

# INDIA: The Long Way Down

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Photos by Max Breckenridge and Simon Gorta.

(December 29/2016 to February 6/2017)



Myself and Joshua Bergmark had initiated the planning for this trip during a birding trip of southeast Asia at the beginning of 2015. It was chosen ahead of several other ideas for trips based primarily on being able to provide as many lifers as possible in as short a time as possible in southern Asia. It was also an attractive option for the high number of endangered and critically endangered species possible. Of course, in addition to the birding pros, India promised to be an exhilarating and fascinating country to visit irrespective of the avian drawcards. Especially so in the face of even further burgeoning development and globalisation. India posed as the most convenient country for an extended trip across as many habitats as possible for us living in Australia. We invited Simon Gorta along for the entirety of the trip, including two weeks in Sri Lanka, and also Oliver Simms (UK) for the first 20 days in the northwest of India (Parts A & B). Another birding mate of our's from Australia, Nathan Ruser, joined us for the final leg of our trip from Bengaluru to Kochi (Parts D & E), and Sri Lanka (see Cloudbirders). In all, this helped to keep costs down, keep things interesting, and stop us from killing each other!

Flights were booked well in advance. We ended up choosing Etihad airways Sydney to New Delhi via Abu Dhabi service. Return from Colombo, this cost us \$1200AUD each. Unlike most bird tour itineraries, we took no internal flights while in country. Instead, our transport involved a variety of hired drivers with personal vehicles, decrepit state buses, occasionally flash sleeper coaches, and the odd rickshaw. Trains proved unexpectedly difficult to organise and we didn't use any in the end. I would suggest if you choose to utilise the extensive railroads that you book well ahead. Overnight sleeper buses (coaches) proved to be a very convenient, comfortable, and cheap way of covering ground. We caught several of these between Ahmedabad (GJ) and Bengaluru (KA). They ranged from spacious double-bed options with pillows, blankets and even WiFi provided, to awkward, sticky affairs lacking aircon and with diesel fumes occluding the senses.

Due to the distances and difficulties involved with accessing certain bird sites, we opted to hire a driver for sections of our trip. We chose Asian Adventures (Iqbal Ahmed was our contact <http://www.asianadventures.net/>) based on a few mentions in other trip reports. They provided an outstanding service. In the north they even booked all our accommodation and some meals as well as providing great drivers, good vehicle (Toyota Innova), and a complimentary bird guide! We also used AA in the south from Bengaluru to Kochi (here we just paid for the driver/car). Our packages with AA covered driver costs, petrol, and all road taxes/tolls, but a tip of roughly 500 Rs per day was expected and happily given to our drivers at the end of each stage.

Due to the demonetisation of certain notes just prior to our trip, accessing money in the country proved difficult at times. Luckily, we were able to obtain a good amount of cash through contacts in New Delhi on arrival. It was a bonus having paid for most of our major costs in the north through AA already as this saved us from having to wait in too many long queues at ATMs for small amounts of cash. By the time we reached southern India the issues had been mostly resolved.

The weather was typically excellent for the entirety of our time in country. New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan were characterized by thick fog and low temperatures in the mornings (generally until 9-10 AM), turning into cloudless, cool days which provided perfect birding conditions. From Gujarat onwards temperatures increased, but mornings were still cool. We didn't encounter rain until we reached Ooty in the Western Ghats. This was simply a factor of altitude as very dreary weather quickly gave way to bright sunshine and then back to driving rain. This didn't impede birding particularly, and Munnar, our other highland site, provided perfect conditions. As expected, lowland sites in the south were fairly humid and hot, but very

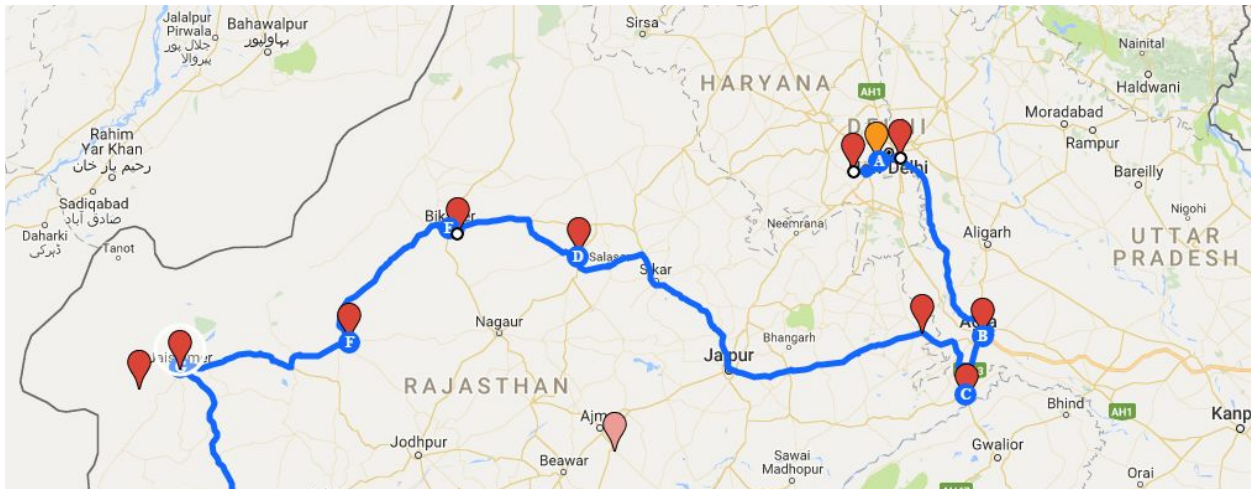
bearable.

## Part A.

### New Delhi to Jaisalmer (Dec 29/2016 to Jan 4/2017)

#### *New Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan*

#### *Masala Chai and Misty Morns*



#### Day 1. Dec 29/2016 (New Delhi and Sultanpur NP) *New Delhi, Haryana*

Arrived to a semi-smoggy New Delhi slightly later than anticipated due to thick fog delaying our transfer flight in Abu Dhabi. Nonetheless, it was a very smooth transition through Indira Gandhi International. We met Ollie and our Asian Adventures contact, Deepak, before heading to a nearby hotel. Despite not hiring a guide, Deepak informed us that he would do that very job, essentially for free, until Mount Abu. He turned out to be an excellent help and certainly succeeded in directing us to birds we likely would've missed without him.

A quick drive to the Hotel Modesty provided Yellow and Red-wattled Lapwings on the manicured and not so well-manicured median strips.

After enjoying our first taste of Indian cuisine and bemusement at the rats running through the ceiling we departed for an afternoon trip to Sultanpur National Park on the edge of Haryana State.

Our first stop was a reedy wetland near Chandu (28.481239, 76.920285) which provided a great array of species (White-tailed Lapwings, Green Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Painted Stork, Western Marsh Harrier) with the definite highlight being a Great Bittern seen in flight by Ollie. A bit further along the nearby canal and Josh's eager searching netted us a family of Sind Sparrows, including a dapper male. A few Baya Weavers and Red Avadavats added to a great little area and we were onward to Sultanpur.

Four entrants including one camera incurred a 200 Rs fee for entry at Sultanpur. Common Hoopoes tending the lawns flanked by Palm Squirrels greeted us, as did a brief Brown-headed Barbet and a more obliging Hume's Leaf Warbler.

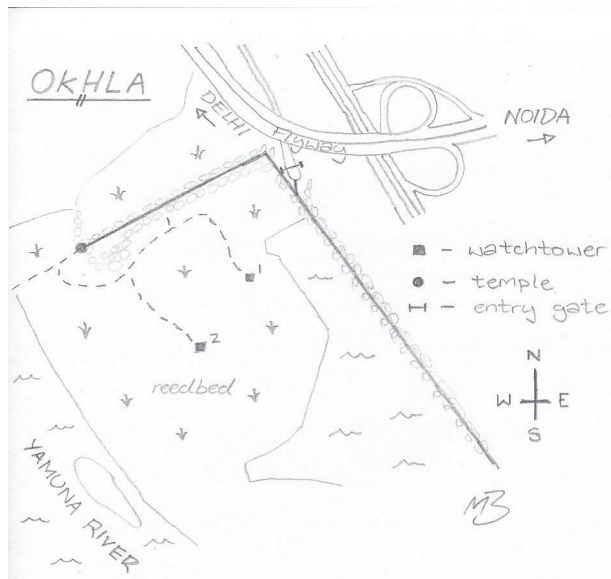
The acacia-lined walkways gave way to a perched Booted Eagle, Jungle Babblers, Ashy Prinia, Rufous Treepie and a Red-chested Flycatcher. It took some time and a few false starts, involving Common Tailorbirds, Common Chiffchaffs and a Lesser Whitethroat, but I eventually locked onto a positive Brooks's Leaf Warbler with its smaller size, more hovering feeding, crown stripe, double wingbar and overall warmer, yellow plumage. A great first day.

Day 2. Dec 30/2016 (Okhla to Agra) New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh

The next morning we met our official driver for the north, Girdav. He skillfully navigated the misty morning traffic in New Delhi in order for us to reach Okhla Barrage (28.571640, 77.307792) where Deepak was waiting. A walk along the barrage provided all the expected wintering waterfowl including Common Pochard, Garganey and Tufted Duck. A mixed flock of gulls and terns feeding over the water included Whiskered Terns with Black-headed, Brown-headed and Pallas's Gull. Just before entering the reedbeds we locked on to a Blyth's Reed Warbler along with an obliging Greenish Warbler and Bluethroat. At the second watchtower we lucked in with brief but clear views of a Brown Crake and then a big group of confiding Striated Babblers. Citrine Wagtails, three species of prinia and a Striated Grassbird added to the mix. Further along we failed to conjure up a White-tailed Stonechat in the unfavorable conditions, but secured somewhat better views of Bar-headed Geese.

Leaving New Delhi for Agra, Egyptian Vultures, Woolly-necked Storks and at least 13 Sarus Crane were spotted in the fields dotted with canola and brick kiln chimney stacks. A couple of odd stops at highway-side wetlands provided a good array of birds including a single River Tern, Knob-billed Duck, Ruddy Shelduck and a variety of waders.

Fighting through the afternoon traffic at Agra we found ourselves watching the Taj Mahal at sunset from the north side of the Yamuna River. Hundreds of mynas, crows and Little Swifts filled the air above River Lapwings, Pied Avocets, Eurasian Spoonbills and Ruddy Shelducks on the river below.



*Okhla mud map and Greater Painted Snipe from Keshar Vihar, Bharatpur.*

Day 3. Dec 31/2016 (Chambal River) Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan

Another misty morning drive saw us arrive at the Dholpur end of the Chambal where two tall

bridges span its width. It was an eery experience driving across the bridge and being unable to see further than 10 metres in any direction. The conditions didn't bode well for a boat cruise scanning for presumably distant skimmers and terns. We began instead by birding the expanse of sandy-gravel river bank near the tiny boathouse (26.657944, 77.904254). Close views of White-browed Wagtail, River Lapwing, Desert Wheatear, Greater Short-toed Larks, Crested Lark and an obliging, but tricky to identify Rosy Pipit lifted our spirits. We boarded the cramped boat which set off at an ideal, quiet pace. After a few off starts with the motor giving out and getting beached on submerged sandbanks we were on our way downstream (southwest) from Dholpur.

The first target to fall was a single Great Thick-knee huddled on the bank, but all attention soon turned to several white and black birds by the waters edge - "Indian Skimmer!" Fifteen of these fantastically proportioned and contrasting birds gave crippling views as they roosted, flew and even courted a mere 10 metres from us. It seemed the fog and absence of breeze had come through as it began to clear and we were able to cruise further downstream across a surface of glassy grey. Several species of wader and a Laggar Falcon perched in a clifftop tree kept us occupied. Tensions were finally relieved when we came across a gorgeous breeding Black-bellied Tern sharing its sandspit with a Mugger and Gharial. It was somewhat disheartening to see this declining species on its lonesome, but nonetheless exhilarating to get so close.

An afternoon visit by some of us to the Taj Mahal was an experience if nothing else. While it's external grandeur is absolutely a must see, the process of entering and competing with thousands of other visitors to get a glimpse of the interior was not worth it in my opinion. Plentiful birdlife on the Yamuna River behind the Taj was a bonus. A quick sift through hundreds of Whiskered Terns revealed a single Gull-billed Tern and at least two gulls which most closely matched Caspian Gull. A species, like some others (Sand Martin, Common Buzzard), which appears to be poorly understood in terms of its range in India.

Arrived on the outskirts of Bharatpur for New Year's Eve.



*We saw only one Black-bellied Tern along the Chambal River, but River Lapwing were more obvious with 14 observed.*

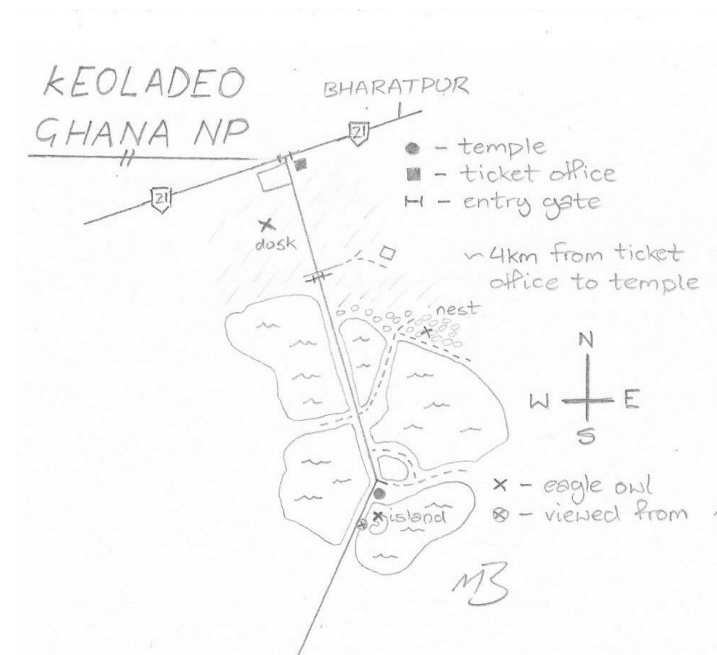
#### Day 4. Jan 1/2017 (Bharatpur and Keoladeo Ghana NP) *Rajasthan*

New Year's Day found us traipsing fallow fields north of Bharatpur in the now expected cold, calm, foggy conditions. Our target bird, Indian Courser, was soon located in a field covered with a minimal layer of young mustard seed (27.286922, 77.372888). Great views of 13 of these exceptionally smart-looking birds were had as they went about their business. Singing

Bushlark, Isabelline Shrike and Tawny Pipit complemented the coursers.

Heading back through Bharatpur we were somewhat surprised to find out that our site for Greater Painted Snipe consisted of a filthy, rubbish-strewn canal in the centre of the city (27.226314, 77.502866). It didn't take long however to see that the place was teeming with birds apparently sustaining themselves very happily on the effluent-rich waterbody fringed with shrubs and reeds. We soon had four individuals of our target including a cracking female lined up in the scope. While we did our best not to give in to a small group of street kids we also saw Red-rumped Swallow, a white Ruff, Citrine Wagtail, Spotted Redshank and Wood Sandpiper among others.

A brief interlude back at the hotel for lunch and then onto Keoladeo Ghana National Park where we found it to be overflowing with Indians visiting on their New Year's holiday. A slow line for tickets was abruptly interrupted by Deepak hurrying us into the park alongside our impromptu park guide, also by the name of Deepak. Our guide did indeed find us Dusky Eagle Owl, but our views of a male flying off to an obscured perch, and a female on its nest in a very unusual position, plus the unfortunate disdain between guides left the situation somewhat sour. In the end we need not of worried or even hired a park guide as Simon happened to find another Dusky Eagle Owl. Thanks to some helpful photographers, we were able to clearly observe this bird roosting in the open on an island behind the temple. We were far more pleased with our views of this particular bird with its intensely orange eyes and we even managed to happen across another bird in the open as we were exiting the park at dusk! In the end it seemed to us that the guide system in the park is essentially a rort as many rickshaw drivers and regular visitors appeared to know where most of the large target birds were each day. Other highlights from the park included roosting Oriental and Indian Scops Owl, Spotted Owlet, Dalmatian Pelican, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Black Bittern and Black-necked Stork.



Keoladeo Ghana NP mud map and a grumpy-looking Shikra from Chak Sakeetra.

#### Day 5. Jan 2/2017 (Bharatpur to Chhapar) Rajasthan

A substantial driving day from Bharatpur to Chhapar followed, but we managed to arrive in

Chhapar with just enough sunlight left to attempt a search for Indian Spotted Creeper. From prior research and discussion with Deepak it had become quite apparent that the creeper/s at the Chhapar site is likely one of the last of its kind and essentially the only reliable site left in India. With that in mind it became a critical target and, coincidentally, one that many of the major bird tour companies are now beginning to properly target.

We found the site in question, just southeast of the town, to be a place where one could easily spend a day's concerted birding and still miss the bird in question. Luckily for us this was not the case. After half an hours birding Ollie locked onto a creeper in flight and after a tense chase we all had fantastic views as the bird fed on bare trunks and sat for several minutes in the scope.

It was an excellent, if not humbling, end to the day, walking through the savanna-esque acacia forest as the brilliant red sun descended from cool cloudless sky into smog.

#### Day 6. Jan 3/2017 (Chhapar area) *Rajasthan*

A big day around the Tal Chhapar Sanctuary and nearby sites beckoned, but our early drive out into the fog proved to be a slow and almost birdless start to the today. A bit disappointed, we returned to the resthouse for a big breakfast and a quick scout around the grounds. With the sun now above the horizon we were able to enjoy flyover Rosy Starlings, great views of calling rooftop Grey Francolin, a pair of Hoopoe, Brown Rock Chat and a male Small Minivet leading his harem of several females through the grounds of Forest Resthouse.

Deepak and Girdav returned and we were then off to Chawas where a drying reservoir (27.795066, 74.407353) provided the standard array of teal, shoveler, Ruff and Pied Avocet. The clear highlight was a group of six Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse that gave nice views on the deck just south of the reservoir. Unfortunately judging by the good numbers of sandgrouse seen in flight upon our arrival we had only just missed the masses coming in to drink. A classy Desert Wheatear and a dark morph Long-legged Buzzard were enjoyed before we headed back to the sanctuary.

Grey Francolin and Indian Blackbuck were everywhere, but the highlight was definitely a stunning Black Francolin sitting in the shade of an acacia bush close to the car.

South of the sanctuary we explored an area of saltworks at Soorwas where we found several wader species including Little Stint and Dunlin. A bit further on, Deepak quietly shepherded us over to the edge of an abandoned well at the bottom of which sat a stunning Indian Eagle Owl with its chick.

While the sanctuary had proved relatively disappointing during the morning, the afternoon proved to be completely the opposite. With the sun now out we found several cracking species, the first being a very obvious female White-browed (Stolizcka's) Bushchat! Spending an hour or so at a random point in the middle of the grassland we picked up several Long-billed Pipit, Steppe and Imperial Eagles tested our ID skills, Pallid and Montagu's Harrier quartered and a surprise Cinereous Vulture high overhead almost blocked out the Sun. We ended our full day at Tal Chhapar watching male Blackbucks spectacularly fighting on their courting grounds.



*One of the last Indian Spotted Creepers (?) and a Great Stone-curlew from the shores of West Banas Dam.*

Day 7. Jan 4/2017 (Chhapar to Jaisalmer via Bikaner and Khichan) *Rajasthan*

An early start in order to reach Bikaner by 9 AM was delayed only slightly by excellent roadside aloo paratha and the zoo that are Indian roads. As Deepak put it perfectly, "You need three things when driving in India - Good brakes. Good horn. Good luck."

We met our local contact, Jitu Solanki, in Bikaner upon arrival who promptly drove us back down the road a little way, across some fields, over a small rise, and in no time at all we had found our target - Sociable Lapwing. We were allowed excellent close views from the Bolero of three of these subtly plumaged, confiding, and critically endangered birds. We also managed to score a single Cream-coloured Courser with a group of Indian Coursers little more than a stone's throw from the lapwings!

Unfortunately the local Saker didn't put in an appearance, but we certainly couldn't complain and so we were off over to the nearby Jorbeer Carcass Dump (27.966534, 73.376524).

Likely one of the least inviting birding sites that exist, the expanse of rotting cows at Jorbeer was surprisingly easy on the nose, and the sight of an epic kettle of vultures filling the sky above was certainly easy on the eyes. Before getting too occupied with the vultures we secured views of Pale-backed Pigeon - a rather uninspiring and timid species, but nonetheless an important target considering its range. We were running out of time to get to Jaisalmer so we quickly ticked up Eurasian Griffon Vulture amongst the hordes of Black-eared Kites, Egyptian Vultures, Steppe Eagles and the odd Cinereous Vulture. It is worth noting that the dump is now under the protection/bureaucracy of the Indian Forestry Dept.

On the way to Jaisalmer we made a quick stop at Khichan (27.137519, 72.418070) for the Demoiselle Cranes of which roughly 2000 put on a great display wheeling close overhead and mingling together in mesmerizing patterns.

The lights of Jaisalmer Fort guided us into the ancient city as we arrived well after dark.





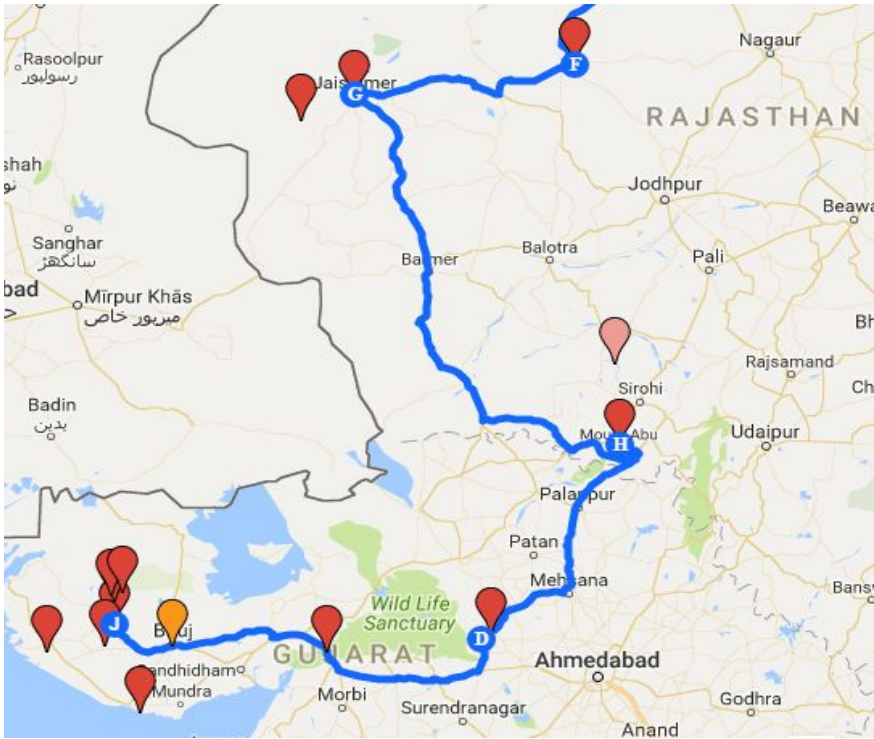
Two specialists of Rajasthan's barren plains - Cream-coloured Courser and Sociable Lapwing.

### Part B.

#### Jaisalmer to Bhuj (Jan 5/2017 to Jan 15/2017)

#### *Rajasthan, Gujarat*

#### *Hearty Thali and Blood Red Reflections*



#### Day 8. Jan 5/2017 (Jaisalmer area) Rajasthan

We rose to a particularly foggy Jaisalmer and no Girdav as he sadly had to return to Delhi for

personal reasons. We met our new driver Manjeet and left Jaisalmer for Akal Wood Fossil Park - 25 km to the southeast (26.833404, 71.046953).

It was slow birding here for several hours until the fog finally relented, but we still managed to find Desert Lark, Indian Eagle Owl, Striolated Bunting and Red-tailed Wheatear. At the end of the road into the park we fluked across four Trumpeter Finch feeding on a rocky hillside as the sun broke through. Northern 'Punjab' Raven and a trio of Emu were also unexpected here.

As an intermission from birding some of us visited Jaisalmer Fort. The rich yellow sandstone favoured as the local building material all that distinguished its narrow streets from the old cities of Europe.

We arrived at our base (Rajasthan Desert Safari Camp) in the tent-city of Sam, for birding Desert National Park, in the late afternoon. Birded the shrubby dunes just to the east. Surprisingly we soon turned up Asian Desert Warbler following it's feeding compatriot (Red-tailed Wheatear). Black-crowned Sparrowlarks, Green Bee Eaters and several Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse on the deck made it a productive spot.



*Indian Eagle Owl posed nicely in the morning at Akal WFP. A single Red-headed Vulture was observed at a kill on the road between Sam and Desert NP HQ.*

#### Day 9. Jan 6/2017 (Desert NP) Rajasthan

Today would be our first of three full days birding in and around Desert National Park south of Sam. It was a very smooth process entering the park thanks to Deepak organising permits in Jaisalmer. The key bird for the park is undoubtedly Indian Bustard, but the area also proved especially good for vultures. As it turned out our first raptor for the day was a Red-headed Vulture on the deck, expertly spotted by Josh. Constant scanning for bustard from the car was difficult due to the quality of the main road through the park, so we took the opportunity to scan from the watchtower at the park HQ (26.719621, 70.595237). Still nothing. A bit further east we happened across more vultures, this time a group of Eurasian Griffon with several Cinereous among them. We had fantastic views of both species sitting in a fallow field close to the road. One odd looking Griffon soon turned out to be an adult Himalayan Griffon - a very unexpected, but welcome addition.

We ventured up a sandy track extending north of the main road where park rangers had seen bustards earlier in the morning. After some searching, three huge birds appeared in the sky, "Bustard!". Everyone locked on to the birds in flight well enough to tick and the pressure on Deepak lifted, but subsequent views would take us the rest of the day to secure.

Much walking across scrubby dunes and driving to the far end of the park ensued in vain before

returning to Sam for lunch. In this time we did manage to list an impressive 15 species of raptor (including falcons) and add Bimaculated Lark to the trip list.

Returning to the park HQ in the afternoon, a young man from the local village appeared next to Deepak in the front passenger seat. Our confusion soon evaporated when, after driving a few kms down a dusty offshoot, we were led straight to four stately male Indian Bustards cruising through the grass. The local clearly had a very keen eye to match his knowledge of the bustard whereabouts as soon after leaving the males he pointed out a further three female bustards to us! We got fantastic close views of all birds, much appreciated after our initial flight views.

#### Day 10. Jan 7/2017 (Desert NP) Rajasthan

Our second day in the park involved a long walk through the grassland from the HQ northwards. The vast expanse of lightly treed plains appeared lifeless at first, but soon proved to be a productive area for birding. We made an about turn after reaching an area of ferrous outcrops where we quickly spotted two more Bustard! Other highlights from the walk included a confiding White-browed (Stolizcka's) Bushchat, roughly 400 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse overhead in small flocks, several Trumpeter Finch at a tiny waterhole and a striking Short-toed Snake Eagle close to the HQ.

We returned to the park in the afternoon and drove some of the sandy tracks north of the main road in the hope of coming across Black-bellied Sandgrouse. We ended up seeing a good selection of birds, including a definite Desert Whitethroat, but no sandgrouse.



*Demoiselle Crane prepare for landing at Khichan, and an imposing Cinereous Vulture from Desert NP.*

#### Day 11. Jan 8/2017 (Netsi) Rajasthan

Netsi Talab was to be our last chance for Black-bellied Sandgrouse in the Jaisalmer area. We rose early to reach the small town's waterhole (27.296054, 70.503316) about 50 km northwest of Jaisalmer. What we didn't quite realise until having lunch afterwards, in nearby Ramgarh, was that this area was out of bounds to foreigners (due to its proximity with the Pakistan border). We made a fairly hasty retreat to Sam after the waiter told us, but during our blissful ignorance at Netsi we enjoyed some great west Rajasthani birding.

After asking locals and tentatively driving through the thick fog on the edge of this very primitive settlement, we found what remained of the talab (lake). Around the drying waterhole we found good numbers of Water Pipit (10) and Little Ringed Plover (45) enjoying the clipped, green grass adjacent. In the acacia we also confirmed singles of Greenish Warbler and Desert Whitethroat.

Good numbers of sandgrouse were passing overhead so we followed them by car to an area of bore overflow near the main road out of town. Here we fluked across a Black-throated Thrush (a sporadic winter visitor to Rajasthan) and had good views of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and Trumpeter Finch coming in to drink.

Restful afternoon back at camp before the long drive tomorrow.

#### Day 12. Jan 9/2017 (Jaisalmer to Mount Abu) Rajasthan

Big drive from Jaisalmer to Mount Abu crossing much of southern Rajasthan and the granitic Aravalli Hills. Picked up Cotton Pygmy Goose during the drive and birded the shore of West Banas Dam in the later afternoon. Great views here of River Tern, Great White Pelican, Tree Pipit, Great Thick-knee and not-so-great views of a stratospheric Short-eared Owl.

Enjoying the spectacle of many hundreds of Streak-throated Swallow massing to roost under the main bridge (24.554796, 72.835751) into Abu Road was a fine way to end the day.



*Sulphur-bellied Warbler doing a good impression of a Wallcreeper, and a White-bellied Drongo with Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, both at Mount Abu.*

#### Day 13. Jan 10/2017 (Mount Abu) Rajasthan

A bright, chilly and splendidly clear dawn was a welcome change from the omnipotent fog. Roaming flocks of Oriental White Eyes and roosting Indian Scops Owl in the hotel grounds, but no Sloth Bear for us despite the owner having seen one outside our rooms that night!

Deepak weaved our route up the mountain with ease and we were soon looking for the gem of Abu - Green Avadavat. It didn't take long. A very productive small field yielded a group of 9 Avadavat as soon as we arrived. The birding proved hectic for the next fifteen minutes as target birds appeared left and right; "White-capped Bunting! Indian Tit! Crested Bunting! Wryneck! Indian Scimitar Babbler!"

We eventually dragged ourselves away, but not after watching a group of avadavat feed right in front of us. Further birding around the fields and village area that surrounds the Oriya Peace Park also proved remarkably productive: Oriental Turtle Dove plentiful, but shy, stunning Plum-headed Parakeets, White-bellied Drongo, rock climbing Sulphur-bellied Warbler and obliging Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, along with the northern race of White-spotted Fantail.

The rest of the day was spent around Trevor's Tank. Slow birding here before we were treated to an inquisitive family of *spadicea* Red Spurfwowl checking us out. No junglefowl sadly, but lounging in the sun like the nearby pair of Muggers was still a satisfying end to a great day.

After a bottle of rum and typically delicious dinner we bid a sad farewell to Deepak. He had proved to be unexpected, but a wholly enjoyable and incredibly friendly guide. We would highly recommend his company and services for those looking to organise a trip through Asian Adventures.

Day 14. Jan 11/2017 (Dasada area) Rajasthan, Gujarat

The next day, after a few hours drive, we arrived at what would easily be the fanciest hotel for the trip - Rann Riders. Aside from being a particularly pleasant place to stay, the grounds and a wetland across the road also proved very birdy. During the afternoon we found several elusive, but readily identifiable Sykes's Warblers in trees around the lake. A cracking Indian Golden Oriole and a Sulphur-bellied Warbler were also picked up right outside the rooms. Across the road we added Garganey and Pheasant-tailed Jacana to the list along with a wide array of waders and waterbirds.

Our afternoon Jeep safari took us north of Dasada to Vanod Grasslands. As the brilliant red sunset shone we found a number of Short-eared Owls under acacias, Rufous-tailed Lark, both Pallid and Montagu's Harriers and several hundred Common Crane coming in to roost.

A full moon replaced sun and soon we had great views of Sykes's Nightjar on the deck and then a pair of calling Indian Thick Knees to round off a great introduction to Gujarati birding.



*Numerous Short-eared Owls were found roosting under acacias at Vanod Grasslands. After sunset, Sykes's Nightjars were also obvious.*

Day 15. Jan 12/2017 (Little Rann of Kutch) Gujarat

Macqueen's Bustard and Greater Hoopoe Lark were high priority targets for LRK so we focused on them first thing today. A biting cold Jeep ride through Zainabad and out onto the Kutch well and truly woke us up. Skirting the edge of salt flat and thorn forest we eventually encountered a pair of shy Macqueen's. They readily flushed, but we managed great views at a distance of them stalking through the scrub.

A very long (60km) drive followed in search of hoopoe lark. Blasting across the exceedingly featureless flats in the open jeep took us to an isolated island of raised rocky ground - Melak Beyt. On the edge of this island we obtained fantastically close views of a pair of Greater Hoopoe Lark and immature feeding alongside two actual hoopoes!

Thoroughly pleased with the morning we compounded our success on our return with some Sand Lark hanging around an area of salt farms, and great views of Indian Wild Ass.

A relaxing siesta back at Dasada before heading out to the bird-covered Nava Talav. The

specialty here being Lesser Flamingo which superbly juxtaposed their Greater cousins with mixed pink hues.

Birding until sunset around the northern shore we listed over 100 species. The highlights included plentiful Paddyfield Warblers, Clamorous Reed Warbler, White-winged Terns, Lesser Sand Plover, distant Small Pratincole and thousands of ducks dotting the reflection of a blood red sunset. We could not find the Marbled Duck which had been reported the previous week.



*Absurdly close views of Greater Hoopoe-Lark at LRK and a crisp-looking female Marshall's lora from GRK.*

#### Day 16. Jan 13/2017 (Dasada to Virani Moti) Gujarat

Bhuj and the Greater Rann of Kutch was to be our last birding destination in the north. Several key species are to be found in the surrounding area of which we managed to see the majority in three full days.

After being greeted by the resident guide Veer at CEDO Camp in Virani Moti, we enjoyed the clean, relaxing grounds and great vegetarian curry before heading out for an afternoon of birding.

In the thorn forest south of CEDO, around Rampar, we began searching for White-naped Tit. The first local specialty to fall was a striking Marshall's lora in a mixed flock feeding in the acacia. Common Woodshrike were very obvious as we climbed rocky slopes and dodged the vicious branches these birds made their domain, and Josh flushed two Indian Nightjars.

Splitting up proved a bad decision as Josh and I only just managed to clue into the distant shouts from the others, "White-naped Tit!" We rushed over and were treated to great views of this large and boldly-patterned tit. A pair responded well to call back and proceeded to feed close by.

Moving on to a small settlement nearby, Sykes's Lark was spotted before the car pulled to a halt. A small group of these characteristics larks fed in a tiny field created by thorn bushes branches next to the home of a Gujarati family bemused at our antics.

Grey-hooded Buntings coming in to roost nearby eventually yielded good views before we wrapped up the afternoon and headed back to CEDO.

#### Day 17. Jan 14/2017 (Greater Rann of Kutch) Gujarat

The key target for birders in the Greater Rann of Kutch is undoubtedly Grey Hypocolius. A predawn drive to the village of Fulay found us standing in a clearing in the scrub patiently waiting. A local led us to the site where bulbuls gorged themselves on berries and an Alpine

Swift was spotted overhead. Soon enough a bird similar in jizz to a bulbul, but obviously larger, appeared in the tree in front of us. A male and female Grey Hypocolius proceeded to give good views as they enjoyed the early morning sun and plentiful berries.

After we had our fill of this peculiar monotypic species we made our way out to Chhari Lake via Bird Rock (aka: Fossil Rock).

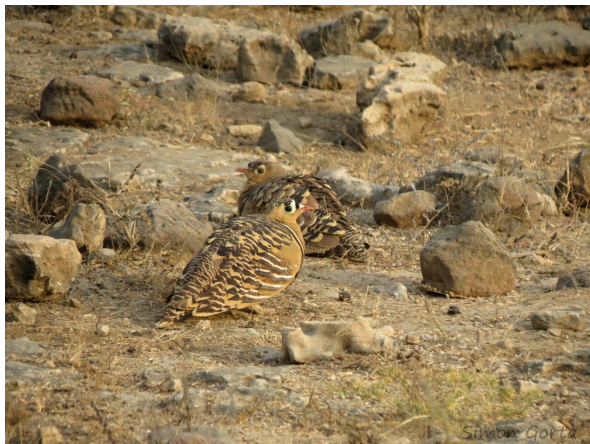
Walking the dried muddy edges and utilising several watchtowers at Chhari we observed over 100 species in a couple of hours. A small group of Oriental Pratincole on the mud and far more satisfactory views of Dalmatian Pelican were highlights here.

After another hearty thali for lunch at CEDO we were out again in the thorn forest for the afternoon. A skittish Indian Nightjar was observed roosting at one site while searching for Painted Sandgrouse. From here we headed further towards Rampar to several areas we ourselves had located online as potential sites for the sandgrouse and other thorn specialties. While it was convenient to have Veer with us during this time, in hindsight we could just as easily birded these sites without paying for his services.

A gorgeous Sirkeer Malkoha perched perfectly next to the dirt road was our first success of the afternoon. We had drive away views of this typically shy bird. It's particularly feminine appearance with pink bill lipstick, mascara and obvious long lashes made this a definite highlight.

A mere hundred metres further on we spotted another target from the car - four superbly camouflaged and intricately-patterned Painted Sandgrouse. More drive away views of another rocky forest specialist.

Veer had promised to take us to a site where he had seen Rock Bush Quail with young three days prior (which was the main reason we agreed to hire him for the afternoon), however after two hours, we had still not actually been taken to the site, despite asking repeatedly. We ended up spending the last hour of sunlight searching for Rock Bush Quail in vain throughout an unrelated and unsuitable patch of habitat, with no explanation as to why we were suddenly not allowed to visit the area with the staked out bird as we had specifically requested. We ended up seeing a male Eastern Orphean Warbler and Indian Bushlark, but not much else, and were a little annoyed by the way Veer refused to answer our questions about the quail.



*Beautiful and superbly-camouflaged Painted Sandgrouse near Rampar and the holy grail of waders at Modhva Beach - Crab Plover.*

Day 18. Jan 15/2017 (Modhva Beach) Gujarat

While we had never intended to pay for the guiding services of Veer for more than one day at

most (being on a tight student budget, can you blame us?), we were seemingly conned into paying for yet another morning - this time in search of Crab Plover. A major target for all of us, Veer had convinced us that the birds were using an alternate roosting site to the classic Modhva Beach. Too concerned to miss this bird we opted for another morning of expensive paid guiding. After a very average packed breakfast, we were dropped at none other than Modhva Beach, and began walking east in search of Crab Plover.

We saw a great variety and good numbers of species along Modhva, but after walking to the far eastern end and covering over 10 km we had still come up short with our target.

During this time, Veer was unable to provide any straight answers to our questions regarding the alternate roost or tide preference of the plover. Hmmm. Oh well... It came as a great sigh of relief when Josh spotted a single Crab Plover halfway back to the pick up point. A cracking bird which showed very nicely, stalking along the waterline, consuming a large arthropod and stealing food from an oystercatcher!

We lunched in Mandvi before heading back to CEDO for a restful afternoon.

In the evening we drove to a nearby riverbed where Striped Hyenas had been observed recently, but sadly turned up a blank for us. Ultimately our time at CEDO was productive, and Veer certainly knows where the birds are, but we felt like the whole truth was often not conveyed to us, and in hindsight would have preferred to search ourselves. This is something which we were beginning to realise is not very easy to swing in India, and were to discover the full extent of this in the south.

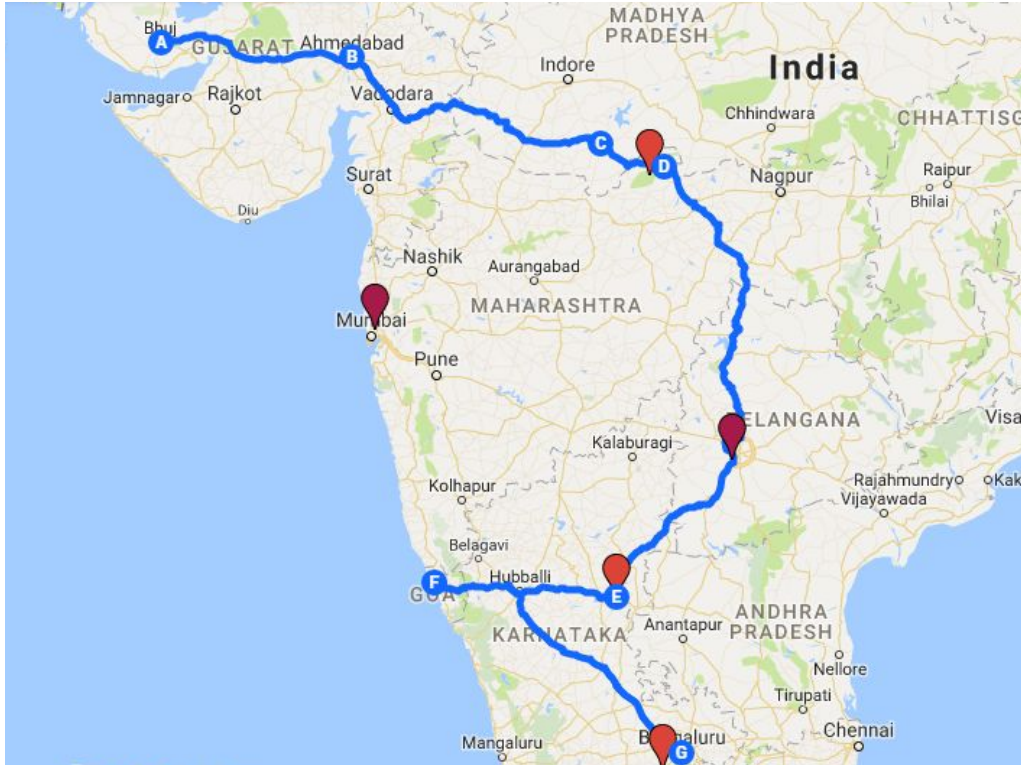
## Part C.

### **Bhuj to Bengaluru (Jan 16/2017 to Jan 23/2017)**

***Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka***

*Busy Buses, Bears and Beers*





Day 19. Jan 16/2017 to Day 20. Jan 17/2017 (Bhuj to Melghat Tiger Reserve) *Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra*

Leaving Manjeet and Ollie early in Bhuj today before catching a state bus to Ahmedabad. From there a sleeper bus overnight to Khandwa and then aboard India's most crowded bus for *eight hours* to travel the *100 km* to Semadoh and the surrounding Melghat Tiger Reserve. The last part was possibly the worst transit Josh and I have ever experienced in Asia.

After meeting the Forest Owlet guide, Bhola, at the park HQ and securing rooms we did some quick birding nearby. Alexandrine Parakeet was a good pick up here as it would be our last site for it.

Day 21. Jan 18/2017 (Melghat Tiger Reserve) *Maharashtra*

At 6 AM we were in the back of another open-top jeep and driving roughly 30 km west from Semadoh with Bhola. After coming across a confiding White-eyed Buzzard we eventually arrived at a nondescript area of forest adjoining a small farm.

A brief stroll and play of the tape before we had a bird respond back near the jeep. Hurrying quietly back we soon spotted a single Forest Owlet halfway up a large tree. The bird sat stoically allowing very satisfactory views before flying directly down to a branch just a few metres from us! Shocked, we watched on as the bird swivelled and scanned for prey, apparently oblivious to our presence just metres away.

We eventually dragged ourselves away after many photos and much joy from us and Bhola alike. A typically skittish bird was now a likely contender for trip highlight.

On the road out several Grey Junglefowl including males solidified a great morning and we were soon off on a much less crowded, and for some reason much faster state bus to Amravati.



*Purple Sunbird and a trio of Grey Francolin - two of the more common species in India.*

Day 22. Jan 19/2017 (Amravati to Hyderabad) *Maharashtra, Telangana*

Our second overnight sleeper bus took us to Hyderabad where we had to wait all day in a shabby overpriced hotel before our next sleeper bus to Hosapete (evening departures only).

Day 23. Jan 20/2017 (Hampi) *Karnataka*

Arrived in nearby Hampi with the sun just poking over the granite monoliths dotting this characteristic landscape. A fruiting fig between the bazaar and Mathanga Hill held our first Yellow-throated Bulbuls (a habitat specific and threatened endemic, harder to find further south on the traditional birding routes). Painted Spurfowl initially proved tricky to secure good views around the slopes of Mathanga Hill, but eventually we lucked out when a party of four, including two males, found themselves cornered between us. In the same patch, an elegant yet clumsy Blue-faced Malkoha was observed - a well underrated bird!

After a relaxing siesta in Hampi Bazaar, we took a rickshaw out to Daroji Bear Sanctuary. In the afternoon six Sloth Bear could be easily observed well, if slightly distant, feeding on rocks covered with honey. The park staff's food offerings also attracted Painted Spurfowl along with Grey Francolin and Indian Peafowl.

Day 24. Jan 21/2017 (Hosapete to Panjim) *Karnataka, Goa*

An overnight state bus from Hosapete to Panjim (Goa) was an experience we would like to forget. After searching the apparent ghost town of Panjim in the early hours we eventually found some suitable lodgings and rested until noon.

An afternoon traipse around Carambolim Lake turned up a few species, but nothing of particular interest, least of all the endemic race of Collared Kingfisher, in actuality quite rare. Multiple noisy Western Barn Owls filled the streets of Panjim's Portuguese Old Quarter lulling us to sleep.



*The seemingly elusive gem of Goa, Vigors's Sunbird, and the far-less elusive Common Kingfisher.*

#### Day 25. Jan 22/2017 (Panjim area) Goa

After plenty of research, we designated a walking route through forest and villages north of the Mandovi River in search of Vigors's Sunbird. This sidestep to Goa for the sunbird was not in our initial plan for the trip, but having seen Forest Owlet so quickly, it was deemed a worthy stopover on our way south. Luckily, the dodgy hotel WiFi prevailed, and we worked out where some reliable areas could be found.

A short taxi ride up to an area of forest known as Socorro Plateau was to be our first shot.

We accessed the forest through a wooden gate on the edge of a small village framed by a protective stone wall. After an hour or so walking up the laterite slope and back we had seen White-cheeked Barbet, White-rumped Munia, Jerdon's Leafbird, brief views of Nilgiri Wood Pigeon and numerous Nilgiri Flowerpecker, but alas no Vigors's.

A long walk along busy back roads lousy with barking dogs and smog-spewing buses ensued. Tiring after several kilometers we sat on the stone wall of a bridge over a dry creekbed. It was to be a fortuitous stop as not a minute later the sunbird feeding surreptitiously on small white flowers nearby turned out to be a Vigors's Sunbird! Our astonishment was tarnished somewhat by the bird in question being an immature male.

Pleased to at least have the bird under our belts we pressed on. After a quick breakfast stop we stumbled upon another Vigors's. This bird, a dashing male, posing and singing calmly in the shade of the flowering tree he was protecting.

We rounded off the morning with a couple of well-earned liquid Kingfishers in Calingute. Over 40 (!) Brahminy Kites circled above the picturesque boat-spotted and tourist-dotted beach.

#### Day 26. Jan 23/2017 (Panjim to Bengaluru) Goa, Karnataka

Rest day in Panjim before our last overnight bus of the trip to Bengaluru. Many Kingfishers.

*The trip report continues as 'India: The Long Way Down - Part II' on Cloudbirders...*