

Birdwatch **WORLD OF
BIRDS
2025**



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MEXICO**

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species in the Yucatán

INSIDE

- THE WORLD'S MOST UNIQUE BIRDS PROFILED
- MIGRATION AND ENDEMIC IN CORSICA
- EPIC WILDLIFE IN SRI LANKA
- OUR PROGRAMME OF READER TOURS

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A warm welcome to *World of Birds 2025*. This digital magazine offers plenty of inspiration to help you plan your birding adventures for 2025, whether it's a relaxed family trip, an intensive tour in the field or anything in between.

When it comes to a more chilled-out holiday, then you could do far worse than take a trip to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula (pages 14-16) or Corsica (pages 10-12). Both of these destinations are straightforward to visit and travel around, offer plenty of activities for non-birding family and have stacks of quality birds, including some wonderful endemics – something I can testify myself having visited both destinations in recent years.

You can also take inspiration from Josh Jones's epic trip to Sri Lanka (pages 5-8) – another destination that can be enjoyed at a slower, non-intensive pace, while still offering a suite of endemics and some fantastic mammals to boot. As a wild-cat enthusiast, it's safe to say I was rather jealous of his amazing Fishing Cat sighting (and of course his splendid views of Leopard).

If there's one man who knows a thing or two about the world's bird families then it's Keith Betton. Those monotypic families, which contain only a single species, include some of the most spectacular birds on Earth, including Shoebill, Hammerkop, Sunbittern and Secretarybird, as Keith describes here.

Of course, sometimes it's easier to have the logistics of a birding holiday organised for you. If that's the case, check out the array of trips we have lined up as part of our World of Birds Holidays programme. These offer super birding at great prices, so take a look at the tours planned and make sure to check www.birdguides.com for any announcements regarding further excursions.

Ed Stubbs

Birdwatch

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Cover: Turquoise-browed Motmot by Glenn Bartley (agami.nl).

Above: Red-backed Flameback in Sri Lanka by Josh Jones.



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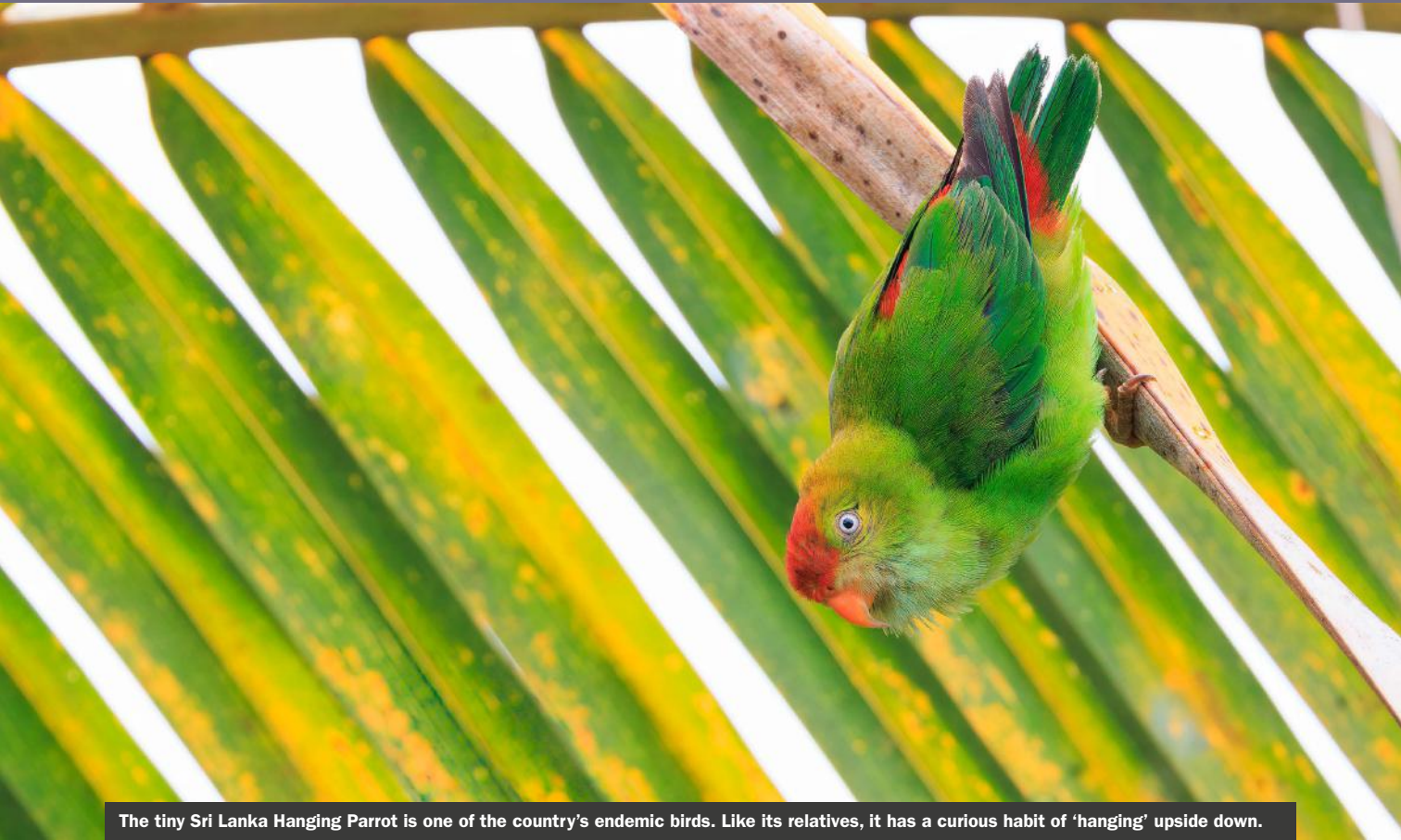
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The tiny Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot is one of the country's endemic birds. Like its relatives, it has a curious habit of 'hanging' upside down.

Birding holidays are so often intensive trips which are laser-focused on securing a set of key targets and amassing as large a species list as possible – but it doesn't always have to be that way!

In recent years, I have found that my most fulfilling holidays have combined quality time with loved ones alongside a fix of wildlife. If a destination offers fascinating history and culture, good food, a nice beach on which to relax and an appealing set of endemic birds to mop up on, that would be the ideal. The issue is that there aren't a huge number of places in the world where this balance can be perfectly struck.

I suspect that many readers will be like me in that they find it hard to leave a place having not seen as much as of its unique birdlife as possible (and ideally all of it). Therefore, a holiday that combines birding and relaxing needs to be somewhere with plenty of avian interest – yet not too much that it ends up taking over!

Step forward Sri Lanka. With a healthy total of about 34 endemic birds (depending on your taxonomic preference), most of which are fairly easy to see if you visit the right places, this beautiful island off the southern tip of India certainly packs a punch on the birding side. Then there's

Spirit of Ceylon

If you're looking for a holiday which offers a mix of birding and relaxing with a healthy dose of culture on the side then look no further than Sri Lanka, suggests *Josh Jones*.

everything else to consider about this wonderful country: brilliant wildlife, great weather, stunning beaches, rich cultural history, delicious food, an established tourist route with plenty of great hotels and a pleasing affordability – what's not to love?

All-round destination

I visited the country with my partner for a fortnight in March 2024. This is generally considered to be towards the end of the peak birding season, with most trips taking place between November and April. The weather starts to get wetter at this time, although it is unlikely that any visit will pass without the odd wet day – this is the tropics, after all.

Our private tour was to take in several of the prime birding locations and was intermixed with 'non-birding' days where we'd take in some of the top cultural sights, with the

final few days of the trip designed for some downtime on the south coast at Mirissa in order to ensure that we headed home feeling relaxed.

What quickly becomes apparent on arrival in Sri Lanka is that birds are everywhere. Much like in India, a history lacking in wildlife persecution means that many species live in harmony with humans and give great views. This makes it a brilliant destination for the photographer – be prepared to fill plenty of memory cards. Shortly after leaving the airport with our guide, we were soon taking in roadside paddyfields filled with waterbirds as well as our first endemics of the trip, including Sri Lanka Swallow.

Ancient fortress

Our first destination was Sigiriya, a spectacular rock fortress that is one of the key stops on the backpackers'

trail. We arrived after sunset, but waking up to see this extraordinary spot from our nearby hotel as the sun rose was truly special – as were the views a few hours later after we walked to the top.

Despite legions of tourists in this area, there are plenty of birds to enjoy in the surrounding scrubby habitat and at the ‘tanks’ – the latter being a term used across the country to describe the reservoirs that form part of an ancient irrigation system. Even in the hotel gardens, endemics were possible – we’d soon scored the likes of Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Crimson-fronted Barbet and Brown-capped Babbler, while wintering birds still hanging on included Indian Pitta and Orange-headed Thrush.

The birds were great, but far from the only highlights. Tantalisingly, at dawn on our second morning, I found out that a group of Asian Elephants had passed the hotel just a few hours before. But later that day, a visit to the nearby Hurulu Eco Park produced some wonderful views of many of these impressive beasts at point-blank range in stunning evening light with no one else around – it was one of the most peaceful and memorable periods of the fortnight. Another standout moment came once darkness had fallen, with a ‘night safari’ producing walk-away views of Fishing Cat. This elusive feline is rather tricky to catch up with across its range, but a few spots in Sri Lanka give a good chance of connecting.

To the highlands

The next leg saw us head to the picturesque city of Kandy, where White-bellied Sea Eagles and Spotted-billed Pelicans drifted around the city lake while we explored the adjacent temples, before we ascended further into the tea-growing region and to the city of Nuwara Eliya. Here, a whole host of interesting birds can be found – including in the suburban setting of Victoria Park, where wintering Kashmir Flycatcher and Pied Thrush gave excellent views alongside further endemics such as Sri Lanka White-eye.

From a birder’s perspective, a visit to this area is essential to connect with one of the country’s rarest endemics – Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush. An early morning visit to Horton Plains NP saw us secure great

ALL IMAGES BY JOSH JONES



As well as boasting plenty of endemics, Sri Lanka attracts wintering species from further north. Among them is the stunning Indian Pitta, which can give great views with patience.



Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush is one of the more range-restricted endemics, being found almost exclusively at higher elevations. This fine male was seen at Horton Plains NP.

views of this secretive bird, plus other tricky targets including Sri Lanka Thrush, Sri Lanka Bush Warbler and the harshly named Dull-blue Flycatcher, as well as a spectacular sunrise on the way up.

Many visitors to Sri Lanka opt to spend more time in this region, taking in some of the many tea plantations and the train ride to nearby Ella, which is said to be one of the most scenic routes in the world. However, we’d opted for more time by the beach at the end of the trip, so we were soon on our way towards our next key destination – the world-famous Sinharaja Forest Reserve, our base for the next two nights.

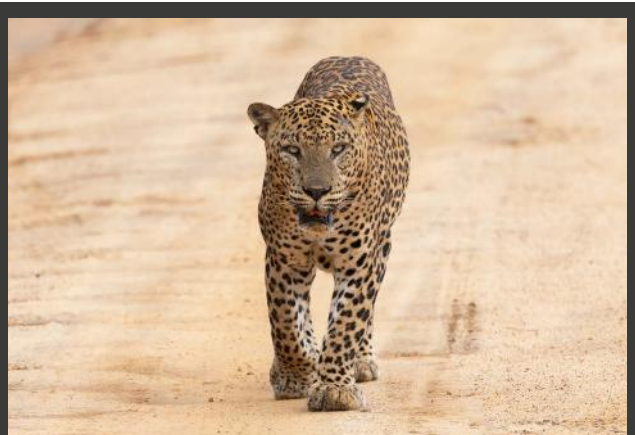
Fantastic forest

Sinharaja is a sultry, sweaty place that offers terrific birding. In terms of endemics, this is the place to come – the great majority of Sri Lanka’s

unique birds can be found within walking distance of the village. The most enigmatic of all is Serendib Scops Owl – a small, gingery owl that was only formally described as recently as 2004. This is perhaps the top target for birders visiting Sri Lanka and I was nervous to learn that a regular roost had been vacated in the days leading up to our visit. Fortunately, the bird had been relocated on the morning of our arrival – the problem was that as we got ready to go and see it, the heavens opened. Having heard my colleague Ian Lycett’s nightmare story of how thunderstorms had caused him to dip this special bird, I was very jumpy. However, there was nothing to worry about, and once the rain had eased off, we slipped and slid down a steep slope to peer into a bamboo thicket, where two admittedly rather bedraggled



Described as a species new to science as recently as 2004, Serendib Scops Owl is a major target for birders visiting Sri Lanka. It is found only in the country's southern rainforests and is currently listed as Endangered by IUCN. This soggy individual was one of a pair enjoyed after a massive thunderstorm at Sinharaja one afternoon.



Sri Lanka offers excellent mammal-watching opportunities. The author was treated to superb views of Asian Elephant (left) and one of the country's most desirable species, Leopard (right), which he encountered at the world-famous Yala NP.

Serendib Scops Owls were staring back at us. Phew!

A full day's birding at Sinharaja produced all the remaining endemics, although ironically it was arguably Sri Lanka's most famous and recognisable avian resident – Sri Lanka Blue Magpie – that was the last to fall. By the end of the day, incredible views of most had been enjoyed, with Green-billed Coucal, Red-faced Malkoha, Chestnut-backed Owlet and White-faced Starling among the scarcer species to give themselves up. In addition to this, we had extraordinary views of a nesting

Black-naped Monarch by one of the tracks and also encountered the shy endemic Purple-faced Langur. I must say at this point that I was very glad to have put my leech socks on!

Game drives

The town of Tissamaharama ('Tissa') is well known among tourists as it is used as a base for exploring the world-famous Yala NP and adjacent parks, and we spent three nights here in the very pleasant Kithala Resort. Overlooking a picturesque area of paddies, birds seen from the balcony included Stork-billed Kingfisher,

White-winged Tern and Oriental Turtle Dove, the last surprisingly being a national rarity.

Yala is considered among the most reliable places on Earth to connect with Leopard. While there's a high chance of seeing this impressive cat, be prepared to grit your teeth – it gets extremely busy with tourists and there can be queues of jeeps when a Leopard is sighted. This happened to be the case on our day, although we were extremely lucky to come face to face with one – 'Lucas', a well-known alpha male – shortly after a lunch break. It was an experience I'll



The beautiful Orange-breasted Green Pigeon is found across tropical Asia south of the Himalaya. As with other green pigeons, it feeds mainly on small fruit. It is widespread and relatively easy to see in Sri Lanka, sometimes alongside the endemic Sri Lanka Green Pigeon.

never forget as he ambled down the track towards our truck, offering some brilliant photo opportunities.

We also saw several Asian Elephants during our day in Yala, while the final bird day-list was an incredible 126 species – all seen from the jeep! There were far too many highlights to list them all, but a tree full of Malabar Pied Hornbills, an Indian Nightjar sheltering her young and the intense hues of Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters certainly stood out. It was a shame to narrowly miss a Sloth Bear, though!

If you'd prefer to avoid the crowds, you could visit one of the nearby parks, such as Lunugamvehera. Here, there is still a good chance of seeing Leopard (we saw fresh footprints), and the chances are that you'll get to enjoy the encounter on your own if you come across one. This is also a brilliant park for birding – we notched up 88 species in a morning.

While you're in Tissa, you can't afford to miss the Indian Flying-Foxes leaving their day roost by the main tank at dusk. This ranks as one of the most astonishing wildlife spectacles I have ever seen. As the light ebbs away, millions of these huge bats take to the air, drink at the lake and then disperse in all directions. It is utterly mind-boggling to watch.

Whale of a time

The final few days of the tour were spent in Mirissa, relaxing by the beach and taking in the sights and sounds of the vibrant south coast, as well as a day trip to Galle. A fitting way to round off the trip was to take a couple of whale-watching excursions offshore, for the seas here are among the best places in the world to see Blue Whale during the winter months. Unfortunately, visiting at the end of the Blue Whale season, we missed our chance to see the planet's biggest living creature, instead having to 'make do' with the second-biggest – a superb Fin Whale – as well as plenty of entertaining pods of Spinner Dolphins and several tern species around the boat.

All too soon, our time in Sri Lanka was at an end. It had been an action-packed trip with phenomenal wildlife enjoyed along the way. A total of 225 bird species was amassed, including all 34 of the currently recognised endemics – full credit to the expertise of our guide, Susa. With brilliant views of Fishing Cat, Leopard and the ever-entertaining Asian Elephant, as well as visiting some incredible places and eating the wonderful Sri Lankan cuisine, it was a trip I'll never forget – and I couldn't recommend it highly enough as a destination. ■



Black-naped Monarch is a stunning passerine found widely across tropical Asia. This male was photographed at its nest by a trail at Sinharaja rainforest.

Further information

Josh's trip to Sri Lanka was organised by Adventure Birding: www.adventurebirding.lk. Josh was expertly guided around Sri Lanka by Susa Weerappuli of Ceylon Birdspotters: ceylonbirdspotters.com.



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Boasting a variety of habitats, from mountain peaks to sandy beaches, Corsica is a highly diverse island with wonderful scenery to boot.

The mountainous Med

Lying south-east of the French mainland and west of the Italian peninsula, Corsica is a Mediterranean island like no other. Rugged and wild, mountains comprise two-thirds of the isle, forming a single chain. Monte Cinto, the highest peak, stands at an imposing 2,706 m, while no fewer than 120 other summits reach beyond 2,000 m.

At 1,926 m, Punta Bocca dell'Oro falls just short of that threshold, but it nevertheless offers a spectacular vantage point as I satisfyingly stand at its peak following a morning climb in mid-May. The plateau in front of me holds 40 or so Alpine Chough, none of which are spooked when a Golden Eagle drifts past. A few Northern Wheatears skip around the rocky outcrop and, unfamiliar to a British birder's ears, Water Pipits are in song, tumbling out of the sky as they hold territory.

Such Alpine content doesn't necessarily feel in keeping with a holiday in the Mediterranean, but this is just one example of Corsica's

There is arguably no Mediterranean island as breathtaking as Corsica, with its jagged mountains and azure seas. The birding is excellent, too, as *Ed Stubbs* discovered during a spring visit.

diversity of habitats. I'm soon reminded of where I am when a pair of Corsican Finches fly in, uttering their subtle but distinctive light trumpeting call, to which I'd now become accustomed. This near-endemic is found only on a handful of islands in this part of the Mediterranean and is a key target for the visiting birder. Thankfully, it is relatively common and easy to see.

The hike up to Punta Bocca dell'Oro produced plenty of other birds, including the *corsicana* subspecies of Crossbill (a possible future split) and the real star of the show, Corsican Nuthatch. Endemic to Corsica, it is the only nuthatch species on the island and is found only in higher-altitude forests (especially from 1,000-1,500 m). Conveniently, forests make up

20% of Corsica, so encountering the nuthatch isn't so difficult.

We enjoyed a few different observations during our short trip, including a particularly special time watching a pair taking food into a nest hole in a dead tree at Col de Sorba, a beautiful area that is generally regarded as the best place in the world to see Corsican Nuthatch.

Spectacular scenery

That's very much the Corsican theme – great birds in spectacular settings. From the wild and rugged mountains, down winding roads to the coast, with sandy beaches, turquoise seas and areas of green peppered with wildflower colour, Corsica is always easy on the eye.

One especially beautiful location is

Belvédère de Pasciolo – a viewpoint overlooking the ruins of an old fort, which can be approached on foot. It was here that we laid eyes on our first Marmora’s Warblers, another Mediterranean-island special with a restricted breeding range. As the trip went on, it became clear than any suitable area of maquis, including random roadside stops, may yield a Marmora’s or two, some of which showed superbly.

Commoner still, and at all elevations, was Moltoni’s Warbler, a species with a similar distribution. We encountered them at all elevations and, in our wonderful accommodation in the village of Vezzani, a pair was nesting in the garden.

The garden offered brilliant birding. Common Cuckoos and Eurasian Scops Owls would often try to outcompete each other during the dusk chorus as we unwound with red wine, and the mornings would be livened up by the noisy Italian Sparrow colony and a nest-building pair of Cirl Buntings.

Away from the lazy garden birding in the foothills, however, thrilling migration takes place on Corsica’s east coast. Dunes de Prunete was only ‘discovered’ as a migration hot-spot in 2014; since 2018, organised counts have taken place every year between March and May. It is thought that, after returning from Africa and passing over Sardinia, many birds fly over Corsica’s eastern plain before heading towards mainland Italy, funnelling over the dunes as they go.

The site has quickly gained a reputation as one of Europe’s up and coming vis-mig destinations. In 2023, some 684,620 birds from 151 species (including 19 raptors) were observed. It is particularly productive for Red-footed Falcon and Pallid Harrier and, on optimum days in April, the site can be thronging with migrants.

My visit came exactly the morning after the last day of the season, and I arrived to a slumbering mass of French birders and a neat pile of beer bottles – it turned out the end-of-season party had barely finished by the time I’d arrived! Despite the peak period being ‘officially’ over there were still stacks of birds on the go, chiefly hirundines but also a detectable passage of Western Marsh Harriers. Scopoli’s and Yelkouan Shearwaters were seen offshore.

Further north along the coast lies Étang de Biguglia – Corsica’s largest

ALL IMAGES BY ED STUBBS



Formerly considered a subspecies of Citril Finch, Corsican Finch is a near-endemic found only on Corsica, Sardinia and a handful of other small islands.



The iconic Corsican Nuthatch is the main prize for birders visiting the island. It is relatively easy to encounter in higher-altitude forests between 1,000 m and 1,500m.

protected lagoon and one of the island’s premier birding destinations. I only had time for a flying visit, but I was still treated to such goodies as Audouin’s Gull, Greater Flamingo and Tawny Pipit. The farmland south of the lake is especially good for passage Red-footed Falcons and great views can often be enjoyed, though unfortunately I wasn’t able to connect with any during my visit.

Migration hot-spot

Another key coastal site – well, for some birders! – is the unsuspecting fields and oak scrub at Riva Bella, near Aghione. Here, among a curious mix of mosquitos, domestic llamas and foraging Wild Boar, one of the Western Palearctic’s greatest Category C prizes lies – California Quail.

I expected this eye-catching species to be perhaps the trickiest of all



The attractive Cirl Bunting is rather common on Corsica, often found singing along minor roads or even nesting in larger rural gardens.

my targets. It has a well-established population along the island's east coast but nowadays is hard to see. However, the relatively new stakeout at Riva Bella has been reliable in recent years and on my visit I was lucky to score four birds while in the good company of some Swedish birders. Surprisingly, a male quail even sat up in a tree for good measure.

During a short but sweet holiday, all of my main Corsican targets were seen well and with ease. I even cleaned up on all the endemic subspecies bar Eurasian Goshawk, which is not easy to connect with. Even though my visit was relatively brief, I enjoyed a fill of European goodies, from Mediterranean classics such as European Roller, Hoopoe and Spotless Starling to montane species including Blue Rock Thrush, Alpine Chough and Golden Eagle, as well as localised regional specialties such as Italian Sparrow and Mediterranean Flycatcher. Whether you're up in the mountains, staking out an endemic target, working a coastal marsh or simply sat in the garden of your accommodation, the birdlife is plentiful and there is always something to see.

This, coupled with spectacular scenery, easy birding away from crowds and in quiet locations, excellent food and typically Mediterranean weather, made it a destination that was hard to find a fault in. Indeed, the only downside was the brevity of my visit – but I made a promise to myself that I would one day return to the mountains of the Med, for there is so much more to explore in this wonderful – and perhaps somewhat underrated – European birding destination. ■



Corsica's higher peaks hold an impressive range of montane species not typically associated with the Mediterranean, including Alpine Chough.



Marmora's Warbler is another desirable bird on Corsica. During the spring, territorial males can be particularly vocal and showy.

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Ferruginous Pygmy Owl is one of the most numerous and widespread owl species in Central and South America. The author was lucky enough to have a pair nesting in the grounds of the hotel he was staying in, allowing for regular and fantastic viewing.

The Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico is an easily accessible tourist destination which offers quality accommodation, fascinating archaeological sites and a nice spread of regional endemic and North and Central American bird species.

I booked a holiday there in July 2024. It was originally just going to be my wife and I, but our youngest daughter (aged 20) discovered that she had a gap in her hectic schedule and would be able to join us. Selecting a compact resort on the coast to the south of the main tourist zone of Playa del Carmen, the three of us arrived hoping for warm sunshine, relaxation, good food, cold beers and margaritas, Maya culture and (for me) some high-quality birding.

As with any overseas birding holiday, I had a mental list of target species that I was hoping to encounter. At the top of the list was the striking regional endemic, Yucatán Jay. Up and out at first light on the first morning after our arrival, I stepped into a hot and humid dawn of unfamiliar calls and songs. Leaving the more manicured areas of the hotel gardens behind, I birded the mangrove scrub and jungle either side

Maya gems

Ian Lycett found hidden treasures galore during a recent holiday to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, with a captivating combination of endemic birds and archaeological wonder.

of an access track that ran several hundred metres back towards the main road from the hotel.

A drumming Lineated Woodpecker, a pair of Rufous-browed Peppershrikes, Great Kiskadees, Hooded Orioles, Tropical Mockingbirds and a couple of Mangrove Vireos all showed well. A larger vireo, also lumbering around in the mangroves, turned out to be an endemic Yucatán Vireo and was quite striking, in spite of the dull monochrome plumage.

I was admiring a fine Grey Hawk as it sat quietly in a nearby tree, when a magpie-like rattle grabbed my attention and I turned to see a flock of around a dozen Yucatán Jays flying across the track towards me. With a jizz rather more like a

compact Eurasian Magpie than a Jay, most had a jet black head and body, and a mantle, wings and tail in a very pleasing shade of azure blue. A single bird was sporting the yellow bill and white head and body of a juvenile, and several had the yellow bill and eyering that marked them out as first-year birds. They were gorgeous, and set about mobbing the Grey Hawk, which then moved off to get some peace and quiet. A major target safely in the bag before breakfast – and Yucatán Jay turned out to be common and fairly confiding, with sightings at most of the sites I visited.

Oranges and lemons

Getting to grips with the wide selection of orioles on offer was a fun challenge. Half a dozen resident

species sport slight structural and plumage variations on deep orange, black and yellow, and readily forage together in mixed flocks. The striking males were relatively straightforward to identify, while some of the females and immatures were rather more problematic.

Hooded Oriole was the most commonly encountered, with the larger Altamira Oriole also fairly easy, while the endemic Orange Oriole was somewhat harder to find. I still managed to watch several of these during my stay, including a pair at a nest. In the winter, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles add themselves to the mix.

Trying to find a way to separate the near-identical Tropical and Couch's Kingbirds was best done on call. These two species could be twins, but Couch's seemed slightly shorter billed than Tropical as far as I could tell. Both were pretty common, sitting up high on wires and the tops of trees.

From the ruins

Always keen to meet new like-minded people and benefit from local knowledge, I engaged the services of Amar Aves (www.birdwatchingtulum.com) for some excursions to top birding sites within easy striking distance of the hotel. Setting off with our guide, José, shortly after 5 am on one morning, we drove down the main highway to Tulum then cut inland to Coba, reaching the large lake there just after sunrise.

Here we started exploring the margins of the lake. A couple of diminutive Ruddy Crakes showed nicely for a minute, before freaking out at some unseen or imagined threat and sprinting back into thicker reeds. A Northern Jacana was feeding on floating lily pads, occasionally flashing golden flight feathers as it skipped across the surface on long toes. We were also treated to close views of a Limpkin and a Least Bittern sitting quietly at the reed edge as a male Morelet's Seedeater sang from a perch above them.

Walking the track along the side of the lake and then into the small adjacent village, we picked up a host of species for the list. A particularly showy pair of Turquoise-browed Motmots were clearly nesting in a partially constructed building – an ideal substitute for their traditional nest sites in caves – and afforded excellent



ALL IMAGES: IAN LYCETT

The noisy, gregarious and colourful Yucatán Jay is endemic to the Yucatán Peninsula. It is rather commonly encountered as birds rove around in large groups.



Hooded Orioles provided plenty of colour and entertainment from the breakfast area at the author's hotel.



The impressive Maya ruins at Coba were a sight to behold – and also offered high-quality birding opportunities.

views. This species is my favourite member so far of an attractive family and is certainly well named.

Cinnamon Hummingbird, both Blue-grey and Yellow-winged Tanagers and the endemic Yucatán Flycatcher also performed. We were able to compare the subtle differences between Yucatán and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, with both species obligingly appearing in the same tree.

The surrounding forest here is very thick, so one of the easiest ways to get into it without becoming lost is to visit the Maya archaeological sites. Coba was the site of an extensive Maya city. At its peak, it is estimated that up to 50,000 people lived there. Abandoned in around 1500AD, it was subsequently reclaimed by the jungle. With only a few key buildings

(including two impressive ballgame courts and a couple of very tall pyramids) now cleared of vegetation, it has a very Indiana Jones vibe – just with a shop, restrooms and bike hire. It must have been quite something in its heyday.

Snake encounter

We rented bikes and spent a few hours birding along the paths between the ruins. At one point we were watching a Brown Jay dining on a caterpillar which was the size of a Cumberland sausage, when another couple of jays started to go berserk behind us. Wondering if they had taken exception to our presence, we turned and looked up to find that the answer was more likely to be the 2.5-m long Mexican Tiger Snake that was moving



The exquisite Turquoise-browed Motmot was one of the highlights of the trip for the author. This species is found from south-east Mexico through Central America south to Costa Rica, often in fairly open habitats such as forest edge, scrubland and agricultural land.

through the tree just above us!

Other highlights here included Collared Aracari, a Black Catbird sitting on a nest, Gartered and Black-headed Trogons, Squirrel Cuckoo and a host of beautiful butterflies, including the huge Blue Morpho.

Back at the hotel late in the afternoon, I looked up from sipping my refreshing margarita and was pleasantly surprised to see a family party of Bat Falcons using the aerial above the pool as a launch pad for hunting dragonflies. They became an afternoon feature of the week, as did the pair of Ferruginous Pygmy Owls nesting in a tree behind the main bar.

One day was spent birding the forests along the Road of the Cenotes (a cenote being a sink hole/pool of cool, crystal-clear water formed by the huge system of underground rivers in the limestone rock of this region) and produced great views of Barred Antshrike, Yellow-tailed Oriole, several Collared Aracaris feasting on fruit in a roadside tree, Grey-headed Tanager, a couple of shiny Red-legged Honeycreepers, Rose-throated Becards on the wires and a fly-over Keel-billed Toucan.

At a private reserve at Toh we had close views of a Tropical Royal Flycatcher (which failed to raise its ornate crest while we were watching

it), a Lesson's Motmot, a pair of Smoky-brown Woodpeckers and, after some effort, good views of an elusive Trilling Gnatwren. A Mayan Antthrush sang its soft whistly song and remained tantalisingly just out of sight somewhere on the forest floor off the path. We watched a colony of leafcutter ants working hard as a team, and were also treated to a delicious home-cooked lunch by one of the local villagers. This was washed down with jugs of refreshing homemade lemonade, which was just the right side of that featured in the TV series *Detectorists*.

Exploring the south

A trip to the south to explore the huge Sian Ka'an biosphere reserve yielded a spread of goodies including Green Jay, Rose-throated Tanager, Scrub and Yellow-throated Euphonias, Collared Trogon and various woodcreepers and flycatchers. Access is limited to a handful of long dirt tracks which we walked down, methodically looking for items of interest.

In one area there was an extremely impressive density of mosquitoes. We were not as methodical in that zone. Several Central American Agouti crossed the track ahead of us, but the hoped-for Jaguar remained

hidden in the rainforest, as did the more regularly encountered Ocellated Turkey. One of the most common jungle tree species in the area was the Chechén or Black Poisonwood. This innocuous-looking tree is highly toxic, and even droplets of rainwater running off the leaves onto the skin can cause a burning rash. The symptoms can apparently be neutralised by rubbing in the sap or nectar from another common tree in the area, the Chacá, but I decided not to put that to the test.

I spent most mornings birding the hotel grounds and coastal strip and then escaped the heat and humidity by setting up in the shade, poolside with the rest of the family in the afternoons. Without too much effort, I came away with a list of around 125 bird species which included a nice selection of the regional endemics. It was hot and humid, but the birding was for the most part easy and many species were common, obliging and from families impossible to see on our side of the Atlantic.

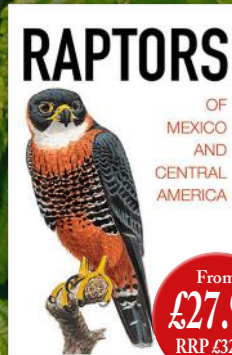
A visit in the winter months would be bolstered by the addition of many species of wintering passerines from the USA, and I would certainly recommend it as an interesting destination for some relaxed birding in combination with a family holiday. ■

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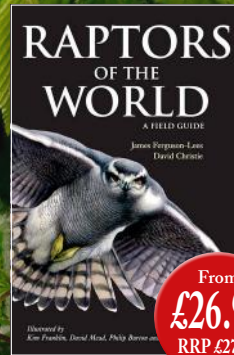
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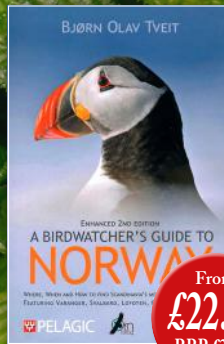
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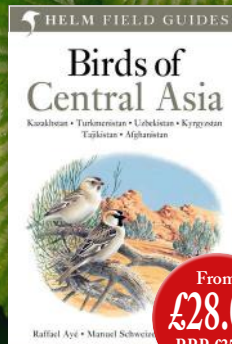
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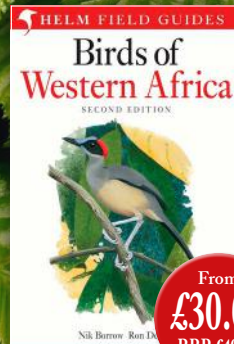
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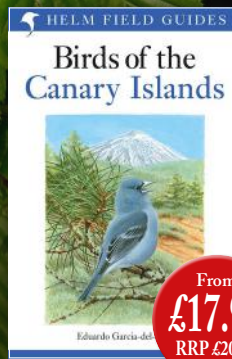
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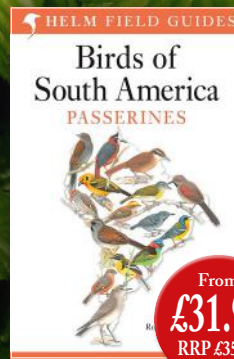
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KEITH WILSON



The bizarre, prehistoric-looking Hoatzin is found in rainforests in northern South America. A monotypic species, its exact taxonomy has been the subject of much debate by ornithologists over the years. Unusually, chicks having primitive claws on two of their wing digits.

Based on the July 2024 edition of the International Ornithological Congress (IOC) checklist, there are currently 254 bird families in the world, which consist of some 11,276 species. Both numbers vary over time, and within the next year new species will be split, and it is possible that new families will be defined as well. The families vary from the huge tyrant flycatcher group, with around 450 members, to a small number that contain only one species – called monotypic families. In fact, there are currently 38 families that consist of just a single species. Most of them are situated well away from the UK and some are in remote locations, but there are a few you could see in many countries with a bit of effort.

But why should a family contain only one species? I asked Professor Ian Newton, author of *The Speciation and Biogeography of Birds*. He said: “There seem to be three possible explanations. These may be the sole survivors of formerly more diverse families with many species. Or perhaps they evolved as individual species which were so restricted in distribution or ecological niche that they had no opportunity to radiate into a range of different species.

One of a kind

While most birds are grouped in quite large families, some are on their own as the single member. Well-travelled world birder *Keith Betton* picks out and profiles 10 outstanding monotypic species.

Another possibility is that they are simply taxonomic errors and should be rolled into other families.”

In theory, DNA studies should resolve the last point, and gradually, as the collection of DNA and the sampling of museum skins is growing, so is our understanding of taxonomic relationships. While this article is current as we enter 2025, in a few years things may look very different. It’s possible that the number of monotypic families will grow.

Monotypic bird families vary and include those that are unique in their physical attributes (such as Oilbird and Hoatzin), while others (such as Ibisbill) look like they could easily be members of larger existing families. But it is possible that these birds really do have distinct ancestries and have come to resemble other

species by convergent evolution, in which they evolve to look like other species because they have the same way of life and are therefore subject to similar selection pressures. In this article I will document some of Earth’s most unique birds.

■ Hoatzin

Length: 65 cm

Distribution: River forests in the Amazon and Orinoco River basins

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Good place to see it: Many of the lodges on the Napo River in Ecuador

This exotic, almost reptilian-looking bird is a real oddity. It has a beak like that of a gamebird and in many ways resembles a very large, shaggy cuckoo. Because Hoatzins nest in bushes that often overhang rivers or lakes, their



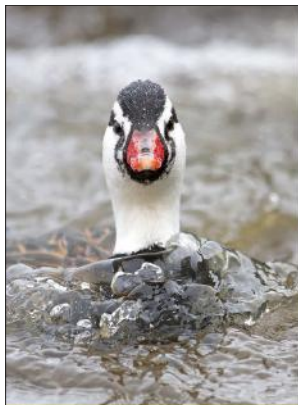
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chicks can swim and, if they fall from the nest, they are able to climb back up because they have two claws on the front of each wing. When they are not tending the nest, the adults spend much of the day sitting around doing nothing. This is because they take a long time to digest their food, which is a mass of vegetable matter. Hoatzins are co-operative breeders, so each pair has two or three helpers. These extra birds assist with nest building, incubation and chick rearing. The taxonomic relationships of Hoatzin have been debated by many, with some placing them with gamebirds, while others suggest that they belong with cuckoos, turacos or pigeons. It is now generally accepted that Hoatzin has no close relatives, although fossil evidence suggests that they were once found in Africa, and possibly dispersed across the Atlantic by rafting on vegetative material.

■ **Oilbird**

Length: 41-45 cm

Distribution: Venezuela and Trinidad south to Bolivia

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Good place to see it: Asa Wright Nature Centre, Trinidad

This is another bizarre bird, which lives in deep caves in evergreen lowland and montane forests. Here it roosts and breeds colonially. Some caves contain only a few birds, but there are cases of huge numbers gathering, such as at Cueva de los Guácharos National Park in Venezuela, where it is estimated that up to 10,000 are sometimes present. Indeed, the local people hold the birds in high esteem and a large statue in the town centre celebrates their existence.

Oilbirds leave their caves at night and travel large distances to find fruit. The birds are thought to use their keen sense of smell to locate fruit, but possibly also to navigate back to their caves. However, just like bats, they rely partly on echolocation and use a series of audible clicks, with each bird in a group clicking at slightly different frequencies. In addition, they have amazing night vision that is better than even some owls. Although people have been tempted to lump Oilbird in with nightjars, it is now broadly accepted that it constitutes a family in its own right.

PATTY MCGANN



Nesting in colonies in caves, Oilbird is nocturnal and feeds on the fruits of oil palm and tropical laurels. It is the only nocturnal flying fruit-eating bird in the world.

ED STUBBS



Ibisbill is related to the shorebirds, but sufficiently distinctive to merit its own family, Ibisbillidae. It is found on high-elevation rocky rivers of Central Asia and the Himalaya.

■ **Ibisbill**

Length: 39-41 cm

Distribution: Himalaya and Central and East Asian plateaus

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Good place to see it: Between Paro and Thimphu, Bhutan

At first sight, Ibisbill resembles avocets or curlews in many ways, both in habitat and shape. Its bill is downcurved like a curlew's, whereas avocet bills are of course curved upwards. Few birds are as striking in

both plumage and ability to hide as Ibisbill. The bold lines on its breast and face can instantly blend into the landscape of river cobbles in which it lives. To cross from one side of the river to the other the birds will often swim rather than fly, even in quite fast-flowing water. With its retiring lifestyle, Ibisbill is still rather poorly known. The species mostly stays within its breeding range of the high plateaus of Asia year-round, but some birds wander south to lower elevations in winter.



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■ **Rail-babbler**

Length: 28-30 cm

Distribution: Far south of Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra and Borneo

Conservation Status: Near Threatened

Good place to see it: Panti Forest, Malaysia

In the right location this is an easy bird to hear, with its long whistle, but it is always hard to see and somehow it operates like a ghost, revealing itself only for a split second despite being a few metres away. However, if you do see one you'll be amazed by its striking colours and, occasionally, you may see it inflating the purple air sacs on its neck. As with other shy birds, it is still relatively poorly understood. At one time, it was placed among the babbler, but more recently people have noted the structural similarities between it and the two species of rockfowl in Africa. However, the babbler name association lives on, even though it is now placed in its own family.

■ **Egyptian Plover**

Length: 19-22 cm

Distribution: Sub-Saharan Africa from Senegal, east to Eritrea and south to Uganda and Angola.

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Good place to see it: Campement de Wassadou, Senegal, or Daboya, Ghana

Despite its name, Egyptian Plover was last seen in Egypt in 1937. It can be shy but will feed along the shoreline of wide creeks and on river islands. For years people travelled to The Gambia to see it, but as other destinations have opened up there are now more opportunities to encounter the species elsewhere.

It is by far one of the most striking birds in Africa and was chosen as the emblem of the African Bird Club. You may see an alternative name of 'Crocodile Bird' in some old books, on the basis that it has been reported to pick insects from the mouths of basking crocodiles. As far as I know there is no truth in that story. Its method of nesting involves digging a scrape on a river sandbar and leaving the eggs partially buried to avoid them becoming too hot. It will also cool the nest by transferring water from its belly feathers. This is without doubt my favourite of the birds featured in this article!

KEITH BETTON



Egyptian Plover is an ornate-looking wader found in sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal in the west to Ethiopia in the east. Despite the name, it no longer occurs in Egypt.

KEITH BETTON



The large and unique Secretarybird has a broad range across sub-Saharan Africa. It appears on the coats of arms of both Sudan and South Africa.

■ **Secretarybird**

Length: 125-150 cm

Distribution: Savanna habitat in sub-Saharan Africa

Conservation Status: Endangered

Good place to see it: Almost any game reserve in eastern or southern Africa

Secretarybirds hunt for snakes, small mammals and insects on foot, like an eagle on stilts. They stomp on snakes and if that does not stun them, the snake is thrown into the air. They strut around and can cover large distances quite quickly. Generally, you don't see Secretarybirds flying. They were named for their distinctive head plumes, which resemble writing quills.

People have compared the bird

to the seriemas of South America, as well as cranes and bustards. However, recent molecular work has demonstrated that it is more closely related to other birds of prey.

■ **Plains-wanderer**

Length: 15-19 cm

Distribution: Eastern Australia in small pockets on farmland

Conservation Status: Endangered

Good place to see it: Deniliquin, Victoria (on a special night tour)

This is certainly an enigmatic species and the only realistic way to see it is to join a dedicated evening tour by four-wheel-drive across farmland. When I first saw one in 1991 it took



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three hours bouncing about on the dirt before we flushed a bird in the headlights. Today it is much easier, and guides use thermal imagers, which is far better for the birds. Thanks to ringing programmes we know that relatively few are caught again, and so the population is higher than sightings suggest. This is a species that is rarely seen other than at night. Research has revealed that each breeding female may be connected to several males, who do much of the chick-rearing, while the females stand on guard. Some have placed Plains-wanderer within the buttonquails, but DNA analysis shows that its closest relatives are jacanas.

■ **Kagu**

Length: 55 cm

Distribution: New Caledonia

Conservation Status: Endangered

Good place to see it: Parc de la Rivière Bleue or Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia

If you only remember one bird from a visit to New Caledonia then it will be this one! Birders who tried to see Kagu two or three decades ago sometimes had to make do with distant views, but today the birds run up when they see tourists and are a big attraction. When alarmed they flare their wings and this reveals chestnut, black and white feathers, much in contrast to the otherwise grey plumage. Some guides feed them on insects and, alongside this, the species has become more common. Furthermore, with better protection from attacks by pigs and dogs, it looks likely to be downlisted to Vulnerable. In addition to this, there is much pride about Kagu as it is the national bird of New Caledonia.

■ **Osprey**

Length: 50-62 cm

Distribution: Worldwide, with birds in North America, Europe and Asia migrating south in winter, while the Australasian population is resident

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Good place to see it: In the UK at publicised breeding sites in Scotland, but also in Wales and England

While some of the families I am looking at are restricted to a relatively small area, Osprey is widespread and one of only six landbird species that occur on every continent except

JJ HARRISON



Kagu is endemic to dense mountain forests in New Caledonia, a group of islands in the south-west Pacific Ocean. It is the only surviving member of the family Rhynochetidae.

Antarctica. Some taxonomists have argued that there are at least two species involved, and for a few years the birds in Australasia were split, but they have now been lumped again. Osprey is different from other raptors in having feet built for fishing, with spiny pads on strong and double-jointed toes for more effective gripping of fish. In Britain, it wasn't long ago that Osprey was restricted to only a few sites in Scotland. Today, however, we can celebrate the fact that Ospreys are breeding again in England, Wales and Ireland. The British population has risen to 300 pairs. Some birds will travel as far as 8,500 km on migration, while those that breed closer to the Equator may move very small distances or even none at all. Interestingly, there is a growing trend for European Ospreys to spend the winter in Spain.

■ **Bearded Tit**

Length: 14-17 cm

Distribution: Reedbeds in Europe and across Central Asia to eastern China

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Good place to see it: In the UK, large reedbeds such as at Leighton Moss, Lancashire, and Minsmere, Suffolk

These pretty birds are more numerous than we realise; they are mostly skulkers when breeding, but at other times they can be very showy. Although they may frequent any available reedbeds, for breeding they select only those that have a dry base

KEITH BETTON



Unusually for a monotypic species, Osprey has an enormous global range that spans six different continents.

and that provides food. Bearded Tits will move south to avoid extremely cold weather and autumn irruptions to reach warmer locations are quite common. Once upon a time it was placed in with the tit family, but it was then moved to the parrotbills, which are similar-looking in many ways and are closely related to babblers. Surprisingly, however, the latest research shows that Bearded Tit is more closely related to larks than parrotbills, so it is placed in its own family. ■

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to Ian Newton, Tim Birkhead and Gavin Thomas for their input on this fascinating area of research.

There is something magical about watching birds of prey. In Britain, the sight of a Golden Eagle cruising over a Scottish mountain ridge, harriers arriving at a winter roost or a close encounter with a Eurasian Sparrowhawk taking out a pigeon in the back garden are all guaranteed to get the pulse racing. Further afield, the chance to see really big numbers of raptors on migration can be truly awe-inspiring. Here are four of the best sites on the planet to experience this unique phenomenon.

Hawk Mountain, USA

An hour-and-a-half's drive north-west of Philadelphia, Hawk Mountain is positioned on the Kittatinny Ridge that runs 300 km across Pennsylvania. It is part of the eastern Appalachian Mountains and acts as a migration route. The autumn raptor count runs from mid-August through to mid-December. October brings the peak of species diversity, which regularly includes 16 species of hawk, eagle, falcon and vulture. Annual counts for this four-month period average a total of 18,000 raptors, with one-day high counts of more than 3,000 birds seen at the peak of Broad-winged Hawk migration during September. Autumn hawk flights are best on days with north-west winds following a cold front.

Strait of Gibraltar, Spain

Here, Europe and Africa are separated by only a narrow stretch of water. This means that the area is used as a migration flyway by thousands of raptors twice every year. March, April and May witness the surge northwards as birds hurry back to their breeding grounds. Autumn migration is particularly good for raptors from late August through to mid-October. A peak day may see several thousand Black Kites and European Honey Buzzards, 1,000 Booted Eagles, hundreds of Short-toed Snake Eagles and thousands of storks pass through. Vultures also feature, with some 3,000 Egyptian and 10,000 Griffon Vultures recorded each season, the latter sometimes being accompanied by the rare Rüppell's Vulture. There are several watchpoints along the Iberian side of the strait. Tarifa is best during a spell of easterly winds, while Punta Carnero and the Rock of Gibraltar at the eastern side are best in a westerly.



FLICKR

Masses of migrating Turkey Vultures are among the raptor spectacles on show at Veracruz in Mexico, which is one of the best places to observe bird of prey passage in the world.

Raptor races

Observing migrating birds of prey is undoubtedly one of the finest avian wonders. Here, we profile four of the best places in the world to enjoy these spectacles.

Veracruz, Mexico

The coastal strip between the Sierra Madre and the Gulf of Mexico acts as a funnel for North America's southbound Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks, Turkey Vultures and Mississippi Kites, as well as northern populations of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Every day throughout September, October and November, raptors pour south. Up to seven million birds are logged each season, making this the world's largest concentration of raptors. If southward migration is stalled due to bad weather further north, the totals when the weather breaks can be astonishing – the day record count is 1.5 million birds of prey!



FLICKR

European Honey Buzzard is one of the most numerous migrating raptors encountered in the autumn at Batumi.

Batumi, Georgia

Raptors leaving northern Europe and Russia each autumn are funnelled along the Lesser Caucasus mountains and onto the coastal strip next to the Black Sea at Batumi. The dedicated Batumi Raptor Count runs from mid-August through to late October each year and the annual

total of one million birds of prey often includes days with more than 10,000 birds. The current record day count is 280,000! The closest of two watchpoints to Batumi is at Shakhvalasho, which is only a half-hour drive. Looking north from here with the sea to the west and mountains to the east, up to 25 raptor species can be recorded in just a few days, these often including the rare Crested Honey Buzzard. ■

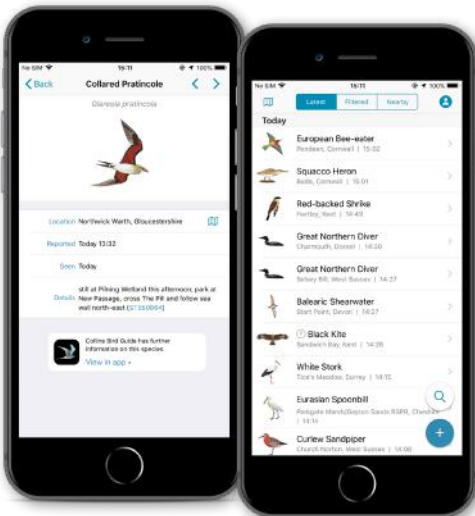
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The *Birdwatch* World of Birds reader tour programme offers a range of thrilling birding holidays. If you're planning to head abroad in 2025 or 2026, make sure you take a look at the trips we have scheduled.

The first of these is a great-value tour of northern India in February 2025 that will be looking for some spectacular birdlife, as well as mammals including Tiger and Leopard. This excursion combines the world-famous Bharatpur and Ranthambore reserves with a visit to the unique Taj Mahal and the Red Fort at Agra. The many avian highlights should include Indian Skimmer, Indian Courser and Sarus Crane, while we should also see two of the Indian subcontinent's crocodiles – Mugger and Gharial.

Our early spring 2025 trip to the delightful island of Sri Lanka is guaranteed to run and has only a couple of places left. Key targets on this tour are all 34 endemic bird species including Serendib Scops Owl, Sri Lanka Blue Magpie and Green-billed Coucal. Sri Lanka is arguably the best place on Earth to see Leopard, which we will try for, and there should be memorable encounters with Asian Elephants. This tour also offers an extension to search for Blue Whale.

A cruise to Spitsbergen and the Arctic ice edge in summer 2025 will hope to see hunting Polar Bears and encounter Bowhead Whales. Various other cetaceans should be found, and we will visit a haul-out to look for the mighty Walrus. The scenery and seascapes are truly spectacular, and birds should include Ivory Gull and Little Auk.

The compact nation of Azerbaijan

JOSH JONES

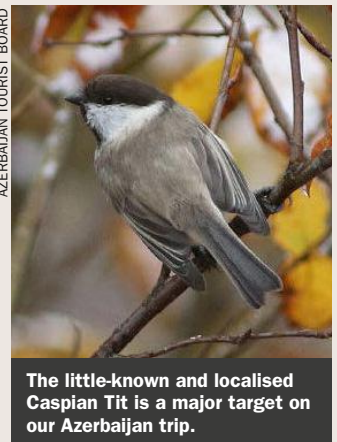


Zino's Petrel is among the rare and special seabirds which we hope to see on the West Africa Pelagic in early May 2026.

has a range of very varied and exciting habitats to explore and some equally exciting bird species to find. Our trip here in February 2026 has the promise of such avian gems as Wallcreeper, White-winged Lark, Caspian Tit, Gldenstdt's Redstart, Caucasian Snowcock and Pallas's Gull.

If Western Palearctic birding is your thing then you won't want to miss the West Africa Pelagic in May 2026. Led by top birders Killian Mullarney and Nils van Duivendijk, this cruise sets sail in Cape Verde and ends in

AZERBAIJAN TOURIST BOARD



The little-known and localised Caspian Tit is a major target on our Azerbaijan trip.

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Sri Lanka Blue Magpie is one of the key species on our tour to its namesake island.

Madeira, with many seabird and cetacean species possible, including Zino's Petrel, White-faced Storm Petrel and Boyd's Shearwater, as well as the chance of a major regional rarity if we are lucky. In addition, Raso Lark will be looked for during a zodiac trip around its namesake island.

Check out detailed itineraries for the above tours by visiting bit.ly/WoBHolidays and start planning your birding trips for 2025 and beyond. New tours will be added to the schedule as the year progresses. ■

For full details of all tours and how to book, visit bit.ly/WoBHolidays



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