India - Western

Desert Specials

Forest Owlet Extension



Great Indian Bustard by Rob Williams

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 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 and Marshall's Iora. 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 several 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 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.

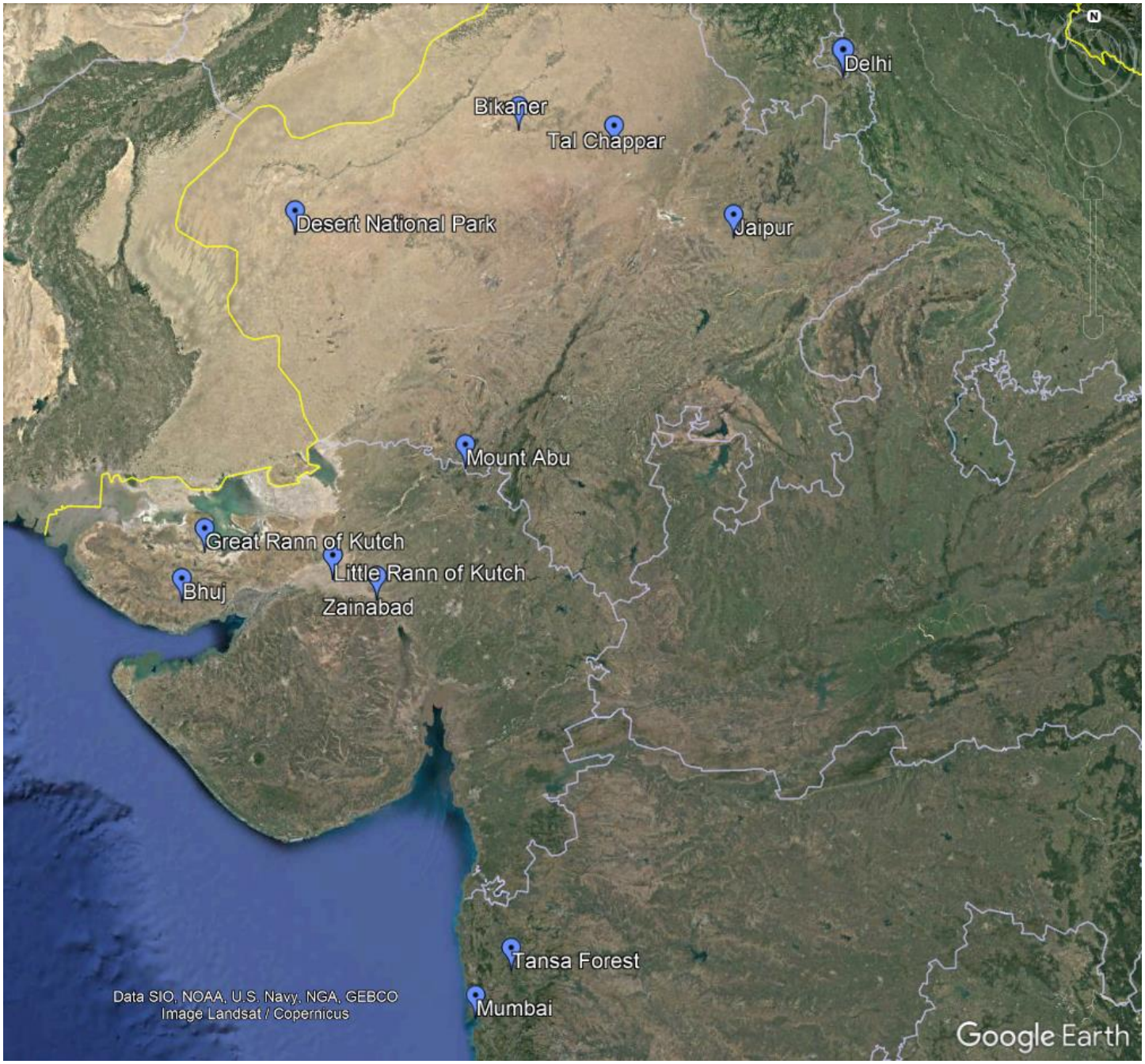
Itinerary & Map

Desert Specials

Day 1	**Arrival in New Delhi**
Day 2	**Train from New Delhi to Jaipur, transfer to Tal Chappar**
Day 3	**Tal Chappar**
Day 4	**Tal Chappar to Jaisalmer via Bikaner & 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 & Great Rann of Kutch area**
Day 13	**Bhuj to New Delhi & final departure**

Forest Owlet Extension

Day 1	**Arrival in Mumbai**
Day 2	**Mumbai to Tansa Forest**
Day 3	**Tansa Forest**
Day 4	**Tans Forest to Mumbai & final departure**


Delhi
Bikaner
Tal Chappar
Desert National Park
Jaipur
Mount Abu
Great Rann of Kutch
Little Rann of Kutch
Bhuj
Zainabad
Tansa Forest
Mumbai
Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO
Image Landsat / Copernicus
Google Earth

Birding sites in detail



Indian Spotted Creeper by Stephan Lorenz

New Delhi to Tal Chappar. This is mostly a travel day as we first take a train from New Delhi to Jaipur before a road transfer to Tal Chappar. Our route takes us through the vast grasslands and deserts of the state of Rajasthan. Time permitting, we'll make a few short birding stops en route, where likely species may include our first Indian Peafowls, Indian Rollers and perhaps Red-naped Ibis.

Tal Chappar. The extensive grasslands that once covered this part of India are now reduced to a few protected fragments and this is one of them. Here, the majestic Blackbuck occurs in large numbers, and its presence is the reason for the protection of this area. 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, Greater Spotted, Eastern Imperial and Steppe Eagles and Laggar Falcon. Demoiselle and Common Crane can sometimes be found in large flocks, whilst Black Francolin pronounce their territories from exposed perches.

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, Hume's Lark, 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.



Blackbuck by Adam Walleyn



Green Avadavat by Rob Williams

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 raptors may include hundreds of Egyptian Vultures and Eurasian Griffons, Steppe Eagles, Himalayan Vultures, Tawny Eagle, Black (Cinereous) Vulture, Black Kite and Eastern Imperial Eagle. The area may also hold impressive flocks of Rosy Starling.

Keechan. This is a famous Demoiselle Crane congregation site where these wintering cranes gather in their thousands, attracted to food put out by a local voluntary organisation. The sheer spectacle of watching and hearing several thousand of these special birds coming into 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.

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. 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 of these areas during our time 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 good country for raptors, and



Demoiselle Crane by Rob Williams



Red-headed Vulture by Rob Williams

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.

Other species associated with the semi-desert scrub include Cream-colored Courser, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Ashy-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 persist in this area, including Indian Gazelle, Nilgai and Indian Desert Gerbil.

Mount Abu. This isolated mountain rises to 1 722 meters above sea level, and the cooler air and verdant greenery should be a nice change from the hot desert below. We will spend our time searching for the prime target here, 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 White-capped and Crested Buntings, Indian Blackbird, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Indian Black-lored Tit, White-bellied Drongo and many Plum-headed Parakeets.

Mount Abu to Zainabad. 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. Time permitting, we'll take a night drive to the edge of the salt pans to search for both Sykes's and Indian Nightjars as well as Jungle Cat and Golden Wolf.



Crab Plovers by Rob Williams



Grey Hypocolius by Forrest Rowland

Little Rann of Kutch. 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 both 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 more than 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.

We will begin our explorations at the Rann's wetlands and open expanses where we look for Common Crane (Sarus Crane is a rare possibility but has not been seen for several years), Painted, Black and Asian 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, 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 in some seasons (the species only occurs in dry years, during wet years the bird is completely absent).

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!

The Khur, or Indian Wild Ass is the most highly prized mammal in this region, where they are often seen singly



Sykes's Lark by Rob Williams



Sykes's Nightjar by Rob Williams

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 Indian and the 'Desert' Red Fox, Golden and Grey Wolves, Jungle and Wild Cats and Striped Hyena.

Great Rann of Kutch. Located north of the town of Bhuj, the Great Raan of Kutch has some of the region's most highly localised and sought-after species. This is a harsh landscape comprised of seemingly endless semi-desert, vast grasslands, scrublands, and large seasonal wetlands that, as with the Little Rann of Kutch, it requires good monsoon rains to be productive.

Some of the birding sites that we will visit include the Chari Dhand, a large depression that fills with monsoon rains, the Banni Grasslands, Fulay and Mata No Madh. Perhaps the most sought-after bird of this area is the tough-to-find, monotypic Grey Hypocolius. 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. The area is likely to host many larks including Rufous-tailed, Crested (*chendoola* subspecies), Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, and Greater Short-toed Larks (*artemisiana* subspecies)

If the Chari Dhand is full of water, then the area can teem 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 may 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' Gulls and Terek Sandpiper.



White-naped Tit by Stuart Elsom



Forest Owlet by Rob Williams

Tansa Forest Reserve. The Tansa Forest Reserve 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 1884 and thought extinct. It was dramatically rediscovered in 1997 and has since been found in a handful of suitably protected reserves. Indeed, it was only discovered 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.

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.

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Moderate. Long travel days, many target species.
Birding Ease		Moderate to easy. Most species provide good visuals in open conditions but may require repeat attempts. Target driven tour with long days.
Accommodation		Variable. Comfortable in larger towns to basic at some sites.
Walking / Trails		Mostly roadside, vehicle-based birding with shorter walks.
Vehicles / Roads		Reasonable quality surfaced roads in most areas, unsurfaced gravel roads in others. Travel by bus & 4x4 jeep, 1 train journey.
Photography		Good to very good in open conditions, lighting can be difficult. No dedicated hides.
Annoyances		Variable temperatures from very cold to warm. Early starts, long travel days.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 13 of the Western – Desert Specials tour;
- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 4 of the Forest Owlet extension;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;
- 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.

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 you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is 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. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour-related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short notice due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original programme as possible.**

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

- Most vehicles do not have onboard heating and can thus be rather cold.
- Open jeep drives into desert areas (i.e., Desert National Park, Rann of Kutch area) take place in the early morning when it is cold to very cold. Depending on local weather conditions, temperatures close to, or below 0°C can be experienced. Do ensure you have sufficient warm clothing for this tour (beanie, scarf, gloves are very useful).
- Western toilet facilities are scarce to non-existent.

Arrival and Departure Details

The main tour begins with an arrival day in New Delhi on day 1, and you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude after a morning flight from Bhuj to New Delhi on day 13.

The extension will begin on day 1 (day 13 of the main tour) after a flight from New Delhi to Mumbai (or Bhuj to Mumbai if the route is available), followed by a transfer to Tansa Forest. The tour will conclude in Mumbai at approximately midday of day 4.

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.

Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi (IATA: DEL) is the main port of entry and departure for international flights into India. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (IATA: BOM), Mumbai is the main port of entry and departure for the extension.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.