

India's Wildlife - A Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 March - 2 April 2011

Report and Images by Talat Khalid



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Participants: David Brotton
Ruth Armstrong
Andrew Pringle

Day 1

Wednesday 23rd March

Tour members departed from London on Emirates Airlines bound for New Delhi via Dubai.

Day 2

Thursday 24th March

New Delhi, en route to Katni

Weather: Sunny with blue skies and some scattered white clouds

The inbound flight from Dubai to Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi landed on time before transferring to Hotel Leela for a wash and change and to have lunch. After lunch we had a couple of hours before we boarded a train to Katni. After some rest at 3.15pm we headed for the train station. Our train to Katni left at 5.30pm. We had our initial chats focussed on photography and bandhavgarh forest, equipment and camera settings. We had dinner around 8.00pm and went to bed.

Day 3

Friday 25th March

En route to Bandhavgarh, Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Sunny with blue skies and some clouds.

We reached Katni at around 6.15am. Our surface transport was waiting for us and took us to Nature Heritage Resort, a beautiful place with plenty of bird life, which we reached at around 8.30am. We were allotted rooms and we decided to meet for breakfast at 9.30am. One of the participants had already been a year ago with Naturetrek and shared some good experiences of the last trip. The breakfast area is in a naturally forested backdrop, and lots of birdlife was seen while we had our breakfast. The participants loved the breakfast especially the masala omelettes. After breakfast, we continued some more discussions about equipment and various settings, especially about shooting raw and setting it to lose less memory space by compressing. We had lenses from 18mm to 400 mm amongst the participants. The primary lenses were Canon 100-300, Canon 100-400, and the Canon 400 2.8 prime, while I had my Nikon 200-400vr zoom. We decided to relax and some enjoyed photography and birdwatching in the resort complex. We had lunch at 1.30pm and left for our very first game drive at 2.45pm.

I explained the various zones, forest rules and route system which are allocated just before the safari. We got the CD route and after entering the forest we saw a Lesser Adjutant Stork in a small pond looking for frogs and fish. We all got our cameras and were clicking, it was good light with the occasional cloud blocking the sun, and then a young Sambar deer came and started drinking water from the pond.

We saw Spotted Deer, Sambar and Hanuman Langurs, and various birds specially the Lesser Adjutant Stork, and particularly photo friendly the Indian Roller who just kept posing for us, and we finally left with loads of images. I kept giving them pointers including reminders to shoot verticals as most beginning photographers and even serious amateurs tend to shoot horizontal images only. By the end of the safari we saw a Langur with a small baby on a nice tree branch. It gave the participants some great shots with the baby looking at the cameras, although light was on the low side. I just reminded them to keep the long tail in the frame as most of the time you don't realise this until you see that you cropped the tail.

By 6:10p.m we were out of the park and back to our resort. After some tea we decided that everyone would come back after a quick shower and discuss some of the photos we had taken on that day on my laptop. The participants had brought no backup devices so had to delete the bad images from their cards to make space for the best images later. We went through birds and animals we saw, had our dinner and watched a nice wildlife documentary about the tigers of bandhavgarh. We went to our rooms around 9:20 p.m. hoping to see a tiger on the morning safari.

Day 4

Saturday 26th March

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Clear blue sky, cool morning & hot afternoons

We met at 5.30am ready for the morning safari, unfortunately one of participants was not feeling well and decided to stay and rest. The other 2 proceeded to our jeep for the 6.15am morning game drive. We started off going towards Andheri Jiria area where a family of four were supposed to be residing. On the way we saw and photographed a Savanna Nightjar sitting on a small rocky area, the participants saw the nightjar for the first time and were amazed at how well camouflaged it was. We reached Andheri Jiria and saw drag marks just near the fireline (made to control forest fires). We circled the area for some time but in vain. We went to a center point and got info that someone who came by our return route had seen the tigers named as the Mahaman cubs. On the way we stopped for Brown Fish Owls. The male owl was sitting in not so good a location but the female was on the nest right on top of a dead tree trunk which was perfect. We tried our luck with the Mahaman family but no trace of them. We also shot photos of a Peacock perched on a log and a Shikra with nice clean background. After that we were out of the park.

After breakfast we rested and met again during lunch. In the afternoon all the participants were ready at 2:45 and on the drive our goal was the Mirchani tigers or the Mahaman tiger family. We got the same route so we went by the same Savanna Nightjar who was sitting in the same spot the whole day and the female Brown Fish Owl was still on top of the dead trunk. We reached the Mirchani area but there were no alarm calls and no signs of tiger and finally it was time to go. On the way back we saw and photographed lots of other birds. After a quick shower we met for our daily review and discussions. I saw some of the images taken by the participants and discussed some techniques. Finally we had dinner and some nice chat and retired to our rooms.

Day 5

Sunday 27th November

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Clear with light-blue skies, cold in morning and hot in afternoon

With 3 safaris already done we were eager to see a tiger. We rushed to Andheri Jhiria where we expected the Mirchani female and cubs to be seen today. As soon as we neared the area we saw a Tiger sleeping and rolling in the grass - the first tiger of the trip. We saw movement a little further in the bush and later a female Tigress emerged and walked the road. We tried to get into the right position before the tigress crossed and moved into the thick forest. The tigress walked past at some distance and all the participants took some good images. We went later to the center point from where we slowly drove back to the gate. On the way back we photographed a few birds and finally just as we had nearly finished the game drive we saw Elephants and a Tigress named Kankatti who crossed in front of us...and later a male Tiger followed. We took some pictures of them before we had to leave the park.

In the afternoon safari we went straight to Andheri Jhiria again and this time we found the male and female Tiger cubs. There was a line of vehicles already and we took an open space from where the cubs were visible but although we tried to make the best of available position we still had a lot of twigs and foliage in front of the cubs before they finally got up and moved inside. We also got a few nice bird images. We saw 6 different tigers that day, and so we were a happy group when we came back!

Day 6

Monday 28th March

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: cool morning and very hot afternoon

We were already excited with the sightings we had the day before and we rushed when the gate opened. We photographed the Eurasian Thick knee. Just before a place called Goradaman we got the bamera male Tiger in front of us walking straight for ½ a km. There were just 4 vehicles and followed as he went to Goradaman marked the area and drank water. He came and walked up on the rocks straight ahead, and we got a few good images there. It was not our route ahead so we could not enter the road, we left the male and went on our route, and after some time we saw the 3 Mirchani Tiger cubs - and got the male cub really close. After that we went to the centre point. I told the participants to try photographing some backlit Langurs. We stayed at Rajbehra meadow for some time watching and photographing Vultures and Chital deer before returning.

In the afternoon we heard Barking deer alarm calls which looked as if we would see a tiger nearby, but the alarm died and there was silence. We waited for some time but with no success. We left the place and took photos of some birds. The participants were trying out the tips that they had got. We came back to the resort and as usual we met and discussed images and we tried to discuss and critique the images shot by us. We had our dinner and retired to our rooms.

Day 7

Tuesday 29th March

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Clean sky and pleasant morning, burning hot afternoon

We went to Andheri Jhiria after checking Ghora Daman for a new male Tiger.

By the time we got there we had a mad rush near the stone wall fire line just ahead. We were after at least 15 other vehicles and I didn't expect to see the Tiger that was sitting in the middle of the road. It was disappointing but then the Tiger just jumped off the fence and came and sat just behind, which made us the 2nd vehicle! We took some nice images in nice golden light. After some time he went up and sat in dense foliage with grass and twigs covering his face most of the time. We tried getting some decent shots once in a while when the opportunity came. After that we went to the center point. Later we shot photos of some birds and came back to the resort.

In the afternoon we went back to the same place and had many vehicles who had glimpsed a tiger, we waited for some time and then had to leave at 5 as we had to get out and have some buffer time just in case another good sighting happened. We took shots of some deer and Black Ibis, and what we thought was a new born Chital or a dead one, we were not sure as it lay so still camouflaged in the grass. After that we photographed a Serpent Eagle and saw 3 Ruddy Mongoose, a Painted Spurfowl and other birds.

We were happy and came back to the resort after which, as usual, we met for our daily image review and critique. I loved what some of the participants had shot, the discussions about the exposure and compositions around dinner time seemed to be working and everyone was improving. We had some excellent dinner and some nice chat and some more image reviews just after dinner. It was late and we went back to our rooms with high hopes for some more great images the next day.

Day 8

Wednesday 30th March

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Nice and pleasant. Not cold

We went to the Andheri Jiria area for the Mirchani family. We saw a male Tiger resting under a tree just before we reached the area. He was lazing around and sleeping - we took some photos and moved forward. We found 2 of the Mirchani Tiger cubs in the dense bush and luckily found a spot just next to one of the cubs which had a decent opening in the dense foliage. Everyone tried to avoid the grass and twigs that were in front of the cubs face to get a decent shot. After some nice poses resting and sitting he went inside and we moved forward to cover our route and go to the center point. We came back later and waited at the water hole where a few others were waiting. Around 9am when we decided to leave, the cubs started moving and crossed in front of our vehicle! That was such a great experience and we were happy to leave the park...

After breakfast we were invited to watch a local cricket match between a local school and foreign tourist. We had some fun there, and later in the evening we went back to Mirchani but this time the forest was silent and we had no tigers. We made the best of our safari by shooting pics of birds and trying out other techniques. We got some close shots of a Serpent Eagle. We went back to the resort happy and after a quick shower were ready for the daily image reviews and discussions before dinner.

Day 9

Thursday 31st March

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: Pleasant and cool

In the morning we reached Mirchani after searching for and photographing some Chital and Langurs. When we reached the area we found lots of vehicles and 3 of the Tiger cubs were on the other side of the fence. Two were visible to us and the 3rd was just behind a tree. They were just lazing and sleeping. The park ranger came and made all vehicles leave after a few minutes of watching. It was not something anyone liked but we had to move. We spent some time shooting a Serpent Eagle again, 2 Savanna Nightjars and at the end just near the gate we saw a group of young Langur Monkeys playing on a big tree branch. Its always fun to watch and photograph young ones playing, they were having a great time playing and jumping and we also had a great time photographing them. We left the park after that and hoped to see some more in the evening.

In the afternoon we hoped to see the cubs again and we went back to the same place. We saw a few vehicles, we could see one cub just peeping out at the far end, just on the other side of the fence, and he was lazing and sleeping so we left the place as we thought they would not wake or move before it was time to leave. On our way back we heard someone saying they saw a Tigress somewhere near Anikat water hole near Rajbehra, so we went straight for it. When we reached there a few vehicles were waiting and after some time the Rajbehra female Tiger came walking along and crossed right in front of us. She was heading for the water hole and disappeared as the waterhole was a little blocked from our position so we went around a bend and saw her just coming towards the water. There was a dead tree trunk fallen just at the bank of the water hole. The water was still and the light was golden and the green sal leaves gave the water a nice green colour. The setting was just perfect and there were just 2 vehicles in this place. We started taking photos as she approached the water. She walked on the dead tree and tested the water before entering it. It was such a great sequence. We kept shooting as she kept moving slowly in the water. At one point she looked at the deer that were running just towards us. She sat for a few moments and then walked ahead. We felt so lucky to have witnessed this beauty in such an amazing setting. The participants were just using all their skills discussed over the week and captured excellent photographs. We were happy and why not. At the resort we could not wait to see the images on my laptop. We got a few great photographs. The participants were glad this happened at the end of their trip as they had been practising and learning and they said they would have not been able to capture such good photographs had it been in the beginning of the trip. I think the discussions and my tips and of course their dedication to learn and get better paid off. We had dinner and went to our rooms.

Day 10

Friday 1st April

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Weather: clear sky and pleasant morning

On the last day we were relaxed and tried various backlit tricks on Langurs and Chital. We moved slowly and photographed a Malabar Pied Hornbill and some more Langurs on the way back to the resort. With only one safari left we were happy that we had so many good opportunities to photograph the tigers and other animals and birds of the park.

In the afternoon we saw a male Tiger outside the fence near Andheri Jiria, he was rolling in the grass, irritated by the flies and was rolling quite a few times so everyone got a chance to photograph him. We left the place as he moved inside the thick bush. We returned to our resort and quickly got ready for our journey ahead to Agra.

At 7.00pm we left for Umaria train station with packed dinners to take on the overnight train to Agra. We boarded the train and settled in for the night.

Day 11

Saturday 2nd April

Sightseeing in Agra, evening train to New Delhi

Weather: a few scattered clouds and hot

We arrived the next morning at Agra Station at around 11.00am. We headed to ITC mogul for a wash and change. All of us decided to carry our camera and a lens or two and leave the bags in our vehicle. We were joined by our local guide Tarun who would accompany us for the day. We had our lunch in Agra and by 1 p.m. decided to see the Agra Fort and Baby Taj first. We spent an hour at the fort and our guide was good at explaining the history of this place. We went and saw the little taj or Ijmatud Daula. We photographed the beautiful architecture and just imagined how beautiful the Taj would be.

We went to the Taj Mahal at around 4 p.m. and since we wanted to see and photograph it in evening light we were in time to scout around and find the best place to shoot it. We decided to quickly see the Taj and at sunset be at the far end of the Taj to photograph it. All of us enjoyed taking pictures of the Taj, we tried taking reflection shots of the Taj in the water and reflections in one of the participants sun glasses. None of us wanted touristy images and as photographers we tried to be creative as this is a monument which has been photographed a lot. I think we were all quite amazed at the workmanship of this beautiful monument. It was closing time for the Taj and we headed back to our hotel to freshen up and leave for the 8:30 train to New Delhi. We reached New Delhi at around 10:45 and at the station were an unusual crowd of fans watching the World Cup finals between India and Sri Lanka, cheering and partying as India won. At the airport we said our goodbyes and I was pleased that the group went home happy and more than satisfied by the entire trip. I left as they entered the airport terminal to take their flight back home.

Day 12

Sunday 3rd April

Inbound to UK via Dubai

Summary - Photography Report

The group consisted of 3 participants, each with a different skill level. All of us had lenses in the range 100 – 400. One participant had a 4002.8, one with a 100-400 and one with a 70-300. I was shooting with the 200-400f4. The range of all the participants was the same so we were getting similar photographs. Over the next few days I wanted them to learn a few important techniques. We saw images on my laptop and then reviewed the good and bad that we did in that situation. We discussed how images could improve, we reviewed focus options and moving the focus point, techniques to focus, etc. Every time we discussed a new technique we tried it on the next few safaris like underexposing for backlit langurs, moving the focus point to get the desired composition, slow panning etc. It was fun and new possibilities of image creation were seen by the participants. We had some fairly good improvements by the end of the trip and the discussions and tips really helped the participants. Since the group was small we had a lot of focus and I knew what each of them liked to photograph. All in all it was a great journey and it passed very quickly with some great photographs to remind us of the good memories.

Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April							
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
1	Intermediate Egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>	✓							✓
2	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓				✓	✓
3	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓
4	Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Black-headed Ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>	✓						✓	✓
6	Oriental Honey-buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>		✓	✓			✓		✓
7	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓							
8	Long-billed Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
9	Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>					✓		✓	✓
10	Crested Serpent-eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
12	Changeable Hawk-eagle	<i>Spizaetus cirratus</i>		✓	✓					✓
13	Jungle Bush-quail	<i>Perdica asiatica</i>			✓			✓		
14	Red Spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix spadicea</i>						✓		✓
15	Red Jungle Fowl	<i>Gallus gallus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Yellow-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>	✓		✓					
18	Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					✓			
20	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>		✓	✓					
21	Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Alexandrine Parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>	✓							
23	Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
24	Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>	✓						✓	
25	Indian Scops-owl	<i>Otus bakkamoena</i>						✓		✓
26	Brown Fish-owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>		✓	✓					
27	Jungle Owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>								✓
28	Savannah Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus affinis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
29	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓							
30	White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>		✓	✓					
31	Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
32	Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>					✓			
34	Indian Grey Hornbill	<i>Ocyroceros birostris</i>	✓						✓	✓
35	Malabar Pied-hornbill	<i>Anthracoceros coronatus</i>						✓		✓
36	Black-rumped Flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓	
37	Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>	✓							
38	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Blue-capped Rock-thrush	<i>Monticola cinclorhynchus</i>								✓
40	Orange-headed Thrush	<i>Zoothera citrina</i>		✓						
41	Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>					✓			
42	Tickell's Leaf-warbler	<i>Phylloscopus affinis</i>	✓							
43	Oriental Magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓	
44	Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>	✓							
45	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				✓	✓			✓
46	Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>	✓							✓
48	Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>						✓		✓
49	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April							
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
50	White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>				✓				
51	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>	✓			✓		✓		✓
52	Rufous Treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	✓				✓		✓	
53	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	✓							
54	Jungle Myna	<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>	✓							
55	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓							
56	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓							

Mammals

1	Royal Bengal Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris tigris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Common Langur	<i>Presbytis entellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
5	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>		✓						
6	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennanti</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
7	Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Chital (Spotted Deer)	<i>Cervus axis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Indian Muntjac (Barking Deer)	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>			✓			✓		
10	Indian Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Other fauna

1	Cobra				✓					
2	unknown snake								✓	

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