

## Monsoon India, 20<sup>th</sup> July – 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2022

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This short report covers mammals seen during a [Birdtour Asia tour](#), at a time of year that sees far fewer overseas visitors to a far wetter and greener India than I've seen before. As the company name suggests, this is a trip focussed on seeing a very special suite of birds above all else, although attention is paid to mammals where possible, and as usual I was attempting to see as much of any and all wildlife feasible. As it turned out, this proved trickier than hoped. We ran into various travel restrictions (inexplicable road closures, security issues etc) which cost time in good habitat at some of the best times of day. It should be made clear that none of this was at all the fault of Birdtour Asia, and guides James & Shashank made every effort to negotiate the myriad hurdles of post-pandemic Indian logistics. For information on the birds seen, see my [eBird trip report](#) and [James's write-up](#).

The tour can be roughly divided into four parts, and I've added a few notes on each below. Most of these aren't going to be attractive as purely mammal-watching locations, but might hopefully add a bit of value to any birders visiting the areas.

As per any visits to the areas visited, a few species were seen daily, or nearly so, in particular **Rhesus** (in the north) and **Bonnet Macaque** (Mumbai/Pune), **Northern** and **Indian Palm Squirrels** (divided along the same lines). **Indian Grey & Small Indian Mongooses** and **Golden Jackal** were all encountered a couple of times each.

Overall, I was little surprised at the lack of small mammals that we ran into, particularly on pre-dawn drives away from the mountains; I would have expected warmer and wetter times of the year to be good for these. Similarly, I was surprised to run into **Nilgai** only once, as this is normally a commonly-encountered species. However, we did manage some decent mammal sightings (and a couple of near misses).

### Uttar Pradesh

We spent one day birding east from New Delhi, across the Gangetic plain almost to the foothills. The most notable species here was one we didn't see, in part because we weren't previously aware of its presence here! **Wetland Barasingha** (*Rucervus duvaucelii duvaucelii* – a separate taxon from the deer many will have seen in Assam) are present at [Haiderpur Wetland](#), a reserve by the Ganges barrage 150km northeast of Delhi (<https://goo.gl/maps/GinqbTts282gzac98>). The herd can apparently be seen fairly easily from the watchtower, which annoyingly we didn't have time to visit due to absurd travel restrictions along the highways. Having a carriageway closed for a pilgrimage was one thing, not allowing any traffic to turn right off the road for a 60m stretch was quite another! Even worse, I'd stopped here for lunch in 2006, completely unaware of the presence of the deer...

### Western Himalayas

We visited two areas on this. After flying from Delhi into Kangra (Dharamshala) airport, we had a long drive into the far northwest of Himachal Pradesh. We arrived right on dark at our basic but comfortable (if you could ignore the issues with the village electricity supply that gave strobe lighting!) [Chamunda Hotel](#). Some fairly robust microbats were hunting around the balconies – no idea what these were, but the options must be fairly limited at 3,000 metres above sea level. Some good quality alpine oak-conifer forest starts a few kilometres further on; I'm not sure on what the logistics of passing the police checkpoint above the village would be, but this habitat could be an

interesting place to be a night. The following dawn we headed up above the treeline towards Sach Pass, easily finding our target of West Himalayan Grasshopper Warbler in remnant dwarf scrub in the overgrazed meadows; the best mammal here (and probably of the trip) was a smart **Long-tailed Marmot** I found while scoping the slopes. A couple of **Royle's Pikas** gave nice views in the scree among more vegetated areas, and another confiding one was in a rocky gully in the forests as we birded our way back down.

The original plan was to continue on the 'highway' over the pass and on to Kishtwar, but a devastating and deadly earthquake had closed the road and put the kibosh on any explorations of lesser known areas. This entailed a long, long drive back down to the terai, into the city of Jammu for an overnight stay, then back up into the Himalayas in Kashmir. Mammals were few and far between up here, and the travel restrictions didn't help: due to the risk of terrorist attacks on the Armanath Yatra Hindu pilgrimage, there was a huge army presence and we weren't allowed to leave Srinagar before 6am. How serious this threat was seemed to vary depending on who you talked to, but it certainly added an edge to things!

The overgrazing in this part of the world is fairly catastrophic, and despite scoping distant ridges, the only mammals I picked up were some domestic goats on top of a cliff face! At Gulmarg (on the western side of the Vale of Kashmir), we took a cable car up to the rocky slopes above the treeline and had nice looks at **Large-eared Pika**. James has (once) seen Leopard in the pine forests at little lower down.

On our last morning we visited Dachigam National Park. It was a bit wet, but after a bit of scanning of ridges with the scope I managed to locate a small group of **Hangul** (Tarim Red Deer, *Cervus hanglu hanglu*) which soon disappeared into low cloud. A group of grey langurs usually hang out behind the entrance were a no-show, possibly due to the weather; surely these would have to be Kashmir Grey Langurs here, but there seems to be conflicting info on this! One was seen by others dashing across the road in the hills above Pathankot. We found fairly fresh prints of Leopard on the loop trail that visitors are permitted to walk.

### **Rajasthan**

At the start of the trip I spent a morning at Bala Quila, on the fringes of Sariska Tiger Reserve, not far from Alwar. Despite the claims of our guide that Leopards and Tigers are often seen in this area, particularly during the monsoon, no tracks or signs were found – to no great surprise – and all the wildlife remained conspicuously relaxed. Species seen well here included **Sambar**, **Northern Plains Grey Langur**, and **Eurasian Wild Pig** (a sow with a dozen stripy boarlets).

Later we visited the plains east of Ajmer for a variety of birds tricky at other times of the year. Limited mammal sightings here included a couple of **Nilgai** and a **Black-naped Hare**.

### **Maharashtra**

Our final port of call was the Pune area. While birding the overgrazed grasslands on the edge of the Deccan plateau we spooked an Indian Fox from its daytime hideaway, which gave a really good view. After the rest of the group headed back to Mumbai, I spent an extra morning in the Bhigwan area. **Indian Wolf** is regularly seen in this area at this time of year, following the nomadic sheep-herding; I also had very close looks at a male '**Deccan**' **Chinkara** and a **Golden Jackal**.

Back in Pune, the [SM Joshi Bridge](#) is good for spectacular close fly-pasts by **Indian Flying Fox**.