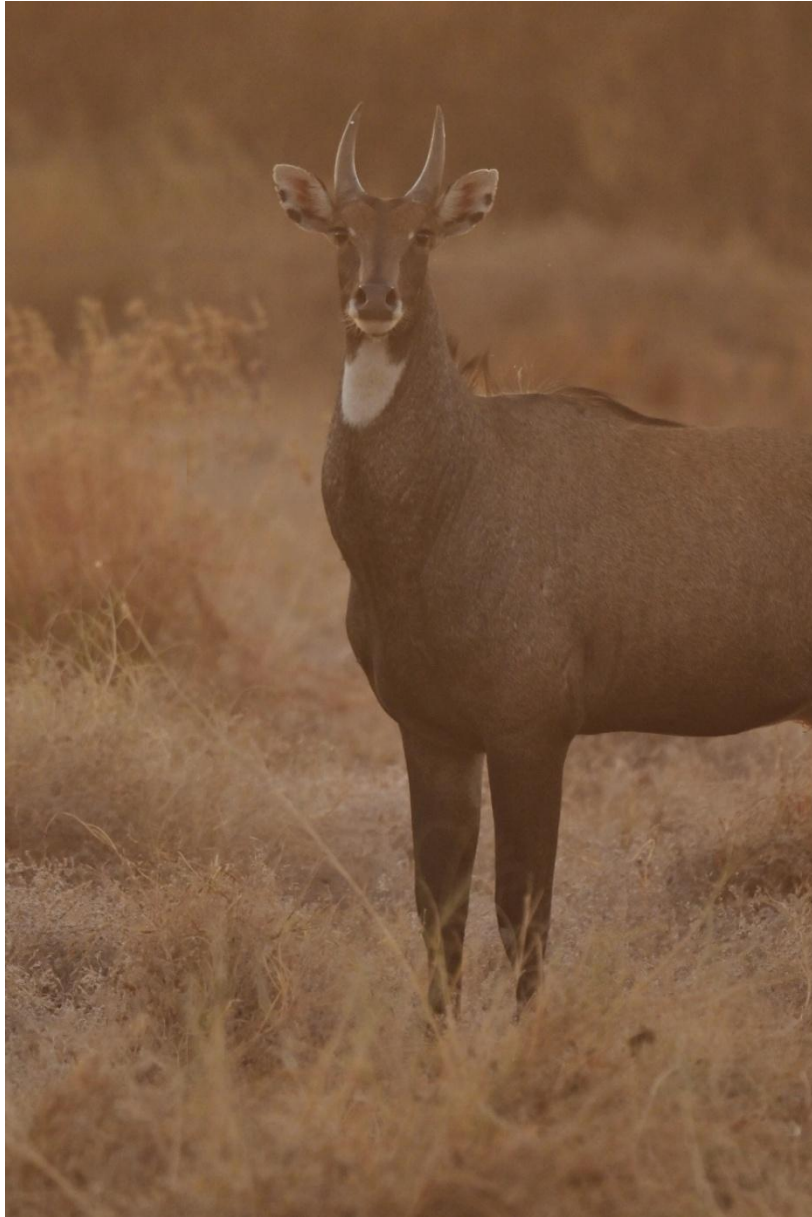
Keoladeo scenery



Northern Plains Sacred Langur and Red-wattled Lapwing among temples

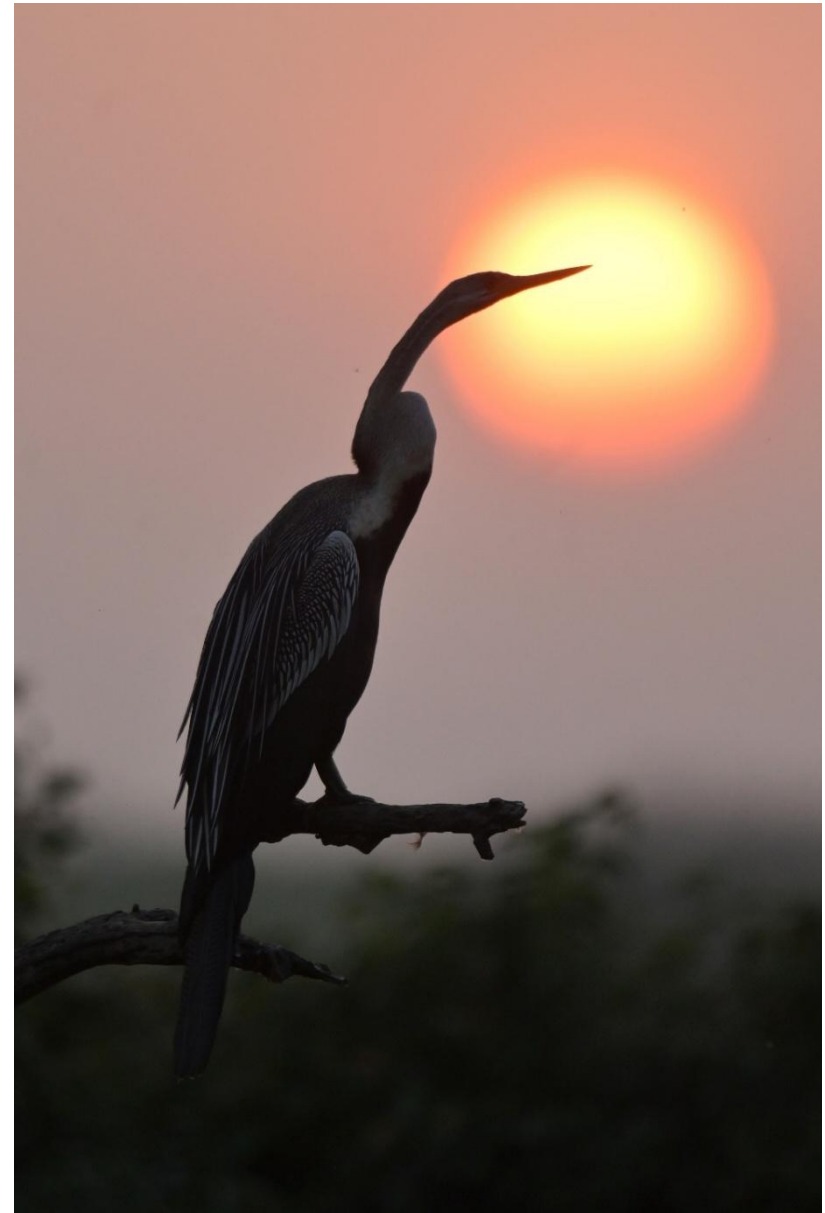


Egyptian Vulture, Steppe Eagle, Desert Fox and Common Babbler at Desert NP



Nilgai, Great Indian Bustard and Indian Roller





Langur and Oriental Darter

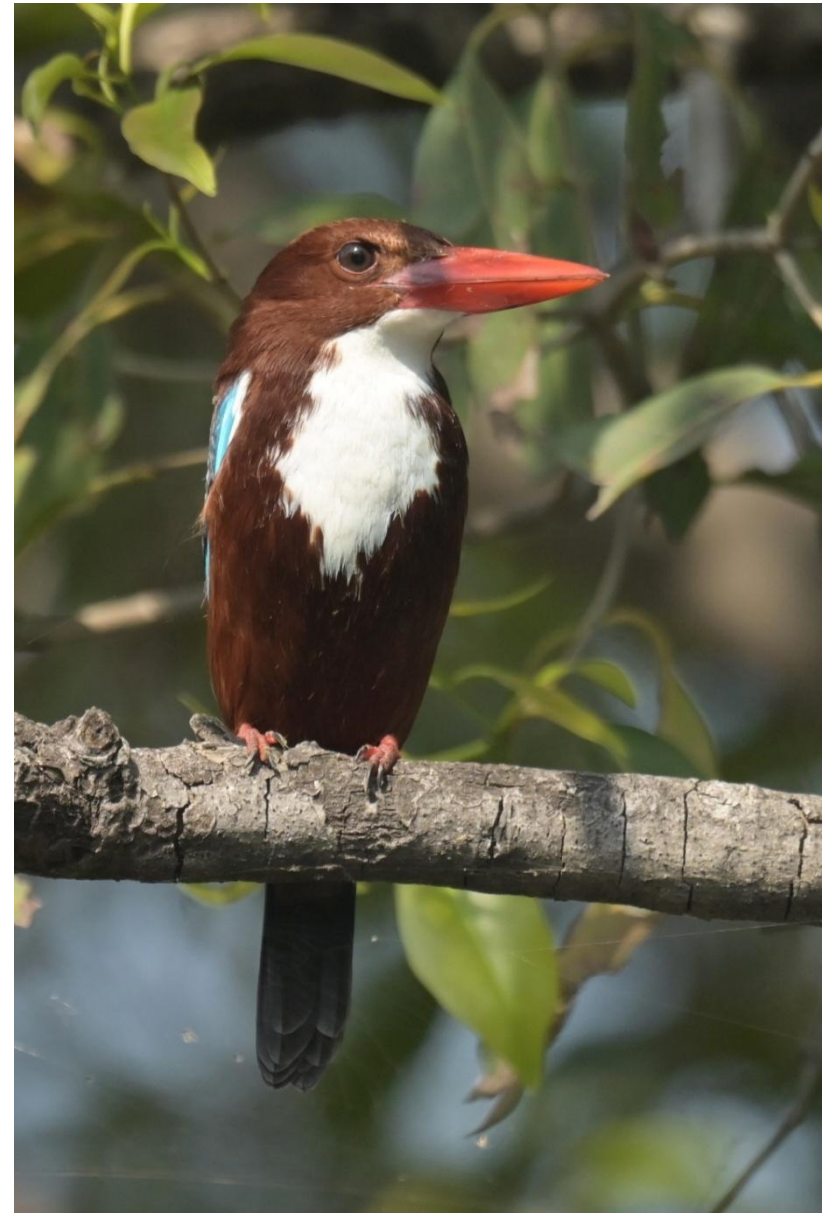
Ducks of Keoladeo : Green-winged Teal, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail



Greater Coucal, Black-necked Stork, Purple Heron and Oriental Darter



Sarus Crane and White-throated Kingfisher





Ducks of Keoladeo : Green-winged Teal, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail



Greater Cormorant, Glossy Ibis, Brown-headed Barbet and Grey-headed Swampphen



Painted Stork, *Nilssonia gangetica* and Golden Jackal



Indian Thick-knee, Bengal Monitor, Nilgai and Wild Boar



Indian Peafowl, Black-headed Ibis, Purple Sunbird and Sambar Deer





Camel Festival at Bikaner

2.4. North-East (Assam and Meghalaya)

Northeast India consists of seven states (the "Seven Sisters") with an identity quite distinct from the rest of the country. Historically, there have even been guerrilla movements seeking greater independence. This region is generally little visited by tourists, apart from a few well-known parks in Assam. Infrastructure is limited, as is proficiency in English than in more tourist-oriented states. Apart from Assam and Meghalaya, most of the states also require special permits for foreigners.

In my opinion, travelling independently in these areas is best suited to particularly adventurous and resourceful travellers, as there are few trains and the most interesting areas require a vehicle. Driving in India is both dangerous and exhausting and driving yourself is not necessarily cheaper than hiring a driver.

However, for naturalists, the region simply holds around half of the country's biodiversity within a relatively small area. Arunachal Pradesh is well known among birders and mammalwatchers thanks to sites such as Eaglenest or Mishmi Hills. I did, of course, consider visiting some of these remote locations with extraordinary wildlife, but the very basic level of comfort, limited cultural aspects and the significant travel time made this option unattractive for my travel buddies. Travelling alone in this region was also not financially viable for me. On the other hand, taking people to discover the megafauna of the Assam plains seemed much more realistic, which is how we ended up visiting the region.

2.4.1. Itinerary and logistics

18/01/2025	Flight to Jorhat and transfer to Hollongapar (by Jungle Travels)
19/01/2025	Hollongapar - Kaziranga
20/01/2025	Kaziranga
21/01/2025	Kaziranga - Tezpur - Nameri
22/01/2025	Nameri
23/01/2025	Trip to Manas
24/01/2025	Manas
25/01/2025	Kakoijana - Manas
26/01/2025	Return to Guwahati (end of Jungle Travels services) and road towards Shillong
27/01/2025	Tyrna (Cherrapunji)
28/01/2025	Tyrna (Cherrapunji) to Shillong
29/01/2025	Shillong - Guwahati
30/01/2025	Guwahati
31/01/2025	Departure for Siliguri by train



We did not try public transport in the region, but it mostly seemed like a good way to waste a lot of time. It is better to form a small group (three to four people is ideal) and use either private taxis or an agency. Jungle Travels was one of the few agencies to respond to my numerous quote requests, and at a very reasonable price. The agent spoke good English, was very friendly and funny, and also had solid knowledge of wildlife, including birds and their calls.

My only criticism would be that he was not sufficiently proactive, in my opinion, with some local guides when changes of plan became obviously necessary. Nevertheless, credit must be given to him for selecting two of the best guides I had during the entire trip, in Manas and Kaziranga. Unfortunately, the guide initially planned for Nameri was reassigned, and we ended up with a less motivated ranger (more details in the relevant section).

I mention this because I realized that while the price of safaris in the parks is the same for everyone (apart from the difference between nationals and foreigners), the quality of the ranger can vary significantly. Using an agency does not only help solve logistical challenges between sites but also allows access to their network and increases the chances of getting good guides.

I can recommend Jungle Travels (info@junglentravels.in) without hesitation if cost is an important factor for you. Perhaps other agencies offer a higher level of service for more demanding travellers with larger budgets.

In total, I recorded 145 bird species in Assam, summarised in the following eBird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/400169>

2.4.2. Hollongapar

The small Hollongapar Sanctuary is well known among primate enthusiasts as it allows relatively easy observation of several species. The Western Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock hoolock*) is obviously the star of the sanctuary, and rangers usually manage to locate them quickly after hearing their territorial morning calls. During our single morning visit, we did not hear any calls and did not encounter them despite our efforts. This was one of the biggest disappointments of the trip, as we also failed to find them later in Kaziranga (in the extreme western sector of the park). Sightings of [Capped Langur](#) (*Trachypithecus pileatus*), [Rhesus Macaque](#) (*Macaca mulatta*) and even [Northern Pig-tailed Macaque](#) (*Macaca leonina*) did not make up for this miss.

The park also hosts more rarely observed species such as the Bengal Slow Loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*), which is difficult to see due to the prohibition of night walks, and the Stump-tailed Macaque (*Macaca arctoides*), living in large nomadic groups. The elephants in the park seemed rather unpredictable and traumatised by their interactions with humans. It must be said that the sanctuary has become an isolated patch, trapping arboreal species such as the gibbons that live there.

A railway line divides the park in two, and we had the unusual experience of watching langurs from the embankment formed by the tracks while a train passed less than two metres behind us. We were based at Gibbon Resort, which was comfortable but not as close to the sanctuary as I had expected.

2.4.3. Kaziranga

Kaziranga no longer needs introduction: it is the emblem of Northeast India and the flagship destination of tourism in Assam. Despite the high expectations I had for this park, I was not disappointed, and it will remain one of the highlights of the trip. Seeing so many large herbivores roaming freely in front of you, as if on the first morning of the world, while knowing that elusive tigers are moving through the tall grass, was a real delight for my travel companions, even though they are not naturalists themselves.

We did three safaris in the park, starting in the eastern range (Agaratoli), then moving to the central range (Kohora) and finally the western range (Bagori). The central range was definitely the busiest (it offers the most realistic chances of seeing a tiger, including a tabby one), but this was not something that affected our experience too much during our only safari there.

Wild Grass Resort also hardly needs any introduction; it is one of the oldest lodges around the park. Founded by a naturalist deeply involved in the management of the park, it may feel somewhat worn to more demanding clients, but I personally appreciated the slightly old-fashioned décor of the rooms and the gardens rich in birdlife (including [Great Hornbill](#) (*Buceros bicornis*) and [Brown Boobook](#) (*Ninox scutulata*)).

The [Indian Rhinoceros](#) (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), the undisputed stars of the park (nearly 70% of the global population), are most numerous in the western range, although they can honestly be seen throughout the park. [Hog Deer](#) (*Axis porcinus*) are also abundant, as are the impressive [Wild Water Buffalo](#) (*Bubalus arnee*). I was surprised not to see more [Swamp Deer](#) (*Rucervus duvaucelii*), and especially fewer wild [Asian Elephants](#) (*Elephas maximus*) than expected. Among carnivores, we observed a beautiful family of [Smooth-coated Otter](#) (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) with young in the eastern range, as well as our only [Crab-eating Mongoose](#) (*Urva urva*) of the trip.

I will not list all the birds of the park, as they cannot really be targeted and one largely depends on what is encountered along the roads, but I will nevertheless mention some particularly notable species observed:

- [Great Hornbill](#) (*Buceros bicornis*)
- [Asian Openbill](#) (*Anastomus oscitans*)
- [Lesser and Greater Adjutant](#) (*Leptoptilos javanicus* and *Leptoptilos dubius* at the nest)
- [Spot-billed Pelican](#) (*Pelecanus philippensis*)
- [Slender-billed Vulture](#) (*Gyps tenuirostris*)
- [Pallas's Fish Eagle](#) (*Haliaeetus leucoryphus*)
- [Grey-headed Fish Eagle](#) (*Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*)
- [Swamp Francolin](#) (*Ortygornis gularis*)



2.4.4. Tezpur

After our rich observations in Kaziranga, we hit the road, stopping along the way to observe a colony of flying foxes and hoping to hear a gibbon call from the road bordering the park, from which we would ultimately only take away a nice observation of [Malayan Giant Squirrel](#) (*Ratufa bicolor*). Assam Macaques are also known to occur on the forested slopes west of the park (around 26°34'27.9"N 93°06'00.5"E).

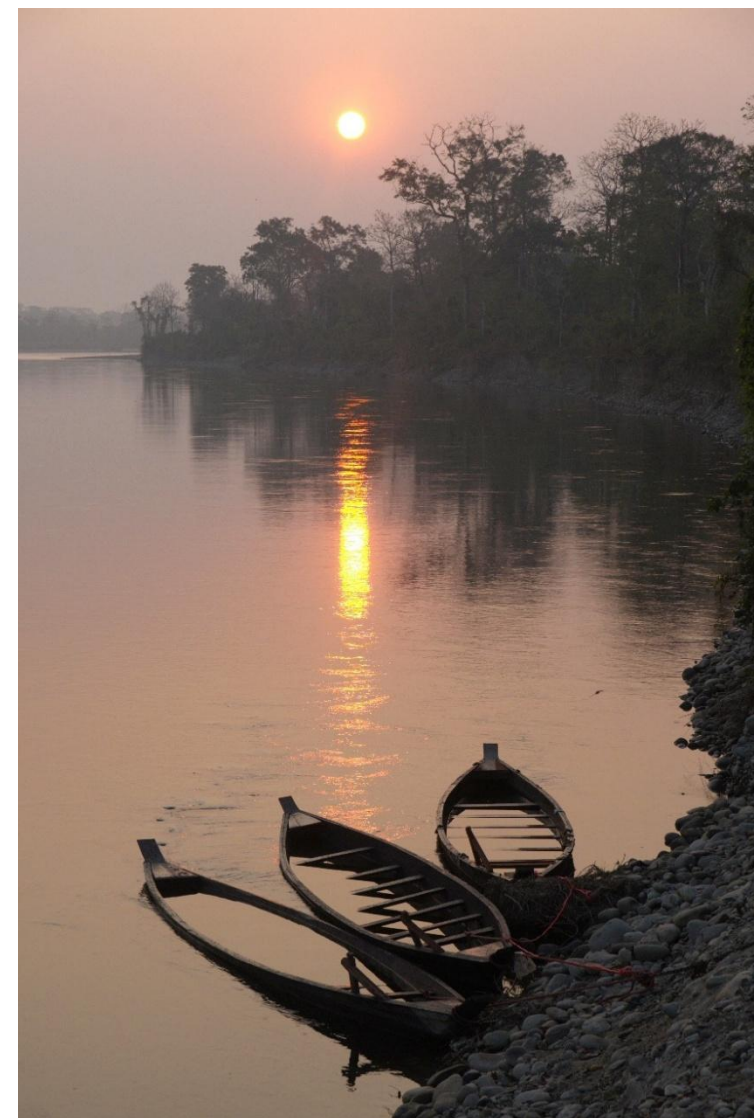
We arrived late in the morning in Tezpur, where we crossed the impressive Brahmaputra River via a long bridge. A fairly large motorboat was waiting for us to go and look for [Ganges River Dolphins](#) (*Platanista gangetica*). It took some time to find them, but we eventually had enough time with them. However, observations of these peculiar creatures are very brief. As for hoping to take photographs, this proved extremely difficult in such turbid waters. The noisy engine and the way the boat was driven also seemed to disturb these endangered animals, which are subjected to this kind of pressure for several hours a day. Although the species itself is extraordinary, the experience did not leave me with the best memories of the trip.

2.4.5. Nameri

The drive to Nameri continued in the afternoon. After settling into our rather basic accommodation but conveniently located near the guide office, our coordinator took us for a short walk around the camp. It felt more like a jungle trek, which I personally enjoyed, though my partner would gladly have done without it! Signs of elephant activity were numerous and very fresh. The surrounding fields are bordered by watchtowers from which villagers take turns guarding their crops at night until the harvest.

Nameri is well known for birdwatching thanks for its rich foothill forest. The park can only be visited on foot, accompanied by an armed guide, after crossing the river on a rudimentary ferry. Although we were staying just a few hundred metres from the administration (at Elephant Paradise Camp, fairly basic but adequate for Nameri), we were woken at dawn only to spend a long time for permits to be issued.

Our local agent had booked an experienced and passionate guide, but he was reassigned at the last minute. We were therefore given another guide who quickly proved to be less motivated. We tried unsuccessfully for the White-winged Duck (*Asarcornis scutulata*), a very rare and endangered species that can sometimes be seen at a waterbody accessible by one of the trails.





Elephants were rumbling nearby, hidden in the vegetation, and we could hear them more than we could glimpse them through the dense forest, which made for quite an intense experience on foot. We did add a few species to the long list of birds present in the park, but nothing particularly notable. Eventually, at 9:00, we were told that the outing was over and that we had to return to the hotel. Very disappointed not to be able to enjoy our only visit to the park for longer, we made our way back to the river, where we crossed paths with the guide we were supposed to have, smiling and leading a group of Indian tourists dressed in robes, formal clothes and polished city shoes... what a waste!

In the afternoon, we were taken upstream along the Kameng River, which we then descended by inflatable canoe. I hesitated to bring my photographic equipment, but I was reassured that it would not be too rough. I can confirm that it is perfectly safe to bring a camera, with little risk beyond a few splashes in the rapids. The canoe operators were excellent observers and handled the boat very well.

Thanks to them, we observed a pair of **Ibisbill** (*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*) as well as our only **River Lapwing** (*Vanellus duvaucelii*) of the trip. We only had one brief opportunity to photograph these birds, as the boat quickly carried us past them, which was slightly frustrating, but we had many better chances with **Ruddy Shelduck** (*Tadorna ferruginea*). Beyond the opportunity to observe different bird species from an interesting angle (even if photography from a moving raft is often challenging), it was a refreshing experience that broke the routine of explorations on foot and by vehicle, which can sometimes become repetitive.

2.4.6. Manas

The journey from Nameri took almost the entire day before we arrived and received a very warm welcome at Pathak's B&B, one of our favourite accommodations of the entire trip.

Manas offers an experience that is both similar and complementary to Kaziranga. One could say that what Kaziranga provides in abundance, Manas makes up for with greater diversity. Notably, one can observe **Gaur** (*Bos gaurus*), which are absent from Kaziranga. I even came across these impressive bovids and a rhinoceros while walking along the road bordering the park in the late afternoon. My attempt at spotlighting, however, proved disappointing.

A large (perhaps too large?) number of hotels are being developed along the edge of the park and do not follow any sustainable approach. Loud music is played in some places until late at night.

Rhinoceroses are less numerous in Manas, and during a single day, seeing one is not guaranteed, whereas in Kaziranga it almost seems unavoidable. On the other hand, we saw more groups of elephants in the forests and tall grasslands, as well as more primates. Among birds, there is quite a lot of overlap with Kaziranga, but forest species are easier to observe here.

This resulted in sightings of **Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos macei*), **Blue-bearded Bee-eater** (*Nyctornis athertoni*), White-bellied Erpornis (*Erpornis zantholeuca*) and **Red-breasted Parakeet** (*Psittacula alexandri*), particularly along the road leading to the Bhutanese border.

This area was until recently a stronghold of an independence movement that used the jungle and the border to traffic rhinoceros horns to finance armed struggle. The truce that was signed has had a positive impact on wildlife, and the rhinoceros population continues to slowly increase. A significant number of ranger stations are positioned at regular intervals, each equipped with a watchtower used to detect suspicious activity.

2.4.7. Kakoijana

An early start brought us around 7:00 to the village of Kakoijana, which serves as the gateway to the small nearby sanctuary where around sixty [Gee's golden langur](#) (*Trachypitecus geei*) of this very localised primate species live. While most wildlife viewing experiences in India take place in national or state parks, this is a local conservation initiative.

As is often the case, administrative procedures that could have been prepared in advance had not been, and the search for the primates only began about thirty minutes later when a young man who had overslept finally joined us.

A group of langurs seems to live very close to the village and even appears to prefer gardens to spend the night, probably because of the safety this provides. We observed them for quite some time above a house, but they were still not very active and remained too high or too hidden to fully enjoy the sighting. At least it ensured that we would see them.

We then headed into the forest with the young guide to try to find others "wilder" groups, and possibly some birds as well. The guide spared no effort and rushed around in all directions like a hunting dog, without really providing any explanations. We wandered around without any clear logic or strategy, and my companions began to lose patience and lag several hundred metres behind.

At that point, I asked our agent to bring this circus to an end and return to the village to at least secure a second opportunity with the more habituated group and hopefully get better photographic opportunities. It turned out to be the right decision, as the animals had not moved far and were feeding in a bamboo clump just above the road.

What a privilege it was to observe such a rare primate at such close range!





Can we get enough of the Gee's Golden Langur ?



Hog deer and Asian Wild Buffalo (true ones!)





Indian Rhinoceros, Asian Elephant and Jungle Myna riding



Gaur, Himalayan Vulture, Greater Adjutant and Great Hornbill



Spotted Owlet and some more buffalos

2.4.8. Guwahati

The main city of Northeast India does not stand out particularly as a tourist destination, but we nonetheless enjoyed our two nights there, during which we were able to enjoy a comfortable bed and a wide choice of restaurants. The lively night markets are also a good opportunity to get a glimpse of Indian culture for someone who would otherwise only come to the Northeast to observe wildlife.

Along the Brahmaputra riverfront, as night was beginning to fall, we were able to observe numerous flying foxes leaving in search of fruit.

My visit to the Assam State Zoo was very enjoyable, and I was pleasantly surprised by its standard compared to my expectations of an Indian zoo (even if some enclosures remain quite poor, and not only the older ones). It is also an opportunity to observe certain species of the country that are otherwise difficult to see, such as Pygmy Hog (*Porcula salvania*), Red Serow (*Capricornis rubidus*), Four-horned Antelope (*Tetracerus quadricornis*), Western Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock hoolock*) or Brow-antlered Deer (*Rucervus eldii*).

Beyond the captive collection, the zoo with its old trees separating various water bodies support a large population of wild birds. I was notably able to observe both species of Asian adjutants at close range. Birding groups visiting the region usually favour the open-air garbage dump, which guarantees sightings of the rare [Greater Adjutant](#), but I was happy to make these observations in a more aesthetic setting and to avoid visiting that site on the outskirts of the city.

As I no longer had much reason to go to the adjutant dump site (and its exact location was not very clear to me), I opted instead for the Garbhanga Forest Reserve. A single paved road climbs into bamboo-covered hills. This turned out to be a very good decision, as I observed a few species there that I would not see later, such as [Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush](#) (*Pterorhinus pectoralis*) and [Black-backed Forktail](#) (*Enicurus immaculatus*). I am also convinced that I observed a group of [Assam Macaque](#) (*Macaca assamensis*).

Had I known in advance how promising the site was, I think I would have hired a local guide, and I would recommend independent visitors to explore this area, which offers a different experience and habitat compared to nearby national parks.



Greater Necklaced Laughinhthrush



2.4.9. Meghalaya

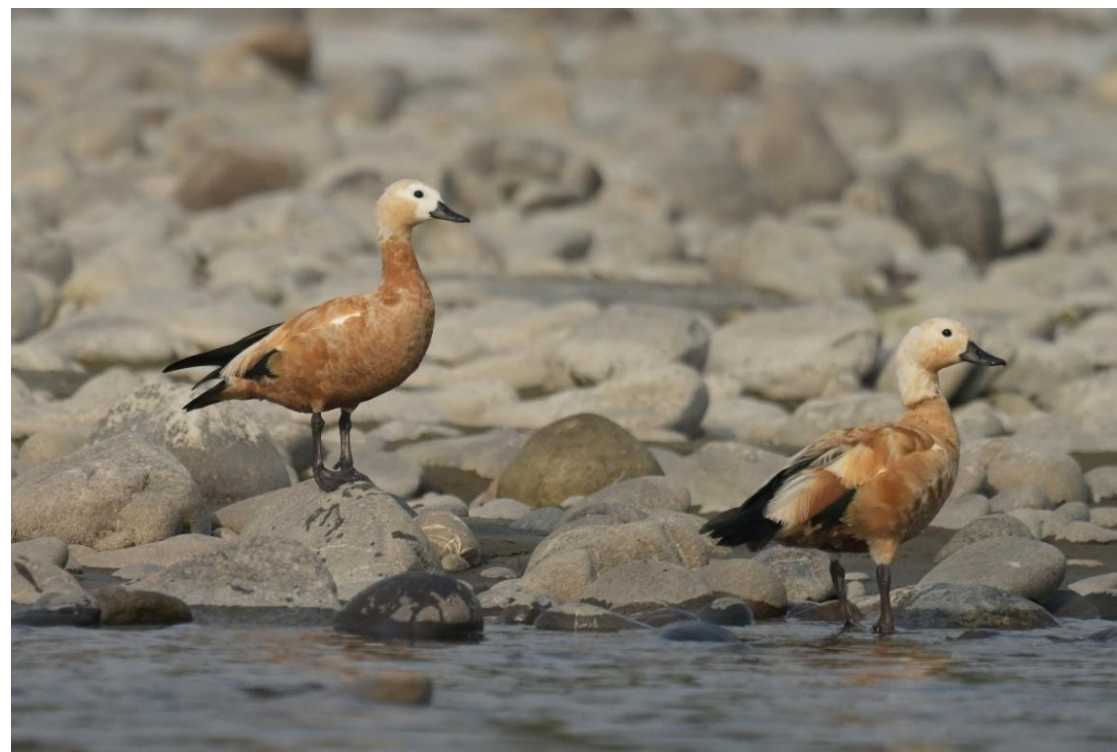
After our Assam safari circuit, we headed straight for Shillong. The idea was then to reach Cherrapunji the next morning, world-famous for its living root bridges. These bridges are built over decades by “weaving” ficus roots toward the opposite side of a canyon, allowing people to move through these densely vegetated hills overlooking Bangladesh. I was hoping to find some new species during the trek through the jungle. But beyond the plastic that was everywhere along the trails, we hardly saw any animals at all. Even the forest at first light was completely silent. The Khasi minority who inhabit these hills are inveterate hunters, and if birds still remain in these forests, they have clearly learned to stay extremely discreet—a striking contrast with the rest of India.

2.4.10. Missed opportunities in Assam

Unsurprisingly, not observing the Western Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock hoolock*) was the biggest disappointment of this leg of the trip, as there were strong reasons to expect it. I would have liked to devote more time to trying for it. Tiger can be seen in Kaziranga (which even holds one of the highest densities in the world), but it is clearly not the best place in India for the species, as sightings are often distant and brief. Other felids remain more of a remote possibility (leopard, clouded leopard, golden cat...). With targeted effort, it might be possible to observe the Fishing Cat.

If I had been travelling in a group of dedicated naturalists, I would have strongly favoured a visit to Arunachal Pradesh (Bomdila and Eaglenest) or eastern Assam (Dihing Patkai, Digboi, Namdapha or Dibru-Saikhowa) rather than Meghalaya. This is the most biodiverse region of the country and one of the only areas accessible for species whose range is otherwise limited to Myanmar and southern China. If I ever return to India, these locations will definitely be among my priorities.

As our stay was relatively short, I do not regret spending only a day and a half in Kaziranga, but it is clearly the place where I would add more time if I could. If Golden Langur is not a major target and you only have a limited time, focusing entirely on Kaziranga and exploring its different ranges intensively makes perfect sense, as Manas does not usually produce as many sightings and takes longer to reach out.



2.5. Sikkim and West Bengal

If Assam regularly features in wildlife enthusiasts' trip reports, Sikkim is mentioned far less often. This tiny state wedged between Nepal and Bhutan shares a some traits with the other North-Eastern states. It nevertheless stands apart quite clearly from neighbouring West Bengal, whose identity feels much more distinctly "Indian". We reached the region by train from Guwahati to Siliguri, a journey of just a few hours. From there, a taxi took us the following day up to Ghum, a small-town bordering Darjeeling at over 2,200 metres above sea level. Darjeeling, which historically used to be part of Sikkim, became our base, for several short excursions lasting a few days each. This leg of the trip had not been organised as clearly in advance as the previous ones. As departure drew nearer, uncertainties began to pile up, and I preferred not to commit too much too early. I also knew that at some point we would have to leave India for a few hours, or even overnight, in order to comply with the visa rules. The only part that had been arranged beforehand was a five-day trek in Singalila National Park, on the Indian side of this high-altitude ridge, in the hope of seeing Red Panda and the local birdlife.

In all, I visited four main sites, which gave me the opportunity to discover no fewer than 94 species, most of them new to me/ Here the link to the ebird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/405751>

2.5.1. Itinerary and logistics

01/02/2025	Siliguri - Darjeeling
02/02/2025	Darjeeling
03/02/2025	Darjeeling - Ravangla
04/02/2025	Ravangla
05/02/2025	Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary
06/02/2025	Ravangla - Darjeeling
07/02/2025	Darjeeling - Gairibans
08/02/2025	Gairibans
09/02/2025	Gairibans - Tonglu
10/02/2025	Tonglu - Dhotrey
11/02/2025	Dhotrey - Darjeeling
12/02/2025	Darjeeling - Latpanchar
13/02/2025	Latpanchar
14/02/2025	Latpanchar - Siliguri
15/02/2025	Siliguri - Nepal border
16/02/2025	Nepal border - Siliguri - Varanasi



2.5.2. Darjeeling

We travelled by private car from the plains to Darjeeling along a winding mountain road. Despite the driver's fast and rather rough driving, it still took us more than three hours to cover the 30 kilometres. Unfortunately, the young driver had the unpleasant habit of repeatedly burping up his breakfast of hard-boiled eggs (and loudly!), which made the winding journey feel even longer and more uncomfortable.

Once we arrived, we were surprised by the cold and especially the pervasive humidity. Accommodation is poorly insulated and not very comfortable from a thermal perspective. We were all the more disappointed because we had imagined Darjeeling as a charming hill station with British-style architecture overlooking vast tea plantations. Instead, we discovered that Indian urban planning — or rather the lack of it — had largely taken over. Houses have been built continuously along the narrow road linking western Sikkim to the rest of India to the point where the city suffocate. In addition to the endless stream of trucks loaded with goods and constantly honking, an old steam train also shares this narrow road, sometimes passing just a few centimetres from the houses.

One of the main attractions of Darjeeling is Tiger Hill, located within the Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary. Tourists flock there by the hundreds to witness sunrise and, when the weather allows, see the high Himalayan peaks glow with the first light of day — notably Kangchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world and the highest in India.



Because of the crowds, reaching the summit by jeep requires booking a permit in advance through authorised operators, a service that is charged at a premium, especially for foreigners. As our accommodation was not far from the sanctuary entrance, I set off on foot as soon as I had finished breakfast in order to make the most of the morning. My companions followed later at their own pace.

The few vehicles on the road seemed surprised to see hikers, but the walk is perfectly feasible, with a climb of about 5 kilometres and 350 metres of elevation gain from Ghum. The forest is beautiful and the park almost empty once the jeeps have descended. As the sky was overcast, few tourists bothered to try their luck. The birds seemed to share this lack of enthusiasm and remained mostly silent. I did not observe anything particularly interesting before reaching the top of the hill and the temple.

Just below the viewpoint, the Buddhist temple is lined with a few vendors and a block of toilets where a feeding station has been set up. This is where bird activity seemed to be concentrated. The birds are both more accustomed to human presence and attracted by food scraps left more or less deliberately for them. [Orange-bellied Himalayan squirrel](#) (*Dremomys lokriah*) also come readily.

The main targets at the summit are [Hill Partridge](#) (*Arborophila torqueola*) and [Grey-sided Laughingthrush](#) (*Pterorhinus caeruleatus*). It still took quite a bit of effort to observe them and eventually manage to take a few photos. I was lucky to also see [Golden-breasted Fulvetta](#) (*Lioparus chrysotis*) and [Grey-sided Bush Warbler](#) (*Cettia brunnifrons*). Because of the cold, bird activity seemed to pick up late in the morning, a pattern that will be confirmed in other locations. My friends had already gone back down because of the temperature. The view remained completely obscured throughout the day, except for a few seconds upon my arrival during which I briefly caught sight of Kangchenjunga's imposing silhouette.

The following day, I returned to try my luck for a few hours on the lower slopes before heading to Sikkim, with little success. The cold and constant humidity, even in the accommodation, started to give us colds, and I began to question my decision to come to Sikkim in February.

Using a local guide may facilitate the observation of certain species, but it did not seem absolutely necessary at this site.

2.5.3. Ravangla

Our next destination was Ravangla, in Sikkim. To get there, main options are either a private taxi or shared sumos, a type of large jeeps that take around ten passengers, (packed in like sardines) and which operate on fixed routes between various towns. We had to make two connections at specific stations. Although it may seem chaotic from the outside, it is actually quite well organised.

We quickly learned to book an extra seat so that there would be only three rather than four of us on a bench, making the journey more comfortable and also speeding up departure, which only happens once the vehicle is full. At the border with West Bengal, the three of us foreigners had to get out to register at the checkpoint. The formalities took about fifteen minutes and did not seem to present any difficulty. Quite tired, we arrived in town and began to discover Bhutanese cuisine, with its momos and wonderfully restorative broths, before heading to our homestay located on a farm below the village.

We stayed on a farm where we were very warmly welcomed, even if the comfort was rather basic. We appreciated discovering the local way of life, and the surroundings offered good opportunities for walking. The following day, I had arranged for Chewang Rinchen Bonpo (+91 97359 00165), owner of Sikkim Birding

agency and Bonfa Farm House lodge, to guide me in the area. I can only recommend his services very highly. Thanks to his field knowledge and sharp observation skills, I was able to add several remarkable species to my list, such as **Scaly Laughingthrush** (*Trochalopteron subunicolour*), **Rusty-fronted Barwing** (*Actinodura egeroni*), **Chestnut-headed Tesia** (*Cettia castaneocoronata*) and the much-desired **Fire-tailed Myzornis** (*Myzornis pyrrhura*).

On the second day, my partner was very ill but still joined us for our hike in the Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary. It was one of the most beautiful forests I have ever seen. We progressed through the mist, among moss-covered branches of ancient oaks and rhododendrons. I came across quite a lot of plastic along the trail, as the authorities do not consider emptying the bins necessary, but also some beautiful mixed flocks composed, for example, of **Darjeeling Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos darjellensis*), **Crimson-naped Woodpecker** (*Dryobates cathpharius*), **Grey-crested Tit** (*Lophophanes dichrous*), **Hoary-throated Barwing** (*Actinodura nipalensis*) and the splendid **Golden Babbler** (*Cyanoderma chrysaeum*).

On the way back, in the bamboo, I was delighted to come across a family of **Black-throated Parrotbill** (*Suthora nipalensis*) and a Dark-breasted Rosefinch (*Procarduelis nipalensis*), before reaching the immense Buddha statue for which the area is famous. Finally, before leaving, we made a detour to the large Buddhist monastery of Ravangla, which is much older and, in my opinion, more interesting. Most notably, on the road, we encountered a pair of **Yellow-throated Marten** (*Martes flavigula*) crossing in front of us.

My solo night searches were cut short by the many dogs from neighbouring farms, which began howling menacingly as soon as I approached. I could nevertheless hear a Mountain Scops Owl...





Chestnut-tailed Minla, Rusty-fronted Barwing and Hoary-throated Barwing

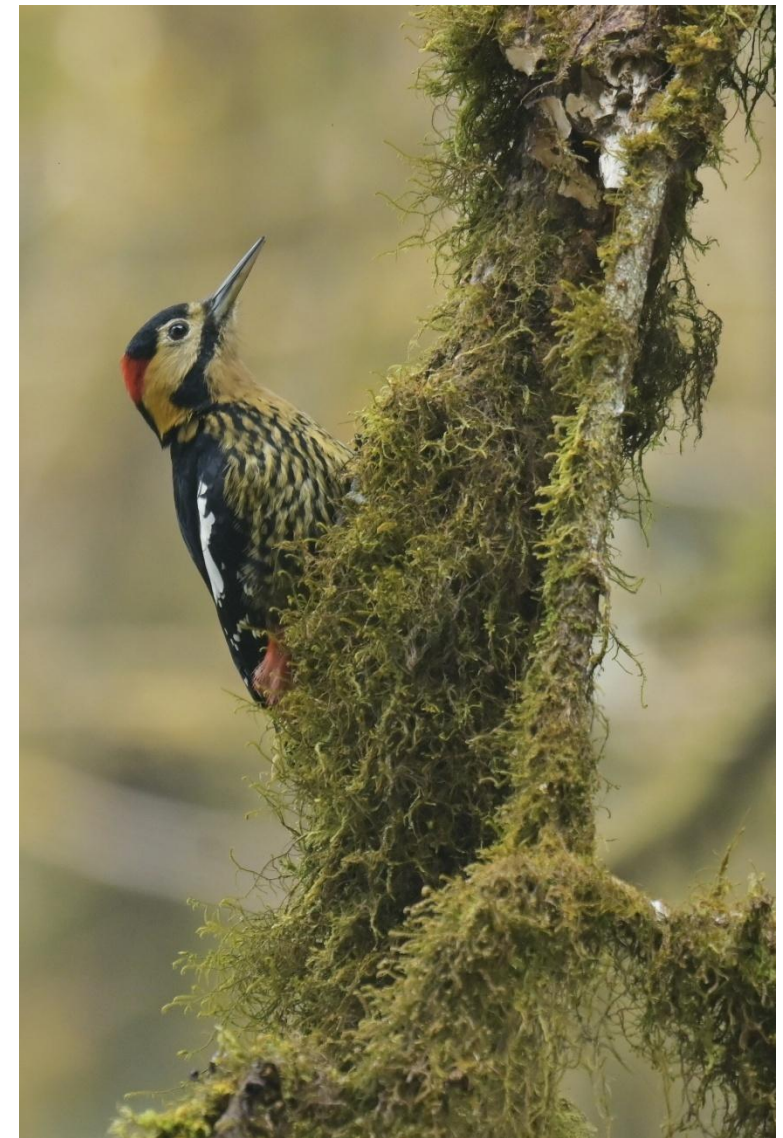
2.5.4. Singalila Ridge

After the short day of travel that brought us back from Ravangla to Darjeeling, we tried to rest and recover, as the following day we were starting a block of four nights and five days in Singalila National Park. The goal was to see the Nepalese Red Panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), which is apparently more commonly seen on the Nepalese side of the border. Despite thorough research, I could not find any accounts of people searching for it on the Indian side, even though Habre's Nest, which seems to be the best location, lies literally a few metres from the Indian border.

Because of the proximity to the border and the difficulty of contacting the lodges by email (despite my attempts), it was necessary to go through a local guide. Indian border guards are numerous and particularly strict, and it is better to arrange permits in advance to avoid issues at the various checkpoints. The trail along the ridge constantly zigzags between Nepal and India. It is accepted that foreigners use this trail, but they are not allowed to spend the night outside the country. Curiously, authorities seem more suspicious of people leaving the territory than those entering it.

In addition to being far beyond my budget, Habre's Nest required making a long detour via Nepal. No wildlife-focused tour operator responded to my requests on the Indian side, or at least not with an acceptable quote, so I turned instead to local trekking agencies. Ashmita Trek & Tours (+91 9733 10 6312) offered us a package at around €500 for three people over five days. I became nervous as the trek approached because I had heard nothing from them and had to follow up, but in the end I had nothing to complain about regarding the organisation. If possible, however, I would recommend contacting Tentei directly (+91 95476 19 953), the guide assigned to us by the agency. He spoke good English and was one of the best guides of the entire trip, both excellent in spotting wildlife and at engaging in pleasant conversation, while also being attentive to his clients' needs.

The trek began with a jeep ride up to Gairibans, the nearest Indian lodge to Habre's Nest, from where the spotters set out each day. We stayed there for three nights, following the same routine: a slow walk to Habre's Nest, then waiting all day over tea or soup while scouts searched for the animal, and, if luck was on our side, a sprint to the location once the panda had been spotted.



Darjeeling Woodpecker

On our first afternoon there, we learned that no panda had been observed for several days, and the thick fog that settled in did not help the search. I focused on a few new bird species attracted by food scraps thrown outside the kitchen, in particular **Black-faced Laughingthrush** (*Trochalopteron affine*) and the superb **Spotted Laughingthrush** (*Ianthocincla ocellata*). My wife was becoming increasingly ill and miserable, and the experience was not off to a great start. The hoped-for Himalayan panoramas were also absent due to the poor weather.

The following day, we followed the same routine, this time under clear skies. My wife, however, was completely exhausted and suffering from bronchitis. After only a few hundred metres, she had to turn back. I walked her down to the lodge so that she could rest, while our guide and my friend continued slowly up the very steep trail. I then ran back to catch up with them and, barely a few dozen metres after re-entering the forest, we suddenly came across a magnificent **Nepalese Red Panda** (*Ailurus fulgens*), feeding on bamboo quite low in a tree. The sighting was extraordinary, and we were ecstatic. After a few minutes, the animal climbed higher into the tree and settled there. What luck!

Our guide immediately ran back to Habre's Nest to inform the other visitors who had been waiting with us the previous day. They returned by vehicle, and we were able to show them the panda, now resting in its tree and occasionally revealing its beautiful face through the foliage. I then asked the driver whether he could take me back down to the lodge to fetch my wife, so that she too could see what the cutest mammal on Earth is perhaps. He agreed without hesitation. I was deeply relieved to be able to share with her the animal that had justified the journey, the long wait, and those freezing mornings when we had to break the ice in the washbasin.

Sharing that moment was both a relief and a real joy. We watched the panda for around thirty more minutes before it eventually moved away, perhaps disturbed by our presence. Unfortunately, I also witnessed some rather disrespectful behaviour towards the animal, with loud shouting and clapping by a local guide and photographer trying to attract its attention for photos.





After three nights in Gairibans, we set off early for Tonglu, mainly following the jeep track, which offers an easier route than the trekking path and better visibility for wildlife observation. It proved quite productive for birding. Among the notable species observed in Singalila during our hikes, I would mention Himalayan Cutia (*Cutia nipalensis*), Yellow-billed Blue-Magpie (*Urocissa flavirostris*), Southern Nutcracker (*Nucifraga hemispila*), Rufous-vented Tit (*Periparus rubidiventris*), Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler (*Pomatorhinus superciliaris*).

The night in Tonglu, at 3,000 metres altitude, was cold and damp, and we did not stay long before descending towards the village of Dhotrey. During the descent, just as my partner was beginning to recover, I started to feel feverish and my energy began to fade.

The weather was not on our side, as we systematically experienced thick fog in the afternoon and evening, preventing any additional outings. I am also unsure whether night excursions are allowed, given the "sensitive" nature of the area and its status as a national park.



Gairibans Trekkers' Hut will be remembered very well by my wife. Hill Partridge and Black-faced Laughingthrush

2.5.5. Latpanchar

After spending one night enjoying the comforts of Darjeeling, I booked a private taxi to take me to this village located at the border between Sikkim and West Bengal. I arranged my stay with Hornbill's Nest Homestay (Sabir Subba +91 94752 54923 or his wife, who manages the accommodation, +91 94348 55447) for two nights, as the area seemed very promising and offers an impressive range of species with a strong Indochinese influence.

If the site is well known, it is primarily as one of the best places to observe Rufous-necked Hornbill (*Aceros nipalensis*). Unfortunately, visiting in February meant I was still too early in the season. In addition, I was increasingly unwell, with body aches and very little energy. The existence of two photographic hides turned out to be very convenient, as I was struggling to remain standing for long.

From the hide, I was able to observe several species that are normally quite difficult to see, such as **Himalayan Shortwing** (*Brachypteryx cruralis*), **Grey-bellied Tesia** (*Tesia cyaniventer*) and **Sapphire Flycatcher** (*Ficedula sapphira*). At dawn the following day, I set out with Subba by car towards a forested slope below Latpanchar, where **Red-headed Trogon** (*Harpactes erythrocephalus*) is fairly reliable. We had good views, and perhaps even more remarkable was a **Long-billed Thrush** (*Zoothera monticola*) that allowed for some photographs.

Later in the day, following indications from local villagers, we eventually heard the distant calls of **Rufous-necked Hornbills**. After scrambling up and down a forested slope, I finally managed to obtain a few shots through the vegetation before the birds flew off, alarmed.

Over these two full days, during which I was far too tired to go out at night and without having a vehicle at my disposal, I did not observe any mammals, although the habitat appears well preserved. If you are a birder travelling in Northeast India and have never been to Southeast Asia, I strongly recommend this area, which is very species-rich yet less visited by specialised tour operators. Otherwise, it may not be an essential stop, but it remains a pleasant and potentially productive one, especially at the right season.

Before continuing our itinerary towards central India, we had to do a "visa-run" : leaving the Indian territory for at least a night and then come back so that we would comply with the regulations limiting the stay to only 90 consecutive days. Crossing into Nepal went relatively smoothly (though not without some minor bureaucratic hassle) but was not particularly interesting in itself.







Spotted Laughingthrush, Black-faced Laughingthrush, Black-crested Bulbul and Red-headed trogon



Sapphire Flycatcher, Mrs. Gould's Sunbird, White-browed Fulvetta and Red-cheeked Squirrel

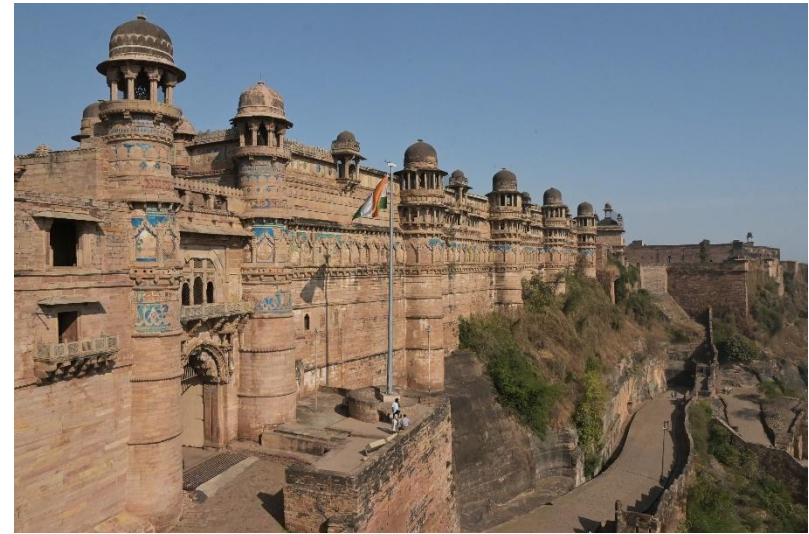


Buddhist Monastery and Yellow-billed Magpie



2.6. Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh

16/02/2025 Nepal - Siliguri - Varanasi
17/02/2025 Varanasi
18/02/2025 Varanasi - Bus
19/02/2025 Bus - Arrival at Khajuraho and safari in Panna
20/02/2025 Khajuraho
21/02/2025 Khajuraho
22/02/2025 Khajuraho - Orchha
23/02/2025 Orchha - Gwalior
24/02/2025 Gwalior



This short transition phase was intended to take us back overland from Northeast India to New Delhi, while visiting a few major cultural sites along the way. We needed to be in Delhi on the morning of the 28th, and we had not booked anything, as some aspects of the trip were still uncertain at the time—particularly how long we would lose with the visa-run between India and Nepal.

Unfortunately, this turned out to be the worst possible moment to travel without reservations, as we were passing near Prayagraj, at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna, where, once every 125 years (of course it had to fall during our trip!), the largest pilgrimage in the world takes place. Between 500 and 650 million people gather there to take advantage of a rare astrological alignment and ritually wash away their sins in the river. We had come to India partly for this kind of cultural immersion, but this pilgrimage felt far too intense, chaotic and overwhelmingly crowded to be approached independently without local support.

With such a rare event, virtually every devout Hindu had made arrangements to come on pilgrimage during these 45 days. Despite the government's efforts, these massive flows of people completely disrupted transport logistics in the region for several months. All trains were fully booked and getting to or from Varanasi—the holiest city in Hinduism and located barely 100 kilometres from the pilgrimage site—became a real nightmare.

We were even considering leaving the country...

2.6.1. Panna National Park

After the chaos of Varanasi and a journey of nearly 24 hours, arriving in the quiet little village of Khajuraho came as a relief. While my wife rested, I immediately set off again on my host's motorbike towards Panna National Park, about forty kilometres away.

Central India is well known for its tiger reserves, such as Pench, Tadoba and Bandhavgarh. I had considered making a detour to this region earlier in the trip, but as tigers were the only real reason to go that far out of the way, I had instead opted for Ranthambore, given its accessibility and lower cost. I knew it would be crowded, but I still hoped to get "my" wild tiger sighting. That had not happened, and neither Assam provided, and I found myself reconsidering the entire upcoming itinerary in order to fit in one last opportunity.

Panna is less well known, but it has the advantage of not requiring a major detour, and its tiger population is increasing thanks to effective protection. I had therefore arranged the safari a few weeks in advance through my guesthouse, Holiday Home Stay, run by Abdul (+91 96303 83 947), one of the kindest people we met during the entire trip — I highly recommend his simple, family-run place.

At this stage, after three months in India and many safaris, the only thing that really mattered to me was seeing a tiger. There are, of course, many other interesting species, but the idea of leaving India after five months without seeing one was beginning to haunt me.

The dry, sometimes rugged landscape was not particularly striking, and the wildlife we observed was standard: a peacock here, some Chital there, a few langurs, and a Chinkara briefly pulling me out of my torpor — but nothing remarkable.

As the light began to fade, we sensed growing tension and agitation as we approached a waterhole. Several vehicles were leaving the area, reporting that a tiger had been seen nearby after killing a cow earlier that morning. Sure enough, the carcass of a cow lay not far from the road.

Suddenly, a massive male Tiger emerged out of nowhere and crossed the road right in front of us. We were not especially close, but we saw him for a few seconds as he moved through an open patch of tall grass, with only a few vehicles around us. He glanced in our direction for a moment — a frozen instant that remains etched in my memory. Despite having seen hundreds of tigers in zoos, this one felt huge.

The big male then lay down in the tall grass next to the carcass. We were lucky enough to catch occasional glimpses of his head appearing above the grass before park regulations forced our vehicle to move on; viewing time at sightings is limited for each vehicle, both to make room for others and to minimise disturbance.

The rest of the safari was anecdotal: I had finally seen the king of India's forests, and I was absolutely overjoyed.



2.6.2. Orchha

This small sleepy town along a river is better known for its temples and its old fort than as a major wildlife destination. However, in addition to being one the cultural highlights, Orchha offers remarkably easy observation of the **Indian Vulture** (*Gyps indicus*), a critically endangered species that is usually difficult to find.

A sanctuary on the opposite bank of the river, which we did not have time to visit, is said to hold a wide range of species typical of central India.



Indian Vulture



Chinkara

2.7. Ladakh



2.7.1. Itinerary and logistics

15/03/2025	Delhi - Leh
16/03/2025	Shey et Thiksey
17/03/2025	Spituk
18/03/2025	Leh - Saspochey
19/03/2025	Saspochey
20/03/2025	Ulley
21/03/2025	Ulley - Sakti
22/03/2025	Sakti
23/03/2025	Rumtse from Sakti
24/03/2025	Sakti - Chemrey - Leh
25/03/2025	Leh - Delhi - Bangalore - Train to Hospet

India is maybe the best country for snow leopard observation in terms of probability, and certainly the most visited for that purpose. Two regions are particularly well known for snow leopards:

- Ladakh is the best known among international travellers. It offers spectacular landscapes, relatively good infrastructure and comfortable homestays, and is fairly easy to access. Local spotters are very efficient at locating leopards in the valleys around Hemis National Park. However, one must bear in mind that most sightings occur at distances of over one kilometre, and the animal can only be seen through a scope, not even binoculars (that also applies to China and Mongolia as far as I understand).

- Spiti Valley or Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary in Himachal Pradesh is much more remote and less comfortable, but also offers closer sightings, as the valleys are narrower than in Ladakh. Most Indian wildlife watchers, who are mainly photographers, tend to favour Spiti over Ladakh for this reason.

I considered both options and neither seemed cheaper than the other. As I was travelling with my wife, who is neither particularly enthusiastic about animals nor tolerant of the cold (to put it mildly), this ruled out Spiti. Ladakh offered more cultural interest and greater landscape diversity.

I was discouraged by the quotes provided by the various agencies I had contacted and initially thought I would simply go to Ladakh and see how things unfolded. The snow leopard was only the icing on the cake, as I also wanted to enjoy the landscapes and the animal life of this region, so different from the rest of India.

Completely by chance, while browsing Google Maps, I came across Mingyur (+91 97975 06493), who had recently started his agency Panthera Expeditions. I found little information about his agency, but no negative feedback, and above all, his quote — which appeared serious — was significantly cheaper than the others. Without wanting to speak poorly of anyone, he seemed to understand that I was not looking for a luxury Snow Leopard experience with top-tier Swarovski scopes, but for a trip combining culture, landscapes and natural history, where birds and other mammals would also have their place. In general, most sightings also seem to result from information shared by spotters with the entire community of guides. The guide's field skills are therefore important, but perhaps not as decisive as the extent and strength of their local network with local communities.

From reading various reports, I understood that sightings can vary from fairly regular to exceptional depending on the year and the location, and that no single area consistently outperform others over multiple seasons. I therefore became convinced that the best approach was to remain flexible depending on recent successes and sightings reported in different valleys. We had a prearranged plan focusing on the Ulley valley, with alternative options prepared depending on how things unfolded.



We stayed with local families, in conditions that were entirely reasonable considering the price and the environment. The food was excellent and very comforting, and the rooms were heated with stoves fuelled by kerosene and dried yak dung, which proved very effective.

To ensure that snow leopard tourism benefits as many households as possible, there seems to be a rule limiting stays to two days per household, so we stayed in three different villages. Staying with locals was clearly one of the highlights of the experience, as it allowed us to immerse ourselves in the daily life of these remote communities during the harshest season of the year.

We were concerned about the cold and therefore rented some winter clothing (as carrying such equipment throughout a long trip would not have been practical), which proved entirely adequate. We paid only €35 for two people for a week (I only rented a down jacket, while my wife rented everything from head to toe).

The list of bird species observed is obviously more limited, but still includes some specialties that are difficult to observe elsewhere in India: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/417649>

2.7.2. Leh and surroundings

Our arrival in Leh, on a flight from Delhi, was slightly delayed due to weather conditions, but the short flight itself went smoothly and offered magnificent views of the Himalayas. This is definitely one of those flights where paying extra for a window seat was worth every rupee!

Upon arrival, we quickly felt light-headed due to the altitude and the lack of oxygen. We did not panic and tried to take things as calmly as possible, which also included registering as foreigners, as Ladakh is a highly militarised region. The first day was dedicated entirely to rest, with only a short outing in Leh.

The following day, we hired a taxi to visit the magnificent Thiksey Monastery, one of the largest in the region. The views from the top over the Indus Valley were spectacular. We then took a short break along the river to eat and were able to observe **Ibisbill** (*Ibidorhyncha struthersi*) at relatively close range. I was particularly pleased, as these sightings were far better than the ones I had had earlier in Nameri.



Before Mingyur came to brief us and provide our rented clothing, I made one last outing, this time towards Phey, where another monastery perched on a rocky spur above the river offers a beautiful panorama. I wasted quite a bit of time on the opposite bank of the river but eventually came across a few interesting birds along the river, including another pair of **Ibisbill** (*Ibidorhyncha struthersi*) and my first **Chukar Partridge** (*Alectoris chukar*).

2.7.3. Valleys around Ulley

An early departure with Mingyur brought us to Ulley around lunchtime. On the way, we stopped several times take in vast and spectacular landscapes and observed a herd of **Ladakh Urial** (*Ovis vignei*). The presence of the Indian army throughout the main valley is striking and does not inspire much confidence regarding the future of the region.

In Saspochey, we were welcomed by a very cheerful woman and an excellent cook. Re-energised, we set out in search of our first snow leopard. A yak kill had reportedly taken place a few kilometres away in a neighbouring valley. A long line of parked cars confirmed that the rumour was not unfounded. I grabbed my camera and ran uphill, convinced that every second could make the difference between an unforgettable sighting and a miss.

Completely out of breath at the top of the hill, where a group of photographers had gathered, I began scanning frantically for the leopard. I asked the other guides, who pointed towards the mountain and then showed me through a scope: rocks, lots of rocks... and nothing else. They insisted, and I eventually understood that this tiny pale spot among the rocks was the elusive [Snow Leopard](#) (*Panthera uncia*). A real anticlimax. The animal was estimated to be 1.5 kilometres away, and even with binoculars, I was unable to relocate it on my own. I also had to use another scope to spot a [Grey Wolf](#) (*Canis lupus*) roaming below the feline.

Despite this, more people gathered for the sighting, including a French-speaking group that had spent ten days in Rumbak, on the other side of the valley, and were beginning to lose hope of seeing the animal. I realised then how lucky I was to at least secure a sight, however poor, of this iconic species.

We returned the next afternoon to the same location to see whether the animal had moved closer. Suddenly, one of the locals received a phone call reporting another sighting in a nearby valley. Everyone rushed to reach the new site as quickly as possible. I am sure the locals—and probably the leopard itself, witnessing the scene—must have been quite amused by this spectacle of frantic and desperate tourists hastily packing up their tripods and sometimes sliding down the slope on their backsides.

We were extremely lucky. Although still distant, a pair of [Snow Leopards](#) could be seen moving along a sharp ridge above the village of Ulley, silhouetted against the sky—to the point that they were even visible from the window of the Snow Leopard Lodge!

The following day's objective was to find [Siberian Ibex](#) (*Capra sibirica*). I must have been one of the few tourists to have seen three snow leopards before even seeing one of their main prey species. In fact, I only observed the ibex from a distance that morning. While I had expected mediocre views of the predators, I had anticipated finding many more caprids in these mountains.

We then moved to higher ground above Ulley and spent part of the afternoon birdwatching. While we dipped on the Pallas's Dipper, I was delighted to finally observe the monotypic [White-browed Tit-Warbler](#) (*Leptopoecile sophiae*). The weather then deteriorated, and we lost several half-days due to low clouds and significant (though still moderate) snowfall for Ladakh.

Before returning to Leh, already satisfied with our snow leopard success, we made a few longer excursions to explore additional landscapes and birdlife. While exploring a sunny orchard bordered by a shaded mountain slope, we startled a large herd of urials, which provided us with an excellent observation.



Snow Leopards, Siberian Ibex, Black-lipped Pika and Ladakh Urial



Brown Accentor, Chuckar, Ibisbill and Horned Lark

2.7.4. Sakti

Sightings of lynx had been reported on the slopes above Sakti, which happens to be Dorje's home village. This became our destination for the day, and we arrived in time for lunch before heading out in the afternoon in search of the feline.

As we climbed, it quickly became clear that lynx was present, as a group of guides and a few Indian tourists were already gathered on site. At least two [Eurasian Lynx](#) (*Lynx lynx*) could be seen through spotting scopes. Once again, the experience was somewhat mixed. On the one hand, it was incredible to observe so easily an animal reputed to be so elusive, yet at the same time, it almost felt too easy on the very first afternoon and from such a distance.

Even through the scope, the motionless lynx was extremely difficult to distinguish, and it was only for a few seconds, when they moved across the snow between rocky scree slopes, that I was truly able to identify the animal.

Sakti was also the only place where I observed a few [Woolly Hare](#) (*Lepus oiostolus*), as well as a [Bearded Vulture](#) (*Gypaetus barbatus*) in flight. Our searches for snowcocks proved unsuccessful. The recent snowfall had certainly influenced the distribution of wildlife.

2.7.5. Rumtse

Rumtse is a very high-altitude village reached by taking the road towards Tso Kar, crossing several impressive and deeply carved canyons. The goal of this day was to finally observe [Bharal](#) (*Pseudois nayaur*) and Tibetan Partridge. In summer, it seems that this is also a good location for Argali.

It was also an opportunity to discover different landscapes and visit the remote village from which Mingyur, our guide, originates. While we had not really been in prime Bharal territory, it only took a single day to obtain excellent observations of this Himalayan caprid. The other target, the partridges, also showed quite easily on a grassy plateau.

At the end of the day, Mingyur told us that we still had a chance to observe snow leopard one last time. With very little traffic and fading light, we drove slowly, scanning the cliffs above the road. But it was not above that we should have been looking...

Dorje suddenly braked and shouted, "[Snow leopard](#)!" The cat was patrolling its territory along the frozen edge of a stream running parallel to the road at the bottom of the canyon. I will never forget this first view of the leopard from behind, its long thick tail contrasting beautifully against the snow.

I couldn't believe my eyes and was shaking with emotion. After a split second of hesitation, I stepped out of the vehicle as discreetly as possible and tried to reposition myself slightly in front the animal, which was still not paying attention to us. It must have been used to passing cars, but as soon as it noticed me on foot, it immediately fled up the cliff that formed the backdrop of the scene.

My wife managed to capture an incredible video on her phone of what appeared to be a young individual scrambling up the rocks—and even slipping at one point. After gaining some height, it reached a rocky ledge from where it observed us, assessing the danger.

What followed was about twenty unforgettable minutes of observation, at less than 40 metres. Its ability to disappear into the landscape, literally before our eyes, was astonishing and made us realise just how difficult it is to locate this animal. The guides themselves were also in awe and openly admitted that this was the best sighting they had witnessed all winter.

A few vehicles passed along the road, but almost none stopped, and we eventually watched the leopard disappear silently into the fading light as dusk settled. That evening, we celebrated with a few beers what we already knew would be the most memorable moment of the entire trip.

2.7.6. Personal reflections on snow leopard observation

This paragraph is based solely on my personal experience over the course of one week and may therefore seem rather limited, but trip reports are also meant for that purpose.

Snow leopards do not only occur in Ulley or Rumbak; they are also present in other valleys around Leh. Of course, the chances of securing a sighting in these two locations are higher due to the greater observation pressure, but during the week of our stay and the one preceding it, for instance, no sightings were reported from Rumbak. Conditions vary from year to year, and some sites may perform better than others depending on the season.

For this reason, I would recommend that anyone planning to visit Ladakh ensure maximum flexibility with their guide, adapting plans according to recent sightings.

If you are a photographer and want to secure more than just a distant sight, it is worth noting that the Ulley valley often provides relatively distant observations. More importantly, getting close to a snow leopard is, in my opinion, rarely the result of responding to a reported sighting, but rather of finding “your” own animal. Narrower valleys may not allow you to scan entire mountainsides with a scope, but they also increase the likelihood of closer encounters.

As is often the case with wildlife, it was while exploring a new area in search of other species that we triggered our best observation. Spending a few days in a well-known location to secure at least one sighting seems essential, but once the species is “in the bag”, I would personally opt for a more active approach, exploring less-visited areas in search of a more intimate encounter, while also discovering new landscapes and species.

Finally, I can only strongly recommend the services of Mingyur, who was knowledgeable, welcoming, highly competent and... a little lucky. Ladakh will remain in our hearts and stands out, for both of us, as our favourite stage in India (and of the entire trip).







Red fox and Bharal or Blue Sheep



Tibetan Partridge, Ladakh urial, Robin Accentor, and White-winged Redstart





3. Southern India

After three months in northern India and a ten-day interlude immersed in Tibetan culture, we changed atmosphere completely: we left Leh in the morning and arrived in Bangalore, Karnataka, at 21:00. From there, we immediately boarded a night train heading towards Hospet, in the far north of the state.

Southern India displays a culture fundamentally different from that of the north, with its own languages, Hindu practices and social structures. The Western Ghats are also a major centre of endemism for birds, as well as for some mammals, and especially for reptiles and amphibians. For the latter, the monsoon season is the best time to visit, even though it can make the overall experience less comfortable.

3.1. Itinerary and logistics

25/03/2025	Leh - Delhi - Bangalore - Train to Hospet
26/03/2025	Hampi
27/03/2025	Hampi
28/03/2025	Hampi - Daroji
29/03/2025	Daroji
30/03/2025	Hampi
31/03/2025	Panjim
01/04/2025	Panjim
02/04/2025	Old Goa
03/04/2025	Panjim
04/04/2025	Cotigao - Agonda
05/04/2025	Agonda
06/04/2025	Agonda - Mysuru



07/04/2025 Mysuru - Bandipur
 08/04/2025 Bandipur - Ooty
 09/04/2025 Ooty
 10/04/2025 Ooty - Coonoor
 11/04/2025 Coonoor
 12/04/2025 Coimbatore - Valparai
 13/04/2025 Valparai
 14/04/2025 Valparai - Thrissur
 15/04/2025 Thrissur
 16/04/2025 Thattekad
 17/04/2025 Thattekad
 18/04/2025 Thattekad
 19/04/2025 Thattekad
 20/04/2025 Thattekad - Munnar
 21/04/2025 Munnar
 22/04/2025 Munnar
 23/04/2025 Munnar - Backwaters
 24/04/2025 Backwaters - Kochi
 25/04/2025 Kochi



As elsewhere in the trip, the itinerary here alternated between locations promising for wildlife and places focused mainly on cultural tourism. Others, such as Hampi or Munnar, are both well-known tourist destinations and good places for wildlife observation.

The initial itinerary was significantly altered following my wife's decision, made during the trip, to undertake a one-month yoga retreat in Goa — a destination I had originally left out of our plans during the preparation phase. I therefore ended up travelling through southern India on my own, which inevitably affected the way I travelled (particularly in terms of transport).

In total, I recorded 216 bird species in Southern India, summarised in the following eBird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/431626>

3.2. Hampi area

The combination of a historical site that can be explored with a great deal of freedom and the remarkable observations I was able to make in Daroji with the help of a guide made this stop one of our favourites in India.

3.2.1. Hampi archaeological site

Hampi was the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire. It was completely abandoned over time as a result of wars and shifting political balances in southern India, leaving behind numerous ruins spread over an impressive area. Although remarkable and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, what truly makes these ruins unique is their immediate setting: reddish, polished sandstone boulders scattered across the landscape.

The Tungabhadra River flows through the site and feeds the canals that irrigate rice paddies and coconut plantations nestled between rocky ridges, bringing greenery to an otherwise dry environment. We visited at the beginning of the hot season, and temperatures quickly became unbearable for midday sightseeing, so most of our days were spent resting until the sun went down and the heat became more tolerable. One day, we even used bicycles to explore the area, which proved both pleasant and efficient.

Hampi also provides access to the dry, thorny forests that cover central India. The vegetation is low, and the birdlife shows a certain level of endemism or at least ecological specialisation. This is particularly the case for the **Yellow-throated Bulbul** (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*), a specialist of the dry interior of the Deccan, as well as the **Jungle Bush Quail** (*Perdica asiatica*).

It was also my first encounter with **Bonnet Macaque** (*Macaca radiata*) and **Southern Plains Grey Langur** (*Semnopithecus dussumieri*). A rather unfortunate domesticated elephant lives in isolation within the temple, spending its days collecting offerings from pilgrims. It is, however, taken daily to bathe in the river, which is quite a remarkable and fascinating sight to witness.

The highlight of the visit, however, came when a family of **Smooth-coated Otter** (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) appeared right in front of us, just as we were watching the elephant's ritual bath.



3.2.2. Daroji

Located about forty kilometres from old Hampi, the Daroji sanctuary protects a large area of thorny dry forest. Although it benefits many species, the [Sloth Bear](#) (*Melursus ursinus*) is clearly the main attraction, and its density here seems relatively high.

The site has become particularly well known because park rangers have established the habit of smearing honey on rocks at a very specific location each day to encourage the bears to stay in the sanctuary. I do not have a strong opinion on the validity or effectiveness of this practice for conservation, but it undoubtedly offers some of the best opportunities to observe this unusual animal.

While general visitors are restricted to a distant and elevated observation tower, photographers can book a kind of mesh hide (more designed for protection than concealment) located at the base of the rocky outcrop where the feeding takes place. We were right in the front row, with several females visiting the site along with their young. Each individual kept its distance; a few grunts could be heard, but there were no real conflicts.

[Ruddy Mongoose](#) (*Urva smithii*) darted between the bears to collect leftovers, while splendid [Painted Spurfowl](#) (*Galloperdix lunulata*) pecked at grain among the more common doves and sparrows. On the way back, I also had a chance to observe a few [Painted Sandgrouse](#) (*Pterocles indicus*).

These very productive photographic sessions are difficult to organise independently, and I strongly recommend going through Pompayya Malemath (+91 94491 36 252).

Pompayya was probably the bird guide who impressed me the most during the entire trip. He also offers pleasant accommodation close to key habitats, where he managed in just a day and a half to find all my target species. Among the regional specialties are [Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark](#) (*Plocealauda erythroptera*), [Indian Eagle-Owl](#) (*Bubo bengalensis*) and





Smooth-coated Otter, Bonnet Macaque and *Psammophilus dorsalis*

Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*). We only obtained brief glimpses of Barred Buttonquail (*Turnix suscitator*), but White-browed Crane (*Zapornia akool*) showed well, in a habitat where I would not even have expected to look for a rallid. A feeding station also allows for very nice photographs of other common species from dry and agricultural habitats and an Asian Grey Mongoose (*Urva edwardsii*).

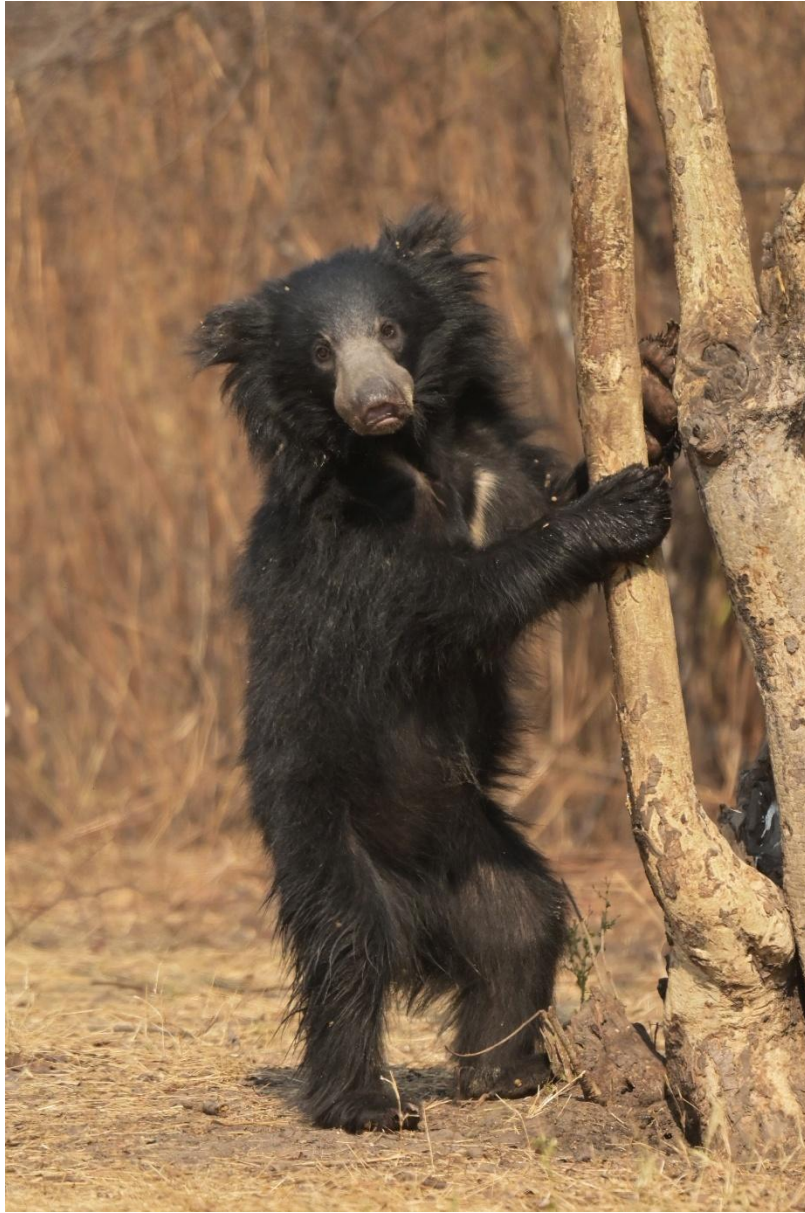
Finally, I should add that the cooking prepared by Pompayya's wife was among the most flavourful and distinctive we had during the trip. Overall, I highly recommend Hampi to anyone wishing to combine wildlife observation with cultural visits - it was one of our favourite stops of the entire journey.



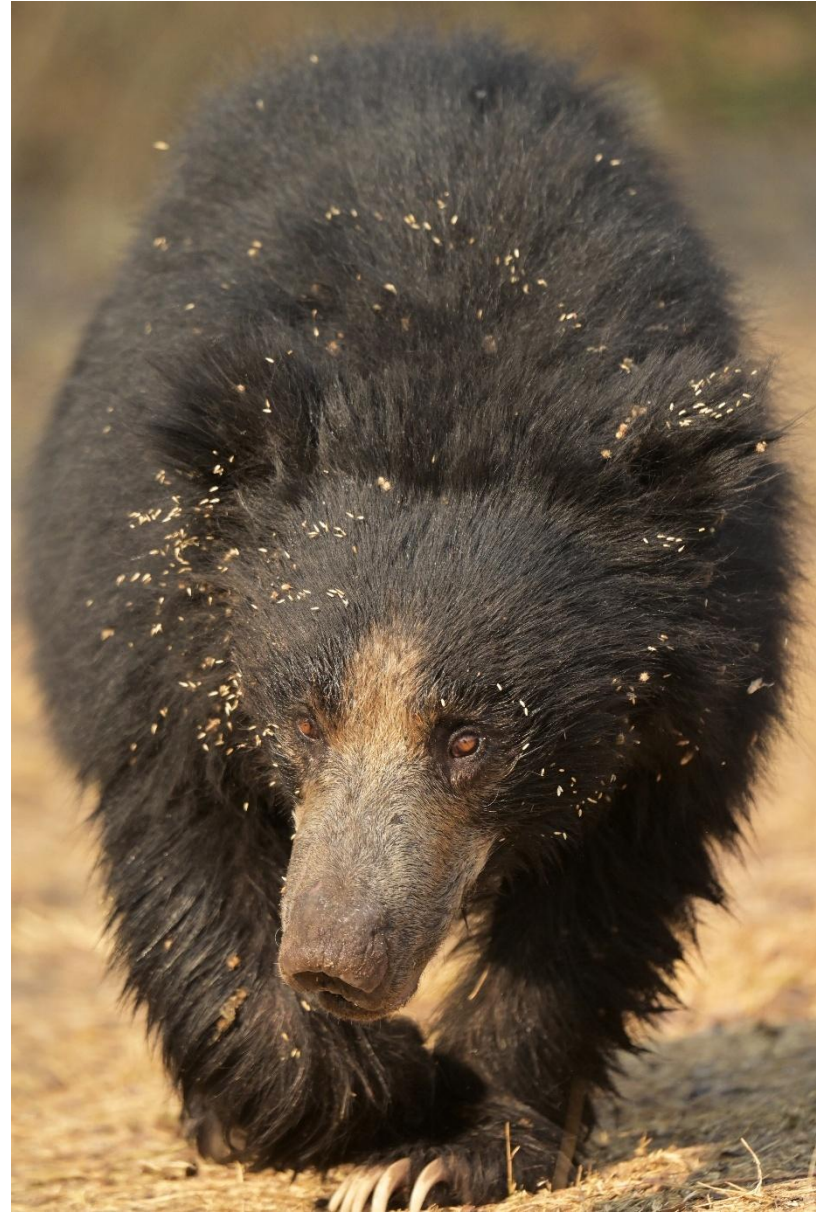
Southern Sacred Langur and Bonnet Macaque



Southern Sacred Langur and Indian Pitta

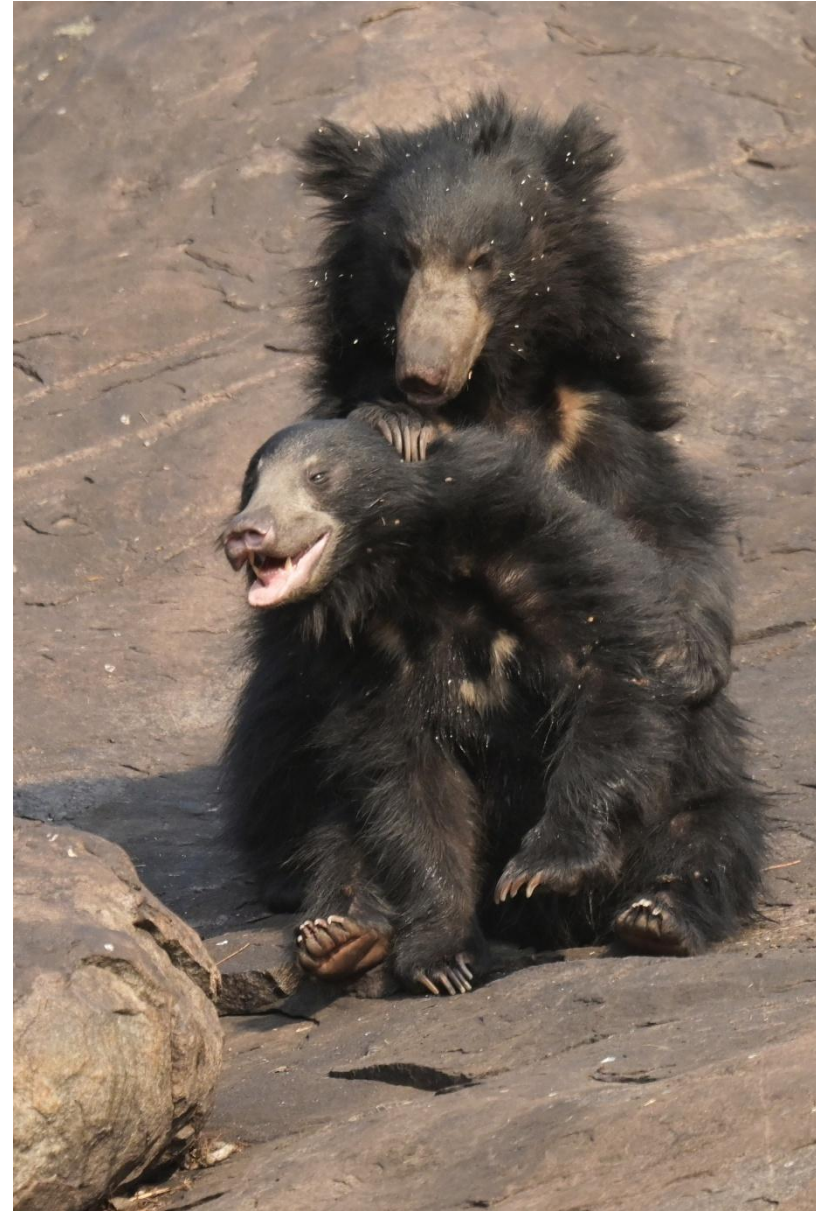


Sloth Bear



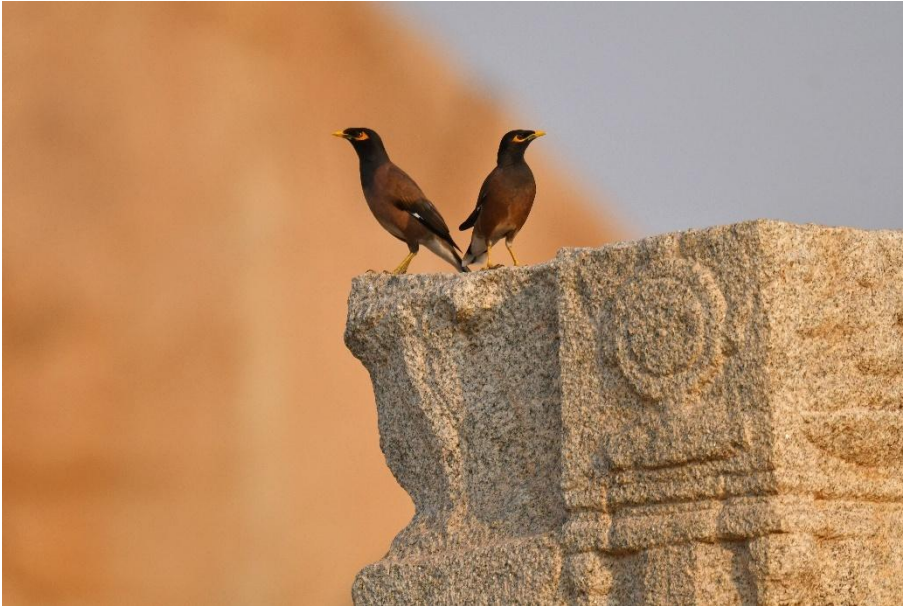


Sloth Bear





Painted Spurfowl, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Jungle Bush-Quail



Common Myna, Brahminy Starling, Blue-tailed Bee-eater and Red-vented Bulbul



Bronze-winged Jacana, Coppersmith Barbet, Ruddy Mongoose and Indian Grey Mongoose





3.3. Goa

Goa is a rather unusual Indian state. The smallest of them all, it was only incorporated into India in 1961, after an invasion by the newly formed Indian army. Goa is mainly known for its colonial heritage (the oldest European settlement in Asia), particularly the Portuguese quarters of Panjim and the baroque churches of Old Goa.

This tourist-oriented state, roughly twice as wealthy as the Indian average and with a mixed culture, provides a good introduction to the Indian subcontinent, as it is far less dense, noisy and “exotic” for Western visitors. It is also more expensive, and along the coast, one can encounter a fair number of excesses linked to international tourism.

Wildlife observation was not the priority here, but I still managed to fit in a few outings between cultural visits and enjoyable meals in local restaurants. The main challenge is to find a way to reach them and that is how I started riding a scooter for the first time and in India !

The rice fields around Panjim, easily accessible by scooter, allowed me to add several waders and larks to my list. **Pacific Golden-Plover** (*Pluvialis fulva*) was high on my target list, while the beach offered opportunities to observe my first seabirds of the trip, including **Tibetan Sand-Plover** (*Anarhynchus atrifrons*), **Greater Sand-Plover** (*Anarhynchus leschenaultii*), **Brown-headed Gull** (*Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*) and **Lesser Crested Tern** (*Thalasseus bengalensis*).

On another day, we booked a boat trip on the Zuari River estuary. Several departure points exist, more or less close to Panjim; we chose Claws & Jaws Boating Safari. Although we did not see all the kingfishers I had hoped for, and close photographic opportunities were limited for some species, we still had an enjoyable and productive morning, notably with several impressive **Mugger Crocodiles** (*Crocodylus palustris*) in the mangroves, and a fine pair of **White-bellied Sea Eagles** (*Ichthyophaga leucogaster*).

We also observed a few Indian **Ocean Humpback Dolphins** (*Sousa plumbea*) feeding between the bridge pillars, a real bonus.







Mugger Crocodile, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Indian Humpback Dolphin and Western Reef-Heron

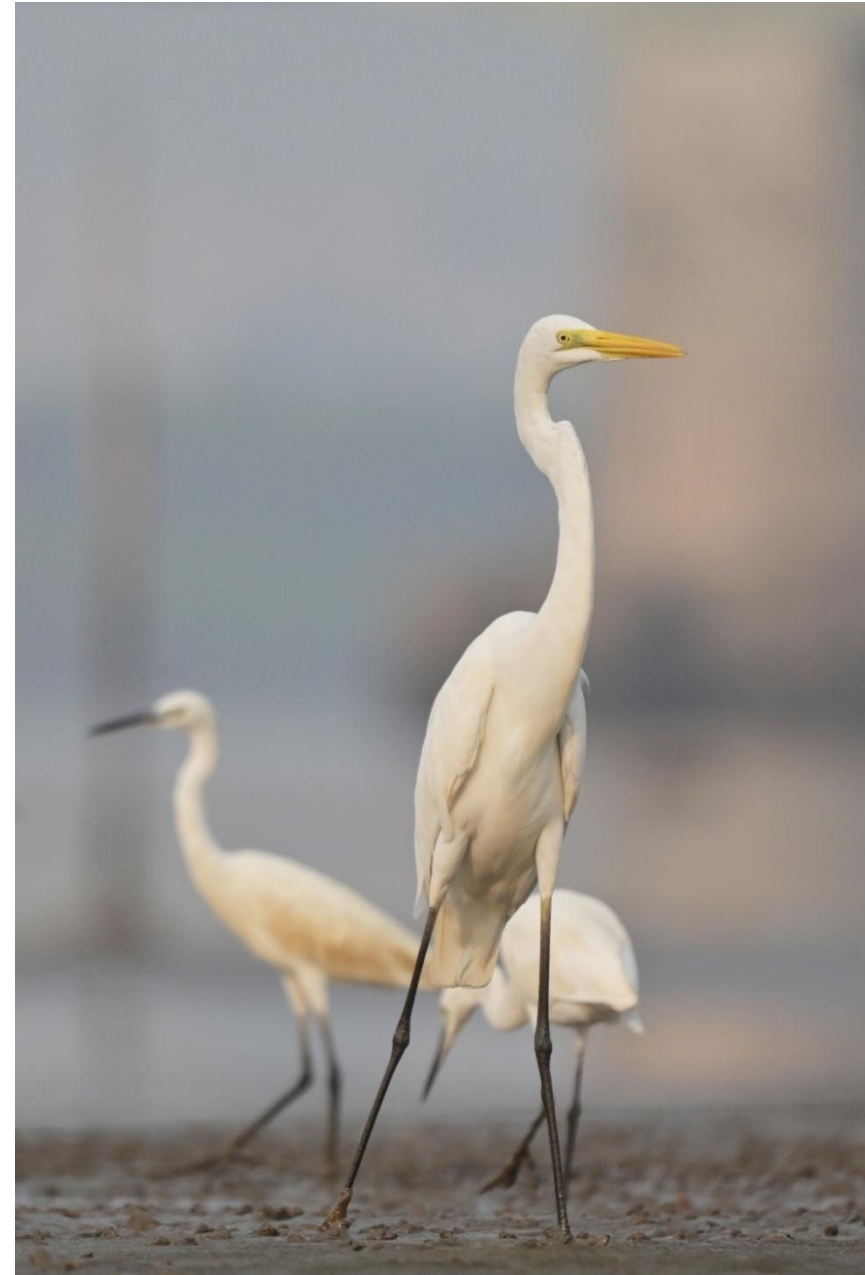
After a few days in Panjim relaxing and enjoying the trendy cafés, we headed towards Agonda, the beach resort where my wife would spend a month attending a yoga course. I arranged with Savio Fonseca from Avocets & Peregrine (website or +91 75889 27753) to guide me in Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary. After picking me up early from our accommodation, we reached the reserve at dawn.

Bird activity was very high, and as it was my first time in the Western Ghats, the “Malabar” species were coming fast, even if few allowed close views. [Black-footed Gray Langur](#) (*Semnopithecus hypoleucos*), [Red Spurfowl](#) (*Galloperdix spadicea*), [Malabar Trogon](#) (*Harpactes fasciatus*), [Malabar Grey Hornbill](#) (*Ocyrceros griseus*) and [Malabar Pied Hornbill](#) (*Anthracoceros coronatus*), [Malabar Barbet](#) (*Psilopogon malabaricus*) and the scarce [Forest Wagtail](#) (*Dendronanthus indicus*) were among the notable observations of the morning.

However, temperatures rose quickly, and activity dropped sharply until Savio picked up the distinctive call of the [Sri Lanka Frogmouth](#) (*Batrachostomus moniliger*), in broad daylight. After a careful search in the undergrowth, he located an active nest of this extraordinary bird, endemic to the western coast of India and Sri Lanka.

It was an incredible sighting, and we even had to step back to avoid disturbing the bird as it incubated on its rudimentary moss nest.

Savio organises both day trips and multi-day tours across the state and has a comfortable vehicle. His English is excellent and very easy to understand. He also has a very ethical and professional approach to his work, and I would not hesitate to recommend his services.



3.4. Karnataka

This section begins in Mysore, one of the largest cities in southern India, which I reached by bus from Goa. After another bus taken somewhat opportunistically towards the Ghats, I was dropped off in front of the Bandipur Safari Lodge.

3.4.1. Bandipur

Although not initially planned, I made one final attempt to see a Bengal Tiger, or even more unlikely, a pack of Dhole, or a Black Leopard. I was also hoping to observe large male elephants with impressive tusks.

The lodge, located along the main road, offered packages at a reasonable price for what is usually an expensive activity, and I was generally satisfied with the organisation. Safaris were conducted exclusively by jeep, departing on time and giving access to a variety of tracks through the hills separating Karnataka from Kerala. The quality of drivers and guides varied significantly, and not all understood why anyone would be interested in birds, let alone how to detect them.

The first safari provided an opportunity to observe a few [Gaur](#) (*Bos gaurus*) coming to drink in beautiful golden light, my first [Grey Junglefowl](#) (*Gallus sonneratii*), various woodpecker species of the subcontinent, and [Indian Thick-knees](#) (*Burhinus indicus*), my only [Tufted Grey Langur](#) (*Semnopithecus priam*) but nothing particularly remarkable. A [Striped-necked Mongoose](#) (*Urva vitticollis*) quickly crossing the road added a touch of excitement — and frustration.

In the evening, before dinner, I watched and listened to [Indian Nightjars](#) (*Caprimulgus asiaticus*). Near Bandipur, a guide based in Masinagudi is reputed to be excellent for observing several species of this family, but I was unable to include this in my itinerary without incurring excessive costs or time loss without having an independent vehicle.

The second safari the following day was quite similar, although slightly longer, cooler and more pleasant. The highlight this time was an extended observation of a pair of [Striped-necked Mongoose](#) (*Urva vitticollis*) foraging, as well as a [Crested Serpent Eagle](#) (*Spilornis cheela*) being mobbed by a fantail.

I enjoyed this final jeep safari in an Indian national park, even though the broader zone — including Nagarhole and Kabini — would certainly deserve several additional days. I would struggle to say whether there are significant differences between these three adjacent reserves in terms of observing the most sought-after species, but Bandipur is definitely the most accessible of the three from a financial perspective.



Striped-necked Mongoose, Grey Junglefowl, Chital and Gaur

3.5. Tamil Nadu

3.5.1. Ooty

The crossing into Tamil Nadu happens without any major transition while passing over a mountain pass and descending again through the forest of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. This reserve, managed by the state of Tamil Nadu, is more popular and run differently. From what I gathered (although my research may not be entirely reliable), there are no long morning safaris; visits are shorter, often conducted in trucks, and include long stretches along the main road, which takes away much of the interest.

I therefore continued towards Ooty, short for its real name: Udthagamandalam (yes, I copy-pasted it). I reached it after following a long series of switchbacks up to the hill station, once appreciated by colonial administrators and now filled with small subsistence gardens and rather underwhelming chocolate shops. A forced stop of about an hour with the group that had given me a lift allowed me to explore the surroundings of the lake. Apparently sterile and planted mostly with introduced species, I eventually found a few interesting bushes and one of my main targets: the **Black-and-orange Flycatcher** (*Ficedula nigrorufa*), endemic to the Ghats.

After finally reaching my hotel on the heights, I set off towards the city's main tourist attraction—but also a key site for birders: the botanical gardens. At the far end of the park, with varying degrees of difficulty, it is possible to find some of the endemic species of the Western Ghats. The Kashmir Flycatcher seemed to have already moved back towards the region that gave it its name.

The following morning, I got up at dawn and headed for the access road to Doddabetta Peak, but hiking up the trail is not permitted, and the gate for vehicles only opens at 8:00. I therefore walked along the road and the tea plantations until I came across a group of **Gaur** (*Bos gaurus*) grazing among the tea bushes. The impressive bovids crossed the road nonchalantly, and I approached them—perhaps somewhat unwisely—quite closely without triggering any visible reaction. Very impressive.

I celebrated the encounter with an Indian-style coffee at a small roadside stall (11°24'50.7"N 76°43'52.6"E), where the shopkeeper told me that small quails often come to feed on the rice he leaves out. These “small quails” turned out to be **Painted Bush Quail** (*Perdica erythrorhyncha*), a species that is otherwise extremely difficult to observe.

A sighting of **Nilgiri Wood Pigeon** (*Columba elphinstonii*) near the gate reinforced this positive trend. I managed to hitch a ride in one of the vehicles heading to the summit shortly before 8:00 and was among the first visitors to reach the top.

The targets at the summit were Nilgiri Laughingthrush (*Montecincla cachinnans*), Tickell's Leaf Warbler (*Phylloscopus affinis*), and Nilgiri Sholakili (*Sholicola major*), all of which I observed without too much difficulty. Below the main viewpoint, there appears to be a territory of Nilgiri Thrush (*Zoothera neilgherriensis*), a notoriously difficult species to observe, but lacking knowledge and a proper attempt, I missed it.





Painted Bush-Quail, Nilgiri Sholakili, Asian Elephant and Malabar giant squirrel



Indian Robin, Nilgiri Laughingthrush, Nilgiri Wood Pigeon and Orange and Black Flycatcher



Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Spot-breasted Fantail, Indian Blackbird and Tickell's Flycatcher

3.5.2. Coonoor

Coonoor is like the little sister of Ooty, another British hill station with a botanical garden much appreciated by local birdlife and offering productive outings without any logistical constraints. I found the botanical garden of Coonoor to be much wilder, larger and overall, more interesting than the one in Ooty, and I would even recommend prioritising this site if it were not for Doddabetta Peak near Ooty.

On each of my visits, I recorded around 25 different species, including [Streak-throated Woodpecker](#) (*Picus xanthopygaeus*), my only sightings of [Square-tailed Bulbul](#) (*Hypsipetes ganeesa*), a showy [Indian Blue Robin](#) (*Larvivora brunnea*), and many other Nilgiri endemics such as the [sholakili](#) and both [Nilgiri](#) and [Black-and-orange flycatchers](#).

The town itself is otherwise fairly unremarkable, but I appreciated being able to stay in a hostel and having a reasonable choice of places to eat in the evening.

The main tourist attraction lies in the surrounding tea plantations, which I visited up to Dolphin's Nose by rickshaw. Nothing particularly outstanding from a wildlife perspective apart from [Bonnet Macaque](#) (*Macaca radiata*), but I would not be surprised if Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) or even Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*) could occasionally be seen there in the early morning.

3.5.3. Valparai

I descended from Coonoor towards Coimbatore by bus through the Palakkad Gap, a lowland corridor cutting the Western Ghats into two distinct sections and driving endemism on either side for certain animal groups. Upon arriving at the bus station, I tried to make sense of the instructions for reaching Valparai, but eventually took the easy option by booking an Uber cab — a convenient solution for travelling from a major urban centre to more remote areas, though not necessarily the other way around.

Valparai is a small town primarily centred on tea cultivation, with domestic tourism playing a secondary role. Located at over 1,000 metres in elevation, it requires crossing an impressive escarpment via some forty-hairpin bends. On the final turns, the luckier travellers may spot Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*). I passed through in the middle of the day, and unfortunately neither the caprids nor the views were rewarding, as a layer of mist had formed below due to heat and human activity.

This hill station has become particularly well known for its [Lion-tailed Macaques](#) (*Macaca silenus*), which are easily observed near Puthu Thottam farm, a few kilometres from town. On two consecutive mornings, I visited a large troop that is fully habituated to human presence; if one remains still, it is not long before the group surrounds you as they go about their daily activities. A truly memorable experience with this very distinctive primate.

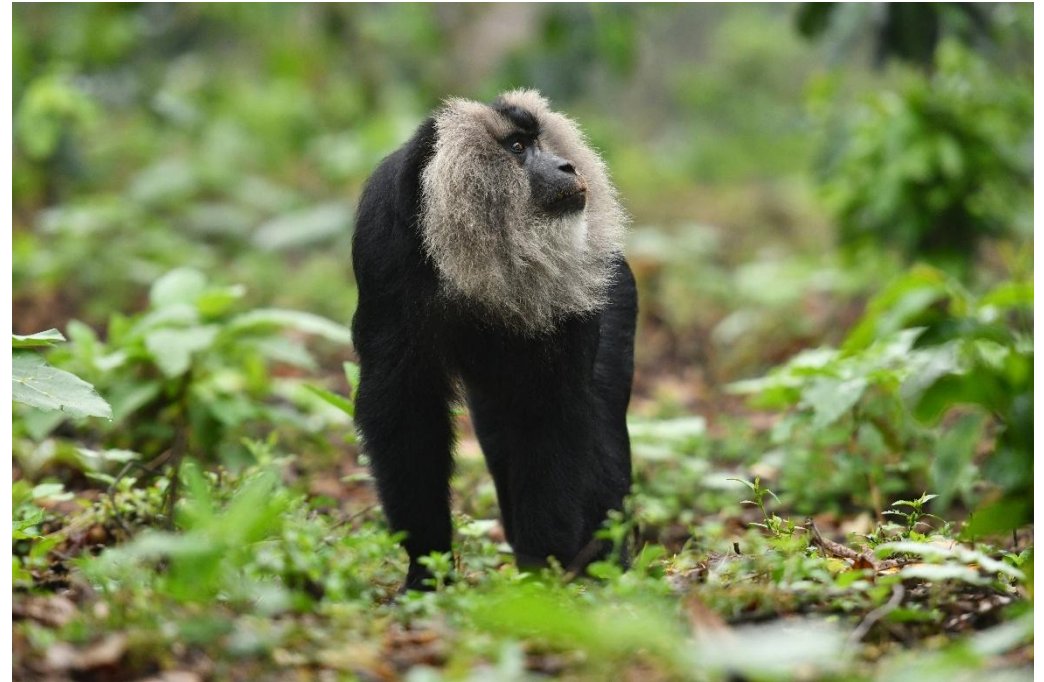
It is also interesting to note that [Nilgiri Langurs](#) (*Semnopithecus johnii*), which are present here but much rarer and more discreet, display a similar colour pattern to the macaques. Each of these two species is the only representative of its respective genus to show such a bicoloured coat, which may suggest a case of convergent evolution, or even adaptive mimicry by the langurs (somewhat reminiscent of coral snake mimics).

I also took a few walks through this landscape of tea plantations interspersed with small forest patches. This provided the opportunity to come face to face with a herd of [Gaur](#) (*Bos gaurus*) — though not with elephants, dhole or leopards, which are also present in the area and are known to favour the sun-exposed rocky outcrops.

There were also many bird species typical of southern India, including [Indian Scimitar-Babbler](#) (*Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*) and [Malabar Whistling-Thrush](#) (*Myophonus horsfieldii*).



Lion-tailed Macaque





Lion-tailed Macaque and Nilgiri Langur



3.6. Kerala

Kerala is a small state located at the southern tip of India, whose identity I found quite distinct compared to its larger neighbours. I found the inhabitants to be more open, more communicative, and overall, more outward-looking than in the rest of India, which makes it a good destination for first-time visitors or for those generally intimidated by the chaos of the country.

Kerala's communist past is reflected in its education statistics and maybe more tangibly in its bus network, which connects virtually every village with an efficient system of transfers and at an extremely low cost.

The cuisine is excellent and quite varied, with a particular highlight being dosas — thin pancakes made from fermented rice and lentil batter — shared across much of southern India.

3.6.1. Thattekad

I had initially planned to visit Thrissur during the Pooram, a local festival where dozens of male elephants are decorated and walk among thousands of people playing music and carrying flaming torches. Probably not the best example of animal welfare, but a spectacle I wanted to witness with my own eyes. India being India, and despite having asked around beforehand about the exact dates of the festival, I ended up arriving five days after the main ceremony. To fill the gap, I arrived one day earlier than planned at Thattekad Bird Sanctuary, which is probably the top birding site in Southern India, with most lowland endemics' observable there.

I stayed at Bird Songs Homestay, which was comfortable and well located. The hosts took good care of me, offering tasty meals that they also prepared for themselves.

I never actually entered the bird sanctuary itself and did most of my birding in the surrounding areas with Sudesh, an excellent local guide whom I can only recommend (+91 95446 35940). I typically rested in the afternoons as rain was often threatening, but we completed two morning sessions and two-night outings in search of some of southern India's more elusive species.

Among the highlights were [Jerdon's Nightjar](#) (*Caprimulgus atripennis*), a sleeping [Slaty-legged Crake](#) (*Rallina eurizonoides*), [Mottled Wood Owl](#) (*Strix ocellata*), [Oriental Scops Owl](#) (*Otus sunia*), and the impressive [Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl](#) (*Ketupa nipalensis*).

In the mornings, we explored the forest, which quickly became hot and humid, but we had good success with a roosting pair of [Sri Lanka Frogmouth](#) (*Batrachostomus moniliger*), a distant nest of [Legge's Hawk-Eagle](#) (*Nisaetus kelaarti*), Malabar Trogon (*Harpactes fasciatus*), [Malabar Barbet](#) (*Psilopogon malabaricus*), [Heart-spotted Woodpecker](#) (*Hemicircus canente*), and [Malabar Flameback](#) (*Chrysocolaptes socialis*).

Finally, after two days and many hours spent searching the dense understory specifically for it, we eventually located the highly localised and rare **Sri Lanka Bay Owl** (*Phodilus assimilis*).

During one of my solo explorations, I also encountered a rare **Travancore Tortoise** (*Indotestudo travancorica*). The area is also known for Slender Loris, but it currently seems impossible to explore further due to the presence of aggressive elephants nearby.

3.6.2. Munnar

Munnar is quite similar to the hill stations visited earlier, but being on the other side of the Palakkad Gap, it hosts a number of different endemics worth searching for. It also provides access to one of the best sites to observe Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*), in Eravikulam National Park.

This national park is very busy, so it is important to arrive early to enjoy at least a few dozen minutes of relative tranquillity. One of the advantages is that everything can be done using public transport without too much difficulty.

At the park headquarters, where I arrived more than an hour before opening, I explored some bushes along the main road. I observed some rather skittish **Nilgiri Langurs** (*Semnopithecus johnii*) and managed to see almost all my target species for the area, including **Palani Laughingthrush** (*Montecincla fairbanki*) and **White-bellied Sholakili** (*Sholicola albiventris*).

After taking the shuttle up to the summit (nowadays the only way to visit the park, which is probably a sensible management decision), I followed a short trail through high-altitude grasslands. As expected, I quickly encountered some **Nilgiri Tahr** (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*), and with a bit of effort, I eventually came across my final avian target: the rather unremarkable **Nilgiri Pipit** (*Anthus nilghiriensis*).

The trail becomes busy very quickly, so I shifted my efforts to lower elevations, where I spent several hours unsuccessfully trying to tape in Nilgiri Thrush (*Zoothera neilgherriensis*). The following day, I made another attempt for that stubborn bird and explored other areas on the outskirts of town before heading down towards the Kerala coast.

Unfortunately, I lost my photos from this part of the trip.

3.6.3. Periyar

Periyar National Park was not initially planned. I had read that it was quite popular and was concerned about being surrounded by crowds of tourists. In the end, I really liked this park, which offers a very different experience compared to others.

Kerala is much more permissive in this respect, despite the presence of a small tiger population at the core of the park, as well as herds of Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*), it is possible to wander on foot in certain areas and truly experience the jungle. Instead of restrictive schedules and expensive jeep safaris as the only way to explore the park, a wide variety of visitor experiences is offered here. The level of disturbance and impact from tourism also seems less problematic than in other areas.

While boat tours are clearly popular, I often had the trails and forest entirely to myself, where I encountered [Gaur](#) (*Bos gaurus*), monkeys, and plenty of birds. It is possible to walk along the road leading to the lake and one of the park's lodges, Aranya Nivas. I stayed there for one night because I had read on Mammalwatching that it was possible to see [Indian Crested Porcupine](#) (*Hystrix indica*) there at night. And indeed, shortly after dinner, a pair of these large rodents came to feed on some vegetables. They are not particularly shy but will retreat if there are too many people or if the lights are too bright. It is possible to approach them quite closely, although I had to quickly step back once when one turned towards me with its quills fully raised — I had clearly gone a bit too close.

This is also one of the rare places in India where spotlighting is possible, although only within the hotel grounds (elephants and leopards are known to roam nearby). I also easily observed Indian [Giant Flying Squirrel](#) (*Petaurista philippensis*).

Periyar also offers guided walks, ranging from short half-day circuits to multi-day treks deep into the park with bivouacs. These looked appealing, but I was concerned that they might involve too much walking for relatively little focused wildlife observation. I therefore chose a shorter trail (the "Green Walk") to search for one of my final targets, the elusive and curious [Wayanad Laughingthrush](#) (*Pterorhinus delesserti*), which inhabits dense bamboo thickets.

I did manage to see it, but my photos were terrible, and I even ended up on the ground while trying to photograph the bird on the uneven terrain. It was also my first encounter with leeches, which somehow managed to get inside my boots!

For the rest of my stay, I birded on my own around the village and along the road between the park entrance and the hotel. It is apparently not allowed to leave the road, but once inside the park, you already have access to excellent habitat, and it is easy to venture a few hundred metres away without difficulty.

Birding was quite successful, with good views of [White-bellied Treepie](#) (*Dendrocitta leucogastra*), [Jungle Owlet](#) (*Glaucidium radiatum*), and an impressive pair of [Great Hornbill](#) (*Buceros bicornis*).

I stayed in a hotel in town, cheaper than the lodge but with very friendly and helpful staff (White Fort Thekkady).

3.6.4. Backwaters of Alleppey

The backwaters are very touristy. I did not put much effort into searching for wildlife there and did not see anything worth mentioning during my two-day stay.

3.7. Missed opportunities in Southern India

I spent relatively little time in the tiger reserves of southern India. Kabini appears to be very attractive, but somewhat too exclusive in terms of access, whereas Bandipur and Nagarhole are both very interesting for observing species such as tigers, leopards, dhole and Four-horned Antelope (*Tetracerus quadricornis*).

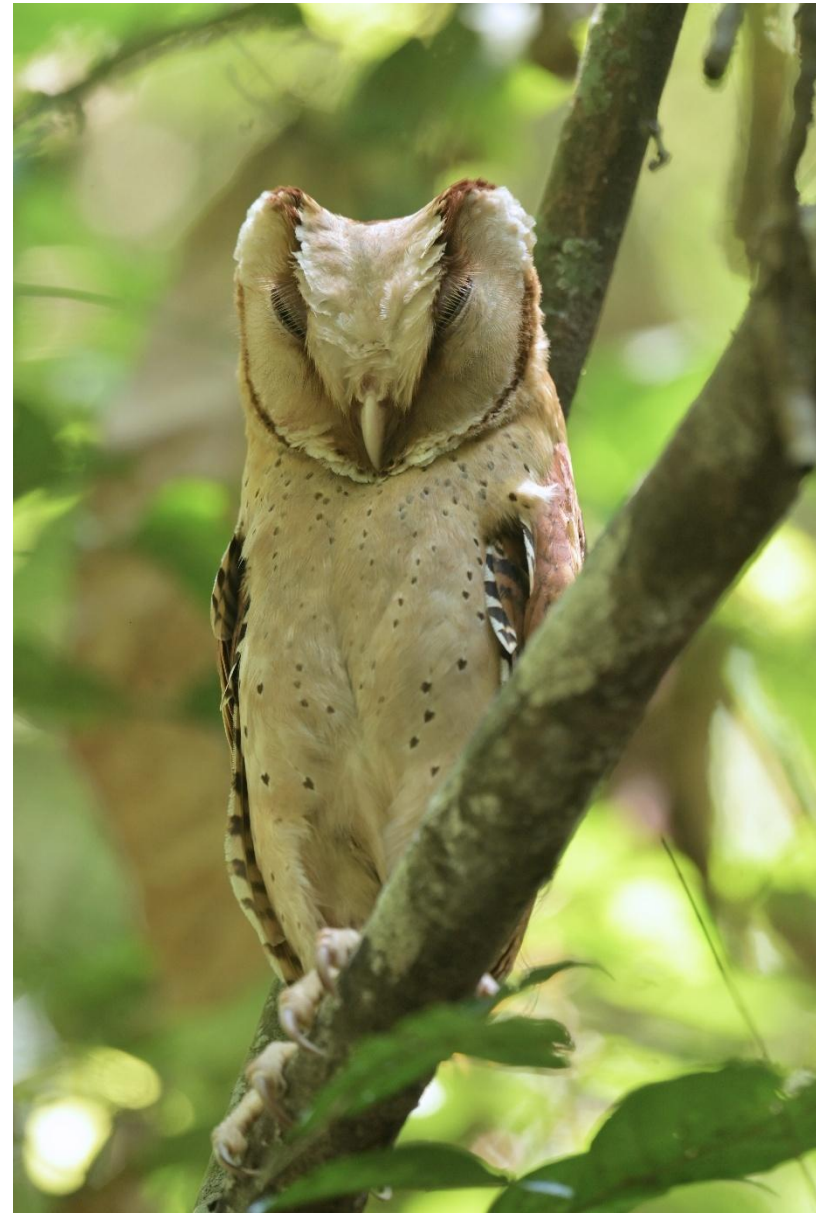
I did not make any particular effort to look for Jerdon's Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus jerdoni*) or the rare Nilgiri Marten (*Martes gwatkinsii*), but venturing out alone at night without a vehicle did not seem advisable. I would also have liked to stop in Masinagudi between Bandipur and Ooty.

Near Coimbatore, scattered sites of open plains provide habitat for Indian Courser (*Cursorius coromandelicus*).

If you stay mainly around Kochi (which was my initial plan), the Parambikulam reserve seems very interesting and offers a wide range of experiences in these forests, even though access can be complicated for a solo traveller.

From Munnar, a visitor with a vehicle would also could explore two additional reserves:

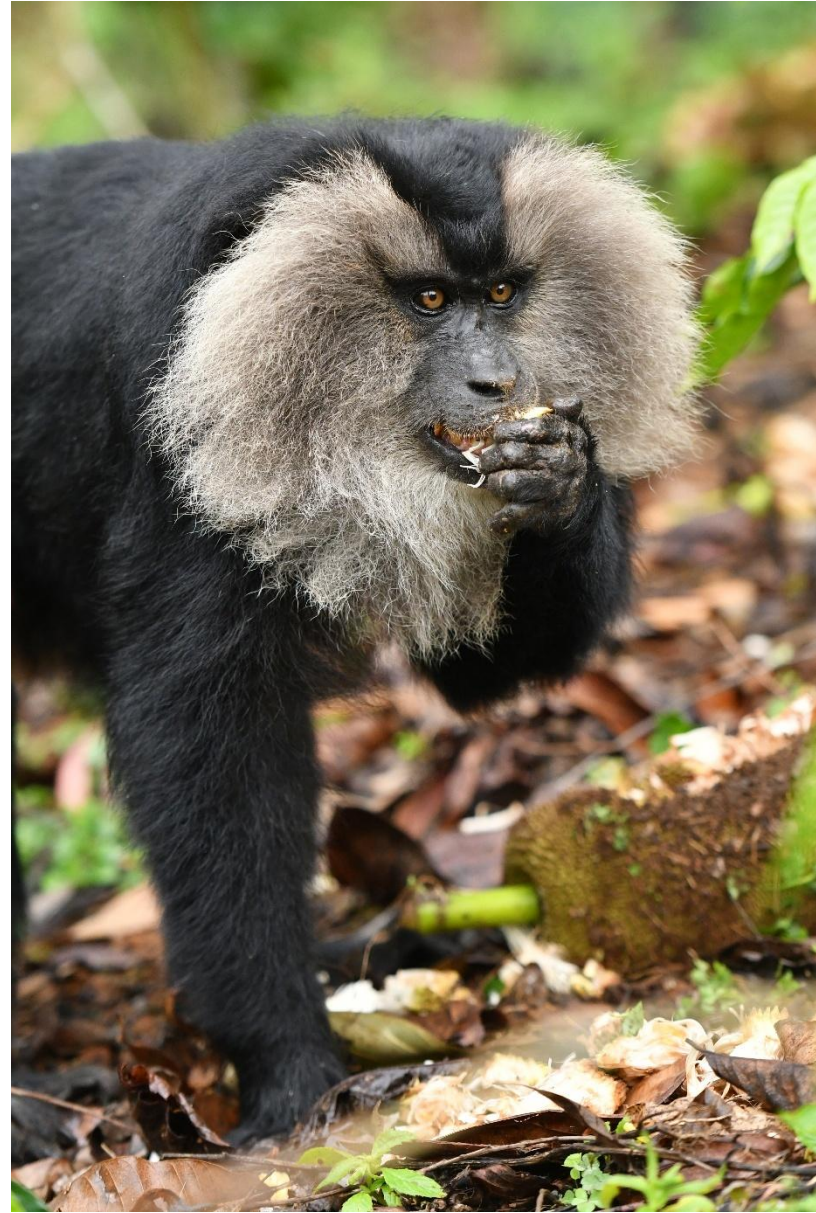
- Top Station seems to offer stunning panoramas and perhaps the best chances for Nilgiri Marten and other high-altitude species. I am not sure how easy it is to observe Nilgiri Tahr there.
- Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the few places in India where the Grizzled Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*) can be seen, which also inhabits dry forest pockets in the rain shadow of the mountains. However, the feedback I gathered suggested a fair amount of frustration, with unmotivated guides and excursions that are often too short and scheduled at unsuitable times. I therefore chose to avoid the long and uncomfortable bus journey. It will be another good reason to return — or perhaps to visit Sri Lanka instead.



Malabar Whistling-Thrush, Sri Lanka Bay Owl and Nilgiri Flycatcher



Malabar Grey Hornbill, White-lined Barbet, Jungle Owlet and Malabar Parakeet



Great hornbill and Lion-tailed Macaque



Mottled Owl, Oriental Scops-Owl and Spot-bellied Owl



Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Indian Porcupine, Loten's Sunbird and Bonnet Macaque



Malabar Grey Hornbill



Peninsular rock agama

4. Malaysia

The next leg of the trip took me to Malaysia for three weeks. While I was preparing the itinerary, Jonas Livet got in touch to tell me that he and Ruta were planning to visit Sabah. Borneo had been a childhood dream destination for me, but I knew it would be too expensive to visit on my own. Since my wife was not especially tempted by the prospect of repeated night drives in tropical rainforest, joining Jonas and Ruta for two weeks was an excellent opportunity. During that time, my wife would remain in India to finish her yoga training.

I flew from Kochi to Singapore for a quick layover — not long enough to leave the airport, but more than enough to feel the change of atmosphere after India — before continuing to Kota Kinabalu. Ruta and Jonas had already arrived three days earlier to visit a few zoological institutions, because apparently some people think this is a perfectly normal way to spend their time abroad... This Malaysian leg was divided into three main blocks: independent travel in western Sabah, organised section in eastern Sabah with AAB and three intense days in Peninsular Malaysia before continuing to Indonesia.

26/04/2025	Pick up at Kota Kinabalu airport and drive to Kinabalu NP
27/04/2025	Kinabalu NP
28/04/2025	Kinabalu NP
29/04/2025	Kinabalu to Tambunan
30/04/2025	Trus Madi
01/05/2025	Trus Madi to Klias Peat swamp
02/05/2025	Klias to Kota Kinabalu, flight to Sandakan and road to Deramakot
03/05/2025	Deramakot
04/05/2025	Deramakot
05/05/2025	Deramakot to Sukau
06/05/2025	Kinabatangan
07/05/2025	Kinabatangan - Gomantong
08/05/2025	Sukau to Lahad Datu. Farewell to Jonas & Ruta and drive back to Sepilok
09/05/2025	Sepilok
10/05/2025	Sepilok and Labuk Bay
11/05/2025	Sepilok and flight to Kuala Lumpur - Road to Bukit Tinggi
12/05/2025	Bukit Tinggi to Bukit Fraser
13/05/2025	Bukit Fraser
14/05/2025	Bukit Fraser to Kuala Lumpur and flight to Denpasar



In total, I recorded 174 bird species in Borneo, summarised in the following eBird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/486887>

In peninsular Malaysia, I recorded 43 more species: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/486889>

Western Sabah

4.1.1. Kinabalu National Park

From Kota Kinabalu, we drove our rental car to Kundasang, which gives access to the main entrance of Kinabalu National Park. We arrived in the rain in mid-afternoon and tried to secure motorised access for the nights ahead. We were sent from one office to another in the park administration, which was already closing and is clearly far more accustomed to the impressive numbers of hikers than to wildlife watchers. Jonas eventually managed to speak with someone in charge, who granted us a pass for the whole duration of our stay!

We stayed at J Residence Nabalu, which certainly did not shine through its amenities, but still offered a very good location and sufficient comfort for a fair price in an area where bookings sometimes need to be made long in advance. I no longer remember the exact details of each day, and in any case that is not especially important. We mostly searched for wildlife along the main road, the other trails being very muddy and narrow. The extra width makes it easier to spot animals moving high in the vegetation, and they also seemed less startled or frightened there than on the small trails. It is also easier to find your bungalow key there if you happened to drop it at night...

We drove up to the end of the road (Timpohon Gate) three times, including once at night in pouring rain, when we eventually had to retreat. The main focus of activity is the rubbish area, where the guides escorting hiking groups deposit “fresh treasures” every day for the various squirrels, rats and treeshrews. The trail branching off to the left before the footbridge, often mentioned in trip reports as a good alternative for montane species, is becoming increasingly overgrown, and we did not invest much time there. On the other hand, the area around the footbridge—especially behind the toilets (always a slightly odd place to lurk around with a telephoto lens)—gave us several interesting sightings, including **Red-breasted Partridge** (*Arborophila hyperythra*), **White-browed Shrike-Babbler** (*Pteruthius aeralatus*) and our first **Bornean Green-Magpie** (*Cissa jefferyi*) within a mixed flock. We got excited about a raptor that we were convinced had to be the Kinabalu Serpent Eagle, but it turned out to be its more widespread lowland cousin. The **Tufted Pygmy Squirrel** (*Exilisciurus whiteheadi*), however, was impossible to confuse, and gave us a long and excellent observation.

Near the park headquarters and between the different lodges, we came across a great diversity of birds, rather used to seeing humans and allowing wonderful views—laughingthrushes, sibilas, and a splendid pair of **Crimson-headed Partridge** (*Haematortyx sanguiniceps*) that showed in the rain. A small snack bar below the botanical garden became both our refuelling station and our shelter during prolonged rain (not uncommon). It was there, in particular, that we finally found the first member of the famous Whitehead trio, so coveted by birders: a **Whitehead's Spiderhunter** (*Arachnothera juliae*) feeding regularly at the top of a flowering tree.

We eventually came across the trickiest of the three, the elusive **Whitehead's Broadbill** (*Calyptomena whiteheadi*), incredibly well camouflaged and discreet, which Jonas picked with the thermal camera in the cold drizzle of the upper forest. On the last day, we hesitated about going down to Poring, another park entrance giving access to a less montane but more foothill-type avifauna. After weighing our options, we chose instead to maximise our field time because we were still missing the **trogon** (*Harpactes whiteheadi*), which we finally found along Power Road, in full view, while everyone else seemed to be looking for it that very day.

Our night outings were not especially long, as we were already quite tired from our days in the field—and in my case, from the accumulated months of travel. Still, we found a handsome bat perched in the understorey and a **Mountain Scops Owl** (*Otus spilocephalus*).

We really enjoyed our three days in this park, which is a very pleasant place to visit (temperature-wise in particular—don't forget a fleece) and where you are fairly free to look for animals on your own, even if there are no emblematic large mammals. As for emblematic mammals, we had a distant and fleeting view of **Kinabalu Squirrel** (*Callosciurus baluensis*), while I dreamed in vain of crossing paths with the mythical Tufted Ground Squirrel (*Rheithrosciurus macrotis*). Borneo truly is paradise for squirrel enthusiasts!

4.1.2. Trus Madi & Gunung Alab

Our second destination was Tambunan and its surroundings, which provide repeated access to montane species and to a well-known hide for the rare and endemic Bulwer's Pheasant. We arrived in the rain at Tambunan Nature Lodge, where we checked in rooms that had not been cleaned with great care. In the afternoon, we headed up to Gunung Alab for lunch, hoping the rain might ease long enough for some late birding. After noodles and doughnuts, the downpour continued unabated, and we eventually gave up and returned to Tambunan to rest in preparation for the next day.

You really need to arrive at the hide very early, before sunrise, to minimise disturbance as much as possible. We waited reverently while the light and the birds gradually arrived. Three **Bulwer's Pheasants** (*Lophura bulweri*), the undisputed stars of the place, appeared quite quickly, but it was still dark and my lens had fogged up. Fortunately, more opportunities came later in the morning. Many birds visited, including the comical **Crested Partridge** (*Rollulus rouloul*), **Red-breasted Partridge** and **Crimson-headed Partridge**, a **Bornean Black-capped Babbler** (*Pellorneum capistratoides*) that put on quite a show, furtive **Grey-hooded Babbler** (*Cyanoderma bicolor*), several species of bulbuls, a very photogenic pair of **Orange-headed Thrush** (*Geokichla citrina*) and **Dayak Blue Flycatcher** (*Cyornis montanus*). Although we were disappointed not to see the Bornean Banded Pitta, which visits this hide regularly, we thoroughly enjoyed the multitude of rodents and treeshrews, represented mainly by **Mountain Squirrel** (*Sundasciurus everetti*), **Jentink's Squirrel** (*Sundasciurus jentinki*), **Low's Squirrel** (*Sundasciurus lowii*), Borneo Black-banded Squirrel (*Callosciurus orestes*) and above all an exceptional appearance by the curious and tiny **Tufted Pygmy Squirrel** (*Exilisciurus whiteheadi*). Among the scandentians, **Mountain Treeshrew** (*Tupaia montana*) seemed to be the most numerous, but **Large Treeshrew** (*Tupaia tana*) was close behind and left me with good memories thanks to its beautiful reddish coat and long nose. If you stay attentive—which is not entirely easy after your fiftieth treeshrew—you can also spot a **Slender Treeshrew** (*Tupaia gracilis*), whose snout and overall appearance are more delicate than those of its montane cousin.

To visit the hide, you can contact Lee Kim Kuan (+60 13 801 4582). He was very responsive, and we paid 550 RM. He did not seem to guide, however. The hide itself is fairly comfortable, with toilets attached and unlimited instant noodles and powdered cappuccino (watch your blood sugar levels). A very rewarding stop for photographic opportunities with species that are otherwise difficult to see, and a veritable orgy of small mammals.

The short night outing we made along the main road was not very productive, apart from a nasty wasp sting on my arm that bothered me for several days. The relative lack of success was probably more a matter of limited time than of an absence of animals in this well-preserved environment. Camera traps set by the owner of the hide show a strong diversity, including porcupines, deer and cats—among them, to our great surprise, a Bay Cat!

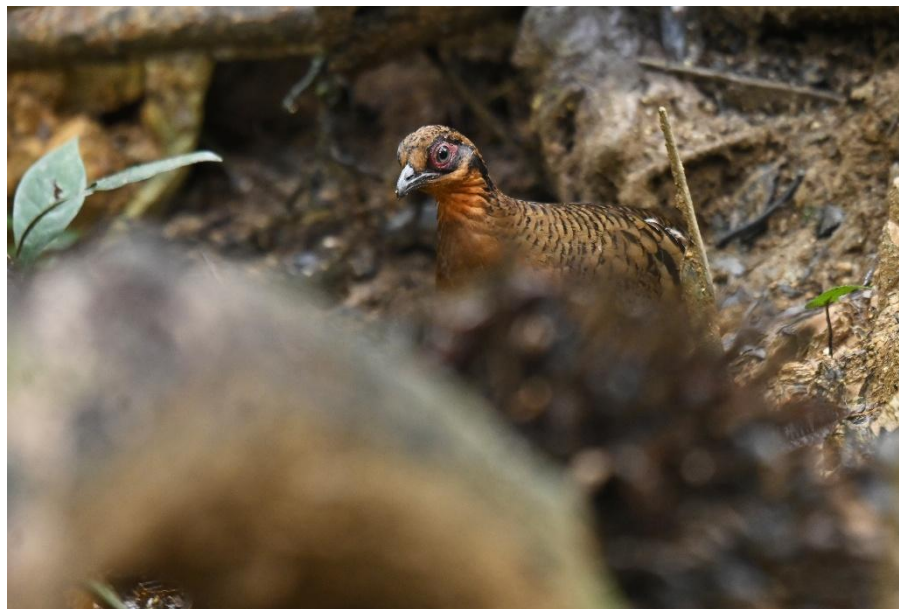


4.1.3. Klias

The small Klias reserve, near the town of Beaufort on the coast, protects and provides access to a habitat quite different from those visited during the rest of the trip. Partly because of the endemic species found there, but also out of curiosity to discover a peat swamp forest, we included this little-visited stop in our itinerary, taking inspiration in particular from Daan Druckker's route. The habitat was indeed different, with a rather uneven shrubby structure. The reserve is visited via wooden boardwalks, which become slippery when it rains and are often in poor condition (during our visit, it was impossible to complete the full loop because of fallen trees and rotten planks).

Our first visit, in the afternoon, took place just after a monumental downpour. In three hours, the list was not very long (see eBird), but it did allow us to identify several species strongly tied to this habitat and not seen anywhere else, such as [Van Hasselt's Sunbird](#) (*Leptocoma brasiliana*) and [Red-throated Barbet](#) (*Psilopogon mystacophanos*). At dusk, the emergence of dozens of [Large Flying Foxes](#) (*Pteropus vampyrus*) all around us was spectacular. After such a quiet afternoon in terms of sightings, Jonas suddenly exclaimed with the thermal camera in hand: a small mammal was climbing a trunk, and once we switched on the torch, he was convinced he had seen the characteristic tail of the [Pen-tailed Treeshrew](#) (*Ptilocercus lowii*). Unfortunately, the little mammal disappeared too quickly for me to really observe it. Knowing how rarely the species is seen, we were still rather pleased with ourselves—but a few minutes later, another one appeared quite close to the boardwalk! This time, the proximity allowed me to get a quick photo once we switched on the torch, confirming our identification beyond doubt. We were delighted! A [Sunda Scops Owl](#) (*Otus lempiji*) rounded off the night nicely. Our visit the following day was very short because we had to return to Kota Kinabalu. I did, however, add [Long-tailed Parakeet](#) (*Psittacula longicauda*) to the list.

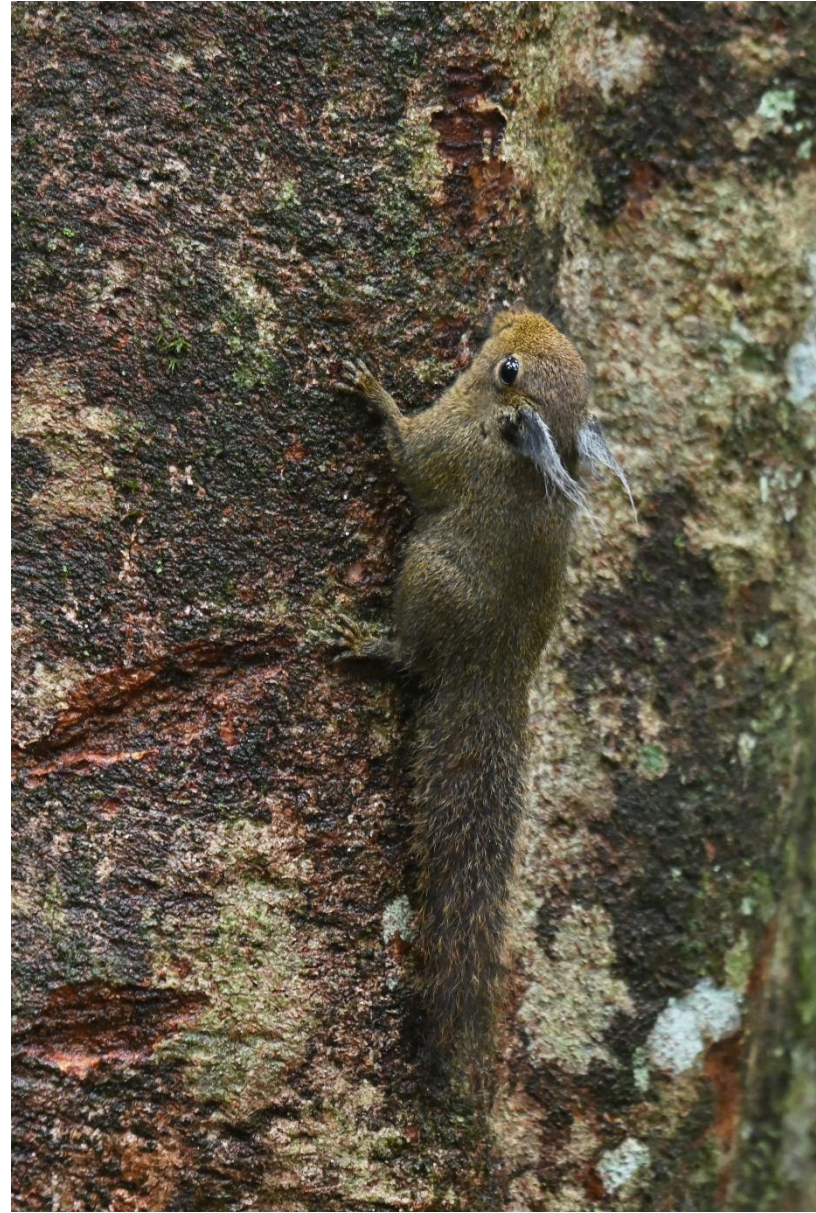
In the end, we never really knew whether we had simply hit an exceptional night when Pen-tailed Treeshrews were particularly active, or whether the reserve is actually an especially good site for the species—which could make sense given the different habitat.



Dayak Blue Flycatcher, Red-breasted Partridge and Orange-headed Thrush



Crested Partridge, Grey-hooded Babbler, Asian Emerald Dove and Narcissus Flycatcher



Pygmy Tufted Squirrel



Crested Partridge, Yellow-bellied Bulbul and Penan Bulbul



Bulwer's Pheasant comes at the squirrel hide :)



Mountain Treeshrew and Jentink's Squirrel



Borneo black-banded squirrel



Borneo black-banded squirrel, Low's Squirrel, Everett's Squirrel and *Eutropis rudis*



Borneo Green-Magpie and Checker-throated Woodpecker



Whitehead's Broadbill, Whitehead's Trogon, Sunda Laughingthrush and Indigo Flycatcher



Crimson-headed Partridge, Bornean Whistling-Thrush and Mountain Wren-Babbler



Bornean Treepie



Little Cuckoo-Dove



Maroon Woodpecker



Orange-backed Woodpecker



Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Bornean Whistler, Mountain Barbet and Golden-naped Barbet



Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush, Black-capped White-eye and Bornean Stubtail



Kinabalu National Park



Unknown bat

4.2. Eastern Sabah

We flew from Kota Kinabalu on AAB's advice, and they picked us up at Sandakan airport, from where the tiring drive to Deramakot began. If I had to do it again, I think I would rather go overland from Kota Kinabalu; taking yet another flight did not really feel justified.

4.2.1. Deramakot

Deramakot hardly needs any introduction: this vast sustainably logged forest concession has successfully developed tourism. In practice, a guide is assigned to you with a seven-hour daily package to use more or less as you see fit. It is possible to extend this by paying extra, which we did on certain days. That also allows you to adapt to the weather, which can sometimes be uncooperative and wipe out entire nights. The longest night outing we did lasted seven hours straight, making it possible to reach deeper parts of the reserve and therefore potentially improve the odds. Afternoons are probably better spent resting, as it often rains and even in the morning the temperature rises quickly. The food is perfectly decent for a place lost in the middle of tropical forest, though it is clearly not what justifies the journey.

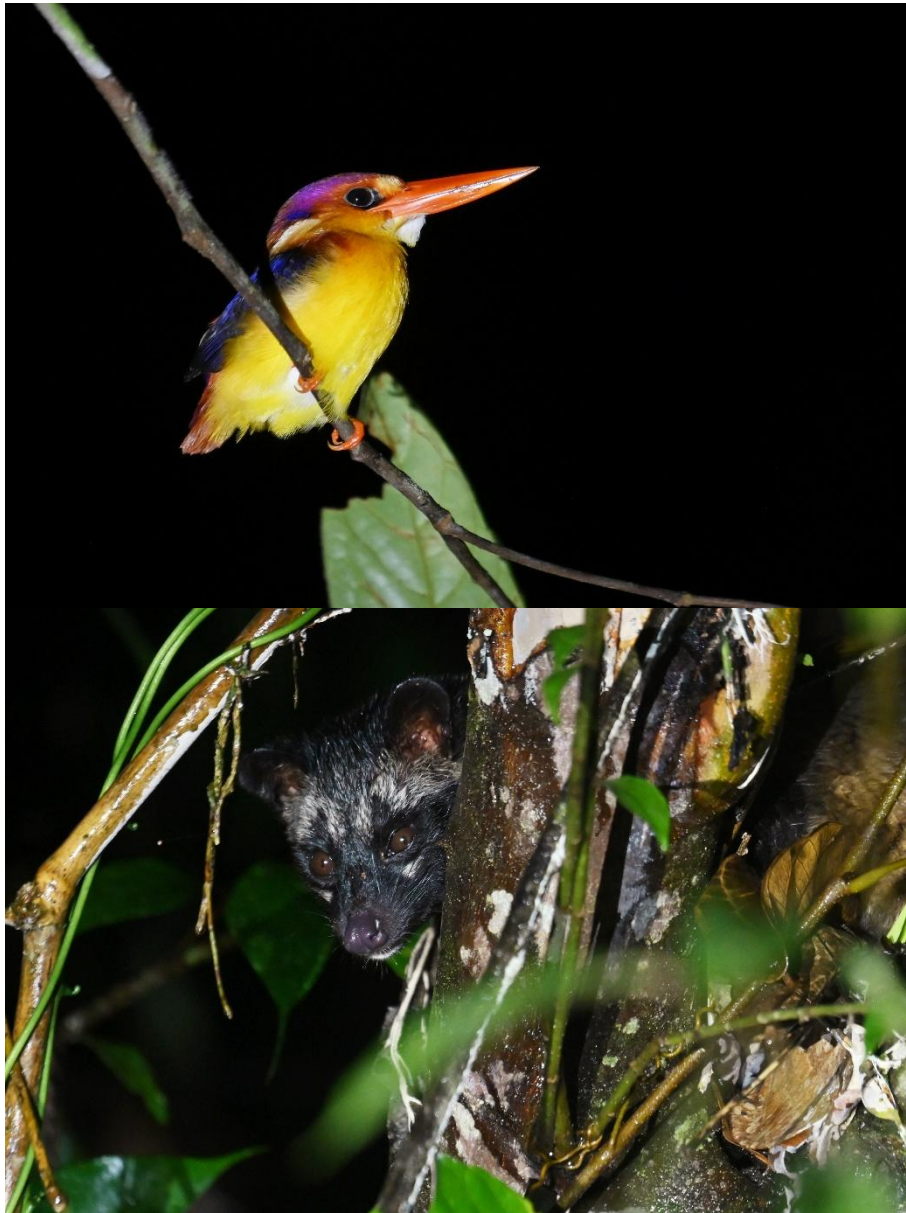
It is essential to book long in advance, as rooms are limited. It seems impossible to reserve independently, which is precisely what pushed us to go through AAB. Adik, an energetic young woman, accompanied us during the stay. Despite the rain, she never dragged her feet when it came to searching for animals with a torch at night, and she gave us some very good sightings.

Our stay of three nights and three days in Deramakot did not produce the species that sit right at the top of most mammalwatchers' wish lists (clouded leopard, marbled cat, pangolin or sun bear, stink badger, bearded pig, or even the rare banteng). It was a slight disappointment not to see any of them, but this needs to be kept in perspective: even if Deramakot is one of, if not the best-known site at present, sightings remain rare (and perhaps are becoming even rarer now that the place has become so famous?).

On arrival, we saw our one and only [Asian Elephant](#) (*Elephas maximus*) of this part of the trip, a male that crossed the road in a rather agitated state as our vehicle approached. By day, we had two very high-quality [Bornean Orangutan](#) observations (*Pongo pygmaeus*)—indeed the best of the whole trip. Curiously, we saw few other diurnal primates. [Maroon Langurs](#) (*Presbytis rubicunda*) were extremely shy, and we only found them on the last day, far away and for just a few seconds. In the birdlife, our various morning safaris and a few walks around camp brought us superb [Whiskered Treeswift](#) (*Hemiprocne comata*), [Rufous Piculet](#) (*Sasia abnormis*), [Black-and-yellow Broadbill](#) (*Eurylaimus ochromalus*), [White-crowned Forktail](#) (*Enicurus leschenaulti*), [Red-bearded Bee-eater](#) (*Nyctyornis amictus*) and many brown bulbuls, not always easy to tell apart. The highlight, however, was undoubtedly stumbling upon a small family group of the rare [Crested Jayshrike](#) (*Platylophus galericulatus*), whose crest is comically large. Towards evening, a muntjac crossed the road in front of us. Jonas seemed fairly confident that it was a [Bornean Yellow Muntjac](#) (*Muntiacus atherodes*).







Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher, Binturong, Philippine Palm Civet and Temminck Flying-squirrel



Philippines Slow Loris



Thomas' Giant Flying-Squirrel



Barred Eagle-Owl



Safari in Deramakot



Crested Jayshrike, Rufous Piculet, Temminck's Sunbird and Black-and-yellow Broadbill



Brown Barbet



Whiskered treeswift



At night, our first highlights came in quick succession: a [Buffy Fish Owl](#) (*Ketupa ketupu*) followed by the splendid [Barred Eagle-Owl](#) (*Ketupa sumatrana*). We came across solitary sambars on every safari, as well as flying squirrels. [Thomas's Giant Flying Squirrel](#) (*Aeromys thomasi*) was the commonest, followed by [Red Giant Flying Squirrel](#) (*Petaurista petaurista*), and then [Black Flying Squirrel](#) (*Aeromys tephromelas*). We also had a very close observation of [Temminck's Flying Squirrel](#) (*Petinomys setosus*), which doesn't seem common.

A large fig tree heavy with fruit near the camp was full of [flying foxes](#) (*Pteropus vampyrus*) and several species of civets, including several [binturongs](#) (*Arctictis binturong*), which are otherwise not especially easy to see. Borneo may well be the place in the world where civets reach their greatest diversity. We observed, in order of frequency:

- [Small-toothed palm civet](#) (*Arctogalidia trivirgata*)
- [Asian palm civet](#) (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*)
- [Banded palm civet](#) (*Hemigalus derbyanus*)
- [Malayan civet](#) (*Viverra zibetha*)

The last two species, being more terrestrial, were each seen only once and very briefly. Curiously, we also saw [Sunda Leopard Cat](#) (*Prionailurus javanensis*) only once. In torrential rain, we came across an entirely white [Moonrat](#) (*Echinosorex gymnura*) foraging in the water-filled ditches. We were also very lucky with our [Philippine Slow Loris](#) (*Nycticebus menagensis*) sightings.

Had the destination not been so expensive, we would gladly have added more days (even if always driving the same road might start to feel repetitive). Not because Deramakot's forest seems to offer dramatically higher probabilities than elsewhere in Borneo, but because the organisation of the site is particularly well suited to wildlife watching. Borneo is home to an extraordinary diversity of fascinating species living at low density in a relatively unproductive forest (Borneo is not a volcanic island with rich soils like many of the other islands in the Indonesian archipelago, and the large fig trees fruit only at irregular intervals).



4.2.2. Sukau and the Kinabatangan River

Several hours of driving through oil-palm plantations are needed to reach Sukau, on the banks of the Kinabatangan River. The immediate margins of the river have been preserved and allow wildlife to use this long corridor. In some places, the forest extends for barely ten metres before giving way to plantation, but there are also a few significant forest blocks still linked by this ribbon. This landscape means animals are not hidden deep in inaccessible forest but can be relatively easy to see when they move. It can feel a little bleak at times, but no other place offers as many opportunities to observe primates and hornbills, elephant herds are more numerous here than elsewhere in Borneo, and tourism provides alternatives to palm oil or to the trafficking of wildlife, whether alive or as trophies.

There is also a clear “edge effect”, well known in ecology, whereby the boundary between two habitats is more productive and attracts more animals. This is quite obvious along the Kinabatangan, where oil-palm plantations are far more productive than the trees of mature, dense forest. All year round, elephants and rodents alike seem to take advantage of this bounty. Those rodents in turn attract many predators, which hunt at night in the plantations before returning to rest in patches of forest.

We stayed with Osman (+60 19841 5259), who was also our guide for the boat excursions on the river, the main way of exploring the area. Tourist boats share the river with barges piled with logs and tractors destined for the plantations. We did three boat safaris a day, of varying duration, and it was a very enjoyable change after the vehicle safaris in Deramakot, the hides, and the trails explored earlier. Osman had worked with the BBC, notably filming pygmy elephants, and proudly displays in his lodge a photograph of himself with Sir David Attenborough.

Depending on what we were targeting and, on our success during the previous outings, Osman took us to different stretches of the main river or to tributaries such as Menanggol, Resang or Silau Teneggang. I do not think it is necessary for independent travellers to study in advance exactly which stretch of river holds each species; this seems seasonal, and the good guides know better where and how to search.

One of our major targets, the Flat-headed Cat (*Prionailurus planiceps*), remained invisible despite our night searches. Water level is also an important variable here, though one that is difficult to control.

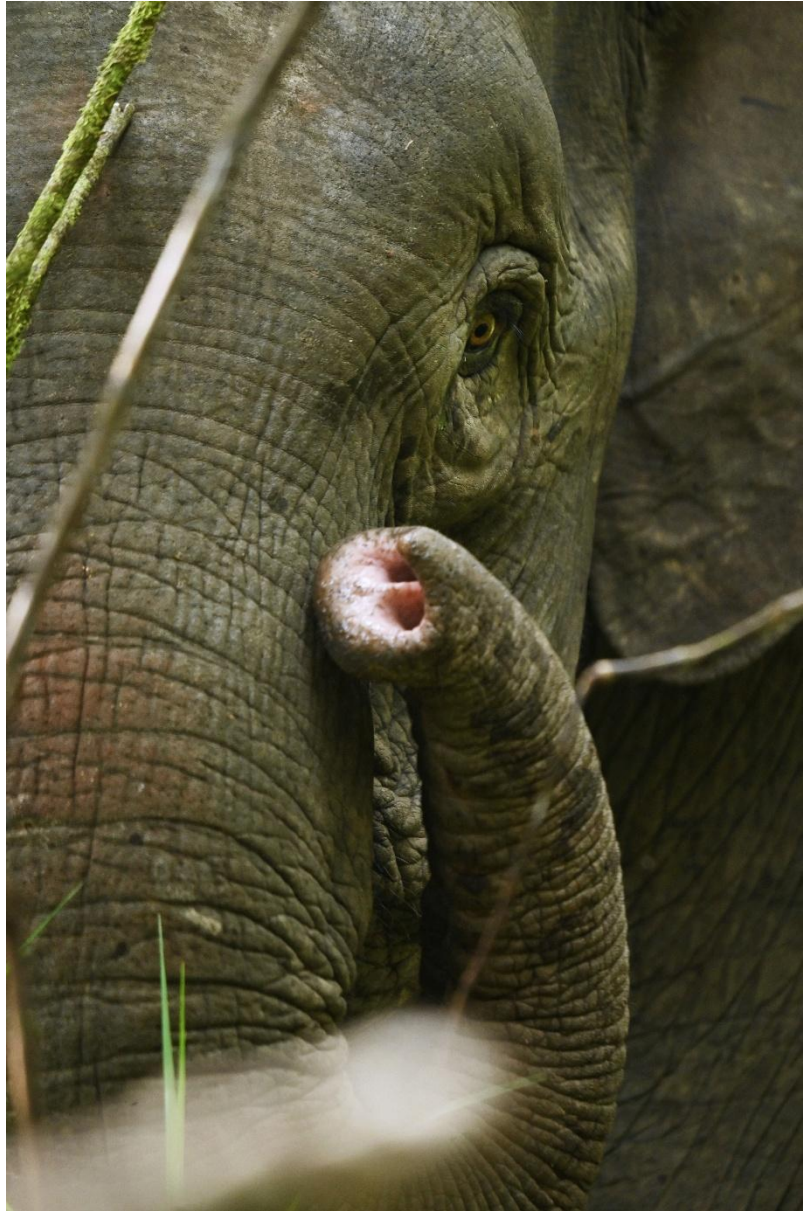
By day, we observed all eight species of Bornean hornbill, including **Helmeted Hornbill** (*Rhinoplax vigil*), of which a male eventually came in to investigate the repeated calls being broadcast over a speaker. A true orgy of these magnificent birds. The rare **Storm's Stork** (*Ciconia stormi*) was abundant here, as were **Oriental Darter** (*Anhinga melanogaster*) and various kingfishers. One morning, Osman's sharp ear picked up the song of the rare **Straw-headed Bulbul** (*Pycnonotus zeylanicus*), so heavily sought after as a cage bird that it is now Critically Endangered. The area is also a paradise for primates, with large groups of **Proboscis Monkey** (*Nasalis larvatus*), **Silvered Langur** (*Trachypithecus cristatus*), **Long-tailed Macaque** (*Macaca fascicularis*) and one distant, frustrating observation of **Maroon Langur**. Although we did not specifically search for them, we did not see any Bornean orangutans here. We should also mention a **Least Pygmy Squirrel** (*Exilisciurus exilis*) and of course the pygmy elephants that made the place famous.

Our night outings allowed us to observe several nocturnal raptors, including **Brown Boobook** (*Ninox scutulata*), **Buffy Fish Owl** (*Ketupa ketupu*), the fascinating **Oriental Bay Owl** (*Phodilus badius*) and **Large Frogmouth** (*Batrachostomus auritus*). Among mammals, however, we came back a little less successful, with only a few civets, rats disappearing too quickly, and sleeping primates. We observed several **Philippine Slow Lorises** (*Nycticebus menagensis*), one of which seemed to show clearly different facial and dorsal markings, though it is difficult to know whether Kayan Slow Loris actually occurs in this region.

Osman is an impressive guide with a very sharp eye, thanks to whom we saw new species. He is very jovial and several times had us in stitches on the boat, notably when he broke into a perfect rendition of "Bombastic" in front of a mating pair of storks. That said, I do want to mention a few practices that I did not find very sustainable, even more so as tourist pressure on the river is increasing sharply. First of all, playback was used systematically, even when we had not asked for it, even with species we had already seen, and in ways that clearly interfered with natural behaviour. We tried for Bornean Ground-Cuckoo and eventually stopped before seeing this furtive animal because it would have involved several hours of playback.

Another problem we encountered was the habit of taking clients onto the riverbank to view **elephants** (*Elephas maximus*). At one point, Osman had gone ashore and invited us to follow him without giving any explanation. We were barefoot, I had a fixed 500mm lens, and while Jonas and I knew that elephants could be dangerous, we were accompanied by two completely non-naturalist tourists armed only with mobile phones. In an instant, we found ourselves face to face, at less than four metres, with a stressed family group and a newborn calf in dense forest. The day before, other casual tourists had shown us phone footage suggesting that this sort of situation is regular. Osman insisted that he knew the elephants and could protect us, but it felt like an accident waiting to happen and an irresponsible way to show wildlife. All the more so since, a few dozen minutes later, we calmly watched a herd feeding along the riverbank.

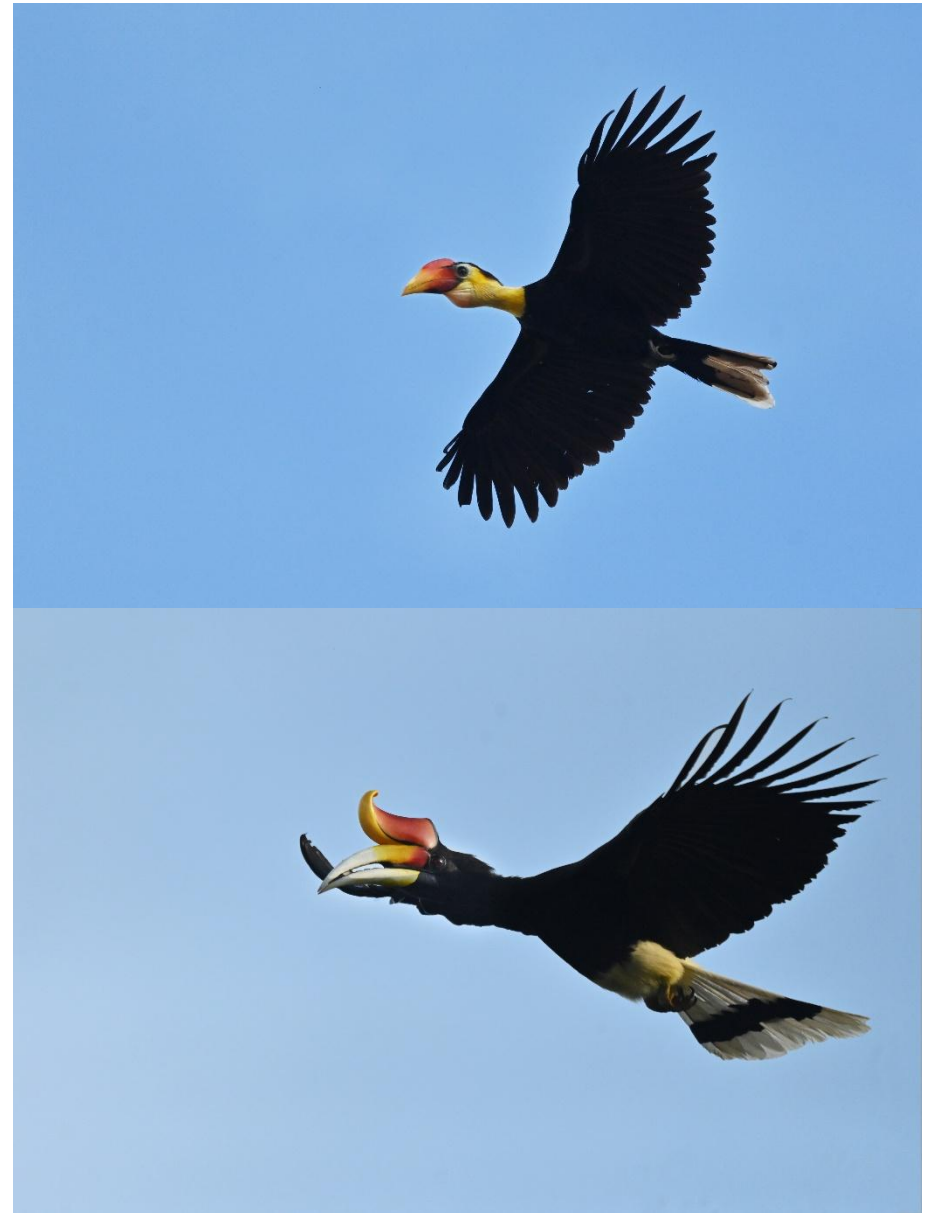




Borneo Pygmy Elephant close encounter

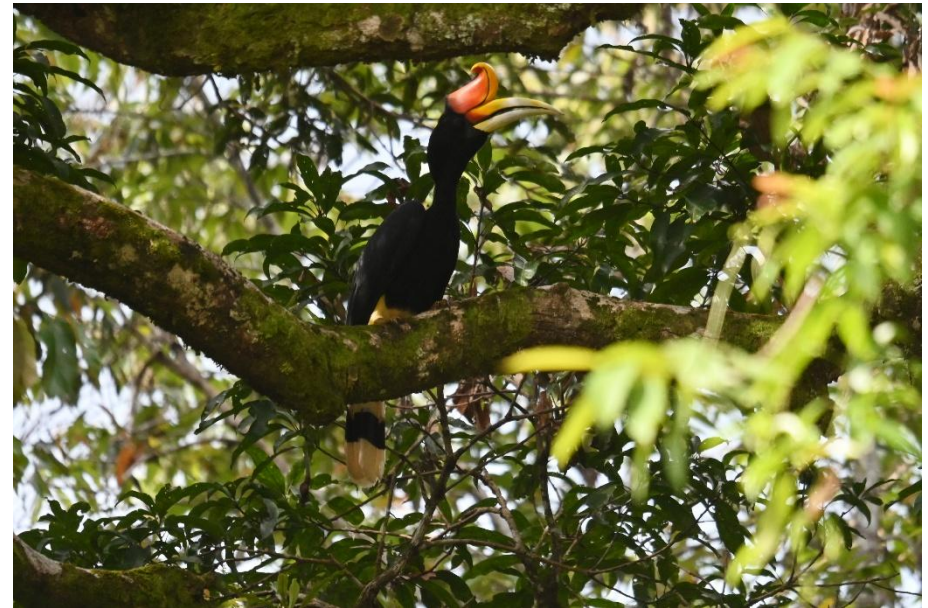


Large Frogmouth, Yellow Bittern and Blue-eared Kingfisher



Hornbill galore at Kinabatangan River : Bushy-crested, Wrinkled, White-crowned and Rhinoceros Hornbill





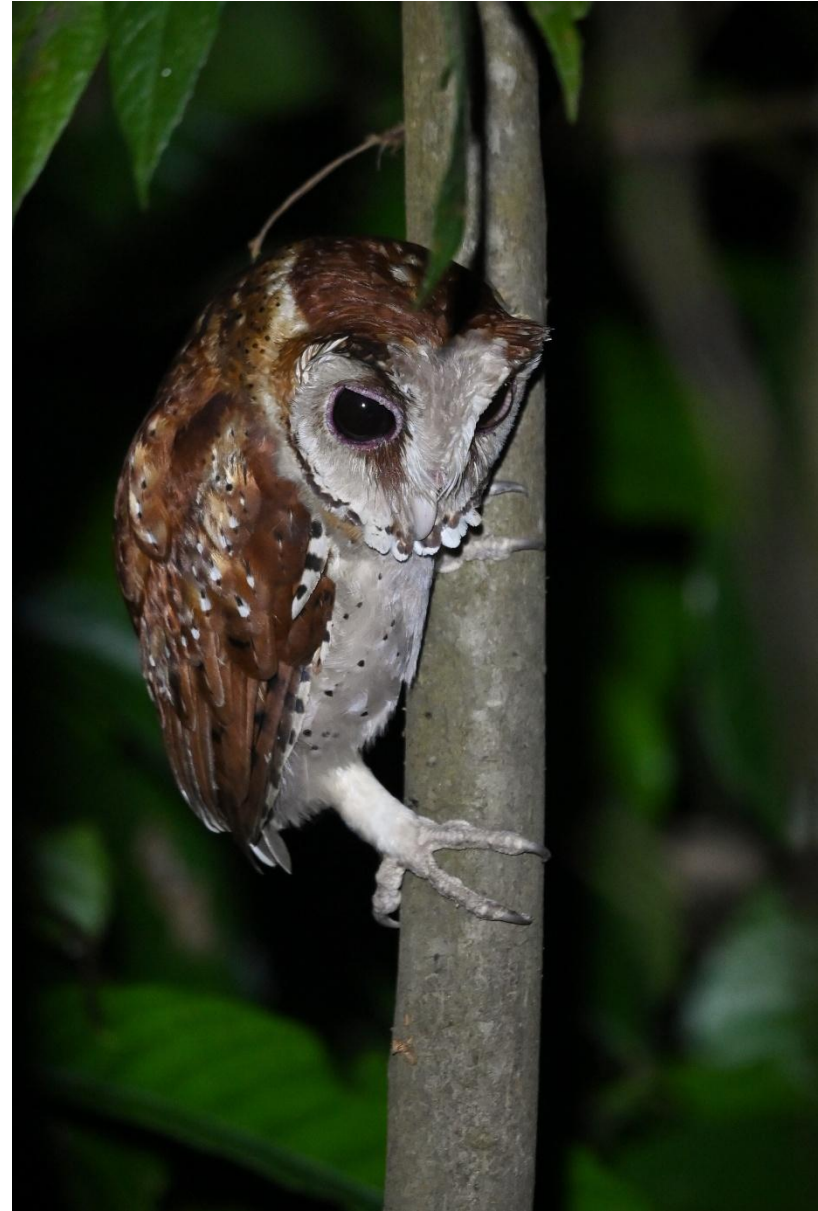
Rhinoceros Hornbill, Malaysian Blue Flycatcher and Storm's Stork



Black-and-red Broadbill, Buffy Fish-Owl and Saltwater Crocodile



Proboscis Monkey



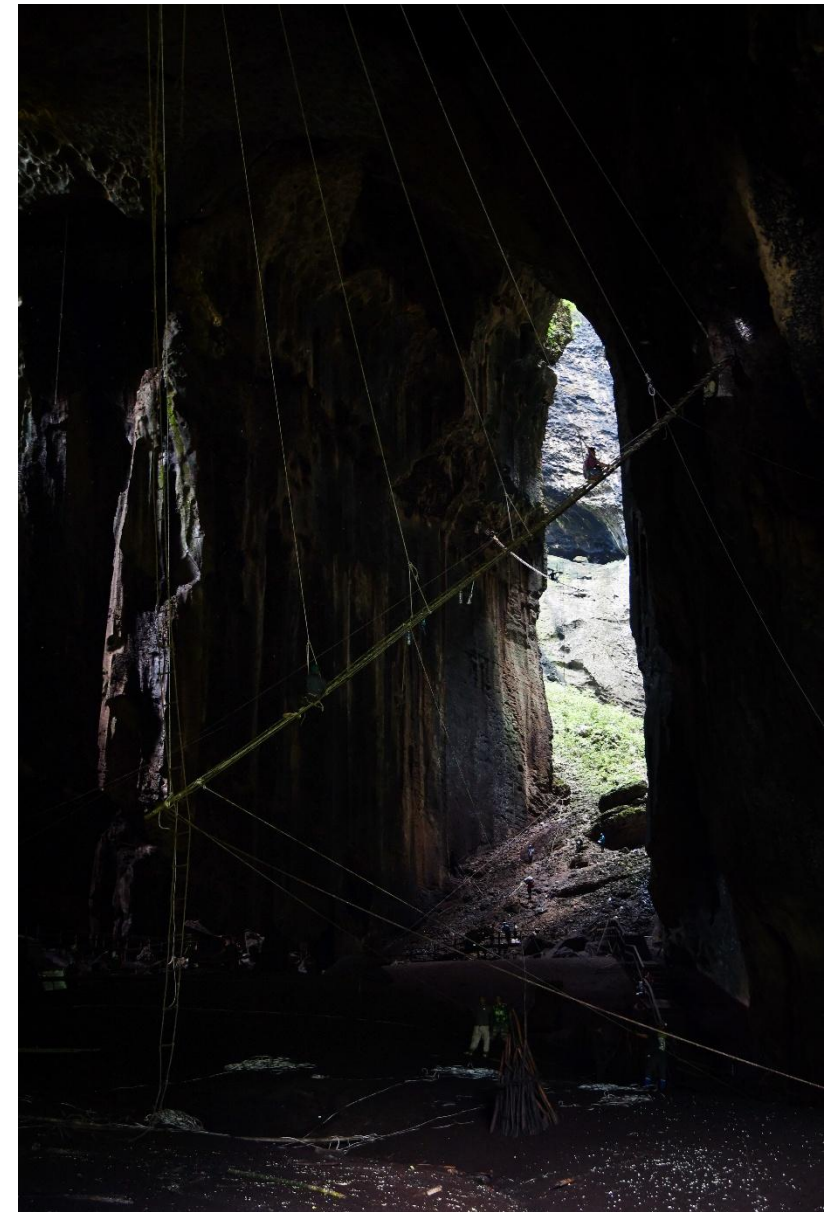
Asian water monitor, Oriental Bay-Owl and Sunda Scops-owl

4.2.3. Gomantong

The Gomantong Caves lie within one of those larger forest blocks still connected to the Kinabatangan corridor, otherwise surrounded by oil-palm plantations. We went there one afternoon from Osman's homestay. The site is known for the langurs we had not yet seen well, for orangutans, but above all for the thousands of bats that emerge from the cave at dusk and attract a multitude of aerial predators. Before the evening spectacle, we explored the main cave more or less deeply, a true karst cathedral. The cave is also the site of a centrally organised, state-managed harvest of swiftlet nests, later sold on Asian markets as a delicacy. The workers move around on great bamboo ladders suspended by ropes, which is worth seeing in itself for those who are not especially fond of walking through bat guano.

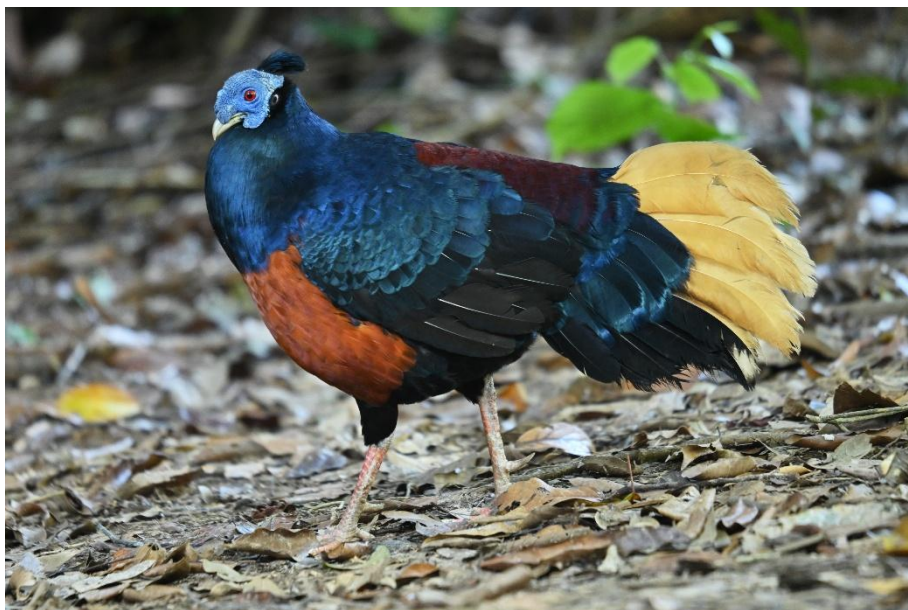
Three species of swiftlets breed there, but Black-nest and White-nest Swiftlets account for 99% of the birds. It is not possible to roam freely through the area; you are restricted to a boardwalk, which limits the potential for observing the resident bats, often too high up. The access road is a good place for langurs and orangutans, and I briefly observed a male, though too well hidden in the canopy. According to several trip reports, it is also a recognised site for pittas, but our playback attempts were unsuccessful.

Late in the afternoon, after climbing a steep series of steps in suffocating heat, you reach a small platform from which thousands of bats pour out continuously for around twenty minutes. A pair of **Oriental Pied Hornbills** (*Anthracoceros albirostris*) comes every evening to snatch bats from the upper branches. They are joined by many raptors, some highly specialised, ranging from the widespread **Crested Serpent Eagle** (*Spilornis cheela*) to **Wallace's Hawk-Eagle** (*Nisaetus nanus*), **Rufous-bellied Eagle** (*Lophotriorchis kienerii*) and the virtuoso **Bat Hawk** (*Macheiramphus alcinus*). Watching each of these aerial predators profit from the bounty is spectacular, and the views over the surrounding rainforest make Gomantong a stop I would strongly recommend to anyone visiting the region.



4.2.4. Kinabatangan Hide

On the way back from Sukau to Lahad Datu, we decided at the last minute to add a visit to another hide run by Razis Nasri (RN Empire Travels) and his family. With luck, this hide can produce Giant Pitta (*Hydrornis caeruleus*) as well as its "little sister", Black-crowned Pitta (*Erythropitta ussheri*). To this end, speakers broadcast calls of the latter species for hour. For this purpose, speakers broadcast calls of the latter species for hours, which I find very questionable. We shared the hide with a large group of Chinese photographers who went out regularly to smoke, which did not exactly help either. Even so, the hide gave us good views of other species we had not yet seen, such as many Bornean Crested Fireback (*Lophura ignita*), including one male that almost attacked my shoes, Sabah Partridge (*Tropicoperdix graydoni*), Rufous-collared Kingfisher (*Actenoides concretus*), amusing Banded Broadbill (*Eurylaimus javanicus*) and a whole suite of lowland forest babblers (see the eBird list). Like all the other hides, it also produced numerous squirrels and treeshrews (but none not seen yet). By late morning, our allotted time was up and we left without seeing the main target of the session. We went for lunch in Lahad Datu, where my path parted from Jonas and Ruta's. They continued to Danum Valley and Tabin, while I headed back to Sandakan and Sepilok with a driver.



Bornean Crested Fireback



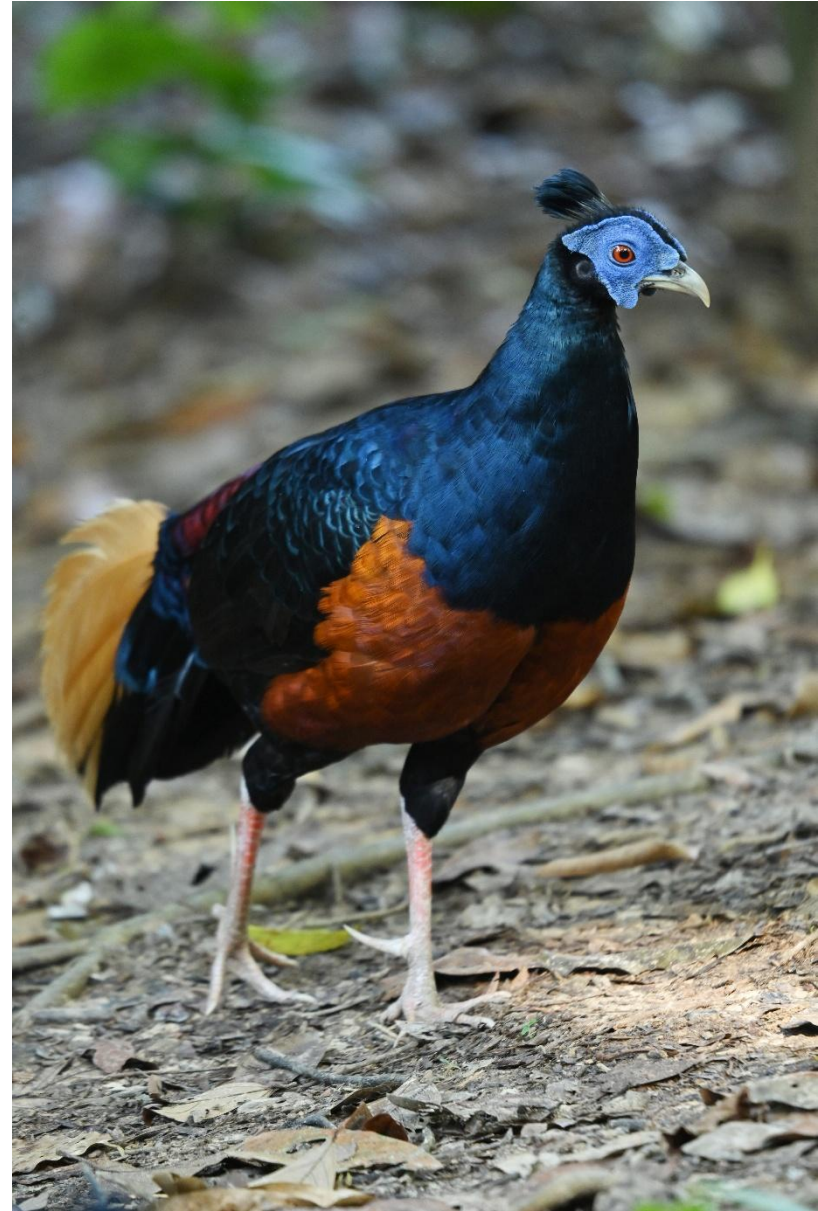
Black-crowned Pitta



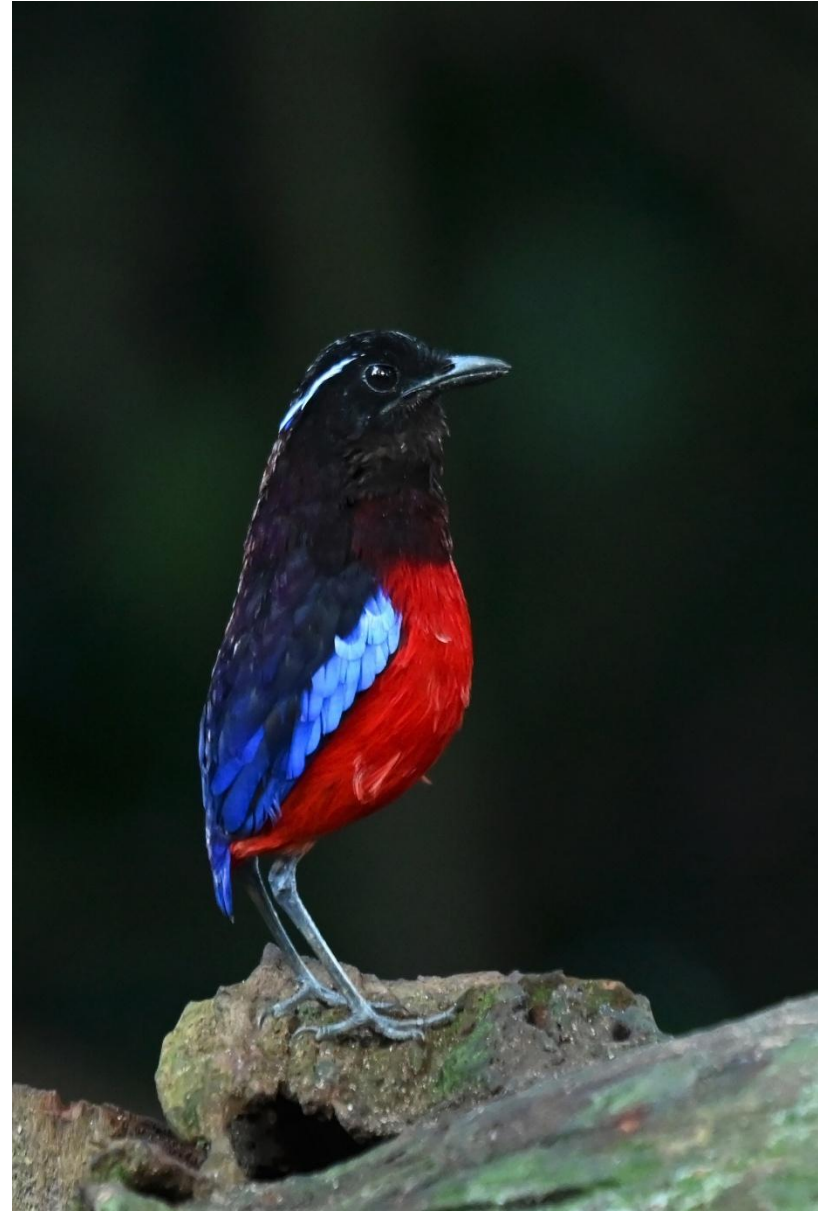
Bornean Black-capped Babbler, Wallace's Hawk-Eagle, Southern Pig-tailed Macaque and Gomantong's worker



Sphenomorphus sabanus, Maroon Langur, Prevost's Squirrel and White-crowned Shama



Bornean Crested Fireback



Banded Broadbill, Black-crowned Pitta and Large Treeshrew

4.2.5. Sepilok

Sepilok is something of a hub built around conservation and wildlife tourism. The orangutan rehabilitation centre is one of the best known and made the place famous. More recently, a similar centre for Bornean Sun Bears has opened nearby. A little further on lies the Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC), a sort of miniature national park dotted with facilities and featuring one of the largest canopy walks in the world, making it much easier to observe the abundant canopy fauna. The protected area is in fact fairly extensive, but further on the trails become fewer, wilder, and, as far as I understand, inaccessible without a guide.

Wildlife at the RDC is more accustomed to heavier tourist traffic, and the habits of some animals are well known, such as the evening glides of the giant squirrels or the roost of the Black-crowned Pitta. Even so, luck, patience and discretion remain your best assets for observing most species from the walkways and observation towers rising to 28 metres.

I loved my three nights in Sepilok. For a solo traveller, or anyone on a limited budget, it is a perfect place where you can stay and eat cheaply, without needing a guide or a vehicle to explore all day long. I stayed in a dorm at Sepilok B&B, only a few minutes from the RDC entrance and with its own treed garden. The hotel has its own restaurant, even if other options exist nearby. The only drawback of the B&B is breakfast, which is served neither early enough nor late enough, meaning you have to split the morning session in two if you want to eat there. On the practical side, make sure you have enough cash with you, as there is no ATM and several places do not accept bank cards.

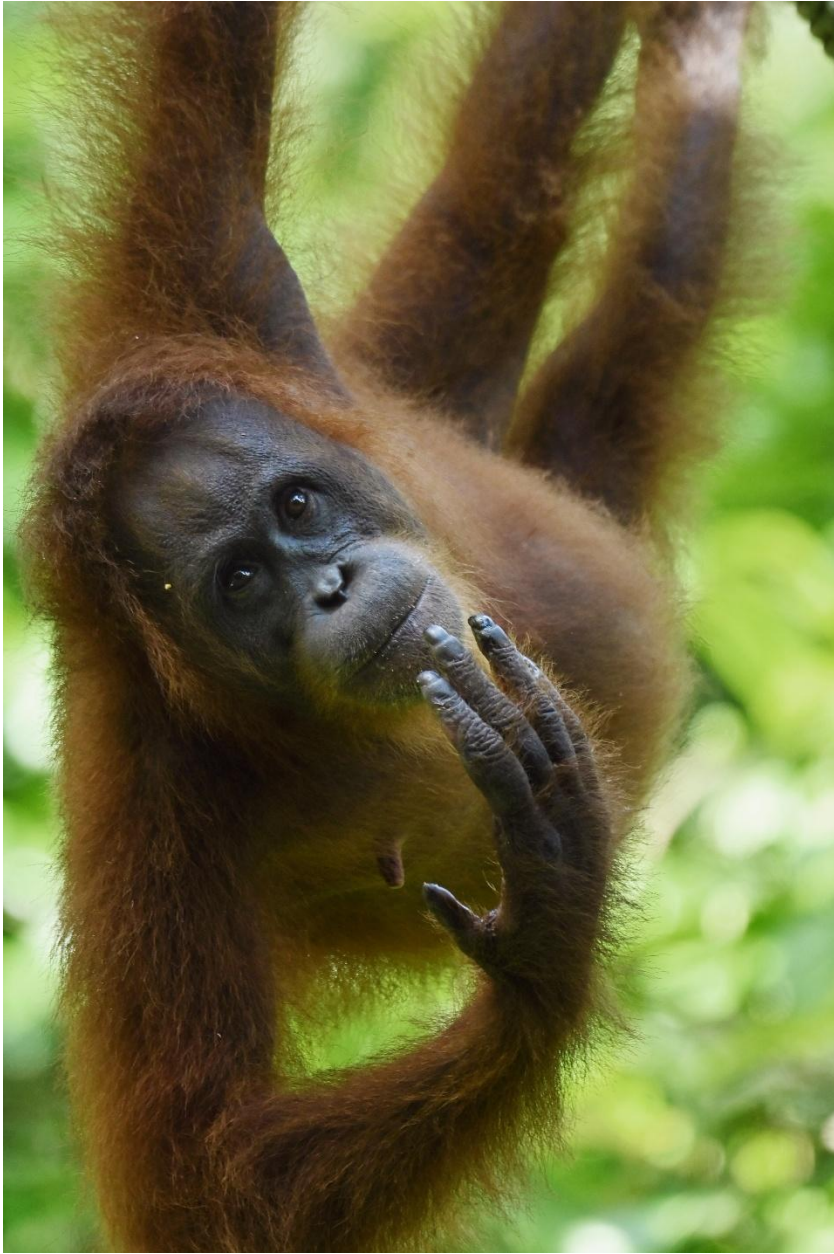
Night walks, which must be booked in advance, allow visitors to search for nocturnal fauna. It should be noted, however, that these guided outings are quite popular and that you are far from alone in the forest. Groups of around fifteen tourists move together, and unless you book privately, you cannot ask the guide to focus on a particular species. The usual sequence is as follows: first the Red [Giant Flying Squirrel](#) (*Petaurista petaurista*) emerging from its artificial nest, then a search aimed mainly at the two nocturnal primates, [Philippine Slow Loris](#) (*Nycticebus menagensis*) and above all [Horsfield's Tarsier](#) (*Cephalopachus bancanus*).

The highlights of my morning visits were the long-awaited encounter with my first wild gibbons, North [Bornean Grey Gibbon](#) (*Hylobates funereus*), several squirrels and bulbuls offering fine photographic opportunities, and above all a chance encounter with a [Spiny Turtle](#) (*Heosemys spinosa*), a highly threatened species.

I found the entrance price for the sun bear rehabilitation centre rather high for what, in terms of the visitor experience, is essentially a zoo, even if I fully acknowledge the value of the work being done there. The opening hours were also inconvenient, so I did not visit. I did make two visits to the orangutan centre, the first one somewhat ruined by a tropical downpour. For someone arriving in Borneo, it is an exceptional opportunity to observe the apes in a rainforest setting, but for someone used to visiting zoos, it was ultimately not all that different. The apes use wooden platforms and ropes around the feeding area rather than moving naturally through vegetation as I had previously been lucky enough to witness. It was interesting, but perhaps not essential for visitors who already have access to orangutans in good captive conditions near home, compared with spending another session at the RDC in the hope of stumbling upon a rare bird such as the much sought-after Bornean Bristlehead (*Pityriasis gymnocephala*).



Sabah Partridge



4.2.6. Labuk Bay

During one of my visits to the orangutan centre, I came across a friendly Belgian couple wearing Antwerp Zoo T-shirts. I asked them whether they might be interested in going to Labuk Bay to see the habituated groups of [proboscis monkeys](#). They replied that they were already planning to go the next day and would be delighted to share a taxi with me. Too good an opportunity to miss!

Labuk Bay is a privately managed mangrove reserve built around the regular feeding of several habituated groups of [proboscis monkeys](#). The experience is therefore not exactly a wild encounter, but it does provide very close and reliable views of this extraordinary primate with its improbable nose and pot-bellied silhouette. In a region where coastal forest has been heavily fragmented, the site at least offers a practical way to observe the species and supports the protection of a few remaining mangrove pockets.

The proboscis monkeys are fed with a sort of special unsweetened bread, which helps concentrate a substantial number of family groups along a narrow strip of mangrove. Feeding takes place at two different platforms, each offering a more or less intimate experience. Since the species is threatened with extinction, this initiative could certainly help support some local populations reduced to a few isolated mangrove pockets. A family of [Silvered Leaf Monkeys](#) (*Trachypithecus cristatus*) also takes advantage of the bounty.

Labuk Bay also gave me a brief observation of a [Slaty-breasted Rail](#) (*Lewinia striata*) crossing the road, and of [Mangrove Whistler](#) (*Pachycephala cinerea*).

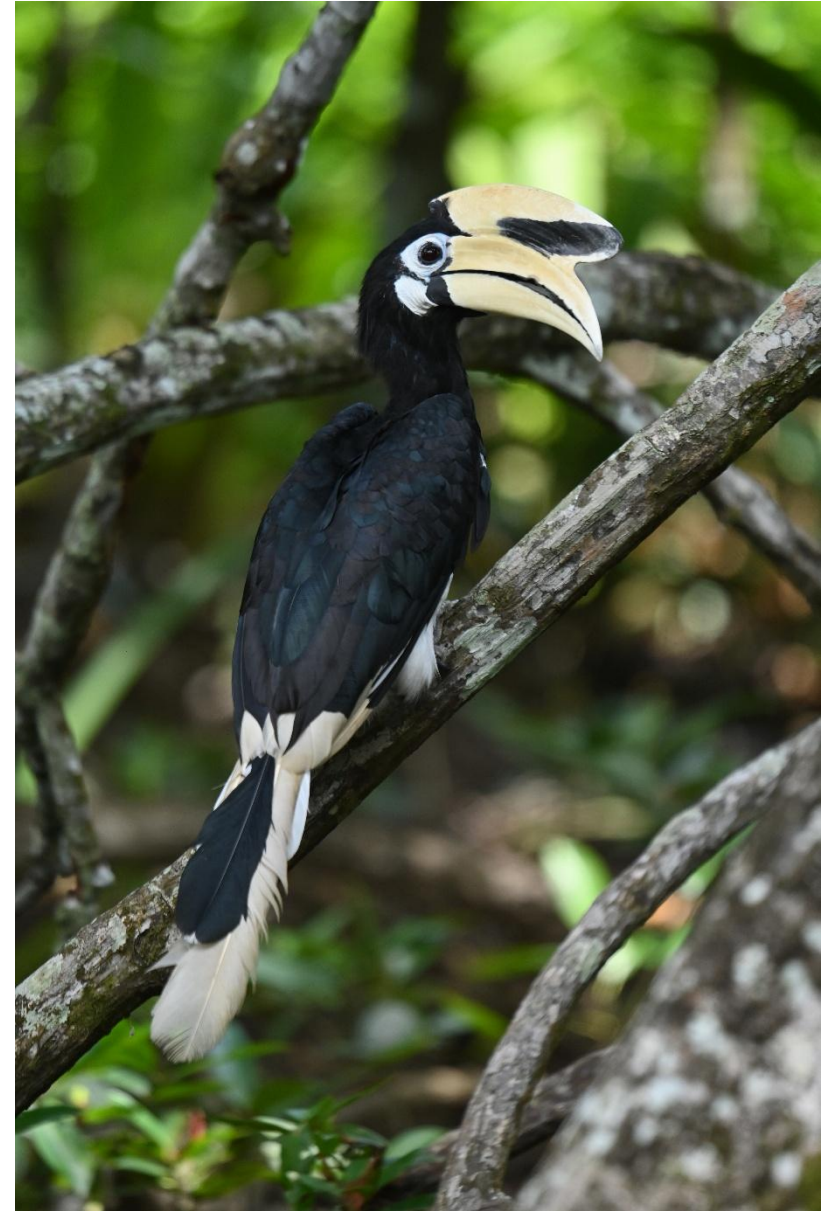


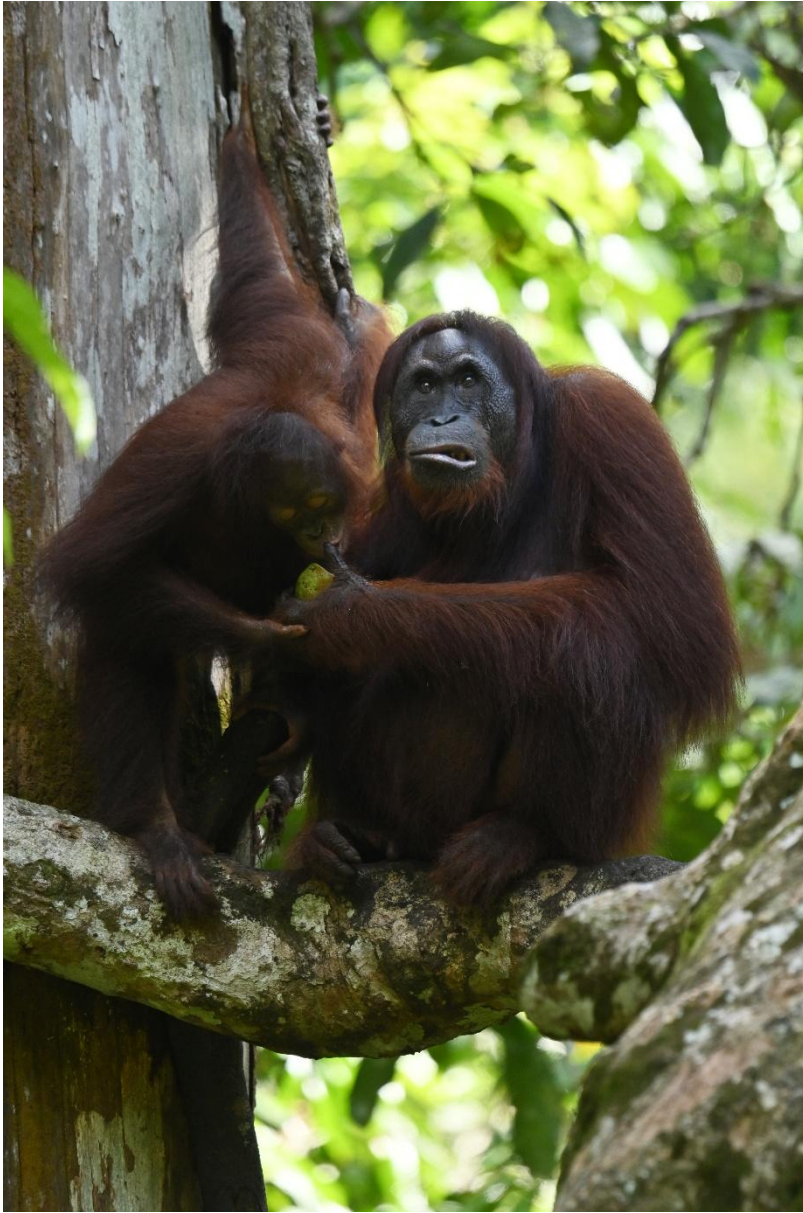


Proboscis Monkey, Mangrove Whistler and Silvered Langur



Periophthalmodon schlosseri, Oriental Pied-Hornbill





Bornean Orang-Utan



Pig-tailed Macaque, and Red Giant Flying-squirrel



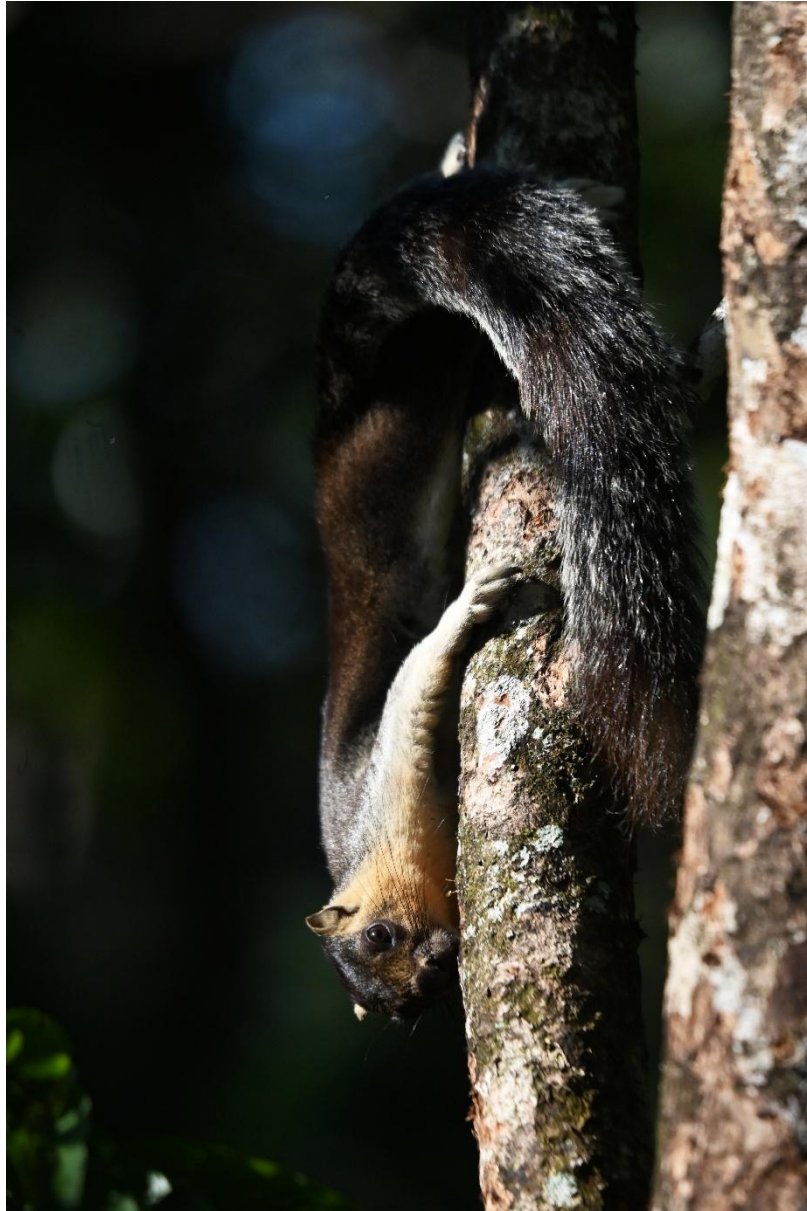
Cream-coloured Giant Squirrel, Horsfield's Tarsier and Northern Grey Gibbon



Prevost's Squirrel and White-bellied Woodpecker



Brown Barbet, Rufous-collared Kingfisher and Verditer Flycatcher



Cream-coloured Giant Squirrel, Spiny and Black-winged Flycatcher-shrike

4.3. Peninsular Malaysia

The area around Kuala Lumpur had always seemed very attractive to me because of the profusion of excellent birding and wildlife sites close to the city, making it a highly efficient stop of a few days for discovering the fauna of Peninsular Malaysia. While the lowland fauna resembles very closely what one encounters in Sumatra or Borneo, the mountains are an important centre of endemism with a more pronounced Indochinese influence. I therefore made a point of stopping in Kuala Lumpur for three nights before heading on to Indonesia, which allowed me to add around twenty new bird species and a few new primates.

The eBird trip report can be found here:
<https://ebird.org/tripreport/486889>

4.3.1. Bukit Tinggi

After arriving at Kuala Lumpur airport, I headed to the car rental desks, where my original booking with a major company was refused because I did not have an international driving permit (even though my licence includes an English translation). Another operator proved less strict, though more expensive. After this setback, I set off for Bukit Tinggi, a hill station about 1 hour 30 minutes from the airport. I drove across the Malaysian capital and was struck by the impressive infrastructure and standard of living after my two weeks in Sabah.

Bukit Tinggi is known for its Japanese garden, at the far end of which a feeding site allows observation of one of the hardest endemic birds to see in natural conditions: **Mountain Peacock-Pheasant** (*Polyplectron inopinatum*). To gain access early in the morning and maximise the chances, it is recommended to stay within the large hotel complex that manages the area and access to the garden. The access road normally opens rather late, and you must let the hotel staff know that you want to go birdwatching so that a guard opens the gate early. Even so, I had to return to reception because nobody turned up as arranged. It did not matter in the end, as I was lucky enough to observe a female accompanied by a juvenile, as well as a superb pair of **Ferruginous Partridge** (*Calloperdix oculus*), a **Hairy-backed Bulbul** (*Tricholestes criniger*) and a **Max's Short-tailed Gymnure** (*Hylomys maxi*) taking advantage of the food left out. I also came across my first **Dusky Langurs** (*Trachypithecus obscurus*), much to my delight!



I returned to the hotel to enjoy the breakfast buffet, and I have to say a few words about the place. Called “Colmar Tropicale”, the entire hotel complex is built as a highly stereotyped, rather cardboard reconstruction of a fantasy Alsatian village. As a Frenchman, I found it hilarious and a touch kitsch, but it is clearly very popular with middle-class families from the capital. Never mind that a red London phone box or an Italian pizza maker completes the scenery...

4.3.2. Bukit Fraser

Two hours later, I reached Fraser’s Hill, which this time is a much more genuinely historic hill station than its counterpart. The imprint of British colonialism is far more tangible here than in the Indian hill stations I had previously visited. This site is very well known among nature enthusiasts, and I quickly understood why. The small hill station spreads across the top of a modest mountain and is criss-crossed by quiet roads and trails giving access to a great variety of habitats. Once there, you do not even need your own vehicle, and the diversity of species encountered is such that one could easily stay a full week or more. The colonial houses are very charming, and the refreshing temperatures of the heights mean you can stay in the field almost all day without animal activity dropping too much.

The different birding hotspots are already well described in various reports (notably Rob Jansen’s *It’s a Wild Life*), and in truth my own success there was only mixed. Several endemic birds that I was targeting could not be found, such as Malayan Partridge and Malayan Whistling-Thrush. I had also harboured great hopes of coming across siamangs in the surrounding forests, but Fraser’s Hill nevertheless gave me the opportunity to add to my primate list. In addition to the fairly common [Dusky Langurs](#) and [Pig-tailed Macaques](#) (*Macaca nemestrina*) visible lower down at the place known as “The Gap”, I observed several groups of [White-thighed Surili](#) (*Presbytis siamensis*) and several [Sunda Slow Loris](#) (*Nycticebus coucang*), including three in the same tree.

Among the birds, I was surprised to find that quite a broad range of species were shared with the Indian Himalaya. Still, the following standout species were entirely new to me: [Silver-breasted Broadbill](#) (*Serilophus lunatus*), [Sultan Tit](#) (*Melanochlora sultanea*), [Long-tailed Sibia](#) (*Heterophasia picaoides*), [Silver-eared Mesia](#) (*Leiothrix argentea*) and the incredible [Blue Nuthatch](#) (*Sitta azurea*). The small feeding stations are not only good for birds but also attract rodents and treeshrews, including [Three-striped Ground Squirrel](#) (*Lariscus insignis*) and [Himalayan Striped Squirrel](#) (*Tamiops mccllellandii*).

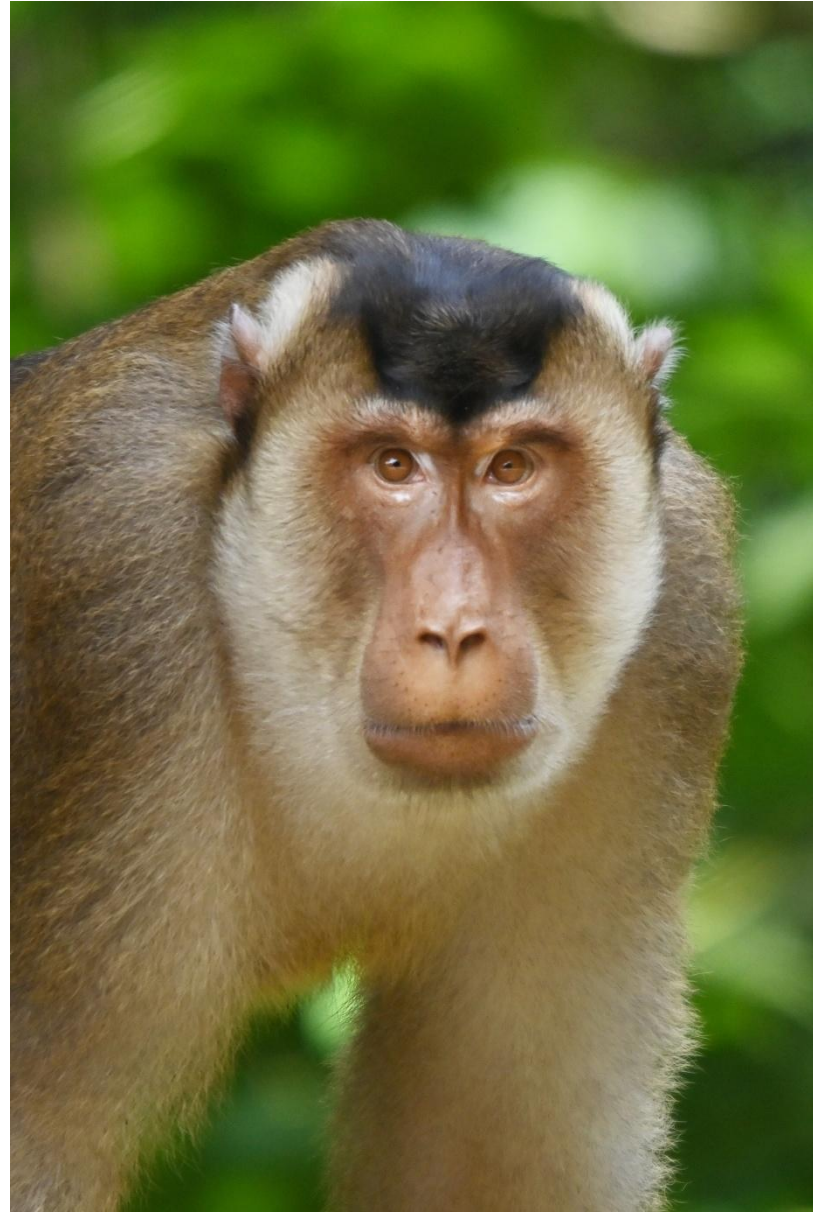
Peninsular Malaysia has much more to offer nature lovers, notably the famous Taman Negara, and I would gladly return to Fraser’s Hill, where more time—or the help of a local guide—would certainly have increased the number of species observed even further. Even so, it is a place where an independent traveller can derive a great deal of pleasure, especially since Malaysian guide prices are far higher than in India.



Ferruginous Partridge, Max's Short-tailed Gymnure, Dusky Langur and Mountain Peacock-Pheasant



White-tigted Surili and Dusky Langur



White-tighted Surili and Southern Pig-tailed Macaque



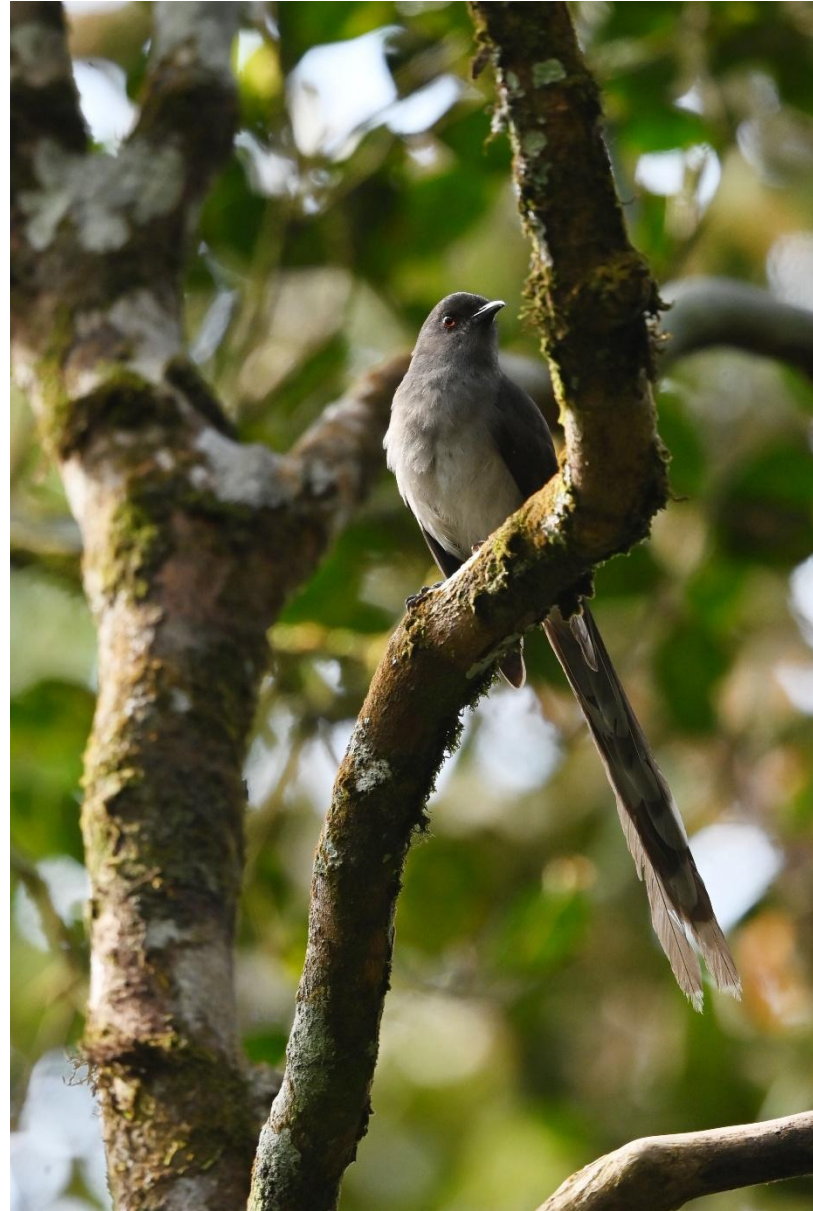
Silver-eared Mesia, Sultan Tit, Cinereous Bulbul, Red-cheeked Squirrel



Red-headed Trogon and Large Niltava



Fire-tufted Barbet, Black-browed Barbet and Silver-breasted Broadbill



Himalayan striped squirrel, Long-tailed Sibia and Chestnut-capped Laughingthrush



5. Indonesia

The final country of the trip was Indonesia, a huge and extraordinarily biodiverse archipelago. Shortly before the trip, Alfred Wallace's travel account had fuelled my imagination and deepened my understanding of the mechanisms explaining the region's endemism and fascinating zoogeography.

The archipelago is immense and, having already been travelling for several months, we arrived a little tired. There was no question of rushing from one island to another, especially since flying is often unavoidable for that and we tried to limit plane travel as much as possible. Apart from four full days on Sulawesi, all the remaining time was spent with my partner. Although she let me go out early in the morning or accepted a few dedicated detours, the itinerary was still largely focused on more cultural and "normal" aspects rather than very isolated and wild places. Unlike India and Borneo, which had been well planned in advance, the Indonesian section was organised entirely on site, just a few days ahead. This definitely affected the quality of the searches, but the added flexibility is also a real advantage.

Kalimantan and Sumatra, despite their obvious appeal, were not prioritised because of their size, limited infrastructure and fauna that partly overlapped with what I had already seen in Sabah. Papua was high on my list but too rough or expensive for my partner to be interested in joining.

5.1. Bali

15/05/2025	Ubud
16/05/2025	Ubud
17/05/2025	Sidemen and Ubud
18/05/2025	Jatiluwh
19/05/2025	Sanda Hideaway
20/05/2025	Ubud
21/05/2025	Bedugul
22/05/2025	Pemuteran
23/05/2025	Pemuteran
24/05/2025	Pemuteran to Java



Bali was a convenient landing point and one that very much appealed to my wife. I was rather wary of tourist overcrowding, but discovering the island turned out to be a pleasant surprise. After several fairly intense weeks in the forest, the very accessible modern comfort, as well as the rich traditions of Ubud, the island's cultural capital, came as a welcome breath of air. The Hindu island is not reputed for its wildlife, lacking large

animals—or at least surviving ones—and being heavily populated. Its compact shape and the strong development of the tourism sector nevertheless make it a good gateway to “get your feet wet” in Sundaland birdlife, even more so when combined with nearby Java, which already shows a notable transition.

In total, I recorded 62 bird species in Bali, summarised in the following eBird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/502731>

5.1.1. Volcanic foothills of the centre of the island

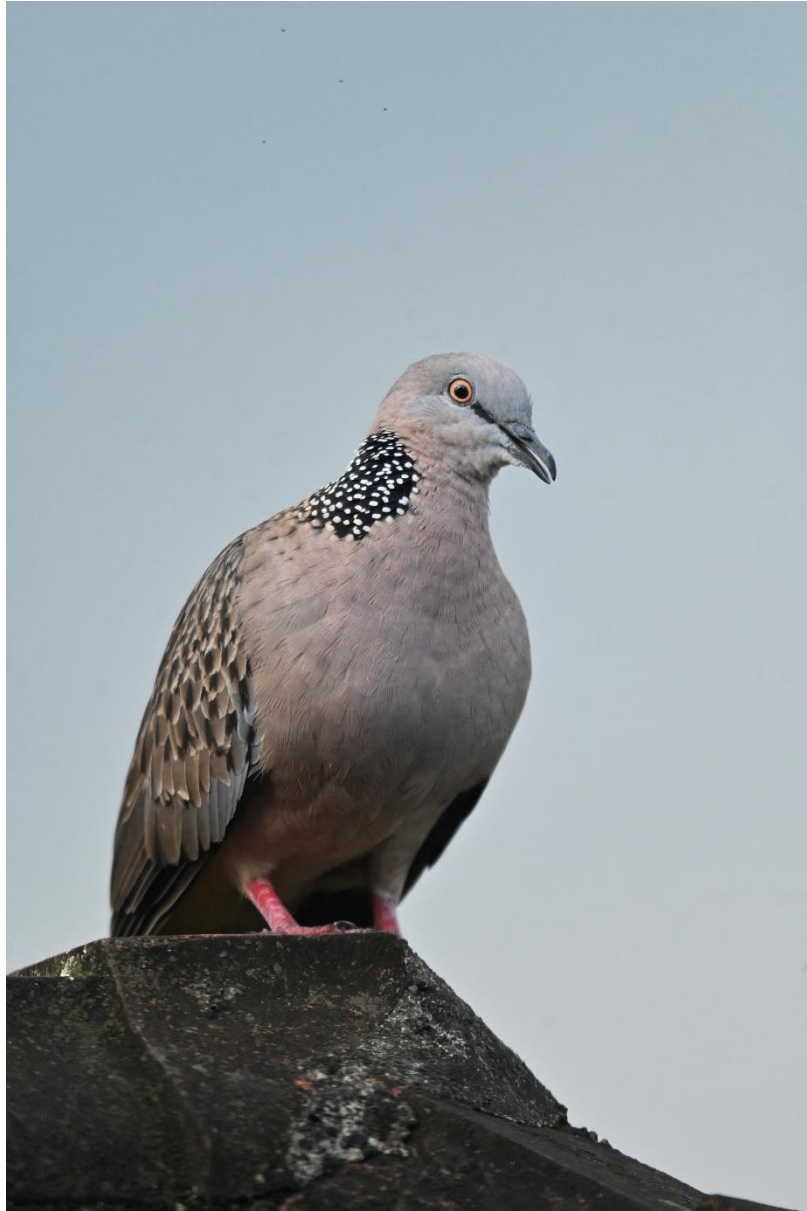
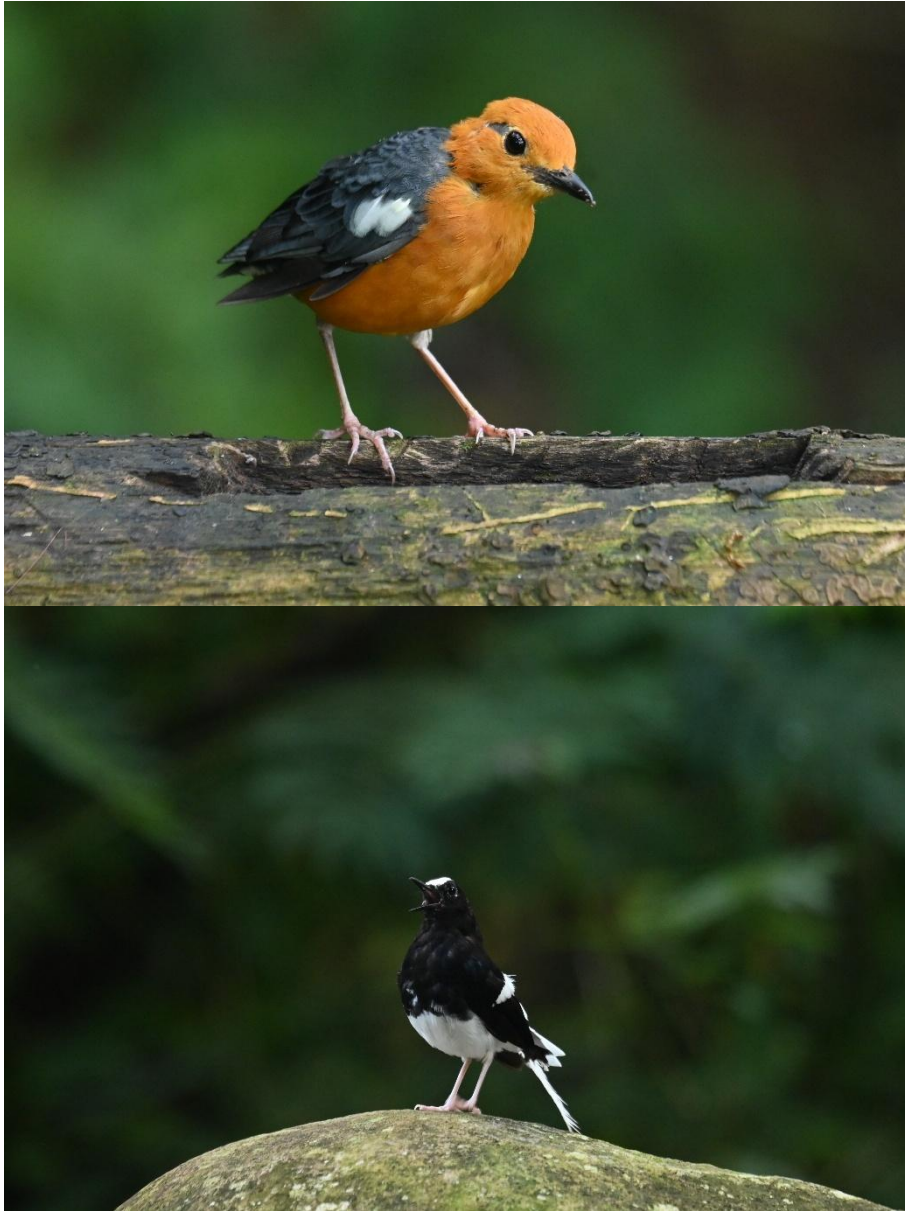
The first area visited was reached through a few day trips from Ubud or Jatiluwih. Renting scooters is almost an institution in Indonesia, and especially in Bali. I was one of those inexperienced gringos who set off riding a scooter on holiday without much preparation. After a day of getting used to it, I became more confident and we were able to reach more distant destinations. The scooter is a very efficient way to explore small Indonesian islands by yourself, where winding roads do not allow you to go very fast and where even the smallest village can create traffic jams lasting several hours in the densest areas.

Without listing all the outings made or species encountered, I would still mention the pretty Pura Batu Karu temple (8°22'21.8"S 115°06'07.0"E), where I was able to see the endangered **Black-winged Myna** (*Acridotheres melanopterus*). At nightfall, it is also apparently a known site for the Javan owl. Sanda Hideaway is a perfect place if you struggle to drag your wife to birdwatching sites. This splendid bamboo cabin lost in the Balinese countryside is very comfortable and zen, but above all offers high-quality photographic opportunities for locally rare species such as **Javan Banded-Pitta** (*Hydrornis guajanus*), **Orange-headed Thrush** (*Geokichla citrina*) or **White-crowned Forktail** (*Enicurus leschenaulti*). The food and hospitality are also of remarkable quality, so I can only recommend getting lost there.

Finally, Bedugul, with its high-altitude lake and botanical garden, often features on birders' itineraries, but we had very rainy weather which prevented us from really enjoying the place. Awful stands displaying flying foxes, owls and civets for tourist photos also exist along the main road, showing that wildlife protection in Indonesia still has a long way to go.



Golden-headed Cisticola



Orange-headed Thrush, Spotted Dove and White-crowned Forktail



5.1.2. Bali Barat National Park

The island's main birdwatching site is Bali Barat National Park, located on a peninsula in the northwest, close to Java. The place is far from the tourist crowds, even if a reasonable level of visitation supports a decent choice of hotels. Tourists mostly come for the beach and the very rich underwater life. Although inferior to the world-class coral reefs of Komodo or Raja Ampat, we spent a superb day snorkelling.

If the site is famous among enthusiasts, it is nevertheless because it holds most of Bali's lowland species, including the endemic Bali Myna (*Leucopsar rothschildi*), which has been reintroduced there and is easy to observe. We were staying in Pemuteran, a short distance from the Banyu Wedang salt pans, which allow many mangrove and coastal birds to be observed without entering the national park, with the cost and schedule constraints that entails. To be honest, I only entered the national park aboard the boat during the diving trip, because the second site is also a jetty located immediately next to the road. At this spot, Bali Mynas have been reintroduced and fed, and the released individuals tend to stay in the area, making them very easy to find.

The salt pans allow observation of five species of kingfisher, including the cute Small Blue Kingfisher (*Alcedo coerulescens*). Another key species is Javan Plover (*Anarhynchus javanicus*) and, with a bit of luck, one can also come across the pretty Little Pied Cormorant (*Microcarbo melanoleucos*) in the company of their cousins Little Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*). Most of the species observable in the park with guides are accessible elsewhere, but I would miss Green Junglefowl (*Gallus varius*).

I did not use his services, but I had been in contact with the guide Made Gtra (+62 813 3814 5594).



Bali Mynha, White-headed Munia and Scaly-breasted Munia



Javan Plover, Sacred Kingfisher, Orange-bellied Flowerpecker and Small Blue Kingfisher



Flame-fronted Barbet

5.2. Java

Only a twenty-minute ferry crossing separates Java from Bali. Although it is not the largest island in the archipelago, Java is certainly Indonesia's main island in terms of population size, economic weight and cultural dominance over the rest of the archipelago. Its eastern part concentrates some fabulous volcanic landscapes and the country's largest temples, which attract tourists from all over the world. The western part, for its part, is marked by Jakarta, the suffocating capital suffocated by uncontrolled urbanisation.

25/05/2025	Banyuwangi and Ijen
26/05/2025	Muncar
27/05/2025	Alas Purwo
28/05/2025	Alas Purwo - Banyuwangi
29/05/2025	Banyuwangi
30/05/2025	Banyuwangi
31/05/2025	Yogyakarta
01/06/2025	Yogyakarta
02/06/2025	Yogyakarta (Prambanan)
03/06/2025	Yogyakarta (Borobudur)
04/06/2025	Yogyakarta (Jatimulyo)
	...
10/06/2025	Jepara - Karimunjawa
11/06/2025	Karimunjawa
12/06/2025	Karimunjawa
13/06/2025	Karimunjawa
14/06/2025	Karimunjawa to Bromo
15/06/2025	Probolinggo to Surabaya to Labuan Bajo
	...
01/07/2025	Labuan Bajo to Jakarta
02/07/2025	Cibodas
03/07/2025	Cibodas
04/07/2025	Jakarta
05/07/2025	Flight back to Paris



Jakarta being the country's main air-transport hub, Java served as a base, and my stay on the island was in fact split into three parts, interspersed between my stays in Sulawesi and Flores. A scooter accident, which inevitably happened and injured my partner's foot, reduced our ambitions and kept us confined to the hotel for a few days.

5.2.1. Eastern Java

The main objective in this region was to see two very interesting and photogenic geological sites: the acidic blue lake of Gunung Ijen with its sulphur carriers, and the splendid panorama of Mount Bromo's crater. If we had had time, we would also have added Tumpak Cewu waterfall and a detour to Prigen Zoo (Taman Safari Zoo II Prigen), which breeds many endemic and threatened Indonesian species. However, a silly scooter accident would immobilise my partner for around ten days and completely disrupt our whole programme. While we were in Yogyakarta to take a break and let her foot heal, I also fell after a driving mistake on my scooter, which left me with extensive grazes.



In total, I recorded 31 bird species in Eastern Java, summarised in the following eBird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/520867>

5.2.1.1. Ijen

We therefore began in eastern Java after crossing the strait. From the very first night, we made our own way by scooter to Gunung Ijen. We left a little later than the groups, because a 1:30 a.m. departure is rather brutal and we did not want to do the hike surrounded by a mass of people. We did not go down to see the blue flames, which can sometimes be faintly visible depending on conditions. This allowed us to go up and come down out of sync with 95% of the site's visitors, to have the place to ourselves and to visit at our own pace. I recommend doing it this way rather than going through agencies that charge a very high price for the service and deliver a mass, tightly timed experience.

A few days later, I slipped away for a few early-morning hours to do a photo session in a hide located on the foothills of Gunung Ijen, at Erekek Geoforest. To book a session, contact Samuel (0857 4871 1646; 350,000 rupiahs for one person) and arrive before sunrise. The main target is the very localised **Gray-breasted Partridge** (*Arborophila orientalis*), but also **White-bibbed Babbler** (*Stachyris thoracica*), which remained absent during my visit. The partridges took several hours before coming in, but eventually allowed good views. **Javan Banded-Pitta** (*Hydrornis guajanus*) seems to be regularly present but did not show, despite the guide's excitement when it came to feed in front of the hide; above all, however, an unexpected **Scaly Thrush** (*Zoothera dauma*) was the good surprise of the day.

5.2.1.2. Alas Purwo

In the afternoon, we went as far as Muncar, a little-touristed port with many colourful boats, which proved a good way to spend the afternoon and meet locals, all of whom were lovely.

The day after our visiting Ijen, we rode by scooter to Alas Purwo, where we hoped to stay. After a long and mentally intense road, we arrived at the guard post marking the reserve entrance. The price for foreigners is quite high, and as the day was coming to an end, I at least asked whether the entrance ticket would cover the following day. For the first time in the country, we were faced with people who were not very helpful and made little effort to understand English. I eventually negotiated by leaving my partner at the entrance while I went to check whether the hotel had rooms available. A complex called Capital O 92612 showed contradictory ratings between booking.com and Google Maps, and we therefore wanted to check the quality of the accommodation before booking. The rooms were basic but large and relatively clean, and above all the location is fantastic, just opposite the beach and a stone's throw from the clearing. A small restaurant allows you to eat, including in the evening if you order before closing. Independent access can be complicated, but one can easily spend several days there on a very modest budget and be inside the national park itself, between the ocean and the forest. The other accommodations are more like surf camps, Alas Purwo being reputed as one of the best spots in the world for that sport.

Like Meru Betiri, Alas Purwo protects the last preserved blocks of tropical forest on the eastern coast, while Baluran National Park, which I unfortunately would not have time to visit, seems to present a drier ecosystem with savannas and deciduous forests. I hesitated for a long time over which of the two to prioritise and, even though Baluran was more accessible and more developed for tourism, I favoured Alas Purwo, where observing Banteng (*Bos javanicus*) is almost guaranteed, whereas at Baluran the “wild” buffaloes seem to encroach on and limit their population. This choice would cost me the observation of Green Junglefowl (*Gallus varius*), which is less common there.

In the immediate vicinity of my accommodation, I found another of my priority targets, a family of [Javan Langurs](#) (*Trachypithecus auratus*) and a troop of [Crab-eating Macaques](#) (*Macaca fascicularis*) living up to their name by foraging in the strandline. The park's main attraction, in addition to its long-deserted beaches beaten by waves and its temple, is the Sadengan savanna, a large clearing whose productivity is increased through regular watering in order to support threatened [Banteng](#) populations. During my two visits on two consecutive days, I had no difficulty observing these impressive bovids, although proximity can be an issue. Alongside them, one also finds macaques, [Lesser Adjutants](#) (*Leptoptilos javanicus*), [Rusa Deer](#) (*Rusa timorensis*), [Wild Boar](#) (*Sus scrofa*), Javan [Green Peafowl](#) (*Pavo muticus*) and [Eastern Cattle-Egrets](#) (*Ardea coromanda*).

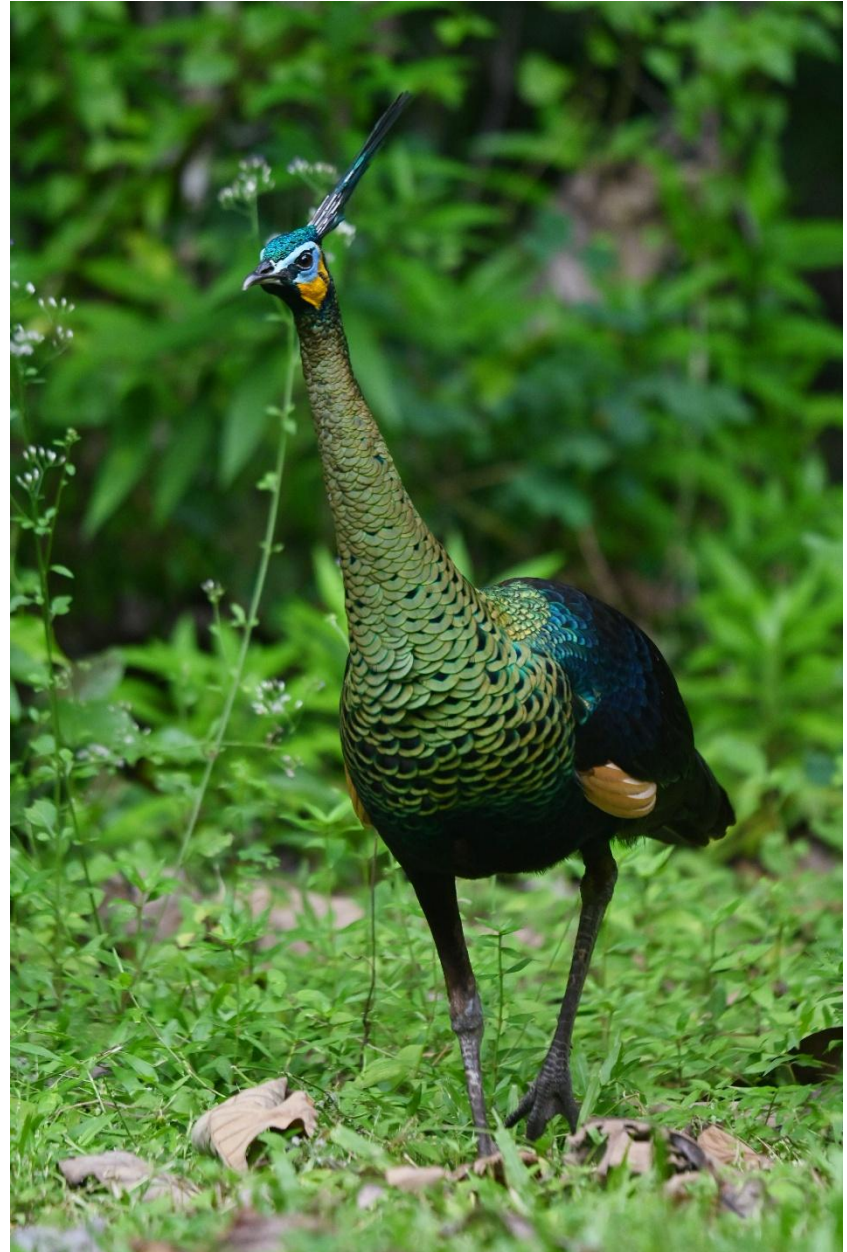
My crepuscular outings aimed at adding other lowland forest bird species were short but, above all, very unproductive, as was a brief night search with my torch. However, I am confident I very briefly observed a [Javan Dhole](#) (*Cuon alpinus*) crossing the track in front of me near the clearing. The long reddish tail and bouncing gait seemed characteristic and this is, I think, an uncommon observation. While it was still early and I was planning to explore the park for the whole morning, we had a bad fall that forced us to return urgently to Banyuwangi and then rethink our plans for the following weeks.



Javan Whistling-Thrush, *Gonocephalus chamaeleontinus*, Scaly Thrush and Javan Banded Pitta



Javan Banteng, male and female, Javan Lutung and Long-tailed Macaque



Green Peafowl

5.2.1.3. Yogyakarta and surroundings sites

Yogyakarta is Java's cultural capital and is regularly visited by international tourists. It has a few interesting museums (a plus for the Sonobudoyo and Affandi museums) and a large palace complex; but it is above all the Hindu archaeological sites of Prambanan and Borobudur that justify the city's place on the main tourist circuit. Both sites are well worth visiting, and I would only mention that *Java Sparrows* (*Padda oryzivora*) are visible and protected among the ruins of Prambanan. Yogyakarta also allowed me to stumble upon a repairman for my lens, which was really beginning to suffer.

5.2.1.4. Jatimulyo

This small village in the countryside around Yogyakarta has become known for its villager-led conservation initiative, which aims to reverse the alarming decline of songbird populations in Java. The villagers agreed to stop all trapping, to monitor the area to prevent poachers coming, and in return hope to attract birders from around the world to observe species that are today no longer very widespread. I therefore wanted to see the place for myself and was ready to contribute financially, but the price requested by the guide contact I had (Imam, +62 821 34441 3091, with a price of 3,400,000 even after negotiation!) seemed exorbitant. I therefore resolved to go there by my own means and see what I could do on site.

I was well received in a small café located at around 7°46'00.3"S 110°06'56.6"E, even though the owner spoke little English. After an excellent coffee while watching flowerpeckers and sunbirds coming to feed on bananas, we went for a short walk in the forest and then I settled into the small hide for *babblers* and *Javan Kingfisher* (*Halcyon cyanoventris*), for a very modest price. A second site (7°45'47.2"S 110°07'03.8"E) offers other hides that I would not have time to explore. A local guide would definitely have helped communication and increased the yield of this visit in terms of number of species, but the price, and the way value is shared raised many questions. In general, Indonesian guides were very expensive compared with the local standard of living and with prices in other countries.

5.2.1.5. Karimunjawa National Park

This stop would last longer than planned because weather conditions prevented our return ferry from going back to Java for two days in a row. The return crossing was also rather rough and a little frightening, given the regular incidents recorded by Indonesian boats.

Because of the fickle weather, it was also difficult to appreciate what this island lost in the Java Sea has best to offer: its underwater world. The water was too cloudy to have good visibility, and we spent most of the time wandering around the village and resting.



Eutropis multifasciata, Horsfield's Babbler, Javan Black-capped Babbler and Javan Sunbird

5.2.1.6. Bromo

Here again, not much to add from a wildlife perspective: the national park mainly serves to protect the scenic volcanic landscapes that attract so many national and international visitors. It is a bit of an industry, with hundreds of jeeps on the volcano slopes belching smoke in every direction, whereas electric shuttles could perfectly well do the job, but the panorama is truly spectacular.

5.2.2. Western Java

Western Java is dominated by Jakarta, Indonesia's immense capital, where urbanisation is out of control and which is suffocating both literally and figuratively, to the point that the authorities wish to move the central administrations to a new city. Jakarta serves as a gateway to a series of interesting natural sites:

- Carita: this seaside resort allows discovery of a few lowland endemic species and is notably famous for night outings in search of reptiles, Banded Kingfisher (*Lacedo pulchella*) and Javan Frogmouth (*Batrachostomus javensis*).
- Ujung-Kulon: the last stronghold of the Javan Rhinoceros but requiring particular logistics to visit and hope to glimpse this mythical animal and other inhabitants of the coastal forests.
- Halimun Salak: the best site for silvery gibbons and a multitude of birds from the mountains of Java. Access is long and exhausting from Jakarta, but the site really seems worth the effort if one can stay there for at least two nights.
- Gunung Gede Pangkrango: much easier access and more tourist traffic via the town of Cibodas and its botanical garden. The site gives access to a diversity of species fairly similar to Halimun, with observation probabilities more or less favouring one site or the other depending on the species, without any clear overall trend. A committed birder with enough time will certainly visit both sites to complete his observations.

For lack of time, we would visit only this last site before returning to Jakarta to catch our flight back to France. Still, it provided me with 64 species, of which 25 were new to me: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/520872>



Pygmy Cupwing



Orange-spotted Bulbul

5.2.2.1. *Gunung Gede Pangrango and Cibodas*

Although located close to Jakarta, it took us several hours to reach Cibodas because of truly horrible traffic, which had nevertheless been mentioned in other trip reports. Absolutely take this factor into account when planning journeys around Jakarta, even more so at weekends.

Our accommodation was located two kilometres from the park entrance, which was convenient for my guide, who picked me up by scooter early in the morning. I spent two days with Adun (+62 877 7867 6186), who had been recommended to me by his colleague Wawann (+62 877 2023 9244). Both were serious, although the prices were not cheap.

We left while it was still pitch dark in order to be at the park entrance at first light to try for *Sunda Thrush* (*Zoothera andromedae*), which we managed successfully. The visit continued inside the park, which in any case seems to offer only one trail up to the summit of the Pangrango volcano. The lower section is good for “underground skulkers”; we notably saw *Javan Robin* (*Myiomela diana*), *Lesser Shortwing* (*Brachypteryx leucophris*), *Javan Tesia* (*Tesia superciliaris*) and *Eyebrowed Wren-Babbler* (*Napothera epilepidota*). Once we reached the boardwalk, we had a little more visibility, which allowed us to observe a few birds living higher up, such as the endemic *White-flanked Sunbird* (*Aethopyga eximia*). It was already 10:00 when we started the Air Panas Trail and the real ascent. Clouds quickly draped the mountain, making photography difficult for the rest of the day. On the climb, we eventually contacted one of the day’s main targets, *Javan Trogon* (*Apalharpactes reinwardtii*), as well as *Javan Bulbul* (*Ixos virescens*) around 6°45'52.9"S 106°58'58.4"E, but Javan Cochoa did not show. Eventually came the rare *Rufous-fronted Laughingthrushes* (*Garrulax rufifrons*), gravely threatened by the songbird trade. *Javan Whistling-Thrush* (*Myophonus glaucinus*) is regularly encountered along the path, as are flycatchers, but it was only higher up that we finally reached the territory of *Javan Shortwing* (*Brachypteryx montana*), which remained a nightmare to photograph even though we obtained responses from several territories. In the mist, we crossed a group of *Javan langurs* (*Trachypithecus auratus*) belonging to a different subspecies than in the east of the island.

Chestnut-bellied Partridges (*Arborophila javanica*) were heard twice and seen very briefly once, even though some guides occasionally manage to obtain longer and more photographically

interesting views. We turned back at Air Terjun Panas, hot springs bursting out of the volcano, around which a camp allows hikers to stop for the night before reaching the volcano summit. It was already quite late and the light was weak, and we did almost the entire way back under heavy rain and by the light of our headlamps. Our attempts for nocturnal birds, also tried early in the morning, were unsuccessful. We tried:

- 6°44'54.2"S 106°59'33.8"E : Javan Frogmouth (*Batrachostomus javensis*)
- 6°44'51.4"S 106°59'43.4"E : *Salvadori's Nightjar* (*Caprimulgus pulchellus*)
- 6°45'10.1"S 106°59'18.6"E : Javan Scops-Owl (*Otus angelinae*)

I ended up soaked and well rinsed after this hike of more than 25 kilometres, which had lasted the whole day. The following day, we once again reached our observation spot before dawn to try for the nocturnal endemics, around 6°44'31.8"S 107°00'21.3"E. Only the nightjar was observed, and not very satisfactorily. A *Barred Eagle-Owl* (*Ketupa sumatrana*) may not have been unrelated to the shyness of some animals. Early-morning access may not be possible for independent birders, but this remains to be confirmed.



Javan Tesia

The garden consists of large lawns and water bodies on a flank of the volcano, interspersed with green gullies and patches of native vegetation that form a continuity with the national park. It is a good place to observe many species because the landscape is more open, the birds are more used to humans, and the number of trails allows access to more areas than the national park's main trail. I notably observed *Javan Kingfisher* (*Halcyon cyanoventris*), *Plaintive Cuckoo* (*Cacomantis merulinus*), *Trilling Shrike-Babbler* (*Pteruthius aenobarbus*), a fairly showy *Pygmy Cupwing* (*Pnoepyga pusilla*), beautiful *Orange-spotted Bulbuls* (*Pycnonotus bimaculatus*), the endemic *Pygmy Tit* (*Aegithalos exilis*), *Sangkar White-eye* (*Zosterops melanurus*), *Crescent-chested Babbler* (*Cyanoderma melanothorax*), *Sunda* and *White-crowned Forktails* (*Enicurus velatus* and *Enicurus leschenaulti*). As the morning harvest had been productive, the weather was becoming threatening again and, since I was wary of the traffic, we left for Jakarta in the early afternoon.

5.2.2.2. Muara Angke

This was my last morning in Indonesia, and even in Asia before returning home, so there was no question of resting, even though I was feeling a bit weak — something that would later be confirmed as food poisoning. I reached Muara Angke by Uber, with access at 6°06'16.8"S 106°45'43.5"E, where a small park protects a rare patch of mangrove preserved in the ocean of concrete. This two-hour outing was productive, allowing me to add a few final ticks to my list. The big prize would have been to observe Sunda Coucal (*Centropus nigrorufus*), but I was already happy enough with numerous Sunda Teal (*Anas gibberifrons*), a group of Racket-tailed Treepie (*Crypsirina temia*), distant views of Pied Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*) on the mudflat and a single Milky Stork (*Mycteria cinerea*) crossing the bay in the distance. It is more relevant to use a guide with a boat, which almost guarantees Milky Stork and also adds a few Christmas Island Frigatebirds (*Fregata andrewsi*), a species with a limited and little-visited range.

I discussed with Eci, a guide based in Jakarta (+62 899 8719 954).

5.2.3. Missed opportunities in Java

As an introduction, it should be said that birds in Indonesia, and especially on Java, are much shyer and more wary than in other parts of Asia because of the heavy trapping pressure. I had a few faint hopes of seeing silvery gibbons, but they seem rare at Gunung Gede and, when they are seen, it is often from quite far away.

Petungkriono, in central Java, seems to be a very productive site for primates, as it holds both Javan gibbons and Javan Surili (*Presbytis comata*), Javan Langur (*Trachypithecus auratus*) and the highly threatened Javan Slow Loris (*Nycticebus javanicus*). In addition to this, a rather expensive hide gives a chance of observing Javan Blue-banded Kingfisher (*Alcedo euryzona*), also critically endangered. The site is, however, remote and difficult to reach independently, and the quotes I had received were quite prohibitive.

As I said in the introduction to Western Java, I did not have time to visit many remarkable sites on this densely populated island (1,200 inhabitants per km²), but whose fauna remained surprisingly rich tough highly threatened. Knowing that leopards survive on this island is fascinating.

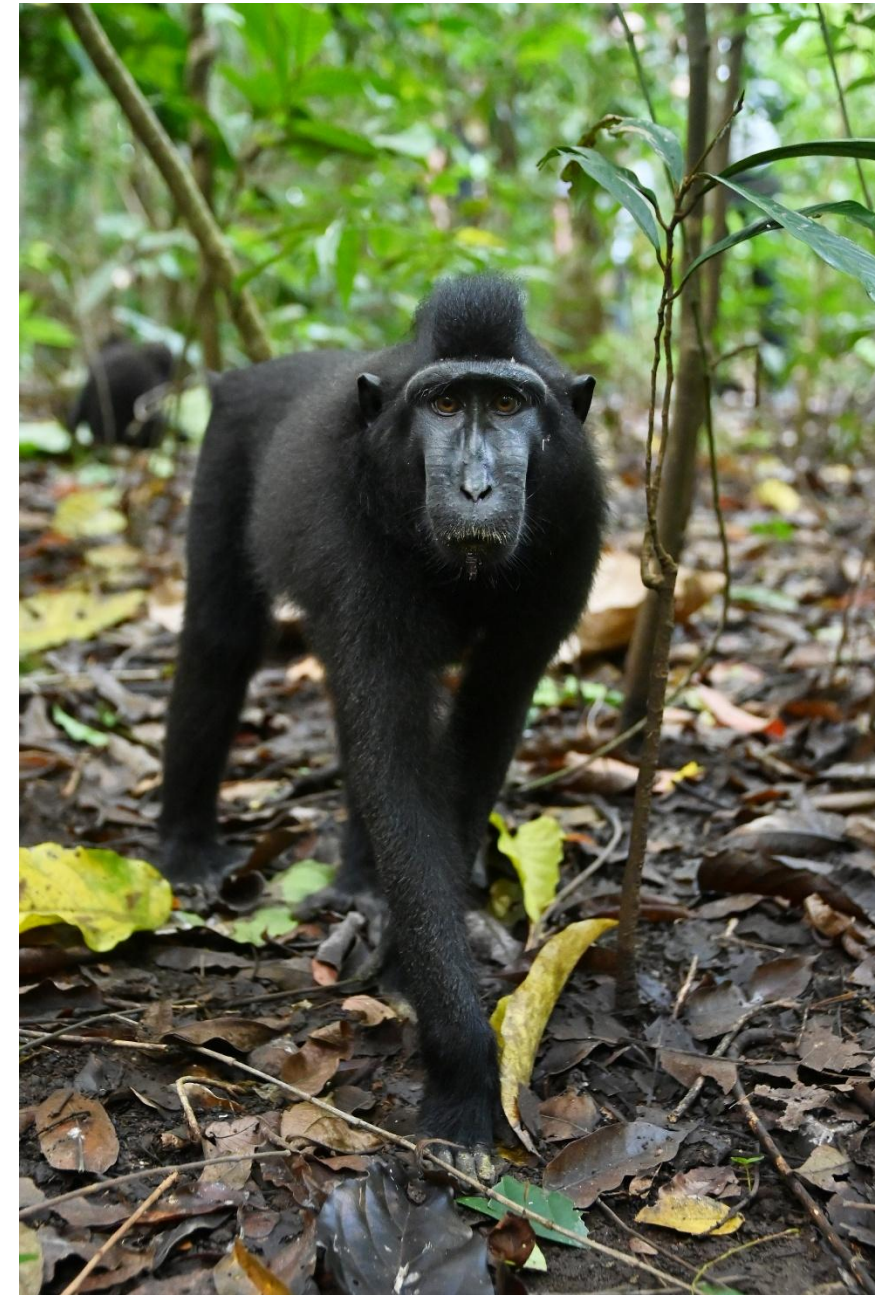
5.3. Sulawesi

05/06/2025	Tangkoko guided
06/06/2025	Tangkoko guided and mangrove cruise
07/06/2025	Tangkoko alone
08/06/2025	Tomohon - Manado
09/06/2025	Manado to Jepara via Surabaya

Sulawesi was probably the island in the archipelago that most fuelled my imagination, because of its unique position on the Wallace Line and its high level of endemism. I was already picturing myself crossing the island from end to end, looking for babirusas, tarsiers, anoa and maleos, but my partner was not especially attracted to the island, and the injury further reduced our room for manoeuvre. In addition, the news that the hide at the Nantu Forest clearing had been destroyed and that babirusas, warty pigs and anoa no longer visited the site made the island lose its primary point of interest. At the last minute, I managed to fit in five days for an express visit to the north-east of the island, where Manado gives easy access to Tangkoko National Park, which already holds a good proportion of the emblematic species. This short trip produced 69 bird species out of which 49 were new: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/520868>

5.3.1. Tangkoko Batuangus

Given the limited time available, I opted for an all-inclusive package with Alfrets, owner of Ranger Homestay (+62 813 1198 3561). Over three full days, I would be guided by a local guide named Epi, who was competent and a little taciturn. We would spend one full day inside the national park, plus another day around the park on secondary sites, as well as a dugout canoe outing in the mangrove. I would then spend one independent day in the national park to try to improve my observations and photos, followed by a final guided day on the slopes of Gunung Mahawu in search of other birds living in slightly higher-altitude forests. This very concentrated package was not cheap but proved worthwhile in terms of both the quantity and quality of observations. Ranger Homestay was basic but sufficiently comfortable and ideally located opposite the park entrance. It is apparently forbidden to walk in the park without a guide, but early in the morning nobody checks and, if you do not leave the main trails, it is fairly easy to find your way with the ocean nearby.



Right at the start of our visit, we were lucky enough to come across a **Rusty-backed Thrush** (*Geokichla erythronota*). Then all the tourists gathered to track and observe a troop of **Crested Black Macaques** (*Macaca nigra*), which have made the park famous. We observed them in the forest at very close range, even if the encounter could have lasted longer. Later on, we would see other, shier groups, and I would not have time to find a troop on the black-sand beach as I would have liked. The undisputed avian star is the **Knobbed Hornbill** (*Rhyticeros cassidix*), one of the largest and most spectacular members of its family. They are regularly seen and heard in the treetops, but it is often difficult to get a good viewpoint unless it is the breeding season and low nests have been located. Its smaller companion, the **Sulawesi Hornbill** (*Rhabdotorrhinus exarhatus*), is more discreet but generally moves lower in the forest understorey, sometimes following macaque troops.

Tangkoko is also famous for the many kingfishers visible there, with no fewer than seven potential species! The Ruddy Kingfisher (*Halcyon coromanda*) is rare and would not be observed, nor would the tiny Sulawesi Dwarf-Kingfisher (*Ceyx fallax*), despite our determined search for it in the undergrowth. It shares its habitat with the **Green-backed Kingfisher** (*Actenoides monachus*), which is the commonest, and with the **Sulawesi Lilac Kingfisher** (*Cittura cyanotis*). With five possible species, owls are also well represented and, after waiting for nightfall and observing the emergence of a family of **Gursky's Spectral Tarsiers** (*Tarsius spectrumgurskyae*), we found **Sulawesi Scops-Owl** (*Otus manadensis*) and **Ochre-bellied Boobook** (*Ninox ochracea*) without too much difficulty. We heard Sulawesi Masked-Owl (*Tyto rosenbergii*), but it did not deign to come closer, and even less so the mythical Minahasa Masked-Owl (*Tyto inexpectata*). Speckled Boobook (*Ninox punctulata*), a species of forested foothills, seems easier to observe at other sites, including Gunung Mahawu.

As proof of my progression within Wallacea — an imposing bust celebrates the British explorer who helped establish the concept of zoogeography — I also observed, thanks to our guide's sharp and experienced eyes, the first wild marsupial of my life: the phlegmatic **Sulawesi Bear Cuscus** (*Ailurops ursinus*). We would miss its smaller nocturnal cousin, which was partly compensated for by a fine observation of a **Whitish Dwarf Squirrel** (*Prosciurillus leucomus*).

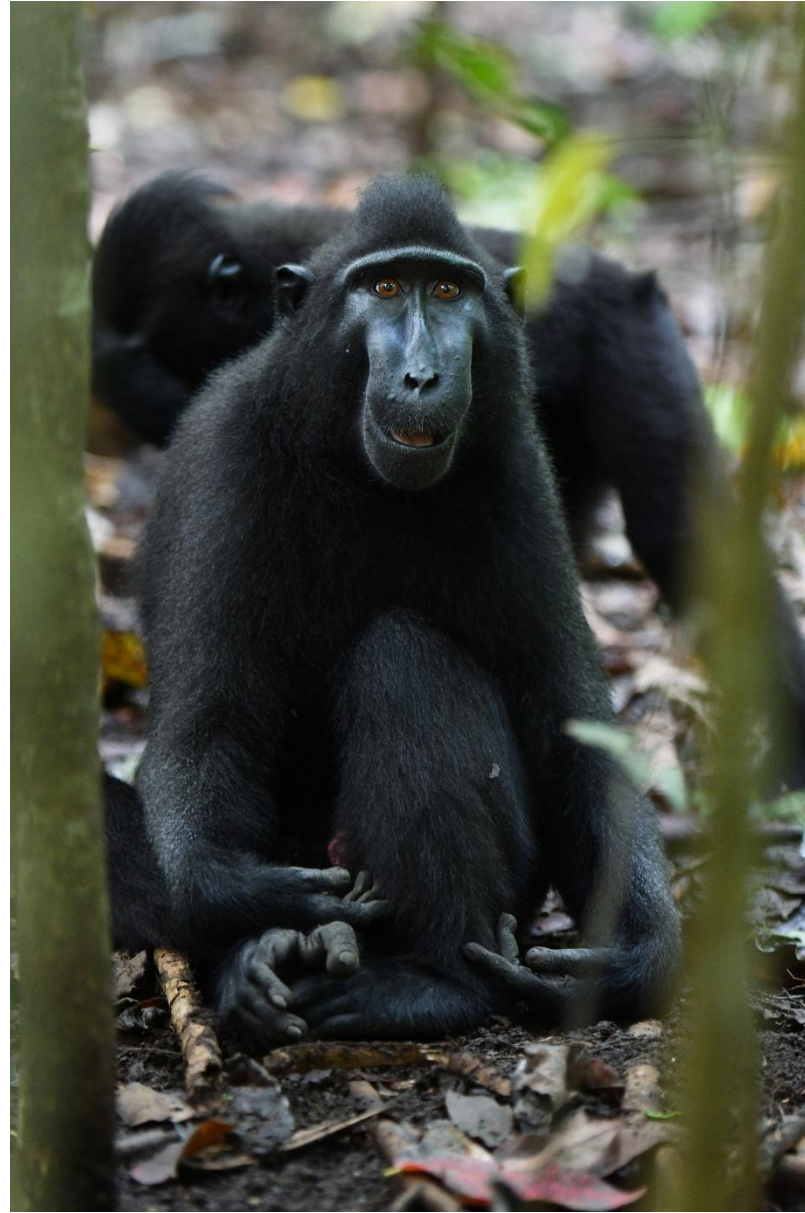
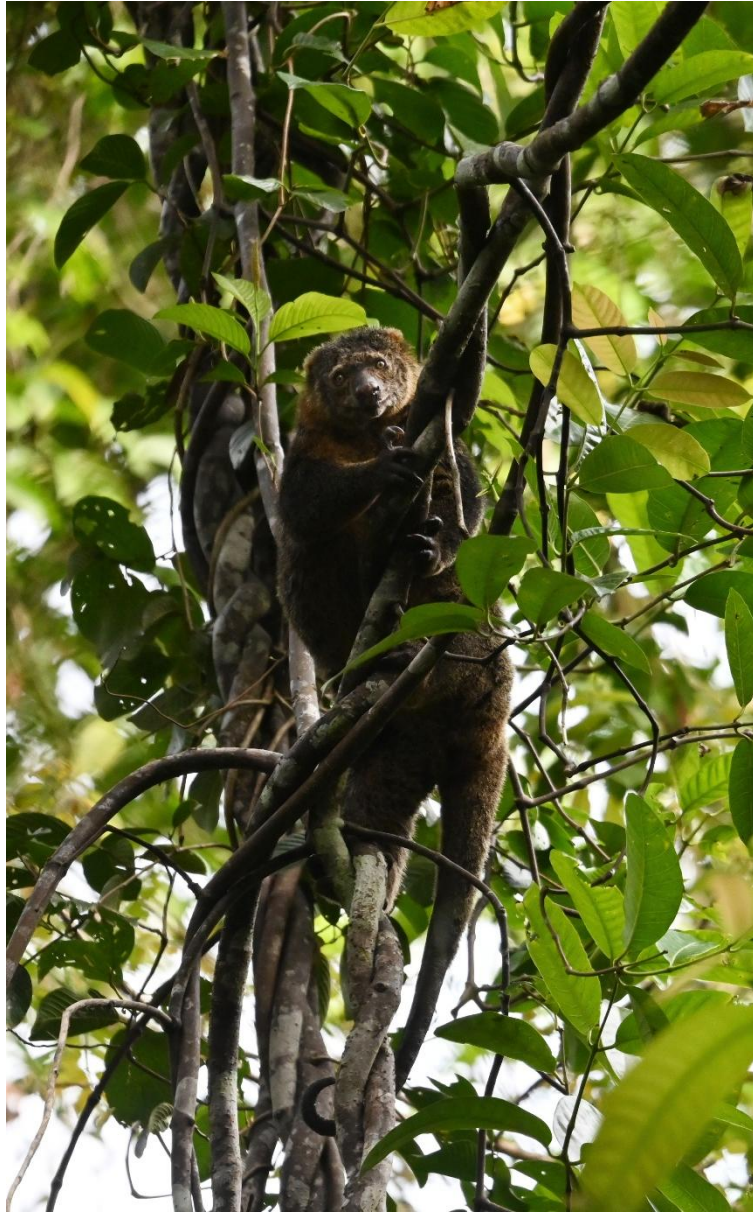
The next day, we explored secondary sites, starting with a viewpoint that allowed us to add canopy inhabitants to the list, including various parrots and pigeons.

Likupang Agricultural Station, located just after the national park entrance, allows observation of less forest-dependent species, more typical of clearings and edges. There I notably found two capricious **Sulawesi Nightjars** (*Caprimulgus celebensis*) and two rail species, **Barred Rail** (*Gallirallus torquatus*) and **Buff-banded Rail** (*Gallirallus philippensis*), the latter with a more widespread distribution. They were accompanied by **Isabelline Bush-hen** (*Amaurornis isabellina*), which I heard several times, but I had to resign myself to only observing it with difficulty and without any photographic opportunity.

The boat outing in the mangrove mainly aimed to observe the **Great-billed Kingfisher** (*Pelargopsis melanorhyncha*), whose range is restricted. For a long time, we saw only **Sacred Kingfishers** (*Todiramphus sanctus*) and **Collared Kingfishers** (*Todiramphus chloris*) before finally coming across the grail, perched on a branch along the exposed ocean shore, which we struggled to approach because of the sea swell. During this boat excursion, I was wearing flip-flops and realised too late that my feet had served as an all-you-can-eat buffet for the local sandflies, leaving me scratching frantically. At night, the sensation worsened, and by early morning I had several open wounds and struggled to put my foot down. But since I had little time, I tried to make the most of my final day in Tangkoko, this time independently. I also had to deal with open wounds on my flank and arm, which slowed me down and irresistibly attracted flies in the tropical humidity. Still, it allowed me to improve my observations of macaques and of some birds, notably the remarkable **Ashy Woodpecker** (*Mulleripicus fulvus*).



Black-crested Macaque and lesser false vampire bat



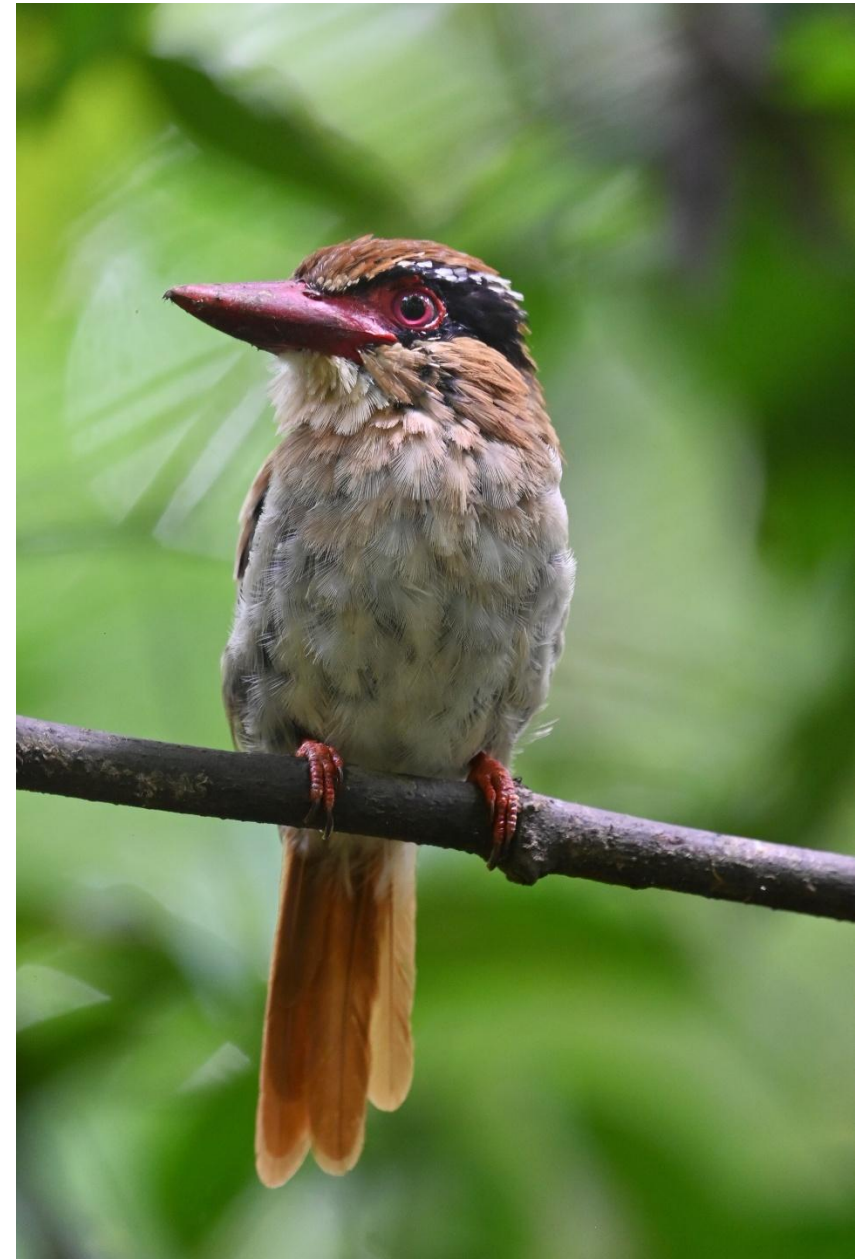
Bear Cuscus and Black-crested Macaque



Gursky's Spectral Tarsier



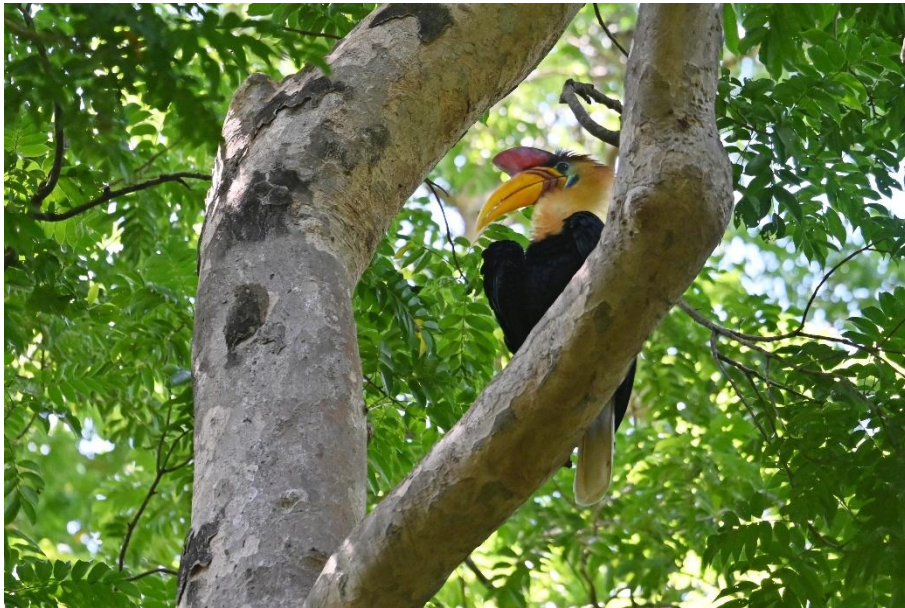
Ochre-bellied Boobook, Sulawesi Scops-Owl, Great-billed Kingfisher and Lampropelma carpenteri



Green-backed Kingfisher and Sulawesi Lilac Kingfisher



Great Slaty Woodpecker, Pale-blue Monarch; Draco sp and Dendrelaphis marenae



Knobbed Hornbill, Warbling White-eye and Black-crowned White-eye

5.3.2. Gunung Mahawu

My last day sees me setting off at dawn for Gunung Mahawu, near Tomohon, with a driver arranged by Alfrets. This is normally a stopover before heading west towards Bogani Nani Wartabone National Park, home to the incredible maleos. We arrive on site and meet up with Epi, the local guide (+62 858 2027 0260). His English was not particularly strong, but he was extremely professional and attentive, and helped me add several local specialties to my list.

The primary target was the rare **Scaly-breasted Kingfisher** (*Actenoides princeps*), followed by an exceptionally cooperative **Sulawesi Pitta** (*Erythropitta celebensis*) at a small makeshift hide. Later in the day, I would also add **Sulawesi Blue Flycatcher** (*Cyornis omissus*). However, I was far from being at my best: my feet were hurting terribly and I was feeling very drowsy.

After finding the **superb fruit doves** (*Ptilinopus superbus*) and while waiting for nightfall before searching for the Speckled Boobook, I gave up and asked my driver to drop me at the hospital near the airport from which I was supposed to fly out the following day. My foot had swollen badly, and the hundreds of tiny bites had become infected. Fortunately, I received very efficient antibiotics treatment at a clinic in Manado, that would start taking effect the next day.

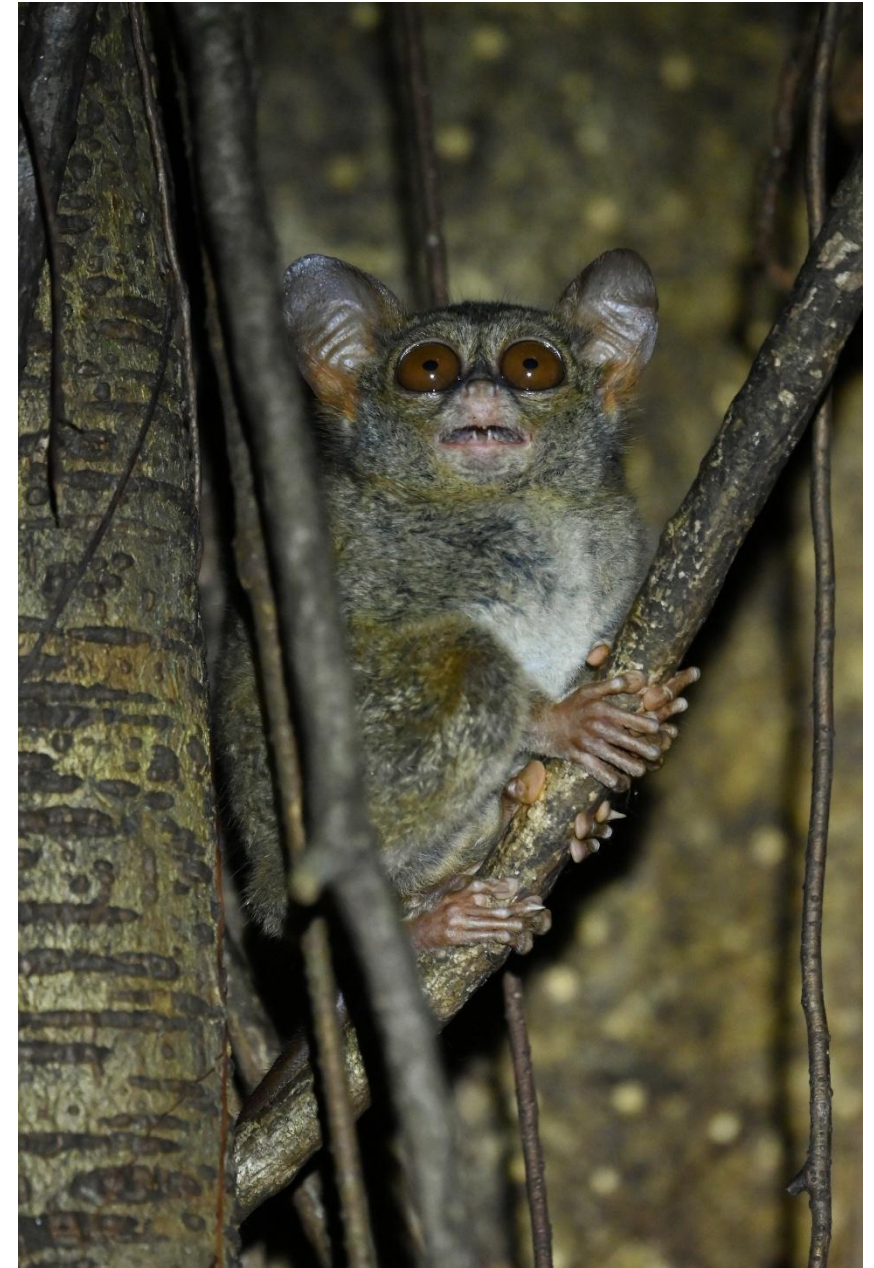
I somehow managed to drag myself to the airport the following morning, but my mind was elsewhere. I missed my flight to Surabaya and was forced to book another one at the last minute. This four-day stay in Sulawesi had been extremely intense, but I was already exhausted and injured, and it was time for me to rest.

5.3.3. Missed opportunities in Sulawesi

Sulawesi is still calling me, with its many endemics I have yet to see, its spectacular volcanic landscapes, and its complex geography that forces difficult choices. I would have loved to spend more time there and, of course, over just four days my ambitions could



only be limited — but it was still a very productive visit. I wish I had known that the Togian babirusas were accessible, as the destination might have appealed to my partner and we might then have made a longer circuit around the island. Going to Sulawesi without seeing the maleos was also a hard sacrifice to swallow, but as Jon Hall and Carlos Bocos' latest trip showed, the possibilities there are numerous, and the logistics require both organisation and a decent amount of time. The only small caveat I would add about Sulawesi — based solely on four intense days of birding — is that I found the local people less warm and welcoming than elsewhere in the archipelago (which is set at a very high level elsewhere I must say).





5.4. Flores and Komodo

Flores would be the last island of our trip through the Indonesian archipelago. Komodo National Park, with its famous monitor lizards, superb landscapes and extremely rich marine life, was certainly the main draw for choosing this destination over other islands in the archipelago. But the main island of Flores also ticks several attractive boxes, notably one of the broadest selections of birds in the Lesser Sunda Islands. Each island has its own character and its own representatives of various genera and would deserve to be visited in its own right, but Flores was a fine introduction to this region, which was completely new to me. There is indeed very little overlap with Bali or Sulawesi, which were the closest places I had already visited. By contrast, Sumatra, for example, is huge and its fauna is largely a mix of that of Peninsular Malaysia, Borneo and Java.

5.4.1. Itinerary and logistics

A main road crosses the mountainous island from west to east as far as Maumere and gives access to most of the main tourist sites. We stopped in Bajawa before turning back, as covering kilometres two-up on a scooter is tiring, and we felt we had already seen the essentials. I had considered adding a few days in Sumba, but

my partner was not attracted by a long ferry crossing just to watch birds and see a few different local ethnic groups, and we would probably have lacked the time to explore it properly.

16/06/2025	Labuan Bajo
17/06/2025	Cruise in Komodo NP
18/06/2025	Cruise in Komodo NP
19/06/2025	Day to Rinca
20/06/2025	Labuan Bajo
21/06/2025	Labuan Bajo to Ruteng
22/06/2025	Ruteng
23/06/2025	Ruteng to Bajawa
24/06/2025	Bajawa
25/06/2025	Bajawa
26/06/2025	Bajawa to Ruteng
27/06/2025	Mbelleling
28/06/2025	Labuan Bajo
29/06/2025	Labuan Bajo
30/06/2025	Labuan Bajo
01/07/2025	Labuan Bajo to Jakarta



The ebird trip report is available with 81 species, is available here: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/520870?view=checklists>

5.4.2. Komodo National Park

5.4.2.1. Cruise

Let's start straight away with the main course. Barely arrived in Labuan Bajo, we headed to the harbour where we enquired about the different options available to visit the famous Komodo park. The ideal solution would obviously have been to privatise a boat with a programme and timings centred on birding, but that was completely beyond our means, and some remote sites require spending at least one night on a boat. We therefore opted for a two-day, one-night cruise with one of the agencies that seemed less bad than the others (Christian Komodo Tour). We knew we were buying a mainstream tourist experience that would inevitably bring a few disappointments, but we would have to make do. And that is exactly what happened. The place is frankly incredibly beautiful, with its turquoise waters full of fish, golden islands and reddish cliffs scattered across the sea like confetti. But overtourism is very much present, with many Asian clients coming just for weekends. Corals are often destroyed by anchors, and some tourist spots are crowded at sunrise because everyone offers the same programmes. There are even

projects to create resorts inside the park, whereas today it is not possible to sleep there other than on a boat — or in one of the few rustic houses of local fishermen. Above all, strong demand does not create much pressure for attention to detail, and once tourists are on board a boat, they have little leverage left to negotiate or ask for anything. One of my greatest frustrations concerned the quality of the snorkelling masks, and I spent my time resurfacing to remove the fog. I would later learn that they need to be washed beforehand with toothpaste! The small boats shuttling people to island excursions are in poor condition and sometimes even dangerous. The cabins are rustic but perfectly sufficient for a single night on board, and the food was quite satisfactory.

But enough complaining about now, and we began our cruise with a slight delay because a young English woman had missed her early alarm. We got to know the other tourists travelling with us: two very nice Swiss travellers, our little English girl with the thong showing, two very cheerful older Australian women never short of drinks, and five Chinese travellers, three of whom were visibly very invested in growing their Instagram community. Their suitcases were enormous, and the young women would present us with a new bikini every half-day. Between each stop: face masks and a full new make-up session! The guide reminded us of the rules to follow and warned that the previous day, a Chinese tourist who could not swim had drowned because she had refused to wear a life jacket for photos... probably a Darwin Award contender. It is both funny and demoralising to realise that every sublime place reached by mass tourism is spoiled by the same behaviours and attitudes, whatever the continent.

The first stop at Kelor Beach allowed us to observe young **blacktip reef sharks** and a **bluespotted ribbontail ray** among many other fish, followed by a second snorkelling spot on the way where many corals were broken. As the sun set and the sky turned orange, all the boats headed towards a small mangrove island. We saw one, then two, then hundreds of flying foxes emerge and fly off for several dozen kilometres to find their food in the trees of the different islands. The species was not clear, but by default I considered them **Large Flying Foxes** (*Pteropus vampyrus*).

The following morning, we woke up at dawn to enjoy the superb panorama over Padar. This is where tourist pressure is most obvious. Yet early in the morning, if attentive, one can hope to come across a blue viper (*Trimeresurus insularis*). Komodo Herping Tour offers excursions focused on the various reptiles of the area, which are certainly also relevant for mammals and birds, but the price asked did not fit our budget. A very habituated male **rusa deer** (*Rusa timorensis*) was waiting on the beach on





the way back, probably hoping for a few treats. Given the crowds, the proximity and the complete absence of rules and supervision, it is almost a miracle that no accident has happened.

It was 11 a.m. and the sun was already very high when we finally arrived on Komodo, the main island where the **Komodo dragons** (*Varanus komodoensis*) live, which are easily observed around the shops. The rules — or at least the way they are implemented on the island — are surreal. Shops line the beach, and a few medium-sized monitor lizards are already visible between the buildings without seeming particularly affected. The little English girl started whining that the dragons were not moving because they had been drugged. The local guide, armed with his flip-flops and a stick, prevented us from taking advantage of the photographic opportunities available and invited us to follow him into the forest, where he then told us that seeing a large individual was very rare... unless we took a particular trail where only he knew the habits of the giants... and, of course, paid a little extra. We refused, but to our surprise, an enormous monitor lizard was shown to us in the bushes a few minutes later. The giant was difficult to see in the vegetation, and 40 people on narrow trails

did little to encourage the animal's tranquillity, so it moved a little deeper in. I mentioned that I was particularly interested in the cockatoos, the megapode and the Green Junglefowl, but there was no time for that and we had to quickly get back on board the boat for lunch...

Frustrated, I got back on board hoping that at least we would observe manta rays as expected at the next spot. Obviously, they were not there, and the masks were still fogged up, although we briefly saw a fairly long shark, which brought my wife's swim to a rapid end!

5.4.2.2. Rinca

Frustrated, we discussed our experience at our accommodation for the evening, D'Flora Homestay. The guesthouse happened to offer a trip to Rinca the next day combined with snorkelling outings. This small guesthouse run by enthusiasts organises daily excursions for its clients. Even if they are not used to birders, and especially to the constraint of arriving early, they make efforts to offer something different, with a certain care for both tourists and the environment. This is how we arrived on Rinca in the late morning. The experience would be much more authentic, and we had all the time we wanted to observe Komodo dragons. A long hike over the island's heights did not bring much besides more dragons and a few "wild buffaloes". In my opinion, the beautiful visitor centre and its immediate surroundings concentrate the main points of interest, with a baby monitor lizard, rusa deers, a troop of long-tailed macaques, kingfishers and, above all, a pair of **Orange-footed Megapodes** (*Megapodius reinwardt*), which delighted me! I would strongly recommend that those on smaller budgets try to build their excursions with them.



Meeting Smaug in person and getting excited about a drab chicken : the Orange-footed Megapode



5.4.3. Labuan Bajo and surroundings

Labuan Bajo was still only a fishing village about fifteen years ago and is rapidly turning into a large hotel complex, with new constructions every year. Urban development may eventually get the better of the small town's charm. The arrival by plane is spectacular, with the jagged coastline plunging into the sea. The surroundings allow anyone with transport to add many Lesser Sundas species fairly easily. The main site, called Labuan Bajo Fishponds on eBird (8°31'50.4"S 119°52'20.8"E), allows observation of many coastal, mangrove and savanna species. The highlight was certainly the **Great-billed Heron** (*Ardea sumatrana*), although it flew off very quickly. A flock of **Flores Green-Pigeon** (*Treron floris*) was a nice surprise after missing them in the mountains. Three kingfishers can be seen there, including the **Small Blue Kingfisher** (*Alcedo coerulescens*). Along the road, I managed to contact a small flock of **Zebra Finch** (*Taeniopygia guttata*), reminding me of my proximity to Oceania. **Wallacean Cuckooshrike** (*Coracina personata*) in the mangrove was also a nice tick.

Parapuar View Point is a dead-end road climbing to the top of one of the hills enclosing the town, where some native vegetation still remains. Although the barrier is down, nothing prevents one from entering on foot at nightfall to look for **Mees's Nightjar** (*Caprimulgus meesi*). Apart from classic species visible at other sites in the surroundings, the site allowed me to observe a fairly approachable **Variable Goshawk** (*Tachyspiza hiogaster*) and, above all, the rare and curious **Flores Crow** (*Corvus florensis*), normally visible only in larger forest blocks. Its presence there may have been exceptional, but it is worth trying, as this is a very shy species.

Finally, Potawangka Road (8°31'05.5"S 119°57'28.8"E) is a stretch of secondary road half an hour from Labuan Bajo crossing a broad transect of lowland forest, which will be particularly interesting for anyone not doing a dedicated birding circuit on the island. My single morning visit allowed me to significantly complete my list of Flores or Lesser Sundas endemics. White-rumped Kingfisher (*Caridonax fulgidus*) is well present there, and I finally contacted **Flores Minivet** (*Pericrocotus lansbergei*) and the supposedly common **Helmeted Friarbird** (*Philemon buceroides*). It was also my first observation of **Flores Crow** (*Corvus florensis*), and this site is probably the most promising one in the region for that species.

Other hills north of Labuan Bajo offer beautiful panoramas over the bay, but seemed to have less birding potential, with vegetation more like human-modified savanna than real forest.

5.4.4. Ruteng

Ruteng seems to be the real cultural capital of western Flores. We set off two-up on a powerful scooter that carried us through the mountains of Flores for about four hours of riding. We only took a few belongings and the camera gear for a short road trip of a few days towards the centre of the island. We stayed two nights in an adorable homestay, Sun Rice Homestay. Regular visitors come to admire the terraced rice fields on the hills and the spiderweb-shaped ones in the valley bottoms. The coffee from the region is also excellent, as Ruteng is surrounded by old volcanoes and the vegetation is particularly lush. The host of the guesthouse actually organises a much appreciated walk every morning through the fields and hamlets.

Ruteng also gives access to several well-preserved patches of montane forest, where a good proportion of the island's endemics are concentrated. The most notable of all is the **Flores Scops-Owl** (*Otus alfredi*), a taxon "rediscovered" in 2005 and whose total population is very limited. Our search began very early with the guide — whose contact details I unfortunately lost — before dawn, in order to try to secure an observation of this small owl, which we managed brilliantly by locating three individuals, probably a pair with a juvenile, around 8°39'44.6"S 120°27'38.4"E. We did not search for it, lacking a thermal camera, but these forests probably also contain the Flores Giant Forest Rat (*Papagomys armandvillei*), another rare and strange taxon. Pleased with our first success, we continued exploring from the road around the Golo Lusang pass and gradually found Sunda **Honeyeater** (*Lichmera lumbokina*), a **Bare-throated Whistler** (*Pachycephala nudigula*) singing at full volume, **Black-backed Fruit-Dove** (*Ptilinopus cinctus*), **Timor Leaf Warbler** (*Phylloscopus presbytes*), **Brown-capped Fantail** (*Rhipidura diluta*) and the various **heleias** encountered on the island.

A little lower down, around 8°39'14.3"S 120°28'00.5"E, we tried again to get good views of the small skulkers that are **Flores Shortwing** (*Brachypteryx floris*) and **Russet-capped Tesia** (*Tesia everetti*). Although the area was under construction and seemed to offer little promise, we successively saw a superb **Chestnut-backed Thrush** (*Geokichla dohertyi*), much less shy than usual if I am to believe the guide, then a **Sunda Brush Cuckoo** (*Cacomantis sepulcralis*) that allowed itself to be photographed.

After lunch in town, we reached a site on the other side of town, at 8°35'15.4"S 120°28'19.4"E. We played hide-and-seek with an **Ornate Pitta** (*Pitta concinna*), which evaded my lens, while the White-rumped Kingfisher (*Caridonax fulgidus*) did not even respond. Night fell and we managed to get good views of **Moluccan Scops-Owl** (*Otus magicus*), but Wallace's Scops-Owl (*Otus silvicola*) remained heard-only. Delighted with my day in Ruteng, we set off the next day towards Bajawa.

On the way back, we stopped again in Ruteng and I returned to Golo Lusang to observe **Flores Jungle Flycatcher** (*Eumyias oscillans*).

I unfortunately lost my guide's contact details, but perhaps by asking the above-mentioned guesthouse owner in advance they will be able to redirect you, as I know they know each other. Yovie Jehabut — WhatsApp +62 823 4086 5422, floresbirdwatching@gmail.com — now guides throughout the archipelago and had not been very responsive but may also be able to help and seems recommended. Liang Bua Cave, or Hobbit Cave, is a site we did not visit but which may also bring its share of surprises, in addition to allowing visitors to meet the archaeologists working on the understanding of Flores Man, a recently extinct, lilliputian-sized hominin — hence the nickname "hobbit". Note that if the Komodo National Park experience really puts you off, but you want to find "your own" Komodo monitor, the villages of Pota and Riung, and in particular Watu Pajung beach, seem to be home to another isolated population.

5.4.5. Bajawa

The Bajawa region lies four hours away by road through the mountains. The road has been renovated and is of decent quality, whereas a few years ago it was reputed to be riddled with potholes.

On the way, two major sites are regularly visited by birding tour operators that do not push on as far as Bajawa. Poco Ndeki Forest is notably known for Flores Crow and Wallace's Scops-Owl. Danau Ranamese is a lake surrounded by substantial, good-quality forest fragments that can bring other endemics.

We dedicated most of our time to discovering typical Bajawa villages and trying to catch the silhouette of Gunung Inerie volcano between the clouds. We also went down to Malanage, where we could relax in a river heated by geothermal activity, before losing all the benefits on the scooter ride back under icy rain. From a naturalist point of view, I would simply mention the observation of a flock of **Leaf Lorikeets** (*Trichoglossus weberi*) at Avatar Hill (Watu Nari Wowo).

We decided to stop our exploration of the island here and turn back without pushing on to Kelimutu, as we had already seen several volcanoes and lakes, and because the distances were tiring.

5.4.6. Mbelliling

We made a one-night and one-morning stop on the slopes of this mountain overlooking Labuan Bajo. The site is known as one of the only places to observe **Flores Monarch** (*Symposiachrus sacerdotum*). The montane forest where a few individuals live was completely shrouded in mist when we arrived, but I managed to contact one individual, which would not be the case the following day. I also found a **Chestnut-capped Thrush** (*Geokichla interpres*), probably less shy under the misty cover, and had some nice photographic opportunities with **Flores Heleia** (*Heleia crassirostris*).

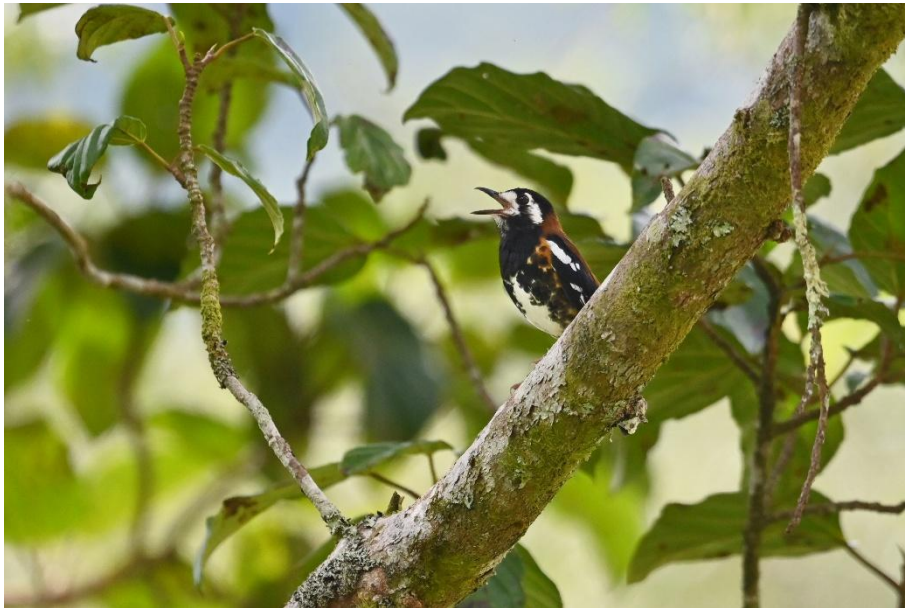
Mbelliling Mountain Ecolodge is a fairly high-end lodge, with a beautiful view of the sea in the distance, and one I could not afford. But in mid-morning, I decided to go and see it with my own eyes and taste their coffee — Flores produces excellent beans. A very friendly employee, Aldi (+62 821 4505 4827), introduced himself and took me to show me **Black-naped Fruit-Doves** (*Ptilinopus melanospilus*) in a fruiting tree at the back of the property. He then allowed me to explore a few hundred metres along a trail behind the property, where I was surprised and delighted to encounter a **Red-cheeked Parrot** (*Geoffroyus geoffroyi*). The following day, I would finally observe the **White-rumped Kingfisher** (*Caridonax fulgidus*).



Asian Buffalo and Rusa Deer



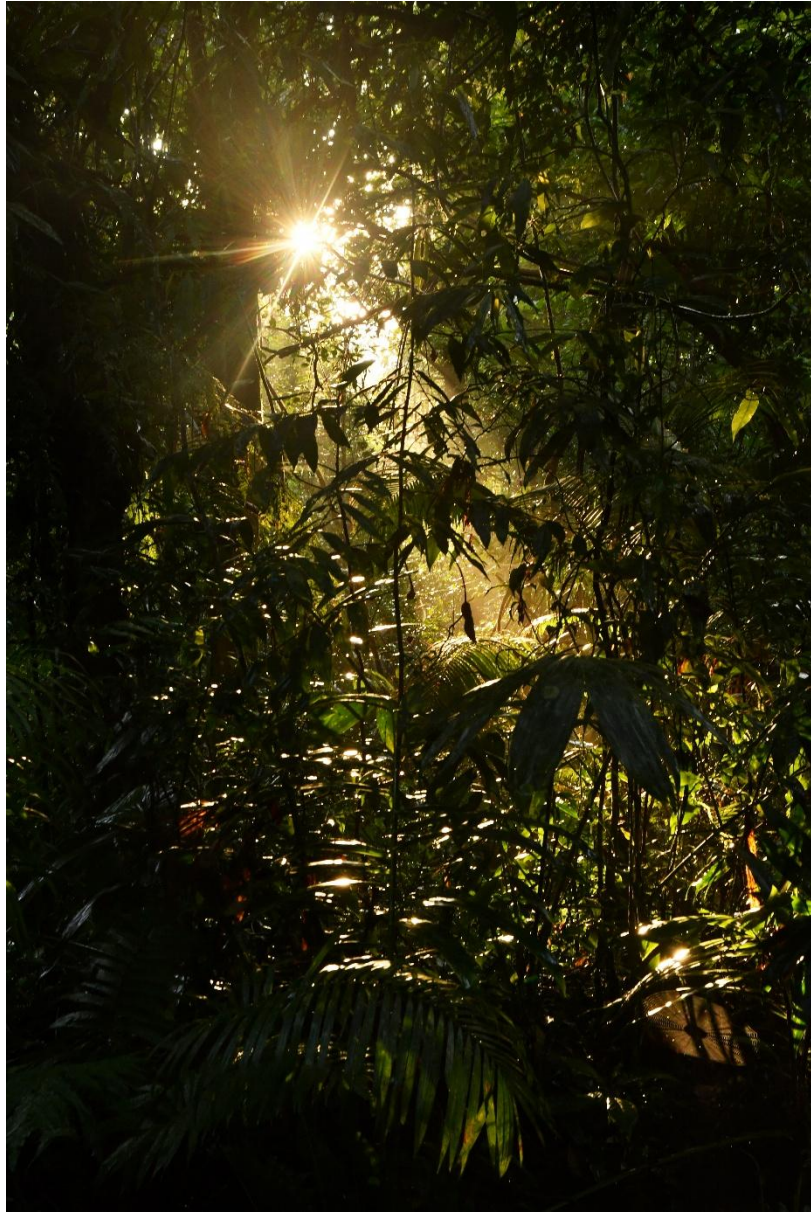
Black-naped Fruit-Dove, White-rumped Kingfisher and Flame-breasted Sunbird



Chestnut-backed Thrush, Asian Tit, Tokay and Flores Scops-Owl



Red-cheeked Parrot



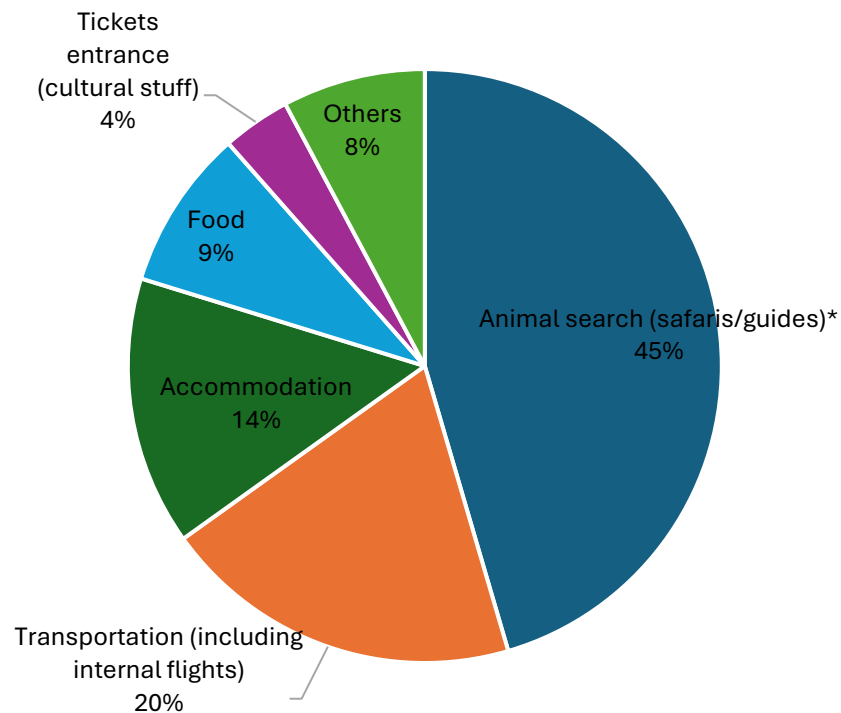


Bare-throated Whistler

6. Budget

During the trip, I tried to keep records of all our spendings and categorize it. The data is not perfect, but I assess that at least 95% of the cost is taken into account. My wife who was a little bit less careful about spendings recording ended up spending only 2/3 of my budget. Is it underestimation or bird and mammal-watching is a costly hobby? I will let you decide 😊.

	Number of days	Daily budget	Budget
India	126	58 €	7 310 €
Malaysia	21	122 €	2 570 €
Indonesia	50	59 €	2 943 €
International flights	-	-	788 €
Total	197	-	12 825 €



The budget was kept well under control, with a total cost of less than €2,000 per month, all included. That is both a lot for a “backpacker” travelling for several months in Asia, and at the same time fairly limited for a naturalist trip involving numerous safaris and occasional use of guides. The Malaysian leg pushed the cost up quite noticeably, and this is something to bear in mind when visiting sites such as Deramakot or Kinabatangan — and even then, I avoided Tabin and Danum, with their high rates.

**Some prestations were including food and accommodation which over-estimate the cost of this category.*

If you made it until here many thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did ! You can contact me at antoine.rabussier@gmail.com, especially if you are looking for a tour leader for some trips 😊.

Appendix: list of mammal species

Common name	Scientific name	Main area observed	Notes
Pen-tailed Treeshrew	<i>Ptilocercus lowii</i>	Klias	Excellent observation
Mountain Treeshrew	<i>Tupaia montana</i>	Trus Madi	Numerous at hide
Large Treeshrew	<i>Tupaia tana</i>	Trus Madi – Kinabatangan	Seen at hide
Slender Treeshrew	<i>Tupaia gracilis</i>	Trus Madi – Kinabatangan	Seen at hide
Horsfield's treeshrew	<i>Tupaia javanica</i>	Bedugul	
Sunda Colugo	<i>Galeopterus variegatus</i>	Deramakot	
Philippine Slow Loris	<i>Nycticebus menagensis</i>	Deramakot / Sepilok / Kinabatangan	
Sunda Slow Loris	<i>Nycticebus coucang</i>	Fraser's Hill	
Horsfield's Tarsier	<i>Cephalopachus bancanus</i>	Sepilok	
Gursky's Spectral Tarsier	<i>Tarsius spectrumgurskyae</i>	Tangkoko	
Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	Rajasthan / Assam / Uttarakhand	Common in several areas
Northern Pig-tailed Macaque	<i>Macaca leonina</i>	Hollongapar	
Assam Macaque	<i>Macaca assamensis</i>	Garbhanga	
Bonnet Macaque	<i>Macaca radiata</i>	Southern India	
Lion-tailed Macaque	<i>Macaca silenus</i>	Valparai	
Pig-tailed Macaque	<i>Macaca nemestrina</i>	Common in Malaysia	
Long-tailed / Crab-eating Macaque	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>	Common in Indonesia, also in Sabah	
Crested Black Macaque	<i>Macaca nigra</i>	Tangkoko	
Nepal Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus schistaceus</i>	Uttarakhand mountains	
Terai Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus hector</i>	Corbett	
Northern Plains Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus entellus</i>	Northern India	
Tufted Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus priam</i>	Bandipur	
Black-footed Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus hypoleucos</i>	Goa, Thattekad and Hampi	Achates, hypoleucos and iulus subspecies
Nilgiri Langur	<i>Semnopithecus johnii</i>	Valparai / Munnar	
Capped Langur	<i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i>	Hollongapar	
Gee's Golden Langur	<i>Trachypithecus geei</i>	Kakoijana	
Dusky Langur	<i>Trachypithecus obscurus</i>	Peninsular Malaysia	
Silvered Leaf Monkey	<i>Trachypithecus cristatus</i>	Kinabatangan / Labuk Bay	
Javan Langur	<i>Trachypithecus auratus</i>	Alas Purwo and Gunung Gede Pangrango	
Maroon Langur	<i>Presbytis rubicunda</i>	Deramakot / Kinabatangan	
White-thighed Surili	<i>Presbytis siamensis</i>	Fraser's Hill	
North Bornean Grey Gibbon	<i>Hylobates funereus</i>	Sepilok	
Bornean Orangutan	<i>Pongo pygmaeus</i>	Deramakot / Gomantong / Sepilok	
Tufted Pygmy Squirrel	<i>Exilisciurus whiteheadi</i>	Kinabalu / Trus Madi	Seen at hide
Least Pygmy Squirrel	<i>Exilisciurus exilis</i>	Kinabatangan	
Five-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennantii</i>	Northern India	
Three-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	Southern India	
Nilgiri Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus sublineatus</i>	Bandipur	
Jungle Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus tristriatus</i>	Goa	
Kinabalu Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus baluensis</i>	Kinabalu	

Bornean Black-banded Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus orestes</i>	Trus Madi	Seen at hide
Plantain squirrel	<i>Callosciurus notatus</i>	Common in Sabah and Indonesia	
Irrawaddy Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus pygerythrus</i>	Assam	
Prevost's squirrel	<i>Callosciurus prevosti</i>	Sabah	
Mountain Squirrel	<i>Sundasciurus everetti</i>	Trus Madi	Common at hide
Jentink's Squirrel	<i>Sundasciurus jentinki</i>	Trus Madi – Kinabatangan	Seen at hide
Low's Squirrel	<i>Sundasciurus lowii</i>	Trus Madi – Kinabatangan	Seen at hide
Whitish Dwarf Squirrel	<i>Prosciurillus leucomus</i>	Tangkoko	
Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel	<i>Dremomys lokriah</i>	Tiger Hill	
Asian red-cheeked squirrel	<i>Dremomys rufigenis</i>	Fraser's Hill	
Malayan Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa bicolor</i>	Assam – Bali - Java	
Pale Giant squirrel	<i>Ratufa affinis</i>	Sabah	
Indian giant squirrel	<i>Ratufa indica</i>	Southern India	
Three-striped Ground Squirrel	<i>Lariscus insignis</i>	Fraser's Hill	
Himalayan Striped Squirrel	<i>Tamiops maclellandii</i>	Fraser's Hill - Sikkim	
Indian Giant Flying Squirrel	<i>Petaurista philippensis</i>	Periyar	Seen at Aranya Nivas
Red Giant Flying Squirrel	<i>Petaurista petaurista</i>	Deramakot / Sepilok	
Thomas's Giant Flying Squirrel	<i>Aeromys thomasi</i>	Deramakot	
Black Flying Squirrel	<i>Aeromys tephromelas</i>	Deramakot	
Temminck's Flying Squirrel	<i>Petinomys setosus</i>	Deramakot	
Indian Crested Porcupine	<i>Hystrix indica</i>	Periyar	Seen at Aranya Nivas
Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	Rajasthan	
Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>	Ladakh	Seen in Sakti
Moonrat	<i>Echinosorex gymnura</i>	Deramakot	White individual in rain
Max's Short-tailed Gymnure	<i>Hylomys maxi</i>	Bukit Tinggi	
Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus medius</i>	Bharatpur / Guwahati	
Large Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus vampyrus</i>	Common in Indonesia and Sabah	
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	Jhalana	
Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	Panna	
Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Ladakh	Multiple sightings, including close encounter
Eurasian Lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>	Ladakh	Seen above Sakti
Sunda Leopard Cat	<i>Prionailurus javanensis</i>	Deramakot	
Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	Bharatpur	
Bengal Fox	<i>Vulpes bengalensis</i>	Desert NP	Briefly seen near
Desert Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes pusilla</i>	Desert NP	
Himalayan red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes montana</i>	Ladakh	
Grey Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Ladakh	
Dhole	<i>Cuon alpinus</i>	Alas Purwo	
Yellow-throated Marten	<i>Martes flavigula</i>	Uttarakhand / Sikkim	Brief sightings near Sattal and Ravangla

Smooth-coated Otter	<i>Lutrogale perspicillata</i>	Kaziranga / Hampi	
Binturong	<i>Arctictis binturong</i>	Deramakot	Several around fruiting fig
Small-toothed Palm Civet	<i>Arctogalidia trivirgata</i>	Deramakot	Most frequent civet listed
Asian Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	Deramakot	
Banded Palm Civet	<i>Hemigalus derbyanus</i>	Deramakot	
Malayan Civet	<i>Viverra zangalunga</i>	Deramakot	
Indian Grey Mongoose	<i>Urva edwardsii</i>	Rajasthan / Daroji	
Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Urva smithii</i>	Daraji	
Crab-eating Mongoose	<i>Urva urva</i>	Kaziranga	
Striped-necked Mongoose	<i>Urva vitticollis</i>	Bandipur	
Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>	Daraji	
Indian Rhinoceros	<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>	Kaziranga / Manas	
Ganges River Dolphin	<i>Platanista gangetica</i>	Tezpur	
Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin	<i>Sousa plumbea</i>	Goa	
Asian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>	Assam and Sabah	
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Several places	
Northern Red Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus vaginalis</i>	Uttarakhand	
Bornean Yellow Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus atherodes</i>	Deramakot	Probable identification
Chital	<i>Axis axis</i>	Rajasthan / Central India	
Hog Deer	<i>Axis porcinus</i>	Kaziranga	
Sambar	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>	Rajasthan / Deramakot	
Rusa Deer	<i>Rusa timorensis</i>	Alas Purwo - Komodo	
Swamp Deer	<i>Rucervus duvaucelii</i>	Kaziranga	
Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	Rajasthan	
Blackbuck	<i>Antelope cervicapra</i>	Tal Chappar	
Chinkara	<i>Gazella bennettii</i>	Desert NP / Tal Chappar / Panna	
Wild Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus arnee</i>	Assam	
Gaur	<i>Bos gaurus</i>	Manas and Southern India	
Banteng	<i>Bos javanicus</i>	Alas Purwo	
Himalayan Goral	<i>Naemorhedus goral</i>	Pangot	
Ladakh Urial	<i>Ovis vignei</i>	Ladakh	
Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>	Ladakh	
Bharal	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>	Ladakh	
Nilgiri Tahr	<i>Nilgiritragus hylocrius</i>	Eravikulam NP	
Sulawesi Bear Cuscus	<i>Ailurops ursinus</i>	Tangkoko	

Appendix: list of eBird trip reports for bird species

Title	Link
Uttarakhand – January visit	https://ebird.org/tripreport/396689
Uttarakhand – March visit	https://ebird.org/tripreport/396832
Rajasthan	https://ebird.org/tripreport/399468
Bharatpur	https://ebird.org/tripreport/399765
Assam	https://ebird.org/tripreport/400169
Sikkim and West Bengal	https://ebird.org/tripreport/405751
Ladakh	https://ebird.org/tripreport/417649
Southern India	https://ebird.org/tripreport/431626
Sabah	https://ebird.org/tripreport/486887
Peninsular Malaysia	https://ebird.org/tripreport/486889
Bali	https://ebird.org/tripreport/502731
Eastern Java	https://ebird.org/tripreport/520867
Sulawesi	https://ebird.org/tripreport/520868
Western Java	https://ebird.org/tripreport/520872