

INDIA: BIRDS, TIGERS, & THE TAJ MAHAL**21st November – 5th December, 2008****Leaders: Peg Abbott & Avijit Sarkhel**http://www.sunrisebirding.com/08India_web/**Wednesday 26th November - Chambal Lodge**

We arrived at Chambal River Lodge for a late lunch, beautifully presented in copper serving dishes lined up on bright linens. Tables and chairs were set outside in the garden and the staff was smiling and ready to greet us. What a pleasant place – and – full of birds! A Brown-headed Barbet peeked over the roof at us as we ate and Jungle Babblers kept up a constant chatter as they bathed in an irrigated part of the flower beds. Avi and the local guides led us for a bird walk around 4 PM, on which we got excellent looks at Yellow-footed Green Pigeons, Indian Gray Hornbills, Thick-billed Flowerpeckers and a very intent Shikra. We gathered around a campfire to chat before our meal. Dinner was in the cozy inside dining room, where historic photos of the property graced the walls. They really outdid themselves, preparing specialty Indian dishes passed down for generations in the family.

Thursday, 27th November - Chambal River

Terrible news rocked India today. Terrorists had attacked two five star hotels in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India's largest city and financial capital. Fighting was still going on as we drove through the villages to our river boat safari. Huddled around fires or in storefront doorways, groups of men packed twenty deep to pour over newspapers. We bought papers ourselves and learned that one of the targets was the venerable Taj Mahal Hotel, a tiled historic jewel of a hotel located right on the waterfront. Though we were far away from Mumbai, we knew loved ones would be concerned and Avi graciously let us use his cell phone to contact people in the States. Feeling their sadness, shock and anger made the morning all the more poignant as we walked across the sands and boarded two small boats to explore the Chambal River. This river is a stronghold for one of three breeding populations of rare Gharials, a crocodile-like reptile, which we were soon able to see. A huge male was sighted almost immediately, hauled out on the shore. We then saw numerous females and sub adults lounging mid-river, their long snouts often pointing up into the sun. Our guide spotted several very young ones on the shoreline and Peg detailed some of the conservation work being done by the World Wildlife Fund and others to try to increase the declining population. Another endangered species finding safe haven here is the Indian Skimmer. We were delighted to find 14 of these beauties and to hear from our guide that they had only returned from their higher elevation breeding areas a short while ago – each day he had been seeing a few more. We added 27 new species today, many of them shorebirds, a gull and two terns, including the rare Black-bellied Tern. With patience we also had fair looks at a Ganges River Dolphin, a good sized individual which leapt a bit out of the water as well as rising to the water surface where we could hear it breathe. We had a bit of an adventure as our driver had ventured out onto deep sand. Despite his best efforts the bus would NOT move, and Avi elected to call in jeeps to our rescue while locals helped to dislodge the bus. Now we could experience the buzz of rural life at eye-level as we navigated busy streets. Lunch in our quiet lodge was just the thing.

Afterwards several elected to take naps. Peg was down with 'Delhi belly' at this point, but the others elected to go see a fascinating historic site. Avi showed them a long line of temples, one still showing intricate interior paintings. He also took them into a village where they could walk amid food vendors and local merchants – which everyone thoroughly enjoyed.

Friday, 28th November - Chambal River / Bear Sanctuary / Return to Delhi - We had a leisurely breakfast at Chambal River and packed up for what would mainly be a travel day as we returned to Delhi

NORTHERN INDIA: BHARATPUR, CORBETT & NAINITAL

21st November - 6th December 2008

Limosa Holidays & Travelling Naturalist

Tour Leader: Peter Kennerley & local guides

<http://www.naturalist.co.uk/reports2008/india08.pdf>

Day 5: Tuesday 25th November 2008

From Agra we headed off to the Chambal Safari Lodge, 90 minutes distant. After a quick lunch we were shown Brown Hawk and Indian Scops Owls at their daytime roosts, followed by a really interesting walk through the nearby fields which were jam packed with birds. Standing crops of mustard held a flock of Red-headed Buntings while already cleared fields were full of starlings and mynas, including some nice Rosy Starlings. Cattle Egrets followed the plough and Indian Rollers snatched disturbed insects, where the fields were worked as they have been for hundreds of years. As dusk fell, we watched a family of Common Palm Civets stretch and play before starting their night-time excursions.

Day 6: Wednesday 26th November 2008

Our expectations for today had been very high and we were not to be disappointed. Just 40 minutes from our lodge lay the Chambal River sanctuary, 400 km of pristine river protected as a sanctuary for Gangetic River Dolphins but a saviour to all those species that depend upon this increasingly rare and fragmented habitat. We could only scratch the surface in our morning excursion, but as soon as we entered the sanctuary, we entered a world where people were no longer dominant. The deep eroded ravines, a unique habitat in their own right, quickly gave us a Common Hawk-cuckoo followed by a showy Long-billed Pipit. As we waited to board our boat, we found several Desert Wheatears on the broad riverbanks, while scanning through a scattering of larks revealed several Short-toed, a single Sand and a couple of Crested. If only we had more time. But the main event beckoned and as we boarded, Black-bellied Tern, Osprey and a flock of Indian Skimmers flew past. The next three hours were some of the very best of the entire tour. Flocks of Bar-headed Geese, nine Indian Skimmers that we could almost touch, Black-bellied and Indian River Terns, a pair of Bonelli's Eagles at their nest, a couple of Woolly-necked Storks, several large Muggers and Gharials basking in the shallows, the only Variable Wheatear of the tour and, finally, those three river dolphins which came up so close to our boat, time and time again.

All too soon we had to leave this paradise and after a quick bite of lunch, set out on the long journey to Corbett.

NORTHERN INDIA - BIRDS & TIGERS**26th January - 12th February 2009****Tour leaders: Keith & Glen Valentine Trip Report compiled by Tour Leader Glen Valentine:**<http://rockjumper.co.za/upload/trip-reports/2009%20Jan%2026-12%20Feb%20Northern%20India%20RBT%20I.pdf>

Our next destination was that of the Chambal River. This area is much dryer than any other region that one visits during our North India trip, offering a whole different selection of species that are restricted to the arid landscape surrounding the river. Two of the key species here are Indian Skimmer and the delicate Black-bellied Tern and we were thrilled to locate both of these elegant birds. Other highlights at and around the river included flocks of Common Babbler, Rufous-fronted Prinia, Sand Lark, the impressive Bonelli's Eagle, Dalmation and Great White Pelicans, rafts of Red-crested Pochard and a host of waders.

INDIA**February 2009****Wildaboutindia.com**<http://www.flickr.com/photos/8773601@N03/sets/72157614414371596/>**Day 4: Bharatpur- beyond Keoladeo and on to Chambal**

So, after lunch we then headed off to our next port of call which was the National Chambal Sanctuary and Chambal Safari Lodge. This was another of the sites I visited with Ian last time so I was looking forward to meeting everyone again and of course taking the boat trip along the river. With the boat trip scheduled for the next day, we spent what was left of the afternoon birding around the grounds. We saw Hoopoe, Plum-headed parakeets, brown hawk owl, barred buttonquail, brown headed barbet and coppersmith barbet amongst others. Mammals around the lodge included indian fruit bats and Indian palm civets- although the latter did not show as well as they had last time I was there.

Day 5: Chambal

The next morning we were out reasonably early for the boat trip on the Chambal river. This is a great site to find Indian Skimmers, Gharial and if you are lucky, gangetic dolphin. However, we were not fortunate on this occasion. Nevertheless it was a fab trip and we saw Indian Skimmers, black francolin, red wattled lapwing, Lesser whistling ducks, Greater thicknee, river lapwing, Black Ibis, Ruddy shelduck, Pied Kingfisher and a couple of river terns. We also saw a Blue Rock thrush. The reptiles included Marsh Mugger, Gharial, and various turtles. There were lots of small pratincoles, a couple of long legged buzzards and a bank Mynah posed well for a photo. After lunch back at the lodge it was off to Agra for an afternoon of sightseeing.

BHARATPUR, CHAMBAL & RANTHAMBHORE**9th -21st February 2009****Birdfinders**<http://www.birdfinders.co.uk/pdf/bharatpur2009.pdf>