

Rajasthan and Gujarat, February 2012 *by Steve Lister*

A report of a 17 day birds and mammals trip organised for the participants by Jo Thomas of Wild about Travel www.wildabouttravel.co.uk. The basic idea was to have an itinerary that targeted all of the key birds of western Rajasthan and Gujarat as well as covering Asiatic Lion (Gir Forest), Asiatic Wild Ass (Little Rann of Kutch) and both Wolf and Striped Hyena (Velavadar). This tour can't be done without several very long drives, and for a less dedicated 'crew' covering the ground in two separate 10 to 14 day trips might be preferable.

Participants: Alison Elphinstone, Steve Lister, Richard and Julia Porter, Robin and Caroline Simpson and Jo Thomas.

Day 1 = Sunday February 5th

Our flight from Heathrow to Delhi landed a bit late due to our departure being delayed by snow. We were met by our courier Manisha and naturalist guide Ranbir and were transferred to the very nice Justa Residence in Gurgaon, on the edge of Delhi. Here we had an excellent lunch and then most of us set out for what turned out to be just a couple of hours at [Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary and National Park](#).

The area around the entrance to the park was quite busy with locals picnicking etc but we saw plenty of birds nevertheless. The lake held a variety of wildfowl including 30 Bar-headed Geese and 100+ Spot-billed Ducks as well as the more familiar Gadwall, Teal, Pintail and Shoveler. There were also two Oriental Darters, four species of white egrets as well as Indian Pond-Herons, both Black-headed and Red-naped Ibises, and a pair of Black-necked Storks on a nest. The first of several too-far-to-be-sure spotted eagles tantalised us.

The acacia woodland around the lake was also productive, with warblers including Hume's and Greenish as well as the educational *tristis* Chiffchaffs and *blythi* Lesser Whitethroats. At least four Black Redstarts, the males remarkably colourful, a few Ashy and Plain Prinias, four Rufous Treepies, a pair of Black-rumped Flamebacks, two Yellow-footed Green-Pigeons and a smattering of bulbuls, barbets and babblers added to a reasonable list.

Day 2 = Monday February 6th

Most of us had an early breakfast and then set out for a morning at [Okhla Barrage](#), another excellent site on the outskirts of the city. We arrived at 0745 and spent about five hours birding properly before



Okhla © R F Porter

the midday heat caused a drop in enthusiasm. Those who had visited Okhla before were pleased to see some improvements to access such as a boardwalk through the tall reeds. Highlights were the species we would not see further west: Striated Grassbird, Yellow-bellied Prinia and a fine male White-tailed Stonechat. Three Bluethroats showed well. Two more spotted eagles were again too-far-to-be sure. Large numbers of familiar ducks included two Garganey. Waders included at least ten White-tailed Plovers. As well as large numbers of Black-headed and a few Brown-headed Gulls we had good views of a few *barabensis* Caspian Gulls.

Then off to the railway station for the 1625 Awadh Assam Express overnight train to Bikaner, avoiding a very long drive. Our second class sleeper accommodation (there was no first class on this convenient train) had nothing at all to recommend it. I would hate to see third class.

Day 3 = Tuesday February 7th

Arriving at Bikaner at 0545 we happily left the train and made for the Lalgah Palace heritage hotel where we used a couple of rooms for washing and changing and then had breakfast. After what seemed an age in which our two guides and driver contrived to take us round in circles we eventually found our way to the local carcass dump area.

On the way we found our first big target

bird, **Yellow-eyed Pigeon**: a loose flock of at least 35 feeding in open acacia woodland.

Moving on to the dump (actually we never got to the bit where the carcasses are) we arrived amongst hordes of large raptors.

Loads of Black Kites, 250 Egyptian Vultures, two Black Vultures, a few Eurasian Griffons, at least 50 Steppe Eagles, three Greater Spotted Eagles, and two juvenile Imperial Eagles. Looking at anything else was difficult but there were plenty of Grey Francolins and Common Babblers (could just as well be called Desert Babbler) and both Desert and Variable Wheatears.

After an all-too-short hour or so at the dump we had to move on. Next stop was the famous village of **Kheechan** where locals feed thousands of **Demoiselle Cranes**. Early morning is best, but it was not possible to fit this into our busy



Yellow-eyed Pigeon © R F Porter



Demoiselle Cranes, Kheecan © R F Porter

schedule without adding an extra night. Nevertheless, a drive around the edge of the village found at least 800 near the irrigation ponds that also held 450 Ruffs and an assortment of ducks, hirundines and wagtails. Later on we would see thousands more cranes.

On the move again, with a late lunch at a roadside restaurant that took a lot of finding. Not much chance for birding in the afternoon as it was still a long drive to Jaisalmer and beyond, but we did manage a stop looking for bustards which produced two Tawny Eagles, our first two Isabelline Shrikes and 12 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. Later a flock of 40+ Bimaculated Larks flew across the road.

It was after dark by the time we arrived at the Prince Desert Safari Camp. Not quite what we expected – one of a scattered line of very touristy camps along the main road rather than being on its own out in the middle of nowhere. Jo's warning about it being cold at night was right, though.

Day 4 = Wednesday February 8th

Early breakfast just as it was getting light and then away for a full day in [Desert National Park](#). The drive there produced a perched [Laggar Falcon](#) – the first of at least three during the day. Arriving at the park entrance we were pleased that the checking-in process was quick and easy, unlike the previous system that involved a day traipsing around Jaisalmer. And it turned out we were the only people in the park all day.

We transferred from our minibus to two wooden camel carts that were to be our base for the day. This worked well, as the two guys who led the camels knew where to go and seemed to have excellent eyesight. They soon found us one of the big targets, [Great Indian Bustard](#) – at least ten including six males together. They were quite wary but the guides manoeuvred the carts well so as to give us good views.

Raptors were conspicuous in the very open habitat. Eagles included three Tawny, two Steppe and a Greater Spotted; at least ten Long-legged Buzzards; two Eurasian Griffon, five White-rumped, two Black and two Red-headed Vultures; two male Pallid Harriers plus a male Hen Harrier. And the three Laggars of course, two of which were nesting near the park buildings.

Common Babblers, White-eared Bulbuls and Southern Grey Shrikes were all numerous, as were Short-toed Larks. Bimaculated Larks and Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks were also



Laggar Falcon © R F Porter



Great Indian Bustard © R F Porter

common, along with 'Punjab' Ravens and both Isabelline and Desert Wheatears. We had a single Rose-coloured Starling and a glimpse of an Asian Desert Warbler.

Late afternoon we left the camel carts and moved back into the minibus to drive up and down the tarmac access road until dark. Along the road we first found a male **Stoliczka's Bushchat** and later a female, interspersed with a group of six **Rufous-fronted Prinias**, both key target species and adding to an excellent day.

Day 5 = Thursday February 9th

As we were packing up to leave the desert camp we saw flocks of 35 Rose-coloured Starlings and 55 Bimaculated Larks.

Only about 6km along the road to Jaisalmer we pulled off onto a large bare area with a few small rocky hills. Here we saw two Desert Larks on the edge of their range, two **Red-tailed Wheatears**, a fly-over **Hoopoe Lark**, 13 Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a male Pallid Harrier.



Red-tailed Wheatear © R F Porter

Next stop was near the village of Ludarwa where we added another **Red-tailed Wheatear** and three more Desert Larks as well as four **Rufous-fronted Prinias**, four Long-billed Pipits, a Short-toed Eagle and a White-eyed Buzzard.

Gadisar Lake at Jaisalmer, or rather the acacia woodland around it, produced a **Plain Leaf Warbler** for two of us as well as a singing Sykes's Warbler and an adult Imperial Eagle. We started to get confused by Lesser Whitethroats that looked like *blythi* but sounded like *minula* are supposed to sound.

Our last stop of the day was at a carcass dump near Jodhpur. Despite there being loads of raptors there we could not pick out anything different.

It was again after dark when we arrived at our accommodation, the wonderful Fort Chanwa at Luni.



White-eyed Buzzard © R F Porter

Day 6 = Friday February 10th

We saw three Small Minivets soon after leaving Fort Chanwa but otherwise our journey to the next stop, Kumbhalgarh, was uneventful. We arrived at The Haveli Resort in time for lunch and did some birding around the garden, adding a few species including Black-lored (or Indian Yellow) Tit and Plum-headed Parakeet.

After lunch we spent four hours on a very up-and-down path through the hills. We spent some time trying to get views of at least five glimpsed Red Spurfowl but without much

success. Easier were a group of six Common Rosefinchs and various flycatchers – a male Tickell's Blue, a male Ultramarine, at least eight Red-breasted and two Grey-headed Canary. Both White-browed and White-spotted fantails showed well, as did three Sulphur-bellied Warblers. Overhead we saw a Bonelli's Eagle and a Changeable Hawk-Eagle as well as small groups of both Alexandrine and Plum-headed Parakeets.

Day 7 = Saturday February 11th

We started out along the road just downhill from the impressive fort at Kumbhalgarh. The highlight here was at least 12 **White-capped Buntings** which were coming to drink at a water pump. We also saw a male Crested Bunting, a distant Blue Rock Thrush on the ramparts, and a few Red-rumped Swallows. Moving down to an irrigated area below our hotel we added Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, four more Sulphur-bellied Warblers and 25+ Chestnut-shouldered Petronias.

Lunch was at the Arbuda restaurant on the way to Mount Abu. Across the road was a large lake which we christened Arbuda Bund. An hour here was very productive and we could have spent a lot longer there. Over a hundred Spoonbills, 15 Woolly-necked Storks, 15 Painted Storks, a Black-necked Stork, 28 Great Black-headed (Pallas's) Gulls, six Small and three Oriental Pratincoles, an Osprey, five Ruddy Shelducks, 24 Comb Ducks, ten Garganey, a Dalmatian Pelican, and, at last, an Indian Spotted Eagle that convinced at least most of us.

Before starting to climb up to Mount Abu Ranbir called a halt when he spotted three Indian Coursers not far from the road; we also had six Yellow-wattled Lapwings on the journey.

We went straight to the key site at Mount Abu, a dry agricultural area beyond the town. Here we soon found a small flock of **Green Avadavats**, the main reason to visit this area. They were feeding with c30 Indian Silverbills and at least five Crested Buntings were in the area too. On the way back to the town a Red Spurfowl slowly crossed the road in front of the bus.

Our overnight accommodation was the rather grand but a little rundown Jaipur House.

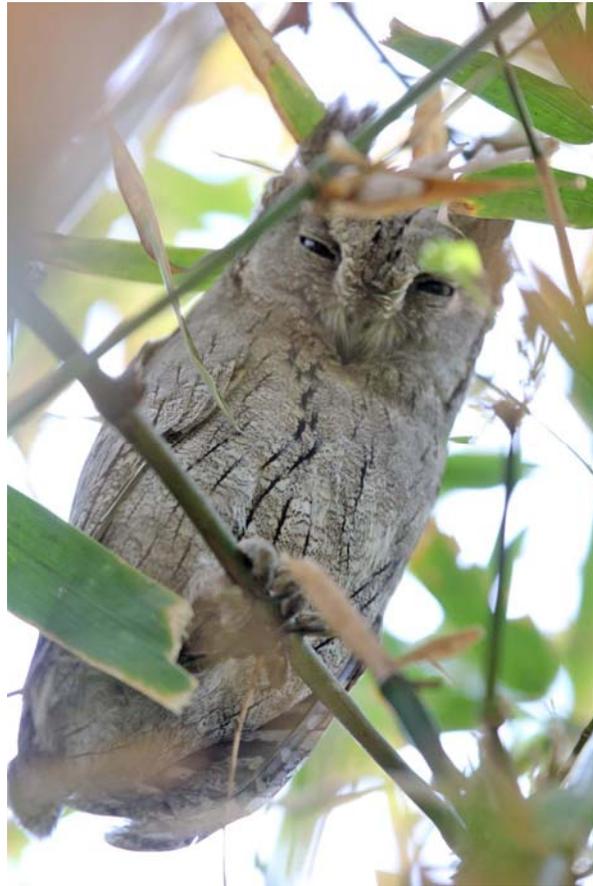
Day 8 = Sunday February 12th

We packed up and then had another hour in the **Green Avadavat** area. This time we had great views of at least 11, along with a **Plain Leaf-Warbler**, 50+ Chestnut-shouldered Petronias and 12 Oriental Turtle Doves.



Green Avadavat © J Tiwari

Then we had a longish drive to Rann Riders lodge at Dasada on the edge of the [Little Rann of Kutch](#). We were soon watching the staked-out [Pallid Scops-Owl](#) at its day-roost in the gardens. Late afternoon we were driven in an ancient and rather uncomfortable open-sided truck to visit a nearby huge wetland area called Nava Talav. Here there were vast numbers of birds as well as a herd of Asiatic Wild Asses that unfortunately seemed to be hassled by a school group. Estimates of some of the birds included 1000+ Greylag Geese, 120 Lesser and six Greater Flamingos, 220 Spoonbills, 20 Great White Pelicans, 11 Dalmatian Pelicans, three Greater Spotted Eagles, 7000 (yes, 7000 – Richard’s count) Demoiselle Cranes, 300 Common Cranes, and 90 Small Pratincoles. Plus uncountable ducks. In the evening a brief drive over the fields across the road from the lodge produced at least two [Sykes’s Nightjars](#) as well as two unidentified nightjars. The lodge staff do this for birding guests as a matter of course. Despite hopes of being able to arrange otherwise the evening was beer free. Gujarat, unlike Rajasthan, is a dry state where alcohol is concerned. Supposedly anyway.



Pallid Scops Owl © R F Porter



Sykes's Nightjar © R F Porter

Day 9 = Monday February 13th

Two sessions birding from the same open-sided truck. Not ideal as we seemed to go past a lot of things we would have liked to look at properly, both on the to-and-from journeys and at the destinations. The travelling distances were rather longer than we expected. The morning session was the Little Rann proper – salt flats and vegetated areas on slightly higher ground. We saw two of the main target species, [Macqueen's Bustard](#), one fairly close and one very distant. Other good birds were a Hoopoe Lark on the ground close up, a Red-necked Falcon, and our first (of many) Rufous-tailed Larks. And we finally got to grips with *minula* Lesser Whitethroats that both looked and sounded right: most world species lists now have this as a separate species.

The afternoon session was a visit to a different wetland, Vanod. Here views were not as good as at yesterday's site as we were very much on the edge. However we did see seven Sarus Cranes, a *fulvescens* Greater Spotted Eagle, and, on a field nearby, two **Sociable Plovers**. Numbers of the plovers vary from year to year and this was a poor one.



Minula Lesser Whitethroat © R F Porter

Day 10 = Tuesday February 14th
Transfer from the Little Rann to the Great Rann. On the way we passed a large area of saltpans where we counted 32 grey Western Reef-Egrets along one side of the road – how many white ones there were is anyone's guess. Not much else on the journey except a field with 14 Indian Coursers. We arrived at Jugal Tiwari's CEDO (Centre for Estuary and Desert Studies) mid afternoon and after a short rest we set out for a scrubby area known as Fotmahadev with a local guide. In two and a half hours here we saw all but one of the four main targets: a superb **White-naped Tit**, three or four **Marshall's loras**, and a male **Painted Sandgrouse**. Other good birds here included ten or so Sykes's Larks, four Grey-necked Buntings, three Common Woodshrikes and two Oriental Honey Buzzards.



White-naped Tit © R F Porter

As well as the lack of beer etc we had to contend with strict vegetarian food at CEDO. Not even any eggs until we pleaded for them.



Marshall's lora © R F Porter

Day 11 = Wednesday February 15th

An early start to be at the Fulay fields by dawn. Here Jugal met up with his local scouts and before too long we had seen first a female and then a male **Grey Hypocolius** in the hedges around this their only regular site in India.

Despite it being a new bird for most of us it was a bit of an anticlimax as everything was so orchestrated and Jugal had guaranteed us success. Glimpses of Indian Eagle Owl and Sirkeer Malkoha were all else of note. We had breakfast near a large rock-pile in an open area, the rocks being frequented by a Red-tailed Wheatear. The rest of the day we explored several areas around Chhari village. The obvious highlight was stumbling upon a flock of ten **Pale Rock Sparrows (Pale Rockfinches)**. Jugal had seen a much larger flock a few km away two or three weeks earlier but these are the first records for the Indian subcontinent of what is essentially a Middle Eastern bird. We also saw an Asian Desert Warbler, a Booted Eagle, a few Alpine Swifts (scarce locally), a **Stoliczka's Bushchat** and a Grey-necked Bunting. And we heard a Water Rail in a reedbed, very scarce locally.



Grey Hypocolius © R F Porter



Stoliczka's Bushchat © R F Porter

Day 12 = Thursday February 16th
An early start for a trip to the Gujarat coast. Our first stop was at a river mouth in Mandvi: small numbers of waders but nothing to get excited about. Then on to the very extensive beach and mudflats at Modhva, 15 km from Mandvi. This was superb, with large numbers of a variety of birds. The main targets were **Crab Plover**, of which we saw at least 26, and **Great Thick-knee**, three.



Great Thick-knee © R F Porter

Other waders included five Terek Sandpipers, 10+ Greater Sandpipers, 50+ Lesser Sandpipers, 20+ Kentish Plovers and a Great Knot. Two Heuglin's Gulls, five Slender-billed Gulls, three Caspian Terns, 20 Lesser Crested Terns, 60 Little Terns. 18 Dalmatian Pelicans. We decided to have lunch in a restaurant in Mandvi rather than rushing back to CEDO. Then in the afternoon we made a return visit to the Fotmahadev area, seeing the same range of

species as on our visit two days before but with the addition of two rather unco-operative **Rock Bush-Quails**, the last of the main targets there.

Day 13 – Friday February 17th

Jo returned home on this day.

The rest of us left CEDO after breakfast for the long journey to the Forest of Gir. We saw very little on the journey, just an Indian Bush-Lark at one stop and our first seen, as opposed to heard, Spotted Owlet. Our lunch stop was as at the Orchard Palace in Gondal: we ate with a very polite and serene American gentleman who we found was Patrick McCollum, the human rights campaigner and peace negotiator.

A large lake on the road a few km before Gir prompted a short stop. 60 Black Ibises and 150 River Terns were around the water, along with six rather large crocodiles, and we found both an Eastern Orphean Warbler and a Wryneck in the acacias.

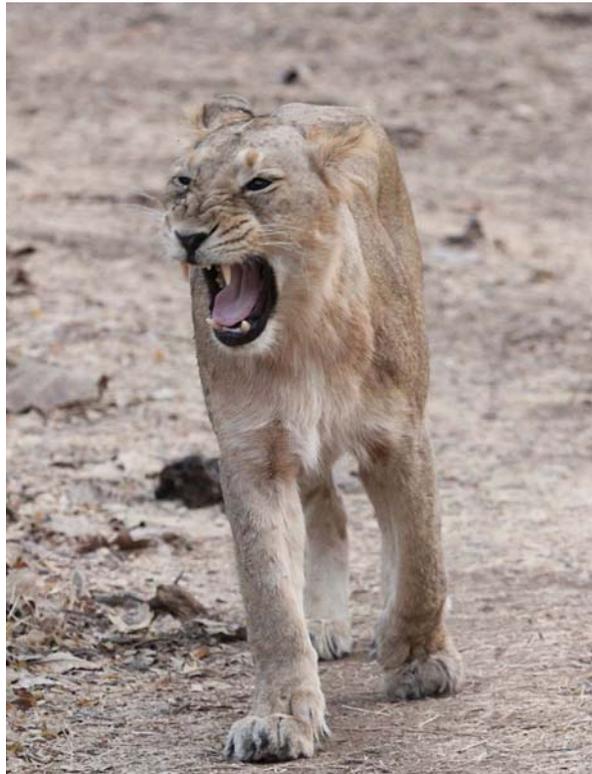
An hour birding around the Gir Birding Lodge produced little beyond 15 Small Minivets and our first encounter with another birding group.

Day 14 – Saturday February 18th

Our first jeep safari into Gir National Park followed Route 3 and began with two Collared Scops-Owls in a roadside tree-hole, soon followed by three Mottled Wood-Owls well hidden in a tree. Otherwise it was rather slim pickings, with two Crested Tree-Swifts and 35 Alpine Swifts overhead, four Large Cuckoo-Shrikes, a Brown-capped Woodpecker and three Brahminy Starlings probably the best. The second half of the morning we walked from the lodge a little way downstream along the nearby river. A Yellow Bittern and a Western Reef-Egret were surprises, and we had good views of five Tawny-bellied Babblers.

After lunch we took another jeep safari into the park, this time on Route 2. We were in two jeeps and between us we saw

ten **Asiatic Lions**, one a superb roaring male that we had all to our selves. Birdwise highlights were a male **White-bellied Minivet** for one jeep and a perched Grey Nightjar.



Asiatic Lion © R F Porter

Day 15 – Sunday February 19th

Robin and Caroline returned home today. For the remaining four of us it was another long transfer day. The journey produced little beyond a group of 12 Sykes's Larks drinking at a roadside puddle and later 105 Indian Cormorants on a canal.

We arrived at [Velavadar](#) at about 1430 and immediately decided it was too hot to go birding. Even at 1630 we just sat in the shade before eventually going for a slow walk out from the lodge. As evening approached 20+ Pallid and 50+ Montagu's Harriers passed over the lodge heading into their famous roost, the largest in the world, in the national park. The Black Buck Lodge at Velavadar is superb. The 'rooms' are actually bungalows with very high standards of fittings and nice seating outside both front and back giving views over the grassland and, for some, a waterhole.

Day 16 – Monday February 20th

We (eventually) had an early breakfast and were ready to have the first of our three safari drives in the park by 0700. We used a smart modern vehicle owned by the lodge: it had quite a high back and enough space for all six of us in comfort. Unfortunately we became increasingly frustrated with the national park gate staff. There seemed to be different rules and regulations each time we entered. Once they insisted that six people could not travel in one vehicle so one of our guides had to stay behind. Twice they insisted we had to have a local guide who turned out to be an elderly gent who had been at the park since it opened: in a way this was good as he knew the place well and was in touch with his two sons who were also guides. He knew where the Striped Hyenas were hiding out and also got us onto Wolves on two of the three drives. But he knew nothing about birds or birders.

Anyway, this morning we got away with all of us in the vehicle and no guide. We had about four hours in the park and covered all of it, the main area of grassland on one side of the road and an area with nice wetlands as well as grass on the other. We were all impressed with the hordes of very smart Blackbucks. The birding was steady rather than spectacular but there were impressive numbers of Black-shouldered Kites and small numbers of eagles – two Tawny, two Short-toed and a Greater Spotted.

The 'siesta' period at the lodge produced the only Singing Bush-Lark of the trip as well as an Eastern Orphean Warbler.

Our afternoon drive started at 1600, with the elderly guide. The obvious highlights were mammalian, with six [Wolves](#) (two loping across the plain and then a female with three large cubs) and a [Striped Hyena](#). The only new bird of note was a male [Painted Francolin](#).



Indian Grey Wolf © R F Porter



Blackbuck © R F Porter

Day 17 – Tuesday February 21st

Our third safari drive in the park, delayed by about 20 minutes by arguments at the entrance and also by having to wait for our elderly local guide.

We saw two Striped Hyenas mating, half-hidden by long grass. Also two Indian Eagle-Owls that our guide disturbed from their roost in a large tree by the old park guesthouse, allowing us to see them sat in the grass. After that he was all for packing in and taking us back to the lodge by about



Painted Francolin © R F Porter

0900 but we eventually convinced Ranbir and then him that this was not what we wanted **and** instead we visited the wetland area until 1020. We saw more Black-shouldered Kite and an adult Indian Spotted Eagle soaring quite close to us convinced even Richard, and a juvenile Lesser Flamingo seemed a bit out of place. After plenty of time to relax, pack and have lunch we set off on our final drive, to the airport at Ahmedabad, mid-afternoon. The route soon joined quite busy main roads and we had few opportunities to stop. The only birds of note were 12 Sarus Cranes and very large numbers of Rose-coloured Starlings.



Black-shouldered Kite © R F Porter

We arrived at the airport in good time for our 2125 flight to Mumbai and onward flight back to Heathrow.

A similar itinerary to this can be found on www.wildabouttravel.co.uk or just call on 01480 370593 / 07817 574235 and speak to Jo who will be able to tailor something to suit you. Alternatively email her on jo@wildabouttravel.co.uk and I'm sure she will be able to help.