

**THE WHIFFINS DO INDIA****15<sup>th</sup> November 2010**<http://www.offexploring.com/parrot-fish/blog/india/agra>

Chambal Safari Lodge turned out to be a pretty swanky place - shame we were only staying for one night really. We had a quick walk round the rather extensive grounds to see what birds were about and this gave me the opportunity to walk into a spider's web - something I haven't done in years. I don't have a fear of spiders but for once, I was happy the owner was out at the time. The web wasn't exactly small and proved pretty resistant to being broken with my face.

The Lodge has it's own wildlife guide so at dusk, he took us out to find the Small Palm Civets that live on site. After a bit of work with a hefty torch, we tracked down two of them in a tree having their dinner. Talking of dinner, ours was due at 7pm so we went for a needed wash & brush up and found we had a couple of squatters in our room - a frog in the shower and a gecko in the air con unit. After an assortment of mostly unidentifiable yet yummy things for dinner, we adjourned with our cups of tea to sit round the fire pit outside until our heads started nodding.

**CHAMBAL****Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2010**<http://www.offexploring.com/parrot-fish/blog/india/chambal-river>

The day started promisingly clear for our boat trip on the Chambal river. The big species to see was the Ganges River Dolphin, another one which probably won't be around for much longer - the Yangtze River Dolphin is already sadly gone for good. We are however, now being blamed by our guide for bringing the rainy weather with us from England. No sooner had we reached the village, than thunder rolled and a flash flood looked imminent. Well, okay so it wasn't quite that bad but it was enough to stop the cars driving down to the riverbank for fear of getting stuck in the mud. So out we got and walked - no bit of damp's gonna stop us, we're British don't you know!

The walk was through hilly scrubland - where Bollywood movie 'Bandit Q' was film apparently - and made for a pleasant stroll. I'm glad I wasn't the one lugging the boat fuel down though. The hills afforded us a view of the wide flood plain on either side of the river, which was dotted with boats being mended and a group of ladies taking a bath - at least I think that was what they were doing. Their sweet singing drifted across to us as we walked and added to the morning's quiet tranquility.

I managed to complete the boat boarding manoeuvre without falling in or indeed, getting wet at all. If you know me well, you'll understand what an impressive feat this was as I seem to have an extremely hydrophilic nature. Apart from one other safari boat, the river was empty but we sincerely hoped it wasn't empty of river dolphins. Happily, there was an abundance of birdlife (including Thick-knees, Black-bellied Terns, Black Ibis and an Eurasian Eagle-owl snoozing in a tree) which the guide was adept at spotting. But the main event was harder to find.

Everyone told us it was pure luck whether we would see it or not and it depended on your eyes simply being on the right patch of water at the right moment. Unlike their marine

cousins, River dolphins are blind and spend very little time on the surface so sighting opportunities are brief at the best of times. We slowly cruised up the river, scanning the water like feverish bargain hunters looking for a half price sale. The jumping fish and sinking crocodiles really didn't help matters but eventually, a glistening grey back crested the surface. With a loud and undignified whoop of joy (I was quite keen), I turned to Mark with a grin spread across my face. Argh, he hadn't seen it so we continued our search with increased vigour as we now knew they were out there. For the next half hour, we played a game of cat and mouse with both the guide and myself getting good views of the dolphins breaching but poor Mark kept, uncharacteristically, missing it. Finally he picked the right patch of water and got a decent view so with smiles all round we moved on to our next target species - the Garial crocodile. Before we spotted this however, our guide called out and there on the bank, slinking through the bushes, was a Jungle Cat. Sightings of this nocturnal mammal are notoriously hard to get so we were very pleased with this bonus catch!

The Garial crocodile has a long thin beak instead of the usual flat snout. It does still have all the sharp, pointy teethies however, and they look particularly sharp and pointy as they poke up at all angles from the tip of it's beak. For the most part, all we saw were beady eyes and nostrils before they sank, ever so slowly, under the surface. When we did spot one basking on a sand bar with jaws agape in typical scary monster pose, it gave me the willies to think there might be one currently under our flimsy craft. Happily I can report, we made it back to land with all limbs accounted for.

Back at the lodge, we grabbed a quick lunch before setting out on the next long drive. This time to Kuchesar, a one night stop-over on the way to Corbett National Park.

## **BIRDING ABROAD PASSAGE TO NORTHERN INDIA**

**November 2010**

**Derek Moore**

<http://www.birdguides.com/webzine/article.asp?a=2433>

The next part of our adventure was a boat trip on the Chambal River. We were to have an overnight stop at the Chambal Safari Lodge. Before darkness fell we found a Brown Hawk Owl roosting, and were pleased to find a number of Indian Fruit Bats in trees above our cabins. We were up early and down to the river to board our boat. En route, a couple of Oriental Honey Buzzards flew across the road. There was eager anticipation as we cast off and almost immediately we had stunning views of Black-bellied Tern, three Small Pratincoles, two Indian Skimmers, Greater Thick-knee and more River Lapwings. Moving further along the river banks we soon had our first views of the wonderful prehistoric Gharials. These amazing thin-snouted crocodiles stunned us by their large size. Marsh Muggers were also present, seemingly ignoring the flocks of Lesser Whistling Ducks. We saw more wildfowl, including Spot-billed Ducks, Comb Ducks as well as the usual Ruddy Shelducks and Bar-headed Geese. Further on an Osprey landed on the beach and a Bonelli's Eagle and a Long-legged Buzzard cruised overhead. Coming to some small islands, we enjoyed great views of River Terns before finding a White-capped Bunting by the shore. We waited a while to see River Dolphins but only achieved frustratingly brief views. Turning back along the other shore, where Little Cormorants were drying their wings, we found a splendid Indian Black Ibis, and had glimpses of a Brown Crake as it played hide-and-seek behind a wrecked boat. On landing we just had

time to spot a Sand Lark on the opposite bank.

This river trip was one of the best I have ever experienced, but alas it was time to head back to Delhi before the second part of our adventure.

### **SPANISH NATURE – INDIA TOUR PART TWO**

**15<sup>th</sup> November – 4<sup>th</sup> December 2010**

**Peter Jones**

<http://spanishnature.blogspot.com/2010/12/india-birding-trip-report-part-2.html>

**Day Seventeen:** I have to admit the Chambal, a river playing host to a rich diversity of life, is a favourite place for me in India. The day was in stark contrast to our long travels of yesterday, starting as it did with a leisurely cruise on the calm waters of the long and wide river. Even before we boarded the boat we saw many birds of interest, Temminck's Stint, Kentish Plover, Sand Lark, Desert and Isabelline Wheatear plus the strange looking Great Stone Curlew. As soon as we set-off on our river journey we spotted both River and Black-bellied Tern with flocks of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse busy coming and going at the water's edge in order to satiate their thirst. Indian Eagle Owl was seen resting in a shady nook on a riverside cliff, whilst Bonelli's Eagle attracted the unwanted attention of mobbing Raven. Bar-headed Goose flocked as Osprey circled above with both Jungle Cat and Jackal seen strolling the shoreline. Soon we spotted some resting Indian Skimmer and yours truly got his 2nd lifer of the tour! We saw so many birds during the morning with another, the Variable Wheatear, making my day. A great day's birding.

**Day Eighteen:** Today was options day and the group had pre-determined to visit Agra and the Taj Mahal. It is such a wonderful site and to come to India, to be so close, and not visit would be such a pity, so off the group went and returned having enjoyed their excursion. In the absence of the group, I wanted to visit one or two birding sites and do a recce for future tours. Along with a friend I ventured out to visit the Sarus Crane conservation area. We took around an hour to reach this wetland with cultivated areas and were soon seeing very large flocks of Red-headed Bunting (photo right) and Black-breasted Weaver, with Bluethroat also being common. Lots of small passerines were observed and the heron family including Purple Heron were in abundance, as of course were Sarus Crane. Visiting a lagoon we found many wildfowl and these included the ornate Cotton Pygmy Goose as well as many Black-headed Ibis feeding in the surrounding rice paddies. Yellow and Citrine Wagtail, Wood Sandpiper, Common and Jack Snipe plus a host of other species made this an area I will definitely visit again, in fact I took the group there late the same afternoon!

### **NORTHERN INDIA BIRDQUEST TOUR REPORT**

**27<sup>th</sup> November – 16<sup>th</sup> December 2010**

**Simon Harrap**

[http://www.birdquest.co.uk/pdfs/report/INDIA\(NORTHERN\)REP10.pdf](http://www.birdquest.co.uk/pdfs/report/INDIA(NORTHERN)REP10.pdf)

We then drove on to Chambal Safari Lodge and, after lunch, teamed up with Dalveer Singh, the excellent in-house bird-guide, to explore the garden and nearby fields. We had excellent views of roosting Indian Scops-, Spotted Little and Brown Hawk-owls, while the fruiting figs held good numbers of Yellow-footed Green-pigeons and Brown-headed Barbets. In nearby field we found Tawny and Olive-backed Pipits, and the area was not without mammal

interest: around 25 noisy 4 Birdquest: Northern India 2010 Indian Flying Foxes were roosting in the trees over our rooms, we saw a magnificent male Bluebull, and, shortly after dark, spotlighted several Asian (or Common) Palm Civets. The next day we drove down to the River Chambal, stopping en route for a flock of Crested Buntings and our first Brahminy Minor and a surprise Grey-headed Starling. In the heavily eroded 'badlands' near the river we saw a variety of dry country species, notably Rufous-fronted Prinia and Indian Silverbill, as well as Common and yellow-eyed Babblers, an elusive Sulphur-bellied Warbler and our first good looks at Indian Black Robin. Once at the river a Great Black-headed Gull few past and we had time to study Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers and a smart male Desert Wheatear. We then boarded our boat for a really lazy morning's trip along the river. One of the first birds that we saw was a real bonus, an Indian Eagle Owl at its nest together with at least one fluffy chick. Other raptors included Long-legged Buzzard, Short-toed and Bonelli's Eagles and a couple of Ospreys, while waterfowl included a pair of smart drake Goosanders and at least 200 Bar-headed Geese. We soon saw our first Indian Black Ibis, and went on to log a total of 13, together with Openbill and Woolly-necked Storks. A variety of waders included half a dozen Great Stone Plovers and several Black-bellied and River Terns patrolled up and down stream. We had to go quite a long way, however, before we found one of our main targets, but when we did it was well worthwhile – a flock of 15 Indian Skimmers loafing, sleeping and periodically taking flight: bizarre and magnificent. There were smaller birds to look at too: Short-toed, Crested, Indian Sand and Oriental Sky Larks and a distant and rather drab female Variable Wheatear. The sanctuary was established to protect crocodiles and we saw good numbers of both Marsh Muggers and the fish-eating Garial, including one large mature male with the large 'clay pot' on the tip of its snout that lends the species its name.

## **INDIA - BIRDS, TIGERS & THE TAJ MAHAL**

**2<sup>ND</sup> - 12<sup>TH</sup> December 2010**

**Christopher Hall**

[newhorizons6266@btinternet.com](mailto:newhorizons6266@btinternet.com))

[http://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=1941](http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=1941)

After lunch, we drive on to the Chambal Safari Lodge, a delightfully tranquil setting after the morning's frenetic haggling and fending off of the persistent hawkers trying to sell trinkets that no one wanted. A relaxing birding session around the lodge begins with a Brown Hawk Owl roosting in a large tree followed by a similarly somnolent Spotted Owlet in another tree nearby. Further sightings include Brown-headed Barbet, Large Grey Babbler, Indian Grey Hornbill, with genuine false eyelashes, Asian Koel, an all black cuckoo with ruby red eyes, and four Black-shouldered Kites on top of the same small bush. As the sun sets big and red, we have a tremendous view of two large black sunspots erupting from the fiery surface, and as soon as darkness falls around 6pm, three arboreal Palm Civets, appear right on time, with cats' eyes gleaming in our torch lights. The Chambal river is hidden by a shroud of mist first thing, but an Osprey sitting on a dead branch close to the shore gradually appears as the mist begins to clear, also revealing Kentish Plover and a very handsome River Lapwing. As the boats glide slowly along the mirror smooth river, Plain Martins pass by low over the water followed by a River Tern, with great views of smart Bar-headed Geese grazing along the river banks. Below higher river cliffs we stop for brilliant views of a Eurasian Eagle Owl, with amber

eyes and a fluffy grey chick, and then a pair of nesting Bonelli's Eagles. Other good sightings include Woolly-necked Stork, Black Ibis, Black-bellied Tern, White-browed Wagtail, Rufous-tailed and Bay-backed Shrikes, a smashing male Desert Wheatear and Great Thick-knee, which looks like a Stone Curlew on steroids! However, this river cruise is not only for the birds, as reptiles basking on the mud banks include a fourteen foot Marsh Crocodile and an enormous sixteen foot Gharial with an exceptionally long thin snout.

## DELHI DAY TRIPS AND CHAMBAL RIVER EXTENSION

4<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> December 2010

Ulrik Andersen

[http://www.travellingbirder.com/tripreports/reports/110116150220\\_birding\\_trip\\_report.pdf](http://www.travellingbirder.com/tripreports/reports/110116150220_birding_trip_report.pdf)

The Chambal River National Sanctuary is certainly a very important locality, holding three endangered species (Indian Skimmer, Gharial and Ganges River Dolphin) in one of the few remaining unpolluted and clear rivers of Northern India.

Half the group (Erling, Morten, Kate and Ulrik) did a three-day extension trip to the Chambal River area from 4th to 6th December. There is only one decent place to stay nearby, the Chambal Safari Lodge, about a five-hour drive from Delhi if you are lucky enough to avoid congestion on the way (our return drive to New Delhi Airport on the 6th took more like seven hours). The Chambal Safari Lodge is a nice and friendly hotel just outside the village of Bah. The lodge is situated in a good grove of trees, a true oasis in a heavily cultivated area. Beware that the lodge is NOT situated near the river; it is about a 40-minute drive to get there.

The food is very good, the staff is friendly, and they even have a good bird guide, Dalweer Singh. Try to get him as your guide here - but be warned that he will usually be allocated to visiting groups from the professional birding companies; e.g., at the time of our visit, he was guiding a Birdingbreaks group. The rooms are good, but very cold in winter since there are no heaters or fireplaces available at all.

To birders, this is almost a must-go area due to the presence of Indian Skimmer from late November to June (they leave the area when the monsoons set in in earnest). To mammal enthusiasts, the main attraction is probably the World's only completely blind cetacean, the Ganges River Dolphin, which can be seen here all year round.

### Our itinerary for 4th to 6th December was as follows:

**4th:** AM drive from Delhi to the lodge; lunch there and afternoon boat trip downstream

**5th:** Morning boat trip upstream, lunch at the lodge, afternoon birding around the lodge

**6th:** Morning excursion by car to an agricultural area (called "Chambal fields" in the lists) frequented by Blackbuck, lunch at the lodge, afternoon/evening drive to New Delhi Airport (from where we flew out at 3 AM on the 7th)

The main attraction here is definitely the boat trips. On our afternoon trip downstream, we managed to get excellent views of Ganges River Dolphins, including views of the peculiar long, almost Gharial-like snout. On our morning trip upstream, we saw eleven much desired Indian Skimmers. On both trips, we saw plenty of Gharials and Muggers (Marsh Crocodiles) and many commoner species of birds, e.g. Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Black-bellied Tern, Pallas's Gull, Indian Horned Owl and Bonelli's Eagle. Mammals spotted along the shore included Sambar and Nilgai.

Birding around the lodge is quite good and we saw (among others) Brown Hawk-Owl, Indian

and Greater Spotted Eagle, Wryneck and Brooks' Leaf-Warbler. Lodge mammals were Nilgai, Common Palm Civet, Golden Jackal, Indian Flying-Fox and Indian Hare.

### **EXPEDITION TO INDIA: GUJARAT, MADHYA PRADESH & ASSAM!**

**December 18, 2010 through January 9, 2011**

[http://cokesmithphototravel.com/Expedition\\_to\\_India\\_2011.html](http://cokesmithphototravel.com/Expedition_to_India_2011.html)

I was in a bit of a hurry however to get to our next destination that afternoon. This part of India this time of year is famous for intense fogs and very poor light. The light at the Taj that morning was flat but not horribly foggy so I was hoping that it would clear for the afternoon when we finally made it to the Chambal River Sanctuary. And it did clear up! Lucky for us that it did as for several days earlier, and for several days after, it did not. We were not scheduled to actually get on the river that afternoon but after the Chambal Safari Lodge manager saw all of our camera gear, and after a little pleading from me, they rearranged our activities and got us a boat to get on the river! Good thing we did as the wildlife and lighting were sublime. My main target species was the Gangetic Dolphin and nailed at least six within the first thirty minutes of the cruise! We also had some great sightings of Gharial and Marsh Crocodiles. There were dozens of bird species added to our lists as well, but none were more impressive than the Indian Skimmers we saw down river. Although we had only one afternoon and one morning at Chambal, we were successful in getting all of our targets and even getting some outstanding desert and river scenery under our belts. This will absolutely be a destination for a future trip and we will plan on spending at least three days there. The Chambal Safari Lodge is outstanding. And they have a resident family of Common Palm Civets who entertain the guests nightly!

### **BIRDING & MAMMALING NORTH-CENTRAL INDIA**

**Uffe Gjøl Sørensen & Hans - Jørgen Bruun Pedersen**

**December 2010 – January 2011**

[http://www.travellingbirder.com/tripreports/reports/110601101356\\_birding\\_trip\\_report.pdf](http://www.travellingbirder.com/tripreports/reports/110601101356_birding_trip_report.pdf)

**Chambal:** The Chambal River is only to be recommended. Access is easy when staying at Chambal Safari Lodge - a nice and relaxed place. The garden and farmland around the lodge is rich in birds and the well organized boat-trips on the undisturbed Chambal River are second to none. Ganges River Dolphin together with Indian Skimmer and Black-bellied Tern are only some of the highlights. In addition to the river-site, we spent one morning with Blackbucks ranging among mustard-fields - an illustration of the future for much of the remaining wildlife in India? There are a number of additional options of places to visit and the lodge has good guides to help find even more.

### **THE FOOTHILLS OF THE HIMALAYAS**

**Les Oiseaux (RSPB Lincoln Local Group)**

**January 2011**

<http://lincolnrspsb.org.uk/newsletters/2011summer.pdf>

An early start proved a vain attempt to beat the traffic jams ahead of a seven hour ride to Chambal Safari Lodge with a brief stop in Agra to view the Taj Mahal across the river. An introductory walk in the grounds yielded three owl species, brown hawk, Indian scops, and

spotted owlet, whilst the surrounding fields held good numbers of yellow-wattled lapwing, various wagtails, and a jungle cat. That evening we were shown a civet cat on the kitchen roof being tempted by scraps of food. Next day en route for our river safari we stopped at one of the many brick factories to find a variable wheatear whilst across the road, feeding in bushes, was a small flock of crested buntings, including five smart males. The mile or so of moonscape scenery near the Chambal River gave us our third lifer of the morning, jungle prinia. The dry river bed held some smart male desert wheatears. During the boat trip, Dalveer, the resident guide spotted a brown crane on the bank but it dived for cover between two rocks. Some gentle persuasion was used and it then showed quite well. Unfortunately the target birds, Indian skimmers, were absent but we had good views of black ibis, mangrove muggers (crows) and the endemic (and weird) gharial. The day's total bird list was 110. Dalveer intercepted us on the way to breakfast the next day to say he had a message that an Indian skimmer was 30 minutes away. Breakfast postponed, we set off at a rush, noting the variable wheatear and crested buntings en route again and arrived at the boat boarding point to see a solitary skimmer on an eyot or islet 50 yards from shore.

## **TIGERS & BIRDS OF BANDHAVGARH BIRDQUEST TOUR REPORT**

**17<sup>th</sup> February 2011**

**Hannu Jännes**

[http://www.birdquest-tours.com/pdfs/report/INDIA\(TIGERS\)REP11.pdf](http://www.birdquest-tours.com/pdfs/report/INDIA(TIGERS)REP11.pdf)

After our busy day in the hustle and bustle of Agra, it was time to head back to the dusty, colourful Indian countryside, and the charming Chambal Safari Lodge for a two nights stay. After a sumptuous dinner a Striped Hyena visited the lodge grounds and some of us managed to get decent views of this rarely seen nocturnal creature.

When we headed for the Chambal river early next morning the sky was again covered with dark clouds promising rain, and they were not going to disappoint! Soon after we had left the bus and secured some new dry country birds including Common Babbler, White-eared Bulbul and Rufous-fronted Prinia, the first of the day's many rain showers arrived. Despite the unpromising weather we boarded our two boats and headed out to look for the enigmatic Indian Skimmer, our main target of the day. This year the skimmers favoured an area 16 kilometres downstream, which meant a long two and half hour boat ride, punctuated by heavy rain showers. Luckily the rain stopped for good before we reached the island where the skimmers were, and we had great opportunities to admire the flock, both in flight and on the ground. Other birds enjoyed during our cruise included a nice group of Painted Stork on a sand bar, many Bar-headed Geese and Ruddy Shelducks, the only Comb Ducks of the trip, noisy flocks of Lesser Whistling Ducks, a few Common Mergansers, Short-toed Eagle, two Long-legged Buzzards, three Bonelli's Eagles, Ospreys, a Brown Crane trying to hide from us behind 4 Birdquest: Tigers & Birds of Bandhavgarh 2011 some large stones, many Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, a few Great Black-headed Gulls, a big flock of beautiful Small Pratincoles, which had recently returned to breed, many prehistoric looking Great Thick-knees, a few Sand Larks on the river bank, a couple of River Terns and a total of 15 of the scarce, and declining Black-bellied Terns, with some excellent views. In addition to these avian delights, we had better than average views of six Ganges River Dolphins, seven or so Gharials (long and narrow snouted fish-eating crocodile), including some cute baby Gharials, several Muger

Crocodiles, with their nasty grins, and Soft-shelled and Indian Tent Turtles. On the way back to our lodge we also stopped for a Brown Rock Chat, a species endemic to India which somehow had managed to escape us until now. In the afternoon, after a very late lunch, we had a walk around the lodge grounds, which produced a cute Northern Boobook and a sleepy Indian Scops Owl, plus the usual selection of the North Indian countryside birds. In the evening we had the opportunity to see three cute Common Palm Civets that were fed behind the kitchen by the lodge staff.

## **NATIONAL CHAMBAL SANCTUARY WITH WILD IMAGES**

**18<sup>th</sup> February 2011**

**Mike Watson**

<http://mikewatsonsdairy.blogspot.com/2011/02/national-chambal-sanctuary-uttar.html>

An early morning roadside stop en route to the Chambal River resulted in a dozen Crested Buntings, winter visitors to the plains, feeding amongst neatly stacked buffalo pats around some small dwellings. At the river itself, a gathering of over 300 ultra-cute Small Pratincoles graced the banks along with several Temminck's Stints. In our remarkably stable craft (easily steady enough to use a tripod) we cruised slowly upriver, past flotillas of Bar-headed Geese and Ruddy Shelducks. Another Indian Eagle Owl sat in the shade of one of the sandy bluffs but well out of DSLR range this time and a Long-legged Buzzard obliged with a close fly-past. A rich variety of wildlife can still be found on the Chambal, including pretty much all of the characteristic species of the large slow-flowing rivers of the Gangetic drainage system that were once found all over northern India. It is like stepping back in time and other relics included both Black-necked and Woolly-necked Storks, Indian Black Ibis, Comb Duck and Black-bellied Tern. Raptors were represented by a minimum of three pairs of Bonelli's Eagles and a fishing Osprey. A pair of Jungle Cats bounded away upslope as we passed by and several Golden Jackals were also prowling the riverbank.

Isolated rocky islets in midstream offered sanctuary to slumbering groups of crocodiles, evil-looking Marsh Muggers and the bizarre Gharial. This was one of the creatures that I most wanted to photograph on this trip and we were afforded repeated good opportunities, enough even to be able think about composing our shots.

The islets had also attracted some massive river turtles as well as peculiar Great Thick-knees and smart River Terns. Eventually we found the last piece in the jigsaw, Indian Skimmer, far upstream and fortunately it stayed put long enough for us to approach it more closely and appreciate the detail of its strange undershot bill.

A 960km long tributary of the filthy River Yamuna, the Chambal River has escaped development and its inevitable pollution owing to the river being considered unholy! It is said to have been cursed by a princess as well as carried the blood of thousands of sacrificed cows, ironically saving it from the even worse fate that has befallen the other rivers around it. The National Chambal Sanctuary was declared in 1978 mostly to protect the critically endangered Gharial, the bizarre long-snouted fish-eating crocodile. Named after the Nepalese word ghara meaning earthenware pot, referring to the enlarged growth on the end of the snout of mature males, which can grow to six metres long and one tonne in weight (second only to the monstrous Saltwater Crocodile). We saw one beast with a large pot but unfortunately it evaded the camera. There are less than 400 breeding pairs left in its



remaining range, a mere 2% of its former distribution, which used to include Pakistan, Burma and the Brahmaputra. A truly magnificent animal!

Our return was delayed by another vehicle breakdown but in typically resourceful style a couple of rickety old jeeps soon materialized to ferry us back to our lodge. After yet another delightful meal a quick tour of the leafy grounds located a couple of much appreciated slumbering nightbirds – Indian Scops and Brown Hawk Owls before we were on our way again.

## INDIA

### February / March 2011

**Trip Type:** Specialist Photo trip, 1 week bespoke itinerary on my own plus 1 week organized specialist photo trip (the second week was organized by Photographers on Safari and the whole itinerary was arranged by Wildlife Trails using their Indian agent Perfect Travels).

**Outline Itinerary:** Bharatpur NP (2 nights), Chambal River (3 nights), Delhi (1 night), Kaziranga NP (5 nights), Delhi (1 night) – 13 nights total with travel from the UK

**Equipment:** Nikon D200/MD-200, D300/MD-10, Nikkors 70-200/2.8, 200-400/4, 17-55/2.8, TC-14E, Wimberley WH-200, Gitzo GT3540XLS, SB-800 (+ homemade bracket), SD-8a, + laptop, readers, duplicate ext. hard drives, etc.

<http://www.wildphotons.co.uk/pages/trip-reports/india-2011-trip-report.php>

When I arrived at Chambal River it was very much like I had imagined. The water level was low (that became more evident a couple of days later) and the boats, small 10-12ft shallow drafts with an outboard, were at the water's edge several hundred meters across the dried river bed.

After the usual faffing around by the guide and boatman for no apparent good reason I was eventually in one of the boats, just me, the guide and the boatman, and heading up river. We soon got a fleeting glimpse of a river dolphin, a local speciality, a few hundred feet away which the guide got terribly excited about. However, I had decided pre-trip not to go chasing pictures of these elusive creatures and waste valuable time in the process. My focus was solely of finding gharial and I had made this clear to the guide back at the hotel, in the car and whilst getting in the boat. Despite my direction he took every opportunity to point out every tiny little bird, we also stopped to look at several Bengal Eagle Owls roosting on the tall muddy cliffs. They were lovely to see but much too far off for a decent picture. And they were not gharial. I took a few snaps out of politeness and we moved on. At this point the guide was telling me that only that morning (that old chestnut!) he had seen around 70 large gharial basking. My hopes were raised a little but I would remain sceptical until I saw them for myself. Sure enough, eventually we did see one, about 3 or 4 foot long (quite small, these animals can grow to 20+ feet!), which slipped into the water after just a few shots. I was a little disheartened but at least they were there, the guide too reassured me that they were there and that we were not seeing them due to the overcast conditions. "They only come out when it is really bright", I think it was probably more to do with temperature than light levels but I smiled and nodded.

The main basking areas used by the gharial were rocky outcrops in the middle of the river that would be soon engulfed as the water level rise in the wet season. The main river course was still very wide even at this time of year, perhaps 50-100m in places, but was only 6 to 10

ft deep for the most part. But despite the crystal clear waters, the river bed was not visible due to the thick vegetation which could have easily hidden 1000s of huge reptiles. The outcrops were only a few hundred metres up stream of our launch site, and so reaching them was very easy, if a little time consuming, but here was nothing much around. As we headed back, a pair of Bonelli's eagles which we had seen up on the cliffs on the way out were drinking at the water's edge that produced some nice pictures. There was also an osprey overhead, but too distant for a decent image. These and a few other sightings kept things interesting if not particularly productive. The next morning I needed a clear sky and some warmth to the air.

The next morning we set off quite late, I would guess around 7am, and by 7:30 we were at the river. To get to the river we took a right turn in a nearby village, off the 'main' road, and about 1-2 miles down this road we entered a zone of sand dunes and mini canyons cut into the hardened sand. I say mini, they were about 30 - 40 feet deep, maybe more, and created specific habitat that separated river from land. This was the main track to the river crossing used by the locals their animals. The tarmac then ended and a temporary track ran the last few hundred metres to where I got in the boat.

At the boats there was again absolutely no urgency to get going but, now knowing how close the basking area was and the fact that the warmer (later) it got the more chance we would have of seeing gharial, I was reasonably chilled about everything. I kept myself busy trying to photograph some of the many small birds busying themselves at the waterline. The sun was climbing from behind the crossing point and burning a beautiful diffuse golden light through the early morning mist. I sat on the bank watching it, thinking what a wonderful sight (i.e., picture!) it would have made earlier when the locals we had passed on the access track would have been crossing the dry river bed in the mist with their camels carrying loads of vegetation of some description. No sooner had this thought saddened me for what I might have missed when a couple of fully laden camels and their masters started to head down the far bank towards the crossing point. My mood quickly changed and I set to getting my camera ready should they start to cross. I couldn't be THAT lucky, surely? But I was, they started to cross, and I was ready. Many frames later (one of which subsequently won the Warehouse Express May photo competition, my first every competition, see here) we got into the boats and headed up river.

The sky was a little overcast but it was bright and warm, it was certainly enough to bring a few gharial out for me to get some nice shots and to judge Chambal as a success. I also spent time at a colony of small birds in the middle of the river some way further upstream. Apparently 'twitches' come from all over the world to see these birds (pratincole), they were certainly very photogenic.

That afternoon I headed into the farmland away from the river, a reasonably long drive not helped by the 30 minute wait at a level crossing for 3 trains to go through! The afternoon was spent cruising the roads and lanes looking for sightings of cranes off in the crop fields. When we spotted one (actually they were usually in pairs) we would pull over and I would head off on my own to try to get close enough for a picture. The birds were a little wary but with care they could generally be approached to within range of a 400mm. At the time the opportunities didn't seem that good but I ended up with some respectable pictures, nothing amazing, but certainly better than anything I could have hoped for of Sarus Cranes at

Bharatpur. All in quite an enjoyable and productive day.

The next morning I set off well before sunrise as I had decided that we would head the other way on the river and look for the Indian skimmers, another local Chambal speciality that I was hoping to capture. Due to the low water level the boat could not get past the crossing point with the guide and me in it, so the boat met us on the other side and we walked the couple of kms across the soft sand to meet it. It was actually really nice to have the walk.

We set off down stream and it was immediately clear from our less sedate pace to the previous day that this would be a longer journey. We saw a few things en-route, the highlight of which was a jungle cat on the bank. How the guide spotted it I don't know but it seemed unfazed as we tried to drift in closer to the shore over the dense water weed. It was clearly still looking for breakfast and we tracked with it along the bank for 30-40 minutes. Luckily we were all heading the same way and it produced quite an amazing experience. At the skimmer nesting site there were about 60-70 birds, they had not nested at this point and were at the early stages and courting and pairing up. Again I got some nice shots and what turned out to be some of my favorite pictures of the whole trip of black winged stilts. A very good morning topped off with a few gharial and mugger crocs on the way back.

After lunch we headed back into the countryside, this time in the opposite direction to the cranes, to look for blackbuck antelope. It was similar to the blackbuck spotting I did at Ranthambore in 2009(only the crops were greener and much higher this time) and the sarus cranes of the previous day. We soon got our first, and as it turned out only sighting, and I got a handful of reasonable shots. Certainly better than I had achieved at Ranthambore. The light was changing, the cloud cover thickened and so I decided to head back. I had hoped for some lovely golden evening light but today it was not to be. On the way back we were driving down a country lane when the driver suddenly stopped, as we started to reverse the guide said that there was a jungle cat! Jungle cat? We were driving through wheat fields and the like; I could barely imagine anything less 'jungle'. But, sure enough just back from the road on a foot path cutting into a field of wheat was a jungle cat having a late afternoon pre-hunt rest. I got a few frames from the vehicle before trying a closer approach on foot. However, no sooner had I got out of our vehicle than a local bus pulled up right at the end of the path the cat was on, the locals were oblivious to the cat and were jumping out of the bus making lots of noise only a few feet away. It might have tolerated me on foot but this was too much and the cat slipped away into the dense crops and with it my pictures.

That night I had a dilemma. When booking this leg of the trip I had kept my options open for the last morning at Chambal such that I could, if the gharial, skimmer, crane or blackbuck had been unsuccessful so far, have one last attempt at any one of them. In reality I had got reasonable pictures of each of them so which should I go back to? I quickly ruled out the cranes or blackbuck, both may be photographically productive (especially the cranes which were amazing to see at 5-6ft tall and would be amazing if there was a morning mist) but the river was a much nicer experience than the farmland. So, gharial or skimmers? The skimmer pictures that I had were less successful than those of the gharial, and if the morning was overcast the gharial would not come out to bask, so I went for the skimmers. Big mistake!

The morning started well enough with a sighting of a striped hyena whilst waiting for the boat to join us, my first ever but the light was too low for a picture, but was otherwise very unproductive and I got little worth keeping. What made it worse was the fact that it was the

warmest morning so far and so the gharial were probably out in force but in the opposite direction. But, you make your choices and take your chance.....Overall the Chambal leg of my trip had been a big hit and I was on a high for Kaziranga, feeling that the whole trip had already been a success regardless of what Assam had in store. And Chambal had one last treat on the way back in the boat. Another Jungle cat! On the same bank of the river as the first one, but too far further down stream the guide thought to be the same one. This one I watched stalk, crouch and pounce, all 4 paws in the air. It missed the mouse or whatever it was after but a lovely sight none-the-less and a great end to my first week

## **NORTHERN INDIA & THE HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS**

**4<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2011**

**PARTICIPANTS:** Eric Greisen, Jim Johnson, Tim Leahy, Cyndie Loeper, Helen Patton, Nolan Pope, Janet Schumacher & Mary Seppanen. **LEADERS** - Lokesh Kumar & Jan Hansen  
<http://www.otusasiotours.com/pasttrips.shtml>

### **8<sup>th</sup> March - Bharatpur and Drive to Chambal**

After leaving the Taj Mahal we drove through the zany streets of Agra and then two hours east to the Chambal Safari Lodge. There we concluded another long day with drinks by a roaring bonfire and two new mammals: Common Palm Civet and Indian Flying Fox.

### **9<sup>th</sup> March - On the Chambal River and Drive to Delhi**

Leaving the hotel at dawn, we drove 15 km to the banks of the Chambal River. A brief stop along the way produced our only Baya Weaver and Variable Wheatear. At the river, we discovered the levels were quite low and instead of boarding our boats, we had to walk about 2 km through soft sand to a point where the water was deeper. The birding was productive and we added River Lapwing, River Tern, Black-bellied Tern and Sand Lark. Once on the river we were struck by the lack of habitation and people in general along its banks. In fact, there are no large settlements, farms, temples or factories anywhere along the Chambal's 900 km course. According to an ancient myth, the river is said to have originated from the blood of cows sacrificed by an Aryan king. The king and everything associated with him, including the Chambal River, were cursed and are considered unholy. In a strange twist of fate, the mythical curse on the Chambal has saved it from human degradation and it is one of India's cleanest rivers. On the other hand, India's sacred river, the Ganges, attracts hordes of Indian pilgrims to its banks and is terribly polluted as a result. I guess if you're a river in India, it's better to be profane than holy. Wildlife abounds along and in the Chambal and during our three-hour trip we saw endangered Indian Skimmers, a very rare Asian Openbill and many Comb and Lesser Whistling-Ducks. Our biggest surprise though were a couple of extremely rare Ganges River Dolphins which, due to the pollution, are no longer seen on the Ganges. Back at the hotel we partook of another curried feast and then spent 8 hours driving back to Delhi, arriving at our hotel around midnight.

## **CHAMBAL**

**Puneetinder Kaur Sidhu**

<http://www.cuttingloose.in/chambal-safari>

The very name invokes visions of an untamed land — raw and powerful. A land that has harboured, over the years, innumerable mavericks — from blue-blooded kings to dreaded

dacoits. A land that never in our wildest dreams could have been envisaged as a recreation destination.

A visit to the region about a decade ago brought about a quick volte face as I embarked upon a truly unique adventure, one that gave me the opportunity to explore the natural, cultural and historical heritage of the Chambal valley. And get me addicted enough to make it an annual pilgrimage. The Chambal Safari, a wildlife safari that acquaints you with freshwater dolphins and crocodiles and a favourite with the birding circuit, was a bold initiative to popularise the hitherto neglected Chambal river and its surrounding ravines and terrain.

It is promoted by the Chambal Conservation Foundation through its chief patron Kanwar Ram Pratap Singh, who moved back to his ancestral farm at Jarar, a short distance from Agra, after opting out of a career in engineering. Soon after, he started developing an eco-tourism infrastructure in the National Chambal Sanctuary in the form of the Chambal Safari. He is joined in this venture by his environmental scientist wife, Anu Dhillon.

The one-day safari began at the Mela Kothi, with a hearty breakfast to sustain us for the four-hour-long boat cruise on the perennial Chambal river, that meanders through the sanctuary — a veritable haven for ghariyals, crocodiles, turtles and gangetic dolphins. As we leisurely chugged along, I was more than pleasantly surprised to turn a bend in the river and come upon a little island infested entirely by sun-basking, motionless ghariyals.

A lone crocodile lazily eyed our boat (mercifully, it was way past his breakfast hour!) before turning its attention to a couple of adventurous turtles. The shutterbugs amongst us got down to business while the remaining few tried to mirror the stillness around us, for fear of being noticed by the toothy predators. A bird watchers' paradise, the banks of the Chambal are an ideal habitat for numerous migratory and resident birds. The most easily sighted (pointed out for my benefit) were the Indian Skimmer, Brahmani Duck, Spoonbill, Flamingo, Pelican and many others. We were also informed by the trained naturalist accompanying us that Sambhar, Nilgai, Black Buck, Chinkara and Hyena are found here. On our return to terra firma, we were greeted by the sight of a parachute tent, under which had been laid out a buffet lunch of the local cuisine — daal bhaati churma and haath ki roti. After a leisurely meal, we began the historical leg of the safari — a one hour guided tour atop an excruciatingly slow camel (well I chose it over the jeep-ride, for fear of being labelled faint-hearted) to the imposing Ater Fort, located a kilometre away in MP.

The Ater Fort is situated on the periphery of the National Chambal Sanctuary and is accessed by traversing a pontoon bridge. As we passed through the small villages on our way to the fort, we caught an interesting glimpse into an ancient world. It also offered us another opportunity to discover the cultural diversity of the region. This fort was once a strategic stronghold that lay at the forefront of numerous battles between the Rajputs, Mughals and Marathas. The crumbling edifice now stands a lonely sentinel over the Chambal Valley and brings alive the romantic glory of a bygone era. The bone-creaking ride back to the lodge — this time by 4W drive — was a rather tame one. I continued to mull over the events of the day as I relaxed in a cottage named Thick Knee — one of the oft-spotted birds in the region — reliving my experience in this ancient land full of ravines, wildlife, legends and folklore. Another quick excursion from the Lodge is Bateshwar — the crescent-shaped temple town on the banks of the Yamuna. Home to over a hundred temples dedicated to Shiva, the pristine white structures make a dazzling contrast against the blue sky and the muddy hills.

An annual fair is staged in this sleepy town each November and I was fortunate to catch it on one of my visits there, one winter. Unimaginable sights, sounds, smells and colours galore comprise this ill-advertised event. Sadhus gather in tented accommodation, as well as return to labyrinthine caves set deep in the soft acacia-rich hills.