

The Western Ghats and Andaman Islands

20th December 2008 to 2nd January

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This report just gives some ideas on the itinerary and logistics for those keen to concentrate on the 28 Western Ghats endemic species, but with limited time and budget. A few notes on birding the Andaman Islands follow.

The Western Ghats leg of this trip was organised directly with the well-known local bird guide Eldhose KV. With Eldhose's help, we saw all the Western Ghats endemics with the exception of **Broad-tailed Grass-warbler**, which we didn't try for through a quirk of our itinerary. **Nilgiri Blue Robin** and **Nilgiri Thrush** were both seen rather briefly whilst **Wynaad Laughingthrush** was only found after several hours of searching at both Top Slip and Thattekkad.



Some of the most notable 'non-endemic' possibilities are **Indian Pitta**, **Indian Blue Robin**, **White-naped Woodpecker**, **Kashmir Flycatcher**, **White-bellied Minivet**, **White-rumped Spinetail**, **Red Spurfowl**, **Ceylon Frogmouth**, **Mottled Wood-owl**, **Ceylon Bay Owl** and **Forest Eagle-owl**. Eldhose can find all of these although they are not guaranteed of course; we scored most of them, but only heard the latter two, narrowly missing views of the **eagle-owl** late one evening. There are a host of other good birds to see of course ranging from **White-backed Vulture** to **Great Black-headed Gull** and a very healthy trip list would be possible by simply following the itinerary sketched out below. There are various birdable wetlands to use as journey breakers on the longest drives.

We visited quite a wide range of sites in Tamil Nadu and Kerala over nine full days but it is clear that a reasonably relaxed itinerary covering just four sites would give ample opportunity to find all of the Western Ghats endemics plus a good selection of the other specialities. This would also minimise travel time on the maniacal and dangerous Indian roads, something worthy of serious consideration.

Eldhose can easily find accommodation along the way with minimal pre-booking, although a short search for a suitable hotel may be required on occasion. Some of the establishments we used were very basic but all were just about adequate. This allowed full flexibility and the chance to move on once all the key birds at a site had been seen. I would suggest something along the following lines as ideal (this is only my view of course and there are undoubtedly many more quality birding sites in the Ghats - just bear in mind that they may be at the end of a really hideous drive):

- Three days Thattekkad (1 hour from Cochin Airport and note that there is excellent nightbirding here)
- Two days Munnar (note that Eldhose's best **Yellow-throated Bulbul** site is a 2-hour drive from Munnar)
- Two days Mudamali (we commuted from Ooty but staying at Mudamali should be possible)
- Two days Ooty (with a little luck, one day only would be needed here)
- Top Slip could remain a final option if there is time and if **Wynaad Laughingthrush** has not been seen

Eldhose is a hugely talented birder with an excellent knowledge of calls and some astonishing stakeouts. I won't give details here but we were immensely impressed by some of the birds he magically showed us in this way. He's hard working and keen to please the visiting birder although it is early days for his privately run tours. He now operates three smart bungalows at Thattekkad, sleeping six in total. This is a lovely place to stay with great birding close by and excellent food prepared by his smiling and helpful family.



Leeches were only present around the bamboo clumps in the damp valley bottoms at Thattekkad. This is prime **Wynaad Laughingthrush** habitat so it's worth taking leech socks if you plan to search hard for it.

Mosquito nets were also useful at Thattekkad. We had beautiful weather throughout with no rain, generally warm to hot temperatures during the day, and cool to chilly early mornings. We may have seen more leeches if it had rained, I guess.

Indian Rupees cannot be carried into India. ATMs are widely available but we'd tried several before we found one that worked. All tourists require a visa before arrival in India and we acquired ours from the London embassy.

We paid an all-in daily fee to Eldhose using Sterling brought from the UK. This was not ideal as we only handed over our payments half way through the trip, meaning we were each carrying a large amount of cash for several days. Also, it may have been better to have paid a daily rate for guiding and transport only, with an agreement to meet the costs of food and accommodation along the way. It seems eminently sensible to start a trip at Thattekkad - it is a short drive from the airport and presumably payment to Eldhose could be made on arrival.

Quite a few nice mammals were seen along the way including an impressive bull Elephant at Mudamali, where Tiger also occurs; and a Tiger had been seen at Top Slip on the day we visited.

Eldhose can be contacted directly on: [eldhose.kv AT gmail.com](mailto:eldhose.kv@gmail.com)

We then spent four days birding on the Andaman Islands making a neat two-week trip in total.

I personally feel that four days was just long enough to do the Andamans justice although we missed a few of the harder endemics, including **Andaman Woodpigeon** and **Andaman Crake** (we almost certainly saw the **crake** on the forest floor at Mount Harriet but it scuttled away before giving a conclusive view).



Of particular note was a group of 35 **Andaman Teal** seen on a large tidal lagoon at Sippighat along with an impressive array of wintering waders. These birds were found by diligently searching the mosaic of large pools in the area.

We made several half-day visits to Chiriya Tapu, a couple to Mount Harriet and one each to Sippighat and Corbyn's Cove. All these sites are covered well in *A Birdwatcher's Guide to India* (Prion, Kazmierczak & Singh) although Corbyn's Cove is probably not as good as it used to be, while Sippighat now seems to be the best wetland close to Port Blair.

We were told that visitors cannot drive hire cars on the Andamans. Our hotel (Sinclairs) provided a car and driver however at a very reasonable daily rate and this was an ideal arrangement. The islands are busy over holiday periods so booking accommodation in advance is advised. Any hotel or guest house in or close to Port Blair would be fine for birders – distances between sites are not great and travel on these laid back islands is easy.

We opted to take malaria prophylactics for the Andamans only, the Western Ghats being deemed a low risk area. Check for the latest advice of course. As expected, the weather was hot and dry, and we were lucky to see no rain.

The Andaman extension did prove quite expensive, as it required two internal flights, a night in Chennai and an additional visa fee. There are one or two ATMs in Port Blair but we didn't need to use them so don't know if they'd have worked.

We'd planned to spend a spare afternoon birding Chennai's *Guindy National Park*. Frustratingly, this was not possible on the day as the park was closed and we were told that special permission was needed. We saw a few interesting species in the scrub outside the park walls but nothing compared to the range that is present inside. More positive in Chennai was the excellent *Footprint Guest House* that we used for one night, an obvious favourite with backpackers. Highly recommended, free internet access, a traveller's library and good rates were all available.

Various help was received while preparing for this trip and our sincere thanks go to the following:

Wild About India's Jo Thomas was extremely helpful in making some of our Andaman arrangements. Contact Jo if you require any Indian tour: www.wildaboutindia.com

And the following kindly provided various help or advice: Dave Farrow (*Birdquest*, www.birdquest.co.uk), Paul Holt (*Sunbird / Wings*, www.sunbirdtours.co.uk / www.wingsbirds.com), Rob Hutchinson (*birdtourASIA*, www.birdtourasia.com) and Gavin Maclean.

A huge thank you to Eldhose of course for his dedicated efforts to get us the birds, not to mention some excellent curries and the essential supply of freshly brewed chai.

Photos by Ollie Wardman ©

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