

JAN Treks & Travels

Journeys into Adventure & Nature

NE-India & Bhutan Birding Tour – 15 days

Tour JTT-NEIBH-WB01: Jorhat – Kaziranga – Manas N.P. – Royal Manas N.P. – Zhemgang – Tingtibi - Phobjikha – Punakha - Thimpu – Paro

On this tour, you will start from Jorhat, India's second most easterly town, and then travel westward through Assam, visiting the spectacular Kaziranga N.P. and Manas N.P. You'll cross the border into Bhutan where another park, Royal Manas N.P. awaits you. Then you'll travel north through subtropical forests to the beautiful high valley of Phobjikha. After visiting the bird-rich broad-leaved forests of Punakha and the spectacular dzong here, you will cross the 3100 m Dochu La pass, with good birding en route. Descending along Thimpu, Bhutan's capital, you'll travel west to Paro, where Bhutan's national airport is situated. Almost every day, a couple of hours, or even the whole day sometimes will be spent on birding, often on multi-hour walks. As the itinerary passes some of Bhutan's cultural highlights, you will be able to visit them as well.

Birding in Bhutan is especially rewarding. Though its size is barely more than the Netherlands, about 770 species of birds have been recorded in Bhutan. The kingdom is recognized as the habitat for 221 globally endemic birds. Their habitats range from some of Himalaya's most extensive and least disturbed tropical forests to cool broad-leaved and towering evergreen forests of fir, hemlock and spruce.

The country is bisected by a well-maintained and paved road and birding especially in mid to late spring (late March to late May) is good virtually anywhere below 3,100 m. Traffic in Bhutan is light and one is not obliged to seek out a park or reserve, since at any stop, even in the midst of farmland, exciting birds are visible.

Itinerary

Day 01: Delhi/Kolkata – Jorhat by air; drive Jorhat – Kaziranga N. P. (90 kms / 1½ hrs)

We arrive at Jorhat and then drive on to Kaziranga and check into Jupuri lodge or a similar lodge.

Kaziranga National Park covers about 1000 sq kms, bordered on the north by the Brahmaputra River and on the south by the Karbi Anglong hills. The largest number of one-horned rhinoceros in Asia roams its swamps, grasslands with tall thickets of elephant grass and areas of mixed deciduous and tropical semi-evergreen forest. It is also home to a wide variety of other animals and birds. Almost 500 species have been counted.

Apart from the Indian rhino, the park contains about 35 major mammals, including wild elephant, tiger, a small population of hoolock gibbon, capped langur, bristly hare, hog badger, otter, leopard, wild boar, sambar, swamp deer, hog deer, muntjac, water buffalo and gaur. Among the birds are the rare greater adjutant stork, Bengal florican, black-necked stork, lesser adjutant stork, Pallas's fish eagle, swamp partridge, grey peacock-pheasant, great pied hornbill, green imperial pigeon, many babblers and thousands of migratory birds, seasonally attracted to the various water areas of the park from as far away as Siberia.

Day 02: Kaziranga National Park

Early morning we will traverse the park on elephant back. Apart from the rhino, other species found are hog deer, swamp deer, wild buffalo, elephants and if you are lucky, the tiger. We will return to the lodge for breakfast. Mid-morning, we will visit the nearby tribal village inhabited by the Mishing tribe followed by lunch at the lodge. In the afternoon, we do a jeep safari (Eastern range) inside the park returning to the lodge at dusk. Dinner and overnight stay is at the lodge in Kaziranga.

Day 03: Kaziranga N.P. - Guwahati

The morning begins with a jeep safari in the central range. In the afternoon, a walk in the Burrapahar range. Walking in Kaziranga is unusual and not many people know that it is possible. The fact is that it is actually the best way to come close to birds and other wildlife. Accompanied by two armed guards (there are rhino's, wild elephant and wild buffaloes in the area) we'll walk through a very beautiful forest, where there are good chances of seeing three species of hornbill, and then reach the silvery beach of the mighty Brahmaputra. Here, waterfowl such as ruddy shelduck, river lapwings and several species of terns can be seen. In the afternoon, we drive to Guwahati, the capital of Assam. Dinner and overnight stay will be at a hotel in Guwahati.

Day 04: Guwahati – Nameri N.P. (Eco Camp) (120 kms / 3 hrs)

After breakfast, you will be transferred to Nameri National Park, where we'll check into an eco camp, you will be staying at tented camps covered with thatched roofs. These camps have attached bathrooms with hot and cold water. In the afternoon, we cross the Bhorelli river by a small boat with a naturalist and a forest guard and start trekking inside the park looking for birds – merganser, Pallas' fish eagle, lapwings, cormorants, ruddy shell duck, kingfishers and if we get really lucky, perhaps the elusive white-winged wood duck and the great Indian hornbill. We return to the eco camp for dinner and overnight stay.

Day 05: Eco Camp (Nameri)

After breakfast, we drive 15 kms upstream carrying rubber rafts with us. We start rafting down the Bhorelli river for 2 hours looking for aquatic birds – ibis bill, swifts, cormorants and darters can be spotted while rafting. In the afternoon, we do a nature walk by the river.

Day 06: Eco Camp – Manas N.P. (300 kms / 7 hrs)

Today, we drive to Manas National Park - a project tiger reserve and a world heritage site. On arrival, we check into the MEWS lodge (this lodge is run by local youths of Manas - basic, but clean with en suite shower and WC). In the evening, we stroll near the tea estate next to your lodge. Dinner and overnight stay is at MEWS Lodge.

Day 07: Manas N.P.

Manas National Park is situated between the Sankos river in the west, the Dhansiri river in the east and bounded by Himalayan foothills in the North. It consists of dense jungle forest that alternates with alluvial grasslands, low alluvial savannah woodland and semi-evergreen forests, providing a rich wilderness for a great variety of wildlife, including many endangered species. In fact, Manas N.P. harbours the highest number of endangered species of all parks in India. Of

the many varieties of fauna in Manas, the three unique residents are the rare pygmy hog, the hispid hare and the golden langur.

Early morning, we do an elephant safari for about an hour through the park. We return to the lodge for breakfast. After breakfast, we go for a jeep safari inside the park to Mathanguri range at the Bhutan border. Apart from having a good chance of sighting herds of elephants and the rare golden langur, watch out for the birds. Manas is home to many bird species, both resident and migratory. Amongst these are the Bengal florican, jungle fowl, several species of bulbul, Brahminy duck, Khaleej pheasant, three species of egret, three species of pelican, Pallas' fishing eagle, crested serpent eagle, scarlet minivet, bee-eaters, four species of kingfisher, great hornbill, pied hornbill, gray hornbill, merganser, pied harrier, osprey, etc.

In the afternoon, we can do another jeep safari towards the eastern side of the park, or walk along the banks of the Manas River. Dinner and overnight stay is at the lodge.

Day 08: Manas N.P. (India) – Royal Manas N.P. (Bhutan)

Early morning, we cross the international border between India and Bhutan by jeep, entering the Bhutanese park of Royal Manas N.P. Here, we'll be spending the rest of the day bird-watching in the forest. The park consists largely of semitropical forests with of long-tailed macaques and Assamese macaques (endemic to Assam and southern Bhutan), and the rivers have otters. Flocks of wreathed hornbills are likely to be seen in the mornings and late afternoon, as well as rufous necked hornbills and great hornbills. Other species that can be observed are the rare pied falconet, red-faced liocichla, gray-breasted tesia, white-spectacled warbler, silver-breasted broadbill, scaly thrush, snowy-browed flycatcher, pale-headed woodpecker, pale blue flycatcher, pygmy blue flycatcher, pale-chinned (Brooks) flycatcher, blue-eared barbet, wards trogapan, violet cuckoo and various species of forktail (in the river). The other attractions at Panbang and Bhutan Manas include boating, river rafting, elephant rides and wildlife watching. The park range office at Manas coordinates these services. While boating and river rafting along the Manas river, one can see goral, capped langurs, cormorants and many other bird species besides the beautiful landscape. The camp site at Pangbang is located at a place called Anilademba at the junction of Mangdi Chhu and Dangme Chhu, at an altitude of 160 meters above sea level. It is now connected with a motorable road to Panbang that connects to the Indian Manas Tiger Reserve. Overnight stay is at the eco camp at Pangbang.

Day 9: Pangbang (Royal Manas N.P.) – Pangtang (Royal Manas N.P.) via Shilongtoe

A day hike will take us to the northwestern part of the park. On the way, we'll pass through patches of pristine rain forest, as well as little enclaves of open areas around small settlements. From Panbang, there is a motorable road is connected to a place called Chenga Zam about 30 minutes by car. Hereafter, we start trekking to Shilingtoe (3 Hours) with birding on the way. It is located at an altitude of 420 meters above the sea level. It is a village and provides a good view of the area due to its location at a higher alleviation. Birds such as bulbuls, barbets, thrushes, hornbills, kingfisher, cormorant, wagtails, trogons and many other species can be seen along the trail between Pangbang – Shilongtoe. Lunch will be served at the Shilongtoe Camp.

After lunch, we continue trekking to Pantang (3 ½ hours). Pantang lies at an altitude of 239 meters above sea level. The camp is located on the right bank of Mangdi chhu overlooking Pantang settlements and the river itself.

The trail is very rich for bird watching with many birds such as thrushes, drongos, hornbills, partridges, pheasants, bulbuls, tree pies, barbets, eagles, fowls and many other species. Overnight stay is at the Pantang eco-camp

Day 10 Pangthang – Tingtibi

Bhutanese jeeps will be waiting at Pangthang to take us over the Zhemgang - Wangdue Phrodang highway. 'Highway' is a relative concept in Bhutan. The small asphalt road will take us right through bird-rich forests, so we'll do a lot of birding on the way. Lunch will be at Tingtibi with birding in the afternoon. The Tingtibi valley can be reached by a descent to the Mangdi Chu in the south of Zhembang. The avifauna in this region includes barred cuckoo-dove, nine species of cuckoos, chestnut-breasted partridges, pin-tailed green pigeons, , red-headed trogon, rufous-necked hornbill, white-browed piculet, bay woodpecker, lesser shortwing, blyth's kingfisher, blue-bearded bee-eater, white-tailed robin, fulvettas and yuhinas, grey-headed parrotbill, rufous-faced warbler, pygmy blue flycatcher, sultan tit, several scimitar-babblers, black-faced laughingthrush and other thrushes. You may be also lucky to spot the beautiful nuthatch, white-bellied heron, collared treepie and lesser rufous-headed parrotbill. You need two days to make this trip with overnight camping.

Overnight stay will be in a tented camp at a beautiful place called Tingtibi (comfortable, upgraded camping with proper beds with thick mattresses and warm blankets) [or in the local hotel/Guest House](#).

Day 11: Tingtibi (Zhemgang) – Trongsa -Phobjikha

Today you'll be sad to leave this magical place. However, after an early rise, you'll be able to savour the idyllic surroundings and its bird life before we set out for Phobjikha. Our journey takes us through elevations between 1800 and 2400 m that harbour a number of special birds who will be the main focus of our attention. As always, there is a chance of seeing something totally exceptional such as the rarely seen purple cochoa feeding at a fruiting tree. Gradually, we will wend our way up to Trongsa, on the road passing the construction works for Bhutan's newest and largest hydro-electrical power plant.

If time permits, we'll visit the *dzong* of Trongsa, an impressive, elongated building that sits on a commanding position right on the east-west highway. In Trongsa, most of the stores are owned and run by Tibetans, a notably hardworking group of people now resident in Bhutan.

Late in the afternoon, we'll climb up through pristine, lichen-festooned forest towards the 3525m high Pele La (pass). This stretch covers a range of habitat from tall, dense, evergreen forest characterized by moss and lichen-covered oak and rhododendron together with broad-leaved trees such as horse-chestnuts, laurels, maples and alders. At higher elevation, the composition changes to conifers such as fir, spruce, larch, hemlock and juniper. Bamboo is another important feature in this region, holding a number of special but elusive species. Important species that can be seen are himalayan griffon (*Gyps himalayensis*), himalayan swiftlet (*Collocalia brevirostris*), lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*), snow partridge (*Lerwa lerwa*), purple cochoa (*Cochoa purpurea*), scalybreasted wren babbler (*Pnoepyga albiventer*), longtailed minivet (*Pericrocotus ethologus*), himalayan monal pheasant (*Lophophorus impejanus*), speckled wood pigeon (*Columba hodgsonii*) and rufousbellied bulbul (*Hypsipetes mcclellandi*).

Just before reaching the Pele La, we'll veer off and take a small side road that leads into the hidden Phobjikha Valley. Overnight stay is at a lodge in Phobjikha.

Day 12: Phobjikha

Phobjikha is a conservation area, managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature, a Bhutanese NGO. Apart from occurrence of white-bellied heron, leopard, red panda and tiger, Phobjikha is mainly known for its black-necked cranes who flock here every winter. These birds breed in Tibet but cross the Himalayas twice a year in order to escape the severe cold over there. They can be seen from the end of October till the end of March.

Other species of birds that can be seen here include the amur falcon (*Falco vesertinus*), redmantled rosefinch (*Carpodacus rhodochlamys*), firebreasted flowerpecker (*Dicaeum ignipectus*), redheaded bullfinch (*Pyrrhula erythrocephala*), scarlet finch (*Haemmatospiza sipahi*), whitetailed nuthatch (*Sitta himalayensis*), magpie-robin (*Copsychus saularis*), goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*), great pied hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*), common hill partridge (*Arborophila torqueola*), snow pigeon (*Columba leuconota*), rufousbreasted accenter (*Prunella strophiata*) and whitebacked munia (*Lonchura striata*).

Day 13: Phobjikha – Pele La – Punakha

It's very early rising again. Before the sun is up, we'll be on our way to the Pele La, where we hope to see the Himalayan monal pheasant and the satyr tragopan, apart from the species mentioned under day 11. Breakfast and lunch will be had en route. After some more leisurely birding, we'll descend to 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. Both the town and the twin rivers that flow past it are dominated by the Punakha Dzong, sited at the confluence of the two streams. After visiting the dzong, we'll proceed to our hotel in Punakha.

Day 14: Punakha – Dochu La - Paro

In the morning, we shall travel up the Mo Chhu valley to an excellent forest area where we will do most of our birding. One cannot help but be beguiled by the beauty of the colours and soul-lifting scenery. Common species in these valleys are: blackchinned yuhina (*Yuhina nigrimenta*), spotted dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*), blackchinned babbler (*Stachyris pyrrhopsis*), blackbreasted sunbird (*Aethopyga saturata*), redbreasted rosefinch (*Carpodacus puniceus*), fulvousbreasted pied woodpecker (*Picoides macei*), large grey babbler (*Turdoides melcolmi*), Himalaya tree pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*), little bunting (*Emberiza striolata*), slatybacked forkail (*Enicurus schistaceus*), whitebreasted kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*), yellow-billed blue magpie (*Cissa thalassina*), grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*), steppe eagle (*Aquila rapax nipalensis*), small niltava (*Muscicapa macgrigoriae*), Himalayan griffon (*Gyps himalayensis*), speckled wood pigeon (*Columba hodgsonii*), grey tit (*Parus major*) and redcrowned jay (*Garrulus glandarius*).

We return to Punakha for lunch. After lunch, we'll drive up to Dochu La (3120 m), where we explore Bhutan's magnificent low elevation mixed evergreen and broad-leaved forests. The diversity of birds, mammals and flowering plants is seemingly endless. We plan to follow a mule trail down up through some of the most beautiful and bird rich forests in Bhutan. Late afternoon, we'll descend to Paro (2400 m). Time permitting, we'll make a brief stop at Thimpu, Bhutan's capital.

Overnight stay will be at a comfortable hotel in Paro.

Day 15: Paro – Delhi/Bangkok

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 (starting with lunch on day 1, ending with breakfast on day 15); 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; visa for Bhutan; flights Delhi/Kolkata - Jorhat and Paro – Delhi/Kolkata.

Exclusions: International airfare; tips; drinks; laundry; telephone calls; insurance; expenses of personal nature.