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SINAV

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Rufous Woodpecker

Rufous Woodpecker at SBWR on 31 January 2009 by Tan Siah Hin David



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Bird Report

January 2009

By Andrew Chow and Albert Low

SINGAPORE HIGHLIGHTS

Undoubtedly, the highlight of the month came in the form of a photographic record of a **Barred Eagle-Owl** from Pulau Ubin. This enigmatic species, which has been recorded sporadically from the mainland has never been photographed locally and with its long-expected persistence on Pulau Ubin finally confirmed, further fieldwork would need to be carried out in order to determine if a viable population does indeed call the small island home.



Barred Eagle-Owl at Pulau Ubin by Marcus Chua

Returning to the mainland, Bidadari Cemetery was christened “Cuckoodari” as the small woodland played host to a multitude of uncommon cuckoo migrants in the form of a **Chestnut-winged Cuckoo**, a single **Indian Cuckoo**, up to 2 **Hodgson’s Hawk-Cuckoos** and 3 **Asian Drongo Cuckoos**.

In the East, Changi Cove continues to be a magnet for both sandy shore waders and grassland species with records of the uncommon **Common Kestrel** and **Red-throated Pipit**, a single **Watercock** and the continued presence of 6 “**White-faced**” **Plovers**.

The mangroves and secondary growth in the North were also productive with sightings of a single **Common Black-headed Gull**, a surprisingly high count of 37 **Red-necked Stints** in mud flats, and the continued presence of **Booted Eagles**, a seemingly regular winter visitor to the area. A vocal **Black-capped Kingfisher** was also noted for the area.

Other interesting records include **Hooded Pitta**, **Blue-and-White Flycatcher** & **Mugimaki Flycatcher** at Hindhede Park, a juvenile **Great-billed Heron** at West Coast Park, several **Sand Martins** at Yishun Dam and the continued presence of the wintering **Blue-winged Pitta** at the Singapore Zoo.

JOHOR HIGHLIGHTS

A brief visit to Panti Forest Reserve during the month was graced by sightings of the uncommon **Black-bellied Malkoha**, a handsome adult **Rufous-bellied Eagle** as well as encouraging sightings of both **Wreathed** and **Black Hornbills**, species which seem to be declining as the forest becomes increasingly degraded.

SUMMARY

This report covers noteworthy bird sightings in January 2009 for Singapore and the surrounding region. In general, the report will include but are not limited to the following categories: rarities, breeding or nesting records, arrival and departure dates for migratory species, new locality records, escapees and unusual behaviour.

In addition, contributors are also advised to be as precise as possible concerning records. Please remember to include details such as how many birds were seen on, the plumage, sex and age of the birds, the type of habitat in which they were observed, the food they were eating (if possible, identify the plant or animal), the weather encountered (what was the wind direction, tide conditions, etc.). Although it is not necessary to have such details for all record submissions, it is a good habit to cultivate and is normally required for very rare or unusual species.

Please send all your records of interest to Lim Kim Seng @ [ibisbill@yahoo.com](mailto:Lim Kim Seng @ ibisbill@yahoo.com) or Lim Kim Chuah @ pittalover@yahoo.com.sg or Yong Ding Li at zoothera@yahoo.com. Alternatively you can also post your sightings at the NSS Bird Group website at <http://wildbirdsingapore.nss.org.sg>. Please send your records no later than one week after the end of every month. Your contributions will be greatly appreciated and acknowledged.

Unless stated otherwise, nomenclature and systematic follow K.S. Lim's (2007) "Pocket Checklist of the birds of the Republic of Singapore (Second Edition)", K.S. Lim & K.C. Lim's (1999) "Pocket checklist of the birds of Johor, Peninsular Malaysia" for Johor, and B.L. Monroe Jr. & C.G. Sibley's (1993) "A World Checklist of Birds " for the rest of the region.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED:

| | |
|------|------------------------------|
| AWC | Annual Waterbird Census |
| BTNR | Bukit Timah Nature Reserve |
| BBNP | Bukit Batok Nature Park |
| SBWR | Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve |

SINGAPORE

WANDERING WHISTLING DUCK *Dendrocygna arcuata*
2 at Botanic Garden, 27/1 (LKC).

LESSER WHISTLING DUCK *Dendrocygna javanica*
1 seen in flooded field in Tuas, 2/1 (LKC/LTK/LBW/YDL). 6 at Botanic Garden, 27/1 (LKC).

RUFIOUS WOODPECKER

Celeus brachyurus

1 heard at the East Coast Park, 9/1 (LKC).
1 seen on 18/1 at Hindhede Nature Park (LKC), feeding high up in an Albizia tree.
1 female seen on 31/1 at SBWR (KK/DT), feeding on ants on the trunk of a tree.

LINEATED BARBET *Megalaima lineata*
1 seen on 16/1 at Jurong Lake area (JoC).
1 seen on 18/1 at Hindhede Nature Park (LKC).

COMMON KINGFISHER *Alcedo atthis*
2 at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). 1 seen on 24/1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) during the AWC 2009.

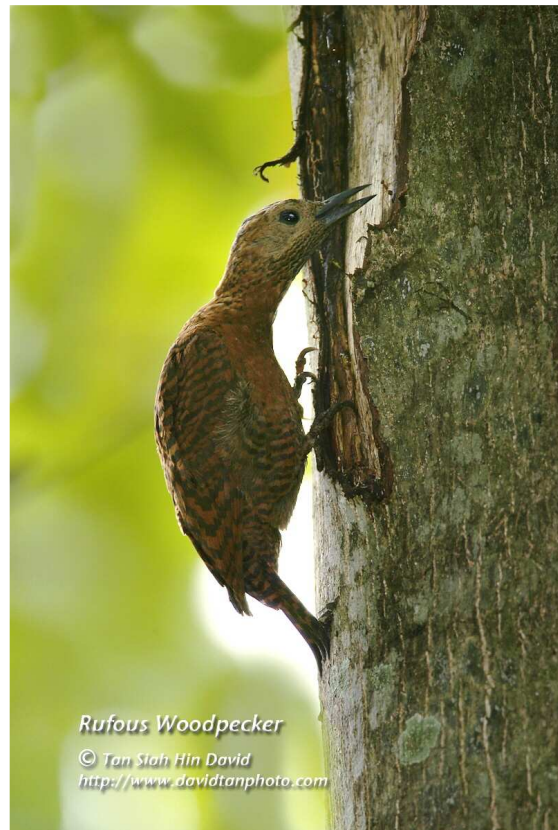
STORK-BILLED KINGFISHER

Pelargopsis capensis

A pair at Sungei Buloh on 2/1 (SA/LKS/LWH) and 1 at the quarry pond at Hindhede Nature Park on 10/1 (LKS). 1 seen on 24/1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) during the AWC 2009.

BLACK-CAPPED KINGFISHER

Halcyon pileata
1 seen calling loudly at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). 1 seen on 24/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (DA/PAH/TSK), during the AWC 2009.



Rufous Woodpecker about to feed on an ant at SBWR on 31 January 2009 by Tan Siah Hin David

BLUE-TAILED BEE-EATER *Merops philippinus*

'Numerous individuals' on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/CIG).

CHESTNUT-WINGED CUCKOO *Clamator coromandus*

1 seen on 1/1 at Sime Forest (SY). 1 at Pandan Canal, 1/1 (TBC). 1 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY).

HODGSON'S HAWK-CUCKOO *Hierococcyx nasicolor*

2 seen on 1/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (JiC/LKK/SY). 2 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY).

INDIAN CUCKOO *Cuculus micropterus*

1 seen on 1/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (JiC/LKK/SY).

BANDED BAY CUCKOO *Cacomantis sonneratii*

1 seen at BBNP on 17/1 (LKS).

VIOLET CUCKOO *Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchus*

1 seen on 1/1 at Sime Forest (SY). 1 heard at Dairy Farm, 27/1 (LKC).

ASIAN DRONGO CUCKOO *Surniculus lugubris*

3 seen on 1/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (JiC/LKK/SY). 2 adults seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY).

RAINBOW LORIKEET *Trichoglossus haematodus*

15 to 20 seen this month at South Buona Vista Road (YDL), roosting in a roadside tree. There could be some Parakeets in the flock.

TANIMBAR CORELLA *Cacatua goffini*

3 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY).

BLUE-CROWNED HANGING PARROT *Loriculus galgulus*

1 seen at Hindhede Nature Park on 23/1 (LKS).

ROSE-RINGED PARAKEET *Psittacula krameri*

2 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY). 4 on 3/1 at Chua Chu Kang Cemetery (CF/LWT/TKH). One at Admiralty Park on 29/1 and one at Pasir Ris Park on 31/1 (LKS).

RED-BREASTED PARAKEET *Psittacula alexandri*

More than 20 on 3/1 at Chua Chu Kang Cemetery (CF/LWT/TKH).

LONG-TAILED PARAKEET *Psittacula longicauda*

2 on 1/1 at Sime Forest (WCC). 2 males and 2 females seen at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). A flock of 7 at Admiralty Park on 24/1 (LKS).

ASIAN PALM SWIFT *Cypsiurus balasiensis*

2 at Hindhede Nature Park on 1/1 (LKC).

BARRED EAGLE-OWL *Bubo sumatranus*

1 seen and photographed on 17/1 at Pulau Ubin (MaC). This is the 1st report of this enigmatic species from this location.

BROWN HAWK-OWL *Ninox scutulata*

2 heard on 18/1 at Hindhede Nature Park (LKC).

SAVANNA NIGHTJAR *Caprimulgus affinis*

3 seen at Tuas grassland, 2/1 (LKC/LTK/LBW/YDL). 4 heard at Changi Cove, 25/1 (LKC/LTK/JiT)

THICK-BILLED GREEN PIGEON *Treron curvirostra*

1 male and 1 female seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY). They were feeding and flying together with about 20 **Pink-necked Green Pigeon** a fruiting fig tree.

RED-LEGGED CRAKE *Rallina fasciata*

At Hindhede Nature Park, 1 on 1/1 (LKC), 1 pair on 9/1 (AOY), 1 on 10/1 (LKS) and 1 immature and an adult on 18/1 (LKC). 2 at Botanic Garden, 27/1 (LKC).



Immature **Red-legged Crake** at BTNR on 18 January 2009 by Lim Kim Chuah

WATERCOCK *Gallicrex cinerea*

1 seen on 3/1 at a track north of the airshow runway (SiC/CIG). A winter bird at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS).

PIN-TAILED SNIPE *Gallinago stenura*

About 20 birds in the marshy short-grass field in Tuas, 2/1 (LKC/LTK/LBW/YDL). 8 flushed at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS).

COMMON SNIPE *Gallinago gallinago*

1 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC).

BAR-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa lapponica*

3 seen on 24/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (DA/PAH/TSK) during the AWC 2009.

WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus*

232 seen on 2/1 at SBWR (DA). 176 seen on 24/1 at Mandi Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

COMMON REDSHANK *Tringa totanus*

34 seen on 2/1 at SBWR (DA). 20 seen on 24/1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) during the AWC 2009.

MARSH SANDPIPER *Tringa stagnatilis*

21 seen on 2/1 at SBWR (DA). At least 1 seen on 10/1 at West Coast (BL). 17 counted at SBWR, 2/1 (LKS). 8 seen on 24/1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) during the AWC 2009.

COMMON GREENSHANK *Tringa nebularia*

153 seen on 2/1 at SBWR (DA). At least 1 seen on 10/1 at West Coast (BL). 1 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH). 1 seen on 24/1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) during the AWC 2009. 46 seen on 24/1 at Mandi Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

WOOD SANDPIPER *Tringa glareola*

3 in the marshy short grass field in Tuas, 2/1 (LKC/LTK/LBW/YDL). 1 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). 2 foraging in a small puddle of water at Changi Cove, 30/1 (LKC/LTK).

COMMON SANDPIPER

Tringa hypoleucos

10 seen on 2/1 at SBWR (DA). At least 1 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/CIG). At least 1 seen on 10/1 at West Coast (BL). 2 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). 2 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH). 7 seen on 24/1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) during the AWC 2009. 9 seen on 24/1 at Mandi Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.



Wood Sandpiper on 30 January 2009 at Changi Cove by Lim Kim Chuah

RUDDY TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

5 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH). 1 seen on 24/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (DA/PAH/TSK) during the AWC 2009. 4 at Changi Cove, 30/1 (LKC/LTK).

SANDERLING *Calidris alba*

At Changi Cove, 4 were seen on 30/1 (LKC/LTK) and 4 on 31/1 (TKH).

RED-NECKED STINT *Calidris ruficollis*

37 seen on 24/1 at Mandi Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

CURLEW SANDPIPER *Calidris ferruginea*

1 seen on 24/1 at Mandi Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis fulva*

21 seen on 2/1 at SBWR (DA). About 50 roosting in the marshy field in Tuas, 2/1 (LKC/LTK/LBW/YDL). At least 20 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/CIG). 2 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). Some seen on 10/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (MN/TKH), in a mixed flock with **Grey Plover**. 68 counted at Lower Seletar Dam on 24/1 (LKS). 1 seen on 24/1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) and 840 seen on 24/1 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009. 1 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

GREY PLOVER *Pluvialis squatarola*

At least 6 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/CIG). Several on 10/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (MN/TKH), mixed flock with **Pacific Golden Plover**. 28 seen on 24/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (DA.PAH/TSK) during the AWC 2009. 20 at Changi Cove, 30/1 (LKC/LTK). 98 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove. 10 were seen on at the sandbar and the other circling and landing on red earth (TKH).

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER *Charadrius dubius*

At Lorong Halus, 4 were seen on 10/1 (AC) and 5 on 24/1 (LKC).

KENTISH PLOVER *Charadrius alexandrinus*

6 to 7 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/CIG), on the sandy spit. More than 10 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

MALAYSIAN PLOVER *Charadrius peronii*

At Changi Cove, 25 were seen on 3/1 (SiC/CIG), on the sandy spit, 4 on 30/1 (LKC/LTK) and 5 on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

WHITE-FACED PLOVER

6 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/CIG), on the sandy spit.

LESSER SAND PLOVER *Charadrius mongolus*

More than 20 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH). 1460 seen on 24/1 at Mandi Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

GREATER SAND PLOVER *Charadrius leschenaultii*

2 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

RED-WATTLED LAPWING *Vanellus indicus*

7 seen at Tuas, 2/1 (LKC/LTK/LBW/YDL). 1 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 3 at 30/1 Changi Cove, (LKC/LTK). 2 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

ORIENTAL PRATINCOLE *Glareola maldivarum*

4 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULL *Larus ridibundus*

1 seen on 24/1 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

SWIFT TERN *Sterna bergii*

10 seen on 24/1 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus*

1 seen at SBWR, 2/1 (LKS). 1 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG), continuously fishing around the spit. 1 seen at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). 1 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH). 1 seen on 24/1 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

BLACK BAZA *Aviceda leuphotes*

16 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG), with 14 one tree. 3 on 3/1 at Chua Chu Kang Cemetery (CF/LWT/TKH). 1 seen on 3/1 at Punggol Grassland (AC). 2 seen on 18/1 at Sungei Tengah (AOY).

CRESTED HONEY-BUZZARD *Pernis ptilorhynchus*

1 seen on 7/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (TKC). 1 seen on 10/1 at West Coast (BL) and another flew across block in Yee Tee area (FeW). 2 were seen on 3/1 at Chua Chu Kang Cemetery (CF/LWT/TKH). 1 seen on 11/1 at West Coast. At least 3 **House Crows** were hopping around its perch flushed the bird and it soon took off in the direction of Kent Ridge (WC). 1 seen on 16/1 from Choa Chu Kang Park (FeW) flying low. 2 adults and 1 juvenile seen on 18/1 thermaling over Sungei Tengah (AOY).

EASTERN MARSH HARRIER *Circus spilonotus*

1 adult male seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 1 female seen on 25/1 (LKC/LTK/JiT) and 31/1 (TKH) at Changi Cove. 1 female and 1 male at Changi Cove, 30/1 (LKC/LTK).

CHINESE SPARROWHAWK *Accipiter soloensis*

1 seen in flight on 3/1 at Punggol Grassland (AC).

JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK *Accipiter gularis*

1 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG), hunting low over the area. Another was seen on the same day at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY). 2 seen on 11/1 at

Keppel area. One was seen chasing an unidentified swallow. Another was subsequently seen in flight over the golf course with a swallow in its talon (AOY).

BOOTED EAGLE *Hieraaetus pennatus*

1 pale morph bird seen on 3/1 thermaling over Lim Chu Kang Road (CF/LWT/TKH). A pale morph seen at Sungei Tengah Ring Road on 18/1 (DL/AOY).

CHANGEABLE HAWK-EAGLE *Spizaetus cirrhatus*

1 to 2 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 1 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY). It was mobbed by a flock of **White-vented Mynas**. It was observed to land briefly on the ground and then took off with a squirrel in its talon. A pale morph adult seen at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). 5 seen on 13/1 at Kent Ridge Canopy Walk (DA) in a group, with at least 2 been immature. 1 seen on 22/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (JoC). 1 juvenile pale morph seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

COMMON KESTREL *Falco tinnunculus*

1 seen on 31/1 at Changi Cove (TKH).

LITTLE GREBE *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

1 at Lorong Halus, 24/1 (LKC)

PEREGRINE FALCON *Falco peregrinus*

1 female seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG) harassing the other birds in the vicinity. 1 seen at Changi Cove on 30/1 (LKC/LTK) could refer to the same individual.

LITTLE EGRET *Egretta garzetta*

137 at 2/1 at SBWR (DA). 12 at SBWR on 2/1 (SA/LKS/LWH). At least 1 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 5 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). On 24/1, 22 counted at Lower Seletar Dam (LKS), 40 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) and 62 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

PACIFIC REEF HERON *Egretta sacra*

1 dark morph seen on 10/1 at West Coast (BL). 1 dark morph seen on 24/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (DA/PAH/TSK) during the AWC 2009.

GREY HERON *Ardea cinerea*

8 counted at SBWR, 2/1 (SA/LKS/LWH). 10 at Lower Seletar Dam on 24/1 (LKS). At least 1 seen on 10/1 at West Coast (BL). 2 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). On 24/1, a flock of 5 were seen flying over Admiralty Park (LKS), 8 seen at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) and 42 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

GREAT-BILLED HERON *Ardea sumatrana*

1 Juvenile seen on 10/1 at West Coast (BL). 1 seen on 24/1 at Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin (DA/PAH/TSK) during the AWC 2009.

PURPLE HERON *Ardea purpurea*

At least 1 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 1 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC).

GREAT EGRET *Casmerodius albus*

2 at 2/1 at SBWR (DA) and 2 at SBWR, 2/1 (SA/LKS/LWH). 2 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). 1 seen at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). On 24/1, 2 were seen at Lower Seletar Dam (LKS), 6 were noted along SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) and 4 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

YELLOW-BILLED EGRET *Egretta intermedia*

On 24/1, 1 seen at Lower Seletar Dam on 24/1 (LKS), 1 at SBWR Route 1 (GeF/KK) and 1 at Mandi Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009.

CATTLE EGRET *Bubulcus ibis*

1 at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS).

POND HERON *Ardeola spp.*

6 seen on 1/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (JiC/LKK/SY). 4 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). 3 seen on 24/1 at Mandai Mudflat (DT/LKK) during the AWC 2009. 5 at Lorong Halus, 24/1 (LKC).

(Note: Due to difficulties in distinguishing Chinese Pond Heron and Javan Pond Heron in their non-breeding plumage in the field, the editors have decided to lump all Pond Herons sightings together unless contributors are certain of their identification e.g. bird was seen in the breeding plumage)

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON *Nycticorax nycticorax*

2 seen flying over Choa Chu Kang Park on 10/1 (LKC/LKS).

YELLOW BITTERN *Ixobrychus sinensis*

1 immature seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 1 seen catching a frog at Tuas, 2/1 (LKC/LTK). 1 seen at the quarry at Hindhede Nature Park on 23/1 (LKS/IR).

CINNAMON BITTERN *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*

1 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY). 1 at Tuas, 2/1 (LKC/LTK).

HOODED PITTA *Pitta sordida*

1 seen this month at Hindhede Nature Park (CF). 1 found dead at Jurong Island on 2/1 and another on 5/1 (LKC).

BLUE-WINGED PITTA *Pitta moluccensis*

1 seen on 11/1 at the Mandai Zoo area feeding on a green caterpillar within the Maned Wolf enclosure. It then flew to the forest near the edge of the reservoir (FeW). 1 approachable individual noted at the Botanic Garden, 27/1 (LKC).

ASIAN FAIRY BLUEBIRD *Irena puella*

1 male seen on 16/1 at BTNR (JoC), bathing in a stream with an **Asian Red-eyed Bulbul**.

BLUE-WINGED LEAFBIRD *Chloropsis cochinchinensis*

2 on 1/1 at Sime Forest (SY).

BROWN SHRIKE *Lanius cristatus*

2 seen on 10/1 at Lorong Halus (AC). 2 seen on 9/1 at Punggol Grassland (WCC). 2 at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). 1 seen on 16/1 at Jurong Lake area (JoC).

LONG-TAILED SHRIKE *Lanius schach*

5 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 4 seen at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS) and a notably high count of 10 birds were noted at Admiralty Park on 24/1 (LKS).

ASIAN PARADISE FLYCATCHER *Terpsiphone paradisi*

1 seen on 1/1 at Sime Forest (SY). 1 seen on 3/1 at the Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY).

DARK-SIDED FLYCATCHER *Muscicapa sibirica*

1 seen on 1/1 at Sime Forest (SY). 1 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY).

ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER *Muscicapa dauurica*

1 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY). 1 seen at Hindhede Nature Park on 23/1 (LKS).

BLUE-AND-WHITE FLYCATCHER *Cyanoptila cyanomelana*

1 female feeding on a macaranga tree at Hindhede Nature Park, 1/1 (LKC).

MUGIMAKI FLYCATCHER *Ficedula mugimaki*

1 seen on 9/1 at Hindhede Nature Park (AOY). 1 first winter male seen at Hindhede Nature Park on 1/1, 4/1, 11/1 and 18/1 at Hindhede Nature Park (LKC). The bird was seen feeding in a *Macaranga* tree. An adult male was also seen here on 4/1 (LKC).

ORIENTAL MAGPIE-ROBIN *Copsychus saularis*

1 heard at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS) and another heard at Admiralty Park on 24/1 (LKS). 1 vocal pair seen on 25/1 at Choa Chu Kang Street 64 (FeW)

DAURIAN STARLING *Sturnus sturninus*

1 seen at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS).

SAND MARTIN *Riparia riparia*

2 seen on 17/1 at Yishun Dam at Lower Seletar Reservoir (CF/LWT/TKH).

RED-RUMPED SWALLOW *Hirundo daurica*

2 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/ClG). 2 seen on 9/1 at Punggol Grassland (WCC). 2 at Hindhede Nature Park on 10/1 (LKS) and 4 at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). 12 at Lim Chu Kang cemetery on 25/1 (LKC/DeL). 6 at Changi Cove on 30/1 (LKC/LTK).



Red-rumped Swallow at Lim Chu Kang on 25 January 2009 by Lim Kim Chuah

STRAW-HEADED BULBUL *Pycnonotus zeylanicus*

3 seen on 9/1 at Hindhede Nature Park (AOY). 3 seen at the quarry at BBNP on 17/1 (LKS). 3 birds were noted on 18/1 at Hindhede Nature Park. One of the birds caught a caterpillar and while killing it by knocking on a branch, a second bird was seen quivering its wing, appearing to be begging for food (LKC).



Straw-headed Bulbul at BTNR on 18 January 2009 by Lim Kim Chuah

RED-WHISKERED BULBUL *Pycnonotus jocosus*

1 seen at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS).

ASIAN RED-EYED BULBUL *Pycnonotus brunneus*

1 seen on 16/1 at BTNR (JoC), bathing in a stream with a male **Asian Fairy Bluebird**.



Asian Red-eyed Bulbul at BTNR on 16 January 2009 by Johnny Chew

ORIENTAL REED WARBLER *Acrocephalus orientalis*

2 birds were seen in some bushes at Changi Cove, 25/1 (LKC/LTK/JIT).

ARCTIC WARBLER *Phylloscopus borealis*

1 seen on 3/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (DA/SrG/Jef/NeK/DT/HeY). 1 at Hindhede Nature Park on 23/1 (LKS).

EASTERN CROWNED WARBLER *Phylloscopus coronatus*

1 seen on 1/1 at Sime Forest (SY).

ORIENTAL WHITE-EYE *Zosterops palpebrosus*

4 seen at Hindhede Nature Park on 24/1 (LKS).

WHITE-CRESTED LAUGHINGTHRUSH *Garrulax leucolophus*

4 seen at the playground at BBNP on 17/1 (SA/LKS/LWH/LWX). A flock was also heard at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS). 3 at Hindhede Nature Park on 4/1 (LKC).

ORANGE-BELLIED FLOWERPECKER *Dicaeum trigonostigma*

3 seen on 1/1 at Sime Forest (WCC).

LITTLE SPIDERHUNTER *Arachnothera longirostris*

1 on 1/1 at Sime Forest (WCC). 1 seen at the foot of BTNR on 10/1 (LKS). 1 at Hindhede Nature Park on 11/1 (LKC).

FOREST WAGTAIL *Dendronanthus indicus*

1 seen on 1/1 at Chestnut Ave (FW).

YELLOW WAGTAIL *Motacilla flava*

At least 20 seen on 3/1 at Punggol Grassland (AC), in flight.

RED-THROATED PIPIT *Anthus cervinus*

2 seen on 3/1 at Changi Cove (SiC/CIG).

ESCAPEES

RED JUNGLEFOWL *Gallus gallus*

A male and a female at the carpark at SBWR, 2/1 (SA/LKS/LWH). Another heard at Neo Tiew Lane 2 on 11/1 (LKS) was probably an escapee.

BLOSSOM-HEADED PARAKEET *Psittacula roseata*

1 male and 1 female seen on 3/1 at Chua Chu Kang Cemetery (CF/LWT/TKH).

RHINOCEROS HORNBILL *Buceros rhinoceros*

1 female seen on 11/1 at BTNR (LKC) with its partner, the female **Great Hornbill**. The same individual was seen on again 13/1 at the same location (JoC).

GREAT HORNBILL *Buceros bicornis*

1 female seen on 11/1 at BTNR (LKC) with its partner, the female **Rhinoceros Hornbill**. The same individual was seen on again 13/1 at the same location (JoC). It was noted to have been recently tagged.

NARCONDAM HORNBILL *Aceros narcondami*

1 seen on 22/1 at Bidadari Cemetery (JoC).

PIED IMPERIAL PIGEON *Ducula bicolor*

About 20 seen on 14/1 and 15/1 (SY), roosting in and flying about a tree at Jurong Town Hall Road, at the edge of JCC golf course, in the morning.

RED-BILLED BLUE MAGPIE *Urocissa erythrorhyncha*

2 seen on 25/1 at Kephill Road at the foot of Mount Faber (LWT).

PIN-TAILED WHYDAH *Vudua macroura*

1 male in breeding plumage at Changi Cove, 30/1 (LKC/LTK).



Pin-tailed Whydah at Changi Cove on 30 January 2009 by Lim Kim Chuah

BREEDING / NESTING REPORTS

LACED WOODPECKER *Picus vittatus*

1 pair seen on 11/1 at Hindhede Nature Park (AOY) was digging a nest hole on an Albizia tree.

BLACK-WINGED KITE *Elanus caeruleus*

1 pair was noted nest-building on a casuarina tree at Changi Cove, 30/1 (LKC/LTK).

WHITE-BELLIED SEA EAGLE *Haliaeetus leucogaster*

1 pair seen on 12/11 at Keppel area (AOY), flying into an Albizia tree carrying broken branches for nest building.

OLIVE-BACKED SUNBIRD *Nectarinia jugularis*

1 nest with 2 eggs was found on Jurong Island, 2/1 (LKC).

JOHOR

GREAT ARGUS *Argusianus argus*

1 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

LITTLE GREEN PIGEON *Treron olax*

8 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BLACK-BELLIED MALKOHA *Phaenicophaeus diardii*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

CHESTNUT-BELLIED MALKOHA *Phaenicophaeus sumatranus*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

RAFFLES'S MALKOHA *Phaenicophaeus chlorophaeus*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

SCARLET-RUMPED TROGON *Harpactus duvauculii*

2 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BANDED KINGFISHER *Lacedo pulchella*

2 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

RUFOUS-COLLARED KINGFISHER *Actenoides concretus*

1 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

RED-BEARDED BEE-EATER *Nyctyornis amictus*

1 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

WREATHED HORNBILL *Rhyticeros undulatus*

3 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BLACK HORNBILL *Anorrhinus galeritus*

12 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

RHINOCEROS HORNBILL *Buceros rhinoceros*

At least 2 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

RED-CROWNED BARBET *Megalaima rafflesii*

1 seen and another heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

CRIMSON-WINGED WOODPECKER *Picus puniceus*

2 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

CHECKER-THROATED WOODPECKER *Picus mentalis*

2 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

WHITE-BELLIED WOODPECKER *Dryocopus javensis*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BANDED BROADBILL *Eurylaimus javanicus*

1 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BLACK-AND-YELLOW BROADBILL *Eurylaimus ochormalus*

1 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Panti (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC). 1 heard at Bunker Track on 26/1 (LKS).

BLACK BAZA *Aviceda leuphotes*

A flock of 15 seen in morning thermals over Danga City Mall on 20/1 (LKS).

RUFOUS-BELLIED EAGLE *Hieraaetus kienerii*

1 adult male seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BLACK-THIGHED FALCONET *Microhierax fringillarius*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

SLENDER-BILLED CROW *Corvus enca*

Two seen at Bunker Track on 26/1 (SA/LKS).

BAR-WINGED FLYCATCHER-SHRIKE *Hemipus picatus*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BLACK-WINGED FLYCATCHER-SHRIKE *Hemipus hirundinaceus*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

LESSER CUCKOO-SHRIKE *Coracina fimbriata*

1 male seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

FIERY MINIVET *Pericrocotus igneus*

At least 1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

LESSER GREEN LEAFBIRD *Chloropsis cyanopogon*

At least 1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

STREAKED BULBUL *Ixos malaccensis*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

DARK-THROATED ORIOLE *Oriolus xanthonotus*

1 seen on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

FERRUGIOUS BABBLER *Trichastoma bicolor*

1 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

BLACK-CAPPED BABBLER *Pellorneum capistratum*

A few heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

MALAYSIAN RAIL BABBLER *Eupetes marcocerus*

1 heard on 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC).

ASIAN PARADISE FLYCATCHER *Terpsiphone paradisi*

2 seen 4/1 at Bunker Track, Pantl (AC/AvC/WiF/LKK/SwL/TJL/WC), one of which is a white morph.

Singapore Raptors Report Spring Migration, January 2009

Reported by Alan OwYong and edited by Kenneth Kee

SUMMARY

Following a report of a mini invasion of 16 **Himalayan Griffon Vultures** to Thailand by Chaiyan of the Thai Raptor Group, we were hoping to see a few come down our way. Unfortunately, none appeared. There were also no reports from Peninsular Malaysia. We also missed the rare **Jerdon's Baza** this month. Both were recorded in January 2008. As with the start of the Spring migration, the numbers and species count were low. We had nine species totaling 92 raptors including seven unidentified birds. The two reports of the **Booted Eagle** stood out for this month. It appeared to be commoner than before. The **Black Bazas** again top the count as expected, with a single roosting flock of 16 at Changi Cove. The **Ospreys** were still enjoying their stay at the Kranji area while the **Peregrine Falcons** were reported elsewhere. Good counts of 19 **Oriental Honey-buzzards** were reported at various locations with one *torquatus* race at Bidadari. We noted a small number of **Japanese Sparrowhawk** (3) and **Chinese Sparrowhawk** (2) still lingering around the island. A single **Common Kestrel** and at least 3 **Eastern Marsh Harriers** were reported at Changi Cove. This site continues to prove a magnet for raptors with 8 species recorded this month.



Two **Eastern Marsh Harriers** clashing in mid-air at Changi Cove on 21st Jan, taken by Lee Tiah Khee graced this month's sightings

MIGRANT RAPTORS

Table 1

| S/N | Species | Count | | S/N | Species | Count |
|-----|------------------------|-------|--|-----|-------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Black Baza | 45 | | 6 | Booted Eagle | 2 |
| 2 | Oriental Honey-buzzard | 19 | | 7 | Chinese Sparrowhawk | 2 |
| 3 | Osprey | 5 | | 8 | Eastern Marsh Harrier | 3 |
| 4 | Peregrine Falcon | 5 | | 9 | Common Kestrel | 1 |
| 5 | Japanese Sparrowhawk | 3 | | 10 | Unidentified Accipiter Raptor | 7 |
| | | | | | Total | 92 |

Note: The numbers are indicative only with similar species in the same area discounted to prevent duplication.

Black Baza (45)

- 1st Martti Siponen reported two birds at SBWR.
- 3rd Simon Cockayne reported a large flock of 14 birds perched on a tree at Changi Cove. He had two more flying overhead later. Over at the CCK Cemetery, Con Foley, Kok Hui and Danny had three flying over. Alfred reported 1 at the Punggol Grasslands. Martti reported yet another at Pulau Ubin.
- 5th Pah Liang had one flying over the AIA building at Alexandra.
- 7th Jin Zhao reported one over at Clementi Woods.
- 10th Martti counted a total of five birds over at SBWR.
- 11th Kenneth Kee and Tobias Ljungquist, a visiting Swedish birder seen one flying over Kranji Reservoir. Martti reported one at Sime Forest.
- 14th Doreen Ang sent in a report of one flying over Alexander Park towards Normanton.
- 18th Alan OwYong saw two circling over the hillsides at Sungei Tengah.
- 23rd Martti reported two birds at SBWR; could be part of the same flock seen on 10th.
- 25th Sunny's team reported two at SBWR during the AWC census. Ho Hua Chew and Cyril also reported one bird flying over the Kranji Bund.
- 26th Martti reported a total of nine birds at the Chinese and Japanese Gardens.
- 27th Martti recorded two birds at Pulau Ubin.



Oriental Honey-buzzard by KC Tsang

Oriental (Crested) Honey-buzzard (19)

- 1st Martti Siponen reported two at SBWR.
- 3rd Danny, Con and Kok Hui reported two over at the CCK Cemetery. two dark morphs were seen on attacking a

- beehive at Queen Astrid Park by colleague of Kenneth Kee.
- 7th KC Tsang photographed a dark morph bird at Bidadari Cemetery.
- 10th Ben Lee saw one flying low over West Coast Road.
- 11th Wing Chong may have seen on the same bird this time perched at West Coast Park. KC Tsang sent in a photo of a *torquatus* race individual taken at Bidadari.
- 18th Alan OwYong reported two birds harassed by House Crows over at Changi Road. He also reported an adult pair and a juvenile enjoying the thermals at Sungei Tengah
- 19th Ding Li reported one bird flying over National Institute of Education.
- 28th One was seen over Clementi by Gim Cheong.
- 26th One at Chinese Gardens reported by Martti.
- 31st One at Jalan Teck Whye by Raj Krishnan.

Osprey (5)

- 1st One seen on by Martti Siponen at SBWR. He reported another one at SBWR on 10th and 23rd. Most likely to refer to the same bird.
- 3rd One seen on fishing at Changi Cove by Simon Cockayne.
- 11th One reported by Martti at Sime Forest from Venus Drive.
- 25th One reported flying over Mandai Mud Flats by Kim Keang and David Li. Over at the Kranji Bund, Cyril and Hua Chew also reported one there.
- 31st Kenneth Kee reported one at the Kranji Telecom Towers. Kok Hui saw one at Changi Cove.

Peregrine Falcon (5)

- 1st Martti Siponen reported one flying over at SBWR.
- 3rd A large female was seen on harassing other birds over at Changi Cove by Simon Cockayne and friends.
- 9th Another was reported by Martti at Tuas South.
- 7th One was reported by Jin Zhao feeding on a lizard at Clementi Woods.
- 24th One reported by Martti at Pulau Ubin.
- 25th One at Chek Jawa Towers seen on by Doreen Ang, Siew Kwang and Ah Huay during the AWC census could be the same falcon seen on a day earlier by Martti.

Japanese Sparrowhawk (3)

- 3rd One was reported hunting at Changi Cove by Simon Cockayne. Doreen Ang and Nessie reported one flying across Bidadari Cemetery.
- 12th Alan OwYong reported one chasing after **Pacific Swallows** over at Keppel Club. Later he saw another bird flying away with a swallow on its talons. This individual probably referred to the same bird.

Booted Eagle (2)

3rd Danny, Con Foley and Kok Hui reported a pale morph bird flying across the road at the CCK Cemetery. Alan OwYong went there the next day but did not see it.

18th Alan OwYong saw an adult pale morph flying low over the Sungei Tengah nurseries.



Chinese Sparrowhawk (2) Pale morph Booted Eagle by Kok Hui

1st Raj Krishnan reported one at Woodleigh Park.

3rd Alfred Chia saw one at Punggol Grasslands.

Eastern Marsh Harrier (3)

3rd Simon Cockayne saw an adult at Changi Cove.

21st Lee Tiah Khee's photographed at least three birds, one male and two females at Changi Cove. See his dramatic photos below.

31st Kok Hui saw a female at Changi Cove, probably the same bird recorded earlier.



Eastern Marsh Harrier (M) by Lee Tiah Khee



Eastern Marsh Harriers (F) by Lee Tiah Khee

Common Kestrel (1)

31st Kok Hui reported the only record of one individual of this rare *Falco* at Changi Cove.

Unidentified (7)

- 10th An *Accipiter* over at SBWR by Martti.
14th One raptor over at Alexander Park by Doreen Ang.
18th One *Accipiter* flying over the Changi Coastal Walk by Alan OwYong.
18th Another *Accipiter* over at Sungei Tengah by Alan OwYong.
26th Two *Accipiter* and an 'eagle' seen at the Chinese Gardens by Martti.
31st A 'raptor' at Bukit Timah Nature Reserve was seen by Martti.

RESIDENT RAPTORS

SUMMARY

The surprise resident find was the **Crested Serpent Eagle** seen on by Doreen Ang while driving along Lavender Street. Martti Siponen, a keen raptor watcher sent in more than 50 sightings from all over the island for January. Many of them probably referred to the same birds seen at one location on different days. Well done Martti! Separate **White-bellied Sea Eagles** were seen gathering twigs at Pulau Ubin and Keppel Club for nest building on Albizia trees. Two other reports of nesting were from Fort Canning and the Mandai area. From the reports, it appears that there were at least three pairs at the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve (SBWR) and Kranji area. This location also supports at least five **Brahminy Kites** with another cluster at Choa Chu Kang (CCK) Cemetery. Reports suggest a healthy number of **Changeable Hawk-eagles** at the Alexander Park and Kent Ridge areas. More than five **Black-winged Kites** were sighted at Changi Cove while a pair of **Grey-headed Fish Eagle** was reported to be back at Little Guilin.

Table2

| S/N | Species | Count | | S/N | Species | Count |
|-----|-------------------------|-------|--|-----|------------------------|-------|
| 1 | White-bellied Sea Eagle | 30 | | 4 | Changeable Hawk-eagle | 11 |
| 2 | Brahminy Kite | 31 | | 5 | Grey-headed Fish Eagle | 3 |
| 3 | Black-winged Kite | 11 | | 6 | Crested Serpent Eagle | 1 |
| | | | | | Total | 87 |

White-Bellied Sea Eagle (30)

- 1st A total of six birds was reported by Martti at SBWR.
3rd One adult at CCK Cemetery reported by Danny, Con and Kok Hui. Martti reported a pair bringing back nesting material at Pulau Ubin.
4th A pair nesting at Fort Canning reported by Pah Liang and also by Chung Cheong one week later.
7th Two birds were reported at SBWR by Martti. Could be part of the family known to inhabit SBWR.
10th One at Pulau Semakau by Ben Lee. Four seen at SBWR by Martti.
11th Two at Lower Pierce Reservoir and one juvenile by Kenneth Kee & Tobias Ljungquist. Kenneth reported the same pair later in the month. Another bird was reported at Sime Forest by Martti.

- 12th A pair seen flying with nesting material to an Albizia tree at Keppel Club by Alan OwYong.
- 18th A pair seen fishing at dusk off the Changi Boardwalk by Alan OwYong.
- 23rd One adult and three juveniles reported at SBWR by Martti.
- 24th Martti reported the same pair collecting nesting material at Pulau Ubin.
- 25th Four reported by Doreen Ang, Siew Kwang and Ah Huay off Chek Jawa. Two birds were reported at SBWR by Kenneth Kee. Two at Lor Halus by KC Lim and Two at Kranji Bund by Cyril Ng and Hua Chew, one at Mandai Mud Flats by KK Lim and David Li, all during AWC 2009.
- 26th A pair seen on flying over Bedok Reservoir by Doreen Ang. One at Chinese Gardens by Martti.
- 27th Two adults and one juvenile at Pulau Ubin by Martti. Could be from the same group.
- 31st One was reported by Raj Krishnan over at Teck Whye. Another pair at SBWR reported by Kenneth Kee. One adult and one juvenile at Bukit Timah Hill by Martti. Kok Hui got another one at Changi Cove.

Brahminy Kite (31)

- 1st Three birds were reported at SBWR by Martti.
- 3rd Simon Cockayne reported four over at Chang Cove. An adult and one juvenile at CCK Cemetery by Danny, Con and Kok Hui. One over AIA building by Pah Liang. Two seen at Pulau Ubin by Martti.
- 7th Two at SBWR reported by Martti. Could be from the same group.
- 9th A pair of adults flying over Punggol by Chung Cheong.
- 10th One at Pulau Semakau by Ben Lee. A total of four seen at SBWR by Martti.
- 11th One over Kranji Reservoir by Kenneth Kee and Tobias Ljungquist. Two over the Sime Forest from Venus Drive by Martti.
- 12th One flying over Keppel Club by Alan OwYong.
- 14th One hunting above Alexander Park, a juvenile on top of Kent Ridge and another hunting over at Normanton Park by Doreen Ang.
- 18th Two flying overhead at Changi Coast walk by Alan OwYong.
- 23rd The largest group for the month was five birds reported at SBWR by Martti.
- 24th Two at Pulau Ubin by Martti.
- 25th One at Chek Jawa (Doreen Ang, Siew Kwang, Ah Huay), one at SBWR (Kenneth Kee), three at SBWR by Sunny's team, two at Halus (KC Lim), one at Mandai (KK Lim and David Li) and three seen on at Kranji Bund, two were seen mating (Cyril Ng & Hua Chew) during AWC 2009.
- 26th Two at Chinese Gardens by Martti.
- 27th Two at Pulau Ubin by Martti.
- 31st Kok Hui reported four birds at Changi Cove. Could refer to the same flock spotted on the 3rd by Simon Cockayne.

Changeable Hawk-eagle (11)

- 1st One was seen over SBWR by Martti.
1st Two were seen on at Woodleigh Park by Raj Krishnan.
3rd Simon Cockayne reported one at Changi Cove. Another record by Doreen Ang and Nessie was of a bird mobbed by **White-vented Mynas** at Bidadari Cemetery. Probably the same bird was reported by Sree at Bidadari the next day. Martti reported one flying over Sime Forest.
13th Doreen reported a flock of five birds circling over Alexander Park. One was identified by her as a juvenile. All were flying towards Kent Ridge.
22nd A pale morph bird was photographed by Johnny Wee over at Bidadari.
31st Kok Hui reported one juvenile pale morph bird at Changi Cove.

Black-winged Kite (11)

- 1st One over at SBWR, followed by subsequent sightings on 7th & 23rd and another two birds on the 10th, all by Martti Siponen.
5th One was reported from Tuas South by Martti with another sighting here on 21st.
9th One seen on perched at Punggol Grassland by Chung Cheong.
10th One at Pulau Semakau by Ben Lee, could be a resident on the island?
18th One seen on hunting at Sungei Tengah by Alan OwYong
25th One reported over at Kranji Bund by Cyril Ng and Hua Chew during AWC.
31st More than five birds were reported by Kok Hui at Changi Cove.

Grey-headed Fish Eagle (3)

- 3rd A pair was reported to be back at Little Guilin by Myron Tay and Doreen.
10th Martti reported one over at SBWR.

Crested Serpent Eagle (1)

- 31st A surprised find for Doreen Ang while driving along Lavender Street, the eagle flew low overhead but slow enough for a clear Identification.

**The numbers in brackets besides the bird name indicates the total number of raptor seen on during the month. Different reports of the same species in the same area are discounted to reduce duplication.*

*Compiled by Alan OwYong from reports sent in to the WildbirdSingapore Forum
Editing and layout by Kenneth Kee. Many thanks to the numerous contributions and reports from the birders. Special thanks goes to Lee Tiah Khee, Tan Kok Hui and KC Tsang for the use of their photos.*

North-West India: Desert Avifauna in the Orient

29 November-15 December 2008

Reported by Low Bing Wen Albert



Pristine Semi-Arid Landscape, Desert National Park by Albert Low

Introduction

The Oriental Faunal Region is not particularly well known for its desert fauna. After all, it encompasses all of Tropical Asia where areas of lush green forests are comparatively, for now at least, a shrinking dime a dozen. However, these harsh desert regions are not only rich in biodiversity, but are also under significant threat, not just from an ever-increasing population but from introduced species as well. As birders, inspired by James Eaton & Rob Hutchinson's successful trip to this region of NW India earlier this year, and fuelled by a desire to observe such rarities like the Asiatic Lion, Striped Hyena and Great Indian Bustard, we swapped our leech socks and umbrellas for sun-cream and sun-hats and ventured into unknown territory- the arid interior of Northwest India, and managed a pretty respectable haul of about 290 species.

Itinerary

For easy reading, the detailed itinerary of the trip is outlined below.

November 29 - Arrival in Delhi at 6am, then two hour drive to Sultanpur. After some introductory subcontinent birding, long six hour drive to Jaipur. Overnight in Hotel Ratan Haveli, tucked away in a quiet alley away from the city centre and excellent value with nice rooms and a good restaurant.

November 30 - Free-and-easy in the "Red City", visiting tourist traps such as the Hawa Mahal and Amber Fort. After dinner, we caught the 2255 overnight train to Bikaner.

December 1 - Arriving in Bikaner at 0725, it was a long seven hour or so drive to Jaisalmer, with numerous birding stops enroute. Overnight in Himmatgarh Palace, situated on top of a small hill just off the main road into the city and the perfect place to enjoy the setting Sun against the backdrop of Jaisalmer Fort in true "Arabian Nights" fashion.

December 2 - A long boring day as we got the permits for DNP sorted. AM visit to Fossil Wood Park 15 mins out of Jaisalmer. Thereafter an obligatory tour of the Fort. Second night spent in Jaisalmer.

December 3 - An early morning (6am) start in high spirits as we were finally on our way to Desert National Park (henceforth DNP). Four hours and many birding stops later, we reached the 7kmx5km fenced core area of the Park, alas with nothing in sight. The situation was very much different in the evening though. Overnight in Rajasthan Desert Safari Camp, a nice resort out in the desert offering alfresco dining and live Rajasthani dancing and music.

December 4 - Our second full day around DNP. Our Mop-Up Operation was generally successful. Second night in Rajasthan Desert Safari Camp.

December 5 - A long drive back down a familiar road, back to Jaisalmer and onwards to Kheechan. Arriving at 930am, there was no shortage of cranes in the village square. After that, a brutal eight hour drive into the hills of Kumbhalgarh. Overnight in Kumbhal Castle, a run-down establishment in spite of its name but with clean rooms nonetheless.

December 6 - AM birding around the forested hills of Kumbhalgarh. Thereafter another long seven hour drive to Mount Abu, arriving in time for Sunset Birding filled with lots of Green! Overnight in Rising Sun Retreat, a passable establishment in the worst hill station I have ever visited in the Orient.

December 7 - After a bout of morning birding in Mount Abu, it was off to the Little Rann of Kutch, another seven hour drive (see a pattern here?). Overnight in Rann Riders, most certainly NW India's equivalent of Borneo Rainforest Lodge, luxury in no-man's land.

December 8 - A full day in the bird-filled desert regions of the Little Rann. Overnight in Rann Riders.

December 9 - Following a morning safari at the Little Rann, it was ANOTHER seven hour drive to Bhuj, or more specifically, the town of Nakhatrana, an hour or so west of Bhuj. Overnight in JP Resort, one of the few hotels in the town.

December 10 - Full day birding around Nakhatrana. Overnight in JP Resort.

December 11 - Second full day of birding around Nakhatrana. Overnight JP Resort.

December 12 - After a brief bout of morning birding, we started on the Mother of All Drives, an epic 9.5 hr drive across the entire Gujarat state to Gir National Park. Overnight in Gir Birding Lodge, probably the best place we stayed in the entire trip.

December 13 - Full day of lion hunting in Gir National Park, although the same could not be said for the birds here. Overnight in Gir Birding Lodge.

December 14 - After a brief bout of morning birding, another seven hour or so drive to Velavadar Blackbuck Reserve, arriving in time to witness the Harrier Roost. Overnight in Nariyani Heritage Hotel in the town of Bhavnagar, an hour away from Velavadar.

December 15 - An eventful day thanks to our flight from Ahmedabad being brought forward without our knowledge. A seven hour drive to Ahmedabad only to find out about this which ultimately costs us our 2315 flight back to Singapore from Delhi. Thankfully, we managed to catch the next flight the next morning.

Logistics & Guiding

As with most visiting birders, ground arrangements were made through Asian Adventures, who came highly recommended from several trip reports and friends. As a first-timer on the tour with no prior dealings with the agency, I would agree that overall, they did a commendable job in running the ground logistics of the tour, especially considering that NW India is a less-traveled birding destination compared to the Northern or even the NE circuit. However, taking into consideration that each of us paid almost USD2400 each for the tour, there was much room for improvement in the standard of local guides allocated to us. Given that we were paying for their services daily, some of them were great value for money while others fell short of the standards that AA are known for. We were otherwise very well taken of in the aspect of accommodation, food, efficient and safe drivers (important in the chaotic streets of India!) and I would still rate them overall as the ground agent of choice for birders heading in that direction. They can be reached at wildindiatours@vsnl.com.

The only logistics arrangements we made on our own was to book our return flight to Delhi from Ahmedabad via IndiGo Air. The reason being it takes 20 hours overland

between the two destinations, so flying back is the best bet for travelers hoping to catch their connecting flights in a hurry.

However, as is always the case in India, things are never this simple. We reached the airport only to find out that IndiGo Air had actually pushed forward their flight from 3pm to 9am that same day. They had spammed my email with a new itinerary but as I had no access to it, I was blissfully unaware of this. In their defense, I really should have called the airline to confirm it beforehand. As it stood, we had to book a new flight on the spot via SpiceAir, only to be caught napping again. This time, we found out that Ahmedabad Airport is an airport of delays. As flights into the city and onwards to Delhi are always coming from elsewhere, they are prone to traffic conditions at the other airports. As it were, although our flight was due for 1920, it didn't come until 2045. The same was the case for even high-end domestic airlines like Jet Airways. There was a traffic jam over Delhi Airport as well, ultimately resulting in us missing our 2315 connecting flight back to Singapore on Singapore Airlines. Thankfully there were ample seats on the next flight at 8am the next day, so after spending a restless night in the Visitor's Lounge, we were on our way.

The bottom line is, as many probably already know, that sometimes even ample buffer time isn't quite enough. However, having said that, I found my dealings with www.makemytrip.com, which allows travelers to book internal flights anywhere in India, to be very professional. Following this unfortunate incident, all I needed was to send them an email explaining the situation and requesting for a refund and the amount was refunded to me within a week. I would still recommend them as the best way for independent travelers to book internal flights around the country.

Environment & People



Textbook Desert sand dunes, with Ding Li for scale. Sam's Sand Dunes, Rajasthan by Albert Low

When the word *desert* comes to mind, many people at once think of rolling sand dunes of at times incredible heights and a completely barren, treeless landscape as typified by the deserts of Africa. In the case of NW India, we only encountered a small section of desert on the way to DNP that had sand dunes. The area, known as Sam Sand Dunes, is a big tourist hit where stopping for any length of time entails hordes of camel riders, mostly men in their early teens, running out from their makeshift huts and tents by the roadside as they compete with one another to sell you a camel ride into the desert. Aside from that, the desert regions of the NW are generally very rocky with areas of extensive rocky outcrops that rise several dozen metres above the surrounding landscape. Thorn scrub consisting of *Acacia* is also common especially around the fringes of these habitats and in rocky seasonal wadis (i.e. river valleys). For more specific habitat information, refer to the individual places section.

The only places we encountered any form of evergreen forests were the semi-deciduous forests in the hills of Kumbhalgarh and Sasan Gir. Interesting mention must also be made of the forests around Mount Abu where we encountered species of *Eucalyptus* as well. At Phot Mahadev, the site for the **White-naped Tit** near Nakhatrana, the rolling hills of thorny *Acacia* forests was unique for the trip as well, and according to Jugal Tiwari, the resident ornithologist of the region, covered an area of approximately 25km square.

The state of Rajasthan and Gujarat, the two states this tour covered, are some of the more prosperous in India, thanks largely to tourism, mining and remittances from overseas. The infrastructure was reasonable to say the least, although as with all driving in India, one still need three things that drivers all over India would tell you: A good horn, good brakes and good luck! It is interesting to note that the condition of roads near the border is excellent compared to the surrounding countryside. Hence, first-timers will be slightly bemused traveling towards DNP and Bhuj as to how all of a sudden pothole-filled one-lane roads opened up into well-marked and well-tarred motorways. As we were to experience firsthand, the Indian Army has an entire division dedicated to preserving these roads in the interest of National Security, and traveling along them just three days after Mumbai 2008 meant truck and trainloads of towed anti-tank guns and artillery pieces, grim faced soldiers and tanks rolling onwards to the Pakistani border to the sound of attack helicopters and the Indian Air Force overhead. Certainly not the most comforting road trip at that time!

The people of the region come across as quiet and resilient individuals. While they are generally inquisitive of birders roaming around their farmlands and deserts, they don't tend to speak very much. We found locals to have an uncanny knowledge of road navigation and many a time our driver would simply pull over and ask random locals for direction, and they were spot on every time. English is generally understood by a few people everywhere we went, with the numbers increasing at more touristy destinations like Sasan Gir and Jaipur.

Winter does not really do much for this dry and arid region. Diurnal temperatures can still rise up to the low 30s, although the relatively low humidity means that it is nowhere as uncomfortable as the tropics. Temperature wise, with the exception of Nakhatrana, it was pleasantly cool at most places after dark, around 20 degrees or so. For some reason,

Nakhatrana seems to be a wind tunnel of sorts after dark, with chilly winds constantly blowing through the town at night and in the early morning, perhaps due to its more coastal location. First Light was usually around 6am, matched with a last light timing of around 6 as well. We found the best time for wildlife watching in general to be between 6-9am and 4-6pm. In the middle of the day, there is really no point in torturing yourself out on the dusty barren landscape as the mammals and birds seem to disappear into thin air.

Acknowledgements

Just a word of thanks to Mr. Mohit Aggarwal and Mr. Iqbal Ahmed from Asian Adventures for their prompt email replies and assistance during the tour itself. Thanks also to Mr. Jugal Tiwari, the resident ornithologist in Nakhatrana for sharing his knowledge and experience with us during our time there. Finally, a word of thanks to Rob Hutchinson and James Eaton for publishing their trip report on their website which first inspired us to follow in their footsteps.

Site Summaries

Summaries for each site are outlined below in chronological order as we visited them. Not all species for each site are documented with attention being given primarily to perceived target species or noteworthy sightings. Where possible, local guides and park entrance fees and other costs (accurate as of the time we are there) are given so as to assist future travelers. Asian Adventures does not include park entrances in their tour costs so we thought it would be helpful for future birders to have some idea beforehand as some places were ridiculously expensive for foreigners.

Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary

We arrived at this destination slightly jet-lagged and no doubt sleepless from a typically restless midnight shift flight. The local guide Mr. Ganesh allocated to us just for this area seemed ok although he disappointed us greatly by claiming that there were no **Sind Sparrows** here at this time of year. We were baffled by such comments given that the species was supposed to be resident here. We eventually got tired of trying to persuade him to bring us to areas where the Sparrows had been seen on before and just decided to do some introductory birding in the area. At least he found a vocalising **Brook's Leaf-Warbler** easily enough, so that was a half-success.

The waterfowl at the Lake were there in numbers, although nowhere as mind-boggling as I thought. The ducks consisted predominantly of **Gadwalls** and **Common Teals**, with lesser numbers of **Common Pintails** thrown in, but that was about it. Our time of arrival probably didn't help much either, as we arrived at 9am and only had 2hrs there before we had to move on.



Waterfowl Nesting Colony, Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary by Albert Low

Sultanpur Entrance Fee: 71 INR Per Pax

Highlights

Brook's Leaf-Warbler: Sultanpur appears to be a regular and accessible location to see this localised winter visitor. As with all *Phylloscopus* warblers, it's easier to save yourself the agony of physical differences and just tell them apart by song. We didn't have a sample recording with us and thus had to depend on the knowledge of our guide. They do sound different from the **Common Chiffchaffs** and **Hume's Leaf Warblers** at any rate, the other two dominant species that occur in the dry acacia woods around the lake. I dare say that given the circumstances, we did place a fair bit of trust in Mr. Ganesh's call and visual ID skills for this one, as he tried to point out the subtle features of the individual we saw well about 300m down the main trail from the entrance gate.

Other Notables

Indian Spotted Eagle: Our first encounter with this species was perched on a dead snag along the banks of the Lake.

Plum-headed Parakeet: 1 male was observed perched in a dead tree.

Pallid Harrier: 1 juvenile was seen on low over some paddyfields near the Bird Sanctuary.

Jaisalmer

Just a quick note, we paid a visit to the Fossil Wood Park like most visiting birders to try for **Plain Leaf-warbler** there. We not only dipped, but saw very little there as well, with only first sightings of **Desert Lark** and **Graceful Prinia** of note. We saw the first of many **Long-legged Buzzards** soaring low over Jaisalmer Fort.



Jaisalmer Fort; 1 of the few living forts in the modern world by Albert Low. Sand Castle anyone?

Fossil Wood Park Entry Fee: 100 INR Per Pax

Desert National Park

This park is famous for the bureaucratic barriers it takes to get there. Like Rob and James, we found the process relatively straightforward but as with all Indian Red Tape, it was needlessly time-consuming as we need to spend one whole day in Jaisalmer to get it sorted. At the end of it all, it was all worth it as the birding within the 7kmx5km core area of fenced-in ungrazed grassland as well as along the road leading to this site was excellent. For ease of documentation, the two sites and the noteworthy sightings are covered separately.

Journey to DNP

This journey is a 2-2.5hr straight drive from Jaisalmer along an excellent road which bypasses the tourist district of Sam Sand Dunes and where all the Safari Camps are located. Staying in any one of these camps, as we did, would reduce the daily journey to DNP to about 45 minutes or so. Thereafter, one is required to present the permits to a police post and then it's another 20km or so along a one-lane road to the core area itself. Nevertheless, the agricultural fields and scrub along the main highway itself warrants investigation and we spent 4.5hrs on roadside birding alone even before stepping into DNP proper.

Highlights

Cream-coloured Courser: These localised residents proved to be a real handful to locate as we scoured ploughed paddyfield after ploughed paddyfield enroute to DNP. Eventually, we counted up to 10 of them in a large expanse of stubble not far from the entrance to DNP at around 10am in the morning. These handsome birds were decidedly skittish and preferred to run away from danger. They are noteworthy because apart from DNP and the surrounding agricultural lands, we never saw them again at any other point in the trip.



Cream-coloured Courser; Desert National Park, Rajasthan by Yong Ding Li

Bimaculated Lark: Interestingly, we only encountered this species once in two weeks in NW India, albeit in a massive flock. There were at least 250 birds feeding in a recently ploughed paddyfield along the main highway between Jaisalmer and Sam Sand Dunes.

Desert Warbler: This species appeared to be common in the general area between Jaisalmer and DNP with up to eight sightings of singles or occasionally a pair foraging in the scrub in 1 morning along the road to DNP. They were shy and decidedly difficult to approach, and like most desert specialists appear to have no qualms foraging on the ground. This is again put in this section because once we left Jaisalmer; we never recorded this species again.

Trumpeter Finch: Another winter visitor that we did not see once we left Jaisalmer. We encountered several small flocks of six to ten individuals feeding unobtrusively by the roadside in the early morning. They were also present in DNP itself with a flock of 25 located on the rocky hill to the left of the entrance gate.

Laggar Falcon: This species appears to be genuinely scarce with just a single individual located on roadside power cables not far from our Desert Camp in the afternoon of our second full day. Good Scope Views were had by all present nevertheless.

Common (Punjab) Raven: Several sightings usually of pairs or small groups clustered around water troughs or squabbling over road kill were noted on the journey enroute to DNP. Easily distinguished from the abundant House Crow as they are almost twice the size and have a much stronger bill.

White-rumped Vulture: Two were observed landing in the evening on an acacia tree in a wadi not far from the Safari Camp. This was only one of a handful of vulture encounters we had on this trip, almost certainly in line with their catastrophic plunge in numbers all over the subcontinent.

Egyptian Vulture: Perhaps in a self-fulfilling prophecy on their potentially dire plight, this species, which was uplisted to Endangered, was only regularly encountered in the villages between Jaisalmer and DNP. Usually seen on in small groups on the ground or thermalling, we hardly recorded them once we reached Gujarat.

DNP Core Area:



Another view of Desert National Park's fenced up core area by Albert Low

The core area of this park, which is where most birders ultimately go to see the **Great Indian Bustard**, features a rapidly declining habitat in India consisting of ungrazed grasslands interspaced with acacia trees and numerous small sandstone hills. It is interesting to note that the actual fenced area is remarkably small, at just 7km x 5km as aforementioned. You could literally scope out the entire area from the viewpoints erected on the hills. However, it is also interesting to note how well the Bustards and other wildlife blend and move in and out of this landscape. When we first arrived here at 930am on our first morning, despite a long sweaty walk along the western end of the park, we turned up hardly anything of note. However, in the evening and early morning the following day, the situation was completely different as the bustards and other wildlife came out in numbers.

Walking is certainly not the best way to get around the park. Although it is basically 1 large rectangle, the clumps of grass are tall in some areas and the thorn scrub can wreck havoc on both clothes and morale alike. On top of that, the wildlife in general is wary and does not allow close approach. We found that riding on the back of a camel was a much better way to get good views of both the birds and other wildlife. As there are wild camels which roam freely both within and out of the fenced area, the wildlife seemed much more accustomed to their presence and riding on the back of one allowed much closer approach particularly to wary species like Bustards then we were able to on foot. The local rangers can arrange these camels in advance and the rental cost is calculated on a day-to-day basis, meaning that payment allows you access to a camel safari both in the morning and evening. The rangers do not speak much English although they have an

uncanny ability to pick out Bustards at range even without the aid of optics, certainly no mean feat in this featureless landscape.



The humble Bustard Mobile! by © Albert Low

Another noteworthy feature of the Park is the presence of numerous artificial water troughs scattered throughout the core area. We were pleasantly surprised to find that these troughs were actually powered by a rather sophisticated pump system that ensured that they would never run dry. These troughs, although not particularly obvious, can often be found in close proximity to small observation hides made out of dry grass and other plant materials. These small hides, although uncomfortable for tall individuals to squat in, allowed for excellent wildlife watching opportunities. Of interest to birders would be the regular presence of large flocks of Sandgrouse that descend on these water sources in the mid-morning and late evening to drink.

Camel Cart Price: 500 INR Per Day

Highlights

Great Indian Bustard: Pride of place of the highlights of this area must certainly go this bird, the avian icon of NW India's arid region. This stately species is rapidly declining throughout its range as a result of hunting and habitat loss, and it's not hard to see why. The individuals we observed were often reluctant to fly, often preferring to keep their distance but never once sprinting or rushing into cover. This sort of behaviour would undoubtedly make them easy targets for projectiles. Furthermore, the sight of cattle foraging within the fenced area of the park shows just how much livestock farming is encroaching on their habitat and how powerless the locals are to stop or reverse such trends.



A pair of **Great Indian Bustards** taking a leisurely stroll through their domain by Yong Ding Li

The best way to observe this species must certainly be to scan the grasslands from the top of the various viewpoints or on the back of a camel through the grasslands. We encountered two individuals, a much larger male and a much smaller female, on our first evening and watched them under the glow of the setting Sun as they took a stroll through the grasslands, always keeping their distance. The next morning, we encountered up to four birds feeding in an area of tall grass near the edge of the fence and managed to get within 100m or so without so much as to flush them all. We even managed to observe two males displaying briefly to each other, presumably a territorial display which involved a fair bit of tail cocking. Mega! Apparently, just a week prior to our arrival, a high count of 12 birds was reported one evening according to the local rangers.



Great Indian Bustard in flight, as seen from the camel cart by Yong Ding Li

MacQueen's (Houbara) Bustard: A much smaller relative of the preceding species (it is even smaller than a Florican!), this species proved much harder to track down thanks to its size and its preference to scurry around like a rodent, probably a defense mechanism against raptors, which were abundant here. We eventually saw a maximum of up to three birds feeding in a comparatively open area with scattered clumps of grass alongside some Cream-coloured Coursers. Unlike the preceding species, this species appears to prefer the more open grasslands characteristic of the boundaries of the core area. Once again, a camel proved instrumental in getting close to these trip targets. Things can't get much better when one is able to view both threatened Bustards in one binocular view.

Stoliczka's Bushchat: Another victim of habitat destruction in this part of the Subcontinent, this Bushchat is globally vulnerable and restricted to areas of ungrazed grassland such as this one. We found them to be a low-density species even in protected areas like this. Despite much scrutinising of passerines perched in the scrub (most were some sort of Wheatear), we only located one female on our first evening and a handsome male the next morning which allowed close approach.



A male **Stoliczka's Bushchat** by Yong Ding Li

Black-bellied Sandgrouse: Another local specialty. Within the NW Indian Circuit, this appears to be the only place where one has a good chance of encountering these large and beautiful sandgrouse. The irony of it all is that, at least in our case, all our encounters were of flying individuals. Nevertheless, the clear blue skies and good lighting particularly at sunrise allowed for excellent flight views of this species. We noted three flocks of 16-18 birds each over the entrance of DNP on our first afternoon, and a pair

much lower over the same area the following morning. In flight, they are easily told apart from the more common **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** by their 'pinless' tails, much larger size and white wing-lining contrasting sharply with black flight feathers.

Other Notables

Short-toed Snake-Eagle: We encountered one individual perched on an acacia tree not far from the entrance to the park in the late afternoon.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse: These may be locally common Sandgrouse but the sight of 200 of them coming in to an artificial water trough to drink in the mid-morning heat was a spectacle in itself. The local rangers know the troughs they frequent and are able to guide the camel cart skillfully to these sites where they pose for excellent photo opportunities. In flight, they resemble sand-colour pigeons with their fast and direct flight patterns, with their pins trailing in their wake.

Wheatears: We observed three species of Wheatears in and around DNP, with **Red-tailed Wheatear** the only species we would catch up with later on in the trip. Of the three species observed here, **Desert** and **Variable** appeared to be equally common, with few and scattered observations of the much less numerous **Isabelline Wheatear**.

Kheechan:



The central courtyard in Kheechan; where **Demoiselles Cranes** enjoy the proverbial free lunch! by Albert Low

A world-famous site thanks to the incredible numbers of **Demoiselle Cranes** which winter in the area and congregate to feast on the massive amounts of grain put out by the

villagers in the courtyard. Just a few weeks prior to our arrival, an incredible count of about 10000 birds were noted in the area.

The site itself is about 2.5hrs out of Jaisalmer, and is nothing more than a village in no-man's land surrounded by sand dunes. I was miserably ill by the time I got here, thanks to falling to the oldest trick in the Indian Medical Taboo Journal by eating some curry chicken at the buffet the night before. I almost fell off the roof of the neighbouring building while watching the cranes as a sudden wave of nausea overtook me, before having to graciously use our kind host's toilet and returning to the car for some pills.

All things considered, it was still a spectacle to behold, in spite of the fact that we only arrived at 9am in the morning. We counted about 300 cranes within the fenced courtyard in the centre of the village, and possibly up to 2000 in the sand dunes surrounding the village. The cranes seem to have a orderly pecking order when it comes to the free lunch, as flocks of 200 or so birds took turns flying in and out of the courtyard during our time there. We learnt from the villagers that as the day heats up, most cranes move on to a unnamed salt lake near the village once they have had their fill, before returning in the evening. The courtyard itself is no larger than the size of a outdoor basketball court, and is tended to by a select team of villagers, who unload the grain there every morning.

10000 cranes equals a mammoth appetite and one cannot help but wonder where all this grain is coming from, considering the barren landscape for miles around. We made a donation to the village, as most birders do, to aid them in continuing to provide grain for the cranes, but it certainly must be quite a mammoth task to keep 10000 of these birds fed and happy through the winter!



A close-up look at their funky hairdo by Yong Ding Li

Grain Donation: 190 INR

Kumbhalgarh

An overnight stop at this site was meant as a journey break on the way to Mount Abu and also one of the few opportunities to scout out a few species found in the hill deciduous forest of the Aravalli Range. Kumbhalgarh is famous for its majestic fort etched into the hill slopes and the 36km wall that encloses it. We did not have time to secure permits to enter the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, and thus had to make do with some average roadside birding as we tried in vain to look for **Red Spurfowl**, a local specialty. The roadside forest birding was generally disappointing, with most species being recorded elsewhere, except for a handful of species outlined below.

Highlights

Grey Junglefowl: Ding Li was ecstatic to have completed his Junglefowls of the world, but it didn't carry as much weight for me considering it was a group of five females. First spotted by our driver in some riverine scrub, we followed them as far as the terrain allowed in hopes of finding a male, but to no avail. This is our only encounter with this species on this trip.

White-capped Bunting: Two observed drinking from a roadside puddle alongside two **Crested Buntings** was also our only encounter with the species during the trip.

River Tern: These handsome terns, probably one of the best looking terns of the region, were locally common in the reservoirs of the numerous agricultural dams that dotted the landscape here.

Eastern Orphean Warbler: Our only definite sighting of this species was here, where we observed a male low down in an area of thorn scrub about 20km downhill from our Kumbhal Castle hotel while trying to find **White-naped Tit**.

Mount Abu

This site is probably the easiest place in the world to see the globally threatened **Green Avadavat**. All that is required is to park yourself in the Lantana lined fields next to the Peace Park near the summit of the Hill Station either in the late evening or early morning and before too long the high pitch "tzip" signaling the arrival of flocks of these birds will precede their quiet foraging for grass seeds on the ground.

Apart from that though, there is not much reason to come here. A favourite holiday site for Rajasthani honeymoons, weekend getaways and family holidays, the hill station is almost certainly past its prime. Chocolate-coloured water flows through the streams here, garbage piles up along the roadside and slums are everywhere. This must be the worst Hill Station I have visited in the Orient to date and in a travel magazine I read during the trip a panel of Indian Travel "Experts" actually rated this place as the top 5 worst hill stations in India! The roads around the hill station are also perpetually busy with the honking of horns and speeding drivers, making them hazardous for birding as a whole.

Mount Abu Entrance Fee: 70 INR (You need to pay to enter this Hill Station)

Highlights

Green Avadavat: Easy in the fields near the Peace Park, two flocks numbering about 40 individuals in total were observed in the late evening and the following morning foraging actively on the ground. Confiding and easy to approach, although they were quick to retreat into the Lantana when sparrowhawks were about.



Adult **Green Avadavat**; Mount Abu, Rajasthan by Yong Ding Li

Other Notables

Indian Scimitar-Babbler: At least two were heard on, one distant individual heard on from the Avadavat area and another heard on lower down in an inaccessible gully.

Crested Bunting: Common in the same fields as the Avadavat with up to a dozen individuals noted included one cracking male in all its glory.

Little Rann of Kutch



Wild Ass galloping across the saline desert; Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat by Yong Ding Li

This proposed World Heritage Site covers a whopping 4954km square and was set aside primarily to protect the last population of the khur subspecies of the Wild Ass *Equus hemionus khur*. However, the reserve also hosts an astounding array of birdlife, thanks to its varied habitats and unique geographical features.

What makes this area unique is that it is believed to have once been a shallow sea which over time due to plate tectonics and sea level changes has dried out. In the wake of all these changes what is left behind is a vast saline desert dotted with numerous elevated plateaus or islands known locally as "bets". How is this of interest to birders then? The "bets" are the main areas within the Sanctuary that are salt-free and support vegetation growth such as *Acacia* and other thorny scrubs. It is on these "bets" that you will find both the Wild Ass and **MacQueen's Bustard**. However, one has to travel into the heart of Little Rann as well, the barren and seemingly lifeless saline desert, to seek out the **Greater Hoopoe Lark**, probably the main avian target for this region.

This is not forgetting the seasonal wetlands that dot the area as well. These wetlands get flooded during the monsoon every year from June to September and cum winter provide an important wintering site for hordes of waterfowl. Interestingly enough, although the whole area is dotted with wetlands, the majority of the waterfowl seem to congregate only in a select few of them, for reasons unknown to us.

As mentioned earlier, Rann Riders proved to be an extremely comfortable base to explore this region. We found the local safari manager, Mr. Rizuan, to be extremely

knowledgeable and passionate about the birds in the region, although on the downside he seemed to be the only guide in the resort who was familiar with all the stakeouts for species like the Hoopoe Lark. Most of the drivers had only passing knowledge of some of the more common waterfowl species.

As an aside, we met Tom Stephenson, a regular columnist for *Surfbirds*, and his wife here, both of whom were on a birding cum cultural trip around India before he returned to Bhutan to train the local guides there.

Little Rann of Kutch Entrance Fee: 1050 INR (Per Safari)

Highlights

Sociable Lapwing: Call us blissfully ignorant as you will, this was the most unexpected write-in on the trip. We subsequently learnt from Mr. Rizuan that since 2006, small numbers of this critically endangered species have been "discovered" wintering in the farms around Dasada (the town where Rann Riders is located). This year, there were eight birds wintering in the farms, and as of our time of arrival, had been feeding in the same patch of ploughed farmland for two straight days. We went down there on our second afternoon in the area and were treated to excellent and prolonged views of this species. True to their "gregarious" nature, they were feeding alongside other lifers for us as well, in the form of **Indian Coursers** and **Rufous-tailed Larks**, not to mention our first sighting of four **Common Cranes** overhead while we were viewing these species.



1 of 8 **Sociable Lapwings** foraging alongside several **Indian Coursers** by Yong Ding Li

Sykes's Nightjar: This must be the easiest place in the usual NW India circuit to see this local winter visitor. The fields opposite Rann Riders hold good numbers of them after dark and brief night safaris can be arranged with Mr. Rizuan to drive out there to spotlight them. Although **Indian Little Nightjar** is also present here, we found that they were easily to distinguish both through physical appearance and behaviour. Not only were the Sykes's a much lighter shade of grey with no obvious markings on the wings, they were also remarkably confiding and allowed very close approach down to a couple of metres! The latter, on the other hand, were much more flighty, and often flew the moment the spotlight was placed on it. We counted three birds during our brief night-drive and all of them showed very well.



Nightjar in a plot of farmland opposite Rann Riders. One of three seen on by Yong Ding Li

MacQueen's Bustard: We had a chance encounter, this time almost running 1 over, with this beauty on 1 of the "bets" at 10am in the morning. We soon realised that it was actually running from a **Common Kestrel** and didn't notice us, giving us brief but great views as it sprinted away into an area of dense thorn scrub with the Kestrel in hot pursuit. We didn't stay to watch the spectacle although, as we had yet to catch up with the next species...

Greater Hoopoe Lark: This was truly the 11th Hour Mega of the trip, and we all but attributed it to divine intervention that allowed us to ultimately leave Rann Riders in peace. Initially, Mr. Rizuan had guaranteed us a sighting of this species. We were honestly shocked when he mentioned this, as this was probably one of the most difficult birds to track down in the lifeless heart of Litte Rann. As it turned out, he actually knew of a nest site for this species that had been in use up till five days before our arrival. What none of us could have predicted was, an unseasonal bout of rainfall had hit the area shortly before our arrival. When we arrived at the nest site, the ground around it had

actually subsided, leaving it as an exposed mound atop this barren landscape. There were two eggs in the nest, but strangely no birds were in sight. This was when we really started getting anxious, for we would have to leave the area in two hours from the time we reached the nest site and it was our final safari before moving on to Bhuj.

After driving for another hour in vain, Mr. Rizuan had no choice but to suggest turning back. Incredibly, within five minutes of that suggestion, he stopped the vehicle in the middle of nowhere, peered through his binoculars, and said the magic words "I got it". We followed his gaze and incredibly, where there was once just a heat wave hovering over the barren, saline land, there was now a bird, and a true oddball at that. The bird had the long tail of a Thrush, the hooked bill of a Scimitar-Babbler and the gait of a Courser. On top of that, it was doing the most peculiar thing, using its hooked bill like a pickaxe and pecking away at a lifeless white rock, like a miner mining for some exquisite gem. After about 10 minutes of foraging in this manner, it faded back into the mirage, never to be seen on again, and along with it, the excitement, expletives, and handshakes and high-fives between birders and guides that epitomises all birding tours.

I am personally intrigued to understand how desert species such as this would abandon nest sites due to abnormal rainfall events. Mr. Rizuan had not visited the area since the rains, and he was sure that they had done so because the ground had subsided after taking on water, yet the eggs, which most likely had long since cooked given the diurnal temperatures we were exposed to, had not been eaten by predators, which illustrates just how lifeless the area is. When we returned to the nest site an hour later, nothing had changed and as biologists we could only wonder what had triggered this bizarre event.



Abandoned **Hoopoe Lark** nest by Yong Ding Li. Note subsidence of the surrounding landscape.

Waterfowl: This was definitely a highlight of the region. The area we were taken to consist of three seemingly interconnected seasonal lakes. Although the numbers were not as high as we thought they would be, the diversity was undeniable and with the aid of a telescope it was a lifer bonanza as we challenged ourselves to sift through the dirt for the gems. Some of the highlights:



One of three interconnected seasonal lakes; Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat by Albert Low

Greater Flamingo: This species is put here to point out that although the local guides like to insist that both species occur here, this is not always the case. Despite careful scrutiny, we came up with only 300 or so of this species, and **ZERO Lesser Flamingo**. This was supported by Tom's report as he was taken to the same area the day after us and also reported a lack of Lesser. The flamingoes here had a tendency to form loose flotillas of about 30-50 birds, although a particularly large flock of 150 or so were noted.

Pelicans: On the particular day we were here, we managed to connect with both species but not in the numbers we had expected. We counted only about six **Dalmatian Pelicans** and a single **Great White Pelican** easily distinguished by its pink facial skin. Nevertheless, we did encounter much larger pelican flocks in some of the roadside lakes around Dasada and later on in Bhuj.

Pratincoles: Careful scrutiny of a flock of 40 **Collared Pratincoles** perched on a sand

bar yielded a single **Small Pratincole**, which conveniently mopped up both targets for us here.

Ducks/Grebes: This was the main challenge here and was conveniently left to me, being the "gunner" who was carrying the scope, while Ding Li sneaked off into the reedbeds to flush birds. Bugger! Nevertheless, I did have my moments. The flotilla of ducks here was nothing short of incredible and numbered literally in the thousands. Disappointingly, we failed to find any Marbled Teals or Comb Ducks, which ruined the moment for me as some of the ducks were in areas where neither my scope nor my body could reach. Nevertheless, highlights included a single handsome **Great Crested Grebe**, 10 **Ferruginous Ducks** amidst the more common **Tufted Ducks**, small numbers of **Eurasian Wigeon** and both **Greylag** and **Bar-headed Geese**. **Ruddy Shelduck** was also present. Aside from that, it was the usual mix of Shovelers, Pintails, **Common Pochards** and **Gadwall** whose only function was to distract the observer from the rarer cousins lurking in their midst.

Miscellaneous: In addition to the above, Ding Li conveniently flushed a single **Jack Snipe** which I missed while scoping ducks. **Common Snipes** were abundant in the reeds and we did manage to locate a small flock of **Dunlins**. **Little Stints** were also common although only a single **Temminck's Stint** was observed. One pair of **Heuglin's Gull** and about 10 **Black-headed Gulls** were the only representatives of the family present. Six **White-tailed Lapwings** were also counted, often foraging singly and unobtrusively. **Pied Avocets** and **Ruff** vied for the dominant wader of the region while **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Eurasian Curlews** were present in small numbers.

In the reedbeds, passerines dominated with **Indian Reed** (formerly **Clamorous**) and the smaller **Paddyfield Warblers**, **Bluethroats**, and small numbers of **Black-breasted Weavers**.

Bhuj/Great Rann of Kutch

From the east end of the Rann Of Kutch, we now moved west into the Kutch Peninsula itself, making forays to the Great Rann of Kutch as this great birding tour drew to a close. The town of Nakhatrana was to be our base for the two full days of exploration in this region.

It was here that we had the privilege to meet up and spend time with Mr. Jugal Tiwari, a passionate ornithologist who has been working in the area for some time now. His base of operations, the Centre for Desert and Ocean, basically summarises our birding here in a nutshell! On a more serious note, it offers accommodation for visiting birders and naturalists and is used as a base for students visiting the area on nature camps and other activities. The Centre is located just five minutes away from the JP Resort, Nakhatrana. In fact, the rooms and public areas of the Resort are adorned with wildlife photos, especially birders, taken mainly by Mr. Jugal over the course of his fieldwork within the region.

We would once again like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Jugal and his assistants for their assistance in making this leg of the trip as successful as it was. For people visiting the area and in need of information, he can be reached at cedoindia@yahoo.com.

Due to the variety of habitats found here and the unique birds restricted to these habitats, I have decided to arrange the summary for this leg in order of sites visited, to give readers a feel for the different habitats visited and the avifauna associated with them.

#1: Salt Pans Along The Bridge Crossing Into The Kutch Peninsula

We found this area to be exceptionally good for gulls. We crossed this area twice, once in the evening and once at around noon, and both times had excellent views of all the gull species known to occur around Kutch literally by the roadside. Although the area looks like the salt pans of Samut Sakhon in Thailand, perhaps due to its inland location it doesn't harbour many waders. However, there was no shortage of gulls as we observed **Brown-headed**, **Black-headed**, **Pallas's**, **Slender-billed** and the tricky **Heuglin's** complex all feasting on the easy pickings of fish exposed by the drying salt pans. As their larger size suggests, the Pallas's frequently engaged in piracy, stealing the catches from smaller gulls. **Western Reef-Egrets** were also abundant in this locale.

#2: Fulay Village

A famous site for the monotypic **Grey Hypocolius**. According to Mr. Jugal this is one of the most easily accessible wintering areas for this species in Kutch as Fulay Village lies right at the end of a decent paved road. An estimated 300 or so individuals are believed to winter in Kutch every year. We were probably closer to the Pakistani border here than at any other point in the trip, with the distance estimated at 60km as the crow flies. Anyway, we were met by a local guide here Mr. Mohamed, an elderly man who has been assisting in monitoring the wintering Hypocolius here for many years now. After a brief walk into the agricultural fields surrounding the village, we quickly came across a flock of eight **Hypocolius** associating with the abundant **Chestnut-shouldered Petronias** and **White-eared Bulbuls** as they foraged among the fruiting shrubs that bordered the fields. The **Hypocolius** were very wary however and often disappeared for long periods into the dense shrubs along the boundaries of the field plots. We observed four males and four females during our time here, with an average number of 10-12 birds recorded visiting the village each winter.

On our way back to the car, we had good flight views of an unexpected **Red-headed Falcon** over the village, apparently a good record of this increasingly scarce bird in this area.

Payment to Mr Mohamed: 200 INR

#3: Chhari Lake & "Bird Rock"



Bird Rock - home of the **Red-tailed Wheatear**; near Nakhatrana, Gujarat by Albert Low

Both of these sites are not far from Fulay and thus are often set aside as a morning circuit for visiting birders. "Bird Rock" is basically a sedimentary rock outcrop that rises out of the largely featureless desert of the Great Rann of Kutch. Geographically, it is an important landmark for travelling nomads as it orientates them to the nearby Chhari Lake, a vast seasonal freshwater lake which is inundated during the mid-year monsoon every year and subsequently dries out, providing an important water and food source for livestock and wildlife alike, a literal oasis in the desert.

For Birders, "Bird Rock" is a regular site for observing two species associated with rocky outcrops. **Red-tailed Wheatear**, the most localised of the four known to occur in the region, was easy here as we found three individuals at various points around the outcrop without too much trouble. Sadly, we dipped the Rock Eagle-owl for the trip, a supposedly common endemic usually associated with such habitats although despite much effort and outcrop clambering we failed to locate any over the course of this trip.

At the nearby Chhari Lake, we would finally catch up with **Lesser Flamingoes** here. This time, they were easily to tell apart from their larger cousins as most individuals were

distinctly shorter-legged and had an all dark, sometimes crimson red bill. Breeding adults also had a lovely crimson-pink plumage unlike the more faded pink worn by their larger cousins. We counted up to 150 birds here, although there were easily more at the lake's centre, which was out of optics range. There were also a lot of Pelicans here. We observed the overwhelming sight of 100 Great White Pelicans taking off in unison at the sight of several hunting Steppe Eagles, which were common around the lake. Also of note were two foraging Black-necked Storks, which towered over the surrounding waterfowl here. Alas, the ducks here were scattered and hard to scope and we turned up nothing unusual amongst the loose flotillas.

#4: Phot Mahadev



Remnant Thorn Forest around Phot Mahadev in the early morning light by Albert Low

This was one of my favourite birding sites in the whole tour, thorns aside! According to Mr Jugal, this is one of the last remnants of the original thorn scrub forest that used to cover much of this area. The forest here is dominated by two species of *Acacia*, with massive thorns to match! The average tree height here was very respectable as we walked through rolling hills covered in largely pristine habitat. Phot Mahadev itself is a temple built on a small hill and yet another visual landmark in the generally featureless forested hills that cover the area.

For birders, this is the best site for seeing the stunning and globally threatened **White-naped Tit**, especially in the early morning. We tried without success with a late afternoon sojourn and saw most of the area's specialties save for this bird, but saw it very quickly the next morning. We christened the Tits "The Sunshine Birds", for just as Jugal had predicted, the moment the Sun peeked its head over the horizon, the forest would burst out in their beautiful song, perhaps signalling the end of a cold desert night and the start of a bright sunny day. The tits are easy to see at this time, as they perch on the tops of the *Acacia* singing merrily, before dropping much lower down to feed with the mixed flocks that move through this area. We had excellent views of up to two birds, with at least two others heard on at different parts of the forest that same morning. The tits have a

unique feeding behaviour, which allows them to survive in this harsh environment. We observed them skillfully extracting seed borers from the seed pods of the Acacias found here, a behavioural element not observed among the other insectivores during our time here, perhaps indicative of an ecological niche carved out by this particular species.

Other Highlights

Sirkeer Malkoha: The culmination of six years of work for both of us. This was our final Malkoha of the world and it was not as easy as we expected. Rare in Gujarat but uncommon at this site, we came across a wary individual that was loosely associating with **Small Minivets** and **Common Woodshrikes**, the nuclear mixed flocks species in the area.

Painted Sandgrouse: The most difficult of the three Sandgrouses and the one I most wanted to see. Ding Li was fortuitous enough to have a confiding pair land right in front of him, and thankfully despite taking the time to hunt me down in the thorn scrub they hung around and we were able to enjoy excellent views of this species. The males are in a league of their own, truly crackers in a desert where most birds are various shades of brown and grey. As with all female sandgrouses, the females are cryptic and blend right into the landscape.

Marshall's Iora: To be perfectly honest, I had expected this bird to be common in habitat like this. However, we found them to be very low-density birds with only a handful of sightings, all of single non-breeding plumaged individuals, foraging low in the acacia shrubs.



Non-breeding **Marshall's Iora**. Note the distinctive white tail panels by Yong Ding Li

Grey-necked Bunting: The shrubs and open fields around the temple are a known roosting spot for this species, and we also observed a handful in the *Acacia* forest as well. At dusk, they were easily found perched in the cacti around the temple compound.

Sykes's Lark: Another species that had us waiting for a long time. We finally caught up with a flock of 10 foraging in some stubble not far down the road from the temple.

#5: Modva/Arabian Sea



Greater Flamingoes dominated this stretch of coastline at Modva by Albert Low

This idyllic seaside fishing community, looking over a pristine sandy beach and the tranquil Arabian Sea, was the perfect place to go wader hunting. With Crab Plover a trip target, but no time to detour to Jamnagar, Jugal suggested that we visit this area to track down our quarry and some other waders that Ding Li needed. According to Jugal, there is a guaranteed site about 120km out of Nakhatrana, but he painted a horror story of human excreta lined beaches, unfriendly fishermen and generally a bad experience, and we quickly shelved that option, as getting there alone was hassle enough, never mind the other distractions.

This area on the other hand, was the exact opposite. Modhva, a small seaside community about 7km out of Mandvi, a comparatively large port town two hours south of Nakhatrana, was not only rich in birds, but was surprisingly pristine with clean white

sand and thousands of small mollusc shells which lined the high water mark like little gems. Finding Crab Plover here was extremely hard work though, even though wader counts in the past have turned up 300 birds here. Against all the odds, and a fair bit of divine intervention again, we found them at last light during low tide, which made for a fair bit of walking across loose sand. There were large numbers of **Greater Flamingoes** here as well, and we literally had to walk amongst a sea of pink on more than 1 occasion. At high tide, wader activity was concentrated around small areas of reef flats found scattered around the beach.

Highlights

Crab Plover: Ding Li and I agree on this one. We have never worked so hard for a wader ever! We first arrived at this location at around 11am in the morning, and trekked across miles upon miles of loose sand in the hope of encountering a roosting flock in one of the numerous bays that dot this extensive coastline. After stopping for lunch at 3pm, we came back again, for a second shot at low tide. Finally, at 545pm, we found six of them feeding along a stretch of coastline. Unlike the other waders, these plovers appear to be feed right along the low water mark where the waves meet the beach, which meant distant views through the scope. Nevertheless, it was the culmination of six hours of work along this coastline, covering about 20km easily across the loose sand back and forth. Probably one of the most satisfying lifers we saw on this trip.

Eurasian Oystercatcher: one of Ding Li's targets, these were common here, with singles seen on at various points along the coast and a small flock of 12 roosting at high tide.

Great Thick-Knee: Another of Ding Li's targets, it was noteworthy to have observed a flock of 15 gathered around an area of reef flats.

Sykes's Nightjar: One of the most astounding records here was to observe this species sleeping on an area of reef flats right alongside foraging oystercatchers. Jugal's reaction when we first spotted this bird was difficult to put in words! Suffice to say; in all his years working in this area, he had never observed behaviour like this. Eventually, the nightjar appeared to tire of the attention it was receiving and flew into the coastal sand dunes that bordered the beach.

Dalmatian Pelican: Likely to benefit from the fish traps laid out by the fisherman and other fishing activities here, six to eight were observed feeding in the shallows, usually within the fishing traps themselves. The locals don't seem to persecute the birds though, based on what we were told.

#6: Un-named Rocky Wadi 40 mins out of Nakhatrana

Likely the same area Rob and James were taken to see **House Bunting**, we were taken here on the same request and a last shot at the **Rock Eagle-Owl**. Our luck with owls continued to fail us, but it took us only an hour to locate a flock of six to eight **House Buntings** feeding unobtrusively on the ground behind a shrine located on one of the taller

outcrops. Given that we only spent about an hour here before the brutal drive south to Sasan Gir, we did not record much else of note here, although **Grey-necked Buntings** were common here as well. As far as I remember, a paved road leads to the shrine/temple situated on the top of one of the taller rocky outcrops here, if that is any help to future birders visiting this area.

Sasan Gir Wildlife Sanctuary



An area of thorn forest in Gir Lion Sanctuary. Asia's only Lion City! by Albert Low

One of the few places we visited where the main attraction was mammals, not birds! This reserve is home to the last surviving population of **Asiatic Lions**, numbering only about 350 or so individuals. With an area of 1412km square, the park also contains one of the last remnants of deciduous teak forest which used to cover much of Gujarat. The park is enclosed along its entire boundary by a wall made out of massive stone boulders, but as with all rocks weathering has taken their toll and in some areas to call it a wall is an overstatement.

We were fortunate enough to encounter three male lions in total during our two safari drives here, with two brothers in the morning and another individual in the evening. Gir Birding Lodge, which is owned by Asian Adventures, operates safaris between 7am-1030am and again from 330pm-6pm, with the remainder being free time, which can be filled by doing some casual birding within the grounds of the lodge and the surrounding area.

For independent birders, take note that entering Gir Wildlife Sanctuary itself can be very expensive, especially if you have your own jeep. In our case, we were financially crippled after our brief stay here, mercifully arranged at the end of the trip. As with all Safaris in India, charges are levied on a per jeep basis, which explains why most locals and non-birders share jeeps. One jeep can realistically take six people, albeit in slightly cramped conditions. The camera charges here were also expectedly expensive, like everything else in this tourist trap, for foreigners. In our case, we were given our own private jeep to ourselves, which also meant that the cost was split among both of us only. The only advantage to this was that we were able to stop as and when we wanted if we spotted something interesting.

Birding here was generally dull and unexciting. As with most deciduous habitats in the Orient, diversity is low and the inability to walk around freely affects birding negatively as well. As of our time there, the formerly reliable day roost of the **Mottled Wood Owl** no longer exists, having been disturbed by monitor lizards, and the local guides mentioned that they are currently searching for other sites. Nevertheless, the lions more than made up for it with their sterling performances, and we left more than happy with our encounters with the Kings of the Jungle. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder as more and more people encroach upon the Sanctuary, what sort of future will the lions face. As it is, there have been reports of prides moving out of the overcrowded reserve into the surrounding villages, and there have even been reports of lions within the Gir Birding Lodge itself (!), as it lies right on the park's boundary.



The King of the Jungle resting after devouring a kill. He still looks hungry though... by Yong Ding Li

Park Entrance Fee: 2610 INR Per Jeep Per Entry
Camera Fees: 500 INR Per Camera Per Day

Notables

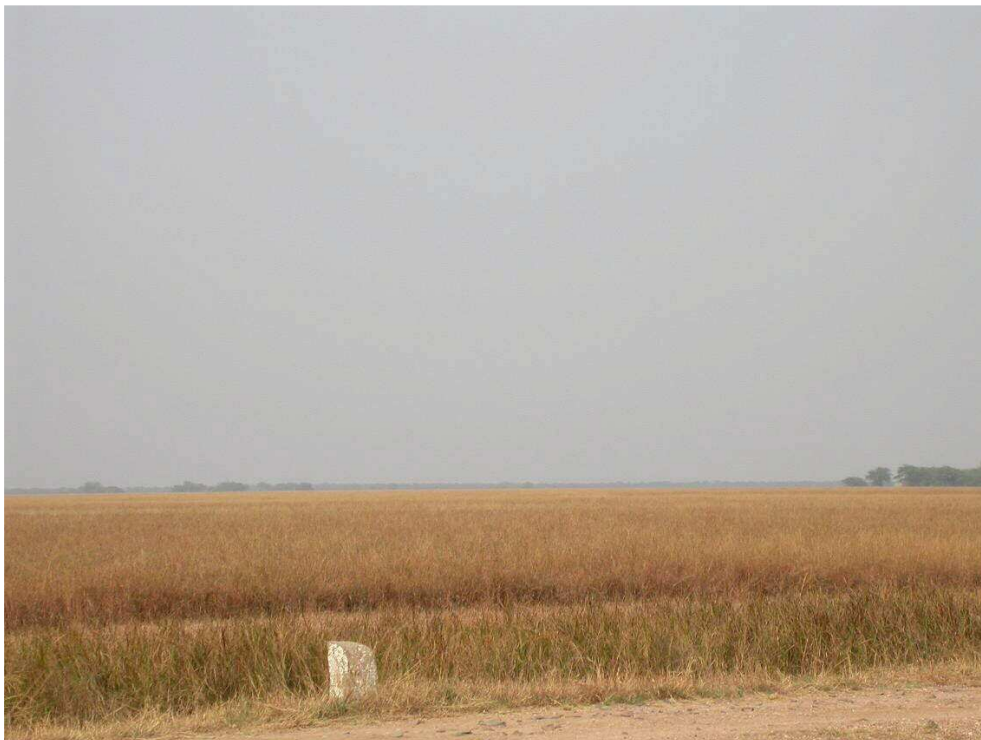
White-eyed Buzzard: A dry woodland species. This is a good place to find this bird and we saw a handful of them during our time within the park walls.

Tawny-bellied Babbler: A subcontinent endemic. A group of six were seen on flicking over leaves in some riverine vegetation just down the road from the Gir Birding Lodge.

Indian Black Ibis: Regular here and was seen on in most other sites around Gujarat. Two birds perched along the river down the road from Gir Birding Lodge.

Indian Pygmy Woodpecker: Common in mixed flocks within the park, with one to two amongst the Minivets and Woodshrikes, not likely to be encountered in the dry arid environments elsewhere on the tour.

Velavadar Blackbuck Reserve



The custard-coloured savannahs of Velavadar by Albert Low. Can you spot the **Blackbuck**?

Our final birding stop of this great tour, this small (34km square) reserve is famous for its population of **Blackbuck**, surely one of the most handsome antelope in the Orient, and perhaps the World. It is also an important breeding ground for the endangered **Lesser**

Florican during the mid-year monsoon, and during the winter months the spectacle of the largest harrier roost in the world is second to none.

We arrived here at the end of a long seven hour drive from Gir to be greeted by expanses of lush, sandy-yellow grasses and majestic **Blackbucks** strolling through them with their harems in tow. Blackbucks can be seen on easily from outside the reserve as herds move into the surrounding grasslands to feed as well. However, if you are after **Striped Hyenas** and Harriers roost like we were, you have to pay the expensive foreigner's rate to enter this grassland.

The local ranger here was extremely hardworking and took us to numerous hyena dens to look for any traces of this rare carnivore. Eventually, at the last den we visited, an adorable almost fully mature Hyena cub with exquisite markings came out to the sound of his squeaks and looked us straight in the eye. Almost certainly one of the most magical moments of the trip.

Thereafter it was off to the nearby harrier roost that didn't disappoint, as hundreds of Harriers congregated over a patch of dense elephant grass and took turns swooping down into the vegetation to roost. To top off the evening, we witnessed awe-inspiring flocks of **Common Cranes** as they formed massive V-shaped flocks at times covering the horizon as they returned to their roosting areas after a day of foraging in the grasslands. There was no better way to end this tour than witnessing such spectacles one after another.



How much is that Hyena in the window? If looks could kill...Can I keep him? By Yong Ding Li

Velavadar Entrance Fee: 1020 INR Per Pax
Camera Fee: 500 INR Per Camera Per Entry
Local Ranger: 100 INR

Highlights

Harrier Roost: The sheer magnitude and beauty of hundreds of harriers congregating against the setting Sun must be seen to be believed. It is a pity that by the time they gather in numbers, the light is too poor for photography. Species wise, the dominant species, **Pallid & Montagu's Harriers**, are noteworthy as they are rare visitors to most other parts of the Orient. Males are very distinctive and easy to tell apart. Females/Juveniles, on the other hand, were more approachable as they perched readily on the tracks within Velavadar but telling them apart was a whole another matter and involved prolonged scope views as we studied their wing projections and how far they stretched beyond the tail. One thing is for sure though, there was no shortage of specimens to choose from!



Pallid Harriers were dominant here. This is but one of hundreds observed by Yong Ding Li

White Stork: Another surprise write-in. This species proved common in the wetlands and salt lakes bordering the park and good numbers of them were often seen on perching in agricultural plots adjacent to water bodies, including a large group of 22 enroute to the airport from Bhavnager and not far from the Reserve.

Red-headed Falcon: Another welcome sighting of this beautiful and scarce falcon, this time of one perched on power cables in the agricultural buffer zone bordering the Reserve which allowed scope views and some photo opportunities.

Long-billed Pipit: The only place we encountered this species during our tour. One bird loosely associating with a flock of **Greater Short-toed Lark** caught our eye just based on size alone!