On the wings of the Peaceful Dragon: birding in western Bhutan 22nd–28th November 2008

Bikram Grewal

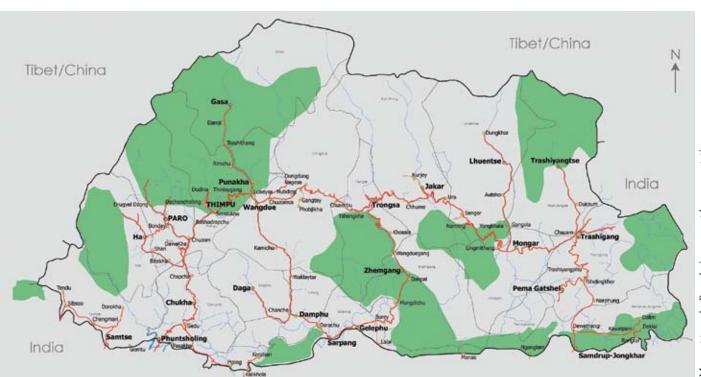
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uch of the pristine forest in the Eastern Himalayas, that is still intact, lies in the sparsely populated Kingdom of Bhutan. Here the people are mostly Buddhists and therefore pacifists. Killing of birds and other game is almost nonexistent and that means that they tend not to disappear at the first sight of humans, as is common in most other parts of northeastern India. I grew up in Assam, literally on Bhutan's doorstep and often entered its southern bits, legally as well as illegally. In the nineties, my friends Tim and Carol Inskipp shifted their attention from Nepal to Bhutan. They would return elated from this small kingdom, with mouth-watering tales of an "all black" Kaleej Lophura leucomelanos or a swiftlet (Apodidae), perhaps new to science. I would sit lapping up their words, determined to follow their footsteps. In the event, this took almost a decade and was triggered by a chance meeting with Peter Lobo who had done much bird-related ground-work and found locations where birds like Hodgson's Frogmouth Batrachostomus hodgsoni and Ward's Trogon Harpactes wardi could be seen. I then badgered my friend, Sumit Sen, to come up with a strategy. Despite numerous run-ins with Sumit—I must admit that he is the picture of serenity and

composure—he came up with a meticulous plan, so exhaustive, that I could have written this report without ever having set foot in that divine country. Each day was carefully planned, with maps and target birds appended. All we had to do was to arrive. We also roped in Ramki and his wife Swarna, to bring some youth and sanity to the group, and to prevent Sumit and me from murdering each other.

Other than the birds, it was the Bhutanese concept of wealth—measured not by filthy lucre but by 'Gross National Happiness' that had me hooked. I was further intrigued by their erstwhile King, who married three sisters on one day, and a fourth when she came of age! Rumours persist that a fifth diplomatically declined to join the merry gang. And so a sunny day in November found our quartet at the Druk Airway's counter in Kolkata International Airport. Bhutan's national airline (the only one that flies into the country) is notorious for postponing and cancelling its flights at short notice. After several false starts we were finally on the plane and air-bound, quivering with anticipation. While flying to Paro it is advisable that you grab the seats on the left of the plane for on a clear day you can see the high peaks with names like Ganesh



Bhutan: courtesy Sumit Sen (www.kolkatabirds.com)

Himal, Cho Oyu, Everest, Lhotse, Makalu, Kanchenjunga and Jhomulhari. The landing in Paro is considered to be one of the most perilous in the world and there are only a handful of pilots who are licensed to perform this feat. It lived up to its hair-raising reputation and when we touched down, the entire plane burst into spontaneous applause.

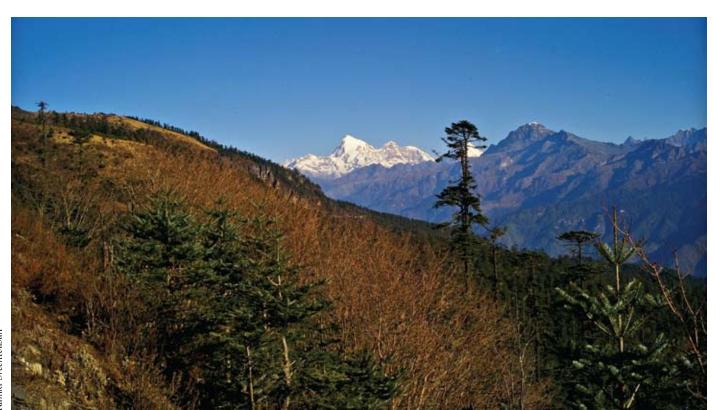
Paperwork was quickly disposed off and we met up with our guide Tashi and chauffeur Mangal, who somehow managed to fit our enormous amount of luggage into a large van before we sped to our hotel on the outskirts of town. Paro is a small town of about thirty thousand people and is set at an altitude of about 2,133 m. The drive from the airport to town gives you the first taste of Bhutan and whets your appetite. The fast flowing Paro Chu River, emanating from the glacial waters of Mt. Jhomulhari, rushes furiously over rocky boulders on the right of the road, while the majestic Paro Dzong looms large with the Ta Dzong (now the national museum) nestling above it. To the uninitiated, a Dzong is a distinctive kind of fortress. It serves many functions, encompassing the spiritual, social and temporal. It had grown dark by then and it was through fading light that we first picked up the shadowy silhouette of a Brown Dipper Cinclus pallasii and a few White Wagtails Motacilla alba. We quickly disembarked, grabbed our binoculars and peered hopelessly through them. A small reddish bird hopped on a bare willow tree and a huge discussion developed as to its identity. After many observations and consultations with books, it was pronounced to be a Hodgson's Redstart Phoenicurus hodgsoni. If we had known then, that it would be one of the commoner birds of the trip, we might not have been so animated.

We checked into the charming Hotel Janka, set in fields beyond Paro and quickly returned to town to check out its nightlife and find a place to eat. Two lessons were learnt that night: booze is extremely cheap and good and Bhutanese food is a mix of noodles, rice and vegetables in cheese. It is also repetitive.

It was also on this night that Ramki discovered the joys of the Bhutanese National Dish Ema Datse, which comprises fiery green (or red) chillies in a cheese sauce. It was served at every meal, much to Ramki's never-ending delight. We ordered for breakfast, to be collected at four the next morning, and returned to grab a few hours of sleep.

Awake at three next morning and out by four with all the bags in the car—and so began the first of our serious birding expeditions—to the Chele La (La means a mountain pass), the highest motorable road in Bhutan. In our excitement, we had left an hour too early (another lesson learnt! Sunrise in November is never before seven) and had to sit it out in the car, midway, waiting for the false dawn to appear. It was bitterly cold and though we were all clad in warm clothing, the chill still crept into our bones making us extremely unhappy. We reached the 3,810 m high pass before the sun rose and got out of the car to the sounds of a bird twittering away. We looked though our binoculars but just could not pinpoint the bird. Very frustrating.

From my research I had learnt that every Bhutanese emits the cry 'lea-gey lu' (victory to the gods) when he crosses this pass and I had every intention of following suit, but all I could achieve in the cold was a very hoarse grunt. The sun rose and immediately, with the first light, bird activity started. We could soon see Mt Jhomulhari and the adjacent Mt Jhiku Drake glittering in the new sun. The vegetation here was mostly dwarf Rhododendron Rhododendron ambiguum and alpine meadows. Our mysterious twitterer turned out to be a very handsome White-browed Rosefinch Carpodacus thura. The distant conifers held a pack of White-winged Grosbeaks Mycerobas carnipes, who eventually came close to the pass and the photographer duo of Ramki and Sumit pronounced themselves satisfied. Our guide, Tashi, had such an inscrutable face, like the rest of his countrymen, that it was very difficult to figure out what he was thinking and, now at the top of the pass, in a voice so deadpan, declared, "the Blood Pheasants are



Chele La Pass and the Bhutan Himalaya

coming," that I thought he said something innocuous like 'shall we have a cup of tea?' In any case the effect was electric as we dropped all and rushed to where he was standing and, lo and behold, a train of Blood Pheasants *Ithaginis cruentus* began to emerge. One by one they trooped out of the undergrowth like soldiers marching in a parade. For someone who had only seen these beauties in wistful dreams, this multitude of excess was unbelievable. Cameras clicked incessantly as more and more appeared and I wondered if the entire worldwide population resided here. Our 'National Collective Happiness' knew no bounds!

In such circumstances Ramki is quite uncontrollable and constantly switches camera bodies, lenses, tripods and innumerable other gadgets in some kind of mechanical frenzy. His wife Swarna, not to be undone, incessantly fires instructions to him, earning her the sobriquet 'Director of Photography'. While Ramki mopped up these stunners, Sumit and I moved down the road, when some slight movement in the undergrowth, below the road, revealed three Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* hens on the move. Frantic but silent arm waving brought Ramki hotfooting and once again the frantic clicking was underway. We moved on down the path and as we turned the corner, espied a beautiful male Himalayan Monal labouring his way up the barren slopes. I knew that Sumit ached to see one of these splendid birds and the look of pleasure on his face revealed that he had finally found nirvana. But by the time Ramki and Swarna arrived, the bird had gone. Still in a daze we decided to breakfast and take a deep breath. The events of the morning had us completely astounded, and all this even before nine in the morning! In our excitement we had completely forgotten that we had dipped on the Satyr Tragopan Tragopan satyra, another elusive bird that was supposedly common here. The two birds that were omnipresent here, and indeed everywhere on our travels were the Spotted Nutcracker Nucifraga caryocatactes and the Rufous Sibia Heterophasia capistrata.

While Tashi and Mangal unraveled the breakfast basket, our friend Sujan Chatterjee arrived with a busload of birders that he had been escorting. We had met him the previous night and exchanged notes. His remark that on this particular trip he had no trouble in seeing all the difficult birds but the 'easy' ones had eluded him, turned out to be prophetic in our case as well, as a

glance at our trip-list will reveal (see URL at end). We descended leisurely, but by now the birding had slowed down, and all we saw were a Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, a female Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis*, Rufous-vented *Parus rubidiventris*, Coal *P. ater* and Grey-Crested *P. dichrous* Tits. A solitary Hoary-throated Barwing *Actinodura nipalensis* made an appearance, as did a pair of skulking Black-faced Laughingthrush *Garrulax affinis*. Swarna was the only one to see a Maroon-backed Accentor *Prunella immaculata*. The only true excitement was when Ramki and Swarna saw and photographed a beautiful male Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*. Since I was nowhere in the vicinity, this made me very 'crossbilled' indeed!

We returned to Paro, and drove down the Paro Chu (river), where our attempts to find the Long-billed Plover Charadrius placidus came to naught, but low and behold the river was full of Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*. This enigmatic winter visitor is so difficult to see in India, but here every few yards or so, was a pair pretending to be a small boulder. All of this along a major road, with large noisy SUVs hurtling at considerable speed. Never in my life did I think that I would tire of seeing Ibisbills, but that is exactly what happened. To take your eyes off an Ibisbill to observe a Long-tailed Shrike Lanius schach, albeit of the tricolor sub-species, was sacrilege, but so it turned out. Sumit called to say that he had found a Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* atop a traditional Bhutanese house and we trooped off to duly record it. Paro was also the only place where we saw three types of sparrows the House Passer domesticus, Russet P. rutilans and the Eurasian Tree P. montanus!

A quick lunch and we were off to our next stop, Thimpu, the bustling capital and the home of the royal family. The journey was only a couple of hours and just before we reached, we stopped at the tanks of the sewage works and the few ducks there turned out to be Brahminy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, a few Gadwall *Anas strepera* and an unexpected Ferruginous Pochard *Aythya nyroca*.

We checked into the Hotel Phuentsholling Pelri, a swish new hotel in the heart of town and decided to eat in and catch up on some much-needed sleep. In any case, and as usual, we had an early start. We had hoped to meet our friend Sudhir Vyas, the

Indian Ambassador, a friend and a great birder, who had very kindly given us suggestions for our trip. Unfortunately he was away.

We awoke before the hotel staff did, which meant that we carried our own baggage down, and were soon on the way to the Cheri Valley. We left town and passed some defence installations and were surprised by the number of Spotted Nutcrackers flying overhead. A Bluefronted Redstart Phoenicurus frontalis sat on a post and the ubiquitous Hodgson's Redstarts P. hodgsoni were everywhere. We drove past the village of Begana and the road soon ended at a place called Dodina, where the track to the Cheri Goemba starts. The monks at this monastery look after the gorals Naemorhedus goral (a kind of mountain goat) and feed the pheasants that are exceedingly tame. But like all good things in life, they come for a price. In this case you have



The beautiful Cheri Valley

to climb almost vertically for over an hour before you get to see the game. Tashi did not think this effort was worth a few birds, but it did not deter a slightly built Bhutanese gentleman, from carrying a humongous cupboard on his back to be delivered to the holy men at the monastery. We crossed the Wang Chu by a lovely covered bridge and came to an open glade where breakfast was served, while Spotted Nutcrackers and Red-billed Choughs soared overhead.

We decided to walk up a path that went gently uphill along the river when suddenly bird activity stated in earnest—Ramki started photographing a Hoary-throated Barwing, Swarna found a Rusty-flanked Treecreeper Certhia nipalensis climbing a mud wall and Sumit discovered a flock, yes a flock, of Green-Shrike Babbler Pteruthius xanthochlorus. Hell broke loose with people running from one vantage point to the other. Not to be outdone, a group of Golden-breasted Fulvetta Alcippe chrysotis made a fleeting and sudden appearance and a Little Forktail Enicurus scouleri popped up on the river for good measure. A pair of Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush G. erythrocephalus played hide-and-seek in the low shrubbery.

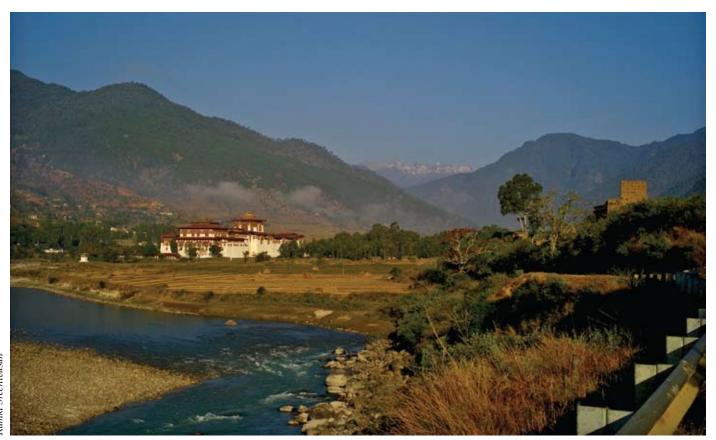
Exhausted by so much activity we trooped back to the car and drove towards the Tango Goemba. Rufous-fronted Tits *Aegithalos iouschistos* were everywhere, but were so nifty in their movement that even our intrepid duo of Ramki and Sumit failed to photograph them and their frustration was palpable and visible. I wished they would capture the object of their desire, and return to normalcy again. Attempt after attempt was made, all unsuccessful. On one such occasion, Ramki scampered up a hillside, like a veritable goat and disappeared into the bushes. When he returned he casually mentioned that while he had missed the said tits, he had seen a green bird, which he took to be a sunbird of some sort. It turned out to be the extremely rare and exceeding beautiful

Fire-tailed Myzornis *Myzornis pyrrhoura*. I seethed with jealousy and decided to buy myself a camera!

At the base of the Tango Goemba, is a circular path, which is more or less flat and we decided to walk along it, disturbing a party of Olive-backed Pipits Anthus hodgsoni. Other than a troop of langur monkeys Semnopithecus schistaceus, the only other creatures of interest were Ashy Drongo Dicrurus leucophaeus, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher Abroscopus superciliaris, a Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush Monticola rufiventris and the diminutive Yellow-browed Tit Sylviparus modestus. We returned to Thimpu, and had lunch in the pleasant 'Seasons' Restaurant, where Ramki insisted on Ema Datse with his pizza. We collected our inner-line permits, changed our money and were on our way to Punakha, the only place where Sumit had, very kindly, allowed us two nights.

We drove south to Simtokha before turning left on the East-West Highway. You know you have arrived at Dochu La pass by the presence of several hundred prayer flags and the 108 newly built Chortens. The forests at this point are mostly rhododendron with a few magnolias and it must make for a wondrous sight in spring when the trees are in full bloom. We peered unsuccessfully though the looming clouds for a glimpse of Bhutan's two highest peaks, Gankhar Puensum (7,541 m) and Kulha Gagri (7,554 m) but had to be satisfied by the forests below that seemed to stretch forever. These forests change from oak, maple pine to hemlock, alder, fir and cypress. The lower stretches have a fair amount of bamboo as well. It is supposed to be a birding paradise, but our luck was out that day and we managed only a Great Barbet Megalaima virens, a few Long-tailed Minivet Pericrocotus ethologus, a gaggle of White-throated Laughingthrush G. albogularis and a few far-flying Yellow-billed Blue Magpies Urocissa flavirostris.

The Hotel Zangto Pelri seemed welcoming enough with our rooms and verandahs overlooking the city and the river. A Large



Punakha Dzong and Mochu River

Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparverioides* called familiarly from the blue pines below. We dined late in the warm dining room as Sumit authorised a later-than-usual start at seven. All night the Mountain Scops Owl *Otus spilocephalus* called. Next morning when we gathered at the parking lot, the hotel's gardens were full of the commoner birds, which had eluded us so far, and we notched up Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae*, Long-tailed Minivets, Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch *Sitta castanea*, besides mynas and doves.

Sujan had told us about the Wallcreepers Tichodroma muraria that frequented the retaining walls around the corner from the hotel. As soon as we arrived a splendid specimen put up an uninterrupted show for us. Ramki and Sumit, for whom this bird was a lifer, came close to being run over several times by the constant traffic on the road as they photographed this little gem from all angles. The bird was still there when they finally gave up, beaming from ear to ear. We descended to town and crossed the Po Chu in search of one of our major target birds, the White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*. Tashi's 'bazaar gossip' claimed that this range-restricted rarity had been seen a few kilometres downstream. We scoured the area, inch by inch, but this elusive bird was nowhere to be seen on either bank. We did see a feeding flock of Tibetan Siskin Carduelis thibetana, a bird none of us had seen hitherto, but it did not make up for our disappointment, neither did the several Ibisbill we saw. A few female Common Kestrels Falco tinnunculus, a couple of Blue Rock-Thrushe Monticola solitarius and a family of Common Merganser Mergus merganser were the other birds of interest on this stretch. A barking deer *Muntiacus muntjak,* which had obviously come down to the river to drink, kept us amused for some time.

Sujan had seen this heron a few days before on the other river, Mo Chu, below the Punakha Dzong and this was where we headed. We repeated the exercise and every bit was scanned carefully. A single Pallas's Gull *Larus ichthyaetus* was seen, as were the Crested *Megaceryle lugubris*, Common *Alcedo atthis* and the White-throated *Halcyon smyrnensis* Kingfishers, but not our quarry. Finally we reconciled to the fact that we would have to wait for another trip to see this long-necked bird and called off our search.

We stopped at a shady grove beside the river and saw River Lapwings *Vanellus duvaucelli* and low-flying mergansers as we ate the first meal of the day. A Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maura* and a single Grey Bushchat *S. ferrea* were the only grassland birds on this sector. We drove up the Mo Chu valley (seeing both the Slaty-backed *E. schistaceus* as well as Spotted *E. maculatus* Forktails)



Pele La



Phobjikha valley

toward our next destination—the Jigme Dorji National Park's Trashithang forest. This bit of Bhutan's largest national park is mostly warm, broad-leaved and very similar to the forests of northern Bengal, with which we were familiar. A single Alpine Swift Tachymarptis melba cruised above and a few Nepal House-Martin Delichon nepalensis were also circling. We managed to grab a quick look at the only Kaleej Pheasant of the trip but unfortunately it did not turn out to be the all black *L. l. moffiti*. The first flycatchers appeared—Orange-gorgeted Flycatcher Ficedula strophiata and Small Niltava Niltava macgrigoriae. Rufous-capped Babbler Stachyris ruficeps, Blue-winged Minla Minla cyanouroptera, Whitebrowed Fulvetta Alcippe vinipectus and Whiskered Yuhina Yuhina flavicollis were some of the birds seen while walking through the forest. But easily the highlight was a pair of Red-headed Trogon Harpactes erythrocephalus who sat 30 m apart but posed for us from 3 m away. Says a lot for the Buddhist way of life!

We returned back to the Punakha Dzong area and gave it another 'once over' in the forlorn hope for the heron. Saw several Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* and Spotted Munia *Lonchura punctulata* instead! Back to the hotel to imbibe a selection of the finest malts courtesy the duty free shop in Kolkata airport. Next morning we left early, as we had to cover a long distance. The plan was to go to the Pele La area before backtracking a bit and reaching Phobjikha valley in time to see the cranes.

We drove past Wangdue Phodrang towards Pele La, the pass that takes you over the Black Mountains and is the boundary between western and central Bhutan. This was as far east as we would go on this trip, but before that we had a date with another mysterious bird—the Yellow-rumped Honeyguide Indicator xanthonotus. When I was younger, I often postponed opportunities to trek hard in the upper reaches of Uttarakhand in northern India to see this sparrow-like bird. And I suddenly found myself older and unfit to undertake such arduous journeys forcing me to reconcile that I would have to dip on this bird in this lifetime. But Bhutan suddenly presented a possibility, and ergo I was a little tense on this leg of the journey. Tashi kept assuring me that the bird would be present, though he did add the proviso that the giant rock bees *Apis dorsata* themselves had abandoned the hives. When we drew up to the point on the bend of the road where the hives were, I could see that they were indeed abandoned and looked so unpromising that Sumit actually walked off down the road and I had to call him back to show him the bird, which sat perched on a small twig under the overhang. It looked so unremarkable from afar that I wondered what the fuss was about. This was the kind of situation that Ramki truly loves, and now he sweet-talked Tashi to accompany him on a rock-climbing mission along a small track he found. Armed with his lenses, that are almost as big as him, he scrambled up the hillside till he was at eye level with the bird, which was completely unimpressed by such heroism. Occasionally it would hop on to the abandoned hives and take a mouthful of wax.

Regretfully we had to move on as we still had many miles to traverse and we travelled through changing landscapes and vegetation till we started a rather stiff climb to the pass. We came across black ice on the narrow road, which forced us to drive slowly. We stopped at a promising bend and played calls of different parrotbills but I was the only one to have a fleeting glimpse of a Great Parrotbill *Conostoma oemodium*. Despite Pele La's reputation, there were very few birds around, other than Rufous Sibia, a few Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*, a single Ashy-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus maculipennis* and Rufousfronted Tits *Aegithalos iouschistos*, which Sumit managed to finally photograph.

Some soaring Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* aside, a buzzard flew alongside and Sumit quickly pointed out that it was somewhat different from the earlier Himalayan Buzzard *Buteo burmanicus* that we had been seeing. The only catch was that there were no authentic records of Steppe Buzzard *B. b. vulpinus* from these parts. Subsequently the photographs were circulated, Sumit proved correct, and an important record established.

We moved on, when a blood-stained man at the edge of the road hailed our car down and told us that his car had skidded and gone down the edge of the cliff and that everyone was gravely injured. Both Mangal and Tashi scampered down the steep escarpment and heroically rescued the injured. We managed to stop traffic on the road and everyone joined the rescue. An hour later the operation was completed and the injured sent off to the nearest hospital, where hopefully all survived. It was a very subdued party that turned back towards Gangtey in the Phobjikha valley.

The descent into the Phobjikha valley below Gangtey is almost surreal with the entire area being covered in dwarf bamboo, beloved of the local yaks *Bos* sp. We did not see any parrotbill that are supposed to live in these bamboos, instead saw a distant

White-winged Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster* dart into the bushes. Not very satisfactory, but the land of the Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* lay ahead and we pushed on till we reached the village. We saw several of these rare cranes in the wetlands that form the base of the valley. Potato fields dotted the valley and form an important part of the local economy. We decided not to visit the Black-necked Crane Information Centre, preferring to hop across the small wet patches and take our photographs from there. In the event we counted about 70 of these long-legged birds, besides seeing a Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* hunt rodents and a resting Indian Jungle Nightjar *Caprimulgus indicus*. The Dewachen Hotel turned out to be the best of the trip with real wood fires warming our cold and tired bones. We slept early as usual after an excellent meal in the warm dining room.

We decided to return to Pele La the next morning, which started promisingly with a pair of Darjeeling Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos darjellensis*, the only representative of the family in the entire trip. But that is where our luck ran out. Other than a pair of Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota*, an Eurasian Tree-Creeper *Certhia familiaris* and a single Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch *Carpodacus thura*, there was precious little to see. Reluctantly we turned back and started the long journey back to Thimpu, where we would spend the night. We returned to the honeyguide spot where our star awaited us, this time a little lower, on a mossy bank. Cameras clicked as if photographing a bollywood nymphet, only that in this case it was a male. While the photo session was in progress, Swarna and I spent some time chasing a Pygmy Wren-Babbler *Pnoepyga pusilla* and a few Black-throated Tit *Aegithalos concinnus*.

A little down the road, we ran into a spectacular mixed hunting flock that included Red-billed Leiothrix, Red-tailed Minla and Nepal, White-browed, Golden-breasted and Rufous-winged Fulvettas. A few cutias showed up in the distance. A Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis* caused momentary excitement, but a Collared Owlet *Glaucidium brodiei*, within touching distance, was the star of the day. Back safely in Punakha we decided to celebrate our last night in Bhutan by going to the Zone Bar, where we had an excellent dinner. Ramki announced in a clear placid voice that he had decided to leave at 0300 hrs for Chele La Pass,

to give the Blood Pheasant another go, before meeting us at the airport at ten in the morning. His long suffering but faithful wife agreed to accompany him, while Sumit and I left at a more human hour of seven. This would give us an hour or so to look for the Solitary Snipe *Gallinago solitaria* in the marshy bogs of the Paro Chu. The snipe we couldn't find but we did see the rarest of crakes—the Elwes's *Porzana bicolor*. What a way to end the trip.

We met at the airport at the appointed time, to discover that our flight had been cancelled! But what followed is another story and must wait another day.

Tashi delek!

Note: A complete list of birds seen on this trip is available at http://www.kolkatabirds.com/ hillbirdsofind/bhutannov08list. htm



Honeyguide Indicator xanthocollis on hive