



**THE HIMALAYAS OF BHUTAN IN NOVEMBER:
WHITE- BELLIED HERON, BLACK-NECKED
CRANE, AND AWE-INSPIRING VISTAS**

2 - 13 NOVEMBER 2020



Ward's Trogon 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 that spread over much of the country. On clear autumn days we enjoy snow-capped peaks as well as fabulous architecture, while we search for a suite of sought-after birds. November is particularly good for birds often missed on spring birding tours to this country – notably **Black-necked Crane** (no guarantee, of course, but we usually find it) and the critically endangered and enigmatic **White-bellied Heron**. Birding Bhutan in November also means being treated to abundant, fabulously exciting mixed flocks that contain the likes of laughingthrushes, yuhinas, fulvettas, and other incredible Oriental bird groups. We also expect to find some fabled Eastern Himalayan birds that can be encountered year-round, such as **Beautiful Nuthatch** (among other nuthatches), the tricky **Ward's Trogon**, the unbelievable **Fire-tailed Myzornis**, **Rufous-necked Hornbill**, **Yellow-rumped Honeyguide**, **Ibisbill**, **Himalayan Monal**, and other vivid pheasants, including the aptly-named **Blood Pheasant**, and a chance at the dazzling **Satyr Tragopan**. The tragopan is more likely on our spring tour, but we nevertheless stand a small chance in November of a sighting of this Himalayan special. Other highlights are **Wallcreeper**, spectacular sunbirds, parrotbills, striking and gorgeous forktails along the fast-flowing rivers – plus 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.

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.

This tour can be combined with our **Bhutan Extension - Assam November 2020** (13 - 20 November 2020) tour.

Itinerary (12 days/11 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 around here, as does **Wallcreeper**, **Black-tailed Crake**, 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 4000 meters

(about 13000 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. 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 Pigeon**, **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. With luck, we may encounter overwintering flocks of the elusive **Maroon-backed Accentor**. We descend by lunchtime after a busy morning of birding to allow enough time for a walk around the trailhead of the track that leads up to the awe-inspiring Tiger's Nest Monastery. From here we enjoy views of this ancient monastery literally built on a cliff face.

Overnight: Paro

Day 3. Himalayan vistas, Dochula Pass, and the Lamperi Royal Botanical Park

Today we head east to the Dochula Pass, which in autumn typically 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 striking **Spotted** and **Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes**, the tiny **Scaly-breasted Wren-babbler**, the vivid **Chestnut-capped Babbler**, the petite **Black-throated Bushtit**, and **Whiskered** and **Striated Yuhinas**. **Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler** skulks about in the bamboo, and **Red-billed Leiothrix**, **Rufous-breasted Accentor**, **Dark-breasted Rosefinch**, and many species of *Phylloscopus* warblers can be seen here too.

Overnight: Wangdu Phodrang Valley

Day 4. White-bellied Heron and the forests of the Mo Chu River

We start birding the fantastic Wangdu 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, but it is often dipped, especially on spring tours. While searching for the heron we may encounter **Spotted** and **Little Forktails**, the 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**, the striking **Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush**, **Speckled Piculet**, and with luck and some patience **Scaly-breasted** and **Spotted Wren-Babblers**. This area is also a site for that most tricky of **Accentors** – the **Maroon-backed**. Stream crossings are home to the elegant **Salty-backed Forktail**, and while

stalking the birds in the forest we will all also keep an eye to the sky for **Mountain Hawk-Eagle**, **Crested Honey Buzzard**, and flocks of **Himalayan Swiftlet**.

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 Mo Po 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: Phobjikha Valley

Day 5. Ward’s Trogon, Fire-tailed Myzornis, and the Black-necked Cranes of Phobjikha

An early start will see us searching for the attractive **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler** around our hotel gardens and the Mo Chu River. As we descend and then start ascending again toward the high-altitude Pele La Pass, we 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**, **Black Bulbul**, **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**. **Rufous-bellied Woodpecker** is always a delight to all. The pass also offers a chance at one of Bhutan’s megabirds – the legendary **Ward’s Trogon**. This species has become much harder in recent years due to road construction, but we will nevertheless try hard. 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**. The tragopan is very unobtrusive in the non-breeding season and thus hard to find. We will therefore need quite a bit of luck to get a sighting of this species on our November tour. As we descend into the high-altitude valley of Phobjikha, we will enjoy one of the world’s rarest **Cranes**, the **Black-necked**. Other species here include **Tickell’s Leaf Warbler**, **Rufous-breasted Accentor**, large flocks of **Red-billed Chough**, and **Hen Harrier**.

Overnight: Phobjikha Valley

Day 6. Pele La Pass

At the top of the Pele La Pass we will search for **White-winged Grosbeak** and **Grey-winged** and **White-collared Blackbirds**. **Great Parrotbill** used to occur here but sadly has become increasingly rare. 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 toward Trongsa, roadside stops may yield colorful **Sunbirds** including **Fire-tailed**, **Mrs. Gould’s**, and **Green-tailed**, **Collared Owlet**, bustling flocks of **White-throated Laughingthrush**, and the striking **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler**. We will keep a lookout for flocks of **Common** and **Nepal House Martins**.

Overnight: Trongsa or surroundings

Days 7 – 8. Birding the spectacular mountain passes of Zhemgang

The road toward 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 normal 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

Day 9. 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. These 'low altitude' forests provide opportunities for many a delightful species: **Long-tailed Broadbill**, **Orange-bellied Leafbird**, **White-browed, Coral-billed**, and **Slender-billed Scimitar Babblers**, **Grey-bellied Tesia**, **Mountain Tailorbird**, **Brown-throated Treecreeper**, and the extravagant **Crimson Sunbird**. We will spend time chasing skulkers including **Blue-winged Laughingthrush**, the aptly-named **Golden Babbler**, and troops of exotic-looking **Gee's Golden Langurs** scurrying through the forest canopy, while noisy flocks of the iconic **White-crested Laughingthrush** scour the forests for grubs lower down. After relishing these impressive species we return to Trongsa.

Overnight: Trongsa

Day 10. Transfer to Thimpu

In the morning at 7:00 a.m. we drive from Trongsa to Thimpu – picking up birds that we have missed on the way. Depending on how much birding we do on the way, we may arrive in Thimpu in time to search for **Black-tailed Crake**, **Brown Dipper**, and **Ibisbill**, and for some capital-city shopping in the evening.

Overnight: Thimpu

Day 11. Yellow-rumped Honeyguide and Jigme Dorji National Park, transfer to Paro

An early morning departure sees us heading for Jigme Dorji National Park. En route we search for the enigmatic **Ibisbill**, **Brown Dipper**, **Black-tailed Crake**, **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 **Brown Parrotbill**, **Kalij Pheasant**, **Golden-breasted Fulvetta**, **Hoary-throated Barwing**, the colorful **Rufous-breasted Bush Robin**, and many more. Birding Ecotours recently discovered a site here for that most dramatic of **Scimitar Babblers**, the **Slender-billed**.

After Jigme Dorji we visit a breeding program for a most-bizarre Himalayan mammal – the **Takin**. It looks like a cross between a giant mountain goat and an antelope!

In the afternoon we travel to Paro.

Overnight: Paro

Day 12. Departure

Today we depart from Paro for our flights home, or to Guwahati to start the Assam, India, extension.

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually only 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.

Duration: 12 days
Limit: 4 - 8
Date: 2 - 13 November 2020
Start: Paro, Bhutan
End: Paro, Bhutan

Price: US\$5565 per person sharing
Single supplement: US\$771

Price includes:

Accommodation
All meals
International guide

Price excludes:

International flights
Alcoholic beverages
Personal insurance
Gratuities
Laundry service
Personal expenses