

ITINERARY
BHUTAN

March 30-April 18, 2024



*Ward's Trogon is considered to be secure in Bhutan, although it is classified as vulnerable throughout its range.
Photograph by participant Margaret Fritze.*

We include here information for those interested in the 2024 Field Guides Bhutan tour:

- a general introduction to the tour
- a description of the birding areas to be visited on the tour
- an abbreviated daily itinerary with some indication of the nature of each day's birding outings

Those who register for the tour will be sent this additional material:

- an annotated list of the birds recorded on a previous year's Field Guides trip to the area, with comments by guide(s) on notable species or sightings (may be downloaded from our website)
- a detailed information bulletin with important logistical information and answers to questions regarding accommodations, air arrangements, clothing, currency, customs and immigration, documents, health precautions, and personal items
- a Field Guides checklist for preparing for and keeping track of the birds we see on the tour
- after the conclusion of the tour, a list of birds seen on the tour

Bhutan, a rampart stretch of the Himalayas that nestles between Tibet and India, is not only a land of great, jagged, snowy peaks, it also holds some of the most extensive remaining tracts of Himalayan forest, sadly severely depleted elsewhere in this range. While the mountainous terrain has enabled this land of breathtaking beauty and fascinating culture to remain isolated from the outside world for centuries (television was not introduced here until 1999), Bhutan has increasingly opened its doors to visitors, allowing us to explore this almost mystical wonderland of birds. Some 700 species have been recorded in a country barely half the size of Scotland—and now it even has its own field guide! A surprisingly good and (mostly) lightly-traveled network of roads now wends its way over passes and down into valleys,

permitting us to encounter some of the world's most sought-after species, many of which have been reduced in numbers through habitat loss elsewhere.

“A stunning mosaic of unusually broad biodiversity and enlightened conservation practices, Bhutan is amongst the world's unique and most valuable intact ecosystems. Because of its location on the junction of two major biogeographical realms—the temperate Palearctic and the tropical Indo-Malayan—and extreme variations in climate and altitude, Bhutan possesses one of the world's most remarkable assemblages of charismatic vertebrates and more than 60% of the endemic species of the Eastern Himalayas.” These words of Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji, Bhutan's Minister of Agriculture, are understandably self-serving; they are also accurate – and how many ministers could make such claims with a straight face?! We suspect you have asked for this itinerary because, whether by word of mouth or from magazine articles, you have heard that Bhutan is a special place: more than 60% of its forests remain intact, the population density is less than 10% that of its neighbors (how many countries have a capital city of only 80,000 people?), the flora (more than 5,400 species) and fauna (e.g. 165 mammals and 700-plus birds, over 400 of them resident) are rich, and the local culture fascinating.

This is a tour to show you both the beauty of this mountain kingdom and the delights of its fascinating wildlife, yet without the difficulties of trekking. As there are so few hotels in Bhutan, however, our journey does necessitate three nights of camping, but our efficient ground crew will ensure that this outfitted camping experience will add to the ambiance of being in Bhutan. This will enable us to be on the spot at some truly superb birding locations where we will walk through oak and rhododendron forests, beneath trees festooned with lichens, mosses, ferns, and orchids in search of such tantalizing delights as Satyr Tragopan, Scarlet Finch, Fire-tailed Myzornis, and the enormous Rufous-necked Hornbill. We realize that the “c” word (“camping”) is anathema to some, and it is a decision we do not make lightly, but the accommodations in certain areas simply do not exist or are not adequate, and the birding far too good to pass by. Our outfitter has large tents in which you can stand up fully; they can hold two single cots (with mattresses!) with room to spare for your luggage. Trust us that the professional camp staff is good: for decades in Bhutan, a significant number of ecotourist nights have been spent in outfitted camps or on treks. What we ask them to do is routine for them. In addition to setting up and striking our camps, the staff will prepare many good outdoor meals (nearly all of our breakfasts and lunches will be picnics), with mountain backdrops to forest foregrounds; bring your binoculars to breakfast and lunch! The staff has earned the affection and admiration of all on our previous tours. Note that away from our hotels, camps and meals, bathrooms will be bushes. Along the roads while we are birding, privacy is limited, and thicker bushes may require a little agility to get up or down a bank. In camp and at picnics, a couple of toilet tents, with a seat on a frame above a latrine hole, are employed.



*We'll spend a few nights in camps, where we'll wake to the sounds of prayer flags fluttering and birds singing.
Photograph by participant Marshall Dahl.*

Our visit has been timed to enjoy the greatest diversity of birdlife: spring remains part of the dry season before the summer monsoon breaks, Bhutan's resident birds will be in full song, and many migrants will be heading north to cross the mountains en route to Tibet and beyond. Many species that move to higher altitudes to breed should still be present at the lower elevations where they have wintered, while others will be arriving from southern India to breed in the forests. As a bonus, some species of rhododendrons, magnolias, and orchids should already be in flower, too.

Even those who have visited India before will find that many of the birds will be new to them. Indeed, many species that are considered rare in Nepal or Thailand are more easily seen in Bhutan. Our experience is that most people simply love the country, including the birding. Join us in pursuit of pheasants, Ibisbill, Ward's Trogon, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Beautiful Nuthatch, and such spectacles as sunbirds in the rhododendrons.

We want to be sure you are on the right tour! Below is a description of the physical requirements of the tour. If you are concerned about the difficulty, please contact us about this and be sure to fully explain your concerns. We want to make sure you have a wonderful time with us, so if you are uncomfortable with the requirements, just let us know and we can help you find a better fitting tour! Field Guides will not charge you a change or cancellation fee if you opt out within 10 days of depositing.

Physical requirements of this tour

- **TRAILS & WALKING:** We'll do moderate amounts of walking (up to 2-3 miles per day), mostly along roadsides, both paved and dirt/gravel. In some cases there will be moderate elevational change, though these are usually gentle rather than steep grades; where possible, we'll travel downhill. In some instances, we may walk off the road onto dirt trails (optional).
- **POTENTIAL CHALLENGES:** We regularly drive for long periods on this tour. Participants must be able to step up (and step down) 10-12 inches to get into and out of our vehicles. On most days, breakfasts and lunches will be hot meals served in the field, under a dining fly if the weather is – or threatens to be – inclement. Tent camping is necessary on several nights, and several lodges are basic.
- **PACE:** After an early departure (we're typically on the road by 5:00 a.m., occasionally earlier), we'll bird for several hours before stopping for a hot breakfast in the field. We'll then bird for the remainder of the morning. On most days, we'll bird our way to our next destination after lunch; if we're staying at the same location for multiple days, we may offer a short break after lunch before heading back out in the late afternoon. Once we reach Bhutan, it's usually possible to get 7-8 hours of sleep per night.
- **WEATHER:** Temperatures will range from the low 40s at night to 70s F during the day. Overall, the weather should be generally pleasant, but you should come prepared for some light rain, occasional heavy rain for a day, and also for some chilly starts, with temperatures just a few degrees above freezing. There is a small possibility of snow at the highest locations, but it does not stick long in April.
- **ELEVATION:** We will reach an altitude of 12,750 feet on several days of this tour, including on our first full day in Bhutan, and will be at or over 10,000' on at least eight days of the tour. We will always sleep at elevations lower than the higher passes we bird, but there are several higher-elevation nights: at Gangtey Gompa/Phobjika Valley (10,000'; 3000m), Sengor (9,600'; 2900m) and Jakar/Bumthang Valley (8,400'; 2500m).
- **VEHICLE SEATING:** So that each participant has equal opportunity during our travel, we employ a seat rotation system on all tours. Participants will need to be flexible enough to maneuver to the back of the vehicle on occasion. Those who experience motion sickness will need to bring adequate medication for the duration of the tour, as we are not able to reserve forward seats for medical conditions.
- **BATHROOM BREAKS:** Participants must be prepared to make comfort stops in nature, as there are simply no other options (away from our lodgings) on most sections of this tour's route. We will have a tented latrine available at every outdoor meal spot, and two such latrines at all camping locations.
- **OPTING OUT:** Where we are staying multiple days in the same lodging, participants can easily opt to sit out a day or sometimes a half-day. This will not be possible on days when we are changing locations (as we do often on this tour).

Our plan is to provide a thorough cross-section of Bhutan's accessible habitats. We will certainly concentrate on the specialties, but so few are the opportunities to see many Himalayan birds that most species will be "specialties" for most participants, and we will enjoy them all.

If you are uncertain about whether this tour is a good match for your abilities, please don't hesitate to contact our office; if they cannot directly answer your queries, they will put you in touch with the guide.



About the Birding Areas

Bhutan has only one main road, with a few spurs, and unless one sets off on a trek, there is only one basic plan: drive along the one road and its spurs. Fortunately, those roads pass through the dry and moist conifer and broad-leaved forests of different exposures from high to low. Our stops are selected to spend time in each of the main habitats as we climb and drop and climb and drop, overall working our way through 12,000 feet (3600m) of life zones. While 60% of Bhutan is forested, along the road the percentage is less, as you would expect, but there are still many excellent birding areas between the cleared regions, and the view over vast tracks of wilderness is inspiring. Despite Bhutan's small size, travel is time consuming; the longest straight stretch of road is reported to be 900 meters. Instead, Bhutan is all curves, climbing and descending, and on a number of days, our "travel time" may consume as much as half of our day. However, the views from our bus are ever-changing, and simply seeing what is out the window is a rewarding part of our tour of Bhutan.

This is not a cultural tour of Bhutan, but we will undertake a few cultural activities. We will try to visit a dzong or two, and we will stop to photograph a handful of dzongs, chortens, water-driven prayer wheels, and the like; some will be right where we are birding or staying. We will offer several short shopping outings (primarily lovely textiles). And throughout the tour you will feel immersed in the country, about which our local guide will provide much detail. Our birder's route takes us to areas beyond the normal tourist route, areas that are remote in time and space, contributing to what is really a moderate cultural experience for a birding tour.

Over the years, our itinerary has varied as the Government of Bhutan opened new areas to tourists and depending on which border crossings were open. If some unexpected geopolitical flip-flop occurs, we'll adjust our route as necessary and still have a great time. A further warning: flight schedules sometimes change, and in past years this has meant that there weren't daily flights between Delhi and Paro. If that happens again, we'll almost certainly add a day to the 16 nights we currently have planned in Bhutan. In that case, the tour fee will be adjusted up or down by only the additional fixed, in-country costs. What we promise is that we will do something representative of wonderful Bhutan, that you will enjoy every day of it, and that we will keep you informed as to what the itinerary will be.

We recommend that you consider coming at least a day early to start to deal with jet lag, to make sure that you get to India on time, and so forth. Through our local tour operator, we can arrange for extra nights, local birding outings, or overnight trips to the Taj Mahal or other parts of India.

A Note About the Tour Fee: This is an expensive tour. Bhutan limits tourist visits (currently around 50,000 a year) by linking visas to the use of an authorized local operator and by requiring local operators to charge a minimum per person per day "Sustainable Development Fee" for even basic services, with perhaps a third of that going back to the government; thus does Bhutan control the influx and make tourism profitable. A visit to Bhutan is truly special privilege, and one has to pay for it.



*The Bhutan Laughingthrush is a near-endemic. We've seen these attractive birds at several locations on the tour.
Photograph by participant Marshall Dahl.*

Itinerary for Bhutan

Day 1, Sat, 30 Mar. Departure for India. Leaving from North America means a departure today on an overnight flight. There are nonstop flights available from several US airports, plus more traditional changes of plane through Europe and Asia. It is a good idea to arrive in New Delhi in advance of the tour to ensure your (and your luggage's) timely arrival and to start to adjust to a very different time zone.

Day 2, Sun, 31 Mar. Arrival in Delhi; Delhi area. Most flights will reach Delhi on the evening of Day 2; our local agent will meet you for your transfer to our hotel near the airport. **Please note that if you arrive today, you may do so only hours before our very early departure on Day 3 to catch our flight to Bhutan.** We really do recommend coming early! Be sure to remember to reset the time on your watch and alarm clock. During our tour, Delhi is 9½ hours ahead of Eastern daylight time (5½ hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time); when it's noon in New York (9 a.m. in Los Angeles), it's 9:30 p.m. in Delhi. If you take medication for high elevation, plan ahead for Day 4. Night at hotel in New Delhi near Indira Gandhi International Airport.

Day 3, Mon, 1 Apr. Flight to Paro; Paro Valley. Flights to Paro are often early in the morning, perhaps very early, like 5 a.m. (meaning a 1:45 departure from the hotel!), and breakfast may be a snack at the airport and a meal on the flight. If the weather is clear, the magic will begin towards the end of our short flight as the haze is pierced by an impressive line of jagged snowy peaks—among them Mt. Everest and the massif of Kangchenjunga—stretching across the horizon on our descent towards Paro and leaving us in little doubt that we are indeed on our way to a wonderful place!

After clearing immigration and customs, changing money, changing our watches and alarm clocks by a half hour, and buying SIM cards, stamps, and post cards, we will have some time (half a day to most of a day, depending on our flight time) to scan the riverside shingle for one of the world's most sought-after waders—the peculiar Ibisbill. The Paro Valley is well cultivated, with the dry flanking slopes clothed in Blue Pine and patches of evergreen forest. Armed with the compact *Birds of Bhutan* by Carol and Tim Inskipp and Richard Grimmett, we'll sort out such typical avian inhabitants of the valley as Hodgson's, Plumbeous, and White-capped redstarts, Gray-backed Shrike, White Wagtail, Russet Sparrow, and Red-billed Chough. If we have had a very early flight, we will head for the hotel in time for substantial recuperation. Night in Paro.

Day 4, Tue, 2 Apr. Chele La; drive to Thimphu. Today will offer our first chance for several of Bhutan's pheasants, which are always a challenge. A very early start (probably our earliest of the tour, at around 4:30 a.m.) will take us to more

than 12,000 feet at Chele La (la=pass), where we will scan the slopes for these spectacular species. On a clear morning the view over the Paro and Ha valleys can be fantastic, and today will be a wonderful kaleidoscope of Bhutan. Pheasants are not the only denizens of Chele La, and in this high-elevation scrub (above tree line), we will look for lingering rosefinches, accentors, and grosbeaks and arriving bush-robins. The forests on the way back to Paro are also birdy, and we will hope for several warblers, tits, Hodgson's Treecreeper, and Spotted and Black-faced laughingthrushes.

After some final birding in the Paro valley, we'll take a several-hour drive east to Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan, situated at an elevation of 7800 feet (2300 m). We'll undoubtedly stop for a new bird or two, including Ibisbill, if we didn't get lucky quickly on our arrival day. Thimpu, with its narrow, winding streets and fluttering prayer flags, must be unique in world; surely, it's the only capital city with no traffic lights! Many of the buildings have beautifully carved facades, and some of the shops have no conventional door—access is by a short ladder to the window! Please note that Tuesdays are “dry” in Bhutan, which means, perhaps, no alcohol at dinner. Overnight in Thimphu.

Day 5, Wed, 3 Apr. To Punakha; the Mo Chhu Valley. An early start is necessary to reach Dochu La (10,450' / 3215 m) in time to admire a vista of Himalayan peaks (if the weather is clear). As we ascend the ridge to the pass, we'll leave the dry conifer forest behind and enter a moister, lush environment with a more varied avifauna. This area supports many “charismatic vertebrates”: Yellow-billed Blue-Magpie, the amazing Fire-tailed Myzornis (an erratic, moss-green and red sunbird-like warbler), Green Shrike-Babbler, Rufous-vented Yuhina, Gould's and Green-tailed sunbirds, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, and many others. Continuing on our winding mountain route through superb stretches of luxuriant forest, we'll make our first attempts for Ward's Trogon. (This isn't our best spot, but they are possible here.) There should be much passerine activity to enjoy. Even at this time of the year, many of the birds will be in mixed-species flocks (bird parties) that suddenly appear as twittering and trilling “waves” comprising the likes of Blue-winged Minla, Black-throated Tit, Black-faced and Pale-rumped (Lemon-rumped) warblers, Blyth's Leaf-Warbler, Whiskered Yuhina, and Rufous-winged Fulvetta. And a recording of Collared Owlet could produce similar collections of lifers. We'll then descend to Bhutan's former capital, Punakha, located in a dry valley. We plan to spend the late afternoon touring the valley's massive dzong, an amazing building with a long history and much current use. Punakha, at 4160 feet (1280 m), is situated by the confluence of the mighty Mo Chhu (chu=chhu=river) and Po Chhu, the two forming the Puna Tsang Chhu, where we will look for lingering waterfowl and migrating shorebirds. Night in Punakha.



One of our cultural highlights will be a visit to the immense Punakha Dzong, situated at the confluence of the Mo Chhu and Po Chhu rivers. We'll also spend time birding here, looking for waterbirds. Photograph by participant Michael Boss.

Day 6, Thu, 4 Apr. Punakha to Darachu, via the valley of the Puna Tsang Chhu. This morning is atypical—we'll start with an emphasis on waterbirds! We'll bird along the Po Chhu, perhaps the Mo Chhu, and the Puna Tsang Chhu where we'll have chances of finding the rare Pallas' Fish-Eagle and one of the world's largest and rarest herons, the White-

bellied Heron—nearly all recent reports of this threatened species have been from this part of Bhutan. The shingle banks of the river can also be home to Ibisbill, and we'll hope for a late Bar-headed Goose or Pallas's Gull en route to its nesting grounds by lakeshores high up on the Tibetan plateau. We'll then start a journey that will be short on birds for a few hours as we travel down the rain shadow in this part of the valley, passing one of Bhutan's major hydroelectric projects (under construction), before turning east up a major ridge. Our destination is a low pass called Darachu, where we will camp for the night. As we approach Darachu, the forests become moister and we'll stop to look for some new birds.

Our camp tonight will be a mini-settlement, with not only our sleeping tents, but toilet tents, a dining tent, and a cooking tent. All the comforts of home? No. Comfortable? Yes, and a convenient transit point from which to explore new habitats. Night in camp at Darachu.

Day 7, Fri, 5 Apr. Darachu to Gelephu. We'll start our birding right around camp at the pass. The wet forest extends downhill to the east, and we will spend the first half of the day birding a very short distance downslope, enjoying first views of many new birds of middle and lower elevations. In the afternoon, we'll continue a couple of hours to Gelephu, a small commercial hub on the Indian border. We'll stay in a simple "local business traveler" hotel (and that means A.C. and hot water). In the late afternoon, we'll make a short foray to open and disturbed habitats (and a sewage plant), looking at any lowland "Indian" species we can find. Night in Gelephu.



*We'll look for the Rusty-fronted Barwing and other low and mid-elevation species when we stay at Tingtibi.
Photograph by participant Myles McNally.*

Day 8, Sat, 6 Apr. Gelephu to Tingtibi. From Gelephu, we will head north for a night of camping that allows us to bird lower and middle elevation forests. Here, we can hope for such specialties as Rusty-fronted Barwing, Yellow-throated Fulvetta, and Rufous-necked Hornbill, along with more widespread species such as Black Eagle, Blue-throated Barbet, Blue-bearded Bee-Eater, and Golden Babbler. In the past, we have occasionally found a pair of the rarely-encountered Beautiful Nuthatch, one of Bhutan's special birds, in the area. We'll also watch for Rufous-bellied Eagle, Asian Emerald Cuckoo, Speckled Piculet, Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike, Blue-winged, Gray-sided, and Rufous-chinned laughingthrushes, Red-faced Liocichla, White-naped Yuhina, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, White-tailed Robin, Pale Blue Flycatcher, and some of the monospecific, erratic wintering flocks of Scarlet Finches, Spot-winged Grosbeaks, Tibetan Serins, and Yellow-breasted Greenfinches. Trees here are festooned with lichens and clumps of ferns and epiphytic orchids, rich foraging places for Rufous Sibia, Brown-throated Treecreeper, and the rarer Himalayan Cutia.

Our destination is near the village of Tingtibi (2300 feet; 700m). Where we will make camp varies from year to year; we have used several sites from 800 to 1200m (2700 to 4000 feet) in elevation. From camp, we may see Great Hornbills, and other "yard birds" could include Barred Cuckoo-Dove, Greater and Lesser yellownapes, Gray-capped Pygmy-Woodpecker, Gray Treepie, Scarlet Minivet, and Black-crested Bulbul. Within a few kilometers of camp along the road are

some moist canyons in which we will seek Pin-tailed and Wedge-tailed green-pigeons, Blue-throated Blue-Flycatcher, Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, Orange-bellied Leafbird, several elusive laughingthrushes, Striated Yuhina, Bronzed, Hair-crested, and Lesser Racket-tailed drongos, and the very local Rufous-faced Warbler. With luck, we could also find a White-bellied Heron, which breeds in the area, and can sometimes be seen along the Mangde Chhu.

This is also our first chance for the localized Golden Langur, which was first described to science in 1955 and is known only from a tiny wedge of Bhutan, barely extending into India. Troops may feed leisurely on the leaves of roadside trees, so if we can find one, good views are often obtained. Night in camp above Tingtibi.



We have a chance for several species of parrotbill. This, the Brown Parrotbill, is a bamboo specialist that we'll watch for near Tingtibi. Photograph by participants David and Judy Smith.

Day 9, Sun, 7 Apr. Tingtibi to Panbang. After breakfast in camp near Tingtibi, today's journey takes us down the valley of the Mangde Chhu to Manas. Our first couple of hours will be spent near Tingtibi in an area of extensive bamboo in which we can look for a variety of bamboo specialists, including Pale-headed Woodpecker, White-hooded Babbler, White-breasted and Pale-billed (formerly Greater and Lesser Rufous-headed) parrotbills, and Yellow-bellied Warbler. We will almost certainly miss a few of the bamboo birds, some which we may encounter in smaller bamboo patches over the next several days. Patches of forest in this area can be good for cuckoos (Banded Bay, Indian, and even Chestnut-winged, and Asian Drongo-Cuckoo), Pin-tailed Pigeon, and some skulking laughingthrushes like Greater and Lesser Necklaced. We should also have more chances for Golden Langur.

As we journey down the valley, the forested gorge is so narrow that the road has to climb, and we will make opportunistic stops in forest patches at different elevations to look for more barbets, cuckoos, bulbuls, warblers, and laughingthrushes. As we descend again, small areas of bamboo and wild bananas offer more chances for some of the babblers and parrotbills.

Our destination is the small community of Panbang, located near the confluence of the Drangme Chhu and Mangde Chhu (below which it is the Manas Chhu). Depending on when we arrive, we may have time to start birding tomorrow's nearby route. The night will be spent at the optimistically named Bird View Resort, from which we may see Ashy Woodswallows and Indian Rollers, but not much else, given its location in the cutover outskirts of town. But it does have nice views of the surrounding ridges, good fans to cut the warmth of a sunny day, a welcoming host, and a good cook. Night in Panbang.

Day 10, Mon, 8 Apr. Royal Manas National Park; Panbang to Nganglam. For the morning, we will explore the 15 kilometers of road that leads from Panbang to the Indian border. The road passes through lovely forest in which we will bird, and offers views out over the rivers as they join and flow south eventually to join the Brahmaputra. This is a wild and wondrous area that offers a rare glimpse of how much of the Indian Subcontinent must have looked millennia ago.

If we can arrange a boat on the spot (not reservable in advance), we will cross to the river's western side, where the HQ for Royal Manas NP lies, and bird the clearings and a forest trail there. If not, there is plenty to occupy us on the eastern side, where the track passes through kilometers of tall, moist forest. The birds seem less impressed by the forest than we are, but there are still a moderate number of possibilities typical of lowland 'monsoon' forest, including Lineated Barbet, Greater Flameback, Red-breasted Parakeet, Black-naped Monarch, Black-crested Bulbul, and Pin-striped Tit-Babbler. We will be looking in particular for four species of hornbill (Rufous-necked, Great, Wreathed, and Oriental Pied).

There are several genera in which 'plains' species meet 'hill species' literally where the plains meet the hills in this valley, including Green (rare here) and Mountain imperial-pigeons, Black-hooded and Maroon orioles, and Golden-fronted and Orange-bellied leafbirds. Another apparent species divide is caused by the river, with Capped Langur on the east side and Golden on the west. Many other species typical of lowland India, some of them poorly known in Bhutan, are also possible here.

We will scan the skies for swifts and a variety of raptors, with possibilities including Collared Falconet which is more likely to be seen perched on a snag than in flight. Small streams may hold a few shy Black-backed Forktails or the larger rivers Crested Kingfisher.

Returning to Panbang in the early afternoon, we'll turn east for a 55 km drive to Nganglam, located on a saddle just above the plains of India. Night at a comfortable small-town "business travelers" hotel in Nganglam, the first of two nights here. Think **laundry!**

Day 11, Tue, 9 Apr. Manas Ridge above Nganglam. We will spend much of the day birding the patches of forest on top of the ridge just west of town, searching for a number of special birds. The forest on the upper ridge offers an interesting mix of foothill species and birds that are typical of middle elevations but occur at around record-low elevations here. We will especially hope to find the rare and local (and very skulking) Rufous-vented Laughingthrush (with which we did connect in 2018). Other special species include Rufous-backed and Long-tailed sibilias, Collared Treepie, and Gray-headed Parrotbill, and we have a good chance for more widespread tropical birds like Long-tailed Broadbill, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Red-headed Trogon, and Sultan Tit. The area is good for a variety of doves, including Barred Cuckoo-Dove, Mountain Imperial-Pigeon, Wedge-tailed Pigeon, and Asian Emerald Dove. We certainly expect that there are more discoveries to be made here. (Rufous-throated Fulvetta? Spot-throated Babbler?) Night at our hotel in Nganglam.



The Barred Cuckoo-Dove is found in the subtropical forests of the Himalayas and parts of SE Asia. Although they are rather uncommon, we will likely find them near our camp in Tingtibi. Photograph by participant Margaret Fritze.

Day 12, Wed, 10 Apr. Nganglam to Yongkola. Today is a medium-length travel day. We'll grab the first few precious early morning hours to bird the wet forests beyond Nganglam. Possibilities include White-browed Piculet, Pale-headed Woodpecker (bamboo), White-bellied Erpornis, White-naped Yuhina, Puff-throated and Golden babblers, and White-

browed Scimitar-Babbler. Our route then takes us north up the scenic valley of the Drangme Chhu, and then crosses it to follow the valley of the Kuri Chhu until it intersects Bhutan's main east-west highway west of Mongar. Much of this road is in a dry, rain shadow valley with limited birding possibilities (though Himalayan Bulbul is one of those). From there, we'll ascend the slopes to a lovely hotel in the small community of Yongkola, our base for the next three nights. We will be flexible today, but in all likelihood our afternoon will be spent in the wet forest just above Yongkola. Night at Trogon Villa, Yongkola.

Days 13-14, Thu-Fri, 11-12 Apr. Forest above Yongkola in Phrumsengla National Park. From Yongkola, the road ascends dramatically into superb subtropical wet forest, where we can experience some of the finest forest birding of the entire Himalayan region – in other words, many more charismatic vertebrates! This region is known as Yongkola or as the Limithang Road, for towns far below, and is now incorporated into Phrumsengla National Park. The hollow bubbling of Golden-throated Barbets begins soon after dawn. Although their song and those of several cuckoos will become a familiar sound to us over the next few days, spotting them takes time, skill, or luck! This will be another good chance for the threatened Rufous-necked Hornbill and for Ward's Trogon.

This area is particularly well known for several rich stretches of bamboo, and we will hope to encounter the jackpot of the right mixed flock, the one with White-breasted and Black-throated parrotbills and Coral-billed Scimitar-babbler, and we will also hope for other bamboo birds such as Golden-breasted Fulvetta and the skulking Broad-billed Warbler. On the subject of skulkers, this slope is rich in wren-babblers, laughingthrushes, and tesias, along with a shortwing or two, White-gorgeted Flycatcher, and Yellow-throated Fulvetta. With near-endemic specialties like Black-headed Shrike-Babbler to search for, too, and our lucky discovery of Beautiful Nuthatch in 2015 (seen again in 2018 and 2019), we will have a pretty busy stay. Nights at Trogon Villa, Yongkola.



The tiny and colorful Golden-breasted Fulvetta is a bamboo specialist that we'll seek in Phrumsengla National Park; we'll hope to find it in the midst of a flock of other small species. Photograph by participant Margaret Fritze.

Day 15, Sat, 13 Apr. Upper elevation forest in Phrumsengla National Park; camp at Sengor. On the preceding two days we will have birded the forest from Yongkola up to about the small community of Namling. Today, we'll start roughly where we left off, and spend the rest of the day working our way up to the small community of Sengor, concentrating on habitats from 8,000 to 10,000' (2,400-3,000m). Satyr Tragopan occurs throughout, although it is far more often heard than seen (we could definitely use some luck here), and we will also be looking for species that average higher than our previous days, perhaps including Green Shrike-Babbler, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Scaly-breasted Cupwing, and Gould's Sunbird. Our destination the first day is the small farming community of Sengor, essentially an inhoding in the national park. Our likely campsite will be an old field near the forest below the community. Night of Day 15 in camp at 10,000' near Sengor.

Day 16, Sun, 14 Apr. Upper elevation forest in Phrumsengla National Park, and onward to Jakar in the Bumthang Valleys. With Satyr Tragopan and Blood Pheasant in mind, we'll travel with a series of short birding stops over Phrumseng La and Ura La to reach Jakar in the Bumthang Valley. The towering conifers above Sengor will warrant a series of stops; this is prime Blood Pheasant country, and we will also look for higher elevation specialties such as wintering rosefinches, Eurasian Nutcracker, and Black-faced Laughingthrush. These conifers again provide us with opportunities to come to grips with various tits: the warbler-like Yellow-browed, the jaunty Gray-crested, and the pretty little Black-browed tits occur here alongside the attractive Green-backed. We reach one of the highest passes of our tour at Phrumseng (Thrumshing) La – 12,350 feet (3800 m). The rhododendron thickets, perhaps just starting to leaf out, may be occupied by returning breeders such as Himalayan Bluetail, Pale-rumped and Buff-barred warblers, Fire-tailed Sunbird, and, if we are especially lucky, Fire-tailed Myzornis. We'll try the places where we have had intermittent success with such scarce birds as Great and Fulvous parrotbills, Golden and White-browed bush-robins, Spotted Laughingthrush, and Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler.

After lunch, a lovely drive will bring us to the fourth Bumthang Valley and the scenic community of Ura. Keep your eyes open for flocks of Snow Pigeons and the newly-split Black-rumped Magpie (formerly a subspecies of Eurasian Magpie) in the fallow fields of the intervening valleys. The next high pass, Ura (or Sheltang or Sheytang) La, can be good for pheasants, which doesn't mean pheasants are easy here, but we will keep our eyes open because we were rewarded in several recent years. Late afternoon will find us reaching the second Bumthang Valley and the town of Jakar. Night at Gongkhar Lodge in the Bumthang Valley.



*The Blood Pheasant is one of the special birds we'll seek in the high elevations.
Photograph by guide Richard Webster.*

Day 17, Mon, 15 Apr. Jakar to the Phobjika Valley. Today is a moderate travel day, the first of two, but it starts with some fine birding and the potential of great scenery. An early start will allow us to reach the higher elevations of Yutong La (11,050 feet/3400 m) in the good, early-morning birding time. It will be chilly, but a walk through the pass could produce a Darjeeling Woodpecker, Fire-tailed Sunbird on the move, the erratic Fire-tailed Myzornis, or a recently-arrived bush-warbler. We will continue toward breakfast in the next zone down, gorgeous upper level forest in which we often find brilliant flowering rhododendrons and magnolias under towering conifers. Birding this region, we will look for several species of sunbirds, the always unpredictable wintering finches (e.g., Red-headed Bullfinch and Gold-naped Finch) and thrushes, and Hoary-throated Barwing, among many potential delights. Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush and White-collared

Blackbird also favor this habitat. Yutong La's formerly extensive bamboo is beginning to recover after a massive die off several years ago, so some of the bamboo birds have begun to return.

After breakfast we will descend to Trongsa, where we plan to tour the amazing Trongsa Dzong. After this scenic and cultural highlight, we will continue past Trongsa and the long, eastern ascent of Pele La, stopping briefly at the historic Chendebji Chorten. Just after Pele La, we'll turn south over a shoulder of the ridge and drop into the Phobjika Valley, a scenic high elevation valley with a marshy bottom that is the primary wintering spot in Bhutan for Black-necked Crane. The cranes should be gone, though in prior years, we have seen a couple of lingering cripples in April – a bittersweet addition to the list! Night at Yo Lo Koe Guest House in the Phobjika Valley near Gangtey Gumpa.

Day 18, Tue, 16 Apr. Phobjika Valley to Paro. Today starts the long journey home, but it is a pleasant day in that we are still in Bhutan and the scenery will keep us happy, and a few short birding stops will help enliven the day. In particular, we will start on a portion of the old road on Pele La, which gives us one of our better chances for Satyr Tragopan and Himalayan Monal. If it is clear, the view can be spectacular from our breakfast table. We'll also have one more chance for Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, should we need it. We will then retrace our way over the Puna Tsang Chhu and DoChu La and back to Paro for the night, taking advantage of the much-improved main road. Night in Paro.

Day 19, Wed, 17 Apr. Paro; flight to New Delhi. With a great deal of reluctance, we'll bid farewell to the magical land of Bhutan as we return to the Paro airport for our flight to New Delhi. We expect a morning flight and so we should arrive in the afternoon with plenty of time for a nap, clean-up, and re-pack, along with dinner, before returning to the airport to journey homeward; most flights depart late in the evening between 11:00 p.m. to 1 a.m. The tour fee includes a day room until 10:00 p.m.; obviously, overnight rooms can be arranged at extra cost for those wishing to stay in India longer.

Day 20, Thu, 18 Apr. Continuation home. Flights to the US generally arrive in the early morning, with plenty of choices for connections home.

About Your Guides

Jay VanderGaast's obsession with birds was evident by age seven when he memorized the plates in Peterson's eastern field guide. He went on to earn a B.S. in biology and briefly contemplated a career in research, but two years on the buggy arctic tundra soon put an end to that plan! Instead, he began roaming the world in search of birds. His travels led him to Costa Rica, where he stumbled into a job as a birding guide at Rancho Naturalista Lodge.

Jay joined Field Guides in 2000, and since then he has guided more than 100 tours on several continents. He lives near Montreal. Jay's schedule of Field Guides tours includes Costa Rica, Brazil, Bolivia, Papua New Guinea, Australia, and China.

"Jay is an excellent guide. The trip would not have been the same without him. His acute hearing and sight and genuine interest and caring resulted in our seeing many exquisite birds. He made certain that everyone saw each bird, and he took great care of us from handling things at airports to choosing super restaurants. The pace was perfect." S. M., New Guinea & Australia

Visit <https://fieldguides.com/guides> for complete tour schedules for Jay; just click on his photo.

Financial Information

FEE: \$11,350 from Delhi

Bhutan Sustainable Development Fee: \$1080 per person (included in the tour fee)

DEPOSIT: \$1125 per person

FINAL PAYMENT DUE: October 2, 2023

SINGLE SUPPLEMENT (Optional): \$1450 (Singles may not available in all areas.)

LIMIT: 9

All participants will be required to confirm they will have completed a full COVID vaccination course at least two weeks prior to the tour (which includes a booster for those eligible to have one). Note too, that many travel destinations may still require proof of vaccination for entry to bypass testing delays or quarantine, and that entry

requirements for a destination can change at any time. Proof of a booster shot, too, may be a requirement for some travel destinations.

Other Things You Need to Know

TOUR MANAGER: The manager for this tour is Karen Turner. Karen will be happy to assist you in preparing for the tour. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call her.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Accommodations in Bhutan are generally simple (more basic in remote areas). We'll spend three nights in comfortable tents with cots, all in delightful settings. Many meals (virtually all breakfasts and lunches) are freshly prepared in the field by our experienced Bhutanese ground team, with dinners taken at the various lodges and camps. Electricity is widespread but mildly unreliable—a flashlight or headlamp with a good supply of batteries is essential; that said, it should be possible to recharge batteries at all of our hotels. All of our hotels have hot water in theory, and most do in practice, but individual units do not always work. Most hotels do not have central heating; individual rooms have space heaters or wood stoves, and a pile of blankets (a couple now have lighter comforters). Hot water at camp is provided in bowls for shaving, putting in contacts, and sponge baths. In general, everything works 90-95% of the time, and if you expect that there will be a time or two when it doesn't, you will be ready for this trip.

A NOTE ON ALTITUDE: We will reach a maximum elevation of approximately 12,750' (3800m) and we will be over 10,000' (3000m) on eight days; additionally, although we will bird down to as low as 300 feet, much of our birding will take place above 6000 feet. We will always be sleeping lower than we go during the day; our two highest nights are at 10,000' (3000m) (Sengor camp, Phobjika Valley) near the end of the tour, the rest being under 8,500' (2500m) (one night) or 7,500'. Most ascents will be made by vehicle; wherever possible we'll work a given area by walking downhill on a paved road or trail or by slowly ascending gentle grades.

DOCUMENTS: A current **passport** (with at least two blank visa pages) valid for six months beyond the date of your return and a **multiple-entry visa** are necessary for US citizens to enter India. Our office will send you the visa application forms and instructions for both India and Bhutan.

If you are not a US citizen, please check with the Indian and Bhutanese consulates nearest you for entry requirements. Information about consulates and entry requirements is generally available online or you can contact us and we will be happy to look this up for you. Passports should have an adequate number of blank pages for the entire journey. Some countries require a blank page for their stamp and as a precaution it is best to have one blank page per country you will visit or transit.

AIR ARRANGEMENTS: Field Guides is a full service travel agency and your tour manager will be happy to assist you with flights to join this tour. Field Guides does not charge a service fee for these services to clients booking a tour. However, we understand that tech-savvy clients often prefer to shop online or that you may wish to use mileage to purchase tickets. Regardless of which method you choose, your tour manager will be happy to provide assistance regarding ticket prices and schedules, along with rental cars and extra hotel nights as needed. **We advise at least some consultation with our office before finalizing your air itinerary to see if we know a "final" Druk Air schedule for flights to Bhutan, because that schedule will determine whether or not we are able to run this itinerary on the scheduled dates or are adding or subtracting a day.**

Please be sure to check with your tour manager prior to purchasing your ticket to make sure the flights you have chosen will work well with the tour itinerary and that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. Once purchased, most airline tickets are non-refundable and carry a penalty to change. Field Guides cannot be responsible for these fees. **Also, it is imperative that we receive a copy of your comprehensive flight itinerary—including any and all flights not covered in the tour fee—so that we may track you in the event of missed connections, delays, or other mishaps.**

LUGGAGE: Please be aware that many airlines have recently modified their luggage policies and are charging additional fees for checked bags. Updates could easily occur before your departure, so you may wish to contact your airline to verify their policy. Additional charges for bags on any flights, whether or not such flights are covered by the tour fee, will be the client's responsibility.

TOUR INCLUSIONS/EXCLUSIONS: The **tour fee** is \$11,350 for one person in double occupancy from Delhi. It includes all lodging from Day 2 through Day 18 (and we will arrange for day rooms in Delhi on Day 19 to use prior to our evening departure), all meals from breakfast on Day 3 through dinner on Day 19, round-trip airfare from Delhi to Paro, all ground

transportation, entrance fees, Bhutan Sustainable Development Fee, Bhutan visa fees, and the guide services of the tour leader(s). Tipping at group meals and for drivers, porters, restaurant staff, camp crew, and local guides is included in your tour fee and will be handled for the group by your Field Guides leader(s). However, if you would like to recognize any local guide(s) or your Field Guides leader for exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are optional and not expected.

The above fees do not include your airfare to and from Delhi, airport taxes, India visa fees, any checked or carry-on baggage charges imposed by the airlines, any alcoholic beverages, optional tips to local drivers, phone calls, laundry, or other items of a personal nature.

The **single supplement** for the tour is \$1450. (Singles may not be available in all areas.) If you do not have a roommate but wish to share, we will try to pair you with a roommate from the tour; but if none is available, you will be billed for the single supplement. Our tour fees are based on double occupancy; one-half the cost of a double room is priced into the tour fee. The single supplement is calculated by taking the actual cost of a single room and subtracting one-half the cost of a double room (plus any applicable taxes).

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact us at fieldguides.com/contact-us/. Our office will be in touch with you by email by the next business day (Mon-Fri) with instructions on how to complete our new electronic registration form and medical questionnaire. (We are no longer accepting the paper version.)

Please mail your **deposit of \$1125** per person, or see <https://fieldguides.com/payment-options/> for our Payment Options. **Full payment** of the tour fee is due 180 days prior to departure, or **by October 2, 2023**. **We will bill you for the final payment at either 180 days or when the tour has reached sufficient subscription to operate, whichever date comes later.**

Since the cost of your trip insurance and airline tickets is generally non-refundable, please do not finalize these purchases until you have received final billing for the tour or have been advised that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate by your tour manager.

SMOKING: Almost all of our clients prefer a smoke-free environment. If you smoke, please be sensitive to the group and refrain from smoking at meals, in vehicles, and in proximity to the group on trails and elsewhere. Even more importantly, smoking is now largely illegal in Bhutan, and cigarettes are restricted in terms of import to Bhutan and purchase there.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refund of deposit and payment, less \$100 handling fee, will be made if cancellation is received up to 180 days before departure. If cancellation occurs between 179 and 90 days before the departure date, 50% of the tour fee is refundable. Thereafter, all deposits and payments are not refundable and non-transferable.

Our cancellation policy only applies to payments made to Field Guides for tour (and any services included in those fees). Airline tickets not included in the tour fee and purchased separately often carry penalties for cancellation or change, or are sometimes totally non-refundable. Additionally, if you take out trip insurance the cost of that insurance is not refundable, so it is best to purchase the policy just prior to making full payment for the tour or at the time you purchase airline tickets, depending upon the airline's restrictions.

The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure. In most such cases, full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. Note this exception, however: If you have been advised pre-tour that there is a non-refundable portion of your tour fee no matter the reason for Field Guides cancellation of the tour, that portion will not be refunded. The right is reserved to substitute in case of emergency another guide for the original one.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EMERGENCY INSURANCE: We strongly recommend you consider purchasing trip cancellation (including medical emergency) insurance to cover your investment in case of injury or illness to you or your family prior to or during a trip. Because we must remit early (and substantial) tour deposits to our suppliers, you acknowledge and agree that we will not issue a refund when cancellation occurs outside of our cancellation policy as published in the itinerary (see CANCELLATION POLICY). In addition, the Department of State strongly urges Americans to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and if it will cover emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation. US medical insurance plans seldom cover health costs incurred outside the United States unless supplemental coverage is purchased. Furthermore, US Medicare and Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the United States.

When making a decision regarding health insurance, Americans should consider that many foreign doctors and hospitals require payment in cash prior to providing service and that a medical evacuation to the United States may cost well in excess of \$50,000. Uninsured travelers who require medical care overseas often face extreme difficulties. When consulting with your insurer prior to your trip, please ascertain whether payment will be made to the overseas healthcare provider or whether you will be reimbursed later for expenses that you incur.

US citizens will receive information from us regarding optional tour cancellation/emergency medical insurance. Our agent, CSA, will insure for trip cancellation and interruption, medical coverage, travel delay, baggage loss and delay, and emergency medical transportation. If you purchase the insurance prior to, or within 24 hours of making final payment for the tour, and cover all non-refundable parts of the trip (including any non-refundable flights and in some cases, other arrangements), pre-existing conditions are covered. You may purchase your CSA policy on-line by visiting our website at <https://fieldguides.com/trip-cancellation-insurance/> and clicking the link to CSA. The CSA webpage also includes a contact number.

Currently we are unable to offer CSA insurance policies to residents of New York and Hawaii. We have had clients provide positive feedback after acquiring insurance thru InsureMyTrip (<https://www.insuremytrip.com/>) in the past, and would suggest that company as an alternative. When purchasing insurance with a company other than CSA, you will want to understand whether the timing of your purchase will affect coverage before paying your first deposit. Insurance purchase requirements can vary from company to company, and such requirements could limit your options if you do not look into this until making your final payment for your tour. Please let us know if you have any questions about this.

Please note, once the insurance is purchased it is non-refundable, so please check with your tour manager prior to making the purchase to assure the tour will operate as scheduled. Citizens of other countries are urged to consult their insurance broker.

RESPONSIBILITY: For and in consideration of the opportunity to participate in the tour, each tour participant and each parent or legal guardian of a tour participant who is under 18 agrees to release, indemnify, and hold harmless Field Guides Incorporated, its agents, servants, employees, shareholders, officers, directors, attorneys, and contractors as more fully set forth in the Release and Indemnity Agreement on the registration form. Field Guides Incorporated acts only as an agent for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, or other means, and assumes no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity caused by defect in such vehicles or for any reason whatsoever, including the acts, defaults, or bankruptcies of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. You acknowledge and agree that Field Guides Incorporated is not responsible for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. The tour participant shall bear all such losses and expenses. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely.

Participants should be in good health and should consult a physician before undertaking a tour. If you have questions about the physical requirements of a tour, please contact our office for further information. Participants should prepare for the tour by reading the detailed itinerary, the information bulletin, and other pertinent matter provided by Field Guides. Each participant is responsible for bringing appropriate clothing and equipment as recommended in our bulletins.

THE RECEIPT OF YOUR TOUR DEPOSIT SHALL BE DEEMED TO BE CONSENT TO THE ABOVE CONDITIONS. EACH TOUR PARTICIPANT AND EACH PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN OF A TOUR PARTICIPANT WHO IS UNDER 18 SHALL SIGN AND DELIVER THE RELEASE AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT AT THE TIME OF REGISTRATION.

NCP 7/2020
8/23 KT; peg;