

TRACKS SAFARIS

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12 night Birding in the Himalayan Foothills

Delhi – Nainital – Pangot – Sattal – Marchulla – Corbett – Delhi – Agra - Delhi



Blue-bearded Bee-Eater



Black Bulbul

The state of Uttarakhand (once part of Uttar Pradesh) is where the foothill of the Himalayas begins in northern India. The state is blessed with unparalleled natural reserves and natural beauty and is referred to as "*Dev Bhoomi*" – meaning '*land of the gods*'. India has a huge diversity of wildlife – which also includes a healthy avian diversity. Birds migrate from Europe and Siberia for winter and we even have birds migrating from the continent of Africa flying on the monsoon winds that help carry them here. Of the 1250 odd species that call India home for a part of the year about 650-700 species can be found in Uttarakhand. The state of Uttarakhand is spread over 20,650 sq miles and about 86% of this is mountainous and 65% is covered by forests.

In this adventure we will explore just the foothills and not go any higher than 2500 meters. Key birding destinations that we will be visiting will be Pangot, Kilbury near Nainital, Sattal, forests around Marchulla and to Corbett tiger reserve. We shall combine our birding trail with Agra where we will visit the Taj Mahal.

Key species to seek in the region are:

Kingfishers: White-throated, Common, Pied, Crested and Stork-billed.

Owls: Spotted owlet, jungle owlet, collared Scops owl, spot-bellied eagle owl, brown fish owl & tawny fish owl.

Woodpeckers: brown-headed pygmy, grey-headed pygmy, rufous, greater yellow-naped, lesser yellow-naped, scaly-bellied, grey-headed, fulvous, lesser goldenback, greater goldenback, Himalayan goldenback, Eurasian wryneck, rufous-bellied, streak-throated, yellow crowned and the greater-slaty

Vultures: Bearded, cinereous, Egyptian, griffon, Himalayan, red-headed, slender-billed & white-rumped

Raptors: Pallas fish eagle, lesser fish eagle, crested serpent eagle, short-toed snake eagle, changeable hawk eagle, mountain hawk eagle, common kestrel, collared falconet, pied harrier, marsh harrier and shikra

Other interesting: Ibisbill, long-tailed broadbill, dollarbird, spotted and little forktail



Plumbeous Water Redstart

DAY ONE

On arrival into Delhi International Airport you will be met by Tracks Safaris representative who will transfer you to your hotel. This afternoon our birding expert in Delhi will meet you at your hotel lobby to discuss birding in and around Delhi before your birding experience at Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary.

Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary: The sanctuary lies 50km outside Delhi. Sultanpur is named after Chauhan Rajput raja Sultan Singh Chauhan. The region around Sultanpur was called Dhundhoti. Sultanpur was the centre of salt production for use in Delhi and the United Provinces of British India till the late 19th century exporting annually 250000 quintals over the Rajputana-Malwa Railway. Salt was produced by extracting brine from about 40 saline water wells using bullocks and drying in open plots. Since salt was one of the major sources of Government revenue, the office of the salt superintendent at Sultanpur supervised the levy of ₹2 tax per mound. With the levy of the heavy salt tax and acquisition of the Sambhar Chawal salt works in Rajputana by the British Indian Government the Sultanpur Salt became uneconomical and by 1903-04 the salt industry was struggling for survival with salt export having fallen to 65000 mounds leading to severe setback to the economy of the Sultanpur area. Finally, in 1923 the British shut down the office of the salt superintendent, had all the mounds of salt thrown back into the wells and shut down the salt industry leading to considerable economic misery to the people.

As a bird sanctuary was discovered by Peter Michel Jackson who was a famous British ornithologist and honorary secretary of the Delhi Birdwatching Society. He wrote to the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, founder of the society, in 1970 about the need to declare the Sultanpur jheel near Delhi a bird sanctuary, and she asked him to take her there. She had to cancel at the last minute but later instructed then Chief Minister of Haryana, Bansi Lal, to protect the wetland and as a result the area was declared a Bird sanctuary in 1972. On 13 July 1989 the reserve was upgraded to a National Park.

Out of total 10,005 species of birds in the world nearly 370 species migrate to India due to seasonal changes including 175 long-distance migration species that use the Central air Asian Flyway route, and among those over 250 species of birds have been sighted at this protected area.

Overnight stay will be at The Roseate Aerocity, New Delhi on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis



Image: Purple Heron

DAY TWO

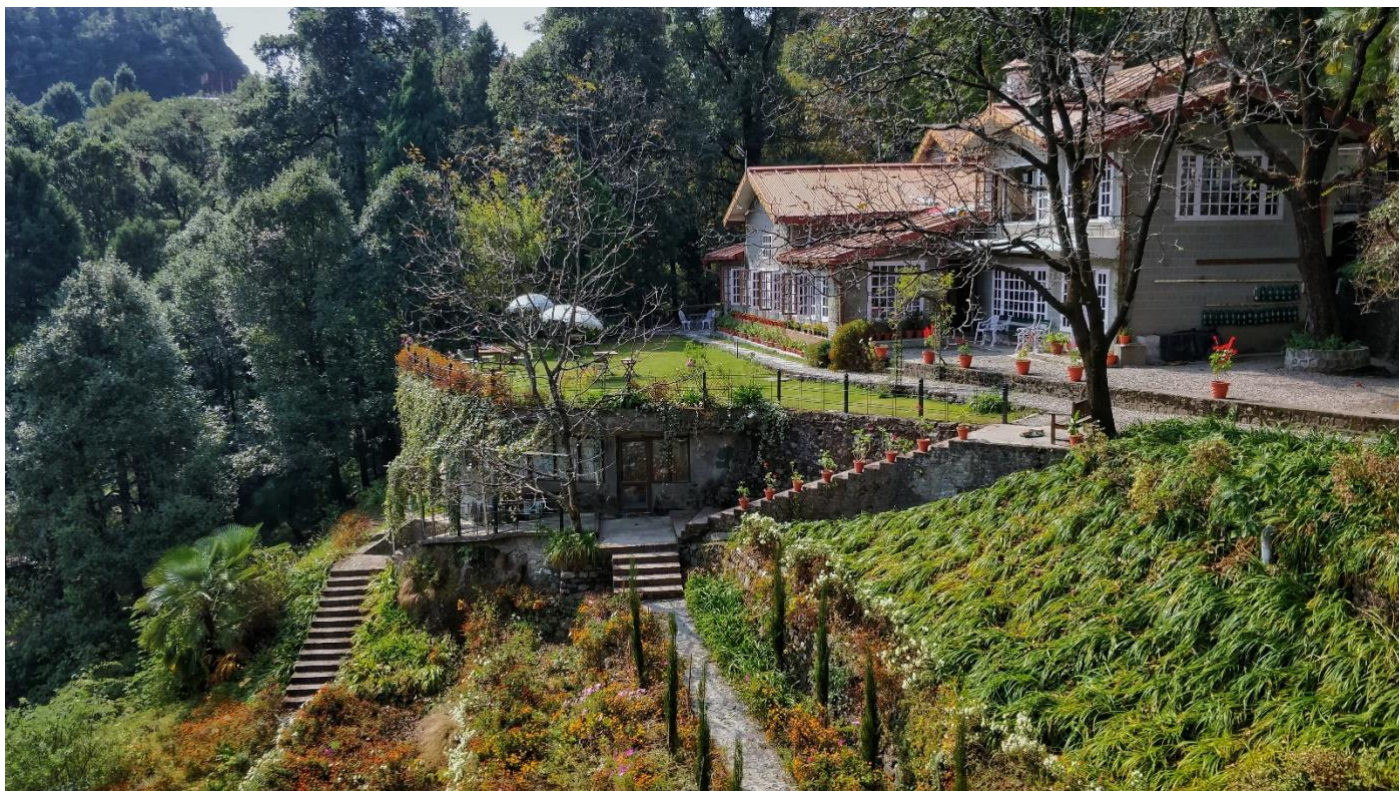
This morning in order to avoid traffic you shall start early and transfer by road to Nainital. The journey is long and takes about 5.5 hours and we shall stop on the way for breakfast and for toilet breaks. If we start early, we should reach Nainital by 1400.

Crowded around a deep, green volcanic lake, Nainital is Kumaon's largest town and favourite hill resort. It occupies a steep forested valley around the namesake lake Naini and was founded by homesick Brits reminded of the Cumbrian Lake district. Our home in Nainital will be the Abbotsford and this shall be our base for the next few days to do birding in Pangot, Kilbury forest and Sattal.

Built in 1876 the property was called "Abbotsford Lodge" owned by an Englishman, John Hope Simpson, Esquire of the Indian Civil Service in the erstwhile United Province of Agra and Oudh. Bought in 1903 by the Prasada's it was rechristened "Prasada Bhawan". The fourth generation of the Prasadas carry on the rich legacy of the past and interiors are a tasteful mix of high wooden ceilings, tinned roof and pinewood flooring that give the perfect feel of the classic mountain house.

Located at the edge of Nainital, Abbotsford allows us to be in Nainital, yet out of it. It offers excellent accessibility to Pangot, Sattal and the Kilbury forests which are just behind the property. This evening take a short bird walk in the surrounding mountains to stretch your legs and to familiarise yourself with the Himalayan Foothills. Please note birding in the foothills will require you to trek and hike. However, if during the trip you find it difficult to trek, we can plan to visit sites that are accessible by road.

Overnight will be at Abbotsford, Nainital on a full board basis



DAYS THREE AND FOUR

These next 3 days you spend birding in Pangot, Sattal and the Kilbury Forest. A large portion of this region that you shall be exploring falls under Nainital Forest Division and is called Naina Devi Himalayan Bird Conservation Reserve. The Naina Devi Himalayan Bird Conservation Reserve has one of the few remaining continuous stretches of moist Oak and Rhododendron forests in the entire northern Indian belt thus being incredibly rich in biodiversity. It is home to over 350 species of birds and wildlife such as Leopards, Himalayan Black Bear, Ghural (Mountain Goat), Barking Deer, Sambhar and Pine Martins.

The more commonly found species in these areas include - White throated and Streaked Laughingthrush, Verditer Flycatcher, Spotted Forktail, Himalayan Griffon, Black Eagle, Rufus Sibia, Cuckoo's, Black headed & Eurasian Jay's, Great Barbet, Himalayan & Rufus Bellied Woodpeckers, Hill Partridge, Khaleej, Koklass and Cheer pheasants to name a few.

Each day you shall start early morning from Abbotsford with a naturalist and will carry a packed breakfast. Although there will be some areas that you will be trekking through, our vehicle shall be sent to meet you at a pre-decided location. On reaching the location the vehicle will bring you back to the lodge. You should be back in time for lunch. After some rest start again around 1500 till sundown.

Overnight will be at Abbotsford on a full board basis

DAY FIVE

Today you can have a slightly later start to the day. Have a leisurely breakfast and head down towards Marchulla (north of Corbett Tiger Reserve). On the way we shall stop near Garjiya Devi Temple to scan the river for Ibisbill and to find different species of Kingfishers.

Vanghat is an exciting destination and lies beyond the park in the forest to the north. To reach the lodge itself is an adventure – you have a short 2-3km hike, then you cross the Ramganga River using a make-shift raft which is pulled across the river using a pulley system and then a short hike gets you to the lodge. Needless to say, it is not a place that abounds with regular tourists. Though the lodge is basic it more than makes up with the adventurous hikes in the surrounding forest.

Set amidst breath-taking surroundings and home to a wide variety of birds, mammals, and other wildlife, Vanghat is aesthetically designed to perfectly align with nature. The lodge is composed of 9 cottages, 4 mud and thatched cottages, and 5 stone cottages. Each one is dedicated to a different group of wildlife, named and painted accordingly to give them unique identities. The mud cottages serve as natural air-conditioners, and the stone cottages are artistically made by local experts and set at a height that allows watching birds from your balcony.

They have planted primarily native fruit trees and flowering plants to attract more birds and butterflies. Native grass species are cultivated that function as a carbon sponge and to provide good food for herbivorous mammals and birds. When harvested, the grasses are also used to renew the thatch roofs of their cottages.

Lunch will be at Vanghat. This evening your exploration of the region begins. We start with a short hike along the river birding and end the walk at the watch tower over a waterhole – active with various birds and deer species of the surrounding jungle. As the light goes down enjoy drinks over a small fire with the naturalists talking about their adventures in the surrounding forest.

Overnight will be at Vanghat on a full board basis



DAYS SIX AND SEVEN

We plan longer walks through the jungles on both these mornings. At Vanghat depending on your level of fitness we can do different walks depending on level of fitness. Typically, in the morning we do 4hr hikes starting at 7am. Breakfast usually is in the forest at a select location. Although the focus is primarily birding, we may come across mountain goats called Ghural and the antelope-like Serow. Even though in the past we have come across elephants, leopards and even tiger these encounters are relatively rare. We return to the lodge and rest for a couple of hours and at about 1500 start again on a shorter hike.

Please note you have the flexibility of just relaxing in the room or by the river. In months other than December, January & February we would strongly recommend a dip in the river after the morning walk - really refreshes you.

Tip: On winter nights while you enjoy your drinks or dinner keep a look out for Porcupines. They are nocturnal but once the sun has gone down can be seen on lodge grounds quite regularly. Do check with the lodge naturalist to show you one.

Overnight will be at Vanghat on a full board basis

DAY EIGHT

Today we shift to the other side of the park. The northern end of the park (where Vanghat is located) is the foothills of the Himalayas and at a higher altitude than the southern end of the park where we move to.



Ibisbill in flight

Before we check out and leave, we take our last walk in the surrounding jungle. We return to the lodge for breakfast, then checkout and leave for Jim's Jungle Retreat on the southern periphery of the park. This is also the part of the park where open jeep safaris are organized to search for the larger mammals of the park.

It would be 1100 by the time we start making our way to Jim's Jungle Retreat. Enroute we could stop again to scan the Kosi River for Ibisbill if you missed it the first time. It is also a great place to see the Wallcreeper and different types of Redstarts.

We should arrive at Jim's Jungle Retreat at about 1430. This afternoon is kept at leisure. However, should any of the guests choose to there is an option to explore the buffer forest on foot with a lodge naturalist. These forests are great for finding tigers on foot. It is also a good place to find brown fish owl that often nests here.

Overnight will be at Jim's Jungle Retreat on a full board basis

DAYS NINE AND TEN

We begin exploring Corbett Tiger Reserve in open jeeps this morning. The park is divided into 5 zones – Dhela, Jhirna, Bijrani, Dhikala and Durgadevi. Our safari explorations will be largely concentrated in the first 3 zones as Dhikala and Durgadevi are inaccessible and very far from our lodge.

The forest department allows 2 safaris a day one in the morning (0700 – 1030) and the other in the afternoon (1430 – 1700). We have planned 2 safaris on each of the two days.

Key wildlife to look out for during these will be tiger, leopard, elephant, sambar deer, chital deer, barking deer, jungle cat, jackal and the sloth bear to name a few. A lodge naturalist will accompany you on the safaris.

An amazing diversity of birdlife too can be found on these drives such as: Great Indian Hornbill, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Alexandrine Parakeet, Plum-headed Parakeet, Slaty-headed Parakeet, Maroon Oriole, Black-hooded Oriole, a variety of Bulbuls, Minivets, Sunbirds, Woodpeckers and Bee-eaters along with singing birds such as the White-rumped Shama.

Overnight will be at Jim's Jungle Retreat on a full board basis



Rosy Minivet

DAY ELEVEN

This morning take you last drive into Corbett Tiger Reserve. You will return to the lodge for breakfast, wash and change and after an early lunch depart for Delhi. The journey to Delhi will take 5 hours by road. We spend the night on the outskirts of Delhi to continue onwards to Agra next morning to visit the beautiful Taj Mahal.

Overnight will be at Crowne Plaza Hotel, Greater Noida on a full board basis

DAY TWELVE

After an early breakfast you check-out and transfer by road to Agra. The journey to Agra should take around 3.5 hours and on the way you will find many birds on the farmlands and the expressway. There are waterbodies that along with the proximity to farmland, attract a lot of species such as the Sarus Crane,

Asian Open billed Stork, White-headed Ibis, Grey Heron, Bar-headed Geese, Greylag Goose, Black-winged Stilts, Green & Red Shanks to name a few. Lunch will be in Agra at your hotel.

This afternoon your city expert shall meet you in your hotel lobby and will give you a background on the Mughals and talk about how the city of Agra grew to be the great Mughal capital. On the tour explore Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal.

Overnight will be at ITC Mughal, Agra on a full board basis

NOTE: Please remember this cannot be a Friday as the TAJ MAHAL remains closed



DAY THIRTEEN

Early this morning check-out and head to Bharatpur by road which takes around an hour. Bharatpur is home to the Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary – a UNESCO world heritage site. Spend the morning birding in Keoladeo Ghana. This sanctuary is excellent place to see heronries of Painted Storks, Black-headed White Ibis, Asian Openbill Stork and Eurasian Spoonbills. It is also home to flocks of migratory ducks and geese such as Northern Shoveller, Northern Pintail, Common Pochard, Crested Pochard, Great White Pelican and the Black-necked Stork. It is also a good park to see different types of Bitterns.

Lunch will be at Laxmi Villas Palace. After lunch continue back to Delhi. The journey to Delhi International airport should take about 4 hours and on arrival you will be met and assisted to check in for your international flight home..

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