

Holiday Highlights

Bhutan

25 February – 14 March 2023

Guides: Sonam Tshering and Julian Sykes

Guests: Maggie and John Tester, Gill Hirst and Pete Williamson

Day 1: We all meet at Heathrow Airport T3 on time and are ready to go. After the usual introductions and pleasantries, Julian arranges to meet everyone airside as they are all upgraded. This works a treat and after security we all head towards a café for a hot drink, before going to board. Our guide again says farewell to us all as we board first and arrange to see him later at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi. The flight leaves a little late but we can make this up.

Day 2: We land a little ahead of schedule at 8am and get through to the baggage carousel in pretty good time. It's been an excellent flight, with most people managing some sleep during the transfer. We eventually get our bags and change some money before heading through to the arrivals hall searching for our rep from the hotel. We actually find him outside and we all go out into the warm sunshine against a bright blue sky. We need two taxis with the first leaving immediately with Gill, John and Maggie. Julian and Pete get theirs a little later and manage to 'kickstart' the list with Black Kite, Red-wattled Lapwing, Red-vented Bulbul, Common and Bank Mynahs – all the usual fayre really.

We all get to the airport hotel and find our rooms are not quite ready, so we go for a very welcome hot drink in their café. Around 11am Julian gets word the rooms are done and we go to reception to formally check-in, which is easy – heading to our respective rooms with a meeting time of 3pm.

We all arrive at reception at the agreed time and walk out into the warm hustle and bustle of Delhi life! We are just at the gate when we see our first good bird – Red-whiskered Bulbul, which is superb. Around these trees we also see Purple Sunbird and Red-vented Bulbuls too. We now walk out along the main roads, logging off more of the usual suspects, until John says "I've got a Yellow-footed Green Pigeon" pointing towards a group of small partially obscured trees. Sure, enough there are several of these beauties feeding amongst the dense foliage. Overhead there are a couple of Black-eared Kites amongst their commoner cousins and Pete spots our first butterfly – Painted Lady.

We keep walking slowly along these busy roads, stopping to check the scattered trees, unfortunately where Julian had planned for us is blocked off, with no access – we even try bribing the entrance guard! At a locked gate we peer through some small gaps as Pete finds a Grey Francolin, followed by a Collared Dove, adding to the list. His good fortune continues with an Oriental Magpie Robin, before Julian first spots a Five-striped Palm Squirrel, followed by a gorgeous male Shikra,

giving wonderful views. It is late afternoon as we stand and scan the area with Julian now spotting a Brown Rock Chat, which is a delight to Pete being new to him. Maggie and John find more (closer) Green Pigeons, as well as Purple Sunbird and our first Ashy Prinia. Another new species for Pete flies over, which is a Dusky Crag Martin - that's two of the seven potential ticks in India for him. He's delighted.

We now head back towards our hotel, again stopping at the entrance where we add Common Tailorbird to the list and we decide to do one final loop, which is very successful. As we walk slowly on Pete enquires about a parakeet with a particularly long tail - it's an Alexandrine, which is superb! A small flock of House Sparrows fly round and now we see a couple of House Swifts too, plus our final new bird of the day – Lesser Whitethroat. After another welcome al fresco hot drink at Costa with some surprisingly good beetroot crisps, we make our way back to the hotel, which is now close by.

We arrange to meet again at 7pm for dinner in the restaurant, which we are all ready for, not having had much since this morning. Around 8.30pm we have finished, completed the checklist and paid our respective drinks bills – we now head to our rooms for a much-needed sleep.

Day 3: Our day starts just before 6am as we meet in the hotel reception, where Julian is waiting with the picnic breakfasts. We are a bit bleary eyed as a bit of jet lag has kicked in! Sanjay arrives with the minibus and we climb aboard with our stuff and head off out of Delhi in the dark. We drive south towards Gurgaon, as the first vestiges of light start to appear in the east, with us making good progress. It only takes an hour to reach the car park of Sultanpur Jeel Wetland Reserve where we meet our wildlife guide for the day - it's another Sanjay! We decide to have our packed breakfast now (or part of it) before leaving and the tariff for the larger cameras is paid. Around 7.30am we are ready to leave, with a group of Peacocks and Large Grey Babblers bouncing around the rubbish bins. A few Painted Storks fly over along with a large group of Intermediate Egrets.

We now walk slowly down to the water's edge and look out across this shallow lake and the fun begins! We are finding new birds constantly, with an array of wildfowl and waterbirds to be seen. The initial highlights include one sought after species by Pete and Gill – Indian Spot-billed Duck, along with lots of Pintail which is a bit of a surprise. Outlandish Grey-headed Swampheens feed along the edge of the reeds and we soon find our first Indian Pond and Purple Herons, Great White Egrets and White-breasted Waterhen. Our guide Sanjay has been watching this site for many years and knows the wildlife well, pointing out our first Hume's Warbler and Oriental Magpie Robin. Julian has started to walk along the track that follows the edge of the lake and finds a gorgeous male Red-breasted Flycatcher as the early morning mist starts to clear.

On we walk slowly, constantly adding new species with Grey-necked (Plain) Martin being appreciated as it's another new bird to some of us. We also see

some lovely Glossy Ibis and our first raptors, with an immature Greater Spotted Eagle looking massive sat in the acacias and a smaller Booted Eagle for comparison. We see our first mammals of the day, with several Nilgai (Blue Bull) starting to feed on the vegetation in the water – what a wonderful place.

We also search around the drier areas, with some of us seeing Indian Grey Hornbill, a pair of Shikra, our first dainty Indian Robins, Siberian Chiffchaff, Eastern Black Redstart and a Coppersmith Barbet. Back at the lakeside we now find Garganey, Ferruginous Duck and a Comb Duck flies through, but is only seen by a couple of us sadly. The sun is starting to warm the ground with a few butterflies around, including Indian Cabbage White, Pale Grass Blue and Common Grass Yellow, which are appreciated by Gill – who is enjoying this special place.

Sanjay now leads us out towards a round 180° viewing hide, with a stand of reeds next to the track. We can hear an 'acrocephalus' warbler singing its scratchy song, which isn't immediately recognisable, but Sanjay says "moustached". Julian is dubious as he's never seen this species here before, but with some persuasion John gets a good view and confirms its identity, which is brilliant as we all manage to see this reedbed skulker. Once we've all had a decent view of this reedbed warbler we walk on towards the single story hide at the end of the promontory. Sanjay stops again and says "Sind Sparrow calling" pointing across the water to an acacia. Julian, John and Maggie get a brief view before the pair disappears, but Sanjay knows these birds and heads towards a tree a little further along the track. There is another one calling and this time we are stood right under it, showing their defining features beautifully, which is absolutely brilliant as it's another new bird to Pete and Gill. We watch this rare sparrow for a while before it flies towards the acacias again and continue along the track.

We now get there and set up the scopes on the huge flock of wildfowl ahead of us, with all the regular species plus numbers of Tufted Duck, Common and Red Crested Pochard, pretty much now completing the set of ducks we are likely to see. We keep scanning and see some gorgeous Citrine Wagtails, Marsh Harrier including a cracking male and our first Black Kites of the day. Sanjay now says "Red-napes Ibis on the tower" and sure enough there are a couple stood on this metal structure in the middle of the lake – we just keep adding new birds. After about 30 minutes here we set off back along the track to the main circular route, seeing an Indian Flap-shell Turtle partially hauled out on one of the small islands.

Our circular walk around the lake slowly continues, when a pair of Little Swift's fly over and there's a few Wire-tailed Swallows and you can even see the wires! The sun is slowly rising above the trees and it's getting warm, when Sanjay says, "cat crossing the track!" – Maggie is at the front with Julian, who get a decent look at a Jungle Cat before it disappears into the bushes. We edge forward hoping it's not our only view and thankfully refind it, looking very relaxed as it is washing itself about 50m away. It is partially obscured by some branches, but does move slightly more into the open where Maggie gets some lovely images of this beautiful feline.

Our walk continues round this large lake, seeing much of the same species and it is now getting quite busy with people.

Sanjay now takes us to a drier part of the Reserve, where we initially see a cracking male Bluethroat, plus a Bay-backed Shrike and a few Red Avadavat. A large warbler flies into a nearby tree, which takes a little time to refind, but it is confirmed as an Eastern Orphean Warbler, which is superb.

It is now after midday and we are conscious of the fact that it's getting hotter, we don't have much water and we still have a good walk before we can go for lunch. We start to keep going, but are constantly stopped by great sightings such as more Sind Sparrows, Sykes's Wagtails, Black-necked Stork, Pheasant-tailed Jacana and Greater Spotted Eagle. We are most of the way round now when Sanjay has one more surprise for us, as again this knowledgeable guide takes us into an area of Acacia trees. He first points out a Common Hawk Cuckoo, before training the telescope on a pair of gorgeous Spotted Owlets, which is superb. As we are watching these very cute birds, a pair of equally gorgeous Small Minivets fly into an adjacent tree, adding yet another new species to the list. It is now time to get back to the entrance and drive the short distance to lunch.

We are all ready for some refreshments and have a very enjoyable lunch in some lovely gardens. Once we are finished, we walk slowly back to the minibus, seeing a Coppersmith Barbet, Long-tailed Shrike and Purple Sunbird. It is now mid-afternoon and Sanjay wants to take us to a site near to his village, which isn't too far away.

We are back in the bus and driving down the road, turning off on to a metalled track soon after. We are driving out through the wheat fields and stop opposite a large Acacia, where we alight the bus and grab our scopes. The guide now sets them up towards the tree and we cannot believe our eyes as there is a Short-eared Owl staring back at us. In fact, there are three SEO's here all partially hidden by the tree's branches. Julian is really pleased as he has never seen this species previously when visiting Sultanpur. We stay for a while enjoying these birds, along with a Crested Lark, Rosy Starlings and a Zitting Cisticola before it's time to head back to Delhi. It has been an incredible extra day in India, with a bird list of 115 species, plus some great mammals and butterflies!

Day 4: Today we are in reception at 'stupid o'clock' waiting for our taxis to Delhi International Airport, having a 7am flight to Paro in Bhutan! We get to the airport a little after 4am and queue to get in and now join the queue to check-in, before joining the queue to go through security! This eats into our 3 hours before take-off and with an hour to go we are airside and in desperate need of some breakfast and a hot drink – so we queue for the café. Thankfully this is pretty quick and soon we are heading to our gate 4a, where we settle down to our food and drink before (you guessed it) queuing to board. We are soon ready to leave and a little after the scheduled time we are airborne although some of us are already asleep!

The flight is great, with stunning views out over the Himalayan Mountains, even seeing Everest in bright blue skies and also some very palatable breakfast, which is great. We are airborne for just over 90 minutes and land in Paro around our expected arrival time, where the queues start again but what a place, it is stunning with the airport being surrounded by snow-capped mountains. We get through security quickly and our luggage is waiting for us in this wonderful small airport full of great photos and models of the country's fabulous temples. However, we need to get outside and start this adventure.

Sonam is waiting with his co-guide Sonam (that's easy!) and we are given a white scarf as a gift of peace and well-being, which is just superb. We are now taken to the lovely minibus and meet our driver for the tour – Pinsho. Once we've had a few photos together and the bags etc are loaded we set off and drive away from the airport car park.

We haven't gone 1km along the road, which is adjacent to a lovely glacial river and Sonam Sr says "Ibisbill" and stops the bus in the main road. We all grab our binoculars and cameras that are in our backpacks and join our Bhutanese guide outside. Just across the water is one of the most iconic and sought-after birds in the world – Ibisbill and it's a fabulous example. As we are watching Maggie spots a White (alboides) Wagtail and a Blue Whistling Thrush, before an Oriental Turtle Dove flies past. We cannot believe this as we are literally just 5 minutes from the airport!

Our driver now takes us through the village to the Thrumshingla Restaurant, which has a wonderful view down through the valley back to the airport. Here we enjoy our first Bhutanese meal, which is lovely and as we are eating John points out our first Russet Sparrows along with the more familiar Eurasian Tree Sparrows. Once we have finished and are ready to go, we make our way back down to the river, where we park.

We are now going for a walk, but immediately after getting out of the bus a gorgeous Wallcreeper flies past and lands on a nearby rockface. This is just incredible as we are now getting wonderful views of this grey and crimson gem as it looks for insects in the rocks and crevices. Eventually the Wallcreeper moves on, as do we walking slowly along the riverside track. We are seeing more White Wagtails, along with a couple of Goosander, Ruddy Shelduck, River Lapwing and another couple of Ibisbill. A handsome Grey-backed Shrike is found by the football pitch and above us we now see our first Himalayan Buzzard. A little further we see some movement on the vegetated bank, where we find a small flock of Black-throated Thrush and another Hodgson's Redstart. We walk a little further seeing both Common and Green Sandpipers, but Sonam is conscious we have already had a long day. He also knows with more birding to do later so he suggests we now head to our first accommodation, higher up in the mountains.

The drive does not take too long to our stunning rural hotel, with its own cabins in the extensive grounds. We accept a welcome drink from reception as the

Sonams sort out our rooms, which are away from the main building. The hotel staff are superb as they show us to the cabins, with a time to reconvene for a late afternoon excursion. We meet our guides and Pinsho at the car park with Pete and Gill having seen a White-collared Blackbird in the grounds as they had a walk round.

Once we are all together, we set off on a drive to the outskirts of Paro, where we stop just beyond a bridge overlooking a water meadow. Sonam Sr explains this is the best site for Black-tailed Crake, but they are difficult (as are most crake species!). A Hodgson's Redstart is flitting around the bushes. We see a movement and it could be a crake, so Julian gets his thermal monocular out and tries to find it in the dense bushes. It is moving nearer to an open area, but doesn't quite look right, even in the black and white image. It now walks into view and it's a Moorhen, which is disappointing to Maggie, John, Pete, Gill and Julian, but Sonam Sr thinks it's superb as they are quite scarce here! We continue to watch and listen, when Sonam says, "I can hear one" and sure enough just below us comes a 'crake-like' sound. We look down and there it is moving through the vegetation on the edge of a puddle – superb! We are trying to remain still and silent as it is really close and we are now getting some wonderful looks at this sought-after waterbird. It does get spooked and runs into cover, but it isn't long before it reappears followed by a second, being found a few metres away. Over the next 30 minutes we enjoy some sightings of the crakes, running around right out in the open – what a wonderful way to finish our first day in Bhutan.

Day 5: The first group consisting of Sonam Sr, John and Maggie leave the hotel with Pinsho at 5.30am, they head up the winding road to the highest pass in Bhutan – Chela La. It is dark still as they head higher, with Sonam seeing a Leopard Cat at the side of the road, which sadly disappears before anyone else can see it – talk about the one that got away! The journey continues with the first vestiges of light appearing as we stop for our first zoothera of the tour – Alpine Thrush.

Maggie continues her account of the day, which is superb.

Sonam hears our target bird, Himalayan Monal calling but it refused to show so we carried on up. Just as we turned one of the hairpin bends, we came across a group of them, a spectacular iridescent male and four females by the road. They were quite confiding and continued to feed. Other smaller birds were feeding in the area, Blue-fronted and White-throated Redstarts, White-browed Fulvettas and a curious Rufous-vented Tit. We tore ourselves away as had to press on up to the summit of the pass at just under 4000m, which was adorned with flags. Just beyond the summit our wonderful Al Fresco breakfast was laid out. Porridge, omelettes, rice and spicy vegetables with toast! A breakfast in the sunshine, with an amazing view over the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas. What could be better? We walked on a bit and noticed a flock of white birds wheeling around the cliff face - Snow Pigeons! They came down and settled on rocks just above our heads, preening and enjoying the warm sunshine. Other birds of note here

were some beautiful pairs of Himalayan White-browed Rosefinches and our first species treecreeper species - Hodgson's.

The rest of the day was spent wending our way down, a mix of walking, birding and driving. After a while we turned another bend and there was our amazing chef Kaka with a hot lunch ready for us! Totally spoiled! Another highlight was seeing a pair of Himalayan Yellow-throated Martens, easily three or four times as large as Pine Martens. As we descended the birding was quieter, but we came across the occasional mixed flocks which included Green-backed Tit, the Asian race of Coal Tit sporting a crest, our second species of Treecreeper - Rusty-flanked, then some gorgeous Rufous-fronted Bushtits and a lucky group of Green Shrike-babblers. What a great day, dreams come true! We now descend back down into Paro and meet Julian, Pete and Gill who have also had a fabulous day. (M. Tester)

The second group have a much more sedate start to their day with Julian, Pete and Gill meeting for a lovely and welcome breakfast in the hotel's restaurant at 06.30am. We are ready to leave 45 minutes later with Sonam Jr and our driver for the day. In the grounds of the hotel we see White-collared Blackbird and Russet Sparrows, before we leave for Tigers Nest Monastery.

It takes around 30 minutes to reach the car park at the start of one of the tracks up to this very famous Bhutanese landmark. We look at our task in awe, as the monastery is precariously positioned on the side of a sheer rock face, high up from where we are standing – how on earth are we getting there? We also realise that we are starting at 2500m above sea level and the rarefied atmosphere is already taking our breath slightly. Once we're ready we set off slowly up, first to an open area with scattered bushes where we see our first new bird – a gorgeous male Blue-fronted Redstart, which is brilliant. We set off again and now enter the forest of pines, which is quiet, but at a water prayer wheel we get a good view of a Blue Whistling Thrush.

The track starts to get a little steeper as we leave the pines behind for the predominant species of Brown Oak and the occasional Poplar. Sonam Jr plays his Collared Owlet tape to try and attract some of the smaller passerines, but no response although we do find a small group of Black-faced Laughing Thrushes. The walk is getting a little tougher, but we all keep going slowly, making regular stops, to catch our breath and listen for birds. It is starting to get a little warmer as we find our first mini 'bird wave' where we get good views of Bar-throated Siva, White-browed Fulvetta and another (female) Blue-fronted Redstart. The track is now getting a little busier with other travellers, some of which try to keep their voices to a dull roar, which doesn't make listening easy! Higher up we reach another stand of pines and here we encounter another bird wave, this time it involves a small flock of Rufous-fronted Tits, Green-backed Tits and more White-browed Fulvettas. Julian tries a bit of pishing here, which works well as these birds are attracted to this strange noise – in fact it's more successful than the Collared Owlet tape. We are getting higher at every turn and the views

across to the monastery are even more impressive and we are told by Sonam that the café is not much further – thank goodness!

Soon enough we drop down to the café, which is lovely, with equally wonderful views across the valley from their veranda. It has taken nearly three hours to get here, with Pete and Gill contemplating whether they should go on! However, the sun is out and it's a fabulous situation as we enjoy our hot drinks and a couple of biscuits, making us feel much better. Julian spots the Himalayan Vulture over the distant ridge and gets brief views of a Nutcracker flying that had been calling in the wooded valley below. A stunning Black Eagle now appears overhead and we get some incredible looks at this large avian predator as it circles round above our heads. Pete is into geo-caching and goes off looking for one nearby, leaving Julian and Gill sat on the veranda, where they now get good looks at another couple of Bar-throated Sivas, which is great. After about 45 minutes Sonam enquires about our move and with the food and rest rejuvenating Pete and Gill, they want to try for the next main viewpoint just opposite Taktsang Monastery. Once we are ready – off we go!

This first part is now quite difficult being steeper, but we are trudging up through some pristine Himalayan forest, with the sun streaming through. There are a few butterflies with Emigrant, Indian Red Admiral and a cracking Queen of Spain Fritillary. Julian is ahead of the rest and is dumbstruck by the view of the monastery from the next viewpoint – it is just stunning. We can now from here see the last part of our journey dropping down to a wonderful waterfall before the final ascent to this incredible building. We are in very good spirits as we step down into the culvert where the waterfall cascades through the granite rockface, all the time keeping an eye out for birds.

We now head up the last 100 (or so) steps to the monastery entrance, where we sit for a short while and talk through options. Julian is not going inside as he will watch the bags, etc as they cannot be taken inside, so Sonam Jr, Pete and Gill remove their shoes and enter this hallowed sanctuary. Julian is quite happy sat on the wall waiting and even more so when a small flock of Altai Accentors fly in and start feeding on the ground. This also produces a gorgeous Rufous-fronted Bush-robin, which is completely unexpected. The three soon get back to Julian, having been totally enthralled by the experience and something they had hoped they would be able to do before the holiday even started. Pete is also thrilled as Julian points out the Altai Accentors, but he really wants to see their commoner cousin Alpine as this species has eluded him globally! It is now early afternoon and we are needing to get back to the café for lunch, which will be most welcome.

We set off back knowing that most of it will be downhill, which gives us some extra energy and we are soon back at the café, enjoying some lunch sat inside. Mid-afternoon we are setting off again and retrace our steps back down the mountain towards the carpark, occasionally looking back to admire our achievement of reaching the iconic Tiger's Nest, although young Sonam made it look quite easy! We are just getting back to the vehicle when we notice a few

laughing thrushes around some picnic tables and get wonderful views of White-throated, Black-faced and Chestnut-crowned.

Sonam says it's time to leave and we rest our legs in the comfortable vehicle as we drive back down to Paro, where we now hook up with Sonam Sr, John and Maggie, who have had a fabulous time at Chela La Pass. All together we now head up to our hotel, where we have some time before dinner to relax and freshen up, which is brilliant.

Day 6: Sonam has informed us that our flight time has been brought forward and we will need to leave the hotel at 5.15am. We are pleased with this as it will give us more time in Bumthang and beyond today. We get to the airport and are quickly through security to the sad news that our flight has been delayed due to poor visibility at our destination. Thankfully the airport is quite interesting with some fabulous wildlife photos adorning the walls, lovely cultural sculptures and some good shops. As we are waiting, we have our breakfast and also send a few postcards as the stamps on offer are also of the local birdlife, which is great. Ironically, we are good to go at the time we were originally due to leave – just before 10am! We are soon taking off on this lovely morning in Paro and heading out of this narrow valley with spectacular views of the Himalayas as we head east. The journey passes quickly as we have a second breakfast on board and catch up with a little sleep before landing in Bumthang.

We are walking off the runway and straight into our minibus that Pinshu and Sonam Jr have driven overnight to here – amazing! We are straight away seeing some of the commoner species with a flock of Red-billed Chough, Black-rumped Magpie and Russet Sparrow. We are soon on board and driving away from the airport, following the river and at the bridge, Sonam stops the bus as he's seen a Crested Kingfisher flying up the river. We scan on both sides but there is no sign, although we do see a few Great Cormorants flying through, Ruddy Shelduck and a Blue Whistling Thrush. We continue the drive starting to wind our way up the road, but stopping soon as Sonam sees a Beautiful Rosefinch at the side of the road. We get out and get great views of several, which are very beautiful as the name suggests. We keep looking round here and find our first Rufous-breasted Accentors, Grey-backed Shrike and Hodgson's Redstart. We set off again climbing slowly now out of the Bumthang valley towards our rendezvous place with Kaka and his team for lunch. We do have time for a couple of short roadside walks, which produce a pair of Red Crossbill, Goldcrest, Green-backed, Rufous-fronted, and Grey-crested Tits.

Mid-afternoon we stop for lunch at Tangsibi, which is a veritable banquet laid out by Kaka and his team (Tobgay and Gyembo), who are so attentive, making sure we are all getting enough – and there's loads! John and Maggie have already had the pleasure of this yesterday, but this is new to Julian, Pete and Gillian and we are overwhelmed as it's not just the meal which is gorgeous the situation is too, looking out over mountains and forested valleys. There are also birds around with Sonam finding our first Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, plus Crested Goshawk,

White-winged Grosbeak, a couple of photogenic Spotted Nutcrackers and White-collared Blackbird.

Once finished we leave the lunch crew and continue our drive up to the famous Thrumshing La Pass at 3800m. A raptor is spotted by John, which is a lovely male Hen Harrier, not something we were expecting at this altitude, along with a very smart Blue-fronted Redstart. We carry on slowly as the road is incredible with the switchbacks and we as passengers are so pleased not to be driving, but Pinshu just takes it all in his stride. Sadly, it is not very clear at the top, but we do get out and know we are in a rarefied atmosphere, as we admire the Buddhist dry stone wall (Mani), adorned with inscriptions and covered in prayer flags. It is cold up here and mid to late afternoon, with a good 20km to go before Sengor and our overnight accommodation, which could easily still take a couple of hours!

We now start down the mountain, but we have only gone a short distance when Sonam stops the bus as he's seen a Lammergeier flying in the valley. We quickly get out and manage to get a view of this adult Bearded Vulture before it disappears round the corner. Sonam now points out a flock of Snow Pigeons feeding on the steep slopes of the roadside, which is brilliant. After a while we are back in the bus and again traversing down the mountain. We reach the Fir tree line and now the area opens into the pastures of the Sengor Valley, where we stop again as there's a huge flock of Plain Mountain Finches flying around.

It is nearly dusk when we reach the Hotel Tshewangmo (or farmhouse) on the edge of Sengor and we had been warned this was a 'no frills' place. It is though in a lovely situation at 3100m and we enter the main room where we are offered refreshments around this wonderful wood-burning stove, which we all sit around. Sonam organises the rooms and the hot water buckets we need to have a wash, as there are no showers – but we don't mind at all for one night. We have a little time before dinner, so we go outside to listen for owls and hear clearly a couple of Himalayan Wood Owls but cannot entice them in. The weather isn't great, so we soon return to the warmth of the stove and enjoy our meal. It is time to retire now as we have another early start in the morning.

Day 7: Sleeping on a mattress on wood pallets wasn't for everyone but some of us slept well and at 5.30am we are at the minibus ready for some pre-breakfast birding. We drive back up the road for a while stopping at a forested valley, where we get out and go for a walk. The area is alive with bird song and calls, with Sonam knowing every peep, seep or treep! It is difficult though as seeing them is a different challenge and a lot of the time they are either in the canopy or dense foliage. Still our guide is very good at calling these birds in with the call of Collared Owllet. This morning is no exception as we see several Ashy-throated Warblers, flocks of White-browed Fulvetta and Stripe-throated Yuhina, a lovely Green Shrike Babbler appears as do the usual tit species with Rufous-fronted, Green-backed, Coal and a single Yellow-browed Tit.

It is a lovely morning, but we are all getting a wee bit peckish, so we drive now the short distance to where Kaka has laid out the breakfast table, looking out over this beautiful forested terrain. As we eat looking out over the forest a woodpecker flies into a dead tree and it's our first Darjeeling Woodpecker, which is then followed by a Rusty-flanked Treecreeper and best of all a stunning Green-tailed Sunbird, which comes right in to some nearby sparse bushes. All thoughts of a poor night's sleep are now a dim and distant memory!

Once we have finished, we climb aboard the bus and Pinshu now takes us back down the Sengor Valley and on the road out to Yongkola. We have travelled a few kilometres along the steep-sided valley when we stop to admire the gorgeous Namling Waterfall, which is cascading down the granite mountainside. There are several Asian House Martins here whirling around, plus another flock of Stripe-throated Yuhinas. The drive now is very slow as we negotiate these incredible roads that hug the mountainside, which are not for the faint-hearted! As we are travelling, we stop for our first Speckled Wood Pigeon, Oriental Magpie-robin, Himalayan Bluetail and a White-tailed Nuthatch. The views are spectacular as we traverse the Namling valley, stopping at the end for our lunch which has been laid out by the guys on a wonderful stretch of road. However, before we eat Sonam has found our first gorgeous Blue-bearded Bee-eater in a nearby tree but it's not in a great position, but we do get some decent views of this fabulous bird. We now enjoy our lunch in the shade, as it's now sunny and warm with a few butterflies around and Julian finds Club Beak, Chocolate Pansy and Dark Clouded Yellow.

After lunch we now drive a short way and go for a walk along the valley, where in the extensive forest we add to our growing list Grey-hooded Warbler, Whiskered Yuhina, Sikkim Treecreeper and an unexpected Black-throated Tit, but it is the aptly named gorgeous male Fire-breasted Flowerpecker which impresses as it sits calling just above our heads. Our drive continues now into the warm afternoon, and we stop again as Sonam has seen a Mountain Hawk-eagle circling above. We stay for a while seeing much the same species and it is a bit quiet. Although Julian again finds a very productive bit of wet mud, where he now finds Blue Admiral, Indian Tortoiseshell, Mottled Emigrant and lots of Dark Clouded Yellows.

We set off again and it isn't long before we are at our very nice hotel in Yongkola, where we check-in and freshen up. We have agreed to reconvene at 3pm, but as always we are keen and have a look around the grounds where we find our first Grey Bushchat of the tour, along with Red-vented Bulbuls, Long-tailed Shrike and another Grey-hooded Warbler.

Once we are all together, we set off, soon stopping for a Crested Serpent Eagle circling above the road, before going to our first stop, where we get out for a short walk up the Tsa Mang road. This is such a productive area and we soon seen a gorgeous Orange-bellied Leafbird, plus a few Rusty-fronted Barwings and Himalayan Swiftlets whizzing round. Pinshu follows us slowly and when we are ready we hop on to the bus and continue up the winding road. Sonam stops the

bus as he's heard the familiar sound of one of our main target species here – Beautiful Nuthatch and the excitement level goes up a notch. We are all quickly out of the bus and standing at the roadside also hearing the distinctive call, which is below in the trees. We are getting a little frustrated as we can clearly hear two birds but cannot see any when the male flies on to a dead tree in full view. We are getting some incredible looks at this stunning bird, whose name doesn't do it justice. It is then joined by its mate and we watch dumbfounded as they both fly up towards us and land less than 50m away again on a bare tree. Julian cannot hold his camera steady as he is that excited with this sighting, having only seen them poorly in the canopy on previous visits to NE India! They stay there calling to each other when Sonam now shouts "Greater Yellownappe", another target for the tour! We cannot believe we are leaving a pair of Beautiful Nuthatch while they are still in full view, but this is a stunner too. We reach Sonam and through the scope we get more great looks at this brilliant large green and yellow woodpecker. The Yellownappe departs as have the nuthatches when we return to the van, but it's hi-fives and smiles all round with this wonderful event.

We again drive on and round a couple more bends Pinshu stops quickly as he's now spotted a couple of Goral at the side of the road. We get some good views from the van, but these are much more wary and soon disappear off the side of the road, so on we go. It is now late afternoon and it's definitely cooling down as we make one last walk along the road, where we initially find a small flock of Nepal Fulvettas, a very gaudy Golden Babbler, Ashy Drongo and a Grey-cheeked Warbler. Now Sonam says "Elachura" cupping his ears towards the sound. This is Pete's one 'big' target as he needs it for his aim to see all the bird families in the world – no mean feat! There is actually a couple we hear, but they are just not showing well enough, although a couple of us are in the right place at the right time to see one moving through a gap in the dense vegetation. Eventually Pete does get a brief view, which is good enough for now, but hopefully we will get another chance later in the holiday.

It is now time to leave as it's starting to get dark and as we drop back down to the hotel, we finish with a small troupe of Capped Langur in some roadside trees – a brilliant day despite the travelling!

Day 8: It is still dark when we leave the hotel at 5am, driving up towards the famous Thrumshing La National Park. Sonam has his torch on the trees at the side of the road and is listening intently. We have been travelling a short while when he asks Pinshu to stop and even from the confines of the minibus we can hear a Mountain Scop's Owl – it must be close! We now get out of the bus and it's definitely in the trees adjacent to the road, with another calling much further away. Sonam uses his torch to try and find it in the foliage but it's just too far in, but when Julian uses his thermal imaging scope we can clearly see the owl's shape in the eyepiece, which is both great and frustrating. We stay a little while trying different places to view but to no avail, so it's back on the bus and continue our drive up through the forest.

It is now starting to get the first vestiges of light as we continue to wind our way up into the N.P. and our first stop is for a very confiding White-throated Fantail, Olive-backed Pipit and Streak-throated Yuhinas. This is clearly a good area and Sonam decides we will take a walk from here, using his Collared Owlet call to attract the forest passerines, although there is another one calling back! As we move slowly along, we come across a flock of White-naped Yuhinas, plus Striated Bulbul, Blue Whistling Thrush and Pete spots a couple of Striated Laughing-thrushes. A Lesser Yellownape flies into the top of a bare tree, soon followed by its cousin – Crimson-backed Woodpecker, which is superb. This broad leaf forest is the perfect environment for many species and we are hearing plenty as Sonam picks out their individual songs and calls. However, we persevere and a small bird-wave produces Grey-throated Minivet, Golden-throated Barbet, Sultan Tit and several White-tailed Nuthatches. As we slowly walk on John and Maggie find a Kaleej Pheasant move through the undergrowth, followed by a very smart pair of Scarlet Finches.

The van has now caught us up and we drive on slowly stopping for a handsome male Grey-winged Blackbird at the side of the road. On we drive again, but not far as Sonam is keen we do another walk now and very quickly we are involved in another bird-wave. It is manic as Sonam is pointing and calling birds in all directions, some of which we have seen and recognise, some we haven't such as Rufous-throated Wren Babbler, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Pale-billed Parrotbill and the gorgeous Red-faced Liocichla. A Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler now calls from the deep vegetation and this is one of our main target species and time is spent to see it. Maggie and John do manage a good view, but Pete, Gill and Julian are not as lucky – that's forest birding unfortunately! The scimitar-babbler goes quiet and the bird-wave has moved through as do we, continuing our walk up through this magical place.

We haven't gone far when we encounter another small bird-wave, where we see our first Green-tailed Sunbirds of the day along with Grey-cheeked Warblers and a couple of Black-headed Shrike-babblers. It must be getting towards breakfast time as our stomachs are reminding us, but we are so enthralled with this Reserve we just want to keep going. Again Sonam tries the Collared Owlet and this time attracts warblers in to the adjacent bushes with a gathering of Chestnut-crowned, Lemon-rumped, Ashy-throated and Grey-hooded Warblers, plus a couple of more stunners in the form of Yellow Babbler and Yellow-throated Fulvetta. We keep going admiring the incredible orchids and bromeliads growing out of their host trees, before we stop again for another major target – Rufous-necked Hornbill. This huge bird is sat a few hundred metres away but giving fabulous views through the telescope, what a great way to end our first session of the day, as we now driving a very short distance to meet Kaka and the gang and some very welcome food and drink.

The breakfast table is again in a wonderful place overlooking this densely forested valley, which is just a tiny area of this huge Reserve protecting Bhutan's incredible wildlife. Once we have finished, Sonam again suggests a walk and we leave the

guys to clean up and move on – it is a wonderful way to wildlife watch. As before we are now hearing and seeing much the same species, but do add a group of Whiskered Yuhinas, a beautiful Black-faced Warbler and Rufous-capped Babbler, along with a Mountain Hawk-eagle and Himalayan Swiftlets overhead.

After a while we are collected again by Pinshu and keep driving higher up the mountain road. Ahead is a gorgeous flowering tree, which is busy with birdlife, so we stop and get out again. A Collared Scops Owl is calling in the distance as we now record a stunning Black-throated Sunbird with the commoner Green-tails, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Rufous Siva and a Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler found by John.

We drive further up and take a minor side road to the end, where we find a couple of Great Barbets but not much else, so we head back to the main track. The drive back is much more productive as we stop to look at our first Bhutan Laughing-thrushes and a Brown-flanked Bush Warbler, followed by another Rufous-naped Hornbill, which flies right past the minibus.

We soon get back to the main track and start back down the mountain stopping at the prayer flags to try for Long-billed Wren Babbler, which we can hear but it's Julian this time who's lucky and gets the only decent view. However, there is some recompense as we find another Rufous-naped Hornbill sat right out in the open, but this time it's much closer and looks superb as we see so much more detail. The time is moving on and we cannot believe it's now past midday as we continue to drive slowly back down the mountain, seeing much the same species. We turn off again down a minor track to where we meet up with Kaka and the team, setting out the table for lunch in another beautiful corner of the forest. As we are sat at the table we are in view of another fabulous flowering tree, which is attracting several bright Golden-fronted Barbets and a Streaked Spiderhunter.

Once lunch is finished, we hang around here for a while having a little rest and chat in the warm sunshine, before Sonam is ready to leave. We again go for a walk along the track and there is a Spotted Forktail and a Himalayan Bluetail, which is awesome as they give some fabulous views. Following this we are back in the bus and driving down the mountain, with Maggie spotting a Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, followed by another stunner – Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush.

It is now mid afternoon when we reach a small farm, which is attracting different species and from the van we can see a flock of Rufous-necked Laughing Thrushes, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch and Blue-fronted Redstart. We keep going now further down the mountain and we stop again as Sonam has seen a Grey Treepie, which as these stops do, result in more new species with Black Bulbul, Common Tailorbird and Black-throated Prinia plus a new mammal – Hoary Squirrel.

We head off again and now we are out of the N.P. having stopped for a troupe of Assamese Macaques and a Crested Serpent Eagle. We drive down to Lin

Mithang where we park as this is a known Tawny Fish Owl site. In the trees around the bus we now find a Yellow-vented Warbler, which is one of the rarer ones, plus a few White-rumped Munias. We walk along the track bordering the river with Sonam checking the mature trees along the way, but no sign of the owl but there is a pair of Crested Kingfisher. Julian has walked slowly on with his thermal imager and cannot believe it when he finds a Yellow-throated Marten asleep in the fork of a tree, followed by a couple of Barking Deer, Hoary Squirrel and a few Assamese Macaques. all of which would be hidden to conventional binoculars.

It is now late afternoon and the sun is starting to drop behind the mountains as we get back to the minibus and head to the hotel for a much needed freshen up and evening meal after this long but incredibly rewarding day around Yongkola.

Day 9: It is another 5am start today and we have to also load our luggage as we are leaving Trogon Villa, which is a shame as we would have loved to have spent more time in Thrumshing La N.P. It is dark and Sonam wants to try for a couple of target species – Bhutan Flying Squirrel and Hodgson's Frogmouth, both difficult!

We leave the hotel and head up the main track into the National Park with Sonam again listening intently and scanning the roadside trees with his searchlight. It isn't long before he hears a frogmouth in the distance, so we stop and get out of the minibus. We can also hear it but it is in the distance and even with a bit of persuasion it's not coming any closer. After a while we are back in the minibus where we keep searching until it becomes light not long after.

We now head along the Yongkola Valley, stopping at another lovely waterfall, where we find a pair of Little Forktails and a White-capped Redstart. On we continue winding our way along this road, with its construction work wreaking havoc on the surrounding forest. We pass a construction worker's house and find around the garden a small flock of White-throated Laughing-thrushes. Further on Sonam hears a couple of significant calls so we stop and get out the bus and in the trees there are Green-tailed Sunbirds, Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, Yellow-browed Tit and Whistlers Warbler, which is not an easy bird to see here.

On we slowly drive, bouncing along this tough road as it twists and climbs up through the valley, making stops for Hoary-throated Barwing, Yellow-browed Warbler, Stripe-throated and our first Rufous-vented Yuhinas we've seen. We seem to have been travelling a long time but just after 7.30am we meet up with Kaka and the boys for breakfast. It is incredible how these meal sites are found as every one so far has been both scenic and productive and here is no exception. It is beautiful sat amongst almost a carpet of Primulas in full bloom and from the table we are seeing Fire-tailed Sunbirds, Himalayan Bluetail, Lemon-rumped and Buff-bellied Warblers – just superb.

After breakfast we go for a walk along this quiet road, where we see lots more yuhinas, sunbirds, warblers and sibilias. After a while we are met by the bus and

once onboard we set off again, now climbing higher and higher towards the Thrumling Pass. Maggie has an altimeter on her phone and is relaying our height at every stop with Nutcracker, Kestrel and Common Crossbill at 3000m and a gorgeous male Red-headed Bullfinch at 3250m. We slowly climb higher and at 3550m we stop again as Sonam thinks he's heard another of our target species – Great Parrotbill. We stand at the side of the road in the cold air, when two fly in and land right next to us, giving tremendous views of this scarce high-altitude breeder. While watching these we also find a smart Darjeeling Woodpecker, Black-faced Laughing-thrush, Coal, Rufous-vented, Green-backed and Grey-crested Tits.

After a while we set off again and now reach the Pass at 3770m, where we get out for a quick photo opportunity and it's very cold on this grey day. We don't stay long and a little after midday we start down the other side, back into the Bumthang Province. We start to wind our way down and after about an hour we rendezvous with our lunch team who have excelled themselves again. While we are waiting for the meals to get served Sonam notices some Blood Pheasant droppings and suggests we take a quick look around. It doesn't take long before he has found a small group and they are close, giving us some incredible views and what a gorgeous bird they are – Pete is 'over the moon', having missed these on previous foreign holidays to the Himalayas. We are all elated with this good fortune and thanking Kaka et al for their choice of venue as we now enjoy another delicious meal. The day is warming up slightly and as we eating, we are circled by three Himalayan Griffon Vultures and a couple of Crested Goshawks, which is superb.

After this very successful lunch stop, we set off again down the mountain, before coming to a halt again. Sonam has seen a White-throated Redstart, but there is another 'chat' he doesn't immediately recognise? We get some good views and some images whilst deliberating it as it's new also to Julian and the rest of us. Sonam suggests a Bhutanese rarity – Blue-capped Redstart and from an internet search we confirm his suspicions, which is fantastic with just a handful of records in the country! We need to keep going and continue down, but soon after this the distinctive call of Himalayan Monal rings out, so again we exit the minibus and search for this iconic and beautiful pheasant. We look around the area and unfortunately flush a pair that disappear down into the valley, but at least we managed a look.

We now need to crack on and we keep driving down the mountain, until we reach the turn off towards Ura. This area is more agricultural and we decide on another short walk, which is great as we now find Sparrowhawk, Little Buntings, Black-throated Thrush and a flock of Plain Mountain Finch. It is now mid to late afternoon and we still have a good drive to our next accommodation. Up we wind towards the Ura by-pass, with Sonam hoping we might see a Satyr Tragopan, but it's quiet apart from Yellow-billed Magpies. Pete does cause a bit of laughter as he sees a shape ahead on the roadside and asks, "are they birders?" as we go on further and can plainly see it's a cow's backside!!! However, a bit further on he

soon makes up for this as he shouts "MONAL" as a handsome male crosses the road right in front of us. We still have a long drive before reaching our hotel in Bumthang, so we settle down now as Pinshu does his job of getting us there quickly and safely.

Day 10: We have just one night in Bumthang, and we have another 5am departure from the hotel as we are heading up to the famous Tharpaling Monastery for dawn. In the dark we wind our way up the narrow winding road to the site, which stands at 3700m. It is such an impressive building and well worth the journey just to see it, but a special avian event happens here which is both unique and incredible. The Buddhist monks for years have been putting out feed for the Himalayan Monals, which come in to feed every morning at dawn. Sonam assures us that we will see them, but you are never absolutely certain until it's happened.

We get there as it's just getting light and our guides lead us up towards this beautiful monastery and immediately point down to where the feeders are. We cannot believe the sight as there are clearly 10 to 15 Monals of both genders picking around at the seed. We are transfixed as these incredibly large, bright, gaudy males are strutting round the few females which are here. However, within 30 minutes most have dispersed back into the dense shrubbery surrounding the site and we now concentrate on other things. Sonam walks us round the area, and we get fabulous looks at a flock of 50+ Snow Pigeons, a few stunning White-browed Rosefinches, White-winged Grosbeak, Alpine and Rufous-fronted Accentors, Red-billed Chough and a Nutcracker. We also see a few Large-eared Pikas and a confiding Orange-bellied Squirrel, before we return for our breakfast which has been set up in the monastery's grounds. Whilst we are enjoying another great brekkie, we see a couple of Himalayan Buzzards and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, which rounds this excursion off nicely.

Once finished and ready, we now set off back down towards Bumthang, stopping for a Himalayan Griffon Vulture and another Himalayan Buzzard on the way. At the bottom Sonam now takes us on another walk through some agricultural fields, looking for Black-necked Cranes. We are spread out and seeing some great birds such as Beautiful Rosefinch, River Lapwing, Little Bunting, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Long-tailed Shrike and White-capped Redstart. John thinks he's seen a pair of cranes in the distance flying low over the fields, so we jump back into the minibus and try to relocate them. We spend some time driving the roads in this area, stopping and scanning but with no sign, although it's a big area and not easily accessible. After a while we decide to move on, thankfully we still have a chance of these elsewhere.

Today is another uphill day, as we head towards Yongtong La Pass at 3425m, where we make an initial stop for Brown Parrotbill. This is a great success as we see a couple of birds making their way through the dense bamboo. Around midday we reach the pass and we are now in the Trongsa Region, heading back down. We soon make a stop along the road and with the help of Sonam's Collared Owlet tape we attract a bird-wave with various species of tit, plus Green

Shrike-babbler, White-tailed Nuthatch and another very confiding Spotted Nutcracker. We continue our traverse downhill until we reach our lunch site, where we hook up with the 'chuck wagon' and during this meal we are treated to great views of a Mountain Hawk-eagle circling overhead.

After this lunch we are back in the minibus and it's like mountain road hopscotch as we drive a bit and make several brief stops. An Alpine Thrush at the side of the road is superb, as we normally don't see 'zoothera' thrushes so well. A flock of Altai Accentors is a welcome addition to John and Maggie's list, having missed them when Pete and Gill saw them at Tiger's Nest. We are not really seeing any new species, but it's a nice day and Julian's enjoying doing some 'buttying' with Common Copper being a new addition to the growing list. Further down towards Trongsa we stop again where Julian finds a very smart Kaleej Pheasant, along with three species of yuhina, Hoary-throated Barwing and a Black Eagle.

Now we head all the way down to Trongsa where we get to our hotel at the respectable time of 5pm, which is great as it gives us plenty of time to relax, freshen up ahead of our evening meal at this lovely hotel, which looks down the Mangde Chhu river to an impressive dzong and the Black Mountains beyond.

Day 11: It is still dark when we meet at the minibus and we can hear Grey Nightjars calling from a few places nearby. We leave the hotel and only go a short distance before a nightjar is spotted by Sonam and we get a really good view in the bus's headlights. Today we have a long drive across to Tingtibi, via another Bhutanese birding hotspot, the Zhemgang Road.

As it starts to get light, we drive out of the town on another winding mountain road, but soon stop as Sonam has now just seen a 'zoothera' thrush at the side of the road, which he thinks is a Long-billed Thrush. We are quickly out of the minibus and it is seen by just a couple of us before it disappears up a water culvert, we agree on his initial identification and stay a while in the hope it might return. Sadly, it doesn't so we move on, stopping a bit further on as Sonam can now hear a Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler. We climb and stand together listening as this bird continues to call. We now see a movement in the undergrowth and it shows to all briefly creeping through the gaps in the bushes. Our guide now hears a Chestnut-headed Tesia, which is a bright yellow and red skulker and difficult to see despite its outrageously gaudy plumage. After a bit of patience, we all do get a good view and even a couple of photos, which is incredible for this ground-dwelling species.

It is now time to move on again and as we are driving we stop briefly for a lovely Barred Cuckoo Dove sat right by the side of the road. On we continue and at another water culvert we stop again and get ready for a short walk. There is a Spotted Forktail here, which is lovely, but we are really pleased to see our first Bay Woodpecker, which is a really impressive bird. In the forest we are seeing many of the commoner species along with a Blyth's Leaf Warbler, Sikkim Treecreeper and a few Blyth's (Fork-tailed) Swifts. Pinshu collects us now and we

are driving again as it's now getting close to breakfast time. We do make another stop as there are some Golden Langurs sat in the trees, but a long way off. Sonam, as always, gives his Collared Owlet tape a blast, which now attracts some interest from the usual warblers, tits and sibilias but also a pair of Long-tailed Minivets, a few Green-tailed Sunbirds and another main target – Mrs Gould's Sunbird, which is just outrageous in its plumage. It has been an incredibly successful start to this day, as we now reach our lovely breakfast site overlooking the beautiful Black Mountains.

As we are enjoying breakfast we continue to look around and across the valley we see a Goral, working its way along the steep slope, plus a cracking male Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush and a flock of Speckled Pigeons fly over. We finish another hearty breakfast and drive on leaving Kaka and the boys to get ready for our next meeting at lunchtime. We don't go far and stop again in a heavily vegetated area with a large flowering tree in the distance. There are some Himalayan Striped Squirrels feeding here along with a gorgeous male Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, a female Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, several Oriental White-eyes, Lemon-rumped and Chestnut-crowned Warblers. As we are watching this we suddenly hear a movement below us in the bushes and it sounds large and shuffling along – what is it? As Maggie and Gill take a step backwards away from the beast! Then a head of a domestic cow appears, chewing on the green leaves it is covered by and we all break down in laughter.

Once we have calmed down, we get back on the bus and continue along the Zhemgang Road, following the line of the Black Mountains. We now reach a bridge spanning the river and again pull over as this is a known site for Yellow-rumped Honeyeater, which would be fabulous to see. From the van we check the rocks surrounding a small clear pool, where we see a couple of Grey Wagtails and a handsome male Plumbeous Redstart, something we haven't seen for a few days. Sonam now points out some huge honeycombs that are attended too by the Giant Rock Bee and favoured food of the honeyguide as you would expect. We cannot see this bright yellow passerine but don't give up hope until our driver Pinshu spots it in a bare tree just below the combs. It is sat there in full view and looking resplendent in the morning sunlight – we are absolutely elated with this and thank Pinshu so much. It is now time to move on again as we have lots to do before lunch on this now glorious day.

The roadside stops are frequent for new species, such as Himalayan Bulbul, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and Orange-fronted Leafbird. Julian is also keen on more butterflies today and enjoys finding Yellow Pansy, Indian Fritillary, Palm Bob and Golden Sapphire. We stop for some Assamese Macaques, before one of the highlights of the day – happening corner. Sonam has seen a Malay Giant Squirrel and we are quickly out of the van at this sunlit, vegetated bend in the road. We get great views of the squirrels, but also Sonam has his tape going and there are several Black Bulebuls, Blue-fronted Barbet, a couple of Sultan Tits, a Speckled Piculet flies in, as do Scarlet and Grey-throated Minivets, White-bellied Epornis, Black-throated Sunbird and a Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike found by Maggie. It is

just unreal how these birds just keep appearing and the 30 minutes spent there goes by in a flash. We set off again, but a troop of Golden Langurs close to the road sees us again out of the minibus and enjoying these beautiful primates.

It is now time for lunch and on we drive to an interesting truck stop, where Kaka and the guys have laid out lunch in a groovy bandstand-like structure. The great birding doesn't stop now, as we see a cracking pair of Blue-bearded Bee-eaters, which are showing incredibly well across the road. We use the parked vehicles as cover and get to within 30m, giving the photographers a wonderful opportunity with this beautiful bird. We now head for some refreshments, which is most welcome and after this we are allowed some downtime for an hour, with Julian again finding more butterflies for the list, including Himalayan Purple Sapphire, Himalayan Sergeant, Common Bluebottle and the stunning Orange Oakleaf.

Eventually we set off again towards Tingtibi, stopping after a while at a Blue-winged laughing-thrush site, where we only manage brief views of this rare breeding species. A drive and stop again for Golden-throated and Great Barbets in a roadside tree, with a Changeable Hawk-eagle overhead. We soon cross the river into the Zhemgang District and continue along the winding road. It is again punctuated with stops that produce a cracking Great Hornbill right next to the road, as is a Kaleej Pheasant. One stop is also quite productive with us adding Black-chinned Yuhina, White-crested Laughing-thrush and Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher to our growing Bhutanese list.

It is now late afternoon as we get to our hotel in Tingtibi and after a bit of time to freshen up we go back out for more looks at Grey Nightjars along this steep rocky slope. We are now ready for another wonderful Bhutanese meal, along with the obligatory local beer.

Day 12: Julian is out for a short walk before the meeting time, with his thermal imager in the hope of an owl but can only hear a Mountain Scotp's in the distance, but he does find a couple of Golden Langurs and a Hoary-bellied Squirrel. We all meet at the minibus at 6am and drive away from Tingtibi to the river at Goling, which is part of the famous Royal Manas N.P. Here we walk along the track looking for another major target – Tawny Fish Owl! It is just getting light, but misty with plenty of bird activity as we find Sultan Tit, our first White-throated Bulbuls and a very smart Grey-headed Woodpecker. The owl is proving elusive and Sonam is thinking we might have to move on when Pinshu, who's ahead of us, starts to wave. We hurry to his position and he points down towards the river and on a low branch in full view is this magnificent owl. It is still quite dull, making photography difficult but it's in such a great place we persevere as it's staring right back at us. After about 10 minutes the owl decides he's had enough of being stared at and flies a short distance into deeper cover and out of sight – what an absolute treat and start to this day!

We now walk slowly back to the minibus, buzzing with this wonderful sighting and continue to drive along the edge of the river. It is not long before we stop again

as Sonam can hear a White-browed Scimitar-babbler. It is not long before we are now getting great views of this bird along with Ashy Drongo, Golden-throated Leafbird and our first views of Blyth's (White-browed) Shrike-babblers. The mist from the river is getting worse so we decide to make our way to the main road, which is interesting as we slowly bounce along, with a beautiful sunrise starting to appear.

We reach the main road and stop at the junction where we encounter a flock of Rufous-necked Laughing-thrushes, a cracking Streaked Spiderhunter plus Ashy Bulbuls and Ashy Woodswallow, which are both additions to the list. We now drive on again to another forested corner of the winding road and get out for another short walk. We haven't gone far when Sonam points up and there on a bamboo trunk is a stunning White-browed Piculet. We are delighted with this, but become ecstatic as it now drops down and perches on a horizontal branch just a couple of metres above our heads looking like a small flying mango! We stay watching this lovely wee woodpecker before it flies off and continue our walk, stopping again for a Mountain Imperial Pigeon sat in a tree.

Pinshu now collects us and we drive slowly on for a short while, with Sonam again wanting us to get out and walk a bit. We haven't gone far with the Collared Scot's tape going when a mixed flock of parrotbills fly into some nearby bamboo. It is mostly Pale-billed and also some White-breasted Parrotbills, which are quite similar and difficult to tell apart as they're moving through the foliage. This bird-wave now starts to attract more species, but they are not easy to follow as they are now high above our heads, but we do see several White-hooded Babblers, which is rare here plus a fabulous male Verditer Flycatcher, Rusty-fronted Barwings and Rufous Sibia. We keep walking on and round the next bend in the track we stop as there's an Asian Barred Owlet being mobbed by a Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, which is both bizarre and superb to watch. It is now time for breakfast and as we walk towards the minibus we find a small flock of Nepal Fulvettas and a Yellow-bellied Warbler – what a morning!

Once back in the bus we now drive straight to our breakfast site, which today is right next to a stream, where we see very smart Grey-backed Forktail and an equally lovely male Blue Whistling Thrush. The breakfast chat is all about how good this early morning session has been and how unlikely things can get any better – but this is Bhutan!

Once ready we leave Kaka and the crew to clear up and drive now back to the main river with a particular target in mind – White-bellied Heron, one of the rarest birds in the world! Our chances are slim, but we arrive and start to walk along checking the river at any opportunity, but also getting distracted by a beautiful Maroon Oriole, then some equally stunning Silver-eared Mesias along with more Nepal Fulvettas. Julian has gone now slightly ahead, finding another gap in the trees to check the river and as he stands there this mega-bird flies into view and lands on a rock in the water. He waves frantically to the rest of us and as we get there it flies again but only into a nearby large tree. We get the scopes on it

and watch as it picks around the epiphytes, presumably looking for frogs. It is huge, smiles all round as this was a 'really hope to see' bird for all the group, being new to all of us. We stay here watching it in the tree before it decides to head off and fly back down the river and out of sight. We stay for a while as there is now a stunning male Crimson Sunbird in a nearby bush and Julian now finds an Asian Fairy Bluebird, which is another good bird to see here. We are now going to leave but a Rufous-necked Hornbill appears flying towards us and lands in full view in a large tree, looking fabulous before taking off again and now going right over our heads before going out of sight – it has been another astonishing half hour in this wonderful country.

Now we do drive on and Sonam wants to take us to a stretch of the river where the White-bellied Herons have nested before. It is slow progress along these bumpy tracks, but eventually reach a parking place where again we get out and follow Sonam further along the track with the river below us. It is lovely and warm now and Julian is finding a few new butterflies for the list with Red Helen, Staff Sergeant and Black Prince. Sonam has now found the nest and the female is sat on eggs, which is brilliant but as we go on a little further the male flies in with food and she gets up, exposing three gorgeous blue eggs – just awesome! While we are there, we are joined by one of the Parks wardens who keeps a careful eye on these rare herons and tells us of their plight against egg stealing and habitat loss, hopefully these dedicated people will be able to secure a future for the White-bellied Heron?

It is now time to move on and we are back in the bus and driving down to a ford in the river, where we stop again as there are lots more butterflies here and everyone is taking an interest. This is mega as Julian is like a kid in a sweetshop, adding more species including the stunning Map Butterfly, which John recons looks like parchment (and he's not wrong). The drive continues and back on the road we head upwards, but it's not long before Sonam is telling Pinshu to stop – he's clearly heard something? We get out quickly to the news that it's a Slaty-breasted Tesia, another ground dweller! Sonam now calls to it and it comes closer, with us getting brief views as it moves under the foliage. Julian is stood to one side and having just seen it now sees a Chestnut-headed Tesia too, which is incredible.

Time is running away with us and Sonam says we must leave and go for lunch, which is back towards the place we had breakfast and on the way see both Slaty-backed Forktail and White-capped Redstart. Around 1pm we again meet up with the chuck wagon at another fabulous location and enjoy another fabulous meal – no chance of going hungry on this tour.

After lunch we do the unprecedented thing of going back to the hotel for a rest, which does make sense as it's now really hot and things are not very active. We get there for 2pm and arrange to meet an hour and a half later, with Pete and Gill opting for a walk down to the river, where they find a nice flock of Rufous-necked Laughing-thrushes. We meet at the allotted time with a Great Mynah in a tree right next to the hotel, giving tremendous views.

We set off and take a by-pass road stopping to look at the river where we now find a Crested Kingfisher, Great Cormorant and a River Lapwing. We again drive on a little further stopping for another walk along this quiet road through the forest. We are spread out and Julian who is slightly ahead finds a Green-billed Malkoha, but it disappears before the rest of us see it. We keep going and Maggie now finds a cracking Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, John having a male Red Junglefowl fly across the road right in front of him. We continue to walk along the road seeing much the same species, along with a barking deer and a family of Golden Langurs, but it's still quiet.

It is late afternoon when we get back into the bus and continue to drive slowly along making one last stop for a very confiding pair of Great Hornbills feeding in a roadside tree. It is now time to return to Tingtibi, after what has been an astonishing and very successful day.

Day 13: We meet at 6am with our luggage as today we are making our way back to Trongsa, Scop's Owl calling in the distance. We head off out of town, stopping after a while for a Barred Cuckoo-dove at the side of the road, followed by a Great Hornbill flying alongside, which is immense. Further up the valley Sonam stops the bus quickly as there are a pair of Goral at the side of the road and this is our best views yet as we watch them watching us! They soon drop off the side of the road into the valley and we continue our slow drive.

A little further on we stop again and we are instructed to get out as he wants to make a short walk here. We can hear bird song and calls all around and soon find a cracking Pale-headed Woodpecker, along with an Ashy Drongo and Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike. We continue our walk and again stop as our guide has now found a Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo and we watch it flying from branch to branch with its large tail streamers. This is then followed by our first bird-wave where we see a gorgeous Black-throated Sunbird, several (equally gorgeous) Silver-eared Mesia, which are close, lots of Nepal Fulvettas and a Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch. We continue walking before turning round and heading back to the bus, which has been slowly following us.

Once ready we set off again and now head off to find Kaka and the guys for an early breakfast. This is yet another fantastic situation and during this feast we see a flock of Speckled Woodpigeons go overhead and in the adjacent bushes is a Grey-throated Babbler. There are already butterflies around on this warm, sunny day and a quick search adds Lesser Punch, Circe and Dark Judy to our list, which is now over 50 species!

After breakfast we go for a short walk in this area, with Sonam Jr doing really well by finding a few Blue-winged Laughing-thrushes, which unusually show really well and we get some great views of this scarce bird. Eventually we set off again and wind our way up through the valley, stopping for another short walk, which is very productive. In some roadside gardens we find a big flock of Yellow-breasted Greenfinch, plus a Golden-throated Barbet and a cracking group of Spot-winged

Grosbeaks sat out in the open. On we again drive higher up and now stopping again as there are several Himalayan Griffon Vultures wheeling around overhead.

Further we go and Sonam stops the bus as he's seen Long-billed Wren-babbler here previously but sadly not today, but we do add Black-throated Prinia to the day's list along with a flock of Rusty-fronted Barwings. We keep going and stop for a panoramic photo of the beautiful Zhemgang Valley, where we now see a pair of Rufous-necked Hornbills, Kestrel and a Himalayan Buzzard. The drive has been slow on these switchback roads and the time is passing quickly as we are again pulling off the road. The large flowering trees around are full of birds and we see our first Hair Crested Drongo, several Mountain Bulbuls and a gorgeous Red-tailed Minla, along with Black-eared Shrike-babbler, Yellow-browed and Lemon-rumped Warblers – all this around one tree in some random place in the mountains, what a country!

We set off again and soon cross the border back into the Trongsa region, stopping for lunch, which is another 'meal with benefits' as the immediate area is crawling with butterflies. Julian investigates a muddy puddle on this now warm afternoon and enjoys finding and photographing lots of Yellow Orange-tips, orange Oakleaf, Autumn Leaf, Great Mormon, Common Jezebel and Jester.

It is just after 2pm when we set off again for Trongsa, stopping further down the valley at Rhotawala to see if we can find the nesting pair of Sheheen (Peregrine) here. It is successful as one bird is found sat in small tree high up on the rock face, which is brilliant as we get some good views through the telescope. On we go again stopping at a patch of woodland for a Large Niltava and then further on for another cracking raptor – Rufous-bellied Hawk-eagle and we watch this brilliant bird circle round high up in the sky, before it disappears over the ridge. We keep going towards the town and our hotel, now stopping again at another flowering tree, where we find a flock of Black-chinned Yuhinas, Oriental White-eye and another Streaked Spiderhunter, which always impress with their outsized long, curved bills. As we get towards Trongsa, we stop one last time at a known Long-billed Thrush site but sadly it's not there, although we do find a Scaly-breasted Cupwing and can hear a Collared Scops Owl in the distance.

We now drive into Trongsa where on the edge of town we pull in to our excellent hotel for the night, having been here previously in the tour.

Day 14: It is a cool morning as we set off from the hotel at 5.45am, leaving Trongsa and soon stopping at a checkpoint by the river for entry to another region. We have another long drive today, heading out to Punakha and birding enroute. We now drive up the valley and the scenery is spectacular, with views back down to the river and seeing a pair of Kaleej Pheasants at the side of the road. We make a couple of brief stop to allow Sonam to listen for target species but it's quiet, although Maggie does find another lovely Barred Cuckoo Dove and we also see a Bar-throated Siva amongst the commoner species.

We stop again and after a playing Collared Owlet a bird-wave moves into some nearby trees and shrubs where we see groups of Rufous-winged Fulvetta, Yellow-rumped and Buff-barred Warblers, Rufous Sibia, Black-throated, Green-backed and Yellow-browed Tits. We keep driving along the valley and at an open area we stop again for numbers of Nepal House Martins, Blyth's Swift and Himalayan Swiftlets, wheeling around together in the glorious morning sunlight. It is an early breakfast this morning as we meet up with Kaka and the guys at 7.30am. This is another productive place as we now find a Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-babbler and several Olive-backed Pipits.

After breakfast we keep going and after a while stop again with John spotting a lovely male Hen Harrier flying through, plus a large flock of Red-billed Chough, a few Chestnut-capped Laughing-thrushes, Ashy-throated and Grey-hooded Warblers – it is quiet though. Thankfully the scenery is stunning as we work our way along this forested valley, although one more stop does produce incredible views of a gorgeous Golden-breasted Fulvetta – one of the highlights of the tour.

The drive continues through this incredible forest and Sonam keeps stopping the minibus and calling in more birds as we add Chestnut-crowned to our warbler tally, with another fabulous warbler-fest attracted to the owlet call. We pass some road workers doing a bit of 'white lining', which seems slightly bizarre on these quiet roads before making another stop in an area covered in beautiful flowering rhododendrons and magnolias. There are lots of thrushes here that are mainly White-collared Blackbirds, but Sonam thinks he's seen a much rarer Chestnut Thrush amongst them. We stay for a while to try to relocate the bird but without success, so we again move on. We again are climbing up through another beautiful valley and now stop for a large gathering of Himalayan Griffon Vultures, circling overhead and some even below us, which is brilliant.

We need to crack as now Sonam is taking us to one of the few Solitary Snipe sites in Bhutan, which is higher up. Eventually we get there and park at the side of the road with a stream running down the side of the road. We now get out of the minibus and slowly walk uphill following the stream and carefully checking the edges. We are seeing some lovely Beautiful Rosefinches, Rufous-breasted Accentors, Wren and White (Black-backed) Wagtail around the scattered trees, before Sonam spots the Solitary Snipe. Its cryptic plumage suited to this environment, but it clearly doesn't like our presence as it flies across the water meadow to another banking, where we see it land amongst some more scattered trees. Flushed with success we now go for lunch, which has been set up a little higher on another flat meadow area – Wangdue Phodreng. It is a fabulous place at 3270m and we are sharing it with a heard of Yaks, who are feeding on the short grass, which Pete loves. Overhead there are more Himalayan Vultures and a Crested Goshawk, along with lots more butterflies around to keep Julian occupied.

Once we have finished, we thank, Kaka, Tobgay and Gyembo for another cracking meal and continue to drive higher up the valley. At the pass we stop and admire the stunning views of the High Himalayas, as we are now slightly over 3400m

– superb. There is a local market here and we spend a little time buying a few presents to take home to our families, with Pete and Gill adding a line of prayer flags to the many others here as a lovely gesture of remembrance.

Once we are all ready, we now get back into the bus and start down the other side turning off for Phobjikha or Crane Valley. This is a known wintering site for the rare Black-necked Crane and the locals here are very protective of these wonderful, elegant birds. We have heard that the main body of this population have already departed but there could be some stragglers still here. The word stunning is used a lot in Bhutan, but this secret valley is both stunning and magical, just being here is very special. We drive along the road stopping to scan these flat agricultural lands set high in the mountains finding our first Bhutanese Hoopoe, which is always great, but sadly no cranes. We are thinking we have failed when Sonam says he's found one, which is in a paddock near to where we are parked. It is an immature bird on its own, which is unusual but Sonam explains some young birds can stay here year round or it might be injured and cannot make the migration – whatever it is we are thrilled to have caught up with this iconic bird.

We leave the crane feeding and now set off back towards the main road, but soon get stopped as there is 'Yak-jam' going on, with several animals obstructing the road. We slowly move through this group and wind our way back up to the road where we continue to head down. We make our first stop now for a troupe of Grey Langurs, before stopping again at a Ward's Trogon site. We get out of the bus and follow Sonam along the road, who is listening for a trogon but hears a Scaly-breasted Cupwing and it's close. Julian grabs his thermal imager and locates this tiny skulker in the bushes, assisting the rest of us with its position and all get a view, which is superb. We continue to walk on, and Sonam now attracts another bird-wave which holds a Mrs Gould's Sunbird, Ashy-throated Warblers and a Black-eared Shrike-babbler. Sadly, the trogons are not there today so we get back into the bus and head off towards Punakha.

We have a long drive now and need to crack on, but along the route we make a couple more stops for a pair of Black Eagles and flock of Chestnut-crowned Laughing-thrushes before getting to the hotel in the evening.

Day 15: We leave our hotel in Punakha at 5.45am, driving towards the Jigme Dorji National Park stopping off at the Mochhu River. Along the route we see the usual Blue Whistling Thrushes at the side of the road, also a flock of White-throated Laughing-thrushes and Oriental Turtle Dove. Near the river we make our first stop looking for trogons but without any success, although Pete does find a cracking Red-tailed Minla and Maggie a couple of (equally cracking) Yellow-vented Warblers, along with Oriental White-eye, Whiskered Yuhina, Buff-bellied Warbler, Black-throated and Green-backed Tits, in a roving mixed flock. Sonam keeps trying for the trogons but only now add a few Chestnut-crowned Laughing-thrushes. We are now back in the minibus and driving slowly along the river seeing White-capped Redstart, Russet Sparrow and a River Lapwing before reaching our breakfast site.

After breakfast we carry on for a slow walk along the edge of the river, where we find now the expected Brown Dipper and Grey Wagtail, but also a beautiful male Verditer Flycatcher and a stunning Pharaoh Locust in the hand. We now drive on, crossing the bridge over the river into the Gasa Province, looking for Takin, which was seen on the previous tour in 2019!

We now start to climb up into the N.P. stopping for a walk upwards along the road. It is quiet but we do see a Mountain Hawk-eagle and plenty of butterflies. As we get to the minibus Sonam can hear a Spotted Elachura and we try to see it. These skulking birds are very difficult to see well but we keep trying to lure it out as Pete would love a good view. We are stood there a while when it suddenly pops into view right in front of Pete, who is absolutely elated.

It is very hot now as we drive back down to the bridge and to another stunning lunch spot near a beautiful stream. The butterflies here again are top drawer and it's lovely to sit and chat in the warm sunshine. We have our Punakha Dzong visit this afternoon and Sonam Jr is getting his traditional costume on.

The gho is the robe that Bhutanese men wear, tightly belted at the waist and pleated once at the back, it is a knee-length garment with broad, white cuffs and they are very smart.

Once we are all ready, we are back in the minibus and heading back to Punakha, stopping a couple of times for a Barking Deer and a superb Black Eagle.

We soon get to the car park for the Punakha Dzong and park up, once we are ready we walk across the covered bridge to the dzong. This magnificent building sits at the confluence of two rivers - the Mother River (Mo Chhu) and the Father River (Pho Chhu) and its position is strategic, as well as well of spiritually important. Dzongs were built not only as administrative centres and monasteries, but they were defensive. The huge walls are an indication of this as is the very steep staircase we climb to get to the front door! Sonam Jr guides us through to the main courtyard, where robed monks and administrative workers are walking by going about their business. The courtyard is dominated by an enormous tree, which is the same species the Buddha sat beneath. The towering wall of the main temple also dominates our view and we walk around to see the main entrance of this temple from the other courtyard. We cannot access the main temple, it is far too sacred, but we do enter the main ceremonial hall where prayers are heard and important ceremonies like the coronation of the present King are carried out. It is an extraordinary space, full of colour and elaborate decoration. But it is the statues that dominate the space, with an enormous statue of Buddha is flanked by huge statues, one of which is the founder of the dzong in the 17th century - Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The whole place is serene to an extreme and quite breath-taking.

Back outside we are all quite speechless from this experience as we make our way to a back exit from the grounds. We now follow Sonam Jr towards the river where we now must cross this groovy suspension bridge just for foot traffic. It is

a little unnerving crossing this moving bridge across the river, but we all make it at our own pace. At the other side we are greeted by Sonam and Pinshu with the minibus and take us back to the hotel for a short rest.

The minibus is in the courtyard where initially Julian, Pete and Gill meet up ahead of the rest of us and find a Pallas's Sea-eagle flying along the river towards the hotel. This magnificent raptor is scaring the Ruddy Shelducks from the river as it continues towards us. We all join Julian, Pete and Gill and now get great views of the Pallas's Fish Eagle flying round. It is a great start to this evening session as we leave the hotel stopping to scan the river where we find a Crested Kingfisher, River Lapwing and our first Red-wattled Lapwing since leaving Delhi. John points out a Barn Swallow flying past and a little further we now find our first Bhutanese Paddyfield Pipit, along with Plumbeous and White-capped Redstarts. It is a lovely walk, which gets much better as we have found a cracking Speckled Piculet, hammering into a dead branch just above our heads – it is amazing to watch this.

We walk on a little further seeing another Crested Kingfisher but nothing new and as it's now evening we set off back to the minibus. We drive the short journey back towards the hotel with one final treat as we see a gorgeous male Wallcreeper on a low sandstone wall right next to the hotel's entrance – superb. It has been another wonderful end to our day around Punakha.

Day 16: It has been a night of rain, hail, thunder and lightning and we leave blurry-eyed at 5.30am on our final full day in this wonderful country. The rain has stopped and it is a fresh morning as we head away from Punakha, seeing our first Blue Whistling Thrushes. This is followed by a large flock of White-throated Laughing-thrushes in the road and now a pair of Kaleej Pheasants. In this broad-leaved forest we stop and go for a walk along the road, where we see a fabulous Bay Woodpecker, which eventually shows really well. This is then followed by its commoner Crimson-breasted cousin, Sikkim Treecreeper and our first Himalayan Jay.

It is a great start to the day as we now get back into the minibus and drive on, climbing higher up the mountain. We make a few more stops along the road but see the expected species, along with a few Yellow-billed Magpies before reaching our last breakfast stop with Kaka and the crew. It is our favourite of porridge, which is delicious, along with some toast and peanut butter – we are going to miss these incredible al fresco meals!

We are parked near our first site of the day – Lamperi Botanical Garden and once ready we walk to the entrance. Sonam organises the tickets and we enter this fabulous area of manicured gardens, ornamental ponds and native trees. As it's still fairly early we have it to ourselves and walk slowly along the paths to the main pond seeing a few Rufous-fronted Accentors as we get there. Sonam now sees another woodpecker species and it's another new one with fabulous views of a beautiful male Rufous-breasted Woodpecker. We now go slightly off-piste as

we take one of the side tracks through the mature forest, seeing Green-tailed Sunbird and an Alpine Thrush. Julian is ahead of us and sees another zoothera thrush, which is a Long-tailed Thrush, but it flies into deep cover before we see it. As we stand waiting to see if it reappears, we do find a very confiding Speckled Pigeon sat in one of the nearby large trees. We now walk on and stop in an open glade, which produces a Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher and Grey-cheeked Warbler, but it's pretty quiet here. We now make our way back towards the entrance, where we take a look at the Visitor Centre and make full use of their facilities, something of a luxury on this tour!

It is a fabulous late morning now with blue skies and scattered cloud as we continue our drive higher up towards the mountain pass. We stop along the road for another of Sonam's walks with the snow-capped High Himalayas in the background – absolutely fantastic. The birdlife seems quiet today, as we find the usual Blue-fronted Redstart, Mrs Gould's Sunbird and Yellow-browed Tit. It isn't long before we are back in the bus and driving higher up this winding road and near the top we make one final stop to walk towards the pass. It is again very quiet, but we soon start to get views of the highest unclimbed mountain on Earth - Gangkhar Puensum at 7,570m and along with all other peaks above 6,000m it is not allowed to be climbed. Apparently to get to the base of this mountain takes some effort; a five day trek from Bumthang or 22 days from Paro – just incredible!

At the high pass there is a magnificent stupa that we stop to look at, along with more facilities and more great views. It is the stupa that is important, as it isn't just one but a complex of 108 surrounding a temple. Each one of these small stupas commemorate an individual who gave their life in defence of the country, fighting rebels who had holed up in Bhutan from Northern India - what a remarkable place. This used to be a site for Satyr Tragopan, but the increase in traffic has caused them to retreat from here, more's the pity. Once we are ready, we get back into the minibus and slowly meander downhill until we convene with our lunch crew, who are set up surrounded by a wealth of prayer flags. Despite our altitude it is lovely and warm sat in the sunshine with Common Crossbills flying over into the adjacent pine trees.

We finish our last meal with these wonderful people who have looked after us so well this last two weeks and we are so very grateful. Julian has the honour of handing out their gratuities, which is small token for all their hard work and skill in providing us with two fabulous meals almost every day and testament to the people of this wonderful country. We know this marks the beginning of the end of our Bhutan tour, which is very sad.

We now wave goodbye to this trio and set off down the mountain for our last few hours of birding, as we still have some way to go before reaching our hotel. Sonam decides the best use of this time would be spent near Paro back along the river. We now drive almost continuously until we reach the edge of the city, having stopped to look at a Spotted Forktail, Himalayan Bluetail and Brown Dipper along the route.

We stop again at the site we visited on our first morning and prepare for a walk along the river. Incredibly the Wallcreeper is in the same area and as we wander along we also see a single Bar-headed Goose amongst a flock of Ruddy Shelduck, Green Sandpiper, River Lapwing and another pair of Brown Dippers. Along the hillside we find a Kestrel, plus a single Black-throated Thrush and a pair of Hodgson's Redstarts with a Grey-backed Shrike near the football pitch – all very similar to our first visit here.

It is late afternoon when we leave for the hotel, knowing we have to now pack for our flight to Delhi the following morning. It is a quiet, reflective time on a holiday that has just kept giving with the two Sonams and Pinshu being its reason and we are thankful for such a great holiday.

Day 17: It is a (reasonably) leisurely start as we have our final breakfast in Bhutan at 7.30am, leaving for the airport around 9am. Before we head off Julian again goes through the ritual of handing out gratuities to Sonam Jr, Pinshu, Sonam Sr, with a heart-felt thanks from himself, John, Maggie, Pete and Gill. Once ready we drive down into town following the river on the lookout for an Ibisbill, but they are not showing today.

At the airport we again thank everyone for their hard work and expertise before heading into the departure hall. We are soon through check-in and security, waiting for our international flight back to Delhi. It is on time, which is great and again one last look at the stunning Himalayas (including Everest) as we head south.

The flight lands at Delhi on time and after the usual airport rigmarole we are outside getting our pre-booked taxi to the nearby airport hotel. It is now mid-afternoon and we decide to go for a freshen up in our rooms before a short walk round to Costa, where we enjoy a very nice coffee, whilst watching Dusky Crag Martins, Red-vented Bulbul, and Rose-ringed Parakeets. We now walk back to the hotel where after another short break we meet for our evening meal and our 'round up' of the holiday, which shows just how fantastic it has been.

Day 18: Our flight dictates we need to be at the airport by 8.30am, so after a 7am breakfast we leave the hotel an hour later. Everything goes well and we are in the air both safely and on-time, getting back to the UK later that afternoon.

Species of the Trip

John – Blood Pheasant, Beautiful Nuthatch, Mrs Gould's Sunbird

Maggie – Blood Pheasant, Speckled Piculet, Ghoral

Pete – Spotted Elachura, Tawny Fish Owl, Blood Pheasant

Gill – Blood Pheasant, Tawny Fish Owl, Mrs Gould's Sunbird

Julian – Golden Langur, Beautiful Nuthatch, Map Butterfly

Place of the Trip

John – Chela La Pass, Bhutanese Architecture

Maggie – Phobjikha (Valley of the Cranes), Punakha Dzong

Pete – Dochu La viewpoint, Tigers Nest

Gill – Tigers Nest, Phobjikha

Julian – Tigers Nest, Royal Manas N.P.

Magic Moment

John – The view from Dochu La across to the High Himalayas and the wonderful memorial to the fight against the Assamese rebels.

Maggie – The flight into Paro, with the views of Everest, dropping into and landing in the valley, then the first views of Bhutan and our welcome.

Pete – The cow incident...

Gill – Everything about Bhutan (plus the cow moment)

Julian – Seeing the wild eggs of a White-bellied Heron

BIRDS

Hill Partridge (H)
Rufous-throated Partridge (H)
Blood Pheasant
Himalayan Monal
Red Junglefowl
Kalij Pheasant
Indian Peafowl (I)
Grey Francolin (I)
Bar-headed Goose
Ruddy Shelduck
Comb Duck
Indian Spot-billed Duck (I)
Gadwall (I)
Mallard
Eurasian Wigeon (I)
Northern Shoveler (I)
Northern Pintail (I)
Common Teal (I)
Garganey (I)
Tufted Duck (I)
Ferruginous Duck (I)
Common Pochard (I)
Red Crested Pochard (I)
Goosander
Little Grebe (I)
Painted Stork (I)
Black-necked Stork (I)
Indian Pond-heron (I)
Grey Heron (I)
White-bellied Heron
Purple Heron (I)
Cattle Egret (I)
Intermediate Egret (I)
Great Egret (I)
Spoonbill (I)
Red-naped Ibis (I)
Glossy Ibis (I)
Little Cormorant (I)
Great Cormorant
Common Kestrel
Peregrine (Shaheen)
Oriental Honey-buzzard (I)
Black-winged Kite
Black Kite (I)
Black-eared Kite (I)
Pallas's Fish Eagle
Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture)
Himalayan Vulture
Crested Serpent Eagle
Indian Black Eagle
Hen Harrier
Western Marsh Harrier (I)
Crested Goshawk
Shikra (I)
Eurasian Sparrowhawk
Himalayan Buzzard
Greater Spotted Eagle (I)
Booted Eagle (I)
Rufous-bellied Eagle
Changeable Hawk-eagle
Mountain Hawk-eagle
Sarus Crane (I)
Black-necked Crane
Moorhen
Common Coot (I)
Purple (Grey-headed) Swamphen (I)
White-breasted Waterhen (I)
Black-tailed Crake
Pheasant-tailed Jacana (I)
Ibisbill
Black-winged Stilt (I)
Avocet (I)
River Lapwing
Red-wattled Lapwing
White-headed Lapwing (I)
Solitary Snipe
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper (I)
Marsh Sandpiper (I)
Temminck's Stint (I)
Common Greenshank (I)
Ruff (I)
Feral Pigeon
Snow Pigeon
Speckled Wood Pigeon
Oriental Turtle Dove
Eurasian Collared Dove (I)
Red Collared Dove (I)
Spotted Dove
Barred Cuckoo Dove
Mountain Imperial Pigeon
Yellow-footed Green Pigeon (I)
Rose-ringed Parakeet (I)
Alexandrine Parakeet (I)
Common Hawk Cuckoo (I)
Large Hawk Cuckoo (H)
Green-billed Malkoha
Southern Coucal (I)
Mountain Scops Owl (H)
Tawny Fish Owl
Himalayan Wood Owl (H)
Short-eared Owl (I)
Spotted Owlet (I)
Collared Owlet (H)
Asian Barred Owlet
Grey Nightjar
Himalayan Swiftlet
Fork-tailed (Blyth's) Swift
Little Swift (I)
White-throated Kingfisher (I)
Common Kingfisher (I)
Crested Kingfisher
Blue-bearded Bee-eater
Green Bee-eater (I)
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater
Common Hoopoe
Indian Grey Hornbill
Great Hornbill
Rufous-necked Hornbill
Great Barbet
Brown-headed Barbet (I)
Golden-throated Barbet
Blue-throated Barbet
Coppersmith Barbet (I)
Yellow-rumped Honeyguide
Speckled Piculet
White-browed Piculet
Lesser Flameback (I)
Rufous-bellied Woodpecker
Crimson-breasted Woodpecker
Darjeeling Woodpecker
Lesser Yellownappe
Greater Yellownappe
Grey-headed Woodpecker
Bay Woodpecker
Pale-headed Woodpecker
Ashy Woodswallow
Small Minivet (I)
Grey-chinned Minivet
Long-tailed Minivet
Scarlet Minivet
Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike
Bay-backed Shrike (I)
Long-tailed Shrike
Grey-backed Shrike
Common Woodshrike (I)
Maroon Oriole
Black Drongo (I)
Ashy Drongo
Bronzed Drongo
Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo
Hair-crested Drongo
Yellow-bellied Fantail
White-throated Fantail
Himalayan Jay
Yellow-billed Blue Magpie
Eurasian Magpie
Rufous Treepie
Grey Treepie
Spotted Nutcracker
Red-billed Chough
House Crow
Large-billed Crow
Jungle Crow (I)
Green-backed Tit
Black-throated Tit
Rufous-fronted Tit
Rufous-vented Tit
Coal Tit
Grey-crested Tit

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|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Sultan Tit | White-throated Laughingthrush | Himalayan Bluetail |
| Yellow-browed Tit | White-crested Laughingthrush | Indian Robin |
| Ashy-crowned Finch-lark (1) | Striated Laughingthrush | Oriental Magpie Robin |
| Crested Lark (1) | Spotted Laughingthrush | Eastern Black Redstart (1) |
| Plain (Grey-fronted)Martin (1) | Rufous-necked Laughingthrush | Hodgson's Redstart |
| Barn Swallow | Bhutan Laughingthrush | White-throated Redstart |
| Wire-tailed Swallow (1) | Blue-winged laughingthrush | Blue-fronted Redstart |
| Dusky Crag Martin (1) | Black-faced laughingthrush | Blue-capped Redstart |
| Nepal House Martin | Chestnut-crowned | Plumbeous Water Redstart |
| Asian House Martin | Laughingthrush | White-capped Redstart |
| Chestnut-headed Tesia | Red-faced Liocichla | Little Forktail |
| Slaty-bellied Tesia | Silver-eared Mesia | Slaty-backed Forktail |
| Ashy Prinia | White-browed Shrike Babbler | Spotted Forktail |
| Plain Prinia | Green Shrike Babbler | Siberian Stonechat |
| Striated Prinia | Black-eared Shrike babbler | Grey Bushchat |
| Black-throated Prinia | Rusty-fronted Barwing | Pied Bushchat (1) |
| Mountain Tailorbird | Hoary-throated Barwing | Brown Rockchat (1) |
| Common Tailorbird | Bar-throated Siva | Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher |
| Striated Bulbul | Red-tailed Minla | Red-breasted Flycatcher |
| Red-whiskered Bulbul | Golden-breasted Fulvetta | Little Pied Flycatcher |
| Himalayan Bulbul | Yellow-throated Fulvetta | Verditer Flycatcher |
| Red-vented Bulbul | Rufous-winged Fulvetta | Rufous-bellied Niltava |
| White-throated Bulbul | White-browed Fulvetta | Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher |
| Ashy Bulbul | Nepal Fulvetta | Brown Dipper |
| Mountain Bulbul | Rufous Sibia | Asian Fairy Bluebird |
| Black Bulbul | White-bellied Erpornis | Orange-bellied Leafbird |
| Brown-flanked Bush Warbler | Striated Yuhina | Fire-breasted Flowerpecker |
| Zitting Cisticola (1) | White-naped Yuhina | Purple Sunbird (1) |
| Moustached Warbler (1) | Whiskered Yuhina | Mrs Gould's Sunbird |
| Siberian Chiffchaff (1) | Stripe-throated Yuhina | Green-tailed Sunbird |
| Buff-barred Warbler | Rufous-vented Yuhina | Black-throated Sunbird |
| Ashy-throated Warbler | Black-chinned Yuhina | Crimson Sunbird |
| Lemon-rumped Warbler | Great Parrotbill | Streaked Spiderhunter |
| Yellow-browed Warbler | Brown Parrotbill | House Sparrow (1) |
| Hume's Leaf Warbler (1) | White-breasted Parrotbill | Sind Sparrow (1) |
| Greenish Warbler (1) | Pale-billed Parrotbill | Russet Sparrow |
| Brook's Leaf Warbler (1) | Oriental White-eye | Eurasian Tree Sparrow |
| Grey-hooded Warbler | Goldcrest | Scaly-breasted Munia |
| Whistler's Warbler | Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch | Indian Silverbill (1) |
| Grey-cheeked Warbler | White-tailed Nuthatch | Red Avadavat (1) |
| Chestnut-crowned Warbler | Beautiful Nuthatch | Alpine Accentor |
| Black-faced Warbler | Eurasian Wren | Altai Accentor |
| Lesser Whitethroat (1) | Wallcreeper | Rufous-breasted Accentor |
| Eastern Orphean Warbler (1) | Hodgson's Treecreeper | Citrine Wagtail (1) |
| Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler | Rusty-flanked Treecreeper | Sykes's Wagtail (1) |
| White-browed Scimitar Babbler | Brown-throated Treecreeper | Grey Wagtail |
| Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler | Great Myna | White Wagtail |
| Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler | Bank Myna (1) | White Wagtail (alboides) |
| Jungle Babbler (1) | Common Myna | Olive-backed Pipit |
| Large Grey Babbler (1) | Rosy Starling (1) | Tawny Pipit (1) |
| Long-billed Wren Babbler | Blue Whistling Thrush | Tibetan Serin |
| Scaly-breasted Cupwing | Alpine Thrush | Yellow-breasted Greenfinch |
| Pygmy Cupwing (H) | Long-billed Thrush | Plain Mountain Finch |
| Rufous-throated Wren Babbler | White-collared Blackbird | Beautiful Rosefinch |
| Spotted Elachura | Grey-winged Blackbird | White-browed Rosefinch |
| Rufous-capped Babbler | Black-throated Thrush | Red Crossbill |
| Grey-throated Babbler | Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush | Red-headed Bullfinch |
| Golden Babbler | Blue Rock Thrush | Scarlet Finch |
| White-hooded Babbler | Rufous-breasted Bush Robin | Collared Grosbeak |

Spot-winged Grosbeak
White-winged Grosbeak
Little Bunting

MAMMALS

Jungle Cat (1)
Goral
Nilgai (Blue Bull) (1)
Himalayan Yellow-throated
Marten
Rhesus Macaque (1)
Assamese Macaque
Grey Langur
Capped Langur
Golden Langur
Hoary-bellied Squirrel
Orange-bellied Squirrel
Five-stripe Palm Squirrel (1)
Malayan Giant Squirrel
Himalayan Striped Squirrel
Large Eared Pika
Muntjac

Common Copper
Common Beak
Club Beak
Lesser Punch
Tailed Punch
Dark Judy
Indian Skipper
Indian Palm Bob
Common Map
Queen of Spain Fritillary
Indian Fritillary
Orange Oakleaf
Autumn Leaf
Common Sailor
Common Lascar
Circe
Black Prince
Common Castor
Common Albatross

BUTTERFLIES

Red Helen
Common Bluebottle
Great Mormon
Common Mormon
Common Jezebel
Painted Jezebel
Common Emigrant
Mottled Emigrant
Pale Clouded Yellow
Dark Clouded Yellow
Indian Cabbage White
Large Cabbage White
Yellow Orange-tip
Great Orange-tip
Common Grass Yellow
3-spot Yellow
Tree Yellow
Pale Grass Blue
Pea Blue
Gram Blue
Common Hedge Blue
Painted Lady
Indian Red Admiral
Blue Admiral
Common Jester
Spotted Blue Crow
Lemon Pansy
Chocolate Pansy
Yellow Pansy
Himalayan Sergeant
Staff Sergeant
Plain Tiger
Indian Tortoiseshell
Common Peacock
Paris Peacock
Indian Purple Emperor
Glassy Tiger
Himalayan Purple Sapphire

OTHER STUFF

Flap-shell Turtle
Tibetan Frog
Tadpoles (sp)
Funnel-web Spider
Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Giant Rock Bee
Indian Honey Bee
Asian Hornet
Pharaoh Cicada
Moth (sp)