

Tour Report

India – India's Big Cats

19 February – 13 March 2023

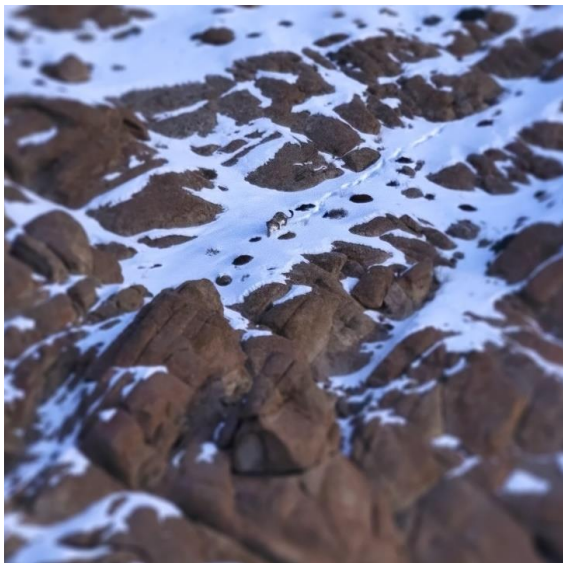
Asiatic lion



Tiger



Snow leopard



Melanistic leopard



Compiled by Swanand Deshpande

Day 1: Sunday 20 February 2023

Our flight from the UK to Delhi was on time. We were greeted by our tour leader Swan, and headed straight to the Pullman Hotel. Swan helped us with a swift check-in to our comfortable and spacious rooms.

We had a leisurely first day to ensure we were all well rested before flying to high altitudes. In the evening we regrouped for a cup of coffee and to get to know each other. We discussed the trip itinerary, our various interests in wildlife, and our past experiences from the wild.

Day 2: Tuesday 21 February 2023

Before our morning flight, we decided to divide our luggage in half, taking only things which would be necessary for freezing Ladakh, and leaving the rest of our luggage at the Pullman. This helped in shedding weight.

After a pleasant stay in Delhi, we were all set to fly to the Himalayas. Checking in to the Delhi airport went like clockwork.

Pretty soon, we started to see a change in the landscape - we began to see mountain tops. Before we knew it, we were seeing the trans-Himalayas with their snow-clad peaks. The mountains were blanketed with snow, and looked stunning against the deep blue skies. Swan had already briefed us to keep our cameras ready in our handbags to capture these grand landscapes, so we got some great pictures.

On arrival, we were glad to receive a warm welcome from the staff at Hotel Grand Dragon (the temperature was now $-10^{\circ}C$). We spent the entire day resting and getting our bodies acclimatised to the environment.

Day 3: Wednesday 22 February 2023

After a cosy night in our comfortable rooms, it was time to explore the city of Leh. Following a cup of saffron tea, we drove to Sindhu Ghat - a beautiful river bank which is home to the elusive and rare ibisbill. We managed to spot three individuals there, but the birds took off before we could take any pictures. We had a very healthy birding session, conducted by tour leader Swan, in which we saw white-capped redstart, common merganser, mallard duck, and a few accentors. Satisfied with our efforts, we returned to the hotel.

Post lunch, we set out to visit the Thikse Monastery, one of the largest Tibetan-style Buddhist monasteries in India, and the largest in Central Ladakh. We were accompanied by a wonderful cultural guide Lobzang. His passion for Buddhism radiated through his story-telling and the immense knowledge that he had on his subject. After this, we drove to the ancient palace of Leh, enjoying breathtaking city views from the 8th floor of the palace.

Day 4: Thursday 23 February 2023

It was time for us to leave the comfort of Grand Dragon and venture out into snow leopard territory. En route to Ulley, we stopped to photograph the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar Rivers. The waters were beautiful shades of turquoise blue.

We started to see changes in the terrain as soon as we left Leh. About 50 kilometres before Ulley, we stopped to explore an 11th century established monastery called Likir before continuing our journey. On the way, we saw urials (a kind of wild sheep), and many birds, including lammergeiers, choughs, and chukars. After reaching Ulley, we had some lunch and rested before heading out to the scouting areas inside the Snow Leopard Lodge. Heading towards scouting area-level 1, the first thing that we saw was a Tibetan ibex. This animal, albeit commonly seen in Ulley, is not often found in other regions of Ladakh, so that was

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a great start.

Day 5: Friday 24 February 2023

Early in the morning, Norbu and his team went out to different valleys in search of the snow leopard. While they tracked the elusive cat, we were at the lodge looking at ibex, golden eagle and snowcock.

Soon we got a message that one of the trackers had spotted a snow leopard. We had been eagerly anticipating this news, so we were ready to go. Jumping inside vehicles, we made our way to the area where the snow leopard had been sighted. Norbu then revealed that it was a mating pair.

Unfortunately, the lead on the snow leopards went cold, no pun intended, and by the time we arrived they were nowhere to be seen.. After some more scouting, we decided to stop for lunch in the village of Saspochey. It was snowing.

Day 6: Saturday 25 February 2023

On Saturday, our target was to see snow leopards and Tibetan wolves. We saw various wildlife species throughout the day, capturing some excellent shots of male Tibetan ibex, however the snow leopards continued to elude us for now.

Day 7: Sunday 26 February 2023

Waking up to the call of Himalayan snowcocks, we headed out to track Tibetan wolves. which had already been seen by one of the spotters. We had a distant sighting of two individuals, and also saw a pair of red foxes.

During the last hour, one of the spotters saw two snow leopards, presumably the same snow leopards that we were trying to track previously. However, by this time it was nearly dark and the leopards were far away, so we headed back to the resort.

Day 8: Monday 27 February 2023

Golden eagles soared in the skies on another lovely sunny morning. We sipped some tea, while listening to the news that two snow leopards might be making their way towards Ulley. Sure enough, we finally saw the rare cat just after lunchtime. We caught a glimpse of the snow leopard's silhouette on the skyline, then tracked it through the spotting scopes as it walked on the ridge. We assumed it was making its way towards the ibex down at the base of the hill. Eventually, time ran out for us and Norbu called it a day. A truly remarkable moment indeed.

Day 9: Tuesday 28 February 2023

On our last morning in Ulley, we spent our time watching the golden eagle, snowcocks, lammergeiers, and ibex. After breakfast we started our journey back to Leh.

Day 10: Wednesday 1 March 2023

An early morning flight took us back to Delhi where we spent another night at the Pullman Hotel.

Day 11: Thursday 2 March 2023

We flew to Rajkot, the closest airport to the lions of Gir National Park. The change in temperature was sudden, but welcome, and overall we had very pleasant weather in Gir. Swan briefed us in the evening

at Gir Serai, while we enjoyed some snacks.

Day 12

Friday 3 March 2023

On Friday we had our first drive in Gir National Park. Two minutes in, we had already spotted a pair of lions with the headlights of our jeeps. We could just make out the male and female subadult cubs in the pitch darkness. Deciding not to disturb them, we moved on to other areas.

A few minutes ahead, we come across rangers patrolling near a watering hole. After a quick exchanges of words with them we learned of a pride that had made a cattle kill nearby. We drove there to see seven lions, including the cubs, feeding on a fairly old carcass of a buffalo. After taking a few pictures, we carried on. In the darkness, it was difficult to get any good pictures.

As sunlight fell on the forest, there was a noticeable rise in activity. There were birds all around. We started with early risers like the magpie-robins, jungle babblers, and treepies, then eventually noted roosting brown fish owls in a nearby Banyan tree. We were thrilled to see them.

As we moved ahead, we came across two jeeps waiting by the roadside. As we approached them, we saw an adult male lion walking towards us, big and handsome. We swiftly moved our vehicles to give him space to cross the road. The blood on his face suggested that he'd recently had a good meal. Once he crossed the road and disappeared into the bushes, we turned our attention to the lioness resting by the water hole.

As we were looking at the resting female, Swan spotted another female in the distant background on a kill. In no time, a tiny head popped out from under the female. It was one of her three cubs, all of which were just a few months old. The cubs were trying their best to rip apart as much of the meat as possible. While all of this was happening, a smaller male lion came out of the same bush as the first lion; the guide said he was the brother of the big guy. It was an amazing sight! Back at the resort, we did a count of the morning's lion activity over breakfast. 17 lions in just a couple of hours!

Just when we thought that this day couldn't get any better, our afternoon safari started with a brilliant leopard sighting. Swan said this was one of the boldest leopards he had ever seen. Naturally, she gave us plenty of opportunities to take some amazing pictures.

This was followed by some more lion sightings. We also spent a healthy amount of time looking at birds on the flame-of-the-forest tree. Sunbirds, flowerpeckers, bulbuls, prinias, mynas, and dozens of other species of birds were seen on the same tree, showing how important this tree is for the avifauna. The ending to our safari was just the cherry on top. The same tiny cubs we had been watching earlier were seen being boisterous and energetic. They were playing with each other, with their mother, and with the other females. It was wonderful.

Day 13 & 14: Saturday 4 & Sunday 5 March 2023

Over the next two days, we enjoyed four safaris with plenty more lion sightings. An abundance of birds were also seen, including Indian paradise flycatcher, Indian vultures, Indian scops owl, spotted owlets, a couple of nightjars, ioras, and so many others.

Gir was a highly successful chapter in our adventure, as we saw nearly 20 lions, a leopard, a couple of marsh crocodile and a plethora of birds. It was very satisfying.

Day 15: Monday 6 March 2023

With big smiles on our faces, we bid farewell to Gir. We were on our way to Rajkot, to board the flight taking us to Bangalore. Nagarhole National Park awaited us.

Day 16: Tuesday 7 March 2023

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After a sumptuous breakfast, we left for Nagarhole National Park. The roads were excellent. After roughly four hours we started to see the backwaters of the Kabini River. On arrival at the elegant Kabini River Lodge, we dumped our stuff in the room, washed up and went straight out for lunch.

Next we met our driver, Shambhu, who has been working in Nagarhole for nearly 15 years. We started our safari after the formalities were taken care of. A handsome crested hawk-eagle was there to welcome us as we entered the national park - poised and perched on a branch overlooking a perennial stream. On the same tree, we were fortunate enough to see one of the more uncommon birds: a heart-spotted woodpecker.

Nagarhole is known for its surreal forest and lush green open lands by the backwaters. We drove towards the backwater and saw a single elephant deep inside the woods. While we were looking at the elephant, Shambhu spotted a couple of otters near the edge of the water.

Despite being only our first safari, we managed to get a glimpse of a tigress. Although she was sleeping, this was nevertheless a fantastic start. At this point, we had already ticked off everything from our list of 'India's Big Cats'. But that being said, a good sighting is what really counts.

Day 17: Wednesday 8 March 2023

Our morning started with common hawk-cuckoo calls resonating through the jungle. We also spotted chestnut-headed bee-eater, grey junglefowl, white-bellied woodpecker, both lesser and greater golden back woodpeckers, a pair of stripe-necked ruddy mongooses foraging on the forest floor, and a lot of other mammals and birds.

Finally, in the afternoon, a cacophony of langur alarm calls alerted us to an important location. Upon arrival, we waited a few minutes before Swan spotted the leopard coming out of a trench. We killed our engines and waited. As soon as she started to move, and we had figured out in which direction she was headed, we rushed to the adjacent road. From there, we would be able to see her coming from a long distance. In no time, she came walking towards us and crossed the road just 1.5 metres away from our vehicle. What a sight it was!

We ended our evening safari with another sighting of a male tiger at a distance.

Day 18: Thursday 9 March 2023

As soon as we entered the park a tigress was walking towards us head-on! She left the road and went inside the forest as soon as other vehicles came behind us. Nagarhole had been very lucky for us so far.

After the tigress went inside the forest, we moved on to a different area. On our way we saw a mother elephant with her calf munching on the branches of an Indian gooseberry tree near the road.

Right after this, while on the road, we saw a jeep parked facing the opposite direction. The driver gave us a sign to stop our vehicle. We stopped and killed the engine, trying to figure out what was happening. In no time we had our answer: a tigress came out of a bush and crossed the road in front of us. Nobody could believe that we had been lucky enough to see two tigers within an hour of entering the park. We spent the rest of our morning admiring a big tusker, which was grazing peacefully at the backwater side.

The afternoon safari was yet another success with an excellent tigeress sighting. This female was seen attempting to hunt spotted deer.

Day 19: Thursday 10 March 2023

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The morning safari went rather quietly, mostly due to the overcast weather. We spent the morning watching birds and other mammals, spotting Malabar giant squirrel, Indian gaur, mongooses and other wildlife.

On the afternoon safari, we were driving through the same patch of forest where we had seen the leopard previously, when, a jeep down the road called us. We could hear langur alarm calls, so we asked the driver about the situation. He whispered "black leopard". And we swiftly took out our cameras, keeping a sharp eye on the bushes.

Suddenly, we saw him make a jump deep inside the bushes. There was no doubt, it was him! The famous black leopard of Nagarhole. He was attempting to hunt, so it took a while before he finally came out. Everything happened so quickly. We were absolutely the luckiest bunch and we could not believe it.

Later in the evening, back at the resort, we celebrated a fantastic day.

Day 20: Friday 11 March 2023

A pleasant change in our activity was the boat safari. We started early in the morning. There was a cool breeze over the water, and as the sun started to rise, we felt the tranquillity of the clean Kabini River. Among the wildlife highlights were osprey, dozens of red-headed and white-rumped vultures feeding on a carcass, kingfishers, and of course, the otters.

In the afternoon, we saw another male tiger resting by a beautiful perennial river that flows through the forest.

Day 21: Friday 12 March 2023

On the last safari of our trip, we got a wonderful farewell. A pack of five wild dogs were spotted trotting around a water hole. We enjoyed looking at their playful behaviour and observing various other social behaviours.

Then we drove back to Bangalore, staying overnight at Taj.

Day 22: Saturday 13 March 2023

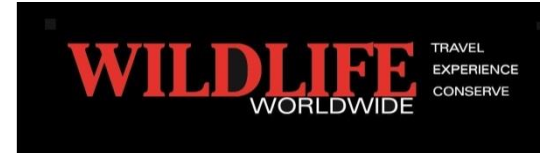
Early in the morning the group departed for Heathrow. And just like that the amazing trip in search of India's big cats was over.

Not only had we seen all the big cats, but we also saw so much more of the incredible wilderness India has to offer.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14	Day 15	Day 16	Day 17	Day 18	Day 19	Day 20	Day 21	Day 22	Day 23
	BIRDS	AVES																							
1	Chukar Partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>						✓		✓	✓	✓													
2	Himalayan Snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus himalayensis</i>						✓		✓															
3	Grey Francolin	<i>Ortygornis pondicerianus</i>													✓		✓								
4	Red Spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix spadicea</i>																				✓	✓		✓
5	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>													✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓																				✓
7	Indian Spot Billed Duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>																	✓		✓	✓		✓	
8	Asian openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>												✓			✓							✓	
9	Woolly-necked stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>														✓							✓		
10	Black-headed Ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>													✓							✓			
12	Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>										✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓			
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>													✓					✓		✓			
14	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>																					✓		
15	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>											✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>													✓		✓			✓		✓			
17	Intermediate Egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>													✓								✓		
18	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>													✓	✓		✓		✓		✓			
19	Darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>																✓		✓		✓			
20	Little Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>											✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Indian Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>																	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓								✓	✓				✓	✓							
23	Black Winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>											✓						✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
24	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>																✓					✓		
25	Grey-headed Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus ichthyaeus</i>																					✓		
26	Crested Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>													✓	✓		✓		✓	✓				
27	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>					✓	✓	✓		✓														
28	White-rumped Vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>																✓	✓			✓			
29	Indian Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>													✓		✓					✓			
30	Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>																				✓			
31	Crested serpent eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>													✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			



70	Indian Pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>														✓	✓	✓	✓				
71	Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>									✓					✓		✓					
72	Orange Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i>														✓							
73	Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>																✓					
74	Bay-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius vittatus</i>															✓						
75	Long-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>															✓	✓					
76	Greater Racket-tailed Drong	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>							✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
77	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>							✓	✓	✓				✓		✓	✓					
78	White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>														✓	✓	✓					
79	Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>															✓	✓	✓				
80	White-browed Fantail	<i>Rhipidura aureola</i>							✓	✓													
81	Asian Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>							✓	✓	✓												
82	Rufous Treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>								✓	✓				✓	✓	✓						
83	Indian Jungle Crow	<i>Corvus culminatus</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>								✓	✓	✓			✓		✓						
86	Dusky Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne concolor</i>								✓													
87	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
88	Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>								✓	✓	✓											
89	Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striata</i>								✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
90	Lesser Hill Myna	<i>Gracula indica</i>													✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
91	Jungle Myna	<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>								✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
92	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>								✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
93	Chestnut-tailed Starling	<i>Sturnia malabarica</i>													✓	✓	✓						
94	Ornate-headed Thrush	<i>Geokichla citrina</i>													✓		✓						
95	Oriental Magpie Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>								✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
96	Indian Robin	<i>Copsychus fulicatus</i>								✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓					
97	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>								✓		✓											
98	Asian Brown Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa latirostris</i>								✓													
99	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	<i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>									✓	✓											
100	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>								✓													
101	Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>								✓	✓	✓					✓						
102	Purple-rumped Sunbird	<i>Leptocoma zeylonica</i>								✓													
103	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓						✓					✓									
104	Chestnut-shouldered Petroni	<i>Gymnoris xanthocollis</i>								✓	✓	✓											
105	Robin Accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓													
106	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>									✓				✓	✓							



