

India – Rare Mammals and Birds of Gujarat

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Depart London, via Doha
Day 2/3	Dhrangadhra Sanctuary (Dasada)
Day 4/6	Kachchh
Day 7/9	Gir National Park
Day 10/11	Velavadar Wildlife Reserve
Day 12	Ahmedabad
Day 13	Fly London, via Doha

Dates

2020

Sunday 1st November – Friday 13th November 2020

2021

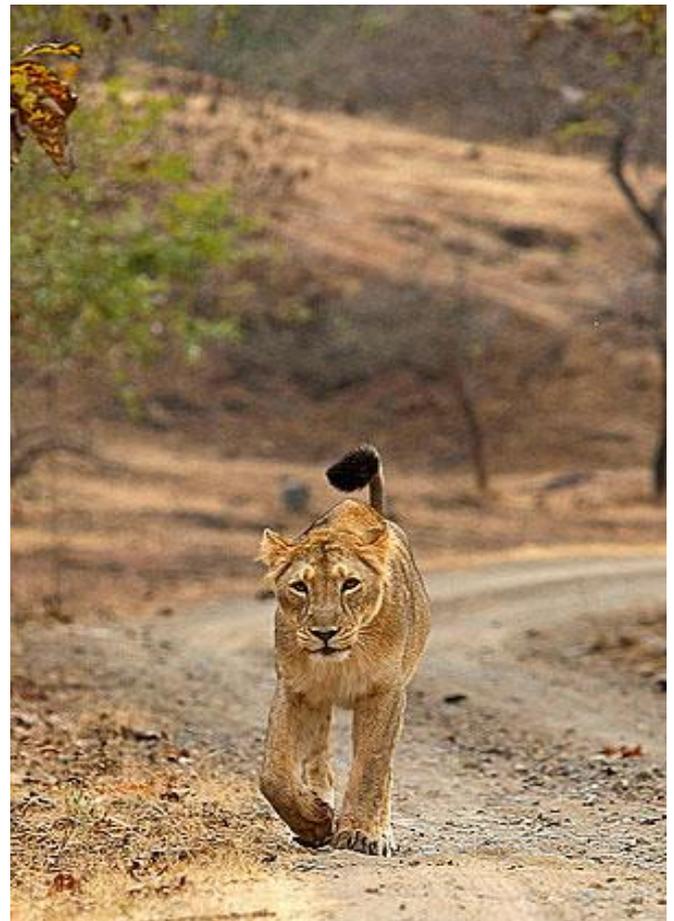
Sunday 7th February – Friday 19th February 2021
Sunday 7th November – Friday 19th November 2021

2022

Sunday 6th February – Friday 18th February 2022
Sunday 6th November – Friday 18th November 2022

Cost

From £3,595 (London/London); £3,095
(Ahmedabad/Ahmedabad)



Asiatic Lion by Raghu Kulkarni



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Single room supplement

£795

Grading

A (easy). This wildlife tour involves little walking.

Focus

Mammals and birds



Blackbuck



Asiatic Lions



Introduction

The Indian subcontinent boasts nearly 500 species of mammal, protected within over 250 wildlife reserves, and is the only place in the world that can still claim both Tiger and Lion among its native fauna. Inevitably, however, it is the Tiger, and such other popular large mammals as Asian Elephant and Greater One-horned Rhino, that are the focus of so many of our India tours. This special new itinerary is different though, a trio of rare Indian mammals – Blackbuck, Asiatic Wild Ass and Asiatic Lion – being our chief targets. A supporting cast of other rarely-seen possibilities, including Striped Hyena, Desert Wildcat, Indian Wolf and Desert Red Fox, is no less mouth-watering!

The range of the Asiatic Lion once extended as far as Greece, but habitat destruction and hunting gradually diminished its population. Today only a few hundred remain in the relict Gir Forest on the Saurashtra Peninsula in Gujarat, India's westernmost state. It is here that we will spend two full days, travelling from our base at a comfortable tourist lodge into the grassland and forest domain of this magnificent predator, encountering a stunning variety of wildlife as we search for our quarry. We will also visit two other wildlife reserves in Gujarat during this holiday, each protecting important populations of endangered species. In Velavadar Wildlife Reserve we will enjoy the highest concentration of Blackbuck on Earth while, in Dhrangadhra Sanctuary in the Little Rann of Kutch, we'll explore the home of the Asiatic Wild Ass. We will also spend time around Kachchh, searching the desert scrub for such rarities as Striped Hyena, Indian Wolf and Desert Wildcat.

We begin with a 2-night stay in Dasada. The Dhrangadhra Sanctuary was established in 1973, this reserve embraces a huge area of flat, saline wilderness and protects an important population of the endangered Asiatic Wild Ass. Finding these shy, sandy-coloured creatures is no easy task in this arid landscape. However, with luck, we should discover a small herd feeding on their favourite 'bets' (islands of coarse grasses), which provide their principal nourishment in this harsh terrain. After two idyllic days in the peaceful haven of the Little Rann of Kutch, we will head to Kachchh.

In Kachchh we will explore the surrounding desert and scrub where such avian specialities as Great Indian Bustard, Grey Hypercolius, MacQueen's Bustard, the endemic White-naped Tit and the exquisite Indian Courser may be seen. In this region our chances of seeing exciting mammals are greatly increased by the fact that, being outside any protected area, night-time spotlighting safaris are possible. Thus we have a much greater chance here of seeing the strange loping Striped Hyena, the charming Desert Wildcat, the desert subspecies of Indian and desert Fox Fox and perhaps a family of Indian Wolves.

Our next destination is the Gir Forest National Park. With a rugged terrain of low hills and tracts of deciduous forest interspersed with areas of grassland, this national park supports a great diversity of mammals including Sambar, Chital, Nilgai, Chinkara (Indian Gazelle), Four-horned Antelope and Wild Boar. With such an abundance of prey it is little surprise that Leopards maintain good numbers in the forests and Striped Hyenas seek to scavenge any leftovers from the big cats' meals. The Gir Forest is, however, most famed for



its Lions and our focus will be to find as many as possible during twice-daily excursions into their habitat. While, elsewhere in India, the Tiger is the top terrestrial predator; here, in the Gir Forest, the majesty of the Lion is unchallenged. We will spend three nights here at a comfortable forest lodge.

Next we travel to Velavadar, where the graceful Blackbuck, one of the most attractive of all Indian mammals, still occurs in large herds that graze the scrubby grasslands set aside for their protection. Indian Wolf, Jungle Cat and Nilgai also occur here. We will head to Ahmedabad for our flight to London, via Doha

In February and November, mammal-watching is excellent but many wintering birds, including cranes, ducks, geese, harriers and eagles, are also to be seen.

Having focused on three of the country's rarest mammals, you may wish to extend your holiday to see more of India's remarkable fauna (Tigers or rhinos, for example). An excellent transport infrastructure makes it feasible to reach any part of India from Mumbai, and we will be happy to arrange visits to any of the country's other reserves for you, either before or after the main tour.

Day 1

London

In Flight

We depart London in the morning at 0900 on Qatar Airways' scheduled flight to Ahmedabad, via Doha (where duty-free shopping is amongst the best and cheapest in the world).

Day 2

Ahmedabad – Dasada

Arriving in Ahmedabad early in the morning, we will meet our driver and transfer to our hotel. After some rest and breakfast at the hotel, we will travel by road for four hours to Dasada and stay at the Rann Riders, a simple but comfortable resort that will be our base for the next two nights. On arrival there will be an option to either wander through the village to see local handicrafts or visit the nearby lakes for birding.

Time permitting, in the afternoon enjoy your first game drive.



Day 3

Dasada

The only wild horse on the Indian subcontinent, the Asiatic Wild Ass maintains a much diminished population of between 1,000 and 1,500 animals in the Little Rann of Kutch, a huge area of flat and arid country now protected as Dhangadhra Sanctuary. Here, the Asses are attracted by patches of coarse grasses known locally as ‘bets’ which rapidly emerge after the summer monsoon rains. The herds of Asses move from bet to bet grazing on the vegetation which represents one of the few sources of food in this barren semi-desert landscape. By late February, when many of the available bets have already been grazed, the largest concentrations of Asses may be witnessed in the few remaining areas and it is this congregation of animals that we will be hoping to observe during our three days of jeep excursions into the Sanctuary.



A handsome pale sandy animal with a distinctive chocolate-coloured stripe from ears to rump, the Wild Asses have a similar profile to their domestic cousins, but are shy creatures and quick to take flight at the approach of danger. With so much desert to roam, and colouration that aids concealment, the herds of Asses are not easy to locate. However, using local knowledge we will hope to find the favoured bets and if we succeed are likely to see substantial herds of Asses, possibly several hundred animals. In such situations we may be able to approach quite close in our vehicles and get some good photographic opportunities.

We will take early morning and late afternoon drives into the Sanctuary to avoid the midday heat, and to take advantage of peak animal activity. Between game drives we will relax at our resort and see what birdlife we can find in the vicinity. The specialised wildlife of the Little Rann of Kutch includes small numbers of Blackbuck, Nilgai, Chinkara, Wolf and the rare Desert Cat. The avifauna is relatively impoverished but it is possible to find Indian Courser, Houbara Bustard, Yellow-wattled and Red-wattled Lapwing, Chestnut-bellied, Black-bellied, Spotted and Painted Sandgrouse, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, and the chance of both Greater and Lesser Flamingos wandering south from their nesting sites in the Great Rann of Kutch.

Day 4

Dasada – Kachchh

In the early morning we will start our seven to eight hours (plus en route stops) journey towards the Great Rann of Kutch. Our base will be at the Infinity Resorts in Nani Aral, close to the dormant volcano, we search the surrounding desert and scrub for many of the region's special mammals and birds.

In the late afternoon enjoy the birding around the lodge.

Day 5 – 6

Kachchh

We will spend two full days and one half day in the Kachchh area. These are the haunts of the Great Indian Bustard, the endemic White-naped Tit and the exquisitely lovely Indian Courser. Our chances of seeing exciting mammals here are greatly increased by the fact that, being outside protected areas, evening walks are possible. Here we have chances of seeing the strange loping Striped Hyena, the charming Desert Wildcat, the Desert subspecies of Red Fox and perhaps a family of Indian Wolves.



Infinity Resorts Rann of Kutch

Day 7

Kutch – Sasangir (Gir National Park)

After breakfast we will start our long drive for around nine to ten hours (plus en route stops) to reach the next destination Gir National Park. We will stop en route to do some birding and enjoy our packed lunch. On arrival we will stay at The Gateway Hotel Gir Forest. This hotel occupies a scenic location overlooking the Hiran River and will be our base for the next three nights. The rooms have en suite facilities as well as hot and cold running water. There is a pleasant swimming pool.



The Gateway Hotel Gir Forest

Day 8 – 9

Gir National Park

Early and late in the day are always best for wildlife viewing and the pattern of our stay at the Gir Forest will be to travel into the Park at first light for several hours then return again at about 3pm. The period between game drives will be spent at the hotel but we will plan bird watching activities and other local excursions for anyone wishing to do so. A total of five visits to the National Park should be rewarded by a great many wonderful encounters with wildlife and hopefully plenty of views of the resident Lions.

The 35,948 hectares of the Gir Forest National Park embraces a rugged terrain of low hills and stretches of scrubby grassland interspersed with meandering rivers. The vegetation consists of mixed deciduous forests containing Teak, Ber, and Flame of the Forest, Jamun, Tendu and Dhak trees. Acacias grow commonly in the drier areas and there are also occasional Banyan trees, much favoured by many bird species during the fruiting period. The Lions of the Gir Forest enjoyed a long history of protection from the former local rulers and it is undoubtedly due to their actions that a relict population has been able to survive. A disastrous drought brought numbers down to a mere 20 animals at the start of the 20th century, but since then their fortunes have prospered and there are now 10 times this number of Lions in the Park. Unlike in many other National Parks, humans live alongside the wild animals in the Gir Forest. Maldhari cattle herders have established several villages inside the Park and over 20,000 head of livestock graze the

grasslands. In general, the settlers and the Lions manage to coexist; indeed the cattle represent an important food item for the big cats, but further encroachments are a threat to the future of the Park and the animals it protects.

The Asiatic Lion is very slightly smaller than the African race and the male has a shorter mane, but such differences are slight and a full grown male is certainly one of the most impressive of all mammals. In behaviour, the Indian Lions are very similar to their African cousins, sharing the same social structure and similarly spending much of the day resting in the shade of a convenient tree or rocky gully. Hunting forays take place mainly at dusk and this is the time that the Maldhari cattle are most at risk as they make their way back to the village stockades. The fearsome roaring of the Lions resounds over the forest at night and noticeably increases in frequency in the late afternoon as a prelude to hunting excursions. Many of a pride's cubs are born during the first few months of the year but, as the interval between cubs may be 18 months to two years, the breeding cycle is somewhat staggered. Life for the Gir Forest Lions is relatively easy with an abundance of prey and few dangers, but wildlife is increasingly under threat in overcrowded India!

Sharing the Gir Forest with the Lions is an impressive variety of wildlife. About 200 Leopards frequent the Park and are regarded as being easier to see here than at any other Park, although they are never predictable. There are large numbers of prey species, including Spotted Deer, herds of Sambar and Nilgai, Wild Boar, Four-horned Antelope, Chinkara and Grey Langurs. Carnivores other than the Lions living here include Wild Cat, Jungle Cat, Golden Jackal, and a small but increasing population of the rare Striped Hyena.

Amid this rather arid landscape the forest vegetation is an oasis for many species of birds including various raptors, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike, Brown Fish Owl, Mahratta Woodpecker and Grey Drongo. In more open areas we may discover flocks of Painted Sandgrouse, especially as they fly in to drink at their favourite pools. A freshwater lake that has formed below the Kamaleshwar Dam inside the Park is an attractive lure for many waterbirds and worth visiting just to see the large Marsh Crocodiles, which regularly decorate the shoreline.

We may not see all the Gir Forest inhabitants during our visits but we will certainly have many hours of absorbing wildlife viewing and game drives in the Park, which should give us the best possible chance of becoming very well acquainted with the magnificent Asiatic Lion.

Day 10

Sasangir – Velavadar National Park

We'll have our morning game drive in the Gir today. Later we will drive for around six hours (plus en route stops) to reach our next destination Velavadar National Park. We will stop en route to do some birding and enjoy our packed lunch. On arrival we will stay at The Blackbuck Lodge for two nights. A very comfortable air-conditioned tourist lodge, complete with a library and a restaurant. It will provide a comfortable base for our activities in this area.

Time permitting; late in the afternoon we will be able to visit the nearby lakes or marshes for some birding.

Day 11

Velavadar National Park

Today we'll enjoy the morning and afternoon game drives in the Velavadar National Park.



The Blackbuck Lodge



The Blackbuck is the sole representative in India of the genus Antelope. It is a graceful and very handsome creature quite often seen in animal collections on private estates in both Europe and North America. The wild population in India has decreased drastically over the last century and fragmented into various pockets from a former position of abundance throughout the plains. Velavadar Reserve, about 64 kilometres from Bhavnagar, contains what is probably the highest concentration of Blackbuck in the world and this will be our destination today.

An arid tract of open scrubby grassland, the Reserve is well suited to the requirements of these lovely animals and the herds of sandy-coloured does, attended by strikingly marked black and white bucks, create a marvellous spectacle. Early March is the rutting period for these antelopes and we should be able to witness conflicts between rival males, each contestant uttering grunting challenges as they face each other with long spiralled horns laid flat along their backs. This is the time of year when male Blackbuck establish their dominance over harems of females, and many skirmishes occur as the younger bucks seek to displace the older animals and claim their right to reproduce.

A few Wolves also occur at Velavadar, but the Reserve exists mainly as a showcase for the Blackbuck and they will definitely be the star attraction during our day here.

Day 12

Ahmedabad

We'll have our final morning game drive in the Velavadar today. After our lunch, we will join our tour leader for a birding walk around the lodge. Later we will drive for around four hours (plus en route stops) to Ahmedabad, there

we should have time for a farewell evening meal at the comfortable hotel before our late night transfer to the international airport.

Day 13

London

The flight from Ahmedabad departs at 03:40 and arrive Doha at 05:00. Connect Qatar Airways QR3 flight to London at 07:45, we are due to arrive back at 12:25. (Flight timings subject to final confirmation nearer departure.)

Grading

A (easy). A. This is a wildlife tour with little walking...

Weather

The weather should be mostly fine and sunny by day with temperatures in the region of 20 – 25°C or higher, but it could be much cooler at night. During early morning game drives it can feel bitterly cold until the sun's heat gathers strength.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price.

Inclusions / Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- International flights in economy class.
- Full board accommodation throughout (i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner). We use comfortable tourist hotels and lodges with private facilities (as described in the text above).
- All transport and guiding.
- All wildlife excursions, park fees and reserve entry fees.

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Online visa (currently US\$40 plus the bank transaction charges of 2.5%).
- Drinks (though most lodges in the national parks provide boiled drinking water or a bottle of water with their compliments).
- Discretionary tipping.
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, laundry, camera fees.



Wild Asses



Indian Wolf



Blackbuck



Asiatic Lion

Flights

We use scheduled Qatar Airways flights for this tour to India, via Doha. Qatar Airways is the biggest success story and one of the fastest growing airlines with one of the most modern fleets in the world.

If you would prefer to travel in Business class on the international sector (normally available at a supplement charge of around £2,995), please call us at the time of booking. If you would prefer to travel from Manchester airport (will be subject to an additional charge of around £195), please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements.

Extensions

A wide range of extensions are available on request.

Checklist and previous tour reports

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and we will gladly send them to you beforehand, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

The consumption of alcohol is prohibited in the states of Gujarat.

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How to book your place!

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

Please provide us with your passport details (passport number, date of issue, date of expiry and your date of birth) at the time of booking.



Asiatic Lion



Blackbuck



Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse



Indian Courser