

North-east India 2010

...with Chris Bradshaw

March 6th - 20th

The North-eastern Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya have become more and more accessible over recent years with increasing numbers of birders now visiting this remote and exciting region. Although this was my third visit to the area, it was the first Birdwatching Breaks group to come to this wonderful part of India. The trip proved to be a great success, with an impressive 358 species seen during the trip with a further 17 heard. Among the many highlights, we saw many specialities of the region, with Blyth's Tragopan, Greater Adjutant, Blue-naped Pitta, Dark-rumped Swift, Marsh Babbler, Jerdon's Babbler, Black-breasted Parrotbill, Cachar Wedge-billed, Mishmi, Bar-winged and Long-billed Wren-babblers, four Beautiful Nuthatches, Fire-tailed Myzornis, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide and Manipur Fulvetta all performing very nicely for us. Somewhat less expected were Lesser White-fronted Goose and Greater Scaup, whilst other good birds included Kalij Pheasant, Lesser Adjutant, Black-necked Stork, Pallas's and Grey-headed Fish-eagles, Pied Harrier, Speckled Piculet, Bay Woodpecker, Slender-billed, Streak-breasted, Coral-billed, Red-billed and White-browed Scimitar-babblers, Rufous-necked, Chestnut-crowned (Red-crowned) and Black-faced Laughingthrushes, Streak-throated and Rusty-fronted Barwings, Yellow-throated and Rusty-capped Fulvettas, Beautiful, Long-tailed and Grey Sibilas, Fire-tailed, Green-tailed, Black-throated and Gould's Sunbirds, Maroon-backed and Rufous-breasted Accentors, Scarlet and Gold-naped Finches and Brown and Grey-headed Bullfinches.

This itinerary was designed to offer a canvas-free trip to this remote region of India, where camping is usually required in order to visit the prime birding areas. Although the lodges in the Mishmi Hills were rather basic, they were wonderfully located and the ground arrangements provided by Peter Lobo and his excellent team made the whole experience as comfortable as possible and thoroughly enjoyable throughout. The weather was also favourable, with very little rain (just an odd shower and a little overnight rain) and sunny skies for the most part. I hope this report brings back fond memories for the participants of this year's tour and I look forward to the opportunity of returning to this wonderful corner of India with future groups.

March 6th/7th: London Heathrow – Delhi – Dibrugarh – Tinsukia

Weather: Hot and sunny.

We all met up at Heathrow's Terminal 5, a rather disappointing first experience of this new terminal for me as all the flight information screens out of action and some guesswork was required to figure out when and where exactly the flights were boarding. Nevertheless we were soon on our way, if a little behind schedule with take off at around 1600hrs. The flight was smooth and we arrived on time at around 0500hrs. We transferred to Delhi's shiny new Domestic Terminal and quickly checked in for our onward flight to Dibrugarh. Around the airport our first Indian birds were Black Kite, House Crow, Bank Myna and House Sparrow. The flight passed smoothly pausing at Gauhati (where Peter joined us) and arriving in Dibrugarh more or less on time, just after 1400hrs. Here we met our drivers and drove to Tinsukia, our base for the next two nights. Birds along the way included Ashy Woodswallow, Black Drongo, Eastern Cattle Egret and Common and White-vented Mynas. On arrival in Tinsukia there was a chance to take tea and enjoy a rest after our long journey.

March 8th: Dibru Saikowa.

Weather: Overcast but warm for most of the day, although a bit cooler early morning and early evening

Our first full day in the field began with a boat trip up the Dibru River where we made various stops on land to search for a number of target birds. As we chugged upstream we started notching up the birds with Grey-throated Sand Martin, Little Egret, Avocet, Common Sandpiper, White-throated Kingfisher, Striated Heron, Gadwall, Indian Spot-billed Duck and Wigeon amongst the early sightings. At our first stop Striated Grassbirds were obvious, whilst a flock of White-rumped Vultures flew over. Heading into the denser patches of tall grass we sought out striking Black-breasted Parrotbill, and we soon enjoying good views of this most impressive bird. Somewhat less obliging and much less impressive looking, the Marsh Babbler was heard singing and seen by some of the group. This arch-skulker never gives itself up easily and today was no exception. Further new birds here included Chestnut-capped Babbler, Streak-throated Woodpecker, Indian Roller and Spot-billed Pelican. A change of location to a site back downstream brought us a flock of Bar-headed Geese and a lone Lesser White-fronted Goose, the latter something of a rarity in this part of the world, although this bird has returned for a number of winters now. Exploration of more grassland areas brought encounters with Grey-backed Shrike, Striated Babbler, Yellow-bellied Prinia and Black-shouldered Kite. Attempts to locate the elusive Swamp Prinia proved unsuccessful, although Jerdon's Babbler was seen well. We took another boat along a stream as we headed for our lunch stop, seeing Bluethroat and a smart male Black-faced Bunting along the way.

After lunch we enjoyed a leisurely afternoon being punted around a large lake where good numbers of duck were present. Among the throngs of birds we enjoyed watching good numbers of Red Crested Pochards, Garganey, Shoveler, Ferruginous Duck, Pochard and perhaps the biggest surprise three Scaup (1 male, 2 females) a scarce winter visitor to this part of the world. Other birds seen in this area included Northern and Grey-headed Lapwings, Streaked Weaver, Long-tailed Shrike, Smoky Warbler, Paddyfield Warbler and a Baillon's Crake. A most enjoyable and relaxing way to conclude our first day in this very birdy part of the world.

March 9th: Tinsukia – Roing (via the Sadia Ghat ferry crossing).

Weather: Overcast in the morning but warm and sunny in the afternoon

We made an early start as we headed for the remote Mishmi Hills situated in India's north-easternmost state, Arunachal Pradesh. The journey included one of the most memorable experiences of the entire trip as we crossed the mighty Brahmaputra River by ferry. It was fascinating to watch the skilled boatmen loading the vehicles onto the boats and it was a truly fascinating insight into the life of people in a remote part of India that is dominated by the ebb and flow of this impressive river. During the crossing we saw two Black Storks. Once across the other side we stopped for an al fresco breakfast. A short walk here produced Bright-capped Cisticola, Greater Painted Snipe and some Slender-billed Vultures. A bit further along we went in search of Bengal Florican and were delighted when we located a female that we saw well on two occasions. Other birds here included Barred Buttonquail, Dusky Warbler, Pintail Snipe, Bengal Bushlark and good numbers of Richard's Pipits.

Continuing our journey we made our way along rather pot-holed and bumpy roads to the border of Arunachal Pradesh and once our permits had been checked we were soon heading for Roing and our accommodation for the night. Arriving shortly before lunch, an initial exploration of the lodge grounds produced Lemon-rumped Warbler, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher, Beautiful Sibia, Streaked Spiderhunter, numerous Black Bulbuls, Orange-bellied Leafbird and Grey-winged Blackbird. Our lunch was enlivened by Himalayan Buzzard and Steppe Eagle, whilst our afternoon birding session produced a nice flurry of birds that included Red-billed Scimitar-babbler, Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbill, Speckled Piculet, Striated Bulbul and Pygmy Blue Flycatcher.

March 10th: Mishmi Hills.

Weather: Sunny and warm in morning and at lower altitudes, but cooler at higher elevations

Although not a long bird list today, the quality was of the highest order. We began in the middle elevations of the area and our first target was to try and find Cachar Wedge-billed Wren-babbler. This we succeeded in doing fairly quickly and enjoyed superb views of this wonderful bird as initially it skulked in cover, but then gave itself up on roadside rocks! Simply amazing. Nearby we saw a feeding flock of Rusty-fronted Barwings and Coral-billed Scimitar-babblers, whilst a superb male Scarlet Finch popped up in a nearby tree-top. Red-faced Liocichlas were typically skulking. As we headed higher we located further quality birds in the form of Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, Rufous-breasted Bush-robin and Collared Owlet. Flocks of Yellow-throated and Rufous-winged Fulvettas were enjoyed, along with Yellow-browed and Yellow-cheeked Tits and several Maroon-backed Accentors. After another excellent al fresco lunch we headed higher and the late afternoon period was punctuated by more excellent birds. A Streak-throated Barwing was singing and showed well. A flock of Streak-breasted Scimitar-babblers was accompanied by a wonderful Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler, always a much appreciated bird. Manipur Fulvettas flitted amongst the undergrowth and we also located our first Chestnut-tailed Minlas, Ashy-throated Warblers and a typically fast moving group of Black-throated Parrotbills. As we arrived at the rather basic, but wonderfully positioned Mayodia Lodge we encountered our first Yellow-billed Magpies, thus concluding a wonderful day in the spectacular Mishmi Hills.

March 11th: Mishmi Hills.

Weather: A cold start, but a beautifully sunny day, although cloudier in the afternoon with a brief shower

The afternoon followed in similar fashion with quality rather than quantity the order of the day. A flock of Black-faced Warblers, another Bay Woodpecker, Brown Bullfinch, Himalayan Red-flanked Bush-robin, Olive-backed Pipit and Gold-naped Finch were great things to encounter, but the main objective was to find Mishmi Wren-babbler, which we duly did and all of us enjoyed good views as one sang in response to playback. Delighted with this we focused our searches on another speciality of the area, the Blyth's Tragopan. A close calling male refused to show, but Theresa got brief views of a nearby female. Further intensive searches were proving fruitless, but eventually we located another female feeding by the side of the road. Not the male we had been hoping for, but a great find nonetheless. A bit further up the road a Plain-backed Thrush completed another wonderful day in Mishmi.

March 12th: Mishmi Hills (Middle Elevations).

Weather: Warm and sunny although chilly in the morning

The day began with another search for Blyth's Tragopan, but on this occasion we drew a blank. Much of the day was spent walking down the road birding the middle elevations of the Mishmi Hills. We encountered yet more great quality birds during the day, with the main highlight being a flock of four Beautiful Nuthatches seen for an extended period feeding at close range, often at eye-level. One of the most highly desired birds of the eastern Himalayas, these were simply superb! Other highlights of the day included a cracking Long-billed Wren-babbler, two hyperactive Grey-cheeked Warblers chasing one another at high speed for several minutes, a Rufous-breasted Accentor, repeat performances by Yellow-rumped Honeyguide and Rufous-breasted Bush-robins, a tree full of Brown Bullfinches, a pair of Red-headed Trogons, a Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, Long-tailed Minivet, Golden and Grey-throated Babblers and a skulking Black-headed Shrike-babbler. In the evening a session after dark produced calling Hodgson's Frogmouth, Collared Scops Owl and Mountain Scops Owl, but sadly no sightings, although this group was tired and ready for some sleep.

March 13th: Roing (Sally Lake Tourist Lodge) – Brahmaputra Crossing – Tinsukia.

Weather: Overcast with a few spots of rain in the morning. Warm and a little brighter later.

We began the day with some final birding in the vicinity of the Tourist Lodge at Roing. Although it was very dull and overcast we found the area to be very busy with birds, with many new species to be seen. Flowering trees were especially attractive to barbets, with Golden-throated, Blue-throated and Great in evidence. Bulbuls were also numerous with Ashy, Mountain and Red-whiskered amongst the more numerous Black and Red-vented. Our first Hair-crested Drongos and Maroon Orioles were seen whilst nearby bamboo attracted Sultan Tit, flocks of Silver-eared Mesias and a Verditer Flycatcher. A Small Niltava was coaxed out of hiding, but the poor light did nothing for this rather dark bird. Back at the tourist lodge we birded around the lake. Here we enjoyed views of Asian Barred Owlet, White-throated Bulbul, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Blue-bearded Bee-eater and Rufous-faced Warbler. As we left for Tinsukia a final check of some flowering trees produced worthwhile as we notched up Blue-winged Minla and Yellow-vented and Chestnut-crowned Warblers. The journey back to Tinsukia was enlivened once again by the wonderful experience of travelling across the Brahmaputra River by ferry, where we also saw a fine adult Great Black-headed (Pallas's) Gull. Other interesting species seen during the journey included Rufous Treepie, Green Bee-eater and Oriental Skylark. Once back in Tinsukia there was time to relax and recover from the long and bumpy journey.

March 14th: Tinsukia to Kaziranga. Afternoon birding in the Tea Garden.

Weather: Warm and sunny all day

We left Tinsukia early as we had a long drive to Kaziranga that was to take up most of the morning (our planned visit to Digboi had been turned down by the relevant authorities). Despite a puncture en-route we made good time, arriving at our accommodation just before lunch. Birds along the way had included Lesser Adjutant, Peregrine, Wood Sandpiper, White-breasted Waterhen and Painted Snipe. After an excellent lunch we headed out to a tea garden where our principle aim was to find a Blue-naped Pitta. After some excellent work by our local guide we managed to see this elusive bird, but unfortunately two members of the group did not get decent views. One for another day... Our exploration of this area produced a good selection of other birds with Rufous-necked and Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrushes, White-browed Scimitar-babbler, Black-hooded Oriole, Rufous-fronted Babbler all seen well. Towards the end of the afternoon we were fortunate to see a Brown Fish Owl and a smart Brown Hawk Owl, concluding an excellent first afternoon in this magnificent area.

March 15th: Kaziranga. Morning in Eastern Range. Afternoon in Western Range.

Weather: Warm and sunny in the morning, but increasing cloud and a moderate breeze in the afternoon with a few spots of rain.

A very birdy day began with a Thick-billed Warbler near the hotel restaurant. Our morning was spent in the Eastern Range, with a Great Hornbill seen as we headed to the entrance to this part of the park. The Eastern Range, like much of the park is a mosaic of grassland and woodland, together with areas of water, a combination of habitats that offers some especially productive birding. Around the lake we saw our first Greater Adjutants, with Lesser Adjutants close by for useful comparison. Other storks were present with Black-necked and Woolly-necked both new. A wide selection of wildfowl was present, whilst waders included Grey-headed Lapwing and Eurasian Curlew (the latter a new bird for our local guide). During the morning we encountered a nice selection of raptors, with a superb male Pied Harrier perhaps the highlight, but both Pallas's and Grey-headed Fish-eagles, Changeable Hawk-eagle, Crested Serpent Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle and Osprey all seen well. A fallow field

was hosting a flock of Black-breasted Weavers, whilst Brown Shrike and Spotted Owlet were also new. The woodlands were also productive with Lineated Barbet, Pale-chinned Flycatcher, Short-billed Minivet, Large Cuckooshrike, Black-rumped Flameback and Green-billed Malkoha amongst the highlights.

The afternoon was spent in the Western Range. Here we explored some grassland, locating Kalij Pheasant and Red Junglefowl, Lesser Coucal, and a Siberian Rubythroat skulking in adjacent scrub. Damper areas produced Brown Crake, whilst the recently burnt areas hosted a calling Savanna Nightjar. From a lookout we were able to scan through a selection of waders that included a good number of Temminck's Stints, with a couple of Little Stints, Kentish Plover, Marsh Sandpiper, Greenshank and more Grey-headed Lapwings also present. A River Tern flew gracefully by, whilst the short cropped grasslands were dotted with Wild Buffalo, Indian One-horned Rhinos, Hog Deer and Swamp Deer. A wonderful sight. Nearby trees hosted Yellow-footed Green Pigeons and a bit further away Oriental Pied Hornbills. As the afternoon drew to a close we found Hoopoe, Blossom-headed Parakeet and a nice male Spot-winged Starling rounding off a superb day in Kaziranga.

March 16th: Kaziranga. Morning in the Tea Garden. Afternoon in Central Range.

Weather: Hot and sunny

We spent the morning in the Tea Gardens, trying for a number of more skulking species. Vernon managed to see a White-tailed Robin, but unfortunately it eluded the rest of us. We also tried again for Blue-naped Pitta, but they were playing hard to get and a brief view of one bounding across the path was all we managed. On a more positive note we managed to get good views of Plaintive Cuckoo, Rufous-necked Laughingthrush, Puff-throated Babbler, Crimson Sunbird and Plain Flowerpecker.

In the afternoon we visited the Central Range, where things were somewhat slow to start with. Skulking Yellow-eyed Babblers were slow to show themselves, a Great Hornbill posed atop a tree and we had close encounters with Elephants. The afternoon was coming to a close when a stunning male White-tailed (Himalayan) Rubythroat emerged from cover and showed very well at close range and we were happy to settle for that. However as we were heading out of the park, I decided we should have a quick look from an observation tower and the sharp-eyed Rafique once again came up trumps with a shout of pussy-cat and we were all entranced as a superb male Tiger walked out of the tall grass and gave us a wonderful show as it slowly walked across the clearing and across the road. A wonderful end to the day and truly one of the highlights of the tour

March 17th: Kaziranga. Morning in the Central Range. Afternoon in the wooded hills behind the hotel.

Weather: Hot and sunny

We began the day with a pre-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds. Ruby-cheeked Sunbird, Greenish, Tickell's and Yellow-browed Warblers and Common Iora were among the species we saw. After breakfast we headed for the Central Range. A hot and sunny day, the birding was slow at times, but new birds for the list came in the form of Mallard, Eurasian Griffon, Abbott's Babbler and White-rumped Shama. Other good birds during the morning included Greater Adjutant, Ferruginous Duck, Changeable Hawk-eagle and Black-necked Stork. A group of Smooth Otters sadly did not linger long.

In the afternoon we had a walk in the wooded hills behind the hotel. Although fairly quiet, interesting species came in the form of Golden-fronted Leafbird, Pale-chinned and Pale Blue

Flycatchers, White-crested and Greater Necklaced Laughingthrushes and a rather distant Blue-eared Barbet.

March 18th: Kaziranga to Shillong.

Weather: Hot and sunny

A long and dusty travel day as we travelled from Kaziranga to Shillong, situated in the Khasi Hills. The journey took most of the day with a break for lunch near Gauwahati, where a nice male Taiga Flycatcher was present. The latter part of the journey up to Shillong was notable for many trucks that belched out thick black exhaust fumes and it was a relief to reach the relative calm of our hotel.

March 19th – Khasi Hills (Shillong to Cherrapunjee - Duwan Sing Syiem Bridge and Nohkallikai Falls).

Weather: Cool start, but then hot and sunny.

We began the day south of Shillong at the Duwan Sing Syiem Bridge, where bird activity was lively when we arrived. A flock of Gould's, Fire-tailed and Green-tailed Sunbirds were joined by several Little Buntings. Brownish-flanked Bush-warblers sang from the scrubby hillsides and we enticed one to show itself and both Blyth's Leaf and Grey-hooded Warblers were performing well. Down in the nearby streambed a Plumbeous Redstart was seen. A Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler was rather less co-operative as it sang from cover hidden from view and despite considerable efforts was not going to show itself. Walking along the road we saw Black-throated Prinia and Grey Bushchat. Moving on in the direction of Cherrapunjee we paused for some Crested Finchbills, a speciality of this area, along with Flavescent Bulbul and Rusty-fronted Barwing. At the Nohkallikai falls we found the hoped for Dark-rumped Swifts wheeling around by the waterfalls that were still running despite five months without rain (and this at the wettest place on Earth!). Our walk here also produced Striated Swallow, Blue Rock Thrush and Hoopoe. After a quiet spell around lunchtime we tried some woodland near Shillong where we saw Chestnut-crowned Warbler, Whiskered Yuhina and smart Snowy-browed Flycatchers. We finished the day in a last attempt to try and coax a Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler into view, but again despite a lot of effort we were unsuccessful, and had to make do with a smart male Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrush, a pleasant way to end a successful last full day in NE India.

March 20th – Shillong – Gauwahati – Delhi.

We began the day in some woodland near Shillong. A couple of species remained elusive, so a final effort was required to try and find them. A Rusty-capped Fulvetta tantalised us from the undergrowth, but eventually after a number of attempts we all managed to get a look at this bird. Assam Laughingthrushes proved trickier and although we easily heard them, they were very shy and brief unsatisfactory glimpses meant this bird failed to make the list. Somewhat easier was Grey Sibia and we enjoyed good views of at least four perched up and singing. That was more like it! Other birds here included Buff-barred Warbler, Little Pied Flycatcher, Oriental Turtle Dove and a pair of Common Rosefinches. After breakfast we made the slow journey down to Gauwahati and eventually reached the rubbish dump where large numbers of Black and some Black-eared Kites were present along with at least 85 Greater Adjutants. It was something of a relief to reach Gauwahati airport, where we checked in for our flight to Delhi. Arrival in Delhi was on schedule and after a meal in Delhi we headed for the International terminal for our flight home.

For details of the full species list or to request further information about the next time we will be offering this trip. Contact us at enquiries@birdwatchingbreaks.com.

