Eagle-Eye Tours

Bhutan Itinerary

Link: Bhutan

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 culture this country has to offer with visits to monasteries and temples.

We will experience some of the finest birding in the Himalayas! We will see over 300 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.

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, 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



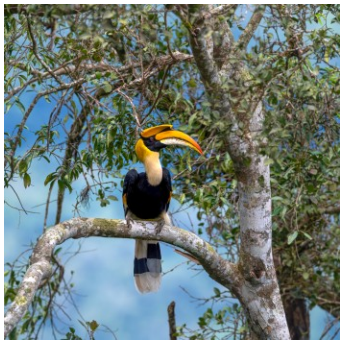
Today we cross one of the high passes, the Thrumshing La, at 3800m. Thrumshing La is the prime habitat for Blood Pheasant and also holds other high altitude species such as Snow Pigeon, Orange-flanked Bush-Robin, Spotted Nutcracker, Red-billed Chough, Fire-tailed Sunbird, Great Parrotbill, Stripe-throated 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. We will also look for the White-bellied Heron, one of the rarest birds in the world with a population of fewer then 200 worldwide. 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. After a fairly long drive we reach the Phobjekha valley. Overnight either at the Campsite Phobjekha or at an hotel.

Day 13: Phobjekha to Punakha



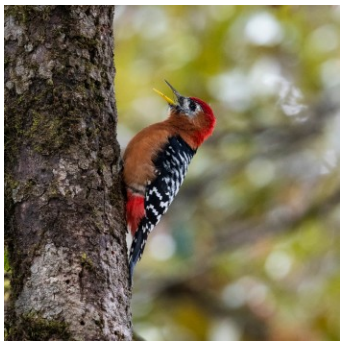
After an early breakfast, we drive to the Pele la pass (4000 m) and spend the morning hours birding along the old road at Pele la for high altitude species such as Himalayan Monal, Spotted Laughingthrush, Himalayan Griffon, Brown Parrotbill, and various finches and bush-warblers. Later we drive to Punakha, 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. 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 forktails, 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



This morning we will look for Black-tailed Crake and Ibisbill near Paro. We will then 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 and plan to hike up to Tiger's Nest, the iconic monastery perched on sheer rock cliffs above the Paro Valley. If the entire hike sounds too ambitious, there will be an option to do a shorter walk part way up the trail, birding along the way. 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 Yeshi 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

Overview

The Bhutan tour is a moderately paced birding tour. We usually start the day at 5:30am with an early morning, before-breakfast walk, as it is best to begin birding at daybreak in the tropics, when bird activity and song are at their peaks. In forest regions, we concentrate on "edge" birding until light is sufficient to enter forest trails. Often bird activity slackens off by noon and we may return to our hotel for lunch and a short siesta, after which we bird again in the coolness of the late afternoon. This itinerary involves changing hotels and moving from place to place frequently. While this pace can be a little tiring at times, it allows us to break up long journeys into shorter, more manageable segments.

Food

We generally have breakfast back at the hotel after birding. We usually have a picnic lunch on the road. Dinner is usually at the lodge or a nearby restaurant. Each evening after dinner we compile the day's checklist, review the day's activities, birds, mammals and other observations, and plan the next day's activities.

Accommodation

During the tour we stay in moderate or good-quality accommodation. In eastern Bhutan we stay in tented camps which are basic, but comfortable with foldable beds and foam mattresses. At the tented camps, there are separate toilet and shower tents as well as separate dining and kitchen tents. The camps have access to electricity, and as an added precaution, also have access to a portable generator to ensure a reliable power supply for charging batteries and devices. All lodgings provide Wi-Fi access, and reliable mobile reception with 3G and 4G coverage is available, even in the camping area.

Walking

For the most part, walking conditions will range from easy to moderate. However, it is important to remember that Bhutan is a high altitude country and most of our time will be between 1,500 and 3,000 m (4,900–9,800 ft), with occasional forays up to 4,000m (13,100 ft). We will move slowly to avoid altitudinal problems such as headaches or breathlessness. The longest birding walk is Pele La, around 3hrs/3km at 3,400m elevation.

Tiger's Nest hike (optional) is a strenuous hike on a well-trodden path of 5.5 km with 650m of elevation gain. The whole hike, including a one-hour tour inside the monastery, usually takes about 6-7 hours. If you are unable to complete the hike, there will be an option to go part way on this hike (to restrooms/cafe) avoiding the steepest sections and bird along the way.

For some of our walks, the passenger vehicle will follow the group every 10-15 minutes, ensuring that clients can rest in the car if needed or travel in the car alongside the group.

Elevation

This tour includes several nights and birding excursions at significant elevations as we travel through the Himalayas. Our highest overnight location is Sengor, at approximately 3,000 m (9,800 ft). On several day excursions, we travel to high elevations, including: Thrumshing La at approximately 3,800 m (12,500 ft), Yotong La at 3,500 m (11,500 ft), Pele La at 4,000 m (13,100 ft), and Chele La at 3,890 m (12,760 ft). The optional hike to Tiger's Nest Monastery reaches approximately 2,950 m (9,680 ft).

At these elevations, some participants may experience shortness of breath, fatigue, or headaches, particularly during physical activity. We generally bird at a relaxed pace with frequent stops, but participants should be comfortable spending time at high elevations and consult their healthcare provider before travelling if they have concerns about altitude.

Driving

Most days involve some driving and we will make sure to have many rest stops each day. The vehicle we use on this tour is a 22 passenger Toyota Coaster bus. The roads will be in good condition.

Climate

Temperatures will range from warm, possibly hot in lowland areas to cool/cold at higher altitudes, with freezing temperatures at the highest passes and at night. Expect cold mornings on most days. It will be mainly dry, but we can expect precipitation in the form of rain or snow.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes
- Includes flights: Delhi to Guwahati and Paro to Delhi
- All meals and soft drinks
- All accommodation (basic to moderate; some tented camps in more remote areas, all comfortable)
- Airport Transportation
- 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
- Sustainable Development & Visa fees
- Gratuities to local guides & drivers

Tour Price Does Not Include
- Flight to/from Delhi
- Travel Insurance
- Items of a personal nature
- Alcoholic Beverages