

# India

## Goa

10-25 January 2004



### Participants:

**Pauline and Alan Cox**  
**Alison and David Curtis**  
**Eric Durbin**  
**Julia Gibson**  
**Satomi and Aki Kawai**  
**Eileen and Pete Knight**

### Orange-headed Thrush

### Leaders:

**Vaughan Ashby and Loven Pereira**

### Saturday 10th January London

*Gloomy and overcast 4°C*

Goa is one of the most popular birding destinations in India for both organised groups and independent birders. There is a wide range of habitats including wetlands, the coast and jungle, the latter particularly well known through the Bhagwan Mahavir Sanctuary in the foothills of the Western Ghats. A visitor on a two-week tour might expect around 250 species, providing all habitat types are covered. Vaughan Ashby, who runs Birdfinders, is an experienced leader in Goa and has developed his itinerary with support from three excellent Goan birders who established the superb Backwoods Camp in 1998. On this occasion we were to be co-led by Loven Pereira.

The Birdfinders 2004 Goa Group assembled at 2130hrs at London Gatwick: Satomi & Aki Kawai from Vancouver; Eric Durbin from Ohio; Allison & David Curtis from Mold; Julia Gibson from Guildford; Eileen & Pete Knight from Weymouth and Pauline & Alan Cox from Farnham - quite an international group with representatives from four countries; half the group had previous tour experience with Vaughan. We flew with Monarch as international flights to Goa are only allocated to Charter carriers; our Airbus A300 took off precisely as scheduled just after 2300hrs for the 9½-hour direct flight.

### Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> January Goa

*Hot and cloudless 35°C*

We touched down in Goa at 1410hrs local time then travelled the 50km, first east and then north-west, via Panjim, to our coastal destination of Baga. En-route numerous species were claimed but birding from a speeding bus is never satisfactory. However, as we crossed the River Mandovi north of Panjim most of the group safely identified a familiar Peregrine Falcon roosting on one of the bridge supports. At 1630hrs we arrived at the Cavala Beach Resort - our hotel base for the tour. The hotel is situated on the beach road overlooking Baga fields; it provided spacious, comfortable en-suite rooms and we soon began to enjoy the wonderful service provided by the staff led by Elvis.

Most took a refreshing shower before the party assembled for a quick introduction to the Baga Fields under Loven and Vaughan's guidance. This is an internationally famous area of some 120ha bounded by the Baga river and the coast road. It comprises dry semi-cultivated fields to the north end, becoming wetter in a complex of paddy fields to the south. The equatorial sunset rapidly claimed our daylight so there was little time even for a cursory glance at the fields. Around the hotel Ashy Drongo and Common Tailorbird had already been seen and a few steps into the fields brought contact with what was to become a familiar avian

landscape: Little Green Bee-eaters, Long-tailed Shrikes, Black Drongos, Hoopoes, Indian Roller and Siberian Stonechat. A male Asian Koel delivered its manic, quickening “*ko-el*” urgings but only his beautifully mottled grey female partner was seen. We had an early endemic species addition when a Malabar Lark was located, first on call and then visually grilled to confirm the distinctive dark colouring compared to Crested Lark; just a few present compared to the more abundant Greater Short-toed Lark. Large pipits were evident and clearly of interest but in this quick survey Vaughan just had time to focus us on a nearby Tawny Pipit<sup>1</sup>, leaving the rather more tricky species to an in-depth session later.

Kites quartered the fields being a mix of Brahminy and Black-eared with up to a score seemingly permanently on view. As the light faded several mixed flocks of passerines arrived to roost on the thin scattering of stunted trees; we identified Scaly-breasted Munias, Rosy and Chestnut-tailed Starlings. There are few birds more nondescript than a female or immature *Munia* but the truly scaly-breasted males were a stunning sight. There was also a mixed group of mynas including at least two Jungle and three Common Mynas. Greenshank, Intermediate Egret, Purple Heron, Indian Pond Heron and three Little Ringed Plovers provided a taste of nearby wetlands. With the bus journey and the Baga Fields dash we had got to grips with 42 species; a modest start, perhaps, but several were new birds to many in the tour party in barely an hour’s observation.

## 12<sup>th</sup> January Saligao to Beira Mar Hotel

*Sunny and very hot by mid-day 35°C*

We visited Saligao, an up-market residential area set in attractive woodland a few km south-east of Baga. Our walk started just before sunrise at 0700hrs and drew stumps around 1100hrs as birds quietened in the increasing heat of the looming midday sun. The calls of barbets, drongos and sunbirds greeted the dawn and catching the solar rays the treetops glowed with stunning male Golden Orioles and a Coppersmith Barbet. The tri-syllabic call of a Green Warbler was heard and the striking, and clearly aptly named, leaf warbler was seen well, soon to be contrasted with the di-syllabic call of Greenish Warbler<sup>2</sup>. Ashy and Black Drongos were compared and then the more distinctive White-bellied Drongo. Then we became immersed in sunbird identification with Purple-rumped, Purple and Loten’s immediately gaining our attention, followed later by Crimson-backed Sunbird. With numerous contacts with pairs of sunbirds we just concentrated on the males to separate the species: Loten’s was by far the longest billed and with an all dark body was hardly confusable with the smaller, slighter billed and all dark metallic sheen of Purple Sunbird. Seen from above Purple-rumped and Crimson-backed were most difficult to separate until the sun reflected the iridescent tones which provides their names, but from below the extent of the dark throat separated them.

Jungle Babblers competed with yapping guard dogs as our walk proceeded; a perched Shikra caused excitement prior to reaching our destination, a spring serving as a communal laundry. Three washer women were noisily chatting and laughing as they lathered, rinsed and finally, to expel the excess water, violently thwacked their clothes against a rock slab worn smooth conceivably by millennia of usage. Thus whip-like cracks echoed around a beautiful wooded amphitheatre, formed by the valley rising from the spring on three sides. This natural stage hosted an avian cast bewildering in its diversity and splendour. Vaughan quickly located a party of Tawny-bellied Babblers foraging in the leaf litter, frustrating to get on to well, but perseverance brought excellent views of their orange underparts and pale throats and the realisation that there were Puff-throated Babblers also present. Major distractions to the Babbler studies were provided by stunning views of four truly exotic birds: Blue-headed Rock Thrush, a white morph Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Orange-headed Thrush and Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher. The amazing procession of colourful species continued with White-browed, Red-whiskered and Red-vented Bulbuls and even Vaughan got excited when two scarce Grey-headed Bulbuls were seen; their grey heads and necks contrasted subtly with green body tones, rather than yellow as illustrated in Field Guides. A White-throated Fantail spread its tail against the trunk of a tree in a fascinating display whilst a Bronzed Drongo glistened in the canopy above us. A party of Brown-cheeked Fulvettas and another of Black-naped Monarchs kept up the amazing pace of discovery; some of the group had seen the dazzling blue of a Verditer Flycatcher overhead. A Blyth’s Reed Warbler gave its regular “*tek*” call and was soon located. While we were concentrating on all this activity in

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<sup>1</sup> Tawny Pipit is a controversial species in Goa as, according to Alström and Mild, it is restricted to North-west India and unlikely therefore to be at Baga Fields. It is also a confusable species with Paddyfield Pipit. For example, Hannu Jännes’s commentary of his Bird Sounds of Goa states “If your walks at Baga Fields produces several sightings of Tawny Pipit, you are probably doing something wrong!” Nevertheless our bird had an unstreaked mantle and strikingly dark lores and so we were in no doubt that our first walk on Baga Fields had produced an unambiguous adult Tawny Pipit.

<sup>2</sup> Greenish, rather than Green Warbler, was the commoner of the two forms we subsequently encountered of what taxonomists now advise is a single “ring” species.

the nearby vegetation Pauline noted an eagle in the trees at the top of the gradient; its long head plumes soon identified it as a Changeable Hawk-Eagle. The eagle took off and soared across the canopy; now with our attention focussed on the sky above we added an Oriental Honey-buzzard followed by a Crested Serpent-Eagle; the growing warmth of the day providing these large raptors with the encouragement to fly. Meanwhile Vaughan and Loven had worked the trees behind the spring, locating a roosting Brown Wood Owl - a stunningly beautiful owl.

The onslaught on our senses, and life lists, continued as we retraced our path towards the bus rendezvous point. A Black-rumped Flameback was heard and briefly seen. Finally, there were views of at least three delightful male Crimson Sunbirds with their bright crimson throats extending in at least one case to the belly.

Taking a midday rest in the shade of our hotel balcony we could see Palm Swifts, Little (or House) Swifts, Red-rumped Swallows and House Martins over the Baga Fields. After the heat of the day we visited Arpuro Hill where Alpine Swifts and a Booted Eagle were soaring on thermals above the escarpment; a few in the party had brief views of Blue-faced Malkoha and Blue-winged Leafbird. We made a very productive stop at the Marinha Dourada resort complex where there were two partially flooded salt pans. A Eurasian Spoonbill was a Goan first for Vaughan; others were more interested in the Stork-billed Kingfisher on the power line above the salt pan; a flock of 50 Small Pratincoles; a small group of Pacific Golden Plovers and singles of Marsh Sandpiper and Temminck's Stint. More familiar waders to European eyes included Redshank which nevertheless appealed to Eric and Aki. Another magic session in a day already crowded with memories.

Our final call was at the legendary Beira Mar hotel where we relaxed until nightfall. It was the first minor disappointment of the day when there was no news on either Cinnamon Bittern or Pintail Snipe. Compensation came in the form of good views of Blue-tailed Bee-eater; more distant views of Black-capped Kingfisher and a supporting cast of Greater Coucal, White-breasted Waterhen, White-browed and White Wagtails. At dusk two Spotted Owlets were located and seen well and a more uncommon Besra flew over, followed by a procession of Night-Herons.

The day total was a creditable 107 and a cumulative two-day list of 116.

### **13<sup>th</sup> January Backwoods Camp**

*Misty at dawn but with a cloudless sky temperatures soon reached the regulation 35°C.*

We left for Backwoods at 0515hrs, passing through Old Goa and Ponda in total darkness before reaching the huge national park known as the Bhagwan Mahavir Sanctuary at dawn. Here we stopped to view large trees just reaching the fruiting stage. One particular tree on the edge of a clearing was the target of several hornbills. What an exciting sight they made: huge Malabar Pied Hornbills sailing in on flat wings, necks outstretched delicately balancing the massive casques moulded above their gigantic bills. We could also see several of the smaller, but hardly less impressive, Malabar Grey Hornbills already feeding on the fruit. The amazing concentration of hornbills, around 20, was present for only a few minutes before one by one they all departed. Their dawn presence here would only last a few days until the fruiting cycle finished. Fascination with the hornbills in these first few minutes of the day distracted us from numerous other new sightings; these included up to 40 Pompadour Green Pigeons; Scarlet Minivets and a Brown-headed Barbet; two more confiding Coppersmith Barbets. A few of the group even added a brief appearance from a Vernal Hanging Parrot.

Another half an hour's drive and now within the park we stopped off for a 300m roadside walk towards a river crossing at Surla. Early morning walks an hour after sunrise provided the best birding most days and today was no exception. We immediately had brief views of a Spangled Drongo, a species not reliably expected to be seen again, as indeed was the case. Loven located a female Grey Junglefowl running for cover just off the road and those fortunate to follow his directions saw the bird very well. There were also exceptional views of three stunning new birds: Golden-fronted Leafbird, Black-crested Bulbul and Black-hooded Oriole. Coincidentally, both the bulbul and the oriole species possess a similar plumage pattern of bright yellow bodies and black heads to the nape and throat. The new species shared the canopy in a wonderful kaleidoscope of colour with Red-whiskered, Red-vented Bulbuls, male Crimson-backed Sunbirds and Eurasian Golden Oriole. We also had our first views of Indian Peafowl with two males. A small accipiter perched by the riverside could be viewed well from the bridge and was identified as a Besra. We heard and some saw our first Malabar Parakeets and for those that missed them yesterday there was a further opportunity to view Brown-cheeked Fulvettas.

When we arrived at Backwoods Camp we found an idyllic setting with the tree canopy shading the cabins and tents, these were arranged in a radial pattern with a dining area at the hub. We ate a good

breakfast of roti, omelettes and coffee. Once settled into our new abode we moved on to the next phase of the day, a raptor watch. We made for a watch point called Toidem but en-route stopped off to gaze for the first time on the jungle covered slopes of the Western Ghats; both temperate and tropical trees covering the hillside to the top of a 900m ridge. There were Aquila eagles using the thermals above the ridge and through a process of elimination they were identified as immature Steppe Eagles. We also had our first, albeit distant, views of Black Eagle. At Toidem the ridge appeared closer and we saw Black Eagle again and Crested Serpent Eagle. The best birds, however, were a flock of Brown-backed Needletails feeding just above our heads and using the ridge thermals a Mountain Hawk-Eagle; both species are far from certain as Goa marks the northern limit of their Western Ghats range. The Needletails were present for most of our stay, a superb sight dwarfing the Red-rumped Swallows and diminutive Indian Swiftlets with which they associated. Brown-backed Needletail is one of the largest swift species in the world and amongst the fastest. We thought we had seen our quota of large raptors but then two Rufous-bellied Eagles, an adult and an immature, flew directly over our heads, close enough to see their beautiful patterned plumage before they flew steadily onwards to the south-west. There were Malabar Larks on the ground in front of us. In the shrubs behind there were brief views of Shikra, Black Bulbul, the white-headed race of Chestnut-tailed Starling and a shrike which some identified as a Brown Shrike.

At the camp for lunch we could hear and occasionally saw Asian Fairy Bluebirds and an Orange-headed Thrush feeding around the dining area; also I was impressed to hear Red Spurfowl calling from not very far away. Reassembling after lunch we were taken to a spot just outside the camp where Loven had relocated a pair of Sri Lankan Frogmouth. They had moved from their traditional roosting site after disturbance from another British touring group. We used a single telescope and went to the viewing point one at a time to try and relieve the pressure on the birds from inquisitive human eyes. They looked most appealing cuddled up together on a branch, not at all like the rather fearsome and ugly illustrations that we were familiar with; the male was slightly smaller and grey in colour rather than the rich-brown of the female.

Late afternoon we bussed the short distance to the strange, gaunt blackened stone edifice of the Tambdi Surla Temple and stayed beyond last light. Around the Temple were Jungle Crows and overhead again were Indian Swiftlets but now mixed in with White-rumped Needletails and Little Swifts. We checked the river course for kingfishers and located a statuesque Brown-bellied Flycatcher. A White-bellied Woodpecker was heard calling and tape luring provided us with excellent views of this magnificent large woodpecker and a Greater Flameback for good measure. There was also a party of four Large Woodshrikes which sallied forth from the high canopy in a shrike-like manner. We then went to a clearing south of the Temple hoping to glimpse a Great Hornbill that had been seen coming into roost on previous nights. Several Mountain Imperial Pigeons flew past and Crested Tree Swifts emerged in the evening light. A Crimson-fronted Barbet had been pumping out its call in front of us and Loven located this diminutive barbet in the top of the tallest nearby tree. Behind us we saw yet another Bulbul species when two Yellow-browed Buleuls made a brief appearance. Vaughan had positioned himself so that he could use a powerful torch to illuminate an established evening perch for a Jerdon's Nightjar. Sure enough, the bird turned up and as it glided around the glade the torch impressively illuminated the diagnostic wing and tail spots of a male. Tape luring also brought in the unspotted and aptly named Grey Nightjar. After nightfall at the camp we ate an excellent supper listening to the calls of a Brown Hawk Owl nearby.

It had been a magical day and we had seen 74 species raising the cumulative three-day list to 153.

## **14<sup>th</sup> January Backwoods Camp**

*Cooler morning but soon warming up and again cloudless skies*

Around 0530hrs we heard our first birds of the day: the Sri Lankan Frogmouths screeched noisy pre-dawn greetings; a Malabar Whistling Thrush uttered its exquisite, languorous whistle and a Red-wattled Lapwing made a ferocious racket as it passed overhead. Loven led us off at 0700hrs on our first visit into the jungle surrounding Backwoods. We had been advised that it would be most unwise to venture into the jungle alone and it certainly looked dense, extensive woodland. We soon saw the impressive Greater Racket-tailed Drongo disclosed by its mellifluous calls and the long whistle of a Pompadour Green Pigeon could be heard. By the river we briefly saw the red-billed and uniform dark plumage of a Black Bulbul and further stunning views of the *gularis* form of Black-crested Bulbul with its yellow body, red throat and all black head; again it associated with Black-hooded Orioles. We checked out the leaf warblers and had good views of a Western Crowned amongst the more common Greenish Warblers. Both Asian Brown and Brown-bellied Flycatchers were seen and Chestnut-shouldered Petronias. A key prize followed when David located a Malabar Whistling Thrush and others briefly saw the dull blue plumage of this handsome, large thrush. We turned back towards the camp and within a stone's throw we located a Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, followed by the more uncommon White-bellied Blue Flycatcher habituating low scrub and stationary under leaf cover for much of the time.

As we ate breakfast the Orange-headed Thrush also fed just feet away from the relaxing team. Vaughan then discovered a Forest Wagtail feeding near his cabin close to the road gate; thereafter it was always about the camp in this fairly localised area but it was never easy to find without a thorough search of the ground and low scrub. Our assemblage at the road gate proved very productive with a Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike seen overhead, as well as Yellow-browed Bulbuls and Scarlet Minivets. Having seen one speciality of the camp, almost immediately we saw yet another blue riband bird. As we entered the jungle once more Loven heard a rustling in the undergrowth and located an Indian Pitta. It wasn't particularly shy but moved so stealthily in the undergrowth that locating it was always going to be difficult. The attractive head pattern was well seen but the supposed green tone of the mantle and upper plumage looked more sombre, matching perfectly the undergrowth.

Eileen's sharp vision picked out two Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, a small nuthatch with a coral-red bill. Attention to the canopy brought other wonderful sightings: White-cheeked Barbet, Verditer Flycatcher, Black-naped Monarchs and Asian Fairy-Bluebirds. On the forest floor we located Dark-fronted Babblers and more Asian Paradise-Flycatchers. The search was now on for Malabar Trogon that had been seen in the area earlier in the day by another group led by Pramod. We were unsuccessful until we spread out and Peter located the birds; others found them difficult to get onto as they moved high up in the tall trees just beneath the canopy. This had been another very satisfying session in the wonderful woodland and as we walked back a Red Spurfowl scuttled through the undergrowth, again located by Loven but only otherwise seen by Julia. We box-searched the area but the bird eluded us.

After lunch and a rest we made a second more strenuous trip to the Tambdi Surla Temple scrambling a km or so up the river canyon to where Loven had located a Blue-eared Kingfisher. Carrying a telescope up the steep escarpment of a stony river course proved challenging to everyone but ultimately we had excellent views of this striking, sought-after bird.

After nightfall both Oriental Scops Owl and the Brown Hawk Owl were heard again back at the camp and the day total was 64 with the trip list now on 169.

### **15<sup>th</sup> January Bolcarnem, Toidem and Surla**

*Cloudless skies all day, the forest somewhat cooler than the coast but still very hot.*

Awakened once more by the singular whistling call of a Malabar Whistling Thrush; the eerie screeched greeting of the Frogmouths reunited after their nighttime feeding; hoots of Brown Hawk Owls interspersed with calls from Red Spurfowl and Malabar Pied-Hornbills. Before dawn we made the short journey to Bolcarnem but en-route we noted Indian Peafowl and two female Grey Junglefowls picking up grit from the road. The bus was able to approach the Junglefowl quite closely before they made off into the bush. At Bolcarnem the children from the village school were assembling and we attracted interest as we walked through their grounds with the sun nudging over the horizon. The fruiting trees were alive with birds and there were outstanding views of a flock of Small Minivets. We walked on into a clearing where there was a wonderful banana tree with a huge crop of bananas, a great tower of fruit but still flowering at its base. In the treetops a Vernal Hanging Parrot was spotted. We noted its diminutive size, uniformly brilliant green plumage and startling coral-red bill. It performed brilliantly coming down from the canopy and hanging upside down on the banana fruit before feeding on the blossom. The supporting cast was exceptional: there were several Crimson-backed Sunbirds; also Plain and Thick-billed Flowerpeckers; a Golden-fronted Leafbird and numerous Common Ioras, Common Tailorbirds, Red-whiskered Bulbuls and Black-hooded Orioles. There was also a small flock of superb Black-headed Cuckoo-shrikes moving through the low scrub followed by another sighting of Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike. Further on the scrub thickened, here the normally difficult Blue-faced Malkoha was heard and then seen incredibly well. Finally, there was a very brief glimpse of a Little Spiderhunter, most just catching sight of its very long decurved bill as it sped through the canopy.

Returning to the camp we had breakfast and then when assembling at the gate Vaughan found another Indian Pitta – we had located two of the three known to be around the camp. A walk through the bamboo plants to the west of the road enabled Loven to locate a pair of confiding Oriental Scops Owls. Over the woodland gliding gracefully on spread wings we watched several Ashy Wood Swallows.

The bus took us once more to Toidem and en-route we stopped off in a felled elevated area of the jungle, producing a rather gaunt landscape with scattered tree stumps. Here the target species was White-eyed Buzzard but there was no sign, despite a careful search, until Eileen once more demonstrated her remarkable vision by locating a distant bird which was confirmed by Loven as indeed a White-eyed Buzzard. We got closer by walking half a mile down the road and even through telescopes the Buzzard's features were still very difficult to discern. When Eileen was asked how on earth she had seen the bird at such long range, she said that when she first picked it up she wasn't sure whether the object was a bird or inanimate, until she

noted it had claws! At this stop-over we had another fine sighting when a Crested Goshawk suddenly appeared overhead, then fanning out its white upper tail coverts proceeded to thrill us with its display flight. We had further views of a second Crested Goshawk here and also Oriental Honey Buzzard. At the raptor watch point we had further sightings of both these species, Shikra and Crested Serpent-Eagle but the Brown-backed Needletails had gone. Other birds seen at Toidem included Malabar Grey Hornbills, and a distant Woolly-necked Stork flying at high altitude.

After lunch those searching for their own birds gained views of the White-bellied Blue Flycatcher, which appeared to be resident within a few metres of the camp. Similarly the first Indian Pitta was re-located close to its original point of discovery. I witnessed one of those nuggets of bird behaviour that will remain in the memory for a lifetime. A male Crimson-backed Sunbird apparently feeding on a branch just under the canopy caught my attention. Closer inspection revealed it was probing a spider's web. Suddenly it fell like a stone from the branch to hang suspended, bill vertically upwards as if trapped by the strands of the web. The sunbird oscillated briefly like a pendulum bob before steadying to the vertical and then spinning rapidly, whereby the web strands could be seen thickening into a filament. Once this filament had formed the sunbird tugged at it and broke it off. The sunbird then flew off with half a metre of high-strength fibre secured in its bill and wafting in its air stream. This complex process of gathering presumed nesting materials wasn't something I had knowledge of and it left me with a sense of discovery.

When travelling to Backwoods we had found Surla to be a very productive site so we returned there in the late afternoon. Amongst the Hirundine flying high above the bridge was a Dusky Crag Martin, the only all-dark bird amongst a flock of Streak-throated, Wire-tailed and Red-rumped Swallows. We walked off the road and had good views of Crested Tree Swifts, Grey-breasted Prinia and three species of Bulbul. Perched amongst the treetops were a Chestnut-headed Bee-eater and three Barbet species: Brown, White-cheeked and Crimson-fronted. We then had our first views of an attractive Heart-spotted Woodpecker. There was also excitement when a small flock of Malabar Parakeets flew in, demonstrating their grey heads and green body plumage before moving on quickly. As we returned to the road two Malabar Grey Hornbills pitched into the treetops to give good views and a Jungle Babbler perched by the roadside.

Back at the camp Vaughan tried to tape lure some of the owls and was rewarded when an Indian Scops-owl came in and perched just above our heads; we had exceptional views when Loven picked it out with the torch beam. Fortified by this success and supper, we trooped into the jungle with torches and the tape lure to try and nail the Brown Hawk Owl. We succeeded in setting off an owl chorus with both Scops Owls species, two Brown Hawk Owls and at least two Jungle Owlets all performing but none came close enough to get a sighting.

The day list was a creditable 78 and the trip list had progressed to 183.

## **16<sup>th</sup> January Molem and Backwoods**

*Cloudless skies again cool until 1000hrs and very hot thereafter until 1800hrs.*

Before dawn both Grey Junglefowl and Red Spurfowl could be heard as we readied ourselves for the day. It took us just 30 minutes to reach Mowlem from the camp; Mowlem is one of the more famous portals to the Bhagyvar Meerhan National Park. We made our usual pre-breakfast walk with Jungle Babblers, Greater Racket-tailed Drongos and Greenish Warblers greeting us. Early on Vaughan identified a Jungle Owlet, but it flew off as befits a diurnal species. Then most saw a Rosy Minivet amongst a flock of Scarlet Minivets and in the early morning feeding flocks above our heads we could make out the now familiar Black-hooded Orioles, Asian Fairy Bluebirds and Golden-fronted Leafbirds. However, a Rufous Treepie here had previously been a strangely uncommon sighting for this abundant and confiding Indian bird. Loven then relocated the Jungle Owlet and we all got convincing views of this little gem; the same species that had given us such a cacophonous outburst in response to Vaughan's tape lures on the previous evening. We left the trail for breakfast and whilst eating omelette in a Spartan but adequate café we noted a Flycatcher in a garden bush; it possessed all the credentials of the recently split Red-throated rather than Red-breasted Flycatcher, with the indicator features of all black tail *and* uppertail coverts and an all-dark bill. When we told Vaughan he stalked the bird and got a frontal view; it had a red throat with a grey breast band that again confirmed Red-throated or Taiga Flycatcher - a species incidentally that has recently been recorded in Britain.

After the meal we returned to the park and had good views of Black-rumped Flameback, Heart-spotted Woodpecker and a flock of six Large Woodshrikes. We also found two more Velvet-fronted Nuthatches and then worked hard to get good views of a Rufous Woodpecker and now almost routine appearances from Asian Paradise-Flycatcher and Brown-cheeked Fulvettas. Despite a long walk nothing further was added with the woodland having gone quiet as the day temperature rose into the 30s. An intriguing, if somewhat frustrating episode, occurred when we relaxed as Vaughan explored a promising stream and disturbed a

small predominantly orange-toned Kingfisher. It flew into the forest and despite some effort was not relocated. It could only have been an Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher so a disappointment for us all.

After our break at Backwoods we were enjoying a cup of tea when we spotted two Malabar Pied Hornbills in the camp. Late afternoon was spent in the bamboo woods on the south side of the camp road where Vaughan used his excellent mini-speaker and CD system to tape lure a White-rumped Shama. Soon the woods were echoing to several natural renditions of the Shama's silvery tones, rivalling Nightingale in its beauty. Finally two birds were seen well; they were stunning long-tailed chats: white rumps, grey and blue toned upperparts and throat contrasting with red underparts. After such a wonderful birding trip when asked: "*What bird did you like best?*" appears an impossible, if even fatuous, question to reply to. It is, however, magical when a bird you have eagerly anticipated seeing, after listening to its calls, finally makes its appearance and is such a stunning sight. White-rumped Shama made such a highlight for me, etched into memory forever. The whole area was productive, we had good views of pairs of Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers, Greater Flamebacks and Heart-spotted Woodpeckers; there were also Malabar Grey Hornbills and Scarlet Minivets.

At Tambdi Surla Temple we seemingly settled in for a quiet evening with routine appearances from White-rumped Needletails, a Crimson-fronted Barbet and the anticipated fly-by from Mountain Imperial Pigeons. There was a Great Hornbill alarm from Loven when he thought he heard the wing beats (his suspicion was probably right as it was seen on subsequent days by other groups). Later we tried once more to tape lure Brown Hawk-owl at Backwoods; this time it worked, Loven was able to spotlight one on top of a nearby tree. To see it so alert and close by was wonderful. Vaughan worked frantically to record the bird on film<sup>3</sup> using a 600mm image-stabilised lens and a powerful flashgun

Our last full day at Backwoods had provided 66 species with 190 for the trip.

### **17<sup>th</sup> January Tambi Surla Temple, Bondla and Carambolin.**

*Temperature around 36°C early afternoon reaching 42°C later, although very hot at Carambolin air so dry it was tolerable.*

In the hours before our departure from Backwoods I noted a Brown Hawk Owl calling insistently from 0400hrs; the Malabar Whistling Thrush giving its haunting rendition from 0600hrs and strident calls from a Grey Junglefowl. We made a pre-dawn visit to Tambdi Surla Temple where we could hear the trill of a Greater Flameback and the lovely long whistling call of a Pompadour Green Pigeon<sup>4</sup>. We moved on and arrived at a site near Bondla known for Indian Scimitar Babbler. As soon as we arrived Vaughan thought he could hear a Scimitar Babbler. We started to search the scrub, locating a large group of Malabar Grey Hornbills, and familiar Red-whiskered Bulbul, Greenish Warbler and Black-headed Oriole. Loven could hear a Little Spiderhunter and after a few minutes search, assisted by Vaughan's tape lure, we were rewarded with wonderful views. The long sicklebill exceeded the length of any sunbird, the body colour was yellow with grey-brown upperparts; considerably larger than a sunbird but closely related in structure. Despite its name it apparently has no insectivorous proclivities, a nectar eater like the sunbirds.

Attention turned to luring the far more reluctant Indian Scimitar Babbler into our visual range. A recording of its haunting soft drum roll of a call "*oop pu pu pu pu pu*" was soon being responded to by the real thing; seeing the bird was a much more difficult proposition. Eventually, the babbler came in close and briefly showed. A lucky few got close views of its dark grey head contrasting with striking white underparts and extraordinary bright yellow bill, incredibly long and heavy and strongly decurved. Stopping to order our breakfast at the Den restaurant for later, we went off and made a careful but unsuccessful search for Brown Fish Owl at the nearby lake. We did chance on two male Malabar Trogons, much better views for some than at Backwoods, with the birds seemingly visible for several minutes. They were, however, mostly views of the upperparts of the birds, with colours more subdued than the vivid vermilion of the underparts noted at Backwoods. As we ate our omelette and toast breakfast a confiding Ashy Drongo provided a good photographic session for those still in possession of a complete telephoto system.

We decided that the four days in the Bhagvhar Meerhan National Park had done us proud and more time would be unlikely to lengthen the species list, so we travelled west for an hour to Carabomlim Lake. We stopped in the grassy stubble fields of Carambolin in the searing midday heat and commenced a search for dry habitat species in particular Rufous-tailed Lark. We soon found a female Pied Bushchat, Siberian Stonechat, Asian Magpie Robin and had good views of two Paddyfield Pipits; Pauline located a Plain Prinia

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<sup>3</sup> Vaughan has a personal photo-collection of 83 owl species from his world travels and uses his best of the year to illustrate the Birdfinders' annual brochure.

<sup>4</sup> I had somehow lost an essential digiscope component, my telescope to camera coupler. I searched the camp in the early hours but was sure it was left in the Temple grounds, hence the diversion. The adaptor was not found.

- a trip tick but we failed to locate the lark. We also had views of White-bellied Fish Eagle and everyone got good views when an adult Indian Spotted Eagle<sup>5</sup> flew close by. Returning to the welcome shade of the tree-line roadside we noted a group of 20 Baya Weavers.

Our next stop was for much needed drinks and for those ignoring advice to western travellers, ice cream. The stop provided our first look at the fringes of the incredibly beautiful lily-filled Carabomlim Lake, a sea of blooms interspersed with many wildfowl. There were flocks of Lesser Whistling Ducks and female or immature Cotton Pygmy-geese, we found just two males, very handsome and quite different from the drab immatures/ males. Both jacana and three egret species were on the lake; Bronze-winged Jacana looked particularly attractive. In an adjacent paddy field there was a Stork-billed Kingfisher, Asian Openbills and Woolly-necked Storks. We travelled on to seek shade and a panoramic view of the lake using the new railway platform at Karmali Station close to Old Goa – the station was remarkably clean and airy by any standard; unfortunately habitat had been destroyed in its construction. Passing trains naturally interrupted our view; one incredibly long train bound for Bangalore had a staggering range of ten different classes of carriage accommodation. The birds were rather distant and a heat haze hampered viewing but excitement was caused by a close quartering Osprey. Across the lake we could see three Pied Kingfishers perched and children nearby found a Mugger Crocodile and chased it away. Meanwhile a study of the duck flocks revealed a pair of Spot-billed Ducks; the red and orange spots on the bills of the male and female were prominent features. Garganey were present in some numbers, for Eric a life tick but most unsatisfactory on such distant views. A single female Shoveler momentarily popped its head up above the reeds but I was the only observer, so no group tick. To get to the lakeside we drove to where the Pied Kingfishers had perched, finding two Temminck's Stints and two Yellow Wagtails. Both the wagtails appeared to be of the Black-headed *feldegg* taxon; each had washed-out yellow underparts and dark, almost black, upper plumage with no evident head pattern, particularly lacking supercilia<sup>6</sup>. A Tree Pipit was running around the grassy plateau, surprising on two counts: there wasn't a tree in sight and Goa is south of the species recognised wintering range.

We drove on to the nearby Ciba-Geigy site, formerly a must for visiting birders; it is now fenced off, tree lined and hence barely viewable. Enterprisingly Vaughan had sought approval from the owner of a nearby tall building to stand on the roof to view the tree-top roosts. We were rewarded with good views of two Woolly-necked Storks, a Black-headed Ibis and at least eight Asian Openbills; disappointingly there were no Lesser Adjutant Storks.

The day had been a long one and with our first major contact with wetland habitat 97 species were seen, increasing the trip list to 217.

### **Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> January Baga and Fort Aguada**

*A hot and humid day back on the coast with a freshening breeze towards dusk.*

The early morning was spent on the Baga Fields starting at the pond where Eric had previously found Greater Painted Snipe; sure enough eight of these gaudy birds were still present. Whilst digiscoping David saw a crane flash across his screen view but it couldn't be relocated. There was now time to study the tricky pipits: we located at least two and possibly four Richard's; at least one Blyth's; some Paddyfield; three more Tree but no Tawny Pipits. The Paddyfield call is distinctly different from either Richard's or Blyth's; the latter pair have similar calls at Baga but there is more "psssh" rather than "schreep" in the Blyth's call. Visually a Richard's is fairly easy with its large size, tall and haughty stance and unambiguously pale lores. To my eyes the Paddyfield Pipit is slightly smaller and has warmer buff underparts and a thin lower loreal stripe; Blyth's is significantly smaller and shorter-legged than the other two and has a darker loreal region. Unfortunately the median covert patterns were too difficult in the field. Easier species included Asian Koel, Greater Coucal, Spotted Dove, Hoopoe, Long-tailed Shrike, both Mynas and flocks of Scaly-breasted Munias and Chestnut-tailed Starlings. New trip birds included brief views of a typical ground-skulking female Bluethroat, a vocal Oriental Skylark and best but disappointingly brief, a Red-headed Bunting.

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<sup>5</sup> Recently split from Lesser Spotted Eagle, and endemic to the Indian peninsula.

<sup>6</sup> The provenance of Yellow Wagtails is dealt with exhaustively by Alström and Mild who recognise a reduced list of 13 subspecies in the world, and different from most Indian field guides (the previous *melanogrisea* taxon which winters in India is lumped by AM into *feldegg*). Although undoubtedly several of the 13 subspecies of Yellow Wagtail winter on the subcontinent most European birders to India would like to believe they are viewing Eastern Yellow Wagtails, this no longer appears to be a likely proposition as they winter further east than the subcontinent. According to AM Eastern Yellow Wagtail is a three taxon-group within the 13 subspecies and has some, but as yet not conclusive provenance, to be split as a separated species from the western taxons of Yellow Wagtail, mitochondria DNA evidence suggests they are genetically closer to one form of Citrine Wagtail!



There were Pied and Siberian Stonechats on show before coming to a field where we sought, and found, three Pintail Snipe. We never saw these on the ground but in flight the rounded rather dark wings less contrasting overall effect with no pale trailing edge to the upper inner wings eliminated Common Snipe; as did the rather languid low direct flight (no zigzagging) and the dry habitat they were frequenting. We crossed through the covered bridge over the Baga River and walked a mile down the road before scaling Baga Hill close to the church. There were Red-whiskered and Yellow-browed Bulbuls, Loten's Sunbirds, both Plain and Thick-billed Flowerpeckers and difficult views of Rufous Treepeeps. Overhead we had had a succession of now familiar raptors, swifts and hirundines notably including Alpine Swift, Oriental Honey Buzzard and a single pale phase Booted Eagle. At the top of the hill we had a chance to study Indian Robin, surprisingly not often encountered by us, a handsome bird with all black plumage and deep red undertail coverts.

After our midday break we bussed south through the frightful coastal strip of Calangute and Candolim to the cooler air of the Fort Aguada headland overlooking Mandovi Bay, to view the Arabian Sea for the first time. In the scrub around the gaunt fort we at last found Pale-billed amongst some Thick-billed Flowerpeckers. Shortly after this there was a dreadful accident when Peter slipped up on a treacherous array of fruit stones shed by the roadside trees. He fell awkwardly trying to protect his telescope and was in terrible pain with what was clearly a severe leg injury. Fortunately, Julia's medical knowledge as a qualified nurse was to the fore, under her direction Peter was made more comfortable. As gently as possible we lifted Peter onto the bus and with Loven, Julia, Eileen and Satomi in attendance he was whisked off to the nearest private hospital in Panjim. The rest of the group walked sombrely to Candolim. There were more Baya Weavers, good views of White-cheeked Barbet and also White-rumped Munia but enthusiasm for birding had waned wondering about Peter's injuries<sup>7</sup>.

We had seen 70 species during the day and advanced the trip list to 227.

### **19<sup>th</sup> January Morjim Beach**

*Another perfect day of dawn to dusk blue skies.*

Just a few km north of Baga is the Chapora river estuary and on its north shore is Morjim beach which would provide our best chance of seeing gull, tern and plover species. This was the appropriate day for the visit, selected with early morning high water in mind to minimise beach disturbance. We arrived around 0700hrs just in time to scan the beach and watch in dismay as an early dog walker flushed a huge flock of gulls, pratincoles and plovers. Fortunately after this disturbance the birds returned and we aligned our optics in eager anticipation. A dark phase Western Reef-heron was quite close by affording us excellent views of its blue-grey plumage stout legs and bill. Vaughan was soon helping us to sort out the gulls. The small gulls were obvious and very familiar Black-headed Gulls; at least 20% larger in size were the less numerous (in the ratio 1:10) Brown-headed Gulls. The facial pattern and pose of Brown-headed is strikingly different to winter Black-headed Gull making identification easy: white irides and eye-rings, heavier bills, rather orange in tone and a larger dark ear covert spot give them a rather gormless expression on the ground; in flight the extensive dark wing tips were also evident. Also instantly identifiable were the much sought-after Greater Black-headed or Pallas's Gulls. I thought we might be lucky to see one or two but the highlight for the day perhaps was that there were at least 40 of these superb gulls in the flock, at all ages and plumage states, including some approaching adult summer plumage.

Thereafter the gulls became ostensibly more difficult to separate with at least three species/forms of large white-headed gull to sort out. The foreground cover of Brown and Black-headed Gulls hindered our views of the larger gulls, so we could only see upperparts and a forest of yellow legs behind! The Caspian Gull *L. Cachinaans* was relatively easy to sort out, now that its characters are well established and described. The head of Caspian is a good diagnostic feature with a long raking forehead peaking far back. The heads of both adult winter and first-winter Caspian Gulls were unstreaked, making it perhaps one of the easiest white-headed gulls to identify in immature plumage. Amongst the flock where some very large, streak-headed gulls with very heavy bills that showed a distinct inward curve between upper and lower cutting edges of the mandibles which often appeared separated by a distinct gap. Where seen the mantles of these gulls were very dark indicating Heuglin's Gull; some believe this form to be conspecific with Lesser Black-back Gull but it appeared to us to be a much larger gull. Most authorities now treat Heuglin's as a separate species. The third white-headed gull type emerged through comparison with the other two: a darker mantle than Caspian

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<sup>7</sup> Peter had severely dislocated his ankle and fractured his tibia. Over the next five days he received excellent medical care from the hospital, fully financially supported by his Holiday Insurer. Afterwards he returned to the hotel where attention was lavished on him and he was able to make one field trip on the bus. The airport departure must have been traumatic despite special consideration by the airport authorities; Monarch took good care of him for the long haul to the UK.

Gull but not as dark as Heuglin's, some streaking on a more rounded head with a steeper forehead and a stubbier bill, invariably with a dark sub-terminal band. This gull is increasingly considered a full species with the name Steppe Gull *L. Barbarensis*, historically it has been considered as a subspecies *barbarensis* of *L. Cachinaans*, or even, according to some Russian authors, a subspecies of Heuglin's Gull.

Gull-billed Terns patrolled the estuary whilst Sandwich, a few lesser Crested and a single Great Crested Tern loafed on a sand bar just off the shore. Amongst scores of Lesser Sandplovers were a few Kentish, around twenty Greater and a single Caspian Plover. It took us some while to go through all the waders, which included 20/30 Small Pratincoles and a lone Dunlin. The Greater Sandplovers appeared significantly larger than Lesser with proportionately longer bills, with a much greater extension beyond the gonys point; legs look slightly coloured green-yellow - rather than the slate grey of Lesser. We started to walk along the beach noting turtle skid marks in the sand but avoiding the protected breeding colony of the rare Ridley Turtle. Two Sanderlings flew down the beach. A palm-roofed, beach bar then provided welcome refreshment before we searched a nearby copse. Here we succeeded in seeing several Brahminy Starlings and a roost of four Night Herons.

After lunch and a swim in the warm waters of the Arabian Sea we again set up on the beach and scoped a distant sand bar. There was a single Caspian Tern to add to the Plover and Gull – surely a unique Caspian day on the subcontinent. Also distantly were two Oystercatchers, two Grey Plovers, a few Curlews and a single Bar-tailed Godwit. The gulls were still further away and Vaughan decided we would get a better view from the other side of the estuary, so we bussed round to Chapora Harbour from where we found six Slender-billed Gulls in the sand bar roost. As fishing boats came into the harbour so Brahminy and Black-eared Kites gathered overhead with an occasional fly-by White-bellied Fish Eagle. Egrets were using the boats for sentry points as the fish haul came ashore; there were white morph Western Reef-herons amongst the dark morph birds and a single Little Egret for comparison. The Western Reef-heron's bill is thicker and paler, with stout legs and huge feet in contrast to the thin legs, smaller feet and thinner all dark bill of Little Egret. A small flock of Pintail flew out to sea.

It had been another wonderful day with just 58 species seen but many were new and important additions to the trip list, now 250.

## 20<sup>th</sup> January Southern Goa

*Same recipe of sweltering heat around midday- very humid and uncomfortable whilst travelling*

We travelled south across the River Zuari and visited Batim Lake. The only vantage point looked directly into the rising sun so it was too difficult to assess the huge wildfowl flock in front of us, apart from noting hordes of Garganey, noisy Whistling Ducks and Cotton Pygmy Geese. Loven decided to return in the evening and we moved on to Curtorim Lake, which had easier early morning viewing with access on three sides. En-route David noted a Buzzard species approaching us that he and Vaughan thought was the *vulpinus* form of Common Buzzard. At Curtorim Lake there were again hundreds of the three common wildfowl to sort through for other species. There was a single male Ferruginous Duck, not previously recorded by Vaughan in Goa, and our first views of a party of the less than elegant Comb Duck. All of the now familiar wetland species we had seen at Carambolin Lake were also present including Oriental Darter; Shoveler and Teal were also added. A White-bellied Fish Eagle quartered the lake and two Stork-billed Kingfishers and an Indian Cormorant perched nearby. Indian Cormorant is larger than the more widespread Little Cormorant with a longer sloping forehead and larger bill with a yellow gular patch at its base. Streak-throated and Wire-tailed Swallows resting on the telephone lines at the lakeside gave very confiding views

We moved on to the target raptor watch point for the day, Velim, our best prospect for vultures. The veterinary use of some antibiotics in India has led to a catastrophic widespread decline in vulture populations across the subcontinent. Thus on arrival at Velim we counted ourselves fortunate to see soaring White-backed Vultures passing overhead to the south; there were eight over a half-hour period. Other raptors included Black-eared and Brahminy Kites, Western Marsh Harrier, Shikra, Osprey, Indian Spotted Eagle, Crested Serpent-Eagle and another buzzard species; it was suspected to be Common Buzzard again but of the *japonicus* form<sup>8</sup>. A dark phase Booted Eagle approached us head-on exhibiting the diagnostic field character "headlights" at the wing roots.

In the dry scrub in front of us a small party of Yellow-wattled Lapwings put in an appearance; there were also Tree Pipits and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters. We left the dry fields and surveyed a paddy field from a raised bank. As if by divine providence a bicycle-propelled vendor, with the slogan "Himalayan Ice Cream" on his carrier, surreally approached us down a dusty track and some, again throwing their dietary advice to the

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<sup>8</sup> Outside the wintering range normally ascribed to Common Buzzard but one of a number of buzzard species that have been occasionally reported in Goa.

wind, relished his fare. The paddy field held all the familiar *Tringa* waders and a Yellow Wagtail that no one saw well enough to ascribe to a specific taxon. We then travelled back to Batim Lake where viewing was much better with the light in a different quarter. All the group could now see the more elusive Eurasian duck species: Shoveler, Teal, Gadwall and Pintail. There were also a few male Common Pochards to be added to the trip list and the Birdfinders' Birds of Goa check list.

As we approached Panjim we stopped off at Santa Cruz marshes where Vaughan located a group of three Broad-billed Sandpipers with two Lesser Sandplovers. The Broad-billed Sandpipers proved an identification challenge as they appeared to have no split supercilium and a heavily decurved bill but careful observation and size comparison through recorded images fully agreed with Vaughan's call. The problem was exacerbated when it was realised that three Curlew Sandpipers were also in the area flying around with more Lesser Sandplovers; later 50 Small Pratincoles arrived. We called in at the Panjim Hospital to allow a contingent from the party to visit Peter who thankfully they found much improved.

The day list was 82 and the trip list had reached 262.

## **21<sup>st</sup> January Chorao Island and Mayer Lake**

*Clouding over later for the first time but still extremely hot with a freshening breeze around 1600hrs*

An early morning start had us at the River Mandovi ferry crossing to Chorao Island just in time for our permitted crossing slot with the bus. We went straight on to Mayer Lake (spelt thus locally but rendered Maer Lake in most guide books), parked up by the restaurant and walked along the south shore at dawn. This beautiful lake is surrounded on three sides by wooded slopes of palm and cashew trees. In the trees above the lake a group of five Orange-breasted Green Pigeons roosted, almost monochromatic grey in the early light but through a telescope there was a barely discernible green plumage body sheen and orange marking on their breasts.

As dawn broke the canopy was alive with feeding flocks: including Ashy, White-bellied and Bronzed Drongos; both Golden-fronted and Blue-winged Leafbirds; Vernal Hanging Parrot and Purple-rumped Sunbirds. Most of the group finally caught up with the beautiful Black-lored Tit, some with Common Woodshrike but the appearance of a Banded Bay Cuckoo was new to all. The exotic calls included Changeable Hawk-eagle, Little Spiderhunter, Indian Scimitar Babbler and Malabar Whistling Thrush. A principal target bird for the visit was Brown Fish-owl; as Vaughan started to search the steep slopes, another group warned us that a Grey Nightjar was roosting close to us. Eileen quickly found the nightjar, which stoically remained at its roost despite numerous close-up photographic sallies. In his hillside search Vaughan startled an Emerald Dove that no one else was to see but amazingly in compensation he soon found a Brown Fish-owl. The party climbed the steep rocky screes to get a line of sight onto the owl, its soft grey-streaked plumage and wonderful facial mask illuminated by translucent yellow irides were seen by all before it flew into deeper cover. One disturbing aspect of Mayem was the unregulated felling of trees by two men just to take a once-only nut harvest – such destruction to eke a living. Before retiring to the restaurant for lunch we had views of Puff-throated Babbler, Rufous Woodpecker, two Changeable Hawk-Eagles and a Crested Serpent Eagle. We were entertained over our meal by a White-cheeked Barbet boring a hole in a nearby tree and the House Crows efficiently cleaning up any food spillages.

Our post-lunch call was at a series of paddy fields that immediately looked promising with our first views of Glossy Ibis – in fact there were 150 or so that got up when the raptor traffic got too high for their comfort. We had settled down to watch a confiding female /immature harrier that was pursuing insects initially and then took a liking to a Zitting Cisticola. It put on quite a performance and was established as a first-year Pallid Harrier with worn plumage, with the orange underwing coverts and body colour rather faded but the pale collar was complete right across the nape down to the ear coverts. There were several *Tringa* waders here and a Temminck's Stint.

Just before the ferry we stopped off to view a marsh bordering the river and saw two quartering male Montague Harriers. The tide was low and we had extensive areas of mud to search for Terek Sandpipers of which there was an estimated 30; four more Grey Plovers; a Black-capped Kingfisher resting on the mud; and a Whimbrel as well as all five egret species feeding along the river. A huge Pintail flock estimated at 5,000 flew towards the sea.

Loven treated us to a quite unbelievable performance on the way back to Baga. Just past the Mandovi bridge outside Panjim the rush hour traffic of scooters, bicycles, buses and vans was seemingly at its multi-lane peak. We pulled over to allow Loven to access the ATM on the other side of this major thoroughfare. The traffic never eased and he launched himself into the thick of the flow like a Toreador playing a bull, with feints and thrusts that carried him with darting movements of true balletic grace through the mêlée.

Somehow he crossed 12 lanes and then returned, safely repeating the manoeuvre to a huge ovation from the traumatised tour group.

A big day with a total of 91 species and the cumulative group totalling 270.

## **22<sup>nd</sup> January River Zuari Boat Trip**

*A few clouds about but mainly blue skies – cooler towards evening*

The bus left at 0630hrs and we travelled through Panjim to the Citada deo Goa near Dona Paula where the boat was moored for the river outing. It was a neat little boat with twin outboards, comfortably accommodating the tour group of 12 and the two boatmen. We had good views of Lesser and Greater Crested Terns, perched side by side; also perched White-bellied Fish-eagle and Osprey. Pride of place of this relaxing morning must go to the kingfisher species, with one Stork-billed, numerous Common, a Pied, two Black-capped and no less than five Collared Kingfishers. The Collared Kingfisher was the whole purpose of this special trip; rated as a very difficult species in pre-trip planning by group members, not so by Loven who was absolutely confident that we would see the bird. Our first Collared Kingfisher was while we were on the main river when there was a flash of blue green; we hove to and several of the party saw the bird before it went further into the mangroves. Once on a little canal you could tell that the experience of the boatman was such that all the favourite perches were scrutinised. Having glimpsed a further two Collared Kingfishers Aki located a fourth. It was perched quite high up in the mangroves near the riverbank. It remained absolutely still: beautiful blue back and wings; large white collar; massive all black bill; and the crown appeared black. The fifth and last Collared Kingfisher was also seen well, it also had a black cap contrasting with its blue back<sup>9</sup>. With the mission accomplished we did our dutiful, but mercifully short, tourist trip to Old Goa between 1140 and 1220hrs before getting back to the Cavala for lunch.

Later some wandered over the Baga Fields before we reconvened for another run to Candolim Marshes and Fort Aguada. We searched without success for a Yellow Bittern; the local youths seemed intent on scaring any birds out of the reed beds. We did get very rewarding views of three Ashy Wood Swallow perched on wires. Fort Aguada again proved unproductive although a dark phase Booted Eagle was seen by some of the group. We finished the day with only our second visit to the Beira Mar where an immature Shikra sat amongst the palms above the pool; initially it was wrongly called a Besra until sorted by Vaughan and Loven. None of the daily regulars at Beira Mar had seen Cinnamon Bittern or Watercock. The upsurge in feral dogs and human activity in the Baga wet meadows seems to suggest that this renowned birding hot spot is declining in interest. Nevertheless raptor sightings were still good: to emphasise the point an Indian Spotted Eagle came in at dusk passing close by our veranda watch point.

Just Collared Kingfisher new in a day total of 71, advancing the trip list to 271.

## **23<sup>rd</sup> January Carambolim Lake, Santa Cruz and Dona Paula**

*Pretty hot again but getting used it and with care you can survive provided you get some shade as relief; wind freshening by 1500hrs.*

We set off at 0705hrs and were at our appropriated lookout building at CIBA-Geigy by 0750hrs to check for the previously missed Lesser Adjutants. Loven and Vaughan soon confirmed that Lesser Adjutants were present; we all saw the birds but distantly. An exciting moment as this Lesser Adjutant roost appears now to be unique in Goa: an awesome hunk of a bird, its very ugliness exaggerated by filaments sticking out like unkempt hair from its head and neck. Vaughan counted eight birds present. We sought a closer vantage point and saw one bird very well. We went to the nearby marsh which held a good selection of waders: two Terek and a Marsh Sandpiper, both stints, a Lesser Sandplover and a small miracle – a feeding, and hence active, Black-crowned Night-heron. After a short drive towards Carambolim we walked along a road prior to visiting the dry field areas. An elderly man walking ahead of us was inquisitively staring back at us; he started to gesticulate wildly at a nearby dead tree. I intimated to Vaughan that he might have something but he suggested that the gentlemen might be *non compos mentis*; at that point a Spotted Owllet and a Black-rumped Flameback flew out of the tree, amusing me a great deal. The old man had not finished for he then invited Loven to follow the point of his finger aiming at the crown of a tall palm tree; precisely there were two roosting Brown Hawk Owls! In the same fields that we had failed to locate a Rufous-tailed Lark in the heat of the day a week ago, David soon located a suspect, in association with some Malabar Larks, which was then confirmed by Vaughan.

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<sup>9</sup> According to field guides the crown is concolourous blue-green as the back, not so with our birds.

We went on and parked by the bar at the lake and walked through the village where both the adults and children treated us with great friendliness. The surrounding paddy fields held numerous Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers but also our first Citrine Wagtails<sup>10</sup> and Common Snipe contrasting with Yellow Wagtail and Pintail Snipe. Back at the bar a supply of the local coconut oil derived hooch was so cheap that the entire stock was requisitioned, in addition to quantities of the rather more healthy mango juice. At the lakeside there were Asian Openbills, Woolly-necked Storks and stunning views of Bronze-winged Jacanas.

After our midday break we set off for Dona Paula but en-route called in once to look over Santa Cruz marshes and the surrounding rice field, where we located 30 Lesser Sandpipers, 20 Pacific Golden Plovers and a Marsh Sandpiper. We stopped off at paddy field nearby where a snipe rose rapidly with a clear pale trailing edge to the inner wing, our second Common Snipe of the day. David picked up a large raptor, readily identified as an *Aquila* eagle species. It flew overhead and exhibited long rather narrow wings with parallel sides without a secondary bulge. The overall body and wing colour was a deep chocolate brown like a female Marsh Harrier; the only variations in the plumage features were a paler crown and paler undertail coverts. The inner wings were held completely flat with the extended hands beyond turned down to give a noticeable anhedral angle, at the extremities, the primary tips were flicked upwards and well separated. This set of features caused Loven to call Tawny Eagle with confidence; on this plumage set it was evidently an adult bird. In the early evening we arrived at Dona Paula where aeons previously volcanic larva flow had created an arid plateau; the gaunt landscape held Indian Robins, at least 20 Ashy-headed Finch-larks, 12 Oriental Skylarks and a mixed flock of 20 Great Short-toed and 12 Malabar Larks. At dusk 12 Yellow-wattled Lapwings flew in to roost.

With the wide habitat coverage we achieved our second highest day list, 97, and the trip list increased to 277.

#### **24<sup>th</sup> January Arpuro Hill and Baga**

*Rather cold at first today and wind got up as early as 1000hrs but a beautiful morning until that point.*

We arrived at Arpuro Hill at 0730hrs; it was appropriate to spend our last morning in jungle habitat and to see this site in the crucial post-dawn period. We were not disappointed as we had excellent views of Blue-winged Leafbird, Loten's and Purple-backed Sunbirds and Grey-headed Bulbuls – all delightful birds. Our last addition to the trip list was Yellow-crowned Woodpecker; three were seen and one was studied for several minutes. There were also good views of Rufous Woodpecker and three eagle species: Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Crested Serpent-Eagle and White-bellied Fish-eagle; the last at a monstrous nest with two young. Fittingly, an Indian Pitta put in a cameo performance allowing its photograph to be taken. As the peak of the morning avian activity waned we stopped again at the Resorte Marinha Dourada marsh; unfortunately there was nothing to detain us unlike the productive visit two weeks previously.

After a midday rest we worked the Baga Fields where there were 300 Short-toed Larks and several Richard's and Paddyfield Pipits. At dusk we sat out with a drink in our hands at the Beira Mar where we had good views of a male Bluethroat and watched a snipe moving furtively to avoid a dog. We had a really good view through the telescopes, although the tail remained out of sight; all present presumed it was a Common Snipe. Finally the dog flushed the bird and to our amusement the uniformly dark wing and slow flight revealed a Pintail Snipe. The immature Shikra still sat amongst the palms above the pool.

A good day list of 86 and a final tour total of 278.

#### **25<sup>th</sup> January Finale**

*Another bright and sunny day with temperatures around 33°C.*

No group activity for the last morning so at 0640hrs. I walked the Baga Fields alone in the hope of finding Bush Quail or Buttonquail or recording some pipit images. Very quiet until sunrise at 0720hrs by which time I had located a Blyth's Pipit, confirmed with its "*schushh*" call, less scolding than Richard's. Later joined by David and together we located Richard's and Tawny Pipits.

Packed up after breakfast and rested before an early lunch and our farewells at the Cavala. You need infinite patience to weather the storm of Indian customs and flight check-out procedures but we were then calmed by nine hours of flawless service from the Monarch cabin crew. Time to reflect on Vaughan, an excellent tour leader, who had devised a superb itinerary; the quality of Vaughan's Goan support team -

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<sup>10</sup> Two forms of Citrine Wagtail were present; the grey-backed (*M.c.citreola*) and black-backed (*M.c.calcarata*) taxons – a potential future split.

particularly Loven Pereiro's field craft; the Backwoods set-up and Elvis' service at the Cavala; above all wonderful memories of so many birds.



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Alan Cox – February 2004

Teleoptronic Creations