

North-East India: Eagle's Nest and Kaziranga Feb 2008

Virtually the first words our ground agent said as we met in the hotel foyer in Delhi last November, "What are doing in February?" "Nothing planned" I replied. "How do you fancy a recce to Assam?" he said. Blimey I got to go to Nepal in April, thought. Yes. Well I would have some of February and all of March at home. Did I need much persuasion?

Assam has only recently been opened up to tourists and still restricted area permits are required to get into neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh. There are virtually no tourist facilities outside the main cities, or metalled roads for that matter, and so a birding trip would be tough. Camping in winter in the foothills of the Himalayas. This was food for thought.

This tour would include three main places which are increasingly being mentioned in the oriental bird press, namely Kaziranga, Nameri and the now famous Eagle's Nest. Three hours later I was on the trip and three days later, now back in England, my internal flights had been purchased. And I still knew little about the trip, but I was aware of some of the great birds on the menu.

This part of India, referred to as the NE Hills in most field guides, boasts a fantastic species list more similar to the birds in Bhutan than anywhere else in India, and although I have had three visits to Nepal there would still be a long list of new birds here. It is part of the Eastern Himalayan range with its own list of mouth watering species which any birder interested in the Himalayan region would clearly love to visit.

Just a few short weeks later and I found myself on the plane to Delhi and back in the Sunstar Hotel. This is the hotel where arguments rage through in the night in the street below, over parking I believe, and where on the floor above they feel the need to move furniture until 2.30 in the morning. The sign on the building opposite reads "No parking, tyres will be deflated" May be someone got a flat.

I had met up at Heathrow with six fellow travellers and we all flew together with Virgin which on this occasion went without a hitch arriving in Delhi with just a few hours of daylight left. We managed a couple of hours birding at Okhla Barrage where the highlight was the two White-tailed Lapwings which were probably the same two birds we had found in November.

That evening we met up with Mohit, my host and owner of Asian Adventures, and our ground agent, who took us to a nice restaurant which in fact I visited before last trip and we had another great meal. The following morning we set off in the bus for an early flight to Guwahati, the capital of Assam, taking with us not only our luggage but seven tents. A flight of just over two hours culminating in beautiful views of mountain tops above the clouds. These were the Himalayas. We cleared the airport fairly quickly and were met by Peter Lobo, our guide for the trip and four land cruiser type vehicles. Luggage on top and the expedition was on its way.

Our first stop was at the compulsory city rubbish dump where our first lifer, Greater Adjutant Stork, numbering 95 birds. A local family who obviously lived on the tip making their living out of other people's rubbish must have wondered why white people with cameras were turning up to look at them and these ugly birds. The two were photographed side by side. Either these birds are huge or the people were very small.

We arrived at our first accommodation, Nameri Eco Camp, in the late afternoon. We dumped our bags and immediately went out birding. An area of secondary forest with lots of birds. Oriental Hobby was breeding in a big tree by the gate and great scope views were possible. Blue-throated Barbets were calling in the garden and the track just outside the camp held warblers, flycatchers, woodpeckers and Niltavas. A glorious array of colour and Little Pied Flycatcher another new bird for me. We had a lovely meal and retired early to our comfortable tents.

The next morning we were up early and set off after a hearty breakfast to the river which we crossed in a canoe. The forest on the other side of the river held many birds including Wreathed Hornbills, Black-breasted Thrush, Streaked Spiderhunter, Yellow-vented Warbler and White-throated Bulbul. All lifers! What a start. A Pallas's Fish Eagle made several appearances and I missed a Sultan Tit.

After lunch we set off on a raft trip in very small inflatables which as we hit even the smallest of rapids I got a little wet. However the two Ibisbills at close range made it all worthwhile. The afternoon walk produced a beautiful male Siberian Rubythroat and some lovely capped Langurs and a Hoary-bellied Squirrel.

The next stage of our tour consisted of nine days of mountain/forest birding at different elevations from 500-3500m. We stayed in the only hotel in Dirang which had no heating apart from a pot-boiler in a corridor open to the elements. Why did they not put it inside? We did get hot water bottles which on one of the nights was the only hot water we received. There was one fan heater which had to be shared between five rooms. Apparently any more than one heater would blow the complete system. There was also a restaurant which could not provide us with any food because the pipes were frozen. Soup, vegetable dahl, vegetable curry and rice or noodles for three nights eaten with our woolly hats and scarves on was an experience. Some even kept their gloves on but I kept dropping my spoon in the soup. We cleaned the hotel out of beer but they did have rum. It was that comfortable that I was looking forward to camping.

We visited the Shangti Valley and caught up with the very rare and globally threatened Black-necked Crane, more Ibisbills and 5 Long-billed Plovers. It was not until we tried to get up to Sela Pass at 4500m that we realised how much snow there was. The pass had been closed for some days and although now open our vehicles were not up to getting us up there safely even with the rocks in the back. We missed some good birds as a result but we are in one piece to return another day. However the snow had pushed other birds down and we managed to see six species of Rosefinch, some amazingly beautiful Snow Pigeons, three species of Accentor and other rare beauties such as White-browed Bush Robin, White-throated Redstart and Orange-breasted Bush Robin amongst many others. All of these were lower than they would normally be. Despite not getting to the top, we had an amazing day with a personal tally of 18 lifers in one day.

The next few days were spent at three camps at altitudes of between 1200 and 2400m with the Eagle's Nest Pass at 2900m.

This was a new experience for me, camping in the snow. This was the first time they have had snow here for 17 years and that is when I choose to roll up. We were given a bucket of hot water every morning at 5.15 for a shower in a cubicle next to the tent made of bamboo and plastic sheeting. But that meant taking off ones clothes.

My two pairs of socks never left my feet for six days and sleeping in a woolly hat and a scarf and two layers of clothing in my sleeping bag plus two blankets just about made it bearable. During the day I wore six layers and one lady ran out at nine layers and she still she was cold. The birds here made it all worthwhile. They were stunning. 13 species of Laughingthrush, four Wren Babblers, two Parrotbills, Fire-tailed Myzornis- 2 males, Beautiful Nuthatch, Sultan Tit, Cutias in flocks and many many more. A full list can be found elsewhere.

Lama Camp is the place where the Bugun Liocichla was first found in 1996 and first named in 2006. Only about 15 specimens are known about and they only occur here. They are named after the local Bugun tribe in the hope of preserving the forest but I don't think it is working judging by the recent deforestation. We saw two and heard another couple. After leaving Lama Camp we had to cross the Eagle's Nest Pass which of course was covered in snow. Imagine an unmade road, steep in places, a thousand foot drop to one side, in the snow and two wheel drive vehicles getting stuck on virtually every up hill bend. People pushing, pulling and the Nepalese helpers, cooks and drivers just laughing and joking as they man-handled the vehicles over the pass. A journey which should have taken two hours took all day but we got there. Not many birds that day though.

The next two camps were lower and therefore a little warmer and there was no more breakfast in the snow. It was a tough but a great experience.

We left the mountains and made our way to our last destination in Kaziranga which is a vast area of grassland with loose open forest. A great place to see the One-horned Rhino, Wild Elephants and Buffalo and the rare Swamp Deer. Some more nice species of birds including Grey-headed and more Pallas's Fish Eagles and a female Pied Harrier. It is a different world out there. The eastern ranges of the park were closed because a herd of 190 Wild Elephants had come down from the hills and were causing chaos. Imagine Stodmarsh being closed because a herd of Elephants were systematically trampling the village.

People are far closer to nature here than we will ever be. Two more species of Laughingthrushes in the Panbura Forest were added to the list.

The return journey to Guwahati was seven hours by road, a return flight to Delhi was followed by another great meal in a private club, of which Mohit is a member, and that ended our tour. Another night in the now very quiet Sunstar Hotel and an uneventful flight home.

In conclusion, this was a fantastic trip with some stunning birds (78 lifers out of about 390 recorded by the group) in breathtaking scenery. Despite the cold and unusual snow conditions it was a great experience and one I hope to repeat with a group in spring 2010. This time we will go a little later so it should be a lot warmer. If anybody is interested in doing this tour please contact me. The list should be nearer 450 species.

I would like to thank Mohit of Asian Adventures for giving me this opportunity, Peter Lobo our very experienced guide and his back-up team of about 15 people to look after just seven of us. A full species list can be found under trip reports.

John van der Dol (As I had no clients on this tour I had to write this myself) March 2008