

India: Tiger and Wildlife Spectacular Photography Tour Report 2019

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by Mike Watson

The eighth in our series of India Wildlife Spectacular tours was happily another success filled with great encounters in *the* most amazing country! The itinerary has varied over the years but ever present destinations like the Taj Mahal, Chambal River, Little Rann of Kutch and Blackbuck National Park continued to wow us and fairly recent addition Tadoba again delivered the tiger encounters we had been missing at the likes of Bandhavgarh and Kanha National Parks in the past. There is no doubt that Tadoba has become our number one choice for tiger for lots of reasons both in terms of number and variety of sightings as well as the frequency of other sought after mammals like Sloth Bear, Asiatic Wild Dog and Leopard. The Taj Mahal in Uttar Pradesh, now thankfully minus scaffolding, was as ever a sight to behold and even if you have seen it before it is still awe-inspiring, we were able to explore its grounds on a sunny day as well as to catch a different aspect from the opposite bank of the River Yamuna at Metab Bagh. The Chambal Sanctuary, which protects a long stretch of northern India's last major unpolluted river was also superb as always, with great looks at Indian Skimmer as well as the rest of it special wildlife, which includes Gharial and Marsh Mugger crocodiles, Indian Softshell and Tent Turtles and a great range of birdlife including Great Thick-knee and Black-bellied Tern in particular. We even managed some extra colour, with our visit to the Bateshwar temple complex coinciding with the Hindu festival of Holi! Chambal Safari Lodge is so lovely it would be worth a visit in its own right and our hosts always make our stay there a special one. The same could be said for Desert Coursers at the Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat and although deep into a drought, we still had some great encounters, although we had to work harder than usual for them. The nighttime Striped Hyena stood out as well as some nice close encounters with the Asiatic Wild Asses. The brightly clothed Mir ladies were also very

popular among our people photographers. Then it was on to Blackbuck National Park, where the hyenas again stole the show with sightings on every jeep safari. It takes something special to put the national park's wolves and Blackbucks in the shade! Blackbuck Lodge is also worthy of a special mention, it is simply world class. Finally Tadoba Andhari National Park in the state of Maharashtra provided us with a fitting grand finale to our adventures in Incredible India! Tiger sightings almost reached 30, Sloth Bears out in six appearances, Asiatic Wild Dogs three and Leopards two but it doesn't do or stay here justice to reduce it to numbers although with so many encounters there were bound to be a few good photographic ones!

CHAMBAL SANCTUARY

After a morning visit to the ever awesome Taj Mahal, where our shutters whirred frantically we continued a little further south to the Chambal River. Most of the animals to be found in and along the banks of the Chambal River of India's Uttar Pradesh state are red-listed, owing to threats such as pollution, disturbance, habitat change and sand-mining so it is privilege to spend time in a place that represents a snapshot of an ancient ecosystem, with all its classic animals still here and flourishing. Birders are drawn here by the flashy Indian Skimmer, however, there is no more impressive beast on the Chambal than the bizarre-looking Gharial, the long-snouted fish-eating crocodile with jaws full of sharp teeth. We saw a handful of the former but a good number of the latter on our boat rides along the river. The river dolphin did not behave for us this time, showing only very briefly but otherwise we had an excellent range of photographic encounters. Ironically the Chambal has been spared from development for all these years owing to an ancient curse and also latterly as a hideout of lawless bandits in the labyrinth of ravines along its banks. More recently the cheap land and untapped resources of the Chambal have again been coveted so, despite being a protected area, its future is not completely assured.

Top of the bill was Indian Skimmer. With a declining world population estimated at only (and very woolly at that) 4,000-10,000 birds it is listed as 'vulnerable' by BirdLife International. The Chambal is the only place you can see it easily like this, from a boat at only a few metres range. Its range stretches from Pakistan in the west to an outlying population in Cambodia and it is declining owing to all the same factors mentioned above so it is another bird to watch while we still can. It is poorly studied and the actual picture may be much worse than currently estimated. All of the factors affecting this bird are only going to get worse as time goes by. We were able to beach our boats right next to a couple of pairs of skimmers in some lovely early morning light. Fab-u-lous! We didn't manage much in the way of skimming photos, afternoon boat trips are usually needed for that. Next in order of priority was Black-bellied Tern, maybe with a similar number surviving as the skimmer but classified as 'endangered' owing to a steeper decline in numbers. We were happy to get some great looks at this one too doing stuff like wing raising, although it is rather restless and is always soon off on its way again.

The Gharials were much more wary than usual and it proved quite tricky to get close to them. Maybe a combination of it being hotter in March than my previous winter visits meaning that they do not feel the need to bask in the sun quite so much and the added factor that someone has been catching them for study recently, we saw a red-tagged individual with a transmitter fitted to its neck. Ugh, horrible for photos though. Also we did not see any mature males this time but we did see lots of little ones, which bodes well for the future. Hopefully they will not be affected too badly the new bridge being built at the site of the old ferry but new infrastructure inevitably means more people. Their croc relatives the Marsh Muggers still seem to be doing well but again they were not quite as co-operative as we would have liked, no head on mouth open shot for instance. Aren't we choosy? Several giant Indian Soft-shell Turtles were hauled-out as was a good number of the much small Indian Tent Turtle.



Chambal River naturalist Bacchu has spotted something else (Image by Mike Watson)

There are also several bird species for which the Chambal Sanctuary must be just about the best place to photograph them, like Great Thick-knee, River Lapwing and Small Pratincole. They will all usually allow point blank approach from boats so all we needed to do was to fuss over backgrounds. A number of other bird species obliged for our cameras including Western Osprey, Egyptian Vulture, Long-legged Buzzard, Shikra, Indian Black Ibis (hopefully its name will finally settle with this one!), Painted Stork, Black-necked Stork, Brown Crake, Comb Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Lesser Whistling Duck and various shorebirds like River Lapwing, Temminck's Stint, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank and Black-winged Stilt not to mention the Lesser Pied and White-throated Kingfishers. A few smaller birds like Blue

Rock Thrush, White-browed Wagtail and Wire-tailed Swallow were also photographed. Even the short walk through the last village before the Sanctuary gates provided our people photographers with some great opportunities, often results from the spontaneous rather than staged are the most pleasing.

Travelling in India during Holi is so much fun, so I was delighted to discover that our 2019 tour fell on the festival dates. It is primarily designed to operate on the best dates for tiger encounters but this was an added bonus. The Hindu festival, which marks the coming of spring, is celebrated amidst a riot of colour, with powder paints sold on every street corner as believers delight in showering each other with all the colours of the rainbow. On one hand it is a spectacular opportunity for colourful photos but on the other it is also a good opportunity to ruin your camera. Happily we were able to steer a middle course and capture some colour without any technical mishaps. While staying at Chambal we had planned a visit to the nearby Bateshwar temple complex, a collection of Hindu temples dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti, some of them dating back to the 8th Century! Lucky for us our visit coincided with Holi offering the chance to capture something different to our usual visits.

Before we had even got anywhere near the River Yamuna on whose banks the temples are situated we came across a large gathering in a roadside field. A large crowd had formed a circle, in which wrestling bouts were taking place. This was not quite what we had planned but was an opportunity too good to miss as we were ushered through the crowds to ring side seats (well sitting on the ground actually). The bouts were taking place on a potato field, complete with stones as well as the odd un-harvested potato, these lads were obviously very tough! During the time we hung around the lighter weight bouts were taking places, between lads in their late teens. We were told the heavyweights would be wrestling later. Nevertheless some of them looked quite handy and fearsome, we witnessed one young lad get battered very quickly by a very skillful opponent and another very imposing character, who had just won his bout was paraded around and around the ring many times by the village elders who apparently arranged and refereed the competition. We were struck how friendly everyone was although there was not a single lady to be seen, apart from our own Mojgan and Linda. Fortunately Martin resisted the temptation to take part! Although we were quite late in the day, the temple complex itself was still thronged with worshipers, some of whom had apparently come from as far away as the state of Bihar. Again we were given such a friendly welcome as well as some less welcome free paint. The festival fell on the day of Shiva, the destroyer and therefore it was his temples that were the ones occupied today. We also visited the Bateshwar Nath temple, built in 1646, which is festooned with bells, gifts to the deity, one of which was donated by a former prime minister. Several folks offered their services to show us around and a number of eager children were having fun. Whilst a religious festival, Holi seems to be all about having fun, no matter what age you are.



Al fresco lunch at Chambal Safari Lodge (Image by Mike Watson)

Chambal Safari Lodge's (CSL) boatmen on the river have become expert in positioning over the years, they have improved dramatically since my first visit here in 2011 and they know how to approach subjects with or against the light, which makes my life much easier compared to say the lottery of tiger reserve jeep safari drivers (with one notable exception but more of that later). In fact everything about CSL is simply wonderful. I arrived this time fresh from the operating table in Agra so I had certainly felt better and our hosts could not have done more to help me feel comfortable. Actually just their amazing food, cooked from fresh market produce would have been enough but the ambience of the lodge and its grounds always makes me want to spend more time here. I am always in such hurry that there is never enough time to enjoy something like simply sitting down and reading a book in the shade, as Nilgai trot past through the pretty lodge grounds. If I had to disappear completely this would be a great place to do it! An oasis in the hustle and bustle that is northern India. Big thanks to our hosts Ram Pratap Singh and Anu Dhillon. We will be back! We returned to Delhi making a short stop at Metab Bagh on the opposite bank of the Yamuna, adding a different aspect to our collection of Taj Mahal photos.

LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH

It is always a pleasure to return to this little corner of India, around three hours west of the capital of Gujarat, Ahmedabad. Driving west the fields become visibly more arid and trees and bushes become fewer, even despite the influence of the Sardar Sarovar irrigation canal, which brings water here all the way from the far eastern border of the state. Our destination here is the Little Rann of Kutch (or ' *Kachchh*')

and its Wild Ass Sanctuary, an almost 5,000sq km reserve established in 1972 for the protection of its namesake. Flooded by the monsoon rains it dries out to a vast parched lakebed for the rest of the year, with occasional small island patches of higher ground. As everywhere in India, there is tremendous competition for land use between man and wildlife. For instance salt production is not legal on the Little Rann, yet this area produces around 75% of India's table salt. The salt flats are also grazed by zillions of livestock from the surrounding villages. A warm welcome awaited us at Desert Coursers Lodge in Zainabad, in more ways than one. The temperature in March is already starting to climb towards 40 degrees Celsius and while the nights are still pleasantly cool, the days are now very hot and dusty. There were still a few lingering winter visitors, like the small flocks of Rosy Starlings, which hang around the villages on the edge of the Rann well into March but the likes of Pallid Scops Owl and Houbara Bustard, which draw the birders to this area had gone back north some weeks previously.



Quiet Desert Coursers at the Little Rann of Kutch is a lovely place to stay (Image by Mike Watson)

We were hoping for some interesting photos of the Asiatic Wild Asses, for which the area is famous but the ongoing drought meant that their numbers had decreased, in fact there was barely a blade of grass left on the Rann itself. Many asses were feeding on farmers' fields instead where they are less than welcome. We did manage some nice evening light on one occasion with a small group of asses on the salt flats but ultimately we spent a great deal of our time searching for hyenas. Striped Hyena has become something of speciality of the Little Rann recently, as the forest guards and local naturalists have spent time tracking them down to their dens, in the vicinity of which they can be seen more reliably. It seems that it is an ill wind, when other animals are dying off the hyenas enjoy an upturn and it is still months until the monsoon rains arrive.



Martin and John aboard IndiGo bound for Ahmedabad (Image by Mike Watson)

Striped Hyenas are usually strictly nocturnal and as well as being quite uncommon and declining (they are listed as 'near threatened' by IUCN), they are consequently difficult to catch up with, despite their very wide distribution from North and East Africa to the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia and India. Striped is also the smallest true hyena and lacks the special skull adaptations of its larger Brown and Spotted cousins. Attacks on humans are very rare and it is usually a shy and retiring creature, whose presence is only betrayed by a trail of bones to its den. We were very keen to repeat the success of our previous Wild Images group and although sadly the den they visited was no longer occupied our hosts knew of at least three others active at the time of our latest visit in March 2019. With spotters posted near the various dens we were hopeful of an encounter. To cut a long story short we spent a lot of time hanging around in the mornings and evenings in the hope of some action and until our last evening all we had to show for our efforts was a brief view of an animal trotting through the mesquite scrub and away. Finally, just after dusk, one of our guys got lucky and found a lovely relaxed hyena not far away from a denning site. We were able to watch it laying on the jeep track ahead of us for several minutes, quite unconcerned before it got up and walked slowly away into the dark forest of thorns.

We saw a lot of other wildlife on the night drives in search of hyenas but it was much harder going than usual owing to the drought. The air is usually filled with moths and other insects in the torchlight for instance but in most of the Rann there was hardly anything. Such was the lack of grass. Near a small lake there was some vegetation and this area proved more productive with sightings of the Little Rann's avian speciality Sykes's Nightjar, as well as Short-eared Owl, Jungle Cat and (briefly) Desert Cat. We didn't manage to get the latter in the frame unfortunately as it dived from one patch of thick thorns to another. Our daytime excursions were not very productive after early morning but there was a couple of active Desert (= Red) Fox dens, one of which was particularly obliging despite the outrageous close approach of one of the other operator's vehicles. We noticed a few harriers still passing through, a couple of male Pallids, one male Montagu's and an unidentified ringtail but generally birds were few compared to my midwinter visits. The portrait photographers among us had a great time snapping the local Mir ladies, who were very happy to oblige with a photo shoot, they've clearly done this kind of

thing once or twice before. They are a branch of a sect that has its origins in Kashmir and their ultra gaudy traditional clothing and jewellery certainly brightened up our images! All too soon it was time to leave our wonderful hosts at Desert Coursers, Dhanraj and Sylvie and make our way to our next destination, Blackbuck National Park at Velavadar.

BLACKBUCK NATIONAL PARK

Although the main attraction of Velavadar's Blackbuck National Park is in its name we were presented with an opportunity too good to miss on the recent Wild Images India tour. A mother Striped Hyena had taken over a fox's den right next to one of the main rides in the park and was showing daily as she left it each morning. Her three pups were also to be seen every day, as they explored in the sea of grass in the vicinity of the end in the late afternoon. You could be forgiven for thinking our tour had turned into a *'HyenaQuest'* but some of our folks had not been set for flash at the Little Rann and were desperately disappointed to have missed that good opportunity. So it was a massive relief to all of us to be given a second chance (well, third, fourth, fifth and sixth chances too actually) to get the hyena images we wanted. To put this into perspective, I had visited Blackbuck National Park on seven previous occasions and had seen the hyena only once there before. They are usually nocturnal and more secretive but when they have large pups they seem to go a little bit crazy.

Each morning mum could be seen lounging around the den as soon as the park opened. Maybe she did not fit into the den anymore in addition to her three fully grown pups? Once the sun had risen she would then make her way off, each time crossing the jeep track just in front of our vehicles and then away into the grassland towards the Bhavnagar road. This show usually offered a superb opportunity to photograph her against a natural background and also against the light as well as with it, *fab-u-lous*! The pups were a little more nervous and would bolt back to the den before we got anywhere near them. In short we saw the hyenas on every single jeep safari, even when we had decided we were done with them and hoped to concentrate on Blackbuck, the main reason for our visit, mum put on her best show of all. She stupidly trotted out towards a pack of five wolves feeding on a Blackbuck kill, almost as if she hadn't seen them? The wolves would only tolerate so much and two of them launched at her, the leader pursuing her almost back to her den. I think she was saved by the wolves' reluctance to come too close to our vehicles? Ross, Mojgan and Linda all got some great images of the chase, albeit a little small in the frame. Already happy with my hyenas, I had decided to go short lenses today to capture something different! Oops!



Ross lines up another hyena shot at Blackbuck National Park (Image by Mike Watson)

Striped Hyenas cannot be expected like this every time at Velavadar, however, with the massive increase in Blackbuck numbers to over 4,000, the wolves are on the increase too and the hyenas clean up after them. So there is plenty of food around at the moment. In fact the wolves cannot keep up! A Leopard was seen recently within 2km of Blackbuck Lodge and of course the lions are not far away. I wonder how long it will be before another apex predator becomes established here? We did see a lot of Blackbuck too. Better remember to take some photos of them! However, we spent the best times of day with the hyenas figuring we could catch up with blackbuck when we could fit them in. Well things don't always work out like that do they? We saw very little fighting amongst the males, most of them were simply grazing the whole time or resting in the heat. The main rut seemed to be over. We didn't see much pronking either, just gentle movements among the herds, except from a distance when the wolves showed an interest. Evening against the light shots were about the best we managed but still nice nevertheless. We can always go back for Blackbuck anytime but the hyena opportunity may not happen again for us.

The winter harriers had all left early and we only saw a couple of stragglers, the grassland was drier than usual and there were few grasshoppers now. A Red-necked Falcon dashed past one morning and we also saw several Black-winged Kites, a Bay-backed Shrike and there were Great White Pelicans and Common Cranes in the area daily. One of the wetlands still had a little water and held avocets, Greater Flamingos, spoonbills and a few Black-tailed Godwits but the amount of water was shockingly low, around 10% of what to ought to be as the drought in Gujarat continues. The grassland was covered with Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks and Crested Larks, however, there was nothing else of note. Other mammals included Nilgai, Indian Fox, Indian Hare and Jungle Cat on several occasions, including in the lodge grounds.



Mojgan enjoys a short break from hyena photography at Blackbuck National Park (Image by Mike Watson)

It was also great to see Wild Images photographer Kalpesh (KC) Jain, who had made the 800km round trip from Surat to say hi! Wow! Thankfully he was also rewarded with some nice hyena images too. Thanks also to Blackbuck Lodge owner Mickey Desai for creating such a wonderful place to stay here. One of the best (if not the best) lodges in India, BBL has featured in all sorts of magazines like Condé Nast Traveller and has won more awards than you can wave a stick at. There is nothing like taking a shower under the stars in your own private bungalow courtyard! The food is simply stunning and as for the accommodation I keep thinking this is way too good for me. We stay at some terrific places on our India tour, all with their own unique features that it is impossible to choose one, I love them all.

TADOBA ANDHARI NATIONAL PARK

When the title of your photo tour includes the word 'tiger' there is a certain expectation that it will produce some good encounters. No need to worry at Tadoba this time, we were right at the optimum time for sightings when the park is dry and all animals congregate around water sources. In total we had almost 30 tiger sightings from 16 jeep safaris, some of which were photogenic. The other wildlife here is pretty special too with a couple of sightings of the very difficult-to-see Chowsingha (or Four-horned Antelope), two Leopard, six Sloth Bear and three Asiatic Wild Dog encounters of particular note. The lodge we stayed at is also very good. It is located right next to the core zone of the park and their CCTV cameras picked up nocturnal visits by Sloth Bear, Leopard, Jungle Cat and (on our last morning) Caracal during our stay. I should mention that you can use your own trail cams here, probably the best place in India to do so!

The first part of Tadoba National Park was established in 1955 and covers 1,727 sq km, of which just over 600 sq km is dry deciduous teak forest, with a dense bamboo understory, much favoured by tigers. The number of tigers in the park is now just over 80 and some very active management has no doubt boosted these numbers, particularly the provision of artificial water sources throughout, with solar-powered pumps. A recent development has also handed the responsibility (and revenues earned) for the buffer zones to the surrounding villages of Dewada and Agazari and less disturbance by cattle grazing and cutting of timber is now being seen. Consequently tiger and Sloth Bear sightings in these zones particularly have increased and Tadoba's buffer zones are now widely regarded as the best in Indian parks. However, Tadoba is not without its problems. Within a week of our return a young tigress was found dead in a snare within 200m of the Khutwanda Gate next to our lodge. Some hapless local deer poachers claim to have caught a tiger by mistake. The demand for tiger parts in Chinese medicine remains high and more recently tiger tourism itself has come in for strong criticism with a study into the levels of hormones related to stress found in tiger faeces linking findings to harassment by tourists in Kanha National Park at least.

We started our jeep safaris with an immediate success from Dewada gate, with a brief sighting of big male Khali. We saw him again next morning but it was not until our third ride that young tigress miss 'W' crossed the road behind one of our jeeps affording some nice portraits for some in jeep number two as she emerged from the forest behind us. As always, the presence of a tiger is betrayed by the alarm calls of Spotted Deer (not always 100% reliable) and particularly Sambar (very reliable!). They see the tiger long before we do, especially if it is walking away from the jeep tracks. The challenge is to then guess where it will cross, or maybe even walk along the track itself for a while and this is where out driver's expertise comes into play. We were lucky to have Lahu Raut for many of our core zone safaris. Lahu has spent almost 30 years working at Tadoba and knows the tigers and their usual behaviour intimately. He is an expert at answering the *'should I stay or should I go?'* question and can often predict where and when the tiger will show up next, often on its usual rounds. This worked very well with *Maya*, the well-known tigress of the core zone, who was often to be found with her two well-grown cubs somewhere in the vicinity of the Pandarpauni waterholes. She is seven years old and this is her third litter but the reason she is so popular is her confidence around the safari vehicles. Lahu has seen her on a more or less daily basis for almost her whole life and has a good idea of where she usually goes next. We were lucky that she had gone walkabout during March and had just showed up back at Pandarpauni a couple of days into our stay and she and her cubs accounted for many of our sightings.

Miss 'W' got us off the mark but being very demanding this was just the first level of tiger photography, the most common encounters being brief track crossings and a two-eyed portrait if you are lucky. What we really wanted was action, interaction and interesting

lighting/backgrounds i.e. not just jeep tracks. Our next encounter was with another well-known tigress, *Choti Madhuri* of the Agazari buffer zone. Her name means 'Little Sweet' after her mother *Madhuri* but she is anything but sweet. She is a big nasty tigress who hunts Gaurs and charges jeeps that annoy her. We saw her one evening in the long grass of the wetland that marks the boundary of her territory, chasing Spotted Deer. She then walked down the jeep track towards us, veering off at the last moment and disappearing into the forest. Quite a nice tiger-in-the-landscape shot but the light was fading and only one of our jeeps had her head-on. So there was still plenty of room for improvement.



Beautiful Maya saunters past her crowds of admirers (Image by Mike Watson)

Our biggest breakthrough came on a cloudy and very muggy afternoon. *Maya* and her cubs had just shown up at Pandarpauni after almost a month of absence and we simply drove there to find not just her but her mate, the dominant male of the core zone, *Matkasur*, half-submerged in a close waterhole. *Maya's* cubs, particularly the male, are very curious and the boy cub even walked up to his father and clipped him over the head, claws out, in play. Dad glared in disapproval but did nothing else. Male tigers will try to kill a female's cubs other than their own in order to make with her so maybe dad was hanging around to ensure that his own kids survived? It is quite unusual to see this behaviour. He was soon mating with another female after our visit though! We enjoyed some super close views of the cubs in particular as well as Maya herself in sunlight diffused by cloud doing a variety of things. All we had to do was to shoot over another jeep and avoid some irritating bits of fencing and grass stems.

On another stinking hot afternoon, temperatures reached more than 42 Celsius on several days, *Maya* and her family were slumbering around Pandarpauni. Time ticked away and many jeeps came and went. I asked Lahu what he thought we should do and the answer was an emphatic *'stay put'*. Painted Francolin coming to drink was an interesting distraction and sure enough, eventually the cubs swam across the waterhole to say hi to their dad before they joined their mum and started stalking the animals wandering towards the waterhole, like Gaur, Spotted Deer, Sambar and Wild Boar, all of which take a risk to come here. At least the landscape at Pandarapuni no. #1 is more wide-open so there is less danger of an ambush than at the other more enclosed waterholes nearby. The boy cub harassed his sister a bit, just like domestic cats do before they took an interest in the potential prey. Neither cub has killed anything yet but no doubt that will happen quite soon.

We were well pleased with our best session at Tadoba by far and all in nice late afternoon diffused sunlight too. Of course you can never take too many tiger photos and there is always something new to hope for. We saw *Maya* and her family a couple of more times and also a transmitter-collared subadult male, *Chota Makta*, who spends almost all his time asleep in Pandarpauni no. #2 waterhole. I imagine he is going to have a hard time when *Maya's* boy cub grows up a little more as he looks destined to be the next big boss of the core zone. We also caught up with both *Choti Madhuri* and *Miss 'W'* again during enforced visits to their buffer zones. *Choti Madhuri* was out hunting on the Agazari zone wetland in the afternoon, she must have been very hungry! Spotted Deer scattered everywhere but she did not managed to catch one. She the started to patrol her forest territory and we caught up with her a couple of times as she crossed the jeep tracks, once quite a nice portrait, which shows what a big tigress she is! It was on this occasion that she was hunting Gaurs. The stupid big wild cows were going crazy, wailing like maniacs and thrashing around in the bamboo, presumably as a show of strength. One of our guides thought she had attacked one of them, injuring its leg with the intention of finishing it off later. I never heard of this behaviour from a tiger before. More like a Komodo Dragon's strategy!

My last A grade tiger encounter was with *Miss 'W'* from Dewada gate. We had been cursing this zone as time went by, sightings were fleeting, we spent almost all of the time zooming around in a cloud of dust (sorry I forgot to mention the dust yet!) seeing very little indeed until towards the end of the morning session we were on our way out and a gypsy coming in the other direction said they had ben watching a tiger at the waterhole for 1.5 hours! Feeling somewhat *'Johnny-Come-Latelies'* we rolled up and there she was, still sleeping on a bank of the large dried up waterhole. Again jeeps came and went and we stayed put using all of our safari time up on her. Yet another case of two of my photographic mottos '*Wait until something happens'* and *'Don't go off and do something else badly*'. When the jeeps were down to three she got up, stretched and yawned (which often gives the impression of a snarl) and walked to the water. She was very hesitant but tasted it and eventually sat down in the water on the edge of the small reed-fringed pool. What a lovely background for a

portrait, even with a little reflection too. *Fab-u-lous!* As I was saying, Dewada Zone is clearly the best!

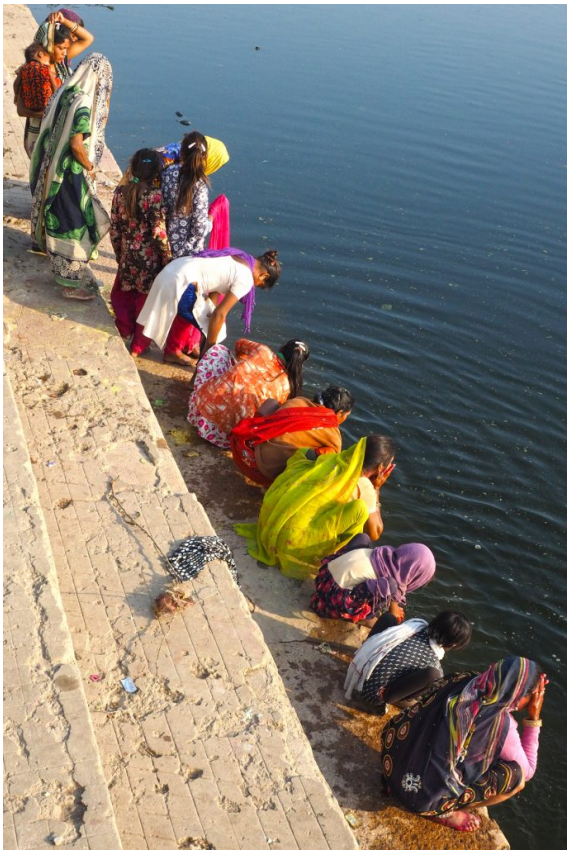
There were plenty of other wildlife highlights during our time at Tadoba. In fact before we even started our first safari a Sloth Bear ran across the road in front of our jeep on the way to Dewada Zone. We had a total of six sightings of Sloth Bear but all were typically brief. Another example of 'default settings for action' as you go around. I do not always follow my own advice unfortunately and had the previous evening's settings in place when a mother Sloth Bear with baby riding on her back appeared in front of our jeep. Damn it! I fired away on the wrong settings but was later pleased to discover that while mostly caught between a convincing motion blur and the correct shutter speed, even at a poor 1/400 sec I had captured some of the action while panning. We also had three encounters with Asiatic Wild Dogs (one of which was quite good) and two Leopards, both of which frustrated a little. If only I had denied the request for a landscape photo of that sodding ghost tree we would have had the leopard in a tree instead! Ah well, you cannot be omnipresent!

Other photographic highlights at Tadoba included the 'vulnerable'-listed Chowsingha (or Four-horned Antelope), a very difficult animal to catch up with India these days as well as Nilgai (to Martin's delight!), endless Spotted Deer, Sambar, Wild Boar, back-lit langur monkeys and several birds, notably Crested Honey Buzzard and Crested Serpent Eagle. However, it was the tigers that we had come here for and they did not disappoint. Thanks to our wonderful hosts at Tiger Trails: Naturalists Khyati and Yash; Kanchen who makes everything go so smoothly and finally Lahu, our driver, with whom it is a real privilege to go on safari! Finally thanks are due to our excellent group, who took the challenges of traveling in India in their stride and had a lot of fun not to mention took some great images! We will be back in India in 2021. See you then?



Jungle Cats really are magnificent creatures, look at those ear tufts! (Image by Linda Broome)





Ladies bathing on the banks of the sacred Yamuna at Bateshwar (Image by Linda Broome)



This Massive bull Gaur at Tadoba had a nasty facial injury (Image by Linda Broome)



A pair of Asiatic Wild Dogs (or Dholes) at Tadoba (image by Linda Broome)



A Desert Fox, one of the stars of the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Linda Broome)



Blackbuck Crossing at Velavadar (Image by Linda Broome)



There can be few animals on the planet that cause as much excitement as a Tiger, seen here at Tadoba (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A Tiger emerges from the forest at Tadoba (Image by Ross Forsyth)



The classic view of the Taj Mahal, no visit to India would be complete without it! (Image by Martin Robinson)



A little Indian Grey Mongoose takes a break from eating a dead goat at Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A Jungle Cat in full flight at Velavadar, look at those Caracal-like ears! (Image by Martin Robinson)



A Leopard melts away into the long grass at Tadoba (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A Mir girl at Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A Mir lady at Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Martin Robinson)



A baby Sloth Bear hitches a ride on its mum at Tadoba (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A spotlit Striped Hyena calmly wonders what all the fuss is about before it walks off into the shadows (Image by Ross Forsyth)



The provision of water sources is very important to the wildlife of India's National parks, like at Blackbuck National Park where this Striped Hyena was photographed (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A Cattle Egret (Image by Martin Robinson)



Backlit Hanuman Langurs make excellent subjects (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A tiny baby langur clings to its mum (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A pair of beautiful Green Bee Eaters (Image by Martin Robinson)



A young girl lovingly combs her goat's hair near the Chambal River (Image by Ross Forsyth)



The bizarre fish-eating Gharial is a highlight of the Chambal River (Image by Ross Forsyth)



Gaurs (known locally as Bisons) fight it out head to head at Tadoba (Image by Martin Robinson)



A sweet little Desert Fox waits patiently for its mum at Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Ross Forsyth)



A Desert Fox and her cub at Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Martin Robinson)



A Desert Fox cub runs for cover at Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Martin Robinson)



A Crested Serpent Eagle take-off at Tadoba (Image by Ross Forsyth)



Maya's handsome boy cub takes a rest at Pandarpauni in Tadoba (Image by Mike Watson)



There are few more impressive sights than a Tiger in full flight (Image by Mike Watson)



Maya's boy cub likes nothing better than to irritate his little sister (Image by Mike Watson)



'Miss W' wakes up and stretches before her bath (Image by Mike Watson)



Gorgeous 'Miss W' takes a bath in Tadoba's Junona Beat (Image by Mike Watson)



Asiatic Wild Ass is usually the main reason we visit the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Ross Forsyth)



This pair of Asiatic Wild Dogs at Tadoba is the last of a pack that was once eleven strong, the rest fell prey to Tigers! (Image by Ross Forsyth)



The River Yamuna flows past Bateshwar Temple Complex (Image by Martin Robinson)



With all the other special wildlife on show the common but no less spectacular Black Drongo often does not get the attention it deserves (Image by Martin Robinson)



The male Blackbuck is surely the most spectacular of all the antelopes? (Image by Martin Robinson)



Maya's boy cub is 15 months old now and approaching full size, hopefully he will make it to adulthood (Image by Mike Watson)



Supertigress Maya and son enter the stage at Tadoba (Image by Mike Watson)



Leopard at Tadoba - we'll take partly obscured (Image by Mike Watson)



'Slow down mummy' said baby Sloth Bear (Image by Mike Watson)



A Savannah Nightjar relies on its camouflage to hide in plain sight at Tadoba (Image by Mike Watson)



The sodding Ghost Tree that cost us a Leopard in a tree shot (Image by Mike Watson)



Ghost Tree is one of the most attractive of India's many trees (Image by Mike Watson)



The sun descends into a thick sea of dust at the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)



A Gaur by the Flame of the Forest keeps a wary eye on the tigers in Tadoba (Image by Mike Watson)



Everyone joins in the celebrations at Holi (Image by Mike Watson)



The majestic Nilgai (or Blue Bull) is an antelope that looks like it has been made from spare parts of other animals (Image by Mike Watson)



Beautiful Maya saunters past her crowds of admirers (Image by Mike Watson)



Maya and her boy cub at the famous Pandarpauni waterhole at Tadoba (Image by Mike Watson)



Chota Makta, the big bad boss of Tadoba's core area (Image by Mike Watson)



Choti Madhuri ('Little Sweet') doesn't live up to her name, she's a big nasty tigress that hunts gaurs and charges jeeps that annoy her (Image by Mike Watson)



Mir girl at the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)



Mir girl at the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)



Mir girls at the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)



Choti Madhuri on the prowl, watch put Gaurs! (Image by Mike Watson)



Chowsignha (or Four-horned Antelope – three and a half in this case) is a shy and retiring (Image by Mike Watson)



Sightings of Striped Hyena on every one of our jeep rides was the highlight of Blackbuck National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



Striped Hyena, Blackbuck National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



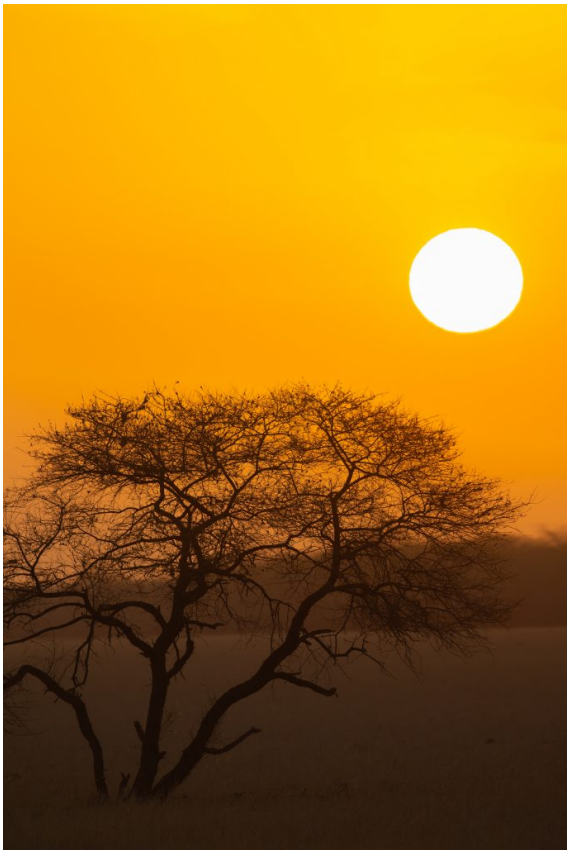
An adult female Crested Honey Buzzard, a common sight in Tadoba (Image by Mike Watson)



This mother Striped Hyena was very confident and afforded some great views every morning (Image by Mike Watson)



The Grey Wolves of Velavadar are on the increase and are very easy to see these days (Image by Mike Watson)



Blackbuck National Park sunrise, Velavadar (Image by Mike Watson)



Holi potato field wrestling bout in progress near Bateshwar (Image by Mike Watson)



The awe-inspiring Taj Mahal, seen here from across the River Yamuna at Metab Bagh (Image by Mike Watson)



Gharial, the long-snouted fish-eating crocodile has one of its last strongholds on the Chambal River (Image by Mike Watson)



Paint-covered Holi worshipper at Bateshwar (Image by Mike Watson)



Asiatic Wild Ass (or Onager) at the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)



Bateshwar Temple scene (Image by Mike Watson)



Sadhu (Holy man) at (Image by Mike Watson)



By March Short-eared Owls are nocturnal hunters at the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)





This Spotted Owlet lived in the trees around our chalet's at Desert Coursers (Image by Mike Watson)



Bateshwar Temple bells (Image by Mike Watson)



Jungle Cats prowl at night in the Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)



A quiet courtyard at Chambal Safari Lodge (Image by Mike Watson)



A (Desert Red) Fox at Little Rann of Kutch (Image by Mike Watson)



It must be hard going for the (Desert) red Foxes of the Little Rann with little food about by March (Image by Mike Watson)



Striped Hyena was high on our wish list at the Little Rann and after much effort we enjoyed a good night time encounter (Image by Mike Watson)



This fearsome looking wrestler had just won his bout (Image by Mike Watson)



Small Pratincoles can be seen in large numbers on the tiny rocky islets in the Chambal River (Image by Mike Watson)



Indian Tent Turtle is very common at the Chambal River (Image by Mike Watson)



Indian Skimmer has a lazy slow motion flight action (Image by Mike Watson)



Chambal River is probably the best place to see the amazing Indian Skimmer (Image by Mike Watson)



The endangered Black-bellied Tern can still be seen at Chambal River (Image by Mike Watson)



Chambal River naturalist Bacchu has spotted something else (Image by Mike Watson)



This fearsome looking wrestler had just won his bout (Image by Mike Watson)



Gharial, the long-snouted fish-eating crocodile has one of its last strongholds on the Chambal River (Image by Mike Watson)



The massive Indian Softshell Turtle is still common along the Chambal River (Image by Mike Watson)



The bizarre-looking Great Thick-knee is another declining inhabitant of India's large slow-flowing rivers (Image by Mike Watson)