

India: Big Cats and Beautiful Birds

March 9-31, 2026 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott

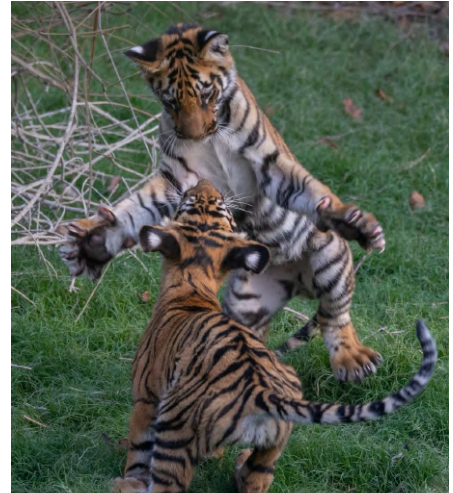
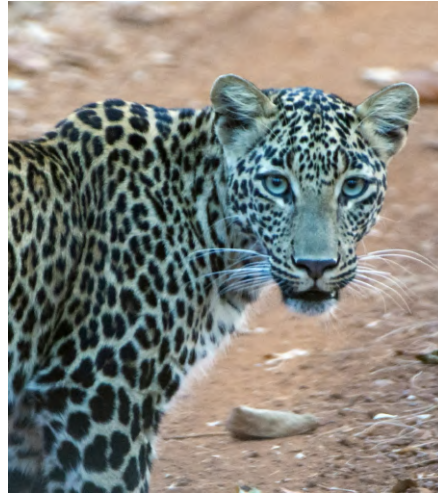


Guides Saurabh Sawant, Peg Abbott with 10 participants: Nicki, Brian, Michelle, Marcia, Diane, Chuck, Monica, Tony, Judith and Marco



Mon., Mar. 9 Arrival in New Delhi | Welcome Dinner and Gathering

Many of our group had arrived early to explore Delhi and it was fun to hear about their adventures. Peg and Michelle arrived today and we all gathered in the bar area of the hotel for welcome drinks ahead of walking to dinner, with a chance to meet each other and hear about plans for the following day. This was a widely traveled group and it was the first time Peg had heard that ALL clients in the group had been to all seven continents previously. Anticipation was high for a great trip ahead.



Our welcome dinner was extraordinary, one of the most memorable of the trip at the Monsoon Café in Aerocity, a small and intimate eatery where we enjoyed sharing various courses selected ahead for us. We started with a spinach leaf in batter lightly fried with yoghurt chaat with mint and coriander chutney. This was followed by a veggie kabob platter, with beetroot and panier cheese kabobs, bottle gourd kabobs, spicy mushroom tikka and pumpkin seed tikka, yum! The main course was perfectly prepared trout, and butter chicken tikka masala. A side dish was a lovely pumpkin curry, of course rice, and for dessert an exquisite pudding, made with black carrots, a regional specialty. What a way to kick off our trip!

Tues., Mar. 10 New Delhi to Nagpur

We got an early start, with packed breakfast (and a few of us amplified these with an unexpected donut shop splurge at the airport...). This part of our adventure was to one of the most productive Bengal Tiger reserves in India, and we were eager to get there. We had about a three hour drive upon arrival and arrived in time for lunch at the lodge. We met the resident naturalists of Svasara Jungle Resort (located near to the northeast gate) Dave and Dollar, who were just terrific, so enthusiastic and informative, and then got settled ahead of the first safari drive into the park. Right on the grounds we saw Coppersmith Barbet, Common Tailorbird, both White-browed and Spot-breasted Fantails and two species of sunbirds, Purple and Purple-rumped, feeding in flowers, and Peg spied the latter species building a nest back by the pool. Tickell's Blue Flycatcher was on our pathway to and from lunch and won the prize for colorful beauty.

We had arrived to a fantastic wildlife paradise with a mosaic of habitats to explore, ranging from dry teak forest to lush lakeshore and riverine areas with huge spreading Jamon trees. Being there in spring, flowering Muaha and other trees were magnets for resident birds. Big meadows within the park mark former villages, a global example of people giving way to preserve space for tigers which are revered in this culture. The park has both buffer and core zones and over the next few days we were assigned various routes to drive and visit. We were very successful in finding tigers, and most of our group got good views of Indian Dhole.

Wed., Mar. 11 and Thurs., Mar. 12 Tadoba Tiger Reserve

Highlights of the next few days safari game drives were numerous. We split into three vehicles, with time to ride with each of the naturalist staff, Peg and Saurabh, but not all going to the same areas each time, which was a bit tricky but thankfully we had enough time here that most everyone in time recorded the same sightings. It was fun to compare notes, raising anticipation for the next day and one of our best mornings when we had multiple



tigers on a Gaur kill, we were all together. We did a morning and an afternoon safari each day, in between we birded on the grounds of the lodge, enjoyed lunch and time to rest.

Memorable were herds of Spotted Deer, smaller groups of Sambar, another deer species with especially stately bucks with harems. We focused on mammals and predators, and also watched out for birds. Various lakes were focal points, visited by the mammals and with abundant waterfowl, waders and shorebirds. Over the time of our stay we collectively saw 17 individual tigers, most memorable were the females with cubs, finding older cubs along the lakeshore, and watching an interacting male and female at the Gaur carcass. We had some wonderful photo opportunities; Bryan caught a perfect reflection of one of the older cubs cooling off in the lake – wow! Sometimes we encountered multiple jeeps and felt a bit crowded, other times we had the sightings almost all to ourselves, or at a distance, where they went about life and we observed them resting on a beach, or making their way along a shoreline. A trip highlight for many was seeing Sloth Bear repeated times, including a mother and almost grown cub, and one that we watched roam down to a waterhole and slide in for a long session of grooming and a bath – just incredible to film and to see. There were loads of langurs to watch, two species of mongoose (Indian Gray and Ruddy), and some superb sightings of Leopards. Eurasian Wild Boar were seen with regularity, as were Mugger Crocodile when we were around lakes and waterholes.

Bird highlights were memorable too. We averaged 40-60 species on each game drive with our largest lists each morning. Finding wild Indian Peafowl gleaming in dawn light was a great start, they are startlingly common. We watched Yellow-footed Green Pigeons and Plum-headed Parakeets sun themselves on treetops, Crested Treeswifts circle above us in the sky, Bronze-winged Jacanas balance on aquatic vegetation, and brilliant Asian Green Bee-eaters devouring butterflies. We watched Indian Gray Hornbills pluck fruit, Gray Junglefowl males strut about in display, Asian Openbills feed on snails, and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos sail between branches with their impossibly long tails waving in the wind. Rufous Treepies were a hit, so raucous and bold. Bar-headed Geese (which we would see later in Ladakh) had just arrived, helping us to feel the pulse of northward migration. The early morning sighting of a Brown Fish Owl staring at us across a small pond was on almost everyone's favorite list at the end of the tour. We will long remember a massive Gray-headed Eagle catching a fish which proved to be too heavy for it to fly away with, we watched its flapping struggle to get it to shore for safe feasting.



There was also village life to observe coming and going from our resort. People walking to and from their tasks, cattle sleeping in groups by roadside gravel piles, agricultural fields being worked, and always the smells of home cooking and fires. Once back at the lodge, the colors and aromas of our own buffets of carefully prepared foods, with daily specials featuring dishes from all parts of India, was a treat. There were lots of dishes to choose from, curries, dahls, yoghurt with cucumber, chicken dishes, fresh vegetables and fruits daily and of course, tempting desserts.

Fri., Mar. 13 Tadoba Tiger Reserve

There was nothing unlucky for us on this Friday the 13th. Like our other days in this magical national Park of India, we had excellent sightings. Right away we were able to find a brown fish owl perched right out in the open and a turnaround of a little side road by a quiet pool. We got wonderful views of photos.

There had been signs of a tiger pug marks and eventually working our way down through a fairly big forest area, we found the tiger sound asleep, resting in the shade thicket adjacent to a small stream. If it wasn't for the white on the belly, we may have missed it all together. In this general area, we were able to find a Changeable Hawk Eagle on its perch, it then dropped down in pursuit of a Little Cormorant in a pool just off the road, unsuccessfully but for us quite a show.

We explored one of the buffer areas adjacent to an area we had explored before, but a bit more to the southeast. To access it, we drove through planted rice fields which were signs of a past village being here, then took off a very bumpy track up a stony hill. The vehicles made a quick start at the top of this hill and we have wonderful views of a female Painted Sandgrouse feeding on seeds that accumulate from blowing wind in tracks at the edge the road. A nearby roosting Savanna Nightjar was remarkable find, so cryptic, that Marcia named it "the rock Bird". It blended in perfectly!

From here, we explored the area on a series of woodland roads, looking for whatever we could find – a massive Indian Gaur, a soundly sleeping Tigress, and special for one of our vehicles which went a bit farther afield, playful, yearling tiger cubs on the shore of a small pond. These three were a family, spread out as these youngsters were about ready to be on their own, so two of our vehicles were watching the sleeping mother tiger as she took a break from these playful two. As we sat watching her sleep we were entertained by number of



wonderful birds, including a hovering Pied Kingfisher diving into the water repeatedly after small fish. There were two pair pairs of Red-wattled Lapwing in the pond and they were rivals, so there was lots of flying back-and-forth with loud calling and agitation. At one point from one of the lapwings took out its frustration on a Great Egret which had to duck as the this much smaller species repeatedly bombed its head! We also watched a Little Egret closely follow a Red-naped Ibis trying to steal his food plucked from the mud.

We had elected a shorter safari for this afternoon, needing a good break after lunch. African Gray Hornbill, African Paradise Flycatcher, Rufous Treepie, and Common Hoopoe were some of the highlight bird species. We drove back right orange glow of the sky as we watch sunset through tree skeletons framing the winding road home. Dinner was delicious, and afterwards some of us tackled the species list to get caught up.

Sat., Mar. 14 Tadoba Tiger Reserve | Nagpur | Velavadar National Park

Today was a repositioning day, we hated to say good-bye to Dave and Dollar who had been such great local guides. We departed after breakfast, drove back to the Nagpur airport, leaving early to catch the direct flight to Ahmedabad landing at 10:30 AM. Logistics can be tricky in covering as much ground as we do but everyone was a good sport about the early departure. Vehicles and guides were there to meet us, we spotted a few birds along the way (including Sarus Cranes feeding in agricultural fields) and made good time.

We arrived at the elegant Blackbuck Lodge, a bit weary from our travel but were quickly charmed by the serene nature of this place. The staff was lined up to greet with smiles and handed us a refreshing, cool towel and drink. Lunch was ready and proved to be absolutely delicious, all different Indian dishes, fine-tuned flavors and many vegetables. Butter chicken is popular but slightly different everywhere we go and always popular.

We marveled at the architecture of the place and all the little cozy places to sit and watch birds at the pond or in the brush, set up with appealing sculptures. Numerous wild Blackbuck were grazing on the grounds . We settled into our rooms, which were spacious and beautifully appointed with an historic hunting Lodge feel and all the comforts one would want. The bathrooms are enormous and had beautiful murals painted in the shower inside. These opened to an outside shower, such a refreshing experience. Monica commented on what a delight that was after our safari days.



We met at four to do a quick Safari into the park. Being an extensive grassland area on one side and a wetland on the other there were many birds to see that were new for us and some very large herds of Blackbuck joined by a lesser number of Nilgai. Our cameras were drawn to the rich chocolate brown coats of the male Blackbuck and their fancy face pattern with highly-decorated inner ears. Males had large harems and plenty of competition, but it was obvious which were dominant. The afternoon light was focused on them, photos of them feeding in fairly tall grasses was just beautiful. We found a Sykes Nightjar, new for many and also enjoyed good looks at Indian Spotted Eagle, Steppe Eagle and three species of harriers. Marco commented that he had never seen so many species of raptor in one location. This is a really important wintering ground for much of Europe and Asia's breeding harriers. As dusk approached, we watched them circle over the grasslands and dive down into them like blackbirds do into reeds, indeed they roost on the ground in huge numbers. As we were watching them go into their roosts, out came couple of Short-eared Owls, which flew around us just starting their shift of nocturnal hunting. Marco, still mesmerized by the activity, commented there must be a big population of rodents to feed all of these raptors.

A highlight of the afternoon for many was a sighting of a female Striped Hyena. She was laying in the grass and occasionally got up and at one time rolled over with four paws up in the air. But sleep was still with her and she didn't get up before we had to leave the park. We thought we would try again in the morning for it was known she had three pups in a nearby den and we hoped to see her coming and going to feed. Alas we did not encounter this elusive mammal again but were really happy to have seen one.

We came back and enjoyed some refreshing drinks (unexpected, much appreciated!) and another lovely dinner. Then off to bed to rest up for more adventures.

March 15 Blackbuck Lodge | Velavador National Park

We left promptly at 6:30 AM wanting to be at the head of the queue going into the park on a Sunday morning. It was busy, but it was also wonderful to see Indian families of Indian out enjoying their parks, the beautiful day and the views of raptors. This morning's big excitement was the sighting of a distant Indian wolf, and eventually a second wolf was seen in the wetland area where we were allowed to get out of the vehicles with our scopes to survey a whole array of waders and shorebirds, as well as 25+ great African White Pelicans. Several species were new for the trip, including three Glossy Ibis, a couple of Common Greenshank, and two species of wagtail, White and Citrine. We found 76 species of birds in a few hours we were out, including Rosy Starling and Tawny Lark.



The early morning safari went quickly and we returned for a beautiful breakfast served outside on the patio. It was all too good! Everyone enjoyed some down time for the rest of the morning, for those that wished birding on the grounds, and good conversation over lunch, which was a choice of Indian or continental – a lovely chilled melon soup, mushroom risotto, and a nod to all of us Americans, apple crisp with vanilla ice cream.

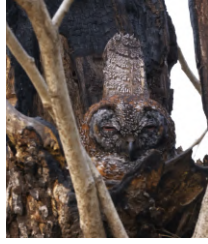
Our refreshing outdoor showers were a hit. Some caught up on photos or journals, others napped, and a few die-hards did some more birding around the lodge, finding Indian Paradise Flycatcher, Clamorous Reed Warbler, and Sykes Warbler.

Four stayed back to soak in the ambiance of this lodge, which was so well thought out architecture, art and furnishings. Eight returned to the park with our lodge guides in two vehicles. We stayed fairly close together and the highlight for both vehicles was getting really good looks at Jungle Cat. We watched them hunt along the grassy edge of a field, listening intently for prey. One group caught views of a pounce! We saw lots of birds of prey, three species of harrier again, and both Greater and Indian Spotted Eagles. Four species of larks fed on seeds blown into tracks of the road affording us good views of Tawny, Crested and Rufous-tailed Larks and Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark. Overhead came the calls of Common Cranes, and visiting small waterholes we marveled at the colors of Painted Storks and the crazy-shaped bills of Eurasian Spoonbills. The only disappointment was not finding the Striped Hyena again, though we waited by the den at dusk, she did not appear.

Mon., Mar. 16 Travel to Gir National Park

We woke to the sound of over 100 Common Cranes flying over fields outside the lodge, a great way to start the day. This morning would be spent traveling, and we enjoyed having a good breakfast at the lodge ahead of our 5-hour drive to Gir National Park. The road out to the main highway was laced with ponds on either side so we had good views of various species of waterfowl as we drove out, as well as big herds of the park's signature antelope, the Blackbuck. Peg and Nicki added some weight to their suitcases, taking away a few of the dishes they had for sale as mementos.

We made a couple of rest stops, the first had an overfriendly young cow intent on sampling our sweets. It enjoyed being scratched behind the ears and left a big slobber mark on Diane's just cleaned shirt – the little local color to our travels.



We did arrive in time for a first afternoon safari. We were shocked at first at how many jeeps were there, but through a good system of spreading everyone out, once past the gate it was fine, we traveled mostly solo. We did encounter Lions with ease, and had a great time watching their antics. We found Crested Serpent Eagle, roosting Mottled Owl, Spotted Owlet, many Asian Bee-eaters, and other songbird species.

Our lodge was larger than at Blackbuck, but with very pleasant spacious rooms with porches, and a pleasant dining area where we could eat inside or out. The evening temperature was perfect so we chose out. Brian earned 10+ stars by complying with the paperwork in this dry state to get a liquor permit – a 45 minute project he completed for all to enjoy. We mainly had a few beers, but it was quite an experience to comply with local regulations.

Tues., Mar. 17 Gir National Park Morning and Afternoon Safaris

We had an additional day and a half to explore this area, taking three game drives and exploring outside of the park one morning with a focus more on birding. We averaged 35-40 species on our drives and again were split up into three vehicles, with local park guides and our team. We found a few new species, both Ashy and Gray-breasted Prinias, Common Iora, Brahminy Starling, Thick-billed Flowerpecker and Yellow-throated Sparrow. We saw Lions on each drive, sometimes singles at water features and sometimes a pride with attentive females and their cubs. Black Drongos and Oriental Magpie Robins kept up a constant chorus. A Shikra stirred up all the small species with attempted hunting, and finding a Eurasian Wryneck was notable.

The hotel had a wood-fired pizza oven and an international menu, we had our choice tonight and we all got wild combinations of food – quite a unique dining night!

Wed., Mar. 18 Gir | Flight to New Delhi

We enjoyed one last morning afield, with highlights being sightings of Common Kingfisher, little blue jewels poised for hunting and noisy groups of Jungle Babblers. We packed up to return to the airport for a flight to Delhi, where we would regroup at the Roseate Hotel and get ready for the next stage of our adventures. At a roadside rest we enjoyed seeing Indian Silverbills making a nest. We wrestled our way through the security check-in, and found the city to be a bit shocking after our many days in the wild. But we were all jazzed by all we had seen and still the prospect of seeing Snow Leopard ahead – all good and moving forward!



Thurs., Mar. 19 New Delhi | Flight to Leh | Acclimation Time for Elevation

Today was the flight day up to the northern region of India that borders Tibet, Ladakh. We did not love the intense security in the airports, though it was for our own good, we had to help each other keep track of gear and not get pushed and shoved. Tiny Monica proved to be our ardent protector! Every cord, and anything electronic had to be out for inspection. Nicki was dunned for a metal box of mints. But we survived, boarded our flight, and were rewarded with fine views of the rugged Himalayas as we dropped into Leh.

A team from our local ground operator in Leh was there to meet us; at the airport friendly staff helped us fill out the extra paperwork needed for this border region. Soon we were getting settled in our lovely, but cold luxury hotel. Once warmed up, our rooms were large and luxurious for the setting, but that first afternoon was brisk, as summer is their high season and these wildlife tourists showing up in March proved to be a bit of a challenge. Our task today was just to acclimate to the 11,300 foot elevation we'd landed in and to rest for the next stage of our Big Cat journey. We hung out in our rooms, and sun poured through the big windows, showing off a fine view of the mountains. Snow Leopard were prime for on the list everyone and we were excited to be here. Acclimating was an important step in the process.

Fri., Mar. 20 Leh | Snow Leopards at Saspochey!

Our rooms had wonderful views of the mountains and the light at dawn was magical, leading to anticipation for our first day at higher elevation. We were supposed to rest and acclimate and we all did enjoy a nice breakfast and the morning to rest. But we heard about a Snow Leopard sighting at the village of Saspochey, and decided to go and try our luck, being that we would view from one spot and not do too much walking. It proved to be a great call as we had some of the best viewing of the trip.

We wound around some impressive mountain roads, and not far out of the village found other cars and viewers, all with scopes, a good sign. There was a big male Snow Leopard on a kill! Not long after we got it in view, it started to move across the valley. We had heard, and it had heard – the yowl call of a female, on our side of the valley – a good half to ¾ mile away. We watched it cross a gully, drop down to the river, wind its way through brush and then lost it. Only about 40 minutes later to have a filmmaker with his own spotting team call out



excitedly, male and female together! We then took turns at the many scopes, they were far away but by being so there was no disturbance and we could watch. They chased and frolicked and started mating, short quick bouts not without some toothy grimacing. The male gave her some strong swats we thought she might reject but she would just go roll in the snow, head out again with the male close behind. We had probably a good hour of viewing before they went out of sight. What a start to the Snow Leopard start of our journey!

Thankfully all of our group handled the higher elevations with no lasting side-effects. We all were on Diamox, and had no issues with that, so other than being short of breath when we did get more active, our time above 11,000 ft. went well.

Sat., Mar. 21 Leh | Shan at Uley | Wilderness Abounding

We left with anticipation of seeing the next chapter in Snow Leopard romance we had witnessed at Saspochey, but we found only a very well fed male, sticking close to the carcass which was at eye level, about 1000 meters from our vantage point. We found it lying out in the open on a flat rock which Peg dubbed the couch, and throughout the hours of observation we had, it returned there several times. Our best activity occurred when Eurasian Magpies dared to come near the carcass. The cat would crouch and stare at them and then when they get just too close, it would leap. It was quite spectacular view, viewed with either the digiscope, videos, or in our binoculars with that huge long tail pro providing the balance. We said two or three such leaps, and the magpie did not give up, eventually the cat came out for an extended feeding belt and pulled on the carcass, lifting up the rib cage, and it must've spewed out a few scraps, and we observed at least one magpie was successful at grabbing a bite before it left.

The setting we watched from was spectacular, with snow-capped peaks in the distance and a rushing stream running below us cloaked with bands of willows just starting to swell with spring budding. It has been an unseasonably warm winter with very little snow. We had to tear ourselves away but we had a pass to cross to get to our next lodgings, which were with a legendary Snow Leopard tracker and his family in a remote valley.

The geography of our drive was most impressive. The lodge called Shan at Uley, located at just over 13,000 feet, had a wonderful naturalist, Urygan, who spoke wonderful English and warmly welcomed us to get settled. They had a superb kitchen staff that put out delicious meals, and simple but adequate rooms that once warmed up,



kept us comfortable. From our windows we could watch Chukar feeding along side Brown Accentor, Robin Accentor, and White-winged Redstart, and walking around we found additional species in the willows around the buildings. A couple of friendly cows shared our space, coming in towards evening for some treats. This would be our home based for the next several nights.

Sun., Mar. 22 and Mon., Mar. 23 Grand Valleys, Himalayan Snowcocks and Snow Leopards

The next few days will always stay in our mind. We were taken in like family and all shared our interest in seeing rare wildlife. Our group was really patient and it paid off, we saw four different Snow Leopards in three different (magnificent and wild!) valleys and had time to savor watching their behaviors. We were here at the best time, as Snow Leopards come down to “lower” elevations in winter, and by this time were courting and mating. Our success at finding them was due to a well-organized team of trackers, living in separate villages, and out daily looking for wildlife activity which they communicate to each other. Their Buddhist heritage is one of generosity and sharing and that sets a wonderful tone for wildlife viewing, using scopes to give animals their space.

Each morning we could join wildlife spotters on a rooftop platform at 7AM, bundled up as if in Antarctica until the sun warmed up the day. These were trackers from the village who use traditional knowledge passed down through generations hewn by years of experience living there. They realized we wanted to see all wildlife and were keen to share scope views of Himalayan Snowcock, Ibex, Indian Wolf, Red Fox, and various birds. Norbu was the lead guide, and his son, also a talented tracker and photographer, had recently returned to run the lodge.

Early viewing was optional, and we’d return to the warm dining room with a well-stoked woodstove for breakfast, then head out to other valleys if we heard of Snow Leopard activity, or just to go explore and see what we could find. Along the Lower Spango Valley we watched Brown Dipper in the rushing stream and followed a Solitary Snipe in flight, keen-eyed Norbu found it once it landed and we got it in the scope for fine views. We did find Snow Leopards again, and Norbu would help everyone with their cameras, at times grabbing one when a Red Fox came out of nowhere and there was only seconds to capture it – he was so quick! Our guides, and several other locals helped us with digiscoping, resulting in several of the group getting some



wonderful video. We'd have a picnic lunch in the field, hot food spread out on a table, as well as a steady supply of hot drinks as we watched and waited for cat activity. One lunch was by a house on a hill with a commanding view, and into the small stream came beautiful Fire-fronted Serins, a lovely songbird species. We took time to learn geology, soak in the grand landscapes and see the Zaskar and Indus Rivers. We explored Uley, Saspochey, Yangtang, Mangyu, Hemis-Shukpachan (the main village with hospital and school), Liker, Kharu, Sakti and Fana.

One evening they invited us into their family home which was so memorable and special. On other evenings we watched documentaries that were all really interesting, fabulous cinematography and stories. An art film by Vincent Muniere was truly memorable. We also enjoyed their small shop, with handmade Snow Leopard stuffed toys from local wool, and textiles from the Lena women's cooperative in Leh.

Tues., Mar. 24 Shan at Uley | Indian Wolves | Hemis-Shukpachan | Maptak La

Our last full day from Uley was pretty incredible! We started off on the viewing deck above Shan at Uley Lodge, were Norbu and Ugyan out early wanting to help us find Himalayan Snowcock which we had heard but not yet seen. As Peg arrived, they hurried her to the scopes, and voila, there were magnificent views of two different pairs ambling among the rocks, feeding on grasses. The males were bending their necks up to the sky to utter loud whistles. We watched them fly short distances and then clamber about the rocky areas. We heard another in flight above.

Ugyan quickly went to get Marco, our keenest birder of the group, and soon Michelle also arrived with her big smile ready to take the scope. We were all watching this really magnificent bird, iconic for the region, when Norbu just exploded with enthusiasm saying over and over again something we couldn't quite understand, but soon figured it out was Wolf – Wolf - Wolf!! He had spotted two Himalayan Wolves coming up probably from the river passing through the fields crossing the road and we picked them up just on the edge of the road so we had good close looks as they climbed past the irrigation ditch and started up the Rocky Hill. Ugyan radiod down the hill to alert Saurabh who had his scope up on the lower deck for those that didn't want to come and climb up to the viewing deck. Soon everybody was out and all eyes were on the wolves and we watched them for a good 15 or 20 minutes make their way up the hill. The guides are so quick with the scoping that we were able to get some good video of their movements. It was just amazing how they handled the steep terrain with absolute ease.



What to start to the morning and what a dilemma to take yourself off of one icon to watch another. We had good luck with some of the small birds also that seemed to be feeding in the barley fields, picking up extra grain, and these included the Great Rose Finch, Brown Accentor, Robin Accentor, Eurasian Wren and Twite. And of course, our faith, faithful Eurasian Magpies. It should be noted that the magpies followed the wolves up the hill, and if we lost sight of them, all we had to do was look for our black-and-white flying friends to relocate the path.

After walking down the road, looking for some of the smaller birds, we loaded up and headed out, stopping again at the river where we had seen Brown Dippers yesterday, but a few had missed them. With luck, we picked one up again, Norbu spotting them almost immediately, and we were able to get the scopes on them. Peg walked down the road and yelled as one started to fly up the river but saw quickly that it was not a dipper. It was a long bird with white stripe in the wing, and a long bill, bingo, a real find, a Solitary Snipe. We saw where it flew in and landed, and it took a little time, but we were able to find it in the scope. It blended in perfectly behind a white poplar tree, but in time everybody connected with a look.

We continued on to Hemis-Shukpachan, the largest city central to the valleys that we had been exploring over the last few days. We had tea up at the large Buddhist sculpture with a wonderful view all around and we're able to pick up sighting of a couple of Golden Eagles. We continued on to Maptak La, a high pass that follows a suture line between the Eurasian plate and the Indian plate – seeing this structural geology around us so clearly felt sublime. There were many colors in the sediments of the Indian plate so we were able to photograph herds of Urial, grazing on grasses growing on purple and green mud stones. Several times, they stopped to lick snow for their moisture. There were several young ones in the group and at least one big male. On the granite rocks of the Eurasian plate we had a fairly close spotting of a band of Ibex. There were both males and female females, and they were close enough to get photos with the animals that scenic in the landscape. Marcia was thrilled with all the colorful rocks are around. This time she had to be content to take photos as they were fairly crumbly to try to pack home, old seafloor sediments that rose with the growth of the Himalayan mountains.

We have been so lucky on this trip and it continued with sunshine and just occasional clouds painting the landscape different colors. Prayer flags waved in the wind. Norbu from Shan at Uley and another friend who is an expert spotter accompanied us, and we all spent time with the scopes in her binoculars, scanning the hills. At times this is an excellence spot for finding Snow Leopard and the technique is really to look rock by rock. No



sighting today, but a better understanding of how this magnificent animal uses the landscape.

We went down to the town again for lunch, setting up in a protected area near a dwelling where some water running into a field that attracted small birds. The kitchen crew had arrived with our food and they had crispy Pappadum, yellow rice with vegetables, and an nod to our western diet (a surprise) Snickers bars. They tasted really good! We found our first Fire-fronted Serin as they flew in to drink, which was a treat. White-capped Redstarts entertained us along with Chukar, a very common species here. We stopped for a photo of the Buddha statue in the center of town as we left and a big flock of the serins came in much closer. We had a few more Golden Eagles on the wing.

It was time to head home and we made a couple of stops to look for birds when we met a jam up with the village in sight of quite a few vehicles, and we could see a lot of people were up on the spotting deck. The wolves seen earlier in the day have been picked up again, this time on the other side of the valley. They had gone up and around the village and we're now hanging out in the rock cliffs above the area we had visited yesterday. We had scope views and got a really good look of one getting up and stretching. Peg and Marco hung back trying to find some more birds and we're lucky to see a Red Fox.

What a day! For our final dinner, they served us some Leduc specialties, including Momo, delicious little dumplings filled with chicken or vegetables. Of course we had dahl and some nice homemade bread.

Wed., Mar. 25 Return to Leh

The breakfast we called out the kitchen staff to commend them on the variety quality of the food. We'd enjoyed during our stay here. It was hard to leave Uley, its stalwart presence that has stood for centuries in these mountains.

But we had one more cat to try for as intermittently throughout the winter there had been sightings of duration links, hunting the slopes of Wari La, a pass that climbs to 5000 meters. A rugged open landscape with slopes holding a mix of rock and grass. We drove a bypass road to get around late and headed up in elevation until we got to a good viewing point. There were other spots here and they had been here since early in the morning and they had spotted fresh tracks in the snow, which gave them good hope howe however despite spending several hours here, with diligence scoping, we failed to find it. We did get wonderful views at high level of Bearded Vulture and Diane finally got her Eurasian Magpie shot when it posed on a beautiful colored rock right in front of



her with the sun showing off the blue in the tail. Marcia entertained us finding a wolf rock and setting up fun photos of herself, imitating a Pallas Cat. We had not brought our lunch wagon along with us so in time our stomachs told us to quit and we headed down to a lovely café with a view of the river and wonderful Momo dumplings along with a hot noodle soup.

We then headed back to the hotel where we were able to get hot showers and pack up our things as most of the group was heading home in the morning via a flight from Leh to Delhi and then onward. Peg and Saurabh did a little shopping to wrestle up some refreshments to have with our celebratory tour wrap-up and it was really fun to share our favorite moments of the first half of the trip with tigers and lions and the second half of the trip with Snow Leopards and Himalayan wolves. Several birds made the top list as well, including the Sarus Crane, Brown Fish Owl, Indian Roller, and Pearl-spotted Owlets.

The hotel staff made us a luscious chocolate cake inscribed with NJ Big Cats 26. We just marveled over the luck we've had with so many sightings from Leopards to Jungle Cats and over 200 species of beautiful birds. It was hard to believe our epic adventure had come to an end.

Thurs., Mar. 26 Leh Airport | Eastern Ladakh Post-Tour Extension

We said goodbyes after breakfast together and many of our flock went to the airport in Leh to fly to Delhi and onward. Peg, Marcia, Judy and Marco joined Saurabh and local guide, Stanzin, for the extension. We were easy on ourselves today and met up in the lobby at 11 PM appreciating a bit of time to do some laundry and get organized for the next section of our journey.

Our first stop was along the Indus River, running a beautiful turquoise color from glacial silt, to look for Ibisbill. A BIG bird (large plane) flew over overhead at 11:32, it was our comrades heading down to Delhi and we waved to them aloft. We peered through a multitude of prayer flags from a bridge to spot the Ibisbill, getting good scope views. We then took a walk in riverine habitat and had a chance to see Mountain Chiffchaff (the Kashmir form), Water Pipit, Himalayan Buzzard and in the stream, Green Sandpiper.

The Thiksey Monastery was really worth a visit, and the climb up the steps to take off our shoes and go inside this sacred space. Marcia loved all the colors of the intricate décor surrounding a big Buddha statue, especially



columns covered in fabric. We met a few monks who explained the meaning of symbols on the archway. Incense was burning and there was a candle by buddha and intricate figures of female goddesses. Best of all in this non-tourist season it was quiet, so peaceful with few tourists.

Ginger lemon tea warmed us up for lunch at a local cafe. We had fun ordering and sharing our dishes. After lunch split into 2 groups, shopping and birding. Peg and Marco were ecstatic to find one of the Himalayas most iconic birds, the Ibisbill. Our guide knew a couple of places to check, the first two produced nothing and then the third – a pair! We watched them feed and then preen on a sandy beach. And we knew where to stop with our comrades another day so they could get a peek too.

Judith and Marcia had a shopping mission and Saurabh helped them with translation. We also scored some wine (not common here) to have with our dinner at the gracious and now very familiar Rewa hotel. It was nice to have a quieter day to prep for the next stage of our epic journey!

Fri., Mar. 27 - 30 Eastern Ladakh from Leh to Hanle

The next four days were memorable for the five of us that continued on, Marcia, Judith, Marco, Saurabh and Peg. Our lodgings in Hanle were at a homestay, where a very patient host tried to keep us warm and fed and comfortable under challenging end of winter conditions at just over 14,000 feet. The drive from Leh to Hanle was extraordinary, we made many stops so it filled a full day. The landscape was stark, bold, colorful and dramatic as we passed through a canyon for several hours. We made birding stops and found specialties of the high country such as Mongolian Finch, numerous Fire-fronted Serin, Hill Pigeon (now common) and Brown Accentor. Within the canyon we stopped in a steep-walled section and were pleased to find both Brown Dipper and Wallcreeper, feeding in the same area. A Himalayan Griffon was also spotted, as well as Blue Sheep and an Indian Wolf.

The canyon opens up at Nyoma, a glorious stretch of river and valley where we saw our first Tibetan Wild Ass (Kiang), at least forty Bar-tailed Geese, dozens of luscious-colored Ruddy Shelduck, Pallas's Gull, and along the road margins, Great Rosefinch and Black-headed Mountain Finch. Closer to Hanle we scanned some wide grass expanses and were thrilled to find our first Black-necked Cranes, just arriving for the breeding season. We settled into our very simple but welcoming homestay, hovered around the kerosene stove to keep warm while enjoying dinner, and mapped out our next few days. We spent them exploring both the wide open marshy areas



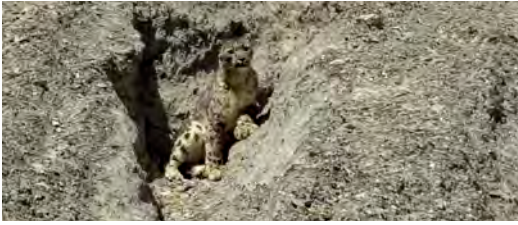
of the valley, and one day going high up into the Tibetan Plateau, an incredible landscape. We were successful at finding a Pallas Cat, almost immediately one morning, and were able to watch it hunting successfully in the scope. The population is declining here so we felt lucky to find them, current threats include packs of feral dogs that have expanded their range with the growth of military camps following the region's conflict with Pakistan. There are several conservation groups working on this issue and habitat is still good, so we are hopeful, it is the same habitat that provides nesting area for Black-necked Cranes.

We were able to watch Upland Buzzard, to find Tibetan Lark which likes grassy mounds at the edge of wet grass habitat, and a real treat – three different Eurasian Eagle Owls, a massive and handsomely patterned owl the size of our Great Horned. They roost on rock ledges and feed on pika, which we were also happy to find. Twite were small finches that sang from the roadside phone lines, Tibetan Sandgrouse we found our final morning not far from the lodge, and in the highest reaches, we found Black-winged Snowfinch, Blanford's Snowfinch and the odd Ground Tit. Wooley Hare get prolific as spring arrives, but we caught site of a few – one being chased by a Tibetan Sand Fox! Probably our rarest mammal to find was the small but incredibly tough Tibetan Gazelle, a species with only a small disjunct population here in India.

Tues., Mar. 31 Return to Leh from Hanle

This morning we packed up to return to Leh, which seemed now like a return to a big city after this remote sojourn. But still on our list was trying to see Tibetan Sand Fox, which we'd missed the days previous. We were successful, high fives all around! We were still stopping for scenic photos, this landscape for anyone who loves rocks and geology was just sublime. We stopped for lunch in the only small town with services on our route, and spied a few birds, found a small herd of Blue Sheep again in the canyon.

We were happy to get back to our familiar Rewa Hotel, they warmed up our rooms so they were cozy and we all took long showers and had time for packing. One final dinner, and preparation to fly home via Delhi the following day. Our flight April 1 was late morning, with time in Delhi ahead of evening departures. Peg and Marcia went back to our hotel to do a major repack and met with Avijit Sarkhel of Vana Safaris, our wonderful partner in this grand adventure. We had been wildly successful at finding Big Cats and Beautiful Birds of India!



Photos: Group (Peg Abbott - PA), Asiatic Lion (Saurabh Sawant - SS), Brown-breasted Kingfisher (SS), Bengal Tiger (Diane Henderson - DH), Spotted Deer (DH), Common Leopard (DH), Asian Openbill (PA), Eurasian Hoopoe (DH), Bengal Tiger (SS), Wild Boar (PA), Wild Dhole (PA), Indian Roller (SS), Sloth Bear (DH), Tiger Reflection (Brian Newlove – BN), Changeable Hawk-Eagle (SS), Red-naped Ibis (DH), Brown Wood Owl (PA), Pied King fisher (SS), Blackbuck (PA), Jungle Cat (SS), Group GIR National Park (PA), Blackbuck (DH), Sykes Nightjar (PA), White-tailed Kite (PA), Indian Wolf (PA), Asiatic Lion Cubs (SS), Indian Wood Owl (PA), Ashy Prinia (PA), Plum-headed Parakeet (SS), Indian Scops Owl (SS), Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (PA), Snow Leopard (SS), Lunch (BN), Chukar (SS), Indian Wolves (SS), Scenic (SS), Fire-fronted Serin (SS), Group (PA), Scenic (PA), White-capped Redstart (SS), Blue Sheep (SS), Eurasian Eagle-Owl (SS), Bearded Vulture (SS), Snow Leopard (SS), Bengal Tiger (DH)