

Tour Report

North-west India's Rare Mammals

5 – 17 November 2022

Striped hyena



Jungle cat



Desert fox



Leopard



Compiled by Ashwin HP
Images by Neil Haggart

Day 1: Saturday 5 November 2022

The group departed the UK on overnight flights for Gujarat via Delhi.

Day 2: Sunday 6 November 2022

We drove from Ahmedabad to Blackbuck Lodge, Velavadar in five hours just before lunch. The guests checked into their luxurious rooms, had a nice lunch, and went off to the park for the first safari of the tour. The park was right next door to the lodge and a vast grassland welcomed us. As soon as we entered the park, we saw some blackbucks running from something. We stopped to see what had caused the excitement, but after a few minutes we hadn't seen anything so we carried on with our drive. We saw a vast number of blackbucks in different groups and several harriers (pallid, Montagu's and marsh, both male & female). We returned to the lodge at 18:00 as it was quite dark, finishing the day with a nice early supper.

Day 3: Monday 7 November 2022

We started early at 06:00; it was still twilight. Arriving into the park at first light, we saw a lot of harriers flying out of their roosting site, as well as more blackbuck and nilghai. There were also flocks of common crane in small groups, and some common kestrels. We then noticed blue-cheeked bee-eater perched on a bush against the light, so we tried to get the right light on them for the best views and photography. I saw some movement on the road ahead, and just then a jungle cat walked across the road, barely a few metres from our car. The cat was moving parallel to our car, so we parked in a clearing which gave us a good view of the jungle cat as it walked out of the grass and the crossed the road just behind our car. We then headed back to the bee eaters to get some good pictures. By 09:00, we were heading back to the lodge for breakfast.

After a nice lunch and some rest, we headed back to the park at 16:00, where we were greeted by more blackbucks, nilghai and calling common cranes. We decided to visit a different part of the park with a big waterbody and grassland area to check. On the way we saw big groups of blackbucks, with males were guarding, or herding, their females. Female nilghai with their young were grazing calmly, common cranes were seen with their young ones, and harriers were flying everywhere.

We were scouting the vast grasslands on the edge of the park, when our naturalist spotted something almost a mile away in the grass. Making out two blobs of grey, he shouted: "Wolves! Wolves!", getting all of us on our feet. The group tried to find the wolves in the vast grassland, until eventually our guide pointed out exactly where to look. Through our binoculars we finally saw the grey blobs rolling around in the grass. I requested use of one of the client's camera to take a picture, as he has a good zoom on it, and we could clearly make out their shape in the pictures. Our first canid on the tour. We spent our evening with the wolves and came back to the lodge after dark.

Day 4: Tuesday 8 November 2022

Following our previous evening's sighting, we went straight back to the place where we had seen the wolves. As predicted they had moved from their resting place, and we roamed the entire park looking for them. In doing so, we spotted an Indian fox returning to its den and calling for its mate – we had pretty good light for this sighting. We also saw another jungle cat moving through the grassland, along with common cranes, harriers, and a couple of pairs of lesser kestrels which are winter migrants here, so not a common sighting. However, there was no sign of the wolves. Heading back to the lodge after the safari, we still had a long day ahead. We were heading to Little Rann of Kutch for the evening.

After a good four or five hours on the road, we arrived at Raan Riders by Kaafila, a beautiful property. We had a nice lunch, then we were off for our first drive in the Raan, driven by Samat Khan, an experienced naturalist at the lodge. The drive to the park was a dusty route through villages, and once we entered the

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park we were welcomed by a heard of grazing wild ass. We got some good shots of the animals, then moved on to the large water body nearby to see hordes of birds of all sorts. There were maybe a few thousand of them: pelicans, stilts, spoonbills, ibis, egrets, ducks, harriers and many more. After our birding session, we carried on with our drive in search of other animals. We didn't have much luck spotting animals that evening, so we came back to the water body for a nice sun downer of coffee and tea. With the setting sun before us, we relaxed and enjoyed our cuppa. On our way back, we used the spotlight to find a few species on the way, we picked out an Indian fox, a desert fox, and a very large jungle cat. After these sightings we returned to the lodge.

Day 5: Wednesday 9 November 2022

On Wednesday morning we were up early and away from the lodge by 05:30. In the dark, we began our drive to a far-off part to the eastern side of the park to look for hyena. We had heard they had a den site in that area. Driving on some bad roads, we arrived to a part of the Rann which had taken over by the exotic plant *Prosopis Julifera*, a weed in these parts. The animals here used bushes and forests of these weeds as hiding places during the day. The hyena den turned out to be an old one, so we stopped for breakfast and tea. The morning had been a little slow, but we still managed to see plenty of birds and wild ass. We headed back to the lodge by midday.

We headed back to the park at 15:00, and we were taken to the western side. We reached the area after 45 minutes, after picking up another guide on the way. We had a trick up our sleeves, driving straight to a part of the park which was secluded, with few visitors. We parked our jeep and walked through the prosopis for a minute or two (this is allowed in this park).

We arrived at an active hyena den. The moment we walked in, we saw the hyena in the distance, moving away from the den. Our guests didn't get a glimpse of the animal, so we decided to wait, moving back to a place where we would have a clear line of sight if the animal decided to come back. We sat on the ground a few metres away from the den. Almost an hour had passed, when I saw some movement in the bushes at the back so I asked the guests to be ready.

In the next few minutes, a striped hyena walked back to toward its den. As we anticipated, he walked along the path, giving us a clear line of sight. We sat on the far side of the line while he watched us, sniffed at us, then having realised we were no threat, walked slowly to his den and sat there watching us. Excitement was running high as we were so close that we could barely move or talk. For a while, we kept quite watching this rare, magnificent animal which was so close to us. It started getting dark, so we finally decided to leave the animal in peace, and slowly walked back to our jeep. We headed back to the lodge, delighted.

Day 6: Thursday 10 November 2022

The next morning we decided to go birding; we saw a Eurasian hobby, harriers, greater spotted eagle, and lesser flamingos. The light and the scenery near the flamingos was so good that we decided to eat breakfast there. It was a beautiful morning with plenty of raptor sightings. After breakfast we headed back to the lodge early.

In the evening, we decided to try and find the hyena again, so we left a little earlier than usual. Reaching the location, we scouted around for a little while, looking for short-eared owls resting under the prosopis tree for shade. We started seeing them in pairs and larger groups, enjoying an amazing viewing experience of a lovely species which is known to migrate long distances. Shortly after the owls, we drove straight on to see the hyena, which was sitting in the exact same place as the previous evening. The hyena got up and left just as we approached the den and didn't return in the evening. We came back to lodge after dark.

Day 7: Friday 11 November 2022

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On Friday morning we started early, so as to reach Jawai, in Bera, for our safari. After a five to six hour drive and packed breakfast, we reached Jawai at lunch time and were ready to leave for the afternoon safari. Our driver and guide was ready at the hotel to take us for the evening drive, and we ventured out to a rocky outcrop next to a village, where we saw two leopard siblings moving around on the rocks. It was quite an interesting sighting. Around dusk, we headed off in search of the smallest wild cat in the world, the rusty-spotted cat, though we didn't manage to spot one. We also squeezed in a night drive, seeing desert fox and Indian fox on our travels. Then it was back to the lodge for dinner.

Day 8: Saturday 12 November 2022

We set off early to look for the small cat. We were unlucky again, though at a separate location we found leopards. It was pretty cold that morning, so we decided to have some tea in the beautiful location. After a final check for the rusty-spotted cat, we headed back to the lodge.

In the evening, we set out to a different location which promised foxes. After dark, we started heading back, but on the way we saw a number of Indian foxes and ticked Indian gazelle (chinkara) off on our species checklist. The Indian fox sightings were pretty good, as they were busy foraging for the berries. We called it a night and headed back to the lodge.

Day 9: Sunday 13 November 2022

Heading back to the rocky hillock just behind the lodge in early morning, we tried our luck at finding leopards. We had received information that female leopards had moved to this area. Heading straight to the place, we enjoyed a breath-taking view of the Jawai Dam: the dam back waters were on one side, while the rocky hillocks were on the other.

We saw a lot of bird activity from where we were parked, then one of the drivers spotted movement and announced that the female leopard was on the move. We spotted her trying to climb on to a big rock. She sat there, looking out over the entire landscape, and half an hour later the cubs came out and climbed on her. They sat next to her for a short time, then climbed down, giving us a brief opportunity to see them all together.

Later, she also moved down and none could see her for a while, but then she climbed onto a triangular rock and sat on its edge looking over her territory. We briefly saw the cubs playing, climbing on top of the neem trees around her, but nothing more. After enjoying a good viewing of the leopard and cubs, we bid them adieu and headed back to the lodge. Then it was time for us to leave for our next destination.

We faced another long drive, but as we didn't have an activity for the evening we took things slow and arrived in the evening. A warm cultural event was organised for us, so we sat and listened to some of the songs from the region.

Day 10: Monday 14 November 2022

The next morning we took things easy, driving to a small town just 15 minutes from our hotel. There we met Mr. Seva Ram, who has been working with scientists and researchers from all over the country to save and protect the demoiselle cranes. He invited us up to his roof top, offering us tea and great viewing of some 5,000 cranes flying overhead, then coming to land at the feeding ground in front of us. It was truly a spectacular sight. After breakfast, we headed for our last destination of the tour, "The Golden City" of Jaisalmer, which was less than four hours away.

Arriving at our desert camp, we had some time to rest. Then we headed out to look for the rare great Indian bustard. We roamed the park seeing many different species of birds, including wheatears, larks, buzzards, and falcons. Then our driver shouted "GIB!" "GIB?", we wondered, "What is that?" Then he said "bustard" slowly, and to our relief saw a male bustard, which was quite some distance away. We could still

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see him very clearly - the beautiful white thick neck, the black cap on his head, and his brown body. The light was fantastic too, and we could see him as he walked around catching insects.

We spent the next half an hour watching the bustard, he was magnificent. When he moved further away from us, we contained our drive, only to stumble on a short-toed snake eagle with its red sand boa kill, then next to him, a steppe eagle waiting for its chance to steal the meal. As this waiting game was going on, we saw another steppe eagle getting pecked by a pair of laggar falcons. Due to the attack, the eagle just landed on the ground and did not fly again until its falcon assailants flew away. The falcons came very close to where we were and perched on a fence post, giving us some amazing viewing.

A few chinkaras moved around in the background, and the desert landscape was adding to the beauty of the sunset. It was just gorgeous being out there. Heading back to the camp after dark, we decided to make the most of our stay by going for a night drive. The weather was not on our side though that evening, but the heavy winds and cold didn't deter us from going out to look for the animals.

Half an hour into the drive we started seeing desert foxes roaming around in the landscape. We also spotted a cat, which was thankfully walking towards us from our right. As it came closer, we could see it clearly. It was desert cat, our very first sighting! He walked across the road we were on and carried on walking away into the darkness. It was an amazing sighting, along with so many desert foxes that night. We retired back to the camp pretty late.

Day 11: Tuesday 15 November 2022

The morning weather was pretty misty and gloomy. It was still a little cold, and the sun was not due to come out till 09:00, so we decided to look for birds perched on the bushes. We had sightings of long legged buzzard, common kestrel, lesser kestrel, merlin, peregrine falcon, steppe eagle, Egyptian vulture, red-tailed wheatear (a rather rare sighting), and many other species of birds. We then headed back for the camp for a late breakfast.

The evening was pleasant, as the wind had died down, which made for a lot better for travelling in a open vehicle. A few minutes into the drive, we saw eight bustards, along with many other raptors perched on the ground or a small bush. We also saw some chinkara. At a small water body, we saw thousands of rosy starlings coming down to drink, which later put up quite a show of murmuration.

On our evening drive the landscape was spectacular. I spotted a desert fox on a sand dune, which ran away even before I could show it to the others. We got out of the jeep to look for it, but with no luck. We decided to explore the landscape, looking out for the shy, elusive animals, but the mesmerising landscape made us stop and have tea, while watching the sun go down.

We decided have an early dinner and go back for a night drive. We stumbled upon a beautiful Indian hedgehog, and more desert foxes, before we called it a night.

Day 12: Wednesday 16 November 2022

It was our last drive of the tour, and the guests had wanted to see a desert fox in the day. I suspected that, since the cold was setting in, some foxes would be on their den, trying to get the first rays of sun and warming themselves. We reached a landscape with lots of small bushes, which provided ideal cover for the foxes. We saw a lot of den sites, some of which were old and some were new, but no foxes anywhere.

After roaming for another half hour or so, we spotted a desert fox sitting under a bush sunning itself. The golden light added to the beauty of the animal, making it look like a golden fox. The fox made our day, as it was quite a beautiful sighting. We kept looking for more, but as the sun rose up it was getting too hot and we decided to head back to camp. It was our last day at the Desert National Park, so we also needed time to pack.

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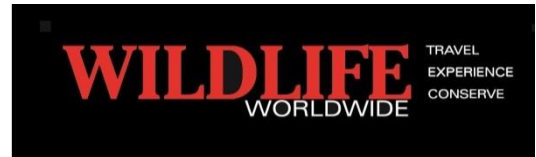
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We had a nice stay at the camp, saying good bye to two of the group and seeing them off on their onward journey in Rajasthan. The remainder of the group and myself started our journey back to the airport to catch our afternoon flights to Mumbai – Heathrow and Delhi respectively.

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Checklist



	Common Name
	BIRDS
1	Grey francolin
2	Jungle bush quail
3	Barred button quail
4	Indian peafowl
5	Greylag goose
6	Lesser whistling duck
7	Ruddy shelduck
8	Cotton pygmy goose
9	Mallard
10	Indian spot billed duck
11	Northern shoveler
12	Garganey
13	Northern pintail
14	Common teal
15	Little grebe
16	Painted stork
17	Black stork
18	Wolly necked stork
19	White stork
20	Lesser flamingo
21	Black-headed ibis
22	Red naped ibis
23	Glossy ibis
24	Eurasian spoonbill

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25	Black-crowned night heron
26	Indian pond heron
27	Grey heron
28	Purple heron
29	Cattle egret
30	Great egret
31	Intermediate egret
32	Little egret
33	Western reef egret
34	Great white pelican
35	Dalmatian pelican
36	Darter
37	Little cormorant
38	Indian cormorant
39	Lesser kestrel
40	Common kestrel
41	Red necked falcon
42	Merlin
43	Eurasian hobby
44	Laggar falcon
45	Peregrine falcon
46	Balck kite
47	Brahminy kite
48	Black winged kite
49	Oriental honey buzzard
50	Egyptian vulture
51	Indian vulture
52	Short-toed snake eagle
53	Eurasian marsh harrier

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54	Pallied harrier
55	Montagu's harrier
56	Shikra
57	Eurasian sparrowhawk
58	Long-legged buzzard
59	White-eyed buzzard
60	Indian spotted eagle
61	Greater spotted eagle
62	Tawny eagle
63	Steppe eagle
64	Great Indian bustard
65	Macqueen's bustard
66	White-breasted water hen
67	Purple swamphen
68	Common moorhen
69	Eurasian coot
70	Demoiselle crane
71	Common crane
72	Black-winged stilt
73	Red wattled lapwing
74	Little ringed plover
75	Kentish plover
76	Black-tailed godwit
77	Whimbrel
78	Common redshank
79	Common greenshank
80	Marsh sandpiper
81	Green sandpiper
82	Wood sandpiper

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83	Common sandpiper
84	Little stint
85	Temminck's stint
86	Brown-headed gull
87	River tern
88	Little tern
89	Whiskered tern
90	Chestnut-bellied sandgrouse
91	Common pigeon
92	Oriental turtle dove
93	Eursian collared dove
94	Spotted dove
95	Red collared dove
96	Laughing dove
97	Yellow-footed green pigeon
98	Rose-ringed parakeet
99	Jacobins's cuckoo
100	Asian koel
101	Greater coucal
102	Short eared owl
103	Spotted owlet
104	Indian eagle owl
105	Little swift
106	Common hoopoe
107	Indian roller
108	European roller
109	Common kingfisher
110	White-throated kingfisher
111	Pied kingfisher

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112	Green bee-eater
113	Blue-cheeked bee-eater
114	Blue-tailed bee-eater
115	Indian grey hornbill
116	Coppersmith barbet
117	Eurasian wryneck
118	Yellow-crowned woodpecker
119	Large cuckoo shrike
120	Common iora
121	Isabelline shrike
122	Bay-backed shrike
123	Long-tailed shrike
124	Southern grey shrike
125	Red-tailed shrike
126	Black drongo
127	Indian golden oriole
128	Asian paradise flycatcher
129	White browed fantail flycatcher
130	Rufous treepie
131	Eastern jungle crow
132	Punjab raven
133	House crow
134	Great tit
135	Dusky crag martin
136	Wire tailed swallow
137	Barn swallow
138	Indian bushlark
139	Bimaculated lark
140	Rufous-tailed lark

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141	Greater short-toed lark
142	Ashy crowned sparrow lark
143	Crested lark
144	Oriental skylark
145	White-eared bulbul
146	Red-vented bulbul
147	Ashy prinia
148	Plain prinia
149	Zitting cisticola
150	Common tailor bird
151	Clamorous reed warbler
152	Lesser whitethroat
153	Common babbler
154	Large grey babbler
155	Jungle babbler
156	Common myna
157	Bank myna
158	Brahminy starling
159	Rosy starling
160	Bluethroat
161	Oriental magpie robin
162	Indian robin
163	Black redstart
164	Common stonechat
165	Pied bushchat
166	Isabelline wheatear
167	Desert wheatear
168	Variable wheatear
169	Red-tailed wheatear

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170	Blue-capped rock thrush
171	Purple sunbird
172	House sparrow
173	Chestnut-shouldered petronia
174	Baya weaverbird
175	Indian silverbill
176	Red avadavat
177	Scaly-breasted munia
178	Grey wagtail
179	White wagtail
180	White-browed wagtail
181	Paddyfield pipit
182	Tawny pipit
	MAMMALS
1	Indian grey wolf
2	Striped hyena
3	Indian fox
4	Desert fox
5	Desert cat
6	Nilghai
7	Indian gazelle
8	Wild boar
9	Jungle cat
10	Leopard
11	Desert gerbil
12	Indian hedgehog
13	Asiatic wild ass
14	Western plains langur

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