

Satpura is acquiring a reputation as one of the best places in the world to see the short-sighted, short-tempered sloth bear.



BIG GAME VIEWING SATPURA NATIONAL PARK

A shaggy bear story

Satpura has the wildlife riches of India's more famous national parks, including sloth bears, leopards and tigers – all it lacks is the crowds, writes **James Parry**.

IT WAS DIFFICULT to know who saw who first. The large, black mass behind the bushes could easily have been a rock, until it shuffled out into the open for a better look: my first sloth bear.

As he sniffed the air and squinted – sloth bears are notoriously short-sighted – the big male pointed his characteristic pale muzzle directly at us. But, unable to pinpoint the cause of his uncertainty, he eventually resumed feeding on fallen *renni* berries. The bear ambled around, barely 20m from our jeep, until suddenly he caught our scent and, in an unexpected explosion of activity, bounded off into the

forest, his shaggy coat flouncing like a ball gown as he ran.

SECRET SATPURA

This brief but memorable encounter marked the start of what one might cautiously call a 'bear rush'. Over the remainder of the week there were no fewer than nine more bear sightings, an extraordinary tally but one that is becoming quite normal in India's latest wildlife-viewing hotspot: Satpura National Park.

Satpura lies in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, in the very heart of India. MP, as it is usually known, contains several of the brightest jewels

in the country's wildlife crown – the celebrated national parks of Bandhavgarh, Kanha and Pench are all here – and the state remains one of India's most thickly forested, with approximately 30 per cent of its land under tree cover.

Satpura National Park was established in 1977. Despite being one of India's largest (and most important) protected areas – along with two adjacent wildlife sanctuaries, it covers slightly more than 1,425km² – it remains among the subcontinent's least-known nature reserves.

It is an area of great scenic beauty, defined by the Satpura

Hills, which run on a broadly east-west axis and reach a peak of 1,352m. Access to the park has traditionally centred on its eastern section via the town of Pachmarhi, a significant hill station during colonial times.

CAPTAIN'S LOG

The importance of the area's timber resources was first noticed by British soldiers, who established a forest department office here in 1862. Among them was Captain James Forsyth, who later wrote a classic book about the area and its wildlife (see *Further Reading*, p87). Today, a lodge bearing his name



Satpura is an excellent place to look for leopards because they are more likely to be out and about during the day here.

There are better places in India to see tigers, but you could still get lucky.



Watch out for Indian wild dogs in open areas where other animals are grazing.



We were faced by a scene more typical of the savannah: hundreds of animals were grazing.

helps the forest department at Satpura to manage tourist access to the park's northern sector, where there are impressive concentrations of wildlife.

My introduction to this remarkable place occurred on a warm and still February afternoon. With Forsyth's Lodge manager Anant Erickson and naturalist Nim Gurung, I walked

through farmland, birding en route, down to the banks of the Tawa River, where a watchtower guards the northern entrance to the park. The only way of reaching the park is on a small boat and, while waiting for it to cross the river to pick us up, we checked out the waders along the shoreline.

Visiting redshanks and wood sandpipers were feeding busily alongside resident locals, such as river lapwings, and the flocks whirring overhead included skeins of bar-headed geese that overwinter here before returning to their breeding quarters north of the Himalayas in the spring.

Birdlife is prolific at Satpura, both within the park and in the 18ha private sanctuary where Forsyth's Lodge is located. One morning, we spotted a grey-headed fish eagle perched on a

Green bee-eaters are common in Satpura and delightful to watch.



rock, eating what may have been a rahu. Black-shouldered kites sailed over the adjacent fields, while rollers and bee-eaters dotted the fences, and crested serpent eagles and long-billed vultures soared in the thermals.

HEAVENLY HABITAT

Once ferried across the river, and with the formalities of park permits concluded, we climbed into a jeep and entered the park. The areas accessible to visitors are mostly covered by moist, deciduous forest, chiefly teak, though the oldest and largest trees were felled for their timber long ago. Forsyth remarked how "the teak has been indiscriminately hacked down for every sort of purpose, for many generations", and much of what you see today is regenerating secondary forest. But because there has been no logging here for several decades, excellent forest habitat is now developing – and the wildlife is prospering.

On entering the park you first come across an open expanse of

meadow. This was formerly the site of a village, its inhabitants and their cattle now relocated as part of an ongoing programme to move permanent human settlements outside the park. The meadows are managed by the park authorities to improve the grazing for wild herbivores.

It's clearly been a success. We arrived shortly after dawn one morning to discover a scene more typical of the African savannah: hundreds of animals were gathered, with herds of blackbuck and spotted deer mingling with families of wild boar, langurs and macaques feeding on the fruiting shrubs, and 30 gaur – or wild bison – cautiously emerging from the forest to graze.

The meadows also offer a rare chance of seeing sloth bears out in the open, as they sometimes forage here for ants and termites. However, it was in the forest that we had our bear encounters, as well as superb sightings of other classic Indian wildlife. Sambar deer and gaur were plentiful, with nilgai antelope in drier areas and

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

By air to Bhopal with Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) or Air India (www.indian-airlines.nic.in) and then 3.5 hours by road to the park's northern entrance. Also accessible by rail to Itarsi (1.5 hours away by road) and Pipariya (1 hour).

ACCOMMODATION

Luxurious Forsyth's Lodge can arrange all activities, and collection from Bhopal airport or railway stations (www.forsythlodge.com). Reni Pani Jungle Lodge is comfortable, too, but further from the park entrance (www.renipanijunglelodge.com). Modest forest department accommodation is also available ☎ +91 755 277 8383.

TRAVEL COMPANIES

Satpura is featured in itineraries run by Indian Explorations (www.indianexplorations.com) and Audley Travel (www.audleytravel.com).

GENERAL INFORMATION

Only 12 vehicles are allowed in the northern part of Satpura National Park at

any one time to reduce the impact on wildlife.

Satpura works well in combination with tiger hotspots **Pench** and **Kanha**.

Information about the **Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve**, the conservation area that includes Satpura, can be found at www.epco.in/pdfs/brisolvol1no1-b.pdf

For news about local conservation, see the **Wildlife Protection Society of India** (www.wpsi-india.org) and the **Bombay Natural History Society** (www.bnhs.org).

FURTHER READING

The Highlands of Central India by Captain James Forsyth (Vedams, ISBN 9788120611597, £48). A fascinating account. Order on p80, quoting code W0610/7.

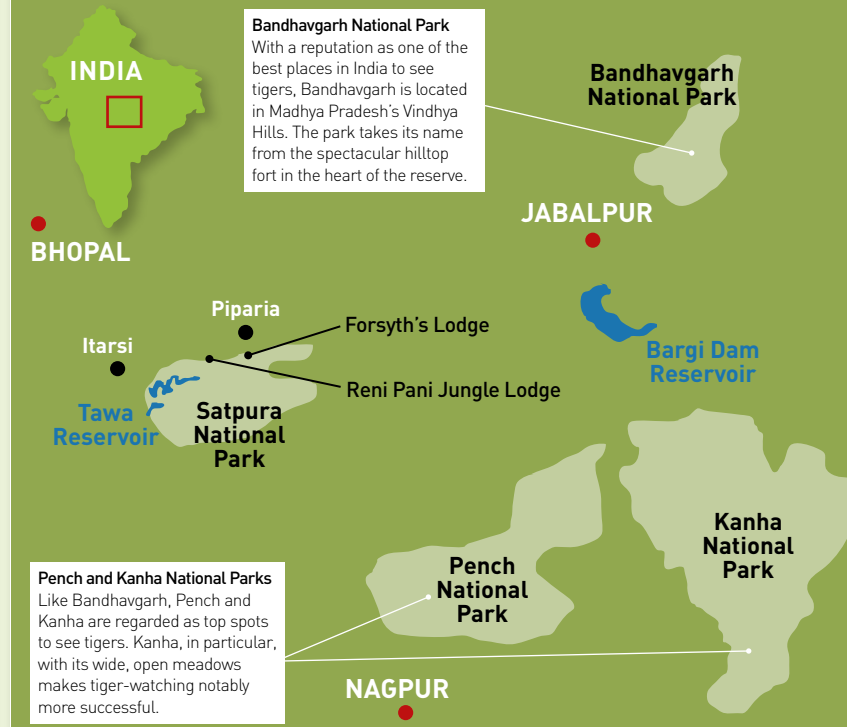
Field Guide to Indian Mammals by Vivek Menon (Christopher Helm, ISBN 9781408112137, £16.99). A must-have. Order on p80, quoting code W0610/8.

Wild India by Guy Mountfort and Gerald Cubitt (New Holland, ISBN 9781845379230, £19.99). Out of print but available second-hand from www.abebooks.co.uk

THE INFORMATION

SATPURA NATIONAL PARK An area of spectacular beauty and great wildlife – one of India's most important protected regions.

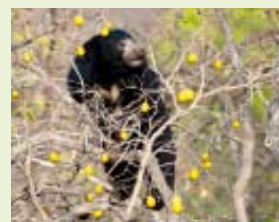
THE NAVIGATOR



LOCATION The central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. **WHEN TO GO** The park is open between mid-October and the end of June, when wildlife concentrates around the remaining sources of water. However, the weather is very hot after early April; the most comfortable months for wildlife-watching are November to March.

TOP SPECIES TO SEE

Left to right: Nick Garbutt/NickGarbutt.com; Elliott Neep/FPA, Indian Gypsy/Alamy; PhotoLibrary.com



SLOTH BEAR

ID Big, black and hairy. **WHERE** You stand as good a chance of spotting a sloth bear in Satpura as you do anywhere in the world, and you'd be unlucky not to see one during a three- or four-day stay. You could glimpse one anywhere, but a good bet is near rocky outcrops, which are good denning sites. Look for signs of digging for ants and check trees, which they climb for fruit and berries. Mostly seen singly, though females with cubs in tow are possible.



LEOPARD

ID Hard to confuse, but well camouflaged in the forest. **WHERE** Very adaptable, but rocky areas and seasonal watercourses are favourite haunts. Often seen walking along forest tracks – listen for langurs' alarm calls. These big cats are surprisingly active in daylight here. The best chance of a close encounter is from elephant back. Fellow visitors saw a female stalk and nearly catch a sambar within metres of their elephant.



INDIAN WILD DOG

ID Larger than a jackal, but smaller than a wolf. The rich chestnut coat and shaggy black-tipped tail are distinguishing features. Usually in packs of 3–12. **WHERE** Open areas with grazing animals. One afternoon we watched three dogs chase and pull down a fawn. We returned later and found a wild boar scavenging the entrails. Wild dogs are a Satpura speciality, but packs are mobile – after several days in one area they move on.



MUGGER/INDIAN CROCODILE

ID Unmistakable, but wary and can be elusive. Mature males can reach 5m long. **WHERE** Adults bask on river banks, while youngsters can be found in ponds. Also seen crossing land between waterbodies. **WHEN** Muggers are most obvious in the dry season, especially in ever-diminishing waterholes. This is also the best time of year to catch attacks on animals as they drink; one was recently seen grabbing a wild dog.



MALABAR GIANT SQUIRREL

ID Rich maroon and black above, with cream arms and underparts. Can exceed 1m long, including tail. **WHERE** Satpura is the most northerly point in India where this mammal occurs. The Satpura Hills are a 'sky island', where species more characteristic of the Western Ghats to the south survive in isolated populations. Look for giant squirrels in the canopies of mature trees where they leap and chase, and where food such as fruit is plentiful.



The chital or spotted deer is one of the key base 'ingredients' for an Indian ecosystem – if they are abundant, predators will be, too.

James Parry even a glimpse of a male four-horned antelope – or chowsingha – arguably the rarest mammal I saw during my time at Satpura. But, inevitably, it was the sloth bears that we were most thrilled to see, and that most enigmatic of big cats – the leopard.

Satpura has recently become one of the best places in India to watch these felines. They are often active during the day here, and are generally unfazed by humans – fellow guests at the lodge saw them regularly. We had two near-misses, indicated by frantic langur calls directly above our heads as the source of their anxiety passed by just a few metres away,

frustratingly out of sight. Finally, we came face-to-face with a beautiful, young male leopard. Our guide recognised him by his distinctive blue left eye, and we watched him for half an hour as he sat on a rock just metres away, before finally rising to his feet and melting away into the forest.

ELEPHANT EXPRESS

It is not just experiences like this that make visiting Satpura so rewarding. The park authorities are also developing an imaginative range of wildlife activities. As well as jeep safaris, it is now possible to explore denser forest not accessible by vehicle on elephant back, and to take boat trips that provide spectacular lakeshore game viewing, especially in the dry season.

However, my favourite was the opportunity to explore the park on foot: Satpura is the only national park of its type in India where this

We watched a beautiful leopard for half an hour, until he melted away into the forest.

is possible. Every step creates a more intimate connection with the forest, as well as providing the chance to look for tracks in a seasonal watercourse or *nullah*, identify butterflies as they bask in sunlit glades and scour the canopy for Malabar giant squirrels. It is a profoundly different experience – a rare and magical treat.

There are tigers here as well – more than 40 at the latest count, though they are highly elusive. However, you don't visit Satpura to see these cats. Sightings are virtually guaranteed at Pench and Kanha National Parks, also in Madhya Pradesh. But there is arguably nowhere else in India right now where sloth bears, leopards and wild dogs are seen so regularly – or where it is possible to experience such abundant wildlife at close range, and in such unusually relaxed conditions.

Northern Satpura has no crowds, no queues and none of what one leading Indian conservationist recently called the "circus atmosphere" of India's busier parks. Rather, it represents something of a crossroads for this burgeoning nation: not just a glimpse back to an India of the past, of beautiful forests teeming with wildlife, but also the opportunity to create an ecotourism model that can help shape the future of conservation in the Indian subcontinent.

The park's field director Nayan Singh Dugnriyal is aware of the opportunities in his hands: "We know Satpura is a very special place. The challenge is to keep it that way, and carefully develop its unique qualities to benefit visitors and wildlife alike." That's what makes it a perfect destination.

James Parry travels regularly to India in search of wildlife and is the author of *Rainforest Safari* (Carlton, 2008).

Look for Malabar giant squirrels in the canopy, where they forage for fruit, flowers, nuts and birds' eggs.



James Parry

Krupaker Senani/Photolibary.com