

Grassland, Desert & Lakes

Rajasthan & Gujarat

By Peregrine Rowse

Thursday 19th - Sunday 29th January 2023



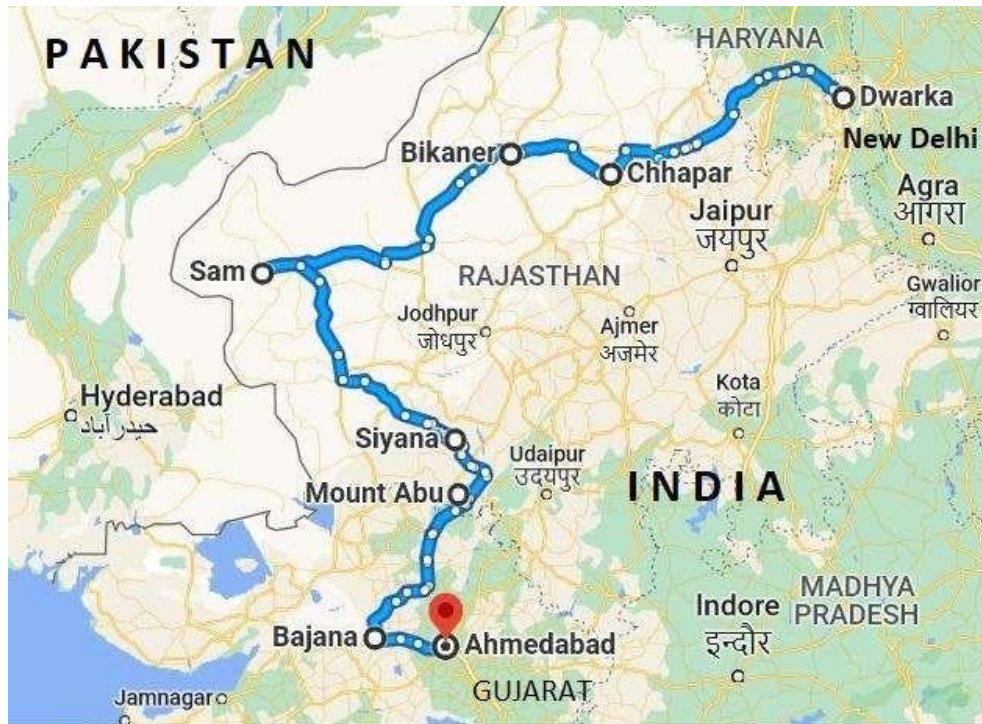
Green Avadavat - a minute, endemic Waxbill now only reliably found at Mount Abu

The outlook for the magnificent Great Indian Bustard is ever more critical with numbers now possibly falling below what is a viable population. I decided therefore to make the long drive out West to the Desert National Park beyond Jaisalmer, the focus of the trip. There are a number of essentially Central Asian species that winter in small numbers in far western India. These are of great interest to those with more than a passing concern for their Indian list. Any trip that includes such rare and iconic species at Great Indian & Macqueen's Bustard, Cream coloured & Indian Courser, eight species of Eagle, spectacular numbers of Demoiselle Crane, the newly established minute wintering population of Namaqua Dove, Lesser whitefronted Goose, Sociable Lapwing, the highly localised endemic Green Avadavat & Spotted Creeper, scarce winter visitors such as Yellow eyed Pigeon, Trumpeter Finch & Desert Lark, five species of Wheatear and three superb Buntings is bound to be memorable.

Due to Covid and a spat between Britain and India that made it more burdensome than normal to obtain a visa, I had not been to India for over four years. For once I fixed the dates of my visit around birding imperatives rather than business commitments. I arranged the tip through Asian Adventures who were efficient and easy to deal with. I was guided by Mahendra Singh who is very experienced on this route and knew his birds and where to find them. There was a lot of driving with basically alternate birding and travel days. My last day West of Ahmedabad, Gujarat proved to be extremely fruitful.

Thursday 19th January - Delhi to Raptors Inn, Tal Chappar, Rajasthan

We left Delhi at 6am for the long drive out West to Tal Chappar, Rajasthan. We reached Tal Chappar ten hours later.



My route through Western India covering about 1700km

Once we got to Tal Chappar we birded for an hour in an area of acacia woodland bordering the Wildlife Sanctuary. This is Mahendra's Spotted Creeper stakeout but he said that they are not very responsive in the evening. In the event we failed to find one but it was fun seeing some Indian birds for the first time in four years. A Yellow crowned Woodpecker, a flock of gorgeous Small Minivet, Bay backed and Southern grey Shrikes and an Indian spotted Eagle were all especially nice to see. The area was covered with handsome Blackbuck and there were good numbers of Nilgai too.



Bay backed Shrike, a fairly common but superbly attractive woodland bird here at Tal Chappar

The Raptors Inn in Chappar village is a simple homestay run by a nice chap who had given up a high pressure existence in Delhi to return with his family to his roots.

Friday 20th January - Raptors Inn, Tal Chappar, Rajasthan

Having had breakfast, we left at 7:30am, which is when it is just about birdable, for the ten minutes drive to the woodland buffer zone we had visited yesterday. Within minutes of getting out of the car Mahendra had a Spotted Creeper responding which showed very nicely for us feeding intensely down to a few metres, oblivious of us, providing a great photo opportunity.



Indian spotted Creeper, an increasingly scarce bird for which Tal Chappar is a well known refuge

It was a nice bright, but cool, morning and the light was superb. We had a distinctive immature Imperial Eagle fly over and a lovely Wryneck as well as many other woodland birds. Not far away an area of salt pans yielded a flock of twenty Avocet and thirty Ruff but some grassy dunes where we hoped to find good numbers of Larks and Pipits only produced Indian Bushlark and Crested Lark.

After a lunch break we left the lodge at 2:30pm to drive the ten minutes to Tal Chappar Wildlife Sanctuary. This is a huge open area of grassland bordered by acacia woodland with a few isolated woodland copses. There was a lovely group of four Spotted Owlets in the entrance gate trees. The grassland of the reserve was however rather quiet. We had a fly through female Pallid Harrier, one huge flock of several hundred Greater short toed Larks, an Isabelline Shrike, distant Imperial and Great spotted Eagles. There were hundreds of Blackbuck everywhere. After a couple of hours driving the grassland we returned to the woodland we had birded in the morning; the most notable addition was a perched Long legged Buzzard.



Blackbuck rutting at Tal Chappar where they are common

Saturday 21st January - Tal Chappar to Lallgarh Palace Hotel, Bikaner, Raj.

Shortly after leaving Tal Chappar I spotted a Laggar Falcon from the car. We screeched to a halt and jumped out to realise that there were in fact two Laggars either hunting in tandem or displaying over wooded farmland. Unfortunately they did not hang around for long. It was a great but rather brief and lucky sighting of what proved to be the only Laggars of the trip.

It was a two and a quarter hour drive to the Jorbeer Reserve on the outskirts of Bikaner. The reserve is a small area of scrubland used as a carcass dump. As we approached the sky was full of vultures and we had an incredible view of a Black Vulture perched on the boundary wall just yards from the vehicle. There were hundreds of Vultures loafing in trees and on the ground.



There were huge numbers of Griffon Vultures at the Jorbeer carcass dump making for a very impressive sight

There were also good numbers of Steppe Eagles and at least one Tawny. Eurasian Griffon and Egyptian Vultures made up the great majority with well over one hundred of each but there were also at least ten Black Vultures. We were not able to find any Indian or White backed Vultures among the masses of Griffons.

We drove the scrubland and soon found a huge flock of strikingly blue Yellow eyed Pigeons which also have distinctive white rumps. There must have been a couple of hundred but they were extremely wary and flushed even from the vehicle at several hundred metres. We tried getting closer both on foot and in the car without much success. We got reasonable views as they fed on the ground in a tightly packed flock but never got close enough for decent photos.

A nicely marked Isabelline Wheatear provided an India tick. I was excited to see a decent sized flock of Rosy Starlings some of which were beginning to come into handsome breeding plumage but Mahendra was more interested in the lone Common Starling accompanying them. We braved the smell to drive right up to the pile of rotting carcasses to admire the sight of a huge number of Griffons feeding on a cow. Quite a sight and experience.

A range of species were unexpectedly reaping the harvest of insects attracted by the carcasses including Black Ibis, Rosy Starling, Hoopoe, Indian Robin and Roller, White browed Fantail and Black Drongo. We stopped briefly at a wetland just outside Jorbeer where I photographed confiding Marsh and Wood Sandpipers and there was a smattering of duck.

It was a short drive through Bikaner to the absolutely spectacular Lallgarh Palace Hotel. The palace is a former home to the Maharajas of Bikaner. The title has died out due to lack of male heirs but the palace is still held by a family trust. It is enormous with each façade being a couple of hundred metres long. It was only built in 1906, designed by a British architect called Sir Samuel Jacob, an engineer in the Indian Army, who designed numerous palaces and public buildings in India.



The Lallgarh Palace, Bikaner where I stayed amongst the faded grandeur

My enormous room was accessed by a wide corridor lined with Tiger and Leopard skins and huge mounted heads of prized Red Deer mostly accounted for in Hungary and Austria in the 1930's. After lunch I wandered around the huge palace and grounds having fun photographing some common birds and adding a few species to our trip list, including Greenish Warbler.

Sunday 22nd January - Bikaner to Paddav Luxury Camp, Jaisalmer, Raj.

We left at 8:30am with 330km to cover to get to Jaisalmer and then a further 40km beyond to the village of Sam on the edge of the Desert National Park. On pretty decent roads and light traffic the 70km per hour speed limit seemed painfully slow. About 100km from Bikaner we pulled off the road and explored an area of gravel plain for a quick look for Indian Courser without luck. We did however see our first Chinkara beside the road. At a chai stop at 10:30 I found my only Indian Jird of the trip though their burrows are everywhere.

At midday we reached Keechan. We pulled off the road and drove to a pair of lakes just outside the village. Here we were greeted by the incredible sight of thousands, we reckoned at least five thousand, Demoiselle Cranes. The noise of the massed ranks of these glorious birds was

overwhelming particularly when they took to the wing to move from one lake to the other. This really is a great birding spectacle.



The incredible spectacle of thousands of Demoiselle Cranes at Keechan

Some Chestnut bellied Sandgrouse flew in to drink, landed briefly but took flight again meaning, sadly, there was no photo opportunity. We left Keechan after 45 minutes at 12:45, still with a lot of driving ahead of us. We got to Jaisalmer with its vast ancient fort on a bluff above the town and a huge military presence at 4pm. It was another forty minutes drive further West to a grassy plain about 5km before Sam. Almost all the way between Jaisalmer and Sam, which had apparently been prime birding habitat, was now trashed with 'desert camps' and leisure activities such as parasailing and dune driving.

We pulled off the road to the South onto a very thinly vegetated plain. Wheatears were well represented here with plenty of Desert and Variable and a single well marked Red tailed Wheatear.



Demoiselle Cranes migrate over the Western Himalaya from Central Asia to winter in North West India

Our primary quarry here was Cream coloured Courser. After a while of anxious scanning we located three absolutely superb birds and manoeuvred the vehicle up-sun of them to get some nice photos. This was another great India tick for me.

Paddav Luxury Camp is located just before Sam about 1km outside the village. It is one of literally hundreds of almost identical such camps. The roadside is made up of a stone entrance façade and behind it the other three sides are made up of tents forming a square enclosing a large open 'medan'. Our 'tents' were in fact brick built bungalows lined on the inside with fabric to give the impression of being in a tent, with an en suite bathroom extension at the back. It was very cold and quite windy at night and being in one of the proper tents would have been draughty and freezing. We are the only guests here.



Cream coloured Courser, a fabulous bird I hadn't seen for decades that was also an India tick for me

I went for a wander by myself for the last hour of light and triumphed in finding two of the distinctive, minute, washed out, wing-flicking Plain leaf Warblers and had fun photographing some gorgeous Green Bee-eaters.



The vivid green of Asian green Bee-eater is even more striking in the arid environment of the Desert National Park

Both the rival camp to one side and the vast white-elephant of a hotel to the other blasted out incredibly loud music until about 11pm which was very boring.

Monday 23rd January - Paddav Luxury Camp, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan

We had breakfast at 6am for a 6:30 departure in an open backed jeep with a driver/ guide. It was a 40 minute drive to the Sudasari entrance to the Desert National Park. It really was bitterly cold in the back of the jeep despite wearing four layers.



Desert Wheatear, a common winter visitor to the Desert National Park from Central Asia

We drove a kilometre or so beyond the entrance barrier and climbed a watch tower that provided views over two of the huge fenced enclosures designed to exclude livestock. These enclosures must be tens of square kilometres and I suspect the largest are over a hundred square kilometres. With no cattle, goat or camels the grass within the enclosures is knee high or higher and there is a thick growth of bushes. All this makes finding Great Indian Bustard a challenge. Apart from anything else, if they are more than about 800m from the fence further within the enclosure, one barely stands a chance. The ground is also undulating which means that there is a lot of dead ground in which they

can hide. We did however know that three females had been seen from the watch tower the previous evening. In the bitter cold we scanned and scanned using my telescope but without luck. After about 45 minutes Mahendra suddenly shouted out that he had a Bustard. How exciting!

The Bustard had walked from some dead ground where it was obviously hidden onto a gravel ridge and was plainly in sight all be it at about 400m. It was a female. As we watched it a magnificent, huge and substantially bigger male with a gleaming white neck also appeared. We watched them sedately going about their business for about 45 minutes which was fabulous but they were too far away for photography. With only between 50 and 100 birds surviving, attempting to see this iconic bird before it becomes extinct was really the catalyst for this trip so it was with great relief and satisfaction that we found it. Many people dip these days and Mahendra recounted a story of spending four days with clients here and not seeing one.



Desert Whitethroat is granted specific status by the IOC but not all authorities. It has a distinctive call, quite different from Lesser Whitethroat, to which this bird responded

We then continued driving the enclosure perimeter tracks, one is not allowed to enter them, and the neighbouring heavily degraded grazing and cultivated areas. We found several Desert Whitethroats, another of my top targets, and a couple of Desert Warblers. Unexpected was a Common Quail that crossed the track in front of the jeep but didn't flush and we were able to get brief views of it slinking through the grass. There were large flocks of Greater short toed Larks and eventually we found a flock of about twenty flighty Bimaculated Lark. We found a very handsome Red headed Falcon sitting on roadside wires but unfortunately it flushed as we approached it.



The main street through Sam, gateway to the Desert National Park

After a really great morning we were back at Sam where we had lunch in a roadside restaurant at midday. We then headed through a grazing area with broken rocky ridges South of Sam to a small dam. Here on the drying muddy fringes were about fifty Desert Larks, an India tick for me, which we had fun photographing.



Desert Lark, an India tick for me, has a tiny distribution in Western India

On a rocky ridge nearby, a known stakeout, we found a nice little flock of five Trumpeter Finch, a scarce Indian bird and another country tick for me. They were highly territorial to one particular rock on the bluff but were reluctant to allow us very close.



Trumpeter Finch, a scarce winter visitor to the Desert National Park and another India tick for me

We then drove westwards through extensive areas of grazing where the Bustards can sometimes be found and along the perimeter fences of further enclosures hoping for another Bustard sighting. We were back at the watch tower at 3:25 but it was by now so windy that it was tricky to hold bins to scan. It seemed very unlikely that we would find the birds again in these conditions and after a fairly cursory search we moved on to investigate a kettle of Vultures we could see forming.

Soon enough we came across the carcass of a cow with about a dozen Griffons and several considerably larger and much darker with streaking on the back and breast, Himalayan Vultures.



The truly enormous Himalayan Vulture. Note the size difference with Egyptian Vulture, itself a pretty big bird

There are no known stakeouts for Hoopoe Lark or Indian Eagle Owl. The Larks must be very scarce given the huge amount of apparently suitable habitat we drove through. What was striking was that all the special birds - Bustards, Coursers, Desert Lark, Trumpeter Finch, require specific stakeouts to see them. They winter here in such small numbers that the chances of bumping into them are vanishingly small. We were apparently unlucky not to see White browed Bushchat and did rather poorly for Falcons.

On the mammal front we saw good numbers of Chinkara and Nilgai, a single Grey Mongoose and a big sounder of Wild Boar. We were apparently very unlucky not to have bumped into a Bengal Fox. We were back at Paddav Camp at 5:15 having driven 250km today almost all on sandy tracks. I was pretty knackered after a long, cold, bumpy day in the back of the jeep but it was certainly one to remember. Mercifully we did not have to endure thumping music from our neighbours this evening.

Tuesday 24th January - Jaisalmer to Siana Camp, Siana, Rajasthan.

We left Sam at 8:35am having had breakfast. It took three and a half hours to go the 158km from Jaisalmer to Balmer. Balmer is a pretty big, busy place and there was considerable confusion about the route with Mahendra navigating on Google Maps on his phone which required numerous U-turns. We got to Sindhari at 1:30pm and had a lunch stop for 25 minutes just beyond. Here we got more lost. Google Maps took us down tiny, single track dirt roads through tiny, humble villages. We eventually got to Siana Camp at about 3pm.



Siana Camp gardens where we ate

This is a lovely peaceful place on the edge of the village with four two story visitor houses set in attractive gardens with flowering Bougainvillea. The place is owned by a family who made a reputation and attracted visitors by baiting Leopards on their land. This has now been banned by the Rajasthan authorities. We were greeted warmly by the head of the family, Pradeep Singh and his son Daksh.



Dry thorn forest at Siana where we saw Indian Eagle Owl and White bellied Minivet

After a cup of tea Daksh and his cousin took us out into the surrounding farmland in an ancient ex-India army open backed jeep. Our first stop was a rocky gully to look for Indian Eagle Owl. At the first attempt we drew a blank so we moved about 500m further along the cliff and tried again. Mahendra gave a blast of its call and immediately the bird responded and then to our delight flew off the cliff and landed on a prominent rock where it continued to call, giving superb views. The female then also appeared. What a great sighting of a great bird.



I was very pleased to finally see the spectacular Indian Eagle Owl, a bird I have dipped numerous times

We then drove a short distance to a small dam where Daksh knew there was a good chance of seeing another of my top targets. We settled down to wait until dusk, enjoying the sight of Wild Boar coming down to drink. As the light faded a glorious pair of Painted Sandgrouse came down to drink. They were wary and didn't hang around for long but it was a superb, atmospheric sighting of another great bird making it an extremely successful evening outing. We had dinner in the garden which was quite chilly but nowhere near as cold as Jaisalmer.

Wednesday 25th January - Siana Camp, Siana, Rajasthan.

Over a cup of tea in the garden well before dawn we heard and then found an Indian Scops Owl which was a nice bonus. We then set off again in the jeep to another area of farmland. Our first quarry was Rock Bushquail in some cultivated fields. Mahendra was more or less constantly playing their call to no avail. After an hour's searching I had a brief view of a bird slinking through the vegetation at the edge of a field but no sooner had I seen it than it vanished. We waited and scanned with no luck and then approached the spot slowly only for the bird to explode from our feet. It had been sitting just yards in front of us in the open but perfectly camouflaged.



White bellied Minivet, a scarce bird of dry thorn forest, Siana

We then drove a short distance to an area of dry acacia woodland. Here we found several Sykes's Warblers and before long our main target - a cracking male White bellied Minivet which was in a small mixed flock that included Common Woodshrike and White browed Fantails. It was a glorious bright sunny morning and a pleasant temperature. We were back to the lodge at 11:30 after an enjoyable morning.

At 4pm we set out again by jeep driven by Daksh's cousin. Our destination was a huge rock outcrop of the other side of the village. We walked an area of scrubby hillside here seeing a nice Booted Eagle and adding several new species including White bellied Drongo and Blue Rock Thrush. Some careful scanning of the massive outcrop eventually yielded a single perched Indian Vulture. We then drove some distance further to another area of farmland where we found a female Bluethroat in some crops and a nice fly-over Short toed Eagle but not the hoped for White browed Bushchat or a Short eared Owl. As it got dark we drove some barely discernible tracks spot-lighting for mammals. Mahendra in the front seat had a very brief view of a Civet across the road but I missed it and only saw Nilgai and Chinkara which are both common.

Thursday 26th January - Siana to Rising Sun Retreat, Mount Abu, Raj.

I had a wander around the grounds before breakfast. They do occasionally get Thick billed Flowerpecker in the garden but I didn't have any luck. We left at 9am for the almost four hour drive to Mount Abu. From Abu Road at the base of the mountain it was a dramatic half hour climb up steep hairpin bends, watched by numerous Langurs loafing beside the road, to Mount Abu itself at 1100m. We got to the Rising Sun Retreat at 11:45. After a sandwich lunch I had a wander around the wooded grounds where I was delighted to find a female Ultramarine Flycatcher. At first I thought it was a Taiga Flycatcher on account of its cold, grey colour and black tail but I soon realised there was no white in the outer tail which had to make it an Ultramarine; this is a bird I have not seen since my trip to Arunachal Pradesh in 2011.



A stunning full breeding plumage male Red breasted Flycatcher at 1300m on Mount Abu

We set out at 2pm for an area of heavily grazed paddocks and scrubby hillsides bordering a shallow lake at 1300m. This is THE stakeout for Green Avadavat. We searched the area carefully for more than an hour without luck which was beginning to get worrying. We did add some nice birds including a stunning male Red breasted Flycatcher, White spotted Fantail, Oriental Turtle Dove and an attractive Sulphur bellied Warbler. We then walked around the lake which held a few duck and headed into another more closed area of bushes. Almost immediately on the narrow track not far in front of us was a fabulous group of about five Green Avadavat including a couple of well marked males. What a great bird and one that I calculated at the time to be my 850th Species for the Indian sub-continent; I realised when I got home that my count was out by a few and that in fact I did not pass that milestone until a few days later at Nalsarovar in Gujarat. We were back to the Rising Sun at 5:15pm.

Friday 27th January - Mount Abu to Royal Safari Camp, Bajana, Gujarat

It was very cold overnight. We hit the road shortly before 9am for the long drive to Bajana, Gujarat. We got to the prosperous looking town of Palanpur at 10:30 where we stopped for chai and then stopped again for lunch at 12:30. As we headed South into Gujarat it became much warmer. The greater prosperity was also very apparent. The speed also picked up with almost no livestock grazing the road verges and better road surfaces. The economy of Gujarat has been transformed by the building of several huge irrigation canals. We crossed the Indira Gandhi canal. This has transformed previously uncultivated land into the centre of the Indian pomegranate and cotton industries.

We got to the fabulous, huge shallow lake of Navatalar at 3:10. I had visited this superb site during my Gujarat trip in 2016 and was excited to be back. The surface of the lake was an incredible sight, literally black with thousands of Coot and Duck. The surrounding mudflats held good numbers of Common Crane and in the shallow water there were huge numbers of both Greater and Lesser Flamingo. We had a great view of a group of c. 30 stunning breeding plumage Dalmatian Pelicans. Almost my favourite new addition to the trip list was a lovely flock of 60 Little Pratincoles. In an hour and a half we saw 50 species, many of which were new for the trip.



One of a fabulous flock of sixty Small Pratincoles at Navatar

It was only half an hour's drive on to the Royal Safari Camp in Bajana on the borders of the Little Rann of Kutch. The camp is an altogether more up-market place set in large, manicured grounds run by the welcoming owner, Bharat. My 'room' was a small bungalow at the far end of the grounds. Best of all, the chap that showed me to my room was able to point out a lovely Pallid Scops Owl roosting in trees in the garden. This is a bird I have not seen since Eastern Turkey in 1985! What a great India tick. We had a much better quality dinner but being in Gujarat I was not able to wash it down with a beer.



The attractive gardens of the Royal Safari Camp, Bajana where I saw Pallid Scops Owl for the first time since 1985

Saturday 28th January - Royal Safari Camp, Bajana, Gujarat

We left the lodge, taking a packed breakfast with us, at 6am in an open jeep on another chilly morning. It was a forty minute drive to the far northwest Zinzuwada entrance to the Little Rann. In addition to vast open salt flats stretching as far as the eye could see, there were areas of extensive acacia scrub and slightly raised grassland. This is the area where a last few remaining Macqueen's Bustard winter; in fact it is the only regular site left in India. This year there are thought to be only seven or eight birds here and many people fail to find them.

We drove along the edges of scrub and, where it was open enough, through the grasslands. I was standing in the back of the jeep. Suddenly I saw an enormous bird flying towards us. There was no doubting what this was and I screamed 'Bustard!'. I think the bird had flushed due to the noise of the vehicle before we were even in view of it but strangely, rather than flying away from the threat, it flew towards us and gave a reasonable and quite prolonged flight view as it passed us and went

away. We marked the approximate area it landed which was probably the best part of two kilometres away and weaved our way through the scrub, in the process stumbling across a very handsome male Montagu's Harrier apparently hunting grasshoppers on the ground. The Bustard took off and flew very strongly away from us long before it came into view. Mahendra had said that they were wary but this was extreme. We wondered if this was due to hunting pressure on their migration route or on their breeding grounds. It was slightly disappointing not to get a better view but very nice to have found it at all.



Mahendra and I enjoy breakfast on the jeep bonnet in the Zinzuwada area of the Little Rann of Kutch

We had breakfast on the car bonnet with a herd of Wild Ass in the distance. We tried several areas, including a spot where they had recently been seen, for Hoopoe Lark but were unlucky. We left the Rann at 10:30 for the 55 minute drive back to the lodge fighting our way through several busy villages en route. The lodge was now busy with local weekenders. Annoyingly children playing in the garden had flushed the Pallid Scops Owl. It's roosting spot yesterday was very obscured with branches and I was hoping for a second chance to photograph it today. I searched carefully for an hour but was unable to find it.



Wild Ass in the Little Rann of Kutch

We left again in the jeep at 3pm stopping in a nearby village where White backed Vultures, now critically rare from Diclofenac poisoning, had been reported. We found two fresh vulture nests but sadly no one was at home. We then went back into the Rann where we drove a different extensive

area of scrub. Here after some searching we found a superb Short eared Owl roosting under bushes. Another great India tick!



Short eared Owl, a scarce winter visitor and another India tick, here in the Little Rann of Kutch

We visited a Striped Hyaena den consisting of four surprisingly small holes on an earth bund. We contemplated staking out this den but the guide thought it was too disturbed. We headed to another den buried deep in scrub. This was a much more extensive den and the area was littered with bone. We settled down and waited for an hour by which time it was completely dark but sadly they did not emerge. Apparently they have several dens within their home range and may not currently been using this particular one.



Salt producer's camp in the Little Rann of Kutch

Sunday 29th January - Bajana to Ummed Hotel, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Today was a bit of a bonus day. Originally I had planned to fly back to Delhi in the afternoon to connect with the BA night flight to Heathrow which would have meant little or no time for birding, but had realised that Air India run a direct early morning flight from Ahmedabad to London. In researching where we might bird today I found a very promising site called Nalsarovar about 60km from Bajana and the same distance south west of Ahmedabad. Having had a quick breakfast we left the lodge at 6:35 for the hour and half drive to Nalsarovar, passing through light rain for 15 minutes. Mahendra suggested we employ the services of a local guide who would be intimately familiar with where to find the specialities. This proved very useful.

Having picked up Ghanti, the guide, we first headed to an area of scrubland a few kilometres East of Nalsarovar. This seemed a completely unremarkable area of ground not materially different from vast areas of northern India but in fact it is very special. Here in November 2020, following the first record for India in coastal Jamnagar, Gujarat in Dec 2017, a lone Namaqua Dove spent the winter. Three years on the wintering population is now up to six birds and it seems to be a tiny toe hold expansion eastwards of this miniature Dove. The nearest resident population seems to be 1400km away in the Arabian Gulf assuming there are not unreported sites in Pakistan or Iran.

Several car loads of Ahmedabad birders and photographers were already on site when we arrived, making this my first proper Indian twitch! We fanned out into the bushes quickly finding a nice male Namaqua Dove perched with Collared and Laughing Doves. We had decent views and the bird was confiding allowing me to get some reasonable pics.



It was exciting seeing Namaqua Dove at Nalsarovar, a new addition to the Indian avifauna that doesn't even feature in the Indian bird books. A tiny population of just six birds started wintering here, their only site in India, in 2020

We then headed a few kilometres further East on tiny roads to an area of cultivated farmland. Here there were many, many thousands of Demoiselle and Common Cranes making a fantastic sight. There were also several hundred Greylag Geese but we could not find the reported Lesser Whitefronted Goose that had been seen this week. Whilst enjoying the Crane spectacle and scanning the Geese I saw two Indian Coursers fly in and land. They were some distance away but when we grilled them through the scope we realised that there were in fact seven of them.

As we left this area of farmland we had an Indian spotted Eagle and an immature White eyed Buzzard, a plumage I am not familiar with, perched right beside the road. Even more exciting was when Ghanti shouted 'Stop' and we realised there was a mixed flock of Red headed and Black headed Buntings in bushes beside the road. Several of the Red headed were stunning almost full breeding plumage males. The Black headed Buntings which were not in such advanced plumage also made a very nice India tick.



One of several stunning breeding plumage Red headed Buntings I saw at Nalsarovar

We then drove for twenty minutes or so to a huge lake called Bhaskarpara at the northerly end of the Nalsarovar lake complex. This meant that we didn't actually visit the main Nalsarovar sanctuary which we figured, being a weekend, would be busy with day trippers and picnickers. At Bhaskarpara there were thousands of duck and Geese on the water including several hundred Bar headed Geese which we had not seen previously on this trip. Over the last week a super rare Red breasted Goose has been with the Bar headed. We searched very carefully through the Geese but sadly there seemed to be no sign of the Red breasted. We did have luck in finding no fewer than three distant Lesser Whitefronts which was superb compensation. Huge numbers of Demoiselle Cranes flew in to loaf in the shallows, having fed in the morning on neighbouring farmland.

We left the Nalsarovar area at 11:50 and drove East towards Ahmedabad. By the middle of the day here it was in the mid to high 20's C; considerably warmer and more humid than we had experienced over the previous ten days. Here just a week ago Sociable Lapwing had been reported in crop fields. Ghanti lead us for c. 2km across a huge open area of fields mainly of wheat, with the odd small harvested areas, walking on small narrow bunds that constitute the field boundaries. Initially I had thought we were looking for a single bird and I was wondering how on earth we would find it in crops that were already about 20cm high but it then dawned on me from something Mahendra said that there were in fact between 50 and 60 Sociable Lapwings in the extended area. Before long the first group of five birds flew up from the crop landing a short distance in front of us; then another to the right and more to the left. They seemed to be everywhere!

They were quite wary but with care we were able to approach a group reasonably closely to get some photos. What an exciting sighting of a now really rare bird. It was very difficult to estimate how many we saw with them flying up from the crop. On more than one occasion I thought there were perhaps two or three birds on the ground in front of us, only for seven or eight to take flight. I reckoned that we had seen at least twenty birds. With hundreds of square miles of similar croplands in Gujarat, it does offer a slight promise that perhaps there are more of this very special bird still around than is currently thought. Let's hope so.



Leaving almost the best until last - the incredible sight of at least twenty Sociable Lapwing, now a critically rare winter visitor from Central Asia

We dropped Ghanti off to make his way back to Nalsarovar and then drove for a rather tedious hour fighting our way through the huge and busy Ahmedabad to the Ummed Hotel, getting there at 3:45pm. What a really fabulous and unexpected last day's birding with a cracking lifer, Red headed Bunting and two rare Central Asia birds in the shape of Lesser Whitefront and Sociable Lapwing, neither of which I have seen since the mid-80's.

I had a taxi at 5:30am the following morning for the ten minute drive to the airport for a 7:30am departure. I landed at Heathrow at 11:15am GMT.

I saw 206 species from 54 families. I saw ten lifers and nine India ticks, taking my Sub-continental list to 853 species. I didn't miss many species; I had an outside chance of Thick billed Flowerpecker and White naped Woodpecker at Mount Abu; I was unlucky not to see the vagrant Red breasted Goose at Nalsarovar or bump into a Raven in DNP but I certainly can't complain. It was a great trip seeing some fabulous birds; many of which are rare and localised in India.

Birds seen in Rajasthan and Gujarat (P = Photographed, **Bold = Lifer, *Italics* = India tick)**

| <i>Anatidae - Geese & Ducks</i> | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| 1 | Bar-headed Goose | Anser indicus | 400 at Nalsarovar. |
| 2 | Greylag Goose | Anser anser | 200 at both Navatalar and Nalsarovar. |
| 3 | <i>Lesser White-fronted Goose</i> | <i>Anser erythropus</i> | <i>Three distant birds on the Bhaskarpara lake at the northern end of Nalsarovar; this is a very scarce bird in India.</i> |
| 4 | Ruddy Shelduck | Tadorna ferruginea | Five at Navatalar. |
| 5 | Garganey | Spatula querquedula | A cracking male and two females at least at Nalsarovar; there may have been more amongst the huge distant duck numbers. |
| 6 | Northern Shoveler | Spatula clypeata | Twenty on the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; thirty on the lakes at Keechan; twenty on the high altitude lake at Mount Abu; hundreds at Navatalar; 500+ in the Little Rann of Kutch and at least 1000 at |

Nalsarovar.

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| 7 | Gadwall | Mareca strepera | Ten on the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; ten at Mount Abu; hundreds at Navatalar; 300 at Nalsarovar. |
| 8 | Eurasian Wigeon | Mareca penelope | Tens at Navatalar; 1000 at Nalsarovar. |
| 9 | Northern Pintail | Anas acuta | Forty at Mount Abu; hundreds at Navatalar; 300 at Nalsarovar. |
| 10 | Eurasian Teal | Anas crecca | Small numbers throughout; hundreds at Navatalar, 100 in the Little Rann of Kutch and 500 at Nalsarovar. |
| 11 | Common Pochard | Aythya ferina | One on the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; 30 at Mount Abu; hundreds at Navatalar; 50 at Nalsarovar. |
| 12 | Tufted Duck | Aythya fuligula | Twenty at Mount Abu; tens at Navatalar. |
| <i>Phasianidae - Pheasants</i> | | | |
| 13 | P Indian Peafowl | Pavo cristatus | Common throughout in farmland and around villages. |



Male Peafowl, a common but stunning bird

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| 14 | P Grey Francolin | Ortygornis pondicerianus | Common throughout in a wide range of habitats including isolated patches of thorn scrub in the Little Rann of Kutch; the max. day count was twenty. |
| 15 | Common Quail | Coturnix coturnix | One ran across the track in front of the jeep in the Desert National Park and we subsequently had brief views of it creeping through the grass. |
| 16 | Rock Bush Quail | Perdicula argoondah | A very brief view of one creeping through crops at Siana and then exploding into flight from our feet. |



Grey Francolin, a common bird of scrubland

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| | | <i>Otididae - Bustards</i> | | |
| 17 | | Great Indian Bustard | <i>Ardeotis nigriceps</i> | A fabulous but distant view of a pair, watched for about 45 minutes from the Sudasari watch tower, Desert National Park. There are thought to be less than one hundred of these magnificent birds remaining and it was exciting to see them, especially as this was really my main target of the trip. |
| 18 | | Macqueen's Bustard | <i>Chlamydotis macqueenii</i> | One bird in flight in the Zinzuwada area of the Little Rann of Kutch; the noise of our jeep flushed it when it was probably about 1 km away but strangely it flew towards us and provided quite a decent fly-by. We drove towards the spot where it landed but it took flight again when we were at least a kilometre away and flew very strongly away from us until it was lost from sight. They are very shy. There are thought to be only seven or eight birds wintering in the Little Rann this year. |
| | | <i>Cuculidae - Cuckoos</i> | | |
| 19 | | Greater Coucal (Greater) | <i>Centropus sinensis</i> | Odd birds seen at Mount Abu, Little Rann of Kutch and Nalsarovar. |
| | | <i>Pteroclididae Sandgrouse</i> | | |
| 20 | | Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse | <i>Pterocles exustus</i> | Twenty coming into drink at the Keechan lakes; 100 including a few birds on the ground in the Desert National Park; twenty roadside birds en route to Siana; 50 at Navatalar. |
| 21 | | Painted Sandgrouse | <i>Pterocles indicus</i> | A great atmospheric sight of a pair coming down to drink at a small dam at dusk, Siana. |
| | | <i>Columbidae - Pigeons</i> | | |
| 22 | P | Rock Dove | <i>Columba livia</i> | Common throughout. Almost all the birds are genuine 'wild' types; the plumage variations of chequered or white birds are very few and far between. |

23 P Yellow-eyed Pigeon

Columba eversmanni

This species is much more distinctive than the books suggest. It is bright blue and has a distinctive white rump (Rock Doves here have grey rumps). There was a large feeding flock of at least 200 at the Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner but it was incredibly flighty and getting close to the birds either in the vehicle or on foot proved impossible; we also saw a distant flock of c. 20 in the Desert National Park.



This was my best effort with Yellow eyed Pigeon, an extremely wary bird presumably due to hunting pressure

24 P Oriental Turtle Dove
[meena]

Streptopelia orientalis
meena

One of these attractive doves was seen at Mount Abu.

25 P Eurasian Collared Dove

Streptopelia decaocto

Abundant everywhere.

26 P Red Collared Dove

Streptopelia tranquebarica

Seen in small numbers on four days; at least 50 in the Nalsarovar area.

27 Laughing Dove

Spilopelia senegalensis

Common and widespread.



The attractive Oriental Turtle Dove at Mount Abu

28 P Namaqua Dove

Oena capensis

A male in scrub a few Km's East of Nalsarovar. This is a newly established wintering population that started with a single bird in Nov 2020; there are now six birds. The first for India was seen at Khijadiya

Bird Sanctuary, Jamnagar, Gujarat in Dec 2017. The nearest population is in the Arabian Gulf c.1400km away.

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| 29 | Yellow-footed Green Pigeon | Treron phoenicopterus | Ten in a village fig tree, Little Rann of Kutch. |
| <i>Rallidae - Crakes</i> | | | |
| 30 | Common Moorhen | Gallinula chloropus | Ten at the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; one in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 31 | Eurasian Coot | Fulica atra | Twenty at the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner and the same number at Mount Abu; 1000's on Navatatar was a spectacular sight. |
| 32 | Grey-headed Swamphen | Porphyrio poliocephalus | Twenty at Mount Abu; ten at both the Little Rann of Kutch and at Nalsarovar. |
| 33 | P Brown Crake | Zapornia akool | A fabulous prolonged view of a responsive pair in a roadside ditch near Bajana, Little Rann of Kutch. |



Having a prolonged view of pair of Brown Crakes in a roadside ditch was exciting even if for most of the time they were too close to photograph

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| 34 | White-breasted Waterhen | Amaurornis phoenicurus | Single birds seen on roadside ponds on four days. |
| <i>Gruidae - Cranes</i> | | | |
| 35 | Sarus Crane | Antigone antigone | A family group of a pair with an immature and a second pair in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 36 | P Demoiselle Crane | Grus virgo | The absolutely amazing spectacle of c. 5000 birds at Keechan where the sight and sound of thousands of birds in flight is awesome; probably at least 5000 birds possibly even more in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 37 | P Common Crane | Grus grus | Thirty in the grassland at Tal Chappar; twenty at Navatatar; 200 in the Little Rann of Kutch and 500 in the Nalsarovar area. |
| <i>Podicipedidae - Grebes</i> | | | |
| 38 | P Little Grebe | Tachybaptus ruficollis | Seen on six days with the max. site count of 50 at the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner. |



Demoiselle Cranes at Keechan - a world class birding spectacle, the sight and sound of which has to be witnessed to be believed



In India Common Crane is a bird of dry grassland rather than the marshes it favours on its northern breeding grounds. Where we saw them together, they towered over the Demoiselle Cranes

*Phoenicopteridae -
Flamingos*

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| 39 | Greater Flamingo | Phoenicopterus roseus | 100 at Navatalar; 100 in the Little Rann of Kutch and 200 at Nalsarovar. |
| 40 | Lesser Flamingo | Phoeniconaias minor | 150 at Navatalar and 500+ in the Little Rann of Kutch. |

Recurvirostridae - Stilts

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| 41 | P Black-winged Stilt | Himantopus himantopus | Seen every day including on heavily polluted village ponds. The max. day count was fifty in the Little Rann of Kutch and Nalsarovar areas. |
| 42 | Pied Avocet | Recurvirostra avosetta | Twenty on salt pans bordering Tal Chappar. |

Charadriidae - Plovers

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| 43 | P Red-wattled Lapwing | Vanellus indicus | A common roadside and farmland bird seen every day with a max. day count of 50 in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 44 | P Sociable Lapwing | Vanellus gregarius | The fabulous sighting of c. 20 birds in wheat fields SW of Ahmedabad. There are thought to be between 50 - 60 in this flock but establishing an accurate count with birds hiding in the crop and popping up all over the place was tricky. These birds first came to the attention of local birders on the 21st Jan. The fact these birds were wintering on completely random croplands of which there are |

hundreds of square miles in Gujarat does offer some hope that they might be less rare than currently supposed. It was surprising to see them in well grown crops rather than bare ground with which they are usually associated.



Neither a lifer nor an India tick but seeing at least twenty Sociable Lapwings was undoubtedly a highlight of the trip

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| 45 | Little Ringed Plover | Charadrius dubius | Five at Navatalar. |
| 46 | Kentish Plover | Charadrius alexandrinus | One on saltpans bordering Tal Chappar; ten at Navatalar. |
| <i>Scolopacidae - Sandpipers</i> | | | |
| 47 | Black-tailed Godwit | Limosa limosa | 100 at Navatalar; five at the Little Rann of Kutch. |
| 48 | Ruff | Calidris pugnax | Thirty on saltpans bordering Tal Chappar; ten at the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve Bikaner; twenty on the Keechan lakes; 250 at Navatalar. |



It is always a privilege to see and photograph the lovely Marsh Sandpiper, here at Jorbeer

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| 49 | Temminck's Stint | Calidris temminckii | Five on saltpans bordering Tal Chappar and 300 at Navatalar. |
| 50 | Common Sandpiper | Actitis hypoleucos | Singles at the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner, the dam in Desert National Park and at Siana. |
| 51 | Green Sandpiper | Tringa ochropus | Singles at Tal Chappar village, the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner and at Mount Abu. |
| 52 | Common Redshank | Tringa totanus | One on the saltpans bordering Tal Chappar. |
| 53 | P Marsh Sandpiper | Tringa stagnatilis | Two at the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; twenty at Navatalar and one at Nalsarovar. |
| 54 | P Wood Sandpiper | Tringa glareola | One in Tal Chappar village; one at the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner and two roadside birds en route to Bajana. |



Wood Sandpiper, another of my favourite waders, also here at Jorbeer



As a Cream coloured Courser instinctively turns its back on a threat to run, it reveals the striking black and white patterning on the back of its head - could this be designed to confuse predators? It seems strange when it is otherwise so well camouflaged

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| 55 | Spotted Redshank | Tringa erythropus | One on saltpans bordering Tal Chappar; one on the dam in Desert National Park and ten at Navatalar. |
| 56 | Common Greenshank | Tringa nebularia | One on the wetland bordering Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; three at Navatalar. |
| 57 | P Cream-colored Courser | Cursorius cursor | <i>The superb sight of three of these great birds together on a thinly vegetated gravel plain</i> |

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| | | | <i>on the South side of the road between Jaisalmer and Sam.</i> |
| 58 | Indian Courser | <i>Cursorius coromandelicus</i> | Seven distantly in agricultural fields whilst watching the Crane flock east of Nalsarovar. |
| 59 | P Small Pratincole | <i>Glareola lactea</i> | The great sight of a flock of 60 on the mud at Navatatar. |



The gorgeous Small Pratincole at Navatatar

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| | <i>Laridae - Gulls & Terns</i> | | |
| 60 | Black-headed Gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | One on the lake at Keechan. |
| 61 | P Pallas's Gull | <i>Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus</i> | Twenty including several coming into breeding plumage at Navatatar and one in breeding plumage at Nalsarovar. |
| 62 | Gull-billed Tern | <i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i> | One roadside bird near Bajana, Little Rann of Kutch. |
| 63 | River Tern | <i>Sterna aurantia</i> | One roadside bird near Bajana, Little Rann of Kutch. |
| | <i>Ciconiidae - Storks</i> | | |
| 64 | P Painted Stork | <i>Mycteria leucocephala</i> | Five at Navatatar and 10 in the Nalsarovar area. |



Painted Stork, Nalsarovar area

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| 65 | Asian Openbill | <i>Anastomus oscitans</i> | Three near Ahmedabad. |
| 66 | Asian Woolly-necked Stork | <i>Ciconia episcopus</i> | One at Tal Chappar; two at Navatatar and one in the Nalsarovar area. |

Phalacrocoracidae - Cormorants

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| 67 | | Little Cormorant | <i>Microcarbo niger</i> | Twenty at Navatalar and one at Nalsarovar. |
| 68 | | Great Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | One at Mount Abu. |
| <i>Threskiornithidae - Ibises</i> | | | | |
| 69 | | Black-headed Ibis | <i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i> | Twenty roadside birds near Navatalar and one in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 70 | P | Red-naped Ibis | <i>Pseudibis papillosa</i> | Seen on five days with a max. day count of twenty in both the Navatalar and Nalsarovar areas but also seen feeding amongst the carcasses at Tal Chappar and Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner. |



Red naped Ibis feeding amongst carcasses at Tal Chappar

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| 71 | | Glossy Ibis | <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i> | Fifty at both Navatalar and in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 72 | P | Eurasian Spoonbill | <i>Platalea leucorodia</i> | Three on the village tank, Siana; 100 at Navatalar; 20 in the Nalsarovar area. |
| <i>Ardeidae - Herons</i> | | | | |
| 73 | | Indian Pond Heron | <i>Ardeola grayii</i> | Seen on five days with a max. day count of only five. |
| 74 | | Eastern Cattle Egret | <i>Bubulcus coromandus</i> | Very common everywhere. |
| 75 | | Grey Heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | Ten at both Navatalar and Nalsarovar. |
| 76 | | Purple Heron | <i>Ardea purpurea</i> | One on a wetland near Bajana, Little Rann of Kutch. |
| 77 | | Great Egret | <i>Ardea alba</i> | Ten at Navatalar, five in the Little Rann of Kutch and tens at Nalsarovar. |
| 78 | | Intermediate Egret | <i>Ardea intermedia</i> | Ten at Navatalar; five in the Little Rann of Kutch and tens in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 79 | | Little Egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | Ten at Navatalar; five in the Little Rann of Kutch and tens in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 80 | P | Western Reef Heron | <i>Egretta gularis</i> | One dark phase bird with an area of white on the wing coverts of its right wing, something I have not seen before, at Nalsarovar. |



This Reef Heron at Nalsarovar had a large area of white on the covets of its right wing

Pelecanidae - Pelicans

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| 81 | | Great White Pelican | <i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i> | 100 at Navatarar. |
| 82 | P | Dalmatian Pelican | <i>Pelecanus crispus</i> | Twenty at Navatarar were in fine breeding plumage. |



Magnificent breeding plumage Dalmatian Pelican at Navatarar

Accipitridae - Hawks

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| 83 | P | Black-winged Kite | <i>Elanus caeruleus</i> | Quite a common roadside bird seen on seven days with a max. day count of 30 in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 84 | P | Egyptian Vulture | <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> | Twenty at Tal Chappar; 100 at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; one near Keechan; twenty in Desert National Park. |
| 85 | | Crested Honey Buzzard | <i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i> | One in flight in Nalsarovar area. |
| 86 | | Indian Vulture | <i>Gyps indicus</i> | One rather lonely bird on the cliffs at Siana. |
| 87 | P | Himalayan Vulture | <i>Gyps himalayensis</i> | Five on a cow carcass in Desert National Park looked huge and dark compared to the Eurasian Griffons. |
| 88 | P | Griffon Vulture | <i>Gyps fulvus</i> | Seeing 100's including many birds fighting over a carcass at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner was an incredible sight; 50+ also seen in Desert National Park. |



Egyptian Vulture, Jorbeer



Black winged Kite is a common roadside bird. Black Vulture at Jorbeer



Griffon Vulture at Jorbeer



Himalayan Vulture, Desert National Park

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| 89 | P | Cinereous Vulture | <i>Aegypius monachus</i> | Two at Tal Chappar; ten at Jorbeer Reserve Bikaner and five in Desert National Park. |
| 90 | | Short-toed Snake Eagle | <i>Circaetus gallicus</i> | A fabulous view of a well marked bird right over our heads at Siana. |
| 91 | | Indian Spotted Eagle | <i>Clanga hastata</i> | One at Tal Chappar and one at Nalsarovar. |
| 92 | | Greater Spotted Eagle | <i>Clanga clanga</i> | Twenty at Tal Chappar; two at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; two at Desert National Park; and singles at both Navatatar and Nalsarovar. |
| 93 | | Booted Eagle | <i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i> | A dark phase bird was seen well at Siana. |
| 94 | | Tawny Eagle | <i>Aquila rapax</i> | At least one at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner but there may have been more amongst all the Aquila Eagles here. |



Steppe Eagle on a carcass, Desert National Park. Almost all the Steppe Eagles we saw, including this one, were immature birds.

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|----|---|------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 95 | P | Steppe Eagle | <i>Aquila nipalensis</i> | At least one at Tal Chappar; 50 at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner and twenty in Desert National Park. |
| 96 | P | Eastern Imperial Eagle | <i>Aquila heliaca</i> | At least two at Tal Chappar. |



Immature Imperial Eagle, Tal Chappar, is a larger, more powerful bird than Steppe Eagle

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|----|-------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 97 | Bonelli's Eagle | <i>Aquila fasciata</i> | One near Siana. |
| 98 | Shikra | <i>Accipiter badius</i> | Six sightings over five days including a perched bird in the Lallgarh Palace gardens, Bikaner. |
| 99 | P Western Marsh Harrier | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> | Three at Navatalar and five at Nalsarovar. |



Marsh Harrier, Navatalar

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| 100 | Pallid Harrier | <i>Circus macrourus</i> | One female/ immature over the grassland at Tal Chappar; one male in the Little Rann of Kutch where we also saw a couple of unidentified ringtails. |
| 101 | P Montagu's Harrier | <i>Circus pygargus</i> | One roadside bird en route to Siana; one at Navatalar; three including a superb male seen hunting grasshoppers on the ground in the Little Rann of Kutch; five in the Nalsarovar area. |



This male Montagu's Harrier in the Little Rann of Kutch seemed to be hunting grasshoppers

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|-----|-----------------------|----------------|---|
| 102 | Black Kite | Milvus migrans | Seen on four days mainly over towns; the max. day count was twenty on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. |
| 103 | White-eyed Buzzard | Butastur teesa | One handsome immature bird at Nalsarovar. |
| 104 | P Long-legged Buzzard | Buteo rufinus | Six sightings over four days between Tal Chappar and Desert National Park. |



Long legged Buzzard, Desert National Park

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| | <i>Strigidae - Owls</i> | | |
| 105 | P Spotted Owlet | Athene brama | A group of four birds roosting in trees at the entrance to Tal Chappar. |
| 106 | P Pallid Scops Owl | Otus brucei | A superb bird roosting in the garden of Royal Safari Camp, Bajana. |
| 107 | Indian Scops Owl | Otus bakkamoena | One seen early in the morning in the grounds of Siana Camp. |
| 108 | P Short-eared Owl | Asio flammeus | A fabulous bird in the Little Rann of Kutch. |
| 109 | P Indian Eagle-owl | Bubo bengalensis | Superb views of a pair on a rockface at Siana. |



Spotted Owlet, Tal Chappar

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| | | <i>Upupidae - Hoopoe</i> | | |
| 110 | P | Eurasian Hoopoe | <i>Upupa epops</i> | Seen on six days with a max. day count of five in the Nalsarovar area. |



Indian Roller hunting insects attracted to the carcasses at Jorbeer

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| | | <i>Coraciidae - Rollers</i> | | |
| 111 | P | Indian Roller | <i>Coracias benghalensis</i> | Seen on six days with a max. day count of 50 on roadside wires between Delhi and Tal Chappar. |

Alcedinidae - Kingfishers

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|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------|--------------------|---|
| 112 | P | White-throated Kingfisher | Halcyon smyrnensis | Seen on eight days with a max. day count of 20 in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 113 | | Pied Kingfisher | Ceryle rudis | Two on wetlands near Bajana and two at Nalsarovar. |
| <i>Meropidae - Bee-eaters</i> | | | | |
| 114 | P | Asian Green Bee-eater | Merops orientalis | A common roadside bird seen on all bar two days with up to 50 being seen on three days. |



Asian green Bee-eater, Desert National Park

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| <i>Picidae - Woodpeckers</i> | | | | |
| 115 | P | Eurasian Wryneck | Jynx torquilla | Two superb birds in woodland bordering Tal Chappar. |



No doubt because they are scarce in Britain and rather mysterious birds, it is always exciting to see a Wryneck

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|-----|--|---------------------------|------------------------|---|
| 116 | | Yellow-crowned Woodpecker | Leiopicus mahrattensis | One in woodland bordering Tal Chappar. |
| 117 | | Black-rumped Flameback | Dinopium benghalense | One in the garden of the Lallgarh Palace, Bikaner and one in Siana Camp garden. |

Falconidae - Falcons

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|--------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--|
| 118 | Common Kestrel | Falco tinnunculus | Seen on seven days with a max. day count of 10 in the Little Rann of Kutch. |
| 119 | Red-necked Falcon | Falco chicquera | One on roadside wires in Desert National Park. |
| 120 | Laggar Falcon | Falco jugger | Two displaying birds over farmland West of Tal Chappar. |
| <i>Psittaculidae - Parrots</i> | | | |
| 121 | Rose-ringed Parakeet | Psittacula krameri | A very common bird wherever there are trees with day counts typically of 100+. |
| <i>Vangidae - Vangas</i> | | | |
| 122 | P Common Woodshrike | Tephrodornis pondicerianus | One in the Lallgarh Palace garden and five in dry woodland at Siana. |



Common Woodshrike in dry thorn forest at Siana where we found it in a mixed bird party with White bellied Minivet and White browed Fantail

*Campephagidae -
Cuckooshrikes*

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| 123 | P White-bellied Minivet | Pericrocotus erythropygus | A superb male in dry woodland at Siana. |
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White bellied Minivet seems to be inexplicably scarce. It probably has more specific habitat requirements than immediately apparent

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| 124 | P Small Minivet | Pericrocotus cinnamomeus | Seen in parties of five birds twice at Tal Chappar, once at Siana and once at Mount Abu. |
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The lovely Small Minivet was common at Tal Chappar and always a delight to see

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| | | <i>Laniidae - Shrikes</i> | |
| 125 | | Isabelline Shrike | <i>Lanius isabellinus</i> |
| 126 | P | Bay-backed Shrike | <i>Lanius vittatus</i> |
| 127 | P | Long-tailed Shrike | <i>Lanius schach</i> |
| 128 | P | Great Grey Shrike | <i>Lanius excubitor</i> |

Single birds were seen on five days.
Up to five per day at Tal Chappar and twenty in the Nalsarovar area.
Three roadside birds en route to Tal Chappar; two at Siana and 10 at Mount Abu.
Seen daily between Tal Chappar and Jaisalmer with a max. day count of 20 in Desert National Park.



Great grey Shrike was pleasantly common in the Desert National Park

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| | | <i>Dicruridae - Drongos</i> | |
| 129 | | White-bellied Drongo | <i>Dicrurus caeruleus</i> |
| 130 | P | Black Drongo | <i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i> |
| | | <i>Rhipiduridae - Fantails</i> | |
| 131 | P | White-spotted Fantail | <i>Rhipidura albogularis</i> |
| 132 | P | White-browed Fantail | <i>Rhipidura aureola</i> |
| | | <i>Corvidae - Crows</i> | |
| 133 | | Rufous Treepie | <i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i> |
| 134 | P | House Crow | <i>Corvus splendens</i> |
| 135 | | Large-billed Crow | <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i> |

One at Siana.
An abundant roadside bird with up to 50 seen daily.
Two seen at Mount Abu.
One in Desert National Park and five at Siana.
Five sightings over four days at Tal Chappar and Mount Abu.
Seen daily with counts of 100+.
Two at Mount Abu; probably under recorded.



The dark breast band of White spotted and the broad white eyebrow of White browed Fantail separate the two characterful Fantail species. White browed has a huge distribution throughout India whereas White spotted is restricted to the Eastern & Western Ghats extending North to the Aravali Hills of Rajasthan where we saw it at Mount Abu.

Stenostiridae - Fairy Flycatchers

136 P Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis* Three at Mount Abu.

Paridae - Tits

137 Indian Black-lored Tit *Machlolophus aplanotus* Three in the grounds of the Rising Sun Resort at Mount Abu.

Alaudidae - Larks

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| 138 | P | Desert Lark | <i>Ammomanes deserti</i> | <i>Fifty seen mainly in one loose flock on drying mud bordering a dam in Desert National Park.</i> |
| 139 | P | Black-crowned Sparrow-lark | <i>Eremopterix nigriceps</i> | <i>Quite widespread in Desert National Park where we saw c. 50 over the course of a day.</i> |
| 140 | P | Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark | <i>Eremopterix griseus</i> | <i>Five at Siana and twenty in the Nalsarovar area.</i> |
| 141 | | Indian Bush Lark | <i>Mirafra erythroptera</i> | <i>Three at Tal Chappar and one at Siana.</i> |
| 142 | | Crested Lark | <i>Galerida cristata</i> | <i>Three at Tal Chappar; three at Navatalar; one in the Little Rann of Kutch and three at Nalsarovar.</i> |



The Black crowned Sparrow Lark is found only in the deserts of westernmost India and I had not seen it since Sudan in 1980, whereas the Ashy crowned Sparrow Lark is found throughout the Sub-continent

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| 143 | P | Greater Short-toed Lark | Calandrella brachydactyla | A huge flock of several hundred birds at Tal Chappar; twenty at Keechan; 200+ in Desert National Park and the Little Rann of Kutch; huge flocks of many hundreds in farmland at Nalsarovar. |
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Greater Short toed Lark is an abundant winter visitor to Northwest India

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| 144 | P | Bimaculated Lark | Melanocorypha bimaculata | Twenty in the Desert National Park. |
| <i>Pycnonotidae - Bulbuls</i> | | | | |
| 145 | | Red-whiskered Bulbul | Pycnonotus jocosus | Five at Mount Abu. |
| 146 | P | Red-vented Bulbul | Pycnonotus cafer | Common everywhere. |
| 147 | P | White-eared Bulbul | Pycnonotus leucotis | Common everywhere especially Desert National Park where we had a day count of 100+. |



White eared Bulbul is a very common bird of farmland and scrub, here at in the Lallgarh Palace gardens, Bikaner

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| <i>Hirundinidae - Swallows</i> | | | |
| 148 | Grey-throated Martin | <i>Riparia chinensis</i> | Up to 10 feeding over the grassland at Tal Chappar; 50 over the lakes at Keechan; ten in Desert National Park; 100's over Navatatar and Nalsarovar. |
| 149 | Dusky Crag Martin | <i>Ptyonoprogne concolor</i> | Up to twenty per day at Siana. |
| 150 | Wire-tailed Swallow | <i>Hirundo smithii</i> | Ten at Siana; two near Bajana; ten in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 151 | Barn Swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | Two at Paddav Camp, Sam; up to five per day over farmland near Bajana and 50 in the Nalsarovar area. |
| <i>Phylloscopidae - Leaf Warblers</i> | | | |
| 152 | Hume's Leaf Warbler | <i>Phylloscopus humei</i> | Up to ten per day at Mount Abu including in the grounds of the Rising Sun Resort. |
| 153 | P Sulphur-bellied Warbler | <i>Phylloscopus griseolus</i> | A superb bird seen well at Mount Abu. |



Sulphur bellied Warbler, Mount Abu

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| 154 | Plain Leaf Warbler | <i>Phylloscopus neglectus</i> | Two seen well in scrub bordering the Paddav Camp, Sam. |
| 155 | Common Chiffchaff | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | One in the garden of the Lallgarh Palace, Bikaner and one in Desert National Park. |
| 156 | Greenish Warbler | <i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i> | One in the Lallgarh Palace garden and one at Mount Abu. |

Acrocephalidae - Reed Warblers

157 P Sykes's Warbler

Iduna rama

Five in dry woodland around Siana.



Sykes's Warbler in evening sun at Siana, the only place we saw this species

Locustellidae - Grassbirds

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| 158 | P | Rufous-fronted Prinia | Prinia buchanani | Ten per day around Tal Chappar where they habitually fed on the ground; one in Desert National Park; two at Siana. |
| 159 | | Grey-breasted Prinia | Prinia hodgsonii | Two in the grounds of the Rising Sun Resort, Mount Abu. |
| 160 | P | Delicate Prinia | Prinia lepida | Two in Desert National Park and two in a reedy roadside ditch near Bajana. |
| 161 | P | Ashy Prinia | Prinia socialis | Five at Mount Abu. |



Ashy Prinia, Mount Abu

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| 162 | | Plain Prinia | Prinia inornata | One at Siana; 10 at Mount Abu and five in the Little Rann of Kutch. |
| 163 | | Common Tailorbird | Orthotomus sutorius | One in the garden of Siana Camp; ten in the grounds of the Rising Sun Resort, Mount Abu and five in the garden at Royal Safari Camp, Bajana. |
| <i>Sylviidae - Babblers</i> | | | | |
| 164 | P | Desert Whitethroat | Curruca minula | Five superb pale birds in Desert National Park. |
| 165 | | Lesser Whitethroat | Curruca curruca | Seen daily between Tal Chappar and Siana with a max. day count of ten at Jorbeer but not seen in the Little Rann or in Gujarat. |

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| 166 | Asian Desert Warbler | <i>Curruca nana</i> | Two together in Desert National Park. |
| | <i>Zosteropidae - White-eyes</i> | | |
| 167 | Indian White-eye | <i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i> | Twenty at Mount Abu including in the grounds of the Rising Sun Resort. |
| | <i>Leiothrichidae - Laughing Thrushes</i> | | |
| 168 | P Large Grey Babbler | <i>Argya malcolmi</i> | A common roadside bird with a max. day count of 100+. |



Large grey Babbler, here in the Lallgarh Palace gardens, Bikaner, is a common roadside bird

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| 169 | Jungle Babbler | <i>Argya striata</i> | Ten roadside birds between Delhi and Tal Chappar. |
| 170 | Common Babbler | <i>Argya caudata</i> | A common roadside bird with a max. day count of 100+; especially common in the Desert National Park. |
| | <i>Certhiidae - Treecreepers</i> | | |
| 171 | P Indian Spotted Creeper | <i>Salpornis spilonota</i> | Super prolonged views of this great bird in woodland bordering Tal Chappar. |



Indian spotted Creeper has particular feeding requirements and has become scarce. I have only previously seen it at Bharatpur in 2006, at which time it was still lumped with its African counterpart. It is no longer found at Bharatpur

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| | <i>Sturnidae - Starlings</i> | | |
| 172 | Bank Myna | <i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i> | A common roadside bird with max. day counts of 100+. |
| 173 | Common Myna | <i>Acridotheres tristis</i> | A common roadside bird with max. day counts of 100+. |



Brahminy Starling is a common but rather exotic farmland bird, here in the Lallgarh Palace gardens, Bikaner

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| 174 | P | Brahminy Starling | <i>Sturnia pagodarum</i> | Ten between Jorbeer and the Lallgarh Palace garden, Bikaner; five at Siana; five en route to Bajana. |
| 175 | P | Rosy Starling | <i>Pastor roseus</i> | 100 at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; one in a huge flock of House Sparrows in Desert National Park; thirty in farmland near Bajana; 100 in the Nalsarovar area. |



Rosy Starling, always a favourite but this bird sadly disgraced itself by feeding amongst the carcasses at Jorbeer

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| 176 | | Common Starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | One in the Rosy Starling flock at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner. |
| | <i>Muscicapidae - Chats</i> | | | |
| 177 | P | Indian Robin | <i>Copsychus fulicatus</i> | Up to ten per day at Tal Chappar and Jorbeer; not seen in the Desert National Park or Siana area; up to five per day in the Bajana and Nalsarovar areas. |
| 178 | | Oriental Magpie-robin | <i>Copsychus saularis</i> | One roadside bird near Nalsarovar. |

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| 179 | Bluethroat | Luscinia svecica | One female in crops at Siana. |
| 180 | Ultramarine Flycatcher | Ficedula superciliaris | When I first saw this bird in the wooded grounds of the Rising Sun Resort at Mount Abu I thought it was a Taiga Flycatcher due to its cold grey tones but as soon as it revealed its all black tail I realised that it was a female type Ultramarine Flycatcher. |
| 181 | P Red-breasted Flycatcher | Ficedula parva | Four including a spectacular male at Mount Abu. |



One seldom sees a Red breasted Flycatcher looking this smart

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| 182 | P Black Redstart | Phoenicurus ochrurus | Seen on eight days with a max. day total of ten including many handsome orange bellied males. |
| 183 | Blue Rock Thrush | Monticola solitarius | One female type bird on boulders at Siana. |
| 184 | Siberian Stonechat | Saxicola maurus | One at Tal Chappar; one in Desert National Park; seen daily from Siana south with ten at Siana and twenty at Nalsarovar. |
| 185 | P Pied Bush Chat | Saxicola caprata | One at Siana and one in the Little Rann of Kutch. |



Pied Bush Chat, a great little bird that we only saw twice the entire trip

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| 186 | P Isabelline Wheatear | Oenanthe isabellina | One at Jorbeer Reserve, Bikaner; one at Keechan; one in the Little Rann of Kutch. |
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Wheatears were a big feature of this trip. This Isabelline Wheatear in the Little Rann of Kutch was surprisingly responsive to its song, even on its wintering grounds



Desert Wheatear was by far the most common of the Wheatears. This female at Tal Chappar was attempting to feed near a male Variable Wheatear which was extremely aggressive towards it whenever it came too close



*This is the male Variable Wheatear that was aggressive to the Desert Wheatear above. This is the *Opistholeuca* ssp which was by far the most common of the three subspecies we saw*

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| 188 | | Brown Rock Chat | Oenanthe fusca | Five at Tal Chappar, mainly in the village; singles at both Desert National Park and Siana. |
| 189 | P | Variable Wheatear | Oenanthe picata | Seen daily between Tal Chappar and Siana with a max. day count of 100. We saw all three ssp; the most common was the all dark Opistholeuca, then the white bellied Picata; we only saw c. 10 of the white crowned Capistrata. |
| 190 | P | Red-tailed Wheatear | Oenanthe chrysopygia | One on a rocky ridge between Jaisalmer and Sam. |



Red tailed Wheatear in Desert National Park has a very limited distribution in India as a winter visitor to the Thar Desert. Judging by the state of this rock this must be a favoured song perch

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| <i>Nectariniidae - Sunbirds</i> | | | | |
| 191 | P | Purple Sunbird | Cinnyris asiaticus | Seen on seven days with a max. day count of twenty in the Nalsarovar area. |
| <i>Passeridae - Sparrows</i> | | | | |
| 192 | | Yellow-throated Sparrow | Gymnoris xanthocollis | Ten at Tal Chappar; up to five at both Siana and Mount Abu. |
| 193 | P | House Sparrow | Passer domesticus | Fairly common throughout but huge spectacular flocks including extremely well marked males (which may account for almost certainly incorrect reports of Spanish Sparrow) in the Desert National Park. |
| <i>Estrildidae - Waxbills</i> | | | | |
| 194 | | Indian Silverbill | Euodice malabarica | Seen on seven days with a typical day count of ten. |
| 195 | P | Green Avadavat | Amandava formosa | Five superb birds including a couple of well marked males took quite a bit of finding at Mount Abu. |
| <i>Motacillidae - Pipits & Wagtails</i> | | | | |
| 196 | | Western Yellow Wagtail | Motacilla flava | One in the Little Rann of Kutch and five in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 197 | | Grey Wagtail | Motacilla cinerea | One at Mount Abu. |
| 198 | P | White Wagtail | Motacilla alba | Twenty on the lawns of the Lallgarh Palace garden included at least two ssp; a few other roadside birds and ten in the Nalsarovar area. |



It was an anxious search of more than an hour before we found the inexplicably rare Green Avadavat in degraded scrub at 1300m at Mount Abu which was far from pristine habitat

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| 199 | White-browed Wagtail | Motacilla maderaspatensis | One on the village tank at Tal Chappar. |
| 200 | Paddyfield Pipit | Anthus rufulus | Five in the Nalsarovar area. |
| 201 | P Tawny Pipit | Anthus campestris | Seen on six days with a max. day count of five at Tal Chappar. |



Tawny Pipit at Navatalar



Trumpeter Finch in Desert National Park has a minuscule distribution in India and was a country tick for me

Fringillidae - Finches

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| 202 | P | Trumpeter Finch | <i>Bucanetes githagineus</i> | Five on a rocky bluff South of Sam in Desert National Park. |
| 203 | | Common Rosefinch | <i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i> | One striking male with an orange (rather than pink) head and breast at Mount Abu. |



It was very satisfying to find White capped Bunting at Mount Abu, especially two well marked males, having failed to do so several times previously, but sadly with the very strong back light I couldn't get a better photo than this

Emberizidae - Buntings

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| 204 | P | White-capped Bunting | <i>Emberiza stewarti</i> | Two superb males together at Mount Abu were a very satisfying find. |
| 205 | P | Black-headed Bunting | <i>Emberiza melanocephala</i> | Ten in a mixed flock of Red headed Buntings in farmland to the east of Nalsarovar. |
| 206 | P | Red-headed Bunting | <i>Emberiza bruniceps</i> | Ten in a mixed flock of Black headed Buntings in farmland to the East of Nalsarovar including some stunning almost full breeding plumage males. |



Red headed Bunting was another very satisfying find, especially in stunning breeding plumage