

## SOUTH INDIA

February 1-19 2016



This encounter between a Spectacled Cobra and a Stripe-necked Mongoose at Nagarhole National Park was the sighting of a life time! It was one of many great highlights on this tour. (Dion Hobcroft)

### TOUR REPORT

This was one of the most enjoyable and successful tours I have led. We had such a remarkable run of great sightings with a very convivial and enjoyable bunch of fellow travellers.

Our first morning saw us departing Bangalore in our trusty bus driven by Lokesh and heading south and west towards Mysore. Halfway through this drive we detoured to the village of Kokkre Bellur, famous for its nesting colonies of Painted Stork and Spot-billed Pelicans. These giant wetland birds nest in the trees amongst this peaceful village's houses and allow people to get exceptionally close without disturbance. There was excellent birding in this village area with ricefields holding flocks of shorebirds including an impressive 100 Black-tailed Godwits, Green, Common and Wood Sandpipers, even a couple of Temminck's Stints further south than where they are regularly recorded. The major highlight was a stunning tame female White-naped Woodpecker, a fairly scarce endemic. Other notables included Cotton Pygmy-goose, Red-naped Ibis, Crested Serpent-Eagle, Bronze-winged Jacana, Coppersmith Barbet, Indian Golden Oriole, Chestnut-tailed Starling, Purple-rumped Sunbird, White-browed Wagtail, Indian Peafowl and Grey Francolin. After enjoying the best of the morning we continued through to Mysore taking in a tasty lunch (complete with White-cheeked Barbet) and having a siesta in our beautiful hotel. In the late afternoon we visited the Sri Chamundeshwari Temple, dedicated to the goddess Parvati on the summit of the Chamuni Hills. Providing a fine vista over the city it was home to our first Bonnet Macaques and Three-striped Palm Squirrels. In the

quieter corners we found our first Indian Black Robins, Ashy Drongos, Greenish Warblers, and a female Indian Paradise Flycatcher with the best sighting being a pair of Blue-capped Rock-Thrush.

The following morning we found ourselves eating our breakfast of muffins, croissants, bananas and boiled eggs on the edge of the Ranganthitoo Wildlife Sanctuary. There were a lot of birds commuting over the farmland including a solitary Bar-headed Goose and pair of Tawny Eagles. The fields held more species including well coloured Red Avadavats, a big flock of winter-plumaged Baya Weavers and a pair of White-rumped Munias. We found our first Black-rumped Flamebacks, Green Bee-eaters, Grey and White Wagtails, Indian Grey Hornbills, Indian Rollers and several Pale-billed Flowerpeckers. With the sanctuary open for business, we took a fantastic boat trip around the waterbird nesting colonies on seven islands. Each island was packed with nesting birds including Painted and Asian Openbill Storks, Spot-billed Pelican, Great and Indian Cormorant, Eurasian Spoonbill, Intermediate and Little Egrets and Black-crowned Night-Heron. Scarcer or less conspicuous birds included River Tern, the superb, dapper Great Thick-knee, the giant Stork-billed Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher and a colony of nesting Streak-throated Swallows building their mud bottle nests under a sandstone overhang. Several enormous Mugger Crocodiles were basking on the rocks, powerful jaws ajar whilst a large camp of Indian Flying-foxes proved entertaining.



It is difficult to get as close as this to Painted Storks anywhere in my travels except Kokkre Bellur. (Dion Hobcroft)

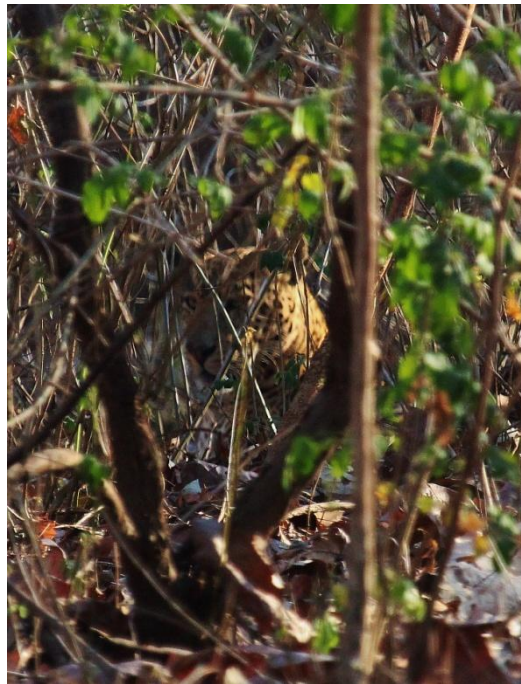
After all of this action we took in a tour of the sublime Mysore Palace, ivory, teak, rosewood, bejewelled howdahs, and thrones of gold, superb murals and more fabulous grandeur of a time only recently past. After a lunch highlighted by tandoori vegetables and winter-brewed chai marsala we drove to our accommodation near Nagarhole National Park. A few stops on the way produced the two endemic larks of the region, Jerdon's Bushlark and the cinnamon crested Malabar Lark. The hotel gardens were alive with birds. Highlights included Forest Wagtail, Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike, showy male Indian Paradise Flycatchers including a stunning white morph, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Eurasian Hoopoe (here the bright rufous Malabar subspecies), a male Blue-capped Rock-Thrush, lovely Tawny-bellied Babblers, a pair of Puff-throated Babblers and a timid Indian Pitta that gave some views.



Not many predators or humans wish to run the gauntlet to the waterbird nesting colonies located on islands in the Cauvery River at Ranganthitoo. The Mugger Crocodiles act as security. (Dion Hobcroft)

Every tour generally has a magic day and today would be ours with two exceptional sightings. It started with a morning safari in Nagarhole, exploring the teak woodlands and nullahs of the Kabini Dam. We were soon amongst the mammals sighting numerous Chital, several Sambar, sounders of Wild Boar, troops of Black-footed Langurs and our first Muntjac. The first of seven Asian Elephants for the day was an impressive tusker, and equally impressive was an enormous bull Gaur. We enjoyed several beautiful and difficult bird species to sight including Red Spurfowl, the beautiful Grey Junglefowl and a glowing Orange-headed Thrush. Both Jungle Owlet and Indian Scops-Owl were much appreciated. An explosion of alarm calls from the Chital and then the Sambar and Black-footed Langurs told us a predator was on the move and all of a sudden a beautiful male Leopard strode into view out of the lantana thicket for a rare sighting were it walked towards and parallel past the group; truly a fabulous encounter. More birds followed including "Malabar" Greater Flameback, an Osprey, Malabar Parakeet, White-headed Starling and both Indian and Velvet-fronted

Nuthatch. Back at the lodge we returned to the area of the Indian Pitta, and several people improved their views of this timid individual.



A male Leopard basks in the morning sun, shrouded in thick Lantana at Nagarhole. We had two Leopard sightings on this tour, both at Nagarhole. (Dion Hobcroft)

After a welcome siesta we returned to the forest and what initially was proving to be a fairly relaxed drive soon turned pear-shaped when we spotted a Stripe-necked Mongoose that had discovered and harassed a very large Spectacled Cobra that was fully hooded up and exhaling like an express train. At one stage the mongoose went right up to the cobra's face and bit at it which sent the cobra backwards, but there was no sign of any damage to the cobra's face and then the mongoose went about digging and exploring but never keeping too far away. It was like it was softening up the cobra for the kill but was certainly in no hurry. Unfortunately we ran out of time in the strictly governed tiger reserve and had to leave. It had been a once in a lifetime encounter, even our local guide had never seen such a thing. We found a few more new birds including Indian Pygmy and Streak-throated Woodpeckers and the chunky Ashy Woodswallow. After dinner folks who were up for it went on a short night walk to check out a fruiting fig. The bright orange fruits attracted a crowd of Indian Flying-foxes and more diligent searching discovered two Asian Palm Civets, cat-like carnivores. Further exploration discovered the arboreal Wroughton's Rat and a fast view of a tree-mouse! It was time for bed after an outstanding day in the office.

We were back at it again the following morning exploring the park by jeep. New birds included the beautiful Orange Minivet, the scarce Grey-headed Fish-Eagle, a Pin-tailed Snipe feeding out in the open, a female Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and Verditer Flycatcher. New mammals included a pair of Golden Jackals and a party of Smooth Otters fishing in the bay. The overall highlight was another fine male Leopard discovered basking in the morning sun in a thicket close to the road. With patience we managed some reasonable photos. Following breakfast we birded again in the hotel gardens and had quite a lively session with great views of Vernal Hanging-Parrot, White-spotted Fantail, a pair of Western Crowned Warblers and a fine male Blue-throated Flycatcher. Our

afternoon activity was centred on boat trip exploring the bays of the national park. Brown-headed Gull, Eurasian Teal, more than one hundred Woolly-necked Storks, a single Streak-throated Swallow were notable amongst a huge variety of wetland birds. The most unusual sightings were of a single White-rumped Needletail, a scarce endemic forest swift and once at the jetty a small flock of Small Pratincoles came hawking by. We had further excellent views of a trio of Smooth Otters munching on fish they had caught. The shoreline was covered in impressive herds of hoofed mammals including Chital, Sambar, Gaur, Wild Boar and a sprinkling of Asian Elephants.

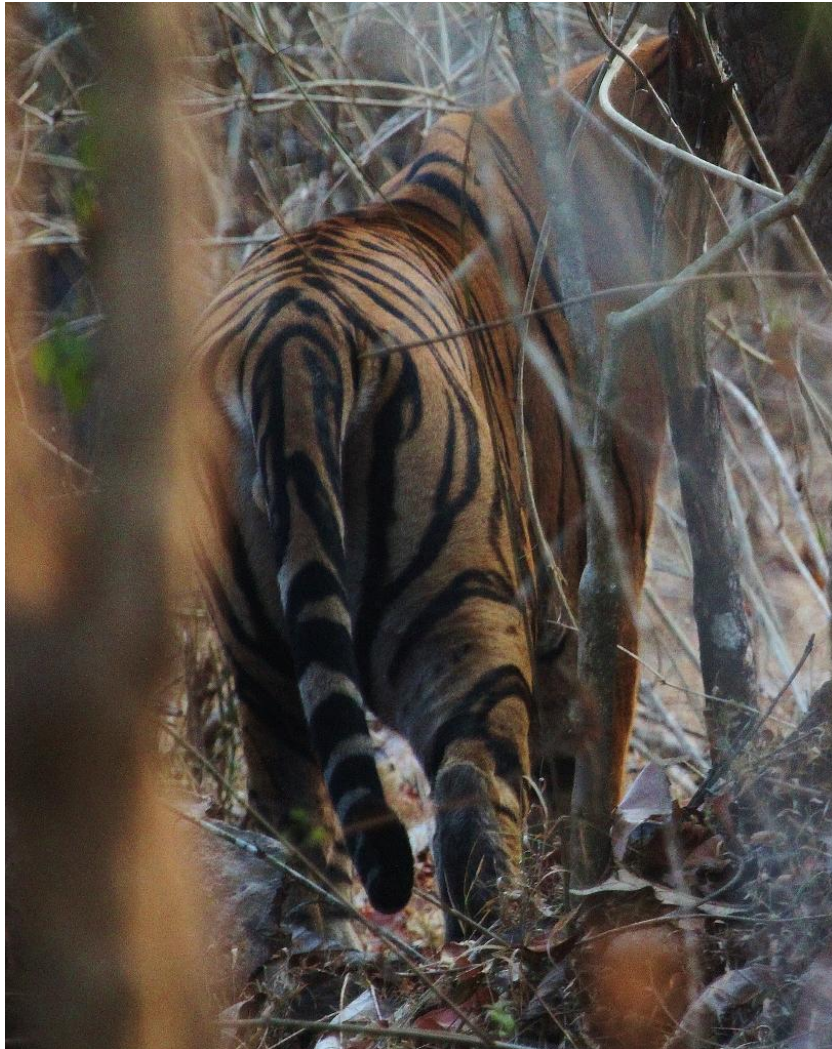


It is a rare event to see the spectacular White-bellied Woodpecker at or below eye-level. We enjoyed some 11 species of woodpecker on this tour, the teak forests being especially diverse for this family of birds. (Dion Hobcroft)

Our last full day in Nagarhole provided excellent birding, woodpeckers, eight species of more than fifty individuals being a major feature of the day. The morning belonged to an outstandingly cooperative female White-bellied Woodpecker. We watched it skirmish with a Greater Racket-tailed Drongo. It came down to feed on a log on the ground next to us and appeared quite muppet-like as it played peek-a-boo. Other good sightings included Green Imperial-Pigeon, Rufous Woodpecker, "Malabar" Large Woodshrike, Blue-faced Malkoha, timid White-browed Bulbul, and both Jerdon's and Gold-fronted Leafbirds. The afternoon session provided great views of Red-headed Vulture, Common Hawk-Cuckoo, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Lesser Yellownappe and a fantastic Heart-spotted Woodpecker. A humid low pressure front was a bonus for aerial birds and we enjoyed an "Edinburgh Air Show" of Indian White-rumped Needletail, Alpine Swift, Little Swift, Crested Treeswift and Asian Palm Swift. Mammals as ever were outstanding and we picked up another very close Stripe-necked Mongoose and had a finale with an Asian Elephant crossing the main road next to us giving the nasal "squeak" call, a sign of annoyance at our close proximity.

A last safari drive at Nagarhole was where we hit the jackpot. Things started slowly with a light fog, and fairly quiet bird activity. Things picked up with a massive mixed flock that held Indian Scimitar-Babbler and Black-naped Monarch amongst more usual suspects. It was when Prem said "Tiger" that things went ballistic. There a strapping male Tiger striding down a road, parallel and close to us. It stopped, looked directly at us and then kept on striding. We approached for more views before it headed off into the thick undergrowth. Everyone was left a little shell-shocked as Tiger is very difficult in South India. Although there are good populations in Nagarhole and the contiguous

Bandipur and Wynaad Sanctuaries, Tigers typically keep invisible. To encounter the “Great Cat” was true serendipity. After this it was difficult to focus on the birds but we enjoyed more fabulous views of White-bellied Woodpecker, a pair of Common Flamebacks (quite a scarce species here) and a fast Nilgiri Flowerpecker. We departed Nagarhole feeling very elated with our extraordinary success in this wonderful park. We commenced our drive to Mudumalai and hit an unexpected problem in road closure for resurfacing just short of our accommodation. We had no choice except to grin and bear it. We killed sometime birding in a scrubby field area and picked up Large Grey Babbler, Bay-backed Shrike, more White-browed Bulbuls and a distant Pallid Harrier. Eventually the road re-opened, and after the usual chaos, jostling and some traffic directing and we made it through to Mudumalai.



We were very lucky to see this male Tiger in Nagarhole. I was able to get a few tail end shots as it disappeared but it did give an excellent side on view walking parallel to us. The important thing is to make sure everybody can see it before the photography! Interestingly Tiger populations are increasing in South India but they are not as reliably seen as they are in North India where some individuals are more habituated to tourist vehicles. (Dion Hobcroft).

It was to be an outstanding morning, hard to go wrong when you start with Indian Pitta bouncing about on the lawn for ten minutes in the telescope! We moved to some short grass scrubby fields, enjoying a delightful covey of Jungle Bush-quail, a pair of Spotted Owlets, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Malabar Lark and a Booted Warbler. When Rajkumar and Rajeev erupted into a screaming state of high excitement it had to be something special and indeed it was: a pair of White-bellied Minivets.

These are birder's birds, rare, beautiful, endemic, enigmatic and elusive. A Hume's Whitethroat and Chestnut-shouldered Petronia were given scant attention as we took off after the minivets! After breakfast we entered the jungle edge, walking quietly, carefully keeping an eye out for elephants. A White-bellied Blue Flycatcher showed well, Asian Fairy-Bluebird, our first Yellow-browed Bulbuls and a superb Brown Wood-Owl were amongst the rewards on offer. After a lengthy siesta we ventured out in the late afternoon to the edge of the sanctuary exploring a road to a village. We picked up more new birds like Crested Hawk-Eagle, Common Woodshrike and very good views of a male Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and White-browed Fantail. It was the mammals that stole the show as we enjoyed not only a very close herd of Gaur but a superb bull Asian Elephant with fine tusks that crossed the road in front of us. This is not what you want to meet on foot in the forest! As it became dark we started looking for nocturnal animals. We found a superb Indian Chameleon that was off to bed for the evening. First up we had two Indian Nightjars, followed by what was probably a Jerdon's Nightjar in flight. One vehicle was lucky enough to get a good view of the elusive Indian Mouse Deer also called the Chevrotain. Then a Brown Fish-owl was located at a reservoir and gave a good view. Heading for home a Jerdon's Nightjar was located and gave a decent view on the ground. This was followed by an Indian Hare, a Small Indian Civet and a presumed Lesser Bandicoot Rat. It was lively end to another seriously good day.



A rare Indian endemic, the White-bellied Minivet was jagged on the main road, which had our guides Rajkumar and Rajish in full panic, screaming mode! The pair gave some good views but have a unique talent for just keeping a little bit further ahead. This is the male with the beautiful orange-pink chest. It was only the second time I have seen this enigmatic bird of the white Acacia thorn scrub habitat that has been widely chopped, burnt and cleared. (Dion Hobcroft)

Starting a little later the next day because of fog, the day slowly warmed up, and with it the birdlife. Loten's Sunbird was scoped where we had our coffee. Eventually we found a co-operative Malabar Whistling-thrush, our first one proving exceedingly shy. A roosting Brown Fish-owl, White-rumped Shama, a stunning white morph Indian Paradise Flycatcher, the scarce Brown-breasted Flycatcher, a well-coloured male Red-breasted Flycatcher and a bathing Indian Blackbird rounded out our final birding session at Mudumalai. We farewelled the friendly staff at Jungle Retreat and commenced the drive uphill via Sighur Ghat to Ooty, the well known hill station of the Nilgiri. On the way we collected Sateesh, our local guide who would accompany us to the end of the tour. We made a few stops collecting Chestnut-headed Bee-eater and a Common Rosefinch on the way. We checked in to the historic and elegantly posh Savoy Hotel. After a great lunch we visited the nearby Cairnhill Forest. It was fairly wintery and cool and the birds subdued. Almost immediately we found Black-

and-orange Flycatcher, a very cute montane endemic. Whilst searching for Nilgiri Blue Robin we had a major stroke of luck when Sateesh discovered a fine Nilgiri Thrush digging in the leaf litter that eventually provided a very good view of this hyper-elusive specialty. A Large-billed Leaf-Warbler came over the foraging thrush. A beautiful Nilgiri Flycatcher was spotted down low in some thick shrubs and proved tame and approachable.



The Indian Chameleon is the only representative of its family in South Asia and is not easy to find. This was one was spotted in Mudumalai National Park just on dusk. (Dion Hobcroft)

Our full day in Ooty commenced with exploring Doda Betta, the highest peak in the Nilgiri, just over 2500 metres. The roadside birding produced our first Nilgiri Laughingthrushes that performed well. We had a surprise pair of Gaur amble across the road ahead of us, the male a real bovine behemoth. Further up the road we found a pair of Nilgiri Wood Pigeons taking gravel from the roadside, and a further flock of eight at the top car park area. Hooray for this, as this nomadic bird can be difficult to connect with. Careful scouting in the forest near the summit yielded the Nilgiri Blue Robin, another potential endemic trouble-maker and it could not have been better behaved as we watched it for a good ten minutes foraging in the dense undergrowth at close range. With the key birds all seen well we went for a bit of exploration in Ooty visiting the very colourful market, examining a lot of exotic produce. After lunch and a break we went down the mountain range to a well grassed granite hillside. A short burst of playback and up popped a magnificent pair of Painted Bush-quail that pirouetted this way and that for ten minutes. What a great bird, a real beauty. The granite rocks held some colourful South Indian Rock Agamas as an added bonus. We decided to check the Botanic Gardens in the off chance we could find the rare Kashmir Flycatcher wintering. No luck with this but several good birds including Grey-headed Canary- Flycatcher, a Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Malabar Whistling-thrush, Indian Blackbird and White-spotted Fantail.





This massive bull Asian Elephant was located just before he crossed the road ahead of us at dusk in Mudumalai. The big tuskers like this are especially dangerous and unpredictable claiming more than 500 lives per annum in India. (Dion Hobcroft)

We departed Ooty early for the lengthy drive via Pollachi and the Animalai Tiger Sanctuary to Valparai. We made a stop halfway down the main Nilgiri Highway where a large number of birds were attracted to fruiting trees. The best was a shy Rusty-tailed Flycatcher that unfortunately gave most people the slip, whilst a pair of tiny Crimson-backed Sunbirds were considerably better behaved. Once in the Tiger Sanctuary we began winding up the Animalai mountains. A fortuitous stop in a grove of their favoured figs turned up the scarce Yellow-throated Bulbul that gave repeat good views for this typically shy bird. A bit further up the hills and another major bonus, a small herd of Nilgiri Tahr, the endangered mountain goat I feared we would miss with the seasonal closure of the Eravikulam National Park during their lambing season. A large male was present, quite approachable although he showed his temper at a local tourist who pushed his luck by getting too close! Further up again, gaining altitude and enjoying a cooling of the temperature we found a few of the very impressive Nilgiri Langurs, sooty black with a golden cape. Another stop turned up the endemic Southern Hill Myna and several Grey-fronted Green-Pigeons whistling and even mating in the scope views. We had one last major surprise for the day, and one we had made this special journey for. One of the most endangered primates in Asia, the Lion-tailed Macaque. We had the privilege to be guided to a troop of about ten of these most bizarre monkeys, unlike any other macaque with their lion like mane of blondish hair. We enjoyed the behaviours as they ate guavas, flashed their teeth, indulged in mating and really did not give a hoot about us or our close proximity. Tired but happy from an exceptional day that had far exceeded my expectations, we made it through to our lovely hotel, our bungalows overlooking a tea plantation.

The following day, after a comfortable evening, we retraced our journey downhill from Valparai making a few good stops on the way. We relocated the troupe of Lion-tailed Macaques seen yesterday. Then we observed Malabar Grey Hornbill, Mountain Imperial-Pigeon, Dark-fronted Babbler, a brief Little Spiderhunter, the red-faced Malabar Barbet and after it had seemed the Indian Yellow Tit had given us the slip it was the only bird we could see for about ten minutes! There was a

lot of bird activity. We then journeyed into the Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, a fairly complicated site logistically, run by the Forest Department army style. VIPS participating in a tiger survey had taken two of our bungalows and there was no choice but for us to double up for one night. The really excellent group took it in their stride. In the afternoon we went for a hike. The bird activity was outstanding as it seemed we walked through continuous mixed flocks. A male Malabar Trogon was very well received, the stunning White-bellied Treepie made an appearance; a shy Flame-throated Bulbul was spotted amongst a bunch of birds including Lesser Yellownape, Heart-spotted Woodpecker and another Malabar Barbet. An unfortunate sighting was the burrow of a pangolin dug out by poachers. In the evening we watched a pair of Indian Giant Flying-Squirrels interact in the trees in the campground. They were joined by a very tame pair of Brown Boobooks, a species of small compact hawk-owl.



Indian Pitta was seen very well in Mudumalai. (Dion Hobcroft)

At dawn we were woken by the caricature primate resonating accelerating boom, “wook-wook-wook” of the Nilgiri Langurs. The birding walk in the morning to the north of camp took us to sandstone outcrops overlooking fine bamboo jungle. It was again alive with birdlife, the major sighting being a pair of Rufous Babblers, a famously timid and scarce South Indian endemic. It took a while but eventually everyone had a good view. Flame-throated Bulbul, White-bellied Woodpecker and another male Malabar Trogon were amongst the catch. Part of our package here included a bamboo raft on the large reservoir, tribal dancing and an afternoon safari India style which made for a bit of fun. We spotted a few good things as well including an adult Rufous-bellied Eagle, two Grey-headed Fish-Eagles, White-bellied Treepie and a Great Eared-Nightjar. We saw a quite a lot of Gaur, Chital, Sambar but the return night drive proved a quiet affair with just a glimpse of Jerdon’s Nightjar of note.

We were on the move again this time departing Parambikulam and heading to the hills of Kerala at Munnar via the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary. Just before departing Parambikulam, Sateesh pulled off a

major coup by spotting a pair of Grey-headed Bulbuls. This quiet, scarce and inconspicuous endemic is a tough bird to find and having missed it in Mudumalai we were very grateful to connect with it. By the time we had dealt with bureaucratic rigmarole of various border crossings, forestry checks for sandalwood smugglers and renewed our road tax pass we were in the extensive Chinnar WLS in the heat of the day. Whilst trawling for Jungle Prinia we had excellent luck with a low flying Legge's Hawk-Eagle giving a prolonged sighting and photographic opportunities. We were quite keen to see the Grizzled Giant Squirrel, a rare species in India so we killed some time having a long lunch. We were not overly hopeful as they are much scarcer and inconspicuous than the Indian Giant Squirrel. Our luck held though and we made the breakthrough and enjoyed excellent views of this lovely animal. As we gained altitude through extensive tea gardens, crops of cardamom and sandalwood forests we made some more opportunistic stops getting very good views of nesting Hill Swallows that then led us to our first Kerala Laughingthrushes. Our hotel in Munnar was quite well received after two nights in the remote jungle of Parambikulam.



The alpha male Lion-tailed Macaque gives a typical facial gesture with eyes wide open and showing the impressive dentition, all necessary in keeping yourself at the top. This spectacular primate is a rare endemic in South India and we made a special detour to see it at Valparai. (Dion Hobcroft)

On a pleasantly cool dawn we found ourselves positioned looking into the gully of a remnant rainforest shola. Prolonged patient peering brought the result of the elusive White-bellied Blue Robin singing strophes of its catchy jingling song, a lovely skulker. The Kerala Laughingthrush was collecting sticks for a nest and a fine male Indian Blue Robin was joined by an Emerald Dove. We particularly enjoyed an excellent view of the highly skittish Dusky Striped Squirrel, a scarce endemic. A casual stroll after breakfast brought a lot of bird sightings including our first Dusky Crag-martins. The adventurous leader explored a flooded cave for bats but found only nesting Indian Swiftlets in the pitch black recesses. Our afternoon activity centred on a gentle uphill hike into the grasslands of the higher Nilgiri peaks. This was due to the closure of Eravikulam National Park during to the sensitive lambing season of the endangered Nilgiri Tahr. The hike was very pleasant, with great views of the mountains and most importantly the specialty Nilgiri Pipit of which we found two

individuals. Several Black Eagles were seen soaring, a Brown-backed Needletail zoomed past and a Plain Prinia perched up. Some trawling for the “monsoonally” vocal Indian Broad-tailed Grassbird did not get a response at this dry time of year.



The Grizzled Giant Squirrel is rare in India, more common in Sri Lanka. It took a bit of patience and some luck to make the breakthrough in Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary. These really are giant squirrels about the size of a House Cat. (Dion Hobcroft)

Sateesh and I had hatched a plan for what was largely a travel day as we had the scarce Yellow-throated Bulbul already under control. So the plan was to head to Thattekad to try for the elusive Sri Lanka Frogmouth. A friend of Sateesh phoned to say he had discovered a roosting bird at Pallambattam much closer, so this was good news. We arrived and walked into the tall luxuriant lowland jungle for about a kilometre and there perched at eye-level only two yards away was a beautiful chestnut, silver spotted female Sri Lanka Frogmouth. The frogmouth remained completely relaxed in our presence; it was a great result. We returned to our original drive schedule on largely winding roads and made it to our luxurious hotel in Periyar in the late afternoon where we rested up.

A morning stroll along the entrance road of the Periyar Tiger Reserve was rich in birdlife. Two species were particularly well received—a fine pair of Great Hornbills were a good result (especially for Grace) and a stunning Black Baza perched low down and close was a rare photographic opportunity for this flamboyant hawk. A supporting cast included Malabar Grey Hornbill, “Malabar” Great Flameback, Heart-spotted and Rufous Woodpecker, Malabar Barbet amongst many others. While some folks went shopping some others visited a nearby marshy paddock that was heaving with snipe, the great majority undoubtedly Pin-tailed Snipe. The afternoon belonged to the search for the elusive Wynaad Laughingthrush. We met two trackers and proceeded deeper into the jungle. A Tiger scratching post was impressive with the claws cutting impressive scars into the bark of the tree. Some crashing in the bamboo proved to be Gaur that disappeared unseen by us. A pair of

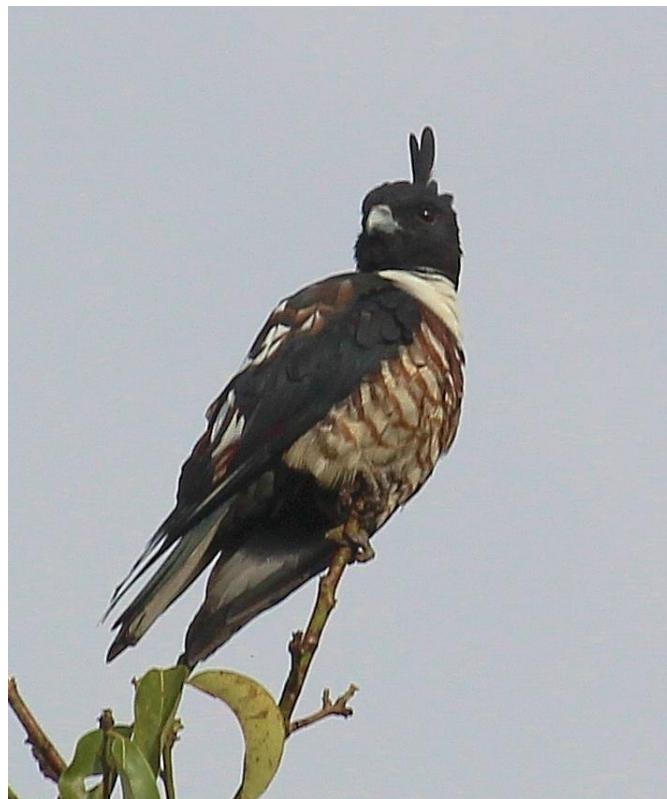
Rufous Babblers gave good views and a Little Spiderhunter was also well behaved, better than the previous one. After two hours of searching up hill and down dale it was not looking good. As we approached an exit gate Sateesh said we should take this side track just for one last try and literally 50 metres in we found a trio of the Wynaad Laughingthrush. One bird holding a stick in its bill perched on a low stem with wings quivering. The other two were buried in the leaf litter, the leaves flying as they foraged industriously. The views all up were excellent and as this species is amongst the most difficult endemics in South India we were definitely chuffed. How often is this the way, you search all day and find the bird in the car park! It is true the harder you work to see a bird the more you appreciate it.



This male Painted Bush-Quail near Ooty was one of several very difficult South Indian endemics we enjoyed fine views of. Others included Nilgiri Thrush, Yellow-throated and Gray-headed Bulbul, Wynaad Laughingthrush, both species of Blue Robin, Nilgiri Pipit and the Broad-tailed Grassbird. (Dion Hobcroft)

Our last full day of birding started with a walk around the main Periyar dam site. The Great Hornbills were relocated and the scope views were very good of these forest giants. Dawn did very well spotting a family of eight Smooth Otters that came right out of the water and loafed briefly on the bank, rolling on their backs and chasing each other around before re-immersing themselves. The weather was cool and cloudy with quite strong wind and this kept the birdlife rather subdued. We enjoyed a Black Eagle, Woolly-necked Stork, Grey-fronted Green-pigeon, Greater Flameback and Malabar Barbet whilst a Mouse Deer frustratingly disappeared on us. The afternoon was spent enjoying some sizable mixed flocks, one containing twenty species. Fairy Bluebird, a truly stunning Malabar Parakeet, White-bellied Treepie, Forest Wagtail were spotted amongst the woodpeckers, nuthatches, drongos and minivets. Before dinner we took a bit of a punt on trying to search for the elusive Slender Loris. Although we had no luck with this Sheila enjoyed the alarm calling Sambar at close range! Dion spotted a Long-tailed Tree Mouse climbing about in a bamboo thicket. As we wound up the hill seeing very little except large vehicles Dion spotted some eyeshine. It proved to be a pair of Jerdon's Palm Civets in the canopy giving some quite good views for a short while as they actively climbed about the sub-canopy revealing bits and pieces of themselves especially the long black tail and very dark lithe body.

The tour was coming to an end, but we hoped for one more bird. Not just any bird, the most famous skulker endemic to South India, the Broad-tailed Grassbird. After a lengthy drive spotting a fine dark morph Booted Eagle and a migrant Richard's Pipit on the way we arrived at some farms with tall glades of extensive grass amidst fields of recently burnt and cut grass. Sateesh was concerned because the destruction of the grasslands was extensive and Dion was concerned because it was heating up and getting windy, hardly conditions for spotting a secretive thicket dweller. After lengthy scouting a single bird piped up with its metallic chinking contact call. Those who were prepared wandered deep into a positively marshy glade and adopted the time-honoured "spot the skulker" position. The grassbird all of a sudden erupted out of thick cover and dived into bushes right in front of us where it remained invisible for the next twenty minutes. Eventually it was lured across a gap, creeping like a mouse across the ground giving very close views, too close for binoculars. It pumped its broad tail and displayed its unstreaked upperparts. As a grand finale it gave one more display flight. We were delighted to see this enigmatic, almost tapaculo like grassbird. We descended from the ghats, arrived in Kochi to freshen up in our day room hotel and then it was time to jet home. It had been a spectacularly successful, wonderful tour with a great bunch of folks. With many thanks to Sateesh, our great man on the ground and trusty Lokesh who took on the Indian traffic with relish. Other wonderful people to be thanked included Thomas in Mysore, Prem, Anil and Rajiv in Nagarhole and Rajesh, Rajkumar and Daniel in Mudumalai.



A lovely Black Baza gave a great view in Periyar where it is a winter visitor. (Dion Hobcroft)

## BIRD LIST

Lesser Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*)

Bar-headed Goose (*Anser indicus*)

Cotton Pygmy-Goose (*Nettapus coromandelianus*)

Indian Spotbill (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)

Garganey (*Anas querquedula*)

Green-winged (Common) Teal (*Anas crecca*)

Grey Francolin (*Francolinus pondicerianus*)

Jungle Bush-Quail (*Perdica asiatica*)

Painted Bush-Quail (*Perdica erythrorhyncha*)

Red Spurfowl (*Galloperdix spadicea*)

Grey Junglefowl (*Gallus sonneratii*)

Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*)



Gray Junglefowl was regularly encountered on this tour. (Dion Hobcroft)

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)

Asian Openbill (*Anastomus oscitans*)

Woolly-necked Stork (*Ciconia episcopus*)

Painted Stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*)

Indian Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*)

Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Little Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*)

Oriental Darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*)

Spot-billed Pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*)



A Spot-billed Pelican at Kokkre Bellur. (Dion Hobcroft)

Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)

Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*)

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

Intermediate Egret (*Mesophoyx intermedia*)

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*)



[Eastern] Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus [ibis] coromandus*)

Indian Pond-Heron (*Ardeola grayii*)

Striated Heron (*Butorides striatus*)

Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*)

Red-naped Ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*)

Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*)

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)



Red-headed Vulture at Nagarhole. (Dion Hobcroft)

Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*)

Oriental Honey-buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*)

Black Baza (*Aviceda leuphotes*)

Red-headed Vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*)

Crested Serpent-Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*)

Crested Hawk-Eagle (*Nisaetus cirrhatus*)

Legge's Hawk-Eagle (*Nisaetus kelaarti*)

Rufous-bellied Eagle (*Lophotriorchis kienerii*)

Black Eagle (*Ictinaetus malayensis*)

Booted Eagle (*Hieraetus pennatus*)

Tawny Eagle (*Aquila rapax*)

Eurasian Marsh-Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*)

Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*)

Crested Goshawk (*Accipiter trivirgatus*)

Shikra (*Accipiter badius*)

Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*)

Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Grey-headed Fish-Eagle (*Ichthyophaga humilis*)



Legge's Hawk-Eagle is found only in South India and Sri Lanka, this bird gave a great view in Chinnar. (Dion Hobcroft)

White-breasted Waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*)

Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*)

Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*)

Great Thick-knee (*Esacus recurvirostris*)

Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*)

Yellow-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus malabaricus*)

Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*)

Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*)

Pheasant-tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*)

Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus*)

Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*)

Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*)

Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*)

Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*)

Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*)

Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*)

Temminck's Stint (*Calidris temminckii*)

Pin-tailed Snipe (*Gallinago stenura*)

Small Pratincole (*Glareola lactea*)

Brown-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*)

Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*)

River Tern (*Sterna aurantia*)

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)

Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon (*Columba elphinstonii*)

Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

Spotted Dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*)

Laughing Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*)

Emerald Dove (*Chalcophaps indica*)

Grey-fronted Green-Pigeon (*Treron affinis*)

Yellow-footed Green-Pigeon (*Treron phoenicopterus*)

Green Imperial-Pigeon (*Ducula aenea*)

Mountain Imperial-Pigeon (*Ducula badia*)



The most difficult endemic pigeon is the Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon that is nomadic following the fruit. We had good luck with this species at Ooty. (Dion Hobcroft)

Common Hawk-Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx varius*)

Asian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*)

Blue-faced Malkoha (*Phaenicophaeus viridirostris*)

Greater Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*)

Indian Scops-Owl (*Otus bakkamoena*)

Oriental Scops-Owl (*Otus sunia*) Heard only

Brown Fish-Owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis*)

Jungle Owlet (*Glaucidium radiatum*)

Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*)

Brown Wood-Owl (*Strix leptogrammica*)

Brown Boobook (*Ninox scutulata*)



The last thing many a flying squirrel ever sees is a Brown Wood-Owl, this individual sleeping the day away in a mango tree in thick bamboo jungle at Mudumalai. (Dion Hobcroft)

Sri Lanka Frogmouth (*Batrachostomus monileger*)

Great Eared-Nightjar (*Lyncornis macrotis*)

Jerdon's Nightjar (*Caprimulgus atripennis*)

Indian Nightjar (*Caprimulgus asiaticus*)

White-rumped Needletail (*Zoonavena sylvatica*)

Brown-backed Needletail (*Hirundapus giganteus*)

Indian Swiftlet (*Aerodramus unicolor*)

Little Swift (*Apus affinis*)

Alpine Swift (*Apus melba*)

Asian Palm-Swift (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*)



We were delighted to be shown this Sri Lanka Frogmouth female by a friend of Sateesh. (Dion Hobcroft)

Crested Treeswift (*Hemiprocne coronata*)

Malabar Trogon (*Harpactes fasciatus*)

Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)

Stork-billed Kingfisher (*Pelargopsis capensis*)

White-throated Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*)

Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*)

Blue-bearded Bee-eater (*Nyctyornis athertoni*)

Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*)

Blue-tailed Bee-eater (*Merops philippinus*)

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater (*Merops leschenaulti*)

Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*)

Eurasian Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*)

Malabar Gray Hornbill (*Ocyceros griseus*)

Indian Gray Hornbill (*Ocyceros birostris*)

Great Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*)



The Malabar Gray Hornbill likes the forest understorey where its maniacal cackle often helped locate it. This male was at Periyar. (Dion Hobcroft)

Malabar Barbet (*Psilopogon malabaricus*)

Coppersmith Barbet (*Psilopogon haemacephala*)

Brown-headed Barbet (*Psilopogon zeylanica*) Heard only

White-cheeked Barbet (*Psilopogon viridis*)



A canopy lover, the Malabar Barbet rarely dropped below the tree tops and was difficult to get a decent photograph of!  
(Dion Hobcroft)

Brown-capped Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos nanus*)

Yellow-crowned Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos mahrattensis*)

White-bellied Woodpecker (*Dryocopus javensis*)

Lesser Yellownape (*Picus chlorolophus*)

Streak-throated Woodpecker (*Picus xanthopygaeus*)

Common Flameback (*Dinopium javanense*)

Black-rumped Flameback (*Dinopium benghalense*)

Rufous Woodpecker (*Celeus brachyurus*)

Greater Flameback (*Chrysocolaptes guttacristatus*)

White-naped Woodpecker (*Chrysocolaptes festivus*)

Heart-spotted Woodpecker (*Hemicircus canente*)

Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*)

Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*)

Plum-headed Parakeet (*Psittacula cyanocephala*)



Malabar Parakeet (*Psittacula columboides*)

Vernal Hanging-Parrot (*Loriculus vernalis*)



The Malabar Parakeet, a busy and industrious bird rarely perched still and rarely came out of the shadows. This male broke all the rules at Periyar and glowed in the sun as it was tempted by Lantana berries. (Dion Hobcroft)

Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*)

Large Woodshrike (*Tephrodornis gularis*)

Common Woodshrike (*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*)

Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike (*Hemipus picatus*)

Ashy Woodswallow (*Artamus fuscus*)

Common Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*)

White-bellied Minivet (*Pericrocotus erythropygius*)

Small Minivet (*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*)

Orange Minivet (*Pericrocotus flammeus*)

Large Cuckoo-shrike (*Coracina macei*)

Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike (*Lalage melanoptera*)

Brown Shrike (*Lanius cristatus*)

Bay-backed Shrike (*Lanius vittatus*)

Long-tailed Shrike (*Lanius schach*)

Indian Golden Oriole (*Oriolus kundoo*)

Black-naped Oriole (*Oriolus chinensis*)

Black-hooded Oriole (*Oriolus xanthornus*)

Black Drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus*)

Ashy Drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*)

White-bellied Drongo (*Dicrurus caerulescens*)

Bronzed Drongo (*Dicrurus aeneus*)

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*)

White-spotted Fantail (*Rhipidura albogularis*)

White-browed Fantail (*Rhipidura aureola*)

Black-naped Monarch (*Hypothymis azurea*)

Indian Paradise-Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*)

Rufous Treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*)

White-bellied Treepie (*Dendrocitta leucogastra*)

House Crow (*Corvus splendens*)

Indian Jungle Crow (*Corvus [macrorhynchos] culminatus*)



An elegant endemic, the White-bellied Treepie was always a big hit with the participants. Interestingly they live sympatrically with Rufous Treepie, this species preferring the moister bamboo jungle. This individual was photographed at Periyar. (Dion Hobcroft)

Jerdon's Bushlark (*Mirafra affinis*)

Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark (*Eremopterix griseus*)

Malabar Lark (*Galerida malabarica*)

Dusky Crag-Martin (*Ptyonoprogne concolor*)

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

Wire-tailed Swallow (*Hirundo smithii*)

Hill Swallow (*Hirundo domicola*)

Red-rumped Swallow (*Cecropis daurica*)

Streak-throated Swallow (*Petrochelidon fluvicola*)

Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher (*Culicicapa ceylonensis*)

Cinereous Tit (*Parus cinereus*)

Indian Yellow Tit (*Parus [xanthogenys] aplonotus*)

Indian Nuthatch (*Sitta castanea*)

Velvet-fronted Nuthatch (*Sitta frontalis*)

Gray-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus priocephalus*)

Flame-throated Bulbul (*Pycnonotus gularis*)

Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*)

Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*)

Yellow-throated Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*)

White-browed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus luteolus*)

Yellow-browed Bulbul (*Iole indica*)

Black Bulbul (*Hypsipetes leucocephalus*)

Tickell's Leaf Warbler (*Phylloscopus affinis*)

Greenish Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochiloides*)

Large-billed Leaf Warbler (*Phylloscopus magnirostris*)

Western Crowned Warbler (*Phylloscopus occipitalis*)

Booted Warbler (*Iduna caligata*)

Blyth's Reed-Warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*)

Indian Reed-Warbler (*Acrocephalus [stentoreus] brunnescens*)

Broad-tailed Grassbird (*Schoenicola platyurus*)

Common Tailorbird (*Orthotomus sutorius*)

Gray-breasted Prinia (*Prinia hodgsoni*)

Ashy Prinia (*Prinia socialis*)

Plain Prinia (*Prinia inornata*)

Hume's Whitethroat (*Sylvia althaea*)

Yellow-eyed Babbler (*Chrysomma sinense*) Heard only

Oriental White-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*)

Tawny-bellied Babbler (*Dumetia hyperythra*)

Dark-fronted Babbler (*Rhopocichla atriceps*)

Indian Scimitar-Babbler (*Pomatorhinus horsfieldi*)

Puff-throated Babbler (*Pellorneum ruficeps*)

Brown-cheeked Fulvetta (*Alcippe poiocephala*)

Rufous Babbler (*Turdoides subrufa*)

Large Gray Babbler (*Turdoides malcolmi*)

Jungle Babbler (*Turdoides striata*)

Yellow-billed Babbler (*Turdoides affinis*)

Wynaad Laughingthrush (*Ianthocincla delesserti*)

Black-chinned Laughingthrush (*Trochalopteron cachinnans*)

Kerala Laughingthrush (*Trochalopteron fairbanki*)

Asian Fairy-bluebird (*Irena puella*)

Asian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa latirostris*)

Rusty-tailed Flycatcher (*Muscicapa ruficauda*)

Brown-breasted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa muttui*)

Indian Robin (*Copsychus fulicatus*)

Oriental Magpie-Robin (*Copsychus saularis*)

White-rumped Shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*)

White-bellied Blue-Flycatcher (*Cyornis pallipes*)

Blue-throated Flycatcher (*Cyornis rubeculoides*)

Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*)

Nilgiri Flycatcher (*Eumyias albicaudatus*)

Verditer Flycatcher (*Eumyias thalassinus*)

Indian Blue Robin (*Larvivora brunnea*)

Nilgiri Blue Robin (*Myiomela major*)

White-bellied Blue Robin (*Myiomela albiventris*)

Malabar Whistling-Thrush (*Myophonus horsfieldii*)

Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*)

Black-and-orange Flycatcher (*Ficedula nigrorufa*)

Blue-capped Rock-Thrush (*Monticola cinclorhynchus*)

Siberian Stonechat (*Saxicola maura*)

Pied Bushchat (*Saxicola caprata*)

Orange-headed Thrush (*Geokickla citrina*)

Nilgiri Scaly Thrush (*Zoothera neilgherriensis*)

Indian Blackbird (*Turdus simillimus*)

Southern Hill Myna (*Gracula indica*)

Jungle Myna (*Acridotheres fuscus*)

Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*)

Chestnut-tailed Starling (*Sturnia malabarica*)

White-headed Starling (*Sturnia erythropygia*)

Brahminy Starling (*Temenuchus pagodarum*)

Jerdon's Leafbird (*Chloropsis jerdoni*)

Golden-fronted Leafbird (*Chloropsis aurifrons*)

Pale-billed Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*)

Nilgiri Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum concolor*)

Purple-rumped Sunbird (*Leptocoma zeylonica*)

Crimson-backed Sunbird (*Leptocoma minima*)

Purple Sunbird (*Cinnyris asiaticus*)

Loten's Sunbird (*Cinnyris lotenius*)

Little Spiderhunter (*Arachnothera longirostris*)

Western Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*)

Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*)

White-browed Wagtail (*Motacilla madaraspatensis*)

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)

Richard's Pipit (*Anthus richardi*)

Paddyfield Pipit (*Anthus rufulus*)

Nilgiri Pipit (*Anthus nilghiriensis*)

Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*)

Forest Wagtail (*Dendronanthus indicus*)



A lovely gentle stroll uphill through tea plantations took us into the montane grassland habitat of the specialised Nilgiri Pipit. (Dion Hobcroft)

Common Rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*)

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

Chestnut-shouldered Petronia (*Petronia xanthocollis*)



Baya Weaver (*Ploceus philippinus*)

Red Avadavat (*Amandava amandava*)

Scaly-breasted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*)

White-rumped Munia (*Lonchura striata*)

## **MAMMALS**

Indian Hare (*Lepus nigricollis*)

Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica*)

Grizzled Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*)

Indian Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*)

Dusky Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus*)

Jungle Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus tristriatus*)

Indian Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista philippensis*)

Small Indian Civet (*Viverricula indica*)

Asian Palm-Civet (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*)

Jerdon's Palm-Civet (*Paradoxurus jerdoni*)

Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*)

Leopard (*Panthera pardus*)

Tiger (*Panthera tigris*)

Indian Grey Mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*)

Stripe-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes viticollis*)

Golden Jackal (*Canis aureus*)

Smooth-coated Otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*)

Indian Flying-fox (*Pteropus giganteus*)

Black-footed Grey Langur (*Semnopithecus hypoleucos*)

Tufted Grey Langur (*Semnopithecus priam*)

Nilgiri Langur (*Trachypithecus johni*)

Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*)

Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*)



A Nilgiri Langur feeds unusually on the ground at Parambikulam. The loud caricature “ooo-ooo-ooo-ooo” call is a feature of this lovely leaf monkey with its golden cape. (Dion Hobcroft)

Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)

Indian Spotted Chevrotain (*Moschiola meminna*)

Common Barking Deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*)

Sambar (*Cervus unicolor*)

Chital (*Axis axis*)

Nilgiri Tahr (*Hemitragus hylocrius*)

Gaur (*Bos gaurus*)



A handsome billy Nilgiri Tahr dines out in the Animalai Tiger Sanctuary. (Dion Hobcroft)

Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*)



A huge bull Gaur in Nagarhole National Park was one of several seen on this tour. (Dion Hobcroft)

## REPTILES

Mugger Crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*)

Garden Calotes (*Calotes versicolor*)

South Indian Rock Agama (*Psammophilus dorsalis*)

Indian Chameleon (*Chameleo zeylanicus*)

Spectacled Cobra (*Naja naja*)

