



# Bhutan: Birding and Culture

with Wilderness Birding Adventures

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Trip report by Aaron Lang

Birding Bhutan is an adventure filled with incredible birds and mammals, wild forests, beautiful people and fascinating culture. It stands alone in the Himalayan region as a unique destination with intact forests, wildlife, culture, and economy. This small country is a place where rare and declining species, struggling to survive elsewhere, still thrive in the densely forested hills and mountains.

This was our tenth trip to Bhutan since 2005. Our diverse group of 10 participants was especially keen and skilled at finding birds without the assistance of myself or of Sonam Dorji, our Bhutanese leader. This made an already enjoyable tour even more fun and exciting and in the end, the result was a longer list of birds, mammals, butterflies, and—this year—fish that were enjoyed by all.

Our itinerary was roughly a loop that began and ended in Paro, stretching as far east as Yongkola and Gyelpozhing in the Mongar district and incorporating a piece of the Indian Plain along the Bhutan/India border from Sarpang to Gelephu. This southern border region is an area birded by very few other tours and the low elevation Indian Plain always holds surprises for us. The entire feel of the lowland border region—architecture, dress, cuisine, etc.—is quite different from the rest of Bhutan, where the mountains dominate daily life. I find this border country very exciting and it's always one of my favorite parts of the tour.

Highlights of this tour were many, both birding and otherwise, and it's difficult to list them all here. Below is my attempt at a brief day-to-day diary, listing just a few of the standout experiences.

## **Day 1, Group Meeting in Bangkok, November 7<sup>th</sup>**

Our group met for dinner in Bangkok at our hotel near the airport the night before our morning flight to Paro. We went over last minute questions, discussed the tour schedule, and enjoyed some Thai cuisine. It was already clear to me that this would be a great trip!

## **Day 2, November 8<sup>th</sup>**

We took a 6:30 AM shuttle from our hotel to the Suvarnabhumi International Airport to check in for our 9:30 AM flight to Paro. The morning's logistics and the flight to Paro were perfectly uneventful and we arrived in Paro around 1 PM. After the usual customs formalities, which are quite painless and straightforward in Bhutan, we were met by our Bhutanese leader, Sonam Dorji (Dorji), and our incredible driver, Pala. Dorji is one of Bhutan's finest birders and a natural guide. Pala's skills as a driver on Bhutan's challenging roads are beyond belief. We would be in great hands for the next 19 days.

Since we were well fed by the great service on Druk Air, we began birding almost immediately after leaving the airport. Our first birding foray was a leisurely search of the Paro River for Wallcreeper and Ibisbill, both of which kindly obliged. We also found River Lapwing, Green Sandpiper, and Common Sandpiper. A Brown Shrike along the river was rare for Paro. We typically only encounter this species in

lower elevations near the southern border. After birding the Paro River, we made the one-hour drive to Thimphu and checked into our hotel for the evening.

### **Day 3, November 9<sup>th</sup>**

After breakfast at the hotel, we birded the Babesa Sewage ponds on the edge of Thimphu. These ponds are right along the Thimphu River and can be a magnet for rare and unusual birds. They did not disappoint this morning and provided for us great views of Ferruginous Duck and Eurasian Moorhen. The latter is a rare migrant in Bhutan, but late fall and wintering birds are nearly unheard of. After birding the lagoons and riverside we made a stop at the Bank of Bhutan to exchange dollars for ngultrum. Our next stop was to the Takin Zoo in the hills above the city to see Bhutan's national mammal, as well as barking deer, sambar deer, and goral. The grounds can often be birdy, but our visit was a bit quiet bird-wise. The rest of the afternoon was spent driving to Punakha via Dochu La pass, a 10,000-foot pass which offers incredible views of the Himalayas, including the world's highest unclimbed peak, Gongkar Phuntsom. While admiring the view we also found Eurasian (Spotted) Nutcracker, White-browed Fulvetta, Red-headed Bullfinch, Yellow-billed Blue-Magpie, and Dark-rumped Rosefinch.

We arrived at our hotel Punakha just before sunset, in time for a cup of tea while watching a few Scaly-breasted Munias come in to roost in the vines on the patio.

### **Day 4, November 10<sup>th</sup>**

We left the hotel early this morning to get to the Jigme Dorji National Park when the bird activity was at its peak. Our hour-long drive passed through Punakha town and the well lit Punakha Dzong, and continued along the Mo Chhu and the road to Gasa. The birding excitement started before we even got to Jigme Dorji when we were delayed by a pair of posing Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babblers. Once in the park, the birding continued to be good and we encountered several mixed flocks which included Nepal and Rufous-winged Fulvetta, Rufous-capped Babbler, and all three of Bhutan's Niltavas—Large, Small, and Rufous-bellied! The morning also brought nice views of Spotted, Slaty-backed, and Little Forktail. Perhaps the birding highlight of the morning, however, came in the form of a small and secretive little brown bird. With great fortitude and patience our entire group was eventually rewarded with excellent views of a skulking Scaly-breasted Cupwing!

Breakfast and lunch were served to us in the field by our impressive road crew. The culinary expertise of the chef and the crew's unwavering attention to our comfort would help make every day of this tour a success. There are few things better than enjoying a cup of coffee and hot breakfast while a mixed flock patrols the trees over your table.

After lunch, we visited the Punakha Dzong, widely regarded as the most beautiful of Bhutan's impressive fortresses. Set at the confluence of the Mo and Po Chhu (female and male rivers) the dzong was constructed in 1637 and was the seat of the Government of Bhutan until 1955. It is still the administrative center of the Punakha District and the winter home of the monastic body. After a tour of the impressive dzong, we walked upstream along the Po Chhu and across the longest suspension bridge in Bhutan. For some, including me, it's a thrilling addition to the afternoon. A few folks saw White-browed Wagtail from the bridge. Others, including me, were too focused on simply crossing the bridge to look down. Unfortunately, once across the bridge we were unable to relocate the wagtail. After the entire group had crossed, we loaded into the bus and continued up the Po Chhu a short

distance to scan the river for White-bellied Heron. With only 60 individuals confirmed in the world (most of these in Bhutan), the White-bellied Heron is Asia's rarest bird. Fortunately, it didn't take long to locate a lone heron hunting in the shallow braids of the Po Chhu. We all enjoyed scope views and watched this highly imperiled bird successfully catch a large fish.

#### **Day 5, November 11<sup>th</sup>**

Today's drive took us south along the Punakha River to the village of Tsirang. A few stops early in the drive produced Olive-backed Pipit, Little Bunting and Little Ringed Plover along the river. Just before our lunch stop, we saw the first Great Hornbills of the trip. While stopping to view these magnificent birds, Dorji picked out a couple of gorals on the cliffs across the river. The goral is a brown-colored wild goat of the Himalayas and can be difficult to pick out on the vegetated cliffs. The biggest birding surprise of the day was a lone Jungle Babbler during lunch. While we always find this lowland species along the Indian border, this is the first time that we have seen it away from that area. Dorji also remarked that he had never seen Jungle Babbler away from the Indian Plain. The day's drive was along a mostly good road and we arrived at the new hotel in Tsirang around 5 pm.

#### **Day 6, November 12<sup>th</sup>**

We left our hotel early this morning to have our breakfast near the roadside stupa at Darachu. Our fabulous road crew again had everything ready for us when we arrived at this beautiful breakfast spot. Since the drive from Tsirang to Gelephu is not too long, we had plenty of time to explore the mid-elevation broadleaf forests around Darachu after breakfast, and we spent several hours birding the forests along the road. Persistence and patience again paid off this morning with another skulker. This time the Long-billed Wren-Babbler was our prize! It was even more stealthy than the Scaly-breasted Cupwing from a few days ago, but we did all eventually see it quite well. Other great birds from the morning included Coral-billed Scimitar-Babbler, Scarlet Finch, Tibetan Serin, Rufous-necked Hornbill, and Fire-tailed Sunbird. Fire-tailed Sunbird breeds in high elevation rhododendron scrub in Bhutan. However, it has left these areas by our November tours and retreated to lower elevation forests, making it a real prize! It can be very difficult to find and is not expected on our fall tours.

The mountain roads eventually settle out on the Indian plain at Sarpang. The only true low elevation area in Bhutan is the narrow strip of flat land along the Indian border. This strip of land is less than 250 meters in elevation and is only a few kilometers or less wide in parts, but it offers a number of birds and mammals not possible in the rest of Bhutan. We birded the 30-kilometer road from Sarpang to Gelephu in the late afternoon and found Indian Roller, Chestnut-tailed Starling, Green Imperial Pigeon, and a pair of Collared Falconets! After dinner at our hotel in Gelephu, we set out in the warm Indian air to look for owls and other night birds. Shortly after heading out we found two Spotted Owlets along the road not far from town! This was a life bird for all on the trip, including Dorji and me.

#### **Day 7, November 13<sup>th</sup>**

Gelephu is a border town and one of three main entry points into India. After just a few days in Bhutan, it is easy to notice in Gelephu the Indian influences to the architecture, dress, cuisine, and the people that you meet. Even ignoring all of these cues, the ecology of the region has a distinctive flavor compared to the rest of Bhutan: the air is humid and sticky, the temperature warm, occasionally hot, and the birds are those of the Indian Plain. Our pre-breakfast birding foray near town was very productive with many highlights. Several Indian Peafowl showed well near the roads. A Greater Flameback called as it flew right in front of us. A few small groups of Red-breasted Parakeets teased us

with fleeting views before we finally enjoyed excellent scope views. A highlight of the morning was another life bird for Dorji, a very cooperative Thick-billed Warbler in the dense grass near the Gelephu airport. Despite the notoriously skulking habits of this species, it eventually perched up tall and proud and showed well for all. During the excitement with the warbler, and fearing that it might be overlooked, a male Siberian Rubythroat teed up on the powerline, flashed his brilliant ruby throat, and called loudly!

The internet and its many communication tools have made the birding world smaller and changed the way we bird at home and while on trips. One clear example of this is the new friend that we made in Gelephu during our tour. Several days before, Dorji and I had learned of a birder in Gelephu who was regularly seeing Spotted Owlets near his home and posting photos on Facebook. Dorji contacted the birder, a teacher at the Gelephu secondary school, and he invited us to come over to the school grounds where he taught and lived. Shortly after introducing himself, the teacher casually led us to a large tree on the school grounds and pointed up, "there's one." A Spotted Owlet looked down sleepily at us. We eventually found four in this tree and he said he thought there were at least ten total at the school. I can only imagine what he might have for us in Gelephu on next year's trip!

In late morning we again began to ascend into the mountains and birded our way to Tingtibi, our home for two nights. We arrived at our camp just after dark and found our tents set up, with beds made, the dinner tent ready for us, and a string of small lights illuminating the cozy camp.

#### **Day 8, November 14<sup>th</sup>**

We left camp early to so we could bird the Domphe road in the dawn hours where we hoped to find White-hooded Babbler. This striking bamboo specialist is uncommon on this stretch of road, and this would be our only chance on the trip to find it. After passing a lot of nice looking forest, Pala and Dorji led us to the right spot and as if on cue just before breakfast (and conveniently located right next to our breakfast spot) we found a flock of White-hooded Babblers. As they often do, the babblers were hanging out with a few Pale-billed Parrotbills (Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbills), another target for the day. After breakfast, we got more and better looks at the White-hooded Babblers, got incredibly close views of two White-browed Scimitar Babblers, enjoyed a Chestnut-headed Tesia at our feet, and found another White-bellied Heron.

Lunch was back in camp and was followed by a couple of hours to rest and recharge before some late afternoon birding, again along the Domphe road. We added several species in the afternoon, including the rare Yellow-vented Flowerpecker.

#### **Day 9, November 15<sup>th</sup>**

We left our camp at Tingtibi this morning and departed for our next camp near Trongsa. Our morning travels led us onto the old road up to Zhemgang, and then down from Zhemgang back to the river. With the completion of a new road right along the river a couple of years ago, this old road has become far less traveled making it a great area to bird these mid-elevation forests. In some places, the canopy nearly connects over the road and the forest birds are right overhead.

One of the most exciting parts of birding in Bhutan is encountering mixed species flocks. These can be exhilarating experiences as dozens of birds dart through the vegetation right in front of you. As the leaders call out the species in the flock, excitement can turn to frustration as the winged targets prove

too furtive to pin down. Some flocks are like this and it can often take a few flocks to get a look at all of the species that are called out. And then there are the kinds of flock experiences that we had just before breakfast on the old road near Zhemgang. As we walked from the shadows of the forest to a sunny break in the canopy, the trees hummed with activity. However, instead of furtive small brown jobbies, this flock was loaded with brilliantly colored, highly cooperative birds that seemed eager to be seen. Orange-bellied Leafbirds, Sultan and Yellow-cheeked Tits, Blue-throated Barbet, Green-tailed Sunbirds, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, and Scarlet Minivets showed and showed well in the bright sun. "Ooohs" and "Ahhhs" rained down. It was exciting and exhausting.

After another fine breakfast provided by our road crew, we continued on our way. Most of the afternoon involved more driving than birding as we progressed on the road up toward Trongsa. The 2016 monsoon season was especially violent and hard on the roads earlier in the year, and one stretch of today's road was particularly bad. The heavy rains had taken out several bridges and a long stretch of road that had only been made passable a few weeks before our trip. As always, Pala expertly maneuvered our bus past the hazards and we made it to camp just before dark. Camp tonight was on the grounds of Kuenga Rabten, the winter palace of the third King of Bhutan. The old palace now serves as a school for young monks and as we settled into camp the chants of the young monks spilled from the courtyard and into our camp.

#### **Day 10, November 16<sup>th</sup>**

After a morning tour of Kuenga Rabten and breakfast in camp, we said farewell to our camp and its impressive view and traveled north to Trongsa, then west toward Bumthang region. Despite poor road conditions west of Trongsa our driving was fairly efficient and we made it into Chummey, the first valley of Bumthang around 2:30 pm. Along the way we passed Yotong La pass, adding our first White-throated Redstarts, and getting more looks at Yellow-bellied Blue Magpies, Eurasian Nutcracker, and White-browed Fulvetas. At Chummey, we visited a local weaving and handicraft shop and had our first views of Black-browed (Rufous-fronted) Tits in a small flock outside the shop.

Our night was spent at the very cozy Kaila Guesthouse, but before checking in for the night we made a birding stop at the bamboo and scrub near the Bumthang airport. In short order we found what we were hoping for, getting very nice looks of Brown Parrotbill. This is a bird for which we only have a few regular spots on the itinerary. Here we also found the more widely distributed Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush.

We got back to Kaila Guesthouse around 5 pm and enjoyed a rest around the wood fire.

#### **Day 11, November 17<sup>th</sup>**

After two days of poor road conditions, it was very nice to get back to good roads that were not under construction or repair. While today's drive was long, the ratio of birding to driving was quite good and our birding stops incorporated a very wide range of elevations. They also included some great birds! The high elevation forests held mixed flocks of White-browed Fulvetta, Gray-crested, Coal, and Rufous-vented Tits. However, the bird that stole the show was the Blood Pheasant. Our early departure from the guesthouse meant that we were in the right habitat early enough to find two accommodating groups of these striking birds right along the road.

We stopped for lunch midway on our descent through the forests toward Sengor. Here we walked a

stretch of the old road hoping for what I consider to be the most beautiful laughingthrush in Bhutan, the Spotted Laughingthrush. We've seen the bird in this area on many previous tours. Often the views are of a skulky bird in the dense brush, and with patience, we can piece together good looks. On this trip, however, we were treated to this boldly patterned bird teed up in the top of a bush at close range as it sang its heart out. For me, this was one of the most memorable and exciting moments of the trip!

After lunch, we continued to drop in elevation on our way to Yongkola, our resting spot for the night. In the late afternoon we made an attempt for Ward's Trogon, and despite a lot of effort we only managed to hear the bird. However, while looking for trogons, Pala tracked down a rustling in the trees and located four female Satyr Tragopans that had just flown to roost! Satyr Tragopans are relatively easy to find in the spring when the males display in meadows and openings in the forest. However, in the fall and winter they descend into the dense sub-tropical forest and only extremely good fortune can get you a glimpse of this shy species. Someone in our group must have been living right as we found these birds with just enough light to enjoy end of the day scope views. A fitting end to a great day!

### **Day 12, November 18<sup>th</sup>**

On our tour we spend three nights in Yongkola, a place often touted to contain the best birding in Asia. The well-preserved forests here are part of the Thrumbsingla National Park and because of the dramatic altitudinal range of the area, the forest contains a diverse list of birds and wildlife. From our base at Trogonvilla, our comfortable hotel, we explored both uphill and down and were able to find many of the regions specialties.

On our first full day in Yongkola we ventured back to the site of the roosting Satyr Tragopans and searched, this time successfully, for the Ward's Trogon. Threatened by forest clearing in much of its range, the Ward's Trogon appears to still thrive in Bhutan's well-protected forests. It's always one of the trip highlights, and this year we got very nice scope views of a male and a female before, during, and after our field breakfast! My favorite kind of dining. Another highlight of the morning was a mixed flock that contained Blyth's Shrike-Babbler, Himalayan Cutia, Black-eared Shrike-Babbler, and the rare Black-headed Shrike-Babbler! After breakfast, we also found a shy, but somewhat obliging Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler.

### **Day 13, November 19<sup>th</sup>**

Early this morning a few of us left the hotel in the dark and walked downhill along the road trying for owls. We heard Asian Barred Owlet and Himalayan Wood Owl but were unable to see either. We joined the rest of the group at 6:30 AM and drove a short distance back into the forest of Thrumbsingla National Park. One target that had eluded us at Darachu, Zhemgang, and now at Yongkola was the Beautiful Nuthatch. We would try unsuccessfully again this morning in good habitat for the nuthatch. While the Beautiful Nuthatch continued to elude us, we did find a very large mixed flock of (Greater) Rufous-headed Parrotbill, Coral-billed Scimitar-Babbler (up to 15!), and Rusty-fronted Barwing. We also watched a group of distant capped langurs jump an impressive distance through the canopy. Three species of langurs occur in Bhutan—gray langur in the west, capped langur in the east, and the near-endemic golden langur in central Bhutan. We had now seen all of the langurs of Bhutan, although we hoped to get closer views of the capped before we left Yongkola.

After lunch back at Trogonvilla and a mid-afternoon rest, we drove steadily downhill to Gyelpozhing to

bird the low elevation valley and riverside. Along the way, we drove through the lovely valley at Limenthang, one of the most picturesque in Bhutan. Here the relatively open country held Crested Bunting, Rufous-necked Laughingthrush, and Black-tailed Crake. Along the river, in Gyelphozhing we had hoped to find Pallas's Fish-Eagle, which we missed near Punakha. Our usual strategy is to simply bird the riverside, hoping to find one flying by. However, as we drove into Gyelpozhang, Pala again proved that he is so much more than just a driver. In a casual phone conversation with a local friend of his he mentioned that he was with a group of birders. I'm paraphrasing here, but basically, his friend said, "Hey, there's big bird with a white head nesting near where I live, you should take your group there." And so Pala and Dorji took us there, and of course, it was a nesting pair of Pallas's Fish-Eagles! Again, someone in our group was living right.

We drove back to Trogonvilla in the dark, along the way shining for night birds and animals. If the Pallas's Fish-Eagle wasn't enough excitement for the day, Dorji's light fell upon a calling Jungle Owlet! This cooperative bird stayed along the road long enough for all of us to get out and enjoy excellent views of this small owl. This is the first time we have found Jungle Owlet on our Bhutan tour.

#### **Day 14, November 20<sup>th</sup>**

We spent our last morning in Yongkola birding a little-traveled road on the back side of the ridge from the village. Here we made one last effort for Beautiful Nuthatch. Our hopes rose when Dorji spotted a Beautiful Nuthatch while scoping across the valley, but the flock moved on and the nuthatch disappeared before anyone else could see it. We were having an incredible trip, finding nearly all of our targets, but the Beautiful Nuthatch would go unseen by our group this year. After crossing back over the ridge to the main road, we were again delayed. This time the delay wasn't road conditions or birds, but a group of capped langurs right along the road. We stopped for a while to watch and photograph these beautiful animals which didn't seem to mind much at all. These views were far better than the distant views we had a few days ago.

Because we chose to spend most of the morning birding around Yongkola and the drive today was long, we arrived at our hotel at Chummey after dark. Along the way, we added Steppe Eagle, Alpine Accentor, and Yellow-rumped Honeyguide to our trip.

#### **Day 15, November 21<sup>st</sup>**

We left the hotel early to get up to Tharpaling Monastery and the hillside above it in time to catch one of the most magnificent birds in Bhutan, the Himalayan Monal. These brilliantly colored, high-elevation pheasants are difficult to find throughout much of their native range because of hunting and habitat loss. In Bhutan, however, this large bird still thrives and can be readily found. We had brief views of two female Himalayan Monals a few days earlier near Thrumsingla Pass, but nothing like the views we had this morning at Tharpaling. Here the birds are almost tame and are far less shy than in other areas and our morning ascent got us up the hill early enough for great views of a male and a female on the hillside above the monastery. During our leisurely views of the pair we also found Red Crossbill, White-winged Grosbeak, and Black-faced Laughingthrush. After the morning of birding we descended to Tharpaling Lhakhang where our road crew had set out breakfast.

Much of the rest of the day was spent driving to Phobjikha Valley, our home for the next two nights. Because of some pretty serious road damage and road widening construction, the drive was longer than normal and we again arrived at the hotel after dark. While there wasn't much birding along the

drive, we did see Northern Goshawk near Trongsa. After dark, a Gray Nightjar flushed off the road in front of us and remarkably landed on a dirt bank next to the road, allowing for great views. We don't often find this species on our fall tours since most have left their high-elevation breeding grounds at this time. Even when we do find it, I don't think we've ever had views that were this good!

### **Day 16, November 22<sup>nd</sup>**

This morning we left the hotel at 6:30 AM for the short drive to Pele La pass, which we had passed over last night after dark. The old road at Pele La is an excellent place to look for high-elevation species and that was our goal this morning. After breakfast at the pass we walked this quiet road and found Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch, Black-throated and Red-throated Thrush, Hodgson's Treecreeper, and White-collared Blackbird. Here the views of Mount Jomalhari, on the border with Tibet, were fantastic.

We returned to Phobjikha in the late morning and made a visit to the Black-necked Crane visitor center near our hotel. Phobjikha Valley is the largest wetland area in Bhutan and this 10,000-foot valley is renowned as the winter home of nearly 500 Black-necked Cranes. After our very informative visit to the interpretive center, we had a fine lunch in the valley (again, courtesy of the road crew) where Black-necked Cranes and Ruddy Shelducks were easily viewed from lunch.

After an afternoon rest back at our hotel where some availed themselves of massages, we took a short walk to a hillside just above the valley floor to watch the cranes come in to roost for the evening. Several dozens were already in the valley when we arrived, and by the time we left over 200 had come in to roost at marshy edges of the valley.

### **Day 17, November 23<sup>rd</sup>**

Today we said farewell to the valley of the Black-necked Cranes and continued further west. There was some road construction from Phobjikha to Wangdi, but we completed this part of the drive before the morning was over. After passing through Wangdi, we birded the Punakha River from Wangdi to Punakha as we did way back on the morning of Day 5. Our hope was that we would find a few migrant and wintering waterbirds and shorebirds along the river. Our hopes were fulfilled and a short time along the river resulted in a pretty long and exciting list of interesting birds. These included a Little Ringed Plover, two Long-billed Plovers, a Kentish Plover, and all three species of Bhutan's lapwings. Another lovely Ibisbill made a showing, as did two Common Greenshanks, and a Pallas's Gull. The rarest bird at this spot, and probably of the entire trip, was a Curlew Sandpiper in winter plumage that was impressively spotted by James. This may prove to be the first record of the species for Bhutan! Bhutan is not rich in shorebird habitat, and this was a particularly impressive list of shorebirds in one spot!

After our lunch just above the Punakha River, and near the temple of the Divine Madman, we made a short drive on good roads to the Royal Botanical Park, just eight kilometers shy of our hotel for the night. This forest park serves as a wildlife corridor between Jigme Singye Wangchuk and Jigme Dorji National Parks. Our afternoon walk on the wooded trails produced Eurasian Jay, White-browed Bush Robin, and an Alpine/Himalayan Thrush. These two species were formerly lumped as one and known as Plain-backed Thrush, but were split into two species in 2016. Alpine Thrush (*Zoothera mollissima*) breeds above treeline in the Himalayas, while Himalayan Thrush (*Z. salimalii*) breeds in the dense forest on the Himalayan slopes. While we were certainly birding in dense forest here, the winter



ranges of these very similar species are yet to be worked out and it's entirely possible that these forested slopes could house both species during the winter. There are some subtle difference in plumage between the species, but our brief encounter did not allow us to study the bird in enough detail to tease out its specific identity.

We arrived at our hotel at Dochu La pass in time to catch a beautiful sunset over the Himalayas.

### **Day 18, November 24<sup>th</sup>**

After a beautiful sunrise over the Himalayas and some early morning birding around the hotel we enjoyed breakfast at the hotel and set off on our drive to Paro, where our trip began. In Paro, we drove directly to the trailhead for Taktsang or Tiger's Nest Monastery, one of the most recognizable and famous sites in Bhutan. Guru Rinpoche, who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan, is said to have flown to the site of the monastery on the back of a tigress to subdue a local demon, after which he meditated in a cave for three months. Our route to the monastery was slightly less miraculous. We walked to Tiger's Nest via a hiking trail and a long series of carved steps to take a wonderful tour of the impressive monastery. On the hike up some in the group saw Green Shrike-Babbler and we had a first class experience with a Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, licking sap from wells he had drilled. Lunch was on our hike down at the tea house.

We arrived back at the hotel in the late afternoon and some of the group took advantage of a traditional Bhutanese stone bath at a nearby hotel.

### **Day 19, November 25<sup>th</sup>**

On our final full day in Bhutan, we left the hotel after breakfast and birded our way up to Chele La, the highest road pass in the country. In the forests on the way up we had nice views of a bird that had thus far eluded us, the Kalij Pheasant. Those who had opted out of the hike to Tiger's Nest Monastery yesterday also caught up with another Rufous-bellied Woodpecker. At the pass we had our most spectacular views yet of Mount Jomalhari. This was our nearest vantage point of this towering peak on the Tibetan border. Near the pass a hike to Kila Gompa (nunnery) was an interesting look at one of the oldest gompas in Bhutan. A few birds were around the nunnery, including Alpine Accentor, Plain Mountain Finch, and Snow Pigeon.

After a lunch at a restaurant back in Paro, we had some time to check out handicrafts and souvenirs at a few Paro shops. We made it back to the hotel for an afternoon rest before heading to Dorji's family home for a fantastic farewell party, including great food, and traditional Bhutanese songs and dancing. Dorji gave us a tour of his family's farm and a first-hand account of rural life in Bhutan. While we visited several major cultural sights on our tour, and throughout the trip we learned of life and living in Bhutan, I think our farewell party is always the finest cultural experience of our trip. Dorji's family put on a very welcoming party and offered us a glimpse at what daily life is like in Bhutan after we leave.

### **Day 20, November 26<sup>th</sup>**

This morning we had time for one last birding outing. After breakfast, we birded the Paro River near the hotel to see what we could find. The marshy edges provided nice views of a Black-tailed Crake and we were treated to very close views of five cooperative Ibisbills right next to the road—a wonderful send-off!

I've put a number of photos from the trip up on the WBA website at:

<http://www.wildernessbirding.com/portfolio-category/bhutan/> I took many more and will eventually get through all of them and will add more to the website later.

### **Bird Species Seen:**

1. Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*
2. Gadwall *Anas strepera*
3. Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*
4. Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
5. Green-winged Teal
6. Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*
7. Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*
8. Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*
9. Blood Pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus*
10. Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus*
11. Satyr Tragopan *Tragopan satyra*
12. Kalij Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos*
13. Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
14. Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*
15. Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*
16. Indian Pond-Heron *Ardeola grayii*
17. Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
18. Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*
19. Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*
20. Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela*
21. Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis*
22. Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malaiensis*
23. Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*
24. Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*
25. Shikra *Accipiter badius*
26. Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*
27. Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*
28. Pallas's Fish-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus*
29. Himalayan Buzzard *Buteo refectus*
30. Black-tailed Crake *Amaurornis bicolor*
31. Eurasian Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
32. Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis*
33. Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*
34. Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*
35. River Lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelii*
36. Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*
37. Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*
38. Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus*
39. Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
40. Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
41. Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

42. Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
43. Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*
44. Pallas's Gull *Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus*
45. Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*
46. Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota*
47. Oriental Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*
48. Red Collared-Dove *Streptopelia tranquebarica*
49. Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*
50. Barred Cuckoo-Dove *Macropygia unchall*
51. Wedge-tailed Pigeon *Treron sphenurus*
52. Green Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula aenea*
53. Mountain Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula badia*
54. Asian Barred Owlet *Glaucidium cuculoides*
55. Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum*
56. Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*
57. Gray Nightjar *Caprimulgus jotaka*
58. Himalayan Swiftlet *Aerodramus brevirostris*
59. Asian Palm-Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*
60. Red-headed Trogon *Harpactes erythrocephalus*
61. Ward's Trogon *Harpactes wardi*
62. Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*
63. Great Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*
64. Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis*
65. Wreathed Hornbill *Rhyticeros undulatus*
66. Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*
67. White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
68. Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris*
69. Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis athertoni*
70. Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*
71. Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*
72. Coppersmith Barbet *Psilopogon haemacephalus*
73. Great Barbet *Psilopogon virens*
74. Golden-throated Barbet *Psilopogon franklinii*
75. Blue-throated Barbet *Psilopogon asiaticus*
76. Yellow-rumped Honeyguide *Indicator xanthonotus*
77. Gray-capped Woodpecker *Dendrocopos canicapillus*
78. Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos macei*
79. Rufous-bellied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos hyperythrus*
80. Crimson-breasted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos cathpharius*
81. Darjeeling Woodpecker *Dendrocopos darjellensis*
82. Lesser Yellownape *Picus chlorolophus*
83. Greater Yellownape *Picus flavinucha*
84. Gray-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*
85. Greater Flameback *Chrysocolaptes guttacristatus*
86. Bay Woodpecker *Blythipicus pyrrhotis*
87. Collared Falconet *Microhierax caerulescens*

88. Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*
89. Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*
90. Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria*
91. Red-breasted Parakeet *Psittacula alexandri*
92. Long-tailed Broadbill *Psarisomus dalhousiae*
93. Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike *Hemipus picatus*
94. Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus*
95. Gray-chinned Minivet *Pericrocotus solaris*
96. Short-billed Minivet *Pericrocotus brevirostris*
97. Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus*
98. Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus speciosus*
99. Black-winged Cuckooshrike *Lalage melaschistos*
100. Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*
101. Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*
102. Gray-backed Shrike *Lanius tephronotus*
103. Black-headed Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius rufiventer*
104. Blyth's Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius aeralatus*
105. Green Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius xanthochlorus*
106. Black-eared Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius melanotis*
107. White-bellied Erpornis *Erpornis zantholeuca*
108. Slender-billed Oriole *Oriolus tenuirostris*
109. Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*
110. Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*
111. Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*
112. Bronzed Drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*
113. Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus remifer*
114. Hair-crested Drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus*
115. Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*
116. White-throated Fantail *Rhipidura albicollis*
117. Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*
118. Yellow-billed Blue-Magpie *Urocissa flavirostris*
119. Common Green-Magpie *Cissa chinensis*
120. Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
121. Gray Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae*
122. Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*
123. Eurasian Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*
124. Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*
125. House Crow *Corvus splendens*
126. Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*
127. Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*
128. Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
129. Asian House-Martin *Delichon dasypus*
130. Nepal House-Martin *Delichon nipalense*
131. Yellow-bellied Fairy-Fantail *Chelidorhynch hypoxantha*
132. Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*
133. Yellow-browed Tit *Sylviparus modestus*

134. Sultan Tit *Melanochlora sultanea*
135. Coal Tit *Periparus ater*
136. Rufous-vented Tit *Periparus rubidiventris*
137. Gray-crested Tit *Lophophanes dichrous*
138. Cinereous Tit *Parus cinereus*
139. Green-backed Tit *Parus monticolus*
140. Yellow-cheeked Tit *Machlolophus spilonotus*
141. Black-throated Tit *Aegithalos concinnus*
142. Black-browed Tit *Aegithalos iouschistos*
143. Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch *Sitta cinnamoventris*
144. White-tailed Nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis*
145. Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*
146. Hodgson's Treecreeper *Certhia hodgsoni*
147. Rusty-flanked Treecreeper *Certhia nipalensis*
148. Sikkim Treecreeper *Certhia discolor*
149. Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*
150. Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*
151. Striated Bulbul *Pycnonotus striatus*
152. Black-crested Bulbul *Pycnonotus flaviventris*
153. Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*
154. Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*
155. Himalayan Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*
156. White-throated Bulbul *Alophoixus flaveolus*
157. Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*
158. Ashy Bulbul *Hemixos flavala*
159. Mountain Bulbul *Ixos mccllellandii*
160. Scaly-breasted Cupwing *Pnoepyga albiventer*
161. Chestnut-headed Tesia *Cettia castaneocoronata*
162. Yellow-bellied Warbler *Abroscopus superciliaris*
163. Rufous-faced Warbler *Abroscopus albogularis*
164. Black-faced Warbler *Abroscopus schisticeps*
165. Mountain Tailorbird *Phyllergates cucullatus*
166. Ashy-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus maculipennis*
167. Pale-rumped Warbler *Phylloscopus chloronotus*
168. Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*
169. Gray-hooded Warbler *Phylloscopus xanthoschistos*
170. Gray-cheeked Warbler *Seicercus poliogenys*
171. Chestnut-crowned Warbler *Seicercus castaniceps*
172. Thick-billed Warbler *Iduna aedon*
173. Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*
174. Striated Prinia *Prinia crinigera*
175. Rufescent Prinia *Prinia rufescens*
176. Fire-tailed Myzornis *Myzornis pyrrhoura*
177. White-browed Fulvetta *Fulvetta vinipectus*
178. Brown Parrotbill *Cholornis unicolor*
179. White-breasted Parrotbill *Psittiparus ruficeps*

180. Pale-billed Parrotbill *Chleuasicus atrosuperciliaris*
181. Striated Yuhina *Yuhina castaniceps*
182. White-naped Yuhina *Yuhina bakeri*
183. Whiskered Yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis*
184. Stripe-throated Yuhina *Yuhina gularis*
185. Rufous-vented Yuhina *Yuhina occipitalis*
186. Black-chinned Yuhina *Yuhina nigrimenta*
187. Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*
188. Golden Babbler *Cyanoderma chrysaemum*
189. Rufous-capped Babbler *Cyanoderma ruficeps*
190. Coral-billed Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus ferruginosus*
191. Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus superciliaris*
192. Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus ruficollis*
193. White-browed Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps*
194. Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler *Megapomatorhinus erythrogenys*
195. Gray-throated Babbler *Stachyris nigriceps*
196. White-hooded Babbler *Gampsorhynchus rufulus*
197. Yellow-throated Fulvetta *Schoeniparus cinereus*
198. Rufous-winged Fulvetta *Schoeniparus castaneiceps*
199. Long-billed Wren-Babbler *Napothera malacoptila*
200. Nepal Fulvetta *Alcippe nipalensis*
201. Himalayan Cutia *Cutia nipalensis*
202. Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striata*
203. White-crested Laughingthrush *Garrulax leucolophus*
204. Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush *Lanthocincla rufogularis*
205. Spotted Laughingthrush *Lanthocincla ocellata*
206. Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush *Lanthocincla pectoralis*
207. White-throated Laughingthrush *Lanthocincla albogularis*
208. Rufous-necked Laughingthrush *Lanthocincla ruficollis*
209. Bhutan Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron imbricatum*
210. Scaly Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron subunicolor*
211. Black-faced Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron affine*
212. Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron erythrocephalum*
213. Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*
214. Silver-eared Mesia *Leiothrix argenteauris*
215. Red-billed Leiothrix *Leiothrix lutea*
216. Red-tailed Minla *Minla ignotincta*
217. Hoary-throated Barwing *Actinodura nipalensis*
218. Rusty-fronted Barwing *Actinodura egertoni*
219. Blue-winged Minla *Actinodura cyanouroptera*
220. Chestnut-tailed Minla *Actinodura strigula*
221. Dark-sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*
222. Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*
223. White-gorgeted Flycatcher *Anthipes monileger*
224. Pale Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis unicolor*
225. Large Niltava *Niltava grandis*

226. Small Niltava *Niltava macgrigoriae*
227. Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara*
228. Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassinus*
229. Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*
230. Little Forktail *Enicurus scouleri*
231. Spotted Forktail *Enicurus maculatus*
232. Slaty-backed Forktail *Enicurus schistaceus*
233. Siberian Rubythroat *Calliope calliope*
234. White-browed Bush-Robin *Tarsiger indicus*
235. Golden Bush-Robin *Tarsiger chrysaeus*
236. Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher *Ficedula strophciata*
237. Taiga Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla*
238. Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis*
239. Plumbeous Redstart *Phoenicurus fuliginosus*
240. White-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus leucocephalus*
241. Hodgson's Redstart *Phoenicurus hodgsoni*
242. White-throated Redstart *Phoenicurus schisticeps*
243. Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush *Monticola rufiventris*
244. Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius*
245. Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*
246. Gray Bushchat *Saxicola ferreus*
247. Alpine/Himalayan Thrush *Zoothera mollissima/salimalii*
248. White-collared Blackbird *Turdus albocinctus*
249. Black-throated Thrush *Turdus atrogularis*
250. Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis*
251. Common Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa*
252. Asian Pied Starling *Gracupica contra*
253. Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*
254. Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
255. Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*
256. Orange-bellied Leafbird *Chloropsis hardwickii*
257. Yellow-vented Flowerpecker *Dicaeum chrysorrheum*
258. Plain Flowerpecker *Dicaeum minullum*
259. Fire-breasted Flowerpecker *Dicaeum ignipectus*
260. Fire-tailed Sunbird *Aethopyga ignicauda*
261. Black-throated Sunbird *Aethopyga saturata*
262. Green-tailed Sunbird *Aethopyga nipalensis*
263. Crimson Sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja*
264. Streaked Spiderhunter *Arachnothera magna*
265. Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*
266. Rufous-breasted Accentor *Prunella strophciata*
267. Gray Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
268. White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
269. White-browed Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*
270. Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*
271. Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*

272. Crested Bunting *Melophus lathamii*
273. Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*
274. Plain Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola*
275. Red-headed Bullfinch *Pyrrhula erythrocephala*
276. Dark-breasted Rosefinch *Carpodacus nipalensis*
277. Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch *Carpodacus pulcherrimus*
278. Dark-rumped Rosefinch *Carpodacus edwardsii*
279. Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch *Carpodacus thura*
280. Scarlet Finch *Haematospiza sipahi*
281. Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Chloris spinoides*
282. Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*
283. Tibetan Serin *Serinus thibetanus*
284. White-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas carnipes*
285. Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans*
286. Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*
287. White-rumped Munia *Lonchura striata*
288. Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*