



## WILDLIFE TRAILS

Fairwater Cottage

Calderbridge

Cumbria

CA20 1DN

Tel/ Fax: 01946 841 495

[info@wildlifetrails.co.uk](mailto:info@wildlifetrails.co.uk)

[www.wildlifetrails.co.uk](http://www.wildlifetrails.co.uk)

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Dear All

Many of you know me as the “bear guy” at Wildlife Trails, but Allan & Kirsty’s infectious enthusiasm for India rubbed off on me a long time ago, and I’ve been itching to return to this most colourful and vibrant country ever since I first visited it in 2004.

Like many of you, when I think of India I immediately think of the much publicised plight of the majestic Bengal Tiger, but India is also home to some lesser known but even rarer and more endangered species like the Asiatic Lion, Asiatic Wild Ass, and Great Indian Bustard. While justifiably famed for its magnificent cats, India also boasts an impressive array of canids including the Striped Hyena, Indian Wolf, Jackal, Indian Fox, and Desert Fox. You may be as surprised as I was to learn that it is possible to see all of these species, as well as myriad collection of some of the sub-continent’s rarest birds, in just one corner of North Eastern India: the semi-arid coastal province of Gujarat, and the Thar Desert in neighbouring Western Rajasthan. It will come as no surprise however to learn that I jumped at the chance when Allan recently offered me the opportunity to scout this fascinating area on behalf of Wildlife Trails.



Like all of us at Wildlife Trails, Ranthambhore National Park holds a very special place in my heart, and it was here that I began my month long trip in mid November. My visit to Ranthambhore was however more about pleasure than business, and I took the opportunity to catch up with old friends like Vipul and Ravindra, visit some of the Tiger Trails Foundation community projects, and of course go in search of the park’s resident tigers. I was fortunate to be able to fit in 7 safaris in 4 days which produced 5 tiger sightings, one of which involved an incredibly memorable and prolonged encounter with the adult male tiger pictured above, with no other vehicles around. My last safari was also particularly noteworthy with a tiger emerging from the bush within 10 feet of our parked jeep on no less than 3 occasions in the space of an hour. Quite a safari!

From Ranthambhore on one side of Rajasthan, I travelled west by train to Jodhpur, and from there by road to Jaisalmer, the state’s westernmost city, and the gateway to the Thar Desert. En-route I visited the 1200 year old Jain temple at Osian and a series of water holes where thousands of migratory Demoiselle Cranes gather in the winter months (quite a spectacle!). My stop in Jaisalmer was a short one in order to obtain a permit to visit nearby Desert National Park which is subject to special security restrictions due to its proximity to the border with Pakistan.

Desert National Park is just one small part of the Thar Desert, the world's seventh largest desert, but it holds the unique distinction of being the last remaining place in India where visitors have a realistic chance of seeing a Great Indian Bustard. This majestic bird which stands about 1 metre high and weighs up to 15kg's (32lbs) is on the critically endangered list, and it is doubtful that the surviving population exceeds 700 individuals. Desert National Park is a real birder's paradise and besides the Indian Bustard it is also plays host to various resident and visiting rarities such as the MacQueen's Bustard, Cream-Coloured Courser, Stoliczka's Bushchat, and Trumpeter Finch. It is also particularly productive in terms of raptor sightings, especially eagles and vultures, with 6 species or more of each typically seen in a single visit. It is also home to some specialist desert mammals like the Chinkara (Indian Gazelle), Indian Fox, Desert Fox, Desert Cat, and Indian Desert Jird (Desert Gerbil).

A unusual aspect of Desert National Park is that there is quite a bit of human habitation within the park, mainly nomadic camel and goat herders, and with the requisite permit, you are allowed to explore it in your own vehicle, albeit accompanied at all times with a Forest Service Officer. I spent the first day of my 2 day visit exploring the park's road system in search of rare birds and mammals with my driver Rakesh and specialist birding guide Ganesh. We were rewarded with sightings of birds as varied as Lesser Spotted, Tawny, Steppe, Booted & Bonelli's Eagle, Eurasian Griffon, Long-Billed, King & Egyptian Vulture, Cream Coloured Courser, Chestnut Bellied Sandgrouse, Stoliczka's Bushchat, and Trumpeter Finch. The highlight though was seeing a rare visiting Saker Falcon, one of the largest members of the falcon family. In the afternoon Ganesh and I went hiking in a grassland reserve specifically designated as an Indian Bustard sanctuary and we were lucky enough to see 2 individuals at binocular range, and then see a third fly overhead – a very impressive sight indeed!



The following morning we arranged to take a camel cart ride with the local Forest Service guards that patrol the Indian Bustard sanctuary (the resident birds and mammals are often far less wary of camels than humans travelling on foot). As the sun rose over the desert we were rewarded with nice sighting of a pair of Indian Foxes patrolling around their den, and we were able to watch them go about their business for about 20 minutes. We were then lucky enough to see 2 MacQueen's Bustards but their larger Indian cousins eluded us the whole morning. Later when we stopped for chai at an outlying Forest Service post we were able to watch a colony of Desert Jirds (Gerbils) darting in and out of their tunnel complex and undertaking their housekeeping duties. When we arrived back at the main Forest Service station our attention was drawn to a Desert Fox taking a drink at the station's water hole. Having failed to see this species out in the field this was a real bonus and I was able to take a series of pictures of this wary and resourceful visitor. In the afternoon Ganesh and I decided to go hiking in the Indian Bustard sanctuary again, despite the heat, and we soon spotted the telltale tall white necks of 8 bustards standing proud of the low lying desert scrub bush. Despite our slow, stealthy, and painstaking approach, as soon as we got within 300 metres of these very skittish birds they took wing. This pattern was repeated 2 or 3 times before we finally admitted defeat, but it is a real privilege to see these remarkable birds even at distance, and especially in flight, so impressive is their wingspan.

In the evening I bid the Thar Desert a reluctant farewell with a cold beer as I watched a live performance of traditional Rajasthani song & dance under the luminous desert night sky. My time in Desert National Park had been all too brief but I had at least experienced it wonderful wildlife and sense of solitude.

I spent the next 2 days travelling south across the border into Gujarat, and then onwards to the Rann of Kutch which is effectively the southern extent of the Thar Desert. Rann means “salt marsh” in Hindi and this unique ecosystem is effectively a vast seasonal salt marsh, though for much of the year it is a saline desert typified by dry salt flats, and scrubby arid grasslands. It is however an important resting site for migratory Siberian birds and is home to the largest flocks of Great & Lesser Flamingoes in India.

My first stop was the Little Rann of Kutch which lies at the head of the Gulf of Kutch and is home to the last surviving herd of Asiatic Wild Ass in India. Just 3000 animals remain in this tiny enclave which they share with Nilgai (India’s largest antelope), Blackbuck, Chinkara, Hyenas, Wolves, Jackals, and Foxes. As rare as Asiatic Wild Ass are, they are very easy to see on safari in the Little Rann of Kutch and I was just minutes into my first safari when I saw my first group. It can be a bittersweet moment when your first sighting of an animal you have longed to see comes so easily, but I felt incredibly privileged to see this fascinating animal, even after seeing more than hundred separate individuals in the course of a couple of hours. Not long into my first safari we stumbled across the grizzly sight of a fresh kill: a Nilgai calf which had fallen victim to either wolves or hyenas. My driver and guide decided that we should enjoy some birding on a nearby lake before returning to the site of the kill in the hope that the perpetrators might return to finish their meagre feast.



However we’d only just moved off when I spotted a wolf loping across the dry salt flats to our right. The excitement was palpable as we set off after it, and for a split second we glimpsed a second wolf off to our left chasing an adult nilgai (probably the mother of the dead calf unwilling to leave it even in death). We were faced with an almost impossible choice but decided to stick with the first wolf we had seen, and fortunately we were able to keep pace with it, albeit at a distance, for about 5 minutes while it was making its escape at full speed. My heart was almost leaping out of my chest but I was able to grab a few identifiable pictures and some much prized video footage of this oh, so elusive predator which to me is always the Holy Grail of wildlife sightings, wherever in the world I am lucky enough to see one.

Having been so incredibly fortunate with mammal sightings on our first safari (Wolf, Asiatic Wild Ass, Nilgai, Blackbuck and Chinkara – pretty much a full house), Ganesh and I decided to focus on birds in the afternoon and were rewarded with some excellent sightings of MacQueen’s Bustards, Short Eared Owls, Pallid, Marsh & Montagu’s Harriers, Steppe, Tawny & Lesser Spotted Eagles, and Ashy Crown Sparrowlarks to name but a few. We also saw plenty more Asiatic Wild Ass and Nilgai, and even got a brief glimpse of a Jungle Cat.

The following day we turned our attention to some of the excellent wetland birding that can be had in this area, as well as some of the fascinating tribal villages nearby. We spent the morning at a location known as Nawa Talao (“New Lake”) where we saw an incredible array of waders, waterfowl, and shorebirds including Greater & Lesser Flamingoes, Greater Pelicans, Eurasian Spoonbills, Black, Glossy & Black Headed Ibis, Pied Avocets, Black Winged Stilts, Little Stints, Blacktail Godwits, Jack Snipes, Ruffs, Greenshanks, Grey, Purple & Pond Herons, Greater, Intermediate & Little Egrets, Painted & Openbill Storks, Little Grebes, Cotton Pygmy & Greylag Geese, Spotbill & Lesser Whistling Ducks, Northern Shovelers, and Eurasian Wigeons. Most exciting though was a flock of about 200 Collared Pratincoles (a very rare sight indeed!).

My next stop was the much larger Great Rann of Kutch which encompasses around 10,000 square miles (30,000 square kilometres) between the Gulf of Kutch and the border with Pakistan to the north. The area hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons in 2001 when the nearby city of Bhuj and the area's outlying tribal villages were devastated by a massive earthquake which claimed more than 20,000 lives and destroyed nearly 1 million homes. The rural communities have recovered remarkably well from this devastation, albeit with a lot of international aid, and the incredibly colourful Kutch region is culturally rich with a number of distinct ethnic cultures co-existing and thriving alongside each other.

I was the guest of a local wildlife conservationist and renowned birding authority who offers simple homestay accommodation to keen birders and wildlife enthusiasts as part of his fund raising efforts for the charitable trust he runs. The trust promotes the conservation of the Rann of Kutch's unique ecosystems, the replanting of indigenous tree species, and educational camps for schoolchildren.

Like Desert National Park, the Great Rann of Kutch is a mecca for birders which offers a realistic chance of seeing some rare and very unusual species like the Grey Hypocolius, Marshall's Iora, Sykes' Crested Lark, Sykes' Nightjar, Crab Plover, and Indian Skimmer. Smaller mammals are also quite well represented here with Chinkara, Indian Wolf, Jackal, Indian Fox, Desert Fox, Desert Cat, Jungle Cat, Indian Hare, and Lesser Bandicoot-Rat all present. Of course in a wilderness area as vast as this you can only scratch the surface in the space of 2 days and the mammals alluded me completely on my first full day safari. However by the end of the day my bird list did encompass several species of Warblers, Pippits, Larks, and Wheaters, Marshall's Iora, Small Minivet, Grey & Black Francolin, Chestnut Bellied Sandgrouse, Eurasian Griffon, Short Toed Snake Eagle, Pallid & Montagu's Harrier, Northern Goshawk, and Long Legged Buzzard.



The following day I visited the famed Banni Grasslands (actually an arid desert area) and the day got off to the best possible start with a lovely close-up sighting of a huge Eurasian Eagle Owl roosting on the ground as the sun came up over the desert. That proved to be a good omen and we saw a second Eurasian Eagle Owl in similar circumstances later in the morning, although our hike up a rocky outcrop in search of Jungle Cat and Desert Cat proved fruitless, though we did find numerous fossils, something else the area is famous for having once been well below sea level. We spent the rest of the morning birding of a vast lake nearby which is known for good reason as Flamingo City. In addition to hundreds of Greater & Lesser Flamingos we saw Great White Pelicans, Eurasian Spoonbills, Painted & Common Stork, Black & Black-Headed Ibis, Black Winged Stilts, Eurasian Thick-Knees (aka Stone Curlews), and Black-Tail Godwits to name but a few.

The afternoon proved to be an absolute mammal extravaganza and we had several lovely Jackal sightings. I had seen Jackals before in a number of the forest National Parks in Madhya Pradesh, but this animal really comes into its own in a desert environment which to my eyes at least seems its true element. Of course the afternoon desert light adds an extra dimension but I came away with some photographs that I was really pleased with. I also had a lovely encounter with a bold and very well camouflaged, sand coloured Indian Fox who allowed me to approach to within camera range and seemingly posed for a whole series of well lit shots.

The following day I travelled a short distance to Bhuj where I spent the morning visiting the city's various historical and cultural attractions including the Aina Mahal (an erstwhile Maharaja's palace built in the heyday of the British Raj), and the enlightening Kutch Museum which offers an excellent introduction to the history,

crafts, and customs of the various ethnic cultures that co-exist in the region. This provided the ideal framework for my afternoon agenda which was to visit a number of the colourful tribal villages for which the area is famous. Having obtained the necessary permit from the local police station (many of the villages lie in a special security zone due to their proximity to the border with Pakistan), I sent off with my guide and driver to visit the first of 3 distinctly different villages. The tribal villages of the Kutch are unique, first and foremost, in their diversity, and neighbouring villages often feature completely different building styles, customs, and styles of dress, with their inhabitants often having very different ethnic backgrounds, though typically all were once nomadic cattle and/or camel herders. The one common denominator is how colourful and vibrant these different communities are, and the intricacy of the handicrafts they produce, whether textiles and embroidery by the women, or wood or leather work by the men,

The first village I visited was particularly renowned for its inhabitants' colourful dress and house painting style. Like many of the villages in the area it was totally destroyed by the 2001 earthquake but it has been painstakingly re-built faithfully adhering to traditional building styles and materials. In many ways it is a living museum showcasing the traditional culture and way of life of its habitants. The second village I visited was equally colourful but the homes were constructed and decorated in a completely different style, and there were obvious differences in the womens' style of dress, even to the untrained eye of a slightly embarrassed Englishman trying not to encroach on an ongoing wedding celebration! The third village was different again, and here the men demonstrated their woodworking skills making wooden kitchen utensils on a hand operated lathe, using wax like colour sticks to extravagantly decorate them while still turning on the lathe.



It was with some reluctance that I bid farewell to the Kutch region the following morning and began my journey east to the end of the Gulf of Kutch, and then south to the ancient city of Junagadh. My main reason for visiting Junagadh was to attempt to climb nearby Girnar Hill, a series of peaks, the tallest of which at 945 metres (3600 feet) is the highest in Gujarat. Girnar is also one of the holiest places in Gujarat and a sturdy stone path said to consist of exactly 9,999 steps leading up to the highest peak is an important pilgrimage route for both Jain and Hindu worshippers. In reality there are around 8,000 steps but the climb is not for the feint hearted or weak willed, and it is said that climbing Girnar barefoot earns one a place in Heaven.

Certainly after climbing the first thousand steps I felt like I was going to die, and after the second thousand steps I wished I was dead! It got much easier after that however, and at around 4,000 steps I reached the most amazing complex of intricately carved and unbelievably exquisite Jain temples built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. After another thousand steps I reached a Hindu temple atop the first peak which afforded spectacular views of the Jain temples below, and the city of Junagadh below that. Anyone blessed with a sense of self preservation would have left it at that, but my stupid pride drove me on another 3,000 steps (down and then up again two more times) before I found myself at the entrance to a tiny Hindu temple impossibly perched atop a needle like third peak, the tallest of them all. I felt an enormous sense of satisfaction to have reached the end of the road – an almost spiritual sense of peace and tranquillity – but there was of course the small matter of the 8,000 steps I would have to retreat before I could head back to the hotel to soak my weary bones. As painful as the climb and descent undoubtedly was, I will always look back on having completed it with great pride, and it gave me a wonderful insight into the real India. The camaraderie among the pilgrims undertaking the climb is palpable, and never in my life have I shaken more hands, or been engaged in friendly conversation by more strangers. You meet every walk of life climbing Girnar, from the wealthiest

Delhi businessman, to the most modest Maldhari cattle herder, and for those prepared to invest the time and effort, the rewards are as unexpected as they are unending.

The following morning I visited some of the many fascinating historical sights in Junagadh including the impressive Uperkot Fort, parts of which date back to 319BC, and which encompasses a complex of Buddhist Caves dating from before 500AD, Jama Masjid, a 15<sup>th</sup> century mosque that was built atop the pillars of an earlier Hindu temple, and two huge 11<sup>th</sup> century step wells. I was also very taken with the intricately carved Mahabat Maqbara, a mausoleum built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the then Muslim rulers of Junagadh.

In the afternoon I travelled the short distance to Gir National Park in time to undertake an afternoon safari. Gir is well known to us as the bastion of the Asiatic Lion and a number of our clients have visited the park on our tours and been lucky enough to see some of the park's 300 or so resident lions. The Bengal Tiger is, in many people's eyes, the symbol of India, but the country's official emblem which appears on all currency and government documents actually features 3 Asiatic Lions. In the time of Alexander the Great, Asiatic Lions ranged across much of the Mediterranean, Persia, and Southwest Asia, from Macedonia in Ancient Greece to modern day India, but today the last survivors of this once mighty population are found only in Gir Forest. They are smaller than their African cousins and are distinctively different in their behaviour and certain anatomical features (e.g. shaggier coats, a distinctive fold of skin that runs along the belly, and a shorter mane in the case of the males). Male Asiatic Lions are also typically solitary and females live in smaller prides. This may relate to the fact that their prey species are smaller requiring fewer lions to tackle them.



I didn't have to wait long for my first, long awaited sight of an Asiatic Lion. I was only about 40 minutes into my first safari when we encountered a magnificent young male resting in the road. He seem to have suffered a puncture wound in his left shoulder, perhaps in a fight with another male, and showed absolutely no inclination to move, despite the presence of two jeeps of excited wildlife enthusiasts. He lay there for fully 30 minutes, periodically snapping at flies or trying to swat them with his magnificent tail, much like a domestic cat would, as we watched in absolutely awe. Eventually he got to his feet, walked right past our jeep, and wandered up the road the way we had come. We were able to follow slowly at a respectful distance and then when he turned off the road and settled down under the shade of a teak tree a short distance, we were able to watch him for another hour or so. He was a truly magnificent specimen and I couldn't quite believe my luck. Eventually we left him resting as the sun began to dip and there was only just enough time to complete our route before the park closed. That wasn't the end however, and 15 minutes later we encountered 2 females resting beside the road, but with the light fading fast and time running out on us, we couldn't dwell too long. It had been quite the first safari however!

Unfortunately it seemed I'd used up all my famed luck on that first safari and over the next 2 days I heard lions roaring in the bush, but further sightings eluded me. Sadly my luck with the elusive Leopard was no better, despite Gir having a long track history of producing fairly reliable sightings of this enigmatic predator. As in 2004 when I visited Pench National Park in Madhya Pradesh, I did at least get to hear a Leopard nearby, but once again that long awaited first sighted eluded me. In addition to seeing Nilgai, Sambar Deer, and Cheetal (Spotted Deer) I did however have some very interesting bird sightings in Gir including Painted Sandgrouse, Collared Scops Owl, Mottled Wood Owl, and White-browed Fantail.

In many ways though, I had saved the best for last as my tour culminated with a visit to little known and rarely visited Velavadar National Park where my guide had told me I had a great chance to see the curious looking Striped Hyena, and probably wolves too.

Before reaching Velavadar however there was the small matter of another mountain to climb, and another pilgrimage to experience. This time I'd set my sights on Mount Shatrunjaya near the town of Palitana, the most sacred of the Jain pilgrimages. A much less taxing climb than Girnar, at the summit is what can best be described as two walled cities which enclose more than 1000 Jain temples, each exquisitely carved in white marble. Each temple alone is worth the climb to see, but the sheer scale of Shatrunjaya makes it, in my humble opinion, one of the 10 must see before you die cultural sights in the world.

Blackbuck National Park as Velavadar is also known is located a short distance north of the city of Bhavnagar. As its name suggests, it's primary purpose is as a sanctuary for the threatened Blackbuck. Hunted almost to extinction in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this magnificent spiralled horned antelope has staged a remarkable comeback in India, with a current population of 50,000 and rising. It is however still not a common sight in India's National Parks and Velavadar is without the best place to view and photograph this beautiful animal. It is also (in my experience at least) the best place to see Nilgai, India's largest antelope. Velavadar is a very small and compact park, bisected by a tarmac access road. On one side of the road the habitat is largely tall dry grasslands, and the other is more like arid scrub desert. The park does however boast a sizeable lake where you can see a variety of waders and waterfowl including flamingos. The park is also famed for the large numbers of Marsh, Pallid & Montagu's Harries that gather here.



Of course it was Velavadar's resident Wolves and Striped Hyenas that really had my juices flowing and expectations were high the first morning I visited the park. The Striped Hyena is an animal which has gripped my imagination since I first saw a picture of one 5 years ago, and my enthusiasm for Wolves is probably already established. A dawn foray into the desert section of the park had failed to produce a much hankered for second wolf sighting, but we had only just entered the grassland section when two unfamiliar canid shapes appeared in the road ahead of us. At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, but the outline and pattern was unmistakable: there were indeed two, real, live Striped Hyenas right before my eyes. They quickly disappeared off the road and melted into long grass but we were able to track their progress as they periodically raised their heads and those telltale huge ears gave away their position. We were able to track them for fully 30 minutes as they rather optimistically stalked a small herd of Nilgai before finally moving off into the distance. In the afternoon we again switched our attention to searching for wolves inspired by a group of Finnish birders that we met who had just seen one, but to no avail. We did however have a lovely encounter with Jungle Cat basking in the road, not far from where we'd seen the Hyenas, and I was able to get out of the vehicle and follow it on foot for about 5 minutes.

Early the next morning we resumed our Wolf vigil but again came up empty handed. The sense that perhaps my luck had finally run out was only re-inforced when I met a young English girl who'd only spent a couple of hours in the park and had already seen 2 Striped Hyenas and a Wolf! Content that she'd seen all there was to see, she departed the scene much to my chagrin! No matter though, shortly afterwards I had another brief hyena sighting of my own, but I was kept waiting until the eleventh hour for the real prize. No, not a wolf, but something much smaller.

My guide had indicated the location of a known hyena den earlier in the day and with the sun going down, and time running out we decided to spend a little time staking it out. The den was known to be inhabited by a female with a litter of 4 pups, but when we arrived on the scene there was no sign of anyone home. Undeterred my guides imitated some hyena calls and then one of them indicated via sign language that he thought he saw movement at the burrow entrance. I could see nothing with the naked eye but when I trained the Leica binoculars that Allan had lent me on the den entrance, there in the shadows looking back at me, was the face of a hyena pup! Unbelievably the pup emerged completely from the den and stood blinking in the warm afternoon sunlight for about 5 minutes, only about 30 meters from where I was sitting transfixed. The fragile little pup made definite eye contact with me and it was one of the most intimate wildlife encounters I have ever experienced, and one that I will remember for the rest of my life.

The following day I decided to have one more roll of the dice, unwilling to pass up the promise of another wolf sighting, but again the luck wasn't with me. My guide's confession that I was the first visitor he'd guided in the park that hadn't seen a wolf offered little consolation, but any lingering frustrations just melted away when I had my 5<sup>th</sup> and final Striped Hyena sighting. We were driving slowly past the den where I'd come face to face with the pup the previous evening when we suddenly spotted movement. There sitting at the den entrance with just her head above ground was the mother hyena. We stopped the vehicle as quietly as we could and decided not to get out of the vehicle so as not to disturb her. She re-paid our consideration by emerging fully from the den and virtually posing for a whole series of pictures in the warm early morning light. Keeping a respectful distance and noise to a minimum she allowed us into her world for about 30 minutes before loping off, presumably in search of food. It was a wonderful note on which to end my trip.

As I travelled back to Delhi and onwards to the UK I found myself reflecting on a trip that had left me with so many vivid memories that will last a lifetime. Indian Bustard, Indian Wolf, Asiatic Wild Ass, Asiatic Lion, and Striped Hyena were just a few of the wildlife highlights that so far exceeded my expectations, and I'd also managed to thoroughly immerse myself in the vibrant and colourful cultures of Rajasthan and Gujarat. It had been a really rich and varied experience, and one which I hope many of you will be inspired to seek with Wildlife Trails.

Best wishes

James

