



**BHUTAN IN FALL:
WHITE- BELLIED HERON, BLACK-NECKED CRANE, AND
AWE-INSPIRING HIMALAYAN VISTAS**

6 – 17 NOVEMBER 2023



Black-necked Crane is one of many highly sought specialties on this exciting tour.

The Kingdom of Bhutan, known as “a Kingdom in the Clouds” and “the Land of the Thunder Dragon”, is a quaint, quiet, and scenically spectacular country with a strong conservation ethic rooted in ancient Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, the people are extremely friendly, there are many environmental protection laws, and the air and water are clean and refreshing. There is nothing quite like experiencing the Kingdom of Bhutan (simply referred to Bhutan hereafter) firsthand, and we look forward to welcoming you onto this short fall tour.

Vast areas of unspoiled forest still cover the Himalayan foothills that spread over much of Bhutan. On clear autumn days we enjoy viewing 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** and the Critically Endangered (IUCN), enigmatic, and also tough **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** (and other nuthatches), the gorgeous **Ward’s Trogon**, the impressive **Fire-tailed Myzornis**, the massive **Rufous-necked Hornbill**, the uncommon **Yellow-rumped Honeyguide**, and the beautiful **Himalayan Monal** and other vivid pheasants, including the aptly named **Blood Pheasant**. There is also 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 include a trio of monotypic specialties in **Ibisbill**, **Wallcreeper**, and **Spotted Elachura** along with spectacular sunbirds, parrotbills, and striking and gorgeous forktails along the fast-flowing rivers – plus a plethora of other tantalizing jewels.



*A big target for birders all around the world, we hope to find the unique **Ibisbill** during the tour.*

In addition to this range 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 eastward through a range of habitats such as pine and spruce forests, subtropical broad-leaved forests, bamboo, alpine scrub, rivers, and many others before the tour ends back where it started.

This Bhutan birding adventure can be combined with our **Birding Tour Assam, India: Kaziranga and Nameri National Parks**, which is a perfect extension to this Bhutan in Autumn tour. On this extension we will be looking for **Bengal Florican**, **Greater Adjutant**, **Blue-naped Pitta**, **Indian Grassbird**, **Swamp Francolin**, and **White-winged Duck**, as well as some awesome mammals such as the magnificent trio of **Greater One-horned (Indian) Rhinoceros**, **Asian Elephant**, and **Bengal Tiger**.

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**, **Plumbeous Water Redstart**, and **White-capped Redstart** (one of the most attractive).

Overnight: Paro

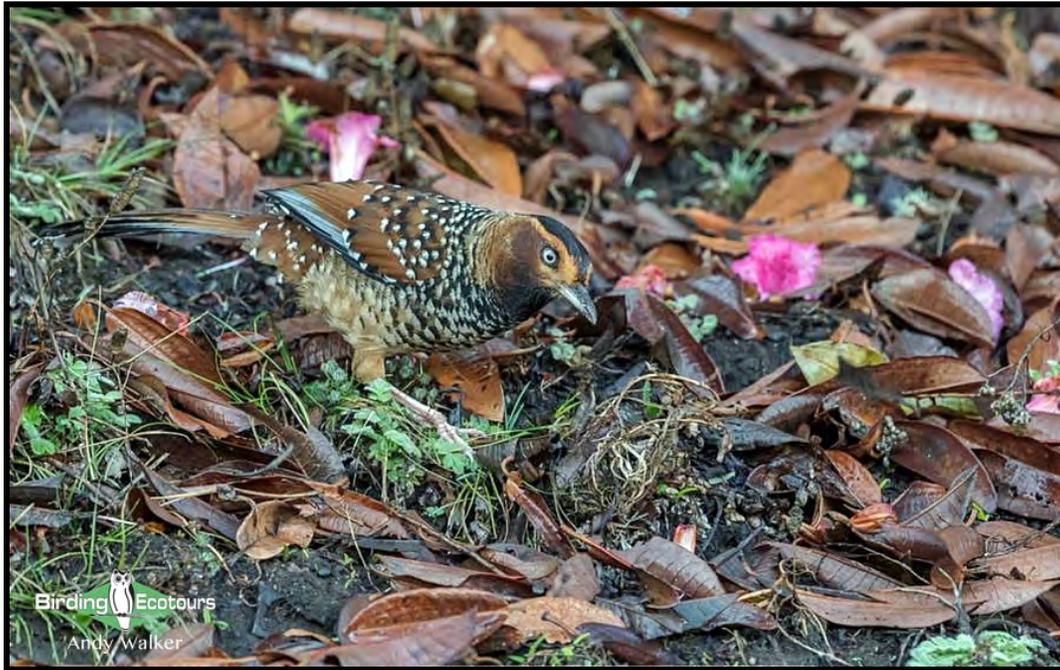
Day 2. Chele La Pass

An early start will have us heading up a spectacular mountain pass, the famous Chele La Pass, which reaches 3,988 meters (about 13,083 feet), looking for a range of specialties as we ascend. The biggest prize for most birders here is **Himalayan Monal**, a veritable rainbow kaleidoscope. In addition to the monal we can find up to four other 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 for flocks of **Snow Pigeons**, **Grey Crested Tit**, and colorful **Green-backed Tit**, as well as the fabulous **Yellow-cheeked Tit**, and 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 other fantastic birds. **Spotted Nutcracker** is common here, as it is over much of Bhutan. With luck we may encounter overwintering flocks of the often-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 to the awe-inspiring Tiger's Nest Monastery. From here we enjoy views of this ancient monastery, literally built on a cliff face from the 1690s onward, an incredible feat by any imagination. Watch for **Black Eagle** flying about! Please ask us if you want to hike up to the monastery so we can factor that into our plans for the day.

Overnight: Paro



*The laughingthrushes in Bhutan are gorgeous, and **Spotted Laughingthrush** is no exception to this rule.*

Day 3. Himalayan vistas, Dochula Pass, and the Lampelri 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 long-tailed **Yellow-billed Blue Magpie** and the vividly colored trio of **Whistler's Warbler**, **Grey-hooded Warbler**, and **Chestnut-crowned Warbler**.

The recently declared Lampelri 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 Laughingthrush**, **Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush**, the tiny **Scaly-breasted Cupwing** (formerly a 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: Wangdue Phodrang

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

We start birding the fantastic Wangdue Phodrang area, where we could find birds such as **Crested Serpent Eagle**, **Slaty-backed Forktail**, various flycatchers, the monotypic **Wallcreeper**, and a host of other quality birds.



*It is beautiful to watch **Wallcreeper** creeping along, flashing the red-and-white pattern in its wings.*

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 birds. Bhutan must be the best country for this difficult species, and it will be a major target during our time in suitable habitat.

While searching for the prized heron we may encounter **Spotted Forktail** and **Little Forktail**, the colorful **Common Kingfisher**, **Upland Buzzard**, and the impressive, huge **Crested Kingfisher**, among many others.

After our search for the heron we explore and bird the magnificent forests along the Mo Chhu River. Here we dive into a further Himalayan birding spectacle with species such as the diminutive yet spectacular **Chestnut-headed Tesia**, the brightly colored **Scarlet Minivet**, **Short-billed Minivet**, **Long-tailed Minivet**, the striking **Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush**, **Speckled Piculet**, and with luck and some patience **Spotted Elachura** (this bird was recently moved into a family of its own, making it a monotypic family, as it is so unique; it was previously called Spotted Wren-Babbler). **Maroon-backed Accentor** is usually a tough bird to connect with. It occurs here in the spring, so we will look for any lingering birds that may still be present. Stream crossings in the area are home to the elegant **Slaty-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 (Oriental) Honey Buzzard**, and flocks of **Himalayan Swiftlets**.



*The diminutive **Little Forktail** can easily be missed.*

After this birding spectacle we visit the legendary Punakha Dzong – Bhutan’s most impressive dzong and currently in use as a monastery. The dzong is situated at the confluence of the Mo Chhu and Po Chhu 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.

Overnight: Phobjikha Valley

Day 5. Phobjikha

An early start will see us searching for the attractive **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler** around our hotel garden 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 Rock Thrush** and **Blue Rock Thrush**, 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 Fulvettas**. **Rufous-bellied Woodpecker** is always a delight, and we will hope to see this pretty woodpecker.

The Pele La Pass also offers a chance at one of Bhutan’s megabirds, the legendary **Ward’s Trogon**. This species has become much more difficult in recent years due to road construction, but we will nevertheless try hard to find this quality bird here. The aptly named **Fire-tailed**

Myzornis may be smaller, but it is no less spectacular, and we will keep our eyes peeled for it. As we ascend higher the mixed broad-leaved forest gives way to stands of rhododendron and coniferous forest, and this is where we start looking 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 look for one of the world's rarest cranes, **Black-necked Crane**. Other species here include **Tickell's Leaf Warbler**, **Rufous-breasted Accentor**, large flocks of **Red-billed Choughs**, and **Hen Harrier**.

Overnight: Phobjikha Valley



Fire-tailed Myzornis can quite easily be overlooked; keep an ear open for its strange, electric-sounding contact call.

Day 6. Pele La Pass

At the top of the Pele La Pass we will search for **White-winged Grosbeak** along with **Grey-winged Blackbird** and **White-collared Blackbird**. **Great Parrotbill** used to occur here but sadly has become increasingly rare. We will also keep a constant eye to the sky for **Himalayan Vulture**, **Steppe Eagle**, and **Long-legged Buzzard** among other delights that may pass overheard. As we descend again toward Trongsa, roadside stops may yield the incredibly colorful **Fire-tailed Sunbird**, **Mrs. Gould's Sunbird**, and **Green-tailed Sunbird**. We might find a **Collared Owlet**, which may attract a range of small bird. Bustling flocks of **White-throated Laughingthrushes** may pass through, and the striking **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler** is possible.

Overnight: Trongsa or surroundings



Grey-winged Blackbird is a rather striking bird.



White-throated Laughingthrush can be extremely gregarious, and it is not unusual to see raucous flocks of over 60 birds moving about, and they often show well, as shown here!

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 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.



*The vivid **Common Green Magpie** is not actually common at all, and we will be pleased to find it while birding in suitable forest habitat.*

A night walk from our camp may deliver **Mountain Scops** and **Brown Wood Owls**. There will be many more highlights during our time here, and the aforementioned birds are only a small sample.

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 in awe of the gigantic and noisy **Rufous-necked Hornbill**. **Great Hornbill** is also a spectacular common sight. These low-altitude forests provide opportunities for many a delightful species such as the rather special **Long-tailed Broadbill**, **Golden-throated**

Barbet, Orange-bellied Leafbird, White-browed Scimitar Babbler, Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler, Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler, Grey-bellied Tesia, Mountain Tailorbird, Brown-throated Treecreeper, and the extravagant **Crimson Sunbird**. We will spend time chasing skulkers like **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



Golden-throated Barbet is quite common but more often heard before it is seen.

Day 10. Transfer to Thimphu

In the morning we drive from Trongsa to Thimphu – picking up birds that we may have missed on the way, or those we simply would like to look for again along the route. Depending on how much birding we do on the way we may arrive in Thimphu in time to search for **Black-tailed Crake, Brown Dipper,** and **Ibisbill**, and for some capital-city shopping in the evening.

Overnight: Thimphu

Day 11. 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 along the river. We will arrive at a section of Jigme Dorji National Park where we have a stakeout for the tricky **Yellow-rumped Honeyguide** by

mid-morning. 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, **Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler**, so it is only right that we look for it again.



*Honeyguides in Asia are tough; we hope to see **Yellow-rumped Honeyguide** on this tour.*

After our visit to Jigme Dorji National Park 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, where we will have the final group evening meal of our tour and try to decide on a “bird of the trip”, no easy task!

Overnight: Paro

Day 12. Departure

Today is a non-birding day, unless you continue with our extension. You depart from Paro for your international departure home, or you can continue on our specially designed **Birding Tour Assam, India: Kaziranga and Nameri National Parks** extension, which leaves from Guwahati, Assam, at lunchtime.

Overnight: Not included

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
Group Size: 4 - 8
Dates: 6 - 17 November 2023
Start: Paro, Bhutan
End: Paro, Bhutan
Prices: US\$7,124 per person sharing – based on 4 - 8 participants (2023) *(due to a huge increase in government tax post-Covid, our Bhutan tour prices will be increasing, except for those who have already booked).*

Single Supplements: US\$866 (2023)

Price includes:

All accommodation (as described above; please note that the accommodation in the mountains of Bhutan is basic to very basic, often with shared bathroom/toilets and in permanent camp sites away from the cities on a couple of occasions)

Meals (from lunch on day 1 until breakfast on day 12)

Drinking water – two bottles of mineral water per day per person from our tour vehicle, please bring a refillable water bottle (if taken from the hotel this will be at your own cost)

Expert tour leader

Local bird and wildlife guide fees

National park/birdwatching reserve entrance fees

All ground transport and tolls while on tour, including airport pick-up and drop-off

Price excludes:

Flights

Visa

Items of a personal nature, e.g., gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls, etc.

Optional tours (e.g., monument entrance fees and associated additional travel expenses)

Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or birding/sightseeing/monument excursions

Soft/alcoholic drinks

Camera (still/video) permits

Personal travel insurance

Gratuities