

Bangalore to Kochi

India Birding Trip with Kalypso Adventures

7 to 18 January 2008



By Usha and Colin Hull

When my husband Colin and I decided to take a birding trip to south India we researched many companies, both for expertise in birding as well as reasonable accommodation at value for money prices. It was Colin's first trip to India and although I was born in India, having since lived all over the world and often visited north India, I had never been to the south. So for both of us, this trip was a first. Colin, a scientist, is a keen birdwatcher in Britain, and I, a journalist, have been learning about birdwatching since our marriage eighteen months ago and have found it increasingly fascinating and rewarding. Although we were familiar with many European birds, most of what we expected to see in India would be completely new.

For accommodation, we considered heritage hotels and guesthouses that were clean and comfortable, with most westernised and modern amenities, but not exorbitantly priced. These properties often had a great deal of character and evoked a real sense of nostalgia for the past.

The only company for south India we could find that met all these criteria, such as expertise, comfort and attention to detail, as well as value for money prices, was Kalypso Adventures. From the start, Commander Thomas, the executive director of the company, looked at what we wanted and drew us up an itinerary that was tailor-made to our own requirements.

Once we had decided on Kalypso Adventures a series of emails followed during which we specified a mix of birdwatching as well as some sightseeing and shopping. We also requested a night on a kettu valum (rice boat) on the backwaters of Kerala as I had read somewhere that this is one of the one hundred things one must do before one dies. To all our questions and requests Commander Thomas responded promptly and courteously.

Kalypso offered an 8-day tour of endemic birds, which would start at Kochi and end at Bangalore. However, as I had relatives to visit in north India, we preferred to visit them first then start at Bangalore and end at Kochi. This wasn't a problem, according to Kalypso, and Commander Thomas was swift to come back with an itinerary which went as follows: Bangalore, Mysore, Masinagudi, Ooty, Thattekaad, Munnar, Alleppey (houseboat) and finally Kochi. Basically he took Kalypso's tour, reversed it at no extra charge, and in the process we added a few bits and pieces (such as the houseboat), to make it an 11-day holiday tailormade for us. So the following is a brief account of the places we visited and the birds sighted. Even before a main tour was under way we had already sighted a few common species such as House Crow, Black Kite and Common Myna that we later saw many times.

Day 1: We arrived at Bangalore and booked into a guesthouse recommended by Commander Thomas, The Terrace Garden. Bangalore is a bewildering mix of places to stay but this guesthouse proved perfectly comfortable for our needs and was quietly and beautifully situated near the main hub of MG Road with its shops and restaurants, where we had a lovely meal in the evening with relatives. We had booked a double deluxe and it came with all mod cons. We almost wished we did not have a TV as all it showed was cricket and more cricket. However, this was India and you cannot get away from cricket, particularly since at the time of our visit a great upset had occurred with Australia. I believe this has since been resolved, which was lucky for the Australians we met on our trip.

We were also, for a small extra payment, met at the airport by the guesthouse's car and driver. The only drawback to my mind, to be repeated many times in the holiday that was to follow, was that because we had to start out very early the following day (in this case to avoid the notorious Bangalore traffic but most often because early morning is when there is a great deal of bird activity), a south Indian breakfast was not possible. Instead, we had to settle for a more conventional breakfast of eggs, toast, etc. Such are the things a keen birdwatcher has to put up with. We did get time for one or two South Indian breakfasts later during the holiday.

Day 2: The receptionist rang through very early to say our Kalypso driver and bird guide had arrived. Our driver was Anwar, a quiet, well spoken man. Our bird guide was Jijo, a young man of enormous expertise. The car we were allocated was a Tata salon, with plenty of room and air conditioning and very comfortable. And so we set off early in the morning, for Mysore, visiting Kokre Belur village on the way.

Kokre Belur is world famous as the village of the storks. For some reason they nest here year after year. The name, according to Wikipedia, combines



Storks and pelicans nesting high in the trees at Kokre Belur

stork and jaggery, or raw sugar from sugarcane. Past peaceful sugarcane fields we drove, stopping eventually for an extraordinary sight, that of many Spot-billed Pelicans nesting in the treetops by the village. At a stop at a lake along the way, Jijo pointed out Pond Heron, Ashy Pynia, Cattle Egret, Intermediate Egret and Wood Sandpiper. This profusion of birds was a fore-runner of what was to come.

As we continued to Mysore we passed many small towns and villages. House Crows and Black Kites abounded and added to them were regular sightings of Brahmini Kite, another bird that seemed to be everywhere, particularly near water.

We reached Mysore in time for lunch and booked into our hotel, the Green Hotel. A former palace, built for Mysore's princesses, today it prides itself on being what its name suggests, green, being environmentally friendly. There are no tvs, no air conditioning, none of the mod cons of 21st century living. What you get are spacious, clean and ensuite rooms, green lawns, a great deal of nostalgia, good food and courteous, friendly service. The climate is most pleasant and precludes the need for air conditioning.

Early evening, we visited the palace, for you cannot visit Mysore for the first time without doing this. The palace is huge and grand and filled with fascinating history. Be aware that to visit some parts you need to walk barefoot some distances. At the time we visited there were hoards of men clad in black, sightseeing. *The Rough Guide to India* told me that these were Ayappa devotees, set on the second largest pilgrimage in the world, intent on reaching a village south of Kochi, a shrine at Sabaimala. We were to encounter similar crowds time and again, particularly near Kochi, sometimes several coachloads drawn up at the side of the road, serving lunch, with the men seated crossleg on the ground, eating off banana leaves.

That night, back at the hotel, we watched bats flitting silently between the trees, fell asleep to a frog symphony from the pond outside our room and awoke to the usual sounds of India: distant traffic and a chorus of House Crows.

Day 3: Breakfast was outside with a Common Taylorbird in the bush and the chirruping of Common Mynas. Early morning saw us on the road to Masinagudi. At some point along the road we passed a White-breasted Waterhen. Gradually the landscape changed, flat plains giving way to gently hilly countryside. In the distance, the Nilgiris loomed, living up every bit to their name, the Blue Mountains.

En route to Masinagudi was Ranganithithu, said to be a paradise for bird watchers and nature lovers. We were not disappointed. Situated on the Kaveri river, it is known to be an important nesting and breeding site for migratory birds. And not only birds. On the river, a crocodile serenely cruised by, betraying his presence with a ripple. Nearby, his kindred sunned on tranquil rocks. A family of Bonnet's Macaque monkeys decided to swim for it, from an island to the shore. Fine, except that one, who thought he couldn't swim, held back to the last. And he was right, for predictably he sank, emerging spluttering.

The birds, of course, were magnificent. We embarked on a boat to view them more closely. Over the tree tops flew a Indian Grey Hornbill. The islands held a profusion of birdlife that we were able to photograph close up, such as Painted and Stork, Open-billed Storks, Black crowned Nightheron, Little Cormorant and Darter. Our oarsman added his comments to that of Jijo's, proving he knew a great deal about the birdlife and wildlife around us.



Spoonbill and Open Billed Stork



River Tern

We got very close in the boat to River Terns and the nesting Storks, Spoonbills and Nighthérons. Smaller birds included the Paradise Flycatcher with its wonderfully long white tail, Blue tailed Bee-eater and White throated Fantail.

We were at Masinagudi by lunch time, and shown to our room at the Jungle Retreat. A sign warned us not to stray from the usual paths, warning that for those who did, 'survivors will be prosecuted'! Our room was a delight, being spacious and secluded, overlooking jungle where monkeys played and I was told that Sambar, a large form of deer, regularly visited, although we did not see any until the evening safari. In the afternoon some Macaque monkeys were seen in trees just outside the windows.and various unknown birds called cheekily from the cover of trees and flew away when Colin tried to identify them.

An evening safari into the jungle by jeep was part of our itinerary. We shared this with two young men who were in India on a business trip, selling solar energy. Masinagudi, for them, was a variation from their usual routine and a welcome distraction. We set off, rattling down areas where there were no paths, waiting with baited breath the glimpse of wild life not normally seen. Soon we were rewarded with sightings of Wild Boar, Spotted Deer, Sambar, Mouse Deer and a Civit Cat, while a Rat Snake lay somnolent beside the road.



Evening jeep safari

When it was getting dark the driver suddenly pulled off the road again and in the headlights was a wild elephant with big tusks, about 100 to 200 meters from the jeep. Feeding on leaves, it did not seem distracted by us and we watched for several minutes before it moved away. During the evening we also had our first sighting of wild Peacock in India, Red Vented Bulbul, Crested Treeswift, Blue-Bearded Bee-Eater, and a Mountain Hawk Eagle perched high in a tree against the evening sky. When night fell, the heavens blazed brilliantly with stars.

Day 4: Before breakfast Colin saw an Indian Pitta feeding in the undergrowth. It obligingly stayed long enough in view to be identified with the aid of a book we had with us. Then, while we were having breakfast, two Spotted Doves wandered in and out of the entrance of the eating area.

From Masinagudi the road winds steeply, through many a hairpin bend to Ootacamund, known to the British as Ooty, queen of the hill stations. On the way we stopped for our first sight of black-faced Langur Monkeys feeding in a tree in the valley below. Rather the adults were all busy feeding. Two tiny little baby Langurs, too full of the joy of life to spend all their time eating, excitedly chased each other from branch to branch, ignored by the adults.

In Ooty our hotel was Regency Villas, a Welcomeheritage hotel, situated in the grounds of Fernhill Palace, formerly a guest house where the Maharaja of Mysore the Wadiyar Raja, would put up his guests. Our room was enormous, with a fireplace, a view of the lawns and lots of nostalgic memorabilia.

An evening walk up and down mountain paths with Jijo, following a visit to the highest point rewarded us with sightings of the following: Jungle Myna, Brahmini Starling, Ruffous Bush Lark, Indian Robin, Yellow Wattled Lapwing, Paddyfield Pipit, Red Whiskered Bulbul (later seen in many other places). Nilgiri Laughing Thrush, Black and Orange Flycatcher and Grey Junglefowl.



Black and Orange Flycatcher



Fast food, Ooty style



Nilgiri Laughing Thrush

Day 5: Today we took the longest drive of the whole trip, approximately eight hours with stops, from Ooty to Hornbill Camp at Thattekaad. We arrived late afternoon and settled in to our comfortable tented accommodation on the banks of the river Periyar, having been courteously greeted and given a welcome drink by the staff. A Whiskered Tern flew low along the river. As evening fell a symphony of crickets started up and across the river, from the Dr Salim Ali bird sanctuary, a bull elephant trumpeted a call. 'So that's what's called a rumble in the jungle,' reflected Colin. We'd arrived too late to do any bird watching, but it was pleasant to relax in that tranquil spot.

Day 6: A morning visit took us to the Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary. At the entrance by the river sat a White Breasted Kingfisher, just one of the many exotic birds we were to see in bewildering profusion and flashes of colour that morning, among them Plum Headed and Rose Ringed Parakeets. We spotted three Oriel species (Eurasian, Black Naped and Hooded) all in the space of a few minutes in one place. We heard the Hornbill before we finally saw it. A Malabar Grey Hornbill it was, beautifully framed against a blue sky, distinctively moving its head from one side to another, a bird from another world. Sightings of Greater Ratchet-tailed Dongo and Black Rumped Flameback followed and Colin was in bird Paradise that morning.

Remembering the elephant call of the evening before I asked Jijo if it was possible to come back in the evening to see them. Jijo looked at me solemnly. 'Can you run very fast?' he asked. 'Because if you can't, it won't be a good idea to come back when elephants are here.'

In the cooler evening, Jijo took us for a late afternoon birding walk in woods near the Hornbill Camp. Here we spotted Grey Breasted Prinya and Ashy Woodswallow, but the biggest treat for me was to see a Malabar Mottled Wood Owl sitting silent and watchful in a in tree, on sentry duty.

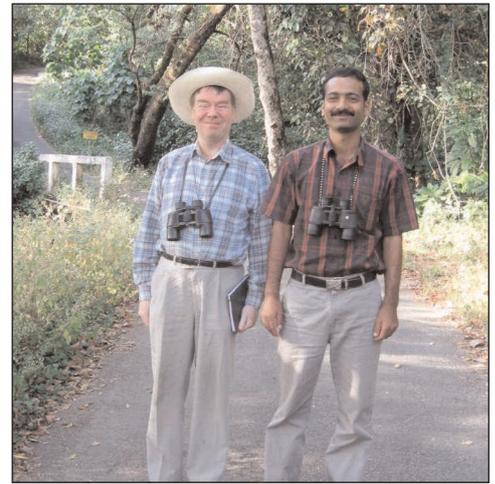


Tranquil Hornbill Camp

Day 7: Early in the morning, having watched the blue flash of a kingfisher skimming low over the river, we headed back to the hills on our way to Munnar, the road winding steeply past neat tea plantations. On the way we stopped and sighted Hill Myna, a large Cuckooshrike on nest, a family of Greater Flamebacks calling to each other, Yellow Browed Bulbul and Spiderhunter. Overhead a Black Eagle soared.

We were booked in at Olive Brook, which calls itself the 'Republic of Nature'. Set in the side of a hill, it has glorious views over the mountains. In the late afternoon we went for a birding walk, spotting Nilgiri Pigeon, Grey-breasted Laughing Thrush and Common Rosefinch. Dinner at Olive Brook was a feast, preceded by a short class in Keralan cooking. The chef promised to email us the recipes. The candlelit dinner that followed was excellent, with course after course.

Day 8: Today we visited Eravikulam National Park in the morning. Jijo had warned us that it was important to get there early, and we soon saw why. We thought we were among the first arrivals, but very soon there were hordes of visitors queueing for the bus, on which is the only access to the park. A little video screen in the bus informed us, just as we were about to disembark, that we were about to see the endangered Nilgiri Tahr (wild goats) which thrived here, and which had been brought back from being almost extinct since the days of the Raj. It wasn't long before we came across these friendly little animals, watching the hordes of people, watching them.



Colin and Jijo

A walk up the mountain away from the crowds rewarded us with the spectacle of an aerial combat between a Black Shouldered Kite and a Short Toed Eagle. We also spotted Montague's Harrier and a Brown Shrike.

Late afternoon we went for a final birding walk in the mountains with Jijo, who was due to leave that evening. At one point Jijo stopped and whistled a plaintive and strange little tune. There was a short silence before the reply was sung back and a lovely dialogue followed with a Malabar Whistling Thrush enticed ever nearer for a better view. Eventually it must have decided something was not quite right, for it flew off with a final reproving call, leaving us bereft.

Ever present were Hill Mynas and Red Whiskered Bulbul. Colin and I had grown quite fond of curious and friendly Bulbuls. 'Boring Bulbuls,' said Jijo dismissively as he sees them all the time. 'Lovely Bulbuls,' we protested. So we settled for 'Boring, but lovely Bulbuls.' Before he left, Jijo sat down and counted with us the number of birds we had seen in seven days: a staggering total of 175.

Day 9: Today it was back to the plains again, with our driver, Anwar. As we left Munnar (the name means the meeting point of three rivers) the morning mist rose like smoke from the water. Then only too soon we were back on the plains, the tranquillity of the mountains giving way to the busy traffic that surrounds the venerable city of Kochi. But Kochi was not yet. Instead, we bypassed it for Alleppey, where down a little lane we were led to our houseboat where we were to stay until the next day.



Kettu vallum on the backwaters

A kettu vallum, we discovered, is a delight. Guide books and literature will tell you it is made without nails of anjali wood and is the old name for a rice boat, being used used to transport just that, rice, but today converted to luxury transport.

A little kettu vallum, just to ourselves came with cook, navigator and captain. We had our own ensuite bedroom and a lounge/dining area where Keralan meals were served, the captain being most considerate in conveying our wishes to the cook.

'We are in heaven and have decided we are not coming home,' I texted relatives back in the UK from my phone. 'Instead, we are going to stay here.' And heaven it seemed, with the shifting light and colour over water and sky and the tranquillity of village life going on around us. Through the day we watched fascinated as fishermen went about their business, women washed clothes by the riverside, schoolchildren went off to school by boat, looking at us with laughing, curious eyes, and little churches tolled the hour. Bird sightings as we cruised along included Whiskered Tern, Egrets, Pond Herons, White Breasted Kingfisher, Common Kingfisher, Brahmini Kite and Black Drongo.



Sunset in God's own country

Days 10 and 11: Our final destination was Fort Kochi where we were booked into the Old Courtyard Hotel. Kochi was a shock after the tranquillity of the back waters, nevertheless the hotel was a peaceful sanctuary. Rooms are large, with lovely old wood furniture, and meals are taken in a shady courtyard where there is a menu to suit visitors from abroad. The hotel is within walking distance of many attractions and has free Internet, which was useful as we needed to choose our seats for the flight home.



The Old Courtyard, Kochi

The holiday price included transfers and tickets for sightseeing. We visited St Francis Church, the earliest built church in India; Mattancherry Palace and the Pardesi Synagogue. In the evening there was a visit to a classical Kathakali dance, which we enjoyed very much, arriving well before the actors put on their make-up on stage, a must-see part of the performance. 'Your mother and I have finally found someone who takes longer to put on their make-up than you do,' Colin texted back to his young stepdaughter in the UK.



Usha and Chinese fishing nets

The following day was free with time for shopping for last minute gifts and a stroll by the Arabian Sea to view the world famous fishing nets. And after that, early in the morning on Day 12, Kalypso sent a car for our final transfer to the airport.

Our grateful thanks are due to Commander Thomas for organising the trip so well, to Jijo for being such an excellent bird guide and to Anwar for his safe driving.

A few little tips:

- The walks included on this trip were gentle and never taxing. For places such as the Dr Salim Ali Bird sanctuary, a good pair of stout walking boots or at least sensible walking shoes come recommended.
- A good torch is useful for night birding walks and on other occasions.
- For birding, bring the best pair of binoculars you can afford. You won't be disappointed.
- We took the usual malaria and tummy upset pills with us, and made sure we had adequate travel insurance. Sun hats, sun screen and insect repellent are also essential if you're not used to the tropics.
- Bottled mineral water is always supplied in the car and there are comfort stops on all journeys.
- For internal flights you book yourself, it's best to reconfirm.
- Visas are required for foreign nationals visiting India.
- To keep in touch with folks back home make sure your mobile is set to international roaming before you leave your home country. Calls are usually expensive, the cheapest option being texting.

Below is a list of the places we stayed at, in chronological order, and their web addresses:

The Terrace Garden: www.terracegardensguesthouse.com/

Green Hotel: www.greenhotelindia.com/

The Jungle Retreat: www.jungleretreat.com/

Regency Villas: www.welcomheritagehotels.com/

Hornbill Camp: www.thehornbillcamp.com/

Olive Brook: www.olivebrookmunnar.com/

The rice boat: www.riceboatskerala.com/

The Old Courtyard: www.oldcourtyard.com/

For details of this trip or others, email info@kalypsoadventures.com

Here is a complete list of birds sighted on our trip:

Grey Francolin

Grey Junglefowl

Indian Peafowl

Duck: Lesser Whistling, Spot Billed, Gadwall, Garganey, Northern Shoveler

Woodpecker: Heart Spotted, Brown Capped Pygmy, Common Flameback, Black Rumped Flameback, Greater Flameback, White Naped.

Barbet: White Cheeked, Coopersmith

Hornbill: Indian Grey, Malabar Grey

Indian Roller

Dollarbird

Kingfisher: Common, White Throated

Bee-eater: Blue bearded, Green, Blue Tailed.
Drongo Cuckoo
Asian Koel
Blue Faced Malkoha
Greater Coucal
Parakeet: Rose ringed, Plum Headed, Malabar
Indian Swiftlet
Crested Treeswift
Owl: Collared Scops, Mottled Wood
Jungle Owlet
Jerdons Nightjar
Pigeon: Rock, Nilgiri Wood
Dove; Laughing, Spotted, Eurasian Collared
White Breasted Waterhen
Common Moorhen
Common Coot
Sandpiper: Green, Wood, Common
Black Winged Stilt
Great Thick-Knee
Common Ringed Plover
Lapwing: Red Wattled, Yellow Wattled
Tern: River, Whiskered
Kite: Black, Brahmini, Black Shouldered
Red headed Vulture
Eagle: Short Toed Snake, Crested Serpent, Black, Lesser Spotted, Bonelli's,
Mountain Hawk
Harrier: Eurasian Marsh, Montagu's
Shikra
Buzzard: Oriental Honey, Long Legged
Common Kestrel
Little Grebe
Darter
Cormorant: Pygmy, Indian, Little
Egret: Little, Great, Intermediate, Cattle
Heron: Indian Pond, Grey, Purple
Black Crowned Nightheron
Ibis: Black-Headed, Black
Eurasian Spoonbill
Spot-billed Pelican
Storks: Painted, Asian open, Woolly
Indian Pitta
Asian Fairy Bluebird
Blue Winged Leafbird
Shrikes: Brown, Bay-Backed, Long Tailed, Grey Backed
Treepies: Rufous, White Bellied
Crows: House, Large Billed

Oriel: Eurasian Golden, Black Naped, Black Hooded
Ashy Woodswallow
Large Cuckooshrike
Scarlet Minivet
Fantail: White Throated, White Browed
Drongo: Black, Ashy, White Bellied, Bronzed, Greater Racket Tailed
Black Naped Monarch
Asian Paradise Flycatcher
Large Woodshrike
Thrush: Malabar Whistling, Orange Headed
White Bellied Shortwing
Flycatcher: Asian Brown, Rusty Tailed, Brown Breasted, Black and Orange, Nilgiri,
Blue throated, Grey Headed Canary
Robins: Oriental Magpie, Indian
Pied Bushchat
Starlings: Chestnut Tailed, Brahminy
Myna: Common, Jungle, Hill
Great Tit (Eastern race with white breast)
Swallow: Barn, Pacific, Red Rumped
Bulbul: Black Crested, Red Whiskered, Red Vented, White Browed, Yellow Browed,
Black
Prinia: Grey breasted, Plain, Ashy
Oriental Whiteeye
Warbler: Blyth's Reed, Booted, Thick Billed, Greenish
Common Tailorbird
Leaf Warbler: Tickells', Large Billed, Tytlers
Laughing Thrush: Nilgiri, Grey Breasted
Babbler: Jungle, Yellow Billed
Rufous Winged Bushlark
Ash-Crowned Sparrowlark
Malabar Lark
Flowerpecker: Plain, Pale Billed
Sunbirds; Purple Rumped, Crimson Backed, Purple, Loten's
Little Spiderhunter
House Sparrow
Wagtail: White Browed, Yellow, Grey
Pipit: Paddyfield, Nilgiri
Common Rosefinch

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The End.