

India

Bharatpur

6–18 February 2004



Participants:

Bob Bailey	Anna Marret
Don Buckle	Chris Rose
Sue Clarke	Mike Rowe
Alison Elphinstone	Brian and Chris Shaw
Grahame Finch	Phillip Smith
Steve Gantlett	Brad Woan
Grace Hansford	Ruth Yeulett

Bay-backed Shrike

Leaders:

Vaughan Ashby and Anser Khan

Day 1: A smooth morning flight to Delhi via Kuwait, arriving in Delhi early on day two.

Day 2: We were met by our local guide, Anser Khan, together with the driver, his mate and a representative of Indian Experience and were driven through the southern suburbs of Delhi on the 170km journey to Bharatpur. For many, this was their first experience of Indian traffic and you could see it in their faces! “Watch that cow”, “How many people are on that motorbike?” and “Is he meant to be driving that way down the dual-carriageway?” were frequent remarks! Birds could be seen from the bus windows but it was really only the ubiquitous Cattle Egrets, Black (Black-eared) Kites and Feral Pigeons that could be identified with certainty. After a couple of hours we stopped for breakfast and then the birding really started. A small roadside pond had many birds in and around it and during the course of half an hour we saw Indian Pond-heron, Egyptian Vulture, Black-shouldered Kite, a huge Sarus Crane, Red-wattled Lapwing, Greater Coucal, Wire-tailed and Streak-throated Swallows, Black Drongo, Asian Pied and Brahminy Starlings, Siberian Stonechat, Paddyfield Pipit, Citrine, White and White-browed Wagtails and Crested Lark. The main highlights of the journey, however, were Asian Openbill and Black (Red-naped) Ibis, a rather scarce bird now.

Arriving in Bharatpur, we checked into the superb Bagh Hotel for a five-night stay. The huge marble rooms were indeed impressive! The afternoon gave us the chance for our first foray into the magical Bharatpur reserve and we were soon overwhelmed by the sheer number of wintering birds, with huge numbers of ducks in particular. The reserve is a series of artificial lakes impounded by bunds and was created in the days of the Raj as an exclusive hunting estate. Hunting was restricted to one or two days a year and bags of over 4000 indicate how abundant wildfowl was in those days. Once in the reserve, transport is restricted to self-ride bikes, bicycle rickshaws or walking and we experienced both of the latter over the following days. Bharatpur is subject to annual variations in water levels dependent upon the monsoon rains, but the winter of 2003/4 was a good one and most of the common European ducks

were present in good numbers as well as Lesser Whistling-duck, Comb, Ferruginous and Spot-billed Ducks and Cotton Pygmy-goose and good numbers of Bar-headed Geese amongst the Greylags. Other waterbirds included Indian and Little Cormorants, Oriental Darter, Purple Heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, large numbers of breeding Painted Storks, two majestic Black-necked Storks, Woolly-necked Storks, a superb Black Bittern, Glossy Ibis and Eurasian Spoonbill in good numbers, White-breasted Waterhen, (Indian) Purple Swamphen and singles of both Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas. Of course with all the prey about it was inevitable that there would be raptors around and we were treated to wonderful views of Eastern Imperial, Tawny, Spotted and Indian Spotted Eagles and Western Marsh-harrier. Best of all however, was a Lesser Fish-eagle, a first for Bharatpur. Around the muddy margins of the pools were common waders like Black-winged Stilts, together with a scattering of *Tringa* waders and a single White-tailed Lapwing. Common and White-breasted Kingfishers were plentiful.

There are also a lot of trees and dry areas in the reserve and in these we were able to add quite a number of other species. Stately Indian Peafowl and shy Grey Francolins were common, whilst we had brief views of an adult Dusky Eagle-owl as well as two almost fully-grown young. An Indian Grey Hornbill was unconcerned by our presence and, although never common, these birds were seen daily in the reserve. Indian Rollers were common in all the drier areas of the reserve and the diminutive Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker was also seen most days. Two species of shrike were present, the ubiquitous Long-tailed Shrike and the far scarcer but very attractive Bay-backed Shrike. The crow contingent was represented by the attractive Rufous Treepie, the abundant House Crow and the scarcer Jungle Crow. Passerines were fairly scarce as there had recently been some cold weather but there was plenty to keep us interested with beautiful Small Minivets, Red-vented and White-eared Bulbuls, the stunning eastern race of Black Redstart, Jungle Babbler, Red-breasted Flycatchers, Plain Prinia, Common Tailorbird, Blyth's and Clamorous Reed-warblers, Large-billed Leaf-warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler and Indian Silverbill. Mammals were present in good numbers with Samba and Nilgai Deer being the most obvious. There was also a sole Tiger on the reserve, attracted by the amount of food, but we fortunately didn't bump into it! Other predators included remarkably confiding Golden-backed Jackals. Rhesus Macaque monkeys were common and Three-striped Ground Squirrels positively abundant. Returning to the hotel at dusk we recorded our last bird of the day, a Spotted Owlet.

Day 3: An early breakfast and a full day at Bharatpur. It was pretty chilly in the early morning light and as we arrived at Bharatpur, quite misty as well. Both Common and Bank Mynas were plentiful in the streets of Bharatpur. We headed straight for the nursery and before long had found an Orange-headed Thrush, Indian Robin and Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher. Nearby a female Grey Bushchat was a nice find, although shortly afterwards a roosting Large-tailed Nightjar just a couple of metres away on an open path was arguably bird of the day. The walk down the main path towards the temple should have taken barely half an hour but there were just so many birds that it took a lot longer! A pair of Indian Scops-owls was found roosting in a tree and an Oriental Magpie-robin obliged from only a few feet before we deviated into the bush to look at a Rock Python. Cutting back across grassland we found Long-billed Pipit in the open area and Olive-backed Pipit under some trees. Most of the trees had warblers in them and during the course of the day we recorded Greenish and Hume's Warblers and Lesser Whitethroat, together with Black-rumped Flameback, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Common Woodshrike. As we approached some new lakes, Striated Heron, Black-headed Ibis, Ruddy Shelduck and many waders, including common Palearctic wintering species, were all new and we enjoyed wonderful views of two adult and two young Dusky Horned-owls roosting high up in a tree. Spotted Deer were added to our mammal list and a large Soft-shelled Turtle was found. Raptors were now very much in evidence and as well as Tawny and Spotted Eagles, we recorded our first Steppe Eagles and a single Changeable Hawk-eagle. Continuing around more bunds, where Red-crested Pochard was added to our impressive list of waterfowl, we eventually reached the site for Indian Courser. Despite a thorough search however, we had to content ourselves with other excellent birds including Yellow-wattled Lapwings, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark, Oriental Lark and Large Grey Babbler. Although late for lunch, we decided to persevere and checked another suitable area nearby. At first we saw just Common Kestrel and Hoopoes but then, in the distance, two wonderful Indian Coursers. It was quite a long walk back to the temple but Bluethroat, Ashy Prinia and Moustached Warbler kept us busy and the superb picnic lunch whilst watching Purple

Sunbird was well worth the wait. After birding around the temple and the nearby bunds looking unsuccessfully for Smoky Warbler and Siberian Rubythroat, we all boarded bicycle rickshaws (two per rickshaw) for the ride back to the coach. Quite a few stops were made en route (birds seem to totally ignore the rickshaws) and we were constantly overtaking and being overtaken by each other!

Day 4: Another whole day spent in the park. This morning we stopped the coach just inside the gates and followed Anser for quite a way into the bushes. There it was, an amazing Brown Hawk-owl roosting in the daylight just a few yards away, a pretty good start to the day! Continuing to the car park, we boarded the bicycle rickshaws again and headed first down the main road and then along a bund. Suddenly we all stopped and there, in a tree, was a Red-headed Vulture. Now it was time to walk and as we assembled we realised that we were being watched by a totally fearless Spotted Owlet right above our heads! Continuing on foot along the bund through open grassland and dry woodland, we added several new species over the course of the next hour: a pair of Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers and several Chestnut-shouldered Petronias and Baya Weavers. Also present were large numbers of Yellow-footed Green-pigeons roosting in treetops. Eventually we reached a sandy area where Anser's father Baloo met us. He examined the ground and showed us a Tiger's pug mark from the previous night. Everyone kept closer together then and when we flushed a covey of Grey Francolins at close range, more than one heart missed a beat! We checked an area where Siberian Rubythroat had been seen previously but had no luck. We were more fortunate however, with a pair of Oriental Honey-buzzards (one dark phase and one light phase) and a Short-toed Eagle flying overhead. Shortly afterwards we found a group of Yellow-eyed Babblers and they led us a merry dance before everyone saw them well. Eventually we reached an open area where Sociable Lapwings had been wintering. After a brief search we found one and then, by carefully searching the area, found a total of seven of these critically-endangered birds. Also present were seven Northern Lapwings and up to 20 Indian Coursers. By now it was getting hot so we set off back to the temple for lunch. There were, however, plenty of birds to see en route and we were late again! After a relaxing break for lunch we checked one of the bunds again for Smoky Warbler and although we failed again, we did get excellent views of Eastern Orphean Warbler, Clamorous Reed-warbler and Moustached Warbler. Back at the temple we searched for Siberian Rubythroat again but could only find Bluethroat so we headed back by bicycle rickshaw to the nursery to look for Marshall's Iora. A Shikra sat on top of a telegraph pole but there was no sign of the iora. Just as we were returning however, a couple of birds caught our attention in the undergrowth. Eventually we all got great views of two female and a superb male Tickell's Thrush, a wonderful end to the day.

Day 5: Today, we set off early for Bund Bharita, a reservoir a couple of hours' drive from Bharatpur. En route we made several stops, first for Common Babbler, then for excellent views of several Brown Crakes. Immediately on arrival we found a 'singing' Brown-headed Barbet. The reservoir gave us good views of Gull-billed, River and Whiskered Terns from the dam but no sign of our target bird. Continuing along the rough track around the edge of the reservoir, three Greater Painted-snipe were found very close to the edge of a small pool, two males and a wonderfully-plumaged female. We worked our way around a number of vantage points where Mallard, Tufted Duck, Osprey and Pied Kingfisher were found. Several Eurasian Wrynecks and Brown Rock-chats gave good views and Anser had the briefest of views of a couple of Indian Skimmers. Eventually we reached the furthest point of the reservoir where Plain Martins were collecting nesting material and an Isabelline (Daurian) Shrike showed well. Retracing our steps, suddenly the two Indian Skimmers flew past at distance and landed on an island. It was very fortunate that we had seen them in flight as when they landed they were extremely difficult to pick out on the other side of an island amongst all the terns! We then started to walk up the hill towards the old hunting palace for lunch but we hadn't finished birding as a couple of Eurasian Thick-knees were found hiding on the rocky slope. As we ate lunch on the balcony of the old hunting palace, high above the lake, we were able to watch the skimmers through telescopes in the knowledge that we had seen an extremely difficult species. After lunch, we retraced our steps down the hill looking for Sulphur-bellied Warbler but without success. We did, however, startle a small gamebird, which scuttled into cover. Eventually, we managed to re-find it hiding under a bush and got excellent views of it – a Barred Buttonquail. Reboarding our bus, we watched a couple of Temminck's Stints in a roadside pool before moving away from the reservoir to a nearby government house. The reason for the stop here was a fascinating Indian Flying Fox (Fruit Bat)

colony. The grounds looked quite interesting here as well and a brief walk around gave us good views of Orange-headed Thrush before we found a surprise, a Sulphur-bellied Warbler climbing nuthatch-like along the trunk and branches of a tree. Finally, a Common Hawk-cuckoo was found making it a very profitable stop. We then drove for over an hour to a Long-billed Vulture colony. All vultures are now becoming rare in India and this is one of the few remaining colonies in the area. We were treated to excellent views of both birds on the nest and in flight. Our short walk here was very rewarding with first Blue Rock-thrush seen on the rocks, then an Indian Bushlark giving views down to only a few yards and finally Oriental White-eye found in some nearby bushes.

Day 6: Today was our day for visiting Agra but as several species were still needed at Bharatpur, we returned there first for a few hours. As we walked along the bund towards the site for Siberian Rubythroat, we checked to see if the Smoky Warbler was around or if there was any sign of a Marshall's Iora. No luck with either but the Lesser Fish-eagle was present in its favourite tree again and a Bay-backed Shrike was ridiculously tame. Although we enjoyed a nice walk, there was no sign of the Siberian Rubythroat either so we started to head back towards the bus. A brief stop at the Smoky Warbler site at first appeared to be fruitless but, just as we were about to leave, Anser heard a call and the bird was seen briefly on an island in the mid distance. We waited and after a few minutes it showed well before flying even closer and giving excellent views of this normally elusive species. Pleased at seeing one out of the three target species we headed to Agra, arriving just in time for an excellent lunch. After lunch, we visited the Red Fort and enjoyed a very informative tour with a local guide. After the fort, we moved on to the Taj Mahal. Here we had to leave our bus and board an electric tram. After a couple of security searches, we were allowed in to the outer courtyards and given a brief introduction to the history of the monument. Then we walked through an arch and there it was – the Taj Mahal – made of white marble, gleaming ahead of us. We spent around an hour viewing this spectacular monument from all angles (it is less impressive inside) and also scanning the river behind. There were good numbers of common waders on the river and eventually, we managed to find our target birds amongst them, a pair of River Lapwings. There was no sign of any terns but a huge adult Great Black-headed Gull flew past. Finally, on the way back to Bharatpur, we stopped off at a marble factory for an interesting display of this ancient craft by the men who maintain the Taj Mahal.

Day 7: Sadly, today we had to leave Bharatpur, but with the prospect of Ranthambore and Tigers, we had plenty to look forward to. It was quite a long journey but, with a packed lunch, we were able to make several stops en route. At a comfort stop we viewed a large reservoir where four ridiculously tame Barred Buttonquail and Kentish Plover were the highlights. As we headed west the landscape gradually became drier and less green. We stopped at a suitable looking site, which, at first scan, appeared relatively birdless. The more we searched, however, the more birds we found: two Yellow-wattled Lapwings, Little Green Bee-eaters, large flocks of Short-toed Larks, a couple of Indian Coursers, Tawny Pipit, Southern Grey Shrike and both Desert and Isabelline Wheatears. Arriving at Ranthambore, we checked into our hotel (seeing White-bellied Drongo in the grounds) before searching the scrub behind it for Painted Sandgrouse. No success, so we drove to another site that Anser knew, passing White-rumped Vultures roosting in a tree en route. After an extensive search, Anser found three Painted Sandgrouse (including one male) in a ploughed field and we enjoyed wonderful telescope views of what must be one of the most delicately patterned birds of its genus. We decided to try to photograph them closer and 'snuck' up behind a building. Amazingly, they allowed us within 12 feet so plenty of video and film was expended! The only other birds of note here were Spotted Doves so we returned towards our hotel. As we drove down the bumpy drive, someone noticed some quail walking around the edge of a field – six Jungle Bush-quail – and, not content with that, three Crested Buntings landed in the field while we were watching the quail, not a bad end to the day!

Day 8: An early morning start to board our 'canter' 22-seater open truck for a drive through Ranthambore. Ranthambore is a wonderful mixed habitat with lakes, dry grassy areas, deciduous woodland and rocky crags. We drove up through the ornate entrance arch to the headquarters. Even as we waited for our guide to check us in, we watched Scaly-breasted Munias. A pair of Painted Spurfowl skulked under some bushes and then the female climbed into a tree. There were high expectations of

Tiger and we could see why they were present in the reserve with all the mammals to prey upon: Nilgai, Sambar and Spotted Deer and Indian Gazelle. A Dusky Eagle-owl sat at the top of a tree in the early morning light before we dropped down to a lake. As we were watching an Oriental Darter and River Tern, we noticed a Muggar Crocodile. Then another climbed out on the bank opposite and as we were watching it, a pair of Great Thick-knees was found close by. As we continued around the tracks raptors started to rise on the thermals: Oriental Honey-buzzard, Changeable Hawk-eagle and Crested Serpent-eagle. A calling Stork-billed Kingfisher was eventually successfully tracked down in woodland, a very rare bird in this part of the sub-continent. Great Tits were an interesting find and reminded us more of home, although this sub-species is much duller, but a Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike reminded us of where we were. Eventually, we completed our circuit and returned to the hotel for a break and lunch. There were quite a few birds around the grounds and in amongst the Little Green Bee-eaters, Red-breasted Flycatchers, Grey-headed Canary-flycatchers and Oriental Magpie-robins were pairs of both White-browed Fantail and Marshall's Iora. Both species showed amazingly well and as we had missed the Marshall's Iora at Bharatpur, this was a particularly welcome find. In the afternoon we returned to Ranthambore, once more seeing many of the species from the morning but, unfortunately, still no Tiger! Leaving the reserve, we found a small group of Dusky Crag-martins around the entrance gate. After dinner, we tried for Oriental Scops-owl but without success.

Day 9: Back into Ranthambore this morning, but this time in gypsies (open-top jeeps). We had four gypsies and two were to go in one direction and two in another. As they are smaller, gypsies can go along tracks that canters can't, so we were able to explore new areas of the park. Of course, each gypsy saw different things and our particular gypsy was privileged to see a Wild Dog. This very rare animal is the only one in the park and much more difficult to see than Tiger! At our next stop, a group of five Black Storks rose from their overnight roosting spot but other than this all of the mammals and birds were the same as those seen the previous day. There were several highlights however, with both Shikra and Spotted Owlet giving amazingly close views and Rufous Treepies joining us in our vehicles at a rest stop! As we were making the return journey we stopped for some pipits, which turned out to be Tree Pipits, and whilst looking at them a bunting was spotted. It flew down to the stream to drink, a superb male White-capped Bunting. Back at the hotel it was lunchtime and still no-one had seen a Tiger. A walk along the hotel entrance track did give us a flyover Bonelli's Eagle and one Crested Bunting was still present, while both the Marshall's Ioras and the White-browed Fantails were still in the hotel grounds. After lunch, we once again returned to Ranthambore in the gypsies, taking opposite routes to this morning. Our two gypsies were fortunate to find two Painted Spurfowl skulking in some bushes and eventually we all saw them through a gap in the vegetation, glowing resplendently in the sun. As we came out into an open area we suddenly noticed several other vehicles performing 'unusual' manoeuvres and upon reaching them discovered that there was a Tiger in close proximity. After an anxious few minutes' wait, suddenly its ears and back could be seen. Eventually we could see the whole animal and then, amazingly, it walked right out into the open and just stood there looking around. It crossed the road, totally oblivious to our presence, a huge adult male. After we had all had memorable views of this majestic animal, we set off in different directions to find the other two gypsies to tell them where to head. Very little of note was seen (or taken in!) during the rest of the afternoon and when we got back to the hotel we waited in anticipation to see if the other two gypsies had seen the Tiger. Sadly, they had arrived too late. They had, however, seen a Brown Fish-owl and Jungle Cat. After dinner, we went out to look for Savanna Nightjar and were treated to excellent views of a displaying male as well as Painted Sandgrouse coming in to drink.

Day 10: Although we were heading west towards Sonkhaliya today, we decided that the half of the group missing the Tiger should have another attempt, so they left in two gypsies. Our half of the group visited a nearby reservoir and spent a relaxed couple of hours watching flocks of Red-headed Buntings and a few waterbirds in the small patches of remaining water. Pied Avocet, large flocks of Little Stint and Dunlin were new for the tour and a solitary River Lapwing was a surprise. A Steppe Gull looked quite lonely sat out in the middle and several Eurasian Swallows made us feel quite at home again. Walking back along the dam to the gypsies, several sandgrouse were seen flying around and eventually we found some on the ground – Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. Returning to meet the others and board our bus for the journey to Sonkhaliya, we were extremely pleased to hear that they had all seen Tiger, a wonderful result. Our

journey was punctuated by several stops – mostly for birds and one for lunch, during which the highlight was a White-eyed Buzzard. Arriving at Juniya, we had to leave our bus as it couldn't get down the narrow streets to the hotel. We were offered a ride in a decrepit lorry but decided to walk the short distance through the town and let the lorry take our suitcases. Once into our hotel grounds we were very pleased to find that there were outstanding views over a marsh and whilst drinking our greeting drinks, found a Jack Snipe. After checking into our rooms we decided to walk out into the fields to view the marsh better. One of the first birds we saw was a Masked Wagtail and we also enjoyed views of another Isabelline (Daurian) Shrike before returning to the hotel. With the light fading, large numbers of Plain Martins and Little Swifts gathered under one of the buildings overhanging the lake and we were able to observe their different types of nest.

Day 11: An early start for the jeep journey to the Sonkhaliya area. It was quite cold at first in the jeeps but it soon warmed up. We scanned a couple of times for bustards but the most significant birds were large numbers of Egyptian Vultures. A stop at a disused quarry startled a family group of Rock Eagle-owls and we had great views of them, both in flight and perched in trees. The area is partly cultivated and partly acacia semi-desert so birds tend to congregate close to the waterhole. We spent some time here seeing huge numbers of Greater Short-toed Larks and a single Bimaculated Lark, but the only evidence of Indian Bustard we could find were footprints in the mud! We spent the rest of the morning driving around the area and a wonderful male Montagu's Harrier and a couple of Eastern Imperial Eagles were seen. Eventually, however, perseverance paid off, and, although it was not the bird that we wanted, nevertheless Variable Wheatear is a difficult bird to find due to its range. A couple more Rock Eagle-owls showed well before we made a long lunch stop in the heat of the day. A walk around some acacia trees gave us Sykes's Warbler, whilst Southern Grey (*lahtori*) and Bay-backed Shrikes and Large Grey Babblers were particularly tame as we sat under the trees. In the afternoon we returned to the waterhole in the hope that the bustards would come in to drink in the evening but it wasn't to be so we returned to the hotel somewhat dusty!

Day 12: It was a reasonably long drive back to Delhi but we did make a couple of birding stops en route. First we stopped for a group of Rose-coloured Starlings in a village, then at a large roadside lake that had plenty of birds on it. Many of the birds we had seen before, but a large flock of Small Pratincoles was a nice find and a lone Great Black-headed Gull compensated those who had missed the Agra bird. The real surprise, however, was a flyover Sociable Lapwing. We stopped at a very luxurious hotel in Jaipur for lunch, followed by a walk across the road to a reservoir. Then it was time for the final leg of the journey back to Delhi and check-in at our airport hotel. We had recorded a total of 246 bird species on this tour, together with good numbers of mammals, including, of course, Tiger!

Day 13: Early morning flight back to the UK.