

INTO THE LAND OF BANDIT QUEEN**A visit to National Chambal Wildlife Sanctuary****5th November, 2009**<http://tailrace.wordpress.com/2009/11/05/chambal-wildlife-sanctuary/>

It was another such journey. Totally unplanned. As soon as we got to know about the 3 day weekend, the dice were cast. Choice fell on Chambal by sheer accident. And the visit exceeded our wildest expectations. We set out from Gurgaon early Saturday morning and halted at Dabchick Dhaba near Hodal for a brief snack before proceeding to Agra. By afternoon we reached the Chambal Safari Lodge at Jarar, 62 kilometers from Agra on Fatehabad road. A small signboard beside a dirt track on the right-hand side of the road unobtrusively announced its presence.

The eco-lodge was located within 100 acres of farmland. Vegetables for meals were handpicked from the farm or sourced from the local market. It was open from October to April and organized river safaris, camel safaris, jeep safaris and nature walks inside the Chambal National Wildlife Sanctuary. We were quickly ushered into our cottage, "Barbet", upon arrival. The cottage was clean and elegant, furnished in faux pastoral. There were bats on the tree beside it, parrots flitted about and a cluster of babblers furiously hopped about in the ground. Birdcalls filled the air.

The sanctuary was a further 20 Km from the lodge, beyond Bah and Jaitpur. We started by late afternoon and reached the sanctuary gate at Nadgawah in 45 minutes. Except for some congestion at Jaitpur, the drive was comfortable. The asphalt road inside sanctuary stopped short of almost a kilometer from the river. It was possible to take the car through a rutted road all the way to the riverbed risking the strain on shock absorbers. We parked our car where the asphalt road ended and walked rest of the way. The track we followed was flanked by Babul, Khejri and Pipal trees. We spotted Peacocks, Sparrows, Hoopoes, Wagtails, Kingfishers, Jungle Babblers, Barbets and Buzzards along the trail.

From the western embankment where we stood, the shimmering steel grey of the river could be seen for miles. The rustic charm of the place was overwhelming. Beyond the clean shaven riverbank, tilled to plant Sarson and Arhar, the tree line rose up like whiskers. Dry Bajra stalks were piled in several places. A pleasant breeze ruffled our hair. Far away two barges ferried people, motorbikes and bicycles across the banks. The clamour from the barges reached us carried by the wind.

We descended a steep slope and soon reached the safari camp near the shore. Sunil, our naturalist from the lodge had binoculars handy and pointed out several birds to us. We found Sparrow-larks among the bushes. Lapwings, Plovers, Stilts and Greenshanks foraged in the shallow waters. An Osprey hovered over the river, Pied Kingfishers rested on a tree stump midstream, a Cormorant sunned on the bank and a pair of Ruddy Shelducks waddled along the shore.

The lodge had 3 fiberglass boats fitted with outboard motors. Presently they are the only option for anyone interested in river safaris. We clambered into one and impatiently began looking out for Gharials, Muggers and Gangetic River Dolphins.

Soon we picked out two Gharials resting on a sandbank near the shore. As our boat inched

near the slithered into the river in panic, their snout and eyes now barely visible above water. We enquired if Gharials ever attacked humans. Negative. They thrived on small fish. Several Gharials rested on the far bank. We cut off the engine and noiselessly drifted near. One had its mouth wide open, exposing an array of razor sharp teeth. Others had their snouts pointing at the sky. They remained motionless, the rhythmic movement of their belly the only sign of life. Yogic trance? Our guide begged to differ.

They were warming up before a long night underwater. The Gharials were gregarious. Once we saw at least ten disembodied Gharial snouts and eyes swimming together midstream. They were an endangered species, but appeared oblivious to their fate. We had seen Gharials in captivity before. But watching them here, seeing them swim about freely and sunbathing on the shore we became intensely conscious of the urgent need to preserve this habitat.

The first Mugger crocodile we saw lay camouflaged in mud with its tail dragging in water. As we approached, it slid back into water in reverse gear and swam away. We returned midstream and began looking about for others. Jackals stared at us from the riverside, a kingfisher plunged into water, two Ruddy Shelducks tottered about snorting among the bushes, and a sole Painted Stork stood petrified on a sandbank. Soon we caught sight of another Mugger burrowed deep in mud, merging harmoniously into the landscape. We stopped the engine and edged close. It followed our movement through hooded beige-grey eyes, but remained still. As we watched, two Woolly-necked Storks walked past it, a kingfisher landed on a nearby twig. Muggers seemed solitary compared to Gharials. Did Muggers prey on humans? So far, there have been no such instances, but they were perfectly capable of hurting us. Their cousins, the saltwater crocodiles were bigger, more aggressive and known to attack large animals. The Holy Grail of our journey, the elusive Gangetic River Dolphin had not appeared yet.

We cruised some distance upstream, turned off the engine and began our stakeout. Before long we heard a splash and glimpsed a grey hump disappearing underwater. The dolphin comes up just about every 3 minutes for air. We kept our eyes peeled on the water. Soon a dolphin surfaced and we managed to see the long snout before it went down. Like Gharial, the river dolphin too is critically endangered. Building of dams, deforestation, fishing, pollution and other human activities have rapidly decimated their population. There are only a few hundred of them left. Besides, the dolphins breed only every 3 years, a fact that makes them all the more vulnerable. Hopefully, the status of national fish recently accorded them by the government of India would help in their conservation.

Sun was already marching towards the horizon as we turned back. The placid river had turned a fluid metallic crimson. Some Open-billed Storks were busy scrounging for food on the shore. As dusk advanced a refreshing cool wind began blowing from south-east. Buffaloes, camels and people were returning home from work. The barges were moored on either bank. As we walked back along the shore we came across a Sparrow-lark nest with two tiny chicks under a small plant. Night had fallen by the time we reached the car. Dinner at the cottage was sumptuous. We were served mutton cutlets and tomato soup as hors d'oeuvre. The main course had chicken flavoured with crushed spices and an array of vegetarian dishes including stuffed tomato, bhindi, arbi, dal and methi aloo. The rotis were served fresh from the oven. Kunwar Ram Pratap Singh, the owner of the lodge joined us during dinner and discussed

various environmental issues faced by the sanctuary.

We set off for the Camel Safari early next morning. Raju and Manisha, the camels assigned for the trip were awaiting us on the riverside. Wooden saddles cushioned with jute sacks and bed sheets were hoisted on their rump and fixed with rope between neck and tail. Once we mounted, the camels rose up tossing us from front to back. I patted Raju on the neck and prayed to almighty God for a safe passage. The ravines unfolded before us. We felt like Bedouins on steroids, out on a sacred quest. Just exaggerating!! Ten minutes of rocking and swaying spread-eagled on the camel strained my spine. I kept adjusting my position and finally attained a state of equilibrium least damaging to my pelvis and vertebra. From atop camels we looked down on people and automobiles as they scurried past in billowing dust clouds. Buffaloes wallowing in fetid pools eyed us curiously. Cows stopped chewing and stared at us. Passing jeeps and motorbikes slowed down to let the camels pass. Pigs scuttled across.

Men, women and children paused from their work and straightened up to glare at us. We simultaneously became spectators and spectacles. Some men carried rifles. We enquired if the dacoits were still around. No, they were either dead and buried or transmuted into politicians following the example of Phoolan Devi. The villagers had no more reason to worry. Guns and the elaborate moustaches were mere showoff. Forty minutes of camel ride across the ravines took us to Ater fort perched precariously on a hill top. It was built by Bhadauria King Badan Singh, Maha Singh and Bakhat Singh in the era 1664-1668. That was all the information we could gather about the fort from our guide. No one knew its history in detail. The fort was in complete disrepair, there were huge fissures on walls, at some places the bricks looked as if they would fall if you so much as touched them. At the fort entrance Archeological Survey of India had put a warning notice against vandalism. Inside, the wall frescoes were defaced, many had faded away with time, broken stone pillars and brackets cluttered the passages. The only structure intact was the watchtower, but its walls were spoilt by graffiti. Here and there some insouciant restoration work was underway. Pipal saplings and grass shoots protruded from crevices. Some sections were near inaccessible due to overgrown grass and tall shrubs. The decrepitude was almost total. To watch a once magnificent structure being gradually reduced to rubble due to neglect was poignant. We took leave of Ater fort by noon. As we left, a flock of pigeons leapt out of its ramparts and swooped back. Buzzards circled over the fort. Nature and time were closing in to seal its fate. We were still pondering over its destiny when the camels deposited us at the riverbank after another spine shattering ride. The time we spent at the lodge, although brief, was exhilarating.

The owners had lent several subtle touches to the lodge and its surroundings which were easy to miss. We complimented them for the excellent taste and hospitality and bid adieu after a leisurely lunch in the open.

Ranjan Banerji

Thursday, 3rd December 2009 00:09

<http://chaos.ranjanbanerji.com/post/2009/12/03/A-fun-trip-on-the-Chambal-River.aspx>

On a recent trip to India I went to the National Chambal River Sanctuary not too far from Agra

and close to Bah. We stayed at the Chambal Safari Lodge which in itself was an excellent experience. Talk about a great place to stay, excellent food, and great hospitality.

On our stay there we went for a river safari. Basically a quiet boat ride on the Chambal river early in the morning. You get to see Gharials, Crocodiles, Gangetic or River Dolphins (impossible to photograph), and lots of different types of birds.

CHAMBAL RIVER RESORT

18th December 2009

Websandthreads

<http://websandthreads.wordpress.com/2009/12/18/chambal-river-resort>

As promised, a look into our wonderful visit to the CHAMBAL RIVER RESORT, a beautiful part of The National Chambal Sanctuary on the Chambal River located in Central India.

Here is a pristine river, unpolluted, and home to a rich variety of flora and fauna, including the rare gharial alligators. After facing extinction, these unusual creatures were re-introduced in the Seventies and have found a place to survive on the Chambal. In addition, the sanctuary attracts a huge diversity of other rare mammals, reptiles, and birds.

Unfortunately, arriving in mid-November, we missed the massive annual migration which was due two weeks later. However, the beauty of the sanctuary and the river "safari" proved to be a wonderful, if brief, experience.

We had a drive to the beach area from the resort lodge and then a gorgeous walk through a green and hilly landscape that reminded me of Italy. Approaching the beach we came upon this stunning view of the river and the waiting boat.

We stayed on the river until all light had disappeared, but before, we saw a few birds and some of the magnificent gharials that inhabit the river. The sunset was spectacular.

As we quietly rode down the river, we heard from the surrounding hills music from, we surmised, a village somewhere out of sight. The peace and beauty of this precious place is protected thankfully, as part of the ancient heritage of India.

Our hosts at the Resort, Kunwar Ram Pratap, and his wife Anu, left careers as engineer and environmental scientist to create an ecologically-sustainable resort that actively uses local people, their arts and skills, and looks forward to making the Chambal River valley a destination where the indigenous wildlife will be protected for future generations from India and abroad.

BIRDING WITH PAMELA RASMUSSEN PART 4 – CHAMBAL

Tue, January 19th, 2010, 7:11 PM

Nikhil Devasar

<http://www.surfbirds.com/maillist/?id=45&start=270>

31st December, 2009

Our destination for tonight was Udaipur, not for New Year's Eve at the Lake Palace, but to catch the train to Agra. En route, we were again met by Satya, who took us to some more birding spots. Our first stop was Sai Dam. It is a huge dam and a small number of birds were scattered all over. Coot, Comb Ducks, Spotbills, Openbills, Black-headed Ibis, River Terns, Grey Herons, Night Herons and amongst the Tufted, one Ferruginous Duck. We resumed our

drive, crossed many Zinc smelting plants and drove beyond Udaipur to the Menar Wetlands. Water levels were low as the rains had been poor this year, but still the area had some interesting birds. Bar-headed and Greylag Geese, Dalmatian Pelicans, a variety of duck including some Mallards and most interestingly, at least 7 Common Snipes feeding in the area. Under a beautiful rising full moon, we stopped for tea at a roadside dhaba, and then after a long dinner at Udaipur we boarded our train and were on our way to Agra.

1st January, 2010

Arrived at Agra by 11, drove to Chambal by 1 and then a lazy lunch and even lazier afternoon, where after saying hi to the resident Brown Hawk Owl we relaxed in the bright sun.

I had visited the Chambal Safari Lodge around 7 years ago and had had a fantastic time, this time the place was even better.

Only Pam found the energy to walk around the complex and record and click birds. The evening was spent by a roaring bonfire with our hosts R. P. Singh and Anu and their friends, listening to numerous fascinating stories of all their various adventure. We reluctantly dragged ourselves to bed for the early morning start.

2nd January, 2010

The day of the Skimmers dawned badly, or rather did not dawn at all. The Lodge was enveloped in a typical January fog and we knew the situation at the river would only be worse. We could barely make out the silhouettes of the birds from the banks and had to focus our binoculars to identify them - Openbills, Egrets, Ruddy Shelduck, Red Crested Pochards were all feeding where our boat was tied. We clambered on, and wrapped up and warm, set off in the mist to look for our birds. Our first target was the Brown Crake which was showing nearby. We headed for a disused pontoon bridge and sure enough, walking in the bank behind it, was the Brown Crake. With much maneuvering and turning of the boat, we were all able to get good views. We chugged along for almost two hours, spotted many pairs of Ruddy Shelduck, Bar-headed Geese fed on the edges, Crested Grebe and Cormorants dived in the waters, a dolphin showed its back, and Egrets and Terns flew over to keep us company. We finally reached our destination - the favoured sandbank of the Indian Skimmers. We could see a few black blobs standing huddled in a group and as we approached long beaks emerged from under wings, heads tilted to survey us and then were promptly tucked away again. Too foggy and cold yet guys, said the birds, and went back to sleep. Thirteen birds we counted and as the light was terrible we decided to leave them for a bit and explore the island. Temmincks and Little Stints dashed around, Little Ringed Plovers ran swiftly on little legs. Occasionally they would stop, do a frenzied tap dance with one leg, and then move on again, pecking at whatever morsel they had managed to unnerve and unearth. A Kentish Plover also fed in the vicinity and behaved like a real bully, chasing the Little Ringed whenever he espied them. A Sand Lark sang loudly and kept jumping up and pecking at the leaves of some Congress weed, ostensibly for a tiny insect. By now it was 11 and the light was as good as it was going to get on this fogged out day so we decided to finally focus our attention on the main event, the Skimmers. We got back onto to the boat and moved a little bit closer. The birds turned towards us and in the silvery light their beaks looked like they were made of Moreno glass - translucent red, changing into orange and then ending with yellow at the end. They allowed us to come fairly close, stretched, walked around, picked up twigs, drank water,

flew a round and resettled and carried on doing this for the next hour that we were with them. A River Tern and a Black-bellied Tern joined them as did another Skimmer because when we did a final count, there were 14.

We left them to sleep again and slowly moved back sailing past gharials, muggers, terrapins, a large flock of Whistling Teal and many Bar-headed Geese with strange orange heads. I thought they were dirty and needed a good scrub, but Pam enlightened us by saying that the colour came from feeding in or near iron rich lakes. We reached back in time for lunch and to greet Anand and Satti who had driven down from Delhi, Anand with a basket full of the yummiest mathis, mattar, gajjak and rewri.

The afternoon was spent walking around the compound and trying to glimpse the Brooke's Leaf Warbler. It whistled in a tree along with a Hume's and in typical warbler fashion, gave us fleeting looks through leaves of different body parts, sometimes wing bars, sometimes crown, sometimes back, sometimes beak and moved so quickly that we could barely focus our binoculars. But he would kindly deign to come to an open branch for five seconds and shutters would rapidly click and we got good views to at least be able to say that we met the bird. A walk around the farmland revealed all the regulars including Black-shouldered Kites, Kestrels, Spotted Owlets and a young Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Our evening ended with a torchlight search for the nocturnal Civet Cat. A few of them live around the compound and we surprised one climbing up a bare tree and got great views.

3rd January, 2010

Tempted by pictures from Patna Pakshi Vihar and learning it is only 100 km from Chambal, we decided to check it out. We set off in the morning and after 3 hours arrived at our destination. Again a rain fed wetland with very little shallow water but every inch of it covered by sleeping duck. Thousands of Pintails, Common Teal, Gadwall, Shovellers, all sat on little hillocks of dried grass and tucked in their beaks, trying to sleep in the cold and fog. Pam diligently scoped each individual till she seemed to know each one personally. One of them looked like a possible Baikal and gave us a few exciting moments, but turned out to be a first winter Garganey. A Snipe snoozed, some Red Shanks waded, Pam ticked some White-tailed Lapwings, Openbills, Spoonbills, Painted Storks flew by and Greylag Geese and Bar-headed Geese grumbled in the cold. A few farmers walked by and all the birds rose as one, filling the sky with their sound and colours. It was wonderful to see such great numbers, even if only of a few species and the Sanctuary is certainly worth exploring again. It must be truly amazing when the water levels are higher and diving ducks and other species can find food. We found what looked like the burrow of a Porcupine and an Indian Scops Owl sleeping in a palm tree in the parking and then it was the long drive back and some Red headed Falcons on trees in the fading light. Another night visit with the civets, this time at the garbage dump behind the kitchens, and it was the end of our birding adventure. The next morning, after a huge breakfast, we all left for Delhi. Anand, of course, knows of a great kachori and samosa place so after a brief stop, we made it back by early afternoon.

A highly successful trip, where we managed to tick everything on the list (almost, Pam will have to come back for the Demoiselle) and be at the right place, at the right time, with the right people, thanks to Nik's fantastic organization. It was an eye-opener and highly illuminating to bird with a dedicated and professional ornithologist like Pam.

She is persistent and thorough, never tires, and has an unmatched knowledge of her subject which she generously shared with us. Many many thanks to both of them for a fabulous birding experience. And many many thanks to all of you for patiently plodding through the longest report ever - only a bird list next time, I promise!

ONE AFTERNOON ON THE CHAMBAL

Monday, 25th January 2010

The Advisory Board

<http://toroid.org/ams/etc/chambal-2010-report>

I packed a bag and pulled on my boots at a few hours' notice this last weekend for a trip to the Chambal river with Mr. and Mrs. D. S. Pandit and Devashish Deb of Delhibird.

We reached Agra at 2200 on Friday after a stressful drive through dense fog, and stayed the night in a forest rest house. The next morning, we heard both Hume's *Phylloscopus humei* and Brooks's *P. subviridis* Leaf Warblers calling outside our window; but it was still foggy, and Devashish's attempts to locate the latter species in the scrub resulted only in grainy photographs of a Lesser Whitethroat. We left after 0900, took the road towards Etawah, and drove some 70km to a village named Bah (no, really!), where Mr. Pandit had booked rooms at the forest rest house. We learned that we needed to hire a boat from the Chambal Safari Lodge (at Jarar, a few kilometres before Bah), so we went back to the lodge around midday to meet the proprietor, Mr. R. P. Singh. It turned out that a boat was only available from 1400 that afternoon, and not at all the next day.

Birding at the lodge

The lodge stands on lightly forested land adjoining agricultural fields, and we spent the next couple of hours walking around while waiting for a boat to become free for us. The lodge building has a thick *Bougainvillea* creeper clinging to the edge of the tiled roof, and I spotted a Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* almost as soon as we walked in. It hopped in and out of the tangled mass of foliage for a good while in the bright sunlight, giving me an unusual opportunity to study it at some length (and giving Devashish an excellent photograph).

Soon afterwards, while I was scanning the trees on the other side of the courtyard, I heard a high-pitched psooooet call behind me, and I turned to see another *Phylloscopus* Warbler in the *Bougainvillea*. This was a lightly-built, slender bird, very different from the heavier Greenish-type Warbler I'd seen earlier. My instant reaction was Brooks's (which I know from Sultanpur, and which was seen in the area recently), but the next few seconds showed me that this bird had a sharply-pointed fine dark beak, and was dull whitish below with none of the yellow flush of Brooks's. Its face was plain, with a whitish supercilium over a fine dark eyeline, and its legs looked dark. It flew down to another bush, and I had a clear look at the upperparts: dull olive with no contrast and no wing bars at all. The bird then flew away, unfortunately before anyone else could get a photograph, or even a good look at it. The only species which matches these observations is Tytler's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri*.

We paid a visit to the solemn-looking resident Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata* just off the "nature trail", saw a Red-Throated Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla* and Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* on our way, and amused ourselves by joining Black Drongos *Dicrurus*

macrocerus in chasing Indian Rollers *Coracias benghalensis* and Yellow-Eyed Babblers *Chrysomma sinense* through the adjacent agricultural fields. We heard a pair of Greenish Warblers calling from a huge old Neem tree, saw a Long-Tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*, a juvenile Shikra *Accipiter badius* in heavy moult, and a couple of Black-Shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus* hunting. We saw two Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus*—an adult and a juvenile—circling overhead, and later also an adult Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata*. I was particularly pleased by the giant Fruit Bats hanging from the trees, chittering to themselves, some with their wings wrapped around them, others with their russet brown faces and bodies partially exposed. I like bats.

Picture yourself in a boat on the river

... Just before 14:00, we drove through Jaitpur (a village adjoining Bah, and usually mentioned in the same breath: Bah-Jaitpur), picking up our guide Surinder and some fuel on the way to the riverbank, some 16km from Bah. We parked on a sand bank at the edge of the river and walked out to one of three green fibreglass speedboats moored in knee-deep water. There were three Greater Short-Toed Larks *Calandrella brachydactyla* hopping about on the bank, one with well-defined dark breast-patches. The boat takes you along a broad, curving stretch of the river, perhaps 10km long. The water is deep in places, and in others barely up to one's ankle. As the water level changes with the seasons (or because water is released from a dam upstream), numerous islands midstream are exposed or submerged. As we pulled out into the water, the first thing I saw was a tiny Gharial *Gavialis gangeticus* just over a metre long, clinging to the edge of a small muddy island. Since my major motivation to visit the area was a chance to see these critically endangered reptiles, I was thrilled. I like crocodiles too. A little further on, past some Brahminy Ducks *Tadorna ferruginea*, Spot-Billed Ducks *Anas poecilorhyncha*, and Pintails *Anas acuta*, we saw a large Marsh Crocodile *Crocodylus palustris* or Muggler—a pleasant surprise, because I didn't know they were to be found here. Further up the bank were more crocodiles, including one massive Muggler that must have been 4m long, with a head like a tree trunk; and some slightly larger Gharial. Not far away was a lone Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor* surrounded by Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia* on the shore, and a hundred-odd Bar-Headed Geese *Anser indicus* in a long stripe across the water. Red-Crested Pochards *Rhodonessa rufina* and some Tufted Ducks *Aythya fuligula* formed their own flock some distance away.

Further on there were more islands with Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* and Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo* sharing the space with turtles (our guide identified them as Indian Tent Turtles *Kachuga tentoria*, but I'm not sure he was right) and crocodiles. We saw some crocodiles floating almost-submerged in the water, and swimming quickly away when the boat approached. We came across the odd Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*, Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa*, a couple of Asian Openbills *Anastomus oscitans* and one Woolly-Necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*. Two or three huge Pallas's Gulls *Larus ichthyæus* circled above, occasionally swooping with the River Terns *Sterna aurantia* to steal a Cormorant's catch. Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis* were seen sitting on distant rocks. The river was obviously full of fish. There weren't many waders. We saw isolated Common Redshanks *Tringa totanus*, Common Greenshanks *Tringa nebularia*, Common Sandpipers *Actitis hypoleucos*, and Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta* on the banks, and many handsome River Lapwings *Vanellus duvaucelii*

besides. We also saw a few Great Stone-Curlews *Esacus recurvirostris* (now usually called Thick-Knees, but the old name sounds nicer to me) on the banks.

I had just seen them for the first time near Pong Dam at much closer range, but it was nice to renew our acquaintance in a different habitat. There were White-Browed Motacilla *maderaspatensis* and White Wagtails *M. alba* everywhere. Our boat had a petrol engine. It was quiet, and not terribly fast—about right for a birding trip. I guess the birds and even the crocodiles are used to what noise they make, because they allowed us to approach much closer than I expected, based on my experience elsewhere. One island we passed had eighteen Gharial and a Mugger sunning themselves. Two of the Gharial were really big, probably close to the 5m mark. Some were brown, others a shiny grey. Most of them, big or little, had their long thin snouts and noses raised up in the air—I'm not sure why.

Finally, after almost two hours, we reached our destination, the habitat favoured by the extraordinary Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*. Mr. Singh at the lodge told us earlier in the day that he wasn't sure if the Skimmers would still be there, the water level having risen recently (because of water released from a dam in Kota) and submerged the spits of sand they favour. But we knew we were in luck, because we could see another boat far upriver, and looking at where it was pointing revealed a few small black-and-white birds; as we got closer, we could make out that they were indeed Skimmers—twenty of them. They were in a sleepy mood, and allowed us to approach quite closely in the boat. When the other boat started its motor and began to pull away, the birds took flight from the tiny spit of sand they were on, and landed on the "shore", which jutted all the way out to the centre of the river. Most of them then tucked their beaks into their wing, occasionally giving a soft Tern-like kwoonk call and waddling about on short red legs. A single Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* sharing the small patch of sand, one of only three or four that we saw (as opposed to the many River Terns everywhere), flew in the other direction instead. The island also had White Wagtails, a Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* and much further away, a large raptor that may have been an Osprey. There were some Temminck's Stints *Calidris temminckii* too, and a little downstream were a Redshank, Greenshank, and Sandpiper feeding close to each other.

On the way back, we saw some more Great Thick-Knees, had an Osprey fly past holding a fish, and narrowly avoided running our boat aground while trying to get a good look at what turned out to be a Long-Legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*. We paused briefly near a stretch of deeper water (which I later learned may have been as much as 60m deep), and had the extraordinary luck to see Gangetic Dolphins *Platanista gangetica* leaping from the water in entirely unpredictable places, revealing a tail-fin here, a nose there, and sometimes no more than a splash and some ripples in the corner of one's eye. Further downstream, we saw an adult Bonelli's Eagle sitting atop a mud cliff stained white below with its droppings, and far below it some Plain Martins *Riparia paludicola* and a Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*. In the rapidly fading light near the unused pontoon bridge—or half of one, anyway—we saw another Long-Legged Buzzard, and a Brown Crake *Amaurornis akool*. We reached the car again at 1730 and I waved goodbye to the solitary Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* on the sand bank.

We returned to Bah that evening, and left for Delhi early the next day. The time lost to fog

meant we could not afford to stop at any of the small wetlands en route (e.g. Sur Sarovar), but we did enjoy a quick look at a male Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* weaving its way, hawk-like, through the trees by the road. Many thanks to Devashish and Mr. and Mrs. Pandit for inviting me along.

NORTHERN INDIA TRIP REPORT FOR THE MARITIMES NATURE TRAVEL CLUB

Date: 25th Jan – 16th Feb 2010

by Blake Maybank

<http://maybank.tripod.com/other/India-02-2010-C.htm>

Day 15: Tuesday, 08th February: Chambal Sanctuary

We went first thing in the morning to the Chambal River for bird and mammal watching. This river is the only major river flowing from the Himalayas through India that is NOT considered holy and, ironically, the corresponding lack of attention it receives means it is one of the most natural rivers in the country. It is superb for nature watching.

We were scheduled for a morning boat outing, with hopes of seeing a good variety of local bird specialities, most particularly Indian Skimmer. And several special mammals were potentially on offer on our river ride as well. We thoroughly enjoyed our boat trip even though we failed to see Indian Skimmer, though lodge guests on the afternoon boat outing sighted two. But our sighting of a Jungle Cat was considerably more rare. We returned to the lodge for a late lunch, then spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the well-wooded lodge grounds, as well as the surrounding agricultural fields, which were productive for pipsis.

CHARMS OF CHAMBAL

18th April, 2010

Lalit Mohan

<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2010/20100418/spectrum/main3.htm>

Once known for its ravines and dacoits, Chambal also has a river that is one of the most serene and clean in the country having a wide variety of avian and marine life, writes Lalit Mohan THE Chambal is a lucky river. No one worships it. No temples or large towns dot its banks. Perhaps that is why it is one of the cleanest perennial waterways in India.

This distinction has come at a price. Ram Pratap Singh or RP for short, the young owner of the Chambal Safari Lodge says: "Its original name was Charmanyavati. In Mahabharata days this area was a part of Shakuni's kingdom. The infamous dice game was played hereabouts. After her attempted disrobing, Draupdi cursed any one who would drink its water. And if this wasn't bad enough, a king, Rantideva, sacrificed several cows on its banks bringing eternal infamy to it."

But the Chambal still beckons. Ten of us left from Gurgaon on a Friday morning for Jarar, 70 km southeast of Agra, where the lodge is located. The lodge, situated close to the river, is part of a large farm owned by RP's family. His great grandfather built it 100 years ago. The stables have been converted into dining areas. There are eight single-room huts and a few rooms in the main lodge. Quiet rural and idyllic, it is a good place to unwind even if one has nothing else on the agenda.

After lunch we headed for the Chambal in Sumos. After a short stretch on a pucca road, the

track turns into the ravines. And then, suddenly, the river looms into view. We piled into two motorboats and set off on our 'safari'. The Chambal must have worked off the ill effects of Draupdi's curse because it is one of the most serene and clean rivers in the country. This was the dry season, so it had shrunk in width. The water was gentle and blue. In 1979, a 400 km stretch, 1 to 6 km wide, including the river, was included in the National Chambal Sanctuary. And a wide variety of avian and marine life found shelter here. A local lad Dalveer was our guide. Throughout the two-hour trip he pointed out a spot-billed duck, some barbets, pelicans, a pair of spotted owls and many more birds.

There are over 300 species of birds in this area. Birds of prey — eagles, kites, buzzards, vultures, hawks and their kin — alone number 50 in variety. This was a particularly good time to see ducks, cranes, storks and the other winter visitors. Most humans who visit Jarar are, in fact, bird-watchers and they come mostly from abroad. But marine life is no less exciting. No fishing is permitted here. "Look 7 o'clock," Dalveer yelled suddenly and we saw a large river dolphin — in fact three of them, jumping briefly, one by one, out of the water. Dalveer said that there are at least 100 of them in the Chambal.

A little further, basking on the rocks were a large number of gharials. These alligator-like creatures have long snouts. Their colour merges with that of the rocks on which they rest, so it takes a while to spot them from a distance, or to count them.

Getting closer, the outboard motor was switched off. In total silence, except for the sound of waves gently lapping the sides of the boat, we watched them. Apart for the occasional yawn, they remained very still. A few young ones frolicked a little. Then the sun started to go down and we turned back. This stretch of the Chambal marks the boundary between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. As we meandered over the river, we must have crossed the dividing line somewhere, because I received an SMS from my mobile company: "Welcome to Madhya Pradesh."

The next day our destination was Bhareh, 100 km away. This is where the Chambal joins the Yamuna. Two things stood out during the ride. One, the excellent state of the road, to have such a surface in the heart of UP means that the PM's Gram Sadak Yojna is working. Two, in many schools in the dusty villages we crossed, the children had a clip-on necktie as a part of their uniform. In sartorial matters no one wants to be left behind! Halfway down the distance, an observation platform has been erected on a promontory located high on a bend in the Chambal. This is a good spot to get a panoramic view of the river and the ravines, which sheltered dreaded dacoits of yore.

At Bhareh the 'unholy', clean Chambal joins the holy, dirty Yamuna. Actually, the former is much wider, but the latter starts about 18,000 feet closer to God, and collects better references on its way. So, the river carries the name Yamuna hereafter until it merges with the Ganga at Prayag. A path through mustard fields takes us much closer to the birds. Pelicans, spoonbills, cormorants, storks, geese, sandgrouse, flamingos — the list is endless — bask in large numbers in the vast expanse of the confluence. Bhareh's other claim to fame is the Bhareh Mahadev temple. Accessed over 70 odd steep steps, this was the favourite deity of dacoits like Man Singh and Madho Singh, whose blessings they sought before they set out to rob and kill. Almost at the same height one can see the ramparts of the Bhareh fort. The ruler was on the side of the rebels in 1857 and after they won the war, the English

blasted all but one of its sides. The lodge at Jarar itself sees over 200 species of birds in the year. We could also spot nilgai, peacocks and deer. But, it provides no TV or newspapers. I had wondered how a news addict like me would survive for two days. But I did and feel all the better for it.