



## ASSAM , INDIA 29 January - 11 Feb 2020

In January of 2020 I traveled to Assam, India with my friend Kevin Bryan and his friend Mark Cowan. While I was mainly interested in the mammal watching portion of the trip, some time was also spent looking at birds and reptiles. As some of the places we visited have already been heavily mentioned on this site, instead of doing a complete day by day travel log, I will touch on the sites we visited and what we saw.

Tour company - I decided to use Wild World India after seeing others on the site give the company good reviews. I can not recommend this company enough. Vikram Singh was quick to answer all my questions and also happy to make last minute revisions. Abhishek Sharma was our main local contact in New Delhi. He always had a great attitude and was punctual for all the transfers in New Delhi. The company used the services of local guide Jintu Tamuly who lives outside Kaziranga National Park. I also can only give Jintu high praises as he

worked hard to find us wildlife and never seemed stressed or annoyed with anything. He also made sure every time that we saw a mammal that I had a good view of it. He is a guide that I hope to travel with in the future.

#### Hotels -

1. Pride Palace, New Delhi -this was the hotel we stayed at on arrival and before departure. Located close to the airport, the hotel was clean and had a friendly staff.
2. Bansbari Lodge - Located right on the outskirts of Manas National Park. The lodge is basic, however hands down was my favorite place we stayed. The staff were beyond accommodating and even threw me a mini celebration on my birthday. It also had some of the best food I have had in India.
3. Wildgrass Lodge - outside Kazirnaga National Park - this lodge has definitely seen better days. The food and service were not as good as the other places we stayed, but the gardens did have some Indian Fruit bats that came to feed on fruit at night.
4. Gibbon Guest House - Located close to Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary. It had more of a feel of a homestay. The owner however was also very friendly and had a strong interest in wildlife. At night we did see micro bats flying around the house.

#### Sites visited -

Pygmy Hog Breeding Center - Bashistha, Guwahati, Assam









Vikram knew that I wanted to see a pygmy hog. Along with the hispid hare, this is probably the hardest mammal to see in Assam. Manas National Park is one of the locations that it “possible” to see the species. But by “possible” I really mean impossible. The species is reported to rarely emerge from tall grass. Even with the time of year when grass is cut in Manas, they just move to areas where tall grass still remains. They are also only really active when access to the national park is prohibited. Their habitat is also severely threatened by human settlements, farmland and livestock. Of everyone I talked to about he seeing the species, the manager at the Bansbari Lodge was the only one that had seen one. He also told me he had seen one only over ten years ago in Manas. No one else I talked to had seen one, including Jintu, our national park driver, and the national park rangers that we were with on our tours. So Vikram suggested that we do a behind the scenes tour of the Pygmy Hog Breeding Center in Guwahati on the way to Manas. We flew from New Delhi to Guwahati to start our trip. The project started in 1996 when six hogs were captured in Manas and brought to the this center. The project is funded by the Assam Government, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and the SSC Wild Pig Specialist Group. The project has currently released 100 hogs back into the wild, and it is currently thought that 50 percent of the current wild population is captive born. The center currently has 33 hogs, however only 8 breeding pairs. The center we visited are releasing the hogs back into Manas, into Orang National

park and the Borradi Wildlife Sanctuary. I talked to a few of people that work with releasing and monitoring the hogs and even after years of doing it, none of them had seen a wild hog except on a camera trap. Most reports from tourists they told me are just sightings of juvenile wild boar. They also pointed out there hogs only live to be about 5-6 years old in the wild. The females are not sexually mature until they are two, and often will only have one litter in a lifetime. While I know some people here do not want to see captive species, it is a great project to support, and you can get excellent views of the



species.

Manas National Park - Probably my favorite part of my trip was spent here. In typical Indian national park fashion you had to have a park









ranger with you each day. The rangers we encountered here however seemed very interested in looking at wildlife. You are not allowed to spotlight and have to exit the park at night, however as long as you are in the process of leaving the park at night you are not fined as in other places we visited.

While you have to work harder for mammals in the park, the majority of the sightings we had were excellent. There have also been an increasing number of mainland clouded leopard sighting in Manas. We were told two weeks prior to coming, a tourist was watching a tiger, when within 30 minutes a clouded leopard crossed the same track. Jintu told us that most of the rangers in the park had at sometime seen a clouded leopard. Not being able to stay at night makes this difficult, but not impossible. We did go to the area where they had the recent sighting several times, but only saw a very fresh sambar deer kill (from a tiger) on the road.



We spent time entering the park by the main Bansbari Gate and once through the Bhuyapara Gate. We also spent time near the Mathanguri Gate on the other side of the park which was on the border of Bhutan. They have a small ranger station here where you can eat lunch. Around the ranger station they also have a troop of semi-habituated Capped Langurs that we watched each time we were near the gate.

The highlight of this area however was the first day we were by the gate, rangers told Jintu that some bears had been seen recently in the forest near the gate. The next day our ranger was notified that the bears had shown up in the afternoon, so we quickly made our way back to the gate, leaving enough time to exit at dark. When I heard “bear” I had thought it would be a sloth bear. However, it turned out to be a juvenile Asiatic Black bear. When we saw it it was right over the edge of a large hill. I suspect/hope its mother was over the top as the bear was in excellent body condition. This was one of the trip





highlights for everyone, and created a large amount of excitement with the rangers, our driver and the hotel staff.

Manas also has a healthy population of Asian Elephants and we had excellent views of them on most days.









Other mammals we saw were Hoary-Bellied Squirrels, Himalayan Striped Squirrels, Malayan Giant Squirrels, Wild Boar, Hog Deer, Indian Muntjac, Wild Water Buffalo, Indian Grey Mongoose, Indian Muntjac, Sambar Deer, Swamp Deer, Gaur, Rhesus Macaque, Indian One-horned Rhino, and Crab Eating Mongoose.

I have seen Sambar Deer in several countries, but had never seen males with crusted oozing lesions on their chests before. Initially I thought the areas were wounds, but later found out they develop these lesions during breeding season (see picture above).

Kakoijana Forest Reserve- this forest is about 30 km south/ 1.5 hour from drive from Manas. In 1995 nine members of the NGO Nature's Foster discovered/found out that a few Gee's Golden langurs were living in a 17 square km area of Kakoijana. The langurs were isolated from other populations in Assam. For three years, working with villagers in the area, a community group was set up to help protect the langurs, and provide income through tourism. When we visited we watched a family group of about 25 Golden Langurs that were hanging around peoples houses. The langurs were very relaxed, and there was a large number of babies present. I think this would be a great spot for anyone interested in photography . We were shown around the village and how they are trying to plant trees to act as corridors into for the langurs to reach another troop in a nearby forest patch.









Bhumuraguri Bridge in Tezpur - we stopped here on the way from Manas to Kaziranga national park. This is a well described area on the Brahmaputra River to watch Gangetic River Dolphins. The day we were there, there were a large number of fishing boats on the river and it did take us over an hour to find our first dolphin.

Kaziranga National Park -This park had the most tourists of any place we visited. It also had strict rules about being out of the park before dark. The park entrances are through an Eastern, Western, Central and Burapahar gates. We spent time going through each gate. At the time we visited there had been sightings of a fishing cat frequently at a small water hole along the West Gate track. We tried unsuccessfully several times to see this species. I also really wanted to see a Hog Badger and Jintu took us to several areas where he or others had seen them. We were also unsuccessful with this species.

Jintu did take us to a spot on Highway 37 close to the Burapahar gate where a troop of Assam Macaques lives. We were rewarded with



good views of this species (first picture below). We also stopped at a small area with roadside stalls that had about five Rhesus Macaques (second picture) and two macaques that we suspected were hybrids.











Jintu also took us on a night walk near his village. The only mammals we saw were Indian Flying Foxes and several Indian One horned rhinos. People from the village took turns staying in a small hut at night to prevent the rhinos from crop raiding. We stopped at a small forest patch near our lodge to look for Bengal Slow Loris which we also did not see. As described in previous posts mammal watching in Kaziranga is easy and rewarding. The majority of the species we saw were in large numbers and appeared healthy. These included Hog Deer, Swamp Deer, Sambar Deer, Indian One - horned rhino, Asian Elephant, Smooth Coated Otter, Rhesus Macaque, Wild Water Buffalo (note many here did look like hybrids with domestic buffalo), Wild Boar, Hoary Bellied Squirrel, Indian Muntjac, Himalayan striped squirrel and Kevin had a brief look at a Lesser bandicoot rat.

Hoolongapar Gibbon Sanctuary - Our final stop of the trip was to see Western Hoolock Gibbon. The sanctuary currently has about 106 gibbons split into 26 family groups. Two of the family groups are habituated to tourism. We were given two rangers to walk with, one of which was keen to find the gibbons for us. We watched both habituated groups for extended periods of time, and had a brief sighting of a male from a non habituated group. We also saw two family groups of Capped Langurs (much lighter morphs than the ones in Manas) and a pair of Rhesus Macaques that spent a large amount of time working on making more macaques, especially when I pointed my camera in their direction. We did try unsuccessfully to see the mega 100 member strong troop of stump tailed macaques that live in





the sanctuary. Malayan Giant Squirrels and Pallas's squirrels were also seen well. Two things to point out. Because of concerns with elephants, you are only allowed to stay in the reserve until 14:00. Also no one really has gone into detail about the number of leeches that



are there..... bring leech socks, you will thank me later.





Species seen -

1. Indian flying fox - *Pteropus giantess*
2. Assam Macaque - *Macaca assamensis*
3. Rhesus Macaque - *Macaca mulatta*
4. Capped Langur - *Trachypithecus pileatus*
5. Gee's Golden Langur - *Trachypithecus geei*





6. Western hoolock gibbon - *Hoolock hoolock*
7. Asiatic Black Bear - *Ursus thibetanus*
8. Smooth-coated Otter - *Lutrogale perspicillata*
9. Indian Grey Mongoose - *Herpestes edwardsii*
10. Crab-eating mongoose - *Herpestes uria*
11. South Asian (gangetic) River Dolphin - *Platanista gangetica*
12. Asian elephant - *Elephas Maximus*
13. Indian One-horned Rhino - *Rhinoceros unicornis*
14. Indian Wild Boar - *Sus scrofa cristatus*
15. Hog Deer - *Hyelaphus porcinus*
16. Swamp Deer (Barasingha) - *Cervus duvauceli*
17. Sambar Deer - *Rusa unicolor*
18. Indian Muntjac - *Muntiacus muntjak*
19. Gaur - *Bos saurus*
20. Wild Water Buffalo - *Bubalus arnee*
21. Black Giant Squirrel - *Ratufa bicolor*
22. Himalayan Striped Squirrel - *Tamiops mccllellandii*



23. Pallas's Squirrel - *Callosciurus erythraeus*
24. Hoary Bellied Squirrel - *Callosciurus pygerythrus*
25. Lesser Bandicoot Rat (KB only) - *Bandicota bengalensis*

Kevin prepared a bird list and a short report which is here.