

NORTHERN INDIA**6th November to 21st November 2005****Frances Boreham and John van der Dol, Mike Brimson, Sue Cook, Graham Crick, Gaynor Cross, Ian Hodgson, Paul Howe, Jim Law, Vida Madell, Sheila Seed and Brian Short**<http://www.sandwichbirdtours.co.uk/docs/India2005.doc>

The river Chambal appeared suddenly beyond deeply fissured sandbanks with thorny scrub thickets that bordered the track into the sanctuary; a wide channel of deep blue-grey water rushing over boulders in a broad, shallow bed that clearly holds a good deal more water in times of flood.

A brisk breeze blew down the valley as we boarded the waiting boat, accompanied by an armed guard, not for protection against crocodiles but from the dangerous human inhabitants of the area. Although we did not know at the time, one of the area's most notorious bandits had been killed in a gun battle with the police less than a week before our visit.

Ghariahs and Marsh Muggers lay patiently on sandbars as we passed steadily upriver, picking out Great Thick-knees, River Lapwings, Black Ibis, Black-bellied Terns and an early party of Bar-headed Geese on the edge of the river and Blue Rock Thrush and an adult Bonelli's Eagle on the sandy crags above. The attraction of the river is Indian Skimmer, and we came perilously close to missing it, an increased amount of water having reduced the population from over 80 a week or so earlier to just one, that stood on a grassy spit as we floated quietly by, flying out into the channel and past us in a close up display that justified the effort in getting here.

Lunch at Chambal Safari Lodge, near Bah, with the couple who operate the trips to the Chambal Sanctuary was the best yet; stuffed tomato, raita, okra curry, dal and rice, with the added attraction of a colony of flying foxes in their grounds. Waving goodbye, we left this oasis of calm and rejoined the chaos outside, retracing our steps to Agra and the Taj Mahal, surely one of the most magnificent of man's creations on this little planet.

RAJASTHAN, NW INDIA**1st–11th December 2005****Robert Oates and Ian Barthorpe**<http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/india/Rajasthan-3/raj-dec-2005.htm>**Saturday 3rd December 2005**

The drive to the Chambal Safari Lodge took about an hour, during which we added the first hoopoe and Egyptian vulture of the trip, as well as a gorgeous black-shouldered kite – though we couldn't stop to watch any of them. I also saw a few common babblers in the villages.

On arrival at the Lodge, we were greeted by the owner and enjoyed a quick cup of tea before heading out for the boat trip. Jungle babblers and ring-necked parakeets were common in the grounds, as were northern palm squirrels. I flushed a hoopoe from just a few feet away, but we both missed the greater coucal that Manoj saw.

The drive from the Lodge to the river Chambal was an eye-opener as we passed through a town that looked rather ramshackle, with many poor communities. The streets were, nonetheless, full of bank and common mynas. Heading into the reserve, we passed many people removing

wood on the back of camels, or on their heads (a practice that we discovered was illegal but ignored by the authorities). We saw a few common babblers in the drier areas.

As we reached the river, we were immediately rewarded with good views of one of our target species. About 30 Indian skimmers were resting on an island within feet of the waiting boat. We couldn't believe our luck, and ran off several pictures despite looking into the sun. A gorgeous white-browed wagtail fed nearby, as did a greenshank.

Boarding the boat, we briefly disturbed the skimmers, giving great views of the flock in flight, but they quickly settled back down. A few ruddy shelducks were on the river, and red-wattled and river lapwings fed on the bank. Redshank and dunlin were familiar reminders of home, and a kestrel hunted along the deforested slopes.

It wasn't long before our next quarry was found. The first gharial was just a snout breaking the surface, but we soon saw several of these magnificent reptiles basking on the banks. Less expected were several marsh crocodiles, while a group of soft-shell turtles posed comically on an island. We both ran off many pictures of the gharials most of which easily reached twelve feet long.

Further along the river we flushed a small group of wigeon as we approached a group of five black ibises – a nice bonus. Alongside these we saw both river terns and black-bellied terns and a little cormorant.

Rounding a spit, we saw a golden jackal running along the bank, having been flushed from a dead cow by a stunning red-headed vulture. A group of bar-headed geese fed nearby. We watched the vulture for several minutes before it took to the air and soared off high. Spectacular!

Looking up at the ridge we spotted first one then two more large raptors. Despite good views, it took us a few minutes to confirm the identification as Bonelli's eagles – an adult and immature. After more excellent views of gharials and marsh crocodiles, we started the return trip looking unsuccessfully for Gangetic dolphins. We did see plain martins over the river and desert wheatear and common sandpiper on the bank.

Back at the mooring, we again had excellent views of the Indian skimmers, with better light for photographs. They were joined briefly by a pied kingfisher. We also spotted a distant osprey.

On the drive back to the Lodge, I saw a probable Montagu's harrier, two grey francolins, a bee-eater species (possibly blue-tailed) and two black redstarts. Back at the Lodge we enjoyed a pleasant light meal, and were rewarded with views of Indian grey hornbills and plum-headed parakeets. I found two Tickell's leaf warblers in the scrub. We were then taken to see at least 20 roosting flying foxes in the grounds. We had another good view of a hoopoe here, too.

NORTHERN INDIA

21st December 2005 – 2nd January 2006

Mark Lopez & John Pegden

<http://www.surfbirds.com/cgi-bin/tripreports/pfp.cgi?>

Day 10 – Saturday 31st

We arrived at Mathura at about 4am and were able to meet our new driver after negotiating the chaos of the train station and managing to locate the exit (no easy task!).

A slow journey to Chambal Safari Lodge then ensued with us arriving around 8am. A stroll around the gardens of the lodge produced 2 Yellow-wattled Lapwings in the fields by the entrance track and 2 Jungle Prinias were identified in the scrub before we continued onto the river safari. The baked mudflats surrounding the river Yamuna held several new birds for the trip, a flock of 15+ Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse took flight just as we arrived, whilst 2 Desert Wheatears, 2 Crested Larks and an Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark were noted on the ground.

Before even getting onto the boat 2 River Terns and a Black-bellied Tern were noted roosting on small islands, and it wasn't long into the boat journey before we observed the main target, a flock of 32 Indian Skimmers. Bar-headed Geese were numerous along the river with over 150 birds noted amongst other wildfowl including Red-crested Pochard, Ruddy Shelduck and Lesser Whistling Duck. Up to 4 Great Thick Knees were observed on various islands along the journey whilst several Temminck's Stints and a Marsh Sandpiper were observed feeding on the river edge and more River and Black-bellied Terns brought the total up to 4 and 5 respectively. Gharials and Marsh Crocodiles were common on the river whilst we were lucky to gain several brief views of a Ganges Dolphin. On the return to the landing quay 11 Black Ibis could be observed feeding on the far bank and a Brown Crake was an excellent if somewhat elusive final sighting on the river.

A REPORT FROM BIRDTOURS.CO.UK, NORTHERN INDIA, DELHI, UTTARANCHAL, CHAMBAL AND BHARATPUR

17th – 31st December 2005,

Author Participants: Alf King (54) and Jeannine King (53)

<http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/india/india-36-N/n-India-dec-05.htm>

Chambal Safari Lodge: Initial impressions were not outstanding, probably due to the overnight train journey and 3 hour road transfer. Over the course of the day however this proved to be one of the highlights of the trip and we wished that we had stayed here an extra night. Overall the camp and the river should be visited by any birder coming to the area. The accommodation was rustic once more but the service, friendliness and general atmosphere was outstanding with drinks around the campfire preceding an excellent dinner in great company. Some comments elsewhere have complained that it is relatively expensive, but these should be taken within the context of the overall quality of the experience.

28th December

At least this meant that we were wide awake when the train arrived at Mathura at 4.30 am. Here we were collected by another driver for the three hour transfer to Chambal Safari Camp. There were no birding highlights of this journey it being early morning, whilst we had a brief insight into the traffic chaos of Agra even at that time. At Chambal a most welcome breakfast was awaiting us as was our rustic but comfortable accommodation.

We set off for the Chambal River, a journey that took an hour thanks to frequent stops to see birds. The difference in eco-system compared with the high grounds of the north was very noticeable, as was the temperature. First there were Yellow-wattled Lapwings in the fields then Grey Francolin in the undergrowth with Indian Peafowl being seen quite frequently and Hoopoe and Indian Roller were common. Rose-ringed and Plum-headed Parakeets were also frequently seen and in a small roadside pool we saw Brown Crake and White-breasted Waterhen.

On reaching the river we were presented with a breathtaking vista with the early mists still departing from the river surface revealing the camel carts that are typical of the region ambling slowly across the pontoon bridge and providing excellent photo-opportunities. The presence of armed guards to protect us from groups of dacoits who supposedly populated the region was insufficient to quell our excitement at the sight of such a good bird area. A brief wander along the river edge produced Bar-headed Geese*, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruddy Shelduck and Lesser-whistling Ducks in profusion whilst Sand Martins passed to and fro. As always in India the absence of gulls from inland waters was surprising to someone from the UK.

We boarded the small boat for our river cruise which was handled sympathetically by the boatman in obtaining good bird sightings without being too intrusive to scare the birds themselves. First up we saw a group of Black-bellied Terns* then many of the commoner waterfowl: Gadwall, Common Teal and Red-crested Pochard. The ubiquitous White-throated Kingfisher was accompanied by Pied also. An immature Bonelli's Eagle was watching proceedings from the side whilst numerous waders could be seen: Common Redshank, Green Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilt, River Lapwing and Temminck's Stint, with Greater Thick-knee standing on the banks and Great-crested Grebe making its only appearance of the trip. The usual egrets, herons and cormorants were in attendance as always whilst a small group of Black Ibis* put in an appearance as we rounded the bend. Loafing on the mud-banks and spits were numerous Marsh Mugger crocodiles with a few enormous specimens amongst them whilst further on were many Gharials resting motionless. We were searching for our main targets for some time until on a far island we could see a group of more than 30 Indian Skimmers* with a few River Terns* to be seen in their midst. Shortly all of these birds rose for a brief circuit showing off their markings in all their glory.

The river still had one more secret to reveal in the form of Gangetic Dolphins but these are both very scarce and travel considerable distances so you are dependent upon luck rather than judgement if you are to see them. Clearly we were out of the former after cruising around for an hour so we set off back to the landing. In doing so we were suddenly aware of a light splashing on the river and then saw the dorsal fin and a small part of the back of a dolphin ahead. Up to three of these animals then came close to the boat providing clear but tantalisingly brief views, which were very satisfying for all that.

We disembarked then cast around for other delights that this area might bring and weren't too long in finding them. First a male Bluethroat appeared in the scrub and as we were watching him we became aware of another group of birds, Ashy-crowned Sparrow larks this time. Careful scrutiny of the bare sand ahead then revealed three Desert Wheatears* that almost ran under the feet of passers by accompanied by Sand Larks* and a Blue Rock Thrush displayed nearby. All in all a most satisfactory morning's birding.

We returned to the camp and after a good lunch Ranbir and I took a longish walk around the perimeter of the grounds which proved to abound with birds. Of the very many that we saw a number stood out, notably a Yellow-crowned Woodpecker*, Coppersmith Barbet, a group of Indian Grey Hornbills, Asian Koel, a young Spotted Owlet in the bough of a tree, Laughing Doves, Eurasian Collared-doves, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Shikra, Rufous Treepie, Ashy Woodswallow, Small Minivet, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Indian Robin, Black Redstart, Brahminy

Starling, Asian Pied Starling, White-eared Bulbul, Grey-breasted Prinia, Common Tailorbird, Hume's Warbler, Common Babbler*, Large Grey Babbler*, Jungle Babbler, Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, White Wagtail, Indian Silverbill, and Scaly-breasted Munia.

After a couple of hours rest and a shower we were ready for dinner. The power supplies in rural areas are even more temperamental than in the towns and Chambal was no exception with storm lanterns being provided for illumination when there are cuts. Just as we went for dinner there was such a cut and we used a small torch to see our way. We were so far into the country however that there was no light pollution to be seen and the absence of electric light combined with a clear sky meant that we were presented with the most outstanding night sky that either of us has ever seen – truly memorable. A really delightful meal was preceded by drinks and snacks and lengthy discourse around the campfire in the company of the other guests; this was a most enjoyable evening and a highlight of the trip.

29th December

After a good breakfast we bade farewell to this special place and made our way towards Bharatpur but detoured first to visit the river at Bateshwar. This is one of the key holy sites for Hindus and has numerous temples along the river bank but we were not in any way made to feel unwelcome, despite our single-minded interest in birding. It was a photogenic area also so we took advantage of that whilst there. I have mentioned previously that a problem with the plains of India in winter is that they are particularly prone to fogs in the morning. Here fog lay over the river when we arrived but this gradually cleared to reveal the usual collection of herons and egrets together with scattered swallows and martins. There were opportunities to study River Terns in more detail and then we had the pleasure of a close-up view of a Pallas's Gull* as it swept back and forth. With the main target achieved we pressed on to Keoladeo Ghana National Park at Bharatpur, passing through Agra again in the process, but managing in the meantime to avoid the generous offers to visit the many retail opportunities available in the town.

NORTHERN INDIA: ROCKJUMPER –BIRDS & TIGERS

5th-24th January 2006

Keith Valentine

http://www.rockjumper.co.za/02_destination_b_reports_india_n_2006_jan_01.htm

Our final train ride of the trip was taken to Agra, where we were transferred by bus to the Chambal

River. Here a boat cruise allowed us an opportunity to view Indian Skimmer, Red-crested Pochard, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Black-bellied Tern, White-eared Bulbul, Sand and Bimaculated Larks, and Long-legged Buzzard. Two other highlights on the cruise were obtaining excellent sightings of Jungle Cat at the waters' edge, and seeing the strange Gangetic River Dolphin.

INDIA BHARATPUR – BIRDSEEKERS**January 2006****Leaders: Steve Bird, Avijit Sarkel & Gina Nichol (Sunrise Birding)**http://www.birdwatchingtours.co.uk/reports/after_tour_docs/India-2006.doc**Day 5 – 23rd January**

This morning was to be our day trip to the wonderful Chambal River, so after an early breakfast and with a few hours to sunrise we set off. A short stop along the way found us a group of Olive-backed Pipits in a field and an Indian Peafowl up a tree. On arrival at the Chambal Safari River Lodge we were invited to a cup of tea and biscuits, but not before being shown a Brown Hawk-Owl sat in full view in a small tree. It was then time to drive down to the river edge in preparation for our boat trip.

This is probably the best and most reliable site in the world to see the sought after Indian Skimmer and we were not to be disappointed as 36 of these gorgeous birds were sat close by on the shore edge, allowing us unprecedented views and photographic opportunities. Beside the skimmers were Little and Temminck's Stint, Little Ringed Plover and our first River Lapwing. Once aboard our boat we set off quietly up river soon passing flocks of Red-crested Pochard and Bar-headed Geese, while above and alongside us flew Steppe and Pallas's Gulls, and both River and gorgeous Black-bellied Terns. Ruddy Shelducks were easily seen and on the shore we cruised past a group of Indian Black Ibis, while above us several Egyptian and a Red-headed Vulture circled. A Long-legged Buzzard was then spotted and as we looked at some Soft-shelled Terrapins, a Brown Crake was spotted running into a burrow. Cruising on we drifted close to a small cliff face and there perched on a small rock was an adult Bonelli's Eagle. Nearby a small island held our first 20ft long Gharials, a Marsh Mugger and on a separate island a flock of Lesser Whistling Duck, several Comb Duck and a pair of Great Thick-Knees. The whole river experience was fantastic and the huge Gharials that we drifted close to were a real highlight. Just before we were due to turn around and return a group of three cranes flew from up river towards and over us finally settling on the shore edge. We turned around and got closer to three Common Cranes, initially thought to be Demoiselle's as three had been reported in the area. Beside the cranes sat four huge Pallas's Gulls of varying ages. Almost back to our start point we tried again for the Brown Crake and this time it showed wonderfully right out in the open. Back on shore we admired the flock of Indian Skimmers and added Sand Martin and a few Wire-tailed Swallows to our day list. A short walk around also got us Desert Wheatear and another pair of Great Thick-Knees.

We were soon aboard our coach and returning to the Chambal River Safari Lodge where lunch awaited us. Another look at the roosting Brown Hawk-Owl was followed by a delicious meal, a little relaxation and then some birding around the lodge gardens. Two groups of Olive-backed Pipits sat in the trees and allowed good study of identification features, while Brown-headed Barbet, Asian Koel and both Hume's and Greenish Warblers also showed very well. Good numbers of Yellow-wattled Lapwings were found and several Red Collared-Doves put on a good show. An Oriental Honey Buzzard tried to hide from the marauding House Crows and a nice Red-breasted Flycatcher gave some very good close views. After completing a full circuit of the

grounds we said farewell to our hosts and returned to Bharatpur and our lodge where we arrived in the dark.

BIRDING AND WILDLIFE VIEWING TRIP TO INDIA

2nd -25th February, 2006

Jo Ann MacKenzie Surrey , British Columbia , Canada

<http://www.peakadventures.ca/birdingtrippics/ tripreport.html>

16th Feb: Bharatpur to Chambal Safari Lodge, Uttar Pradesh

A 7 a.m. departure from the Sunbird Hotel for a 4-hour drive to Chambal Safari Lodge, with a tourist stop at Fatehpur Sikri historical site, where a pair of Egyptian Vultures was nesting in one of the towers. Chambal Lodge was charming, with comfortable cottages and delicious meals of organically-grown items.

After lunch, we drove to the Chambal River Sanctuary, the last couple of kilometres through sand dunes and thorn scrub "badlands." The river was wide but not very deep. A floating bridge enabled vehicles to cross, but camel caravans just had to wade. Birds along the riverbank were Indian Skimmer, Black Ibis, Temminck's and Little Stint.

17th February: Chambal Safari Lodge to Agra, Uttar Pradesh

Gathered at pre-dawn for an early breakfast and departure to the very impressive Bateshwar Temple complex.

Situated 70 km. from Agra on the banks of river Yamuna, Bateshwar is an important spiritual and cultural centre. Today, the once glittering metropolis has been reduced to a small village.

The place is named after the presiding deity of the region, Bateshwar Mahadeo and has 108 temples dedicated to the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon.

The most striking feature of Bateshwar is its towering cliffs of clay and its impressive row of white temples strung along the slow flowing Yamuna River . In actual fact they have not been built on the holy stream banks but atop an artificial embankment, or bund. It is more than likely that the course of the river was changed because it threatened to erode the foundations of a brick fort repeatedly built by the 17th century ruler, Raja Badan Singh Bhadawar. The fort's impressive ruins still stand in Bateshwar-Shoripur. We wandered through the village, and took a do-it-yourself barge across the Yamuna River just to see what was on the other side — not much, so we returned. The most interesting bird was a Pallas' Gull, the largest of the black-headed gull species.

After lunch at the Lodge, we drove back to the Chambal River Sanctuary for a 2-hour boat ride. We saw many Gharial and some Mugger (two species of fresh-water crocodiles), Golden Jackal, but no Gangetic Dolphin.

Back to the Lodge to collect our luggage, then off for the 60 km drive north to Agra, and the Hotel Pushp Villa a couple of km from the Taj Mahal, which could be seen from the hotel's 7th floor revolving restaurant.