

The magical monals of Mishmi—a week's birding in eastern Arunachal: 18–25 November 2007¹

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Grewal, B. 2009. The magical monals of Mishmi—a week's birding in eastern Arunachal: 18–25 November 2007. *Indian Birds* 5 (3): 62–64.

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Our collective curiosities about the Mishmi Hills were first aroused when we learned that Julian Donahue and Ben King had 're-found' the enigmatic Rusty-throated Wren-Babbler *Spelaornis badeigularis*, now re-christened, Mishmi Wren-Babbler, in 2004. This bird was known to the world from only a single skin of a female that landed in the mist-nets of Drs Sálím Ali and Dillon Ripley during their survey of the area in the late forties. It lay hidden from the ornithologists' eyes till the venerable duo lured it by playing the tape of similar species and managed to not only photograph, but also record its song. We scoured the Internet in the hope of getting more information, but other than establishing that it was supposed to be locally common, little was available. Ben King's reports were brief, but full of allusions about the birdlife of this little-visited area. We managed to make contact with Julian, who was more than helpful and gave us maps, details of routes, and most importantly, names of places where we could stay. To him our grateful thanks. Another celebrated birder, James Eaton, visited the Mishmi Hills, but did not complete a trip report, limiting himself to listing the birds seen. The list made tantalizing reading and was full of birds like Purple Cochoa *Cochoa purpurea* and Green C. *viridis* Cochoa, Violet *Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchus* and Asian Emerald C. *maculatus* Cuckoos, not to mention Satyr Tragopan *Tragopan satyra* and Blood Pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus*. Names like Gould's Shortwing *Brachypteryx stellata*, White-hooded Babbler *Gampsorhynchus rufulus*, Pale-headed Woodpecker *Gecinulus grantia* and Purple Wood-Pigeons *Columba punicea* dotted the lists and made mere mortals like us toss in our sleep.

Armed with what little knowledge we had, but with a high sense of anticipation, we contacted Help Tourism with a request to organise a trip to the Mishmi Hills. To their eternal credit, the intrepid Asit Biswas and Raj Basu undertook two recce trips before proposing that we travel on the sensible road, i.e., to Hunli, via Roing and the Mayodia Pass. And so one sunny morning we arrived in Dibrugarh, in eastern Assam, the north-eastern-most airport in India. We met up with Raj and the support team and proceeded straight to Saikhowa Ghat, where we had to ferry our two jeeps across the Lohit River. The journey took us through splendid tea gardens with familiar names and we spent some pleasurable time seeing the *affinis* race of the Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, while the dark race of the Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus stejnegeri* had us temporarily foxed.

The crossing was one the most perilous that any of us had ever undertaken and included the transfer of our vehicles, with the help of two thin planks, onto two country boats joined together to form a primitive raft. Having successfully managed this arduous task, we

spent the one-hour journey eating our packed lunch and scanning the river, which was speckled with Brahminy Shelducks *Tadorna ferruginea*. A lone Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* flew in the distance.

We drove on to the small town of Roing, the district headquarters of the Lower Dibang Valley, once the entry point to the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency, popularly known as NEFA. We topped up our supplies that included meat on the hoof, live chickens and, most important of all, fuel for the cars. This was to be our last outpost before we entered the true Mishmi Hills. Essentials would now onwards become scant and cell phones would (mercifully) be dead. Fortified with enough food, drink and such necessities, we moved on, bypassing the broken bridge on the Itapani River, to finally reach the grand-sounding 'Dibang Valley Jungle Camp'. This rustic camp consisted of a typical Mishmi 'long-house' built on stilts. Charmingly located, overlooking the Lohit and Dibang River systems, it sat in a forest clearing, now planted with nascent orange trees. Adequate would be a good term to describe the resort, though it must be said we were the first occupants, and plans for improvement are underway. Sitting in the covered portico, we could see Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo* and a Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus* fly over the river basin, and a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* perched on a wire near the camp. A pair of Grey Bushchats *S. ferrea* flickered in the shrubs. All of this boded of good birding, and after having had the first of many excellent meals, prepared by our camp cook, Jibon, we retired to await a 0330 hrs wake-up call. We rose to the call of hoolock gibbons *Hoolock leuconedys* and shivered in anticipation (and the cold!) of what lay ahead of us in this mystic land.

First-time travellers to north-eastern India will marvel at how early the sun rises and how soon it sets. It is always sensible to be out in the field thirty minutes before sunrise to take advantage of the day's best birding hours. So it proved on our first day of serious birdwatching in these fabled hills. It is best to point out at this stage that most of our birding, on this trip, took place on the main road to Hunli, and beyond, and this was because the habitat was so pristine and dense, with no paths leading into the woods, and with the forest-edges and scrub limited. The birds were truly shy, and this we attributed to the many small-bore guns in evidence, and the fact that almost every Mishmi tribal carried a slingshot. We saw several birds, particularly of the laughingthrush family, but due to the heavy foliage, and their skittish behavior, we could not identify them all with any certainty. Bird densities were low, the species less varied and hunting parties smaller than the ones in northern West Bengal and Sikkim. Similarly, the warblers were few and far between, with Yellow-browed Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* being the commonest. Others, over the days, included a few Grey-cheeked Flycatcher-Warblers *Seicercus poliogenys*, Orange-banded Leaf-Warbler *P. pulcher*, Grey-faced Leaf-Warbler *P. maculipennis*, and a single Blyth's Leaf-Warbler *P. reguloides*.

¹ [Editors' Note: A slightly modified version of this article was earlier published on http://www.kolkatabirds.com/mishmi/mishmi_tripreport.htm. We are grateful to the author as well as the owners of the website for permitting us to use this article.]

This notwithstanding, we soon had the first of our many lifers of the trip. These included Long-tailed *Heterophasia picaoides* and Beautiful *H. pulchella* Sibia, and White-throated Bulbuls *Alophoixus flaveolus*. Grey-backed Shrikes *Lanius tephronotus* were common and Short-billed Minivets *Pericrocotus brevirostris* made a brief appearance. A pair of Large-billed Blue-Flycatchers *Cyornis banyumas* surprised us all, and due to their rarity in India, we marked them as only a possibility till experts later confirmed from our photographs. Pleased with our brilliant start, we returned to the long-house, packed our jeeps and started the slow climb to Mayodia Pass, which was to be our next halt. En route, we played the tape of the Mishmi Wren-Babbler at the different points given to us by Julian. We elicited no less than seven responses, but the bird never showed itself. However Yellow-throated *Alcippe cinerea* and Streak-throated Fulvetta *A. cinereiceps*, Sultan Tits *Melanochlora sultanea*, Streak-throated Barwings *Actinodura waldeni*, Streaked Spiderhunter *Arachnothera magna* and Dark-throated Rosefinch *Carpodacus nipalensis* kept us occupied. Perhaps the most interesting bird on this stretch was the very 'tit' like White-bellied "Yuhina" *Yuhina zantholeuca*, which now rejoices under the new name of White-bellied Erpornis *Erpornis zantholeuca* bestowed upon it by Pam Rasmussen. A few Striated Bulbuls *Pycnonotus striatus* also turned up on the road. By far the most gregarious bird in all our days in the hills was the Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* of the *nigrescens* race. Flocks containing up to a few hundred birds were not uncommon, and seen several times a day. A pair of yellow-throated martens *Martes flavigula* appeared suddenly and then disappeared with equal alacrity.

A quick lunch on a bridge added the two ubiquitous redstarts—the White-capped *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* and the Plumbeous *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*, while the Blue-fronted *Phoenicurus frontalis* remained the commonest redstart of the trip. By mid-afternoon we had reached Mayodia where our accommodation consisted of a so-called 'coffee-house'. It was actually a rest house with basic amenities, but there's an interesting story why it's called a 'coffee-house'. It seems the local government did not have funds for a full-fledged rest house but had some money under the head 'coffee-house'. So they built this structure and labeled it so. It's a different matter no one asked why a 'coffee-house' should be built in such a remote place where permanent population comprised just the *chowkidar* and his wife. Anyway, we were grateful to these far-sighted accountants, for it bestowed upon us a roof in this very cold and wind-blown pass. We spent the rest of the day birding locally, looking unsuccessfully for parrotbills (Panurinae) in the extensive bamboo brakes. Though Common Hill-Partridges *Arborophila torqueola* called regularly, much to our disappointment, we did not see any. A Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis* and a pair of displaying Eurasian Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* provided small compensation.

Leaving before dawn we had just crossed the pass when Sumit Sen, who had left his spectacles behind, exclaimed that he saw a flash of a white-tailed bird hurtle down the valley. As we stopped to search for this bird, Bill Harvey stated that there was a deer with a white tail on the road. It was only when we lifted our binoculars did it dawn on us that there was not one but two magnificent Sclater's Monals *Lophophorus sclateri*. We had great views of these spectacular giants, even if they were over 200 m across the valley. They are so seldom seen that almost no photographs exist of them in the wild. Little is known about them other than they are high-altitude birds and Mayodia pass is perhaps the lowest point where you can see them in this area. In 1998, the veteran birder Pratap Singh and R. Suresh Kumar had discovered a new subspecies of Sclater's Monal in western Arunachal. It had an all-white tail and was subsequently named *arunachalensis*. Our birds, with extensive

chestnut banding on the tail, could possibly be an intermediate variety between the nominate race and the white-tailed one. We await expert advice.

Chuffed by our success we continued birding down the road, but that day was to prove the leanest, with only few birds seen. This surprised us no end, for the habitat was verdant with little disturbance, but the only birds of any note where Red-headed *Garrulax erythrocephalus* and Black-faced *Garrulax affinis* Laughingthrushes. The commonest birds were Rufous-vented Yuhinas *Yuhina occipitalis*, which seemed to thrive at this point. Another cold night followed, and next morning we packed our bags and started a leisurely drive down to Hunli, seeing four species of yuhinas and two of fulvettas. A Bar-throated Minla *Minla strigula* and Mrs Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae* showed well. A fast-flying Chestnut Thrush *Turdus rubrocanus* was an added attraction and as usual the Black-throated Sunbirds *A. saturata* were the dominant nectar-feeders. A pair of Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* rode the thermals. The other raptors seen here were a displaying of Eurasian Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* and a few Black Eagles *Ictinaetus malayensis*. A possible sighting of a Vivid Niltava *Niltava vivida* caused momentary excitement, but sadly we could not confirm if it indeed was one or some other similar flycatcher.

Hunli is a small town with a pleasant circuit house where we were booked. But the local village headmen (*Gaon Buras*) decided to hold an unscheduled meeting there and occupied our rooms. With some persuasion we managed to retrieve two rooms and spent two comfortable nights in this not-so-cold town. Birding in the garden produced a flock of Common Green Magpies *Cissa chinensis* and a Brown-Flanked Bush-Warbler *Cettia fortipes*. The evening was spent in trying to use the only phone in town, curiously based in the local liquor shop.

The local authorities had warned us that we should not venture beyond Hunli as warring factions of the Idu Mishmi tribes had caused tension in the area. We were glad that we disregarded this advice -- for the next 20 kms proved to be the best birding of the trip. As we drove towards the Ithun River bridge, we were greeted by Slaty-backed *Enicurus schistaceus* and Black-backed *E. immaculatus* Forktails at every turn. A single Kaleej Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos* hesitantly crossed the road. We stopped to observe some unfamiliar looking White-crested Laughingthrushes *G. leucolophus* and chanced upon a very obliging Coral-billed Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus ferruginosus*, while the next tree produced a pair of Red-headed Trogons *Harpactes erythrocephalus*. We were rather surprised by the complete lack of woodpeckers, the only one hitherto seen was a lone Rufous *Celeus brachyurus* in the relative lowlands, and we were



The NE race of this widely distributed Himalayan pheasant has a black crest and belly and a white rump. Photographed this male Kaleej Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos* crossing the road late one evening in Mishmi Hills.

Photo: Kamini Sheerazoon

relieved to see a pair of Large Yellow-naped Woodpeckers *Picus flavinucha* high in the canopy, which also produced the lone Blue-eared Barbet *Megalaima australis* of the trip. Great Barbets *M. virens*, though, were plentiful and were seen and heard all the time.

At the river a fine male Hodgson's Redstart *Phoenicurus hodgsoni* and a Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii* added to the day's tally. Himalayan Swiftlets *Collocalia brevirostris* flew overhead and just as we were getting into our cars, a fly-past of eleven Wreathed Hornbills *Aceros undulatus* completed our joy.

Next morning we returned to this magical strip to add Grey-throated *Stachyris nigriceps* and Gold-headed *S. chrysaea* Babbler. Several Red-tailed Minlas *Minla ignotincta* and a single Red-faced Liochicla *Liocichla phoenicea* were seen well. Long-tailed Broadbills *Psarismomus dalhousiae* were always a pleasure to watch and Grey-bellied Tesia *Tesia cyaniventer* a much-prized catch. A fruiting tree produced a clutch of Golden-throated Barbets *M. franklinii* that afforded us a long and leisurely occasion to photograph them. Other birds seen on this stretch were Grey-sided Laughingthrushes *G. caerulatus* and over-flying Barred Cuckoo-Doves *Macropygia unchall*. A solitary Fairy Bluebird *Irena puella* flitted through the trees but Orange-bellied Leafbirds *Chloropsis hardwickii* were common and seen often.

The next morning we started our long drive back to Roing, replaying the wren-babbler tape at every suitable site. In the end, just as we were about to give up, a single bird responded to the tape recording and Bill Harvey was fortunate enough to see it, while the rest of us had to be content with a few Black-faced Flycatcher-Warblers *Abroscopus schisticeps*. It might be prudent to point out that while birding in the Mishmi Hills, keep a sharp lookout for a strange animal called the 'mithun'. A semi-domesticated bovine, it is a cross between a gaur *Bos gaurus* and domestic cattle. The more mithuns a Mishmi owns, the higher his status. It is used as bride-price and often, for barter. They are let loose to graze and can turn up at an awkward moment!

In the evening Mr Dhature Meuli, owner of several mithuns and a local politician-cum-businessman, arrived at the resort accompanied by his charming wife, Seppa, and a horde of relatives, servants, and children, and proceeded to cook a traditional Mishmi meal for us. This feast, consisting of several dishes, went on for many hours and was accompanied by the local rice brew that kept us happy but also a bit fuzzy the next morning.

Birding around the camp produced several Pygmy Wren-Babblers, both, the Lesser Racket-tailed *Dicrurus remifer* and Greater Racket-tailed *D. paradiseus* Drongos, and much to our delight, we managed to trace a noisy White-browed Piculet as well as its cousin the Speckled. A pair of hoolock gibbons hooting in the canopy rounded off a great morning—they are India's only ape, restricted to the north-east, and are highly endangered.

Bidding adieu to the Mishmi Hills we crossed the Lohit again, and on this occasion saw some Black Storks *Ciconia nigra*, a White-rumped Vulture *G. bengalensis*, a pair of Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus*, and few Pallas's Gulls *Larus ichthyaetus* on the river. A pair of Mallards *Anas platyrhynchos* sat on a far away island, as did a few Gadwalls *A. strepera*.

We had planned to make a very short visit to the Dibru-Saikowa National Park, near Tinsukia, but our ferry got stuck in the receding river and by the time we extricated ourselves and reached Benu's Camp at Guijan, it was almost dark. A quick boat-ride in the setting sun and the rising moon produced an Indian Short-toed Lark *Calandrella raytal*, and some fast flying ducks. Some felt a flock of Tufted Pochards *Aythya fuligula* could have contained a few Baer's Pochards *Aythya baeri*, but we could not confirm this with any certainty. Ducks seen included Common Teal *A. crecca*, Northern Pintail *A. acuta* and a few Ferruginous Pochards *Aythya nyroca*.

The banks of the Dibru River held Little Ringed *Charadrius dubius* and Lesser Sand Plovers *C. mongolus*, besides several Temminck's Stints *Calidris temminckii*. The sudden appearance of a Ganges River dolphin *Platanista gangetica* was a perfect end.

Promising to be back soon, we proceed to Dibrugarh, where we stayed at the luxurious, colonial and enchanting Mancotta Chang Bungalow run by the charming Manoj and Vineeta Jalan, who served us a most delicious meal that night. This bungalow, built on stilts, used to be the residence of the manager of the tea garden; the Jalans have restored it to its original colonial glory and run it as a hotel. If you ever happen to be in this part of the world, don't miss it. After days of roughing out in the wilds, we had a terrific sleep to the call of Spotted Owlets *Athene brama*.

Early next morning saw us at the nearby Jokai forest and, in the few hours that we spent there, we found several Small Niltavas *N. macgrigoriae*, Common Ioras *Aegithina tiphia*, a pair of Little Pied Flycatchers *Ficedula westermanni*, Black-winged *Coracina melaschistos* and Large *C. macei* Cuckoo-Shrikes and numerous Pompadour Green-Pigeons *Treron pompadora*. An Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica* walked nonchalantly on the path. The birds here are obviously well protected and were not shy at all. A visit to the Jokai forests is well recommended.

All in all it was a great trip to a largely unknown and understudied area. Though we did not see many of the species mentioned by King and Eaton, we still managed to spot many beauties such as Golden-headed Babbler, Rufous-bellied Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius rufiventer*, Streak-throated Fulvetta and the two species of Barwings. The star, of course, was the Sclater's Monal followed by the Large-billed Blue-Flycatcher. In hindsight, perhaps we should have kept a few more days in hand, including some for the enigmatic Dibru-Saikowa.

As we proceeded home, the words of Frank Kingdon-Ward rang in my mind, "Behind the mountain lies the garden of God."

Itinerary: 18–25 November 2007

Day 1: Arrive Dibrugarh Airport, Assam from Kolkata and proceed by road to Sikhowa Ghat on the banks of the Lohit River. 2 hour ferry crossing at Saikhowa Ghat and then by road to Roing, Lower Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh. Overnight at 'Dibang Valley Jungle Camp'.

Day 2: A.M. Birding around 'Dibang Valley Jungle Camp' thereafter proceeding by road to Mayodia Pass with birding on the way. Arrive Mayodia Pass area in the afternoon and overnight at 'Coffee-House', Mayodia.

Day 3: Full day birding around Mayodia Pass. Overnight at 'Coffee-House', Mayodia.

Day 4: Drive to Hunli with birding stops on the way. Afternoon drive to Itapani River area. Overnight at Hunli Circuit House.

Day 5: A.M. Birding around Itapani River and afternoon birding around Hunli. Overnight at Hunli Circuit House.

Day 6: Drive to Roing with birding stops on the way. Evening arrival at Roing. Overnight at 'Dibang Valley Jungle Camp'.

Day 7: A.M. Birding around 'Dibang Valley Jungle Camp' thereafter departure for Dibrugarh. Afternoon boat ride at Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. Overnight at 'Mancotta Chang Bungalow', Dibrugarh.

Day 8: A.M. Birding at Jokai Forest, Dibrugarh. Mid-day flight back to base.

– Sumit Sen