

BIRDING GOA – JANUARY, 2007

Malabar Endemics, Southern Indian specialities & lots of Curry!

The former Portuguese colony of Goa - [Goa the name is derived from Govearashtra and is the old name for the southern part of Konkan.] is a small province on India's west-coast, nestled between the Sahyadri Ghats to the east and the Arabian Sea to the west, it is India's smallest state merely 64 miles long and 37 miles wide with an area of 1350 square miles. Two rivers divide Goa: The mighty Zuari which is 39 miles long and the Mandovi which is 36 half miles long. There is a range of mountains called the Western Ghats and the highest is 3827 feet high.

Goa has a population of about 1.34 million of which one third are Christians and remainder Hindu and approximately 10% Muslim. Majority of the population resides in Panaji - the state capital. Goa is hot, temperatures range from 34 C maximum to 19 C minimum between October and March and between March and May from 34 C maximum to 27 C minimum. The Southwest Monsoon is from early June to September with rainfall of 3200 mm. During our visit temperatures were reaching the high 20.s at midday, so bring sun protection and a cap/hat with you. Under these circumstances bird watching after late morning was hard work. Early morning birding always was the most rewarding and from about 15:00 became easier, dusk set in at about 18.15.

The rupee is India's official currency. At time of writing the exchange rate was about 80 rupees for £1 sterling. Money can be changed everywhere and cash-withdrawal is possible at several sites. A visa is needed for India; they can be obtained at the High Commission of India, presently costing £30. In 2006 vaccinations for Goa were recommended for Hepatitis A, Polio, Typhoid and Tetanus.

The state has a lot to offer European birders with varied habitats near the main tourist areas, wetlands, paddy fields, mangroves, tidal estuaries, open grassland, scrub and forests all easily accessible by taxi, or even on foot. Goa is therefore often described as a perfect introduction to Indian birdlife and during a visit to Goa in winter, several Indian endemic species and/or subspecies can be encountered. These endemics are not only birds restricted to the Western Ghats or Southern India, but also widespread Indian endemics are encountered. Goa also provides the opportunity to observe scarce Western Palearctic birds such as warblers and Waders. From 5th January, 2006 -18th January, 2006, Chris Knox, Tony & Paul Stewart, Andy Mcleavy and Iain Robson made an intensive Birding trip to Goa, we were joined in the second week by Paul Cassells, Bob Biggs, Tony Crilley and John Willis, for most this was our first trip to India. The trip was hatched about a year before, and we booked a two week package through Thomsons holidays opting to stay at the recommended Marinha Dourada resort in Arpora, this proved to be a first class base, clean, comfortable and with great birding on the doorstep.

Between the 14th -16th January we left our hotel base for a trip to the, Backwoods Camp and for many this was the highlight of the trip, we left the Camp with an impressive bird list, but also enjoyed the beautiful scenery, and the mainly vegetarian food and tented accommodation was up to a good standard, we were all impressed with our guide Leio, so much so that we plan to use Leio and his team for a trip to Northern India in 2009. All in all Backwoods is a 'not to be missed' site on a birding trip to Goa.

We never encountered any problems in Goa, we found the people very friendly and laid back, the food cheap, and to a very good standard and birders appeared to be tolerated in all areas we visited, indeed the only cross word we had all week was not from locals but fellow British birdwatchers! We all agreed that Goa is easy to bird and a great place for a birding / family holiday. A two-week trip including a couple of days at Backwoods should give you a bird list of two hundred plus. The top sites are all well covered and visited regularly by Western European birders, it is however, despite its popularity, still a state with hot spots as yet undiscovered, and reason enough for a return visit, which am sure we will.

Chris Knox

Foreword: Chris Knox, Trip Report: Tony Stewart, Photographs: Iain Robson, Paul Stewart, Chris Knox, Tony Stewart

Day One - Thursday/Friday January 5/6th 2007

Anticipation levels had been building for weeks and finally the departure date was here. The minibus which we had pre booked turned up 35 minutes early catching everyone on the hop. But with everyone safely on board we made our way to Manchester for our flight to India. We reach the terminal at 11.30am and made our way to the Monarch Airlines desk. Check in went smoothly and we were soon enjoying a pint in the bar awaiting departure. The flight departed on time at 15.30pm and some nine and half hours later we arrived at Dabolim Airport in Goa at 06.20am (local time). It was pretty chaotic at the airport and bureaucracy reigned supreme in true Victorian style. But eventually we cleared the airport. We decided to dispense with the official Thomas Cook transfers and take one of the numerous cabs. Let the fun begin, assured by the driver that he could cope with 5 of us, he piled us into his small Ambassador taxi, bags and all. We couldn't do much for laughing as he sped off, to join the wackiest race of them all. The drive to Baga was crazy but brilliantly funny. Thank god we didn't hire a car!!

We arrived at the Marinha Dourada Hotel and paid our fare of £5 for the 45 kilometre ride!!!!!! We quickly dumped our bags after checking in and headed off for our first real taste of Indian birding. The hotel was specifically chosen for its close proximity to local birding hotspots such as the Salt Pans, Arpora Woods and Baga Hill. The salt pans were immediately opposite the hotel.

Birdlife on the pans was abundant with Herons reigning supreme - 10 Great Whites, 30 Little Egrets, 4 Cattle Egrets, 30 Indian Pond Herons and 4 Intermediate Egrets. Other species included 3 Common Kingfishers, Osprey, House Crow, White-browed Wagtail, Long-tailed Shrike, Paddyfield Pipit, 4 Greenshanks, 3 Marsh Sandpipers, Redshank, Common Sandpiper and several Small Pratincoles.



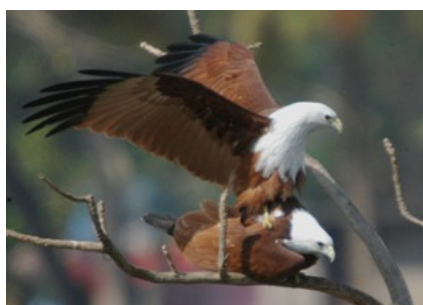
Paddyfield Pipit & White-throated Kingfisher & Jungle Myna

As we ventured around the ponds we racked up the species adding White-throated Kingfisher, Pied Bushchat, Black-eared & Brahminy Kites, Brown-headed Gull, Red-wattled Lapwing, Pacific Golden Plover, Ashy Prinia, Asian Palm Swift, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Streak-throated Swallow, Wire-tailed Swallow, Little Ringed Plover, Rock Dove, Temmincks Stint, Purple-rumped Sunbird, Little Cormorant and Black Drongo. Over the nearby hills were two White-bellied Sea Eagles. The afternoon heat was beginning to become unbearable and we decided to retire to the hotel to chill out for the afternoon. We reconvened at 17.30pm and commandeered a couple of taxis to take us to Baga town and in particular the Biera Mar Hotel. The Biera Mar hotel is famed for its views over the Baga fields and is renowned for some of the more secretive and sought after wetland species. The hotel welcomes birders from around the world, although you are expected to buy a drink. Armed with a freshly squeezed glass of fruit juice we set about birding the fields.

The Baga Fields are a vast area of paddy which flood heavily during the monsoon. At the time of our visit much of the water had disappeared but there was a still lot to see. Raptors included Marsh Harrier, Black Kite, including several birds identified as the race '*Lineatus*' Black-eared Kite. Carefully watching the electricity cables running through the fields produced lots of birds including the superb Little Green Bee-eater, Common and Jungle Myna and Richards Pipit, White-rumped Munia, Scaly-breasted Munia, Ashy Wood Swallow, and Rose-coloured Starling. Cattle Egret and Indian Pond Heron were numerous and a handful of White-breasted Waterhen were noted. Black Drongo was common and several Plum-headed Parakeet and Asian Palm Swift were noted overhead. A showy Oriental Magpie Robin was seen around the balcony, as was a rather elusive Paddyfield Warbler, scoping the scrub produced a Brown Shrike and an Eastern Stonechat. There was a loud bang as a bird collided with an electric overhead cable, many of the birds took flight and close to the hotel ADMc had a Cinnamon Bittern which lifted from the reeds and returned almost immediately, making him the sole observer of the bird and to this day the butt of numerous jokes.

Weeks prior to arriving in Goa, Chris (Flapper) Knox had been in contact with a local guide called Abhi Naik who was provisionally booked as our guide for the trip. During the days leading up to departure Chris had tried several times to make contact with Abhi, via email, without success. This lack of contact had Flapper flapping! Coincidentally a local taxi driver/ bird guide called Rama M Govekar (Raymond) ventured onto the viewing platform at the Biera Mar and introduced himself. After a while Raymond left the proceedings to return to the taxi rank at the front of the hotel leaving Chris to conduct a quick straw poll which resulted in Abhi being kicked into touch and Raymond being hired as our guide.

Dusk was approaching fast and although we had seen a fabulous array of birds the hoped for Rails and Bitterns had failed to show. However there was still time to connect with one of our target species - Painted Snipe. The bird crept out almost unnoticed from deep cover and all present managed excellent views of this secretive species. It was almost dark so we decided to head back to the hotel to freshen up and head out for a meal and a few beers. Outside the Biera Mar we shook hands with Raymond to seal the deal and took his taxi and made our way back.



Ashy Wood-swallow, Brahminy Kites & White-browed Wagtail

Day Two - Saturday January 7th 2007

An early start (06.30am) saw us heading away from the Hotel and making the short (ish) walk to Arpora Wood. The pools outside the hotel had most of the birds present the previous day with the added addition of our first Stork-billed Kingfisher and 2 White-browed Wagtails. Close to the hotel we added Black-lored Tit considered by some as a distinct species from birds in Northern India. House Crows were abundant and there were several White-throated Kingfishers which were to become a familiar sight. As we made our way to the woods several Blyth's Reed Warblers were heard calling from the irrigation ditches and several White-breasted Waterhen was seen. Within the woodland there was a large nightclub - the Copa Cobana, passing the night club on the left you enter the woodland proper. Red-whiskered Bulbuls sang loudly from prominent perches together with the odd Red-vented Bulbul and the newly split Indian Golden Oriole was present here in good numbers. Other birds included White-throated Fantail, Black Hooded Oriole, Purple-rumped Sunbird, and Rufous Treepie. The only Warblers were Blyth's Reeds and Greenish appeared common here, near a stone cliff a Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike and a White-cheeked Barbet showed well. Our trip list was growing by the minute and we quickly added Spotted Dove, Common Woodshrike, Long-tailed Shrike, Ashy Drongo, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Purple Sunbird and Grey Headed Bulbul. Overhead flew a party of Alpine Swift. Lots of Common Iora were seen which caused a few moments of merriment, as all present managed crippling views except for poor Chris, who began to Flap big style. Desperation set in as he realised he had dipped a mega (Ha Ha) - cue the tabs. Further along the track we added Plain Flowerpecker, Plain Prinia, and several noisy and showy Rufous Woodpecker. Chris got his own back on the lads as he and ADMc managed to bag a Grey-breasted Prinia which the rest of us dipped and a stunning Zoothera species was observed in the shape of an Orange-headed Thrush and it was a cracker. A group of Jungle Babblers called noisily from the scrub. We were later told that they travel in groups of seven and are affectionately known as "the seven brothers". The heat rose steadily and we retired to the hotel for the afternoon. A couple of the lads went off to Baga beach for a walk. We had arranged to meet up again at 16.00pm for our first outing with Raymond. Whilst waiting for Raymond we had the chance to scan the Pools opposite the hotel and there were lots of waders present including Greenshank, Redshank Small Pratincole and several stonking Marsh Sandpipers. The Redshanks were very pale here and were reminiscent of winter plumaged Spotted Redshanks which were claimed by some of the group until Chris got his trusty red pen out at the evening log call.

Raymond arrived shortly afterwards and he had brought along fellow taxi driver and bird guide Mahesh D Dhargalkar and were soon on our way to the village of Siolim Oxel Bardez and in particular a spectacular area of rice paddies which stretched as far as the eye could see. It really was a stunning place and soon we were racking up the birds. Several Black-winged Stilts were present with dozens of Indian Pond Herons and Red-wattled Lapwings. Raymond soon located the big one in the shape of a solitary Grey-headed Lapwing. The Grey-headed Lapwing is a species which breeds in northeast China and Japan with the mainland population wintering in northern Southeast Asia from north eastern India to Cambodia. The Japanese population winters, at least partially, in southern Honshu. This particular bird was well out of its normal winter range but nonetheless a great trip tick. The now familiar Kingfishers seemed to be everywhere. Seventy five Small Pratincoles were on the far side of the paddy. Other waders included Common Sandpiper and Temmincks Stint. A Snipe species had everybody's attention but the hoped for Pintail turned into a Common. Also present were several instructive Siberian Stonechat, Little Cormorant, Black Drongo, Chestnut-tailed Starlings, Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail and two Asian Open-bill Storks. We got close views of a cracking Lesser Spotted Eagle and a Marsh Harrier quartered the monsoon soaked paddies. Mammals seen were a Mongoose and a Five-striped Palm Squirrel. We headed off and made our way back to the Arpora Woods with our guides. A Golden-fronted Leafbird showed well almost as soon as we arrived. We quickly added the secretive Puff-throated Babbler, Nilgiri Blackbird, Shikra and Black-rumped Flameback. Most of the birds that we had seen during our morning walk were again present, although in smaller numbers. Raymond led us to an area of bare scrub and as we waited by the track he flushed a Savannah Nightjar. The bird lifted only to land a couple of metres away. We crept closer and got crippling views of the bird. We called it a day and headed back to the hotel and a night on the town. Saturday is market night in Arpora and the roads were jam packed with vehicles and made for a very slow drive into Baga. Eventually we got to our chosen restaurant and enjoyed a fabulous meal with four pint's each, for less than a fiver a man!



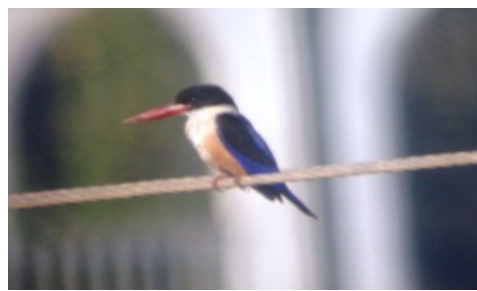
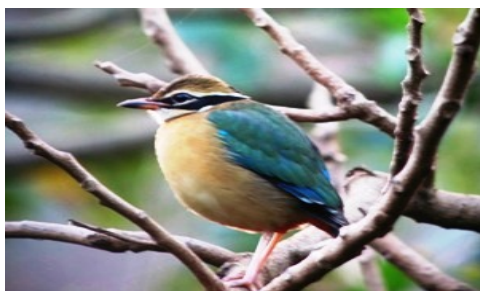
Savannah Nightjar

Day 3 Sunday - 8th January 2007

We met up with Raymond and Mahesh outside the Hotel at 06.00am and headed off for the village of Fort Aquada. Raymond had requested that we made little or no noise as we approached his "secret site". First birds to show at first

light were another wonderful Orange-headed Thrush and several female Indian Peafowl. We walked up the track until Raymond brought the group to a stop and in silence we scanned the fringes of the track ahead of us. Before long we had a superb Indian Pitta in the bag and we were fortunate enough to enjoy some brilliantly prolonged views of this confiding bird. Even at this early stage of our trip was surely a contender for bird of the trip. The Pitta sat for an age as an appreciative group stood and marvelled at the bird at a distance of less than 2 metres. Other birds were Hoopoe, Greater Coucal, Purple Sunbird, Indian Golden Oriole, more Peafowl and a Spotted Dove. We obtained good views of a Rufous Treepie and nearby a White-browed Bulbul showed well along with an Ashy Drongo. An Indian Scimitar Babbler called from cover, but we couldn't catch a glimpse of this rarely seen bird. Raymond had only ever seen one Scimitar Babbler during his birding life. We left Fort Aquada grinning like Cheshire cats and decided to put in another stint at Arpora Woods. There were lots of Plain Flowerpecker together with Black-lored Tit, Red-vented, Red-whiskered and Grey-headed Bulbul, Jungle, Tawny-bellied and Puff-throated Babbler, Rufous Treepie, Asian Koel, Shikra, Common Woodshrike, Loten's & Purple Sunbird, Long-tailed Shrike, Alpine & House Swift, Greenish & Blyth's Reed Warbler. It was getting hot and the boys were getting hungry so we made our way back to the taxi's adding more birds to the list such as Blue-winged Leafbird, and great views of the scarce Blue-faced Malkoha and another Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. Raymond took us to the legendary Lila Cafe, much famed from the hippie 60's, for a breakfast of masala omelettes, bread and freshly squeezed fruit juices. Raymond and Mahesh left us at the cafe to enjoy our late breakfast. We arranged to meet up again the following morning. After breakfast we decided to walk up the Baga Hill before heading back to the hotel. The sun was baking and a walk up the hill didn't seem a good idea but we marched up anyway and we were rewarded with some excellent birds such as Pale-billed & Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Greater Coucal, Stork-billed Kingfisher, Ring-necked Parakeet and a stunning pair of Small Minivet. A good selection of Raptors were seen from the hill top including 2 White-bellied Fish Eagles, Short-toed Eagle, Osprey, Oriental Honey Buzzard, as well as the common Brahminy, Black and Black-eared Kites.

We retired to the hotel to reconvene at 16.00pm. When we met up again we decide to walk to the Biera Mar via the Baga fields. The fields were accessed by crossing the Baga River Bridge which is situated by the Lila Cafe. There was plenty of birdlife on the fields which were fairly extensive and very wet in places. The now familiar Drongo's, Myna's, Crows and Kingfishers were very much in evidence, however there were several other species present to keep us on our toes as we headed across the fields towards Baga. Good finds included, Brahminy Starling, Plain Prinia, Indian Roller and a flock of Baya Weavers and a tricky pipit gave itself up on flushing – a Richards. A small accipiter hunting the palm edges was identified as a Besra a widespread resident of South Asia from India through South China and Indonesia. A Chat species was observed and initially its identification had the team bamboozled, as it had a striking supercillium and unusual plumage features. We eventually agreed that it was a probable Whinchat, which was later scrubbed by Flapper and his big red crayon. Whinchat was unlikely to occur in this part of the Indian sub-continent which was well away from its African wintering quarters. We eventually arrived at the balcony having skilfully sidestepped three of the mangiest dogs in India. It was 17.30 as we ordered our freshly squeezed fruit juice and the day was drawing to a close. New birds were seen from the Biera Mar namely two stonking Black-capped Kingfishers, Purple Heron, Green Sandpiper and the rather featureless Indian Swiftlet.



Indian Pitta & Black-capped Kingfisher

It was approaching 19.00 when a couple of Snipe were seen but identification could not be clinched. That night as we walked to yet another fabulous restaurant we added Indian Spotted Owlet which emerged at dusk to hunt from the telegraph wires and several Indian Flying Foxes were seen. The evening meal with a few beers at the All Spice in Arpora came to £6 per man an absolutely wonderful way to end the day.

Day Four - Monday January 9th 2007

Six thirty am and we were driving towards Old Goa having added Whimbrel at the Marinha Dourada pools to the list. We stopped at a garage and filled up with 50p litre petrol. Early birds included the expected Kites, Crows and Kingfishers which seemed to be everywhere. Long-tailed Shrike was added at the Petrol station. We arrived at our first stop of the day Carambolim Woods and almost immediately we had our target species in the bag, Jungle Owlet and Brown Hawk Owl which afforded us excellent views.



Brown Hawk Owl, Jungle Owlet & Spotted Owlet

The wood around the old mans cottage also held Jungle Crow a welcome addition to the trip list. Other birds present were Indian Golden Oriole, 10+ Asian Koel's, a ticking Blyth's Reed Warbler, Common Iora, Oriental Magpie Robin, Baya Weaver, Ashy Prinia, Spotted Dove and Greenish Warbler. Just beyond the wood the habitat opened out to reveal a large lake which produced 2 Indian Cormorants, Little Cormorant, Gull-billed Tern, Pied Kingfisher, Greenshank, Common, Marsh & Wood Sandpipers, and Streak-throated Swallow, Black-headed Ibis, Darter and the usual egrets. This was a great place for birds of prey and Raptors in the vicinity included Common Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Greater & Lesser Spotted Eagles and Brahminy Kite. Passerines included two stunning Small Minivet's, Plain Prinia, Greenish Warbler, Siberian Stonechat, Bluethroat and the first Coppersmith Barbet of the trip. The next stop was the main Carambolim Lake and a chance to connect with more of the trips target species. Although water levels were quite low the area teemed with bird life. There were plenty of duck species present with familiar species from back home such as Pintail, Eurasian Wigeon and Gadwall and unfamiliar species such as Comb Duck, Lesser Whistling Duck and Spot-billed Duck. Also present were many Cotton Pygmy Goose, 100+ Purple Gallinule, Glossy Ibis, Bronzed-Winged and Pheasant tailed Jacana's. There were also plenty of waders and herons with good numbers of Red-wattled Lapwing, Common Sandpiper, Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Cattle, Intermediate and Little Egrets, Purple Heron, Little Grebe, Common Coot and Common Moorhen. In keeping with the rest of Goa there were lots of Kingfishers present and a 'Thunbergi' race Yellow Wagtail patrolled the margins. Raptor species included Black Kite and a nice Cream crown Marsh Harrier. A superb Indian Muggar Crocodile lay menacingly under a tree.



Bronzed-winged Jacana, Coppersmith Barbet & Blue-tailed Bee-eater

We took time out for lunch and enjoyed eleven masala omelette sarnies and drinks for just less than £6. After lunch we headed back towards Panaji city with roadside birds including Indian Rollers, Black-shouldered Kites and a Long-tailed Shrike. Passing the main river just outside the City three Gull-billed Terns were fishing. Close to Baga a superb Tawny Eagle was effortlessly hanging in the sky. Later in the afternoon we had a trip to Divar Island, which was a ferry ride across the massive Mandovi River. A wintering Pied Harrier had been seen the previous month and was high on our list of target birds. The Pied Harrier proved elusive but Divar Island proved to be a fantastic place to visit with six Pallid Harriers including one absolutely memorable ghostly male. An Osprey was observed mobbing a White-bellied Sea Eagle. The identification of Oriental Skylark was clinched and other birds included Greater Short-toed Lark, Indian Roller and a flock of approximately 200 Baya Weavers. The shores of the Mangroves held Great White Egrets, Kingfishers, c140 Glossy Ibis and Darter. A handsome dark phase Western Reef Egret was a nice find. The silted shore of the Mangrove had lots of Mudskippers and Mitten Crabs.

Day Five - Tuesday January 10th 2007

The six o'clock starts were the norm and the first hour was always the toughest as the effects of the alcohol gradually wore off. We were en route to Mayem Lake which was about an hour's drive from the hotel. We had a brief stop close to the Aldona Bridge a known site for Yellow-wattled Lapwing. Seventeen Lapwings were seen amongst the stubble of a

roadside field along with several Hoopoe, Malabar Lark, Paddyfield Pipit, Greater Coucal and Twenty Rose-coloured Starlings. We arrived at Mayem Lake at about 7.40am and we quickly added several new species to the trip list -A Rufous Woodpecker went about its business and nine very handsome Orange-breasted Green Pigeons sat high in a nearby tree. We walked along the forest track and guided by Raymond stopped at a well known spot for Brown Fish Owl. We were in luck as the bird was seen roosting in a nearby tree. A second Owl was spotted and preceded to fly across the lake itself showing brilliantly as it went. Mayem Lake environs were revealing new birds every couple of minutes such as Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, and a pair of Changeable Hawk Eagle of the race '*cirrhatius*' defined by its very prominent crest. Bronzed Drongo and White-bellied Drongo were observed alongside each other and several Nilgiri Woodpigeon flew overhead. Raymond guided the group to a roosting Indian Grey Nightjar a recent split from the Indian Jungle Nightjar further north in the sub continent.



Indian Grey Nightjar, Yellow-wattled Lapwing & Greater Coucal

Raymond then took us to a second species of Nightjar, this time it was an Indian Little Nightjar. Again we had great views. The path around the lake was becoming impassable with the vegetation getting thicker and thicker. Another birding guide hurriedly came towards us armed with a stick. He claimed he had heard a tiger in the undergrowth. At this point Chris believe it or not 'flapped' began to retreat from the wood, smoked several tabs. No tiger was ever seen but a Wild Boar came toddling along the path a few minutes later. As the path came to an end we added a cracking Emerald Dove to the trip list. We returned to the vehicles retracing our steps along the edge of Lake Mayem. We spotted a bird which we initially thought was a Wryneck but turned out to be a Banded-bay Cuckoo a scarce Goan bird and a lifer for Mahesh. Breakfast of Omelettes was enjoyed in the park's cafe before we headed off to our next stop. At 11.30 we arrived at Ticknem Lake which was relatively quiet with Greenshank and Redshank on the margins and a perched Osprey. The fields behind were a little better and give us our first Tree Pipit of the trip, male and female Pied Bushchat's and a kettle of Storks contained six Woolly-necked and the massive Lesser Adjutant. Mobile again we headed off to Chora Island which had lots of birds with Curlew and Grey Plover being added to the trip list. Also present were 100+ Brown-headed Gulls, 150+ Gull-billed Terns, 250+ Pintail, single Whimbrel, Woolly-necked Stork, Common Kingfisher and Black-headed Ibis. The mangroves were alive with invertebrates and hundreds of Mudskippers. The morning outing was over and our guides dropped us back at the hotel for our afternoon chill out session with each of us doing our own thing. At 17.00 the guides returned and took us for an evening forest walk for Brown-wood Owl. Sadly we were out of luck with the Owl but were compensated with a superb Malabar Whistling Thrush. We ended the day on the balcony of the Biera Mar with an iced fruit juice, watching Purple heron, Marsh Harrier, White-breasted Waterhen, Shikra, Green & Wood Sandpipers and Scaly Breasted Munia.

Day Six - Wednesday January 11th 2007

Throbbing Heed and a dry mouth accompanied an extra early start. Yes it was 05.30 and we were on the road bound for the Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary. This was an excellent site with many highlights, although i am still recovering from stalking a hen in the undergrowth (Grey Jungle Fowl). We saw new birds with Malabar Grey Hornbill, Dark-fronted Babbler, and the distinctive '*Gularis*' race of Black-crested Bulbul – the aptly named Ruby-throated Bulbul. A splendid White-rumped Sharma, the shy Asian Fairy Bluebird, Yellow-browed Bulbul, Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, Heart-spotted Woodpecker and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch were also observed here in a pulsating 15 minutes with a wave of birds moving into the area.. By this time i was becoming rather desperate for a bird with a short name to ease the stress on my pencil as the point was becoming rather blunt and was promptly rewarded with a Chiffchaff. It didn't last long as we added Malabar White-headed Starling, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Crimson-backed Sunbird, Orange-headed Thrush, Black-capped Monarch and a tricky Western-crowned Warbler. A superb male Blue-capped Rock Thrush was an added bonus. A family party of Wild Pigs trotted through the undergrowth and several Spotted Deer were seen. Other Mammals seen were Giant Squirrel and a few Black-faced Langurs (primates).



Orange-headed Thrush & Blue-capped Rock Thrush

Bondla also produced a perched Besra, and groups of Jungle Babblers & several elusive Puff-throated Babblers. Again a Scimitar Babbler was heard calling but not seen. A familiar Grey Wagtail and a not so familiar Forest Wagtail were added to the list together with Malabar Whistling Thrush, Bronzed Drongo, Asian Paradise Flycatcher and Common Iora. Bondla Lake was next up and good birds seen here were 4 Crested Treeswifts, Wire-tailed Swallow and a Vernal Hanging Parakeet. The morning outing came to an end and we headed back towards the Goan capital of Panaji. The telegraph wires along the main road were dotted with birds with perching Indian Rollers, Black-shouldered Kite, Spotted Doves, Blue-cheeked and Little-Green Bee-eaters and a Marsh Harrier was seen quartering a nearby field. The approach road to our hotel took us through Saligoa zor The fields near to the village held Long-tailed Shrike and Indian Rollers, but our attention was drawn to a large Aquila soaring above the fields. As we watched the bird came closer and banked and allowed confirmation of a Tawny Eagle.

The afternoons in Goa were spent doing our own thing in the heat of the day. Iain was usually flat out on a sun bed book in hand, Paul doing his stuff in the Gym, Andy doing his Duncan Goodhew impressions in the pool, Flapper smoking a hundred tabs and armed with more books than Waterstones quietly accepting / rejecting species on the trip list and me chucking Rupees out of the window for the local cherubs.

We met up again at 17.00 for a walk up and around the Baga Hill where the usual suspects were seen. We then followed directions recorded in an old internet trip report and found a breeding colony of Alexandrine Parakeets. Another cracking night followed with the highlight being a candlelit meal at one of the many beach shacks on Baga Beach.

Day Seven - Thursday January 12th 2007

Flapper had been up all night with his trousers around his ankles because today was the Gull day. A late 6.45am start saw us en-route to Morjim Beach with a pair of White-bellied Sea Eagles and a Stork-billed Kingfisher seen from the van. A glorious morning greeted us when we arrived at the beach and soon Flaps was frothing at the mouth with a huge flock of Gulls roosting on an exposed sand bar. His skill came bubbling to the surface and he grappled with Heuglin's Gull (*Larus Heuglini*), Steppe Gull (*Larus [heuglini] barabensis*), Caspian Gull (*Larus cachinnans*), Great Black-headed Gull, Common Black-headed Gull, and Brown-headed Gull & Slender-billed Gull. Terns present included Little Tern, Lesser & Greater Crested, Sandwich and Gull-billed Tern. We arrived at the site having just missed a River Tern. For those of us that didn't have the Gull passion of Chris there were lots of other great birds as well as a pack of rampant dogs comically trying to catch Gulls for their breakfast. Two White-bellied sea eagles patrolled the far shore and the beach held good numbers of Greater and Lesser Sand Plover present together and providing a nice comparison of size and identification features also noted were Kentish Plover, Terek Sandpiper and Dunlin.



Greater & Lesser Sand Plovers, White-rumped Munia & Red-wattled Lapwing

We stopped at a beach shack for breakfast then had a walk up the beach to the north seeing more waders including Terek & Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, Redshank and more Lesser Sand Plovers. Present also were Grey & Purple Heron, Pied & Common Kingfisher and the usual Egrets. We dipped on our usual afternoon outing preferring a lazy session at the hotel and an early start for the evening meal and ice cold Kingfisher's.

Day Eight - Friday January 13th 2007

The rest of the lads were due to arrive later in the day for the start of their week's holiday. But first there was another hectic day's birding to contend with. Another early start and we were off to our first stop of the day at the Dona Paula Plateau. This was a site which Raymond knew was good for Black-crowned Sparrow Lark. The site was close to an urban area and after a short search we found the birds - 4 males and 1 female. Also present were 10 Oriental Skylarks, Spotted Owlet, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Indian Robin, White-browed and Red-vented Bulbuls. We then headed for Batim Lake with 2 Stork-billed Kingfishers seen from the van en-route. We reach the Lake at 08.00 and quickly located some familiar wildfowl with Teal, Shoveler, Garganey and Pintail all ticked off together with other familiar favourites - Coot and Little Grebe. More exotic (to us) were Bronzed-winged Jacana, a handful of Spot-billed and 200+ Lesser-whistling Ducks. The next site was the Sridona Salt Pans with Waders being the main feature with Greenshank, 25+ Pacific Golden Plover, Temmincks Stint, Little-ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper all present. Four Asian Koels were also seen together by the roadside. Santa Cruz Rice Paddies was the next port of call and after a short walk along the dyke we spotted at least 6+ Pintail Snipe only identified in flight. Two Marsh Harriers were over the flooded field and also seen were Gull-billed Tern, Pacific Golden Plover, 2 Black-headed Ibis and a Woolly-necked Stork. A large raptor flew across the paddies and appeared to land in some nearby palms. We headed towards the trees and soon located the bird. We deliberated over its I.D until we were all convinced that it was a Steppe Eagle confirmed via photos showing the elongated gape. We moved off to Panjim Salt Pans just outside the Goan capital and waders were the order of the day with 6+ Curlew & 2 Terek Sandpipers, 6 Little Stints, 10 Kentish & 1 Pacific Golden Plover, Redshank and plenty Red-wattled Lapwings. We were close to Panjim and we made our way to a small coffee shop for breakfast. House Sparrow was numerous within the city. The morning was over and we headed back to the hotel with the Tawny Eagle seen at the same spot as before. At the hotel 4 Common Tailorbirds were seen from the room window. The rest of the boys had arrived and had been adrenalin birding in the baking heat around the Marinha Dourada environs. We met up with them at 16.00 and jumped in a couple of cabs to the balcony of the Biera Mar. Again the balcony provided some excellent birding with Scaly-breasted and White-rumped Munia's, White-breasted Waterhens, Bee-eaters, Kites, Myna's and Kingfishers all seen. Also on the fields were Rose-coloured Starling and Paddyfield Pipits. The target for the new arrivals was Painted Snipe and after a while the bird obliged by showing on the fringes of the field. A Ruddy-breasted Crake was also seen this evening from the Biera Mar. We left the balcony and made our way to the front of the hotel where Raymond was introduced to the new lads. The taxi ride home was short but gave us two Spotted Owlets sitting on telegraph wires.

Day Nine - Saturday January 14th 2007

We had pre-booked a birdwatcher's boat trip up the Zuari River and Cumbarjua Canal with the team from the Backwoods Camp. We were picked up at the hotel by a courtesy coach and driven to a rendezvous point where we were to board our boat for the trip. First birds of the day were Stork-billed & White-throated Kingfishers and an Oriental Magpie Robin. We arrived at the quay and boarded our boat which departed at 08.30. Two boats left the quay within minutes the second boat was full of German and Norwegian Birders. We proceeded down the mighty Zuari and spotted a Humped-back Dolphin. Gull-billed, Little and Great Crested Terns were seen together with 3 Ospreys. Sandbanks and mangrove fringes held Terek & Common Sandpipers, Curlew, and Redshank & Greenshank. Egrets were common with most species being present an added bonus was the sighting of a Dark Phase Western Reef Egret. Our target birds on the boat trip was Collared Kingfisher and as we made our way up the Canal up to 5 birds bird were observed in the Mangrove. There were plenty of massive Indian Reed Warblers on the mangrove edge and we also recorded a handful of Darter and a fleeting Scaly-breasted Rail. The boat trip was excellent value. We headed back to meet our bus, which had driven some distance to meet us at an alternative quay. We boarded the bus at 11.30 and headed off to Bantim Lake. Nothing new was added for group one but the lake provided the opportunity for the rest of the lads to catch up with Cotton Teal, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Lesser-Whistling Duck and Plum-headed Parakeet. Later that afternoon we met up and had a lazy stroll to the Arpora Woods. Again the place proved to be great with lots of birds present with Black-Hooded Oriole, Large Cuckoo-shrike, Shikra, Black-rumped Flameback plus the expected species. A magnificent White-bellied Sea Eagle passed overhead. We also managed to relocate the Savannah Nightjar which was still roosting in the same area.

Day Ten - Sunday January 15th 2007

The big day was on us as day ten signalled the start of our Backwoods Camp trip. No trip to Goa would be complete without a visit to Backwoods. The two people from the hotel were due to travel with us, but couldn't bear the thought of sharing the same space, had decided to postpone their visit till after we left. We were pleased they didn't show up and spirits were high as we left the hotel at 05.00. Although Goa is relatively small, the variety of habitats, from mangrove to monsoon forest, means that its natural diversity is considerable. Recognised as a biodiversity hotspot and having been classified by Birdlife International as one of the most important Endemic Bird Areas in Asia, the Western Ghats and in particular the Baghwan Mahaveer Wildlife Sanctuary is home to the Backwoods Camp. Covering 240 sq.km, the Baghwan Mahaveer is the largest protected area in Goa, providing some degree of security to the deciduous and evergreen forests of the foothills of the Western Ghats and to the wildlife they support. Along the full length, the Ghats support an incredible number of endemics and of the sixteen species endemic to the Ghats; eight can be regularly found here. Backwoods Camp is situated amongst the tranquil forests of the reserve and is perfectly positioned for birdwatchers to explore. It offers expert guiding and ecologically friendly accommodation (Tents!!!!). We arrived at Backwoods at 07.15 having survived a grand prix style drive to the camp by a driver who we confidently aged as about 13! We were met by our host and genuine good guy Leio who beckoned us off the bus some 100 or so metres from the camp. This was a well planned stop as soon Leio had guided us to a cracking pair of Sri Lankan

Frogmouths which were at roost in a Bamboo bush. Leio took the group out for a walk along one of the many trails. New birds were quickly added to the list with Two Greater Flamebacks, Scarlet Minivet and Spangled Drongo all ticked. We also saw Shikra, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Heart Spotted Woodpecker and Orange-headed Thrush. We ended up seeing many species and we hadn't even stopped for breakfast. We made our way back to the camp for breakfast of Chapattis and Bombay Potatoes and were allocated our rather splendid tents for the duration of our stay. After Breakfast we headed out on one of the many trails in the forest. The heat had built up considerably and as a consequence most of the birds had disappeared but there was still enough to keep you on your toes with the Endemic Malabar Parakeet one of the first birds ticked. There were one or two Western Crowned Warblers along with Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Flame-throated Bulbul, Yellow-browed Bulbul and Black-Hooded Oriole. We stopped at a dry river bed where we were asked to train our scopes through the foliage to reveal a roosting Spot-bellied Eagle Owl which is never annual at Backwoods, and it was an absolute cracker. We left the Owl in peace and headed back for tea adding Tickell's Blue Flycatcher and a couple of Streak-throated Swallows. Tea was served at 15.30 and then it was straight out birding. The late afternoon proved to be very rewarding, as if it hadn't been rewarding enough already.

We added several new birds to our list including Pompadour Green Pigeon, Brown-backed Needletail, Black-throated Munia, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, White-rumped Needletail, Black Bulbul, Rufous-bellied & Black Eagles, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Hill Myna and Blue-eared Kingfisher. What a day, this would be day that would last long in the memory. That night the noise levels went up a notch as we hit the Kingfisher's in the company of the Backwoods team and enjoyed an excellent vegetarian meal. One sour note was the jealousy and rather cutting comments directed at ourselves from a group of British birders staying at Backwoods with a well known bird tour company, they were blatantly unbelieving (and envious) of our bird list. It was pleasing that we held our heads high and kept our cool and did not descend to their petty levels. What a bunch they were. One last laugh before retiring to bed was our tent had gained a few extra guests in the shape of a couple of Burg Frugs (Toilet Frogs) and several spiders the size of saucers. It made for an interesting few minutes before falling asleep.

Day Eleven - Monday January 16th 2007

The morning dawned with John waking everybody up as he screamed blue murder during a refreshing ice cold shower. At 06.30 we met for tea and biscuits to a cacophony of birdsong this followed on from the frog chorus which resonated through the forest during the night. First birds of the day were Puff-throated Babbler and two Indian Peafowl. We Drove off from the camp in the bus and an Indian Pitta flew across the road in front of us. We arrived at the Mahadeva Temple at Tambdisurla and almost immediately connect with some Vernal Hanging Parrots, Bronzed Drongo and Small Minivet. More new birds for the trip were added with Black-naped Oriole, Crimson-fronted Barbet and a Malabar Trogon gave us the run around before being confirmed and added to the list. We returned to Backwoods and headed off along one of the trails with Leio. After a while we spotted the much sought after Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher which was an absolute gem. In the dark murk of the forest this little bird shone like a beacon and ranked as one of the birds of the trip, if not the bird of the trip. It was a privilege to see it & a difficult digi-scoped shot for Iain.



Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher, Spot-bellied Eagle Owl & Collared Kingfisher

During the walk along the trail we also caught up with the elusive Indian Blue Robin, eventually most of the group obtain adequate views of a nice male. We reached a clearing in the forest which gave us the chance to bird skywards. Malabar Giant Squirrels were feeding in the tree tops along with Malabar Grey Hornbill. Flapper did well to call a Spectacled Piculet which was soon followed by a second. A familiar Grey Wagtail was feeding by the river's edge and a Forest Wagtail skulked nearby. Above us were a couple of Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters and a drab female Asian Paradise Flycatcher. We returned to base for brekky before heading out again for a late morning walk. We had a raptor watch and saw Shikra, Crested Serpent Eagle, Black Eagle, Booted Eagle and a White-eyed Buzzard. A Malabar Great Hornbill flew across the clearing seen only by a few of the group and other birds seen were Crested-tree Swift, Loten's Sunbird and Chris and Leio were able to confirm a flighty and elusive flycatcher as Blue-throated – a rare bird at Backwoods. A huge swarm of Bee's flew, thankfully, across the far side of the pasture we were standing in. In a shrub near to our watch two Purple Sunbirds were busy feeding their two chicks. Back at camp we settled down for a delicious lunch of Pea Curry, but not recommended for a bus full of blokes!. After lunch Leio heard a Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker and quickly put us onto the bird in a nearby tree. After lunch a short walk added Flame-throated Barbet, Malabar Parakeet, Greater-

Racket tailed Drongo and Orange Headed Thrush. We reconvened at 16.00, slightly cooler, and headed off adding Common Iora, Changeable Hawk Eagle, Malabar Grey Hornbill and Malabar White-headed Starling. As dusk approached we headed off for our Nightjar watch at a site a few miles away. After a while, in total darkness, we found 2 Jerdon's Nightjar and as we carefully approached we were allowed to get within 3 metres of the bird perched on a low rock and obtain crippling views in torchlight. A probable Spot-bellied Eagle Owl was heard calling distantly and a Brown-hawk Owl was seen from the bus. The evening will probably be remembered for, Jerdons Nightjar apart, the incredible night sky with billions of stars shining brightly.

Day Twelve - Tuesday January 17th 2007

Our last day at the camp and for the first time in what seemed an age we ticked an Indian Pond Heron feeding in the field close to Backwoods. We boarded the bus and headed off to Barabhum High School, unchallenged we wandered around the school fields whilst the day to day business of the school went on as usual. Behind the school high in a tree a Verditer Flycatcher basked in the morning sun showing very well. Indian Golden Oriole and Malabar Grey Hornbill woke up to the warmth of the morning sun. This was an excellent area to bird and we soon had our first Chestnut-throated Petronia of the trip followed by a group of Malabar Pied-Hornbills. Also seen were 3 Black-headed Cuckoo Shrikes, Rufous Treepie, Ashy Woodswallow, a delightful Little Spiderhunter and an educational Asian Brown Flycatcher. We walked through an area of trees and shrub and connected with Grey-headed Bulbul, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Crimson-fronted Barbet, Black-rumped Flamebacks and Asian Koel. We reached an area which led down to a river valley which was equally productive with a familiar White Wagtail, Changeable-Hawk Eagle, Common Kingfisher, Red-wattled Lapwing and Two Brown Fish Owls.



Malabar Pied Hornbill, Purple Sunbird & Stork-billed Kingfisher

We headed back to Backwoods for breakfast and promptly added the mega White-bellied Woodpecker this bird despite its size just wouldn't be pinned down however through perseverance and much athleticism we all got brilliant views. For our last walk in the Backwoods forest we headed off to the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl roost to have one last look at this magnificent bird. An Orange-headed Thrush was seen along with Puff-throated Babbler, Crimson-backed Sunbird and a Brown Shrike. Back at base we said our goodbyes to Leio and boarded the bus back to our Hotel. Backwoods was a brilliant experience and one of the main highlights of the holiday. En-route back to Arpora the Tawny Eagle was noted in display and a couple of perched Black-shouldered Kite were seen. The pools opposite the hotel held both Temmincks and Little Stints and several Marsh Sandpipers. Two Common Tailorbirds were close to the hotel reception. For the last hour of the day we walked to the nest site of the Alexandrine Parakeets but added nothing of note. Another brilliant night lay ahead for the boys.

Day Thirteen - Wednesday January 18th 2007

A quick straw poll the night before saw us opt for a second visit to Morjim beach and at 07.00 we were on our way back for more Gulls. The same species of Gulls were present as before with plenty of Steppe, Heuglin's and Great Black-headed and again we missed out on River Tern, but there were Crested and Gull-billed patrolling the shore. A large Raptor species went unidentified on the far side of the estuary and the mixed flock of Sand Plovers were still feeding on the shoreline. Small passerines included Pied Bushchat, Long-tailed Shrike and Purple-rumped Sunbird. There was a large tract of low level vegetation at the top of the beach. We spread out in a line and slowly walked through eventually flushing a Barred Buttonquail, which flew a short distance before disappearing into the undergrowth. An Olive Ridley Turtle's nest, ringed by a protective fence was an interesting find, and all the more pleasing to see someone had took the time to help protect this rare and vulnerable species. We left the beach and headed off to Querim Beach. The short journey was quite interesting. A short stop revealed the presence of 6+ Yellow Wagtails of the thurnbergi and flava races. A Little Ringed Plover and a still to be identified Pipit species were also close by. At Mandrem Bridge 2 Shikra shot through and 'many' Indian Swiftlet moved south as part of their daily diurnal movement between the breeding grounds at Vengurla rocks 16km off the coast of Maharashtra and some 32km north of Goa. Just beyond the bridge was an area of rice paddy which held Greenshank, Red-wattled Lapwing and Common Sandpiper. Eventually we reached the beach and spent an hour birding the dunes and pine fringes. The most interesting bird found, was unexpected, and a lifer for Mahesh - a Black Redstart. Mahesh was jubilant, not so the boys but it was still a trip tick. As per usual the heat increased and only mad dogs and Englishmen remained. Enough was enough and we headed back to the hotel. A great

night followed and loads of food and drink was consumed. Our trip was drawing to a close and we certainly made the most of the rip roaring Goan night.

Day Fourteen - Thursday January 19th 2007

We were suffering from bird fatigue and most of us decided to relax for the last day, even my notes for the end of the trip lacked clarity and depth, my pencil was blunt. Even though it was a last chance to catch up with all the common species we had enjoyed during the past two weeks, most of the lads opted out of the birding, preferring instead to go shopping for prezzies etc for their loved ones back home. It was hats off to ADMc who soldiered on to the end with a full days birding, including a trip up the Baga Hill and the local Salt Pans. Andy returned with an impressive list of local birds including a Little Spider Hunter, one of over 50 birds seen within sight of the hotel. Our last night was a relatively quiet though we did manage the odd sherbet or two to complement another great meal. We were made aware that the return flight may be delayed a few hours due to the bad storms in the U.K. Flights were out of sync as planes became stranded in various airports around the world. We shrugged it off and had a good night retiring in the early hours a little worse the wear.....two hours later and all hell let loose as flapper took a phone call from reception alerting us that a bus was coming to take us to the airport within half an hour. In true Dads Army style, the "don't panic" shout was ignored as flaps charged from room to room rousing everyone from bed. It was hilarious. We made our check-in just on time and boarded a smaller than usual plane which had to hop from Goa to Bahrain to Cyprus and onto Manchester. We arrived safely and met our minibus driver who then drove us all home.

This was the end of a fantastic trip, with great birds and brilliant company.