

Jungles and Wetlands of Northern India

Wildlife Trip Report Nov 26 – Dec 10 2017.

Day One and Two

This was our second trip to India in 2017. The tour included five clients and led by Richard Baines. All photographs in this report are of the trip. Arriving in Delhi at 0900 on the overnight flight from Heathrow, gave us time to explore Lodhi Gardens before we caught the afternoon train to Ramnagar. Lodhi Garden in central Delhi is a wonderful first taste of India with lots of wildlife. Small groups of **Black Kites** sat in trees by the temple whilst **Indian Palm Squirrels** dashed across our feet. Every time we visit the garden something new pops up, this time it was a **Small Indian Mongoose** hunting for prey. Our first destination was Jungle Jim's (JJ's) Retreat where we would be staying for five nights. JJ's is ideally placed in the buffer zone of Corbett National Park (NP) with some great habitat just outside our lodges. The jungle garden is a great place for learning and photographing common birds and other scarcer Himalayan species which spend the winter in the area. Small flocks of **Yellow-fronted Greenfinch** from the higher Himalayas mingled with resident **Red-whiskered Bulbul** and wintering **Crimson Sunbirds**. Two **Collared Scops Owls** roosting in Bamboo give great views of their under carriage!



View from the jungle garden watchtower (photo by Richard Baines)



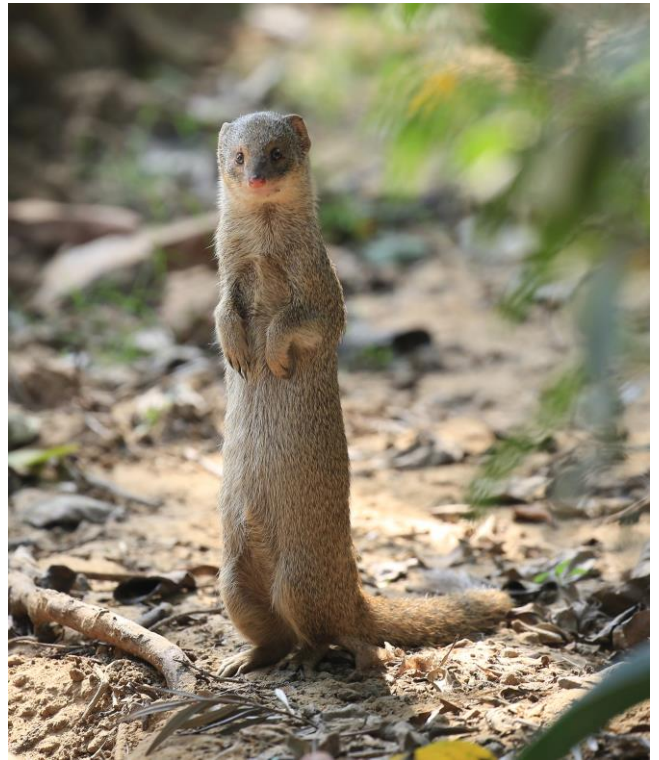
The restaurant at JJ's (photo by Richard Baines)

An afternoon drive into Corbett NP on the Bijrani drive was our first taste of wild landscapes and native forest. **Spotted, Barking and Samba Deer** crept through the jungle occasionally giving distinctive alarm calls as Tigers roamed the undergrowth. Six huge **Great Hornbill** crashed through the branches of a fruit tree whilst nearby a superb **White-tailed Rubythroat** skulked in the grassland.

As evening drew closer we ended the day with fabulous views of a **Changeable Hawk Eagle** roosting in a dead tree.



Crimson Sunbird male (photo by John Fielding)



Small Indian Mongoose (photo by Richard Baines)



Changeable Hawk Eagle (photo by Richard Baines)

Day Three

Leaving JJ's at dawn with a packed breakfast we headed down to the famous Kosi River in our open topped Jeeps which are ideal for photography and wildlife watching. This iconic river flows south from Nepal and the high Himalayas. No less than five species of Kingfishers awaited us; **Crested Kingfisher**, **Pied Kingfisher**, **White-throated Kingfisher**, **Common Kingfisher** and heard in the distance **Stork-billed Kingfisher**! Sweet incense drifted above the stunning landscape and temple as a group of teenage boys arrived on the bridge dragging a damaged icon. They had travelled 125km to give it a fitting burial in the river.



White-capped Water Redstart (photo by Richard Baines)

By the side of the river we were torn between the jungle behind us where a tiny **Collared Falconet** hunted from the tree tops and the river shoreline where **Plumbeous** and **White-capped Water Redstarts** fed with a **Wallcreeper** amongst the shingle on the side of the river. After lunch we headed for Tumariya Reservoir which after the decent monsoon had a good level of water. Many water birds were seen including **Black-necked Stork** and **Asian Open Billed Stork**. Closer to home only a few hundred meters from our lodges at JJ's fresh Tiger footprints signalled the presence of a nearby killer. Two magnificent **Nilgai**, **Golden Jackal** and several **Indian Thick-knee** watched the jungle from the edge of the river in nervous anticipation...

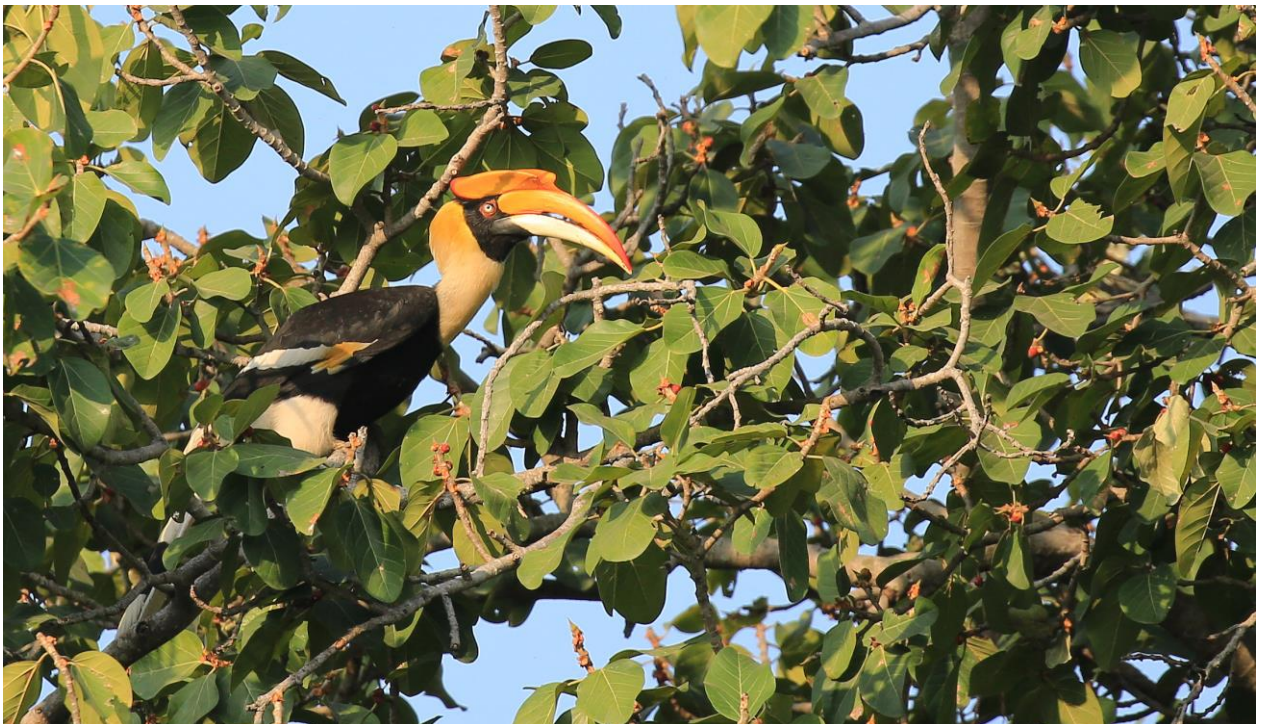




Golden Jackal male (photo by Richard Baines)

Day Four

A full day inside Corbett National Park (NP) in our jeeps. We arrived at the NP gates at dawn registered our passports, full of anticipation but a bit chilly, wrapped in blankets in the open top jeeps and looking forward to a warm sunrise. By the end of the drive we had seen all three Corbett **Hornbills; Oriental Pied, Great and Indian Grey** including an hour watching six huge **Great Hornbills** devour fruit from a **Banyan tree**. A spectacular sight.



Great Hornbill (photo by Richard Baines)

We spent the afternoon in the Jhirna zone a fabulous area for birds and mammals. Hundreds of **Spotted Deer**, **Northern Langur**, **Reisus Mackaks**, **Golden Jackal**, **Porcupine** and a **Jungle Cat**. This was great enough but the best sighting of the day two big black hairy gorgeous **Sloth Bears**! This shy and nocturnal bear is only rarely seen out in the open and when it is, it's usually brief. We were very excited as a male and female sauntered our way through the grass, the male showing the distinctive white crescent on his breast. As soon as they saw us they quickly (in reality not very fast, they are not called Sloth Bear for nothing) lumbered away. Amongst many other highlights were three species of **Vulture**; **Red-headed**, **Cinereous** and **Himalayan Griffon** and a **Rufous Woodpecker**.



Sloth Bear (photo by Richard Baines)

Day Five

This was our last full day exploring the vast expanse of Corbett NP. We spent the morning in a large area of tall grassland and scattered scrub in the Dhela Zone. This is a relatively new landscape created/restored from commercial agriculture. The grasses and shrubs exploded with hundreds of birds. From tiny **Ashy Prinias** and **Indian Silverbills** to **Hen Harriers** and **Red-headed Vultures**.

Lots of new species were added to our list including **Yellow-throated Marten**, **Bengal Bushlark**, **Baya Weaver** and **Chestnut-eared Bunting**. It was also a great place for photography with many birds such as **Long-tailed Shrikes** refusing to budge, forcing our jeep to move backwards to gain focus! On the way back to Jungle Jim's Retreat a female **Wild Boar** brought her inquisitive piglets out of the bush for a walk whilst nearby a family of **Golden Jackal** trotted past our Jeep looking very smart indeed.

Our stay came to an end with an atmospheric wait for the mysterious and elusive Bengal Tiger. On our March 2017 tour we saw a **Bengal Tiger** in this same area. **Spotted Deer** barked their alarm from close by and ran for cover but the Tiger refused to appear. As the last rays of light vanished from the jungle we were left with amazing memories of iconic wildlife provided by fantastic guides and a big roaring reason to return!



Yellow-throated Marten (photo by Alistair Peterson)

Day Six and Seven

Leaving Jungle Jim's Retreat is always tough. The jungle garden birding is great, staff are amazing, the food is fabulous and I even came to love the squabbling animals nesting in the roof of my cabin! Next stop Delhi and then the **Taj Mahal**.

Train journeys in India are always fun but to get into the zone you have to slow yourself down, allow time and open yourself up to conversation. On our tour in March I was sat at a table on the Delhi express with my business partner Steve Race. A middle aged Indian couple arrived and sat opposite us, the man carried a long blue feather which he placed on the table. "That looks like a **Blue Magpie** feather" I said, he looked shocked. It was, and he had just found it on the road outside the station. We spent the next five hours sharing birding and photography stories and we still keep in touch.

The **Taj Mahal** is a truly magnificent monument, justifying the inclusion in an updated seven wonders of the world. We include it in our wildlife tour itinerary because as one of our clients said on this trip; "it's easily the best non-wildlife experience I have ever photographed". We were guided by local expert Ashok who also took us to **Agra fort**. Both sites are in fabulous condition but everyone was totally blown away by the Taj. On the adjacent River Yamuna big numbers of waders and herons feed and roost as hordes of **Little Swifts** circle above with **Black kites** and one or two **Egyptian Vulture**.



White-browed Wagtail (photo by Richard Baines)



Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (photo by Richard Baines)



Taj Mahal Panorama at sunset using i-phone 6S (Photo by Richard Baines)



Our group with local expert guide Ashok. (Photo by Richard Baines)



Agra Fort. (Photo by Richard Baines)

Day Eight

Roadside birding and photography can be great in India. In some of the most unlikely places you find great birds. On our way to Bharatpur, a roadside pool only a few meters from our cameras, held lots of **Black-winged Stilt**, **Wood Sandpiper**, **Green Sandpiper**, **Citrine Wagtail** (Nominate Race *Citrella*), **Yellow Wagtail** (Race *Beema*), **White Wagtail** (Race *Personata*), **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Ashy Prinia**, **Plain Prinia** and above us **Indian Grey Hornbill**. We arrived at The Birders Inn in Bharatpur just in time to see one of the resident **Indian Scops Owls** in the garden before it decided to hide from view.



Indian Scops Owl. (Photo by Richard Baines)



Oriental Scops Owl. (Photo by Richard Baines)

Our first afternoon in Keoladeo National Park proved very fruitful. Despite the lower water levels due to the poor summer monsoon in this area there were lots of birds and mammals. **Purple Heron**, **White-tailed Lapwing**, **Lesser Whistling Duck**, **Indian Spot-billed Duck** and raptors galore such as **Greater Spotted Eagle** and **Eurasian Marsh Harrier**. By the side of the causeway below our feet and above our heads were **Bluethroat** (Siberian race), **Oriental Scops Owl**, **Spotted Owlet** and **Rufous Treepie**. **Samba Deer**, **Spotted Deer** and **Nilgai** grazed the marshes whilst **Wild Boar** scuttled between the bushes.

At about 4pm we heard the haunting call of the world's tallest flying bird **Sarus Crane**. Two of these magnificent Krauncha (Indian for Crane) landed within 100m of us on the marsh! They feed during the day on agricultural fields but roost on the wetland at night. We spent an hour with these giants making sure we not only ratted off lots of photos but drank in the experience of watching a bird nearly six feet tall!



Sarus Cranes. (Photo by Richard Baines)

Day Nine Jungles and Wetlands of Northern India (YCN/Indus tour)

A full day in Keoladeo National Park and despite the low cloud and mist there was once again loads of wildlife! I dispensed with my camera for the day to concentrate on recording video using my Swarovski ATX 95 scope and i-phone 6S. There can be few better places in the world to photograph such a wide selection of wildlife as Keoladeo, everything from tame **Bluethroats** to massive male **Samba Deer**. Instead of chasing around like a headless Junglefowl its often better to stake out a good location and let the wildlife come to you. This way our group got to 'drink in' the spectacle and watch and learn from species behaviour.

My personal favourites here are the Eagles. **Greater Spotted Eagle**, **Indian Spotted Eagle**, **Crested Serpent Eagle** and **Steppe Eagle** were all seen at close quarters. But to really nail the identification you need a really good local guide and Bjindra Singh is an Eagle-eyed expert! In our final hour the marshes were awash with mammals and birds. A family of **Wild Boar** ran across the grassland whilst two **Sarus Crane** trumpeted loudly. Nearby there were **Spoonbills**, **Black-headed Ibis**, **Wooly-necked Stork**, **Black-necked Stork**, **White-tailed Plovers** and as a **Peregrine** flew in hundreds of **Wagtails** exploded out of the wetland. Oh and I nearly forgot about the three **Spotted Owlets** that flew in to watch the show!

Day Ten Jungles and Wetlands of Northern India (YCN/Indus tour)

Morning at Byana Lake and Band Baretha. The highlight of the morning's trip was a visit to see the last few **Indian Vultures** breeding at Band Baretha. The cliff site is behind a school and it was lunch time! Before long we were being served tea by the teenagers, this was a very kind gesture and typical of the warm welcome in many villages. Everyone wanted to see the Vultures through my scope, the reaction was "vaah, vaah", translated as wow in Hindi.

We were pleased to see up to six birds including at least one immature bird, but this excitement was tinged with sadness as Brijendra Singh explained the massive steep decline in Vultures across the whole of Asia caused by the introduction of the veterinary drug diclofenac in the 1990's. Brijendra told us he remembers seeing over 2,000 Vultures in Keoladeo National Park in the late 1980's. Since the decline India has suffered a big rise in Rabies and other diseases, with fewer Vultures, cattle carcasses attract more feral dogs and rats. Now the drug is banned there is hope but any population recovery will be slow, and in some villages the drug is still being used. India has now started a reintroduction program determined to restore the population to previous levels. To see how you can help the scheme see this link. <http://www.save-vultures.org/>



Indian Vulture. (Photo from a video grab by Richard Baines)



Wow! Vultures! School children and local farmers admire these great birds (Photo by Richard Baines)

Day Eleven Jungles and Wetlands of Northern India (YCN/Indus tour)

An early morning start and a drive to the National Chambal Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary. A three-hour boat trip was ideal for getting some amazing views of the wildlife on the river. The **Gharial** is a specialised fish-eating crocodile native to Northern India and critically endangered. Nearby **Marsh Crocodiles** sun bathed on the sand banks only a few meters away from a stunning flock of **Indian Skimmers**. We counted 17 Skimmers, newly arrived in the last few days to winter on this section of the river. Two **Black-bellied Terns** and ten **River Terns** fished nearby.



Marsh Crocodile (Photo by Richard Baines)



Gharial Crocodile (Photo by Richard Baines)

The area is also great for raptors. In the three hours we were there we saw Osprey, Long-legged Buzzard, Laggar Falcon, Bonelli's Eagle and two Egyptian Vultures. As we sat having our lunch by the boat house we noticed a Gangetic Dolphin surfacing in the river. The views were too unpredictable and brief for a photo but we were very pleased we had seen one. In the late afternoon we visited a village close to Keoladeo National Park to search for Painted Snipe which proved a success as two birds crept slowly around a muddy pool with other waders.



Getting low down with the action on the Chambal River!
(Photo by Richard Baines)



Black-bellied Tern (Photo by Richard Baines)



Indian Skimmers (Photo by Richard Baines)

Day Twelve **Jungles and Wetlands of Northern India (YCN/Indus tour)**

I remember as a teenage birder leafing through bird books of mysterious foreign places and looking at some birds in awe and wonder. One of those birds was **Indian Courser**. To see the courser's, we travelled to an area of open dry farmland with large fields shallow ploughed but without extensive cropping. Within minutes we found six **Indian Courser** feeding in a field in a very similar way to Dotterel they reminded me of a cross between Dotterel and Cream-coloured Courser.

The sparse vegetation and dry soil created a habitat structure which mirrored semi-desert. This provided ideal conditions for other birds such as **Desert Wheatear**, **Isabelline Wheatear**, **Tawny Pipit**, **Short-toed Lark** and **Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark**. A short distance away we found a carcass of a buffalo patrolled by six **Egyptian Vulture** of the Indian sub species *ginginianus* (pale straw tip to the bill rather than the dark tip of European birds) and nearby several **Yellow-wattled Lapwing**.



Indian Courser (Photo from a video grab by Richard Baines)

After a bird packed morning it was back to the Birders Lodge for lunch then a return to Keoladeo National Park. The NP is only five minute rickshaw drive from the Birders Inn! This gave us a great opportunity to photograph some of the wildlife in better light and with better knowledge of where the best areas are. But one of our best finds however was just before dark; a female Porcupine with two baby porcupettes!



White-tailed Lapwing (Photo from a video grab by Richard Baines)

Day Thirteen Jungles and Wetlands of Northern India (YCN/Indus tour)

Our last day at Keoladeo National Park proved once again what a great place this is for getting up close to a wide range of fantastic birds and mammals. The sunrise brought with it a glorious mist over the marsh and as the land warmed, **Spotted Deer** were highlighted by the golden rays of sunshine. As I set up my video alongside Paul and John who were photographing the Deer, we noticed a **Rufous Treepie** balancing on one of the antlers. I hastily started my video and watched as the Treepie pecked at a cut on the deer's antler and swung around as the Deer tried to shake it off.

I tried in vain to capture an **Indian Spotted Eagle** on video on this trip but we did see several flying over. Brijendra had told us there were currently about four pairs of Indian and 20 pairs of Greater Spotted in the Park. However as so often is the case whilst looking for one thing, the unexpected turns up. This time in the shape of a very smart **Booted Eagle** sitting no more than 150m away! There was even time for a Hoopoe to land next to the Eagle as it was preening but a split second after I had put my scope away for the final time, doh!



Greater Spotted Eagle (Photo from a video grab by Richard Baines)



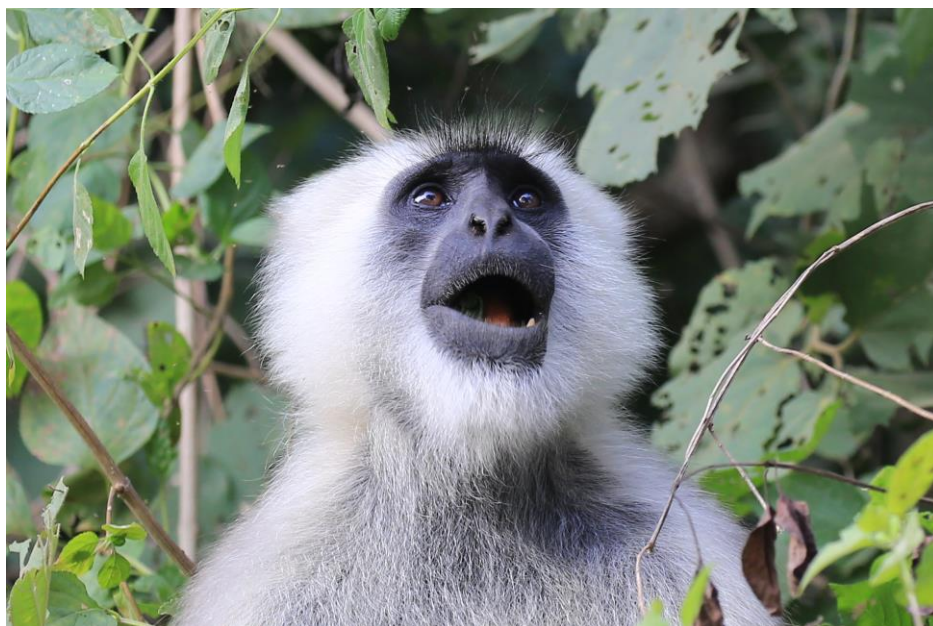
Booted Eagle (Photo from a video grab by Richard Baines)

Day Fourteen Jungles and Wetlands of Northern India (YCN/Indus tour)

After such a wildlife packed two weeks we had to do some souvenir shopping. We bought gifts from the small gift shop in Keoladeo National Park and a government licensed crafts shop in Delhi hoping our shopping would in some small way help local people and/or wildlife habitat protection. Huge thanks to our wonderful clients Svetlana, Alistair, John, George and Paul. We had some fantastic guides throughout the trip including Manoj Sharma, Rakesh Bhatt, Brijendra Sing and Ashok. I am now looking forward to our next trip in November 2018....



Our group at Keoladeo National Park (Photo by Richard Baines)



Northern Plains Langur (Photo by Richard Baines)

Written and compiled by Richard Baines December 2017