

## Tour Report

### India – Nagarhole's Tigers, Wild Dogs & Leopards

5 – 14 April 2019

Leopard



Sloth bear & Asian elephant



Dhole



Tiger



Tour Leader: Bret Charman

A remarkable ten-day trip to India's Nagarhole National Park with six brilliant clients, in search of the region's exquisite wildlife. Staying at the comfortable Kabini River Lodge proved to be the perfect place to rest between memorable safari trips, in what is surely one of India's hidden gems.

**Day 1: London Heathrow to Bangalore**

**Friday 5 April 2019**

Half of the group had already arrived in India, while the other half were on an overnight British Airways flight to Bangalore.

**Day 2: Bangalore to Kabini River Lodge**

**Saturday 6 April 2019**

Those members of the group (including myself) on the overnight flight from London arrived just before 5am and quickly made our way to meet the rest of the group at the Goldfinch Resort. We all had an enjoyable breakfast together before setting off for our journey to Kabini River Lodge. The journey took around 5 hours, including a drive by of the Maharaja's palace at Mysore, and we finally arrived in the grounds of the lodge.

It wasn't long until lunch, so after settling in our rooms we all met up again for our first meal in our home for the next week. No sooner had we finished lunch, than it was nearly time to head out on our first drive in Zone A. Our first sightings were of common myna, which seemed to be everywhere, before coming across our first small herd of chital (spotted deer). It wasn't long before we came across our first grey langurs, bonnet macaques, a common hawk cuckoo and plenty of grey jungle fowl. As we slowly made our way through the forest we listened intently for the sounds of chital and langur alarm calls, but all seemed to be quiet today.

As we continued our search for our feline quarry, we stumbled across a pack of wild dog (dhole), which were resting on the edge of the forest line, before having wonderful sightings of both ruddy and stripe-necked mongoose (the second of which was having a drink). We also saw some nervous elephants before we had to leave the park for the day. We arrived back at the lodge excited to know what we might see during the coming days.

**Day 3: Nagarhole National Park**

**Sunday 7 April 2019**

This morning we had our first drive in Zone B. A tiger had been seen there by a boat safari group the afternoon before, so we went in search of it. As we reached the lakeshore we heard langur and chital alarm calls almost immediately. While we sat underneath the alarmed langurs, a troupe of bonnet macaques sat close by, while a lone elephant and sambar deer also made an appearance. We waited for some time, knowing full well where the tiger was sitting, but we were unable to get a sighting. We moved on to see if we would have any more luck in another part of Zone B, but to no avail. However, we did see our first wild boar family, several woolly-necked storks and black-rumped flameback (also known as lesser goldenback).

This afternoon we returned to Zone A in search of the felines which had so far eluded us. As we entered the park, we learnt that a group in another vehicle had heard alarm calls so we stopped a short while, waiting to see what might show itself, but after a few minutes and no further alarm calls, we moved on deeper into the zone. Every now and then we paused as we tried to hear any potential alarm call, but the forest remained quiet and kept its secrets. As we passed the resthouse, wild dogs were visible to us once more although they were at quite a distance. We had heard that there were alarm calls near one of the waterholes which a tigress with young cubs is known to frequent, but after some time we still had no cats. As we waited for the tiger to appear, we were entertained by a ruddy mongoose feeding on a dead monitor

lizard, a pair of green bee-eaters, an oriental paradise flycatcher and our first barking deer which had come for a drink.

We were out of time and needing to make a speedy exit when we came across our first male gaur, an incredible specimen which, sadly, we didn't have time to stop and enjoy. As we drove back towards the gate, a leopard was just disappearing into the trees. Sadly only a few members of the group caught a glimpse of him as he seemed to melt into the thick scrub. We made it back to the lodge for a shower and some dinner after a busy day on some bumpy tracks.

#### **Day 4: Nagarhole National Park**

**Monday 8 April 2019**

It was back to Zone B this morning and we worked hard to find any cats. We did find some tiger and jungle cat prints, but no sightings of the animals to which they belonged. We did, however, see our first Brahminy kite as well as having splendid views of a crested hawk eagle and lesser hill myna. We also had our first good sighting of a black-naped hare and some lovely views of giant squirrels, as a pair delighted us with their acrobatic leaps from tree to tree.

As we moved back down towards the backwaters of Kabini River we saw our first oriental darters, painted storks, little cormorant, Indian pond heron, black-winged stilt and wood sandpiper. As we neared the end of our drive we watched a family of gaur feeding at the edge of the forest, followed by a troop of grey langurs. It was wonderful to spend some quality time with the gaur, the largest bovine in the world. Although the cats continued to elude us the gaur definitely put a spring in our step and as we made our way back to the lodge a herd of elephants was feeding on the roadside.

After lunch it was time to head back to Zone A and we all had a good feeling about visiting this area today. It wasn't too long before we were finally rewarded for all our hard work. Another vehicle had spotted a couple of leopards, at quite a distance, on a high branch in the forest and we enjoyed views of these stunning cats for some time. One individual was very happy to relax on a branch while the second performed an acrobatic leap before descending down the tree at speed. After all the group had had their fill with the spotted felines, we went in search of the next cat species that had so far eluded us, the tiger. As we were driving down the road we got tipped off that there was a tiger not too far away. We sped off and incredibly the tiger crossed the road only 30 feet in front of us. What a privilege – a tiger sighting without another vehicle present! For one member of the group it was their third trip to India, but their first tiger and what a showstopper it was – a huge male in his absolute prime. As we headed off to see what else we could find, the resthouse pack of wild dogs delighted us with a walk-by, allowing the whole group to capture a stunning range of photos.

Could the day get any better? Well, yes! In fact we had another superb tiger sighting: a female walked across the road in front of us (and other vehicles, on this occasion) and then started to stalk a chital. A short dash proved fruitless and the tiger slipped out of view into the thick vegetation.

As we were leaving the park a leopard happened to be walking by the main road, towards the park gate. Five different cats on one drive... remarkable! What a perfect afternoon it was and one that the group will remember for many years to come.

#### **Day 5: Nagarhole National Park**

**Tuesday 9 April 2019**

Our first morning drive in Zone A... and was it going to deliver as it had the night before? It was always going to be tough even to come close to yesterday's excitement but, after a quiet start, we came across several vehicles parked in the same spot where we had seen the leopards the afternoon before. Sure enough, there was a leopard resting on a branch only some 20 metres from where we had seen it the day before. Our excellent guide then spotted the second leopard in another tree in a rather awkward position

and it took quite a while before the whole group was able to catch a glimpse (and rightly so, for it was superbly camouflaged). The rest of the safari was relatively quiet but, after another performance from the big cat family, everybody was very happy indeed.

After a quick breakfast the whole group headed out onto the backwaters of Kabini for a short ride aboard one of the lodge's boats. We saw a range of new species including river tern, intermediate egret, great egret, purple heron and Indian spot-billed ducks.

We headed out for our evening drive determined to find Blacky, the male black (melanistic) leopard the park is famous for. We worked our way up and down tracks through his territory, but there was no sign of him. We made our way towards the edge of his range, where there is a break line through the forest and saw a beautiful male elephant with large tusks and a lone bull gaur some way behind.

We spent around 20 minutes watching the elephant before heading back into Blacky's territory but still no sign. Then, as we were heading off in search of tiger or another leopard, we had news that the melanistic leopard had been seen up a tree. We had somehow missed him and rushed back to the site. By the time we arrived the leopard had left his comfortable branch, but there were chital calls from the forest. After 10 minutes or so we spotted the black cat, at quite a distance (some 250 yards) climbing a tree with what we later found out was a chital fawn kill. The views were not the best, but at least we'd had a glimpse of this stunning creature, his black glossy coat catching the light before a rain storm moved in. We grudgingly made a hasty retreat back to the gate to ensure we weren't late leaving the park.

#### **Day 6: Nagarhole National Park**

**Wednesday 10 April 2019**

As a group, we begged and pleaded the night before to go back to Zone A, for another chance to find the black leopard and our driver/guide combo managed to get us in for the fourth drive in a row. We headed into the park, hoping that we might be in luck once more and boy did we put in a lot of effort. After numerous drives we finally had chital and langur calls just off the track, but they then died away. As we waited to see the cat, we enjoyed a mixed flock of plum-headed and our first Malabar parakeets as well as a marvellous white-bellied woodpecker. The cat (we assumed it was the black leopard) had obviously gone to ground and after a lengthy period we moved away. Just half a mile away we got the briefest glimpse of a tigress as she disappeared into the thick lantana scrub. We waited to see if she would come back and whilst we did we enjoyed great views of a greater flameback, greater racket-tailed drongo and oriental magpie robin. On our way out of the park we stumbled across another male tiger, in his prime, who stopped momentarily and provided some wonderful photography opportunities.

After managing to secure Zone A this morning, it was almost inevitable we would be in Zone B this afternoon, so we set off, wondering what we might find today. We firstly headed down towards the backwaters of the Kabini River and had good sightings of our first marsh mugger crocodiles and osprey too. We then headed back along the main road to the other part of the zone and enjoyed great views of the large male elephant on the edge of the main road. We also saw a grey mongoose and peacocks galore as we drove along the perimeter of Zone B. As we rounded a bend, a vehicle was stopped in front of us and we caught a brief glimpse of a dhole (wild dog), before it trotted off into the thick lantana scrub. We continued along the road away when we heard about a leopard up a tree. We headed there immediately and when we arrived, the leopard was sat in a tree just off the road. Within seconds, this large male (with a severe wound on his face) started to make his way down the tree, delighting the group with his skilful descent. It was another great way to end our drive and once again Nagarhole delivered.

#### **Day 7: Nagarhole National Park**

**Thursday 11 April 2019**

It was back to Zone A this morning, and what a misty morning it was too. The landscape was shrouded in this ghostly mist, and everything seemed to be quieter because of it. We worked our way around the area

where we had last seen our dark feline quarry, but we were not having much luck. We did hear that the tigress with mature cubs had moved back through the area but our searching proved to be fruitless. Both the tiger and the black leopard remained elusive for the entirety of our drive and instead we enjoyed some of the rich birdlife including greater and black-rumped flamebacks, lesser hill myna, Indian roller and, of course, the regular array of mammals including chital (spotted deer), grey langur, bonnet macaque and the odd Indian giant squirrel.

This afternoon we headed back to Zone B once more and almost immediately heard alarm calls from a barking deer which were very close to the road. We waited in anticipation, but nothing showed itself on what was proving to be an overcast affair. We worked our way down the road, periodically pausing to hear what news the forest had for us. Once again though, it all seemed to be a little on the quiet side. We continued ever onwards (it is a pretty long road) and as we did so I noticed a black shape in the distance – it was a sloth bear digging out a termite mound. Only a couple of hours previously, we had been talking about sloth bears and how they are particularly shy and hard to see, so it seemed as if it must be fate. We managed to slowly work our way closer so the group had a good view. After a little time, the bear stopped lapping up the termites with its suction-cup lips and turned to look at us. At that moment, the bear realised exactly what we were and made a run for cover at an incredible speed.

We hadn't seen anything else and started to work our way back down the road, the same direction we came from, when an elephant charged across the road some 350 metres away. Our guides told us it must be charging the sloth bear we'd seen 20 minutes earlier. As we sat enjoying some wonderful views of this female elephant, the sloth bear appeared in the distance and the group managed to capture some lovely images of an elephant with the bear further along the road. Everyone was on a massive high and as we calmed ourselves, we enjoyed a pair of Indian rollers which were putting on a bit of a show. After an unexpected pit stop, the group continued with their safari, but everything had calmed down and the forest returned to its sleepy state.

## **Day 8: Nagarhole National Park**

**Friday 12 April 2019**

Today we were back in Zone A, hoping that we might finally get a decent few of the black panther. However, it was not to be this morning. No matter how hard we tried – and our driver and guide were simply brilliant – we had no luck with the black panther, or any other member of the genus Panthera. Now the pressure was on for this evening. We did, however, have a plethora of bird species all around, with Indian cuckoo calling incessantly, both jungle and common mynas galore and crested serpent eagle too. A male elephant proved to be the mammalian highlight of the morning.

So off we went after lunch for our last evening drive in Nagarhole, and what an incredibly special place it is. This vast forest is home to a staggering diversity of species, and the sightings it had provided throughout our trip were second to none. Of all India's tiger reserves, surely this has to be among the very best, one of the country's hidden gems.

As we entered Zone A once more, we suddenly jerked to a halt as a sloth bear made a very brief appearance on the edge of the treeline, some 20 yards away, before making a speedy retreat. There was no time for photography, but it was a brilliant sighting and a lovely way to start the drive. We were working hard to try and find Blacky once more. The alarm calls were non-existent though and, despite finding some leopard tracks on the dusty roads, there was no sign of him. We did have another encounter with a lone elephant, this time one who was particularly relaxed with our presence, which made it very enjoyable.

As we made our way back round to where we started our drive we came across an absolutely stunning crested hawk eagle, perched up in a tree by the roadside allowing the whole group some stunning photography opportunities. With a great portfolio of images of the crested hawk eagle (formerly known as the changeable hawk eagle) we ended up at one of the fire breaks and saw a vehicle watching something in

a small stream. We arrived to find the Kabini Backwaters female with her three large cubs, somewhat obscured by vegetation, having a lovely time in the cool waters. We spent some 10 minutes with them before another vehicle arrived and changed our viewing angles, therefore we decided to move on once more and see if we could find something of our own. Sadly, on this occasion, it was not to be, but nonetheless it had been another incredible drive in this wonderful park.

#### **Day 9: Nagarhole National Park to Bangalore**

**Saturday 13 April 2019**

We had heard that this morning we would be back in Zone B, but thanks to some very hard working people, we managed to secure Zone A one last time. Whatever happened this morning, at least we knew we had one final chance to see the elusive black leopard. It was a cooler morning with a rolling mist blanketing the forest once more. As we made our way through the forest, straight towards Blacky's territory, a lone wild dog appeared on the edge of the lantana scrub. We stopped the vehicle a long way ahead of the dhole, but it was particularly wary and rightly so with a black leopard and tigers about. This is no place for a lone dog.

We continued onwards, working hard to find any of the cats, and enjoyed a stunning display from a peacock as he tried to woo a female, who watched on rather unimpressed. A little further we came across two wild dogs trying to hunt chital deer, providing incredible views and photography opportunities. What was proving to be a successful morning got even better when a tiger seemed to magically appear by the side of the road, walked nonchalantly by and slipped away into the thick vegetation. Our expert guide and driver suggested he might well reappear as he went in search of water, but we wanted to search for the black cat one last time. Sure enough, as we completed a circuit, the large male tiger was disappearing from view once again in a more open area of this beautiful national park.

Sadly our final drive in Nagarhole had to end and we returned to the lodge for the final time. Breakfast lay waiting for us and then it was time to ready ourselves for the journey back to Bangalore. On our way we stopped at the edge of a small lake and enjoyed great views of purple swamphen, little and great egrets, white-breasted waterhen, spot-billed duck, coot and little cormorant, which made a lovely interlude on the long drive.

Upon arrival in Bangalore, with an early morning wake-up the following day, it was time to settle in our rooms and try to get a good night's sleep.

#### **Day 10: Bangalore to London**

**Sunday 14 April 2019**

A very early awakening meant a nice quick transfer to the airport (there was little traffic on the road) and after a speedy check-in, the group soon boarded the morning flight back to the UK. The flight home provided the opportunity for us to reflect on a fabulous trip to the wonderful surrounds of Kabini and the magical forests of Nagarhole National Park.