

WorldWideWonders



KEOLADEO GHANA NATIONAL PARK

BIRDING BHARATPUR

Close to many of India's most celebrated art treasures lies one of the world's most amazing hotspots for rewarding bird watching and photography



Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*

Large flocks of the very colorful Painted Stork - often mixed with Black-headed ibis, as here - are a common feature of the waterlogged open plains of Bharatpur.



Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*

The Spotted Owlet is an extremely common species in Bharatpur.

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Keoladeo Ghana National Park - formerly known worldwide as the Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary - is a famous avifauna sanctuary in the immediate vicinity of Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India, which hosts thousands of birds, especially during the winter season. This tiny (29 sq. km) pocket of biodiversity is a veritable treasure trove for students and researchers and it is one of the most celebrated migratory bird habitats in Asia. Once the private wildfowl shooting preserve of the Maharajas of Bharatpur and their guests, the Park now plays host to 388 bird species, of which over 230 are known to be resident. It is also a major tourist destination, with more than 125.000 visitors a year. It was declared a protected sanctuary in 1971, and it is also a World Heritage Site, being placed on the Montreux Record under the Ramsar Convention; according to founder of the World Wildlife Fund, Peter Scott, Keoladeo National Park is one of the world's best bird areas. Keoladeo is a man-made and man-managed wetland, and one of the most easily reached and visited National Parks in India. The reserve is locally known as Ghana, and is a mosaic of dry grasslands, dry woodlands, woodland swamps and wetlands, criss-crossed by a multitude of raised bunds, dust roads and simple, easy trails which are a joy to explore on foot, on bicycle or on a local rickshaw. The rickshaw "drivers" are in fact very well trained, often multilingual birdwatchers and

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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

bird guides, and will make a huge difference when one is exploring the Park and searching for its wildlife. This is a very scenic area and a paradise for wildlife photographers, especially those focusing mostly on birds - photo opportunities are endless, even in low season when the air is muggy and the sky overcast and grey. It is very close to frequently visited, historically and artistically significant tourist destinations such as Delhi (180 km), Jaipur (178 km) and Agra, home of the legendary Taj Mahal (55 km), and well-connected to all by train or bus. While in Bharatpur, one can also take the extra step as we did and visit the even tinier wetland of nearby Nounera - mostly known to birdwatchers and bird photographers only - where the stupendous Sarus crane *Grus antigone* can often be seen grazing in the fields. Accommodation in the area is readily available - we can recommend the lovely and spotless Hotel Sunbird, which is comfortably close to the Park's gates and ticket office. Of course, Keoladeo Ghana was also once best known as the only wintering habitat in India of the rare Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus*: "The cranes sadly stopped visiting since 2002 (with this population in particular now believed to have been driven to extinction by hunting), but come October, every eye still scans the sky in the forlorn hope that the "white angels" will return to their winter home in the heart of Rajasthan..." ●



The tree-lined avenues of Kheoladeo Ghana

Walking around Bharatpur is a joy - the Sanctuary is criss-crossed by a huge network of tree-shaded, raised dirt roads and trails which overlook the wetlands and make photography a pleasure. If one does not feel like walking, bicycles and above all cycle rickshaws are a very viable, inexpensive and comfortable alternative.



Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*

Kheoladeo Ghana's location in the Gangetic Plain makes it an unrivalled breeding site for herons, storks and cormorants, and an important wintering ground for large numbers of migrant ducks. The National Park is open all year from sunrise to sunset.



Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*

The larger trees and thick bushes lining the roads and trails in the woodland swamps of Bharatpur are used as convenient perches overhanging water by many birds, offering wonderful photographic opportunities for those who are willing to move cautiously and wait patiently.



Indian Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*

A very common and rather striking duck species which can be easily observed and photographed in the wetlands of Bharatpur.



Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

The most common parakeet in the Kheoladeo Ghana general area, often seen nesting - like this female - in old tree cavities.



Spotted deer or Chital *Axis axis*

Most people visit Kheoladeo Ghana National Park for the birds, but the mammal fauna is interesting even if reduced with 27 species counted. Ungulates which can be seen in the area include Blackbuck, Chital, Sambar deer (rare), Hog deer, Nilgai or Bluebull, Wild boar and feral cattle.



Indian scops owl *Otus bakkamoena*

A beautiful and splendidly camouflaged species which can be often located in dry or semi-dry palm clumps. Rickshaw drivers usually know where to locate this and other species.



Intermediate egret *Mesophoyx intermedia*

The woodland swamps of Bharatpur offer uniquely beautiful scenic spots.



The Taj Mahal

Kheoladeo Ghana is comfortably close to some of India's most beautiful and celebrated monumental works of art, like Agra's impressive Taj Mahal. Other world-famous sites relatively near are the art cities of Fatehpur Sikri and Jaipur, both well-connected to the National Park by road.



Sarus crane *Grus antigone*

A day excursion to Nounera - a tiny 250-hectare stretch of agricultural land near the outskirts of Bharatpur - is highly advisable if one is interested in observing several birds of prey, vultures and above all the stately Sarus crane, one of India's most beautiful non-migratory birds and an iconic species of wetlands.



Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

The spreading, cultivated fields - no heavy machinery is being used here, with all work being done in the traditional way - around Nounera offer wonderful opportunities to observe at relatively close quarters more than 70 different bird species, all co-existing undisturbed and in harmony with the local farming communities.



Purple Moorhen *Porphyrio porphyrio*

Kheoladeo Ghana's extensive, man-made and man-regulated wetlands represent a much-needed oasis for thousands of waterbirds in the arid landscape of Rajasthan.



Indian palm squirrel *Funambulus palmarum*

A very common sighting on the trees lining Bharatpur's waterways and marshlands.



Job opportunities for many locals

These local ladies are employed by the National Park for road maintenance and woodcutting - one of the countless examples of how a National Park or Nature Reserve can contribute to the local economy. Many Bharatpur citizens work in the tourist industry - as birdwatching guides, providing transport or offering accommodation.



Sarus crane *Grus antigone*

The cultivated fields around Nounera offer good chances to approach and photograph this large, beautiful species.



Deeg Palace

Another very interesting and well preserved site which can be visited on the way to Nounera.



Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor*

Several water bodies dot the arid landscape at Nounera - these host large numbers of cormorants, flamingos and waterbirds. Due to the dust, high humidity and smoke from countless cow dung fires, skies are very rarely blue in the Gangetic plains - our images are never color-corrected on purpose, to portray Indian skies as they are.



Indian Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*

Still waters, tree shadows, floating water plants and beautiful bird species all conspire to make a visit to Kheoladeo Ghana a photographer's dream. By virtue of being one of the best bird watching sites of Asia, more than 100,000 visitors come to the National Park every year; of these about 45,000 are foreign tourists.



Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor*

A panoramic shot of Nounera water bodies and its resident waterbirds.



Black-necked stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*

Another spectacular species commonly seen in the Sanctuary, usually at a distance.



Purple Sunbird *Cinnyris asiaticus*

Smaller species are not to be ignored as they are often stunningly beautiful.



Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

One of the Indian subcontinent's most common and most easily observed birds, and yet a species of extraordinary beauty, often seen while feeding on seeds and berries - as here - or socializing and screeching noisily. A very common encounter along Bharatpur's white roads.

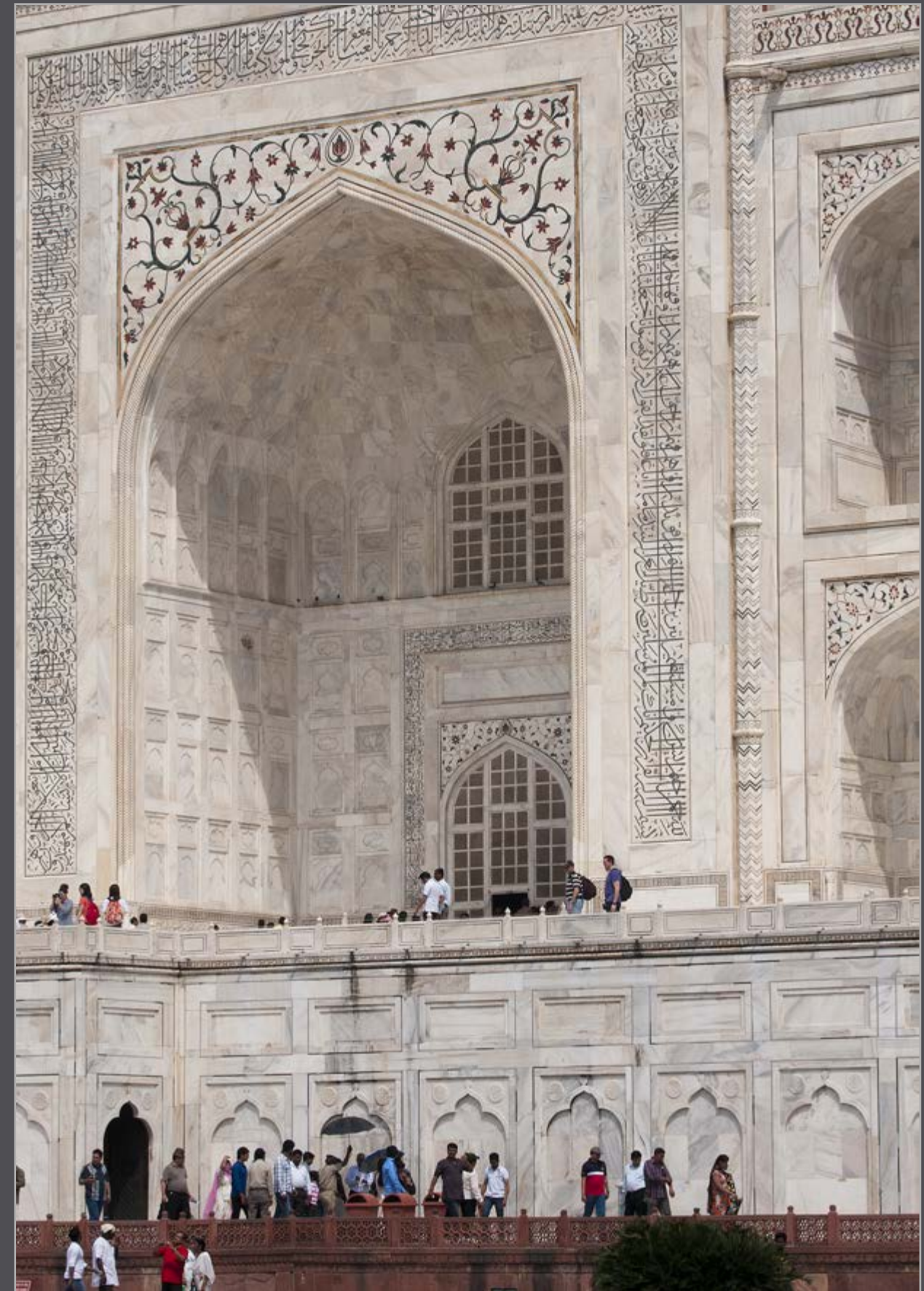


Indian Jackal *Canis aureus*

Large predators are absent from Kheoladeo Ghana, with leopards having been deliberately exterminated by 1964, but small carnivores include Bengal fox, Jackal (the most commonly observed one), Striped hyena, Common palm civet, Small Indian civet, Indian grey mongoose, Fishing cat, Leopard cat, Jungle cat and Smooth-coated otter.



Sarus crane *Grus antigone*
A great encounter on the Nounera plain.



The Taj Mahal
A day trip to this world-famous monument is not to be missed when in Bharatpur.



Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*
One of the many smaller, less noticeable species haunting the local wetlands.



Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*
A commonly observed species - often in small groups, with up to seven or eight individuals lined up along a branch together.



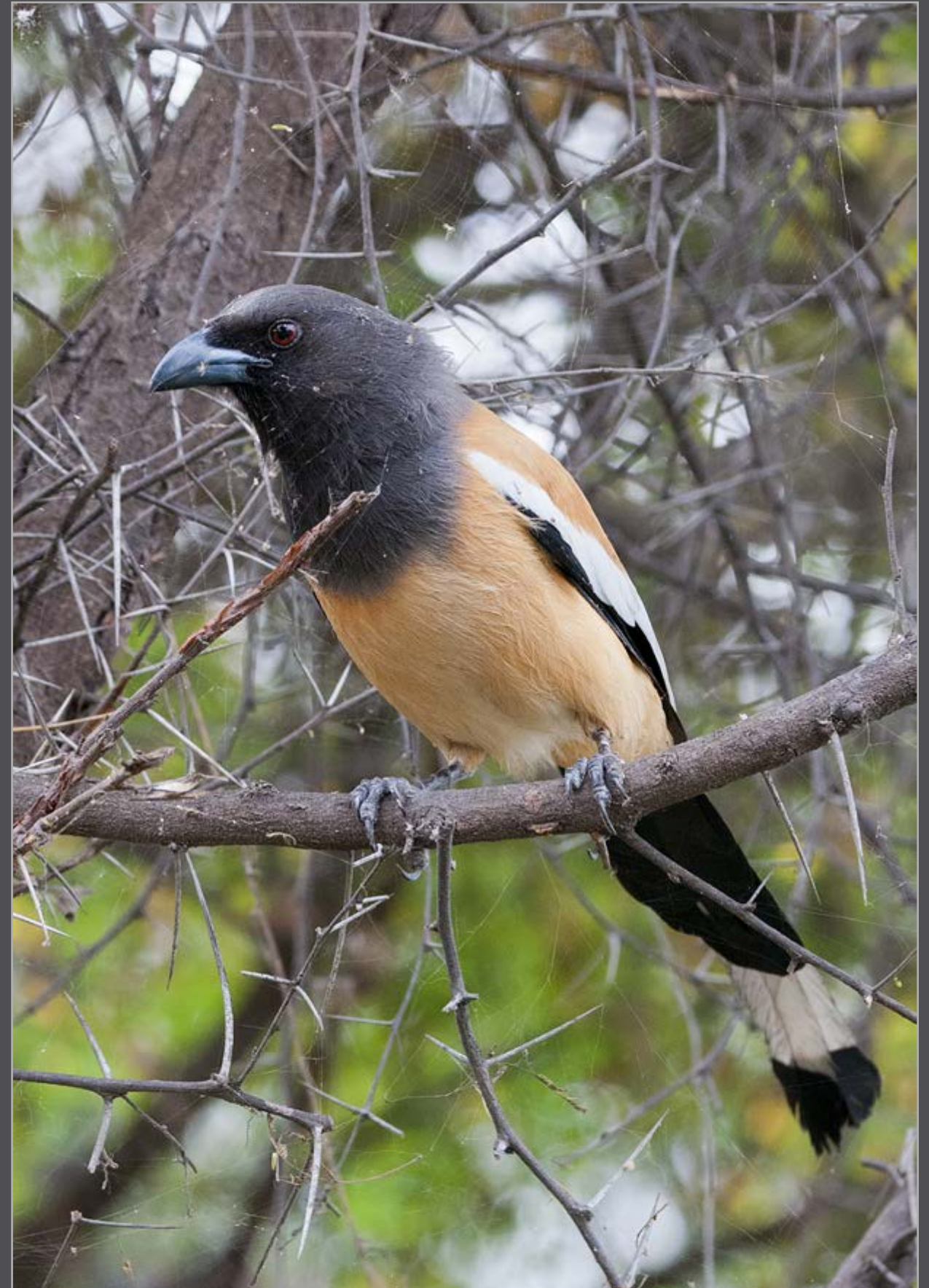
Nilgai or Bluebull *Boselaphus tragocamelus*

Nilgais in knee-deep water, crossing the mist-shrouded wetlands at dawn, offer good opportunities for atmospheric landscape shots - these in our view are very representative of the very essence of the unique environment of Kheoladeo Ghana.



Rhesus macaque *Macaca mulatta*

A very common species - and one you don't want to get too close to as it can be aggressive.



Indian or Rufous Tree Pie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*

Bharatpur is not only about waterbirds exclusively - other species abound here.



Little cormorant *Microcarbo niger*

When exploring the still waterways of Kheoladeo Ghana one should always keep an eye on shady areas near the raised bund - these are the favorite haunts of many small herons, little cormorants and several kingfishers. In one specific area of the Park sightings of the Indian python *Python molurus* are also quite common, particularly in winter.



Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*



Purple heron *Ardea purpurea*



Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Keoladeo Ghana's 29 square kilometers environment is a scenic mosaic of dry grasslands, woodlands, woodland swamps and wetlands. These diverse habitats are home to a minimum of 388 bird species, 379 floral species, 50 species of fish, 13 species of snakes, 5 species of lizards, 7 amphibian species, 7 turtle species, and a variety of other invertebrates.



Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor*

The man-made shallow dams near Nounera are peacefully inhabited by large numbers of waterbirds, undisturbed by the local farming communities.



Indian or Three-striped palm squirrel *Funambulus palmarum*

A very common but always interesting and attractive camera subject!



Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

Many raptor species can be sighted around the open plain of Nounera.



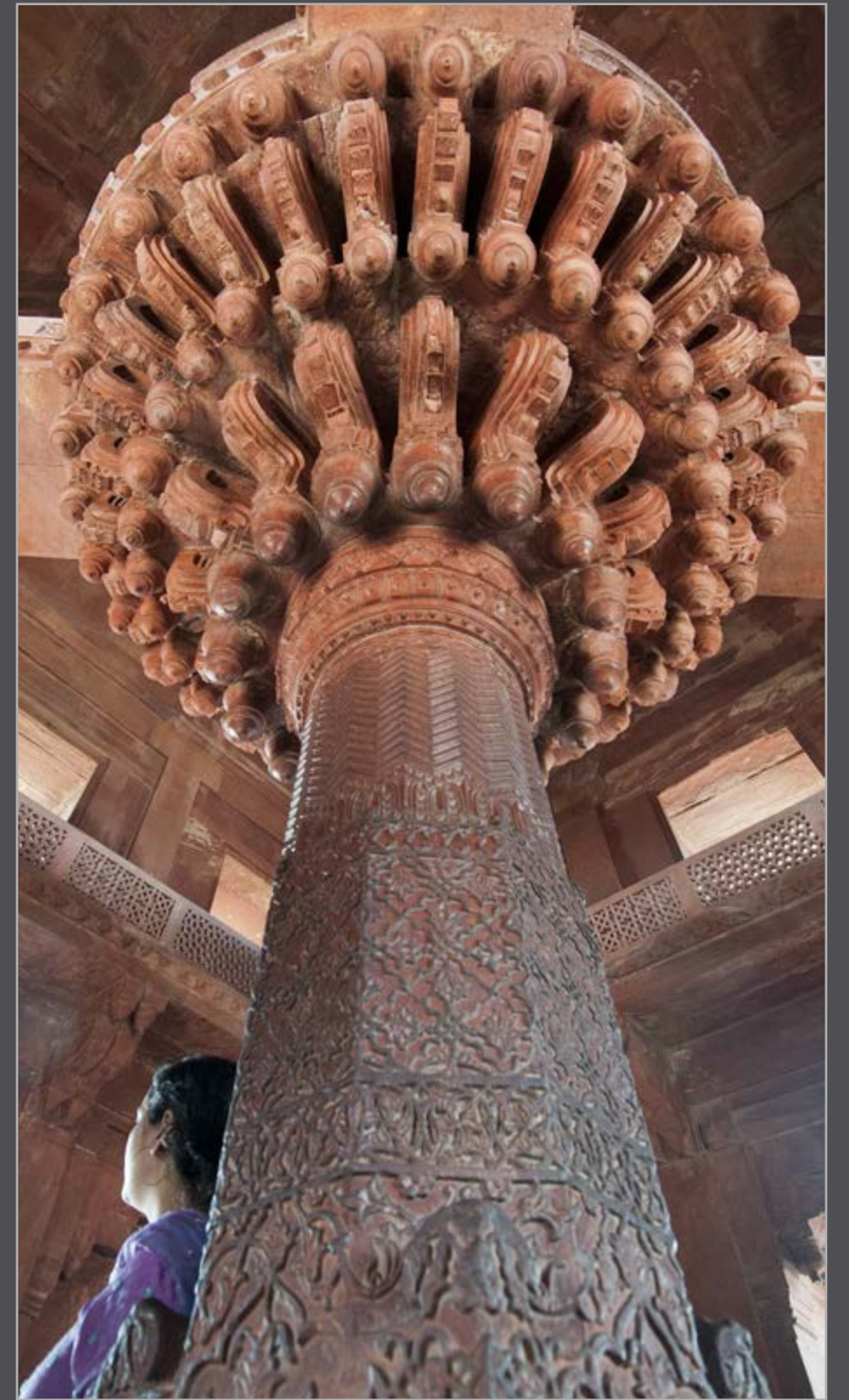
The Taj Mahal

One of the world's most photographed and visited monuments - a must-do excursion when in Bharatpur.



Sarus crane *Grus antigone*

A graceful symbol of the Gangetic plain and the tallest of the flying birds, with a height of up to 1.8 m (5 ft 11 in).



Fatehpur Sikri

Another stunningly beautiful art complex and an unmissable day trip - at the very minimum - when staying in Bharatpur.



Indian pond heron or paddybird *Ardeola grayii*

Even modest, very common species such as this one often become uniquely interesting when viewed up close and photographed in the shadow-dappled waterways of Kheoladeo Ghana. Habituated to hundreds of visitors daily, most species here are relatively undisturbed by human presence and can often be approached at close quarters.



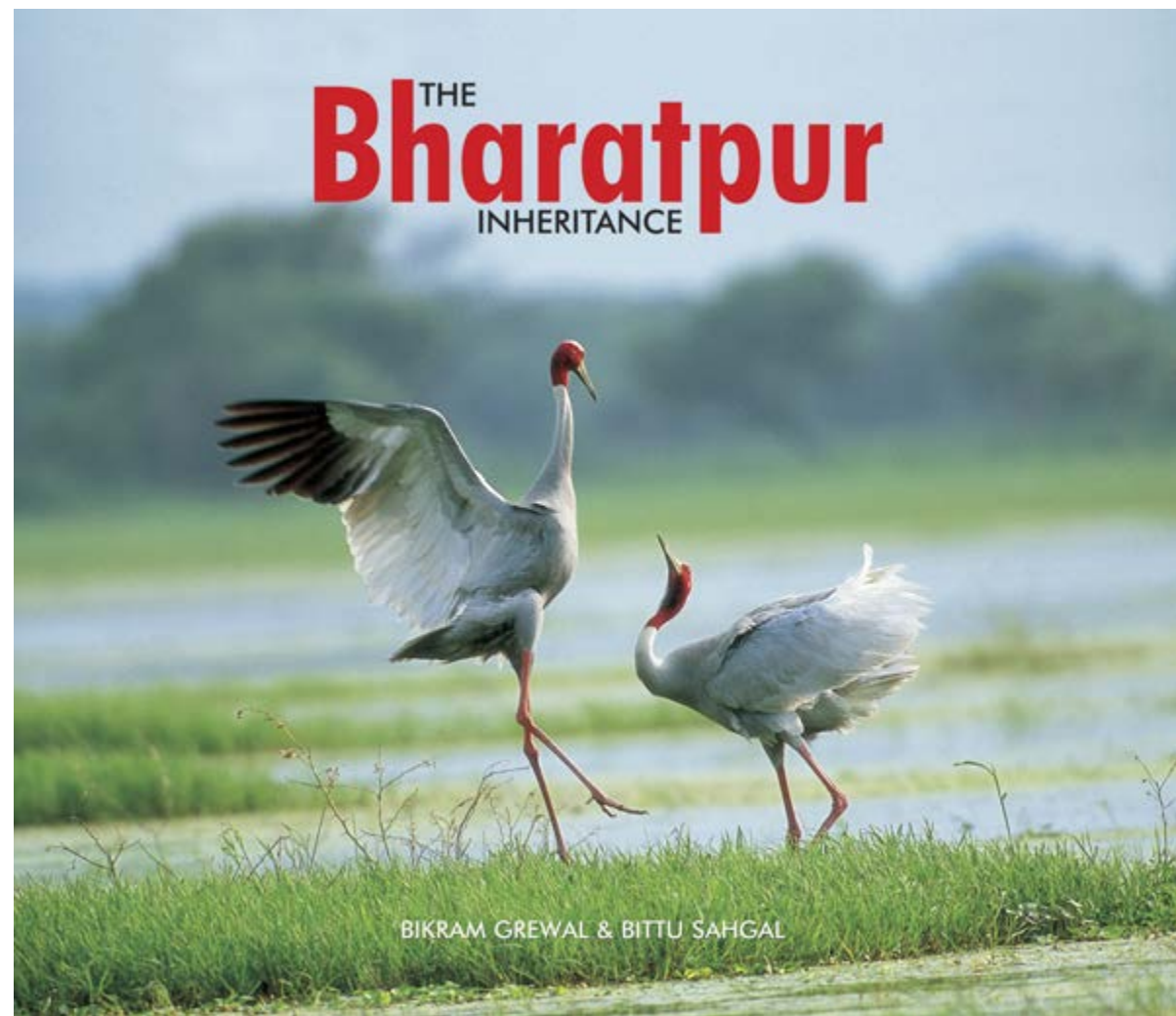
Nilgai or Bluebull *Boselaphus tragocamelus*

For us it is the stately Nilgai - even more than the incredibly diverse avifauna - which truly embodies the *genius loci*, the guardian spirit, of Kheoladeo Ghana. Bathed in the misty, smoky atmosphere of the Bharatpur wetlands, this usually semi-ignored and rather ungainly species acquires in our eyes a new, iconic, magical significance.

The Bharatpur Inheritance

by Bittu Sahgal and Bikram Grewal

For those interested in reading and finding out more about Keoladeo Ghana NP and its wildlife-rich environment, we can safely recommend *Sanctuary Asia Magazine's* stunning coffee-table book *The Bharatpur Inheritance*, edited by Sanctuary's own legendary creator (and staunch activist) Bittu Sahgal and by Bikram Grewal. The volume is illustrated with hundreds of beautiful images of the Reserve's wildlife and habitats and is packed to the brim with in-depth, accurate, up-to-date information about Bharatpur, its present, its future and the problems it has to face. *The Bharatpur Inheritance* is part of a series entirely dedicated to India's spectacular and threatened natural heritage - other titles in the series are devoted to Kaziranga, Tadoba, Corbett, Bandhavgarh, Periyar and the Sundarbans National Parks. *The Bharatpur Inheritance* and its companion volumes in the series (some sadly now out of print) can be ordered online from www.sanctuaryasia.com, the website of India's premier wildlife and natural history magazine.



Painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala*.