

Pench National Park, India:

Mammal watching trip report by Atif Hashmi & Rebekah Thompson

This was mainly a trip to see our family in Mumbai, India, but we still managed to squeeze in a 3 day visit to Pench National Park in Central India too.

We chose Pench because we had heard that this national park is not as busy as some of the other famous Central Indian ones that are renowned for their excellent wildlife sightings (the most famous ones are Bhandavgarh, Kanha and Tadoba Andhari).

Pench also offered the chance to do a night safari which is unusual for India. Eventually we did not get the time to do the night safari but if we had an extra day or two, we would have definitely tried to see some night wildlife. Pench was also the closest national park to Nagpur train station which makes getting there easier if one is travelling to this region from Mumbai or even Delhi.

The team consisted of Atif, Rebekah and Atif's two brothers who live in Mumbai, Fauzan and Gilman.

Rebekah is the photographer in chief, so all photos included here are taken by her, unless otherwise mentioned. Atif was doing the usual videography. If you want to see the results, then please see our short wildlife film on Pench National Park here: <https://youtu.be/zwUNmJfNveM>

For a report on all the wildlife including birds we have also put together everything on our blog:

<https://wildtravelsdemystified.wordpress.com/2022/07/01/pench-national-park-india/>

Dates: 5th June 2022 to 7th June 2022

Logistics and pre-planning:

We decided to take the train from Mumbai to Nagpur and back. It was not an issue to book the train as this was not a holiday season, like Diwali or Eid.

The journey time from Mumbai to Nagpur was around 14 hours. We had arranged a pickup and drop off through Pench Jungle Camp from Nagpur Train station. It took us just a little less than 2.5 hours to get to Pench Jungle Camp from Nagpur train station.

Safaris in India get booked well in advance, so we arranged 4 safaris through the contact at Pench Jungle camp in late April 2022. Three safaris were from Turia gate and one from Khursapur gate. The park is spread across two different Indian states. Turia gate falls in the state of Madhya Pradesh and the Khursapur gate falls on the Maharashtra side. Different states have different park rules, so while we had to pay camera charges on the Maharashtra side, there were no such charges on the Madhya Pradesh side. Both gates are very strict with the ID checks. They cross-check the IDs against the information they have for you when the safaris are booked.

We were fairly impressed by the rigorous checks because this meant that the wildlife inside was fantastic and very visible. It was clear that most of the wildlife did not see humans as a threat and were not skittish at all.

One is not allowed to step outside the vehicle, and we did not see anyone walking inside the park. The only handful of people we did see who were on foot were some workers mending the roads.

Accommodation:

We stayed at the wonderful Pench Jungle camp. The accommodation was booked through Booking.com but they arranged everything for us. The food was delicious and the packed breakfasts for both the morning safaris was incredibly filling. They arranged the safaris for us and with regards to the timing and punctuality of the drivers and the paperwork around the booking of the safaris they were simply impeccable. This is a highly recommended place, and it was a shame that we did not have more days otherwise we would have acquired the services of their in-house naturalists to look for more birds, reptiles and smaller mammals.

The Report in brief:

Day 1-

We left Mumbai CST (Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus) at around 19:00 pm on the 4th June and arrived at Nagpur Train station the next day at just before 9:00am.

We were picked up promptly by the pickup arranged via Pench Jungle camp and after a quick breakfast stop, we were at our accommodation by noon.

After freshening up, we were all set for our first safari at 15.30pm through Turia gate. Spotted deer/Chital were strolling carefree just by the gate and it was great to see that they did not have a lot of fear of humans. Grey langurs & Rhesus macaques were roaming around us in similar abundance. Before long we spotted a good-sized herd of Sambar deer. They were a little concerned by the presence of Indian wild dogs or Dhole. A sounder of Indian boar searched for food very close to all this action.

This was excellent mammal watching but the birds around us were similarly wonderful. Despite the oppressive heat, resident birds such as White throated kingfishers, Yellow footed green pigeons, and raptors such as Changeable hawk eagles added to the wildlife extravaganza.

Before long we drove to a lake and the guide said that a Tigress was lying at the far end of the water's edge. He said that it was difficult to make out if she was the Tigress called Pardev or if this was one of her nearly fully grown cubs. As time went on the rest of the Tiger family appeared by the water and soon, we had four Tigers in a single frame.

As we were filming and photographing the Tigers the birdwatching continued to be excellent all around us.

As the evening passed, we decided to look for other wildlife. The only other mammal of note was an Indian flying squirrel that was just about to leave its hole, high up in a dead tree. However, the sound of the jeep alarmed it and it went back inside very quickly so we could not photograph it. Later that night Atif's brothers were disturbed by an Asian house shrew running amok in their bed and they realised that it must be chasing a House gecko. Thankfully, the debacle did not last for long and they were able to chase the shrew out of the bed and outside the main door.



Grey or Hanuman Langur (above) and Sambar (below)





Indian boar (above) & Male Spotted deer (below)





A sounder of Indian boar (above) and Sambar getting ready to face off with some Indian wild dogs (below)





4 Bengal tigers in a frame!

Day 2-

The morning safari started at around 5.30 am. This would be through Khursapur gate which is located on the Maharashtra side of the National Park. Like all drives, the guide was keen to find us more Tigers on this safari as well. As we were waiting for the Tiger by a lake, we saw an Indian Bison/Gaur and enjoyed some early morning bird watching.

There were good numbers of Sambar deer. Spotted deer and Grey langurs are so common that the guides and drivers don't stop for them at all. A lone and extremely shy Four horned antelope/Chowsinga was a mammal of note on this safari.

Eventually the driver tracked down a Tigress called Pardev by the side of a cave. The morning safari ended with excellent views of a young Tigress cooling off by a small pond and then she strolled past by us as she disappeared into the deep forest.

For the evening safari, we tried to convince our guide several times that we didn't want to see anymore Tigers and we want to search for other wildlife, especially birds, herps and other mammals. This was all in vain as he was hell bent on finding us a Tiger.

Eventually he started to track for Indian wild dogs and Leopards, but he soon got news of a Tiger sighting and rushed us back to the same lake where we had seen the four Tigers the previous day.



This young tigress cooled off in a pond and then strolled right in front us.





Indian bison or Gaur (above) and Nilgai (below)





A Four horned antelope, it was very shy and disappeared quickly.

Day 3:

On this last Safari, we had an excellent guide and she agreed to not chase Tigers. The first interesting mammal of the day was a lone female Nilgai. After observing her we spent time looking for other wildlife and the birdwatching that morning was exceptionally good.

After breakfast we enjoyed great views of the Pench river and soon after ran into some Golden jackals very close to the river. A large Indian boar was another good sighting that morning. We also enjoyed sightings of some Indian mongoose as they scampered around the herds of spotted deer. We spent several hours looking for Leopards because we have never seen them in the wild (despite looking for them extensively in various places). However, the Leopards continued to elude us.

After the safari we headed back to the camp and checked out in the afternoon. It was time to head back to Nagpur train station and back to Mumbai.

A note on what to do if you want to see more mammals than us:

The guides are assigned to the Safari Jeeps/vehicles as you enter the National Park. We realised this on the last day, but it is possible to request the same guide if you like them. You will have to pay a fee of Rs 600 (about £8 or \$10) for this request though.

All guides have good knowledge of the main species of flora and fauna found inside the park, but they obviously have the Tigers as their main focus. It was very difficult to convince them to look for other wildlife. If you do have more time here, check with Pench Jungle Camp or your accommodation to see if they can arrange for a specialist guide who can find you other mammals. Bats, rodents, and other smaller mammals here should be possible if one were to spend some time looking for them. The ecosystem is excellent, and we only scratched the very surface in terms of species diversity.

We were not able to spend anytime looking for mammals in the night because the morning safaris were very early, and we were limited by time. A Night safari or two should yield some more mammals. Indian wolves are really, really difficult, and we were told that Striped hyenas have not been seen for nearly 10 years here. However, you must take your chances.

We did not ask about spotlighting, but we think that spending some time around the accommodation grounds in the night may reveal a few smaller mammals and definitely a few bats.

My brothers had spotted a cat around their accommodation one afternoon and the description seemed to match an Indian jungle cat. A photo was taken with the phone but we are still not sure if this was just a stray domestic cat or a wild cat. The cat was at a fair distance so the photo may not be definitive, and then it disappeared with great speed before we could arrive with our photography gear. The accommodation had 4 German shepherds but no domestic cat(s), which adds to the mystery. We have not included this mystery cat in the final list of mammals.

Mammals List:

- 1) Bengal Tiger (7 seen in total, on three safaris out of four. Only because we actively tried not to see a Tiger on the last one!)
- 2) Nilgai (seen one on only one safari out of four)
- 3) Four horned antelope (one seen at a distance on only one safari out of four)
- 4) Spotted deer (Extremely common, seen in good numbers every day)
- 5) Sambar (Common, seen in good numbers)
- 6) Grey Langur (Extremely common, seen in good numbers every day)
- 7) Rhesus macaque (Common, seen on most safaris)
- 8) Indian palm squirrel (Not very common here, few were seen around the rocks inside the park)
- 9) Indian flying squirrel (one seen only fleetingly on first safari)
- 10) Asian house shrew (one, chased away from the bed!)
- 11) Golden jackals (Two were seen only on one safari)
- 12) Indian bison or Gaur (One was seen on one safari only)
- 13) Indian boar (Fairly common, seen on 3 out of four safaris)
- 14) Indian wild dogs (A small pack was seen on the first safari only)
- 15) Indian mongoose (Two were seen on the last safari)

Mystery mammal! Is the cat in the middle a domestic one or an Indian jungle cat?

