

# Raptor-watching in Corbett National Park and beyond

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Going to Corbett National Park in Uttaranchal for me means pulling out the legendary Jim Corbett's books from the bookshelf and transporting myself to those very hills that he walked endlessly in search of man-eaters.

In March this year, my journey started from Delhi where I joined Rishad Naoroji, who has studied raptors in Corbett for seven years. Our drive to Dhikala took longer than expected as the road after the Moradabad by-pass got gradually worse. By the time we reached Dhangadi Gate, it was 15:00 hours. The gate closes at 16:30 hours sharp. Timings are strictly enforced and no visitors permitted to proceed to Dhikala if they arrive even 5 minutes late. Within the Park no driving is allowed between 12:00 noon and 14:30 hours and all vehicles must return to Dhikala by 18:00 hours. Sometimes it is frustrating when one has to rush back from wherever one is in order not get a fine levied. In Corbett, it is mandatory to take a guide whenever a tour of the Park is taken. The charges are Rs. 125/- per ride.

The final approach to Dhikala is a beautiful drive through a gigantic cathedral of Sal trees. It is worth stopping here for a while to soak in that jungle atmosphere. Late one morning we stopped here on hearing alarm calls of chital *Axis axis*. Was a tiger *Panthera tigris* abroad? Suddenly, a breeze brewed up and the Sal leaves started falling. When it intensified, I closed my eyes momentarily and could have sworn I heard rain. What a magical moment!

At the picturesque complex of Dhikala, we had a room in the old two-storey rest house where Jim Corbett once stayed. Sitting in its balcony, listening to the 'chaunk, chaunk' of the Large-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus macrurus* and the contact calls of elephants down by the river, was like a promise of good things to come.

Corbett is great for watching raptors and since I was with a raptorophile like Rishad, identification was swift. It was interesting to see various plumage phases of Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis*, and differentiating those of the various adult and sub-adult vulture species.

Raptor-watching and sightings of vultures were our main objectives and we drove twice to see them, towards a place called Ringora across the Ramganga River. Along the route we usually saw a pair of Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus*, a soaring Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, a couple of Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*, on smaller trees, getting ready for breakfast. Calls of Pallas's Fish-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucorhynchus* and the almost-human crying sounds of the Lesser Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* rent the air. Craning our necks upwards, we zoomed in on a couple of Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus*, Slender-billed Vultures *Gyps tenuirostris*, Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis*, Cinereous Vultures *Aegypius monachus*, and the Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*. These vultures have a sepulchral aura about them. Standing on the ground, from a distance, they could pass off as squatting men wrapped in shawls. Crested Serpent Eagles *Spilornis cheela* were rather common and courtship displays had begun. We also

spotted pairs of Shikras *Accipiter badius*. A Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* and a Eurasian Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* too. We picked out Steppe Eagles and the fearsome, crested, Changeable Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus*. Even more fantastic was the sighting of two large eagles standing on the riverbank in the distance. With fully white tails, they turned out to be White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla*. We were informed that these birds should have gone back to their breeding grounds by now. We found the nests of Crested Serpent Eagle and Changeable Hawk-eagle on Sambhar Road. The nests were within 100 metres of each other. Later we saw a Langur *Presbytis entellus* on the nest of the Crested Serpent Eagle.

The Chauras (open grassy areas) were sprinkled with Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* but revealed that Pied Bushchats *Saxicola caprata* were ubiquitous. We even spotted and photographed the much talked about Hodgson's Bushchat *Saxicola insignis* 200-odd metres from Dhikala. This bird has a white throat and is larger than the Common Stonechat. This was a high point of our trip. I had also seen the Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata* and later, after talking to Manoj Sharma, (he has prepared an excellent checklist of birds) learnt that this species is very rarely seen in Corbett.

Our next destination was Haldu Parao, which lies in the Sonanadi Sanctuary, a part of the Kalagarh Tiger Reserve, Division Landsdowne. It has neither electricity nor canteen services. We took provisions and a cook from Dhikala. We reached Haldu Parao after a leisurely 4-hour drive via Kanda. Once inside the main gate the road to the Forest Rest House (FRH) runs parallel to the Palain River flowing in a small gorge. Quite picturesque! We forded the river to reach the FRH. Built in 1892 the FRH is well maintained with two bedrooms on either side of the dining room. There is an electric fence running on solar power all around the compound to prevent elephants straying in. I was shown a very large tin truck (used for storage of food grains) with holes made by elephants. The smaller elephants were able to break down the door and enter the rooms. Life is tough for forest personnel here. Water has to be fetched from the river below.

For two evenings, we observed a pair of Large-tailed Nightjars *Caprimulgus macrurus* in what seemed to be a pre-mating ritual in the open space around the FRH.

At around 18:45 hours the nightjars would start their usual 'chaunk, chaunk' calls. One of them would sit on a wooden pole and call with both wings drooping. The other would then land on the open ground, lie flat and make guttural sounds with its pure white throat puffed up. Ali and Ripley, *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan*: Vol. 4, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983), compare this second call to the croaking of bullfrogs. This bird (the female) would then shuffle around at the same spot with its tail and wings spread out.

Every now and then, she would upend her posterior at an angle of approximately 70 degrees and her croaking calls would increase in intensity whilst she was on the ground. She would fly a little, land in another spot, and repeat these actions. The male uttering

his 'chaunk, chaunk' calls would fly down and very briefly land on her as if for mating. This behavior was repeated a number of times.

Another highpoint for me was seeing Great Slaty Woodpeckers *Mulleripicus pulverulentus*. I had not seen them on the second morning; barely had I put my shoes I rushed outside hearing loud birds calls. Lo and behold! Five Great Slaty Woodpeckers working close together on a tree trunk. Their calls are as distinct as they are loud. We had one more occasion to hear and observe them. We decided then and there that if we ever located a nest we would endeavour to set up a hide and study their breeding habits.

Four kilometers from the FRH at Kakri Dang Chaur, we counted 30 vultures. In this motley bunch, we saw one White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* and two Slender-billed Vultures. An Egyptian Vulture was harassing an immature Griffon Vulture.

Although we did not actually stop to check birds other than raptors and vultures, I did notice that male Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* were displaying and calling throughout the day and well into the evening. Indian Grey Hornbills *Ocyrceros birostris* were everywhere. Every now and then, we heard a commotion of 'demented laughter' from White-crested Laughing Thrushes *Garrulax leucolophus*. More than a dozen Black Storks *Ciconia nigra* were seen floating on thermals in Haldu Parao. A large hawk (*Accipiter* sp.), with a whitish underside and a lot of barring and streaks, was probably a Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*. The Himalayan or Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* was very common and seen everywhere. They are more conspicuous along the roads up in the hills.

Having completed the first part of our trip, we headed further up into the hills. Our destination was Ranikhet and Pangot, near Nainital, to observe vultures at slaughterhouses and garbage dumps.

From Haldu Parao we drove via Domunda (at the confluence of Ramganga and Kosi Rivers) to Mohan. A little after Mohan we stopped at Kwaliti Inn (famous with visiting birdwatchers) for a late lunch of *pakoras* and tea. Rishad pointed out the nest of Pallas's Fish Eagle high up in a bare tree close to Kwaliti Inn. One chick was seen sitting up at the nest. A Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* seen from the road. We reached Ranikhet late in the evening.

We drove to Chowbattia the highest point where the oak forest is still good. Chowbattia is now under the Army's control. A soldier accompanied us. We were returning after two years to see whether Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* still nested in Kautilya Hall. They did! Kautilya Hall, built in 1910, was originally a church but is now used by the local army division for conferences.

Sadly, we did not see a single vulture either at the abattoir or at the garbage dumping ground. However, a good number of Steppe Eagles were seen. These eagles are more scavengers than hunters. Even the locals living in the vicinity were acutely aware that vultures disappeared 3 years ago.

Two days later, at Nainital, we had a quick look at the garbage-dump on the hillside, but found only Steppe Eagles and Large-billed Crows *Corvus macrorhynchos*. Rishad told me that these crows are now soaring and circling overhead as if imitating vultures and their fiercer cousins, the eagles. Not wanting to stop we drove straight through the town of Nainital for Pangot, 15 kms away. The trees were thicker above the town but some patches were getting bare. Perhaps, a sign of demand for firewood?

We took a short detour to the oak and deodar forest of Kilbury at 7,200 feet. There is a nice FRH but the interiors are not

maintained. We could see Cheena Peak, the highest point at 8,500 feet. Mohan, the forest guard kindly gave us tea that we had with cheese and crackers. Another frugal lunch! The wind was up and the air a bit chilly!

After telling ourselves that this was an exciting area for birds we headed for our last destination, Pangot, where we were booked to stay at Mohit Aggarwal and Pawan Puri's "Jungle Lore Birding Lodge". It is indeed a well-managed property with extremely nice and cozy cottages. Birders are welcomed with open arms. As already remarked in the visitors' book by previous visitors the cook does an admirable job in serving good, wholesome meals.

The next morning Lokesh, the young hotel guide, beckoned us outside, pointing to female Maroon Orioles *Oriolus traillii*, Black-throated Tits *Aegithalos concinnus* and a host of Himalayan birds that came regularly to feed on the bird table and the trees in front of the hotel. Mornings were spent with toast in one hand and binoculars in the other. I noticed one almost bare tree with small clustered leaves. Each leaf had a red centre. Fresh leaves were sprouting from ends of branches. Warblers and Tits were among its branches picking insects all day and every bird we saw visited this 'buffet spread' throughout the day. The local gardener told us the local name - "dharmouli". Across the valley, we could see a large patch of bird-droppings on a hillside. We learnt later that that was a regular nest site of the Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*.

At Vinayak, which is beyond Pangot, the enthusiastic Lokesh pointed out several lifers. A silent pair of Mistle Thrushes *Turdus viscivorus*, Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*, Grey-winged Blackbird *Turdus boulboul*, and Rufous-bellied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos hyperythrus*. Rufous Sibilas are very common in these parts. We were lucky to spot two Goral- mountain goats.

On our way back through Nainital, we once again passed the garbage-dumping area. No Vultures. Nothing. Just the usual Steppe Eagles and the acrobatic large-billed Crows.

During the entire trip that we traversed by road, only one White-backed Vulture was seen in Kakri Dang Chaur, Kalagarh Reserve Forest.

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