

THE CHAMBAL, INDIA**26th October - 3rd November 2007****by David Newman**<http://www.kentos.org.uk/Trip Reports/Chambal.htm>

This was a family holiday, not a birding one but I saw 157 species of birds in six days. We stayed at the Chambal Safari Lodge and the hospitality could not have been better. By breakfast of our first morning, my head was spinning with 43 species seen in the grounds on an hour's walk-about. For birders, and especially birders with families who would like to have a taster of India, there could be no better place.

The Planning

The Chambal Safari Lodge is 70km south-east from Agra in north-central India. We found it through www.responsibletravel.com, whose philosophy of adventurous travel, balanced with environmental concern and wish to support and sustain local development, fitted with what we wanted. We also wished to introduce our children aged 9-14 years to the culture of India in a safe family friendly manner. I noted from the internet that a number of birding tours include a day here and spoke highly of the warm hospitality and good birding. We found these two features so evidently in abundance that I felt others might like it too. This holiday would particularly appeal to those whose party includes a mixture of ardent birders and those who simply enjoy natural history and general travel. There is no swimming pool or beach, and night-life is blissfully quiet so if these aspects are essential to you, perhaps take a second week in Goa.

The Chambal

The Chambal river starts in Central India and flows north before turning south-east to form part of the border between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh south-east of Agra. It flows almost parallel to the river Yamuna, one of the main tributaries of the Ganges, for some 50km before merging with it after a journey of 900km. Unlike most of the Gangetic tributaries it has very little habitation along its banks and consequently has very clean water. For this reason in the 1970s it was chosen as the site for re-introducing a captive breeding programme for the Gharial *Gavialis gangeticus*, a long-nosed, fish-eating crocodile that was being decimated by poaching. The clean water also makes it one of the last remaining stretches of the Ganges where the Gangetic Dolphin *Platanista gangetica* is still found in good numbers. A 600km long stretch of the river including 1-6km either side was declared a National Conservation Sanctuary in 1979.

Why the Area is Special

The monsoon climate and local geology of the Gangetic plain in this area have led to the formation of a complex mosaic of ravines up to 6km on either side of the river and are so steep and unstable that agriculture is very limited. Much dry small acacia-type scrub still occurs and provides a sanctuary to a host of interesting wildlife. In addition, just north of the Yamuna is a very different looking landscape of rice paddies in which 100square km have been designated as a conservation area for the Sarus Crane. The lodge provides a half-day guided tour of this area where sightings of this magnificent bird are virtually guaranteed.

Guides

The lodge employs a very enthusiastic naturalist, Mr Dalveer Singh who knows the areas and the birds very well. He showed us the regularly roosting Indian Scops Owl and Brown Hawk Owls, and Spotted Owlets in Lodge grounds, and I appreciated having the salient distinguishing features between Blyth's Reed Warbler and Paddyfield Warbler, and between Hume's Leaf-Warbler and Greenish Warbler among many other slightly tricky species pairs that occur in the area pointed out to me. Early morning and evening walks around the grounds and surrounding fields produced a wealth of species, and one got the impression that so crowded is India that birds cannot help but get used to humans – certainly the quality of the viewing was superb.

The Accommodation

The lodge is developed within the 35 acre grounds of a beautiful old large house, where there are many large, mature trees. Eight small brick cottages with verandas grouped into four around an open garden provide comfortable accommodation with en-suite. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are provided outside the main house and are not to be missed if you enjoy Indian food. The owners Mr Ram Pratap Singh and his wife Anu were immensely helpful in arranging itineraries, transport and guides, and made themselves very accessible.

Other things to do

In addition to the tours offered by the lodge, we took a taxi to Agra early one morning arriving at 7am to see the Taj Mahal with a guide and then on to Agra Fort. In the afternoon we went north to Ketham Forest Reserve on the Delhi Road, to see a large reservoir where I had Spot-billed Duck, Greater Flamingo and Brown-headed Gull amongst other waterfowl seen elsewhere. Within the forest complex we were taken on a fascinating 2 hour tour of the bear sanctuary where dancing bears have been rescued from the streets. This was all arranged impeccably by Mr R.P. Singh.

Trips offered by the Lodge

The lodge tours include a camel ride from the other side of the river (in Madhya Pradesh) to Fort Ater; a 40min each way trip. The fort in its day must have been fabulous, but has fallen into decay; definitely worth a visit but it is impossible to bird from the back of a camel! There are two river safaris – one upstream and the other down; it is worth doing both – there is so much to see the chances are you will miss something on one trip and get it on the other. There is also a trip to the temple complex at Bateshwar. At this time of year, the road passes through a large cattle fair which culminates in mid- November when donkeys, horses and camels join the cattle to be traded – it is very atmospheric and full of photographic opportunities. Jeep safaris also go out to another area near the Chambal river where good numbers of the endangered Blackbuck – a rather magnificent deer (male is black and white with very long spiral horns) are found. These tours are half-day in length so there is time to just sit and read on the veranda, play cards, wander around the lodge and have tea on the lawn.

INDIA – RAJASTHAN, UTTAR PRADESH AND MADHYA PRADESH

November 2007

Richard Powell

http://www.travellingbirder.com/tripreports/view_birding_tripreport.php?id=306

Friday 23rd November

With my stomach vastly improved, I made the most of a lie in and then set off to the Chambal Safari Lodge, which is a lovely place to stay. I had a brief period of mild panic when I arrived,

when I couldn't find a pouch of mine that contained my passport and a load of rupees. Thankfully it was under the driver's seat, it found its way there during a spot of hard braking.

After lunch Rattan Singh, The Godfather, was at the lodge guiding a group of people, which included a couple from Norwich called Ian and Jo. It took me a while for the penny to drop, but I realised that I had been in touch with Jo a few months before while in cyberspace, on a website called Bird Forum. Jo had started a thread saying they were off to India and I replied to say I was too, although I wasn't sure if our paths were to cross.

Prior to an afternoon walk in the surrounding fields, Rattan showed me roosting Collared Scops Owl and Brown Hawk Owl in the grounds of the lodge. The afternoon walk included Black-Breasted Weaver. Just before dinner, Rattan took us to an area of mature trees in the lodge grounds to look for Common Palm Civet. We eventually found three by torchlight, walking around the branches. Rattan eventually found six.

This then led to a wonderful dinner, washed down with Kingfisher lager. They did some great things with Cauliflower, and I'm not a huge fan of that particular vegetable. Unless it's in a cheese sauce. The more beer consumed then inevitably led to more inane and whimsical, but thoroughly enjoyable, conversations with Ian and Jo. Jo's photos on her camera were excellent. I could have easily stayed longer and got through more beer, but there was a 6:30 start for a morning walk next day.

Saturday 24th November.

Surprisingly not hungover, the peace and quiet must have helped, a pre-breakfast walk with Dalveer produced Greater Short-Toed Lark and an Indian Hare. After breakfast we took the drive over to the National Chambal Sanctuary.

The trip to the sanctuary with Dalveer was brilliant. We saw Crested Bunting, Crested Lark, Indian Bushlark, River Lapwing, Bar-Headed Goose, a few Sand Larks, Gharial, Marsh Crocodile, Great Thick-Knee, about 50 Chestnut-Bellied Sandgrouse, 15 Indian Skimmers, Black-Bellied Tern, Comb Duck, Long-Legged Buzzard.

We then got to the site of a Bonelli's Eagle nest. As we were there we heard the call of a flock of Cranes. They turned out to be 45 Demoiselle Cranes, and they flew straight over us and over the Bonelli's Eagle nest. It was an amazing sight. Apparently Demoiselle Cranes should be further west by then, in Gujarat and at Keechan in Rajasthan, so these birds were late.

We went a bit further on and Dalveer took us to an area good for Sirkeer Malkoha. Now he jumped off the boat with no problem, skinny young lad that he is. When I did that, I was nearly up to my knees in mud! Typical! No damage to my optics though so that was alright. The boat man cleaned my boots in the river

It was well worth getting muddy though. Not long after leaving the boat Dalveer was jumping up and down in delight! "It's Sirkeer Malkoha, Its Sirkeer Malkoha!!".

On the way back we saw Pallas's Gull and Black Ibis. Dalveer also found a water buffalo that was wallowing around in the mud. Dalveer then started laughing and compared the buffalo with me! Thanks Dalveer, thanks very much! It was all very funny though. I just kept looking at my trousers during and couldn't stop laughing. What is my driver going to think? He was fine, found it as funny as I did.

Then in an afternoon walk with Dalveer, we saw Asian Koel, Bronze-Winged Jacana, Black-Breasted and Baya Weavers, Chestnut-Shouldered Petronia, a pair of Red-Necked Falcons, Oriental Turtle Dove.

A few more beers were consumed that evening after a successful day. Much fun was had with Dalveer and the other staff while reciting my buffalo impressions, and Dalveer's reaction to finding the Malkoha.

I'm certain that Kingfisher lager was stronger here than at Bharatpur. I noticed on the bottle at Hotel Sunbird it said "alcohol content no more than 5%", whereas here, just into Uttar Pradesh, it said "alcohol content no more than 8%". It seems a little odd they don't mention an exact figure. It could be zero percent, it could be 7.9 percent. It certainly felt more towards the latter!

Sunday 25th November

A little groggy this morning! But another pre-breakfast walk produced a Wryneck. I wasn't planning to go on another boat trip, but there was time to fit another one in. It made sense otherwise I would be sitting around the safari lodge all morning.

We went in the opposite direction this time to look for the Gangetic River Dolphin. On the way Dalveer found three Asian Openbill Storks sat in a tree.

We eventually got to the Dolphin area and we had some excellent views. The last view we had was of the Dolphin leaping straight up into the air, about 30 metres away from the boat. After that, the boatman said it was the best view he had had in 10 years! As we weren't going to do any better than that, we set off back, with River Tern and Osprey seen on the way.

After lunch it was time to head back to Agra to catch the train to Umaria.

INDIA 2007 TIGERS, TAJ AND HIMALAYAN BIRDS

November 2007

Jo and Ian

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/8773601@N03/sets/72157603341038890/?page=2>

<http://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=102900>

22nd November

Our train was delayed by two hours but at least we were all comfortable and we all managed to get some much-needed sleep this time. We were met on the platform by a familiar face, Sandeep, our driver from Bharatpur. Another friendly face was at Chambal in the form of Rattan Sing, We were also introduced to his nephew Dholbeer who was obviously following in his Uncle's footsteps.

We were supposed to have the afternoon to relax at Chambal Safari Lodge and both Mike and Ian were looking forward to the change of pace. All plans for a lazy afternoon were dashed however as it was announced that we would take our boat trip, planned for the next morning, that afternoon. Personally, I was quite happy with this arrangement and after lunch we took the 45min drive down to the river. As Rattan was with us we of course stopped en route for Crested Bunting, but soon were on a boat cruising down the river. Gharials, Marsh Muggers, and numerous turtles were easy to spot and there was also a variety of wildfowl including Ruddy Shelduck, Lesser Whistling Duck, Comb Duck and Bar-headed Goose. Waders included River Lapwing, Kentish, Little Ringed and Lesser Sand Plover, We also saw River and Black-bellied Tern as well as a lone Indian Skimmer. On the way back a Golden Jackal could be seen on the bank taking a drink and we caught the briefest of glimpse of the Gangetic Dolphin. We retired to the Lodge for a relaxing evening. For those who are on the lookout for Souvenirs, Dholbeer does his own line of hand-painted t-shirts which are worth a look.

23rd November

I was up early for a morning bird walk but our guides were on a bit of a go-slow so all we really saw was a Collared Scops Owl and a Brown Hawk Owl. After breakfast we took a drive back to the river again stopping whenever Rattan saw something interesting. This included Hoopoe, Bluethroat, Black-bellied Weaver, and Jungle Prinia. Birding along the river gave us good views of River Lapwing, Sand Lark and Greater Thicknee, Having seen only the one skimmer yesterday we were keen to see more so Rattan worked his magic and scored us an unauthorized boat ride up to the island where we got good views of a dozen or so birds.

Lunchtime around the lodge provided further opportunities for birding and I got a good view of a pair of Black-rumped Flamebacks on a tree by our lodge. Skimmer lodge, the one we stayed in sits under a tree that is the home of a rather noisy colony of fruit bats- so don't expect a lie in if you stay there! That afternoon we met another of Asian Adventure's guests, Richard, who I had been corresponding with on Bird Forum. We birded around the lodge and local fields, getting nice views of a Brown-headed Barbet amongst other things. After dark we searched the trees by our lodge for Indian Palm Civet and got some good views of about six of these cute little critters.

24th November

I was awoken early by the Fruit bats returning to their roost, so decided to get up for the early morning bird walk. This time we went out to the fields and added a Greater Short-toed lark and Baya Weaver to our list. We got a call from the lodge asking us to head back because we were due to leave for Agra. After a quick breakfast I finished packing and we were off on our way again. Again, Rattan didn't disappoint us with views of Yellow-wattled Lapwing, three Oriental Honey Buzzards and best of all, a Lesser Spotted Eagle on the way.

NORTHERN INDIA: BHARATPUR, TIGERS AND THE TAJ MAHAL

1st – 21st December 2007

Sam Woods

http://www.tropicalbirding.com/tripReports/TR_India_Dec2007/indiatourreport07.html

Day 7: KEOLADEO GHANA NATIONAL PARK (RAJASTHAN) onto CHAMBAL SAFARI LODGE (U.P.)

After a final lunch at the fantastic Bagh hotel, we departed for Chambal Safari Lodge, our base for the following morning river safari. On the way there was little to add, but we did pick up a small group of Red-naped Ibis feeding in some recently fertilized fields alongside the highway. Once at the lodge, our late arrival left little time, except to see an Indian Hareleaping around at the back of the resort, and to see a party of Common Palm Civetsemerge from their day roost, and later we picked up our second Brown Hawk-Owl of the day, this time watched at night as it hawked for insects from its treetop perch.

Day 8: CHAMBAL RIVER SAFARI (UTTAR PRADESH)

A short time after a chilly, misty dawn we made the journey down to the Chambal River itself, a noted area for birds and an internationally recognized bird sanctuary. The main target bird in the area is the wintering flock of Indian Skimmers, a very localized, globally threatened species that spends the winter months on the sandy banks of the Chambal. This year we ran into 36 of these superb skimmers, the rarest of the three species worldwide. Another declining and local species, Black-bellied Tern was found plucking insects from the glassy surface of the Chambal, all the birds seen being in resplendent breeding plumage, complete with jet black underbelly.

Some low-flying birds were followed closely and led us straight to a group of over 30 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, feeding on the boulder-strewn banks. Other birds on the safari included a nesting pair of Bonelli's Eagles, a single low flying Long-legged Buzzard, huge rafts of Bar-headed Geese resting on the water, a chunky Great Thick-knee hiding along the rockier part of the Chambal, and a lone Common Merganser resting on a sand bar. The birds, good as they are were not our only focus, a couple of interesting 'crocs' regularly using the sandy bars alongside the river as a resting place. Just a couple of Mugger Crocodiles were seen, although well over 60 long-snouted, fish-eating Gharials were found loafing on some small sandy islands in the middle of the Chambal.

A definite highlight of this year's river safari. We then returned to Agra, the home of the Taj Mahal, where we boarded our overnight train for our journey into 'Tiger Country', and our visit to the fabled Tiger Reserve of Bandhavgarh in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.

COMPLETE NORTHERN INDIA – TIGERS AND HIMALAYAS EXPLORATION TOUR

29 December 2007 to 12 January 2008

Participants: Mike Clacey, George Armbrust

Guide (and report written by): Duan Biggs

Total species count: 344

[Http://www.birdingecotours.co.za/Tripreports/reportindiadec07.php](http://www.birdingecotours.co.za/Tripreports/reportindiadec07.php)

30 December – Delhi to Chambal Wildlife Sanctuary

We left Delhi at 0700, as the first trickles of the winter sun peeked through the capital city. This was our first experience of India's remarkable road traffic. The country's main roads have to accommodate modern vehicles, trucks, busses, bicycles, cattle, goats, rickshaws as well as those on pilgrimage. This makes traveling the 200 or so kilometers to Chambal, a 7 to 8 hour operation. The last part of our drive was broken by a pair of seldom-seen Yellow-wattled Lapwing. A late-ish lunch at the attractive Chambal Lodge delivered the striking Brown-headed Barbet. As we approached our boat launch site on the Chambal river, we were treated to a group of Large Grey Babblers. The sandy plains of the river held Crested Lark. A boldly-coloured White-browed Wagtail was feeding nearby at a pool of water and a pair of delightful River Lapwings were resting nearby. We enjoyed a good look at Kentish Plover just before we jumped onto our boat for a boat trip to remember. Our first indulgence was a large group of Indian Skimmers on a sandy island. This was followed by a Brown Crake foraging on a nearby bank. Our first of many Indian Peafowl stood sentinel atop a nearby hill, and a Blue Rock Thrush was perched atop a riverside shrub. The boat stood in awe of a group of Great Thick-knees a stone's throw away. A pair of nesting Bonelli's Eagle provided perched and flying views. On our return journey we picked up on Black-bellied Tern, Lesser Whistling Duck and brief views of flying River Terns. Non-avian highlights from the boat included the peculiar fish-eating Gharial and a Golden Jackal. We returned to the crisp evening air of the Chambal Lodge having notched up 71 species that afternoon.

Highlights: Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Brown-headed Barbet, Lesser Whistling Duck, Indian Peafowl, Black-bellied Tern, River Lapwing, brief views of River Tern, Brown Crake, Great Thick-knee, Gharial.

31 December – Chambal and the Taj Mahal, Bharaptur

Rattan knocked on our doors at dawn: "Time for Brown Hawk Owl." Sure enough, a few minutes after a warming cup of coffee, he had spotted one perched in thick foliage in the lodge grounds. Owling for the morning was not done. We had Collared Scops Owl shortly thereafter. A productive pre-breakfast session in the lodge grounds delivered: the immaculate Black-rumped Flameback, our first Indian Roller, Chestnut-shouldered Petronia and cracking views of Indian Robin. After breakfast we visited one of the Seven Wonders of the World – the Taj Mahal.

DELHI BIRD

07-08, January 2008

N. Sethi

http://groups.google.com.et/group/delhibirdpix/browse_thread/thread/733bbe6eafebbad4

Highlights :-Skimmers(of course), red headed vulture, common buzzard, long legged buzzard, common merganser, black bellied tern, painted sandgrouse, brown hawk owl

Hi! last weekend caught between the hunt for sibes and twitching at Assan barrage we chose to walk the middle path and visited the charming Chambal Safari Lodge at Jarar about 70km from Agra. We landed there early on Saturday morning after spending the night at Agra (and seeing the Taj at close quarters in not so full moon light) and chose to go down to the river at the Chambal Sanctuary. On way a pair of crested buntings surprisingly showed up nicely by the roadside. The river was an enchanting experience - clear flowing waters and clean banks. Immediately on landing there we found a common buzzard close by sitting on the bank trying to plan its day and giving us good opportunity to study the brown patch on belly etc (of course with raptors all your study goes the moment u see one soaring overhead). There were desert and Isabelline wheatears, sand larks little ringed plovers and osprey on a pole, as usual, giving close views. We hopped on board the boat run by the lodge barely able to contain the excitement of seeing skimmers (which were on the wish list for a loonng time). As we boarded a lone common merganser was spotted (I'm told by Bill they haven't been mapped from there before as they are usually found high in the foothills. Its understood that they are seen there – probably more upstream). A lone red crested pochard with five females with brilliant light falling on them was a great sight. As we cruised numerous bar headed geese, comb ducks, great thick knees, about 150+ grey herons were seen amongst the Chambal gharials (in news these days having been found dead due to liver cirrhosis), red headed turtles, marsh crocodiles. And then at last a group of skimmers –those striking birds whose breakfast was over so couldn't see them hunting with their lovely beaks. Nevertheless they all raised their heads to give us good views while a black-bellied tern basked close by. And then Dalveer our bird guide (an able nephew of Rattan Singh) shouted to draw our attention to the dolphins- but where – they just come up for few seconds before diving underneath. One needs a quick eye and patience to see the rare Gangetic river dolphins. Feeling exalted we headed back to see a pair Bonelli's eagle on the cliff with the female probably sitting on the eggs in the nest. An afternoon walk to the nearby pond showed yellow wattled lapwings in the grounds on the way and at the pond five common snipes for once feeding along with the other waders in the open and then back at the lodge the brown hawk owl showed nicely. A walk in the fields around the lodge in the morning showed a good number of resident birds like bhraminy myna, red collared dove, black-breasted weavers with a lone booted warbler. Rest of the morning was spent basking in the sun in the

lawns watching peahens, brown-headed barbets, koels at the watering holes. At this place one really feels surrounded by birds-in fact you wake up in the morning to the call of grey partridges which are soon joined by the parakeets and the brown headed barbets.

On Sunday we headed back to delhi in the afternoon and stopped briefly at sur sarovar sanctuary (about 16 km from Agra) to have a quick look. There were a good number of spoon and open bills apart from numerous waterfowl which unfortunately were at a distance and totally against the light –I guess it should be good in the morning-I guess some other time

NORTHERN INDIA

9th - 21st January 2008

Rockjumper Birding Tours

[http://rockjumper.co.za/upload/trip-reports/2008 Jan 9- 21 Northern India RBT \(pvt tour\).pdf](http://rockjumper.co.za/upload/trip-reports/2008%20Jan%209-21%20Northern%20India%20RBT%20(pvt%20tour).pdf)

We then moved on to Chambal Safari Lodge, custodians in the conservation of the Chambal River, which includes the protection of the rare Ganges River Dolphin. We had a very pleasant stay here enjoying the farm environment and new ticks were Barred Buttonquail, Black-breasted Weaver and an Indian Palm Civet. Although we did not see the Gangetic Dolphin due to a breezy wind, we found other noteworthy species such as the very rare Indian Skimmer, Brown Crake, Black-bellied Tern, Great Thick-knee, Bonelli's Eagle and close up looks at Mugger Crocodile and Gharial-a prehistoric looking beast! Later that afternoon we visited the temples at Fatepursikri, the soft evening light made for stunning colorful images.

BIRDING AND WILDLIFE TOUR OF INDIA

26 January – 21 February 2008

Trip Report by Catherine J. Aitchison

[http://kellysekhon.shawwebspace.ca/asset/view/12837/india trip report 2008 by cathy aitchison.pdf](http://kellysekhon.shawwebspace.ca/asset/view/12837/india%20trip%20report%202008%20by%20cathy%20aitchison.pdf)

Wednesday, February 6

We arrived after dark at our rural lodging for the next two nights, Chambal Safari Lodge, to find a cheerful fire blazing in an outdoor fire pit, and mugs of hot soup to combat the post-sunset chill. After dinner we retired to rustic but very comfortable cabins, each named after a local bird. Ours was "Thick-knee Cottage". I hoped this was a lucky sign that I would soon add a real Great Thickknee to my life list! Chambal is an "eco-tourism endeavour committed to the sustainable use of natural resources". Meals are home-cooked using fresh organic ingredients, waste water is recycled into the ground via soaking pits, and large numbers of indigenous trees and shrubs are planted on the property each year. This encourages birds, mammals and reptiles to make their home here.

Thursday, February 7

A pre-breakfast walk with birding guide Dal found a new group of birds in the garden greenery and dry weedy fields around the lodge: two Yellow-wattled Lapwings, an Egyptian Vulture, a Red-throated (-breasted) Flycatcher, a Greybreasted Prinia, two Indian Grey Hornbills, four Yellow-footed Green-Pigeons and a pair of beautiful Plum-headed Parakeets. To top off the walk, Dal pointed out a Brown Hawk-Owl perched low in a tree near the driveway. We all had wonderful views of it and the cameras were busy.

After breakfast, our morning excursion was a boat trip on the nearby Chambal River in the National Chambal Sanctuary, a wildlife area designated in 1972. The Indian gods were smiling on us as we enjoyed a delightful trip, highly rewarding in the numbers of birds and animals sighted. Along the dirt road to the river we passed numerous camels, extremely picturesque with their turbaned owners and loads of firewood, heading for the village markets. A Crested Bunting was also on the roadside and we saw our first four Pied Starlings. The land along the banks of the river could be termed “badlands” – high banks of dry gravelly soil eroding in deep gullies toward the river. However, this is one of the cleanest rivers in India; clean enough for Fresh Water Dolphins, notoriously unable to cope with pollution. As we left the bus we spotted two female Nilgai (Blue Bull Antelope), the largest antelope in Asia. On a nearby bank edge, a spectacular cobalt blue, purple and turquoise Indian Roller was perched, closely flanked by two Rose-ringed Parakeets. What a sight as the roller periodically flew up to catch an insect, his bright colours flashing in the morning sunlight! No wonder it’s one of Kelly’s favourite birds. A Long-legged Buzzard sat on a low hill not far away and a River Lapwing cruised low over the water. We embarked in two open boats with outboard engines, going slowly upriver and were kept very busy looking at all the wildlife. Waterbirds spotted included four Blackbellied Terns, three Black (red-naped) Ibis, Osprey, the first Spot-billed and Comb Ducks of the trip, Black-winged Stilts, Bar-headed and Greylag Geese, Red-crested and Common Pochards, Temminck’s Stints, a Kentish Plover, thirty-four Lesser Whistling Ducks, three hundred or so Grey Herons, a Brown Crake and a first-year Pallas’ (Black-headed) Gull. On a sandbar in the middle of the river were more than thirty very large Gharial, several of them mature males with the distinctive large ‘knobs’ on the end of their narrow snouts, as well as ten Marsh Crocodiles, some absolutely huge. Two Fresh Water Dolphins entertained us for some time, surfacing around us and sometimes coming quite near our boats. For the birders a real treat, and a specialty of this area, awaited us on another sandbar – twenty-five Indian Skimmers loafing and flying low over the water. At one point, the whole flock lifted off and gave us a fantastic air show, then resettled onto the sand. As if this wasn’t enough, we delighted in some great land birds as well: Citrine and White-browed Wagtails, Desert and Variable Wheatear, Pied Bush-chat, twenty Greater Short-toed Larks, a Southern Grey Shrike, Indian Robin, a pair of Bonelli’s Eagles perched on a riverside cliff, two Grey Francolin, two of my hoped-for Great Thick-knees seen quite close, and, to cap it all off, two very cute Spotted Owlets cuddled together in a riverbank hole (possibly youngsters at their nest?) As we climbed out of the boats, Susan suddenly pointed along the river bank, “What’s that?” We looked quickly and saw a grayish dog-like animal moving quietly away through the dry grass and shrubs, not very far from us. An Indian Grey Wolf! A very rare sighting. The Gharial, Marsh Crocodiles, Fresh Water Dolphins and Wolf seen this morning are all globally threatened species. After all this, we went happily ‘home’ for lunch where Jungle Babblers and Fivestriped Palm Squirrels joined us in the garden, boldly cleaning up any available scraps of food.

An afternoon excursion to the village of Bateshwar on the Yamuna River gave us a wonderful sight of about 40 exotic domed white temples along the river bank. The temples, all that is left of an original 100, are dedicated to Lord Shiva and were built by King Bada Singh about 400 years ago. Three Woolly-necked Storks and two Painted Storks, the first of the trip, flew above the river as we floated along on a high-sided wooden barge, the best way to view the beautiful spectacle of the river bank with its steep ghats, or steps, lined with the white domed temples

against the bluest of skies. This area has many holy men, or sadhus, some of whom could be seen sitting outside their little “cells” carved out of the sandstone bank opposite the temples. They usually live by themselves, on the fringes of society, and spend their days in devotion to their chosen deity. They are not supposed to work, but live on donations. One of these bearded old men, dressed in somewhat tattered robes, chatted to a group of us. Mary asked if she might take his picture and he graciously gave his permission, then asked if he could have a copy. “How will I get it to you?” she asked. “Oh, I’ll give you my e-mail address” was his casual reply! As he searched his voluminous robes for a scrap of paper to write down the address, we noticed his cell phone dangling from a cord around his neck!

Back at Chambal Lodge after dark (6 pm), Dal announced that he was going to try to see the pair of Palm Civets that live in a big tree near Thick-knee Cottage. We brought our flashlights, bins and cameras. Dal shone his light and the civets, which had been out on a large limb, retreated into a fairly big hole containing their nest. Then they peeked out again and finally one (likely the male) calmly came out for a minute. They’re about the size and shape of a big house cat, but with shorter legs, mottled brown/grey fur and rounded ears. We all managed pretty good views and then shut the lights off and left them to resume their nighttime activities. All in all, it had been a banner day for birding and wildlife!

Friday, February 8

A cool (14 C) early morning at Chambal Lodge and pre-breakfast birding brought some more goodies. Our first Brown-headed Barbet appeared in the garden and a pair of gorgeous Small Minivets, the male with black head, back and wings and a blazing orangey-red breast, the female similar with a bright orangey-yellow breast. They perched together on a nearby low branch while we drank our morning coffee al fresco. An Egyptian Vulture flew low over the garden, Rose-ringed Parakeets fussed and chattered in the trees and the ever present Jungle Babblers checked the lawn for tidbits. We reluctantly left Chambal at 9 am after group photos in front of the pink-bougainvillea-draped dining room, and goodbyes and thanks to our host and hostess for a wonderful and highly productive stay.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH ASSAM, NE-INDIA - WITH AN EXTENSION TO CHAMBAL

Feb.-March 2008

NOTES ON BIRDS, MAMMALS, and REPTILES

by Joergen Bech and Jette Lyager (Copenhagen, Denmark)

[http://www.netfugl.dk/trip_reports/asia/ArunachalPradesh Assam NE-India feb-march2008.pdf](http://www.netfugl.dk/trip_reports/asia/ArunachalPradesh_Assam_NE-India_feb-march2008.pdf)

15.03. 2008

Long drive to Chambal south of Agra. Dry and hot landscape – Jammu River completely dried out! The Chambal Safari Lodge has a very pleasant atmosphere and is situated at the fringe of a small traditional village. Highly recommendable! It was once a cattle-station and this has left some good acacia-stands. A migratory Ultramarine Flycatcher, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, and Yellow-wattled Lapwing. Palm Civet at dusk.

16.03.08

Drive to Chambal River, the last morning-hours looking for dry area-species before entering the boat. The water floats from Deccan and is still clear and pollution low – conditions needed for the 3 endangered species: Indian Skimmer (a total of 28), Gangetic Dolphin (3), and Gharials

(20). Last paradise? – development in India is fast and the environmental impact is all too obvious!

Long drive back, long rows of wagons of any kind loaded with potatoes wait for days to unload at the store-houses. Patience – India! Met with Indian and Danish friends in the evening, but time was running out and the night-flight for Europe closed another adventure in India.

SKIMMING THROUGH CHAMBAL – NATIONAL CHAMBAL SANCTUARY

March 2008

Jayanth Sharma

<http://www.wildlifetimes.com/forums/viewtopic.php?p=1141&sid=9915abf22a9085e3edf0ad947330e384>

Apart from the Gharials whose sighting was more than assured, my other target species of the trips were the endangered Indian Skimmers and it was also a good place to sight the Sarus Cranes. After my flight to Delhi, a six hour drive to the town of “Bah” in Uttar Pradesh (60plus kms from Agra) was where I was supposed to camp. “Chambal Safari” is a nice resort near Bah which accommodates just a few tourists and it is probably the only wildlife centric accommodation for tourists around here.

Shruthi my wife was brainwashed by my father to keep ourselves safe and secure from the dangerous “Dacoits”. But I was sure nothing of that sort could happen – usually. We were happy to see very few guests in the resort and all of them were guests from outside India. Most of these guests had binoculars in their possession and things looked positive at first sight. It would have been a disaster to end up spending time with groups which had no interest in wildlife, but thankfully here, all we found were bird watchers and wildlife enthusiasts. Grey Hornbills, Pied Mynas, Fruit Bats, Jungle Babblers, Rose-ringed Parakeets were all over the place and our little room was nice and beautiful. We hardly had an hour to refresh and get ready for the evening boat safari in the Chambal River. After a twenty minute drive from our resort to the village of Ater, Chambal was sighted and our boatman was waiting for us with other guests. Soon the motorboat took off and we ventured on our first boat safari in the pristine Chambal River.

Within less than ten minutes of our journey on the boat we started identifying beautiful birds and in no time I sighted my first Gharial basking on the banks of Chambal. As we approached the Gharial I could count at least twelve tiny Gharials basking alongside the elder. They were motionless for most of the time but on a few occasions, they jumped in to river as the boat approached.

Ruddy Shelducks, Bar-headed Goose, Egyptian Vultures, Lesser-whistling ducks, Mugger crocodiles, Stone Plovers, River Terns were all a sight to watch. We gradually moved down stream and from at least 400 feet distance our guide and the boatman alerted us of the Indian Skimmers. I was overjoyed to have found skimmers so quickly. Almost resembling the River Terns, the Indian Skimmer is a gorgeous bird with a colorful beak that helps it skim through the surface of the water. They are usually found in pairs and at this point at least 12 pairs of skimmers were resting on the ground.

Occasionally they would fly around our boat making loud calls and get back to their base. I was very eager to try and photograph them while they were skimming. But unfortunately they seem

to be skimming only early in the morning and usually after sunset. However, I did have a glimpse of one bird skimming very close by my boat. The evening light was magical and the skimmers were the best we had seen that evening. A quick drive up the stream got us back to the jetty and we went to bed with a wonderful first innings at Chambal.

The Sarus Crane trail

I had an option to either go back to the boat safari or try and explore the fields nearby in order to sight and photograph the extremely endangered Sarus Cranes. Last time in Gujarat, I had a disappointing experience with the Sarus Cranes as they were extremely shy and always on the move. They would sense my presence from 200 feet away and fly away. I was crossing my fingers and hoping to get closer to at least one pair this time. We crossed village after village, town after town and little did we realize that we had already traveled 45kms in search of the Sarus Cranes. Hope was almost dead and we reached Sepai, the native of the politician Mulayam Singh Yadav. We decided to check till the end of the abandoned air strip in this village whose inauguration was halted by a court order.

Hurray! I shouted when I sighted two adult Sarus cranes walk briskly across the field at a distance of 300 feet. But before I ended my celebration they flew away making calls and I was again disappointed. But after a couple of minutes they came back from the other side and landed on a huge dump of hay in the open field. I quickly mounted my camera on the tripod and with binoculars in hand; I set out on foot inside the fields of Sepai. The farmers were eager and keen to know what was happening. But my driver handled them well and none came closer to me and I was not disturbed. Within five minutes I got as close as 200 feet to the cranes and I started stalking them hiding behind a huge bush and some trees. When I peeped out of the bush I realized I didn't do a great job of stalking. The Cranes already knew of the enormous body hiding behind the bushes.

But surprisingly, the pair was tolerant and didn't move a bit. I slowly grabbed some oxygen and started clicking their pictures. Every minute I stepped a foot or two closer and in less than 10 minutes I was as close as 50 feet from them in the open field. I was thrilled that the cranes didn't perceive me as threat and didn't fly away. I don't remember anything other than the movements of the romantic Sarus Cranes in courtship. They sang and danced and after half an hour of pleasing me and making me jealous of their romance, they bid good bye to me and my camera. It would be an understatement to say I was thrilled. I was super-thrilled and excited and I ran back to the car to tell the story of them to my wife and driver. But they were always observing through the binoculars and already knew we had struck gold.

That evening in the boat was no other guest and I had all the time in the world to spare for the beautiful Skimmers. I spent at least two hours watching them fly and call in turns and during this phase I managed a few action shots of the skimmers. I was again disappointed that I couldn't see them skimming. However in the second innings with Skimmers proved very fruitful. Since I knew more about these birds by then, I could take pictures of them in action and while at flight. At least a dozen River Terns and a few hyper-active Black-bellied Terns also treated my eyes. Eurasian Spoonbills were sighted close by and the day ended with a lot of Skimmer activity. While returning back to the base, a Bonelli's eagle was sitting on the ground and was being constantly attacked by a river lapwing. The eagle had been conspiring over the lapwing's nest and as usual the lapwings abused the eagle time and again. It was getting dark and I had very less time to witness the argument of these two birds.

On my last boat safari in Chambal, I decided to focus my efforts on the Gharials. Since it made sense to drive up stream on mornings keeping the sun behind our backs, we decided to visit parts of the river we hadn't seen till then. Gharials were seen in dozens over the banks of the river and Lesser-whistling ducks, Comb ducks, Ruddy-shelducks accompanied the lazy gharials. I spent nearly two hours trying to produce something different. But I must admit it is quite tough to get different shots of these as they hardly move and simply bask in the open. Loads of them lie around the tiny islets on the river and spend the whole day basking. It was interesting to see the Gharials move on land. They are probably the slowest amongst all crocodiles on land.

The Glimpse of the Dolphins

After a while, we reached an area where the river widened. The boat was switched off in the middle of the river and we waited for the Ganges river dolphins to show up. After nearly 10 minutes, our boatman sighted Dolphins which we all missed. But after a while we had a glimpse of another dolphin nearby. Over the next 15 minutes, we sighted four more dolphins surfacing up and vanishing in the blues of Chambal. On the way back to the jetty, I decided to get off and look for the tiny sand larks. In the heat of the day, crawling on the soft grounds of Chambal's banks, I had a tough time finding these tiny shy birds.

Finally, it was time to pack my bags and move out of Chambal. I had to travel to Delhi. After having sighted all the crocodile species of the subcontinent for which I had to travel long distances, I am a satisfied man. In spite of my mind discouraging me from wasting a boat safari on Chambal by going on the Sarus Crane trail, my heart pushed me towards the latter. I cannot express in words the amount of satisfaction that I underwent after this tedious session in the Paddy/potato fields of these villages.

I do suggest anyone visiting this place to surely spare some time for the Sarus and also do a safari on the fields in order to sight the Black-bucks and Nilgais up close. Mr. Ram Pratap Singh of the Chambal Safari told me that not many Indian tourists visit the place and most of his guests are from outside India. Not many of us realize what a paradise we have been ignoring over here. After the recent Gharial deaths in the river, I was happy not to have sighted even a single carcass and it seems the situation was improving. After all Chambal is known as one of the country's pristine rivers. Why shouldn't it remain so?