

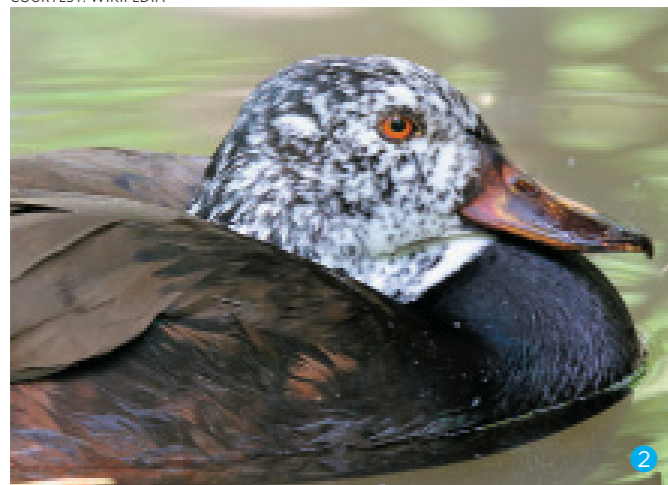


A Bird In the Bush

A trip to Assam's tiger country reaps a bountiful harvest of feathered friends. Text and photographs by **ASHISH KOTHARI**



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Did you see it?" In any tiger reserve in India, this question could only mean one thing: did you see a tiger?

With one exception. In Nameri Tiger Reserve, Assam, the question is about a species far less glamorous, even though far more endangered: the white winged wood duck. It was a delight to hear this question being asked by tourists, in part because, for once, some other species was getting attention, and because I had seen it and could proudly say so!

There are only about 1,000 of these ducks left in the world, about half of them in northeast India. One of the sizeable populations is in Nameri. Even if no other species were found here, the protection of Nameri's forests would be crucial to safeguard the WWW duck.

The other delightful difference between Nameri and other tiger reserves is that you can walk. And so there I was, with forest guard Mina Ram Gogoi, walking on a path with the Jai Bharali river on one side and the forest on the other. And though trying to get a glimpse of the WWW duck was one of our objectives, it was by no means the only one; Nameri's myriad other wildlife (as well as its flora) is equally interesting. And I was lucky in having Mina Ram with me—he had learnt birding on his rounds with visiting birders, and is excellent at spotting birds and identifying them. He is proficient even with most bird calls, which is an enormous boon in a rainforest where birds are often heard more than seen.

As we approached the Muniram Beel, a small lake deep in the forest, Mina Ram beckoned me closer, his finger to his lips. I got my camera ready, and tiptoed to his side, peering at the spot where he was pointing to the pond in front of us. Suddenly, there was movement—a duck glided out of its hiding spot, glanced back at us, and before I could focus, vanished in a flutter, but

not before I could see the conspicuous white in its wings. I had just spotted the white winged wood duck, exactly where Mina Ram had said it might be.

I was lucky to see the duck again at the Bali Pung Nala, a stream further into the forest. But this was only the icing on the cake, as there was much more that I saw and heard over two days of walking, boating, and just sitting around at various points of the reserve. Visitors are allowed to go on a couple of set walking trails that wind their way through a few kilometres of forest, grassland and the riverbank with an official guide. They also have the option of row-boating down the Jai Bharali, passing through gentle shallow rapids and gentler deep stretches, watching the forest on both sides.

For the bird-minded, one of these boat rides is a must, as one sees another relatively uncommon species, the ibisbill. It's a wader that is found in rivers with lots of shallow boulder-strewn stretches. It can very easily be missed, blending as it does so brilliantly with the background. It was only Mina Ram's keen eyes that helped me spot a few as we oared down the Jai Bharali; on one of these occasions the birds were on the shore of a small island in the middle of the river, and I was able to get off the boat and creep up to them for some nice pictures. The bird's main distinguishing feature is its long down-curved beak akin to that of an ibis. It's a testament to nature's ingenuity in design—the beak's angle helps the ibisbill in prising out insects and other small creatures for a tasty meal.

Other delights on the boat ride were flocks of ruddy shelducks and mergansers swimming along the banks, or taking off in a flutter of wings and flying parallel to us for a while before veering off. Much smaller shorebirds like little plovers watched us warily, and at one point a thick-knee with its demented look (and yes, oversized knee joint) eyed us with suspicion before deciding we were

1 A thick-knee, renowned for its enormous knee joint 2 There is a sizeable population of the endangered white winged wood duck in Nameri 3 A boat cruise through the forest with the veteran forest guard Mina Ram Gogoi 4 Countless cormorants crowd the branches of a tree, looking like noisy, big, black fruits 5 The ibisbill, a shallow wader, is an uncommon bird that is found in rivers with plenty of shallow boulder-strewn stretches 6 A hoary-bellied squirrel

NAMERI

harmless. The most remarkable was a set of trees that from a distance looked like they were laden with big black fruits; on closer scrutiny they turned out to be hundreds of cormorants. They would have looked like soldiers on guard had they not been so incredibly noisy, engaging in a restless dance of taking off and landing.

The forest walks were equally fascinating. Dwarfed by trees a hundred feet tall and with 'buttressed' trunks so broad at the base that a car could easily pass through, one instantly feels humble. That feeling was heightened by the sheer diversity of plants and animals all around. Were it not for Mina Ram's skills at spotting birds and identifying their calls, I would have been quite lost. At the

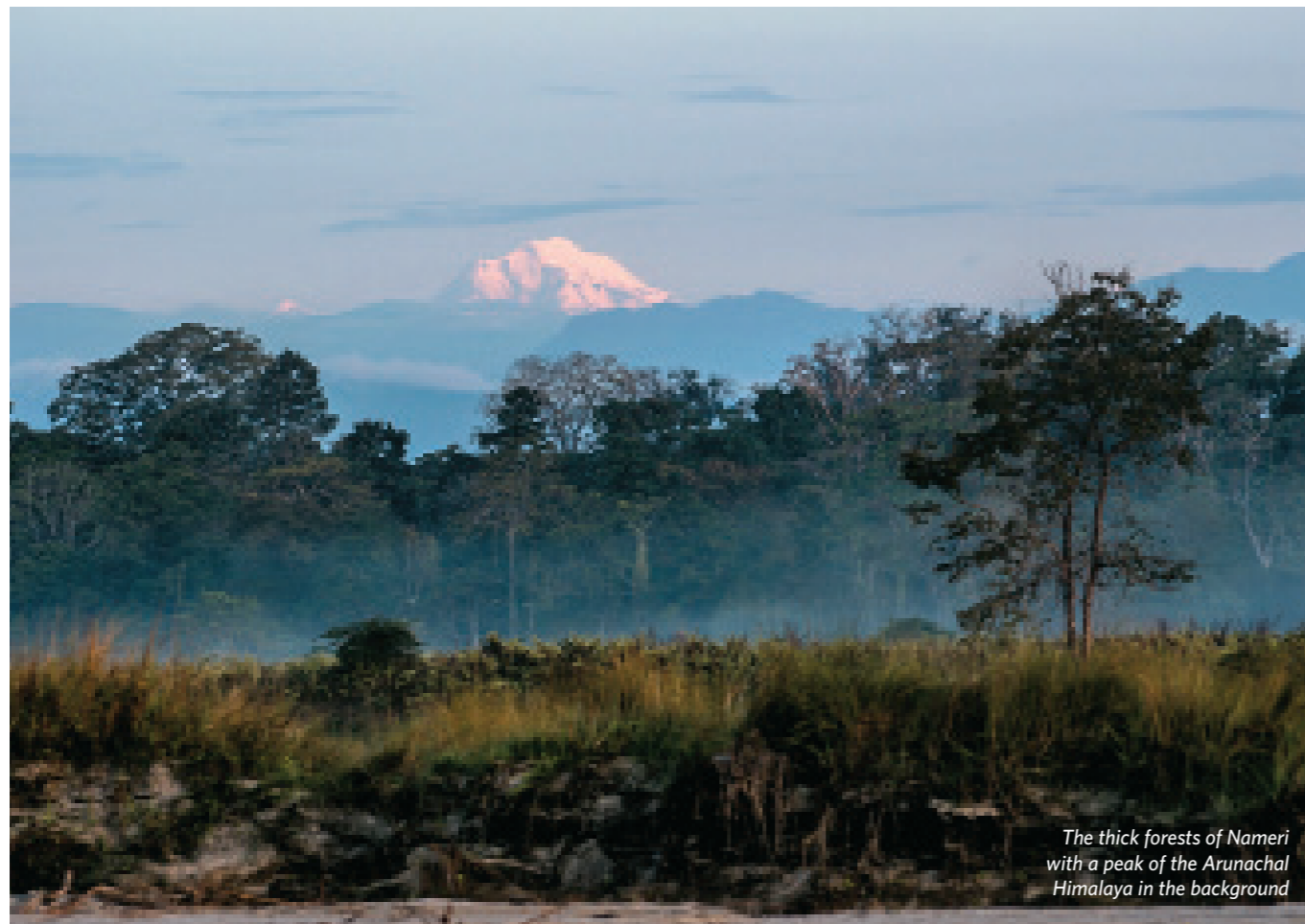
beginning of the walk he had rattled off names of species he said I was sure to see; from amongst these I'd picked the ones I was very keen on spotting, as I had never seen them before. So over the next couple of days he would occasionally stop dead in his tracks, motion me to listen and then beckon me to a forest patch to show me one of these birds. The sultan tit, the streaked spiderhunter, the pinstriped tit-babbler were all seen like this. Occasionally when I saw something he'd missed, I would be mighty pleased with myself!

Nameri has on record some 315 bird species, and further studies will quite likely add many more to this count. In the two days I was there, I was able to see over 70. This isn't bad for an evergreen

forest where dense vegetation often blocks one's view. Especially exciting were a couple of great pied hornbills that came visiting a massive *bhelu* (*Tetra-meles*) tree just behind where I was staying. Apparently they regularly nested here, and it seems they were coming to inspect whether the tree was still home-worthy! Though I have seen this bird a number of times in various parts of India, I am still astonished by its size, the loud 'whoosh whoosh' sound when it flies overhead, and its unique beak casque.

Hornbills were not the only wildlife I saw at the resort I stayed in, a down-to-earth and very comfortable place called the Nameri Eco Camp. Run by the Assam Bhareli Angling and Conservation As-

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The thick forests of Nameri with a peak of the Arunachal Himalaya in the background

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sociation, it has tented accommodation, along with boating and guide facilities. The owners conduct a number of activities that involve local villagers, including training them to manage most of the resort's work, as well as other avenues of livelihood generation. Every morning I awoke well before dawn to the sound of myriad birdcalls, grabbed my binoculars without even washing my face, and headed out. On one of these occasions I was rewarded with the sight of the great pied hornbill pair.

Close to the Eco Camp is the pigmy hog breeding centre run by EcoSystems India. One of the country's most important endeavours to revive the population of a highly threatened species, it is worth a visit to catch a glimpse of the tiny hogs in their breeding pens. The centre's campus itself is full of wildlife, with the staff having recorded nearly 80 species of birds and 147 of butterflies. When I visited, I was rewarded with the additional sight of a troupe of capped langurs who were hanging around high up on the trees in the campus.

As I reluctantly prepared to head back to Guwahati, Mina Ram came to bid me goodbye. I told him in mock complaint that he had not been able to show me some of the species I'd wanted to see. He said I needed to return for a longer trip! And as so often happens in wonderful places I have had the privilege of visiting, I promised to myself that I'd come back and explore some more of Nameri's natural treasures. 



A giant tree with a broad, hollowed-out, buttressed trunk

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THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

The 344-sq-km **Nameri Tiger Reserve** (of which the **Nameri National Park** occupies 200 sq km) lies 35 km from Tezpur in Assam. Tezpur can be easily reached from Guwahati (220 km) and Jorhat (215 km).

WHERE TO STAY

Nameri Eco Camp (₹1,978 double

tent, 9435250025 (Divisional Forest Officer), ontrip.in/nameri-eco-camp) beside the Jai Bharali river is the best option at the reserve. The accommodation is in comfortably appointed tents, with a spacious dining area. The tents are spacious, intelligently designed for convenience, and contain all that one would need in such a place, and a bit more, including hot

water and power.

The camp offers boating and hiking through the forest with forest department guards.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

This region is very rich in avifaunal biodiversity. Apart from tigers and other mammals, this region is a **birders' paradise**. You can speak to the Eco Camp

people and organise **hikes** in the neighbouring forests along with trained guards for this. Apart from this, you could also go for a spot of **river rafting**. This can be organised by the Eco Camp.

Visit the nearby **pigmy hog-breeding centre** for a sight of this rare and extremely endangered species.

■ ASHISH KOTHARI