



India Mammal and Bird Experience with WildWorldIndia

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Overview

This is a 'long-awaited' India trip report I and my keen fellow animal watcher - Kat - participated in over the Christmas period of 2018/2019. We spent a month in the country travelling to Assam in the north-east, several reserves in the central states, and finishing off in the south around the Western Ghats. I had read several previous trip reports with complaints about the hordes of local Indian tourists in some parks (such as Tadoba) so I was ready for this but I must say that personally we didn't find it really bothered us that much, and at times it was almost amusing. Although if you're after that 'just me and the animals' experience.....try elsewhere (and good luck). It seemed good to me that people were out there appreciating their country's wildlife, even if it was just looking for that one Tiger sighting to excitedly relate to family and friends back home. I'd also read about the palaver that can be had waiting to get into parks due to a certain over-officious park management bureaucracy system. But WildWorldIndia had it all organised for us (and great kudos to them) so that we avoided all that and I can only remember one afternoon safari in Kaziranga where we had to wait a while. I did find it amusing watching the mad crush at the park office as guides pushed, yelled and demonstratively thrust pieces of paper at park staff in order to get their allotted drive in the park.

All up we saw 50 mammals and 359 birds (i.e. good views). The following is a precis of our various experiences on the trip. The main focus is on mammals but this was also a highly successful bird trip as well. I have attached a full list of bird and mammal species as seen at each park for those interested in 'going deep'.

Delhi - 3 days

First up was three days in Delhi to get over jetlag and look at a few of the touristy sites. We decided to stay in the heart of Old Delhi so we could take in the much vaunted 'functional chaos' of the area and be within walking distance of some of the big tourist areas such as the Red Fort, spice market etc. To cope with this we stayed at

the rather expensive but excellent Heritage Haveli Dhramapura, a renovated Mughal era residence. It was situated in the heart of the Paharganj district close to several tourist sites. A notable highlight of our old world luxurious room was the mirrored mosaic tiles situated directly in front of the toilet. An interesting decorative choice which gave ample room for uncomfortable self-reflection. We enjoyed the local tourist/cultural sites, endured the smog and heaving masses of people, were amazed at the vehicular chaos and tangled electricity 'network' adorning the buildings everywhere. Here Kat started what turned out to be a continuing phenomenon throughout the trip - being asked to have her photo taken with random local people.

Of course this part of the trip wasn't really about animals but there were Rhesus Macaques in the middle of the old town as well as 5-Striped Palm Squirrels. Others referred to them as 3-Striped but to me there was a definite lateral stripe on the beasts I got good looks at, and they were literally everywhere. Black Kites blanketed the skies over the Red Fort and perched around the Haveli rooftop. I even saw my first White-throated Kingfisher from there. A trip to Lodhi Gardens was a pleasant way to get out of the hustle and bustle and see some common birds, plus we picked up good looks at Small Indian Mongoose around some ponds. If I had my camera I could have gotten my only close up photos of Yellow-footed Green Pigeons as they were often sitting in low trees, well at least as good as the unrelenting smoggy haze would have allowed. We also got what was most likely a Black Rat climbing a wall in the old town spice markets.....fairly inconsequential in the grand scheme of things but hey, they all count.

Kaziranga - 6 days

Having had lunch with our wonderful hosts from WildWorldIndia (Abhishek and Vikram) the day before, we got up early to fly to Guwahati for the first leg of our trip proper. I learnt an unfortunate lesson in that there is no alcohol allowed in hand luggage on internal flights in India. You either risk it in your stowed luggage or don't bother. Bye bye duty free vodka. We were met at Guwahati airport by our excellent guide Jintoo (spelling it as it sounded so apologies if incorrect) and drove the four hours on to the town of Kaziranga and lodging at the Infinity Resort (food generally pretty good). The resort itself had a few nice birds in the grounds as well as Hoary-bellied Squirrels. Our only view on the trip of a Pied Falconet was from within the resort grounds.

We spent the next few days doing morning and afternoon game drives in various sections of the park. It was holiday time in India and the park was for the most part heaving with multitudes of jeepnys (as the open-topped



Great Hornbill – great bird

jeeps are called). Generally this wasn't really an issue for us although there were a few instances where we seemed to wait an inordinate amount of time to let car after car pass us before we could make our own way onwards on the sometimes narrow tracks. I'd also say if you have back issues bringing your own cushiony implement to put against the back of the seats might be a comforting idea as the back rests are.....hard, and the bumpy tracks can take their toll I found.

Kaziranga is a large area (430 km² according to Wikipedia) of swamps and tall grassland interspersed with patches of forest and bordered in the north by the wide expanse of the Brahmaputra River. There are a lot of animals and it gets described as India's version of the African plains (unnecessarily). We were there in the winter dry season so getting around the park was at its best although it made for some quite chilly mornings and evenings. The sun went down quite early and it was pretty much dark by about 5 pm. We spent most of our time in the central area of the park with forays into the

eastern and western sections and a morning trip to the 'nearby' Gibbon Sanctuary (about a 3 hour drive).

The Greater One-horned Rhino is the prime beast people want to see in Kaziranga and they really aren't that hard to see it has to be said, at least from a distance. Getting closer was more a matter of luck but given we were there for several days we had a few quite close (satisfying) encounters. The first morning we embarked on a dawn elephant 'safari'. I did think beforehand this had an air of 'cheesy tourist activity' about it but it was actually quite an enjoyable experience as it allowed you to go off-track and get very close to rhinos which seemed quite unperturbed as opposed to the noisy jeeps. The elephants seemed well looked after which I have to assume (hope) is the case.

Of course there were lots of other animals to see including lots of Wild Boar and deer (Hog Deer, Swamp Barasingha and Sambar), Water Buffalo, and great views of Indian Elephants, Capped Langurs and Smooth-coated Otters. Highlights included: seeing South-Asian River Dolphin pop it's head up right in front of us during a lucky five minute stopover at the Brahmaputra River (I was VERY happy with this, by no means was this going to be a guaranteed beast to see); and excellent extended views of a pair of Hoolock Gibbons with a quite small juvenile hanging out in trees next to the highway. A Black Giant Squirrel was found doing exactly the same thing (but actually over the highway) just up the road from this. The highway gibbon sightings kind of made our allotted trip to the Gibbon Sanctuary a bit redundant given the distance of the drive and the rather short time we were allowed in the sanctuary itself. We saw gibbons again and also were lucky enough to see Pig-tailed Macacques. There are a number of other primates in the park but you have pretty much no chance of seeing them. The camera fees here were a bit exorbitant and the mandatory tips to two local guides who did pretty much nothing were a bit galling.



Female Hoolock Gibbon with baby – a very obliging family



Two Indian rhinos having a 'moment'



A quite cute Hog Deer

Jintoo was great with the birds as well which was very helpful for me (and my list). There are abundant waterbirds on the wetlands and my (admittedly modest) world waterfowl list took a huge leap upwards. A few highlights (and there were plenty) in no particular order of preference were: excellent and quite close views of

perched Great Hornbill, Pallas's Fish Eagle, Swamp Francolin, Griffon Vulture, Asian Barred and Spotted Owlets, Long-tailed Minivet, Abbot's Babbler and the now quite hard to see Greater Adjutant. I won't forget the sight of looking at a Coppersmith Barbet and having a Shikra descend from nowhere while I was literally watching the barbet through my binoculars. Nature action in all its glory. On our final morning Jintoo offered to take us for a walk in the tea plantations behind the lodge to look for birds in the adjacent patches of scrub instead of a last game drive. I was definitely keen to take a morning off from the jeep seating situation and we netted a few nice birds with the highlight being him using call playback to bring in a White-browed Piculet, without a doubt the tiniest woodpecker I've laid eyes on. VERY cute. We bid goodbye to Kaziranga and embarked on our transport back to Guwahati airport, got stuck in traffic for a long while and rather nervously made it through a fairly chaotic airport process and into the departure lounge with not much time to spare.

Kaziranga animal totals: 18 mammals and 176 bird species

Chambal River – 2 days

After spending New Years night in a rather plush Delhi airport hotel (the huge shower with a clear glass pane right beside the bed was a nice indulgent touch I thought) in a very modern airport hotel complex we were off to Chambal River. The drive north (about 5 hours) allowed us to see how far Delhi (and surrounding cities, not necessarily easy to tell when one stopped and the next one started) actually stretched and how much construction is currently going on in the area. A lot of the apartment complexes going up were intimidating in stature to say the least. Some of them just seemed to be 'popping up' in the middle of surrounding agricultural fields and not actually near much in the way of suburbia..

Chambal River was a quick one night stop for a couple of boat rides on the Chambal River which, having been there, I would have added a day or two extra to enjoy the place and go look for Blackbuck which can be seen on safaris from here. The National Chambal Sanctuary area is in some pretty dry habitat and seemed to be the start of camel country being on the edge of Rajasthan (camels were commonly seen in the villages on the way). Our lodge (Chambal Safari Lodge) was excellent and the lunch on the lawns when we arrived was pretty cool and felt a bit like a ye olde 'raj' experience. The food was excellent. The grounds had a few Indian Flying Foxes roosting, a pair of Grey Mongoose running around, Nilgai, Indian Hare and a pair of Common Palm Civets we spotlighted at night. Our allotted guide (whom I can't remember the name of – apologies) was again, very good with the birds. This was quite useful given there were a lot of 'small brown birds' I would really have struggled with when walking in the eroded 'badlands' that lie adjacent to the river.

Garial and Mugger Crocodile



Soft-shelled Turtle, beauty is in the eye of the beholder?



Plying the quiet and still river in the afternoon and morning was a picturesque way to look for wildlife and produced the main attraction and that was excellent views of several Gharial including at least a couple of large and impressive males. There were plenty of Mugger crocodile and we got bonus views of a large Soft-shelled Turtle sunning itself on the bank. We also got good views of our first Golden Jackal. Birds weren't the main mission here but we still saw 75 species in our short stay with a few we didn't see anywhere else.

We then drove to Agra and did our, some would say obligatory, stop at the Taj Mahal. It's an impressive sight to be sure. The place was absolutely heaving with people (unsurprisingly) and Kat was asked to take part in a number of family photo shoots. I wasn't generally called on for these (offence not taken). We then met up with and had dinner with Rajen (as we were to know him), our guide for central India. It was off to Agra train station for our overnight train to Bhopal. We attracted our fair share of attention in the station but my highlight was seeing a cow walk out onto the main platform, walk around a bit before finding a bin to search through for a snack. How it made it up the steps and through the main entrance I'm not sure. The locals mostly seemed to take it in their stride and ignore it. We were booked in a 'luxury' cabin. I guess 'luxury' is all about perspective but I wondered what conditions the poor souls in 3rd class were subject to.

Satpura Tiger Reserve – 4 days

After an overnight train to Bhopal we arrived early in the morning and then drove about 4 hours to our 'plush' new digs at the Forsyth Lodge, our first site in the parks of central India. We got our only view of Blackbuck on the trip along the way grazing in a random field. Far off but adequate views nonetheless. When I say plush I do mean plush, our rooms were large and comfortable, the food was great and plentiful, and the attention from the lodge staff was relentless (disconcertingly so at times). Hot water bottles were supplied for the chilly nights and chillier morning drives. There was a bonus open air bedroom on the second level which we tried for a little while one night, but the cold chased us off, plus we were afraid of being swamped by the abundant pillows on offer. The grounds were set in a large patch of regrowth scrub and held numerous photographic opportunities for birds (including Indian grey Hornbill and Puff-throated Babbler) and mammals sighted included Northern Plains Langur and Jungle Cat.



Jungle Cat – a lot of patience required for this shot



Indian Giant Squirrel – no patience required at all

We spent the next 4 days doing morning and afternoon jeep trips into the reserve. A quick drive to the Denwa River from the lodge and then crossing over into the reserve itself. Satpura was the least tourist populated of the 3 central reserves we visited with relatively few cars in sight during our visits. It was quite hilly with plenty of scenic views across rocky country and gorges, with patches of teak forests shedding their leaves, and smaller

areas of bamboo clumps all apparently suitable for the beasts we wanted to see. Rajen unfortunately had come down with a cold (or some sort of illness) but proved to be a great beast tracker. We had our first fantastic views of a Tiger lying down about 10 m away from our car for quite a while. This caused great excitement to all as apparently as they are usually hard to see well in this reserve. We also had middling views of leopard a few times, and excellent views of Jungle Cat on several occasions (the only place we saw them on the trip). There was plenty of ungulate action (or tiger/leopard prey) on offer including Chital, Nilgai and our first sightings of Gaur. On one occasion we witnessed a male Nilgai swim across a river which was quite something given how aquatic these tall, skinny antelopes don't appear to be. One day we drove across the reserve to a rangers camp where we had lunch. The camp had several Indian Giant Squirrel and some rather tame langurs to provide a multitude of photo opportunities as well as great views of birds such as Blue-bearded Bee-eater and Indian Yellow Tit. Our return journey got us our first look at Sloth Bear, a beast I was very keen to see.

Pench Tiger Reserve – 4 days

We said goodbye to our gracious hosts at Forsyth Lodge and took the long drive to Pench Jungle Camp, our base for the next 4 days for exploring Pench National Park. The lodge was a nice relaxed place with plenty of birds to see and try and photograph in the grounds and along the rural roads outside if you cared to go for a walk. On our final night a large corporate group 'invaded' the lodge providing some amusingly enthusiastic team-building antics to watch. Thankfully we were far enough away from the night time action to not be bothered by the noise, something Rajen probably wished for when we met up with him the following morning.



Leopard – star of the show at Pench



Northern Plains Langurs – drinking.....obviously

The National Park was a quick 5 minute drive from the lodge. The mornings in particular were quite chilly and we had to wrap our blankets around our bodies strategically in order to retain a bit of body heat (no hot water bottles here). Pench is a large National Park although the safari access is to a fairly limited section of the overall park. The setting is a lot drier and less forested than Satpura with rolling hills, large bare grassy areas and rocky outcrops. Again there were plenty of deer, mainly Chital, which provided abundant fodder for Leopards and Tiger. And it was here we got our best sighting of Leopard on the trip. We rolled up to a sea of jeeps parked up beside a large rocky outcrop with two leopards sitting on a rock. We jostled with the other jeeps for a viewing position (and re-jostled.....and re-jostled.....a chaotic but good-humoured feature of the wildlife safari in India it seems) and watched them from afar for awhile with good although distant and partially obscured views. After a while they moved on and then Rajen's predictive tracking sensibilities went into over-drive. We drove around the area shifting position from time to time (along with all the other jeeps) in an effort to be there when the beasts hopefully emerged from the bush. After an hour of this I had kinda resigned myself to the fact that was it



Mottled Owl – pick of the birds at Pench

when we suddenly came to an intersection to find one of the Leopards sitting calmly on the road about 20 m away. After 5 minutes (and a multitude of photos) it then got up, started walking towards the car before turning off down a gully about 10 m away from us. Magic.

On another afternoon we travelled to an adjacent reserve located over the border in the neighboring state. Apparently this was a good place to get good views of Tiger. It was far more vegetated than Pench making it difficult to see very far into the scrub. Having driven around for a while we suddenly stopped having heard the sound of a distant Tiger roaring, a mother calling for its cub. We positioned ourselves above a gully and waited as it slowly approached the car (periodically roaring) and then low and behold, it calmly walked out of the scrub and walked across the track not more than about 5 m from the car and still doing the odd roar, seemingly oblivious to our presence. After this outing we stayed behind for a delicious local masala chai and opted to wait until the sun went down

and spotlight on the way to the lodge. Our only success was a man squatting in a paddock probably assuming he could carry out his business in private. Oh dear.....chuckles were had all round. We also spent another evening doing a spotlighting safari in a 'buffer zone' property outside of the national park. It was pretty cold and we managed to get good views of a Common Palm Civet, a few bemused looking deer and an Indian Nightjar. An indifferent result but a bit of fun nonetheless. It was good to get back to the lodge. Bird highlights were again many but included excellent views of owls including Jungle and Spotted Owlet, Indian Scops Owl and the very attractive Mottled Wood Owl (3 roosting in a tree in fact).

Tadoba Tiger Reserve – 4 days

Our final destination in central India was the Tadoba Tiger Reserve Our drive took us through a strange landscape mixed with gleaming modern towering electricity towers over a very rural setting complete with ox carts aplenty to dodge on the roads. We arrived at the Svasara Jungle Lodge, a nice relaxed place with friendly hosts and good food. The grounds had a few birds for more (often frustrated) attempted photography and an impressively large specimen of Jerdon's Bullfrog could be found around the sewage pond out the back of the kitchen (we like to wander).

Unfortunately Rajen had to finally give in to his illness and leave us so we were assigned a new guide on arrival. The reserve was a very short drive up the road and away we went in the morning. Tadoba seems to be THE place to see Tigers at the moment and our guide insisted that one female in particular, that had become quite tolerant of the safari vehicles, called Maya (spelling optional) was the most photographed Tiger currently in existence. She also had two large cubs in tow at the time we were there. Tadoba is a relatively flat park with lots of wetlands and dense groves of bamboo which Tigers love, but can make Tiger spotting difficult. No problem for us though. We were immediately taken to the main lake where a large Sambar carcass was located right beside the lake and had Maya and both cubs hanging out right out in the open. We knew we were in the right place when we rounded a corner and saw the dozens of jeeps lined up along the track replete with assortment of huge camera lenses aimed towards the action.



Tadoba.....you won't be alone.....



One dead Sambar – three happy Tigers



And again

As the sun rose we were treated to an hour of great views including the tearing of chunks off the carcass and a bit of carcass dragging thrown in. Great stuff! I'm not sure how the carcass came to be there and I have my suspicions but I'm not complaining. The carcass disappeared after a couple of days of periodically spotting the family lazing around by the lake which meant we suddenly had to work for our Tiger views. After a lot of seemingly aimless running around the park not seeing a great deal we settled on a small wetland with a few jeeps parked. The jeeps gradually peeled off until it was just us and our guides conferred feverishly and decided this was the place to be and we would stay put. After a while a few rather skittish looking Sambar made there way out of the bush and went to the wetland for a drink. Lo and behold Maya leapt out of nowhere to make a run at the deer sending them off in all directions and leaving us utterly gobsmacked - Wow! The attack was unsuccessful but she then proceeded to walk down the track and we followed her (and followed us after a bit of maneuvering) for about an hour often getting to within about 5 metres of the jeep. Wow, again. Hundreds of photos later on she finally left the track and we were left very happy.



Maya and one of her 'cubs'



A Sloth Bear that refused to look at the camera

Of course there were plenty of other mammals to see in the park including the ubiquitous Chital, as well as Wild Boar, Sambar, Gaur and Muntjac. We got great views of Sloth Bear, good but distant views of three Dhole chasing a lone Chital, our only views of Madras Tree Shrew, Ruddy and Grey Mongoose, and plenty of Plains Langur. Birds were less of a star in this park but we still managed a number of species not encountered anywhere else including Rufous-tailed Lark, Common Babbler, Ultramarine Flycatcher, Indian Silverbill, Red Avadavat and Citrine Wagtail.

Southern India – Western Ghats – 9 days

We said our goodbyes to central India heading to the airport at Nagpur and flying south to the rather modern looking Bangalore to stay the night. In the early morning we met up with our guide Sathvan (again apologies for the spelling) and set off for the long drive (6 hours) to Masanagudi. Along the way we stopped for a (too) short stop at the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary which allowed great opportunities to get close (by boat) to a range of waterbirds including the



Painted Stork

attractive Painted Stork and Eurasian Spoonbill as well as plenty of Mugger Crocodiles. We could have wandered around the grounds for a while but were 'encouraged' to keep moving by our guide. We were still able to stop for excellent views of Wire-tailed Swallows sitting on the electricity wires just outside the gates. After a long drive we stopped rather unexpectedly and were eventually herded onto a 'tourist safari' and went into Bandipur Tiger Reserve. This was the least enjoyable safari experience on our trip as we were stuck on a bus with about 30 other people. The bus still travelled off road but given the noise it generated the chance of seeing much at all was virtually nil. We saw a couple of Elephants and a Sambar and did manage far off views of a Leopard sitting in a tree as the sky grew increasingly dark but, given what we had already seen elsewhere in India this was 3 hours wasted. We then had to drive for another couple of hours in the dark at breakneck speed before getting to our new digs at the Jungle Hut Lodge quite late.



Jungle Hut Lodge cast: a casual Indian Grey Mongoose, Indian Pitta and Black-footed Langurs having fun on the roof

The next couple of days were spent driving around Mudumalai area primarily looking for birds. And we got some crackers including the Indian Pitta (incredibly easy to see for a pitta given we saw it out in very open areas several times, Indian Scimitar Babbler, Indian Nuthatch, several woodpecker species, Forest Wagtail and plenty of other species. A (rather rough) night drive netted 3 nightjar species and we again picked up good views of Sloth Bear and elephants. It has to be said the Jungle Hut Lodge was our favourite lodging on the trip. A nice relaxed atmosphere with a great mountain backdrop and with no shortage of birds (including Indian paradise Flycatcher) to photograph and we counted eight mammals in the grounds themselves. It was nice enough that we decided we needed a break and took an afternoon off from the safaris and just hung out. The Black-footed Langurs put on a great show one afternoon using a thatched gazebo as a slippery slide and using the kids swings.....like kids. We weren't allowed to spotlight around the place ourselves but the management said they would arrange for the 'night guard' to wake us up if something good turned up. So at about 2 in the morning we were woken up by the guard knocking on the neighbours door instead of ours (whoops) and he took us out to

show us a large Bull Elephant which had forced its way through the hedge fence and had proceeded to make a dinner out of the lodge garden. As it got closer to the lodge itself took us into the open air reception area and left us as his hand had been forced into doing something. The elephant then kind of ran a few steps towards our torch (uh oh) before veering off into the car park, damaging a car and then being chased out by our trusty guard with a bit of yelling and no doubt a few whacks with his trusty elephant deflection stick he was carrying. Enervating stuff.

After 3 nights it was off to Valparais and into the highland tea estate ridden Western Ghats themselves. On the way we took a side trip up a mountain to spot Black-chinned Laughing Thrush which obligingly popped its head out of the mountain scrub right in front of our parked car. The tea estates are certainly picturesque but even Sathvan repeatedly described them as 'green deserts' and it was difficult to not think about how much forest had been replaced. Indeed the tall trees that often dominate the non-tea landscape are in fact imports from Australia: Tasmanian Bluegum (*Eucalyptus globulus*) (grown for wood pulp) and the plantations themselves featured regularly planted Silky Oak (*Grevillea striata*) (another Aussie import) (apparently grown for firewood). On the way to our hotel we got our first views of the star of Valparais – Lion-tailed Macaques (a great looking monkey if ever there was one). Unfortunately they were messing around in bins like any other macaque used to living near people. Our hotel (Sirikundra Bungalow) was an old tea estate house and was a bit of a strange place and well out of the town. The staff served the food in a rather formal but old dining room (i.e. seen better days) and insisted on standing over us while we ate (a rather uncomfortable way to not enjoy eating dinner). After dark the gates were shut and the electric fence went up (to keep out wandering elephants) so there was nowhere to go at night. The grounds had a few birds to look at as well as abundant Jungle Palm Squirrels (which made quite a racket running around ceaselessly in the hotel roof at night).

The next day we set out to look for the macaques and weren't disappointed with a troop of 50 or so hanging out by the road. They really are photogenic animals. We sat with them for at least an hour as they went about their business and almost completely ignored our camera laden presence. They were generally very quiet only occasionally making soft hooting noises to communicate to each other. Sathvan noted they were known for being silent. Rather excitingly a Stripe-necked Mongoose popped out for a run while we were watching the macaques. We spent the rest of the morning and afternoon birding in the area. Unfortunately this was



Lion-tailed Macaque – a good looking monkey it has to be said



Nilgiri Langur – a monkey with an odd hairdo

restricted to walking the roads in the area which meant dodging a lot of noisy vehicles of various types. Not the most comfortable way to look for wildlife. Nevertheless, we saw quite a few good birds including Speckled Piculet, Legge's Hawk Eagle (that one got Sathvan very excited), Malabar Parakeet, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch. We also got what turned out to be our best views of Nilgiri Langur on the trip sitting in trees right beside the road, although unfortunately we were again 'encouraged' to move on quickly before we could enjoy their presence for long. Other mammals in the area included the oddly unattractive looking Bonnet Macaque, Indian Giant Squirrel and Red Muntjac.

The next morning we took off (at the now familiar breakneck speed our driver preferred) and headed for the higher mountain area around the town of Munnar.

On the way down the hill from Valparai we stopped for a group of Nilgiri Tahr on the road. Another target species ticked! Another long drive ensued as we headed towards the hills of Munnar via the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary. We stopped off at the entrance to the park for a bit of a walk through the dry scrub along a creek as there was apparently a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl roosting somewhere obviously eager for us to disturb him. Along the way we managed to get decent, if a bit far away views of the prize mammal of the area – the Grizzled Giant Squirrel (tick). We got to the owl spot and after an extended period of searching we got rather frustrating views of the owl tucked away in amongst some leaves high up in a tree. There was no doubt what it was is about the best I could say. We also managed to pick up a few ticks which we didn't find until that night and were told later on were quite common in the park (thanks for the warning). A bit down the road we passed some more langurs and it wasn't until I asked it was realised these were South-eastern Langurs (the only time we saw them). We dove out of the car to get a few pictures but some rather over-officious guards chased us off for reasons best known to them. The drive up the mountains through the sanctuary followed some very picturesque scenery but unfortunately the pace of our drive tended to preclude any stopping, although we did pick up brief views of Blue-faced Malkoha.



A wild Indian Elephant hanging about in a tea plantation Nilgiri Tahr – very rare and a lucky sighting as it turned out

We arrived in the picturesque town of Munnar and headed up the other side of the valley to our last tour hotel – the Olive Brook. The hotel had a great outlook over the valley and although small had a nice garden which allowed ample opportunity for more bird photography including Indian Blue Robin, Indian Scimitar Babbler, Malabar Barbet, Orange Minivet, Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, Purple Sunbird (to be fair a common bird in most places but very frustrating to try and photograph well) and Nilgiri Flycatcher. Flying squirrels were known to hang around the trees around the hotel but our couple of night walks along the road around the hotel produced not much except a fleeting view of what must have been a Bandicoot Rat.

We spent the next couple days cruising the roads and tracks looking for some of the high altitude specialties including the rather fetching Black and Orange Flycatcher, White-bellied Blue Robin, and Kerala Laughing Thrush. Other goodies included Yellow-browed Bulbul, Square-tailed Bulbul, Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Vernal Hanging Parrot and several raptors such as Black eagle and Bonelli's eagle. It has to be said without our trusty guides skills our Kerala raptor list would have been quite short. Unfortunately our trip up to the Erivikulam National Park to see Nilgiri Tahr was frustrated by the fact it had just been closed earlier than usual due to the onset of the breeding season. Lucky we chanced upon them on the road earlier! We took a trip up to the cloud (or shola) forests and went for a guided walk in the rather vain hope of chancing on the 'fabled' Nilgiri Marten but it has to be said there wasn't too much to see that hadn't already been seen – fleeting views of Nilgiri Langurs, Giant squirrel, good views of Stripe-necked Mongoose and a few deer.

On the day before leaving I realized there were a number of lowland bird species we hadn't had the opportunity to see and due to poor planning hadn't opted for. Luckily Sathvan 'knew a guy' and arranged for us to stop for a couple of hours with a guide in Thettakad Bird Sanctuary on our way to our final stop in Fort Kochi before flying home. The sweaty lowlands were a welcome change and a frenetic couple of hours madly chasing our guide around made us wish we'd stayed a night or two. We got some great birds including Malabar Trogon, the tiny (for a frogmouth) Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Black Baza (what a cutie), Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher (which our guide somehow managed to locate in a well hidden and very non-descript spot), Brown Hawk Owl, the impressive White-bellied Woodpecker, Flame-throated Bulbul, Dark-fronted Babbler and White-bellied Blue Flycatcher. We had to say our goodbyes all too soon and were dropped off in Fort Kochi. We relaxed for a couple of nights in the picturesque environs and tropical heat of Kochi, enjoyed drinking beer at the waterfront and got a bit frustrated when all our travel cards decided not to work any more the day before we were due to leave. Luckily we had enough money to see us through. There were no birds of note to report but I did see Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin slide by the waterfront as the final mammal sighting of the trip. All up – 50 mammals and 352 birds were seen on the trip. We had great fun in India and thank Abhishek and Vikram from WildWorldIndia and all our guides for arranging a well organized trip and pretty much getting us great views of everything we really wanted to see and photograph!



A few birds to finish on: left to right - Nilgiri Flycatcher, Purple Sunbird, Sri Lanka Frogmouth and Malabar Trogon

Happy animal hunting

Brett

Our mammal is attached. Feel free to contact me if you'd like to see a bird list as well.

India mammal list December 2018-January 2019

Common name	Scientific name	Assam	North		Central			South				
		Kaziranga	Delhi	Chambal	Satpura	Pench	Tadoba	Masanagudi	Valparai	Chinnar	Munnar	Thekkad/Kochi
Madras Tree Shrew	<i>Anathan ellioti</i>						1					
Himalayan Striped Squirrel	<i>Tamiops macclellandi</i>	1										
Three-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>				1	1	1	1				
Five-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennantii</i>		1	1								
Jungle Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus tristriatus</i>								1		1	
Hoary-bellied Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus pygerythrus</i>	1										
Giant Black Squirrel	<i>Ratufa bicolor</i>	1										
Indian Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa indica</i>				1			1	1		1	1
Grizzled Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>									1		
Bandicoot rat species	<i>Bandicota sp.</i>										1	
Black Rat	<i>Rattus rattus</i>		?									
Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>			1		1		1				
Indian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>	1						1			1	
One-horned Rhinoceros	<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>	1										
Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus arnee</i>	1										
Gaur	<i>Bos gaurus</i>				1	1	1		1			
Red Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>				1		1		1			
Sambar	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>	1			1	1	1	1	1		1	
Barasingha (Swamp Deer)	<i>Rucervus duvaucelii ranjitsnhii</i>	1										
Chital (Spotted Deer)	<i>Axis axis</i>	1			1	1	1	1				
Hog Deer	<i>Axis porcinus</i>	1										
Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>			1	1		1					
Blackbuck	<i>Antelope cervicapra</i>				1							
Nilgiri Tahr	<i>Nilgiritragus hylocrius</i>								1			
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	1			1	1	1	1				
Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>				1		1	1				
Wild Dog	<i>Cuon alpinus</i>						1					
Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>			1		1						

