Join the ABA and Rockjumper for the 2016 ABA safari to northern India!

Perhaps the world’s richest cultural landscape, India boasts a staggering geographical diversity, from deserts and forests to tropical, palm-lined shores to the snow-capped peaks of the impossibly high Himalayas. This ABA Safari starts and ends in the capital of New Delhi, an excellent hub for the rich avifauna and iconic mammalian mega-fauna of northern India. Our safari explores two of the most famous birding and wildlife national parks in northern India: the royal wildfowl sanctuary of Keoladeo National Park at Bharatpur, with its spectacular wetlands; and fabled Ranthambhore National Park, a reserve widely known as one of the best places to see the Bengal Tiger, and also a spectacular birding destination.

We invite you to join us for this unforgettable celebration of India’s incredible birds, iconic mammals, dramatic scenery, rich history and kaleidoscope of cultures! Please see p. 21 for more information.

—George Armistead, ABA Events Coordinator
More than 100 million years ago, the Indian plate broke away from the great southern landmass known as Gondwanaland and crept northward at a slower-than-glacial pace, eventually crashing into the Eurasian plate. This process thrust up the Himalayas, now the world’s greatest mountain range. Today, the vast Indian subcontinent, also referred to as South Asia, is dominated by the Republic of India. Other South Asian nations include Pakistan and Bangladesh (the trio of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh made up British India), as well as the Himalayan nations of Bhutan and Nepal and the scattered isles of Sri Lanka and the Maldives. These countries occupy 1.7 million square miles (10% of the Asian continent or 3.3% of the world’s land surface) but support 45% of Asia’s human population and more than 25% of the world’s population.

With more than 1.2 billion citizens, India is the world’s second most populous country, although it’s only the seventh largest country in area. Nevertheless, it’s still a massive nation, encompassing more than 1.2 million square miles. Despite the high population density, India is a treasure trove for the wildlife watcher. Conservation International includes India among the 17 “mega-diversity” nations that support most of the world’s plant and animal life. Parts of India are matched only by Africa for the big game

Tigers and the Taj Mahal, and More!

Brahminy Starling, Khujaraho, Madhya Pradesh. Photo by © Adam Riley.

Painted Spurfowl. Ranthambhore National Park, Rajasthan. Photo by © Adam Riley.

experience, and its total of 291 mammal species—most famously the bulk of the world’s tiger population—is formidable. Boasting no fewer than 1,274 bird species, of which 82 are endemic, India’s bird list is surpassed only by Indonesia and China outside the Neotropics.

Getting to grips with such a vast and bird-rich country is a formidable challenge to any world-birder. To obtain a comprehensive coverage of South Asia, a big lister would need to visit northern, southern, northeastern, and western India, as well as Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives offer relatively limited opportunities for supplementing a big lister’s life list.

This article focuses on northern India, which is the classic Indian birding tour. Northern India is on any list of the ten must-do birding journeys on the planet. If you have not been to India, this is the recommended introduction, offering world-class birding, excellent mammal opportunities (including the best chance of seeing a tiger in the wild), a staggering cultural experience, and breathtaking landscapes from the endless Gangetic Plains to the snow-capped Himalayas. The recommended time is the northern winter from November to February when temperatures are pleasant and large numbers of Palearctic and Himalayan migrants are present.

Situated on the expansive Gangetic Plains, the natural starting point for exploring Northern India is India’s sprawling capital, New Delhi. Despite a burgeoning population in excess of 16 million people, more than 450 bird species have been recorded within the boundaries of Delhi giving the city the title of the second highest bird list of any national capital in the world. (Nairobi is the winner.) Any leafy suburb or public garden teems with birds, Lodi Garden is a great example. Typical Indian urban species include Black-rumped Flameback, an impressive
woodpecker, noisy groups of Jungle Babblers, Rose-ringed and Alexandrine parakeets, Brown-headed and Coppersmith barbets, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Red-whiskered Bulbul, and a diversity of starlings including Asian Pied and Brahminy as well as Common and Bank mynas.

Farther afield, but within close proximity to the city, excellent birding sites include Okhla Sanctuary on the holy Yamuna River. Although Okhla is one of the most polluted and filthy places I have ever visited, it also counts as one of the locations hosting the most birds I have ever seen. Waterfowl, flamingoes, gulls, shorebirds, and passerine migrants are everywhere during the northern winter, and desiderata include Brown Crake, Jack Snipe, White-tailed Stonechat, Streak-throated Swallow, and Red Avadavat. Tughlaqabad Fort is another superb birding and historical site. This deserted, walled city was built within a dry scrubby zone that supports Rufous-tailed Lark, Rufous-fronted Prinia, and the strange Sirkeer Malkoha. A little farther from the city is Sultanpur Lake National Park, also known as
Sultanpur Jheel. (A jheel is a pool or lake, usually seasonally inundated.) This park hosts water birds and overwintering raptors, among them Painted Stork, Bar-headed Goose, and Imperial and Greater Spotted eagles.

However, time around Delhi is only a precursor to even better sites!

Heading southward into the regal state of Rajasthan, one reaches the birding mecca of Bharatpur. A first-time visitor’s primary taste of traditional India is usually experienced when exiting New Delhi to the quieter, but nevertheless humanity-filled rural areas. One passes through small towns and villages and farming homesteads where people still live lives little changed by the modern world. Domestic livestock abound including camels, donkeys, goats, sheep, holy cows and, at times, even elephants clogging the roadways. People are continuously busy, going about their daily chores, be it selling roasted peanuts and vegetables from carts, collecting cow patties for cooking fuel, or working the fields.

The key location at the end of this journey is Keoladeo National Park, an extensive series of shallow ponds artificially created as a duck-hunting preserve by a former maharaja of Bharatpur. Now it is a wetland sanctuary attracting thousands of wintering waterfowl, shorebirds, cranes, and raptors. The best method for exploring the reserve is by means of bicycle rickshaw, following the network of raised dikes that crisscross the labyrinth of ponds. These rickshaws, each capable of transporting only two people, are operated by local guides, many of whom know the park and its birds intimately. Scanning through the water...
bird assemblage is a treat, and first-time visitors are often overwhelmed by the staggering numbers of species. Regulars include Knob-billed Duck, Lesser Whistling-Duck, and Indian Spot-billed Duck, Pied and White-throated kingfishers, Oriental Darter, Indian Pond-Heron, Woolly-necked and Black-necked storks, Asian Openbill, Black-headed Ibis, Dalmatian Pelican, Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged jacanas, Greater Painted-Snipe, and White-tailed Lapwing.

Standing at nearly six feet tall, the world’s tallest flying bird, the Sarus Crane, is joined during the northern winter by small numbers of migratory Common Cranes. Sadly, the population of Siberian Cranes that overwintered here were extirpated in 2002. Marshy edges attract a variety of migrant passerines including Blue-throat, Blyth’s and Clamorous reed warblers, and Western Yellow, Citrine, White and White-browed wagtails, while Wire-tailed and Red-rumped swallows hawk insects overhead. Raptors are especially well represented in the reserve, with concentrations of large migrant eagles such as Eastern Imperial, Greater Spotted, Steppe, and Indian Spotted being of special interest. Other raptors include Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Bonelli’s and Booted eagles, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, Shikra, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, and Laggar Falcon.

Extensive areas of arid acacia-dominated woodland and dry grasslands
surround the ponds, providing Gray Francolin, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Greater Coucal, the very uncommon and localized White-tailed (Marshall’s) Iora, White-eared Bulbul, Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher, Purple Sunbird, Baya Weaver, and Indian Silverbill. These Indian residents share their habitat during the winter months with a wide range of migrants from northern Asia, notably Red-breasted Flycatcher, Hume’s and Greenish warblers, the very localized Brook’s Leaf Warbler, Siberian Rubythroat, and Isabelline Wheatear. In the evening, nocturnal residents to be looked for include Dusky Eagle-Owl, Spotted Owlet, Indian Scops-Owl, and Large-tailed, Gray, and Jungle nightjars. Bharatpur’s mammals include groups of nilgai; these huge animals, largest of all Asian antelopes, also are known as blue bulls. Also be on the lookout for sambar, spotted deer (chital), wild boars, golden jackals, rhesus macaques, northern palm squirrels, and Asian palm civets. Interesting reptiles include mugger crocodiles, massive Indian softshell turtles, and Indian rock pythons.

Close to Bharatpur is the city of Agra, home to India’s and arguably the world’s most famous building, the magnificent Taj Mahal that translates literally as “Crown of Palaces.” This World Heritage Site is famous for the elegance of its design, its extraordinary translucent white marble dome, its mathematical symmetry and the immense numbers of intricately carved and inlaid semi-precious stones that adorn its walls. Beginning in 1632, tens of thousands of architects and laborers—and more than a thousand elephants—toiled for 20+ years to complete this breathtaking edifice. The Taj Mahal was commissioned by the grief-stricken Shah Jahan after his third and favorite wife Mumtaz Mahal died during the birth of their 14th child. The birding is excellent here, so keep a look out for Indian Chats, Dusky Crag-Martins, families of Spotted Owlets and Dusky Eagle-Owl in the gardens, Egyptian Vultures, and elegant River Lapwings. Other nearby sites worth visiting include the Agra Red Fort and the ancient city of Fatehpur Sikri.
While visiting these great plains of India, it’s essential to visit one of India’s tiger reserves. Several provide reliable chances of encountering the largest of all cats, and arguably the most impressive of all predators. Recommended tiger reserves include Bandhavgarh, Kanha and Tadoba, but currently my first choice is Ranthambhore National Park. The park is easily accessible from Delhi and Bharatpur by road or train, and it is also currently providing excellent tiger sightings. Tiger numbers have recovered well after a poaching crisis here in the early 2000s, with more than 60 tigers now in the park, quite a few of which are habituated to the presence of tourists. Locating these magnificent cats requires skill, patience, and luck.

Located in the Sawai Madhopur district of south-eastern Rajasthan, Ranthambhore National Park is one of India’s largest parks, protecting over 150 square miles (540 square miles if you include the buffer zone) of a rich mosaic of deciduous woodland, bamboo thickets, meadows, lakes, and marshes. Dominated by the 10th-century Ranthambhore Fort, which sits atop a plateau 700 feet above the plains, this scenic reserve contains high concentrations of mammalian herbivores. This abundance of prey species supports one of the healthiest populations of tigers anywhere.

Traveling in open vehicles, visitors explore the network of roads within the park watching for telltale signs such as pugmarks or scat in the road, and listening for the alarm calls of sambar, spotted deer, southern plains gray langurs, and Indian Peafowl. With luck, these will lead one to a tiger, padding along a dusty track or sprawled out in the dappled sunlight of a bamboo thicket. If fortunate, one might even find a Tiger photogenically arranged on one of the abundant 10th-century ruins dotted around the park, or swimming across a lake. Looking into the amber eyes of a royal Bengal tiger undoubtedly ranks as one of the world’s ultimate wildlife experiences.

Although tigers are the most celebrated reason for visiting Ranthambhore, this scenically stunning park also offers excellent birding. More than 320 bird species have been recorded. The mixture of deciduous woodland and meadows supports good numbers of resplendent Indian Peafowl, surely the most magnificent bird on the planet. Other key birds include the stunningly
beautiful Painted Spurfowl, the elusive Jungle and Rock bush quails, Yellow-legged Buttonquail, the endemic Painted Sandgrouse, the uncommon White-naped Woodpecker, the impressive Brown Fish-Owl, eye-numbingly colorful Plum-headed Parakeets, Southern Gray, Bay-backed, and Long-tailed shrikes, Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher (listen for its sweet song, given from dense bamboo patches), flocks of Small Minivets, the active White-browed Fantail, and the seemingly ever-present and often very tame Rufous Treepies. Small numbers of the critically endangered Indian Vulture nest on the cliffs entering the park, and other raptors to keep an eye out for include Red-headed Vulture (rare), Pallid Harrier, Shikra, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, the unusual White-eyed Buzzard, Bonelli’s Eagle, and the chunky Crested Serpent-Eagle.


Tigers are the star attraction, but Ranthambhore hosts an exciting supporting cast of intriguing mammals. The leopard population is healthy. Although harder to spot than tigers, leopards are nevertheless regularly sighted. Striped hyenas prefer the park outskirts, and sloth bears roam the park. Other predators include Indian wolf (rare), golden jackal, Indian fox, jungle cat, caracal (rare), and ruddy, Indian gray, and small Indian mongooses. Likely herbivores include spotted deer (chital) and sambar. Less common are Indian gazelle (chinkara) and nilgai. “Sounders” of wild boars are frequently encountered, as are troops of the often-tame southern plains gray langur. And the very luckiest might spot an Indian pangolin.

To perfectly round off an exploration of Northern India, a visit to the forests and slopes of the Himalayas is essential. From Delhi, the most accessible recommended site is the old hill station of Nainital in the Kumaon foothills. An overnight train ride—an adventure in its own right, but a better option than driving due to this region’s highly congested roads—followed by a drive gets one to this quaint town perched atop a pear-shaped lake at an altitude of 6,837 feet. Nainital is surrounded by forests, woodlands, and cultivated valleys offering a great selection of Himalayan species, especially during the winter months when numerous high-elevation...
specialties descend to escape the extreme cold. The scenery is stunning, especially from a point known as Snow View, which offers spectacular study of the high Himalayas, including Nanda Devi, 25,643 feet above sea level.

As one ascends to Nainital, the broad-leaved woodlands provide such goodies as Red Junglefowl (ancestor of the domestic chicken), Kalij Pheasant, Hill Partridge, Rufous-bellied Eagle, the beautiful Long-tailed Broadbill, and the truly impressive Red-billed Blue-Magpie. High-altitude grasslands support coveys of cryptic Cheer Pheasants and, in the surrounding woodlands, the lovely Koklass Pheasant. Keep an eye out for Himalayan Quail, originally collected from the Nainital area. Last recorded in 1876, it is likely extinct—although habitats haven’t changed dramatically so hope remains. Birds of the open coniferous and native broad-leaved forest include the ubiquitous Blue Whistling-Thrush, Speckled Piculets, a host of woodpeckers, including Scaly-bellied, Himalayan, Rufous-bellied, and Brown-fronted, Black-headed Jays, busy flocks of White-throated, Chestnut-crowned, White-crested, Rufous-chinned, and Striated Laughingthrushes, the beautiful Rufous Sibia, Blue-winged Minlas, the delightful but secretive Chestnut-headed Tesia, Green-tailed Sunbirds, the skulking Scaly-breasted Cupwing (formerly Wren-Babbler), small flocks of Red-billed Leiothrixes, Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers, flighty Yellow-bellied Fantails, White-tailed Rubythroats, Himalayan Bluetails, and a variety of leaf warblers, tits, flycatchers, thrushes, and nuthatches. Raptors are commonly seen soaring along the steep ridges, and potential species include the sought-after Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon, the huge Cinereous Vulture, and Mountain Hawk-Eagle.

If you have further time, it’s worth including a visit to Jim Corbett National Park and the forests along the Kosi River upstream from Ramnagar. The Corbett reserve supports a tiger population, but sightings are less reliable than at Ranthambhore. Key birds in this area include the unique and highly sought-after Ibisbill, Great Slaty Woodpecker (the world’s largest extant woodpecker), Tawny Fish Owl, the impressive Great Hornbill, the classy Wallcreeper, Spotted and Little forktails and the rare White-throated Bushchat. The endangered Gharial, a bizarre snouted crocodile also occurs in the park’s rivers.

It would be difficult to find a more exciting, culturally-diverse bird and wildlife packed voyage than northern India, an experience that every traveling birder should seriously consider.