

## Tour Report

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

4 – 11 April 2022

Leopard



Indian wild dog



Elephant



Tiger



Compiled by Varun Devaraj

Images by Cara Patel

## **Day 1: Monday 4 April 2022**

The guests arrived at Kabini River Lodge, after a flight from London, a five-hour drive from Bengaluru and a quick breakfast stop at Goldfinch retreat. We then met for lunch and post lunch we set off at 15:00 for our first safari in the Nagarhole National Park (Kabini). This evening we were in zone B, one of two zones in the park, a scenic area along the northern shores of the Kabini River.

We drove along the backwaters and came across our first herd of spotted deer and troops of black-footed grey langur. After combing through a couple of inlets we arrived at President's Corner. A picturesque bay with sweeping views of the Kabini reservoir. A small herd of Asian elephants were grazing at the edge of the water. We watched the herd for a while. While at President's Corner we received a message from another vehicle that a leopard had been seen close by. We drove to the area to find that the leopard had dragged its spotted deer kill into the lantana thicket. There were a few jeeps present, so we waited for a few minutes and managed to get a glimpse of the leopard. Some of the guests just about managed to see the leopard. It was not great viewing, but with leopards that's sometimes the case.

After a while we drove to another inlet to look for a tiger that had been seen earlier in the afternoon. We arrived at Sunset point, a wide-open expanse with views of the Kabini reservoir. There was a large herd of spotted deer and a few elephants grazing in the open. A few minutes in, we heard the growl of a tiger and realised that it had got close to the elephant herd. The spotted deer started calling in alarm and the elephants, who had a calf with them charged the tiger and drove the tiger deep into the undergrowth. The lead matriarch followed the tiger deep into the bush as the tiger and the herd disappeared from view. The ensuing drama was brief but quite unbelievable. It is not often that you get to see an interaction between elephants and a tiger. What a stellar start to the week in Kabini.

## **Day 2: Tuesday 5 April 2022**

On our first drive into zone A, we decided to check the north-western corner of the park along the Barballe stream. Once again, we found ourselves on the look for the famed black leopard. We looked at the leopard's usual haunts, evergreen patches along the Barballe stream and two large ficus trees with thick foliage. With no luck we decided to drive to the south-east corner and explore the watering holes.

At one of the water holes as we were waiting, we heard the snort of a gaur, usually a sign of a carnivore. With the guests glued to the bund behind the small waterbody, we scanned around for any signs. About a minute later, a magnificent male leopard climbed on top of the bund in open view and carefully scanned the area for the presence of other carnivores. After which the leopard tentatively approached the water and began to drink. All the while he constantly kept vigil, as the area was also frequented by tigers. Just as the leopard arrived, he quietly slipped away, and a few minutes later we heard alarm calls in the thick undergrowth. An amazing start to our first full day.

For our evening drive we started at 15:00 and were back in zone B. We drove along the backwaters of Kabini reservoir, with beautiful views of the waterfront teeming with spotted deer and sambar deer. We came across a pair of elephants, an impressive tusker and a female that were courting. After a few minutes with them, we decided to drive around and look for tigers.

At one area close to the water we saw a few vehicles lined up and just as we got there the guests were fortunate to get a glimpse of a tiger. As soon as we got there the tiger disappeared into the bush. We continued our drive and stopped at various points along the reservoir, abundant with woolly-necked storks, darters and egrets. After spending some time watching the birds, we decided to drive around as it was approaching dusk. We saw the same tiger once again from earlier in the evening. The forest this evening was ringing with alarm calls from spotted deer, sambar deer and the occasional langur. It was getting dark and we decided to drive back to camp. A lovely day in the forests of Kabini.

## **Day 3: Wednesday 6 April 2022**

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This morning we decided to drive to the south-eastern part of zone A, where a couple of water bodies had seen a fair bit of tiger activity. We drove to temple tank an area with wonderful ancient Chola ruins, a civilisation that once thrived in southern India. Upon hearing alarm calls we decided to wait at the temple tank and half an hour later there was no sign of any carnivore. With little over an hour left, we decided to check a large water body, Bisalwadi at the north-eastern corner of the park. On our way there we came across a tigress that casually sauntered on to the road from our left and decided to mark her territory along the road. For some of the guests it was the first proper view of a tiger. The tigress walked along the road marking and defecating as we followed at a safe distance. She trodded along for over five hundred metres as we followed and finally crossed over to the right and disappeared into the thicket. The guests were ecstatic and could not believe what we had just witnessed. We continued to track the tigress and caught up with her on a parallel road and saw her once again for a brief moment.

We continued on and were excitedly talking about our encounter when one of the guests spotted a leopard by the side of the road in a depression beyond a bund. We waited for a few seconds and the leopard came on to the bund, scanned the road ahead and slowly walked ahead of us for about 100 metres. Turning around every few seconds to check on our approaching vehicle. The leopard slowly left the road and disappeared into the undergrowth. The moment seemed surreal after the experience with the tiger and the morning could not have been more spectacular.

This evening we decided to go to our favourite place in zone B, President's Corner. A small bay that is a good place to see otters. As we got there the otters were sunbathing on a mud island in the middle of the Kabini River, a good distance away. As we were scanning the bay for birdlife, we noticed that a tiger was sitting in the bamboo thicket on the opposite bank nearly invisible, except for the white under belly. This bay certainly lived up to its reputation as a great spot. We waited a while for the tiger to approach the water, but that never materialised.

After a while we heard two elephants trumpeting loudly on the far bank, as the sound reverberated through the entire forest. We drove to another inlet which was closer to the elephants and watched them as they tussled one another in the river. We returned to President's Corner to see if the tiger had moved. The tiger was where we left it and eventually got up and disappeared into the bush. Watching a tiger and listening to elephant's trumpet in the background was certainly a nice way to spend an evening. A superb day overall in the Nagarhole National Park.

#### **Day 4: Thursday 7 April 2022**

We started our safari at 18:20 and drove to the south-eastern part of zone A as there had been some news about a tigress with cubs from the previous evening. We checked the areas around temple tank, tiger tank and Tarakka reservoir areas believed to be the tigress' home range. After considerable time and no luck we decided to drive on and check other areas. While we waited, we saw some stunning birds like the white-bellied woodpecker, amazing peacocks in the summer finery and green bee-eaters. We were also blessed with a couple of Indian giant squirrels in great light. As the day was getting warmer and approaching closing time, we left the park and drove back to camp.

We were back again in zone A this evening and decided to drive to the north-east corner of the park. We drove through areas that were less frequented to get an idea of the animal movement in those parts. As we climbed a steep section of the road, we came across a magnificent tusker deep in the bush. We drove slightly ahead and waited for him to come out in the open. It was worth the wait as he slowly made his way towards us and fed on a climber that lay on the ground. The dexterity of his trunk was a sight to behold, as he masterly stepped on one end and used his trunk to peel the climber. After about ten minutes, we decided to leave him alone and drove towards the Barballe stream. The jaunt of the now mythical black leopard. With no signs of the leopard, we drove to Bisalwadi, the perennial water source in the north-eastern corner of the park. We came across two herds of elephants wallowing in the water. After about 15 minutes, some commotion in front of our vehicle caught our eye. Two large-billed crows chased and pinned down a rose-ringed parakeet

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and went about dismembering the bird. A sight none of us had witnessed before and only read in some naturalist field notes.

As the temperatures dropped we decided to check the south-eastern corner again for the tigress and her cubs. As we got there we heard a lot of alarm calls but no luck with a sighting. While we waited a black-naped hare revealed its presence as it was trying to avoid being stepped on by a spotted deer stampede. A rare sight during the day as they generally are more crepuscular by nature. Another thoroughly enjoyable day in the forests of Kabini.

#### **Day 5: Friday 8 April 2022**

After an early start, we drove straight to the backwaters and our favourite area around President's Corner. The idea was to get there early and try and catch the otters leaving their den in the hedge glory thickets. A few minutes after we got there, six smooth-coated otters came out of the bush in the early morning mist and entered the water. The visibility was not great, but the scene was hauntingly beautiful. We waited for the otters in the next inlet, but they never made it back to land. We continued onwards in search of other wildlife and came across an old makhna (tuskless male) elephant. The makhna patiently fed on the nutritious grass oblivious to our presence.

We received some information that a sloth bear had been seen in another area of zone B and drove there. No luck with a sighting but we did see another magnificent bull elephant with sweeping tusks. We combed the area for the bear and checked another spot where a leopard had been seen earlier. No luck on either front but a nice morning, nonetheless.

The morning in zone A was fairly quiet, so we decided to drive around the park bird watching as there was no news of any sightings. We checked a couple of water bodies due to the humid afternoon conditions. As we were driving a vehicle crossed our path and informed us of a tiger sighting at the temple tank water hole. By the time we reached the water hole some vehicles were lined up, watching a tigress lying under a Banyan tree. We decide to watch her for a brief moment and then drive on as it was still early in the afternoon. After leaving temple tank we drove across to the north-west corner of the park and looked for the black leopard once again. With no luck, we decided to go back to Bisalwadi tank, the perennial water source. En route we came across a vehicle watching some birds. We waited there to pass them when all of a sudden, some grey jungle fowl were flushed out of the undergrowth. A clear sign of a carnivore. A few seconds later, a majestic male tiger appeared from the bush ahead of us. The tiger spray marked on a tree and walked across the road and disappeared into the bush. The moment was brief, but the guests saw their first male tiger in all its glory in perfect evening light. The sheer presence of a mature male tiger going about his day was breath-taking. Another splendid evening in Nagarhole National Park.

#### **Day 6: Saturday 9 April 2022**

Having had great sightings of both the tiger and leopard, we decided this morning to look for the elusive sloth bear. We combed the south-eastern part of zone B, which is open and peppered with termite mounds. A staple part of the bear's diet. After the first couple of hours driving around and no luck, we decide to check the backwaters. The birdlife after the previous night's shower was fantastic. We watched minivets, green imperial pigeon, greater racket-tailed drongos, white-cheeked barbets and the ubiquitous crested serpent eagle. As we resigned ourselves to the fact that it was a quiet morning on the mammal front, we decided to check one last road. In the past few days there was news of the presence of a pair of wild dogs in the area. We scanned the area and decided to head back to camp, when at far bank a considerable distance away, we saw two wild dogs by the edge of the water. As we got closer, they jumped in and out of the water playing without a care in the world. The past week's search for them finally paid off. The guests were overjoyed as we observed some great behaviour between the pair. The park closing time was approaching and we had to reluctantly leave them behind to make it back to camp.

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This evening we were back in zone A. We entered from the elephant camp at Balle and headed straight for the north-west corner, the area frequented by the black leopard. We spent some time there combing the road parallel to the Barballe stream but with no luck of a sighting. We then checked a couple of water bodies in the south-eastern corner of the park. The activity this evening was surprising low after last night's downpour. On our way out of the park we caught a glimpse of a tiger disappear over the bund at one of the water bodies. The guests managed to see the tiger for a brief second before it vanished into the bush. As we were losing light, we headed back to camp.

### **Day 7: Sunday 10 April 2022**

At first light we entered zone B and decided to explore the bays around the backwaters of Kabini. The area had been kind to us in the past and we were hoping for the same this morning. At sunset bay, a wide expanse with sweeping views of the reservoir, there was news of the movement of a tiger. We had no luck on the tiger front but did enjoy incredibly beautiful views early in the day. After we checked a couple of inlets, we drove President's corner. We spent time scanning the bamboo clumps at the edge of the forest. An area frequently used by tigers for the shade. Having seen nothing, we decided to drive on. As the vehicle took a corner, one of the guests gestured excitedly to stop. All the while a young male tiger was sprawled in the open grassland, hiding in plain sight. An absolute surprise as the spotted deer in the area showed no signs of alarm. We spent the next 15 minutes watching the tiger as he turned from side to side, yawned and catch the morning sun. After a while he got up and walked into the bamboo thicket. A wonderful start to our morning.

We continued checking every inlet for signs of the wild dogs. Having seen them in the area before, we wanted closer views. The elephant camp at Balle was another area where the wild dogs were seen from time to time. Twenty minutes of searching the area proved unsuccessful. On our way back to the main gate as luck would have it, the same pair of wild dogs were half-heartedly hunting a herd of spotted deer. We got really close on this occasion and followed them for almost 3 kilometres. The pair moved along the motorable tracks and every so often would scan the area for prey and the presence of big cats. The wild dogs seemed oblivious to our presence and gave us the privilege of following them on the daily routine. An amazing way to finish the morning.

This evening we were back in zone A. We drove to around the north-west corner. The haunt of the black leopard as it was our last drive in zone A. We wanted to spend as much time along the Barballe stream to increase our chances of seeing the elusive black leopard. After a considerable amount of time searching the evergreen patches of the Barballe stream, we reluctantly left the area. With no luck in the other parts of the park, our time in Kabini was drawing to a quiet end. As we were leaving the park, we received information of a tiger been seen in an area close to the park gate. With dusk fast approaching, we decided to drive to the area. Upon getting there, a line of vehicles were leaving the area back to camp. Having come a fair distance, we stuck around for a few minutes. This turned out to be the right decision as the famed backwater female, an ageing tigress who had reared some of the tigers we had seen over the past week, walked head on towards our vehicle. The tigress stopped every few metres to spray mark and defecate, all the while walking towards us. An amazing sight. With time running out we left zone A for the last time.

### **Day 8: Monday 11 April.**

Our last drive into Nagarhole National Park was a pleasant morning. We were back in zone B. The mood was fairly relaxed as the past week had produced some amazing opportunities for wildlife viewing. The idea this morning was to check the usual areas without a specific target. We stopped to watch white-bellied woodpeckers, streak-throated woodpeckers and bulbuls. We checked a few inlets before we got to President's Corner. On our way we saw a vehicle parked intently looking in the undergrowth. We waited to see how this played out and a few minutes later a tiger walked onto the road ahead of us and slowly inched its way in our direction. It took us a few minutes to realise that it was the same tigress from last evening. The backwater female had covered a considerable distance given her age. The tigress was continuing to spray

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mark and mark her territory. Having watched her for a few minutes we decided to maintain our distance and let her go about her business. A truly magical end to our week in Nagarhole.

Post a quick breakfast in camp, we set off to our hotel in Bangalore and enjoyed a well-deserved day's rest 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	Lesser whistling-duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>						✓	✓	
2	Ruddy shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>					✓			
3	Indian Spot-billed duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>	✓	✓				✓		
4	Indian peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Red spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix spadicea</i>						✓		
6	Gray junglefowl	<i>Gallus sonneratii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Rock pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓					
8	Eurasian collared-dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>						✓		
9	Spotted dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Green imperial-pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>							✓	
11	Blue-faced Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus viridirostris</i>						✓		
12	Common hawk-cuckoo	<i>Hierococcyx varius</i>	✓		✓				✓	✓

13	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>							✓	
14	Red-wattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
15	River tern	<i>Sterna aurantia</i>		✓					✓	
16	Asian openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>	✓			✓		✓		✓
17	Woolly-necked stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
18	Oriental darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	✓				✓	✓		✓
19	Little cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>					✓			
20	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓			✓			✓	✓
21	Indian cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>		✓						
22	Gray heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓			✓		✓	✓
23	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					✓			
24	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓				✓		✓
25	Intermediate egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>						✓		
26	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>							✓	
27	Indian pond-heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	✓			✓			✓	
28	Black-headed ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>						✓		
29	Red-naped ibis	<i>Pseudibis papillosa</i>					✓			
30	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		✓					✓	



31	Oriental honey-buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>				✓				
32	Red-headed vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>				✓				
33	White-rumped vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>				✓				
34	Indian vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>				✓				
35	Crested serpent-eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓	
36	White-eyed buzzard	<i>Butastur teesa</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	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				✓			✓	
41	White-throated kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
42	Green bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
43	Chestnut-headed bee-eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>					✓	✓		
44	Indian roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
45	White-cheeked barbet	<i>Psilopogon viridis</i>				✓			✓	✓
46	Black-rumped flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>	✓		✓		✓			
47	Streak-throated woodpecker	<i>Picus xanthopygaeus</i>				✓			✓	✓
48	White-bellied woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus javensis</i>	✓			✓			✓	✓

49	Rose-ringed parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>					✓	✓		
50	Malabar parakeet	<i>Psittacula columboides</i>		✓						
51	Black-hooded oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>							✓	
52	Black drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	✓	✓			✓			✓
53	Greater racket-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>	✓						✓	✓
54	Indian paradise-flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>						✓		
55	Long-tailed shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>			✓				✓	
56	Rufous treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>			✓					
57	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>		✓					✓	
58	Large-billed crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</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	Indian nuthatch	<i>Sitta castanea</i>					✓			
63	Southern hill myna	<i>Gracula indica</i>					✓			
64	Brahminy starling	<i>Sturnia pagodarum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
66	Oriental magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓

67	Gray wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓					✓	
68	White-browed wagtail	<i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i>						✓		x
	<b>MAMMALS</b>	<b>MAMMALIA</b>								
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	Black-footed grey langur	<i>Semnopithecus hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Bonnet macaque	<i>Macaca radiata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
12	Wild pig	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Smooth-coated otter	<i>Lutrogale perspicillata</i>			✓		✓			
14	Indian giant squirrel	<i>Rutufa indica</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
15	Asian elephant	<i>Elephus maximus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

16	Three-striped palm squirrel	<i>Funanbulus palmarum</i>			✓			✓		
17	Black-naped hare	<i>Lepus nigricolis</i>				✓				