

SOUTHERN INDIA 15th - 29th January 2013

Published by Jacquie + David Bridges (jsb810@btinternet.com)

Participants: David + Jacquie Bridges, John + Jane Hopkins

GENERAL

The trip was very well organised and arranged by Wild About Travel. The e-mail address is jo@wildabouttravel.co.uk + the web site www.wildabouttravel.co.uk. Our guide was Jijo Mathew, who speaks very good English and catered for all our needs. He is very knowledgeable in all aspects of fauna and flora identification, and an expert tracker! The transport (a small mini bus driven by Denising, who is a very careful driver) was air-conditioned and very comfortable, which made the travelling pleasant. The food, of course, was excellent, so much so that we all put on a few extra pounds! All accommodation was of a high standard, comfortable and clean.

The pace of the tour was fairly relaxed allowing us to explore the local areas, one of which was the Nilgiri tea plantation, covering a vast area. We were also taken to a farm which produced rubber where we were shown how it was tapped and processed. The farmer also grew various spices but at the same time maintained the habitat for wildlife; a good view of a Mottled Wood Owl was had by all at that particular site. We enjoyed seeing temples on our journeys and we visited a few. Ootacamund ("Ooty") botanical gardens, is a fantastic place, not only for the plants and shrubs but for birds. The Kashmir and Black + Orange Flycatchers were a pleasant surprise!

OF OTHER INTEREST

We encountered a few species of Butterflies, Mammals, Dragonflies and Reptiles on this trip (many of which Jijo, our guide, identified). They will be listed at the end of this report along with the Birds check list.

FIELD GUIDES

Birds of the Indian Subcontinent, Second Edition (Richard Grimmett, Carol + Tim Inskipp); Birds of South Asia - The Ripley Guide (Vol.1: Field Guide); Field Guide to Indian Mammals (Vivek Menon).

WEATHER

In general it was hot and sunny although at Ooty, due to the high elevation, there were early morning frosts. Taking warm clothing is advisable for this trip, not only for the occasional cold early morning starts, it can also get rather chilly in the evenings.

SITES

For further details of all sites mentioned in this report please e-mail jo@wildabouttravel.co.uk

TRAVEL TO KOCHI

It was a very foggy start to the trip. We were delayed in Delhi for several hours and finally flew to Kochi via Chennai, which made our arrival very late. The tour company arranged for us to have an overnight stay at the Lotus Hotel in Kochi, which was very pleasant and comfortable with excellent food. We soon forgot about the frustration of the delays and the re-routed flight via Chennai.

ITINERARY

15th January Kochi-Munnar-Olivebrook

We were picked up after breakfast at Kochi for the onward journey to Munnar. We stopped for a few breaks and saw many species: White-cheeked Barbets, Southern Coucal, Orange Minivets, White-browed Wagtails and a world tick for a couple of us, Swinhoe's Snipe, to name but a few. We arrived at Olivebrook Resort around midday. After lunch, we walked through the forest behind Olivebrook to Grassvena, an area of grassland then on to the hilltop (Pothamedu), birds seen included Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Yellow-browed Bulbul, Nilgiri Flycatcher, Nilgiri Flowerpecker, Kerala Laughingthrush, Common Rosefinch, Dusky Crag Martin, Pallid Harrier and Tickell's Leaf Warbler. Our aim had been to see the Broad-tailed Grassbird but alas, unlucky today!

16th January Olivebrook-Eravikulam-Chinnar Wildlife Reserve

We left Olivebrook early and drove to Eravikulam Reserve, which is positioned along a hillside. Whilst walking along a road on the reserve, we encountered Hill Swallow, Montagu's Harrier, Himalayan Buzzard, White-bellied Blue Robin (Shortwing) and Besra. The most exciting moment of the morning was the excellent views of Nilgiri Thar, a mammal well sought-after. We then drove to Chinnar Wildlife Reserve, a vast open shrubby area. During a walk on the reserve, birds seen were Yellow-billed Babbler, Coppersmith Barbet, White-bellied Drongo, Bay-backed Shrike, Crested Serpent Eagle, Crested Hawk-eagle, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Paddyfield Warbler, Blue-faced Malkoha, Cinereous Tit, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Grey-bellied Cuckoo, Ashy Woodswallow, Bronzed Drongo, Common Woodshrike, Pale-billed Flowerpecker, White-naped Woodpecker, Verditer Flycatcher and a juvenile Common Hawk-cuckoo being fed by Yellow-billed Babblers.

17th January Munnar-Periyar

Today we made an early start for the uphill climb for the Broad-tailed Grassbird at Grassvina, an area of mainly hilly grassland. A steep climb, but after a two and a half hour watch we were all rewarded for our efforts, we saw at least two birds. Some other birds seen at this site were Ashy Prinia, Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Square-tailed Bulbul, dark phase Booted Eagle, Crested Serpent Eagle and a Blue-capped Rock Thrush. After breakfast we continued our journey to Periyar, the next place of stay for a couple of nights. We encountered Common Iora, Black Eagle, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Nilgiri Pipit, Short-toed Eagle, Tawny-bellied Babbler, Bonelli's Eagle, Yellow-throated Bulbul, White-browed Bulbul, White-bellied Drongo, Brown Shrike and many more. We finally arrived at the Wildernest Hotel, Periyar late afternoon. The rooms were comfortable and clean, the breakfast was very good, too. For our evening meals we ate at the Spice Village (only a few hundred yards from the hotel), the food and service were excellent.

18th January Periyar

After an early breakfast we made our way to the wildlife reserve and spent the morning in and around the area. Periyar is a mixture of various habitats with both open and forested areas and an extensive lake. We took a short raft ride across the misty, tranquil lake. Once over the other side and during a walk in the forest, birds seen were Malabar Trogon, Malabar Whistling-thrush, Southern Hill Myna, White-cheeked Barbet, Greater Flameback, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Greater Racket-tailed

Drongo, Vernal Hanging Parrot, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Black-lored Tit, White-bellied Treepie, Malabar Barbet, White-bellied Blue Flycatcher, Large-billed Leaf Warbler, Malabar Grey and Great Hornbills, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Crested Goshawk, Black Baza and Red Spurfowl. We lunched at Ambally then visited a different area of the reserve to the south side of the town. Other birds seen were Jungle Owlet, Loten's Sunbird, Dark-fronted Babbler, Flame-throated Bulbul, Black-naped Munia, Malabar Parakeet, White-rumped Spinetail, Wynaad Laughingthrush (another much sought-after species), Brown-backed Needletail, Indian Scimitar Babbler, Orange-throated Thrush and Pintail Snipe.

19th January Periyar

We took an early morning walk to a different part of the reserve where birds seen included Woolly-necked Stork, Oriental Darter, Grey Junglefowl, River Tern, Ashy Woodswallow, White-bellied Woodpecker, Orange Minivet, Brahminy Kite and Painted Stork. After lunch we were taken on a 2-hour boat trip (optional) organised by Jijo and the reserve. Life jackets are supplied and are expected to be worn which can make movement and photography a little difficult.

20th January Periyar to Thattekkad

We ate a later breakfast and left Wilderrest around 8.30 for the Hornbill Camp Thattekkad, which would be our place of stay for the next couple of nights. The camp was about 4½ hours away. On the journey we encountered many of the same species of birds mentioned already, although of note en route, were the many flocks of Lesser Whistling-duck. We arrived at the Hornbill Camp around 1.30pm. The camp is a large area of tents which were very clean and comfortable. The food too was excellent, without being too spicy. The staff were very pleasant, helpful and accommodating. During a late afternoon walk around a farm, in Thattekkad, we were taken to a wooded area and shown a Mottled Wood Owl. On and around the farm we also saw Stork-billed Kingfisher, Green Bee-eater, White-cheeked Barbet, Ashy Woodswallow and Rufous Treepie. The farmer showed us how latex was tapped from a rubber tree and the way it was processed to make rubber; it was very interesting to see the end result. During the walk he also pointed out many herbs and spices (Turmeric, Cumin and Ginger, to name but a few) that he grew for selling at the local markets.

21st January Thattekkad + Idamalayar

We left camp around 6.30 with a packed breakfast and drove to Idamalayar, which is a forested area. We mainly birded along the road where some of us ticked Black-naped Oriole. Other birds seen on our walk included Golden-fronted Leafbird, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, White-rumped Spinetail, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Malabar Woodshrike, Malabar Trogon, Rufous Babbler (this was the only place we saw this bird), Heart-spotted Woodpecker, Thick-billed Warbler, Dollarbird and Blue-faced Malkoha. Many of these were also ticks for some of the group. We made our way back to the camp for about 11.30 as it was getting very hot, then venturing out again about 4.30 p.m. to an area east of the camp. We encountered 2 more Dollarbirds and also of note were Red Spurfowl and Orange-headed Thrush. We took a walk along the suspension bridge from where we saw Green Imperial Pigeon and many Chestnut headed Bee-eaters. During the early evening, in a nearby forest, some of us ticked Great-eared Nightjar. We also saw Brown Hawk Owl and Brown Fish Owl. Rather a good day's birding, to say the least!

22nd January Oorlanthanni + Thattekkad areas

Whilst sipping our early morning coffee on our balcony (attached to the tent) we saw a large passage of Whiskered Terns flying along the river. We then made our way to Oolanthanni which is a large forested area and a wonderful site for birds. Of note were Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Flame-throated Bulbul, Orange + Small Minivets, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, Black-throated Munia, Brown Fish Owl, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Brown-cheeked Fulvetta and Blue-throated Blue Flycatcher. It was getting rather hot so we went back to camp for lunch and a couple of hours relaxation before the afternoon adventure during which we saw Jerdon's and Jungle Nightjars.

23rd January Chalakudy + Kol Land Marshes

We left Hornbill Camp after breakfast for our next destination, one night at the River Retreat in Chalakudy. We arrived mid-afternoon as we had been birding en route. River Retreat is a large complex, very clean, comfortable and the food was delicious. After settling into the hotel we made our way to Vazhachal where we visited the Kol Land Marshes. The marshes cover a vast area with many species and much time is needed to fully enjoy this site. Species here included Storks, Ibises, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Streaked Weaver, Watercock, Slaty-breasted Rail (this was the only area where we saw these last three species).

24th January Chalakudy –Ooty

During the 6-hour journey to Ooty we saw some good birds from the vehicle: such as the many Brahminy Kites, Shikra and Crested Treeswift. We arrived at the Monarch Hotel in time for an excellent lunch, after which we made our way into Ooty itself for the Botanical Gardens. This was an amazing place not only for birds but for all sorts of fauna and flora. We saw the glowing Black-and-Orange Flycatcher and Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher; Velvet-fronted Nuthatches were very confiding, and photogenic, as was an Indian Blue Robin. Many butterflies were busy feeding off the plants together with Nilgiri Flowerpecker and Nilgiri Flycatchers were feeding along the rows of trees and shrubs. There was much to see and enjoy. We heard talk of a male Kashmir Flycatcher still being present but, alas, we did not see it today.

25th January Doddabetta + Ooty Botanical Gardens

We left the Monarch Hotel early for the Mountain Watchpoint at Dodabetta. No sooner had we left the vehicle we were greeted with fantastic views of Black-chinned Laughingthrush all around the watchpoint. Nilgiri Blue Robin was another new bird for us. We drove down from the watchpoint, and left the vehicle to walk along the forested slopes. Jijo searched ahead for a short while and located a Nilgiri Thrush, a spectacular, endemic bird to see. Fantastic views were had by all and some great photos taken. We went back to the hotel for lunch and to reflect on the amazing events of the morning. During the afternoon we made our way once again to Ooty Botanical Gardens. Jijo was determined to find the male Kashmir Flycatcher, convinced it had not gone far. After watching Olive-backed Pipits feeding amongst the borders along with White-spotted Fantail, we saw a small group of photographers snapping away at a bird feeding in a rather large tree. This, to our delight, was the male Kashmir Flycatcher. This truly turned out to be a wonderful day.

26th January Ooty to Masinagudi

Up and out very early this morning for Kallatty hoping to see Painted Bush Quail, which would be a new bird for us all. We were rewarded with 5 birds, as well as Malabar Lark and Blue Rock Thrush and many more. We made our way back to the hotel for a good hearty breakfast, then collected our

luggage ready to make our way to Masinagudi and Jungle Hut on the Mudumalai Reserve, for a couple of nights stay. The journey was not too long and we arrived just in time for lunch. Jungle Hut was one of the most interesting, comfortable places of the trip. Accommodation was clean, food excellent, and the standard of service was very high. The owners catered for all our needs and made sure everything was to our liking. The afternoon was spent birding around the Mudumalai Reserve. We saw our first Booted Warblers of the trip plus Yellow-crowned and White-naped Woodpeckers, Yellow-throated Sparrow, Savanna Nightjar and Jerdon's Bushlark.

27th January Mudumalai Reserve

Out early this morning as there were many birds to see in a different area of the reserve. The morning's birding was busy and, although there were no new birds for us, there were plenty of trip ticks. Back for breakfast and birding around Jungle Hut. It was good to see 3 Puff-throated Babblers along with Scaly-breasted Munia, Asian Paradise Flycatcher Taiga Flycatcher and White-rumped Shama. Jijo sent two of his young helpers to search for White-bellied Minivet in an open bushy area of the reserve during the early afternoon. For all of us, this was a much sought-after bird. After a couple of hours of searching they located a male bird. It had proved to be very difficult to find but we all had brilliant views of yet another outstanding bird. Many good photographs were taken.

28th January Jungle Hut to Mysore

We left Jungle Hut and headed toward the Green Hotel at Mysore, another fantastic place to stay. We had two stops en route and saw many species, including White-eyed Buzzard and Sykes's Warbler. After lunch and a rest (as it was rather hot early afternoon) we drove to Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary. On the journey, Black-headed and Red-naped Ibises were seen. We spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening at the sanctuary, seeing large numbers of nesting Pelicans, Egrets, Ibises and Storks.

29th January Mysore to Bangalore

Alas, the last day of the trip. We left our hotel for the outskirts of Mysore where we stopped for a walk around a small wasteland site and saw our first Indian Silverbills of the trip as well as Yellow-wattled Lapwing and Sykes's Lark. Continuing our journey to Bangalore, a Shaheen Peregrine and an Indian Eagle Owl rounded off the trip very nicely.

Upon reaching Bangalore our group separated; Jane and John headed for their extension to the Andamans (report to follow), Jacquie and Dave went to Bharatpur followed by Panna Bandhavgarh and Kanha Reserves.