

## TRIP REPORTS

### KERALA, INDIA by Dennis Buss

#### 10-13 July 2004

I had business in Bangalore Wed-Fri, 14-16 July, and I arranged with Gurudongma Tours & Treks for four days of bird watching in Kerala. The cost was \$600 USD, which covered room and food, it covered a car and driver, and it covered the cost of a guide. Gurudongma Tours & Treks subcontracted the entire trip to [Kalypto Adventures](#): Commander Thomas Zacharias.

I spent the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend in Vermont, spent a day at MIT and Thurs evening 8 July, I flew to Mumbai. I arrived Mumbai Fri night 9 July and stayed in the Leela Kampanski Hotel.

**Sat 10 July:** Took 5:45a flight to Cochin (Kochi) and arrived 7:45a. My driver met me, and we began driving for Munnar at 9:00a. We arrived at the Tall Trees Lodge at 12:30p after a few brief stops. The Tall Trees Lodge is in the Western Ghats at about 2000 m. Ate lunch and birded from 1:30p to 5:00p. It was good weather: 75°F: cloudy, but no rain. At 5:30p, it began to rain. It rained off and on during the night. **17 new birds.**

**Sun 11 July:** I am 62 years old today. Woke up 5:00a, but it doesn't get light until 6:30a. Drove and walked to a spot where Broad-tailed Grassbird is seen, Saw the Grassbird and returned for breakfast. Then we drove for 2 hours to a spot in Tamil Nadu overlooking the plains. Saw Yellow-throated Bulbul and other scrub birds. Then drove 2 hours more to Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary in foothills 35 miles east of Munnar. Stayed in Periyar River Lodge in Kuttanpuzha. Commander Thomas visited, but didn't stay for dinner. In spite of all the travel, got **23 new birds.**

**Mon 12 July:** Left lodge 6:00a and, before breakfast, got 15 new birds. After breakfast, we went into tall forest and got 7 more new birds. Saw Stork-billed Kingfisher from the lodge while waiting for lunch. After lunch, we got another 7 birds for a staggering total of **30 new birds.** We spend an hour waiting for Great-eared Nightjar to fly by without success. Otherwise, we had excellent success.

**Tues 13 July:** Got Mottled Wood-Owl early on. Then the day got slow. In the first three days, I saw most of the new birds that are possible. Went to Edamalayar Dam and took a 3 km (one way) walk. We heard Puff-throated Babbler, but our guide's recorder would not record, so we missed the Babbler. Got Brown-backed Needletail about 3:30p and headed for the airport. **6 New Birds**

#### Retrospective

If you add up the new birds for the four days, you get 76. In fact 4 of the birds that I thought were new I had seen previously, and the total of new birds was 72. But 72 new birds in 4 days is phenomenal!!

July is in the middle of the monsoon season. It rained every day, but the rain was tolerable. It would often rain for 20 min and would stop, and the sun would poke through the clouds

There are 16 Endemics of the Western Ghats

- Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon
- Nilgiri Pipit
- Nilgiri Flycatcher
- Malabar Grey Hornbill
- Rufous Babbler
- Crimson-backed Sunbird
- White-bellied Treepie
- Grey-breasted Laughingthrush
- White-bellied Blue Flycatcher
- White-bellied Shortwing
- Malabar Parakeet
- Black and Orange Flycatcher
- Grey-headed Bulbul
- Broad-tailed Grassbird
- Wynaad Laughingthrush
- Nilgiri Laughingthrush

I saw all except the last two.

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## BIRDS

- Little Cormorant
  - Great Cormorant
  - Darter
  - Intermediate Egret
  - Indian Pond-Heron
  - Purple Heron
  - Cotton Pygmy-Goose: Saw male and female the afternoon of 7/12.
  - Lesser Whistling Duck: Saw a few flying on 7/12.
- # Grey-headed Fish-Eagle: Saw two across the river from Periyar River Lodge on 7/11. Saw one close on 7/13.
- Black Eagle: Saw one rather close at our mid-day stop on 7/11. Saw another later in the day. Previously seen in Taiwan, 8/7/00.
- # Changeable Hawk-Eagle: Saw one very close at our mid-day birding stop on 7/11. Saw another perched in Thattekkad the evening of 7/12.
- # Grey Junglefowl: Saw in Thattekkad before breakfast on 7/12. Saw again the afternoon of 7/13.
- # Red Spurfowl: Saw in Thattekkad returning by car from birding before breakfast on 7/12. Saw again on 7/13.
- Purple Swamphen
  - Red-wattled Lapwing: Saw at Cochin Airport from the plane on 7/10.
  - White-breasted Waterhen
  - Bronze Jacana
  - Pheasant-tailed Jacana
- Rock Dove
  - Spotted Dove: Saws 7/11.
- # Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon: Endemic of Western Ghats: On the morning of 7/11, as I waited in the fog for our guide to show up, I saw a dove fly by. He was grey below with a white band at the base of his tail. The Princeton Field guide says that Nilgiri has a "uniform slate-gray tail". But our guide is confident that this is what I saw, and the birdlist for the Tall Trees Lodge lists only Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon and Pompadour Green-Pigeon.
- # Mountain Imperial-Pigeon: Saw at Periyar River Lodge on 7/11.
- # Green Imperial-Pigeon: Saw 10 in a flock the afternoon of 7/12.
- # Pompadour Green-Pigeon: Saw before breakfast on 7/12.

- # Emerald Dove: Saw one well before breakfast the morning of 7/12. Saw a couple more later in the trip.
- # Vernal Hanging-Parrot: Saw at our first stop on the drive to Munnar on 7/10. Saw more in Thattekkad.
- # Malabar Parakeet: Endemic of Western Ghats: Formerly called Blue-winged Parakeet. Saw many in Thattekkad.
- Plum-headed Parakeet: Saw one in Thattekkad on 7/12. Previously seen in India on Christmas 98 trip.
- # Sirkeer Malkoha: Saw in the scrub vegetation during our mid-day stop on 7/11.
- Greater Coucal
- Asian Koel
- # Grey-bellied Cuckoo: Saw before breakfast on 7/12. The Princeton Field Guide to the Birds of India lists two species
  - Grey-bellied Cuckoo: *Cacomantis passerinus*
  - Plaintive Cuckoo: *Cacomantis merulinus*

However, Clements-2000 lists only Plaintive Cuckoo with subspecies *C. m. passerinus* in India. It appears that BI has split these, but Clements treats them as a single species.
- # Common Hawk-Cuckoo: Saw before breakfast on 7/12. This is called Brainfever Bird, and is heard constantly.
- # Mottled Wood-Owl
- # Jungle Owlet: I spotted this on two different occasions the morning of 7/12. Both times, I saw the Owlet sitting on its branch, but was unable to get my binoculars on it.
- # Jerdon's Nightjar: Saw very well the evening of 7/12.
- # Indian Swiftlet: Saw many in Thattekkad..
- # Asian Palm Swift: Saw the evening of 7/12.
- # White-rumped Needletail: Saw several quite well at Edamalayar Dam on 7/13.
- # Brown-backed Needletail: Last bird of the trip. Saw late in the day 7/13. They were quite high, and I could see that they were larger than Indian

Swiftlets that were also present. But I could not see the white on their bellies.

- House Swift: Saw the evening of 7/12.
- # Crested Treeswift: Saw many in Thattekkad.
- # Malabar Trogon: Saw this after breakfast on 7/12. I got excellent looks at it
- Pied Kingfisher: Saw at Thattekkad on 7/11. Saw another on 7/13.
- Common Kingfisher: Saw one.
- White-bellied Kingfisher
- # Stork-billed Kingfisher: Saw two the afternoon of 7/12.
- # Chestnut-headed Bee-Eater: Saw in Thattekkad before breakfast on 7/12.
- Little Green Bee-Eater: Saw many in Thattekkad.
- # Dollarbird: Saw 6-8.
- # Malabar Grey Hornbill: Endemic of Western Ghats: Saw 8-10.
- # Crimson-fronted Barbet: Saw at our first stop on the drive to Munnar on 7/10.
- White-cheeked Barbet: Formerly called Small Green Barbet: Saw 4-6.
- Brown-headed Barbet: Saw 7/11.
- Coppersmith Barbet: Saw 7/11
- # Common Flameback: Heard and saw very well on 7/10 when we arrived at the Tall Trees Lodge.
- # Streak-throated Woodpecker: Saw in Thattekkad on 7/11 and on 7/12.
- # Rufous Woodpecker: Saw in Thattekkad before breakfast on 7/12 and later in the afternoon.
- # Greater Flameback: Saw in Thattekkad before breakfast on 7/12.
- # Black-rumped Flameback: Saw in Thattekkad before breakfast on 7/12 and several times subsequently..
- # Lesser Yellownape: Saw in Thattekkad before breakfast on 7/12.
- # Speckled Piculet: Saw at our first stop on the drive to Munnar on 7/10.
- # Brown-capped Pygmy-Woodpecker: Saw twice on 7/12.
- # Heart-spotted Woodpecker: Saw one a long way off on 7/12.

- Pacific Swallow: Saw 7/10.
  - Red-rumped Swallow: Saw 7/11.
- # Dusky Craig Martin: Saw at Edamalayar Dam on 7/13.
- # Nilgiri Pipit: Endemic of Western Ghats: On 7/10, we drove to Erivakulam National Park where the Nilgiri Taur lives, and saw both Taur and Nilgiri Pipit almost immediately.
- # Large Cuckoo-Shrike: Saw in Thattekkad on 7/11.
- Scarlet Minivet: Saw male and female on 7/10. Saw several subsequently.
  - Small Minivet: Saws a small flock on 7/12.
- # Yellow-browed Bulbul: Saw one well on 7/10.
- # Yellow-throated Bulbul: This bird was the principal target bird of our mid-day stop on 7/11. I finally got one in my binoculars. The entire head is yellowish green.
- # Black-crested Bulbul: The ruby-throated race (*Pycnonotus melanicterus melanicterus*) is endemic to Western Ghats. Saw the afternoon of 7/12.
- # Grey-headed Bulbul: Endemic of Western Ghats: On 7/12, we saw this perched quietly for a long time.
- Red-whiskered Bulbul: Ubiquitous.
  - White-browed Bulbul: Rather common at the mid-day stop on 7/11.
  - Black Bulbul: Saw a huge flock at a stop on 7/11. Previous seen in Taiwan.
  - Red-vented Bulbul: Abundant at the mid-day stop on 7/11
  - Common Iora: Saw in Thattekkad on 7/11.
- # Golden-fronted Leafbird: Saw several on 7/12 & 7/13. Some were seen in the tops of trees far away, and a scope would have provided excellent views.
- # White-bellied Shortwing: Endemic of Western Ghats: The Shortwing perched conspicuously and sang for us.
- # Orange-headed Thrush: Saw the morning of 7/12 before breakfast. Saw *Zoothera citrine cyanotus* with vertical black stripes on head
- # Malabar Whistling-Thrush: Saw two on 7/10.
- # Grey-breasted Prinia: Saw one singing at the top of a tree in Thattekkad on 7/11. Saw another on 7/13.
- Plain Prinia: Saw 7/12.
- # Broad-tailed Grassbird. Endemic of Western Ghats: Before breakfast on 7/11, we drove for about 1 km and walked for another 20 min to a place

where Broad-tailed Grassbirds are found. It was very foggy and drizzling. But we saw the Grassbird three times fly up to a height of about 3 ft before settling back into the grass. Elshose said several times that very few people see this bird. It is rare and local, and it breeds in summer.

- Common Tailorbird
- # Black-and-Rufous (Black-and-Orange) Flycatcher: Endemic of Western Ghats: Saw one well on 7/10.
- # Nilgiri Flycatcher: Endemic of Western Ghats: We looked for this for a while before finding it on 7/10. Saw two blue birds flit across a trail about a foot off the ground. Saw female on 7/11.
- # White-bellied Blue-Flycatcher: Endemic of Western Ghats: Saw in Thattekkad after breakfast on 7/12. Saw male and female gathering nesting material and making nest in hole in tree.
- Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher: Saw quite a few of these on 7/10. Previously seen in Bharatpur, 2/5/95.
- # Brown-breasted Flycatcher: This is supposed to be a winter migrant, but we saw one on 7/11 in Thattekkad.
- Pied Bushchat: Saw several on 7/10.
- Oriental Magpie-Robin: Saw 7/11.
- Indian Robin: Saw on 7/11
- # Gray-breasted Laughingthrush: Endemic of Western Ghats: Saw two on 7/10, and heard others singing
- # Brown-cheeked Fulvetta: Formerly called Quaker Babbler. Saw one well on 7/10 and again on 7/12.
- # Rufous Babbler: Endemic of Western Ghats: Saw several times on 7/13.
- # Dark-fronted Babbler: Saw a pair on 7/13.
- Jungle Babbler: Sat in Thattekkad on 7/11.
- Yellow-eyed Babbler: Saw in Thattekkad on 7/11.
- Great Tit
- # Black-lored Tit: Saw a flock on 7/10.
- # Velvet-fronted Nuthatch: Saw one well on 7/10.
- Purple-rumped Sunbird: Saw 7/11.
- # Crimson-backed Sunbird: Endemic of Western Ghats: Saw 7/10.

- # Long-billed (Loten's) Sunbird: Saw very well the afternoon on 7/12.
- # Little Spiderhunter: Saw after breakfast on 7/12. Saw very well on 7/13.
- Plain Flowerpecker: Saw well on 7/10. Previously seen in Taiwan, 10/31/98.
- # Pale-billed Flowerpecker: Saw 7/11 & 7/13.
- Oriental White-eye
- # Black-hooded Oriole: Saw many.
- # Asian Fairy-bluebird: Saw several after breakfast on 7/12.
- Long-tailed Shrike: Saw 7/10.
- # Large Woodshrike: Saw before breakfast on 7/12 and on 7/13.
- Common Woodshrike: Saw 7/12.
- White-bellied Drongo: Saw 7/11.
- Greater Racket-tailed Drongo
- Black Drongo
- Bronzed Drongo
- # Ashy Woodswallow: Saw many in Thattekkad.
- Large-billed Crow
- House Crow
- # White-bellied Treepie: Endemic of Western Ghats: Saw in Thattekkad before breakfast on 7/11.
- Common Myna
- Hill Myna
- # Jungle Myna: Saw from the road on 7/11.
- # Chestnut-tailed Starling: Formerly called Grey-headed Starling. Saw on 7/11
- # Black-throated Munia: Saw in Thattekkad on 7/11. This is very rare, and that we were very fortunate to see it.
- Nutmeg Mannikin: Also called Scaly-breasted Munia: Saw a small flock the afternoon of 7/12.
- White-rumped Munia: Saw one the afternoon of 7/12.

**132 Total birds seen: 72 New Birds**

- Saw Nilgiri Taur in Erivakulam National Park on 7/10.



- Saw two foxes on 7/10.
- Saw a rodent that looks like a Chipmunk. On 7/11.
- Saw Three-banded Palm Squirrel 4-5 times
- Saw Malabar Giant Squirrel on 7/13. About a meter long: Bluish grey on the back. Tan on face and (I think) underparts.

Indian Elephant. On 7/13, we saw lots of Elephant droppings. A man walking past in the jungle warned us that there was an Elephant up the road. But we didn't see it.