

In search of the Bugun Liocichla and other parables from Eaglenest: 28 February–8 March 2009¹

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At the end of 2008, at a birder's hug-fest in Bangalore, I had the pleasure of meeting Dr Ramana Athreya of whom I had heard much. He had not only found a new species of bird—the Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum* (of which more anon) but also had, almost single-handedly, converted Eaglenest into the hottest birding spot in India today. I had, over the last few years, read tantalizing reports of birders returning from this little-visited spot in western Arunachal, with names of birds like Ward's Trogon *Harpactes wardi*, Beautiful Nuthatch *Sitta formosa* and Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler *Xiphirhynchus superciliosus*, birds that I had dreamt of and reconciled not to seeing in this lifetime. I returned to Delhi and soon managed to erase Eaglenest from my mind. A few months later Ramki Sreenivasan and I were birding in the Sat Tal area of Kumaon, when he casually mentioned that he was going to Eaglenest in a few weeks' time and had made all the requisite arrangements and I was more than welcome to join him. All I had to do was to buy a ticket! He made it sound so simple. Without hesitation I nodded my head in affirmation and started reading up all I could find on the area, which incidentally wasn't a great deal.

The first thing I learnt was that it was simply called Eaglenest—not Eagle's Nest or even Eagles Nest. This 218 km² park was supposedly named after the 4th Indian Army division, which had a red eagle as its standard and which was posted in the area in the 1950s. I still don't know the veracity of this claim but it is a good story anyway. The second thing I learnt was that Eaglenest lay along an abandoned, but jeep-able track, that ran from approximately the Lama Camp 2,350 m through the highest point on the road at Eaglenest Pass 2,800 m (the official starting point of the sanctuary), then descended to Sunderview 2,465 m, Chakoo 2,405 m through the abandoned GREF camps at Bompu 1,940 m and Sessni 1,250 m, and finally down to Khellong 750 m in the plains. As can be seen from the relative heights, it covers a vast range of altitudes, and this is reflected in the changing habitats and, in turn, in its birdlife. The road has a rather interesting history. Till India's defeat in the war with China in 1961, this was the only road that connected the Tawang Monastery to lowland Assam. From Tawang, the road went over the Sela Pass before reaching Bomdila and then on to Tenga, before turning right and taking the route mentioned above, till it passed Khellong, and went on via Doimara and Missamari before hitting Assam near Balipara and Tezpur. It was on this road that the Dalai Lama fled, when he escaped the Chinese in March of 1959. He was weakened by dysentery and could not ride a horse as befitted his stature. Instead he had to be carried on a 'dzo', a hybrid between a yak and a cow and considered the lowest form of transportation. I wondered what he made of this evergreen forest, and did he tarry to admire the birds?

In due course of time the army constructed a new highway connecting Tenga to Bhalukpong, on its way to Tezpur, and our famous road fell into disuse and disrepair, which is probably why the forests on either side are still intact. A few years back the Border Roads Division revived a plan to convert it in to an all-weather highway and started blasting some cliffs to correct certain alignments. Luckily the Supreme Court intervened and the army pulled out, but not before destabilizing parts of the area, which are still prone to landslides during the rains. The road is now maintained by the Bugun tribe and used mostly by birders, bar an occasional thief or murderer fleeing the authorities!

Birders might consider Eaglenest a paradise, but in the eyes of the Forest Department, it is completely insignificant, and in the eight days we were there, we did not meet a single forest personnel, which might be a good thing in the long run! In fact, Eaglenest is, administratively, under the officer-in-charge of the Pakke Tiger Reserve, who sits in splendid isolation in far-away Seijusa. This forest is now effectively "looked-after" by members of the resident Bugun tribe and its elder, the splendidly named, Indi Glow. Ramana has fashioned things in such a manner that the Buguns are now stakeholders in the continued existence of the sanctuary. They run the birdwatching camps, generating income and therefore it is in their interest to stop traditional hunting, *jhoom* or shifting cultivation and to prevent the poaching of timber from these forests.

The area we were going to visit lies mostly in the districts of East Kameng, and West Kameng, which are located in western Arunachal Pradesh and are high in elevation. They are named after the fast flowing Kameng River (known downstream, in Assam, as the Jia Bhorelli), and which drains both the basins of Gori Chen and Kangto peaks and the Buddhist Monastery of Tawang. This region lies below the Himalayan watershed and borders Tibet in the north and Bhutan in the west. Eaglenest is contiguous with the Pakke Tiger Reserve and the Sessa Orchid Sanctuary and along with Nameri in Assam, forms the last great stretch of pristine forest left in India. If you add the adjoining Dirang-Tawang area, then you certainly have the greatest birding hotspot in India, comparable to any in the world. Luckily the pressures of human population are minimal here in Arunachal and this, along with its logistical isolation, has helped in its continuing existence.

So it was with great excitement that we all met at Kolkata airport on the last day of February 2009 to catch the red-eye flight to Guwahati. Ramki had arranged for us to be guided by Shashank Dalvi, who had helped Ramana document the fauna of Eaglenest. I had heard many good things about him, but when I espied this man-child through sleep-ridden eyes I was suddenly filled with doubt. How can this boy, barely out of his teens, lead us veterans, I asked Ramki, who just smiled back ominously. Never in my life have I been happier to be proved wrong, for this adolescent not only knows Eaglenest like the proverbial back-of-his-hand, I have never met anyone who knows bird-calls better. I strongly advocate that

¹ [Editors' Note: A slightly modified version of this article was earlier published on <http://www.kolkatabirds.com/hillbirdsofind/eaglenesttrip2009.htm>. We are grateful to the author as well as the owners of the website for permitting us to use this article.]

anyone venturing into Eaglenest should have him by his side. He will surely double the number of birds you will see. An uneventful hour later we were at Guwahati airport and made our acquaintance with the first of the several eccentric charmers who make a visit to Eaglenest so memorable. This was our driver, Gopal, who was to chauffeur us for the entire trip, through some rather treacherous stretches of mountain roads. Gopal spent the first day testing how far he could push us, but once he accepted that we were hard nuts to crack, he quickly fell into line and was pleasant and helpful for the rest of the trip. He was passionate about his mobile phone, on which he constantly played music, and often, simultaneously, games. He also knew every pretty woman on the stretch between Bhalukpong and Eaglenest. For some unknown reason he was re-christened "Gopley" by the end of the first evening and the name stuck, an occurrence he took with equanimity.

Our first stop was the rubbish dump, just west of Guwahati city. It is tucked away from the road, but soaring adjutants give away its location. The rubbish dump held two kinds of scavengers, the first were of the avian variety, with approximately one third of the world's population of Greater Adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius* present in this one place. The other was the human scavenger who sifted through the rubbish to salvage any thing that could be recycled. It was not a pleasant place and despite the plethora of both species of the stork (*L. dubius* and *L. javanicus*), we made a quick getaway as soon as Ramki declared him satisfied with the pictures he wanted.

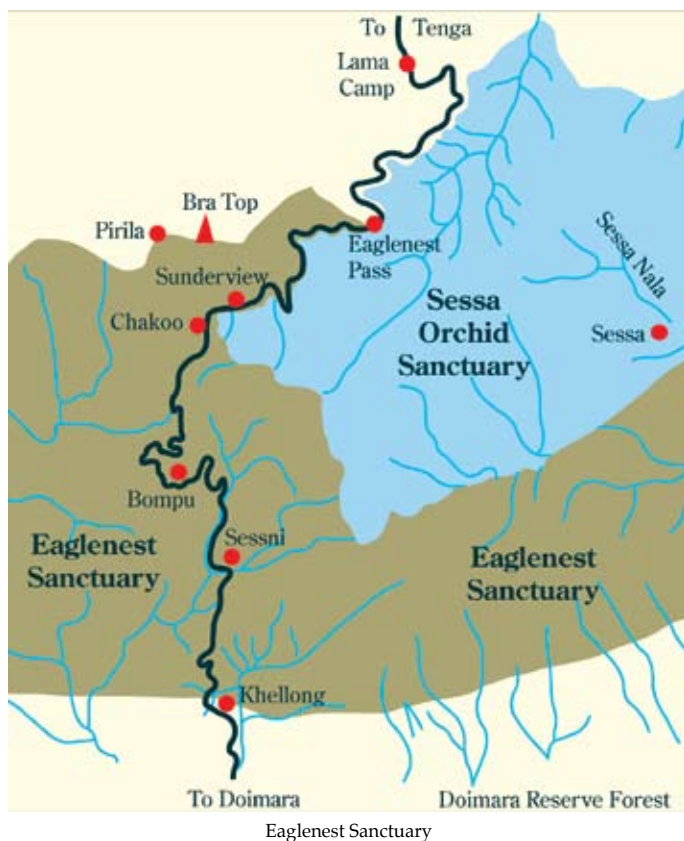
Shashank had arranged for us to have lunch at the Eco Camp, on the edge of Nameri National Park. Both Ramki and I had made earlier jaunts to this park, which is considered to be the last haunt of the White-winged Wood Duck *Cairina scutulata*. Ramki had managed six of them in one frame and I had seen none! Enough to turn anyone into an agnostic! On this occasion we had no time to give it another go, so had to be satisfied with the three Oriental Hobbies *Falco severus* that hang around the tall trees at the entrance

of the charming lodge. In between wolfing our lunch Ramki managed to get his photographer's itch out of the way by shooting Red-breasted Parakeets *Psittacula alexandri*, Hill Mynas *Gracula religiosa*, and Black-hooded Orioles *Oriolus xanthornus* that screech their way through the leafy compound. As we drove on we saw the eastern Indian specialties—the Black-billed Roller *Eurystomus orientalis* and the Black-headed Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach tricolor* sitting on telephone wires. It is also along this section that several hundred Amur Falcons *F. amurensis* congregate during their migration, making for a thrilling sight. Our next stop was Bhalukpong where we entered Arunachal Pradesh, after getting our permits checked by a desultory guard. We drove along the Kameng River, through the Pakke Tiger Reserve and then the Sessa Orchid Sanctuary. The forests on either side seemed so tempting and inviting but we had to move on if we were to reach Lama Camp at a sensible hour. The only time when Shashank allowed us to stop was when we got down to scan promising looking streams for that most elusive of kingfishers—Blyth's *Alcedo hercules*. We drew a blank on the first rivulet but at the second one, Shashank found a distant blue speck that was certainly not a Common Kingfisher *A. atthis*! It was far away and we looked at it for several minutes before finally declaring it to be a Blyth's. I wish we could have photographed it as proof (mostly for our sceptical friend Sumit Sen), but the terrain defeated even Ramki.

We moved on and reached, by dusk, the unattractive military cantonment town of Tenga, where we searched, unsuccessfully, for diesel, while Gopley renewed his acquaintance with the local beauties. We turned left here and almost immediately started climbing past the settlement of Ramalingam. It was very dark by now and I was worried that Gopley would doze and thus veer off the steep escarpment, and endeavored, with Shashank, to engage him in incessant banter. Suddenly the car's headlamps picked up a uniform rufous-coloured cat on the dirt-track, but it quickly scampered off, not before we saw a strong black tip at the end of its tail, which helped us confirm that it was indeed the seldom-seen and extremely rare Golden Cat *Pardofelis temminckii*. A good omen at the start of our trip.

We limped wearily into Lama Camp. It had been a long day and we were tired. We trooped into the dining room where a wood stove struggled weakly to emit heat. It was freezing and we were soon wearing all that we owned. I knew it was going to be bitterly freezing at night and took the precaution of dipping heavily into Scotland's finest malt—Dalmore. The fact that Shashank's surname shared the first three letters with the afore-mentioned tippie resulted in him being referred to as Mr Dalmore for the rest of the trip. We also got acquainted with another charmer, a person so small in age and size that he made Shashank look definitely middle-aged. It would be some years before his chin would make contact with one of Mr Gillette's inventions. He was called "Ugh-oo" and was to become our bottle-wash, general dogs body and occasional cook on our trip. We hungrily gulped our food and retired to our tents. The ever-willing and smiling staff had loaded our beds with additional blankets and put in hot-water bottles, but despite their concern I spent the night tossing and turning in the cold. Never before have I slept with gloves on! Sunrise came as a relief, and having had our mandatory cup of tea, we ventured out on to the road.

This stretch, around Lama Camp, is a traditional community forest belonging to the Buguns and consists mostly of degraded forest and some bamboo groves. Occasionally a magnolia tree, in full bloom, would make for an interesting break in the overall greenery. And these forests hid, for many long years, a secret that Ramana first glimpsed as early as January 1995. He saw a strange bird that he could not identify and whose description was missing from all books. Some suggested that it might be the Emei Shan Liocichla



Eaglenest Sanctuary

Liocichla omeiensis, but the closest one occurred a thousand miles away. In 2006, he managed to mist-net two specimens, with the forest department, and announced the discovery of a new bird to an astonished world. With tremendous generosity he called it the Bugun *Liocichla bugunorum* after the local tribe. I spent a great deal of my time in Eaglenest, wondering if I would have done the same, and at the end of my introspection declared, but only to myself, that I would have named it Mrs. Grewal's *Liocichla* for the sake of domestic harmony, and I felt much better at that thought!

This bird, after its startling discovery, has proved why it remained unknown for so long. Only a score of specimens have been seen since and all in this area—bar one. It was our endeavour to see it today, before descending to Bompou Camp, as Lama had been spoken for that night by a group of birders Ramana was bringing in. Our intrepid leader, Mr Dalmore, now bedecked in an assortment of apparel, started playing the call of the Bugun *Liocichla*. He had told us that it preferred being part of bird-armies and is seen most in the company of barwings. We stood on the road and looked below us. A single Blue Whistling Thrush *Myiophonus caeruleus* searched for food in the leaf litter and Beautiful Sibilas *Heterophasia pulchella*, the first of several hundred we saw, flitted from tree to tree. Striated Laughingthrushes *Garrulax striatus* were not uncommon and the recently-split Bhutan Laughingthrush *G. imbricatus* behaved exactly like its commoner cousins the Streaked Laughingthrush *G. lineatus* of northern India. We also kept an eye out for the Yellow-rumped Honeyguide *Indicator xanthonotus*, which has been seen in this area. But we got no sight of either the honeyguide or the *liocichla*—and returned reluctantly to camp for breakfast. I decided to take a walk along a small trail that led behind our tents, and was soon rewarded with a dazzling sight of a brilliantly-coloured male Rufous-Breasted Bush Robin *Tarsiger hyperythrus*, a bird that I had never seen before. I got quite excited and called to Ramki and by the end of the day we had seen two males and five females. We gave the newly discovered bird another go, with disappointing results, and finally packed our bags and departed, heartbroken, for newer pastures.

We rose steadily and were soon enveloped by heavy mist, taxing even the powers of the reliable Gopley. A small signpost announced that we were entering the portals of Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary and indeed the landscape changed immediately at the crest. Small to medium height bamboo now covered the wet earth and the icy wind stung our eyes. This inclemency notwithstanding, Shashank found a pair of Streak-breasted Scimitar Babblers *Pomatorhinus ruficollis* and soon Ramki and he were in hot pursuit. I, being slighter more worm-eaten, declined this chase, content with a gentler option, and was given an excellent view of a Grey-bellied Tesia *Tesia cyaniventris*. Ugh-oo and Gopley had, by now, got a crackling fire going in the middle of the road and were warming their fronts and bottoms alternately when I arrived and joined them. The enterprising duo returned with the news that they managed to photograph a Brown Parrotbill *Paradoxornis unicolor*, a rare bird, known to be found at this point. We descended slowly, stopping when Shashank heard a call. He would conjure up several strange sounds from his lips and more often than not they elicited some sort of response. If that failed he would fiddle with his tape recorder and play birdcalls. On one such occasion he called out a Bar-winged Wren-Babbler *Spelaornis troglodytoides*, one of nature's great skulkers. It was a thrilling moment! We saw this diminutive bird, relatively in the open, and Ramki even managed to get a perfectly good photograph. We walked on, flushing a nervy Ashy Wood-Pigeon *Columba pulchricollis*, but getting good views of a Collared Owllet *Glaucidium brodiei* and a roosting Grey Nightjar *Caprimulgus indicus*. Several times we disturbed flocks of Olive-backed Pipits *Anthus hodgsoni*, feeding on the road, and were pleasantly startled when a flock of about forty White-collared Blackbirds *Turdus albocinctus* suddenly

crossed the road in single file. There seems to be some dispute about which species of tragopans are found in the park, with the Temminck's *Tragopan temminckii* and Blyth's *T. blythii* being certain, but whether the Satyr *T. satyra* is found, is debatable. In any case we saw neither!

Our two primary targets on this stretch for the day were the enigmatic Ward's Trogon *Harpactes wardi* and the Beautiful Nuthatch *Sitta formosa*, but there was no sign of either. We saw single specimens of Black-faced *G. affinis* and Red-headed *G. erythrocephalus* Laughingthrush and towards the end of the day managed one each of Scaly *G. subunicolor* and Spotted *G. ocellatus* Laughingthrush, both of which were lifers for me. Talking of 'lifers', my fellow traveller counts his day by the number of "P-lifers" he gets. As you've guessed, it simply means how many new birds he has managed to photograph. Therefore our numbers never tallied, he trailing me, naturally, by a large score. This day he managed to do well with the yuhinas, getting the Whiskered *Yuhina flavicollis*, Stripe-throated *Y. gularis*, and Rufous-vented *Y. occipitalis*. He added the Yellow-throated Fulvetta *Alcippe cinerea* to his kitty and I think it was a happy Ramki who entered Bompou Camp that evening. Bompou, in the local vernacular, means bamboo and the camp is surrounded by tall groves. These are often inhabited by wild elephants and many trip reports talk of the occupants being kept awake all night by these giants. We had no such problem that night and were soon asleep in the slightly warmer conditions. Another reason for our peaceful sleep was the excellent dinner, prepared under difficult circumstances, by yet another charmer, simply called 'Chinese', on account of his ability to turn-up a good vegetable chowmein! Thus ended our first full day of birding. I had expected to see more birds, but their thinness on the ground was more than compensated by their uncommonness.

The day dawned bright and crisp and I instinctively knew that it would be a good one for us. While breakfast was being readied, we walked to a nearby knoll and Shashank picked up a call of a bird I had wanted to see all along, for a strange reason. The bird was a Broad-billed Warbler *Tickellia hodgsoni*, but its scientific name consisted of the two names of my favorite birders of yore—a certain Mr Samuel Tickell and Mr Brian Hodgson, both of whom played very significant roles in the history of Indian ornithology. Needless to say that when the bird finally showed itself, (looks superficially like a Mountain Tailorbird *Orthotomus cuculatus*), I was extremely pleased, which is more than I can say for Ramki who failed to get a p-lifer, though a Black-faced Warbler *Abroscopus schisticeps* was some compensation. Post-breakfast we started walking back towards Lama Camp, as Shashank wanted to call out another specialty of Eaglenest—the strange-looking Wedge-billed Babbler *Sphenocichla humei*. We played our tape at several suitable locations but failed to elicit a response. We were slightly luckier with its smaller sibling, the Rufous-throated Wren-Babbler *S. caudatus*, and actually had two specimens in our sights. We reached an area called 'Bhoot Kollai', an excellent bit of cloud forest, where Ramki, on a previous trip, had photographed a Ward's Trogon *Harpactes wardi*. We scanned what little we could see through the mist and just managed to get a fleeting glimpse of a high-flying pair of Ward's Trogon—a very unsatisfactory sighting. We searched for another 30 min and called it off. Now a dilemma presented itself to me, and I debated whether the sighting was good enough to qualify a tick in my well-thumbed guidebook. Technically I could, but I decided I would not, leaving this wonderful beauty on my wish list. The power of superstition! We moved on, bumping into Ramana, and his troop who too were looking for the same bird.

A pair of Darjeeling Woodpeckers *Dendrocopos darjellensis* cheered us up. We saw both the Rufous-gorgeted *Ficedula strophilata* and the White-gorgeted *F. monileger* Flycatchers in the same area.

A pair of Kaleej Pheasants *Lophura leucomelanos* scuttled across the road before Ramki could lift his camera. A single Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis* flew overhead, another unsatisfactory lifer. We had been hearing this bird all over but had failed to see it, so I was happy that at least I had managed some sort of a look. A Golden Babbler *Stachyris chrysaea* popped out and disappeared as quickly, but we did well with fulvetas, notching up the Golden-breasted Alcippe *chrysotis*, Yellow-throated *A. cinerea*, and the Rufous-winged *A. castaneiceps*. When we reached the abandoned camp at Chakoo, we decided to turn back. I had read somewhere that Chakoo was the remotest polling booth in India, with a total electorate of just three people. I tried to imagine a bureaucrat huffing and puffing his way here, with a chair and a table, awaiting these three worthies to turn up and exercise their franchise, and all along hoping that an errant elephant didn't cross his path.

We returned to Bhoot Kollai where our tapes brought an urgent response. We scrambled up the banks into the mossy forest and were immediately rewarded with extremely close views of a brilliant male Ward's Trogon *Harpactes wardi* and soon after, by another. The equally showy female, not to be outdone, appeared and flitted from branch to branch, posing for us. They would, as trogons often do, sit on a branch close by, but with their back to us as if oblivious of our presence. For over an hour they performed for us - hawking insects, leaving us spellbound.

That night I was woken up, from deep slumber, by the call of a Mountain Scops Owl *Otus spilocephalus*. The call was so loud that I reckoned it was within ten feet of me, and I quickly put on my torch to look for my slippers. The moment the light came on inside the tent, the owl went quiet, and I returned to bed. Within ten minutes it started again. This sequence was played out at least four times and finally I got out of my tent and heard the bird fly away in a *whirr* of wings. Till date I have never met a person who has actually seen this bird, and very few pictures exist.

Next morning I discussed with Shashank, that I was getting a bit worried that the so called "locally common" Beautiful Nuthatch *Sitta formosa* had not been seen yet and he assured me that no person had left Eaglenest without seeing this bird. I countered that I held many such records and was loathe to attach yet another to my name! He just smiled nonchalantly and so I kept quiet. We decided to give the wren-babblers a go, and strolled along to a nearby stream, which also was the water source for the Bompou camp. As Shashank looked for suitable places to play his calls, Ramki and I managed to see both the Slaty-backed *Enicurus schistaceus* and Spotted *E. maculatus* Forktails. Soon Shashank called for us and we scurried over just in time to get a fleeting glimpse of an Eye-browed Wren-babbler *Napothera epilepidota*. The diminutive Chestnut-headed Tesia *Tesia castaneocoronata* drove us completely insane by popping up at different places in a plot of damp shrubbery, but never long enough to get a good look. But it was to be a good day for the *Stachyris* babblers and we soon ticked Rufous-fronted *S. rufifrons*, Rufous-capped *S. ruficeps*, Golden *S. chrysaea*, and Grey-throated *S. nigriceps*. We did well too on fulvetas, including the first Nepal Alcippe *nipalensis* of the trip. So far we hadn't had a great time with the raptors, other than a Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* daily, but today's tally included a magnificent flying Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis* and the humbler Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*. Our attempts to find the Beautiful Nuthatches continued to be futile and we returned to camp for lunch.

We decided to chance our luck by descending towards Sessni and beyond. A good move, for almost the first bird we saw was the gorgeous Sultan Tit *Melanochlora sultanea* at eye-level, a dream species for Ramki. Other interesting birds included Grey-chinned Minivet *Pericrocotus solaris*, Large Woodshrike *Tephrodornis gularis* and Mountain Bulbul *Hypsipetes mccllellandii*. A little lower down a

Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus ferruginosus* showed for a few seconds in a mixed hunting flock consisting of Rusty-fronted *Actinodura egertoni* and Streak-throated *A. waldeni* Barwings, Bronzed *Dicrurus aeneus* and a Lesser Racket-tailed *D. remifer* Drongo but alas no sign of our nuthatches. A flowering Indian Coral tree, by the side of the road, played host to a single, extremely aggressive Streaked Spiderhunter *Arachnothera magna* that drove terror into the hearts of the Orange-bellied Leafbirds *Chloropsis hardwickii* and the much larger Long-tailed Sibia *Heterophasia picaoides*, who also vied for the spring nectar. Since the birds were intent on feeding and showed no fear of us, it allowed Ramki the freedom of taking out his large lens and tripod. The results, as expected, were spectacular. Soon we reached an area where the landscape opened up a bit, on either side, and my eyes fell upon a strange bird I had never seen before and which Shashank identified as Grey-headed Parrotbill *P. gularis*, a bird seldom reported from India. Much energized by this sighting we scanned the terrain and found a tangly bit of open ground from where a dozen or so Red-faced Liocichla *L. phoenicea* emerged, one after the other, but so fast that a salivating Ramki did not even have the time to react.

We moved on towards Khellong, seeing a pair of Wreathed Hornbills *Aceros undulatus* fly across the horizon. We managed to get telephone signals at a certain spot and rang our families and learnt about the dastardly attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Pakistan for the first time. We turned back and saw the first of the four male Red-headed Trogons *Harpactes erythrocephalus* of the day. A pair of Kaleej Pheasant suddenly crossed the road, taking Ramki by surprise. As we neared camp, we came upon a Large-tailed Nightjar *C. macrurus* next to the road, and managed to get within three feet of the bird, photographed it, and left it to its own devices. It had been a good day but still no Beautiful Nuthatch—true panic was setting in. Tonight was to be our last night at Bompou and tomorrow we would move to the lower camp at Sessni, technically too low for the nuthatch. Shashank was still optimistic, citing several occasions when he had espied this bird in lower elevations, and which by now, to me, had attained an almost a mythical status.

The day started well enough with an over-flying Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela* and then a pair of Rufous-necked Hornbills sitting in the open, though a trifle far. We were well camouflaged, so Ramki could take the liberty of using his larger lens and tripod. Shashank told me that you could decipher the age of this species of hornbill by the number of notches on its casque. I decided to believe him till someone proved otherwise! We walked on and suddenly came across a huge bird army crossing the road. Members whizzed past like miniature jet-fighters and by the time you picked up a bird in your binoculars, it had gone. I was so confused that I decided to use just my bare eyes and picked up a Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler *Xiphirhynchus superciliaris*, several Greater Rufous-headed Parrotbills *P. ruficeps* and Rufous-backed Sibia *Heterophasia annectans*. There were several other species in the group but I was too dazzled to figure out what they were—but now understand why the Arunachal bird armies have such an awesome reputation. I am sure there were some Beautiful Nuthatches and Cutias *Cutia nipalensis* in the flock but they escaped our collective attention. We stopped to recover our breath, when Shashank pointed out a dark-looking thrush. Ramki, who is always alert to such situations, turned his camera around and managed three quick shots. Instant replay showed it to be a Red-faced Liocichla *L. phoenicea* and Ramki's picture is the best I have ever seen of this master skulker. Another good bird we saw later was the Scarlet Finch *Haematospiza sipahi*, which stood out like a sore thumb in the greenery.

We drove down past the flowering tree with the resident spiderhunter, towards Khellong. I was very keen to go down to the Doimara River bridge, where we had a chance to see the White-

crowned Forktail *E. leschenaulti* and perhaps a Blyth's Kingfisher. And also the Pied Falconet *Microhierax melanoleucos*, which prefers this altitude, but a landslide halted our progress, and reluctantly we had to turn back. We decided to bird at this lower height and saw White-crested Laughingthrush *G. leucolophus*, Greater Yellownappe *Picus flavinucha* and Striated Bulbul *Pycnonotus striatus*. But no Beautiful Nuthatch. Next morning we said our goodbyes to Bompou and the smiling staff and drove slowly down.

A Barred Cuckoo-Dove *Macropygia unchall* twisted its way out through the branches when it saw us, but a pair of Mountain Imperial Pigeon *Ducula badia* thought that remaining still was a better way of defense, but they did not escape the eagle-eye of our guide and Ramki took some good pictures. A few Himalayan Swiftlets *Collocalia brevirostris* cruised the sky while a Golden-throated Barbet *Megalaima franklinii* was finally located for Ramki to photograph. A Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina melaschistos*, in the company of Rufous-backed Sibias *Heterophasia annectans*, brought temporary hope about the nuthatches, as they are usually accompanied by them in bird waves, but in this case the army had swept past and these were only the stragglers. Red-headed *G. erythrocephalus* and Striated *G. striatus* Laughingthrushes were seen, as was a single Black-eared Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius melanotis*. We saw both the Rusty-flanked *Certhia nipalensis* and the Brown-throated *C. discolor* Treecreepers. All in all a regular day, with a few good birds, but none of the stars revealed themselves.

Sessni literally means stinging nettle, and this pernicious weed surrounds the camp, but the real threat came from a small mite that rejoices under the name of Dam-Dim. Found at lower altitudes (I had first encountered it in the Mishmi Hills of Eastern Arunachal) their bite is so noxious that the afflicted area gets swollen and the bite itself starts suppurating. Needless to say, I was the only person to be attacked, and both my hands swelled and would not fit my gloves. I was miserable and the wounds remained infected well after I returned home. I did not sleep well that night, due to the pain, and told my companions that I would not join them for the pre-breakfast jaunt. While I awaited their return I took a little stroll and saw a perky Golden Bush Robin *Tarsiger chrysaeus* hop around, above our tents.

Today was a do-or-die day. We would drive all day, first heading down to Khellong and then turning around and traversing the entire length of Eaglenest before reaching Lama Camp. We packed out bags and hit the road keeping a sharp eye for any major bird movement. A Collared Owlet *Glaucidium brodiei* and a Red-headed Trogon *H. erythrocephalus* where the first birds we saw and finally a Slaty-blue Flycatcher *Ficedula tricolor* revealed itself. I was very keen to see a Pale-capped Woodpecker *Gecinulus grantia* and though we heard the Bay Blythipicus *pyrrhotis* a few times we saw neither of these rare and localised woodpeckers. We walked large distances and suddenly I screamed to my mates that I had a Black-headed Shrike-babbler *P. rufiventer* in my sights. It turned out to be a Rufous-backed Sibia *Heterophasia annectans* and what is more important a member of a large bird army. Shashank, clutching to this last straw, produced two Beautiful Nuthatches, which we saw very well. And as if on cue, a visibly relieved Ramana turned up and his group too had good views. Whew!

We turned around as we had a long way to go and the weather was not looking too promising. We stopped at a stream called Hathi Nullah, to scan for forketails when we saw a large family of small-clawed otters *Aonyx cinerea* and were totally flummoxed by this unexpected bonus. The rest of the day was almost a washout, due to the weather, and we drove fast to reach Lama before the clouds broke. Shashank was also expecting some friends of his to turn up that night. This charming couple from Mumbai, Mandar and Pallavi, ostensibly got married three days earlier, after a long

courtship, and decided to spend their honeymoon birding in the area. It seems they took this major step, as it was the only way their leave would be sanctioned. What people will do to birdwatch and it surely takes all sorts to make this world! In the event they turned out to be keen as mustard and obviously thrilled by their first trip to north-eastern India. Pallavi was an excellent cook to boot and supplemented Ugh-oo's efforts that night.

Next day was to be our last in Eaglenest and the entire day was to be devoted in quest of the Bugun Liocichla. Our newfound friends from Mumbai turned out to be excellent birders and we now had five pairs of eyes concentrating on the job at hand. We walked down from the camp to a point, where in the previous week, an all-girls birding group from Delhi had seen the bird. They were friends of mine, and I had exchanged gossip with them from the airport. They were disappointed that they had dipped on the trogon but had goodish views of the liocichla. I was convinced that my case would be the reverse. Ramki had seen and photographed this bird on his last trip but was as keen, nonetheless. We scanned the valley below us as we had done on the first day, turning up pretty much the same birds, but no sign of our star. We saw a huge truck overloaded with freshly cut bamboo emerge from the forest and we wondered if this was the beginning of the end?

An hour later we moved on to a dry streambed when suddenly a pair of birds emerged from somewhere and dived into a bush. We got a brief glimpse of the liocichla but was it good enough to merit a tick? Probably not. The newly-weds were busy ticking off all the new birds they were seeing and by lunchtime had amassed a healthy score. Reluctantly we returned for lunch and I philosophically paraphrased Mahatma Gandhi to Shashank as why the toil was more important than the reward. He wasn't impressed and became even more determined to give us a 'proper' view. Back down the road again, and more disappointments. A Himalayan Buzzard *Buteo buteo* of the *burmanicus* race was seen soaring and a Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler *P. ruficollis* swelled our friend's list. It started to turn dark and I was ready to sound the retreat, when a group of barwings hopped out and Shashank confidently declared that we would now see our elusive liocichla. He was absolutely correct, for a few seconds later a pair hopped out, posed for us for a second and disappeared. Mission successful. Shashank was declared a hero and we retired, tired but happy, to polish off the remnants of our dwindling stock.

So ended our fairy-tale sojourn in this fabled and blessed land and as I write this report a few weeks later, I have just heard that our hero Shashank Dalvi Esq. alias Mr Dalmore has since found four additional haunts of the Hodgson's Frogmouth! Any moment the phone will ring and Ramki will say, "We are all meeting tomorrow at Guwahati airport, at noon. See you there."



Photo: Ramki Sreenivasan

We encountered a flock of about fifty of these high-altitude White-collared Blackbirds *Turdus albocinctus* at the Eaglenest Pass (2,800 m). The birds were very shy and we had to photograph them from inside our jeep.