Wild Globe Travel Consultancy
Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.
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INDIA

Date - December 2015

Duration - 31 Days

Destinations
New Delhi - Sariska Tiger Reserve - Ranthambore National Park - Sawai Madhopur - Katni - Panna National Park - Bandhavgarh National Park - Kanha National Park - Pench National Park - Umred Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary - Tadoba Andhari National Park - Nagpur - Satpura National Park - Bhopal - Agra - National Chambal Sanctuary - Bharatpur - Keoladeo National Park

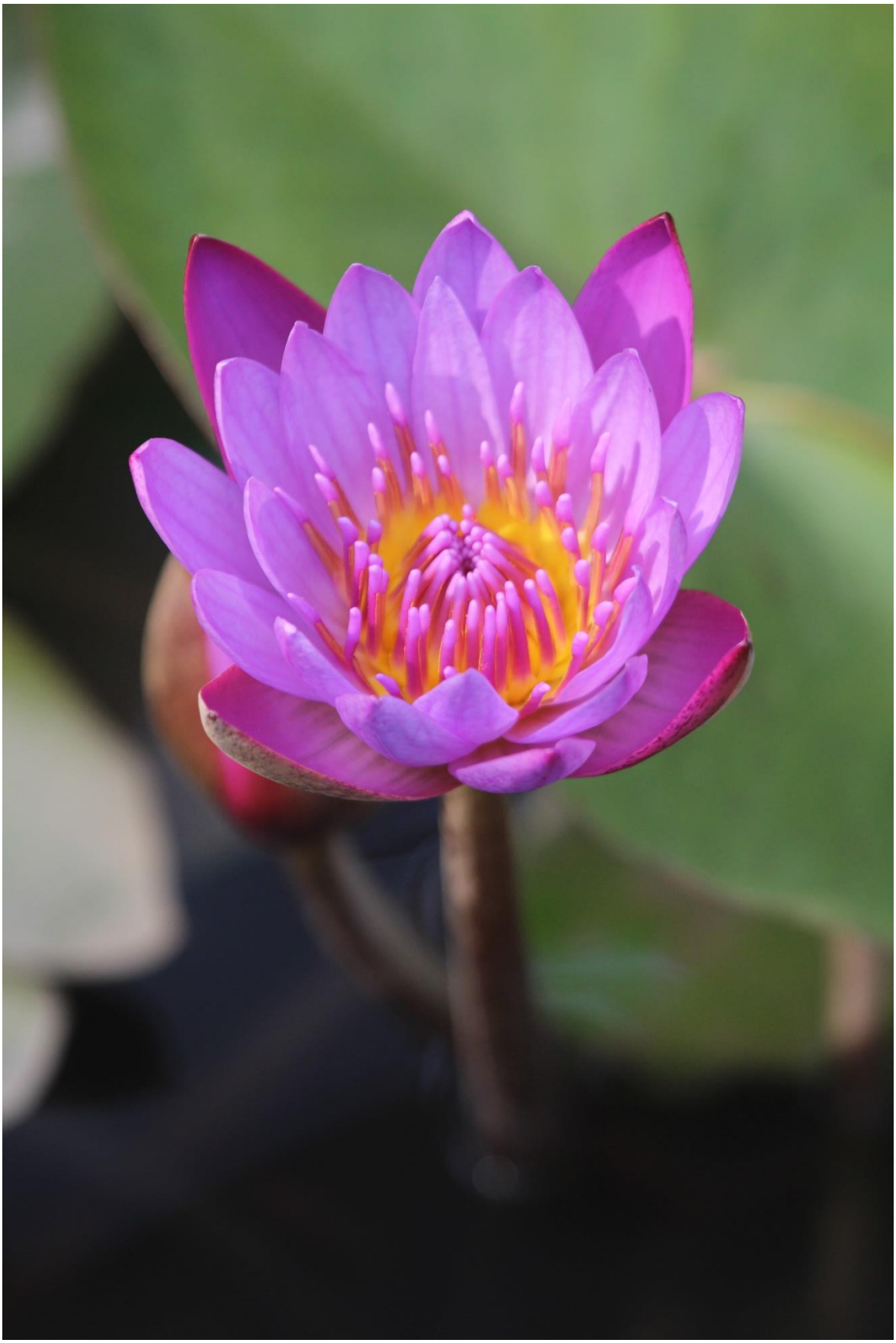
Trip Overview

Following a massively disappointing tour in Tibet, when a well-respected but basically dishonest UK operator somehow managed to transform one of the great wildlife adventures into an uninspired and decidedly mediocre traipse across the most spectacular plateau on earth, it was a real joy to be back among my own trustworthy local representatives. At least now if things went wrong, they would do so with an element of honesty that had been conspicuous by its absence at 'The Roof of the World' and it was nice to know that my local Indian agents would do everything possible to ensure that my trip was a complete success, as has always been the case when I have travelled in this intoxicating and diverse land. As I have stated on so many occasions, despite its countless and inherent flaws, to me India remains the most captivating of destinations and I had been estranged from her beguiling charms for far too long. That does not mean that I am blind to the crushing poverty, injustice and endemic corruption that still blights so many aspects of Indian life and nor do I choose to ignore these fundamental issues. Indeed, the opposite is the case and my trip reports will continue to highlight the myriad and significant challenges that are routinely encountered when visiting any region of this huge country, particularly concerning the wildlife, which is struggling in much of India, as it is across most of the globe. However, for all of the very obvious problems, India remains a land of beauty and diversity, whether we are discussing the incredibly warm people, the enthralling animals or the equally breathtaking landscapes, all of which vary extraordinarily from one unique area to the next. The vast majority of the Indians that I have been privileged to meet have been almost inconceivably friendly, certainly considering the poverty and inequality that so many struggle with on a daily basis and the seemingly insurmountable social barriers that restrict the lives of literally millions of them from the cradle to the grave. There is an authentic warmth and courtesy about the Indian people, particularly it must be said from those of a less prosperous background, and the hospitality that I have experienced across most of the country has at times entirely humbled me. I have been treated as an honoured guest by hundreds of 'ordinary' people who could have easily resented my presence, but who instead chose, time after time, to share what little they had with me, not begrudgingly, but with genuine pleasure and kindness. I always look forward to returning and I had originally intended that this tour would incorporate many of the areas that I had not visited for far too long and that I generally recommend to potential guests. As such, it would have been one of my old fashioned trips lasting well over two months, but alas I do not really have time for those epics these days and therefore had to divide my ideal stay into two distinct tours, this one in December 2015, closely followed by a second of similar duration in February 2016. The first would feature the famous tiger reserves of Rajasthan and central India and the second would include Assam in the northeast of the country and Gujarat in the opposite direction to the extreme west and the border of Pakistan. As far as I am concerned, these contrasting destinations combine ideally to produce the perfect introduction to the astonishingly diverse wildlife that few people are aware occurs here and at the same time offer an incredible opportunity to encounter ten of India's most exotic large mammal species on one single trip. Of course everyone wants to see tigers and, although, as I will elaborate upon shortly, this has become more difficult in recent years, with the right itinerary, you should certainly still encounter the most majestic of cats in the national parks of central India. At the same time, and again with the right expert planning and an element of good fortune, leopard, sloth bear, dhole, striped hyena and wolf are all likely to be observed. Whilst they are often spotted easily, wolf and dhole can also be challenging, which is partly why it makes sense to include other areas in which they can be found. In Assam, unless you walk around with your eyes closed, you will definitely encounter Asian elephants and the greater one-horned rhinoceros, which is a truly spectacular beast and unbelievably gentle given the obscene persecution that it has suffered for so long. Assam is also home to the hoolock gibbon, India's only ape, which was recently split into two distinct species, the western hoolock gibbon of Assam and the eastern version which mainly occurs in China and Myanmar…or Burma as it is indelibly known to those of us with an interest in and knowledge of British history. Assam also affords further chances for both tiger and leopard, as well as dhole, intelligent, courageous and highly social wild dogs that can be encountered in packs of more than thirty,

although fewer than twelve is far more common in my experience. The last of India's 'big ten' can be found in the teak forest of Sasan Gir in Gujarat and it remains surprising to me that so few people are aware that wild lions can be observed in India. These Asiatic lions are a subspecies of the lions that everyone is so familiar with in Africa and at one time they roamed Asia, the Middle East and much of eastern Europe. As I will explore in more detail in my next trip report, the entire surviving population, which was recently estimated at less than 300 breeding adults, now exists in just one tiny area and the oft discussed plans to move a number of lions to another region, and thereby hopefully ensure their long-term survival, are yet to materialise. As it is, these somewhat smaller lions are currently easy to see within Gir National Park, which is also productive in terms of leopard sightings, and Gujarat itself provides excellent additional opportunities to observe wolf and striped hyena. The crucial element to this spectacular trip, which is one of my favourites anywhere in the world and is perfect for people who have not visited India previously, is to devote sufficient time to each area, which is actually the key to almost any successful wildlife expedition. As my mammal lists will testify, this tour is not simply about ten high profile animals, regardless of how magnificent they are, as there are dozens of other unique and rare species to be discovered in these bountiful areas and beyond them the exhilarating options are unparalleled. From snow leopards and Asiatic black bears in Jammu and Kashmir, to red pandas in West Bengal and clouded leopards, golden cats and even sun bears in Arunachal Pradesh, the wildlife possibilities are virtually endless and I have not even touched upon around three quarters of this massive country, which is home to a staggering fifteen different species of cat. I would assess the possibility of finding a few of these over both tours, but even with more than two months available in total, I was not able to include every destination that I had hoped and have consequently scheduled further trips to Dachigam National Park in September 2016, principally to focus on Asiatic black bears, and to various destinations within Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in February or March 2017. James will hopefully be with me on both of those research trips, as I have come to rely on him as a full-time assistant and he was again invaluable on this tour. It is impossible to photograph nocturnal animals without expert assistance and James has been spotlighting at my side now for a number of years. As such, we work extremely well together and have developed various systems that require little or no communication. We both know what we are doing and I have been able to find and photograph many rare and elusive animals purely as a result of his

dedication and enthusiasm. It is of course a special privilege to be able to travel with my son, but the simple truth is that James more than earns his place on any tour and that it would be difficult to find someone that I could work as well or as instinctively with. It is important to be able to trust someone completely on such intense tours, as we are always insanely busy and it is not uncommon to find ourselves working twenty hours straight. Certainly sixteen-hour days are very much the norm and although I love every frantic moment and would not have it any other way, it is not always easy to appreciate everything when you are spending so long in the field. Whilst we try not to overlook certain animals, that sadly can occur with common species and it can also be difficult to truly savour the culture or atmosphere of a region. I desperately try to avoid this, as I used to travel just for the pure joy of it and I still try to absorb as much of the local life and customs as a demanding schedule permits. To assist, I tend to read something about the country that I will be visiting before I travel and perhaps even on the plane, as I detest flying, not because I am at all anxious, but because I am always interminably bored on long flights. I have no set rules regarding what I choose and am just as likely to select even a tenuously linked novel than an in-depth history or travel guide, which I often find to be soulless and lacking in any real insight or perception. As I have mentioned previously, Raj: The Making and Unmaking Of British India by Lawrence James is a compelling read and a superb introduction to the story of India under British rule. However, much of its appeal rests on the special relationship forged between two nations and on this occasion I had a more intimate treat in store, as I had known that I would be travelling to India for some time and deliberately delayed revisiting one of my favourite novels until this trip. The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a lullaby of a novel, a languid masterpiece of language and mood that both entrances and consumes the doomed reader from the first paragraph: *'May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees, Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.'* As a debut novel, it was published in 1997 and remains Roy's only novel to date, it is beyond compare in modern literature and when I first read it I resented having to put it down, despite the fact that I only did so once.

To call it evocative does not even begin to do it justice, in the same way that it is not sufficient to call Mahatma Gandhi great. In so naming him, you simultaneously fail to convey exactly why he was great and if The God of Small Things is only evocative, then the sun is just a light that we work by and the moon a mere signal for when we should sleep. Whilst the novel's greatness undoubtedly resides in its language and use of rhythm, the prose is new, fresh and utterly magnificent, the themes espoused are perpetual and echo those of my own beloved Thomas Hardy. Separated as they were by two continents and more than a century, not to mention vastly contrasting backgrounds, both authors explore the same timeless issues of love, betrayal, corruption, intolerance, discrimination and the very essence of humanity. 100 years after Hardy weaved his devastating depiction of the English class system with the help of a young stonemason by the name of Jude Fawley, Roy would find a consenting voice in the form of seven-year-old Rahel, who narrates the full horror of the Indian caste system without a trace of the comprehension or bitterness that ultimately condemned poor Jude. With consummate skill, and an obvious affinity for language, Roy has conceived a magically subtle novel of social conscience that



stands comparison with the illustrious social works of any bygone age. For further reading I would recommend any novels by George Eliot and Charles Dickens, both of whom were contemporaries of Hardy, the wonderful and haunting play An Inspector Calls by J.B.Priestly, The Grapes of Wrath, for which John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for literature, The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists by working class hero Robert Tressell, which was published long after Tressell was buried in a paupers grave, and the sublime Les Miserables by Victor Hugo, although positively not the awful musical version. All of these works share the same aspirations and values, but while Roy's trancelike soliloquy describes a bloated and overripe India full of imperfections, it does it so alluringly that it is impossible not to want to return. Having finished The God of Small Things on the plane, my thoughts drifted towards the type of India that awaited me in 2015, as I had not visited these central reserves for several years and I was aware that many changes had occurred in that time. Although I receive regular reports and updates from operators and guides whom I trust, that is not quite the same as being on the ground and personally being able to assess changes on a daily basis. In my previous India trip report of October 2014, which was written regarding a dedicated snow leopard expedition, I provided a brief history of conservation in India since Independence in 1947 and described how approximately half a billion US dollars had been wasted attempting to conserve tigers since the prime minister Indira Gandhi launched Project Tiger at Palamau Tiger Reserve in 1973. Since that report, another census has taken place and tiger numbers are said to have increased from 1,706 to 2,226 in India and to approximately 3,890 worldwide. Whilst this is immensely encouraging news if accurate, it is unlikely that any recovery will be sustained given the continued poor management of so many national parks across the country and the appallingly stupid decision to greatly limit the access to these reserves. The current abysmal situation dates back to July 2012 when the Indian Supreme Court completely banned tourism within the core areas of every tiger sanctuary, ostensibly to ensure that the tigers would not suddenly be disturbed by the same tourists who have collectively protected them from extinction for decades, despite the very worst efforts and inexcusable excesses of Indian officials. Those of us associated with wildlife tourism knew that this single decision would ultimately sound the death knell for the tiger in India and that these majestic cats, as well as many other endangered and vulnerable species, would have been eradicated years ago if so many people did not depend financially on their continued existence. If a large number of locals, entire villages and towns in many cases, were not making money from live tigers, then a lower number would be making a great deal more money from dead ones and most of us were aware that thankfully the ban was simply untenable. Entire economies would collapse almost overnight and it was no surprise when the Supreme Court reversed their ill-conceived decision within a matter of weeks. Unfortunately, in deciding that they would ideally like to retain the income generated by tourists without allowing those same troublesome tourists to disturb their tranquil reserves, they replaced an unworkable rule with an unthinkable one that will almost certainly expedite the demise of the tiger across much of its current range. The rule itself sounds perfectly reasonable, as it has been decided that only 20% of every national park will be accessible and that the majority of tigers and other wildlife will live undisturbed natural lives in the remaining 80%. The idea is that this is an inspired compromise that will deliver the best of both worlds, as it will allow local communities to continue to generate much needed income and at the same time allow visitors to travel from all over the world to see these magnificent animals. In an ideal world I would probably even support this type of policy, as nothing makes me happier than animals living a natural existence far away from the generally negative effects of man. However, the underlying issue in this case is that the 80% that visitors can no longer enter now receives little or no protection and in reality is being left unguarded for heavily armed poachers to exploit, more or less at will. By their very presence, tourists have always helped to police the areas they visit, or at least force forest officials to do so, and with this vital level of protection removed, and the same few tigers being constantly spotted in the tourist zones to convince everyone that all is well, there is very little to prevent a repeat of the poaching that took the tiger to the edge of extinction following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. For this controversial initiative to have any chance of succeeding, the wildlife only zones need to be monitored and heavily protected, but instead thousands of forest employees have lost their jobs since the 20% rule was introduced and once again the Indian government has managed to snatch mediocrity from the jaws of excellence. In a few years another generation of Indians will be scratching their heads and wondering where all the tigers have gone and meanwhile hapless tourists are paying a great deal of money to experience the most inexplicable restrictions that I have ever encountered within a national park system. The new regulations are being strictly applied and the 20% pertains not to the land mass of each reserve, but to the circuit of roads within each park. Consequently, if there are 200 kilometres of road, only up to 40 kilometres will be accessible to tourists, as the 20% rule is very much a maximum and not a minimum figure. In addition, the parks are largely split into zones, which has admittedly been the case for some time, and these zones

are further subdivided into separate routes. In Bandhavgarh for example, where I had a 100% record in terms of dhole sightings prior to this trip, the first two of the main three zones are also split into four routes, from which you are not allowed to deviate. Not being able to deviate means exactly that, as you are not permitted to turn your vehicle at all and have to continue in the same forwardly direction for the entire game drive, even if it means ignoring an animal that is moving in the opposite direction or that you may have noticed belatedly behind the vehicle. On several occasions we had the entirely ludicrous and potentially dangerous situation of several jeeps all reversing at reasonably high speed in an attempt to stay with a tiger, simply because it was illegal for any of the drivers to make a safe turn and pursue the animal at a reasonable distance in the same direction. Again using Bandhavgarh as an example, not only are you not guaranteed to find a particular animal, now you are not even guaranteed to be allowed to search for them, as a pack of dhole were observed in zone three on the day that we arrived, but we were not due to use that zone until the morning of our departure, by which time they had moved on. There was of course no absolute guarantee that we would have seen them if we had been able to choose our own zones and routes, but this happened to be a fairly unhurried pack and everyone else with access to zone three did encounter these striking predators for the best part of two full days. Missing animals is a common and normal part of any safari, but knowing where they are and not being able to drive less than twenty minutes to see them is somewhat frustrating to say the least, particularly for those with far less time available than I had on this trip. We never did encounter dhole at Bandhavgarh and for the first time I would no longer guarantee seeing a tiger at the specific reserves I have always relied upon. Whereas you would have previously been astoundingly unfortunate not to see tigers at say Bandhavgarh or Kanha, certainly if you spent sufficient time at each, the new regulations mean that for more or less the first time this is far more likely and I actually spoke to a couple of groups who had been profoundly disappointed not to encounter the one iconic animal that almost everyone visits India to see. Given the number of drives available to us, we would have been unlucky to share the same fate, but when you examine the basic facts, it could have happened to us as well at certain parks. At Ranthambore we enjoyed one thirty second sighting in six game drives and we also observed just one solitary tiger on the same number of drives at Bandhavgarh. At Kanha, we had three exceptional encounters within an hour of entering the park, including two huge males within a couple of metres of the vehicle, and then failed to see another tiger for the entire duration of our stay. Whilst I would certainly still encourage first time visitors to include two or three of these iconic parks, I would probably now suggest that they have to be far more selective in terms of which reserves they visit and for guests who are not looking specifically for tigers, I will recommend more remote areas where the new rules either do not apply or are not as strictly enforced. I agree in principle that wildlife should not be disturbed by a human presence, but this rule will not achieve that and I personally find the additional restrictions, as there were always some in most Indian national parks, intolerable and unnecessary. Although tourists who have not visited these reserves previously will not be aware of the extent of these changes, overnight some of the most attractive sections of several parks have been lost and the result can only be described as soul destroying for someone who has explored these parks with relative freedom for so many years. Entire parks are almost unrecognisable now and whilst the vast majority of these precious sanctuaries are now no longer receiving any protection, the 20% areas that tourists are allowed to access are literally being driven into the ground. By filling such tiny areas with so many vehicles, simply to retain as much revenue as possible, the park authorities are ruining the experience for the tourists that they rely so heavily upon and the animals within these zones are coming under far more pressure than was ever the case. The solution would be to limit the number of people entering a park on a daily basis to a reasonable level, but to open all of the roads to ensure that the entire reserve was protected and that no one area received too much traffic. Roads could then be closed when a

female in that section of the park had very young cubs, which is a rule that I have always agreed with. Alternatively, if the authorities insist on retaining this ludicrous and potentially disastrous initiative, they have to ensure that visitor numbers are strictly controlled within the accessible areas, or they will simply become dead zones with basically no animals, and that somehow sufficient funds are made available to guarantee that all of the parks are fully patrolled and protected. With so little money devoted to conservation, this is unlikely to happen and without these assurances in place, the future of the tiger in India remains perilous. Strangely, part of the problem is that so many locals are now visiting these reserves, as you would hardly see an Indian face in a national park two decades ago. Although it is wonderful to meet so many Indians taking a real pride and pleasure in their own exceptional wildlife, the downside is that, with a population of over a billion, there are a lot of Indians who want to access these reserves, which in turn is placing a great deal of pressure on some of the more popular parks, in a way that overseas tourism never really did. In addition, locals pay considerably less than foreign visitors and are of course travelling far shorter distances, which means that they will have other opportunities to return to a park if they do not encounter tigers as a result of the new rules. This will no doubt obscure the deficiencies in the new system to some degree, at least until the next tiger census and the inevitable consequences of yet another inept and poorly executed concept. I do not intend to dwell on this issue throughout the remainder of this report, as I visited eight tiger reserves on this tour and the rules apply in all of them to some degree. Instead, the reader should be aware that all of the drives within the national parks are restricted in this way and that there are consequently less sightings of the more elusive animals that most people are desperately hoping to see, which is obviously a poor starting point for a safari. Tiger, leopard, sloth bear, wolf and dhole encounters were all well down in comparison with previous trips of comparable length and we only completed the full set of predators that I expected to see at the very last moment. The only real consolation was at night, as you cannot spotlight in most Indian national parks, but several of my guides know good areas beyond the parks and we enjoyed a number of successful nocturnal drives and walks at various locations. I have decided not to produce detailed written comparisons between each reserve in this format, as they all have their own special appeal and I have never tired of exploring any of them. Instead therefore of writing protracted and rather dull comparisons, I have concentrated on our major highlights at each sanctuary and have also produced a simple table detailing exactly which mammals were observed at each destination. I have used numbers to indicate how many of a particular animal were seen with regards to some of the more elusive predators and for the remainder I have used an ‘X’, to confirm that this species was seen at that park. If you exclude the last two destinations, which are not tiger reserves, there was not a huge difference between them in terms of

the total number of species observed, as the lowest was 15 and the highest 22. We did finally manage to see all of the mammals that I had expected, although not all that I had hoped for, but it was very much touch and go for most of the trip and far harder than should have been the case. To call the tour unsuccessful would not be accurate by any means, but it was still the most unproductive trip of comparable length that I have experienced in India and it took 70 game activities to find one pack of four wild dogs and one lone wolf. Just for reference, I have not included Umred Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary, as we only spent an afternoon there and the solitary daytime walk of any significance was near Ranthambore, although we also spent long periods exploring the grounds of our lodges, including at night with spotlights.

Mammal Sightings at Each Major Reserve

(1) Sariska, (2) Ranthambore, (3) Panna, (4) Bandhavgarh, (5) Kanha, (6) Pench, (7) Tadoba, (8) Satpura, (9) Chambal, (10) Keoladeo

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
National Park Drives	4	6	5	6	6	5	8	5	5	1
Area Drives/Walks	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Area Spotlighting Drives/Walks	1	2	3	0	2	2	1	2	4	1
Total Activities	5	9	8	6	8	7	9	7	9	2
Tiger	-	1	2	1	3	2	4	1	-	-
Leopard	-	-	4	-	1	-	1	1	-	-
Jungle Cat	(1)	1	-	1	2	4	5	-	2	-
Rusty-spotted Cat	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wolf	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Dhole	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-
Golden Jackal	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	X
Bengal Fox	-	3	2	-	1	2	-	-	1	-
Striped Hyena	-	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
Sloth Bear	-	-	4	-	-	-	1	7	-	-
Honey Badger	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Small Indian Civet	(X)	-	X	-	-	X	-	X	-	X
Common Palm Civet	X	-	X	-	-	X	-	X	X	X

Small Indian Mongoose	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
Indian Grey Mongoose	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
Ruddy Mongoose	X	-	X	X	-	X	X	-	-	-
Sambar Deer	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X
Barasingha	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-
Spotted Deer	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X
Northern Red Muntjac	-	-	-	X	X	-	X	-	-	-
Blackbuck	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
Nilgai	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Chinkara	-	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Four-horned Antelope	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Gaur	-	-	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	-
Wild Boar	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-
Southern Plains Grey Langur	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-
Rhesus Macaque	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X
Indian Hare	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X
Madras Treeshrew	-	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	-
Indian Porcupine	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Three-striped Squirrel	-	-	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	-
Five-striped Squirrel	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	X	X
Indian Giant Squirrel	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-
Large Brown Flying Squirrel	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-
Black Rat	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indian Gerbil	-	X	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-
Indian Bush Rat	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indian Desert Jird	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indian Flying Fox	-	X	-	-	X	X	-	-	X	-
Lesser Horseshoe Bat	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indian Pipistrelle	X	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	-	-
Leschenault's Rousette	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ganges River Dolphin	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
Total Species Per Reserve	17	21	22	17	19	20	15	15	14	10

(X) Observed by our guide only.

Of the eight tiger reserves that I had decided to return to, Sariska was the only one that I had visited recently, as James and I spent an afternoon here before our snow leopard tour in October 2014. It was a very brief affair, but I made a mental note that, despite not seeing tigers, the park merited a longer stay and could be utilised as a gentle introduction to the common species of India, particularly as the accommodation was lovely and Sariska is the nearest national park to Delhi. Although we again did not see a tiger, nothing occurred on this visit to change my mind, as you can explore what is a highly scenic reserve at your own pace and in my opinion it is far better to drive for three or four hours to spend your first night in India in a superb rural location, than it is to waste a precious night in a busy city hotel. The real bonus arrives on your first morning, as you can be watching a splendid variety of wildlife in a tranquil setting within a few minutes of your lodge, as opposed to fighting your way through the horrendous Delhi traffic for several hours. I personally prefer to escape the vast majority of cities as soon as I land and the beauty of Sariska, its actual innate beauty aside, is that

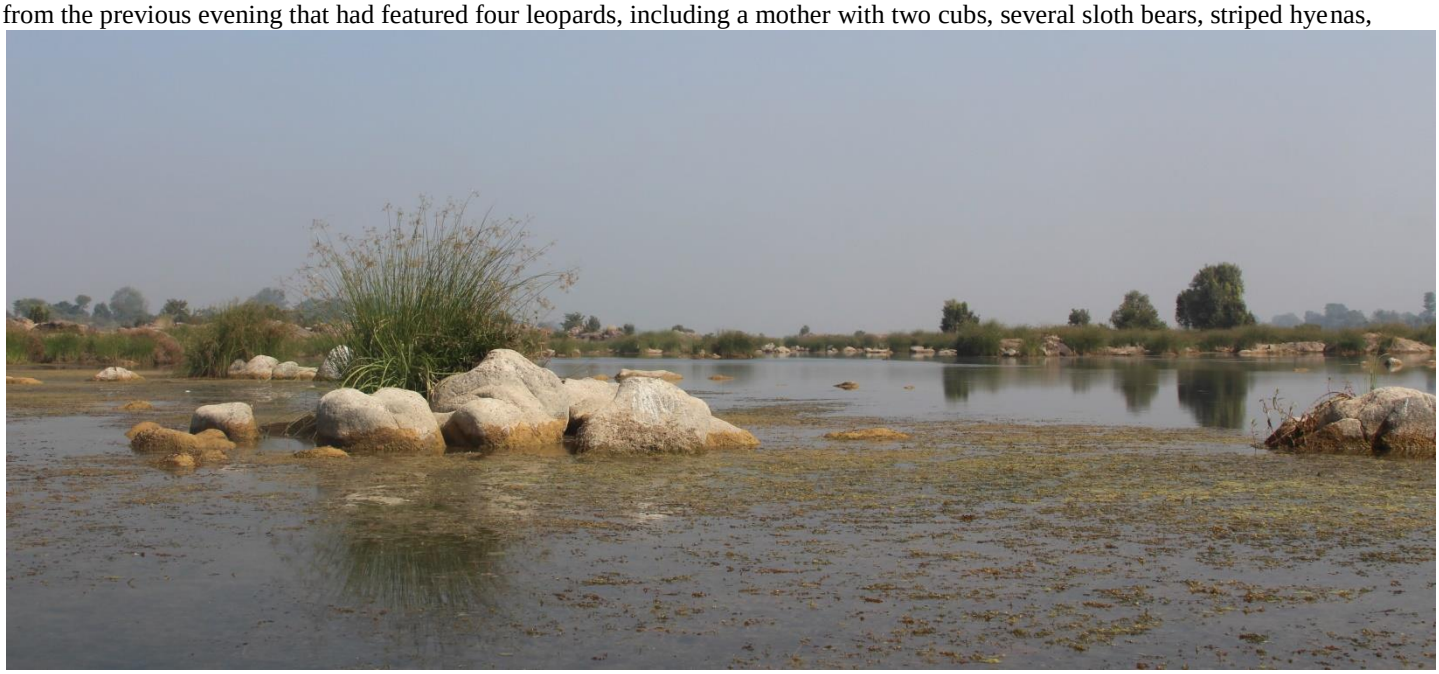
the animals are fairly used to people and are generally easy to photograph, which provides guests with an early opportunity to capture a few impressive pictures against a gorgeous backdrop. I used the same guide as in 2014 and at the end of our four drives he was fairly despondent that we had not seen either a tiger or a leopard, as there are apparently thirteen tigers in the reserve now and over 50 leopards in the vicinity and most tourists do see at least one or the other. He really had no need to be, as were delighted not only with what we had seen, but the way in which we had seen it. We were with good friends, my main Indian operator had joined us for the first few days and our lodge guide was also extremely pleasant, in a beautiful natural environment watching equally resplendent wildlife with very few other tourists. It was essentially the type of idyllic start that I had hoped for and we were also aware that we had missed a leopard crossing our path by less than 30 seconds and a tiger by about three minutes, as the vehicles directly in front had seen both and had actually disturbed the sleeping tiger just before we arrived. We also missed a jungle cat and a small Indian civet, both of which our guide briefly glimpsed, but had better luck with a rusty-spotted cat that I caught in a spotlight on some rocks beyond the park boundary. We continued to look for the diminutive feline, the rusty-spotted cat is the smallest of the fifteen cat species found in India and only the black-footed cat rivals it as the smallest worldwide, and after half an hour or so James apparently spotted it again and I was able to take a quick reference shot. Given the direction in which the original cat had darted and that we had searched so far from our initial position, I think that it was more likely that James had discovered a second cat rather than the one I had spotted earlier. Not that it made any real difference, as Sariska had provided us with an immensely enjoyable and highly encouraging beginning and we all moved on to Ranthambore in excellent spirits. There is something indescribably moving about an Indian forest, particularly in the early morning when the clearings are shrouded in mist and the sun has yet to reveal what stalks silently through the long grass. It does not seem to matter whether you are in Assam, Kerala or Madhya Pradesh, they are all haunting and Ranthambore, with its commanding fort, atmospheric hunting lodges and exquisite lakes, is more evocative than most. The former hunting grounds of the Maharajas of Jaipur, as well as a military bastion dating back more than a thousand years, Ranthambore is steeped in history and I have indelible memories of watching a succession of regal tigers here over the years, as well as my first ever sloth bear. In truth this stay was not as eventful, but we did see our first tiger of the tour, albeit briefly and I was thrilled to spot a honey badger running across the road ahead of our vehicle early one morning. We were able to watch it foraging for several minutes and although I have seen literally dozens of these animals in Africa, I believe that this was only my second honey badger encounter in India. My local operator was even happier, as this was one of the very few mammal species that he had not seen before. As would prove to be the case at more than one reserve, we probably experienced more success away from the national park, but it is difficult to confirm whether this was entirely as a result of the new restrictions or simply because we had the opportunity to spotlight away from the park. It was almost certainly a combination of both in truth, as relatively blank days were continually salvaged by highly productive night drives. We started both evening sessions within the extensive grounds of our lodge and on the first encountered our only porcupine of the tour, as well as a number of hares and gerbils. Just beyond the nearby town, we had a very nice view of a striped hyena and a prolonged encounter with a jungle cat, which this time we all saw, despite the fact that it returned to the undergrowth whenever we shined the spotlight towards it. What followed was a game of cat and mouse, with us as the hapless rodents, as I attempted to

photograph the nervous moggy when it ventured out into the open for a few seconds. Unfortunately, I needed the light for even a reasonable shot, which it was just not prepared to accept and eventually we decided that it was not fair to disturb it any longer and gave up. It suddenly occurred to me that the 'curse of the jungle cat', which had first struck in Sri Lanka earlier in the year, may have returned and my very worst fears were to be realised throughout the trip, as I failed to capture a single decent jungle cat photograph and ultimately decided that these fiendish creatures were deliberately making fleeting appearances just to taunt me. I actually struggled with photographs of a few nocturnal animals, including striped hyena and Bengal fox, but at least we saw both species well and our first two fox sightings were brief glimpses during the day as we searched for other species. We accidently flushed the first whilst exploring an area that a wolf pack had been seen in on a few occasions and the second as we watched a small herd of blackbuck, including a male with the typical spiralled horns. Not surprisingly, neither of the startled foxes decided to hang around for pictures, but the first walk in the wolf area did produce a wonderful encounter with a colony of Indian desert jirds, incredibly sweet rodents that instantly freeze whenever they think they might have been spotted. As such, they are a photographer's dream and we spent a delightful hour watching them scurrying between their burrows as if their lives depended on it, which, with so many foxes around, of course they did. All of these sightings were within a reasonable drive of Ranthambore, but none of them were actually in the park, which once again really highlights the importance of local knowledge, as our stay at Ranthambore would probably have been viewed from an entirely different perspective if we had to exclude the ten or so species that we discovered beyond the national park, including Chinkara, which were observed on a small area of private land that our guide was familiar with. One encounter that did take place within the park involved three hanuman langurs, or southern plains grey langurs as they have been classified following a reassessment of the species. I have seen these common and widespread primates squabbling and fighting on a number of occasions, as they exist in strictly hierarchical groups where dominance, as is usual in the animal world, is asserted through aggression. Most of the disputes are not of a serious nature and are often resolved by the piercing warning cries of the dominant male or by a chase and perhaps a few bites if vocalisations do not work. I have witnessed males attacking each other, but generally one will always flee before much damage is

done if he does not feel he can win. I am not therefore exactly sure what caused the events that we watched unfold and perhaps it was simply a case of two evenly matched males refusing to back down. Whatever the reason for the unusual intensity, what followed was a struggle of such aggression and brutality that it was difficult to watch without looking away and almost certainly killed both protagonists. The initial confrontation appeared to follow the usual pattern, with a great deal of bickering and posturing which then escalated into a few minor charges by each male. At various stages it looked as if either monkey might leave before the fight got out of hand and even after they had clashed violently a few times, I still thought that one or either of them may back down. The problem was that whenever it looked as if this might transpire, a much smaller female langur began harassing one of the two males, which would instantly attack the other. I am not certain if this is correct, as I have not witnessed this behaviour in langurs previously, but it looked as if the female was encouraging the males to fight, which I know does occur with other species, as a female seeks to choose the strongest possible male to father her young. If that was the case then her parenting strategy probably needs some work, as the two male primates attacked each other with such ferocity, that one had a hand more or less hanging off and both had sustained such appalling wounds, it was doubtful that either could survive. We did not stay to watch the bitter end, as the entire episode had been fairly disturbing and we left the exhausted and broken primates staring at each other no more than a few feet apart, neither able to respond to the by now subdued efforts of the female to rekindle a lost cause. Our time at Ranthambore was also partially overshadowed by the news that Ustad, a male tiger that had killed four people since 2010, had been removed from the park and would spend the rest of his life in captivity. The Indian Supreme Court, yes, them again, would later rule that ‘Ustad deserved no leniency and had been rightly jailed’. Aside from the fact that we are now rather incredulously applying human laws and even morals to wild animals, the simple truth is that Ustad did exactly what all male tigers should do, he killed other animals encroaching upon his territory. Although he has been called a man-eater, which is the easiest way to ensure that a tiger can be killed legally in India, Ustad never left the national park to eat villagers or townsfolk and has been removed from his home simply for having the natural instinct to defend his territory, which male tigers have to do for most of their lives until they are eventually overthrown and usually killed by a younger, stronger male. Now an animal that would easily walk 30 kilometres a day, will have to spend its life caged in a zoo largely

because far too many Indians view these so called protected reserves as their own personal commodities and do not pay sufficient respect to the creatures living within them. Instead of banning tourists from 80% of all parks, the Indian Supreme Court should ensure that these critical reserves receive the protection they so desperately require and that local communities are not allowed to continue to abuse them. Human encroachment has been damaging national parks all over the world for decades and most of the fatalities that have occurred in India have either been as a result of villages developing on or spilling into protected land or as a result of some form of illegal activity, be it poaching, grazing cattle, collecting firewood or even washing clothes in restricted and dangerous areas. To save money, forest guards are not even given vehicles to patrol in and instead have to either cycle or walk everywhere, which is hardly encouraging in terms of eradicating poaching or for their own safety. It was no coincidence that one of Ustad's victims was a park guard walking alone, or that the others should not even have been in Ranthambore, but this is overlooked when people are killed and the locals shriek and wail for justice or revenge, often taking the law into their own hands by poisoning dozens of animals in an attempt to kill one. This has been the case at Gir National Park previously, where a large number of Asiatic lions have been poisoned for the crime of killing cattle, but the villages at Gir are actually within the park and lions are being slaughtered for failing to recognise which animals they are allowed to hunt within their own protected territories. We are not talking about one or two small settlements on the periphery of the reserve, as there are over 50 villages and around 3,000 people living in the park, who collectively own approximately 10,000 cattle. This, within a national park that is so arid, water has to be driven in daily just to keep the resident wildlife alive and that's primary purpose is to safeguard the very last population of Asiatic lions on our planet. Whilst I was initially pleased that Ustad had not been shot, my local contact, who would unfortunately be leaving us after our stay at Ranthambore, thought that he should have been rather than endure captivity. It would be a dreadful judgement to have to make, but having seen photographs of this once mighty predator slouched aimlessly against the wire of his enclosure, I must admit that I find it difficult not to agree with him. If we left Ranthambore with slightly heavy hearts, our spirits soared as soon as we arrived at our next lodge, which was superbly situated overlooking the stunning Ken River. Everything about this lodge was idyllic, from the wonderful rustic setting, to the gorgeous river views and the incredibly helpful staff, who really could not have done any more to ensure that our stay was a total pleasure and hugely productive. Our accommodation at Ranthambore had been lovely, with crocodiles sunning themselves beside our own private lake and spectacularly coloured kingfishers hovering overhead, but you could tell that the atmosphere here was special the moment you arrived and I really did not want to leave after our three nights. We were here to visit Panna National Park and this

time it was debatable whether we had more success within the park during the day or at another outstanding area that we visited to spotlight at night. The manager and the main guide personally took us out at night and we were so engrossed on one occasion that we did not return until almost midnight, only to find that the wonderful staff had all stayed up and had the usual delicious dinner sitting waiting for us. You cannot teach or even buy this type of commitment or enthusiasm and we had a fabulous time here simply because the entire camp wanted us to have a fabulous time. Both the manager and the guide were as thrilled as we were when we saw a rare animal and I so enjoyed their animated company and knowledgeable stories, that it was genuinely difficult to say goodbye to them when it was time to leave. Within a few minutes of arriving, our appetites had been wetted with tales of an unforgettable night drive from the previous evening that had featured four leopards, including a mother with two cubs, several sloth bears, striped hyenas,



Bengal foxes and both common palm civets and small Indian civets. Although we did not manage to achieve quite the same remarkable haul in a single night, after three we had encountered everything except the leopard cubs and had even managed to add a rusty-spotted cat, as well as an adorable sloth bear cub with its protective mother and a couple of snakes. We saw four sloth bears in all at Panna, three of them at night, and our striped hyena and Bengal fox sightings were the best of the trip. Our rusty-spotted cat encounter was as well, as we were destined not to see another and this one approached to within a couple of metres of our jeep. Unfortunately, from a photographic perspective at least, it did so at full speed, as our guide made a squeaking sound as soon as we identified it in the spotlight and instead of displaying the usual bemused interest before slowly moving on, it sprinted directly at us. It was far too quick for me and although I got a few pictures of it walking away, I missed the best shot as it dashed towards us to investigate the strange noise. Luckily I have seen these petite and rather pretty cats on a number of occasions and have a nice recent photograph from our trip to Sri Lanka earlier in the year. Within the park our main target was a four-horned antelope, as this was the only reserve that we were due to visit where this species occurred with any regularity and we were therefore aware that if we missed it at Panna, we were unlikely to see it at all. As you can imagine, our guide did everything possible to find one for us and he did initially mention that it was the type of animal that you can see three days in a row and not again for another four weeks, which I recognised only too well. We also had a number of factors against us, as these antelopes are very small and unless a female has young, live largely solitary lives. They also occur in very low densities, so you are looking for a handful in a huge area, and are extremely nervous, which is entirely understandable when you take into account the tigers and leopards that we encountered sauntering along rather ominously if you are a bite sized ruminant. When you add the length of the grass and the fact that you are only allowed to game drive for a few hours each morning and afternoon, it is a miracle that anyone ever sees some of these more elusive animals, but we kept trying the best areas and were eventually rewarded with an excellent view of a lone male, which, as expected, was the only four-horned antelope sighting of the tour. This hard earned success aside, our highlights inside the park included our first sloth bear in daylight, albeit at distance, a pair of inseparable young adult tigers, that it was no surprise to discover were sisters, and four different leopards. Sadly we encountered the tigers towards the end of the day in fading light and although this actually produced some reasonably evocative shots, the effect was

ruined somewhat by the concrete waterhole that we found them relaxing at. I dislike photographing wildlife in artificial conditions, but this was a very insignificant issue and on the whole our stay at Panna had been magnificent. The enthusiasm and dedication of both the lodge manager and senior guide produced a number of unforgettable experiences and the 22 mammal species that they helped us find would not be surpassed or even equalled at any other reserve. They also kindly arranged a magical boat ride on the Ken River, where we were able to photograph an array of wading birds against another superlative landscape. Red-naped ibis, red-wattled lapwings and Asian openbill storks were joined by an energetic pied kingfisher and back on dry land Indian rollers added further adornment to the already picturesque scene. As always on the subcontinent, the birdlife was impressive and we spent much of our time photographing a succession of interesting and attractive birds, including a large number of raptors and a variety of owls. It must

be said that the lesser adjutant, a large member of the stork family, probably cannot be classified as overly attractive, but it is certainly interesting and was one of the first birds encountered when we moved on to Bandhavgarh National Park, historically one of my favourite reserves in central India. I cannot recall how many tigers I have seen over the years at Bandhavgarh and some of my happiest memories are from a reserve where I had never failed to see dhole previously and had a pretty good record in terms of wolf sightings as well. Without intending to labour the point, it is very hard to escape the feeling that this famous old reserve has been seriously undermined by the new regulations and that the ludicrous system of routes within zones has diminished its appeal. This is not simply based on the fact that we saw one tiger and one jungle cat for a combined total of maybe 90 seconds during our entire stay or that we were not able to drive to an area where we knew dhole were being seen, as I have discussed Bandhavgarh and other similar reserves with a number of interested parties, including tour operators, guides and tourists, and the overwhelming response is that the park has been severely damaged by the changes. To balance the argument slightly, other visitors did have better and longer tiger sightings than us, although, that said, a few did not see any tigers at all, and the guests that were fortunate enough to have access to both the zone and the specific route that the wild dogs were utilising, would have been able to view those animals in relative peace with fewer vehicles, which is always a bonus. In addition, some of the other reserves were not a great deal more productive than Bandhavgarh and probably only appeared to be because we had opportunities to spotlight in the vicinity, which was unfortunately not the case at Bandhavgarh. There is some truth in this, as a few night safaris did definitely paper over the cracks at times and we would have been far less satisfied with almost every park if we had not been successful at night. However, even taking these caveats into account, Bandhavgarh just did not feel like the same destination that had so enthralled me all those years ago. We were still able to savour plenty of highlights, including superb views of many of the more common species that are constantly taken for granted and first sightings of northern red muntjac, which had recently been split from the southern red muntjac that I had always known, and Gaur, a huge and immensely impressive type of wild cattle that we would encounter at every tiger reserve from now on. On the opposite end of the size spectrum, three-striped squirrels were seen for the first time, we had been watching the five-striped variety up to this point, as were Madras treeshrews. Regrettably, a few birds aside, nothing was spotted around our lodge, which was probably

the most luxurious of the trip, as the grounds were too well maintained to attract a great deal of wildlife, even at night. The food here was certainly the best of the tour and the facilities were equally fine, but I would have swapped it all for the opportunity to spotlight each evening, even the pool, for as blue and tempting as it appeared, December is not a warm month in central India and the water was deceptively cold. In summary, Bandhavgarh was not a disaster, it just felt like one and we were not sorry when it was time to leave. If that sounds a little harsh, part of the reason was that our next national park would be Kanha, which holds a special affinity for me personally and for many Englishmen in general. My affection for the reserve dates back to my first visit, as I had learned as a young boy that Kanha was the inspiration behind Rudyard Kipling's classic collection of stories The Jungle Book and I can still remember the excitement and anticipation when, as a grown man, I realised that I would be visiting the forest that many of my favourite childhood stories were based upon. Fortunately, for once the reality lived up to the myth, as Kanha is one of India's most appealing reserves and I was smitten as soon as we drove up to Bamni Dadar for my first breathtaking sunset overlooking the park. Although I came to realise that Kanha was just one area that Kipling drew inspiration from and that he never actually visited these beguiling sal forests, I have always enjoyed spectacular success here and my love for this special place has never diminished. My favourite of The Jungle Book stories did not actually involve Mowgli or the other characters that Disney went on to immortalise in their famous musical film version, as I preferred Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, the tale of an incredibly brave mongoose protecting an English family from evil cobras. I can clearly remember being terrified that Nagaina, yes J.K.Rowling almost certainly read Kipling before naming her own snake in the Harry Potter books, would kill the courageous mongoose after he had destroyed her eggs, as well as the accompanying elation when he eventually emerged from her nest unscathed and victorious. Whilst it does not bear a great deal of resemblance to the three Mowgli stories that appear in Kipling's book, the Disney film is in many ways far more engaging for young children and the tiger Shere Khan was probably a close second to The Child Catcher from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, in terms of the most terrifying children's movies baddies. The voice is everything in animation of course and Shere Khan's charmingly sinister clipped tones were provided by the venerable English character actor George Sanders, who won a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award for his portrayal of a sardonic theatre critic in All About Eve with Bette Davis and a then unknown Marilyn Monroe. In addition to going to see the films whenever they appeared at the cinema, I used to play the Disney soundtracks, including all of the actual dialogue, on my small record player, as videos and dvds did not exist back then and even when video did become popular, Disney would never release their films in that format, as they were frightened of diluting the Disney monopoly and somehow

devaluing their brand. So as young children we would buy the vinyl version of each film and sit and listen to them over and over again. My own personal favourites were Peter Pan, Pinocchio, The Sword in the Stone, with Merlin magically duelling Madam Mim, Mary Poppins, although, as a boy who grew up in London, even at seven I would cringe at Dick Van Dyke's criminally appalling cockney accent, Bedknobs and Broomsticks, Robin Hood and of course The Jungle Book. Robin Hood was a particular favourite, partly because it was set in England, which, as you can tell from my list, I generally preferred, but largely because it featured the imperious acting skills of Peter Ustinov as Prince John and the comedic genius of Terry Thomas as Sir Hiss. Their scenes together were exceptionally funny and I always had visions of Sir Hiss dismissing Robin and his merry men as an 'absolute shower', a jibe that Thomas immortalised during an illustrious career playing some of the greatest upper class bounders since Flashman. Apart from the steely, calculated menace of Shere Khan, the songs were probably the strongest element of the Disney version of Kipling's classic and even today James and I will sometimes sing something from The Jungle Book, as I introduced him to many elements of my own childhood and he subsequently grew up with all of these songs and films as well. Although I have absolutely no idea what an orangutan is doing in an Indian forest, King Louie's I Wan'na Be Like You, is a popular choice and our absolute favourite is Baloo's life affirming, The Bare Necessities, which usually receives a rendition when we have just seen a wild bear. The other song that we crucify regularly, neither of us have the best singing voices in truth, comes from another of my beloved childhood films, as I first saw Chitty Chitty Bang Bang when I was very young and, apart from being terrified by the sinister Child Catcher, was very impressed with both the theme tune and the idea of a flying car. I was even more impressed when I discovered that this wonderful film had been written by the James Bond author Ian Fleming, as I was devoted to 007, despite the fact that I largely grew up with the awful Roger Moore versions. Dick Van Dyke took the lead, but on this occasion without his lamentable London accent, and Gert Frobe, 'Goldfinger' himself and probably the only obviously funny German I had known, played the evil Bavarian baron. The film and stage versions are great fun and the song that James and I have appropriated is Posh, as we have been travelling together since he was very young and a lot of our trips, or sections of them at least, have been fairly rough with generally more creatures than comforts. Consequently, whenever we used to arrive somewhere even remotely nice, with maybe a bed and even washing facilities, I would sing the first verse of Posh to him:

'Oh the posh posh travelling life, the travelling life for me
First cabin and captain's table regal company
Whenever I'm bored I travel abroad but ever so properly
Port out, starboard home, posh with a capital P-O-S-H, posh'

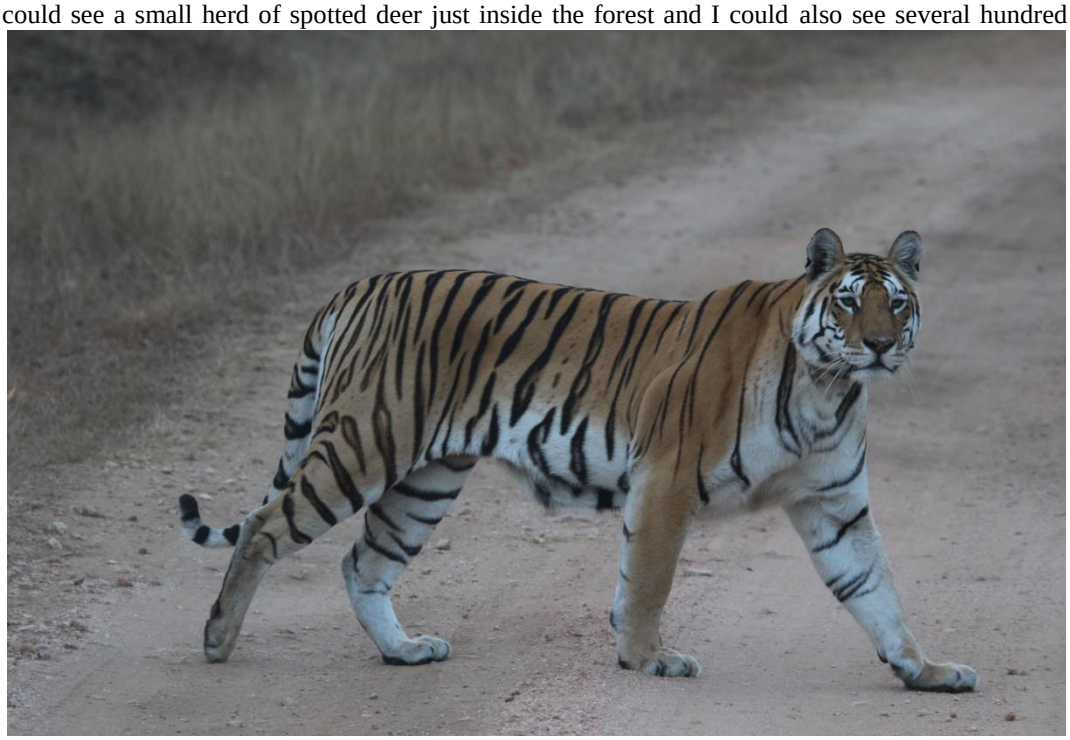
Now we sing it together if we stay anywhere lavish and James has stated that when he finally settles down to write a true and unabridged account of our adventures, he will call it Whenever I'm Bored, which is a nice touch and makes me smile. As an aside, and before I digress much further, shortly after the second of these two trips, Disney released a live action version of The Jungle Book, which we went to see. Although it was enjoyable and the special effects were impressive, it is more challenging to see a tiger portrayed with human characteristics and motives in this day and age, certainly given the Indian Supreme Court's ruling regarding Ustad, who was tried and convicted on a more or less human basis. Apart from the fact that it was absolutely freezing, my overriding

concern as we set out for our first game drive at Kanha, was that I would barely recognise a park that I had such fond memories of. I was therefore probably more relieved than ecstatic when we encountered a huge male tiger patrolling its territory within a few minutes of entering the park. After just over an hour we had seen three and I began to relax. The second was an even larger male, which we also found on the road marking its territory, and the third was a younger female that emerged from under a bridge just as we crossed. I was aware that while I could not make a definitive judgement based on a single hour or one morning drive, it was still a hugely promising beginning and the early indications were that Kanha had not suffered the same fate as Bandhavgarh or Ranthambore. I am not sure at what stage exactly the doubt began to creep in regarding this rather premature theory, but after five and a half more or less blank drives, certainly as far as major predators were concerned, I realised that Kanha was not immune and that I was going to have to change my entire thought process regarding my tried and trusted tiger reserves and possibly even in terms of whether I would continue to use Rajasthan and central India for tiger tours. This was not a knee jerk reaction, as I had been collecting data for the best part of three weeks and all of the evidence was confirming what my tour operators and guides have been telling me for two years, that it was now far more difficult to find certain species at many of the national parks that we had always relied upon. Guests at our lodge were complaining that they were not seeing anything and one group had been at Kanha for five days without a single tiger sighting. These stories would have been almost unheard of even a decade ago and it is impossible not to worry about the continued survival of much of the wildlife in the extensive areas that no longer receive any protection. As long as the animals themselves endure, I am not that anxious about future tours, as there will always be ways to ensure that committed guests see tigers and other species and finding these elusive creatures was never meant to be easy. This is why these research trips are so essential, as it is now my job to produce a series of alternative options for future clients, based not on redundant details from past visits, but on my own first-hand experiences and on the detailed information provided by my contacts on the ground, who deal with these issues on a daily basis. As at most of the other reserves, we still enjoyed our stay at Kanha and fortunately had a couple of different locations to try at night. The first was actually a rival lodge, who have had large brown flying squirrels living in their grounds for a number of years. Our guide had informed the owners of our visit before we arrived and they had very kindly invited us to try for the squirrel, which obligingly emerged just after dusk, before gliding off into the night. Our second forest location was not wildly productive, but it was a relief to be spotlighting again after the enforced break and we were delighted to see another jungle cat and a Bengal fox. Given that we were not having tremendous success at night, we decided that it might make sense to switch things around a little and to leave at 4am the next morning in order to slowly spotlight our way towards one of the further entrance gates. It was a great theory, and we did indeed observe another jungle cat, but we had not taken the temperature into account that early in the morning, particularly in a moving and totally exposed jeep. It was of course absolutely freezing and after an hour we could barely hold the spotlights. We were happy just to make it to the park gate and spent the next two hours waiting for the first weak rays of sunshine to begin thawing us out. The mornings were usually the same, very cold, with a gentle layer of mist that shrouds the forest and gives each Indian reserve such a romantic and mysterious ambience. However, at Kanha and later on at the National Chambal Sanctuary, the fog had gone well beyond atmospheric and had reached the level whereby we could not see more than a metre in front of our vehicle. At one stage we had to pull over for almost an hour just to ensure that we did not find a tiger in the worst possible way and on a number of days we had no real visibility until almost 9am. Fortunately, time was not a massive factor at Kanha, as we were really only looking specifically for one species and barasingha, or swamp deer as they are also known, are not terribly difficult to locate. They are rare in this area though, as Kanha is the most southerly extreme of their range and the herds here make up the only population in central India. We had good views of several herds of various sizes during our stay and knew that we would see

this species again when we visited Kaziranga National Park in Assam in less than two months. Of course we were still searching intensely for rare and elusive species, most notably dhole and wolf by this stage of the trip, and on Christmas Day we received the marvellous gift of a large male leopard walking along the road just ahead of our jeep. We were all grateful for this unexpected treat, just as we were for the special Christmas dinner that the friendly lodge staff prepared especially for us. After a superb meal, I love curry more than most, but a well cooked roast potato can be a wondrous thing, I continued to work on the extremely nervous dog that had barked at us incessantly as soon as we arrived. We learned that he had been rescued from dire conditions and acted in this manner with all strangers until he realised, perhaps after two or three weeks, that they would not harm him. I sadly did not have even a week to spare and therefore decided to expedite the process by enticing the jumpy pooch with cheese from the canapés. As most dogs do, this little one loved lying in front of the open fire, but would run out into the cold if anyone approached that he was not yet comfortable with. I therefore had to get to the fire first one evening and wait for him to join me, which he duly did and by the time that I left after three nights, he was lying upside down asleep in my arms. It was probably my greatest success of the entire tour and we were still discussing how cute he was when we arrived at our next lodge and were greeted by two insanely boisterous German shepherd puppies. The dopey dogs aside, which we spent most of our precious spare time with, our lodge at Pench National Park was not really my type of accommodation, as it was fairly large and impersonal and I prefer small and intimate camps if possible. However, I was using it because the guide here is known to be very good and that was certainly the case. Interestingly, given the supposed connections between Rudyard Kipling and Kanha, Pench probably has a better claim as the setting for The Jungle Book, as Mowgli is actually swept away on the Pench River and the nearby Seoni district lends its name to the Seeonee wolf pack that raises Mowgli. Many of Kipling's locations are clearly based on real places that appear in Robert Armitage Sterndale's semi-autobiographical work Seonee or Camp Life on the Satpura Range, including the Seoni Hills and the gorge where Shere Khan is killed. In addition, Mowgli was believed to be inspired by Sir William Henry Sleeman's publication An Account of Wolves Nurturing Children in Their Dens, which was apparently based on several real life cases. Sleeman was a British officer charged with suppressing the murderous Thuggee secret society in the 1830s and his article was first published in the mid 1850s, approximately 40 years before Kipling's classic stories were released. Whilst it remains likely that Kipling drew on a whole range of sources when creating The Jungle Book, it is difficult not to at least contemplate Mark Twain's famous quote when assessing his so called intimate connection with Kanha '*never let the truth get in the way of a good story'*. Although it was necessary for me to visit as many national parks as possible whilst travelling in this region, the one problem with tours of this kind is the lack of variety, as long trips usually incorporate several diverse areas, but that was not the case this time and Pench was our sixth tiger reserve of the eight that we were due to assess. We could not expect even slightly contrasting landscapes, or indeed very many new species, until we reached the National Chambal Sanctuary and by this stage of the tour, despite our best intentions in terms of appreciating the commonly observed animals, we were really mainly interested in species that we had not encountered previously or exceptional shots of the rare animals that we had already seen. We did still stop to admire and photograph a variety of wildlife, but I was now being far more selective in order to cover as much ground as possible and at Pench this strategy finally paid off. Having missed them on several occasions during the tour, our long searches were finally rewarded when our guide spotted at least one dhole in the extreme distance and we gambled on where exactly it was heading. Thankfully we made the right call and as we sat and waited in a combined state of frenzied excitement and intense anxiety, four wild dogs crested a hill and ran straight towards us. Sadly this was where our good fortune ran out, for although the stunning dogs did stop to rest within a reasonable distance of us, a nearby forest ranger was hammering out a metal panel and the noise was obviously bothering them. I tried to signal for him to stop, but my gesticulations went unnoticed and eventually the pack moved on. This was

one of those occasions where you do not know whether to laugh or cry, as we were thrilled to have seen these extraordinary canids at last, but they were clearly keen to rest and would have almost certainly ventured even closer. Had we known that this was to be our only dhole encounter of the entire trip, we would have probably been more relieved than satisfied and before the trip had commenced, I would have categorically failed to predict that 70 wildlife activities would produce one twenty-minute sighting, even taking the changes that I was aware of into account. We were still seeing tigers though and Pench had been the venue of the BBC documentary Tiger - Spy in the Jungle, which was narrated by the esteemed David Attenborough and featured a number of cameras disguised as rocks and tree trunks. The cameras were carried into position by elephants in order to avoid disturbing the tigers and much of the series focused on the famous female Barimada and her devoted efforts to protect and raise her four cubs. One of those cubs, Collarwali, named after the defunct radio collar that she continues to wear, has become even more celebrated than her mother and is known to many locals as the Queen of Pench. Born in 2005, Collarwali gave birth to her first litter in 2008 and has produced an incredible 22 cubs in the eight-year period to April 2015, sixteen of which have survived to adulthood. This in itself is unusual and so is the rate that Collarwali weans her young, as tigers are usually independent by around eighteen months and finally leave their mother between two and two and a half years. For whatever reason, the process is far quicker with Collarwali, and apparently for several females at Pench, as her cubs are fully weaned by sixteen months and she is producing her next litter within two years. We did not encounter any of her 2015 cubs, which were born in April and would have been left in safety while she hunted, but we did see the young male from the litter that she produced in 2013. We were also fortunate enough to see the grand old lady herself on a couple of occasions, the first of which involved about fifteen safari vehicles all reversing because the park rules would not permit us to turn around safely and drive in the same direction that Collarwali was walking. Totally ludicrous and I very rarely involve myself in this type of nonsense or chase an animal when there are so many other vehicles already pursuing it. Instead I asked our driver to pull over

and to let everyone else pass, including Collarwali, who walked away into the forest. There were only two vehicles remaining when she reappeared and at the same time a golden jackal approached from the opposite direction. There is certainly nothing unusual about seeing a tiger and a jackal in close proximity, but this particular jackal was carrying the head of a spotted deer in its mouth and decided to move on very quickly as soon as it spotted the much larger predator and made the decision to protect both of its heads. Collarwali was meanwhile showing an interest in something and sat down patiently at the edge of the forest. There are times when I feel slightly sorry for tigers, as they cannot walk anywhere without one animal or another barking or screeching at them and even when you can see that they are well fed and are clearly only interested in sleeping, they are forced to move on as a result of the incessant alarm calls all around them. On the other hand, when a tiger does eventually saunter into view, my perspective tends to change somewhat and more or less instantly my sympathy switches to all of the other poor creatures that are forced to live with it. This was one such occasion, as I could see a small herd of spotted deer just inside the forest and I could also see several hundred pounds of hulking death slinking towards them in the form of Collarwali. You could instantly understand how she had been able to raise so many cubs, as this was a huntress still in her prime, a skilled and deadly predator, moving silently and inexorably towards the unsuspecting deer. Stalking flat to the ground in that almost comical manner, she had already cut the distance to her prey by more than half when she suddenly increased the tempo, rising into a charge and sprinting the final few metres before pouncing full length into the undergrowth. The final assault was over in less time than it takes me to read the sentence describing it and I will never forget the unadulterated power and exceptional grace of that pounce, regardless of the outcome, as deer scattered in all directions and we were never certain whether she killed or not. All I can say for sure is that she did not appear again before we had to depart and when we saw her the next day, she had definitely fed. We tried for the wild dogs again on a few occasions, but the remainder of the highlights during our time here occurred at night beyond the national park. On our two nocturnal drives we encountered three jungle cats and two Bengal foxes, as well as small Indian civets, common palm civets and several Indian hares and gerbils. Our stay had therefore been a good one and we



moved on with a new number one priority, as we had still not seen a wolf and were fully aware that we were running out of opportunities to do so. Before we reached our seventh tiger reserve we stopped off for an afternoon game drive at Umred Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary, which I had not visited previously. It is difficult to assess a park in just a few hours, but the reserve has an impressive mammal list and the local guide confirmed that tigers were encountered reasonably regularly, as well as leopards and sloth bear. Although relatively uneventful, our drive was pleasant enough for me to want to return if the opportunity arises and we did miss

a leopard by a few seconds, when the only other vehicle in the whole park, a private car in fact, watched the typically relaxed predator cross directly in front of them. A wolf was never likely at Tadoba National Park, in truth I am not aware of anyone having seen one there, but dhole, leopard, sloth bear and tiger are all commonly observed at a reserve that has become increasingly popular in recent years. Despite actually encountering three of those four species, our stay at Tadoba was by far the most disappointing section of the tour, largely because the experienced guide that we were meant to use was not available and his replacement was very poor. You can sometimes accept and work with a guide who is not that knowledgeable or proficient in the field, as long as he is keen and his enthusiasm compensates for any other deficiencies. That was not the case with this particular individual, as he was apathetic at best and did everything within his power to ensure that he did as little as possible each day. He would arrive late for game drives and on the first morning he attempted to return to the lodge almost an hour early, which I did not accept. Within the park he would ignore most of our requests until I had to begin issuing clear instructions to him and our driver, which is not really the way that I like to operate and can make things needlessly uncomfortable. The same female tiger with three cubs was being seen at distance each day in an open area and after he had taken us to see her twice, I mentioned that I would prefer to concentrate on other areas, partly because she was so far away, but largely because there were always between 40 and 60 vehicles watching her at a time, which I just did not want to be part of. Despite this request, when we next entered the park he took us straight to the same spot and basically refused to move on until we had been completely boxed in by other vehicles, at which point he sat down, shrugged, smiled and informed me that there was nothing we could do until the tigers left and all of the other jeeps moved on. I obviously had no intention of sitting there for several hours and asked our driver to leave, which now meant forcing maybe thirty other vehicles to also move, which took over

twenty very irritable and noisy minutes to accomplish. To say that we were not popular was an understatement and the entire episode was so unnecessary that it rather ruined our stay to some degree. These things happen from time to time of course and I have discussed the situation with my local representative for future reference and to hopefully ensure that the situation is not repeated. We did see the tiger walking with her cubs on our final afternoon and also managed extremely brief glimpses of a leopard and a sloth bear, plus a prolonged view of a jungle cat, which I was able to photograph, but certainly not well enough to lift the curse. We also just missed dhole on two separate occasions and could see where they had been marking their territory and even the shapes of their bodies where they had been lying in the dirt, which was somewhat galling to say the least. At night James and I walked on our own, initially around the wild grounds of the lodge, but then down towards the local village, as we were staying at Tadoba over the New Year period and the camp was extremely noisy each evening. It was nice to spend some time on our own in any case, particularly given the situation with the guide, and our longer village walk yielded three jungle cats, two snakes, several frogs and another owl. Our eighth and final tiger reserve was Satpura National Park and I cannot think of a more appropriate reserve to finish at, not only in terms of the spectacular location on the Denwa River and some magnificent sightings, but because there were hardly any other vehicles and no one appeared to pay much attention to zones, routes or driving religiously in the same direction. As such, for the first

time in almost a month, we had some freedom inside a national park and the flexibility to make decisions of our own. You take this freedom for granted in parks across the world, very few of which impose these stifling regulations, and it was simply wonderful to be able to choose what we searched for again, instead of just driving aimlessly in circles. Now we could actually do our job, we could follow tracks and react to alarm calls, or even explore certain areas where we knew specific animals occurred. We had seen thirteen tigers to date across seven reserves and I did not necessarily think that we would find a fourteenth at Satpura, which is more known for sloth bear and dhole encounters, either of which we would have been thrilled with. It was therefore a very unexpected and delightful bonus to bump into an absolute beast of a male on our first morning drive and to then be able to spend almost an hour with him, particularly as the first 40 minutes or so were shared with just one other vehicle. He paid absolutely no attention to either of us and continued to methodically mark his territory with sprays of urine and secretions from his anal glands. Had James and I known that these were to be our final moments with one of nature's supreme predators, we would have both agreed that it was a more than fitting way to end. As it was, however, we still had the best part of three days remaining and we turned our attention to the sloth bears and dhole that Satpura is famous for. That we had no luck with the wild dogs was disappointing and frustrating in equal measure, as I had been hoping for an outstanding sighting of these consummate hunters throughout the tour and we would instead have to settle for the

small pack that we encountered at Pench. The same fortunately, was not the case regarding sloth bears, which were observed on such a regular basis, we almost began to expect to see them on every drive. In all we enjoyed six sightings of seven animals at Satpura, one female with two cubs and two females with one cub each. Watching the interaction between the mothers and young was a highlight of this or any other trip and on one memorable occasion, the poor harassed and obviously exhausted mother stopped in the middle of the road and fell fast asleep sitting up in the sunshine. She only woke when her cub returned and both bears ambled away together. The captivating bears and somehow the park itself, appeared to dictate our pace for the last few days, as Satpura lends itself to gentle exploration and after such a demanding schedule, we were more than happy to reduce the tempo and savour the charming antics of these adorable little black balls of fluff. They spent much of their time either hoovering their way across the forest floor or desperately attempting to catch up with their distracted mothers, that spent far more time overturning large boulders in the hope of finding something to eat, than they did on any parental duties. The entire idyllic experience was further enhanced by the fact that we had to cross the Denwa River to reach the reserve, which was pleasant enough each morning, but magical in the evening when we left to take the boat back and the sun was setting over the shimmering water, against a burning crimson sky. Even the one new species that we were hoping to see here surrendered itself in a leisurely manner, as we first heard the chattering of an Indian giant squirrel while watching the tiger and when I had finally located it, the guests in the other vehicle could not understand why I was occasionally taking pictures of something in the trees, when a mammoth tiger was walking beside us. Their quizzical looks turned to incredulity when I eventually explained that I was photographing a squirrel. We encountered several during the course of

our stay and we also heard a lot of alarm calls, some of which we could now choose to investigate. We did not feel the need to chase them all, but on our final afternoon we had a great deal of fun tracking what we thought was probably a leopard from the type, pattern and length of the various calls. At the same time, we unequivocally demonstrated what had been missing for almost a month and what had been lost to visitors in so many parks across much of India. Around three hours after we first heard the screams of the agitated langurs, our quarry strolled calmly into view and whilst our efforts did not on this occasion develop into a great sighting, the leopard that we had all predicted was evidently hunting and was reluctant to reveal itself for more than a few seconds, it was still a great experience, an experience that thousands of future tourists will sadly now be denied. Our reluctant leopard was to be the last animal that I photographed in a tiger reserve and it was now time for a change of scenery and at least one more new mammal, as we still had that wolf to find and the National Chambal Sanctuary would represent our last opportunity to do so. The sanctuary was conceived in Madhya Pradesh in 1978 to protect the gharial, a small crocodile that had been hunted and poached to the brink of extinction and is still critically endangered. The reserve stretches over 400 kilometres along the Chambal River and incorporates the unique and significant ravines that lie on either side up to widths of six kilometres. Occurring in three neighbouring states, Chambal is administered jointly by Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and also protects the endangered Ganges River dolphin and a

variety of wildlife, including the red-crowned roof turtle, yet another critically endangered species. Whilst we intended to explore a number of different locations within the sanctuary, we wanted to initially concentrate our efforts on the gharial and river dolphin and took two boat rides to search for each. The gharials were easy to find and certainly easy to distinguish from the mugger crocodiles that we also encountered, as the males have a distinctive boss at the end of their equally characteristic snouts which resembles a type of Indian pot used for carrying water. In Hindi the pot is known as a ghara, which gives the gharial its name. Gharial populations were reduced from as many as 10,000 in the 1940s to less than 200 in 1976 and although some belated protection saw them recover very

slightly to over 400 in 1997, their numbers had fallen by almost 60% again by 2006, when there were thought to be less than 180 breeding adults remaining. Current population trends and sizes are unclear, but it is believed that the Chambal River protects around 50% of all remaining gharials across their greatly diminished range. The Ganges River dolphin has suffered similarly, but the Chambal River is not considered to be holy, which has protected it from much of the pollution that is destroying the Ganges, the most sacred river in India and known as Ma Ganga or Mother Ganges to hundreds of millions of devoted Hindus. The Chambal River is pristine in comparison and the stretch that we visited on two occasions is one of the best in the country to view these marvellous freshwater dolphins. We found four in all over both trips, but no pods and solitary animals moving up and down the river are far more difficult to stay with and photograph than groups hunting together around the boat. We were not at all disappointed, as the boat safaris were a highlight of a very successful stay at Chambal and towards dusk on the second we spotted the distinctive gait of a striped hyena shuffling along the riverbank. The sanctuary incorporates a lot of different habitats and we made a point of trying to visit as many as possible, including the ravines that support so much wildlife either side of the river, as well as a few less obvious sites where our guide had seen certain mammals previously. Most of his suggestions were spot on and his local knowledge, hard work and enthusiasm provided us with exceptional views of both small Indian mongoose and Indian grey mongoose, which we had barely seen previously. He also delivered the first herd of blackbuck since Ranthambore and a small group of sarus cranes, although he could do little about the heavy fog that made them tricky to see, let alone photograph. Our best and probably final chance for wolf was among the ravines along the river, but despite searching day and night, jackals and Bengal foxes were as close as we got to their larger distant cousins. Jackals would also visit our lodge at night, along with jungle cats, Indian hares, two different owls and several common palm civets, which were actually residents, as opposed to guests. As such, you would have assumed they knew exactly where they could tread safely and where the various perils lurked. Apparently that was not the case for one very young or very injudicious civet, that thought it would be a good idea to use a telephone wire as a shortcut to some fruiting trees, only to discover that the wire was not actually that stable. It realised its mistake as soon as the wire took its weight and it began simultaneously swaying from side to side and squealing in absolute terror.

It attempted to turn round at one early stage, which was clearly never going to work and instead it had to inch its way towards the trees whilst desperately trying to cling on. Ordinarily I would have taken pictures, but I did not want to use the spotlight and literally sway the balance against the struggling civet, which was still wobbling uncontrollably. Eventually it managed to get within maybe

two metres of the tree and with one colossal leap, which was accompanied by a heart rending scream, it threw itself towards the safety of the branches. It just about made it and within seconds had rushed straight down the trunk and away into the night, possibly with the sound of our laughter ringing in its ears. We were marginally less amused when we were informed one morning that a group of birders had seen an Indian hedgehog the previous evening, as we had spent many hours looking for this creature and at the time had been searching a different area with our guide just a few minutes away. No one had thought to come and get us and although we kept trying, that particular mammal eluded us and would ultimately have to wait for our next trip. That one very minor frustration aside, my decision to include Chambal had been vindicated and at only around 300 kilometres from Delhi, this excellent wildlife destination can be easily reached and simply added to most itineraries. Indeed, Agra was only just over 60 kilometres from where we stayed and on the journey down, we had stopped briefly for views of the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort. Having said that, even if we had not seen a single animal, Chambal would have been worth visiting for one totally surreal incident that occurred while we were having breakfast one morning in the front garden of a farmer's house. In the distance I could see a group of cyclists moving towards us and they appeared to be in the middle of some form of cavalcade. I expected them to continue on without stopping, but one of the cyclists noticed me with my camera and when he stopped, everyone did the same, including the two cars, which were full of security men. I noticed immediately that the man who had stopped was dressed casually and was wearing a baseball cap, but the rest were wearing smart business suits and they were all riding brand new Mercedes bikes. It quickly dawned on me that this was election time in India and my guide recognised the casually garbed gentleman as the chief minister of the region, as I did later when we saw his face plastered on hundreds of billboards. I turned to James and said that it was a publicity stunt to prove that the minister was truly a man of the people and that even though he was an important man, he rode a bike like millions of normal Indians. At this point Mr Mercedes came over and introduced himself and we had a brief conversation that commenced with him asserting that we were birders and then gently berating our poor guide for not taking us to his home village where there were 'a lot of birds'. I did briefly explain that we were interested in all wildlife and that our guide had been very helpful, but of course as a politician he was not really listening and was instead teaching our guide how to perform his duties and informing his entire entourage of the top birding destinations in Uttar Pradesh. The best part was when one of his advisers thought that it was necessary to explain to me that his boss was 'an important man, but humble, one of the people'. I have to say, that in an age of sound bites, focus groups, lobbyists and general political sophistication, I found it rather endearing that his aides had to spell out what they were doing and actually explain the angle they were attempting to convey. They may as well have stuck a 'Man of the People' label on his head and they should have at least ensured that he could ride, as he wobbled down the road when he set off again, in the way that a young child does when they are first learning, which is a bit of a giveaway in terms of the old 'I am really one of you' ploy. Before they left we had our picture taken together and looking back I was horrified that they may be used in a local newspaper. Not in case they had any influence on voters or helped sway an election, but because I knew that I was going to be

described as a bloody birder. It was all rather jolly in any case and we would have probably left Chambal in better spirits had we not been aware that we had now missed one of our main target species, as there were no wolves at our final destination, Keoladeo National Park. We had less than a full day at Keoladeo, which used to be known as Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary and is one of the most famous birding destinations in the world. It is actually a manmade reserve that was originally created as a hunting ground for the Maharajas of Bharatpur and to this day the commemorative hand-painted boards still survive immortalising famous shoots, many of which were held in honour of British dignitaries and officials. For example, on the 12th of November 1938 a shoot in honour of the Viceroy and Governor-General of India Lord Linlithgow bagged 4273 birds in a single day, a hugely impressive number until you go on to read that 3044 waterfowl were blasted to smithereens in the morning, but only 1229 were similarly despatched in the afternoon, which appears to be a very poor show unless of course there were only 1229 cowering ducks left following the earlier revelries. The gun dogs would have got good exercise that day at least, although when you consider that just 39 inbred upper class twits were responsible for the entire massacre, their poor dogs must have been exhausted and you can imagine a pile of golden retrievers and labradors lying shattered in the mud barely able to move, with their tongues hanging out and their tails wagging pathetically in surrender. As for Lord Linlithgow, he served as viceroy for seven years until 1943 and all you can really say about his rule was at least the ducks died relatively quickly, as Linlithgow was viceroy during the Bengal famine and was at least partially responsible for the deaths of up to three million Bengalis from starvation and disease. He was so unpopular among many Indians that it is suggested that his term as viceroy paved the way for Indian independence after the second world war.

The main purpose of our visit was to assess the condition of Keoladeo following years of severe water shortage, which partially dates back to the politically motivated decision in 2004 to divert over 90% of the precious water that sustained the park and consequently the breeding grounds of thousands of migratory birds, to local agricultural use and cattle farming. The result, as all but the most feeble minds could have predicted, was an ecological disaster from which the park has never fully recovered and which threatened its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as well as its Ramsar listing as a Wetlands of International Importance. Additional water is now pumped in from local drainage projects and from the Chambal River as a contingency, but a lack of water has remained a serious issue over the years and in 2014 an entire population of around 1,500 painted storks abandoned the reserve in the middle of the breeding season, leaving hundreds of eggs to be eaten by crows and other scavengers. The problem has been exacerbated by the presence of an invasive and robust species of African catfish, which was apparently introduced to the park when a local fish farm flooded. The catfish, which has thrived, has severely damaged the indigenous fish populations and, to a lesser extent, some small waterfowl species, which it also eats. In 2014, prior to the mass departure of storks, almost 30 truckloads of catfish were removed from the park and given to the local residents. Unfortunately, it was reported at the time that many endemic fish were also inadvertently targeted, fish that the breeding birds relied heavily upon to sustain themselves and raise their chicks. Thankfully, the eradication process has seemingly improved since then and an almost unbelievable 40,117 African catfish were removed from this tiny sanctuary during 2015 alone, which emphasises just how serious their threat has become and why they need to be strictly controlled. In terms of the water levels at least, I have been informed that the situation has improved recently and the park did appear to be in a healthy condition during our visit, although I will need to monitor developments carefully and will be asking my colleagues to keep me updated. Despite its location within a couple of kilometres of a hectic metropolis, Bharatpur's population is now approaching three million, and the fact that it is too small to even have a buffer zone, a healthy and vibrant Keoladeo has always been a favourite destination of mine. I saw my first Indian python here many years ago and have always considered Keoladeo to be an amazing resource to have more or

less on your doorstep, as it is only 180 kilometres from Delhi and sits conveniently within India's Golden Triangle, a famous tourist route between Delhi, which needs no introduction, Jaipur, the beautiful capital city of Rajasthan, and Agra, home to the Taj Mahal and formerly the base of the Moghul empire. Sariska also rests within this renowned circuit, Ranthambore lies just a little further south, and in many respects these six destinations combine perfectly as an introduction to India for the more general traveller with an interest in culture, history and architecture, as well as wildlife. When the water levels are adequate, Keoladeo is an exceedingly pretty reserve, with an array of colourful birds and always something to attract your attention or divert the eye. It has been famous for python sightings for decades and we saw two on this visit, one sprawled over several branches of a low tree and another that we inadvertently disturbed and were able to watch slide away into its burrow. Pythons may look as if you can outrun them, but they cover the ground incredibly quickly and that is just not the case. In addition to our first monitor lizards of the tour, we encountered several nilgai, which, at the other end of the elusive spectrum and surprisingly to me, were the only mammals observed at all ten of the major reserves that we visited. I had hoped that we might see a smooth-coated otter as well, as these aquatic carnivores are slowly recovering in a park that they more or less disappeared from for several years. Whilst that did not occur, we still encountered ten species in considerably less than a day and I will arrange to stay longer when I am next in the area. The park can be explored on foot or with the assistance of a cycle rickshaw, which our local guide had kindly provided for us, although we preferred to walk and mainly used the rickshaw for our equipment. The absurdly hardworking cyclists who pull these heavy contraptions are sometimes referred to as rickshaw walas and they know the park intimately, often providing even the qualified guides with the latest news and information regarding sightings. Towards the end of the day, there was maybe half an hour of daylight remaining at best, I was talking to ours while our guide checked an area for later that evening, as we had been granted permission to return to the park at night to look for a fishing cat. I am not sure what made me turn from our conversation, but as I did, I glimpsed a split second view of something dark slipping into the distant undergrowth. I shouted hyena to James and our driver responded 'no, jackal' but I instantly knew that we were both wrong, even from that one fleeting glance. We quickly ran towards the point where the animal had disappeared and saw a large dog staring directly back at us, which I knew, even as I held my breath and raised my camera, was a wolf. I fired two shots before it turned and was gone, melting away as quickly as it had appeared. Having searched for over a month with no success, we had finally seen a wolf in a

national park where they were not known to exist and had obviously never been photographed. To say that we were elated was a massive understatement, as this was the very last animal that we would encounter in daylight after 31 days. It was a miracle really and the pictures that I took instantly became two of my favourite shots of all time. As you can clearly see, our beautiful wolf is covered in blood after feeding and was probably heading towards the nearby stream to drink when I turned and disturbed it crossing the forest trail. Our guide could not quite believe what I showed him when he returned and he asked my permission to inform the park director of this important discovery. I was reluctant to agree at first, as wolves are not well loved in the best of places and Keoladeo is a tiny reserve surrounded by villages and cattle farmers. However, he assured me that the director was doing his best to secure the highest level of protection for the park and that evidence of major predators would greatly help his cause. I therefore agreed to provide him with copies of my two photographs, which I have since done. After such a high, James and I did consider not going out that evening, as it almost seemed preposterous to try to attempt a more memorable ending. However, a lot of effort had been made to enable us to look for the fishing cat and we concurred that it would be ungrateful not to proceed. As it was, the fishing cat appeared the night after we had departed and we ultimately finished with nice views of several common palm civets and small Indian civets. No matter, as we have seen a lot of fishing cats, including superb views of a mother with two young in Sri Lanka earlier that year, and were also aware that we had better chances for this animal on our next trip, which was now just over a month away. I obviously had to delay any detailed assessment of this tour until after that one, as the two had originally been planned as one long expedition and any initial decisions would be determined after every destination had been visited and researched individually. What I did already know by this stage, was that the tiger reserves of Rajasthan and central India had unquestionably been impacted by the new regulations and that the wildlife of these and other reserves has once again been put in jeopardy by people who either do not understand what they are dealing with or who choose to ignore the consequences for political or financial gain. I expect tigers and other animals to be killed as a direct result of the nonsensical new rules and I equally expect some animals to become more difficult for tourists to see in the wild. One is far more important than the other of course, but for someone who believes that conservation and tourism are inextricably linked, both are a problem. The first issue is sadly beyond my control, but one option for tourists will be to take full day jeep safaris, as these enable you to spend longer in the park and to escape the strict regulations regarding only being able to drive in certain zones and on specific routes. I did not arrange any full day drives on this trip, as it was more important that I assessed each reserve under normal conditions and some guests are not going to be happy paying almost $1,000 for a single game drive, even if it does allow them to explore a park for longer. Unless money is no object, in which case you would automatically choose the full day option every time, even if you did not utilise every minute of each of them, a combination of the two types of safari might work for some guests, with possibly one full day safari reserved for each national park. Either way, by ensuring that the standard morning and afternoon drives are now so inferior, foreign visitors are being asked to pay a great deal of money just to be able to explore the same park roads that they used to explore for a fraction of the cost. It’s a scandal really, but the real scandal will be if there are no tigers left by the time

that anyone realises it. Although it actually occurred in early January 2016, the hugely unexpected wolf sighting at Keoladeo was a magnificent way to finish what, if I am honest, was a mixed year in terms of my wildlife research trips. The year actually began extraordinarily well, with a superlative tour in Sri Lanka, that was one of the most enjoyable and successful trips I have ever been involved with. Our guide was just about the most enthusiastic and dedicated I have known and not only did we see almost every major terrestrial mammal in the country, we saw them superbly well. Estonia was more challenging in some ways, but it was still an encouraging recce in terms of future Eurasian lynx trips, with the added bonus of a fabulous European polecat sighting. A couple of minor setbacks aside, the United States was also a tremendous adventure, largely as a result of a succession of amazing encounters and also in terms of the freedom with which such a spectacular country can still be explored. The incredibly sweet ringtails at Carlsbad Caverns were a major highlight of a trip packed full of them. Which brings us to Paraguay, where things did start to go slightly wrong, largely as a result of some biblical weather and the worst run of ill fortune I have known. We still savoured some exceptional moments and a good friend was able to put the experience into some kind of context by proclaiming ‘if that’s your worst tour, sign me up’. So in Paraguay we tried and we largely failed, but we failed honestly, which was not the case when we visited Tibet in October. Without dwelling on it a great deal further, this was a career low for me and I still regret breaking my own rule and using a UK operator. However, as I wrote at the time, I will eventually forget the tour itself, but will never forget the serene female Tibetan fox that James and I managed to get within a few metres of and spend such a special time with. That beautiful creature was the highlight of the year for me, just ahead of our enigmatic grey ghost at Keoladeo. That is the true privilege of what I do, as you never know how each day will unfold or what wonders you will suddenly stumble upon to instantaneously make everything worthwhile. With my return to India and mammoth expeditions planned for Alaska and Australia, 2016 promises yet more adventure and perhaps a nice view or two within some of the most memorable landscapes on earth. If you listen carefully, you may even hear a distant refrain….oh, the posh, posh travelling life…

The Southern Red Muntjac (Muntiacus muntjak) , has been split into two species and the Indian species, as well as the Sri Lankan species from an earlier trip in 2015, is now classified as the Northern Red Muntjac (Muntiacus vaginalis).

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Tiger	Panthera tigris	Observed in every tiger reserve excluding Sariska.
2	Leopard	Panthera pardus	Seven animals in four different reserves, including four at Panna.
3	Jungle Cat	Felis chaus	Sixteen across seven reserves, mainly at night.
4	Rusty-spotted Cat	Prionailurus rubiginosus	One or possibly two at night at Sariska and one running towards us on a night drive at Panna.
5	Grey Wolf	Canis lupus	Lone individual at Keoladeo National Park, the first ever photographed at that national park.
6	Dhole	Cuon alpinus	Pack of four at Pench for around twenty minutes.
7	Golden Jackal	Canis aureus	Observed at most reserves, common at several.
8	Bengal Fox	Vulpes bengalensis	Nine individuals in total, most seen at night and none at all in a national park.
9	Striped Hyena	Hyaena hyaena	One at night outside Ranthambore, three at night near Panna and one at dusk at the National Chambal Sanctuary.
10	Sloth Bear	Melursus ursinus	Four at Panna, one at Tadoba and seven at Satpura, including cubs.
11	Honey Badger	Mellivora capensis	Nice sighting of one running across the road and foraging at Ranthambore.
12	Small Indian Civet	Viverricula indica	Isolated sightings at five reserves.
13	Common Palm Civet	Paradoxurus hermaphroditus	Observed on several nocturnal drives and routinely encountered at our Chambal Sanctuary accommodation.
14	Small Indian Mongoose	Herpestes auropunctatus	Brief sighting at Panna and a longer encounter at a village rubbish tip within the National Chambal Sanctuary.
15	Indian Grey Mongoose	Herpestes edwardsii	Brief glimpse at Sariska under a gate and an excellent view of one just outside our lodge at Chambal.
16	Ruddy Mongoose	Herpestes smithii	Commonly encountered in several reserves, but not at all in five.
17	Sambar Deer	Rusa unicolor	Observed at every reserve excluding the National Chambal Sanctuary.
18	Barasingha	Rucervus duvaucelii	Only observed at Kanha, but in good numbers.
19	Spotted Deer	Axis axis	Abundant at every reserve excluding the National Chambal Sanctuary.
20	Northern Red Muntjac	Muntiacus vaginalis	Relatively common at Bandhavgarh, Kanha and Tadoba.
21	Blackbuck	Antilope cervicapra	Small herds near Ranthambore and within the National Chambal Sanctuary.
22	Nilgai	Boselaphus tragocamelus	Perhaps surprisingly, this was the only animal encountered at all ten sanctuaries.
23	Chinkara	Gazella bennettii	Low numbers near Ranthambore and at Panna and Bandhavgarh.
24	Four-horned Antelope	Tetracerus quadricornis	A solitary male at Panna.
25	Gaur	Bos gaurus	Healthy populations at the five reserves from Bandhavgarh to Satpura.
26	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	Encountered at all eight tiger reserves.
27	Southern Plains Grey Langur	Semnopithecus dussumieri	Common in all eight tiger reserves and absent beyond.
28	Rhesus Macaque	Macaca mulatta	Seen everywhere excluding Tadoba National Park.
29	Indian Hare	Lepus nigricollis	Routinely observed at night at every destination excluding Bandhavgarh, where we could not spotlight.
30	Madras Treeshrew	Anathana ellioti	A few individuals observed at both Bandhavgarh and Tadoba.
31	Indian Crested Porcupine	Hystrix indica	One within the grounds of our lodge at Ranthambore.
32	Three-striped Palm Squirrel	Funambulus palmarum	Common within the reserves at which they occur.
33	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	Funambulus pennantii	Common within the reserves at which they occur.
34	Indian Giant Squirrel	Ratufa indica	Only encountered at Satpura.
35	Large Brown Flying Squirrel	Petaurista philippensis	Lone animal in the grounds of a lodge at Kanha.
36	Black Rat	Rattus rattus	Dozens at Sawai Madhopur railway station.

37	Indian Gerbil	Tatera indica	Several individuals on night drives at Panna and Pench.
38	Indian Bush Rat	Golunda ellioti	Small group observed for more than half an hour during a stop at Sariska.
39	Indian Desert Jird	Meriones hurrianae	Close and prolonged views of several on a walk in the Ranthambore region.
40	Indian Flying Fox	Pteropus giganteus	Roosts located at four reserves.
41	Lesser Horseshoe Bat	Rhinolophus hipposideros	Large colony in a cave at Bandhavgarh.
42	Indian Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus coromandra	Observed in flight at three locations.
43	Leschenault's Rousette	Rousettus leschenaultii	Roost of between 25 and 30 at Panna.
44	Ganges River Dolphin	Platanista gangetica	Low numbers observed on successive days at the National Chambal Sanctuary.

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