

REPORT OF A BIRDING AND WILDLIFE TRIP TO

THE GIR FOREST AND RANN OF KUTCH

GUJARAT STATE, INDIA

6-12 March 2013

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1. Introduction

This report is of a birding and wildlife trip to the Gir Forest National Park and the Little Rann of Kutch National Park in Gujarat State, India by Robert Oates FLS and Dr Peter Spillett of the UK between the 6th and 12 March, 2013. The authors were in India for a conference and the trip was a six-day extension. Fortunately this was the best time of year to visit the Gir Forest. All arrangements for travel, guides and accommodation were made in advance through Mr Manoj Vardhan of Individual and Group Tours (IGT) of Jaipur (gitsindia@hotmail.com, www.ourindiantours.com). Robert Oates has arranged several wildlife trips to India through IGT and all have been excellent for seeing the target species and obtaining value for money.

On this trip the main target species were the Asiatic Lion, *Panthera leo persica* and the Indian race of the Asiatic Wild Ass, *Equus onager*. The Asiatic Lion has around four hundred individuals remaining in its last refuge of Gir Forest and the Indian Wild Ass has around 3,000 individuals remaining at its last refuge of Little Rann of Kutch. But we also wanted to see as many bird species as possible. On the trip we actually had excellent views of Asiatic Lion (ten seen and one heard) plus two sightings of Leopard. At the Little Rann of Kutch we saw many groups of Indian Wild Ass. At both sites and places in between we recorded a total of 14 mammal species, 4 reptile species and 143 bird species. A good source of information about both areas is the website of the Forest Department of Gujarat State - www.gujaratforest.org.

For identification purposes we used 'A Field Guide to Indian Mammals' by Vivek Menon published 2009 by A & c Black of London. For the birds we used 'A Field Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent', by Krys Kazmierczak of 2000, published by Christopher Helm in London. Bird Species listed below with a * against their name are regarded as globally threatened or near-threatened (Collar *et al.* 1994). For the reptiles we used 'A photographic guide to Snakes and other Reptiles of India' 2008 edition by Indraniel Das, New Holland Publishers (UK) Ltd.

Gir National Park & Wildlife Sanctuary comprises 1,412 sq km of deciduous forest interspersed with semi-evergreen and evergreen flora, acacia, scrub jungle, grasslands and rocky hills. Fed by perennial and seasonal rivers and streams, the sanctuary has large water bodies like the Kamleshwar Dam that are good for crocodiles and birds. The census of 2010 recorded a total of 411 Lions in the park of which 97 were males, 162 females and 152 cubs. Only the 258 square kilometre 'core area' designated as the National Park can be visited by tourists. But we saw 10 lions over three days, all close up which was not unusual for the season. The guides said that we were helped by it being the mating season, so that the animals were preoccupied with each other and did not mind showing themselves. The views were made all the better by us often being the only jeep in sight in this little visited park.

The weather during our trip was uniformly dry and sunny, which was excellent for photography. The temperature was uniformly warm and up to 35 degrees Centigrade in the shade at midday. We recommend this trip for easily seeing and photographing two of India's speciality mammal species and many birds, in a clean and comfortable part of the country with warm weather and good quality hotels at reasonable prices.

2. Wednesday 6 March

We took the 12.10 Jet Airways flight from Delhi to Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat State. At 1.35pm we arrived and were met by our IGT organised car and driver. We set off immediately to the south west for the 400 km journey to the Gir Forest National Park. The roads were in good condition and with much less traffic congestion than around Delhi. There was even a dual carriageway for much of the way. The journey was advertised as taking four and a half hours with a refreshment break half way; but that was over optimistic and the drive eventually took seven and a half hours to the hotel door. The countryside was mostly intensively farmed crop land with the common Indian roadside birds to be seen.

We arrived at the Gateway Hotel, Gir Forest, inside the National Park just after dark (www.thegatewayhotels.com). This was an excellent modern 4 star hotel at a good price. There were few guests and we were the only westerners. The whole place was cool, clean and well maintained. We had spacious rooms with balconies looking down onto the gardens and a small river, with the hills of the national park beyond. The pool was clean and useable, with gym and massage services advertised though we did not use them. The hotel staff were well trained and helpful and the chef was excellent. The food was a selection of continental and Indian dishes. Surprisingly there were no mosquitoes present here. Gujarat is a dry state and there is no alcohol for sale anywhere, even in tourist hotels. But we saw no signs prohibiting the consumption of imported alcohol in the privacy of your own room.



Photo: the pool at the Gateway Hotel with Gir Forest reserve in the distance

3. Thursday 7 March

Morning

We set off for our first jeep safari at 6.30am. IGT had booked morning and afternoon jeep safaris, with just for the two of us in the vehicle each time. The jeeps had large soft seats and the terrain was not very bumpy. The park office for collecting entry permits (booked in advance by IGT) was only ten minutes drive away. After ten minutes of formalities we drove another ten minutes to one of the entry gates to the park. By 7am we were in the park and looking for lions, which we expected to be as rare and elusive as the tigers in other national parks. After only ten minutes a lion was heard roaring but we did not actually see one until the afternoon.

The habitat in the park was mostly dry deciduous forest of low trees such as Teak and Sal. The trees were denser than in Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan and visibility through them was on average only 50 to 100 metres on either side of the jeep. There were some more open grassy areas with scattered bushes. But as in many other national parks, watering holes were provided which attracted many species and made them easier to see. Species seen during a game drive of two hours and a half are listed below.

Mammals recorded:

1. Five –Striped Ground Squirrel, *Funaambulus pennantii*
2. Hanuman Langur, *Semnopithecus entellus*
3. Jackal, *Canis aureus*
4. Sambar Deer, *Cervus unicolor*
5. Spotted Deer, *Axis axis*
6. Nilgai antelope, *Boselaphus tragocamelus*

Birds recorded:

1. Large-billed Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos*
2. Changeable Hawk Eagle (southern race), *Spizaetus cirrhatus cirrhatus*
3. Grey Nightjar, *Caprimulgus indicus*
4. Rose-ringed Parakeet, *Psittacula krameri*
5. Plum-headed Parakeet, *Psittacula cyanocephala*
6. Purple Sunbird, *Nectarinia asiatica*
7. Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, *Cyornis tickelliae*
8. Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, *Petronia xanthocollis*
9. Long-billed Pipit, *Anthus similis*
10. Common Raven, *Corvus corax*
11. White Stork, *Ciconia ciconia*
12. Common Myna, *Acridotheres tristis*
13. Indian Robin, *Saxicoloides fulicata*
14. Oriental Magpie Robin, *Copsychus saularis*
15. Collared Scops Owl, *Otus bakkamoena*
16. Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*
17. Black Ibis*, *Pseudibis papillosa*
18. Black Drongo, *Dicrurus macrocercus*

19. Common Redstart, *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*
20. Rock Pigeon, *Columbia livia*
21. Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, *Treron phoenicoptera*
22. White-throated Kingfisher, *Halcyon smyrnensis*
23. White-browed Fantail, *Rhipidura aureola*
24. Red-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus cafer*
25. Jungle Babbler, *Turdoides striatus*
26. Indian Green Peafowl,

Midday

Back at the Gateway Hotel after lunch we recorded along the small river:

27. Spot-billed Duck, *Anas poecilorhyncha*
28. Eurasian Spoonbill, *Platalea leucordia*
29. Black-headed Ibis*, *Threskiornis melanocephalus*
30. Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*
31. Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*
32. Little-ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius*
33. Glossy Ibis, *Plegadis falcinellus*
34. White-browed Wagtail, *Motacilla maderaspatensis*
35. Woolly-necked Stork, *Ciconia episcopus*
Black Ibis*,
36. Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava*
37. River Tern, *Sterna aurantia*
38. Common Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*
39. Indian Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*



Photo: the river behind the Gateway Hotel

Late afternoon

On our afternoon jeep safari we had a long close view of two male Asiatic Lions. We also stopped briefly at the Kamaleshwar Dam in the park and saw what is claimed to be the largest population of Muggers crocodiles in one place in India. We counted sixty-three crocodiles in and out the water before we had to move on. Before we left the park a Leopard ran across the track in front of the jeep in the dusk. After dark at the hotel we found a Yellow-green House Gecko.

Mammals recorded:

7. Asiatic Lion, *Panthera leo persica* (two males)
8. Common Leopard, *panther pardus* (one)
9. Wild Pig, *Sus scrofa*

Reptiles recorded:

1. Muggers crocodile, *Crocodylus paluster*
2. Yellow-green House Gecko, *Hemidactylus flaviviridis*



Photo: male Asiatic Lion, *Panthera leo persica*

Birds recorded:

40. Asiatic Brown Flycatcher, *Muscicapa dauurica*
41. Red-throated Flycatcher, *Ficedula parva*
42. Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, *Culicicapa ceylonensis*
43. Brahminy Starling, *Sturnus pagodarum*
44. House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*
45. Oriental Turtle Dove, *Streptopelia orientalis*
46. Laughing Dove, *Streptopelia senegalensis*
47. Eurasian Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*
48. Plain Prinia, *Prinia inornata*
49. Great White Pelican, *Pelicanus onocrotalus*
50. Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*
51. Darter, *Anhinga melanogaster*
52. Asian Palm Swift, *Cypsiurus balasiensis*
53. Painted Stork, *Mycteria leucocephala*
River Tern, *Sterna aurantia*



Photo: Black Ibis, a globally threatened species

Friday 8 March

Morning

On the morning jeep safari we saw one male and two female lions engaged in mating and spent most of our time watching and photographing them.



Photo: Asiatic Lion, male and female

Birds recorded:

55. Indian Nightjar, *Caprimulgus asiaticus*
56. Asian Koel, *Eudynamys scolopacea*
57. Greater Coucal, *Centropus sinensis*

Midday

By the riverside after lunch we found the following:

Mammals:

10. Bat sp. – *Pipistrelle type*
11. Grey Mongoose, *Herpestes edwardsii*

Birds recorded:

58. Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*
59. Red-rumped Swallow, *Hirundo daurica*
60. Purple Swamphen, *Porphyrio porphyrio*
61. Rufous-fronted Babbler, *Stachyris rufifrons*
62. Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, *Petronia xanthocollis*
63. Common Iora, *Aegithina tiphia*
64. Great Tit, *Parus major*

Afternoon

On the afternoon jeep safari we saw two pairs of Asiatic Lions engaged in mating behaviour and again spent most of our time watching and photographing them. On the way out of the park we had a better view of a leopard in the dusk.



Photo: Common Leopard in Gir Forest

Animals recorded:

Asiatic Lion
Common Leopard

Birds recorded:

65. Oriental Honey Buzzard, *Pernis ptilorhynchus*
66. Oriental White-eye, *Zosterops palpebrosus*
67. Booted Eagle, *Hieraaetus pennatus*
68. Small Minivet, *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
69. Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros*



Photo: Changeable Hawk Eagle, southern race

Saturday 9 March

We had our last jeep safari in Gir this morning and saw another male Lion, said by the guide to be three years old. We parked quite close and watched him for an hour or so until he strode away down a path almost brushing our vehicle as he passed by. Shortly after, we were surprised to see a pair of Four-horned Antelope with a young one. This is a rarely seen species despite their being plentiful habitat across north India. Unfortunately, the sighting was a short one but we were soon cheered by finding a rare Lesser Spotted Eagle perched high in a great tree.

Morning

Mammals recorded:

- Asiatic Lion – one male
- 12. Four-horned Antelope, *Tetracerus quadricornis*

Birds recorded:

- 70. Lesser Spotted Eagle, *Aquila pomarina*



Photo: our last lion, close-up!

Midday

After lunch at the Gateway hotel we were driven by our IGT guide northwards for the four hours to the Rann Riders Resort at Dasada in the Little Rann of Kutch. The resort is laid out in traditional Indian style with single storey rooms in pleasant gardens around a large open-sided dining and resting area. Again the food (Indian only) and service were excellent as were the staff but there were mosquitoes here. The jeeps for the safaris were more basic than those at Gir but still adequate. Again there were few other visitors around and we were alone at most of the sites visited.



Photo: a typical room at Rann Riders resort

The Wild Ass Sanctuary encompasses an area of 4,954 square kilometres of the Little Rann of Kutch and the districts of Surendranagar, Rajkot, Patan, Banaskantha and Kachchh. Fortunately the guides knew where to look in this vast area! This is the only remaining population of Indian Wild Ass in the entire world and one of the six geographical varieties or sub-species of wild asses surviving on the earth.



Photo: Indian race of the Asiatic Wild Ass, *Equus onager*

Sunday 10 March

Morning

On our first jeep safari in the morning with a local guide provided by the Resort we drove out past cultivated fields, small creeks and saline pools and then across shrubby salt-flats to quickly find the Wild Asses. The male Asses were dotted about in small groups and approachable enough to for us to get good photographs. But the females had foals and kept their distance amongst the bushes. On the salt flats we stopped at a den of Desert Fox (a race of Red Fox) to photograph a mother with her cubs. On the way back we stopped at a village pond to record several new birds.

Mammals recorded:

13. Red Fox (Desert race), *Vulpes vulpes* – one with young
14. Indian Wild Ass, *Equus onager* – small groups and singles
Hanuman Langur -1
Nilgai,

Reptiles recorded:

2. Indian Black Turtle, *Melanochelys trijuga* – 2

Birds recorded:

71. Desert Wheatear, *Oenanthe deserti*
72. Crested Lark, *Galerida cristata*
73. Pallid Harrier, *Circus macrourus* – 1 male
74. Montagu's Harrier, *Circus pygargus* - 1 female
75. Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*
76. Greater Hoopoe Lark, *Alaemon alaudipes*
77. Sand Lark, *Calandrella raytal*
House Sparrow,
78. Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*
79. Short-eared Owl, *Asio flammeus*
80. Greater Short-toed Lark, *Calandrella brachydactyla*
81. Rufous-tailed Lark, *Ammomanes phoenicurus*
82. Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach*

At the village pond were:

- Black Ibis
Painted Stork
83. Ruff, *Philomachus pugnax*
 84. Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*
 85. Great Egret, *Casmerodius albus*
Black-winged Stilt
 86. White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*
 87. Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea*
 88. Indian Pond Heron, *Ardeola grayii*

Midday

At midday we returned to Rann Riders Resort for lunch and found a juvenile Indian Garden Lizard in the garden, plus some large unidentified frogs in a pond.

Reptiles recorded:

3. Indian Garden Lizard, *Calotes versicolor* - 1



Afternoon

On the afternoon jeep safari our guide stopped first at another, larger village pond with more water-bird species and a Saker Falcon dashing over. He then drove out to a different area of salt flats, where we saw fewer Wild Asses than in the morning.

Mammals recorded: Indian Wild Ass – 2, 5, 2



Photo: Asiatic Wild Ass, *Equus onager*, at Rann of Kutch

Birds recorded:

89. Pied Kingfisher, *Ceryle rudis*
90. Cotton Pygmy-goose, *Nettapus coromandelianus*
91. Garganey, *Anas querquedula*
92. Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*
93. Common Teal, *Anas crecca*
Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava melanogrisea* (Black-headed Wagtail)
94. Spot-billed Duck, *Anas poecilorhyncha*
95. Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*
96. Pheasant-tailed Jacana, *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*
97. Saker Falcon, *Falco cherrug*
98. Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, *Pterocles exustus*
99. Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*
Wood Sandpiper
101. Swinhoes Snipe, *Gallinago megala*
102. Temminck's Stint, *Calidris temminckii*
103. White-eared Bulbul, *Pycnonotus leucotis*
104. Common Stonechat, *Saxicola torquata*
105. Variable Wheatear, *Oenanthe picata*
House Sparrow
Pallid Harrier -1 female
106. Common Babbler, *Turdoides caudatus*
107. Common Crane, *Grus grus* -15
Montague's Harrier – 1 male



Photo: male Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, *Pterocles exustus*

Monday 11 March

Morning

On our morning jeep drive the guide took us south to a large salt-water channel at Toondi. On route we stopped to see a group of the endemic Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* in roadside fields. At Toondi there we recorded around 1,500 Greater and Lesser Flamingo together with many other waders and water-birds. There were also around two hundred Dalmatian Pelican and Great White Pelican together. A large eagle sat on the ground in a bare salt pan was quite approachable in the jeep and turned out to be a Greater Spotted.



Photo: View of flamingos at Toondi



Photo: Dr Peter Spillett birding on the salt-flats

Birds recorded:

- 108. Black-shouldered Kite, *Elanus caeruleus*
Common Crane – 100+
Woolly-necked Stork
- 109. Ruddy Shelduck, *Tadorna ferruginea*
- 110. Indian Courser, *Cursorius coromandelicus* – 5
- 111. Pied Avocet, *Recurvirostra avosetta*
- 112. Greater Spotted Eagle, *Aquila clanga* – 1
Spoonbill
- 113. Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*
Common Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper
Northern Shoveler
Painted Stork
- 114. Greater Flamingo, *Phoenicopterus ruber*
- 115. Lesser Flamingo, *Phoenicopterus minor*
Grey Heron
Black-tailed Godwit
- 116. Tawny Pipit, *Anthus campestris*
Crested Lark
Teal
- 117. Eurasian Wigeon, *Anas Penelope* – 8
- 118. Gull-billed Tern, *Gelochelidon nilotica* – 5
- 119. Pallas Gull, *Larus ichthyeatus* – 1 ad, 1 imm
- 120. Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus*
- 121. Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark, *Eremopterix grisea*
- 122. Dalmatian Pelican, *Pelecanus crispus*
Great White Pelican,
- 123. Western Reef Egret, *Egretta gularis*
- 124. Common Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*
Purple Swamphen
- 125. Purple Heron, *Ardea purpurea*
- 126. Eurasian Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*
- 127. Little Stint, *Calidris minuta*



Photo: Greater Spotted Eagle, *Aquila clanga*

Midday

After a long hot morning we returned to the resort for lunch and in the grounds found two new birds with the kind help of Mr Ratan Singh, a guide with Avian Adventures:

Birds recorded:

- 128. Blyth's Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus dumetorum* - 1
- 129. Shikra, *Accipiter badius*
Purple Sunbird

Afternoon

In the afternoon the jeep safari took us first to 'Temple Lake':

Birds recorded:

- 130. Common Coot, *Fulica atra*
Wigeon
- 131. Gadwall, *Anas strepera*
- 132. Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina* – 1 male
- 133. Sarus Crane, *Grus antigone* – 1
Indian cormorant
- 134. Black Kite, *Milvus migrans*

We then went to Doomanah Village around 45 km north east of Dasada to see a small colony of tree-nesting White-rumped vultures, a rare sight since their population crash. We counted sixteen adults and two young ones in this colony.

Birds recorded:

- 135. White-rumped Vulture*, *Gyps benghalensis* – 16 adults plus 2 immatures.



Tuesday 12 March

Morning

The morning jeep drive took us to Navatalar Lake, around 15km south of the Resort. Here again there were around 1,000 Greater and Lesser Flamingo feeding together with many other birds.

Birds recorded:

- Greater Flamingo
- Lesser Flamingo
- 136. Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*
- Little Stint
- Black-winged Stilt
- Common Crane
- 137. Demoiselle Crane, *Grus virgo* – 1 adult, 1 immature
- Teal
- Northern Shoveler
- Black-tailed Godwit
- Kentish Plover – flocks
- Pied Avocet – 16
- Greater Spotted Eagle – 1
- 138. Greylag Goose, *Anser anser* – 7
- 139. Long-billed Pipit, *Anthus similis* – 2
- 140. Rosy Starling, *Sturnus roseus* – 7
- Common Sandpiper
- Ruff
- 141. Marsh Sandpiper, *Tringa stagnatilis*
- 142. Plain Martin, *Riparia paludicola*
- 143. Great Knot, *Calidris tenuirostris* – 1 with Ruff flock



Photo: Rosy Starling, *Sturnus roseus*

Afternoon

In the afternoon our IGT guide drove us the 105 Km in three hours to Ahmedabad. We were early for the flight and so spent an hour visiting the house of Mahatma Ghandi, now a museum. In the grounds there we were surprised to see another even tamer Indian Garden Lizard, *Calotes versicolor*. We then took the Indigo Airways flight at 19.50 to Delhi.

TOTALS

Total mammal species recorded = 14
Total reptile species recorded = 4
Total bird species recorded = 143