

## Trip report: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, India, August 2019

*Rauno Väisänen*

It was primarily a butterfly-watching trip, and an ultimate one it was going to be. Three rare butterfly species were our main targets, and the timing of our trip was decided by the overlap of their flight times. We were lucky enough to see them all. We saw also some interesting mammals, though in this respect the trip was quite frustrating, to say the least. A lot of time, but only limited opportunities in prime habitats. However, I hope that my mammal report will help other mammalwatchers to plan their trips to this wonderful area.

Our trip started from Pärnu, Estonia, and continued to Tallinn and Helsinki, from where we flew to Kolkata and further to Guwahati, Assam, where we arrived on 15th August. From Guwahati we continued by car to Tezpur and Eaglenest, which was our first destination in Arunachal Pradesh. We spent there four nights on 16–20th August. From there we continued to Dirang, from where we visited Mandala and did also a day trip to Sela Pass and beyond to the Tawang side, mostly in order to see the alpine flora. From Dirang we drove back to Tezpur and further to the Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh, where we spent three nights on 22–25th August. From Pakke we drove via Itanagar to Ziro which was our next destination on 25–29th August, including two days and one night at Talle Valley. At Ziro we spent the last full day studying the unique Apatani culture. And finally, we continued via Dibrugarh to Jorhat, Assam, and visited the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary 30–31st August. Instead of Guwahati, we flew back to Kolkata from Jorhat on 31st August.

It was a private tour planned together with Avijit Sarkhel of Vana Safaris. He did a great job, especially with the careful and detailed pre-tour planning. We were accompanied by the Indian naturalist, nature photographer and film maker Saurabh Sawant from Mumbai and our trustworthy driver Rinku. All the arrangements were excellent. Saurabh is a great person and has an astonishingly wide and deep knowledge of Indian nature fitting perfectly with our diverse interests. Our local guides including Phurpa (Monpa tribe) at Eaglenest, Ahei (Nyishi tribe) in Pakke, and especially, Punyo Chada and Koj Mama (Apatani tribe) at Ziro were all very good.

We stayed at a tent at Lama Camp at Eaglenest, at basic forest rest houses at Pakke and Talle Valley, at nice modern hotels at Kolkata (Pipal Tree), Tezpur (KRC Palace), Dirang (Norphel Retreat) and Dibrugarh (Little Palace), and finally at the wonderful, cosy Chada homestay at Ziro and the atmospheric Haroocharai tea estate of the mighty Barooah family in Jorhat. The food was excellent all the time, especially at Ziro and Jorhat. I have been in South Asia ten times and this was the first time I didn't have any stomach problems.

Because of the butterflies, we decided to go there during the monsoon time. This year the monsoons were very heavy, including heavy flooding in Kaziranga and elsewhere. In Arunachal Pradesh they started and ended early. They were also accompanied with some earthquakes, which are common there.

Eventhough we were quite well prepared for anything, there were surprises. The biggest positive surprise was that the weather was most of the time wonderful: sunny days and clear skies showing the distant snowcapped mountain. We had heavy rains only in the very beginning at Kolkata and Tezpur and in the end at Jorhat and Kolkata again. There were some rains elsewhere, but luckily only during nights or long drives. Thus, butterfly-watching was just great. I had expected only short sunny breaks between the heavy rains and foggy days. Our comprehensive rain gear was hardly used at all. While the heat (+38 degrees C), extreme humidity and leeches made our treks very tough in the rainforests of Pakke and Assam, it was quite pleasant on the mountains.

The second surprise was that the road conditions were far worse than we were able to imagine, although we were warned, and we have seen before really bad roads from Madagascar to northern Russia. The major route via Bhalakpur to Tawang was totally destroyed when a mountain slope had collapsed, and is likely to be unavailable at least for months. So we had to change our plans, and use the western Tezpur–Orang–Shengaon–Rupa road. Even the other main routes like Tezpur–Orang–Shengaon–Rupa–Tenga, Dirang–Sela Pass–Tawang or Itanagar–Ziro were full of landslides, stones and gravel, and parts of the roads were often collapsed due to heavy erosion. In addition, on those winding roads there was often quite heavy traffic, trucks and sometimes military vehicles making driving a pain. There were some stretches of roads in relatively good condition, but they were just exceptions. The small roads were in very bad condition and risky, some of them also flooded or with deep mud. All the actual road connections had to be checked beforehand from local sources. We had extra food and drinks in the car all the time for the possible, or even likely, incidents that we would get stuck somewhere for a couple of days. Nevertheless, we didn't have any such incidents. The only problem was that driving was very time-consuming.

**The Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary** (abbreviated **E** in the mammal list below) is a world-famous bird-watching destination, with a superb but elusive mammal fauna. Normally, there are two large tented camps, Lama and Bompou Camps during the birding season. However, during this time of the year there were only three tents at Lama Camp maintained by a small group of Nepali staff. Bompou camp was pulled down and left for the elephants during the low season. There were no other tourists or western visitors at Eaglenest – and we didn't see them anywhere during our whole stay in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. So everything was only for us. Unfortunately, the road towards the Eaglenest Pass was totally broken soon after the Tragopanda trail meaning that our access to the better mammal localities near the pass and beyond was impossible. We were told that it was not the only landslide there so that the whole road was in quite a desperate condition. To make the situation still worse, we witnessed at close quarters a massive landslide which cut the road just below the Lama Camp, too, so that we were blocked between two landslides. Fortunately, the camp staff was able to open the road below the camp quite fast. Anyway, these road conditions meant that our night and early morning drives were very short. The night drives resulted mostly in grey nightjars. Fortunately, the elephants were on the other side of the pass so that hiking was quite safe, unlike during the birding season.

**The Pakke Tiger Reserve (P)** is another wonderful mammal-watching destination, having even seven tigers, and very few visitors. Pakke was not originally included in our original plan. We hoped to visit Namdapha, but due to political violence and insecurity near Nagaland, and a recent fatal incidence, Namdapha had to be replaced by Pakke. Pakke was also recently recommended to us by Peggy and Marc Faucher during our trip to Mongolia. We and Avijit tried to get permits to visit the Pakke Tiger Reserve in the night time. There is a patrolling road network of 114 km suitable also for night drives, at least in theory. Frustratingly, in spite of all our efforts, we were allowed to visit the park only during the day time, which was better than nothing, since the tiger reserves are generally closed for public during monsoons. There may be some good reasons for the strict permit policy. The road conditions may be difficult, but our experience was that roads were much better in the reserve than outside it, and the weather conditions were good during our stay. There is a really serious elephant problem in the reserve so that we were escorted by two armed forest guards all the time during our walks. There have been fatal incidents at the reserve. There is also a poaching problem, in spite of the considerable recent advances in decreasing it by involving local communities and increasing law enforcement. A young bear was illegally killed by two youngsters during our stay. However, as far as I can judge, the main reason for not allowing night drives by us seems to be part of the stricter than earlier policies, and possibly the sensitivity of the forest and/or Project Tiger authorities. Hopefully, it will help protection of the magnificent tiger reserve. Anyway, Pakke in the daytime was good for butterflies. We did nice walks along river

banks and forest roads, but there were few mammal sightings as expected. We also tried a night drive along some very bad roads in not so good habitats outside the park, but it resulted only in a spotted owl.

Ziro is the centre of the unique Apatani culture in the formerly isolated agricultural valley surrounded by mountains. Close to it lies **the Talle Valley Wildlife Sanctuary (T)**, which is still poorly investigated. It has also its share of wildlife, e.g. clouded leopards and golden cats, but even more importantly some wonderful butterflies. The road there is difficult, but doable with a jeep and a patient driver. Night drives are in practice impossible. However, it is possible to walk along the dirt road or the quite extensive but partly overgrown trail network, though finding cats may be challenging by foot.

**The Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary (H)** is a patch of about 21 square kilometers in the middle of huge tea plantations of the Assamese plain, and it is crossed by a railroad. The sanctuary can be visited only in the daytime. Due to the fierce elephants, visitors must be accompanied by an armed guard. We had to change our hiking route, since elephants killed somebody when we were there. The reserve is a good place to see primates, especially early in the morning.

The whole trip was in fact targeted to see three very rare and beautiful butterflies, i.e. the Bhutan glory (*Bhutanitis lidderdalii*), the brown gorgon (*Meandrusa sciron*) and the Kaiser-I-Hind (*Teinopalpus imperialis*). We saw altogether 25 Bhutan glories, 15 of them at Eaglenest already during our first morning on 17th August, and then a few more more during the next days there, as well as a few at Mandala and Talle Valley. Most of them were flying high at tree tops. Some, if not most, of them at Eaglenest belonged to a closely related species, the mystical Bhutan glory (*B. ludlowi*). At Talle Valley we saw seven brown gorgons on the very first day 26th August mudpuddling on the road side. The biggest surprise was, however, that we saw there also the Kaiser-I-Hind ('the emperor of India'), an unbelievably beautiful bright green papilionid (see the photo below taken by my old mobile phone).



The Kaiser-I-Hind was seen and photographed alive there five years ago for the first time in India. Both the several very active local lepidopterists and Indian and foreign collector groups had tried to find it again, but in vain. Frankly speaking, I didn't believe that we had any realistic possibilities to find it, but we were extremely lucky. Like the other two species it has been on my most wanted species list for decades. Next day we didn't see it any more...

We watched moths in several nights at Eaglenest, Talle and Ziro, using a mercury vapour lamp. It was very rewarding, especially at Eaglenest, even during foggy and rainy nights.

So I am very happy with the trip results. That being said, the list of mammals below is quite short and modest. Since we found our target butterfly species surprisingly fast, we had at most places really a plenty of time to try to find mammals, but we could not use it efficiently due to the above mentioned external conditions. In Assam, we had not time to try to see the Gangetic dolphin by boat, which is said to be relatively easy, and brief scanning of the Brahmaputra by binoculars was not successful at Tezpur and Dibrugarh.

Birdwatching also was quite difficult during this time. However, the bird species that were seen, were seen well during the clear mornings. Of course, just after the breeding season birds were silent and didn't respond to tapes at all. For example, at Eaglenest only few birds, e.g. the beautiful sibia, Bhutan laughingtrush, chestnut-crowned laughingtrush and broad-billed warbler were singing, and the mountain scops owl was calling during the nights. There were more than 40 new bird species for me, but mostly small and modest warblers, yuhinas, parrotbills, nuthatches etc., all quite common residents of the E Himalayas. We missed all the rarities like the Bugun liocichla, Blyth's tragopan and Ward's trogon at Eaglenest, and didn't see even grandalas at Sela Pass.

In conclusion, the monsoon season is beautiful but probably not the best time to visit NW India for mammalwatching (or birdwatching). Also the post-monsoon season may be problematic, since the road conditions may remain long afterwards very difficult. However, it will be more crowded when the conditions become better at the end of the year and many birdwatchers rush there.

The more challenging matter is related to the unpredictable permit policies. It is not possible to guarantee in advance whether it will be possible to visit those reserves, especially in the night time, since things, situations and people may suddenly change. Hope you will be luckier than we were!

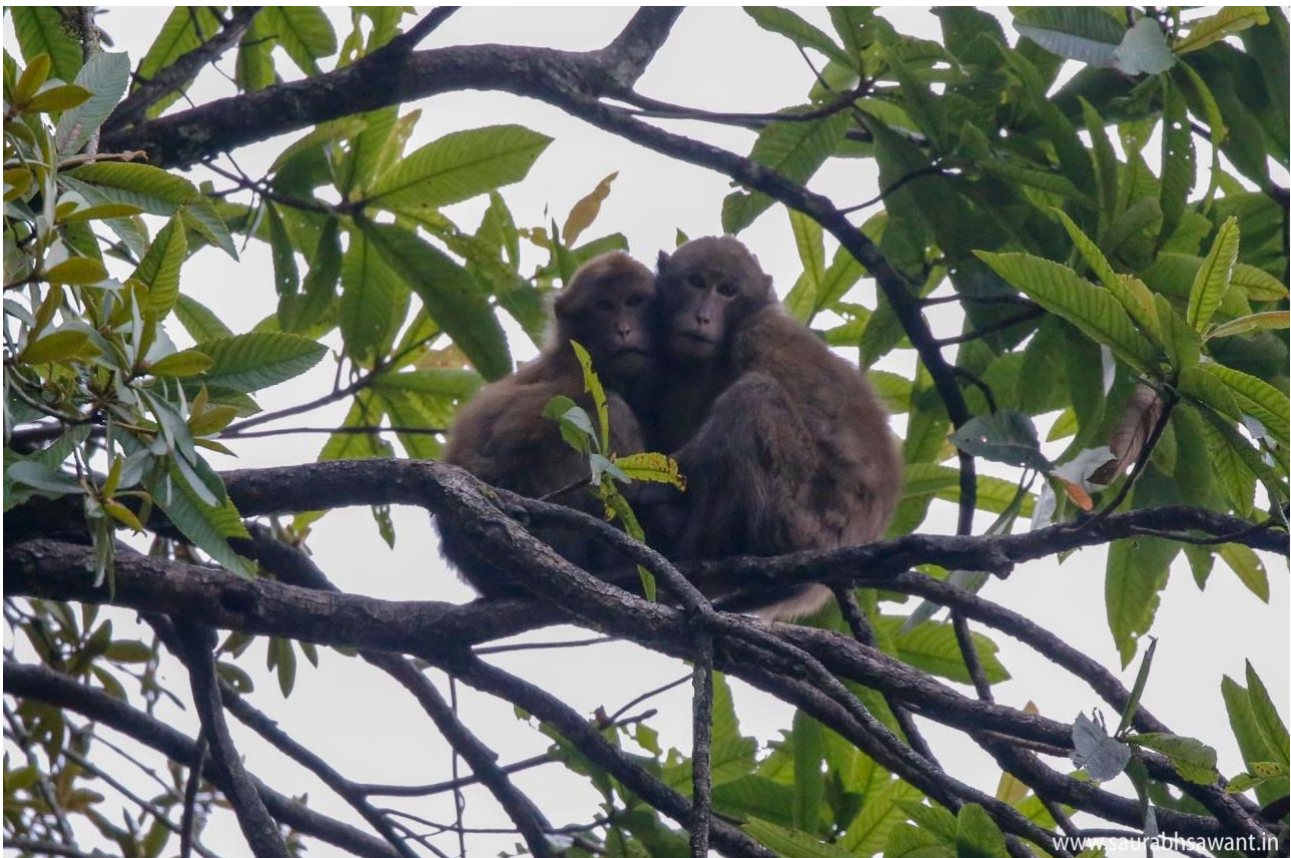
## List of mammals

**Capped langur** (*Trachypithecus pileatus*). A troop of six langurs was seen nicely at **H** in the morning on 31st August.

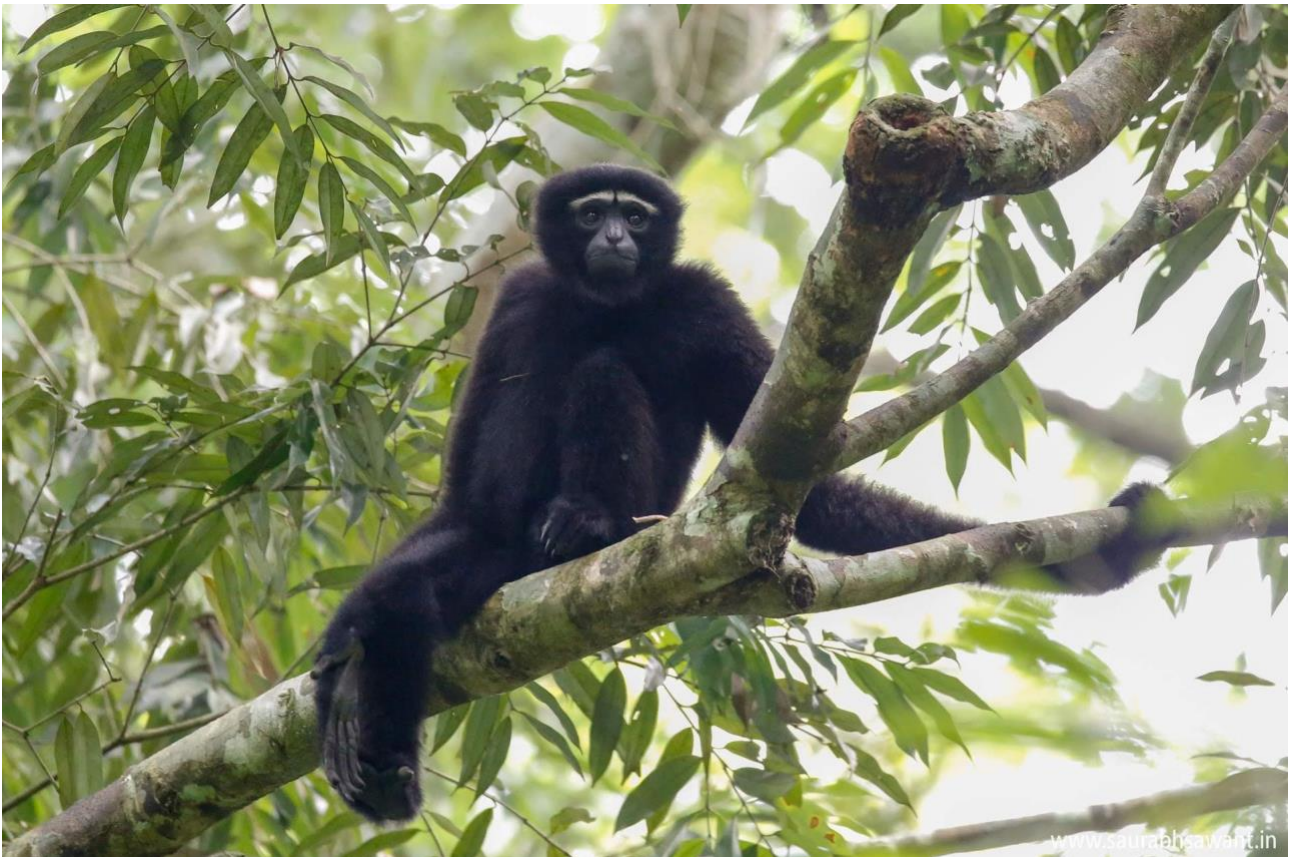
**Rhesus macaque** (*Macaca mulatta*). A troop was seen near Chingi on the Orang-Shengaon road. One was seen in **H** on 30th August.

**Northern pig-tailed macaque** (*Macaca leonina*). A small troop was seen at **H** on 30th August.

**Arunachal macaque** (*Macaca munzala*). A couple was sitting together on a hanging branch on a high cliff at **E** during our morning drive on 19th August. A troop of about ten monkeys were eating berries at the road side near Morshing on 22nd August. Photo by Saurabh Sawant.



**Western hoolock gibbon** (*Hoolock hoolock*). According to the forest officers, there live 106 individuals belonging to 26 family groups in **H**. In the morning on 31st August we got wonderful close views of the life of one of these families. A female and a male were relaxing on a strong branch some five meters apart, while a young one was playing and attacking both of its parents. The young one was especially fond of his father, which finally gave up and played with it quite a long time twice, and somehow seemed to enjoy itself. The favourite was when the male swung the young one hanging from a small branch by one hand, just like the parents do with their kids at the playground next to our home. Photo by Saurabh Sawant.



**Yellow-throated marten** (*Martes flavigula*). We got great views of two animals on a sunny morning on a hill side at **E** on 20th August.

**Masked palm civet** (*Paguma larvata*). One was seen during our night walk at **T** on 26th August.

**Domestic cat** (*Felis catus*). One was seen during a night drive below Lama Camp on 18th August.

[**Asiatic golden cat** (*Catopuma temminckii*). We didn't see the species, but we saw the remnants of an eaten rodent at **T** and a lot of paw marks of a medium-sized and a small cat. We concluded that there had been a female and a juvenile golden cat.]

[**Asian elephant** (*Elephas maximus*). Apart from the tame ones at **P**, we didn't see any elephants, though there were tracks everywhere at **E**, **P** and **H**. Surely, we did our best not to encounter them. The situation is very sad, difficult and dangerous. The elephant numbers are quite high, several thousands of them in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. There are large protected areas, but the traditional migrating routes are converted into agricultural lands so that the conflict with the local people cannot be avoided. When the people use fireworks and explosives against elephant or even

shoot them, the elephants become very angry and they have a long memory.]

**Indian muntjak** (*Muntiacus muntjak*). Tracks were seen at **E** and **H**, one was heard in **P** on 23rd August, and one was seen barking loudly close to us during a night walk in **T** on 26th August.

**Domestic yak** (*Bos grunniens*). One was seen on the Tawang side of Sela Pass.

**Mithun/gayal** (*Bos frontalis*) These domestic gaur-like bovines were especially common at Ziro and **T**.

**Malayan giant squirrel** (*Ratufa bicolor*). One was seen at **H** on 30th August, and two more the next day.

**Hoary-bellied squirrel** (*Callosciurus pygerythrus*). One was seen in **P** on 23rd August.

**Pallas/Red-bellied squirrel** (*C. erythraeus*). One was seen at **H** on 30th August, and two more next day.

**Himalayan striped squirrel** (*Tamiops macclellandi*). One was seen at near Shengaon 16th August and at least four at **E** on 18–19th August.

**Bhutan giant flying squirrel** (*Petaurista nobilis*). One individual was feeding small fruits low in a tree next to the road below Lama Camp at **E** during the night drive on 18th August. We got wonderful sights of it, since it was not willing to leave its dinner just because of a couple of tourists. One of the highlights of the trip. Photo by Saurabh Sawant.

