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The Rann of Kutch is a vast area of salt desert / salt marsh located in the north-west of the Indian State of Gujrat. It borders the Arabian sea on the west, the Indus river delta to the north and stretches east for about 250 miles. It is split into the Great Rann and the Little Rann, somewhat loosely, based on ability to access and administer the vast region. It is arguably the largest salt desert / marshland in the world, covering an area of about 10,000 sq. miles. Desert or marshland?

In the monsoon season it floods and becomes a continuous marshland, then as the water evaporates it leaves behind vast stretches of parched mud-flats dotted with scrub vegetation on “islands” and brackish lakes in basins. I visited the Little Rann, on a birding trip, a few days ago.

Here’s some of what I saw.



Typical habitat: Vast stretches of sunbaked mud flats, punctuated by basins of water, dotted with and bordered by acacia-like Babul trees. The bovine is a wild Nilgai, an antelope endemic to India.



This Eurasian / Common Kestrel migrates from its summer home in Europe to winter in India. The vast empty desert seems an unlikely place to winter in, but many migrating birds find refuge here.



This place is also home to the Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary. No, I am not kidding. This is the only place where this endangered mammal still survives.



Another small falcon, the Merlin, made a surprise appearance here. A resident of the northern reaches of Europe and North America, it winters in the southern portions of those continents and in some central parts of Asia. This rarity was a prized find for the Bombay based birders, even more so than the Peregrine Falcon that was sought so fervently. To give you an idea of this “falcon fever”, our group spent three hours roaming the desert to find the Peregrine and the Merlin. How the drivers pick out the specks of these lone birds in this vast empty wilderness is truly amazing; though it is a matter of bragging rights for these guides who operate sans binoculars.



The vast empty flats we roamed to find the falcons, and came across an unexpected little thing. Trying to hide under a wheel of one of our vehicles was this little lone bird. It made no attempt to fly away despite being approached at arm's length by more than a dozen photographers. It did flit about and tried to hide inside our vehicles. We were puzzled, but could see no injury or signs of illness. After ten minutes we did coax it out from underneath the tire but it stayed around another couple of minutes and then took off, flew high up and away. The only explanation I can reach is that it was exhausted from a migratory flight and had to rest and recover. Smart bird, this Zitting Cisticola, taking refuge amongst humans and staying safe from the falcons who would have loved to have it for breakfast. (The bird's name is amusing; it sounds like a disease - a cyst one gets from sitting too long.)

For a desert, the Little Rann is surprisingly full of life. A Desert Wheatear, another seasonal migrant, feeds on insects it finds in the cracked mud, as do the trio below.



There are three species in this frame; from L to R, Kentish Plover, Little Stint, Lesser Sand Plover.



The stands of the Babul tree harbor many species, native and migrant. This migrant, a McQueen's Bustard, led us on a chase before allowing us to photograph it.

This Black Drongo brazenly stole a morsel of meat from under the beak of the much larger eagle. The Drongos were fearless little devils, chasing away Harriers, Eagles and Owls. Gangsters!



There is obviously food here for birds of prey. The desert attracts not just small falcons, but also large eagles such as the Imperial Eagle, which was feeding on a kill.



These resident Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse simply disappeared into the dry brush.



This Common Greenshank caught a fish, which it had to let go because it was too large to gobble.



The Black-winged Stilt looks so elegant.



The stretches of shallow water attract hundreds of Pelicans, Flamingos, Avocets, Storks, Egrets and many other waders. Great White / Rosy Pelicans, Egrets, Black-headed Ibis



Hundreds of Lesser Flamingos mix in with dozens of Greater Flamingos.



Sunset over the Little Rann of Kutch

Common Crane are seen in flocks or in family trios – parents with a young bird. Dozens of larks thrust their beaks in the dirt, finding food, no doubt. This seemingly barren land is full of life. At the edges of the Rann are human settlements – villages with cultivation. There is more life there, which I will portray in the next chapter. For now, I bid you “Good evening!” 🐦