

**CHAMBAL- Its rustic, its raw, its untamed...go for it!****19<sup>th</sup> November, 2015****Manjulika Pramod**<http://www.manjulikapramod.com/2015/11/19/chambal-ravines-and-the-charms-of-nature/>

Hey, what do you know about Chambal? When a fellow travel writer posed this question to me... I went blank for a moment. Charmanwati river, Phoolan devi, legendary bandit tales, mud moulds and the violent ravines... uuuummhhh...that's it!

I sounded nervous because that was all I knew about or had heard about Chambal. Thankfully, the conversation happened when we were on the way to this land of unique habitat. The ignorant me was about to see a different side of Chambal, the one that is not only about bandits or the cursed river but is home to Gharials, Gangetic Dolphins, Indian Skimmers and 290 species of resident and migratory birds. 80 kilometers from Agra, this piece of land which is located at the confluence of three states- Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh is a place to be close to nature. With a vibrant diversity and a unique eco-system, it has lots to tap our interest.

The drive from Agra was not a very long one, may be because I dozed off. It was turbulent at times. Blame the roads or the rough patches in between. When the bus stopped, we were in one of the most green parts, the famous Chambal Safari Lodge. I thought Chambal would be all about arid and ravine lands but this sprung as a surprise. In the first look, it promised gracious and green hospitality to me and it did lived up to it. Let me take you around this beautiful, quiet, rural and idyllic place. You can just come and laze around here because 200 species of birds are seen in this lodge itself. Yes, just be careful to chose the right season to be here if you love bird-watching.

Since we only had a day here, it was important to make the most of it. If I had more time up my sleeves, I would have loved to walk around the lodge but for now, we had to do too many things in one day. I kept the nearby walk-around for the next morning. We freshened up in our rooms, had a home-made lunch and headed to the river. Our bus was soon on the road. It was a mix of pucca and kaccha road and more of the ravines later. At around 1.5 kilometers before the river, we de-boarded the bus and walked to the river.

Making our way through the path next to the fields reminded of my visit to my grandfather's village. In fact a few villagers did stop to look at us curiously. We were a trail of 15 walking with cameras, accessories etc. The first person I met was this boy with the camel who looked keen to get clicked.

The path through the fields soon took us to the river. The after-effects of the rain could be seen in the soil. And somewhere it also hinted the making of the ravines. Soon, when the Chambal river was in view, the myths and the legends associated with it began to afloat in my mind. Hope you know them?

If you have read the scriptures, I am sure you would have come across the Chambal river. Well, let me talk about the famous two stories. First, After the dice game and its events, Draupadi cursed everyone who would drink from the river or use it for anything. And later, king, Rantideva, sacrificed cows on the banks and made it infamous for ever. It was certified unholy and named Charmanyavati which means originating from the blood of thousands of cows.

There are no temples here and no civilization on the banks. Now, the infamy has become a blessing because its the cleanest. The humans have kept away, thus everything is untamed around and marine life has thrived. It is a large breeding center for Ghariyals.

Soon we all climbed on our boats excitedly. We were promised some sights of ghariyals and lots of birds. And we were not disappointed. After floating for some distance, we went further towards the zone that would give us a sight of ghariyals. The outboard motor of the boat was switched off. We remained silent and we did spot a large ghariyal on the bank and saw some baby ones too. I didn't get a picture. Damn, my camera lenses. My friend Swati did succeed in getting a good click of the bird and the gharyial. Read her post here.

Chambal river marks the boundary between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. As we were boating and enjoying the ride over the river, I am sure we touched M.P. state because I received an SMS on my cellphone "Welcome to Madhya Pradesh."

When the sun showed indications of sunset, we decided to return as we had to go to Bateshwar temple too. During the boat ride, I learnt quite much about National Chambal Sanctuary from the guide. The NCS is a 400 km stretch of the river Chambal. The sanctuary starts at Kota barrage in Rajasthan. Apart from that we also learnt that Pelicans, spoonbills, cormorants, storks, geese, sandgrouse, flamingos and many birds visit it in the coming season. I am sure it would be one awesome sight to spot them all. If you love spotting birds, be here at Chambal between December 4-6 at the country's first Bird Festival. You will meet the birds as well as international wildlife experts, photographers, eminent bird watchers too. This region of Uttar Pradesh has very rich bio-diversity and makes for the choice of the event. To spent a night in the lodge was another unique experience. At one point it was scary too. The silence and the sounds were interesting. Before we were headed further to Etawah and then Lucknow, I did not miss exploring the beauty of the lodge in the morning.

## **NORTHERN INDIA**

**30<sup>th</sup> November to 1<sup>st</sup> December 2015**

**David Hoddinott**

<http://www.rockjumperbirding.com/wp-content/media/Trip-Report-Northern-India-Dec-2015.pdf>

After lunch we visited the vast Agra Fort and then made our way to the Chambal River where we overnighted. The following morning we enjoyed a super boat trip on the Chambal River and found good numbers of Bar-headed Geese, splendid Red-naped Ibis, a confiding Indian Spotted Eagle, pair of Bonelli's Eagle, superb Eurasian Sparrowhawk, an unexpected Demoiselle Crane, several Great Stone-curler, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and Black Francolin, Black-breasted Weaver and Chestnut Munia nearby.

## **NORTHERN INDIA: TIGERS, BIRDS AND THE HIMALAYAS**

**January 2016**

**Andy Walker**

<http://birdingecotours.com/trip-reports/india>

After this birding session we started our journey to the delightful Chambal Safari Lodge, calling in to visit the very impressive Fatehpur Sikri World Heritage Site, one of the best preserved collections of Mughal architecture in India. After our time here we continued our journey, arriving near dusk at our accommodation. We enjoyed a very nice meal and had a walk around the grounds at night, finding **Brown Hawk-Owl**, **Indian Scops Owl**, common palm civet, Indian flying fox, and Indian long-eared hedgehog.

**Day 7<sup>th</sup>: 9th January 2016. Chambal River and Safari Lodge to Delhi via Taj Mahal**

We took an early morning drive to the Chambal River. A brief stop in some scrub near the river produced the secretive **Sirkeer Malkoha**, **Crested Honey Buzzard**, **Plum-headed Parakeet**, **Grey-breasted Prinia**, **Common** and **Yellow-eyed Babblers**, **Baya Weaver**, and **White-capped Bunting**. Once on the water we had great looks at the stunning **River Lapwing**, which was numerous along the river banks, and we found a small group of **Great Stone-curlews**. Both **River** and **Black-bellied Terns** were present in small numbers, and a **Pallas's Gull** put in an appearance. A large flock of **Bar-headed Geese** was a spectacular sight as they flew in. While on the river we also saw three turtle species and two species of crocodile: mugger and the critically endangered gharial.

After our trip out to the river a spot of birding in the lodge grounds produced day-roosting **Brown Hawk-Owl** and **Spotted Owlet**, **Eurasian Hoopoe**, **Indian Grey Hornbill**, and **Brown-headed Barbet**, among a number of common birds. We had a long drive and a stop at the Taj Mahal World Heritage Site ahead of us, so after a wonderful lunch we pressed on, arriving at the Taj Mahal in the early afternoon.

## **NORTHERN INDIA**

**Lars Petersson**

<http://www.larsfoto.se/en/gallery/bird-images-from-foreign-trips/northern-india?res=800>

A tour along some of Indian most famous birding sites (Corbett, Ranthambore, Chambal River Bharatpur). Organized by ourselves.

The first 6 photos shows some of the most desired birds by me and my travel companion. Thereafter the images are uploaded chronologically.

## **NORTHERN INDIA BIRDS & TIGERS**

**8<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

**Tour Leader: Rich Lindie**

<http://www.rockjumperbirding.com/wp-content/media/Trip-Report-Northern-India-I-2016.pdf>

**13<sup>th</sup> February:** The mode of transport for our fifth morning was, without a doubt, the smoothest of the entire trip. Cruising slowly down the Chambal River, we forgot, for a few hours, about the bumpy and busy roads to which we'd become so accustomed. There, over the course of just a couple of hours, we were also very lucky to start the day with sightings of Ganges River Dolphin, the very elegant Indian Skimmer, the apparently very popular Black-bellied Tern, Gharial, River Lapwing and a handful of impressive Egyptian Vultures. A great way to start the morning indeed. Then it was back to the crazy roads around Agra and the much anticipated Taj Mahal. Escorted through the masses of foreign and local visitors, we skilfully but leisurely made our way around and through the Taj Mahal in great time, selfies and booties

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included. A brief visit to a nearby marble inlay factory and we soon were back en route to Bharatpur for the third time on the tour, this time to stay.

## **FIVE CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE CROCODILIAN KIND**

**February 29, 2016**

**Matt Miller**

<http://blog.nature.org/science/2016/02/29/five-close-encounters-of-the-crocodilian-kind/>

### **Ghariahs of Chambal - Wildlife Spotting Near the Taj Mahal**

While only a couple of hours from one of the world's greatest and best-known tourist attractions, the Taj Mahal, Chambal Sanctuary only attracts a small number of hard-core naturalists each year.

The area is home to many wildlife specialties, including two crocodilians that can be seen on most trips. The mugger crocodile is an impressive beast, but for me the real draw is the gharial. This crocodile poses no risk to humans: it has a fantastically weird snout, thin and toothy for catching fish. To my mind, it's one of the coolest looking reptiles around. You can watch them after a morning of hiking (or riding camels) to ancient forts and visiting some of the most fascinating temples in the world.

#### **Bonus Creatures:**

Chambal is the best place to see some Indian bird specialties including the Indian skimmer. You also have a decent chance of spotting freshwater dolphins as well as nilgai, sambar deer, golden jackal and other interesting mammals.

## **CHAMBAL RIVER – ECOSYSTEM & RAVINES**

**14<sup>th</sup> April, 2016**

**Anuradha Goyal**

<http://www.inditales.com/chambal-river-ecosystem-ravines/>

Chambal River, best known for Chambal ghati – the famous home of bandits, is today the cleanest river in India with a flourishing river ecosystem where you can meet Ghariyals or Crocodiles, fresh water turtles and many species of birds. A boat ride on Chambal River at sunset time is worth exploring.

Chambal Valley as the name suggests is located on the banks of River Chambal. Chambal River creates a natural divide between the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh almost making you feel that it is Chambal that is dividing the northern and central India.

You hear the word Beehad all the time in reference to Chambal Valley that is notorious for its Dakus or Bandits. In fact most of remember the word Chambal from phrase 'Chambal ke Daku' and the most famous of them being Phoolan Devi. Come to think of it women could be bandits in this Beehad. Chambal Ravines provide enough contours on its landscape for the bandits to live happily. Chambal bandits have had a long history of surviving multiple governments since the ancient, medieval and modern times. I remember many tales of my parents traveling through this area as a young couple when my father was posted in Bharatpur and they would come to watch films in Agra.

As I walked on these ravines as part of large travel writers' group and with UP tourism taking care of us, I wondered how it would be to walk alone on these Chambal Ravines. Would the

ghosts of well known bandits who call themselves Rebels instead of Bandits speak to me? Would I be able to hear stories of their hay days from the villagers? Those questions remain but it was an experience to walk on those uneven surfaces and go down the ravines to meet the river. Walking to the river we saw it flowing as silently as possible. It was like a band of blue in the middle of muddy ravines. Boats plied between the two shores taking villagers from one end to another. With no road or bridge connecting the two shores, a mid-sized boat made rounds between the two shores.

### **Mythology of Chambal River**

Chambal region was originally called Charmanyavati – as it is referenced in Mahabharata also. It is said that during the epic period, the land around Chambal River belonged to Shakuni – the maternal uncle of Kauravas. It was somewhere here that Pandavas first lost to Kauravas in the dice game and the disrobing of their queen Draupadi took place. Draupadi it seems cursed anyone who would drink the water of Charmanyavati or the Chambal River. Since then the river is considered cursed.

However it seems today the very curse has become its blessing. Chambal River is the most pristine of rivers in India today. If you want to see the riverine eco-system of a unpolluted river you need to take a ride down the Chambal River.

Geographically, Chambal River originates from Vindhyas near Indore in Madhya Pradesh. It travels about 1000 kms carving boundaries between MP and Rajasthan and then MP and UP before merging with Yamuna. When you take a boat ride on the Chmbal river, you get to birds on its banks. There are various species of storks, falcons, babblers etc. In the river, be prepared to meet Ghariyals – many of them would be swimming or taking a siesta on the banks of Chambal River.

If you are lucky you can meet the freshwater turtles. In a 45 minutes or so that I spent on the boat, I saw birds flying all around. Ghariyals made an occasional appearance and they almost played hide and seek with our cameras. Their uneven body surface was their marker both inside the water and on the adjoining mud. I am told that the chambal is also home to River Dolphins that have become more or less extinct in River Ganga.

It is one of the best places to watch birds and crocodiles in India perhaps.

Sunset at the river was as beautiful as the sunsets I am used to watching on the Arabian sea. Sun was retiring for the day as we said bye to Chambal River and started walking to our cars. I felt I have just visited a mysterious corner of the country. It was a corner that I always knew about but probably never thought I would be able to visit one day. It was like a bit of romance slipping away from the stories of Chambal.

Chambal is a unique river that is not only cursed as per the traditional beliefs in a land that worships its rivers. It is a river on whose banks, outlaws ruled for the longest of time.

### **Stay – Chambal Safari Lodge**

We stayed at Chambal Safari Lodge – some distance away, but in a place where you can see lots of birds. I got up in the morning to see hundreds of flying foxes hanging on the tree outside my room. Check out their website for a history that is woven around animal fairs when it was called Mela Kothi. Today of course it is an eco-lodge that lets to enjoy the yet unspoiled beauty of Chambal and they have a team to assist you.

On my morning walk through the fields around Chambal Safari Lodge, I came across a whole lot of peacocks also taking a walk.

Overall, after visiting Chambal River, I was damn happy to see a living river, a clean river and a river that had humans, birds and aquatic life all in it – a complete ecosystem of its own, that is so rare to see now. However, how long will it remain clean is another question.

### **A TRIP TO CHAMBAL RIVER IN AGRA, INDIA**

**Tuesday, 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2016**

**Bruce 8:25 AM**

[http://brucekekule.com/photography\\_abroad/a-trip-to-chambal-river-in-agra-india/](http://brucekekule.com/photography_abroad/a-trip-to-chambal-river-in-agra-india/)

Gharial crocodiles and the Sarus crane were the main objective...!

This was to be my last safari on this month long trip to India. The site is situated in Agra, east of Delhi where the famous Taj Mahal is located.

The Chambal River has some very interesting creatures and the main ones I was after were the gharial (thin-jawed fish eating crocodile) and the Sarus crane (the world's tallest bird). Time was limited and I was lucky to photograph both species in one day. I stayed at the Chambal Safari Hotel some 70 kilometers past the city of Agra. We left at 5am and arrived at the boat landing where a speed boat was waiting near dawn that was another 22 kilometers from the lodge.

Within no time at all, we bumped into gharial and I got several but they were all female. The males would slip into the river as soon as they spotted us. But I was happy to get some decent photographs and as the sun rose into the sky, it became dreadfully hot and light was very harsh so we returned to the hotel for lunch. Other species captured were the mugger crocodile and Indian blue peafowl in full display mode. Many water birds are also found here. Back again at 3:30pm and we motored up the river once again. Shortly thereafter, two Sarus cranes were spotted feeding along a sandy bank. I was delighted and surprised to see how close we got to the tall birds. I will return in mid-March 2017 when the weather is much cooler and the crocs are a lot easier to see when they need to bask for long periods in the sun regulating their body temperature due to the very cold river. All in all, it was a quick but very satisfying trip to the Chambal River. Enjoy...!