

## **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW:**

Just as certain bird species tend to appear again and again on birders' most-wished-for lists, so special parts of the world have become widely coveted dream destinations. An example of a country that has emerged relatively recently to fire birders' imaginations in this way is Bhutan. At least 3 distinct biogeographic regions meet in this part of the eastern Himalayas, thus helping to account for its high biodiversity and endemism, and it holds a lot of rare and charismatic species which continue to be relatively easy to see. For those of you still unfamiliar with Bhutan's avifauna think of such birds as 3 fabulous pheasants (Himalayan Monal, Satyr Tragopan and Blood Pheasant); the quietly lovely Ibisbill (a monotypic family); Ward's Trogon; Rufous-necked and Great Hornbills; several accentors; a long list of terrific laughingthrushes together with their intra-family relatives the scimitar-babblers, wren-babblers, barwings, yuhinas, fulvettas, etc.; parrotbills; and an intriguing selection of finches. And a lot more. Historically access has been somewhat problematic but within the last 10 to 15 years many restrictions have been eased and tourism has taken off. Most people visit Bhutan to experience a timeless, almost fairy-tale Buddhist kingdom replete with monumental fortresses (called dzongs); countless fluttering prayer flags which are seemingly never out of view; fascinating architecture; colorful pageants; and charming, friendly people. But bird watching and trekking are also becoming popular, and several companies have sprung up to cater to people with these interests.

Candy and I have had Bhutan in our sights for several years now but had always held off going, partly because of the expense and partly because we don't especially like birding in large, organized groups. Then we discovered Gurudongma Tours & Treks on the internet. They are based in Kalimpong, West Bengal, India, and lead fixed or customized bird trips to various destinations in northeastern India. But what really caught our eye was that they also have all the required permits and business connections to take birders into Bhutan, virtually next door for them. Ever since our very enjoyable trip to northern India in 2003 we had wanted to return, so the situation seemed perfect for us. So, after some "due diligence" checks we contacted Gurudongma partner General Jimmy Singh, and eventually put together a fabulous 30 day itinerary encompassing 10 days centered on Kaziranga and Nameri National Parks in Assam, northeast India, and 20 days in Bhutan. And now that we are back home we can say that the trip did come close to being perfect, so we are pleased to highly recommend Gurudongma. Peter Lobo, <http://www.allindiabirdingtours.com>, [birdingindia@gmail.com](mailto:birdingindia@gmail.com) also a partner, is a keen, knowledgeable and inexhaustible bird guide, fun travelling companion and seamless expeditor. Oh yes, about the cost. For those of you who also yearn to visit this wonderful part of the earth just get in touch with Peter Lobo and you will be very pleasantly surprised.

Bhutan and northeastern India practically demand to be combined into one super-birding trip. They are conveniently close together, both now have good tourist infrastructures, and of course have great birds. The varied mountain-and-valley topography of Bhutan contrasts sharply with the flat floodplain and low hill country habitats of adjacent ne India; thus, together they offer a diverse and highly complementary bird fauna. On a smaller scale the same thing can be said about Kaziranga (grassland) and Nameri (forest) national parks. So in a nutshell this entire region represents a virtual birding Shangrila, and appropriately so since the very term was originally coined by James Hilton in his 1930s novel *Lost Horizon* with these eastern Himalayas in mind. In Bhutan we recorded 295 bird species in 18 full and part birding days. When the 267 species seen in ne India are factored in (only 7 full birding days), the total for the whole trip was 462 different birds. Fully 203 of these (44%) were new from birds we recorded in northern India in 2003. Birding on both legs of the trip was spectacular, many species seeming special or compelling to us for various reasons. And for those who like mammals with their birds Kaziranga is tremendous - I will simply note that the park supports the highest population of the threatened Indian Rhinoceros anywhere, and visitors are assured of repeat point-blank looks at this primeval looking beast. A trip report and annotated species list for ne India has also been posted on this same site.

## **THE ITINERARY:**

**Day 1 (Apr 07)** - 06:00: Birding above Phuentsholing at 300m. Drive to Thimphu (2240m) with birding stops along the way. Overnight in Thimphu at Hotel Pemaling.

**Day 2 (Apr 08)** - AM: Birding north of Thimphu at Jigme Dorji National Park in the Cheri valley, @2564m. PM: Sightseeing in Thimphu.

**Day 3 (Apr 09)** - 05:00 AM departure; along central highway to Dochala (3150m); bird east side of pass by walking the highway. 10:15: Drive to Punakha and visit Punakha dzong. Drive north along Mo Chu (river) towards Jigme Dorji NP, birding along road to Shatem campsite (1670m) from 13:00. Camp overnight in tents.

**Day 4 (Apr 10)** - AM: Bird upriver (north) from campsite in the national park. PM: Bird down river from campsite

**Day 5 (Apr 11)** - AM: Depart for Gangtey with stops en route as we climbed towards Pelela. PM: Leave the central highway, turning south towards Gangtey and walk from near the Gangteyla pass at 3358m down into the Phobjika valley. Visit Gangtey Gompa. Night at the very nice Gompa Guest House (2960m)

**Day 6 (Apr 12)** - 05:30 departure for Pelela (3412m). Birding walk down the old road (3375-3000m), stopping for picnic lunch. Drive to Trongsa 14:15, arriving at Sherubling Tourist Lodge 17:50 (2290m).

**Day 7 (Apr 13)** - 05:00: Leave Trongsa on the Zhemgang road. Many stops in various habitats and altitudes. Arrive at Tingtibi campsite at 17:30 (8-900m)

**Day 8 (Apr 14)** - Drive above camp to about 1100 m, gradually birding back down to camp at 15:20. Bird trail near camp until 17:40

**Day 9 (Apr 15)** - 04:00: Drive up road 1.5 hrs to good forest above Zhemgang at 1775m. Bird north along road through varying altitudes (as low as 1040m) to an improvised roadside campsite at around 1800m

**Day 10 (Apr 16)** - Leave 05:30, alternately walking and driving road through a succession of altitudes and moister/drier habitats back to Trongsa, arriving at 15:30. Overnight again at Sherubling Tourist Lodge

**Day 11 (Apr 17)** - 05:00 departure, ascending Yotongla (3275m) and birding down from summit. Visit hand-made textile centre in Chumi valley. Overnight at River Lodge, Jakar, 2490m.

**Day 12 (Apr 18)** - Away by 05:00, over Shertangla (3418m) thence through Ura valley (28-2900m), up Thrumsingla (3757m), and down to Sengor campsite (@3000m).

**Day 13 (Apr 19)** - Birding down the famed Lingmethang road from Sengor camp past Namling to Yongkhola campsite at 17:00, 1535m.

**Day 14 (Apr 20)** - AM: Drive back up road, birding at various altitudes up to @2150m. PM: Back down road past camp to as low as @550m and on to Mongar (1565m) with assorted birding stops.

**Day 15 (Apr 21)** - AM: Depart near 05:00 heading east to Korila @2307m. PM: Retrace route back westwards through Mongar to a makeshift campsite in valley on lower Lingmethang road, @875m.

**Day 16 (Apr 22)** - Up Lingmethang road to Thrumsingla with birding stops, and lunch at Sengor camp. PM: drive back through Ura valley to River Lodge at Jakar.

**Day 17 (Apr 23)** - Long travel day, Jakar to Thimphu with a few brief stops to bird.

**Day 18 (Apr 24)** - AM: Shopping at weekend market and elsewhere, Thimphu. PM: Drive to Paro for more sightseeing (eg, "Tiger's Nest" monastery). Overnight at Gangtey Palace (lodge), 2275m.

**Day 19 (Apr 25)** - Day trip up the fabulous Chelela (3988m). Late PM: Visit Paro dzong.

**Day 20 (Apr 26)** - Rain-delayed departure from Paro -> Kolkata -> New Delhi -> Toronto.

**Note:** Altitudes come from several written sources, not all of which agree, and also from my altimeter which can give erroneous readings of plus or minus 100m depending on barometric pressure.

## **PLANNING AND LOGISTICAL NOTES:**

### ***Getting There:***

Current tourism policy in Bhutan requires that all visitors must either enter or leave the country by air, which automatically means using the state owned airline, Druk Air. The major connecting city is New Delhi, but Kolkata and I believe Bangkok are also serviced directly. Gurudongma handled these air reservations. In practice most tourists fly both in and out. In our case it was more convenient to enter by road at Phuentsholing because we were relatively close at hand after concluding our 10 day trip in ne India. In theory there are 2 additional road entry points east of Phuentsholing, one of which would have been extremely convenient for us, but both have been closed for a few years due to potential threats from armed insurgents connected with the political unrest in ne India.

A visa is necessary to visit Bhutan. This was pre-arranged by Gurudongma and all we had to do was check in at the border, fill out a form for each person and pay the fee (\$20 US). The whole procedure took less than half an hour.

### ***Travel Within Bhutan:***

Tourism in the country is highly regulated. For example, there is a minimum per diem price which is apportioned among the tour operator, hotels, the government, etc. I do not think it is possible to enter the country, rent a car on one's own, and then go driving around. Most tourists are part of organized fixed itinerary tours. Until fairly recently there was a cap on tourist numbers, and also a mandated minimum party size and length of stay, but not now. We were free to design our own itinerary for a party of only 4. It is still necessary to travel with a Bhutanese tour operator, in our case Rainbow Tours, which has a working relationship with Gurudongma Tours & Treks. Once the itinerary and timing were set the 2 companies between them made all necessary arrangements and reservations.

We travelled in a standard 7 passenger van operated by Rainbow Tours, who were represented by a driver and an assistant/expediter. The party was filled out by our bird guide Peter Lobo of Gurudongma, and of course the 4 birders. Everything went very smoothly. From time to time we had to stop at army or police check points to present papers but we were never delayed. The van suffered a failing head gasket towards the end of the trip, most notably on the long return drive westwards across the country from Jakar to Thimphu. This necessitated a few stops to top up with water, but it was not an inconvenience because we

were always in great habitat and we took these as opportunities to look for birds. In any case we got back to the capital with no problem and nearly on time.

### ***Accommodations and Food:***

We stayed in the country 20 nights. Twelve were at hotels, lodges or guest houses that ranged from "great", with all the amenities, to "fine", only a bit more basic but nothing at all to complain about. In all but 1 case we had private toilet and shower/washroom facilities. To our unsophisticated palates food seemed very similar to that in India, that is to say, good. Most dishes were fairly rich, prepared in a sauce or "curried" form. For those who like an occasional break to more familiar (ie, bland) food, breakfasts normally were omelette or scrambled eggs and toast, and quite often one could top out on a big plate of fried potatoes. And always there was tea (the chai masala tasting just as good as in India).

The other 8 nights we camped. By North American standards the camp grounds were only nominally that, with no facilities other than a latrine tent with a dug pit. Most of the time they were in fact improvised (even if traditionally used) spots on scarce, relatively level ground close to the road. We slept in Rainbow's small 2-person tents which are normally used on their trekking expeditions. Of course this isn't to everyone's taste, but it cannot be avoided because there is no suitable accommodation in the immediate vicinity of many of the very best birding areas. But more positively, we were more than happy to camp. On several of our trips to far-flung places we have had to commute long distances from tourist type lodgings to birding sites, in the process often missing those precious minutes after dawn for birding. It was thus great to wake up in the first dim light then bird nearby before breakfast. And in any case, all birding tours to Bhutan have to do the same thing.

Rainbow's staff travelled ahead of us in a pickup truck with all the gear. Camp was always set up when we arrived and it wasn't long before hot tea and warm water for washing were brought to us. By the time we had settled in a very good evening meal was ready. Then it was tabulating the day's bird list and to bed. Our companions brought their own sleeping bags. Candy's and mine were provided, or I should say donated, by the staff because our request had somehow got lost in the shuffle, the only mix-up of the trip. In practice it scarcely mattered anyway because most camping was at low altitudes and hence it was quite warm at night. At the beginning I was always surprised to come across the crew beside the road around noon with a pre-cooked hot meal ready to eat, only a little less elaborate than supper. And they followed the same procedure with tea and cookies/biscuits at mid-morning and afternoon. Candy and I can certainly vouch for the staff of Rainbow Tours. They were always punctual, helpful and cordial. The driver was a great character with a short brush-cut and a big smile, and Norbu (not doing the driving on this trip) was both an excellent companion, a big help in finding birds (as you will note in the species list) and always answered our questions about his country patiently and lucidly.

### ***Health and Safety:***

We did not need any new inoculations above those standard jabs we'd already accumulated for previous trips. However, you should check one of the helpful government travel advisory websites (eg: [www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca)). We had no problems with food or water other than a couple of days of traveller's stomach, which is normal for us on every trip. We noticed biting flies a couple of hot days when we were birding interior valleys but they did not amount to much. Despite warnings in a few books I don't think we even saw a terrestrial leech. Although the highest altitudes we reached (about 4000m) could potentially cause some people problems we were unaffected, likely because we were able to acclimate to the heights gradually. We never felt in the slightest personal danger or even remotely uncomfortable during the entire trip. The large majority of Bhutanese people we encountered were open, friendly, helpful, and curious. Lovely people.

### ***Money:***

The Bhutanese ngultrum is pegged at the same value as the Indian rupee, and the rupee is considered legal tender in Bhutan (although when we tried to use 500 Rs notes to pay the departure tax at Paro airport they were not accepted). At the time of our visit 1 \$US equalled @43.5 Ng/Rs (36.3 per \$Ca). We only needed cash for souvenirs and drinks. For large purchases, such as fascinating old Buddhist religious items, ceremonial masks, or lovely hand made fabric in eastern Bhutan it is often possible to use a credit card, and some places accepted US dollars. The trouble is that it is hard to know this in advance so you will definitely want some extra currency if you like to bring home something nice to remember your trip. And when you are in eastern Bhutan be sure to try a bottle of Red Panda beer (an empty even makes a neat little souvenir)

### ***Weather:***

I have read several April trip reports for Bhutan where it rained, sleeted or even snowed. I think we were lucky. We had rain showers several nights, but we lost no time during the day. A typical day driving through the mountains on the central highway would serve up very cool temperatures (as low as 4C) with overcast in the early morning, often accompanied by fog (or was it cloud?) at the passes, then sun or high partial overcast later on and sometimes quite hot (>30C), particularly in the interior valleys. I gather you have to go there prepared for about anything. However, because almost all birding is done from paved or good quality gravel roads there is no pressing need to take bulky rubber boots at this time of year.

### **FIELD GUIDES:**

We had 2 books in the party, and found that we needed both. In general the strengths of one offset the weaknesses of the other. Several different titles relevant to the region by the same authors (**Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskip and Tim Inskip**) all appear to use the same illustrations although the species are grouped on plates differently. So it doesn't much matter whether you have the version that is specific to Bhutan or one of the more all-encompassing titles which also include birds of India, Pakistan, Nepal, etc. **A Field Guide To The Birds Of The Indian Subcontinent** by Krys Kazmierczak and Ber van Perlo is the other book.

### **THE COUNTRY:**

Bhutan is perched on the south slope of the eastern Himalayas. It is a small country, roughly 325 km long by 145 km wide, but only as the Large-billed Crow flies because extreme topographical variation makes distances seem a lot farther. Many books comment on Bhutan's superficial similarity to Switzerland, in size, landscape and scenery and, curiously, even the architecture of the chalet type houses. Though the population has increased sharply in recent decades it is still only in the order of 700,000. As we snaked along the central highway that now links the series of formerly isolated central valleys where most habitation occurs it seemed hard to believe that the road and nearly all development and infrastructure dates from the 1960s at the very earliest and most of it considerably later. For example, the Indian prime minister had to enter the country on foot to make an official visit in the 1950s. The first tourists visited in 1974. TV came to Bhutan only in 1999! Roads on the unstable mountain slopes require constant repair and upkeep by large road crews brought in from India.

Roughly 70% of the country remains forested, much of it in a largely pristine state. Ice and snow cover some 10% of the land base in the highest mountains. Less than 10% is cultivated. The country is centered on 27 degrees N, about the same latitude as Cairo and West Palm Beach, Florida in the US. The climate ranges from tropical along the low southern edge to essentially polar in the high inner (or greater) Himalaya. A lot of rain (as much as 5-6 m) falls in the southern border area and adjacent mountain slopes, peaking during the June to September monsoon season, but generally much less in the interior valleys (0.5-1m). The central valleys can be quite cool in winter, and even experience fairly frequent snowfalls though it tends not to accumulate for long. It was spring when we visited. We had several

days of 30-35C maximum temperatures, not just in the valleys (1700-2500m), but also considerably higher near passes (3500m plus).

Bordering the Indian state of Assam in the south is a narrow band of lowland, immediately giving way to steep foothill and mountain slopes. Distinctly lush tropical or subtropical vegetation extends from as low as 150m up to perhaps 1800m in places, largely a broadleaved evergreen forest though sometimes taking the form of a slightly drier oak-like association (*Castanopsis indica*). Agriculture now covers considerable portions of the lowest areas. Between 1800 and 2000m the vegetation becomes a wonderfully diverse and more temperate forest type where tree groups familiar to someone from North America start to appear: maples, beeches, birches, magnolias and various oaks as well as tree rhododendrons. Above 24-2500m a transformation occurs into a mixed deciduous-coniferous forest featuring progressively more Blue Pine (with 5 needles), fir, larch and hemlock along with numerous hardwood species. Finally, on the upper slopes near the passes a more open, now mainly coniferous community takes over which is close to sub-alpine in character. In places as we ascended, and especially in the vicinity of passes, the understory was aglow with a fabulous array of stunning rhododendrons representing almost 50 species, many of which are in flower in April. We did not get above the tree line into the true alpine zone. In certain drier than normal areas in the valleys but also on the mountain slopes, the microclimate favors stands of the 3-needled Chir Pine, often with an open grassy and/or sparse shrubby understory.

In Bhutan you are always going up or down. And turning left or right at the same time. It is joked that the only straight, level road in the country is the airport runway at Paro. Three major mountain systems run north to south through the central part of the country, between which lie broad and fairly high valleys. The single-lane main highway winds west to east, seemingly always climbing to one of many beautiful major or minor passes (varying in altitude from 2300m or lower to almost 4000m) or descending into one of the interior valleys (approximately 1500m to as high as 2800m). One or more rivers bisect the valleys, also contributing to bird diversity. Together this system of central mountains and valleys is termed the outer Himalaya. It is here that the majority of major towns, much of the country's population and agriculture, and of course most tourism is concentrated. On rare clear days the "real" mountains of the so-called inner (or greater) Himalaya can be viewed in the distance to the north from some of the passes, impressively stark snow and ice covered peaks up to 7497m above sea level. Some of this area is open to trekkers, but many of the higher interior mountains remain off limits so as not to disturb or upset spirits residing therein.

## **BIRDING:**

Almost all visitors arrive by air at Paro in the west of the country and travel eastwards by vehicle of one type or another. Birding consists basically of repeated transects from valleys up through 2 or 3 vegetation zones, over a pass and down the other side to perhaps overnight in one of the valley towns, then repeating the same process next day. Extra days were spent making side trips up or down some of the valleys. As everywhere, there are well known birding locations and special stake-outs for prime birds, but a stop almost anywhere can be really good. Two roads that branch south off the main highway are not to be missed, the Zhemgang and the Lingmethang roads (note that spelling of place names is variable in the literature and even locally; I use versions jotted down from road signs for the most part). Both extend as far south as the Indian border, but neither can be driven that far, by tourists at least. However this isn't too important because it is possible to descend well into the subtropical zone (to as low as @550m) so that a nearly full array of elevational habitats is accessible, and hence you have a chance at most of Bhutan's most sought after birds.

Our normal routine was to rise early, usually around 04:00 to 04:30 in order to drive to birding sites by just after dawn. Even when we were camping some driving was usually necessary so wake-up times were not much later. This is very important. Even in the mountains on hot sunny days a drop-off in bird activity was clearly noticeable by 09:00 or even earlier. After that we always kept walking, but birds could be surprisingly hard to come

by for long periods. Activity would often pick up to some extent again in late afternoon. It is something of a paradox that in a country where we experienced some of our best birding ever and saw several all-time favorite birds, we also went through periods of some of the very dearest birding I can ever remember! Hence the importance of planning an itinerary so that the party can be positioned close enough to the next birding area so as not to miss this critical early morning period. For the most part we did this, the only notable exception being the morning we travelled from the Shatem campsite north of Punakha to Gangtey in the Phobjika Valley, arriving rather late to bird on the west slope of Pelela. In this instance it would likely have been better to have left the camp on the previous afternoon and overnighted in Wangdue Phodrang.

Peter Lobo worked extremely hard and for very long hours without ever losing his enthusiasm or good humour. Many times we were on the road before 05:00, birding from first light (@05:30) nearly until dusk (18:00 or a bit later). Not too surprisingly people were tired in the evenings and usually ready to turn in quite soon after supper and the bird list, so that we never got around to trying any night birding to speak of (although we kept saying we should). Peter has a CD and tape player which we used somewhat sporadically and with mixed success, although some very good birds were seen this way. I don't think he had tape-and-playback capability, and that may have hindered us with a few singing birds we wanted to see. He also had a new digital camera with 500mm lens with which he ardently pursued birds. The upside to this was that he very generously prepared CDs for us (done in the field using a laptop) with some tremendous photos, the views often better than I remember!

## **DAILY LOG:**

### ***Day 1; Apr. 7:***

We did a little pre-breakfast local birding in heavy overcast just above Phuentsholing at @300m without seeing much, although a Lesser-necklaced Laughingthrush was welcome. Several species were seen that would provide our only ticks for Bhutan, but nearly all of these were familiar already from our 10 days in northeastern India (see the separate report and species list). There were hundreds of beautiful epiphytic orchids (*Dendrobium aphyllum*) blooming in the trees along this part of the road, just 1 of some 600+ orchid species in Bhutan. After reading how light road traffic is in Bhutan we were unpleasantly surprised at the long lines of noisy buses and trucks laboring up the highway and belching diesel fumes, but this was mostly due to traffic having been delayed for a considerable period for road repairs; however, Phuentsholing currently is the only road access point from India so there is bound to be a fair bit of traffic on this stretch of highway.

At 09:30 we drove off into the mountains and the interior of Bhutan. At 1475m we ran into intermittent mist and fog, hereafter a regular occurrence. After a few uneventful stops starting at @1800m all hell broke loose at 1990m in the form of a large fast moving mixed flock which provided a nice introduction to Himalayan birding. An overview of the days birds: Long-tailed and Scarlet Minivets; very nice Striated, Black-crested and Black Bulbuls; Orange-bellied Leafbird; Blue Rock-Thrush; Grey-winged Blackbird; several warblers; Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied and White-throated Fantails; Green-backed, Yellow-cheeked and Yellow-browed Tits; Ruby-cheeked and Gould's Sunbirds; Maroon Oriole; Ashy Woodswallow; Ashy, Bronzed and Hair-crested Drongos; Rufous and Grey Treepies plus Gold-billed Magpie; and 15 species from the family Timaliidae, including 3 laughingthrushes (White-throated, Striated and Black-faced), 3 babblers (Rufous-fronted, Rufous-capped and Golden), Hoary-throated Barwing, Blue-winged and Chestnut-tailed Minlas, Rufous-winged Fulvetta and the very common and widespread Rufous Sibia. Perhaps best were the 2 exotic looking Cutias, except that they kept disappearing and briefly materializing again in the fog.

Once over the 2490m high Chapchala (the suffix "la" means mountain pass) we descended a bit into the western-most of the large central valleys. Here microclimate was obviously drier with scrubby vegetation and some Chir Pine. And then it was not long until we drove into

Thimphu, reputed to be the only capital city in the world with no traffic lights. Instead a dashing traffic cop in a very nifty uniform directed vehicles with great flair at one main intersection. Only around 45,000 people live in Thimphu, though from the look of all the construction in process the population must be rapidly increasing. We were soon at the modern and comfortable Hotel Pemaling. Thimphu is at about 2320m asl.

### **Day 2; Apr. 8:**

This morning we drove north of Thimphu for about 45 minutes up the Cheri Valley and into Jigme Dorji National Park, covering a range of roughly 2350-2600m. We birded a path beside a swift-flowing stream traversing a lovely mature, predominantly oak, forest. Although birding was a bit slow we ended up seeing several worthwhile birds, including: Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, 4 Brown Dippers, 2 nice Rufous-breasted Accentors near a foot bridge festooned with prayer flags, a sharp White-collared Blackbird, Buff-barred, Blyth's Leaf and Golden-spectacled Warblers, 4 redstarts (Hodgson's, Blue-fronted, Plumbeous and the gorgeous White-capped), Black-browed Tit, our first of many Green-tailed Sunbirds and Grey-backed Shrike, also a common bird. A mammalian highlight was 2 (maybe more) goat-like Common Gorals on the rocky hillside above the trail.

We headed back to town for lunch and spent the afternoon sightseeing and prospecting for souvenirs and gifts. Some Red-billed Choughs stalking about in the yard of a house near the outskirts of Thimphu were a nice surprise. In Thimphu we visited our first of the amazing Bhutanese dzongs, the Trashi Chhoe Dzong. These are massive, imposing citadel-like structures, yet surprisingly whimsical at the same time with their superficially capricious concoction of hundreds of offices, temples, chapels, monks' quarters, miscellaneous rooms, stairways, courtyards, towers, etc. They serve both as administrative and religious centers, each located in separate wings. Every major town has a dzong and every one is different, though sharing basic design similarities. Somewhat unbelievably no blueprints or drawings were ever drawn up, the design being based on mentally formulated plans and construction proceeding from verbal instruction. It is said that nails are never used in building a dzong!

### **Day 3; Apr. 9:**

Up early and away by around 05:00, today towards the 3150m high Dochala. We birded at the summit then walked down a bit to get some breakfast at a homey restaurant situated above the road at 3115m. The temperature was 11C at 07:30. We found it a bit hard at first to focus on birding in the clutter of thousands of fluttering, flapping prayer flags marking the pass along with the array of dozens of small white chortens housing prayer wheels. And also our first close views of beautiful rhododendrons in flower. From this point on I looked forward to reaching each pass as much for the flowers as for the birds, repeatedly burning through film without restraint. Vistas of blooming rhododendrons and magnolias are, thankfully, forever etched in my mind because this is a devilishly hard thing to capture decently on film, although close-ups were no problem. Several more timaliids made their welcome appearance including Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, White-browed Fulvetta (becoming a regular hereafter), Rufous-vented and Stripe-throated Yuhinas, and best of all a pair of the brilliant Fire-tailed Myzornis in a flowering shrub beside the road. We also observed some furry little Large-eared Pikas, apparently just outside their burrows near the edge of the road.

At 10:15 we proceeded on towards Punakha, pausing for obligatory riverside photos of the wonderful dzong. Along the river at the dzong was a surprising assortment of waterfowl, a single Bar-headed Goose and several species of ducks: 12 Ruddy Shelducks, 3 Wigeons, a Gadwall, 12 Common Pochards and a Common Merganser. We then stopped a few km upstream to eat lunch next to the river, @1400m altitude, temperature 30C. Something at supper last night did not agree with me so I was not in the mood for any lunch, and instead studied one of the great birds of the trip in the scope for nearly 45 minutes - a fabulous Ibisbill spent the whole time methodically probing among the large stones/small rocks of a partially exposed bar in the river directly opposite us, occasionally grabbing a large insect larva or

nymph, and perhaps a few crayfish. Despite having looked at dozens of photographs of this bird before the trip I was taken by surprise at its quiet beauty, and in particular by the extreme narrowness of its long downwept bill.

Then further northwards along the Mo Chhu Valley and into the eastern side of the same Jigme Dorji National Park we had already visited north of Thimphu. Eventually we stopped to walk the dirt road (1550-1670m) to a rough campsite beside the river. As we were to find throughout the trip birds could be very inconspicuous on warm days. We saw little new on the walk though I was pleased with Mountain Bulbul.

#### ***Day 4; Apr 10:***

We birded upriver along the road in the morning, then downriver in the afternoon. Although it was slow birding for the most part, in the end we saw some good new species. Some highlights: Black Eagle, Mountain Hawk-Eagle, the first of many Fork-tailed Swifts, Crested Kingfisher, Great and Golden-throated Barbets, Lesser Yellowthroat, Crimson-breasted and a lovely pair of Bay Woodpeckers, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, 4+ more Brown Dippers, Chestnut-headed and Slaty-bellied Tesias, Verditer Flycatcher which from here on became the commonest member of the family, 4 Small Niltalvas, Little and Slaty-backed Forktails, several Nepal Fulvettas, and Black-chinned Yuhina. One of our targets along the swift flowing Mo Chhu (river) was the rare and range-restricted White-bellied Heron. We came up short though several other birding groups in Bhutan at the same general time connected.

#### ***Day 5; Apr 11:***

Bound today for the Phobjika Valley, winter home to Bhutan's national bird the Black-necked Crane but at this time of year all gone to their breeding grounds in Tibet. We made perhaps a bit of tactical error in staying the night at the camp site, missing the all-important time period just after dawn in travel. Among the birds seen on a slow morning were Rufous-bellied Eagle and the only Blue-eared Barbet and Pale Blue-Flycatcher of the trip. At one point a lovely Yellow-throated Marten appeared on the road, ambled along for a few seconds then dashed off downslope. We stopped for lunch just above the hamlet of Nobding (2877m) on the ascent up the western slope of the major pass called Pelela, the gateway into central Bhutan. Nine Himalayan Griffons sailed around overhead as we ate.

But that would be for tomorrow. In the afternoon, just before Pelela, we turned south, climbed briefly to Gangteyla and then descended, though not very low, into the Phobjika Valley. At 3358m we got out of the van and walked down the road into the valley for a few km. Here the vegetation was rather stark, dominated by ground-hugging dwarf bamboo with the odd single tree or small stands of Blue Pine and larch. Among the relatively few birds we saw: the sharp tricolor race of Long-tailed Shrike, Brown Parrotbill, Rufous-vented Tit and Russet Sparrow. Finally we drove down into almost pure Blue Pine forest interspersed among pastures and crop fields, where we visited the famous and ancient Gangtey Gompa, currently undergoing major renovation (almost amounting to reconstruction). We found a kind of "church supper" in progress in the courtyard, in honor of visiting religious figures. Monks and townfolk were gathered around and one monk was distributing heaping double handfuls of the staple red rice. Some 23+ scurfy dogs representing a considerable range in shapes, sizes and latent breeds was also present, most of them fixated on the hand of an elderly monk who seemed to toss out as many tidbits to them as he allowed himself. Then a bit further down the valley to a lovely lodge situated at 2960m called the Gompa Guest House. At 20:30 the temperature was 9C. We were pleasantly surprised by and very appreciative of the copious hot water for showers, which felt particularly good tonight.

#### ***Day 6; Apr. 12:***

Up early at 04:00 and away not long after 05:00 in an attempt to be first along the road at Gangteyla. It was 7C but frost lay on the ground as we climbed up the valley towards the

pass. One of the great moments of the trip came at 3265m when nearly everyone at once spotted a pair of Himalayan Monals in the open alpine woodland ahead of the van. The first soft rays of oblique sunlight had just penetrated the frosty ground, and the male Monal glittered and shimmered as he and the female slowly walked out onto the road, paused a bit then ran off and downhill. I would say spectacular but that is much too mundane a term.

We continued on to Pelela, 3412m on my altimeter and 4C (why did I leave my gloves in the baggage?). We got out to walk downhill along the old abandoned road cut. The place was ablaze with rhododendrons, also very spectacular. Some good early sightings: 5 Rosy Pipits (some showing a delicate pinkish breeding blush), 6 Dusky Thrushes, Alpine Accentor, Fire-tailed Sunbird, Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, @15 Eurasian Nutcrackers, White-browed and Dark-breasted Rosefinches, Red-headed Bullfinch and 7 White-winged Grosbeaks. By 10:00 the temperature had moderated to 15C, climbing to 24C during lunch at a scenic lookout. Some of the later morning birds: Stripe-throated Yuhina, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher (very sparsely distributed in Bhutan), Long-tailed Thrush, and a big gang of Black-faced Laughingthrushes buzzing all around but it was really tough to get on even one of them with bins. We concluded this wonderful walk at 14:15 at about 3000m, then headed for Trongsa, pausing for some photos at the overlooks to the famous and extremely picturesque Trongsa Dzong, and arriving at Sherbuling Tourist Lodge at 17:50 (2290m).

### **Day 7; Apr. 13:**

It was with considerable anticipation that we drove out of the lodge grounds near 05:00, bound for Tingtibi campsite on the famous Zhemgang road. Just after leaving the lodge the driver slowed for something on the right and Norbu and I spotted a Black-backed Forktail in the dim light, perched beside the track on the left. The Zhemgang road runs south from Trongsa, traversing a steep sided valley and most of the way bordering the Mange Chhu. There are several major ups and downs between Trongsa and Tingtibi, and I confess I lost track of the details though I know the vegetation varied a lot from surprisingly dry Chir Pine forest with minimal understory (possibly in rain shadows on main north facing slopes?) to much more lush temperate and finally subtropical sections. Somewhere along here we saw a Booted Eagle. After a longish drive we stopped at a well-known stakeout for the scarce and very patchily distributed Yellow-rumped Honeyguide by rock faces inhabited by bee colonies. More than 35 Ashy Drongos swooped around, apparently unconcerned by a Eurasian Sparrowhawk that sat quite contentedly on its perch projecting out from the cliff. But, and likely not a coincidence, none of the much smaller and presumably more vulnerable honeyguides. Another birding group we bumped into said the sparrowhawk had also been there yesterday, and when we came by again 2 days later, there it was near the same perch, and again no honeyguide.

At 08:45 (1340m) we started walking down through a section of predominantly Chir Pine forest, although deciduous vegetation bordered the river, but already it was becoming noticeably quiet. We persevered and ended up with a few decent sightings, most notably both Great and a pair of beautiful Rufous-necked Hornbills, but also: Rufous Woodpecker, Hill Prinia, Blue-throated Flycatcher, White-throated and Himalayan Bulbuls, Crested Bunting, and also a tree full of very pretty and near-endemic Golden Langurs. Both Blue-capped (20) and Blue Whistling-Thrushes (25) were common roadside birds, the latter seeming to like wet places where small streams crossed under the road, and several times on the trip I noticed them hopping down and disappearing into culverts when the van went by. By 10:30 it was 30C. Just before our lunch break we walked by another section of cliffs towering above the road. I noticed Norbu peer upwards, carefully scanning the rock faces. Then he beckoned us excitedly, and there, up in a little cul de sac in the rock, sat a lone Snow Pigeon, seemingly dozing in the heat of the day. Eventually it fidgetted around a bit giving us good views, even of its diagnostic tail pattern. Good spotting!

We drove, now ascending, up to the hamlet of Zhemgang at 1975m, then downwards once again. As we rounded a bend we had to halt for an Oriental Honey-Buzzard in the middle of

the road. It was standing midst the debris of wrecked honeycomb, bees swarming all around as well as crawling on it, and calmly bolting down what looked like chunks of comb, whether containing honey, bee larvae or both we don't know. We drove past and got out. The buzzard departed, but we had fabulous views of a pair of Blue-bearded Bee-eaters, and could see the feathery "beard" of one rippling in the breeze and glowing in the sun. A short walk @1437m produced a Streaked Spiderhunter, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo and Broad-billed Warbler. Then we continued on to the camping spot in a bit of field near some houses, arriving at 17:30, altitude somewhere just over 800m. Among the livestock with whom we shared our camp site was a personable and mellowed out nanny goat who was gorging herself on huge mouthfuls of hemp!

### **Day 8, Apr. 14:**

We woke near 05:00 in 19C temperatures to calls of a Jungle Nighthawk. The order of the day was to drive back upslope, making random (?) stops here and there. Near 925 m we recorded Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, 10 Ashy Bulbuls, Grey-throated Babbler, Black-throated Sunbird and Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, and very happily, got quite good looks at the tiny skulking Spotted Wren-Babbler in a ravine, emerging just enough from dense undergrowth in response to tape. A Blue-naped Pitta called, but would not oblige with a view. At 1150 m we added a terrific White-browed Scimitar-Babbler and 5 Sultan Tits. At 09:20 we were at @1090 m and got good good scope views of Collared Owlet and saw a Chestnut-winged Cuckoo in flight. And somewhere along the line we saw a couple of the impressive and big, boldly marked Black Giant Squirrels. Plus big sprays of epiphytic white orchids (another *Dendrobium*?) arching out from its perch beside the road and drooping quite near the ground. Lunch time saw us in 30C temperatures but at what altitude I'm not sure - demonstrating the limitations of altimeters during rapid changes in barometric pressure, mine was showing us going upwards as we walked down the road!

We then drove down past camp to where the road was blocked by security personnel above the Indian border at Gelephu. So we returned to camp and strolled up a dirt track along the river to one of the many mini hydroelectric stations that have been installed throughout the country through the auspices of international aid programs. A few birds were about: a Rufous-throated Partridge crossing the trail, 10 Barred Cuckoo-Doves and a Mountain Imperial-Pigeon, 2 Asian Drongo-Cuckoos, Greater Yellowthroat, and it was a pleasure as well as a relief to find a couple of lovely Green Magpies back near camp. We were finished birding at 17:40, back in our little field with the goats and cows.

### **Day 9, Apr. 15:**

The order for today was to retrace our path, back up (and down, etc.) the Zhemgang road towards Trongsa. We were up at 03:30 and on the road by 04:00, proceeding basically upwards for 1.5 hours, passing Zhemgang, and finally stopping @ 1775m, 11C, for a roadside breakfast of still-warm omlette and pancakes! Terrific service, but I never did get used to eating in the middle of the night. Breakfast was finished just as it got light enough to start birding from the road at 05:45. It was an exciting morning producing some really fine birds: smashing views of Oriental and Large Hawk-Cuckoo, a very close Striated Bulbul, Grey-sided Bush-Warbler, Rufous-bellied Niltalva, Little Pied Flycatcher, point blank looks at Rusty-fronted Barwing, Black-throated Tit and Crimson Sunbird. But our best luck came in a semi-cleared area near a house where Peter cued on a bit of movement and we soon were scope-viewing a very obliging pair each of Streaked Laughingthrush and Red-faced Liocichla, the latter especially lovely compared to the rather hum-drum illustration in the field guide.

By noon the temperature had hit 28C, at 1520m. We continued up, down a bit, up, a sharp dip to as low as 1040m where we encountered several typical lowland species, then a climb through the more arid habitats and over Khosela (or Korsula) at 1550m before descending to where the crew had established another improvised campsite beside the road. Over this latter stretch of road we made a few brief stops, seeing Grey-faced and Stripe-breasted

Woodpeckers (presumably rare here since its range map in our guide does not include Bhutan), and finally getting really good looks at the lovely, harmoniously colored Rufous-necked Laughingthrush.

### **Day 10, Apr. 16:**

Despite a rain shower we were entertained(?) nearly all night long by a singing Large Hawk-Cuckoo. We started to walk at 05:30, at @1810m. A Hill Partridge called out over the valley, but birding was slow. However, perseverance pays off and we ticked a few worthwhile species: Asian Emerald and Eurasian Cuckoos, 100+ Nepal Martins at a nesting cliff along with both Fork-tailed and House Swifts (the latter now split from Little Swift by Clements), Golden-fronted Leafbird, Dusky and Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, and at an area where cleared fields bordered the road 5 Little Buntings and several Grey Bushchats. Also, after having previously missed seeing several singing birds, it was great to finally get good looks at a the distinctively marked White-browed Shrike-Babbler. Plus, after a lot of discussion, a Darjeeling Woodpecker at 1950m that just didn't seem to be right in either the patterning of red on the upper breast or the curved red with orange-tawny border on the neck. However, Peter played the tape and claimed a correct response, adding that the field guide illustrations of this species almost always provoke an argument. Finally @ 2050 m as we approached Trongsa we got a Rufous-bellied Eagle overhead. We got back to the town at 15:30 and took time to tour the fascinating dzong.

### **Day 11, Apr. 17:**

Breakfast at 04:30 and 05:00 departure for Yotongla where we stopped at 06:43 to bird at the summit where my altimeter read 3275m but our guide book says 3425m. A fair bit of traffic was moving through the pass early. It was quite cool and the sun battled to break through thick fog. The dark and dank conditions did not inhibit a nice pair of Black-faced Laughingthrushes busy collecting nesting material. Other species we picked up were: Buff-barred and Large-billed Leaf-Warbler, a pair of Golden Bush-Robins, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Coal Tit and Eurasian Magpie. Peter played the CD in front of some dense bamboo and immediately a pair of Great Parrotbills rushed out and sang in response. By the time we had tea at 0850 the sun had appeared and the temperature had warmed to 16C. From then until 10:40 we saw virtually *nothing!* How could so much lovely forest be so empty?

We drove down the east slope of Yotongla into the Chumi valley, now officially into eastern Bhutan, and stopped at a textile weaving complex where we made a fairly serious dent in our supply of foreign reserves. The driver for 2 tourists said they had just seen a pair of tragopans a bit further along the road. Peter was quite sceptical that the pine habitat was not right but we drove carefully through the area anyway, and, we did see a nice pair of - Kalij Pheasants! The rest of the drive to Jakar continued through the mostly uniform pine forest lacking diversity in tree species composition and in age and structure of both the overstory and understory. Thus, apart from a few magpies we saw very little in the way of birds. On the approach to Jakar we stopped to look at another terrific Ibisbill at the Bumthang Chhu. We arrived at the River Lodge at 16:15, approximately 2485m asl.

### **Day 12, Apr. 18:**

Following our by now well established routine we tried to bolt down some breakfast before hitting the road at 05:00. Soon we climbed the first pass of the day, Shertongla (about 3420m) and were thrilled to see another exquisite pair of Himalayan Monals at about 2815m. From here the road descended into the Ura valley (28-2900m asl) for several km before starting up again, this time towards Thrumsingla, and I realized we were now on the fabled "Lingmethang Road", a full-fledged member of the panoply of most famous birding roads of the world. It did not take long to understand why. At 3100m we ran into our first Blood Pheasants, extremely lovely, and in the next several km saw no fewer than 14 in 4 different encounters. And there was a female Satyr Tragopan upslope from the road, hunkered down in

the low vegetation of an old scar from a rock or snow slide. Still going up, and now into the beautiful Thrumsingla National Park. At a scenic lookout we heard then saw a noisy bunch of Long-billed Crows below us, squabbling loudly over something hidden from our view on the ground. Our driver and Norbu immediately cued on this as evidence of a carcass. The driver fetched his big machete-like blade from the van and off the two of them went sporting big anticipatory grins. Being Buddhists they would not kill it themselves, but they were hopeful of sharing some of the meat from an already dead animal with the crows. I made a mental note to examine the soup with some care tonight. Alas, they reappeared after 15 or 20 minutes to report that there was a dead Yak down there but unfortunately it was "smelling too much" to take any meat. Meanwhile the birders had seen Fire-tailed Sunbird, Alpine Accentor and White-browed Rosefinch. Likely both the crows and birders lucked out.

At Gayzamchu a brief stop for salty buttered tea (good to try, once) in a dark little establishment across the road from a collection of small dwellings housing road crews. Then we continued the ascent of Thrumsingla and entered a fascinating world of moss draped conifers (pine, spruce and especially fir) with a shadowy understory featuring many species of rhododendrons, some in bloom, many more with thick flower buds ready to burst open. Remnant patches of dirty snow lay packed in amongst the rhododendrons. The altitude at the summit of the pass is 3757m. Then we started to drop down, passing the small village of Sengor at 2900-3000m and arriving where camp had been set up beside the road at 2775m. We spent most of the afternoon driving up and down the road, evidently the best technique for intercepting tragopans who reputedly walk downslope in the morning and upslope later in the day. But without success although we had a nice Plain-backed Thrush late in the day near camp.

### **Day 13, Apr. 19:**

The ground was wet from overnight showers as we resumed the quest for a male Tragopan after breakfast, at 05:45, temperature 6C. We were on our 3rd round trip between Sengor (close to 3000m) and a few houses at 2460m called Namling when there he was, standing on the road. The Tragopan started to walk, then it ran across the road and disappeared *upslope* (heading the wrong way?). The altimeter here read 2765m. Mission accomplished, we drove back down below Namling and commenced walking from 2165m down into a lush deciduous forest with bamboo thickets, while dodging through a few long lines of cattle being herded up to summer pasture in the mountains. Peter tried the CD player on 3 species of singing wren-babblers. A Long-billed would not show at all. Some got glimpses of a Rufous-throated in the very dark understory, and a Pymy Wren-Babbler gave us fits as it flitted around in the shrubs just below our feet but only Candy really saw it when it hopped into plain view just at the spot she happened to be looking. Around lunch we arrived at the Namling Chhu, another Yellow-rumped Honeyeater stakeout. Here there was no sparrowhawk, so we got long scope views of 2 birds. And it was also a fine place to eat lunch, by a small creek tumbling down to the main river where a Little Forktail provided amusement.

In the afternoon we continued walking down the road in heavy overcast and with a few odd rain drops. Birds were reasonably active all afternoon, a few of the highlights being: White-browed Piculet, Short-billed Minivet, Black-faced Warbler, Large and Rufous-bellied Niltalvas, Yellow-throated and Rufous-winged Fulvettas, Red-billed Leithrix and a big fast-moving flock of 50+ Fulvous Parrotbills. Perhaps the nicest sighting was a group of 6 dapper Cutias. We got prolonged close views as they searched along limbs and in clumps of moss and other epiphytic plants. They have lovely precise markings and at times I was reminded of new world cotingas. At one point as we studied some skulking babblers and fulvettas a Himalayan Weasel appeared for a few seconds in a pile of rocks beside the road. And in the same area we found a clump of dainty white terrestrial orchids that I think were in the genus *Pleione*. We ended the walk at 15:45 at @1900m because rain seemed to be threatening (although none actually appeared), and drove to the Yongkhola camp at 1535 m, just below the boundary sign for Thrumsingla NP, where it was a brighter and warmer 21C. Just across the road from camp we saw a pair of Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babblers very well as they foraged out in the open in a fallow rice field.

### **Day 14, Apr. 20:**

Back up the mountain this morning for 17 km to 2150m. A Scaly Thrush flushed from the roadside and perched nicely for us. Five Speckled Wood-Pigeons sat huddled high on some bare branches, likely hoping for a warm-up from the sun which had not yet made its appearance through the misty fog. We spent the morning working our way back down through the lush subtropical forest. Birding was good, at least early on: a pair of Bay Woodpeckers; Spotted Bush-Warbler; Rufous-capped and Golden Babblers (finally seeing the latter's black-streaked head) which habitually move about together; Black-eared Shrike-Babbler; and 4 gorgeous little Golden-breasted Fulvettas. Peter used the CD player at another place where thick stands of bamboo bordered the road and straightaway a terrific Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler flew out to the edge, perched on a long arching stem of bamboo and sang for nearly a minute, permitting great photos. This was followed by equally good looks at 3 Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babblers almost directly across the road.

At around 14:00 we had reached 1840m and boarded the van to continue eastwards to Mongar. As we descended the valley took on a different character, with drier and scrubbier vegetation and considerable land converted to agriculture. At 1300m we stopped to look at small birds in the roadside shrubbery which turned out to be Striated Yuhinas. They were clearly intermediate between the 2 races depicted in our field guide, showing orangey cheeks but also with rufous-orange on the forehead. We made 1 additional stop lower down where the road cut through an unpromising looking little wetland within a complex of small terraced fields. Peter played the CD and got a vigorous response from 2 Black-tailed Crakes. It was no surprise that seeing them was a different matter, but eventually we all did get good quick looks at the rich rufous and black plumage and even the red eye.

From here we continued on towards Mongar, reaching as low as about 550 m just before the town of Lingmethang (Limnithang on some road signs) and then a long twisty drive (though only 30 km) mostly through quite dry Chir Pine woodland. Just outside the town crews were applying tar and gravel to the road causing traffic to back up. After a vigorous discussion with a flag man our driver pulled out like he was going to drive around the bottleneck but then reconsidered and we waited in line. Arrival in Mongar near dark, altitude about 1600m.

### **Day 15, Apr. 21:**

Another 05:00 departure to drive 20 or so km further east to the Korila pass, only around 2300m asl. As we neared the pass the dry hills gave way to a near-tropical deciduous forest type, though not so lush as farther west. As we walked down the east side of the pass we had to work for birds, with long stretches between activity. Ultramarine Flycatcher, Red-tailed Minla and Eurasian Jay were new for the trip. Chestnut-crowned and Broad-billed Warblers were seen and a pair of White-tailed Nuthatches repeatedly came to the same spot on the ground just off the road to collect nesting material. We drove back up to the pass to eat lunch and walked the track to a telecommunications tower where a Gold-naped Finch was feeding and 3-4 neat White-throated Needletails zoomed by. These were the easternmost birds of the trip.

Around 14:30 we turned around and began our long journey back westwards and at 17:30 pulled into our campsite (@860m), this time in a fallow rice paddy one level down from the road. Several narrow terraces were arrayed below us like a series of cascading waterfalls and pools. It was very pleasant sitting there in our camp chairs in the late afternoon sunlight, sipping a couple of Red Pandas and doing the bird list. And also enjoying a private performance by a raucous party of White-crested Laughingthrushes in small trees bordering the paddy complex below us. Eventually they settled down in a tree and we watched them through the scope as they preened and relaxed, very beautiful in that special soft but still crystal clear early evening light. One of the best sights of the trip for me.

### **Day 16, Apr. 22:**

At 05:40 it was 16C as we started up the Lingmethang road for the last time. A Chestnut-breasted Partridge flushed off the shoulder and across the road at 1100m. We paused at 1250m so Peter could check out a calling bird. As we got out of the van 5 big, noisy laughingthrushes materialized, hopping around in the roadside grass and shrubs. They were Rufous-chinned Laughingthrushes and appeared to be another gradation between 2 subspecies, having pale lores but with very heavy black malar area and also lacking conspicuous rufous ear coverts. Our last attempts for Wedge-billed Wren-Babbler came up short. At 1650 m brilliant flashes of color turned into a flock of 6 M and 5F Scarlet Finches in a fruiting tree, nearly as showy as our tanager of the same name at home. On the way up to Thrumingla we passed no fewer than 4 birding parties, making 6 in all we met on the trip, and we knew of a further 2 more groups before we had arrived; obviously Bhutan is becoming popular. We wondered where all the camps would be set up tonight. At 2140m we tried once more for Ward's Trogon and were disappointed again - several groups got it in the previous few days. By 2660m a higher altitude character became apparent with the first big fir trees. By the time we reached the top of the pass (3760m) we were, typically, into a bit of mist.

After a tea break at Gayzamchu we set out for Jakar but stopped in a type of sub-alpine low shrub and conifer community at 3090m when we saw several birds darting across the road. And lucky that we did because there were 2 new trip birds in the mixed flock, Green Shrike-Babbler and Grey-crested Tit, and we also saw the white-throated form of Black-throated Tit. When we reached the Ura valley again quite a lot of tourists were taking in a festival in progress. A few km further, in an extensive area of intermediate sized pines with grassy sections, we were surprised to spot a male Monal walking on one of the open hillsides. And not long after that, just ahead of the car in front of us, a large and obviously well fed Himalayan Black Bear made quite good speed along the road in a laborious lumbering gallop before finally executing a nifty right turn up a rough vehicle track. We arrived at Jakar at 18:00.

### ***Day 17, Apr. 23:***

The longest travel day by a large margin as we retraced last week's route from Jakar west over at least 4 major passes and intervening valleys. But we made a few planned as well as a number of unscheduled stops, the latter to periodically top up water levels in the radiator due to a leaking head gasket. I did not have it in me to pay close attention to locations, but somewhere before Yotongla we got good looks at 6 Brown Parrotbills, and I fluffed yet another good chance to see one of my top targeted birds when I walked too quickly down from the road into the shrubbery and a flash of feathers was all I saw of the much wanted Spotted Laughingthrush. I was none too pleased. Somewhere at 3100m a partridge flew up over the road, nearly hitting the van. I wanted to vote for Hill Partridge because we had several heard-onlys by now, but in truth we had no idea which of the 3 possibilities it was. Nothing else we saw was new but it was nevertheless good to get additional good looks at another big nesting colony of Nepal Martins, Ashy-throated Warbler, both Streaked and Black-faced Laughingthrushes and Gold-billed Magpie. Finally into Thimphu, I for one plain tired out. And as I somewhat moodily settled in to the room I turned on the TV on an impulse and was stunned to see Formula 1 race cars circulating the Imola circuit, qualifying for tomorrow's San Marino grand prix. Nowadays this is one of the very few sporting events I take an interest in, so suddenly I was very pleased indeed.

### ***Day 18, Apr. 24:***

A completely bird-free day, if one can believe it. In the morning we visited the terrific weekend market, draining most of our remaining funds on great old things - religious objects such as a small ancient looking Buddha housed in a tin carrying box with dried flowers (but with a window to see in, or out) and the whole thing encased in oily protective fabric (no idea what the proper name is), a smoky old festival mask portraying a demon of some type, prayer flags, hand made paper, first day covers of Bhutan stamps, you name it. Apparently antiques cannot be taken out of the country without permits but the old items we looked at already

had wax seals from the relevant ministry affixed to them to indicate they were OK. After lunch we departed for Paro where we took in some standard touristy highlights such as the National Museum and we had a distant view of the impressive Taktshang Goemba ("Tiger's Nest" monastery) perched 900 ft up a cliff west of Paro. Finally we checked into the very atmospheric 19th century Gangtey Palace lodge, altitude around 2240m and temperature 23C. It was great to relax for a bit on the patio and gaze out over the extremely scenic town and valley while drinking multiple cups of very tasty chai masala. Somehow it did not seem to matter all that much that the television here was broken, so I could not watch the F1 race.

### **Day 19, Apr. 25:**

Last birding day. Not a lot of new species today, but then at this stage of the trip we could not expect many. Yet in some ways this was the best day of all. For starters it was Candy's birthday and she had high hopes for some sightings, not a twitcher's wish list of new ticks, but instead she yearned for second or even third views of some of the quintessential, charismatic eastern Himalayan birds we had come here to see. And so it turned out. We left the Gangtey Palace at 04:35, hoping we might be the first vehicle up to Chelela. I do not know if we were, but when we got to @3428 m there were 3 pairs of Blood Pheasants on and beside the road. For obvious reasons it is not always easy for everyone in a multi-passenger van to get good views. But we all tried to position ourselves, some slouched low in seats, some hanging out of windows, so that everyone else had a more-or-less clear look at the wonderful pheasants walking and peck around the van.

At 3454m 2 male Himalayan Monals took their time walking off the road. At 3503m we saw a pair of Blood Pheasants and a male Monal. Then we chugged up to the top of the pass, 3988m according to the sign, though I regret to say that my new handy-dandy altimeter wasn't saying the same thing. It was 4C and it felt cold as we shivered into our jackets, sipping hot tea and munching the packed breakfast. There was a bit of activity and I remember walking downslope a little to get a look at some small birds that turned out to be White-browed Rosefinches, when I was startled to be grabbed from behind and more or less dragged back up to the summit where Norbu pointed down the other slope to 2 immaculate and exquisite Spotted Laughingthrushes only a few meters below, where they searched around the low shrubbery and ground before slipping farther down and away.

We started down the road on the north side of the pass. Almost immediately a pair of monals flushed to the left, downslope. Then a terrific Collared Grosbeak interrupted its flight on top of a dead tree. Somebody sighted yet another male Monal below us as it first ambled upslope then halted on a huge flat-topped boulder where it stood for several minutes in iridescent splendor, soaking up the warm sun which had finally broken through the overcast. We heard a Satyr Tragopan calling but could not see it. Two small birds flitted between big fir trees but paused long enough to be identified as Fire-capped Tits, and we saw 2 Red-flanked Bluetails and our only Olive-backed Pipits for Bhutan. After eating lunch we headed back down the pass, stopping once to walk a little through the forest between the switchbacks in the road, and flushed 3 Eurasian Woodcocks. Back at Paro we went to see the lovely dzong and returned to the lodge around 16:30. At supper Norbu brought out a lovely birthday cake for Candy.

### **Day 20, Apr. 26:**

We were in the parking lot at 05:00 to load our luggage when the local Tawny Owl gave out a few "hooh-hooh" calls, our last tick of the trip. As we were checking in at the airport it started to rain and the light fog closed in a bit more. So though we did not lose any birding time to rain, it did affect our travel. Paro airport operates only by VFR rules - pilots must be able to actually see where they are going rather than relying only on instruments. So we spent 2 ½ hours chatting with other departing birders and buying out some of the last stock of T-shirts featuring Ibisbills and Tragopans. Druk Air's schedule on Tuesdays is routed to Kolkata and the delay meant that we would miss our connecting flight to Delhi. However, Druk called

ahead and a cheerful, chatty little man missing a good portion of his front teeth met us at arrivals. He ushered us along to the terminal next door (all the while gripping Candy's carry-on bag over his shoulder and declaring "I am going to Can-ah-da!"), and then helped to arrange a ticket swap from Air Sahara to Indian Airlines that would get us to Delhi in time for our connection to Toronto and also save us the trouble of buying new tickets then trying to get refunds later on at home. Extremely good service and much appreciated.

From then on our trip home, though long, tiring and boring, went like clockwork. The only excitement came as we were standing up ready to board our flight at Delhi. A big oaf of a man had been haranguing the attendants calling the flight and checking boarding passes, trying to lay claim to a block of 4 adjacent seats in the central aisle so he could stretch out and sleep, and evidently he had been at it during check-in too. I was standing right there but facing away, at first that is, not paying much attention when suddenly one of the young ladies decided to let him have it. Right behind my back. In a loud, commanding voice with perfect diction and a charming lilt: "You just shut up and be quiet! I had enough of you already at the coun-tah!" I'm sure I cleared the floor by 2-3 inches at least. When I turned around, she was maybe 5'1" at a stretch, black eyes still flashing and long black hair swaying. One of the best put-downs I have heard. The guy did shut up, cowering down in his seat a bit, but as soon as he was on the plane he started in on the stewardesses, and he did get his 4 seats, and did sleep nearly the whole 14 ½ hours to Toronto, except for meals of course. I was quite jealous.

I have enjoyed the wonderful trip all over again while preparing the report and species list. It remains only to once again sincerely thank Peter Lobo and General Jimmy Singh of Gurudongma Tours & Treks, and Norbu and the rest of the crew from Rainbow Tours for a fabulous time.

We would be more than happy to answer any questions ([pcprevett@execulink.com](mailto:pcprevett@execulink.com)), and to forward a blank multi-day checklist for Bhutan and northeast India in spreadsheet format.

#### **POST SCRIPT (June/05):**

We ticked one new bird after we got home, adding Eastern Crowned Leaf-Warbler. While working through identifications of the warbler images on Peter's CD I realized that one of them had to be an E Cr L-W (and very helpfully, another photo clearly depicted the similar Blyth's Leaf-Warbler). Ironically, I was pretty sure I saw an Eastern Crowned L-W on Day 17 on the Zhemgang road, and I even remember calling Peter to come have a look but he was busy taking pictures. But 2-3 days later I backed off the identification when everybody else called a bird I thought was the same species a Blyth's L-W. Sure enough though, it was obvious from the preceding and following pictures that the bird had indeed been photographed on Zhemgang road! Peter must have clicked the bird after I left it for something else. Even in "real time" there were occasions when the instant images on the screen of Peter's digital camera helped us with identifications.