

India

Eaglenest

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Participants

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Beautiful Nuthatch

Day 1 Overnight flight from London to Delhi.

Day 2 Arrival in Delhi and transfer to the newly-refurbished domestic airport (in preparation for the Commonwealth Games to be held in Delhi later this year), where we met Inge and Helmut. The remainder of our first day was spent mostly in transit, beginning with a Kingfisher Airlines flight to Guwahati, the Assamese capital, with distant views of Mount Everest from the left side of the aircraft. On arrival, we were met by the drivers who would take us to Nameri National Park and remain with us until our drop to Kaziranga National Park on the last leg of the tour. We transferred into their three jeeps to begin the long drive across the Brahmaputra into central Assam. A short distance outside the airport we decided to make a halt to stock up on bottled water for the journey, only to find that a nail had punctured a tyre of the second jeep in our convoy! Not a particularly good start to the tour, but the unscheduled stop gave us the chance of some birding while the drivers busied themselves with roadside repairs. Our first birds of the tour included Asian Openbill, Lesser Adjutant, and Bronze-winged Jacana in the marshy fields lining the road, to which we added Blue-throated and Coppersmith Barbets, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, a flock of six Yellow-footed Pigeons, Rose-ringed Parakeets, Large Cuckooshrike, Red-vented Bulbul, Asian Pied Starling, White-vented Myna, Barn Swallow, and three Greater Adjutants, an endangered species now restricted almost entirely to the Assam valley, as we continued on our way. We arrived at Eco-Camp to find the sky dark and threatening a downpour, and with the light already fading we just had to hope it would clear by the morning. We were greeted by a calling Jungle Owlet, which we did not see, and a Brown Boobook, which we did, before a delicious buffet dinner, our species log, and a welcome sleep in our comfortable tents, which kept us dry when the clouds finally burst during the night.

Day 3 Being considerably further east than much of the rest of India, the sunrises 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!

The following morning we woke at 05.30 to find the skies still cloudy but the rain had stopped. First light in the camp compound rewarded us with good views of Nameri's more common species, including Common Hill Myna, Chestnut-tailed Starling, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, Green Imperial-pigeon, Greater and Lesser Yellownapes, Red-breasted

Parakeet, Lineated Barbet and the camp's resident pair of Oriental Hobbies, with a pair Wreathed Hornbills flying over above our heads. 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 rowing boat to enter Nameri National Park. 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. We alighted onto a broad stony bank complete with three Sand Larks, Citrine Wagtail, and Long-billed Pipit, while a pair of Great Hornbills flew overhead on their way back into the forest after their early morning foray into nearby plantations. 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. Dressed in our leech-proof socks, the morning walk in the reserve took us through the forest fringes along the river where we had good views of Hair-crested Drongo, Barred Cuckoo-dove, Emerald Dove, Pin-tailed Pigeon, Vernal Hanging-parrot, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, numerous woodpeckers including Grey-capped, Brown-capped, Stripe-breasted, Rufous, and our only Grey-headed of the trip, Asian Barred Owlet, Maroon Oriole, Black-winged and Large Cuckooshrikes, Black-naped Monarch, Long-tailed and Scarlet Minivets, Black, Black-crested, and White-throated Bulbuls, Streaked Spiderhunter, Buff-barred, Greenish, Ashy-throated, and Pale-rumped Warblers, Eastern Crimson and Green-tailed Sunbirds, Velvet and Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches, Ashy Woodswallow, a pair of Green-billed Malkohas and Blue Rock-thrush. The river and its stony banks and sandbars held species such as Black Stork, Ruddy Shelduck, Northern Pintail, Common Merganser, Red-crested Pochard, a large group of Fulvous Whistling-ducks at a distance, Small Pratincole, River Lapwing, Crested and Pied Kingfishers, Plumbeous and White-capped Redstarts, Osprey, River Tern and, somewhat unusually, six Pallas's Gulls.

After lunch back at the camp where we had good views of Daurian Redstart and White-rumped Shama, we set out again. After an unsuccessful attempt to relocate the Siberian Rubythroat that some of the group had seen bathing in a puddle on the road outside the camp, we were back on the boat to Nameri. This time we headed towards a patch of open grassland where we had good views of a single Striated Grassbird and a delightful Pied Falconet perched at the top of a bare tree. As we made our way back through the forest we made a series of detours in order to scan every secluded pool for one of our primary targets here, White-winged Duck, but were unsuccessful. The forest guard accompanying our group admitted that a recent attempt by the Forest Department to extend one of the swamps in a bid to manage this habitat for its most famous and highly-endangered inhabitant had resulted in its drying-up, as a result of which sightings of the duck had been irregular for the past few months. Despite having no luck with the duck our forest guard brought our attention to crake in one of the pools, which turned out very unexpectedly to be a Black-tailed Crake. A species of lower montane rainforest the Black-tailed Crake is a bird more usually found above 1000m of elevation and although it has been seen in Kaziranga and Manas National Parks in the lowlands of the Assam valley this is almost certainly the first record of this species in Nameri.

Day 4 Our second full day at Nameri dawned very foggy, not an uncommon occurrence in this region but putting an end to our plans for an early morning river rafting trip in search of Ibisbill. With the thick fog reducing visibility to a few yards we decided to wait for it to lift and headed out onto the road outside the camp to try once more for the Siberian Rubythroat. On my playing the call we received an immediate response but the bird, or as it turned out birds, were reluctant to show themselves. With some patience we were eventually treated to exceptional views of a pair coming out onto the road one in front of us and one behind. We continued our walk along the track through the roadside scrub and made our way back to the camp for breakfast as the fog lifted. With the fog all but gone 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. Things began quietly, our first notable birds being Black and Steppe Eagles overhead. Our primary target along the river was of course Ibisbill and when, 20 minutes into our journey, we had close views of at least 17 individual birds sitting perfectly camouflaged among the boulders and passing above us in flight, we were certainly not disappointed. Other species along the river included Great Thick-knee, Striated Heron, a selection of waterfowl not seen on the previous day including Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, and Mallard, our only Dollarbird of the tour perched in a bare tree, and our first notable mammal, Yellow-throated Marten. With some time to spare before lunch, we walked back from our river landing to the camp, adding a good selection of raptors, including Rufous-bellied Eagle, Common Buzzard, and Peregrine Falcon to our list.

We arrived back at Eco-Camp in time for lunch, only to find that India's omnipresent administrative inequalities were to thwart our afternoon plans for a further walk through the reserve. A group of government officials and their families were visiting Nameri for the afternoon and had requisitioned all available forest guards for their visit. Since entry to Nameri without a guard is prohibited it seemed that we would be prevented from entering the reserve. With no choice but to accept we spent our time around the camp, where we saw Black-hooded Oriole, Little Pied Flycatcher, Small and Large Niltavas, three Black-throated Thrushes and Blue Whistling-thrush, our first of many, before heading down for a walk along the river, which was largely quiet. As we returned to the camp for the night I heard an Oriental Scops-owl calling and lured it into a tree above us, but its chosen perch was amidst thick foliage and despite our best efforts we could not locate it. This evening we were met by Rofik, a local guide who would assist the group throughout our stay at Eaglenest. Despite the high diversity of species in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh, bird densities are quite low and birding, complete with fast-moving bird waves and a large number of established skulkers, is not effortless. To ensure that everyone sees as many species as possible, a local guide is essential.

Day 5 Our plan for the following morning had been to leave early and spend the day traveling up into the foothills to Eaglenest, our next destination. However, since we had been prevented from entering the park the previous afternoon, and with important specialities, namely White-winged Duck, missing from our list, we rose early for a last attempt. I woke to hear a Spot-bellied Eagle-owl sounding its eerie call from above our tents, and as I set out to search for it with the early risers of the group it flew low above our heads. After breakfast, we set out into Nameri, heading straight for one of the forest pools where a duck had been seen by forest guards the previous day. As we approached the pool as quietly as possible a single bird flew out from the swamp, fortunately heading towards us and allowing good views in flight. As we had found our target bird with time to spare before our early lunch and departure, we spent the remainder of the morning birding the forest edge, these final few hours in Nameri turning out to be some of the most productive we spent within the reserve. New birds seen this morning included Blue-eared Barbet, a pair of Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers, Large Woodshrike, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Hodgson's Redstart, Slaty-backed Flycatcher, Pale-chinned Blue Flycatcher, Golden-spectacled and Yellow-browed Warblers, Abbott's and Puff-throated Babbler, Striped Tit-babbler, Fork-tailed Swift, and Nepal House-martin.

We left Nameri after an early lunch at Eco-Camp (with an exceptional group total of 170 species) for the long drive up into the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. After a lengthy stop in Bhalukpong at the state border while our permits were checked we began our climb into the foothills of the eastern Himalayas towards Eaglenest. Roadworks and fog made our journey slow and dusty in places, however a short break along the river near the Nag Mandir (temple) at the military base of Tenga gave us good views of Brown Dipper. Past Tenga the landscape soon began to change, and we found ourselves on narrow, rough jeep tracks with hairpin bends flanked by enticing forests. We arrived at Lama Camp, just outside the northern boundary of Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary early evening, where at 2350m the weather was again ominously overcast and the temperature markedly different to that of Nameri! 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 (more basically equipped here) with hot water bottles to keep out the cold.

Day 6 Our first full day at Eaglenest dawned clear, and we awoke to admire the morning sunlight lighting up the Gori-Chen mountain range along the Indo-Tibetan border from the camp, our views only interrupted by 16 Olive-backed Pipits perched on an electricity wire! After a quick wash in hot water provided by the bucket, followed by tea, coffee and biscuits, we set out in search of our first Himalayan species, walking downhill along the road from Lama Camp towards Tenga. Since the recently-discovered Bugun Liocichla is known almost exclusively from the area surrounding the camp, we concentrated on searching for this elusive bird, which trails roving flocks of barwings, while enjoying good views of some of Eaglenest's more common inhabitants including Red-flanked Bluetail, Blue-fronted Redstart, Streaked (or Bhutan) Laughingthrush, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Black-chinned Yuhina, Black-throated, Green-backed, and Yellow-cheeked Tits, Striated Bulbul, a profusion of Beautiful Sibias, Grey-headed Bullfinch, Yellow-billed Blue-magpie, Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler, and Bay Woodpecker in flight. After half an hour or so, we were beckoned by another group of birders and rushed over in hope of the liocichla; however, they had called us over for a flock of stunning Scarlet Finches. After a roadside breakfast of eggs, hot porridge, pancakes with bananas, tea and coffee, we headed uphill to where the liocichla had been heard calling, before continuing downhill to the base of the valley and from here taking a narrow path through the forest. New species included Golden-throated and Great Barbets, Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, White-tailed Nuthatch, Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, Black-faced and Grey-hooded Warblers, Whiskered Yuhina, Rufous-capped Babbler, White-browed Shrike-babbler, Striated and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes and Rufous-breasted Accentor with exceptionally close views of a soaring Black Eagle. As we made our way back to the jeeps I noticed a flock of barwings moving away from us through the understorey and we spread out as much as possible along the narrow path to monitor the flock as it moved. After

awhile, minutes after I asked everyone to look for birds following the main flock, a single Bugun Liocichla jumped into the view of an ecstatic Dylan's bins, only to disappear and elude the rest of us. We tried to trace the bird by following its call but to no avail and having been out for almost 8 hours, returned to the camp for a welcome lunch. During the afternoon we again headed downslope and frantic pockets of activity in the forest provided views of most notably, Hill Prinia, Yellow-browed Tit, Gold-naped Finch and Brown Bullfinch.

Day 7 After spending two nights at Lama Camp, the following day we were to move southwest to our next camp at Bompou, which lies within the sanctuary proper at 1940m. After a brief but unsuccessful attempt for the Bugun Liocichla and a late (07.30!) breakfast we left Lama Camp. Driving along the jeep track towards Bompou, we found a single Eurasian 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. Here we found Rufous-vented and Stripe-throated Yuhinas, Crimson-browed Finch and a flock of at least five Brown Parrotbills in the bamboo, while we also heard a small group of Spotted Laughingthrushes moving through the undergrowth. Typically vocal yet elusive we were made to struggle for a good view, which we eventually did manage as the flock moved back along the track towards Lama Camp. As we stopped for our roadside lunch, we added a pair of Darjeeling Woodpeckers, following which we left the jeep track to walk a trail through the old, moss-draped broadleaved forests. Here we found Hoary-throated Barwing, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Plain-backed Thrush, Grey-cheeked Warbler, Gould's Sunbird, and Rufous-fronted Tit, while some of the group had brief views of a single Beautiful Nuthatch with three White-tailed Nuthatches. Later in the evening, we came across a small flock of Plain Mountain-finches on the track and some of the group enjoyed good views of two perched Speckled Wood-pigeons. At Bompou, we were greeted with hot tea, coffee, and Aubergine pakoras followed by another delicious dinner before settling into our tents, anticipating adding a good number of new birds the following day as we explored the bird-rich mid-altitudes of Eaglenest below Bompou.

Day 8 After a hot breakfast, we headed in our jeeps towards Sessni at 1255m. As we drove, those in the first two jeeps in our convoy were treated to Asian Emerald Dove and Grey-sided Laughingthrush on the track. As we spent the morning walking along the track with our vehicles following behind us, birding was exhilarating, exhausting, but ultimately rewarding as we tracked down many new species including Mountain Imperial-pigeon, Grey-chinned Minivet, Blue-winged Leafbird, Yellow-bellied Fantail, Bronzed Drongo, Black-throated Sunbird, White-naped Yuhina, Grey-throated and Golden Babblers, Black-eared Shrike-babbler, Yellow-throated and Golden-breasted Fulvettas, Rufous-headed Parrotbill, a flock of 15+ Black-throated Parrotbills, Rufous-gorgeted and the rarer White-gorgeted Flycatchers and Common Green-magpie, with Crested Goshawk and Oriental Honey-buzzard seen in flight. Rofik and I had our work cut out to get everyone on to a pair of Rufous-throated Wren-babblers moving through the low scrub however, they eventually posed for photos, as did an extraordinary Long-billed Wren-babbler. As we neared Sessni, a lone Asian Elephant crossed our path at a distance. After our picnic lunch stop at Sessni, we headed back towards Bompou, finding Hill Partridge, Banded Bay Cuckoo, Kalij Pheasant, and Rufous-necked Hornbill along the way and Slaty-backed Forktail in a mountain stream. Further uphill, we stopped to sort through a roving flock, amongst which we found three exquisite Beautiful Nuthatches.

Day 9 The following morning we returned to Sessni aiming to add some more species associated with the bamboo breaks to our list. As we drove lower, the weather became decidedly hotter, and our thermals were removed in favour of t-shirts! Amongst the bamboo, a small roving flock provided us with our first White-hooded Babblers, Coral-billed and Long-billed Scimitar-babblers and Black-browed Parrotbills while some of the group managed glimpses of a Chestnut-headed Tesia calling and moving through the dense undergrowth. Other species included Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, Short-billed Minivet, Slaty-blue Flycatcher, Long-tailed Sibia, Red-tailed Minla, Yellow-bellied and Rufous-faced Warblers, Nepal and White-browed Fulvettas and Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrush, with Changeable Hawk-eagle, Indian Spotted Eagle, Himalayan Swiftlet and Silver-backed Needletail passing overhead. After a very revolutionary picnic lunch of pasta and salad followed by KitKats at Sessni, we made our way uphill to spend the evening above Bompou. The activity calmed down in the mature broadleaved forest and Rhododendrons where the only notable new bird in growing mist was a flock of White-throated Laughingthrushes. Back at camp, our evening log declared our list for the day as an exceptional 65 species.

Day 10 With our next and final night in Eaglenest at Lama Camp, we spent most of the following day scouring the area between Bompou and Eaglenest Pass for two of the region's most secretive inhabitants: Ward's Trogon and Fire-tailed Myzornis, which had so far eluded us. The myzornis appeared early in the day and great views were had by all. As we passed Sunder View, midway between Bompou and Eaglenest Pass, I heard a Ward's Trogon calling in the distance and stopped to try to call the bird in. After an initial response, which seemed close, we were made to endure a long wait before a stunning male flew in followed by a female, giving all of us excellent views at close range. After

stopping at Eaglenest Pass for a picnic lunch, we continued on to Lama Camp thinking that our day could not get any better, but more was to come. After a short stop to leave our luggage at the camp, we headed downhill. Although the forest was initially quiet, I soon noticed a flock of barwings moving along the valley below the road. As we watched we came across a remarkable Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler and suddenly some of the group glimpsed a liocichla trailing the main flock. Following the flock as it moved we all eventually managed views of what is undoubtedly the most elusive of Eaglenest's birds, Bugun Liocichla, its yellow loreal spots glaring at us like headlights through the dark of the understory. We returned to the camp as the light was fading to reflect on what had been an excellent last day at Eaglenest and eagerly anticipate our journey to Kaziranga National Park.

Day 11 The following morning we were reluctant to leave, but there were still more good birds in store as we made our way back down towards Tenga and picked up our first White-collared Blackbird and Himalayan Greenfinch. As we approached Sessa at 1250m, we made a stop along the road overlooking the valley where in a flurry of activity we picked out no less than five Beautiful Nuthatches, Sultan Tit, Black-headed Shrike-babbler, and the striking Himalayan Cutia. Further on we had excellent views of a Collared Owlet sitting on a cable along the road, and an exquisite male Pied Harrier, before we arrived back at Nameri for our lunch halt. After lunch, we continued our journey into the Brahmaputra basin of central Assam to Kaziranga. As we skirted the park boundary, Asian One-horned Rhinoceros' were immediately visible on the plains and we stopped to scan the grassland at intervals before arriving at Wild Grass, our base for the next four nights. After checking-in and a refreshing welcome drink, everyone rushed to their rooms to wash off the Eaglenest experience! Six nights in temperatures too cold to shower unless during the warmer midday periods when we were inevitably out birding meant that everyone was ready for a good clean-up, especially one involving hot water!

Day 12 After spending the last ten days birding on foot at Nameri and Eaglenest, Kaziranga was a new experience for the group as we set out on our first birding from open jeeps. We spent our first day in the park in Kohora, otherwise known as the central range, with lunch back at Wild Grass, exploring the vast grasslands, intermittent wetland and pockets of mature woodland. In this mosaic of habitats, we found a good selection of birds, including Red Junglefowl, Swamp Francolin, Himalayan Rubythroat, Yellow-eyed and Chestnut-capped Babbler, Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker, Rosy-headed and Alexandrine Parakeets, Streak-throated Woodpecker, Common Iora, Grey-backed and Brown Shrikes, Ashy, Plain, and Yellow-bellied Prinias, Baya Weaver, Rufous Treepie, Grey-headed and Pallas's Fish-eagles, Spot-billed Pelican, Black-necked Stork, Ferruginous Duck, Grey-headed Swamphen, Shikra, White-rumped and Slender-billed Vultures, and Himalayan Griffon. Dusky Eagle-owl and Large-tailed Nightjar at dusk were the last birds of the day before a traditional dance performed by Adivasi tribals back at Wild Grass.

Day 13 Early Saturday morning we were back to the central range, where we transferred from our jeeps onto elephant back to head off into the grasslands in search of Bengal Florican. As our elephants spread out among the Spotted, Swamp and Hog Deer, and trundled slowly through the grass, we flushed a male Bengal Florican, which flew around us before dropping back into the grass. As we continued further the bird flushed again allowing us a repeat view and, satisfied with our sighting of this endangered species, we moved back out of the grassland to enjoy our packed breakfast and a cup of Chai, tea made to the typical milky Indian recipe and far too sweet for most of us, including myself! After breakfast, we drove on to Kaziranga's Agaratoli or eastern range, stopping for a Stork-billed Kingfisher on roadside wires and enjoying good views of a Greater Flameback as our entry permits were issued. On entering the range we found our first Spotted Owlet, Blue-bearded Bee-eater and Bluethroat, and picked out Greater Adjutant, Bar-headed Goose, Darter, Grey and Purple Herons, Black-headed Ibis, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Cotton Pygmy-goose, Garganey, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Little Grebe, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Northern and Grey-headed Lapwings, Green, Common, and Marsh Sandpipers and Eurasian Curlew in the vast wetlands that teemed with waterbirds. With a recent Tiger sighting in the central range it was decided that we should spend the afternoon there in what would turn out to be an unsuccessful attempt at India's most recognisable mammal. We did, however, find Eurasian Griffon, Hen Harrier, Bengal Bushlark, Oriental Skylark, and Zitting Cisticola.

Day 14 The state of Assam produces most of India's tea, and despite the 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. Determined to make the most of our final day in Kaziranga, early Sunday morning took us to one of the plantations flanking the reserve. Our day began slowly as we were hampered by thick mist, however as it began to dissipate under the growing warmth of the sun, we added Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush, Striated Babbler, White-browed Scimitar-babbler, Grey-breasted Prinia, Red-breasted and Dark-sided Flycatchers and Grey Treepie to our list, also adding

Dusky and Smoky Warblers back at Wild Grass. After lunch, we took off in our jeeps for the Baghori or western range. Despite the overcast and windy conditions, we saw a good selection of species of which Indian Cormorant and Pied Avocet were new additions. We also had more exceptional views of rhino with a single Smooth-coated Otter in the wetlands. With large sections of the grasslands burning as part of their annual management our final dusk in Kaziranga was a particularly spectacular one.

Day 15 The final day of the tour took us back through heavy traffic to Guwahati, our last new birds of the tour being Green Bee-eater and Black-rumped Flameback. As we traveled westwards, dense clouds began to form and our generally good fortune with the weather continued as the first drops of rain began to fall just as we entered the airport terminal. 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 before most of the group departed on their international return flight to London, with memories of almost 400 superb birds in India's most ornithologically rich region.

Leio De Souza