

EAGLENEST & BEYOND

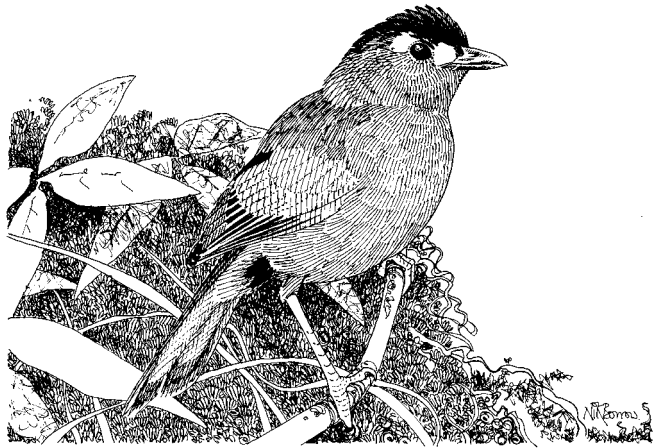
The New Himalayan 'Hot Spot'

Saturday 16th April – Sunday 1st May 2011 (16 days)

Leader: Hannu Jännes

Group Size Limit: 9

Tour Category: Easy at times, but mostly Moderate



Bugun Liocichla (Nik Borrow)

Imagine stunning mountain scenery and birding along a drivable jeep track through magical, untouched old-growth montane forest, where waves of beautiful birds sweep by, and almost every turn brings another rarely-seen Eastern Himalayan speciality!

This dream can now become a reality with this exciting tour to the amazing Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, situated just a stone's throw to the east of the Bhutan border, in western Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India. It was here that the most sensational ornithological discovery in India for over half a century was recently made, in the form of a new species for science, the beautiful Bugun Liocichla. Add to this a visit to the little known Dirang region to the north, and Nameri National Park to the southeast, and you will have the opportunity to taste the full range of northeast India's rich birdlife.

Arunachal Pradesh is now recognised as one of the world's top biodiversity hotspots, the profusion of species being due to its unique

location (at the junction of the Palearctic Region with both the Indo-Malayan and Indian sub-regions of the Oriental Region), topographical range (with 7000m peaks on its northern border with Tibet, looking down on the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam which, just 150 kilometres away, has an elevation of only 100m or so), and high rainfall.

We begin this mouth-watering tour at Nameri National Park, on the edge of the Assam Plains. Based at a comfortable tented safari-style camp, we will be searching, amongst a wide range of lower elevation species, for the rare White-winged Duck, as well as the restricted-range White-cheeked Partridge and Pied Falconet.

From Nameri, we will penetrate deep into the main Himalayan range, winding our way through deep valleys, to Dirang, a small town situated along the road to the famed Buddhist monastery at Tawang. Based at Dirang, we will reach our highest altitudes of the trip, notably when we ascend to almost 4200m at the Sela Pass, one

of the highest road-passes in the Himalayas. Here, we will seek out Snow Partridge, Blood Pheasant, Himalayan Monal and Grandala, while closer to Dirang, in the Sangti Valley and along the wonderful Mandala road, we will find species ranging from Long-billed Plover and Ibisbill to Bhutan Laughingthrush, Ludlow's Fulvetta and Fire-tailed Myzornis.

Finally, we will move on to Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, the main focus of the tour. We will use three established camps for bases, have vehicles at our disposal throughout, and the walking effort will generally be easy. There is no need to trek at Eaglenest because of the good road access, and we aim for maximum comfort and flexibility. Along a drivable jeep track through the awe-inspiring forests, we will be searching for a mouth-watering selection of Eastern Himalayan gems, ranging from Chestnut-breasted Partridge, Blyth's Tragopan and Ward's Trogon, to Long-billed and Rufous-throated Wren-Babblers, Sikkim Wedge-billed Babbler and Beautiful Nuthatch. We will, of course, make a particular effort to see the recently described Bugun Liocichla, which is still only known from Eaglenest and its border areas. All in all this wonderful new area offers disciples of Himalayan birding an extraordinary experience.

Birdquest has operated

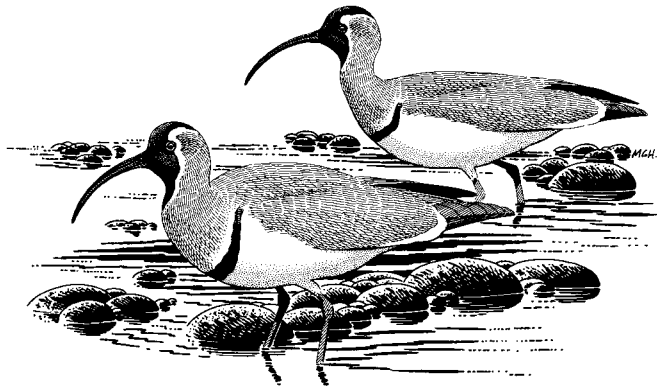
tours to northeast India since 1989.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this morning in Guwahati, the capital of Assam. We will arrive at Delhi in the morning and connect with an onward flight to Guwahati, the capital of Assam. From here we will drive to Nameri National Park for a two nights stay at a comfortable safari-style, permanent tented camp. Along the way, a range of commoner Indian birds will be on show in the fields and along the roadside, such as Asian Openbill, Great and Eastern Cattle Egrets, Black and Black-shouldered Kites, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Black Drongo, Ashy Woodswallow, and House and Eastern Jungle Crows (the latter split from Large-billed).

Day 2 Covering some 200 square kilometres of undulating forested terrain, bisected by the Jia Bhareli River, Nameri National Park has varied forest and woodland habitats covering some 94% of its area, while there are also areas of open grassland and marshland, and the various rivers have sandy riverbanks and gravel bars. Ornithologically, the main attraction is the small population of the endangered White-winged Duck. As we search for this unpredictable species, much of our time





Ibisbills (Michael Hodgson)

will be spent across the river from our camp in a mosaic of forest, small pools and grassland patches. Two other major specialities occur here; White-cheeked Partridge, which we are sure to hear giving its loud territorial calls, and the notoriously difficult Blue-naped Pitta. If we see either of these mega-skulkers, we will count ourselves extremely lucky. A variety of raptors hunt the more open country, including the impressive but threatened Pallas's Fish-Eagle, as well as more widespread species like Oriental (or Crested) Honey-Buzzard, Crested Serpent Eagle, Shikra, Common Kestrel and Peregrine Falcon, while the sleek Oriental Hobby and fierce little Pied Falconet can often be found spying for prey from exposed perches. The clearings also provide habitat for a variety of other birds, such as Black-billed Roller (a potential split from Indian), Common Hoopoe, the scarce Bengal Bushlark, the wintering Siberian Stonechat, Grey Bushchat, Paddyfield Pipit, Brown and Grey-backed Shrikes, and Blue Rock-Thrush. Nameri is a great place for pigeons, with Oriental Turtle-Dove, Spotted Dove, Barred Cuckoo-Dove, Emerald Dove, Pin-tailed and Ashy-headed Green-Pigeons (the latter split from Pampadour), and Green Imperial Pigeon all likely. Woodpeckers are unsurprisingly also well

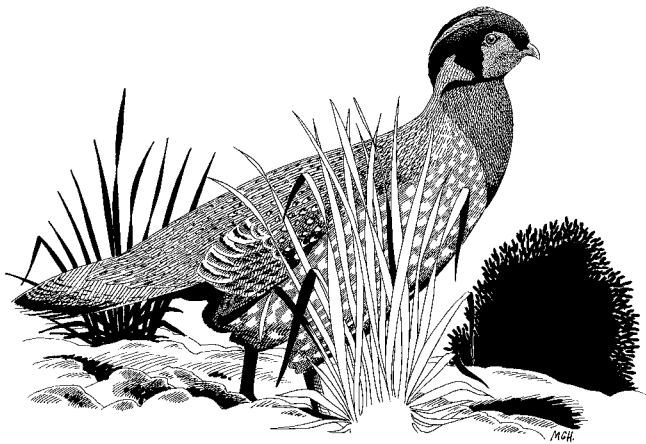
represented, and we should at least see Grey-capped Pygmy, Rufous, Grey-headed (or Grey-faced), Lesser Yellownappe, and Greater Flameback. A number of classic lowland tropical forest species such as Red Junglefowl, Vernal Hanging Parrot, and Great and Wreathed Hornbills can be quite easy to see here. The early mornings see a lot of activity along the forest edge. Green-billed Malkohas flop around in the thicker foliage, while the diminutive Sapphire Flycatcher can be tracked-down by its rattling call, often on a lofty exposed perch. Foraging mixed flocks of passerines contain Black-winged Cuckooshrike, Pied Flycatcher-Shrike, Long-tailed and Scarlet Minivets, Large Woodshrike, White-throated Fantail, the babbler-like White-throated Bulbul, Common Iora, Blue-winged, Golden-fronted and Orange-bellied Leafbirds, Sultan Tit, Yellow-browed, Greenish and Grey-hooded Warblers, Chestnut-bellied and Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, Plain Flowerpecker, the scintillating Crimson Sunbird, Oriental White-eye, and Black-hooded and Maroon Orioles. Inside the forest itself, the undergrowth and middle forest storeys hold a variety of smaller and more skulking species, including Pale-chinned Flycatcher, Lesser Shortwing, White-rumped Shama, Abbott's, Puff-throated and Striped Tit-Babblers,

and the jaunty Grey-bellied Tesia, and we will also have a chance of finding the very secretive Blue-naped Pitta and Dark-sided Ground-Thrush. Exploration of the river system and adjacent grassland patches should bring us typical residents such as Indian Spot-billed Duck, Little Ringed Plover, River and Red-wattled Lapwings, Small Pratincole, River Tern, Lesser Coucal, Common, White-throated and Pied Kingfishers, Grey-throated Sand-Martin (split from Brown-throated), Sand Lark, Himalayan Wagtail, Blue Whistling-Thrush, Chestnut-capped and Striated Babblers, Yellow-bellied and Plain Prinias, and Striated Grassbird, and we have a good chance of seeing Brown Crake and Great Thick-knee. There will also be a variety of non-breeding waterbirds to identify, such as Ruddy Shelduck, Goosander (or Common Merganser), Common Moorhen, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper and Temminck's Stint. Wintering Palearctic passerines that inhabit the scrub and edge habitats between the river and forest, or the riverbanks, may include Amur Wagtail, Red-throated (or Taiga) Flycatcher, Siberian Rubythroat, Bluethroat, Hodgson's Redstart, and Thick-billed and Dusky Warblers, while the more difficult Brownish-flanked and Russet Bush-Warblers are probably both resident. At dawn and dusk we will become accustomed to the sound of the crepuscular Asian Barred Owl and, after nightfall, we will search the camp area for the more nocturnal species that reside here, including Oriental Scops-Owl, Brown Boobook and Large-tailed Nightjar. Other species that we should find at Nameri include Little and Great Cormorants, Little Egret, Indian Pond and Striated (or Little) Herons, White-breasted Waterhen, Rose-ringed and Red-breasted Parakeets, Greater Coucal, Himalayan Swiftlet, Asian

Palm-Swift, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Great, Lineated and Blue-throated Barbets, Black-crested, Red-whiskered, Red-vented and Himalayan Black Bulbuls, Grey-breasted Prinia, Common Tailorbird, Chestnut-tailed Starling, Common, Jungle and White-vented Mynas, Common Hill-Myna, Asian Fairy-Bluebird, and Ashy and Hair-crested Drongos. If we are fortunate, we will see a Black-backed Forktail or some returning migrant Spot-winged Starlings.

Day 3 After we say our goodbyes to Nameri National Park, we will head northwest to Dirang for a five nights stay. Along the way we will have brief opportunities for birding in the extensive pristine forests of Pakke Tiger Reserve and Sessa Orchid Sanctuary, which both abut the road. We will also pause at a cliff where the secretive Yellow-rumped Honeyguide has been seen in recent years.

Days 4-7 Some 25km west of Bomdila, at the boundary between West Kameng and Tawang districts, lies Dirang, our birding base for sorties into the Sangti Valley and along the Mandala and Sela Pass roads. The Sangti Valley, which is only a short drive away, supports India's only known wintering flock of the threatened Black-necked Crane. Unfortunately, the cranes are usually gone by early March, but there will be plenty of other interesting species to search for, in particular, the tricky Black-tailed Crake, which can still be found in small patches of marshy rank grass and reeds. At 1500-1600m elevation, this dry-flanked valley has a selection of habitats varying from pine and broadleaved woodland and cultivation to riverine shingle banks. A variety of flycatchers, such as Rufous-gorgeted, Slaty-backed, Little Pied, Ultramarine and Grey-headed Canary, inhabit groves of broadleaved trees, while flowering oaks sometimes



Temminck's Tragopan (Michael Hodgson)

attract the nomadic Fire-capped Tit. Small mixed flocks of leaf-warblers often hold Lemon-rumped Warblers, and these are joined by Black-throated (or Red-headed) and Green-backed Tits, and Brown-throated Treecreeper. The valley-cultivation provides a winter home for Olive-backed and Rosy Pipits, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Blue-fronted Redstart, Little Bunting, and Himalayan (or Yellow-breasted) Greenfinch, while Oriental Skylark, Long-tailed Shrike, Russet Sparrow and Crested Bunting breed in the area. The boulder-strewn rivers and streams provide suitable habitat for the wonderful Ibisbill, Crested Kingfisher, Plumbeous Water-Redstart, White-capped River-Chat, Little Forktail and Brown Dipper, as well as Long-billed Plover and Wallcreeper. Other species that we should find here are Himalayan Buzzard (split from Common), Black-throated Prinia (split from Hill) and Large-billed Crow.

A steep winding road leads some 60 km from Dirang up to the Sela Pass which, at 4176 m, is one of the highest motorable passes in the Himalayas. As we thread our way through the steep forested valleys, we will gradually ascend through changing habitat zones, finally emerging above the

conifer-dominated treeline at the barren and rocky pass. By the time of our visit, the temperatures should be rising, and the snows melting, and we will hopefully be treated to a stunning view of rugged peaks stretching away as far as the eye can see. In the open landscape above the treeline, we will be on the lookout for the well-camouflaged Snow Partridge, flocks of Snow Pigeons and the curious Grandala, which looks like a cross between a thrush and a starling. Himalayan Griffon Vulture may be seen soaring around the slopes. Closer to the forest limit, we will scan the slopes for that classic montane pheasant, the Himalayan Monal, and listen for its curlew-like cries. Moving back down to the upper forest levels, sprinkled with conifers and birch, we will explore a series of tracks and trails in search of the superb Blood Pheasant. Busy bird-waves contain Coal (crested here), Rufous-vented and Grey-crested Tits. Scrub at the forest edge provides cover for birds like the restricted range Rufous-breasted Bush-Robin and the boldly-marked Bar-winged Wren-Babbler. Other species that we will be looking for are White-throated Dipper (which here replaces Brown Dipper along fast flowing streams), Winter Wren, Alpine Accentor,

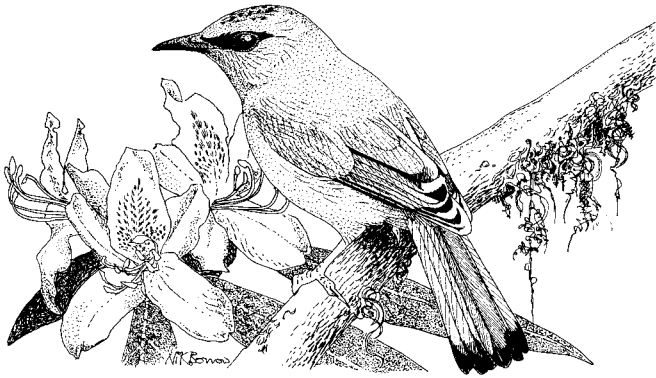
White-throated Redstart, Spotted Laughingthrush, Goldcrest, Plain and Brandt's Mountain-Finches, Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch, White-winged Grosbeak and Red-billed Chough.

Our third venue in this remote region, barely known ornithologically, will be the wonderful Mandala Road, which climbs from Dirang Dzong (just south of Dirang) up through temperate broadleaved evergreen forest, then oak-rhododendron forest with bamboo, to conifer-clad ridge-tops at 3200m. Birding from the narrow road, we will sample the birdlife of all the habitat zones between 1700 and 3200m. Early mornings on the cool ridge-tops see a flurry of bird activity. Mixed flocks of tits, small babblers, including the localized Ludlow's Fulvetta, and Ashy-throated Warblers work through the open forest, and are often joined by Rusty-flanked and Hodgson's Treecreepers (the latter a recent split from Eurasian), Stripe-throated and Rufous-vented Yuhinas, and Buff-barred Warblers. Thrushes and chats are often in evidence, notably White-collared Blackbird, Black-throated Thrush, Blue-capped Rock Thrush and Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail. Spotted Nutcrackers utter their raucous but atmospheric calls from exposed conifer branches. The rich broadleaved evergreen forests still have some fantastic large trees, smothered in moss and epiphytes. Birds that we will expect to find include Himalayan Cuckoo and Darjeeling and Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, while Striated Bulbul and the cheeky White-tailed Nuthatch are also around. Thicker vegetation along the forest edge is a good place to look for the restricted-range Bhutan Laughingthrush (split from Streaked), as well as the rather more retiring Grey-sided and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes, the latter of the highly distinctive *nigrimentum* race,

and we will also be on the lookout for Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, Rufous-capped Babbler, Red-billed Leiothrix, Bar-throated Minla, the exquisite Golden-breasted Fulvetta (that quintessential Eastern Himalayan gem), Rufous-winged Fulvetta, Beautiful Sibia, Whiskered Yuhina, waves of noisy Black-faced Warblers, Rufous-fronted, Green-backed, Yellow-cheeked and Yellow-browed Tits, Green-tailed Sunbird, and Red-headed and Grey-headed Bullfinches. Small gullies and overgrown log-piles shelter Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler and Chestnut-headed Tesia. Scrubby areas, close to the bottom of the road, are a good place to look for the rather skulking Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush, as well as Russet, Grey-sided and Brownish-flanked Bush-Warblers, while the streams provide habitat for Spotted Forktail. Bamboo brakes are frequent all along the road and, in these, we have a good chance of seeing Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler and the tiny but super-energetic Black-throated Parrotbill. During our exploration of the



Ward's Trogons (Craig Robson)



Fire-tailed Myzornis (Nik Borrow)

area we will constantly be on the lookout for the amazing Fire-tailed Myzornis, which often seeks out flowering rhododendrons or tree-sap, sometimes in company with the lurid Fire-tailed Sunbird. We should also run into some of the scarcer species of the area, which include Temminck's Tragopan, the sultry Speckled Wood Pigeon, the beautiful Ward's Trogon, Great and Fulvous Parrotbills, Dark-breasted and Dark-rumped Rosefinches, Brown Bullfinch and Tibetan Siskin. The superb Red Panda has also been seen in the area, though we would count ourselves extremely lucky to see one.

Day 8 This morning we will drive south via Bomdila and Tenga to Lamacamp, situated at 2350m at the edge of Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, for the first of our seven nights under canvas. In the afternoon, we will begin our exploration of the sanctuary.

Days 9-14 Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary covers some 218 square kilometres and spans an altitudinal range of 500–3200m. The big advantage that Eaglenest has over other wilderness areas in Arunachal Pradesh is its combination of altitudinal range and easy access, with a drivable jeep track cutting through the sanctuary from its base at 500m altitude to the Eaglenest Pass at 2800m. The selection of Eastern Himalayan

specialities in this area and the paucity of visitors has combined to give the place a magical, almost mythical quality, with the allure of untried trails in wonderful temperate forests where few foreigners have ventured. In places, the broadleaved evergreen forest exhibits a pristine tight canopy which stretches unbroken as far as the eye can see. We will base ourselves at three well-established campsites: Lamacamp, Bompou (1940m) and Sessni (1255m). All of our time in the sanctuary will be spent exploring the rich, and largely untouched, montane broadleaved evergreen forest, with areas of bamboo, secondary growth, and scrub. At the higher levels, there will also be conifers, while at the lower levels the broadleaved forests become more sub-tropical, and there are also clearings and areas of upland agriculture. In late 2006 the first new species to be discovered in the Indian subcontinent for many decades, was described in the form of the beautiful Bugun Liocichla. We will be making a special effort to find this rare Indian endemic which is so far is almost exclusively known from the Lamacamp area! During early spring, many birds are likely to still be massed together in roving bird-waves, which typically include (depending on elevation) Speckled and White-browed Piculets,

Greater Yellow-nape, Long-tailed Broadbill, Grey-chinned and Short-billed Minivets, Yellow-bellied Fantail, Striated Laughingthrush, Golden and Grey-throated Babblers, Rusty-fronted and Streak-throated Barwings, Blue-winged and Red-tailed Minlas, Nepal Fulvetta, Striated and Black-chinned Yuhinas, White-bellied Erpornis, White-browed, Green and Black-eared Shrike-Babblers, Yellow-vented, Chestnut-crowned, Grey-cheeked, Green-crowned and Whistler's Warblers (the latter two split from Golden-spectacled), Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Black-breasted Sunbird, Streaked Spiderhunter, and Bronzed, Lesser Racket-tailed and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, with a sprinkling of gems like Himalayan Cutia, Yellow-throated Fulvetta, Rufous-backed and Long-tailed Sibias, White-naped Yuhina, Black-headed Shrike-Babbler, the much sought-after Beautiful Nuthatch, and Mrs Gould's Sunbird amongst them. The list of galliformes at Eaglenest is impressive, with three species of hill-partridge, Common, Rufous-throated and the restricted-range Chestnut-breasted all possible, while pheasants include the wonderful Temminck's and Blyth's Tragopans, along with the more widespread Kalij Pheasant and Grey Peacock-Pheasant. We should find a number of these species, though seeing them will require patience and our success rate will also depend on luck. New raptors that we will hope to find include Crested Goshawk and Black and Mountain Hawk-Eagles. The Eastern Himalayas is also a great place to see flycatchers, and we should find Dark-sided, Slaty-blue, Ultramarine, Snowy-browed, White-gorgeted, Pale Blue, and Pygmy Blue Flycatchers, as well as Large, Small and Rufous-bellied Niltavas. In the middle storey of the forest and in the canopy, will be frugivores like the striking Rufous-necked Hornbill, Mountain Imperial-Pigeon, Golden-throated Barbet, and Ashy and Mountain Bulbuls, as well as the manic Large Hawk-Cuckoo. Careful scanning of the mid-storey may well be rewarded with a sighting of the superbly pink Ward's Trogon, which is well distributed here in the moss-draped stands of old growth forest. Dense vegetation bordering the jeep-track harbours such gripping birds as Golden and White-browed Bush-Robins, Crimson-faced Liocichla (split from Red-faced), Long-billed, Rufous-throated and Spotted Wren-Babblers, Sikkim Wedge-billed (or Blackish-breasted) Babbler, Hume's Bush-Warbler (split from Yellowish-bellied), Broad-billed Warbler, Crimson-browed, Scarlet and Gold-naped Finches, and Slaty-bellied and Grey-bellied Tesias. The understorey just inside the forest is home to Eyebrowed and Pygmy Wren-Babblers, and Rusty-capped Fulvetta, while the many streams hold Slaty-backed Forktail. In areas of bamboo, at varying elevations, we will be looking for Pale-headed Woodpecker, the black-capped nominate race of the Coral-billed Scimitar-Babbler (a potential split), R White-browed Scimitar-Babbler, Indian White-hooded Babbler, Brown, Greater Rufous-headed Parrotbill, Yellow-bellied and Rufous-faced Warblers, and the rather retiring White-spectacled Warbler. We should also see Red-headed Trogon, Bay Woodpecker, Darjeeling and Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers, Large Cuckooshrike, White-browed Shortwing, White-tailed and Blue-fronted Blue-Robins, Chestnut-bellied and Blue-capped Rock-Thrushes, White-crested, Scaly, Black-faced and Blue-winged Laughingthrushes, Silver-eared Mesia, Mountain and Dark-necked Tailorbirds, Dark-breasted and Dark-rumped Rosefinches, Grey-headed Bullfinch, Yellow-billed Blue and Green Magpies, and Grey Treepie. At dawn and dusk



Himalayan Cutias (Craig Robson)

me may be lucky enough to see thrushes venturing onto the jeep-track, with the local selection including Small-billed Scaly, Plain-backed, and Long-tailed Thrushes, and Grey-winged Blackbird. There is a range of excellent nightbirds at Eaglenest, including Mountain Scops-Owl, Brown and Himalayan Wood-Owls (the latter split from Tawny), Collared Owlet, Grey Nightjar and Hodgson's Frogmouth, and although all of these area easily heard,

we will have our work cut-out trying to see them all. With perseverance and a bit of luck, we should also get a look at a few of the tougher inhabitants of the area, which include Long-billed Thrush, Purple Cochoa, Gould's and Rusty-bellied Shortwings, Rufous-vented Laughingthrush, Maroon-backed Accentor and Brown Bullfinch.

Day 15 After some final birding at wonderful

Eaglenest we will return to Nameri for an overnight stay.

Day 16 After some early morning birding at Nameri we will drive back to Guwahati, where we will have an opportunity to look for the endangered Greater Adjutant, which breeds nearby, along with the more widespread Lesser Adjutant, before the tour ends late this afternoon.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotel at Dirang is of normal Birdquest standard. The tented camp at Nameri is an African-style safari camp with large, comfortable, walk-in tents with attached brick-built bathrooms, a pleasant dining area and attentive staff. For eight nights at Eaglenest we will stay in simple tented camps specially erected by our friendly local camp staff. Sleeping tents are of the large, 2-person, walk-in size with two camp beds (but are available for single occupancy). We will also

have toilet shelters, wash shelters and a large dining shelter (fixed structures will be used where available). Hot water is available in buckets/bowls for washing on demand. So the whole experience is quite comfortable and the settings delightful. Road transport is by large, jeep-like cars and roads are variable in quality (on average good, although the track through Eaglenest is quite rough in places).

Walking: The walking effort is easy to moderate.

Climate: In the Himalayas it is cold to warm, and sunny periods alternate with occasional wet and overcast spells. It will be distinctly cold at night at higher elevations and there may even be some snow. Conditions at this season in the plains and low foothills are typically hot, dry and sunny, but it is sometimes overcast and cooler.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are worthwhile.