

India

Bharatpur, Ranthambhore and Sonkhaliya

9–21 February 2008

Participants:

Les Awford

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Indian Courser

Leaders: Ansar Khan and Bill Blake

Day 1: Overnight flights to New Delhi.

Day 2: With people arriving at New Delhi Airport on three different flights it meant a somewhat staggered arrival for the group but eventually we all met up with our ground agents and our local guide, Ansar Khan. Soon our luggage was loaded onto our comfortable, air-conditioned coach and we were on our way out of Delhi. Our first Indian bird was the ubiquitous House Crow at the airport. Eventually we joined the Delhi–Agra Highway and made good progress southwards. What were to become common roadside birds were seen from the coach – Cattle and Little Egrets, Black-headed Ibises, Black-shouldered and Black-eared Kites, Red-wattled Lapwings, Eurasian Collared-doves and Laughing Doves, noisy Rose-ringed Parakeets, White-breasted Kingfishers, Indian Rollers, Black Drongos, Common and Bank Mynas and Red-vented Bulbuls, plus good numbers of Egyptian Vultures. Mid morning we stopped at Kosi where an area of roadside pools produced a good selection of birds. The highlight for many at this stop was the superb Black-necked Stork that flew in to land on one of the pools just after we arrived. It promptly snatched a Little Grebe from the water's surface, juggled it in its huge bill, killing it by flailing it from side to side and, after several attempts, swallowed it whole. Other birds here included three species of cormorant, Indian Darter, Purple Heron, Painted Stork, five species of duck, Shikra, Greater Spotted Eagle, Marsh Harrier, a flyover Sarus Crane, Purple Swampphen, a White-tailed Lapwing, Asian Pied Starling and Citrine Wagtail. A few hundred metres further on we stopped for refreshments. This stop produced another, or the same, Greater Spotted Eagle being mobbed by a Shikra, a Greater Coucal, White-eared Bulbul, an Ashy Prinia, Lesser Whitethroat and two magnificent Masked Wagtails. Pushing on to Bharatpur we eventually left the Highway and travelled on narrower, quieter roads – roadside birds included Indian Peafowl, Southern Grey, Bay-backed and Long-tailed Shrikes, and Rufous Treepie, plus two Red-naped Ibis which proved to be the only ones of the trip.

Arriving in Bharatpur, we stopped for some birding along a rather dry canal. Our target species here was Greater Painted-snipe and we all had excellent views of three birds here plus Black-winged Stilt, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Marsh, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers, two Temminck's Stints, Common Snipe and Ruff. We also added White-breasted Waterhen, Brahminy Starling, Zitting Cisticola and Plain Prinia. We checked into our hotel, the Bagh (garden). After a late lunch we boarded our coach again for the short drive to the Keoladeo Ghana National Park, known to

birders simply as Bharatpur. Before entering the reserve we checked out a nursery area nearby, here we had reasonable views of a roosting Brown Hawk-owl. We also added Indian Grey Hornbill, Brown-headed Barbet, a handsome Black-rumped Flameback, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher and a pair of Purple Sunbirds to our growing list. Entering the reserve for the few hours before dusk, initially we searched for Indian Rock Python, but with the heat of the day already subsiding, the snakes had gone to ground in a Porcupine burrow complex. The birds did not disappoint however; a Crested Serpent-eagle soaring overhead showed off its intricate underwing pattern and a Grey Nightjar roosting on a horizontal branch of a tree showed how well its subtle plumage camouflaged it. A Eurasian Golden Oriole sang briefly but did not show itself. Grey Francolin, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, two Spotted Owlets, Coppersmith Barbet, Ashy Drongo, Scarlet Minivet, a fine male Red-breasted Flycatcher, Olive-backed Pipit plus one each of Orange-headed Thrush and Scaly Thrush were all additions to the days list. The Scaly Thrush showed extremely well at very close range as it fed by turning over the leaf litter, Ansar was very excited as it is an uncommon bird at Bharatpur – it proved to be the first write-in of our trip. We returned to our hotel for an excellent dinner, followed by the bird log and some well-earned sleep – a long day with 103 species for the group.

Day 3: After an early breakfast we boarded our coach again for the short drive to the reserve. Earlier, Richard P. had seen a Taiga Flycatcher in the hotel grounds close to his room. Ansar (who lives on the reserve) greeted us at the reserve gates, as did a pair of Wire-tailed Swallows perched on the roadside wires. Our visit this year coincided with a “dry year”, last summer’s monsoon rains had not been as heavy in this part of Rajasthan with the consequence that the usual lavish wetland was replaced by a rather parched landscape with only occasional wet areas dotted here and there. Leaving our coach at the car park we walked out into the dry savannah and Acacia thorn scrub. Ansar soon spotted our main quarry, an Indian Spotted Eagle, perched atop a tree giving decent views and later giving good flight views. A Shaheen Falcon (Peregrine) mobbing an Oriental Honey-buzzard was somewhat brief and missed by some of the group. Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Eurasian Wryneck, White-bellied Drongo, Bluethroat, Pied Stonechat, Indian Robin, Oriental Magpie-robin, Chestnut-shouldered Petronia and small groups of Indian Silverbills were additions to the list. We headed back to the “main road” to check out the roadside trees and found a roosting pair of Indian Scops-owls in a palm tree, Common Woodshrikes and a very obliging Spotted Creeper. Mammals seen included inquisitive Rhesus Macaques, many acrobatic Palm Squirrels, two Indian Gerbils, Chital (Spotted Deer), Sambar, Nilgai (Blue Bull), Wild Boar and Golden-backed Jackals. In and around the few roadside pools we added Black-crowned Night-heron, Eurasian Spoonbill, a flock of 70 Bar-headed Geese, Ruddy Shelducks, 30 Indian Spot-billed Ducks, a single female Garganey, Comb Ducks, Spotted Redshank, Rufous-tailed Lark, Common Tailorbird, Clamorous and Blyth’s Reed-warblers and Paddyfield Pipit. We also found a single Water Rail (an uncommon bird at Bharatpur and another write-in). Overhead a Common (Steppe) Buzzard of the *vulpinus* race, Steppe Eagle and Red-headed Vulture vied for our attention. Our hotel delivered a packed lunch to us and we ate in the shade of the trees around the temple attracting the interest of numerous Palm Squirrels, mynas and Rufous Treepies and even a courageous waterhen. Wheeling overhead were Little Swifts with a few Red-rumped Swallows and a couple of Sand Martins; in the trees were a pair of Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers, two *tristis* Chiffchaffs plus another pair of Indian Scops-owls roosting in a palm. A well-watered jheel nearby held a pair of White-browed Wagtails and some surprisingly large Indian Soft-shelled Turtles. A short walk into a dry open area produced a Short-toed Eagle, two Barred Buttonquails (for some), an *isabellinus* Isabelline Shrike and our main quarry, three very handsome, elegant Indian Coursers which showed very well before flying off. For the afternoon we had the use of an electric bus and we visited various areas either side of the “main road”. A visit to a Dusky Eagle-owl nest found us watching a huge female on the nest and a male perched nearby. Other new birds seen were Small Minivet and Yellow-eyed Babblers plus another Black-necked Stork and Bay-backed Shrike, whilst Andrew and Richard saw and heard a Hume’s Whitethroat. We revisited the Porcupine burrows of yesterday afternoon and this time we saw two Indian Rock Pythons – a small one about 5 – 6 feet long and a large female about 11–12 feet long with a thick girth. Today we timed the visit just right, having admired the snakes for five minutes or so they slowly disappeared back into the Porcupine burrows. Finally we visited the area where we saw Scaly Thrush last evening, earlier one of Ansar's colleagues had found a Long-tailed Nightjar roosting on the ground amongst the leaf litter. Eventually we located the bird and despite the

noisy breaking of dead twigs and the close attention of the photographers amongst us, including flash, the bird remained motionless, confident in its cryptic camouflage. Walking back to our coach, Andrew and I had brief views of a Verditer Flycatcher, but it did not co-operate for the rest of the group and flew out of sight. Another good day with 119 species – an excellent dinner, washed down with a cold beer for some, and the bird log rounded off our day.

Day 4: Richard saw the Taiga Flycatcher for the second morning running on his way to breakfast. This morning we had a very short drive to the Muthi Jheel, a rather dry canal close to our hotel. We found a good selection of sandpipers, a group of six Pied Avocets and a single Little Ringed Plover plus Intermediate Egret, Paddyfield Pipit and a superb male *beema* Yellow Wagtail. New birds for the trip were Red Collared-dove, Pied Kingfisher, a noisy group of Large Grey Babblers and at least one Streak-throated Swallow which obliged by perching on a wire with Wire-tailed and Barn Swallows. Finishing our walk outside the gates of the Maharajahs Palace where our coach was waiting, both Brown Rock Chat and White-browed Fantail showed well before we boarded the coach to battle with the chaotic Indian traffic. We drove to Fatehpur Sikri, a fortified ghost city fort and a world heritage site. It was once the capital of the Moghul Empire, it was built in an area that suffered from water shortages and was abandoned after 14 years after completion. Here amongst the crowds our guide for the day, Limon, shared his knowledge with us about this fascinating site. Ever watchful for birds we saw at least one Oriental Honey-buzzard amongst the many Black-eared Kites and Egyptian Vultures overhead and Andrew picked out a couple of swifts that turned out to be Pacific Swifts – another write-in. Back on our coach we headed through the chaotic Indian traffic to Agra and another world heritage site – Agra Fort. This huge, formidable red sandstone structure dominates southeast Agra and is testament to India's bloody history. We walked among the gardens and intricately carved buildings with Limon again sharing his knowledge; Brown Rock Chats were common at this site and at least two Booted Eagles were overhead with the Black-eared Kites. Lunch was al fresco at the Riao Restaurant where a representative of our ground agents came to check we were being well looked after. Having introduced himself to me he asked me "does anyone in the group not like mushrooms". It seemed a viable question so I duly asked the group, he and Ansar burst out laughing having actually asked, "does anyone want to use a washroom" – oops. It was a source of amusement to the group over lunch and for the rest of the day. Next came Agra's best-known world heritage site, the Taj Mahal, surely one of the seven wonders of the world. What can be written about this site that has not already been written? Suffice to say that all of the group were suitably gob-smacked as we walked through the vast red sandstone gateway for our first proper view of this spectacular white marble mausoleum. After Limon's thorough guided tour we stood on the balcony behind the dome to check out the Yamuna River below us. Almost immediately we picked up a large gull flying towards us – a super, second winter Great Black-headed Gull; other new birds on the river were a lone River Lapwing and some Kentish Plovers plus the largest group of Ruddy Shelducks seen so far. In the Taj gardens at least four Eurasian Hoopoes were feeding on the well watered, manicured lawns, the trees held Yellow-footed Green Pigeon and a pair of Coppersmith Barbets and a Small Indian Mongoose was also seen on the lawns. Many photographs later we left the Taj to head back to Bharatpur, stopping at an Inlay Workshop to see the process of inlaying semi-precious stones in the marble; dinner at our hotel was followed by the bird log; 93 species for the day.

Day 5: A pre-breakfast look around the hotel gardens added Taiga Flycatcher and Oriental White-eye. After breakfast we picked up Ansar at the reserve gates and headed to Bund Baretha, a large reservoir an hour or so away. Various birding stops en route produced a photogenic pair of Spotted Owlets roosting in a roadside tree; two Red-headed Buntings and a Common Babbler in some fields, and a couple of Brown Crakes on a small marshy area. A short walk through some dry, dusty fields produced a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, a fly-over group of 12 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Plum-headed Parakeets, an Indian Bushlark, at least four Ashy-crowned Sparrow-larks, an Isabelline Wheatear and a Black-breasted Weaver plus many Chestnut-shouldered Petronias and Indian Silverbills. Our last stop was at a school where the mature trees in the grounds held a roosting colony of Indian Fruit Bats. Checking a small flock of Greenish Warblers, Oriental White-eyes plus Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher Ansar found a Tickell's Blue-flycatcher, unfortunately as soon as he shouted it disappeared. After a brief search Ansar shouted Tickell's, we assumed it was the Flycatcher re-found but it was a Tickell's Thrush feeding in the leaf litter

under bushes. Finally we arrived at the dam end of Bund Baretha, the water level was quite low, creating lots of small islands and we were spoilt for choice, as the area was so full of birds. A group of five rare Indian Skimmers and two Great Thick-knees showed well on the nearby islands. New birds were everywhere and included Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes, Glossy Ibis, Greylag Geese, 15 species of duck that included four Mallard, many Red-crested Pochards and Ferruginous Ducks and about 20 Cotton Pygmy-geese, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Osprey, splendid Bronze-winged Jacanas, a single Eurasian Curlew, many Black-tailed Godwits, Whiskered and River Terns and two Common Kingfishers. Moving on a stop for a perched Crested Serpent-eagle also produced an Asian Openbill overhead and some Red Avadavats in the reeds. Driving along a bumpy track hugging the side of the reservoir we saw our only Pheasant-tailed Jacana, unfortunately a bird in non-breeding plumage, before arriving at an old Hunting Lodge on a hill overlooking the reservoir. We ate our packed lunch in the shade of the old buildings. There were many Chestnut-shouldered Petronias in the trees and we enjoyed better views of River Terns. After lunch a short walk along the lakeshore gave us good looks at Crested and Rufous-tailed Larks, a Grey-breasted Prinia and small numbers of White-capped Buntings. Leaving the reservoir we drove on to a working quarry at Berna; the cliff face away from the hustle of the quarry holds a small breeding colony of Long-billed Vultures. We saw at least four of these endangered birds on their breeding ledges plus Eurasian and Dusky Crag-martins and House and Rock Buntings here. The hoped for Wallcreeper that had been in the area for a month or so did not show itself, the sun was already off the cliff face by the time we arrived so the bird had presumably moved higher up. As we left the quarry Hanuman Langurs were making their way up onto the cliffs to spend the night safe from predators. Arriving at our hotel in the dark we had a late dinner and bird log; a staggering 158 species for the day.

Day 6: After breakfast we spent the morning in the reserve searching on foot in an area of Kadum woodland we had not visited yet. Our main quarry was the virtual endemic Marshall's Iora, despite much searching and tape playing we drew a blank. A Common Hawk-cuckoo in the middle of an Acacia bush was the first new bird of the day. Ansar then heard what he thought was a Brooks Leaf-warbler, we saw a bird briefly, high in the trees, and it looked good but it promptly disappeared before we could nail it. Fortunately, a bit further along the track, Ansar relocated the bird by its high-pitched call. It gave excellent views, surprisingly low down for this difficult species, showing off its pale-green upperparts with yellowish supercillium and ear-coverts, yellowish double wing-bar and pale (yellowish) rump. This lifted the mood of the group and we headed for our picnic lunch (again delivered fresh by our hotel) somewhat cheerier. This afternoon we had the use of the electric bus again – it ferried us to some of the more remote parts of the reserve that are seldom visited. New birds were a couple of elegant Yellow-wattled Lapwings, a single male Black Francolin and a Long-billed Pipit plus more exquisite Small Minivets and at least 40 Yellow-footed Green Pigeons resting in one tree. At a very remote part of the reserve we waited where harriers can be seen coming into roost and were rewarded with a very handsome, ghostly male Pallid Harrier. On the pools by the Temple we found two roosting Sarus Cranes and a good collection of waders with good numbers of Marsh Sandpipers. Tonight we stayed on the reserve after dark with the intention of looking for Fishing Cat. First we watched an old film about Bharatpur (narrated by Sir Peter Scott) before setting out in the dark; a Fishing Cat was regularly being seen feeding on scraps specifically left out for it, despite a torchlight search we could not find the cat. Another late dinner back at the hotel, our last night here so it was time to pack as well. 100 species for the day.

Day 7: After an early breakfast we loaded up the coach and headed southwest to Ranthambhore, although no great distance the journey was slow due to narrow and busy roads. It was made even longer when we got stuck in a traffic jam caused by two vehicles colliding on a very narrow piece of road close to a very busy small town. Over an hour later the traffic finally started to move and we were on our way again; we stopped in an area of farmland; here Little Green Bee-eaters entertained us over a packed lunch. Arriving at the Tiger Den Hotel in Ranthambhore we only had time to drop our bags in our rooms and freshen up before we climbed aboard an open-topped jeep (Canter) and drove towards the reserve with our Park guide Jhoti. Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve is set amongst the Aravali Hills, a mixture of dry deciduous jungle, lakes and dry scrub dominated by the impressive ruins of a massive eleventh-century fortress. We stopped overlooking a lake where a pair of Woolly-necked Storks strutted about on the far bank; suddenly

Jhota shouted TIGER! There it was, not a mirage, but one of the most magnificent beasts on the planet appearing from the Elephant Grass to sprawl out on the lakeside. Then another Tiger appeared out of cover and ran towards the other playfully growling and sticking out a paw as it continued to the lake shore and disturbed some basking Mugger Crocodiles with a show of petulance. These were both young females, some 16–18 months old, and part of a litter of three cubs. It just got better and better as the other sibling, a male, appeared and started scent marking the base of a tree. We now had three Tigers, all in the open and all to ourselves, it could not get any better – but it did! All three cats started to walk straight towards us and at one time the male was no more than 10 metres away. Cameras were clicking and the “wows” got louder as the tiredness and fatigue of our long journey was quickly forgotten thanks to these magnificent big cats. Other vehicles started to gather around the cats, and us so we decided to leave and head further into the park. New birds seen were Spotted Dove, Alexandrine Parakeet, Grey Bushchat and Great Tit (much greyer lacking the yellow tones of our birds back home). More River Terns plus many waders, more Great Thick-knees, Pied Kingfisher, White-browed Fantail and White-browed Wagtail all showed well and mammals were well represented with Hanuman Langurs, Sambar, Chital and Wild Boar. Our final new bird in the Park was a Eurasian Thick-knee of the Indian race very close to our vehicle. Driving out of the Park we had yet another Tiger sighting, the male from earlier and close to where we had left it. We drove back to our hotel and walked a short distance to a small pool in the scrub, here with the light fading we watched about 50 Painted Sandgrouse coming into drink at the waterhole. We were four short for dinner tonight with some not feeling well but at least no one missed the great afternoon in the Park; 108 species for the day.

Day 8: After a very early breakfast it was still dark as we climbed into our Canter, well wrapped in blankets for a very chilly drive into the park again. On a different route to yesterday the park seemed very quiet with Langurs, Sambar and Chital plus a Black-tailed (Ruddy) Mongoose being the only mammals seen. The birds were much as before with Long-billed and Red-headed Vultures, Black-rumped Flameback and Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and White-bellied Drongos. A Hume’s Warbler was new for most as was a White-naped Woodpecker that was only heard. We returned via the buffer zone, finding Tiger pugmarks outside the park proper, where some fine Nilgai bulls were well photographed plus a very handsome male Black Redstart and we finally saw Chinkara (Indian Gazelle), firstly a single male and later two females and a male on a hillside. Returning to our hotel, those that were well enough went for a short walk through the dry fields and scrub surrounding our hotel but bird activity lessened as the heat of the day rose. We did have good views of a pair of Painted Sandgrouse plus Little Green Bee-eaters and displaying Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark. New birds added were Tawny Pipit, Rufous-fronted Prinia and a Variable Wheatear of the race *opistholeuca*. Lunch at our hotel was followed by a siesta in the midday heat. We set off into the park again mid-afternoon; we drew Trail No. 5 this time. We saw plenty of Tiger prey but no big cats; Black Stork and Grey Wagtail were new birds but searches for Brown Fish-owl and Stork-billed Kingfisher proved fruitless. All too soon it was time to leave the Park, as we turned a bend an adult male Tiger appeared ahead of us on the track, walking straight towards us and being followed by another Canter. We reversed to give it more room but unfortunately it decided to slink off back into the forest, spray marking the base of a tree, before disappearing. There then followed a roller coaster of a ride along the bumpy, dusty track as our driver tried to make up time to be out of the park by closing time – we made it with a few minutes to spare. Tonight’s dinner was al fresco with a barbecue plus traditional Rajasthani music and dancing, 87 species for the day.

Day 9: Another early start – this morning we went to Surwal Lake, a chilly hour away. The lake turned out to be virtually bone dry, a walk across the mud produced distant large flocks of Kentish Plovers and Short-toed Larks, a perched *callidus* Peregrine Falcon plus mixed groups of White, Yellow and Citrine Wagtails. The surrounding fields added five Jungle Bush-quail, Rose-coloured and Common Starlings and the star of the morning, a superb Jungle Cat. It appeared around the edge of sugar cane field, and then trotted out into the open straight towards us, posed briefly for the cameras, before moving off along a field edge. Heading back Andrew spotted a Large Cuckooshrike flying over the road as we passed through Sawai Modaphur. We then detoured to some kind of animal park, which proved to be a rather sad affair but we did turn up the best new bird of the morning en route, a White-eyed Buzzard sat atop a dead tree posing nicely for the whole vehicle to see. Small Minivets, Rufous-fronted Prinias plus fine males of

opistholeuca Variable Wheatear and *phoenicuroides* Black Redstart were also seen. After lunch some had a siesta whilst others birded around the hotel and nearby fields. An Asian Koel was seen near the dining hall; Peter and Helen took pictures of various birds in the fields, including a pipit that was initially thought to be a Richard's Pipit but proved to be a Rosy Pipit (identified back home when seen on the big screen). Back into the Park, this afternoon's trail climbed up into the hills through well-wooded country. A Besra (another write-in) flew over and we found Sloth Bear and Tiger pug marks in the sandy soil. Leaving the park Ansar spotted a pair of Painted Spurfowl scratching around in the dirt and leaf litter close to the road giving excellent views. We got news that a male Tiger was being seen on the main road out of the park so we turned round but by the time we got there the Tiger had moved back into the reserve – some of us had distant views of the Tiger across the lake. Returning to the hotel we tried for Savannah Nightjar at a couple of nearby sites but we drew a blank – we did see Indian Hare, 109 species for the day.

Day 10: This morning we drove up to Ranthambhore Fort; Richard, Marigold, Terry and Margaret opted for a walk in the fort with our Canter driver, the rest of us walked slowly back down the road the way we had come. It was an enjoyable walk down, birding as we went. We saw a good selection of birds including more Painted Spurfowl, a pair of White-naped Woodpeckers, Common Iora, a cracking male Tickell's Blue-flycatcher plus two Tickell's Thrushes and an Orange-headed Thrush. All too soon the Canter was at the bottom of the hill waiting to pick us up. As we left a large accipiter flew over, a Crested Goshawk – according to the books somewhat out of range, but a bird that Ansar sees here occasionally but regularly. Returning to our hotel it was time to finish off any packing before loading up the coach to leave on the long drive to Juniya. We stopped for a packed lunch in the shade of some roadside trees. Andrew found a chiffchaff here, which after consulting the books and some discussion we identified as Mountain Chiffchaff. Moving on we stopped as we crossed the Banass River; we added Brown-headed Gull plus an adult and 1st winter Great Black-headed Gull, two Ospreys and many Streak-throated Swallows. Arriving in Juniya our coach driver did an excellent job driving through the narrow streets of the town and managed to get us within 100 metres of our hotel, the Amar Bagh. It was in a lovely setting on the side of a lake (unfortunately dry), what little water there was attracted various waders including our first Little Stint of the trip. Little Swifts and Streak-throated Swallows were nesting in the hotel buildings, the latter in hundreds. An excellent al fresco dinner followed with an Indian Scops-owl directly above us, 118 species for the day.

Day 11: Another very early breakfast so we could be away well before first light – travelling in three jeeps it was a very cold drive to Sonkhaliya. We arrived shortly after dawn and started to drive through the dry fields and thorn scrub in search of Indian Bustard. We stopped at a small marble quarry, we flushed a pair of magnificent Rock Eagle-owls that then perched nearby giving excellent views. A Jungle Cat also appeared from a hole in the rocks before running off. Striated Babbler was another addition to the list as was a small covey of Common Quails and three ground roosting Short-eared Owls. We carried on searching for bustards, even enlisting the help of the local goat herders but as the heat of the day grew our chances lessened. We continued to add new species for the list though – an obliging Sirkeer Malkoha, Long-legged Buzzard, Desert Wheatear, Desert Lesser Whitethroat and a group of three rare Sociable Lapwings. We also had very close views of at least eight Indian Coursers, Yellow-wattled Lapwings and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. In the midday heat we retired to some shade (limited in this area) for our packed lunch and a rest to wait for the heat to subside a little – six of the group decided to return to the hotel after lunch for a more relaxed afternoon. Whilst “relaxing” Andrew found a singing Sykes's Warbler that showed extremely well in an Acacia thorn. We checked an enclosed area where Stoliczka's Bushchat had been seen in the past but again we drew a blank. We did flush six more Short-eared Owls in this area and what we took to be two more Rock Eagle-owls. The “eagle-owls” perched up on a gnarled Acacia, at the time we all remarked at how different the two birds looked, they're being a striking size and colour difference between them. The smaller bird was exactly the same as the birds we had flushed from the marble quarry earlier but the second bird was much larger; more than one of us researched the available literature back home and we all concluded the second owl was a Eurasian Eagle-owl. We saw more Variable Wheatears of the *opistholeuca* race but this time we also saw a couple of males of the white-bellied race *picata* and a superb male of the white-capped race *capistrata*; these show how aptly

named this bird is. As the heat of the day began to subside we searched more earnestly for Indian Bustard. The “fields” held large flocks of Short-toed Larks and good numbers of Tawny Pipits but still we could find no bustards. Rapid and large changes in agriculture, plus increased human disturbance not helping our cause. Scanning from a bit of a vantage point we saw a small dashing falcon that was initially identified as a Red-footed Falcon before it perched up to reveal its true identity – a Merlin, an uncommon bird in the area and a new bird for our guide, Ansar. It was a cold and dusty drive back to our hotel for a refreshing shower, another excellent al fresco dinner washed down with a few beers and the bird log; 66 species for the day that included 12 species new for the trip.

Day 12: An early start for the long drive to Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, also known as the Pink City. Our route in Jaipur took us past the Hawa Mahal, (Palace of the Winds) then out of the city passing the Jal Mahal (Lake Palace). The road then wound steeply through a mountain pass to the Amber Fort, possibly the most magnificent of all the great Rajput fort-palaces; dizzily perched above the Amber Fort was Jaigarh Fort, another magnificent mountain fortress. We stopped here to take photographs before moving on for Delhi. After lunch we arrived at Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary, a small wetland reserve some 30 miles south west of Delhi. We spent a pleasant couple of hours walking around the reserve, which, although dryer than normal, was still much wetter than we had got used to at Bharatpur. The wetland held good numbers of various herons, ducks and waders, two Black-necked Storks, two Sarus Cranes and Eastern Imperial and Greater Spotted Eagles. Our last new birds for the trip were Common Cranes and a perched White-tailed Eagle and we finally got to see Red Avadavats. Leaving the reserve we could hear cranes bugling as they came in for the night but unfortunately they were out of sight; 102 species for the day. We drove to a hotel close to New Delhi Airport where we had use of rooms to freshen up, pack properly, dine, call the last bird log and grab a few hours sleep before our early flight.

Day 13: The tour concluded with arrival back at Heathrow.

An excellent trip with a good group of people; my special thanks go to Ansar for his knowledge of the birds and the area. I would also like to thank Andrew Ross and Richard Patient for their bird finding and ID skills and to Peter and Helen for their many excellent photographs. The group total was 263 species, which includes those species that were only heard; this beats the previous best total of 246 species for this Birdfinders tour. I would like to thank everyone on the tour for making it a fun tour to co-lead.

Bill Blake