

Bhutan for the birdwatcher

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The mountain 'Kingdom of Bhutan' lies in the eastern Himalaya and is bounded on three sides by states of the Indian Union and on the north by China. "Druk Yul's" or the "Land of the Thunder Dragon's" historical isolation, its ancient Buddhist culture, and breathtaking pristine landscape makes it a unique, mysterious and unforgettable destination.

Landlocked Bhutan is a country of dense forest-clad hills, deep gorges through which flow fast mountain rivers, and high snow-capped mountains. The northern alpine borders with Tibet are lined with some of the most impressive and bleak peaks of the Himalaya with the Kula Gangri rising to 7,554 m. The southern portions along India are covered in dense evergreen tropical forests. From north to south flow the Torsa (Amo Chu), Raidak (Wang Chu), Sankosh (Mo Chu) and Manas (Dangme Chu) Rivers dissecting the country into several slices.

Bhutan is, perhaps, the last showpiece of the true 'Eastern Himalaya' and a tribute to the country's enlightened policy of co-existence with nature. It's primeval forests cover almost 65% of the land area of 47,000 km² and vary in altitude from 60 m to 7,550 m. This diverse geography results in a mix of subtropical broadleaf forests, coniferous forest and alpine meadows.

Such an amazing range of habitats makes Bhutan a place of immense ecological diversity where disparate bird communities can co-exist in harmony in discrete biotic units.

Although lacking any endemics, Bhutan's bird list tops 650 species, almost half of what has been recorded in the entire Indian Subcontinent. But we think that Bhutan is seriously under-birded, thanks to difficult terrain and the country's isolation. Many birds that are common a stone's throw away across the southern border with India are, as yet, unrecorded in Bhutan. Similar must be the case with Bhutan's northern borders. It is only a matter of time before these birds are observed and added to Bhutan's growing list.

Given Bhutan's natural diversity it is not surprising that the country is a key stronghold of such enigmatic birds like the White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*, Blyth's Kingfisher *Alcedo hercules*, Ward's Trogon *Harpactes wardii*, Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis*, Blood Pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus*, Satyr Tragopan *Tragopan satyra* and Wood Snipe *Gallinago nemoricola*. Many endangered mammal species like snow leopard *Uncia uncia*, clouded leopard *Neofelis nebulosa*, takin *Budorcas taxicolor*, tiger *Panthera tigris* and red panda *Ailurus fulgens* also find safety in Bhutan in the face of threats from all around.

Birding in Bhutan

The most popular way to bird in Bhutan for non-Indian and Bangladeshi tourists is to take a 'Group Highway Tour'. This type of trip is dictated by the following:

1. Tourism is restricted. Visitors must travel as part of a pre-arranged package or guided tour.
2. Tourists can enter into Bhutan at Paro airport or from Phuentsholing or Samdrup Jongkhar.

3. Bhutan charges a \$200 daily minimum tariff for foreign tourists visiting in a group of 3 persons.
4. Most of Bhutan is forested and there are few all weather motorable roads.
5. Much of the birding has to be done in 'Restricted Areas' requiring a 'Route Permit'. Deviations from the planned route are not allowed.
6. All visitors must have an official guide with them at all times.
7. Terrain, costs, culture, infrastructure, time constraints (usual visas are for 15 days) all recommend a planned and guided 'Group Highway Tour'.
8. Off road treks are specialized affairs needing much planning and several permissions.

[Note: Indian tourists have some flexibility and need not travel in groups or pay a daily minimum tariff.]

Birding circuit

Bhutan can be effectively divided into three sectors to facilitate description and developing birdwatching circuits. These are:

Western sector: western border to Pele La at 90°13'E.

Central sector: Pele La to Bumthang at 90°47'E.

Eastern sector: Bumthang to eastern border.

The full circuit usually starts at Paro and exits from the southern border at Samdrup Jongkhar. This usually takes 18–21 days to complete and is often packaged with a day at New Delhi and a couple in Assam and again in New Delhi at the end. Smaller tours are restricted to the 'Western sector' as they enter and exit from Paro.

Western sector: western border with India to Pele La

Paro region 2,300–4,100 m

- i) Paro–Drugyel Dzong–Jangothang 2,300–4,100 m.
- ii) Paro–Chele La–Ha Valley 2300–3,503–2,774 m.

The Paro Valley is relatively dry. Blue pines grow on the slopes but most of the valley is cultivated. The main birding is along the Pa Chu riverbed north of town.

Birding routes

- Drugyel Dzong–Jangothang 2,580–4,090 m: This alpine zone can be trekked over 8–9 days. Paro–Drugyel Dzong (13 km) is also bird-rich and can be easily 'done' from Paro.
- Paro–Chele La: Blue pine forests and higher up silver fir, spruce and hemlock. Be the first car up to get the birds on the road. Takes about one-and-a-half hours from Paro.
- Chele La–Ha Valley–Paro: A drive through good forests and farmland.

Thimphu–Punakha region 1,100–3,110 m

- i) Thimphu–Dochu La–Punakha 2,300–3,115–1,100 m.
- ii) Thimphu–Begana–Tango–Dodena 2,300–2,760 m.

Birding routes

- Thimpu Valley 2,300–2,700 m: Good birding sites around Begana and Cheri villages at 2,500 m. Sub-alpine, temperate broadleaf, evergreen, coniferous forests and shrubberies.
- Dodena 2,575 m: A 45 minutes' drive north from Thimpu. Area above Dodena, below Cheri Monastery, consists of oak forests.
- Dochula Pass 3,115 m: Good birding sites are found between 2,800 m and 2,000 m east of Dochula Pass. The mixed evergreen forest along the packhorse trail consists of fir, cypress, rhododendron, oak, and bamboo.

Punakha region 1,100–3,850 m**Birding routes**

- Punakha – Mo Chu Valley – Rimchu 1,100–1,700 m
 - Mo Chu Valley: The best area for birding is in the warm broadleaved subtropical forests between 1,300 m and 1,650 m along the Mo Chu River.
- Treks beyond Rimchu:
 - Rimchu–Trashithang–Damji: covers broadleaved and coniferous riverine forest with 1,700–2,430 m alt. This is a one-day trek.
 - Damji–Gasa: cool broadleaved forests, 2,430–2,770 m. A day's trek.
 - Gasa–Koina–Laya 2,770–3,200–3,850 m: cool broadleaved mixed forest. 3-day trek.

Pele La–Phobjikha Valley region, 1,300–3,410 m

Wangdue Phodrang–Pele La area: mixed conifer forests, rhododendron, bamboo meadows and river valleys.

Birding routes

Wangdue Phodrang–Gangtey–Phobjikha Valley, 1,300–3,050 m.

- Gangtey–Pele La: 3,000–3,410 m.

- Pele La 3,410 m: fir, rhododendron and bamboo forest. Recommended walk is downhill along the old abandoned road; cut through mixed broadleaved forests on the western slope of Pele La.
- Gangtey–Phobjikha Valley 3,000 m.
 - Phobjikha Valley: On the western slopes of the Black Mountains, Phobjikha is a valley. The road from Gangtey to Phobjikha is characterised by the dominance of very short dwarf bamboo.

Central Bhutan: from Pele La to Bumthang Valley

- Trongsa – Yutong La – Bumthang 2350 – 3520 – 2600m
- Trongsa – Shemgang 2350 – 500m
- Royal Manas National Park 60 – 500m.

Birding routes**Trongsa – Yutong La – Bumthang 2,350–3520 m**

- Trongsa Valley: This warm and sunny valley between 2,350–1,100 m consists mainly of terraced cultivation.
- Yutong La 3,520 m: This is the top birding area in this sector. This pass area is dominated by thick forests of Silver Fir, Rhododendron, Hemlock, pine and dwarf bamboo.
- Gatsa Valley 2,800 m: Boggy meadows
- Bumthang – Jakar 3,520–2,600 m: The riverbeds on the road hold birds in the shrubbery.
- Bumthang Valley 2,600 m: High-elevation agricultural fields and riverine valleys.

Trongsa–Shemgang 2,350–500 m

Area has subtropical forests around Tingtibi and impressive giant bamboo forests.

Royal Manas National Park 50–500 m

Shares the border with India's Manas Tiger Reserve and shares a similar habitat though the forests on the Bhutan side reach higher elevations. Best accessed from India.



Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis*

Eastern Bhutan: Bumthang Valley to eastern border with India

- i) Bumthang–Sengor–Namling–Yongkhala–Lingmithang 2,600–3,800–2,600–1,500 m.
- ii) Mongar–Trashigang–Narphung–Dewathang–Samdrup–Jongkhar 1,500–2,450–1,350–1,700–250 m.

Birding routes

Bumthang–Lingmithang 2,600–3,800–1,500 m

Spectacular road after crossing Trumshingla Pass down to Lingmithang. The habitat quickly changes from conifers to subtropical forest as you drive down. The broadleaf evergreen forest commences at 2,600 m. A few exit trails into the forest can be found at 2,500 m near a mountain ridge. The road between 2,600 and 1,500 m is the most productive.

- Sengor to Namling 3,050–2,360 m: Passes over Trumshingla Pass (3,800 m) and consists of cool broadleaved forests with Hemlock stands.
- Namling to Yongkala 2,360–1,700 m: Mixed cool and warm broadleaf forests dominate this stretch.
- Yongkala to Lingmethang 1,700–650 m: An area supporting warm broadleaf forests towards the south.
- Lingmithang 750–1,500 m: This is considered on of Asia's best birding stretches. Area has dry subtropical ravine forests with Chir Pine and scrubby valleys.

Mongar – Samdrup-Jongkhar 1,500–2,450–250 m

The Trashingang province is very densely populated and the hills are under intensive cultivation.

- Mongar–Trashingang 1,500–1,350 m: Temperate broadleaved forests.
- Narphang La to Deothang 1,700–850 m: Warm broadleaf subtropical forests
- Deothang area 1,100–200 m. Good habitat consisting of warm broadleaf and subtropical forests.
- Deothang - Samdrup Jongkhar 850–250 m: Subtropical forest at the border with India. Samdrup-Jongkhar is the usual exit point for a cross-country birding tour starting from Paro or Phuntsholing.

Travel to Bhutan:

A. Indian travellers

- 1) Entry into Bhutan can be either by land or by air. Druk Air, the national air carrier of the Kingdom, operates regular flights to / from Paro to Delhi, Kolkata, Kathmandu and Bangkok. By land, entry into Bhutan is possible through southern border town of Phuentsholing and Samdrup Jongkhar.
- 2) Entry permit: Indian nationals travelling between Bhutan and India do not need visa. An identity document, be it either passport or an election commission I.D. card is, however, required for presentation at immigration during entry, to obtain an entry permit.
- 3) Route permit: required for those travelling to restricted areas beyond Dochula pass. The route permit is processed and issued in Thimphu only after arrival in Bhutan and on production of the entry permit. This permit can be processed only during working days (Monday–Friday).
- 4) The Indian Rupee is accepted all over Bhutan. It is advisable not to carry Rs. 500/- and Rs. 1,000/- denomination currency notes, as they are not usually accepted. Very few establishments accept credit cards and there are no ATM's for tourists.

B. Other travellers

- 1) Independent travel is not permitted in Bhutan. Visitors are

required to book travel through a registered tour operator in Bhutan.

- 2) A minimum daily tariff is set by the Bhutanese Department of Tourism. The rate includes all accommodations, all meals, transportation, services of licensed guides and porters, and cultural programs where and when available.
- 3) A valid passport and visa are required for entry into and exit from Bhutan. Visas must be applied for at least 15 days in advance and are stamped at point of entry. Druk Air will board only travelers with visa clearance from the Tourism Authority of Bhutan.
- 4) Route permits as in A3 above apply.

[Disclaimer: Information provided here is on a best effort basis and may not be accurate. Please check with relevant authorities or your travel agent for correct updated information.]

Useful facts and figures

Area: 47,000 km².

Climate: Tropical in plains, cool winters in central valleys and severe winters with cool summers at higher elevations. max/min: Thimpu 25°C / (-)2.5°C; Punakha 32°C / 4.2°C Credit Cards / ATM's: Amex & Visa are accepted in some establishments. No ATM.

Currency: Ngultrum (Nu) and is pegged with Indian Rupee which is also accepted.

Electricity: A/C 220/50 (volts/hz). Most major towns have electricity.

Food: Rice, buckwheat, cheese and meat are staples.

Language: Dzongkha. English is also used / understood.

Literacy: 60%.

Population: 600,000.

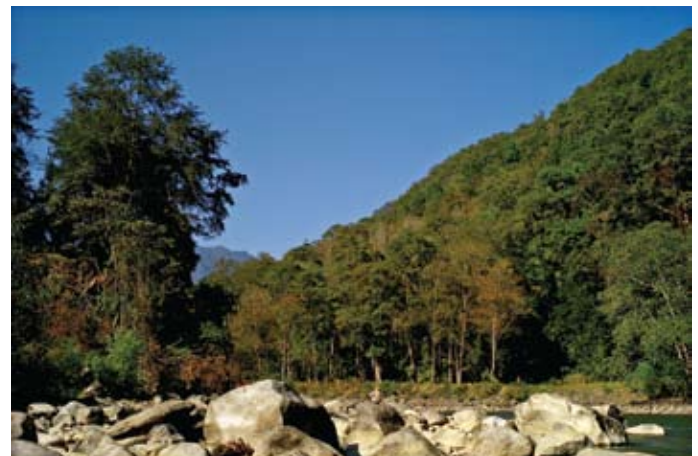
Religion: Drukpa Kagyu, a school of Mahayana Buddhism

Telephone: Country code +975; Cell phones work. Limited Internet facilities.

Time: GMT/UTC +6.

Further reading

- Ali, S., Biswas, B. & Ripley, S. D. 1996. *Birds of Bhutan*. 1 ed. Director, Z. S. I. (ed.) Calcutta: Zoological Survey of India.
- Inskipp, C., Inskipp, T. & Grimmett, R. 1999. *Birds of Bhutan*. 1st ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Various trip reports on the Internet.



Cheri valley

Ramki Sreenivasan