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## North-west India

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*Forest Owlet, Melghat*

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**31 Dec 07 – 1 Jan 08**

**Melghat Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra**

Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra is not exactly on the way to anywhere. Positioned in a low hill range covered in dry degraded teak forest, it was originally set up to protect a dwindling Tiger population. These days, it is questionable whether there are any tigers left to protect in Melghat. Nevertheless, habitat conservation in the area has benefited a number of other endangered animals and plants, as Melghat is one of only a few areas where the recently rediscovered Forest Owlet is known to occur.

Attracted by the lure of this elusive owlet, we decided to start off our "North-west" India trip in the central part of the subcontinent with a brief visit to Melghat. Landing in Nagpur on the last morning of the year, a five-hour drive took us to Parat Wara, which was going to be our base for Melghat and the site of our New Year's Eve celebration. After dumping our belongings in the hotel, the onward drive to Melghat produced many common birds as well as the first goodies in the form of Large Grey Babblers amongst the many Jungle Babblers along the roadside. A perched Spotted Owlet was a good omen for the up-coming afternoon.

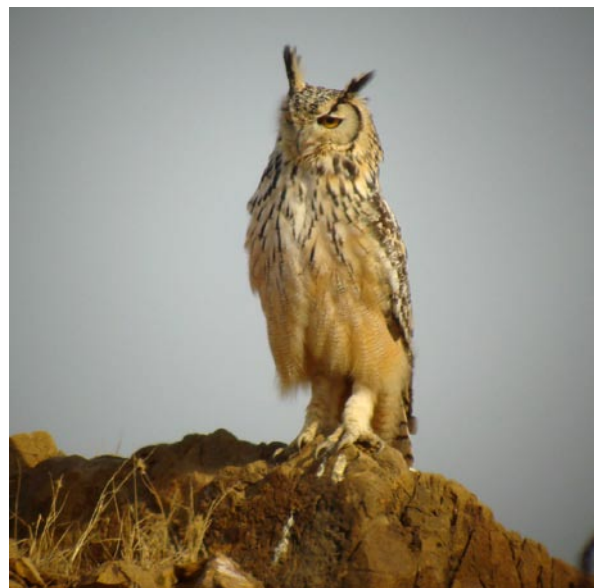
In Melghat, we were welcomed by a local forest warden who is familiar with the owlet's regular haunts. As the afternoon approached quickly, we wasted no time and headed straight for one of the areas frequented by the species. A quick stop on the way there yielded our first perched White-eyed Buzzard, a raptor endemic to the subcontinent. On arrival in the target area, the next major specialties popped up instantly when we spotted three female-type White-bellied Minivets and our first Sulphur-bellied Warbler moving through the scrubby landscape. Our excitement soon reached a climax when we found ourselves within a stone-throw of an openly perched Forest Owlet. Telescope views of this individual left us open-mouthed, and it was a golden opportunity for photo shots of this rarely-seen bird. We must have spent more than an hour enjoying this bird, interrupted by brief encounters with White-browed Fantails and Common Woodshrikes.

When it was time to carry on, we found it difficult to leave the owlet behind and continue to a riparian area where we found Siberian Chiffchaffs in the river vegetation and Black-rumped Flamebacks in the dense teak stands. The first mixed flocks contained common Melghat birds such as Hume's Leaf and Greenish Warbler, as well as Grey Tit, a recent Oriental split from the familiar Palearctic Great Tit. Continuing on the road; we turned up Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Jungle Bush-Quail and Sirkeer Malkoha. Towards dusk, we detected some great bird commotion involving many common species as well as Tickell's Leaf-Warbler and Indian Yellow Tit. The stir was probably caused by the presence of a number of Jungle Owlets, which we eventually teased into view.

The night of New Year's Eve was spent in bed catching up on some well-deserved sleep as the nightclubs appeared to shut early in Parat Wara. On the morning of New Year's Day, we then set out to Melghat once more to do some general woodland birding along the road. The morning activity gave us a refreshing bird boost in the form of White-spotted Fantail, Tawny-bellied Babbler, Blyth's Reed Warbler, White-bellied Drongo, Alexandrine Parakeet, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Velvet-fronted and even our first Indian Nuthatches. After a flock of Indian Grey Hornbill near the park headquarters, we birded our way to the margins of the park, turning up a lone wintering Ultramarine Flycatcher, Common Hawk-Cuckoo, Indian Pygmy Woodpecker and Thick-billed Flowerpecker. Scrub around the site of our lunch stop produced a band of Brown-cheeked Fulvetta. On the occasion of a couple of lucky roadside stops along the return journey, we added Indian Silverbill and Bay-backed Shrike to our tally, but then it was finally the moment to head back to Nagpur in time for our onward flights to Mumbai and Bhuj.



*Hypocolius, Fulay*



*Indian Eagle-Owl, Chhari*  
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**2-5 January 08**

**Bhuj Area, Gujarat**

After our lunch-time arrival at Bhuj Airport, we were greeted by our driver Rakesh and immediately headed to the town of Nakhatrana, our base for the following few days. The common White-eared Bulbul constituted our first local specialty and proved abundant in the surroundings of our Nakhatrana hotel. Rosy

Starlings were seen in flocks by the hundreds. The remaining afternoon light made for a great start to our stay, as we searched through a parcel of bushland near Nakhatrana and had our first encounters with a number of common Bhuj specialties, including big flocks of Grey-necked Bunting, a few Variable Wheatears (ssp. *picata*), Rufous-fronted Prinia, Isabelline Shrike and two to three Marshall's Iora.

The next day was dedicated to the Naliya Grasslands, where great conglomerations of Common Cranes were just as spectacular as our first Indian Coursers and Asian Desert Warblers. Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse occasionally flew overhead in small groups and also came in to a waterhole to drink, while a multitude of foraging harriers was mainly made up of Pallid. It was here that we spotted our first Long-billed Pipits and Bimaculated Larks in amongst incredible numbers of wintering Greater Short-toed Larks of the subspecies *longipennis*. Other good wintering passerines that we picked up here for the first time were Desert Wheatear and Sykes's Warbler. The afternoon was spent on the beach near the town of Pinglashwar flushing a Sykes's Nightjar from the dunes and watching big flocks of waders and waterbirds on the beach and estuaries, including Western Reef Egret and three Great Thick-knees. A brief stop in a village on the way back yielded views and prime photoshot opportunities of approximately 100 Sykes's Larks.



**Sykes's Lark, Pinglashwar**



**Painted Sandgrouse, Nakhatrana**  
© James Eaton / Birdtour Asia

On our second full day, we had a chilly early morning start in agricultural land near Fulay Village, where we soon spotted about ten male individuals of one of our major targets, the distinct Hypocolius. The birds mixed with commoner birds such as Baya Weavers and Chestnut-shouldered Petronias. We drove on into the open desert towards Chhari Lake, where an adult and three juvenile Indian Eagle-Owls sat in fully exposed perched view on a rocky outcrop that was also the home of a pair of Red-tailed Wheatear. Scanning Chhari Lake from an observation tower, we saw hundreds of ducks and other waterfowl, including many Dalmatian Pelicans and our first Greater Flamingos. The plains near the lake were the haunts of up to a hundred *Aquila* eagles, with particularly high numbers of Steppe and Greater Spotted Eagle, plus a few Tawny Eagles mixed in. En route back to Nakhatrana, we encountered a group of about ten Painted Sandgrouse beautifully perched by the roadside.

The destination of our last day in the Bhuj Area was bushland near the temple of Mahadev Pura, where we scoured the low trees and scrub for White-naped Tit. Unlike its conspicuous local counterpart, the Grey Tit, this endemic bird can be elusive, shy and difficult to see. We eventually found a number of birds in different areas around the temple, possibly amounting to ten individuals. Other good species in the bird-rich scrub included Eastern Orphean Warbler, a few Marshall's Iora and the only Jungle Prinia of our trip. In amongst the flocks of buntings, Rob repeatedly spotted Striolated Bunting, but the birds stayed out of sight for the rest of us. That's why we asked our driver to take us to a rocky wadi area about 45 minutes from Nakhatrana for our last couple of hours of birding in the afternoon. The area has been reliable for Striolated Bunting in the past and indeed yielded one perched on a thorny bush within about two minutes of getting out of the car. What an excellent way of ending our stay in the beautiful Bhuj area!



*Asiatic Lion, Gir*

© Rob Hutchinson / Birdtour Asia

**6-8 January 08**

**Gir National Park and Velavadar Reserve**

An overnight train ride on the Bhuj – Ahmedabad line was ensued by a quick morning visit to the famous Velavadar Blackbuck Reserve, one of the last remnants of natural grassland habitat within the agricultural landscape of Gujarat. Scanning the area from the tower, we saw herds of Blackbuck and Nilgai, and walking the tracks through the grasslands, we flushed larks of many denominations (Greater Short-toed *longipennis*, Rufous-tailed, about 20 Sykes's and two Crested). A Sykes's Warbler foraged on bushes in the car park. However, we did not have the time to stay on until the evening when the reserve is the site of one of the greatest avian spectacles in Asia. We saved that part for our return trip in a few days and drove on to Gir National Park in the far south of Gujarat. Gir is home to the last Asiatic Lions, a species that used to be widespread in the Middle East and South Asia before the rise of the first agricultural human communities. Nowadays, there are only just over 300 of them left in Gir, and continued protection efforts are necessary so as not to let them slip below the zero threshold of extinction.

Arriving in Gir around dusk, we had a quick stroll around the grounds of our beautifully situated hotel and spotted three Indian Jungle Nightjars perched on electricity wires. The next morning, as we embarked on our first lion safari, things started off well with close views and photoshops of a Mottled Wood-Owl at its daylight roost and a juvenile Crested Hawk-Eagle loudly advertising its presence to its parents from atop a dead tree. As we continued along the track, word broke out amongst the jeep caravan that a lion had been spotted crossing the path, so we drove back a few kilometres to the site where it had happened, only to find it full of tourist jeeps and devoid of lions. After an excruciating wait, when all of the other jeeps had given up and left, our fortunes finally turned around. Luckily, thanks to the eagle-eyes of our local driver we were soon privileged to gripping views of a female lion dozing in the shade of a teak tree within viewing distance from the elevated back of the jeep. The lions in Gir are accustomed to the tourist jeeps, but on account of their low numbers they are far from guaranteed on a safari visit to the national park.

It came almost as a mockery of the sheer luck we had in the morning that our afternoon safari provided us with even better views of a male lion. Again, our driver's skills were instrumental in staking out this fine specimen of a cat, as it dozed in the shade and then even got up and walked towards the jeep in full splendour, only to veer off the last minute and disappear into the expanse of Gir's jungle scrub. Understandably, birds struggled to compete with mammals on this day, though some of the more memorable species included five Woolly-necked Storks, a Black-headed Ibis, about 25 Indian Black Ibis, a White-eyed Buzzard, a Booted Eagle, White-browed Fantail, Tawny-bellied Babbler, Thick-billed Flowerpecker (the Indian subspecies being a probable split from its South-east Asian counterparts), Scaly-breasted Munia and a surprising Sulphur-bellied Warbler.

After a long drive back north on the following day, we arrived at Velavadar before dusk, just in time for the amazing harrier roost spectacle. From our vantage point atop the tower, we were treated to the sight of hundreds of harriers flying in to roost in the reeds and grasses of Velavadar. Montagu's Harriers were in a slim majority to Pallid Harriers, and we even lucked out with a single male Hen Harrier to the joy of all of us.



*Syke's Nightjar, Little Rann of Kutch*

© Rob Hutchinson / Birdtour Asia

**9-10 Jan 08**

**Little Rann of Kutch**

After an evening car ride we finally arrived at Rann Riders, our comfortable base for the next couple of days. The next morning, we were taken into the desert expanses of the Little Rann of Kutch, where we soon connected with our first target species, the elusive and endangered MacQueen's Bustard. Following more distant glimpses at first, we were eventually treated to delightful views of a bustard puffing out its feathers in response to an attacking Common Kestrel. We carried on into the heart of the Little Rann, the zone where not a single bush or stalk grows. It took us an intense search of a couple of hours to discover two gorgeous individuals of the clown-like Greater Hoopoe Lark by the trackside. Tired of sharing its habitat with other birds, this species seems to have retreated to this barren moonscape where few other living things will compete for what little resources there are.

Having seen both our prime targets on the first morning, we decided to round our visit off with some relaxing wetland birding in the afternoon and the following day, visiting a couple of saline lakes in the process. The sheer wealth of birdlife on these lakes reaches unimaginable dimensions. Hundreds of flamingos of two species share the muddy banks with dozens of pelicans and ibis – equally of two species each. We scanned through thousands of ducks to find the tastier titbits amongst them, such as a Comb Duck, ten Ferruginous and two Marbled Ducks. High numbers of waders and gulls included such treats as a handful of Jack Snipe and two handfuls of each Collared Pratincole, White-tailed Lapwing and Slender-billed Gull. The reedbeds were home to skulking songbirds (Paddyfield and Indian Reed Warbler, *pallidogularis* Bluethroats and Graceful Prinias) and less skulking ones, such as a group of 100 Black-breasted Weavers.

Jeep rides through the surroundings of the lakes provided stunning views of Olaner as well as opportunities to catch up with Imperial Eagle. One of the great highlights in this area turned out to be a triplet of beautifully camouflaged Sykes's Nightjars perched in little dips along the trackside, where they were skilfully picked out by our local driver and provided for picture-book photo views.

12-13 Jan 08

**Desert National Park, Rajasthan**

Following a pleasant full-day drive, we arrived in the Golden City of Jaisalmer, the setting of “Arabian Nights”, with its golden citadelles crowning the city fortress atop a hill. Jaisalmer is the gate to the famous Desert National Park, located in a sensitive border area to Pakistan, and renowned for the bureaucratic obstacles it takes to overcome in order to visit this place. Our permit acquisition was surprisingly straightforward, such that we were allowed to visit the core area of the national park on the following morning. Arriving at Suraseri, one of the few remaining fenced and ungrazed remnants of semi-desert in the park, we prepared ourselves for a morning hike through grassy ground in search of the Holy Grail of Desert National Park, the Great Indian Bustard. Already along the first few hundred meters of trailside, we flushed such desert specialties as Black-crowned Finch-Lark and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, the latter in their hundreds. As the cold made way to the first proper rays of sunlight, we hit upon the first individual of about a handful of Stoliczka’s Bushchats. This endangered species is restricted to ungrazed grasslands of northwest India and has become exceedingly rare in the past decade. We watched them for extended periods of time, as one male gave us a sample of its breast-wagging ground display, but our observations were soon interrupted by a stately flying silhouette in the distance that turned out to be our first Great Indian Bustard. It landed across the plain and granted us brief perched views before disappearing behind the bushes.



***Stoliczka's Bushchat, Desert NP***



***Green Avadavat, Mt. Abu***  
**© James Eaton / Birdtour Asia**

Spurred by this instantaneous success, we rushed over the plain to obtain better views, and as we arrived at our distant hilltop vantage point and scanned the plains, we discovered not one but two bustards feeding at a distance. Initially surprised by the difference of impression these two birds made, we soon realised that we were watching a pair of wintering MacQueen’s Bustard – not its bigger sedentary cousin from just an hour ago. Both species have been pushed to the brink of extinction in the last few years, MacQueen’s by hunting in its Arab breeding grounds, and Indian Great by the phenomenal loss of habitat in its overpopulated Indian breeding grounds. In fact, it is hard to see how the Indian Bustard will hang on for much longer when considering that Desert National Park is its last global stronghold, and that they are becoming very scarce even here.

In the course of the remaining time we spent at Suraseri and its surroundings, we were treated to spectacular views of three more Indian Bustards, a pair and a singleton, perched and in flight, as well as a handful of Laggar, hundreds of Trumpeter Finches, numerous Variable Wheatears (some of which were *capistrata*), dozens of Cream-coloured Coursers, about 20 Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a welcome conglomerate of five vulture species around a carcass. On our way out of the national park proper, we stopped in an ancient hamlet for photo shot opportunities of Desert Lark, and then continued to the Fossil Park Reserve outside of Jaisalmer, famous for its petrified wood fossils. The acacia grove at the entrance of Fossil Park used to be a location for Plain Leaf-Warbler in the winter, but a full morning spent here failed to turn up any. Instead there were numerous Siberian Chiffchaffs around, besides Sykes’s Warblers, Eastern

Orphean Warblers, more Desert Larks, thousands of Bimaculated Larks, Punjab Raven and a single Red-tailed Wheatear.

**14 Jan 08**

**Kheechan**

The following morning we departed early from Jaisalmer in time to reach Kheechan at dawn. Kheechan has been made world-renowned by the singular spectacle of thousands of Demoiselle Cranes coming in to feed on seeds laid out by villagers in a little courtyard in town. After positioning ourselves strategically on one of the adjacent rooftops, we witnessed groups of hundreds of cranes on the surrounding hillsides as they slowly advanced to the village in uncoordinated bouts of flight. Finally, the first individuals displayed the courage to pass the fence into the courtyard, soon followed by their less bold peers. At its height, the spectacle encompassed 5000 cranes feeding on the grains in the courtyard, accompanied – rather surprisingly – by about 50 Ruffs and hundreds of Rock Pigeons. After enjoying this grand show for three hours, our driver Rakesh had to physically drag us away from the rooftop for the long onward journey to Mt. Abu. For many of us, Kheechan remained the unforgettable highlight of this fantastic trip to northwest India.



*Demoiselle Cranes, Kheechan*



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**15 Jan 08**

**Mt. Abu**

A famous Indian mountaintop resort and honeymoon destination, Mt. Abu has made ornithological news as a reliable site for the rare Green Avadavat. This lovely little *estrildid* proved easy to find after an early-morning start in dry paddies near the summit of the mountain. Throughout our stay in Mt. Abu, we ended up seeing five different flocks of more than a handful of individuals each. The adults can only be described as stunning, but even the juveniles were surprisingly lovely to behold and bore an uncanny resemblance to juvenile Australian Gouldian Finches in their bulky structure and chlorine colouration.

After our ecstatic reaction to the avadavats wore off a bit, the very same paddies produced other interesting avian treasures in the form of Crested and White-capped Buntings, Yellow-eyed Babbler as well as Brown Rock Chat. The afternoon was then spent walking down the summit road through dry forest, where Black-rumped Flameback, wintering Common Rosefinch and Tawny-bellied Babbler were welcome distractions.

**16 January 08**

**Sultanpur**

Following a refreshing night in a sleeper train to Delhi, we were picked up at the station and taken straight to Sultanpur, a wetland area about 60km out of Delhi in Haryana State. The amount of birds here – in such close vicinity to India's capital – was just mind-boggling, with huge gatherings of ducks, storks, ibis, herons, and waders, including some more unusual fare such as White-tailed Lapwing, Greater White-

fronted Goose and Imperial Eagle. However, our main targets here were not waterbirds, but a duo of range-restricted songbirds that are regular around the lake.

After lunch on arrival, we immediately set out into the acacia groves at the trail's entrance, looking carefully through the Lesser Whitethroats, Hume's Leaf-Warblers and even a Wryneck until we found our first vocalising Brooks's Leaf-Warbler. We ended up seeing a handful of these birds, and there is reason to believe that Sultanpur may be one of the best stake-outs for this elusive species in the winter. Subsequently, we searched through the reeds of the lakebed in our quest for the next specialty, but initially we only saw Red Avadavats – in fact hundreds of them – foraging and then roosting in the reeds. At the very far end of the lake then – finally – we struck gold as a familiar chirping sound indicated the presence of a sparrow, which was visually confirmed to be a male Sind Sparrow. This species has gradually increased its range from the Indus river drainage in Pakistan to the Delhi area, possibly in response to human habitat conversion, but it remains a difficult species at Sultanpur for now. Despite its close similarity to House Sparrow in the field guides, its subtle head colouration makes it instantly recognizable to anyone with a fair share of experience with House Sparrows. The Sind Sparrow sighting came just in time as it was getting dark and we needed to head back to Delhi for our international return flights. It was a brilliant ending to our northwest India trip.



*Olangar, Little Rann of Kutch*

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