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INDIA

Date - February 2017

Duration - 25 Days

Destinations
Kolkata - Guwahati - Nameri National Park - Pakke Wildlife Sanctuary - Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary - Kaziranga National Park - Jorhat - Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary - Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary

Trip Overview

This was meant to be the first of a number of spectacular tours in 2017 and the fact that it did not proceed as planned, highlights not only some of the difficulties involved with remote wildlife travel, but, more specifically, what can go wrong when you visit certain areas of India. I had been working on this trip for some time, as Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, the two states that I would visit on this tour, plus the bordering states of Nagaland and Manipur, which I intended to explore the following year, are all home to an astounding variety of rare mammals and the entire region is one of the most diverse in all of South Asia. Of the eight cat species that occur in this part of northeast India, I was hoping to encounter clouded leopard, Asiatic golden cat and marbled cat on this one tour and other very real possibilities included sun bear, Asiatic black bear, sloth bear, dhole, binturong, spotted linsang, large Indian civet, masked palm civet, small-toothed palm civet, yellow-throated marten, Asian small-clawed otter, hog badger, large-toothed ferret badger, small-toothed ferret badger, Bengal slow loris, Malayan porcupine and Chinese pangolin. A red panda sighting was also a realistic prospect and although we would not reach there on this occasion, further north in Arunachal Pradesh, Eurasian lynx and snow leopards increase the cat tally in this extraordinary region to an equally remarkable ten. When you consider that tigers, leopards, rhinos, elephants, gibbons and a host of other captivating creatures are all routinely observed in these bountiful forests, it is easy to understand why I have been so keen to research other habitats in these territories for so long and to hopefully run a variety of tours here. Much of the northeast has barely been visited, let alone studied in any depth, and I believe that these isolated and largely inaccessible jungles have the potential to offer exceptional wildlife viewing opportunities that will ultimately rival more or less any destination on the planet. The difficulty in attempting to unearth and promote new places and unique experiences, is usually the lack of infrastructure and a number of my exploratory expeditions have suffered as a result. This is to be expected, to some degree at least, as a great deal can go wrong when you are travelling in such remote locations and it is essential that I resolve all of these logistical issues before I allow guests to follow in my footsteps. However, this tour was slightly different, as most of the problems were entirely unnecessary and could have been avoided with even a modicum of integrity and common sense, coupled with perhaps a smidgen of human empathy. It has to be said that the majority of Indian officials have very little of any of these qualities and our situation was further hampered by the fact that I was using a new local operator, who sadly attempted to conceal the problems that we encountered and lied to us on a number of occasions in order to do so. This is not uncommon unfortunately, as often guides will try to avoid disappointing their clients or, in more devious cases, avoid paying refunds, by pretending that everything is going swimmingly and exactly as they had planned. This occurred several times on this trip and although I appreciate that the operator, who I was also using as my personal guide, was not intrinsically dishonest, he was disingenuous on too many occasions for me to be able to trust him with my guests and ever use again. As I explain to everyone who I work with, we can deal with almost any problem between us, generally without recriminations or any repercussions, but I require 100% honesty and transparency in all matters and at all times, as this is the very least that I owe people who have put their faith in me and have paid me to produce what may be a once in a lifetime adventure. It is therefore immensely frustrating when someone you have trusted insults your intelligence in this way and at times it was difficult to remain entirely composed when I was so obviously being lied to, for whatever reason. It was a great shame for all of us in many ways, as I was once again travelling with my son James and this was likely to be his last trip to India before he takes up his university place next year. In addition, the local operator has ruined a potentially rewarding business relationship with someone who has dedicated much of his time to the conservation of fragile ecosystems and the myriad species that inhabit them. As I will elaborate upon over the course of this report, operating tours in the areas that I was due to visit is currently inconceivable, let alone those further afield, and having been forced to cancel my visit to Dachigam National Park in September 2016, due to the violence in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, I am having to reassess certain parts of India as viable wildlife destinations. I will personally travel almost anywhere, but you cannot expect even the most committed wildlife enthusiasts to tolerate being literally turned away at the entrance to a reserve that they have spent a great deal of time and money to reach and consequently I am currently looking at alternative sites for most of the major mammals found in the more remote parts of the country. For me this is a personal tragedy, as India has always had a special place in my heart and I am genuinely distraught at the prospect of having to abandon entire regions, particularly in a year that will witness the 70th anniversary of Indian

independence. For a complete history buff who grew up admiring the great Mahatma Gandhi, the 15th of August 1947 has always held a real significance for me, as it represents not only the date that the British finally ceded control of India, but the culmination of one man's epic struggle to defy the most powerful empire on earth and lead his people to freedom. For such a slight man, particularly in terms of the delicate stooping figure that we are all so familiar with towards the end of his life, Gandhi was an undoubted colossus of his or any other age and his courage and conviction changed the course of history, as well as the lives of hundreds of millions of his compatriots. I have always commemorated the 15th of August and taken time to quietly remember what Gandhi achieved, whilst at the same time reflecting upon the savagery and horror that left such an indelible stain on the country following independence. Despite widespread opinion to the contrary, the Partition of India was not a British idea, it was actually a British last resort, a way of expediting the India problem following the cessation of the Second World War, when the country was trying to recover from years of hardship and protecting even the most attractive elements of Empire was the very last thing on the collective consciousness of the new Labour government under Prime Minister Clement Attlee. When Lord Mountbatten was appointed the last Viceroy of India in February 1947, his fairly uncomplicated brief was to hand over a united India by no later than the end of June 1948 and in order to do so he would need to convince all of the major protagonists, including Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, who would become the First Prime Minister of India, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League for more than thirty years and eventually the first Governor-General of Pakistan. Both Gandhi and the equally liberal Nehru argued for their country to remain united, but Jinnah feared, possibly with some justification, that the 92 million Indian Muslims, who represented slightly less than 25% of the population, would become marginalised within a largely Hindu country and he consequently insisted upon an entirely independent Muslim nation that would be known as Pakistan. Following a number of unproductive meetings with Jinnah and a series of violent confrontations during which several thousand people were killed, Lord Mountbatten reported to parliament that the situation was too volatile to delay the transfer of power until 1948 and that in order to avoid a catastrophic civil war, the provinces of Punjab and Bengal should be divided along religious lines to form West Pakistan and East Pakistan, now Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively. Although Gandhi would never agree to the partition of the country that he had struggled for so long to free, Nehru and the rest of the Indian National Congress, as well as representatives of the Sikh community, acknowledged that Pakistan already existed in all but name and that they would reluctantly accept partition. Consequently, in August 1947, the majority of Indians found themselves free of direct colonial rule for the first time in almost 90 years and tens of millions of Muslims celebrated the birth of their own independent nation. After years of subjugation under the yolk of imperialism, it should have been a time of unadulterated joy for all factions, regardless of ethnicity or religion, but instead around fifteen million freshly liberated citizens found themselves stranded as refugees on the wrong side of the religious divide and the killing started immediately. Communities that had lived together in peace for centuries erupted into murder and bloodshed along sectarian lines and within a few months between one and two million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had been killed. Neighbours who had previously celebrated each other's religious festivals and openly shared food, hacked each other to death and entire families were wiped out by the very people they had grown up with. Women had their babies cut from their wombs and infants were burnt alive or had their brains dashed out against brick walls.

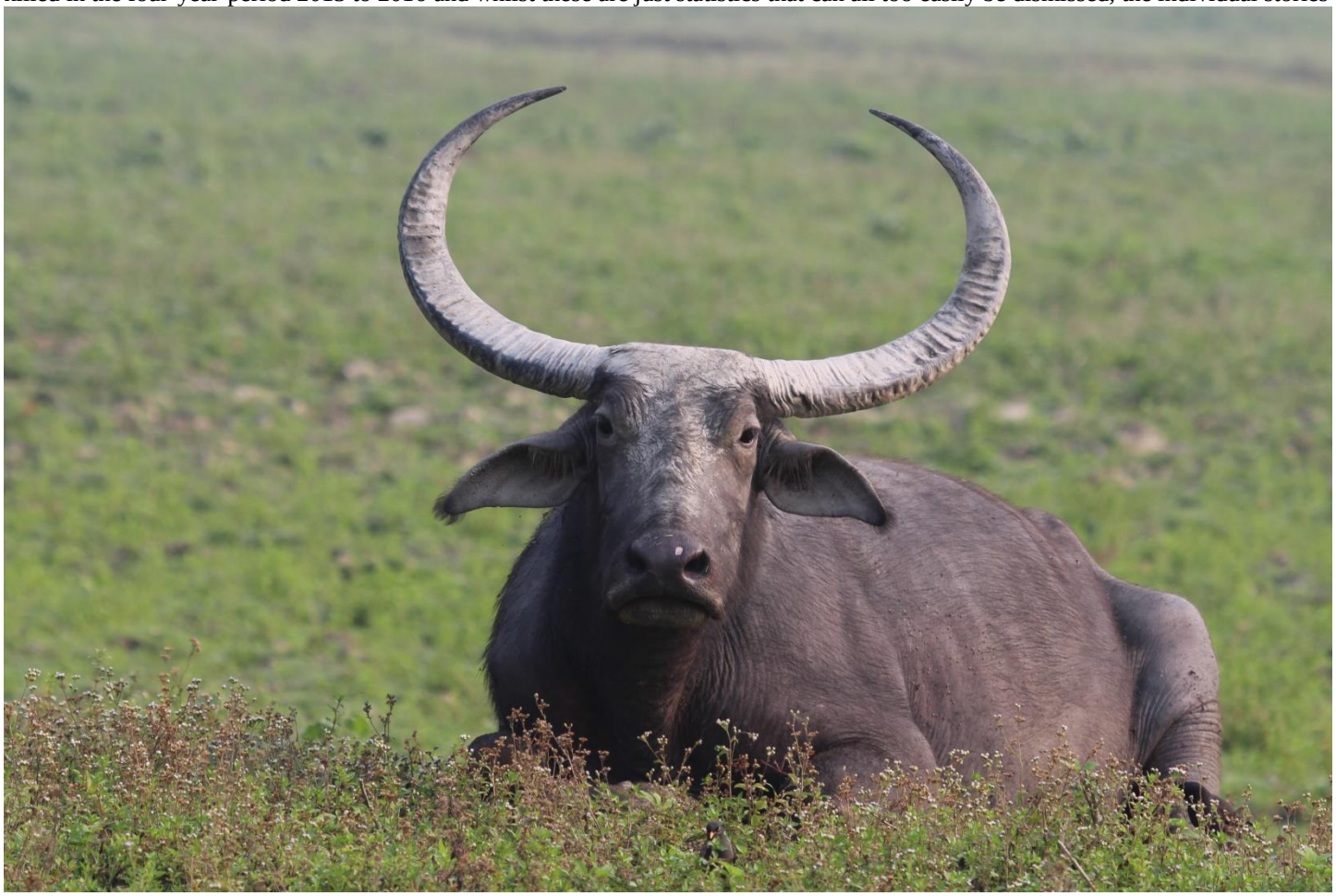
Tens of thousands of women and girls were raped and many took their own lives rather than face the shame of being dishonoured in this way. Some men killed their own wives and daughters for the same reason and one particularly harrowing account tells of young girls holding their own pony tails in the air so that their father could behead them with his sword and thus protect their honour. Lifelong friends turned on each other for no better reason than the fact that they no longer shared the same nationality and entire trainloads of refugees were slaughtered and their bodies sent on to India or Pakistan, depending on where they were attempting to flee to. Where Hindus and Sikhs remained in the ascendancy, Muslims were massacred and in turn where Muslims dominated, Hindus and Sikhs were butchered. Meanwhile, the British stood by and watched the atrocities unfold in much the same way that United Nations troops would allow the Hutu slaughter of up to a million Tutsis in Rwanda almost fifty years later. British soldiers were ordered to protect their own citizens during the transition of power and although barely a white person was killed during the unqualified agony of partition, entire generations of Indians would never even learn what became of their loved ones. The British were not of course responsible for the religious idiocy and fervour that caused previously peaceful human beings to begin hacking women and babies to death, but there is no doubt that partition had been poorly planned and hopelessly executed and Mountbatten himself did not believe that there would be any ‘mass transfer of population’. Whether violence could have been avoided is debatable, as many historians believe that it was inevitable given the political and religious tension that swept across the country prior to the division of Punjab and Bengal and the mass killings that had already occurred a year earlier when Jinnah had called for a Direct Action Day in order to further the cause of an independent Muslim nation, which at that stage had been rejected out of hand by the Indian National Congress. What is not in question is that the British made no attempt to maintain law and order as Mountbatten had initially promised and that even today the dark shadow of the horrific events of 1947 hangs heavily over both India and Pakistan, two nations born of extreme violence that have never found peace with each other. Both countries have clashed continually during the subsequent years, over ideology as much as physical territory, and the sad reality is that the eternal disharmony between the two could not be much further from the vision that Mahatma Gandhi had for his people when he had a dream of freedom and the courage to defy an empire. On the 30th of January 1948 partition claimed yet another victim when Gandhi was shot dead by a fellow Hindu who blamed this passionate advocate of ‘nonviolence’ for the brutality caused by partition and blindly accused Gandhi of supporting Muslims above his own people. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who had suffered from Tuberculosis since the 1930s, did not survive a great deal longer, dying of pneumonia in September 1948, and Jawaharlal Nehru succumbed to a heart attack in May 1964 after serving as the Prime Minister of India for almost seventeen years. As for Lord Mountbatten, he too died a violent death, when the Irish terrorist organisation the Provisional IRA blew up his boat 32 years after partition in August 1979. The last Viceroy of India died of terrible wounds before he could receive medical attention on shore and two young boys and an 83-year-old woman were also killed in the explosion. Although I have heard it espoused in some quarters that Mountbatten had blood on his hands and met a fitting end, many were far more culpable for the outrages committed following independence and, perhaps just for once, the blame should be laid squarely at the feet of the actual perpetrators of those heinous crimes, the mobs of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who believed that they were somehow justified in the mindless slaughter of innocent babies, children and mothers and the enslavement and rape of so many women and young girls. Sometimes it is simply inexcusable to hide behind the failings of others and whilst the British were undoubtedly responsible for much of the tragedy that would unfold following their hasty departure, this one truth can never justify the unspeakable acts that followed and tainted so many lives. As for the IRA, they routinely targeted civilians as well as military objectives and it was impossible to grow up in London during their bombing campaigns, euphemistically known as the ‘Troubles’, and have any real sympathy for their cause, even if, as was the case

with me, you did not believe in colonialism and supported at least the principle of a peaceful united Ireland. As with the children of all conflict, countless generations have paid for the sins of their fathers across India, Pakistan and Britain and the catastrophic consequences of colonial rule continue to echo through the ages on a global scale. The teachings of Mahatma Gandhi should be as relevant today as they have ever been, but the world no longer wants to listen to reason and we appear to have forgotten his very simple message: *'an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind'*. I have to say that these thoughts were not upmost in my mind during the long journey to Guwahati, but I never visit India without considering the implications of the British Raj or partition, particularly as these seismic historical events have such relevance to modern India and the way in which people continue to react to one another and their environment. Although some of the more high profile issues have been discussed a great deal, certainly concerning tigers and a few other iconic species, conservation has never been a significant factor in the daily lives of most Indians and the land has always been viewed as an inexhaustible resource capable of sustaining an infinite population. Well that population has now grown to more than 1.3 billion and with at least 800 million of those either living in poverty or eking out an austere subsistence lifestyle, the nation's incredibly diverse wildlife has suffered massively as a result. Habitat destruction has eradicated entire populations all over the country and in general densities are extremely low for most species, with many surviving in tiny isolated pockets. The critically endangered pygmy hog is just one of numerous examples of this devastation, as the tall grasslands they inhabit in the northeast have been all but destroyed and now barely 150 of these diminutive wild pigs remain. I had therefore arranged to spend a day at Nameri National Park and to visit the adjacent Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme, where they run a captive breeding programme and have been releasing hogs since 2008, primarily in an effort to establish healthy populations within their former range. The project itself is a fairly modest affair and the IUCN, whose Wild Pig Specialist Unit are part of an initiative that also involves the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, have not assessed the species since 2008. Whilst it is consequently difficult to ascertain exactly how effective the project has been, the hogs certainly breed successfully in captivity and more than 100 have been introduced to the wild to date. A field monitoring programme has confirmed that many of these pigs have survived the initial release and this crucial conservation project is also responsible for maintaining a captive population, as an insurance policy in case anything happens to the remaining pygmy hogs in the wild. I had intended to visit one or two of the release sites on my next visit, but as that is now unlikely to occur, or at least not for some time, I will have to monitor their progress with the help of some of my local contacts. After a pleasant hike within the national park, during which we encountered six mammal species, we were all very much looking forward to moving on to the first main wildlife destination of the trip, Pakke Wildlife Sanctuary, which has a wonderful reputation among the few individuals who have visited it and an equally outstanding mammal list. As it was, we would later reflect that Nameri National Park was the first and last section of the trip that went entirely as planned and, to coin a phrase from the illusory Lemony Snicket, the remainder of the tour descended into what can best be described as 'A Series of Unfortunate Events'. The weather was the first of our problems, as a great deal of time in the field was lost to heavy rain and at Eaglenest freezing temperatures and heavy fog severely hampered our efforts and certainly adversely affected the animals that we encountered, both in terms of numbers and diversity. This was the second trip out of three that had been blighted by poor weather, it rained almost continuously in Alaska the previous year, but at least dreadful weather conditions can be accepted as an occupational hazard, which was not the case regarding the more or less terminal issues inflicted by our own operator and several local officials, which were barely credible, even by Indian standards. Our visit actually started incredibly well, as Pakke is clearly a stupendous forest and on our very first night drive we encountered a binturong, a Bengal slow loris and a leopard cat, as well as several common palm civets and a small Indian civet. Another slow loris and a large Indian civet followed the next morning and as we drove through the dense jungle later that day, a sneaky leopard crisscrossed the road behind our vehicle on no less than three separate occasions. Sadly, that was as good as it was

going to get at Pakke, as the next two night drives were wiped out by torrential rain and although we had six nights in all at this wonderful destination, our guide had informed us that our time would be divided equally between two similarly productive locations within the reserve, which was regrettably untrue. It would instead transpire that because the illustrious biologist George Schaller was also due to visit during our stay, we would only be allowed three nights within the park and not the six that we had booked almost a year in advance, despite the fact that three forest rest houses were available and we had our own vehicle, guide and driver. Both parties could easily have stayed at the same time, but the forest officials would not allow this and our guide consequently decided to lie to us and pretend that our destination for the final three nights was also within Pakke. This was very clearly not the case and after a drive of several hours, we ended up in a village miles beyond the boundary of the park at some sort of homestay that our guide now admitted he had never even visited. To make matters worse, when we tried to explore the local jungle, we quickly discovered that there was no way of traversing the rudimentary forest path in our jeep and that we had basically driven all this way for nothing. Our guide had known before we even arrived in India that our time at Pakke had been cut in half, but instead of sharing this fairly fundamental information, which would have allowed us to investigate and discuss viable alternatives, he took the easy way out and simply lied. This was a genuine shame, both in terms of the trip and for me personally, as not only did it undermine my confidence in a man whom I had paid a great deal of money to and was hoping to be able to trust future guests with, but I really believed that we had a superb chance of discovering something very rare at Pakke and was convinced that clouded leopards, golden cats and Chinese pangolins were all real possibilities. I still am in fact, but I do not know if I will ever return to this reserve and I made the rather easy decision that we would move on to our next destination Eaglenest, as opposed to spending a further two days in an area that we could not even search. Although the low temperatures and at times impenetrable fog undoubtedly hindered our efforts, Eaglenest was our only even partially successful location of the entire tour, as we were able to spotlight for reasonable periods on six of our seven nights and were rewarded with largely exceptional views of four masked palm civets, two yellow-throated martens, a leopard cat, which was seen on a few occasions, and a marbled cat, which sat watching us in a tree for several minutes on one of our night drives. Asiatic golden cat had been our main target, as several had apparently been seen on one single trip with the same guide at almost the same time a year earlier, and whilst we were not fortunate with that particular animal, I believe that in more favourable weather conditions golden cat and clouded leopard encounters are actually likely here. Our final day was unfortunately ruined by not only the rain, which returned with a vengeance, but by the news that local forest officials were refusing to allow British tourists to enter a number of wildlife sanctuaries following a BBC documentary that accused Indian authorities of the indiscriminate killing of innocent villagers in their war against rhino poaching at Kaziranga National Park. The programme, entitled ‘Killing for Conservation’ and subtitled on the internet as ‘Kaziranga: The park that shoots people to protect rhinos’, was produced by the BBC’s South Asia Correspondent Justin Rowlatt and, as both sensationalist titles unquestionably suggest, this was

about as far as you could imagine from being a balanced piece of journalism exploring the serious issues of conservation and poaching in an age when literally thousands of species have been pushed to the brink of extinction. Instead Rowlatt simply repeated the very worst excesses of the BBC, which is a publically funded organisation and as such should be entirely impartial, but has all too often used public money to espouse either its own corporate views or the personal views of its own often biased journalists. It would be difficult to argue that the latter was not the case on this occasion, as Rowlatt's hatchet job of a documentary displayed all the objectivity of a Donald Trump tweet and he made absolutely no attempt to even explore the other side of his own ill-conceived argument. Sloppy, lazy, mediocre journalism is one thing, and Rowlatt's piece somehow managed to embrace all three, but dishonest is a step too far when you are charged with educating people, particularly children who may be approaching a subject for the first time, and it is certainly dishonest to include only the facts that purport to support your own opinions. The 'ruthless anti-poaching strategy' that Rowlatt refers so melodramatically to could only ever apply to people entering the national park illegally and for decades sophisticated and determined gangs of poachers have been winning, killing literally millions of animals across the globe, as well as hundreds of generally poorly armed and inadequately trained rangers and forest guards. Over a thousand rangers have been murdered in the last decade alone, with thousands more wounded or beaten, and the majority of these were not killed in gunfights by cornered poachers, but were executed by brutal criminal organisations, many of which are state sponsored. Whilst Rowlatt interviewed the grieving widow of a man killed in a civil riot, which, incidentally, was not even connected to the park's anti-poaching initiatives, no time was given to the widows or orphans of rangers killed attempting to protect the defenceless animals that are currently being slaughtered at entirely unsustainable levels all over the world. These rangers are at the very forefront of wildlife conservation and are risking their lives on a daily basis, usually for barely any reward and with no guarantee that their families will be supported if they are killed. Outgunned and outmanned, they often live in extremely arduous conditions deep in the wilderness and it is difficult to fully comprehend just how mentally exhausting their daily lives must be. Conversely, many poachers have access to the latest technology, including state of the art weapons and military grade thermal and night vision equipment. Poverty of course fuels much of the poaching that takes place around the world and criminal networks routinely employ impoverished locals to either lead them to animals or to actively kill animals on their behalf, for which they are usually paid a fraction of their true black market value.

For years these expendable foot soldiers have masqueraded as innocent villagers, pretending to be lost or drunk when confronted by guards, and it should be remembered that almost all of the shooting incidents at Kaziranga have taken place at night, when there can be very little excuse for loitering in a dangerous forest where both the animals and the rangers might kill you. All of the locals know how strictly Kaziranga is protected and if you are still prepared to risk entering after dark, the likelihood is that you are probably poaching in one way or another, whether it is for subsistence purposes or to hack a rhino to death for its horn. Rowlatt's overtly misleading piece fails to take any of this into account and whilst I have no issue with him addressing legitimate concerns, it is this lack of impartiality and barely concealed bias that I so object to. Given that neither Rowlatt or his BBC producer appear to understand the concept of balance, allow me to instead provide some, as approximately 30,000 elephants are butchered each and every year and there has been a catastrophic 62% decline in elephant numbers during the last ten years. As far as rhinos are concerned, 4,448 were killed in the four-year-period 2013 to 2016 and whilst these are just statistics that can all too easily be dismissed, the individual stories



behind each incident are as sickening as they are barbaric. To take just one appalling example, in 2014 a group of tourists encountered a white rhino in Kruger National Park that had been severely wounded but was somehow still alive. Much of its face had been hacked off with a machete and its eyes had been gouged out. After the condition of the poor animal had been reported, it took park rangers three days to find it, at which point they discovered that it also had a bullet in its brain. It is difficult to imagine the fear that this animal experienced or the suffering that it endured before it was finally put out of its misery and this is the reality of poaching that Rowlatt intentionally chose to ignore in order to produce a piece that supported his own preconceived agenda. This is the very definition of irresponsible journalism, as these fundamental issues address the future of our planet for ensuing generations and I can only hope that Rowlatt never has to look each of his four children in the eye and tell them of the part that he played in the extinction of the Indian rhinoceros, an imposing but vulnerable animal that a few committed people were doing their best to protect. Rather unsurprisingly, the Indian authorities agreed with my assessment and Rowlatt's disingenuous film earned the BBC a five-year ban from all national parks, tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries in the country. The National Tiger Conservation Authority or NTCA criticised the 'grossly erroneous' reporting and a spokesperson for the Ministry of Environment concurred that the BBC 'have misrepresented facts and selectively over-dramatized interviews'. Although it was the least important element of the entire episode, the damage had already been done for us and even before we left Eaglenest, we were informed that we would not be granted access to our next scheduled destination, Sessa Orchid Sanctuary, which apparently can be productive in terms of Asiatic black bear sightings. We were already due to visit Kaziranga briefly, as well as the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary near Jorhat, and would now have several days at the former, given the time that had been lost at both Pakke and Sessa. However, our guide informed us that he had contacted officials at Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary and had been assured that we would be able to access the reserve and could still spotlight each night, which was just as well really, as we were now looking to Dehing Patkai to salvage the entire tour. Kaziranga is a superb and vitally important reserve, but it was very unlikely to produce any of the really rare species that we were hoping to find on this trip, particularly as you are not allowed to enter the park until 7.30am and no night driving is permitted, which of course makes it almost impossible to encounter nocturnal animals. In addition, the new visitor restrictions, no more than 20% of any tiger reserve is now accessible to tourists, are applied very strictly at Kaziranga and I believe that only about 8% of the park is actually open to the public. This means that everyone basically navigates the same short and often crowded circuits continuously and that game drives here can be decidedly repetitive as a result, which is not the ambiance you would choose to engender for visitors to such a special area. This actually applies to many of the Indian parks now and I am really hoping that these nonsensical restrictions will be relaxed at some stage, as they will undoubtedly prove to be counterproductive and are meanwhile taking all the fun and suspense out of game driving. More seriously, by packing growing numbers of visitors into tiny sections of each reserve, park officials are putting a huge

amount of pressure on the animals either living in these areas or passing through. Elephants are particularly susceptible to any disturbance and it still shocks me that Indian forest guides and jeep drivers are so poorly trained and have no real knowledge of the animals they are surrounded by on a daily basis. On three separate occasions we were charged by elephants on this tour and each incident could have been avoided with just a little understanding and care. All three episodes were caused by our drivers either forgetting or refusing to turn our vehicle engine off within close proximity of herds of elephants with young and each time the obviously distressed elephants clearly displayed signs of agitation and aggression. Unless they are hunting you for food, which is extremely rare, animals always warn you before attacking and you could patently observe all of these elephants becoming more anxious and irritated, particularly the young males that will often attempt to stamp, literally on occasion, their authority on any potentially dangerous situation. Not only could I tell that each of these elephants were going to charge, but I knew more or less when they were going to do so and fortunately the first two instances were resolved by me instructing our drivers to kill the engine. On the third occasion however, the driver refused to, insisting that he needed to keep the engine running in case we had to reverse quickly. I told him that if he turned off now, we would not need to reverse, but it was only when the charging elephant was within maybe twenty metres, and I went to reach for his key, that our guide intervened and ordered him to switch off, at which point the elephant stopped dead in its tracks, displayed a few more signs of annoyance and wandered off. My old guides would have recognised the signs and these events reminded me of the best I have ever known, a local working in and around Corbett National Park who would actively track animals, as opposed to just driving around hoping to see them. He showed me tigers on foot, which is as exhilarating as it sounds, and when my son James was four he took us out in the early morning darkness at Corbett and spent the entire day tracking one single tiger. He pointed out the pug marks and indicated how recently the tiger had passed and towards sunset he parked the vehicle just beyond a small patch of forest and whispered that our quarry was within that section and that if we remained silent, we would see it when it moved just before dusk...at which point my boy decided it was an appropriate time to burst into his loudest rendition of one of his favourite nursery rhymes:

Oh, the grand old Duke of York,
He had ten thousand men,
He marched them up to the top of a hill,
And he marched them down again.

My guide and I looked at each other and, realising that about twelve hours of intense tracking had just been completely wasted, both burst out laughing in front of a gloriously happy young boy who was now merrily singing the second verse:

When they were up, they were up,
And when they were down, they were down,
And when they were only halfway up,
They were neither up nor down.

It was one of those unforgettable moments that parents cherish and I remember being immensely proud of my young son, which has not changed to this day, even when, on the drive back to the lodge in the dark, he turned to me and asked ‘are we not going to see a tiger today then’? Such memories are always tinged with sadness, as it can be difficult for a parent to accept that their child has grown up and that there will be no more similar events to recall and treasure. Days like this are no longer really possible at most of the Indian tiger reserves now in any case, given the various access and route restrictions imposed recently, but James and I encountered yet another tiger at Kaziranga on this trip and I wonder now when we will see our next one together, as James disappears off to university next year and I am unsure when or if the two of us will return to India. The tiger aside, which was unfortunately forced off the road by a convoy of vehicles before I was able to take a decent photograph, several smooth-coated otters were the only carnivores spotted within Kaziranga and a great deal of our time was spent in the company of water buffalos, rhinos and elephants, which cannot be a bad thing, even if they were not the mammals that we had travelled to India to search for and to spend quite so much time with. We also returned to Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, primarily to assess the spotlighting potential after the fiasco of our previous visits, but the situation had deteriorated even further in light of the BBC documentary and we were quickly informed that this was simply not going to happen. Instead we spent an entertaining morning watching the spectacular antics of two troops of hoolock gibbons and in the afternoon we searched successfully for northern pig-tailed macaques, which are generally found high in the canopy, and hugely distinctive stump-tailed macaques, which spend most of their time on the forest floor and allowed us to follow them quietly for over an hour. In all we saw five primates at the gibbon sanctuary this time, compared to six last year, and if you require further details regarding either Hoollongapar or Kaziranga, please refer to my India 2016 trip report. It was now time to move on to our final destination, Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary, a sprawling rainforest in east Assam where we had six nights to find at least one or two of our key target species and thus rescue the trip. It should certainly have been possible, as I have been looking to visit Dehing Patkai since 2010, when I saw an article stating that researchers had identified seven different cats here, the highest diversity of cat species ever photographed in a single area. For the record, the magnificent seven were Tiger, Leopard, Clouded Leopard, Golden Cat, Marbled Cat, Leopard Cat and Jungle Cat, all of which were recorded on camera traps during a two-year study. We had no sign of any of these on a first daylight drive, which was really only noteworthy for the number of huge trucks that we passed and the fact that our ‘safari’ terminated at a tea planation. The road itself was less than 15 kilometres long and alarm bells were already resonating despite our guide insisting that this was just part of the sanctuary and that we would be allowed to explore all of the accessible forest roads, including at night. Given his previous track record, I was worried that he was again lying and that we were basically going to spend six days game driving on a tea plantation access road, because we had been refused permission to enter the actual wildlife sanctuary and he was attempting to pretend otherwise. When, on the next drive, we went straight back to the same road, my worst fears were confirmed and I had the uncomfortable task of asking our guide to stop lying and inform us of the actual situation, at which point he disappeared to speak to various park officials and returned to confirm what I already knew, that we were not going to be allowed to access the main section of the sanctuary during the day or at night, which basically meant that our tour was over. Even at this stage he attempted to mislead us by insisting that this single haulage road, which ran along a river and through a woefully degraded patch of secondary forest, was the Assamese equivalent of the Serengeti and that he might very well choose this option even if we had been permitted to explore a wildlife sanctuary that I had been planning to visit with him for almost three years. He was obviously only just getting into his stride, as he also informed us, with a completely straight face, not to worry about the heavy traffic coming from the tea plantation, as there was going to be a strike in the local area and there would not be any trucks on the road for at least a couple of days as a result. When that did not work, he took the easy way out and blamed the BBC, cursing Justin Rowlatt and stating how ‘unbelievable’ it was that the ‘BBC had totally ruined our tour’. I, on the other hand, took a contrary view, for although I believe that the BBC was culpable of producing a disingenuous and contemptible piece of gutter journalism, it was not at all responsible for our

situation and had certainly not forced a group of petty and malicious Indian officials to renege on the booking they had previously accepted and been paid in full for. Whilst our guide clasped his evil BBC documentary angle like a get out of jail free card, I attempted to explain that with a little honesty, I could have probably salvaged the situation, as we still had two weeks available when he was informed of the true extent of the problem at Eaglenest and decided not to share the full impact with us. In two weeks we could have travelled anywhere in India, including to see snow leopards in Ladakh, or even beyond, but it was now too late and we had the option of either returning to Kaziranga or flying home early, which, given that we had to spend those last few days in the company of the person who had at least exacerbated so many of our problems and caused a few of his own, would have probably been preferable, certainly from my perspective and no doubt from his as well. As it was, I had no way of changing our flights easily in the remote area that we were staying and by the time I could, we would have almost been due to fly home in any case. Manas National Park was also a possibility, but you cannot spotlight there either and the long drive would have left us with barely two full days to explore the park. I was also aware that a clouded leopard had recently been released back into the wild at Manas and that it had been approaching tourists during the day, which I really did not want to perpetuate or become involved with. We therefore went back to Kaziranga and, the magnificent rhinos and other imposing wildlife aside, the main consolation of returning was finding the gorgeous female street dog that we had fed and rolled around on the floor playing with during our first stay. I should actually say that she found us, as I heard a familiar bark as we stepped down from our jeep and turned to see her running at full speed towards us before she literally launched herself into my arms. It was one of the happiest reunions I have known and I can barely recall a more affectionate and gentle dog, unless you happened to be a goat that is, as she really did not like goats for some reason and on several occasions I had to intervene as she harassed yet another hapless bovid. Despite the difficulties that I expected us to face whilst exploring such remote areas, I had always believed that this would be a spectacular trip and that we were going to discover destinations that I would be sending guests to for years.

It almost was, but ultimately, the combination of a few vindictive bureaucrats, an ambitious British journalist, an ineffectual tour operator and some pure old fashioned bad luck, proved to be insurmountable and the trip will sadly be remembered as one of the least successful and least enjoyable that I have been involved with. Of our 25 nights, only fifteen were spent at the correct location and of the 21 night drives that we were due to take at the four main destinations of Pakke, Eaglenest, Sessa and Dehing Patkai, which ostensibly the entire expedition had been built around, we were permitted to take only ten, three of which were entirely wiped out by abysmal weather and six more were undoubtedly damaged by similarly poor climatic conditions. Our one night drive at Pakke was sensational, but intense research trips just cannot survive this number of setbacks and that first spotlighting session really only emphasised exactly what we were missing as we sat outside or were turned away from the reserves that we had spent so long planning to visit. Regardless of our guide's not insignificant failings, that we did not see Sessa or Dehing Patkai at all and were asked to leave Pakke after just three of our six nights, was entirely due to the disgraceful behaviour of a few Indian Forest Service representatives, many of whom, like so many administrators and politicians in India, are acknowledged to be either corrupt, incompetent or, more usually, both. As much as I have always loved the intoxicating country and the generally warm and friendly Indian people, this is the reality of the situation and I cannot currently see a way of sending guests to destinations that there is a very real chance they will not even be allowed to enter. Similarly, there is no way that I can trust this operator come guide with my clients, as I have to take the view that if he will lie to me then he will certainly lie to them, which is obviously unacceptable. So basically, the tour failed on every

conceivable level except one…none of my guests were involved or adversely effected by the problems that I experienced, which of course is the entire point of these research tours and why I will never send anyone to a destination that I have not travelled to myself. This has always been my philosophy and although my principal priorities remain the welfare of the animals that I search for and the conservation of the ecosystems that I visit, no one benefits if you send guests on a trip that does not meet either their expectations or my own, which are generally much higher. I remain unsure when I will be able to return to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam as a result, or indeed undertake the planned exploratory expeditions within neighbouring Nagaland and Manipur, but I do know that on an absolute disaster of a tour, we still encountered an exceptional variety of splendid wildlife and that India will always remain the sparkling jewel in South Asia's extraordinary crown. That I will return to this magical land is beyond doubt and I would like to end this trip report, which I am completing a few days after the 70th anniversary of Indian independence on the 15th of August 2017, by remembering the souls who perished in the horrific violence that followed. In the immortal words of Rudyard Kipling, who was himself so intrinsically linked to India…'Lest We Forget'.

Wild Cat Species of the World

The IUCN Cat Specialist Group recently published their latest taxonomic review of the world's wild cat species, which increased the number of cats considered to be unique species by two to 40. One of the new assessments involved the leopard cat, a variation of which we encountered on this trip, which has now been split into two distinct species, the mainland leopard cat and the Sunda leopard cat. The other recent determination involves the wild cat, which has also been split on a genetic basis between the European wild cat and the African wild cat. The 40 species are listed in the table below, which also includes three subspecies that are frequently referred to as unique species, and the same IUCN group have currently identified 77 subspecies, although this figure will no doubt change following further research and analysis.

No.	Common Name	Scientific Name
1	Lion	Panthera leo
2	Jaguar	Panthera onca
3	Leopard	Panthera pardus
4	Tiger	Panthera tigris
5	Snow Leopard	Panthera uncia
6	Sunda Clouded Leopard	Neofelis diardi
7	Clouded Leopard	Neofelis nebulosa
8	Cheetah	Acinonyx jubatus
9	Jaguarundi	Herpailurus yagouaroundi
10	Puma	Puma concolor
11	Borneo Bay Cat	Catopuma badia
12	Asiatic Golden Cat	Catopuma temminckii
13	Marbled Cat	Pardofelis marmorata
14	African Golden Cat	Caracal aurata
15	Caracal	Caracal caracal
16	Serval	Leptailurus serval
17	Canada Lynx	Lynx canadensis
18	Eurasian Lynx	Lynx lynx
19	Iberian Lynx	Lynx pardinus
20	Bobcat	Lynx rufus
21	Mainland Leopard Cat (including the Iriomote Cat subspecies)	Prionailurus bengalensis
22	Sunda Leopard Cat	Prionailurus javanensis
23	Flat-headed Cat	Prionailurus planiceps
24	Rusty-spotted Cat	Prionailurus rubiginosus
25	Fishing Cat	Prionailurus viverrinus
26	Pallas's Cat	Otocolobus manul
27	Colocolo (including the Pampas Cat and Pantanal Cat subspecies)	Leopardus colocolo
28	Geoffroy's Cat	Leopardus geoffroyi
29	Guina or Kodkod	Leopardus guigna
30	Southern Tiger Cat or Southern Oncilla	Leopardus guttulus
31	Andean Cat	Leopardus jacobita
32	Ocelot	Leopardus pardalis
33	Northern Tiger Cat or Northern Oncilla	Leopardus tigrinus
34	Margay	Leopardus wiedii
35	Chinese Mountain Cat	Felis bieti
36	Jungle Cat	Felis chaus
37	African Wild Cat	Felis lybica
38	Sand Cat	Felis margarita
39	Black-footed Cat	Felis nigripes
40	European Wild Cat	Felis silvestris

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Tiger	Panthera tigris	Clear but brief single sighting at Kaziranga.
2	Leopard	Panthera pardus	One on several occasions at Pakke.
3	Marbled Cat	Pardofelis marmorata	Extended view of an individual sitting in a tree at night at Eaglenest.
4	Leopard Cat	Prionailurus bengalensis	Brief view of one at Pakke and three sightings of the same animal at Eaglenest.
5	Golden Jackal	Canis aureus	One at night on wasteland near Kaziranga.
6	Smooth-coated Otter	Lutrogale perspicillata	Several sightings at Kaziranga.
7	Yellow-throated Marten	Martes flavigula	Two individuals at Eaglenest.
8	Binturong	Arctictis binturong	One at night at Pakke.
9	Large Indian Civet	Viverra zibetha	One crossing the road on an early morning drive at Pakke.
10	Small Indian Civet	Viverricula indica	One at distance on the road in the morning at Pakke.
11	Common Palm Civet	Paradoxurus hermaphroditus	Three at night at Pakke.
12	Masked Palm Civet	Paguma larvata	Three on our first night drive at Eaglenest and one on our fifth.
13	Asian Elephant	Elephas maximus	Low numbers at Pakke and common at Kaziranga.
14	Greater One-horned Rhinoceros	Rhinoceros unicornis	Abundant at Kaziranga.
15	Sambar Deer	Rusa unicolor	Low numbers at Nameri, Pakke and Kaziranga.
16	Barasingha	Rucervus duvaucelii	Several herds at Kaziranga.
17	Hog Deer	Axis porcinus	Routinely observed at Kaziranga.
18	Northern Red Muntjac	Muntiacus vaginalis	A few individuals at Nameri, Pakke and Eaglenest.
19	Wild Water Buffalo	Bubalus arnee	Large numbers at Kaziranga.
20	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	One at Pakke and common at Kaziranga.

21	Western Hoolock Gibbon	Hoolock hoolock	Two small groups at Hoollongapar.
22	Capped Langur	Trachypithecus pileatus	Groups at Nameri, Pakke and Hoollongapar.
23	Stump-tailed Macaque	Macaca arctoides	One group for an extended period at Hoollongapar.
24	Assam Macaque	Macaca assamensis	Low numbers at Pakke and Eaglenest.
25	Northern Pig-tailed Macaque	Macaca leonina	Small troop high in the trees at Hoollongapar.
26	Rhesus Macaque	Macaca mulatta	Common at and between several destinations.
27	Bengal Slow Loris	Nycticebus bengalensis	One at night and one in the morning at Pakke.
28	Black Giant Squirrel	Ratufa bicolor	Several sightings at Eaglenest, Kaziranga and Hoollongapar.
29	Hoary-bellied Squirrel	Callosciurus pygerythrus	Observed at Nameri and Kaziranga.
30	Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel	Dremomys lokriah	Several individuals at Pakke and Eaglenest.
31	Himalayan Striped Squirrel	Tamiops macclellandii	Common at Eaglenest and Kaziranga.
32	Particolored Flying Squirrel	Hylopetes alboniger	Two individuals at Eaglenest.
33	Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel	Petaurista nobilis	Relatively common at night at Eaglenest.
34	Red Giant Flying Squirrel	Petaurista petaurista	Several sightings whilst spotlighting a Eaglenest.
35	Indian Flying Fox	Pteropus giganteus	A few individuals around Kaziranga at night.

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