

Go Slow...in Tiger Country

Naturetrek Tour Report

6th – 16th November 2022



Female Tiger sleeping



Indian Giant Squirrel



Nilgai



Gaur

Tour report kindly compiled by tour participants Ken Edwards and Gavin Malloch
Photos by Ken Edwards, Elaine Edwards and Jesan T Das



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Days 1-3

We arrived at the luxurious Claridges hotel in New Delhi at 3.00 in the morning. After a few hours' sleep we spent the rest of the next day relaxing, taking short walks, sitting by the pool. The following day was scheduled for a visit to old Delhi. Rahul took us in a minibus, and we visited the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid mosque, a vendor of spices, the Gandhi Memorial and had a couple of rickshaw rides. Going through into old Delhi was like traversing a portal into a different world: from the Lutyens-designed avenues, parks and elegant houses of the government and embassy district straight into noise, colours, aromas, bustle, poverty. The Red Fort is an immense structure originally built by the Mughal Empire in the 17th century. At the mosque we were almost the only westerners and therefore the objects of attention; we were politely accosted by some of the Indian visitors from out of town asking for selfies.

Days 4-10

We boarded an internal flight from Delhi to Bhopal early morning, which meant a very early start for the group! We got on the plane safely thanks to Raj, Naturetrek's Delhi representative. On arrival at Bhopal, our cars were waiting to take us on the three-hour trip to Reni Pani Jungle Lodge, Satpura National Park. We had been apprehensive because previous tour reports had mentioned bad roads, but the roads were fine and the ride was smooth, apart from having to dodge the inevitable cows that have priority everywhere, even on dual-carriageway roads. There were also Langurs and Rhesus Macaques on the road!

Reni Pani Jungle Lodge is a superb and well-run facility nestling on the outskirts of the forest. We were greeted by the manager, Erwin, and also by our naturalist guide, Jesan. The main building houses the bar and restaurant, with a swimming pool beyond (where it was reported three Leopards recently came to drink). In another building is the shop and the library, the only place where limited wifi is available. Our cabins were spacious and quiet, with big wooden verandas, comfortable beds, excellent bathroom facilities with a choice of indoor and outdoor hot showers.

We had daily four-to-five-hour drives into the National Park, alternating between four morning drives and two evening ones, a nice balance. We were driven by Jesan in an open-sided jeep for half an hour to the edge of the Tawa Reservoir, where we dismounted and boarded small ferries to take us across the water to the entrance to the National Park itself. Here we transferred to a similar Satpura National Park vehicle with a local driver and naturalist in the front seats – Jesan remaining with us as guide because the local employees had little English.

It had been impressed on us that, despite the Tiger Country reference in the tour's title (and the fact that the National Park is also called Satpura Tiger Reserve) we should not expect to see Tigers, as they are shy and unhabituated to human beings here, unlike in other reserves in India. However, Jesan reported there had been an alert that a Tiger had been spotted on our first day, so he had some hopes and the guides were keeping their eyes and ears open for signs and alarm calls from prey animals.

Satpura is covered by mixed deciduous forest and is decidedly hilly, the trails winding up and down as well as side to side, occasionally dipping into a small ford over a stream. Teak predominates in part of the forest; other

significant trees pointed out were Mango, Tamarind, Satinwood, Crocodile Bark Tree, Gooseberry Tree and the extraordinary Ghost Tree which sheds its papery bark twice a year.

Among the herbivores we observed in profusion were: Chital or Spotted Deer, a small, delicate species resembling our Fallow Deer; the larger Sambal Deer (a favourite prey of the Tiger); Nilgai or Bluebuck, the largest Asian antelope, the males being blue-grey in colour; and Gaur, also a favoured Tiger prey. We were told the Gaur is the ancestor of the now extinct Aurochs, the wild cattle that once roamed Europe. Seeing them was like watching a prehistoric cave painting come to life. They are the largest bovid species occurring today. Mature males are almost black, the females and younger males brown. We had a very close view of a herd, with juvenile males locking horns in play fight. Jesan told us these combats are designed to establish dominance relationships and avoid real fights; which, if they do occur, run the risk of death or serious injury.

We were also keen to see the famous Indian Giant Squirrel, and were not disappointed, with two excellent sightings of these richly coloured, long-tailed rodents in the trees.

A big highlight was several sightings on separate days of a female Sloth Bear foraging in the forest with her two nine-month cubs. On one occasion, our jeep came to a halt on the path separating the mother from the two cubs, which caused a little concern; but the cubs, one by one, plucked up the courage to cross the path in front of our vehicle and rejoin their mother with much grunting and snuffling. These bears, we were told, pose the most danger to local villagers – more so even than the Leopard, because their sight is poor and there is always the risk of their coming upon humans unexpectedly. Like most bears, they are omnivorous, but are particularly fond of termites, which they suck in through the considerable gap between their front teeth.

We caught a glimpse of a Leopard one morning, stalking the undergrowth about a hundred metres from our jeep and momentarily climbing a tree to have a good look at us before descending and moving on. We also saw Wild Pigs and a juvenile Mugger Crocodile.

We had been hoping to spot Indian Wild Dogs or Dhole, but were unlucky in this.

Birds there were in profusion, and Gavin, our birder on the trip, was able to compile a complete checklist of species observed, in conjunction with our guide Jesan. His summary follows below.

But what of the Tiger? We had a report that a female had been observed with two cubs in the vicinity (the animal had been given the name Firebreak Female because of where she was spotted). But despite observing clear, fresh prints in the mud at the side of the path, and once hearing repeated alarm calls from the Langurs in the trees, we didn't see anything for two days.

Then suddenly, on our fourth day trip, it happened. We had stopped momentarily to observe a Wood Spider, in the middle of its immense web slung between two trees, overpowering and killing a butterfly – the most action we had seen that day. The jeep started up again and moved up a hill. As we breasted the top, the female park employee in the driver's seat suddenly called to the driver to stop immediately. And there she was: a beautiful five-year-old female Tiger lying asleep right in our path – we had come perilously close to running her over!

After two days of hushed stops listening for sounds and combing the undergrowth for sightings, this encounter was almost comical in its suddenness. The Tiger was no more than three metres from the front of our vehicle. And she was not going to have her sleep disturbed. If we made a sound, her ears would prick up, and once or twice she actually opened her eyes and looked at us then went back to sleep. Once she turned over with her paws in the air like a kitten then settled on her other side.

We couldn't get past, and there was no sign she was going to get up. So after about 20 minutes, our driver decided to back the jeep down the slope until he could find a place to turn round, and we said goodbye to Firebreak Female. Where were her cubs? Were they safe? We didn't know.

By common consent, this was the highlight of our trip.

Our morning safaris started in darkness at 6.00am, dawn beginning to break as we crossed the misty water. We were provided with blankets for the cold (and even with hot-water bottles on the later trips as the temperature was dropping) but the return was in bright sunshine and we were welcomed back to Reni Pani with refreshing wet towels and glasses of iced tea. In the middle of each safari we stopped for a picnic breakfast and a comfort break. The two afternoon safaris started in sunshine at 2:00pm with the sun setting before we returned, and on those occasions the welcome involved hot towels and hot masala tea.

Reni Pani Lodge was a great place to stay, and we were treated like royalty. The meals were excellent and abundant. Jesan's knowledge of the local wildlife and his passion for communicating that knowledge to us was outstanding. We have him to thank for helping us with some of the photos here attached, as none of us are experienced photographers. We particularly enjoyed his showing of some of his own videos of animal and bird behaviour, screened in the library from his laptop – even though the one of a Leopard consuming a Langur from the head down was a gruesome sight. Leopards consider Langur head a delicacy.

Days 4-10 – the birds

The bird list is not long but packed with quality. Around the Reni Pani site we spotted spectacular birds like Tickell's Blue, Grey-headed Canary and Verditer Flycatchers and there were tens of Red-breasted Flycatchers including one definite Taiga Flycatcher, loads of Hume's Warblers and Tailorbirds, which had a few Greenish in amongst them plus familiar, but greyer, Great Tits and over-wintering Lesser Whitethroats. We also saw a Black-naped Monarch next to the restaurant and Barred Buttonquail next to where the jeep drives started which was also the denizen of Bay-backed and Long-tailed Shrikes.

In the forest we had to work harder but seemed to see something different every day. Memorable sightings include a Crested Serpent Eagle looking straight at us followed by a Variable Hawk-Eagle happy to pose in a low branch followed by a fly pass by a Grey-headed Fish Eagle. When the sun came out in the mornings, the graceful Crested Treeswifts took to the air, the Brown-capped Pygmy and Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers started pecking away and Barbets and Drongos – including Greater Racquet-tailed – became active. With patience we also dug out Painted Spurfowl, Small Minivet and Orange-headed Thrush. There was always something to see though, be that the 'naughty-boy' Jungle Babblers, the parakeets (Ring-necked, Alexandrine and Plum-headed), the Red-vented Bulbuls and the Rufous Treepies, always up to something.

In the farms between Satpura and Reni Pani we saw Green Bee-eaters and Indian Rollers a-plenty, alongside Rufous-tailed and Ashy-crowned Finch Larks, but the star bird was a Stoliska's Bushchat (a real rarity that should have been in Gujarat). We finally identified a nearby *Aquila* eagle as a Great or Indian Spotted Eagle enabling us to end on twelve raptors for the trip.

Day 11

All too soon it was time to say goodbye and return home.

Our drivers arrived to transport us back to Bhopal in two cars, right after the final safari, which didn't provide much that was new other than several excellent sightings of Crested Serpent Eagle. The idea was to stop off shortly before Bhopal at Bimbhetka to view the prehistoric cave paintings, but in the event we might have done better to omit this stop, fascinating as it was, because time was getting short. It turned out that the centre of Bhopal had been completely cordoned off for the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, and our cars were held up in very heavy traffic as our drivers tried to find our way round to the airport via the old town. Our promised meal at the Jehan Numa Palace had to be called off and we had to make do with a packed dinner before boarding the flight to Delhi.

It was therefore a rather rushed ending to what had been a fabulous tour. Raj was there to greet us at Delhi Airport and we were deposited at the Pullman Hotel nearby at 1.00am. Not much time for sleep – up at 5.30 to be sure of catching the morning BA flight to London.

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Birds

English name	Comments
Barred Buttonquail	
Painted Spurfowl	
Grey Junglefowl	
Indian Peafowl	
Bar-headed Goose	
Ruddy Shelduck	
Knob-billed Duck	
White-naped Woodpecker - H	only seen by guide
Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker	aka Black-backed Flameback
Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	
Yellow-crowned Woodpecker	
Coppersmith Barbet	
Brown-headed Barbet	
Indian Grey Hornbill	
Malabar Pied Hornbill	
Common Hoopoe	
Indian Roller	
Common Kingfisher	
White breasted Kingfisher	
Stork-billed Kigfisher	
Green Bee-eater	
Asian Koel - H	Heard only as we were distracted by a Leopard!
Greater Coucal	
Rose-ringed Parakeet	
Alexandrine Parakeet	
Plum-headed Parakeet	
Crested Treeswift	
Mottled Wood Owl	
Jungle Owlet	
Spotted Owlet	
Savanah Nightjar	
Rock Pigeon	
Spotted Dove	
Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	
White-breasted Waterhen	
Red-wattled Lapwing	
River Lapwing	
River Tern	
Eastern Osprey	
Black Kite	
Black-shouldered Kite	

Grey-headed Fish Eagle	
Long-billed (Indian) Vulture	
Crested Serpent Eagle	very good views
Shikra	
White-eyed Buzzard	
Greater (Indian) Spotted Eagle	after some research and seeing photos I now know the Aquila eagle we saw was this species
Changeable Hawk-Eagle	
Booted Eagle	Gavin only on trip back to Bhopal
Common Kestrel	
Darter	
Great Cormorant	
Indian Cormorant	
Little Cormorant	
Little Egret	
Eastern Cattle Egret	split from Western Cattle Egret
Great Egret	
Chinese Pond Heron	
Grey Heron	
Black-headed Ibis	outskirts of Bhopal
Red-naped Ibis	Dehli
Wooly-necked Stork	
Painted Stork	Tawa river - GM only
Asian Openbill	Tawa river - GM only
Bay-backed Shrike	
Long-tailed Shrike	
Rufous Treepie	
Large-billed Crow	
House Crow	
Black-hooded Oriole	
Large Cuckooshrike	
Small Minivet	
White-throated Fantail	
White-browed Fantail	
Black Drongo	
Ashy Drongo	
White-breasted Drongo	
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	
Asian Paradise Flycatcher	Gavin only
Common Iora	
Black-naped Monarch	
Common Woodshrike	
Orange-headed Thrush	
Taiga Flycatcher	

Red-breasted Flycatcher	
Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher	
Verditer Flycatcher	
Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	
Oriental Magpie-Robin	
Indian Robin	
Black Redstart	Tibettan subspecies
Stoliczka's Bushchat	vagrant from Gujarrat/Rajasthan
Common Stonechat	
Common Mynah	
Brahminy Starling	Gavin only on journey from Bhopal
Great Tit	
Dusky Crag Martin	
Wire-tailed Swallow	
Streak-throated Swallow	
Red-whiskered Bulbul	Delhi and on road
Red-vented Bulbul	abundant
Grey-breasted Prinia	
Plain Prinia	
Zitting Cisticola	
Common Tailorbird	
Common Chiffchaff	
Hume's Warbler	
Sulphur-bellied Warbler	guide only
Greenish Warbler	
Jungle Babbler	abundant
Ashy-crowned Sparrow lark	
Rufous-tailed Lark	
House Sparrow	
White-browed Wagtail	
Grey Wagtail	
Paddyfield Pipit	
Tree Pipt	
Red Avadavat	
Scaly-breasted Munia	