

# Mt. Saramati & Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary

18–22 May 2010

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Spot-breasted Parrotbill  
*Paradoxornis guttaticollis*

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We had tentatively planned to travel on to Mizoram (Murlen and/or Phangwphui) following the completion of our Nagaland trip. Fortunately or otherwise, it didn't quite work out due to logistical and other reasons, and we decided to explore some other unseen (by us) part of Nagaland. A region that immediately sprang to mind was Mt. Saramati (3,821 m) situated at the eastern edge of the state, where the verdant Naga Hills merge with the Patkai Hills of neighbouring Myanmar. Furthermore, these parts had been poorly, if ever, birded making it a likely location for long-unseen specialties—and we had specific laughingthrushes in mind.

We presumed that Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary (listed as an Important Bird Area), lying just north of Mt. Saramati would potentially be less plagued with hunting pressures as it is supposed to be a protected area—though such logic usually doesn't prevail in Nagaland. We discussed these plans with Bano and soon, after a flurry of calls, she had the whole trip organised. We wish we had someone like Bano in all these difficult-to-access north-eastern Indian states! So, as soon as the other members had left, we took off into the unknown.

It was extremely depressing and sad to observe such rampant killing (especially as we travelled further from Kohima), and the indiscriminate and absolutely conscience-less *jhum* cultivation across the entire stretch. The only consolation was that hunting didn't seem to be commercial (unlike in Dimapur, Kohima, Peren areas), as we didn't see any evidence of bush meat being

sold in local village markets. Entire hill slopes looked naked, freshly stripped by an evidently bustling timber trade in every village and settlement. These were scenes straight out of Brazil or Indonesia—irreversible and mindless destruction of primary evergreen jungle by slash-and-burn—the single biggest cause of global warming. The other consequences too were obvious—soil erosion, landslides, acute water scarcity (in summer, a bucket of non-potable water in Kohima costs Rs. 20), and the complete extermination of local wildlife. We are guilty of even trying to bring to notice the following exciting sightings to the birding community, fully aware that they have a limited timeframe before they disappear forever.

The closest village to access both Mt. Saramati and Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary is Pungro—a beautiful hamlet perched on top of a hill, a full 12–13 hr drive from Kohima (c. 300 km). This Kohima–Pungro drive is the 'hilliest' we have done in our lives, and we constantly climbed and descended one hill after another for the entire day, with never more than a 50 m straight stretch. The driver of our Scorpio, Sahil, who had been pulled down from faraway Dibrugarh in Assam for this special operation, demonstrated some fantastic mountain driving skills. By the end of the day as we were pulling into Kiphre, the district headquarters, to make final enquiries and arrangements, our stomachs churned like washing machines!

Outside of meal halts on this marathon drive, we made only one birding stop—with no more reason than to get out of the car



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**Pungro landscape is typical of much of Nagaland. June 2010**

in pure boredom—but were soon rewarded with two fantastic sightings. The first was of the seldom seen Burmese Shrike *Lanius colluriooides*, so far recorded in the country only as a rare winter visitor, and a few Striated Prinias *Prinia crinigera* in full song and disproportionately long tails, even by breeding-prinia standards. Thrilled with these birds and their images, we went back to the car and drifted into fitful sleep.

The route traversed almost half the entire length of the state, crossing the towns of Pfutsero, Longmatra, Meluri, and Kiphere, as well as Losami in Manipur, which had a delightful bustling market that offered Chinese-made essentials like army hats, clothing, knives, lanterns and, of course, dried barking deer *Muntiacus muntjak* meat, sold under a 'no hunting' signboard!

We reached Pungro as the sun was going down behind the seemingly unending Naga Hills. A lot of village elders had to be met (and many hands shaken) before a very fancy government 'guest house' was opened up for us. No one really knew which 'department' operated this and who we had to pay for it but it did have a full-time caretaker who could also cook—what more could we ask for!

We had two full days of birding ahead and on the first day we decided to visit Fakim WLS for reasons mentioned above. A two-hour and 26 km pre-dawn drive brought us to Fakim village (via Lithur and Pinkim)—the trailhead to the sanctuary accessible now onwards only by foot. Leaving the car, we soon started the extremely precipitous climb, and after a few kilometers were in superb cloud forest (reminiscent of Bompu in Eaglenest, Arunachal). We soon got Large Niltava *Niltava grandis*, 'Himalayan' Aberrant Bush-warbler *Cettia flavolivacea*, Bay Woodpecker *Blythipicus pyrrhotis*, Wedge-tailed Green-pigeon *Treron sphenurus*, Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus*, Rusty-capped- *Alcippe dubia*, and Rufous-winged- *A. castaneiceps* Fulvettas, Maroon Oriole *Oriolus traillii*, Ferruginous- *Muscicapa ferruginea*, and Slaty-blue- *Ficedula tricolor* (rufous-bellied ssp.) Flycatchers, Pygmy- *Pnoepyga pusilla*, and (the, by now,

ubiquitous) Naga Wren-babbler *Spelaeornis chocolatinus*. Just as we were walking away from superb views of the latter, the skies opened and we had to make a desperate scramble down the hill that was quickly turning into thick viscous gravy. Luckily before the rain turned profuse, we reached our car. Post a quick lunch in the village we left for Pungro. Luckily the weather turned around. The sun made a brief comeback and, in this surreal setting, we found a pair of singing Spot-breasted Parrotbills *Paradoxornis guttaticollis* flitting around in the grassy slopes just below Pinkim. It was gratifying to note the multiple locations of this rarity, after our group first reported it from Nagaland (near Benrue) in January of 2010.

On day two, Shashank came up with a counter-intuitive strategy of not trying to access the hard-to-reach slopes of Mt. Saramati, beyond Thanamir village (of which we had little information, especially on habitat and hunting) but to explore the degraded hill slopes next to Pungro town to attempt and find 'new' and exotic laughingthrushes. In retrospect, this was a brilliant decision, for in less than an hour of morning birding we had seen two very special laughers—Ashy- *Ianthocincla merulina*, and Spot-breasted- *S. merulina* Laughingthrush, both with patchy sighting records from India and SE Asia. What was interesting about the Ashy was its atypical laughingthrush behaviour, as it preferred pine branches in addition to the usual thick undergrowth in the degraded hills. We had three sightings of this bird hopping and feeding in conifer branches, at eye-level on the road. To see the bird multiple times out in the open was surprising given the number of guns going around in the outskirts of Pungro. Shashank was shocked out of his wits when he heard a gunshot that attempted to kill the very bird whose song he was recording. Luckily, the bird survived, but only to sit on another exposed perch. The future of this species, with its 'suicidal' tendency, seems grim. The Spot-breasted, on the other hand, behaved like a true laugher and more than made up for its brave and reckless cousin. It offered exactly three views in over an hour

of crawling in thick and damp leech-ridden undergrowth. We also got many Striated Prinias as well as an unexpected skulking Spot-throated Babbler in full song. At some point Shashank thought that he had had a brief look at a White-browed Laughingthrush *Dryonastes sannio*, but as the bird did not reveal itself again, we thought we left it as unconfirmed. Another interesting sighting was of a displaying Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis*. Usually this bird is found at altitudes below 900 m, but as we were above 1,500 m we were a little surprised.

Rain again hampered birding though we were happy to return to camp and witness an absolutely dramatic sunset—a daily feature in our three-day stay at Pungro.

Day three was the full-day drive back to Kohima from Pungro and we prepared ourselves for the ordeal with fully charged iPods and laptops. We got more views of the Ashy Laughingthrush outside town as well as a lone Slender-billed Oriole *Oriolus tenuirostris* foraging in pines, and then departed Pungro at sunrise. Just below Chomi village, about 17 km after Pungro, where spears replaced guns for some reason, we stopped to try and photograph some Striated Swallows *Hirundo striolata*. Giving up this exercise soon, I started clicking away at what appeared to be a flock of Silver-eared Mesias *Leiothrix argenteauris* going up a bush, not far from the road. Shashank was uncharacteristically speechless, and then asked rather sarcastically whether I was photographing the Yellow-throated Laughingthrushes *Dryonastes galbanus* he was watching through his binoculars. Adrenaline shot through both of us as they were indeed its nominate race—a bird never photographed before in India. We were absolutely thrilled and I quickly checked to confirm if I had got good enough images of this near mythical bird. A review of the photographs now reveal some variation from the illustrations in guidebooks—



Deer meat being sold openly on the way to Fakim WLS

for these birds seemed to have a blue patch behind the eye and a striking white vent (the books mention yellow).

Other birds we found on the otherwise uneventful drive back were Rufous-necked- *D. ruficollis*, and Greater-necklaced- *Garrulax pectoralis* Laughingthrushes, Grey-headed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*, Collared Treepie *Dendrocitta frontalis*, and Long-tailed Broadbills *Psarisomus dalhousiae*.

It is indeed ironic that the 'dense' Nagaland jungle contains precious little (the classic 'northeast empty forest syndrome'), while the degraded habitat holds some of the world's most exciting birds. These sightings can at best be only temporary—*jhum* and hunting will eventually exterminate them along with everything else. The unsustainability of *jhum* and hunting is so obvious that the state needs to immediately create inviolate spaces (like Khonoma and Dziilake valleys) where this rampant destruction is stopped entirely and immediately, before every hill and every valley turns silent.

#### While birding in Fakim WLS we found the Bella Rat Snake, the first record from India

