

NORTHEAST INDIA – ASSAM, ARUNACHAL PRADESH + DELHI

12 February – 2 March 2017

We met with our travelling companion David at Heathrow, and after a coffee and chat, we boarded our plane for a smooth flight to Delhi, but due to delays were too late to take a trip to Sultanpur – this would have to wait until our penultimate day.

We settled into our hotel, and after lunch, Merv and David decided to take a walk up the road, but I was keen to take a rest. They had quite a productive trip with **Red-collared Dove, Bank Mynah, Common Mynah, Eastern Large-billed Crow, Chiffchaff, White-throated Kingfisher** and **Eastern Orphean Warbler**

The following morning we took an internal flight to Dibrugah in Assam and were met by our guide, Sudesh and Padam our driver. We were driven to Tinsukia where we would spend the night. The drive was interesting, passing many tea gardens and remote railway stations with people and animals just wandering along the tracks. Fields produced grazing cattle, accompanied by **Cattle Egrets**. We also saw a **Grey-backed Shrike** and **Red-vented Bulbul** on a wire.

We got to our hotel, and looking out from the window we could see the town was very busy - the streets lined with shops, people milling around and the usual mixture of cars, vans, tuk-tuks, bicycle rickshaws, motorbikes and cycles all vying for space.



View from our hotel room, Tinsukia

We had a nice lunch then set off through the busy streets to do some birding at Borajan. It was lovely to be walking by a wooded area. Birds were a bit sparse, but spotted were **Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Spangled** (or hairy-crested) **Drongo** and a **Red-whiskered Bulbul**. A treat was to see a small group of **Assamese Macaques**. It was now very gloomy so we set off for our hotel at 1715.

The next morning we loaded up our things and left at 0600 for the long drive to Namdapha National Park. We stopped at a service station for fuel and in the next field was **an Indian Pond Heron, White Wagtail** and **Magpie Chat**. We had breakfast near a tea plantation and whilst there saw **Jungle Mynah, Golden-fronted Barbet** and **Streaked Spiderhunter**. En-route to Miao a **Himalayan Buzzard** gave good views.

We got to the border entry post to Arunachal Pradesh where we had to wait for our papers to be checked – everything done at the usual slow pace. As we waited we spotted **Pied Starling, Tree Sparrow** and **White-vented Mynah**.

Once in Namdapha, we drove for a while over the typically rough roads and then got out to do some birding. We found some good birds too: **Indian Roller, Black-backed Forktail, Green-billed Malkoha, Ashy Bulbul, Sultan Tit, Scarlet Minivet, Ashy Drongo, Blue-winged Minla** and **Silver-eared Mesia**. By a waterfall we saw the lovely **Slaty-backed Forktail** and **White-capped Water Redstart**.

After a long, bumpy drive we arrived at the Deban Rest House which was basic, but very peaceful.



Deban Guest House

We had lunch and a short rest afterwards. Merv and David decided to have a walk towards the river (a tributary of the Brahmaputra). I stayed in the room to catch up on my log when suddenly Sudesh came rushing in "Gibbons, quick!". I grabbed my bins and rushed out and there in the nearby trees were male and female **Hoolock Gibbons**! Females are a light tan colour and the male almost black with striking white eyebrows.



Hoolock Gibbon

David and Merv returned and told us they had seen a **Crested Kingfisher** and several **Black Storks**.

After that excitement, we went for a walk along some local tracks with lovely views of the river and mountains beyond. We were accompanied by Japang, who would be our companion and guide during our time at Namdapha.

We walked for about two hours and found some good birds along the way: **Pied Falconet, Black Bulbul, White-throated Bulbul, Rufous Woodpecker, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Blue-eared Barbet, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch** and **Striated Yuhina**. A lovely sight was of 13 **Wreathed Hornbills** flying over.

We walked along a very muddy patch where the prints of a **leopard** could be seen – fairly recent too, according to Japang. Further birds were the near-endemic **Rufous-throated Fulvetta, Great Barbet, Grey-headed Parrotbill, Whiskered Yuhina** and **Black-chinned Yuhina**.

We returned to Deban and had the first of our very civilized 'tea-time' breaks with tea and sometimes biscuits sometimes delicious home-made Indian savouries. We would be setting off for our trek through the forest tomorrow and were amazed to be told that our luggage,

along with the tents and provisions would be taken to the camps by 7 porters, 2 elephants, 4 mahouts and 2 cooks – rather unexpected for just 4 of us! We also would be trekking all day, so we weren't quite sure what to expect. Back to our room, with lights out fairly early and the alarm set for 0500.

The next day dawned bright and cool with Sudesh trying to organise everyone for the day ahead. We eventually set off at 0615 spotting a **Blue Whistling Thrush** in the gardens. We went towards the river and crossed a very rickety bridge made of a few bamboo poles lashed together.



The Bamboo Bridge

We scanned for Ibisbill without success, but did spot **Little** and **Great Cormorants**, a couple of **Barn Swallows** and a **Siberian Stonechat**. We now had to climb up a steep type of stepladder to enter the forest, after which came a steep and stony track.

We were now in Namdapha forest proper which was a real treat – no roads, no people just the sound of birds and in the distance the calls of the gibbons. Of course, we were looking for the birds and came across **Yellow-bellied Fantail**, **Long-tailed Sibia**, **Greater-necklaced Laughingthrush**, **Red-tailed Minla**, **Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo**, **Chestnut-rumped Warbler** and **Buff-barred Warbler**. Through the trees we could see **Asian Palm Swifts** and **Himalayan Swiftlets** flying overhead. The forest was lovely; large trees of many types, creepers and strangler figs together with a variety of ferns, mosses, lichens and plants.

We continued along the tracks, most of which seemed to be going uphill rather than down – but we were going at a leisurely pace which was good. More nice birds came along: **Pin-striped Tit-babbler**, **Slaty-bellied Tesia**, **Hill Mynah**, **Rufous-necked Hornbill**, **Beautiful Sibia** (not that beautiful) **Lesser Yellow-naped Woodpecker**, **Black-winged Cuckoo-shrike**, **Yellow-bellied Warbler** and **Maroon Oriole**

After lunch in a small forest hut, we set off and started to look for birds. The ones found were **Small Niltava**, **White-bellied Epornis**, **Ashy-fronted Warbler**, **Grey-cheeked Warbler**, **Short-billed Minivet** and the lovely **Red-headed Trogon**.



Transporting some of our 'stuff' to camp

We reached Hornbill Camp, where the tents had been very efficiently erected by the porters and we settled into our tent. I was pleased to see the toilet tent was within easy reach!

We had a quick walk before dinner with no birds seen but a nice **Himalayan Orange-bellied Squirrel**. After dinner Sudesh arranged for us to try and see Hodgson's Frogmouth. Unfortunately, no Frogmouth, but the night sky was absolutely beautiful with the stars bright and clear.

Merv and David were chatting and I was back in the tent writing up my log, about to turn in when Merv came dashing in "Quick, there's a flying squirrel out here – bring your bins". Of course, I dashed out to find Japang shining his powerful torch on the surrounding trees. We were amazed to see a total of four **Namdapha Flying Squirrels**, with one 'flying' between the trees. We watched these attractive animals for some time and then at 2200 decided it was time for bed.



Namdapha Flying Squirrel

The next day we left Hornbill Camp at 0600 and started seeing birds fairly quickly: **Large Cuckoo Shrike, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Chestnut-crowned Warbler, Golden-fronted Leafbird** and **Rufous-backed Sibia**.

As we carried on, we could hear gibbons, and Japang pointed them out in a nearby tree. To our delight not only was there a dark-coloured male, but a female with two youngsters! They gazed at us curiously and then took off through the trees stopping occasionally to look at us – a wonderful sight.



Female Hoolock Gibbon and Youngster

Carrying on after the excitement, we found **Bronzed Drongo, Nepal Fulvetta, White-bellied Epornis** and **Great Hornbill, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo** and **Ashy Wood Pigeon** were good spots. We also came across the tracks of wild Forest Elephants, so it is good to know they are around.

We sat by a bamboo area and saw a **Grey Peacock Pheasant, White-tailed Nuthatch** and the lovely **Himalayan Cutia**. Almost immediately down the track came 'our' elephants accompanied by a few of the porters. It seems absolutely amazing that these huge animals can travel along such small tracks and leave hardly any signs of being there.

We reached Rani Jheel camp where tea and snacks were waiting for us. We had a short walk before dinner and turned in fairly early, tired after all the walking.



Setting up Camp, Rani Jheel

We left Rani Jheel the next morning and set off for our final camp, Firmbase. Our first stop was an area to try for Blue-naped Pitta, but sadly no luck. It was very quiet, and although a lovely day to enjoy the forest and views over the valley and hills beyond, there was a distinct lack of birds.

As usual, Sudesh persevered and we did find the attractive **Golden Babbler** and the beautifully-coloured **Long-tailed Broadbill**. A large tree produced a good flock including **Grey-throated Babbler**. We came to a patch of bamboo and spent quite some time looking for **Snowy-throated Babbler** and **White-hooded Babbler**. Thankfully, both were seen eventually, although this took some effort. Some **Greater Rufous-headed Parrotbills** were also seen

It was now very hot, and we continued slowly towards the camp which came as quite a surprise. Three permanent buildings (Rangers' accommodation when they are in residence) and a washroom and toilet. There was also a nice little viewing tower for our use.



Some of our porters enjoying a well-earned rest

We set off again in the afternoon, and although still very warm, we headed towards the river. By a dry river-bed we found a **Yellow-bellied Prinia** in some tall grass. Walking was hard going over stones, mini boulders and rocks, so lots of concentration needed.

We reached the river eventually, which was lovely – clear and fast-flowing in parts. A **Striated Heron** flew up nearby and Merv and David found a **Common Sandpiper**. I noticed some paw prints in a patch of wet sand, and was delighted to be told by Japang they were the prints of a Fishing Cat – wow! Little chance of seeing one, but great to know they are around.



Fishing Cat Paw Prints by River Noadhing

We sat around for ages, hoping to see the White-bellied Heron, but no luck, so we headed back to the Camp. We headed back to our tent after dinner, and the temperature had dropped significantly, so we wrapped up in our thermals before turning in.

The next morning following a lovely breakfast of porridge and pancakes, we set off for a walk to the bamboo area and started looking for birds. This proved to be the best morning so far, with new species for all of us. **Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbills, Red-billed Scimitar Babbler (after much calling and searching) Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, Pale-headed Woodpecker, Fulvous-headed Woodpecker, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Collared Treepie, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon** – quite a haul!

We moved further up the path and settled down for a bit of a stake-out. Here we found **Black-headed Shrike Babbler, White-throated Fantail, Grey Treepie** and **Pale-chinned Flycatcher**. All these took a significant amount of work and patience, but we were delighted with the sightings. Feeling pleased, we headed back towards the camp for lunch. Just as we entered the camp area, a flock of at least 18 **Rufous-vented Laughingthrushes** flew out from a large clump of grass.

After lunch, I had a little rest, and about an hour later I was called out to see a **Black-throated Thrush** in the tree opposite our tent. We were also treated to an attractive **Stripe-breasted Woodpecker** on an opposite tree. In the meantime, one of the porters came to show us a huge moth he had found. We carefully put it in on a leaf on the roof of our tent and it had vanished shortly afterwards.



Huge moth, Firmbase Camp

We then set off for another trek to the river. We saw no new birds which was disappointing, so headed back to camp for dinner.



Beautiful sunset over Firmbase Camp

Up at the usual time, and the sunrise was so beautiful; lighting up the forest and the distant mountains where the Snow Leopards can be found. Today we would be heading back up the ridge to Hornbill Camp, missing out Rani Jheel. We did have a break at the bamboo clearing area where we saw **Red-naped Laughingthrush, Imperial Mountain Pigeon and Black-throated Sunbird**. Luckily, we did have several stops to draw our breath, and I have to say the views from the top of the ridge were wonderful. We came across a **Greater Yellowname** and a **Himalayan Giant Squirrel** in a far tree.

We had lunch and then it was still an upwards climb, but after an hour or so, the trail levelled out somewhat, much to everyone's relief. Along the way we came across a **Black-winged Cuckoo Shrike** and the best views ever of the **Beautiful Nuthatch** – a bird that really lives up to its name.



Beautiful Nuthatch, Namdapha NP

We passed Rani Jheel, and as the trail got easier, we jauntily reached Hornbill Camp where tea and biscuits were waiting. After dinner, we returned wearily to our tent and were ready for bed after the day's exertions.

We had rain and lightning during the night and it was still raining when we left the camp the next day, so we made sure we had our waterproofs on just in case. We set out for our journey to Deban, but as it was so wet and murky, there weren't many birds about. However, we did come across a pair of **Brown Hornbills** and a **Pin-tailed Green Pigeon**. The jaunty little Yellow-bellied Fantails seemed unconcerned by the downpour.



Yellow-bellied Fantail, Namdapha NP

The rain had now worsened from a minor shower to a downpour. We soldiered on through the dripping forest, the trails becoming ever more slippery. We walked on, as quickly as we could, stopping briefly to look at a pair of **Slaty Woodpeckers**, but the rain was now so heavy it was difficult to see anything through our bins. Eventually we came to the wooden ladder leading down towards Deban.

Once back at Deban we were given water for a shower before lunch, which was very welcome, and tried to arrange our clothing to dry although some hope of that given the fact that the rain was still bucketing down. In the meantime, Sudesh had gone to the little lookout point to try and spot Ibisbill, but without luck, but did see a **Verditer Flycatcher** land on a bush.

We knew this was the last time we would see many of the porters and mahouts, so we gave them our grateful thanks along with their tips.

We had lunch and as the rain was still heavy, birding was out for the time being. Merv, David and I did to and stand on the lookout point for a while, and did see **Ibisbill** by some stones in the river but it was very murky and visibility not great. A **Grey-backed Shrike** also landed close by.

A very windy night, but not too disturbed, thankfully. We met up at 0530 for birding, but it soon became evident the weather was against us. The rain started up, varying between light showers and heavy and persistent. We did manage to see a few birds between the showers, and to our surprise there were a few little flocks about. A nice **Black-throated Sunbird** was feeding upside down and a lovely **Little Pied Flycatcher** was nearby as was a **Ferruginous Flycatcher**. I noticed some hirundines overhead and Sudesh identified them as **Nepal House Martins**.

Over breakfast, we were told that there would be a delay setting off due to the weather. It appeared there was an issue with the road, as a truck which was supposed to be here an hour ago, hasn't arrived. We therefore lounged around and got our luggage ready for loading. Just then, the heavens opened – real monsoon stuff! In the meantime, Japang went on his motorbike to the Rangers' station to see if they had any idea what had happened with the road – thankfully, they have radio contact with Miao as there is no mobile 'phone signal here.

Japang returned to tell us that a huge Banyan Tree had come down blocking the road, so no vehicles could get in or out. Amazingly, the Forest Rangers don't possess a chainsaw or any other heavy equipment. We were just finishing our lunch when we were told that Sudesh had arranged to get another driver and vehicle from Miao; he would meet us the other side of the tree, we would drive down and transfer ourselves and our luggage from our present vehicle to the new one. We were now worried as to whether the replacement vehicle would get through at all, and if it did it would be a lot later than expected.

However, at 1530 Sudesh came to tell us we were leaving. We loaded up and he drove our vehicle to where the tree had fallen. To say the road had deteriorated was an understatement – if it was rough before it was now grim. Deep mud and deep water along the narrow road, made for a very hairy – albeit short – trip.

We got to the obstacle and could see what had happened. The tree had broken in half due to the high winds, and was at a 45° angle across the road, meaning a motorcycle or person could get through, but not a vehicle. It was now pouring with rain, but we got ourselves and our luggage into the vehicle with our new driver, Raju. Padam would stay behind with his vehicle and re-join us later when the road was clear.

We set off, with Raju doing a superb job getting us safely to Miao for us to complete signing out of Arunachal Pradesh at the police station. We then went to Japang's house, where we were made welcome with tea and cake and we met his two very polite sons.

After giving him his well-deserved tips, we said our fond farewells and set off for Tinsukia, arriving at 2115. A late dinner then bed.

We left Tinsukia early the next day, and on the outskirts Sudesh saw two **Spotted Owlets** in a tree at the side of the road – lovely little birds. A **Rufous Treepie** also flew over.

We drove through the towns of Domdooa and Talap and just outside the latter found a good colony of **Indian Fruit Bats** roosting in a large tree. In a field a little further on it was good to see 7 **Lesser Adjutant Storks**. We had a challenging journey, as many of the roads were impassable due to the heavy rain, so we had to make several detours.

We came out of Assam and once more entered Arunachal Pradesh. We got to our hotel in Roing in the pouring rain. There was a power cut in the whole town, not surprising given the storms.

We drove to Sally Lake in the afternoon, and were joined by Gunga from the local Naga-Mishmi tribe. The only new bird of the day spotted by David was a **White-crowned Forktail**. It was now raining so we went back to the hotel for a welcome meal.

There was no rain the next morning, and a break in the clouds signalled a much better day ahead. We were brought coffee in our room, and set off early to explore a grassland area.



Main Street, Roing

Once at the grassland, we were joined by Ravi, a local guide. The first birds were **Ruddy Shelduck** flying over and then the bird of the trip so far for me appeared through the tall grasses – the lovely **Black-breasted Parrotbill** which showed amazingly well. We were trying hard for the birds, but as most were real 'skulkers' it wasn't easy. However, **Grey-breasted Prinia**, **Yellow-bellied Prinia** and **Green-backed Tit** were found.

It was now very hot and sunny as we had breakfast. We set off again seeing **Common Iora**, **Rufous-capped Babbler**, **Rufous-fronted Babbler**, **Paddyfield Warbler** and the lovely **Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroat**. As it was so hot we decided to drive back, with a **Changeable Hawk Eagle** being seen en-route

After lunch we returned to Sally Lake where some good birds were seen: **Yellow-vented Warbler**, **White-spectacled Warbler**, **Blue-winged Minla**, **Crimson Sunbird**, **Black-eared Shrike Babbler**, **Common Kingfisher**, **Rufous-vented Warbler**, **Whistler's Warbler**, **Common Tailorbird**, **White-rumped Munia** and the lovely **Daurian Redstart**.

Sudesh decided we would drive a little further up the road and try again for the Frogmouth. At the first stop, we saw a **Green Imperial Pigeon**, but no Frogmouth. There were also some **Pipistrelle-type bats** flying around.

We tried another three places for Frogmouth and we didn't see it, but did at least hear it at last. It was now very dark and cold so we set off for Roing.

The following day saw us packed and away at 0600 for our next stage of the trip. We stopped at Sally Lake on the way, to see what birds were around. It was a good idea, as we saw **Chestnut-bellied Rockthrush, Asian Barred Owlet, Collared Treepie, Magpie Robin, Himalayan Bluetail, Emerald Dove** and **Banded Bay Cuckoo**.

We left the lake and set off for the long journey to Mayodia, stopping at various places to try for birds. The views over the river floodplain were spectacular, stretching into the distance. Our first stop produced **Blue Rock Thrush** by a bridge, where **Ibisbill** was also seen. **Black-chinned Warbler** and **Grey-chinned Leaf Warblers** were next, along with **White-naped Yuhina** and **Rusty-fronted Barwing**. A nice **Striated Bulbul** was also seen.

After lunch at a little settlement called Tiwarigaon, we had a walk around and found **Little Bunting, Olive-backed Pipit** and **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker**. A **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** flew over our heads into the nearby trees. By a leaking water pipe we saw a **Spotted Forktail**.

Sudesh had tried a couple of times for **Manipur Wedge-billed Babbler** without luck, but we settled down by a likely looking patch to try again. It took ages, but after much perseverance we eventually saw it – phew!

We were now climbing higher and higher up the road which wound around the hillside, and it was exciting to see a pair of **Golden Jackals** cross the road in front of us.

Another stop produced **Bar-throated Minla** and brief views of **Blue-winged Laughingthrush**. Our last bird of the day was a **Rufous-bellied Niltava**.

We eventually reached the 'coffee house' at Mayodia, and what a view! We were high above a valley with tree-covered hills in front and beyond that, the towering snow-covered mountains – the 'tail-end' of the Himalayas. It was one of the most wonderful views I had ever seen – truly magnificent. We felt a little breathless as we climbed up the steps to our accommodation, not surprising as we were at just under 9,000 feet altitude. It was also very cold.

Our room in the rest house was fine and included an en-suite toilet which I was absolutely delighted about. After a welcome dinner we did the bird list and then returned to our room for the night. The generator had been turned on (for lighting only) but was turned off after a couple of hours. We pulled on our thermals and another couple of layers and got under the blankets for sleep.



Mayodia accommodation and mountains beyond

Up early, and after a cup of coffee and a biscuit we set off for the Mayodia Pass (2,655m). This didn't take long, and as soon as we got to the sign for the Pass we had excellent views of **Red-throated Thrushes**. It was bitterly cold to start with, but when the sun came out, we felt warmer, and the views across to the mountains were stunningly beautiful.

We had a great morning, with good views of some very special birds: **Blue-fronted Redstart, Brown-throated Fulvetta, Gold-naped Finch, Streak-throated Barwing, Stripe-throated Yuhina, Yellow-browed Tit, Manipur Fulvetta** and the gorgeous **Fire-tailed Myzornis**.



Manipur Fulvetta

We had our breakfast at 0800 and carried on birding. **Rufous-breasted Bush Robin, Green Shrike Babbler** and **White-breasted Robin** were good finds. A **Northern Goshawk** flew over and a **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler** took some while to find, unlike the sweet little **Black-faced Warblers** looking like tiny bandits with their black masks. A **Rufous-vented Yuhina** flock were the last birds seen before we went back for lunch.



Black-faced Warblers

After lunch, we drove down the road, getting out to bird along the way. We had a pretty good afternoon with **Rufous-vented Yuhina, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Blythe's Leaf Warbler, White-tailed Nuthatch, Long-tailed Thrush, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush**, and a surprise **Common Buzzard**. **Arunachal Macaques** were heard but not seen, unfortunately. We returned for dinner, bird list and bed.

The next morning, after a quick coffee and biscuit, we were about to get into the vehicle when Sudesh spotted a **Yellow-billed Blue Magpie** by the lodge. We set off at 0530 to bird

the road going down towards Roing. Unfortunately, it was drizzling as well as cold, so we donned our waterproofs.

Sudesh also tried for ages for the Mishmi Wren-babbler, but no success at all. A nice new bird was the **Grey-winged Blackbird**.

After lunch at Tiwarigaon, we walked a little way and Merv spotted a group of birds which turned out to be **Red-faced Liocichla**. I had missed out on these at Eaglenest, so was delighted to see several of them.

The day was drawing to a close, without having seen many birds, so we set off for the lodge. En-route we saw a pair of attractive **Darjeeling Woodpeckers** and a very nice **Scaly Laughingthrush**. We then continued to the lodge, feeling very tired as we had been up for 12 hours. A quick cup of tea and dinner. We did the bird list and then trotted off to bed as we were leaving for the Mayodia Pass in the morning at 0515.

Again it was very cold the next day, although we were done up in several layers plus hats and gloves. Despite Sudesh trying for ages for the Monal, we had no luck seeing it or anything else. We did hear **Hill Partridge** in the distance but didn't get a sighting.

Back for breakfast, and then packed and set off for the long drive to Tinsukia. We stopped off at a few places to try for Mishmi Wren-babbler, but again no luck – another one to write off the list. After some time we did find a **Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker** and some **Long-tailed Minivets**. Returning to the same hotel in Tinsukia, the alarm was set for 0430 for a 0500 departure tomorrow.

The next day, we set off to bird a grassland area. We stopped en-route to look at a flock of birds in a tree and saw **Black-headed Oriole**, and **Yellow-footed Green Pigeon**. Assamese and **Rhesus Macaques** were also in the same tree to the annoyance of the birds.

We got to our destination and straight away set off down a track with tall grasses and bamboo either side, but we could see across to a few open grassy areas. Birds soon started appearing: **Indian Spot-billed Ducks**, **Pied Kingfisher**, **Bluethroat**, **Spotted Bush Warbler**, **Striated Babbler**, **Rosy Pipit**, **Plain Prinia** and an overflying **Black-shouldered Kite**.

In an open area we could see **Northern Lapwing**, and in the distance, **Teal** and **Watercock**. A group of 7 **Open-bill Storks** was perched high in a tree. With our local guide, we started looking for **Marsh Babbler** in amongst the bamboo and did see it eventually.

Our next target bird, **Jerdon's Babbler**, was relatively easy to see, so relieved sighs all round. We could see a **Hen Harrier** in the distance and we also spotted a lovely **Citrine Wagtail** – little did we know that we would see large numbers of this little bird!



Citrine Wagtail, Lake Maguri Bill, Assam

We were then taken for a boat ride on the lake and had a real bonanza bird-wise during our 1.5 hour trip. **Bronze-winged Jacana, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Black-winged Stilt, Glossy Ibis, Bar-headed Goose, Pintail, Shoveler, Garganey, Wigeon, Little Grebe, Gadwall, Green Sandpiper, Ferruginous Duck** and an **Eastern Marsh Harrier** was quartering the reeds in the distance.

In a clump of rushes in the middle of the lake, we eventually spotted the elusive **Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler**. Also in the same clump was a **Clamorous Reed Warbler** which showed well, and a surprise was to see an **Eastern Water Rail** come out from the base of the reeds.

We started heading back to the Camp for lunch and saw several **Purple Swamp Hens** on the way. A **Common Sandpiper** was the last bird before we reached the bank and headed off for our food.

We had a nice lunch sitting in a thatched hut, which was very relaxing. Sudesh told us we would be taking another boat trip around 1300. We also said 'goodbye' to Padam who was heading off to collect another tour group.

We boarded the boat and cruised gently around enjoying the peace and sight of so many birds. A **Purple Heron** was the first to be seen, followed by **Common Pochard, Moorhen, Tufted Duck, Cotton Pygmy Goose, Red-crested Pochard, Intermediate Egret** and **Little Egret**.

There were several **Lesser Whistling Ducks** and a **Snipe** and a handsome **Pied Harrier** flew over. We also stopped by a clump of reeds where Sudesh found a **Ruddy-breasted Crake** – a very attractive little bird.

It was now getting on for 1600 and still no rare ducks. We were beginning to think we would be out of luck, when our guide spotted the gorgeous **Baikal Teal** – what a gem! After getting some really good views of the duck, we headed back.



Baikal Teal, Lake Maguri Bill

The sun was now going down and the lake looked very beautiful with the sun's reflection on the water. Some fishermen were also out setting their nets before dark. We loaded up and set off for Tinsukia.



Fishermen setting nets, Lake Maguri Bill, Assam

We got back to our hotel where we had dinner and then did the long bird list for the day. We returned to our room with the alarm set for 0400.

The alarm went off and we were brought coffee and then set off for the Digboi Forest Preserve and Elephant Sanctuary, about an hour away. It was still dark and the traffic was very light.

We came to the Reserve which was by a massive oil field and refinery. Birds were rather hard to come by, but the target bird, **Chestnut-backed Laughingthrush** did make a brief appearance. A **Greater Coucal** landed in a tree below us giving good views and a **Taiga Flycatcher** made a brief appearance. A couple of **Red-breasted Parakeets** flew over.

We wandered slowly back to our vehicle for breakfast. As we were eating, a **White-breasted Waterhen** could be seen in some rough grass by a house. We drove back to the hotel, stopping briefly by a patch of water where an **Oriental Pied Hornbill** was perched in an overhanging tree. We reached the hotel at 0900 and arranged to meet up at 1000 to do the list. We had a welcome cup of coffee, finished packing and met in the restaurant to do the list. Sudesh totted up the total birds seen on the trip: 295. I had also recorded 10 mammal species.

At 1100 we left the hotel for our trip to Dibrugah airport. We said fond farewells to Sudesh who has been a fantastic guide and great company for nearly 3 weeks..

We changed flights at Kolkata and our flight to Delhi was slightly delayed, but both us and our luggage arrived safe and sound. We were met at the airport by Ranvir who told us he would be our guide for the trip to Sultanpur tomorrow. We were dropped off at Hotel Lohmod and after a shower fell into bed.

Our last full day in India, and we met with Ranvir at 0630 ready for our trip to Sultanpur. Once we got out of the busy Delhi traffic, it didn't take long to reach our destination. Apart from one sector of the Park which was closed, it was just as we remembered it from three years ago.



Entrance to Sultanpur National Park

Once in the Park proper, we started birding down a track with trees and bushes on either side. The first birds were the noisy **Rose-ringed Parakeets**, quickly followed by **Great Egret**, **Eastern Black Redstart**, **Greenish Warbler**, **Black-rumped Flameback** and a couple of skulking **Indian Thick-knees**.

We came off the track to walk through the bushes to find **Grey Bush Chat**, **Hulme's Leaf Warbler**, **Brook's Leaf Warbler**, **Brown-headed Barbet**, **Chestnut-shouldered Petronia**, **Coppersmith Barbet** and on the ground, **Tickell's Thrush**. A **Spoonbill** flew over, and paying attention to the trees, we found **Large Grey Babbler**, **Lesser Whitethroat**, **Plain Prinia**, **Ashy Prinia** and the attractive **Yellow-crowned Woodpecker**. A little group of **Sind Sparrows** pecking in the grass was a good spot. A **Shikra** flew over and settled in a distant tree.



Brown-headed Barbet, Sultanpur

We moved on to a track between two wetland areas which was very productive, with lots of waterbirds. **Black-headed Ibis**, **Yellow-billed Stork**, **Common Redshank**, **Grey Heron**, **White-tailed Lapwing**, **Painted Stork** and good numbers of **Black-necked Storks**.

From a track at the side of a very posh-looking house, we saw **Red-naped Ibis**, **Purple Sunbird**, **Tawny Pipit**, **Green Warbler**, **Greater Spotted Eagle**, **Greater Flamingo**, **Oriental Honey Buzzard** and **Comb Duck**.

After lunch, it was now very hot and as we walked to an area of scrub we found a **Common Hawk Cuckoo**, **Asian Brown Flycatcher** and **Common Wood Shrike**. We left the main track and entered the scrub. A surprise was a **Grey Francolin** scurrying away and an **Indian Hare** leapt up from where it had been dozing. The final birds of the day were a **Long-billed Pipit**, **Indian Bush Lark**, **Marsh Harrier** and a good-size group of the charming **Indian Silverbills**. A **Steppe Eagle** circling above us was good to see. We were also pleased to see several **Spotted Owlets**, so it seems that Sultanpur is a good place for them. The active Asian Palm Squirrels seemed to be everywhere.



Spotted Owlet, Sultanpur

We were all feeling quite tired, so we set off for our journey back to Delhi. We got together with David at 2000, went through the day's list whilst eating our room service meal, feeling rather sad that tomorrow we would be on a flight back home.

What a wonderful trip! The trek through Namdapha was hard going at times, but so rewarding to be in the beautiful forest with wonderful birds, enchanting gibbons, 'flying' Namdapha Squirrels and the other flora and fauna. Our lovely porters, cooks, mahouts, not forgetting the elephants! Our superb guide, Sudesh together with all the local guides and drivers who looked after us so well. The beauty of Mayodia; majestic snow-capped mountains and deep valleys was a particular favourite spot and one of the most captivating places I have been to. Not forgetting the special place that is Sultanpur.

Thanks to Jo at Wild About Travel for arranging this trip – it was absolutely wonderful, a real adventure. Although we had seen many of the birds before, it was so worthwhile travelling to this area which is absolutely stunning.

Ann & Mervyn de Winter
March 2017

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