

India Tour Report : Kerala & Tamil Nadu – February 2012

Dave and Anne White, Coventry, August 2012.



Following a very enjoyable trip to Delhi, Agra, Bandhavgarh, Ranthambore & Rajasthan in the spring of 2009, organised for us by IGT, we decided to travel again to India in February 2012. Focusing again on culture & birding, IGT arranged an itinerary for us taking in the following:

Kochi:

Our first stop in India was based at the Taj Malabar Hotel. Situated right by the water front, we had our binoculars in action to view Black & Brahminy Kites. However, we were soon out with a guide who took us around delightful old Fort Kochi where we saw the amazing diversity of influences on this small area of India – from Chinese, Arab, Dutch, British to Indian. A boat trip from the hotel gave

good views of the famed Chinese fishing nets followed by an evening performance of Kathakali dancing. The makeup is very elaborate and it takes the dancers hours to prepare for their performance.

Thrissur

We had an overnight stop here and were able to see the outside of the Guruvayur Temple with the four elaborately carved wooden entrances. Then we travelled to the nearby rice fields, started more serious bird watching and reminded ourselves of some of the common Indian birds. By now our driver Subash was getting used to this strange British occupation and was becoming very adept at finding birds. The next day we travelled east across Kerala on the main Kerala –Tamil Nadu highway (possibly not a highway as we would know it in the UK) to Mettupalayam.

Mettupalayam

We had an overnight stop at Black Thunder Resort, a water theme park which is set at the base of hills. We took the opportunity of exercising our binoculars again as we walked around the grounds and were stunned with the mix of birds in the adjoining woodland. Our most amazing sighting was of a male Asian Paradise Flycatcher with its long white ribbon-like tail feathers appearing to dance through the trees and this was closely followed by a Changeable Hawk Eagle resting in a nearby tree. By this time the 100-400 lens on the camera was in overdrive!

Nilgiri Mountain Railway

This was our morning on the toy train to Ooty. We were out before dawn and after our names were checked off the list by the conductor we were allowed to board the little blue train. We started the ascent to Ooty on one of the last steam hauled lines in India. This took over 5 hours to climb the 46 kilometres from the hot plains to the cooler hill station and what a journey. The train was full and stopped frequently to take on water. The scenery was stunning as we climbed higher and higher and there was a party atmosphere as everyone took photos of the train and each other and gangs of local monkeys appeared out of the forest looking for food.

Ooty

Here we were in a town that used to be a British hill station, it was certainly cooler and we saw our first tea plantations on the steep slopes. The afternoon was spent in the Botanic Gardens and produced a range of birds including the beautiful Velvet Fronted Nuthatch. The following day we visited Doddabetta the highest peak in Southern India. Here we caught up with the local endemic, the Nilgiri Laughing Thrush scurrying around the paths while the local people sold food and warm clothing (hats and scarves for those less used to the cooler air – we just thought it was a very pleasant temperature)!

Top Slip

Driving south from Ooty gave us some splendid views of Indian Rollers and took us to Top Slip where we stayed at Banyan Tree Farmstay for two nights. This allowed us a full day of birding in the Top Slip area. The drive up to Top Slip gave excellent views of birds including the Crested Serpent Eagle. A local tribal guide took us on a fascinating morning walk through the dry Top Slip Forest where we

not only saw an abundance of birds but had good views of the Nilgiri Giant Squirrel and a herd of the beautiful spotted Chital deer. This is a delightful area with magnificent views out to the plains below.

Munnar

The drive to Munnar took us through Indira Gandhi National Park which yielded fabulous views of a Black Shouldered Kite with prey and took us into the magnificent slopes of the tea country. The views were spectacular and watching the ladies clipping the tea bushes with their shears was fascinating. We were staying in Munnar for three nights and met up with our bird guide, Abhilash, on the first afternoon. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of all aspects of wildlife. We were soon to value his detailed understanding of birds and their habitats as he located and was able to show us all but one of the local endemic species for us on our trips with him. We sadly missed the Broad Tailed Grassbird!

Thekkady

On the road again and this time heading to Thekkady through the tea and coffee plantations over the high hills. We were staying at the Aranya Niwas Hotel in the Periyar National Reserve. Highlights here were the early morning walk in the reserve with Abhilash and a local guide, the boat trip on the lake in the afternoon and evening sightings of flying squirrel. We saw so many birds here and also wild elephant, boar and sambar deer. Tiger are present but didn't put in an appearance – sightings are very rare.

On the Backwaters near Kumarakom

Just 24 hours on a houseboat gave us a good feeling for life on the Backwaters. There are few roads and everything moves on the water whether it's people, provisions or building materials. The bird life is limited by the habitat but we had excellent views of Whiskered Terns, Darters, Woolly Necked Storks and other common water birds.

Thattekad

We then travelled north past Lake Vembanad and stopped off at Vembanad Reserve where there was a huge roost of fruit bats. Then on to Hornbill Camp, which was a tranquil spot by the river. We were keen to make the most of our remaining time in India with Abhilash. Highlights here were beautiful views of the Black Baza, Rufous Babbler, Ceylon Frogmouth to name just three. This was a splendid trip with wonderful sightings of so many birds (173 species in total) and other wildlife. Good hotels and good guiding organized for us by IGT. We offer our sincere thanks to Manoj and Harsh for some fabulous memories. We are sure that we will be back to India in the future and will look to IGT to organise this for us.

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