

# India

## Bharatpur, Chambal and Ranthambhore

9–21 February 2009

### Participants:

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**Red-headed Vulture**

**Leaders:** Ansar Khan and Ray O'Reilly

It was with relish that I co-led a trip to the legendary world-famous wildlife hotspot of Bharatpur, and with a visit to the Tiger Reserve at Ranthambhore included I was sure it would be a wonderful experience. I was not prepared, however, for so many incredible mammal encounters throughout the tour, which was led by the expert Indian naturalist Ansar Khan, whose local knowledge was excellent.

**Day 1:** We met at Heathrow Airport and caught our early morning flight to Doha, the capital of Qatar, arriving in the evening to witness a desert sunset, for a night flight to New Delhi, the capital city of India.

**Day 2:** New Delhi lies somewhat south of the old city. Its forms of transportation include famous retro bus taxis and of course green and yellow auto-rickshaws. We soon had our luggage, met Ansar and our driver Dilbar Singh, and boarded a very comfortable coach to which we would develop quite an affection for during the rest of our stay in India. We headed down broad, tree-lined streets as we headed due south towards the state of Rajasthan on the Delhi–Agra National Highway 2, through the state of Uttar Pradesh or UP as it is known here, on a five-hour drive to Bharatpur. Even in the early hours of the morning life here was vibrant, the vehicle hooters were of an eclectic mix and as dawn broke we stopped at some roadside pools at Kofi across the state border into Rajasthan, and they were teeming with wildlife. It was our first taste of Indian birding and many species we watched here were fairly numerous. We saw Cattle, Little, Intermediate and Great Egrets, Great, Indian and Little Cormorants, Oriental Darter, Little Grebe, Grey and Purple Herons, Indian Pond-herons, Painted Stork, (Eastern) Greylag Goose (*rubrirostris*) with pink bills, Northern Shoveler, Garganey, Common Teal, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Gadwall, Egyptian Vulture, Black-eared Kites, Shikra, Western Marsh-harrier, Purple Swamphen, Eurasian Coot, Common Moorhen, White-breasted Waterhen, Black-winged Stilt, Red-wattled Lapwing, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Common Redshank, Ruff, Eurasian Collared-doves, Laughing Doves, White-breasted Kingfisher, Black Drongo, Common and Bank Mynas, Common, Brahminy and Asian Pied Starlings, House and Jungle Crows, Red-vented Bulbul, Bluethroat, Oriental Magpie-robin, Graceful and Plain Prinias, Yellow, Citrine, White and White-browed Wagtails, Wire-tailed Swallow, House Sparrows and genuinely wild Rose-ringed (Ring-necked) Parakeets. But best of all were three stately Sarus Cranes, the largest crane in the world, absolutely dwarfing a Greylag Goose that was seen off after invading their space. It is a red listed vulnerable species whose population has decreased by 33.3% since 1980, its red

patches on its head and neck are actually bare skin and not feathered at all. A breakfast stop was made shortly afterwards and a walk around the restaurant garden that overlooked a surrounding marsh brought yet more new birds: a pair of very smart Masked Wagtails found a leaky pipe, Black-headed Ibis and Woolly-necked Storks both showed well and we observed a Purple Heron catch a massive carp-like fish that it was struggling to keep under control. We pushed on to Bharatpur and eventually left the highway, progressing on much quieter hinterland roads that were bordered either side by Eucalyptus. The journey was brightened up with bursts of crimson Bougainvillea flowing over roadside walls, and new birds seen here included Indian Peafowl, Oriental Honey-buzzard and Rufous Treepie. Rhesus Macaques were present in all shapes and sizes and Mike enjoyed views of a ringtail Pallid Harrier. We were soon arriving at the town and we stopped for some more birding along a canal and were soon watching our target birds, two Greater Painted-snipes standing motionless by some vegetation allowing prolonged 'scope views. There were also numerous shorebirds present including some diminutive Marsh Sandpipers and Temminck's Stints, more Citrine Wagtails were marvelled at, including some pristine adult males, and Geoff found a Black-headed Wagtail. More White-breasted Waterhens were admired as were Brahminy Starlings – translated from Hindu, Brahminy means the ultimate.

We checked into our hotel called Bagh, which when translated means garden, and what a beautiful garden it has. A brief birding session either side of lunch here brought us Greater Coucal, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Hume's Leaf-warbler, Greenish Warbler, Jungle Babbler, Indian Grey Hornbill and the onomatopoeic Asian Koel whose calls are a favourite background noise in many Indian movies and plays. Some gorgeous butterflies allowed us to photograph them including Common and Plain Tigers, Common Crow and Common Mormon (a type of Swallowtail). After a late lunch we boarded the coach once again and visited some rather dry dusty fields that were inhabited by Thorny-nightshade and Acacia bushes and here we viewed Black-shouldered Kite, Steppe Buzzard, Egyptian Vulture, Grey Francolin, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Red Collared-dove, Ashy-crowned Finch-lark, Southern Grey, Bay-backed, Long-tailed and Daurian Shrikes (part of the Isabelline allospecies). White-cheeked Bulbul, Indian Robin, Common Babbler, Paddyfield and Tawny Pipits were also present. Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, formerly known as Yellow-throated Sparrow, have their numbers boosted in winter by migrants from more northerly regions and many adorned the Acacia trees.

Our mid afternoon destination was the Keoladeo Ghana National Park, the official name of the birders' paradise known simply as Bharatpur. We birded around the visitors centre area and Seetharam. This area is wooded with one or two small pools and new birds came in the shape of two roosting Large-tailed Nightjars. These intricately-plumaged night birds were a firm favourite of mine and featured highly in the bird of the trip vote carried out in Qatar on our return. Grey Nightjars were also found as they sat perched on tree limbs allowing close photography. Other avian delights came in the shape of Coppersmith Barbet, Ashy Drongo, White-browed Fantail, Striated Heron, Black-rumped Flameback, Oriental Magpie-robin and Black Redstart of the orange-bellied race *semirufus*. Additional animals recorded were Nilgai (Blue Bull), Indian Monitor Lizard, Three-striped Palm Squirrel and more Rhesus Macaques plus a single Indian Hare going by the alias of Black-naped Hare, which its scientific name of *nigricollis* confirms. We returned to the Bagh Hotel and enjoyed a delicious dinner where I carried out the log and we had a comfortable night. What an auspicious start to the trip!

**Day 3:** We all sat down to an early breakfast and excitedly boarded our vehicle for the short drive to the reserve. Luckily the last monsoon had dropped plenty of rain in this part of Rajasthan so water birds were not going to be a problem this year. The marshlands are flooded by the Ghana Canal each year and the park is in a natural depression. It was once a duck shooting location used by Viceroys and Maharajas who bagged up to 4000 birds a day! It was made into a bird reserve in 1956 and a National Park in 1964. As we travelled by rickshaw up the centre track towards the temple, Ansar recognised one of the drivers from when he was a small boy.

Myriads of waterbirds were present, many of them nesting, emanating a cacophony of sound that reverberated around the area. New birds included Black-crowned Night-heron, Asian Open-bill, Black-necked Stork, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Bar-headed Goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous and

Comb Ducks, Booted, Steppe and Greater Spotted Eagles, Greenshank, Pied and Common Kingfishers, Streak-throated Swallow, formerly known by the more evocative name of Indian Cliff Swallow, Blyth's Reed-warbler and Indian Silverbills. Two Indian Scops-owls were 'scoped as was a Dusky Eagle-owl on its nest. Our rickshaw peddler nonchalantly mumbled Black Bittern as we tootled along causing me to make an immediate stop request. We retreated back to the spot and were soon relishing very good views of the bird until it became camera shy and flew off.

We ate lunch near the temple surrounded by a mixture of wildlife jostling for scraps and Geoff had part of his lunch pilfered by a macaque! On a nearby pool we added Cotton Pygmy-goose to our list. We moved onto the watch point tower overlooking open marshland again huge numbers of aquatic birds were present including Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Common Crane, White-tailed Lapwing, White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Lesser Whistling-duck and Ashy Prinia. We visited the Keoladeo Temple and were greeted by the holy man who implanted all of us with red forehead spots. Another Indian Scops-owl was scoped roosting in palm tree close by. We went for a walk along trail 4 where I found a splendid Rosy Pipit near some cattle, and we strolled through an area of what looked like giant Eyebright Bushes. These were like a magnet to iridescent Purple Sunbirds and yet more butterflies. Other new birds showed in the shape of Olive-backed Pipit, Large Grey Babbler, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher, Brown-headed Barbet, Common Woodshrike, Scarlet and Small Minivets, Pied Stonechat, Grey Bushchat and Eurasian Golden Orioles. There were many other animals and insects seen including a plethora of pythons near some Porcupine burrows, yes, six Indian Rock Pythons! These beasts average in length about four metres and they are red listed as near threatened. Amazingly they have been recorded fasting for up to two years; lets hope they manage to avoid those spines! Another Indian Monitor Lizard, Chital (Spotted Deer), Sambar (Maned Deer), Wild Boar, Flap-shelled Turtle and those delightful butterflies namely Glassy Tiger, and my favourite, Yellow Orange-tip. Our final stop of the day was to scope the pair of Dusky Eagle-owls as we watched the male bird hooting. We once again dined on a scrumptious dinner washed down with a cold beer before doing the log and having a restful night's sleep once again at the Hotel Bagh.

**Day 4:** This morning we were back in the park bright and early. We birded along trail No1, through some Kadum trees and more Acacia bushes, where we had further views of many of the previously-seen species plus some new birds: Crested Serpent-eagle, Common Hawk-cuckoo, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, White-bellied Drongo, Tickell's Thrush and an elusive Brook's Leaf-warbler. We also had some other special wildlife moments with spawning Catfish, ten Golden-backed Jackals and many Skipper Frogs. We ate a cooked lunch at the park headquarters while we photographed yet more butterflies in the garden, the Marigolds were the flowers that they seem to be particularly fond of. Peacock Pansy, Painted Lady, the brilliant (literally) One-spot Grass Yellow and Hawk Moths, each with an especially long proboscis, were all recorded.

After dining we visited an open grassland area of the park called Koladar here yet more new avifauna was watched, namely Yellow-eyed Babbler and the near-endemic Marshall's Iora named after an Englishman, Captain G.F.L. Marshall who also co-wrote, with his brother Charles, *The Butterflies of India, Burma and Ceylon* between 1882 and 1890. They also have a Fig Parrot named in their honour. Ansar and I also flushed a pair of Barred Buttonquails. The insidious mesquite is an invasive plant that has infiltrated the park and becoming a real nuisance being originally native to a relatively small area of southern USA and Northern Mexico, it is now one of the most problematic plants in the world, an eradication programme is underway in Oman but what hope India? We arrived back at the hotel late afternoon and a pair of Oriental White-eyes was a pleasant addition to a growing tour list and these bespectacled little gems performed beautifully right outside our hotel rooms. And another link with Oman as this plucky pioneering white-eye has managed to colonise far flung tropical islands and including, in 1997, Mahawt Island, which is a stones throw away from the mainland of The Sultanate of Oman in the Arabian Sea. After dinner we were treated to a film on Keoladeo National Park that we all enjoyed before retiring to another restful night.

**Day 5:** We had an early start this morning as we headed of to Bund Baretha, a reservoir around 60km from Bharatpur, about 1.5 hours drive on roads bordered by mustard fields. However, a collapsed bridge meant an arduous detour along a bumpy sandy track that was just wide enough to take our bus and when

we met traffic coming the other way we just shut our eyes. All was well though and we stopped at some small pools with lily pads and trumpet-shaped pink *Convolvulus* flowers. We were pleased to find another fine Black Bittern that allowed lengthy scope views and I pished a Clamorous Reed-warbler out of cover plus a pair of Spotted Owlets posed for photography. We were heading due south and stopped at the Circuit House School where we looked at some Indian Grey Hornbills and entered the grounds to view 200+ Indian Fruit Bats or Flying Foxes: surprisingly they do not possess echo location, relying on smell and eye sight, and these bats have a wing span of around 60cm, about two feet across, and feed on nectar as well as mangoes and bananas. Further Oriental White-eyes were observed as was Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher joining the commoner passerines, Greenish Warblers and Red-breasted Flycatchers. It was just a short journey from here and we reached the dam or barrage at Bund Baretha where we scanned across the reservoir River and Whiskered Terns quartered the shoreline, Great Crested Grebe was added to the list as were 100 Red-crested Pochards. We also located 100 Ferruginous Ducks, and Tufted Ducks and Common Pochards were even more numerous.

We took a walk up the north-west arm of the reservoir and found Little Ringed Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Snipe, Rufous-tailed Lark, Ashy Prinia, Tawny Pipit and an adult blonded-naped Eastern Imperial Eagle, along with some truly alluring Yellow Pansy butterflies. We stopped at the bridge over the river on the north-east side and 'scoped a Brown Crake. We also found Dusky Crag-martin and Grey Wagtail and then I picked up an unusual looking wagtail that proved to be an adult male Amur Wagtail, a write-in! We decided to take lunch at the Maharaja Mahal's Palace where we enjoyed a breathtaking panoramic view of the reservoir. After lunch we had a fair walk, about 3km, that produced two White-tailed Lapwings, a cracking male Daurian Shrike and an Indian Bushlark, and an impressive Banyan Tree. The palace itself was ornate with a giant Honey Bee nest suspended from an archway and the building and courtyard was adorned with Brown Rock Chats. The stunning views across the water and the surrounding countryside were admired and new species included four Indian Skimmers and an Osprey, along with further views of the Eastern Imperial Eagle. Our first stop this afternoon was the Banyan Fort Quarry where we watched a small colony of Long-billed Vultures nesting (we would see them again here on the penultimate day of the tour from the train to Delhi). This is a critically endangered, red listed raptor. Two male Blue Rock-thrushes were viewed as was Red-rumped Swallow and a garrulous flock of Common Babblers. We saw a troop of nosy Hanuman Langurs. These beguiling monkeys are named after the Hindu Vanara divinity Hanuman, who is the inquisitive human that possesses the tail of a monkey. We stopped at a nearby Brown-throated Sand Martin colony that had around fifty occupied nests, it was here that we spied our first Plum-headed Parakeets, a truly handsome bird. Our final stop of the day was at Banyan Fields. The terrain here was dusty fields with some small pools and yes even more Acacia bushes. Crested Lark, Siberian and Pied Stonechats were watched and Vicky came up trumps by finding a Desert Wheatear! Today was the highest daily count that we could muster a total of 140 birds – not too shabby. Overnight was spent at the Hotel Bagh, Bharatpur.

**Day 6:** After yesterday's foray we ventured back into the Keoladeo National Park, a sign at the entrance proudly proclaims it as a World Heritage Site. This morning we plumped for trail No 1 and then onto trail No 2. We were birding in the Sapanmori, through a well-wooded area, and tenacious searching was productive as we found an exquisite male Siberian Rubythroat in full breeding plumage and an adult male Taiga Flycatcher; both these red-throats brightened up our daybreak. We were also rewarded with views of both an adult and a streaky-breasted juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle. *Aquila* Eagles were much in evidence this morning as fifteen Steppe Eagles showed off their joker-like leers and one bird snatched a mobbing House Crow earning a round of applause! Six Greater Spotted Eagles showed off their oval nostrils and, although not an *Aquila*, a Crested Serpent-eagle at point blank range with a three foot (90cm) Water Snake in its talons provided us with some lovely snapshots. Yellow-footed Green-pigeons sat unobtrusively at the top of a fig tree and an additional Common Hawk-cuckoo and Ashy Drongo was recorded. We watched a very showy white-eyed Eastern Orphean Warbler and a Brook's Leaf-warbler finally gave itself up to the whole group with a particularly confiding singing bird, at least six Bluethroats including a red-spot with azure-blue throat feathering and a pair of Sarus Cranes dancing, displaying and trumpeting were ornithological high points.

After our final lunch at Keoladeo Temple we took the electric bus to trail No 4 and Koladar stopping en-route for thirty Common Cranes and a pair of lovely turquoise-eyed Indian Cormorants. Soon we were watching three species of lapwing in the same field of view including a Grey-headed Lapwing enabling us to make comparisons. We explored a different area of Koladar, savannah grassland, with dried reeds and water-filled ditches. We fairly quickly found our second Marshall's Iora of the tour and a pair of Red-headed Vultures. They were once known by the more regal name of Indian King Vulture and are red listed as critically endangered as the population has crashed by 50%, a casualty of the NSAID Diclofenac compound used in veterinary medicine that is now known to be highly toxic to vultures. They are magnificent beasts and were soon joined by an adult Indian Spotted Eagle. Other birds on show were ten Egyptian Vultures, six Black Francolins, fifteen Red Collared-doves, five Siberian Stonechats, five Zitting Cisticolas and fifty Red Avadavats, including some fairly vermilion coloured male birds with their flame-red rumps shining in the sun. Ansar and I had a Red-necked Falcon rocket past chasing passerines. We finished the day up at the main temple near the park entrance dedicated to the monkey God Hanuman. We were shown around even inside the inner sanctum where scriptures were read and we were allowed to take photographs. In the grounds wild Nilgai were fed by hand and a Short-nosed Fruit Bat flew over a couple of times. We returned back to the Hotel Bagh for our final nights rest there.

**Day 7:** We had a lovely surprise this morning: a roosting dark-breasted Barn Owl in the hotel gardens, found by the manager who proudly showed it to us before we were on the road to Agra. We arrived at Agra mid-morning in time to carry out some birding along the River Yumuna near the Agra Fort, also called the Red Fort as it is mainly built from red sandstone. It was built by Mughal Emperor Akbar and it is a world heritage site. It was pleasant to sit back relax and marvel at the hustle and bustle of Indian life outside the bus window. We passed through some busy markets with a colourful array of goods for sale sharing the road with Oxen pulling carts, Camels, Donkeys, Goats, Pigs, Dogs, cycles, rickshaws, other buses, trucks and steam rollers all jostling for the same road; it was a veritable cornucopia of Indian life. We trundled along National Highway 11 and en-route there were umpteen cricket matches taking place on almost any patch of bare ground with sticks and bricks as wickets. What a luxury it must seem for those who progress to playing on lawns then the game must feel so much easier. Black-eared Kites hung in the air and were abundant and fearless. We were dropped off on a busy road by the fort where we took photographs and walked along a track through a rubbish dump to the River Yumuna. It was a rather insalubrious spot and exceedingly pungent but good for birds and giving us fine views of the Taj Mahal in the distance. I set up the 'scope and we were soon admiring flocks of stints, mostly Temminck's, with lesser numbers of Little Stints. Caspian and Great Black-headed Gulls with black hoods were studied and we found some very smart River Lapwings, our fifth species of lapwing of the trip! Indian Bushlarks were display-fighting wagtails were abundant with White, Masked, White-browed, Citrine and some very interesting eastern races of Yellow. Several Bank Mynas were seen riding on the backs of Oxen.

We ate lunch at the Riao restaurant with some surreal entertainment outside including a singing, dancing boy (a firm favourite of Dave's) and an Indian style magician. After dining we headed off to one of the wonders of the world and visited the Taj Mahal. It is the mausoleum of Shah Jahan's wife Mumtaz Mahal this perfectly symmetrical marble monument took twenty-two years to complete, 1630–1652. This feat was accomplished by 20,000 builders and labourers. It sits amid landscape gardens on the banks of the River Yamuna over which we scanned and watched Great Black-headed Gulls along with some Kentish Plovers and Ruddy Shelducks but the star of the show was a forlorn River Lapwing on the near shoreline. This splendidly plumaged plover has a bizarre display when it is known to raise its crest as it stoops, spins and stretches its neck in an animated way. A pair of Red-crowned Roofed Turtles shared the banks of the river. We also had a look around the garden as often in this type of environment birds become used to humans and become rather tame. We found several Eurasian Hoopoes happily feeding on the well-watered lawns and Indian Grey Hornbills in the fruit trees, while Black Drongos hunted insects from the fences.

Mid afternoon, we left for the Chambal Safari Lodge in Uttar Pradesh where around the visitors' centre, whilst enjoying a cold drink, we saw Asian Koel and Coppersmith and Brown-headed Barbets. We then walked a short distance and watched a motionless Brown Hawk-owl. Later we watched the same bird

flycatching while we were sitting around the campfire. All too soon dusk fell and once again we were treated to further views of around fifty Indian Fruit Bats and a pair of Spotted Owlets whilst House Geckos defied gravity in their pursuit for food. Armed with torches we went looking for Civet Cats and scored by seeing two super beasts that were fairly arboreal. These mammals are known as Palm Civets and were greatly appreciated by us all.

**Day 8:** An excitement filled the air this morning as we boarded the bus and headed towards the National Chambal Sanctuary and our River Wildlife Cruise, and we still found time for our roosting owl fix and today's was yet another pair of Indian Scops-owls. It was around a three quarters of an hour drive to the turn off down a sandy and often bumpy track to the reserve but we were birding all the way. A family group of elegant-looking Crested Buntings were a lifer for the whole group closely followed by Tree Pipit, Rufous-fronted Prinia and Sulphur-bellied Warbler. We arrived at a vast sandy beach with sporadic clumps of vegetation where a Long-legged Buzzard caught our attention as we birded our way to our boat. It was an extremely good site for larks with Ashy-crowned Finch-lark, Short-toed, Crested and Oriental Larks all being studied as was an Isabelline Wheatear. By our boats were some gravel islets just offshore and on one there were eighty Small (Little) Pratincoles wheeling around showing off their startling chequered wing patterning, and on islet sat a pair of superb Indian Skimmers. The sun shone on their preposterous bills that went from red to orange and then yellow. Indian Skimmers are red listed as vulnerable, mainly due to habitat loss and it is one of only three species of skimmer known to science. Ruddy Shelducks were one again ubiquitous.

We boarded two boats, one with Ansar as leader and the other with myself, and we were soon under way. It wasn't long before we were wildlife watching some very fearsome looking Mugger Crocodiles. This red listed vulnerable reptile was on the look out for any unsuspecting animal that might be tempted to the river to drink. Great Thick-knees were very much in evidence. We were treated to some tremendous views of Red-naped (Black) Ibis with a dozen or so birds on show throughout the morning. These ibis are equally as happy in dry habitat as in wetlands. We saw some huge flocks of Short-toed Larks and our quarry, Indian Sand Larks, were nest building. Black-bellied and River Terns were plentiful and we found some huge flocks of duck including our first Eurasian Wigeon and large numbers of Red-crested Pochards. An Osprey was seen fishing and we visited a Bonelli's Eagles eyrie with one bird flying over us and the other showing off its diagnostic white back-patch. A Variable Wheatear showed well (an aptly named species although our bird was of the nominate race *picata*, also widely known as Eastern Pied Wheatear, although this name is somewhat of a misnomer as the Pied Wheatear has a range that extends equally if not further east!). Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers vied for our attention as did a second male Amur Wagtail and further views were also had of Great Black-headed Gulls with their tri-coloured beaks. This cruise was not just about birds as the other wildlife was equally if not even more interesting and we saw and photographed at least thirty Gharials this finely-snouted pre-historic looking beast is one of the worlds oldest crocodiles on the planet having been around since before the dinosaurs and form part of a world population of under 150 individuals that were brought back from the brink of extinction in the 1970's by a dedicated band of conservationists. It is still however, critically endangered. Another endangered animal here was the Gangetic or Fresh Water Dolphin and a few were seen this morning as were Red-crowned Roofed Turtles with at least twenty of this also critically endangered small turtle showing. Flap-shelled Turtles were also on display. On returning to the beach, we headed back to the Chambal Safari Lodge for lunch and were all sorry to leave. But leave we must and we headed off to Agra stopping again at the Riao Restaurant for coffee. We then pressed on to Mathura Station where we took the train to Sawai Junction. We were still not done with wildlife watching however, as Bandicoot Rats were scampering around the track and were photographed by Dave. Translated from Telugu into English as Pig-rat, the Lesser Bandicoot Rat can grow up to 40cms including the tail and they have been known to attack and devour small children! The final animal of the day was a House Mouse on the train sniffing around some discarded food cartons that made one nameless member of the group squeal. We arrived fairly late at night and transferred to the nearby Tigers Den Resort near Ranthambhore National Park back in the state of Rajasthan.

**Day 9:** Ranthambhore National Park lies in south-east Rajasthan and was declared a sanctuary in 1955. It is almost 400sq km in size and is famous as a Tiger reserve and also for its large resonant Banyan trees. This is an iconic reserve and the park is one of the largest and most famous of northern India and was the former hunting grounds of the Maharajahs of Jaipur with their main quarry being Tigers. The scenery here is extremely aesthetic, comprising of deep ravines, steep cliffs with Acacias and other deciduous tree forests that lie beneath an impressive eleventh century fortress. Our mode of transport during our time in the park would be by large open topped jeeps called canters. Wildlife seemed oblivious to these modes of transport and would allow some extremely close encounters. Today was our first morning in the park and we were allotted to Zone Two. We were enthralled at the dramatic scenery and the impressive fort that overlooks the park. There are also some very rugged rock faces on show. Gum trees were dotted about and large clumps of *Euphorbia* that are known as the Indian Spurge Tree. Rutting Chital added to the ambience and Wild Boar was relatively common. The bird of the morning was undoubtedly a Wallcreeper, which flew over our vehicle, plus a pair of Painted Spurfowl gave good views. Plum-headed Parakeets were numerous here as were Dusky Crag-martins and Little Swifts. Red-rumped Swallow was added to the list and a trio of White-bellied Drongos performed for us. Small Minivet and White-browed Fantail were fairly numerous as were some very grey Great Tits of the race *corsus* and a couple of White-capped Buntings were watched at a drinking pool. We returned to the Tigers Den Resort for lunch and a siesta. In the hotel gardens a pair of Marshall's Ioras was feeding on the nectar of Purple Bindweed and Bougainvillea and we saw these birds three days running. Some small pools just outside the hotel held a fair selection of waders including Marsh Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank. After lunch we drew Zone Four in the park. This is a drier area with a couple of lakes where we saw some pug marks (Tiger tracks). Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker was a new bird for trip and a single Chinkara or Indian Gazelle was a new mammal for the trip. We returned to base in the early evening and watched close to 50 Painted Sandgrouse drinking at the pools just outside the hotel. After showering we went for a delicious meal and a cold beer. We spent overnight at the Tigers Den Resort.

**Day 10:** Once again we opted for an early breakie and it was still dark as we climbed into the canter. We were well wrapped up in blankets as it is decidedly chilly here at this time of the day during February. We were off into the park and we had drawn Zone Three this morning and as dawn broke, we were soon observing mammals: Hanuman Langurs, near-threatened Sambar (Maned Deer), Chital (Spotted Deer) and Ruddy Mongoose. In India, mongoose are often domesticated and kept in and around dwellings for controlling vermin, they emit a high pitched sound that is commonly known as giggling and they are also venerated for their ability to handle venomous snakes. Avian delights were soon apparent and we were watching raptors as these were very much in evidence. We were delighted to once again see Red-headed and Long-billed Vultures although Crested Goshawk was a new bird. We watched only our second Black-tailed Godwit of the tour (we would see hundreds tomorrow). I was feeling somewhat queasy this morning and was looking forward to our siesta, but this was not before we enjoyed some fabulous views of a pair of White-naped Woodpeckers and some more Yellow-footed Green-pigeons and also only our second Grey Wagtail. I dosed myself up and took a nap and entered the afternoons' events with renewed vigour and what an afternoon it turned out to be! We picked Zone Four once again and were soon Tiger hunting. We drove around 30kms into the park when we stopped and I put my bins on the stripes and announced "I've got it" we had two Bengal Tigers in the undergrowth and one of them let out a loud growl and looked at us and yawned with its pink tongue curling up. They got up and padded around at one stage walking towards us, what a moment. No superlatives could capture the moment and it seemed as if the whole tour had culminated here as we watched with baited breath as they disappeared into the undergrowth. This red-listed endangered feline is India's national animal and can grow up to over 3 metres in length; now that's a big cat! We moved onto some nearby drinking holes and did some bird watching where a covey of fifteen Jungle Bushquails were brazen and four White-capped Buntings were viewed as were both Eurasian and Great Thick-knees and our only Common Chiffchaff of the tour. We then back-tracked to where we had seen the tigers over an hour previously and they were still there only this time even closer. Whew! We dragged ourselves away and started towards camp when passing a sheer cliff face another canter had spotted an Indian Leopard perched right on top silhouetting the skyline and we couldn't believe our luck. But amazingly it wasn't over because as we watched the leopard a pair of Brown Fish-owls flew in right in front of us and started displaying by puffing up their white-throats as

they perch at first on a nearby cliff face and then in a close tree and all of this was in the same hour! We had another restful night at the Tigers Den Resort telling newcomers our tiger tales.

**Day 11:** We were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning after yesterday's success and our mode of transport this morning were open-topped smaller jeeps as we headed east 35kms to Surwal Lake. This is a brilliant site that many felt was their favourite morning of the trip. This freshwater lake just teems with birds and is crying out to be made into a reserve as quite frankly it is presently being abused. Some of the highlights included 70 White Pelicans, 25 Eurasian Spoonbills, Greater Flamingo (at last for Jacky), 30 Great Black-headed Gulls juxtaposed with Common Black-headed Gull showing off their enormous size difference, 11 River Terns and thousands of waders including 100+ Pied Avocets. The lake was surrounded by fields some of them mustard and wheat but most of them just dry and dusty. These fields also provided some fine birding with five Stone Curlews or Eurasian Thick-knees of the race *indicus* and regarded by some as a separate species known as Indian Thick-knee. Anser had another Red-necked Falcon and this one caught a Rock Dove but still managed to elude us despite extensive searching. We marvelled at 11 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse which allowed prolonged scope views as did four additional Indian Coursers that were a big hit with Dennis and voted bird of the trip during a vote in Qatar on our return to blighty. Eleven Alexandrine Parakeets were observed being a much wanted and searched for bird throughout the tour. This species has an erroneous entry in Wikipedia which states that it is named after Alexander the Great however its former name of Princess Alexandra's Parakeet suggests otherwise. Desert Wheatears were fairly numerous here and a pair of handsome Rose-coloured Starlings allowed close approach. This morning's piece de résistance however, was another mammal, a fine herd of thirty Blackbuck including a stately hart complete with corkscrew horns. This near-threatened antelope treated us to prolonged views and is endemic to the sub-continent, although it has been introduced elsewhere. We returned to the Tigers Den Resort for lunch and clocked up thirty-five species in the hotel gardens. We went out again this afternoon to Ranthambhore National Park and took it nice and gently making lots of stops in the picturesque Zone Three where a small group of Barred Buttonquail were observed by everybody and a solitary Yellow-bellied Prinia was a write-in. We also watched another Indian Hare our second of the tour and went to look at the Painted Sandgrouse drinking once again outside the hotel. We saw 133 species of birds today and we had our final night at the Tigers Den Resort.

**Day 12:** Our final day and we had a few absentees this morning. We were up before dawn and back into the park for a couple of hours in Zone Four, the Tiger Zone, but it was pretty quiet and a close perched male Shikra was the high point. I wanted us to do some birding on the approach road as it looked good habitat and it immediately paid off as we added three new birds: the scintillatingly-blue Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, a pair of Common Ioras and a flock of five diminutive Grey-breasted Prinias. We drove up to the courtyard below Ranthambhore Fort and climbed up to the top. The views across the park were amazing – Little Swifts flew by at eye level and we looked down at Plum-headed Parakeets in stunning light. The fort was constructed during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and is made out of red karauli stone. Many Hindus also made the climb as they visited the temple at the top that is dedicated to the Elephant God Ganesh. By late morning we were back at base in time for a shower and change ready to leave. The long six hour rail journey back to Delhi was brightened up by Dave who told some very good jokes that had us all laughing and made the journey convivial. Most of the journey was in daylight and lots more birds were watched for the last time from the train that at times moved rather slowly. We visited the Hotel Shanti Delhi for a wash and brush up, before heading to the airport.

**Day 13:** We left the hotel at 01.30 for the international airport for our very early morning flight back to Doha this time we arrived in daylight. We caught an early afternoon Qatar Airways flight back to Heathrow arriving around late afternoon. The cessation of the trip had arrived so we said our goodbyes and made our journeys home, with some happy lasting memories.

**Ray O'Reilly**