

LADAKH – QUEST FOR A SNOW LEOPARD

8th - 19th February 2019

It had long been an ambition to visit Ladakh in winter to search for the near mythical Snow Leopard, though most trips seemed to involve camping and much hard trekking. When a work colleague put us on to Snow Leopard Lodge in Uley, this sounded like the trip for us, so we wasted no time in contacting LK at Encounters Asia (www.encountersasia.com) and booking. The total cost was just over US\$10,000 for the two of us (my wife, Wendy, and I) for the Snow Leopard trip, with the extension to Satpura, associated air fares, a day excursion to Sultanpur, and other sundry additions adding a further US\$3,000 to the total. All the arrangements were handled by LK and worked well. Our local guide in Ladakh, Gulzar, and his brother Imran run Frozen Himalaya (www.frozenhimalaya.com) a travel company based in Leh whom Encounters Asia use for the Snow Leopard quest, so if you were just doing that, they may be worth contacting direct.

The lodge holds c.12 people, and the annex associated with it a similar number, the 20 or so of us just about doubling the population of the village. Although everyone congregates at a Leopard (or other) sighting, we travelled in a fleet of smaller vehicles, with a driver, 2 or 3 guests, and maybe a guide in each. A system which allows flexibility and one that worked well.

8th February, arr. Delhi

Arrived Delhi just after midday following Malaysia Airways flight from Auckland via Kuala Lumpur. **Black Kite** was our first bird in India, seen from the plane as we taxied to the terminal. Only a short distance to our hotel, but took quite a while due to the traffic. Added **House Crow**, both **Common** and **Bank Myna**, the ubiquitous **Rock Pigeon** plus single **Red-wattled Lapwing** and **White-throated Kingfisher**. By the time we'd checked in and eaten, it was already late afternoon. Being a bit jet-lagged and with an early start the following morning, we took a quick turn around the small hotel grounds (adding **Ring-necked Parakeet** to our fledgling list) and turned in for the night.

9th February, arr. Leh

A 4am pick-up for the short drive back to the airport and then a most spectacular flight up into the Himalaya to Leh at c.3,500m. Though sunny, it was -13°C when we got off the plane, a short bus ride brought us to our home for the next 3 nights, The Grand Dragon Hotel. Certainly grand, with a spectacular view toward the mountains, the centrepiece being 6,135m Stok Kan Gri, the highest peak in the Zaskar range, a magnificent view from both our room here, and up at Uley. Met our local guide, Gulzar, who gave us strict instructions to take things very easy today to help us acclimatize. **European Magpie** and, of course, **Rock Pigeon** seen, though the latter here a bit more interesting than usual. Not showing the variety of Feral Pigeons in most places, the birds here also showed whitish rump patches. Studying the field guide, they would seem to be genuine wild **Rock Pigeons** of the subspecies *neglecta*.

10th February, Leh

Another day devoted to acclimatisation. Morning excursion, 8.30am to noon, took us to Thicksey Gumpa and Shey. Still minus a few degrees, but little wind. Thicksey Gumpa, a 15th century monastery was very ornate, though we could feel the 200 steps up to it at this altitude! Few birds apart from **Rock Pigeons**, but saw a few **Mallards** and **White-winged Redstarts** on route.

Shey was an area on the Indus river floodplain dominated by pollarded **Willows**, **Poplars** and **Sea Buckthorn**. Plenty more **White-winged Redstarts** (presumably wintering in flocks at these "low" altitudes, the only one we'd seen before much higher up in Nepal in April), lots of **Magpies** and a

lone **Common Sandpiper**. Also had the first 2 lifers of the trip, a **Brown Accentor** followed by a male **Red-fronted Serin**.

The afternoon was spent mainly exploring the town of Leh, a **Great Tit** in the hotel grounds and a **Red-billed Chough** the only birds of note.

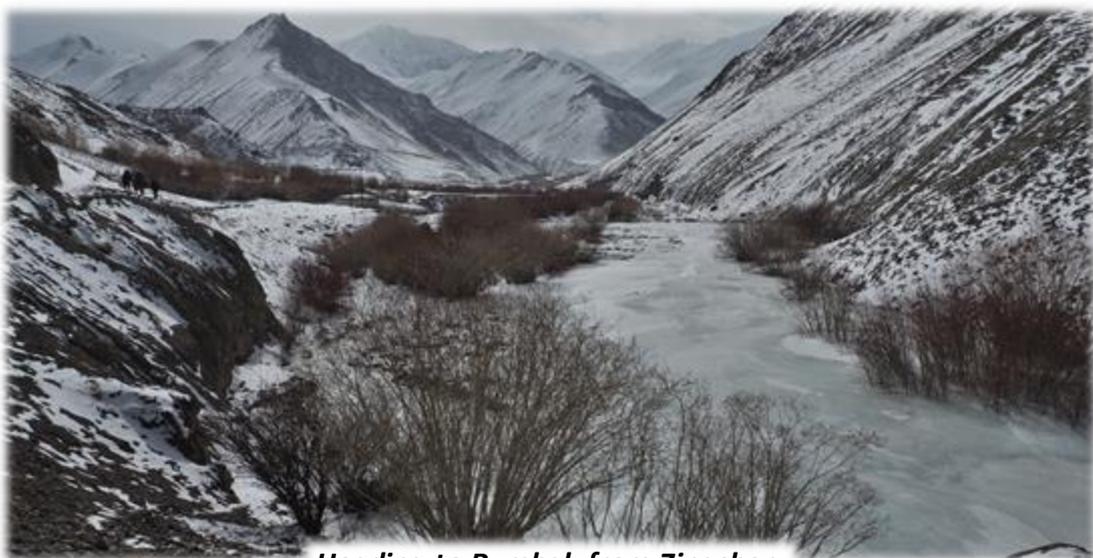
11th February, Hemis National Park

Woke to a thin, fresh covering of snow outside the hotel, low, but clearing cloud, and -8°C. Set out 8am with Imran, Gulzar's brother, as our guide, for the one hour drive to Hemis NP at Zingchen and started walking from there 9.15am. Our start point was not much higher than Leh, and we were to follow a small, frozen river up to Rumbak at c.3,850m. Unfortunately Wendy had a bad stomach upset (I'd had a mild case the day before) so didn't join us, but Marion, another member of the group who'd been laid low yesterday but, like us, had opted for an extra days acclimatisation, was fit again.

Scenery was spectacular in a stark sort of way, very arid, **Willows** the staple of what vegetation there was, though we also identified **Mountain Rose**, and little in the way of wildlife. With the river solid ice, no wind and few people, we could experience the sort of silence rarely found anywhere.

A **Magpie** was seen soon after we set out, the next birds 2 **Golden Eagles** and a **Himalayan Griffon** high above the ridge on our right. A flock of c.12 **Blue Sheep** were watched through the scope, the favourite food of Snow Leopards, and rumours that one of these latter beasts had been seen nr Rumbak also reached us. Not that it made us hurry, that was pretty much impossible given the altitude! On we plodded, adding a **Great Tit** at Husing, eventually reaching Rumbak at 12.30pm.

This area is the traditional one for Snow Leopard trips, ones which involve camping, so whilst we were glad we were heading up to a more comfortable lodge at Uley, it was still good to visit Hemis NP. Passing a few campsites, we could see the assembled masses (about 25 people) on a nearby paddock, scopes trained on a distant mountain ridge. The rumours were true! We joined them and soon had good scope views of a very distant **Snow Leopard** (estimated to be 2-2.5km away). Watched it for about 90 minutes, a beautiful creature indeed, though the experience somewhat detracted from by the sheer distance, the tracking collar it was wearing, and Wendy not being with me to enjoy the moment. Still, it was a wild Snow Leopard on day 1 of our search, after a very enjoyable walk, and before we'd even got to Uley, so nothing to complain about! It moved around a bit showing itself off, but never looked like coming any nearer to us sadly.



Heading to Rumbak from Zingchen

Whilst here, we also saw 5 **Lammergeiers** circling, even further away than the cat, and 5 **Tibetan Partridges**, another lifer. By 2pm, the Leopard was almost on the skyline and a gentle breeze had got up making things distinctly chilly, so we retreated about 15 minutes back toward the village and scanned the ridge again, 2.15-3.15pm. We couldn't pick out the animal again, despite many folk trying, and had to make do with 3 more **Blue Sheep**, 3 very distant **Himalayan Snowcock**, and 2 equally distant **Red-billed Chough**.

Much easier walking down, so we were back at the vehicles by 4.45pm. I don't recall seeing a single animal or bird the whole way. A quick stop at Spituk (5.20-5.30pm) to look for Ibisbills produced nothing, and we were back at the hotel by 6pm after a very enjoyable day.

12th February, Leh to Uley

Another thin dusting of snow this morning, a leisurely start (9.30am) and a balmy -5°C. Time to add **House Sparrow** to our trip list in the hotel grounds, along with **Rock Pigeon** and **Magpie** before setting out. The plan was to drive to Uley with one or two birding/wildlife stops on route. The first of these had us wondering a bit when our driver, in his limited English, pointed out Hill Pigeons. Would have been nice, if only it were true, but they were clearly just **Rock Pigeons**! However, he had a very keen eye and soon found a group of **Chukar**, which, when we stopped to look, were accompanied by 3 **Horned Larks**. Next was a large (150+) flock of **Brandt's Mountain Finch**. I don't know what else we might have found, but around 10am our driver got word of a **Snow Leopard** at a place called Hemisshuk which was on an alternative route to Uley, the one we were now going to take!

We arrived at the site 11.10am, with several people already assembled and watching. High on a ridge in a steep, narrow valley, still very distant but much closer than yesterdays, we watched it for about 10 minutes until it got up and walked over the ridge out of view. We waited a couple of hours hoping it would reappear (it didn't!) but we were able to watch a flock of c.15 **Ladakh Uril**, one of the Snow Leopards important prey species, plus **Lammergeier** and **Golden Eagle** overhead.

Around 1.20pm, news reached us that the same Leopard was visible from the other side of the ridge, so off we went. Stayed at this site 1.40- 4.10pm, with the animal in view pretty well the whole time. Two days, 2 **Snow Leopards**, a great start and, of course, Wendy got to enjoy this one too! Little did we know at the time, but this would be our last sighting of this majestic cat. Lunch, which was originally planned to be eaten at the lodge at Uley, somehow miraculously appeared at this site which was up a dead-end road in the middle of nowhere, the organisation here really was first rate!

Snow Leopard, high above Hemisshuk



After enjoying that, and another **Lammergeier** circling, we had a drive of just under 2 hours to our home for the next 6 nights, Snow Leopard Lodge at Uley, over one of the most amazing roads I've ever seen! Up and down, lots of hairpins, no much tarmac and plenty of snow covering it. Our driver though was excellent, and thankfully took things very slowly. We saw a few more **Chukar**, plus single **Brown Dipper** and **Eurasian Wren**, eventually arriving at 6pm. The end of another wonderful day.

13th February, Uley

With 6 nights (5 full days) at Uley, we were introduced to the routine. At 7am, a cheery face brings a cup of tea. The spotters are already out (quite a team spread over a wide area) of which one group are just above the lodge whom you are welcome to join should you so wish. Everyone then reconvenes for breakfast at 8.30am, when the news is collated and Gulzar and his team form a plan for the morning. Lunch can be either back at the lodge or out in the field depending on where we're going and what the plan is.

Today, there was little news of anything, some **Asiatic Ibex** grazing on a hillside above the lodge was the main highlight, so we set out at 9.45am to walk up the road above Uley for about an hour to a point from where we could view them. Uley is at c.4,000m and I really struggled! Nice **Robin Accentor**, **Magpie** and **Chukar** around the lodge, and single **Brown Dipper** and **Great Tit** from the walk. Overcast, -8°C and snowing very lightly. Spent a good hour watching the **Asiatic Ibex** with the scope, probably c.15 of them, males, females and young, clearly grazing, though difficult to tell on what on the barren, snow covered face they occupied. Also distant views of a **Lammergeier**, **Red-billed Chough** and 2 **Himalayan Snowcock**. Returned to the lodge for lunch c.1pm.

After a bit of a siesta, we went out again 4-5.30pm to the lookout just above the lodge. Watched what was presumably the same herd of **Asiatic Ibex**, still very distant, an even more distant, perched, **Golden Eagle**, single **Brown Accentor** and **White-winged Redstart**, plus **Robin Accentors**, **Red-billed Choughs**, **Magpies** and **Chukars**.

14th February, Uley

Breakfast time around the lodge saw sunshine, -3°C, and the usual suspects (**Chukar**, **Magpie**, **Robin Accentor** and **Great Tit**). Set out at 10am for a 30 minute drive to Yang Thang where we spent an hour. Main highlight here were Snow Leopard tracks, thought to be about 2 days old, but, alas, no sign of the creature that had made them. In fact, there was very little, a **Golden Eagle** from the road the only bird of note.



Brown (left) and Robin (right) Accentors, Uley

With deeper snow higher up, the theory was that the Leopard must have headed downhill, so we drove a few minutes further on to a viewpoint overlooking Saspotsey, the 2nd largest village in the area. **Chukar** and **White-winged Redstart** in the valley below, sunny and calm conditions (now feeling almost warm!) but not much else. Stayed in this vicinity until 1.30pm before returning to the lodge c.2.15pm for a late lunch.

Walked up the road above the lodge again in the afternoon (3.45-6.10pm, +5°C when we set out, -1°C when we got back) pausing for a while at one of the lookouts. The same herd of **Asiatic Ibex** we'd watched yesterday were still busily grazing on not much, a huge spiral of **Choughs** (150-200 birds, presumably Red-billed though too distant to tell) seen high over a distant ridge, along with **Lammergeier** and at least 3 **Golden Eagles**. A **Brown Dipper** was watched feeding vigorously in the un-frozen parts of the river below the road and a **White-winged Redstart** flew by. When we returned to the viewpoint where some of the team had stayed, we were shown a sleeping **Red Fox** in the scope, interestingly mostly grey in colour, and a **Wallcreeper** flew high over us. I doubt I would have ticked it had it been a lifer, but the distinctive, butterfly-like flight rendered it unmistakable, even if it was impossible to discern any of its great plumage.

15th February, Uley

Wendy and I headed back up the road for an hour before breakfast (7.20-8.15am), -8.5°C, very dull, but calm. Two **Brown Dipper** on the river, and a **Brown Accentor** accompanied the regular quartet, but it was nice being out on our own.

With nothing to report from the spotters, we set out by car at 9.45am to head down toward Hemisshukpachan, the largest village in the region, and one we'd passed on our way up to Uley a few days ago. By this time it had warmed up to -2.3°C, but the cloud was still low and it was snowing. Only small flakes, but fairly steady, conditions which were to continue throughout the day. A short stop allowed brief views of a **Robin Accentor** and a **Brown Accentor** together, another stop a flock of c.150 **Brandt's Mountain Finch**, and a third, in Hemisshukpachan, 2 **Eurasian Wren** and another **Brown Accentor**. **Chukar** and **Magpie** seen regularly throughout.

Between 11am and 12 noon, we left the vehicles and walked down the road. More **Chukar**, a **White-winged Redstart** and a **Red Fox** which ran across the road before being quickly lost was the sum total of sightings, though it was a pleasant enough walk in the falling snow. The cars followed us, producing tea and biscuits as they seemed to do frequently, and during this break one of the spotters found a group of c.5 **Ladakh Urial** high on a hillside. It was a great effort by him to spot them, but we all got OK scope views. Left at 12.40pm for the drive back to the lodge for lunch. Due to the snow which had been falling all morning, it was an "interesting" drive back up the hill, the only sighting of note another **Red Fox**. Fortunately our drivers did a great job and we all arrived safely c.2pm.

With visibility decreasing further, and the snow continuing to fall, most of us didn't venture out again in the afternoon, a good opportunity to catch up on notes, photo sorting etc.

16th February, Uley

Awoke to c.5cm of fresh snow, but the skies were clear, and, consequently, it was the coldest morning of the trip at -16°C. Went out for a short walk before breakfast, 7.15-8am, just up the road above the lodge and back. Lots of Woolly Hare tracks, and at least 1 set of Red Fox tracks, though no sign of either creature. In fact, not much in the way of wildlife at all; single **Magpie**, **Robin Accentor** and **Brown Accentor** (even the Chukar and Great Tit had deserted us today!), but also one very nice surprise with 2 **Streaked Rosefinches** by the river. Much darker than the Great (supposedly the more common here at this time of year) and without white discernible in the outer tail feathers. Lifers are always nice, even more so when unexpected!



The view from our room, Snow Leopard Lodge

Set out for the day at 9.50am, the sun shining and the thermometer already up to just -6°C. Lots of fresh snow, and the vehicles all arrived equipped with snow chains today. Soon saw the days first **Chukar** (perhaps they just don't like the cold?) and then found a set of "Wolf" tracks in the new snow on the road. Followed these a good few kms, but no sign of the animal itself (see tomorrow's notes!). Two **Asiatic Ibex** were spotted on a distant skyline, the days mammal list at last underway!

Below Yang Thang we got out of the vehicles and walked down a rather pleasant little valley to Sumdo (11am-12 noon) where we met the cars again and took tea (12-12.40pm). Another large (c.150) flock of **Brandt's Mountain Finch** seen in the valley, also more **Chukar** and **Magpies**, and a couple of **Red-billed Chough**. At Sumdo there were c.30 **White-winged Redstart** with c.10 **Brown Accentor** plus a **Golden Eagle** passing by on the other side of the valley. Resuming our walk down the road, we stopped again after a short distance and spent the next 30 minutes watching about 10 **Ladakh Urial** on an impossibly steep looking scree slope. Apparently they'd just descended to the river for a drink before returning to the higher ground they prefer. Seemed like a huge effort for a few mouthfuls of water!



Ladakh Urial on steep scree nr Yang Thang

From here we had a bit of a drive, first back out to NH1, the main road from Leh toward Srinagar we'd used on the day we came up to Uley, then up the same side road we'd used then, passing the spot where we'd first enjoyed the Snow Leopard, eventually stopping at 2.20pm for a late lunch just below Hemisshukpachan. It was sunny, but although the wind was fairly gentle, it had a real bite to it. There was a recent kill a few hundred meters away we were told, so the plan was to wait in the hope the Snow Leopard might return.

It hadn't by the time we left at 5pm, but the afternoon produced the most productive birding so far. A flock of 50-60 **Hill Pigeon** was the days 2nd lifer, quickly followed by the 3rd, two **White-browed Tit Warblers**. Typically skulky, they spent much time in a **Sea Buckthorn**, but did give occasional great views, a stunning little bird and one I'd definitely hoped to see. There was more as we walked up to the village and back. The first big terrace held **Brown Accentor**, **Horned Lark** and **Great Rosefinch**. **Chukar** and **Magpie** were everywhere, and in the village itself, we had our first **Great Tit** of the day and a **Brown Dipper** on the river.

It took about an hour to drive back to the lodge, much less snow (and therefore easier driving) than yesterday. The thermometer at the lodge still read -7°C. Presumably it had got a bit warmer during the day, though not much snow had melted in Uley itself.

17th February, Uley

There had been talk of an earlier start today, but spotters had found the carcass discovered yesterday still intact so we reverted to the usual plan for our last full day at Uley.

Set out 9.45am, quite sunny and already up to -4°C after a clear and chilly night. The basic route for the day was the loop we'd driven yesterday, just in the opposite direction. Our first stop was just 15 minutes down the road at a corner we'd stopped at briefly on several occasions looking, without success, for **Wallcreeper**. Spent an hour (10-11am) walking up the valley and back, initially following a **Red Fox**. Lots of **Woolly Hare** tracks (no Hares) and the remains of a **Chukar** (perhaps the fox's breakfast?) was all we saw, but it was a pleasant walk.

A little lower down we saw 2 **Brown Dippers** on the river, then 2 **Eurasian Wren** in the same spot in **Hemisshukpachan** we'd seen them a couple of days ago. 12.10-12.50pm we stopped for tea just below the village in the same place we'd found plenty of birds yesterday, and found a similar collection. Lots of **Chukar**, several **White-winged Redstart**, c.25 **Horned Lark**, a few **Great Rosefinch** and 25-30 **Hill Pigeon**.

Another half hours walk down the road produced precisely nothing, but no sooner had we got back into the vehicles than we were out again, this time to watch 6 **Ladakh Urial**, our closest views of them yet. After turning off the main highway, there were lots of **Chukar** and **White-winged Redstart** and we eventually stopped at 2.40pm for a late lunch below **Saspotsey**. The morning sun had been short lived (though it returned just before we got back to Uley) and it felt quite cold. Stayed in the area until 4.30pm (apparently there had been a brief sighting of **Snow Leopard** earlier),

spending some of the time being entertained by a **Wallcreeper** feeding amongst stones in a small creek with a **Eurasian Wren** for company. Only other sighting of note was the days second **Red Fox**.

Some excitement on the drive home when 2 "Wolf" were spotted in the area we'd seen



Wallcreeper below Saspotsey

tracks yesterday. Good views, though sadly one was a feral dog and the other a dog x wolf hybrid! Made us wonder about the true origins of the tracks that had excited us yesterday morning! Another **Red Fox** (possibly the one we'd seen at the start of the day) was also seen. Got back to the lodge c.5.30pm with the thermometer reading -7°C. It felt like it hadn't really warmed up all day, though I'm sure it had.

A quick look from the lookout above the lodge, just in case the Leopard had come back over the ridge from the Saspotsey valley ended another day in this amazing environment.

18th February, Uley to Leh

Set out at 6.45am before the sun was up in a chilly -12°C for a walk up the road behind the lodge. There had been many Woolly Hare tracks up here previously (and today) and we were keen to see one. Unfortunately, they were to remain elusive which surprised us a bit. Reading previous trips reports, it seems they are seen quite regularly, and the proliferation of tracks suggested they weren't exactly rare, yet, somehow, they successfully eluded us! Returned for breakfast at 8.15am having seen **Great Rosefinch**, **Red-billed Chough** and **White-winged Redstart** along with the usual quartet.



Ibisbill, nr Leh

Left at 9.50am for the return to Leh via the Saspotsey side of the loop with which we were now familiar, stopping for groups of 12, then 4, **Ladakh Urial**. Reaching the main highway, our first **Rock Pigeons** were seen at Nimmu, and a **Brown Accentor** at a brief stop at Pathar Sahib.

Turned off the main road at 12.30pm to head back up the road we'd taken a week ago toward Hemis NP. Stopping at the park boundary to look, without success, for Blue Sheep, we added **Goosander** to the trip list with a pair on the river. Crossing back over the Indus near Shey were **Mallards** and lots of **White-winged Redstarts**.

Our last stop before reaching Leh (1.45-2.05pm) was also on the Indus just out of town, and here we were successful in locating our prime target with a great view of 2 **Ibisbills** feeding amongst the pebbles in the river. Also a **Greenshank** for good measure.

After checking back into the Grand Dragon and partaking of a late lunch, our last excursion in Ladakh was to a small stream below the Shanti Stupa which allegedly, was a good place for Solitary Snipe. Saw **Wren** and **Brown Dipper**, but no snipe.

19th February, Leh – Delhi – Bhopal

A travel day taking Air India flights to Delhi, an afternoon in a hotel there, then on to Bhopal. Clouds hung over the mountains as we left Leh, so it was nowhere as spectacular as the flight in. Sad to be leaving, but plenty more to look forward to before returning to NZ!

On leaving Leh, our list was a modest 29 species of birds and 5 mammals. However, winter in these parts is always going to be fairly quiet so we weren't expecting a huge list. We'd had prolonged scope views of our main target, added 6 new birds to my list (20% of what we'd seen!), enjoyed great company, and, perhaps most impressive of all, some stupendous scenery.

Birds seen in Ladakh

Mallard	Common Greenshank	Brown Dipper
Common Merganser	Rock Pigeon	White-winged Redstart
Chukar	Hill Pigeon	Robin Accentor
Himalayan Snowcock	Eurasian Magpie	Brown Accentor
Tibetan Partridge	Red-billed Chough	Black-headed Mountain-
Lammergeier	Horned Lark	Finch
Himalayan Griffon	Great Tit	Streaked Rosefinch
Golden Eagle	White-browed Tit-Warbler	Great Rosefinch
Ibisbill	Wallcreeper	Fire-fronted Serin
Common Sandpiper	Eurasian Wren	House Sparrow

Mammals seen in Ladakh

Asiatic Ibex	Blue Sheep	Snow Leopard
Ladakh Urial	Red Fox	

SATPURA 20th – 23rd February 2019

20th February, Bhopal to Satpura

Stayed at Jehan Numa Retreat in Bhopal for the night. A fantastic place with what looked like great potential for birds in its grounds, though not arriving until 11pm, and leaving again at 8am, we didn't have anything like enough time to do it justice. Despite the lack of opportunity, still managed to rack up a list of 18 species, including a lifer in the form of **Indian Robin**. Other highlights were great views of **Yellow-eyed Babbler**, **Purple Sunbird**, **Ashy Prinia**, **Verditer Flycatcher**, **Oriental White-eye** and **Black Redstart**.

The driver who'd taken us from the airport to the hotel last night arrived bright and cheerful at the appointed hour, though we were startled to learn he is actually based at Forsyth Lodge (our home for the next 3 nights) and driven out there, then back, overnight! The journey took us from 8 to 11.20am with a few very short stops, and the days bird list grew rapidly. Within a couple of minutes of setting out, we passed a small wetland which held **Black-winged Stilt**, a large flock of **Black-headed Gull**, **Indian Spot-billed Duck** and a multitude of **Barn Swallows**.

Although really just looking from the car, we kept on finding interesting birds, **Green Bee-eater**, **Indian Roller** and **Long-tailed Shrike** fairly common, **Black-winged Kites** on several telegraph poles, **Little Swift**, **Indian Pond Heron** and both **Large-billed** and **House Crows**. A single **Rufous Treepie**, a wonderful view of a perched **Plum-headed Parakeet** found by our driver, a group of half a dozen circling **Indian Vulture** (another lifer) and 4 **Sarus Cranes** together in a wetland area that could have held all sorts had we but time to look. The drive took us through one part of the Satpura Reserve, where both **Rhesus Macaques** and **Northern Plains Langurs** were common along the roadside.

Pretty much the first bird seen at the lodge was a **Woolly-necked Stork** that flew over, then after a protracted lunch, **Purple Sunbird**, **Common Tailorbird**, a flock of **Jungle Babbler**, **White-browed Bulbul** (lifer #3 for the day) and a group of 3 **Indian Grey Mongoose** were seen.

Before lunch we were given a brief introduction to the park and how things operate here. Satpura translates to "Seven Mountains", though with the highest parts only reaching an altitude of c.1350m, the features for which it is named are more like large hills. The core area of the park is some 1370km², with the buffer zone (pretty much as good for wildlife) bringing it up to almost

3000km². Just 5% of the core area is open to visitors but that still provided ample for our short stay here.

As with many places in warmer climates, activities from the lodge take place morning and afternoon/evening with a gap in the middle of the day. Therefore, we headed out for a short drive and then walk along the Denwa River, the border between the Satpura Tiger Reserve proper and the buffer zone (3.45-6.40pm). The core area of the park is closed on Wednesdays, but it didn't really matter as there is great birding on both sides of the boundary. It was warm (not too hot, just very pleasant, and sunny).

A **Northern House Gecko** was duly observed as we were assembling to set out, and we saw several good birds even before we got to the river, just a few minutes away. First were about a dozen **Indian Grey Hornbill** heading to a large fig tree, and when we turned our binoculars onto the tree itself, there was a **Coppersmith Barbet** there too. Plenty of **Green Bee-eaters** flying and perching, a nice view of a **Spotted Owlet** in a hole in a tree, more **Plum-headed Parakeets** (not popular with locals apparently due to the damage they wreak on fruit trees) and both **Shikra** and **Common Kestrel**. Started walking c. 4.20pm.

The habitat was mainly dry mud in the river floodplain, with the river itself providing sustenance for many species. One of the first we saw was a new subspecies for me, a male "**Black-headed**" (**Yellow**) **Wagtail** (*Motacilla flava feldegg*), a fine looking individual it was too. A few pipits and larks caused ID challenges and much discussion with our lodge naturalist, Sae. I was eventually happy with **Tawny Pipit** and **Oriental Skylark**, much as we tried to turn the latter into Syke's Lark!

One of the birds we hoped to find here was the critically endangered **Black-bellied Tern**, and we were lucky enough to have one fine specimen fly by at close quarters. The larger **River Tern** was very common, both were lifers for me, and there was also **Little Tern**. Another key species here is the **Small Pratincole** of which we saw a handful, though the Indian Skimmer (very much on the "wanted" list here) eluded us. **Great** and **Little Cormorants** were noted, as were **Great** and **Little Egrets**, **Indian Spot-billed Ducks**, **Ruddy Shelduck** and an impressive flock of c.200 **Bar-headed Geese**. A spectacular view of **Painted Stork**, a large flock of **Woolly-necked Stork** and a lone **Asian Openbill** joined the list, as did **Black-headed** and **Red-naped Ibis**.

Shorebirds provided a mix of species we've seen in many places such as **Greenshank**, **Redshank**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Kentish Plover**, **Little Stint** and **Green** and **Common Sandpipers**, along with ones with which we were much less familiar, such as **River** and **Red-wattled Lapwings**. A few **Wire-tailed Swallows** flew amongst the **Barn Swallows**, there was a flock of 150+ **Eurasian Spoonbill** and a **Pied Kingfisher** fishing. Toward the end of the excursion there was a **Peregrine** perched in a tree, and a flock of c.10 **Black-crowned Night Herons**. At the start of the day, my Indian bird list had been 66 species, today had almost doubled it to 130, with 5 lifers into the bargain!

It wasn't just birds though, a **Mugger (Marsh Crocodile)** was seen swimming, whilst both **Spotted Deer** and **Wild Pig** had been noted across the river.

21st February, Satpura

The plan had been to head out to the core area of the reserve at 6am, but we woke c.5am to the sound of heavy rain and thunder. News was that the access and road conditions needed to be assessed and that there would be delay. It had stopped raining by c.5.30am, and in the event we weren't held up by much. Getting the green light, we left the lodge at 6.45am, stopping briefly to admire the days' first lifer, a couple of **Malabar Pied Hornbills**, and were off on our jeep safari by 7am.

News was that a Leopard had been sighted close to where we set out from, and though we never saw it despite a good search, we were able to enjoy some agitated **Northern Plains Langurs**, a herd of **Spotted Deer**, and many birds. Several small flocks of **Chestnut-shouldered Petronias**, one,

maybe two, **Brown-headed Woodpeckers, Common Woodshrike, White-browed Fantail** (lifer #2 for the day), **Common Iora**, and a few more waterbirds helped swell the list. Chief amongst the latter was my first ever **Indian Cormorant**.

Everyone, it seems, wants to see a **Bengal Tiger** in India, and even though it was far from top of our list, when word came through there was one not too far away, off we went at rally-drive pace through the bush tracks to where half a dozen jeeps were already assembled. In other parts of the country there can be 10 times that



Sambar Deer, Satpura

many apparently, but that still didn't make the animal any easier to see as it was largely obscured in the long grass. Managed some sort of a view, though we were very glad we'd seem one much better in Nepal 5 years ago! Some nearby **Sambar Deer** gave us a much better look.

Next was breakfast (9-9.30am) at a place called Elephant Camp, one of only two spots in the park which can be used for a picnic, as the morning began to warm rapidly. Our butterfly list got underway soon after setting out again with **Common Mormon, Common Sailer, Common Crow,**



Gaur, Satpura

Tawny Coster and **Striped Tiger**. The next area we checked had recently been very reliable for one of the species we had come to Satpura to look for, Sloth Bear (the other was Wild Dogs, though with those particularly, there's a much greater element of luck required). Despite the confidence of Sae, our naturalist, that we would not only find a female but her cub too, we didn't! Did see some more **Sambar Deer** and a magnificent herd of **Gaur** as well as adding a few more birds (**Oriental Honey Buzzard, Stonechat** and **Black-hooded Oriole**, the latter bringing the

Indian list to a nice, round, 150 to end the morning) and 2 **Mugger Crocodiles** before we exited the park by crossing the river bridge again at 11am.

Lunch and the traditional siesta over the hottest part of the day followed, though there's always wildlife to see and as we assembled for the former we were shown a **Bronze-backed Tree Snake** in the rafters of the main building. Quite small, non-venomous, and very pretty.

Out again at 4.20pm for a late afternoon/night drive in the buffer zone. The lanes near the lodge added **Brahminy Starling** and **Pied Bushchat** to our list, but the main occupation in the pre-dark period was sitting in the jeep at various waterholes hoping for something to happen. It was quite warm, and we watched the clouds build up as we observed thunder and lightning. It looked

like we in for a downpour and might have to curtail activities, but fortunately it all passed over without a drop of rain.



Sloth Bears, mother with cubs, Satpura

A **Grey Wagtail** was the major (only!) activity at the first dam (5.15-5.40pm), but the second (5.45-6.30pm) turned up what we'd been hoping for. We had to wait a bit, then the local guide spotted some movement in the undergrowth, **Sloth Bears!** The mother and her two cubs were known to be in the area, and after a slow and careful approach toward us, we

got a great view of all 3 drinking together at the waters edge. Didn't stick around long, but a magical sight!

We stayed out until 8.50pm, and as we drove around in the dark, all sorts of things were seen. Around 6 **Sambar Deer** in 1's and 2's (one of which, when it's eye shine was first spotted, caused great excitement as it was thought to be a Leopard) a **Nilgai**, 2 **Indian Hare**, 3 **Indian Gerbil** (one of which gave us an excellent view, though the other two vanished almost as quickly as they were seen!), 3 **Wild Pigs**, 4 **Eurasian Thick-knee**, a **Grey (Jungle) Nightjar** sitting on the track, a **Barn Owl** and 3 **Spotted Owlets!** A wonderful night drive!

22nd February, Satpura

Departed the lodge 6.30am for a second jeep safari in the core area of the reserve (6.45-11am). An **Indian Hare** seen on the short drive to the boundary, and a **Peregrine** as we crossed the river. We spent our time in a similar area to yesterday, but we still added several new species to our trip list. Two **Oriental Honey Buzzards** perched for us giving reasonable views through the trees. Apparently they're known as "pigeon heads" due to the shape of their head which sounds like a rather derogatory term to me! Sae was particularly excited by the **Long-tailed Minivets**, not common here and a new bird for her. Before the breakfast stop back at Elephant Camp (8.50-9.30am) we'd also seen **White-bellied Drongo**, **Stonechat**, **Alexadrine Parakeet**, **Green Sandpiper**, three **Tigers** (siblings that have been hanging around together. It was one of these we saw yesterday, but all 3 were just about visible today, one giving us great views and photo



Mottled Wood Owl, Satpura

opportunities), **Northern Grey Langurs** and **Sambar Deer**.

As is the norm, temperatures soon began to soar once the sun starting getting up, and **Baronet** was added to our butterfly list, along with some of those seen yesterday. There were many more butterflies than we identified, but nice to at least work out some of them! **Crested Treeswifts** were also active, whilst 3 **Mottled Wood Owls** roosting together in an **Indian Ebony** weren't, but gave us excellent views (lifer)! Other highlights from the drive back to the river crossing were a flock of c.30 **Lesser Whistling Duck**, a soaring **Indian Vulture**, **Comb Duck**, **White-eyed Buzzard** and **Crested Serpent Eagle**. Away from birds more **Nilgai**, **Gaur** and **Spotted Deer**, and a small lizard I photographed and later ID'ed as a **Bronze Grass Skink**.

Escaping the core area, we crossed back over the Denwa just as a local farmer was driving his herd of Buffalo past. Accompanying the animals were **Grey**, **White** and **Yellow Wagtails**, **Cattle Egrets**, pipits and drongos.

Back at the lodge, today's lunchtime distraction were two **Puff-throated Babblers**.

Our afternoon excursion today was a boat trip on Denwa River. We were hoping to find the recently returned Indian Skimmers. The area holds about 12 pairs (so there are better places to them!) and though we missed out, there was, as always, much else to enjoy. Leaving the lodge just after 3.30pm, it was an hours drive to the launch site, mostly through crops of wheat and chick peas, the different habitat allowing us to see some different birds. The days 2nd lifer was **Rufous-tailed Lark**, which seemed to be fairly common around these parts, and there was also **Stonechat**, **Pied Bushchat**, **Zitting Cisticola** and **Tawny Pipit** amongst others.

We were out on the river 4.40-6.30pm, returning just as the sun was setting. The Skimmers nest in amongst the terns, which were just getting started for the season. Lots of pairs of **River Terns** (low hundreds), and less, though still plentiful, **Small Pratincoles** as well as some **Little Terns**. Soon after setting out we had a good chance to study the differences between **Great**, **Little** and **Indian Cormorants** as all 3 were together on a small sand bar. Also saw c.6 **Black-bellied Terns** and a nice collection of other waterbirds and waders; **Little Ringed Plover**, **Redshank**, **Greenshank** and **Black-winged Stilt** we were familiar with, but as we returned in the fading light, 2 **Great Thick-knees** gave us our last lifer of the day.

The drive back in the dark, 6.30-7.30pm, was fairly quiet, but did produce some mammals with 2 **Common Palm Civets**, an **Indian Flying Fox** and an **Indian Hare**.

23rd February, Satpura and return to Bhopal & Delhi

Our final morning at Satpura, we once again headed for a drive in the core area ((6.40-11am). The sun didn't get so hot so early today, and this, perhaps coupled to the fact we went on some different tracks, enabled us to grow our bird list more than I was expecting. Soon after leaving



Grey (Jungle) Nightjar, Satpura

the park gates we were in an area we had been to, but this time we found the bird we'd missed yesterday with 2 roosting **Brown Fish Owls**, a great start. I had been surprised at the paucity of Woodpeckers given how many we'd seen 5 years ago in the Terai of Nepal, and how many of the species we were seeing here were similar to there, but today

went some way to rectifying that. We had the previously seen **Brown-capped Woodpecker** again, but also several **Lesser Goldenbacks**, a female **Streak-throated Woodpecker** and a male **Yellow-crowned. Greenish** and **Sulphur-bellied Warblers** were seen, so were **Jungle Prinia** and a male **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, also a great view of a **Grey (Jungle) Nightjar** perched at eye level right next to the jeep! A small flock of **Green Pigeons** held both **Orange-breasted** and **Yellow-footed**, more **Gaur** and a new mammal for us with 2 **Malabar Giant Squirrels**.

With all that to see in the cooler weather, breakfast was a little later than the last couple of days (9.40-10.20am) and being further from the entrance gates, there wasn't much time for anything on the way back other than driving. However, the breakfast stop on the Sonbhadra River was not only very scenic, it also had **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Grey** and **Striated Heron**, **Barn** and **Wire-tailed Swallow**, what would prove to be the days only lifer, **Dusky Crag Martin**, **Grey Wagtail**, 2 **River Terns**, a **Three-striped Palm Squirrel** and 2 **Mugger Crocodiles**.

It is only a short drive (less than 10 minutes) back from the river to the lodge, and on an uninspiring looking patch of short, dry grass that we'd crossed several times, today we found a small flock of **Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks**. Whether they'd just arrived, or whether we'd previously overlooked them, I don't know. We also saw **Shikra** again, and the **Spotted Owlet** in his usual tree hole.

Lunch, a siesta in the heat of the day, then a 4pm pick-up for the drive back to Bhopal and a late flight on to Delhi. Got to the Holiday Inn c. midnight, nothing of note on route.

Birds seen in Satpura

Lesser Whistling-Duck	Crested Serpent-Eagle	Yellow-footed Pigeon
Bar-headed Goose	Shikra	Alexandrine Parakeet
Comb Duck	White-eyed Buzzard	Rose-ringed Parakeet
Ruddy Shelduck	Eurasian Kestrel	Plum-headed Parakeet
Indian Spot-billed Duck	Peregrine Falcon	Greater Coucal
Green-winged Teal	White-breasted Waterhen	Barn Owl
Indian Peafowl	Common Moorhen	Brown Fish-Owl
Asian Openbill	Eurasian Thick-knee	Spotted Owlet
Woolly-necked Stork	Great Thick-knee	Mottled Wood-Owl
Painted Stork	River Lapwing	Gray Nightjar
Indian Cormorant	Red-wattled Lapwing	Crested Treeswift
Great Cormorant	Snowy Plover	Common Kingfisher
Little Cormorant	Little Ringed Plover	White-throated Kingfisher
Oriental Darter	Black-winged Stilt	Pied Kingfisher
Gray Heron	Common Sandpiper	Green Bee-eater
Great Egret	Green Sandpiper	Indian Roller
Little Egret	Common Greenshank	Indian Gray Hornbill
Cattle Egret	Common Redshank	Malabar Pied-Hornbill
Indian Pond-Heron	Little Stint	Brown-headed Barbet
Striated Heron	Small Pratincole	Coppersmith Barbet
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Little Tern	Brown-capped Woodpecker
Black-headed Ibis	Black-bellied Tern	Yellow-crowned
Red-naped Ibis	River Tern	Woodpecker
Eurasian Spoonbill	Eurasian Collared-Dove	Streak-throated
Oriental Honey-buzzard	Spotted Dove	Woodpecker
Black-shouldered Kite	Laughing Dove	Black-rumped Flameback
Indian Vulture	Orange-breasted Pigeon	Common Woodshrike

Common Iora
Long-tailed Minivet
Long-tailed Shrike
Black-hooded Oriole
Black Drongo
Ashy Drongo
White-bellied Drongo
Greater Racket-tailed
Drongo
White-browed Fantail
Rufous Treepie
Large-billed Crow
Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark
Rufous-tailed Lark
Oriental Skylark
Dusky Crag-Martin
Barn Swallow

Wire-tailed Swallow
Common House-Martin
Great Tit
Red-vented Bulbul
White-browed Bulbul
Sulphur-bellied Warbler
Greenish Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Common Tailorbird
Jungle Prinia
Red-breasted Flycatcher
Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher
Oriental Magpie-Robin
Indian Robin
Stonechat
Pied Bushchat
Blue Rock-Thrush

Puff-throated Babbler
Jungle Babbler
Oriental White-eye
Common Myna
Brahminy Starling
Golden-fronted Leafbird
Purple Sunbird
Western Yellow Wagtail
Gray Wagtail
White Wagtail
White-browed Wagtail
Tawny Pipit
Tree Pipit
Olive-backed Pipit
House Sparrow
Chestnut-shouldered
Petronia

Mammals seen in Satpura

Rhesus Macaque
Northern Plains (Hanuman)
Langur
Sambar Deer
Spotted Deer
Nilgai

Gaur
Wild Pig
Sloth Bear
Tiger
Common Palm Civet
Grey Mongoose

Indian Hare
Indian (Malabar) Giant
Squirrel
Three-striped Palm Squirrel
Indian Giant Flying Squirrel
Indian Gerbil

A note on Forsyth Lodge

This had been our accommodation for the last 3 nights, booked, along with most of the activities and everything else on this trip with Encounter Asia. I'm sure it's possible to book direct. It's one of 3 lodges close to the park, priding itself on its point of difference being that it works much harder to employ locals where possible, something we like to support. It also tries very hard to reduce plastics etc, something else we applaud strongly.

We found the place excellent; keen, friendly and attentive staff, good food, a wealth of knowledge of the areas natural history, and very much a "can do" attitude with regard to our requests for changes of plans for excursions and with Wendy's dietary requirements.

On arrival, we were introduced to Sae, our lodge naturalist, who, whilst new to the job, knew what to do, was keen to learn more, and was excellent company. She was with us on all our excursions, and drove whilst we were in the buffer zone. She realised our priorities and suggested the best activities to realise them. We took a local guide on each excursion, mostly good spotters with little English (though variable!), and, for core area drives, a local driver. Core area drives need to be booked and cost a little extra (we did an extra one for about US\$60 one morning).

General plan (for us) was a drive in the core area in the morning leaving the lodge c.6.30am and leaving the park by 11am (that's all the permits allow for), back to the lodge for lunch, then out again anywhere between 3.30 and 4.30pm for a walk/night drive/boat trip. The core area is closed on Wednesday afternoons, but the buffer zone is just as good (better even for some things!) so it's no big deal.

A most excellent place to stay that we couldn't recommend highly enough. We could easily have spent more time here.

24th February, Sultanpur NP

After a late night, we had a leisurely start today. Harish, our guide for the trip, picked us up at 9.30am. We had been warned that although the park is only a few kms from Delhi, it can regularly take 1½ - 2 hours to get there depending on traffic. Perhaps because it was a Sunday, we made it in just under an hour, and back in only slightly more. I had really looked upon our visit as not much more than something to productively fill the time between getting back from Bhopal and getting out flight out of the country c.11pm. First impressions did nothing to dispel that thought, lots of people, a very well manicured path around a large lake, and some lawns by the entrance, though I couldn't have been more wrong!

Once we started birding (completing the circumnavigation of the lake between 10.20am and 2.10pm, it proved to be excellent. 81 species in under 4 hours gives a good idea, a few Nilgai, and, near the entrance, lots of 5-Stripe Palm Squirrels. Also several Soft-shelled Turtles.

Lots of waterbirds (plus a few others) boosted our trip list, though most of the new species were common ducks or waders in the UK. Apart from the spectacle of so many birds, the highlights would be as follows;

Feruginous Duck, 4 of them and one of 4 lifers. A bird I had seen before in the UK, but with the almost ever present question mark over their origin there, one I had omitted from my list, so great to tick them at last.

Painted Stork colony. A couple of dozen or so pairs with 5 month old chicks occupying a large tree.

Black-necked Stork. A single pair had bred on the reserve, and we saw the adults and their two offspring.

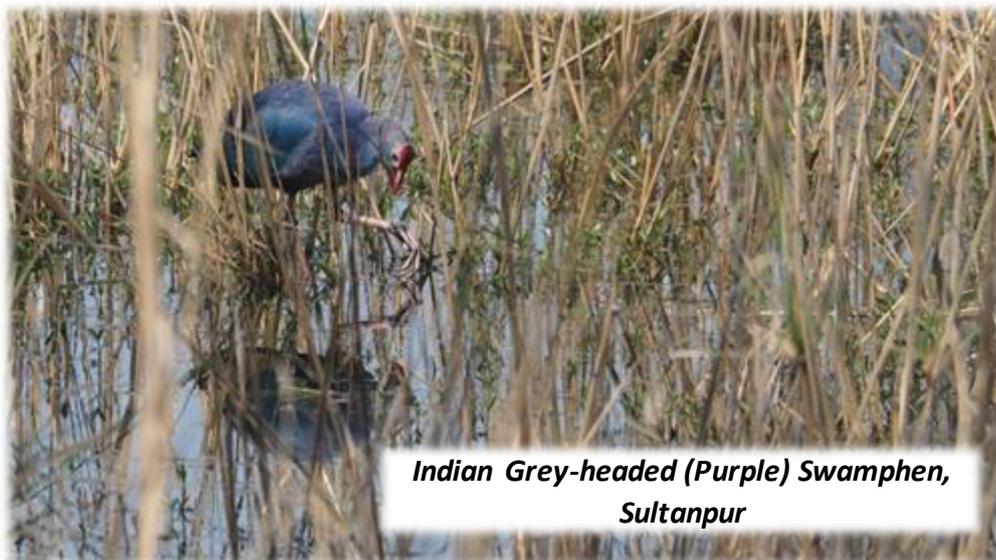
Indian Grey-headed (Purple) Swamphen. A bird which deserves to be a lifer (and now is on many lists having been split. Certainly looked very different to the Swamphens at home.

Large Grey Babbler, another lifer.

Syke's Warbler. Like a pale-billed Chiffchaff but with a different song. I had them recorded as "heard only" in the UAE back in 2010, but this was my first sighting.

Sind Sparrow. I'd passed it off as a House Sparrow without really looking at it too hard, Big mistake, but fortunately Harish rescued it. Quite different when you actually look properly, just that I hadn't! A bird for which people come here and the last of the days lifers.

Spotted Owlet. Have seen 3 different birds quite regularly over the last few days at Satpura, but you can never get enough owlets, so I was happy to see another.



***Indian Grey-headed (Purple) Swamphen,
Sultanpur***

Birds seen at Sultanpur

Graylag Goose	Eurasian Spoonbill	Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher
Comb Duck	Oriental Honey-buzzard	Red-vented Bulbul
Gadwall	Black Kite	Common Chiffchaff
Eurasian Wigeon	White-breasted Waterhen	Hume's Warbler
Indian Spot-billed Duck	Purple Swamphen	Sykes's Warbler
Northern Shoveler	Common Moorhen	Common Tailorbird
Northern Pintail	Eurasian Coot	Ashy Prinia
Garganey	Red-wattled Lapwing	Plain Prinia
Green-winged Teal	White-tailed Lapwing	Lesser Whitethroat
Common Pochard	Black-winged Stilt	Red-breasted Flycatcher
Ferruginous Duck	Green Sandpiper	Oriental Magpie-Robin
Little Grebe	Spotted Redshank	Indian Robin
Greater Flamingo	Common Greenshank	Black Redstart
Black-necked Stork	Wood Sandpiper	Stonechat
Painted Stork	Common Snipe	Pied Bushchat
Great Cormorant	Eurasian Collared-Dove	Large Gray Babbler
Little Cormorant	Rose-ringed Parakeet	Oriental White-eye
Oriental Darter	Greater Coucal	Asian Pied Starling
Gray Heron	Spotted Owlet	Purple Sunbird
Purple Heron	White-throated Kingfisher	Western Yellow Wagtail
Great Egret	Green Bee-eater	Citrine Wagtail
Intermediate Egret	Eurasian Hoopoe	White Wagtail
Little Egret	Coppersmith Barbet	House Sparrow
Cattle Egret	Long-tailed Minivet	Sind Sparrow
Indian Pond-Heron	Long-tailed Shrike	Red Avadavat
Glossy Ibis	House Crow	Indian Silverbill
Black-headed Ibis	Plain Martin	
Red-naped Ibis		

Mammals seen at Sultanpur

Nilgai	Five-striped Palm Squirrel
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By the time we were back at the car park it had got quite warm so we headed back to the hotel, did a few other things we needed to do, ate, showered then got taken to the airport for our flight out. Our first visit to India, hopefully not our last.

Field guides used:

Field Guide to Indian Mammals Vivek Menon, 2009

Birds of the Indian Subcontinent (2nd edition) Richard Grimmet, Carol Inskipp, Tim Inskipp, 2013

Photographic Field Guide Wildlife of Central India David Raju, Surya Ramachandran, 2016

Bird lists generated from the Avisys recording software.