

NE-India & Bhutan Birding Tour – 23 days

Birding tour Assam, Arunachal Pradesh & Bhutan Traverse East to West

Tour JTT-NEIBH-WB02: Guwahati – Nameri N.P. – Eagle nest Sanctuary – Samdrup Jongkar – Trashigang – Sakteng N.P. - Mongar – Senggor - Bumthang – Trongsa - Punakha - Thimpu – Chele La - Paro

On this tour, you'll visit the Northeast of India, one of the most biodiverse places on earth and particularly rich in birds, and Bhutan which due to its well conserved ecosystems and extensive range of altitudinal stages is a birder's paradise in its own right.

You'll start at Guwahati, the capital of Assam (India), and then visit the bird-rich park of Nameri, where the rare wood-winged duck and the ibisbill can be spotted, and the even more bird-rich Eaglenest Sanctuary where not so long ago a new bird species, the Bugun liocichla, was discovered.

After that, you'll cross the border to Bhutan and travel up through forest-covered mountains to the isolated town of Trashigang. You'll visit the nearby national park of Sakteng, home to some semi-high altitude species. Then, traveling westwards you'll cross three passes and on the way see three national parks as well. Some highlights of this trip will be Yonko La where an amazing array of birds lives in the forested mountains, and the Chele La, where there are good chances of seeing Himalayan monal, blood pheasant and collared grosbeaks. You'll also get the chance to see some of the cultural highlights of Bhutan, such as the Trashigang Dzong, Punakha Dzong and the temples of Bumthang Valley.

Itinerary

Day 01: Arrival Delhi

After arriving at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, you'll be taken to a very comfortable guesthouse not far from the airport for the overnight stay.

Day 02: Arrive Guwahati; transfer to Nameri N.P.

In the morning, you'll fly from Delhi to Guwahati, a 2.5 hr flight on which you can get some good glimpses of the Himalayas and the immense flood plains of the Brahmaputra. After arrival at Guwahati, you will be driven straight to Nameri National Park, where we check in to a very charming eco camp. The Nameri Eco Camp is an eco-friendly accommodation in the woods close to the park. The accommodation consists of large luxury tents with attached bathrooms. You can start your birding right here as great hornbills are known to regularly nest in the tall trees in the compound.

Day 03: At Nameri



The whole day will be a day spent at Nameri, walking and rafting on the Borelli River. We'll walk along the banks of the river through the forest. On and near the river, there are good chances of seeing small pratincole, greater thick-knee, merganser, Pallas' fish eagle, river lapwings, three species of cormorants, ruddy shell duck, black-winged stilt, little ringed plover, three kingfishers (the whitebellied, the pied and who knows the crested kingfisher), and the black stork. In the forest and above, there are many smaller forest species, such as the

crested goshawk, oriental honey-buzzard, rufous-bellied eagle, oriental hobby, and perhaps the great Indian hornbill. We'll keep a special look out for the white-winged wood duck. This extremely rare waterbird breeds near small ponds inside the forest. Probably less than 300 individuals remain in Assam. As these birds are seriously endangered, we'll be very careful not to disturb them.

In the afternoon, we'll go rafting on the Borelli River. Apart from many water birds that may have been seen in the morning, the main objective is to spot the ibisbill.

Day 04: Nameri – Eaglenest

If the ibisbill is not spotted the previous day again, we go rafting. After that, we proceed to the Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary. On the way, there will be occasions for birding at Bhalukpong, on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border and at Tippi. Our first halt in Eaglenest will be at the Lama Camp, located amidst temperate broad-leaved forests at an altitude of 2350 m.

Eaglenest is home to at least 454 species of birds. It is possibly the only place in India where three species of tragopan (pheasants) can be observed. It is also the site of the last new discovery of a new bird species in India. In 1995, the Bugun liocichla was first observed here. With some luck, the species can be seen close to the Lama Camp.

Day 05: Eaglenest, at Lama Camp

In the morning, we go birding around the Lama Camp on foot and then drive to Eaglenest Pass (2800 m) and back. Birding will be along a jeep track in temperate bamboo, conifer, broad-leaved forest and scrub. Birds that can be seen here include white-crested laughingthrush, Bugun liocichla, ward's trogon, beautiful sibia, coral-billed scimitar-babbler, white-bellied erpornis, rufous-vented yuhina, rufous-winged fulvetta.



Day 06: Eaglenest, at Bompou Camp

Early morning, we drive to Bompou Camp (1940 m). It is a 'birding drive', driving and walking along the jeep track over the pass and down to Chaku and Bompou. The

habitat is a temperate broad-leaved forest with meadows and roadside scrub. Overnight stay is at Bompou camp.



Day 07: Eaglenest, at Bompou Camp

We will have a full day of birding around the Bompou camp. We'll walk in the direction of Sessni (12 km). Birds that can be seen in this area include wreathed hornbill, necked hornbill, golden-throated barbet, rufous-backed sibia, crimson-breasted and Darjeeling woodpecker, lesser and greater yellownape, rusty-bellied shortwing, golden bush robin, white-naped Yuhina and purple cochoa.

Day 08: Eaglenest, at Bompou Camp & Lama Camp

Full day of birding around the Bompou camp again. Late afternoon, we drive down to the Lama Camp.

P.M. If clients wish, we can spend one half day visiting the Sangti Valley for its black-necked cranes.

Day 09: Eaglenest – Orang N.P.

We start early and drive down to the Assam plains and continue on to Orang NP, off the highway on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. Here, we check into the local tourist lodge. In the afternoon, we drive through the tracks inside the park looking for birds. Orang is sometimes referred to as mini-Kaziranga. It is right on the banks of the Brahmaputra and is home to rhinos, wild elephants, tigers, wild buffaloes, pygmy hog and at least 222 bird species, many of them migratory birds. Some of the key species found here are the Bengal florican, spot-billed duck, black-necked stork, greater adjutant stork, lesser adjutant stork, woolly-necked stork, rudy shelduck, gadwall, mallard, pintail, pallas' fishing eagle and a number of others include forest and grassland birds.

Day 10: Orang N.P. - Samdrup Jongkhar

The drive leads through the northern reaches of the Brahmaputra floodplains, where it touches the mountains of Bhutan. These so called *duars* ("doors" to the valleys of Bhutan) are lush green and fertile. The landscape is a mix of small hamlets, rice fields, ponds and rivulets, tea plantations and forest remnants. Given an early start, there will be enough time for bird watching and photography on the way.

At the end of the afternoon, you'll cross the Indo-Bhutanese border, where you'll be met with your Bhutanese guide and bid farewell to your Indian guide. Samdrup Jongkar is right on the other side. Here you'll check in to your hotel.

Day 11: Samdrup Jongkhar – Trashigang

The 180 Kms drive from Samdrup Jongkhar to Trashigang takes over 6 hours. It crosses several ridges of 2002 m - 2510 m high.

The area from Samdrup Jongkhar (250m) to the dzongkhag (province) border at Deothang (850 m) is interesting with much of the remaining forest habitats. Semi-tropical forests full of long-tailed macaques are found not far from the road, and the rivers have otters. Flocks of wreathed hornbills are likely to be seen flying across the road in the mornings and late afternoon. At 300 meters elevation, just 400 meters from the Samdrup Jhonkar bridge, a dirt road leads to a power house and continues east along the river for 2 kms. After having crossed a small stream and a fruit plantation it is possible to penetrate into an old growth forest on a trail. Be careful as herds of elephants forage in this area. The species likely to be observed are the rare pied falconet, red-faced liocichla, gray-breasted tesia, white-spectacled warbler, silver-breasted broadbill, scaly thrush and snowy-browed flycatcher, pale-headed woodpecker, pale blue flycatcher, pygmy blue flycatcher, pale-chinned (brooks) flycatcher, blue-eared barbet, Wards trogon, violet cuckoo, various species of forktail (in the river), dark-rumped swift, rufous-bellied eagle, greater rufous-headed parrotbill, and many others. Overnight at hotel in Trashigang.

Day 12 & 13: Sakteng

The Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuaru is Bhutan's easternmost protected area. Though it has not been studied thoroughly, it is already clear that this 650 sq km large park has a high biodiversity. It is an important habitat to endangered species like musk deer, red panda, Himalayan black bear, and red fox. Even the mysterious mythical yeti (abominable snowman) is believed to reside in the sanctuary. Birds that can be seen here with some luck include seven species of pheasants - snow partridge, hill partridge, rufous throated partridge, blood pheasants, himalayan monal pheasants and satyr tragopan. It takes at least two days of trekking to get to the interior of the park. But thanks to a new road that has recently been constructed, we can also get a glimpse of it on day walks. Our basis for this will be Rangjung where we stay in the simple but clean gompa hotel.

Day 14: Sakteng - Mongar

The eastern towns of Mongar and Trashigang are not interesting for birding so the tour is spent for cultural experience. In both places we'll visit the *dzong*. Dzongs are castle-like structures that in the past used to house the army, local administration and a monastery. These days the army stays elsewhere but dzongs still have the double function of district administration office and monastery. Overnight in Druk Zhongkhar hotel

Day 15: Mongar – Ura

Today, we'll spend time birding at the Yongko La (pass, 3425 m) and then proceed to the village of Sengor, a tiny settlement of shingle roofs and lush fields. This village is also the home to these mountains' most special bird, the monal (Lophophorus impejanus).

Here we'll explore the wonderfully rich subtropical forests of this area. Stretching away to the horizons, these forests differ noticeably from those at higher elevations with tall trees sporting magnificent girths supported on huge buttresses.



The Limethang forests are indeed nature's gift to birders. Many of Bhutan's most sought-after birds can be found here. You are likely to see: chestnut-breasted partridge, blue-naped pitta, ward's trogon, red-headed trogon, blue-fronted robin and rufous-throated, wedge-billed, long-billed and bar-winged wren-babblers.

Day 16: Ura – Bumthang

Ura is the last and the highest valley of Bumthang. Perched at an altitude of 3,100 m, Ura village has characteristically closed clustered houses, which is quite unusual in Bhutan. The day is spent exploring the fascinating Ura valley and Bumthang. Overnight stay is at Jakar in Rinchenling Lodge.

Day 17: Bumthang – Trongsa

We drive to Trongsa. On this trip of 65 km, there is an altitude variation from 2,600 m in Bumthang Valley to Yotongla pass at 3,400 m and then descends to Trongsa valley at 2,100 m and the vegetation changes from coniferous and mixed alpine of Bumthang to temperate forests of Trongsa. Apart from being one of the most beautiful valleys of the kingdom, Bumthang is also the religious heartland of the nation. The ideal birding spots in this region are before Yotongla pass, farmland in the valleys and the riverside of Chamkhar Chhu river. Some birds of this area are: goldcrest, blyth's pipit, common sandpiper, little bunting, redbilled chough and cormorant.

Day 18: Trongsa – Phobjikha

Today, we'll cross another pass, the Pele La (3425 m). Just after that we enter the secluded high valley of Phobjikha. Because of a large flock of black-necked cranes that winter here, this valley is considered one of the most important wildlife reserves in the country. The fascinating Gangtey village sits on the ridge overlooking the large green expanse of Phobjikha valley.

We'll explore the valley on foot. In addition to the large flocks of black-necked cranes that can be seen here (Nov-March), you can expect the amur falcon, redmantled rosefinch, firebreasted flowerpecker, redheaded bullfinch, scarlet finch, whitetailed nuthatch, magpie-robin, goldcrest, great pied hornbill, common hill partridge, snow pigeon, rufousbreasted accenter, whitebacked munia, just to name a few.

Day 19: Phobjikha - Punakha

We leave the beautiful Phobjikha Valley and descend towards Punakha, the site of Bhutan's most impressive and most lavishly decorated dzong. Punakha was once the capital of this tiny nation that preserves its cultural and natural heritages so keenly. Punakha Dzong is one of the largest in the country. It is situated at the confluence of two rivers, the Mo (Mother) and Po (Father) Chu (River). After visiting the



dzong, we'll proceed to our hotel in Punakha.

Day 20: Punakha – Thimpu

Early morning, we explore the Mo Chu Valley (1400m-1700m) and some beautiful forests upstream. There are chances of spotting the ibisbill, the bar-headed geese, the great-headed gulls, the white-bellied heron - one of Bhutan's most elusive species (rare and difficult to see), tawny fish owl, river lapwing, red-headed trogon, grey-headed woodpecker, striated bulbul, little niltava, all three tesias, pygmy blue flycatcher, rufous-chinned laughing thrush, red-faced liocichla, scarlet finch, spotted wren-babbler, wedge-tailed pigeon, bay woodpecker, yellow-vented warbler, fire-capped tit, white-gorgeted flycatcher, perhaps three species of forktails, and all three species of tesias.

After lunch, we'll drive up to Dochu La (3120 m). Though the drive would take only 2 hours, we'll spend the whole afternoon on this stretch, mostly outside the car, birding along the highway and on forest trails, exploring magnificent low elevation mixed evergreen and broad-leaved forests. Highlights could include hill partridge, satyr tragopan, rufous-bellied bush-robin, golden-naped finch, hoary barwing, Edwards rosefinch, golden bush-robin, cutia, fire-tail myzornis, nutcrackers, lemon-rumped leaf-warblers, blue-bellied flowerpeckers, green shrike-babblers, olive-backed pipits, gold-billed magpies, plain-backed thrush, red crossbills, and more. The diversity of birds, mammals and flowering plants is seemingly endless. We plan to follow a mule trail through some of the most beautiful and bird rich forests in Bhutan. Late afternoon, or more likely early evening, we'll descend to Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan (2400 m).

Overnight stay is at a good hotel in Thimpu.

Day 21: Thimphu – Paro

In the morning, we'll explore the beautiful upland valley northwest of Thimpu. Relatively dry, Thimphu valley is surrounded by fine stands of Blue Pine and temperate evergreen forests. The increasing human settlement has pushed birding spots at least 10 kms away. Now the ideal areas for birding are around the stream near Motithang and in and around Begana and Cheri villages.



Some of the bird species recorded here are: common sandpiper, red-rumped swallow, sparrowhawk, grackle or hill myna, grey wagtail, whitebellied yuhina, upland pipit, plumbeous redstart. In the afternoon, there will be some time to visit some of the cultural highlights of Thimpu. Thimphu is also a cultural center with many sights to see and experience such as: the Insitute for Chuzum Dzorrig, where young people are being trained in the art of traditional painting, sculpting and nine more arts; the Institute of Traditional Medicine; the Folk Heritage Museum; the Textile Museum, Tashi Choe Dzong, where Bhutan's parliament resides; Zilukha Nunnery; the Handicrafts Emporium; and the Takin Reserve, where the national animal, the odd-looking *takin*, can be seen.

After that we drive to Paro, where we check into a comfortable hotel.

Day 22: Paro – Chele La - Paro

Very early morning, we drive up to the Chele La (3988 m), Bhutan's highest motorable pass. Here there are good chances of seeing the Himalayan monal, blood pheasant and collared grosbeaks. Slowly descending back to Paro for lunch, we'll take in a good sample of the sub-alpine and montane birds living in the rhododendron and cedar forests here.

In the afternoon, we explore the Paro Valley further to the northwest. The altitude of Paro Valley ranges from 2,150 – 2,950 m and the ideal birding spots are in the farmlands, the lower and upper broadleaved evergreen forests and along the sides of the rivers. Some of the recorded bird species in Paro include aberrant bush warbler, blyth's reed warbler, himalayan whistling thrush, common teal, greyheaded flycatcher warbler, green-backed tit, Hodgson's redstart, jungle crow, himalayan brown dipper, crested honey buzzard, himalayan treecreeper, hill pigeon, rufous-breasted accentor, rufous turtle dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*), rufousbellied hawk-eagle (*Hieraaetus kienerii*), stripethroated yuhina (*Yuhina gularis*), longtailed minivet (*Pericrocotus ethologus*).

The valley also possesses a wealth of cultural attractions such as the Ta Dzong (National Museum), Rinpung Dzong and the Kyichu Lhakhang. If you wish, you can hike up to the most famous temple of Bhutan, the Taktsang Lhakang, or Tigersnest. This is a walk of at least 4 hours up and down and can only be done after a very early lunch.



Day 23: Flight Paro – Delhi

The flight to Delhi leaves early. If you're on the flight to Bangkok, however, there is time to do some birding before boarding the plane.

Tour Price

P.M. Ask for quotation.

Inclusions: Accommodation on twin share at the indicated places on full board (day 01/02 at Delhi breakfast only); all transfers and sightseeing as per itinerary by vehicle specified; English speaking escort cum birding guide/naturalist throughout the tour; one bottle of mineral water per person per day; all entrance and monument fees, fresh fruits everyday; candies/ chocolates/ wafers on drives/ transfers. Flights Delhi - Guwahati and Paro – Delhi

Exclusions: Airfare both international and domestic; tips; drinks; laundry; telephone calls; insurance; expenses of personal nature.