

India - A Wildlife Photography Tour to Bandhavgarh

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 15 November 2009



Eurasian Hobby



Royal Bengal Tiger



Royal Bengal Tigers



'Northern Plains' Grey Langur



Jackal



Photographing Vultures

Report by Meethil Momava with images by Aniket Sardana



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leaders: Meethil Momaya (Main Local Guide)
Aniket Sardana (Co-leader)

Participants: Dorothy Williams
Janet Young
Adam Smith
Paul Michael Hayward
Lee Johnson
Michael Frankling
Paul Beagan
Andrew Poole
Judith King
Phillip Edwards

Day 1

Wednesday 4th November

Tour members departed from London on Emirates Airlines bound for New Delhi via Dubai.

Day 2

Thursday 5th November

New Delhi, en route to Katni

Weather: Sunny with blue skies and white clouds

The inbound flight from Dubai to Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi landed on time. We accompanied the participants to Ashok Country Resort where they could wash and change and have lunch. After lunch we had a couple of hours before we boarded a train to Katni. After some birdwatching, we sat together discussing Bandhavgarh, India's wildlife, and other topics. At 3.15pm we boarded our coach and headed for the train station. Our train to Katni left at 5.25pm. We had dinner at 8.00pm and the conversation continued until bedtime.

Day 3

Friday 6th November

En route to Bandhavgarh, Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Sunny with blue skies, not cold.

We reached Katni at around 7.00am. Our surface transport was waiting for us and took us to Nature Heritage Resort, which we reached at around 9.30am. We were allotted rooms and met for breakfast at 10.30am. After breakfast, the participants did some photography and birdwatching in the resort complex. We had lunch at 1.00pm and left for our very first game drive at 1.45pm. Our three jeeps headed for the main gate of the tiger reserve. Park rules meant that we would all be given a fixed route and would be heading in separate ways.

Half an hour into the drive we spotted some fresh tiger pug marks on the road. A tigress had walked there just a few minutes before us. We followed the paw prints as silently as our jeep would permit.

After a couple of hundred metres, the prints went off the road. We waited, but hearing no alarm calls decided to carry on with the drive. We saw Spotted Deer, Sambar and Hanuman Langur, and various birds like the Lesser Adjutant Stork. We stopped a couple of times to take pictures of Spotted Deer, and Hanuman Langurs. Most of the participants were seeing these species for the first time and were trigger happy. I made it a point to emphasise good looking individuals of the common species. Photographers who are seeing a new species often get carried away and shoot a lot of ordinary pictures that don't have much artistic value. And since our days in Bandhavgarh are limited, my role was to accelerate the process of taking good photos of 'ordinary' subjects.

We later met our friends in another vehicle who had stopped to see a Jungle Cat. We could not see it from where we were – apparently it was well-camouflaged behind a log. Towards the end of the game drive we had a good opportunity to photograph a young Sambar, it was curious and came towards our vehicle. It is increasingly difficult to find cooperative subjects in Indian wilderness. Therefore, when you encounter one it is important that you use the opportunity to the fullest. The light was quite low when we found this young Sambar. Young ones when alone, are curious by nature and are not afraid to come close – that is exactly what this Sambar did. I asked the participants to increase the ISO settings of their camera, and use appropriate support. Initially they were reluctant, sighting light as a reason, but I insisted because this opportunity would not reappear in the next seven days!

By 5.00pm the light was no longer suited for photography so we exited the park at 5.30pm and headed back to the hotel. We had tea at 6.30pm and continued our discussions over dinner at 7.30pm. Most went to bed around 9pm in preparation for an early start.

Day 4

Saturday 7th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Clear with light-blue skies, cool

We met over tea at 5.30am and proceeded to our jeeps for the 6.15am morning game drive. Our four-hour game drive was filled with the calls of parakeets and pug marks of the tiger but we did not see any tigers that morning. We saw a variety of birds and exited the park at 10.15am. In the evening game drive, we used previously known information to track the tiger in a particular area. It was 5pm and we had almost given up hope, when a racket of Langur calls confirmed the tiger's presence. I immediately turned to the three participants in my jeep and instructed them to get their cameras ready. I told them to set the exposure on their cameras to get a decent picture in low light. While we adjusted the settings on the cameras the jeep was slowly moving closer to the Langur calls. We peered into the bamboo grove, and found the tigress! The tigress wanted to cross the road behind our jeep, we waited for her to do so, but she changed her mind and decided to cross in front of us. With one leap she was on the other side of the road, and though we tried to find her in the bamboo grove, but she had disappeared.

Another one of our jeeps saw a tiger too, they were going by when all of a sudden a tiger head popped up near their vehicle. They were stunned and so was the tiger! The tiger backed up and came out ahead of the vehicle. Both encounters gave people a few photo opportunities but it was not easy as it was dark in the bush and they were so excited at seeing a tiger that they were not totally ready with their cameras!

Day 5

Sunday 8th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Clear with light-blue skies, cool

By now we were getting into the routine of morning and evening game drives. We heard a lot of alarm calls and even heard the tiger roar, but could not see any. It was a bright clear day and since all participants wanted to visit the Fort 'Bandhavgarh' we had scheduled it between the game drives*.

We returned to the hotel after the morning game drive, had our breakfast, carried some packed lunch and headed for the Fort at 11.00am. The Fort visit was a refreshing break from the routine of game drives. Moreover the whole group could be together. At places we could be on foot and this enabled good interaction and photography opportunities. Vulture Point on the Fort was a good place for photographing soaring vultures. I was also able to view the participants compositional skills when they are not confined in a jeep. The difference in subject matter and the ability to move around on foot really brings out the best in some participants who are more comfortable walking around their stationary subjects. Here, we practised different compositional techniques and also studied the effect the quality of light has on pictures.

* The visit to the Fort was not on the itinerary, but since all participants wanted to go and were willing to pay extra for it, we arranged it.

Day 6

Monday 9th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Cloudy skies, humid, but not cold

The morning was cloudy and silent. The sunlight could not tear through the cloud cover. In the first half-hour of the game drive we saw a twenty-month-old tiger cub (Jhurjura cub) run across the road and disappear into the forest. It got our hopes up high and we tried to locate its siblings and mother, but in vain. The low light did not encourage us to do much photography either. At breakfast, it began to drizzle and many of the participants asked me if this was normal for November – it was not. However, during breakfast I had explained to the participants how some amount of rain is good for photography. It changes the colours of the forest – makes them more saturated and clears the air by settling the dust. If the clouds clear up the light, it would be ideal for landscapes and jungle shots – and especially if there is a herd of deer in the meadow.

During the evening drive, our jeep spotted a tigress when we were only five minutes into the park. She was drinking water by the roadside. As the jeeps lined up to see her, she walked away into the jungle. The guide knew where we could get a closer look at her and we parked on another road – waited for her and out she came. The guide and driver had helped us figure out where she will appear, and accordingly I had given the three participants a position each so that they didn't get in each other's way when the action started.

By now, there were jeeps lined up behind us, they would get into the picture frame if the tiger crossed the road behind us as it seemed she would do. The participants had their eyes on the tigress that was now visible through the thicket.

Very quickly I pointed out the jeeps that would come in the frame, I asked them to zoom out and take the vehicles whole, they can always crop the picture later – but if it's composed wrongly with a distracting part of a jeep in the main picture frame, then the picture would be wasted.

Luckily all three of our vehicles were there and we all had a good look at the tigress. She was the Churbera Tigress, the mother of two small cubs. We continued on the route and saw a pair of Collared Scops Owls, a family of Wild Boar, White-eyed buzzard, Grey Hornbill, Brown headed Barbet, White-rumped Shama and an Indian Muntjac. Another of our jeeps saw four more tigers (Jhurjura cubs and their mother).

Day 7

Tuesday 10th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Cloudy skies and rain. Not cold.

The morning drive was filled with alarm calls and tracking pug marks. We waited at a number of places, but the tiger did not make an appearance. We saw a jackal, but the rest of the morning was uneventful. At some time during the evening drive, it had begun to rain and with the change in weather, the jungle was remarkably silent. Bird activity had almost come to a standstill. We checked out a number of locations but drew a blank. On the last try for the evening, I sighted a cub sitting on a rock hiding behind dry grass. It was one of the Churbera cubs, and another was sitting some distance away. These are approximately 3.5-month-old cubs and an extremely rare and wonderful sighting.

It was very important that we get good pictures of but a rainy November evening does not give much light to get a perfect shot. However, modern digital cameras can do a lot with little light and we just have to know how to work our lenses when they take time to focus in low light. The participants already knew how to setup their camera for the kind of light available to us. However, the cubs were sitting behind grass and the focusing systems were getting mis-led and were focusing on the blades of grass in front of the cubs' faces, instead of on the cubs themselves. I showed the three participants that were with me how to manually focus on the cub. Since it is difficult to manually focus a large lens while holding it in the hand, I recommended they use a bean bag to rest their lens on it and show them how to work their cameras to get their subject in good focus.

Day 8

Wednesday 11th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Cloudy skies and rain. Not cold.

We saw a few glimpses of the Chakradhara Tigress in the second half of the morning drive. She was walking on the opposite bank of a dry stream. We waited until it was time to exit the park but she had made herself comfortable in one of the bends in the stream and wouldn't be moving any time soon. In the evening game drive, we checked certain places where other vehicles had seen a tiger in the morning, but it had moved to another location. On our way back, we visited a cave and saw Horseshoe Bats. When we were leaving the cave, we heard alarm calls so we headed in that direction, but the calls were from deep inside the jungle and she would not be visible from the road.

On days like these, one has to let go of wildlife and make good use of the other photo opportunities at hand. Rain and cloudy skies make a good setting for macro shots or pictures where you want to mute the contrast. Orchids, which in Bandhavgarh are small and high up the trees, are best shot under a cloudy sky. The rain had washed the trees and the greens were really something that you could see. These make interesting pictures as you are getting landscapes of two seasons in one trip - November grass and monsoon foliage. I encouraged the participants to make good use of this opportunity.

Day 9

Thursday 12th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Cloudy skies and rain. Not cold.

We saw a pair of jackals on the morning game drive. We decided to make the most of the cloudy weather which is the ideal time to shoot Langurs. Their black faces and shining fur make it very difficult to get a correct exposure in strong light, so a cloudy day gives even lighting and it is possible to get an individual or two sitting with their face lit up with a bounce or fill light. I asked participants to be on the lookout for a troop so that they could get some good pictures. In some parts of the park, the clouds parted and let the sun shine through. One of the jeeps was lucky to be in that area and got some good photo opportunities to shoot landscapes and colourful grass in beautiful light.

In the evening game drive, two of our jeeps witnessed a very interesting event. They were watching the two Churbera cubs when they heard alarm calls from further up the road. Other vehicles coming that way saw a tigress with a fawn in her mouth walking along the road. She was bringing food to the cubs. When the tigress got closer to the cubs, she growled very softly as a call to supper. She dropped the fawn near the cubs and sat down beside them as they played with their food. The cubs are small and are usually hidden in the grass, but the tigress passed by very close to the jeeps. This was another remarkable sighting on this trip. Such intimate behaviour is not often seen.

Day 10

Friday 13th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Cloudy skies and rain. Not cold.

On the last day it is advisable to shoot whatever you want to complete your collection of Bandhavgarh! So the participants were instructed to photograph everything that they liked, but we were restricted by the weather and limited by the absence of subjects. During the morning drive, we saw a glimpse of the Churbera Tigress on her way to the water hole. She stepped onto the road, walked a few metres, and then left the road and cut across the jungle towards the water hole. That evening we tried to locate her, but could not trace her. The drizzle that kept on and off had turned into a steady downpour that evening. We tried searching for B2, a male tiger, that was seen near a dry stream that morning, but could not find him either. We covered a lot of area hoping to find the tigers that were on the move. We checked all possible routes that they usually take, but there was neither sight nor sound of them. Our last chance was the Churbera cubs, so we waited at a junction near there. When we saw vehicles coming from the opposite direction we understood they too were hidden from view. Thus we concluded our last game drive in Bandhavgarh.

We returned to the hotel at 5.00pm, packed, and had an early dinner. At 7.00pm we left for Umaria train station to take the overnight train to Agra. We boarded the train and settled in for the night.

Day 11

Saturday 14th November

Sightseeing in Agra, evening train to New Delhi

Weather: Cloudy skies, hot and humid

We arrived the next morning at Agra Cantt. Station a little after 11.00am. Since the train was running a little late we had had breakfast on the train. We headed to Hotel Gateway for a wash and change. We also had to pack for a day trip to the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort. All of us decided to only carry our camera and a lens or two. We were joined by our local guide Ratan Tiwari who would accompany us for the day. We had an early lunch at a city hotel and headed to the Taj Mahal. All of us enjoyed taking pictures of the Taj, it is always a challenge to take good pictures of a monument that has been photographed so extensively.

For those who had seen the Taj Mahal for the first time it is natural to make touristy images – like the one we see everywhere. But to make good images of the Taj is to understand its chief characteristics and then either emphasize them or totally contradict them. For example, the Taj Mahal is a symmetric building – in that case either you emphasize the symmetry or you break the symmetry in your pictures.

After spending nearly two hours at the Taj we headed to the Agra Fort, we would have loved to have spent more time here but by the time we had finished our tour here it was almost closing time. We headed back to the hotel and the participants packed their bags. We took the 8.30 train to New Delhi and then a coach and headed to the airport. Here I said my goodbyes to the group as they entered the airport terminal to take their flight back home.

Day 12

Sunday 15th November

Inbound to UK via Dubai

Summary - Photography Report

The group consisted of ten participants, each with a different skill level. Three of them used a compact digital camera (the type used at home and when on vacations) one was shooting slides, while the others had a variety of Digital SLR equipment. The group had a variety of experience. One was shooting slides and had a collection of 30,000 pictures; there was a professional wedding photographer; while the others varied between occasional photographers to serious amateurs.

It is not possible to address a group as diverse as this one as a whole. Each participant is at a different level – in terms of both, skill and interest. Anything you decide to say will be uninteresting to at least half of the group. If you say something too basic the serious amateurs will not be interested, while if you talk about advance techniques the casual photographers will not understand what you are saying.

Moreover each one's needs were different. They could be classified into three categories – one group was happy with whatever they saw and photographed, the second was happy with mere sightings of the tiger and some 'ordinary' photography, while the third group wanted really good photo-opportunities.

After considering all the above I decided to cater to each participant individually.

The on-field preparation on the first two days included (for each participant):

- * understanding their needs,
- * what they expect from the trip,
- * why they take photographs,
- * how much they understand their equipment,
- * observe what they shoot over the first two days, and
- * familiarize myself with their style of photography

After gathering the above information I planned at least two one-to-one sessions (each of up to 60-90 minutes) with each participant. During this time they could show me the pictures they had shot that day, and answer their questions. I discussed the following with each participant: Camera settings, shooting formats, seeing light, exposing for a particular quality of light, nuances of composition (going beyond the rule of thirds), camera angles, and discussed/gave feedback on each picture that they had taken during the one-to-one session. I hope the camera advice and photographic experiences they have received on this trip will be of some help to them in the future...

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!



Rhesus Macaque by Aniket Sardana

Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name		Common name	Scientific name
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	40	Jungle Owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>
2	Indian Pond-heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	41	Spotted Owlet	<i>Athene brama</i>
3	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	42	Asian Palm-swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>
4	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	43	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
5	Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	44	Stork-billed Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>
6	Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	45	White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
7	Oriental Honey-buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	46	Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
8	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	47	Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>
9	White-rumped Vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	48	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
10	Long-billed Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	49	Indian Grey Hornbill	<i>Ocyroceros birostris</i>
11	Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	50	Brown-headed Barbet	<i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>
12	Crested Serpent-eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	51	Black-rumped Flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>
13	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	52	Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>
14	White-eyed Buzzard	<i>Butastur teesa</i>	53	White-browed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla madaraspatensis</i>
15	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	54	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
16	Changeable Hawk-eagle	<i>Spizaetus cirrhatus</i>	55	Red-whiskered Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>
17	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	56	White-eared Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus leucotis</i>
18	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	57	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>
19	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	58	Jungle Prinia	<i>Prinia sylvatica</i>
20	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	59	Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>
21	Jungle Bush-quail	<i>Perdica asiatica</i>	60	Oriental Magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
22	Red Spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix spadicea</i>	61	White-rumped Shama	<i>Copsychus malabaricus</i>
23	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	62	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
24	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	63	Asian Paradise-flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>
25	Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	64	Common Babbler	<i>Turdoides caudatus</i>
26	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	65	Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>
27	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	66	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>
28	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	67	Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthomus</i>
29	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	68	Long-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>
30	Red Collared-dove	<i>Streptopelia tranquebarica</i>	69	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>
31	Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	70	Hair-crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus hottentottus</i>
32	Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	71	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>
33	Yellow-footed Pigeon	<i>Treron phoenicoptera</i>	72	Rufous Treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>
34	Alexandrine Parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>	73	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>

Common name	Scientific name	Common name	Scientific name
35 Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	74 Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
36 Plum-headed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>	75 Jungle Myna	<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>
37 Common Hawk-cuckoo	<i>Cuculus varius</i>	76 Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
38 Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>	77 House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
39 Indian Scops-owl	<i>Otus bakkamoena</i>		

Mammals

Mammal Species	Scientific name	Mammal Species	Scientific name
1 Royal Bengal Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris tigris</i>	8 Indian or Black-naped Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>
2 Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus kelaarita or kutas</i>	9 Three-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennarum</i>
3 Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	10 Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>
4 'Northern Plains' Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus entellus</i>	11 Chital (Spotted Deer)	<i>Cervus axis</i>
5 Common Mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsi</i>	12 Indian Muntjac (Barking Deer)	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>
6 Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>	13 Indian Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
7 Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>		

Other Taxa

1 Indian Flapshell Turtle	<i>Lissemys punctata</i>	5 Big-eared Horseshoe Bats	<i>Rhinolophus macrotis</i>
2 Common Garden Lizard	<i>Calotes versicolor</i>	6 Skink	
3 House Gecko species	<i>Hemidactylus or Gehyra etc sp</i>	7 Monitor Lizard	
4 Unidentified snake			