

India - Just Tigers!

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 March - 9 April 2008

Report compiled by Chris Kehoe



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Day 1

Friday 28th March

Outbound from UK

Group members departed from various UK airports on Emirates Airlines flights to Dubai from where there was an onward connection to New Delhi..

Day 2

Saturday 29th March

Arrival in New Delhi, sightseeing in New Delhi

Weather: sunny and hot

The inbound flight from Dubai arrived approximately on time and Dilip was in the arrivals hall at Indira Ghandi International Airport to greet the group and escort them by bus to the rather grand Trident Hilton Hotel nearby. The afternoon was spent sightseeing in New Delhi, including visits to India Gate and the Ghandi Museum.

Day 3

Sunday 30th March

En route to Jabalpur by overnight sleeper

Weather: sunny and hot

After a morning of leisure at the hotel we checked out at 11.15 and made our way to Nizarrudin Station where we had an excellent buffet lunch in the station restaurant before boarding our overnight sleeper at 15.00.

The train left on time (actually a little early) at 15.25 and we began to chug south through the Delhi suburbs. Packed dinners were eaten on board before we retired to our bunks for the night.

Day 4

Monday 31st March

Arrival at Jabalpur; transfer to Tuli Tiger Resort near Kanha NP; Kanha NP

Weather: sunny and hot

Our train pulled into Jabalpur station almost on time at 06.45 and we quickly boarded five vehicles that delivered us to Narmada Jackson's Hotel where rooms were available for a quick wash and change before we sat down to a buffet breakfast. Back in the vehicles we commenced the four hour drive to Kanha at 08.30, a journey punctuated by a quick drinks stop near Mandla. Arriving at Tuli Tiger Resort we checked-in quickly and soon settled down to a buffet lunch.

At 14.45 we boarded five jeeps that delivered us to the National Park entrance fifteen minutes away and commenced the first of our game drives in the park. By the time we exited at the closing time of 18.30 all had had encounters with some of the commoner species in the park such as Gaur (particularly common at this season), Spotted and Sambar Deer and Grey Langur Monkeys and one jeep had a brief encounter with a tiger crossing the road, a taste of things to come, or so everyone else hoped! Throughout our time at Kanha the Sal Trees were in flower and fragranced the air with their sweet scent everywhere we went.

Day 5

Tuesday 1st April

Kanha NP

Weather: sunny and hot

A knock on the door at 05.00 preceded tea and coffee at 05.15 and departure for the park at 05.30, a pattern that would be the norm for the remainder of our stay. Although technically open at 06.00, park bureaucracy prevented entry before 06.10 (also a recurring theme!) and we then split up to follow the routes allocated to each jeep by the park authorities. No tigers were seen on any of the routes taken before breakfast but by the time we gathered at the central meeting point of the park news came through that each of the elephant teams in the park (three in all) had managed to locate tigers and that tiger shows (in which visitors are taken by elephant to see the great cats) were on offer.

The decision was made to head for the closest elephants in order to maximise the chances of success (tigers do sometimes move off causing the show to be abandoned) and within half an hour we had all been taken to see a rather sleepy male tiger nearby. Along with six other tigers in the park this individual was sporting a radio collar (part of a research project aimed at gaining a better understanding of the behaviour of these animals) though it was fairly discreet and certainly didn't hinder our enjoyment of what, for most, was their first encounter with a wild tiger.

Back at the resort there was time to rest and reflect on the events of the morning before lunch at 13.00 and a return to the park at 15.00.

Our evening drive resulted in no tiger sightings though one jeep did have a surprise encounter with a Jerdon's Baza flying over, probably the first ever record in Central India, while everyone else contented themselves with views of the numerous herbivores on show (including several Wild Boar) and enjoyed the scenic delights of the park.

Day 6

Wednesday 2nd April

Kanha NP

Weather: sunny and hot

Prior to breakfast at the park centre at Kanha we had to content ourselves with the usual herbivores and birds but word soon came through that two teams of elephants had located tigers, a collared male near Kanha meadows and a mating pair near the Kisli Gate. Depending on the time of arrival of the jeeps for breakfast a decision was made by the drivers about which of the two tiger shows would be most appropriate and everyone saw at least one tiger from elephant back this morning. One jeep even had the chance to pay extra and squeezed in both tiger shows. We were back at Tuli by 11.00 before the temperature rose too high.

During our evening drive two jeeps had encounters with tigers (both somewhat distant, at least compared to the views from elephant back) and one jeep came across a pack of Dhole near the meadows. Everyone had had another good day!

Day 7

Thursday 3rd April

Kanha NP

Weather: sunny and hot

We once more concentrated on the Kanha and Kisli areas of the park and had breakfast at Kanha. Our morning drive resulted in sightings of a Sloth Bear for one jeep and a single tiger which walked along the road followed by the vehicle for about 20 minutes before detouring off into the jungle. The elephants failed to locate any accessible tigers today, and the park director declared the mating pair out of bounds as they can behave rather unpredictably! During the evening drive most jeeps had a fairly distant view of a tiger slumbering at the meadows and some had prolonged views of a small pack of Dhole nearby.

Day 8

Friday 4th April

Kanha NP

Weather: sunny and hot

Our morning drive produced a single tiger rather briefly (seen by two jeeps) and the usual large numbers of herbivores and birds. It was quite a surprise to see so many vehicles at Kanha a breakfast time, a sure sign that the weekend was near. During the evening drive a couple of jeeps again came across a pack of Dhole and others had rather fleeting views of a tiger in the vicinity of the meadows

Day 9

Saturday 5th April

Kanha NP

Weather: mainly sunny and hot but with rain during our afternoon drive when rather cool

For a bit of a change we headed towards the Mukki Gate this morning and bumped into a couple of Sarus Cranes in the meadows there (the first recorded inside the park for about 15 years we were told). En route one jeep had a close encounter with a Sloth Bear on the road. The Mukki elephants failed to locate any tigers but a couple of our jeeps enjoyed views of a pack of Dhole while everyone enjoyed the relative tranquillity of this quiet and little visited corner of the park where a large herd of Barasingha gave particularly good views as we were eating breakfast.

Our return journey to the resort involved a drive through the villages adjacent to the park allowing an insight into the simple but in many ways rather pleasant seeming lives of rural Indians in this fertile part of Madhya Pradesh.

Our evening drive commenced in bright sunshine but dark clouds soon appeared and the heavens opened for an hour or so. Fortunately most of the jeeps managed to get their plastic rain covers on in time to prevent everyone getting a soaking. Once the rain had stopped a couple of our jeeps came across a tiger in the meadows where it was intermittently visible at some distance in the vicinity of a kill.

Day 10

Sunday 6th April

Kanha NP

Weather: sunny and hot

In order to try to avoid the weekend crowds we decided to have breakfast on a high plateau overlooking the park but as it turned out just one jeep made it there as everyone else was distracted by news of tiger shows – the tiger we visited lingered just long enough for all to see it from the elephants. Those who did make it to the plateau enjoyed excellent panoramic views of the park to compensate.

During our evening drive two jeeps had an encounter with a tiger in the meadows and most saw a pack of Dhole along the entrance road as we were exiting the park just before nightfall. Our final evening at Tuli Tiger Resort was enlivened by the appearance of some local tribal dancers.

Day 11

Monday 7th April

Final morning at Kanha; overnight train to Agra

A final game drive this morning resulted in most people having a close encounter with a tiger from the jeeps. Back at the resort there was time for a shower and some final packing before we sat down for lunch at 13.00. After saying our goodbyes at Tuli we returned to Jabalpur (with a drinks stop en route) and arrived at Jabalpur Station in ample time to catch our overnight sleeper to Agra. Everything ran on time and we had dinner on the train.

Day 12

Tuesday 12th April

Sightseeing in Agra; drive to Delhi or Bharatpur

Our train pulled into Agra Cant Station a little late at 09.00 but we were soon on our way to the nearby Mughal Sheraton where rooms were available for a wash and change. After a leisurely breakfast we visited the nearby Taj Mahal in the company of local guide Beebee who explained some of the history behind the Taj and took the group inside to see the tomb. After taking plenty of photos we made our way to a large shop where a demonstration of marble inlay work was watched before we spent some time admiring, or purchasing, some of the merchandise on offer.

A leisurely lunch was taken at a nearby restaurant before we made our way to Agra Fort. Beebee led a walk around the historic fort and we then returned to the Mughal Hotel and had an hour or so to freshen up before saying our goodbyes to those group members who were undertaking an extension to Ranthambore with Dilip and travelling to Bharatpur for an overnight stay. At 16.30 we boarded our bus for the rather long drive to Delhi where we arrived at the Ashok Country Resort near the airport soon after 22.00. Rooms were available for a wash and change and time available for some final packing before we made our way to the airport soon after midnight.

Day 13

Wednesday 13th April

Inbound to UK

Our flight to Dubai left on time at 04.15 and arrived a little ahead of time at 06.00 (local) which gave ample time for everyone to catch their onward connections to various UK airports.

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Species Lists

All records refer to Kanha National Park unless otherwise stated

Mammals

(Royal Bengal) Tiger *Panthera tigris tigris*

Sightings were very good on this tour with a total of at least seven different individuals seen and multiple sightings of some animals. Everybody managed to see tigers from elephant back at least twice (including a particularly obliging mating pair) and everyone also saw one or more from the jeeps. A surprising proportion of the tigers seen were males (females being more usually encountered), perhaps as a result of some recent changes that have seen a couple of old, long established males usurped by younger animals. We had several encounters with neck-collared individuals, part of an ongoing research project taking place in the park. At least one tiger was seen each day with a maximum of four seen on one date.

Jungle Cat *Felis chaus kelaarita* or *kutas*

There were a total of three sightings, about half the group seeing at least one

Dhole (Asiatic Wild Dog) *Cuon alpinus dukhunensis*

Everyone managed some good views of these often very elusive animals which were seen on four dates. Probably two packs were involved as seven individuals near Mukki contained several pups while groups of 4-7 at Kanha did not

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*

Everyone had encounters with at least a couple of animals

Sloth Bear *Melursus ursinus*

Four sightings represented a good haul, three were briefly on roads and one in the undergrowth, about half of the group members connected with this elusive animal

Indian Grey Mongoose or Common Mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii*

Mongoose were seen on about half of our days at Kanha NP

'Northern Plains' Grey Langur *Semnopithecus entellus*

Very common

Rhesus Macaque *Macaca mulatta*

A few along the road from Jabalpur to Kanha were the first, thereafter this largely urban species was found in small numbers at Agra

Barasingha or (Kanha) Swamp Deer *Cervus duvancelii branderi*

A fenced enclosure at Kanha NP contained small numbers but we had regular encounters with wilder looking groups including an impressive gathering of over 30 at Mukki. Kanha NP was initially set up to protect this very rare and localised species, the subspecies *branderi* now occurs nowhere else

Sambar *Cervus unicolor*

Although seen everyday, numbers were much lower than for the next species and most animals were spotted lurking in quite dense forest, probably a shrewd move as this is the preferred prey of tigers

Chital or Spotted Deer *Cervus axis*

Very common, an open country species

Indian Muntjac or Barking Deer *Muntiacus muntjak*

A handful were encountered, this species is much more retiring than its larger cousins, often seen only briefly before disappearing into dense jungle

Nilgai *Boselaphus tragocamelus*

A couple were seen from the train near Agra

Gaur (Indian 'Bison') *Bos gaurus*

Large numbers of this spectacularly huge bovine were seen on a daily basis, the animals being attracted to lower areas of the park this late in the season

Eurasian Wild Boar *Sus scrofula*

Quite common at Kanha NP where up to dozen were seen most days

Five-striped Ground Squirrel *Funambulus pennanti*

Abundant everywhere away from the densest natural forests, even in the centre of Delhi and Agra

Indian Flying Fox *Pteropus giganteus*

Small numbers were seen on a couple of occasions near the first entrance gate to the park

Indian Giant Flying Squirrel *Petaurista philippensis*

Two were seen by one jeep as it exited the park one evening

Birds

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis capensis*

A couple were seen regularly

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

Common and widespread at most wetlands

Great Egret *Egretta alba modesta*

Common and widespread at suitably large wetlands

Intermediate Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia intermedia*

One or two were often seen on one particular pool

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea cinerea*/'*rectirostris*'

A couple of singles were seen occasionally

'Eastern' Cattle Egret *Bubulcus (ibis) coromandus*

Good numbers were in agricultural land adjacent to the park with many more seen from moving trains

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii grayii*

A few were seen on most ponds and small lakes

Striated Heron *Butorides striata javanica*

One was seen on two dates

Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus episcopus*

Three or four were noted

Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*

Singles were seen on a couple of occasions

Indian Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosus*

One or two were occasionally seen or heard

Lesser Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*

Up to 50 were occasionally seen

Jerdon's Baza *Aviceda jerdoni*

One flew over near Indri one afternoon; certainly the first record for Kanha National Park and probably the first ever recorded in Central India. Although usually regarded as a resident species, there are enough out of range records in India and SE Asia to suggest that at least some are migratory, a migrant is probably the best explanation for this most unexpected record

Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus ruficollis*

Three or four were recorded

Black-winged or Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus vociferus*

One or twos were seen on several occasions

Black Kite *Mihus migrans govinda*

Although abundant in urban Delhi and, to a lesser extent, Jabalpur and Agra none were seen in more rural areas

White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*

One or two were seen on a couple of occasions

Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus*

Singles were on three occasions

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

A couple flew over at the Taj Mahal

Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela cheela*

One or two were seen or heard most days

Shikra *Accipiter badius cenchroides/ dussumieri*

Up to 15 per day were seen, a surprisingly large number

Crested (Changeable) Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus (cirrhatius) cirrhatius*

One or two birds were seen on several dates

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*

One, presumably a migrant, was seen on one date

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus*

Just one was seen

Jungle Bush Quail *Perdica asiatica asiatica*

A small group were seen on one date

Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus murghi*

At least a couple were seen on each drive, many more were heard

India or Blue Peafowl (Peacock) *Pavo cristatus*

Quite common, some males were displaying

Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*

Two near the Mukki Gate were reportedly the first recorded inside the park for about 15 years! A couple more were seen from the passing bus near Mathura

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus phoenicurus*

A couple were seen at various wetlands

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus indica*

Small numbers were at a couple of wetland areas

Indian (Eurasian) Stone Curlew *Burbinus (oedinenus) indicus*

Two or three were regularly seen in the meadows

Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus indicus*

Quite common in the meadows, a rather noisy species

Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus*

A small handful of these localised arid country specialists were found in the meadows

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Singles were seen occasionally at a couple of wetlands

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus himantopus*

A few were seen from the train

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*

Feral pigeons were seen in all urban areas

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis erythrocephala*

Up to 10 per day (but more normally just one or two) were seen

Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis suratensis*

Common everywhere

Eurasian Collared-dove *Streptopelia decaocto decaocto*

Small numbers were recorded daily

'Southern' Yellow-footed Green Pigeon *Treron phoenicopterus chlorigaster*

Small numbers were seen most days

Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria eupatria/nipalensis*

A handful were seen and heard

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri borealis/manillensis*

Common in Delhi and Agra but rather scarce at Kanha

Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala cyanocephala*

Commonly seen during game drives

'Southern' Greater Coucal *Centropus (sinensis) parroti*

A handful were recorded most days

Common Hawk-Cuckoo *Hierococyx varius varius*

Far more often hear than seen but a couple were observed

Sirkeer Malkoha *Taccocua leschenaulti leschenaulti*

One was seen on one date

Asian Koel *Endynamys scolopaceus scolopaceus*

Far more often heard than seen but several showed well at various sites, a particularly noisy individual called each morning near our rooms

Indian (Collared) Scops Owl *Otus (letitia) bakkamoena gangeticus/marathae*

One was seen on one date

Brown Fish Owl *Bubo zeylonensis leschenault*

One was seen one evening by a couple of jeeps

Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum radiatum*

At least one or two were seen on most drives

Spotted Owlet *Athene brama brama/indica*

One or two were present near the entrance on several occasions

Little or House Swift *Apus affinis affinis/ nivalensis*

Quite common over Delhi and Agra

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis atthis (pallas?) / bengalensis*

One was seen occasionally at the meadows

White-breasted or White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis smyrnensis/fusca*

Quite common, seen on all drives

Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis orientalis*

Seen during each drive in small numbers

Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis benghalensis/ indica*

Several were seen on all drives

Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops epops/ ceylonensis*

Three were seen and others heard

Malabar Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros coronatus*

Singles were seen on two occasions

Indian Grey Hornbill *Tockus birostris*

A handful were seen most days

Brown-headed Barbet *Megalaima zeylanica inornata*

Very common, though much more often heard than seen, also heard in Agra

Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima aemacephala indica*

Quite common and widespread, many more were heard than seen though several gave good views

Rufous Woodpecker *Ceelus brachyrus*

Singles were seen on two occasions

Streak-throated Woodpecker *Picus xanthopygaeus*

Three of four were seen

Black-rumped Flameback *Dinopium benghalense benghalense/dilutum*

A couple were seen most days

White-naped Flameback *Chrysocolaptes festivus festivus*

Up to three or four were seen on three dates

Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii filifera*

A pair were regularly seen at the meadows

Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus*

One was with Red-rumped Swallows over the meadows one evening

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica erythrogygia*

Three or four were seen on one date

Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus rufulus*

Small numbers were around the meadows

Large Cuckooshrike *Coracina novaehollandiae novaehollandiae*

At least a couple were seen most days

Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus cinnamomeus*

A couple were briefly in trees at Tuli Tiger Resort

Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*

A handful were seen, mainly in flight

Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer cafer*

Very common and widespread

Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*

A noisy pair were regularly seen Tuli Tiger Resort, others were heard

Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*

A couple of late migrants were heard

Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis saularis*

Common and quite widespread

White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*

Singing birds were seen on four occasions, others were heard

Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata indicus/maurus*

A handful were seen in the meadows

Brown Rock Chat *Cercomela fusca*

A couple were noted at the Taj Mahal

Indian Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii horsfieldii*

Although heard with some regularity in bamboo thickets this rather skulking species often proved hard to see well

Yellow-eyed Babbler *Chrysomma sinense hypoleucum*

Two were seen on one occasion

Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus striatus/sindiana/orientalis*

These busy and characterful birds were very common and widespread

Brown-cheeked Fulvetta *Alcippe poioicephala brucei*

Quite common in the bamboo areas though not always easy to see well

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis cursitans*

A handful were seen in the meadows

Grey-breasted Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii hodgsonii*

Small numbers were seen quite regularly

Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis socialis*

One or two were seen

Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata inornata*

Overall this was the commonest Prinia with daily encounters in the meadows

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius guzuratis*

Quite common and widespread

Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*

Very small numbers were seen and heard

Hume's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*

A few lingering birds were heard or seen briefly

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus*

Another species heard more often than seen though several showed well in the grounds of Tuli Tiger Resort

Great Tit *Parus major stupae*

Small numbers were seen most days

Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis*

Two or three were seen briefly

Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos erythrorhynchos*

Rather common, though the large majority of those seen were hurtling overhead calling

Purple Sunbird *Nectarina asiatica asiatica*

Very common and widespread

Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa palpebrosa*

Quite common and widespread, easiest to see at Tuli Tiger Resort

Indian (House) Sparrow *Passer (domesticus) indicus*

Small numbers were found in urban contexts

Chestnut-shouldered Petronia *Petronia xanthocollis*

Small numbers were found in drier areas

Brahminy Starling *Temenuchus pagodarum*

This attractive species was seen regularly in the grounds of Tuli Tiger Resort and elsewhere

Asian Pied Starling *Gracula contra contra*

Just a few were seen, mostly at Tuli Tiger Resort

Common Mynah *Acridotheres tristis tristis*

Common and widespread

Bank Mynah *Acridotheres ginginianus*

Small numbers were on the lawns at the Taj Mahal

Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*

At least a couple were seen each day

Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*

Common and widespread away from denser forest

Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*

Three or four migrants were seen on two dates

White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caeruleus caeruleus*

A handful were seen

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus paradiseus*

Common, a few were seen on all drives and many more heard

Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda vagabunda*

Quite common, seen daily

House Crow *Corvus splendens splendens*

Common to abundant in urban areas but replaced by the next species in rural contexts

'Indian' Jungle Crow or Large-billed Crow *Corvus (macrorhynchos) culminatus*

Common at Kanha but scarce elsewhere