

**INDIA: BHARATPUR AND CHAMBAL RIVER NATIONAL PARKS****November 2006****Published by Colin Bradshaw (drcolin.bradshaw AT btinternet.com)****Colin Bradshaw, Celia Bryce, Kate Hudson**[http://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=1041](http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=1041)

A short trip to Bharatpur and Chambal River was an ideal taster for India. Travelling was limited in distance and the birds were great. Chambal Safari Lodge: Absolutely superb – an old stately home set in a mature fig plantation with extensive grounds filled with birds. I had several new birds from the breakfast table set on the lawn. If watching Asian Koel, Common Wood-shrike and Scarlet Minivet while eating superb food appeals to you, this is the place for you. Anything can turn up there as I photographed White-capped Bunting and Oriental Turtle Dove in the grounds. It is the embarking place for the trip to the Chambal River Safari and is superbly situated next to a small village in the tribal part of Uttar Pradesh which allows you to explore local life somewhat. It is worthy noting though that two hours on a camel is not for those with soft backsides!

**NORTH INDIA – TROPICAL BIRDING – BIRDS, TIGERS AND THE TAJ MAHAL****2<sup>nd</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2006****Guides: Keith Barnes & Iain Campbell**[http://www.tropicalbirding.com/tripReports/TR\\_NorthIndia\\_Dec2006/TR\\_NorthIndia\\_Dec2006.htm](http://www.tropicalbirding.com/tripReports/TR_NorthIndia_Dec2006/TR_NorthIndia_Dec2006.htm)**8<sup>th</sup> December: Bharatpur to Chambal Safari Lodge**

We spent one last morning in the park and managed to add a few species including Peregrine Falcon, Asian Koel, Brown Hawk Owl, House Swift, Small Minivet and White-browed Fantail. In the afternoon we took the drive to Chambal Safari Lodge where we quickly located another roosting Brown Hawk-Owl that most people enjoyed before a serious Indian cookup.

**9<sup>th</sup> December: Chambal River - Umaria**

The morning started brilliantly as we enjoyed a spectacular river safari on the Chambal River. Before we got to the river, we scored a female Crested Bunting on the roadside. Arrival at the river quickly saw us start to notch up some serious birds such as Desert Wheatear, Crested Lark and an amazing family of Great Thick-knee. After boarding the boat the great sightings continued and at first we found over 30 Indian Skimmer, all on a riverbank. The river also produced Black-bellied and River Terns flitting up and down the waters, a small family of Sand Lark eventually succumbed and the rivers were lined with the impressive Mugger and Gharial crocodiles. A Red-naped Ibis strutted along the river flanks and we found a large flock of Red-crested Pochard amongst some more regular ducks. Other river specialists included Brahminy Kite, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Great Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls. An unexpected treat came in the form of a Long-legged Buzzard that hung over us for some time. The first shout of "dolphin" got everyone quite excited and we were soon enjoying multiple, if brief, views of Gangetic River Dolphin, with these endangered cetaceans' backs breaking the water regularly. A little gurgle alerted us to a party of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse that sped past en-route to a drinking spot somewhere upstream. All too soon the river adventure was

over and we had soon notched up a great number of new and specialty birds amongst the more regular waterbird quarry.

**COLIN AND CELIA BRADSHAW****December 2006**<http://www.wildaboutindia.com/Testimonials.htm>

Bharatpur was great but Chambal was exquisite - an absolute must-return place. .... Our memories will last for a long time: of the multi-coloured saris in front of the gleaming white Taj Mahal; Indian Skimmer and Gharial on a misty sandbank on the Chambal River; bartering for mangoes, roasted peanuts and bangles at Jaitpur whilst Lesser Whistling Duck called overhead; Rhesus Macaques mobbing a Crested Serpent Eagle at Bharatpur; a flock of forty Open-billed Storks soaring over the Maharaja's Palace at Bund Baretha; giving an impromptu lesson to a class of uniformed schoolkids on how to tell Intermediate from Great Egret near Agra [they seemed more impressed with my camera than their new-found knowledge]; finally sitting on the lawn at Chambal Safari Lodge drinking a cold Kingfisher beer by candlelight whilst Flying Foxes and Brown Hawk Owl came out of roost above our heads.

**INDIA TRIP REPORT****8<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> January****Colin and Sue Turvey**<http://www.cretewww.com/world/india/index.htm>**Day: 15, 22<sup>nd</sup> January**

All packed to be on our way we headed out to wait for our driver who arrived at 0830.

Although it was nice to be on our way, it was a shame that our dream return here was to see the terrible decline in this site...awful. All that can be hoped for, is good rains in the future, we do not believe that pumps will do the job as they will only bring deep water to the surface without nutrients and food for the wildlife and will probably be detrimental to the water table as well.

Our driver to Chambal had no knowledge of birds but spoke good English and his driving skills were brilliant, we were so pleased when he informed us later that he would accompany for the rest of our trip.

From Bharatpur to Chambal we had to drive through Agra where we saw the Taj Mahal in the distance, bringing back memories of our 1996 visit. As our previous trips to India were either beach or cultural we gave the Taj a miss and continued in search of the wildlife.

We arrived at Chambal Safari Lodge at 1130... after the concrete block at Bharatpur this place is idyllic. We were greeted warmly by Ram Pratap Singh the owner and camp staff and shown to our cottage, these eco friendly cottages are really roomy and comfortable and after a very nice lunch and drink we headed off for a walk in the lodge area with our very enthusiastic new guide Dalveer.

Dalveer hand paints T shirts with birds and the Chambal logo, he can also imitate birdcalls for a wide range of species his knowledge and enthusiasm is inspiring We feel our holiday is back on track after Bharatpur. A small pool produced several wader species and the arable land around the lodge was rich in birdlife with sixty species seen in the afternoon.

On our walk we came across a huge carcass of a bullock in a field nearby with a lot of stray dogs fighting and enjoying a rare meal, not a pleasant sight for the squeamish. All around there were Egyptian Vultures waiting for their chance, they were unbelievably close, not at all worried about human presence and gave us the chance to get some good photos of all ages of this small scavenger.

After a good afternoon birding we sat around the campfire after dinner chatting with the other birders and met a BBC film crew with John Aitchinson doing a documentary about the Ganges [due out in July/August].

A late evening walk looking for Civet Cat we heard them but did not get a sighting and during the night they could be heard scampering over the roof above.

**Birds seen today, seventy species**

- o Whitethroat Oriental Magpie Robin
- o Black-winged Stilt Redshank
- o Cattle Egret Grey Heron 30 in a tree on road
- o Osprey Black Kite
- o Red-wattled Lapwing Black Drongo
- o Asian Pied Starling Peafowl
- o Rock Pigeon House Crow
- o Pond Heron Indian Spotted Eagle
- o Long –tailed Shrike Rufous Treepie
- o Black Shouldered Kite Little Grebe
- o Indian Roller Hoopoe
- o Bank Myna Booted Eagle
- o Kestrel Egyptian Vulture
- o Collared Dove Jungle Babbler
- o Brown Hawk Owl Chestnut-shouldered Petronia
- o Red-throated Flycatcher Yellow-wattled Lapwing
- o Large-billed Crow House crow
- o Common Sandpiper Wood Sandpiper
- o River Lapwing Shoveler
- o Pintail Greenshank
- o Yellow Wagtail Green Sandpiper
- o Temminck's Stint Asian Openbill
- o Black-headed Ibis Redshank
- o Little Cormorant White-throated Kingfisher
- o Indian Silverbill Honey Buzzard
- o Spotted Owlet Brown-headed Barbet
- o Indian Grey Hornbill Red Collared Dove
- o Olive-backed Pipit Large Grey Babbler

- o Yellow-crowned Woodpecker Bank Myna
- o Common Myna Asian Pied Starling
- o Bramhiny Starling Black-shouldered Kite
- o Long-tailed Shrike Stonechat
- o Southern Grey Shrike Red-necked Falcon
- o Bay-backed Shrike Little Pied Flycatcher
- o Plain Prinia House Sparrow

### **Mammals, Reptiles n' Fish**

- o Fruit Bat .....resident in camp
- o Civet Cat ... none seen although they ran all over the roof through the night !!

### **Day: 16, 23<sup>rd</sup> January**

Up at 0700 for coffee, with a pre breakfast walk again with Dalveer. You have to be prepared for the culture shock as the locals head into the open for their daily ablutions' you definitely have to watch your footing here ..... nuff said. Beware in this, the most populated state in India... Uttar Pradesh.

Today we would head to the river Chambal, our journey for our boat trip on the river was to last about an hour.

We passed lots of camels heading to and from the river carrying their loads of wood. Brick kilns with small donkeys carrying huge loads of bricks to distant storage areas, many schoolchildren walking miles to school and busy villages teeming with people ...wonderful sights and sounds.

The boat trip turned out to be about an hour and a half long, it got very warm this morning after the chill of the night and we shed layers of clothing ....we still dressed as for Corbett....we saw a wide variety of wildlife including the endangered Gharial Crocodile there are few of this species left with ever declining numbers and although we never saw the even rarer Gangetic Dolphin we did get to see the splash of one as disappeared below the water ...you have to be facing the right way at the right time to catch even a glimpse of one of these beauties. We were also lucky enough to see Osprey, a single Greater Flamingo and Great Thick- knee.

The afternoon was spent lazing around our cottage and the dining area. Since leaving Crete we had virtually been on the go for ten days so a little relaxing birding in the safari Lodge with cups of tea was definitely required, we settled in for the afternoon with Anu Dhillon Singh, Rams wife and spent a pleasant time chatting and birding..... we watched the Fruit bats as they set off in the late afternoon from a tree near to our cottage, Hoopoe dust bathing at our feet and the Jungle Babblers that have gotten into the habit of raiding the sugar bowls and a Bengal Fox as it made its way through the sparse undergrowth. After dinner that night we again looked for Civet Cat but once again they were not obliging us and we had to be content with their noisy journeys across our roof at night. We never did get to see one.

### **Today spotted thirty four species**

- o Asian Koel [pair]
- o Brown-headed Barbett
- o Coppersmith Barbet 2 Tree Pipit
- o Black Redstart Comb Duck
- o Grey Wagtail White Wagtail

- o Shikra Brown Rock-chat
- o Bar-headed Goose Black-bellied Tern
- o Great Crested Grebe Red-crested Pochard
- o Ruddy Shelduck Little Cormorant
- o White-browed Wagtail Pallas's Gull 1
- o Great Thick-knee Temminck's Stint
- o River Lapwing Lesser Whistling-duck
- o Grey Heron Greater Flamingo 1
- o Kentish Plover Dunlin
- o Painted Stork 4 Sand Lark 3
- o Long-legged Buzzard Osprey 1
- o Common Sandpiper Desert Wheatear
- o Kestrel Black Kite
- o Mammals, Reptiles n' Fish
- o Gharial Crocodile Marsh Crocodile
- o Turtle... several species Jackal
- o Fruit Bat Bengal Fox

#### **Day 17: 24<sup>th</sup> January**

##### **Trip to Wetlands**

Today should have been our trip to Patna Bird sanctuary, but as with Bharutpur there was no water, so Ram Pratap arranged for us to go to an area of wetland, we and Dalveer were guinea pigs to see if the birding was any good in this area for future trips...again not much water here but there were canals and some good birding along the way.

Our guide and driver were not too sure of the route so lots of stops as we saw various potential sites which put us behind schedule.

Our first stop was at a bridge over the Chambal River somewhere north of the lodge where we had our only pelican sightings as sixteen flew north along the river, a beautiful sight as they flew through the mist in V formation.... we found twenty two bird species here. We also witnessed a funeral procession and cremation at the riverside here, where we were ushered quietly by.

We stopped at various places on the way as we spotted Sarus Cranes in agricultural fields. At one stop two Sarus Cranes allowed fairly close intrusion as they ritually danced, whilst photographing these a Greater Spotted Eagle landed in the only tree around, right where we were located ... Another great sighting.

Moving on we found a field with c30 Black-headed Ibis and a Woolly-necked Stork.

At the wetlands we again found the surrounding land dry but we managed another sighting of three Darter, Marsh harrier and a pair of Black-necked Stork with a very young barely fledged bird that was being fed by the male as the female sat perhaps one hundred yards away taking an afternoon nap. The large canals here quite empty of birds.

Lunch over and it was time to return to camp, we stopped on numerous occasions as we sighted birds. A Painted Stork stood alongside the road and allowed really close up views and

some nice photos. Thereafter it was a dash all the way back to camp, Ram Pratap was phoning wondering/worried were we were. The drive back was not the best of drives, the driver, after a stop at a roadside kiosk to buy something !!! to chew and thereafter seemed to be on a high, drove like a man possessed, our Indian Moments driver was with us and he also turned a whiter shade of pale...

Relief, safely back at camp at 1615hrs a few coffees, dinner on our own, exhilarated and tired after another brilliant day we crashed into to bed for 2200hrs. All the other birders had moved on and the BBC were still out filming along the Ganges tributaries.

**The days sightings another 48 bird species**

- o Great White Pelican [16 in flight ] Kentish Plover
- o Little Cormorant Citrine Wagtail
- o Temminck's Stint Barn Swallow
- o Black Kite Egyptian Vulture
- o Sand Lark Wood Sandpiper
- o River Lapwing Grey Heron
- o Ruddy Shelduck Kingfisher 2
- o Ruff Little Ringed Plover
- o Rufous –tailed Shrike White-eared Bulbul
- o Black Ibis Peafowl
- o Grey Wagtail Red-headed Bunting
- o Painted Stork 8 Bronze-winged Jacana
- o Sarus Crane 2+ 6+2 +4 Greater Spotted Eagle
- o Black-shouldered Kite Greater Coucal
- o Black Drongo Pond Heron
- o Woolly –necked Stork Kestrel
- o Black-headed Ibis 30+ Paddyfield Pipit
- o Chestnut-shouldered Petronia Hoopoe
- o Indian Roller Pied Bushchat
- o Darter 3 Marsh Harrier m & f
- o Bluethroat Black-necked Stork 1 m+1 f + 1 very young bird being fed by male.
- o Short-toed Snake Eagle Crested Lark
- o Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark Painted Stork I sat at roadside
- o Booted Eagle Crested Bunting m & f

**Day 18: 25<sup>th</sup> January**

Another boat trip was planned for today. Up at 0700 ready for the transfer to the river at 0830 and a trip downstream this time looking for Indian Skimmer, luckily seeing c30 and getting to see them skimming. Not too many other bird species seen this morning but got to see a nice Pallas's Gull and a River Tern as they flew over our heads. Missed out on the Gangetic Dolphin again, lots of Mugger and Garial crocodile on the sand bars and river banks.

After lunch back at camp we were asked if we wanted to take a trip to Bateshwar with its 100 Temples and maybe another boat trip, we accepted hoping to add a few more species to our list. Not too many birds here either, we added Black-bellied Tern and had the amazing sight of 70 Painted Stork circling overhead before descending to the river right in front of us.

**Nineteen bird species seen**

- o Sand Lark 35+ River Tern
- o Pied Kingfisher Ruddy Shelduck
- o Pallas's Gull m Great Thick-knee 2
- o Little-ringed Plover Red-wattled Lapwing
- o Spoonbill Indian Skimmer 30
- o Whistling Duck 60+ Black Ibis
- o Desert Wheatear Egyptian Vulture
- o Black-bellied Tern Jungle Babbler
- o Painted Stork c70 Redshank
- o Greenshank
- o Mammals, Reptiles n' Fish
- o Garial Crocodile Mugger Crocodile
- o Turtle [several species ]

**Day 19: 26<sup>th</sup> January**

Our last day today so we were up early to take advantage of the morning walk around the lodge, we had some good photo opportunities today with some nice close birds and a few new to our list. Unfortunately in the haste to pack and download photos the camera memory card was removed from the laptop before the pictures of the morning had finished downloading and we ended up losing some very nice pictures of the last seventeen birds listed below. A lesson learned here.

After lunch we departed for the six hour drive to Delhi, a very tiring drive it was too, we arrived at about 1800 and were really grateful that we had an excellent driver.

**Seen at Chambal in the morning thirty one species**

- o Tree Pipit Hoopoe
- o Indian Grey Hornbill Black Drongo
- o Indian Robin Black-shouldered Kite
- o Southern Grey Shrike Ashy Prinia
- o Plain Prinia Little-pied Flycatcher
- o Stonechat Cattle Egret
- o Bramhiny Starling Bank Myna
- o Bay-backed Shrike Indian Silverbill
- o Brown-headed Barbet Coppersmith Barbet
- o Red Collared Dove Grey Francolin
- o Honey buzzard [pair] Peafowl 2
- o Spotted Owlet Oriental Skylark 2

- o Black Ibis 6 Indian Bushlark 1
- o Indian Roller Pied Bushchat
- o Black Kite Long-tailed Shrike
- o Asian Koel [pair]

## **A BEND IN THE RIVER CHAMBAL**

**February 2007**

**N. Subramanian**

<http://nirupama-subramanian.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/02/a-bend-in-the-river-chambal.htm>

The word safari usually conjures up images of intrepid travelers in the jungles of Africa, scanning the Savannah for lions and tigers, antelopes and elephants. I had even been on a camel safari, wobbling on the ship of the desert across endless stretches of sand dunes. This was the first time, I had heard of a river safari. What could you possibly see on a river apart from blurred images of unidentifiable fish or buffaloes wallowing in the shallows. That too on the Chambal, which was associated with wildlife of a different kind. It was with some trepidation that I agreed to a safari on the river Chambal, an idea picked up by friends, from an advertisement in a travel magazine, with little information about what exactly was in store for us.

It was about 9.p.m when we arrived at the Chambal Safari Lodge, a few kilometers from Agra, near the village of Bah. There were no lights on the streets and save for the small stretch of road illuminated by the headlights of our car, everything around was cloaked in an impenetrable thick blackness. The biting January cold and the damp tendrils of mist that twirled around us created an eerie atmosphere, right out of a horror film. We were thankful to spy the dull lights of the Lodge. The Chambal Lodge is owned and run by Ram Pratap Singh, a scion of a royal family that also owned several fields and land around the area. We were shown to our accommodation, rustic cottages that had names like Ibis and Tern, done up in a Fab India ethnic chic style. After a barbecue dinner, warmed by wine and a bon fire, soothed by a clear night sky cluttered with stars, I felt ready to tackle the ravines and rivers of the Chambal.

The next morning was mellow with warm sunshine that felt like melted butter. The lush green foliage around the lodge and the cheerful sounds of unknown birds was a pleasant contrast to the previous night. The Safari, I learnt, was actually a cruise on the river Chambal, where the main attractions were sightings of migratory birds and crocodiles.

The Chambal is a pristine river, relatively unspoilt by industrial effluences or human detritus. It originates in the Vindhyadan ranges of Central India, passes through certain districts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh before joining the Jamuna. A 400km stretch and about 2km wide swathe of river ravines has been designated a protected wildlife area- The National Chambal Sanctuary. I believe there are more than 250 species of birds, migratory and local, that can be seen at this sanctuary.

We drove down to the banks of the river accompanied by our guide Yadav, who nonchalantly carried a gun, a long rifle just like the ones from Bandit Queen. He also carried two books on birds. "Why a gun?" we asked him. "Just in case," he said mysteriously. Surely, we would not be attacked by dacoits leaping out from the Chambal ravines! At the river, we got into a motor

boat. There were four of us, Yadav and the boatman. The first few minutes were peaceful, still, except for the soft throbbing of the boat. The river, flanked by small hillocks and ravines was also calm with occasional ripples stirred to life by the morning breeze. My husband was poised with his camera and our friends were ready with binoculars but there was no sign of any life above or below the waters. "Wait till the sun climbs up," said Yadav, sensing our anticipation.

The boat seemed to dip by a bend in the river and I saw the first bird of the morning. It was a Ruddy Shelduck, bobbing merrily in the water, its orange-rust plumage gleaming in the sun. A lone osprey perched on a branch that seemed to have sprouted at the edge of the waters. I flipped through our bird book, making a note of the birds Yadav said we would see. My foray into bird watching was limited to identifying the birds that came to our garden during my childhood in Delhi, common garden birds like mynas, sparrows, bulbuls and shrieking babblers, all information gleaned from a borrowed Salim Ali book. In recent times, I have only had close encounters with the crows and pigeons that made a mess in the balcony of our apartment. During the next few hours, I discovered the pleasures of being an amateur ornithologist. We saw a flock of Indian Skimmers, black and white birds with orange beaks that darted across the sandbar with sudden spurts of energy. Bar headed geese swam close to our boat, gliding like sedate dowagers. A pair of River Lapwing pecked determinedly at invisible grub among the shallows. In the distance, I could identify an ibis with its distinctive curved beak and glossy black plumage. A black bellied tern made smooth circles overhead and a few brown birds, probably whistling ducks, alighted gracefully on a rock that peeped out of the river. Sarus cranes called to each other in melancholy tones across the mudflats.

Just as the boat moved closer to the banks, we spotted our first reptile, a baby ghariyal, about a foot long, resting in a natural alcove carved out by the river currents along the banks. It was motionless for a while and then dropped with a sudden splash into the water. The ghariyal is a member of the crocodile family but looks different from its cousins due to a long narrow snout, with fine teeth, specially adapted for catching small fish. A few yards ahead, a pair of turtles, mottled and mud colored, clambered onto the banks. The underwater creatures had emerged to greet the sun, which was gazing with benevolent warmth on the river. Our boatman cut the engine and we drifted close to a sandbar. As we moved closer the sandbar seemed to shake itself and come alive. It was full of ghariyals, the largest almost 5m long.

The group lay basking in the sun, oblivious to our presence. A huge mugger, the Indian crocodile, stirred briefly on an adjoining rock. It looked like a mean creature, with small cunning eyes above massive jaws spiked with sharp pointed teeth. One swish of its tail could have toppled our boat and created a scene out of Lake Placid. For a minute, I hoped our guide's gun was loaded. Luckily, the crocodile was more interested in enjoying the sun than a midday meal. A heron hopped nonchalantly near the crocodile's head. After a few seconds, some of the ghariyals slithered into the water, as though sensing our presence. Our guide informed us that the ghariyals were an endangered species and never attacked humans. A mugger, on the other hand, once attacked and killed a small child that was bathing in the river.

Suddenly, our guide pointed to the other side of the river and shouted excitedly. I barely caught a glimpse of a silver flash across the sparkling waters. It was a dolphin, probably a Gangetic Dolphin that was supposed to inhabit these waters. I had only seen the friendly telegenic dolphins on TV, rubbing snouts and shaking fins with small children across bright blue artificial pools. My knowledge of dolphins was limited to a long ago reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The*

Hungry Tides from which I remembered that the Gangetic dolphins were shy elusive creatures that had to be tracked patiently, for hours, for a sighting. I saw another brilliant arc of light carved across the waters but we were too far to see anything resembling a dolphin. We had to be contented with the sight of one of the largest crocodiles I had ever seen, that moved like a prehistoric monster along the far bank.

We returned to the shore after four hours of the safari. It was early afternoon. We passed over a trek to an ancient fort in favor of lunch and returned to the lodge. It was a long drive to Delhi and we wanted to reach there before the fog set in. We had enough memories of our river adventure to savor along the way. I knew that I would never again see a river as just another water body but a thriving ecosystem that sustained a wonderful variety of animal life.

## **INDIA: GUJURAT AND RIVER DOLPHINS**

**February 2007**

**Jon Hall**

<http://www.mammalwatching.com/Oriental/orientindiagujurat2007.html>

### **Chambal (night one)**

I flew into Delhi at 1am on Sunday morning and met my driver and car (self drive car hire is pretty unusual in India and you would have to be intrepid or suicidal to try to drive yourself when the extra cost of a driver is negligible). We drove overnight to Agra, which should take about 4 hours but took us 6 because my drive stopped for "5 minutes", and we woke up 2 hours later. Rested in Agra and then we drove another 2 hours onto the Chambal Safari Camp. The camp is excellent: a nice setting, good food and great staff who were keen to help find me some animals. Chambal National Park is a long thin strip of scrubby forest bordering the Chambal River. The camp offer boat trips along the river in the mornings and afternoons. And the stretch of the river they visit is home to a population of Gangetic River Dolphin that are very findable most mornings.

The boat trips leave from a bridge across the river a half hour drive from camp. The afternoon safari was picturesque with some nice birds, plenty of Gharials and Mugger Crocs, and a few turtles. But no dolphins.

Perhaps they are not active in the afternoon or perhaps they spend their time elsewhere. The next morning though we were on the river at about 9am (as soon as the mist cleared), and travelled the 3km downstream to the dolphin spot. Within five minutes we saw the first animal break the surface. There were 3 or 4 animals feeding here for about an hour, though it was difficult to approach them. I had only fleeting glimpses as they broke the surface for a second every two to three minutes. The dolphins hang out near a small sand bar that was also home to a group of Indian Skimmers. Some spotlighting around Chambal in the evening found a Common Palm Civet in the garden and Indian Foxes (a mother and two cubs) denning in the paddock (more like waste ground) outside the camp. They occasionally see Striped Hyenas here late in the evening. Indian Flying Foxes were feeding in the garden at night, and Five Striped Palm Squirrels common in the daytime. I set 15 Elliott traps without success.

**BIRDSEEKERS - INDIA – BHARATPUR AND KANHA****Feb – 2007****Leaders Nick Bray & Avijit Sarkhel**<http://www.birdseekers.co.uk>**274 Bird Species recorded****Day 6: Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> February**

But we had to leave and drove to the wonderful Chambal Safari Lodge, where we were to spend the night. We arrived just as the sun was setting, and after settling into the nice rooms we had a great buffet dinner, after which we did the checklist and then sat outside around the bonfire chatting. One of the local guides then came to inform us he had found something interesting and we took our torches and walked across the gardens where a Common Palm Civet was spotlighted up in a large tree.

We had a really good view of it scuttling along the enormous branches before it shot into a hole and out of sight. We also saw a family of Bengal Foxes that were a resident feature of the extensive grounds here, before retiring for the night.

**Day 7: Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> February**

We awoke to a lovely clear sky and met in the gardens for a delicious 'al fresco' breakfast, and everyone wished we were spending another night here as the ambience as well as some good 'garden' birds made us wish we were staying longer. We were shown roosting Brown Hawk-owl and Indian Scops-owl, in the grounds, and there was also Yellow-footed Green-pigeon, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Brahminy Starling, and both Brown-headed and Coppersmith Barbets. Needless to say we were late heading out for the much anticipated boat trip, but we were once again simply enjoying ourselves way too much to rush! Anyway, we were soon off on the short drive, only stopping to look at some Crested Buntings that had been resident in the same set of fields all winter. This was a major surprise and the first time we had recorded this species on the tour, and we had really great views as well! A short while later we drove through some arid canyons and crested a hill where we had our first view of the Chambal River, where a Camel train crossing the river provided an excellent photo opportunity. A Long-legged Buzzard gave good views flying over in the blue sky as we walked down to the river, where on some small islands we saw White-browed Wagtail, a pair of Great Thick-knees, River Lapwing, a flock of Kentish Plovers, and loads of Small Pratincoles. These latter birds look quite bland when perched on the sand banks, but when they take flight the contrasting wing pattern transforms them into really sexy little birds! Scanning down the river there was a flock of Red-crested Pochards, as well as several graceful River and Black-bellied Terns. Once aboard our motorized boat we headed downriver, and were soon enjoying nice views of Ruddy Shelduck, Bar-headed Goose and several Black Ibis. A Lesser Pied Kingfisher flew alongside us, and a few Black Ibis were seen feeding along the shoreline, but we were pretty much taken by a string of Gharials along the water's edge, with some young ones as well as much bigger adults. More views of both terns followed, before we had a majestic trio of Bonelli's Eagle, Oriental Honey

and Long-legged Buzzard soaring overhead which was very good to compare size and structure. And then we could just about make out some black and white shapes on a sandbank further downriver, and sure enough as we got closer they turned out to be Indian Skimmers. Our boat was maneuvered around the island skillfully by the 'driver' allowing us to get great views, with the flock of 28 birds flying around us at one stage and settling on another island. This is one of the birds of the entire tour and it was a privilege to watch them in all their glory. In fact the setting was perfect as we had Gharials next to the skimmers, Black-bellied Terns flying with the skimmers, Ruddy Shelducks and Eurasian Spoonbills stood next to the skimmers, and all in perfect light. But eventually we had to turn around and head back, getting further views of all the previously mentioned species, as well as having reasonable views of Gangetic River Dolphin breaking the calm water's surface repeatedly. So we returned to the coach, seeing a flock of Grey-throated (Plain) Sand-martins near the coach before driving back to the Chambal Safari Lodge to collect our bags and have a leisurely lunch before driving to Agra Cantt Railway Station in order to catch our overnight train to Jabalpur.

#### **NORTHERN INDIA REPORT**

**23<sup>rd</sup> February – 10<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

**PARTICIPANTS Wilma & Jos Wanten; Reuver, The Netherlands – e-mail: [jos.birds@hetnet.nl](mailto:jos.birds@hetnet.nl)**

**<http://home.hetnet.nl/~joswanten/indiapart1.htm>**

**Chambal Safari Lodge** (<http://www.chambalsafari.com/>): excellent eco-lodge with large and clean rooms. Excellent service.

#### **Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> March**

We arrived at Mathura train station at 4:30 AM. Here we were picked up by our driver for the next week. The drive to the Chambal River Lodge took about 2 1/2 hours arriving there just after sunrise. After dropping our luggage in our room we had an outside breakfast after which we set off to the Chambal River accompanied by our driver, guide Dalveer Singh and someone from the lodge's staff who carried a weapon (I don't know for what reason). The journey to the river took about an hour including two birding stops for amongst Hoopoe, Brown-headed Barbet and Crested Bunting. We arrived at the river near a pontoon bridge which was used for crossing the river by the many camel carts which was apparently the common way of transport in the region. After waiting a few minutes we boarded the boat for a 2 to 3 hours ride downriver. The birding was really excellent from the boat with many new birds occurring for our trip list. The riverbank held many Mugger Crocodiles and Gharials resting motionless in the warm morning sun. We even had a short glimpse of the endangered Gangetic Dolphin. During the boat ride we noted amongst Comb Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Common & Pied Kingfisher, Black-bellied Tern, Short-toed Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard and Eurasian Eagle-owl sitting in his nest hole along the riverbank. After about one hour we approached an island in the river and it was soon clear that it held one of our target birds for today. It held about 40 roosting Indian Skimmers accompanied by other good birds like Eurasian Spoonbill, Great Thick-knee and several other wader species. At the riverbank next to the island we had our only Black Ibis of the trip. On our way back we made a short stop on a dry sandy island for wheatears and Crested Sandlark.

Another dry sandbank close to the bridge held dozens of Small Pratincole and a few Temminck's Stint. Driving back to the lodge we passed a small village where many people were on the streets throwing paint to each other. Our guide told us it was because of the celebration of the Holy Colour Festival. Our driver and me also received a full load of paint through the opened car window which ruined my shirt and pants. Back at the lodge I changed clothes and we had lunch in the garden. We decided to take a few hours of rest during the afternoon because we only had a couple of hours sleep last night. Around 4 PM Dalveer showed up again and we birded the lodge surroundings until dusk. First Dalveer showed us a Collared Scops-owl roosting in a banana tree behind the lodge. We had some excellent birding and the place was really teeming with birds. Some of the most noteworthy birds included Asian Koel, Yellow-footed Pigeon, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Bay-backed Shrike, Small Minivet and Indian Silverbill. Back at the lodge we took a shower and went for dinner. Our day list ended up at 100 species of which 38 were new for the trip, having a trip total now of 301 species. Best bird of the day: Indian Skimmer.

## **MADHYA PRADESH, INDIA**

**April 2007**

**Published by Mike Meidlinger ([mikemeidlinger@yahoo.com](mailto:mikemeidlinger@yahoo.com))**

**Participants: Alison Waldegrave, Tom Ennis, Jack Ashby, Tobias Nowlan, Mike Meidlinger**

**[http://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=1311](http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=1311)**

**4<sup>th</sup> April 2007**

We then drove on to the Chambal Wildlife Sanctuary, our home for the evening and what a home indeed. A walk around the local fields surpassed all expectation producing Grey Francolin, Jungle Bush Quail, several Paddyfield Warblers, Bluethroat, Zitting Cisticola and Indian Silverbill in the short crops and low vegetation. Taller trees and scrubs reminiscent of Africa's acacias held a male Red-headed Bunting, Ashy Drongo and a male Taiga Flycatcher. Small flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings passed overhead periodically and a small orchard provided us with our first Spotted Owlet of the tour along with a single althaea Lesser Whitethroat and an Indian Cuckoo, apparently the first record of this species for the area. As we returned to camp in the last breathe of light following an awe-inspiring sunset we had the privilege to observe over 200 flying foxes leaving their daytime roost beside our chalets. A short night walk after dinner provided us with short glimpses of Palm Civet and Indian Fox before an early night.

**5<sup>th</sup> April 2007**

Today dawned bright and early and with first light saw an increase in bird activity with the most notable additions to the list being a single Hume's Warbler and Asian Paradise Flycatcher. A quick bite to eat and we were transferred through the rugged cavernous terrain of the Chambal region stopping briefly to note Rufous-fronted Prinia, Common Babbler, White-eared Bulbul and Plain Martin before arriving at the river of the same name.

Reminiscent of North Africa we were greeted by a caravan of camels and their owners as we traversed across the flat arid plains, themselves broken only by the lazy waters of the small winding water-body we had come to experience. These dried plains held breeding River Lapwing, Indian Little Ringed Plover, Great Thick-knee, Crested Lark and Oriental Skylark. Meanwhile the crust of a muddy shoreline held a host of waders, Kentish Plover, a large flock of

wagtails which comprised of much the same as those on the shores of Dehli's Yuhimna as well as taivana Yellow plus personata and leucopsis White along with a solitary Red-throated Pipit. Boarding our vessel we began our journey along the river proper, from the boat we were watched cautiously by both Garials and Mugger Crocodiles catching the early morning eat on the banks. Avian highlights included Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Bar-headed Goose, Black-bellied and River Terns, Sarus Crane, Indian Skimmer and Little Tern. Our major target however had been to catch a glimpse of the elusive and highly endangered Gangetic River Dolphin.

While on our return back upstream, having lost all hope of finding them, the atmosphere onboard akin to a weight of solid lead until a non-distinct splash immediately spurred Jack into action picking up what turned out to be at least two of these awesome cetaceans. We watched these two for a total of about 45 seconds over twenty minutes with sightings consisting of second-long views interspersed by long 5-6 minutes of submersion, but eventually the whole group obtained enough pieces of the puzzle for contentment. An elated boatful of giddy naturalists returned to shore quite ready for a celebratory litre of water and an afternoon siesta.

The emotion hadn't quite left the group as we bid bon voyage to our host and guide.... before heading on to Bharatpur just west of Agra ready for our final full day tomorrow. A short search on the way produced excellent views of the endangered and charismatic Blackbuck which truly has to be the best looking antelope in the world. We managed to find six of these handsome beasts striding and feeding in open farmland finding it difficult to understand the reality that the wild population of this species is in real trouble.