

Wild India

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Depart UK

Days 2-7

Bharatpur

After our morning arrival in Delhi we drive south to the famous Keoladeo Ghana National Park. Known to birdwatchers as Bharatpur, this is one of the most important wetlands in the world. Packed into just 29 square kilometres are a wide diversity of birds, no less than 350 species having been recorded. Perhaps the most delightful aspect of Bharatpur is the approachability of the wildlife. This, combined with the extreme abundance, makes this paradise an absolute mecca for wildlife photographers the world over. Early mornings are quite magical as mists rise from the water-lily bedecked jheels, obscuring the legs of a stately Blue Bull as it stands by a row of Jamun trees, these covered in the ghostly shapes of numerous Painted Storks - this is what Bharatpur is all about! Bharatpur was originally constructed by diverting local irrigation canals back in the late 19th century. This was so that the local Maharaja could indulge his passion for wildfowling and in so doing he created a wetland masterpiece. However, the hunting stopped over thirty-five years ago and nowadays vehicles are kept out and all is quiet. Except that is, for the feeding frenzy of the vast numbers of birds! It has been estimated that Bharatpur's Painted Storks take 1200 tonnes of food per square mile during the time it takes to raise their chicks. And that, as they say, is a lot of frogs! In fact the waters are thick with life, a veritable living soup of frogs, toads, snails, terrapins, pondweed, carp, catfish and waterlilies. All this food sustains one of the biggest heronries in the world as well as several species of stork. The largest is the Black-necked Stork, which stands nearly five feet tall and can be seen from a vast distance, which is just as well, as they are now very rare! Taller still are Sarus Cranes which move solemnly through sedgebeds, looking skyward as flocks of Common Cranes descend noisily from the sky, their clarion calls ringing atmospherically across the marshes. Cormorants, Darters and the comical-looking Comb Duck are all common, and stunning Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged Jacanas decorate the Sapanmari Jheel. Brightly coloured kingfishers, bee-eaters and rollers flash past Babul trees overhanging pools where Purple Gallinules chunter away in reeds like demented purple chickens.

Bluethroats, Orange-headed Ground Thrushes, Indian Grey Hornbills and Coppersmiths inhabit forest dotted with pools as do roosting Long-tailed Nightjars, confident in their beautiful cryptic camouflage. Spotted Owlets line up along branches and we'll hear the deep hoarse hoots of Dusky Horned Owls - these often perch on tall treetops as dusk approaches - while cute Collared Scops Owls peer

down at us from their roosts. Raptors really are exceptional at Bharatpur, with Imperial Eagle, Spotted Eagle, Red-headed Vulture and the ubiquitous Crested Serpent Eagle all featuring. Dry lands offer yet another selection with Sirkeer Malkoha, Yellow-wattled Lapwing and the beautiful Red Avadavat, whilst beautifully patterned Rock Pythons bask in the sunshine. Bharatpur is also fantastic for mammals. Sambar and Blue Bull will be sighted daily whilst boisterous groups of Wild Boar splash in the shallows. Rhesus Macaques argue noisily in Kadam trees and Common Grey Mongoose wander along the paths as if they own them!

Day 5

Optional trip to the Taj Mahal

The zenith of Moghul architecture and one of the most fabulous monuments in the world, is found in Agra, capital of all India under the Moghuls. The Taj Mahal is one of the few places in the world that can truly transcend the hordes of tourists and accompanying fripperies. This magnificent building is an experience not to be missed. Don't leave the optics behind though for along the Yamuni River are Black-bellied Tern and River Lapwing. Later we visit the vast Agra Fort whose red sandstone ramparts protect wonderful pavilions of such intricate workmanship and mosques and audience halls decorated with ornate pillars inlaid with jasper and lapis lazuli. Those not going to the Taj Mahal can spend extra time at Bharatpur.

Days 8-13

Ranthambhor Tiger Reserve

We catch the morning train (first class) through the fascinating countryside of Rajasthan for a three hour journey to Sawai Madhopur, just a few kilometres from the magnificent landscapes of Ranthambhor. We couldn't be better placed in Castle Jhumar Baori as it is on the scarp slope (and thus has tremendous views all around) which marks the boundary of this majestic unspoilt remnant of the great jungles of Central India. Ironically Ranthambhor escaped destruction largely because it was the favoured hunting ground of the Maharaja of Jaipur. It became one of the first Project Tiger reserves and has since developed into an outstanding National Park. Because of the strict protection enjoyed by the Tigers they became active by day and thus much more visible to visitors. Ranthambhor's friendly Tigers, as they became known, are frequently encountered in broad daylight (except for a period several years back when poaching again reared its ugly head). While we cannot guarantee sightings of these beautiful but elusive animals, we have given ourselves a fine opportunity of seeing and hopefully photographing them with four and a half days in the park - and it is likely that we shall see them on more than one occasion! Impressively large numbers of Sambar and Spotted Deer (Chital) also graze these grasslands and are sometimes joined by Indian Gazelles (Chinkara). Jungle Cats can sometimes be seen stalking sandgrouse or doves in the grasslands in the beautiful evening light. Leopards sometimes saunter across the tracks, particularly in the steep and wooded hills

surrounding the hugely impressive Rajput fort of Ranthambhor which overlooks the park's main lake. Hanuman Langurs frequent the battlements whilst overhead Bonelli's Eagles and Crested Serpent Eagles soar. Sounders (herds) of Wild Boar are a common sight by the small lakes which dot the wonderful dry deciduous woodlands and tawny grasslands which make such a beautiful landscape. Peacocks swagger through these open woodlands - they are abundant - and above them Small Minivets, White-bellied Drongos and Blossom-headed Parakeets perch in fruiting trees, often in company with groups of Indian Tree-pies and Yellow-legged Green Pigeons. Stork-billed Kingfishers, their huge dagger-like bills making them look top-heavy, hunt along small rivers inhabited by Mugger Crocodiles and the secretive Brown Crake. Outside the park are arid grasslands which are home to Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Indian Courser and the Bengal Fox. At Lake Soorwhal we can find a rich variety of birds and herds of the rare Blackbuck. Immaculate males, their beautiful black-and-tan coats contrasting with their strikingly white bellies and superb two-foot long spiralled horns, are a really magnificent sight. This is a superb birdwatching site with flocks of Demoiselle Cranes, White Pelicans and lots of waders including Great Thick-knee and Small Pratincoles.

Days 14 & 15 Jaipur and Delhi

Much of the day will be spent exploring a little of this showcase of Rajastani architecture with visits to the fantastic Palace of the Winds and to the Amber Fort. In the afternoon we return to Delhi before catching our return flight to the UK the next morning.

or...

Days 14-21 Extension to Nainital & Corbett

To complete your sampling of Northern India's fabulous and varied wildlife why not join our extension which takes us by train into the foothills of the Himalaya and thence to a resort beloved of Delhi's inhabitants, both now and during the British Raj - the hill station at Nainital. Now its elegance has faded somewhat but the picturesque town still retains a charm not least from its magnificent position over six thousand feet up and nestling below the aptly named Snow View Ridge. The panorama of great Himalayan peaks (including 26,000 foot Nanda Devi) away to the north is quite astounding and the birdwatching is excellent too with Lammergeiers and Himalayan Griffon Vultures soaring over the convoluted landscape. Various laughingthrushes and accentors are on the agenda and in woodlands are some of the glorious jewels of these hills such as Golden Bush Robin, Fire-capped Tit, Orange-flanked Bush-Robin and the immaculate Red-billed Blue Magpie. In Nainital's parks, gardens, meadows and pine forests we can see Black-headed Jay and the stunning Great Barbet whilst

brilliantly-coloured Slaty-headed Parakeets are abundant. It is a three hour journey back downhill to the wonderful Quality Inn. This is one of the finest wildlife lodges we've stayed at and we'll spend two nights here and one at the Dhikala compound as we explore the Kosi River valley and Corbett National Park. This is a fantastically rich area. Fabulous White-crested Laughing Thrushes will wake us with their maniacal laughter whilst Pallas's Fish Eagles and Mountain Hawk Eagles patrol the skies above the Inn. Both Tawny and Brown Fish Owls roost in trees down by the Kosi River where beautiful White-crowned and Plumbeous Water-Redstarts as well as the stunning Spotted Forktail live. Wintering Wallcreepers are not uncommon! Jungle Cats, Leopards and Tigers are all possible here and inside Corbett, where the supporting cast includes Hog Deer and birds such as the gorgeous Green Magpie, elegant Kalij Pheasant, Red Junglefowl, an amazing variety of woodpeckers, bulbuls and drongos and the rapacious Collared Falconet, itself no bigger than a Chaffinch. By the unspoilt banks of the Ramganga River we can watch the Gharial, a prehistoric-looking fish-eating croc, whilst strident Himalayan Crested Kingfishers patrol the banks. On the last day we return to Delhi before catching our return flight back to the UK on Day 21.

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