



16 Days of Northwest India Birding: Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat Detailed Itinerary

Day 1: Arrive in Amritsar and Afternoon Birding at Harika

We will arrive at the Amritsar international airport this morning, and then travel to Harike (about one hour away).

In the afternoon in Harike, we can begin our birding and exploration of the area. This is an extensive area of productive marshes formed around an irrigation barrage below the confluence of the Rivers Sutlej and Beas. Among the rich variety of water birds, raptors and widespread north Indian birds, we will also find our key range-restricted target, the Rufous-vented Grass-babbler. Other important species here include Jerdon's Babbler, Striated Babbler, Sind Sparrow, Black-breasted Weaver, White-tailed Stonechat, Sand Lark and more. A host of wintering species such as Moustached Warbler, Mountain Chiffchaff, Brook's Leaf-warbler and the scarce White-crowned Penduline Tit could add to our afternoon of birding.

Day 2: Birding Harike Full Day

An early start will be in order, to support our search for any key species in the area we may have missed the day before.

We will continue birding the Harike area today.



Day 3: Full Day Drive to Tal Chhapar

On day 3, we will undertake a full day drive south into Rajasthan to Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary, birding along the journey.

Day 4: Tal Chhapar

We will spend the morning birding the Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary, a small area of savannah grassland and tropical thorn forest. Despite its small size Tal Chhapar is home to a diversity of dryland species, most notably White-browed (Stoliczka's) Bushchat, the scarce and localized Indian Spotted Creeper, and flocks of Yellow-eyed Dove; a scarce winter visitor from Central Asia. Other species here include White-eared Bulbul, Common Babbler, Brahminy Starling, Egyptian Vulture and the first of many species typical of the arid landscape, including Southern Grey Shrike, Variable Wheatear, Desert Wheatear and Brown Rock Chat. Raptors are numerous and include



Tawny Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle and Laggar Falcon.

Day 5: Bikaner to Khichan to Jaisalmer

A pre-dawn start this morning takes us northwest to the outskirts of Bikaner to search the area around the Jorbeer rubbish dump for flocks of declining and localized Yellow-eyed Pigeon which winters here in good numbers. We will also encounter a selection of *Aquila* eagles dominated by Steppe Eagle, together with the ubiquitous Black Kite, Egyptian Vulture and a good selection of dry land birds. Later we head southwest to Khichan, to enjoy the extraordinary spectacle of up to 8,000 Demoiselle Cranes congregating to feed on grain provided by the village. Continue on to the desert town of Jaisalmer, close to India's border with Pakistan, for a three-night stay.

Days 6 and 7: Jaisalmer

Spend two days exploring this eastern corner of the Thar, or Great Indian, Desert, which stretches south into the state of Gujarat and west into the Sind district of southern Pakistan, protected around Jaisalmer within Desert National Park, or 'DNP'. This is one of India's largest protected areas, established as a vital refuge for the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard, our key target here. Sand dunes comprise 20% of the reserve, complemented by sparse grass and scattered shrubs, and interspersed with craggy rocks. Part of the area is fenced, protecting the natural grasslands from overgrazing by cattle, and although the bustards can be found elsewhere this enclosure provides the most suitable habitat and will be the focus of our search. DNP is also home to White-browed (Stoliczka's) Bushchat, a species restricted to the Thar Desert and peripheral areas, and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and occasional Black-bellied Sandgrouse, drawn to pools of water. Other notable species include Cream-colored Courser, Isabelline Wheatear, a variety of larks including Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Desert Lark, Bimaculated Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark and Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark, plus Asian Desert Warbler, Desert Whitethroat, Graceful Prinia, Trumpeter Finch, Common Raven, and a host of raptors including Tawny Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle and Laggar Falcon. Mammals include Chinkara (Indian Gazelle), the secretive Desert Cat, Bengal and Desert Foxes, the Indian endemic Blackbuck, and diurnal Indian Desert Jird. Spend two nights in a comfortable hotel in Jaisalmer.



Days 8 and 9: Jaisalmer to Siana

Before we depart Jaisalmer on the morning of Day 8, we will have time to search for the Great Indian Bustard, if we have not yet seen them.

We will soon need to head south to Siana (6 hours), a small village lying where the Thar Desert begins to merge into the rugged Aravalli Hills. Siana is surrounded by dry plains disrupted by rocky outcrops, and the beginning of the scrub jungle which cloaks the deeper Aravallis. The mosaic of habitats supports a good diversity of birds, including Sirkeer Malkoha, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark, Indian Bushlark, Striolated Bunting, Yellow-legged Buttonquail, Barred Buttonquail, Rock Bush-quail, Indian Thick-knee, Red Collared Dove, the scarce and localized White-bellied Minivet, Dusky Crag-martin and Indian Eagle-owl. Siana's primary attraction, as seen in David Attenborough's 'Life of Mammals', is as one of the best places in India to encounter Leopard, and an evening jeep drive will provide excellent chances of this instinctively secretive big cat, alongside smaller Jungle Cat, and with a realistic chance of the elusive Indian Wolf. Night in a comfortable rural lodge in Siana.

Day 10: Siana to Mount Abu

Spend the morning at Siana before heading south into the Aravalli Hills to Mount Abu (2.5 hours), a small hill station at an elevation of 1220 meters on the large plateau formed by the peak of the same name. This is one of few places where the rare, endangered and delightful Green Avadavat is regularly seen, and this will be our key target during the afternoon spent around Mount Abu. These hills contrast starkly with



the arid lands we have passed through and we can expect several new birds, possibly Indian Scimitar-babbler, Tawny-bellied Babbler, Yellow-eyed Babbler, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, White-capped Bunting, Crested Bunting, Red Spurfowl and Grey Junglefowl. Night in a comfortable heritage hotel in Mount Abu.

Days 11 and 12: Mount Abu to Dasada, Little Rann of Kutch

Depart Mount Abu in the morning of Day 11, driving southwest into the state of Gujarat to Dasada (4 hours), birding en-route, in particular for the numerous raptors of the region which include Bonelli's Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Red-headed Falcon and six species of vultures. Here in northern Gujarat the southern edge of the Thar Desert develops into the vast saline flats of the Great and Little Ranns of Kutch (or Kachchh), perhaps the bleakest, dustiest, most desolate region of India. This unique environment is preserved as India's largest protected area, a part of which is the Wild Ass Sanctuary whose principal role is the strict protection of the last remaining

population of Khur, or Asiatic Wild Ass. From a base at Dasada spend two days exploring the birdlife of the Little Rann, astonishingly rich given the inhospitable conditions and almost featureless landscape. Birds are concentrated around elevated patches of scrub, surrounding villages, and vast seasonal wetlands such as those at Tundi and nearby Nawa Talao, key species including Houbara (MacQueen's) Bustard, Bluethroat, Blue-headed Rock-thrush, Orphean Warbler, Graceful Prinia, Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, Indian Courser and White-tailed Lapwing, with the possibility of a rare Sociable Plover. Thirteen species of larks have been recorded in the area, including Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Rufous-tailed Lark and Syke's Short-toed Lark. Resident Sarus Cranes and Lesser Flamingos are accompanied in the winter months by thousands of Demoiselle Cranes and Common Cranes, plus Greater Flamingos, alongside sizeable groups of Great White Pelican, Dalmatian Pelican, Painted Stork, Black-necked Stork, Black Stork, White Stork, Indian Black Ibis, Glossy Ibis, Black-headed Ibis, Collared Pratincole, Oriental Pratincole, Small Pratincole, Bar-headed Goose, Greylag Goose and huge congregations of a variety of ducks. Nights in a comfortable wildlife lodge on the edge of the sanctuary.



Days 13-15: Moti Virani, Kutch

Depart Dasada in the morning of day 13, heading north across the Gulf of Kutch into the Kutch peninsula to Moti Virani near the town of Bhuj (6 hours). Spend the remainder of the day plus three days exploring this peripheral part of the Thar Desert. During the long dry season this is a land of sun-baked alluvial mudflats. However, despite first appearances, the region is particularly rich in birds. The inherently saline soil is naturally suited to the growth of nutritious grasses and succulents which, along with stretches of water in dhands, natural depressions left by the monsoon, and islands of dry thorn forest that punctuate the otherwise flat landscape, provide food and refuge to great numbers of waterfowl, waders, raptors and larks. This is the only known wintering site of Grey Hypocolius in India, which we will search for in the Fulay village region within the

grasslands of Banni. Among the key species in the area are the striking White-naped Tit and Rufous-fronted Prinia in the thorn forests of Phot Mahadev, Marshall's Iora, Grey-necked Bunting, Indian Courser, Red-tailed Wheatear around the rocky outcrops that punctuate Banni's otherwise featureless terrain, Short-eared Owl, Sykes's Nightjar, Savanna Nightjar and various waterfowl in Banni's Chhari Dhand. A host of gulls, terns and waders can be found in the Jakhau mangrove swamps and Pingleswar seacoast, including the striking Crab-plover, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, rare Great Knot, Black-bellied Tern, Caspian Tern, Whiskered Tern, Great Black-headed Gull and a selection of egrets. Some of the more distinctive mammals of the region include Desert Cat, Chinkara or Indian Gazelle, Long-eared and Pallas's Hedgehogs, and Indian Desert Jird. Nights in a simple but comfortable guesthouse run by a conservation organization.

Day 16: Departures from Bhuj

Departures from Bhuj airport this morning or continue with post-tour extension.

