

## FEATURES — 5

# To Kathmandu and beyond!

By Professor Alastair Driver

*As I write, the cold April rain is chair-sodding 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 22-strong multi-skilled team gathered by the Scientific Exploration Society with a mission:

*To continue the studies of the wild elephants, tiger and deer of Bardia, for 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, 70 year old Col John Blackford Snell CBE.

After a 14 hour stop-over in Kathmandu, still assaged by the terrible earthquakes of early 2015, we flew on by turbo-prop plane to the appropriately named rural town of Nepalganj. 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 Geronwa 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 afternoon, 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. Sadly the herd eluded us as they remained many miles away in another part of the park, but we did encounter two large male 'tuskers' 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 feed on.

I also heard of a couple of people killed by tigers, including the brother of our senior guide and of a baby being snatched by a mugger 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 moan about being stung by a wasp!



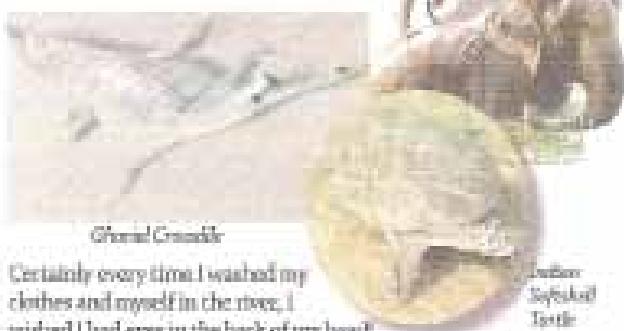
*Left: A long safari through the jungle and above: Alastair with his expert guide Roshanali*



*Above: Col Blackford Snell (left) with Alastair*

*Right: Dhole cub*

*Left: Golden Jackal*



*Giant Crocodile*

*Dhole  
Slothful  
Tigress*

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

The variety of wildlife was truly stunning and thanks to our superb guides we identified over 150 species of birds, 50 mammals, and 40 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 undoubtedly highlight of the visit. I had visited two Indian national parks in recent years and 'blanked', 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 hardly known corner of the planet when I give a lecture on the expedition to the Seeing and Hearing Eye Society on Friday 11 October.