

## Bhutan Itinerary

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### Tour Overview

Nestled in the magnificent Himalayas, between India and Tibet, lies the seemingly timeless Kingdom of Bhutan. A magical country steeped in tradition, folklore and deep-seated Buddhist beliefs, Bhutan has in recent years opened her borders to travelers and naturalists. Enjoy huge tracts of Himalayan forest, snow-capped mountain ranges and the often approachable and exceptional wildlife, and experience the traditional cultural this country has to offer with visits to monasteries and temples.

We will experience some of the finest birding in the Himalayas! We will likely see over 250 species as we search for Satyr Tragopan, Ward's Trogon, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Himalayan Monal, Ibisbill, Wallcreeper and Beautiful Nuthatch, as well as, many mammals and exquisite flowers.

An outstanding Bhutan birding tour to an outstanding birding destination that still maintains fascinating traditional practices and beliefs.

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### Itinerary

#### Day 1: Arrival

Our Bhutan birding tour starts on arrival in Delhi, India. Overnight in Delhi.

#### Day 2: Flight to Guwahati, drive to Samdrup Jongkhar

We take a morning flight from Delhi to Guwahati, the largest city in the state of Assam, located on the south shore of the Brahmaputra River. We leave Guwahati along busy roads packed with cars, street hawkers and rickshaws, cross the Brahmaputra River, and continue across the Indian plain of Assam. We look out for Little Cormorant, egrets, Indian Pond Heron, Ashy Drongo and Red-wattled Lapwing in roadside wetlands, with possible sightings of Small Pratincole, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Citrine Wagtail, Rusty-rumped Warbler and Striated Grassbird. We will also make a special effort to find Lesser and Greater Adjutants, both highly endangered species. We enter Bhutan, complete the immigration process at the border, and enter the town of Samdrup Jongkhar where we spend the night. Overnight in Samdrup Jongkhar.

### **Day 3: Samdrup Jongkhar to Morong**

We spend the morning exploring lowland forest between Samdrup Jongkhar and Deothang. This forest is remarkably rich and diverse; target species here include the rare Dark-rumped Swift, Pied Falconet, Jungle Babbler, Large Hawk Cuckoo, Pin-tailed Green Pigeon, Wreathed and Great Hornbill and Puff-throated Babbler. In the afternoon, we start climbing from the foothills, perhaps encountering Long-tailed Sibia, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Blue-winged Laughingthrush, Common Green Magpie, Silver-eared Mesia, and several species of cuckoos. In the evening we will look for one of the main target birds in Bhutan, the Beautiful Nuthatch. Overnight at the Morong Campsite, at 1710m.

### **Day 4: Morong to Trashigang**

We will have a before-breakfast outing back to the location of the Beautiful Nuthatch if we didn't find it yesterday. After breakfast at the campsite, we make our way to Trashigang stopping along the way for birding. Today's target species will include Rufous-necked Hornbill, Grey-sided Laughingthrush, Long-tailed Broadbill with other possibilities such as Black Eagle, Mountain Hawk Eagle and species of yuhinas. Overnight in Trashigang.

### **Day 5: Trashigang to Kori La to Mongar to Yongkala**

En route to Yongkala, we stop at Kori La. The forest here is rich in mosses and lichens, and we search these mountain forests for Steak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, Grey-winged Blackbird, Hoary-throated Barwing, Long-tailed and Short-billed Minivets, Bhutan Laughingthrush, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler and Spotted Wren-Babbler. In the afternoon we will reach Bhutan's wet subtropical forest and one of the finest birding areas in the Himalayas, at Campsite Yongkala, for a three-night stay. We bird these lush forested valleys searching for shortwings, Black-headed Shrike-Babbler, Ward's Trogon, Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, barbets, Golden Bush Robin, Chestnut-breasted Partridge and many other rare species alongside Little Forktail, Large Niltava, Russet Bush-Warbler, Chestnut-breasted Partridge, Violet Cuckoo and Rufous-faced Warbler. Overnight at the Campsite Yongkala (1875m).

### **Days 6-7: Yongkala; the Limithang Road**

We spend two full days birding along this incredible 80 km long road, ranked amongst the ten top birding sites in the world, with waterfalls and ravines appearing around every bend. We search for the area's specialties such as Wedge-billed Wren-Babbler, Rufous-throated Wren-Babbler, Spotted Wren-Babbler, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Coral-billed Scimitar-Babbler, Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler, flocks of parrotbills, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Scarlet Finch, Slaty-bellied Tesia, Lesser and White-browed Shortwings and many more. Overnight at the Campsite Yongkala.

### **Day 8: Yongkala to Sengor**

We start early, moving uphill in search of high altitude species that include Blood Pheasant and Satyr Tragopan, the bird that draws many birders to Bhutan. The dense conifers forest hold many good species such as Mrs Gould's Sunbird, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Bar-winged Wren-Babbler, Red-headed Bullfinch, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Gold-naped Finch and Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler. Our campsite near the pastureland is good for thrushes. Overnight at the Campsite Sengor (3000m).

## **Day 9: Sengor to Jakar to Trongsa**

Today we cross one of the high passes, the Thrumshing La, at 3800m. Thrumshing La is the prime habitat for Blood Pheasant and also holds other high altitude species such as Snow Pigeon, Orange-flanked Bush-Robin, Spotted Nutcracker, Red-billed Chough, Fire-tailed Sunbird, Great Parrotbill, Stripe-throated Yuhina, Grey-crested and Coal Tits and White-browed Fulvetta. We may be lucky and have our first encounter with one of the most colorful pheasants of them all, the magical Himalayan Monal. We continue through the valley of Bumthang, one of the most beautiful valleys in Bhutan. Crossing another high pass at Yotongla (3500m), we may find Hill Partridge, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Brown Parrotbill, Chestnut-crowned and Black-faced Laughingthrushes, Darjeeling Woodpecker and Gold-naped Finch. We then head for Trongsa. Overnight in Trongsa.

## **Day 10: Trongsa to Zhemgang**

Today on our drive to Zhemgang, we will have lots of stops at several forested valleys. We have chances for Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler, White-browed Scimitar-Babbler, Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, Grey-bellied Tesia, Crested Bunting, Long-tailed Shrike, prinias, Rufous Woodpecker, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Spot-winged Starling, Common Green Magpie, Rufous-bellied Eagle, Mountain Hawk Eagle, Common Kestrel and various minivets. This is also our best chance for the Golden Langur, a rare monkey endemic to Bhutan and only discovered in the 1950s. Overnight at the Campsite Zhemgang (1680m).

## **Day 11: Zhemgang to Tingtibe Road**

Today we explore a wide variety of habitats along the Zhemgang to Tingtibe road. Habitats vary from mossy forests to streamside lowland forest. This is another chance to see Golden Langur, which is fairly frequent here. We also search for Rufous-necked and Great Hornbills, Pin-tailed Green Pigeon, Cutia, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, Scarlet Minivet, various laughingthrushes, woodpeckers, Chestnut-headed and Grey-bellied Tesias, Spotted Wren-Babbler, and another chance to find Beautiful Nuthatch. Overnight at the Campsite Zhemgang.

## **Day 12: Zhemgang to Phobjekha**

We head back to Trongsa today, birding many sites on the way, looking for species we might have missed up to now. In Trongsa we make our first cultural visit, the impressive Trongsa Dzong. This dzong is the ancestral home for the Royal family of Bhutan. The first king of Bhutan was the governor of this dzong, and even now there is the tradition that any future king of Bhutan must receive the title of governor of Trongsa. After a fairly long drive we reach the Phobjekha valley, sacred wintering ground for the Black-necked Crane. Overnight either at the Campsite Phobjekha or at an hotel.

## **Day 13: Phobjekha to Punakha**

After an early breakfast, we drive to the Pele la pass (4000 m) and spend the morning hours birding along the old road at Pele la for high altitude species such as Himalayan Monal, Spotted Laughingthrush, Himalayan Griffon, Brown Parrotbill, and various finches and bush-warblers. Later we drive to Punakha, traveling through the valley of Wangdi Phodrang; along the way we look for Ward's Trogon, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide and mixed species flocks. In the evening we bird along the Pho Chu valley looking for one of our main target birds, White-bellied Heron, one of the rarest birds in the world with a population of fewer than 200 worldwide. Other birds we might see include Common and Crested Kingfisher and the enigmatic Ibisbill. Overnight at Punakha.

## **Day 14: Punakha to Thimphu**

We spend the morning birding inside the Jigme Dorji National Park and along the Phochu River. Possibilities include Red-headed Trogon, Slaty-bellied and Chestnut-headed Tesias, Small and Rufous-bellied Niltavas, Black-chinned Yuhina, a trio of forketails, several wren-babblers, woodpeckers, laughingthrushes, and with luck Pallas's Fish Eagle. In the afternoon, we visit the impressive Punakha's Punthang Dechen Phodrang (the name means Palace of Great Bliss) standing where two rivers, the Phochu and Mochu, meet. Punakha Dzong has special significance in Bhutan history. Punakha Dzong was the place where Bhutan's first king, Ugyen Wangchuk, was crowned in 1907. It is the winter residence for Je Khenpo (spiritual leader) and the entire central monk body. There is often a Tawny Fishing-Owl roosting in the big trees on the riverside. We then drive to Thimphu over the Dochla pass (3150m); on a clear day the whole eastern Himalayan range is visible. Overnight in Thimphu.

## **Day 15: Thimphu to Paro**

In the early morning we visit the local sewage pond for Ibisbill and Black-tailed and Ruddy-breasted Crakes. After breakfast we drive north of Thimphu and then hike to the Cheri monastery. During the hike we may see Spotted, Chestnut-crowned and White-throated Laughingthrushes, Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Wallcreeper, Brown Dipper and White-collared Blackbird. Goral (Mountain goat) occur around the monastery. We then return to Thimphu for lunch, and continue on to Paro. Overnight in Paro.

## **Day 16: Paro; Cheli La Birding**

Early in the morning, we drive through old-growth evergreens on the way to the cool and stunning alpine meadow of Cheli La pass (3890m). This is the highest pass accessible by car in Bhutan. Here we could be rewarded with three different species of pheasants: Himalayan Monal, flocks of Blood Pheasants, and Kalij Pheasant. Also here are several rosefinches, grosbeaks and laughingthrushes. We then drive back to Paro for lunch. In the afternoon we have scheduled a visit to Kichu Monastery, one of the oldest monastery dating back to the 7th century. It is believed that in the 7th century a Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, built 108 monasteries representing different parts of the demon body to pin her to earth forever. Kichu monastery is believed to have been built on the left leg of the demon. Overnight in Paro.

## **Day 17: Paro River or optional Tiger's Nest Excursion**

We have a full day in the Paro Valley today. There is an option for a strenuous hike up to the Tiger's Nest, the iconic monastery perched on sheer rock cliffs above the Paro Valley, for those that are feeling up to the challenge. If that sounds too ambitious, we will be birding along the Paro River and take a stroll through town. Taktsang Monastery (Tiger's Nest) is located 2950 meters above sea level. Sanctified by Guru Rimpoche, this is one of the most venerated pilgrim sites of the Himalayan world. Over time many great Buddhist masters have visited and meditated here. In 1692 the 4th temporal ruler of Bhutan built a monastery over the cave where Guru Rimpoche and his consort Khandro Yeshe Tshogyal meditated. The monastic complex clings to rock towering 800 m above the valley. Overnight in Paro.

## Day 18: Departure

Our Bhutan birding tour ends this morning we leave this incredible country and catch our flight to Delhi where we connect to late evening international flights.

## What to Expect

The daily itinerary on our Bhutan birding tour varies somewhat according to weather and habitat, but the general pattern will be to go for a short walk before breakfast. Most birding will be from quiet roads and wide trails. Driving will be limited to either small or moderate stretches. On many days we have picnic lunches as we transfer between localities. Bhutan is a high altitude country; most of our time will be between 2000 and 3000 metres, with occasional forays up to 4000m. We will move slowly to avoid altitudinal problems such as headaches and breathlessness; acclimatization can be helped by sitting quietly and drinking plenty of fluids. Temperatures will range from warm, possibly hot in lowland areas to cool at higher altitudes, with freezing temperatures at the highest passes and at night. Although it will be mainly dry, we can expect precipitation in the form of rain and perhaps snow, therefore a light rain-jacket and waterproof hat would come in useful. Stout, waterproof footwear is recommended and a small umbrella is also very useful. Transportation will be by bus.

During the tour we stay in moderate or good-quality accommodation. In eastern Bhutan we stay in tented camps which are spacious and comfortable. Walking conditions will be relatively easy, occasionally moderate with steep sections; some strenuous optional hikes. Mosquitoes and other biting insects should not be a problem on this tour, but it is advisable to bring insect repellent. All of our accommodations are clean and comfortable, and our bus will be more than adequate. In the evening, after dinner, we discuss the day's events and sightings, list the birds and other wildlife seen, and prepare for the next day's itinerary.

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## What's Included

### Tour Price Includes

- Includes flights: Delhi to Guwahati and Paro to Delhi
- All meals
- All accommodation (basic to moderate; some tented camps in more remote areas, all comfortable)
- Ground transportation (bus or van with driver)
- One EET guide plus 1 or 2 local guides with 4-12 participants
- All park, conservation, and entrance fees
- Gratuities to local guides & drivers

### Tour Price Does Not Include

- Flight to/from Delhi
  - Travel Insurance
  - Items of a personal nature
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