

Birdwatching trip to Rajasthan, NW India

1-11 December 2005



Painted storks, little cormorants and great white egret, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe (above left); white-throated kingfisher, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe (above right); demoiselle cranes, Khichan © Robert Oates (below)



Robert Oates and Ian Barthorpe
(written by Ian)



Gharials, Chambal River © Robert Oates



Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe

Arrangements

This tour was organised following a meeting between Rob and Indian conservationist Harsh Vardhan at the British Birdwatching Fair in August 2005. Rob wanted to organise a birdwatching trip to Bharatpur and other Rajasthani wetlands, and Harsh was happy to make arrangements. Harsh was also keen to show us some of the desert highlights, especially the cranes of Khichan

All arrangements for the trip were made by Harsh and Manoj Vardhan through their company Indian Bird and Wildlife Group (formerly Group and Individual Travel Service), based in Jaipur (contact details at end of this article). This included the itinerary, accommodation, travel arrangements and guides. We only had to book flights separately.

Transport was by taxi or train, and we had no complaints about either. Accommodation was in moderate standard hotels and was generally very good. Two nights were spent on sleeper trains, helping to maximise birdwatching opportunities. We had three different guides during the trip: Harsh, Manoj and a park guide at Bharatpur, Hari Singh.

On arrival in Delhi we visited Okhla Barrage on the Yamuna River on the first day. Next day was at Chambal River, before moving to Bharatpur where we spent two and a half days. From here we headed to Jaipur spending a day at desert sites to the west. Our final area was the edge of the Thar Desert around the cities of Phalodi and Bikaner, before returning to Delhi.

Overall, this was an extremely successful arrangement. The tour was well-organised, so that we only had to worry about watching and photographing the superb wildlife. We are very grateful to Manoj and Harsh for their attention to detail. None of the desert sites that we visited (except Khichan) would be easy to find without a local guide such as Harsh (in fact you'd struggle to find any of them).

Daily tour details and sightings

Thursday 1 December 2005

We took a train to London and tube to Heathrow to board the overnight Virgin Atlantic flight to Delhi, departing at 21.00 hours.

Friday 2 December 2005

We arrived in **Delhi** on time at 10.40 local time (05.10 GMT) after a very good flight (although without getting much sleep). We were met at the airport by Manoj, who took us to our hotel – the **Westend Hotel**. Perhaps predictably, the first bird of the trip was a black kite over the airport.

After a quick change of clothes we set off again at 12.30. The common mynas in the hotel car park were sensibly seeking shade under cars and proved very comical. This was the first of many new birds for us both.

Rob's tripod had unfortunately broken in transit so we drove into the city centre to buy a new one. We took the chance to stop for a meal, before heading to **Okhla Barrage** on the Yamuna River. As a first time visitor to India, I was fascinated by the driving techniques and apparent chaos on the roads and vowed never to drive there myself.

There were lots of black kites over the city, with small groups of house sparrows, rock doves and house crows on many wires. We also saw the first of many ring-necked parakeets and a black drongo on route to Okhla.

We arrived at Okhla at 14.45, and walked along a spit of land through tall scrub with water on both sides. We spent a superb two and a half hours at this excellent site, remaining until dusk.

The first of several northern palm squirrels allowed us to approach within a few feet as soon as we left the car.

The wetlands contained large flocks of waterfowl, mainly coots, shovelers, pintails and pochards. Further on we saw several Indian spotbills, and many teals. Other wildfowl here included ruddy shelducks and both greylag and bar-headed geese, and eventually a few gadwalls. There were two great crested grebes and several little grebes. Flocks of plain martins and barn swallows hawked overhead.

Both grey and purple herons were fishing on the far bank, then an intermediate egret popped out of the vegetation just in front of us. At the end of the spit were 20 greater flamingos, several great white and little egrets and a large flock of roosting spoonbills. A huge black-necked stork was fishing, and an Indian pond heron allowed close approach. Among several great cormorants were two little cormorants and an oriental darter.



Greater flamingos at Okhla © Robert Oates



White-throated kingfisher © Ian Barthorpe

Waders were dominated by black-tailed godwits and black-winged stilts, plus a large flock of avocets. Several river lapwings and red-wattled lapwings were close to the path, as were redshanks and wood sandpipers and a single marsh sandpiper. Dunlins, ruffs, curlews and moorhens were also present.

A large mixed flock of black- and brown-headed gulls flew in, and two immature yellow-legged gulls flew through. Several white-throated kingfishers were present.

The scrub held several interesting passerines, the most obvious of which were ashy prinias. Asian pied starlings and two paddyfield warblers were in the reeds. As dusk fell, we had good views of a flock of jungle babblers and found two dusky warblers.

We returned across the city in the rush hour, reaching the Westend Hotel again at 18.35.

Saturday 3 December 2005

We made a very early start, leaving the hotel at 05.05 to reach Delhi station in plenty of time for the 06.00 **train to Agra**. The train journey was surprisingly comfortable, and proved quite productive for birdwatching.

Black kites, rock doves, house and large-billed crows and common mynas were easily seen close to the tracks. As we passed through small villages we saw the first of several Indian peafowls.

Black-winged stilts were on most small pools and ditches, and small flocks of cattle egrets fed in many fields. I saw what was to prove my only woolly-necked stork of the trip, while Rob saw two a few minutes later. We both saw two painted storks. A few pools held either Indian spotbills or little grebes. I also managed to pick out a grey francolin close to the track.

We arrived in **Agra** a little late at 09.05 and our taxi driver took us to a café for breakfast. This short stop proved productive, with a superb Indian robin in the garden, along with several more familiar birds: ring-necked parakeets, collared doves and white wagtails. A laughing dove was more unexpected, but we missed the purple sunbird that Manoj saw in the garden.

Driving out of Agra, we made a brief unscheduled stop to photograph an elephant and mahout walking down the main road – our only elephant.



Elephant on Agra highway & Chambal Safari Lodge © Ian Barthorpe

The drive to the **Chambal Safari Lodge** took about an hour, during which we added the first hoopoe and Egyptian vulture of the trip, as well as a gorgeous black-shouldered kite – though we couldn't stop to watch any of them. I also saw a few common babblers in the villages.

On arrival at the Lodge, we were greeted by the owner and enjoyed a quick cup of tea before heading out for the boat trip. Jungle babblers and ring-necked parakeets were common in the grounds, as were northern palm squirrels. I flushed a hoopoe from just a few feet away, but we both missed the greater coucal that Manoj saw.

The drive from the Lodge to the river Chambal was an eye-opener as we passed through a town that looked rather ramshackle, with many poor communities. The streets were, nonetheless, full of bank and common mynas. Heading into the reserve, we passed many people removing wood on the back of camels, or on their heads (a practice that we discovered was illegal but ignored by the authorities). We saw a few common babblers in the drier areas.

As we reached the river, we were immediately rewarded with good views of one of our target species. About 30 Indian skimmers were resting on an island within feet of the waiting boat. We couldn't believe our luck, and ran off several pictures despite looking into the sun. A gorgeous white-browed wagtail fed nearby, as did a greenshank.



Indian skimmers on Chambal River © Ian Barthorpe



Indian skimmers in flight © Robert Oates

Boarding the boat, we briefly disturbed the skimmers, giving great views of the flock in flight, but they quickly settled back down. A few ruddy shelducks were on the river, and red-wattled and river lapwings fed on the bank. Redshank and dunlin were familiar reminders of home, and a kestrel hunted along the deforested slopes.

It wasn't long before our next quarry was found. The first gharial was just a snout breaking the surface, but we soon saw several of these magnificent reptiles basking on the banks. Less expected were several marsh crocodiles, while a group of soft-shell turtles posed comically on an island.

We both ran off many pictures of the gharials most of which easily reached twelve feet long.



Gharial on Chambal River © Robert Oates



Black ibises on Chambal River © Robert Oates

Further along the river we flushed a small group of wigeon as we approached a group of five black ibises – a nice bonus. Alongside these we saw both river terns and black-bellied terns and a little cormorant.

Rounding a spit, we saw a golden jackal running along the bank, having been flushed from a dead cow by a stunning red-headed vulture. A group of bar-headed geese fed nearby. We watched the vulture for several minutes before it took to the air and soared off high. Spectacular!

Looking up at the ridge we spotted first one then two more large raptors. Despite good views, it took us a few minutes to confirm the identification as Bonelli's eagles – an adult and immature.

After more excellent views of gharials and marsh crocodiles, we started the return trip looking unsuccessfully for Gangetic dolphins. We did see plain martins over the river and desert wheatear and common sandpiper on the bank.

Back at the mooring, we again had excellent views of the Indian skimmers, with better light for photographs. They were joined briefly by a pie kingfisher. We also spotted a distant osprey.

On the drive back to the Lodge, I saw a probable Montagu's harrier, two grey francolins, a bee-eater species (possibly blue-tailed) and two black redstarts.

Back at the Lodge we enjoyed a pleasant light meal, and were rewarded with views of Indian grey hornbills and plum-headed parakeets. I found two Tickell's leaf warblers in the scrub. We were then taken to see at least 20 roosting flying foxes in the grounds. We had another good view of a hoopoe here, too.

We left the Lodge at 16.30 for the drive to Bharatpur. We had a brief stop in Agra at dusk to view the Taj Mahal – albeit from a great distance. A small bat species hunted the many mosquitos here, and many black kites soared over the city.

We arrived at the **Park Hotel in Bharatpur** at 19.05. After a quick rest we met our guide for the next few days, Hari Singh, and two other park guides, over dinner.

Sunday 4 December 2005

Looking out of the hotel window at first light, Indian peafowl and ring-necked parakeet were immediately obvious. Within the space of a few minutes I'd added Indian robin, red-vented bulbul, shikra and large-billed crow.

After an early breakfast, we said goodbye to Manoj who had to return to Delhi for business. We met Hari Singh at the **Keoladeo National Park** gates at 07.40, for a full day in the park.

Within seconds, we'd seen the first of several groups of rhesus macaques as they posed on the roadside.

We wandered into the scrub in search of a dusky eagle owl. We found one sitting on a nest, and nearby its mate gave much better views, roosting high in a tree. The first rufous treepie of the day showed well nearby. This was a fantastic start to the day.

Walking back to the car, a ring-necked parakeet posed for photographs in a shaft of sunlight, and we came across a mixed passerine flock that included red-vented and white-cheeked bulbuls, lesser whitethroat, black drongo and hoopoe.

Around the park buildings, we had great views of both large-billed and house crows and rock doves. There were several brahminy starlings here too. While waiting for the boat trip, we were treated to close views of Indian magpie robins and northern palm squirrels. A shikra shot through at high speed, but Rob missed it as he was photographing the squirrels.

The boat trip was fantastic. It was very relaxing and quiet, with superb views and the chance to get close to many amazing birds. The first of these was a white-throated kingfisher, that perched while we passed right below it.

Emerging onto the lake, both intermediate and great white egrets allowed us to approach close by, while we had great views of little cormorants and oriental darters. More familiar to us were moorhens, coots, little grebes and grey herons. The dominant birds, though, were the painted storks. Many pairs were still nesting, with lots of newly fledged young.



Great white egret, Bharatpur © Robert Oates



Painted storks, Bharatpur © Robert Oates

We were only on the boat for a short time, but also added Indian spotbills, bar-headed geese and great cormorants, plus a purple heron, spoonbill and black-headed ibis in flight.

On the islands were red-wattled lapwings, green sandpipers and a few Asian pied starlings. A greater coucal showed well on one island, and two black-rumped flamebacks on another were stunning additions to the list. Overhead there were many house swifts as well as both red-rumped and wire-tailed swallows. Shortly before returning to shore a pied kingfisher hunted briefly near the boat and white-breasted waterhen was seen.

Almost as soon as we had left the boat, Hari located one of the best birds of the trip. It took us a little while to spot it through a tangle of undergrowth, but we soon had reasonable views of a cracking greater painted-snipe. While watching this we had several other birds offering good photo opportunities: red-wattled lapwing, white-throated kingfisher and little cormorant. A bay-backed shrike perched more distantly.



Red-wattled lapwing, Bharatpur © Robert Oates



Indian darter, Bharatpur © Robert Oates

The rest of the morning was spent walking along a track between two large lakes, surrounded by an array of amazing birds. There were large mixed flocks of herons (including Indian pond herons), cormorants (including Indian cormorants), wildfowl and coots. We hardly knew where to look, and took endless photographs. One of the best birds was a huge black-necked stork.

It wasn't just birds either. There were good views of nilgai antelopes and spotted deer (or chital). More distant were a group of six wild boars on the far bank. Further along this path were encountered the first of several golden jackals in the park.

The trees and bushes along the pathside couldn't be ignored either, with chiffchaff and dusky warbler seen well, and several Indian pond herons, white-breasted waterhens and white-throated kingfishers perching in their lower branches. A hoopoe, a couple of greater coucals and a pair of black-rumped flamebacks showed well too.

Back on the water, further highlights included two lesser whistling ducks, three comb ducks in flight (although sadly Rob missed these and we failed to locate any more) and an Asian openbill flying over.

Eventually we reached a small gate to a village in the north-west corner of the park. Close to here, Hari took us to see our second owl species of the day. A group of eight spotted owlets stared down at us from their perch, unperturbed by a group of youths playing cricket nearby.

From here we retraced our steps back to where we had got off the boat. With the heat of midday building we paid less attention to the impressive waterfowl flocks, but enjoyed several good raptors.

One of several marsh harriers very obligingly perched for photographs close to the path. Two juvenile brahmyn kites that soared overhead with painted storks tested our identification skills. Much easier was a stunning adult crested serpent eagle. An adult Bonelli's eagle soared over too.

Continuing along this path, the scrub came into its own. A couple of bluethroats skulked on the ground, and booted, dusky and greenish warblers showed well. Easier to identify were a cracking immature golden oriole and two yellow-crowned woodpeckers. The latter joined a party of small minivets.



Marsh harrier, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe



Yellow-footed green pigeon, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe

For me, one of the best birds of the entire trip was yellow-footed green pigeon. Sadly we only saw one group of four, although they were very obliging. These were truly stunning birds, even better than they looked in the fieldguides.

This was a great finish to a long morning, and soon after that we reached the Bharatpur Ashok Hotel for lunch, and a short rest. Several grey francolins patrolled the grounds, giving good views.

After lunch we headed for the nursery area. First, though, we detoured in search of the day's third owl species. This was much shier than the first two, but we did get brief views of a collared scops owl before it retreated to its hole. Nearby, a second bird was similarly shy.

Around the nursery we had our first sightings of a colony of bees, forming an impressive semi-circular nest high in the branches. We were searching for passerines – always a challenge in the canopy. Two brown-headed barbets were noisily calling and eventually showed well. Their distinctive call sounded more like a monkey than a bird to me.

In the mid afternoon heat few passerines were around, but we did have good views of a verditer flycatcher. This superb pale blue-grey bird is apparently a good bird to find locally. Nearby, we searched unsuccessfully for roosting nightjars.

From the nursery we circled round a dry grassy and scrubby area where we added laughing dove before coming to a small pool near the village of Jatoli. This pool was productive, with cattle and little egrets, greenshank, redshank and red-wattled lapwings joined by a few white wagtails. Around the village were house sparrows and collared doves.

As the day was drawing to close, Hari took in search of our final target species for the day. This did take some searching for, and we had probably walked right underneath it without locating it. Eventually, another guide arrived and successfully found our fourth owl species of the day – a brown hawk owl.

Back at the hotel, we strolled around the garden after dinner in search of nightjars or bats, but had to be content with a pair of red-wattled lapwings that didn't appreciate being disturbed.

Monday 5 December 2005

Our second day at **Keoladeo** started with several good birds from the hotel. Best were flyover oriental darter, little cormorant and grey heron. In the garden I saw laughing dove, white-cheeked bulbul and large-billed crow.

We met Hari Singh at the park gates shortly after 07.40 and headed straight for the nursery. In the cool early morning there were a lot more birds around than the previous afternoon.

Near the park buildings we heard a common tailorbird singing but didn't try to locate it having been assured we'd "see lot's more" – we didn't. Hari called a purple sunbird flying over, but neither of us was prepared to tick it as we merely saw a small passerine.

An ashy drongo perched prominently on a tree top, with a black drongo nearby allowing a good comparison of these very similar species. A grey francolin showed well, as did Indian peafowl.

Lesser whitethroats were one of the most visible species in this area. Jungle babblers, common mynas, brahminy starlings and red-vented bulbuls also showed well, as did a rufous treepie.

Two brown-headed barbets called noisily again, and we located at least two coppersmith barbets in the same tree. From the size difference it's hard to believe these species are so closely related. A Hume's leaf warbler and at least two red-throated flycatchers flitted among the canopy. I briefly glimpsed a probable oriental white-eye but couldn't confirm the identification.

In a more scrubby area beyond the wall we had brief but good views of a cracking orange-headed thrush and the first of several grey-headed canary flycatchers. Adding to the varied colours we relocated yesterday's verditer flycatcher in a flock of small minivets. Nearby we successfully located two roosting large-tailed nightjars well camouflaged among the leaf litter. We also watched two golden jackals which obviously had a kill nearby.

Heading back towards Jatoli, we saw several lesser whitethroats, at least one bluethroat, a greenish warbler and another Hume's leaf warbler and red-throated flycatcher. Around the small pool were wood and green sandpipers, greenshank, black-winged stilt, cattle egret, Indian pond heron, white-throated kingfisher and at least three races of white wagtail (*M.a.alba*, *personata* and *dukhensis*).

Along the raised path around the park perimeter we had great views of a spotted owlet, plus an Indian magpie robin and another greenish warbler.

Hari Singh invited us back to his house for a mid morning cup of tea. Walking through Jatoli village, we felt that few of the western birdwatchers had probably entered before, as we attracted lots of glances from the villagers. Entering the village we saw Asian pied starlings and Indian robins.



Collecting water, Jatoli © Ian Barthorpe



Northern palm squirrel, Jatoli © Robert Oates

Sitting on the roof of Hari's house, enjoying the experience of a real Indian village, away from the trappings of the tourism industry, we also enjoyed some good wildlife. Several northern palm squirrels ran about the adjacent roofs. Our first brown rock chat showed extremely well in a nearby tree and

several bank mynas and house sparrows were here. We also added the first Egyptian vulture of the day.

Returning to the park we continued along the perimeter path. The dry woodland here was an excellent spot for flycatchers, with several sightings of three species: red-breasted, red-throated and grey-headed canary flycatchers. A small flock of olive-backed pipits fed in the leaf litter, while a group of long-tailed minivets flitted through the canopy.

We searched through an area of dry scrub, looking for stone-curlew without success, and also failing in our search for an Indian rock python that often used a porcupine hole. A sad sight here was the remains of an Indian peafowl that had probably been poached.

Soon we followed the main track back towards the wetland areas. Following a small stream we located a grey wagtail and flushed an Indian grey hornbill. Overhead a couple of Egyptian vultures soared and a few house swifts wheeled around.

As we reached the lakes again we paused for a snack with excellent views of a marshy area. A white-breasted waterhen fed nearby, and our first Indian roller showed well, if distantly, perched on a stick. Wildfowl here included Indian spotbill, teal, shoveler and ruddy shelduck. The first of several glossy ibises fed, with spoonbills and purple herons, among the egrets. A black-headed ibis was also seen, as were several nilgai and spotted deer.

Walking on, we were closely watched by a large group of rhesus macaques and a large bull nilgai emerged from the bushes within a few feet of us. A bay-backed shrike showed well.



Rhesus macaques, Bharatpur © Robert Oates



Nilgai, Bharatpur © Robert Oates

The shallow marshy areas here proved excellent for waders, with good views of little stints and little ringed plovers. Among them we picked out several paddyfield pipits, and a river kingfisher perched nearby.

Raptors showed well here, and we were rewarded with close views of booted and greater spotted eagles and marsh harriers.

As we headed back towards the middle of the park, the variety of wildfowl and waders increased further. One of the best waders was a lovely white-tailed lapwing among a mixed flock with spotted redshanks, marsh sandpipers and ruffs. While watching these waders we picked out several garganeys in a flock of pintails and teals.

Further across the marsh we picked out a small group of sarus cranes in the distance, then a stunning juvenile imperial eagle cruised low overhead.

When we reached the main central track, Hari pointed out a little (striated) heron feeding in the shadows of a ditch. The trackside trees had good numbers of Indian and great cormorants and a couple of Asian openbills.

Eventually, we reached the canteen area for lunch at 13.30. Our lunchbreak was far from quiet for birding, with both barn and wire-tailed swallows hawking around the trees. Jungle crows and northern palm squirrels provided good entertainment, and a pair of ring-necked parakeets nesting in the clearing performed well for the cameras.



Ring-necked parakeet, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe



View from Keoladeo Temple, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe

After lunch, we headed past the Keoladeo Temple to a narrow spit of land. This was a great area for night herons, with at least 23 roosting. On the spit, Hari pointed out an Indian rock python sleeping under a thorn bush. Several Indian roof turtles basked on overhanging branches here, too.

After a quick look at the small temple, we looked at another wetland area to the south-west. Several sambar deer showed well north of this track, as did a few whiskered terns. The best area, though, was south of the path.

A good flock of bar-headed geese fed close by, with several greylag geese among them. Gadwalls and Indian spotbills showed well. Slightly further away was a flock of about 80 common cranes, and an osprey flew over. Waders here included black-tailed godwits and some stunning views of Temminck's stints. As we were leaving, we located a lovely purple swamphen feeding nearby, then a fantastic tawny eagle drifted over, adding to our marvellous raptor list.



Bar-headed goose, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe



Purple swamp-hen, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe

The long walk back up the entrance track showed the park still had more to offer. A flock of small passerines included several plain prinias and a few chiffchaffs. Among the large colonies of storks and herons (mostly painted storks and spoonbills), we saw a few black-necked ibises and the day's only black-necked stork.

A few tufted ducks and little grebes fed in the shallows, but best of all were three cotton pygmy-geese. As a wildfowl fan, this was one of the species I most wanted to see, and although they were in eclipse plumage, I was pleased to get good views. A hoopoe and another two spotted owlets were found as the light faded, along with more golden jackals.

We eventually got back to the hotel at 17.30. Unfortunately, I then suffered a disturbed night's sleep due to a mild case of the notorious 'Delhi belly' – not helped by my dislike of most Indian food.

Tuesday 6 December 2005

On our final morning in **Bharatpur**, we again met Hari Singh at the park entrance at 07.45. We started with a short stroll around the Shanti Kutir Forest Office area in search of Tickell's thrush. Sadly, we were unable to find this lovely species, but we did see several forest birds. These included brown-headed barbets, Indian magpie robin, rufous treepie, and excellent views of a bluethroat. A hoopoe and a few plain prinias were here too.

We then took a rickshaw from the main park buildings towards the temple. A couple of piebush chats were close to the path, and soon we had the now familiar sight of painted storks and a variety of herons and other waterfowl.

I spotted a couple of cotton pygmy-geese again, in the same area as the previous evening. Shortly afterwards, we stopped to enjoy fantastic views of a juvenile pheasant-tailed jacana. Again, a breeding adult would have been preferred, but this was still a great bird to find.



Pheasant-tailed jacana, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe



Bronze-winged jacana, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe

Continuing along the main track, we added the usual mix of waterfowl, including spoonbills, little cormorants, Indian pond herons, oriental daters and great white egrets. Both white-throated and river kingfishers were seen too.

On reaching Keoladeo Temple, we turned east for several hundred metres before leaving the rickshaw to continue on foot towards the grassland areas. Walking through more shallow wetlands, the bushes contained red-vented bulbuls, brahmyny starlings, black drongos and the more familiar lesser whitethroats, while a few house swifts were overhead.

Purple herons and wood sandpipers were among the pick of the waterbirds until we spotted a distant white-tailed lapwing. A few whiskered terns hawked over the water, and we found the first common snipe. Soon we located our second juvenile jacana. This was a bronze-winged jacana, and like the pheasant-tailed it posed for photographs.

The first of three greater spotted eagles seen today was perched on a dead tree only a few hundred metres away, giving great views. Marsh harriers hunted around here, and a little later we saw a stunning steppe eagle to complete a great list of raptors for the park.

Herons here included glossy and black-headed ibises and cattle egrets, and soon we found a black-necked stork close to the track. Among the waders we found Temminck's stint, little ringed plover, black-tailed godwit and green sandpiper. This area had the largest flocks of coots, with several little grebes and a good variety of ducks among them, including a few garganeys. One of the best birds here was a river tern, which obligingly landed on an island.

As the amount of scrub increased, we found a greater coucal and several Asian pied starlings. We also heard a yellow-crowned woodpecker. Soon we spotted a group of bar-headed geese flying over, then located a stunning group of three sarus cranes, much closer than yesterday.

Eventually, we came to a dry grassland area where we were greeted by a group of common babblers. A yellow wagtail fed around a small pool and we could hear more sarus cranes. Another later flew low overhead.

On the dry grasslands we searched through the red-wattled lapwings and picked out several yellow-wattled and sociable lapwings. It was great to see the latter, as they are now such a rare bird globally. (Ironically, when we got home to England, we found out that one had turned up at RSPB Rainham Marshes in London). Other waders on the grassland included common and spotted redshanks, and a curlew.

A stunning Indian roller perched among the lapwings and grey francolins were seen here. While we scanned, Hari Singh searched the area on foot, looking unsuccessfully for the Indian coursers that had been here the day before. We had to content ourselves with lapwings, pipits and starlings. We managed to identify both long-billed and tawny pipits, but there may have been other species here too. A common starling completed the list of starlings and mynas for the trip.

All too soon we had to return to the rickshaw. As we did so, we scanned the coot flocks, picking out both pochard and red-crested pochard in the flock. Two greater spotted eagles caused havoc, and the black-necked stork gave even better views than earlier. Wire-tailed swallows hawked for insects.



Black-necked stork, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe



Indian pond heron, Bharatpur © Ian Barthorpe

As we returned to the park offices in the rickshaw, we took a last opportunity to enjoy the experience of Bharatpur's wetlands. Hopefully we'll get back there soon, and spend a bit longer next time as two and a half days was not enough to do it justice.

After thanking Hari Singh for all his help (we'd highly recommend him as a guide), we got into the taxi for the long drive to Jaipur, departing the park at 12.00. Our driver had instructions to stop for lunch and then at a lake for some birdwatching, but we had no guide with us for the afternoon.

Shortly after leaving the park we saw an Egyptian vulture perched at the roadside. The brickworks on the road to Jaipur were a fascinating example of local industry, but apart from mynas and crows there was little birdlife. As elsewhere in India, though, every tiny pool held either a red-wattled lapwing or black-winged stilt or two.

Lunch was at Hotel Ganguar (Mahua). This was obviously a main stop for tourists on the Agra – Jaipur road, serving a good selection of English as well

as Indian food – a welcome relief. The road, though, was of variable quality, and very poor in places. Our driver did a great job of avoiding the over-laden lorries and trailers, camel trains and cattle.

At 15.25 we arrived at the **Lake Palace Hotel, Kalkaho** for an hour's birdwatching. The hotel looked to be an impressive remnant from the Raj, but was actually built very recently. Without a guide, we were hoping we didn't find anything we couldn't identify. We need not have worried.

Water levels were low on the lake, so wildfowl numbers were low. The most numerous species were coots, pochards and tufted ducks. A few little grebes, shovelers, Indian spotbills and teals were present too. Four Asian openbills and an oriental darter were on the lake, but the only waders were a common sandpiper and a little ringed plover.

A cracking pair of yellow-crowned woodpeckers gave excellent views. As we returned through the hotel gardens, a small warbler flitted through some bushes. On closer inspection we identified this as a common tailorbird. Having failed to see one in the park, this was a great bird to find for ourselves, and it was soon joined by another. Even better, we then found an eclipse male purple sunbird nearby – another species we had missed in the park.

Other passerines in the gardens here included chiffchaff, black redstart, common babbler and house sparrow. Another purple sunbird, a female, was feeding on flowers in the more formal garden, while a white-browed wagtail strutted around the lawn.

We left Kalkaho at 16.35 and arrived at the **Arya Niwas hotel in Jaipur** at 18.20, where we contacted Harsh Vardhan to arrange to meet him the next morning.

Wednesday 7 December 2005

We had a more leisurely start this morning, meeting Harsh at the hotel at about 09.00. Perhaps predictably, the species seen while waiting in the city centre hotel garden were only rock dove, collared dove, house sparrow and ring-necked parakeet.

Our first stop today was **Man Sagar Lake**, on the outskirts of Jaipur. This is the site of the Indian Bird Fair, an event that Harsh helped to found. We viewed the lake from a high wall running along one end. The view was one of contrasts: desert hillsides behind the lake; an urban backdrop to our left; people living in tents amid the rubbish on the shore; yet some fantastic birding.



Man Sagar Lake scenic © Robert Oates



Marsh sandpiper, Man Sagar © Ian Barthorpe

Looking down from the wall we had great views of a wide range of waders. Not surprisingly, black-winged stilts and red-wattled lapwings were prominent among them. Wood, marsh and green sandpipers and little ringed plovers were easy to pick out, and we also found both redshank and greenshank. Soon we picked out a white-tailed lapwing, which Harsh assured us was a first record for the site.

The wader list continued to grow, and soon we had picked out little and Temminck's stints, Kentish plovers and ruff. Feeding among them were both white-browed and white wagtails. On the drier land we picked out a lovely desert wheatear, and a flock that certainly included paddyfield and tawny pipits, though there may have been others.

All this time, we had also been watching a growing flock of black kites, many of which settled on an island. Little egrets and grey herons fished in the shallows.

On the lake itself, we picked out a few coots, gadwalls and teals. More careful scanning revealed that a distant flock of diving ducks consisted of seven ferruginous ducks with a single female tufted duck.

There were passerines here too. Flocks of plain martins and red-rumped swallows hawked overhead. A pair of common mynas was nesting in a lamppost behind us, and common and Asian pied starlings fed nearby. Black drongos and red-vented bulbuls were not unexpected, while a southern grey shrike obligingly hunted for prey on the grassy bank, and a group of jungle babblers were on the rock face.

Man Sagar was a great place and should certainly be considered in a birdwatching itinerary in the Jaipur area. We had stayed here longer than intended when we finally left at 11.15.

As we drove back across Jaipur we finally saw our first little green bee-eaters as well as Indian roller. From here we followed the motorway west before heading north into the dry steppe-like country. We were surprised to see several nilgai in such dry areas: a contrast to Bharatpur's wetlands.

In this steppe country, the roads were narrow and sandy, and as we pulled over to let vehicles come through in the opposite direction we unfortunately picked up a puncture. While our driver changed the tyre, we took advantage of some birding. There were more little green bee-eaters and great views of a black-shouldered kite. Common babblers were widespread, while we saw several piebush chats in this area, as well as a long-tailed shrike.

Within a few miles of setting off again we picked up a second puncture. Despite being in the middle of nowhere, we were soon surrounded by an excited group of schoolboys who had just emerged from an English exam. While our driver hitched a lift to the nearest town to collect a new vehicle, we kept the children amused by showing them some little green bee-eaters in the telescope. We also saw two distant shikras here.



Black-shouldered kite © Ian Barthorpe



Birdwatching at Phulera Lake © Robert Oates

After a delay of about 45 minutes we were on our way in a new vehicle, and eventually reached **Phulera Lake (Mundia Freshwater)** at 14.20. There was a tiny patch of water in a very dry area, but around the pool we saw purple swamphen, white-throated kingfisher and black-tailed godwit.

The surrounding sandy saltpan was teeming with pipits, but we didn't spend time trying to identify them in the heat haze. Instead, we drove across the sand for better views of the remaining patches of water in the middle.

Despite the isolation we added a few more species here, including several avocets, shovelers, greylag geese and ruddy shelducks and 86 bar-headed geese. Less expected were five common shelducks (the only ones of the trip). A booted eagle sat on the sand caused some ID problems initially. The star bird here, though, was undoubtedly the Pacific golden plover picked out in the distance. A vagrant to this area, Harsh and Rob took some convincing of its ID.

After an hour, we moved to the nearby **Sambhar Wetlands**. This is a RAMSAR site for its wetland birds, and just a few weeks earlier Harsh had seen large flocks of pelicans here. When we arrived, though, it was dry salt pans as far as the eye could see.

We found a spot for lunch here, watching laughing doves and red-vented bulbuls while we ate. After lunch we drove across the sand to reach a small pool, which proved to be quite productive.

Several waders showed well here, including marsh and wood sandpipers, greenshanks, spotted redshanks, Temminck's stints, Kentish and little ringed plovers and black-tailed godwits, plus three curlews here. Rob and Harsh picked out a yellow-legged gull, while I saw a black-headed gull. Several pintails and shovelers were here, along with two pochards and a few little grebes.

Overhead there were several house swifts and a large flock of plain martins. Driving back across the salt pans we saw several red-rumped swallows and desert wheatears and a grey francolin.

From here we stopped at a small **pool near Phulera Lake**. This was immediately promising as the margins were lined with tall rushes and grasses – the first such pool we had found in the desert.



Vegetated desert pool near Phulera © Robert Oates



Cattle egret © Robert Oates

Rob was soon stalking an obliging cattle egret for photographs. As he did so, I picked out a gorgeous rufous-tailed (isabelline) shrike that came and landed close by. Although we didn't check its racial identity at the time, I think this was probably a Turkestan shrike (race *phoenicuroides*).

An impressive flock of 110 ruffs flew over, with a few other waders on the margins, notably little ringed plover and avocet. Little grebes were on the water.

This was an excellent spot for wagtails, and by the time we left we had identified both the *calcarata* and *citreola* races of citrine wagtail, white wagtail and a *melanogrisea* yellow wagtail. The vegetated margins held both ashy and plain prinias as well as Blyth's reed warblers and a bluethroat. In the surrounding scrub we found our only red collared dove among several of their more familiar cousins. There was a rufous treepie here too.

We left here at 17.55 just as it was getting dark.

A couple of hours later we arrived at Harsh's house in Jaipur for a much needed cup of tea. As we had several hours until our train departed, Manoj took us out for the evening to a local theme park called **Chokhi Dhoni**.

If you're looking for some evening entertainment in Jaipur this is certainly recommended. It's a replica of a traditional village fete with food stalls, dancers, magicians and other attractions. We enjoyed a good meal, before returning to the house. As we left to drive to the station at 23.40, two spotted owlets were calling outside: a nice bonus in the city.

We took the overnight **sleeper train from Jaipur to Phalodi**. It eventually left the station at 01.10, and we managed to get a few hours sleep.

Thursday 8 December 2005

The last few hours of the journey, once the sun had risen, allowed us to enjoy some interesting wildlife and views of our first proper sand dunes. Predictably, the easiest birds to see included rock and collared doves, house sparrows, house crows and bank mynas, with several black drongos perched on overhead wires.

Any pools and ditches contained the usual black-winged stilts, plus several Indian pond herons and cattle egrets, while Indian peafowls were in many of the villages.

The first really notable birds of the day were a few demoiselle cranes flying in the distance, and we enjoyed good views of both nilgai and Indian gazelle close to the track. One or two desert wheatears in the dunes were, fortunately, seen while the train was stationary, as were a few laughing doves. Two raptors were seen from the train: a stunning black-shouldered kite and an impressive steppe eagle.

The train arrived in **Phalodi** at 09.50, where we were met by our taxi driver who took us to the **Sunshine Hotel**. This was a more basic hotel than others we had used, but served our needs. Little green bee-eaters on the balcony were a bonus. After freshening up and a quick breakfast, were left again at 11.15.

As we headed out into the desert, several black kites and an Indian roller were noted. On the road towards Lohawat, it wasn't long before we noted the first vultures soaring overhead. As we moved closer for better views, it was obvious that they were feeding nearby.

Egyptian vultures were the most numerous, but bigger species included cinereous (black) vultures and a *Gyps* species. Harsh identified these as long-billed vultures, though since returning home we've discovered that this species has not been seen locally for several years following their population crash. We think they were probably Eurasian griffon vultures. A few steppe eagles joined the soaring vultures too.

Whilst watching these raptors, we were joined by pied bushchats in the roadside scrub, with both desert and variable wheatears in the fields. A purple sunbird fed briefly close to the car, and both Indian roller and kestrel perched on overhead wires. The former allowed us to take several photographs of this stunningly colourful bird.



Variable wheatear © Robert Oates



Indian roller © Ian Barthorpe

We tried to find the feeding vultures, driving off road through a dispersed village, eventually locating the dead cow on which they were feeding. We approached as close as we could for some good photo opportunities.

Driving across the desert, we flushed several larks, but only one allowed identification: an ashy-crowned sparrow-lark . Other birds here included hoopoe , common babblers , red-vented bulbuls and more variable wheatears .

Eventually we moved on, stopping at a **Bishnoy Temple** for lunch. The monks here feed the Indian gazelles and several of these beautiful little antelopes grazed nearby while we ate in the shelter of the temple buildings.

After lunch we strolled around the temple's reservoir. A stunning shikra soared overhead, giving Rob his best views of this small hawk. The scrub was quiet save for a small flock of chestnut-shouldered petronias . These are surprisingly attractive sparrows with their yellow throat patch. An Indian peafowl and a black redstart completed the birds here.

On leaving the temple, we stopped at a couple of roadside pools and villages. Waders included black-winged stilts , red-wattled lapwings , greenshank and green sandpiper . These were joined by gadwall and little grebe on one pool.

A small warbler initially defied identification, but later that evening, having spent time consulting the fieldguides, we were both confident that it had been a Sykes's warbler (formerly considered to be the *rama* race of booted warbler). A highlight was a colony of Indian desert gerbils adjacent to the road, allowing close viewing. A grey francolin was also seen.

We returned to the temple at 15.45 to watch the gazelles being fed. This was an incredible experience, watching several completely wild Indian gazelles feeding on grain just a few metres away. We took the opportunity to run off

many photos of them, plus the attendant Indian peafowl and a large flock of rock doves. We left the temple at 16.20.



Indian gazelle, Bishnoy temple © Robert Oates



Indian gazelle in desert © Robert Oates



Indian gazelle, Bishnoy temple © Ian Barthorpe



Indian peafowl, Bishnoy temple © Ian Barthorpe

At 16.40 we arrived on the outskirts of **Khichan** village to be greeted by a huge flock of demoiselle cranes. These are beautiful birds, and the sight of about 3000 feeding so close to the village was awe-inspiring. As we stood on the bank of the small reservoir, the birds seemed oblivious to the comings and goings of villagers and their sheep and dogs. Only a running camel caused any panic.

The evening light was wonderful, allowing us to take many fantastic photographs with the grey and black birds contrasting beautifully with the reddish sand.



Demoiselle cranes, Khichan © Robert Oates



Demoiselle cranes, Khichan © Ian Barthorpe

On the reservoir, small wildfowl flocks included teal, shoveler and pintail, plus little grebes. As well as the usual black-winged stilts and red-wattled lapwings, we found a Temminck's stint on the shore, while both plain martins and red-rumped swallows fed overhead.

As the light began to fade, we headed into the village to see the site where the cranes are fed by villagers. Seeing the walled paddock surrounded by buildings on three sides (with the fourth open to the dunes) it seemed impossible that the cranes would actually come into the village in the morning. We returned to the hotel at 17.50.

An evening safari into the desert in search of owls and mammals was unsuccessful. Harsh and I spotted a fox species in the distance and Harsh saw a barn owl, but the trip was cut short when we had to dig the jeep out of soft sand by torchlight.

Friday 9 December 2005

An early start saw us back in **Khichan** for 07.00. It was surprisingly cool in the early hours. We were invited to sit on the roof of a family house to await the cranes, while a Swiss birdwatching group used a building on the opposite side of the paddock. Our hosts were very enthusiastic about their cranes, clearly recognising the benefits to the village of seeing visiting birdwatchers.

As the sun began to rise, the demoiselle cranes gathered in the nearby dunes. Their long shadows on the red sand were worth seeing in their own right. The cranes initially seemed reluctant to come into the feeding area, but a large flock of rock doves took advantage of the free grain, along with collared doves and Indian peafowls.

Eventually the cranes began to approach closer until the first one entered the paddock. Soon we were watching in amazement as most of the 3000 cranes crowded into the paddock just a few metres from us. Neither words nor our many photographs can really do justice to this incredible sight. Bizarre was a regularly used adjective to describe the experience. We would recommend this to anyone contemplating a trip to this part of India.



Demoiselle cranes at feeding station, Khichan © Robert Oates



Demoiselle crane, Khichan © Ian Barthorpe



Demoiselle crane feeding station, Khichan © Ian Barthorpe

Before leaving Khichan, we were also treated to excellent views of brown rock chat and white-cheeked bulbul. We returned to the hotel for a quick breakfast. Looking out from the balcony of our room, I was rewarded by close views of several little green bee-eaters on wires and a shikra on a telegraph post. Both species were digiscoped.



Little green bee-eaters, Phalodi © Ian Barthorpe



Shikra, Phalodi © Ian Barthorpe

At 09.40 we left for a long drive in search of vultures at a known feeding sight. Crossing the desert between Phalodi and Bikaner, we were able to see several passerines from the car. These included black redstart, black drongo, southern grey shrike, variable and desert wheatears and the ubiquitous house crows. A couple of common ravens showed well, and we also located common babblers, bank mynas and our only crested lark.

Raptors were to be a feature of the day. The first was a steppe eagle, soon followed by a couple of peregrines of the race babylonicus (barbary falcon) and kestrels. At a dead cow we found a few Egyptian vultures and two red-headed vultures.

At a wetland on the edge of **Bikaner**, we saw white-throated kingfishers, black-winged stilts, red-wattled lapwings and green, wood and common sandpipers, while a few plain martins fed overhead.

Eventually, we reached the site of a huge **dead animal dump outside Bikaner** where we were blown away by the sight of huge flocks of vultures and eagles.

As we drove into the dump, we estimated there to be at least 300 Egyptian vultures, at least 200 Gyps vultures and at least 50 cinereous (black) vultures. Again, since returning home we have discovered that the Gyps vultures were all Eurasian griffons, not the long-billed vultures that we had hoped they were. (Our photos later confirmed the ID after comments from RSPB researchers that the latter had not been seen near Bikaner for several years.)



Cinereous (black) vulture, Bikaner © Robert Oates



Eurasian griffon vultures, Bikaner © Robert Oates



Egyptian vulture, Bikaner © Ian Barthorpe



Eurasian griffon vulture, Bikaner © Ian Barthorpe

We climbed on top of the jeep and drove into the middle of the dump, allowing us many incredible photo opportunities of vultures resting in trees or on the ground, or scavenging the bones and carcasses of hundreds of dead cows, goats and camels. The stench was almost unbearable in the heat, and we had to remain wary of the many feral dogs, but we were mesmerised by the impressive vulture flocks.

Vultures were far from the only birds here though. At least 40 tawny eagles mixed freely with the flocks, and we also located a few steppe and greater spotted eagles among them. There were surprisingly few black kites, and they left as soon as we reached the site.

We were slightly surprised to find a few herons in the throng: a cattle egret and at least two black ibises. Passerines included a few black drongos, a southern grey shrike, three desert wheatears, and a few starlings: common myna, brahminy starling and common starling. Two grey francolins fed close by.

Eventually we had to draw ourselves away as we had a long return journey to make. We stopped at a nearby level crossing to enjoy our lunch in the shade of the railwayman's hut. The adjacent pool held moorhen, coot, black-winged stilt, red-wattled lapwing, greenshank, green and wood sandpipers, with more plain martins hunting overhead.

As we were preparing to leave, we located a Bonelli's eagle soaring over the dump, then finally managed to find our first long-legged buzzard. This proved to be the final new bird of the trip for both of us. We subsequently spotted another soaring near the roadside on the long drive back to Phalodi. Otherwise, the return journey was fairly uneventful.

We returned to the hotel at 17.35, giving us time for a quick break before arriving at the station at 18.40. Unfortunately, the train was late departing, eventually leaving at 20.15.

Saturday 10 December 2005

After a relatively sleepless night, the **train** arrived in Jaipur at about 06.00. Harsh left us here, and we continued to Delhi. The train was due to arrive at about 12.00, which would have allowed us to spend a few hours back at Okhla Barrage for a final afternoon's birdwatching.

Unfortunately, after several delays, we eventually arrived at **Delhi Main station, Old Delhi** at 17.15, just as the light was fading. Although this was obviously a disappointing way to end the trip it did serve as a reminder that in many countries it is worth having a spare day at the end of a holiday to allow for transport delays.

Despite the frustration of losing our last afternoon, we did see several good birds from the train. Raptors were represented by a kestrel, shikra and black-shouldered kite, and as we approached Delhi by the almost ubiquitous black kites.

In the pools and ditches, we saw the expected black-winged stilts and red-wattled lapwings, plus a few moorhens and a female shoveler. In the fields we watched cattle egrets and Indian peafowls.

After a few days in the desert, it was good to see ring-necked parakeets again, with further colour added by little green bee-eaters, Indian roller and long-tailed shrike. A brown rock chat was a good find on one station, while black drongos, house crows, bank mynas and house sparrows were more predictable.

After such a long train journey our taxi driver battled through the Delhi rush hour to take us back to the **Westend Hotel**, where we were glad of the chance of a shower.

Sunday 11 December 2005

Our taxi driver picked us up at 08.50 for the short drive to **Delhi International Airport**. Our flight departed on time at 12.50, and we enjoyed superb views of the deserts of Pakistan and Afghanistan from the plane, with the Himalayas in the distance. We landed at Heathrow at 16.50 GMT, then took a train back to Biggleswade after an extremely enjoyable trip.

Species totals

198 bird species (plus 3 possibles, plus 3 seen/heard by guides only, plus several races of wagtails)

Of these, about half were new species for both us.

12 mammal species (plus 3 unidentified, plus one dead only)

5 reptiles

4+ butterfly species, including striped tiger and common crow

(See attached list for details)

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West End Inn, N.H.#8, New Delhi (Tel: 011 251166666)
The Park, Opp. Keoladeo National Park Gate, Bharatpur (Tel: 05644 233192)
Arya Niwas, Snsar Chandra Road, Jaipur (Tel: 0141 2372456)
Hotel Sunrise, near power House, Phalodi (Tel: 02925 223412)

Guides:

Manoj Vardhan - at Okhla Barrage, Chambal River and journeys from Delhi to Chambal via Agra and Chambal to Bharatpur

Hari Singh – in Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur (contact details: Hari Singh, Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur (Raj) 321001 India.
Harsh Vardhan – at Man Sagar and desert sites between Jaipur, Phalodi and Bikaner

About us

Ian Barthorpe is Marketing and Publicity Officer for the RSPB, based at Minsmere, Suffolk

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