

## Thailand-India Blog

### India

#### March 11: Fly to Delhi and live in luxury. Disaster in Japan.

Got up even earlier than usual to catch a 6:50am flight to Delhi. Had an uneventful flight and landed in Delhi at 9:35, with a time change of 1.5 hours. India insists on keeping time 30 minutes different from most of the rest of the world. We were spotted by the driver sent to pick us up before we saw him, a good sign. After a quick 20 minute ride, we were delivered to yet another luxury hotel where we planned to spend the next two days. Our introduction to India was quick: no fewer than five people were involved in checking us in and showing us to the room. In India, there is always someone ready to

provide any needed service.



I had insisted on a day to rest up. Linda insisted on sightseeing. We arranged a tour of some of the sights of the city, and a bit of shopping, for the next day. I happily set up a good internet access in the room and we called home using Skype, which cost us 2.3¢/minute instead of the usual telephone charges. We were prepared for a video call, but after a brief experiment with Charles, we abandoned that idea.

I was delighted to find live cricket on the tube. Linda was delighted to find some news again. We had a choice between CNN and BBC and switched back and forth between them. Shortly, we found that the news was dominated by an earthquake of magnitude 8.9 in Japan, followed by a devastating tsunami. The pictures were incredible.

Our guide for the next part of the trip, Mark Brazil, lives in Japan, and we immediately wondered if he was OK. Then we wondered if he would be able to join us. I sent off an email and received a reply a few hours later. He had left Japan 3 hours before the quake and would be in Delhi as planned. A later email informed us that his wife was OK; they lived in a part of Japan relatively unaffected by the quake. We still stayed glued to the tube most of the day, breaking only for a copious buffet lunch.

Linda hit the exercise room while I watched cricket live, something not usually available in the US. The ICC World Cup is going on now, and there are plenty of matches to watch, all using the One Day International format, limited to 300 balls (50 overs) for each side. England managed to lose a close match to Bangladesh.

#### March 12, 2011: Sightseeing and Shopping. We meet Mark Brazil.

After a nice buffet breakfast, we set off to see some of the sights of Delhi with an English-speaking guide, Rakeesh, and a driver. It was our first introduction to *real* Indian driving, since the route from the airport to our hotel involved a nice freeway. Here's the full story about Indian driving. To begin

with the roads range from *dual carriageways*, that is divided highways (often these are toll roads), to dirt tracks. Into this mix of roads pour a collection of every conveyance known to mankind:

- Trucks of every size and description
- Buses, also of every size and description
- Private cars
- Three wheel vehicles called *Tuk-tuks* that carry passengers and freight for hire
- Wagons, mostly filled with sacks of potatoes at present, pulled by everything from modern tractors to draft animals: horses, donkeys, camels, buffaloes
- Bikes, powered by motors or human power.
- Walking people of all ages, including young children that are frequently unsupervised.

The result was described in our pre-departure memo as *horrendous*. Actually, I think a better word is inf\*\*\*\*ingcredible. Driving in India, so we were told, requires three things:

1. Good horn
2. Good brakes
3. Good luck

The horn is used often. It means, “I’m coming thru, get out of the way.” Brakes are used to avoid hitting children and dogs who don’t get the warning. Luck is important as we learned on the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Rules of the road are treated as mere suggestions, and not very reasonable ones. Street signs are either exiguous or written in the strange Hindi script that we can’t read. (Fortunately, the driver usually can.) Stop signs are universally ignored. Stop lights are interpreted with some flexibility. At one major intersection we noted people actually stopping for red lights, but that was the exception.

Given all this, there is really only one way to approach Indian driving, and that involves closing your eyes until the vehicle comes to a complete stop. Then, if luck is with you, you will find yourself at the destination. Then you congratulate the driver on his skill and get out.

With that background, you can understand why we began the day early. Even though it was Saturday, we wanted to beat the main rush of traffic. At 8:30, we set out to explore Delhi. Our first stop was a new Hindu temple, Akshardham as it is usually known. It has another, far more complicated name that our guide recalled as if reciting a poem. It is only a few years old, and quite impressive.

However, we were even more impressed by the *Lotus Temple*, a Ba’hai temple designed to look like a lotus flower. We decided not to try to go inside, as that would have required standing in a queue for more than an hour. Instead, we opted for the Information Center, which explained the background of the religion as well as the techniques used to construct the building. Each *blossom* in the roof is covered with hundreds of marble slabs, each one constructed to exacting specifications. The building



has been called “the Taj Mahal of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

We also visited a museum, which was somewhat interesting, but overrated. Then, we did a little shopping. Linda wanted to buy a traditional Indian outfit to wear. I wound up buying a nice Cashmere sweater that will be just right for Austin winters. We bargained a bit, but wound up paying far more than we planned. Linda thinks they played us for suckers. I prefer to think we got a quality product.

We got back to the hotel in time to meet Mark Brazil for dinner, then went to bed. Tomorrow, we head out for some real birding.

### **March 13, 2011: Highway brinksmanship, Bharatpur and a Palace of Parakeets**

Up early, we met the Cloudmans at breakfast. They arrived after we went to bed last night. As soon as we were ready, we set off for Bharatpur, a legendary birding hot spot. We zipped along the freeway – after making a few interesting maneuvers to get headed in the right direction. Overnight, construction along the freeway had closed the obvious route. This is apparently a common problem in Gurgaon, the city in the Delhi area where we are located. Gurgaon is enjoying a building boom, the result of its connection to the information industry. *Cybercity* is a big area near the hotel, and we see many business people in the hotel. Laptops are common.

Then we found traffic again. We took a shortcut to avoid the heart of Delhi, which gave us a look at another side of Indian life. We crept along at a stately 30km/hr trying to avoid all the people and vehicles driving the wrong way along the shoulder. Although it was Sunday, there was still a great deal of activity. There is *always* a lot of activity in India.



At one point, we came to a total stop. It turned out to be a train crossing, and we had to wait for the train from Delhi to Agra to pass. Then, the fun started. The crossing was too small to allow two large trucks to pass each other, so whoever had the most nerve went first. The idea of taking turns doesn't seem to be part of Indian driving

etiquette, so after one truck set the pace, everyone on that side of the crossing followed in its wake. Unfortunately, the head of the line on our side was a bit timid, so we waited until finally our line began to move.

We saw part of the problem after we got across the tracks. A truck had stalled on the other side and all traffic had to work around it. A large trailer-tractor combination, not quite an 18-wheeler, but close, had tried to make it around the truck on the right hand side and wound up in a large ditch along the side of the highway. We wanted to get a photo, but didn't dare ask the driver to stop.

After that, things went fairly smoothly until we were 2km from Bharatpur. Then, we came to a bridge that was closed to large vehicles such as ours. We set off on a detour over unmarked roads





unfamiliar to our driver. After several tries, we hit on the correct road and arrived at our destination, a former Maharajah palace now operating as a hotel and restaurant. Rose-ringed Parakeets were everywhere; we got used to seeing these lovely birds frequently.

We had time to go birding in Keoladeo National Park, about 10 minutes drive away. One of the nice aspects of this outing was a great look at an Indian Scops-owl, a cousin of our Screech Owl, in a roost hole. It made itself available every day we were there, giving us many opportunities for photos. Terry probably has the best ones, but we managed to get the one shown above.



The main attraction of the park, which used to be a private hunting reserve for the Maharajah and friends, including Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, is the wet areas supporting a lot of water birds. A plaque in the park relates how many ducks were killed during these visits. The highest daily total was over 4000! Ironically, Curzon is probably best known for his wife's addition of sherry to turtle soup, now known as Lady Curzon soup. As the turtles used are endangered, the soup is seldom served these days.

### **March 14, 2011: Keoladeo NP: Owls and Monkeys**

We headed back into the park, using bicycle-powered rickshaws to get us to the wetlands quickly. Along the way, we encountered a large concentration of Rhesus Macaques, as well as the same owl we spotted on the previous day. We also saw Asian Spotted Owlet, which turned up several times during our visits. This was to prove the impetus for a major owl hunt later in the visit as we tried to find a Dusky Eagle-Owl, a relative of our Great Horned Owl that nests in the park.

Lifers came slowly. I drew ever closer to the milestone of 4000 species seen in the world. I told everyone about my prior milestones, always small brown birds. Number 1000 is lost in the mists of time, but the 2000<sup>th</sup> was a Zitting Cisticola, perhaps the quintessential LBJ. (LBJ is birder slang for Little Brown Job.) My 3000<sup>th</sup> species was the Brown-bellied Antwren, another small brown species that was part of a mixed feeding flock in Suriname. So, I was looking for something similar for the 4000<sup>th</sup>. What would it be?

### **March 15, 2011: Mark gets sick, Owl Hunt Surprise, Jim's Milestone**

Another day in Keoladeo NP began badly. Mark was obviously feeling punk, with what we hoped was just standard traveler's problems. Ultimately, he decided to head back to the hotel and go to bed, leaving us in the hands of Vijay, our Indian guide for this portion of the trip. Just before he left, he showed us a Blyth's





Reed-warbler, which I logged at #3998. Shortly after that, we way a Pallid Harrier for #3999, as I slowly drew closer to the goal.

After Mark left, we set off on the Great Owl Hunt. The local contact in the park knew of several areas where we had a chance to see the Dusky Eagle-owl, including a nest. However, the nest was no longer being used as the young had flown. He heard at least two of the owls and tramped around trying to locate them without success.

As a consolation prize, he offered us a view of a Rock Python. This huge snake can barely be

seen in the photo shown here. It was about 3 meters long and as big around as my fist. The female of this pair was supposed to be even bigger. Shortly after I grabbed this shot, the snake joined his mate in a hole nearby.

When we got back to the hotel, I thought about checking up on Mark, but his room was dark, so we decided to let him sleep. That turned out to be a bad decision. He told me later that he tried to call out to me but was too weak to manage it. Fortunately, Vijay did check on him and immediately took him to the hospital. After several hours in the hospital, he was well enough to join us in the morning.

Meanwhile, I ran the birds and got a surprise. The Brown-headed Barbet was listed as *heard only*, and hence not counted as a life bird. We had seen one well in the morning, so I had one more lifer than I expected.

Then I also discovered that the bird I had logged as Red-throated Flycatcher in Thailand was actually recognized by the Clements taxonomy as Taiga Flycatcher, making it a different species from the Red-breasted Flycatcher we saw in India. Thus, I got a retrospective lifer from the adjustment. The end result of all this was that I achieved the milestone of 4000 with one species to spare. Even better, my 4000<sup>th</sup> species was the lovely nondescript Blyth's Reed-warbler, another LBJ. My streak was intact!

### **March 16, 2011: More Indian Driving, Taj Mahal, Agra Shopping, Red Fort**

Today, we drove to Agra to see the sights, especially the world-famous Taj Mahal. We have seen numerous photos of the building from the entrance, with the reflecting pools in the foreground. Somehow, none of the photos showed the masses of tourists also in the foreground. Still, it is an impressive structure, and well worth the time required to visit.

We ate lunch at the Only Restaurant. That's really the name. It is certainly the most frequented establishment if not the only one around.

We then went to a place where they make marble artworks using the same style, materials, and techniques that went into the Taj. Without any effort, I found the most expensive piece in the place. The price is determined by the number of separate pieces of semi-precious stone inserted into the marble. The one we wound up buying had something like 19,000 inserts in a round plate about the size of our salad plates. I bargained somewhat and got a small item we intend as a present added for free, but still will have a higher MasterCard bill than anticipated waiting when we get home.

After that, we went to visit the Red Fort. The Mughal king who had the Taj Mahal built as a tomb for

his beloved wife – she died during the birth of their 14<sup>th</sup> child – was deposed by his son and imprisoned in the fort with a view of the tomb. I claimed that the son was angered because of the expense of the construction, which took 20,000 workers 22 years to complete.

After seeing the Red Fort, we drove to the Chambal Safari Lodge for our final day and half of birding before joining the main tour. We arrived in time for a walk around the lodge, picking up some new birds and an unexpected Common Palm Civet, *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*, sitting in a tree near



the dining area.

### **March 17, 2011: Chambal River downstream: River Dolphin, Jungle Cat, Indian Skimmer**

We set off early, planning on breakfast on the river. Today, we were going downstream to see a flock of endangered Indian Skimmers. Before we got to the river, we stopped along the road and picked up several new birds right away. The habitat is different here, less like that we had in Delhi in 2003, so lifers started to accumulate. Soon, we began to wonder what

would be Linda's 4000<sup>th</sup> bird.

It turned out that we had to walk from the end of the road to the boat. Part of the river is too shallow for any boat. Indeed, the river seemed low enough to wade across if it weren't for the presence of Marsh (or Muger) Crocodiles. While nowhere near the size of the Nile Crocs we saw in Uganda, they were still big enough to make one think twice.

We also had some views of the highly endangered Gharial, a strange crocodile that specializes in eating fish. It has a long thin snout and in the view we had showed two eyes and nostrils. We hoped for better looks tomorrow.

We did see the Indian Skimmers, a flock of about 90 birds on a sand bar. On the way there, we spotted a Ganges River Dolphin. It wasn't very cooperative; the best view we had showed the back and dorsal fin. Once, I thought I saw its snout briefly. We counted it anyway based on four different sightings.

One the way back, our guide spotted a Jungle Cat, *Felis chaus*, close by. We had wonderful views of this lynx-like cat that is usually very difficult to see. Later, our guide saw another, though much farther away.

We had to hike back to the van from the boat landing, a hot 30-minute walk thru sand and some thorny bushes. We were very happy to reach vehicle finally and head back to the lodge for lunch.



After lunch, we set off for what was supposed to be a 30 minute drive to an area where we could see a flock of Sarus Cranes. It turned into a marathon drive thru Indian villages crowded with people, taking a full two hours to get to our destination. At one point, I took a photo thru the windshield of the vehicle to try to convey the full impact of what driving can be like. We were pretty disgusted by the time we got to the field, though the sight of a flock of Rosy Starlings mollified us somewhat. After a short time birding, we headed back, arriving for dinner after dark.



### **March 18, 2011: Chambal River upstream: Gharials, Small Pratincole, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. Linda's almost milestone. Seven hours back to Delhi.**

Today, we headed upstream on the Chambal River. This had the great advantage of starting on a navigable part of the river, so we were able to drive to the boat. We were hoping to get good looks at Gharials, with Small Pratincoles and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse as a bonus. We were lucky enough to see all of them very well.

During a quick stop ashore, mainly to take advantage of a gully hidden from view of the river, we had a chance to photograph a fabulous White-browed Wagtail in full breeding plumage.

We went up as far as a small rocky island where we saw at least 50 of the beautiful Pratincoles. Their plumage, with no feather out of place, reminds me of the look of Cedar Waxwings back home.

They were so close on the island that we were able to photograph them as well. They aren't usually so easy to get a good look at. We also saw at least 20 Gharials, but they are very shy, and submerged as soon as we got close enough to try to get a photo. Still, we were glad to have seen this very vulnerable species.

The Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse came to drink from the river, giving us fantastic looks. We had a male and female in the scope at the same time. We celebrated that as Linda's 4000<sup>th</sup> species, only to discover that we had already seen them in Delhi in 2003. We'll have to wait until later to finish off her milestone.



Then, it was time to deal with Indian traffic again. The Hindu festival of Holi is coming this weekend, and thousands of people were traveling to visit relatives. Virtually any wheeled vehicle was loaded way beyond their design capacity. The record for a tuk-tuk is said to be 19 people. We never saw one that overloaded, but we saw several vehicles with 8 people hanging onto the back.

Moreover, large trucks simply stopped along the road, often to deal with repairs, but sometimes just for a break. The highway engineers had not thought to provide roadside rest areas, so the trucks simply took the outside lane. Dual carriageways were thus turned into one lane roads.



Our driver seemed to be quite skillful, so eventually, we just closed our eyes and let him deal with the problem. Seven hours later, we were safely back at the incredibly luxurious hotel in Delhi preparing to join with the main tour.

Tomorrow, we get to sleep in. Our first meeting isn't until 8:30. Then we have a day of sightseeing around Delhi.

## March 19, 2011: Sightseeing in Delhi

Today was devoted to playing tourist in Delhi. We started in New Delhi, seeing the area devoted to embassies and government offices. This is a carefully planned development, with wide roads, planted medians, and many roundabouts. It reminded us of Washington, DC.

Then, we descended into "old" Delhi, the original city that existed before the major construction of the new area beginning in 1911. This is a warren of narrow streets crammed with traffic and people. We switched to pedal rickshaws to explore this area, supposedly because it was more efficient, but maybe just for the experience. The noise level when you're in an open carriage down with the poorly maintained mufflers and loud horns cannot be appreciated without actually being there. We wished we had ear plugs. However, then we wouldn't have heard the driver pointing out interesting things as we passed. We found the MacDonal'd's that was being turned into a cineplex one of the least expected. I wanted to get a photo of a hole-in-the-wall shop we passed called Office Depot, but there was no place to stop, and the ride bounced too much to get a shot.



We toured an area of spice shops. Most of these were closed for the Holi festival, which seems to take up the entire weekend. Many people live in apartments reached via dark stairways, and others seem to live out on the roof, with only a sheet over their heads. They bathed on the roof, stripping down to underwear but fortunately no further. Despite their obviously strained circumstances, the inhabitants of the area managed to have a few modern conveniences.

The aroma of red peppers and other spices cloyed the air, and soon most of us were sneezing and coughing. We retreated to the relatively purity of the outside air.



Another rickshaw ride took us back to our bus, which then transferred us to a nice restaurant for lunch. After that, we toured the area of India Gate, a large memorial arch. Originally constructed by the British to honor war dead in World War I, now the gate is simply a symbol of India. I found it much



less impressive than the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

More impressive was the Qutab Minar, a tower built by one of the Mughal emperors. A later emperor began a tower five times the size of the first one, but the empire didn't last long enough to complete it. The surviving tower appears to be in excellent shape. While we were there, we managed to see



Alexandrine Parakeets shortly after we arrived, which we celebrated as Linda's milestone bird.

Finally, we went to a shopping area devoted to Indian crafts, where Linda managed to find yet another piece of Indian clothing to buy. I had been told to try to find paper maché boxes, something that would cost about \$5. I had them on my radar screen when a nice man touched me on the shoulder to inform me that my wife needed me. He took me back to his stall, where we depleted my supply of cash.

Finally, we returned to the hotel in modern Gurgaon, and our hotel with satellite TV and good internet connections. We had our first dinner with the entire group, during which Mark announced Linda's milestone to general astonishment by the group, most of whom were not serious birders. After dinner, we made some phone calls back to the states using Skype, and the final 20 overs or so of India's trouncing of the West Indies in the Cricket World Cup.

## March 20, 2011: The Temple Complex at Khajuraho



Up a bit earlier this morning for a quick transfer to the airport, where we caught a plane for Khajuraho, a World Heritage Site of ancient temples. The temples are an impressive example of stone carving, but are most famous for the depiction of everyday life in the area at the time they were built. The depiction leaves nothing out, and the x-rated sculpture is a major attraction.

Our guide addressed the question of why 108 is a special number in Hindu and Buddhist tradition. In Thailand, we found out that we were due some good luck because the pile of coins we bought to donate contained exactly 108 coins. Several of the objects in the temple repeated this theme. We were told that it



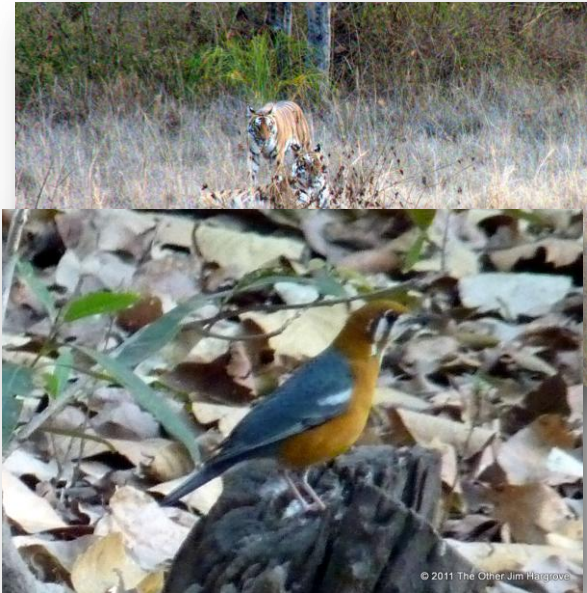
was because there are 12 signs in the Zodiac and 9 planets, and  $108 = 12 \times 9$ . This is pure hogwash, since the people at the time of the carving had no idea there were nine planets, and today we have only 8 after demoting Pluto. I tried to explain that  $108 = 2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3$  or  $2^2 \times 3^3$ , which I like as an explanation.

No one else buys this.

Our guide also explained that Hinduism is actually a monotheistic religion, that all the gods are simply manifestations of the one god. I commented to the Cloudmans, “If I were a born skeptic, and I am, I might suggest some theological revisionism is going on.”

Our hotel in the town unexpectedly had free WiFi, allowing for a quick note back home and some phone calls before we hit the sack. Tomorrow we start early to go to Bandhavgahr.

### **March 21, 2011: Bandhavgahr NP: Tigers!**



After breakfast, we set off for Bandhavgahr National Park, about 4 hours or so away. We’ve learned by now that travel time estimates in India must have some poetic license. The name of the park has more letters than it seems to require as the pronunciation is something like *Bandagar*. It is famous as a Tiger reserve, having the largest density of *Pantera tigris* in the world. We arrived in time for lunch and a short rest before boarding jeeps for a tour of the park. The rules are arcane: the first tour begins at sunrise and ends at 10:15; the second begins at 3:15 and ends at sunset, which is about 6:15 at present. You must stay in your assigned jeep at all times, which means that careful attention to liquid intake at lunch is essential.

We were lucky in our first outing and managed to see three tigers, a mother and two of her almost-grown cubs. She was known to have four cubs, two males and two females, and some people watching the group claimed to see another one in the background. We were more than satisfied with the view we had, and managed to take the enclosed photo, showing the mother and one of the cubs.

The park is due to the work of one man, Kailash Sankhala, who began in 1956 to call for protection of the tigers. Today, the Tiger is the national animal of India and protected throughout the country. An estimated 4000 tigers remain in the wild, down from a population estimated at 25,000 in 1900, when they were still being actively hunted. [Correction: The number according to a presentation we had is less than 1000. There are estimated to be 12,000 in exotic game ranches in North America.]

We have also seen several new birds in the park, and one fairly common one that is not a lifer, but still a beautiful bird, Orange-headed Ground Thrush. We saw many of these in Bhutan, but this is a different subspecies, with lovely black and white stripes on the face. I thought it should be called Tiger Thrush for its coloring, but that local name is reserved for Scaly Thrush, which doesn’t look remotely like a tiger.

### **March 22, 2011: Bandhavgahr NP: Linda’s New Favorite Bird®**

Yesterday, we noticed several people riding in the jeeps wearing surgical masks. “How quaint,” we



thought. Today, we made sure we had scarves to cover our mouth and nose. Despite various maneuvers by our driver, we frequently wound up eating dust from the vehicles in front of us.

This morning, we were watching a Brown Fish Owl, which we have seen repeatedly, when another jeep roared past. “Tiger! Tiger!” they shouted. “Brown Fish Owl!” I shouted back. They roared off and we quickly turned around to race to the spot where the tiger had been seen. We found a lone cat (female according to our guide) sleeping. As we were watching, our driver noted, “Crested Treeswift overhead.” We

all ignored the tiger in favor of the bird we had been searching for. The scene had some comic overtones. Our driver was watching the people in the next jeep, who were watching us in astonishment as we watched the Treeswift. No one was looking at the tiger.

In the afternoon, Linda saw her New Favorite Bird<sup>®</sup>, a Malabar Pied Hornbill that flew overhead and landed in a bare tree for a perfect view. Alas, we weren’t able to get a good shot of the bird for this report. Here are some on the web.



## **March 23, 2011: Bandhavgahr NP: Tiger ClusterF\*\*\* (Apologies to Jon Stewart)**

Yawn! Another day, another Tiger. Today, we were happily birding when we spotted an amazing conglomeration of jeeps by the side of the road, a sure sign a tiger is in the area. This is an even better indicator than animal alarm calls. Of course, we had to join the scrum. We learned that a male, almost grown, had gone down to a water hole for a drink. He was out of sight when we arrived, but appeared shortly. Then, he walked along the dike around the water hole and into the forest. Quick! Try to get to a position to see it again. We raced other jeeps to a spot where we saw him walking. Terry's camera clicked off shot after shot as he simply held the shutter button down. The tiger disappeared into the forest again, setting off another mad scramble. This time, though, the viewing was over. Instead of a photo of this madness, we have a shot of a gorgeous, as yet unidentified, butterfly.



## **March 24, 2011: Best Tiger Yet**

Today, about 10 minutes into our jeep drive, we had our best tiger sighting so far. A single male lay in the grass grooming himself. He looked so much like one of our cats that it was almost funny. Finally, he sat up, yawned several times, and headed off. Soon it was out of sight in the reeds.



Another tour participant, Sarah Kodalen, had a Canon camera similar to the one I left at home and had asked for a lesson in using it before we set out. She captured the photo shown at left, using one of my tips. So, when I asked if I could use the photo, she was happy to agree. These cats are truly magnificent beasts and we feel very fortunate to have seen them so often. Some members of the tour waited until yesterday afternoon for their first look at one.

We also got a great look at a pair of Painted Spurfowl, which allowed us to finally identify the

“mystery bird” we saw on the road to Bandhavgahr. We'd been back and forth, but now we agreed that the bird we had seen was a female Painter Spurfowl. Whew!

Last night, we noticed the lodge owner reading e-mail and discovered we could get on the net. So, I am sending out this note now, as we won't have access again until we get to Calcutta (Kolkotta), several days from now.

## **March 25, 2011: Travel Day, Driving to Kanha**

Today, we spent the whole day driving to Khana, a distance of 250km. In Texas, that would be nothing,



but this is India, and our route took us thru rural Mayda Pradesh. We stopped in a couple of villages along the way, mostly just for a break. After one stop, Linda discovered her camera missing. She thinks someone picked her pocket in the village, but we can't eliminate the possibility that it simply fell out of her pocket. At any rate, this nice pocket camera bought to replace the one she left on the roof of our car in California has long outlasted most of its predecessors. Alas, we had not downloaded photos from the camera in several days, so those are lost. Here she is with it, shortly after buying some crisps for the trip.

We arrived at our home for the next four days, the Kanha Jungle Lodge, at dusk. We had a short wait until time for the Asian Giant Flying Squirrel to make an appearance. Unfortunately, our group had an attack of the sillies, caused by too much confinement during the course of the trip. There was so much laughing that the squirrel refused to come out of its hole. Maybe the rain during the day had something to do with it.

### **March 26, 2011: Kanha Jungle Lodge, Giant Flying Squirrel**

Today, we began our exploration of Kanha National Park, another tiger preserve. Although there are many tigers here, they are harder to see than in Bandhavgahr. As a consolation, we have many new birds to watch.

The Little Green Bee-eater is a common bird, one we have see almost every day so far. It's easy to get blasé about it, as it is a very beautiful creature. The picture here is intended as a placeholder for the one Terry captured. Shortly after I took this photo, a second bee-eater landed on the same stalk of grass, and Terry managed to snap the shutter at just the right moment to show the second bird lighting on the stalk, wings still extended. It is really a great picture that I plan to share later.



### **March 27, 2011: Kanha NP: Breakfast on the Escarpment, Insect walk**



This morning, being Sunday (I know because our guide told us), we planned to go to a different part of the park to avoid the crowds. And crowds there were! Many Indians, mostly with kids included, came to the park to see the tigers. We went to have breakfast atop the Escarpment, the highest point in the park at 875meters above sea level, with a lovely view of the area below. We saw just how extensive the preserve is. Several small areas could be identified as former villages forced to



relocate to make room for the tigers. We managed to get some new birds on the way and saw Crested Treeswifts perched for the first time. A male and female delighted us by providing an automatic 5-star rating for mating while we watched. They became Linda's New Favorite Bird<sup>®</sup>, displacing the Malabar Pied Hornbill from the top spot after only a few days.

Before lunch, we had a chance to wander the grounds of the lodge looking at butterflies and other insects. I managed to get this marvelous shot of an unidentified dragonfly that our hostess says is new to her.

In the afternoon, we returned to the park and found another good tiger sighting. I took some video of the tiger as it walked across a grassy area. The video needs some processing, so it will have to wait until we get back to Austin. The sighting was attended by the usual melee of cars jockeying for position. I wished I had taken video of that, but we were bouncing around so much it wasn't possible.

## March 28, 2011: How to see Tigers Best

This morning, we rose even earlier than usual, at 4:45 so we could be among the first vehicles into the park,



thereby gaining a low number for future activities.



We had heard that

there might be a "tiger show" today, where we would have a chance to view the beasts from the back of an elephant. The strategy was to get a low number, then race to the area to register for an elephant ride, converting our low number into a place near the front of the queue. Then, we stalled by driving around the roads nearby, getting two new birds in the process, before racing back to get in line for the elephant ride.

The plan worked well. All of us were near the front of the queue when the mahouts and their elephants located a resting tiger. We missed being in the first cohort and had to wait about 30 minutes for our chance. Then we raced to the elephant assembly

spot, mounted our steed, which is not as easy as you might think, and walked sedately to a spot less than 10 meters from the tiger. We took lots of photos. The one shown here is my favorite. We were really close. The tiger and elephant obviously had a long working relationship and weren't concerned with each others presence. The tiger is a female, 11 years old; the elephant, a male, 15 years old. Linda asked the Mahout how long the elephant lived. "Yes," was his reply. That happens frequently. The guides and other personnel have learned to recognize standard questions and answer them easily, which leads us to think they speak English.

Just to break the monotony of all the tiger photos, I've included this shot of a Crested Serpent-eagle. The bird hung around the same branch for the entire time we were in Kanha. We saw it every day.





## March 29, 2011: Travel day, with Tigers for Breakfast

Up at 4:45. I packed while Linda got ready for another try to see tigers from elephant back again. I opted for another birding outing. Jenny had two lifers on the trip, and we saw what would surely have been Linda's New Favorite Bird if she had been there. We had spectacular views of Blue-capped Rock-thrush, both male and female. We had seen the bird several times in Bhutan, but it is still a magnificent species. We also had a fleeting view of Four-horned Antelope, a diminutive

creature with the scientific name *Tetraceros quadricornis*, which translates to Four-horned four-horned in both Greek and Latin.

However, Linda trumped us by managing to see a female tiger eating a recently-killed Sambar deer. We should have some video of the actual feast, but to whet your appetite, here is a still shot.

Then we had another trip thru rural Madyha Pradesh followed by a short flight to Kolkata, which used to be Calcutta. We arrived at our hotel late, about 11:00 in the evening. Tomorrow, we fly to Assam for our final stop before heading home. This may be our latest update until we get home unless we manage to send one from Delhi.

## March 30, 2011: Travel Day: Kolkata to Jorhat and Kaziranga NP

Not much to report today. We fought our way thru the traditional Indian traffic, Kolkata style, to the airport, where we waited around for our [delayed] flight to Jorhat. We had a real plane (737-800) instead of a turbo-prop for this trip. That translated into 3 abreast seating, making the smaller plane a preferred option despite Jenny's misgivings about small planes. We finally left only about an hour behind schedule.

After we landed and got into vehicles for the trip to Kaziranga, we found the roads almost deserted. India and Pakistan were playing in the semi-final round of the ICC World Cup (Cricket). I missed most of India's batting, locating a TV set in the Deplui River Lodge, our hotel, in time to see the end of India's innings. The match is a 50-over One Day International format, which in case you're not up on Cricket means that each side gets a chance on 300 balls, 6 at a time. The afternoon was devoted to India's turn to bat; the evening, to Pakistan's.

After dinner, I watched a bit over half of Pakistan's innings, but as we had to get up at 4:45, I went to bed before it was over. India won by 30 runs, to everyone's relief. The final match, against Sri Lanka, will be on Saturday, our last day in the field. That means I will probably only be able to see the end of the match after dinner again.

## March 31-April 3, 2011: Dephlui River Lodge, Kaziranga NP: Rhinos, and more, from Elephant-Back

I've combined these days as they were all quite similar. We arose early, about 4:30 a.m., when the sky was just beginning to grow light. We are far east now, in the part of India almost disconnected from the main peninsula, with Bangladesh stuck in between. As all of India is in one time zone, which happens to be offset 30 minutes from the rest of the world, this means that dawn and dusk both occur early here. After some quick tea and bickies, we set off for Kaziranga National Park, an extensive area of *terai* habitat. Terai is formed from sand eroded from the Himalayas and brought down by the might Brahmaputra river, which is quite unmighty now, waiting for the monsoon. The soil is quite rich and has been adapted for agriculture over much of its former extent. Only a national park in Nepal and this one in Assam remain.

The park contains quite a diverse collection of wildlife, including still more tigers. We have learned that a recently completed census of the tiger population puts the total at about 1700 individuals in India, somewhat more than our host in Kanha thought, but quite a bit lower than the 4000 official estimate. It turns out that the previous estimate was based on reports sent in by the rangers in the various tiger preserves. No one wanted to admit that their tigers had all been extirpated, so they kept reporting the previous numbers. Finally, someone got wise of the problems with the numbers. The current estimate is based on both automatic cameras located along trails in the preserve and the kind of DNA analysis of fur derided by John McCain during the 2008 election.

However, the real attraction of the park is the large numbers of Indian One-horned Rhinoceros. The best way to see these is by riding elephants, so that is what we did every day we were there. The first day, we drove into the park to Elephant Point #2, arriving about 6:30 when the ride from Point #1 was finishing up. We then rode back to Point #1. The second day, we reversed this, riding the first ride. The third we repeated the first ride. Each day, we saw several rhinos, including several females with young. I've included two photos of these animals in this report.

We also added some new birds to our list, which is now over 525 for the entire trip and about 285 for the India portion of the trip. We have several new mammals as well, including the Capped Langur monkeys we saw feeding in a tree in the Park.

Afternoons were devoted to some activities in areas near the park. The birders walked along the edge of a tea plantation next to a forest while non-birders visited a nearby village. The area is famous for the tea plantations, which have been here for many years and produce a special variety of tea. We've developed a taste for *masala chai*, a combination of tea with herbs such as cardamon and cinnamon, milk, and sugar. I'm ready to get back to real coffee, though. The only coffee available in most places in India (and Thailand as well for that matter) is instant.



On Saturday, Linda opted for a final safari into the park, while I stayed to watch the finals of the ICC Cricket World Cup on TV. India and Sri Lanka squared off for the match, starting at 2:30 p.m., in Mumbai. The estimated audience for the event was huge, probably more than 1 billion people. Terry and I were the only Americans present with the manager of the Lodge. The staff had to stay outside the TV room and watch thru the plate glass window.

Linda naturally had a lifer while I was engaged with the cricket, Tickell's Leaf-warbler, apparently one of the few *Phylloscopus* warblers easy to ID. I was sorry to miss a lifer, particularly one I will no doubt have trouble catching up on, but I loved the cricket. It was probably the only chance I will ever have to watch a final of World Cup Cricket in the country where it is being played, not to mention the chance to cheer on the host country.

The match started poorly for Sri Lanka, and for a while I thought it would be no contest, but they steadily improved through the afternoon, and finished with an amazing flurry of runs in the final four overs. The target for India was 275 runs for the evening.

After dinner, Linda retired and I returned to the TV room. After an initial disaster where India lost its two best batsmen early for a scant 18 runs, they settled down for a long chase. Throughout the match, India's run scoring pace was greater than Sri Lanka's at the equivalent stage, but still not enough to win the match. About 9:45 p.m., with the result very much in doubt, a rainstorm appeared and knocked out the satellite TV. We fretted and waited for the rain to quit and the signal to return. Finally, after about 30 minutes it came back. I didn't want to go back to our cabin in the rain, so I waited it out with the natives. When the TV came back on, it was late in the match, but India still had a good chance to win it. And then they did, with the same kind of flurry of scoring Sri Lanka had put on during the afternoon. The winning shot was a might 6 (the cricket equivalent of a home run) hit into the stands. Fireworks went off all over the country, including our area. I got to bed about 11:00 after a very enjoyable day.

This morning, we again arose early to pack for the start of our return trip. This involved yet another sortie into the maelstrom of Indian traffic. Our vehicles were late arriving, not a good sign, but one that gave me a chance to tag one final lifer, Crimson Sunbird, near the lodge while we were waiting. Linda had seen one in Kanha that I had missed.

We drove to Guwahati, the big city in Assam, for the flight to Delhi. Then, we fly to Doha and on to Houston. The drive was an excruciating series of traffic jams, all of them involving large trucks filled with road construction materials. The final 20 km to the airport was a struggle where we narrowly avoided collisions on more than one occasion. One jam was caused by a bus-truck incident that seemed fairly minor but blocked two "lanes" of the highway. Actually, of course, there are no lanes marked on the road, and they would be ignored anyway.

Finally, with bladders near the bursting point, we made it in time for a quick lunch before boarding the plane to Delhi, where I am typing this. We hope to be able to change our ticket in Delhi and leave for Houston 24 hours earlier than planned. Otherwise, we have another day in Delhi before heading out.

It has been a long but a very rewarding trip, and we are ready to be back in the USA.





