

Western India

Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat



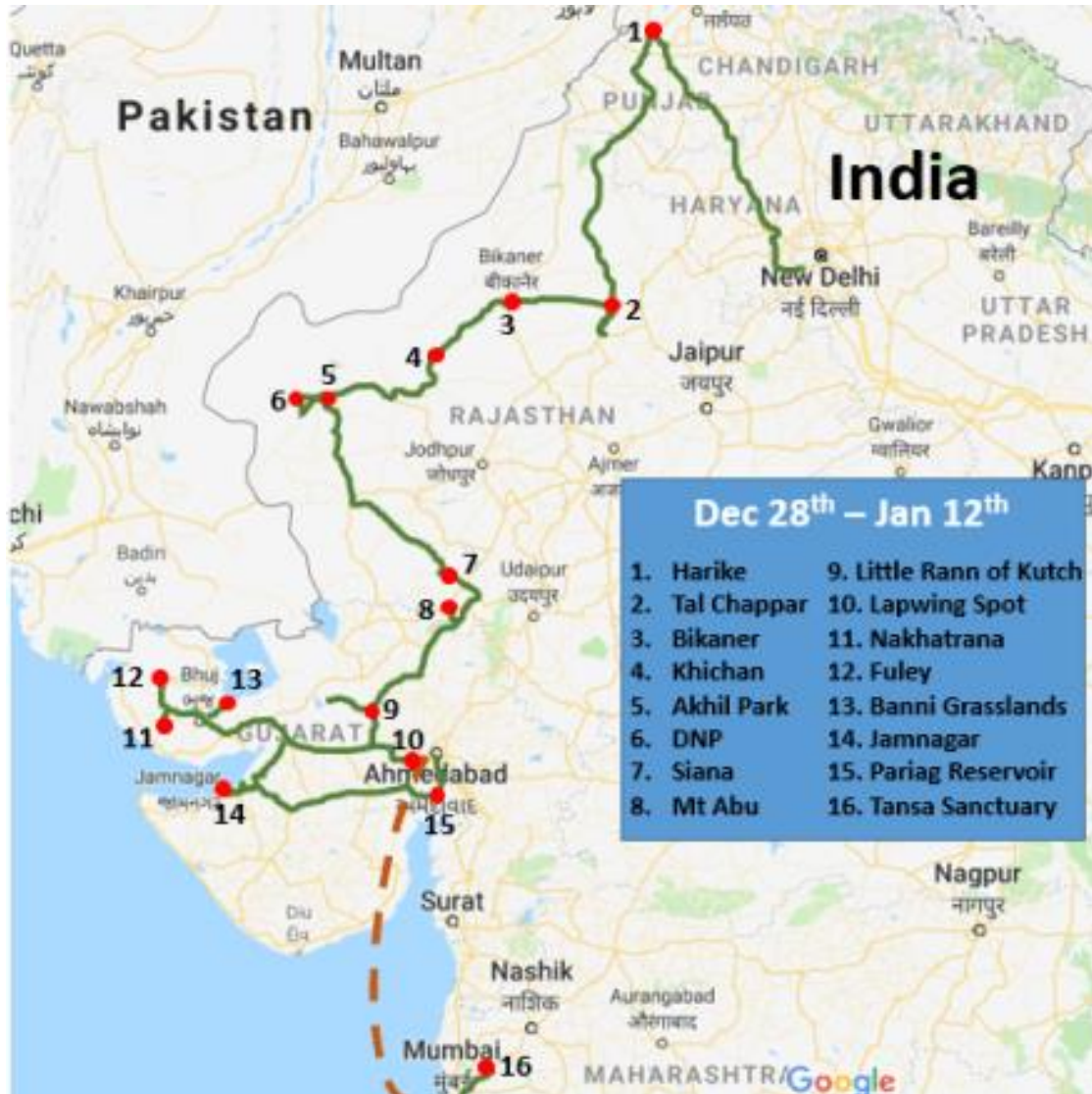
Independent Budget Birding Dec 28, 2018 – Jan 12 2019

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www.budgetbirders.com

Overview:

Western India isn't the most glorious of birding destinations, but with only two weeks available and the increasing dire state of Great Indian Bustard, Melissa and I decided it would be a good time to visit. We followed the "standard" western India birding tour itinerary starting in the north in Punjab and finishing in Gujarat to the south (with a quick extension to Mumbai for Forest Owllet). This trip is pretty straight forward with fairly easy birding including some very range restricted and endangered species. Luckily a few friends were able to join us including Julien Mazenauer, Killian Vaucher, Stephan Lorenz, and his wife Claudia. In the end we ended up with just over 330 species with the average cost per person being around \$860.



Itinerary:

Day 1: Arrive Delhi Airport (0200) and drive to Harike (1230), afternoon birding Harike (1300-Dark)

Day 2: Harike (0700-1300), start drive towards Tal Chappar. (1330-2130), night in Ratangarh

Day 3: Ratangarh to Ganeri (0500-0700), Ganeri area (0700-0930), Ganeri to Tal Chappar (0930-1045), Tal Chappar area (1100-1300), Tal Chappar to Bikaner (1300-1530), Vulture Conservation Area (1530-1730)

Day 4: Bikaner to Khichan (0400-0630), Khichan (0630-0830), Khichan to Akal Fossil Park (0900-1200) Akal Fossil Park

Day 5: Desert National Park (0600-1700)

Day 6: DNP to Siana (0400-1030), Siana, Palace Spot (1030-1300), Siana Resort (1330-1400), Daksh's White-capped Bunting and Rock Quail Spots (1430-1800)

Day 7: Daksh White-bellied Minivet spot (0700-1130), Siana Resort (1130-1300), White-bellied Minivet Spot (1330-1800)

Day 8: Siana to Mt Abu (0530-0700), Mt Abu (0700-1100), Mt Abu to Little Rann of Kutch (1100-1700)

Day 9: Wild Ass sanctuary (0700-1300), Desert Coursers (1330-1430), Lake (1500-1700), Desert Coursers (1700-1800)

Day 10: Little Rann of Kutch to Sociable Lapwing spot (0500-0700), Lapwing spot (0700-1030), Lapwing Spot to Bhuj area (1030-1700)

Day 11: South of Nakhatrana (0700-1000), Fuley Area (1100-1300), quick rest back at hotel, Fuley Area (1500-2000)

Day 12: Fuley area (0700-1000), Fuley to eastern Banni Grasslands (11-1330), Eastern Banni Grasslands (1330-1430), Drive to Jamnagar (1430-2000)

Day 13: Jamnagar Salt Pans (0700-1000), Balachadi Beach (1030-1130), Jamnagar Salt Pans (1230-1330), Sachana Beach (1430-1530), Jamnagar to Ahmedabad (1600-2100)

Day 14: Pariag Reservoir Area (0700-1300), Ahmedabad

Day 15: Flight Ahmedabad to Mumbai (0415, delayed to 0600), drive to Tansa (0800-1200), Tansa (1300-1900)

Day 16: Tansa (0430-1000), drive to Mumbai airport



Weather: Visiting western India in the winter time, the weather is pretty predictable. Clear, cold in the mornings and warming up by the afternoon. Temperatures were chilliest in the north (lows around 2 C) and warmest in the Bhuj area. Every day was sunny with no chance of rain. Actually, most of western India is in a severe drought with both the Little Rann and Greater Rann suffering greatly from the lack of water. Of note, there is usually very thick fog between Delhi and Harike during the winter and this will seriously effect driving times and birding. The fog typically burns off by midday, but driving in the early morning or during the night will be very slow going.

Money: Exchange rate at the time of the trip was ~70 rupiah for 1 USD. The exchange at the airport was ~65 to 1 USD. ATMs could be found in all major towns although it was important to think ahead and make sure to get money when passing through a major area. A few ATMs didn't work, but it never took long to find an operational one. The biggest issue is that the limit on most ATMs is only 10,000. Some gas stations take card and we should have paid with card more, but regularly forgot to ask.

Transportation: Self-driving in India was fairly painless. The roads are in fantastic shape and there were only a few areas on this itinerary that involved driving in larger towns/cities. The biggest issue with self-driving India is getting a rental car. We booked through AVIS thinking we'd be dealing with a large company, but when Julien and Killian arrived at Delhi, finding the AVIS office turned into a 7(!) hour debacle. Eventually they tracked down the right spot in Delhi which happened to be a Mercury Car Rental spot at 28.54238, 77.12768 (15 min taxi ride from the airport). When we returned the car, the process was a good bit smoother. We called before dropping off the car in Ahmedabad and were given a location to meet the AVIS representative. We did end up breaking a side mirror (early morning at the hotel backing out), but this only cost us 5,000 rupiah since we had the full insurance. If you can navigate renting the car, I highly recommend self-driving. Although getting cars with drivers is very easy to do (and only slightly more expensive) I find having a driver is more like baby sitting and is often way more hassle than it's worth. It was quite entertaining showing up places and having locals ask where our driver was as very few people (even Indian tourists) self-drive. One thing of note, the van we rented had a speed limiter on it set at 80 kph. This was absolutely brutal as most roads were in fantastic shape and there were hundreds if not thousands of kilometers where we easily could have been going at least 100 kph if not 120 kph. Having the limiter seriously slowed down drive times between major sites.



Hotels:

Harike: Gee Kay Hotel, 800 per room: Very basic/not very nice, but the only close option, no heat (or hot water)!

Ratangarh: Shri Lacim Hotel (28.08825, 74.600732), 1,500 per room: Very basic, but an upgrade from the night before and slightly cleaner, no hot water

Bikaner: OYO 2450 Hotel Laxmi Residency, (20.007255, 73.321788), 2,000 per room: Adequate room, clean, hot water

Jaisalmar: Kavi's Hostel (26.909826, 70.913262), very nice hostel and cheap

Siana: Siana Resort (25.13316, 72.6837), Fantastic resort with great rooms/food. Price is 7,000 per room but includes meals, jeep, and guiding.

Little Rann of Kutch: Desert Coursers (23.286989, 71.765184), 1,900 per person per night (includes meals): Very nice place with roosting Pallid Scops Owls. Owner is very knowledgeable and can coordinate jeeps.

Greater Rann of Kutch: JP Resort (23.35466, 69.259894), 3,000 per night: Very clean rooms, good shower

Jamnagar: Lime Tree Hotel (22.47924, 70.062574), 3,000 (but for four people staying in one room): Very clean room, good shower

Ahmedabad: Mariott Aloft (stayed using reward points)

Tansa area: (19.43953, 73.299525), 1350 per room, fairly clean, hot water, restaurant was actually one of the best we ate at!

Acknowledgments:

As usual, the success of this trip wasn't just from the hard work of the participants, but also from the wealth of information that we received from friends. Many thanks to Hannu Jannes from Bird Quest for directions about a few tricky birds in Harike, Rob Hutchinson of Bird Tour Asia for advice and GPS points for a few target species, Pritam Baruah for some advice/hotel information as well as authoring one of the only trip reports available for DNP, Yann Muzika for GPS coordinates that were useful throughout the trip, and Shashank Dalvi for his valuable information for finding Forest Owlet and other species in Tansa. Also many thanks to Daksheshwar Singh for his hospitality at the Siana resort. Thanks to Julien and Killian for spending an obnoxious amount of time acquiring the rental car so that we could leave as soon as Melissa and I landed and thanks to Julien and Stephan for helping with driving. Specific thanks to Julien and Melissa for proof reading this report.



Birding Sites

Harike:

Overview: Harike, located just south of Amristar is a large wetland area that is typically visited for a few range restricted species; specifically "Sind" Jerdon's Babbler, Rufous-vented Prinia, Sind Sparrow, and Brooke's Leaf Warbler. Other good birds here include White-crowned Penduline-Tit, White-tailed Stonechat, and Mountain Chiffchaff. This area is also home to a number of other open country species and lots of waterfowl. Be aware that during the winter, the area is usually covered in thick fog in the morning that sometimes doesn't burn off until 10:00 or 11:00.

Birding:

Canal Area: This is the main area of Harike. Park the car at 31.13633, 74.95111 and walk south along the canal. This area is good for Sind Sparrow which often feeds on the seeding grass along the canal. We had a small flock late in the evening at 31.134969, 74.951179. Also along this trail we had a nice flock of migrants including a Green Warbler and a Scaly Thrush. Although we didn't try for Rufous-vented Prinia here, it should be fairly common. You can also view the lake from 31.13682, 74.95299. We did a brief scan here midday, seeing a number of duck species, but nothing too special.

Road to SE corner: We spent an early morning walking along the road that borders the marsh which has a number of large trees along it. We parked at 31.1182,75.01142 and walked both north and south of this point. This area was loaded with wintering warblers with dozens of Common Chiffchaffs and Hume's Leaf Warblers as well as Cetti's Warbler, Moustached Warbler, Clamorous Reed Warbler, and Paddyfield Warbler. The main highlight of this area though is Brooke's Leaf Warbler, which for us, took almost two hours of searching, but we finally found a single bird at 31.120983, 75.015276. Brooke's Warbler is surprisingly visually different than the many Hume's Leaf Warblers which appear much more yellow. The best way to find it is just walk along playing the song and atching for a phylloscopus to react strongly. As you walk further north along the road, you'll eventually see rice paddies to the west, bordered by elephant grass. This is the third birding area that we spent a significant amount of time at.

SE corner: We birded this area the first afternoon that we arrived as well as mid-morning on the second day. The rice paddies and fallow fields hold a number of winter species including White-tailed Stonechat which we found a pair along the river at 31.13303, 75.01822. The main reason to visit this area though is the easy access to the elephant grass which is home to the range restricted "Sind" Jerdon's Babbler as well as a good spot of Rufous-vented Prinia, White-crowned Penduline Tit, and Mountain Chiffchaff. Although we had nearly a dozen Jerdon's Babblers, the closest and most responsive ones were at 31.12715, 75.017104, but the entire edge of elephant grass should be checked.



Tal Chappar:

Overview: We spent a single morning in this area specifically looking for Indian Spotted Creeper, but also spent some time at the Black Buck Reserve enjoying the antelopes as well as White-browed Bush Chat.

Birding:

Ganeri Area: The area both north and east of Ganeri is good habitat for the Indian Spotted Creeper. We took a road at 27.68005, 74.74197 and spent the morning searching the area for the creeper and were successful in finding one after about 90 minutes of searching. We also had Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Gray Francolin, and Rufous-fronted Prinia.

Black Buck Reserve: We arrive here around 1030 and spent about 90 minutes driving around the park. As we headed towards Tal Chappar we arrived from the south along the road that borders the eastern part of the reserve. There were tons of Black Bucks along this road as well as a few fruiting trees that contained a number of Rosy and Brahminy Starlings. After entering the park at 27.81143, 74.43455 (entrance fee is 200 INR for the car and 300 INR per person), we drove through the reserve along the dirt tracks finding a single White-browed Bush-Chat at 27.793765, 74.429259 as well as some distant Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and Common Cranes.



Bikaner:

Overview: Southeast of the town is the cattle carcass dump which is the highlight of visiting the picturesque town of Bikaner. The fields around the carcass dump are also home to thousands of wintering Yellow-eyed Pigeons.

Birding:

Carcass Dump: The entrance is at 27.96021, 73.38223 and has a gate. The gate was shut and chained when we arrived, but unlocked so we opened it and drove in to the dump although it isn't far and probably best to just park outside. Throughout the entire area were large gatherings of vultures including hundreds of Egyptian Vultures (including a single *ginginianus*, with the pink tipped bill), Eurasian Griffons, and smaller numbers of Cinereous Vultures. There were also large numbers of Steppe Eagles, a few Eastern Imperial Eagles, two Laggar Falcons, and a Shirka. Along with the raptors the main target, Yellow-eyed Pigeon, was very numerous with large flocks feeding in the fields directly next to the fenced in area.

Khichan:

Overview: Not much to say, this is the place for the Demoiselle Cranes

Birding:

We arrived just before dawn and went to the pond at 27.13827,72.41702 which had over a thousand Demoiselle Cranes roosting at it. We spent about 2 hours here watching the cranes which eventually moved out into the surrounding areas. From here you can just drive around the town and find flocks of cranes to watch. They were everywhere. This site is not necessary to visit but rather enjoyable.

Jaisalmer:

Birding:

Akal Fossil Park: Located just east of Jaisalmer, we visited the fossil park midday after watching the cranes at dawn in Khichan. The entrance fee is very cheap (110 rupees for 6 people and the car). We drove in and spent about 3 hours walking around the entire area looking for a few targets; Red-tailed Wheatear, Striolated Bunting, Indian Eagle Owl, and Trumpeter Finch. The wheatear was quite common throughout, but it took a lot of effort to find a few buntings at 26.820375, 71.039874 (much easier in Siana). We also managed to flush a pair of Indian Eagle Owls as well as one of the best sightings of the trip, a Syke's Nightjar at 26.820384, 71.037274.

Desert National Park:

Entrance/Permits: Prior to the trip we were a bit unclear about whether you could visit the park without a permit/guide. You are allowed to visit the park without a guide. Entrance fee is 300 per person and 200 for the car. Since we didn't know the specific details (and the fact that we were visiting New Years Day), we opted to hire a guide. Also of note, you need to leave a copy of your passport at the guard post, but they don't have a copy machine. To save time bring a copy of your passport otherwise you'll waste time trying to get copies made in the nearby village of Sam.

Guide: Prior to arrival we contacted Urash (+91 952 1652 660) via whatsapp and reserved him for January 1st. Although Urash doesn't speak English, he knows the birds very well and has outstanding eyesight. He charged 2,500 INR for the day. On top of the guiding fee, we were unable to take our van into the park, so we took a jeep that Urash had already coordinated. This cost an additional 6,000 for the day.

Driving: The main road that crosses DNP is in decent shape, but in the middle the road deteriorates and becomes very sandy so it isn't possible to cross from Sam the whole way to the south entrance in your own basic rental. That being said, if you enter from the south, you could take the hard packed sand side roads and have access to some of the bustard enclosures. For the area that we had the bustard, you technically could enter from the south and drive there with a small car and without a guide. That being said, the bustards move around a lot and can be very difficult to find, so I'd still recommend a local guide and off road vehicle.

Birding: We met Urash in Sam at 0600 and headed south almost completely across the park before taking a right (26.688358, 70.624847) and heading south west to set of enclosures at 26.662582, 70.612815. We arrived just as it was getting light and miraculously had 5 Great Indian Bustards in flight. They happened to be our first bird of 2019. We found the birds on the ground but they were around 600 meters away. We tried to reposition, but the birds flushed and as we found them the second time, they also took off almost immediately. We then spent another 6 hours driving around DNP searching for the bustards before finally re-finding them in almost the same area we had them at dawn. Unfortunately, not 1 minute after finding them, some people walking along the road flushed them again, but luckily this time we were able to re-find them pretty quickly and finally have some time to enjoy these amazing birds, although they were still quite distance away at about 200 meters. While watching this group we found another group for a total of at least 7 Great Indian Bustards for the day (possibly 12 if the first group of 5 were different birds). It was amazing how skittish these birds were and even remaining in the car they would get nervous and start walking away even when the car was hundreds of meters away.

Although the main focus of the day was bustard searching we did manage to find a number of other birds including Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Bimaculated, Greater Short-toed, and Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks, Isabelline and Desert Wheatears, Asian Desert Warbler, Trumpeter Finch (near water at 26.731224, 70.546244), Laggar Falcon, and a number of vultures including White-rumped, Red-headed, Cinereous, and Himalayan Griffon.

Siana:

Overview: Located 5-6 hours southeast of Jaisalmer, the dry rocky hills surrounding Siana are home to a number of targets including White-bellied Minivet, Grey-necked, White-capped, and Striolated Buntings, and Rock Bush Quail. Along with the avian highlights, mammal watching can be decent with fairly regular sightings of Striped Hyena (we dipped). Although the town of Jalore located about 45 minutes north of Siana has a few hotel options, we opted to stay at the Siana Resort, the only viable accommodation in Siana. Although the resort is a bit pricey (7,000 a night), this fee includes food (3 meals per day) as well as jeep transportation and expert guiding. This was very helpful for us, as it has been extremely dry and birding was a bit difficult. We thoroughly enjoyed staying at the Siana Resort and having Daksh as a local guide. He's very knowledgeable of the area and his family owns a good bit of land in the area that is home to all of the targets. The majority of GPS spots in this section are from their land and you'd need permission to visit.

Birding:



Palace Area: We arrived late morning to Siana and first birded this spot. Park at 25.25717, 72.71314 and there's a trail that leads through the canyon. This area should be good for White-bellied Minivet and White-capped Bunting, but we failed to find either. We did manage to see Indian Vulture and Barbury Falcon and after hiking through the canyon we also found a Brooke's Leaf Warbler at 25.256595, 72.698541. There were also a number of Striolated Buntings throughout the area, but few other birds. On the drive in there is a water tank at 25.262107, 72.730068 that also held a number of Striolated Buntings early in the morning.

Rock Bush Quail area: After showing up unannounced at the Siana Resort and deciding to stay there, we went out with Daksh to look for White-capped Bunting and Rock Bush Quail. He first took us to a water hole that he created since they are in a severe drought. After seeing the White-capped Bunting at the water hole (along with Grey-necked and Black-headed Buntings in the nearby hills) we headed to some fields at 25.218433, 72.751847 to look for Rock Bush Quail. We walked the fields in a big line for about 20 minutes before finally finding a small covey of quail. We also saw Indian Bushlark, Greater Spotted Eagle, Pallid Harrier, and a pair of Red-necked Falcons at this spot.

White-bellied Minivet area: Once again, this area is owned by Daksh's family and you'll have to ask permission before visiting. We parked at 25.122944, 72.630245 and spent almost an entire day walking the flat acacia forest as well as exploring the rocky hillsides. Grey-necked Buntings were fairly common here along with plenty of Striolated Buntings. Other interesting species seen here include Eastern Orphee Warbler, Black-rumped Flameback, Small Minivet, and Sulphur-bellied Warbler. It wasn't until late afternoon that we finally managed to see a group of 4 White-bellied Minivets coming in to roost. We highly recommend visiting this area in the late afternoon as it seems to be the best time for the minivets. Also of note, Julien flushed a roosting Pallid Scops-owl along the backside of the hills at 25.119506, 72.643327.

Mount Abu:

Overview: The main reason to visit Mount Abu is to see the highly range restricted Green Avadavat but the forest sections on the drive to the avadavat spot provides an opportunity to see a number of species that won't be encountered elsewhere on a typical western India tour (although most are much more common in other parts of India).

Birding:

Oriya Village Peace Park: Technically you don't bird the peace park, but instead the fields/bushy area just to the east of the peace park. Park at 24.632776, 72.763078 and take the small path east of here to get access to the fields/bushy area. We spent an early morning here and saw a number of new birds including Grey-breasted Prinia, Indian Yellow Tit, Crested Bunting, White-bellied Drongo, Tawny-bellied Babbler, and White-capped Bunting. After about an hour of searching we finally found a flock of about a dozen Green Avadavats feeding along the path and within the cow pen at 24.631212, 72.764739.



After birding the peace park we made a few stops on the drive down checking the forested areas. We added an additional few new birds including Indian Scimitar-babbler, Brown-capped Woodpecker, Red Spurfowl (24.63030, 72.7469), Oriental Honey-buzzard, and Red-whiskered Bulbul.

Little Rann of Kutch:

Overview: The little Rann of Kutch is a staple of the West Indian bird route for its easy access to Sykes Nightjar and Pallid Scops Owl. Along with the nightjar this area is great for MacQueens Bustard and is home to the Indian Wild Ass. There are a few options of places to stay, but we decided to stay at Desert Coursers which is detailed below. Although we used Desert Courser's jeeps for access to the Little Rann, technically we could have accessed the majority of the area with our own car as the main tracts were hard packed. If you want to save money you can probably go at it on your own, but the area is vast and having local knowledge of the bustard's whereabouts (which are becoming increasingly scarce) is probably worth the extra money.

Desert Coursers: Cost is 1,900 per person per night which includes three meals. We did a single night safari for about an hour which cost 2,000 and then a day time safari is 3,000 for 3-4 hours. We stayed out 6 hours which cost 6,000. It's quite an expensive place, but the owner is very helpful and knows good locations for all the birds. Also a plus, the lodge grounds is the wintering home of a few Pallid Scops Owls, which otherwise seem to be very difficult to get at night.

Birding:

Syke's Nightjar area: We did a single night safari with the owner of Desert Coursers checking the fields east of Nava Talaw. We entered the area by turning off the road at 23.230158, 71.756709, crossing a small river, and driving around the open area before finding our first Syke's at 23.211759, 71.477457. We eventually found another one as well as an Indian Nightjar. Essentially they should be about anywhere in this general area and just driving the dirt roads/walking the area should produce a few sightings.



Wild Ass Sanctuary: We visited this area for a half day and coordinated the visit the evening prior with the owner of Desert Coursers. This is necessary so that you can get your permit the night before so that you can enter the park early. Otherwise you'll have to get your permit at 0730 when the park office opens (really not recommended). The cost to enter this park is quite steep. In total it was 3,500 for six people and the jeep. On top of this is was 6,000 for the jeep for 6 hours. In additional the park employee wanted 1,200 per camera (!) so we decided to all leave our cameras in the room for that day! (hence the digi-binned shots).

We entered the Wild Ass Sanctuary at around 0700 from the entrance at 23.249656, 71.699942 and headed across the Rann in search of Macqueens Bustard in the scrubby sections. There's no entrance gate and we never had to show our permits during the entire day. It only took about 90 minutes of searching before we found two Macqueens Bustards at 23.284774, 71.640873. Only a few minutes later we saw an additional 3 birds in flight for a total of 5 Macqueen's Bustards. From here we started the Greater Hoopoe Lark search which turned into quite a process. Before heading out for the day, the owner of Desert Coursers didn't think we'd see either the bustard or the hoopoe-lark as both have been quite scare this year because of the severe drought conditions. He said the hoopoe-lark hadn't been seen recently in the typical spot so we first checked an area that our driver had seen one a few days prior. After unsuccessfully seeing it here, we made the long drive out to the typical area at 23.37966,71.155483. This spot is slightly higher than the surrounding area and is typically the best area to find the hoopoe-lark. Unfortunately we didn't see it and thought we dipped, but on the drive back we located two Greater Hoopoe-larks in the non-descript middle of nowhere at 23.397676, 71.233027 and 23.398099, 71,281301.

Sociable Lapwing Spot:

Birding:

The owner of Desert Coursers mentioned that 80-120 Sociable Lapwings were found wintering in some fields outside of Ahmedabad. This is by far the largest concentration that has wintered in the area in quite some time and during our visit there were also a number of locals out photographing the birds. The owner of Desert Coursers helped coordinate our visit by contacting a local guide, Latif (9978741689). We coordinated to meet Latif in the morning and after picking him up at 22.828236, 72.05769, drove about 30 minutes east to some fields. We turned south at 22.827404, 72.287758 and parked at 22.823797, 72.287325. This area was awesome with thousands of larks, the lapwings, Sarus Crane, and a single Red-headed Bunting at the same location that we parked. We found the Sociable Lapwings in the fields at 22.81871, 72.284666. I doubt the



lapwings will be in the same spot next year, but it's worth asking the owner of Desert Coursers if any are around or trying to contact Latif directly, but be warned that Latif speaks zero English. On the way back to drop off Latif we made a quick stop to see Indian Courser at 22.834647, 72.111309.

Greater Rann of Kutch:

Overview: Just like the Little Rann, the Greater Rann of Kutch and the dry thorn forests south of it are another typical stop on the Western India bird tour. The area around Bhuj is home to a variety of habitats including grassland, desert, and dry thorn forest. A number of targets are found in the area with the best being White-naped Tit and Syke's Lark, but a few others such as Marshall's lora, Grey Hypocolius, Cream-colored Courser, Painted and Spotted Sandgrouse, and Sirkeer Malkoha keep things interesting. Of note, Grey Hypocolius, typically a specialty of the area, seems to be getting increasingly harder here. We screwed up going for White-naped Tit the first morning and then spent the majority of the rest of the day unsuccessfully searching for the Hypocolius. The following morning we only saw a single female in flight despite an entire morning of intense searching. In hindsight, we should have dedicated the first morning to looking as well since the tit is quite easy in the right areas and shouldn't be hard to get later in the day, while the hypocolius is typically only gettable early morning, especially since numbers are now very low.

Birding:

Nakhatrana Thorn Forest: Located just south of Nakhatrana there is access to some decent patches of thorn forest. We spent a single morning in this area and it took all of 30 seconds to find our first White-naped Tit at 23.248944, 69.20619. We spent about an hour at this spot finding a few more pairs of tits as well as Syke's Warbler, Jungle Prinia, and Small Minivet. We then move up the road a bit closer to Nakhatrana and spent some additional time walking the dry scrub looking for Sirkeer Malkoha. Unfortunately we couldn't find the malkoha which became our only dip of the trip. We found another White-naped Tit at 23.262377, 69.217495 along with Eastern Orphean Warbler. After unsuccessfully finding the malkoha, we stopped just at the edge of the village for Syke's Lark which hangs around the rocky areas (23.268998, 69.216228) and easily found a few feeding amongst the piles of trash.

Fuley: We spent midday here as well as the following morning. This is typically one of the main hotspots for Grey Hypocolius, but the past few years this species has been becoming increasingly scarce in the area. When we arrived midday, it was very hot and we asked in the small village (23.56298, 69.27050) about the bird. A few locals motioned us to keep driving a few km north to a "resort" (23.573178, 69.269215) which is where Mohammed lives. We drove north and found Mohammed hanging out at what appears to be an abandoned resort. It actually looks like a good area to camp if you bring your own tent/food. Anyways, Mohammed only speaks basic English, but pretty much said it was too hot for the Hypocolius and that we needed to try in the morning. Although we realized that was typically the case, we decided to search the area ourselves and headed towards a GPS point just east of the village that friends had seen the Hypocolius at a few years earlier (23.563882, 69.278897). We walked around in the heat of the day for a while, but couldn't find much. We eventually gave up and returned to Mohammed and told him that we'd meet him at 0730 the next morning to guide us. Long story short, we picked up Mohammed the next morning and went to exactly the same spot we had the GPS coordinates for. We spent the entire morning staking out various Slavadora bushes in the area and eventually heard a single bird, which soon took flight in front of us and flew about a kilometer away and out of sight. Great. Only other thing of note is that on the way to and back from Fuley we ran into small groups of Painted Sandgrouse literally in the small village at 23.537654, 69.272726 which might have been attracted to the small amount of water in the area (the whole region is in a huge drought). Worth keeping an eye out for them in that area.

Banni Grasslands: We didn't really explore the western side of the grasslands much except late evening and for a few hours after dark. Not much interesting to report except a single Indian Eagle Owl and about a half dozen Jungle Cats. We did however visit the eastern Banni Grasslands midday after the morning of the hypocolius. We drove to the town of Lodai and headed further north to the start of the grasslands. We didn't know exactly where the roads started, so we took a decent dirt track at 23.443745, 69.895182 which paralleled some power lines heading north. We followed the track along the power lines and eventually started heading a bit further east where we ran into a flock of about 60 Spotted Sandgrouse at 23.483384, 69.940641. This was our only target at the spot so after seeing them, we backtracked and started the long drive towards Jamnagar.

Jamnagar:

Overview: Most birding tours fly out of Bhuj, but since we had rented a vehicle in Delhi, the only place we could return it in the “general” area was much further to the east in Ahmedabad which ended up being great as it meant we could check out Jamnagar as well as the next location, Pariag Reservoir. The main reason to visit Jamnagar is that it’s the only spot in the region for Indian Skimmer. The salt pans are home to a number of other waterbirds as well and a beach a few km to the north hosts large groups of Crab Plovers.

Birding:

Jamnagar Salt Pans & Beaches: The salt pans are just north of town. Main viewing areas are along 22.50932, 70.03118 and 22.51838, 70.05038. We first showed up here at dawn and couldn’t find the skimmers. This area isn’t too tide dependent (low tide was 1100 for us), but we weren’t sure if maybe the skimmers were out feeding. After spending the morning enjoying the other waterbirds in the area as well as the decent number of Sand Larks (highest concentration at 22.514473, 70.054074), we headed a bit north to the beaches of Sachana and Balachadi to look for Crab Plovers. Of course we arrived almost exactly at low tide which was a terrible decision as massive mudflats were exposed and birds were mostly 1-2 km out. We did manage to find a few distant Crab-Plovers at 22.60528, 70.197546, but decided to head back to Jamnagar for lunch and then check the salt pans again for the Indian Skimmers. This plan worked out well, as when we arrived back at the salt pans, we quickly located a large group of Indian Skimmers roosting at 22.508524, 70.033913. Eventually the flock relocated to 22.511481, 70.026193. Shortly after we moved over to the second spot, a local birder, Rajdeepsinh Jadeja, showed up and spent a bit of time chatting with us. He said the area isn’t too tide dependent, but the skimmers usually are only found in the area roosting in the afternoons (something to keep in mind). He also had discovered an Asian Dowitcher a few days prior, but unfortunately it wasn’t in the area it had been hanging out the past few days. If you’re going to visit the area I’d recommend reaching out to Rajdeepsinh on facebook as he seemed very knowledgeable of the area. From here we made one more visit to the beaches north of Jamnagar since the tide should have come in by now. We checked the south beach at 22.581751, 70.192829 and this time the tide was completely in and all of the shorebirds were roosting in large flocks. Overall about a thousand birds were present with the highlight being 200-300 Crab-Plovers, 50 Great Knots, and our first Bar-tailed Godwits of the trip.



Pariag Reservoir Area:

Overview: Located about an hour south of Ahmedabad, this area consists of a few wetlands/ponds along with some interesting agricultural fields. I originally found this spot while perusing eBird as there were a number of really good recent sightings including hundreds of Black-headed and Red-headed Buntings, Sarus Crane, three species of Pratincoles, and Indian Spotted Eagle. Since we had an extra day and would be flying out of Ahmedabad early the following morning, it made sense to spend a morning in the area. Overall this was a fantastic place to bird and in a casual morning of birding we saw 145 species!

Birding: We spent a single morning in this area and visited three main areas, Narda Wetlands, Pariag Reservoir, and Vastana Road. Below are details about each spot

Narda Wetlands: Park at 22.585393, 72.618444 and there's a trail that leads around the edge of the pond with plenty of reeds. We arrived here at dawn and the lake was filled with waterfowl including a few dozen Garganey and our only Cotton Pygmy-Goose of the trip. Unfortunately a few hunters on the far side of the pond took a few shots and put the majority of the ducks up into the area. Most settled back down but were flighty and headed off to other areas over the next hour. The reeds around the lake are supposed to be good for a number of rail species, but the only one we were able to see was Rufous-breasted Crake (directly in front of where you park next to the little shack). Although we didn't find anything too outstanding in the area, it was very enjoyable with additional highlights being a couple dozen Sarus Cranes, and Tri-colored Munias.

Pariag Reservoir: Entrance to the lake is at 22.549942, 72.62655 where you can drive in, park, and walk out to a little observation tower. The lake is quite large and doesn't really provide a good viewing opportunity. We only spent a few minutes here, but when we got back to the car, we got distracted for a few minutes as the woods around the car produced Indian Paradise Flycatcher, Greenish Warbler, and Purple-rumped Sunbird. The best birding here is actually the set of ponds along the main highway just east of the lake (22.55540, 72.62579). There were a ton of waterbirds here including lots of Ruddy Shelducks, Graylag Geese (with a few Bar-headed), and a very large flock of 200+ Small Pratincoles.

Vastana Road: Just west of Limbasi, Vastana road heads west through some agricultural area is that loaded with Red-headed and Black-headed Buntings. Along with the buntings we found a large flock of cranes including Demoiselle, Common, and Sarus Cranes. We also found a decent sized flock of Collared Pratincoles at 22.59818, 72.57274 as well as great looks at an Indian Spotted Eagle.



Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary:

Overview: Tansa is popular because it is the closest spot to Mumbai to get the recently discovered Forest Owlet. Along with the owlet, Tansa is a great location to see the range restricted Vigor's Sunbird and is home to a healthy population of Mottled Wood-Owls.

Access: Even after visiting, I'm a bit confused about access. Since we only had two days in the area, we hired a driver at the airport instead of trying to rent our own vehicle again (we didn't want to waste a ton of time like what happened in Delhi). We arrived at Tansa midday and headed towards our Forest Owlet spot which involves passing by a few gates including a military checkpoint at 19.56714, 73.23968. When we got to the checkpoint we were stopped and told we couldn't go any further without permission from the forest office that we passed a few km back. We turned around and went back to the Forest Office at 19.54732, 73.26196 where we talked to a guy who seemed a bit confused about having to give us access, but he made a few phone calls, took pictures of our passports, and then said we had permission. We then went back to the military checkpoint and the major there didn't believe we had permission. He eventually left us through, but took a small "fee" of a couple hundred rupee as well. We continued on to our spot and had the driver park along the road. When we returned a few hours later, the driver had moved a couple hundred meters up to the village and said someone (a ranger or military) and stopped and said he wasn't allowed to be there and that we'd get fined. We also stopped for a good chunk of time at another location later that night and again very early in the morning and the driver warned us that we could get in trouble, but no one ever stopped and said anything to us. Not sure if we actually weren't allowed to be there or if the driver just didn't like being by himself in the forest. Our driver informed us that we would get eaten by a tiger. Plenty of birders visit the area so I can't imagine it's a big deal, but just be prepared you might have some issues.

Birding: We started at our Forest Owlet spot where you park at 19.63125, 73.27467 and walked south east along a small trail to clearings around 19.62908, 73.27669. Although it was the heat of the day (1400) we had a Forest Owlet respond very quickly, but it literally took hours to finally track it down and see it as it would only call infrequently and wasn't moving much. Eventually we got great looks at two birds and then went back out to the road and headed a bit further downhill into a wet forest gulley where we had Jungle Owlet and Malabar Trogon at 19.63296, 73.27615. We then drove back out towards the beginning of the reserve and tried for Mottled Wood Owl after dark. We had a pair respond a few times at 19.53643, 73.30155, but they quickly went silent. We headed off to a hotel for the night and returned at 0400 the next morning to try for the owls. Although we probably heard 6-7 different Mottled Wood Owls, they were being extremely difficult and unresponsive. It was a very frustrating few hours and eventually it started to become light and we had all, but given up. Julien played the tape one last time and a Mottled Wood Owl came aggressively flying in at the same spot we had heard it last night. It might just be easier to wait till dawn to try for the bird! In the same area we had a male Vigor's Sunbird, White-naped Woodpecker, Tawny-bellied Babbler, Jerdon's Leafbird, Pale-billed Flowerpecker, and Indian Grey Hornbill.



Budget

Overview: As expected, traveling in India was quite cheap with the overall cost of the trip from Delhi back to Delhi being around \$860 per person. Exchange rate at the time of the trip was 70 rupees to 1 USD although exchange rate used for calculations is based at 65 rupees to 1 USD which was the rate at the airport. Below are a few details on each category.

Hotel: By far the most expensive category. Hotels ranged in price from the cheapest in Harike at \$12 per room to \$46 per night at the JP Resort in Gujurat. This cost is also slightly higher as the cost of staying at Desert Coursers and Siana Resort is included in this total but includes food at these locations and guiding/transport as well at the Siana Resort. Hotel cost is based on two people per room except for on three nights when Julien and Killan slept in the same room as Melissa and I so for those nights it's split four ways.

Car Rental: We rented a Toyota Innova for 14 days starting in Delhi and ending in Ahmedabad for \$1196 (\$85 per day) and then hired a driver/Toyota Innova in Mumbai for two days for \$184 (included gas and driver costs). In addition was had to pay \$75 for a broken side mirror. All costs were split between six people.

Internal Airfare: Cost of the flight from Ahmedabad to Mumbai was \$27 and the flight from Mumbai to Delhi was \$88. Both flights were on Air India.

Food: On almost all days we just ate quick street food for breakfast and lunch and usually ordered a big dinner. Most dinners for 6 people cost between \$18-\$23 dollars (for all six people!). The overall number for food is slightly lower since the cost of food was included at Desert Coursers and Siana Resort

Guides: We paid for guides at Desert National Park as well as a local to take us to the spot for Sociable Lapwing

Entrance Fees: Entrance fees were quite cheap for most locations with the Little Rann of Kutch being the most expensive

India Budget	
Category	Cost
Hotel	\$318.73
Car Rental	\$243.87
Internal Airfare	\$114.00
Food	\$61.70
Gas	\$55.84
Guide	\$45.38
Entrance	\$19.31
Toll	\$2.01
Total	\$860.85

