

Last chance to see: searching for rare and endangered birds in Western India 29/12/2016-16/01/2017



Introduction

I was initially thinking about doing Colombia this winter but when Max Breckenridge, an Australian NGB member, messaged me and asked if I would like to come to India with him, Josh Bergmark and Simon Gorta, I jumped at the chance. Their plan was to do the west, the south and Sri Lanka over 7 weeks but due to work commitments, I could only join them for the three weeks in the west. This was my first visit to India apart from a week work trip in Delhi where I'd been able to pick up only a few common species.

Asian Adventures put together a very nice package for us for 18 days. For 85,000 INR (c£1,000) this included accomodation, a driver, petrol, some permits and most meals. This represented excellent value.

We had specifically not paid for a birding guide but they sent one anyway, Deepak Kumar. He was very helpful as he knew all the spots and, although he occasionally made mistakes on some of the more complicated IDs, he was a great person to have along. He was also the sort of guide I like - one that lets you do your own birding and find your own birds.

The trip was a huge success as I saw a total of 300 species in the three weeks including the vast majority of the key target species and a total of 138 lifers.



Day 1 - 29th December: Arrival and Sultanpur

Max, Josh and Simon's flight was due to arrive a couple of hours before mine but due to their flight being delayed, we arrived at around the same time. This worked quite well and we were met at the airport by Deepak shortly after 11.00.

We drove to the nearby Hotel Modesty, where we would stay the night. Even on this short 20 minute drive, we started to pick up our first good birds. These included three lifers for me; Yellow-Wattled Lapwing, Brown Rock Chat and Bank Myna (not quite sure how I missed these on my work visit). We also had our first introduction to the abundant species of the area like Black Kite, Red-vented Bulbul, House Crow and Common Myna.

After a quick rest in the only really squalid hotel of the trip and the first of many vegetarian curry lunches, we set off at 13.30 to the wetland reserve of Sultanpur, about an hour south of Delhi.

The lifers continued to come on this drive as I saw Indian Roller, Indian Silverbill and Painted Stork, as well as more familiar Black Drongo, Laughing Dove, Barn Swallow and Cattle Egret.

We decided to start outside the reserve along the Indira Gandhi canal with the primary intention of finding Sind Sparrow. Before properly commencing the search, we stopped by a large marsh that was absolutely teeming with birds.

In addition to common European ducks and waders, there were Little Cormorant, Grey-headed Swamphen, Temminck's Stint, Indian Pond Heron, Black-headed Ibis, Paddyfield Pipit, Glossy Ibis, Marsh Sandpiper & Temminck's Stint.

Amongst the wheeling flocks of Grey-throated Martin, we were able to pick out a couple of Sand Martin. I also had brief views of a Great Bittern but unfortunately the Australian birders who have never seen one were not able to get on to it before it dropped in to the reeds. This is apparently an excellent record for the area.

We tore ourselves away and continued driving along the canal adding Baya Weaver, Shikra, Greater Coucal, Common Crane, Pied Starling, Ring-necked Parakeet, Pied Bushchat, Black-shouldered Kite and our only Peregrine of the trip to our fast growing list.

Eventually, Josh spotted a couple of Sind Sparrows and we enjoyed decent views of at least 2 pairs. Deepak's suggestion of driving to a particular spot for Red Avadavat was a good one as we had great views of this colourful bird.

We then headed in to the reserve and amongst the first birds we saw was a Hume's Warbler, a real bogey bird for me. Other birds by the entrance included Brown-headed Barbet and Hoopoe.

We headed round the perimeter of the lake although our main focus was the birds in the bushes. Amongst these, we found Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Ashy Prinia, Indian Robin, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Large Grey Babbler, Oriental Magpie Robin, Black Redstart, Rufous Treepie, Common Tailorbird, Jungle Babbler, Common Peafowl &, best of all, a showy Brook's Leaf Warbler.

We did not have much time to scan the lake but we did notice Purple Heron, Oriental Darter, Ferruginous Duck, Spoonbill and a perched Booted Eagle. We also saw our first Nilgai of the trip.

Day 2 – 30th December: Okhla and drive to Agra

After a fairly sleepless night, we left at 7am and made the short drive to Okhla, another wetland on the edge of Delhi. After paying the fairly hefty entrance fee, we headed to the lake where we found many of the same species as at Sultanpur. There were however a couple of new additions like Indian Cormorant, Bar-headed Goose, Bronze-winged Jacana, and a single female Garganey. A large flock of gulls contained Pallas's Gull, Brown-headed Gull & Black-headed Gull as well as Whiskered Tern. I moved a bit slower than the others, enjoying several Hume's Warblers in the lakeside bushes as well as an Indian Grey Hornbill and a Common Kingfisher.

When I caught up with the others, they were watching both Blyth's Reed Warbler and Greenish Warbler and I had good views of both. A small boardwalk through the reeds had several more new species like Plain Prinia, Yellow-bellied Prinia and a couple of smart Bluethroats.

We continued round to a viewing tower from where we had excellent views of Brown Crake, Striated Babbler and Citrine Wagtail. We also saw Red-Whiskered Bulbul and Common Starling. Max and Simon had brief views of a Striated Grassbird but I could not get on to it. There was also no sign of White-tailed Stonechat, which occasionally winter on site.

As we had seen most the key species, we set off on the three hour drive to Agra just before midday. This drive was amazingly productive as we saw 2 Woolly-necked Stork, Long-legged Buzzard, many Egyptian Vulture, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon and an excellent total of 9 Sarus Crane.

A stop at a small roadside wetland produced further new birds like Wood Sandpiper, Ruff, Long-tailed Shrike & Siberian Stonechat. Deepak then directed the car to a further roadside wetland, which was very productive. Highlights here included a superb River Tern, Comb Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Indian Jungle Crow & Pied Kingfisher.

After these stops, we did not arrive in Agra until about 4.30. After checking in at the pleasant Pushp Villa, we headed across the Yamuna river to have our first look at the Taj Mahal as the late faded. Even this produced some new birds including River Lapwing & House Swift.

Day 3 - 31st December: Chambal and Taj Mahal

We awoke to thick fog this morning but nevertheless headed to the Chambal river at Dholpur, arriving at about 8.30. We held back from immediately going on a boat but instead searched the sandy area by the river. Finding birds was obviously difficult but we were able to find Short-toed Lark, Wire-tailed Swallow, Desert Wheatear and White-browed Wagtail. We also photographed a Pipit, which we retrospectively identified as a Rosy Pipit - an excellent find!

As the fog started to lift, we started to see birds on the river like River Lapwing and River Tern. By 10, we decided to chance our luck on the river and paid for a 2 hour boat cruise (about 4500 INR between the 4 of us, compared to 2,750 INR each charged by Chambal Safari Lodge).

The main targets for the boat ride were Indian Skimmer and Black-bellied Tern. We were successful in having superb views of both including 15 of the former. Other good birds included several Great Thick Knee and a Laggar Falcon in the same tree as an Osprey! More familiar birds for a European birder like me included Blue Rock Thrush, Sand Martin, Kentish Plover and Little Stint. We also had good views of Mugger Crocodile and Gharial but we could not find the hoped for Gangetic River Dolphin.

After seeing all our avian targets on the Chambal, we headed back to Agra for a late lunch and afternoon visit to the Taj Mahal. Even at this spectacular building, there were new birds to be found including Caspian Gull, Gull-billed Tern and the first positively identified Black-eared Kite.

We then headed for the 90 minute drive to Bharatpur. Unfortunately, we arrived too late for any birding although we did see our first Red-naped Ibises on route. We had a low key New Year's Eve, excited for what the famous wetland reserve would hold for us tomorrow.

Day 4 - 1st January: Bharatpur

We awoke unsurprisingly to thick fog so instead of heading in to the reserve, we decided to head to fields a 40 minutes drive away to look for Indian Courser.

We initially tried an area of stubble but we could not find any coursers. We did however find several other good birds including Isabelline Shrike, White-eared Bulbul, Red Turtle Dove, Tawny Pipit, Peregrine and Yellow-wattled Lapwing.

We then drove to a new area seeing a Golden Jackal on route. After arriving at this new area, Josh immediately spotted the Indian Coursers in a field. We headed along the edge of the field to get better views and were able to count nine birds in total. We also saw the only Singing Bushlark of the trip here.

After the success with the coursers, we headed to the filthy canal in the centre of Bharatpur. Amongst the heaps of common waders like Wood Sandpiper, we soon found our target - 3 superb Greater Painted Snipe. We also saw our first Grey Wagtail and Red-rumped Swallow of the trip.

We headed back to the hotel for an early lunch before heading to the famous Keoladeo Ghana National Park. The park was absolutely packed and there was a long slow-moving queue for tickets. We did see our first Green Bee Eater of the trip while waiting but eventually got fed up and agreed to pay a guide, also called Deepak, to allow us to skip the queue and to show us Dusky Eagle Owl.

This guide was an unpleasant character and best avoided. He tried to make us pay more just before he showed us Dusky Eagle Owl but thankfully our own Deepak managed to persuade him otherwise.

A combination of the determination of the others to see Dusky Eagle Owl as quickly as possible in the short time and the guide's laziness meant we zoomed along the main path. I found this very frustrating as there were clearly thousands of birds and I regularly had to call the others back. Amongst the new birds we saw along the main path were Lesser Whistling Duck, Purple Sunbird, Brahminy Starling, Oriental Honey Buzzard and the only Mallard of the trip. There were also superb views of Comb Duck, Bronze-winged Jacana and Ferruginous Duck. We did also stop briefly to look at 2 roosting Oriental Scops Owls. This is not a species I thought I would see on this trip and particularly pleasing as I managed to miss them in Malaysia back in 2015.

Eventually we turned off the main path and the pace slowed a little. Amongst the throngs of water birds, we were able to pick out a superb Black-necked Stork, while two Dalmatian Pelicans flew overhead. There were also numerous Spotted Eagles though we were only to positively identify Greater Spotted Eagle.

We were then taken to the Dusky Eagle Owl nest where the male flushed easily and the female was hunched down so the views were not great. The whole thing was very uncomfortable and I was not happy with the ethics of it as it is difficult to see how we were not disturbing these endangered birds.

Next stop was a roosting Indian Scops Owl, although I spotted a couple of Bay-backed Shrike on route. Josh and Max then decided to go with both Deepaks to look for Tickell's Thrush but I had had enough of charging around when there were so many birds around so decided to go off on my own.

I enjoyed some fantastic views of common water birds and low flying eagles. I also was able to see some new trip birds like Asian Openbill, Intermediate Egret, Night Heron as well as 2 roosting Spotted Owlets that were helpfully pointed out by a local. After about an hour, I bumped in to Simon running down the track. He had been shown by a rickshaw driver a roosting Dusky Eagle Owl by the path. I lent him my phone so he could call the others and he took me to see this wonderful bird. While waiting for Josh and Max (who had failed to find Tickell's Thrush), I saw some further great birds like a superb Black Bittern, a perched Crested Serpent Eagle and Sarus Cranes. I also saw Chital, Sambar and Nilgai.

Eventually we had to leave the park as it was getting dark. Even on the way out, the new birds kept coming as we saw our first Grey Francolins and Common Babblers by the exit. In addition, we found another Golden Jackal and remarkably our fourth Dusky Eagle Owl of the day perched in a dead tree.

Despite getting frustrated with the pace, it had been an amazing day with over 120 species seen. It was gutting that we had to leave early the next morning as I would have liked more time in this wonderful place.

Day 5 - 2nd January. Drive to Tal Chappar

We left Bharatpur after breakfast for the long, long drive to Tal Chappar that took us through Jaipur. Few birds were seen during the journey although we did add Southern Grey Shrike and Rose-coloured Starling to our list.

Eventually after around 7 hours driving, we reached Tal Chappar and headed straight for the Spotted Creeper site at Gaushala. We were not particularly optimistic as we had heard that a birding group had dipped only a couple of days ago.

After only 40 minutes of searching, I spotted the target bird on a nearby tree and waved the others over. Josh was first to arrive and we saw the Spotted Creeper fly off strongly away from us. A nerve racking couple of minutes followed before we re-found the bird on a tree a few hundred metres away and enjoyed spectacular views.

Other birds found in the area in the evening included a low flying Tawny Eagle, Variable Wheatear, Zitting Cisticola and a small flock of chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse

As it was getting dark, we left the area and checked in to the rather odd Forest Resthouse, where we would stay for two nights.



Day 6 – 3rd January: Tal Chappar

We woke up to thick fog but still thought we would try our luck driving round the park. Unfortunately, the fog made things very difficult as we saw very few birds apart from Short-toed Lark and Southern Grey Shrike. We did however manage to find our first Rufous-fronted Prinia in a small patch of bushes. There were also numerous Blackbuck, Nilgai and Chinkara. After just over an hour, we decided to give up and head back to the Resthouse for a late breakfast. As the sun started to come out, birds started to appear and we found our first flock of Small Minivets of the trip.

We then headed back in to the park and it was slightly more productive. Amongst the numerous Grey Francolin, Short-toed Lark and Hoopoe, we were able to find a stunning Black Francolin, Sparrowhawk, Long-billed Pipit, Bar-headed Goose and a flock of Common Crane. We also flushed a quail from the roadside but could not re-find it.

We then headed out the park to an area of arid land where an hour produced Steppe Eagle, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, a confusing dark morph Long-legged Buzzard and Variable Wheatear. Driving back along the park boundary, we were delighted to encounter a group of 4 low-flying Eastern Imperial Eagles - such impressive birds!

Our next stop was an area of salt flats where there was a large number of common waders including our first Dunlin of the trip, Marsh Sandpiper and Little Stint. Our reason for being here was not waders but because Deepak knew some owl roosting spots. He showed us two quarries, one of which had a Barn Owl of which we could only see the tail and foot, but the other one had the real prize - an Indian Eagle Owl with a youngster.

After a stop in town for a drink and a snack, we headed back in to the park. One of our first sightings was a chat species - the others were convinced it was a Stoliczka's Bushchat but I think it was a pale Siberian Stonechat.

In contrast to the morning, the park was full of birds with huge numbers of pipits, Siberian Stonechats and Short-toed Larks. Raptors were also obvious with several Steppe Eagles, Montagu's and Pallid Harriers and a high flying Black Vulture. We stayed in the park until dusk mainly to watch the harrier roost but instead ended up watching the extraordinary spectacle of fighting Blackbucks.

Day 7 - 4th January: Drive from Tal Chappar to Jaisalmer via Bikaner and Keechan

Today was going to be a long driving day so we set off early at 6 am. The first new bird for the trip of a day was a flock of Rose-coloured Starlings by our breakfast stop, where we enjoyed particularly good parathas.

We had seen some photos on facebook of some Sociable Lapwing near Bikaner and Josh had eventually been able to make contact with a local guide called Jitu Solanki who agreed to show us the lapwings (for a fee of INR 2,500). We arrived at Bikaner at around 10 and climbed in Jitu's jeep.

We drove to a rocky field where we saw our first Isabelline Wheatear and Indian Fox of the trip. It did not take long before we located the three Sociable Lapwings and enjoyed remarkable views of this critically endangered bird. The special field also had other birds as Jitu showed us a flock of Indian Coursers that also contained our only Cream-coloured Courser of the trip. We then looked for a Saker Falcon that had apparently been in the area but without success - I wasn't too fussed anyway as I have seen them before in Hungary.

After the spectacular success, we headed to the famous carcass dump where we met up again with Deepak and our driver, Gurdev. Here, we got our most uninspiring life tick of the trip as we found the large flocks of Yellow-eyed Pigeons. The raptor spectacle was however extraordinary. There were huge throngs of Steppe Eagles, Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vultures, Tawny Eagles and Black Vultures.

Eventually, we had to tear ourselves away as it was still a very long drive to Jaisalmer. After about three hours, we stopped at Keechan to view the spectacle of over 1200 Demoiselle Cranes feeding by a small lake. Again this stop was all too brief as we had to be back on the road to Jaisalmer. The

three hour drive was uneventful apart from the first Punjab Raven and we arrived long after dark after what had been a truly special day.

Day 8 - 5th January: Akal Fossil Park and Jaisalmer

Our driver Gurdev had to head back to Delhi but Asian Adventures handled this very well and sent a replacement driver, Manjeet, who picked us up at 7 as arranged.

We headed to the Akal Fossil Park but yet again were hampered by thick fog. We waited until around 9 before heading in to the park but the fog still had not cleared. This made things difficult but we eventually found a couple of Desert Larks as well as some common birds we had seen elsewhere. As the fog started to clear, a few more birds appeared like Red-tailed Wheatear, Trumpeter Finch, Indian Eagle Owl and Punjab Raven. The Striolated Bunting that Max saw had long gone before I got there and there was no sign of any Plain Leaf Warblers.

After several hours, we headed in to Jaisalmer for a superb vegetarian lunch before Simon and I spent a couple of hours in the superb fortress of narrow streets and striking buildings, while Josh and Max did some jobs in town. A brief stop at Lake Gadisar was fairly fruitless before we headed to our tented camp in the desert near Sam. I have to be honest I was dreading this accommodation, often described as an Indian version of Butlins, but I was pleasantly surprised.

After checking in, we headed out for a couple of hours in the desert near the camp. This was surprisingly productive as we found several Desert Warblers, Black-crowned Sparrow Lark, Red-tailed Wheatear, a "capistrata" race Variable Wheatear and numerous Green Bee-eaters.

Day 9 - 6th January: Desert National Park

After a quick breakfast, we headed straight to the National Park excited what the day would bring. Driving along the access track, it was not long before Josh shouted "stop". He had spotted a Red-headed Vulture and we enjoyed decent views of it feeding on a carcass along with some Egyptian Vultures and an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle.

We carried on to the headquarters and tried some of the watch towers. Unfortunately, we could not see any Bustards but we did spot an opistholeuca Variable Wheatear and a distant flock of vultures. Heading round to check the vultures, mainly Griffon and Black, we were shocked to find an adult and juvenile Himalayan Vulture. We continued along the track and found a superb male Montagu's Harriers before Josh yelled "Bustard" as we had brief flight views of 3 of these massive birds. Simon and Max also saw a Desert Red Fox but I was focussed on the birds.

We carried on our search for better views but failed to refind them. We did however see several Laggar Falcons, Bimaculated Lark, Tawny Eagle and several of the surprisingly common Desert Warbler.

We returned to the camp for lunch before heading back to the park to continue our search. We debated attempting the notorious camel cart but instead picked up a young local park ranger, who promised to show us where he had seen 5 bustards in the morning. After 20 minutes driving on some sandy track, the park ranger's eagle eyes spotted 4 male Bustards not far from the road. We enjoyed excellent prolonged views even if the fence made photography very difficult. After this success, we headed back before, remarkably, the ranger spotted 3 more Bustards (this time a young male and 2 females). The rest of the day was unsurprisingly quieter though we did see a male Pallid Harrier and several Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse.

Day 10 - 7th January: Desert National Park

We woke up to more thick fog this morning so delayed our start until around 9. When the fog cleared, we headed in to the National Park and set off on a long walk in one of the enclosures. We had seen most the target birds the day before but we were able to find new birds like Short-toed Eagle (probably my world bogey bird!) and Graceful Prinia. There were also numerous Desert Warblers, Variable Wheatears, Long-billed Pipits and obvious Desert Whitethroats. I walked a slightly different route to the others and eventually found a Stolicszka's Bushchat. I called the others over and we enjoyed decent views of this very rare bird.

Arriving at a watering hole, we sat and waited in the optimistic hope of Black-bellied Sandgrouse but had to make do with Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and Trumpeter Finch. Another watering hole was largely dry but, remarkably, we found 2 more Great Indian Bustards in the distance and a Red-headed Vulture. By this time, it was very hot and not anticipating a long walk, I had not brought any water. We made the long 6 or 7km walk back to the car before returning to the camp for a late lunch.

Having seen all likely target birds apart from White-rumped Vulture, I decided to use the afternoon to rest. The others headed out and found no new birds but did have brief views of Desert Cat.

Day 11 - 8th January: Netsi Talab

Having seen most the birds in the Desert National Park area, we decided to try something different and headed to close to the Pakistan border. We had heard in trip reports about a place called Netsi Talab, where apparently sandgrouse come to drink.

It was about a ninety minute drive and we arrived in more thick fog. The pond was largely dry but was visited by Kentish Plover, Spotted Redshank and Little Ringed Plover. There were also numerous Pipits, which surprisingly were mostly Water Pipit but Paddyfield and Tawny Pipit were also present. The thorn forest in the area was quite productive with a White-browed Fantail, Greenish Warbler, Isabelline Shrike, Bluethroat and numerous odd Lesser Whitethroats.

As the fog started to clear, Josh spotted the Sandgrouse coming down somewhere in the distance. We headed in the car and eventually established they were coming down to a pool in an agricultural field. We headed over there and tried to get in to a good position to view. We waited but despite hundreds of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, no other sandgrouse came in but we did have a nice flock of 22 Trumpeter Finch. As we were leaving, something caught my eye on a small pool behind us. I got binoculars to it and, after a few expletives, shouted "male Black-throated Thrush"! It did not stay long but everyone managed to get at least flight views of it. The map in my book shows this to be hugely out of range. After this excitement, we headed back to the dried up lake where we found a family of 4 Mongoose and Deepak and I saw a brief Orphean Warbler.

We had a nice vegetarian lunch in a nearby town before heading back to camp for a relaxing end to the afternoon.



Day 12 – 9th January: Drive to Mount Abu

Today was a really long driving day as we left Sam at 6am for the 9 or so hour to Mount Abu. We made a couple of strategic stops on route in reasonable looking thorn forest but most were fairly quiet. One, however, turned up 2 Common Woodshrike, a shock Booted Warbler and a flock of circling Great White Pelican. A stop for lunch produced a flock of Small Minivets but otherwise it continued to be quiet until a decent looking lake on the outskirts of Jalore. This was quite productive with a pair of Cotton Pygmy Teal the highlight but also River Tern, Marsh Sandpiper and Ferruginous Duck.

We joined the main highway until we arrived at the Banas Dam opposite the Arbuda restaurant. This was teeming with birds with Osprey, River Tern, Great White Pelican and a pair of Great Thick Knees the best on the vast reservoir. The arable fields were also productive as we had the first Spotted Doves and Tree Pipits of the trip as well as a Yellow-wattled Lapwing. We also had superb views of three low flying Oriental Honey Buzzards and a surprise high flying Short-eared Owl. After an all too short hour, we had to tear ourselves away so we could get to Mount Abu not too long after dark.

Our final stop was at a bridge in Abu Road where we watched a vast flock of Streak-throated Swallows going in to roost. We arrived at the slightly run down Rising Sun Retreat at about 6pm and, after an excellent dinner, headed for an early night. This meant that we missed a Sloth Bear that the hotel owner saw in the middle of the grounds close to midnight!

Day 13 – 10th January: Mount Abu

We decided to spend the first hour of the morning exploring the very nice gardens of the Rising Sun Retreat. This proved a good decision as there were loads of birds even if viewing was difficult in the poor light. Amongst the highlights were a brief flock of Tawny-bellied Babbler, Coppersmith Barbet, Ashy Drongo, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Tree Pipit, Hume's Warbler, Indian Scops Owl and numerous Oriental White-eyes.

After breakfast, we headed straight to the area just outside the Peace Park. As well as Mongoose and Hanuman Langur, this was full of birds. New birds for the trip included several superb Crested Buntings and, finally, our first Chestnut-shouldered Petronias.

Walking round to where Deepak say he always sees Green Avadavats, the new birds continued to come first as we found Indian Yellow Tit, White-bellied Drongo, Yellow-eyed Babbler and White-capped Bunting. It was not long until the Green Avadavats appeared and we had good views. Climbing over the wall, we continued to find good birds like Jungle Prinia, Grey-breasted Prinia, Wryneck and a pair of Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker. It was frantic stuff. I also had good views of an Indian Scimitar Babbler but my poor direction giving meant that only Max could get on to it.

We then returned back to the Peace Park and tried a different area. This was also hugely productive with many of the birds as before. New additions included White-spotted Fantail, Plum-headed Parakeet, Oriental Turtle Dove and Sulphur-bellied Warbler. Next, we drove up the hill stopping for a flyover Booted Eagle and Oriental Honey Buzzard. We then tried a few tracks in the optimistic hope of finding White-naped Woodpecker or Black-rumped Flameback but unsurprisingly failed.

After a decent lunch, we headed further down the hill towards the sanctuary. We stopped on route by the side of the road to get good views of a Tickell's Blue Flycatcher that Deepak had spotted. There was also a large feeding flock of Yellow-eyed Babblers, Grey-breasted Prinias and Oriental White-eyes. We saw plenty of birds in the next few hours but mostly things we had already encountered apart from good views of Red Spurfowl that came in to Josh's tape.

We had agreed with the hotel owner that he would wake us up if the bear came again but unfortunately it did not. We could not complain though, it had been a truly spectacular day with 15 lifers for me. Deepak left us this evening as he had to go back to Delhi for another tour so, after a final meal, we thanked him for his help.

Day 14 – 11th January: Drive to Rann Riders

We left Mount Abu at 7am for the 4 hour drive to the very plush Rann Riders - a contrast to the sort of places I usually stay on my birding trips! The journey was quiet apart from a few Red Spurfowl on the road down from Abu.

We arrived before 11.30 and had a good 4 hours to enjoy lunch, a rest and the bird-filled gardens. By the lake outside our rooms, we found Syke's Warbler, Striated Heron, Indian Golden Oriole, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Hume's Warbler and Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher. The lake across the road was even more packed with life. Highlights here were my first ever Pheasant-tailed Jacana (a bird I'd always wanted to see!), Pale Martin, Bluethroat, Cotton Pygmy Teal, Garganey and Asian Openbill.

At 15.30, we headed out with our driver Sammy in a jeep. It was a slow start as, despite making clear we had seen several already, he insisted on taking us to see a roosting Indian Eagle Owl.

After this, we headed to the dried up Vanod "Wetlands". This was much more productive as amongst the vast Short-toed Lark flocks, there were also many Ashy-crowned Sparrow and Rufous-tailed Larks. We explored the area finding no fewer than 6 Short-eared Owls, 4 Greater Spotted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, thousands of Common Crane, Yellow-wattled Lapwing and several Pallid and Montagu's Harrier.

We stayed around the area until after dark. This started quietly with only an Indian Fox but soon livened up as we found at least 6 Syke's Nightjar. They afforded some spectacular views as one allowed us to walk right up to it on foot. After this success, some speculative playing of the tape for Indian Thick-Knee elicited an immediate response and the target flew in and landed close to the truck.

Day 15 – 12th January: Little Rann of Kutch

We met with Sammy at 7 and set off in the cold in to the bizarre saline wasteland of the Little Rann of Kutch. We started by driving around an area of bushes on the edge of the Kutch. The first hour or so had little to show for it apart from a Tawny Eagle until we found our main target - two Macqueen's Bustards. They were quite skittish but we did manage decent enough views.

We then headed a huge distance across the Kutch in the jeep, stopping only briefly to look at some Onagers (Wild Asses) before a shout of Hoopoe Lark had us grinding to a halt! Indeed, 3 Hoopoe-Larks were feeding with 3 Hoopoes. We then enjoyed spectacular views of these special birds that made the extremely uncomfortable jeep journey worth it! It was past 11 and we had over 60 kilometres to travel back across the Kutch so after having our fill of the Hoopoe-Larks, we headed back towards Rann Riders. We did stop briefly by some salt pans where we were pleased to find a small flock of Sand Larks.

During our lunch break, we arranged with Manjit to take us to Desert Coursers lodge in the hope of finding Pallid Scops Owl but unfortunately once we got there, we were informed they had all deserted their roosts.

At 15.30, we met up with Sammy again and drove to the famous wetland at Nava Talav. This was absolutely heaving with birds and we saw over 100 species in the afternoon alone. The most obvious birds were the thousands of Greater and Lesser Flamingos, Great White Pelicans and wildfowl. Both Marbled Duck and Lesser White-fronted Goose had been seen recently in the area but we were unable to locate them. Waders were particularly abundant with highlights being Lesser Sandplover, White-tailed Plover, Temminck's Stint and some distant Little Pratincoles. There were also vast tern and gull flocks made up of Pallas' Gull, Black-headed Gull, River Tern, Whiskered Tern and two White-winged Tern. Passerines were also very much in evidence including Citrine Wagtail, at least 8 Paddyfield Warblers and a Clamorous Reed Warbler. The latter was my 1,999th world bird - I was somewhat relieved it was not number 2000 as after Cape Reed Warbler as number 1000, I was hoping for something more exciting. 2000 would have to wait for tomorrow.

Day 16 – 13th January: Drive to CEDO and Fortmahdev

We left Little Rann of Kutch early for the 6 and a half hour drive to CEDO in the Greater Rann of Kutch. There were not huge numbers of birds on route but Western Reef Heron, Lesser-black Backed Gull and Dusky Crag Martin were all new for the trip.

After a nice vegetarian lunch and a rest, we headed at 15.30 with a local guide called Veer to the thorn forest at Fort Mahdev. It was not long until I ticked off my 2000th bird and a quite attractive one at that, a Marshall's lora! There were also several Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers, Small Minivets and Common Woodshrikes. We then tried a different area where after some searching Veer heard the call of a White-naped Tit and we enjoyed good prolonged views of a pair of these rare birds.

After this success, we moved closer to the village where we found Syke's Lark, Grey-necked Bunting and Indian Bushlark. A search for Rock Bush Quail had fairly predictable results but it had been another successful day.

Day 17 - 14th January: Greater Rann of Kutch

It was an early start this morning as we headed out in Ceddo's jeep with Veer and a driver. Our first stop was the famous toothbrush tree bushes at Fulay where we waited an hour or so to see our main target - Grey Hypocolius. We enjoyed good views of at least seven of these enigmatic birds. There was a steady stream of other birds to keep us entertained during the wait including a few Alpine Swift, flocks of Bimaculated Larks, Montagu's Harrier, Great White Pelican and some particularly uninspiring Common Rosefinches.

We then headed to the Banni grasslands to an area called "Bird Rock" in the hope of Striolated Bunting. There was no sign of any buntings but we did see both Variable and Red-tailed Wheatears. After a packed breakfast, we drove in to the Banni Grasslands. Here the highlights were Tawny Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle and Indian Spotted Eagle.

Our next stop was the vast Chaari Lake. Like most wetlands in the area, this was teeming with birds. There were a few Dalmatian Pelicans amongst the thousands of Great White Pelicans, a few Little Stints amongst the numerous Temminck's Stints and a few White-winged Black Terns amongst the Whiskered Terns. Other birds present included Isabelline Shrike, Paddyfield Warbler, White-tailed Lapwing, Great Crested Grebe and an array of Yellow Wagtail taxa. The best birds here were however 3 Oriental Pratincoles, which we had great views of. I also had brief views of both Water Rail and Baillon's Crake but unfortunately could not get the others on to either.

After this morning's excitement, we headed back to CEDO for lunch and a rest before heading out again in the afternoon. We tried an area of rocky hills near Fort Mahdev for Rock Bush Quail, which was unsuccessful, but we did flush an Indian Nightjar. Moving on to try another area, we came grinding to a halt when Max spotted a Sirkeer Malkoha and we had exceptional extended views of it perched on a bush. A little further on, we came to a halt again as we had great views of 4 Painted Sandgrouse right by the road.

We then tried yet another area for Rock Bush Quail and perhaps even White-bellied Minivet but drew a blank apart from a few Orphean Warblers. I guess we had to miss a species at some point on our trip! The day was not finished yet as driving back after dark, we encountered a Jungle Cat by the side of the road and watched it before it disappeared off.

Day 18 - 15th January: Mandvi and Naliya

Today was my last full day in India and we decided to do something completely different and head off to the coast. We arrived at the beautiful beach at Mandvi at around 8am and, after a packed breakfast, set off in search of birds.

There were not huge numbers of waders on the beach but Lesser Crested Tern and Slender-billed Gull were both offshore. Further down the beach, we found numerous Caspian Gull, Pallas' Gull, Steppe Gull and Heuglin's Gull as well as numerous Greater Flamingo. After about 2 kilometres, we started to encounter waders including Curlew, Terek Sandpiper, Avocet, both Greater and Lesser Sandplover, Sanderling, Red Knot and Grey Plover. We continued walking along the beach for a further 8 or 9 kilometres in search of our main target, Crab Plover, but drew a blank. We did however see Whimbrel, Brahminy Kite, Black-necked Stork, Oystercatcher and an impressive flock of 11 Great Thick-knees.

Spirits were not high as Crab Plover was one of our most-wanted birds but fortunately on the return journey, after a total searching time of almost 5 hours, we were relieved to encounter a single bird feeding in the surf. We had some really special views of this spectacular bird. We then still had a long walk back to the car where we encountered many of the same birds and a brief flock of a couple of Sand Larks. After a decent lunch in Mandvi town, we headed back to Cedo for a much needed shower to clear the sand off us.

For our final evening, we decided to try a place in the Naliya Grasslands where Veer had seen Hyenas on two occasions recently. We waited at the stake out for over an hour until it was well past dark but unfortunately we had to make do with 2 Golden Jackals and an Indian Mongoose.

Day 19 - 16th January: Travel home

We left Cedo at a silly time and I was dropped off at Bhuj airport with plenty of time for my 8.20 flight to Mumbai before flying from there to London. I arrived home at about 7 in the evening UK time as the flights went without a hitch. I was even upgraded to Premium Economy for the flight back to London!

It had been a great trip so I'd like to use this opportunity to thank Max for inviting me, Asian Adventures for putting together such a good value package, Deepak for being an excellent guide and our drivers Gurdev and Manjeet. Western India may not be the most visually attractive birding destination I've been to but it is full of special birds so I really recommend it. Do contact me at oliver@cornwood.co.uk / [@osimmsbirding](https://twitter.com/osimmsbirding) on Twitter if you want more specific site or hotel information and I'll do my best!

Thanks everyone for reading, appreciate it has been a long report!



Full Trip List – Lifers in bold

1. **Black Francolin**
2. **Grey Francolin**
3. **Red Spurfowl**
4. Indian Peafowl
5. **Lesser Whistling Duck**
6. Greylag Goose
7. **Bar-headed Goose**
8. **Knob-billed Duck**
9. Ruddy Shelduck
10. **Cotton Pygmy Goose**
11. Gadwall
12. Eurasian Wigeon
13. Mallard
14. **Indian Spot-billed Duck**
15. Northern Shoveler
16. Northern Pintail
17. Garganey
18. Eurasian Teal
19. Red-crested Pochard
20. Common Pochard
21. Tufted Duck
22. Little Grebe
23. Great Crested Grebe
24. Greater Flamingo
25. Lesser Flamingo
26. **Painted Stork**
27. **Asian Openbill**
28. **Wooly-necked Stork**
29. **Black-necked Stork**
30. **Black-headed Ibis**
31. **Red-naped Ibis**
32. Glossy Ibis
33. Eurasian Spoonbill
34. Eurasian Bittern
35. **Black Bittern**
36. Black-crowned Night Heron
37. Striated Heron
38. **Indian Pond Heron**
39. Eastern Cattle Egret
40. Grey Heron
41. Purple Heron
42. Great Egret
43. Intermediate Egret
44. Little Egret
45. Western Reef Heron
46. Great White Pelican
47. Dalmatian Pelican
48. **Little Cormorant**
49. Indian Cormorant
50. Great Cormorant
51. Oriental Darter
52. Western Osprey
53. Crested Honey Buzzard
54. Black-winged Kite
55. Black Kite
56. Brahminy Kite
57. Egyptian Vulture
58. **Himalayan Vulture**

59. Griffon Vulture
60. **Red-headed Vulture**
61. Cinereous Vulture
62. **Short-toed Snake Eagle**
63. Crested Serpent Eagle
64. Western Marsh Harrier
65. Pallid Harrier
66. Montagu's Harrier
67. Shikra
68. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
69. Long-legged Buzzard
70. **Greater Spotted Eagle**
71. **Tawny Eagle**
72. **Steppe Eagle**
73. Eastern Imperial Eagle
74. Booted Eagle
75. Common Kestrel
76. **Laggar Falcon**
77. Peregrine Falcon
78. **Great Indian Bustard**
79. **Macqueen's Bustard**
80. Water Rail
81. **Brown Crake**
82. Baillon's Crake
83. Purple Swamphen
84. Common Moorhen
85. Eurasian Coot
86. **Sarus Crane**
87. **Demoiselle Crane**
88. Common Crane
89. **Indian Stone Curlew**
90. **Great Stone Curlew**
91. Eurasian Oystercatcher
92. **Crab-plover**
93. Black-winged Stilt
94. Pied Avocet
95. **River Lapwing**
96. **Yellow-wattled Lapwing**
97. Red-wattled Lapwing
98. **Sociable Lapwing**
99. **White-tailed Lapwing**
100. Little-ringed Plover
101. Kentish Plover
102. **Lesser Sand Plover**
103. **Greater Sand Plover**
104. **Greater Painted Snipe**
105. **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**
106. **Bronze-winged Jacana**
107. Common Snipe
108. Black-tailed Godwit
109. Bar-tailed Godwit
110. Whimbrel
111. Eurasian Curlew
112. Spotted Redshank
113. Common Redshank
114. Marsh Sandpiper
115. Common Greenshank
116. Green Sandpiper
117. Wood Sandpiper
118. **Terek Sandpiper**

119. Common Sandpiper
120. Ruddy Turnstone
121. Red Knot
122. Sanderling
123. Little Stint
124. Temminck's Stint
125. Dunlin
126. Ruff
127. **Cream-coloured Courser**
128. **Indian Courser**
129. **Oriental Pratincole**
130. **Small Pratincole**
131. **Indian Skimmer**
132. Slender-billed Gull
133. **Brown-headed Gull**
134. Black-headed Gull
135. **Pallas's Gull**
136. Caspian Gull
137. Lesser Black-backed Gull
138. Gull-billed Tern
139. Caspian Tern
140. Lesser Crested Tern
141. **River Tern**
142. **Black-bellied Tern**
143. Whiskered Tern
144. White-winged Tern
145. **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse**
146. **Painted Sandgrouse**
147. Common Pigeon
148. **Yellow-eyed Pigeon**
149. Oriental Turtle Dove
150. Eurasian Collared Dove
151. Red Turtle Dove
152. Spotted Dove
153. Laughing Dove
154. Rose-ringed Parakeet
155. **Plum-headed Parakeet**
156. Greater Coucal
157. **Sirkeer Malkoha**
158. Western Barn Owl
159. **Indian Scops Owl**
160. **Oriental Scops Owl**
161. **Indian Eagle Owl**
162. **Dusky Eagle Owl**
163. **Spotted Owlet**
164. Short-eared Owl
165. **Syke's Nightjar**
166. **Indian Nightjar**
167. Alpine Swift
168. House Swift
169. **Indian Roller**
170. White-throated Kingfisher
171. Common Kingfisher
172. Pied Kingfisher
173. **Green Bee-Eater**
174. Eurasian Hoopoe
175. Indian Grey Hornbill
176. Brown-headed Barbet
177. Coppersmith Barbet
178. Eurasian Wryneck

- 179. **Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**
- 180. **Yellow-crowned Woodpecker**
- 181. **Common Woodshrike**
- 182. **Marshall's Iora**
- 183. **Small Minivet**
- 184. **Isabelline Shrike**
- 185. **Bay-backed Shrike**
- 186. Long-tailed Shrike
- 187. Southern Grey Shrike
- 188. **Indian Golden Oriole**
- 189. Black Drongo
- 190. Ashy Drongo
- 191. **White-bellied Drongo**
- 192. **White-spotted Fantail**
- 193. **White-browed Fantail**
- 194. Rufous Treepie
- 195. House Crow
- 196. **Indian Jungle Crow**
- 197. **Hypocolius**
- 198. Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher
- 199. **White-naped Tit**
- 200. **Indian Black-lored Tit**
- 201. **Singing Bushlark**
- 202. **Indian Bushlark**
- 203. **Greater Hoopoe Lark**
- 204. **Bimaculated Lark**
- 205. **Rufous-tailed Lark**
- 206. **Desert Lark**
- 207. **Greater Short-toed Lark**
- 208. **Sand Lark**
- 209. Crested Lark
- 210. **Syke's Lark**
- 211. **Black-crowned Sparrow Lark**
- 212. **Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark**
- 213. Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 214. **White-eared Bulbul**
- 215. Red-vented Bulbul
- 216. **Grey-throated Martin**
- 217. Sand Martin
- 218. **Pale Martin**
- 219. Barn Swallow
- 220. Wire-tailed Swallow
- 221. Dusky Crag Martin
- 222. Red-rumped Swallow
- 223. **Streak-throated Swallow**
- 224. Common Chiffchaff
- 225. **Sulphur-bellied Warbler**
- 226. **Brooks' Leaf Warbler**
- 227. **Hume's Leaf Warbler**
- 228. **Greenish Warbler**
- 229. **Clamorous Reed Warbler**
- 230. **Paddyfield Warbler**
- 231. Blyth's Reed Warbler
- 232. Booted Warbler
- 233. **Syke's Warbler**
- 234. Zitting Cisticola
- 235. **Rufous-fronted Prinia**
- 236. **Grey-breasted Prinia**
- 237. **Graceful Prinia**
- 238. **Jungle Prinia**

- 239. Yellow-bellied Prinia
- 240. **Ashy Prinia**
- 241. **Plain Prinia**
- 242. Common Tailorbird
- 243. **Indian Scimitar-Babbler**
- 244. **Tawny-bellied Babbler**
- 245. **Common Babbler**
- 246. **Striated Babbler**
- 247. **Large Grey Babbler**
- 248. Jungle Babbler
- 249. Lesser Whitethroat
- 250. **Desert Whitethroat**
- 251. Eastern Orphean Warbler
- 252. **Asian Desert Warbler**
- 253. **Yellow-eyed Babbler**
- 254. Oriental White-eye
- 255. **Spotted Creeper**
- 256. **Bank Myna**
- 257. Common Myna
- 258. Pied Myna
- 259. **Brahminy Starling**
- 260. Rosy Starling
- 261. Common Starling
- 262. **Black-throated Thrush**
- 263. Bluethroat
- 264. Oriental Magpie Robin
- 265. **Indian Robin**
- 266. Black Redstart
- 267. **White-browed Bushchat**
- 268. Siberian Stonechat
- 269. **Pied Bush Chat**
- 270. Isabelline Wheatear
- 271. **Red-tailed Wheatear**
- 272. **Desert Wheatear**
- 273. **Variable Wheatear**
- 274. **Brown Rock Chat**
- 275. Blue Rock Thrush
- 276. Red-breasted Flycatcher
- 277. Tickell's Blue Flycatcher
- 278. Purple Sunbird
- 279. House Sparrow
- 280. **Sind Sparrow**
- 281. **Yellow-throated Petronia**
- 282. Baya Weaver
- 283. **Red Avadavat**
- 284. **Green Avadavat**
- 285. Indian Silverbill
- 286. Western Yellow Wagtail
- 287. **Citrine Wagtail**
- 288. Grey Wagtail
- 289. White Wagtail
- 290. **White-browed Wagtail**
- 291. Paddyfield Pipit
- 292. Tawny Pipit
- 293. **Long-billed Pipit**
- 294. Tree Pipit
- 295. **Rosy Pipit**
- 296. Water Pipit
- 297. Common Rosefinch
- 298. **Crested Bunting**

- 299. **Grey-necked Bunting**
- 300. **White-capped Bunting**