

Bhutan – Birding the Buddhist Kingdom

Rare Bird Club

26th March to 7th April 2022 (14 days)

Trip Report



Satyr Tragopan by Daniel Danckwerts

Trip report compiled by Tour Leader: Daniel Danckwerts



Tour Summary

There can hardly be a richer destination in all of Asia than the incredible mountain Kingdom of Bhutan, nestled between India and China. We spent two fabulous weeks exploring the western and central regions of this remarkable country, covering endless swathes of unbroken forests, experiencing the great and proud Buddhist Culture, paying witness to some



Ibisbill by Daniel Danckwerts

of the best scenery anywhere on Earth, and sighting a selection of brilliant fauna and fauna. In terms of the wildlife, we ultimately recorded 227 bird species along with a handful of interesting mammals. Notable sightings include fantastic views of both Satyr Tragopan and Himalayan Monal, the striking Snow Pigeon, the indescribable Fire-tailed Sunbird, Long-tailed Broadbill, both Ibisbill and Wallcreeper (each monotypic families), and a selection of glorious laughingthrushes, redstarts, and rosefinches. Notable mammals included the highly range-restricted Gee's Golden Langur, Assamese Macaque, the impressive Black Giant Squirrel, and two species of endearing Pika. Herewith are the details of our adventures...

We met as a group in Bangkok for our early connecting flight to Paro. There, we met our fantastic local guides – Tandin and Tashi – for the first time. After a brief opportunity to check into our hotel, we made our way to the Paro Dzong for our first introduction to the rich Buddhist culture that so defines this incredible Kingdom. We marvelled at the incredible architecture, the detail to which the Dzongs have been decorated, and learnt about 'Devine Madman' and other ancient Buddhist histories. Finally, we took a stroll along the Paro Chhu where we amassed a great introductory list of birds. Our highlight was the unique Ibisbill, which proved totally camouflaged among the tumbled boulders. Other interesting species including the Plumbeous and White-capped Redstarts, Brown Dipper, Russet Sparrow, Red-billed Chough, Large-billed Crow, Himalayan Buzzard, and Bar-headed Goose.

From Paro, we caught a short internal flight to the city of Bumthang in central Bhutan. After checking into our hotel, we took a drive along the Bumthang-Ura highway birding the highland coniferous forests. We encountered several busy flocks containing the Short-billed and Long-tailed Minivets, Coal, and Gray-crested Tits, Lemon-rumped and Buff-barred Warblers, Black-browed Tit, Goldcrest, Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, White-winged Grosbeak, White-browed Fulvetta, and the localized Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch. In the evening, we slowly returned to Bumthang scanning the road verges for pheasants and we were successful in seeing both Himalayan Monal and Blood Pheasant.



Himalayan Monal by Daniel Danckwerts

Early the following morning, we took a drive to the nearby Tharpaling Monastery. The entrance road



Wallcreeper by Daniel Danckwerts

gave us several Himalayan Monal, including at least three glorious males, as well as a covey of confiding Blood Pheasants. Around the monastery, we sighted the Alpine and Rufous-breasted Accentors, Red-billed Chough, Goldcrest, Black-rumped Magpie, Eurasian Hoopoe, the elegant Snow Pigeon, and both the Himalayan White-browed and Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinches. Several Himalayan Griffons flew low overhead offering uncharacteristically good views. We returned to Bumthang for lunch and an afternoon rest, before taking a walk along the Chamkhar Chhu. There, we sighted River Lapwing, the White and Gray Wagtails, our first Wallcreeper, and a brilliant pair of Black-tailed Crake.

more Blood Pheasants but heavy snow overnight left the pass rather treacherous, and we turned back. Continuing, we spent the balance of our time on Yotong La where bird activity was overall quite low presumably because of the cold weather. Nevertheless, we etched out several more Black-faced Laughingthrush, White-browed Fulvetta, both Northern Goshawk and Eurasian Sparrowhawk, and Himalayan Griffon. As we approached Trongsa, we added Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, Kalij Pheasant, and Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler.

Our itinerary was heavily focussed on the central highlands but, the next day, we made an effort to reach some lowland broad-leaved forest near Zhemgang. A long drive ensued but this was a most worthwhile exercise offering us many new species that we would not have otherwise seen. Key highlights included the Blyth's and Black-headed Shrike Babblers, Nepal Fulvetta, the almost cartoon-like Long-tailed Broadbill, Chestnut-breasted Nuthatch, Lesser Racket-tailed and Hair-crested Drongos, the Asian Barred, Collared and surprise Jungle Owlets, Red-tailed Minla, Mountain Tailorbird, Sultan Tit, Golden-fronted Barbet, a selection of brilliant laughingthrushes (Scaly, White-throated, White-headed), and an excellent group of Rufous-necked Hornbills. On the mammal front, we added the Himalayan Striped and Black Giant Squirrels, Assam Macaque, as well as Gee's Golden Langur.

From Trongsa, we drove to the Phobjikha crossing the lofty Pele La en route. Our first afternoon on the pass gave us the Eurasian Nutcracker, Yellow-browed and Rufous-vented Tits, Lemon-rumped Warbler, Stripe-throated and Rufous-vented Yuhinas, Chestnut-tailed Minla, White-tailed Nuthatch and a quick male Himalayan Monal that flushed by the roadside. Dropping toward the Phobjika Valley, we watched an unusually confiding pair of Kalij Pheasants and marvelled at the male's display.

Next day, we returned to Pele La and concentrated our efforts on 'chickens.' Initially, the weather conditions seemed strongly against us as heavy snow pelted down all around us. However, there was no cause for concern as the Pheasants clearly enjoyed the icy conditions. First, we encountered a handful of Himalayan Monals including several more males. Lower down in the juniper thickets, we happened upon a trio of Satyr Tragopans including two glorious males. The birds couldn't have been any more confiding, feeding on the road for around 20 minutes. One male even performed a partial display, lowering his unique fleshy wattle. As the



Satyr Tragopan by Daniel Danckwerts



Dark-rumped Rosefinch by Daniel Danckwerts

morning progressed, we encountered yet more Himalayan Monals and Satyr Tragopans, but our best find was an incredibly responsive Hill Partridge that scurried through thickets offering views for most. Other notable species that were seen on the pass included the scarce Dark-rumped Rosefinch, Crimson-browed Finch, Darjeeling Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Blue Magpie, Ashy-throated Warbler, Gray-sided Bush Warbler, and Spot-winged Grosbeak. During the 'heat' of the day, we then visited the Black-necked Crane Conservation Centre where we learned about the RSPN's efforts to save this incredible species and where we also had the opportunity to see two captive cranes.

On an absolute high, we continued our travels in a westerly direction towards the Punakha Valley. En route, we searched for the elusive Ward's Trogon, but our efforts were unrewarded. Distractions included the sought-after Himalayan Cutia, Green-tailed Sunbird, Black-faced and Gray-hooded Warblers, Whiskered Yuhina and Rufous-capped Babbler. We arrived in the mid-afternoon and took some time to rest up after a busy few days.

We spent most of the following morning scouring the Pho and Rio Sankosh Puna Tsang Chhus for the Critically Endangered White-bellied Heron. We ultimately managed to find one of these stately birds in the company of several Gray Herons. Our efforts further yielded the Crested, White-throated and Common Kingfishers, Common Merganser, Ruddy and Common Shelducks, Eurasian Wigeon, Mallard, Gadwall, Red-crested Pochard, Tufted Duck, a surprise Pied Avocet, and Little Ringed Plover. Thereafter, we explored an area of pine forest where we quickly happened upon the stunning Slender-billed Oriole and a glowing male Ultramarine Flycatcher. Lastly, our afternoon was spent exploring the Punakha Dzong; without a doubt one of the biggest highlights of our tour.

From Punkaha, we drove to Thimpu; Bhutan's capital. Our drive took us over Dochu La and we used this final opportunity to search for the Ward's Trogon (albeit unsuccessfully). New birds included the endearing Pygmy Flycatcher and the Hodgson's and Sikkim Treecreepers. We added the Chestnut-headed Tesia and Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon on our morning excursion to the Jigme Dorji National Park. Once we reached Thimpu, we settled into our recently refurbished hotel before enjoying an informative dinner with BirdLife's partners from the RSPN through which we discussed various conservation challenges that Bhutan is currently facing.

From Thimpu, we drove back to Paro where our tour began some two weeks prior. Those who wished to climb to the Tiger's Nest Monastery spent the afternoon doing so, built against a precarious cliff overlooking Paro. The rest spent a few hours birding in the immediate vicinity of the city and our hotel sighting the Steak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Black-browed Tit, and Black-faced Laughingthrush. The Paro Chhu gave us a few more Ibisbill, flocks of Russet Sparrow, unbeatable looks at the Black-tailed Crake, and both the Common and Green Sandpipers.



Black-tailed Crake by Daniel Danckwerts



The final morning was spent exploring the Chele La pass above the city. Reaching a lofty summit of 4,988m, we spent the bulk of our time covering alpine habitats near the top of the pass where we added the White-throated Redstart, sensational Fire-tailed Sunbird, and a surprise Robin Accentor. After a brilliant morning of birding, we returned to Paro for the final afternoon before sharing a delicious farewell dinner. Early the following morning we bid Bhutan goodbye as we caught our outward flight to Delhi.



Punakha Dzong architecture by Daniel Danckwerts

Annotated List of species recorded:

Note: A digital version of the checklist is available on eBird using the link provided below.

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/114540>

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