

## Tour Report

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

25 April – 2 May 2022

Tiger



Leopard with spotted deer kill



Asian elephant



Crested serpent eagle



Compiled by Varun Devaraj

## **Day 1: Monday 25 April 2022**

The guests arrived on flight BA119 from Heathrow, London. After a quick breakfast at Goldfinch Retreat in Bengaluru, we drove to Kabini River Lodge. We arrived at 14:00, in time for lunch and the guests settled into their rooms.

At 15:00, we set off for our first safari. As we were leaving the lodge grounds, commotion at the front gate caught our attention. We stopped and noticed that a rat snake was trying to raid a common myna nest which was located in a burrow, high up on a tamarind tree. The snake was halfway in the nest as the myna pair mobbed and pecked the snake, before it eventually entered the burrow as the mynas watched helplessly. We then drove towards the park wondering what else was in store for us this evening.

Our first drive was around the Kabini Reservoir in zone B, one of two zones that the park is divided into. Given that this was our first drive we drove around slowly stopping for backfooted grey langur and spotted deer. We spent some time with the deer herds and drove towards President's Corner, a shallow bay in the backwater area where on the far bank we saw our first Asian elephants. We decided to drive to another bay to get closer to the herd, and when we arrived two magnificent tusked elephants were locked in a showdown whilst the rest of the herd including two young calves, barely a month old fed on the fresh grass on the silt rich slopes of the reservoir. The two tuskers kept at it until one of them decided to drive the other bull away from the herd, and the guests were thrilled to be witness this in the picturesque open expanse of Nagarhole National Park.

While we were watching the elephants, we received a message that a tiger had been seen in another area of zone B, a fair distance from where we were. Given that none of the guests had seen a tiger before, we drove there in hope, considering the distance. Half an hour later we arrived in the area to find a few vehicles lined up on a straight stretch of road. As we came to a stop, we saw people in the other vehicles pointing to the undergrowth to their right. As we scanned the area, a tigress came out of the bush and broke into a jog as she stalked a herd of spotted deer. The moment was brief though as the tigress disappeared into the thicket as the herd of spotted deer continued to call in alarm. This was a beautiful way for the guests to see their first tiger, its secretive nature and the mystery of the big cat in all its glory. We waited in the area, as most of the vehicles left, and after about an hour and no sign of the cat, we slowly drove back to camp as it approached dusk.

## **Day 2: Tuesday 26 April 2022**

This morning was our first foray into zone A - the heart of Nagarhole National Park. The conditions were foggy and there was a fair bit of dew which was unusual for a summer morning. Five minutes after entering the park, we heard strong spotted deer alarm calls and headed that way. As we arrived the spotted deer were intently looking in a particular direction, so we drove ahead a few paces and caught a glimpse of a shy sub-adult tiger rushing for cover. We waited for a while and with no alarm calls, we decided to drive along. We checked the south-east corner of the park, an area that had seen a fair bit of tiger activity in the past few days, however we did not see another tiger, but the forest was ringing with alarm calls. The birds were active this morning and the guests enjoyed good views of the black-rumped flameback woodpecker, common hawk cuckoo, Oriental honey buzzard and several displaying peacocks. As it was nearing closing time, we drove back to camp.

This evening we were in zone B, the area along the backwaters of the Kabini Reservoir. We arrived at 15:30 and drove towards the inlets of sunset point and President's Corner. En route, we received a message that a leopard had been seen near the reservoir. We drove there in the hope of getting a glimpse of the elusive cat and when we got there, a couple of vehicles were searching the area. Sadly, we were there a few minutes late and the cat had moved up a hillock and disappeared. We spent some time there, to see if we could pick up on some alarm calls but no luck. We continued onwards to President's Corner and were greeted by a few woolly-necked storks and grey herons, and a lone tusker splashed around in the water.

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There was a constant ring of alarm calls behind President's Corner on the far bank, although there was no sign of a carnivore.

We decided to leave the area and head back to where the leopard was seen earlier, and when we got there we were greeted by a herd of Indian gaur, grazing peacefully in the area. This was the first time the guests had seen the gaur, the largest wild bovine in the world. We spent some time with the herd and then decided to go back to President's Corner. On arrival we heard strong alarm calls from spotted deer and langur, and we waited in the area but again had no luck. As we were about to leave, we heard the strong alarm calls again from a road running parallel to where we were, so we followed and two vehicles were waiting to see if there was any sign of a carnivore. A few seconds later, one of the other vehicles spotted a leopard cub, curled up on a ficus tree and all the guests got a view despite it being hidden and at a distance - as is the case sometimes - with leopards in tiger dominated landscapes. With light quickly fading we decided to drive back to camp.

### **Day 3: Wednesday 27 April 2022**

This morning we were in zone A, and after an early start at 06:00, we drove to the north-eastern corner of the park to Bisalwadi, a perennial water source. We stopped at various points along the road and heard alarm calls from spotted deer that were continuous but there was no sign of carnivores. After a while we drove to the south-eastern part of the park to check the water holes, since the temperatures were quite warm. The guests saw some nice birdlife including shikra, crested serpent eagle, blue-bearded bee-eater and white-throated kingfisher. We also enjoyed great views of the stripped-neck mongoose. We then received some information about a tiger in the area we were near, so we waited near a waterhole that the big cats frequent. With no luck of a sighting and temperatures on the rise, we decided to drive back to camp.

In the evening, we were back in zone A and were among the first vehicles to enter the park. We headed straight for the southeast corner of the park. The morning had seen a fair bit of big cat movement around Temple Tank and the surrounding area, so we checked a few water holes but had no luck with big cats.

As we passed another vehicle, we were informed that the bridge we passed a few minutes earlier had proven lucky for them and unfortunately, we had missed seeing a leopard by a couple of minutes. Half an hour later our luck had not improved, and we missed a tiger - it was proving to be a day of near misses! We took a call to go back to the waterhole where the tiger was seen earlier in the evening and waited there in hope that the heat of the day would tempt the tiger back to the water. After about 20 minutes of waiting, a young tiger cub cautiously appeared over the bund and hunched down when it saw the vehicle. The cub was around a year old and extremely shy, it intently stared our way but refused to come to the water to drink. This was the first decent view of a tiger for the guests. A few minutes later, the tiger disappeared back into the thicket and we waited for another 15 minutes but we did not see the tiger again. Dusk was fast approaching, and we decided to drive back to camp.

### **Day 4: Thursday 28 April 2022**

Having spent the whole day in zone A, this morning we were in zone B. Our plan was to explore the Sigur Junction and a couple of inlets in the backwater area. The previous day had seen some carnivore activity, and as today was quieter with no alarm calls we drove to a couple of the bays, where there was a possibility of some decent bird watching. We saw jungle owlet, crested serpent eagle, Eurasian hoopoe, white-throated kingfisher, Brahminy starlings and Indian spot-billed ducks. We also enjoyed great views of Indian giant squirrel.

As we were approaching closing time, we received news of a leopard lounging on a tree. The area was close to where we were, so we decided to give it a shot. We got there just in time for a brief look through a fair amount of foliage and at a considerable distance. Once the guests had seen the leopard, for some just some rosettes, we decided to drive back to camp.

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Our plan this evening was to explore the waterholes in the southeast corner of the park. There had been some recent tiger movement in the area, so we arrived at the first waterhole, Tiger Tank, and scanned the area where the blazing afternoon heat had brought a few spotted deer to the water. We drove past the body of water and stopped at a clearing and after a few minutes we heard some spotted deer alarm calls. We drove towards the alarm calls and just as we got there a leopard was standing on the road looking in our direction. We slowly inched forward and saw that it was a majestic male in his prime. We stopped our vehicle as he slowly walked along the apron of the road paying us no heed. The leopard paused for a moment before disappearing into the thicket. The guests were thrilled as this was our first proper look at a big cat. We waited a little longer, but he didn't reappear. Despite this it was a great start to our evening.

We proceeded to drive to the northwest corner of the park, the area frequented by the famed black leopard. We combed the Barballe stream and the surrounding woodland but had no luck. After about an hour, we decided to go back to the southeast corner of the park and check the water. We got to Tiger Tank and saw two elephants with a calf on the far bank. As we approached there was a leopard standing a mere few metres from us - it was the same male from earlier in the evening. He proceeded to walk by the side of our vehicle, a few feet away when a myna bird caught the its attention and he made a half-hearted attempt to catch the bird which was a near comical set of events.

Next, something across the road had caught the leopard's attention - a spotted deer stag was lying down facing the other way. Despite the constant alarm calls from the langurs, the deer continued to lounge about. The leopard slowly walked on to the road in front of our vehicle and there was still no reaction from the stag, so the leopard continued to slowly cross the road before lunging towards the stag. In a fraction of a second, as the stag was about to get on its feet, the leopard caught its jugular and flipped the stag mid-air on its back. The drama had alerted a herd of spotted deer a few metres away and the deafening chorus of frightened langur and spotted deer rang through the entire forest. The guests were both in shock and in awe at what we had just witnessed. The leopard held on to the throat of the stag for a good ten minutes before the stag slowly stopped moving entirely, as the leopard dragged the kill behind a thin tree. The entire sequence played out in an open patch of grassland, and we watched as the leopard started to feed. In complete contrast to what most natural history accounts mention, the leopard started feeding from the rump - usually behaviour associated with tigers. Having seen the entire sequence of events and dusk fast approaching we decided to drive towards camp.

We were excitedly discussing the past hour when all off a sudden we noticed that a tiger was lying a mere two metres from the track. We could not believe our luck this evening. We watched as this young tigress rolled around barely acknowledging our presence. After the guests got their photographs, we waited a couple more minutes before the tigress slowly got up and walked away into the thicket. With time running out we drove back to camp. This was possibly among the most exciting safaris the guests had witnessed and a fantastic way to end the day in Nagarhole National Park.

#### **Day 5: Friday 29 April 2022**

This morning we were in zone B. We entered by 06:15 and drove straight to Sigur Junction - a crossing that led to a few productive inlets. We waited there for alarm calls, but the morning seemed to be quiet. After checking President's Corner and a couple of other inlets, we decided to wait at sunset point, an area with an expansive view. We were notified that a pair of Indian wild dogs were seen in zone B, a fair distance away from us and the guests were thrilled at even the prospect of seeing the wild dogs. We drove straight to the area, and a little short of where the wild dogs were reportedly seen, we came across a magnificent tusker. We stopped to look at him briefly and decided to come back for him since we were keen to see the wild dogs.

As we got to the area, a vehicle was watching the pair, three metres from the track. We slowly edged forward and stopped behind the other vehicle and watched the wild dogs rolling in the grass and playing. It was two young males, possibly siblings. This was a special moment as it was the first time the guests saw

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Indian wild dogs. We watched them chase each other and play fight, and then after a few minutes they ran into the thicket and disappeared. We waited around and with no sign of them, drove to some inlets where we could possibly catch them again.

After a whole hour, we found the two dogs running along the water's edge in one of the inlets. We followed them until the road permitted and drove to the next bay in anticipation. A few minutes after we arrived, we saw the dogs trotting in our direction. We waited as a lone tusker kept us company and then the wild dogs finally came nearby and suddenly decided to cross the shallows and head for the far bank. They were heading straight for the tusker. This was something none of us had seen before. The dogs ran towards the tusker and gave chase. What ensued was loud trumpeting and puffs of dust as the elephant tried to drive the wild dogs away. The whole interaction barely lasted a couple of minutes before the elephant drove the dogs into the woodland. A breath-taking scenario had played out in front of us, and it was an amazing morning in the Nagarhole National Park.

We were back in zone A this evening and our plan was to check the water bodies in the south-eastern part of the park as we had done the previous day. We received an update on our way that there was a tiger that had been seen in one of the water holes. As we reached Temple Tank, a line of vehicles had queued up by the water but there were no sign of tiger in the water. We scanned the bund covered with foliage and the white underbelly of the tiger was barely visible in the undergrowth. We waited in anticipation and about half an hour later the tigress finally got up, walked straight towards our vehicle, and then crouched behind a small scrub. It was amazing to see an animal that size, disappear in front of our eyes! The tigress eventually went into the water and lay in the pool, with her head resting gracefully on a small boulder. We watched her as she cooled off in the afternoon sun, and then a good 20 minutes later she got up and disappeared back into the thicket.

We decided to drive on to the north-western part of the park to look for the famed black leopard. On our way there the most unexpected thing happened – a sloth bear came onto the road, ahead of us and froze on seeing our vehicle. The guests managed to get a look and take a few photos. In a fraction of a second the bear bounded away after hearing another vehicle approaching. The moment was brief but seeing a bear in Nagarhole this summer was proving difficult, so the guests were overjoyed with their luck this evening. We looked for the sloth bear again but with no luck, so we continued towards the Barballe stream and a few minutes later the skies opened up above us. It was a heavy downpour, so we decided to drive back to camp.

#### **Day 6: Saturday 30 April 2022**

After the heavy downpour the previous evening, we were expecting the forest to come alive today. We entered zone B early and drove to some of the inlets along the backwaters of the Kabini River. There was barely any movement in any of the inlets, and it was eerily quiet. At about 07:00, the bird activity picked up due to a post shower insect frenzy. We saw vernal hanging parakeet, streak-throated woodpecker, Malabar starling, crested serpent eagle, rufous woodpecker and a number of displaying peacocks. The morning may have been quiet on the mammal front but was certainly alive with birdlife.

This evening we were back in zone A, and the first waterhole as soon as you enter the park was a hive of activity, with a sub-adult tigress sitting in the water. The guests had some good views and took plenty of photos. The tigress lay in the algal waters for a good half an hour and then slowly got up and disappeared over the bund. We waited for a while further up the road, but sadly there was no sign of her again. As we were leaving the area, we received a tip-off about a tigress in the south-eastern part of the park. The area was frequented by a mother with cubs so we could not pass on the opportunity. We drove there and waited for close to an hour, where we heard a few alarm calls which was likely to be from them moving around deep in the woodland.

After a while we decided to check some water bodies in the area. On our way there we came across two magnificent tuskers, both of which were in the early stages of musth (peak breeding phase). The males

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tend to be aggressive and unpredictable during this phase, but the two tuskers were busy going about their business, paying us no heed. With dusk fast approaching, we decided to check the north-west corner of the park, the abode of the black leopard. We combed the area around the Barballe stream but with no luck. As we were losing light, we decided to drive back to camp, and close to the park gate there was nice surprise waiting for us - the two wild dogs we had seen the previous day were walking towards us. With no time left, we decided to leave the wild dogs and head back to camp.

### **Day 7: Sunday 1 May 2022**

This morning we were back in zone B and the showers had continued for one more night. As with the previous morning, there wasn't much activity. There were no alarm calls, and the herbivores were not to be seen. We enjoyed views of crested hawk eagle, crested serpent eagle, velvet-fronted nuthatch, vernal hanging parrot, streak-throated woodpecker, and a number of other species. The surprise of the morning was a black-naped hare, and the guests enjoyed a good view of the hare which are usually quite nocturnal, resting during the day. After a pleasant morning of birding, we drove back to camp.

Since the morning was quiet, we were anticipating an active evening. As we drove into the park, the weather started to turn for the worse. Dark clouds gathered overhead, and it started to drizzle. We continued, hoping that the rain would abate – our patience paid off as ten minutes later the skies cleared. We drove to the water bodies in the south-east corner of zone A but sadly there was barely any sign of life, with the rains altering the pattern of animal movement. After checking the area, we drove to the north-west corner trying our luck with the black leopard one last evening. We combed the Barballe stream and its surrounds. As we were preparing to circle back, we received information of a leopard being seen close to one of the forest camps. We drove there to find two vehicles parked along a straight stretch of road, looking at a leopard sprawled comfortably on a branch about 50 metres away from the track. The guests managed to see the leopard and take a few photographs. Dusk was fast approaching, so we drove back to camp for our last night in Nagarhole.

### **Day 8: Monday 2 May 2022**

It was our last day in Nagarhole National Park, and the past week had been good to us, with spectacular wildlife viewing. We were back in zone A and decided to focus our efforts in trying to find the black leopard one last time. We tried an alternate approach. Rather than drive through the entire park to get to the northwest corner, we decided to enter from the elephant camp - a camp for domestic forest department elephants.

On our way there, a mere 100 metres from the camp, we heard strong bonnet macaque alarm calls. We decided to wait it out and see how it played out as the frequency of the alarm calls suggested there was possibly a leopard in the area. After about ten minutes and a fair bit of backing up and going forward, we caught a glimpse of a tiger. We waited there and a couple of minutes later, a magnificent male tiger walked out of the undergrowth and slowly crossed the road ahead of us. We watched as the tiger disappeared into the bush - we could not believe our luck.

Wanting to see what else was in store for we drove to the area of the black leopard. We combed the area carefully, but we reluctantly left the park for the last time. After a hearty breakfast and bidding farewell to the lodge staff, we drove back to our hotel in Bangalore for the night. A day's rest was certainly well deserved before the flight back to Heathrow.

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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
	<b>BIRDS</b>	<i>AVES</i>								
1	Ruddy shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	✓				✓			
2	Indian spot-billed duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	
3	Indian peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Gray junglefowl	<i>Gallus sonneratii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Rock pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓			✓		
6	Oriental turtle-dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Spotted dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>		✓	✓				✓	
8	Yellow-footed green-pigeon	<i>Treron phoenicopterus</i>				✓			✓	
9	Green imperial-pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>					✓			
10	Common hawk-cuckoo	<i>Hierococcyx varius</i>	✓				✓	✓		✓
11	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>					✓			
12	Red-wattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>					✓			



14	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					✓			
15	Small pratincole	<i>Glareola lactea</i>					✓			
16	Little tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>					✓			
17	River tern	<i>Sterna aurantia</i>		✓			✓		✓	
18	Asian openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>				✓	✓			
19	Woolly-necked stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	✓				✓		✓	
20	Painted stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>					✓			
21	Oriental darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
22	Little cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>					✓			
23	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					✓			
24	Indian cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>					✓			
25	Gray heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
26	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					✓		✓	
27	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓			✓	✓		
28	Intermediate egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>	✓				✓			
29	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓			✓	✓		
30	Indian pond-heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
31	Black-headed ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>					✓			

32	Red-naped ibis	<i>Pseudibis papillosa</i>					✓			✓
33	Oriental honey-buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	✓			✓		✓	✓	
34	Crested serpent-eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
35	White-eyed buzzard	<i>Butastur teesa</i>								
36	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>				✓				
37	Brahminy kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>			✓		✓		✓	
38	Gray-headed fish-eagle	<i>Haliaeetus ichhyaetus</i>					✓		✓	✓
39	Brown fish-owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>							✓	
40	Jungle owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>				✓				
41	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	
42	White-throated kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Green bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>							✓	
44	Chestnut-headed bee-eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>								✓
45	Indian roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
46	White-cheeked barbet	<i>Psilopogon viridis</i>			✓					
47	Greater flameback	<i>Chrysocolaptes guttacristatus</i>				✓				
48	Black-rumped flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	
49	Streak-throated woodpecker	<i>Picus xanthopygaeus</i>		✓		✓		✓		

50	Rose-ringed parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>					✓			
51	Plum-headed parakeet	<i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>				✓			✓	
52	Malabar parakeet	<i>Psittacula columboides</i>							✓	
53	Small minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>			✓			✓		
54	Black-hooded oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>					✓			
55	Black drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>		✓		✓			✓	
56	Greater racket-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>						✓	✓	
57	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
58	Cinereous tit	<i>Parus cinereus</i>						✓		
59	Red-vented bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>					✓		✓	
60	Red-whiskered bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>		✓						
61	Jungle babbler	<i>Argya striata</i>		✓						
62	Yellow-billed babbler	<i>Argya affinis</i>					✓			
63	Indian nuthatch	<i>Sitta castanea</i>			✓					
64	Brahminy starling	<i>Sturnia pagodarum</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
65	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Oriental magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓		
67	Tickell's blue flycatcher	<i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>						✓		

	<b>MAMMALS</b>	<i>MAMMALIA</i>								
1	Spotted deer	<i>Axis axis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Sambar deer	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Barking deer	<i>Muntiacus muntjac</i>						✓		
4	Gaur	<i>Bos gaurus</i>		✓			✓			
5	Bengal tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
6	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>		✓		✓			✓	
7	Dhole	<i>Cuon alpinus</i>					✓	✓		
8	Ruddy mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>						✓		
9	Stripe-necked mongoose	<i>Herpestes vitticollis</i>			✓	✓	✓			
10	Indian grey mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>						✓		
11	Black-footed grey langur	<i>Semnopithecus hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Bonnet macaque	<i>Macaca radiata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
13	Wild pig	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
14	Smooth-coated otter	<i>Lutrogale perspicillata</i>					✓			
15	Indian giant squirrel	<i>Rutufa indica</i>			✓	✓				
16	Asian elephant	<i>Elephus maximus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
17	Three-striped palm squirrel	<i>Funanbulus palmarum</i>						✓		

<b>18</b>	Sloth bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>					✓			
<b>19</b>	Black-naped hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>							✓	