

India - Tiger Direct

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 22 February 2009

Report compiled by Nick Acheson



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Summary: I write a lot of these things. And every time – without a word of exaggeration – I sit down to write and think to myself: what a superb trip, what a privilege to have been there, what fantastic wildlife we saw. And it's true again this time. At the risk of repeating myself or of straying into hyperbole: what a superb tour we shared, what utterly brilliant wildlife we saw and what an incredible privilege it was to visit such beautiful places as Pench, Kanha and – for some of you – Tadoba. What an honour, too, to have met and been helped by such generous, kind and welcoming people, wherever we went.

Let's not beat about the bush – your pre-tour extension was unique, if not world-record-setting, for the perfectly absurd number of Sloth Bears seen. Fourteen! Who's ever heard of a group seeing fourteen Sloth Bears? And the whole tour was exceptional for the sheer number and quality of Tigers seen (I think the highest individual score was nine). But what touched me most – and really I've never said this before – was how much each Tiger moved you. You were lucky with Tigers, but you deserved to be lucky too. You treated each Tiger – and the Tigers' forest itself – with respect, love and awe. The many Tiger-tears shed meant a lot to me too.

And there was so much else to enjoy on this tour. Kanha Jungle Lodge is a highlight in itself – star-gazing, butterfly-watching, cookery and a candlelit dinner in the forest. Meanwhile in the parks, placid Gaur grazed and munched, Barasingha waded through the wetlands, Common Langurs marshalled their inky infants and Peacocks fanned their exquisite tails against the evening sun.

Thanks are due to many people (and many creatures) who made our tour such a success, and such a delight. Prominent among them are Dhanya and Kaustubh and the staff of Tuli Tiger Corridor in Pench; our drivers and local guides in Pench Tiger Reserve; the very responsible drivers who took us safely between sites; Tarun, Dimple, Jai and all the wonderful, beaming staff at Kanha Jungle Lodge; and our drivers and local guides here too.

Day**Sunday 15th February**

Travel from the UK

Day 1**Monday 16th February**

Unfortunately, due to the vagaries of India's internal flights, I (the tour leader) wasn't with the group today. However, Sameer, Dhanya and Kaustubh did a superb job of taking you to the forests of Pench and looking after you. What's more, having done my share of safaris in Pench, I can well imagine how things went. Chestnut-shouldered Petronias probably chipped from the top of every dry tree, Green Bee-eaters looped and whirled over the roads, Chital bucks nodded their antlers at one another – trying to look big – and Common Langurs chewed placidly in the trees, keeping a careful eye on their over-adventurous young. How am I doing? I reckon I'm on a bit of a roll so I'll carry on. White-throated Kingfishers shone – and Crested Serpent-Eagles scowled – from dead trees over the water holes and the forest muttered and murmured with the sounds of Rufous Treepies, Great Tits and White-bellied Drongos. Thus are the beautiful days we spend in Pench.

Day 2**Tuesday 17th February**

Today, inasmuch as it can ever be said that I'm all there, I was actually there. I'd arrived deep in the night (after a second aircraft delay) and woke Sameer from his beauty sleep. So it was that this morning for the first time we all headed to the forest together and much fun we had. The star creatures of the morning were undoubtedly three Wild Dogs which were seen superbly by one of our jeeps. This was the first record of these fantastic animals in the park in three months so it was all the more impressive that two more of our jeeps saw them in the afternoon. A Jungle Cat was also briefly and quite distantly seen this morning as were bluish male and toffee-coloured female Nilgai, splendid-antlered Chital, stately Sambar and less-than-stately Wild Boar. The bird highlight of the morning was a tree full of hornbills and barbets – Indian Grey and Malabar Pied Hornbills alongside Brown-headed and Coppersmith Barbets – feeding on figs. However, they had some stiff competition in the form of impeccably handsome Yellow-wattled Lapwings and Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Larks at close quarters.

There were two fantastic sightings in the afternoon. Everyone shared in the delight of watching the Indian Giant Flying Squirrel – a tip-off from Sameer in November and now a Naturetrek institution – emerge from her hole in an Arjun tree and launch herself into the dusk. One of our jeeps arrived late for the squirrel-spotting session (but still just in time to see her fly) and my finely-honed leader-instinct had already told me that the cause of their lateness would probably have had stripes on it. And thus it was – thanks to Kaustubh's brilliant decision to take a scenic detour while leaving the park, one of our groups spent twenty-five minutes alone in the company of a beautiful Tigress as she wandered along the road. The stuff of legends!

Day 3**Wednesday 18th February**

This morning was taken up by our farewells to Pench and our drive to Kanha. No fewer than three species of shrike were seen along the road – Long-tailed, Bay-backed and Brown – and glorious Indian Rollers seemed to be everywhere. Also popular was a brief stop in a little town, where local people crowded round us, their smiles almost too big to fit on their faces, and lovingly engaged us in conversation in their very best English.

This afternoon we had more luck with Tigers in the Mukki range of Kanha National Park. Two of our jeeps had a great view of a female while one of the same jeeps, plus one other, had brief views of a male. Way to go Naturetrekkers!

Not content with merely spotting Tigers, this afternoon you also devoted attention to Golden Jackals, a Jungle Cat, a peaceful herd of Gaur (gotta love Gaur) and a twosome of beautifully blue flycatchers – Tickell's and Verditer. All in all a superb afternoon in the charming forests of Kanha.

Day 4

Thursday 19th February

No Tigers today...there were, however, many wonderful creatures to keep us happy. Gaur were just everywhere – each of our jeeps had great encounters with these magnificent animals – and one jeep watched an unusually tame female Barking Deer and her confiding fawn. Barasingha were also much appreciated, especially a herd of 52 (out of a world population of perhaps 350 animals of this subspecies) which was grazing in and around Sondar Tank in the afternoon. Peacock males waved their splendid tails; Black and Woolly-necked Storks poked through the wetlands; Lesser Whistling-Ducks dozed on the shores; Yellow-footed Green-Pigeons gave their weird, squeaky songs from the trees; and all was biodiverse bliss in Kanha.

In the evening Dimple kindly took many of you to the bridge to learn about the stars of India's night sky and listen to the sounds of the forest.

Day 5

Friday 20th February

Today you all saw at least one Tiger and some of you saw two! Music to my ears! Everyone rode the Kisli elephants to see a fantastic three-year-old female, and some of you – those who until now hadn't seen any Tigers at all – watched as the Tigress moved from her hideout under a lantana bush and wandered along a dry stream bed. She didn't wander far though – I was left stranded on the elephant that was keeping watch over her when the young female moved into the open forest nearby and simply plonked herself down to rest. After the Kisli Tiger-show Tarun's jeep managed to hurry back to Mukki for a second one; here they saw an older female.

All in all it was an excellent day for Tiger-sightings around the park. This morning friends of mine from other lodges saw at least two other Tigers, including the celebrated Lakkargada male who was scratching a tree in the very same meadow where he was seen by one of our Tiger Direct groups in November.

Over lunch, Dimple led the group on a butterfly, caterpillar and chrysalis-spotting walk around Jungle Lodge and shared her tremendous knowledge and love of these beautiful creatures – Common Mormon, Common Crow, Grey Count, Baronet, Orange Oakleaf, Common Sailor...and the afternoon's highlight was a family of Gaur in the gilded light at Sondar Camp. What a day.

And it wasn't over yet. In the evening Dimple and Tarun's kitchen staff gave a display of their cooking skills in the dining room, after which you were all on such a Tiger-high that I had trouble getting you to sit down and eat anything at all.

Day 6

Saturday 21st February

Everybody saw a Tigress *again* today. This time it was the wonderful Minkur female who was found by the mahouts in the Mukki range as she lay dozing in light cover on the bank of a stream. This ten-year old female was first seen as a half-grown cub by Tarun on Valentine's Day in 2000 and since then she's only very rarely allowed herself to be seen by jeeps. She has no problem with elephant though and – with the songs and calls of Greenish and Hume's Leaf Warblers, Common Tailorbirds and Purple Sunbirds in our ears – we paid court to her from the back of the elephants. Simply fantastic!

The highlight of the afternoon was undoubtedly the family of wild dogs, seen at different times and in varying numbers by everyone, finishing their baby-Chital kill in the grass at Bishanpura. But there was plenty more to see too – Gadwall and Teal dabbled in the pools, Red-rumped Swallows swooped over the maidans, Grey Wagtails danced in the mud and the skies were graced by Shikras and Changeable Hawk-Eagles.

Supper this evening was served by candlelight in a clearing in the forest at Jungle Lodge, as a Collared Scops-Owl sang from the trees nearby – a perfect end to a perfect visit to this wonderful park.

Day 7

Sunday 22nd February

Most of the group headed for Nagpur today, on the first leg of their journey home. Dan and Caroline stayed in Kanha for an extension and later wrote to me that they'd had several more fantastic encounters with Tiger and Leopard (lucky things). But for most of you the thrills of the tour had largely come to an end. Black and Black-shouldered Kites and a Short-toed Eagle brightened the drive to Nagpur and oh-so-early the next morning we said our goodbyes at the airport.

Thank you all for a quite wonderful tour. No matter how good the itineraries, the lodges and the local staff, good tours aren't possible without the enthusiasm, flexibility, good humour and interest of the clients. And really good tours aren't possible without the love the clients have for the forests and their fantastic inhabitants. Thanks for making this a *really* good tour.

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Species Lists

Birds (h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			17	18	19	20	21
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	✓	✓
3	Little Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>		✓	✓	✓	
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	✓	✓
5	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	✓				
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Intermediate Egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Indian Pond-Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
11	Asian Openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>	✓				
12	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	✓		✓		✓
13	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>			✓	✓	✓
14	Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptotilos javanicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
15	Black Ibis	<i>Pseudibis papillosa</i>		✓	✓	✓	
16	Lesser Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>			✓	✓	✓
17	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			✓		
18	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			✓	✓	✓
19	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓	✓	✓
20	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓				
22	Oriental Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	✓				
23	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		✓			
25	Long-billed Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	✓				
26	White-rumped Vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	✓		✓		
27	Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>			✓		
28	Crested Serpent-Eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
30	White-eyed Buzzard	<i>Butastur teesa</i>	✓				
31	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciatus</i>		✓	✓		
32	Changeable Hawk-Eagle	<i>Spizaetus cirrhatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓				
34	Painted Francolin	<i>Francolinus pictus</i>			h		✓
35	Grey Francolin	<i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i>	h				
36	Jungle Bush-Quail	<i>Perdica asiatica</i>	✓				
37	Red Spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix spadicea</i>			✓	✓	✓
38	Red Junglefowl	<i>Gallus gallus</i>			✓	✓	✓
39	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
40	White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>			✓		
41	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓		
42	Stone Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		h			✓
43	Yellow-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
44	Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	✓	
46	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓		
47	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		✓		✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			17	18	19	20	21
48	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>			✓		
49	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>			✓	✓	
50	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓		
51	Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Yellow-footed Green-Pigeon	<i>Treron phoenicoptera</i>	✓		✓	✓	
53	Alexandrine Parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Plum-headed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Common Hawk-Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus varius</i>		h	✓	h	h
57	Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Collared Scops Owl	<i>Otus bakkamoena</i>		h		✓	✓
59	Brown Fish Owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>				✓	
60	Mottled Wood Owl	<i>Strix ocellata</i>		✓			
61	Jungle Owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
62	Spotted Owlet	<i>Athene brama</i>			✓		
63	Brown Wood Owl	<i>Ninox scutulata</i>		h			
64	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>			✓		
65	Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	✓	✓			
66	Crested Treeswift	<i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>					✓
67	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			✓	✓	
68	White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
70	Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	✓		✓		
72	Malabar Pied Hornbill	<i>Antracoceros coronatus</i>	✓	h			
73	Indian Grey Hornbill	<i>Ocyrceros birostris</i>	✓	h	✓	✓	✓
74	Brown-headed Barbet	<i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>	✓	h	✓	✓	✓
75	Coppersmith Barbet	<i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>	✓	h	✓	h	h
76	Brown-capped Pygmy-Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos nanus</i>		h			
77	Streak-throated Woodpecker	<i>Picus xanthopygaeus</i>		✓	✓		
78	Black-rumped Flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>	✓		✓	h	✓
79	White-naped Flameback	<i>Chrysocolaptes festivus</i>		✓	✓		
80	Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix grisea</i>	✓				
81	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			✓		✓
82	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓	✓
84	Olive-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>		✓	h		✓
85	Large Cuckoo-shrike	<i>Coracina macei</i>	✓	h	✓	h	h
86	Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>	✓				
87	Long-tailed Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus ethologus</i>			✓		
88	Scarlet Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i>				✓	
89	Red-whiskered Bulbul	<i>Pyconotus jocosus</i>			✓		
90	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pyconotus cafer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Golden-fronted Leafbird	<i>Chloropsis aurifrons</i>	✓				
92	Blue Rock-Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		✓			
93	Orange-headed Thrush	<i>Zoothera citrina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				✓	✓
95	Ashy Prinia	<i>Prinia socialis</i>	✓		✓		
96	Plain Prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>	✓			✓	
97	Blyth's Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>	✓	h			
98	Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>	✓	h	✓	h	h

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			17	18	19	20	21
99	Hume's Leaf-Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus humei</i>	h	h	h	h	h
100	Greenish Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>	h	h	h	h	h
101	Asian Brown Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa daurica</i>			✓		
102	Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>	✓	h	h	✓	
103	Verditer Flycatcher	<i>Eumyias thalassina</i>	✓		✓		
104	Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher	<i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>		✓	h	h	h
105	Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher	<i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i>	h		h		
106	Oriental Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	✓		✓		
107	Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>	✓				
108	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochuros</i>	✓	✓	✓		
109	Siberian Stonechat	<i>Saxicola (torquata) maura</i>			✓		✓
110	Pied Bushchat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>			✓		
111	Black-naped Monarch	<i>Hypothymis azurea</i>		h		h	h
112	Asian Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Tersiphone paradisi</i>			✓		
113	Indian Scimitar-Babbler	<i>Pomatorhinus horsfieldii</i>			h		
114	Yellow-eyed Babbler	<i>Chrysomma sinense</i>			✓		
115	Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
116	Brown-cheeked Fulvetta	<i>Alcippe poioicephala</i>		h	h		h
117	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	h		✓		
118	Velvet-fronted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta frontalis</i>			✓		
119	Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>	✓	✓	✓		h
120	Thick-billed Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum agile</i>	✓		✓		
121	Oriental White-eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i>	✓	h	h		h
122	Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
123	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>				✓	
124	Bay-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius vittatus</i>	✓				
125	Long-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>	✓				
126	Common Woodshrike	<i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>	✓				
127	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
128	White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caeruleus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
129	Hair-crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus hottentotus</i>		✓	✓		
130	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
131	Rufous Treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
132	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>		✓			
133	Jungle Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
134	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
135	Asian Pied Starling	<i>Gracupica contra</i>		✓			
136	Brahminy Starling	<i>Sturnus pagodarum</i>	✓	✓			
137	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓		
138	Chestnut-shouldered Petronia	<i>Petronia xanthocollis</i>	✓	✓	✓		

Mammals

1	Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
2	Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
3	Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	✓	✓			
4	Common Langur	<i>Presbytis entellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>	✓			✓	✓
6	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
7	Asian Wild Dog	<i>Cuon alpinus</i>	✓				✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			17	18	19	20	21
8	Indian Tree Shrew	<i>Anathana ellioti</i>	✓				
9	Three-striped Palm-Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
10	Indian Giant Flying Squirrel	<i>Petaurista philippensis</i>	✓		✓		
11	Gaur	<i>Bos gaurus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Barasingha	<i>Cervus duvaucelii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Chital	<i>Axis axis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Barking Deer	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	✓				
17	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓