

# Sri Lanka, Southern India and The Andamans Jan Feb 2024

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*Banded Bay Cuckoo*

Just recently returned from a month-long trip to Sri Lanka, the Western Ghats of Southern India and the Andaman islands. A really excellent birding trip with two brilliant guides visiting some really attractive parts of the world (in places!). We were visiting 3rd world countries so you have to put up with the dirt, squalor, and litter that goes with overcrowding ( which Stephanie finds hard to do) and just enjoy the beautiful forests, the magnificent scenery of the highlands of the Sri Lanka and the Ghats, and the never ending tea estates.

The birding was really special. We found all of Sri Lanka's 34 endemics and saw 68 of the 72 birds were looking for. The 4 we missed -Indian Golden Oriole, Sri Lanka Bay Owl, Jungle Nightjar, and Spot-bellied Eagle Owl we found in India giving us effectively a full house in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka we saw 34 birds which had to come off my India list leaving 38 realistic possibles in India. Two birds we did not have time to look for -Broad-tailed Grassbird and Grasshopper Warbler (needed an extra day for these two) which meant we missed only 4 birds in India. The Andamans has 20 endemics and we only missed one- the Andaman Masked Owl. This owl roosted in the eaves of a block of flats with a busy road outside. He was supposed to emerge at dusk, preen for a couple of minutes before flying off to hunt. Unfortunately he flew straight out the first night we looked for him and neither us of saw him go in the second it took for him to leave, so our last night there we were back for a second try, but he never emerged at all. Our guide said the site was too well known- too many people playing its call and he would need to find a new site for the bird.

We were really fortunate with the night birds seeing 4 nightjars and 13 owls of which I photographed 3 nightjars and 11 of the owls. The photography was special- I was using my new R7 with the 100-500 lens for the first time and really enjoyed the



*Blue-tailed Bee-eater*

flexibility of a zoom lens after all those years using the 400m DO lens . The cropped sensor of the R7 gives you an effective reach of 800mm which proved invaluable on a couple of occasions. My only criticism is that its low light capability is nowhere near as good as the IDX. At 32000 ISO you really get a poor quality shot, with even Topaz finding it difficult to fix the noise and sharpen the shot. My usual percentage of birds photographed to seen is 70% but on this trip I was closer to 90%, a testimony to our guides for trying so hard to get the birds close enough to photograph and to Stephanie for her patience waiting until I had got a shot. I reached my milestone of 7000 species seen last year and am now just 36 birds short of photographing 5000 species. Hope to get them in Madagascar in November. We visited Madagascar over 20 years ago before I was a photographer so It should not be a problem. This is a target I will be proud to reach. Probably a hundred people have seen over 7000 birds but a mere handful have photographed 5000.

We arrived in Colombo at 8.30 in the morning to be met by the owner of Walkwithjith our tour organizer and our bird guide Saman. Our first stop was two hours away-the lowland rainforest of Kitulgala where many of the endemics were to be found. Saman knew all the local landowners and guides so I was not surprised when he told us we would be looking for our first endemic- Chestnut-backed Owlet on private property. We found this bird late afternoon buried deep in the



*Changeable Hawk- Eagle*



*Crested Tree-swift*

forest. We could not approach closer than 30 meters or we were told the bird would fly. At that distance it was tricky to find with binos and impossible to photograph. As predicted he flew just after us getting reasonable views. As compensation we heard an Indian Pitta calling and got our first photos of this bird. We also picked up Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill, Crimson-fronted Barbet and Layard's Parakeet and two of the more common bulbuls- Yellow-browed and Square-tailed.

We had three days at Kitugala exploring different

sections of the forest with many new lifers found along the easy walking trails. Indian Swiftlets flew overhead while we found two early morning Babblers – Dark fronted and the endemic Brown-capped. Light was too bad for a photograph. We found the tricky Green-billed Coucal and Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon, Red-backed Flameback, Sri Lanka hanging Parrot, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Sri Lanka Drongo, Spot-winged Thrush and the white morph of the Indian Paradise Flycatcher. I thought I had great shots of this bird only to find its entire head obscured by a leaf. It was many days later in India that I managed to get shots of the regular morph. We saw many more birds in these lovely forests. I will just mention Orange and yellow-billed Babblers, Sri Lanka Swallow, Orange Minivet and Sri Lanka Hill Myna.

Then we headed for the highlands and Nurewa Eliya and the Horton Plains NP. Nurewa Eliya is well known for its jewellers and ceylonese sapphires. I treated Stephanie to one, so she could get over not finding too much to eat. She found the local curries over spiced for her taste and not much else on the menu! Beef as in India is rarely on the menu, being sacred to Hindus. Beer could also be a problem more so in India than Sri Lanka where many of the smaller hotels were not licensed. In Nureya Eliya at



*Great Stone Curlew*

our fancy hotel obtaining a beer was not a problem- just the noise from the Hindu temple across the street where a festival was being held.

Horton Plains holds some high-altitude endemics which we needed to find- the tricky Sri Lanka Bush Warbler, Sri Lanka White-eye, Dull Blue Flycatcher and Yellow-eared Bulbul. We managed them all with no real difficulty and also got Legge's Hawk Eagle on the way back down. In the afternoon we visited Victoria Park, a well-known park right in the middle of town famous for the overwintering migrants Pied Thrush and Kashmir Flycatcher. The same Sri Lanka birding circuit is used by all the birding groups visiting Sri Lanka so we used to bump into the same birders at all the hotels we used in the evening. So Victoria Park held 10 Rockjumper birders as well as a couple of other groups all looking for the same two birds. The thrush is very secretive hiding deep in the undergrowth and only emerging as the sun dips below the horizon. We got reasonable views but no photograph. We found the flycatcher which came nicely to the call giving great views and photos before the others arrived.



*Indian Pitta*

The next day we had a long five hour drive south to Tissamaharama from where we would travel by jeep each day to Lunugamvehera NP, Bundala Wetlands and the Yala NP.



The Sri Lanka National parks are as poorly maintained as the Indian parks. They charge tourists a fortune in dollars to use dreadful roads and disgusting toilet facilities- just as bad as the Masai Mara in Kenya.

Lunugamvehra was relatively quiet- just a handful of jeeps all looking for leopard. We gave the leopards a miss and focused on the birds and what a brilliant mornings' birding we had. The birds just never stopped coming, Blue-faced Malkoha, Sirkeer Malkoha, Malabar Pied Hornbill. Magnificent Indian Peafowl some displaying with their tails in full view. Grey bellied Cuckoo, and Black-headed Cuckooshrike were all on show. On the river banks Great Stone Curlew, Pin-tailed Snipe, Painted Storks, Asian Openbills and Lesser Adjutants fought for space beside the mugger crocodiles. There were plenty of raptors around too- Crested Honey-Buzzards, Crested Serpent Eagle, Changeable Hawk-eagle, Grey bellied Fish and White-tailed sea Eagles.

Stork-billed, Common and White-throated Kingfishers along-side Indian Rollers and Chestnut-headed, Asian Green and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, along-side Eurasian Hoopoes, Sri Lanka Woodshrikes beside Comon Ioras and Black-hooded Orioles. The list just went on and on- over 60



*Indian Peafowl*

species for the morning.

The Bundala salt pans was an interesting visit. Hundreds of Painted Storks and Spot-billed Pelicans in great flocks all successfully catching fish. Lots of Common Redshank beside the Greenshank, Common and Wood Sandpipers and a few oriental Pratincoles amongst the Lesser Whistling Duck. Got my first shots of Tricolored Munia amongst the Grey-headed Swamphen and White-breasted Waterhen and Pheasant-tailed Jacana in full breeding plumage- had only seen them in winter plumage before and our first Brahminy and Rosy Starlings of the trip.

Yala NP was something else. After heavy early summer rains the roads were almost impassable which made things difficult especially when 60 yes 60 jeeps were all trying to do the same thing. It tries your patience when you are sitting in a queue of 10 jeeps waiting while some woman tries to photograph a peacock with her cellphone. In peak season you can get 200 jeeps all trying to access

Yala at 6.00am, all fighting for the same limited road space. It must be a nightmare- imagine when a leopard was spotted !!!

After Lunugamvehera, Yala was never going to match the birding extravaganza we had there. Don't think we saw a single new bird that day. We looked desperately for Sloth Bear which neither of us had seen before with no luck and it was notable by its absence from the Indian parks too.

It was time to move on to our final stop- Sinharaja Forest- another lowland forest in the wet zone holding the last six remaining endemics we needed and we only had a day and a half to find them. I left Stephanie behind for our first endemic- the Serendip Scops owl. The guides had found a bird 200 meters up an impossibly steep slope. You had to haul yourself up by clinging on to small trees and it took 20 minutes to reach the bird

It was buried deep in the bush- how these guides find these birds I don't know but I did manage a couple of not very good photos.

We left at 4.30 am the next morning to climb on our jeep on an impossibly rocky road to the research station where two of the endemics were fed at dawn. Sri Lanka Spurfowl is a forest spurfowl which was practically impossible to see before they started feeding the birds. The birds are not 100% reliable. The next day we were told neither they, nor the Sri Lanka Blue Magpie pitched up. But at 6.00 am just as the light was good enough for a photo, we had both birds firmly in our pocket along with White-faced Starling for good measure. Back down the hill we now had a 2 kilometer walk along a well-worn birding trail with other birding groups in front and behind us. We had poor views of Malabar Trogon (much better in India), good views of Ashy-headed Laughingthrush which just left our last endemic- Red-faced Malkoha, a flock loving canopy bird which never gives great views. We reached the end of the trail with no luck but ventured along a small side track where we found a pair -not in a flock but feeding quietly in the canopy. Even managed a couple of reasonable shots. Then lots of high fives and



*Malabar Pied Hornbill*

back down the trail for lunch. We told the Rockjumper bunch who were only five minutes behind us but they never found the bird.

Pressure off we had a leisurely final mornings birding before heading back to Colombo for our flight the next morning to Kochi or Cochin in India.

Our plane was delayed coming into Kochi but we still met the driver and managed to arrive at Hornbill Camp just outside Thattekkad just after lunch. We met our guide Jijo who would be with us through to the end of the trip in the Andamans.

This area was more prosperous than Western and Northern India with some very expensive homes just outside the small towns filled with Mom and Pop shops. Many people own their own land here and are rubber or cardamom plantation owners or even small tea estate owners.

Our birding was done in the small forest patches around town and in particular from some large rock slabs in Oorlanthanni Forest.

Our first afternoon gave us another Owl- Mottled Wood Owl and Crimson-backed Sunbird to add to the Purple-rumped and Loten's Sunbirds we had seen in Sri Lanka. Our camp was not licensed but the beer we bought we were not allowed to have with our supper – could only drink it in our room. We eventually gave up trying to buy beer- one bar we tried insisted we open the bottles and pour the beer into our own plastic bottles.

The next morning we were up on the rock slabs looking for the local specials. Grey-fronted Green Pigeon, Malabar Pied and Grey Hornbills, White-cheeked Barbet, Blue-winged Parakeet, Malabar Woodshrike, Flame-throated Bulbul, Southern Hill Myna, Malabar Starling and Nigiri Flowerpecker were all found in quick succession, while our afternoon sortie gave us nice views and shots of the shy Grey Junglefowl.

We spent more time here the next day and also visited Thattekkad bird sanctuary. The rocks slabs were not as busy as the previous day but Fork-tailed Drongo-cuckoo was seen and much better views of Malabar Trogon and Malabar Barbet were had. Grey-headed Bulbul was added to the bulbul list and views were had of Green Warbler a bird which somehow is on the SA list. Another new addition was Rusty-tailed Flycatcher an overwintering migrant, along with Indian Golden Oriole, a bird we missed in Sri Lanka and White-bellied Treepie.

It was time to move on to Periyar but Jijo said a slight detour was necessary. The Sri Lanka Bay Owl had been found at Oorlanthanni and tucked way up in the deepest part of a thicket there he was, right next door to a Brown Fish Owl.



*Black and Orange Flycatcher*

The drive up to Periyar Tiger Reserve was through some magnificent scenery. While called a tiger reserve you can only walk there- no vehicles allowed so no-one was too worried about bumping into a tiger but we did have to circuit round some Gaur and Asian Elephants. The birds we were looking for here were Wayanad's Laughingthrush, Malabar Whistling Thrush, Malabar Imperial Pigeon and White-bellied Blue Flycatcher. We got them all in two visits.

We moved on to Munnar moving ever higher to Joburg's height 1600 meters. We were now on the Tamil Nadu border and crossed the state line to look for Yellow-throated Bulbul and Nilgiri Pipit. We missed the Pipit but picked up Rufous Babbler instead. Back in Munnar the hotels grounds were good for Black and Orange Flycatcher in the bird bath and just along the road in the late afternoon we found Nilgiri Woodpigeon, Hill Swallow, Palani Laughingthrush, Nilgiri Flycatcher and nice views of Black-throated Munia. A good days birding in very pleasant cooler weather.

We were back early the following morning at Lockhart's Gap to look for the pipit and found an obliging bird along the road side sharing the rocks with Dusky Crag Martins. Then it was the turn of White-bellied Blue Robin, another skulker who never leaves the depths of his thicket. We spend the afternoon looking for Malabar Flameback, a flock following bird and Nilgiri Thrush, another skulker which is found on the banks of highly vegetated mountain streams. We found neither- our first dips of the trip.

Day 8 of the trip saw us with a long but incredibly scenic drive to Ooty (known as queen of the hill stations) at 2240 meters above sea level. We were now in Tamil Nadu and reached Ooty in the late afternoon, the only real excitement being a Yellow-legged Buttonquail which froze in the road in front of us before rushing for the safety of the verge.



The next day we birded through the tea estates, getting a brief glimpse of Painted Bush Quail before walking through some montane grasslands for Malabar Lark, and in the forest patches for Tytler's leaf Warbler, Greenish Warbler, and Blyth's Reed Warbler and our next big special- Nilgiri Laughingthrush and Nilgiri Blue Robin, another hard to find skulker. We rounded off the day with nice views of a cracking male Black and Orange Flycatcher.

It was time to move further north dropping in altitude once again to Mudumalai NP. This for me was the best birding site on the whole India trip. It is officially a tiger reserve but we saw very little game and the park actually has enclosed a number of villages within its boundaries so there are a lot of domestic animals wandering round as well. We did a couple of mornings' drives ( with a ranger as officially you are not allowed to stop on the side of the roads) and we also walked (again with a local guide) – I tipped him well when he showed me Jungle Nightjar on its day roost and Spot-bellied Eagle Owl ( a magnificent-looking Owl) all within half an hour. We then spent nearly two hours looking for Jungle Bush Quail which we never managed to see.

On our drives we saw many of the birds we had seen already and there were not many new birds left to find but we saw our first vultures of the trip- White-rumped and Red-headed, Booted and Bonelli's Eagles (the Bonelli's- both in the air and sitting on a freshly killed Peahen) and Plum-headed Parakeet and Common Woodshrike were new for the list. I finally managed shots of Indian Paradise Flycatcher and Booted Warbler- a strange bird which spends more of its time foraging on the ground rather than in a tree. Our only new bird here was Indian Nuthatch as despite all our best efforts we could not track down White-bellied Minivet- another dip.

Our final stop on our Indian leg was the Bandipur Tiger reserve. Here there is a real chance of seeing Tiger and Leopard.

We did two game drives in Jeeps supplied by the lodge- a late afternoon trip and another early morning. Both were a great disappointment driving around with 6 others all desperate to see tiger (not a sign anywhere) although we did see two very distant Leopards sitting on a rock a full kilometer



*Bay-backed Shrike*

away. No one was interested in birds although the driver did stop for a second if I asked him to. The mythical Sloth Bear was also nowhere to be seen.

So, a disappointing end to the trip. We now had a long drive to Bangalore with a quick visit to Amba Vilas the main palace in Mysore. Interesting but as hot as hades and full of tourists. I was looking forward to tomorrow's flight to Port Blair in the Andamans.

I don't much like tropical islands and I have been to lots of them in the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific oceans .They are always hot and humid and once you get away from the beach hotels and dive resorts you are back in the third world- dirty, scruffy, and full of litter and discarded electrical appliances and abandoned cars and trucks.

The Andamans were no different. They felt Indian despite being so close to Myanmar and we did not even see a dive resort let alone a fancy beach hotel. Our hotel was on the beach but it was a fairly modest affair. Its saving grace was that it did sell beer, until they ran out on our last night. We treated ourselves to a double gin and tonic each and ignored the fact that they cost \$15 (R300) each.



*Andaman Crake*

It is extremely fortunate that you can find 20 endemics all within 20 kilometers of Port Blair in the Southern Andamans because travelling further afield meant taking ferries or using seriously bad roads. The Nicobars have a further 5 or 6 endemics but they are off limits to tourists and birders.

We did in fact take a 20 minute ferry ride with the car on board to our very first birding site as it saved two hours by road.

I have already told the story of the Andaman Masked Owl on our first evening there, so we were keen to get started on our first full day on the Islands with only the Andaman Teal under our belts. We were headed for a stretch of forest along the Shoal Bay road where nearly all the endemics could be found and which most visiting birders themselves visit, so we ran into other birding groups on both the days we were there.

Our first target was Andaman Crake, a chicken-sized bird that's lives in deep vegetation. We got brief views of the bird deep in the foliage but how do you make it cross the road in front of you?? Well first you have to find a bird other birders don't know about and is not used to the constant tape playing the ones along the Shoal Bay Rd get. So, it was only later that afternoon on a very quiet track that we put the speaker down on the far side of the track and our crane came out to give me a couple of nice photos.

We then had over the course of the next hour or so a string of new birds. Andaman Green Pigeon, Andaman Cuckoo-dove, Andaman Coucal, Andaman Cuckooshrike, Andaman Treepie, Andaman Woodpecker, and Andaman Drongo all came in quick succession.

The Andaman Flowerpecker took a little longer and the Andaman Bulbul which is supposed to be a very confiding bird, we only saw briefly and Stephanie missed altogether. We only got flying views of the Andaman Wood Pigeon and I never managed photos of this bird, but we did get nice views of White-headed Starling (another endemic) and a Black Baza.

There are five Owls and the Andaman Nightjar you need to track down on your visit here and you have four nights in which to do it.

On our first night after luring out the Crake, we found three of them. I can't believe how good Jijo was at this. He was very protective of his site, swearing me to secrecy, not that I would know where to find these birds again, but he told me some birders take GPS readings and then tell others.

Our first target was Hume's Boobook. Jijo selects a tree and tells me the Owl should land on a particular branch and sure enough it did. Got a nice photo and we moved on -just another 30 meters deeper into the forest where we called up the Andaman Scops Owl. This bird also posed well, something Jijo said was getting increasingly difficult to achieve as it was ignoring calls at other better- known sites. It does indicate a problem for some of these island birds with small populations when they are continuously harassed by birders.

Our final owl that night was the Andaman Boobook, again just 30 meters away from our previous spot. This guy did



*Andaman Scops Owl*



not hang around but I did manage a photo. Three Owls within 60 meters of each other all within 45 minutes- just simply amazing.

The next day we visited some zoological gardens at Chidiya Tapu but spent three hours on some quiet roads nearby as they don't open until 9.00 am. We managed three new birds that morning. Andaman Serpent Eagle which can often be tricky to find and Andaman Shama which came out of its thicket to the call. Then at last an Indian Cuckoo which gave us views and photos from a distant tree even though its far-carrying call sounds much closer. We looked hard for the Wood Pigeon in the gardens but had no luck.

We did a couple of beaches in the afternoon. I was hoping for a Beach Thick-knee, a bird we have always just missed on our travels round Pacific shorelines. It would be our last Thick-knee so I was desperately keen to look for it. Jijo said there was practically no chance. The bird does not like people and prefers the many small deserted islets off shore. So no luck there, just plenty of Greater Sand and Pacific Golden Plovers, a Whimbrel and a couple of Collared and White-throated Kingfishers.

Our targets that evening were the Nightjar and the Andaman's sub-species of Oriental Scops known as Walden's Scops Owl- a very likely split in the near future. Jijo remained true to form and we got nice views of both.

So, with the exception of the Andaman Masked Owl we had cleaned up our list. Our last day was devoted to better photos and finding Stephanie an Andaman Bulbul, which with some difficulty we managed to do. It was a great shame our last attempt at the Masked Owl was unsuccessful.

We only flew out after lunch the next day and decided to take the morning off and have a lie in and a late breakfast before another 36 hours of airports and travel. We said good-bye to Jijo in Chennai before the long haul home on Emirates via Dubai to Joburg.

So a very pleasant trip with some wonderful birds- shame Stephanie could not handle the food. She also fell in shower and hurt her foot in India which restricted her movements for the rest of the trip so she missed most of the night birds.



*Oriental Scops Owl*