

Eaglenest 2013 Trip report

Group: Wendy Black, Nicholas Branson, Jon Gallagher, Evonne Hannar, John Hannar, Olive Hannar, Erik Klop, Rob Wardle

Leaders: Peter Lobo & Rafik

Itinerary

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| 06 May | Arrival Delhi |
| 07 May | Delhi – Guwahati – Nameri |
| 08 May | Nameri – Dirang, Sangti valley & Dirang (afternoon) |
| 09 May | Sela Pass |
| 10 May | Mandala road |
| 11 May | Dirang – Lama Camp |
| 12 May | Lama Camp – Eaglenest Pass – Bompu Camp |
| 13 May | Sessni & Khellong area |
| 14 May | Sessni area |
| 15 May | Bompu – Eaglenest Pass – Lama Camp |
| 16 May | Lama Camp – Nameri |
| 17 May | Nameri – Guwahati – Delhi |

Trip report:

text by Erik Klop

photos by Jon Gallagher (JG), Nicholas Branson (NB), Rob Wardle (RW) and Erik Klop (EK)



Small niltava (*Niltava macgrigoriae*) (JG).

Daily log

06 May: Delhi

In the course of the morning all participants arrived in Delhi, where we were transferred to a comfortable hotel not far from the airport. Some afternoon birding in the hotel gardens produced a few common Indian species including the ubiquitous House Crows, Common and Bank Mynas, Ashy Prinia, Purple Sunbird, Red-vented Bulbul and Jungle Babbler.

07 May: Delhi – Guwahati – Nameri

After several hours waiting at Delhi airport, we finally boarded our delayed flight to Guwahati where we arrived in the afternoon and met with our guide, Peter Lobo. At the outskirts of town we first visited the famous rubbish dump, where we saw several tens of Greater Adjutants as well as Lesser Adjutant, before we continued our long drive to Nameri Tiger Reserve. Driving through the plains of Assam produced roadside birds including Little Cormorant, Indian (Black-billed) Roller, White-throated Kingfisher, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon and Oriental Magpie-robin.



Greater adjutant (*Leptoptilos dubius*), Guwahati (NB).

08 May: Nameri – Dirang, Sangti valley & Dirang

Sunrise is very early this far east in India, and by 4.30am the grounds of Nameri eco-camp were full of bird activity. One hour of birding before breakfast produced some excellent lowland species, including many Red-breasted Parakeets, several Dollarbirds hawking for insects, a very showy Great Hornbill, Blue-throated Barbet, Greater Flameback and Black-hooded Oriole. After breakfast we had a short drive to the Assam/Arunachal border, and after clearing the border formalities we soon entered the magnificent mountain scenery of Arunachal Pradesh. The drive to Dirang took all morning but we had several

interesting birding stops along the way with Little Forktail, a very close and confiding Small Niltava, Crested Kingfisher, Brown Dipper, Blue Whistling-thrush, Striated Laughingthrush, White-naped Yuhina, Yellow-throated Fulvetta and Black-breasted Sunbird. Around midday we arrived in Dirang where the scrub and trees around the hotel had Long-tailed Minivet, Black Bulbul and Grey-cheeked Warbler.

In the afternoon we visited Sangti valley, the only known breeding site of Long-billed Plover in India. We did not have to search hard for it, as we had not even stopped the car before we saw a Long-billed Plover running towards the river where we all had superb views of this much-wanted species. Our attempt to see our other target bird, Black-tailed Crake, was challenged by a brief rain shower but as soon as the rains stopped we soon had the crake in full view, foraging in a marshy part of the valley. We still had a few hours to walk along a quiet road near Dirang where we picked up more Brown Dippers, Blue-headed Rock-thrush, Dark-sided and Verditer Flycatchers, Ashy Drongo, Oriental White-eye and Crested Bunting. After a delicious dinner we all went to bed early as the next day would have a very early start to visit the famous Sela pass.



Long-billed plover (*Charadrius placidus*) (EK) and Black-tailed crake (*Porzana bicolor*) (JG).

09 May: Sela Pass

The alarm clocks went off at 2.30 in the night and we were soon on our way to the highest point on this trip, Sela pass at 4200m. It had rained heavily during the night and the road was muddy and slow-going. However as the sun was coming through the weather looked increasingly bright and sunny. We had breakfast below the pass in some spectacular scenery, where we were surrounded by many gorgeous Fire-tailed Sunbirds, Greenish, Buff-barred and Lemon-rumped Warblers, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Red-headed Bullfinch and Himalayan White-browed and Dark-rumped Rosefinches. We looked for Fire-tailed Myzornis without success, but two beautiful Snow Pigeons flying low over our breakfast site provided good compensation.

Driving a little higher we soon arrived at the pass in bright sunshine. We had only just stepped out of the vehicles when we saw several Grandalas, joined by many Plain and a few Brandt's Mountain-finches, flying around and hopping on the bare rocks among the snow. A few male Grandalas came very close and the views we had of these bright-blue birds in this landscape were out of this world. A little further we scanned the mountain slopes for Himalayan Monal but found some other 'chickens' instead: a group of five Blood Pheasants was foraging on the lower slopes and gave us excellent views as they were not at all bothered by our presence. Other good birds included Olive-backed and Rosy Pipits, White-collared and Tibetan Blackbirds, more Snow Pigeons and Grandalas, Golden Bush-robin, Blue-fronted Redstart, White-capped River-chat, Black-faced Laughingthrush and a few distant Beautiful Rosefinches. After a few hours birding at 4000m the mist came rolling in, so we decided to head back slowly, stopping at an alternative site to try for the monal and to have lunch. Clearly the gods were on our side today as Rafik

soon spotted our target bird. However the monal spotted us too and immediately ran into cover, giving only a few of us a brief sighting before it vanished. After this somewhat disappointing sighting we continued with our lunch, but we were interrupted by a small green bird that flew into a small tree right in front of us: a Fire-tailed Myzornis! We all had cracking views of this little beauty and the excitement had not settled yet before Rafik yelled “MONAL” again, pointing at a male Himalayan Monal that was foraging not far away in a small forest glade. This time we all enjoyed superb scope views for nearly 10 minutes before the mist blocked our views. Sometimes birding just doesn’t get any better... After this spectacular sighting we headed back to Dirang where we had some rest or spent the last hours of the day birding near the hotel.



Top: birding below Sela Pass, and Grandala (*Grandala coelicolor*) (EK).

Bottom: Blood pheasant (*Ithaginis cruentus*) and Himalayan monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*) (JG).

10 May: Mandala road

Today was our second full day in the Dirang area, and everybody was keen to continue the success we had on the previous day at Sela. At 4.30 in the morning we drove up Mandala road, pausing for a beautiful male Kalij Pheasant that was spotted by John, Olive and Evonne. Arriving at 3000m altitude the first birds we encountered were Rufous-bellied Woodpecker and a very confiding Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler! This was also a good site for Bar-winged Wren-babbler and playing the tape immediately resulted in a bird popping out of the undergrowth to start singing out in the open. Quite a spectacular start to the day and we still had a full day of birding ahead of us. From the top of Mandala road we walked down and birded the roadsides. The weather was rather variable to put it mildly, as sunshine, mist and rain all came in quick succession throughout the day. The drizzle did not stop bird activity as we soon encountered more Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers as well as Darjeeling and Crimson-breasted Woodpeckers; unfortunately Bay Woodpecker was less cooperative and only gave us brief flight views.

Mandala road lived up to its reputation, as new birds kept on coming and we found Himalayan and Lesser Cuckoos, Short-billed and Grey-chinned Minivets, Scaly Thrush, Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrush, Grey-crested Tit, a good set of flycatchers including Slaty-blue, Rufous-gorgeted and Ultramarine Flycatcher, Large-billed Leaf Warbler, very handsome Black-throated Parrotbills, Russet Sparrow, lots of Green-tailed Sunbirds and a few Mrs Gould's Sunbirds, females only of Gold-naped and Crimson-browed Finch, and Blanford's Rosefinch. The 'babbler' list also grew rapidly with Bhutan, Chestnut-crowned, Black-faced and Spotted Laughingthrushes, several fulvettas including the stunning Golden-breasted, the three minlas, our first of many Beautiful Sibias, a female Blyth's Shrike-babbler and a fine male Black-headed Shrike-babbler. An attempt for Gould's Shortwing made us clamber up a steep and muddy hillside, which was an interesting experience but did not result in any sign of the shortwing. We were considerably more lucky with some of those other skulkers, including Scaly-breasted Wren-babbler, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Indian Blue Robin and White-browed Shortwing that all gave excellent views.



White-browed shortwing (*Brachypteryx montana*) and Black-headed shrike-babbler (*Pteruthius rufiventer*) (JG).

11 May: Dirang – Eaglenest (Lama Camp)

We left Dirang early in the morning for the drive to Eaglenest, where we would be based for the next week. Along the way we found some good birds such as Black Eagle, Blyth's Swift, Orange-bellied Leafbird and a skulking Russet Bush-warbler that eventually showed well. A non-birding highlight was found in the rubbish below the gas station of Tenga, where two magnificent King Cobras were seen from a safe distance. Upon entering the Eaglenest area we were greeted by a roadside Assamese Macaque, and with Lama Camp in view we soon made our first attempt to see the Bugun Liocichla (this being the only place in the world where this species – first described in 2006 – is known to occur). It did not take much time before we heard it, but our efforts to actually see one resulted in mixed success as only Rob and Jon got good views of the bird. The rest of us had to settle with brief flight views and hope for better sightings around Lama Camp! The closely-related Red-faced Liocichla was more cooperative, as well as two Ferruginous Flycatchers and White-tailed Nuthatch.

The afternoon was spent around Lama Camp, trying for better views of the liocichla but the bird kept us nervous for some more time. Hill Partidges were calling all around (but never showed), and we saw Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon, Great Barbet, Striated Bulbul, Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler, Grey-sided Laughingthrush, brief views of skulking Rufous-chinned Laughingthrushes, and a female Scarlet Finch. Some confusion was caused by a very big-looking Grey Nightjar that was flushed from the ground by a mammal, probably a Yellow-throated Marten. As the day came to an end we returned to camp for a good meal (surrounded by pictures of our target bird) and a very comfortable hot shower before going to bed early.

12 May: Lama Camp – Eaglenest Pass – Bompou Camp

Of course the Bugun Liocichla was top priority this morning and the adrenaline started running when we heard it singing just below the camp. We hurried down the road, listening for the bird when suddenly two liocichlas flew in from behind and dashed into the undergrowth right in front of us. We were still trying to follow their movements when suddenly one of the birds popped out of the undergrowth onto an exposed branch of a small bush, where we all had excellent views of the bird – what a relief! With the target bird in the bag by 5 am we continued birding around Lama Camp for some more time before we moved on to Eaglenest Pass and Bompou Camp.

Eaglenest Pass gave us good views of Mountain Hawk-eagle, Blyth's Swift, Whistler's Warbler, Brown Parrotbill, and Spotted Nutcracker. We pushed our luck by trying to tape-in a calling Blue-fronted Robin – and with success, as the bird briefly showed itself in a gap in the vegetation before becoming invisible again. Further down the road we had a brilliant male Gold-naped Finch, two very close Scaly Laughingthrushes, Black-throated Prinia and all the 'usual' laughingthrushes and yuhinas. The vegetation was getting more dense as we approached somewhat lower elevations, making birdwatching more difficult and considerable effort was needed to see skulkers like Lesser Shortwing and Grey-bellied Tesia. Other good birds seen that day included Large Niltava, Broad-billed Warbler, and Yellow-cheeked and Rufous-fronted Tit.



Top: Eaglenest Pass (EK) and Fire-tailed sunbird (*Aethopyga ignicauda*) (RW).

Bottom: Mrs. Gould's Sunbird (*Aethopyga gouldiae*) and Scaly laughingthrush (*Trochalopteron subunicolor*) (JG).

13 May: Sessni & Khellong area

We spent the entire day at lower elevations around Sessni and Khellong, where a completely new set of species awaited us. From the cars we spotted several Kalij Pheasants, as well as a Crested Serpent-eagle and even a Slaty-backed Forktail that was flushed from a road puddle. A Hodgson's Frogmouth was heard calling but unfortunately we never got to see it. We were more lucky with White-gorgeted and Pale-blue Flycatchers, Red-headed Trogon, White-browed Scimitar-babbler and bamboo specialists like Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbill and White-hooded Babbler. We also continued our 'wren-babbler quest' successfully with Eyebrowed and Long-billed Wren-babblers, both of which came extremely close and gave excellent views.

Later in the morning we had a short coffee break at Khellong, at only 900m altitude the lowest mountain site during the trip. In some scrubby undergrowth we found Puff-throated and Rufous-fronted Babbler, the latter confusingly similar to the Rufous-capped we had seen at higher elevations. A short walk in open secondary growth gave us Large Woodshrike, Mountain Bulbul, Long-tailed Sibia, and Greater Racket-tailed Drongo; we also passed the holy *Phoebe goalparensis* tree that was planted in 1959 by the 14th Dalai Lama during his epic journey from Tibet. Around midday we slowly headed back to Sessni where we had lunch at a good viewpoint over the surrounding hills. Black Eagles were patrolling the forested hillsides and a flock of swifts included both White-throated and Silver-backed Needletails. Lunchtime was also used to look for Rufous-necked Hornbill, and after some time a male hornbill flew into a large tree where it was unfortunately partly hidden from view. Other birds around Sessni included Grey-backed Shrike, Yellow-throated Fulvetta and Golden Babbler, and soon we found a second Rufous-necked Hornbill that, unfortunately, again was well hidden in the canopy. We decided to wait, hoping it would give us better views – and it did, as after 10 minutes or so it flew to a bare tree where we all had great views of this beautiful species. A highlight for Jon was a Beautiful Nuthatch that showed briefly, but unfortunately it was gone before the rest of the group could set eyes on it.



Forest around Sessni (EK) and Long-billed wren-babbler (*Rimator malacoptilus*) (JG).

14 May: Sessni area

Our second day in the area around Bompou Camp was used to track down some more of the middle-elevation species. We had a great start with a Rufous-throated Wren-babbler (again extremely close) and again several Kalij Pheasants on the road. A White-tailed Robin showed well to most of the group, soon followed by a marvellous Chestnut-breasted Partridge only a few metres away on the dark forest floor. Birding in the dense forest was not easy, however, and we had to work hard for species like Bay Woodpecker and the much-wanted endemic Sikkim Wedge-billed (or Blackish-breasted) Babbler. After a few hours birding we finally heard the babbler calling, but it did not show easily and most of the group had to settle with just brief glimpses of the bird moving quickly through the undergrowth. Other birds were more cooperative, and we enjoyed good views of Hodgson's Hawk-cuckoo, Golden-throated

Barbet, another Rufous-necked Hornbill, Long-tailed Broadbill, Little Pied Flycatcher, Maroon Oriole, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Coral-billed Scimitar babbler, Rufous-backed Sibia, Greater Rufous-headed Parrotbill, and a very showy Sultan Tit. A Green Cochoa was calling distantly, but would not come closer.

Besides the babbler, another priority species for today was Beautiful Nuthatch. We knew this would be a difficult one, but Jon had seen it the previous day so we knew it was out there. Again it was Jon who found it – and again, the bird disappeared before the others could see it. We continued birding and as we walked further down the track suddenly a bird flew onto a mossy branch overhanging the road – Beautiful Nuthatch! This time we all had good views and we were in high spirits after having seen this gorgeous species so well. Later in the afternoon we passed the Sikkim Wedge-billed Babbler site again, so we gave it a second shot for those who had not seen the bird properly in the morning. This time we had more luck, as after a few minutes it hopped into a small gap in the vegetation where it remained for a whopping 10 seconds or so, finally giving good views. After this successful day of intensive birding we headed back to camp, with a nice surprise for the first vehicle in the form of a family of Rufous-throated Hill-partridges crossing the road.

15 May: Bompou – Eaglenest Pass – Lama Camp

Today was our last full day in the Eaglenest area, and we used the entire day for the journey back to Lama Camp, birding along the way. On top of our priority list was one of the most spectacular Eastern Himalayan specialities: Ward's Trogon, a species we had failed to see in the previous days and today would be our last chance to find it. The day started slowly as the birds kept rather quiet. A Sapphire Flycatcher was heard but unfortunately it would not show, and two probable Purple Cochoas flying over the road could not be found again. There was no sign of the trogon either, and we mostly found the 'usual suspects' like yuhinas and Green-tailed Sunbirds, until we were fortunate to come across a small group of Himalayan Cutias that were much appreciated.

Then, after several attempts for Ward's Trogon, Peter finally got a response. It turned out to be a female, and her subdued colours made it very difficult to see when it was perched on a mossy branch. After some playback the bird came closer until we all had very good views. Happy with this observation we continued searching for a male, and after some time we finally found a bright red male flying through the forest. We made great effort to see it perched, but the views were poor as somehow the bird was always obscured by a branch or leaves. After we accepted that this was the best we could get, we turned our attention to a White-spectacled Warbler that was calling close by, completing our list of *seicercus* warblers. In the meantime the trogon apparently lost its shyness, and it flew onto an exposed branch in full view! Finally we all had superb views of this smashing bird – an absolute highlight of the trip.

We spent some time birding Eaglenest Pass at 2800m altitude, where we saw Rufous-bellied Niltava, Black-faced Laughingthrush and Spotted Nutcracker, before we arrived at Lama Camp to spend our last night in Eaglenest. We celebrated all the birds we had seen with a special "birding in Eaglenest" cake made by the camp crew, which was a fitting end to our visit.



Ward's Trogon (*Harpactes wardi*) (JG).

16 May: Lama Camp – Nameri

Before leaving the mountains we visited the first liocichla site again, where we had our last views of montane specialities like Great Barbet, Black-winged Cuckoo-shrike, Ferruginous Flycatcher, Large Niltava, Grey-sided Laughingthrush, Silver-eared Mesia, Himalayan Cutia, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, and a new species for the trip in the form of White-winged Grosbeak. When looking at a Grey-winged Blackbird that was sitting on the road, suddenly a bird flew onto a low branch right above the blackbird – a Bugun Liocichla out in the open! After some final mountain birding we stepped into our vehicles again for the long drive to Nameri. Some roadside birding resulted in good species like Black-backed and Slaty-backed Forktails, Nepal House-martin, White-crested Laughingthrush and Hair-crested Drongo. We still had time to visit an area in the foothills where we had Pin-tailed Green Pigeon, Drongo-cuckoo, Long-tailed Broadbill, Black-crested Bulbul, Striated Yuhina, Nepal Fulvetta and Streaked Spiderhunter. The sight of Common Mynas along the road meant we were back in the lowlands and we checked in at Nameri eco-camp for our last night in northeast India.

17 May: Nameri – Guwahati – Delhi

As our flight to Delhi left late in the afternoon, we still had a few hours in the morning to bird the woodlands of Nameri Tiger Reserve. The camp grounds had a fine Brown Hawk-owl and the usual Dollarbirds, Blue-throated Barbet, Great Hornbill and Red-breasted Parakeets. After breakfast we had a very fruitful walk to the river with several new species for our trip, including Wreathed and Oriental Pied Hornbills, Asian Barred Owlet, Ashy-headed, Thick-billed and Orange-breasted Green Pigeons, Green-billed Malkoha, Chestnut-headed, Little and Blue-bearded Bee-eaters, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Abbott's Babbler, Common Iora and Common Tailorbird. Along the river we found River Lapwing, Great Thick-knee and a group of impressive Asian water buffaloes.

Back in Guwahati we still had time for a short visit to a marsh not far from the airport, where we added Cotton Teal, Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged Jacanas, Ashy Woodswallow and Baya Weaver to our list. After this final birding stop we had to catch our flight back to Delhi, where we arrived in the evening and still had time for a drink and go through our long trip list that had reached over 300 species.

All in all we had a very enjoyable and successful trip to the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, where we had seen a superb selection of Eastern Himalayan specialities. We would like to thank Peter, Rafik, our superb drivers and ground crew, for their great company and a very smooth and well-organized trip to this remote area.

Erik Klop
June 2013