

## BHUTAN

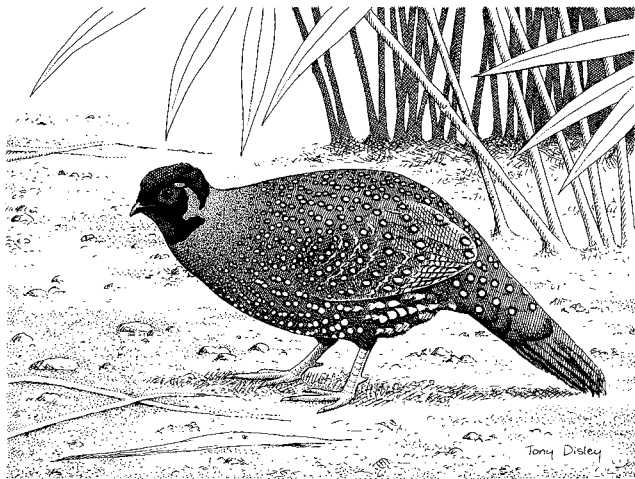
### *The Ultimate Himalayan Bird Tour*

*Thursday 21st April – Sunday 8th May 2011 (18 days)*

*Leader: Dave Farrow*

*Group Size Limit: 9*

*Tour Category: Easy to Moderate*



*Satyr Tragopan (Tony Disley)*

Bhutan is a land of superlatives, the last surviving example of a Tibetan Buddhist Kingdom that proudly guards and treasures its cultural and natural heritage. Blessed with a tiny population and steep inaccessible valleys, it holds fabulous pristine forests that are almost entirely untouched and are full of birds.

By far greatest diversity of Himalayan bird species is to be found in the Eastern Himalayas and a journey through Bhutan provides the opportunity to see such delights as Satyr Tragopan, Himalayan Monal, Blood Pheasant, Dark-rumped Swift, Ward's Trogon, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, Coral-billed and Slender-billed Scimitar-Babblers, Long-billed, Rufous-throated, Bar-winged and Spotted Wren-Babblers, the strange Sikkim Wedge-billed Babbler, the near-endemic Bhutan Laughingthrush, Yellow-throated Fulvetta, White-naped Yuhina, Fulvous, Great, Brown and Greater Rufous-headed Parrotbills,

Blue-fronted Robin, Broad-billed Warbler, Beautiful Nuthatch and a cacophony of laughingthrushes, just to mention some of the endless highlights this fantastic journey has to offer.

Bhutan is an unspoilt, thinly-populated country that offers not only the finest birding in the Himalayas but also a wonderful cultural and travel experience. Hotel accommodation ranges from good to reasonable and roads are fairly good (and mostly have delightfully little traffic), but on this very comprehensive itinerary, that produces more Bhutanese specialities than any other, we will have to stay in outfitted camps (in quite comfortable style, complete with sleeping, dining, toilet and shower tents) in areas with no guesthouses. Being able to stay right in the midst of such superb Himalayan environments, with the best birding in the country all around us, is an experience that greatly adds to the wonders of our Bhutanese journey. All in all, Bhutan

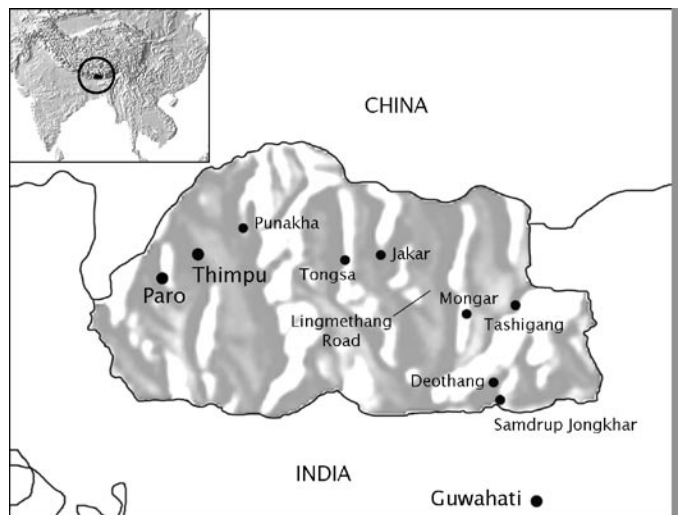
offers the discerning birder a truly unforgettable adventure!

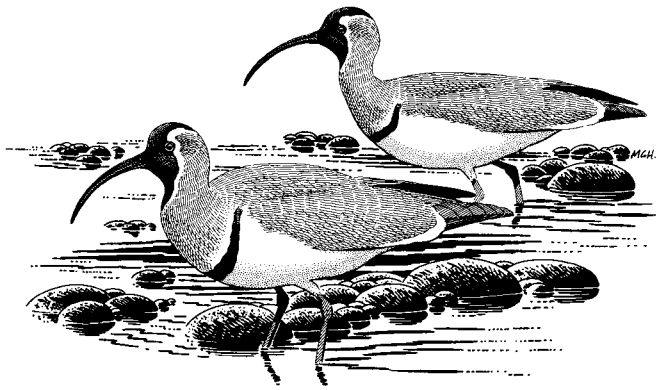
We are most fortunate to be able to visit such an exciting place and our tour will explore the very best of Bhutan's bird habitats, concentrating on the central and eastern parts of the country, which are the richest of all. We will drive over high passes into forested valleys at Punakha, Tongsa and Jakar and then continue eastwards to the superb and seldom-visited 'Lingmethang Road'. From this magnificent area we will travel still further east and finally descend through some lower altitude forests around Deothang to the border town of Samdrup Jongkhar. Here we finally leave the country and enter the wide plains of Assam.

Nearly two-thirds of Bhutan is forest, the remaining fraction is either above the treeline or under agriculture in the narrow valley bottoms, most of the land being too steep for any settlement or farming. There is only one road traversing the country, and prior to the 1960s there were none. The Buddhist values of the Bhutanese people mean that they have for centuries led their lives in harmony with their environment; their beliefs show a deep reverence and respect for all sentient beings, and they are thus perfect guardians

of what is now emerging as the ultimate place for birding in the mountains of South Asia. The country has only opened its doors to foreigners quite recently, and although it does so with outstanding hospitality, it is not without some reserve, wishing to avoid the negative side-effects of uncontrolled tourism apparent in other developing nations. Numbers of visitors are restricted to a strict quota and the government imposes a fixed and high daily tariff, which, bizarrely, is exactly the same whether one is staying in the best hotel in Thimphu or camping in the hills!

The government's stated commitment to conservation and sustainable development ought to ensure that the sublime forests of Bhutan are protected, and that they still hold a bounty of birdlife just waiting to be enjoyed in the years to come, but in many areas of the country deforestation is already gathering pace. For now, however, there is still plenty of forest remaining even along the roads and so our tour will spend day after day immersed in lush mountain forests while our travels will be enlivened by a series of splendid and impressive dzongs (fortress monasteries) that usually occupy eagles-nest locations of strategic importance. The Bhutanese



*Ibisbills (Michael Hodgson)*

people still dress in traditional garb and their customs and lifestyles are preserved with enthusiasm and pride. All these factors combine to make this country one of the most rewarding and thrilling bird tour destinations available today.

Birdquest has operated tours to Bhutan since 1997.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins this morning at Delhi, from where we take a flight by the national airline of Bhutan, Druk Air, to Paro for an overnight stay. Here we will arrive with a steep and exciting descent into the Paro valley, dominated by the impressive Paro Dzong. This afternoon we will explore the Paro area. In particular we shall be looking out for the strange and beautiful Ibisbill, which breeds here amongst the gravel islands in the fast-flowing rivers, and the furtive Black-tailed Crake. Typical breeding birds of the area include River Lapwing, Oriental Turtle Dove, Eurasian Hoopoe, Himalayan Black Bulbul, Grey-backed Shrike, Red-billed Chough, Large-billed Crow, Green-backed Tit, Brown Dipper, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Plumbeous and White-capped Stone-Redstarts, Siberian Waterchat, Grey Bushchat, Blue

Whistling Thrush, Himalayan Wagtail and Russet Sparrow, while lingering winter visitors are likely to include Green Sandpiper, Rosy Pipit, Hodgson's Redstart and Black-throated Thrush.

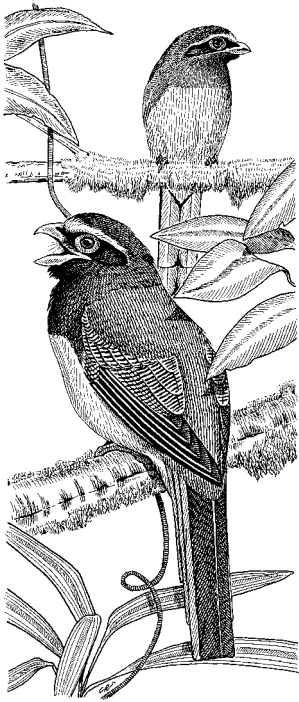
**Day 2** We will set off early today to drive up to the impressive Chele La pass on the road to Haa, which at a breath-taking 3780m is an excellent spot for seeing the spectacular Himalayan Monal. This has to be one of the most colourful and strikingly-patterned of all the world's many pheasants, so that is saying a lot! Seeing an adult male at relatively close range (for they are not hunted here) as it shows off its iridescent blue, indigo, orange, green and black plumage is an extraordinary experience, and when one flies off displaying its white back patch and uttering its wild, ringing cry the moment seems to epitomize High Himalayan birding in all its glory! During our visit we will have our first opportunity to find the attractive Blood Pheasant (and also our first Kalij Pheasants) and also see a good selection of high altitude species, most of which will become very familiar to us during our travels. Typical species here include Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Grey Nightjar,

Yellow-billed Blue Magpie, Spotted (or Eurasian) Nutcracker, Long-tailed Minivet, Coal, Grey-crested and Rufous-fronted Tits, Black-faced Laughingthrush, White-browed Fulvetta, Rufous-vented Yuhina, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Buff-barred Warbler, Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail (split from Northern), Blue-fronted Redstart, Long-tailed Thrush, White-collared Blackbird, Mrs Gould's Sunbird, Olive-backed Pipit, the huge Collared Grosbeak, White-winged Grosbeak, and Himalayan White-browed and Dark-rumped Rosefinches. With a bit of luck we will find some Altai Accentors lingering in their winter quarters while they wait for their breeding grounds in the far Tien Shan and Altai mountains to become more hospitable. After returning to Paro we will continue to Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, for an overnight stay. Thimphu is little more than a big village, though quite modern, and sits in a broad valley at an altitude of 2350m.

**Day 3** We will leave Thimphu early in the morning and drive east, climbing up into the high forests of the Dochu La. In the Dzongkha language that is spoken in Bhutan, 'la' is the word for a high pass, and where the road climbs to 3100m,

rising above the dry, pine-dominated forests of western Bhutan, we enter stands of hemlock, fir, rhododendron and evergreen oak which we will want to explore. We will pause at the pass where, on a clear day, there is a spectacular, panoramic vista of the snowy massifs of the high Himalayas to the north. Birding here will be a mouth-watering introduction to the ornithological delights of the Eastern Himalayas. The star attraction is the stunning but secretive Satyr Tragopan. We will listen for their rather braying calls, and persistence may well be rewarded by views of a glowing red male stalking across a bamboo-choked hillside, with the drab female quietly feeding nearby. White-throated, Striated and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes are likely to be prowling noisily through the undergrowth, while other species we may encounter include Darjeeling Woodpecker, Rufous Sibia, Hoary-throated Barwing, the lovely but restless Fire-tailed Myzornis, Stripe-throated Yuhina, Rufous-winged Fulvettas, Lemon-rumped and Ashy-throated Warblers, Whistler's Warbler (split from Golden-spectacled), the diminutive, *Phylloscopus*-like Yellow-browed Tit, Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, Green-tailed Sunbird, Common Crossbill, Dark-breasted

*Kalij Pheasant (Craig Robson)*



*Ward's Trogons (Craig Robson)*

Rosefinch and Red-headed Bullfinch. After whetting our birding appetites here, we will descend to Punakha (1350m) for a two nights stay at a traditionally decorated hotel perched high above the Puna Sang Chu valley.

**Day 4** The small town of Punakha was once the capital of this tiny nation that preserves its cultural and natural heritage so keenly and both the town and the twin rivers that flow past it are dominated by the Punakha Dzong, sited at the confluence of the channels. From Punakha we shall travel up the Mo Chu Valley to an excellent area of forest where our birding will be concentrated. Along the river and its tributary streams we should find Great Cormorant, Crested Kingfisher and Slaty-backed Forktail. We will see a wide selection of species today, but in particular we will be looking out for the localized Yellow-vented Warbler, which is common in these mid-altitude forests and the delightful Spotted Wren-Babbler, which positively vibrates as it

pours out its amazingly loud song from a low perch. If we are very fortunate we will find the very rare and little-known White-bellied Heron or Pallas's Fish Eagle. Other birds we could well encounter include Crested Serpent Eagle, Kalij Pheasant, Oriental Cuckoo, Himalayan Swiftlet, House Swift, White-throated Kingfisher, Great and Golden-throated Barbets, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Greater and Lesser Yellownapes, Maroon Oriole, Ashy and Hair-crested Drongos, Common Myna, Grey Treepie, Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike, Mountain Bulbul, Ultramarine, Verditer and Grey-headed Flycatchers, Small Niltava, Slaty-bellied Tesia, Blyth's Leaf, Green-crowned and Grey-hooded Warblers, Black-throated Tit, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker and Black-throated Sunbird. There will also be an excellent selection of babblers which may include Rufous-capped Babbler, Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush, Red-tailed and Blue-winged Minlas, Whiskered Yuhina and Nepal Fulvetta. Along the river on the outskirts of town we will have another chance to find the splendid Ibisbill, while Slender-billed Oriole favours the nearby pine forest.

**Day 5** This morning we leave Punakha behind and continue eastwards along what is known as the 'Lateral Road', the only highway that crosses Bhutan from west to east. Seemingly without a straight stretch anywhere in the country and barely wide enough for two vehicles, it was only surfaced in the 1980s. Its hairpins traverse the steep south-facing valleys of the region, giving us spectacular views over the forested landscape. Much of our birding will be from its verges, for most of Bhutan is fortunate in having only light traffic. Along the way we will pass Wangdiphodrang Dzong, which sits above the Mo Chu

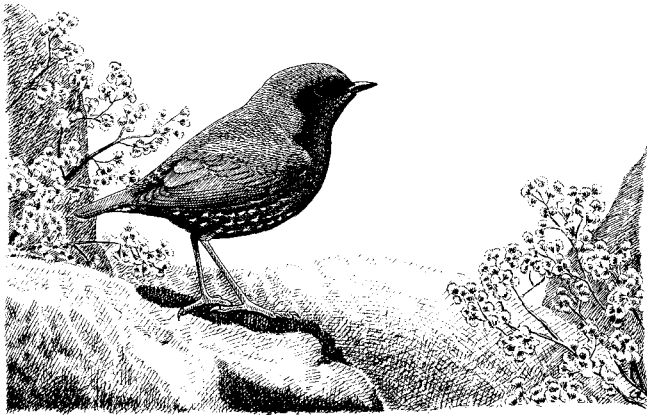
guarding the crossing point, before we climb up through lichen-festooned forest to the Pele La (3300m). During the journey we shall check a roadside cliff festooned with the nests of Giant Rock Bees where Fork-tailed Swifts can be watched shooting in and out of their nest crevices. Here we shall hope to find the little-known Yellow-rumped Honeyguide as it sits quietly alongside the bees nests. Other birds we could see today include Himalayan Griffon, Lammergeier, Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon, Hen Harrier, Chestnut-bellied and Blue-capped Rock Thrushes, Hume's Bush Warbler (split from Yellowish-bellied), Grey-sided Bush Warbler, Yellow-bellied Fantail and Fire-tailed Sunbird. Eventually we will reach Tongsa for an overnight stay.

**Day 6** Continuing westwards to Jakar, we shall explore the bamboo-clad slopes of the Yutong La pass (3400m) where we have a final chance to look for such high altitude species as Alpine Accentor, White-browed Bush Robin, Great and Brown Parrotbills, and even the furtive Fulvous Parrotbill. From here we drop down into the series of dry, pine-forested valleys known as Bumthang. Eventually we will reach the small town of Jakar, where we will stay overnight in a beautiful wooden guesthouse.

**Day 7** Today we will arrive at the second highest pass of the journey, the Thrumsing La, which, although situated at 3700m, is still shrouded in thick hemlock and rhododendron forest. A very high treeline (around 4000m) is a feature of the Eastern Himalayas, a consequence of the monsoons that come up from the Bay of Bengal and bestow a large amount of rainfall on these mountains. The pass is frequented by some high-altitude birds such as the beautiful Blood Pheasant, the strikingly-patterned Snow Pigeon,

Spotted Laughingthrush, Goldcrest, Golden Bush Robin, Rufous-vented Tit and Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch. As we descend we can see forested ridges stretching away as far as the eye can see. Immediately below us will be a forested mountainside, so steep that if it was not for the fact that a narrow road winds its way down it, by means of numerous hairpin bends, it would be inaccessible to all but the hardest and most agile of adventurers. This is the area that has been dubbed the 'Lingmethang Road' by the few lucky ornithologists to have reached this Shangri-la of Himalayan birding. We will camp along the road for the next five nights, spending two nights in the upper levels and three nights much lower down.

**Days 8-11** The 'Lingmethang Road' bisects every forest altitudinal zone between 3700m and the valley bottom at 650m, an incredible drop of 3050m in just 79 kilometres! Very few birdwatchers can say they have visited this remote area and yet it holds some of the most sought-after Himalayan species. The list of birds here is large and diverse, and our tally will include many species characteristic of the Eastern Himalayas. We shall, however, be concentrating on a number of prime specialities. The calls of Ward's Trogon, a montane species entirely restricted to the Eastern Himalayas, are soft but quite far-carrying and we are likely to hear this wonderful bird before a vision of pink heralds the arrival of a male in a nearby forest giant. Rufous-necked Hornbills still survive here and can be seen slowly flapping their way along the ridges, or perched in the top of a tall tree. Satyr Tragopans are not uncommon here and with a modicum of luck we will be able to observe the deep red, white spotted male of this amazing pheasant,

*Gould's Shortwing (Craig Robson)*

which can often be quite unconcerned by the presence of human beings. The skulking Blue-fronted Robin is easily heard but hard to get good views of as it flits from one perch to another amongst the undergrowth. Rather easier are the noisy bands of Yellow-throated Fulvetta and Grey-cheeked Warblers that are a conspicuous part of the avifauna in the lower levels. The large Greater Rufous-headed Parrotbill tends to go around in noisy groups, often keeping company with Rusty-fronted Barwings, while other bird waves often contain smart White-naped Yuhinas. As always, wren-babblers are a delight to watch and we will enjoy seeing Rufous-throated Wren-Babblers bobbing up and down and, if we are fortunate, Long-billed or Bar-winged Wren-Babblers, or the strange Sikkim Wedge-billed Babbler, singing away in a roadside ravine. Coral-billed Scimitar-Babblers like to hack away at wild bananas in search of insects, but the amazing Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler clambers up and down creeper-infested tree trunks, probing into the deepest crevices with its extraordinarily long and finely curved bill. Deep in the bamboos, Broad-billed Warblers call thinly, only occasionally venturing out onto the edge of the clump. Other species include Crested Goshawk, Mountain

Hawk Eagle, Large Hawk-Cuckoo, Lesser and Drongo Cuckoos, the dazzling Asian Emerald Cuckoo, Asian Barred Owllet, Red-headed Trogon, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Crimson-breasted and Bay Woodpeckers, Oriental Skylark, Nepal House Martin, Grey-chinned Minivet, Striated Bulbul, Streak-breasted and Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babblers, Scaly-breasted and Pygmy Wren-Babblers, Golden Babbler, Black-throated Parrotbill, White-crested, Rufous-necked, Grey-sided and Scaly Laughingthrushes, the near-endemic Bhutan Laughingthrush (split from Streaked), Cutia, White-browed and Black-eared Shrike-Babblers, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Black-chinned Yuhina, the stunning little Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Dark-sided, Little Pied, Blue-throated, Pygmy Blue and Pale Blue Flycatchers, the shy Sapphire Flycatcher, the secretive White-gorgeted Flycatcher, Large and Rufous-bellied Niltavas, Yellow-bellied Fantail, the miniscule Chestnut-headed Tesia, Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler, Hill Prinia, Large-billed Leaf, Chestnut-crowned and Black-faced Warblers, White-browed and Lesser Shortwings, White-tailed Robin, Grey-winged Blackbird, Yellow-cheeked Tit, White-tailed Nuthatch, Brown-throated Treecreeper, Oriental White-eye, Lesser

Racket-tailed Drongo, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch and Crimson-browed Finch. If we are lucky we will find Black-headed Shrike-Babbler or the dapper Gold-naped Finch. Hill, Rufous-throated and Chestnut-breasted Partridges can regularly be heard calling from the hillsides, and with luck we should see at least one of these wary species. We have even been fortunate enough to once come across a Gould's Shortwing pausing on its way to its breeding grounds above the treeline.

**Day 12** We shall spend most of the day on the lower reaches of the Lingmethang Road before crossing the Kuri Chu river and climbing up to Mongar where we will stay the night in an hotel. As we drop into the drier and partly cultivated part of the Kuri Chu valley, we should find Spotted Dove, Common Cuckoo, Long-tailed Shrike, Oriental Magpie Robin, Red-vented Bulbul, Striated Prinia, Blue Rock Thrush and Crested Bunting.

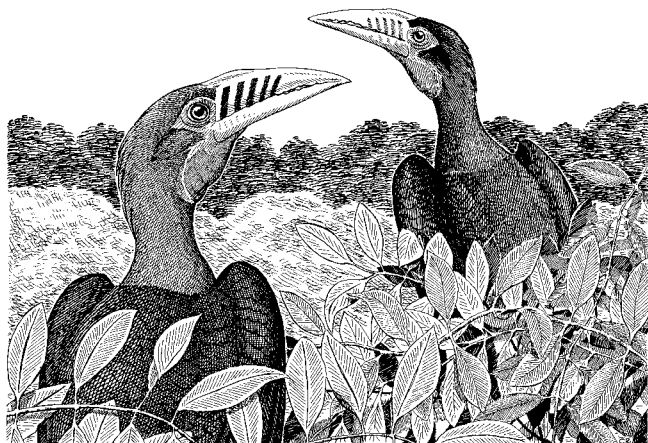
**Day 13** Early today we will drive up to the nearby Kori La, one of the last high passes on our route. Here the forest is rich with moss and orchids, and the bamboo forms a dense undergrowth below the evergreen broadleaf forest. Birds we may find here include Speckled Woodpigeon, Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Red-billed Leiothrix, Grey-winged Blackbird, Spotted Forktail, Grey-bellied Tesia, Mountain Tailorbird, Scarlet Finch and Brown Bullfinch. Later we will continue eastwards to Tashigang (1150m), a large village (but the capital of eastern Bhutan!), dominated by the impressive Tashigang Dzong,, for an overnight stay. On the way we will keep an eye open for Himalayan Bulbul and also for Himalayan Goral, a sure-footed mountain goat that favours steep grassy slopes.

**Day 14** Leaving Tashigang

district, we wind our way southwards into the hills of south-eastern Bhutan to the Deothang area for a further two nights camping. The Eastern Himalayas are the most diverse part of that mighty mountain range, and their steep profile means that from the plains to the highest peaks the distance can be as little as 80 kilometres in places. We will pass through more forest on the way and will stop to look for Indian Blue Robin and anything else of interest. There is also a chance we will encounter the rare and little known Ludlow's (or Brown-throated) Fulvetta along this stretch of the highway. As we head southwards along a narrow ridge, the plains of Assam become visible in the distance.

**Day 15** Around the small garrison town of Deothang much of the land has been cleared of its foothill forest, but at higher altitudes some magnificent subtropical forest can still be found by the roadsides. The star attraction of this fine area is Beautiful Nuthatch, which survives here at one of its few known

*Beautiful Nuthatch (Craig Robson)*



*Rufous-necked Hornbills (Craig Robson)*

localities. We have a fairly good chance of encountering this mega-star amongst the taller trees, probably being first alerted by its remarkably loud call, although how long this habitat-sensitive species will continue to hang on here in the face of the steady clearance of Bhutan's foothill forest is seriously open to question. Already the squatters are moving in. Amongst the other birds we may well encounter in the area are the magnificent Black Eagle, Bar-tailed Cuckoo-Dove, the secretive but noisy Whistling Hawk-Cuckoo (split from Hodgson's), White-throated Needletail, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Common Green Magpie, Blue-winged Laughingthrush, Red-faced Liocichla, Silver-eared Mesia, Striated Yuhina, Long-tailed Sibia and Streaked Spiderhunter. We should also encounter the magnificent Rufous-necked Hornbill once again.

**Day 16** After spending most

of the day above Deothang we will descend to Samdrup Jongkhar, a border town which lies at the juncture of the Brahmaputra plains and the Himalayas at an altitude of only 300m, for a two nights stay.

**Day 17** Quite remarkably, the Bhutanese side of the border still has some forest at this low altitude and so we shall be able to enjoy some foothill forest birding. As we explore the mountains that hang in the pre-monsoon haze above the Assamese plains, we will look for species that we may not have encountered elsewhere on our journey, such as Oriental (or Crested) Honey Buzzard, Thick-billed, Wedge-tailed and Pin-tailed Green Pigeons, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Emerald Dove, Indian, Plaintive, Banded Bay and Violet Cuckoos, Green-billed Malkoha, Asian Palm Swift, Dollarbird, Wreathed, Great and Oriental Pied Hornbills, Blue-throated and Blue-eared

Barbets, Speckled Piculet, Rufous and Grey-capped Woodpeckers, the gorgeous Long-tailed Broadbill, Large Woodshrike, Scarlet Minivet, Common Iora, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Asian Fairy-Bluebird, Black-crested, White-throated, Red-whiskered and Ashy Bulbuls, Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush, White-browed Scimitar Babbler, Grey-throated Babbler, Striped Tit-Babbler, Black-naped Monarch, Rufescent Prinia, Common Tailorbird, Yellow-bellied Warbler, White-rumped Shama, Bronzed and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, Common Hill Myna, Black-backed Forktail, Sultan Tit and Crimson Sunbird. The little-known Dark-rumped Swift is regularly seen here, and Blyth's Kingfisher, another highly localized species, is occasionally encountered.

**Day 18** Leaving Bhutan at Samdrup Jongkhar, we will cross into Assam and drive across the flat plain to the capital of this Indian state, Gauhati, which lies on the mighty Brahmaputra River. Many plains species will be new for us after our long spell in the mountains, and in particular we should see Little Cormorant, Indian Pond Heron, Eastern Cattle, Great, Intermediate and Little Egrets, Asian Openbill, the huge and ugly Greater Adjutant (now a critically endangered species), Lesser Adjutant, Lesser Whistling Duck, Garganey, Black and Black-eared Kites, White-rumped Vulture, the endangered Slender-billed Vulture (split from Indian or Long-billed), Grey-headed Swamphen (split from Purple), Bronze-winged Jacana, Red-wattled Lapwing,

Rose-ringed Parakeet, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Indian Roller, Richard's Pipit, Zitting Cisticola, Striated Grassbird, Black-hooded Oriole, Black Drongo, Ashy Wood-Swallow, Asian Pied Starling, Jungle Myna, House Crow and Eastern Jungle Crow (split from Large-billed). In the early evening we will catch a flight back to Delhi where the tour ends.

#### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotels/guesthouses are mostly of normal Birdquest standard. The guesthouse at Tashigang and the hotel at Samdrup Jongkhar, are clean but pretty simple establishments, although all rooms have private bathrooms. On the Lingmethang Road and in the Deothang area we will camp for a total of seven nights in a total of three different localities, all arrangements being made by our competent and friendly Bhutanese camp staff. Sleeping tents are 2-person size (but are available for single occupancy) and we will also have toilet tents, a shower tent and a large dining tent, so the whole experience is quite comfortable and the settings often delightful. Road transport is by small coach and roads are reasonably good (with very little traffic).

**Walking:** The walking effort is easy to moderate.

**Climate:** Conditions at this season range from fairly hot at lower altitudes to warm at middle altitudes and cool or even cold at high altitudes. Sunny periods alternate with wet and overcast conditions.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities are worthwhile.