

Red Pandas, Rhinos & Tigers | Trip Report

January 10 – 27, 2020 | Written by Narca Moore-Craig



With Naturalist Journeys Guide Carlos Sanchez, local guide Avijit Sarkhel and participants Diane, Lynda, Jill, Mariel, Steve, Lynne, Harriet, Narca, and Jim.





Our Naturalist Journeys tour to India was led by Carlos Sanchez and local operator/guide Avijit Sarkhel, owner of Vana Safaris. Carlos and Avijit were both excellent—both very knowledgeable, obviously enjoyed people, and gave their utmost to make the trip successful for everyone. Carlos has a very steady presence, in addition to his vast knowledge of varied subjects and accomplished ID skills.

Avijit was truly remarkable, including in the lengths he went to, to make this trip work out. Logistics were unusually demanding. Because of political unrest in Assam—the locale for a couple of our parks—he had made backup plans, taking into account every contingency possible. In the end, the trip went as originally planned.

Fri., Jan. 10 Arrival in Kolkata | Calcutta

Arrivals went smoothly for all the group, and the Holiday Inn Kolkata was an excellent choice as our city base for the tour. It was very comfortable, had an upstairs meeting room for our initial get-together, and had a good dining area, where Indian food predominated but some Western food was available. Avijit learned quickly that most of the group had wimpy palates, and everywhere we went, he was careful to order food that was toned-down in its hot spiciness.

Two of us spent our free day resting before the tour started, adjusting to the local time. Other early-arrivers took advantage of a city tour organized by Vana Safaris and enjoyed it so much their first day that some went on a second city tour the following day—the day designated for group arrival.

Sat., Jan. 11 Fly to Jorhat | Tea plantation

On today's flight to Jorhat, we had distant views of the magnificent Himalayan range in Bhutan. After landing, we drove to the Harucharai ("Small Bird") Tea Estate, where our accommodations were in cabins on the old estate, and the home-cooked food was delicious.

Before dinner, we birded the grounds of the estate, enjoying Crimson Sunbirds working the mimosa blooms and flocks of Yellow-footed Green-Pigeons coming to roost. We had great looks at a male Red-backed Flameback (a truly grand woodpecker), and a pair of Asian Barred Owlets, beginning their nightly prow. A bonfire countered the night chill, followed by lingering conversation after dinner. Everyone began to appreciate the distinctions between different harvests of tea leaves.



Sun., Jan. 12 Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary | Afternoon in Kaziranga National Park

We rose early to drive to the gibbon sanctuary, a patch of beautiful primary forest surrounded by agricultural lands. After a packed breakfast with hot tea at the entrance of the sanctuary, we hiked a wide, mostly level trail into the forest, preceded by an armed guard, in case we encountered an offended wild elephant.

Beautiful Capped Langurs first greeted us, followed by Rhesus Macaques and two Northern Pig-tailed Macaques, most regarding us aloofly from their tree-branch resting spots. The uncooperative gibbons were laying low this morning.

Birding was quiet, punctuated by periods of swirling activity and excitement whenever we encountered a mixed foraging flock. Gray-chinned Minivets and a Black-winged Cuckooshrike joined the Common Ioras and White-throated Fantails. Here we saw Abbot's Babbler, Ruby-cheeked Sunbird, Lesser Racquet-tailed Drongo and Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrikes, for a good introduction to several bird families typical of the subcontinent.



In the afternoon, we took our first safari in Kaziranga National Park, using open-air safari vehicles. The beautiful late-afternoon light revealed vistas of a big, shallow lake, surrounded by patches of forest—and our first encounters with Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros, small Hog Deer, rare Eastern Swamp Deer, massive Sambar Deer, wild Asian Elephants, and wild Water Buffalos. As evening drew near, the glow lighting the rhinos and the wildlife-filled lake intensified.

Our accommodations in the Kaziranga area were at Infinity Lodge, in comfortable rooms laid out around a swimming pool, edged by flowers and trees.

Mon., Jan. 13 – Tues., Jan. 14 Kaziranga National Park

For two days we explored different sections of Kaziranga in our safari vehicles, encountering not only more of the magnificent mammals, but also a wide range of birdlife, including many Bar-headed Geese, renowned for their migration over the high Himalayan ranges to their breeding grounds in the north. Numerous waterfowl species included Lesser Whistling-Ducks, Ruddy Shelducks, Falcated Duck, Ferruginous Ducks and Cotton Pygmy-Goose. Rare Swamp Francolins and a Greater





Painted-Snipe joined the more abundant lapwings—Gray-headed, River, Red-wattled, and Northern—and several stork species, including the endangered Lesser and Greater Adjutants.

Quite a few raptors were in the mix, too: Steppe Eagle, Booted Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, and Pallas's Fish-Eagle. One morning two Dusky Eagle-Owls greeted us. Small birds were more difficult to identify from the vehicles, but we still enjoyed Stork-billed Kingfisher, Rose-ringed Parakeets, Cinereous Tits, Chinese and Siberian Rubythroats, Bluethroat, and various shrikes and bulbuls. One superlative Black Giant Squirrel climbed on branches over our heads.

The second afternoon we drove a short distance beyond Kaziranga to the Brahmaputra River, where we embarked in a long, low-slung boat, which carried us upstream a few minutes to a spot where Gangetic Dolphins surfaced at intervals, giving us quick glimpses of their long beaks clearing the water, before again submerging.

Another afternoon also brought a very close encounter with a One-Horned Rhino, seeming nervous at first, but then returning to its foraging. Apparently, rhino encounters support an entire local industry of fixing cars which have been damaged by their charges.

Our second morning, we set out in open jeeps for a nearby region of the national park, only to modify the plan as fog thickened. So, we first visited a local restaurant, which provided hot tea to accompany our packed breakfast. The restaurant was graced by a giant fruiting *Ficus* tree, filled with Great Hornbills, barbets of several species, and the usual bulbul contingent. After a leisurely breakfast-birding stop, the fog lifted, and we continued into the park.

A final highlight as we departed Kaziranga was a stunning pair of Red-necked Falcons, which demonstrated their cooperative hunting technique.

Wed., Jan. 15 Return to Kolkata | Travel to Sundarbans National Park

Our travel back to Kolkata was smooth. After a brief return to our Holiday Inn for lunch, we set out on the 4-hour drive to the jetty, where a boat took us into the mangroves of Sundarbans National Park. The park protects the most extensive mangrove forest in the world, located in the delta of the combined Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. En route, our very good drivers had to weave Indian-style through all manner of transport, sacred cows, and livestock using the roads—a breath-taking experience for the uninitiated. Our group rode in a convoy of several comfortable taxis. One of the drivers had grown up in Mother Teresa's orphanage, and had been her driver for 12 years.



Our base in Sundarbans was Sundarbans Jungle Camp, a collection of scattered cabins around a central dining building. Once again, food was very tasty, and the staff were friendly. Rooms were clean and simple, with hot running water.

Thurs., Jan. 16 – Fri., Jan. 17 Sundarbans National Park

Each morning began with hot tea, followed by an all-day boat trip in a two-deck boat, with bathroom, kitchen, and a rest area below the main viewing deck. Breakfasts and lunches were served on board. When the early fog lifted, we spotted bright kingfishers, waders, and egrets. Each day we walked along one of the boardwalks suspended above the mangroves and viewed critters from a tower. The Sundarbans area is famous for its Tigers, and visitors are well-protected by netting along the walkways.

The first day's tower overlooked a pond where Chital (Spotted Deer) drank, and Water Monitors swam and lounged. A pair of Brahminy Kites circled, causing the Lesser Whistling-Ducks to dive, in a striking syncopated water dance. Back on the river, a good-sized Saltwater Crocodile lounged in the sun.

Our second morning here, we began by carefully searching the banks, and were rewarded when our guides found a beautiful Jungle Cat, resting on the bank with her playful kitten. The pair seemed completely unfazed by our presence. The mother rested while the kitten explored nearby, returning to attack her twitching tail.

After a second morning of exploring, we returned to the jetty for the wild ride back to Kolkata and the luxury of the Holiday Inn. We arrived in the midst of a wedding celebration, the men dressed in pink turbans with long flowing tails, and everyone dancing at the hotel entrance.





Sat., Jan. 18 Fly to Bagdora | Drive to Tumling village near Singalila National Park

Our flight to Bagdora was again smooth. Then began the 3-hour drive to the mountain fastness of Tumling, a tiny Nepali village located right on the border of India and Nepal, and our jumping-off spot for visiting Singalila National Park. Elevation was 10,000 feet, and in early mornings, before clouds covered it, we could see not-so-distant Mt. Kachenjunga from the village. Kachenjunga is India's highest peak at 28,169 feet.

Here we stayed in a simple homestay, run by extremely welcoming hosts. Avijit had brought his own team of people to help with group logistics. He had also brought propane heaters for each of our rooms, extra blankets, and similar items to make our stay more comfortable. Hot water was available each evening for face-washing, and it would have been possible to have a sponge bath using a bucket, but we all forewent our customary showers because it was much too cold. Each evening we had hot-water bottles to warm our beds. Even with the propane heaters, we woke some mornings to ice on the inside of the windows and frozen water pipes.

Food at the homestay was excellent. Here we first tasted momos! Momos are steamed or fried dumplings with various fillings, a traditional Nepali food, very popular with our group. Just outside the dining area was a patio, perched above the surrounding garden and overlooking the distant slopes of the mountains. We were greeted each morning by Black-faced and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes, Yellow-billed Blue-Magpies, Rufous-breasted Accentors, a couple of Dark-breasted Rosefinches, and Blue-fronted Redstarts. A Himalayan Buzzard perched nearby, and one big flock of Plain Mountain Finches swirled around the hillsides. Our hostess has taken on the project of reforesting the nearby hillside with native rhododendrons; the new trees appear to be thriving.



Sun., Jan. 19 – Tues., Jan. 21 Singalila National Park

Normally we would have traveled a good road between Tumling and Singalila National Park and the Red Pandas, but that road was closed during our trip due to recent snow, so we went on a rocky, snow-free road, requiring an hour to traverse 6 kilometers—it was worth it! Our encounters with two Red Pandas were extraordinary.

The first two mornings were dedicated to Red Pandas. We lingered, birding, on the main road at the village, waiting for word to reach Avijit from the Red Panda scouts. There we enjoyed Himalayan Griffons, one stunning White-throated Redstart, and Rufous-vented Tits.

Once a panda had been located, we hopped in the jeeps (this time, *not* open-air!) and traversed the rocky road to the Red Panda reserve. There, Avijit's team helped us up and down the very steep hillsides to the mossy tree favored that day by a Red Panda. The pandas were quite aware of us, but stayed in their lofty perches, lounging, yawning, stretching, and staring at us. Because of the steepness of the hillsides, we could look directly across to each panda. Spending time in the company of Red Pandas was a huge trip highlight!

After our time with a Red Panda, each day we returned to a small village for lunch, then birded along a nearby road, with no other traffic, either foot or car. When we encountered a flock, we found some spectacular birds, but overall the forest was quiet in the afternoons. Huge oak trees towered over us. Birding highlights in the Singalila area included a Great Barbet, White-browed Fulvetta, Brown Parrotbills, Stripe-throated Yuhinas, White-tailed Nuthatch, and several gorgeous laughingthrushes, especially Striated and Spotted. Flocks could include Silver-eared Mesias, Red-billed Leiothrix, and Chestnut-tailed Minla. White-collared Blackbirds observed our progress, and Himalayan Bluetails foraged at the road's edge.

On our fourth and final night at Tumling, after dinner two of Avijit's team entertained us. One sang and played a ukelele, while the other accompanied his friend, using unique vocal percussion. Who would have thought that



we'd be listening to fine renditions of "Knock-knock-knockin' on Heaven's Door" and "Take Me Home, Country Roads", as well as a lovely local tune, at this high perch in the Himalayas?

Wed., Jan. 22 – Mon., Jan. 27 Singalila to Kolkota | Kanha Tiger Reserve Extension

We returned next to Kolkata, where we bade farewell to Diane. The next day the rest of our group flew to Raipur for the post-trip extension, then drove to our lodging near Kanha Tiger Reserve. At the Raipur airport, we knew we had arrived in north-central India, when we found Rosy and Brahminy Starlings foraging at our feet.



Unfortunately, en route to Shergarh Lodge, while stopping for tea and birding next to the restaurant, one of our group slipped and broke her ankle. After that, Avijit and a physician in our group returned to Raipur with our injured friend, where they found an excellent hospital. Doctors there stabilized our friend's ankle, and Avijit made arrangements for her to return home after a few days in the hospital. Luckily, the timing coincided with the return of our group, so that several people, including Carlos, were able to accompany her home.

Meanwhile, the rest of our group continued to Kanha, arriving in time to check into our rooms and go on an afternoon safari in the reserve. That first afternoon we found a Tigress with her half-grown cub! The cats were extraordinarily beautiful, resting beneath the trees in the late afternoon light. The moment was somewhat bittersweet, as we thought about our friends who were missing this encounter. The next day, Avijit and our stalwart doctor returned, and they, too, were able to see Tigers. In all, our group saw four Tigers, over a period of 4 days in the reserve.



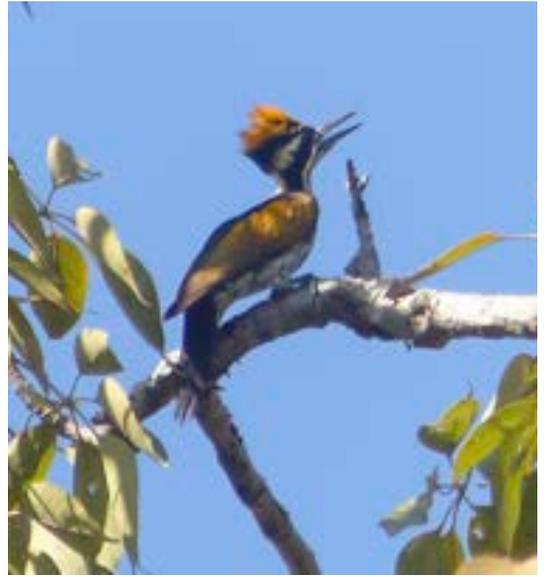
Where Tigers thrive, a substantial prey base also thrives. Kanha is home to a horde of Chital, as well as endangered Barasingha deer, Sambar, Barking Deer, rare Gaur, Indian Boars, and Blackbuck (a small and striking antelope).

Northern Plains Gray Langurs were everywhere: they raced up and down trees, groomed each other, and regarded us solemnly.

People in one of our vehicles even saw a Sloth Bear, foraging nearby without concern. In addition to Golden Jackals, we were privileged to find a pair of Indian Wild Dogs, quite a rare sighting.



Because Tigers are present, everyone had to stay in the vehicle for safety. Therefore, birding is done primarily from the vehicles. Nonetheless, we saw some fine species, including Red-naped Ibis,





Golden-fronted Leafbird, Rufous Treepies, Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, Plum-headed Parakeets, omnipresent Brown-headed Barbets, Hoopoes, and Indian Gray Hornbills. Raptors were also in abundance. At one bathroom stop (fenced to keep out Tigers), we found a wonderful Brown Hawk-Owl; small Jungle Owlets also sunned in tree cavities by the road. Back at the lodge, we were able to study the more difficult leaf warblers, distinguishing among them Greenish and Blyth's.

Before our last dinner in the hall, we gathered by the fireplace to soak in the warmth, view Steve's video of the Sloth Bear, and consider our recent adventures—a fine summing-up, before tomorrow's departures for Delhi and our flights home.

Thank you, Carlos and Avijit!

Photo Credits: All photos for this trip report were provided by Narca Moore-Craig

Red Panda; Collared Kingfisher with a fiddler crab; The homestay's patio; Indian Wild Dogs at Kanha; Yellow-footed Green Pigeon; Fog in the primary forest of Hoolongopar Gibbon Sanctuary; Our group on the trail; Capped Langur; Northern Pig-tailed Macaque; A magnificent, wild Asian Elephant in Kaziranga National Park; Bar-headed Geese; Dusky Eagle-Owl; Greater One-horned Rhino; Great Hornbill; Blue-throated Barbet in a fruiting fig tree; Cabin at Sundarbans Jungle Camp; River transport through the mangroves; A mother Jungle Cat with her kitten; Saltwater Crocodile enjoying the sun; A rare Brown-winged Kingfisher (a mangrove specialist); Wedding festivities in Kolkata; Kachenjunga, India's highest mountain; Our homestay lodging in Tumling; the village of Tumling; male Blue-throated Redstart; Red Panda in Singalila; Adult Himalayan Griffon; Red Panda; Male White-collared Thrush, cousin to our American Robin; Stripe-throated Yuhina eating fruits; Chital, or Spotted Deer; Tigress with half-grown cub, resting after play; A splendid Sambar buck; Gaur; Northern Plains Gray Langurs, mother with young; Long-tailed Shrike; White-naped Woodpecker; Eurasian Hoopoe, with Common Myna; Red-naped Ibis; Indian Roller; Crested Hawk-Eagle; Carlos and Avijit spotting birds from the tower at Kaziranga National Park.