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BHUTAN

Birding in a Himalayan Paradise



Great views of Ibisbill was one of the major highlights of our trip to Bhutan © Colin Bushell

Bhutan

Birding in a Himalayan Paradise

26 April – 10 May 2023

Leader: Colin Bushell

Introduction

Limosa's new tour to Bhutan was truly a journey through one of the world's least spoilt environments. Taking the meandering highway east and then back again westward, we passed various Stupas and Dzongs, enjoyed snow-capped peaks, clear, fast-flowing rivers and beautiful temperate pine-oak and subtropical evergreen forests.

Our group was treated to four stunning pheasant species (including the incredible Satyr Tragopan), Ibisbill, Crested Kingfisher, three Tesias, five Parrotbills, two Shortwings, two Forktails, three Accentors, six Rosefinches and for the 'LBJ (little brown jobs) aficionados, there were Bush Warblers and 'Phylloscs' to ponder over.

We had great views of thirteen species of Laughingthrushes including the incredible looking Spotted, Ward's Trogon, Beautiful Nuthatch and Rufous-necked Hornbill. Also seen with relative ease were Himalayan Cutia, Grey-winged Blackbird, Ultramarine Flycatcher, Golden Bush Robin, Spot-winged Grosbeak and Scarlet Finch, whereas on tours to destinations such as Northern Thailand, these are merely 'hoped-for rarities'.

All this, with very nice accommodation, delicious food and great 'in-the-field' dining for breakfasts and lunches, provided by a fantastic support team made Bhutan birding a very pleasurable experience indeed.

Trip Diary

26 and 27 April

After months of preparation involving detailed itinerary planning and visa applications undertaken by the office staff, Limosa's all new Bhutan birding tour was finally underway.

Our meeting point was a well-chosen hotel, close to Suvarnabhumi International airport in Bangkok, where most of the group met up for dinner (good Thai cuisine) on the evening of 'day 2' of the tour. Formalities completed and instructions for our transfer to the airport the following morning digested, we retired for the night.

28 April

Druk Air flights from Bangkok to Paro in Bhutan leave early and we assembled in the foyer of the hotel, a bit bleary eyed to say the least. After a short transfer to the airport, we made our way through a surprisingly busy Bangkok airport, given the very early hour. Druk Air were

very efficient, and we were through to the departure lounge in no time at all. The food outlets weren't yet fully functional, but we found a place to snack and consume coffee, discuss the programme for the day and even dare to dream of some of the birds we were hoping to see.

We left on schedule, and it was a very comfortable journey with some fine views of the Himalayas as we neared our destination. Descending towards Paro between the forested valleys and over the terraced fields, we touched down in bright sunshine.

Paro airport must be one of the most ornate anywhere in the world and we were soon outside meeting up with Tensen (in his very smart gho – Bhutanese traditional men's garment), our birding guide for the first few days of the tour, and Sonam who would be our driver for the whole trip.

We headed out of Paro and along the Pa Chhu, where Tensen located our target bird - an Ibisbill by call, only a short time after leaving the airport! The air was thin, so we disembarked somewhat gingerly, before enjoying superb views of this strange 'shorebird', its pied plumage blending so well with the pebbly, rocky stream habitat. River Lapwings, White Wagtails (of the *alboides* subspecies), Black Bulbuls, Grey-backed Shrikes and White-collared Blackbirds were enjoyed along the river, all in fine weather.

Scanning over the hillsides we picked out some White-throated Needletails and two or three Hobbies, but our attention frequently focussed back on the river where White-capped and Plumbeous Water Redstarts could be seen. Handsome Russet Sparrows and Oriental Turtle Doves, future regulars of the tour, accompanied us during our walk.

After a long morning (due to the early Druk Air flight), we headed back through Paro, stopping at a small marshy area where we saw a couple of Black-tailed Crakes. They responded nicely to a brief spell of playback, scuttling across little open areas of damp ground, often too quick for binoculars to be raised, but nice views nevertheless.

We then headed to a restaurant near our hotel for lunch. Over the coming fortnight we would get used to enjoying a selection of meat dishes, rice, tasty vegetables and chilli-cheese (for those with a 'spicy inclination'), served with tea or coffee and finished with a fruit dessert.

Lunch was certainly welcome, as was some 'time-out' before dinner, with an opportunity for some relaxation at the hotel overlooking Paro in the afternoon. Meeting in the bar in the early evening, we completed our first checklist of the tour. It was not a lengthy list but included some real 'quality species', with Ibisbill the stand-out bird of the day.

After a tasty buffet meal, it was time for bed in preparation for an early start the following morning.

29 April

We headed west from Paro towards the high pass of Chele La. As the morning sun hit the forested slopes, we could hear Coal Tits in the conifers lining the mountain road, similar, but not quite the same (to my ear, at least), as the ones 'back home'. White-collared Blackbirds

were flushed by the bus, flying off into roadside undergrowth, but more confiding was the pair of Kalij Pheasants that slowly walked up the hillside beside the bus, giving everyone a chance to see them.

Blood Pheasants were also roadside birds as we neared Chele La, lingering on the banks below the road, with moss-green underparts, white heads and red undertail coverts, face and legs, they were certainly a stunning bird producing plenty of appreciative comments from the bus!!

Our third pheasant of the morning came in the shape of a Himalayan Monal, scampering up the slope. We stopped the bus briefly, seeing Olive-backed Pipits, a Blue-fronted Redstart, White-winged Grosbeaks and our first Black-faced Laughingthrushes.

A short walk along the road bordered by forest was very productive with Alpine Accentor briefly seen by a few, some White-browed Rosefinches and a few mixed flocks containing Rufous-vented and Grey-crested Tits, White-browed Fulvettas and some tricky warblers including Buff-banded, Lemon-rumped and the less subtle Whistler's. Tensen declared that better was to come with the Monals (he was right), and suggested we make our way to the pass where our first 'field breakfast' of the tour was waiting for us.

Our chef Tobgay, ably assisted by Jigme and Ugyen, had prepared a wonderful breakfast for us and it all seemed rather surreal sitting at a table, eating porridge, eggs and pancakes while watching Spotted Nutcrackers, Blue-fronted Redstarts and White-collared Blackbirds!

Our first Spotted Laughingthrushes (what a bird!) appeared just as we finished tea and coffee, before we set off back down the mountain. We had a long way to go but the forest in the lower slopes was still worth a second look and we added Rufous-fronted Bush Tit, Rufous-vented Yuhina and a party of White-throated Laughingthrushes to the list before leaving.

Passing back through Paro, we began to ascend, the journey giving us a couple of hours to relax after a busy morning in the field. This gave our 'meals on wheels' team enough time to pack up, overtake us and prepare lunch in an incredible setting, festooned with prayer flags, below Dochu La.



Great Parrotbill © Colin Bushell

We birded in rather overcast conditions at just over 3,000m and made our way past the 'restaurant' to a small viewpoint where some Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes performed beautifully for us. Tensen tried for our main target bird once we were all in position and the huge Great Parrotbill responded well to a short burst of song, perching nearby as it made its way through the bamboo stand on the slope below us. Black-faced Laughingthrushes were still competing for our attention with the Chestnut-crowns as we began our first tussle with Large Hawk-cuckoo. The Hawk-cuckoo won this round, but we would be back for more.

More roadside birding yielded Rufous-capped Babblers, Whiskered Yuhina, Rufous-winged Fulvettas and the stunning Green-tailed Sunbird. By mid-afternoon we had reached Lampelri, where we saw our first Nepal House Martins feeding with some Himalayan Swiftlets over the forest. An impromptu stop gave us an opportunity to stretch our legs and see Maroon Oriole, some Long-tailed Minivets, Verditer Flycatcher and some Grey-headed Warblers. Our first woodpecker of the trip, Greater Yellownape, appeared, but it was the Golden-throated Barbet that stole the show, perching in the open for brilliant 'scope views.

At last, we had Punakha in our sights and by way of a change, we stopped at a good vantage point overlooking the river. The critically endangered White-bellied Heron had been seen here over the last few days, but alas, there was no sign of it this afternoon. Scanning the river and islands produced a small flock of ducks, including Red-crested Pochards, Gadwalls and a lone Tufted Duck.

Crossing the bridge, we found a single Goosander and a trio of kingfishers – Common, White-throated and the mighty Crested. With time against us, we drove into Punakha, picking up a few Chestnut-tailed Starlings, Oriental Magpie-robins and River Lapwings before reaching our hotel for the night, with a riverside view. Tensen joined us for the bird checklist, before leaving us for dinner with his family and friends. It would be the final time with him this tour, so we said our thanks and goodbyes before settling in for the night.

30 April

It was another early start, this time along the Punakha Valley to Bumthang. With bags outside the rooms before departure, we met Chubzang, our guide for the remainder of the tour, before leaving.

Scanning the river below for White-bellied Herons as we went, we made our way east along the valley, the forest bordering the road becoming more humid (even with the odd leech) as we progressed. Various roadside stops produced handsome male Blue-crowned Rock Thrushes, Wedge-tailed Green Pigeons, Great Barbets and Scarlet Minivets before we stopped for some proper birding! Chubzang attracted a Spotted Elachura from the undergrowth very skilfully, with Orange-bellied Leafbird and Long-tailed Shrike posing less of a challenge.

East of Wangdue we came across our first mammals of the tour, Assamese Macaques and Grey Langurs but it was on this stretch of road that the birding really started to 'kick in'. Hill Partridges called in the distance as we went in search of forest dwellers like the stunning Rufous-bellied Niltavas, Rufous Sibias and best of all, Himalayan Cutias. This strange species is a much-desired bird on many Asian birding tours, especially in the mountains of northern Thailand, so it was a real delight to see them so readily in Bhutan, given their difficulty elsewhere. Striated Laughingthrush appeared only briefly (better was to come with that one), but Bhutan Laughingthrush showed very well indeed. Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrushes perched on roadside snags, so easy to see, even from the bus.



Ward's Trogon © Colin Bushell

Our next quest was one of 'Bhutan's Big Five', Ward's Trogon, which is a rare bird of the broadleaved temperate forests in the eastern Himalayas, preferring older, mossy woodlands. It didn't take Chubzang long to locate a pair in one of his favourite spots for this species, with both male and female seen well and allowing 'scope views from the road. Incredibly a Mountain Hawk Eagle flew down the road while we were watching the trogon, only just above head height! Other highlights in the area included some Short-billed Minivets, Yellow-browed Tits and Spot-winged Grosbeak.

Pygmy Cupwing was the next target as one started to sing. Chubzang managed to entice it into view as it crept along a mossy trunk on the forested bank. White-tailed Nuthatch, Blyth's Leaf Warbler and Rufous-winged Fulvetta were somewhat easier to see than the Cupwing and all before breakfast! The tables were set up at Khele Kha and as we dined in the morning sunshine, Brown-flanked Bush Warbler sang nearby.

Moving on once again, we added White-browed Shrike Babbler, a beautiful male Fire-breasted Flowerpecker and Large-billed Leaf Warbler to the ever-increasing bird list for the tour. Unfortunately, a Pygmy Blue Flycatcher just would not cooperate, so we boarded the bus to continue our journey, climbing on towards Pele La.

A short stop below the pass produced Whiskered Yuhina and the incredible Red-billed Leiothrix, as well as a brief Himalayan Cuckoo. Reaching Pele La at around 3350m, we slowed down a little, just to catch our breath. Yellow-billed Blue Magpies flopped around the elfin

forest edge, their tails trailing like loose plumes as we entered the 'Old Road' around the pass. Hill Partridges were calling close by on the scrub-covered slopes, but we just couldn't find one. Chubzang reckoned they could be perched in the bottom of some of the nearby bushes as the calls were so resonating, so it was a little frustrating, to say the least.

By now some of the birds had become 'familiar faces'; Rufous-vented Tits, Grey-crested Tit, Rufous-vented Yuhina and Black-faced Laughingthrushes being a few species we had seen with some frequency, especially in mixed species flocks. Brown Parrotbill was new today, and just like the hulking Great Parrotbill, it performed beautifully for us. However, the surprise star of our pre-lunch walk was undoubtedly the Chestnut-headed Tesia. With all eyes trained on the undergrowth, as we hoped for a glimpse of the little skulker, this individual decided it would perch on top of the bush in the sun, catching us all out! With no sign of Solitary Snipe on the high-altitude bog, we settled for another delicious field lunch before travelling on towards Trongsa.

The journey in the afternoon was punctuated with a few stops, with Large Hawk-cuckoo teasing us once again, the positive being a Himalayan Cuckoo that showed well as the Hawk-cuckoo darted here and there, giving only fleeting views to most of the group. A Black Eagle showed briefly, before disappearing below a ridge and a female Kalij Pheasant also made a brief appearance.

Reaching Yotong La we 'de-bussed' once again with the cloud rolling in as we walked the road. The stunning Red-tailed Minla was one of the first birds to react to Chubzang's owl recording, along with the usual Green-tailed Sunbirds, Rufous-vented Yuhinas, White-browed Fulvettas and Yellow-browed Tits that readily came to mob the 'false owl'. A small party of Stripe-throated Yuhinas was a new bird for the tour and we heard Streak-breasted Scimitar Babblers for the first time too.

Moving on, Chubzang promised us a 'trip tick' as we passed through Gaytsa, on the way to our destination of Bumthang. The Black-rumped Magpie is very common in the valleys here around the fields and pens on the outskirts of town but apart from this species and a few Red-billed Choughs there wasn't much else, so we headed on to our hotel in Bumthang where we sampled the local 'Red Panda' brew as we completed another checklist.

1 May

Heavy overnight rain had left a few of the group resigned to a morning of waterproofs and umbrellas but by the time we left the hotel and Bumthang, it began to ease to leave us with misty conditions as we climbed through Larch, Silver Fir, Spruce and Hemlock toward Selthang La.

We were told by Chubzang that this sort of weather was good for finding roadside pheasants and the omens were certainly good with Himalayan Monals and a couple of Blood Pheasants at the forest edge and then came that 'WOW! moment' as a male Satyr Tragopan was found

by the road. What a stunning bird with white spotted crimson underparts, dotted white brown upperparts and a blue throat and eye-ring bordered by black and it was calling!



Satyr Tragopan © Colin Bushell

'Bus birding' had undoubtedly proved to be the most successful method for 'pheasant hunting' but it was now time for a walk in the beautiful pine forests. Strolling along the road we saw our first Red-headed Bullfinches and then a smart singing Scaly Thrush which looked stunning in the 'scope!

Blandford's Rosefinch was new and it was nice to do a 'grosbeak double' before breakfast, watching Collared and White-winged Grosbeaks within minutes of each other before we sat down to cereals, coffee, tea and eggs once again. Crossing the pass, we found our first Red Crossbills and Slaty Blue Flycatchers as well as a very handsome Himalayan Bluetail.

Entering the Ura Valley, we saw our only Snow Pigeons of the trip, as three flew over the fields in the distance. A couple of Beautiful Rosefinches appeared all too briefly, but thankfully the Common Rosefinches on distant trees behaved more favourably.

Thus far, the road conditions had been very good, but entering the Thrumshing La National Park, the surface deteriorated somewhat, slowing our progress. We hadn't gone too far before we had to stop anyway, as another carload of birders had located a superb immature Mountain Hawk Eagle perched in a roadside tree. We enjoyed brilliant views of this bird, crest raised from time to time, as it turned its head. We exchanged Collared Owlet for the Hawk Eagle for the other birders (a team who we would bump into on several occasions over the coming days), when Chubzang expertly located a calling owlet in a roadside pine.

After a good start, the day became a little more arduous due to roadworks and some rather inclement weather conditions. Stopping near the Nobling Death Drop waterfall, spirits were lifted by the sight of a couple of Little Forktails and with improving weather, thoughts of an

early finish were thankfully dashed, as we finished our day birding along the road down to Yongkola.

In little more than an hour our afternoon improved considerably, with Large and Small Niltavas both heard as we left the bus. Sightings included Great Barbets, Grey-chinned Minivets, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher, Spangled Drongo, White-throated Fantails, Tickell's Leaf Warblers, White-bellied Erpornis and Black-throated Sunbirds. A good session indeed and we even managed to add one more quality bird as we arrived at Trogon Villa, when a singing Rufous-necked Laughingthrush appeared outside reception.

We checked in for the first of a three nights stay and a welcome respite from the travel thus far. It was a fine base from which to explore the surrounding forested slopes.

2 May

It was nice to go to the bus without our luggage this morning, enjoying a *relatively* late start and a hot drink outside the lodge courtesy of our support team. The Rufous-necked Laughingthrush was another early riser and a few of the team caught up with this species after missing it the previous evening.

A short drive into the forested valley and we were heading down a winding track, watching Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babblers, Bhutan Laughingthrush, Maroon Oriole, Grey Treepies, Golden-throated Barbets and Grey-headed Woodpecker. This area is described as "the best birding area in Bhutan" in Grimmett et al and we found many new species as we explored the subtropical forests. The mixed flock species included Grey-chinned Minivets, Yellow-vented Warblers, Indian White-eyes, White-naped Yuhinas, Nepal Fulvettas and Yellow-cheeked Tits. Sultan Tits, so often the 'flock leader' in Asia, finally came into view, after calling in the distance.

Away from the flocks, we picked out Orange-bellied Leafbirds, Grey-throated Babbler, Verditer and Little Pied Flycatchers and once again enjoyed good views of various Laughingthrushes including Striated and Bhutan. A White-browed Piculet gave spectacular views at close range and we worked hard for views of Slaty-bellied Tesia, but what a morning!

Our support team had set up breakfast nearby and only a Spotted Forktail kept us from porridge. Porridge won that round for most, but the forktail showed fantastically well!

Once breakfast was finished, we could concentrate once again on the birds. A Grey-sided Laughingthrush calling on the slopes wasn't interested in approaching us, but we were about to experience one of the best birding spells of the morning, maybe even the tour!

The chattering call of a Beautiful Nuthatch (another of Chubzang's 'Bhutan Big Five') could be heard from high on the slopes and we waited patiently for it to appear. When it did, however, we enjoyed superb views over the following few minutes, followed by a much appreciated Blue-bearded Bee-eater!



Beautiful Nuthatch © Colin Bushell

We continued to work hard for our birds and as a Black Eagle and Crested Serpent Eagle soared above the forests, we began checking the understory where Small Niltava and White-gorgeted Flycatcher required a bit more effort to see well. Black-winged Cuckoo Shrike, White-crested Laughingthrushes and a Greater Yellownape followed, but all attention suddenly concentrated on the distant canopy as a single call of Rufous-necked Hornbill had been heard.

Scanning intently, we picked one up on the opposite slope, another job for the 'scope, but there it was – another 'Big Five' bird. Another individual appeared briefly just as we headed back to the bus. A fabulous morning was then topped off nicely with a fly-by Oriental Honey Buzzard as we drove back to the main road to meet up with our support team for lunch.

We had lunch not far from Trogon Villa, opting for our first proper siesta of the tour just afterwards, although the Rufous-necked Laughingthrush was still available for those wanting a second look. Refreshed, we walked along the Lingmethang Road in the afternoon and after a slow start and a shower, birds began to appear.

Laughingthrushes continued to delight with Lesser Necklaced and White-crested showing not long after we left the bus, although we were made to wait a little longer for an elusive Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush. The appearance of a Speckled Piculet made it a 'double piculet day' for most of the group but, unfortunately, the Common Green Magpie remained elusive. Are they actually 'common' anywhere?

Flocks at the forest edge along the road held Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrikes, Grey-hooded Warblers and Indian White-eyes and we enjoyed our best views of Himalayan Buzzard (a perched bird) along the road.

And then finally, we had decent views of Large Hawk-cuckoo – a bit of a relief after hearing so many! At the same time, we could watch Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, Square-tailed Drongo-cuckoo and a brief Blue-throated Barbet. However, perhaps bird of the afternoon was Chestnut-winged Cuckoo, such a stunning and colourful species, or was it the Red-headed Trogon that took that accolade? Anyway, it was fine afternoon's birding, that's for sure!

Very happy with the day's haul of birds which included Beautiful Nuthatch, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Spotted Forktail and a supporting cast of laughingthrushes, we returned to the lodge well satisfied and toasted these with a dram of Bhutanese whisky.

An evening walk back along the Tsamang Road (where we had birded in the morning) was interesting and although we didn't see much, Oriental Bay Owl, Mountain Scops Owl, Collared Scops, Asian Barred Owlet, Brown Wood Owl and Hodgson's Frogmouth were all heard! We did, however, see a Sambar Deer.

3 May

The Jainala Road was our destination this morning and once again, we travelled unincumbered, with another night at Trogon Villa to come, so no need to take the luggage. Virtually our first bird of the day was Brown-flanked Bush Warbler, and it showed very well indeed, dispelling the myth that all Bush Warblers are skulkers. Silver-eared Mesia was even easier and certainly easier to identify.

A good series of sightings over the subsequent few minutes included a Rufous-bellied Eagle, Black-throated Prinia, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler and best of all White-breasted Parrotbill, continuing our good run of parrotbills for the tour. The birds kept coming, some we had already seen before such as Red-faced Liocichla, Greater Yellownape, Scaly Laughingthrush and Rufous-bellied Niltava but others like Grey-sided Laughingthrush, Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler, White-tailed Robin and Grey-winged Blackbird were all new. Yongkola was certainly living up to its reputation as Bhutan's best birding area!

Breakfast was calling, but not before Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Striated Bulbul plus a few of the 'usuals' were seen. Chubzang made light work of a Long-billed Wren-babbler, enticing this shy species into view with relative ease. Indeed, we even had time to set the 'scopes on it. A passing flock consisted of Rufous-capped Babblers, Yellow-throated Fulvettas and a nice selection of fancy warblers – Black-faced and Chestnut-crowned.

Breakfast had to wait a little longer when Lesser Shortwing threw down the gauntlet and Chubzang, never one to turn down the challenge, reciprocated by persuading it to show. A nice male Large Niltava was the final bird seen before a well-earned breakfast.

The post breakfast session was much quieter, however, it was great to get another look at Rufous-necked Hornbill for those who had missed the morning session along the Tsamang Road the previous day. Of course, there were plenty of opportunities to reprise views of Himalayan Cutia, Blue-winged Minla, Yellow-cheeked Tit and Little Pied Flycatcher, but 'new'

birds were hard to find albeit we enjoyed fine views of Rusty-fronted Barwing, Pale Blue Flycatcher, Nepal Fulvetta and our first Rufous-bellied Woodpecker.

In the afternoon, we slowly made our way back towards Trogon Villa. A Blue-winged Laughingthrush broke the trend for that family of birds, by remaining very elusive and giving only tantalisingly brief views, but entering a somewhat dryer forested area, we began to pick up a few different birds. Our first Crested Bunting appeared on a roadside rock alongside a handsome male Siberian Stonechat. As usual the appearance of a couple of birds like this was the encouragement needed to disembark and explore further. A wise move: new birds followed including Rufescent and Himalayan Prinias and best of all a very handsome Blue-throated Blue Flycatcher.

Near the bottom of the valley, at Lingmethang, we searched for a Tawny Fish Owl that had roosted in riverside trees earlier in the spring. Alas, it had shifted location and we couldn't find it, but we did hear several Blue-naped Pittas on the slopes above us.

Our final birding of the afternoon was alongside the river and Chubzang told us this was our one and only chance of Himalayan Bulbul and we duly found one, as well as a Crimson Sunbird in the same bush. This was a good time to end and we headed back to Trogon Villa for the final time. The bird checklist had certainly taken a healthy boost during our stay at Yongkola.

4 May

Leaving Yongkola, we began to retrace our steps west along Bhutan's main highway. A female Scarlet Finch and Striated Bulbuls stopped us soon after leaving Trogon Villa, but the main obstruction was a couple of large landslides blocking our progress. Temporarily helpless, we birded the roadside forest, exactly what we had planned anyway, just maybe for a little longer. As luck would have it, the landslides were cleared relatively quickly and we enjoyed good views of another Rufous-necked Hornbill, some Grey-cheeked Warblers, Yellow-throated Fulvettas and a splendid Rufous-throated Wren-babbler.

With a clear passage westward, we could concentrate on birding once again, although the thought that our support team (and breakfast!) could be on the other side of the landslides, had caused extreme concern amongst the group! With normality restored, we enjoyed our best views of a stunning Blue-winged Laughingthrush before Sonam arrived to a hero's welcome with the bus. A quick stop by some cliffs where there were many bees' nests produced the target bird almost instantly, a Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, which showed really well.

Pressing on to Numling, a roadside flock stopped us and Chubzang 'released the pygmy owl' once again, with many chattering small birds coming to see what all the fuss was about. Black-eared Shrike-babbler was one of the most attractive birds to arrive, with White-throated Fantails flitting around amongst many of the species we had encountered previously in these mixed flocks.

It was a stand of bamboo that really produced the goods, however, when a small party of Black-throated Parrotbills appeared; such ornately patterned and colourful birds and one of the stand-out birds of the tour. The timing of breakfast was immaculate as usual, with hot food and drink very welcome after a busy morning.

Chubzang tried hard to find us Golden-breasted Fulvetta and Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler but, unfortunately to no avail. Birds we did find as we returned to the Sengor Valley, and more misty conditions, included Rusty-fronted Barwings, White-browed Shrike-babblers, Rufous-winged Fulvettas and a very smart Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher.

With the mist descending and the 'scope put away, we concentrated on some 'bush-dwellers' that included a nice Himalayan Shortwing and lovely views of a Scaly-breasted Cupwing. Chubzang clearly has a penchant for these little birds, pulling them into view so successfully on repeated occasions without undue distress to the birds. Dark-rumped Rosefinch, Hoary-throated Barwing and yet more minlas, Yellow-bellied Fantails, Greenish Warblers and yuhinas followed, as well as a majestic Rufous-bellied Eagle overhead.

Thrumshing La was a little disappointing for birds (although the area was spectacular to walk), apart from a massive flock of Plain Mountain Finches. There must have been over two hundred birds in the air, although they were impossible to count.

We had a fair distance to travel to reach Bumthang. Stops in the Ura Valley in the mid-afternoon period were predictably a little quiet, apart from some Red Crossbills. We were now back in coniferous forests, so bird diversity was a little lower than the last few days. We were reacquainted with White-winged Grosbeaks, Large-billed Leaf Warblers, Spotted Nutcrackers and a few Greenish Warblers. A female Satyr Tragopan and three Wild Boars, all seen from the bus, were perhaps the most notable wildlife sightings as we cruised through the pines down to Bumthang where Red-billed Choughs and Black-rumped Magpies were dotted around the fields.

5 May

Another early start saw us climbing out of Bumthang, this time towards the Tharpaling Monastery. It was a clear and sunny morning, resulting in some nice views of distant snow-capped peaks. Birds were in evidence at the entrance gates, where Greenish Warblers, White-collared Blackbirds and Olive-backed Pipits were all seen. Entering the grounds, we showed respect to the monks and then soon located some Himalayan Monals, the males in their glossy best and it was fantastic to see them so close.

Although these huge pheasants were the main attraction, there was plenty else to see with Rufous-breasted Accentor, Dark-breasted Rosefinch, Bar-throated Minlas, Red Crossbills and Russet Sparrows all frequenting the lower slopes near the buildings.

A Grey-sided Bush Warbler showed exceptionally well along the switchback trail above the monastery, but most of our time was taken by the singing Golden Bush Robin that Chubzang

located by song. A female Blue-fronted Redstart posed very well for photographs on some rocks as we made our way down to the gates where breakfast awaited us.



White-collared Blackbird and Oriental Turtle Dove at Tharpaling © Colin Bushell

Once again, the lads had made a great job of breakfast and we ate with a spectacular Himalayan backdrop of distant snowy peaks under clear blue skies. Greenish Warblers sang beside us, Black Kites and Himalayan Griffon Vultures were gliding by as we feasted on our porridge, omelettes, vegetables and chips, washed down with hot drinks.

After breakfast, we drove a little downhill into the pine forests where we went for a short walk. Hill Partridges ‘sang’ in the distance, and we continued our recent good run of Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher sightings.

By late morning, we had reached Yotong La where Chubzang hoped to find us a Red Panda, and although this was not to be, by exploring some quieter areas near the pass, we chanced upon a nice party of Fulvous Parrotbills. Lunch near the pass was actually quite a ‘birdy’ affair with Crested Goshawk seen perched and another of those busy mixed species flocks containing Large-billed and Lemon-rumped Warblers, Yellow-bellied Fantails, Bar-throated Sivas, several yuhinas, Whistler’s Warblers and Green-tailed Sunbirds.



Fulvous Parrotbill © Colin Bushell

Dropping into Trongsa, we stopped the bus for a small flock of Altai Accentors, the only ones of the tour and at a patch of Alder forest saw the huge Malay Giant Squirrel. Arriving at the hotel, we took time for a breather before heading out once again, some opting for a relaxing visit to the Trongsa Dzong, the rest birding the Zhemgang Road.

Although the afternoon was warm, we still found plenty to look at. The Golden Langurs on the far side of the valley were lovely to watch through the 'scope and we also enjoyed our best views of Blue-winged Minla and, after a short struggle, had acceptable looks at Lesser Shortwing too. Bhutan Laughingthrush, Scarlet and Long-tailed Minivets and Rufous-bellied Niltava were all also seen, however, it was undoubtedly the Hodgson's Hawk-cuckoo that was the highlight of the afternoon, as after hearing so many over the previous days, we finally enjoyed some good views through the telescope.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped briefly for a Russet Bush Warbler that was singing on the slopes but it didn't show, so we made our way to our rooms to prepare for bird checklist and dinner.

6 May

It was another early start (although by no means the earliest) and having driven through town, we stopped at the first patch of forest we reached. A very smart Indian Blue Robin sang from the depths of the roadside bank of trees and we could just make it out through the branches. A Russet Bush Warbler singing nearby made its way onto the bird list after yesterday's 'no-show' bird near the hotel with Short-billed Minivets, Black-throated Bushtits, Orange-bellied Leafbirds, White-browed Shrike-babblers and Rufous-capped Babblers also all seen before we returned to the bus.

With our first view of the forested slopes of Jigme Dorji in the distance, we pressed on to Ngala hearing Bay Woodpecker, seeing a few Scarlet Finches and at a roadside bamboo stand, a flock of Black-throated Parrotbills.

After trying all of Chubzang's favoured sites, it seemed we weren't going to see Golden-bellied Fulvetta or Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler, but he continued to try hard with the recordings. More frustration came on reaching Pele La, when a Golden-naped Finch was heard, but refused to show but the 'Old Road' produced many of the birds seen previously such as Yellow-browed Tits, White-browed Fulvettas and Stripe-throated Yuhinas, but alas, no Myzornis.

Lunch and a short siesta were well received, and the afternoon birding was good with plenty of bird activity, despite the rather drizzly conditions. Our only Green Shrike-babbler of the tour appeared and we enjoyed fine views of Common Rosefinches, Hoary Barwings, Red-headed Bullfinches, Rosy Pipits, a Darjeeling Woodpecker and for many of us, our first Alpine Accentor of the trip.

Rain, turning to hail, curtailed our birding in the mid-afternoon just as a Spotted Laughingthrush was treating us to unbeatable views. Retiring to the bus and with some way

still to travel, we headed for Punakha, seeing a Kalij Pheasant, Wedge-tailed Green Pigeons and as the river widened, River Lapwings and a Crested Kingfisher. Checking into our delightful riverside hotel for two nights, we even had time for a period of rest before dinner.

7 May

Scanning the Puna Tshang Chhu near Punakha, we found Great Crested Grebe, Tufted Duck, some Gadwall and Wigeon, but unfortunately, no White-bellied Heron. This species must be perilously close to the brink of extinction, with perhaps only around sixty individuals remaining in the wild.

A Slender-billed Oriole sang from the far bank, a bird we managed to locate and 'scope, before moving on to an area with large shingle islands. Here we found a Pallas's Fish Eagle making a Ruddy Shelduck rather nervous. Closer scrutiny of the river revealed quite a few River Lapwings, at least seven Green Sandpipers, six Little Stints, a Goosander and perhaps most noteworthy (in Bhutan) a Common Tern. We enjoyed a riverside breakfast in the company of a Brown Shrike, Chestnut-tailed Starlings, a Richard's Pipit, Hoopoes and our only House Crow of the tour.

Heading in the direction of the Dzong, we located a smart White-browed Wagtail, more Ruddy Shelducks and some Ibisbills. We then entered the Jigme Dorji National Park where, unfortunately, the weather deteriorated. Watching the river closely we found Brown Dipper, but best of all a Smooth-coated Otter that performed well on the nearby shore below us.

We took lunch in a lovely spot (with a shelter) near a bend in the river, where we could watch White-capped and Plumbeous Redstarts. After lunch, some of the group visited the Punakha Dzong, built in 1637 and situated at the confluence of the Mo and Pho Chhu. Known as the 'Palace of Great Happiness', it is considered one of the most beautiful Dzongs in Bhutan.

The remaining group members continued to birdwatch, although little was added to the day. Sonam picked 'the birders' up after a while, and reunited, we checked the river once again seeing another Brown Dipper, more Ibisbills and our first Red-wattled Lapwings of the tour in the terraced fields.

Returning to the hotel, we enjoyed some more excellent Bhutanese cuisine before retiring for the night.

8 May

We started our final full day in the field checking the river, as we left our hotel in Punakha. A brief look revealed little change from the previous day as the fish eagle was still around, but only Common Redshank was new for our tour list. Reaching the forest, we saw what were now familiar birds like Green-backed Tit, Nepal Fulvetta, Greater Yellownape plus a Speckled Piculet. Lesser Coucal made its first appearance of the tour and we chanced upon another Kalij Pheasant with a couple of Streak-breasted Scimitar Babblers performing beautifully for us.



Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler © Colin Bushell

We took breakfast in hot and sunny conditions at Lumitsawa, with the warm weather probably largely to blame for the paucity of birds. Climbing higher, we explored Lampelri Botanical Gardens where we had our best views of Speckled Wood Pigeons, Tickell's Warblers and a male Himalayan Shortwing.

We lunched near Dochu La, in the same spot we had dined on the outward journey at the beginning of our Bhutan adventure. A last gasp attempt at Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler was, unfortunately, unsuccessful, although we found the Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes we had seen earlier in the tour.

Heading towards Paro, we stopped in the river valley for one last look at Ibisbills, River Lapwings and the handsome *alboides* White Wagtails, before arriving at our hotel for the final night of the tour.

9 and 10 May

The rather late and leisurely breakfast came as 'a bit of a shock to the system' and with no time available for birding, Sonam picked us up on schedule for the ride to the airport.

Druch Air were, once again, efficient and we had plenty of time after check-in to browse around the small, but very attractive airport. Our flight to Bangkok left on time and we enjoyed views across the mountains on a beautiful clear morning.

On arrival in Bangkok, and after what seemed like an age for our bags to arrive, the group split. Most, with later onward connections to the UK headed to a nearby hotel in the city whilst the remainder headed to departures to check in for a homebound flight later that evening.

It was the end of a fascinating journey through Bhutan. A tour full of so many special and memorable experiences!

My thanks go to Chubzang and Sonam, our companions virtually throughout the trip. Birding and driving expertise personified is the most succinct way I can describe these two incredible people. Special thanks also to the aforementioned 'lads' – the super-efficient catering team who kept us well fed in the field and, of course, Tensen. He may have been with us just a few days, but his knowledge, birding skills and personality were evident from the first few minutes of our reception at the airport. And finally, of course, thanks to the group for their enthusiasm throughout the tour.



Punakha Dzong © Colin Bushell