

WINTER IN THE WILD: SPOTS TO VISIT IN INDIA

NEW DELHI
DECEMBER 15, 2021



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This season, set out on an adventure in the wilderness to catch glimpses of elusive creatures and

rediscover the beauty and bounty of Nature

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Every season has something special in store for those with wanderlust. And for wildlife enthusiasts, winters are the best time of the year. As the temperatures dip, creatures of the wild across the country come out of their hiding places, offering rare sights. "For wildlife and nature lovers, every season is special as the forests look different every season. But winter is popular for wildlife tourism since many parks open up after the monsoon and the sightings are great when the grasses are scant. Tracking is also better as the trails are dry," says Shoba Mohan from Responsible Tourism Society of India.

Depending on what you wish to spot, there are options galore in India for winter wildlife getaways. "Snow leopards of Ladakh are a classic wildlife itinerary. Winter is especially beautiful in Corbett with its varied bird

population. One can also experience the beautiful sunrise and rare sightings in the meadows of Kanha," says Mohan who is also the founder of RARE India.

In Jawai, Rajasthan, one can spot leopards if they know how to look for them. "This is a very shy species, and thus people don't guarantee leopard spotting. But here you can see them much more easily as compared to any other part of India. There's also the beautiful Jawai Dam, which is home to hundreds of species of migratory birds and crocodiles," shares Shatrunjay Pratap Singh, a naturalist and founder of Bera Safari Lodge, Jawai, Rajasthan. However, to spot snow leopards, one should stay in The Rumbak Valley, as it assures best sightings in Ladakh.

Tiger lovers can visit Pench in Madhya Pradesh. There are three zones in Pench National Park and tigers can be found in all of them. "Some have mother and young cubs, whereas others have dominant male tigers. There is also the famous Collarwali Female Tigress, who has entered the Guinness Book of World Records for raising the maximum number of cubs to adulthood. Beyond tigers, Pench gives some excellent opportunities to see leopards, wild dogs, sloth bears, and countless species of birds," says Amit Sankhala, owner of Jamtara Wilderness Camp.

Tadoba, which falls in the Chandrapur district of Maharashtra, is said to have higher probability of wildlife sightings than any other parks. "Other than tigers, visitors report frequent encounters with leopards, gaurs (Indian bison), rusty spotted cats, ratels, barking deers, spotted deers, sambars, wild pigs, flying squirrels and more. Over 200 species of birds including the crested serpent eagle, honey buzzard, the shy jungle fowl, and much more can be spotted. It also has its own Bagheera, a black or melanistic leopard," informs Ranjit Mandal, naturalist and general manager of Svasara Jungle Lodge at Tadoba.

The Rumbak Valley in Ladakh assures best sightings of snow leopards in India



With a booming population of the big cat and wide forest tracks, Tadoba is excellent for tiger spotting. PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK (FOR REPRESENTATIONAL USE ONLY)

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Some more wild trails to follow this winter



Kaziranga

Home to 90% of Assam's one-horned rhino population, Kaziranga National Park is your best bet. "In Kaziranga, one can enjoy safaris and elephant rides. Rhinos can also be spotted in Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, Manas National Park," says Sushil Ngate, ornithologist from Wild Mahseer.



Dudhwa

"18 endangered species of the Terai Himalaya can be spotted in Dudhwa National Park (UP)," says Shubhashini Dubey, from TUTC Jaagir Lodge, Dudhwa. The species include Bengal florican, Indian skimmer, swamp deer, fishing cat, peninsular black turtle, Burmese python and Gangetic dolphin.



Kanha

Kanha is one of Asia's premier wildlife reserves, capturing the essence of the jungles of central India. "Apart from over 260 bird species and mammals, Kanha is also one of the best places to photograph tigers," says Belinda Wright, wildlife photographer and co-proprietor, Kipling Camp.



Assam boasts of the largest population of one-horned rhinos, with more than 90% in Kaziranga National Park



Jawai Dam in Rajasthan is home to hundreds of species of migratory birds and crocodiles