

# WildWings

## GOA BIRD FESTIVAL - 10-25 NOVEMBER 2001

### **Trip Report by Tony Marr - Tour Leader**

The fourth WildWings trip to Goa in India was as successful as the previous ones, and although at 278 species the trip total was a little less, it was quality rather than quantity this time. The ten participants were led by Tony Marr, with David Fell as his understudy to prepare for leading the November 2002 tour. The Bird Festival was again based at the Beira Mar Hotel in Baga, a popular venue for European birders with its open-air restaurant, bar and swimming pool overlooking a bird-rich marsh and paddyfields, well away from the crowded beaches. A modest hotel by European standards, it has friendly, helpful staff and an unequalled view over the marsh and fields from the balcony of each of our rooms.

We took advantage of the inexpensive and very efficient and reliable taxi and coach services to cover much of Goa's 60-mile length during our two weeks' stay. We had arranged many of these trips in advance with the local birders from the Backwoods Camp, who took care of the coach arrangements and local guiding for us, and other excursions were organised from the hotel with the knowledgeable taxi drivers who not only drive you to each location, but can help to find the target birds when you arrive! The weather was typically very hot and humid, so trips were often for just the early morning or the late afternoon, with a siesta period in the middle of the day. In the event, most people preferred to sit under the shade on the hotel balcony and, with a cooling drink in hand, watch the endless procession of raptors, kingfishers, bee-eaters, swifts, hirundines, herons, egrets and waders passing over the marsh.

It was thus that we spent the first few hours after our arrival, recovering from the nine hour direct flight from Gatwick. From the hotel we recorded Ashy Wood-Swallows, Cinnamon Bitterns, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Red-wattled Lapwings, Stork-billed, White-throated and Black-capped Kingfishers, Blue-tailed and Green Bee-eaters, Asian Palm, Fork-tailed and Little Swifts, Asian Koel and Asian Paradise Flycatcher. When the day cooled down, we took a walk around the fields below the hotel, getting to grips with the confusing array of pipits, starlings and munias. We successfully separated Richards, Tawny, Blyths and Paddyfield Pipits, found Jungle Mynas and Chestnut-tailed Starlings, and both White-rumped and Black-headed Munias. Common and Pintail Snipe, Pied Bushchats, Malabar Larks, White-browed Wagtails, Blyths Reed and Greenish Warblers were added to the list, and, back at the hotel at dusk, we watched the regular pair of Spotted Owlets which sit on power cables above the bar and serenade the guests. Very tired by now, we enjoyed the first of many Kingfisher beers with our Goan meal at the open-air tables set out for our group before retiring for a much-needed night's sleep.

On the following morning we made an early start by taxis to visit nearby Candolim Marshes, departing before breakfast but taking with us bottles of fruit juice and the first of the sandwiches we were to grow to love, to keep us going until we returned to the hotel for lunch. On a lovely cool, still morning, we birded along the river and over the bridge, where we found Lesser Whistling Duck, Gull-billed Terns, Greater Coucal, Plum-headed and Rose-ringed Parakeets, Coppersmith and White-cheeked Barbets, Black-rumped Flameback (to be the commonest woodpecker of the trip), a Shikra causing panic among the small birds, a handsome Rufous Treepie, beautiful Wire-tailed Swallows, an Asian Brown Flycatcher and a number of other little brown jobs. We completed the day with an afternoon visit to Baga Hills, where we were rewarded by finding a pair of Small Minivets, a White-browed Fantail, Common Iora, Puff-throated Babbler, a Loten's Sunbird, and a flyby of firstly, a light morph and dark morph Booted Eagle together, and, as a finale, a very handsome adult White-bellied Sea Eagle which cruised along the hillside and over our heads. We were by now really getting into our stride.

The next day started with a half-day coach trip to Morjim Beach, renowned for gulls, terns and waders. We were not disappointed. Two impressive adult and one near-adult Great Black-headed Gulls were spotted

among hundreds of Yellow-legged and Heuglin's Gulls, Brown-headed, Black-headed and Slender-billed Gulls, and terns of four species - Gull-billed, Little, Sandwich, and Lesser Crested. The waders included two Greater Sand Plovers among the 30 Lessers and 30 Kentish Plovers. An afternoon visit to Aguada Fort found a Greater Spotted Eagle overhead, in the trees Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Vernal Hanging Parrot, White-bellied Drongo and Common Hawk Cuckoo, and the main attraction, skulking in deep cover next to a grotty path, two Indian Pittas, with Orange-headed Ground Thrushes and a rare Indian Blue Robin joining them in this rather unsavoury, yet rewarding, location.

The next four days were among the best of the whole fortnight, spent deep in the Western Ghats forests in the comfortable and well-organised Backwoods Camp. We slept in camp-beds in permanent tents, with flush toilets and showers, albeit cold ones (refreshing after a sweaty walk in the jungle), and ate delicious local food cooked by girls from the nearby village. This was an experience not to be missed, with Pramod Madkaikar, our birding guide, accompanying us on walks through the forest and short drives to the nearby Tambi Surla Temple and other localities. Our bird list grew here by leaps and bounds, assisted by Pramod's remarkable hearing and eyesight, with numerous raptors (Crested Goshawks, Changeable and Mountain Hawk Eagles), swifts (Indian Swiftlets, Crested Treeswifts and Brown-backed and Silver-backed Needletails), nightjars (Grey and Jerdon's), owls (Jungle Owlet and Brown Fish Owls seen and Collared Scops Owl calling), woodpeckers (the tiny but charismatic Heart-spotted which we renamed Heart-stopping, along with Rufous, Black-rumped Flamebacks and Greater Flamebacks), and flycatchers (including Asian Paradise, Verditer, Tickell's Blue, White-bellied Blue, Red-throated and Asian Brown). In the quiet of the forest, far from the sounds of people, vehicles and aircraft, we watched Malabar Trogons, Malabar Grey and Malabar Pied Hornbills; Indian Pitta, Blue-eared Kingfisher, Malabar Whistling Thrushes and Forest Wagtail around the camp; Malabar Parakeets and Mountain Imperial and Pompadour Green Pigeons; and a host of barbets, bulbuls, drongos, woodshrikes, cuckoo-shrikes, sunbirds, orioles, babblers and minivets. The list seemed endless, and each walk, even along the same stretch of forest as before, would yield new birds.

On our return to Baga, we were now into our second week. Baga Hills, in an early morning visit which was, not surprisingly, more productive than the previous visit in the heat of the afternoon, added Indian Peafowl and Blue-faced Malkoha. In the afternoon we were driven to Carambolin Lake, an hour away, which was as ever just full of birds. A Lesser Adjutant Stork circled overhead when we got out of the coach, and in the fields nearby we found a group of at least 45 Asian Openbill Storks, flocks of Baya Weavers and Yellow Wagtails, and one very smart Citrine. On the lake were big flocks of Garganey and Lesser Whistling Duck, two Comb Duck, 25 Cotton Pigmy Geese, an Oriental Darter and Little Cormorants among all the Purple Swampheens and Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged Jacanas. The usual colourful array of kingfishers and bee-eaters greeted us, an Emerald Dove shot past, and Whiskered Terns, Peregrine and Osprey were rather more familiar species. Egrets - we had a few...

On a rewarding morning near the Goan capital Panjim, we visited the grassy and rocky plain at Dona Paula where we encountered Yellow-wattled Lapwings, Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks, Greater Short-toed Larks, Oriental Skylarks, and Tawny, Blyth's and Richard's Pipits, together with Oriental Magpie Robins and Indian Robins, Rose-coloured Starlings, an Indian Roller and Long-tailed Shrikes. The next stop was the paddyfields and river at Santa Cruz, finding the target species of Small Pratincole (a flock of 150+) after sifting through masses of waders, including Temminck's and Little Stints and numerous shanks and sandpipers. Terek Sandpipers and the rather rarer Dunlin were found on a roadside pool. On our way back to Baga we had excellent telescope views of the regular pair of roosting Brown Wood Owls at the fountain at Saligao, and to end a wonderful day, some of the group were lucky enough to watch a male Pallid Harrier over the marsh behind the hotel, where it flushed a flock of some 250 Greater Short-toed Larks. The first Greater Painted Snipe and a female Watercock were seen from the balcony.

A day visiting Charao Island and Mayem Lake was turned into an attempt on Pramod's day list on the island where he lives, with 117 species to beat. An attempt a year ago had failed to get close to his record, so this year's bird race was planned and executed with great vigour and enthusiasm. We departed in the dark, to cross to the island as the sun rose, and returned at sunset on the last daylight ferry, so had the maximum time available. The rules allowed us to start counting from the departure of the morning ferry and to continue until the landing of the evening one back on the mainland, almost exactly twelve hours.

We got off to a speedy start, and until mid-morning the species total rose steadily. Alongside the by-now more familiar species, we found a diminutive Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, a young Banded Bay Cuckoo being fed by a Common Iora and a stunning Blue-bearded Bee-eater in the forest by Mayem Lake; two Pallid Harriers, one of which (just like the one seen from the hotel at Baga) flushed a big flock of Greater Short-toed Larke, but in this case an astounding 2,000 which swept back and forth across the fields in a state of apparent panic; Lesser Spotted, Greater Spotted and Changeable Hawk Eagles; and a Woolly-necked Stork. Inevitably the pace slowed down during the heat of the afternoon, but on our return to the river at the end of the day we found a range of waders, gulls and terns and had a last-minute rush of new species. The last of these was a Eurasian Curlew which flew over the ferry in failing light - species number 131 at the end of a remarkable and most enjoyable day. Pramod accepted our new record very gallantly - and after all, there were a dozen of us making an attempt on his one-man record!

On the following day we recovered from the exertions of the bird race by taking a leisurely boat trip up the Zuari River from near Panjim. The objective was to see Collared Kingfisher, of which we saw two and had excellent views, and we also found Stork-billed, Common, Pied, White-throated and Black-capped Kingfishers. We came upon a number of orange/yellow billed terns sitting on posts in the river, and separated some 20 Lesser Crested from among over 100 Greater Crested.

Just one major trip remained, to the lowland monsoon forest of the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary in the south, where we stayed overnight in a small hotel. We stopped en route to watch two Black-shouldered Kites by the road, and spent much of the morning at the Chandranath Hills and Temple where we found a number of new species on the walk down the hill - White-backed and Long-billed Vultures, a Crested Serpent Eagle calling over our heads, Blue and Blue-capped Rock Thrushes, a Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike and two Nilgiri Woodpigeons. We pressed on to Canacona and the Molyvar Hotel, from which we made an afternoon outing into the forest, a half-hour drive away in the extreme south-east of Goa. This is a wonderful peaceful and unspoilt area of forest, low hills and rivers, well away from the usual noise and chaos of India, with permit entry, wide rides and fairly open trees which make finding birds easier than in some of the denser forests to the north. On the afternoon walk, and during a return visit the next morning when it was cooler and fresher, we caught up with some species we had missed at Backwoods, such as the huge White-bellied Woodpecker and Great Hornbill (both overhead in the same tree at one point!), and Grey Junglefowl. A complete surprise was a write-in for our list - two very handsome White-bellied Treepies in the forest, usually a more southerly species in the Western Ghats, and a new bird even for Pramod. On the way back to Baga we called in at Velim Lake, which is not unlike Carambolim Lake, full of waterfowl and with raptors passing overhead including at least 5 Lesser Spotted Eagles.

Our last day was a free day, with people revisiting favourite places, sightseeing or souvenir shopping. Several spent the day around the hotel balcony area, where obligingly a Greater Painted Snipe showed well at close range - only the second sighting on this trip - and where they were able to have their last views of the amazing range of species which can be watched here in style and comfort. After an evening meal out together, the group had an early night before the pre-dawn start on the following morning for the coach to the airport and the long journey home. By general assent, it had been a marvellous trip, with great birding and value for money, and meeting, if not exceeding, people's expectations. One couldn't ask for more...