

Biodiverse Bhutan: Birds, Mammals & Beyond

April 10 – 23, 2023 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott

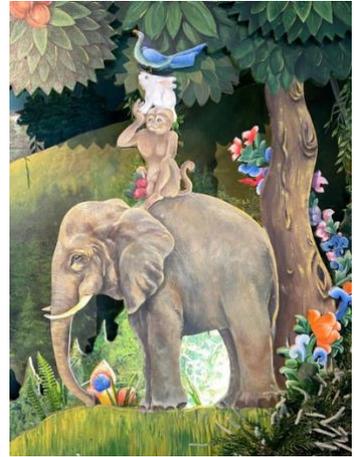


With guide Peg Abbott, and participants: Ellen, Jay, Julia, Karen, Monna, & Phil



This was an inaugural tour to Bhutan for Naturalist Journeys, a journey delayed by the pandemic with planning in the works since 2019. So, we were thrilled to land in Paro, Bhutan to finally start our adventures. We worked with our partner and great guide from India, Avijit Sarkhel, who ironed out many of the logistics for us as Bhutan opened up again for tourism. We were joined by two superb guides and naturalists with bird, mammal, and botany expertise while in Bhutan. This year was complicated by border crossings, so we ended up with a lot of one-night stays to do our route. This will be streamlined for a better pace in 2024 but all in all we were happy to experience so much geography, wildlife, and birds.

Bhutan's biodiversity as part of the globally important Himalayan Ecoregion is off the charts, due to the integrity of its habitats and forest cover of over 70% of original – almost unheard of on the planet. Bhutan is in the Eastern Himalayan and the forests we explored were a mix of the vast Palearctic zone and the Indo-Malayan realms. With a complex geography we experienced firsthand (not a straight road in the country and LOTS of mountain passes) we were able to visit grasslands, broad-leaf forests, pine forests, mixed conifer forest and a few small wetlands. The lovely blooms of magnolia and rhododendrons gave us a colorful tapestry to travel through this spring.



Mon., Apr. 10 Arrivals | Meet up in Delhi

Several of our group arrived in Delhi early, Jay and Karen enjoyed several days doing some cultural exploring, and Phil jumped right into birding going to one of Delhi's biodiversity parks his first day. Monna and Peg enjoyed some garden time together and seeing a few species at our hotel. Those on the extension flew back today from Guwahati, Assam. We had dinner at the Andaz Aerocity Hotel and Avi had arranged a nice table for us where it was a bit quieter. Those on the Manas National Park extension got in from their flight a bit late, so those here for the main tour were finishing up as Peg, Monna, Phil and Avi arrived. We were happy to meet each other and to be joined by Monika Kapoor Sarkhel (Avi's wife) who made everyone feel welcome. She leads cultural tours and has a deep knowledge of Indian cuisine – making our dinner conversation lively. It was great to see that conversation flowed freely and we looked forward to a grand adventure ahead.

Tues., Apr. 11 Flight to Paro | Views of Mt. Everest | Thimphu

Our flight to Paro was rescheduled by the airline for late morning today, but no one minded too much as they could get a bit of rest and get some breakfast. Breakfast at the Andaz Aerocity hotel is a lavish affair, with tables loaded with both western and Indian foods. We feasted a bit and then headed over to the airport. It was a sunny day, and it did not seem long until we were getting views of the snow-capped high Himalayan peaks. We were thrilled to see Mt. Everest and snapped photos as quick as we could, thankfully it stayed in view for some time, wow! We landed in Paro (about 7300' ft. elevation) and looked around at the snow-capped high peaks (up to 18,000' ft.). Our plane tail read Royal Bhutan Airline in colors of maroon and gold. Going into the terminal, beautifully painted murals made us feel we were entering fantasyland – indeed, we were finally here! The airport décor had vibrant artwork and furniture and fixings all Bhutanese in style, with a model village and Dzong crafted right on the luggage carousel. Just outside, our guides Norbu and Pema, and driver Kungzang were there to meet us, and as we arrived later than expected, they whisked us away so we could reach Thimphu by dark. We



would have time on Paro for a couple of nights on our return, our destination tonight was a truly lovely hotel in the capital city of Thimphu. Our first bird of the trip was the Blue Whistling Thrush, a bird we'd seen every day of our tour and a beauty. Along the Paro River in travel, we spotted Plumbeous Redstart and Oriental Turtle Dove. We passed apple trees in bloom, and a mix of cypress, walnut, willow, and wild rose. We passed several Chortens, old and new, along the way, buildings that house relics and important offerings to insure safe passage along the rugged roads. All of the buildings we saw had classic Bhutanese architecture lines. Little did we know that the crazy winding path we traveled up and down mountains and alongside rivers would be typical for all of our following days. We went up and down to arrive again about 7600 ft., situated beside a lively flowing river. One cannot understate the complexity of Bhutan's terrain, truly a country of magnificent and imposing mountains.

We arrived at a hotel we'd not planned on (we had thought we'd reach Punakha when we had the early morning flight) but Norbu had worked his magic to get us into one of the loveliest hotels we could imagine. It was a hotel designed with the influence of the former Queen and every element of it was tasteful. Our rooms were palatial, with a huge bathroom, sitting room, and bedroom. It was wonderful to be able to shower, sort our gear and make our transition to adventures ahead here. In our closet there were even male and female traditional sets of clothing we could wear if we wished! Travel weary, no one actually did, but it was fun to see such lovely textiles and enjoy the art and architecture of this place. We settled in, went up to dinner, where many lovely foods awaited us. We started in luxury – a good thing as we had some very simple lodgings in the southern less-traveled area ahead of us.

Wed., Apr. 12 Thimpu to Punakha | Dochu La

We woke up alongside the Thimphu River, with Plumbeous Redstart, River Lapwings and two species of wagtails (Gray and White) queuing up on stones along the bank. Phil was out early to take in everything possible. We enjoyed breakfast with a river view, and by 6:30 we headed out for the day. We put layers on for our time on the high and scenic Dochu La (la = pass, this one 10,200 feet). On the way up, one of our first "stop!" call outs were for a striking, Yellow-billed Magpie Jay. It was calling loudly and posed well - a good start to the day. Keen-eyed Avi spied a perched Crescent Serpent Eagle, so we pulled over and hopped out to scope it. Small songbirds were



everywhere- Indian White-eye, Gray Bushchat, Ultramarine Flycatcher, Blythe's Leaf Warbler and - a real showstopper - Mrs. Gould's Sunbird. The intensity of color on that bird is striking! We drove uphill through forests of Blue Pine, oaks and our first blooming rhododendrons. The monument of 108 Chortens jumped into view at the crest of Dochu La. The beauty of this architecture in all its intricacy, nestled into hemlock and spruce, blooming magnolia and rhododendron was profound. And within the beauty we had a veritable bird explosion with laughingthrushes (White-throated, Chestnut-crowned and Spotted), White-collared Blackbird and a family group of Rufous-throated Fulvetta were among the 23 species tallied in a very short time. Just a few turns down the road Julie spied our first mammal, a Himalayan Gray Langur, so we piled out and picked up some nice bonus birds after seeing it, Green-backed Tit, Whistling Warbler and Large-billed Warbler. Nice!

Following this we spotted a Himalayan Buzzard perched in fine view. Our next stop was the nearby Royal Botanical Park, where we walked for an hour and half or so among blooms of wild strawberries, violets, gentians, rhododendrons, and magnolias. We walked a loop trail finding several laughingthrushes (Chestnut-capped, White-throated, and Gray-sided), a Rufous-crowned Babbler, Large Hawk-Cuckoo and Himalayan Cuckoo and a colorful Rufous-bellied Woodpecker excavating a cavity. The weather was fine, and we saw a number of colorful butterflies and a pika (possibly a Large-eared Pika); Avi told us there are 6 or 7 species of this rabbit-family member in Bhutan and the taxonomy is being worked on. Time passed quickly, and soon we turned our thoughts to lunch. Out of nowhere, on a wide bend in the road, lunch was there waiting for us! It turns out we were assigned a dedicated Camp crew and they were waiting for us with a lightly battered chicken, potatoes, asparagus, and locally grown mushrooms. They set a lovely table, with linens and flowers, from which we had a grand view, into which flew Himalayan Swiftlets and one larger White-throated Needletail. Nice! Continuing downslope towards Punakha, several took a quick nap until Norbu called out, "Black Eagle". It flew very close, returned on a circle, and then rose skyward.

On arrival, we took time to visit Punakha Dzong, the second oldest in Bhutan, built in 1637. Once a fortress, it has stood regally at the junction of the Po Chhu (Male River) and the Mo Chhu (Female River) for over 5 centuries. It is lovingly cared for, and its two sides are used for a combination of administrative and spiritual



purposes today. The courtyard was full of murals including the Four Harmonious Friends, one that we would see in many places. As we studied the murals, monks walked through adorned in burgundy and yellow robes. Our guides donned their own cream color shawls as we entered, draped over their shoulder to show respect. There was no photography inside the temple but the effect of being there was incredible. Coming out of the Punakha Dzong, we followed the Mo Chu, first finding two Bar-headed Geese and two Ruddy Shelduck along with a River Lapwing within view of the white fortress. We drove another 20 minutes past the Mo Chhu and Po Chhu confluence down the main Puna Tsang Chhu, scanning for the critically endangered, White-bellied Heron. We were not successful, but found a number of duck species, most which will very soon migrate north, but to do so we battled strong winds and blowing sand, rough on people and optics. After a very full day we checked into our hotel, perched high above the Punaka Dzong and the intersection of rivers. It was lovely, again with large rooms but had a LOT of stairs, we would walk off some of the calories of our abundant food! We started dinner with a nice pea and pumpkin soup, then had a variety of dishes to choose from on the buffet and ice-cream for dessert. Our species tally was about 60 species, most all new to the group. Gray Nightjar serenaded us as we walked uphill to our rooms. The lights on the Punakha Dzong were mesmerizing – all that history so much alive today!

Thurs., Apr. 13 Punakha to Chumey

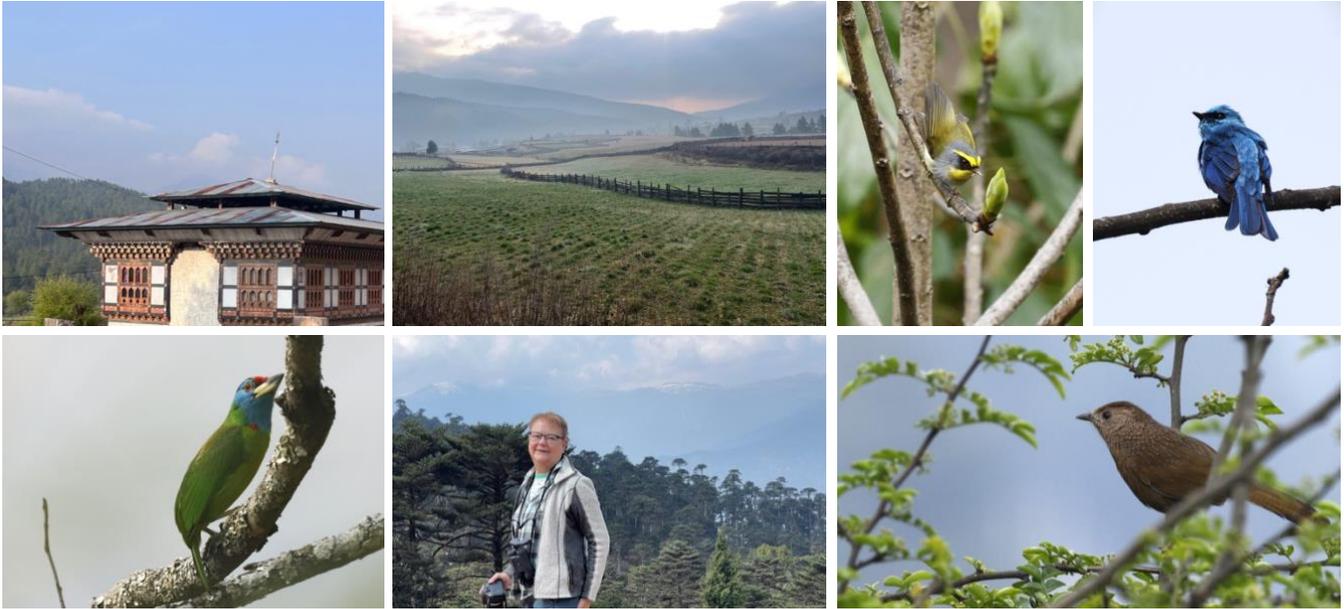
We got underway by 6:30 AM after having a fine view of a Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler from the parking area. Today was largely a travel day, punctuated by birding stops. Some were planned, others spontaneous. Julia started to call our stops “Bhutanese fire drills” as we’d all pile out, then pile back in. We checked the heron habitat once again leaving Punakha, picking up sightings of Great-crested Grebe, Little Ringed Plover, and a lone Black-winged Stilt. We made several forest stops, encountering mixed flocks with Red-tailed Minla, White-tailed Nuthatch and Black-throated Tit. We found Dark-sided Flycatcher sallying out like our pewees do, and Brown-flanked Bush Warbler at our feet. We found Rufous Sibia posing well and both male and female Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush – a stunning bird. We crossed the first of two high passes today, and just below Pele La (11,122 ft.) connected with our culinary team. Lunch was spread out for us with a herd of yak and an expansive view. As we got out, we were surrounded by Himalayan Griffon, at least 14 in total. They lifted out of the valley, perhaps from a kill, like giant circling kites. Some flew right over our heads! It was magical. So were the big bouquets of flowers on our tables from the camp crew at lunch – we felt pampered out in the middle of nowhere! Fortified, we continued our drive, with a goal to reach the Tharpaling Monastery late afternoon when a couple of species of



Bhutan's famous pheasants are known to come in as monks prepare the evening meal. We cut it close, but by 4:30 PM we were winding up a narrow dirt road that climbs up to the site. We wound through some verdant fields of barley and newly planted fields of potatoes, fat cattle, still-woolly ponies, and fruit trees in bloom. With the architecture of farmhouses rivaling that of any building seen in town, it was like driving through a storybook tapestry. We saw Black-rumped Magpie, Red-billed Chough, and Gray-backed Shrike. Monks were gathered around small fires, crouched comfortably and spooning dinner from bowls. A few were working on a new construction project. We parked at the top and we're rewarded for our efforts with fine views of brightly colored Himalayan Monal, 3 males and a female. We were breathless from the elevation but also from the intensity of color in this bird! We witnessed sunset over the prayer flags, again magical. At dusk it got chilly. We arrived at our lodgings in the valley of Chumey to stay at the Chumey Nature Resort just after dark. The cozy wood-constructed lodge was most welcoming, and the staff had dinner prepared. We warmed up in the dining room and started with a lovely mushroom soup. We had beef curry with rice and noodles, veggies, and fruit for dessert. Thankfully our rooms were heated, and the bedspreads were made locally, handwoven with wool. It felt wonderful to tuck in and unwind after a long but rewarding day.

Fri., Apr. 14 **Chumey to Mongar**

Breakfast was back in the cozy dining room, eggs, and a local specialty – buckwheat pancakes. As we loaded up, we found Rufous-breasted Accentors feeding on the road margin mixed in with Little Buntings. We had two big passes to cross in route to Mongar, and the going was slow due to a lot of road construction. It was a beautiful route through forests of Blue Pine, then a mix of hemlock and spruce, with a few stately cedars in the mix. Our first stop happened spontaneously as we spied our first Eurasian Nutcracker and then a Red Crossbill. We then had a nice mixed flock with Lemon-rumped Warbler, White-browed Fulvetta, Gray-crested Tit and two species of sunbird, Mrs. Gould's and Green-backed. Further along we walked a small trail alongside a rushing stream with White-capped Redstart, Buff-barred Warbler and Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher. A fat Orange-bellied Squirrel scampered about in the lush moss. Old man's beard lichen decorated the trees. Road construction got pretty intense, we threaded our way through piles of road material, then got stopped by heavy machinery. Several bridges were being replaced. A few lucky members of our group at the bus were able to see a Himalayan Serrow, a goat-antelope, cross the road before disappearing into thick brush. Atop one pass, at almost 12,000 feet,



prayer flags of every color blew in the wind. We found the Himalayan form of Coal Tit in a mixed flock here with its distinctive black crest. Our lunch wagon appeared just as we needed a break from the bumps in one small section of paved road. Today it was chicken, three different vegetables and red rice, for dessert fresh fruit. Our crew wore T-shirts with birds and were always most welcoming; when we finished, they sat comfortably cross-legged on the ground, eating with their fingers as many Bhutanese do. Today's bouquets were primroses mixed with rhododendron, lovely bright purples, blues, and reds to brighten our day. A Green-backed Sunbird entertained us as it fed on rhododendrons. Peg and Phil found the first Rufous-vented Yuhina of the trip, pretty with a rufous nape to its gray crest.

From here it was mainly driving, navigating bumps and twists on miles and miles of dirt road chewed up by the recent construction, a massive road-widening project. One section had an awfully long stretch of fallen trees, some of the magnificent forest giants that made us sad. We spotted a White-throated Kingfisher along a small stream, Norbu thought a first for that elevation, 3400 meters. We found one good mixed flock and picked up Chestnut-tailed Minla and Ashy-throated Warbler. Near the lovely series of waterfalls of Namling we watched a big group of Nepal House Martins feeding. Our travel was extremely slow today due to so much road construction, but we saw a lot of scenery, lovely waterfalls, a taste of Bhutanese life, and we made the best of it with birding stops and camaraderie.

Sat., Apr. 15 **Birding Korilla Pass from Mongar | Afternoon Free Time**

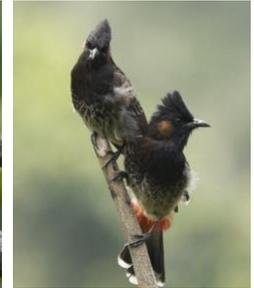
We enjoyed not having to pack up, had coffee in our rooms and headed a short way out of town. Bird activity was very high, with almost 30 species tallied on our first two stops. We got terrific looks at five species of warblers, the prettiest of the lot being the Black-faced. A Maroon Oriole teed up in clear view, as did a Himalayan Bulbul. A Himalayan Striped Squirrel fed on the new flowers in a towering tree. We had mixed flocks of minlas, tits and Long-tailed Minivet. Jay gave Pema and Norbu a high five clap for their quickness with the scope. We had left early, so our camp crew prepared a fantastic breakfast break, with omelets, toast, fresh fruit, and a lovely



spinach chile mix for those that liked the heat. The morning passed quickly, birding in a variety of habitats. We crossed over the pass, then walked a quiet road on which we found Lesser Yellownape and had cracking views of Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler and Mountain Bulbul. Local farmers walked past with burden baskets holding fuel and other goods. The sun got hot by late-morning, so we headed back up to enjoy lunch at the pass, amid hundreds of waving prayer flags. We managed to get on to a small flock with views below us, Red-billed Leiothrix, Rufous-capped Babbler, Chestnut-tailed Minla and Hoary Barwing. Coming downhill we stopped as a couple was cutting forage for their cattle, a nice interface with the local culture. After lunch we walked a bit more, finding a flock with babblers in a real prize, the Golden-naped Finch. It was low to the ground, feeding in some strawberry and deadfall, and we got superlative views. We also found Common Rosefinch, and Green-headed Finch. As activity had slowed down at midday we headed in, reaching the hotel by 3 PM. It was our first short day of the trip and it was very much appreciated by all to have a break. We had time to shower and repack and do some hand laundry and several walked into town to get a sense of daily life. The hotel had a nice selection of local weaving and handicrafts. Dinner was a buffet, with some nice choices, including a fresh fish option and lots of vegetables. We shared some red wine and caught up two days on our bird list, about 150 species recorded at this time.

Sun., Apr. 16 Mongar to Yongkola

We woke up early and had our bags out and loaded as we were eager to be off for the day, feeling a bit more rested after a break. Again, activity at this time of day made it worthwhile to get up and soon we were walking in a lovely forest, of Chur Pine habitat, and we found some extraordinary species. Top of the list was a Crested Eagle Owl that somehow Pema spotted, it was perched low in the shade of a big tree, but almost woven into small branches to appear totally blended in. We were able to get the scope on it, so all had a super view. We took quite a while watching and trying to photograph the specialty. We pulled ourselves away to walk down the road, searching for other species when we heard the call of Common Green Magpie, another showstopper! This bright green Corvid came in loud, two of them together, stopping and calling above us in the pines. They let us right



back to the area we had found the owl, and upon checking on it we found an Asian Barred Owl. So out came the scopes for our second beautiful owl of the morning.

We were also gradually filling in a number of small birds that we had hope to find and getting fair views of many of them. Streaked Spiderhunter and a pair of Greater Yellownape were a good addition a bit further along our route. As all of this happened before breakfast, it was nice to find tables and chairs and a nice spread of buckwheat pancakes and eggs, waiting for us. Avi pulled out a special syrup, created by Monika, his wife, and told us the story of the indigenous flower (*mahua* – *Madhuca indica*) that makes this molasses like sweet syrup just perfect for the pancakes. Right from the breakfast table we saw a Great Cormorant go up the raging river that was beside us in view, and we had a good show of Hair-crested, and Ashy Drongo in the flowering trees. Avi heard and was able to bring in a Himalayan Prinia calling in the shrubs in the gully just behind the breakfast table - a pretty handy find! At the river, we found a Green-billed Malkoha making repeated trips to the tree, where it seemed to strip off, bark or small tweaks and go back to a nest tree. It's a long tail trailed behind it like a new-world quetzal. On the bridge across the river, Pema found us a Crested Kingfisher and got it in the scope. We then walked a dirt road paralleling the river, soon spotting a White-capped Redstart near some of the rapids. We were hoping to find a Tawny Fishing Owl that is known to frequent the area, but a third fabulous owl of the day was not to be. We did get good looks at Gray-throated Babbler, at beautiful Blue-throated Flycatchers, and the first Gray-capped Pygmy Woodpecker of the trip. Blue-winged Minla joined a mixed flock and were new for several of the group.

Back in the bus, we spotted a Long-tailed Shrike and made a stop but just about as we drove off, a bird crossed the road and flew into a cornfield, a Bar-buttoned Quail! All the guides were very excited about this as it's not an easy bird to see. Avi hopped out and up on the roof rack to be our spotter and was quick to entice the bird to stay in the area by softly playing its song. We were very fortunate that it was interested in the sound and proceeded to march down the cornfield in intermittent view for all. It went back-and-forth ducking in and out of the corn stocks, but in time all had good views. Wow! We met our lunch wagon for a delightful picnic atop a viewpoint, where there was a small shop, and we were able to find some nice juices, local snacks including banana chips, and had a bit of time to relax. Mid-afternoon, we settled into our birding lodge, Trogon Villa, where our rooms had names like Finch and Pheasant with photos as decor to match. After an hour break to rest



we headed uphill on the famous Limenthang road, sadly this year largely torn up due to road widening. On a Sunday afternoon it was relatively quiet, though our views were obscured by thick smoke settling into valleys from a large fire burning to the south. The birding was challenging but the rewards were great. In the canopy we found Blue-winged Minla, Himalayan Cutias (acting like oversized nuthatches), and then to our elation, a calling, and quite visible Beautiful Nuthatch. Yellow-throated Fulvetta came into clear view, a few of our group got a glimpse of Red-billed Leiothrix and we heard Lesser Shortwing calling, but not to be revealed. In vine tangles a flock moved through quickly pointing out in the understory a Rusty-fronted Barwing and a noisy Black-crowned (Coral-billed) Scimitar Babbler. We saw Bay Woodpecker and two cooperative Golden-throated Barbets. Time went quickly, and we headed back for nice showers ahead of a 7 pm dinner. A few other birders were there so it was fun to compare notes. After our checklist we turned it in to be ready early the next day. We were a bit anxious about the fire, and whether we could continue on our route as planned.

Mon., Apr. 17 On to the Southern Region, the Road Less Traveled!

We had breakfast at the hotel, then headed out having gotten news that the risk of fire along the road to the south would not block our path. We made a couple of road stops, happy to have sun break through the haze for good photos and observations. New species included Striated Yuhina, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, White-browed Shrike Babbler and Nepal Fulvetta. We got better looks at Rufous-necked Laughingthrushes and Orange-bellied Leafbird. Teasing us as heard only were Rufous-throated Partridge and a Chestnut-winged Cuckoo.

Continuing on our way, we entered a dramatic canyon. Beyond the Kuri Chhu hydroelectric project, perched boldly out on a pine limb was a Pallas Fishing Eagle, one impressive raptor! The next couple of hours were incredible, an adventure by any standards, driving a narrow (cliffhanging!) road through this winding fantastic gorge. It was particularly memorable for those on the drop-off side of road, looking straight down to the river we followed at least 1000 feet below. Much of the road was paved, but there were extensive sections of dirt complete with bumps and fallen rocks. More than once large, colorful trucks bringing goods up from India passed us in fairly narrow places. Waterfalls on this route were common, one prettier than the next. To us this was high adventure, for residents this was the main road used in winter when snow precludes travel on the higher passes! Our lunch stop was not far from the junction of the Kuri Chhu and the Manas Chhu, two great



rivers of Bhutan. This dramatic junction is in an area of about 3000 ft of topography, steep-walled on both sides. And on a cliff side turnout, behold – the lunch wagon and smiling crew were waiting for us!

The rest of day seemed tame in comparison, a couple of birding stops, a beautiful waterfall to get out at for photos and a stretch and checking into our very simple accommodations in the small town of Nganglam, population about 1000, where residents seemed to enjoy watching us as much as we enjoyed watching the birds. We had some great birds like a pair of Sutan Tits and at least one pair of nesting Long-tailed Broadbills that gave us great views – we had seen the birds before, but views were superb here. We took a walk along the Nganglam River and were very pleased to find Dipper, another Crested Kingfisher and Slaty-backed Forktail. It was a lovely river, moving quickly through polished rocks and rimmed by trees. Dinner was about to be a similar buffet to nights previous when Pema walked through the door with a BIG smile, Norbu, Avi, and he had found us pizza, really delicious pizza from a local shop. We devoured it! The hotel owner was very attentive and seemed pleased to host us, few tourists ever get this way.

Tues., Apr. 18 Nganglam to Panbang Through Incredible Forest

We started early once again, making another run down the river that has been so productive the evening before. We had more good views of Brown Dipper and Slaty-backed Forktail, but we failed to find Blyth's Kingfisher which Norbu was hoping we'd find, but it was time to move on. Our breakfast stop was at Gashari Community Forest, where we got good views of Pale Blue Flycatcher. A few lingered for photos of this fairly tame bird, when Peg heard noises of something moving in dried leaves below. To her surprise, there was a Rufous-throated Partridge, a difficult bird to see. We had a female in view directly below us, but she moved off quickly before others could be assembled. We could hear the male calling, and encouraged him with playback, but he did not move in the ten minutes or so we tried, and we gave up.

Walking the road was scenic, easy footing and productive. We then got back in the bus, fortified by coffee and breakfast, but not far up into the forest Norbu and Pema spotted a Rufous-necked Hornbill, first of the trip, and we piled out like a Chinese Fire drill to line up for good scope views. Another stop proved to have a mother lode



of good species, memorable was a family group of White-hooded Babblers moving through with a pair of Pale-billed Parrotbills. Several got a view of White-browed Shrike Babbler and Ellen spied a tiny, White-browed Piculet working away in a vine tangle. A rarity for Bhutan, Rufous-backed Sibia perched out in the open for photos. A Golden Babbler joined a flock of Striated Yuhina and Blue-winged Minla. It was eye-popping fun, all these great birds! Lunch was nestled into the forest, a cozy place to sit and renew our energies with a nice beef and noodle dish and fresh veggies and fruit. A person could get used to this! The rest of the day unveiled some fantastic birds, as we passed through broad-leaf forest and bamboo. We checked into our even simpler lodgings, a low point of the trip (though the best in town) which felt dubious. The staff welcomed us with smiles, tea and coffee and we heard a Pin-striped Babbler in the yard. But we were tired, and our guides struggled to revive our spirits. Retail therapy was in order! Avi had heard about a community initiative to make craft and useful items from bamboo. We walked through the streets of town, passing the temple and local feedstore, it was wonderful to walk with the locals at days end and feel their rhythm of life. At the shop we were welcomed warmly, and we could see the raw materials used for baskets and floor mats. We looked at the variety of products and had fun. Several of us snapped up a collapsible basket with a tight lid, the same one that we've been served nuts from throughout our journey, a wonderful memory of the trip. Peg noticed that Kunzang, our incredible driver, was eyeing a good stout basket. Peg saw it as a small way to thank him for his truly heroic driving through the gorge so came away with us and for the rest of the trip it sat beside him, holding neatly the waters and other items he kept handy for us. Ecotourism at work!



Wed., Apr. 19 Panbang to Tingtibi

We packed up and were out early, ahead of the restaurant opening. We birded open habitat near the town, finding a Black-backed Forktail in a small stream and above it a calling Indian Cuckoo. A Chinese Rubythroat came out and posed nicely as did Greater Coucal and a pair of Green-billed Malkoha. A woman who saw the bus came out with fresh garden beans and just-picked chilies to sell, most welcomed by our camp crew. Who of course were there with us, for us, providing an excellent breakfast. Continuing on, we made a series of road stops, the first for Rufous-necked Hornbill that flew into a large tree above the road. A group of Great Hornbill flew on the other side of the road, below us, following the river. We followed them to a fruiting tree where 9 were feeding with a troop of 14 Assam Macaques. We had great fun watching the hornbills feed, some on big red flowers, a couple acting very excited to feed each other. There were interesting actions between the two species, fun to observe. Next was a stop at the scenic Twin Waterfalls, a roadside stop of great beauty. We all spilled out of the bus and spread out to take photos, selfies, and videos. To the side by a water leak, we found a big puddle attractive to butterflies of many kinds, including Common Maplets, Paris Peacock Swallowtails and Red Helens. We even found a tiny frog, the size of a thumbnail, species unknown. Further along Norbu spotted a pair of Collared Falconets, tiny raptors that feed often on butterflies. They caught several as we watched, and at one time the male flew down and fed the female. Walking back to the bus, some of our group watched the male pick up and devour a lizard. The road from Panbang to Tingtibi was lush and wound alongside a large river. The wild section included massive trees that arched above the road. Small villages were interspersed, rural settlements with a few cows, newly planted gardens, bamboo corrals. We spied a Black Eagle and several Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters as we drove. Lunch included the national dish, chilies and cheese, this time with the fresh green chilies picked yesterday- delicious! They also treated us to a mushroom dish with cheese, which was quite excellent too.

After lunch we drove through more spectacular mountain terrain. Descending from a pass we spied a troop of Golden Langurs feeding in a massive tree with broad spreading limbs. We saw them feed but they were wary, and one by one left their patch of fruits to convene in the center. Karen spotted one big male, there were at least five big females, a few teenagers, several agile and frisky babies and two tiny babies. Some were a rich golden color, others almost white. The tree had a great resting area where multiple branches spread out in a whirl. We



left them grooming and sleeping, two youngsters leaping and chasing each other in a circuit. We saw four troops in total before reaching camp at Tingtibi. One stop was by a stream where we spied two Slaty-backed Forktail and both Plumbeous and White-capped Redstarts. The road crew had set up a tar mixer; on one side of the bridge serene wild nature, the other an industrial camp. Our next stops were often single birds, Kalij Pheasant, hornbills. Just above the village of Tingtibi we found our camp crew near the village temple. We thought we were headed to the forest so were surprised, but our camp was instead perfectly set up in the circle of prayer flags, dining area in between. It fit our needs for a travel night, and a Brown Boobok (owl) coming to land on the tallest prayer flag during dinner was a bonus. We would say goodbye to the camp crew in the morning, as we were headed toward the cities with more services. They had been a very important part of our trip and much appreciated. Our tents had comfortable camp cots with mattresses and a nice woven rug on the floor, a small table to hold our things. They put out the fabulous final meal, grilling an entire catfish to perfection, it was suddenly flavored and delicious, nixed with rice and vegetables.

Thurs., Apr. 20 Tingtibi to Phobjikha

We woke up in our tented camp, listening to the sounds of prayer flags blowing in the wind. Then it was off again on the “blue highways”, our nickname for each turn and its forest vistas blending into layer upon layer of mountain foothills. Poinciana grew wild and we noticed a number of wildflowers. We stopped to find Blue-throated Barbet, Verditer Flycatcher, and One of our bird highlights today was finding Hodgson’s Cuckoo, first heard at a birding stop, quick-eyed Julia saw it land and we were able to get fine scope views – even photos and video. Another bird highlight was a cooperative male and female Crested Bunting posing for us near a farm. We were headed out of the low country back to the high, so we had more gripping miles of cliff-hanging roads, but our driver seemed very much at ease as if going to the store. We took our lunch break at a very nice hotel in Trongsa, with views of the impressive Dzong there and a Common Cuckoo that posed nicely for us as we drove by. We passed spiritual Chortons, waterfalls, a spot where we got to view Bhutan’s only honeyguide, and colorful Tata trucks from India carrying goods. Finally, we were back in the pines, with an understory of rhododendrons in bloom, and in open areas of the passes, yaks grazing. Our lodgings tonight would be at Phobjikha, a lovely mountain valley famous for wintering Black-necked Cranes. The cranes had migrated out by April, but it was a lovely place to stay. Before settling in we sampled the Old Pele La Road, enjoying a chance to stretch and bird. There were mixed flocks and many rhododendrons in bloom. Good views of Darjeeling Woodpecker were a

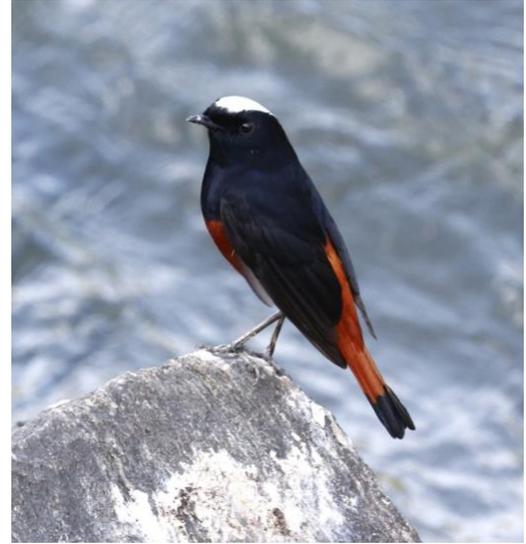


highlight. Our lodge was lovely, rock and wood construction, with views of the valley and nice large rooms. After our time in the yet-to-be developed south we were ready for such creature comforts!

Fri., Apr. 21 Gangtey Valley | Birding Pele La Pass on the Old Pele La Road | Paro

This morning proved to be one of our favorites of the trip, time to walk in a glorious setting with abundant views and birds. Snowy peaks of the Himalayas poked through and before us was a profusion of red and pink blooms. But for us the color of the day was ORANGE, the breast color of one of Bhutan's most notable birds, the Satyr Tragopan. We saw our first from the van, but it dashed into the brush. On foot we could hear several calling. Avi had lagged behind to listen and try to track one uphill when a male came right out on the road margin with 25 feet of him! It was calmly grazing and seemed comfortable with him. But how to tell us! "Peg, Peg" he called out with some urgency. Peg heard him and looked back to see him sit quickly down and looked to where he was pointing his camera. We all cautiously approached for an incredible sighting. We also found Blood Pheasant and Himalayan Monal, and several smaller species including Green Shrike Babbler. Ellen spotted a smaller bird by her feet on a rock – a Scaly-breasted Cupwing! In time through Norbu's patient calling, all got a view as it hopped up on the road above a culvert. We saw five species of warbler, several tits, all in a mixed flock. An action-packed morning. A few of our group had elected to sleep in (pheasants require super early mornings) and they were rewarded when Pema found them an Indian Roller, a stunning bird that was the only one of our journey.

At the pass was a handicraft market and we were happy to stop. We tried the dried yak cheese (chewy!) and shopped for some lovely woven goods and local bells that we could use as wind chimes. Downslope we tried again for Ward's Trogon in a spot they'd been present at earlier in the week, but alas, our midday timing was not ideal, and it failed to respond. Super close views of a flying Mountain Hawk-Eagle and then a lovely Rufous-bellied Niltava were nice compensation for our miss. On our list today was a stop at the national weaving center in Thimpu. The Gagyel Lhundrup Weaving Centre was a joy to visit, with four weavers working at the time who we could watch. They use a traditional backstrap loom, but the detail created with silk and other fibers was really stunning to observe. They had a showroom of weaving, from table mats and runners to scarfs, shawls and



half and full-size Kira, the woman's traditional dress that can take over a year to make using such fine techniques. Carrying treasures, we had to tear ourselves away, but we were bound for Paro and that meant another mountain pass! While Thimpu is the capital city, Paro has the airport and we settled here to be close on our final day out. The downtown was charming, was Bhutanese architecture housing a mix of craft stores, cafes, and general markets of appeal to the locals. Our lodgings were uphill with a view of the city, nestled into the pines in comfortable, spacious cabins. A Gray Nightjar sang us to sleep again.

Sat., Apr. 22 **Chele La Pass | River Birding**

Our final outing was to the highest point of our trip, close to 4000 (3988) meters. We left early to have our best chance with pheasants. It paid off with 22 Kalij Pheasant encountered in the forested section of the road, a dozen Blood Pheasant and two Himalayan Monal. Gray Nightjar were calling at dawn as we departed. We drove up and up on a one-lane paved road that had turnouts for drivers to cope with two-way traffic. It was a fine day and we had looks at the snow-capped higher Himalayan peaks. As we drove higher up the mountain we entered a cloud of mist, which intensified to rain, and then snow! It was clouded in and snowing at the pass, so we ate our box breakfasts in the van, determined to wait for both birds and views. Hot coffee seemed divine. We went down the other side towards Haa to stall a bit and see if it might clear. In an area of stunted conifers, we picked up White-winged Grosbeak. It did brighten a bit, so we returned to the pass, crossing back to start walking and looking for mixed flocks. Snow decorated every shrub and tree; it was like a fantasyland. We had good views of Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch. But the snow at this elevation depressed bird activity and we had to work hard to find a few of the specialists. We headed back down into the forest and were rewarded with hearing and then seeing a calling Blanford's Rosefinch, not an easy bird to find. They were lots of tits, mostly Gray-crested, and Rufous-vented. We photographed a small pika and, on the way up had good views of Yellow-throated Marten. By 11:30 AM we headed in, picking up two of our group who had elected to sleep in.

Shedding a few of our woolly layers we headed into town for lunch. This was at a lovely, modern pizzeria on the main street that was adorned with cafes and tourist shops. Change is coming to Bhutan, very much in evidence in Paro, though it is still a delightful small city with tasteful architecture and lofty mountain views. After lunch we went out to the view of Tiger's Nest, no one in our group having opted to make the steep climb up to experience it at close range. It was lovely to see it nestled onto a dramatic cliff. We stopped to check for Black-tailed Crake in



a small wetland and after thinking it was not to be, we heard one call and came out into the clearing quickly. Monna had a good view, then it slipped away and Karen, further down the viewing area, found it again. This time we were all successful as it made a dash across a fairly open area. We ended with a GRAND finale bird – the Ibisbill. In view of the Paro Dzong, not far from downtown, this unique bird, the only member of its family, fed along the stream affording us really fine views.

What a journey! We celebrated the final evening, some wearing lovely woven goods they had purchased and all joining in to talk through their favorite birds and moments. Top birds were varied and included the Himalayan Griffon, Satyr Tragopan, Blood Pheasant, Barred Button Quail, Verditer, White-capped Redstart, Hoopoe, Asian Barred Owl, Pallas’ Fishing Eagle, Scaley-breasted Cupwing, Darjeeling Woodpecker, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, White-browed Fulvetta, Ibisbill, Collared Falconets (courting with gifts of butterflies), Spotted Laughingthrush and several of the sunbirds. Special moments included bird highlights but also the patience, skill and knowledge shared by our guides and the experience of camping under the prayer flags. We had weathered many miles but gained so much for the effort.

Sun., Apr. 23 Departures

Our group was most companionable, and it felt odd to be breaking up the flock. Thankfully Paro airport could not be a nicer place to check in to and wait, its public areas full of art and comfortable furniture, even a corner where you can try out some paintings. Time to hunker down for the long flights home, but we were so happy to explore this beautiful country of the Himalayas steeped in traditions and still deeply forested and pristine.

Manas National Park Extension

Fri., Apr. 7 Arrivals in New Delhi | Flight to Assam | Manas National Park

India has two key national parks situated on the border of Bhutan, and since our March India / Red Pandas tour visits Kaziranga NP, we chose Manas NP to feature ahead of Bhutan. It was the perfect pairing, offering an easy



way to get to the lowland habitats that the two countries share. We saw 72 bird species there not on the main Bhutan journey. Manas is generally less crowded than Kaziranga and offers good chances to see Bengal Florican and so many diverse bird species.

To get there, we flew from Delhi to Guwahati on a short flight on a blue-sky day with tall snow peaks of the Himalayas in view. On arrival we found Asian Palm Swift and House Crow right out the door. We then had a half day drive to the eastern side of Manas, with some of the bird highlights in travel being White-throated Kingfisher, Green Imperial Pigeon, Rufous Treepie, and Crimson Sunbird. We arrived in time for an afternoon outing, using local jeep safari vehicles to venture into the park. Right from the start it was a bird bonanza and really great for mammals too, with Indian Rhino being at the top of the list. We also saw Asian Elephant, Indian Gar, and right next to our vehicle, a fresh Tiger track!

Sat., Apr. 8 Full Day - Manas National Park

Our morning safari drive was exceptional, we drove first through some villages then entered the grassland section of the park, wide open with the dramatic rise of mountains behind – we were looking right into Bhutan! There were some specialty birds we wanted to see here, and we arrived while activity was still high. We saw two Bengal Florican, endangered and impressive members of the bustard clan. They were jumping into the air and vocalizing, then landing out of site in the grass. With study you could pick out their long necks moving and prepare for the next display. Fabulous.

Golden-headed Cisticola gleamed in the sun, perched up on emergent stalks taller than the main grassy areas. Siberian Stonechat joined them on these visible perches as did both Ashy and Plain Prinias. We had to look harder for some of the elusive birds of the scrub, but found four species of babblers: Striated, Slender-billed, Yellow-eyed and Chestnut Capped. Overhead we spotted Changeable Hawk Eagle along with the more common Oriental Honey-buzzards. In wet areas we picked up Red-wattled Lapwing, Lesser Adjutant and Asian Openbill. Wild Peacocks (Indian Peafowl) calling and displaying from a line of trees was memorable.

After the grassland area we ventured into lush forest, picking up Lineated and Blue-throated Barbets, Red-collared Dove, Green-billed Malkoha, Black-naped Monarch, Himalayan Flameback, Gray-capped Pygmy



Woodpecker, Asian Fairy-bluebird and two lovely minivets, Scarlet and Rosy. Time passed quickly and all of this was before our lunch! We had a bit of a post-lunch rest, but the birds were calling and off we went, loading into the jeeps once again with our guide and the local guides. We saw three species of green-pigeon, Rufous Woodpecker, a flowering tree full of Red-breasted Parakeets, a nesting pair of Silver-breasted Broadbill, two species of leafbird, about 35 species in total and really good views of them all.

Sun., Apr. 9

Today we crossed over to the other side of the park, leaving it for awhile to enter at a different gate. En route we had wonderful looks at Common Kingfisher by a small pond. Once inside the park we found the same extraordinary lushness to the forests, with activity at a level it gave us the sense of a bird explosion, the bird densities were high! We saw both Greater and Black-rumped Flameback, watched a pair of Black-winged Cuckooshrike building their nest, and worked our first big mixed flocks where Velvet-fronted Nuthatch mingled with drongos, bulbuls and warblers. Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters were a big hit showing off all their array of color, but the sudden appearance of four Great Hornbills quickly stole the show. The smallest bird of the trip made an appearance high in flowers of the tree canopy, a Plain Flowerpecker. We enjoyed finding Rufous-necked Laughingthrush and marveled at the Bengal Monitor Lizards sunning themselves on trunks of trees. Collared Falconets were near the gate we passed through to get to our lodgings, a treat to watch these small predators feed on butterflies.

We checked into our new lodgings, and after lunch and a rest headed back into the park. Our route paralleled the river, and we made a few side turnoffs to see what we'd find. Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker, Puff-throated Babbler, White-rumped Shama and Small Niltava were a few of our finds. Long-tailed Broadbill with its color and classy appearance was a treat, and we found three species of roosting owls, Asian Barred Owlet and Brown Boobook giving us the best looks. Two Kalij Pheasant decided to take a dust bath in the road – nice!

Mon., Apr. 10

It has been our intention to drive from Manas National Park north into Bhutan, crossing there and making our way into the mountains. Sadly, the border was closed for many months and Bhutan had not reopened it to



foreign visitors. This would greatly increase our driving times for the 2023 tour if we were to see any lowland areas at all, frustrating as we could practically see them from here! We made the best of it but returned in the afternoon to Delhi on a flight. Before that Avijit shared a community conservation project with us at Kokoijana Village where we were able to see Gee's Golden Langur, one of the world's really beautiful primates. Sanjeev Ray showed us around and took us to his home for tea and a chance to meet the family. Monna enjoyed reading a book in English with their eager to learn young boy. In the village we saw Gray-headed Woodpecker, Asian Koel, and White-throated Fantail. We then threaded our way back through the busy lives of rural Indian people, fascinating to see trucks loaded with produce, and just to watch day to day life. Close to the airport there was a wetland area where we had a super quick stop to find 40 or more Gray-headed Swamphen, 2 Purple Heron, 9 Bronze-winged Jacana, and several egrets.

Photo Credits: Silver-cheeked Broadbill (Peg Abbott - PA), Himalayan Griffon (Bhutan Birding), Group at lunch (PA), Eurasian Hoopoe (PA), Capped Langur (PA), Satyr Tragopan (Bhutan Birding), Bhutan Airlines (PA), Gorgeous Artwork (PA), Siberian Stonechat (PA), Greater Flameback (PA), Slender-billed Babbler (PA), Building details (PA), Asian Green Bee-eater (PA), White-collared Blackbird (PA), Airport Mural (PA), White-throated Laughingthrush (PA), ar-headed Goose (Bhutan Birding), Himalayan Monal (PA), Rhododendron Forest Details (PA), Enjoying Lunch (PA), Lunch Stop (PA), Mrs. Gould's Sunbird (PA), White-browed Fulvetta (PA), Lunch Spread (PA), Rufous Accentor (PA), Himalayan Moral (Bhutan Birding), Building details (PA), Hazy Scenic (PA), Black-faced Warbler (PA), Verditer Flycatcher (PA), Blue-throated Barbet (PA), Soaking in the views (PA), Bhutan Laughingthrush (PA), Yellow-cheeked Tit (PA), Good Times! (PA), Courtyard (Phil Ryan - PR), Whiskered Yuhina (PA), Green-billed Malkoha (PA), White-throated Kingfisher (PA), Greater Yellownape (PA), White-browed Shrike Babbler (PA), Red-vented Bulbul pair (PA), Long-tailed Broadbill (Bhutan Birding), White-headed Babbler (PA), Bird-listing & Dinner (PA), Eyebrowed Wren Babbler (Bhutan Birding), Archway (PA), Golden Langur (PA), Baskets (PA), Blue-throated Barbet (PA), Peg by waterfalls (PA), Golden Langur tail (PA), Tented Camp (PA), Crested Bunting Male (PA), Great Hornbill (PR), Chechnut-headed Bee-eater (PR), Brown Boobook (Bhutan Birding), Scaly-breasted Cupping (Bhutan Birding), Enjoying the view (PA), Anything for the perfect shot! (PA), Weaving Center x3 (PA), Oriental Turtle Dove (PA), Coal Tit - Himalayan race (PA), Snowy Road (PA), White-capped Redstart (PA), Gorgeous City Details (PA), Final Dinner (PA), Murals x 3 (PA), Great Hornbill (PA), Asian Elephants (PA), Asian Barred Owlet (PA), Bengal Monitor Lizard (PA), Red-breasted Parakeet (PA), Black Giant Squirrel (PA), Indian Rhinoceros (PA), New Friends (PA), Yellow-eyed Babbler (PA)