

India's Wildlife - A Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 March – 8 April 2018



Female cub at Damnar River



Jungle Cat



The bold female from Sukkhi Pattiya



Walking along the road

Report & images compiled by Himanshu Rathore



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Summary

The Photography Tour of Bandhavgarh National Park was a truly awesome experience for all of us. What could be better than seeing five Tigers on the first safari! We had some lovely sightings and in all we saw a total of 14 Tigers and lots of other mammals including three Jungle Cats, Indian Tree Shrew, and Common and Ruddy Mongooses. We were lucky enough to spend 45 minutes with a Tiger as it walked along the road, and just our vehicle witnessed it. We also saw some lovely birds including eagles and other raptors. It was a great tour and both Vernon and Christopher took some lovely photographs, and Susan took some awesome videos.

Day 1

Wednesday 28th March

In flight to Delhi

Day 2

Thursday 29th March

Our overnight flight from the UK arrived in Delhi, where we met Himanshu. We then went to the Holiday Inn hotel for a wash and change, before we had a lavish buffet for lunch and discussed plans for the day.

We had a rest before leaving for Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station at 3pm. Delhi was quite busy, as usual. We reached the station at 4.30pm and porters were hired to take care of the luggage. We boarded our overnight train to Katni and went to our reserved air-conditioned first class compartment, where we settled in to our seats. The train left on time at 5.30pm. We were carrying a packed dinner which we ate at 7pm. As we had our own private bogey for just the four of us, Himanshu took the opportunity to give a small presentation about photography and the general conditions we would face. As everyone was tired from a long journey, we slept early.

Day 3

Friday 30th March

We reached Katni early in the morning. After getting off the train, we headed to our vehicles for the two-hour drive to Bandhavgarh. We reached the lodge at 8.30am and went to our rooms, before meeting for breakfast at 9am. After a good breakfast, we sat down to discuss the plan ahead.

We had a rest before getting ready for our first drive in Bandhavgarh National Park. At 1pm we had lunch and left for the park at 3pm. We entered the Khitauli zone and were greeted by some lovely birds near the stream where we saw storks, Crested Honey Buzzard and Crested Serpent Eagle. We went towards one of the waterholes where we saw some pugmarks from a four-month-old Tiger cub and its mother. We waited for a few minutes then went ahead. As we were crossing a meadow, Himanshu spotted a lovely Jungle Cat which gave us quite a show. Vernon and Chris got some good shots of it, especially when she sat down. In the later part of the evening we headed back towards the gate because the Mahaman Tigress spends a lot of time in the grass near the Bhadrashila stream, next to the gate. As we arrived we saw a bit of commotion of vehicles, so we positioned our jeep near the stream. Four cubs came out into the open. They are around eight-months-old and were jumping around in the water, giving us quite a show. The only problem was that it was quite low light conditions, so it

was more of a viewing sighting. Everyone was very happy with our sighting of four Tigers on the first drive. We exited the gate and took the main road. We had driven around a kilometre when we saw a lovely male Tiger sitting on a mound in the middle of the meadow!

We had a very cheerful evening; Chris specially was very delighted. We retired to bed at around 9pm as we had an early start in the morning with a 4.45am wake-up call.

Day 4

Saturday 31st March

We woke at 4.45am and met for coffee at 5.15am, after which we left for the Khitauli zone, hopeful of finding the cubs where they had been the previous evening. We could only find a male Tiger's pugmarks as we entered the stream area, so we continued. We looked for another female with three-month-old cubs, but only found a few pugmarks from the night's activity. We scanned the entire area but there was no sign of a Tiger. Chris and Vernon took some pictures of Sambars, Chitals and monkeys. We had breakfast and then headed out of the park and returned to the lodge.

After some rest and lunch, we again set out for the Khitauli zone. This time we got some good pictures of birds and deer.

We met for dinner at 8pm and retired to bed by 9.30pm, hoping for a good day tomorrow.

Day 5

Sunday 1st April

The day started a bit earlier than usual as the park timings changed, so instead of 6am, the park was now opening at 5.45am. We left the lodge around 5.20am and headed to the Khitauli zone again. We decided to explore the far end where two females and a male Tiger reside in an area called Hawa Mahal. We saw pugmarks on a circular road. As we finished the circuit there was excitement in the form of alarm calls, scrap markings and fresh pugmarks: something was happening! We came in front of the Hawa Mahal building and there was a Chital alarm call from the left side of the road. We stopped and waited barely two minutes when a lovely young female Tiger emerged from the thickets. She crossed the road right in front of our jeep and then we followed her for a long while. Sanjay, our driver, did a fine job by getting us to some of the best positions for photography. We followed her for almost 20 minutes, after which she disappeared into the bamboo thicket.

During our afternoon safari we tried to find this same Tiger as we hoped she would come to the waterhole, but she eluded us.

After a good celebration for today's lovely sighting, we had dinner and retired to bed by 9pm.

Day 6

Monday 2nd April

This morning was special as it was our first safari in the Magdhi zone, and Vernon had some lovely memories of Magdhi from his last visit. We entered the park and headed for the Sukhi Pattiya area, where we saw a few vehicles parked. We approached and saw a Tiger sitting on a rock across the meadow with a second Tiger sitting on a hill to the right of the first one. As we were watching them a third Tiger came out from the meadows. At

first we thought it was the mother and two cubs, but it was not the case. The Tiger which came out of the meadow was actually a female from the previous litter of the same mother who was trying to make her territory. As the two sub-adult cubs saw the female, they started running. The one on the hill disappeared in the thickets but the one in the meadow ran across the meadow and then hid in the grass. After a few minutes it got up, ran across the stream and disappeared in the thickets. We could see the Tigress trying to locate the two cubs and she went into the thickets. We knew something might happen so we waited. About 20 minutes later she came out in the open, walked through the grassland and crossed the road in front of us. We reversed a little and waited, and then she came out and walked all along the road. We spent 45 minutes photographing this Tiger walking along the road! It was truly an awesome experience and the light was just perfect. Both Chris and Vernon got some great pictures, and Susan took a lovely video of her walking along the road. We left her after enjoying a great sighting and went to the breakfast point. After a hearty breakfast, we exited the park just in time.

We went to another area in the afternoon to look for the Pattiya female and her cubs, but were not lucky so we went to the same area where we had left the female in the morning and, sure enough, she was right there, cooling off in the lake. After enjoying another good sighting, we headed back for the lodge.

We had a small celebration for the lovely sighting and then, after a hearty dinner and coffee conversations, we retired to bed.

Day 7

Tuesday 3rd April

We started at the usual time and our motive today was to try and find Sloth Bear, Leopard or maybe a male Tiger! So we set off for the Khitauli zone. We did find tracks and signs of Leopard, Sloth Bear and male Tiger, but they kept eluding us, so we came out of the jungle at 11am.

After lunch and a rest, we set off for the Tala zone, where we headed straight for the Damnar river area, towards the south end of the park. As we reached it we saw a Tiger standing on the road. It was the Damnar female, also known as spotty. She crossed and went in a patch of jungle but she was moving fast and growling. We decided to go to the far side of the jungle to try and intercept her, as she would go that way as one of her cubs had been seen in that direction. We waited and the excitement built up as we could hear her growl. A little later the growling faded so we thought she may not be coming out this way. We drove back a little and stopped next to another jeep. They told us that one of her cubs is sitting next to the road just ahead. As we turned on the ignition to head that way, the Tigress was on the road, just behind us! We backed up quickly and Vernon and Chris got some lovely shots of her walking towards us before she crossed the road and disappeared into the thicket. We then quickly turned and went to see the cub sitting next to the road. There were lot of vehicles at this spot but we saw the sub-adult sleeping next to the road. After around five minutes the female cub decided to move. She walked along the road and entered the river bed, where she went and sat in the water! The light was just perfect and we all got some lovely shots. After having a good look and getting ample pictures, we set off to exit the park.

Dinner was served at the usual time and we enjoyed an evening discussing the Tigers we had seen.

Day 8

Wednesday 4th April

Today we had a drive in the Magdhi zone and it was an exciting morning. There were fresh pugmarks of male and female Tigers, and then very fresh footprints of a Sloth Bear. We followed the bear footprints and saw a congregation of vehicles at the T junction. We learned that the bear had been on the road and had just moved off it, and might come out on the Nilgai road. We drove round but were not very hopeful as, unlike Tigers, Sloth Bears are not so predictable and start digging where they find a good termite mound or a root. We waited for 15 minutes but nothing happened, so we went towards the Sukkhi Pattiya patch where we saw some nice raptors like Shikra and White-eyed Buzzard, and both Chris and Vernon got some good pictures. After some bird photography and breakfast, we headed out of the park.

On Wednesday afternoons the park is closed. About 2pm we had a storm and it rained for a good 20 minutes. Later we went to Racha village where Chris and Vernon did some people photography, and we saw locals harvesting a wheat crop. We also went through the village and Vernon took some images of village children, who were overwhelmed on seeing their photographs. It then rained again so we stopped for a while under a tree and saved ourselves from getting drenched.

We had dinner at the usual time and retired to bed early.

Day 9

Thursday 5th April

We went to the Magdhi zone in the morning and drove straight to the Sukkhi Pattiya area, where we saw a Tigress walking across the stream. This was the same Tigress we had seen for 45 minutes a couple of days ago. She walked along for a while, giving very good photographic opportunities. Later she entered the patch of jungle so we waited for a while but then decided to go to Jobhi grassland, where there was a good chance of finding a big male Tiger. On the way we found some fresh pugmarks so started following them. These pugmarks were of a different Tigress but after tracking her for almost four kilometres, we finally lost the pugmarks. We eventually reached the Jobhi meadow where the forest guard told us that had we been there five minutes earlier, we would have seen a lovely male Tiger drinking water from the waterhole! He said that the Tiger had just walked towards the grassland and gone on the far side, which is a closed area. We had breakfast before driving back towards the gate. On the main road we learned that another Tiger had been seen so we went and saw one of the Mahaman cubs sitting in the water, well hidden by grass. We did get to see it although it wasn't a photographic opportunity.

After lunch we went to the Tala zone. First we went to see Shesh Shayya, a very famous 10th century AD period temple which has a huge reclining statue of Lord Vishnu. After enjoying the place, we headed towards the south of the park. We drove towards Andhiyari Jhiriya and, just before the fire line, we met a guide who told us that he expected two male Tiger cubs, which we had not seen previously, to come out in the fire break. We sat and waited for almost 45 minutes, and then the two cubs came out, walking along the fire break. The light was a bit low but Vernon and Chris did take a few pictures. After enjoying the sighting for a good 20 minutes, we headed out of the jungle.

The evening was spent discussing the last safari and travel plans for the next day.

Day 10

Friday 6th April

Today was our last drive in the park and we had to go to the Khitauli zone. The popular demand was to see Leopard and Sloth Bear! Just after crossing Sidh baba on the main road, we heard frantic monkey alarm calls; the call that Langurs make, especially when a Leopard is moving. The calls intensified and a lot of vehicles stopped on the main road, all hoping to find the Leopard. Eventually the other jeeps moved on, but we waited for the longest time because the Leopard is also called “the ghost of the forest”. It eluded us too so, after an hour of waiting, we entered the Khitauli zone. We checked all the potential areas and driver Sanjay tried his best, exploring as much area as possible. We did find tracks and signs of Sloth Bears and Tigers but not the animals themselves. Finally we headed back towards Bhadrashila waterhole, which was our last hope. Himanshu saw a Tiger moving in the meadow towards the large high grass, but unfortunately Vernon, Chris and Susan couldn't spot it. We waited and within 10 minutes the Tigress came out into the open with one cub and they both sat in the water. Vernon and Chris took a lot of pictures. After giving us a great show she went back into the long grass and then crossed the meadow again, to enter jungle patch on the far side. This was the best ending to the last safari we could have hoped for, and we exited the park at 11am.

On returning to the lodge we rested for some time, had lunch and packed. We left the lodge with a packed dinner at 4pm. Our train was due at 7.30pm but it was half an hour late, so finally we were on the train at 8pm. We settled in, had dinner and retired to bed.

Day 11

Saturday 7th April

We were supposed to reach Agra at 8am but arrived at 9am. We were received by a local representative who took us straight to the Sarover Crystal Hotel, where we had a ‘wash and change’ room booked. After washing we had a hearty hot breakfast and then set off for the Taj Mahal at 11am with guide Mr. Tarun. Vernon and Susan had already been to the Taj a couple of times before but they still thoroughly enjoyed it. Chris took a full tour and was overwhelmed with the beauty of the Taj. Later we went to the Tomb of Itma u Daullah, also known as the Baby Taj. Afterwards we went for lunch at the only restaurant.

We saw Agra Fort after lunch and by the time we got free from there it was 4.30pm, so we returned to the Sarover Crystal Hotel where our luggage had been kept. We had a cup of coffee at the hotel before we left for the railway station. At 5.50pm we got on the train and we arrived at Nizammudin railway station at 7.30pm. We left the station about 8.15pm and headed straight for the airport. Due to the traffic it took us an hour to reach the Roseate House Hotel, next to the international terminal, where we had use of the facilities. At 10pm we went to the airport where we said our thanks and goodbyes to Himanshu before checking in for our 1.30am flight home.

Day 12

Sunday 8th April

Our flight landed back in the UK, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

Species Lists:

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; some previous/alternative names in brackets)

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April							
			30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					✓	✓		✓
2	Spot-billed Pelican	<i>Pelicanus philippensis</i>								✓
3	Indian Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>					✓	✓		
4	Little Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	✓			✓		✓		✓
5	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					✓			✓
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			✓		✓		✓	
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	✓							
9	Eastern Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus coromandus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
11	Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Red-naped Ibis	<i>Pseudibis papillosa</i>	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
13	Crested (Oriental) Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	✓							
15	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓							
16	Grey-headed Fish Eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus</i>	✓		✓					
17	White-rumped Vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>				✓				
18	Indian Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
19	Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	✓			✓		✓		✓
20	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>				✓				
21	Crested Serpent Eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
22	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
23	White-eyed Buzzard	<i>Butastur teesa</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciatus</i>						✓		
25	Changeable (Crested) Hawk-Eagle	<i>Nisaetus cirrhatu</i>				✓	✓			
26	Painted Spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix lunulata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Red Junglefowl	<i>Gallus gallus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>					✓			✓
30	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				✓				
31	Eurasian Stone-curlew (Thick-knee)	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>		✓		✓	✓			✓
32	Yellow-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>				✓				
33	Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			✓					
35	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
38	Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	<i>Treron phoenicoptera</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
39	Alexandrine Parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
40	Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
41	Plum-headed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>	✓							
42	Common Hawk-Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus varius</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
43	Indian Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus micropterus</i>						✓		
44	Sirkeer Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus leschenaultii</i>		✓			✓			
45	Southern Coucal	<i>Centropus parroti</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓	
46	Brown Fish Owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>					✓			
47	Jungle Owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
48	Spotted Owlet	<i>Athene brama</i>				✓			✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April							
			30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
49	Indian Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus asiaticus</i>	✓							
50	Crested Treeswift	<i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>			✓			✓	✓	✓
51	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓	✓			
52	White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>							✓	
56	Indian Grey Hornbill	<i>Ocyrceros birostris</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Brown-headed Barbet	<i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>					✓			
58	Coppersmith Barbet	<i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>			✓		✓	✓		
59	Lesser Goldenback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
60	White-naped Woodpecker	<i>Chrysocolaptes festivus</i>				✓	✓			
61	Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix grisea</i>							✓	
62	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>							✓	
63	Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>	✓					✓	✓	
64	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>				✓			✓	✓
65	Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>			✓				✓	
66	Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>			✓					
67	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>				✓				
69	Orange-headed Thrush	<i>Zoothera citrina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Jungle Prinia	<i>Prinia sylvatica</i>						✓	✓	
71	Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>			✓			✓		
72	Taiga Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicilla</i>			✓			✓		
73	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	<i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
74	Oriental Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>		✓	✓		✓			✓
76	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓				✓		
77	White-browed Fantail	<i>Rhipidura aureola</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓		
78	Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓			✓		
80	Indian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta castanea</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	
81	Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>	✓		✓				✓	
82	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>						✓		
83	Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
84	Bay-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius vittatus</i>		✓						
85	Long-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
86	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	✓	✓						
87	Large Woodshrike	<i>Tephrodornis gularis</i>		✓						
88	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Ashy Drongo	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>		✓		✓		✓		✓
90	White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caeruleus</i>	✓			✓				✓
91	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>		✓			✓	✓		✓
92	Rufous Treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
93	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	✓						✓	
94	Indian Jungle Crow	<i>Corvus culminatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>			✓	✓	✓			
96	Chestnut-tailed Starling	<i>Sturnia malabarica</i>			✓				✓	
97	Brahminy Starling	<i>Temenuchus pagodarum</i>	✓		✓			✓		✓
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>								
99	Chestnut-shouldered Petronia	<i>Petronia xanthocollis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April							
			30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6

Mammals:

1	Royal Bengal Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris tigris</i>	5		✓	3	2		4	2
2	Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus kelaarita/kutas</i>	✓			✓			✓	
3	Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Common Langur	<i>Presbytis entellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Common Mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsi</i>			✓					
6	Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>	✓							
7	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>			✓		✓		✓	✓
8	Indian Tree Shrew	<i>Anathana ellioti</i>	✓		✓			✓		✓
9	Black-naped (Indian) Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>			✓					
10	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennanti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
11	Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Chital (Spotted Deer)	<i>Cervus axis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Indian Muntjac (Barking Deer)	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>								✓
14	Nilgai (Blue Bull)	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	✓	✓						✓

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