

## TRIP REPORTS

### **Thattekkad Birding Trip Report , August 18-19, 2004 by K Koshy**

I spent two days (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> August 2004) of intensive birding at Thattekkad, Salim Ali Sanctuary and the nearby areas like Kutampuzha, Bhoothathankettu, Keerampara and Edamalyar in Idukki and Ernakulam Districts of Kerala, India. The tour was arranged by M/s [Kalypso Adventures](#), Kochi on whose suggestion I decided, and rightly so, to spend two full days in the region rather than the one-day trip I had originally planned.

Started early from Kochi on a taxi from Greenlands arranged by Commander Thomas of the [Kalypso Adventures](#) with the young and educated (Graduate in Computer Science!) driver Jeevan around 6.30 AM, comfortably covering the 60 miles in an hour and a half with stopover at Kothamangalam for breakfast at a local tea shop.

Thattekkad Sanctuary is situated in a natural delta formed by two branches of River Periyar, which is crossed by a strange contraption they call Jangar boat. It is actually three dugouts with an enormous wooden platform secured together with ropes and powered by a diesel motor much like the ones used for irrigation pumps in North India. Though we were told that the car, a modest Tata Indica, could be driven on to the platform and ferried across the river, the approach to the boat proved to be quite formidable and we decided to leave it, like many others before us near the ferry, unattended, and as per locals quite safe. In any event, we endured the crossing inhaling a good dose of diesel fumes from the motor with no little trepidation. Mercifully, the Forest Inspection Bungalow where the Chief Conservator of Forest Mr. Varghese had booked accommodation for me turned out to be close by and we trudged the 200 yards with our luggage and equipment.

Rooms are stark, though clean and comfortable and the staff including the forest guard and the DFO very co-operative and resourceful. The Watchman cum cook, Stephen is truly heaven sent and produced delectable food and served it with a smile and numerous anecdotes about the forest life.

The Sanctuary is spread over 25 square KMs and boasts of a museum and viewing towers. The entire area is well protected and the jungle is allowed to exist with as little human interference as possible. But according to the guide, the birds do not seem to be aware of the exact boundaries of the Sanctuary and they tend to frequent the neighbouring areas as much as the sanctuary itself. As a result most of the bird sightings were made outside the Sanctuary area and this is where a local guide become absolutely necessary.

For those like me who are not used to birding in thick monsoon forests, spotting birds among the thick foliage is an added problem. My guide had a keen ear for bird calls (He never had a binocular for 10 years!) and he hears the birds first and then spots them. Walking in the thick jungle on a sunny day (read *hot*) can be very exhausting and intake of large quantities of water is recommended, both before start and during the walks. (Carry packaged water as the local water is hard and can have unpredictable effects on your stomach).

Kuttampuzha off the Sanctuary was our first destination where we had a fantastic close view of a crested serpent eagle who obliged us by turning his head several times as if to show off his crest. We also saw a large number of Malabar parakeets, lorikeets as well as leafbirds and iora. The jungle was agog with the calls of racket tailed drongos justifying the local name *Kaadumuzhakki* which means *squabble raiser*.

Keerampara on the other side of the River too yielded a large number of birds including Crested tree swift, Asian Palm swift, three variety of woodpeckers and two of Babblers. Four types of Sunbirds, Black hooded oriole, bronzed drongo and some waders were the other attractions.

We spent the maximum time in the Sanctuary looking for the Sri Lanka Frogmoth, which was high on my wish list, but they refused to oblige. However, in case of the mottled owl pair, our persistence paid dividend and they gave us magnificent views on perch as well as in flight, kind courtesy the harassing crows. Dollarbird and the Malabar whistling thrush which were also on my list were easier to view at Edamalyar. Atop the hillock above the dam at Edamalyar (550 m above sea level) we were lucky to see many birds including the Brown backed needletail and Indian swiftlets and unlucky enough to donate blood to leeches.

In all over 100 species, including the following, many or which were firsts for me.

1. Mottled wood owl (1 pair seen after several attempts at Thattekkad)
2. Grey headed bulbul 4
3. Rusty tailed flycatcher 2
4. Malabar Trogon male and female
5. Malabar Parakeets (Plenty)
6. Lorikeet (plenty)
7. Black rumped falmeback (several)
8. Common flameback (several)
9. Greater falmeback
10. Heart spotted woodpecker (several more heard than seen)
11. Rufous woodpecker
12. Black hooded oriole
13. Loten's sunbird
14. Crimson backed sunbird
15. Purple rumped sunbird
16. Purple sunbird
17. Common kingfisher (not so uncommon in Kerala)
18. White throated kingfisher
19. Stork billed kingfisher
20. Indian roller
21. Malabar pied hornbill
22. Malabar grey hornbill
23. Brown cheeked fulvetta
24. Green bee eater (plenty)
25. Common hawke cuckoo
26. Asian palm swift
27. Crested tree swift
28. Crested serpent eagle (gave us a really close and nice view, a pity I did not take my camera for fear of rains!)
29. Imperial green pigeon
30. Emerald dove
31. Moorhens both purple and common
32. Jerdon's nightjar (heard calling near Thattekkad Forest IB, from midnight to early morning )
33. Jungle owlet
34. Great eared nightjar
35. White rumped needletail
36. Dusky crag martin
37. White cheeked barbet
38. Black throated munia
39. Scaly breasted munia
40. Nilgiri whistling thursh
41. Basra eagle
42. Black napped monarch
43. Little spider hunter
44. Rufous babbler
45. Greater racket tailed drongo
46. Shikra
47. Wistling ducks (5 flying across the river Periyar at Thattkkad ferry)
48. Purple heron
49. Rufous tree pie

50. White billed tree pie
51. Bronzed drongo
52. Jungle myna
53. Yellow browed bulbul
54. Grey headed bulbul
55. Puff throated babbler
56. Yellow billed babbler
57. Golden fronted leafbird
58. Grey jungle fowl
60. Pied kingfisher
61. Brahminy kites (several over backwaters in Kochi)

(Complete list available with me)

One aspect of Forest management at Thattekkad deserves mentioning. Thattekkad is really God's special gift to Kerala and birders all over the world. However, it has not received the publicity it deserves. A few private persons like Commander Thomas is doing their best to promote the site, but sadly, neither the Wildlife Department of Kerala nor the Tourism Department have done enough in this direction. It is really a pity. The area holds potentials for attracting at least a few thousand birders from the world over, but no birding magazine I have seen carry even a single report or even advertisement about this birding haven. Indiscriminate felling of natural flora and worse still, the replacement of natural native species with exotic and commercial plants like teak, manjium and eucalyptus are adversely affecting the natural avifauna. The Forest Department would do well to restore at least partly valuable native trees like *Kulamavu (machyllus macarantha)* and *Anjili (arthocarpus hirufta)*.

The tired but very satisfied duo of myself and Jeevan returned to Kochi at dusk on the 19<sup>th</sup> full of sweet memories and promises to visit the area again in the winters which is the best season for birding in Kerala.

Tips for birders planning to go to Kerala

1. It is better to visit during November to March
2. As for accommodation at Thattekkad, there is the [Hornbill Camp](#) run by Kalypso which starts operations from October through May every year (corresponding to the birding season)
3. Be prepared for leeches. Carry a bottle of diesel and K.Oil mixture to be smeared on legs and hands as a preventive measure and also sufficient quantities of salt or slacked lime to get rid of them.
4. Light clothing would do as even in December, the thick monsoon forests can be humid and warm.
5. Get a guide if possible.
6. See the birds first with your ears as they are barely visible in the thick foliage without the aid of ears.
7. Spotting scope will be great help.
8. Good locations are Thattekkad, Munnar, and hills near Coimbatore.

Happy birding

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