

Part One. Bharatpur & Surrounds.

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Before the main adventures in the high Himalaya, a four day excursion focussing on the amazing wetlands of Bharatpur, a mosaic of waters, islands and scrubby surrounds that just drip with a multitude of breeding storks, herons and other waterbirds. After a few dry years, the colonies were back to their old glories, Painted Storks in their hundreds the absolute highlight. Also managed a short stop on the Yumina River at Agra, birding under the shadow of the Taj Mahel. A surprisingly good selection of birds in this most magnificent of settings, including River Lapwings and assorted waders.

12 October. From a chilly Lithuania, rather wet and gloomy, I boarded an early evening flight to Helsinki on Finn Air. A fifty minute transfer, it was then into the air again for a six-hour flight to Delhi, arriving 05.25 local time. Stepping out into a muggy dawn, adventures were about to begin...

13 October. Bharatpur.

Efficient and rapid passage through immigration in Delhi Airport, I wandered out of the airport into the approaching dawn. An immediate assault by the sounds and smells that is Delhi, the skies brightening and Black Kites launching into the still hazy air, House Crows and Common Mynas raucous in their morning chorus, traffic and the constant hooting of horns more so. Splashing out (not excessively, remember this is India), I opted not to do battle with central Delhi and buses and trains, but instead took a taxi direct to Bharatpur, four and a half hours to the south. Common Mynas in virtually every village on route, Bank Mynas in some, Red-wattled Lapwings and various herons and egrets in flooded fields. Nothing changed regarding the roads in India - still the same manic free-for-all, one truck had hit a tree and spilt its load, elsewhere everybody else seemed intent on doing likewise. Ah, India! A little before 11.00 a.m. I arrived at the Royal Guest House in Bharatpur, a nice enough place and just a ten-minute walk from the gates to Keoladeo Bird Sanctuary, one of the most impressive wetlands in India. Already a staggering 35 C, I nevertheless set out almost immediately to explore the reserve. A few minutes wading through the rickshaw wallahs and guides keen to avail their services upon me, and I was in. Despite the heat, Indian Rollers and Black Drongos prominent, so too noisy gaggles of Jungle Babblers and a couple of stately Indian Peafowl. Continuing along, the first few hundred metres of track take you through fairly arid shrub and thicket, no doubt productive a dawn, but precious little activity now - a few White-eared Bulbuls here and there, one White-eyed Buzzard sitting atop a dead tree, processions of cormorants and storks flew over, all headed to the breeding colonies further along. At those colonies however, it was absolutely buzzing - after a couple of dry years in recent times, good monsoons coupled with new water agreements have restored Bharatpur back to its glory. Acacia islands absolutely dripping with spectacular breeding birds, a feast for the eyes - Painted Storks in their hundreds, Asian Openbills fairly common too, plus mega numbers of both Indian and Little Cormorants, four species of egret, at least three of heron and as a added extra, both Darter and Spoonbill present too. Sat here for a while, just enjoying the comings and goings, a lot of nest building activity going on, some birds already incubating. Storks were dropping out of the air, tumbling down onto their nests, others were stalking nearby islands, Darters and cormorants meandered through the waters.

With Bharatpur an extensive area, all bird rich, I then decided to continue my wanders. White-breasted Kingfisher, Rufous Treepie, Lesser Goldenback, Greater Coucal all seen fairly easily, also several Hume's Leaf Warblers, Oriental Magpie Robin and Red-breasted Flycatcher. A few mammals noted too - as well as numerous Rhesus Macaques and Five-striped Palm Squirrels, also saw five Spotted Deer, several Nilgai, one Small Indian Mongoose and two Grey Mongoose. By now rather weiry from the heat and suffering the effects of a lost night, I cut back through the Nil Tal woodlands to reach the Old Nursery. Bar rather a lot of Rhesus Macaques, I saw virtually nothing there, so continued on my way to the Ramband area to sit out the late afternoon. A nice part of Bharatpur, I have seen Grey-headed Fish Eagle

here in the past, as well as both jacanas and good concentrations of wildfowl. Still a little early in the season for much of that, but a nice selection regardless - in the inundated water meadows, one Cotton Pygmy-goose, several Purple Herons, quite a few Great White Egrets and Intermediate Egrets, numerous Darters and, in the air above, five Woolly-necked Storks and a small flock of roving Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. A good hour before sunset, I decided to call it a day, pausing in the woodland just adjacent to admire a mini feeding frenzy in a fruiting tree - at least 18 Yellow-footed Green Pigeon scoffing the small fruits, so too Indian Grey Hornbills, a few Brahminy Starlings and, squawking nearby, an active flock of Large Grey Babblers. In the dark gloomy underbelly of the forest, a Striated Heron stalked upon a flood pool, Golden Jackals emerging on an island to greet the end of day. On the long trudge out of Bharatpur, Indian Robins were now bouncing up out of the bushes in the arid zone, along with a family of Common Babblers, more Brahminy Starlings and a male Asian Koel. At 5.00 pm. I was back at my hotel, I crashed out on my bed, it had been a long day! 14 October. Bharatpur. An excellent day from start to finish, 10 hours wandering and admiring the waterbird spectacle that is Bharatpur. Entering at dawn, a lot of activity in the arid zone - Indian Peafowls, trillions of Ring-necked Parakeets and loads of Brahminy Starlings, plus Chestnut-shouldered Petronias active, Indian Robins running along the paths and three species of prinia popping up in the bushes, nice birds all. Also a Long-tailed Shrike, an Asian Koel, several Indian Rollers and a couple of Greater Coucals. In the wetlands, my first port of call was again the Ramband area - Yellow-footed Green Pigeons feeding in the fruiting tree again, but it was the wetland that was of most appeal. In this vast bed of water grasses, birds would rise into the air every few minutes to fly along and drop back into the grass further along - along with the first migrant Pintail, Teal and Garganey, other species included at least six Knob-billed Ducks, five Cotton Pygmy-geese, two Spot-billed Ducks, about ten Lesser Whistling Ducks and numerous flocks of Ferruginous Duck. Also plenty of Indian Pond Herons, Intermediate Egrets and Purple Herons, who knows what else lurking in the grass! I then took a long walk along a path that veers towards the eastern boundary of the sanctuary, passing through an area of thick acacia, alternating from wetland edge to arid interior. Several Wild Boar surprised along here, each charging off into the wetlands with great gusto, also a few Nilgai and three Golden Jackals. Birding was a little quieter for a while, but did include another Asian Koel, a number of Blyth's Reed Warblers and a Red-breasted Flycatcher. About four kilometres along, a little after taking a side track to return to the main wetland zone, I remembered I had found a Dusky Eagle Owl on a nest at this spot a few years back. Despite locating the tree, I unfortunately did not repeat the find! Did however see one Oriental Honey Buzzard, a European Hobby and a Shikra, not too bad at all.

With the sun now high, the best course of action now was to find a shady spot and settle down to try to get a few photographs. The spot I found was a small bridge over a channel between two pools - with an abundance of small fish pushing into the channel, the place was absolutely choc'a'bloc with birds, Indian Squacco Herons squabbling over best location, Indian Cormorants swimming to within a few metres, Little Cormorants just behind and both Intermediate and Great White Egrets in the grasses beyond. Also a White-breasted Kingfisher peering down and, best of all, an engaging Striated Heron hunting from the concrete bridge support. Hanging at an almost impossible angle, the bird would then suddenly jump off the bridge and plunge into the water, kingfisher style. With success, the heron then flew up to a nearby tree to devour its catch before returning to repeat the technique. Neat. Stinking hot again, 35 C as the day before. Walked up to the temple in the park's centre, dismayed to see the small cafe now longer operated, damn! Ah well, Five-striped Palm Squirrels entertained, a Purple Sunbird flitted over and a couple of River Terns patrolled the waters just beyond. Sanity suggested that I returned to the first gate for a coffee, but laziness dictated otherwise - if I walked all the way back there, I am sure I would not have returned to this northern extreme of the park! So instead, off I went, hardly at a trot, but taking the trail that loops around the huge pool to the north of the temple. Excellent birding all the way round, a stately pair of Sarus Cranes on a small island with a toddler of a chick, one smart adult Pheasant-tailed Jacana and loads of Purple Swamphens amongst the early highlights, two Spotted Owlets also worthy of mention. Further round, I was beginning to wilt, but a Lagger Falcon flying in to flush egrets certainly woke me up, several Eurasian Marsh Harriers and an Osprey also noted, as well as a pair of Lesser Whistling Ducks trailing ducklings. Also a Hoopoe and several Whiskered Terns, plus two Small Minivets briefly.

Late afternoon, I was beat - time to backtrack to that canteen for coffee! Think I was walking zombie mode here, as I saw little of note, two Red-rumped Swallows perhaps the only additions to the day's tally of birds, though a stag Sambar was nice. Finally reached the canteen, downed a coffee and watched the birds about, a second Hobby of the day, herons and storks flying over, babblers making a racket nearby, one Common Stonechat on a wire.

Far too lazy to return to the wetlands, I took a wander back to town - House Crows everywhere, two Wire-tailed Swallows zipping about over the main roundabout, Red-vented Bulbuls in scrubby gardens, one Brown Rock Chat on an old wall. With the sun now dipping towards the horizon, back to my hotel I went. 15 October. Bharatpur & Agra Out at dawn again, I decided today to rent a bicycle to reach a few key stops before the heat again climbed to its giddy heights.

First stop was the Old Nursery, but most disappointingly, Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher was the only birds of note, maybe this site gets better later into the winter. A close-quarter Golden Jackal was rather nice however. Continuing, I then cut through the Nil Tal woodlands, finding an exquisite pair of Woolly-necked Storks wading in a forest pool, plus an assortment of birds including Lesser Goldenback and a pair of Common Woodchats, the first of the trip. From there, I crossed a dyke across a vast pool of water grasses - three Pheasant-tailed Jacanas and numerous Purple Swamphens - before reaching the temple area, a good scout of this area revealing a pair of Spotted Owlets, about 30 Black-crowned Night Herons in roost, two Striated Herons and two River Terns, presumably the same two as the day before.

And with that, I decided to leave Keoladio, a flock of Rose-coloured Starlings and an Asian Pied Starling on the way out. It was now mid-morning and the sun was burning down again, I packed my bags and jumped on a local bus to Agra, 50

km to the east and home to the Taj Mahel.

An easy afternoon in the streets of the Taj Ganj, the bustling market area just south of the Taj Mahel, its crowded alleys a maze of eateries and budget hotels. As the sun waned a little, I wandered down to the Yumuna River, a polluted stinking affair that the Taj Mahel in all its grace stands above. For one of India's most sacred rivers, and one that flows past its most iconic of monuments, it amazes me that the river is not treated a little more dignity - worshippers in their dozens tread their way through the bankside rubbish to offer gifts to the river, garlands of marigolds. Complete with plastic bag, so the gift is cast into the river to join the choking collection of previous offerings, mixed with copious volumes of other detritus and debris, raw sewage trickling into the river at several points.

That said however, it is still a strangely serene and attractive location, the sun setting over the Taj, a fabulous number of birds present despite (or because of) the rubbish. Black Kites wheel in all directions, hurtling flocks of Little Swifts scream around the domes of the Taj, the river itself is alive with waders and other opportunists. Two pairs of River Lapwings strut on a sand bank opposite, Indian Pond Herons and dozens of Black-winged Stilts feed at the sludgy edges of the river, Little Stints, Greenshanks and Green Sandpipers too. Upchannel, many birds visible in the distance, destination for my morning walk, I decide. Flocks of many thousand House Crows descend to roost in woodland over the river, the Black Kites begin to ditch into trees, another day over. 16 October. Taj Mahel, Agra. A sleepy sun rising over the Yumuna River, the Taj gearing up for another day of tourist onslaught, the crowds already beginning to enter. On the banks of the river, amongst a not so delicate aroma challenging the nostrils, waves of birds were already milling, flocks of House Crows sifting the rubbish, Black Kites loafing on sand bars, a couple of River Terns zigzagging just upchannel.

In a careful tiptoe, really not wishing to slip into the black soup that passed for water, I edged along the bank, heading from the Taj towards the Red Fort visible a couple of kilometres further on. The path passed a temple and then soon opened out onto a grassy bank, rather pleasant even if somewhat rubbish-strewn. A bumper crop of waders, Black-winged Stilts and Red-wattled Lawings predominating, but also quite a few Temminck's Stints, Ruff, Common Redshanks and Little Ringed Plovers amongst the others, with smaller numbers of River Lapwings, Marsh Sandpipers and Wood Sandpipers also present. White-breasted Kingfishers sat on posts, an Egyptian Vulture plodded through a pile of rubbish, a Woolly-necked Stork paddled in the shallows, essentially birds everywhere! Out on the sand islands, plenty to sift through, not least the assorted races of both Yellow and White Wagtails, plus small flocks of Oriental Skylarks. Every so often, I gave in to the natural tendency to gaze back at the Taj Mahel, the domes and towers silhouetted against the rising sun, clouds of Black Kites already in residence, the Little Swifts mere specks from this distance. Two Wire-tailed Swallows flitted over, a flock of Little Egrets settled just adjacent. I was considering walking a little further, but the a particularly gooey inlet looked most unwelcoming, so instead, decided to cut inland, the banks of the Yumuna at this point basically parkland and overgrown scrub. For what is basically the centre of the city, you could effectively have been in a rural retreat - several Indian Peafowl wandered by, chicks too, Jungle Babblers worked the scrub in flocks, a Greater Coucal sat atop a bush in the sun. A little further, a small park attracted yet more birds, Hoopoes amongst the prizes, but the undoubted highlight a splendid Brown-headed Barbet. Also dozens of Five-striped Palm Squirrels and the obligatory Rhesus Macaques, not at all bad for a city walk.

Back in the centre, some sort of festival on this day, a constant procession of brightly coloured folk marching through to beating drums and much fanfair. No further plans for the day, I chose a rooftop restaurant and passed the day away, Black Kites and Egyptian Vultures over the Taj Mahel a stone's throw to the south, Rhesus Macaques and the squirrels clambering across rooftops all around.

Late in the day, I took a train to Delhi, three Sarus Cranes on route. I had no particular desire to be in this city, but next morning I would have my flight to Ladakh, the adventure was about to begin. For 'Part Two' of my trip, [CLICK HERE](#) Ladakh, The Quest for the Snow Leopard