

## Delicious Delhi – Sultanpur and the surrounding area

2<sup>nd</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> March 2013 by Martin Birch

My work took me to Delhi for a week and with a weekend free I teamed up with Sanjay, a local guide from Sultanpur, for some great birding. Sanjay had been recommended to me by Peter Lobo from *All India Birding* and I would not hesitate to recommend Sanjay should you be in the area.

I'd read about Sultanpur from various trip reports on surfbirds and with this marshland reserve being just a few miles south of my conference centre it provided a perfect weekend retreat and some incredible birding.

Approx 250 species of birds are found at Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary. Some of them are resident, while others are Siberian and European migrants. As a bird sanctuary, we can thank Peter Jackson, famous ornithologist and once Honorary Secretary of the Delhi Birdwatching Society. He wrote to the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, way back in 1970 about the need to declare the Sultanpur jheel as a bird sanctuary. A walk along the perimeter of the park takes up to two hours.



**The weekend's best birds: Baikal Teal (above), Marbled Teal, Long-billed Dowitcher, Indian Courser, Asian and Eurasian Eagle Owls and Sind Sparrow.**

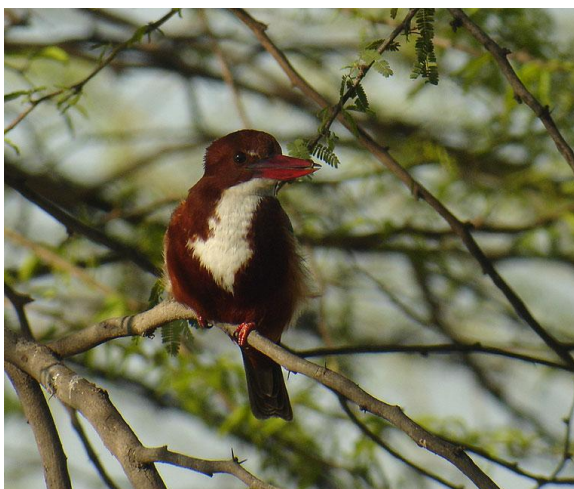
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With the assistance of Peter Lobo from *All India Birding* I was put in contact with Sanjay, a local guide at Sultanpur. Sanjay met me at the gate to the reserve where I teamed up with Peter and Sue Schattner, an American couple who were birding their way around India and employing Sanjay's birding skills.

I was soon enjoying my first of many **Hume's Leaf Warblers**, then a winter-plumaged **Taiga Flycatcher**, whilst a secretive **Purple Heron** worked an area of reed below the path.

On the marsh dozens of **Garganey** and **Ferruginous Duck** were scattered amongst the hundreds of Shoveler and Teal, whilst small groups of **Black-winged Stilts**, **Little, Intermediate** and **Great Egrets** worked the edge of the marsh. Pretty quickly I picked up a distant **White-tailed Plover**, the first of 4 birds that we saw during the day. **Little Cormorants** rested on bundles of floating vegetation, whilst a **White-breasted Kingfisher** added some colour to the morning.

Raptors during the day included an early morning **Osprey**, followed by numerous sightings of **Western Marsh Harrier**, **Greater Spotted Eagle** and then **Booted Eagle**.



*White-breasted Kingfisher and Little Cormorant, Sultanpur*

Walking along the western edge of the reserve, Sanjay told us of the Baikal Teal that had been seen a few days previously. This news suddenly made scanning the waterfowl a whole lot more interesting! And after sifting various groups of ducks, much to my surprise, I nailed the **Baikal Teal**, resting with a group of Garganey and Shoveler as the pictures above and below show. Always distant, it showed well enough through the scope, before taking flight into the more inaccessible areas of the marsh where, despite subsequent searches, I never managed to pin it down. In flight this is a cracking duck and I would have loved to have relived this experience on the Yorkshire coast the other month!



Walking on, Sanjay located 2 **Sind Sparrows** in their favourite tree and then walking back into an area of woodland helped us locate a **Brooke's Leaf Warbler** – a bird I would have never called on my own. And whilst we were following the Brooke's Leaf Warbler, I picked up another interesting warbler which, with Sanjay's assistance, we confirmed as a stunning **Sulphur-bellied Warbler**. Twenty minutes later and Sanjay had located our final warbler species of the morning; a nice **Orphean Warbler**.





*Sind Sparrows and Hoopoe, Sultanpur*

As my three new birding pals moved on, I hung back to try to photograph a **Hoopoe** and whilst doing this spotted a small group of waders arrive on the marsh not far from me.

Scanning through the small group of **Spotted Redshank** I was shocked to see what could only be a 'dowitcher' - but no sooner had I set eyes on the bird than the flock took flight. Thankfully, they alighted only a couple of hundred metres away and retracing my steps back down the track, I quickly located the flock on the marsh and frantically scanned them in the hope of finding my 'dowitcher'. Sure enough there it was and there was little doubting it was a dowitcher. Calling Sanjay over, we all enjoyed reasonable, if distant, views of the bird whilst Sanjay phoned various Delhi birders to spread the news. I managed to grab a few digiscoped shots for the record, before the small group of waders took flight again.



*Long-billed Dowitcher, Sultanpur*



By the time Delhi's finest appeared on the scene there was little to show for their dash to Sultanpur other than the images on the camera. It didn't help therefore when these were quickly disregarded as a 'Redshank' by Delhi's top birder and others drifted away.

Reckoning that the bird had not gone far (Sultanpur is a pretty small marshland reserve surrounded by woodland and then a large expanse of agricultural land so it seemed highly unlikely that the flock of waders would have left the reserve in the middle of the day) I set to work on trying to relocate the dowitcher. And by the middle of the afternoon I had pinned the bird down for the third time; this time with a larger flock of wading birders (Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Snipe, White-tailed Plover and



Little Ringed Plover) in a drier part of the marsh in the northern corner. And this time 'Delhi's finest' got to enjoy India's third ever **Long-billed Dowitcher**! And Peter's photo below shows just what a nice bird it was.



*Long-billed Dowitcher, copyright Peter Schattner*

Having found the Baikal Teal and then a Long-billed Dowitcher, it didn't seem possible that the day could get any better. And whilst **Indian Courser** hardly competes on rarity status, on looks it certainly does. Sanjay took us outside of the reserve to an area where this species is pretty straightforward to find and sure enough we found a group of nine birds.





*Indian Coursers and Indian Roller, near Sultanpur*

This Indian Roller also joined in on the act and with flyover Sarus Cranes, helped push the day list beyond 100 species!

On the Sunday, Sanjay suggested visiting a range of sites near Sultanpur that hosted a number of other top-drawer species. First stop was the Basi Wetlands where thousands of waders were feeding in the fields with **Wood Sandpiper**, **Marsh Sandpiper**, **Temminck's** and **Little Stint** being the most numerous. **Kentish Plover**, **Avocet** and **Black-winged Stilt** were also present whilst **Citrine Wagtails**, **Bluethroats** and **Wire-breasted Swallows** added a splash of colour.



*Temminck's Stints, Basi wetlands*





From here we went to the Baland Tanks with the target of connecting with a wintering **Marbled Duck**. The bird played hard to see for a while before eventually showing well – the third major rarity in the Delhi area this weekend and sufficient for the story to make it into the Times of India ([click here for the press cutting](#))!



*Marbled Teal*

From here Sanjay took me owling; first a stop-over for **Asian Short-eared Owl** before taking me to two sites where we connected with **Asian Eagle Owl** and then a **Eurasian Eagle Owl**.



*Asian Short-eared Owl and Spotted Owlet*

In total we notched up some 150 species over the two days. We found/saw three massive rarities for India and a host of other quality birds. Sultanpur is a cracking, easy to access, reserve and Sanjay a great birding companion if you ever find yourself in the area.

But even our conference centre produced a decent list of birds. Walking around the gardens delivered memorable views of a roosting Honey Buzzard, a noisy Shikra, a pair of Indian Grey Hornbills and lots more Hume's Leaf Warblers.



*Eurasian Eagle Owl and Green Bee-eater*

## **Species list**

### **Sultanpur Reserve – day one**

1. Oriental Darter (8 in flight and half a dozen in trees)
2. Little Grebe (c.20)
3. Little Cormorant (Abundant)
4. Grey Heron (5+)

5. Purple Heron (3)
6. Great Egret (4+)
7. Intermediate Egret (at least 2)
8. Little Egret (many)
9. Indian Pond Heron (3+)
10. Cattle Egret (100's)
11. Painted Stork (2)
12. Black-necked Stork (adult plus young)
13. Asian Openbill (1)
14. **Sarus Crane** (3)
15. Black-headed Ibis (c.8)
16. Glossy Ibis (2)
17. Spoonbill (10)
18. Eurasian Teal (100+)
19. **Baikal Teal** (drake)
20. Garganey (c200+)
21. Wigeon (10+)
22. Pintail (100+)
23. Gadwall (c. 100)
24. Indian Spot-billed Duck (20)
25. Northern Shoveler (500)
26. Ferruginous Duck (20)
27. Black Kite (1)
28. Western Marsh Harrier (2+)
29. **Greater Spotted Eagle** (2)
30. **Booted Eagle** (2)
31. Osprey (1)
32. Kestrel (1)
33. Grey Francolin (4)
34. Indian Peafowl (2)
35. **Sarus Crane** (3 overhead)
36. Purple Swamphen (2)
37. Common Moorhen (50+)
38. Eurasian Coot (100+)
39. Black-winged Stilt (c.100)
40. Red-wattled Lapwing (c40+)
41. **White-tailed Plover** (4+)
42. Yellow-wattled Lapwing (10)
43. **Indian Courser** (9)
44. Common Redshank (1)
45. Green Sandpiper (2)
46. Wood Sandpiper (20+)
47. Spotted Redshank (3+)
48. Ruff (c.15)
49. **Long-billed Dowitcher** (1)
50. Greenshank (6+)
51. Little Ringed Plover (8)
52. Snipe (1)
53. Brown-hooded Gull (2)
54. Eurasian Collared Dove (many)
55. Red Collared Dove (3)
56. Rose-ringed Parakeet (20+)
57. Alexandrine Parakeet (1 in flight)
58. Greater Coucal (2)
59. White-throated Kingfisher (1)
60. Green Bee-eater (10+)
61. Indian Roller (1)
62. Long-tailed Minivet (1)
63. Eurasian Hoopoe (4)
64. Black-rumped Flameback (1)
65. Wire-tailed Swallow (at least 3 birds)
66. **Indian Cliff Swallow** (c.10)
67. Plain Sand Martin (10+)



- 68. House Swift (5)
- 69. Crimson-breasted Barbet (2)
- 70. Red-vented Bulbul (1)
- 71. Common Chiffchaff (1)
- 72. Hume's Leaf Warbler (1)
- 73. Brooke's Leaf Warbler (1)**
- 74. Sulphur-bellied Warbler (1)**
- 75. Orphean Warbler (1)
- 76. Taiga Flycatcher (1)**
- 77. Red-breasted Flycatcher (1)
- 78. Indian Robin (1)
- 79. Magpie Robin (3)
- 80. Black Redstart (5+)
- 81. Common Stonechat (3)
- 82. Pied Bushchat (2)
- 83. Crested Lark (2)
- 84. Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark (100+)
- 85. Greater Short-toed Lark (c.100)
- 86. Paddyfield Pipit (6+)
- 87. Richard's Pipit (2)
- 88. Tawny Pipit (1)
- 89. Tree Pipit (3)
- 90. Yellow Wagtail (3+)
- 91. Citrine Wagtail (1)
- 92. Large Grey Babbler (c.20)
- 93. Purple Sunbird (2)
- 94. Bay-backed Shrike (1)
- 95. Rufous-backed Shrike (2)
- 96. Black Drongo (Common)
- 97. House Crow (Abundant)
- 98. Bank Myna (10+)
- 99. Common Myna (Abundant)
- 100. Asian Pied Starling (2)
- 101. Sind Sparrow (2+)
- 102. House Sparrow (many)

**Hotel Gardens – Sunday morning – 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2013**

- 102. Brahminy Starling (2)
- 103. Yellow-fronted Green Pigeon (1)
- 104. Laughing Dove (1)
- 105. Jungle Babbler (10)

**Basi wetland – 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2013**

- Painted Stork (4)
- 106. Black Ibis (3)
- Glossy Ibis (6)
- Purple Swampphen (1)
- 107. Comb Duck (1)
- 108. Ruddy Shelduck (20)
- 109. Bar-headed Goose (200+)
- Indian Pond Heron (1)
- 110. Temminck's Stint (20+)
- 111. Little Stint (200+)
- 112. Dunlin (4)
- Ruff (200+)
- 113. Marsh Sandpiper (c.10)
- Wood Sandpiper (c.50)
- Green Sandpiper (4+)
- 114. Kentish Plover (20+)
- White-tailed Plover (2)

- 115. Avocet (10+)
  - Black-winged Stilt (100+)
- 116. Black-tailed Godwit (c.50)
  - Black Kite (8)
  - Kestrel (1)
- 117. Egyptian Vulture (1)
  - Wire-tailed Swallow (1)
  - Citrine Wagtail (20+)
  - Yellow Wagtail (10)
- 119. White Wagtail (3)
  - Paddyfield Pipit (4+)
- 120. Rosy Pipit (1)
  - Tawny Pipit (2)
- 121. Bluethroat (2)
- 122. Common Babbler (1)
- 123. Ashy Prinia (2)
- 124. Plain Prinia (1)
- 125. Oriental Skylark (2)
  - Crested Lark (2)
  - Rufous-backed Shrike (1)
  - Pied Bushchat (2)
- 126. Common Starling (2)
- 127. Indian Silverbill (1)

#### **Baland Tanks**

- Oriental Darter (c.10)
  - Little Grebe (c.20)
- 128. Indian Shag (c.10)
- 129. Great Cormorant (c.40)
  - Grey Heron (3+)
  - Great Egret (2)
  - Eurasian Teal (100+)
- 130. Marbled Teal** (drake)
  - Garganey (c.50)
  - Wigeon (1)
  - Pintail (200+)
  - Gadwall (c. 200)
- 131. Lesser Whistling Teal (1)
  - Northern Shoveler (200)
  - Ferruginous Duck (20)
- 132. Red-crested Pochard (3)
- 133. Pochard (30)
- 134. Common Sandpiper (1)
- 135. **Small Indian Pratincole** (2)
- 136. Pheasant-tailed Jacana (3)
  - Greater Spotted Eagle (1)
  - Sind Sparrow (4)

#### **Sultanpur area**

- Egyptian Vulture (1)
- 137. Asian Short-eared Owl (2)
- 138. Spotted Owlet (2)
- 139. Variable Wheatear (1)
- 140. Zitting Cisticola (2)

Travelling – 141. White-breasted Waterhen (3), White-breasted Kingfisher (1), 142. Black-winged Kite (1)

#### **Bhinda Was**

- 143. Stone Curlew (3)
- 144. Asian Eagle Owl (1)



- 145. Eurasian Eagle Owl (1)
- 146. Black Francolin (3)
- 147. Jungle Crow (2)
  - Black-rumped Flameback (1)
  - Green Bee-eater (20)
  - Large Grey Babbler (20+)
  - Indian Roller (1)
  - Hume's Leaf Warbler (1)
  - Lesser Whitethroat (1)
- 148. Grey-headed Petronia (2)

**Hotel Gardens – all week**

- Red-wattled Lapwing (2)
  - Indian Peafowl (2)
  - Black Kite (3)
- 149. Shikra (1)
- 150. Honey Buzzard (1)
  - Hoopoe (1)
  - Green Bee-eater (2)
- 151. Indian Grey Hornbill (2)
  - Laughing Dove (2)
  - European Collared Dove (4+)
  - Yellow-footed Green Pigeon (2)
  - Jungle Babbler (c. 20)
  - Rufous-backed Shrike (1)
  - Bluethroat (1)
  - Hume's Leaf Warbler (c.10)
  - Lesser Whitethroat (6)
  - Ashy Prinia (6+)
  - Purple Sunbird (2)
- 152. Indian White-eye (3)
- 153. Red-cheeked Bulbul (3)
- 154. Common Tailorbird (1)
- 155. Common Woodshrike (3)
  - Black Redstart (male)
  - Common Myna (many)