

FEATURE — 5

To Kathmandu and beyond!

By Professor Alastair Driver

As I write, the cold April rain is stair-rotting and my expedition to Bardia National Park in Nepal in the last two weeks of March already seems like a fading dream.

I was part of a 20-strong multi-skilled team gathered by the Scientific Exploration Society with a mission:

To continue the studies of the wild elephants, tiger and rhino of Bardia, fix the other wildlife and provide aid for the local communities.

The latter included dentistry — mainly tooth extractions — for the local communities, distributing spectacles, handing out previously-raised funds to deserving causes and visiting the local primary school for which we had funded a major refurbishment programme.

My role was to lead the wildlife studies as requested by my dear old friend, the expedition leader and living legend, 80-year-old Col John Blackford, Snell CBE.

After a 14-hour stop-over in Kathmandu, still ravaged by the terrible earthquakes of 2015, we flew on by turbo-prop plane to the appropriately named rural town of Nepalgunj. From there we trundled by ancient bus for 3 hours to the edge of the 400 square mile wilderness of Bardia National Park in the lowland Terai region of South-West Nepal.

At the edge of the park we transferred to jeeps for the final hour of the journey through dense forest to our tented camp on the banks of the Geruwa River, by now running very low as it was the middle of the dry season.

Over the next nine days we undertook elephant safaris in the early morning and, in late afternoons, to track tigers, rhinos, wild elephants and any other wildlife we came across.

In between, we took long excursions by jeep into the forest in search of an elusive elephant herd which was known to contain the largest Asian elephants on record. Daily the herd eluded us as they remained many miles away in another part of the park, but we did encounter two large male 'bustlers' who were roaming from the rest of the herd.

I was shocked to discover from our guides that wild elephants kill an average of 25 people a year in the small villages scattered around the edges of the park, mainly when they come in to the village areas in search of crops to food on.

I also heard of a couple of people killed by tigers, including the brother of our senior guide and of a baby being crushed by a crocodile and then successfully rescued by the family, but not before several of them had been badly injured. So spare a thought for these people when you next worry about being struck by a weevil!



Left: Jeep safari through the jungle and above. Alastair with his expert guide Bernie Hill



Indian Bhoir



Bhimeswar Lingar



Above: Col Blackford (left) with Alastair

Right: Dabrhathara

Left: Golden Jackal



Ghoral Crocodile

Certainly every time I washed my clothes and myself in the river, I wished I had eyes in the back of my head!



Indian Spotted Tortle

The variety of wildlife was truly stunning and thanks to our superb guides we identified over 150 species of birds, 50 mammals, and 20 reptiles. I also photographed numerous butterflies and dragonflies which I am now identifying in order to pass on the records to the park authorities, as little, if any, work has been done on these species so far.

The whole area receives very few visitors and has great capacity to become a high value eco-tourism destination — as long as numbers and activities are sustainably managed. Much of the potential comes from the fact that you are pretty much guaranteed to see tiger if you stay for a few days and have the right guides.

Certainly for me, apart from some of the spectacular and rare birds, this was the undoubted highlight of the visit. I had visited two Indian national parks in recent years and 'blinked', but on this trip I saw three different tigers, with the final encounter of a large male rolling on its back, viewed from an inflatable raft at a distance of about 20 yards, giving me the 'photo-opp' of a lifetime!

You can find out more about this amazing and barely known corner of the planet when I give a lecture on the expedition to the Seeing and Seeing Eye Society on Friday 11 October.