

SOUTH INDIA: The Western Ghats

An 11-day birding tour focusing on the impressive number of regional specialities of tropical hill forests and plateau grasslands in a 350km stretch of the scenic Western Ghats.

Our tour is a thorough exploration of the Western Ghats, the range of low mountains running parallel to the west coast of the Indian peninsular, with particular emphasis on finding the species endemic or near-endemic to this global biodiversity 'hotspot' in some of India's premier birding destinations. Swathed in tropical forest and capped by unique stunted 'Shola' forests that form sky-islands amid plateau grassland, these hills are home to no less than 30 endemic or near-endemic birds. Visiting a series of sites at varying elevation along a 350km stretch of the ghats, we'll look for Black and Orange and Nilgiri Flycatchers, Nilgiri, Palani and Wynaad Laughingthrushes, Nilgiri Thrush, Nilgiri and White-bellied Blue Robins, White-bellied Treepie, Malabar Trogon and Broad-tailed Grassbird, with the prospect of night birds such as Ceylon Bay Owl and Ceylon Frogmouth. We visit in early spring, when temperatures are moderate at all elevations and when our target endemics and more widespread south Indian birds are accompanied by winter migrants. We'll also no doubt encounter a selection of interesting mammals, including the endemic Nilgiri Langur and Nilgiri Tahr.

TOUR HIGHLIGHTS:

- *Productive birding across a 350km stretch of the endemic-rich southern Western Ghats*, from lush lowland rainforests to the unique 'Shola' habitat of elevated sky-islands.
- *A diverse and abundant birdlife*, with 250 plus species including a dozen flycatchers, warblers and woodpeckers, Malabar Trogon, eight bulbuls, the striking Pied Thrush, four species of hornbill, the secretive Indian Pitta, and an extensive selection of birds of prey.
- *Realistic chances of seeing most of the 30 species endemic or near-endemic to the Western Ghats*, including Black-and-Orange Flycatcher,

Nilgiri and White-bellied Sholakilis, Nilgiri, Palani and Wynaad Laughingthrushes, and Broad-tailed Grassbird.

- ***An impressive selection of night birds*, including Sri Lanka Frogmouth, up to five species of nightjar, and up to thirteen owls including the enigmatic Sri Lanka Bay Owl.**
- ***An interesting selection of mammals*, including large mammals such as Asian Elephant and Gaur, plus regional endemics such as Nilgiri Tahr, Nilgiri Marten and Nilgiri Langur.**
- ***A journey through some of India's most scenic areas*, including the gently rolling emerald hills of Munnar's tea estates, and a glimpse of the colonial era in the hill station of Ooty.**

Day 1-3: Bangalore to Mudumalai National Park

Arrivals into Bangalore international airport this morning, driving west to Mudumalai National Park in Tamil Nadu for a two-night stay. Much of Mudumalai lies in the rain shadow of the ghats, and in the dry deciduous forest and thorn scrub we will look for endemics that favour these conditions, such as Malabar Woodshrike, Grey-headed Bulbul and Malabar Lark, alongside Painted Spurfowl, Sirkeer and Blue-faced Malkohas, Indian Nuthatch, numerous babblers and woodpeckers, and the highly localised White-bellied Minivet. We will depart on the drive up into the Nilgiri Hills by mid-afternoon on day 3, for a two-night stay in the former colonial hill station of Ooty.

Day 4: Ooty

At 2268m Ooty is among the highest reaches of the ghats, home to some of the most restricted range endemics confined to these elevations. Today, we will explore remnant patches of shola, the native stunted temperate forest unique to these higher hills, for some of the most enticing endemics of the tour, including Nilgiri Blue Robin, Nilgiri Flycatcher, Nilgiri Thrush and Nilgiri Laughingthrush. Other possibilities include Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, Blue-capped Rock-thrush, Southern Hill Myna, and a chance of wintering Kashmir Flycatcher.

Day 5-6: Munnar

On day 5, a long drive south will take us into the Cardamom Hills of Kerala for a two-night stay at Munnar at 1600m. Munnar is uniquely picturesque, dominated by tea plantations but with patches of native woodland and vegetated gullies where we hope to encounter Indian Rufous Babbler, Malabar Whistling-thrush, Alpine and Blyth's Swifts, Hill Swallow, and Painted Bush-quail. Further afield, in upland plateau grasslands and shola we will look for White-bellied Blue Robin, Palani Laughingthrush, the striking Black and Orange Flycatcher, Nilgiri Pipit, the elusive Broad-tailed Grassbird, and endemic mammals such as Nilgiri Tahr and perhaps the elusive Nilgiri Marten.

Day 7-8: Periyar National Park

We leave Munnar in the morning of day 7, travelling south to Periyar via Bodinayakanur (or Bodi for short) to look for the localised endemic Yellow-throated Bulbul in its preferred rocky scrub habitat in the rain shadow of the ghats. We will arrive at Periyar, our southernmost site, by midday to begin our exploration of this vast area of undulating terrain surrounding the Periyar reservoir. The rich forests and grasslands host a diverse avifauna which includes some of the most elusive endemics, notably Wynaad Laughingthrush, as well as some sought-after winter migrants such as Pied Thrush and an abundance of mammals including Gaur (Indian Bison), Ussuri Dhole (wild dog), Asian Elephant, various deer, Nilgiri Langur, Malabar Giant Squirrel and Travancore Flying Squirrel.

Day 9-10: Thattekad Bird Sanctuary

In the morning of day 9 we make our way to the base of the Cardamom Hills to Thattekad Bird Sanctuary for a two-night stay. The magnificent lowland rainforest of Thattekad is considered the richest bird habitat in peninsular India, comparable and with affinities to the bird-rich Eastern Himalayas. Most of the Western Ghats' endemics not confined to the sholas and higher altitudes occur here, and among our key targets will be White-bellied Treepie, White-bellied Blue Flycatcher, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Malabar Parakeet and Small Sunbird. We also hope to encounter some of the exceptional selection of night birds found here, that includes Spot-bellied Eagle-owl, Mottled Wood-owl, Ceylon Bay Owl and Ceylon Frogmouth, as well as four species of nightjar. Other possibilities include Malabar Trogon, Great Pied and Malabar Pied Hornbills, White-bellied and Heart-spotted Woodpeckers, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Indian Pitta, Black-

throated Munia, Emerald Dove, Black Baza and Grey-headed Fish-eagle. The damp, humid forests are equally rich in butterflies, including exquisite endemics such as Malabar Banded Peacock.

Day 11: Depart Kochi

Depending on group departure plans we may have time for some final birding at Thattekad before leaving for Kochi. Departures from Kochi (Cochin) international airport this afternoon.

ITINERARY IN BRIEF:

Day 1: Bangalore to **Mudumalai**
Day 2-3: **Mudumalai National Park**
Day 4: **Ooty**
Day 5: Ooty to **Munnar**
Day 6: Munnar and **Eravikulam National Park**
Day 7-8: **Periyar National Park**
Day 9-10: **Thattekad Bird Sanctuary**
Day 11: depart Kochi

BIRDS: 250+

MAMMALS: 10-15

PHOTOGRAPHY: Good

TOUR EXTENSIONS:

Combine this tour with **Tansa: Forest Owlet and More** or ask us for a custom extension anywhere in India.

KEY SPECIES - BIRDS:

Black and Orange, White-bellied Blue, Nilgiri and Kashmir Flycatchers, Nilgiri, Palani and Wynaad Laughingthrushes, Indian Rufous Babbler, Indian Scimitar-babbler, Nilgiri and White-bellied Blue Robins, Nilgiri Thrush, Pied Thrush, Malabar Trogon, White-bellied Treepie, Flame-throated, Yellow-throated, Grey-headed, Yellow-browed and Square-tailed Bulbuls, Orange Minivet, Malabar Woodshrike, Malabar Starling, Lesser Hill Myna, Malabar and White-cheeked Barbets, Malabar Whistling-Thrush, Malabar Grey, Malabar Pied and Great Pied Hornbills, Nilgiri Woodpigeon, Grey-fronted Green-pigeon, Malabar Parakeet, Nilgiri Flowerpecker, Small and Loten's Sunbirds, Broad-tailed Grassbird, Dark-fronted Babbler, Black-throated Munia, Malabar Lark, Nilgiri Pipit, Hill Swallow, Indian Swiftlet, Sri Lanka Bay Owl, Spot-bellied Eagle-owl, Sri Lanka Frogmouth.

KEY SPECIES - MAMMALS:

Bonnet Macaque, Northern Plains Grey and Nilgiri Langurs, Asian Elephant, Gaur (Indian Bison), Ussuri Dhole, Nilgiri Tahr, Nilgiri Marten, Indian (Malabar) Giant Squirrel, Travancore Flying Squirrel.