

South India birding in the monsoon...not all it's cracked up to be!

Trip report to Goa and Karnataka, Southern India 7th- 20th August 2018

by Christopher and Victoria Harper.

We had been told by many people that to visit Southern India you had to go in the dry season, and indeed online birding reports for the area for that time of year sounded great. There is one snag with this as far as we are concerned, and that is with us both being teachers and having a limited time to holiday in our winter, this was out of the question. So a monsoon trip it was, bringing with it some outstanding wildlife, together with the sights and sounds of the subcontinent at this special time of the year. So I would definitely advocate a trip to India in the monsoon.

We flew to Goa with Qatar airways from Manchester, via Doha in Qatar. The plane was spacious, stopover only a couple of hours, and we arrived after getting our Visas and then a taxi to Baga in North Goa by about 04.30am. Check in, room, sleep.

Tuesday August 7th...Baga

As ever in any new area, the excitement and adrenaline kick in as soon as the birds started singing outside, so by 7.30 we were eager to shake off our jetlag and see what the area had to offer. For both of us it was our first time in mainland Asia, and we couldn't wait to see what was outside. By reading various books prior to our trip, including the very good 'Where to watch birds in North Goa' by David Gosney we chose to stay at the Beira Mar Hotel (renamed Oliva Resort as of late 2017). Despite not being able to pay online they held a room for us, and this proved to be an excellent place to stay for our first three full days. Our initial room was on the ground floor and opening the door to the garden we immediately noticed a pair of White-rumped Munia building a nest under next doors window frame. Great start. In the trees above a confiding Red Whiskered Bulbul soon appeared, and on the roof a Black-lored Tit looked gorgeous in the morning sunshine (they do have it at times during the monsoon). Many House Crows were around the garden. On our way to the pool for a morning swim, we had a quick detour via some of the lush vegetation in the hotel grounds, and soon spotted Indian Silverbill, Oriental White-eye, Pale-billed Flowerpecker, Red-vented Bulbul, and peeping Crimson-Backed and Purple-rumped Sunbirds. Ten new species in half an hour, pretty good going.





Above left: White-rumped Munia. Above right: Oriental White-eye. Below: Red-whiskered Bulbul



After an early dip in the pool, during which the heavens opened with some heavy warm rain, the sky cleared, and this was a cue for a lot of birds to show themselves. (On the trip as a whole this was a bit of a theme...heavy shower followed by the birds making the most of the proceeding dry spell). So with scopes set up under the umbrellas we scanned the marsh and riverine area behind the hotel and pool. Anyone can come to the pool area and do this apparently, and it is certainly worth it from the amount of birds we saw in just over an hour there from 08.30-10.00.

On the wires over the marsh were many Baya Weaver, including young and many summer plumaged adults, families of Scaly-breasted Munia busy nest building, and Jungle Mynah. Less frequent were Black Drongo, White-throated Kingfisher and a few Rock Pigeon. In and around the marsh itself was a superb amount of water birds. The list included Red-wattled Lapwing, Little Cormorant, Indian Pond Heron, Grey and Purple Heron, Great and Intermediate Egret, Cinnamon Bitterns and a couple of Western Reef Egrets. Lesser Whistling-duck were seen frequently, as were Common Redshank. A skulking White-breasted Waterhen was seen climbing the reeds. In the vegetation close to the hotel, but still in the marsh were a couple of stunning male Crimson Sunbirds, noisy Ashy Prinia and Common Tailorbird, and a family party of Oriental Magpie-robin.



Above left: Scaly-breasted Munia. Above right: Jungle Myna



Above left: Baya Weaver. Above right: White-throated Kingfisher



Above left: Oriental Magpie-robin. Above right: White-breasted Waterhen

All this time flying around the marsh and easy to see were Brahminy and Black Kites, a couple of White-rumped Needletail and Wire-tailed Swallow with the more common House Swifts. Passing Parakeets included mainly Ring-necked, but a couple of Plum-headed, and smaller flocks of Alexandrine with their very different flying style were also seen. What a great start to the holiday.

After a bit of faffing where the owners eventually agreed to move us to a room with a balcony view of the marsh (as promised in correspondence), moving cases and checking the birds in the excellent Helm publication 'Birds of Southern India' by Grimmett and Inskipp, we spent a lovely couple of hours in the afternoon from the balcony getting to know the more common birds of the area already seen, but adding many new species, some spending time in the low trees just outside the balcony, at eye level. Included here are Greater (now Southern) Coucal, Black-rumped and Common Flameback, and Vernal Hanging Parrot. Across the marsh was a confiding female Indian

Peafowl, Bronze and Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, and female and male Asian Koel. As well as the frequent Kites, a huge bird of prey that made its way off the distant Baga Hills and drifted over the hotel we could only assume was a Black Eagle. Rare but not unheard of in the area.



Above left: Brahminy. Above right: Greater Coucal



Above left: Plum-headed Parakeet. Above right: Ring-necked Parakeet



Above left: Black-rumped Flameback. Above right: Asian Koel

Peckish by dusk, the hotel restaurant provided great views of an almost resident Spotted Owlet as it moved from perch to perch after its prey, and a Nightjar species later around the lawn drawn to the moths was most probably Grey according to our guide when we asked him the following day. The day's other wildlife highlight was watching the numerous Indian Fruit Bat's coming to feed around the hotel. Looking like large birds of prey as they came in over the marsh to almost disappear as they nestled in the tree tops.

So what a great first day. Very little rain, amazing wildlife, a pool with Brahminy Kites overhead and Magpie-robins by your towel, and a balcony overlooking a buzzing marsh. A definite warm welcome to India.

Wednesday 8th August...Carambolim and Vagator

Mr Gosney had used Santosh Redkar as a taxi driver come bird guide for his trips, and by emailing him we arranged a pick up from the hotel at 6am. He is a lovely guy, and his knowledge of the area is excellent. I recommend him to anyone who visits the area...you really don't want to try driving yourself around unless you have a death wish.

We drove first to Carambolim Fields and later to Carambolim Lake, again on a mainly dry day interspersed with a few showers. The former site has a good bit of woodland too, so provides a good mix of habitats in which to see birds. For the purpose of the report we are just really talking about the new birds seen on the day, although obviously many more of the ones already mentioned were also seen again. For a full list, please feel free to contact us.

Arriving about 07.30 a Zitting Cisticola was already in full song, Spotted Doves on the road, and a Common Kingfisher on a nearby reed. Flying about were many Darter, Indian Cormorant, a Yellow Bittern, Cattle Egret, Little Heron, Black-headed Ibis, and best of all three distant Painted Storks and a White-bellied Sea Eagle. Again, the wires and posts produced good birds, with Stork-billed Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher, Green Bee-eater and Common Lora all seen, the latter looking especially beautiful in the morning sun. On the road was a large flock of feeding House Sparrow, Black-headed Munia and Red Avadavat.

A stroll through the woodland gave us diminutive Grey-breasted Prinia, a perched Shikra, two of our 'must sees' in the form of a Black-headed Oriole and White-cheeked Barbet, and a Tickell's Blue Flycatcher on the road. The other side of the wood the road emerges back into fields/marsh, and here were Bronze-winged Jacana, Purple Swampphen, with feeding Little Swift and more Wire-tailed Swallow, some showing their full adult 'wires'. The morning sun again helped with showing some of the birds off to their best. We saved the best views to nearer 10am, with great views of Lotens and Purple Sunbirds and a couple of gorgeous Pompadour Green Pigeons. Common Peafowl were in nearby bushes, and on the ground the classic displaying male.



Above left: Common Lora. Above right: Shikra



Above: Black-headed Orioles



Above left: Purple Swamphen (and Lesser whistling Duck). Above right: Common Peafowl



Above: Displaying Common Peafowl

It was only a short drive via a nice drink break to Carambolim Lake. En route to the towered bird viewing area we had decent views of White-browed Bulbul, and from the tower itself both Whiskered and Gull-billed Tern, many Black-winged Stilt, and both Black and Bar-tailed Godwit. The Water Buffalo seemed unconcerned with the Marsh Mugger Crocodiles present in good numbers and giving great views.

On the opposite side of the lake it is possible to see adjacent paddy fields too, and from here we saw Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, Black-crowned Night Heron, a large flock of Glossy Ibis, fishing Osprey, and three Lesser Adjutant Storks with a look that only a mother could love. Great birds nevertheless.

So an excellent morning's birding for 2500 rupees. A bargain and a big tip and a rest before an afternoon looking at a bit of the culture around Baga.



Above left: Water Buffalo. Above right: Marsh Muggar Crocodile



Above: Lesser Adjutant Stork

We decided to get a taxi from just outside the hotel and were lucky to find another of the people who we had read about called Raymon. So, on our way to visit the face of Shiva on Vagator beach he pointed out a Little Crane in Baga Fields to us (not even on the bird guide), stopped to let us admire a small flock of Yellow-wattled Lapwing and White-browed Wagtails en route, and was excited as us as a White-bellied Sea Eagle drifted just above us near the cliffs. At Chapora Fort we were very lucky when a Crested Goshawk flew into a tree right next to us, stayed for 30 seconds, then was gone in a flash. He mentioned a few good places he knew, so we booked him for a trip in the afternoon the following day, having already secured Santosh for another morning session.

The evening brought another hour chilling on the balcony, adding Rufous Treepie and Purple Sunbird to our garden list, together with a pair of Indian Mongoose chasing each other around, and an inquisitive Three-striped Palm Squirrel before the Fruit bat finale. Later we enjoyed the Spotted Owlet show again, followed by a few Kingfisher of the chilled beer variety.



Above left: Yellow-wattled Lapwing. Above right: White-browed Wagtail



Above left: Rufus Treepie. Above right: Indian Mongoose



Above: Three-striped Palm Squirrel

Thursday 9th August...Bondla and Fort Aguda

Our second morning with Santosh was spent at Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary in South East Goa. On the way we saw a small flock of Ashy Wood Swallow by the road. The first hour was actually spent just outside near the woodland edge, near a small village with cultivation. Here there were some showy Indian Robins, a spooked Large Hawk Cuckoo, gracefully soaring Crested Treeswifts, and a Pied Cuckoo in full song, much to the enjoyment of Santosh (he doesn't get a lot of trips in the monsoon, and the Cuckoo only sings during this time, so again a reason to go off season). A flyby Emerald Dove signalled it was time to head to the forest.

Walking towards the Sanctuary itself we crossed a bridge, under which flew a Kingfisher, which with a good scope view turned out to be Blue-eared and whilst attempting a photo a gorgeous Blue-faced Malkoha flew into the bush next to us. On the road were many Jungle Babblers (nicknamed the '7 sisters' apparently as there is always that number in a flock), lovely Orange-headed Thrushes, as well as noisy White-faced Macaques in the canopy above.



Above left: Blue-eared Kingfisher. Above right: white-faced Macaque

The forest itself brought us some truly stunning birds, and this is really where a guide like Santosh comes into his own, recognising calls, and knowing roughly whereabouts in the foliage the particular bird will be. So, within the space of 20 minutes, we had located Brown-headed Barbet, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, Rufous Woodpecker, and also none other than five of our target species: Heart-spotted Woodpecker, Golden-fronted Leafbird, both Small and an almost on fire Scarlet Minivet, and Black-naped Monarch. With the addition of Black-faced Langurs, a noisy Malabar Giant Squirrel and many Large-billed Crows, this was probably the best bit of forest birding of the whole trip. Again, a rain free morning definitely helped.

Despite stopping on our way up towards the zoo, we couldn't locate probably our number one target bird for the trip, Malabar trogon, but did have prolonged views of the state bird of Goa the Black-crested (now more appropriately named Flame Throated) Bulbul, together with Yellow-browed Bulbul.

The zoo itself is for rescued animals, but the area has some good mixed habitat, and again some new birds were seen here with the help of Santosh knowing some good areas within it. Stand out was a Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, with addition of a Dark-headed Babbler, Black-throated Munia, skulking Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, and finally a Grey-headed Bulbul after hearing them a few times without setting eyes on them.

So, another great morning's birdwatching, and another bargain from Santosh. We also heard some birds without seeing them, so birds like Malabar Grey Hornbill, Crested Hawk Eagle, Green Imperial Pigeon and Little Spiderhunter

would have to wait for another time. He also agreed to take us to our new destination the day after, saving a bit of faffing.



Above: Santosh and us in Bondla

After a well-deserved rest, Raymon's trip in the afternoon to Fort Aguda was a more sedate affair, with a stop in a well wooded area on the way to see if we could see the resident Brown Fish Owl. We were a little less fortunate with the rain here, and missed the owl, but did have a good supporting cast before and after a very heavy downpour. Both White-browed and White-throated Fantail were seen well, as well as a Blackbird, and a large flock of Chestnut-tailed Starling. Despite it singing, we could not locate the Blue-winged Leafbird. Only time in India we came close.

At Fort Aguda we had some great views of some of the birds we had already seen, including some excellent action from two White-bellied Sea Eagles, as well as stunning scenery in a historic setting. Money well spent again.

Our final night in Baga was spent sorting out our belongings for the trip the following day and looking forward to our first early morning when we could actually scope the marshy area from our balcony.



Above: White-bellied Sea Eagle

Friday August 10th...Baga to Mollem

As well as watching some of the previously mentioned species, and the joy of watching the many Brahminy Kites leave their roost from the nearby trees, our only new 'balcony' birds of the morning were a couple of vocal Coppersmith Barbets, while from the pool we were lucky to see the poking head of a Watercock along with the usual bustling of the Mynah's, Munia, Herons, Lapwing and Weavers.

Our next destination was near Mollem in South East Goa, at a place called Dudsaghar Family Farmstead. We had already payed half the cost of the two night stay through bank transfer, and were looking forward to a more rural setting. On the way Santosh made a couple of stops, the first to expertly locate a Malabar Grey Hornbill he had heard from the car, and the second to scan fields containing two Woolly-Necked Storks, two Asian Openbill Storks, and another Lesser Adjulant. A Common Kestrel flew over as we scoped these, a local rarity and a little out of season.

The farmstead itself is almost self-sufficient, cooks all of its own food from produce grown on site, and is heavily forested, with a great mix of habitat, including an unchlorinated pool, where you can swim along with the local tadpoles and frogs. It has its own nature trail on site, which after a rest we thought we would follow.

Some excellent new birds were seen, along with the resident pair of Malabar Grey hornbills, nesting Malabar Giant Squirrel and local White-faced Macaques. Best of all was a party of Malabar Parakeets, another of our target species. On top of this was a single Hill Mynah, a few more Rufous Woodpecker, another Pied Cuckoo, and a trio of new species. Rufous Babbler, Long-tailed Shrike and a female White-bellied Blue Flycatcher. Looked around for the male but it wasn't to be but did disturb a party of Orange-headed Thrushes as well as nearly standing on Purple Crabs that come down from the canopy in the wet season. All throughout the walk we made sure we had our 'snake sticks' with us (provided by Ashok, the owner), just in case. They were never needed, which was a pity.



Above: Red-wattled Lapwing. Above right: Malabar Grey Hornbill



Above left: Long-tailed Shrike. Above right: Purple Crab

After a lovely meal, it was time for a shower with a difference as in our room it opened out onto the canopy. So as you are washing away the day's heat, you are spied upon by Hornbills, Barbets, Sunbirds and Macaques. An experience not to be missed. Our friendly Gecko helped keep the room mosquito free for the night too.

Saturday August 11th...Tamdi Surla

Ashok had kindly sorted out a taxi for us for the morning's trip to Tamdi Surla, an ancient Hindu Temple in the heart of the Western Ghat's rainforest. It is close to Backwoods' Camp, a birdwatching paradise in the dry season, but closed in the off season, and so has a similar range of species as well as a lovely temple.

Salim, our driver, was a bit of a naturalist himself and en route regaled us with his stories of spotting Leopards and Tigers in the nature reserve (It is part of the Bhagwan Mahaveer wildlife sanctuary). He had a few good places to stop, with good views of Spotted Deer and a nice plantation edge that contained more Malabar Parakeets, Barbets, Sunbirds and woodpeckers, including a brief view of the large White-bellied before it flew strongly away from us. A Grey Junglefowl was on the approach road to the temple, boding well for our forest walk to the waterfall.



Above: Spotted Deer

At this point, however, our luck with the weather ran out for a while. Around the rear of the temple we saw a few good birds, but it was in general very quiet. In the open area we saw quite a few passing over, including good views of a Nilgiri Wood Pigeon and Basra, but as we edged past the Macaques up the waterfall path the clouds rolled in, and with it a good hour of torrential rain. This did spook a huge Brown Fish Owl out from its tree above the river, and a couple of Malabar Grey Hornbill, but that was about it. As the path turned quickly into a river, and the small river we had crossed turned quickly into a torrent, we cut our losses and headed back to the temple for a bit of spiritual relief. We did get great views of another Black-crested Bulbul here together with many smaller species, as well as almost stepping on the biggest frog we had ever seen. Bullfrog species of some sort?

Meeting back up with Salim, the way back provided a nice stop off to scope more Woolly-necked Stork, with again a Lesser Adjutant, and behind them an early returning White Stork. The Hornbills greeted us at the farmstead as usual.

A chilled afternoon around the pool and bar was just what was required, but not before another walk around the nature trail during which Vicky nearly planted her boot on a Smooth Snake, despite her stick. We gave up after fifteen minutes due to more torrential rain, but we were lucky to see in the banana tree next to the bar a Little Spiderhunter feeding very close (not so lucky, as apparently it comes every day), and a Malabar Pied Hornbill by the pool (again a regularly visiting species). Two of our targets seen, although the Trogon and Indian Pitta still eluded us.

An evening spent with an Indian pop covers band drinking Ashok's 'Jungle Juice' (as seen on Indian TV) was great fun, but perhaps not the best idea with us rising early (what else?) for the nature walk the next day.

Sunday August 12th....Mollem to Vasco de Gama

A dry start after a wet night is often the cue for some good birding, and a beautiful white morph male Asian Paradise Flycatcher was a great start, together with our best views of Oriental White-eye and Common Lora. Worth a sore head for. However, as we neared half way, the skies opened yet again, and after a twenty minutes soaking where we could do nothing but shelter, we decided again to cut our losses. It did clear as we turned, putting a small flock of Palm Swift up, but that was that for this area of Goa.

On the journey to Vasco de Gama (picked to be near the airport for our early flight the next day), we saw our only glimpse of Cotton Pygmy Goose, with four of these diminutive little geese feeding by a roadside pool. They just flew as I clicked the camera, after getting our understanding taxi driver to reverse.

We had time for a brief tour of the town in the late afternoon, once the rain had calmed down, and by the fishing port obtained good views of adult and immature White-bellied Sea Eagle, many Gull-billed Tern, and plenty of Wire-tailed Swallow. A meal at dusk and a walk back through the bustling town gave more excellent views of a large roost of Indian Fruit Bats. Early roost for us as the flight to Bangalore was at 07.45 the following day.

Monday August 13th...Vasco de Gama to Bandipur

A taxi for the six hour drive from Bangalore to Bandipur Tiger Reserve was arranged for us by Skyway, as was the booking of the Serai Hotel, Bandipur. Our one expensive hotel of the holiday, but worth it as you'll find out. The journey via a superb Hindu Temple near Mysore was eventful, with a glimpse at some real bustling Indian life, appalling poverty in places, juxtaposed with the optimism of the booming high tech businesses of the area. The journey bought a few new birds, probably the best of which was a flyover Spot-billed Pelican over Bangalore, together with a few Comb Duck and quite a few Spot-billed Duck. Around Mysore there were a few Black Ibis on roadside paddy fields, with numerous Black-necked Ibis and hundreds of Black Kites.

As we neared the reserve itself, the scenery and wildlife soon became different, and roadside Red Spurfowl, Eurasian Collared Dove, Oriental Turtle Dove and Red Collared Dove were a taste of more to come. Near the village local to the Serai were a few Dusky Crag Martin, a confiding Long-tailed Shrike, and a pair of Little Grebes. Settling into our room, the balcony overlooked some nice fruiting trees, which provided a good view of many birds throughout our stay. The pick of the first evening were a party of Plain Flowerpeckers, and very tame Yellow-billed Babblers who would almost eat out of your hand.



Above left: Spot-billed Duck. Above right: Yellow-billed Babbler

One of the best wildlife experiences of the whole two weeks was, however to come in the early evening. As we were walking to reception, an excited member of staff shouted that there had been a kill just outside the hotel grounds, with a large Spotted Deer taken by an Indian Wild Dog (Dhole). About ten of us rushed down to see this, but the Dhole had gone. However, the deer remained, and we were able to walk around it, looking at its lifeless body on the scrubby field. We retreated back into the hotel grounds when on the wall jumped an adult Wild Dog, who seeing the coast was clear, bought the rest of the pack to feed on the fresh kill. From behind a Banyan tree, the twelve of us watched as the pack made short shrift of the deer. They were then joined by the biggest Wild Boar any of us have seen, and the pack leader and Boar had a stand-off for a few minutes before the boar went on his way.

The resident hotel naturalist was as gobsmacked as we were by the whole magical twenty minutes, describing it as a once in a lifetime experience for the locals, as well as us tourists.



Above: Dhole pack feeding

We ate well and slept well, with the hope of maybe more of the same on our safari the next morning. This was booked through the hotel, with the half hour transfer to the Reserve Gate organised through reception without any fuss. And at about £25 each for the morning, good value.

Tuesday August 14th...Bandipur

Although not the best time to come to see Tigers, we figured that we had to have an attempt to see this mythical big cat when in India, knowing also that the Bandipur area would be good for other wildlife even without a sighting. So after a transfer from our hotel to the Safari departure site, we headed off on one of three safari's that we would complete whilst here. Birds seen early on the trip included Painted Francolin, both Red and Grey Junglefowl, and two new species of Woodpecker, Yellow-crowned and Streak-throated. Mammal wise sightings were quiet, but we did see the endemic Striped-necked Mongoose, more Langurs and Macaques, Spotted Deer and best of all a bull Asian Elephant within 10 meters of the jeep. As we came back to the reception there was our first Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch at eye level with a Great Tit for company.

The safari runs until about 9.30am, meaning on return to the hotel there is time for a late breakfast and relax before an exploration of the area later in the day. The resident naturalist leads guided walks and we took advantage of this offer mid-afternoon. Sudesan Kuttappan is an honorary member of the Oriental Bird Club, and knows the area very well, having grown up in a nearby village. On his walk we saw both Common and Alpine Swift, Dusky Crag Martin, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Laughing Dove, Spotted Owlet, Mourning Dove, Long-tailed Shrike, Brahminy Starling, and two more of our targets in the form of a Bay-backed Shrike and Pied Bushchat. The farmland is also great for a few endemics, and Kuttappan certainly knew where to see them. We had good views of Yellow-eyed Babbler,

Jerdon's Bushlark and Malabar Lark, as well as hearing a Jungle Bush Quail. We made sure he could take us the next day, as he was sure we could get a view of the latter from somewhere.

In the evening we returned to the kill site, but no mammals were seen, although we did get good views of a Brown Shrike, White-bellied Drongo and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. An Indian Nightjar skimming the field was our final action before our late meal and early night.



Above left: Black-faced Langur. Above right: Asian Elephant



Above left: Yellow-footed Green Pigeon. Above right: Mourning Dove



Above: White-bellied Drongo

Wednesday August 15th...Bandipur

Sudesan had promised us a guided walk early, so we met up at reception and walked out of the hotel again into the surrounding farmland and scrub. There were many birds to be seen around the area with a bit of patience, and we managed to get good views of Jungle Bush Quail and Yellow-legged Button Quail, as well as a few Paddyfield Pipit in the fields. In the more wooded parts were a single Common Woodshrike, Hoopoe, and both Black-headed Cuckoo Shrike and Large (Malabar) Woodshrike. Our only warbler was spotted here also, in the form of a Lesser Whitethroat. The walk finished near the top (Southern) end of the hotel with a Brown-backed Needletail flying through and a few Chestnut-shouldered Petronia gracing us with their understated beauty.

After a lunch, which included a stunning view of a close hovering Black-shouldered Kite, we persuaded the guards to let us out of the compound for an hour, promising to keep to the road and main tracks. The hour was worth it as we saw a Slaty-breasted Rail in the marshy roadside lake avoiding the Terrapins, skittish Grey Francolin on the roadside verge, and a few Green Imperial Pigeon heading towards the mountains. No sign of any big cats, although we were alert for these throughout which was not an unpleasant experience.

An evening safari bought a couple of new birds for the trip in the form of a few Coot and Moorhen, but very little else in the form of birdlife that was new. We did see our first Gaur, a few Samba Deer, missed a Sloth Bear by a few seconds, and best of all a couple of Asian Elephant families, one group bathing in a lake, the other guarding a very small baby as they trundled along through the woodland. Nice end to another great day in the National Park.



Above left: Indian Terrapin. Above right: Indian Gaur



Above left: Samba Deer. Above right: Asian Elephants

Thursday August 16th...Bandipur

Our final safari was a pretty wet affair, but nevertheless pretty good for birdlife, with a Crested (Changeable) Hawk Eagle being the pick of the sightings, together with a couple of Indian Bush Lark, a large family of Gaur, and a Large Bandicoot Rat. Again we missed the Sloth Bear by seconds. A final walk in the afternoon with Sudesan in again conditions where rain came and went gave us a nice flock of 24 Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Shikra, Spotted Owlet, and very luckily a Jerdon's Baza hurtling around the scrub.

An evening 'mountain watch' from the hotel fence in an attempt to see a big cat didn't produce any sightings, but we did see a couple of cracking new birds. The first a Mountain Hawk Eagle going over our heads and heading for said mountains, and the second a calling Nightjar species that landed on the track just over the fence and then went tantalisingly out of view. By mimicking the call and checking with Sudesan it was confirmed as a Great-eared Nightjar, a local rarity and a great addition to the holiday list.

This was our final full day in Bandipur, and although we were disappointed with the lack of any big cats, the Elephants and birdlife certainly made the excursion worthwhile, and I would definitely recommend the place for wildlife enthusiasts.

Friday August 17th...Bandipur to Cavellossim

Our taxi ride to Bangalore airport started off well with a sighting of seven Elephant not far from the hotel but hit problems before Mysore with us having to detour to avoid the terrible flooding in certain areas. Stuck in traffic we did see a few new birds for our list, including a perched White-eyed Buzzard, and our only Indian Roller of the trip. We just made the flight in time back to Goa and had a pleasant hour-long journey to South Goa and Cavellossim's 'Goa Villa Holiday' apartments.

After some faffing deciding which villa we were allocated, we had little daylight left to explore, but were graced by a group of three flyover Blue-tailed Bee-eaters and more Indian Fruit Bats roosting in the complex's grounds. The evening was spent watching the test match from a very good restaurant. Great end to a long day's travelling.

Saturday August 18th...Cavellossim

'Wagtail1' (aka Ian) had written a very detailed report on Tripadvisor about a recent stay right next to our accommodation, and we found a couple of his reports very helpful in planning a route or two for our last two days. We found the whole area a lot more relaxed, greener and less developed than the Baga area, and certainly had some great birdwatching, despite an increase in rainfall during a lot of the time here. A walk along the beach Northward to scrub behind the Dona Sylvia hotel, and then on to the newish Assolna-Cavellossim bridge over the River Sal proved productive, whilst at the same time quite relaxing. A Grey-breasted Laughing Thrush skulking in the scrub was the first new bird of the day, accompanied by many Pompadour Pigeon and a White-bellied Sea Eagle. Amongst the fields by the road were a couple of Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, a sheltering Drongo Cuckoo, and various small Lizards and larger butterflies, including a Southern Birdwing. Many Baya Weavers were busy nest building along the route, aided by artificial nests put up by residents.

From the bridge, with the tide out, a few sand bars were in the middle of the river, and these proved good for birds, with a few Marsh Sandpiper probing away, but best of all an early returning Greater Sand Plover chasing the flies. The permanent island in the middle was full of nesting birds, including an Openbill Stork family, together with many species of Heron, Egret and Cormorant. On returning to the villa at lunch, a White-rumped Sharma was moving through the borders.

Being by the sea, in the late afternoon, we couldn't resist a proper seawatch, and so with curious locals looking on we decamped to a spot sheltered by the life guard post to spend an hour or so looking over the Indian Ocean. The rain was pretty heavy at times, but we did get some good views of the birds mainly following the fishing boats along the shore. The most common species was Sooty Tern, but we also saw a single flyover Slender-billed Gull and a couple of Lesser Crested Tern. The weather really turned later, so we called it a day and headed back after a relaxing day in a lovely setting.



Above left: Chestnut-headed Bee-eater. Above right: River Sai Island roost/nest site



Above left: Southern Birdwing. Above right: home with hanging nests

Sunday 19th August...Cotigao and Cavelossim

We were up early on our final day for a pick up by Rahul Alvarez, an excellent published photographer and local guide. We were lucky as the few hours we spent at Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary somehow remained dry, despite there being heavy rain seemingly everywhere else in South Goa. The entry gate is graced by a board showing some of the wildlife living in the area, including Rahul's great shot of a Black-crested (Flame-throated) Bulbul. Along the main track we were soon watching Malabar Grey Hornbill, Malabar Giant Squirrel and Langurs. Approaching a more open

area a Crested Serpent Eagle saw us and flew up to a higher spot, and a large group of Yellow-browed Bulbul moved through. Both Nilgiri Wood Pigeon and Pompadour Green Pigeon were present in good numbers.

Travelling deeper into the reserve soon provided a birding 10 minutes to savour. Noisy Coppersmith Barbets drew our attention, and with them was a single Crimson-fronted (Malabar) Barbet, well spotted by Rahul, and a close by Black-crested Bulbul looking stunning in the early morning sun. Then the unmistakeable noise we had been listening out for all holiday...Malabar Trogon. We sneaked off the path and there on a low branch we finally saw the 'must see' bird of the trip calling for a few seconds before a twig snap spooked it away into denser cover. Hi fives all round and a great way to finish our monsoon forest sessions, having given up hope after the two previous failures. Retracing our steps to the car, the Eagle again made an appearance, and travelling back to the villa Rahul treated us to brunch. He was great company and I can heartily recommend him to anyone thinking of birding in South Goa. Worth every rupee.

After a rest and waiting out the showers we decided to do an afternoon extended walk north up the beach, around more scrubland and a seawatch near the lifeguard hut. Again this was very good with more new species seen. Following the boats were about six Great Crested Terns with the usual throng of Black and Brahminy Kites. A Curlew flew over the lifeguard hut, and many Marsh Sandpiper flew along the shoreline with Common Redshank. In the scrub further North than we went the previous day we saw both Puff-throated and Large Grey Babblers, and as I was scoping the latter, Vicky followed a Black Baza behind me, with me missing it by a second. Next time!

Returning to the villa complex, the Southern end actually backs onto the Sal River, and we spent our final hour of daylight in India watching various birds going to roost in the trees and flitting around the shore. Best of them included a Pied Kingfisher, Wire-tailed Swallows, Great Egret, Little Heron, hundreds of Kites, Common Kingfisher, White-bellied Sea Eagle, and a frustratingly unseen calling Brown Wood Owl, together with a few flyover Indian Fruit Bats.

The evening was left for packing and reaching the airport for a 3.30am flight back, with a bonus Wood Mouse in the airport being the final new species on this trip. In all we notched up 231 bird species, and we were chuffed with this after being told that monsoon season would be a struggle. With cheaper flights, accommodation, some amazing people and culture, we can honestly say that India in the monsoon has been wonderful, and we would do it again at the drop of a hat.

Should anyone wish to see our full list, get contacts for our guides or for our accommodation please do not hesitate to contact us.



Arabian Sea selfie

Chris and Vicky Harper, October 2018

www.manchesterbirding.com