TROPICAL BIRDING
India Photo Tour 2017
Guide Iain Campbell

Tour report by participant
ROB GOWAN
Photos by Rob Gowan and Iain Campbell

Day -1 – Pre Trip Delhi City Tour

Our tour began in Delhi which has about 16 million people within the city limits putting it in the top five most populous cities in the world. If you include the surrounding urban area the population is closer to 25 million. Any way you count it, it's a big city. Delhi is divided into 9 districts one of which is New Delhi which was started by the British in the 1930's after they moved the capital from Calcutta back to Delhi. Another is Central Delhi which contains the old walled city now know as Old Delhi. It was founded in 1638 when the Mughal Emperor moved his capital to Delhi from Agra.

All five of the trip participants arrived in Delhi at least a day before the official start of the trip so four of us (Joe, Hilda, Frank and me) decided to take a Delhi city tour. The experience began with the drive from our airport hotel in to Old Delhi. Driving in Delhi bears little resemblance to driving in North America. To my untrained eye there appear to be almost no rules. For example lane markers are completely ignored so that 2 lanes going in one direction could have 4 or 5 lanes of traffic on it. The only rule I could work out was that you must use your horn to tell other drivers you are coming. And since there is always someone coming there is always lots of horn honking. Another difference is that the roads contain all manner of conveyance from human powered to animal powered to diesel powered. Carts, two wheelers, three wheelers, four wheelers and more are all represented. This makes for a huge difference between the slowest and the fasted vehicle and that leads to constant overtaking. It is not a surprise to see a vehicle coming at you in your lane as it attempts to overtake something it thinks is moving to slowly. Despite what seems very close to chaos there appears to be no road range and a low number of accidents. Perhaps they are on to something our heavily regulated system is missing.

Our first tour stop was a produce market in Old Delhi where we were able to get some photographs of the vendors and their vegetables.

Our next stop was Jama Masjid which is one of the largest mosques in India capable of holding over 25,000 worshippers in the open air courtyard. I climbed the 130ft tall minaret on the left for a better view.

The rickshaw ride ended at the Red Fort and from there we left Old Delhi and moved on to some of the sights in New Delhi. We went to the India Gate which was built by the British in the 1920's as a memorial to 82,000 soldiers of the Indian Army who died in WWI. It also contains an internal flame as a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. From the gate we travelled along the Rajpath (or King's Way) to Rashtrapati Bhavan which is the home of the president of India. At 340 rooms it is one of the largest presidential palaces in the world.

Our next stop was the tomb of the second Mughal emperor Humayun. He ruled over Afghanistan, Pakistan and part of northern India from 1531 to 1540 and from 1555-1556 when he died at age 47 after falling down some stone stairs. The UNESCO World Heritage Site is the first “garden-tomb” in India and created a precedent for future Mughal architecture which reached its peak in the Taj Mahal (which was built by his great grandson Shah Jahan).

The patio of the tomb provided an opportunity to photograph some of the many Black Kites that swirl over Delhi.

Our final stop of the tour was another UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Qutub Minar. It is a 73m tall minaret that is the tallest of its kind in the world. It was originally constructed in the early 1200’s but then was struck by lightning in 1369 and destroying the top storey. This storey was replaced shortly after by three new storeys. It is a pretty impressive site. The grounds include several ruins plus the foundation of another tower that was intended to be twice as tall as the Qutub Minar. It didn’t get beyond the foundation after the person who commissioned the work died. The site also turned out to hold our first of 8 owl species for the trip, a couple of tiny sleeping Spotted Owlets.

That evening the full group (Frank, Joe, Hilda, Jim, Rob and tour leader Iain) met for our first of many Indian buffet dinners.

Day 1: Off to Bharatpur

This morning we met Gajendra our local guide for the trip. He proved to be an invaluable member of the team not just for providing logistics and translation assistance but also being a keen birder and leopard spotter and eventually a friend. At 7:15 we piled into our mini bus for the 4 hour drive from Delhi to Bharatpur. We passed through part of Delhi and then connected up with the foggy Yamuna Expressway for most of the journey. The countryside is flat and mostly agricultural with some mud brick making factories. The final hour of the drive was on secondary roads through small towns and more farmland until we reached Bharatpur and the Birder's Inn where we stayed for the next 3 nights.

Birder's Inn is less than 500m from the entrance to Keoladeo National Park. Keoladeo is a man-made wetland created in a natural depression over 250 years ago. It was a hunting ground for the maharajas of Bharatpur and in 1982 was established as a national park and bird sanctuary. In 1985 it was designated as a World Heritage Site. The park contains areas of dry forest, grassland, wetland and lakes and is a haven for ducks, herons, shorebirds, etc. Last year was a good monsoon so there was plenty of water in the park. This made for many wetland bird photography opportunities.
Our visits to Keoladeo were all done by rickshaw. These allowed us to get fairly deep into the park while still being about to jump out quickly to take photographs.

Our first visit was after lunch and we quickly racked up a good list of birds including Bar-headed Goose, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Painted Stork, Indian Cormorant, Yellow Bittern, Indian Pond-Heron, Eurasian Spoonbill, Sarus Crane, Greater Coucal, Common and White-throated Kingfishers, Indian Robin and Bluethroat.

Day 2 – Full Day in the Park
Up before dawn for breakfast at the Birders Inn then back into the rickshaws by 7 to return to the park. Our first stop was for a pair of Sarus Cranes that were close to the path and provided good photo opportunities. They occasionally called to other cranes in the park which was great to hear.

We also had fairly distant views of a pair of Black-necked Storks. Today we had boxed lunches that allowed us to spend the whole day in the park. Our lunch spot was a great place for Brahminy Starling. After lunch the group stopped to photograph a Common Hawk-Cuckoo while on our way to check out a nesting Dusky Eagle-Owl. The park is not just about birds Chital (Spotted Deer) and Nilgai are fairly common. On our way out this evening a Golden Jackal made an appearance.

Back at the hotel we enjoyed a well-deserved beverage and then the Indian buffet dinner.

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Day 3 Cranes and Coursers

After doing so well with the park birds on the previous days, this morning we headed out into the predawn fog to look for some photo opportunities outside the park. We headed north of Bharatpur through smaller and smaller communities until we were into farm fields. We came across this family of Sarus Crane in a field of mustard. We also picked up Greater Flamingo, Great White Pelican and some fly over Common Cranes and Woolly-neck Storks nearby. The hoped for Blue Buck however proved elusive.

Following our boxed lunch we stopped at a fallow field for Indian Courser. There were several around however they didn't allow us to get close. This Indian Roller was more accommodating. In the same field we had good looks at Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark and Crested Lark.

Day 4-5 - Mughals and Muggers

We were on the bus by 7 for the drive to Agra. The original plan was to head straight for the Taj Mahal but with the morning fog we have been experiencing in Bharatpur we decided to make a stop along the way and hopefully arrive at the Taj after the fog had lifted. The stop was a place called Fatehpur Sikri. Fatehpur Sikri was founded in 1569 by the Mughal emperor Akbar (son of Humayun and grandfather of the man who built the Taj Mahal). It is quite an impressive site made up of many red sandstone buildings including palaces for each of the emperors 3 wives (one Hindu, one Christian and one Muslim) sited on top of a rocky outcrop. The site was also home to Akbar's 400 plus mistresses. Since we were there fairly early it was very quiet and we were able to enjoy it almost all to ourselves.

We had a local guide who took us through most of the complex. He told us that the emperor came here to see a Sufi saint who lived in this location. The saint blessed his pregnant Hindu wife and she had a son (prior to that all of his children had been girls). The emperor was so impressed that he moved has capital here from Agra.

We continued on to Agra for lunch with a quick stop to photograph out some Red-naped Ibis. After lunch we boarded an electric bus to take us from the parking area to the entrance to the Taj Mahal. Gas/diesel engines are restricted within 2km of the Taj to try and reduce the impact of pollution. The Taj Mahal was built by the 5th Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal. It is a World Heritage Site that attracts 7 to 8 million visitors each year and several of them were there during our visit. Despite the crowds the Taj Mahal easily met or exceeded expectations and even managed to convey a feeling of peacefulness (except inside the tomb room which was a zoo of sweaty pushing and shoving).

After enjoying the Taj Mahal we got back onto our bus for the 90min drive to Chambal Safari Lodge arriving just as the sun was setting. We sat around the fire and enjoyed a beverage while Flying Foxes circled overhead. The lodge provided a very tasty dinner after which a short walk on the hotel grounds and rewarded by good looks at an Asian Palm Civet.

Day 5

The next morning we headed out early for the short drive to the Chambal River. Along the way we made some productive birding stops with good photo opportunities of Plum-headed Parakeets, Indian Robin and Purple Sunbird plus a fleeting view of Jungle Bush-Quail. At the river we had Ruddy Shelducks and White-browed Wagtail.

The fog was still just lifting off the river so we had time for a masala chai before heading out. Chambal River is one of the few rivers in India that is considered unholy. For many years the ravines along the river were also home to bandits. As a result no major settlements, temples or industry were built on its banks keeping it relatively wild and pollution free. A 250 mile stretch of the river is now a national sanctuary and although enforcement is weak the river is still home to mugger crocodiles, gharial, river dolphins, turtles, terns, skimmers and other birds.
We had great views of the crocodile and the gharial and fleeting glimpses of dolphins as they broke the river surface for a quick breath.

We had no luck with the hoped for skimmers and only a couple fly by Black-bellied Terns but we did see a Great Thick-knee and Bar-headed Geese.

Back at the lodge we had some time after lunch to check out the grounds including the Flying Fox roost, a Brown Boobook and a Gray Hornbill before bussing back to Agra to catch our overnight train to Katnai.

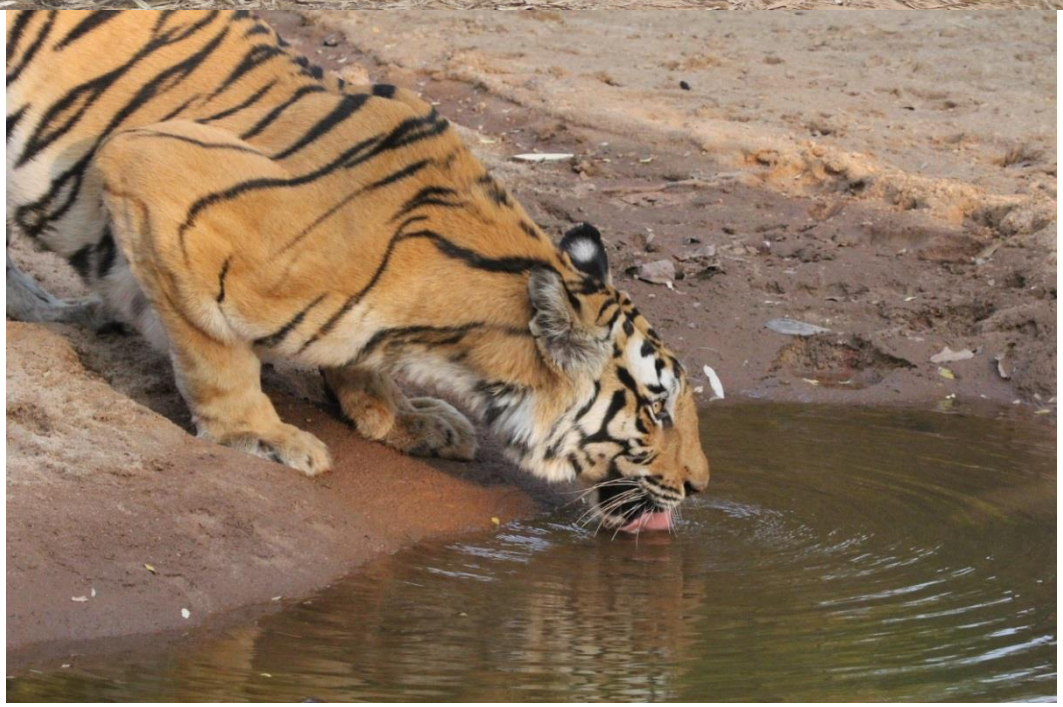
Day 6-12 Tigers, Tigers, Tigers

Day 6

We took the overnight train from Agra to Katnai. Having a bed in a first class cabin was very comfortable and allowed us to cover some miles and get some sleep at the same time. We arrived in Katnai by about 6:15 and transferred to cars for the roughly 2 hour drive to Bandhavgarh Jungle Lodge. The lodge was very nice with separate cabanas plus a large dining/lounge area with a roof top deck. The grounds provided some good birding opportunities including this female Tickell's Blue Flycatcher and best of all it is right next door to the main entrance to Bandhavgarh National Park.

At 2:30 we loaded into 3 safari jeeps called Gypsies and assembled at the park gate with about 6 other jeeps for the 3 o' clock gate opening. When the gate opened we all rocketed into the park along the dusty dirt roads. It seemed unlikely to me that we'd be able to spot anything although we did have a nice look at a Crested Serpent Eagle. Then we came around a corner and saw several jeeps stopped at different angles along the road. Between us and the jeeps that had arrived from the other direction was a Tiger lying on the road. As we arrived it got up and walked into the bamboo beside the road. We then learned that there was a family group working on a Wild Boar that had been killed the day before. We saw the 3 juveniles, roughly 2.5 years old. The view through the bamboo wasn't perfect for photographs but looking into the eyes of a tiger from that close was very special.

Eventually the jeeps moved on and we continued down the road until we came to another parked jeep. This time it was the mother of the 3 juveniles and she was on the road drinking from a small stream. Eventually she moved a short distance off the road allowing us to move into a better viewing position. She stopped at a small pool and we had fantastic photo opportunities in perfect light as she lapped up some water and then sat in the pool before walking away. What an incredible start to our Bandhavgarh visit!

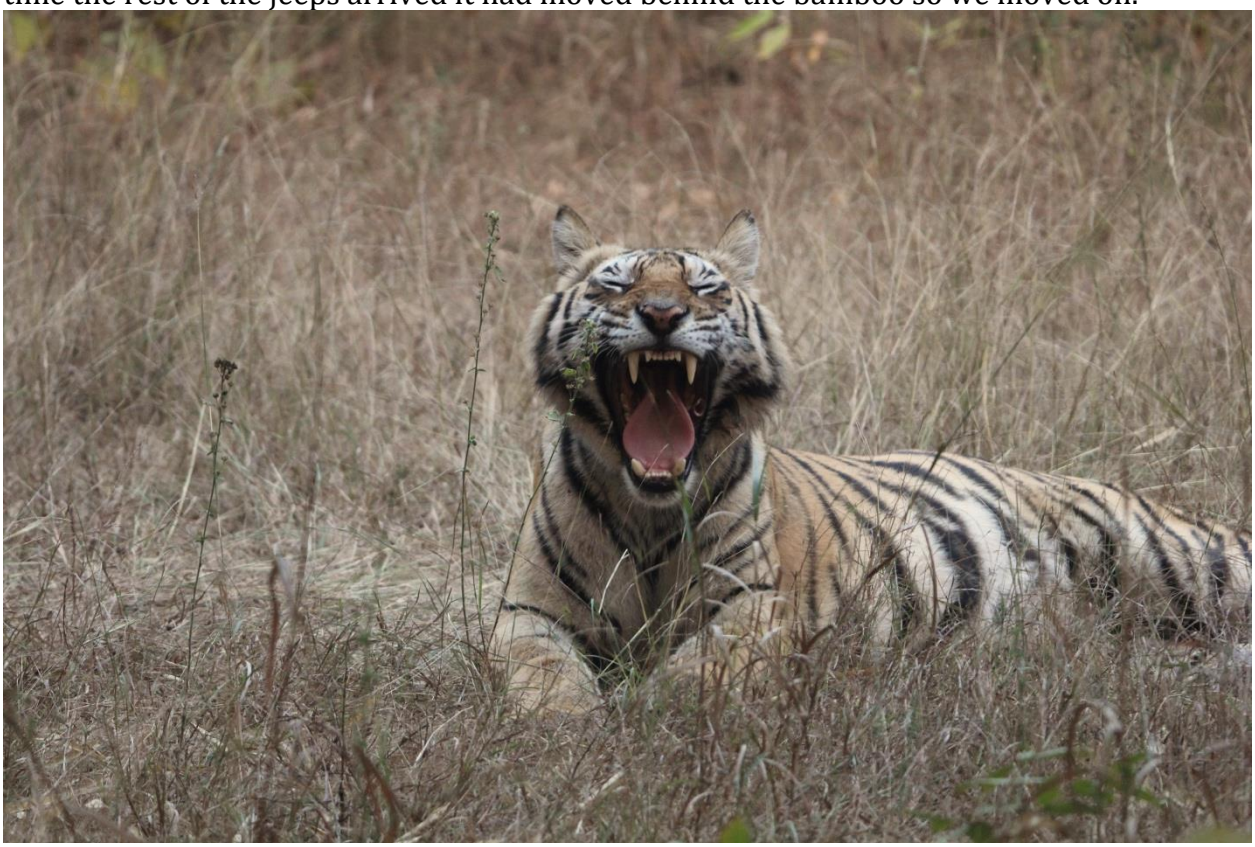


We began to head for the exit as the sun was setting and were driving through a forested area when the guides stopped the jeep. They had heard alarm calls for some of the many Gray Langurs in the park. We waited and then our guide spotted a Leopard moving through the trees. We shifted the jeep into a spot where we thought it might cross the road and were partially right; it bounded across the road behind us. The light was very low but I just managed this action shot.

We returned to the lodge for dinner and to revel in our 3 tiger and 1 leopard day.

Day 7

Permits for Bandhavgarh are either half day (in at 6:30 and out at 11:00 or in at 3:00 and out at 5:00) or full day (in at 6:15 and out at 5:00). The full day permits are highly prized because you also have more flexibility in where you can go within the park. Today was our first of two back to back full day permits. It was quite chilly as we headed out before dawn and the blankets we were given were very welcome. We started by racing to the site of the wild boar kill and were rewarded with views of the mother and 3 juveniles. Three of the tigers were behind the bamboo munching on the carcass but one was out in the open allowing us to photograph it looking at us and yawning. By the time the rest of the jeeps arrived it had moved behind the bamboo so we moved on.



Our guide wanted to check out another potential tiger location and we really hit the jackpot this time. We joined the 4 or 5 jeeps already at the location just as two young (about 9 months old) tigers were doing a little play fighting that ended with one of the running up a leaning tree trunk. The mother and one other cub were also in the area and at one point all four of the lay down on the road in front of us as if posing for the cameras. We happily snapped off hundreds of photos as they yawned in our direction. Eventually they decided to move on walking up the road toward us and into the bush very close to our jeep. Two fantastic tiger experiences before 7am!

We spent the rest of the morning bouncing around the park roads picking up Gaur, Ruddy Mongoose, Sambar (below), Spotted Deer and Golden Jackal.

For lunch we went to the “center point”. It is one of only a few small locations in the park where you are allowed to get out of the jeeps. It was a welcome opportunity to stretch the legs and get some chai from one of the vendors. After lunch we drove part way up one of the hills to a place called

Shesh Shaiya. It features a 65 foot long statue of Vishnu reclining on a seven hooded serpent. This was another small area where we were allowed out of the jeeps and there were several birds in the surrounding forest. The most interesting was a white morph Asian Paradise-Flycatcher. It is like a ghost with its long white tail whipping around in the forest.

Day 8

The next day was an even earlier start. We again have a full day permit but are entering the park at a different gate that is about 5 km away from the lodge. Soon after getting in we saw some Red Jungle fowl. This wild ancestor of the chicken is perhaps the most significant bird on the planet for humans. It is also quite spectacular to look at. Unfortunately they seem to have a habit of rushing into the bushes before you can get your camera on them. We battled for good shots of them for days before one finally cooperated. I never would have guessed that photographing chickens would have been so much more difficult than photographing tigers!
Shortly after the Jungle fowl we came across another female tiger walking along the road. We learned that it is the mother of the female we saw yesterday with the younger cubs.

We had breakfast in the park and then spent the rest of the morning looking for more tigers. I think it's in the guides DNA to always be searching for the next tiger. By the time we got to the center point for lunch we were ready for a break. After lunch we returned to the Vishnu statue however it was quieter than yesterday. Soon after we got there Iain realized that he had lost his phone so we decided to return to the center point to look for it. Our jeep lagged behind a bit and we got photo opportunities of Painted Spurfowl and display Indian Peafowl. Soon after we left the display we came across two jeeps stopped and the road and just in front of them was a tiger. It was the mother of the 3 younger cubs from yesterday. She walked down the road and into the bush so we moved around to a spot where she might come back to the road. As we waited we could hear thunder and then a lightning bolt flashed in the distance. The tiger didn't return to the road but a few rain drops started to fall. Iain had miraculously spotted his phone on the side of the road so we decided to head for the exit. By the time we got there the rain was coming down in earnest making for a cold, wet ride back to the lodge where we warmed up around the fire.

Day 9

We awoke at 5:30 to wind and rain. Iain made the rounds and we all agreed to skip the morning drive and grab and extra hour or two of sleep. After breakfast the rain had stopped and some of us explored the grounds picking up an Orange-headed Thrush and Black-hooded Oriole amongst others

After lunch we loaded back into the jeeps for another tour of the park. For the first time we have a visit without a tiger. We heard monkey alarm calls and waited but no tiger appeared.

Day 10
We were back to the main entrance first thing this morning and took a rocky track up into hillier part of the park. It was very scenic but surprisingly free of birds and animals

Day 11
We were up early again to return to the more distant entrance. We saw a Golden Jackal in the mist but things were generally quiet.

Then after breakfast we stopped at a man-made watering hole with 3 other jeeps and just waited. Amazingly within minutes an adult male tiger walked out of the bush. It crouched at the watering hole and had a good drink then walked across the road a couple jeep lengths from us. Our amazing tiger luck continues.

Later we came across a couple parked jeeps. They had a tiger lying fairly close to the road but just barely visible through the brush. We tried angling for a better view but it just wasn't there so we left and started heading for the exit. Further along the road we came across more parked jeeps and sure enough there was another tiger for us. This one was posed very nicely on the other side of a grassy area. As we watched it got up and walked toward the road nearby. Our driver got us into perfect position to see it come onto the road, lie down for awhile and eventually disappear into the grass.

Back at the lodge we sat around a fire outside and had a BBQ dinner. It included crispy deep fried snacks that were a bit like potato chips and were very hard not to just keep eating. The BBQ chicken was also very good.

Day 12

We were at the main gate again this morning for the 6:30 opening. Our driver had achieved the pole position so we were in first. Not far along we passed through an area with a steep rocky slope to our left and Gajendra called out “Leopard, leopard, leopard”. We slid to a halt and looked up to our left and there was the leopard sitting on a rock very close, looking down at us. It was too dark and too quick to get a photo but a great sighting for a final excursion into the park. Bay 9:30 we were back at the lodge packing up for the roughly 4 hour drive to Jabalpur airport. From there is as about a 90 minute flight back to Delhi where we transferred to airport hotel for buffet dinner and bed.

Day 13-17 Kaziranga – Rhinos, Elephants, Hornbills and Dust

We assembled in the lobby at 3:30am for the short drive to the airport. By the time we made it through the various line-ups and Iain got his boots through security we were at our gate just in time to board our IndiGo flight to Guwahati. It was mostly cloudy during the 2 ¼ hour flight however we did have glimpses of some of the higher Himalayan peaks which was very cool. I didn't realize it at the but this image shows 4 of the top 6 highest mountains in the world. On the left is Cho Oyu #6 (8201m), in the middle is Mt Everest #1 (8850m), somewhat lost slightly below and to the right of Mt Everest is Lhotse #4 (8516) and finally the peak on the right is Makalu #5 (84181m).

From the Guwahati airport it was about a 5 hour drive to our hotel, the Infinity Resort, next to Kaziranga National Park. Kaziranga is in the far northeastern corner of India in the state of Assam. The park protects forest and floodplain of the Brahmaputra River. Kazirangha National Park is home to Indian Rhinoceros, Water Buffalo, Asian Elephant and Barasingha, all threatened or endangered animals. We had a quick lunch and then loaded into the familiar jeeps for our first excursion into the park. It wasn't long before we came across rhinos. In one large field we saw 27. They were fairly distant but impressive nonetheless. We also saw Barasingha and Hog Deer. The roads in Kaziranga are similar to Bandhavgarh but here they are even dustier. Dust masks would have been a good idea.

Out of the park by 5 and back to the lodge for Indian buffet and a local beer called a He-Man 9000. It is apparently "super, ultra, strong" (but not very good).

Day 14

We were into the jeeps at 6:30am to go about 20 min east to the Central Range park entrance. Kaziranga doesn't open until 7:30 so we ate our boxed lunch and birded the area around the gate.

This part of the park features more forest. We had a pair of Great Hornbills (more about them later) and some Scarlet Minivets plus a nice encounter with at least 7 Asian Elephants.

The road took us to the banks of the Brahmaputra. It starts in Tibet and flows west along the north side of the Himalayas, then cuts through the mountains and joins up with the Ganges in Bangladesh. It is nearly 4000km long. Here it is wide and slow moving. During the monsoon though it would be very different.

After lunch we headed to the western entrance. The forest here was very quiet however we did have a nice male elephant and our best rhino view.

On the way back to the lodge we attempted to use a bank machine again without success. Getting cash in India has been a real challenge all trip. There are restrictions on how much you can get, bank machines often don't work and when they do they provide 2000 rupee notes. Most of our purchases are in the 10 to 100 rupee range and very few vendors are able to make change. We just had enough to cover the camera fees at Kaziranga

Day 15

This morning we were back to the central entrance. While paying our fees some Assam Macaques wandered by. They look very similar to the Rhesus Macaques but have a straight tail instead of one with a bend at the end. Back in the park the highlight was a pair of Great Hornbills. We first saw them fly into a tree and a bit later saw them at their nest in the cavity of a tree.

At lunch we showed our photos to Iain and he got very excited. This was his most wanted one bird to photograph so we agreed to return to the site in the afternoon. In an effort to get there first we drove hard through clouds of dust. It was the most unpleasant drive of the trip but shortly after we got there one of the Hornbills flew in and we left Iain and Joe happily clicking away while we headed off to see what else we could see.

We found a Slender-billed Vulture perched in a flowering Silk Cotton Tree. The large red blooms on these trees have been added a welcome splash of colour to visit to Kaziranga. We also saw several Kalij Pheasants and this Red Jungle fowl.

Our final target for the day was an Oriental Pied Hornbill. We'd see one fly over earlier but were unable to get a photo. As we were heading for the exit our three jeeps came together and Gajendra spotted a pair of hornbills. However just as we raised our cameras they flew leaving them as the birds that got away for this trip.

Day 16

No jeeps this morning. They have provided us with some wonderful photo opportunities but I think we were all happy to not be bouncing around in the dust this morning. All that is, except Joe who is staying a few extra days and headed out at 6:30 as usual. The rest of us walked around the hotel adding Asian Palm Swift as the last bird of the trip and getting a better look at Blue-throated Barbet. Some local children found us quite curious enough to stop playing but only for a minute.

Then we loaded into the cars for the drive back to Guwahati airport. We made it through the various lines just in time to load onto the plane for the flight back to Delhi. It was even cloudier on this flight so views of the mountains were very limited. Jim left the group at the Delhi airport to join up with a cultural tour and Gajendra headed for his home. The remaining four of us had a water buffalo steak dinner at the airport hotel. Hilda is staying an extra day to do some shopping, Frank and Iain left for the airport at 11 and I headed to bed in preparation for early morning departure.

Day 17

Up at 2am to give me plenty of time to be in the lobby at 3 for my taxi to the airport. I had just started my shower when I was very shocked to see the hotel door open and someone walk in. I shouted at them and then realized it was Frank. His Aeroflot flight to Moscow had been delayed to the extent that he was going to miss his connection in Paris and after several phone calls he is now not leaving until later tonight. We said good-bye again and this time I headed for the airport and he went to sleep.

My flight left at 6:30am and we flew west over Pakistan and Afghanistan. I was on the aisle so could see much of the mountains. Perhaps K2 would have been visible as some point. Soon after that they darkened the windows and I tried to get some sleep. We arrived in Vancouver at 8am making it about a 15 hour flight (delayed about an hour by head winds). This made my connection in Vancouver very tenuous. I ran between the various line-ups and made it just as they were closing the gate. The attendant said he was surprised that I'd made it. 15 minutes to Victoria. Sarah was there to pick me up. I have some great memories of India but am happy to be home.