

PRIMATES IN EASTERN INDIA AND BHUTAN

Where: India (Mumbai, Tripura, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal), Bhutan
When: January – February 2026 (7 weeks)
Who: Alex Schouten and Jeannette den Hertog

INTRODUCTION

This is our second visit to India. We are focusing on finding **PRIMATES** in areas we didn't visit on our previous trip to the Western Ghats in Southwest India. Off course we don't close our eyes if we see a gaur, otter, rhino or elephant in the national parks. But the information in this report is only about primates, by far our favorite animals.

As usual, we arrange the trip ourselves as much as possible and (almost) never book a fully organized trip. There are three reasons for this:

- We travel slowly and often stay in the same place for at least 3 or 4 nights. We also schedule days where we do little and just relax. That is unthinkable on an organized trip, where the pace of travel is always (very) high. That is why we have not included a day-to-day schedule in this report.
- By organizing it ourselves, we save a lot of money. Moreover, Alex enjoys picking out the accommodations himself for example.
- It is sometimes more satisfying to spot a primate species yourself than to have it pointed out every time by a guide. However, guides are mandatory in India's national parks and most of the time they are useful. At times, hiring a local guide is worthwhile as a way to support a local conservation project; this applies, for instance, to the Gee's golden langur in Assam.

We were successful with all the target primate species (9 species) seen. After covering the organization of the trip (logistics), we will discuss all the primates seen (14 species in total) one by one.

LOGISTICS INDIA

Traveling within India is easy: there are plenty of domestic flights, buses, and trains, and Uber works very well in the major cities. In the state of Assam (Kaziranga NP and Manas NP), we decided to rent a car and drive ourselves. While this might not be for everyone, it offers a great deal of freedom of movement. If you have previous experience with driving in Asia, you should be able to handle driving in India as well—just make sure to avoid the bigger cities. We rented the car in Guwahati through a company called FuFu Gadi; the communication was smooth and professional, and the car was excellent. For our visit to the state of Arunachal Pradesh, we decided against driving ourselves (too complicated with permits) and instead arranged a car with a driver for 8 days through the same company.

Access to that state is not particularly easy for foreign tourists, as a permit is required which cannot be obtained online; consequently, a guide, hotel, or tour operator needs to arrange it for you about 1 month before you enter the state.



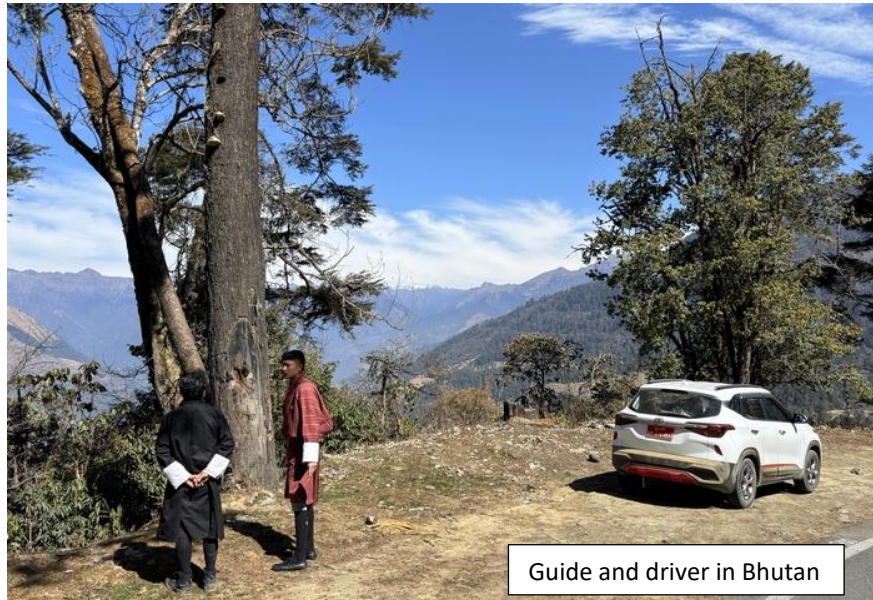
Western Hoolock Gibbon (male)



Self driving in India 🤖

LOGISTICS BHUTAN

In Bhutan, you are not permitted to travel around independently outside the cities of Paro and Thimphu, nor can you rent a car yourself. We organized the Bhutan leg of our trip through Druk Flightmode Tours and Travel (<https://www.drukflightmode.com/>). They do not require you to take a pre-set tour; instead, you can customize your own itinerary. Druk Flightmode arranged the car, driver, and (mandatory) guide, while we booked the hotels ourselves. Druk Flightmode offered good prices and left the planning of the trip up to us. We flew from Guwahati (India) to Paro (Bhutan) and, after one week, left the country overland via Phuntsholing. As far as I know, this is one of the few border crossings where non-Indian tourists can enter or leave Bhutan by land. Be aware that visiting Bhutan is not cheap as you have to pay a Sustainable Development Fee of USD 100 per person per night (through August 31, 2027).



PRIMATE SPECIES SEEN

1. Assamese Macaque (*Macaca assamensis*)

Assamese macaques are found from Nepal to Vietnam, primarily in hilly or mountainous terrain. We've seen this species a couple of times, most of the times beside the road:

- In Assam, a large group lives at the foot of the hill where the Tukreswari Temple (26.04949, 90.63217) is located. These macaques are not always friendly. If you want to enter the temple grounds or walk up to the temple on the hill, it is recommended to take one of the guards (carrying a stick) along with you. The macaques can be seen already hanging around a gasoline station right next to the temple grounds. Although we had already seen the Assamese macaque on previous trips, we decided to seek out the species again—partly because it is located just over an hour's drive from Kakoijana Park, the prime spot for Gee's Golden Langur.
- Around Latpanchar we saw them a few times sitting on the barriers beside the road.
- We spotted Assamese macaques in Bhutan several times, mainly along the roadside. There were a few sightings along the main road east of Thimphu (the same stretch of road route as the sightings of Nepal grey langur) and more along the road from Thimphu to the border crossing with India at Phuntsholing.



2. Arunachal Macaque (*Macaca munzala*)

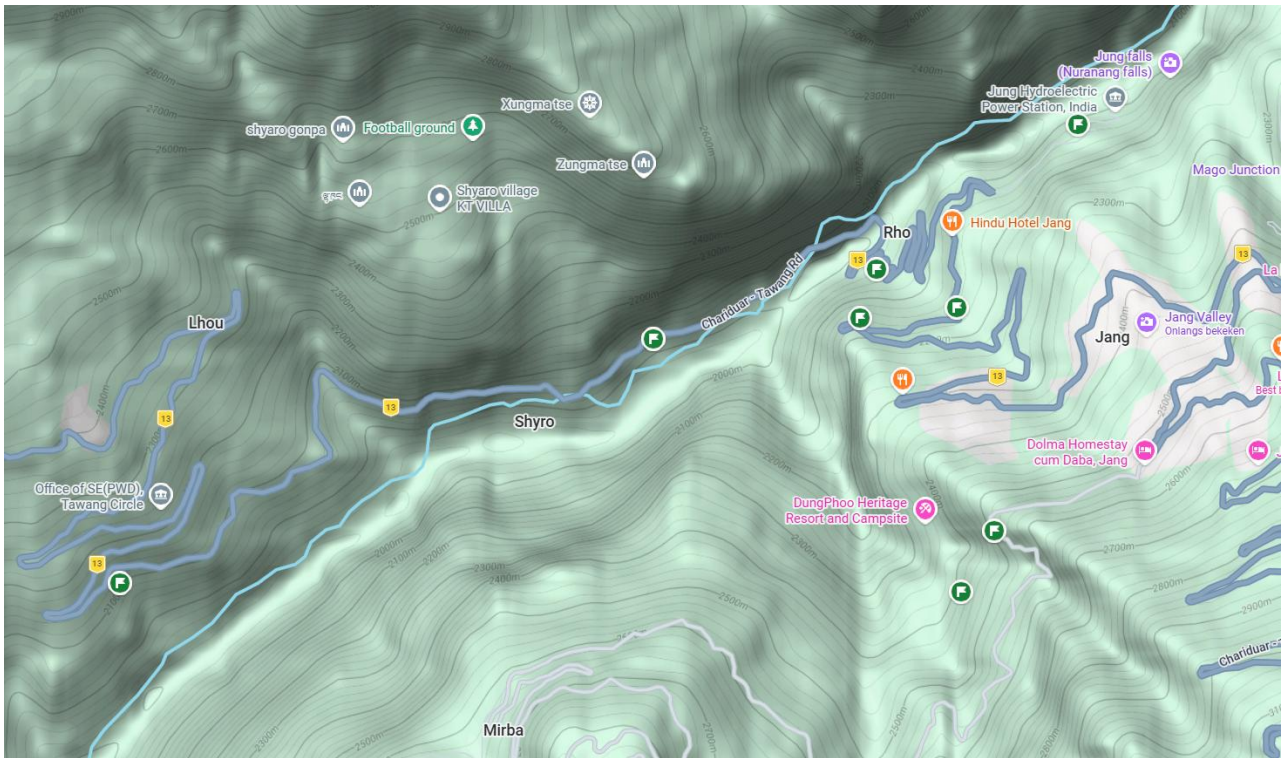
The morphology, genetics, and taxonomic variation of macaques in northeastern India—including this taxon—are very poorly understood. The Arunachal macaque inhabits an area north of the Sela Pass, whereas the Sela macaque lives south of that pass. Online sources suggest there are only about 250 adult individuals of the Arunachal Macaques; in our view, this information is incorrect. We observed more than 100 Arunachal macaques (including juveniles) along the main road in the vicinity of the village of Jang over the course of a single afternoon and the following morning. Given the locations of our sightings, we are 100% certain that we did not double-count any groups. The areas where we spotted the Arunachal macaques represent only a (very) small fraction of the species' total range. Observations made by others near the Tawang Monastery indicate the presence of a substantial population there as well. We were unable to travel the roads north of Tawang, as they are inaccessible to Western tourists; however, the site where the specimen used for the species' original description was found lies another 25 km to the northwest of Tawang (as the crow flies). In short, it is highly implausible that we encountered 20% of the population (approximately 50 adults) along the main road within just a fraction of the species' total range.



Moreover, we have noticed that the appearance of this species is highly variable. Various adult animals have a dark face (one of the easiest characteristics of this species), but we have also seen several adults with a pale face. Some individuals within a group even resemble Assamese Macaques.

So where did we see the Arunachal Macaques? See the map below, the green dots are our sightings done on 1 afternoon (the sightings close to Jang on the southern site of the river) and the following morning (the sightings on the road on the north side of the river). We spend some more time in the area and saw more groups, but those ones could be the same as the day(s) before.

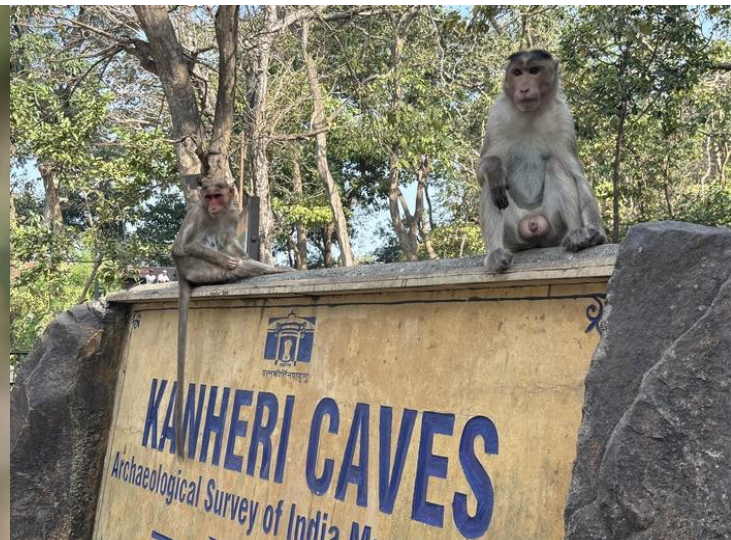
Accommodation: An excellent place to stay is the Ngyamzar Resort on the entrance road to the Jang Falls. The Arunachal macaques visit the gardens of this accommodation regularly. The rooms are good and the view from the restaurant is beautiful.



3. Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*)

This species is common in southwestern India. During this trip, we visited Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai where the Bonnet macaques are abundant around the Kanheri Caves. They hang around the food stalls and, given the chance, will empty your backpack. You can get to the caves with a public bus or a bus from the national park, both are leaving from the entrance the park in Borivali East. No guide is needed.

Accommodation: Nine Square Residency is a excellent hotel, just a few km from the entrance of the national park.



4. Pig-tailed Macaque (*Macaca leonine*)

This is not a common species in India. We caught a brief glimpse of a single individual of this species in the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary. At the time, we were more interested in the Assamese macaques, a large troop of which was sitting on an unpaved road.

5. Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)

This is the most common monkey species in the lowlands of Assam. We have seen the species on several occasions—such as in Manas and Kaziranga National Parks, just outside the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, at the Hatimura Temple (along the Brahmaputra River), and in the Sepahijala Wildlife Sanctuary in the state of Tripura. You also regularly see Rhesus Macaques sitting along the roadside.



6. Sela Macaque (*Macaca selai*)

A study published in the journal **Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution** in 2022 concluded that the Sela macaque (*Macaca selai*) is a distinct phylogenetic species that evolved from the Arunachal macaque through allopatric speciation. It remains unclear to me whether or not this split is widely accepted; for instance, it is recognized in the Mammalwatching database and on the New England Primate Conservancy website, but not yet on website of the IUCN Red List.

This species lives south of Sela Pass, whereas the Arunachal Macaque lives north of it. The best place to spot the Sela Macaque is along the main road from Dirang to Tawang. Near Hotel Samjhana (27.405665343, 92.134293871), there is a row of small roadside eateries. Restrooms are located behind these eateries (on the valley side). From there, you have a view of a small rubbish dump where Sela Macaques forage for food. Staff at the roadside stalls can point out



exactly where to look. We saw the macaques there both on our way to Tawang and on the return journey (at 10:00 AM and 1:00 PM). As birdwatchers have also spotted the monkeys here, it appears to be a fairly reliable location. Others have also sighted Sela Macaques on the route from Dirang to Manda La Top. When we stayed at the accommodation Oak View (a few nice cottages) in the Shergaon Valley, the owner showed us a picture from a camera trap nearby with Sela Macaques on it. His photograph shows adult animals—most with pale faces (a characteristic supposedly typical of the Sela macaque)—but also one animal with a 'black' face. It appears that while the Sela and Arunachal macaques differ genetically, their physical characteristics are variable. According to him, when the orchards in the valley bear fruit, the monkeys can frequently be found along the roadside in the Shergaon Valley.



7. Stump-tailed Macaque (*Macaca arctoides*)

This beautiful species has a wide distribution range in Southeast Asia, yet it is found in just a few places. As far as we know, there is just one such location in India: the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary in Assam. There are a few big groups in this forest one group is seen regularly not too far from the entrance. We were able to enjoy a large group of stump-tailed macaques for quite some time as they lingered on an unpaved road in the park (guide mandatory to enter the sanctuary).



8. Black-footed Gray Langur (*Semnopithecus hypoleucos*)

This species is common in a fairly narrow strip along the coast of southwestern India. During this trip, we visited Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai to see this species. It's hard to miss near the Kanheri Caves inside the national park; they hang around the food stalls. Unlike the Bonnet Macaques, they leave tourists alone.



9. Capped Langur (*Trachypithecus pileatus*)

The capped langur has a wider distribution range than Gee's golden langur. Three or four subspecies are recognized. We saw the capped langur in several places:

- Manas National Park (west and east). We visited two areas in Manas NP: the eastern section (Kokilabari)—which sees few tourists, is densely forested, and is home to many bird species—where we spotted both rhesus macaques and capped langurs; and the busier western section (Bansbari Range), where more mammals can be seen (such as rhinos, elephants, and gaurs). In that latter area, we got some excellent views of the capped langurs. Near the entrance of the Eastern range is just 1 accommodation available, Thobgang Jungle Tourist Camp. This is an excellent accommodation with very good (bird) guides. A place to consider compared to the touristic western range of Manas NP.
- Kaziranga National Park. We did not visit either of the central entrances in Kaziranga NP because they can get extremely crowded, especially on weekends. The eastern entrance (Agaratoli Range Office) is



very quiet and offers sightings of many mammals, though we did not spot any primates there. The western entrance (Burapahar Range) is also quiet; there, we saw Rhesus Macaques and Capped Langurs. The latter are found in the forested area near the entrance, while the macaques inhabit the thickets out on the plains and along the river.

- Sepahijala Wildlife Sanctuary near Agartala in Tripura. We saw one group of Capped Langurs there, but they were far away—too far for a picture. This is a different subspecies from the one found in Manas and Kaziranga National Parks.

10. Gee's Golden Langur (*Trachypithecus geei*)

Gee's golden langurs are easily spotted in Kakoijana Park and the adjacent village. As you drive into the village from main road 117, you pass under a gateway adorned with 'statues' of primates—a beautifully crafted feature. There is only one place to stay in the village: Kakeya Resort. It is a simple but perfectly adequate place to sleep, and the food is delicious. The resort is located right in the center of the village, so you can clearly hear village sounds from your room. The owner of Kakeya Resort (whose English is very basic) acts as a guide for the monkeys himself. For some reason, he initially tries to take visitors looking for Gee's golden langurs into the forest, where the monkeys are actually quite hard to find (we didn't see them there). In reality, there is a large troop of Gee's golden langurs living right in the village, they are very easy to locate. We visited that troop once in the afternoon and again the following morning. It was a fantastic experience because the animals are fully habituated, allowing you to observe their behavior up close. Along with the gibbons, this species was the 'primate highlight' of the trip. Don't try to find the langurs in the village on your own as you likely have to cross private properties to find the langurs.



11. Nepal Gray Langur (*Semnopithecus schistaceus*)

This species of langur inhabits mountainous areas at altitudes between 1,500 and 4,000 meter. Its range is extensive, stretching from Pakistan in the west to Bhutan in the east. We spotted this species in two locations in Bhutan:

- 1) During a hike to the (beautiful) Cheri Monastery, located north of Thimphu; this large troop (about 15 individuals) is frequently seen here. Altitude 2700 meter.
- 2) Along the main road from Thimphu to Wangdue Phodrang, between the Royal Botanical Park (Lampelri) and extending 15 km east of the park. Altitude 2500 – 2800 meter.



12. Phayre's Leaf-monkey (*Trachypithecus phayrei*)

The Phayre's Leaf-monkey (*Trachypithecus phayrei*) is quite easy to see in Satchari National Park in Bangladesh. But the political situation can be a problem when planning a trip to Bangladesh. So we went to the Sepahijala Wildlife Sanctuary near Agartala in Tripura (India). Just arrange a taxi to the entrance on the west side of the park, pay the minimal entrance fee and walk along the paved road in the park. On the first morning we were not successful, but I didn't feel well that time. The second morning we saw a nice group of Phayre's Leaf Monkeys crossing the road through the sanctuary. They were quite shy, so the picture is not great. This sanctuary seems to be a good alternative for Bangladesh to see this endangered primate species. Be aware that Tripura is visited by very few foreign tourists; consequently, the tourism infrastructure is limited. During the four nights we spent in the state, we didn't see a single other Western tourist and drew curious stares wherever we went. We attracted so much attention that a journalist interviewed us in the nature park, and a few hours later, we appeared on the TV channel Headlines Tripura. The following day, we were recognized on the street several times ;-)



13. Tarai Gray Langur (*Semnopithecus hector*)

This species is found in a narrow strip stretching from western Bhutan to beyond the western tip of Nepal, at elevations between 150 and 1,600 meters. A small population also lives in the state of West Bengal in the foothills above Siliguri. They are sighted now and then near Rongtong and Latpanchar. Both locations are well-known among birdwatchers, meaning local bird guides sometimes know where the monkeys are. During our brief one-night stay at Rongtong Homestay (an excellent homestay, very good birdguide), we did not see any langurs. In Latpanchar (where we spent three nights, with various homestays available in the village), we spotted langurs twice near the famous Trogon Point (approximately 3 km west of Latpanchar village, altitude 950 meter).



14. Western Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock hoolock*)

The place to see this magnificent gibbon species is the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, southwest of Jorhat. A railway line cuts through the forest reserve, and the gibbons inhabit both sections. You can only visit the protected forest area with a guide. On the first morning, we couldn't enter the forest until 9 a.m. because it was too foggy earlier on; the gibbons don't sing or move much in the fog, making them hard to spot. Once the sun finally came out at 9 a.m., the gibbons became active and were quickly located. Unfortunately, we missed out on hearing their amazing songs. The next morning, we took a walk on our own along the access road bordering the forest. And there... we spent a long time watching a gibbon family eating fruit, a private performance. On both mornings, the gibbons were very relaxed; they are accustomed to humans. We stayed at the Gibbon Eco Camp, located within walking distance of the forest entrance. It is a simple but perfectly adequate place to stay, and the owner (who is also a guide) is very friendly and helpful. They can also provide all meals. Additionally, you can take a lovely walk through the tea plantations—where there are plenty of birds—and along the edge of the forest. Besides the monkeys living in the forest itself, you can also see rhesus macaques frequently sitting on the railway tracks. It is certainly not necessary to stay in Jorhat and make the trip to Hollongapar at the crack of dawn.



FINAL THOUGHTS

The trip to eastern India was a great success, in terms of the primates as well as the country itself (safe, nice climate etc). Yes, it always takes a little time getting used to the sights, sounds, and bustle of India, but the Indian people are open, friendly, and helpful. We had a 100% trouble-free trip.

We managed to find all the diurnal primate species we had hoped to see. Primates in India are not shy, and various species live near villages or along roadsides. While this may not be the most natural setting, it is a fact of life in a country with a human population of nearly 1.5 billion. The highlight of the trip was (off course) spotting 12 primate species across northeastern India and Bhutan—including species (such as the Nepal Gray Langur, Tarai Gray Langur, and Phayre's Langur) that people usually travel to northern India, Nepal, or Bangladesh to see. The bonus was the two species of monkeys we saw in the national park, which borders the metropolis of Mumbai. In short, northeastern India is an excellent destination for anyone wishing to see a wide variety of monkey species within a relatively compact area.

If you would like to have some information about our trip, don't hesitate to get in contact with us: schouten.alex@outlook.com



Assamese Macaque