

NATIONAL CHAMBAL SANCTUARY, Uttar Pradesh, India**13th -14th December 2003****Bill Harvey**www.delhibird.org

Eight delhi birders (Nikhil, Sheila, Sunita, Bikram, Rattan Singh, Mohit, Kavita and myself) spent the weekend at the Chambal Safari Camp run by Ram Pratap Singh and his wife, Anu. A very relaxing experience with excellent food and general comforts. It is about half an hour from the river itself where the birds, mammals and reptiles were fantastic.

We recorded 113 bird species in our short stay and even added 11 to the draft checklist which will shortly join the burgeoning collection put on our website by Bikram.

The first species was one of the best; a very supercilious Brown Hawk Owl in the Camp itself. Also there of interest were Spotted Owlets, Oriental Honey-buzzards, Large Cuckoo-shrike, Hume's Warblers, White-bellied Drongo, both Red-throated (albicilla = Taiga; what an awful choice of name, but now formally accepted by the august British Ornithologists Union!) and Red-breasted (parva) Flycatchers and Black Redstarts.

At the river almost the first birds we saw were Indian Skimmers. There must have been 40 odd present there and we had excellent close views, particularly from the boat. Also several River and Black-bellied Terns but of gulls only a few Pallas's and a Brown-headed. Waders were predictable but with Great Thick-knees, River Lapwings and Kentish Plovers showing especially well.

To the duck list we added numerous Gadwall and several Wigeon but the stars were the beautiful Red-crested Pochards. At least 500 Bar-headed Geese were a great sight (1% of the world's population), marred by our finding at least 12 dead and dying from deliberate poisoning on the Sunday. RP has already taken the issue up with the Forest Dept and charges against the farmer concerned (who we identified) will be filed. Only 2 Greylags but lots of garrulous pairs of Ruddy Shelducks.

What else? A very confiding Osprey, a classically pale Long-legged Buzzard, a drinking Booted Eagle, about 20 Black Ibis and several Woolly-necked Storks, a stunning male Desert Wheatear, lots of Sand Larks and an arenarius Rufous-tailed Shrike. One of the more special sightings was of a couple of Lesser Coucals disporting in the open.

We had incredible views of many Gharials (up to 4m long but, encouragingly, many small young ones), Muggars and turtles, fleeting but frequent views of Gangetic Dolphins and several Golden Jackals.

But the star creature was the ghu-ghu; variously described as a minny dinosaur, a reptile, an amphibian, an insect and a crustacean. We found it was sort of Sand Cricket which lives in holes in the sand near the water's edge. It is weirdly patterned pale with stripes and with strangely spiky back legs. The most remarkable thing is that these tiny insects actually attack you if disturbed. I had two trying to bite at my shoe. And the bite hurts if it enters your flesh apparently!

BIRDING AND WILDLIFE IN INDIA**January 2004****Nari Mistry (Cayuga Bird Club, Newsletter April 2004)**www.birds.cornell.edu/cayugabirdclub/pdf/April2004.pdf

First we drove via Agra to the Chambal National Sanctuary, a linear park along the Chambal River. We stayed at the Chambal Safari Lodge, wonderfully primitive but comfortable cottages in a heritage plantation that yielded 13 new bird species right there. A three hour boat trip on the beautiful river gave us close-up views of huge marsh crocodiles and gharials (fish-eating crocs). We were surrounded by rafts of Bar-headed Geese, Ruddy Shelducks, Lesser Whistling Ducks, Red-crested Pochards, and lots of shorebirds. Rare specialties were the Indian Skimmer, Great Thick-knee, and the endangered Gangetic Dolphin. Our guide for the first two days was the renowned Rattan Singh, a self-taught birder who, in his younger days, accompanied Salim Ali, the doyen of Indian birding.

TIGERS & BIRDS OF BANDHAVGARH – BIRDQUEST**January - February 2004****Mark Beaman**www.birdquest.co.uk/frameset.cfm?eTours=0

The Chambal is one of the most unpolluted major rivers in Northern India and for this reason alone it still holds a rich variety of wildlife. Eventually, after passing along narrow highways full of foraging Common and Bank Mynas and Large Grey and Jungle Babblers, not to mention cyclists, wandering cows and gaudily painted trucks and buses, we arrived at the sandy banks of the Chambal. No sooner were we out of the bus than the first Indian Skimmers were spotted resting on a small island and we were soon admiring these bizarre black and white birds with their huge orange-red and yellow 'broken-tipped' bills (we were ultimately to see 42 in total). Target number one already and we had only been here a few minutes! Great Thick-knees were standing by the banks, watching us with their huge eyes, and numerous waders (including many River Lapwings), Lesser Whistling-Ducks and Ruddy Shelducks fed in the shallows, while the first of three Pallas's Gulls flapped past.

After being poled out to the shallow anchorage on a raft, we boarded our boat for the trip upriver, which proved to be a great way of seeing the Chambal's birds and other wildlife. We soon encountered Golden Jackal, a large flock of Bar-headed Geese, Burmese Spot-billed and Comb Ducks, a Long-legged Buzzard, River Terns and then, even better, four Black-bellied Terns (a rare and declining bird of Asia's rivers), before the cry of 'dolphin' went up and about five, effectively blind, Gangetic Dolphins put on a show for us for the next half hour or so as they surfaced to blow before diving once more. After this enjoyable experience was over we headed upstream again until the looming bulk of several crocodiles appeared on some low islands up ahead. Here were the first of no less than 12 Gharials, the enormous, broad-bodied, jagged-tailed and very long and narrow-snouted, fish-eating crocodile of the Gangetic system, plus a Mugger, a more conventional crocodile that resembles the Nile Crocodile of Africa. As we drew near, the decidedly prehistoric-looking Gharials crawled ponderously into the water, submerging until just their raised eye arches were visible.

After some Small Pratincoles were spotted on another island we headed back to base, but new things were still coming our way as we encountered the declining Red-naped Ibis, Steppe Eagle and a very coy Brown Crake that liked to hide in a recess in the earthy bank until it was hopeful we had gone away (but we fooled it with a bit of artful circling around and drifting downstream without the motor!). After that it was time for lunch and our first Indian Grey Hornbills, Chestnut-shouldered Petronias and both Oriental Honey Buzzard and Shikra.

NORTHERN INDIA

16th January – 1st February 2004

Gruff Dodd, Sara Dodd, Clive Hurley & Eleanor Hurley

www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id+321

Tuesday 27th January 2004

On arrival at the lodge we had some breakfast, while birding in the immediate gardens. Eurasian Collared-Doves, Indian Roller and Jungle Babblers were seen around the main building, while a Crested Honey-Buzzard flew into a nearby tree. Hoopoe and Black Redstart were also seen, before Ratan beckoned us over to a tree he was standing under - he had found a roosting Brown Hawk-Owl which gave superb views Chestnut-shouldered Petronia were also new, and then Ratan completed an owl double by finding a pair of Spotted Owlets. A walk away from the main building produced a few Red Collared-Doves among the more numerous Eurasians, as well as Brahminy Starling, Common Tailorbird and Black Drongo, as well as a large roosting colony of Flying Foxes.

It was time to head off to the river, with brief stops near the village of Bah for Bank Myna and Yellow-wattled Lapwing and at Nandegam for Bank Myna, Large Grey Babbler, Asian Pied Starling and Black Drongo. The track we were following eventually arrived at the river, and we drove out onto the wide sandy flat to where the boat was waiting for us. Before we had even got out of the van, we had spotted our main target for this area - a group of c. 30 Indian Skimmers roosting on a sand bar in the river - a great start!

Several Black Ibis were also seen here, as well as Ruddy Shelduck, Lesser Ringed Plover and Greenshank, while a walk away from the camp produced a small group of the Sand Larks which Ratan had promised and scoping the river produced views of Red-crested Pochard and Bar-headed Geese. We were rowed out to the boat on a pontoon and started our leisurely 1.5 hour trip down the Chambal River. We were soon getting much better views of Bar-headed Geese, Brown-throated Sand-Martins hawked past the boat, and River Lapwings, Little Egrets, Pied Kingfisher, Little Cormorant and more Black Ibises were seen on the banks. Approaching a larger vegetated sandbank in the river, we enjoyed fabulous views of two Great Thick-knees, a flock of Lesser Whistling Ducks and a River Tern, while a Black-bellied Tern flew overhead and several Mugger Crocodiles rested up on the riverbanks. Red-headed Vulture and Kentish Plover were added to the list, before we spotted some ripples in the river ahead of us - Gangetic River Dolphins! Several were seen briefly breaking the water on either side of the boat. We had now reached a part of the river where many Gharials rested on sand banks in the river - amazing prehistoric-looking creatures, and much larger than I had expected, and we enjoyed excellent close up views and photo opportunities if these animals.

INDIA BHARATPUR – BIRDSEEKERS**February 2004****Leaders: Steve Bird, Nick Bray, Viv Stratton, Dilip Saini & Avijit Sarkhel**www.birdtours.co.uk/birdseekers/feb05/bharatpur/Bharatpur-2004.htm**Day 7 - Thursday 19th February**

A short time after as we drove over the brow of a hill we found ourselves looking down on the Chambal River. With a beautiful blue sky and calm, 'glassy' river the stage was set for a memorable boat trip. Getting onto our two boats required us to stand on a pontoon and be pushed towards a little grassy knoll where the boats were waiting. Once seated comfortably we set off downriver, initially sailing close to the right hand shore, where our first Great Thick-knees and River Lapwings stood unconcerned by our presence. There were several Black Ibis dotted along the riverbank, and their plumage looked quite stunning in the strong sunlight, and some took flight showing their white 'shoulder' patches.

Overhead, a Crested Serpent Eagle, some Small Pratincoles and lots of Plain Martins were seen. Several Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers were stood at the water's edge, whilst Crested Lark and Desert Wheatear were seen on the banks. There were also close views of several Gharials and Marsh Muggers. Suddenly, somebody shouted "dolphin" and with rising excitement the boats slowed and everyone scanned the surrounding water for any sign of our quarry. After several tense minutes the dorsal fin of a Gangetic Dolphin was seen by a couple of the group, but it seemed to have disappeared. Moving further downriver, a Desert Wheatear was spotted and we manoeuvred the boats closer to shore to get a better look. A pair of absolutely stunning Black-bellied Terns flew quickly downriver, and were pretty close to start with. Several more close, but brief encounters ensued with the Gangetic Dolphins, but all too soon we had to return to our coach.

The trip upriver was notable for the very close views of several large rafts of Bar-headed Geese, whilst good numbers of other wildfowl included Comb Duck, Lesser Whistling Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Spot-billed Duck, Garganey, Red-crested Pochards and several other species more familiar to us. Another dolphin sighting punctuated our return journey, and there was also a Long-legged Buzzard and juvenile Bonelli's Eagle overhead. On our return, several Temminck's Stints were seen feeding at the water's edge, before we took shelter under a huge parachute that someone had erected over the tables and chairs. Here we settled down to our picnic lunch, complete with copious amounts of beer and soft drinks. From the comfort of our chairs we could watch some of the commoner birds flying along the river, including a juvenile Yellow-legged Gull. A few restless souls braved the midday heat to walk along the beach, where several Paddy field Pipits gave superb close views. And then it was time to leave, but not before Nick B spotted a very distant Pallas's Gull upriver, so we all boarded the bus and drove as close as we could before getting out and walking a bit further. It turned out to be a full summer plumaged bird, and whilst here an Indian Skimmer appeared and promptly flew along the river in front of us. Wow!

NORTHERN INDIA**23rd March – 14th April 2004****Peter van der Wielen & Alma Leegwater**http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/india/india24N/ind_april_04.htm**Chambal River**

This site is about 60 km South of Agra. It can be visited as a daytrip from New Delhi (recommended as it is a very long drive) or from Agra. Recently a lodge, the Chambal Safari Lodge, opened about 20 km from the river. We had lunch there and made a walk around the premises. The grounds were quite birdy. The lodge consists of an old (over 100 years) farm that is being transformed in a dining room. Accommodation is in the form of small bungalows about 100 m from the main building. I guess that staying there is a very nice experience but as we had not heard of it before, we had booked a hotel in Agra.

The birding is done on a wide stretch of the Chambal River about 30 minutes from the lodge. Due to its high population of both mugger and gharial crocodiles and all of the typical river birds, the river is a sanctuary.

There is a small boat available for trips upriver. The river is quite wide, has many sandbanks and rocky plateaus and good water plant vegetation. The water was very clear and you could look quite deep in the water. Our trip was great with the only disappointment that it was too short, just 2 hours. We would have loved to double that. Besides the crocs, there's Gangetic dolphin, breeding river black-bellied and little terns and the main attraction, a regular flock of up to 60 Indian skimmers.