

SOUTH-WEST INDIA: JANUARY 2015

Trip Report by David and Vicki Bryant

Introduction

We visited India for a second time, during two weeks in January 2015. The focus was on the Western Ghats in the South West, visiting the States of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Our trip was organised by Kalypso Adventures, which is based in Kochi. This company is run by Thomas Zacharias (info@kalypsoadventures.com) – his efficient and informed responses to plans and queries were outstanding. We were guided by Sathian Meppayur: he splits his time between guiding, teaching, writing and painting and was both an excellent bird guide and an enjoyable and informative travelling companion. Hence, we learned a lot about India as well as finding all but two of the endemics. Our trip list numbered 263 species (seen); a total that included most of what could be expected but should, in retrospect, have been boosted by a full day on the coast to look at shorebirds.



The moist and forested Western Ghats near Munnar (l) contrast with drier lowlands at Mudumalai (r).

Itinerary

Our route ran from Kochi in the south to Nagarhole in the north, beginning on 17th and returning to Kochi late on 29th January 2015. We visited, in turn, Thattekkad (3 nights), Periyar Tiger Reserve (2 nights), Munnar (2 nights), Eravikulam National Park, Ooty (1 night), Mudumalai National Park (2 nights) and finally Nagarhole National Park (2 nights) then Kochi (1 night). The accommodation was proposed by Thomas, with an opportunity to upgrade if we wished, but it proved to be excellent throughout: ranging from a tented forest camps, a colonial hill station, park lodges, to a pleasant city-centre hotel. The mix of styles was perfect for us and there was nearly always some birding on the doorstep to fill odd gaps in the schedule. After Nagarhole (visited in a failed attempt to see Tigers), we then drove back to Kochi over one day, including a too-brief stopover at a beach midway. Only a little of the driving was rugged or tiring and often included half-hour excursions to ‘hidden’ forests or other sites nearby. With so much forest now under cultivation (including ‘barren’ rubber trees), and with the remnants therefore fragmented, a maze of minor access roads and tracks and a virtual absence of road signs, it is hard to imagine how the way to prime sites could be found efficiently without a local guide. Our guide and driver knew where to go without getting lost.

Birding

The birding was very good without being spectacular: some spells in the forest were quiet although the endemics mostly duly turned up. Bumping into a mixed feeding flock was always good. While most of the endemics were widespread a few others gave only single-site records, including Black-

and-Orange Flycatcher, Black-chinned Laughingthrush, Grey-headed Bulbul, Nilgiri Blue Robin, White-bellied Blue Robin, Nilgiri Thrush, Nilgiri Woodpigeon and Malabar Woodshrike.



Nilgiri Flycatcher (W. Ghats endemic) – seen at several sites on higher ground in the Western Ghats.

General comments

A Visa has to be obtained before entering India and is now very expensive (tourist - £92): the price has more than doubled in the space of 2 years! South-west India is free of Malaria so the health precautions are easier than in the north. We had no issues with contaminated food or drink in spite of drinking filtered water (and ice) when it was all that was available (otherwise we used bottled water provided by Kalypso). We had no security problems and the only unnerving encounters were with Elephants, which roam freely in some remote areas. The comfort/accommodation enjoyed during this trip was in marked contrast to that in NE India (Assam and especially Arunachal Pradesh) where the tourist infrastructure is mostly undeveloped or absent (See our earlier trip report for details). In compensation, perhaps, our species-list for North and North-east India was nearly twice as long as that for the South-west!

We thoroughly recommend Kalypso Adventures as a reliable and good-value company to organise a trip around India. It is often the case that if you book via an overseas company they will then engage Kalypso to do the on-the-ground organisation. All at some extra cost, of course. Contact Thomas directly (see e-mail above) and ask him what you want. You will see on Trip-advisor that he has many satisfied customers! He is also happy to cover much of India although focussing on the South-west.

The rise of the ‘rude-photographer with a big lens’ seems to have gone further in India than we have found elsewhere. One such at Nagerhole, after I objected to her taking my leg-space and blocking my view for too long, retorted ‘Well, I’m a professional’! Unfortunately, some guides (at Kabini River especially) seemed to accept their priority, perhaps because most birders are not as pushy? Why do all

'big-lens' photographers not ask around first when grabbing the 'best view' or offer to email anyone they inconvenience with a (copy-protected) 'good-will' photo taken on the day?

Species List

The list included 24 of the 26 endemics with Black and Orange Flycatcher and Nilgiri Thrush amongst the highlights. The two species we missed were Wynaad Laughingthrush (heard only) and Broad-tailed Grassbird (we ran out of time). We saw 23 raptor species, including just a single Indian Vulture and several Black Baza. Amongst the more elusive species were White-bellied Minivet. There was a wide selection of migrants from northern Asia and the Himalayas, including, for example, Western Crowned Warblers and Rusty-tailed Flycatchers. Seeing and hearing Booted and Sykes's Warblers in the same general area was also instructive. The Common House Martin proved to be widespread on higher ground and is seemingly overlooked by most guides and visitors (*i.e.* is absent from trip lists) – albeit, not the most exciting of birds for most!



Nilgiri Pipit (endemic), Savannah Nightjar and an edge-of-range White-bellied Minivet

We used Grimmett *et al.* (2011) Birds of the Indian Subcontinent in the field but also had access to The Ripley Guide (Rasmussen & Anderson, 2012). These covered most eventualities. The systematic list largely follows Grimmett *et al.* with some taxonomic updates from the Ripley Guide. If two common names are in widespread use they are both given.

The species-list identifies 7 species which were 'heard only' (*h*) and those seen at just a single location: Thatterkkad (*T*), Periyar Tiger Reserve (*PTR*), Munnar (*M*), Eravikulam National Park (*ENP*), Ooty (*O*), Mudumalai National Park (*MNP*) and Nagarhole National Park (*N*).

Pheasants, Partridges and Quails

Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*

Jungle Bush Quail *Perdica asiatica* (*MNP*)

Painted Bush Quail *Perdica erythrorhyncha* (*ENP*)

Red Spurfowl *Galloperdix spadicea*

Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii*

Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*

Ducks and Geese

Lesser Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*

Indian Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Grebes

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Storks and Ibises

Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*
Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans*
Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*
Red-naped Ibis (Black) *Pseudibis papillosa*

Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*
Great Egret *Casmerodius albus*
Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*
Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*
Intermediate Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia*
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
Western Reef Egret *Egretta gularis* (N)

Cormorants and Snake-birds

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
Indian Cormorant *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*
Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*
Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*



Darter

Falcons

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus peregrinator* and *F.p.japonensis*
Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Hawks, Eagles, Harriers, Ospreys and Vultures

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*
Black Baza *Aviceda leuphotes* (T)
Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*
Black Kite *Milvus migrans*
Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus*
Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*
Shikra *Accipiter badius*
Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus*
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Besra *Accipiter virgatus*
Common Buzzard (Steppe) *Buteo buteo vulpinus*
Legge's Hawk-eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis*
Crested Hawk-eagle *Nisaetus cirrhatus*
Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* (PTR)
Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciatus*
Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*
Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis*
Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* (N)
Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus* (PTR)
White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*
Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*
Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela*
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (N)

Rails and Coots

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*
Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Plovers, Sandpipers and Snipes

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*
Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*
Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*
Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
Pin-tailed Snipe *Gallinago stenura*
Oriental Pratincole *Glareola maldivarum* (N)
Small Pratincole *Glareola lactea* (N)

Gulls and Terns

Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*
Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*
Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*
Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini*
Steppe Gull *Larus barabensis*
Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*
River Tern *Sterna aurantia*
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*
Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda*

Pigeons and Doves

Grey-fronted Green Pigeon *Treron affinis*
Yellow-footed Green Pigeon *Treron chlorigaster*
Green Imperial Pigeon *Ducula aenea*
Mountain Imperial Pigeon *Ducula badia*
Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*

Nilgiri Wood Pigeon *Columba elphinstonii* (M)

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Spotted Dove *Stigmatopelia chinensis*

Laughing Dove *Stigmatopelia senegalensis*

Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*

Parrots

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*

Malabar Parakeet *Psittacula columboides*

Vernal Hanging Parrot *Loriculus vernalis* (T)

Cuckoos

Chestnut-winged Cuckoo *Clamator coromandus* h

Common Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx varius*

Banded Bay Cuckoo *Cacomantis sonneratii* h

Grey-bellied Cuckoo (Plaintive) *Cacomantis passerinus*

Drongo Cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris* (T)

Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*

Blue-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus viridirostris* (M)

Southern Coucal *Centropus parroti*

Owls

Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* h

Indian Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena*

Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum*

Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*

Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata* (T)

Frogmouths

Sri Lanka Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*

Nightjars

Great-eared Nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis* h

Jerdon's Nightjar *Caprimulgus atripennis*

Savanna Nightjar *Caprimulgus affinis* (MNP)

Swifts

Indian Swiftlet *Collocalia unicolor*

White-rumped Spinetail (White-rumped Needletail) *Zoonavena sylvatica* (N)

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba* (N)

Fork-Tailed Swift *Apus pacificus*

House Swift *Apus affinis*

Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*

Crested Treeswift *Hemiprocne coronata*

Hoopoes, Trogons and Rollers

Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Malabar Trogon *Harpactes fasciatus* (T)

Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*

Dollar Bird *Eurystomus orientalis* (T)

Kingfishers and Bee-eaters

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*
Stork-billed Kingfisher *Halcyon capensis*
White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*
Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus* (N)
Green Bee-eater (Little Green) *Merops orientalis*

Hornbills

Malabar Grey Hornbill *Ocyeros griseus*
Great Hornbill *Buceros bicornis* (PTR)

Barbets

White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*
Malabar Barbet *Megalaima malabarica*
Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*

Woodpeckers

Speckled Piculet *Picumnus innominatus* (M)
Rufous Woodpecker *Celeus brachyurus* h
Streak-throated Woodpecker *Picus xanthopygaeus* (T)
Lesser Yellownape *Picus chlorolophus*
Lesser Goldenback (Black-rumped Flameback) *Dinopium benghalense*
Common Goldenback (Common Flameback) *Dinopium javanense*
White-bellied Woodpecker *Dryocopus javensis*
Yellow-crowned Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis*
Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos nanus*
Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente* (T)
White-naped Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes festivus* (MNP)
Greater Goldenback (Greater Flameback) *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*



Yellow-crowned Woodpecker

Pittas

Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*

Wood-shrikes, Cuckoo-shrikes and Minivets

Bar-Winged Flycatcher Shrike *Hemipus picatus*

Malabar Wood Shrike *Tephrodornis sylvicola*

Common Wood Shrike *Tephrodornis pondicerianus*

Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina macei*

Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina melanoptera*

Orange Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*

Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*

White-bellied Minivet *Pericrocotus erythropygius* (MNP)

Fairy Bluebird, Common lora and Leaf-Birds

Common lora *Aegithina tiphia*

Golden-fronted Leafbird *Chloropsis aurifrons*

Jerdon's Leafbird *Chloropsis cochinchinensis*

Asian Fairy Bluebird *Irena puella*

Flowerpeckers and Sunbirds

Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile*

Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*

Nilgiri Flowerpecker *Dicaeum concolor*

Purple-rumped Sunbird *Leptocoma zeylonica*

Crimson-backed Sunbird (Small) *Leptocoma minima*

Purple Sunbird *Leptocoma asiaticus*

Loten's Sunbird (Long-billed) *Cinnyris lotenia*

Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostra*

White-eyes

Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*

Shrikes

Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus*

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*

Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus* and *L.c. lucionensis*

Drongos

Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*

Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*

White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens*

Bronzed Drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*

Orioles

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus h*

Treepies and Crows

Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*

White-bellied Treepie *Dendrocitta leucogastra*

House Crow *Corvus splendens*

Indian Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

Tits

Great Tit *Parus major*

Indian Yellow Tit *Parus aplonotus (PTR)*

Swallows

Dusky Crag Martin *Hirundo concolor*

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Hill Swallow *Hirundo tahitica*

Streak-throated Swallow *Hirundo fluvicola*

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Larks

Jerdon's Bushlark *Mirafra assamica*

Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark *Eremopterix grisea*

Malabar Lark *Galerida malabarica*

Bulbuls

Grey-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus priocephalus (T)*

Flame-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus*

Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*

Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*

Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus*

White-browed Bulbul *Pycnonotus luteolus*

Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*

Square-tailed Bulbul *Hypsipetes ganeesa*

Prinias and Warblers

Grey-breasted Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii*

Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*

Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*

Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*

Sykes's Warbler *Iduna rama*

Hume's Whitethroat *Sylvia althaea*

Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*

Tytler's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri*

Tickell's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*

Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*

Western Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus occipitalis (M)*

Babblers and Thrushes

Puff-throated Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*

Indian Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*

Dark-fronted Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*

Yellow-eyed Babbler *Crysomma sinense*

Rufous Babbler *Turdoides subrufus*

Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus*

Yellow-billed Babbler *Turdoides affinis*

Wynaad Laughing Thrush *Garrulax delesserti* h
Black-chinned Laughing Thrush (Rufous-breasted) *Garrulax cachinnans* (O)
Kerala Laughing Thrush *Garrulax fairbanki*
Brown-cheeked Fulvetta *Alcippe poioicephala*

Nuthatches

Indian Nuthatch (Chestnut-bellied) *Sitta castanea*
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis*

Starlings and Mynas

Chestnut-tailed Starling (Grey-headed) *Sturnus malabaricus*
Blyth's Starling (Malabar) *Sturnus blythii*
Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum*
Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
Lesser Hill Myna *Gracula indica (religiosa)*

Thrushes and Chats

Nilgiri Blue Robin *Brachypteryx major*
White-Bellied Blue Robin *Brachypteryx major* (M)
Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea*
Oriental Magpie-robin *Copsychus saularis*
White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus* (MNP)
Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*
Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*
Blue-capped Rock Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus*
Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*
Malabar Whistling Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*
Orange-headed Thrush (White-throated Ground Thrush) *Zoothera citrina cyanotus* (M)
Nilgiri Thrush *Zoothera neilgherriensis* (MNP)
Indian Blackbird *Turdus simillimus*

Flycatchers and Fantails

Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*
Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui*
Rusty-tailed Flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*
Black-and-Orange Flycatcher (Black and Rufous) *Ficedula nigrorufa* (M)
White-bellied Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis pallipes* (PTR)
Blue-throated Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides* (N)
Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae*
Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina*
Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudata*
Grey-Headed Canary Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*
White-spotted Fantail *Rhipidura albogularis*
White-browed Fantail *Rhipidura aureola*
Asian Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*
Black-naped Monarch *Hypothymis azurea*

Sparrows and Munias

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
Chestnut-shouldered Petronia *Gymnoris xanthocollis*
Indian Silverbill *Euodice malabarica*

Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*

Wagtails and Pipits

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* (mainly *beema*)

Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus*

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

White-browed Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*

Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*

Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*

Nilgiri Pipit *Anthus nilghiriensis*

Rosefinches, Finches and Buntings

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*

Indian Pitta – a wintering migrant from the north. Much more often heard than seen and one of only a few species on the trip requiring a tape-lure to see it.

