

## India and Nepal – November 2009

*By Penny Williams*

This was my first proper holiday without Peter since getting married 23 years ago (not counting the long weekends sailing in Cornwall). Would I still enjoy it without Peter being around and would I wish he was there?

I went on holiday with friends whom Peter and I have made on other Naturetrek holidays. Steve and Ann (from Huntingdon) and Liz (from Sherborne) left their cars at our house and Peter drove us all to Heathrow in the pouring rain on a Thursday evening. The other people on the trip were our friend Sara (from Norfolk), plus three others whom we had not met before, who turned out to be Heather and Elspeth (friends travelling together) and John. Our guide Suchit met us in Delhi.

The first time I was glad Peter was not with us (for his sake) was on our first evening. We were in Delhi and being shown some of the smart parts of New Delhi including an arch that was a memorial to the war dead. There were loads of people around and lots of street sellers. The main items being sold were a sort of swirling piece of plastic which lit up as it was fired into the sky. I thought "Peter would enjoy these" and so asked how much they were. Three for 10 rupees (£1) so I bought three. Immediately we were surrounded by other street vendors offering to sell theirs for less. Even without haggling we could have had 15 for 10 rupees. So two of the things Peter hates were happening all within 24 hours of starting the holiday, being surrounded by people and people trying to sell things that you don't want to buy!

Shortly after this we made our way to Delhi railway station for our overnight train trip. I have never seen so many people out on the streets nor heard so many horns. There were traffic jams everywhere and it probably took about an hour to go 1½ miles. At the station we had to stay close to each other and, again, there were hundreds of people around. The trains were packed and people hanging out of the doors as the trains departed because there was insufficient room for everyone inside. Health and Safety would have had a fit.

Once our train finally left (about 45 minutes late) we tried to get some sleep. However some of the other people in our carriage did not think it was time to sleep (they had not had an overnight flight the previous night) and chatted away for what seemed like hours.

Now for disembarking. Suchit had warned us that the train would only be in the station for a couple of minutes so he had all our bags lined up by one door, where his friends were going to meet the train, and we were all lined up at the other door with strict instructions to get off the train as quickly as possible. We picked up our bags and I could not believe how many people were on the platform. Liz and I managed to get separated from the rest of the party and did not know whether they had turned left or right on leaving the station so we just stood at the entrance refusing numerous offers of lifts and taxis until Suchit came back and found us.

That was our last experience of public transport and crowds for over two weeks. On a couple of occasions we had a few children around us fascinated at what we were doing but in the main it was just us and the wildlife.

When we got off the train we were still in India and we stayed in India for the next few days in Corbett National Park. This is a park run by the Indian government and the accommodation was quite basic. The food was served in a cafeteria and did not vary

hugely but the wildlife and scenery were fantastic. We went out three times a day and on each occasion but one were in jeeps. That one occasion was an early morning ride amongst the long grasses on the back of an elephant. It is the most amazing experience swaying along high up on the back of such an animal. The elephants had to start the ride by walking down a steep hill. It was quite slow progress as the elephant would not put its foot down until it was sure that the foot would go flat. After the steep hill down we then went across a river and again each foot had to be perfectly flat before the elephant would put its any weight on it.

Whilst walking amongst the long grass, the elephant took the opportunity of having its breakfast so every few seconds there was the sound of tearing grass. Occasionally there was a slapping sound. This appeared to be when the elephant had not only got some grass but also some of the root and soil. There was also the sweet smell of cannabis from the plants that were growing amongst the grasses. The birds eat the cannabis seeds as well, which might have explained some of the odd behaviour we saw from some of them.

We had some excitement on our ride. We were trying to find wild Indian elephants and we came across a herd of mothers with some babies. Apart from this herd was a male elephant and he did not like us being around. There was quite a lot of trumpeting going on and the elephant transporting us was not happy. At one point he jumped sideways which was definitely very alarming. Thankfully the rest of the ride was just at walking pace going forwards but I did wonder for a couple of seconds what it might be like being on the back of a bolting elephant. Memories of my childhood when I was on a bolting pony came flooding back.

Now Corbett is where I saw two tigers. On the first occasion I was with Sara. We had become separated from the other jeep, which had Liz and Ann in it. Our guide was told about a sighting and we raced over there (almost as alarming as being on the back of a jumpy elephant, as the back of the jeeps were open and we swung about quite a lot). When we got there all you could see was about one foot of the middle of the tiger. You could see the orange skin and two stripes but that was it. The tiger was sleeping under a bush seemingly oblivious to all the people trying to see it.

Fortunately, the following day, our guide spotted a female tiger sleeping under a bush about 25 feet away from the track. Unfortunately another jeep disturbed her so, after looking at us, she got up and started walking away, but parallel to the road. We moved along and again saw her where she tried stopping. However we were obviously disturbing her and so she carried on walking and disappeared into the bushes. However our guide thought that she might carry on walking which would mean she would cross some tracks. Our guide was right and that was when the photo opportunity came. She came out of the bushes, walked down the road and disappeared into some more bushes. Fortunately almost everyone else in our group had realised that something was up and were positioned further down the track and so everyone saw this tiger.

Seeing this female tiger will remain in my memory forever but getting a photo (even if it is not very good) was a real bonus.

The day we left Corbett we had another great wildlife sighting. In the river we saw three Indian river otters. They were clearly having fun in the shallow waters and we were able to watch them for about ten minutes. They were too far off to photograph but again it was wonderful seeing such wildlife.

We then had a night of luxury in the Corbett Hideaway Hotel (somewhat disturbed by the engagement party going on outside our rooms) before moving on to Nepal. Now the Indian guides we met were very helpful but everyone in Nepal was wonderful. Nothing was too much trouble and interest and smiles were apparent all the time. We were staying just outside Bardia National Park where the local people seemed to take a real pride in keeping their homes (even if powered by fires and candlelight) clean and tidy and free of the plastic rubbish we seemed to see almost everywhere else. The animals kept by the Nepalese appeared to be part of the household including the cows and the goats.

Bardia was wonderful partly because we were now able to walk rather than ride in the jeeps. On our first walk, we saw not only tigers' but also leopards' paw prints, and also scratches made on some trees by the tigers. There were lots of good birds around and we had some wonderful sightings of Hornbills and Crested Serpent Eagles. On our last evening we went to a tower where we stayed virtually until sunset and whilst watching all the wildlife we saw a rare Asian One-horned Rhino in the distance. We also saw Rhesus Macaques (monkeys) and Swamp Deer and the bird of India, the Indian Peafowl or, as we know it, Peacock.

The next day we had to set off early in order to get to Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha. Here you could tell those of us who had come for the culture and those of us there for the birds and other wildlife. Just before we got to the accommodation we found Sarus Cranes (see the photo as they are beautiful birds) and then Steve and I went out with our guides to bird-watch whilst the others went off to see the Stupa on the site of Buddha's birthplace.

That evening, amazingly enough, I was able to ring Peter. By chance I had looked at my mobile phone as Ann had talked about getting a signal. Not only did I have a signal but I could make calls even though I had not arranged international calls with my provider. I had a long chat with Peter and he was able to tell me about Apollo's minor operation for an abscess and I told Peter what delights he was missing. [Note from Peter – I was quite happy where I was, thank you, although coping with the aftermath of Apollo's operation was quite difficult]

The following day it was a two hour birdwatching walk or a visit to various monasteries on offer so you can guess which one I chose. More Sarus Cranes plus great views of a Black Bittern. The another long drive to Chitwan National Park.

Chitwan is a wonderful place and we had a warm welcome when we arrived there. There is a wonderful viewpoint over an area of grasses and Steve and I could be found there as soon we arrived. Suchit left us alone and we discovered our bird identification skills were not as good as we had thought. Still it was great not to be bouncing around in a vehicle and there was a wonderful sunset even if we did mistake an Indian Pond Heron (a very common bird) for a Cinnamon Bittern (a very rare bird)!

In Chitwan we again went out on the back of elephants. This time we did not see any wild Elephants but we were accompanied by a mother and baby elephant and we got extremely close to an Asian One-horned Rhino who did not seem to be troubled by our appearance at all. He looked at us for a short time and then carried on eating.

In Chitwan we also travelled down the river by boat and went into the park itself in jeeps. We saw some wonderful birds and got close to Rhino whilst on foot (not a wise thing to do but we didn't know that the rhino was around until we found a steaming pile of dung). Suchit beat a hasty retreat to the beach where we had to

cross the river by dugout canoe to get back to the jeeps. I was the last one left on the beach surrounded by footprints not only of Rhino but also of Tiger. If either had appeared I would not have waited for the boat but would have been paddling across the river boots and all

The final part of lowland Nepal was at Koshi Tappu. This was another day's drive from Chitwan but we stopped at the dam to look for the Ganges River Dolphins. We were very lucky and had fleeting glimpses of, probably, three different Dolphins. After this about a 45 minute drive before reaching the camp. Now we may have been sleeping in tents without electricity but, despite this, it was definitely the nicest place we stayed. Collared Owlets in the trees by the restaurant, Long-tailed Shrike and Great Coucal in the long grasses a few feet away and a Jungle Cat walking through the camp. Unfortunately I did not see the Cat in the camp itself but had three sightings on the road running alongside the Camp. And not only did we see Jungle Cat but, also (some way off) Fishing Cat as well.

The owls were very active, and noisy, at night but the camp itself was a wonderful place to stay.

After that a long wait at the airport at Biratnagar (about a four hour delay) to get to Kathmandu. Fortunately Suchit had arranged a picnic lunch for us for that day. Picnic lunches in Nepal are wonderful. Always at least one hard-boiled egg, usually two, a banana (which were lovely and sweet), a clementine and a box of mango juice. However the best part of the boxes were the extra bits which were often home made crisps, onion bhajis and pancakes filled with curried potatoes. All very delicious. Unfortunately quite a few boxes also included pretty dry cheese sandwiches (no butter – only white bread and dry cheese) but Suchit promised us at Kosi no cheese sandwiches and he was right in that none appeared there. Unfortunately, however, they did reappear on the last day in Kathmandu.

Kathmandu was much quieter than we had expected. This was probably due to the fuel shortages which meant that we saw extremely long queues at the petrol stations. The advantage to us was that our trip to the south of Kathmandu took only about an hour which meant more time to look at all the new species of birds that we were finding in Kathmandu. However the best part of that day was getting back to the hotel where there was a long e-mail from Peter waiting for me detailing his activities while I was in India and Nepal. It made me laugh and made me realise that it would be wonderful to get back home and see him and the cats even if it did mean saying goodbye to the wonderful wildlife and scenery of Nepal and India. Also my travelling companions were very good company and we were so busy I had very little time to miss anything of the UK (and in particular the work)!