

Gujurat Tour

February 2014

Participants: *Bo & Maggie Crombet-Beolens and Morland & Charlyn Jones:*

The trip was an 'add on' to a two week tour of southwest India 'cleaning up' some Western Ghats' endemics prior to a short visit to the UAE (hence a built in rest day). Both couples have mobility issues and the youngest participant was just under 65 years old.

Day 01: Cochin to Ahmedabad to Little Rann of Kutch

Day 02: Little Rann of Kutch

Day 03: Little Rann of Kutch

Day 04: Jamnagar to Gir National Park

Day 05: Gir National Park

Day 06: Gir National Park to Velavadar

Day 07: Velavadar

Day 08: Velavadar to Ahmedabad

Day 09: Rest in Ahmedabad no activities

Day 10: Departure to dubai

See our [Bird List](#) (& Mammals & Reptiles) seen on our trip to western India, with everything seen at each site listed.



Diary

19th Feb: Kochi (Cochin) Airport - Ahmedabad - Little Rann of Kutch

After a morning transfer to Kochi airport to catch a flight to Ahmedabad via Mumbai at 0745 hrs... so the itinerary said... but we actually ended up routed through Chennai, across country then back northwest... taking up most of the day. We had wheelchair assistance everywhere and SpiceJet's staff were friendly and efficient.

We were met by our guide (Rattan, that two of us knew from a previous trip to northern India) and drove (three hours, not two as per itinerary) to **Rann Riders**, <http://www.rannriders.com> which is a rather shabby and dusty resort, with little local competition. They also organise jeep rides into the Little Rann of Kutch so have a virtual monopoly. However, they were very accommodating as they put up mosquito nets for us when asked. The drive did give a few opportunities for roadside birding but we arrived tired and had to try and sort things to get the best compromise... rooms were either too far for Mo to walk to dinner or of a lower standard than we wanted with no ceilings just wooden cladding inside thatched roofs. This safari resort is described as: "...imaginatively designed using local materials with extensive grounds with a water-body, ponds, gardens, plantations and agricultural fields" - although the gardens did not prove to be very attractive to birds apart from the captive Emu and Muscovy ducks!



20th and 21st Feb: Dasada - Little Rann of Kutch

Our (Maggie and Bo) day started with a drive in an open vehicle into the Little Rann of Kutch. The reserve is around 20kms from the resort and the roadside fields, hedges, ponds and ditches proved very productive for birds. Warblers, shrikes, larks, rollers, doves, kite and many other species abounded including a most obliging owlet.



On reaching the salt flats we searched for Greater Hoopoe Lark without success, but saw many Desert and Variable Wheatears, Long-tailed, Rufous-tailed and Bay-back Shrikes. A passing mantis also briefly joined us. There were large flocks of Short-toed Larks and several raptor species with Montagu's Harriers and Black-shouldered Kite often hunting a few feet from the vehicle. Several more distant raptor sightings proved to be Spotted Eagle. Several times we saw Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse disappear into the distance.



The **Little Rann of Kutch** http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Rann_of_Kutch is a popular wildlife tourism destination being a wildlife sanctuary having the world's last population of wild asses (Khur). There are also two fox species and some Nilgai.

It is ancient salt marsh that has become saline dessert and salt panning still goes on (we saw several such small scale operations with a family camped out tending to their pans) as does the more profitable occupation of shrimp farming although this is discouraged.

Flat dry and barren areas are chequered with areas of light scrub and tough grasses. This mix makes for good habitat for some special birds including bustards, sandgrouse, francolins and many wheatear, lark and pipit species etc.

The area was accorded the status of a biosphere reserve (2008).



As we drove around we encountered more and more wild ass, at first in ones and twos but eventually in herds of fifty or more. We came upon a dessert fox's den with feathers strewn around the entrance, a fox had clearly enjoyed a meal of Short-eared Owl. Later we got terrific views of a Dessert Fox which ran from us continually looking back to check we were a safe distance away.

Maggie described this as the best morning of our long trip with its unique landscape, great birds and other wildlife...



In the late afternoon we (all four of us) drove out to another area where there is a huge wetland with an astonishing density of water associated birds, many hundreds each of waterfowl, waders, storks, pelicans, ibis, herons and egrets and many roosting raptors. Evening at an incredible wetland takes some beating... It was wonderful to see so many familiar and unfamiliar birds together. Birds we associate with winter such as pintail and wigeon seem different in the afternoon light of India and somehow unexpectedly intermingled with exotic Openbill, Painted & Wolley-necked Storks, White & Spot-billed Pelicans and Glossy & Black-headed Ibis etc. Among raptors Spotted Eagles predominated. But best of all a stunning pair of India Coursers in pristine breeding plumage racing about a small ploughed field and then posing stock-still for a photoshoot! It was well worth the terrifying drive in the dark back to Rann Riders!

On our second morning we drove to the Little Rann and another wetland with great birds... but the real treats were in the fields around the wetter area. Hundreds of Yellow Wagtails and legions of larks with Crested and Oriental Skylark joined by virtually tame Sykes's Larks, as well as some sandgrouse that were all obligingly close. En route we had our only Syke's Warbler of the trip.



22nd Feb: Dasada - Gir National Park

We departed early for Gir NP knowing we had a long and tiring journey ahead of us (our itinerary said it was 5-6 hours, but Rattan said it would be more like 7-8 hours and he proved to be closer but still short as it took well over nine hours). This did include a few toilet breaks and a stop to eat our snacks and give the driver a break as well as a few birding stops once we entered the greater park area, which had the inevitable bureaucratic delay to issue permits in triplicate and open barriers.

We had planned to stay at **Gir Birding Lodge** http://www.girnationalpark.com/gir_lodge.htm however, we had found out that the individual cabins were all some distance from the dining room and pick up point and anyway wanted somewhere with more comfort than our previous lodge at Rann Riders. So we arranged a stay at the **Gateway Hotel Gir Forest** <http://www.thegatewayhotels.com/girforest/overview.aspx> at Sassan overlooking the River Hiran.



Char scanning the river

The arrangements were made on our behalf and as we drove into the hotel compound we were at first relieved to see that it was a really nice hotel, then plunged into exhausted despond when we were told that the hotel rooms were fully booked but that we had been given one of the 'cottages'.

This turned out to be a family accommodation consisting of two en suite bedrooms (one much larger than the other) and a shared sitting room (one bedroom had nowhere to sit and only a small double bed). Our travelling companions were unhappy pointing out that although we were friends we were not family and should not have been given shared quarters. As we slumped into chairs with our bags about us a mouse ran out from under the couch and a quick look around showed more evidence in the form of a windowsill covered in mouse droppings. Despite this being cleaned and our being assured that the mouse had been removed the next day more droppings appeared.

Meals were taken in the hotel proper and were very good with the chef cooking some pasta and etc. on request as some of the party couldn't face another curry. Breakfast was very good and the hotel nicely appointed, but the reception staff rather haughty and inflexible. Not only were the two couples' bills combined with a refusal to separate them for us but when laundry was returned (having been given in separately at different times) it was all mixed together, as was the bill for it. Moreover, no one showed us the shower switch, which was outside of the bathrooms so we ended up with cold showers not knowing that hot water WAS available, 'free wifi in all rooms' was actually only available in reception and you had to pay for it! All these irritations were small in themselves, but made the overall experience something of a let down... despite the laundry costs being waived.

23rd Feb: Gir National Park

We spent this day visiting the park on both the morning and afternoon 'safaris' to look for more wildlife and birds including the last wild Asiatic Lions in the world.

The 'safaris' are beset with very Indian bureaucracy. Permits need to be arranged in advance and jeeps line up with guides, drivers and minor officials wandering hither and thither almost as if choreographed. One man inspects a chit and passes it to another to stamp who passes it to be signed off... all the while examining passports to make sure only legitimate visitors are let in. It then costs R600 for a permit to photograph the animals and that only lasts for the duration of your jeep ride... do it again later and you need another permit! To the passengers waiting in the dark it all seems to be a farce.

Once the farce was acted out we entered the park all going off on pre-ordained routes to minimize daily disruption to the parks fauna.

Gir Forest National Park <http://www.girnationalpark.in> is a tapestry of dry deciduous forests, acacia scrub and grassland, fed by rivers and reservoirs, covering over 1400sq Kms. At its core is a fully protected area of over 250sq kms. It is the last abode of the Asiatic lion and has a thriving population of Leopard, Sambar, Chital, Nilgai and Wild Boar.



Our morning drive (Maggie & Bo) was by Jeep with a guide provided by the park (Rattan went with Mo).

The local guy was not bad at birds despite his lack of optics (warblers, he said, were beyond his skills as he had never had binoculars). New birds included Black-headed (Black) Redstart, Grey Asiatic Flycatcher, Small Minivet etc. In the village area we had some very close birds which I attempted to photograph such as Red-naped Ibis, Brahminy Starling, Bulbuls, Peacocks etc.



Rattan managed to wangle another safari despite our not having booked one... He was with us this time and thanks to his incredible skills, and manipulation of the driver and guide into going where he wanted rather than they wanted to take us, we saw a great deal more than we had in the morning.

Even before we got into the park proper we had notched up some lifers and had great views of a small covey of Barred Buttonquail. The biggest excitement was to see Leopard very close to us... laying just a few feet from the track. As I scrambled to (unsucessfully) find my camera, the

Leopard got up and slowly walked away! We also had some distant asiatic lions and lots of langur, Wild Boar and Spotted Deer.



As we were leaving the park a couple of jeeps were stationary looking at some much closer lions. A large male was asleep until our guide walked over and threw a stick at it! The lion merely raised his head and looked at us before going back to sleep. The guides laughed and did not believe us when we told them that African lions are very dangerous creatures. It seems that these lions have no history of man-eating and wander at will through towns and villages without anyone getting too alarmed.



That evening we were put into a spin when the chap looking after our house texted to say we had a leak! Maggie wanted to be home to sort it... but over the next few days we managed to organise a repair to our boiler from afar... one of the hazzards of long trips!

24th & 25th Feb: Gir National Park - Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar

We travelled the (for once predicted) six hours from Gir to Velavadar and checked-in at **Blackbuck Lodge** http://www.gujaratforest.org/black_buck1.htm



This was by far and away the best resort we stayed at in India. It has a limited menu and most of the staff seemed very young and inexperienced and most did not speak English. Their initial treatment of our guide did not sit well with us. They seemed to think he should sit by himself and eat completely different meals. Once this was sorted out we had no further problems and were well looked after.

The individual 'cottages' are luxurious with air conditioning, a choice of indoor and outdoor shower, the biggest beds I have ever seen and generally well appointed.



Each has its own seating area overlooking a pool at the rear used by Blackbuck, Black-naped Hare, Fox and a variety of birds including our only Rufous-fronted Prinia of the trip.



Blackbuck National Park http://www.gujaratforest.org/black_buck1.htm at Velavadar is known for its large blackbuck antelope population, but is also one of the few places in India where wolf proliferate, although they are rarely seen in the daylight. Jackal, jungle cat and hare are more easily seen and Indian fox on the periphery (we saw one at the lodge). The reserve is wonderful for birds too especially raptors and we saw Short-toed Snake Eagle, Imperial, Steppe, Tawny, Greater and Indian Spotted Eagles, Kestrel, White-eyed and Long-legged Buzzard, Black-shouldered Kite, Shikra, Eurasian Sparrow-hawk and Hen, Marsh and Montagu's Harriers. Although current numbers are low this site has been the biggest communal harrier roost in the world with many thousands of birds coming in at dusk.

Over several days and a number of visits we also saw Hyena, Jungle Cat, Wolf, Dessert Fox, Red Fox, Nilgai and hundreds of Black Buck. There are several lakes and smaller reservoirs within the park and we were treated to wonderful views of many species including over 100 Painted Storks at one, many Common Cranes and a few Sarus Cranes, and among the other Pelicans, there were several Dalmatian ones. We also had fly-over Demoiselle Cranes. While watching the largest lake we also saw two wolves and notched up birds we had not seen elsewhere such as Paddyfield Warbler, Avocet and many more.

26th Feb: Velavadar - Ahmedabah

As we were going on to UAE to bird some more we had a planned a free day in Ahmedabad to rest before the onward journey. The drive to Ahmedabad (4 hours) was deliberately slow so we could take a last slow drive passed the National Park and stop on the way if we saw anything of interest.

We stayed overnight stay at **Hotel Lemon Tree Premier The Aprium**, <http://www.lemontreehotels.com/Lemon-tree-premier/ahmedabad/the-atrium-ahmedabad.aspx> which was a good hotel with a view of the Sabarmati River, which at this season was little more than an open sewer with the muddy parts of the river bed covered in human detritus. Nevertheless, there were waders, egrets and Painted Storks on the river, a few terns and gulls and our only Knob-headed Duck of the trip. A road is being constructed between the hotel and the river and several families were living on the building site in dwellings made of tarpaulins.



28th Feb: Ahmedabad – Dubai