

Biodiverse Bhutan: Birds, Mammals & Beyond

April 11 – 24, 2024 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



Guides Norbu Norbu, Pema Dawa, and Avijit Sarkel, with Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys and ten participants: Kathy and “Florida” John, Gail and “Montana” John, Joan and “Arizona” John, Geri, Lila, Lois and Andrew. Tenzin was our driver and a master spotter – particularly of Red Panda!



Thurs., Apr. 11 Paro to Thimphu | Cheri Valley Birding

Arrival by air in Paro is dramatic, as the plane winds through the mountains fairly close to a tall ridge, then makes a sudden, distinct turn to descend into a quick landing. Skilled pilots get this route and flights are timed for lowest turbulence, thus the dawn departure from India. The airport buildings are built with classic Bhutanese architecture making this a special place to land, right from the start. We marveled at mountains as we crossed the tarmac, then entered to a welcoming space with an intricate wooden interior, painted murals and local art.



Even the luggage carousels are a wonder, with a village scene in 3-D in the center! The city of Paro itself is beautiful, laid out along the Paro Chhu river with the historic Paro Dzong in view from every direction. Peg, John and Gail were in a day early and enjoyed some walking and birding and a chance to visit the national museum, perched on a hill with a grand view of the Paro Valley. The rest of the group met them there, arriving on the dawn flight in, and by mid-morning we were on our way to Thimphu. But best of all, in sunshine and fresh air after flying, we had time for some birding below the Paro Dzong where we saw a lively pair of Brown Dipper, the much sought-after Ibisbill, two species of redstarts, Red-billed Chough, and Eurasian Hoopoe.

Before heading out of town we refueled with coffee at the Mountain Café where Joan jumped right in to try the local sweets. The road out of town was winding, with sites of local farms and homes, temples and prayer flags. Our first birding stop held view of a temple with the river below, and sightings of Blue Whistling Thrush, White-capped Redstart and White Wagtail among other species. As we traveled, Norbu answered questions as we were so eager to learn more about Bhutan architecture, temples, markets, customs, and then beautiful nature as we passed by Blue Pines with long cones and Poplar tree blowing in the wind. We learned the five colors of prayer flags aligned with five elements, five emotions, and five directions: Blue = sky and space (health and longevity); Red = fire (wishing, fulfillment); Yellow = earth (victory over obstacles); White = air (good fortune, purification); Green = water (compassion). They were in our view every day, everywhere.

We saw several stupa, three in particular marking the cross of four roads leading in 4 destinations and the meeting of two rivers, the Paro Chhu and the Thimphu. We would see more and more elaborate ones on the high passes, and our patient driver drove around them three times of us so we could observe the protection of honoring this tradition when traveling.

By late morning we checked in at our lovely hotel, big windows, carved and painted furniture, multiple floors with carved wooded railings to match the furnishings. Lunch by Thimphu's impressive Stupa just off the square. Local foods: trout from the local stream, fresh asparagus, and fresh fiddlehead fern in a cheese sauce. Also a lovely salad with fresh greens, safe for us to eat. Black current ice cream. Lemonade, lime sodas, fresh squeezed. Gail and John elected to walk back to the hotel and enjoy a chance to see details of the stupa and watch the ebb and flow of local life. The rest of us drove back and caught some rest and regrouped a bit from international travel.

Those that wanted to start birding headed out of town in the late afternoon, up into some pine woodlands where we could bird quiet roads. We saw our first mixed flocks with Green-backed Tit, Rufous Sibia and a



stunning Verditer Flycatcher. On a woodpile, we marveled at a singing Rufous-breasted Accentor. It was cool enough to layer up with jackets but sunny and pleasant. A line of three stupas straddled a flowing stream among the pines, lovely! This is where Kathy started her fascination with Rufous Sibia, one of the most vibrant songsters of our trip. We spotted small prayer offerings laid out nearby. Back to dinner at the hotel and a good night's rest.

Fri., Apr. 12

Dochula Pass | Royal Botanical Garden | Choelong Trulsum Chorten | Punakha Dzong

Today was a truly wonderful day, filled with birding in a variety of habitats, each productive, and capped off with a visit to the truly incredible Punakha Dzong. Our route from Thimphu took us over the 10,200 foot high Dochula Pass, where the 108 Memorial Chortens were built by Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk, the Queen Mother. They are stunningly beautiful in their setting and as we birded in the area, we had time to admire them, lit up by the sun on this lovely day. Gail, John and John also hiked up to see the Druk Wangyal Lhakhang temple, built in honor of the 4th King.

We birded here among huge native cypress trees draped with epiphytes, and stunning rhododendrons of several colors and species in bloom. White Magnolia blossoms decorated the tapestry of forest but sadly the high distant peaks of the Greater Himalayas were shrouded in clouds. We went behind the restaurant to a small ravine and were rewarded with super close looks at Yellow-billed Blue Magpie and a highly vocal Great Parrotbill. We saw White-collared Blackbird, a Hodgson's Treecreeper and the impossibly cute Black-browed Tit. Fanning out past the Chortens, birds came and went in flocks and kept us busy, a highlight seeing at least Fire-tailed Myzornis in a flock from the road, along with White-browed Fulvetta and two species of minla. With some patience and climbing a bit upslope we got some great views.

We not far from the Royal Botanical Gardens, our next stop for birding and a walk. We made a loop of a couple miles at a leisurely pace, taking many species. Highlights were many and included Large Hawk Cuckoo, Rufous-bellied and Darjeeling Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Fairy Fantail, Ashy-throated, Lemon-rumped and Whistler's Warblers and good views of Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler. Another furtive species Avi was amazed to see move into plain view atop a small shrub was Chestnut-headed Tesia, a great find. We have wonderful looks at the colorful Rufous-bellied Niltava, and equally bright Ultramarine Flycatcher. Two species of sunbirds, Mrs. Gould's and Green-tailed were a delight.



Our mobile food truck set up a feast for us, the first of many. They picked a lovely spot with a view, at the Choelong Trulsum Chorten where on the quiet part of the road leading into this site Andrew spotted a Sikkim Treecreeper, joined by a White-tailed Nuthatch, Green-backed and Yellow-browed Tits, Gray-chinned Minivet and Whiskered Yuhina. A Black-throated Tit flew in and being SO cute it got all those cameras clicking.

We got to the Punakha Dzong at a perfect time, late afternoon when few visitors remained and when soft light started to paint the ornamentation and structures with golden light. It is so impressive to enter within, to be surrounded by walls dating to the 1600's (17th Century) that remain so central to daily life for the Bhutanese people today. We watched monks walking through the hallways and plaza in their maroon-colored robes, and admired paintings, fabrics and gilded ornamentation of the inner temple. We walked over sleeping dogs that positioned themselves for the cooling effect of wind coming down the river, or through passages of stone. We learned about practices of compassion and enlightenment and saw into a small window of understanding into the complexity and rich history of the Buddha and subsequent reincarnations. We looked up to bee combs probably stuffed with honey and out to mountains and the confluence of the Mo Chhu and Pho Chhu rivers.

We checked into a lovely hotel, multi-storied with intricately carved railings that matched carved furnishings, all in Bhutanese style. The wooden interior complemented large windows with a grand view – a very nice place to land after a full day.

Sat., Apr. 13

Sarpang Wandue Highway | River Stop by Pema Karpa Hotel | White-bellied Heron Site and Visitor Center of Conservation Project | Punakha River Valley

In part because we had done well with forest birding the day previous, and had a lot of our trip ahead in broadleaf and conifer zones, we decided to drop radically in elevation and give seeing one of the world's rarest birds a try. We valued this day so much in future year's we've now added a day!

Right off the start we saw Blue-capped Rock Thrush alongside the road, along with a Gray Wagtail. Dropping in elevation, we spied two bright Scarlet Minivet, a flock of Indian White-eye and both Assam Macaque and Himalayan Gray Langur feeding not far from our route. While the entire trip aside from this day was spent in lush, untouched nature, this valley held Bhutan's heartbeat for the economy and quality of life as they modernize. It was a landscape of hydropower development, with electric lines and substations, ongoing projects,



and a long tunnel. Once past the tunnel we stopped for a great find, an Asian Barred Owl perched at eye-level. Several birds came into view as we watched it, including Oriental Magpie Robin, Blue-necked Flycatcher, and Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike. We also enjoyed seeing a Hoary-bellied Squirrel.

Our driver expertly maneuvered us into position for a cliffside breakfast at a place we had a good chance of finding White-bellied Heron, a known nest site from previous years. The Camp crew had gotten there ahead and had tablecloths ready and hot food steaming. But we were too distracted by finding this very rare bird! We had distant but really great looks, first at the male which was collecting sticks, flying up from the streambed to a ledge where it pulled on small shrubs. It then flew off with sticks in its beak to a huge tree across this immense canyon. It disappeared down into lush foliage, but Pema spotted a second bird, which we learned was a female, feeding in fast moving water, perched on a rock. In time we calmed down enough to eat, but popped back up to keep an eye on both birds. Three gentlemen spotted us and stopped to say hello, members of the science team keeping an eye on these birds. Tshering Tobgay told us about the project, the annual monitoring effort made and encouraged us to go and see the Visitor Center further down the valley. We did and all enjoyed seeing exhibits about the bird's life histories and two individuals held in captivity due to injuries but still important to possible breeding efforts in the future.

We had a long way to get back home, so we kicked back in our comfortable bus and a few nodded off. At this elevation we saw Yellowbell, Blue Tick and Fire Flame Bush in brilliant bloom. Just before Thimphu (Punakha) we stopped at an overview of the river where we found several ducks including Ruddy Shelduck, River Lapwing, both Green and Common Sandpiper and among the river stones two species of wagtail, White-browed and White. Time to call it a day and enjoy a local brew on the patio with a view of the river and mountains, followed by dinner at the hotel. A Eurasian Kestrel called loudly at dusk, probably nesting on the building somewhere.

Sun., Apr. 14 Punakha River | East West Road | Pelela Pass | Trongsa Waterfalls and Forest Birding | Chumey Nature Resort

We left the hotel at first light, an Asian Koel a new bird seen as we boarded the bus. It and the Oriental Magpie Robin had been calling since 5AM, our avian alarm clock for the day. We had a full day ahead, with a drive over two passes to reach Chumey by day's end. We were not in a rush, and stopped readily for some great birds. The first stop was by a scenic waterfall at the bend of the road where water wheat and several locations framing us with burden greenery. The bus came to a quick stop for two Spotted Forktails bathing in some of the runoff. We



got out to see Blythe's Swifts circling close by, dashing into crevices in the rugged roadside cliff. A Himalayan Cuckoo flew in and we trained the scopes on it. We then made two stops to try for Ward's Trogon, and while we did not hear or see that magnetic species, we found at least 25 others including Himalayan Cutia, seen at eye-level and very close range. The food truck crew were waiting around a particularly scenic road bend where we got our first good views of high, snowy peaks. A Maroon Oriole serenaded us as we enjoyed fresh-brewed coffee, omelets, fresh fruit and red rice.

The weather was gorgeous, almost too hot and sunny for the way we were dressed. The scale of scenery got grander by the minute. At Pelela pass red prayer flags danced in the wind. We had fun shopping for woven goods and lovely-sounding bells and then spied our first Himalayan Griffons circling above. We circled the Chorten led by "Arizona" John chanting *Om ah um baza guru pema cede um* (Om Mani Padme Hung) for good luck, then stopped quickly upon finding a herd of yaks grazing amid a mosaic of blooming rhododendrons. One yak was caramel-colored, another black with a striking white mane and tail. Two Himalayan Griffons and two Large-billed Crows fed on spilt rice, a traveler's offering, along the road. The mountains make their own weather, and we descended the pass in a rainstorm. Thankfully it cleared by lunch. Ripe strawberries and scope views of two Little Forktail atop the waterfall which was our view were highlights. A two forktail day, sweet! Norbu and Pema talked to us about schools, about life events and how they are noted, and various aspects of Bhutanese life as we wound our way on the East West Highway. This is more of a maze than a highway, with no straight stretches at all. Views were sublime. We stopped in Trongsa for the market, picked up some welcomed ice-cream bars and got money from the local ATM. Roadside birding in the afternoon gave us views of Great Barbet and really fine views of Gray-headed Woodpecker. We also found Eurasian Jays and Nepal House-Martin. Many of the lodges in Bhutan are built into hillsides and have lots of steps. This was true of Chumey Nature Resort and due to the elevation, we huffed and puffed a bit and grateful thanked the young strong girls who delivered our suitcases. Our cozy rooms had blankets made by local weavers and good heaters, fine views. The dining room had a nice fire going, fresh homemade soups, and a local whiskey that for some sure hit the spot.

Mon., Apr. 15 Tharpaling Monastery | Chumey Nature Resort

We started early to be up at the monastery above Chumey when birds were still active. We heard Hill Partridge right at dawn and the farm fences were topped by Gray-backed Shrike and somewhat local to this area, Black-rumped Magpie. A dirt road wound up and up and up, until we could see many of the Himalayan peaks between prayer flags blowing in the strong wind. In the shelter of some of the buildings we found Himalayan Monal, not



at all tame but not minding our presence. We got stunning views of their iridescent colors, wow. And below the patio we had an overview of a brushy area with Goldcrest, Buff-barred Warbler and Black-faced Laughingthrush feeding. A White-winged Grosbeak seemed to pose for inspection, and keen-eyed Joan spotted an Alpine Accentor high on the roof of one of the buildings, keeping company with a half-dozen Snow Pigeon. Another highlight of this morning was seeing Dark-rumped Rosefinch, so beautiful in plumage.

It would have been a spectacular morning, but two things made it even more so. First the local monks allowed us into their temple, and Pema helped interpret what we saw there, such peace and beauty! And second was our wonderful kitchen crew was there with breakfast waiting amid both the birds and the views. Heading down the mountain, we spotted Blood Pheasant, another beauty. We got back after a stop at a local weaving store where several had fun helping the local economy. In an age-old tradition, purchasers looked to others of the group to coach, and in the end went home with some nice woven goods.

Down time back at the hotel was appreciated, during which some walked a bit, some napped and Peg and Gail took a hike which involved wading a river and then threading down valley through local farms. We saw two Eurasian Hoopoe and had time to appreciate the architecture and local dress of the people. Some young school girls bravely asked us questions and then giggled as they left us.

Evening brought a good meal, good camaraderie within our group, a few more whiskeys and time for catching up on our bird list. Peg kept a steady stream of eBird lists shared for those that wished, but it was still good to review and let all these new species sink in a bit each evening.

Tues., Apr. 16

Ura Valley | Gazamchu | Phhrumsengla Pass | Sengor Campsite

Today we started early as usual, first walking a bit along the road and then heading along our way through the Ura Valley. One stop revealed a bird we had to study a bit, which turned out to be a migratory Richard's Pipit, not usually seen in this location. By mid-morning we were climbing up in elevation and our birding stop held sightings of Himalayan Griffon, Blood Pheasant and Satyr Tragopan, Eurasian Nutcrackers making almost the same sound as our nutcracker back home, and a mixed flock with Coal Tit, Gray-crested Tit, Lemon-rumped Warbler, Blyth's Leaf Warbler and White-browed Fulvetta.



To keep us happy and in good spirits Pema would make the rounds in the bus with a Bhutanese basket filled with wonderful snacks. Avi added some delicious specialties he brought us from India, describing them made us hungry if we were not so at the start. We were a well-kept group!

Our lunch stop gave us a chance for more forest birding and we picked up a real beauty – Gold-naped Finch as well as seeing Green-tailed Sunbird and Red-tailed Minla. Two species of yuhina, Stripe-throated and Rufous-vented were pretty numerous and vocal. As we approached Phrumshengla Pass, we had time for a good stretch walking and birding in lush forests. We had another look at Fire-tailed Myzornis, and a beautiful Rufous-bellied Niltava, plus two Satyr Tragopan, one what approached close enough for some beautiful photos. One stop for views on the pass was blustery, Geri and Lila posed for photos with a magnificent backdrop as the rain started to fall. Thankfully it was more mist than rain and we continued on our way.

The star of the day for most of the group was seeing a Red Panda in the wild. We were spread out below Phrumshengla Pass at this point, and five or six were back searching every mossy log for signs of them as they had been sighted in this area several weeks before. We saw the group taking quick scope turns by the bus, and then saw Pema racing towards us – Red Panda! Just as we got there it scampered down the mossy log it had been resting on. There were high fives and for those that missed it long sad faces – thankfully a few days down the line we'd try again with success! The weather was turning a bit to mist and light rain, so we decided to head to our camp, not knowing quite what to expect. A flock of White-throated Laughingthrushes passed through across the road as we arrived. Our crew was there with our tents assembled and we were pleased to find a wooden outhouse, a nice dining table at what we would call a roadside campsite. It was closed on this day but a wooden store was between us and the road.

We got a nice campfire going and magically appeared some of the whiskey we had enjoyed. With light rain and cooler temperatures, we enjoyed this treat a lot. Lois has bought a new warm hat and sat comfortably in the mist and light rain laughing and smiling as Pema and “Montana” John shared stories. After dinner we heard owls and wanted to go to find them. They were super active, a bit elusive but we did see Himalayan Owl several times in flight. In the middle of the night we heard Gray Nightjar from our tents. We slept surprisingly well on our thick foam mattresses on cots and had nice lights for seeing inside our tents. By staying here, we were in prime terrain for tomorrow's birding.



Wed., Apr. 17

Sengor Birding | Upper Lingmethang Road | Namling Waterfalls | Yongkhola | Trogon Villa

Another early start, we had breakfast at camp and started birding at a site not far ahead. We searched for calling Scaly-breasted Cupwing for some time, and Geri who had really wanted to see this species got a super view, just the right angle and timing. Others got glimpses of this very mouse-like bird scurrying in the understory. We also heard Chestnut-headed Tesia, another skulker and in a ravine, Bar-winged Wren-Babbler. Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher put on a good show while feeding, and Black-faced Laughingthrush was a nice find. Our next stop revealed the beautiful colors of Mrs. Gould's Sunbird, as well as Chestnut-crowned Warbler, Long-tailed Minivet, a loud Whistler's Warbler, White-tailed Nuthatch and Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush. At a scenic high waterfall stop we found two Little Forktails and a White-capped Redstart before taking Lila set the tone by posing and then lots of us lined up for photos of each other at this stunning site.

By mid-morning we were in the heart of the legendary Lingmethang-Namling Road, one that transects a lot of elevation with excellent habitat along its entire length. On a curve of the road we finally caught up to a Ward's Trogon. It was gray and misty so the colors did not shine but we got good views and it was calling. We admired the colors of Darjeeling Woodpecker, saw two species of shrike-babbler (White-browed and Black-eared) and found both Yellow-browed and Yellow-cheeked Tits. Pygmy Cupwing was a nemesis for many of the group but we heard them at close range. Golden Babbler joined Rufous-capped Babbler and Yellow-throated Fulvetta long the roadside shrubbery, and we were happy to find Hoary-throated Barwing and Blue-winged Minla. This was one of our highest species count days, pretty exciting!

After a roadside lunch that included the native fiddlehead ferns and a variety of dishes, we continued down in elevation, picking up Golden-throated Barbet, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, White-breasted Parrotbill, Black-crowned Scimitar-Babbler and Himalayan Cutia, a real beauty that loves to feed nuthatch style in mossy branches. Our guides were thrilled to hear, and then find for us, not one but three Beautiful Nuthatch. We loved finding the bird on the cover of our field guide – high fives all around. After a true frenzy of birding we headed to Trogon Villa, a lodge ideal for birders. We were happy to settle into our large rooms that had lots of outlets to charge up all our gear, bird portraits on the wall, hot tea and coffee and good showers. And we would be here three nights so we could really settle in.



Thurs., Apr. 18 Trogon Villa | Lingmethang Road above Trogon Villa

We were out early, and our first eBird checklist had 50 species noted! We loved seeing the Sultan Tit, an elegant little bird. A Large Hawk Cuckoo posed regally, and we heard or saw several Himalayan Cuckoos as we ll. We all paid attention when Norbu called back to us, “hornbills” and gathered up quickly. It was a pair of Rufous-necked Hornbill and they were feeding, flying tree to tree up high above us. At one point they got ahead of us but Avi re-spotted them and called us up for good views. This was a grand old forest with huge trees, and in the lush growth around them we found Greater Yellownape as well as Bay Woodpecker. We enjoyed scope views of Maroon Oriole, Great Barbet, Golden-throated Barbet, Gray-headed Canary Flycatcher, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, and Sikkim Treecreeper. Among the many small species was a new one for us, Black-faced Warbler. High above us was one of the smallest of birds, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker. And a Streaked Spiderhunter proved to be impressive as well.

After lunch we found White-browed Shrike Babbler and had three Himalayan Cutia, a favorite of several of our group for the trip. Little Pied Flycatcher was fun to watch feeding and we got good looks at Red-tailed Minla.

We took a break back at the lodge, where Eurasian Tree Sparrow and Spotted Dove were found by the parking area. Our plan was to go back up the road, check more flocks, and come back after dark so we’d have a chance at some night birds. We saw more Rufous-necked Hornbill and at one stop, two species of small owls were calling, Mountain Scops Owl and Collared Owlet. As dusk settled in, we heard Oriental Scops Owl as well, and we searched quite a long time at one dense tree, within which a Hodgson’s Frogmouth called. It would not budge for our call, but we all agreed being out at night in this magical forest was worth the try and we’d do it again.

Back to a late dinner and a quick checklist tally and bed.

**Fri., Apr. 19 Lower Lingmenthang Road | Tridangbi Viewpoint |
Menchugang River Trail | Trogon Villa**

We had a full day to venture to the lower reaches of the Lingmenthang-Namling Road. This amazing route through Phhrumshengla National Park makes an amazing transect through some of the richest forests on Earth, and much like its South American cousin, the famed Cusco-Manu road, birding remains at a high level of activity throughout.



Going lower afforded us at least thirty new species and we started tallying them on our first stop. We spied a Long-tailed Shrike, then a Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, quickly followed by Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush. White-crested Laughingthrush made a loud racket while a secretive Pygmy Flycatcher caught our attention in the roadside shrubs. This first stop netted us 40 species, including Streaked Spiderhunter, Rufous-capped Babbler, Ashy Bulbul, Nepal Fulvetta, Orange-bellied Leafbird, and Scarlet Finch. We also had great looks at Capped Langurs as a troop crossed the road.

At a wooded gully with some patience and quick scope work we got looks at both male and female Ward's Trogon (Red-headed Trogon), a Himalayan specialty. A few were there with Norbu when it came right up to the edge of the ravine for a full-on view! The male was so bright he looked stage-lit among the greenery. The female's complex tones perfectly matched the reds and soft oranges of new leaves. While searching we also encountered White-bellied Erpornis and to our delight, a Black Giant Squirrel, lounging on a tree branch in plain view. We made a pit stop at a roadside viewpoint and snack shop, a fun chance to try local savories and sweets. Just off the view we watched Mountain Hawk Eagles soar below us, and from the patio, at close range a singing Himalayan Prinia. Pema called out his now-familiar round up call, "forwarding" and we piled in, drove on, stopping in an agricultural area to admire Crested Bunting and Rufous-necked Laughingthrush.

Crossing a bridge to our next stop, we had superb looks at Crested Kingfisher. This one was very alert, poised on a rock to pick off prey swimming in the rushing stream around it. We then walked a trail along this rushing stream, a known location for Tawny Fish-Owl. It was a very hot day and we melted a bit (overdressed as we'd been chilled in days previous) looking for it. Assam Macaques entertained us as did numerous butterflies as we searched. We saw a most impressive flowering tree, *Daubanga grandiflora*. Sadly the owl selected shade for its roost, too dense for us to discover. We turned around here, stopping on the road for the perfect view of Blue-bearded Bee-eater. The beauty of this species is hard to describe but for many it was the highlight of the day. Our last stop was just shy of the hotel, a good chance to stretch our legs and to sort through a mixed flick and fine views of Maroon Oriole. We walked back to the hotel, and enjoyed time to freshen up ahead of dinner and our growing checklist.



Sat., Apr. 20

Lingmethang Road Waterfalls | Phrumshingla Pass – Red Pandas Again! | Trongsa

After breakfast, we packed up and headed out for the travel day to Trongsa. We would cross two passes, retracing our steps, with time to search for some species we missed. No surprise, our “ninja” tempter, the Rufous-throated Wren Babbler, was calling loudly from a dense gully. This time several of the group got at least a peek, and Geri got lucky for a good view. We heard some loud calling and were lucky to catch two Rufous-necked Hornbills in flight. They landed where we could get great scope views. A Collared Owlet kept calling, leading us down the road, but in route we encountered Blue-winged Laughing Thrush which drew off our attention.

Further up the road, we sorted through a mixed flock that included Green-tailed Sunbird and Yellow-throated Fulvetta, we got another good look at Yellow-bellied Warbler. Pema and Norbu were especially fast and faithful about using their scopes for all to see well, appreciated so much by Lois who would smile and exclaim when she connected with a good view, and Lila, our keen spotter and new to almost all of these species. Driving further up in elevation, we found Mountain Tailorbird and White-throated Fantail, flocks of Whiskered Yuhina, and to our joy, two Black-throated Parrotbill busy feeding on bamboo just off the road. Looking at our photos when back on the bus Avi noted one of the two was banded and we wondered who might be studying this population. Driving off, a Satyr Tragopan crossed the road, wow!

The next stop was at the place many of our group had seen a Red Panda several days ago. We scanned that area to no avail, and compared notes with a group of photographers who had been there for some time. Norbu suddenly rounded us up somewhat urgently, saying, let’s go, too many people here. What we did not know is that Tenzin, parked around the corner, had eyes on two!! We picked up our pace with this news and were thrilled to get scope views. We watched one groom on a mossy branch, and another feed on buds of rhododendron. They went up and down moss-covered tree trunks with ease. We’d lose sight of them and pick them again. It was just a thrill, especially for our five that had missed the one found days ago. We drove onward with big smile and the buzz and glow of seeing an endangered species, with a limited range, in its native habitat. The downward section of road once over the 12,000+ pass was a stunning color show, with dense rhododendrons decorating the slopes. Our next stop was lunch, set up on a scenic bend of the road. Rice, sautéed beef, several kinds of vegetables, chili and cheese (the national dish, served daily), and fruit for dessert. We had found the pandas, and some great birds, so now needed to make tracks to our hotel. Norbu told us a lot about trekking in Bhutan and how it was set up, the different routes of varied difficulty, and then answered our many questions about Bhutan, its future, if its concepts of Gross National Happiness can be sustained.



Tonight's hotel was a nice splurge, spacious and elegant with lovely furnishings. We enjoyed views of the Paro Dzong and surrounding mountains.

Sun., Apr. 21 Trongsa | Mangde Chhu River Forest | East West Highway | Pelela Pass | Phobjikha Valley Black-necked Crane Visitor Center | Gangtey Tented Camp

We had a nice breakfast before leaving Trongsa and then drove a short way to do some birding before we climbed up in elevation. We got good looks at Large Hawk Cuckoo and a Crescent Serpent Eagle posed well on a dead tree in plain view. By now we were used to the loud calls of Great Barb et, a common species with a lot of personality. Three Scarlet Minivet were feeding in deciduous trees, putting on some wonderful flight shows. Norbu spotted a Hair-crested Drongo and we had a good show of warblers and one of our favorites, the electric blue Verditer Flycatcher. Mrs. Gould's Sunbird was present and we saw Orange-bellied Leafbird. In the middle of the bird show Andrew spotted a troop of Golden Langur, a beautiful primate. He stayed behind to photograph them more as we moved up the road birding, then ran to get us as the troop had moved closer to the road. They had some young babies and not expected here, we were thrilled to see them.

As with many days we made stops at random, the whole country really does feel like a national park. We had very little traffic and could walk at leisure, listening and spotting. On a roadside corner we found Gray Bushchat, two Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler and Bhutan Laughingthrush. A Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo flew over and we had good luck finding it again, lightning quick Pema had it in the scope in seconds. "Arizona" John had fun recording the birders birding, making videos of our antics and delights.

A very fun interlude was seeing a men's game of darts. Two teams were sparring off on this beautiful Sunday and our guides let us know it would be an all-day affair, with wives and families eventually joining with food and drinks. They tossed a long throw and when someone made a point they got to wear a colorful sash. We cheered them on and they seemed to enjoy the audience. Just past the game we stopped to watch a Common Cuckoo hunting insects, perching among prayer flags between bouts of feeding. Another lovely species of rhododendron was in bloom, *R. lindlayii*. We had lunch by a pretty waterfall, under a tent to shade us. There were ripe strawberries for the picking and plentiful. White-capped and Plumbeous Redstarts worked the stream and Ultramarine Flycatcher caught insects repeatedly not far from our feast. Striated Laughingthrush were vocal and comical to watch. We had warm sun, Lois and "Arizona" John sat in the doorway in view of the falls enjoying



conversation. After lunch we started up Pelela Pass, in route finding a patch of white-flowering *Rhododendron griffithianum* along the way. We also saw *Rhododendron arboretum* that Avi told us could be used to make wine. Atop the pass we saw abundant prayer flags and this time fine views of at least 25 Snow Pigeon. They would circle above then land and forage as a group, feeding on seeds among bright primrose blooms. Red-billed Chough did their acrobatics and we spotted Blue-fronted Redstart, a lovely songbird. At this elevation we saw larch trees just getting their new set of needles and approaching the pass maples, hemlock and pines.

We admired the craft stalls just beyond the pass. Avi had his eye on some baskets, but we decided to wait and visit the next day when we had more time. We did make a birding and photo stop as we descended into the Phobjika Valley as there was a veritable carpet of blooming rhododendron across the open valley as well as some fine specimens along our road. Himalayan Buzzards soared overhead, and hearing the flight song, we located an Oriental Skylark. Our guides wanted to show a few specialties here and before long they'd invited in with call Brown Parrotbill – we got wonderful looks. A mixed flock followed them in and before we know it, we were calling out and snapping photos of Black-faced Laughingthrush, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, Chestnut-tailed Minla and Spotted Laughingthrush. "Florida" John so wanted to see Hill Partridge and they were singing from the forest edge, but alas, remained elusive.

Entering this dramatic valley, "Montana" John commented, "this could be Montana". Indeed it appeared lush and green with peaks all around. We stopped at the Black-necked Crane Visitor Center, sponsored by the same groups that put the White-bellied Heron center together. There were a few captive individuals, injured and unable to fly, but otherwise healthy and so impressive to see at close range. We watched a film and learned more about this species, which winters here from November to March before leaving for northern and higher elevation breeding areas. Andrew checked the birds at the edge of the property, finding two Ruddy Shelduck in a distant pond, and at closer range, Olive-backed Pipits.

Everyone had been asking about our tented accommodations, but no one was prepared for how lovely they were. On raised tents, spacious with nice furnishings and full baths, they were cozy and just right. Gail sat out on her porch taking in the view and ambiance. "Arizona" John and Joan had booked a hot stone bath, anxious to try that out at a local farmhouse. Several of us enjoyed the large photo books in the main building, soaking in the sun that poured through expansive windows. It was nice to have a few hours free ahead of dinner and tomorrow's great birding day.



Dinner was at the lodge and we got to try their wonderful potatoes, locally grown and elegantly smooth. We did our bird tally over by the big cast-iron woodstove at the bar. Himalayan Owls were calling as we went to bed, in the distance.

Mon., April 22 Phobjika Valley | Old Pelela Road Birding | Greater Himalaya Views

This morning we rose early to head up to Old Pelela Road for one of the most memorable walks of our journey. We got there in time to see Himalayan Monal, two males sparring a bit along the road. We could hear several Satyr Tragopan and had a quick flyby, but the several Hill Partridge calling were too thick in the forest to try for. Himalayan Griffon put on a good show – ten in total with their massive wingspans soaring, quite impressive. With them was a Crested Goshawk. Not far from our path we spied a very busy Moupin Pika, taking in the sun and feeding. We'd see several more that day, this was their realm.

The terrain here was open, with rhododendrons of varied species all at the peak of bloom. It was almost too beautiful to bird, and “Montana” John and Gail took off just to get in a good hike, finding their own treasures – including a Red-headed Bullfinch. Eurasian Nutcrackers were harvesting the rhododendron buds as if they were seeds and flying off presumably to cache them. We had good sightings of both Darjeeling and Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers, two of the most colorful of that clan. Mixed flocks drew our attention again and again with a mix of warblers, yuhinas, tits, fulvettas, minlas and Yellow-bellied Fairy Fantail. We found a lone Green Shrike Babbler and got excellent looks. Andrew wandered into a glen of blooming rhododendrons so incredible he came back up to get us, and a bonus bird there was Rusty-flanked Treecreeper. Dark-sided Flycatcher was new for us and it perched out in the open for fine views. Almost as bright as the blossoms were Common Rosefinch, White-browed Rosefinch, Red-headed Bullfinch, and Crimson-browed Finch. We spotted a buckskin horse, off-duty and enjoying some grazing, at one point it startled and galloped off over the hill. There were yaks as well, and it cleared by mid-day enough to see some snow-capped peaks of the high Himalayas. We walked about three miles at a leisurely pace and returned to find our faithful food truck near the start of the road, offering up yet another feast. Some of the rhododendrons we saw were *Rhododendron kesangiae* (big pink bloom), *R. thomsonii* (small red bloom), *R. barbetum* (big red bloom), *R. arboretum* and *R. keysii*. Kathy and Lois posed among them for Peg to take a snap; she enjoyed recording their friendship grow on this tour.



We had fun

at the small roadside shops as we drove back to the lodge. There were woolen goods, metal chimes and bells, baskets, and cloth and bags. We had the rest of the afternoon free, enjoying our lovely lodging and the views. Avi decided it was pizza night and we had fun with that. After dinner, we tried a little owling as darkness fell, and though we heard them, the two Himalayan Owls calling did not come in.

Tues., April 23

Phobjika Valley | East – West Highway to Paro | Gagyel Weaving Cooperative

We had a ways to go today but wanted to stop at a lone roadside stand away from the others, where a woman displayed some lovely weaving as she tended her yaks. This morning her husband was there, and he shared a bit of the techniques of herding and shearing. This couple was weathered by years of hard work but still inspired by their roaming life in the mountains. As we would head home, they would make their way up in elevation, following lush grass and blooming flowers. We also stopped here to have everyone see the Oriental Skylarks and they put on a good show, jaunting up to sing against the sky.

We made several roadside stops today, finding many of the same species but getting at times, better looks. Green-tailed and Mrs. Gould's Sunbirds always caught our eye and two Gray-sided Laughingthrush were new. Patient Geri waited and waited for a glimpse of Pygmy Cupwing, calling almost at our feet. Late morning we stopped by a dramatic waterfall. Looking up we saw a cluster of huge beehives full of honey and active with bees. It was not long until we spotted Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, a species that visits the hives to use the wax for their nesting. At this stop we saw *Rhododendron edgeworthii* and *R. griffithiaum*. Not far down the road we found the same two Spotted Forktail we'd seen driving in and were thrilled to get a second view. Joan found another Asian Barred Owl and called out "owl!" quick enough we could stop, back up, and get terrific views.

Another roadside stop after our lunch stop gave us views of Crimson-naped Woodpecker, a handsome species. Avi spotted an Oriental Honey-buzzard and we tried for additional views of Ward's Trogon to no avail. Not too far away we stopped for a restroom break at a market area where we could see chiles and fiddle-necked ferns drying in the sun. A huge blast of wind came up and we tried to assist locals tying down their tarps.

We rode a ways to make some miles, then stopped when passing through Thimphu at the Gagyel Weaving Center where everyone could see weavers at work. The quality of craftsmanship here is extraordinary and we marveled at the textiles, every color of the rainbow and holding such intricate pattern. Several of the group



picked out gifts and we left with big smiles. Next was to see the famous traffic policeman – for years there were no traffic lights in Thimphu and at a main intersection uniformed traffic guards still direct the traffic flow by hand. We waived to them as we passed and continued on to Paro. Here we checked into our lodging in the pines, lovely cottages with porches and a big main lodge. Dinner was served buffet-style and we did our checklist in the bar and headed off to bed. Gray Nightjar sang in the night.

Wed., April 24

Birding Chelela Pass or Hiking to the Tiger's Nest

Today our group split up with a choice of two adventures, birding on Chelela Pass or hiking to the iconic monastery of Bhutan at Tiger's Nest. The birders left early, assured that our wonderful food truck would prepare breakfast in the field. Our hikers fueled up on hot breakfast from the hotel and left not long after. Chelela is the highest highway pass in Bhutan at over 12,000 feet. This seemed like a great place for Geri and Lila to pose for a shot, as Geri's local newspaper likes to post the town residents traveling far afield – fu n! The climb up to this pass from Paro is highly scenic, much of it through thick conifer forest. En route we saw a dozen+ Kalij Pheasant, 3 female Satyr Tragopan, and several Blood Pheasant. Norbu pointed out the color difference in this region compared to those we'd seen before in the east.

We had breakfast with a grand view, surrounded by flowers. We had fresh asparagus omelets, buckwheat pancakes and fruits. This was our last mobile meal, and we said good-bye to the wonderful crew that had so steadily and safely kept us fed in the rural places we explore. We had a gratuity envelope ready for them and wished the good fortune and health for their future days. After breakfast it was onward and up. The pine forest gave way to mixed conifer, then the forest became more stunted and ghostly wind-trimmed trees emerged as near barren trunks, characteristic of plant growth in extreme environments. The hillsides on either side were clad in shrubbery laced with a few small streams. Birds were oddly quiet today, we had good looks at Blue-fronted Redstart, Spotted Laughing Thrush, and Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch including a bright pink male. Norbu was able to get the scope on almost everything we saw, so in many ways today was a grand final review. Big herds of yak were out grazing, and we had time to photograph them and watch the herd. Patches of primrose in bloom were brilliant.

Time passed quickly, and we had decided head back down to enjoy lunch in Paro at the delightful Mountain Cafe with some to shop or look at produce in the local market where Avi was anxious to pick up some delicacies. Our hikers, "Florida" John and Kathy, "Montana" John and Gail and Pema had a good challenge ahead of them, with an 1800 foot climb, then a descent and ascent on to the nine temples of the cliffside Tiger's Nest complex. Five



electd to give it a try after hearing that even the walk to the teahouse (reached in an hour of the overall three) was worth it for the view. With big smiles they all made it, some with Fitbit's diving into the red zone more than others but all triumphant. And all humbled and inspired by the spirituality of the place, so clearly evidenced by the faith of locals visiting a most sacred site alongside them. There are no photos allowed inside but all described the immersion as beautiful, challenging (many narrow, steep steps) but so worthwhile and meaningful. Pema provided commentary that enriched the experience a lot.

The hikers made such good time that the birders could pick them up about 1:30 and all headed in for a celebratory lunch. The menu was varied at Mountain Café and some stuck to Bhutanese food, some tried Indian and a few - cheeseburgers, wow! Most opted for a post lunch return to the hotel, thoughts of a nap or a head start on packing on their minds. Five stayed in to shop and had a lot of fun finding some treasures. After the ample and late lunch our festive last night at the local brewpub dwindled to a small core group. We had fun, shared trip highlights, and some good food. Driving back, we stopped to admire the beauty of the striking lit-up Paro Dzong. Our hotel was in the hills above Paro, nestled among big pines. A Gray Nightjar serenaded us to sleep.

Thurs., Apr. 25 Morning Breakfast Wrap Up and Birding | Departures

Our flight was late morning and we welcomed a bit later breakfast at 7 am. We shared some trip highlights, filled in our last bird list column and thanked our wonderful guides. En route to the airport we gave seeing the Black-necked Crake (Black-tailed Crake) a second chance, having had no luck the afternoon previous at the small wetland site. Avi was persistent and we all reaped the rewards of his efforts as one peered out of the reeds with a fat caterpillar in its mouth. Nothing like a new bird on the final airport day! The Paro Airport is beautifully constructed and full of art. One last gasp of their commitment to having more than profit guide life. We learned so much, experienced so much, and we were leaving today with more hopeful hearts.



Photos: Group Photo (Peg Abbott - PA), Himalayan Monal (PA), Himalayan Griffon (PA), Red Panda (PA), Blood Pheasant (PA), Blue-bearded Bee-eater (PA), Golden Langur (PA), View from plane (PA), Andrew Avery Spotted Dove (PA), Yellow-billed Blue Magpie (PA), Great Parrotbill (PA), Mrs Gould's Sunbird (PA), Group Birding (PA), Asian-barred Owllet (Norbu Norbu - NN), Blue-throated Barbet (PA), White-bellied Heron (NN), White-winged Grosbeak (PA), Himalayan Monal (NN), Prayer Flags (PA), Waterfall (PA), Textile (PA), Scenic (PA), Gray-sided Bush Warbler (PA), White-throated Kingfisher (PA), Blood Pheasant (PA), Richard's Pipit (PA), Large-billed Crow (PA), Florals (PA), Firepit (PA), Red Panda (NN), Campsite (PA), Rufous-winged Fulvetta (PA), Lodge (PA), Large Hawk-Cuckoo (PA), Spiderhunter (PA), Long-tailed Shrike (PA), Black Giant Squirrel (PA), Black-throated Tit (PA), Lodge (PA), Red-vented Bulbul (PA), Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush (NN), Crested Kingfisher (PA), Crescent Serpent Eagle (PA), Black-throated Parrotbill (PA), Golden Langur (PA), Scarlet Minivet (PA), Common Cuckoo (PA), Brown Parrotbill (NN), Rufous-vented Tit (PA), Pika (PA), Darjeling Woodpecker (PA), Himalayan Monal (NN), Local Artist (PA), Hoary-throated Barwing (NN), Market (PA), Himalayan Gray Langur (PA), Peppers (PA), Prayer Flags (PA), Yak mother and young (PA), Spotted Laughingthrush (PA), Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch (PA), Himalayan Bluetail (PA), Himalayan Cutia (NN)