

Southern India's Western Ghats w/ Andaman Islands Extension | Nov. 1-20, 2023 | by Greg Butcher



With Guides Avijit Sarkhel of Vana Safaris, Greg Butcher, Vic, Nara, and Danish and with participants Brenda and Tom, Alice and Art, Monna and Virginia, and Kay, Pam, and Reba.



Wed., Nov. 1

Chennai

Art and Alice arrived 24 hours earlier, but the rest of us on the extension landed in Chennai in the early morning of November 1. (We all flew on Qatar Airways, which had convenient departure times, but middle-of-the-night arrivals.) Nonetheless, we all got up for breakfast and went birding at Muttukadu Backwaters, where we were exposed to birding in India traffic for the first time. We had great wading birds, including Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Spot-billed Pelican, and Painted Stork; some big shorebirds, including Eurasian Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit; and our only Great Crested Tern of the trip. After lunch we visited Pallikaranai Marsh where we saw our first Indian Spot-billed Ducks and Indian Pond-Herons.



Thurs., Nov. 2

Chidiya Tapu, South Andaman Island

We returned to the airport to fly to Port Blair on South Andaman Island and our drive south to Wild Grass Lodge in Chidiya Tapu. On the shore, we found our only Pacific Reef-Herons of the trip and our first Collared Kingfishers. On dry land, we enjoyed our first Andaman endemics: Andaman Drongo, Andaman Bulbul, Andaman Shama, and White-headed Starling. We got our first looks at one of my favorite birds of the trip, Violet Cuckoo, a southeast Asian species. We had a large flock of Plume-toed Swiftlets, but I confess I have yet to see any plumes. Not many people get to the Andaman Islands, so we really enjoyed some rare birds with a lot of help from our local guide Vic.

Fri., Nov. 3

Chidiya Tapu, South Andaman Island

Today we drove north to Shoal Bay and other birding spots north of Port Blair. The wetlands produced Lesser Whistling Duck, Andaman Teal, Long-toed Stint, and Stork-billed Kingfisher. On drier land, we had our only looks today at several endemics – Andaman Cuckoo-Dove, Andaman Serpent-Eagle (!), Andaman Woodpecker, and Andaman Flowerpecker. We also added the very rare White-nest Swiftlet, newly split from Edible-nest Swiftlet and found only on islands in southeast Asia, and Mangrove Whistler, another southeast Asian species. We ate lunch at one of our favorite restaurants of the trip: Junglee Mirchi. Like many islands, Andaman has few mammals, but a few reptiles. We had a close-up view of a Bengal Monitor, a four-foot lizard, for our non-avian highlight. We had some great night birding on this trip, starting on this night with Andaman Nightjar, Oriental Scops-Owl, and Hume's Boobook.

Sat., Nov. 4

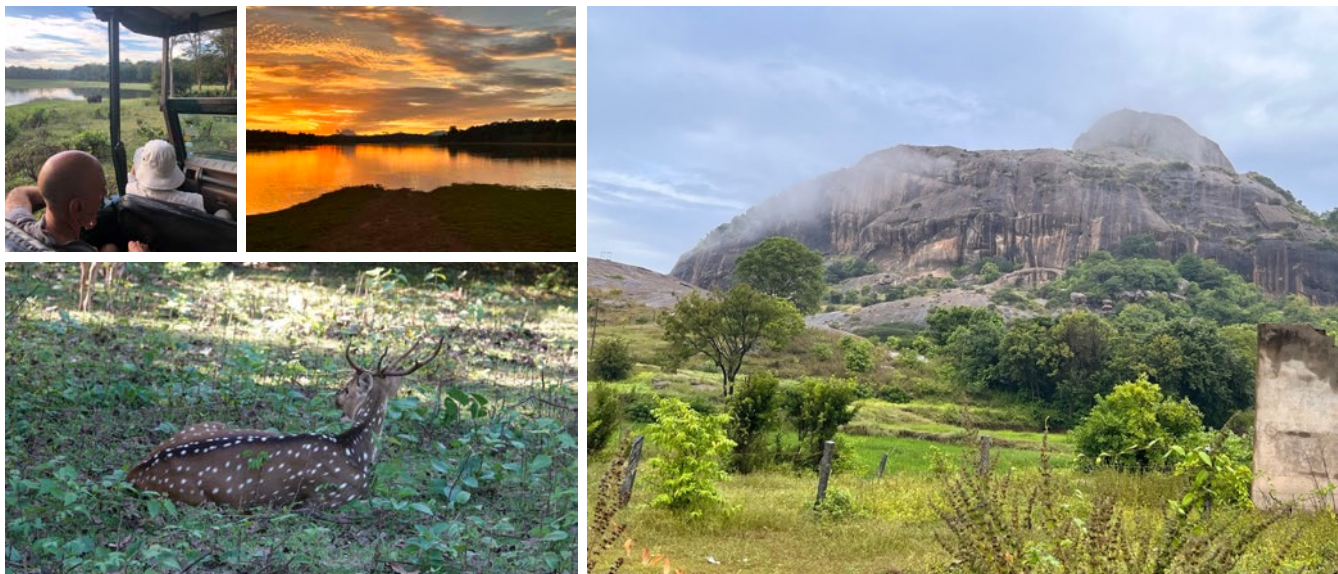
Havelock Island or Swaraj Dweep

We took a ferry to Swaraj Dweep today but were disappointed with the birding. If we go back, we will plan to stay overnight because the morning and evening birding should be more productive than it was mid-day.

Sun., Nov. 5

Chidiya Tapu north to Jirkatang

We filled in several gaps among the endemics today, adding Andaman Green Pigeon, Andaman Coucal, and Andaman Treepie. We also saw a number of southeast Asian specialties, including White-breasted Woodswallow and White-bellied Sea-Eagle. To add variety, we also found interesting shorebirds such as Bar-tailed Godwit and Tibetan and Greater Sand-Plovers.



Mon., Nov. 6

Wild Grass Lodge and flight to Bengaluru

We all cheered when we finally got scope views of Andaman Wood Pigeon from the deck of our lodge. It was our last Andaman Island endemic for the trip. The birding near the lodge was excellent, as we enjoyed our last looks at several species, including Freckle-breasted Woodpecker and Long-tailed and Red-breasted Parakeets. Then we were off to the airport and our flight to Bengaluru (Bangalore) where we said goodbye to Virginia and hello to Kay, Pam, and Reba.

Tues., Nov. 7

Bengaluru to Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

Transit days can be a bit crowded, with everyone's luggage, and long, with a lot of ground to cover, but today was also a day with a number of bird species that we wouldn't see anywhere else. They ranged from the tiny Pale-billed Flowerpecker to the huge Indian Spotted Eagle to the odd-looking Sirkeer Malkoha and Crested Treeswift to a couple of Babblers: Yellow-eyed and Yellow-billed. Then we got our first taste of the amazing Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, and the wonderful accommodations and service at Kabini River Lodge nearby.

Wed. and Thurs., Nov. 8 & 9

Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

The mammals: We did it! We all had amazing looks at a female **tiger** in the afternoon and half of us also saw a male tiger the same morning. A female tiger is between 220 and 350 pounds. I first saw the female chasing away the pack of wild dogs, then she stood motionless, not caring a bit about us. Finally, she walked slowly across the track and into the brush. I will never forget! There may be only 1,600 tigers in all of India. Ours were here!

We spent a lot of time with presumably the same pack of **dholes (wild dogs)** at Nagarhole. Half our group saw the pack stalk a **sambar** (large deer). When they gave up on the sambar, they strolled past our vehicles and headed down the track until they encountered the female tiger. They retreated quickly and let out quite a scream, presumably to reform the pack. The next day we found the pack idling near the water and engaging in a lot of social play. It is rare to share so much time with social predators like these!

The **sloth bear** came from our left and crossed the road in front of the safari vehicle. He ambled off through the lantana hedgerow to the right. He seemed unaware of/unconcerned with our presence. For **Asian elephants**, we saw mothers and calves and males with big tusks. We saw wild and domestic elephants. We didn't see large numbers, but we had quite a variety.



We saw a group of about 10 **gaurs** (a massive wild species related to cows) with calves, cows, and bulls all mixed together. **Chitals** (spotted deer) were everywhere in the tiger reserve! The largest group we saw might have had 200 animals, including bucks, does, and fawns. The most common and most tame monkeys were the **bonnet macaques**; we also saw quite a few **Malabar grey langurs**. At dusk each night, we saw the huge fruit-eating bats, **Indian flying foxes**. A bit overshadowed by the rest, we also saw **wild boars**, **smooth-coated otters**, and **stripe-necked mongooses**.

Wed. and Thurs., Nov. 8 & 9 Nagarahole Tiger Reserve

The birds (plus a BIG mugger crocodile): Does this belong in the mammal section or the bird section? There was a dead elephant that amazingly attracted four species of vultures: Egyptian, Red-headed, White-rumped, and Indian! All four species are considered Endangered or Critically Endangered by BirdLife International. We had three species of Hornbills: Indian Grey, Malabar Grey, and Malabar Pied. I never got used to seeing Grey Junglefowl walking around like wild chickens. Indian Paradise-Flycatcher made a big impression. An advantage to being in a frequently visited area is that our driver was able to show us a roosting Indian Scops-Owl. And right next to our rooms was a garden attracting Purple-rumped Sunbirds!

Fri., Nov. 10 Kabini River Lodge to Ooty

All good things must come to an end; it was time to leave Nagarahole Tiger Reserve. Luckily, we still had a lot of good birding ahead of us. Before leaving the lodge, we were able to see a roosting Mottled Wood-Owl. We walked out into nearby farmland and found a Malabar Lark. It's good to keep your eyes open while driving: we had both Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged Jacanas in a wetland next to the road. While driving up one of many steep hills, Avi spotted the very rare Legge's Hawk-Eagle; we were all able to get out for scope views. Like many of the species we saw, Legge's is endemic to Sri Lanka and southwestern India.

Sat., Nov. 11 Ooty: Doddabetta and Cairn Hill

We reached some of our first elevation today, going over 7,500 feet at Cairn Hill. There are only seven species with Nilgiri in their name, and we found four of them today: Wood-Pigeon, Laughingthrush, Sholakili, and Flowerpecker. Except for the flowerpecker, these are all very rare restricted-range species. We also saw several



unique flycatchers today: Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, Spot-breasted Fantail, Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher, and Black-and-orange Flycatcher.

Sun., Nov. 12 Ooty to Pollachi

Today was a travel day, but we saw several good birds along the way. It was a “Crested” day as we saw the Crested form of Changeable Hawk-Eagle and Crested Goshawk. Highlights today included the red-and-green Coppersmith Barbet, Indian Scimitar-Babbler, and Purple Sunbird.

Mon., Nov. 13 Pollachi to Munnar

We had another hilly drive to Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary and Marayoor en route to Munnar. The highlight of the day was Greater Painted-Snipe, one of the few species in which the female is more colorful than the male (and we saw a female!). Hill Swallow is another rare species restricted to Sri Lanka and southwest India. It was a good woodpecker day with Lesser Yellownape and Black-rumped Flameback. (India has a lot of woodpeckers without “woodpecker” in their names.)

Tues., Nov. 14 Eravikulam National Park

We passed through kilometer after kilometer of tea plantations en route to the national park, which is home to the Nilgiri taur, a wild goat. We had great views, as some individuals have become quite tame. Today was a great day for finding endemic species with small ranges: Palani Laughingthrush, White-bellied Sholakili, Nilgiri Flycatcher, and Malabar Whistling-Thrush. The last one was my favorite: jet-black body with bold blue highlights! Bonelli’s Eagle is widespread in Europe and Asia, but it’s always fun to see an eagle.

Wed., Nov. 15 Periyar Tiger Reserve

What a tough situation to be in: A pair of Black Eagles appears (fairly close) overhead, but I’m ordered to stay quiet! Why? One of the rarest birds of the trip – Yellow-throated Bulbul – was right in front of us, but few of us had seen it yet. Luckily, it all worked out: We all got great looks at the bulbul, and almost all of us saw the eagle too, either that day or two days later. We had two other endemic species today – Malabar Imperial-Pigeon and Malabar Barbet – and another eagle – Rufous-bellied.



Thurs., Nov. 16 Niraamaya Cardamom Club & Periyar Tiger Reserve

It was our toughest hike of the trip: four up-and-down hours, but the Periyar habitat was superb, and we kept finding great birds. We started out with small ones: Jungle Owlet and Indian Pitta, but then we started seeing big ones: Malabar Flameback, Malabar Trogon, and to top it all off, a pair of Great Hornbills. The walk seemed even longer than it was because the trail was full of leeches. We all had leech socks on, but a few of us had leeches anyway. We had lots of conversation about them, but they caused no real trouble. We stayed at Niraamaya Cardamom Club and were rewarded with two owls after dark: Oriental Scops-Owl and Brown Boobook.

Fri., Nov. 17 Niraamaya Cardamom Club to Windermere Riverhouse (from Thekkady to Thattekad)

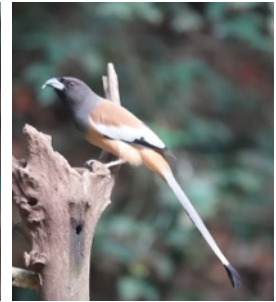
We walked from our lodge down the road to a friendly neighbor, who brought out hot drinks for everyone in addition to good views from his deck. Then we were off to Thattekad and its bird sanctuary. You'd think after all these days, we'd be running out of new birds to see, but we weren't done yet. Red Spurfowl was another chicken-like bird running loose on the forest floor. White-rumped Spinetail was a small, seldom-seen swift. At a blind in Thattekad Bird Sanctuary, we saw the beautiful Blue-throated Flycatcher and the rare endemics White-bellied Blue Flycatcher and Rusty-tailed Flycatcher.

Sat., Nov. 18 Thattekad Bird Sanctuary

Local knowledge is indispensable, and Danish had that and great birding skills too. He had staked out two of the rarest and most difficult-to-see birds of the trip for us: Sri Lanka Frogmouth and Sri Lanka Bay-Owl, not only rare but wildly exotic to boot! A couple other new birds for us were Heart-spotted Woodpecker and the southwest India endemic Crimson-backed Sunbird. Windermere River House was one of the nicest lodges of the tour, with a very attentive staff.

Sun., Nov. 19 Thattekad Bird Sanctuary and Hornbill Camp

During the tour, we saw all 11 species with "Malabar" in their name, including five today: Pied-Hornbill, Barbet, Parakeet, Woodshrike, and Starling. And it was our first four-Sunbird day: Purple-rumped, Crimson-backed, Loten's, and Little Spiderhunter. The birding was good today; some of the more interesting species were Little Swift, Stork-billed Kingfisher, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, and Flame-throated Bulbul. Most of us saw a Black Baza, but I missed it. The night birds at Hornbill Camp were amazing: Indian Scops-Owl, Jungle Owlet, and



Jerdon's Nightjar, topped off by Great-eared Nightjar, big, exotic, and very rare in India (also found in southeast Asia). What a way to end the tour!

Mon., Nov. 20

Drive to Kochi (Cochin) for Flights Home

We saw 225 species on the mainland and 284 including the Andaman Island extension. I checked eBird to see how rare some of the birds we saw were, based on eBird records. For the extension, all the birds with "Andaman" in their names have been seen 5,400 times (Andaman Coucal) or less, as were two other Andaman Island endemics we saw, White-headed Starling and Hume's Boobook. Fourteen mainland species are as rare as the Andaman Island species: Sri Lanka Bay-Owl, Nilgiri Sholakili, Legge's Hawk-Eagle, Nilgiri Laughingthrush, White-bellied Sholakili, Yellow-throated Bulbul, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, Palani Laughingthrush, Black-and-orange Flycatcher, Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Great Eared-Nightjar, Hill Swallow, and White-bellied Blue Flycatcher. The rarest birds we saw were Andaman Nightjar (427 eBird records) and Sri Lanka Bay-Owl (500 eBird records). Almost all the rare mainland species are SW India endemics (plus Sri Lanka for some species), as reflected in the names Nilgiri, Palani, Malabar, Indian, and Sholakili, named for the stunted forests of the western Ghats called sholas. We are worried about the conservation status of some of the rare birds we saw. BirdLife International has determined that some of the species are Critically Endangered -- Red-headed, White-rumped, and Indian Vulture -- and others are Endangered -- Egyptian Vulture, Nilgiri Sholakili, and Nilgiri Laughingthrush. These and many other Indian species are receiving conservation attention as covered in the recent publication on the State of Indian Birds. Despite conservation concerns, we enjoyed all these birds, plus wonderful mammals, including killer views of a mother tiger (also a species receiving conservation attention in India)! What a wonderful trip for all of us!

Photo Credits: Bengal Tiger (Arthur Zapolski - AZ), Little Egret (AZ), Scenic (AZ), Asian Elephant (AZ), Bonnet Macaque (AZ), Malabar Gray Hornbill (AZ), Group Birding (AZ), Changeable Hawk-Eagle (AZ), Butterfly (AZ), Boats (AZ), Drive (Kay Rhoads - KR), Sunset (AZ), Chital (AZ), Scenic (AZ), Stripe-necked Mongoose (AZ), Dhole (AZ), White-throated Kingfisher (AZ), Malabar Gray Langur (AZ), Bengal Tiger (AZ), Scenic (AZ), Marsh Crocodile (AZ), Indian Pond Heron (AZ), Nilgiri taur (AZ), Group on Raft (AZ), Pool (KR), Street life (), Butterflies (AZ), Black-rumped Flameback (AZ), Rufous Treepie (AZ)