

# Bhutan

## Birds & Buddhism

Friday 16 February – Saturday 03 March 2018

Leaders: Nigel Jones and Chubzang Tangbi

2018 Cost **£5,499** single room supplement **£420**



In 2018 we make our 12<sup>th</sup> tour to Bhutan to visit the high altitude forests of the Bhutanese Himalayas – a land of rhododendron forests, stunning panoramas and friendly Buddhist culture. Birdwatching in Bhutan is a sublime experience as it is a small sparsely populated county with small towns that are frequently surrounded by untouched habitat. In the valleys, the wide rivers provide excellent wintering habitat for the Ibisbill – that strange and enigmatic wader from the Tibetan plateau. On the upland mires, Black-necked Cranes (the world's least-known crane species) may be encountered, prior to their northward departure to their breeding grounds in Tibet. The forests are the best-preserved anywhere in the Himalayas and other species we can seek include Himalayan Monal, Blood and Kalij Pheasants, Wallcreeper, Crested Kingfisher, Great Barbet, and Yellow-billed Blue Magpie. We should come across many colourful minivets, fulvetas, minlas, yuhinas and sunbirds, and three species of forketails are possible. Although birding is our main priority, we can take time to appreciate the Buddhist culture and in particular, we shall have several opportunities to see Dzongs, which blend the role of both fortress and monastery, playing a central part in Bhutanese life.

Bhutan has taken measures to protect her environment and to try to develop a sustainable tourist industry. To this end it has restricted the number of tourists allowed to enter the country each year and it charges a high price for the privilege of entering. This is one of the factors that makes tours to Bhutan expensive, but it should ensure that future generations will be able to visit a country that has much to offer in the way of pristine landscapes, as well as being uncluttered by large numbers of tourists. This new itinerary has been designed to see the best of the country, with a minimum of long-distance travelling, and removing the need to use tents. Bhutan hotel food is excellent and varied, catering for both western and Oriental palates. This proved to be an especially popular feature on our previous tours. Travel with Chubzang and Nigel on this tour, designed to see Bhutan in the best possible way.

### ITINERARY

#### Days 1 & 2

We catch our scheduled flight from London, and we arrive in Delhi next day, in the early hours. After a restful morning, we will take an afternoon outing for birding in Delhi.

#### Days 3 & 4

We fly from Delhi to Paro in Bhutan. Our flight visits Kathmandu en route – if the weather is clear, there are stunning views Mount Everest and other Himalayan peaks. We land in the picturesque Paro Valley at 2,150m and transfer to our hotel where we stay for two nights. We have our first introduction to the Bhutanese birds, including the riverine Himalayan species such as White-capped and Plumbeous Redstarts, Brown Dipper and our first Ibisbills. These unique waders migrate from their breeding grounds in

the mountains surrounding the nearby Tibetan Plateau, to winter on the shingle banks of these wide rivers at lower altitudes. In the afternoon we drive along the Paro Chu River towards Drukyl Dzong (now in ruins) and across the valley we can see Tiger's Nest Monastery, perhaps the holiest monastery in Bhutan. The next day, we can drive above the tree-line into alpine meadows and dwarf rhododendron scrub to the pass at Chele La, at 3,800m. Here we have the possibility of finding the beautiful Himalayan Monal, Kalij and Blood Pheasants, Spotted, Black-faced and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes, Brown Parrotbill, Blue-fronted Redstart, Fire-tailed Sunbird, Orange-flanked Bush Robin, Rufous-breasted and Alpine Accentors, White-browed Rosefinch, Collared and White-winged Grosbeaks and White-throated Redstart. In the afternoon, we visit the Paro River valley and birds to look for include

Ibisbill, Blue Whistling Thrush, Hodgson's and Blue-fronted Redstarts, Brown Dipper, Long-tailed Shrikes and Yellow-billed Blue Magpie.

#### Day 5

In the morning we catch the short flight to Bumthang, the religious heartland of Bhutan, where we stay overnight. In this valley we can look for Brown Parrotbill, Hodgson's Redstart, Red-billed Chough and Rufous-breasted Accentor. In the afternoon we drive to Shelthang La where there are spectacular views of the magnificent Gangkar Puensum at 7,315m, the world's highest unclimbed peak. Species we may encounter along this drive include flocks of Grey-crested, Coal, Green-backed, Yellow-browed, Black-throated and Black-browed Tits, Mrs. Gould's and Green-tailed Sunbirds, Blood Pheasant, Himalayan Monal and the rare Satyr Tragopan.

#### Day 6

This morning we make an early start to be at Tharpaling Monastery at dawn as we hope to witness the monks feeding both Himalayan Monal and Blood Pheasants, which have become accustomed to this practice. From Tharpaling we will continue to Trongsa, stopping at Yotong La (3,450m) for high altitude birds such as Himalayan Griffon, Lammergeier, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Rufous-vented Yuhina, Black-faced Laughingthrush, Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, White-winged Grosbeak, Great and Fulvous Parrotbills, Red-headed Bullfinch, Stripe-throated and Whiskered Yuhinas. In the afternoon we drive to our hotel in Trongsa and on this journey we may encounter Himalayan Cutia, Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Barred Cuckoo Dove, Greater Yellowthroat, Steppe Eagle, Tibetan Siskin, Large Niltava and Black-eared Shrike-babbler.

#### Days 7 to 9

Today we drive down the Shemgang Road, which is one of the most beautiful roads in the world with stunning mossy waterfalls. Here we can find an amazing variety of birds as the mixed broad-leaved forests stretches from 2,200m to 700m. This is home to the Golden Langur together with Red Junglefowl, Black Eagle, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Mountain Hawk-Eagle,





Black-necked Cranes



Ibisbill

**Outline Itinerary**

|                   |                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Day 1</b>      | Depart London               |
| <b>Day 2</b>      | Delhi                       |
| <b>Days 3-4</b>   | Paro                        |
| <b>Day 5</b>      | Bumthang                    |
| <b>Day 6</b>      | Trongsa                     |
| <b>Days 7-9</b>   | Tingtibi                    |
| <b>Day 10</b>     | Trongsa                     |
| <b>Day 11</b>     | Phobjikha                   |
| <b>Days 12-13</b> | Punakha                     |
| <b>Day 14</b>     | Paro                        |
| <b>Day 15</b>     | Delhi                       |
| <b>Day 16</b>     | Depart Delhi, arrive London |

**Party Size**

Maximum of 11 clients.

**Accommodation**

Comfortable accommodation in twin/double and single rooms, with private facilities and is normally the best available in the areas visited.

**Transport**

By private coach and minibus.

**Includes**

All flights, meals, accommodation, transport, entry fees, services of the leaders, airport taxes and tips.

**Excludes**

Video and camera fees charged at many parks.

**Gradings**

-  Good

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-  240

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-  Warm to Cool

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-  Moderate

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-  Special

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-  Moderate

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-  Excellent

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-  Moderate

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-  Scheduled



Maroon-backed Accentor

White-crested Laughingthrush, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Blue Rock Thrush, Striated Yuhina, Common Green Magpie, the rare Spot-winged Starling and Blue-throated Barbet. It is a long drive to Tingtibi, where we stay for three nights, but we can stop frequently for birds, mammals and the stunning views. During this drive we can also look for some of the highly prized birds of Bhutan the Rufous-necked Hornbill, Pale-headed Woodpecker, Blue-fronted Robin and White-hooded Babbler. In and around the warmer sub-tropical area of Tingtibi, we will look for Mountain Imperial-Pigeon, Spotted Elachura (formerly called Spotted Wren Babbler), Emerald Dove, Rufescent Prinia, White-throated Fantail, White-browed Scimitar Babbler, Black-throated Sunbird, Streaked Spiderhunter and Black, Bronzed and Lesser Racket-tailed Drongos.

**Day 10**

Today we start early in order to reach the habitat of the Beautiful Nuthatch. Other species we hope to encounter here include Bay Woodpecker, White-cheeked Bulbul, Blue-capped Rock-Thrush, Tickell's Leaf Warbler, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Spotted Forktail, Siberian Stonechat, White-tailed Robin, Blue-winged Laughingthrush, Pygmy Wren Babbler, White-naped Yuhina, Crimson Sunbird and Sultan Tit. After breakfast we continue birding along the Shemgang road on our way back to Trongsa, where we stay overnight, stopping at prime locations to cover habitats we missed on our way down to Tingtibi.

**Day 11**

Today we drive to Bje Zam, birding on the way, hoping to spot Grey-sided Bush Warbler and Bhutan Laughingthrush. After a hot picnic breakfast we continue our drive to Phobjikha where we stay overnight. The road takes us through Chendibji Chorten, where alongside the river here we may encounter Brown Dipper, Crested Kingfisher, Fire-tailed Myzornis and Yellow-browed Tit. As the road climbs we can look for Spotted Laughingthrush, Rufous-vented, Whiskered and Stripe-throated Yuhinas, Himalayan Griffon and Lammergeier. As we reach Pele La at 3,300m, with prayer flags fluttering in the breeze, there will be amazing views across to snow topped Jhomolhari. We continue to the picturesque Phobjikha Valley, situated on the western slopes of the Black Mountains.

Phobjikha is one of Bhutan's few glacial valleys and one of the most important wildlife reserves in the country and home to the endangered Black-necked Cranes that migrate from the Tibetan plateau to over-winter here. At this time up to 250 Black-necked Cranes can be found in Phobjikha and we spend time walking in the valley as these magnificent birds with their impressive seven and a half feet wing-span fly overhead.

**Days 12 & 13**

We can spend the morning in the valley looking for the cranes and other species such as Hen Harrier, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Oriental Skylark and Wood Snipe. Later we drive to Punakha where we stay for two nights. The next day we visit the Jigme Dorji National Park. Once we reach the broad-leaved forest we can look for White-throated and Striated Laughingthrushes, Small Niltava, Maroon Oriole, Orange-bellied Leafbird and Whiskered Yuhina. Raptors may include Black Eagle, Mountain Hawk-Eagle and Besra and we hope to find both Little and Slaty-backed Forktails. There is also the chance of seeing the critically endangered White-bellied Heron, as well as Pallas's Fish-Eagle. In the afternoon, we can visit the magnificent Punakha Dzong, built at the confluence of two rivers.

**Day 14**

This morning we leave Punakha and travel to Lumetshawa before dawn to try to spot our target bird for the day – the rare Ward's Trogon, amongst other avian species, such as Mountain Hawk-Eagle, Black Eagle, Hodgson's Treecreeper, Spotted Forktail and Slaty Blue Flycatcher. After a hot picnic breakfast we continue to the Royal Botanical Park at Lampelri. Here we look for Chestnut-crowned Warbler and Dark-rumped and Dark-breasted Rosefinches. We travel to Dochu La, an awe-inspiring sight with the road festooned with prayer flags where on a clear day, there is a magnificent panoramic view of the high Himalayas including the highest peak in Bhutan at 7,497m. We continue to Paro where we stay overnight.

**Days 15 & 16**

We fly from Paro, via Kathmandu, to Delhi. We meet up for our final dinner and then transfer to the airport late in the evening for our return flight to London, where we arrive in the morning.