

Birding on a family trip to Kerala and Tamil Nadu 20 December 2005-13 January 2006.

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The main purpose of this trip was to spend quality family time (wife, three sons 4-10) together and do some relaxing tourism in south India after a busy autumn. As the rest of the family does not bird, birding opportunities were restricted to early mornings, late afternoons and sky-scanning/sea-watching when the kids were in the hotel pools or on the beach. Having visited north India, Pakistan and China before for hard-core birding, I made careful preparations and a priority list on what I wanted to see on this trip. I did thus not spend much time on e. g. waterbirds or detailed counts, instead I went for the species in the following priority order: 1 endemics for southern Kerala, 2 south Indian endemics which should be possible to get based in Goa, 3 subcontinent endemics and 4 anything else that would be a tick for me. I did not bring a telescope which would have been useful to have on a few occasions (Gavi and beaches).

Itinerary et al

We flew Lufthansa Copenhagen-Frankfurt-Madras and back which had the second best deal of European airlines. Delta via Paris were slightly cheaper but as they were in "Chapter 11" at the time so we did not wish to take the risk of booking them.

The trip was wholly arranged by Mr. Thomas Zacharias from Kalypso Tours (<http://www.kalypsoadventures.com/>). He was incredibly professional, responding to email swiftly, sorting out the few problems we had directly on site and understanding our needs completely. He also knew quite a bit about birds and has bird guides available although we did not use them. He arranged our transports, which were in good vehicles and extremely punctual. Cars were modern and spacious and transports would sometimes allow us time for sight-seeing. Kalypso Tours is therefore highly recommended as a reliable and professional tour operator.

20 December - Depart Copenhagen via Frankfurt to Chennai.

21 December – Arrived at our hotel Ideal Beach Resort after midnight. Birding in the hotel area.

22 December – Left Ideal at noon, night train from Chennai to Cochin.

22 - 27 December - Stayed at Emerald Island homestay, near Allepey.

27 - 31 December – Green Mansions at Gavi, inside Periyar National Park.

1 January – 5 January – Hotel Samudra at Kovalam.

6 January- 9 January – Talayar tea Estate, northeast of Munnar.

9/10 January – Night train from Ernakulam/Kochin to Chennai.

10-12 January – Ideal Beach Resort.

13 January – Depart back to Copenhagen.

Birding sites

Information on this was mainly collected through trip reports and "A Birdwatcher's guide to India".

Ideal Beach Resort (<http://www.idealresort.com/iblocation.htm>) near Mamallapuram (Mahaballipuram), south of Chennai. – Seawatching very unproductive. Hotel garden and ricefields on the west side of the coast highway were worth exploring. The area just south of the village where the Crocodile Farm is (c 8 km north on the toll road) was interesting in the mornings. The only Woodshrike and Common Iora of the trip were seen there. Sandy areas east of the toll road, some 2-5 km north held Blyth's Pipits, Tawny Pipit, Ashy-headed Finch Lark etc. The river mouth at Kovalam had few waders.

Emerald Island (<http://www.emeraldislekerala.com/html/abus.htm>) in Backwaters. – I had no information here. Walking around and watching the river mornings/evenings was basically it. I birded within 1 km from the homestay. The garden of it held sunbirds, the only Forest Wagtail of the trip, Stork-billed Kingfisher etc.

Gavi (<http://www.homestayskerala.com/html/thek/gm.htm>) Periyar.– This is c 45 min jeep ride inside the park. Three rooms available, as well as treks with overnight camping. Jeeploads of daytourists from Thekkady came in around 9 and left around 15, but we were often alone there in the evenings. Excellent place but food very basic and poor in variation (often only one hot dish for dinner) so it is advisable to bring in extra stuff unless you want to stick to chapati, dal, egg curry and pineapple. No soft drinks, no sweets. There is one bird guide there, Biju, and he was allocated us for treks etc during

the whole stay. He was very interested in birds and quite good at calls but had no binoculars. We saw elephants on the way there and tiger had been spotted a month previously very near the lodge. We saw some day-old tiger tracks in the forest opposite the lake. Much birding was done along the road leading to Gavi and around the lake, i.e. within 500 m from the lodge. The old cardamom plantations of the adjacent village were extremely good in the late afternoon. The grassy hills are also worth exploring as there are reports of Grassbirds on the hill just behind Green Mansions. I only managed to flush a number of Thick-billed Warblers out of it on my several attempts. If we had not had kids with us, we would have done a two-night camping trek here and spent two nights in the lodge.

Kovallam (<http://www.ktdc.com/Samudra.htm>) – Hotel Samudra was our choice here and birding was not interesting at all. It is probably possible to make excursions based here, but it feels superfluous to go to Kovallam unless one is desperate for a swim. This was the only hotel with underperforming staff, the service was in fact quite appalling which is a pity as the premises are very nice (probably the best beach) and the hotel - allegedly - a three star. *Note that Kovalam with one -l- in the species list refers to Kovalam north of Mamallapuram in Tamil Nadu.*

Talayar Tea Estate (<http://www.homestayskerala.com/html/mun/talay.htm>) Near Munnar. – Misty place northeast of Munnar. 30-40 minutes to reach Rajamalai National Park. Excellent place to stay in, super service and one staff (Suresh) who was interested in birds. It is necessary to bring a vehicle here if one wants to explore the area. Managed to bird along the road towards northeast, a waterfall c. 10 min up the road could be interesting if explored more, also the sandal wood forests along this road would be worthwhile. At the checkpoint in the village some 40 min away there were Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters. Two of the ornithological highlights of the trip were in Rajamalai; Nilgiri Pipit and Tickell's and Tytler's Leaf Warblers together. A stop at a small stream at a school between Rajamalai and Munnar produced the only Blue-headed Rock Thrush of the trip.

Books

I decided to leave Kazmierczak et al and Grimmett et al at home (having thrown away the "Pictorial Guide" when these two volumes appeared) and brought P. Rasmussen's 2005 guide with me. It is in two volumes: one with plates (and, thankfully, maps on the facing page!) and one with text, including interesting sections on Indian ornithology. Plates were ok. The text was thorough but did not convey so much of field "feel" for the birds, focussing more on plumage details which however was quite helpful. Call descriptions were very thorough and often both transliterated (presumably in American English) and with sonagrams. I have always found sonagrams awkward but after a while I actually thought they were helpful. Rasmussen also splits many taxa and has, in some cases, detailed information on subspecies so this book is definitely worth to buy.

More information

Feel free to contact me at erik@hirschfeld.se.

Systematic list of species

The value of counts in such non-systematic birding as I did is rather low, so I just treat each species here rather generally. Taxonomy and names follows Rasmussen.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Recorded at the lake in Gavi.

Indian Shag *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*

Seen in Backwaters, Gavi, Chennai and Kovalam

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Seen in Backwaters, Gavi, Chennai and Kovalam

Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*

Seen in Backwaters, Gavi, Chennai and Kovalam

Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*

One backwaters.

Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis schistacea*
Samudra beach, Kovallam.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
Common in paddyfields.

Great Egret *Egretta alba*
Quite common in paddyfields

Intermediate Egret *Egretta intermedia*
Common in paddyfields.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus (ibis) coromandus*
Common, recorded all days.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
Singles in backwaters.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*
Singles in backwaters.

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*
Common, recorded all days.

Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans*
1 flying Mamallapuram.

Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*
1 flying Kumily.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicurus roseus*
1 Mamallapuram.

Unid. Duck *Anas sp*
Several flocks flying north at sea early mornings Mamallapuram, possibly Garganey.

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*
1 Mamallapuram, 1 Gavi.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*
Common.

Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*
Quite common, Mamallapuram, Kovallam and along roads.

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*
1 juv. Gavi.

Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela*
1 juv. Gavi, 1 juv. along the road a few km northeast of Talayar.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*
1 imm. Emerald Island.

Besra Sparrowhawk *Accipiter virgatus*
1 Emerald Island.

Shikra *Accipiter badius*
Common Mamallapuram, singles Emerald Island.

Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis*
Singles daily at Gavi.

Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*
Several at Gavi.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
1 Gavi.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*
Singles recorded.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*
1 Gavi.

Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondericanus*
Common Mamallapuram, singles Emerald island.

Jungle Bush-quail *Perdicula asiatica*
Singles Gavi.

Painted Bush Quail *Perdicula erythrorhyncha*
Male and female Rajamalai, on the road at first checkpoint.

Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii*
Common Gavi and Talayar area.

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
Singles early mornings Emerald Island.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
Small flock at Kovalam north of Mamallapuram.

Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*
Quite common Mamallapuram.

Pintail Snipe *Gallinago stenura*
One presumed this species flushed from paddyfield on Emerald island. Call and field characters identical to those I am familiar with from the Middle East, therefore assumed to be this species and not Swinhoe's.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*
Small flock at Kovalam north of Mamallapuram.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*
Small flock Kovalam north of Mamallapuram.

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*
Several on the road Emerald island – Aleppey.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*
1 Emerald Island.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
Quite common Emerald island, 2 Kovalam, singles Kovalam north of Mamallapuram.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*
Singles Kovalam

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*
Seen along the road Mamallapuram – Chennai.

Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*
Small flocks offshore at Kovallam.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*
Small flocks offshore at Kovallam.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*
1 Mamallapuram.

Swift Tern *Thalasseus bergii*
Singles off Mamallapuram.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
Small flocks offshore at Kovallam.

Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda*
1 Emerald Island.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*
Common Alleppey, Emerald Island and Kochin.

Domestic Pigeon *Columba livia*
Common.

Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*
Common Mamallapuram, Kovallam and Talayar.

Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*
Singles at Gavi.

Grey-fronted Green Pigeon *Treron affinis*
2 at Gavi.

Mountain Imperial-pigeon *Ducula badia*
Singles Gavi.

Vernal Hanging Parrot *Loriculus vernalis*
2 overflying Gavi.

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*
Common Emerald island, Kovallam and Mamallapuram.

Malabar Parakeet *Psittacula columboides*
Common Gavi and Thekkady.

Southern Coucal *Centropus (sinensis) parroti*
Common Emerald island, 1 Mamallapuram (the latter looked small though).

Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopaceus*
Common recorded all places.

Common Hawk-cuckoo *Hierococcyx varius*
1 Emerald island, 1 Mamallapuram.

Spotted Owl *Athene brama*
Singles Mamallapuram, Emerald island and Kovallam (in a hole in a palm at the far end of the swimming pool at Samudra).

Indian Little Nightjar *Caprimulgus asiaticus*
One or two at Mamallapuram.

Indian Swiftlet *Aerodramus unicolor*
Common Talayar.

Indian White-rumped Spinetail *Zoonavena sylvatica*
Common Gavi and Thekkady.

Brown-throated Needletail *Hirundapus giganteus*
Singles Rajamalai and Talayar.

Asian Palm-swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*
Common Mamallapuram and Kovallam.

Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*
Small flock in a quarry on the road Ernakulam-Gavi.

Little Swift *Apus affinis*
Singles Mamallapuram.

Crested Treeswift *Hemiprocne coronata*
Singles Thekkady.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*
Common Emerald island

Stork-billed Kingfisher *Pelargopsis capensis*
Quite common Emerald island.

White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
Common, seen more or less daily except at Gavi.

Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*
Seen in pairs around Mamallapuram-Kovalam.

Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippensis*
Common Emerald Island.

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaultia*
Common at the first main village c 40 min northeast of Talayar.

Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*
Singles Mamallapuram and Emerald Island as well as along roadsides to/from Kovallam and Ernakulam.

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*
Singles Mamallapuram.

Malabar Grey Hornbill *Ocyroceros griseus*
Seen every morning at Gavi.

Great Pied Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*
5 in a fig tree at Gavi. Definitely one of the most memorable observations..

Brown-headed Barbet *Megalaima zeylanica*
1 in sandalwood forest northeast Talayar.

White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*
Common Emerald Island, Gavi and Talayar. Birds heard calling Kovallam may have been Brown-headed as I never saw them.

Malabar Barbet *Megalaima (rubricapillus) malabarica*
Common Gavi.

Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*
At least 5 Emerald Island

White-bellied Woodpecker *Dryocopus javensis*
One old cardamom plantations, Gavi.

Black-rumped Flameback *Dinopium benghalense*
Singles Emerald Island and Mamallapuram.

Greater Flameback *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*
Singles Gavi and Talayar.

Jerdon's Bushlark *Mirafra affinis*
Common sandy areas around Mamallapuram.

Ashy-crowned Finch-lark *Eremopterix grisea*
Small flock regularly sandy area north Mamallapuram.

Brown-throated Sand Martin *Riparia (paludicola) chinensis*
1 Gavi.

Dusky Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne concolor*
Common Gavi, roosting in the bridge.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
Common.

Hill Swallow
Hirundo (tahitica) domicola
Common Talayar, singles Gavi.

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*
Common Mamallapuram, Gavi and Kovallam. Both streaked and unstreaked subspecies.

House Martin
A flock of 25 daily at Gavi.

Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus*
1 Emerald island.

White-browed Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*
Singles Mamallapuram and Gavi.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*
Singles at Emerald Island.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
Common Gavi and, especially, Talayar.

Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*
Singles on grassy hills in Gavi.

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*
2 sandy area north of Mamallapuram.

Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*
2 sandy area a few km north Mamallapuram.

Nilgiri Pipit *Anthus nilghiriensis*
4-5 Rajamalai. I had prepared myself mentally for weeks for this species, being prepared to use time-consuming "Richard's Pipits-in-long-grass" tactics. As we arrived at the upper checkpost at Rajamalai, one bird was walking on the road, 2 metres from a guard. When I got out of the car, there were several more, very confident and even singing. One of the highlights on this trip.

Orange Minivet *Periclorotus (speciosus) flammeus*
Singles common Gavi, also at Talayar.

Pied Flycatcher-shrike *Hemipus picatus*
2 old cardamom plantations Gavi, singles Talayar.

Malabar Woodshrike *Tephrodornis sylvicola*
Singles at old cardamom plantations at Gavi.

Common Woodshrike *Tephrodornis pondiceranus*
1 north of Mamallapuram.

Asian Paradise Flycatcher *Tersiphone paradisi*
Singles Emerald island.

Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*
Common.

Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*
Common Mamallapuram, Emerald island and Talayar.

Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*
Singles Gavi.

Square-tailed Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes (madagascariensis) ganeesa*
Common Gavi and Talayar.

Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia multicolor*
1 north of Mamallapuram.

Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*
Common Gavi. One *lucionensis* seen at Mamallapuram.

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*
Common Talayar.

Indian Blackbird *Turdus (merula) simillimus*
2 Gavi and several along the road Talayar-Rajamalai. All seen well were quite dark.

Malabar Whistling Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*
Common Gavi, singles Talayar area.

Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*
1 ideal Beach Resort.

Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassinus*
Singles Gavi.

Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudatus*
Common Talayar.

Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae*
Several in old cardamom plantations and village near Gavi.

Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*
Singles Gavi and Talayar/Rajamalai.

Blue-headed Rock Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchos*
1 male at small stream school between Rajamalai and Munnar.

Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea*
1 male in the garden at Talayar.

Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*
Common Emerald island, Talayar and singles Mamallapuram.

Indian Black Robin *Saxicoloides fulicatus*
Singles north of Mamallapuram.

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*
1 male Gavi.

Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*
Common tea plantations Gavi and Talayar.

Kerala Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron fairbanki*
Common Talayar and Rajamalai. (previously Grey-breasted *garrulax jerdoni*)

Indian Scimitar-babbler *Pomatorhinus (schisticeps) horsfieldii*
Common Gavi.

Tawny-bellied Babbler *Dumetia hyperethra*
Singles Gavi.

Dark-fronted Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*
Singles Gavi.

Indian Rufous Babbler *Turdoides subrufa*
Small flock on the road Vandiperiyar-Gavi.

Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striata malabaricus*
Mamallapuram and Talayar.

Yellow-billed Babbler *Turdoides affinis*
Singles Mamallapuram.

Brown-cheeked Fulvetta *Alcippe poiocephala*
Singles Gavi.

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*
Common in paddyfields at Emerald Island.

Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis*
Singles Gavi.

Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*
Singles Emerald Island and Mamallapuram.

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*
Common Emerald Island, Gavi and Mamallapuram.

Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*
Very common Mamallapuram.

Thick-billed Warbler *Acrocephalus aedon*
Common on grassy hills at Gavi, i.e. same habitat as alleged Grassbirds.

Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*
Common, very common at Talayar.

Tickell's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*
1 Gavi, common Rajamalai.

Tytler's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri*
1 Rajamalai.

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*
Very common, recorded daily.

Indian Yellow Tit *Parus aplonotus*
Singles Gavi and Talayar.

Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis*
Several old cardamom plantations Gavi.

Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
1 Emerald Island.

Nilgiri Flowerpecker *Dicaeum concolor*
Several at Gavi.

Purple-rumped Sunbird *Leptocoma zeylonica*
Singles Mamallapuram and Gavi, common Emerald island.

Small Sunbird *Leptocoma minima*
Common Gavi.

Purple Sunbird *Cinnyris asiaticus*
Singles Mamallapuram.

Loten's Sunbird *Cinnyris lotenius*
Singles Mamallapuram, common Emerald Island.

Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*
Common Gavi and Talayar.

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*
Common Gavi and Talayar.

Indian Silverbill *Lonchura malabarica*
Small parties Mamallapuram.

Tricolored Munia *Lonchura malacca*
2 Emerald Island.

White-rumped Munia *Lonchura striata*
1 Emerald Island.

Black-throated Munia *Lonchura kelaarti*
Several Gavi and Rajamalai.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus indicus*
Common in villages, not recorded daily.

Grey-headed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*
Small flock at Emerald island.

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
Common Mamallapuram, Kovallam and along roadsides.

Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*
Common Emerald island and Talayar.

Lesser Hill Myna *Gracula (religiosa) indica*
Common Gavi.

Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus kundoo*
Common Mamallapuram and Emerald island.

Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*
Common Gavi.

Asian Fairy-bluebird *Irena puella*
Common Gavi and Talayar.

Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*
Common, recorded more or less daily.

Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*
Singles at Gavi.

Bronzed Drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*
Singles at Gavi.

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*
Singles Emerald Island and Gavi.

Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus*
Common Emerald Island and Mamallapuram.

Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
Singles at Emerald island and Mamallapuram.

House Crow *Corvus splendens*
Common except Gavi.

Indian Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*
Common Gavi and Talayar.

Total of 175 species.