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Keoladeo Ghana National Park, India

by David BEHRENS

Category: Places



Chital Bucks: Canon EOS D60, Canon 500mm f/4.5, 1/500, ISO200

Imagine a park with thousands upon thousands of birds - everywhere you look there are ducks, geese, cranes, herons, pelicans, kingfishers, egrets, cormorants, kites, eagles, hawks, falcons, vultures, owls, hoopoes, drongos, mynas and robins - with brief noisy interruptions by the coming and going of the seven sisters - Jungle Babblers. This is not a silent park. Imagine parakeets as common as sparrows; dawn that starts with the piercing trumpeting of Sarus Cranes and evenings announced with the mocking howls of jackals and deep raspy hoots of the Dusky Eagle Owl calling to its mate. Chitals abound with stately racks; Sambar bucks are seen sparring in jest and the large ungainly Nilgai with their funny black and white socks are seen grazing among the cranes. That was my introduction to Keoladeo Ghana National Park - a park that ranks as one of the best waterfowl preserves in the world and also known for its wintering of the rare and endangered Siberian Crane.



Dusky Eagle Owl: Canon EOS D60, 500mm w/1.4X, f/6.7, 1/45, ISO100

My first visit to Keoladeo was in late November 2001. Three and a half days and 1700 photos later I was hooked. This is a park that I will want to visit again and again. To a birdwatcher this is a dream come true - to a wildlife photographer it is like dying and going to heaven. Keoladeo is a zoo without bars. You can walk in this park - not being restricted to structured pathways or enclosed inside jeeps. For the most part there is a general tolerance to man's presence - allowing a good chance to walk softly, compose and click the shutter.

Keoladeo was not always a sanctuary for wildlife. Originally set aside in 1850 as a deer shooting site and later constructed in 1901 with ponds and dykes as a duck shooting reserve - this was a hunting paradise for royalty. A park frequented by Maharajas, Viceroy, Kings, Senators and Generals; with as many as 4,273 birds recorded shot in a single hunt.



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Spotted Owlet: Canon EOS D60, 500mm, f/4.5, 1/45, ISO200

Then in 1956 Keoladeo was made a bird sanctuary, a National Park in 1981 and declared a World Heritage site in 1985.

Ever since that visit in late 2001 I could not get Keoladeo out of my mind. Finally I had the opportunity to go back this February. This time I had four and a half days to play and I could hardly wait. I arrived in Delhi and my hired car and a driver in a Hindustan Ambassador was at the airport to pick me up. After a 5-hour drive from Delhi through some interesting countryside and villages we arrived in the small town of Bharatpur. On the outskirts of town there is a stone wall that surrounds Keoladeo Park and after paying a 200 rupees entry fee for myself and 50 rupees for the car, we drove to the only hotel inside the park - the Bharatpur Forrest Lodge - a quaint 3-star hotel with 16 rooms and guests are usually seen wearing binoculars around their neck and cameras slung over their shoulders. My kind of place.

The last time I was in Keoladeo in 2001 I took the flat bottom boat ride, with our guide poling through the still waters, for only two hours. That proved to be too short and this time I was going to go out for at least 3 hours with my 500mm mounted on tripod - ready to shoot the ducks, eagles, kingfishers, egrets and other critters. However, this time the waterways were not there. In their place were dry fields looking like they've never seen standing water. Bharatpur had experienced 2 straight years of drought and was dry! This was a totally different Keoladeo Park. But 4 days and 800 pictures later I knew that even in a bad year, this was an exciting place for wildlife photography.



Indian Skimmer: Canon EOS D60, Canon 500mm f/4.5, 1/760, ISO100

On the last day of my previous visit - after oohing and ahing over all the wildlife I learned a very important lesson. Hire a guide. They are not expensive and they know the area. When I finally broke down and hired my guide the first questions asked was what do you want to see? After further questioning we decided initially on owls and nightjars. About three hours later I think I saw 5 owls and 2 nightjars. This time I immediately hired a guide and since it was already late in the afternoon we only had time for maybe two hours before it was too dark. 98 pictures later I had captured 3 Spotted Owlets, 3 Dusky Horn Owls, Sambar Deer, Sarus Cranes and a lovely sunset with an eagle silhouetted against the setting sun. My recommendation is get a guide.



Over the next three days my guide took me all over the local area. In the park we saw more owls, hawks, eagles, vultures, ducks, geese, cranes, pelicans, a small assortment of water birds that had congregated in the small waterway formed by well water, jackals, pythons and a nightjar. We took a day trip to the Band-Bairatha dam and lake, which was about 50km from Bharatpur and there we saw many of the usual assortment of migratory

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waterfowl; ducks, geese, herons, terns, cormorants and the Indian Skimmer. Driving back we stopped at a "guest lodge" that had Flying Foxes or fruit bats on its grounds.

Siberian Crane: Canon EOS D30, Canon 100-400mm IS, 2X, MLU

All in all, Keoladeo National Park on a bad year carries wonderful photo opportunities. In a good year it is a wildlife photographers dream come true. In my two visits of roughly 7 days total I took about 2500 pictures. Now imagine a nature photography club turned loose for 7 days in this park! On a good year I rate this park as highly recommended.



Dawn with ducks: Canon EOS D30, Canon 100-400mm @150, f/4.5, 1/30, ISO400

Logistics/costs: I went the extravagant approach and hired a car and driver for 5 days that cost about 225 USD. If one wanted to cut costs the train from Delhi to Bharatpur is very cheap and a car and driver can be hired from Bharatpur at a much cheaper rate. The Bharatpur Forest Lodge hotel that I stayed at was 2500 rupees (Rs) or 52 USD per night. This was probably the most expensive hotel around and at a high season rate as well. I was told that a good hotel just outside the park runs about Rs 500. The entry fee into the park is Rs 200 for foreign nationals plus another Rs 200 for a video camera. Still cameras are free. Guides go for Rs 70 per hour (Rs 120 per hour for groups of more than 5) and boating is Rs 25 per head or Rs 75 for the boat per hour. Rickshaws are available for Rs 50 per hour and can take you into the center of the park, which is not a bad idea if you are packing 20 kg of photographic gear.



About the Photographer

David Behrens is Director of Safety, Operations & Infrastructure for the International Air Transport Assoc. (IATA) Asia Pacific region. One of his passions in life is wildlife and underwater photography. Living in Singapore and a heavy travel schedule has allowed him many opportunities to pursue this hobby and passion.

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