

Birding Trip Report: Desert National Park, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India 10, 11, 12 Dec 2015 – By Pritam Baruah

The Thar Desert in the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan is the western most frontier of India and although its sandy and scrubby desert-scape can seem rather lifeless, it is actually a veritable hotspot for birding. In particular, there are some sought-after species here that are difficult to find elsewhere in India. By far the most important target here is the spectacular Great Indian Bustard, a subcontinental endemic. The bird that once almost became India's national bird is now at the brink of extinction, with about less than 100 remaining (which some consider to be an optimistic estimate). The huge Desert National Park (~3100 sq km) is the GIBU's last stronghold, with little over 40 individuals calling its relative security home as of recent times. The rest are in highly fragmented (and potentially unsustainable) populations elsewhere in peninsular India. Although a GIBU sighting in DNP is not guaranteed, the Sudasari area of DNP is still the best place for this mega bird across its entire range. Most of DNP is a mixed-use zone with large spaces used for agriculture and livestock grazing. However there are grassy enclosures in Sudasari that serve as inviolate refuges for the GIBUs. The DNP, surroundings and nearby Ramgarh hold a number of other desert specialties such as Stoliczka's Bushchat, Black-bellied & Spotted Sandgrouse, Trumpeter Finch, Asian Desert Warbler, Plain Leaf Warbler, Black-crowned Sparrow Lark, Bimaculated Lark, Cream-coloured & Indian Courser, Barbary Falcon and Punjab Raven. Meanwhile, rocky areas between Jaisalmer town and Sam/Khuri villages hold Desert Lark, Striolated Bunting and Rufous-tailed Wheatear. And overall the open country is great for raptors and vultures. The Houbara Bustard is a rare winter visitor that is sometimes seen in Sudasari. Some species like Rufous-tailed Lark and Greater Hoopoe Lark visit during the summer to breed.

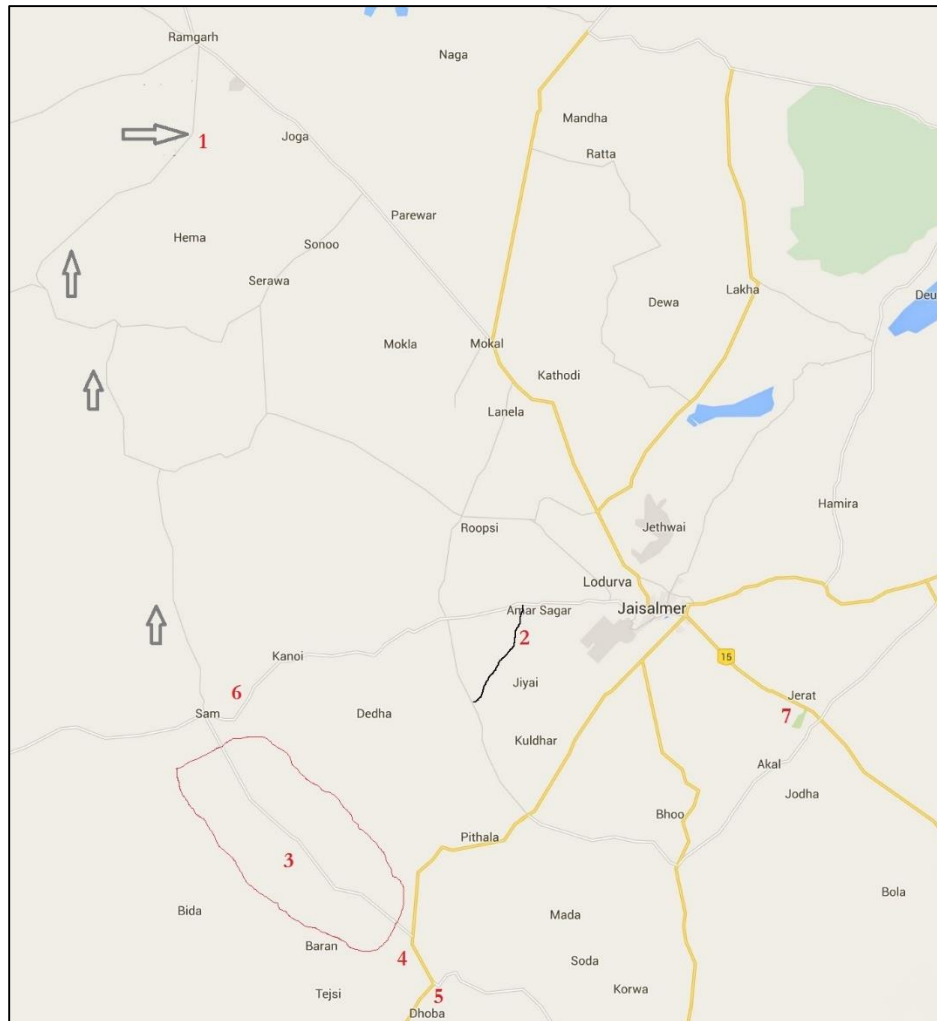
My trip to the DNP area was a last minute decision to make the best use of a few spare days soon after a family visit to Ranthambore and before work responsibilities took over again. I discussed the potential in detail with my friend Shashank Dalvi who visited the area just weeks earlier and had come away with great success. I initially planned to be there on 13th as well, which would have been optimal but eventually I just couldn't swing it. But although I had much less time than ideal, I was still able to connect with most species including what I considered by far the most important, the GIBU. However I did miss a few targets that are getting increasingly rare in India: Trumpeter Finch, Stoliczka's Bushchat & Spotted Sandgrouse. That just leaves me with ample reason for a repeat visit to this amazing area. Among mammals, the Chinkara, Desert and Indian Foxes were easy to find but I failed to see the Desert Cat, which would be yet another great reason to revisit.



Desert National Park entrance at Sam

➤ Map & Places

91 km x 83 km



1	Netsi Talab	A lake just south of Netsi village. About 1 hour drive from Sam and 8 km before reaching Ramgarh. Lake is not visible from the highway so drive into the stony flats at the right arrow. Good for waterfowl and hundreds of sandgrouses (Chestnut-bellied, Black-bellied, Spotted come to drink usually 2 hours after dawn). Trumpeter Finch also comes to drink here. Scrub and barren flats nearby can be good birding too. Lat/Lng 27.294097, 70.501314.
2	Kuldhara	Ruins & rocky area. Not necessary to enter the ruins complex as all targets can be found outside on the side of the road too. Desert Lark, Rufous-tailed Wheatear, Striolated Bunting etc.
3	Sudasari	The GIBU hotspot, 1:15 hour from Jaisalmer. There are large enclosures where livestock are not permitted. Consequently these enclosures have good grass, serving as refuge for the GIBU. The best place to see GIBU is in and around the enclosures. GIBU are also found far away from the enclosures but tend to be quite rare. The entire road from Sam to Khuri (5) has good birding. The area inside the red line in the map can be birded in random walking stops. Urash Khan (9521652660), a NP worker & guide, is known to have a fair idea of the GIBU's movements and he has a good pair of eyes. There are artificial water pools inside the enclosures but the photo hides are now gone and the staff don't seem to know bird movements at all.
4	Pal Rajah Resort	Small desert 'resort'. They have a wildlife guide Anwar Khan (9929341531). Stayed one night.
5	Khuri	A small resort village 50 mins drive from Jaisalmer. Nearby scrub, dune, flats can be birded.
6	Rajputana Camp	Typical large desert resort built for revelry. Stayed here one night.
7	Akal Fossil Park	I didn't bird here but reportedly good for the same species possible in Kuldhara.
8	Pithala	Good birding on the direct road from Jaisalmer to Khuri.

➤ Itinerary & Diary

Date	Time	Activity
10-Dec	5:30 - 10:15	Hired a car with driver and drove from Jodhpur to Jaisalmer. Enquiries in Jaisalmer revealed that <i>no permits are necessary for Indian citizens</i> (just pay entry fee at the gate in Sam or Sudasari).
	10:15 - 12:30	Birding between Jaisalmer & Sam. The rocky area at the first RRB Energy wind turbine yielded Striolated Bunting, Red-tailed Wheatear & Desert Lark. Random birding stops till Sam.
	12:30 - 13:30	A terrible roadside lunch in Sam. Slow service seemed to be the norm in this area.
	13:30 - 17:00	Birding between Sam & Pal Rajah Resort including Sudasari area. Asian Desert Warbler, Plain Leaf Warbler, Black-crowned Sparrow Lark, vultures. Also Bimaculated Lark and Greater Short-toed Lark in the thousands. In Sudasari, I sought out Urash Khan, a NP worker, to book his services for the next day. Night in Pal Rajah Resort where their resident guide Anwar Khan offered to guide me the next day. He claimed to know the birds & mammals but I declined since I had already booked Urash.
11-Dec	06:45 - 08:00	This far west in winter birding became possible only at 6:45 am. Birding in random stops till Sam didn't produce anything new until two Barbary Falcons appeared overhead.
	08:00 - 12:30	Picked up Urash who suggested we take a camel ride through the west enclosure (where the GIBU was last seen, two days ago). The camel cart allows a taller lookout and faster coverage and cars are not allowed in the enclosures. Unfortunately the ride was unsuccessful. Then we drove around (outside) the enclosure in dirt roads, stopping at strategic raised mounds to scan from the top. Urash's deep knowledge of the topography meant that we stopped only in specific spots. Finally in one spot that was exactly west of the west enclosure, we spotted 4 GIBUs (3 females, 1 male). Further along, we had Laggar Falcon, Punjab Raven, Cream-colored Courser & Indian Courser. Unfortunately no sign of Stoliczka's Bushchat. We drove to Sam for lunch.
	12:30 - 13:30	Roadside lunch at Sam.
	13:30 - 17:30	With the choice of sticking around Sudasari for Stoliczka's Bushchat or trying for the Sandgrouses (& possibly Trumpeter Finch) in Netsi Talab, we chose the latter. We reached Netsi after a one hour drive only to find out from livestock herders that the sandgrouses rarely drink twice in winter (there is one obligatory drink 2 hours after dawn of course). We birded the nearby scrub and scanned for waterfowl at the lake. On further reaffirmation that the sandgrouse are unlikely to come, we decided to walk around the desert hoping to find sitting birds. We did not. On our drive back, we had Common Crane, Red-naped Ibis & Desert Whitethroat. I dropped off Urash in Sudasari and drove back to Sam. Night at Rajputana Camps where an outdoor party went on till 11 pm.
12-Dec	8:00 - 12:30	Woke up quite sick today. Regained strength to continue at 8:00 am. Drove to Netsi and waited till the sandgrouses started showing up. At 10 am, just as I started seeing some movement in the sky far away, a water truck drove up, parked itself in a shallow part of the lake and fired up its noisy pump. That must have spooked the sandgrouses as I could see that they were abruptly landing far from the lake. But no sooner than the truck left, the birds started arriving in droves. It was quite difficult to manage my scope as hundreds dropped down at the water's edge in little groups at different spots. They would take a brief drink of water and fly away. Most were Chestnut-bellied but to my relief a group of 8 Black-bellied landed as well. There was no sign of the Spotted today. Neither could I spot any Trumpeter Finch, although there were a lot of larks and doves. On the way back we had a few Short-toed Snake Eagles attempting to hunt.
	12:30 - 13:15	Roadside lunch at Sam.
	13:15 - 15:30	Drove to Sudasari, picked up Urash again. Drove out to search for Stoliczka's Bushchat around the east enclosure at Sudasari but no success. There were some artificial water pools in Sudasari but the staff at the office (including Urash) had no idea what time the Trumpeter Finches might show up. I was running out of time so I decided to drop off Urash at the office and head for Kuldhara (between Sam & Jaisalmer, by a turnoff close to the gigantic Suryagarh Hotel) because it has been reported there as well.
	15:30 - 18:30	Drove to Kuldhara area and birding there. The habitat was rocky. No sign of Trumpeter Finch but connected with the rocky area specialists again. Drove to Jaisalmer where the trip ended.

➤ Annotated Bird List

1	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Netsi Talab.
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Netsi Talab.
3	Indian Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>	Netsi Talab.
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	Netsi Talab.
5	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	Netsi Talab.
6	Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	Netsi Talab.
7	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	Netsi Talab.
8	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	[NT] Netsi Talab.
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Netsi Talab.
10	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	Common.
11	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Netsi Talab.
12	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Netsi Talab.
13	Little Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	Netsi Talab.
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Netsi Talab.
15	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	Netsi Talab.
16	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	Netsi Talab.
17	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Netsi Talab.
18	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	Common.
19	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	[EN] Quite common everywhere.
20	Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	[CR] Between Jaisalmer & Sam.
21	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	[NT] Sudasari.
22	White-rumped Vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	[CR] Sudasari.
23	Indian Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	[CR] Between Sam and Sudasari.
24	Short-toed Snake-Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	1 between Sam & Netsi, 1 near Sam sand dunes.
25	Tawny Eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>	Common.
26	Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	A few.
27	Eurasian Marsh-Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Common in Sudasari.
28	Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>	[NT] Common in Sudasari.
29	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	Common.
30	Great Indian Bustard	<i>Ardeotis nigriceps</i>	[CR] Three females and one male in a single sighting just west of the west enclosure in Sudasari. Seen well through scope from a raised mound of sand. We decided to get closer for photos as there was a convenient dirt road leading towards the birds. However once we got there we found no sign of them. We did not see anything big flying away so we were not sure what happened. We were walking over to another mound to get a better look when suddenly we flushed two of the females from brush. Unfortunately the male and the remaining female did not show anymore.
31	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	One flock of about 70 between Sam and Netsi.
32	Demoiselle Crane	<i>Anthropoides virgo</i>	A large flock of about 300 flying overhead in perfect formation just outside Jaisalmer. A very pretty sight.
33	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Netsi Talab.
34	Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	Netsi Talab.
35	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	Netsi Talab.
36	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	Netsi Talab.
37	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	Netsi Talab.
38	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	Netsi Talab.
39	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Netsi Talab.
40	Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>	4 in Sudasari, 2 between Sam & Netsi. On stony flats.
41	Indian Courser	<i>Cursorius coromandelicus</i>	2 in Sudasari along with Cream-colored.
42	River Tern	<i>Sterna aurantia</i>	Netsi Talab.

43	Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles excustus</i>	Common. Hundreds flew in to drink water from Netsi Talab. The action can take place anytime between 9 am & 11 am and can last for over 30 mins. Apparently the Spotted Sandgrouse always come first but they didn't show up at all (didn't hear their flight calls). Many more seen overhead at Sudasari and Kuldhara just before dusk.
44	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>	A flock of 8 made an appearance along with hundreds of Chestnut-bellied. This is a major target in the DNP/Ramgarh area. Locally known as <i>Gatta</i> , both this and the Spotted Sandgrouse are local delicacies so their wintering population has been decimated by poachers. Although this is a known issue, unfortunately there is little to no law enforcement.
45	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Common.
46	Oriental Turtle-Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	Common.
47	Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Common.
48	Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	Common.
49	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Common.
50	White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	Common.
51	Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	Common where there is grass.
52	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Scattered sightings.
53	Laggar Falcon	<i>Falco jugger</i>	[NT] 1 near Jaisalmer and few more in the Sudasari area.
54	Barbary Falcon	<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>	2 flew overhead south of Sudasari.
55	Isabelline Shrike	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>	Common.
56	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	Common.
57	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	Common.
58	Punjab Raven	<i>Corvus (corax) subcorax</i>	4 in the Sudasari area. Ssp of Common Raven.
59	Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix nigriceps</i>	Quite common in the Sudasari area.
60	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	Few were seen on the way to Sam from Jaisalmer at the rocky area where the first RRB Energy wind turbine is located. Few more in the Kuldhara area. Favors rocky areas in desert. Red-tailed Wheatear & Striolated Bunting in the same area.
61	Bimaculated Lark	<i>Melanocorypha bimaculata</i>	This large and handsome lark was seen in large flocks numbering in hundreds in the Sudasari area.
62	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	The most common lark in the desert. Seen in large flocks of hundreds. Several thousand seen overall.
63	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	A few between Sam & Sudasari.
64	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Common.
65	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	Common.
66	White-eared Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus leucotis</i>	Common.
67	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Several in shrubs between Sam and Khuri.
68	Plain Leaf Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus neglectus</i>	Several in shrubs between Sam and Khuri. This is an uncommon species that looks very similar to Common Chiffchaff. It frequently flaps wings at lightning speed (noticeable only through optics at close range) and also has a different call.
69	Graceful Prinia	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>	Common where there is grass (Sudasari).
70	Asian Desert Warbler	<i>Sylvia nana</i>	Several in low shrubs between Sam and Khuri.
71	Desert Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia minula</i>	A few between Sam & Sudasari and also near Netsi.
72	Common Babbler	<i>Turdoides caudata</i>	Common.
73	Indian Robin	<i>Copsychus fulicatus</i>	Common.
74	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola maurus</i>	Common.
75	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	Common.
76	Red-tailed Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe xanthopyrma</i>	Until recently treated as conspecific with Rufous-tailed Wheatear. Prefers rocky areas in desert. 2 seen well on the way to Sam from Jaisalmer at the rocky area near the first RRB Energy wind turbine.

77	Variable Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe picata</i>	Common. Several of the uncommon ssp <i>O. p. capistrata</i> with white crowns seen well in Sudasari.
78	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	Common.
79	Rosy Starling	<i>Pastor roseus</i>	Strangely, only one seen near Netsi Talab.
80	Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>	A few.
81	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Common.
82	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	Common.
83	Long-billed Pipit	<i>Anthus similis</i>	2 in Sudasari.
84	Striolated Bunting	<i>Emberiza striolata</i>	Until recently treated as conspecific with House Bunting. Prefers rocky desert. Seen well on the way to Sam from Jaisalmer at the rocky area near the first RRB Energy wind turbine. Desert Lark & Red-tailed Wheatear in the same area.
85	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Common.
86	Indian Silverbill	<i>Enodice malabarica</i>	Common.



Desert Lark, Striolated Bunting



Asian Desert Warbler



Plain Leaf Warbler



Bimaculated Lark



Variable Wheatear (*O. p. capistrata*)



Crested Lark



Cream-colored Courser



Short-toed Snake Eagle