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# CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS WITH MY FEATHERED FRIENDS IN THE TEAK TOWN OF KERALA - NILAMBUR

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It was from the stimulus of many lovely photos sent to me for identification by Rahul, a techie from Thiruvananthapuram, that I was determined to visit Nilambur. Rahul visits his home at Nilambur frequently and I decided to spend my Christmas holidays with my family at his hometown. Nilambur is a small town surrounded by forests on the route from Kozhikode to Gudalur. The total area of Nilambur forest including the North and South Divisions is around 1142 sq. km.



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**NILAMBUR**

After many days of waiting, finally, on 24th December, we boarded the Rajyarani Express from the starting point i.e., Kochuveli Railway Station (for those outside Kerala - Kochuveli Railway Station, in the outskirts of the city, is set up to ease the burden at Thiruvananthapuram Central Railway Station, just like Hazrat Nizamuddin station in New Delhi). Thanks to Mr. Mrinal who dropped us at the Railway Station, we reached the station at 8.00pm, although the actual time of departure was only at 8.50pm. We had a peaceful dinner in the train as co-passengers were yet to come. Keeping the Covid-19 protocol, we avoided much interaction and swiftly occupied the allotted berths right after the TTE checked our tickets. We arrived at Nilambur by 5.00am in the pinching cold of the early morning of Christmas Day. We got into the cab arranged by Rahul and reached his home in 30 minutes. We received a very warm welcome at Rahul's home with his whole family present. They served us hot coffee, which obviously triggered Nature's Call, after which we freshened up.

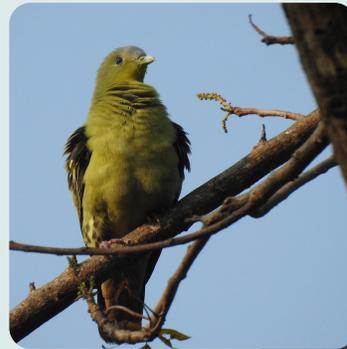


Orange Minivet



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Two is company, three is a crowd - especially for birding. Hence, we decided to take the convenient route of leaving our families back at Rahul's house so that they can celebrate Christmas together in their own ways and we could be spared to go for birding in the nearby forest area. Against our expectation, they agreed to this idea. We got ready by 7:30 in the morning in our regular birding attire along with our camera, binoculars, some snacks and water bottles. The yummy breakfast made by Anushree, wife of Rajesh, Rahul's elder brother really served as the boosters. Rahul got permission in advance from his father to use his new Honda Active and off we went.



Gray-fronted  
Green Pigeon

Vernal Hanging  
Parrot



Asian Brown Flycatcher



Indian Golden Oriole

The undisturbed forest area near Rahul's house was an abode of many bird species. We listed out 93 birds from this area in a span of two days. These forests are mostly deciduous, interspersed with semi-evergreen patches adjacent to human habitations. We listed around 16 migratory and 10 endemic birds. Asian Paradise Flycatchers in different morphs, the lone Broad-billed Roller and Blue-bearded Bee-eater, nesting of Vernal Hanging Parrot and a flock of 28 Grey-fronted Green Pigeons were the highlights. On the first day itself, we could capture on camera the Asian Paradise, Asian Brown and Brown-breasted Flycatchers, and Indian Golden Oriole, all of which are migratory. Our thorough observation of the different levels of vegetation - the forest floors, canopy, dried open branches, thickets, and rocks helped us achieve this result.

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Around midday, we suddenly noticed Parakeets and Mynas flying away with alarm calls. We sensed the presence of a bird of prey and started scanning the sky. From nowhere, a big bird landed on a dry tree just above our head and to our utmost surprise, it was a Crested Hawk Eagle. Unfortunately, it detected our presence with its keen senses, sat with its back to us and then flew away immediately. In spite of our best efforts, we did not get a good picture of the bird.



Purple Sunbird

As we walked along the River Chaliyar, we witnessed a very rare feeding behavior of Little Egrets fishing in the air along with a large flock of more than fifty Cormorants. When the Cormorants dived into the water, fishes jumped above the water surface to escape the them, and the Egrets used this opportunity to their advantage and caught the these fishes on air. It bears much resemblance to the group hunting by a mixed-hunting party of birds, that we usually see in the forests, where many birds of different species hunt/forage together.

On the same day evening, we came across the loners as well. The Broad-billed Roller and Blue-bearded Bee-eater were found in their favorite place/habitat; on a large tall tree which has shed most of its leaves, on the banks of the Kanjirapuzha which is a tributary of River Chaliyar.



Crested Hawk Eagle



Malabar Woodshrike

The second day was teeming with the endemics. It really started off well with a flock of twenty-eight Grey fronted Green Pigeons near the Aadyanpara waterfalls, which is a major tourist attraction in Nilambur. We then came across the Crimson-backed Sunbird, Malabar Woodshrike, Rufous Babbler, Malabar Parakeets, and Malabar Trogon.

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On the way back, we were very lucky to sight the nest of Vernal Hanging Parrot in which both the male and female birds were seen frequently visiting and feeding the chicks. The parents busily feeding their young was a cute sight. We spent around half an hour enjoying their nesting activities. Then we came across few Orange Minivets, a large number of Plum headed Parakeets, and a Verditer Flycatcher.



Crimson-backed  
Sunbird

Rufous Babbler



Our feathered friends came calling on us even during our family time. A Travancore Pied Kingfisher disclosed his nest on the bank of Chaliyar River when both the families were enjoying a country boat ride. Two Common Sandpipers were feeding vigorously on the banks of the Chaliyar River. Three River Terns also drew our attention with their repeated calls.

The two-day Christmas celebration was a great family time with a bonus of meeting our feathered friends. Thanks to Rahul for all the hospitality and logistics.



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