

Eaglenest

22 March–6 April 2011

Participants

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White-winged Duck

Day 1: The departure from London Gatwick was on time and our transfer in Dubai went smoothly. Unfortunately, after boarding the plane there was a technical issue, which resulted in a two-hour delay so we arrived in Delhi two hours behind schedule.

Day 2: The delay in the group's international flight arrival in Delhi made it unlikely that we would make our domestic connection to Guwahati. Fortunately we were able to get a message through to Leio from Dubai and he was able to arrange enough seats for us on a later flight and the only inconvenience we had to endure was a few extra hours at the airport. Our domestic flight departed on time with everyone tired but raring to go as we began the journey to India's northeast, where we would spend the following two weeks focusing on Kaziranga and Nameri National Parks, both lowland reserves in the Brahmaputra basin in the state of Assam, and Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary in the eastern Himalayas in the mountainous border state of Arunachal Pradesh. We arrived in Guwahati, the Assamese capital, around midday to find our four jeeps waiting patiently for us with packed lunches to keep us going as we set out to find the first birds of the tour along the road to Kaziranga. Our first stop was the Guwahati garbage dump just outside the airport, and although not the most pleasant of sights or smells this proved to be an excellent site for one of the regions primary specialities, Greater Adjutant. An endangered species, the Greater Adjutant is now restricted almost entirely to the Assam valley, and here were around a hundred probing the garbage alongside Lesser Adjutants, countless Cattle Egrets, and the pitiable community of rag-pickers, including some children smaller than the storks, who make a meagre living from other peoples cast-offs. A cloud of Black and Black-eared Kites circled overhead. The remainder of our first day was spent mostly in transit and we arrived at Wild Grass, our lodge at Kaziranga in central Assam that was to be our base for the next four nights, by evening for a very welcome rest after a long and tiring day.

Day 3: Eager to make the most of our first morning at Kaziranga we rose early, and, after tea and coffee, were out at 06.00 and making our way to Kohora, otherwise known as the central range, in open jeeps. We reached the park even before the gates were opened to visitors, so spent some time birding around the entrance where we saw Asian Openbill, a

flock of 50+ Bar-headed Geese, and Shikra overhead. Our plan for the early hours was to take a ride on elephant back through the grasslands primarily in search of Bengal Florican, an endangered species. As we waited to transfer onto our adult elephants the mischievous young ones accompanying their mothers kept us entertained, with one hunting for the biscuits in our pockets with its trunk! As our elephants spread out and trundled slowly through the grass we found ourselves among herds of Spotted, Swamp, and Hog Deer. We had exceptionally close views of the first of many Indian One-horned Rhinoceros, and although we were to be unlucky with the florican we did see Striated Babbler, Bengal Bushlark and Oriental Skylark, and heard but could not locate the Swamp Francolin calling from within the grass. After a packed breakfast back at our jeeps, during which we enjoyed close views of Sulphur-bellied Warbler and Taiga Flycatcher, we began the drive through the central range to explore the vast grasslands, intermittent wetland and pockets of mature woodland. As we stopped at a watchtower to scan the marshes a female Bengal Florican flew straight towards us. Before everyone in the group could get onto the bird however it dropped down into the grass, so we waited until it took flight again, this time landing in the roadside grass just out of sight behind our last vehicle. As our jeeps began to reverse slowly back the florican flushed again and we were rewarded with exceptional flight views of this magnificent bird. In the mosaic of habitats we found a good selection of birds, including Indian and Greater Spotted Eagles, Spot-billed Pelican, Oriental Darter, Grey and Purple Herons, 10 Black-necked Storks, Black-headed Ibis, Red Collared-dove, Yellow-footed Pigeon and Hair-crested Drongo, plus close views of Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, before making our way back to Wild Grass for lunch where Crimson Sunbird, Oriental White-eye and Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker were seen in the lodge grounds. After lunch we took off in our jeeps to drive through the Baghori or western range. We had a few new additions to our morning's birdlist, notably Great Hornbill, Western Marsh-harrier, Hen Harrier, seven Slender-billed Vultures (the only ones of the tour) and close views of Red Junglefowl. A real bonus was in store for us when we came across a Tiger feeding from the carcass of an Asiatic Wild Buffalo it had killed earlier – this kept us captivated for the rest of the afternoon and we watched as the Tiger was repeatedly harassed by a couple of Rhinos. Our delicious dinner back at Wild Grass was accompanied by a heavy thunderstorm that continued into the night.

Day 4: This morning was thankfully dry although cloudy and damp, and humid as a result. After breakfast we drove on to Kaziranga's Agaratoli or eastern range, enjoying good views of Stork-billed Kingfisher as our entry permits were issued. On entering the range we were immediately granted excellent views of an exquisite male Pied Harrier as it scoured the grasslands, and as we waited for it to take flight again from behind a bund just out of view we found our first Spotted Owlet, as well as Alexandrine, Red-breasted and Rosy-headed Parakeets, Black-throated Thrush, and White-vented Myna amongst other mynas and starlings feeding in a silk cotton tree. Further into the drive we also saw Oriental Pied Hornbill, Kalij Pheasant, and Blue-tailed Bee-eater, and picked out a good selection of waterbirds including Indian Spot-billed Duck, Garganey, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Little Grebe, Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Northern and Grey-headed Lapwings, Wood and Marsh Sandpipers and Woolly-necked Stork in the vast wetlands. After lunch we headed back to the central range to focus on grassland species, and despite the overcast and windy conditions found a good selection of birds including Chestnut-capped and Yellow-eyed Babblers, Striated Grassbird, Zitting Cisticola, Rosy Pipit, and Swamp Francolin, as well as Grey-headed Fish-eagle and Eurasian Griffon, returning to Wild Grass before the thunderstorm set in.

Day 5: The state of Assam produces most of India's tea, and despite their disastrous effect on the region's native vegetation the intermittent scrub among the tea estates provides suitable remnant habitat for a good variety of birds. Although overcast we were determined to make the most of our time despite the bad weather and set out early to take a walk into the tea gardens. We had barely entered the plantation before the sky opened and in the downpour were left with no choice but to turn back, taking shelter in a cowshed until the rain subsided. After breakfast back at Wild Grass we returned to the central range, this time driving further along the trail and into a patch of woodland. This proved to be a very successful morning, with Black-breasted Weaver, Green-billed Malkoha, Blue-throated and Lineated Barbets, Grey-faced Woodpecker Oriental Honey-buzzard and Crested Serpent-eagle all being seen. The star bird of the morning was without a doubt Blue-naped Pitta; its skulking behavior made it hard to track in the undergrowth however good views were eventually had by most of the group. After lunch we returned to the central range to take advantage of the morning's activity, which we hoped would continue into the afternoon, and allowing some group members to catch up on species missed. We were not disappointed adding Green Imperial-pigeon, Oriental Turtle-dove, Emerald Dove, Grey-faced Woodpecker, Black-rumped Flameback, Abbott's, Spot-throated and Puff-throated Babblers and White-rumped Shama to our day's list. After spending some more time on the pitta, which we found in the same place as this morning, it was already dusk as we made our way to the park gates. The front jeeps in our convoy had a fleeting glimpse of a Large-tailed Nightjar as it flew from its perch, while our exit was further delayed by a pair of Rhinos that refused to be moved from the jeep track.

Day 6: This was to be our final day in Kaziranga, and early morning took us back to the tea plantations flanking the reserve. Our day began with great views of a Siberian Rubythroat that popped up to sit on top of the tea plants, and under the growing warmth of the sun we added Rufous-bellied Eagle, Pied Falconet, Dusky Warbler, Stripe-breasted Woodpecker, Greater Necklaced and Rufous-necked Laughingthrushes, the latter in a large flock of 25+ White-browed Scimitar-babblers, Blue Rock-thrush and a Daurian Redstart for some as it emerged briefly from within the tea plants. After breakfast we set out on the long drive up to Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, stopping only for roadside repairs to a flat tyre in one of our jeeps, and to eat our packed lunches in Bhalukpong at the state border while our permits were checked before beginning our climb into the foothills of the eastern Himalayas. As we drove further into the hills the landscape soon began to change, and we found ourselves on narrow un-tarred jeep tracks with hairpin bends flanked by enticing forests. We arrived at Lama Camp, just outside the northern boundary of Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary in the evening, where at 2350m the weather was again ominously overcast and drizzly and the temperature markedly different to that of Kaziranga! We settled in, changed into some warm clothes and made ourselves comfortable in the dining hall to enjoy a delicious dinner cooked up by our camp staff, before heading to bed in our tents with hot water bottles to keep out the cold.

Day 7: Being considerably further east than much of the rest of India, the sun rises over the northeastern hill states a good while before it hits the rest of the country. Since all of India follows Indian Standard Time this means some early mornings for birders wishing to make the most of the most productive hours of the day! Our first full day at Eaglenest dawned cloudy and overcast, obscuring our view of the Gori-Chen Mountains that mark the border of India and Tibet. Our first birds were a few Olive-backed Pipits perched on an electricity wire in front of the dining area. After a quick cup of tea, coffee and biscuits we set out in search of our first Himalayan species, walking downhill along the road from Lama Camp towards Tenga. Our main target was the recently discovered Bugun Liocichla, known almost exclusively from the area surrounding the camp. As we concentrated on searching for this demonstrably elusive bird, which trails roving flocks of barwings, we enjoyed good views of some of Eaglenest's more common inhabitants, including Grey Bushchat, Black-throated and Green-backed Tits, White-tailed Nuthatch, Great Barbet, Himalayan Bluetail, Grey-winged Blackbird and the usual profusion of Beautiful Sibias. After a roadside breakfast of eggs, hot porridge, pancakes with bananas, tea and coffee we continued our walk downhill in improving weather. New birds here included Scarlet Finch, Ashy and Striated Bulbuls, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Chestnut-tailed and Red-tailed Minlas, Rufous-headed Parrotbill, Bay Woodpecker, Golden Bush-robin, Himalayan Cutia, White-browed Shrike-babbler, Chestnut-crowned and Grey-cheeked Warblers and a small group of Ashy Wood-pigeons flying overhead. During the afternoon we again headed downslope and frantic pockets of activity in the forest provided views of, most notably, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Striated, Rufous-vented and Stripe-throated Yuhinas, Crimson-breasted and Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers, Striated and Grey-sided Laughingthrushes, White-spectacled and Ashy-throated Warblers, Brownish-flanked Bush-warbler, Rufous-breasted Accentor, around 15 Tibetan Siskins and Yellow-cheeked Tit. As we were trying to keep pace with the fast-moving bird waves a single Bugun Liocichla called above the road, so we spread out to track its movement along the cliff face amongst a flock of barwings moving through the understorey. A second bird replied from below the track and eventually, to our delight, came out into the open in the roadside bushes, providing everyone exceptional views of this established skulker and its distinguishing yellow loreal spots.

Day 8: Having spent two nights at Lama Camp today we were to move southwest to our next camp at Sunderview, which lies on the opposite side of Eaglenest ridge within the sanctuary proper at 2450m, and after a late (07.30!) breakfast we left Lama Camp. Driving along the jeep track towards Eaglenest Pass we stopped for a small mixed flock but could not get onto anything of note before the fog thickened and the drizzle set in. Deciding to drive on we came across a single Spotted Nutcracker perched at the top of a dead tree before arriving at Eaglenest Pass, which at an elevation of 2780m is the highest point we would climb to during the tour. As we reached the pass the weather deteriorated, so we continued towards Sunderview, stopping for another excellent roadside lunch. In patchy showers we spent the rest of the day around Sunderview, following the jeep track and forest trails through the old, moss-draped broadleaved forest, with some good birds coming out for us where the weather brightened. Key birds today included Himalayan Swiftlet, Little Forktail in a mountain stream, Plain-backed Thrush, Chestnut-crowned, Spotted and White-throated Laughingthrushes, Rufous-capped Babbler, Golden-breasted and Ludlow's Fulvettas, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Fire-tailed and Green-tailed Sunbirds, Crimson-browed Finch, Yellow-bellied and White-throated Fantails, and Short-billed Minivet, with excellent views of Darjeeling Woodpecker and a stunning male Ward's Trogon, one of three of these typically elusive birds calling from a patch of forest. Back at Sunderview we were greeted with hot tea, coffee, and Aubergine pakoras followed by another delicious dinner before settling into our tents with our hot water bottles, anticipating adding a good number of new birds the following day as we explored the bird-rich mid-altitudes of Eaglenest below Sunderview.

Day 9: After a hot breakfast we headed downhill in our jeeps towards Bompu at 1940m, from where we would continue slowly down to Sessni at 1255m, exploring the sub-tropical forests and bamboo brakes of these lower elevations. We spent the day walking along the track with our vehicles following behind and with the weather on our side birding was exhilarating, exhausting, and ultimately rewarding as we tracked down many new species, including Black Eagle, Golden-throated Barbet, the only Speckled Piculet of the tour, Grey-chinned Minivet, Mountain Bulbul, Pygmy Blue-flycatcher, White-gorgeted Flycatchers, Small Niltava, Golden Babbler, Blue-winged Minla, Yellow-throated Fulvetta, Rufous-backed and Long-tailed Sibias, White-naped Yuhina, Sultan Tit, Beautiful Nuthatch, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Black-throated Sunbird, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Brown Bullfinch, Long-tailed Broadbill, Black-headed Shrike-babbler, Coral-billed Scimitar-babbler, and Long-billed Wren-babbler, while both Spotted and Wedge-billed Wren-babblers were heard calling in the scrub but stubbornly refused to emerge.

Day 10: This morning we returned to Sessni, aiming to add some species that we had missed the previous day. As we drove lower the rain set in yet again but we braved the weather and got to work sorting through the itinerant bird waves, noting Silver-eared Mesia, White-bellied Yuhina, Hoary-throated Barwing, Red-headed Trogon, Black-faced, Pale-rumped and Grey-hooded Warblers, Bar-tailed Treecreeper, Streaked Spiderhunter, Scarlet Finch, Maroon Oriole, Greater Yellow-nape, Bronzed and Lesser Racket-tailed Drongos, and a group of eight White-crested Laughingthrushes as well as Mountain Imperial-pigeon, Rufous-necked Hornbill and Rufous-throated Partridge and a single Himalayan Civet spotted by Vaughan. This night was scheduled to be spent at Sunderview, however with no improvement in the weather conditions on this side of Eaglenest Ridge we made the decision to head back to Lama Camp where the weather had been more conducive to birding (and the tents a little more cosy!), and where we could catch up with some of the species more commonly seen on the northern side of the ridge. The weather deteriorated further as we set out, with thick fog reducing visibility to a few yards making our journey slow and birding practically impossible, so we drove straight to Lama Camp and spent the evening around the welcome warmth of the fire.

Day 11: With this being our last day within Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary we decided to split our day to cover a range of elevations, spending the morning above Lama Camp and at Eaglenest Pass, followed by an afternoon spent birding the road below the camp. Our first new bird of the day, Gold-billed Magpie, was seen from the camp itself before we made our way to Eaglenest Pass. The weather here was barely better than the day before, but we made the most of our last chance of birding here and after a rough walk we saw Brown Parrotbill and Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler before the fog set in again. We returned to our jeeps to find our drivers huddled around a fire, so we all joined them, enjoying a warming cup of tea or coffee and biscuits. We persevered, and as the fog eventually thinned we hung around the Rhododendron flowers hoping for one of the most secretive inhabitants of this region that had so far eluded us. It was not long before a bird was spotted flying across the track, and as it moved from plant to plant feeding on the flowers great views were had by all of the bird we were waiting for, the striking Fire-tailed Myzornis. With this bird on our list we returned to the camp, adding a small flock of Red Crossbills as we enjoyed our lunch. The weather cleared up during our walk downhill but activity was subdued, although we did manage to see a good selection of species of which Golden-spectacled Warbler, Gold-naped Finch, Streaked, Scaly, and Black-faced Laughingthrushes, and Pygmy Wren-babbler were the most notable new additions, before returning to Lama Camp where we added Grey Nightjar in the fading light. Our plan for the following morning had been to leave early to spend the morning travelling down to Nameri National Park. However, on hearing news of a general strike in Assam (called by separatist parties protesting the visit of the Indian Prime Minister on a campaigning visit in the run-up to elections) scheduled for the following day, which would close all roads in the state from 06.00 until 18.00, we were forced to change the plans for our journey. We would now need to depart Lama Camp at midnight, getting us to Nameri at the break of dawn before the strike was enforced, so an early dinner was arranged followed by an early night to catch a few hours of sleep.

Day 12: We set out in the dark for a memorable drive from Lama Camp down through the foothills and back into the Assamese plains to Nameri through yet more heavy rain that turned the roads into rivers and made the journey slow. When we reached Bhalukpong the interstate border was still closed for the night but after a short wait we continued to Nameri, arriving at Eco-Camp (and the nearby Jia Bhorelli Wild Resort that would accommodate some of our group) half-asleep yet ready for a good breakfast and some new birds. With everyone tired after the sleepless night we spent most of the day around the grounds of Eco-Camp and along the track through the roadside scrub down to the Jia Bhorelli River, in search of the more common species of Nameri to which we would not be able to dedicate time in the coming days. A Brown Hawk-owl was found roosting in the camp grounds, while good views of Oriental Hobby and Pied Falconet were had by some of the group before our break for lunch, during which everyone took the chance of a warm shower in warm weather after the cold conditions of Eaglenest! Other notable birds of the day included Ruddy Shelduck, Small Pratincole, River Lapwing, Asian Koel, Asian Drongo-cuckoo, Silver-backed and Brown-backed Needletails,

Nepal Martin, 20+ Wreathed Hornbills, Greater Flameback, Long-tailed Minivet, Black Redstart, Blyth's Reed-warbler, Tickell's Leaf-warbler, and Asian Pied Starling.

Day 13: Refreshed after the comfortable night in the warmer climate of the lowlands, we woke at 05.30 to find the skies cloudy but fortunately dry. We were to spend the day within the sanctuary with a picnic lunch, so after breakfast we drove the few minutes along the jeep track down to the banks of the Jia Bhorelli River, which we crossed in a rowboat to enter Nameri National Park on foot. Nameri occupies the stretch of wilderness extending along the opposite bank to the foothills of the eastern Himalayas and the border of Assam with Arunachal Pradesh. The Jia Bhorelli itself has been an important line of defense in the preservation of Nameri, and as we crossed the river the complete lack of forest on its west bank stood in stark contrast to the mature swamp forest of the reserve awaiting us on the eastern side. There is no vehicular access into Nameri, and while this means that the inner ranges of the park are out of reach it does allow thorough exploration of the outer edges on foot with an armed guard, something that is rarely permitted in India's reserves. We spent the day exploring Nameri's various habitats, from the Jia Bhorelli with its stony banks and sandbars, through the forest and scrub fringing the river and deeper into the forest and open marshy grasslands hidden within, detouring off track to scan the series of secluded forest pools for one of our main targets, White-winged Duck, a highly endangered species and one of Nameri's flagship birds. Notable birds of a productive day included Great Thick-knee, Sand Lark, Cinnamon Bittern, Lesser Coucal, Orange-headed Thrush, Barred Cuckoo-dove, Indian Cuckoo, Dollarbird, Black-crested Bulbul, Rufous Woodpecker, Lesser Yellownappe, Wedge-tailed and Pin-tailed Pigeons, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Pale Blue-flycatcher, Striped Tit-babbler, Velvet-fronted and Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches, Common Rosefinch and a good selection of raptors including Mountain and Changeable Hawk-eagles, while some of the group had a glimpse of a single White-winged Duck that flushed as we approached one of the forest pools.

Day 14: Our last morning at Nameri took us back into the park after an early breakfast with our first priority being better views of White-winged Duck and Pied Falconet, which had both been missed by some of the group. We made our way down to the river, across in the rowboat and headed straight to the secluded forest pool, making our way through the undergrowth as quietly as possible. The single bird present in the pond amongst the reeds allowed us excellent views and some good photographs before it flew off, clearly exhibiting its white wing panel in flight. Satisfied with the duck we made our way through the forest and open grassland to a watchtower, adding a group of 20+ Thick-billed Pigeons, Plaintive and Grey-bellied Cuckoos and White-throated Bulbul before making our way back to the river and to Eco-Camp for lunch. After lunch we had planned a rafting trip in search of Ibisbill, which winter in good numbers along the Jia Bhorelli. Although by this time of year they have already begun to leave the lowlands there were still reports of a small number of birds present on the river and we took the chance to try for them. We climbed into our jeeps for the 30-minute drive upstream, before transferring into our two-man rubber dinghies; each steered by two oarsmen sitting at the rear. From here we floated, by and large sedately, down the Jia Bhorelli for around two hours, until we arrived back at the riverbank adjacent to Eco-Camp, from where we had been crossing the river to access the reserve. We were unsuccessful with the Ibisbill, but other notable birds along the river included Great Crested Grebe, Great Cormorant, Striated Heron, Fulvous Whistling-duck, Kentish Plover, Plumbeous Redstart, and Eurasian Thick-knee, with Black-shouldered Kite, Crested Goshawk, Osprey, and Pallas's Fish-eagle overhead, before we returned for our final night in Assam.

Day 15: With a long drive to take us back to Guwahati airport we left Nameri early to avoid any more flight mishaps! The drive was uneventful, stopping only for yet another flat tyre and a traffic jam as we neared Guwahati, which gave us the chance to eat our packed lunch. With our return flight to Delhi departing as scheduled we had ample time for a wash, welcome rest, and our last dinner as a group in Delhi.

Day 16: Morning transfer back to New Delhi airport for our uneventful return flight back to London via Dubai with memories of many superb birds in India's most ornithologically-rich region.