



Birds of Paradise

In the foothills of Kerala's Western Ghats, an avian enthusiast returns to the forests of his first bird-watching adventure to discover that tranquility still prevails.

— by Prathap Nair

Under the dense forest canopy, I crane my neck to locate the bird my guide has just spotted. “Follow this tree trunk and look for the bunch of dry leaves as the branch forks to your nine o’clock,” he whispers. When I finally catch sight of the Sri Lankan frogmouth, I’m hardly overawed: sporting a broad froggish beak and drab (if perfectly camouflaged) plumage, it won’t win any beauty pageants. But the forests of the Thattekad Bird Sanctuary are the only place in India where you can see this nocturnal bird, so I still feel a sense of accomplishment.

I was a novice bird-watcher when I first visited

this little-known corner of central Kerala a decade ago. Back then, I couldn’t tell my swallows from my swifts, though I was filled with a noob’s enthusiasm. My accommodation was a no-frills guesthouse with bucket showers. Seasoned bird guide Abhilash V.S., a reedy, mustachioed man with sparkling brown eyes that radiated with joy with every bird spotting, took me around. Ten years later, he’s my guide again. But a few things have changed.

Nestled at the foot of the Western Ghats, the flat, lowland forests of Thattekad have remained under the radar of most tourists, though their cult status among serious bird-watchers continues to grow. In the 1930s, the great Indian ornithologist Salim Ali

declared the area to be the richest bird habitat in peninsular India; half a century later, Thattekad was officially declared a bird sanctuary, its 25-square-kilometer swath of tropical woodlands harboring more than 270 avian species. Twitchers from across India and beyond flock here during the winter season (October to March) to spot as many feathered creatures as they can. Golden-backed woodpeckers, purple-rumped sunbirds, chestnut-tailed starlings, gray-headed bulbuls, pompadour green pigeons, Malabar hornbills, fairy-bluebirds, orange minivets — the list goes on and on.

In the years that I have known Abhilash, he has gone from working for a local eco-lodge to opening one of his own, an affordable glamping operation called Birds Murmur Camp. With just eight safari-style tents, the property is surrounded by pineapple fields on the banks of the Edamalayar River, whose far shore rises into thickly wooded hills. Hammocks beckon invitingly under the shade of cacao trees and kayaks bob in the current. I'm told that herds of thirsty elephants will sometimes venture to the river's edge when the water is low.

I check in over a busy end-of-season weekend. To keep the business small and sustainable, Abhilash and his two partners run a fairly egalitarian ship, pitching in with the day's chores whenever necessary. While they're busy making beds, I steal a moment on a hammock. Delicate, jasmine-like flowers embedded in the branches above me shiver gently in the breeze, and giant green cacao pods hang low enough to brush my feet. The hills across the river shine crimson with trees preparing to shed their leaves as summer approaches.

At lunchtime, as the blazing sun strolls across a cloudless sky, sprinklers affixed over the dining pavilion spurt to life, cooling down the canvas roof. I wolf down a gently spiced tuna fish curry tempered with *kodampuli*, a type of tamarind typical to south Kerala. The sweet fragrance of pineapples wafts down from the groves above the camp.

Luxury here is more sublime than materialistic. It is the company of birdcalls and the proximity of wildlife — of being simultaneously embraced by the forest's silence and jolted by the sudden clamor of hornbills, woodpeckers, giant squirrels, and monkeys. It's the simplicity of meals that remind you of someone's home kitchen, put together by the same people who fix your bed and take you on bird-watching tours. It's also the ease at which you can disconnect from the outside world.

But tourism is increasingly making its mark on Thattekad. Numerous homestays have sprung up since my first visit, and few fancier river-facing properties are under construction. I ask Abhilash if the development is manageable given the fragility of Thattekad's delicate ecosystems. "The day that

we witness something unfortunate like an elephant trampling down a tourist car, all tourism here will stop," he says.

My first night begins with the chorus of a million cicadas. A full moon hangs brightly above the hills, and the forest reverberates with the ardent mating call of the male hawk-cuckoo — the so-called brainfever bird — well into the wee hours.

Early next morning, we drive four kilometers to the parking lot at the sanctuary's entrance and head out on foot. The trail takes us crunching over dry leaves and past thorny bushes with wayward branches that we brush away with our hands. I revel in the joy of making sense of the forest with the help of a passionate naturalist like Abhilash, who identifies every chirp and whistle and screech. At a stream, a rare blue-eared kingfisher dives in for a kill. The bird snags a fish in its dagger-like beak and carries the wriggling catch to a tree, where it smashes it on a branch repeatedly before swallowing it whole.

Up ahead, we spot another endemic bird: the bright orange Malabar trogon. A cackle of males is courting a female bird high up in the canopy. I squat down with my binoculars and watch the mesmerizing drama unfold until the whole contingent take off and disappears. It feels like I have witnessed a secret forest ritual.

We eagerly venture deeper into the woods, and by the end of the morning, Thattekad has more than lived up to its promise. I've sighted over 30 bird species, including the aforementioned Sri Lankan frogmouth.

Back at the camp, I sit in stupefied pleasure outside my tent digesting yet another substantial lunch. A white-bellied black bird perches on the jackfruit tree next to me, inspecting its spiky fruits for worms. Then a tourist boat interrupts my reverie. Crammed with passengers, it puttters down the Edamalayar, K-pop playing loudly above the drone of its motor.

I mull over the perils of overtourism on a bike ride that evening. The road takes me east along the river, past bathing villagers and football-playing teens. Out on the water, pearly-white egrets stalk the reedy shallows for food. After an hour or so I turn around, mindful that I need to return to Birds Murmur Camp before it gets too dark. The orange sun is already dipping below the hills. I pedal faster, guided by the faint scent of pineapples, until I can see a flicker of lights from the property. The brainfever hawk-cuckoo has already begun its piercing call. This will be another eventful night. 🦉



Thattekad on the Fly

GETTING THERE

About an hour's drive away, Cochin International Airport in Kochi is served by flights from major Asian cities including Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Bangkok.

WHERE TO STAY

A short drive from the Thattekad Bird Sanctuary on the banks of the Edamalayar River, **Birds Murmur Camp** offers eight glamping tents and numerous activities like kayaking, bird-watching, biking, and hiking (birdsmurmurcamp.com; from US\$100 a night per person, all-inclusive).