

Back to Khonoma

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Mountain Bamboo Partridge *Bambusicola fytchii*

A tree is beautiful, but what's more, it has a right to life; like water, the sun and the stars, it is essential. Life on earth is inconceivable without trees. Forests create climate, climate influences peoples' character, and so on and so forth. There can be neither civilization nor happiness if forests crash down under the axe, if the climate is harsh and severe, if people are also harsh and sever ... What a terrible future!

ANTON PAVLOVICH CHEKHOV (1860–1904)

This was to be our third and last trip, on behalf of the Government of Nagaland, to do a bird survey of this extreme but truly fascinating northeastern state. Sumit Sen, who had been on two earlier trips, was otherwise occupied, but Shashank Dalvi and Ramki Sreenivasan would re-join the team. Mohit Aggarwal, now an aficionado of all things Naga, would join us later in the trip. Bano would continue as team leader. We considered all the places we should visit, particularly the Mon and Tuensang areas, where we hadn't been before, but after hearing reports of heavy hunting and slash-and-burn in those part of Nagaland, decided to settle for the Khonoma and Benrue area, which we knew were free from these two curses, and decided to revisit them and do a more in-depth study.

Ramki, Shashank, and I had spent the previous week trying to set up target species, and the brilliant Shashank had produced a list that contained, *inter alia*, four laughingthrushes namely, Yellow-throated *Dryonastes galbanus*, White-browed *D. sannio*, Spot-breasted *Stactocichla merulina*, and Ashy *Ianthocincla cineracea* as possible candidates. He studied what little was known about them, which was miniscule, as two of them have never been photographed, and the third was represented by a photograph of a dead bird taken in lower Arunachal. All we truly

deduced was that they preferred degraded scrub rather than the traditional thick vegetation. Another bird that made the list was the rarely seen Spot-throated Babbler *Pellorneum albiventre*.

I hadn't seen the Rangapahar Zoo in Dimapur, so I flew in a day earlier, and ensconced myself at the comfortable Aier's Residency. Next morning we made the trip to the zoo. It was uncomfortably hot as we trekked its vast and verdant confines. As zoos go, it wasn't much, having a few birds cramped in terrible conditions, but the compounds were full of trees, which would make for good birding in more salubrious conditions. The only birds we saw were a few House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, and a Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*. I promised that I would return in winter and try and see the Grey Peacock-pheasant *Polyplectron bicalcaratum* that is rumoured to lurk in the vegetation.

We collected Ramki and Shashank in the afternoon, and drove (chauffeured again by the silent Tokaho) straight to Khonoma, where we decided to sample the alternate home-stay run by the delightful Mr & Mrs Meru. The rooms were brilliant with lots of warm water, and having consumed a delicious dinner, we nodded off as soon as our heads hit the pillows. Gulping tea at 0400 hrs, we waited for Shashank to appear with all his gear: a sound-

parabola, binocular, camera, recording, and playback equipment, and assorted wires sticking out of him making him look like a character from a bad science fiction movie. I wondered how he ever got through airport security. Ramki confirmed that it took Shashank at least 30 minutes to complete that particular operation.

We got into Tokaho's canary-yellow Sumo jeep and drove through the familiar coppiced alder forest to the parking lot above the sleepy hamlet of Khonoma. The short journey produced Little Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula westermanni*, a Spotted Forktail *Enicurus maculatus* and tantalizing glimpses of Black-breasted Thrushes *Turdus dissimilis*, which made Ramki salivate. A pair of very dark Kaleej Pheasants *Lophura leucomelanos* quickly crossed the road denying photographs. They were almost black, and that made us wonder if they were of the *moffiti* ssp. that I have been obsessed with after hearing about them from Tim and Carol Inskipp. Another mystery to be resolved in the future!

Ramki was keen to photograph the Naga Wren-babbler *Spelaornis chocolatinus*, which had managed to escape his frenetic camera on the earlier visit, as well as try and see the almost mythical Gould's Shortwing *Hetroxenicus stellatus*, photographed by Sachin Rai at the same spot exactly a year earlier to the day. The energetic duo decided to climb the steep gully straightaway, while we sauntered more leisurely along the road. I knew they would be gone for a few hours, so we had ample time to loiter without intent. The first thing I noticed was how the numbers of Crested Finchbills *Spizixos canifrons*, and Grey Sibilas *Heterophasia gracilis* had declined, since we were here in January. Presumably they had paired up and fled higher to cooler climes where they could bring up their young in more comfortable surroundings. A few still lingered but they were uncommon.

We walked along, finding that bird densities were lower than

The house in Benrue where the Dark-rumped Swift is said to breed



Ramki Sreenivasan

the last time, but I knew that would happen since the migrants had left. I managed to see a Yellow-rumped Honeyguide *Indicator xanthonotus* on a cluster of newly erupted honeycombs. Both, Mrs Gould's- *Aethopyga gouldiae*, and Fire-tailed- *A. ignicauda* Sunbirds made swift appearances. Grey-hooded Warblers *Phylloscopus xanthoschistos* were much in evidence. Common- *Cuculus canorus*, Indian- *C. micropterus*, Oriental Common- *C. canorus*, and Small- *C. poliocephalus* Cuckoo—called from everywhere, the loudest being the Large Hawk-cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparverioides*. The Great Barbet *Megalaima virens* tried it best to keep up in the cacophony. A large flock of Nepal House-martins *Delichon nipalense* circled the skies in the company of Himalayan Swiftlets *Aerodramus brevirostris*. Hours passed but there was no sign of the duo, and I started getting worried. We had breakfast while watching the resident Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach (tricolor)*. The familiar sound of a pair of the recently split Spot-breasted Scimitar Babblers *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis* made me dart out to the adjoining foliage, and for the first time in my life, I managed a satisfactory look at this great skulker. My good fortune continued, as a singing Naga Wren-babbler drew my attention, and I spent a fascinating few minutes seeing this Nagaland specialty in full song. Great relief, for I had refused to be coaxed by my younger colleagues to join them in their heroic activity of scaling the mountain in order to see this bird.

It was almost lunchtime when they returned, having managed to photograph the Naga Wren-babbler as well as its cousin the Pygmy Wren-babbler *Pnoepyga pusilla*. Other birds they saw, and photographed included the rare Rusty-capped Fulvetta *Alcippe dubia*, Wedge-tailed Green-pigeon *Treron sphenurus*, Mountain Hawk-eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis*, Striated Laughingthrush *Grammatoptila striata*, Red-faced Liocichla *Liocichla phoenicea*, Slaty-Blue- *Ficedula tricolor (cerviniventris* ssp., with rich buff underparts), and Snowy-browed- *F. hyperythra* Flycatchers. Perhaps the most important bird they photographed, and one that had them puzzled a great deal, was a *Seicercus* warbler with a broken eye-ring, and a grey head, which did not match any of the illustrations and descriptions in the current guidebooks. As it turned out it was the exceedingly rare Grey-crowned Warbler *Seicercus tephrocephalus*, seldom recorded from India. They however missed the shortwing and managed only to elicit a weak response from the Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler *Sphenocichla roberti*. Much to their disappointment they missed the Brown-capped- *I. austeni* as well as the Striped- *Trochalopteron virgatum* Laughingthrushes.

Back in the warm confines of Khrieni and Gongui Meru home-stay, we dined royally on a meal cooked by Bano, and went to bed early. The plot was to do a quick trip to the coppiced forests just above Khonoma to see if we could find the Lesser Shortwing



Ramki Sreenivasan

The author doing the trip list at night, Meru's homestay, Khonoma

Brachypteryx leucophrys that Shashank had heard singing, earlier in the day. Finding a suitable spot, Shashank played the tape and a Lesser Shortwing went berserk, circling us, and posing briefly, allowing Ramki to practice his art. The Lesser Shortwing of north-eastern India *carolinae* has dark brown upperparts, and I was very thrilled with my lifer. We also saw Dark-sided- *Muscicapa sibirica*, and Ferruginous- *M. ferruginea* Flycatchers, but yet again the Black-breasted Thrushes evaded Ramki.

We decided to move location to Benrue from where we had received several reports of Dark-rumped Swifts *Apus acuticauda* breeding in the village. What we thought would be a three-hour journey stretched to almost six, over bad roads, and it was dark by the time we reached. The journey itself was through the immense and awe-inspiring forests of Dziilake valley, but remained largely uneventful, bar a small nightjar, which we failed to identify, and a single Blue-winged Laughingthrush *T. squamatum*. The only true excitement being when our car flushed a large rail-like bird, with dark dangling legs. It was not a Black-tailed Crake *Porzana bicolor* for sure, but what else could it be at this altitude? Another mystery.

Next morning the young duo came back from an early morning jaunt with a picture of a forktail. The spots were visible but it had no white on its crown. Perhaps a juvenile Spotted turning into an adult? In the meanwhile Bano had gathered a huge number of local residents and we showed them photographs of the Dark-rumped Swifts, but they were unaware of its existence.

We then trooped into the village square below which the rarest of swifts – Dark-rumped – purportedly bred. We peeked into an old thatched dwelling (whose dark interiors housed several skulls and bones of unidentifiable birds and animals), and saw several birds swooping under its eaves. We watched these birds for several hours and ALL of them turned out to be Himalayan Swiftlets. This prompted two opinions, the first of which was that perhaps the Dark-rumped had bred and left, and the second that the said swifts were misidentified. We would like future and past

birders who have been to Benrue to share their thoughts with us. Disappointed, we decided to wend our way back to Khonoma, where Mohit awaited us. The journey back was much quicker as there were few birds to stop for.

The next day would be our last together, and Ramki and Shashank would head to the Mt. Saramati region, while the remaining three of us would make a brief foray to Tuophema, before heading back home. All along Ramki was fidgeting and complaining that he had not been able to photograph the Mountain Bamboo Partridge *Bambusicola fytchii*, the Spot-breasted Scimitar-babbler and the Black-breasted Thrush. So early morning saw them disappear with determined looks, and it was great relief all-round when they declared that they had achieved their goal and more. They also saw the Striped Laughingthrush *T. virgatum*. Bidding goodbye to the charming Merus we drove on to Kohima where we would part ways.

Next morning we left early, as we wanted to explore some of the lowlands around Dimapur, before catching our flight. We veered off the main highway and entered the Seithekiema area, near the airport, and added many common lowland birds to our checklist. The area resembled parts of neighbouring Assam. There was no evidence of hunting, and so the birds were not shy.

We made several friends over our three trips, received nothing but kindness from everyone. Saw birds that are almost mythical, and had a truly life-enriching experience. We are all aware that Nagaland is beset with many problems. Hunting and *Jhum* leading the list, but the areas that are protected, have some of the finest birding I have experienced in forty years of wandering in strange and faraway lands. The forest department is seized of the problem and is genuinely trying to improve matters. I understand that it is soon going to be mandatory for every village to declare a minimum of ten hectares as protected area. If this is done it will be a major achievement. We wish the government more power and greater strength to their elbows.

The pristine Dziilake valley is still free of *Jhum*



Ramki Sreenivasan