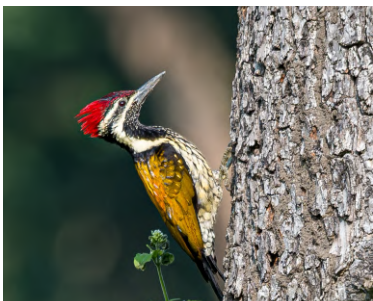


Southern India's Western Ghats With Andaman Islands Pre-tour Extension

November 9-23, 2024 | Trip Report by Peg Abbott



Guides Avijit Sarkhel and Dhanish Trogon, with Naturalist Journeys host Peg Abbott and seven clients: Larry, Fran, Arlana, Arden, Scott, Janet, and David



Andaman Islands Extension

Some of our group had arrived early to explore Kolkata a bit, planning both a city tour and some birding. Fran and Larry leading the pack with a good bird list underway after several outings there and we had a good time meeting for dinner November 4th to trade notes and prepare for our upcoming adventures.

Tues., Nov. 5: Flight to Port Blair | Burmanallah | Big Tree Resort | Chidiya Tapu Biological Park

On November 5, with Arlana and Arden arriving early morning, our group was complete, and we flew to India's remote Andaman Islands, a gorgeous archipelago rich in endemic species. The combination of scenery, lack of



any crowds and superlative birding made this a very special time. We chose to fly early in the day to have as much time as possible to explore. At the airport had a bit of a rush navigating between multiple terminals at Kolkata’s airport, but soon were underway, enjoying aerial views of the island before landing. Stepping out of the plane into tropical air, all our cares beyond birding flew away.

Our lodgings for this part of the trip were absolutely delightful, our small lodge (aptly named Big Tree Lodge) was tucked into a rural part of the islands, with some massive trees arching over the open-air dining area and our individual cabins. Diya, the manager, was an accomplished traveler settling down here, and she made us feel very welcome. Vishu, our waiter, took good care of us and soon learned what we liked to eat and drink, always ready for us. Meals were creative and we had fun learning more about local foods. We tried dahl, local fish, chicken and vegetable curries, and more. One of our favorite dinners was “Khow Suey” - a Burnese dish made with fresh coconut milk, potatoes, beans, carrots, onions, chiles, vinegar, cilantro, roasted garlic, fried onions, and crushed peanuts. Often joining us was Nara, the dog; a lively pup that won our hearts quickly.

Wed., Nov. 6: Local Birding | Chidiya Tapu | Sippighat Wetlands | Ograbraj Wetland

We started the day with a short walk from the lodge, where we saw Green Imperial Pigeons, tiny Vernal Hanging-Parrots and, in shrubs by the dining area, the endemic Andaman Flowerpecker. We enjoyed a hearty breakfast of omelets, eggs, and toast with an unusual homemade banana jam. Our birding day was planned to visit sites of a mix of wetland and forest habitats. We quickly found Andaman Treepies, Andaman and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, Andaman Shama, beautiful Asian Fairy-bluebirds, Lesser Whistling-duck, Cotton Pygmy-goose, Gray-headed Swamphen, and two thrilling birds of prey, Andaman Serpent-Eagle and White-bellied Sea-Eagle. We also found a good number of shorebirds arriving for winter (close to 80 Andaman Teal), very close Blue-tailed Bee-eaters on a post and more. We enjoyed a pizza lunch at a fun local restaurant between outings, served with spicy snacks, and in the parking lot some good close birds that gave our photographers a smile.

Dinner included a coconut fish (or veg) dish wrapped and cooked in a banana leaf which was moist and delicious, plus chayote, dahl, and crisp flat bread. A great birding day and we were happy campers!



Thurs., Nov. 7: Andaman Islands | Bamboo Flats | Roadside Ponds | Khartang Forest | Shoal Bay | Bidnabad | Ferrargunj Forest | Chouldari Wetland | Night Birding

We took a dawn stroll down the lane below Big Tree Cottages and were delighted to find endemic White-headed Starlings, a pair, perched up in the early morning light with Long-tailed Parakeets. Another good fortune was seeing the endemic Andaman Bulbul on a roadside wire.

We were exploring farther afield today, and once the cars arrived, we were on our way to take a ferry over to another peninsula to explore some woodlands and wetlands of the Mt. Harriet area. The ship was “weathered” and we had fun watching locals as we were among the few tourists aboard. We stayed out on deck and were pleased to watch White-bellied Sea-Eagle and Whimbrel.

We walked a quiet road for much of the morning and ran into two mixed flocks. Colorful Scarlet Minivet males (red) and females (yellow) were active alongside Black-naped Monarchs. We got much closer looks at White-headed Starlings in this thick vegetation and, while admiring them, Dhanish found us the real prize of the day, Andaman Cuckoo-Dove, a secretive forest species. We had great looks at it, a large rust-colored species, and it was feeding so we got a good show. Another winged gem flew in, a Freckle-breasted Woodpecker. It fed in vine tangles, then had a good preening session out in plain view. A third flock provided good views of Andaman Cuckooshrike, Andaman Treepie and two species of drongos.

As we left the third mixed flock, we got back to the car. Dhanish ran back for a forgotten lost item. We sat enjoying a relaxing sit on upholstery and commented on the sudden nice breeze. Within minutes rain hit hard - the breeze should have been our clue! It had been sunny and hot enough to sweat despite our only movement being the raising binoculars. We sheltered with one of our local guides, and Dhanish and Avijit arrived back with the retrieved item, soaked but laughing about it.

We used the time amid this strong downpour to drive to our next site; a boardwalk to the beach through mangroves. That spot was magical! We saw two Ruddy Kingfisher, a bird that radiates light from its rufous feathers, the male enhanced with a wash of purple. The bill was intense orange, like waxy lipstick. Both birds sat still and with a little juggling we got fine photos - quite remarkable as this species can be very difficult to see. We also saw a pair of Mangrove Whistlers and four White-breasted Woodswallows - a species that ranges just this



far from Indonesia. We only had the chance to see it on this extension.

Time for lunch! After that, we spent time on tidal and wetland areas finding a big variety of waders and shorebirds.

Fri., Nov. 8: Roadside Wetlands | Ferrargunj Forest

We started the day birding the road by the lodge, then ventured out to another mix of forest and wetland sites. We enjoyed sightings of Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, and Andaman Coucal.

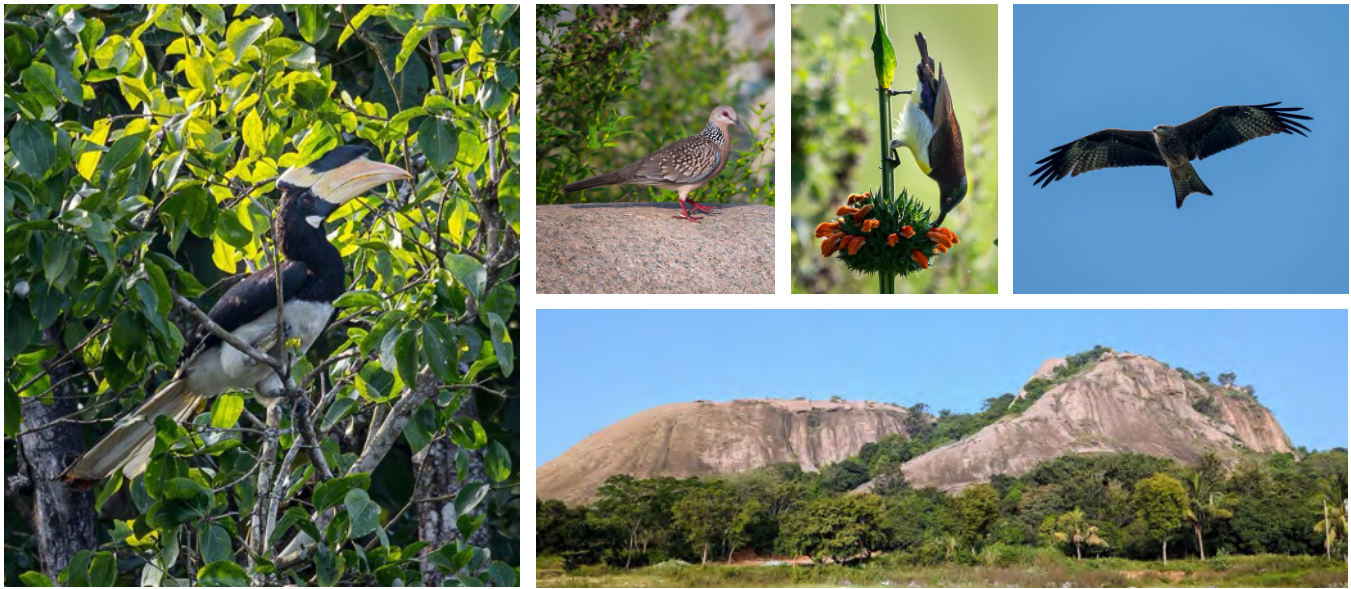
A walk through Ferrargunj Forest got us into massive trees and great looks at Andaman Woodpecker, Dollarbird and several other endemics. A roadside wetland turned out to be rich in species including several Pin-tailed Snipes, Gray-headed Lapwing, Wood Sandpiper and Long-toed Stint. From the car we stopped for a close up, cracking view of a Stork-billed Kingfisher, what a bird!

After a break back at the hotel we ventured out for night birds - the sought-after one being an Andaman Masked-Owl that Dhanish knew of a roost site. Success! We also walked into a nearby forest to get illuminated views of a sitting Andaman Nightjar and the Walden's form of an Oriental Scops-Owl. It was clear that with Dhanish we'd met a night bird whisperer!

Sat., Nov. 9: Port Blair | Chidiya Tapu Biological Park | Sippighat Wetland | Flight to Bengaluru | Meet up for our Main Journey

We wanted to bird the final morning close to our cottages, and our mission this morning was to try to pick up the final endemic species we were missing, the Andaman Wood-Pigeon. We heard two, and found twenty species on this walk, but were also restricted by rain and by time.

We went up on the deck of the nearby lodge, where there was a fine view of the forest canopy and had super looks at Andaman Green Pigeon, and a perched Asian Fairy-bluebird, but alas, no wood pigeons. We continued walking down the road and scoped several possibilities, then drove on to another patch of mature forest, where we got good looks at a flock of Small Minivet and a glimpse at a Violet Cuckoo associated with them. Dhanish, on



a mission, was literally dashing up the road with hopes of finding one, but we explained that we were content, we had seen so much, and we were ready to go back and pack up in order to make our flight.

We made one last try at the biodiversity park we had visited earlier. But the footpath here was dangerously slippery so we could not make the steeper upper loop, opting instead for a level trail which gave us looks at Asian Emerald Dove, and a Long-tailed Parakeet that was investigating some sort of food source in the tree, followed by a Red-whiskered Bulbul, and a Freckle-breasted Woodpecker. We couldn't tell what they were eating but were happy to get some good photos. We had a bit of a mix-up with our group spreading far and wide trying to find the pigeon, but it was not to be, and the flight to Bangalore was pressing.

We thought we had to change planes in Chennai, so we're very pleased to find we had a direct flight. In just 2-1/2 hours we were back on the mainland in southern India. Three of our group join us here; Scott, David, and Janet. We met for dinner which was a buffet, and got to know each other better with some more detailed introductions and a friendly conversation. Off to bed to get some sleep and be fresh for our morning adventures.

Southern India's Western Ghats

Sun., Nov. 10: Bengaluru to Nagarahole Tiger Reserve | Boat Safari

We got on the road early this morning, excited to get to the famous Nagarahole National Park and Tiger Reserve. Our driver was ready with an excellent streamlined bus that had big windows, ample seating and high clearance – ready for adventure were we!

As it was pretty much a full travel day to get there, we planned a stop at what Peg dubbed the "Rock Wonderland" - a fascinating landscape of eroding granites 3.5 billion years old, some of the oldest rocks on the planet. Here, a series of rounded rock monoliths of varied shapes surrounded us, and we scanned for endangered roosting vultures which find sanctuary here. We found only one and learned sadly that all of India's vultures are endangered. We hoped this lone sighting reflected the time of day as we were there mid-morning - perhaps most were out to feed.

Ramanagara was a super birdy place, and we walked for an hour or so with the birds arriving fast and furiously. One of the most memorable was a Coppersmith Barbet that was curious about our playback call and came in



almost dancing on the nearest utility wire. High on the cliffs, we saw a Booted Eagle which flew acrobatically, ending in a spectacular dive. With it, a Common Kestrel, Dusky Crag-Martins, and an Oriental Honey-buzzard also circled on the wing. In shrubs around the base of the rocks we found Common Tailorbird, Ashy Prinia and Asian (Cinereous) Tit. On some blooming shrubs we met our first sunbirds, both Purple and Purple-rumped, with good close views. Equally colorful were Rose-ringed Parakeets, feeding on tree blooms. A Tricolored Munia was a nice find and a few got good views of Red Avadavat.

The next stop, more a spur-of-the-moment decision, was inspired by seeing Spot-billed Pelicans as we crossed a large water body, a reservoir named Ramammankere. Our driver found a spot for us to pull over and we scoped out a host of species including Red-wattled Lapwing, Asian Openbill, Painted Stork, Great Cormorant, Eurasian Spoonbill, Red-naped Ibis and more.

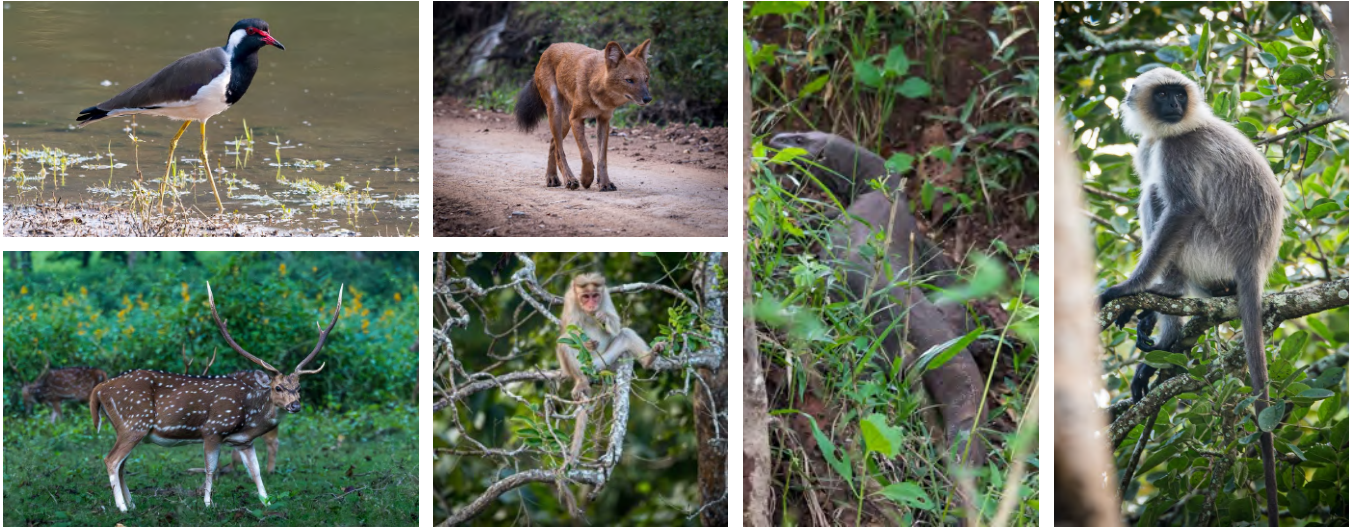
Avi bought us some treats, local lentil cakes and some sweets, as stopped for a pit stop and snacks. We wanted to reach the lodge in time for an afternoon boat safari and we did so with success. We chose the river to be relaxing after travel, and it was.

We launched on to the reservoir portion of the Kabini River, almost immediately spotting River Terns. We got fine views of Painted Stork, so beautiful in the afternoon light. Common Greenshank was new, and we had several Red-wattled Lapwing. Four different Ospreys observed our passage, and cormorants (Little and Great) were common; one on a nest at close range was fun to see.

Our lodging at Nagarahole National Park, the Kabini River Lodge, was government-owned and by staying here we had access to four-wheel jeeps and experienced drivers. Our driver for the next few days would be Revanna, who had thirty years of experience and a wonderful knowledge of the wildlife and the network of roads we navigated to find them. Our rooms were spacious cottages with AC, WIFI, porches, and a view of the river.

The food was good here, specializing in South India dishes. Each night there was a soup, some delicious breads, a dish with panner, several vegetable dishes, a salad with peanuts, an angel hair pasta with sauces, a yoghurt sauce, sambal, dahl, and crispy-fried baby corn. The food was mostly vegetarian, though at the end of the line they had lamb or chicken. Sweets were often something made with coconut.

Mon., Nov. 11 & Tues., Nov. 12: Nagarahole Tiger Reserve Jeep Safaris



Each day we had two jeep safaris, with time to bird on the grounds of the lodge in between. The morning drive left early, 6 AM and went about 3 hours. We had coffee early, then returned to an elaborate Indian breakfast, with a nod to western food being omelets. A fleece was nice for the first hour or so (a few mornings there was mist and one had curtains of light streaming through the forest).

We focused on predators early, driving the park roads, which had the sides cleared of brush for 100 feet or so and that made viewing easier. The very first morning was our best, we saw so much it was hard to process it all! First up were massive Gaurs, found in a herd with one large bull and host of females and young. We almost drove right by the first elephant, spotted by Alana and David. What a joy to see two females with a baby, feeding and ambling with little regard for us. Chital, also known as Spotted Deer, were so common we almost stopped looking at them until we noticed two young males sparring. Then some stotted with all four feet off the ground and stretched to the maximum possible. They have young year-round, so we saw babies of all ages. Far less frequently we saw Sambar deer, much larger and darker. Over the next three days we saw three species of mongoose: Indian Gray, Ruddy and Stripe-necked. Loud calls alerted us to the presence of Indian (Malabar) Giant Squirrels, stunning creatures with two toned coat, white and a lush rufous color. We watched one leap through the canopy and hurl itself tree to tree, crossing a gap.

Birds were plentiful, and several times we encountered woodpeckers amid small flocks. White-bellied Woodpecker and two species of flamebacks (Malabar and Black-rumped) were big, crested species much like our Pileated woodpecker back home, with even more color and pattern. At the wash room stop, we got very close looks at a Streak-throated Woodpecker where it fed on a tree about six feet away, ignoring us completely. That rest stop proved to always have some bird action, giving us our best looks at Indian Nuthatch as well. Drongos were plentiful, with five species: Ashy, Bronzed, Black, White-bellied and Greater Racket-tailed. On a typical morning safari drive we'd have about sixty species, from iconic Indian Peafowl to Indian Golden Oriole. Our luck with owls continued and we found the tiny Jungle Owlet and the massive Brown Fish-Owl, in genus *Bubo* like our Great-Horned Owl with similar power and size. Parakeets were often on the wing, Rose-ringed, Plum-headed and Malabar and one morning we found a dozen or more Crested Treeswifts on a wire. Three species of bee-eaters were winged jewels: Asian Green, Blue-tailed and Chestnut-headed. The latter showed its colors so well as it dipped into waters of one of the small ponds. Sadly, we did not find the Bengal Tiger. Though three were spotted one afternoon that we were out, we were in a different section of the park. Our luck instead was having two sightings of Asiatic Leopard.

The undisputed highlight of our time here, a true "National Geographic" moment, was finding a pack of four Indian wild dogs, or Dholes. Avi spotted one laying down fairly close to the road, and it tolerated us, quietly



watching. We spotted three others further down the road, and watched as the most near one got up, greeted another, and then all four wound past us, up a hill and out of sight. We took lots of photos and were grinning about our great find when ahead of us we heard a loud alarm call by a Spotted Deer, looked up and witnessed an explosion of hooves and feet. A Spotted Deer ran for its life, with all four legs extended as wide as possible, reaching impressive speed. But closing in on it even faster was one of the dogs, with a second not far behind. They ran downhill, and although our view was blocked by trees, in seconds the dogs had one down and we heard its last call. Our adrenaline was pumping and we started to scan, moving up slowly. Peg spotted the scene of the dogs bent down and already feeding, then two more dogs came from our right, crossed the road and started coursing, overshooting the direction of the other two but obviously aware and wanting to get to the kill. Fairly far off (a long range for cameras but fine for binoculars), we watched the pack interact, the young pup having to wait to grovel for its share. The dogs stayed wary; feeding, then looking around. One moved off finally, kept watch and let “Junior” come in. What was once a deer was pretty much just a ribcage when we pulled away, maybe fifteen minutes later. It was a thrill. This is an endangered species and not easy to find, so this was our only sighting in five safari drives.

Wed., Nov. 13: Nagarahole | Ooty

Dhanish greeted us with his sprinting springer spaniel run, excited to show us a Barn Owl that Peg had heard calling the morning before. He saw two, but once we gathered, they were wary, so we ticked it as “heard” only, as we had a long travel day and a morning safari ahead. This day was it, “Tiger or Bust”, and we were nearly the

first in line to enter the park, eager with anticipation. We were in the section of the park that had sightings the previous afternoon and our guide knew the best spots to scan. Almost right away we had a special sighting, a Brown Fish-Owl, barely discernable in the mist and dawn light. It was perched so we could study it a while. What a bird – a big Bubo (same genus) like our Great Horned Owl. Later in the morning we found yet another (three in total) and this one was perched in the open in good light. We were doing well with owls!

We wound our way through the lush forests, scanning and finding Gaur, Sambar, Chital, and two species of mongoose: Stripe-tailed and Indian Gray. We declined a wash room stop as there were other jeeps there, and it was that serendipity that put us just in the right place at the right time. Leopard! We had turned right and the jeep in front of us made a sudden turn around, pointing up in a large tree. There on the right horizontal limb was a Leopard, on its version of a couch, ready to rest for the day. We watched it in one pose, then getting up to switch the direction facing, displaying its spot pattern, huge paws, long tail and with a great yawn, its impressive



canines. We all snapped photos, jockeyed up and back for best views, and in time as another vehicle found us, it got up and came to the center tree trunk and scratched like a cat with a carpet pad, a yoga stretch, then sitting down again. We were with it a good half hour or so, then decided to try our last hour left searching for the other big kitty. Sadly, to no avail, but Nagarahole had been good to us with many sightings and supreme views of leopards.

We got back to the lodge for a quick breakfast, pack-up and were on the road by 10:30. Avi spotted a Blue-faced Malkoha, a snazzy looking member of the cuckoo clan, and we all got good looks with a little twisting and turning to see out the bus window (not to scare it), switching seats. There was a new species for us there as well, White-browed Bulbul.

Lunch on the way was great fun. Avi knew of a local place that served classic South Indian food and they were pleased to have us. Srinidhi restaurant was a small place, and locals were diving in, eating with their fingers which is their custom. Avi carried silverware in for us, for which we were grateful. Our placemats and plates were banana leaves and we were served up scrumptious foods right on the leaf, with two kinds of bread, chili sauce, a vegetable sauce, and various pickles, curd, corn, Kadu (curry with banana stem), toran (lentils and coconut), and more. Fresh lime sodas and good strong coffee washed it down and we were ready to get back on the road.

About 4PM, we arrived at a private farm with an old temple site to meet a local guide and enjoyed simply marvelous birding. He knew just where to show us Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl, another large and impressive species not easy to find. It was tucked into dense bamboo and shrub thickets, but with patience we were able to view and photograph it. After this highlight we had to stop to just gawk at the view. We had arrived at the Western Ghats and the peaks loomed above us, clad in greenery but exposing rock outcrops under a sculptured skyline. We walked uphill through an open landscape, marveling at Malabar Lark, Jerdon's Bushlark, Indian Robin and soaring overhead, Bonelli's Eagle. We walked about a mile and a half all together, including a last request; would we like to see the Spotted Owlet? Of course. We went over to a farm outbuilding and in the clearing dotted with trees we had a family group, three in total, two peeking out of a roost hole. They were simply too cute for words.

We had an issue with local officials about using a shortcut byway to Ooty, and it was a bit murky to us as to the reasons why, but an adventure unfolded with us getting into three jeeps and our bus driving a longer route



around. We bumped our way into the night, up into the higher hills and finally to our lodging in Ooty, an aging monolith of a hotel, to be close to the birding. It was literally tucked up into the edge of the Shola Forest.

They were ready for us and had a nice dinner buffet. By the time we finished and got to our rooms, there was a knock with our luggage and another fulfilling day was complete. We had arrived to the famed Nilgiri Mountains; one of the larger of the South India sky island ranges.

Thurs., Nov. 14: Ooty | Birding the Shola Forest

Just out of our hotel we could walk a road into the Shola Forest. We saw our first Indian White-eye leaving the parking lot, and within minutes we had sightings of several endemics: the Nilgiri Laughingthrush, and a pair of shy Nilgiri Sholakilis. We had fabulous looks and photo opportunities of Indian Scimitar-Babbler, Indian Blue Robin, and of a really beautiful bird – the Black-and-orange Flycatcher. Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher fed from tree to tree, and we had good views of Green Warbler and Tickell’s Leaf Warbler as well.

Back for breakfast, and then a drive up the mountain. We went to the end of the road at Doddabetta Peak, where we parked our bus, and parked ourselves at a viewpoint where a mixed flock closed in around us. Birds were oblivious to us, feeding in the light mist. We saw Asian Tits, more Nilgiri Laughingthrush, Indian Blackbird, and others. We walked through a market as delicious aromas of good foods gave our senses of smell quite the experience there. Between two vendor stalls, we leaned over the bank to find a Puff-throated Babbler.

The mist turned to rain, so we thought it best to go down in elevation. Fran expressed an interest in the botanical garden, so soon we had a plan. It was a busy place and, for us, the people-watching rivaled the birding. New for us on the trip at this location was Velvet-fronted Nuthatch; a stunning bird that looks like it put on pink lipstick. We found another endemic, the Nilgiri Flowerpecker, and Peg spotted a good one, a Kashmir Flycatcher - a migrant that winters here with a highly restricted range on the breeding grounds (Kashmir) and the wintering grounds (Western Ghats).

Lunch was at a local restaurant, modern and trendy with a patio and international cuisine. Larry got his Mexican food fix, and several chose burgers, lamb or cauliflower, and all had big smiles on their faces. They had an artsy gift store and all-in-all it was a nice mid-day break. After lunch, we had fun sorting through textiles from all over India at a store that supports weavers and several came out with a few treasures.



Since we'd been chased off by rain before seeing an important endemic species, we went back up to the pass in search of Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon. We went to the lookout spot, but a full market day had resulted in garbage being tossed there, so we moved away. Soon we heard Dhanish's excited call, "over here, over here, over here!" We found a flock of eight or so at the quieter end of the parking lot, landing around some garbage piled there. Here we were in pristine Shola Forest, so lush and decorated with epiphytic plants, and where do we find the sought-after species – in the parking lot by some trash! Still, we marveled at their pattern and beauty and were glad to have found them.

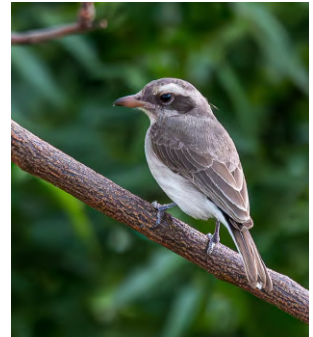
We headed in early today for a rest and a nice break for doing laundry, catching up on notes, and downloading photos. Dinner was at the hotel and Peg had prepped the daily bird list and to make it easier, as we'd missed it the day before. They brought out enough food for three times our party size; no losing weight on this journey!

Fri., Nov. 15: Ooty | Pollachi

Today was mostly a travel day. As we'd seen most of the specialties of this area, we left early so we'd have time to explore lower elevation dry forests upon reaching our next destination. We got out on a high viewpoint with a field of tea below us, watching wild Gaur feeding in a marshy area. We played the call of Painted Bush-Quail and had two answer almost right away, though perhaps a 100 yards or more away from us. We waited in the fresh mist, watching a Pied Bushchat, Indian Blackbird and the ever-present Black-whiskered Bulbuls, but alas, they were not budging much. We waited patiently, but decided "10 more minutes". They came in closer, but not close enough and we opted to move along. So much to see!

We had some raptors along the way; we stopped for a flying Black Eagle from a distance, a perched immature Shikra we got in the scope, and a Changeable Hawk-Eagle over the bus. We had fun at a coffee stop with the locals watching us curiously. Good strong coffee and our favorite sweets, Ooty Varkey, and a squat toilet bathroom break at the third floor of a local hotel and we were on our way.

Large coconut groves signaled we were getting close to our hotel, and it was indeed nestled into a plantation. What a lovely place to land with a gracious owner, an outdoor patio for dining and big spacious rooms with walk in showers; a nice treat! We birded at the gate of a tiger reserve, not far away. We walked out into a plowed field, and at the edge spotted Jerdon's Leafbird, Black-hooded Oriole, White-bellied Drongo, Common Woodshrike, Yellow-billed Babbler, Tawny-bellied Babbler, and two Gray Francolin, in a veritable bird explosion!



We had a fun encounter with the park rangers - two women and their male boss - who asked to take a group photo, placing them at the edge and then the middle. They shook our hands, practiced some English and gave us great welcoming smiles.

We returned to the lodge, and took a short break which was interrupted by a great bird calling at dusk, Indian Pitta! We ran around and got everyone and approached its roosting tree. Dhanish found it quickly with the spotlight – wow! We could hear and fairly quickly located an Indian Scops-Owl; our good luck with owls continuing.

Banyon Farm Tree Homestay proved to be a special place. Dinner was home cooked, served in lovely pots with two kinds of flat bread: one shaped like a pancake, tasting like sourdough. We dipped the flatbread into several luscious vegetable and broth dishes, complimented by tart lemon pickles and several curd dishes, one with fresh chopped shallots. Much of our meal came right from the garden. Banana pudding made from fresh bananas from the farm was a different dessert and quite good. We did our bird list and turned in early, loving the AC in our rooms for a good night's rest.

Sat., Nov. 16: Pollachi | Chinnar | Munnar

They made us coffee before dawn, and on the bus, Avi pulled out small bananas and Ooty Varkey biscuits (our favorite!) for a snack. We had a distance to go today and between our love of stopping at coffee shops and for bird stops it could be a long but fun day.

We stopped first at two wetlands and found a host of great species, with really good photo opportunities. Bronze-winged Jacana with two chicks, a female Watercock, Common Iora male and female, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Asian Green and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters and a host of other species.

We worked an open field area behind a coffee shop where we enjoyed a break, and found Jungle Prinia, Indian Bushlark, Bay-backed Shrike and a big flock of Indian Silverbills.

We started driving up into the mountains, passing through the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. It was lush, but more arid on one side of the road, with succulent plants and tall shrubs. Views of tall mountains to the west were extraordinary; totally cloaked in forests. Our entry point was at Chinnar where we had lunch, followed by a walk



through a beautiful riparian area, looping back through the dry scrub. There were some enormous trees and David commented on the old-growth and how impressive it was. We found White-rumped Shama, a Common Kingfisher, Puff-throated Babbler and a very local mammal, the Grizzled Giant Squirrel.

On each of our three stops at the wetlands, the field, and the forest, we arrived back at the bus just as it started to rain, so luck ran with us in good fortune today.

Rain continued as we drove, and rain was with us when we spotted one of the top birds for Western Ghats, Legge's Hawk-Eagle, a large raptor. Ours was a soggy one, perched in a large tree that we could view from the road. A few braved getting out for photos with an umbrella and the rest took turns viewing through the scope set up in the bus - tenacious birders! We filled the day quite full but managed to get through traffic congestion in Munnar and on to lovely OliveBrook Lodge in the mountains before sunset.

High in the trees above our rooms we found our first Malabar Barbets, and we listened to quite an end-of-day chorus from our patios. The lodge had colorful gardens, massive primary forest trees behind it, and cozy rooms. The food was quite good, and the waiter took good care of us. With the many and varied stops we made today, it was a banner day for the checklist with at least twenty new species!

Sun., Nov. 17: Munnar | Eravikulam NP | Grassbird Quest

We were so lucky to have full sun today for our visit to the Eravikulam National Park. It was a glorious day, with views of Anamudi Peak, the highest peak south of the Himalayas, in stunning light. We arranged for tuktuks to drive us up to higher reaches and it was great to take in the grand sweep of mountain scenery from an open air vehicle. We stopped in a lush ravine and found White-bellied Sholakili, Palani Laughingthrush, getting better and closer views. We stopped at a beautiful cascading waterfall high above us, and reached the visitor center, where we started walking. We were on the hunt for Nilgiri Pipit but even by 8 AM the park was teeming with local tourists having a grand time in classic Indian style, evidenced and recorded by the million selfie photos they were taking. One had to be careful not to bump into them with their sudden stops for the perfect selfie location. We were looking for Nilgiri Tahr, a mountain goat endemic to the Western Ghat mountains, studied by the renowned biologist George Schaller, who titled a chapter on his work with them in one of his books, *Cloud Goats*.



What beauty he worked in; we couldn't stop finding the perfect mix of weathered rock, flowering shrubs and mountains to compose our photos. Rounding a bend on our hike up, Dhanish spotted Nilgiri Tahr way above us, coming down at an angle on a steep slope (probably 40 or more) with some half-size young ones in the group. We took iconic pictures of them on the rocks, but soon found out they were headed our way. Before we left, they were down in the parking lot, seeing if anyone might feed them (with rangers around, no) and moving off to graze and drink from one of the waterfall streams. We also saw Malabar Giant Squirrel, Hill Swallows, Dusky Crag-Martin and Nilgiri Flycatcher.

We had lunch in town at a tourist hotel, then made our way back to the lodge. Some chose to stay back and rest and enjoy the lovely ambiance there, or to go try to find the Broad-tailed Grassbird, a habitat specialist of grasslands. We walked up an old road from a neighboring hotel, finding some forest birds on the way. We emerged at a grassland to find the grass so tall our shorter group members had to stretch a bit to see. We spent an hour or so glassing the expanse dotted with rocks and shrubs, encouraged as we were hearing the bird. In the end, we got glimpses, not so much of key field marks, but of the behavior they are known for - moving up a grass stalk vertically, then diving down into cover. We were thinking we best wrap it up when a Bonelli's Eagle flew by at low range, causing commotion among the bulbuls present. This closed down activity so we headed down, passing a Black-and-orange Flycatcher in route.

Our bird list had reached 180 species for those on both the extension and main tour and we still had a good number of days to go. Best of all, we were seeing most species well and some of the harder ones to see we got second and third chances. Our photographers were capturing winning shots which they promised to share - a happy group all around. Dinner this evening had a chicken marsala dish; Janet said the best she'd ever tasted. And Aloo Gobi, a cauliflower and potato dish, was a big hit - yum! Temperatures were perfect for sleeping, just a bit on the chilly side.

Mon., Nov. 18: Munnar | Periyar

We had another travel day, but we were seeing such great scenery and street life that no one seemed to mind. Driving out from the lodge, we passed the road construction where they were heating tar with a wood fire, and as David observed, handling hot tar in shorts and flip flops. Over our several days here they had made good progress though. Once past construction, the road paralleled the river and in large trees between us and the water, we caught sight of a Malabar Whistling-Thrush. It came out in the open (not common) and strutted up a branch, showing off its iridescent colors. The day was off to a good start!



The first part of our drive was through the High Ranges, with at least nine layers of mountain peaks in view as we reached an area called the Gap. Here we were to look for a few specialty species. Before we even parked the

bus Arden said, “Quail, right here.” A pair of Painted Brush-Quail were on the mossy cement safety bumpers of the road, just out of our window! We could not get cameras up quick enough, but oh, what a view. We piled out and were there about 40 minutes, plenty of time to gawk at the scenery, and to find more quail on rocks below the road. Dhanish was doing his “spaniel run” to and fro, trying to find us a Nilgiri Pipit. He got a few of the group on one, but the rest scanned and waited, entertained by a White-cheeked Barbet, Dusky Crag-Martins that were landing on the colorful, water-stained rocks, and a Pied Bushchat. We spotted Dhanish down below us and he was waving excitedly. So, off we went, down into a quarry of sorts, and there we got views of the pipit at a distance, but distinct. One flew around us calling and we spotted it landing, affording us the best looks.

Onward we went, stopping as we’d see new species from the bus, including Short-toed Snake-Eagle. We stopped for lunch in a small town, with quite delicious dishes with the same textures and colors, but new flavors, including a mushroom dish.

After lunch we stopped at a marsh and picked up a number of species including a non-breeding plumage Pheasant-tailed Jacana and at least 250 Northern Pintail, a lone female Garganey and a female Western Marsh Harrier with her distinctive white cap. We sorted out three species of cormorants, and chatted with locals that could not help but stop at the sight of us, clad with all our gear, staring into rice fields on one side, a pond on the other. Time to go, we had tracks to make to get to Periyar.

Tues., Nov. 19: Periyar Region | Niraamaya Lodge

We learned we would need to walk an alternate trail at Periyar National Park due to recent rains and slippery conditions. People are understanding that no one wanted to risk a fall, so we had breakfast at the lodge and then headed out for the park. We met a couple of park rangers, who would walk with us as guards as this was a park where wild Asian Elephants roam. The first part of the walk was an area of human settlement that is gradually being phased out. People are being asked to relocate as there are too many conflicts with wildlife, particularly with Guar, but also Asian Elephants. Among the gardens and colorful homes there, we saw at least 30 or more Malabar Parakeets - our first chance to see this really beautiful species at close range. We saw Loten’s Sunbird with its very long bill and our first few of Little Spiderhunter, a close relative.



We left the homes and gardens to walk along the narrow berm above a shrubby gully backed by primary forest. Here, we got a good look at Rufous Babbler, and Black-throated Munia, two new species for our trip. Continuing into the forest, we got good looks at Malabar Giant Squirrel, and a flock of birds came through, giving us good looks at White-cheeked Barbet, Flame-throated Bulbul, Dark-fronted Babbler, Indian Scimitar-Babbler, Malabar Starling and Golden-fronted Leafbird.

Two Heart-spotted Woodpeckers gave us good looks as they were engrossed in tapping and courting at what was possibly a future nest site. Lesser Yellownappe (a woodpecker) was less obvious, but present in dense foliage on one of the massive trees. Everyone enjoyed the chance for a 3-mile walk in forest and clearings as a nice change from our roadside birding of the previous days.

Then, we took a break from birding to visit a local spice farm. Kerala is world famous in the spice trade, and has been for centuries. We learned so much from Stefan, who showed us rows of cardamom and the aerial roots from which that flower and fruit grow. The plants mature enough to bear fruit when four years old, and each aerial root will be viable for about a year with others emerging off the same plant. After about 16 years, they replant. We also learned about Malabar pepper, which has a rich flavor and is created by plants flowering in the monsoon season; during which time the pollen separates and flows down through leaves of the tree. We learned about the four colors of pepper and how they emerge from different life stages and harvest techniques. Stephen showed us cinnamon, cloves, allspice, vanilla, turmeric, and more.

Afterwards, it was time for some great retail therapy and we all had fun shopping. Everyone had Christmas on their mind and these spices could be perfect gifts. Quite popular were the different, blended types of marsala that we were able to smell and learn about how to prepare.

Now that we learned about spices, we had a special opportunity to taste them. Avijit had arranged an incredibly special lunch for us at the home of his local friends and colleagues, Manu and Sonnie. Monu was away, but Sonnie's niece, Soni, helped her, and they could not have been more welcoming. We entered their lovely home and got to meet some of the family, see their antiques and furnishings, and a marvelous collection of painted carvings of cattle heads. Cattle are honored as part of the season of abundance and a whole wall was filled with these collectibles and we admired these, and intricate, colorful textiles from Rajasthan. There is a festival in January, about a month after the solstice, which is an important time for harvesting spices. The meal included dishes that we would not be able to get in a restaurant, such as a very delicate spiced ginger pickle. The zing of



the lemon pickles blended perfectly with the marsala and other dishes. Sonnie explained the dishes, including one with lentils, pumpkin and spices that was very unique. We lingered a bit over coffee and tea, and then returned to our lodge for some precious hours of free time. Some took naps, some had a massage at the spa, and Peg and Arden wandered around photographing birds, including a very cooperative pair of Greater Racket-tailed Drongos seen right off the kitchen porch.

At dusk, we met by the pool, hoping for better looks at the Brown Boobook which had made a quick appearance the day before. A couple from Belton staying at the Lodge came down to take a swim, and I'm sure they were amused at sharing space with a group of birders on the hunt.

Dinner included a fish dish cooked in banana leaves, several vegetable marsala dishes, dahl, and of course two types of bread. This evening, we could celebrate that our bird list was up to 300 species!

Wed., Nov. 20: Periyar | Thattekkad

We decided to bird around lovely Niraamaya Lodge and were pleased to get great looks at White-bellied Treepie in the parking area before we headed out for the day. A few of the group had spotted Malabar Hornbills near the casitas, nice!

The morning was largely spent in travel and we took the back roads that never stayed straight for more than two seconds. So, we twisted and turned our way down to a famous birding area of India at Thattekkad. Our first stop was at 7:30 AM, a quick one along the road initiated by a fine view of Crested Serpent-Eagle. We also were able to find Malabar Hornbills, Orange Minivet, Indian Golden Oriole (what a beauty!), and Golden-fronted Leafbird. Not much farther down the same road, we stopped again - this time the reward being fine looks at Malabar Flameback and tiny Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker. We saw three species of bulbuls, Yellow-browed being new for our trip. Crimson-backed Sunbirds still stopped us in our tracks with their beauty, and we found Jerdon's Leafbird, also a new species for us.

We had a scenic drive through the Kerala region, famous for growing tea and spices among the mountainous terrain. We were able to check into our delightful lodgings at Birds Murrur Camp, then went to a nearby forest reserve where Dhanish had some friends of his looking for specialty birds for us. They were able to walk us right up to two Sri Lanka Frogmouths huddled together on their day roost, a cozy couple. We had wonderful looks at another stunner, the Malabar Trogon. Malabar Barbet, Malabar Gray Hornbill and Malabar Starling rounded out



our list. How wonderful to travel with knowledgeable local guides who know just where to find the specialty species.

Our night bird attempts here revealed Jerdon's Nightjar - at least four flying about - along with Slaty-legged Crake, Orange-headed Thrush and Indian Pitta, right before dark.

Thurs., Nov. 21: Birds Murmur Camp | Kothamangalam Ball Field and Dam | Night Birds from Inchatotty Suspension Bridge

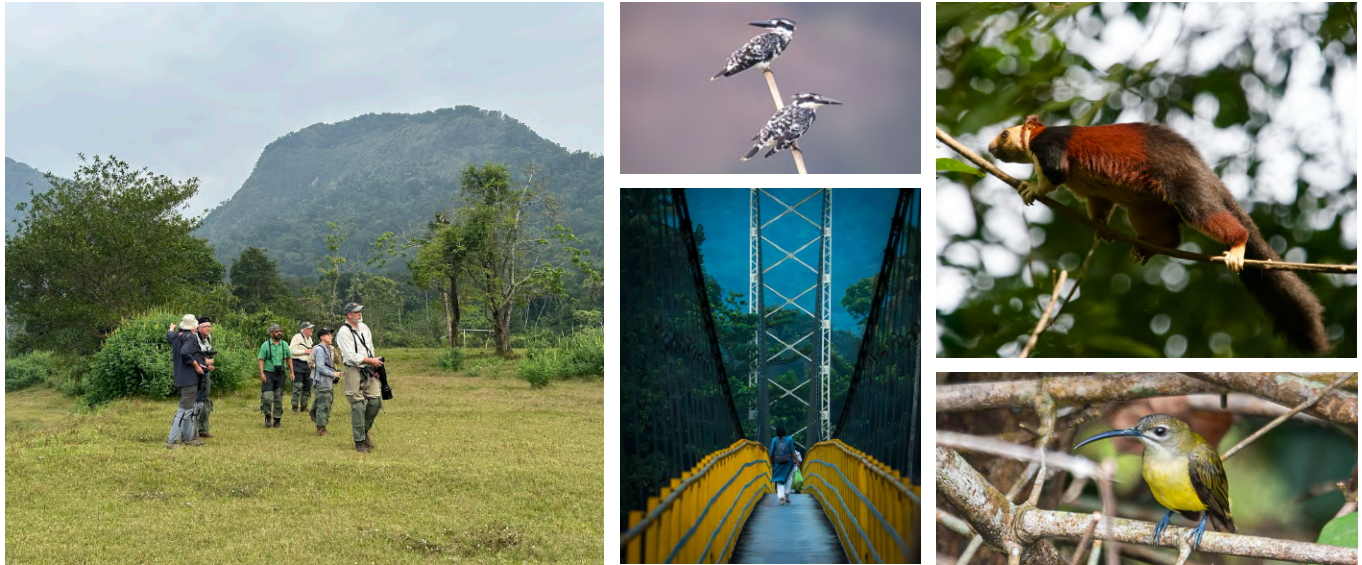
We had a fabulous morning on a lava dome area with amazing views all around. We hiked into this site, and on arrival found a Crested Goshawk using one of its favorite perches, giving us good scope views. We also saw Gray-fronted Green-Pigeons, Brown-backed Needletail, eye-level views of Malabar Barbet, good views of Malabar Flameback, elusive Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Little Spiderhunter and one very tame Brown Shrike that seemed to linger so we could catch a photo of it.

After this, we met Dhanish's stake-out crew for one of the thrills of the trip, the chance to get good close views of Sri Lanka Bay-Owl. Unforgettable! A pair of Brown-breasted Flycatchers also entertained us near this site. We returned to Birds Murmur camp for lunch and afterwards enjoyed some down time, with a good number of birds right on the grounds including a Greater Coucal, White-cheeked Barbet, and a little gang of Jungle Babblers.

At 4 PM we headed out, birding an open area by a waterway and crossing a ball field with scenic hills all around. There were three species of bee-eaters: a stately Purple Heron, a Malabar Flameback gleaming in the sun and two dapper Pied Kingfishers that posed nicely for us. We saw about 35 species before moving on to another area to scan for nightjars. It was not quite dark, and we had a good sighting of a Blue-throated Flycatcher on the way to an impressive pedestrian bridge with high wires spanning a wide river. The bridge swung with our footsteps and those of locals going home for the night. We had our first view of Great Eared-Nightjar here, and then drove to

another forest path along the road. We were able to hear it calling and see it in the light is above us.

A full day! The food at Bird's Murmur was some of our best, and the refrigerator with some cold beer was most welcome too. Avijit explained many of the dishes to us and gave us cooking tips so we could try them at home. Fun!



Fri., Nov 22: Thattekkad Area | A Birthday to Celebrate

Today was Fran's birthday and Avi picked some fresh flowers which she wore on her hat with a smile. To start the day, we went to a serene and beautiful rock outcrop with a grand view. Our hope was to see Malabar Imperial-Pigeon, which was the last of our species with Malabar in the name to see. Larry spotted a group of Green Imperial Pigeons we got in the scope, the green in their wings very obvious. It was a glorious, sunny morning and we got lost in taking photos when Dhanish excitedly called for the scope. He spotted two Malabar Imperial-Pigeon, at some distance, but the brown in the wings was clear. Everyone got good views at length, then they took flight in the valley; what an impressive bird. It was not long before we had a call for another impressive bird, two black Bazza flew in and perched in a dead snag. One started to "pray" as it lifted its head toward the sky and we watched the wings and then its tail fan. We also saw Gray-fronted Green-Pigeon, and at close range, two species of flowerpeckers, Thick-billed and Nilgiri. A big mixed flock flew through, with orange Minettes showing off their acrobatic flight and brilliant colored plumage. Malabar Barbet came to close perches. We hate to leave this wonderful vantage point, but our plan was to go back for breakfast, and then head out again to a new area.

We entered a small town nearby and found a festival of some sort going on that looked like it was probably the opening of a new temple. The women were in especially beautiful dress, so it was a parade of colors as we went along our route.

Dhanish had been out scouting and found the day roost of Brown Boobook. A few got some looks of it in dense vegetation, but as soon as we lined up to look, we got the word that there was an elephant nearby in the area and we should go. When elephants come around, the news quickly works its way among the villages. This elephant had apparently just taken out of fence.

After a short break we went back out, driving a ways to visit a hide (bird blind) set up by locals. It is called Treepie hide and it lived up to its name, giving us glorious views of these striking birds. Activity at the site was constant, with several feeding areas and a central water feature. Malabar and Chestnut-tailed Starlings splashed away and Jungle Babblers dipped in for the show. At times, it was like a fountain! The treepies joined them to drink but not bathe.

The first hour we had sun, and so it was quite warm in the blind, but it didn't keep our photographers from clicking almost constantly. Thankfully, some clouds moved in, gave us different lighting, and we enjoyed the



second hour of just watching for the more occasional visitors which included Oriental Magpie-Robin, Red Spurfowl, and Indian Paradise-Flycatcher.

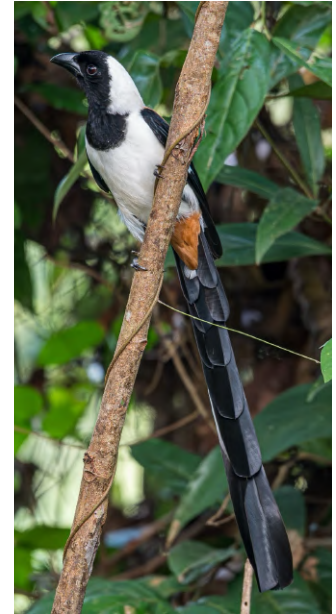
It was a bit of a hike, and we were all a bit tired. Dhanish was keen to show us one more owl and we rallied. We stopped at a local hotel for a restroom break, and it was fun to see an Indian Flying Fox on the wing - so much bigger in size than we had imagined! We drove a bit farther and we couldn't figure out why the guides made a stop in the city. We thought they were out "doing errands" in a pouring rain, until Peg got a WhatsApp message in the bus, "the owl is answering." A few of our hearty ones grabbed umbrellas and got out to view the owl we'd been searching for in an opening in an abandoned building. To our surprise, we had absolutely fabulous looks at Eastern Barn Owl and laughed at ourselves for trying. This was owl number 14 for the trip and extension, pretty remarkable.

It was time to celebrate! In addition to all of our adventures, it was Fran's birthday today so we wanted to celebrate that. Peg treated to some beer and wine, and Avijit arranged for a gorgeous and very tasty cake. We also shared our favorite birds and highlights for the trip. There were so many it was really difficult to choose.

A highlight for several people was seeing the drama of the Indian Wild Dogs chasing and taking a Spotted Deer in Nagarahole. The leopard was mentioned at that location as well. Favorite birds included Ruddy Kingfisher, sunbirds (all of them), owls (all of them), Legge's Hawk-Eagle, Malabar Trogon, Malabar Flameback, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, White-cheeked Barbet and more. Peg offered some summary statistics for our trip: Of 57 endemics noted on our checklist, we saw 52, including those on the Andaman Islands extension. In addition, we saw another 21 near-endemics, mostly with a geography of residing in India and Sri Lanka. We saw all 11 birds that start with the name Malabar, 6 of the 7 species that start with Nilgiri. So fun!

Sat., Nov. 23: Thattekad | Kochi | Fly Out

It was our final morning, and since the first flight out wasn't until 4:40 PM, we had time to do a morning birding session. We had some coffee as the dawn chorus started, and took off for a patch of woodland nearby. We hoped to encounter a mixed flock and have a chance at seeing our last possible endemic, the Gray-headed Bulbul. This bird loves berries, and it often goes around with mixed flocks that are feeding on them, yet its strategy is to sit still for long periods of time, so it's fairly difficult to find. We could hear its metallic call and Dhanish searched and searched to pin the location down. With his amazing hearing precision, we had success!



We were so happy and enjoyed seeing about 22 species in the hour we had. We arrived in Kochi with enough good time to eat lunch and to chill ahead of flying. Avijit graciously made sure we were all set. We hated to say good-bye!

Photos: Blue-tailed Bee-eater (Arden Powell - AP), Asian Elephant (AP), Black-rumped Flameback Woodpecker (AP), Indian Leopard (AP), Velvet-fronted Nuthatch (AP), Indian Scops Owl (AP), Collared Kingfisher (AP), Stork-billed Kingfisher (AP), Scenic (Peg Abbott - PA), Chestnut-headed Bee-eater (PA), Andaman Bulbul (PA), Greater Racket-tailed Drongo (PA), Ornate Sunbird (AP), Purple Swamphen (PA), Alexandrine Parakeets (AP), Ruddy Kingfisher (AP), Andaman Scop's Owl (AP), Arlana and Danis (AP), Andaman Nightjar (AP), Long-tailed Parakeet (PA), Black-naped Oriole (Larry Armstrong - LA), Arden and Larry (Arlana Powell - ARP), Saltwater Crocodile (AP), Coppersmith Barbet (PA), Malabar Pied-Hornbill (AP), Ramadevarabetta Vulture Sanctuary (AP), Spotted Dove (AP), Purple-rumped Sunbird (AP), Black Kite (AP), Small Minivet (AP), Spot-billed Pelican (AP), Painted Stork (AP), Oriental Darter (AP), View from the Boat on the River (AP), Bonnet Macaque (AP), Chital (Indian Spotted Deer) (AP), Gray Langur (AP), Indian Dhole (AP), Red-wattled Lapwing (AP), Indian Flying Fox (AP), Fleeting glimpse of an Indian Monitor Lizard (AP), Crested Serpent Eagle (AP), Rose-ringed Parakeet (AP), Asian Elephant (AP), White-cheeked Barbet (AP), Mottled Wood-Owl (AP), Indian Leopard (AP), Brown Fish-Owl (AP), Stripe-necked Mongoose (AP), Farmer and oxen (AP), Lunch! (PA), Indian Roller (LA), Indian White-eye (AP), Nilgiri Sholakili (AP), Black-and-orange Flycatcher (AP), Market Fast Food! (AP), Scenic (PA), Afternoon Tea (PA), Bonnet Macaque (LA), Common Woodshrike (AP), Birding (PA), Little Egret (AP), Changeable Hawk-eagle (AP), Nilgiri Flycatcher (AP), Scenic (PA), Purple Sunbird (LA), Partial Group Photo (Danish), Crimson-backed Sunbird (AP), Nilgiri Tahr (AP), Malabar Flameback (AP), Birding the lodge (PA), Jungle Owlet (AP), Malabar Parakeet (AP), Red-vented Bulbul (AP), Heart-spotted Woodpecker (AP), Greater Racket-Tailed Drongo (AP), Southern Hill Myna (AP), Malabar Gray Hornbill (AP), Rufous Treepie (AP), Bar-winged flycatcher-shrike (AP), Sri Lanka Frogmouth (AP), Malabar Trogon (AP), Slow Loris (PA), Sri Lankan Bay Owl (PA), Golden-fronted Leafbird (AP), Little Spiderhunter (AP), Pied Kingfisher (AP), Inchathotty Suspension Bridge viewpoint for Nightjars (AP), Peg, Larry and Arden (ARP), Malabar Gray Hornbill headshot (AP), Chestnut-tailed and Malabar Starlings (AP), White-bellied Treepie (AP), Group (PA)