

Gujarat

A TASTE OF AFRICA



India is a vast, sprawling country, teeming with people, but it also supports more than 1 200 bird species. Most birders visiting India for the first time do a northern loop, centred on Bharatpur and the Himalayan foothills (see Nick Garbutt's article in volume 9, number 4). While this offers a good cross-section of Indian birds, as well as the chance to chase tigers, African birders might consider cutting their teeth in the state of Gujarat, which has more in common with this continent than the rest of India. **Peter Ryan** reports on some of the region's birding attractions. ▶

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Birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat lies north of Mumbai on India's north-west coast. At some 196 000 square kilometres, it is half the size of Zimbabwe, yet comprises only five per cent of India's land area. It offers a wide range of habitats, from verdant woodland in the southern hill country, where the annual rainfall exceeds 2 000 millimetres, through the dry woodlands of Gir National Park, to the Banni grasslands and saltplains of the Great Rann of Kutch on the Pakistan border. Incorporating almost a third of India's coastline, Gujarat has a wealth of mangroves, reefs and mudflats, and there are some 2 000 square kilometres of freshwater wetlands, so waterbirds are well represented. The state boasts a bird list of more than 500 species, including several that are hard to find anywhere else.

THE JAINIST TRADITION OF *JIV DAYA* IS SIMILAR TO THAT OF *UBUNTU*, BUT EXTENDS TO WILDLIFE AS WELL AS PEOPLE ... AND GUJARATIS TAKE PLEASURE IN SHARING THEIR LAND WITH THOUSANDS OF MIGRANT BIRDS

Like most of India, Gujarat is densely populated. Ahmedabad, the largest city, is home to seven million people and the state as a whole supports around 50 million. They seldom eat meat or fish, so there is little evidence of hunting. As a result, many birds are remarkably habituated, allowing exceptional opportunities

for viewing and photography. Indeed, I frequently found myself comparing it to Ethiopia in this regard. The Jainist tradition of *jiv daya* is similar to that of *ubuntu*, but extends to wildlife as well as people. Birds and other wildlife are part of local culture, and Gujaratis take pleasure in sharing their land with thousands of migrant birds. I enjoyed watching a large flock of birds feed on a seed crop while the farmer stood by, waiting to harvest. Migrant Black-headed and Red-headed buntings were common, as were House Sparrows from Tibet and a smattering of Common Rosefinches.

Much of the flat ground is cultivated, but these fields still support many birds, including vast flocks of Rosy Starlings, while Rose-ringed Parakeets, Little Green Bee-eaters, White-breasted Kingfishers and Common Peafowl add splashes of colour. There is plenty of good birding close to Ahmedabad. Thol Lake Bird Sanctuary has a few Bar-headed Geese among the large numbers of Greylag Geese, and a nearby dump for dead livestock is worth checking for some of India's few remaining vultures. Egyptian Vultures are quite common, but the larger vultures are very rare. Only two White-rumped Vultures were present when I visited, although other species turn up from time to time. The unprecedented collapse of the once-vast vulture populations has seen a concomitant increase in other scavengers, particularly feral dogs, which are now estimated to number more than two million in Ahmedabad alone.



Gujarat lies on the South Asian flyway. Although a few species such as Bar-headed Geese and Demoiselle Cranes fly over the Himalayas, most migrants eschew crossing this formidable barrier. Many pass west of the mountain massif, funnelling south to Gujarat. Almost half the birds recorded regularly in the state are migrants, so winter is the best time to visit. Most of the region's parks are closed during the summer monsoon, making a visit then inadvisable, unless you are set on seeing the endangered Lesser Florican displaying in late July and August. Gujarat's grasslands are one of the species' last strongholds, although even here they are threatened by illegal trapping and habitat loss.

I visited Gujarat in November 2010 to attend the Global Bird Watchers' Conference in Jamnagar, six hours' drive west of Ahmedabad on the Gulf of Kutch. During the meeting there were several outings to Khijadiya, a remarkable 600-hectare wetland reserve just east of Jamnagar. Berms built in 1920 and extended in 1956 contain the freshwater



Above Visitors to the Global Bird Watchers' Conference bird along the dykes in Khijadiya, near Jamnagar.

Left The attractive White-browed Wagtail, endemic to the Indian subcontinent, was surprisingly scarce. We encountered it only in Gir National Park.

Opposite The Indian Black Robin, which resembles a scrub-robin, is common in a wide range of habitats.

Previous spread, left Gujarat shares many species with the Middle East and North Africa, including the golden jackal. Recent studies suggest that this canid is more closely related to the grey wolf and coyote than other jackal species.

Previous spread, right After we had waited more than two hours at a carcass dump, a striking White-rumped Vulture finally arrived to feed, only to be seen off by a crowd of House Crows. The collapse of India's vulture population ranks among the most dramatic wildlife crises ever.



GUJARAT HAS 134 SITES THAT SUSTAIN AT LEAST ONE PER CENT OF THE GLOBAL POPULATION OF ONE OR MORE WATERBIRD SPECIES, WITH NINE SITES HAVING MORE THAN 100 000 WATERBIRDS

and large flocks of wintering Common Cranes. You can drive or walk along the berms, and a series of observation towers allows good views over the area.

But even outside the reserve waterbirds are common – and confiding – on the many rivers and wetlands that dot the landscape. Painted Storks, Spot-billed Ducks and classy River Terns go about their business within metres of busy roads, blithely ignoring even pedestrian traffic. Gujarat has 134 sites that sustain at least one per cent of the global population of one or more waterbird species, with nine sites having more than 100 000 waterbirds. One of the most impressive wetlands I visited was just north of Porbandar, on the Arabian Sea coast, where thousands of Demoiselle Cranes gather to drink and roost after feeding in the adjacent agricultural lands. How long they will continue to do so remains to be seen, as a barrage of wind turbines has been erected right next to the wetland.

Tens of thousands of Demoiselle Cranes winter along the coast around Porbandar, feeding in the surrounding fields and gathering in vast flocks to roost in the coastal wetlands. Here they run the gamut of a seemingly endless line of newly erected wind generators. The impacts of the structures on the cranes haven't been assessed.

Other good species here include White-tailed Lapwing and both Saunders's and Little terns. Steppe Gulls can be studied nearby at Porbandar's old port.

Gujarat supports more than 20 per cent of India's industrial output. Just west of Jamnagar, vast oil refineries process crude oil from local wells and oil shipped in from the Arabian Gulf. The refineries stand in stark contrast to the Gulf of Kutch Marine National Park at Jamnagar, which protects a large proportion of the coast. Star attractions from a birding perspective are wintering Indian Skimmers, as well as the large numbers of Crab Plovers that forage on the tidal flats. But the area fosters a host of other coastal birds: Lesser Sand Plovers are abundant, and there are enough Greater Sand and Kentish plovers to allow easy comparison. Great Knots and Slender-billed Gulls are fairly common, and the adjacent coastal flats and pans attract many more species.

For many wildlife enthusiasts, one of the main reasons to visit Gujarat is to see the last surviving population of Asian lions. Situated inland, about four hours'



drive south-east of Porbandar, Gir National Park is an area of dry forest blanketing low, rolling hills. The lions look pretty much the same as their African cousins, but their habitat is denser and their prey quite different: axis and sambar deer, nilgai antelope and wild boar are sufficiently abundant to prevent too much conflict with humans and their livestock. Formal access to the reserve is confined to morning and evening guided game-drives, during which you are not allowed out of the vehicles (despite the fact that many locals live in the sanctuary, herding their cows and water buffaloes on foot), so it is also well worth your while to explore the woodland around Sasan town, which borders the reserve.

Although Gir doesn't have any range-restricted birds, I was lucky to see the scarce White-bellied Minivet and, with a bit of help from knowledgeable guides, I saw Mottled Wood-Owl, Indian Scops-Owl, Spotted Owllet and Indian Nightjar at their daytime roosts. Woodpeckers are common, ranging from the large and gaudy Black-rumped Flameback to the diminutive Brown-capped Woodpecker. Migrating Greenish and Hume's leaf-warblers share the canopy with Common Ioras and White-browed Fantails, while raucous parties of Jungle Babblers occupy the lower strata with Common Woodshrikes, delightful Tawny-bellied Babblers and Rufous-fronted Prinias. The local form of



Great Tit bears little resemblance to the species familiar throughout much of Europe. Overhead, Crested Treeswifts and Oriental Honey-Buzzards are common, there are still good numbers of Changeable Hawk-Eagles and there is a chance of seeing one of the few Red-headed Vultures to survive the diclofenac débâcle.

Heading north-east from Gir, another prime attraction is Velavadar National Park, home to the largest population of blackbuck. It's a long drive, but take the time to stop in the occasional ▷

Above Like many Indian birds, the large, richly coloured Rufous-tailed Lark is quite tolerant of people, allowing it to be studied at leisure.

Top India has a wealth of starlings and mynas. I particularly enjoyed the huge assemblages of Rosy Starlings, but perhaps the most striking species we saw was the Brahminy Starling, yet another subcontinent endemic.



OVERALL, GUJARAT IS AN EXCITING DESTINATION FOR AFRICAN BIRDERS. IT IS SUFFICIENTLY DIFFERENT FROM AFRICA TO MAKE FOR AN EXOTIC BIRDING EXPERIENCE, BUT HAS ENOUGH COMMON ELEMENTS TO HELP ENHANCE YOUR AFRICAN BIRDING SKILLS

The Sociable Lapwing is listed as Critically Endangered and has a global population of barely 10 000 individuals. The discovery a few years ago of a wintering flock in agricultural lands near Dasada has made Gujarat one of the most reliable places in the world to see the species.

patches of scrub along the way; I was pleased to find Painted Sandgrouse and Indian Bushlark here. Velavadar's extensive grassland and scrub is ideal for harriers, and around 3 000 congregate each evening to roost on patches of open ground. Montagu's and Pallid harriers predominate, but there are also Hen and Western Marsh-Harriers. It's an ideal place to hone your skills at separating the tricky juveniles and females of these species. Other raptors in the area include White-eyed Buzzards, Laggar Falcons and Greater Spotted Eagles.

Velavadar is also lark country, with thousands of Greater Short-toed as well as the distinctive Rufous-tailed, and Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark. Both Crested and Syke's larks occur, allowing the chance to compare them alongside one another. But pride of place goes to the 80 or so Lesser Floricans in the reserve, almost five per cent of the estimated global population. They are difficult to locate when the males are not performing their bizarre jumping display, but I came across a group of four in relatively short grass. On the mammal front, Velavadar has plenty of nilgar in

addition to the stately blackbuck, and there's a reasonable chance of seeing Indian wolf, striped hyaena and golden jackal.

The north of Gujarat is dominated by large tracts of grassland, and salt marshes (known as ranns). Seasonal flooding of the ranns during the monsoon creates ideal conditions for flamingos, and both Greater and Lesser breed regularly on the Great Rann of Kutch. Together with the nearby Banni grassland and surrounding farmland, this region is home to a suite of restricted-range birds such as Indian and Macqueen's bustards, Marshall's Iora, White-naped Tit and White-browed Bushchat. Other species that can be tricky to see elsewhere are Sociable Lapwing and the enigmatic Grey Hypocolius, related to the waxwings. One enterprising birder has set up a community nursery to grow and plant out the fruiting shrub favoured by the hypocolius in winter.

The Little Rann of Kutch, only a few hours' drive north-west of Ahmedabad, is good for Macqueen's Bustard, Asian Desert

Warbler and a range of raptors, including Imperial and Greater Spotted eagles, as well as many Short-eared Owls. Mammal watchers will enjoy the Indian wild ass and desert fox, as well as further chances of Indian wolf and wild boar. Indian Coursers are best found in recently ploughed fields in adjacent farmland, and wetlands again offer a wealth of waterbirds, including Sarus Cranes. Local knowledge helps to reveal sites for Pallid Scops-Owl and Sykes' Nightjar, and is essential to connect with a flock of the critically endangered Sociable Lapwing. For the other specials, you have to venture further to the Great Rann, which requires quite a bit more time spent driving on rather indifferent roads.

Overall, Gujarat is an exciting destination for African birders. It is sufficiently different from Africa to make for an exotic birding experience, but has enough common elements to help enhance your African birding skills. I can strongly endorse it as a great introduction to birding on the subcontinent. For bird photographers, the combination of abundant, confiding birds and mostly clear, calm winter days is unbeatable. □

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Several airlines offer flights to Mumbai or Delhi, but Emirates has flights from Dubai to Ahmedabad, which link conveniently with its direct service to Dubai from Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg.

Plan to visit between November and April, when most migrant birds are present and the summer monsoons have finished. In winter the climate is generally clear and warm during the day, cooling pleasantly at night, especially in the interior. Insects are barely a problem, and although travel clinics list the state as having malaria, you shouldn't need prophylaxis in winter provided you take reasonable precautions.

TRANSPORT

The roads range from good to mediocre, and it usually takes a fair amount of time to cover even modest distances, so don't be too ambitious when planning your itinerary. Other road users pose the greatest challenge: in towns, all manner of traffic – buses, cars, scooters, bikes, pedestrians and livestock – merges and mingles in a seemingly chaotic pattern, punctuated by endless hooting. It more or less works, despite the lack of apparent rules and regulations. By moving fairly slowly, people accommodate others in a manner akin to the way pedestrians weave through

a crowded concourse. And rather than being pushy, hooting is like saying 'Excuse me, please'. Indeed, most trucks have 'Hoot please' painted on their tailgates (not that Indian drivers require much encouragement in this regard). The roads out of towns are equally exciting, with overtaking in the face of oncoming traffic being standard practice. Even on modern freeways, don't be surprised to find a truck heading towards you in the fast lane. All of this means it is pretty much obligatory to hire a car with a driver. Having a driver also takes care of the problem that most road signs are completely unrecognisable if you only know the English name of your desired destination.

FOOD AND ACCOMMODATION

Food and accommodation are excellent value for money, provided you are happy to rough it a bit in the smaller towns and to eat the local cuisine. There are plenty of hotels in most centres, offering accommodation across the spectrum of quality and price. Gujarati food is almost exclusively vegetarian and much of it is strongly spiced. The state is alcohol free, so don't expect to celebrate a good day's birding with a cold beer.

Visit www.waders.in for more information.

