



A (Budget) South India Cleanup

November 2025 | 18 Nights & 19 days | Kerala, Tamil Nadu, & Karnataka



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Overview

South India's a fascinating birding destination. While most tours focus heavily on the Western Ghats and their endemics, the region has so much more to offer, especially for first-time birders.

When Lukasz got in touch with me in August 2025 to plan a South India tour to see as many lifers as they could in 18 days, I was excited. I love working directly with clients and planning trips around their targets, and we'd planned stops in several places that aren't usually on the route map of a classic South India tour. After months of discussion, bookings, and back-and-forth with Lukasz, we finally had an itinerary in place that could help us check as many species as we could off their lists - quite ambitious, but if everything went as planned, we were looking to push the boundaries of how many birds one could find in South India in two and a half weeks. See the eBird trip report for our journey [here](#).

The Budget

All in all, excluding flights to and from Poland, the trip cost around **USD \$2500** per person, for three clients, for nearly 19 days!

At all our birding destinations, we booked hotels that weren't too fancy, but comfortable enough that we never had any issues. After all, all we needed was a bed to sleep on after an entire day out looking for birds! Single (or sometimes dual-occupancy) rooms between USD \$20-\$30 a night meant that we managed to rack up a hotel bill of less than \$500 per guest for the entire trip. The driver and I shared a room (around \$400 for 18 days), which was covered by the group as well.

For transport, we hired a tempo traveller (a kind of minivan) - an excellent choice for Indian roads, fully air-conditioned, with operable windows that cost us around \$90 (INR 8100) a day. Our driver, Rajeev, was a seasoned bird tour veteran who knew the popular birding spots like the back of his hand!

Food was one department where we made no compromise. We ate anywhere we felt like, and ended up finding some gems along the way. Roughly \$20 per person per day, and we always ended up skipping a meal since none of us was ever hungry enough for all three meals.

As a guide fee, I charged a flat \$150 per day, and wherever we hired local guides, the guide's salary was cut from my share with no additional expense to the group. All bills were reimbursed by the group upfront, with no additional markups on expenses.



White-naped Tit © Ronith Urs



Malabar Flameback (male) © Lukasz Ifczok

The Trip

Day 1, November 7th: Arrival at Kochi

Most bird tours never go exactly as planned, and this one was no exception. Due to an unfortunate delay in their flight from Poland, the group missed their connecting flight to India via Dubai and ended up taking the next available one, which meant arriving at Kochi airport late at night, around 8 pm.

A little disappointed that our time here was cut short by a day, we headed towards **Thattekad**, our first destination for the trip. We drove straight to our homestay at Thattekad, about an hour away, but not before a brief stop at Kalappara, a small clearing in the forest to hear several nocturnal birds calling their hearts out. The Oriental Scops-Owl, Indian Scops-Owl, Jungle Nightjar, Jerdon's Nightjar, and Great Eared-Nightjar. All this without setting foot outside the vehicle - the area is particularly dangerous at night, with elephants frequenting the spot. We drove to Foresta Thattekad to retire for the night and prepare for the long day ahead.

Thattekad is famous for a reason: It's one of the largest patches of low-elevation rainforest in the Southern ghats and home to many unique low-elevation endemics and specials that aren't easily found anywhere else on the trip.

Day 2, November 8th: The Thattekad Adventure

We set out from our lodge at sunrise towards **Urulanthanni**, a popular patch 20 minutes from Thattekad, to check off as many of the low-elevation specials from our list as we could. While heading out, we made a short stop at the Thattekad bridge for a few riverbirds. We got lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the Lesser Fish-Eagle and a majestic River Tern flying low overhead; a lifer for the group! After 10 minutes at the bridge watching swallows and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters prancing around, we made our way to Urulanthanni.

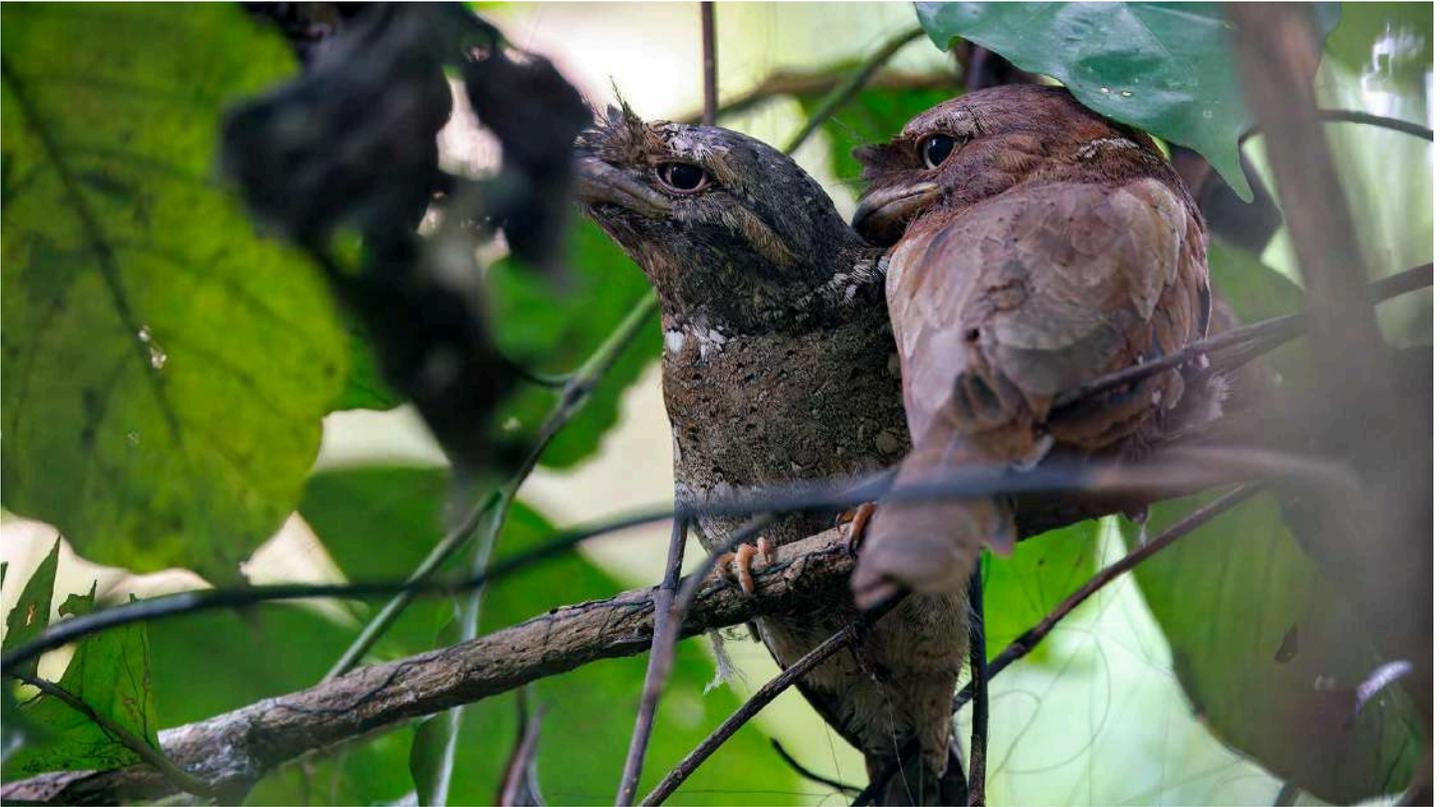
Thattekad is also one of those heavily policed birding spots where you could get in a lot of trouble birding without a local guide. We hired Praveen, an excellent birder based in Thattekad, to accompany us. On reaching Urulanthanni, we were met with a burst of activity with mixed-species flocks constantly moving around a small open rock face that we hiked up for a better view. Malabar Grey Hornbills dueted in the trees nearby while flocks of Crimson-backed & Purple-rumped Sunbirds, Nilgiri Flowerpeckers, Little Spiderhunters, and Vernal Hanging-Parrots visited flowering trees. Flame-throated and Yellow-browed Bulbuls roamed the treetops, while a large flock of Indian Swiftlets circled overhead.



Crimson-backed Sunbird (male) Lukasz Iczok

After a successful morning with great views of the common low-elevation endemics, we visited a nearby section for the White-bellied Blue-Flycatcher, a highly sought-after bird here. A male flew in and settled nearby, allowing extended observation before moving deeper into its patch. No trip to Thattekad is complete without the Sri Lanka Frogmouth, and we were lucky enough to have Praveen spot and show us a bird roosting low in a tree nearby.

We stopped at a known day roost of the Sri Lanka Bay-Owl, but couldn't find it. The Bay-Owl has become increasingly difficult to find at Thattekad over the years, with individuals shifting roosts more frequently than before. Nocturnal access to prime habitat patches has also been cut off out of fear of elephants.



Sri Lanka Frogmouth pair © Lukasz Ifczok

After breakfast at a nearby restaurant and snacks for the next few days secured, we headed to a small temple in Urulanthanni for the Legge's Hawk-Eagle - a pair had been nesting in the area for over three years in a row! As soon as we got there, we were greeted by a massive flock of Malabar Woodshrikes, with a lone Rusty-tailed Flycatcher posing for pictures.



Rusty-tailed Flycatcher © Lukasz Ifczok

After some waiting in the hot midday sun, a juvenile Legge's Hawk-Eagle briefly appeared circling the top of the hill while calling before quickly dipping out of sight. The first time I'd ever heard a Legge's Hawk Eagle calling! This was especially high on our list of targets since Lukasz, Zbigniew and Marian had missed it in Sri Lanka a year ago. On the way back, a Crested Goshawk flew in and landed on a nearby branch while trying to hunt a lizard, posing for pictures. We rounded up and spent the hottest part of the day catching some rest before heading out for an action-packed evening session near the homestay.

In the evening, we stopped at a local hide at the Eldhose Birding Lodge in the evening to catch a glimpse and photograph the elusive Slaty-legged Crake, with a generous number of birds flying in to feed on mealworms at a feeding station. Each person pays INR 1000 (~\$11) for a session there, and it's always a spectacle. Greater Racket-tailed Drongos. White-bellied Treepies, Black-rumped Flamebacks, and even a lone Indian Pitta emerged to feed on worms put out at specific times by the caretakers, and by the time feeding begins, they're already ready and waiting! Most birds that visit the hides here are also very accustomed to the setup and allow extremely close views. Baiting and bird-feeding are extremely controversial topics in India, with the practice being outright banned in most places. If it's done hygienically and disease transmission risks are properly managed, I struggle to see the harm. Human-induced habitat change has already irreversibly altered bird behaviour to an extent that we've never seen before. Is one more bird feeder really doing any damage?



Slaty-legged Crake © Lukasz Ifczok

With dusk quickly approaching, we made our way to Kalappara to catch a glimpse of the nocturnal birds. After a flurry of retiring calls from Indian Pittas, the nocturnal calls began echoing through the forest. Jerdon's Nightjars with their metallic '*kuhuhu*', Great Eared-Nightjars with their resounding '*pip-peeoweeow*', and Oriental Scops-Owls with their mellow '*pup, pup-prrr*'. Praveen had been seeing an adult Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl in the area for a few months, and we tried our best to track it down, but couldn't get any views. The bird uttered a few resounding, wailing cries in response to tape, but never emerged.



Jerdon's Nightjar © Lukasz Ifczok

Post the session at Kalappara, we went looking for more nocturnal birds. A short stop for a Jungle Nightjar near a hillock nearby, then a small grove with a pair of Mottled Wood-Owls. Excellent sightings! We wrapped up the successful nocturnal session, then headed back for a late dinner and an overnight at the homestay.



Mottled Wood-Owl © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 3, November 9th: The Thattekad Adventure

We drove down to the main entrance to the Thattekad Bird Sanctuary to hop on the Frogmouth trail. The trail opens at 7 am, but we had a few pre-opening surprises - a pair of White-bellied Woodpeckers at the mini-zoo, while taking in the rather sad sight of the animals in their enclosures. Accompanied by a ranger, we walked through a wetland full of Lesser Whistling-Ducks into beautiful stands of old-growth rainforest. The highlight of the trail is almost always the majestic Black Baza, a bird that migrates all the way to the Western Ghats in winter and spends a few months here.



Black Baza © Lukasz Ifczok

The trail was also punctuated by the songs of Blue-throated Flycatchers defending their territories, while mixed-species flocks flew past at dizzying speeds. We were lucky enough to witness the bizarre song of the Grey-fronted Green-Pigeon, and some interesting catches like a solitary Fork-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo.

After wrapping up the frogmouth trail with over 60 species for the morning, we moved to the Dr Salim Ali trail on the other side of the road. The vegetation on this trail is more deciduous and bamboo-dominated, with patches of secondary growth forest giving way to a slightly different bird assemblage. We managed amazing views of a flock of White-bellied Treepies, many woodpeckers, Crested Treeswifts, and more.

Post the morning session and some time at ease after lunch, we headed to another hide near the sanctuary. After the mealworms were scattered, a pair of Greater Racket-tailed Drongos swooped in immediately and began singing, making for amazing recordings and images. A male Blue-throated Flycatcher, a female White-bellied Blue Flycatcher, a flock of Yellow-browed Bulbuls, and an otherwise shy Malabar Whistling-Thrush joined in on the fun. Watching birds interact at hides is always a fascinating experience, and we got to see Racket-tailed Drongos attempt to chase other birds from the vicinity rather aggressively.



Malabar Whistling-Thrush © Lukasz Ifczok

After the evening session, we positioned ourselves strategically at the Thattekad bridge just before dusk in time to witness a spectacle - hordes of Great Eared-Nightjars flying over the clearing above the river towards their nocturnal foraging spots! We counted about 8 birds, with a few hawking insects right above our heads. We then headed to a few spots to look for the Sri Lanka Bay-Owl, with no luck. Bummer!



Great Eared-Nightjar © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 4, November 10th: Thattekad to Periyar

After a (near) cleanup at Thattekad, we had just one species that we had yet to see - the Grey-headed Bulbul. Before heading to Periyar, we stopped at Kalappara for the morning, stepped out of the van, and almost immediately heard a pair calling in the undergrowth nearby. Nearly an hour later, we finally managed frustrating views of a pair moving with a mixed flock before they quickly disappeared, never to be seen again. We accepted our fate and drove towards Periyar Tiger Reserve, where a special endemic awaited us - the Wayanad Laughingthrush!

The drive to Periyar was breathtaking. We managed to spot another pair of Legge's Hawk-Eagles circling a reservoir, followed by incredible views of another perched Crested Goshawk. We reached our homestay (Green View, Thekkady) just after noon and headed for the Green Walk in Periyar Tiger Reserve after lunch, looking for the Wayanad Laughingthrush.



Crested Goshawk © Lukasz Ifczok

We were accompanied by Sreenivasan, an experienced ranger and tracker with the forest department who had spent his whole life in the landscape. After putting on our leech socks and arranging for tickets (around \$8 per person for tickets + park entry fee), we walked briefly and stopped at a marsh full of Pin-tailed Snipes. After some great views of a group foraging and flying between patches, we continued through the narrow lanes of Sreenivasan's village, down into the trail where the Wayanad Laughingthrush flock was encountered regularly. After some searching, we heard the familiar scratchy contact calls of a flock and managed views, but couldn't photograph them in the poor evening light. We also noticed they were moving in a loose mixed flock with Rufous Babblers! When the evening set in, hordes of Grey-fronted Green-Pigeons flew into a tree to roost, and we headed back out to end our day on a high note with another lifer to the list. The sightings were satisfactory, but we wanted to try again the next morning for better pictures. While exiting, some unexpected but excellent sightings of a flock of Rufous Babblers right at the Thekkady Parking lot!

Day 5, November 11th: Periyar to Munnar

Before heading to Munnar, we walked back into the green walk trail with Sreenivasan, hoping to get better views of the Wayanad Laughingthrush. The flock seemed louder and bolder than the previous evening, and we struck gold while the flock attempted to move downhill towards us, with multiple individuals coming into clear view for extended periods while singing. Couldn't have ended the morning on a higher note!



Wayanad Laughingthrush © Lukasz Ifczok

We wrapped up and headed towards Munnar, where we checked into Misty Heights resort. After checking in and a quick lunch, we wasted no time heading up the road to the trail that leads up from Deshadan Mountain Resort, where we managed to check off nearly all our Munnar targets in one evening: the Palani Laughingthrush, White-bellied Sholakili, Black-and-Orange Flycatcher, and other high-altitude endemics like the Nilgiri Flycatcher. After a point, the trail opens into shola grassland, prime habitat for the endemic Broad-tailed Grassbird. It was late into the evening & we had no time to hike further into the patch, but we did hear a sharp, metallic *'tink'* confirming the grassbird's presence. We called it a day and headed back for dinner.



Palani Laughingthrush © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 6, November 12th: Munnar's Targets

We walked through the trail leading up from Deshadan Mountain resort early in the morning, where we were greeted by the loud, melodious songs of White-bellied Sholakilis in the thickets, Nilgiri Wood-Pigeons fluttering around in the mossy trees, and flocks of Palani Laughingthrushes busy feeding. We reached a clearing and clambered up into the grassland on a trail that clearly hadn't been walked in a long time. Only elephants seemed to have moved through the area recently and left their telltale signs - piles of dung that are impossible to miss in the grassland. While we struggled to clamber up, the first signs of the grassbird appeared nearby: a few sporadic, but loud *'tink'* calls. The first bird showed briefly before ducking into cover. The grass was full of life: Common Grasshopper-Warblers calling from nearby, flocks of Plain Prinias singing, and Blyth's Reed-Warblers hopping about. While we made our way towards the peak, a group of Blyth's Swifts flew by, and a Painted Bush-Quail called in the distance. It was already a fantastic day by 10 am. We moved closer and closer to the calls of a grassbird till we reached the peak, and with a little tape, a pair hopped out onto a shrub a few feet away! In all the chaos, I saw and briefly missed showing the group a Nilgiri Pipit. We wrapped up and headed for lunch at noon, all scratched up from the blades of grass.



Broad-tailed Grassbird © Lukasz Ifczok

In the evening, we drove down to Eravikulam National Park. Birding was slow, but we did see Nilgiri Tahrs and great photo-ops of Nilgiri Flycatcher, White-bellied Sholakili, and Palani Laughingthrushes. The Nilgiri Pipit was nowhere to be seen, and still a pending lifer for the group.



Nilgiri Flycatcher © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 7, November 13th: Munnar's Targets

We checked out of our hotel early and drove down to the Lockhart gap viewpoint, hoping for views of the Nilgiri Pipit - and after some searching, Marian spotted one right by the side of the road on the dew-drenched cliff!



Nilgiri Pipit © Lukasz Ifczok

Happy with our sighting, we continued down from Munnar, passing through Chinnar Wildlife sanctuary in the lower elevations. We stopped to stare at huge mixed flocks with White-bellied Drongo, Speckled Piculet, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, and a Yellow-crowned Woodpecker in attendance, with many Malabar Woodshrikes. A Tickell's Blue Flycatcher sang in the bushes nearby. Down in the plains, several raptors flew by as we made our way to Coimbatore: a Booted Eagle, a Greater Spotted Eagle, and a Bonelli's Eagle.

We drove straight to Coimbatore and spent the evening at Kannampalayam grasslands checking the open country & scrub birds off our list: Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Jerdon's Bushlark, Large Grey Babbler, Spotted Owlet, and more. Our major target, the Indian Courser, was nowhere to be seen. The grasslands around Coimbatore were disappearing quickly. Roads and fences lined each site, and the courser had all but vanished from the landscape. After nightfall, echoes of Indian Nightjars and Indian Thick-knees pierced the air.



Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 8, November 14th: Coimbatore and Whereabouts

We set out to the Anuvavi Murugan Temple trail, a popular birding hotspot on the outskirts of the city. Built on a small hillock, the temple was a great place to find scrub & deciduous forest birds like the White-browed Bulbul, Jerdon's Leafbird, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Red Spurfowl, Blue-capped Rock-Thrush, Blue Rock-Thrush, and a lone Fork-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo. Our biggest target was giving us some trouble - we'd sporadically heard the Yellow-throated Bulbul, but they did not emerge or give good views. Satisfied with the morning's sightings, we turned back for brunch.



Jerdon's Leafbird © Lukasz Ifczok

After a short stop at a nearby wetland for waterbirds post lunch, we continued to a second hillock nearby to catch a glimpse of some open-country birds and nocturnals after dark. Migrating European Bee-Eaters flew past, Blyth's and Paddyfield Pipits flushed while we walked around, and a pair of Yellow-eyed Babblers allowed extended views. A flock of over a hundred Alpine Swifts circled the skies.

When nightfall approached, we heard a wave of Indian Pitta calls sweep over the area, I counted at least 15 birds in every direction! After the pittas, Indian Nightjars began calling from the grasslands, while Jerdon's Nightjars called from the base of the hillock. A cacophony of nocturnal birds in a healthy scrub habitat. We encountered a baby Plains Vine Snake and made our way back to the lodge for the night.



Indian Nightjar © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 9, November 15th: Coimbatore to Kotagiri

Determined as ever to catch a glimpse of the Yellow-throated Bulbul, we visited another hillock nearby called Bedathapuram. This hillock was a better habitat for the Bulbul - rockier, more open, and less invasive vegetation. Halfway up the stairs, we had our first Yellow-throated after nearly a dozen White-browed, and some more as we trekked up! The hillock also had some other excellent birds: Blue-faced Malkoha, White-tailed Iora, Common Woodshrikes, Jungle Prinias, and a lone Eurasian Hobby. While walking back down, we had an unexpected Eastern Orphean Warbler in a dense Acacia patch, and a couple of Short-toed Snake-Eagles engaged in aerial combat overhead. A memorable morning!



Yellow-throated Bulbul © Lukasz Ifczok

We made our way up towards Kotagiri in the evening and stayed at the IVC Villa on the edge of town. Right after checking in, we drove down to Mildhane for a short birding session. As the sun set, a Brown Wood-Owl's calls echoed from the valley below.



Dusky Crag-Martin © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 10, November 16th: Kotagiri to Ooty

After a great sight of a pair of Nilgiri Laughingthrushes munching on fruit right from our homestay, we headed to a popular spot by a tea estate to look for the Kashmir Flycatcher. About ten seconds after we got out of the car, we had our bird perched by the side of the road while calling! It quickly disappeared downhill, and we spent all morning tracking it for better views. A beautiful nonbreeding male.



Kashmir Flycatcher © Lukasz Ifczok

Later in the morning, we drove down to Ooty and stopped briefly at Cairn Hill. The trail was silent in the mid-day heat, but we had an amazing flock of *Phylloscopus* leaf warblers on the way to the parking lot - multiple Tickell's Leaf, Greenish, and a Yellow-browed, among others. After heading to our hotel at the Tiger hill homestay (we rented out the whole house with 3 rooms for \$90 a day), we birded on the trail opposite to the Doddabetta entrance (the pre-dawn trail hotspot on eBird). Great views of a family of three Nilgiri Sholakilis, some Nilgiri Laughingthrushes, and more endemics followed! A Gaur on the trail stopped us in our tracks and sent us back sooner than we'd expected.



Nilgiri Sholakili © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 11, November 17th: Doddabetta and the Ooty Countryside

After some early morning searching for the Nilgiri Thrush, we made our way up to Doddabetta peak to try our luck. The birds here are fascinatingly bold, and do not mind foraging around garbage heaps through the year. Nilgiri Laughingthrushes, Indian Blackbirds, Cinereous Tits, and Nilgiri Wood-Pigeons in very close proximity made for excellent photos. Unfortunately, Nilgiri Thrushes seem to migrate downhill around the onset of winter in November, and though we tried really hard to spot a straggler at this elevation, we were out of luck. Ooty is probably the best place to spot the thrush outside peak winter months.



We drove back down to the city, had a light breakfast, and visited the Ooty botanical garden where we managed to check the Indian Yellow Tit off our list, with a few wonderful mixed flocks moving by. A lone male Kashmir Flycatcher posed for pictures & roamed his patch to hunt nearly the entire time we were around.



Indian Yellow Tit © Lukasz Ifczok

After lunch, we drove down from Ooty town to the lower reaches of the plateau for a second attempt at the Nilgiri Thrush. This ended up being the one costly miss on an otherwise successful trip with nearly everything checked off the list! A tough bird in November and December, and we were unlucky enough to visit in a year where there were no known individuals wintering in the lower elevations.

Day 12, November 18th: Ooty to Masinagudi

We drove down to Masinagudi in the morning, with some quick drive-by lifers including a majestic White-eyed Buzzard! On the way to our resort, we stopped after noticing a few raptors flying overhead, but little did we know we were in for a treat - from a single spot, we found White-rumped Vultures, Greater Spotted Eagles, Steppe Eagles, an Indian Spotted Eagle, a Kestrel, and a pair of Yellow-throated Sparrows. We reached the Tiger Paw Resort (\$25 a night per room), checked in for lunch, and resumed birding nearby.

After driving down to Bokkapuram, we were met with a second flurry of raptors - a Red-headed Vulture flying low overhead, a pair of Bonelli's Eagles, a flock of vultures with Indian and White-rumped, and a pair of Indian Nuthatches to top it off. Birding here without a local is risky and most areas are off-limits, but we couldn't find a local free to accompany us and had to stick to the peripheries of villages. Very productive, though! A short stop at a small marsh while heading out yielded a Ruddy-breasted Crake calling from the reeds, and we marked the spot to return to in the evening to try and see it.



Red-headed Vulture © Lukasz Ifczok

In the evening, we drove down the Moyar road to Chikkamman temple in search of some scrub forest targets. After excellent views of a male White-bellied Minivet on the way, we stopped at the Chikkamman temple. A flock of Black-headed Cuckooshrikes, White-browed Bulbuls, flowerpeckers, and sunbirds greeted us at the temple, with an unexpected hidden Rock-Eagle owl scoped out by Marian! On our way back, we stopped at the little marsh again, where the Ruddy-breasted Crake and a Yellow Bittern emerged to feed briefly in the last rays of light.



White-bellied Minivet © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 13, November 19th: Masinagudi

We spent another great morning birding around Bokkapuram with a local guide who knew the area well. Excellent views of the Indian Nuthatch, a Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Hill Swallows, White-rumped Munias, a roosting Oriental Scops-Owl, and flocks of Plum-headed Parakeets. After breakfast, we moved to the Maravakandy watchtower to scan the wetland for interesting waterbirds, then drove to the Moyar dam again. We managed to find Yellow-footed Green-Pigeons, a monitor lizard on the road, another Red-headed Vulture flyover, and a pair of White-naped Woodpeckers. While returning late in the evening, we stopped by the little marsh hoping for better views of the Ruddy-breasted Crakes, but this time, a pair of Baillon's Crakes emerged from the reeds to feed late in the evening! Another lifer, and another unexpected surprise.



Baillon's Crake © Lukasz Ifczok

The post-nightfall birding session here was one of the most memorable owling sessions we've had on the trip. We had just one target in mind - the Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl. Kuruvi Siddan, a longtime Masinagudi local and accomplished bird guide, was kind enough to take us around Bokkapuram in search of it at 6:30 pm. We spent the first half hour roaming the bird's territory, listening for calls, before we finally heard its characteristic piercing wail in the distance. Elephants trumpeted away in a nearby hillock, and we had to be extra cautious about not straying too far away in the elephants' direction. After an hour of searching, we spotted a young adult perched high in a tree. The group managed quick photos, and we got out of there before the elephants moved in.



Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 14, November 20th: Masinagudi to Wayanad

In the morning, we drove down to the Vibudhimalai Murugan Temple Hill, looking for Jungle Bush-Quails. We heard a pair soon after reaching, but spotting them in the scrubby hillside vegetation before they flushed turned out to be much harder than we thought. We tracked a pair down to a small bush, walked up to it, flushed them again, and finally managed decent views when a male decided to run across a bare area towards the female, which had flushed in a different direction. Mission accomplished!



Jungle Bush-Quail © Lukasz Ifczok

After we reached the 900kandi area in Wayanad, we got into a jeep and headed up to Ela Blooms (\$30 a room), situated up in the lower slopes of the Vellarimala range. We were here for just one bird - the Banasura Laughingthrush. The jeep ride up to Ela Blooms is an incredible experience every time; all of us held on to the jeep's frame for our dear lives while it rocked back and forth violently on the bumpy road. As soon as we reached the property, we wasted no time gearing up and got on the steep trekking path up the hill for the laughingthrush. We were accompanied by Palash, the attender at Ela Blooms, who'd picked up a little birding during his time there. After an hour of trekking from 1400m to 1530m, and distant calls of pairs from uphill, we finally encountered a pair contact-calling in some shrubs nearby and managed great views while they passed us by. Everybody was extremely glad we'd nailed it on our first attempt and didn't have to trek back up this arduous trail again in the morning tomorrow. We trekked back and spent the evening relaxing.



Banasura Laughingthrush © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 15, November 21st: Wayanad

Probably the only relatively chill day on the tour, since we'd already seen our target the previous day and had a whole extra day with no pressure to see anything. We woke up late, spent some time at the small sewage outlet behind the kitchen, where many birds came to feed on scraps. We managed some great views of Yellow-browed Bulbuls, narrowly missed a pair of Grey-headed Bulbuls that briefly visited the spot, and a flock of Black-throated Munias, among others. I'd also seen a Nilgiri Thrush feed on worms when I was here in April once, so we were on high alert for the possibility of checking the thrush off the list here. Unfortunately, there was no sign of it this time of the year in Wayanad either.

Day 16, November 22nd: Wayanad to Mysore

After some leisurely birding in the morning, we drove down to Mysore to visit some of the scrub grassland patches on the outskirts of the city for a few plains targets. I love taking birders to Hanchya, a small village on the outskirts of Mysore with a significant grassland area left. We looked for and found Indian Bushlarks, Red Avadavats, Blyth's Pipits, some Indian Silverbills, an Indian Spotted Eagle, Tricolored Munias, and more! A small patch of reeds yielded brief views of another pair of Ruddy-breasted Crakes. The highlight bird of the day was the Tawny Lark - a very quickly disappearing dry-region species adapted to plains grassland and rocky outcrop in the region. I didn't expect one in the season since they're typically very quiet and shy, but we lucked out! In the evening, we headed to the Mauve Orchid hotel (\$20 a room) for the night.



Tawny Lark © Lukasz Ifczok



Indian Bushlark © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 17, November 23rd: Mysore to Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary

Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary is about a 2-hour drive from Mysore, so we wasted no time heading to Cauvery for some special birds: the White-naped Tit, White-tailed lora, Painted Sandgrouse, and Sirkeer Malkoha. On entering, we drove up and down the U-bends before Sangama, listening for the Tit's calls - and sure enough, in some fields by a patch of scrub forest, we found a flock of three birds. The White-tailed lora was abundant in the area as well.



White-naped Tit © Lukasz Ifczok

When it got too hot in the day, we headed to the Arkavathy River Bridge nearby for excellent views of a perched Lesser Fish-Eagle and a young Tawny Eagle, with a few other highlight birds along the river.



Tawny Eagle © Lukasz Ifczok

We then drove to Jungle Lodges and Resorts (JLR) at Galibore for lunch and some downtime in the hot afternoon sun, but not before we spotted a pair of Brown Boobooks and other great birds at the property. JLR offers a pre-booked day visit pass for \$20 per person that includes a buffet lunch, coffee, and a short boat ride on the river for better views of waterbirds. We had excellent views of the Lesser Fish-Eagle on the boat again.



Lesser Fish-Eagle © Lukasz Ifczok

Around 5 pm, we headed out from JLR and stopped by a small hillock behind the Bommasandra tribal village. The hillock is home to Painted Sandgrouses that breed here and arrive in the evenings to roost, but we were met with a disappointing sight - new trenches had been dug on the hill by the forest department and half the habitat was in peril. We still saw a good number of sandgrouses, and headed towards Mayura Hotel at Sangama (\$20 a room) for dinner and a stay. Managed great views of Jungle Owlets here too.



Painted Sandgrouse (male) © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 18, November 24th: An Evening at Nandi hills

After some light birding on the way to Bangalore, we headed straight to Nandi Hills, an hour north of Bangalore. We were here mainly for the Pied Thrush, better views of Tawny-bellied Babblers, and the Tytler's Leaf-Warbler. We managed great but rather distant views of the Pied Thrush flock up in the canopy, and excellent sightings of a flock of Tawny-bellied Babblers in the Nandi Hills nursery. The Tytler's Leaf-Warbler was nowhere to be seen; they typically arrive here later in the season in December. Other highlights we had were a massive flock of 250+ Grey Wagtails. An Asian House-Martin, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, and a Yellow-browed Warbler. We also found and photographed an Indian Swiftlet, the first record for the region! After a solid evening, we drove back down to Bangalore and spent the night at a hotel in Jakkur (\$20 a room), in the northern part of Bangalore.



Pied Thrush © Lukasz Ifczok



Tawny-bellied Babbler © Lukasz Ifczok



Eurasian Sparrowhawk © Lukasz Ifczok

Day 19, November 25th: Departure from Bangalore

After a very successful trip, Lukasz, Zbigniew, and Marian were prepared to depart on an onward flight to the Andamans. We did have a few hours to bird in the morning before the flight, and decided to stop by Kalkere Lake. The lake had a near-perfect water level and a large congregation of waders and waterfowl, which made it a treat. A Red-necked Phalarope and a pair of Grey-headed Lapwings had also been reported here earlier, and we thought of trying our luck with the extra time we had on our hands. Sure enough, we managed to scope out the Grey-headed Lapwings in the group of 1000+ Black-winged Stilts, 400+ Wood Sandpipers, and a host of other waders and ducks. The Phalarope had unfortunately migrated on by then. After the morning session, we got to the airport and dropped the group off.



Grey-headed Lapwings © Lukasz Ifczok



All smiles after a successful 18-day tour! Lukasz, Marian, Zbigniew, Rajeev, and Ronith.

Trip Report & Checklists

I've compiled all our checklists into an eBird trip report, with a tally of 330+ species! Check it out [here](#)

Contact Information

If you'd like to do similar budget tours anywhere in India, do get in touch to help plan your next one! I'm especially good at birding tours to Northeastern India (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, etc.), Western India (Gujarat & Rajasthan), and all of Southern India.

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Happy Birding!



A juvenile Legge's Hawk-Eagle © Lukasz Ifczok