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Ken Logan



NORTHWEST INDIA AND THE HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS FEBRUARY 2015

I arrived in Delhi on the flight from Ahmedabad mid-morning – got that usual sinking feeling when there is no one standing there with “Mr Logan” written on his board but my guide Sanjay and driver did not take long to arrive. Then we off to Okhla -a big pan filled with lots of reed beds an hour out of Delhi. Sanjay my guide knew his stuff- only two birds worth going to Okhla for, he said- Yellow-bellied Prinia and White-tailed Stonechat. So that is what we chased and found- never saw them anywhere else.



Then it was back to the smog and rush hour traffic of Delhi. An early start the next morning saw us on the way to Sultanpur another waterbird reserve. Heavy fog persisted to 9.00am and we birded the outskirts of the reserve- Sanjay was on home territory and knew his way around. As the fog cleared we began to find some interesting birds- lots of Bar-headed Geese, Common and Jack Snipe, Sarus Cranes, Oriental Sky-lark, Citrine Wagtail, Clamorous Reed and Paddyfield Warblers. Had I seen Sind Sparrow he asked and we were off to his spot for Sind Sparrow even finding Spanish Sparrow along the way.



After lunch we tackled the reserve itself- plenty of waterfowl but as usual they were all a long way off. Then it was time to bid farewell to Sanjay and head back to Delhi . Tomorrow was Taj Mahal day.

It is a truly beautiful mausoleum- much more impressive from the outside than within and as an added bonus there is some good birding along the river bordering the Taj Mahal. Lots of Shelduck, Geese and waders with Egyptian Vulture and Black-eared Kite overhead

Then we threaded our way through Agra (a small Indian town- population- only 4 million) on the way to Keoladeo National Park better known as Bharatpur

Bharatpur is one of India’s best known reserves- once the domain of an Indian Maharaj who used it to hunt wildfowl. It wasn’t unfortunately at its best. They had had little rain which had affected the numbers of birds there as well as the species variety. My guide here was Bridjendra a man who knew the park intimately, having guided and worked there for over 30 years. He asked me if I had seen Painted Snipe and seemed a little disappointed when I said I had .He had found a new spot for two birds and was keen to show me – so off we went for some photographs.

Bharatpur is a small reserve with many flooded grasslands surrounded by roads built on small dykes. You have two choices as far as transport is concerned- you can walk or you can hire a rickshaw. Birding by a bicycle drawn rickshaw was a



new experience and one that works well- you see a bird- stop and hop out – and there you are. Because it was so dry none of the usual thrushes or nightjars were there so I had to content myself with Dusky Eagle-Owl on the nest, Red Avadavat, White-capped Bunting and some good raptors- finally got my Bonellis Eagle here after missing it in Europe and Northern Africa. And of course there was always the wildfowl- Lesser Whistling Duck, Gadwall, Spot-bills, Shelduck, and plenty of Bar-headed Geese to name but a few.

We had four nights just outside Bharatpur NP- just a rickshaw ride away from the main gate. But having tracked down everything I needed in the park itself we headed off further afield to the Bund Baratha and the Chambal River, where 3 possibles awaited me- Indian Skimmer, Black-bellied Tern and I even heard rumours of a Laggar Falcon.

The Chambal River reserve was run by the dreaded Indian Parks Board so having to wait nearly an hour for the “guide” was no surprise. I of course had my own guide but you are not allowed on the river without an “official” “jobs for the boys “ guide. You barely run up the river for more than a kilometre and you get an hour for your permit money- if you return late you pay for another hour, so you have to watch your time carefully. Still it was long enough to find and photograph all that I was looking for and I even got to see the Gharial- a weird fish eating Crocodile like reptile which I



had never even heard of before. The Skimmers were on a sand bank a little way up the river and allowed a close approach. The Black-bellied Tern obligingly flew on just as we finished with the skimmers, and Laggar Falcon perched high on the rock face enjoying the early morning sun. River Lapwing and Common Kingfishers rounded off a great hour on the boat.

I always enjoy being on a boat on a river so it was a good day out and a pleasant change from the birding done to date

Having flattened Bharatpur it was time to return to Delhi to catch the overnight train to Ramnagar for onward transfer to Corbett. Now it is 2 hours by car from Bharatpur to Delhi and we were ready to leave at 2.00pm to catch the 9.30pm train in Delhi. Our driver therefore decided to travel on the back roads rather than pay the tolls on the motorway. We reached the outskirts of Delhi at 5.00pm and it then took another three and half hours to do the next 40 kilometres through the Delhi rush hour. What an absolute nightmare!! We arrived at the station fretting and harassed to join one of the largest masses of humanity I have ever seen. There are a dozen platforms at the station and each was thronged with thousands of people standing shoulder to shoulder waiting for a train. It was literally impossible to move without pushing and shoving your way through. I was beginning to wonder what my compartment would be like. I initially thought I would have an overnight sleeper to myself, but when handed the ticket and I could see it only cost R150 I feared the worst.



True enough I was ushered into a compartment which I had to share with six other people with an Indian lloo 30 metres away used by the entire carriage. Nightmare stuff!! You were given a pillow and a blanket to use on your narrow leather bed. Sleep, as you can imagine was impossible with people chattering away all night- the good news was that we arrived at 5.00am the train having left over an hour late so i only had to suffer for six odd hours.



Leaving the station in the pitch dark you now literally pray that your guide is going to be there to meet you. . As usual there was no little man with “Mr Logan” on his board. Twenty minutes later I was getting worried – I had all sorts of people offering to give me a lift -trouble was – I had no idea where I was supposed to be going. However they arrived in the open Suzuki just as panic was about to set in and we set off for the hotel and some breakfast before starting the days’ birding.

And what a morning’s birding we had- It was one of those special days where the lifers just never stopped coming- over thirteen before lunch. We had Ibisbill and Wallcreeper before it was light



enough for photography. My guide was brilliant and we knocked off the skulkers- two Tesias and Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler with consummate ease. Woodpeckers and Flycatchers followed with something new at every stop. A simply brilliant mornings birding. We spent another day and a half birding the surrounds of the park before heading off for Corbett NP 30 kilometres up the road. It is another 30 kilometres from the park gate to the Park HQ where we were to stay for 3 nights- the drive in took all morning picking up Tawny Fish Owl and

Lesser Fish Eagle along the way.

Every now and again you come across a spectacle in the avian world which is really quite special. We were driving in Corbett NP in the early morning when a male Khalij jumped into the road in front of us closely followed by two females. The two females then started to attack each other while the male watched carefully and paid close attention but never actually interfered. This continued for five minutes and with no obvious conclusion or result the threesome then wandered off into the bush again.

I liked Corbett- it is a big reserve with plenty of different habitats, lots of good birds and it is of course a premier tiger reserve. I did in fact see tiger on two separate occasions. 99% of people who go there, go to see tiger but the majority of the sightings are brief and fairly disappointing. They live in fairly thick woodland with a dense understory so you can never see more than a



couple of metres into the forest; so the dozens of Suzuki jeeps wait on the road at one of the known crossing points and wait until they hear the alarm call of one of the Muntjac or barking deer. When the deer barks they shout ‘there is a tiger over there’ and drive to the point where they hope the tiger may cross the road. This of course only happens occasionally and I saw people happy to spend two hours waiting for a fifteen second glimpse as the animal crosses into the undergrowth 50 metres up the road.



I didn't spend anything like that time waiting and we were lucky that the tiger crossed the road just 10 minutes after we got there. We were in the second row of waiting jeeps and by the time I had picked my camera up the tiger was gone. Our second sighting was much better- we were on our own in a distant section of the park across the river when we heard the alarm call and went to investigate. We found the animal – again in thick bush only twenty metres from us. Our driver made a mistake and spooked the animal which turned its back on us and disappeared in two

seconds flat. I had only one shot which showed a semi obscured face.. Still two tigers in two days wasn't bad.



The birds were good too- plenty of raptors, some vultures and a variety of smaller stuff- didn't get that many new birds but you had the grasslands, the forest and the river and the waterside edges to the big lake so there were plenty of areas to look for many different birds

We left Corbett early on our last morning there as I wanted to get back to the river where we had seen the Wallcreeper- I wanted a photograph. Needless to say after searching for an hour –no Wallcreeper- we tried another two stake outs further along the river- No Wallcreeper, so we headed on to Nainital. Arriving just before lunch in this picturesque hill station now tourist spa, we birded the outskirts of town and lo and behold on a rock face on the main road- there was the Wallcreeper. Not the greatest of shots- it was a long way off but after fighting the traffic on the road I at least managed something.

Now one very special little bird I desperately wanted to see was the Red(or Fire) fronted Serin. I was told we had a 20% chance bur our guide knew where to look and in no short time we found a flock of 20 birds. These guys were desperately skittish- you couldn't begin to get close enough for a shot and every time they flew after settling I thought that was the last I would see of them. But they kept moving round in circles and after chasing them for nearly 2 hours (the benefit of birding on your own) they finally settled in



front of a villager's garage and by poking my lens through a hole in the wall I managed a few shots well hidden from view.

We had 4 days here- plenty of time to see what I needed- but it took two attempts to find the Koklass pheasant having missed it first time around and the Slaty-backed Forktail led us a merry dance- eight hours over two days and over 10 kilometres of river side marching before we finally tracked down a pair on the river.. It is always the difficult birds you remember best and this one I won't forget in a hurry. Still never managed to find the thrushes- they just simply were not where they were supposed to be and the Black-throated Accentor also managed to give us the slip but I hit over 90% of the birds I wanted in Corbett and Nainital so my guide Devi received a tip I hope he was pleased with.



Ethiad- their cheap fares are not worth the trouble!!

Birding on the this leg of the trip was never too difficult- the waterfowl were still difficult to approach- a hangover I suppose from the hunting days .The pheasants were difficult and very shy with views really only possible in the first light of dawn but for the rest it was possible to get satisfactory sightings.

So my tour ended with the long drive back to Delhi and the even longer flight back home. At least Ethiad didn't manage to lose my bag on the way. Three months late I am still fighting for some compensation- remember to never fly

