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INDIA

Date - February 2016

Duration - 34 Days

Destinations
Kolkata - Sundarbans National Park - Bagdogra - Darjeeling - Singalila National Park - Guwahati - Jorhat - Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary - Kaziranga National Park - Manas National Park - Ahmedabad - Blackbuck National Park - Gir National Park - Bhuj - Great Rann of Kutch - Banni Grasslands Reserve - Little Rann of Kutch - Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary - New Delhi

Trip Overview

No real preamble is required at the beginning of this report, as this trip follows on directly from the previous India tour that finished a month earlier in January. Originally I had been hoping to combine the tours as a single grand expedition, but ultimately I was not able to spare more than two months for one single tour and even after two long trips, I still need to research several destinations in India over the next year or two. In September I will travel to Dachigam National Park, which sits just over twenty kilometres from Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir. At that time of year, Dachigam is probably the best place in Asia to see Asiatic black bears and also protects brown bear, yellow-throated marten, markhor, Himalayan goral and the Kashmir stag or hangul, a subspecies of elk which has now been split from the European red deer. In February or March 2017 I will return to the northeast to assess future tours in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, as both states, as well as bordering Nagaland and Manipur, which I also intend to explore at a later date, are home to an astonishing variety of rare species. The eight cats that occur in these regions include clouded leopard, Asiatic golden cat, marbled cat and fishing cat and two species of bear, sun bear and Asiatic black bear, are joined by a host of

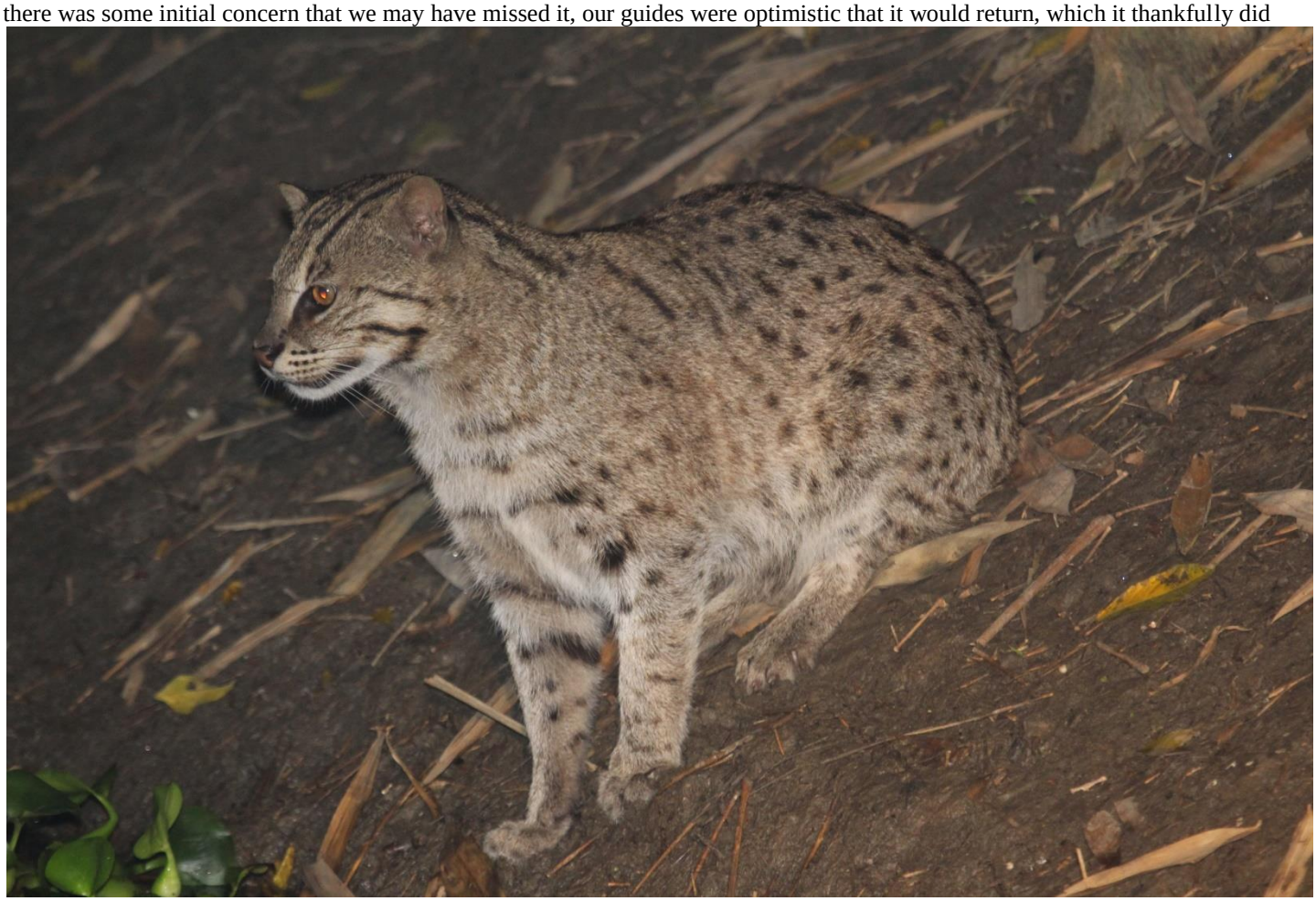
generally elusive small carnivores. Binturong, spotted linsang, large Indian civet, masked palm civet, small-toothed palm civet, yellow-throated marten, hog badger and both large-toothed and small-toothed ferret badgers are just a few of the predators that we will have the opportunity to look for. Otters, weasels and mongooses are also well represented and Bengal slow loris, Malayan porcupine and Chinese pangolin are just three of the many other unusual creatures found in this part of the world. Although a list of species in this form is fairly dull, it does not take a great deal of imagination to envisage searching for and finding even a few of these incredibly scarce animals, as there are probably only a handful of people on the planet who have encountered all of these species and even I have not yet done so. A few of these animals were possible on this tour, but I did not devote a great deal of time to any of them, as I instead wanted to concentrate my efforts on the trip that I have designed as an exciting introduction to the exceptionally diverse wildlife of India. As I explained in my previous report and will partially repeat here, the itinerary will feature three or four states, including the best tiger reserves of central India and or Rajasthan, as well as Assam and Gujarat, two of the three regions that I researched in detail on this tour. With the right planning, sufficient time and a modicum of good fortune, I would expect the trip to produce sightings of ten of India's most well known and charismatic mammals, as well as an array of other enchanting wildlife. For the record, the ten target species are tiger, lion, leopard, sloth bear, dhole, wolf, striped hyena, Asian elephant, greater one-horned rhinoceros and western hoolock gibbon. However, this is of course just a suggested itinerary that I believe works outstandingly well, particularly for first-time visitors to this unique country, and guests would not necessarily have to concentrate exclusively on these animals or even these regions, as alluring as they undoubtedly are. At one time I would have been reasonably confident that every tour would encounter these ten animals and although I still believe that this will occur more often than not, as I illustrated in my last trip report, the new park regulations have certainly ensured that this is not guaranteed. It never really was of course, as nothing is entirely guaranteed where wild animals are concerned and I have been involved in wildlife travel for far too long to take anything for granted. That said, these animals were never especially hard to find and the restrictions that I detailed in my previous report and will summarise here, hugely impacted our freedom to explore and consequently the success of the tour. In more than a month and across 70 different safari activities, we experienced just one dhole encounter, with four animals for around twenty minutes, and one wolf sighting, in a national park where they had never previously been recorded. Without going into too much detail, as readers can always refer back to that last report, in a misguided attempt to protect the 2,000 or so remaining Bengal tigers, following decades of woeful ineptitude and wilful negligence, the Indian Supreme Court initially banned all tourism within the core zones of every tiger reserve in the country. The ban lasted for about as long as it took government officials to spell the word bankrupt, so just a few weeks, and a compromise of sorts was reached when the regulations were relaxed and it was announced that tourists would be allowed to access

20% of each reserve. However, this access is strictly monitored and safari vehicles are only permitted to use the zones, and in most cases specific routes within these zones, allocated to them by park officers, regardless of whether tigers or other animals are spotted elsewhere. On several routes within many of the national parks, you are not even allowed to turn your vehicle around and have to continue in the same direction until your intrepid exploration of that single circuit comes to a glorious end. For someone who values personal freedom more or less above all things, the fact that I could no longer dictate our game drives or even respond to an animal's behaviour or basic movements, was a real issue that drifted somewhere between challenging and soul destroying. At Bandhavgarh the absurd new rules culminated in the equally ludicrous situation whereby we could not drive a few kilometres to watch a pack of dhole that everyone else was watching, everyone that is, who had been assigned that specific route. I am the first to accept that the welfare of the resident wildlife should come first in all cases and that a degree of inconvenience, however annoying and possibly expensive it may prove to be for visitors, is a very small price to pay to ensure the continued survival of the tiger. It similarly goes without saying that I support any genuine initiatives to protect animals and their habitat, but in reality the tiger only exists in India today as a result of international tourism and I believe that these ill-considered restrictions are likely to do more harm than good and could have a devastating effect on the already fragile tiger population. Given that the 20% tourist zone is a maximum figure, at least 80% of most tiger reserves now receive little or no protection and if conservation history has taught us anything, it is that poachers are far too ruthless to turn down the opportunity to exploit a weakness. I sincerely hope that time will prove me wrong, as poaching is endemic across the globe and tiger numbers are already so low that it would only take one more sustained slaughter, however brief, to force these powerful creatures to the brink of extinction, which, to our eternal shame, is more or less where they have been for approaching half a century. For James and I at least the problems should be fewer on this tour, as we were not due to visit many actual tiger reserves and those that had been included on the itinerary were more remote and hopefully significantly more relaxed as a result. Unlike the previous tour, when I revisited The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy, a haunting book that I knew and treasured, for this flight I had chosen a novel that I had not read previously, The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga, an Indian by birth, he was born in Madras or Chennai as it is now known, and an Australian by citizenship. Their Indian origins aside, Roy and Adiga share the fact that they both won the Booker Prize for their debut novels, a not inconsiderable achievement, as the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, to give it its full title, is a prestigious literary award that was at that time open to all Commonwealth and Irish novelists writing in English. There however, the similarities end, for although The White Tiger tackles many of the same themes as The God of Small Things, including the Indian caste system, poverty and social injustice, it does so with the grating screech of one of millions of lost souls within its own 'Rooster Coop' metaphor, as opposed to the lilting intonation that Arundhati Roy calls upon so lightly and yet so skilfully. You cannot blame a book for not being The God of Small Things or a writer for not being Arundhati Roy, but you equally do not need a sledgehammer, or even a broken bottle, to crack a nut and Adiga's unrealistic and heavy handed treatment of the subject matters tackled so delicately and yet so persuasively by Roy, is strangely difficult to forgive. Perhaps it is simply the fact that they both won the Booker Prize and have consequently been judged so critically, as The White Tiger is not a bad novel by any means, but there is no meaningful association between the two works and to try to compare them really only highlights the arbitrary nature of awards. They each have a voice and something to say, but while one is preaching raucously from the street corner, the other has the somewhat unfair advantage of a chorus of angels all singing from the heavens on its behalf. I had finished the book when we landed in Kolkata, which was just as well, as we had another hectic schedule and there would be little time for either of us to read. Our first destination was the Sundarbans on the Bay of Bengal, the largest remaining mangrove forest on earth and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the majority of which lies within southern Bangladesh. Formed by sediment deposited by the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers as part of the vast Ganges Delta, the Sundarbans is a complex and immensely important ecosystem that encompasses a variety of forest types and diverse habitats sustaining outstanding biodiversity across both terrestrial and marine environments. More than a thousand plant and animal species have been recorded within the salt tolerant mangroves and largely freshwater forests that sit beyond them and, depending on which source you accept, between half and two-thirds of the Sundarbans has already been destroyed. In excess of four million Indians and Bangladeshis make their home here and the natural resources of this unique region have been ruthlessly exploited for decades. Timber extraction, legal and otherwise, and agricultural use, historically in the form of paddy fields and more recently

shrimp farms, have resulted in extensive deforestation and burgeoning human settlements continue to encroach upon the remaining intact areas, large sections of which are meant to be protected in both countries across a number of extensive reserves. Several species, including buffalo, hog deer, gaur and Javan rhinoceros, which is unpardonably virtually extinct now, have all disappeared from the Sundarbans and rising seas, the oceans of the world have risen by unprecedented levels over the last decade, have already submerged significant tracts of mangrove. Around 40% of the Sundarbans sits within Indian territory and many of its inhabitants, on both sides of the border, are living in severe poverty. Most depend on fishing and farming for their livelihoods and various routine activities, including gathering honey in the forest and collecting leaves for fuel, brings villagers into contact with the resident tigers, which are excellent swimmers and well adapted to life in such a demanding environment. The natural consequence of this uneasy and often tragic relationship is a number of human deaths each year, as tigers are opportunist hunters and will eat almost anything, including other tigers in some cases and people in areas where the two coexist in close proximity. I have seen various estimates regarding human fatalities, around 50 a year appears to be the most popular guess, but no official figures exist and unquestionably far more tigers have been killed by people than the other way round and not innocently for food. That does not help of course if you live in the Sundarbans with a family to protect and dozens of kilometres of fencing has now been erected to safeguard the main human settlements, at least within the Indian national park area that we visited. It can only be hoped that this will reduce the conflict between millions of people and actually very few tigers, as it was always thought that tiger numbers here were overstated, partly because India and Bangladesh counted their populations separately and in different ways, and a recent census has confirmed that there are probably no more than 200 tigers across the entire Sundarbans, as opposed to the 600 or so that had been recorded here previously. We were not visiting to look specifically for tigers, as I more wanted to assess the national park in general after such a long absence, which was just as well, as the tiger proof fence appears to be working and it is now incredibly difficult to see a tiger in a reserve that used to be one of the most renowned in India. I had been informed that this was the case before we travelled and everything we experienced, including lengthy conversations with park rangers, guides and other tourists, confirmed that you would not even consider visiting the Sundarbans if seeing a tiger was your main priority. To be fair, it has always been difficult to see these big cats here and the park's

popularity was more established on its dark reputation as the lair of ferocious man eaters than for actual sightings. There were still encounters, when smaller, faster boats were used and tigers would be spotted on the mudflats or even swimming between the myriad islands that form this unrivalled ecosystem, but they were erratic in comparison to other reserves and with no roads to traverse and all safari activities now completed in large, slow boats, the fence appears to have well and truly tipped the balance. If I needed confirmation, which I really did not after almost 40 hours of what can only be described as soporific tedium on our own virtually inert craft, it arrived later in the tour when I spoke to a guide who had led more than 300 full day boat safaris without seeing a single tiger.

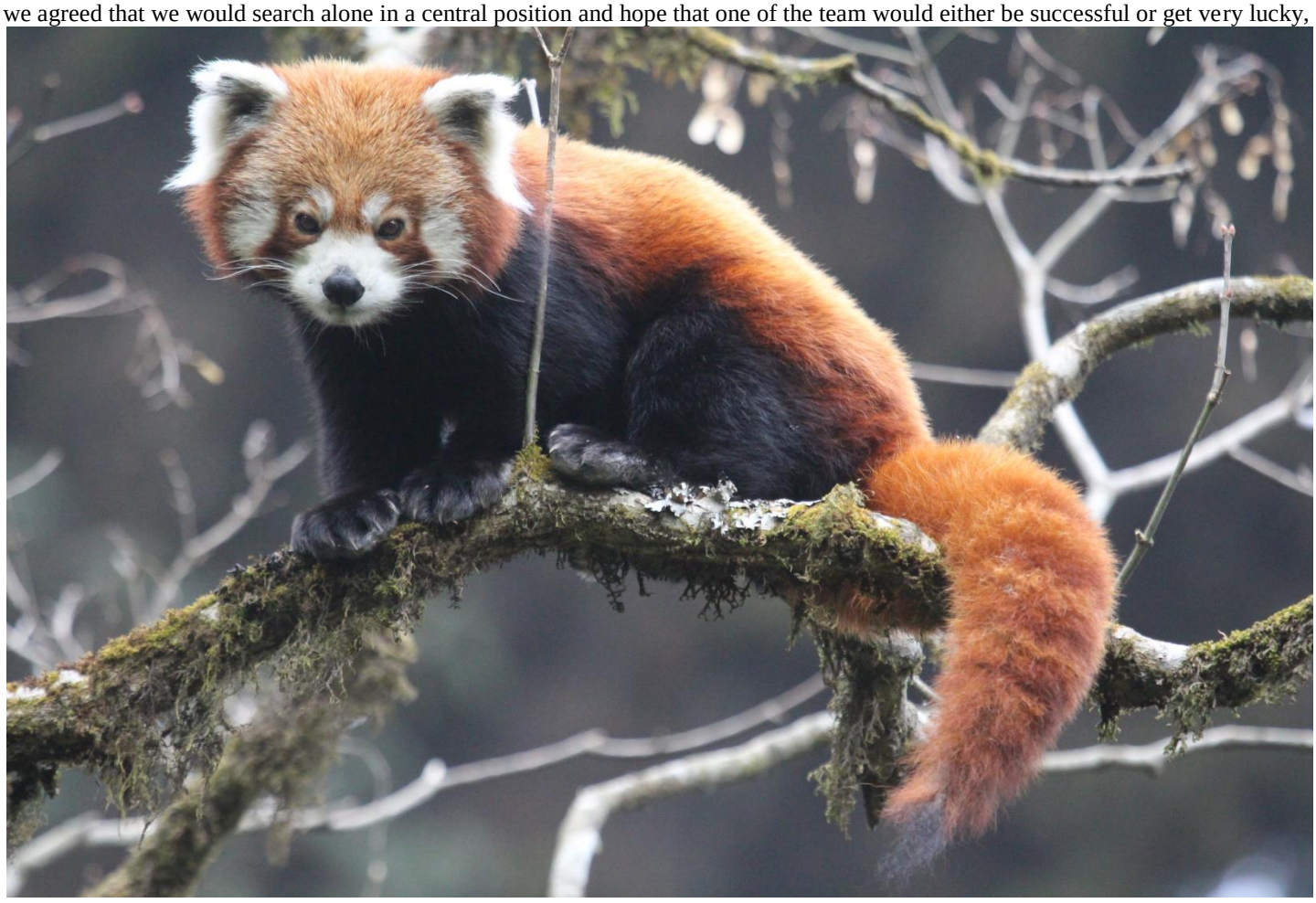
He did better than I could have managed, as twelve hours a day on a boat that barely moves with little or no visibility for long stretches, tested even my resolve and at times the catatonic stupor was so intense, our guide simply gave up and went below to sleep. Fortunately I did not and while he dozed in the midday heat, I spotted an Indo-Pacific humpbacked dolphin on my side of the boat and just had time to point it out to James before it disappeared. Although brief, this was probably the highlight of our stay, as our four boat rides, including the two in and out of the park, were relatively unproductive and on one particularly trying day we observed four spotted deer from the boat, as well as a few rhesus macaques and a small group of wild boar at one of the viewing platforms. To be fair, other days were slightly better, with nice views of Irrawaddy dolphins and some reasonably large salt-water crocodiles, as well as a female jungle cat with three extremely young and playful kittens. We watched the exuberant balls of fluff pouncing and playing for almost half an hour and whilst the light was not ideal and we could not really take the boat close enough for decent photographs without disturbing them, it was a special moment during a relatively difficult section of the trip. We saw at least one more jungle cat and several rodents on our evening spotlighting walks around the nearby village, as our friendly guide knew all of the locals personally, many of whom were keen to help us look for animals at night. This did not exactly work in our favour, as at one stage we had maybe 25 villagers trailing behind and whenever we announced an eyeshine, they would all immediately dash off to see what it was for us, which basically explains why I can only confirm one additional jungle cat, despite the fact that we illuminated at least a dozen small mammals during our three-night stay. Given the demanding days, when a great deal of concentration was required in severe heat, we were not overly concerned and it was just nice to at least partially relax with such friendly people, many of whom found it highly amusing that we wanted to spend time taking pictures of rodents. The same thing had occurred at Ranthambore on the previous trip, when we had gone for a long walk to look for wolves and ended up spending an hour photographing desert jirds, much to the astonishment and amusement of our elderly local guide, who could barely contain his mirth or stop shaking his head in disbelief, as we happily snapped away at ‘rats’. We saw another jungle cat on the cruise back to Kolkata, this time sitting on a Hindu shrine, and just as I raised my camera to record what would have been a highly unusual shot, the ‘curse of the jungle cat’, struck once more and the previously relaxed moggy suddenly leapt for cover. Thankfully, I generally have more luck with other felines and so it proved in Kolkata, as my main Indian operator had arranged for us to visit a village where a fishing cat has been routinely observed. A small group of local wildlife guides had been monitoring the cat for some time and were aware that it could appear at one of several locations, or not at all of course, and consequently instructed us to wait at one possible destination, whilst they covered another three or four. They seemed reasonably confident that the cat would show up and sure enough, after about a three-hour wait, one of the guides returned to inform us that it had been seen by a pool near the village. It had disappeared again when we arrived and although there was some initial concern that we may have missed it, our guides were optimistic that it would return, which it thankfully did



after about twenty fairly anxious minutes. What followed was a magical encounter, as we were able to watch it living up to its name as a fishing cat by a small natural pond with about half the village standing behind us, none of whom made any significant noise and barely moved in order to avoid disturbing it. The hushed and excited tones only added to the experience and although it did not actually catch a fish, it was a real treat to observe it prowling along the bank, before sitting completely still for several minutes and eventually pouncing into the water. We had just missed one of these distinctive animals at Keoladeo National Park on the final day of our previous trip, shortly after we had been fortunate enough to see a wolf, so it was particularly pleasing to see this one and to spend so long with it. We also had a brief, but clear view of a golden jackal at the same pool as we waited for the cat to return and remarkably, given the areas that we would visit, were not to see another until the last leg of our trip almost a month later. These initial few days had been a late addition to the tour and it was now time to begin the first of the three major sections around which the trip had been planned. To do so, we had to fly from Kolkata to Bagdogra, both of which are in the state of West Bengal, which basically

stretches along the western and northern borders of Bangladesh all the way to the Himalayas and the borders of both Nepal and Bhutan. From Bagdogra we would meet a new set of guides and drive further north to Singalila National Park. On the way we would pass through Darjeeling, which is famous across the globe as the home of Darjeeling tea, as well as the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway or the 'Toy Train' as it is affectionately known. Completed in 1881, the two foot or narrow gauge railway runs between Darjeeling and New Jalpaiguri and stops at Siliguri, which was already connected to Kolkata, then known as Calcutta, by a standard broad gauge railway. This now meant that you could travel directly from Kolkata to Darjeeling by rail, which was highly convenient for the hundreds of British officials and their families who would summer at the fabulous hill station of Darjeeling, far away from the crippling heat of Kolkata during the summer months. Perceived now as holiday resorts and tourist attractions, hill stations were an essential element of British rule in India and even today they remain an indelible reminder of a colonial presence on the subcontinent. In the same way that William the Conqueror built a series of formidable castles to secure his prize of England following victory at the Battle of Hastings, so the British Raj created a succession of impressive towns at higher elevations to escape the oppressive heat of the Indian summers. Although not fortified, they were centres of British administration and commerce nonetheless and were generally situated in the most picturesque locations, often by beautiful lakes and cool, secluded forests. Many were modelled on English villages with a central mall or thoroughfare where most of the government buildings could be found, as well as usually an Anglican church. A large number administered some form of local industry and produced their own revenue, as per the tea production in Darjeeling, and those that did not were financed by state subsidies and by the summer residents themselves, who invested immense sums in their seasonal escapes and the growing local economies, either through taxes, which were strictly applied in some of the more prominent stations, or via private donations to ensure that the civic amenities were of a standard tolerable for an English gentleman. With the resident's charming cottages mimicking the country houses back home, these summer retreats were recognised as an authentic slice of England in a foreign field and as such were as far removed from Indian culture as it is possible to imagine. If anything, the class system that so dominated almost every aspect of life in Victorian society, was even more oppressive within at least some of these small, intimate communities, where an ordered social hierarchy was strictly adhered to and an often stifling social etiquette dictated much of hill station life. Hunting was of course de rigueur, as was horticulture somewhat surprisingly, and the higher echelons bravely suffered a packed social calendar embracing a whirl of afternoon teas, formal dinners, garden parties, dances, balls and fetes. We stopped briefly at the fascinating 'Toy Train', which now operates with both steam and diesel engines, and also at a tea estate, of which there are almost 90 covering the Darjeeling hills. In the same way that neighbouring vineyards produce contrasting wines, so the tea estates produce different varieties of tea, each with their own unique characteristics and flavours. At one time India was the biggest producer of tea on the planet, but that mantle has since been assumed by China who, along with Kenya and Sri Lanka, also now export more tea than India. It took us the best part of two days to reach Singalila and upon arrival we were greeted by a notice board illustrating twelve of the mammals that occur within the national park. The 'Animals Of The Hills' included three common species, muntjac, rhesus macaque and wild boar, but when you consider that a leopard was the next most routinely observed creature, you will have some idea of exactly why we were spending a full week here. In no particular order of importance or rarity, the final eight species were Himalayan serow, leopard cat, yellow-throated marten, Siberian weasel, Asiatic black bear, Chinese pangolin, clouded leopard and red panda, which was our number one priority here and our only real target for the entire tour. In normal circumstances a sign of this kind would have fired our enthusiasm and our imaginations, particularly as red pandas were being spotted regularly and we were likely to be able to spend some of our time searching for one or two of these ridiculously rare species. Unfortunately, we had received some dire news whilst travelling from Kolkata, as it had been reported that a stray dog had killed two red pandas the previous

day and the park had been closed as a result. As you can imagine, we were absolutely distraught, as there are thought to be less than 30 adult red pandas in Singalila and for two of these defenceless creatures to be killed so senselessly was very hard to take. As most people are aware, I am a devoted lover of all dogs, but domestic animals have no place in or around wildlife habitats and both cats and dogs, many of which are feral, cause a catastrophic amount of damage all over the world each year. I was immediately worried that the two pandas killed were the young of a family group that visitors had been watching for some time, including guests that our own guides had been with just two days prior to our arrival. I had already seen photographs of these young pandas with their mother and thought that it was far more likely that two cubs had been killed together, as opposed to a single dog hunting down two adults in close proximity, although that was possible given that pandas have no means to defend themselves and are immensely vulnerable when they leave the relative safety of the trees to drink on the forest floor. These cubs were less than a year old and although I was assured that they were not the animals that had been killed, which I desperately wanted to believe, my doubts increased as our stay went on and we were unable to find them. Ultimately, it transpired that my worst fears had been realised and that these cubs were indeed dead. Our main guide did not tell us until we left the park and although he stated that he had only just discovered the truth himself, it was likely that he had known for some time and either did not want to upset us or was worried that we might lose hope if we were aware that it would not be possible to find the pandas that everyone else had seen and that the guides had been relying on for almost a year. There were certainly no other guaranteed sightings and as we slowly discovered over seven days, our success or otherwise would now depend on sheer good fortune and the determination of our local scouts, who basically spent every minute of every day searching the steep slopes of Singalila for any sign of pandas. It must be said that everyone was more than a little subdued following the appalling news and the technique utilised to look for pandas did not greatly improve the situation for James and I, despite the fact that it clearly made sense. Essentially the plan was to search as many likely areas as possible, which we immediately realised the scouts could do much faster without us. The more ground they covered, the more our chances improved, so we agreed that we would search alone in a central position and hope that one of the team would either be successful or get very lucky,



depending on your perspective. Whilst this left us somewhat isolated, we were equally aware that if we did insist on accompanying one of the guides, there would be no easy or quick way of returning if another scout was successful elsewhere. It was therefore a waiting game and the only good news after two full days was that at least the park had not been permanently closed as originally feared. It was also established that the dog that had killed the pandas came from one of the small Nepalese settlements adjoining the park, as Singalila sits on the border with Nepal and the Indian rangers informed us that they are not allowed to shoot dogs belonging to or venturing from those settlements, regardless of the damage they cause. With just a single squirrel to show for our efforts over the first two days, or more accurately for the efforts of our insanely hard working scouts, we got our first major breakthrough on the morning of day three, as we drove to the new area that we intended to spend the day searching. As we turned to slowly climb yet another slope, we all more or less simultaneously spotted a large male red panda waddling purposefully down the road towards us. It was not the sighting we had expected and it was far briefer than we would have liked, largely as a result of the unearthly racket our reconditioned 1957 Land Rover made whenever it was faced with another steep gradient. The grand old lady may have been a miracle of British engineering, but at almost 60-years-old, quiet she was not and it was amazing really that the apparently oblivious panda had continued along its path for so long without running. It rectified that as soon as we came to a crashing halt, taking one quick look at us before flinging itself towards the safety of the vegetation and up a hill as fast as its fat little legs would carry it, as this was not an insignificant animal, not in panda terms at least, and was easily the largest red panda I had seen. Though fleeting, the entire sighting had probably lasted no more than five seconds, after the tragic news concerning the panda deaths, we were all elated to finally see a healthy panda and that one brief glimpse renewed both our enthusiasm and our energy and ensured that we continued our search in far better spirits. That new resolve would be tested at times over the next two days, which yielded a single yellow-throated marten sighting for one of our scouts, that we would have been thrilled with. As it was, James and I had little chance of finding anything, as we had to continuously explore the same area on any given day as our guides searched further afield and we waited for them to report back. For two people who love to be active, this was fairly tough and at times I did consider changing things and joining our guides on at least some of their treks. However, we held our nerve and stuck to the plan and on the afternoon of day five our patience was finally rewarded. A panda had been spotted reasonably close and now we were extremely grateful that we were not several kilometres away searching with a different scout or even on our own. Despite the fact that it was not far, that next walk was an anxious one, at least for me, as I remember that James was fairly calm and was confident that the panda would still be there when we arrived, which I must admit was not entirely the case for me. Happily, and mercifully to some degree, he was right and when we saw our two main guides they were beaming from ear to ear and quickly pointed out a little red blob in a nearby tree. As I approached, I could see that this was a juvenile and that it was peering down at two of our scouts, who were sitting contentedly on the ground directly below, savouring the moment when their hard work had finally paid off. It was a wonderful scene for so many reasons and I was relieved to observe that the panda was not at all perturbed by our presence, as I really wanted to spend some time with this absurdly adorable creature without disturbing it. I realised that this was not going to be a major issue after just a few minutes, as all that staring had obviously been just too much for the youngster and it promptly curled up and fell asleep directly above us. As it napped we moved ourselves into a better position on the side of a hill and were so close by this stage that as I was clicking away I made everyone laugh by calmly announcing ‘National Geographic’. My pictures are not that good of course, but I

will never forget this encounter and at least have a series of shots that do it justice. As you will discover, despite a few inevitable setbacks, in many ways this was a blockbuster of a trip with some spectacular sightings of some truly magnificent wildlife. However, none of them could quite match this magical experience, which was unquestionably the highlight of the entire tour and a career highlight as well. You can never guarantee seeing even abundant animals as close as this or for as long, so to spend over an hour with a creature this rare and difficult to find was exceptionally satisfying, particularly considering that so few pandas occur in the park and that two of those had been killed just before we arrived. What is difficult to understand when watching these pathologically endearing animals, is exactly why they are classified as carnivores, as they clearly have difficulty savaging a leaf and to describe them as carnivores or, god forbid, as predators, is somewhat akin to calling Joseph Stalin a humanitarian or describing Donald Trump as a feminist. The fact is that around 95% of a red panda's diet is made up of bamboo and the remainder consists largely of vegetation and fruit. Captive pandas have been known to eat small mammals and birds, and although this is almost certainly the case in the wild as well, this feeding behaviour has rarely been observed or documented. Many mammals will eat meat if they get the opportunity to, including a large number of primates, but all you really need to know about red pandas is revealed by the fact that you usually find them in trees with the most moss, simply because pandas like to be comfy when they sleep and the moss provides them with a nice soft bed. Our guides were not sure of the exact age of this particular juvenile, which also meant that we could not determine its sex, but it was certainly younger than two and we eventually chose to leave it, as opposed to it moving on independently. That was an awfully difficult decision that I had to make in consultation with James and our guides and whilst we were aware that we were not distressing the panda in any way, part of the job is knowing when to quit. I did not want to risk influencing its behaviour and did not consider that our encounter could have been any better, regardless of how long we tarried. I was especially pleased for our superb guides and scouts, who worked tirelessly to ensure that we were not disappointed, despite the awful start, that they knew was going to make their job far tougher. They take great pride in showing guests these iconic animals and we were genuinely grateful for their supreme efforts on our behalf, as I expressed at the time and in a more tangible form when it was time for us to depart. Entirely understandably, the intensity and pace dropped off somewhat over the final two days and James and I now took the opportunity to join our guides and explore more of the park. We did still search for pandas, but I turned our attention to other animals as well and suggested that we spotlight on our final night. I had initially hoped to go out each evening, as I always do at every destination, but they had not really conducted night safaris here and I did not press the issue when I saw how hard everyone was working during the day for us. It was only when the pressure eased that I thought it would be more reasonable to suggest an exploratory drive and even then our guides had to secure special permission to spotlight within the first section of the national park, which had not been permitted

previously. It was exciting to be breaking new ground and our minds went back to the board that we had seen on the first morning and particularly that clouded leopard. Regrettably, and rather stupidly, I had neglected to take the condition of our ancient vehicle into account, as you somehow get used to the incessant noise during the day, but at night it is truly excruciating and you can imagine leopards and just about everything else, automatically taking cover with their paws over their ears. Rolling slowly downhill was more or less okay, but as we tried to climb the steep sections, of which there were many, our indomitable old lady screamed in protest and emptied another stretch of national park. It became so bad that the words futile and hopeless came to mind on more than one occasion and when I suggested that we walk instead, I was informed that it was not a good idea because of the large number of Asiatic black bears in the area, one of the animals James and I were desperate to see. On one of the relatively flat, quieter sections, we did spot a pair of Himalayan serows, medium sized bovids that are usually described as goat-antelopes, as well as several hares on the way back to the tiny village we were staying at. It was not a massive issue, as this section of the trip had been almost exclusively about red pandas, but I did discuss the spotlighting here for future reference, as it has the potential to be amazing and we agreed that there are a

number of ways that it could be improved for next time. For now though, we just had one more task to perform, as you can see four of the five tallest mountains on earth from Singalila and on the morning that we departed, I wanted a group shot with the entire team in front of Mount Everest. After such a terrible start it was a magnificent way to end and whilst the two dead pandas were certainly never forgotten, and I have since reported their unnecessary deaths to all of my Indian contacts, our stay at Singalila surpassed our expectations, not in terms of a huge number of spectacular sightings, but for the unforgettable hour or so that we spent with one very special predator. An animal so vicious, that as we left, it was searching for a nice patch of moss to bed down in. For the record the four mountains on view in order of height were Everest, Kangchenjunga, Lhotse and Makalu. The missing one is K2 on the border between China and Pakistan, which is the second tallest in the world in terms of height above sea level and sits around 240 metres lower than Everest. Kangchenjunga, the third highest, appears above as part of a group of mountains known collectively as the 'Sleeping Buddha', which, as hopefully you can clearly see, is named as a result of the distinctive shape that the various peaks form.

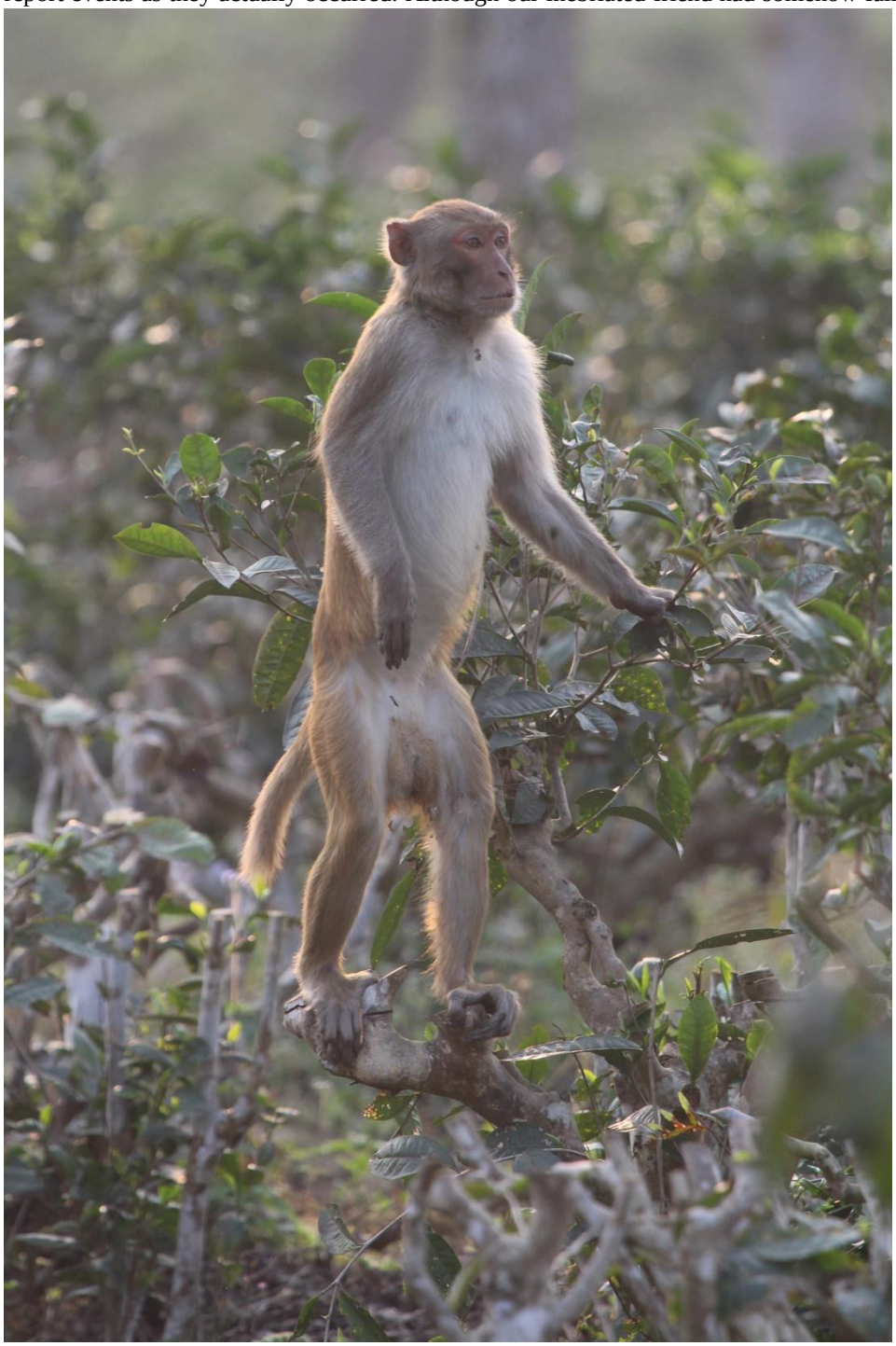
Having spent the entire tour in West Bengal, a few brief forays into Nepal aside to search for pandas, it was time to take the short flight east to Assam, where we would be visiting two national parks and the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, a small patch of isolated forest that supports, among others, seven species of primate. The most famous is the hoolock gibbon, India's only ape, which is now considered to be two distinct species, the western hoolock gibbon found here in Assam and the eastern hoolock gibbon, which has only been recorded to the extreme east of the country and is far more common in China and Myanmar. Of the remaining six primates, four are types of macaque, stump-tailed, northern pig-tailed, Assam and rhesus, the fifth is the capped langur, the only common langur in the northeast, and the last is the Bengal slow loris, the only nocturnal primate in northern India and one of only two nocturnal primates in the country, the other being the grey slender loris, which is found in the south. I was hoping to find all seven, but the gibbons were my priority, partly because they are such amazing animals to watch and also because they are one of the major mammals that my suggested introduction to the wildlife of India tour can be built around. They are usually fairly easy to find here, but not really in a positive way, as the forest has been badly degraded and this small remaining fragment exists within a sea of tea plantations and villages. The gibbons therefore have nowhere to go and I have never taken more than a couple of hours to locate them as a result. As expected, we encountered the langurs almost as soon as we arrived, as these striking monkeys are not generally concerned by a human presence and can often be found near the sanctuary entrance and around the park and staff buildings. I did not spend a great deal of time with them at this early stage, as I knew that we would see them again later in much better light and was keen to find the gibbons as soon as possible. My favourite way of doing so is to hear their calls first, as there are few sounds as evocative as gibbons singing to each other in the early morning and it is always a privilege to listen to their intricate and harmonious vocalisations. In larger jungles hearing them does not guarantee finding them, but here it more or less does and we were delighted when their haunting calls first started resonating through the forest. Within minutes we were watching a small group of around ten gibbons, including several juveniles. They were active by this stage and there are few more engaging sights than watching gibbons swing from hand to hand high in the canopy. The actual term is brachiation, which sounds more like a cow digesting its food and is a poor choice of words for something so spectacular. Gibbons are the most acrobatic of apes and their typically long arms, almost twice the length of their legs, propel them across the forest with astonishing strength and dexterity. It is always an absolute joy to observe these breathtaking displays and to then watch the same animals hanging so nonchalantly from one arm or two, as they decide where to feed next. We had two encounters with gibbons that morning, the first of which had been in the company of a large group of friendly Indian students and the second with just our guide. We were alone again when our guide took us to look for a group of stump-tailed macaques that are being studied here, which was very fortunate, as we met the researcher involved in the study and were able to savour an intimate encounter with a large and exceedingly calm troop of

monkeys as they foraged low in the canopy and across the forest floor. It was a different type of sighting to the gibbon encounters, but no less special and, with monkeys moving all around us and very young infants actually playing at our feet, we had to ensure that we did not disturb either the research project or, more importantly, the parents that were trusting us around their young. This type of care is second nature after so many years and we ultimately spent more than an hour slowly moving through the forest with them, often sitting for periods to watch them interact and feed. It was another highlight of a trip that was beginning to produce them regularly, although I did not expect quite the same experience if we were able to locate northern pig-tailed macaques, which are the most arboreal of the macaques in this region. True to form, they were high in the canopy when we found them, but it was not dense and we had good clear views in several places. They also had rather photogenic young and nice sightings of two reasonably rare squirrels, the black giant squirrel and the Himalayan striped squirrel, completed a remarkable morning. Having occupied ourselves around lunchtime photographing capped langurs in more appropriate light, Assam macaques were our only target for the afternoon, which are

the most difficult of the diurnal primate species to find at Hoollongapar. There are currently two subspecies of Assam macaques and their appearance differs across much of an extensive range that includes large areas of Asia from India and Nepal in the west to Vietnam in the southeast. The ones here are not as shaggy as elsewhere, but you can still clearly differentiate them from rhesus macaques, which is really the only other species they could be mistaken for in this area. Our guide knew of a possible spot for them on the other side of the reserve and on the drive we saw the more common rhesus macaque, which would give us a good opportunity to compare the two if our guide could once again demonstrate that there really is no substitute for expert local knowledge, which is something of a mantra of mine and has served me well for more than two decades. Happily he did and after a short walk we encountered the first of between twelve and fifteen Assam macaques foraging among the heavily cropped trees of a tea plantation. They were fairly skittish at first, but soon settled and we spent the remainder of a fading afternoon watching them move between the plantation and nearby forest. It had been a perfect day so far and as dusk approached we prepared to look for our seventh and final primate at Hoollongapar, the Bengal slow loris. It needed to be dark of course and as we waited to begin spotlighting for these unusual creatures with concealed toxic glands and bright, bulging eyes, one of the park rangers informed us that a herd of elephants had been seen nearby. As in so many places they occur, elephants have a bad reputation in this area and before we travelled one of my Indian contacts had mentioned that we had to be careful of the ‘killer elephants’ here. I took exception to what is an ugly and inaccurate term, as elephants do not actively seek out people to kill and the vast majority of incidents that occur between elephants and people are as a result of human encroachment and exploitation. The killer elephant comment reminded me of one of Gary Larson’s superb The Far Side cartoons, when two intrepid explorers, complete with jungle pith helmets, encounter an elephant emerging from long grass with something, rather incongruously, held in its massive front foot. One turns around to the other and warns ‘Not too close, Higgins….This one’s got a knife’. As with most of Larson’s cartoons, you really need to see the actual illustration for it to work properly, but the vision of an elephant needing to attack such feeble beings with a tiny blade is what resonates. In the few hours that we were at Hoollongapar, we witnessed just a little of what these killer elephants have to deal with on a daily basis and why they so obviously feel threatened and sometimes react as a result. Firstly, they have to cross train tracks to reach the forest and hundreds of elephants are killed on railway tracks each year. Then, when they reach the sanctuary of the forest to feed in safety, they have to somehow tolerate locals driving trucks and motorbikes straight through the middle of what is supposed to be a protected reserve. Meanwhile, visitors shout and scream at each other, while men illegally collect firewood on bicycles. We observed all of this behaviour in one single day, not in a bustling city, but in a sanctuary where the wildlife is meant to be the priority. As I have attempted to explain on so many occasions, perpetuating the myth of killer elephants is singularly unhelpful and it is instead the responsibility of everyone involved in wildlife travel and tourism, to inform people how these often tragic conflicts can be avoided

and lives can be saved, not only of people, but of the innumerable elephants killed in violent and mindless retaliation. Although I could have written this piece regarding a variety of Asian or African destinations, I have long maintained that most elephant attacks are a self-fulfilling prophecy and I could not have been provided with a better example of this than the incident that we watched unfold that day at Hoollongapar. We of course jumped at the opportunity to go and see the elephants when the guard informed us that they had been spotted and within a few minutes were quietly watching several animals at a respectful distance. The small herd was spread out calmly feeding on both sides of the forest road, the same road that trucks and motorbikes had raced along earlier that day, and we could clearly see several juveniles and at least two calves. It was an entirely peaceful scene until something appeared in the distance and several agitated elephants began to trumpet in alarm. I did not understand what was happening at first, but then I saw a villager riding his bicycle towards the elephants, which were now clearly distressed. If he had even stopped at this stage, the situation could probably have been salvaged, but he kept on riding straight at them and eventually the elephants broke in terror and ran. They did not stampede or charge directly towards him, but fled in all directions and the apparently suicidal local disappeared in a flurry of panicking elephants and a cloud of dust. When the dust finally settled and we arrived on the scene, instead of finding a mangled corpse, which could easily have been the case, we were relieved to see that he was sitting up and apparently unharmed. His bike was not even damaged and when we went to help him we immediately realised what the problem was and why he did not stop for or even notice, a rather substantial herd of elephants. The man was so drunk that he could barely respond to questions and when he had sobered up sufficiently to communicate, he informed us that elephants, probably 'killer elephants' I would imagine, had attacked him. That is what you are dealing with and his actions could not only have got himself killed, they could have got anyone killed in the vicinity, including women and children from his own village, as the petrified elephants ran instinctively to safety. He reminded me of a type of person that I first met years ago while canoeing in Florida. I was coming back up the river as a few others were heading out and between us we disturbed a moderately sized alligator that was certainly no more than six feet long from snout to tail. Perceiving at least some kind of threat from our presence, the alligator swam towards one of the canoes briefly in order to reach the safety of deeper water, at which point it dived and swam away. Whilst I cannot remember the exact words of this particular American, they were along the lines of 'wow, did you see that guy, must have been ten foot and he came straight for me'. I do remember smiling at him and shaking my head, but after I had been for a swim, I later on heard him recounting the same story to a family with young children and this time the alligator was a twelve foot monster that had tried to attack his canoe. Humans like to exaggerate the threat of animals, as it makes them feel braver and more important, in the same way that hunters feel important or more masculine when they kill something bigger and stronger than themselves. No matter that the animal was not even aware of any danger and had no chance to defend itself or that it was shot from an entirely safe distance with the assistance of a high calibre automatic weapon and a telescopic sight. There is of course threat in some situations, but generally conflict can be avoided with common sense and a modicum of care and the vast majority of incidents occur when people do something wrong, intentionally or otherwise. Many years ago in Etosha, an amazing national park in Namibia, the workers at one of the rest camps, which were all entirely fenced for the safety of the tourists and the park staff, decided that they did not want to make the long walk back to their own accommodation each night and that they would instead take a shortcut through the bush. They did so by making a small opening in the wire fence, which they partially closed behind themselves each night. They were local people and knew that walking alone in the bush was incredibly dangerous, so they took the sensible precaution of moving in groups when they left each evening, which will generally deter most predators. This went on for months, with them coming and going each day without incident and it seemed as if man's ingenuity had once again conquered another obstacle, albeit a relatively minor one. The problem on

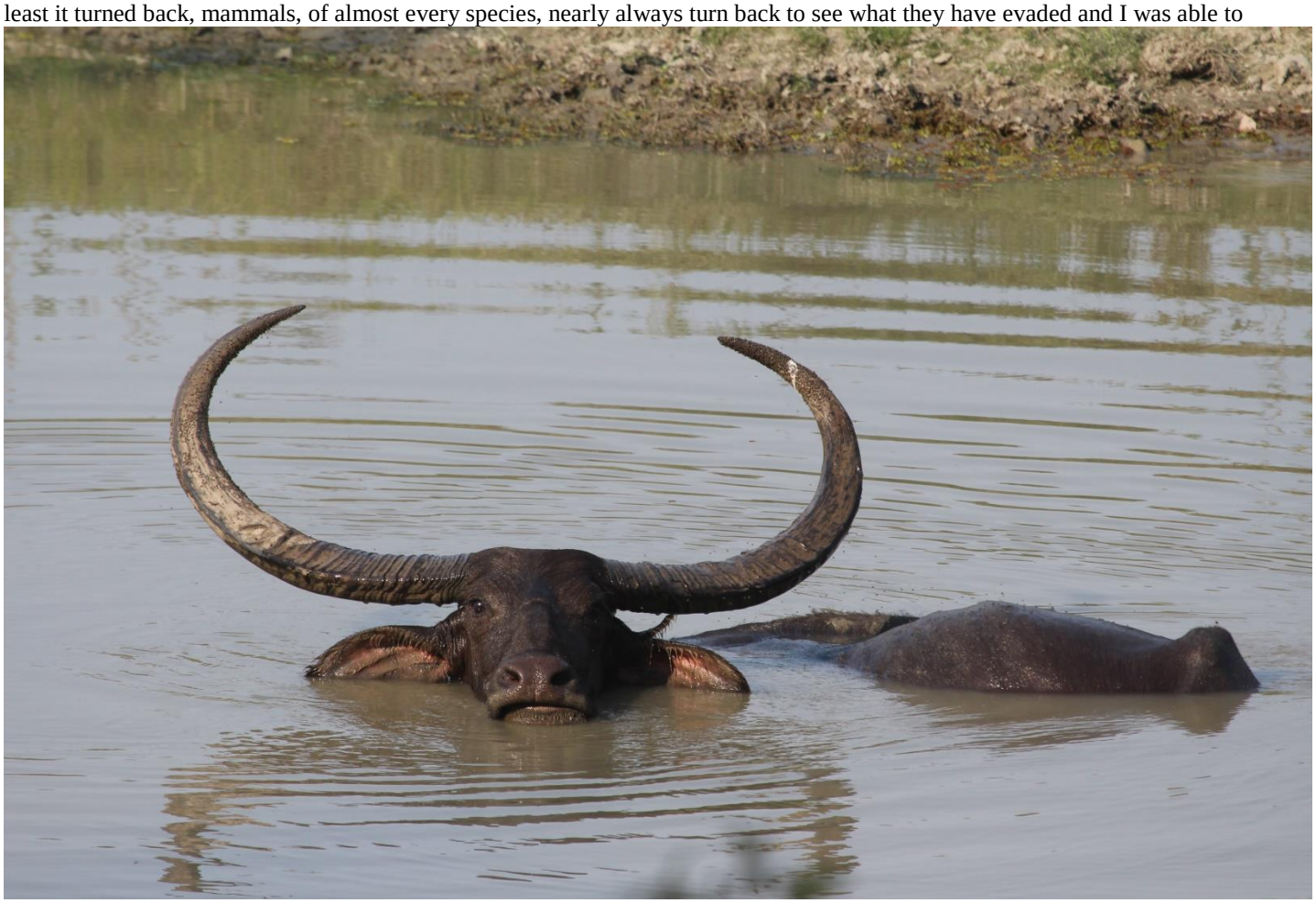
this occasion was that although the Etosha lions never did attack a group of workers walking across the African plains late at night, one clever lioness had seen that they emerged at exactly the same place every evening. One night, several hours after the park staff slipped quietly out through the hole in the fence, she slipped quietly in and within seconds had killed a German tourist in his sleeping bag. A male eventually followed her in to feed and when another tourist later raised the alarm, both lions were killed, the female simply for being the smartest and best hunter in her pride, qualities that should have kept her alive. I know that story well, as I have slept at that same camp and waterhole on several occasions, also in a sleeping bag without a tent. Obviously I was extremely relieved that this man had survived, but if he had been killed, he would have only had himself to blame and I was less pleased that he lied about the incident and blamed the elephants, asserting at one stage that he had been forced to dive into a ditch to save himself. He did not know that we had watched the entire episode and I was just thankful that, this time at least, there were independent witnesses to report events as they actually occurred. Although our inebriated friend had somehow failed to kill himself, he certainly murdered our chances of spotlighting that night and I had to work another opportunity into the itinerary in order to look for the loris. This involved an eight-hour round trip a few days later for less than three hours actual spotlighting and a great deal of additional effort for everyone, including our guide and driver. At least this time nothing was likely to go wrong, as we had arranged for the head of the sanctuary to take us out, along with the excellent guide we had used during our previous visit. That at least was the theory, the actuality was that when we arrived, the reserve manager had consumed half a bottle of whisky and could barely stand. He was more intoxicated than the cyclist had been and, just to add a little piquancy to the whole affair, he was brandishing an antiquated double-barrel shotgun, presumably in case those ‘killer elephants’ returned. He was so drunk, he was swaying all over the road and I had terrible visions of one of us picking up the bright orange eyeshine of a loris and our very own Dirty Harry turning round and blasting the poor little bugger to infinity. At one stage I half expected him to start singing and calling me his best friend, but as it was, he just barked drunken instructions at the top of his voice and proceeded to shine his light directly in our eyes. When he wasn’t strobing the lorises, he was shouting at them and I concluded that we had more chance of finding something with the sloshed cyclist and the panicking pachyderms. Given the considerable effort that we all made to return, it was a thoroughly depressing evening and, having made my displeasure known in the clearest possible terms, we departed after barely an hour. Although I initially regretted the fact that we returned and we obviously did not leave in the best of spirits, I will probably visit the sanctuary again when I travel back to Assam in 2017, as I need to assess the reserve properly at night for future guests and, more significantly, I do not want to simply turn my back on such an important patch of forest or the precious species that it protects, just because it is managed badly. I of course knew nothing of the ill-fated second visit as we drove west to Kaziranga National Park, another UNESCO World Heritage Site and the last major bastion of the greater one-horned rhinoceros or the Indian rhinoceros as it is now known. I have to admit that I have no idea why such an expressive and fitting name was changed to something so bland and I will continue to use the name that I grew up with. Regardless of our labels for them, according to the 2015 census, Kaziranga is home to around 2,400 rhinos, which equates to just under 70% of the surviving global population. Global is actually something of a misnomer, as these rhinos have been eradicated across most of their former range, they are extinct in both Bangladesh and Bhutan, and now only exist in small isolated pockets across India and Nepal. Habitat destruction, largely for agricultural purposes, and legal hunting, took the species to the edge of extinction in the early 1900s and since then varying levels of protection have seen their numbers increase to around 3,500 in total. Not a great deal to show for more than a century of conservation and they are still poached today for their horn which, as I am sure you know before I even write it, is used in traditional Chinese medicine. The national park itself is bordered to the east and north by the mighty Brahmaputra River, which flows through four countries, China,



Bhutan, Bangladesh and finally India, and is one of the three major rivers that I wrote about previously in terms of forming the Sundarbans and draining into the Bay of Bengal. Kaziranga is situated in the floodplain created by this river and its unique and largely untouched environments form one of the finest and most important wildlife reserves on earth. With an alluring mix of light woodland, lush tall grasslands and iridescent pools, it is also extremely beautiful and the animals that thrive here only adorn it further. It is not uncommon to see rhinos, elephants and water buffalo within the same stunning landscape and barasingha are found among the swamps and reed beds, whilst hog deer and muntjac shelter within the forest. Tigers of course improve any backdrop and although they take full advantage of the long grass here and can be difficult to see, when you do spot one, the experience somehow feels more genuine. As per the tiger reserves of central India, Kaziranga is split into zones with different entrance gates, some of which are a fair

distance apart. That, however, is where the similarity ends, as you can choose your own zone for each drive and when you are inside the park you have the freedom to explore anywhere within that zone. In addition to greatly increasing your chances of finding an animal, particularly a tiger, this freedom completely transforms the game driving experience, as even the atmosphere is different when you know that you are actively searching for wildlife and are able to respond to the alarm calls and other natural signs that indicate when an animal is close. If you think that this sounds too good to be true, it sadly is, as the gate times at Kaziranga are incomprehensible and severely impact the likelihood of finding anything other than the more common species. When we visited in February it was light at around 5.30am, but we were not allowed to enter the park until 7.30am, which is just about the most senseless and arbitrary legislation I have ever encountered. Considering that you cannot spotlight within the reserve, the park officials are basically ensuring that it is more or less impossible for visitors to see any of the nocturnal animals that occur at Kaziranga, as the only remaining chance is in the early morning, when some of these creatures are still active. I was hoping to photograph a greater hog badger on this trip, as I have seen them at Kaziranga previously and they are not usually that difficult to encounter here in the early morning. Unfortunately we had very little chance with such insane bureaucracy in place and this regulation will also severely impact tiger sightings, as the vast majority of these occur in the early morning when tigers are often observed patrolling and marking their territory. We were still fortunate enough to encounter three of these splendid cats during our stay, one for just a few seconds as it crossed a clearing and another at distance, but the third was in front of our vehicle after we had actively tracked it following a sequence of alarm calls over a large area, an area that we automatically knew a tiger was walking through. Having done almost everything perfectly, we actually made a very slight mistake right at the end, which cost me the chance of a nice photograph of our quarry crossing the road. We had narrowed our search down to one patch of wetland and were waiting to see if our tiger would

emerge or whether it would double back into the tall reeds that covered most of the swamp. I am always patient in these situations, but you often have to make split second decisions and it is incredibly difficult to second guess the movements of an animal that does not want to be seen. I looked at my guide and we both shrugged and indicated to each other that we should probably turn and see if it had crossed just behind us, which tigers regularly do. As it was, just as we turned, so the tiger emerged behind us, dripping with dirty, muddy water from where it had been lying in the swamp just a few metres away waiting for us to leave. I had no way of taking a good picture while we were moving and the tiger was some distance away by the time that we had stopped and I could shoot accurately. At least it turned back, mammals, of almost every species, nearly always turn back to see what they have evaded and I was able to



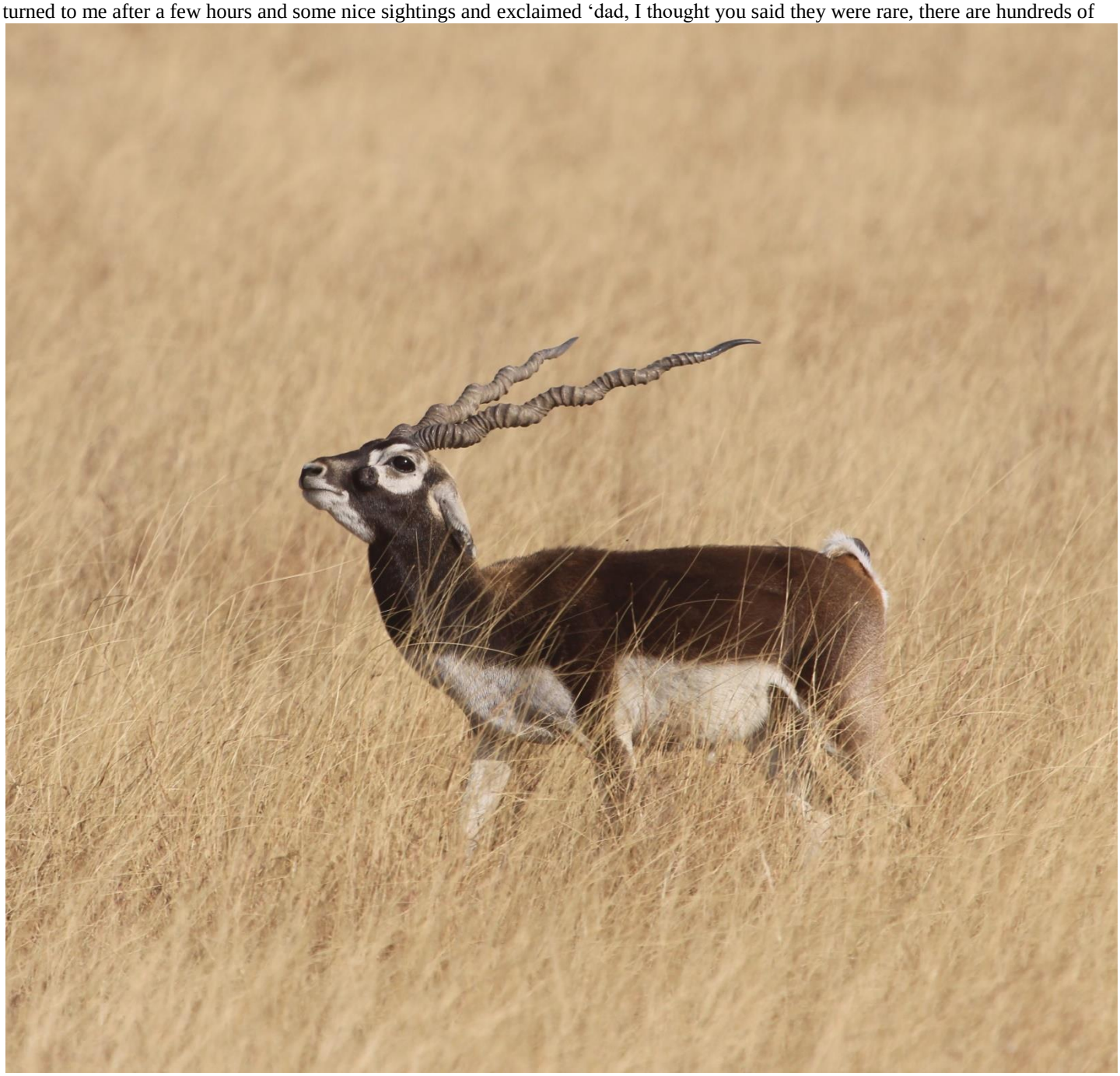
photograph it looking directly towards us before it calmly turned and disappeared silently into the long grass. Those couple of hours were so much fun and it is this type of exhilarating experience being lost at so many renowned tiger reserves across the country. Whilst it was of course wonderful to see tigers, particularly in such exciting circumstances, the real stars of the show at Kaziranga are the rhinos and we spent much of our time with these magnificent animals. Even with the tall grass, they are very easy to see across sections of open plains and it was not unusual to be able to count ten to fifteen rhinos in one enchanting 360 degree view. With such healthy numbers living in close proximity, there were a lot of calves, which the mothers kept at a safe distance from the road, making them difficult to photograph. This was a small price to pay for their continued safety, as poaching is still rife in Assam, as it is almost everywhere to be fair, and mothers are understandably highly protective of their young. Although poaching will not stop until the very last animal has been killed, or the Chinese finally accept that their largely backward ideas regarding medicine are destroying the planet, the real concern at Kaziranga is that some officials are involved in the killing and are being paid a great deal of money to more or less authorise an ‘acceptable’ number of rhino deaths each year. I was aware of this before I travelled, but three different sources,

independently of each other, all confirmed that this was the case and that it was common knowledge that certain national park employees were heavily involved. Whilst you sincerely hope that this is not the case, it all sounds depressingly familiar, as much of the poaching around the world could not occur without sustained levels of corruption and I would imagine that these damning reports are very likely to be correct. At a more junior level, forest guides have always been involved in poaching and the standard of guides varies alarmingly from state to state and even from park to park. These guides, or naturalists as they are commonly known, are provided by the Indian Forest Service and you have to take one on every game drive, in addition to your lodge guide and driver. Ostensibly they are provided for your protection and to help you look for wildlife, but some would struggle to find the vehicle door if it had not been opened and it is difficult to escape the feeling that their main role is to ensure that you do not break any of the park rules. The majority, who are either devoted to their role or are at least honest and competent guides, are constantly undermined by an abysmal minority, who, to have secured the job in the first place, you can only assume must be the unloved and witless illegitimate sons of park officials. I have experienced these so called naturalists shouting and throwing stones at animals and banging on the side of their vehicles, simply to provide better photographs for their guests, and hopefully guarantee a large reward, and I have known many accept money to drive into the forest for a superior view of an animal, even in some cases of a tigress protecting her newborn cubs. This is obviously far more serious, as poachers will always pay more than tourists and I have lost count of how many times guides have been caught assisting poachers, not only in India, but all over the world. Although I am always friendly and try to engage them in conversation, some guides will barely even nod hello when they arrive and it is not uncommon for one to sleep for the entire duration of a game drive and depart without uttering a single word, particularly on the cold morning drives when they arrive wrapped in as many blankets as they can muster. As always, there were a few unhelpful park guides throughout the trip, but the majority were friendly and enthusiastic and our own guides were never less than professional and dedicated. We did not have a great deal of luck with any particularly rare animals, largely due to the late starts and the fact that we were not able to spotlight within the park, but Kaziranga remains an absolute gem and we enjoyed a succession of prolonged encounters with all of the iconic mammals that you would expect to see here. Our tiger stalking exploits probably could not be bettered in terms of pure excitement and we were also delighted to observe at least three pairs of smooth-coated otters, again against the sumptuous backdrops that this outstanding national park is famed for. We did try at night as well, but I have not been in Assam for an age and forest that I used to spotlight in now no longer exists. We instead tried several fragments of degraded forest that our guide knew and enjoyed reasonable success with a number of snakes, two common palm civets and a particolored flying squirrel. It is always fun to try new places, but we were not able to establish any entirely suitable spotlighting areas for prospective guests and I will visit a few additional sites when I return to the state in early 2017. This is how I like to choose every destination that I will eventually recommend, by assessing them all personally and as we moved on from Kaziranga, we stopped at one that I have been using for many years. Whilst no doubt a wonder of engineering, at first sight the commanding Kolia Bhomora Setu bridge, which stretches over three kilometres across the Brahmaputra River, does not look that promising in terms of natural wildlife encounters. It is however, one of the most reliable spots to watch Ganges river dolphins and there are enterprising boatmen sitting waiting to take tourists out for a closer view of these endangered freshwater mammals. We took the boat ride to break up a fairly long travelling day and saw our third dolphin species of the tour within about as many minutes, without ever going out to sea. As tends to occur on extended tours, our final destination in Assam suffered from that simple fact that it was visited towards the end of our time here, as Manas National Park is a superb reserve in its own right and is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Contiguous with Royal Manas National Park in neighbouring Bhutan, the Indian section of what is basically the same ecosystem, is home to the last wild populations of pygmy hogs,

the smallest and by far the rarest species of pig on earth. Critically endangered, there are thought to be less than 200 pygmy hogs remaining in tiny scattered populations in and around Manas, the species was actually believed to be extinct until rediscovered in 1971, but even at that stage no concerted conservation efforts were made on its behalf and now the pygmy hog is in danger of being listed as extinct twice. Thankfully, the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme, an alliance of several organisations, including the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or the IUCN for short, and the government of Assam, is working to prevent this and has established a captive breeding programme that has seen 85 pigs released into the wild to date. Not only has this substantially increased pygmy hog numbers, it has created vital subpopulations beyond the national park, which will ensure the future survival of this significant and admirable little pig, should a catastrophe occur at Manas. We did spend several hours at a site where these diminutive hogs are known to occur and have been seen by the guides who live within the park, but we were not able to devote anywhere approaching sufficient time to such a scarce animal and I guessed that our chances of success were probably far worse than extremely remote. They should be better next year, as I intend to visit the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme as part of a stay at Nameria National Park, with a view to supporting their considerable efforts to save this species. I am also hoping to arrange a tour of one of the release sites, which currently looks likely, and to offering future guests the opportunity to support this important initiative by adding one or both destinations to their Assam itinerary. These conservation based options can be incredibly rewarding and, as I outline on the Conservation section of my website, I generally recommend at least one or two on every tour of any length. Guests invariably relish the chance to move beyond the standard tourist destinations that everyone is familiar with and it is always a real thrill for them to encounter various types of wildlife at close quarters and to witness the remarkable efforts that so many dedicated people, often volunteers, go to in order to protect these vulnerable creatures. It always adds an extra dimension to any trip and of course provides each project with the funds that they so desperately need to continue their essential work. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, Manas did not conjure quite the same magic on this occasion, as we had already spent a great deal of time watching largely the same species at Kaziranga and had in some ways turned our minds to the exceptionally rare animals that occur here. This was not overly realistic on our part, not given our relatively short stay of three nights and the lack of spotlighting opportunities in productive areas. That said, Manas is one of the premier wildlife reserves in all of Asia, particularly when assessed as one complete ecosystem incorporating Royal Manas in Bhutan, and it is hard not to have your head turned by a mammal list that includes Asiatic golden cat, clouded leopard, Asiatic black bear, gee's golden langur, small-toothed ferret badger, binturong, Asiatic brush-tailed porcupine, hispid hare and, rarest of all, the aforementioned pygmy hog. Dhole were a more reasonable prospect and melanistic leopards, or black panthers as they are generally referred to, are more commonly observed here than anywhere else that I am familiar with. One was spotted two days before we arrived, although again we saw neither animal despite our best efforts and a great deal of time in the field. Nonetheless, if we had visited Manas before Kaziranga, we would have been content, at least in terms of what we encountered during the day when we were not expecting or looking for elusive nocturnal ghosts. There were less rhinos and elephants at Manas, but some of our encounters were better thanks to a friendly forest guide, who was very relaxed and allowed us to sit on his porch as both species wandered around us at different times. Given the amount of time that we spent in the vehicle each day, this was a real treat and so was our impromptu foray into Bhutan, when we discovered the border checkpoint within the national parks completely deserted and went for an impromptu hike along the banks of the Manas River. It was a productive one as well, as we spent several minutes watching a smooth-coated otter swimming and hunting in the fast flowing water and when we returned to Indian territory, we encountered a large herd of water buffalo relaxing in the same river. The buffalo at Manas are actually very important, as they are the only genetically pure wild water buffalo remaining in India, the other populations having been exposed to and bred with the domestic variety. Having missed them at Kaziranga, Manas produced the only gaur

sightings of the trip, as well as three new carnivores, a lone small Indian mongoose dashing across the road when we first arrived at our lodge, a crab-eating mongoose that did exactly the same thing when we took a short break within the park and several small Indian civets whilst spotlighting for hispid hare beyond the reserve. For one sensational moment we all thought that we had found the hare at least, but it turned out to be the common Indian variety and must have wondered why it had suddenly found itself surrounded by spotlights and cameras. Given their restricted range and endangered status, it would have been hard to improve upon an encounter with such a scarce lagomorph and another of our targets, gee's golden langur, has an even smaller home territory and can only be found around the Manas area and across the border in Bhutan. There are actually two populations remaining, but this is not a natural occurrence, as the original intact population has been completely separated by human activity, principally the destruction of their territory for cattle grazing, crop production and timber. They are apparently no longer found within the park, or at least not regularly within the areas accessible to tourists, and we instead drove an hour or so to a small village where the local community have protected some forest and are making a real effort to conserve this animal. We were able to meet one of the naturalists responsible for the project and he told us how they were working to provide corridors between the small groups that have found themselves living in isolation within small fragmented patches of forest. This would be another excellent option for wildlife enthusiasts, not least because the langurs are highly attractive animals and we spent two tremendously enjoyable hours watching them in the early morning sunshine. Many of our daylight sightings were exceptional and if Assam had not proved to be all it could be, this was entirely due to the lack of spotlighting opportunities in pristine or at least healthy areas. In truth we missed more or less half the story here and even a few reasonable night drives or walks would have almost certainly unearthed a few of the rare animals that you aim for on every trip. I will rectify this when I visit both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh next year, as I intend to concentrate on great wildlife areas beyond the national parks, where we will be able to spend long sessions spotlighting each evening. Considering the diverse, exotic and inordinately elusive species that I have already mentioned, even at this early stage, it is a tantalising prospect. As is the case in all arid environments, there is far less diversity in Gujarat, but it is still home to some of the most alluring wildlife on the continent and remains one of my favourite destinations in all of India. Our first stop was Blackbuck National Park, which many people still refer to as Velavadar Blackbuck Sanctuary, its former

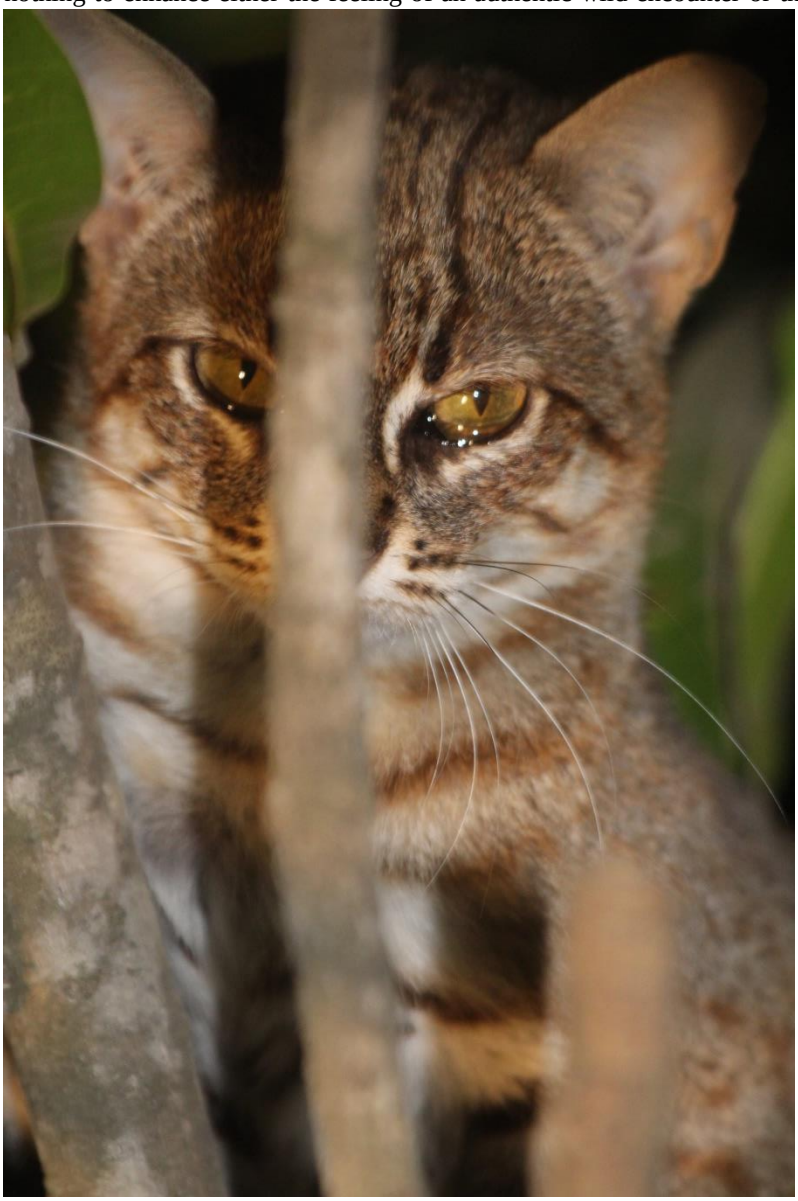
name. When I first visited Velavadar there were very few accommodation options, but the national park is now serviced by a superb lodge, which was just as well after a long travelling day that involved the drive from Manas to Guwahati, the flight south to Kolkata, a second flight west to Ahmedabad and finally a three-hour drive to the lodge. We still went out for a spotlighting walk as soon as we arrived, but the reward of a few Indian hares and gerbils, did not quite match the determination. We only had two nights here, as it is a small sanctuary and the main attraction are the blackbuck antelope that have been protected at Velavadar for forty years. They are easy to see of course, as are the much larger nilgai antelopes that they share the reserve with, and when I first brought James here as a young child, having explained that we were going to look for some rare antelopes that were extinct in every country except India, he turned to me after a few hours and some nice sightings and exclaimed 'dad, I thought you said they were rare, there are hundreds of



them?' I modified that delightfully innocent line for his benefit as we stood together surveying another herd across the same golden grasslands more than a decade later and we both smiled as I reflected on just how fortunate I had been to travel the world with my son for so long. We have had some amazing adventures together and I sincerely hope that he will remember them all with as much awe and wonder as I still do. We did think that we might add a wolf to those adventures, as they are commonly observed here and there were several sightings during our stay. Unfortunately, as can always happen with wild animals, we just kept missing them and concluded that we had probably used up most of our luck with this species at Keoladeo National Park on our last trip, when we spotted and photographed a wolf in a park where they had never previously been recorded. Instead we had to be satisfied with a brief glimpse of a jungle cat, the curse was still very much in place and I was not able to achieve a picture of any kind, and a much better view of a stunning cobra drinking at one of the pools within the grounds of our lodge. Despite the absence of a wolf, which we were confident we would rectify elsewhere, it was still an enchanting start in a ravishingly beautiful setting and we travelled south to Gir National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary in tremendous spirits. Gir, or Sasan Gir as I first knew it, is famous as the last bastion of the Asiatic lion, a smaller subspecies of the African lion that once roamed a massive area from modern day Bangladesh all the way west across Asia and the Middle East to Greece on the Mediterranean. These are the biblical lions that young children were taught stories of at school, but, presumably because their African cousins still endure in relatively large numbers, very few people are aware that by the turn of the last century Asiatic lions had been hunted to the cusp of extinction. In India, officers of the British Raj and Indian maharajas accounted for thousands of animals and in 1913 it was reported that there were no more than twenty lions remaining in the Gir Forest, which represented the entire surviving population across their former range. Although the lion census of May 2015

estimated that over a century later this number had increased to a more sustainable population of 523, a figure that I believe has probably been somewhat exaggerated, the exact number of lions is not currently the main conservation issue facing this animal, as scientists and early environmentalists have been advising of the need for a second population of Asiatic lions since the 1950s. The flash floods that killed at least ten lions and many other animals in 2015 perfectly illustrate why, as one serious incident or rampant disease could easily eradicate these lions for good and a second population would also help to improve the genetic health of the species. In 1958 a translocation was attempted when a male and two females were moved to the Chandraprabha Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh. More than a decade later their numbers had increased to just eleven, which suggests they were not receiving a great deal of protection at any stage, and within a year the entire pride had been wiped out by local farmers, who had always objected to their presence. Despite repeated calls to reintroduce lions to Madhya Pradesh, this plan has been discussed for as long as I can remember and certainly since the early 1990s, the government of Gujarat has always vigorously resisted, as they are aware that their state is renowned as the last home of these majestic animals and they guard their precious assets jealously and greedily, as well, of course, as the significant income and prestige that the lions generate. The posters of the Gujarat Forest Department say it all really, as they show a picture of the lions from Gir with the helpful slogan, 'Gujarat's Pride, World's Envy!'. Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary was to be the site of the reintroduction and, after years of legal dispute, in April 2013 the Indian Supreme Court finally ruled that the translocation had to be completed within six months. Three years later not a single lion has been moved and the Asiatic Lion Reintroduction Project appears to have reached an impasse that Indian officials apparently do not have either the goodwill or competency to resolve. The whole sorry episode is an unmitigated disgrace, particularly when you consider the conditions that the lions in Gir currently have to endure. There are anywhere from 3,000 to 7,000 people, depending on whose figures you accept, living inside the actual national park in dozens of villages supporting between 10,000 and 14,000 cattle. All within a reserve so arid, water has to be delivered on a daily basis just to keep the resident wildlife alive. It has become a standing joke that you do not really need to game drive at Gir anymore, as you can just sit and wait at the artificial waterholes and you will see lions and leopards, which we indeed did on this visit. Whilst it is true that a lot of local people take a great deal of pride in their lions and do their best to help conserve them, several hundred even turned out to mourn the drowned lions in 2015 and thousands of the open wells in which the lions used to accidently drown are now being covered, it remains a sad fact that they are still killed for taking cattle. Irrespective of their exact numbers, many lions live beyond the national park and consequently beyond its security, as the entire protected area, including both the national park and the sanctuary, is less than a sixth the size of Yellowstone National Park in the United States, which is in itself considerably less than half the size of Kruger National Park in South Africa. So we are not talking about a huge area and the actual national park, which is the only section that receives full protection, equates to approximately 16% of the total reserve. Whilst not wishing to labour the point, this basically means that the Asiatic lions at Gir, which you have to remember are the last of their species on earth, receive approximately 1% of the protection that the African lions living at Kruger receive…and still the government of Gujarat will not allow lions to be removed in order to create a critical second population. At the moment this wilful failure to act is merely unacceptable, just as the reasons for not doing so are inexcusable, but should something devastating transpire within these arid teak forests, the consequences could be catastrophic. Not surprisingly given the number of locals within the park and the fact that they are tracked on motorbikes and by foot all day, the lions are very easy to see here and our five game drives yielded seven sightings of eighteen different cats. As I have already mentioned, several were spotted at the concrete waterholes that are the lifeblood of the reserve in many ways and attract most of the resident wildlife at different parts of the day. We saw our first golden jackals since Kolkata at one of the artificial pools and also a leopard, which came to drink in the late afternoon of our final game drive after I had spotted another of these stealthy cats

sauntering along earlier that morning. Having missed them at so many locations, Gir was our last real opportunity to see a leopard and we were more than content with our brief and entirely unexpected sunrise encounter. The afternoon sighting, which was considerably longer and at maybe half the distance, was consequently greeted as something of a bonus, although, as always, the stark concrete does nothing to enhance either the feeling of an authentic wild encounter or the ensuing photographs. I do not care a great deal about the



pictures of course, but it would surely be more appropriate if the cattle were artificially fed and watered beyond the reserve and the standing water within was preserved purely for the wildlife, which I always considered was pretty much the point of a national park. To date we had seen two new species of cat in Gujarat and three in all, which we unexpectedly increased to four whilst spotlighting within the large unkempt grounds of our lodge. With only a few hares and scorpions to show for our efforts, we hit the jackpot on our final walk when I illuminated a tiny cat that, on size alone, appeared to be a rusty-spotted cat. It fled into a low tree before I could be entirely sure and although at no stage was it completely unobscured, it tarried long enough for me to clarify the identification and get just the one shot, thanks in no small part to James' skill with a spotlight. As you never want a creature to have to hide in this manner for long, not directly in the open with no obvious way passed his pursuers, we backed away and extinguished our lights in the hope that it might emerge slowly enough for us to enjoy a better view. Regrettably, it was an entirely forlorn hope, as the obviously relieved feline seized its opportunity and leapt to the ground as soon as our lights went out before disappearing over the garden wall and into the national park, which our lodge backed directly onto. It was still a marvellous encounter, all the more so for being totally unanticipated, and, on difficulty at least, was probably the highlight of our stay at Gir. However, my own personal favourite was with a grizzled male lion, that was covered in scars and was still ruling his own pride at age eleven, which is a considerable achievement in a small area with a high density of lions and a lot of young bucks forever looking to take your place. It always makes me smile when I hear tourists talking about lazy male lions and how they just sleep while the lionesses do the hunting, as all successful males have to spend most of their adult lives fighting, often to take over a pride and then continuously to defend it. They live hard short lives, on average six years less than the females, and although I knew that in all probability this old male would ultimately die a savage, lonely death at the hands of a younger, stronger lion, he was still the king and he was still mating and passing on his genes, which is really his sole purpose for being on earth. Although I have witnessed first-hand how demanding and often brutal the natural world can be, I recognise that I have the propensity to romanticise it to some degree and to apply characteristics to animals that humans generally only recognise in themselves. I am thankfully not alone in this, as this perspective installs in us an empathy that usually makes us want to treat wildlife in a way that we would like to be treated, kindly and fairly for example. Whilst completely pragmatic to this lion's purpose and likely fate, to me he had a nobility and courage that transcends mere biological instinct, he made choices distinct to his personality, not simply to his species. If you want to take the human analogy a step further, this was a real warrior and when he finally went down, you knew that he was not going to do

so without a fight. For now he was savouring the fruits of his labour, watching at a distance as his latest batch of cubs played together and pestered their sleepy mothers. As we left, he rolled onto his back in the scorching afternoon sun with his legs swaying in the air. Mel Brooks was right 'it's good to be the king'. We did not have long enough at our final two destinations, as we had three nights at the Great Rann of Kutch and just two at the adjoining Little Rann of Kutch, when I could have easily spent that many weeks at each. This is a beguiling region that I have always had a great affinity for and I was very much looking forward to exploring the contrasting ecosystems and habitats of Kutch itself, including the salt plains of the Great Rann of Kutch, which flood seasonally to produce shallow saline wetlands, and the Banni Grasslands, the largest expanse of savannah on the Indian subcontinent. Beyond these two

distinctive areas, we would search the arid rugged hills and some of the last remaining tracts of dry deciduous thorn forest, which are currently receiving scant protection in Kutch and across most of the state. We were with a general wildlife guide for our entire stay in Gujarat and had local guides at each new destination, so four in all and our third was a highly qualified ecologist who had worked for the best part of six years on a 'Bird Migration and Grassland Ecology Project' in the Banni Grasslands, which has been proposed as one of the possible sites for the reintroduction of India's missing sixteenth cat species, the cheetah. As with the previously discussed lions, the Asiatic cheetah subspecies used to occur across the Middle East and central Asia, but the last three Indian cheetahs were shot in 1947 by the unspeakable Maharaja of Surguja, who, as I have mentioned in a previous report, is also credited with having individually slaughtered over 1,300 tigers. Whilst the project has been discussed for a number of years, at least twenty that I am aware of, it has never progressed and really only highlights the urgency of the situation for the Asiatic lions, as during the time that petty Indian officials of various departments and governments have been squabbling and trying to protect their own interests, the Asiatic cheetah has almost been eradicated, with perhaps only twenty surviving in Iran. He who prevaricates is lost and, in much the same way that the Tasmanian tiger only received official protection in Australia two months before the last animal died in captivity, so the Asiatic cheetah will also certainly be extinct before any action is even agreed upon, let alone taken. Despite the fact that the local guide had only seen three in 24 years in this area, one of my main targets at Kutch was a caracal, as I know the region is a stronghold for these elusive cats and that other visitors had seen one less than a week before we arrived. I was not unduly worried by our guide's lack of success, as he is more an ornithologist and as such is not generally as active at night, which is when we would concentrate our efforts. James and I were

surprisingly confident as we set out on the first night drive and within a few minutes had spotted a porcupine scurrying back down its burrow. We had just passed a village when I caught something to the left of the vehicle in my spotlight, which I went to dismiss as a dog for maybe half a second, probably because of the nearby settlement and the number of dogs that you always see around them. Fortuitously, in the field it is second nature to double check everything and, as I turned for that second look, I knew instinctively that this was not a dog. I was not entirely sure what it was, but both my head and my heart cried caracal and I was elated to see that for once they were in unison. Bathed in the yellowish tinge of my spotlight and staring directly at me, was a breathtakingly beautiful adult

caracal, that calmly watched us pull over before padding serenely away into the vegetation at the base of a substantial hill. James and I immediately followed, as we knew that if we were quiet, we had a very good chance of seeing this spectacular animal again, which indeed we did, twice. On neither occasion was I able to take a decent photograph, but I did get a reference shot of the caracal peering at us through a thorn bush and I was not really expecting anything better, as the 'curse of the jungle cat' is nothing in comparison to my lack of success in photographing caracals. Over considerably more than two decades, I have an entire collection of disappearing tails and blurred heads and it remains an ambition of mine to take at least one reasonable photograph of this captivating animal. That said, the quality of the sighting is the only really important factor and we were all absolutely thrilled with this one, particularly as it had occurred within less than an hour of our very first night drive. Whilst not routinely observed anywhere within their range, caracals are easier to see in Africa and my only previous Indian encounter had been in Rajasthan where, incidentally, the wife of my main local operator had recently spotted one whilst driving between Jaipur and Ranthambore. The caracal was our seventh cat species of what was turning out to be an outstanding tour and a night later we remarkably had an eighth, when we saw the first of three wild cats we would encounter at Kutch, two at the Great Rann and one later when we moved on to the Little Rann. Known in India as the desert cat, this animal appears in various guises across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and much of Asia and, as such, is by far the most common felid in terms of the number of realms it can be found in. I have personally seen wild cats in approximately twenty different countries, including the United Kingdom and they occur in over a hundred or basically in more than half the countries on earth. To discover six different cat species in one region is fairly remarkable and our time at the Great Rann turned out to be something of a mammal extravaganza. In addition to the only hyena sighting of the tour, which I initially thought might be our caracal again, our guide found a small herd of extremely nervous chinkara within an isolated patch of thorn forest and two more jungle cats in the Banni Grasslands, one of which was sitting completely out in the open on a rock, illuminated in the most glorious evening light, almost taunting me to take my best shot. I did not hesitate and as I raised my camera to finally break the curse, it suddenly sprung out of sight. It had not looked at all agitated or even as if it might jump and it took several minutes for the laughter in our vehicle to subside. I had more success with rodents and we took time out to photograph two desert jird colonies and a nest of Indian bush rats during the day, as well as a number of Indian gerbils and field mice at night, when we also encountered several different snakes. Golden jackals and nilgai were spotted by night and by day and in this region Indian grey mongooses replace the ruddy mongooses so common throughout much of the country and all the famous tiger reserves in central India. We probably saw ten grey mongooses at Kutch, as well as our first two Bengal foxes of the tour, which were both photographed at night, hunting the abundant rodents. For all of us, including our excellent guides, it was an enthralling three days in magical surroundings and we even managed two of our major targets within an hour of each other, when we initially encountered an Indian hedgehog at the side of the road and then spotted a collared hedgehog, or an Indian

long-eared hedgehog as they are also known. I was able to get a picture of the first and although the latter escaped us, it was very easy to differentiate between the two, as the collared hedgehog does not have the distinctive white facial markings of its Indian counterpart. Having missed the collared variety at the National Chambal Sanctuary on the previous trip, when another group were watching one but the guides neglected to call us, it was particularly satisfying to find both species within such a short period of time. It also again

perfectly illustrated the often bewildering vagaries of wildlife watching, as we spent almost two weeks in Gujarat and did not have a single glimpse of another hedgehog either side of that productive hour. Similarly, but of far more concern given the cause, we had spent more or less three months in Sri Lanka and India during the previous year without seeing either a single Indian pangolin or a Chinese pangolin during our time in Assam. Whilst they have always been difficult animals to find, friends, guides and contacts are confirming that they are disappearing across their former range at an alarming rate and that if poaching is not addressed, at least some of the eight pangolin species will soon be extinct. As I mentioned in my Borneo trip report of July 2014, they are being killed both for their meat and for their scales, which, as per the elements of almost every organism to have walked or crawled on this earth, are much in demand for use in traditional Chinese medicine. Mercifully we were not considering such gloomy prospects immediately after our fabulous hedgehog sightings or when we moved on to the Little Rann of Kutch and our final destination, the Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary, home, as the name suggests, to the Indian subspecies of the Asiatic wild ass. A striking equid that once roamed central and northern Asia, the Middle East and as far east as Turkey and the Ukraine, the Asiatic wild ass is regionally extinct in most of the countries that it used to occur and the population of almost 5,000 at Kutch is the third largest global population after Mongolia and China. The wonderful

news is that wild ass numbers here have increased robustly during the last few years and its range has gradually expanded into the Great Rann of Kutch and neighbouring Rajasthan. We certainly found several herds relatively easily and spent almost two hours walking and sitting with one group of maybe 40 animals, which were reasonably calm and eventually allowed us to approach to within a few metres for some nice pictures. Sadly, I do not think that wolves are doing as well, as we had not seen any in all of the usual areas and a number of guides and locals informed me that they are killed indiscriminately by cattle herders. We still had a good chance here, as our guide did say that he sees wolves reasonably regularly, as well as striped hyenas, which are another animal that you generally encounter fairly routinely in Gujarat, but we had struggled with. He undoubtedly did his best for us in any case, as he contacted his network of guides, drivers and farmers and asked them to let him know as soon as they saw either a wolf or a hyena. Meanwhile, we searched hard ourselves and enjoyed considerable success with final wild cat and jungle cat sightings as well as three more Bengal fox encounters and the belated appearance of a red fox. We eventually saw around a dozen of these very common foxes, I often watch them playing in my back garden with my dopey dog's toys, and we spent a spellbinding two hours or so with a female nursing her three extremely young cubs in the glorious early morning sunshine. We did get a call regarding a hyena that had been spotted, but it had moved on by the time that we arrived and it did not look as if we would now end the tour with a wolf, as that was the only call that we would receive during our brief stay. On our last day, and very much on the off chance, we checked an old den that wolves were occasionally known to use and this time we found tracks that we knew were fresh, as we had visited the same den the previous afternoon. All the prints were around and towards the den and it therefore looked as if one lone animal had used it on a transitory basis and was almost certainly still inside. It was still early at that stage, so we returned before dusk to hopefully watch it emerge and as we sat waiting within sight of the den, but downwind and not too close, we reminisced quietly about the end of the previous trip when we had seen our first wolf in the final minutes of daylight and how extraordinary it would be if exactly the same thing occurred at the very end of this tour. Unlike the previous occasion, when the sighting had taken on almost miraculous proportions, the odds were in our favour this time and we still believed this as our last blazing Indian sunset fell across a blood red sky and dropped slowly into the welcoming desert. The entrance to the den remained visible and it was now surely only a question of time before the wolf would emerge. I am not certain exactly how long that thought lasted, but we waited four and a half hours in all and were eventually having to use our spotlights to check if cunning lupus had appeared and was absconding into the darkness. We would have stayed longer if we had another night available, but our race was run and we had to drive to Ahmedabad that evening for our very early flight home. As we did so, James and I kept looking at each other and shaking our heads and smiling, it had been another incredible adventure and, unlike our previous tour when I had captured the wolf with that last second photograph, this time we had been outsmarted by a creature that epitomises true freedom and the spirit of the wild. This time the wolf had got away and that truly felt like the perfect end.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Tiger	Panthera tigris	Three sightings at Kaziranga.
2	Asiatic Lion	Panthera leo persica ssp	Eighteen different lions during seven sightings on five game drives at Gir National Park.
3	Leopard	Panthera pardus	Two individuals at Gir National Park.
4	Caracal	Caracal caracal	Excellent view of an adult walking at night at the Great Rann of Kutch.
5	Jungle Cat	Felis chaus	Six in the Sundarbans, one at Blackbuck NP, two at the Banni Grasslands and one at the Little Rann of Kutch.
6	Wild Cat	Felis silvestris	An adult and juvenile at the Great Rann of Kutch and an adult at the Little Rann of Kutch.
7	Rusty-spotted Cat	Prionailurus rubiginosus	Individual in the grounds of the lodge at Gir.
8	Fishing Cat	Prionailurus viverrinus	One individual in a small village outside Kolkata.
9	Golden Jackal	Canis aureus	One at the fishing cat village near Kolkata, one at Sasan Gir and low numbers at the Great Rann of Kutch.
10	Bengal Fox	Vulpes bengalensis	Two at the Great Rann of Kutch and three at the Little Rann of Kutch.

11	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Around a dozen at the Little Rann of Kutch, including several cubs.
12	Striped Hyena	Hyaena hyaena	Individual walking at the Great Rann of Kutch, which I originally thought was a caracal.
13	Red Panda	Ailurus fulgens	Brief sighting of a large male walking on the road and more than an hour with a juvenile in a tree at Singalila.
14	Smooth-coated Otter	Lutrogale perspicillata	Several sightings at Kaziranga and one at in Bhutan across the border from Manas National Park.
15	Small Indian Civet	Viverricula indica	Two whilst searching for hispid hare at Manas.
16	Common Palm Civet	Paradoxurus hermaphroditus	Two at night in a degraded patch of forest near Kaziranga.
17	Small Indian Mongoose	Herpestes auropunctatus	One running across the road as we approached Manas.
18	Indian Grey Mongoose	Herpestes edwardsii	Commonly observed in Gujarat.
19	Crab-eating Mongoose	Herpestes urva	One brief sighting on a jungle path at Manas and a second sighting by our guide at the same destination.
20	Asian Elephant	Elephas maximus	Observed at all three destinations in Assam.
21	Greater One-horned Rhinoceros	Rhinoceros unicornis	Between 50 and 100 different animals at Kaziranga and Manas.
22	Sambar Deer	Rusa unicolor	Encountered in low numbers at Kaziranga and Manas and common at Gir.
23	Barasingha	Rucervus duvaucelii	Large numbers at Kaziranga.
24	Spotted Deer	Axis axis	Low numbers in the Sundarbans and abundant at Gir.
25	Hog Deer	Axis porcinus	Abundant at Kaziranga.
26	Northern Red Muntjac	Muntiacus vaginalis	Observed in low numbers at Kaziranga and Manas.
26	Blackbuck	Antilope cervicapra	Large numbers at Blackbuck National Park.
27	Nilgai	Boselaphus tragocamelus	Common at Blackbuck National Park and encountered throughout most of Gujarat.
28	Chinkara	Gazella bennettii	Small herd in the Banni Grasslands.
30	Gaur	Bos gaurus	Two individuals at Manas National Park.
31	Wild Water Buffalo	Bubalus arnee	Common at Kaziranga and Manas.
32	Himalayan Serow	Capricornis thar	A pair at Singalila National Park.
33	Asiatic Wild Ass	Equus hemionus	Between one and two hundred at the Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary.
34	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	Encountered in every region accept at Singalila.
35	Western Hoolock Gibbon	Hoolock hoolock	Two family groups at Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary.
36	Southern Plains Grey Langur	Semnopithecus dussumieri	Common at Gir National Park.
37	Gee's Golden Langur	Trachypithecus geei	Group of around twenty in the Manas National Park area.
38	Capped Langur	Trachypithecus pileatus	Easily observed at the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary.
39	Stump-tailed Macaque	Macaca arctoides	One large family group for an extended period at the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary.
40	Assam Macaque	Macaca assamensis	Between twelve and fifteen just beyond the boundary of the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary.
41	Northern Pig-tailed Macaque	Macaca leonina	Small group at the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary.
42	Rhesus Macaque	Macaca mulatta	Observed at most destinations.
43	Collared Hedgehog	Hemiechinus collaris	Individual at Kutch running along the road and into the vegetation.
44	Indian Hedgehog	Paraechinus micropus	Individual at Kutch at the side of the road.
45	Indian Hare	Lepus oiostolus	Routinely observed at several destinations.
46	Indian Crested Porcupine	Hystrix indica	Individual at night at Kutch.
47	Black Giant Squirrel	Ratufa bicolor	Observed at all three destinations in Assam.
48	Pallas's Squirrel	Callosciurus erythraeus	Three individuals observed at Singalila.
49	Hoary-bellied Squirrel	Callosciurus pygerythrus	Encountered at Kaziranga and Manas.
50	Himalayan Striped Squirrel	Tamiops macclellandii	Infrequent sightings at the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary and Kaziranga.
51	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	Funambulus pennantii	Abundant at Gir National Park.

52	Particolored Flying Squirrel	Hylopetes alboniger	One lone animal whilst spotlighting in degraded forest near Kaziranga.
53	Indian Gerbil	Tatera indica	Commonly observed at night in Gujarat.
54	Indian Bush Rat	Golunda ellioti	One confirmed sighting at the Great Rann of Kutch.
55	Indian Desert Jird	Meriones hurrianae	Two colonies of between five and ten animals at the Great Rann of Kutch.
56	Little Indian Field Mouse	Mus booduga	Observed at several destinations in Gujarat.
57	Indian Flying Fox	Pteropus giganteus	Several roosts at Kaziranga.
58	Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bat	Cynopterus sphinx	Low number at Kaziranga.
59	Indian Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus coromandra	First observed in the Sundarbans.
60	Irrawaddy Dolphin	Orcaella brevirostris	Small pod of four or five in the Sundarbans.
61	Ganges River Dolphin	Platanista gangetica	Two animals on the Brahmaputra River by the Kolia Bhomora Setu bridge.
62	Indo-Pacific Humpbacked Dolphin	Sousa chinensis	One beside our boat in the Sundarbans.

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