The Andamans...30th January to 3rd February 2013.

John & Jane Hopkins, UK.

This was an 'add-on' for my wife and myself after we had spent a couple of weeks birding S. India with Dave and Jacquie Bridges. The whole trip was very well organised by Jo Thomas of Wild about Travel (http://www.wildabouttravel.co.uk/) Our guide on the Andamans, Vikram Shil, was enthusiastic, tireless and determined to show us as many of the birds in the Andamans as he could. We were also fortunate to have a very comfortable 4x4 with an excellent and cautious driver...very necessary as driving on the Andamans is like a high-speed version of that in S. India! Our hotel was the very comfortable and scenically located Bay Island Resort in Port Blair which boasted air-conditioned rooms and very spacious outdoor (but covered) lounge/bar areas. The food was an excellent buffet-style presentation which could be eaten either in an air-conditioned dining room or outside on the pleasantly breezy terrace looking out over the bay to Bamboo Flat. We were provided with packed breakfasts by the hotel which were always very satisfactory and always ready for the early hours kept by birders.

Itinerary.

30/1/13       Flight from Chennai to Port Blair, transfer to hotel. Afternoon and early evening at Chidiya Tapu. Back to hotel.

31/1/13       First ferry to Bamboo Flat then Mt. Harriet...all day. Back to hotel.

1/2/13         Morning at Chidiya Tapu and Sippighat. Lunch at hotel. Afternoon at Sippighat. Back to hotel.

2/2/13         Morning at Ferragunj and Sippighat. Lunch at hotel. Afternoon at Sippighat. Back to hotel.

3/2/13.        Transfer hotel to Airport , flight to Delhi.

Notes.

A special 'permit' is required to visit the Andamans and we requested this when we obtained our Indian visas. In the event, we still had to go through the process of obtaining the 'permit' on arrival at Port Blair...but this was slightly chaotic rather than time-consuming.

We took anti-malarials as there is a substantial risk of malaria in the islands. In the event we had very few problems with wildlife though mosquitos were a nuisance when out owling..definitely worth covering up and 'deeting' for those outings. The required anti-malarial medication was not 'heavy-duty' and produced no side-effects for either of us. The parts of the Andamans we visited had a reasonably modern infrastructure and caused us no health problems..the standard precautions involving using bottled water and eating sensibly should be sufficient to prevent any difficulties.

Systematic list.
(Endemic subspecies marked * Endemic species **)  
IOC taxonomy.

Lesser Whistling Duck                    Up to 500 seen.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bird</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Pymy Goose</td>
<td>max. 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andaman Teal **</td>
<td>numbers seem to be increasing due to increased wetland areas left by the Tsunami of 2004. We saw a magnificent flock of at least 200 birds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Bittern</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnamon Bittern</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey Heron</td>
<td>1 imm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple Heron</td>
<td>1 imm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Reef-Heron</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Baza *</td>
<td>2 at Chidiya Tapu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-bellied Sea-Eagle</td>
<td>a common bird, always visible around Port Blair and from the ferries to and from Bamboo Flat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andaman Serpent-Eagle **</td>
<td>1 perched in a road-side tree at Chidiya Tapu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changeable Hawk-Eagle *</td>
<td>2 at Chidiya Tapu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andaman Crake **</td>
<td>probably quite widespread, as a total of 3 seen and several heard, at both Mt. Harriet and Chidiya Tapu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaty-breasted Rail</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-breasted Waterhen</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watercock</td>
<td>1 female/imm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Golden-Plover</td>
<td>10+ seen most days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesser Sand-Plover</td>
<td>up to 3 seen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Sand-Plover</td>
<td>up to 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Ringed Plover</td>
<td>max. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Sandpiper</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eurasian Curlew</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-toed Stint</td>
<td>birds viewable very closely on mud-flats... max. 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Common Snipe
Marsh Sandpiper
Black-winged Stilt
Andaman Wood-Pigeon **
Red Collared-Dove
Andaman Cuckoo-Dove **
Andaman Green Pigeon **
Red-breasted Parakeet
Indian Cuckoo
Violet Cuckoo
Andaman Coucal **
Andaman Scops-Owl **
Oriental Scops-Owl
Andaman Hawk-Owl **
Brown ( Hume's ) Hawk-Owl **
Andaman Nightjar **
Brown-backed Needletail
Edible-nest Swiftlet *
Glossy Swiftlet*
Common Kingfisher
Stork-billed Kingfisher
Black-capped Kingfisher
Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker *

max 2
1
1
a total of 4 seen
common in lowland farming areas, max. flock of 200
Pairs seen at Mt. Harriet and Chidiya Tapu.
Widespread...total 10+ seen
total of 3 seen.
total of 3 heard calling
1 male seen at Mt. Harriet
widespread..seen or heard every day
1 very responsive bird seen on Mt. Harriet
1 seen and 3 heard near Chidiya Tapu.
1 seen well
1 seen
a small flock of 6 birds seen
only seen twice , total of 3 birds..much scarcer than Glossy Swiftlet.
common, with a large roost under the piers around the ferry terminal for Bamboo Flat.
4 birds seen
seen twice
2 singles seen

We struggled with this species, eventually seeing one at Sippighat. However another birder we met had seen 10 at Chidiya Tapu in one morning, so maybe we were just unlucky.
Andaman Woodpecker ** this impressive bird was quite widespread...we saw a total of 4 and heard 2 more.

Large Cuckoo-Shrike * 1 seen on Mt. Harriet

Andaman Cuckoo-Shrike ** 3 on Mt. Harriet

Small Minivet * 3, all in lowland areas

Brown Shrike quite common....several seen well were of the race lucionensis, which breeds in E. China and winters south to the Philippines but also on the Andamans and peninsular India.

Andaman Drongo ** common and widespread

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo * widespread but less common than Andaman Drongo

Black Drongo 2 seen

Black-naped Monarch total of 4 seen

Andaman Treepie ** widespread, 7 seen

Andaman Bulbul ** common...seen every day

Pale-footed Bush-Warbler * very skulking but 2 eventually gave themselves up in a marshy area.

Oriental Reed-Warbler a total 3 seen and 5 heard, all in lowland areas.

Black-browed Reed-Warbler 1 at the Pale-footed Bush-Warbler marsh.

Asian Brown Flycatcher 1 seen

Andaman Shama ** 2 seen well plus 4 heard

Common Hill Myna * a total of 4 seen and several heard..widespread

Daurian Starling seen on 2 dates, max.30 at roost...this species is a recent arrival to the islands, occurring as a winter visitor.

White-headed Starling ** a total of 6 seen, at Mt. Harrriet and Chidiya Tapu. This species is quite tricky to see well as feeding flocks are very active and occupy the dense canopy of fruiting trees.

Andaman Flowerpecker ** widespread...a total of 10 seen.

Olive-backed Sunbird * also widespread and seen in similar numbers to the Flowerpecker.
Western Yellow Wagtail  4 seen and 1 heard

Grey Wagtail  1

The following species were seen daily in reasonable numbers:

Great Egret
Little Egret
Cattle Egret
Indian Pond-Heron
Striated Heron
Brahminy Kite
Purple Swamphen
Eurasian Moorhen
Eurasian Coot
Common Sandpiper
Common Greenshank
Wood Sandpiper
Common Redshank
Whimbrel
Emerald Dove
Green Imperial Pigeon
Long-tailed Parakeet *
Vernal Hanging Parrot
Asian Koel
White-throated Kingfisher
Collared Kingfisher
Blue-tailed Bee-eater
Scarlet Minivet *
Black-naped Oriole
Eastern Jungle Crow
House Crow
Barn Swallow
Pacific Swallow
Red-whiskered Bulbul *
Dusky Warbler
Asian Fairy-bluebird
Oriental Magpie-Robin *
Asian Glossy Starling *
House Sparrow

Misses.

Really very little...Vikram knew the area and the birds very well.

Nicobar Pigeon  this is apparently possible on one or two small offshore islands but involves a very long journey to reach the area.
Andaman Masked Owl: this has apparently become very difficult. It is now found mainly in urban areas and the residents are not very enthusiastic about birders hanging around their houses after dark!! Vikram knows of one site where there is a sympathetic resident but unfortunately he was away when we were there.

Narcondam Hornbill: we asked Vikram about this exciting bird. It is possible to hire a boat to go to the island but it is a long trip and landing isn't permitted...you have to watch from offshore until you see one fly.....so definitely a bird for the enthusiast!!

Mangrove Whistler: we tried many times for this species but with no success...the birds were totally unresponsive to tapes....presumably due to the time of year?

Mammals.

On 1/2/13 we were birding along the road at Chidia Tapu (a tract of native lowland forest S. of Port Blair) when we disturbed a small mammal from the road. It ran to the side but we stood back and it returned....it had found a food item (maybe a road-kill Dragonfly?) in a niche in the road surface. Several times it was spooked by passing vehicles or pedestrians but returned to its food item. On our return to the UK we set about the process of identifying it. Clearly a Shrew of some type, it soon became apparent that the short-list was

1) Asian House Shrew (apparently un-recorded on the islands, usually found around habitation and structurally different from our 'beast'.
2) Andaman's Shrew
3) Jenkin's Shrew.

We then embarked on a long correspondence with mammal experts all over the world and a reasonably thorough search of the literature. The general consensus was that it was a Crocidura shrew, (nos. 2 & 3 above) but that the exact species could not be determined without a specimen. Both of these shrews are poorly known....there would appear to be only a couple of specimens of each and approximately the same number of sightings. Our own view is that from the basic colour of the fur it was more likely to be Andaman's Shrew but with the present state of knowledge a conclusive identification would only be possible by studying skull ossification and the dentition. One thing is certain though...whatever the precise species involved, it was certainly the rarest and most poorly known 'creature' we saw on our visit to the islands!

(If anybody is interested in this mammal and can help with the identification or would like any more information or more photographs, I can be contacted on johnhopkins77ATbtinternet.com)