

Part Three. Ranthambhore and Tigers.

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A short excursion into Rajasthan to visit Ranthambhore National Park and its immediate surrounds, an excellent few days with an eventful Tiger encounter, plenty of birds and an end with a bump on a train! Top birds included Bonelli's Eagles hunting Cattle Egrets, an Crested Serpent Eagle, several Great Thick-knees and a Large Cuckoo-Shrike feeding a fledged youngster.

With the Snow Leopard adventure over and four days at my disposal before a return to Europe, I pondered my options - my two main choices were a trip up to Ramnagar and Nanital for a rich feast of birds on the lower slopes of the Himalaya or a few days at Ranthambhore in Rajasthan for the chance of Tiger to add to the cat haul.

Political disputes and Supreme Court judgements had resulted in all the tiger reserves in India being closed prior to my departure from Europe, seemingly quashing the latter option. However, whilst in Ladakh, the Supreme Court reversed its decision, so with a desire to both bask in some warm sunshine and possibly see the iconic cats, I opted for Ranthambhore.

30 October. Travel Day, Ladakh to Ranthambhore.

From Leh, a late morning flight back to Delhi, the cold rugged beauty of the Himalaya replaced by the hot humid seething mass of humanity and dirt and pollution that is Delhi. People and cars everywhere, pigs running aside the road, Black Kites wheeling above, House Crows and Common Mynas rejoicing in the rubbish. With no desire to savour this longer than necessary, I went directly from the airport to main train station to catch a train to Sawai Madhopur, junction for Ranthambhore. Bank Mynas running around the platform, House Crows and House Sparrows hopping about alongside, my train departed at 16.50, a comfortable sleeper that arrived at 22.00. A quick taxi and I was in my hotel, the very fine Atitya Hotel, my room costing the grand sum of four euros.

31 October. Ranthambhore National Park.

A very pleasant walk in the Ranthambhore area is along the road in the buffer zone between the national park main entrance and Ranthambhore Fort a distance of six or seven kilometres. As part of the reserve, access on foot is strongly discouraged, but not as far as I am aware technically prohibited. Some minutes of debate with the guards, they trying to insist it was illegal, me arguing that locals occasionally walk this way, I got through. Thick forest and prime tiger territory, birding here is in reality a little foolhardy and, to be honest, quite scary. Amazing it is though, Black-faced Langurs numerous, occasional Spotted Deers, birds galore ...and, adding a certain edge to the proceedings, fresh Tiger pugmarks. Naturally, the inevitable happened. About 3 km into my walk, senses very heightened and all steps taken with great caution, I reached a shallow valley with a stream running up the centre and woodland rising on both sides. All pleasant enough, Common Tailorbirds in the bushes, a couple of Eurasian Kingfishers on the stream, one Striated Heron too, but ahead the Langur Monkeys were alarming - this stopped me dead in my tracks, any sign of alarm by monkey or deer in Ranthambhore is almost certainly due to the nearby presence of Tiger. Alarms were constant, a few hundred metres ahead as I could gauge, time to stay put I thought, of course not knowing which way the presumed Tiger was going, if in my direction it would be with me in a matter of minutes.

Ten day earlier, elsewhere in the reserve, a Tiger had killed a lone walker, the third such incident this season alone. I had no wish to become the next statistic, so began to ponder my options, considering the trees and also a total withdrawal from the area. Neither seemed particularly realistic, nor the option of jumping in a pool a little further back. A regular passage of vehicles uses this road up to the fort and, most timely, a motorcycle just happened to come motoring up the road at that moment, even more fortunately it did not have the usual two or three pillions already squashed onto the back. I hopped on and off we went, continuing towards the fort. Round a couple of corners and there she was, one female Tiger parallel to the road, padding her way up the valley!!! Jeepers, quite happy I paid attention to the monkeys! Got a few blurry shots of the Tiger as we went speeding by, bouncing through potholes, me trying to swivel to photograph the cat. A laughing jolly rider was the motorbike guy, but he sure wasn't about to stop for me to get better shots!

I then decided to spend the next hour or so birding around the fort, a far safer option! Amongst hoards of pilgrims that climb the hill to the fort and its temples inside, there is quite a lot to see for the wandering birder too - several Small Minivets, quite a few Brown Rock Chats, oodles of both Ring-necked and Plum-headed Parakeets, one Indian Golden Oriole, loads of Rufous Treepies and, a rare sight in India these days, a single Long-billed Vulture. Also hundreds of Langurs hanging about for freebie hand-outs of grain and marigolds, gifts from the passing pilgrims.

For my afternoon entertainment, I joined the scrum at the forest department office for tickets into the national park proper. Thanks to Indian bureaucracy, Supreme Court rulings and inept government, obtaining the required permits to visit tiger reserves in India is now an energy-sapping exercise in frustration, and it is becoming worse. Of course, for added inconvenience, the ticket office is not near the park gates, but 15 km away in the town of Sawai Madhopur. And

then to top it off, if you get tickets, you are randomly allotted a zone to visit within the park. I unfortunately got zone 8, an area of dry hills without lakes or significant water - this is a pretty rubbish part of the reserve for mammals, so chances of further felines this day were effectively zilch. Nevertheless, a mildly attractive area, high cliffs and deep gorges and not too bad for birds either - three Small Buttonquail the best, but also Lesser Goldenbacks, White-bellied Drongos, both Bay-backed and Long-tailed Shrikes, one White-browed Fantail and plenty of the commoner bits and bobs. For the non-birders aboard the jeep however, it must have been a tad tedious - big mammals amounted to a mere handful of Sambar, one herd of Spotted Deers, a few Nilgai and, rather better, a pair of Indian Gazelle. One Indian Jackal also put in an appearance at the end of the day, as did a very brief Small Indian Mongoose. 1 November. Ranthambhore. A little after dawn, before the day's temperatures began their climb to the dusty highs of about 30 C, I hitched a lift up to the park gates again. Instead of entering the reserve however, I then turned east and walked adjacent to the reserve for about six or seven kilometres, a route that took me through a landscape of arid bushland, poor quality farmland and occasional dams. Chances of encountering a Tiger in this direction are minimal, but I did follow fresh tracks of Common Leopard for quite a while and other mammals hopping over the crumbling masonry from the national park included several Nilgai. In birding terms however, the area is excellent. Typical aridland birds such as Yellow-eyed Babbler and Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark were encountered without much effort, as were Indian Robins, Hoopoe, Indian Bush-Lark and various prinias. Also found a female Pied Bushchat in an area of scrub, two River Terns and a couple of White-browed Wagtails on a small dam, a splendid pair of Bonelli's Eagles hunting Cattle Egrets at an irrigated field and, here and there, occasional migrants, including Black Redstarts, a Red-breasted Flycatcher and a Hume's Leaf Warbler.

At midday, with the sun high and the land a hazy cocktail of assorted dusts, I retreated to a nearby village to seek out a chai shop, and thereafter jumped in the back of a bush taxi to return to my hotel for a short afternoon siesta. BBC news on the telly, a fan whirling on the peeling ceiling, almost like being back in civilisation!

By mid-afternoon, however, I was back on at the gates of Ranthambore National Park. Not learning much from my experiences the day before, I decided to walk the fort road again, the guards barely even debating with me this time, but just waving me through. Hyper cautious this day, but the birding was actually even better than the day before - in addition to the usual assortment of forest birds, some of the highlights in my couple of hours included a Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, a Large Cuckooshrike feeding a fledged youngster, a small party of Common Ioras, several Oriental White-eyes, a Coppermith Barbet and a splendid male Verditer Flycatcher.

With Indian Peafowls making a racket in the roadside thickets however and my mind playing images of a Tiger suddenly emerging, I have to confess that I bottled out on this day and actually only walked a kilometre or two before I deemed it too dangerous.

Back at the park gates, loads of Plum-headed Parakeets coming into roost, but for me, I hitched a lift back to my hotel on the back of an over-packed bush taxi, 17 people inside, plus me and two others hanging on the back with splendid views all around. 2 November. Ranthambhore. Up at 5.00 a.m. to join the medlam for permits at the forest office department in Sawai Madhopur, what joy! By 6.30 a.m. with no advance in the queue and me bored out of my brains, I contemplated giving up on a trip to Ranthambhore National Park and instead taking a stroll. But no, the queues suddenly lurched forward a little, the counter appeared and a light at the end of the tunnel materialised between assorted heads of guides and tourists. And my allotted spot on a jeep - Zone 7, almost as rubbish as Zone 8 I happened to know! Declining the offer, I was shunted sideways to the queue for canters, large twelve-seater things that do actually offer very good views. A few more minutes of waiting, form-filling and waving of passport and I got a seat for Zone 2, much better - a picturesque route that would meander around a series of large lakes and old temples draped in forest cover.

Still cursing the rubbishy system for on-the-spot ticket allocation, on the canter I hopped, a prime front seat available, and off we went. For all the effort of getting the permit, the actual tour is pretty naff too - regardless of jeep or canter, the drivers and obligatory guide are basically pretty hopeless and certainly possess virtually no knowledge of birds. On this particular trip, the mode of operation was to drive to the lake shore, turn off the vehicle and stop for lengthy periods in the hope of hearing distant deers or monkeys alarming, a sign of Tiger. With no alarms, they would then zigzag around a bit, then return to the lake shore to repeat the cycle. Pretty tedious overall, but the lakeside stops did offer some excellent moments to watch the birds otherwise ignored by the guide - amongst the best, five rather splendid Great Thick-knees standing out in the open between Mugger Crocodiles, a few Bronze-winged Jacanas in wet grassy margins, one Pied Kingfisher hovering beside our vehicle and a good assortment of herons and egrets, including a Striated Heron. Also two Ruddy Shelduck, a few River Terns and a brood of baby Knob-billed Ducks. No sign of Tiger whatsoever, bar a few relatively old pugmarks, but a reasonable selection of other mammals fortunately, small herds of Spotted Deer and Sambar common, Wild Boars in places and Nilgai at regular intervals. Highlights of the morning however were a number of birds happened upon - a cracking Crested Serpent Eagle perched in a dead tree, a very nice Spotted Owlet in another tree and two Woolly-necked Storks drifting over mid-morning.

Less than three hours in the reserve and it was over, the canter departing via the gate near Ranthambhore fort. At this stage, I was quite happy to hop off and then spent a very pleasant time wandering for the rest of the day, a little bit down the access road that had provided adventures a couple of days before, but more so around the fort itself. Lots of pilgrims doing the climb too, but plentiful birdlife as well, semi-tame Indian Robins perching up on walls, Brown Rock Chats on the monuments, Ring-necked and Plum-headed Parakeets zooming about, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Eurasian Hobby and Long-billed Vulture all overhead. Also a flock of Bar-headed Geese migrating over, an Indian Roller at the fort top and

little flocks of assorted passerines, the pickings including Indian Silverbills, Common Tailorbirds and abundant Rufous Treepies.

Monkeys of two species also present, plus the Five-striped Palm Squirrels as usual and, a bonus, one Short-tailed Bandicoot-Rat.

Having completed my cultural obligations, wandering as far as the main temple, I then ambled back down, finally jumping into the back of another bush taxi to take me back to the hotel late afternoon. Popped into town to buy a train ticket, then spent the evening on the rooftop of my hotel, Ring-necked and Plum-headed Parakeets zooming over, a weird gecko of some sort on the walls. Dusky Crag Martins flitted about, a shimmering sun set over the hills beyond. 3 November. Life on the Rails.

I did have ideas of entering Ranthambore National Park again, but not keen on enduring the 5.00 a.m. permit fiasco a second time nor the pretty poor effort that the tours actually entail, I instead decided on an early return to Delhi, taking the 7.00 a.m. train from Sawai Madhopur.

That should have all been straightforward enough, eh? Having bought my ticket only the evening before, the late purchase meant that I had a 'waiting list' ticket, the seat basically guaranteed, but the actual seat number only confirmed by the conductor on the train. No worries.

So, there I was on the platform nice and early and much to my delight in rolled the train 20 minutes early. 'Oh good, plenty of time to find the conductor', I thought, clambering aboard with my backpack and camera bag. A conductor took a quick look at my ticket and directed me ahead. Along the carriage I started to walk, a slight jolt surprising me as the train began to move. 'Er, why is the train moving already?' No response from the passengers adjacent. I presumed it was just moving along the platform a little, but no it seemed to be gathering pace! 'Ei, why is this train moving?' I directed to a passenger with a little more concern. Blank looks, then I was pointed to another conductor, this one lying on a bench in a little compartment. A long lazy perusal of my ticket, then he looked up. 'Oh you are on the wrong train'. 'What? Oh crap, where is this one going?' Whatever his answer, I did not understand, but it sure wasn't anywhere near Delhi.

With the station already vanishing into the distance, a sudden dash of panic swept across me, not only would I miss my train, a train for which I had a nice cushy air-conditioned seat awaiting, but I was also sailing off into an unknown backwater of India, quite possibly meaning I would not get back to Delhi in time for my flight next morning! 'Stop the bloody train', I directed to the conductor, knowing already the request would be in vain. 'Oh crap', I thought again, 'I need to get off', knowing that Indian trains never lock the doors. A few moments later, I was standing at the open door, the Indian landscape rolling by rather faster than I would have liked. 'Don't jump' I hear several passengers shouting. 'No choice', I thought, really not fancying the idea that much myself either.

Images of Steve McQueen and the Great Escape started to roll through my mind, the passengers realising I was going to it, then adding 'Okay, we will throw you your bags, jump!'. No way I was jumping loaded with rucksacks, so that seemed reasonable, me now in the footplate, trying to gauge a good landing spot. Waa aaarr, into the air...

Well, that was the first time I have ever jumped off a train, hitting the ground running and somehow managing to stay on my feet, I was pretty pleased. Run fast as I could however, there was no way I was going to catch up with the open door again, the train was going way too fast. Then I saw my first bag launched into the air, bouncing down the embankment. Before I had time to even bury my eyes in my hands, out followed my camera bag, my laptop in the outside pocket. It was painful to watch, a shuddering thud as it hit the dust, bouncing a couple of times before landing upside down. Boo hoo, I just knew my laptop was a goner, I hoped my camera equipment had fared better.

Picked everything up and walked the kilometre or so back to the station, my correct train now sitting there waiting. Boarded and found my seat, nice it was. Glumly checked over my gear, camera and lenses fine, but laptop smashed as expected. Ah well, moral of the story, don't chuck laptops out of moving trains, they don't like it! Tinted windows on the train, so nothing seen on route. In Delhi, after a midday arrival in the city of noise, dirt, congestion and chronic air pollution, I settled into a dump of a hotel, had a last few wanders around the streets and markets, then prepared for exit from India, my trip nearly over. Overhead and around, the usual mix of Black Kites, Common Mynas and House Crows, that was about that.

4 November. Departure. 10.40 a.m. local time, Black Kites drifting about, time to board my Finn Air flight for Helsinki, goodbye India. Some hours later, via several time zones and one transfer, I touched down in Vilnius. For List of all Birds and Mammals, India & Ladakh 2012 [CLICK HERE](#)