



**BIRDING THE PRISTINE FORESTS OF THE EASTERN
HIMALAYAS: THREE WEEKS IN BHUTAN**

27 MARCH - 15 APRIL 2019



Ibisbill is one of our targets on this trip.

Bhutan, known as the land of the Thunder Dragon, is a quaint, quiet, and scenically spectacular country with a strong conservation ethic rooted in ancient Buddhist traditions. Vast areas of unspoiled forest still cover the Himalayan foothills, which spread over much of the country. We expect to find most of Bhutan's fabled Eastern Himalayan species such as **Beautiful Nuthatch** (and other nuthatches), **Ward's Trogon**, the unbelievable **Fire-tailed Myzornis**, **Rufous-necked Hornbill**, **Yellow-rumped Honeyguide**, **Ibisbill**, and of course **Satyr Tragopan**, **Himalayan Monal**, and other vivid pheasants. Other highlights include **Wallcreeper**, spectacular sunbirds, five species of parrotbills, up to ten species of laughingthrushes, striking and gorgeous forktails along the fast-flowing rivers – in addition to a plethora of other tantalizing jewels.

In addition to this host of fabulous birds we expect to also find a host of fascinating mammals, including Gee's golden langur, black giant squirrel, yellow-throated marten, and many others. Beautifully crafted dzongs (the word means "fortress", but these days they are indeed mostly fabulous monasteries) and temples, such as the famous Tiger's Nest Monastery, dot the awe-inspiring landscapes of the vast Himalayas.

We begin our tour with a flight arriving in Paro in the west, and we gradually make our way eastwards through a range of habitats such as pine and spruce forests, subtropical broadleaved forests, bamboo, alpine scrub, rivers, and many others. We eventually exit the country into north-east India, where you have the option of an extension for lowland Indian plains birds and some awesome mammals such as the magnificent Indian rhinoceros.

This Birding Tour Bhutan adventure can be combined with our **Birding Tour India: Bhutan Extension – Assam April 2019** tour (15 – 22 April 2019).

Please note that the detailed itinerary below cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Itinerary (20 days, 19 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Paro

Our flight arrives at the spectacular Paro International Airport, which is walled in by mountains. Here we will not only be introduced to the fantastic and unusual architecture of Bhutan, but we will also immediately start exciting Himalayan birding. **Ibisbill** lurks along the stone-strewn river beds, as does **Black-tailed Crake** in nearby cane marshes, and a host of other highly sought-after birds such as **Brown Dipper**.

Overnight: Paro

Day 2: Himalayan Monal at Chele La

We head up a spectacular mountain pass, the famous Chele La, which reaches 4 000 meters (about 13 000 feet), looking for different specials as we ascend. The biggest prize for most birders is the **Himalayan Monal** – famous for its kaleidoscopic vivid rainbow hues. The monal comes out onto the mountain pass at dawn. But in addition we can find up to four pheasant species today. Other targets include awe-inspiring Himalayan species such as **Spotted Laughingthrush**, **Mrs. Gould’s Sunbird**, and **Golden Bush Robin**. We will look out for flocks of **Snow Pigeons**, **Grey Crested** and colorful **Green-backed Tits**, as well as the fabulous **Yellow-cheeked** variety. The attractive **White-browed Fulvetta** is found in most feeding flocks. Also possible are four different redstarts, a variety of rosefinches, **White-collared Blackbird**, and a plethora of others. **Spotted Nutcracker** is common here, as it is over much of Bhutan. We will see the amazing Tiger’s Nest Monastery high on a ledge – please ask us if you want to hike up to it. We descend after a busy day of birding for a second night in Paro.

Overnight: Paro

Day 3. Yellow-rumped Honeyguide and Jigme Dorji National Park

An early morning departure sees us heading for the capital of Bhutan, Thimphu. En route we search for the enigmatic **Ibisbill**, **Brown Dipper**, **Ruddy Shelduck**, and the local form of **Great Cormorant**, among others. We will arrive at a section of Jigme Dorji National Park by mid-morning, where we have a stakeout for the tricky **Yellow-rumped Honeyguide**. Also possible here are **Kalij Pheasant**, **Golden-breasted Fulvetta**, the elusive **Maroon-backed Accentor**, and many more. After Jigme Dorji we visit a breeding program for a most-bizarre Himalayan mammal – the takin. It is a goat-antelope (Caprinae) and accordingly looks like a cross between a giant mountain goat and an antelope! We return to Thimphu in time to search for **Black-tailed Crane** in the early evening and enjoy some capital city shopping.

Overnight: Thimphu

Day 4. Himalayan vistas, Dochula Pass, and Lamperi Royal Botanical Park

Today we head east to the Dochula Pass, which provides fabulous views of Bhutan’s seven highest Himalayan peaks. Birding here and in the forests below is also impressive, and we will search for the illustrious-looking **Yellow-billed Blue Magpie** and vividly-colored **Warblers**, such as **Whistler’s**, **Grey-hooded**, and **Chestnut-crowned**. The recently declared Lamperi Royal Botanical Park is our next stop as we descend. It has been amazingly productive on our past tours. The birds here are so good and so many that it is hard to decide where to look! Our targets at this site include the enigmatic **Brown Parrotbill**, the vivid **Chestnut-capped Babbler**, the petite **Black-throated Bushtit**, **Whiskered** and **Striated Yuhinas**, and the colorful **Red-flanked Bluetail** (Orange-flanked Bush Robin). **Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler** skulks about in the bamboo as well as vivid minivets and nuthatches circling in the trees above.

Overnight: Wanghdue Phodrang Valley

Day 5. White-bellied Heron and the forests of the Mo Chu River

We start birding the fantastic Wanghdue Phodrang valley, where we could find birds such as **Crested Serpent Eagle**, **Slaty-backed Forktail**, **Little Forktail**, various flycatchers, **Wallcreeper**, and a host of others. With luck we might encounter **Tawny Fish Owl**, and we will

start looking for **White-bellied Heron**, a bird that was historically widespread through the foothills of the eastern Himalayas, but which has declined dramatically and now has a world population of perhaps only 250. Today Bhutan must be the best country for this species. Whilst searching for the heron we may encounter **Spotted Forktail**, colorful **Common Kingfisher**, **Upland Buzzard**, and the impressive **Crested Kingfisher**, among many others.

After our search for the heron we explore and bird the magnificent forests along the Mo Chu River. Here we dive into a further Himalayan birding spectacle with species such as the diminutive, yet spectacular **Chestnut-headed Tesia**, brightly-colored **Scarlet, Short-billed**, and **Long-tailed Minivets**, and with luck and some patience **Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler** and **Spotted Wren-Babbler**. This area is also a site for that most tricky of **Accentors** – the **Maroon-backed**. Whilst stalking the birds in the forest we will all keep an eye to the sky for **Mountain Hawk-Eagle**, **Crested (Oriental) Honey Buzzard**, and flocks of **Himalayan Swiftlets**. After this birding spectacle we visit the legendary Punakha Dzong – Bhutan’s most impressive, and currently a monastery. The Dzong is situated at the confluence of the Mo Chu and Po Chu rivers and has been subject to many attacks, floods, fires, and earthquakes since it was built in the 1600s. The beauty and tranquility of this edifice is awe-inspiring to most.

Overnight: Wangdue Phodrang Valley

Day 6. Ward’s Trogon, Fire-tailed Myzornis, and many more

An early start will see us searching for the attractive **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler** around our hotel gardens. We then start ascending again towards the high-altitude Pele La Pass and will keep a lookout for roadside attractions such as **Chestnut-bellied** and **Blue Rock Thrushes**, and we may encounter **White-throated Kingfisher**. The roadside forests on our ascent are home to Himalayan specialties such as **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike**, **Speckled Piculet**, **Rufous-fronted Bushtit**, and **Black-chinned Yuhina**. If we have not done so yet, we will start enjoying the attractive, busy flocks of **Rufous-winged Fulvetta**. The **Rufous-bellied Woodpecker** is always a delight to all. The pass also offers a chance at one of Bhutan’s mega birds – the legendary **Ward’s Trogon**. The aptly-named **Fire-tailed Myzornis** may be smaller, but it is no less spectacular. As we ascend higher, the mixed broadleaved forest gives way to stands of rhododendron and coniferous forest, and this is where we start looking out for another Bhutan mega – the remarkable **Satyr Tragopan**. At the top of Pele La we will search for **Great Parrotbill**, **White-winged Grosbeak**, and **Grey-winged** and **White-collared Blackbirds**. Your guide will keep a constant eye to the sky for **Himalayan Vulture**, **Steppe Eagle**, and **Long-legged Buzzard**, among other ‘raptorian’ delights. As we descend again towards Trongsa, roadside stops may yield colorful **Sunbirds**, including **Fire-tailed**, **Mrs. Gould’s**, and **Green-tailed**, **Collared Owlet**, bustling flocks of **White-throated Laughingthrushes**, and the striking **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler**. We will also keep a lookout for flocks of **Asian** and **Nepal House Martins**.

Overnight: Trongsa

Day 7. Birding the spectacular mountain passes of Zhemgang

The road towards Zhemgang must be one of the most spectacular birding roads on the planet. Sheer drop-offs to thousands of feet far below make for a most memorable of birding

experiences. The forests and forest edges host a plethora of outstanding species, including **Slaty-backed Forktail**, the delicately-colored **Rufous-necked Laughingthrush**, the gaudy **Common Green Magpie**, the sizeable **Blue-bearded Bee-eater**, the striking **Rufous-bellied Niltava**, and, with a bit of luck, the forest-patrolling **Rufous-bellied Hawk-Eagle**. A highlight for many is likely to be the conspicuously-plumaged **Sultan Tit**. Our campsite at Zhemgang is phenomenally located high atop a Himalayan ridge next to a Buddhist chorten (a mound-like structure containing Buddhist relics) overlooking the valleys far below. A night walk from our camp may deliver **Mountain Scops** and **Brown Wood Owls**, and the mystical-looking black giant squirrel

Overnight: Camping, Zhemgang

Days 8 – 10. Beautiful Nuthatch, Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler, and more

The elegantly-plumaged **Beautiful Nuthatch** is one of our main targets in Zhemgang. Birders are likely to be equally awed by the gigantic and noisy **Rufous-necked Hornbill**, and **Great Hornbill** is also a common sight as we descend towards our campsite at 600m altitude in Tingtibi. These ‘low altitude’ forests provide opportunities for many delightful species: **Long-tailed Broadbill**, **Orange-bellied Leafbird**, **White-browed**, **Coral-billed**, and **Slender-billed Scimitar Babblers**, **Grey-bellied Tesia**, **Mountain Tailorbird**, **Sikkim Treecreeper**, and the extravagant **Crimson Sunbird**. We will spend time chasing skulkers including **Blue-winged Laughingthrush**, the aptly-named **Golden Babbler** and **Golden Bush Robin**, while troops of exotic-looking Gee’s golden langurs scurry through the forest canopy above and noisy flocks of the iconic **White-crested Laughingthrush** scour the forests for grubs lower down. After relishing these impressive species, we return to Trongsa before starting our drive toward the legendary Lingmethang Road.

Overnight Days 8 and 9: Camping, Tingtibi

Overnight Day 10: Trongsa

Day 11. Trongsa to Bumthang

An early morning outing around Trongsa may deliver views of **Hill Partridge** scurrying through the forest undergrowth. The petite **Pygmy Wren-Babbler**, **Nepal Fulvetta**, and the near-endemic **Bhutan Laughingthrush**, as well as the striking **Striated** variety, may also be found here. We will make our way towards Bumthang, where we will stock up on supplies for our camping excursion along the Lingmethang Road. After this we will search for species like **Plain-backed Thrush**, flocks of **Red-billed Chough**, the quintessential Bumthang valley **Eurasian Magpie**, the aptly-named **Plain Mountain Finch**, and the more colorful **Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch**. The Bumthang river also allows more views of **Brown Dipper** and **Ibisbill**, and we will scour the marshes for **Solitary Snipe**.

Overnight: Bumthang

Day 12. Snow Pigeons on the pass to Sengor

Today will be another day of climbing up to nearly 4 000m on another spectacular mountain pass, actually the highest one in Bhutan – Thrumsing La. Up in the high mountains we should pick up flocks of **Snow Pigeons**, as they flutter over the valleys. Other species en route include **Upland Buzzard** and **Himalayan Vulture**, and bird parties at this altitude are likely to yield

many an adorable **White-browed Fulvetta** and **Grey Crested** and **Green-backed Tits**. Also with some focused effort we are likely to get cracking looks at **Blood Pheasant**. In the late afternoon we will approach our camp at Sengor – our site for the gorgeous, red and black, white-spotted **Satyr Tragopan**.

Overnight: Camping, Sengor

Days 13 – 16, Birding the Lingmethang Road to Mongar

The name ‘Lingmethang Road’, along which we have campsites at either end for three nights, will send shivers of delight down the spine of many an avid world birder. In the higher reaches we search for the tragopan, and an abundance of other spectacular species await us as we work the road up and down: **Fulvous, Rufous-headed, and Pale-billed Parrotbills**, as well as the petite **Black-throated, Scaly, Blue-winged, Rufous-chinned, Grey-sided**, and more **Laughingthrushes**. We will also be looking for **Bar-winged** and **Rufous-throated Wren-Babblers, Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler**, and with a lot of luck the bizarre **Sikkim Wedge-billed Babbler, Ward’s and Red-headed Trogons, Fire-tailed Myzornis, Chestnut-capped and Golden Babblers**, the extravagant **Himalayan Cutia**, and **Chestnut-bellied and White-tailed Nuthatches** can also be seen here. The collection of **Fulvettas** includes the exquisite **Golden-breasted** and the subtler **Yellow-throated**. We also hope to find **Rusty-fronted and Hoary-throated Barwings** and **White-browed, Rufous-breasted, and Golden Bush Robins**; the list is endless! Night outings may yield **Brown Wood, Indian Scops, and Mountain Scops Owls** as well as **Grey Nightjar**. Doubtless, our time along the Lingmethang Road will be the tour highlight for many. After three nights camping we travel through steep chir-pine-sloped valleys to Mongar, where we refresh and clean up at a hotel.

Overnight Day 13: Camping, Sengor

Overnight Days 14 and 15: Camping, Yonkala

Overnight Day 16: Mongar

Day 17. The Ward’s Trogons of Kori La pass

An early start gets us to the exquisite-looking forest on Kori La as the birds awaken. The birding here is red-hot throughout. Feeding flocks may include **Black-eared Shrike-babbler, Rufous-vented** and **Whiskered Yuhinas**, and **Grey-chinned Minivet** aplenty, as well as **Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, Eurasian Jay, and Greater and Lesser Yellownapes**. Other specialties we have recorded along here on past tours include delights such as **Ward’s Trogon, Fire-tailed Myzornis, Blue-fronted and White-tailed Robin, Maroon Oriole, and Pygmy and Sapphire Flycatchers** amidst a continual stream of yuhinas, and redstarts are also likely. As we cross more deeply-incised river valleys populated by chir-pine forests, we will look out for **Pallas’s Fish Eagle**.

Overnight: Trashigang

Day 18. Trashigang to Narphung

We bird the forests from Trashigang to Narphung, stalking parties of tits, niltavas, fulvettas, minivets, and more, while catching up on the odds and ends that we may have missed earlier or

desire better views of. If not already, we are bound to encounter groups of attractive capped langurs on this day. **Oriental Skylark** and **Grey Bush Chat** frequent our campsite in Narphung. Overnight: Camping, Narphung

Day 19. Narphung to Samdrup Jonkhar

Our last full day in Bhutan will likely be as spectacular as any other. The forests and scrub below our campsite may yield an array of goodies, including **Brown-flanked Bush Warbler**, **Yellow-breasted Greenfinch**, **Pale Blue**, **Slaty-blue**, and **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers**, and **Silver-eared Mesia**. Species usually encountered at lower altitudes on the plains of India, such as **Common Rosefinch**, are likely to show up. We have further opportunities to chase skulkers such as **Golden Bush Robin**. Earlier tours have kicked up **Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush** and **Red-faced Liocichla** from these forests and shrubberies. As we descended down towards Samdrup Jonkhar and the Plains of Assam, a great variety of new birds await us: **White-naped Yuhina**, **Long-tailed Sibia**, **Blue-eared Barbet**, **Green-billed Malkoha**, **Common Iora**, **Asian Fairy-bluebird**, **Dark-sided Flycatcher**, and **Red-whiskered Bulbul**. We also have a chance for better and further views of birds like **Himalayan Flameback**, **Great, Blue-throated**, and **Golden-throated Barbets**, **Ashy Wood Pigeon**, and **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**. We have another site for **Beautiful Nuthatch** near the garrison town of Deothang, and as we approach Samdrup Jonkhar we will search for **White-crowned** and **Black-backed Forktails**, **Blue-eared Kingfisher**, and the tricky and range-restricted **Dark-rumped Swift**.

Overnight: Samdrup Jonkhar

Day 20. Departure for Guwahati

Today we enter India into the Plains of Assam and drive to Guwahati for your flights home, or to continue on our Assam extension, which includes Kaziranga and Nameri National Parks.

Duration: 20 days
Group Size: 4 – 8
Date: 27 March – 15 April 2019
Start: Paro, Bhutan
End: Guwahati, India

Price: US\$8393 per person sharing (**For booking before the end of February 2018, you can get 2018 prices, which are US\$7955 per person sharing, single supplement US\$1171.**)

Single supplement: US\$1235

Price includes:

Accommodation. We will camp for several nights – this is all-equipped camping and we spoil you with good food.

All meals

International guide

Price excludes:

International flights

Drinks and alcoholic beverages

Personal insurance

Gratuities

Laundry service

Personal expenses such as gifts