

Some new and interesting bird records from Bhutan

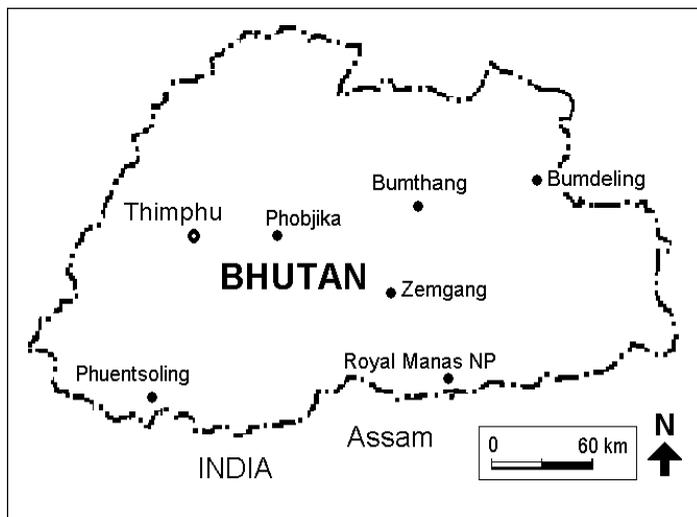
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A number of threatened birds were observed in the Kingdom of Bhutan during visits to that country between October 1985 and December 2006 (41 field days). At least nine threatened species were observed that included Lesser Adjutant-Stork *Leptoptilos javanicus*, White-winged Duck *Cairina scutulata* and Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis*. In addition, near-threatened species such as the White-tailed Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus albicollis* was also recorded. The Lesser Adjutant-Stork, White-winged Duck, Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus*, and Streaked Weaver *Ploceus manyar* are new to Bhutan.

The Kingdom of Bhutan (27°35'–27°45'N 95°10'–95°40'E) has been fairly well covered by ornithological surveys (Ludlow & Kinnear 1937a, b, c; Ali 1977; Saha 1981; Gole 1989; Ali *et al.* 1996; Pradhan 1999; Bishop 1999; Inskipp *et al.* 2004 and Spierenburg 2005). The entire country forms part of Eastern Himalaya Endemic Bird Area (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998) (Fig. 1). The terrain is mostly mountainous with small montane valleys and narrow strips of plains along its border with India. The elevation varies from 100–4100m a.s.l. The main rivers are the Manas (Drangme Chhu), Mangde Chhu, Sunkosh Chhu and Wang Chhu (Chhu=river).

The natural vegetation ranges from tropical wet evergreen and semi-evergreen in the southern foothills to subtropical and temperate forests in the north. Farther north occur the sub-alpine and alpine vegetation with snow at the high peaks. The climate is tropical monsoon in the south and mountain type with a hot and wet summer and a cool and drier winter.



The annual rainfall is between 2,300–3,800mm. The temperature ranges from -0°C–35°C.

Although I had visited, on and off, parts of southern Bhutan since 1985, from September 2004 to November 2006 I was able to make frequent visits as part of my official work. During these visits, totaling 41 field days, I had the opportunity to observe a number of birds, four of which were new country records. The birds were observed / sighted from vehicles or on foot along existing paths and roads. Once country boats were also used (along the Manas River). Some significant records are given below.

Lesser Adjutant-Stork *Leptoptilos javanicus* Vulnerable. The only record was of a lone bird that flew over Mathanguri, affecting both Royal Manas National Park (Bhutan) and Manas National Park (India) on 25.ix.2004 (Choudhury 2005). It is a common species in the adjacent plains of Assam (Choudhury 2000).

White-winged Duck *Asarcornis scutulata* Endangered. Observed in Mathanguri area of Royal Manas National Park on 3.viii.2006. At least two ducks flew between the Boundary Pillar Numbers 200 and 200/2 between India and Bhutan just below the bungalow (26°47'N, 90°57'E) at 19:30hrs. This was the first record for Bhutan as well as Manas National Park of India, where earlier in the afternoon three ducks were recorded (Choudhury 2006). In the month of August, roosting and feeding sites of the duck were located within 1km of Bhutan in Manas National Park of Assam. The Forest staff on the Indian side of Mathanguri also observed ducks flying towards Bhutan at night on a few occasions.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* At Trashi Yangshi, a preserved specimen was examined that was killed by a villager after it had killed a Black-necked Crane on 15.12.2005 inside Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary.

White-tailed Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* Near-threatened. An occasional winter straggler to Bhutan (Inskipp *et al.* 2004).

It was recorded from western part of the country in Punakha and Thimphu *dzongkhags* (*dzongkhag*=district) (Inskipp *et al.* 1999). An adult was observed and photographed in Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary on 18.i.2006. It was perched in a tree by the Kulong Chhu (27°38'20"N, 91°28'40"E) at an elevation of 1,900m a.s.l. This was not only the first record for Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary but also for eastern Bhutan as a whole.

Short-toed Snake-Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* One observed on 27.xi.2005, between Mathanguri and Panbang in Royal Manas National Park. Recorded as vagrant twice from Bhutan in the Kuri Chhu near Lhuenste (Spierenburg 2005). The present sighting was in Zemgang *Dzongkhag*.

Changeable Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatu*s First sighted in Mathanguri area on 11.iii.1996. The next sighting was at Nganglam town in Samdrup Jonkar *dzongkhag* (now Pema Gatshel *dzongkhag*) on 22.vi.2006.

Blood Pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus* Two coveys were observed on 16.i.2006 at Thrumshingla National Park. First 12 birds were seen crossing the road at 3,400m, then >10 were observed by roadside forest at 3,600m.

Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* Vulnerable. Observed two birds in Thangbi Valley (2,700m; 8km north of Jakar, Bumthang *dzongkhag*) on 15.i.2006). At Trashi Yangshi, a preserved specimen was examined that was killed by a Golden Eagle on 15.xii.2005 inside Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary. For other records see Table 1.

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthrsii* One on 13.i.2006 in Puna Tsang chu, between Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang in Wangdue *dzongkhag*.

Stone-Curlew *Burhinus oedice*nemus One bird was observed on 24.xii.2006 near Bogamati (south-east of Bhangtar) in Samdrup Jongkar *Dzongkhag*—a first record for the *dzongkhag*. In Bhutan, this species has been found just once, in a dry river-bed at Manas at 250 m, on 18.iv.1993, suggesting that it might breed there (Spierenburg 2005).

Khasi Hills (Dark-rumped) Swift *Apus acuticauda* Vulnerable. Restricted-range. A few (two birds clearly identified) were in flight on 12.ix.2004 near the spot (26°49'N 91°37'E) in Samdrup Jongkar

Table 1. Observations of the Black-necked Cranes		
Date	Site (altitude)	Remarks
14.i.2006	Phobjikha Valley (2,900–3,000m)	c150 seen; maximum seen together was 52, followed by 39 and 36; remaining were between 1–6.
17.i.2006	Trashi Yangshi (1,850–1,900m)	c50 seen in twos, threes and small groups foraging and then leaving to roost in Bumdeling Sanctuary.
18.i.2006	Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary (2,000m)	c140 roosting; slowly they left for Trashi Yangshi and other places.
18.i.2006	Trashi Yangshi (1,850–1,900m)	>50 foraging in the town.

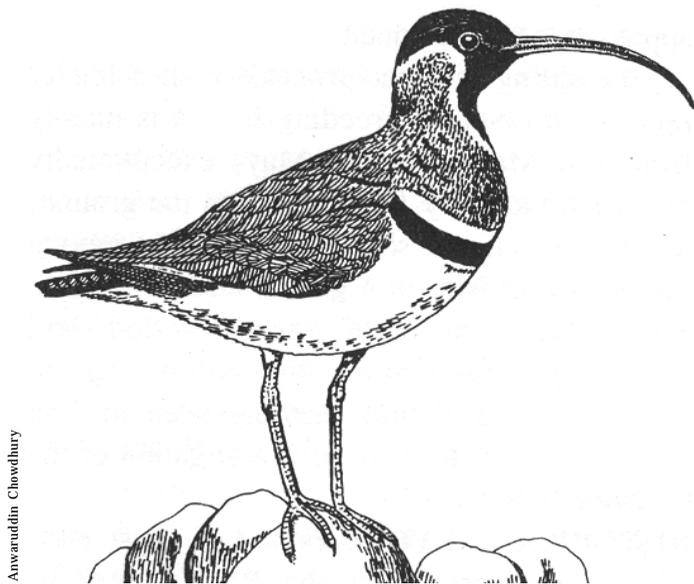
Dzongkhag, where the Balti River enters India from Bhutan. The second sighting was on 21.v.2006, north of Guabari (Assam), also in Samdrup Jongkar *Dzongkhag* (Bhangtar area) (26°48'N 91°42'E). Both the areas are quite close to a nesting colony located between Deothang and Samdrup Jongkhar, 7km north of the latter (Spierenburg 2005).

Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus* Ten birds were seen perched on electric wires near the first check gate on way to Nganglam town in Samdrup Jonkar *dzongkhag* (now Pema Gatshel *dzongkhag*) (26°49'N, 91°13'E) at about 11:15hr on 22.vi.2006. The site was about 1.5km from the India-Bhutan border (Manas National Park, Assam) and was a clearing at an elevation of about 200m. On 5.ix.2006 at least seven birds observed flying (singly and not as a group) and hawking insects in the air in the Choki area (26°48'N 91°25'E). This is a first record for Bhutan (Spierenburg 2005).

Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis* One bird was observed and photographed in October 1985 at Mathanguri. It was on the Beki River, hopping from one boulder to the other on either side of the international boundary. It also perched on Boundary Pillar No. 200. That was also the first record for north-eastern India (Choudhury 2000). Two birds were observed on the boulders of the Rydak River in Chhukha district on 2.xi.1995 (across the border near Bhutanghat of West Bengal, India).

Streaked Weaver *Ploceus manyar* Recorded at Daifam (26°54'N 92°05'E), in the south-eastern corner of Bhutan, on 10.vi.2000, which was a new country record at that time (Choudhury 2003). A male in breeding plumage was the first to be sighted, then a female. A few more birds were spotted later. The birds were in a maize field at the base of hills at an elevation of 200m. The birds were feeding, moving from one maize stalk to another.

Baya Weaver *P. philippensis* In Bhutan this species is a rare resident (Spierenburg 2005). I observed a nesting colony at Daifam (26°54'N 92°05'E) on 10.vi.2000. It was in this semi-urban locality, at the base of hills, at an elevation of 200m. More than 45 nests were counted, spread across three coconut palms and an arecanut (=betelnut) palm. Thereafter, on 11.vi.2000, many birds were seen in Khaling Wildlife Sanctuary at an elevation of 250m. Here the nests were within India but very close to the international border (at the eastern edge of Khalingduar Reserved Forest and outside the northern boundary of Koramor tea estate of Assam).



Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthrsii*

Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica* Two birds were observed at 2,000m on 2.iv.2005, on the way to Buli in Zemgang dzongkhag—a first record for Zemgang dzongkhag.

Conservation

With 72.5% of its land area under forest cover (Anon. 2002), Bhutan offers rare opportunity for long-term conservation of different species of birds as well as other life forms. Added advantage to this is its predominantly Buddhist population, most of whom do not hunt animals. There are nine protected areas in the country covering a significant 26.23% of the country's geographical area. The Black-necked Cranes, which mostly affect areas outside the protected areas are revered by the local people and are not molested since time immemorial.

Unfortunately the rapid expansion of the road system in Bhutan, including the building of many new feeder roads and the widening of the lateral roads and the large numbers of road labourers that such work demands, has resulted in substantial roadside habitat destruction and degradation as well as disturbance to and poaching of species such as Satyr Tragopan *Tragopan satyra* and other galliformes.

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White-winged Duck *Asarcornis scutulata*

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Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* at Tso-kar Lake, Ladakh.

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