

FIVE DAY BIRDING TOUR – FEBRUARY/ MARCH 2006

By Derek Coleman

This five day tour between Monday 27th February and Friday 3rd March was arranged by email with Thomas (info@birdskerala.com) and consisted of Duncan Hines and myself.

MONDAY

We were collected from our hotel in Kochi at 6:00am and set off for Thattekkad. After a drive of just over two hours, we met Eldhose at the jetty, completing our journey to Hornbill Camp along the River Periyar by boat. Within minutes of arrival, we were watching a very confiding Indian Pitta that was present every morning around the camp. After breakfast, we set off birding in a nearby open forest area and had excellent views of Blyth's Pipit, Banded Bay Cuckoo and two roosting Mottled Wood Owls. Like us, they were finding it hot and we could see their white throats ventilating trying to keep them cool. After a tea stop, we drove to an area of secondary plantation in search of Drongo Cuckoo, which we saw, along with Streak-throated Woodpecker. We returned to Hornbill Camp for lunch seeing Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker on the way. After lunch, we entered the Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary where a Grey-bellied Cuckoo gave excellent views around the Bird Sanctuary buildings along with a roosting Collared Scops Owl. We walked into the Bird Sanctuary to the roosting site of Sri Lankan Frogmouth. A pair of birds was sitting next to each other forming a cross in scrub with many dead leaves affording excellent camouflage. We then waited at the nest of a Crimson-backed Sunbird to see the adults return to feed their young chick. A forest walk produced Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Heart-spotted Woodpecker, Dark-fronted Babbler and even better views of Drongo Cuckoo. At the end, a Dollarbird was sitting on some telegraph wires above a busy street. We returned to Hornbill Camp for 'armchair birding' waiting for birds coming to roost: a Large-billed Leaf Warbler in waterside vegetation and about one hundred Asian Openbills to an island on the opposite bank.

TUESDAY

After an early breakfast, we drove about 15km to the dam at Edamalayar for a forest trek. The highlight was good views of male and female White-bellied Flycatcher with supporting cast that included Besra, Changeable Hawk-eagle, Vernal Hanging Parrot, White-bellied Woodpecker, Malabar Parakeet, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Lesser Yellownappe and Western Crowned Warbler. On our return to the dam, White-rumped Needletail and Crested Treeswift were hawking overhead. We returned to Hornbill Camp for a late lunch and afternoon siesta. Mid afternoon we set off to a marshy pool where we saw Watercock and a short walk along the River Periyar revealed River Tern, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater and Green Imperial Pigeon. In the car-park, we saw 'White-headed Starling' that Eldhose informed us has recently been recognised as a new species which was resident while the Chestnut-tailed Starling, which we had already seen, was a winter visitor.

WEDNESDAY

Another early start entailed waking up the staff at the Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary to purchase our permits! Once equipped, we had a short excursion to see Grey-headed Bulbul before a more serious forest trek that lasted to early afternoon but was well rewarded. During the trek, we had several good views of both Rusty-tailed and Brown-breasted Flycatcher enabling us to get to grip with their identification. Other birds seen included Crested Goshawk, Malabar Trogon, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, White-bellied Tree-pie, Large-billed Leaf-Warbler and Western Crowned Warbler. We had been unsuccessful in locating Wynadd Laughing Thrush so after our midday siesta, we followed a stream in another attempt but this endemic was to elude us. In the early evening, we departed by boat from Hornbill Camp downstream. Once on dry land in the Bird Sanctuary, we saw a male Blue-throated Flycatcher before the sun set when a Great-eared Nightjar flew over to its feeding ground and two Jerdon's Nightjar briefly hawked around us. A tape luring and spot lighting session was spectacularly successful with a perching Oriental Scops Owl and a flight view of a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl.

THURSDAY

We departed after breakfast for Munnar breaking our journey at some paddy fields near Kothamangalam. Amongst a flock of White-rumped Munia, there were several Black-throated Munia. After sampling the local toddy, we continued and checked into High Ridge County Hotel, which is like entering a time warp to colonial times. Before lunch, we visited two sholas (the stunted evergreen forest just below the tree-line) and saw Nilgiri Flycatcher, Black and Orange Flycatcher, Blue-capped Rock-thrush, Grey-breasted Laughing Thrush and White-bellied Shortwing. After lunch at the Hotel, we watched Tickell's Leaf Warbler at a shola that was more extensive and at a higher altitude. We then visited an area of reedy grassland just above the sholas, which must have been a very extensive habitat at one time but now is being burnt on a regular basis. On neighbouring hills we could see large areas that had been burnt. In this area, we had excellent views of Broad-tailed Grassbird. Eldhose informed us that it was the only area that he knew near Munnar that still held this rare endemic. It would seem that unless attempts are made to restrict burning, then this bird could be in serious trouble. We retraced our journey to another shola where we watched Nilgiri Wood Pigeon. An amazing day (6 of the 16 endemics) was rounded off by watching Indian Swiftlets coming to roost making clicking sounds amongst other calls.

FRIDAY

Before breakfast, we soon obtained excellent views of Nilgiri Wood Pigeon and Tytler's Leaf Warbler as we walked through a shola on our way to the tops, which needless to say had been burnt. After over an hour searching, Eldhose eventually managed to find our quarry, a pair of Nilgiri Pipits in a small area that had escaped the burning. It was clear that burning was to their detriment and other birds since we saw little else. After breakfast, we visited several areas in an unsuccessful search for Painted Bush Quail. Driving through one tea plantation we had excellent views of a Hill Swallow perching on a fence next to the road. We returned to the Hotel for a late lunch and then set off for the four hour return journey to Kochi. I personally saw 157 species (128 at Thattekkad and 43 at Munnar). Inevitably, I did not see every species and missed Indian Blue Robin, Puff-throated Babbler, Rufous Babbler and Crimson-throated Barbet. I had seen the last two species on previous trips and at the time was watching another bird that I wanted to see. At times, you really did not know what to look at! An amazing and very enjoyable trip during which, between us, we saw 14 of the 16 endemics. We obtained excellent views of them all, except Wynaad Laughing Thrush, which eluded us and Nilgiri Laughing Thrush, which is found further north. We would not have seen nearly as many species but for Eldhose's field skills and local knowledge. He took us to areas where he knew the target species was present and usually quickly located it by hearing the call. We were constantly exhorted to 'come' followed by 'very clear'. Our thanks to Eldhose, Kumar, our driver, and the back room boys at Hornbill Camp, who were always capable of producing a sumptuous meal on our arrival. (derek.coleman@hotmail.co.uk)

	Thattekkad	Kothamangalam	Munnar
Oriental Darter	*		
Great Cormorant	*		
Little Cormorant	*		
Great White Egret	*		
Intermediate Egret	*		
Little Egret	*		
Cattle Egret	*		*
Purple Heron	*		
Indian Pond-Heron	*		*
Asian Openbill	*		
Lesser Whistling-Duck	*		
Oriental Honey-buzzard	*		*
Black Kite	*		
Brahminy Kite	*		

Besra	*		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk			*
Crested Goshawk	*		
Common Buzzard			*
Changeable Hawk-Eagle	*		
Rufous-bellied Eagle	*		
Crested Serpent-Eagle	*		
Red Spurfowl	*		
Grey Junglefowl	*		
Common Moorhen			*
Watercock	*		
Purple Gallinule	*		
Bronze-winged Jacana	*		
Red-wattled Lapwing	*	*	
River Tern	*		
Whiskered Tern	*		
Spotted Dove	*		*
Emerald Dove	*		
Pompadour Green Pigeon	*		
Green Imperial Pigeon	*		
Mountain Imperial Pigeon	*		
Rock Dove	*		*
Nilgiri Wood Pigeon			*
Plum-headed Parakeet	*		
Malabar Parakeet	*		
Rose-ringed Parakeet	*		
Vernal Hanging-Parrot	*		
Common Hawk-Cuckoo	*		
Drongo Cuckoo	*		
Banded Bay Cuckoo	*		
Grey-bellied Cuckoo	*		
Asian Koel	*		
Greater Coucal	*		
Sri Lanka Frogmouth	*		
Great Eared-Nightjar	*		
Jerdon's Nightjar	*		
Mottled Wood-Owl	*		
Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl	*		
Collared Scops-Owl	*		
Oriental Scops-Owl	*		
Jungle Owlet	*		
Indian Swiftlet			*
White-rumped Needletail	*		
Asian Palm-Swift	*		
Alpine Swift			*
House (Little) Swift	*		
Crested Treeswift	*		
Indian Roller	*		

Dollarbird	*		
Malabar Trogon	*		
White-throated Kingfisher	*		*
Pied Kingfisher	*		
Blue-tailed Bee-eater	*		
Green Bee-eater	*	*	
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	*		
Blue-bearded Bee-eater	*		
White-cheeked Barbet	*		*
Eurasian Hoopoe			*
Malabar Grey-Hornbill	*		
Streak-throated Woodpecker	*		
Lesser Yellownap	*		
Black-rumped Flameback	*		
Common Flameback	*		
White-bellied Woodpecker	*		
Heart-spotted Woodpecker	*		
Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	*		
Common Iora	*		
Eurasian Golden-Oriole	*		
Black-naped Oriole	*		
Black-hooded Oriole	*		
Indian Pitta	*		
Dusky Crag-Martin	*		*
Red-rumped Swallow	*		*
Hill Swallow			*
Ashy Woodswallow	*		
Black Drongo		*	
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	*		
Ashy Drongo	*		*
Bronzed Drongo	*		
Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike	*		
Large Woodshrike	*		
Long-tailed Shrike			*
Chestnut-tailed Starling	*	*	
White-headed Starling	*		
Common Myna	*	*	
Jungle Myna		*	*
Southern Hill Myna	*		
Rufous Treepie	*		
White-bellied Treepie	*		
House Crow	*		*
Large-billed Crow	*		*
Large Cuckooshrike	*		
Scarlet Minivet	*		
Black Bulbul			*
Yellow-browed Bulbul	*		
Red-whiskered Bulbul	*		*

Red-vented Bulbul	*		
Black-crested Bulbul	*		
Grey-headed Bulbul	*		
Dark-fronted Babbler	*		
Jungle Babbler	*		
Brown-cheeked Fulvetta	*		
Grey-breasted Laughingthrush			*
Brown-breasted Flycatcher	*		
Asian Brown Flycatcher	*		
Rusty-tailed Flycatcher	*		
Black-and-orange Flycatcher			*
Nilgiri Flycatcher			*
White-bellied Blue-Flycatcher	*		
Blue-throated Flycatcher	*		
Asian Paradise-Flycatcher	*		
Black-naped Monarch	*		
Plain Prinia			*
Broad-tailed Grassbird			*
Thick-billed Warbler	*		
Blyth's Reed-Warbler	*		*
Common Tailorbird	*		
Tytler's Leaf-Warbler			*
Tickell's Leaf-Warbler			*
Large-billed Leaf-Warbler	*		
Greenish Warbler	*		*
Western Crowned-Warbler	*		
Oriental Magpie-Robin	*		
Pied Bushchat			*
Blue-capped Rock-Thrush			*
Malabar Whistling-Thrush	*		
Orange-headed Thrush	*		
White-bellied Shortwing			*
Eurasian Blackbird			*
Great Tit	*		
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch	*		*
Blyth's Pipit	*		
Nilgiri Pipit			*
White-browed Wagtail	*		
Grey Wagtail	*		*
Oriental White-eye			*
Crimson-backed Sunbird	*		
Loten's Sunbird	*		
Plain Flowerpecker	*		
White-rumped Munia		*	
Black-throated Munia		*	
House Sparrow			*
Common Rosefinch			*