

West Bengal

Fairy-tale Creatures

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 To Delhi

After an evening departure from Europe we'll arrive late lunch time in Delhi and transfer to our hotel.

Day 3 fly to Bagdogra and drive to Singalila National Park.

After a relaxed breakfast in our hotel in Delhi we'll take a mid-morning flight to Bagdogra Airport. A scenic journey takes us the eighty kilometres through the region's famed tea gardens to Manebhanjan. Here we'll change to the vintage landrovers that will be used both transport us to and from Singalila but also when we need them on the day trips therein. From Manebhanjan the road winds quickly up to higher altitude and once we've entered the park proper well' pass through dense forests and bamboo brakes before reaching Habres Nest in the Tinchuley Forest. Our base for the next week.

Days 4 - 9 Singalila National Park & Tinchule Forest

Singalila is a land of fabulous beauty. Even before Sir Joseph Hooker visited the area it had been recognised as habitat and landscape worthy of protection. The British bought it from the Sikkim Durbar in 1883 and immediately declared it a forest reserve and it remained almost untouched for another century when 78 square kilometres were declared a national park. It also protects a rich cultural heritage as witnessed by the diverse cultural groups found in such a small area – the Tamangs, Newars, Lepchas, Chettris, Gurungs and Sherpas all inhabit the forests hereabouts.

The exotic cascading calls of Laughingthrushes emanate from the fairytale forests of Singalila, each tree bough seems carefully gardened with layers of moss interrupted by occasional orchids and Rhododendrons. The gnarled twisting branches of the oaks have the thickest load of all and it is along these that we'll be looking for the tell-tale orange-red furry ball that is the sleeping Red Panda. This cutest of animals is found in reasonable numbers in Singalila and we'll have a very good chance of encountering them during a week's stay in the Habre's nest. Habre is the local name for the Red Panda and nest a very good name for the rather lovely accommodation situated on Singalila's main ridge, seven thousand feet above the plains of Bengal. The views are simply sublime, with four of the five highest Himalayan peaks, Mount Everest, Kangchenjunga, Lhotse and Makalu, all visible from the ridge. There are other

fairy-tale creatures here too – the glorious Satyr Tragopan, stunning butterflies, improbably cute (and elusive) Wren Babblers, and possibly the even cuter, the vintage landrovers that are used as safari vehicles here! However Singalila is not like many Indian National Parks, there's no need to stay in the vehicle here, and in the main our landrovers will just be 'in support' or dropping us off or picking us up so that we can enjoy the wonderful forests in peace. Sleek and confident Yellow-throated Martens cross our trail from time to time hunting the Barking Deer which are common here. We might come across a Leopard Cat or Hodgson's Porcupine, particularly on nightwalks, but some of Singalila's more spectacular mammals, such as Himalayan Black Bear and Clouded Leopard, will require a lot of luck to connect with. The Leopards here are often of the black form! The list of amazing birds is impressive with all manner of Laughingthrushes, Woodpeckers, Nuthatches, Treecreepers, Tits, Yuhinas and Minivets. Highlights will likely include Blood Pheasant, Kalij Pheasant, Brown and Fulvous Parrotbills, Rosefinches, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, and the gorgeous Fire-tailed Myzornis. We'll see various Rosefinches, Hill and Rufous-throated Partridges, Bullfinches and a rich assortment of babbler-kind. There's lovely Crimson and Fire-tailed Sunbird whilst overhead soar Himalayan Griffon Vultures. A highlight will surely be the Beautiful Nuthatch, a bird of great beauty and of specific habits – it loves the thick epiphyte-laden boughs of the larger trees, and we'll look for it amongst oak ferns, mosses and orchids on such trees. The orchid riches are well-known with literally hundreds of species known from the area and we are visiting at pretty much peak season for their flowering. Rhododendrons are varied with eighteen species blooming mostly in April. Brilliant red *Rhododendron arboretum* is dominant at higher levels where the mixed oak, *Acer*, *Michellia*, *Sorbus*, and *Magnolia* forests grade into thick Silver Fir forests. In the lower woodlands we'll find huge flowered *Rhododendron dalhousiae* as well as pink *Rhododendron campanulatum*, elegant little *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* and both *Rhododendrons falconeri* and deep red *fulgens*. Primulas include the gorgeous *Primula capitata* and the delicate *Primula listeri* and other plants of note include *Meconopsis*, Iris and Cobra Lilies such as *Arisaema griffithii* and *Arisaema nepenthioides*.

Days 10 – 13(am) **Suntaleykhola**

On Day ten after breakfast the landrovers will return us to Manebhanjan and from there we'll make the journey to Chalsa. The other side of famed Darjeeling is Suntaleykhola situated at the southern end of the Neora Valley National Park and close by the Bhutanese border. It is the largest area of pristine habitat left in the state and has a diverse and largely intact mammal and bird fauna. Here we'll have further chances to see Red Panda. There is a good population of Gaur (Indian Bison) and Sambar here, and we'll also look for Goral and Serow. The magnificent Sultan Tit will be high on our wanted list, and there's a host of fine birds including Maroon Oriole, Slaty-backed Forktail and Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush. Parties of Long-tailed Sibilias mix with Orange-bellied Leafbirds, White-naped Black-chinned Yuhinas, and Grey-chinned and Short-billed Minivets

in the tree tops. We'll also see Ashy Bulbul, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Grey Nightjar, and both Golden-spectacled and Chestnut-crowned Warblers. Forests above our base are home to Hodgson's Giant Flying Squirrel and night time excursions will also help s to look for Jungle Cat and Indian Wild Dog. If we are very lucky we might find Clouded Leopard for this is the stronghold for this species in West Bengal. Leopard Cat and, near our accommodation, Jungle Cat, are quite possible too. Assamese Macaques are common and we'll also see **Semnopicticus hector**.

Days 13(pm)-17(am) Jaldapara

We'll finish the tour with several days in Jaldapara National Park set in the Terai in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas. Amongst the wide-open expanses of tall elephant grass we'll find the Indian One-horned Rhinoceros. The park holds the largest rhino population in India after Kaziranga National Park. Sambar and Spotted Deer are plentiful, and we'll see groups of Indian Elephants taking their daily baths on the shores of the great Torsha River. We've a good chance of Leopard here and there will be plenty of birds too with highlights being Great Indian Hornbill, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Thick-billed and Pin-tailed Green Pigeons, Pied Harrier, Hill Mynas, and Pallas's Fishing Eagle,

Day 17(pm) To Bagdogra and to Delhi

After driving to Bagdogra Airport we'll check-in for our flight to Delhi, then take lunch, and then catcher the early afternoon flight to Delhi where we'll transfer to our hotel.

Day 18 Departure

To Book a on this Holiday please fill in the booking form which you can download from www.greentours.co.uk (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post/fax to Greentours, PO Box 148, Buxton SK17 1BE, UK. Tel/Fax +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Butterfly, mammal and bird checklists are available.