ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

India

Western: Desert Specials

15th January to 27th January 2023 (13 days)

Forest Owlet Extension

27th January to 30th January 2023 (4 days)



Demoiselle Cranes by David Shackelford

The wonderfully diverse nation of India is well-known for its verdant landscapes and the snow-capped Himalayas. It therefore surprises many people to learn that India is also blessed with some incredible deserts, and our tour showcases this much-underrated habitat by exploring some of India's less

frequented parks and reserves in the county's dry, western parts. Desert National Park, Tal Chappar and the Great and Little Ranns of Kutch are amongst the most important of the protected areas of western India and we will visit all of them. We will also pay a visit to the more verdant Mt Abu along with an extension to the deciduous forests of Tansa Reserve.

Along the way we are going to see some of the most threatened and rare birds not only of India but of the whole world. Species we are searching for include the Great Indian Bustard which sadly teeters on the brink of extinction, the almost equally rare White-browed Bush Chat, along with Indian Spotted Creeper, Yellow-eyed Pigeon, Green Avadavat, Sociable Lapwing, Macqueen's Bustard, White-naped Tit, Marshall's Iora, and for those doing the extension the recently rediscovered Forest Owlet. We also stand a great chance at picking up two of the more difficult monotypic families in the world, namely Crab-Plover and Grey Hypocolius. The general birding is excellent with lots of breeding specialties supplemented by vast numbers of overwintering northern migrants including famous congregations of cranes, impressive flocks of waterfowl and waders and a number of interesting passerines. Mammals are yet another interesting feature of this trip and along the way we can expect to see Blackbuck, Indian Gazelle and Indian Wild Ass amongst others.

THE TOUR AT A GLANCE…

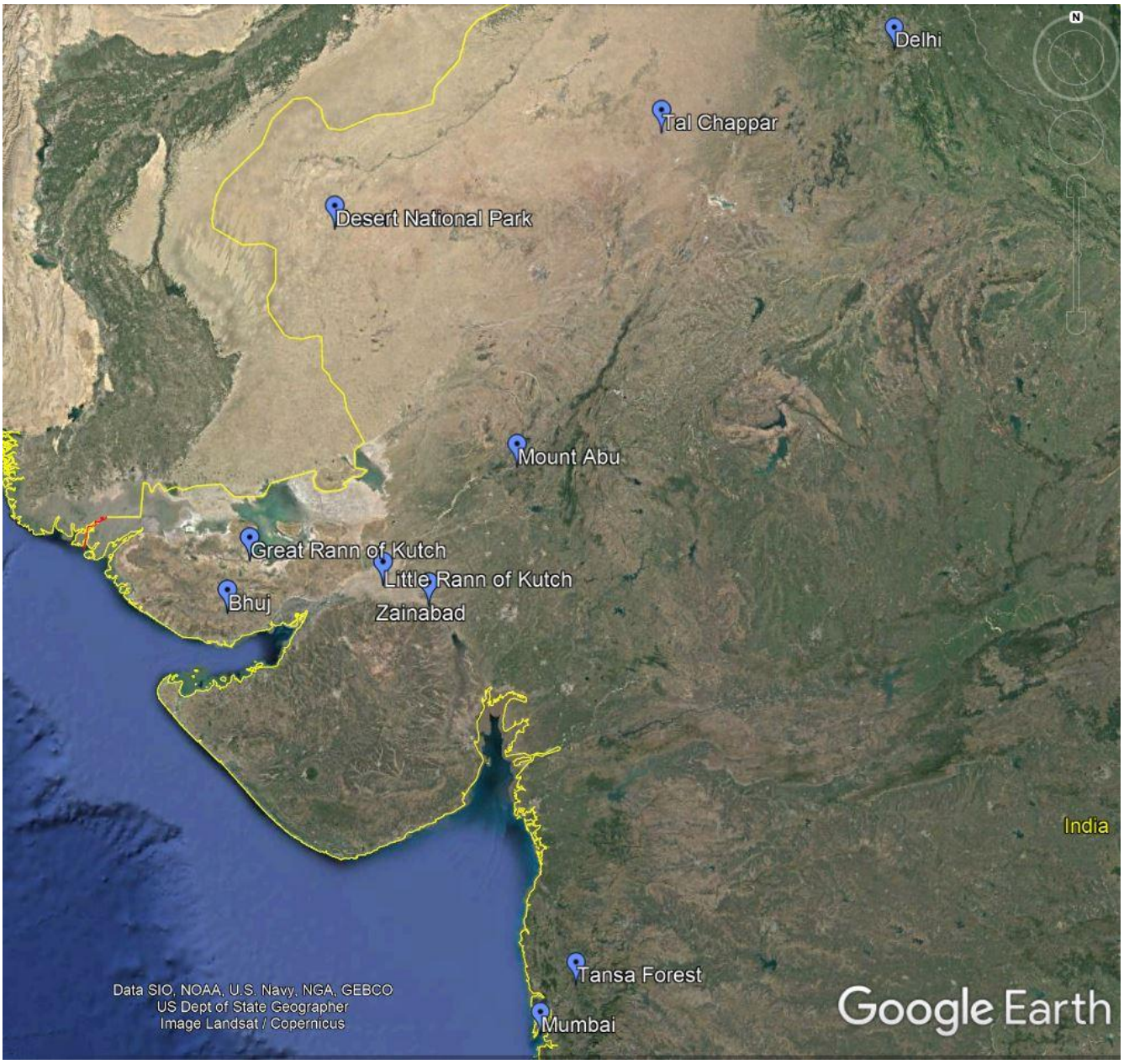
THE ITINERARY

Day 1	**Arrival in New Delhi**
Day 2	**New Delhi to Tal Chappar**
Day 3	**Tal Chappar**
Day 4	**Tal Chappar to Jaisalmer via Bikaner and Khichan**
Days 5 & 6	**Desert National Park**
Day 7	**Jaisalmer to Mount Abu**
Day 8	**Mount Abu to Zainabad**
Day 9	**Little Rann of Kutch**
Day 10	**Little Rann of Kutch to Bhuj**
Days 11 & 12	**Bhuj and Great Rann of Kutch surroundings**
Day 13	**Final departure**

EXTENSION ITINERARY

Day 1	**Arrival in Mumbai**
Day 2	**Mumbai to Tansa Forest**
Day 3	**Tansa Forest**
Day 4	**Tansa Forest to Mumbai and depart**

TOUR ROUTE MAP…



THE TOUR IN DETAIL…

Day 1: Arrival in New Delhi. On arrival in India's bustling capital city of New Delhi, we will transfer to our accommodations within the city limits. With remaining daylight, we should encounter our first Black Kites, flocks of screaming Rose-ringed Parakeets, Spotted and Eurasian Collared Doves, Pied, Bank and Common Mynas, Eastern Jungle and House Crows, Red-vented Bulbuls and Eurasian Tree Sparrows. Today is set aside as an arrival day, and we will all gather at dinner for an orientation talk introducing you to the awaiting splendours of this wonderful tour.



Blackbuck by Rich Lindie

Day 2: New Delhi to Tal Chappar. This morning we head west into the vast grasslands and deserts of the state of Rajasthan. The majority of the day will be dedicated to travel with birding stops en route. We can expect to find our first Indian Peafowls, Indian Rollers and perhaps Red-naped Ibis. We will arrive in the Tal Chappar area for some initial explorations of the grasslands and thorn scrub forest.

Day 3: Tal Chappar. We have a full day birding the Tal Chappar area. The extensive grasslands that once covered this part of India are now reduced to a few protected fragments and this is one of them. The majestic Blackbuck occurs in large numbers in the grasslands here, and its presence is the reason for the protection of this area. We will enjoy watching these superb antelope! In addition to Blackbuck, we may also find Indian and 'Desert' Red Fox, Indian Grey Mongoose and Indian Hare.

The plains support large numbers of both Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, Steppe Eagle and Laggar Falcon. Demoiselle and Common Crane can sometimes be found in large flocks here, whilst Black Francolin pronounce their territories from exposed perches.

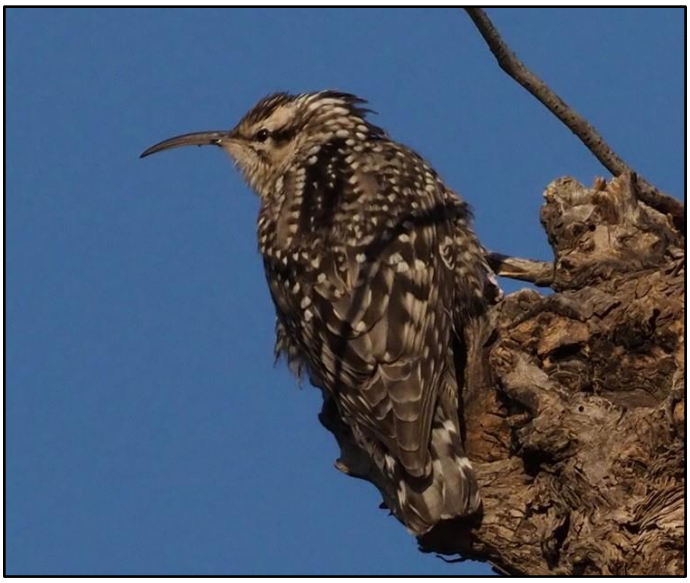


Great Indian Bustard by Rich Lindie

Birding the surrounding thorny forest will be an equally important aspect of our time here. The prime target for us in this habitat is the wonderful Indian Spotted Creeper. Other specialties to be on the watch for in this habitat include Rock Bush Quail, Rufous-fronted Prinia, Eastern Orphean Warbler, White-capped Bunting and with luck White-bellied Minivet.

More widespread species we may find include Spotted Owlet, Indian Roller, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Black-rumped Flameback, Bay-

backed and Great Grey Shrikes, Small Minivet and Indian Silverbill. We may check an area or two for roosting Indian Eagle Owl as well.



Indian Spotted Creeper by Stephan Lorenz

Day 4: Tal Chappar to Jaisalmer via Bikaner and Khichan. Today we will travel to Jaisalmer with a couple of very important stops en route. With an early start, we will first check in at Bikaner. Here at a rather unpromising looking rubbish tip that is optimistically called the Jorbeer Conservation Reserve, there is a gathering of Yellow-eyed Pigeons every winter. A once abundant species, it has now become quite rare, but this site supports a large wintering population that come down each year from the Asian steppes. Immense numbers of Steppe Eagle are also typical here, and we will search through them for rarer eagles and vultures including Tawny and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Eurasian Griffon and Cinereous and Egyptian Vultures.

Our next stop will be at the famous Demoiselle Crane congregation in Keechan. These wintering cranes, which gather here in their thousands, are attracted to food put out by a local voluntary organisation. The sheer spectacle of watching and hearing several thousand of these special birds coming in to feed is an unforgettable sight that will certainly be one of our major tour highlights! Other birds that can be found in the semi-desert scrub here include the near endemic Brown Rock Chat, Greater Short-toed Lark, Variable Wheatear and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. After a long, but rewarding day, we will arrive at our accommodation in Jaisalmer in the evening.

Days 5 & 6: Desert National Park. The city of Jaisalmer is the perfect base from which to visit the Desert National Park and explore the surrounding Thar Desert, and we have two full days set aside to make the most of this area.



Sociable Lapwing by Rich Lindie

Great Indian Bustard is the flagship species of the area. Once widespread through India's grasslands, this majestic bird has declined precipitously and is now on the verge of extinction - with possibly less than 100 left. It is thought to be breeding at only two small fenced and protected grassland reserves, and we will be scouring one during our time here in the Thar Desert. Chances remain high to see the bustard at this site. Another highly endangered bird present here is the White-browed (Stoliczka's) Bush Chat, which is typically associated with scattered bush and fallow fields in dry, open areas. The region is fairly good country for

raptors and we should encounter Pallid Harrier, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Tawny Eagle and Laggar Falcon, while three Critically Endangered vulture species still occur here: Indian, White-rumped and Red-headed.



Red-headed Vulture by Markus Lilje

Other species associated with the semi-desert scrub include Cream-colored Courser, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Greater Short-toed and Bimaculated Larks, White-eared Bulbul, Graceful Prinia, Asian Desert Warbler, Desert Whitethroat and Isabelline, Desert and Variable Wheatears. Some nearby rocky areas have Striolated Bunting, Desert Lark, Red-tailed Wheatear and Indian Eagle Owl. A few mammals still persist in this area, including Indian Gazelle, Nilgai and Indian Desert Gerbil.

Day 7: Jaisalmer to Mt Abu. Depending on our success thus far, we may have time for a final bit of morning birding around Jaisalmer before we will continue onwards to Mt Abu. This isolated mountain rises up to 1,722 meters above sea level, and our afternoon arrival here in the cooler air and verdant greenery should be a nice change from the hot desert below.

We will spend this afternoon searching for our prime target, Green Avadavat. This is one of the few known sites for this threatened finch, and it is quite common in the area! In addition, a host of other interesting birds are possible here including Red Spurfowl, White-bellied Drongo, Indian Black-lored Tit, Indian Scimitar Babbler and Crested Bunting.

Day 8: Mt Abu to Zainabad. We will have another morning's birding around Mt Abu before driving back into the lowlands. Whilst primarily a travel day, we will make various stops en route, keeping our eyes open for Sarus Crane, Painted Stork and Black-headed Ibis amongst others. We will end our day in Zainabad, our base from which to explore the Little Rann of Kutch.



Green Avadavat by Stephan Lorenz

Day 9: Little Rann of Kutch. We have the entire day to explore this fabulous area. The Little Rann of Kutch is a strangely austere, barren-looking land, a wilderness of vast salt-flats and seemingly little else. Yet such a view is deceiving as the Rann is astonishingly rich in wildlife, especially if there has been a good monsoon season in the previous months, since this ensures that several waterbodies in the area will be sufficiently full to support huge numbers of water birds.

These include Lesser and Greater Flamingos, and Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans. To boot, we can also expect a good assemblage of raptors, as well as a very interesting selection of species well adapted to life in a semi-arid environment, including many fine-looking wheatears and larks. At this time of year there can also be staggering numbers of Demoiselle Cranes, and on a past tour, we recorded in excess of 18 000 of these graceful and beautiful birds – surely one of the greatest concentrations of this species anywhere on earth! In addition, this is the last home of the Indian Wild Ass, and we will almost certainly see this endangered mammal during our time here.



Grey Hypocolius by Forrest Rowland

We will begin our explorations at the Rann's wetlands and open expanses where we look for Sarus and Common Cranes, Painted, Black and Woolly-necked Storks, Asian Openbill, large numbers of duck species, Black-headed Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, White-tailed, Yellow-wattled and possibly the rare Sociable Lapwing, Indian Courser and huge numbers of a great variety of shorebirds. The Rann is also an excellent place for raptors and some of the species we might encounter include Common and White-eyed Buzzards, Steppe, Greater Spotted and Booted Eagles, while Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse is also possible.

We will make a special effort to locate the rather shy Macqueen's Bustard that winters here, and have chances for a good number of larks in this dry area, including endemic Sykes's, Rufous-tailed, Greater Short-toed and Crested Larks along with Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark. The most interesting of the larks here, however, is the exceptional Greater Hoopoe-Lark which breeds in the most barren-looking of the salt flats. We will also go on a night drive in search of the localized Syke's Nightjar, which occurs here alongside Indian Nightjar. Seeing overwintering Pallid Scops Owl will likely not require any nocturnal searching as our local guide should know of a day-roosting bird!



Sykes's Nightjar by Rich Lindie

The Khur, or Indian Wild Ass is definitely the most highly prized mammal in this region, where they are often seen singly or in small herds, on or near the Rann itself. Other mammals that are also present include Nilgai, Indian Gazelle and Small Indian Mongoose, while rarer possibilities include Golden Jackal, Indian and the 'Desert' Red Fox, Striped Hyena, Grey Wolf, Jungle Cat and Wild Cat.

Day 10: Little Rann of Kutch to Bhuj. Today we have the morning to explore the Little Rann once again for any of the numerous specials that we may have missed the previous day or still

require better views of. After lunch, we will then depart on the long drive to Bhuj, where we will arrive in the early evening.



White-eyed Buzzard by Glen Valentine

Days 11 & 12: Bhuj and Great Rann of Kutch surroundings. The Great Rann of Kutch, located north of the town of Bhuj, has many birding treasures, and over the next two days, we will visit various sites in the area, targeting some of the region's most highly localised and sought-after species.
The Great Rann is a harsh landscape comprised of seemingly endless semi-desert, vast grasslands, scrublands and large seasonal wetlands that, as with the Little Rann, require good monsoon rains.

Some of the birding sites that we will visit over the next two days may include the Chari Dhand, a large depression that fills with monsoon rains, the Banni Grasslands, Fulay and Mata No Madh. Probably the most sought-after bird of this area is the tough-to-find Grey Hypocolius. This species is placed in its own monotypic family and is one of the most highly prized birds in this region. We will visit scrub jungle habitat near the town of Fulay, where they are often found feeding on the berries of their favoured *Salvadora persica* or Toothbrush Tree.

At a nearby site, Mata No Madh, we will target the rare and localised White-naped Tit, an Indian endemic that is rather infrequently recorded, as well as Marshall's Iora. The Banni Grasslands offer us our best chance of seeing the now endangered Sociable Lapwing, along with wintering flocks of Common Crane and sometimes Spotted Sandgrouse can be present. If the Chari Dhand is full of water then the area can be literally teeming with birds. Many species of waterfowl are then present together with large numbers of raptors. We also have opportunities to see a wide range of other species and perhaps even catch up on something that we may have missed; possibilities include Rock Bush Quail, Painted Sandgrouse, Sirkeer Malkoha, Syke's Lark, White-bellied Minivet, Grey-necked Bunting and Jungle Prinia. We should also have time for a visit to the Gulf of Kutch, where the unique Crab-Plover is possible amongst many other species of shorebird, gull and tern which has sometimes hold Slender-billed and Pallas' Gull and Terek Sandpiper.



Syke's Lark by Stephan Lorenz

Day 13: Final Departure. The tour will end after breakfast this morning. For those continuing onto the short extension, we shall take a flight to Mumbai.

Forest Owlet Extension



Forest Owlet by Yuvraj Patil

The main purpose of this short extension is to visit Tansa Forest where we shall search for the recently rediscovered Forest Owlet. Long feared extinct, it was rediscovered in 1997 and has since been found in a handful of areas of central India. It was very recently found in this forest, which now offers the most accessible viewing of this species. In addition to this fascinating diurnal owl, we can look for a few other specialties which may include the very localized Vigor's Sunbird, along with possibilities for Malabar Trogon, Mottled Wood Owl and Jerdon's Leafbird amongst many others in this lush deciduous forest.



Vigor's Sunbird by Markus Lilje

Day 1: Arrival in Mumbai. Today we will travel to the coastal city of Mumbai**, o**ne of India's largest cities and the most important city in the large state of Maharashtra. Today is set aside as an arrival day, and we will all gather at dinner this evening for a short orientation talk and meet any new arrivals.

Day 2: Mumbai to Tansa Forest. This morning we will drive inland to Tansa Forest reserve which protects a large tract of dry deciduous woodland. This virtually unknown forest reserve has very recently sprung to prominence as THE place see Forest Owlet. Originally collected in 1873, it was not seen again after



Malabar Parakeet by Adam Riley

1884, and thought extinct. It was dramatically rediscovered in 1997, and has since been found in a handful of suitably protected reserves. It was only discovered here in Tansa Forest as recently as 2014! With a strong population (counted at 42 individuals), our chances of a sighting are excellent. This diurnal owl is a lizard hunter and we are hoping to get great views as we search for it today.

Day 3: Tansa Forest. We have the full day to bird Tansa Forest. Of course, we will continue to search for Forest Owlet in the unlikely event that we missed it on the previous day, or desire better views. Aside from the owlet, there are a whole host of other interesting species to look for in this excellent forest, chief amongst them, the recently split and very localised Vigor's Sunbird. An excellent support cast may include Jungle Bush Quail, Red Spurfowl, White-eyed Buzzard, Ultramarine and Tickell's Blue Flycatchers, Jerdon's and Golden-fronted Leafbirds, Malabar Parakeet, Malabar Trogon, Indian Golden and Black-hooded Oriole, Indian Paradise Flycatcher and Tawny-bellied Babbler.

In the evening, our nocturnal sessions will be targeted at Mottled Wood Owl, Jungle Owlet, Indian Scops Owl and a trio of nightjars covering Indian, Jungle and Savanna.

Day 4: Tansa Forest to Mumbai and departures. This morning we depart Tansa Forest and make our way back to Mumbai, where the tour will conclude.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:

Tour dates, prices, single supplement rates, approximate flight costs and spaces available for this tour are displayed on our website. Please see under IMPORTANT NOTES below.

This includes:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 13 of the main tour, and from dinner on day 1 to breakfast of day 4 on the Forest Owlet Extension;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings during the tour;
- All ground transportation;
- All national park and other reserve entrance fees; and
- All guiding services (including tips for local guides and services).

This excludes:

- **ANY flights**, including the domestic flights mentioned in the itinerary;
- Visa fees;
- Any drinks;
- Special gratuities; and
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

a) Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is however fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing (usually 4 months before the tour.) The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates, which are also quoted in the respective fixed currency.

b) Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration a small party supplement will have to be charged.

c) Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.

d) Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader/s at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If, therefore, you feel that he/they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them.

Please note:

- It is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20kg (44lb) for check in luggage and 8kg (+-18lb) for hand luggage.

- Fitness: This Western India tour does not require a high level of fitness, but participants should be in good general health as some of the birding will be done on foot, and may require walking for several hours at a time. Should you have any physical limitations or medical conditions, please notify us in advance of departure. Please be aware that for much of this tour you will be in remote areas well away from modern medical facilities.
- Since many of the birding sites are very far apart, a lot of time is spent driving on this tour. Due to the much lower population density here than in the rest of India, we are, however, able to cover greater distances in less time.

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE DETAILS:

These tours **do not** include **ANY** airfares. The main tour will begin in New Delhi on day 1, and as this is scheduled as an arrival day; you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude after breakfast at Bhuj Airport on day 13.

The extension tour will begin on the morning of day 1 (day 13 of the main tour) with a flight from Bhuj to Mumbai, followed by a transfer to Tansa Forest. The tour will conclude at Mumbai International Airport around midday of day 4 after a transfer from Tansa Forest.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your **Tour Confirmation** package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

FLIGHTS:

Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi (IATA: DEL) is the main port of entry for international flights into India for this tour and is well serviced by many of the world's major airlines, whereas Bhuj Airport (IATA: BHJ) is the main port of exit. **Please DO NOT book any flights until you have consulted the Rockjumper office for confirmation on the status of the tour.**