

Tour Report

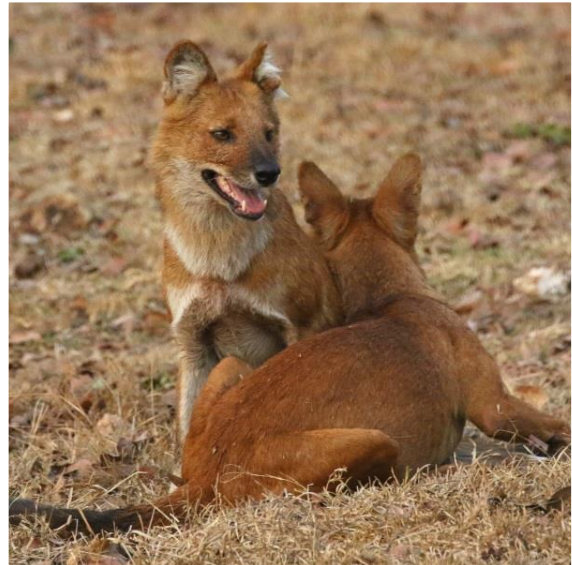
India – Nagarhole's Tigers, Wild Dogs & Leopards

22 March 2019

Black panther by Jon Isaacs



Wild dogs by Jon Isaacs



Tiger by Jon Isaacs



Wild dog & chital by Jon Isaacs



Tour Leader: Nick Acheson

Day 1: Friday 22 March 2019

Half of the group met at Heathrow today for an early afternoon flight to Bangalore.

Day 2: Saturday 23 March 2019

Those of us arriving today from the UK touched down before dawn and were efficiently transferred to Goldfinch Resort nearby. Here we met two more group members and had a good breakfast. The rest of the morning was spent making the five-and-a-half hour journey to Kabini River Lodge where we were welcomed by naturalist Ravi and given an introduction to the lodge and our programme.

After lunch (during which hungry bonnet macaques broke into a carelessly unlocked room nearby) and mid-afternoon tea, we headed into the park for our first safari in Zone A. Here we were enchanted by the abundant common and jungle mynas, jungle babblers, grey langurs and chital that we saw, supported here and there by chestnut-tailed (Malabar white-headed) starlings, a ruddy mongoose, a magnificent (and very placid) Asian elephant tusker and much more.

The only fly in the ointment was that three jeeps had a lucky encounter with the near-mythical black panther as he crossed a road. We arrived some three minutes too late. Despite our listening at length to langur and chital alarm calls, from animals we knew were seeing our panther, the cat never reappeared. As we left the park at dusk we did, however, see our first cat, in the form of a jungle cat, right at the park gate, bringing to an end our first drive in this gorgeous place.

We returned to the comfort of the guesthouse for a well-earned dinner and rest.

Day 3: Sunday 24 March 2019

This morning we were up and having tea and coffee before dawn, in order to reach Zone A of the park in the cat-beloved cool of the morning. This was a fine plan, for this morning we saw our first tiger, as he nonchalantly pottered around a fireline, intently sniffing the scent marks of other cats and himself spraying several times. As tiger was a new animal for almost everyone in the group we were delighted.

Also this morning we saw a huge tuskless male Asian elephant, who seemed very happy to have his photograph taken. Many excellent photos were also taken of peafowl, including males with splendid trains, backlit grey langurs and some very showy Indian rollers. There were plenty of dashing male grey junglefowl about and, of course, hordes of chital, including many females with young and lots of handsome bucks with their magnificent antlers in velvet.

At lunchtime today we met the last member of our group, who had been delayed at Heathrow thanks to a flight connection. He brought us luck this afternoon in the form of his first ever leopard. We spotted this very svelte female on the road in front of us, where she rolled in the dust before walking to the roadside to sit down. She then confidently walked to the edge of the forest where we lost her. As we passed the same area later on, in a breathtaking feat of spotting, driver/guide Sadiq picked up a leopard draped across a branch in a tree quite deep into the forest. Whether or not it was the same leopard was impossible to say, but we were thrilled.

The afternoon's second major highlight was a pack of five Asian wild dogs near the forest resthouse. Another jeep had seen them coming in our direction but had lost them. First we saw chital reacting in panic to the dogs' presence nearby but nothing of the dogs. Sadiq took us on a scenic detour round a little-travelled road, in the hope they might be there. They weren't but when we got back to the resthouse, with

no other jeeps present, we had a phenomenal encounter with these gorgeous animals as they played, dozed and trotted past us. Bravo!

There was plenty more to see this afternoon, including Asian elephants, photogenic grey langurs, grey junglefowl and wild boar, but the unrivalled winners of our admiration were a cat and five dogs.

Day 4: Monday 25 March 2019

This morning we took the delightful boat safari with boatman Bhima along the dammed Kabini River between Bandipur and Nagarhole National Parks. Quite apart from the sheer number of waterbirds we saw, it was wonderful simply to experience another aspect of this lovely protected area. There seemed to be woolly-necked storks everywhere we looked, accompanied by a handful of painted storks and a couple of Asian openbills. There were also many river terns, with here and there a few whiskered terns, little terns and brown headed gulls. As for waders, there were black-winged stilts, Temminck's and little stints, wood and common sandpipers, lots of greenshank, little ringed plovers in display, and flocks of charming small pratincoles. Herons were very well represented too, with little and great egrets all over the place, and a few grey and purple herons and Indian pond herons to be seen too. Great and little cormorants were very numerous, while we saw just one Indian cormorant. There were kingfishers – white-throated and common – and one distant spot-billed pelican. Staying with the theme of spotted bills, there were several Indian spot-billed ducks. Raptors were represented by plenty of brahminy kites and ospreys, a handful of grey-headed fish-eagles and a pair of oriental honey buzzards.

If that weren't enough there were plenty of mammals, in the form of chital, wild boar, a brief sambar and a splendid Asian elephant tusker. We added three new mammals too: two quick and fairly distant views of stripe-necked mongoose, two Asian golden jackals which we saw twice, first eating a very dead waterbird and later trotting along the shore, and – to our delight – a family of confiding smooth-coated otters. All in all, we agreed, a splendid morning of wildlife watching in a beautiful place.

After breakfast we wandered for an hour in the lodge grounds, seeing and photographing many birds including white-throated kingfisher, Indian golden oriole, white-cheeked and coppersmith barbets, Blyth's reed warbler and a couple of gorgeous male purple-rumped sunbirds. We were amazed by the bonnet macaques next to the dining room which not only turned the washroom taps on to take a drink but also turned them off again when they had done!

This afternoon was sullen and hot and the wildlife was correspondingly difficult to see. As we drove into Zone A we saw couple of sambar, as indeed we did as we sped to leave the park at dusk. The reason we pushed this afternoon to the very limit was that one jeep had the good fortune to see two leopards walking along the road near a tank. We stayed by the waterhole for as long as we could, listening to a barking deer in the jungle which was clearly seeing the cats. However, this evening it was not to be. Previously, nonetheless, we had seen a leopard in a tree, some distance from the road, in precisely the same spot as yesterday (though the leopard was facing in the opposite direction today). We also saw three beautiful stripe-necked mongooses this afternoon (to add to the two we saw this morning by the river) plus the usual crowd of chital, langurs, peafowl, grey junglefowl, common and jungle mynas and Indian rollers. With a backing cast like that one can hardly grudge a quieter afternoon every now and again.

Day 5: Tuesday 26 March 2019

This was yet another splendid morning in this beautiful park. Initially all of the jeeps in Zone A struggled to see or hear anything carnivorous, though we were delighted by our encounter with a ridiculously friendly stripe-necked mongoose who trotted along the road towards us and scent-marked right beside us. We were also very pleased to see two Asian wild dogs crossing the road, clearly intent on a hunt. There were

also many good birds, including Indian nuthatch, southern hill myna, flyover Malabar parakeets, lots of brahminy starlings and a brief heart-spotted woodpecker.

Receiving news of a tigress which had crossed from Zone B into Zone A we drove to the area into which she had been seen heading. A long wait, with occasional alarm calls from chital, seemed as though it would be futile, as we were getting ever closer to park closing time. However in a glorious final flurry of activity, some lucky clients glimpsed a sloth bear crossing the road ahead of us and the bear seemed to spook the tigress (mother of three small cubs which were seen around the same tank last week) who then appeared at the edge of the track and sat watching us. Eventually time summoned us away, but we were ecstatic, especially our Belgian contingent who had been detained by airline problems at the start of the tour and had therefore missed our first tiger.

Having worked hard every afternoon thus far in the areas in which the black panther is commonly seen, this afternoon Sadiq decided we would go on the opposite direction as far as it is possible to go, to look for this morning's tigress. As soon as we reached the waterhole we received news that the black panther, for which we had looked in earnest for three afternoons, had been seen in his usual range. So there we sped, reluctantly ignoring the resthouse family of wild dogs as we went. When we reached the spot we found the magnificent animal draped in a tree at the roadside, his jade eyes staring at us in disdain. The forest guards who had found him had seen him mate a spotted female, which had then gone into the bush. It is tantalising to think that in three months' time the next generation of leopards bearing black genes (or even coats) may be born here.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in the company of Nagarahole's ultimate cat, occasionally nudging the jeep forwards or backwards for the photographers to get a better angle on his face through the saplings growing at the road's edge. Sad to leave this once-in-a-lifetime leopard, but elated to have seen him, we left the park as the shadows grew.

Day 6: Wednesday 27 March 2019

This morning what could we do but head back to Zone A in search of more of its wonderful animals. Close to the area where we saw the black panther yesterday we heard two groups of langurs alarm calling, clearly each seeing a different cat. However the cats were not in the mood to be seen. The carnivorous highlight of our morning was undoubtedly an encounter with the five resthouse wild dogs (which we had so rudely eschewed yesterday). We watched them as they played on the dust road, several of you taking wonderful photos, and followed as they trotted down to the river to drink and then crossed the bridge into the core zone, where we could not follow.

The herbivorous highlights were twofold. Two photo opportunities had specially been requested. The first was a chital with a myna on its back. This we achieved as the kindly morning light played on the faces of a bachelor herd of chital, one of which had a jungle myna perched on his head between his magnificent velvety antlers. The second request – for a photogenic sambar – was proving much harder work, as all of these splendid deer were deep in cover or very skittish, turning to run as soon as we approached. However, as we rounded a bend we came across two sambar in the road – a female and a male with small antlers – and these, once they had started from the road, stood close by and looked back at us, giving the photographers excellent opportunities to capture them.

There was of course far more in the park this morning, including ashy drongo, rose-ringed and plum-headed parakeets, brahminy starlings, a wild boar, stripe-necked and ruddy mongooses, a red-headed vulture perched in trees by a lake, and any number of handsome chital. What a privilege to be spending a whole week in this beautiful, biodiverse place.

Immediately after lunch, we walked into the forest in the southeast corner of the lodge compound to visit the large fig tree with a roost of Indian flying-foxes (which we have seen flying out at the end of each evening safari). Later, having decided we would like to spend more time with elephants, we took the afternoon boat safari. And boy did we see elephants! They were seemingly everywhere, including lone tuskers and families of females with their young. We watched one herd at length as they kicked grass with their feet to dislodge and eat it. Some were also hurling clouds of dust over themselves. Most dramatically of all, later we saw an imposing male in musth powering towards this same family. First he tried to carve a female off the group; then he got into a furious fight with the largest male accompanying the group (still considerably smaller than him). We watched in amazement as the musth male snapped off a healthy chunk of the smaller male's tusk and drove him from the herd. Dramatic stuff!

Also this afternoon there were many hundreds of chital along the shore, and many hundreds of river terns, including some sitting metres from us on a mud island, in gorgeous evening light. There were plenty of other waders and waterbirds, plus ospreys, grey-headed fish-eagles and a family of three smooth-coated otters hauled out on the shore, staring contentedly at us and apparently waving their paws.

Day 7: Thursday 28 March 2019

Having had the immense privilege of exploring Zone A for the past few days, and seen a huge amount as a result, this morning we thought we would try out Zone B. Initially we drove along the old main road, following Sadiq's instincts. His instincts were spot on as we found last night's tracks of leopard and tiger and fresh sloth bear scat and – agonisingly – a tiger walked along a short stretch of the road after we had passed and before we returned. We nonetheless did not manage to see any of them. We did however see plenty, including our first barking deer (having only heard them alarm calling until now), and photogenic peafowl, wild boar and Indian giant squirrels. Also of note here was a flock of small minivets which dropped into a dead tree beside us as we watched the barking deer.

Hearing news of a tiger which had been seen by one jeep at Backwater in the main part of Zone B, we headed in that direction. The cat, the Backwater male, had left by the time we arrived. Nonetheless we continued enjoying ourselves, seeing a number of elephants, more Indian giant squirrels, lots of woolly-necked storks along the shore of the dam, some gorgeous yellow-footed green-pigeons coming down to drink, and huge numbers of chital, accompanied as always by jungle mynas.

In the afternoon we ventured back into Zone A, in the hope of seeing the Backwater female tiger and her three well-grown cubs, which had been seen here on and off while we had been away doing other things. Alas it was not to be, though one jeep did briefly see the female. Instead we had a hot but lovely afternoon watching all of our by-now familiar jungle friends. Highlights for the photographers included a perched common hawk-cuckoo and a black-naped hare in the road.

Day 8: Friday 29 March 2019

Every time we ventured into this gorgeous park we seemed to see new animals. This morning's undoubted highlight was an encounter with three sloth bears – mother and cub – as they crossed the power line transect. Having bolted at the passing of our jeep, they remained a while in the curtain of lantana at its side, with the female poking her nose out for long enough for some to get a picture. This morning's other great mammal was a single gaur, also in lantana scrub, which Sadiq spotted on the driver's side as we drove along.

As for this morning's birds, the most exciting event was a violent battle between two pairs of jungle mynas, locked in each other's claws and beaks, and struggling so intensely on the ground, that they barely noticed all of the cameras trained on them. Of course there were plenty of other birds too, including several black-

rumped flamebacks, attractively perched Indian peafowl, lots of exquisitely dappled grey junglefowl and hordes of jungle babblers.

This afternoon was, to say the least, excellent. We met the full herd of female gaur along the powerline, not far from where we had seen a single member in the morning. We delighted in watching the chocolate females and fudge-brown calves grazing and browsing placidly in warm afternoon light. The next highlight was a furtive female leopard walking across the track in front of us, stopping a couple of times and allowing the photographers to take wonderful shots. We surmised (by her location) that she was the female with whom the male black panther had briefly been seen before we saw him in a tree. (And indeed it transpired that the following morning he would be seen in exactly the same spot).

The final highlight was seeing the Backwater female tiger, who had recently brought her three full-grown cubs into Zone A. The cubs were doubtless resting in the forest somewhere nearby but we were extremely pleased to see the mother as she got up from the middle of the road clearing, walked to its edge and settled there to rest, occasionally rearing her head to look at us.

Of course we also saw all the typical beauties of Nagarahole this afternoon, but it was the gaur, the leopardess and the tigress who captured our attention and our hearts.

Day 9: Saturday 30 March 2019

In 21 years of leading wildlife-watching holidays the world over, my groups have rarely had such powerful experiences as we had this morning on our last drive in Nagarahole. Shortly after entering Zone B we heard from another vehicle that they had just seen wild dogs heading in the direction from which we had come. We both turned around and in no time we heard the news that the first vehicle had witnessed a wild dog kill.

We arrived to the harrowing spectacle of a young adult pair of dogs tearing at the bloodied hind quarters of a magnificent chital buck with his antlers still in velvet. The death of the chital was agonising to witness, but extremely powerful. When the adult dogs left the dying buck we knew that they must have gone to fetch their litter of small pups. They returned with them within a few minutes, the pups initially slipping in and out of sight in the lantana scrub, unsure whether to emerge in front of two jeeps. They did nonetheless and we saw both savagery as the dogs ate the still-living chital and tenderness as the parent dogs kept careful watch over their bouncy little pups. It was an extraordinary event to witness and left us all deeply contemplative.

It was therefore a fitting end to a magnificent first Wildlife Worldwide tour to Nagarahole, on which every day we were amazed and delighted by the wildlife of this wonderful park and charmed by the kindness and humour of its people. Thanks are due to everyone at Kabini River Lodge for hosting us so very well, and in particular to Sadiq who, in addition to knowing the park and its wildlife astonishingly well, was superb and witty company throughout. Thanks to you all too, for having been such a great group with whom to launch this tour and for having shown so much love and enthusiasm for the spectacular wildlife of Nagarahole.

Day 10: Sunday 31 March 2019

Having returned to Bangalore the previous evening, today we reached the UK (and in some cases took onward flights).