

Nepal

15–27 March 2012
Extension to 31 March

Participants

Ian Kirk
Mike and Wendy Lofthouse
Simon Peile

Leader Suchit Basnet



Blue-fronted Redstart

Day 1: Overnight flight from London to Delhi with the UK contingent meeting up on the plane by virtue of having adjacent seats.

Day 2: Morning flight onward to Kathmandu arriving early afternoon on time. Immigration was a bit slow, a large Korean plane having beaten us in by 10 minutes or so, but we eventually emerged to a warm welcome from Suchit, complete with flower garlands, and were quickly transported to Hotel Marsyangdi in the heart of the city. There we met Simon who had arrived from South Africa the previous day, and the group was now complete. Over a cup of tea at the hotel Suchit briefed us about the tour as a whole, and particularly the next day's excursion. We had time before dark to open the bird list with Black Kite, House Crow, House and Tree Sparrows all visible from our hotel room window.

Day 3: After an early breakfast we left for Phulchowki Hill on the edge of rapidly expanding Kathmandu shortly before 07.00. This hill is around 2700m in height and has a road, rough in places but drivable, to the communications mast at the top. We stopped just before reaching the hill for a quick view around. Within minutes we had seen Barn and Red-rumped Swallows, Black-lored Tit, Hume's Warbler and the first of several Grey-hooded Warblers among others. Driving into the woodland at the base of the hill we had good views of a Blue Whistling-thrush on the road and, on stopping for a short walk, Blue Magpie, Blue-fronted Redstart and Yellow-browed Tit. Moving further up the hill, and stopping at intervals, we soon added a good number of species including Grey Treepie, Maroon Oriole, several flycatchers and warblers, Rufous Sibia, Mrs Gould's and Fire-tailed Sunbirds, most of them new species to all four of us. Higher up Green-tailed Sunbird replaced the other two species and we began to see Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes. At the top of the hill we left our transport and slowly walked down, stopping for a picnic lunch on the way. We came across a party of very attractive Black-throated Tits, had a brief view of a Black Eagle, a good view of a White-throated Laughingthrush and also of a Collared Owl which Suchit pulled in with his MP3 player. We returned to the hotel in the late afternoon through Kathmandu's, to us, chaotic traffic, passing the odd group of urban Rhesus Macaques on the way.

Day 4: We left for the airport after an early breakfast. The early morning traffic was much lighter and Suchit managed to point out roosting Flying Foxes in some of Kathmandu's trees as we passed. The flight to Biratnagar was slightly late taking off but we arrived there mid-morning having had good views of the Himalayas, with Everest clearly visible in the distance. On arrival we saw a White-browed Wagtail on the

roof of one of the airport buildings and our first Shikra flying close by. A Koshi Camp vehicle was waiting for us and we were soon off on the one-and-a-half hour journey to Koshi Camp. Towards the end of the journey we spotted a White-rumped Vulture and two Himalayan Griffons circling. After reaching the camp we had some time to explore our immediate surroundings before lunch and soon realised that there was plenty to see, Birds seen within the camp included Spotted Owlet, Indian Scops-owl, Fulvous Woodpecker, Blue-throated Barbet, Asian Koel, Greater Coucal, Rufous Treepie, Taiga Flycatcher and Olive-backed Pipit. During lunch one of the camp staff came in and told us that a male Siberian Rubythroat had just been seen in the bushes behind the dining room. This bird, which stayed throughout our time at Koshi, was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the trip, frequently coming out into the open and being almost confiding! After lunch we went for a late afternoon walk, up-river in the nearby part of the reserve, seeing three Jungle Owlets, three Common Hawk-cuckoos and, by the river, Black Francolin, Lesser Whistling-duck and a Smooth-coated Otter going in and out of the water. Returning to the camp we had good views of a Red-necked Falcon, Asian Openbill and Lesser Adjutant. On the camp ponds Common Moorhens and Bronze-winged Jacanas had been joined by a Black Bittern. As we drank our pre-dinner beers we had our first sight of one of the Jungle Cats that lived in the camp.

Day 5: An early morning cup of tea preceded our departure at 06.00 with a packed breakfast. This day we went down-river a short distance, exploring both the fishponds on one side of the road and the riverine grassland on the other. In the latter we found Lesser Coucal, Small Pratincole, a mating pair of Red-naped Ibis (in an isolated tree), Ashy Woodswallow and Indian Golden Oriole. We stopped for breakfast in this habitat and had an excellent view of two pairs of Swamp Francolins feeding on Wild Water Buffalo dung. After breakfast we moved out a bit further into the grassland for a better look at a Long-tailed Shrike and a Paddyfield Pipit. We suddenly realised that the twenty or so Water Buffalo which had, until then, been happily grazing had taken it into their heads to come towards us at a fast gallop. Suchit and the local guide Anish diverted them with shouts and stones but the incident certainly added a bit of excitement to the morning! Exploring the adjacent fishponds we soon found Green and Wood Sandpipers amongst the herons and egrets, also 3 or 4 Citrine Wagtails, and an Osprey and Greater Spotted Eagle flew past overhead. We returned to camp for lunch and discovered a Cinnamon Bittern on the ponds, whilst an Imperial Eagle appeared briefly overhead. After the lunch break we went out into the woodland to search for owls whose roosting spots Anish had found. We successfully tracked down both a Brown Fish-owl and a pair of Brown Hawk-owls, and also saw a pair of Streak-throated Woodpeckers. It was still light at this stage so we returned to the fishponds and, after some effort, managed to positively identify a Pin-tailed Snipe. Other good birds for the day included Grey-backed Shrike, Striated Grassbird, Rosy Pipit and Thick-billed Warbler. Returning to camp at the end of our afternoon excursion Suchit spotted a single Thick-billed Pigeon, a real rarity, in a flock of around twenty Yellow-footed Pigeons perched in the top of a largely leafless tree. We also had good views of an Indian Grey Mongoose and an Asiatic Golden Jackal.

Day 6: Again, after a quick cup of tea, we left camp around 06.00 with our breakfasts for a river trip in the camp inflatable. We soon saw a flying Bar-headed Goose and, also on the river, Ruddy Shelducks, White-throated and Pied Kingfishers, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Common (Himalayan) Buzzard, Steppe Eagle, and Grey-throated Martins. We stopped for breakfast on a large island, covered largely with tall grasses but also with pools and sandbanks. Suchit embarked on a cisticola and prinia masterclass, showing us Plain and Graceful Prinias, Zitting and Bright-capped Cisticolas with White-tailed Stonechats thrown in. Breakfast by a marshy pool brought us Temminck's Stint, a ringtail Hen Harrier, Black Stork, three red-spotted Bluethroats, Striated Babbler and Citrine Wagtail. Returning to the boat we found Little Ringed Plover and a Rosy Pipit. Re-embarked we saw a Peregrine and, as we came in to land, a Short-toed Eagle. Back on land and returning to camp we found Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark, Yellow Wagtail, Crested Bunting (fleetingly) and, close to camp, a male Pied Harrier. Stopping to look at Hog Deer we also found two large (15' or so) Rock Pythons sunning themselves at the roadside only a few yards apart. Back at camp we were visited by a Stork-billed Kingfisher and a Black-shouldered Kite. The lunch break was shorter than usual because our afternoon destination was the Koshi Barrage, more than an hour's drive away. On the way we had one of our very few disappointments of the whole trip – low water levels in roadside ponds had resulted in the hoped for Pheasant-tailed Jacanas disappearing elsewhere. At the barrage itself there were several rafts of duck, predominately Gadwall and Northern Pintail, with some Eurasian Wigeon, Northern

Shoveler, Eurasian Teal, three Red-crested Pochards and a single male Garganey. Nearby were three Great Crested Grebes and a roosting Eurasian Spoonbill. A Booted Eagle flew past and we all had good views of Ganges River Dolphins as they surfaced to breathe.

Day 7: This was another early start day with us heading some distance up-river to an extensive area of dry grassland alongside the river, with larks being the main target. On arrival we scanned the river and soon found ten Bar-headed Geese, Ruddy Shelducks, Gadwall and other dabbling ducks together with one male and two female Red-crested Pochards. Hundreds of Little Pratincoles were flying overhead and there were several apparently-nesting pairs of Yellow-wattled Lapwing. We heard and then saw two Little Terns. There were also two Woolly-necked Storks by the river and a Bay-backed Shrike. We quickly found Sand Lark and Oriental Lark, and a Tawny Pipit. We were then fortunate to find a group of six larks, three Greater Short-toed and three Hume's Short-toed, which allowed us the opportunity for close comparison. Unfortunately we did not find any Indian Coursers despite a family having been present a couple of weeks before. Just before leaving to return to camp we saw Indian Thick-knee and a Bengal Bushlark. On the return journey we passed a flying male Hen Harrier. After lunch we had an extended search of the camp reedbeds for Smoky Warbler, finally all getting a good view of one, thanks to Suchit's efforts with the MP3 and Anish's pinpointing of its precise location. Blyth's Reed-warbler was also found and some had a fleeting view of a Dusky Warbler. Three Black Bitterns were present in the camp, also a single Little Stint. Patience towards dusk brought the reward of clear and close views of a Ruddy-breasted Crake.

Day 8: We had breakfast in camp, before saying farewell to the Siberian Rubythroat and departing in our minibus just after 07.00 for the long drive to Chitwan. We stopped for a couple of breaks on the way, finding both Brown and Grey-capped Woodpeckers, a group of three Chestnut-shouldered Petronias, Small Minivet, Plum-headed Parakeet and three Indian Grey Hornbill – all in the canopy of a Sal forest that bordered the road for a proportion of the distance. On arrival at our Chitwan hotel, Machan Paradise Lodge, we immediately had a close view of a One-horned Rhinoceros in the damp grassland below the observation outlook. Once we had settled our luggage into our rooms we set out to explore the environs of the lodge, finding a wide range of species, quite a few of them new to us. As well as the ubiquitous White-throated Kingfisher, Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker, White-breasted Waterhen, Bronze-winged Jacana and Indian Pond-heron among others, we also saw Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Emerald Dove, Brown Crake and Hill Myna. We also saw Marsh Muggers and our rooms had resident Spotted Geckos.

Day 9: We had an early breakfast and spent the morning exploring a wider area around the lodge, covering a variety of habitats including wetland, damp grassland, dry grassland, woodland and river bank. The grassland gave us Pied Bushchat, both Siberian and White-tailed Stonechats as well as three new prinias – Grey-breasted, Ashy and Yellow-bellied – Plain Prinia, both Zitting and Bright-capped Cisticolas and Rufous-rumped Grassbird. We also put up two nightjars, which did not fly far and which we were able to identify as Savannah Nightjars. In the woodland around the lodge we saw Himalayan and Greater Flameback, Lineated and Coppersmith Barbets, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and Oriental Pied Hornbill. Along the river bank bushes held a Common Chiffchaff and both Chestnut-capped and Slender-billed Babblers. After lunch the afternoon activity was an elephant ride through much the same area as covered on foot in the morning. The experience was completely different, however. Birds did not seem to be as nervous of elephants as they normally were of humans on foot. As a result we all got extremely good views of two male White-tailed Rubythroats, arguably even more handsome birds than the Siberian variety! We did flush some birds, including a female Greater Painted-snipe, which flew close enough and for long enough for all of us to see it well, and a Cinnamon Bittern. Ian and Simon, from their elephant, saw Wild Boar, whilst we saw Crested Bunting, a Common Rosefinch and a Jungle Cat. Hog Deer were numerous with at least ten seen by all. The elephant ride finished with us sore and stiff but all agreed it was not an experience to be missed. Other noteworthy birds seen during the day included a male Indian Peafowl (from the outlook, where a pair of Asiatic Golden Jackals also put in an appearance), Black Francolin, Grey-bellied Cuckoo, a light-morph Booted Eagle, Purple Heron, a Smoky Warbler and a very skulking Spotted Bush-warbler.

Day 10: Again breakfast at the Lodge before an early departure with a packed lunch. The whole day was spent in and around the Sal forests of the Chitwan National Park, mixing walks with travel in an open-topped

jeep. From the river bridge at the park entrance we saw a Peregrine and our first River Lapwing and shortly afterwards, inside the park, Rosy Minivets, Alexandrine and Red-breasted Parakeets. Before we had gone any great distance Suchit spotted a Sloth Bear off the side of the road but it quickly dropped down and, despite waiting some time, we saw no more of it. In an open area of forest we stopped to examine recent tiger tracks and observe several rhinoceros close to the road after watching three male Indian Peafowl displaying to a few apparently disinterested females. A Crested Serpent-eagle was perched in an isolated tree and later, by another part of the river, an Oriental Honey-buzzard gave us excellent views before lazily flying off. The opposite bank of the river had a couple of hauled-out Gharials well within binocular range, as well as more River Lapwings. Another walk in a more densely wooded part gave us a Long-tailed Broadbill, a pair of Tickell's Thrushes, White-rumped Shama, Western Crowned Leaf-warbler and Golden-spectacled Warbler. We had come across Red Junglefowl earlier in the day, and been much taken with their bright plumage, and in the late afternoon visited a small lake where there was an active lek of these birds with at least four males displaying and two females in attendance. Also in the lake area was a Grey-headed Fish-eagle on a nest, a few hawking White-rumped Spinetails and a single Common Coot, among other more familiar species. Other noteworthy species seen at various times during that day included Grey-headed Woodpecker, Pompadour Green-pigeon, Black Baza, Large and Common Woodshrikes, Oriental Darter, Asian Paradise-flycatcher, Pale-chinned Blue-flycatcher, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Black-crested Bulbul, Pale-footed Bush-warbler, Puff-throated Babbler, Striped Tit-babbler, White-bellied Yuhina and, as we left, Blue-tailed Bee-eater. All in all a very varied and rewarding day, with well over 100 bird species and plenty of mammals!

Day 11: After an early morning cup of tea we took breakfast with us and headed into a part of the National Park which Suchit knew, from past experience, to be good for Red-breasted Trogon. Since his last visit several trees had blown across the road and we had to walk in to the target area. This was easily achieved and after some effort Suchit attracted in a male with his MP3 player. All but Suchit had a good view of the bird, although it appeared that he may have seen a female bird which eluded the rest of us. Hearing unexplained noises of movement in the trees a short distance away we made a tactical withdrawal to a nearby part of the forest where we found Crimson Sunbird and Streaked Spiderhunter. Other birds seen included a pair of Golden-fronted Leafbirds, a Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, Himalayan Bulbul, Oriental White-eye and, in a bush adjacent to a wet patch within the forest, a Grey-crowned Prinia. After lunch back at the lodge we returned to the National Park and had further good views of Red Junglefowl, including two fighting males and one male with a harem of six females. By the river we had good views of an Indian Thick-knee and at least one pair of Oriental Honey-buzzards. The intention was to end the visit with some time in a watch tower overlooking grassland in the hope of seeing new mammals. This we did with some success, watching a young Sloth Bear for ten minutes or so. However, before we got to the tower we had stopped to look at a female rhinoceros and its half-grown calf which were grazing about 20 yards from the road edge. At first it paid us no attention but then suddenly turned towards the jeep and went into a full charge until brought up short by the roadside ditch. Both mother and calf then turned tail and ran. No real danger but definitely something of a thrill! The afternoon was particularly good for animals. As well as the Sloth Bear and rhinoceros we saw good numbers of Spotted Deer and Sambar, a Wild Boar and a Bengal Monitor Lizard. Back in the lodge garden a couple of Short-nosed Fruit-bats were found roosting in a small tree.

Day 12: After an early breakfast we bade farewell to Simon, who was returning to Kathmandu later, and set off towards Pokhara at around 07.00. The first part of the journey was relatively quiet bird-wise, with the usual egrets, a few Great Cormorants and the only new species being some House Swifts for which we stopped briefly. However, the other side of Mugling we kept our eyes open for vultures and were eventually rewarded. By the time we had reached Pokhara we had seen about 12 Egyptian, 7 White-rumped, 4 Himalayan Griffon, 6 Cinereous and a single Red-headed Vulture, plus a Steppe Eagle. We reached Pokhara before mid-day and dropped our excess baggage at the hotel to which we would eventually return after the trek, and also ate our packed lunches there. After lunch we drove to Naya Pool and left there on foot around 14.00, with our three porters carrying the bulk of our luggage. Two went ahead to our evening destination whilst one, the telescope porter, remained with us. Our route up to Sayauli Bazar followed a river valley through farmland with scattered trees and occasional patches of woodland. Almost immediately we came across White-capped Plumbeous Redstarts, both very attractive birds, and also a family group of six Brown Dippers. Soon after this we were accompanied for a short while by a pair of Bonelli's Eagles apparently

quartering the adjacent valley side woodland. Further along the river some patient watching gave us quite reasonable views of a pair of Slaty-backed Forktails flying in and out of some roadside bushes, and we had very good views of a juvenile Mountain Hawk-eagle perched in a nearby tree. Great Barbets were fairly numerous in the valley and we eventually had a good telescope view of one and, after some splendid efforts by Suchit with his MP3 player, of a Green Magpie. As we got closer to our guest house we found Greater Yellow-nape and Greater Flameback as well as Orange-bellied Leafbird and Grey Bushchat. Ian and Wendy also had brief views of a Black-chinned Babbler but unfortunately I missed it – it was an extremely skulking bird! Other birds seen that first afternoon of the trek included Indian Roller, White-throated Kingfisher, Spotted Dove, Black Kite, Hair-crested Drongo, Blue Whistling-thrush, Green-backed Tit, Grey-hooded Warbler, Russet Sparrow, Grey Wagtail and White-rumped Munia. We also saw Terai Langur monkeys.

Day 13: Yesterday had been an easy walk with a height gain of only 150m (500'). This day was a stiffer challenge with a further 720m (2300') of climbing over the four miles or so to Ghandruk. We started the day with an early breakfast and with a good view of Fishtail, a relatively close and shapely 6000m peak. We left around 07.00 leaving behind some frayed looking backpackers suffering from the effects of their end of trek party the previous night. The climb out of the village was steep, along a well-surfaced zig-zag track, and we were glad of the excuse to stop and look for birds at frequent intervals. A flock of around forty Snow Pigeons flew past and these were quickly followed by a good view of a perched Upland Pipit. Reaching the top of the village we came out at the end of the recently built road from Naya Pool and saw the mule trains being loaded – from here on all transport of goods and materials up and down the valley was by mule or porter. A juvenile Northern Goshawk flew overhead as we started on the next, gently undulating, section of track. We saw relatively few new birds until we reached Ghandruk, but we did see Large-billed Crows, a group of five Blue Magpies, large numbers of Nepal House Martins at their nesting cliff, Streaked Laughingthrush and a Striated Prinia, and heard our first Eurasian Cuckoo of the year. The path steepened as we approached Ghandruk and we were pleased to reach a restaurant at the entrance to the village, where we were refreshed by glasses of cool lemonade followed by a tasty early lunch. We then climbed up through the village to our guest house where we quickly settled in with a cup of tea followed by a walk around the upper part of the village. This walk was quite productive and birds seen included Slaty-headed Parakeet, Asian Barred Owlet, Verditer Flycatcher, Small Niltava, White-tailed Robin, Lemon-rumped Warbler, Pygmy Wren-babbler and Red-billed Leiothrix. We also had good views of a Small Indian Mongoose and a pair of Yellow-throated Martens

Day 14: We were up early for a cup of tea before 06.00 and the view from the guest house was stupendous. In the cool morning air the bulk of Annapurna South dominated the northern landscape but other substantial peaks also contributed to the overall effect. From a climbing point of view our side of Annapurna looked fearsome, with no obvious route to the top. Just after 06.00 the nearby monastery played tapes of Buddhist chants over loudspeakers and this added considerably to the exotic ambience of the location. We left shortly afterwards to climb up behind the village on the track towards Tadapani. Before leaving the village we had four Ashy Wood-pigeons fly past and also had a fleeting view of a Spotted Forktail on the edge of a gully before it flew off. At the edge of the village a male Pink-browed Rosefinch obligingly perched for us on a low bush, quickly followed by a pair of Blue-fronted Redstarts. Carrying on gently upwards we reached an isolated restaurant where we stopped for breakfast. Whilst breakfast was being prepared we explored the immediate area and had a good view of a pair of Gold-billed Magpies, and a Scaly Thrush which was perching on a low branch at the side of the restaurant. We also saw Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes and a male Verditer Flycatcher in the same vicinity. After breakfast we continued up the hill to a height of around 2300m (7500' or so). The woods appeared relatively free of birdlife but at intervals Suchit played his Spotted Owlet call and mostly had a very good response. The birds seen in the morning included Slaty-backed Flycatcher, Snowy-browed Flycatcher, a female Ultramarine Flycatcher, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Mountain Bulbul, Striated Laughingthrush, Golden Babbler, Green Shrike-babbler, Black-eared Shrike-babbler, Blue-winged Siva (formerly Minla) and Rufous-winged Fulvetta. We also had a good collection of sunbirds, including Mrs Gould's, Green-tailed and, a new one, Black-throated. We returned to our breakfast restaurant for lunch and from there to Ghandruk. Overhead, during the morning we had a pair of Crested Serpent-eagles and a Besra.

Day 15: Once again we were up early to brilliant views and a breakfast accompanied by the chanting of the monks. We left around 07.00 to return to Naya Pool, stopping for lunch at the Sayauli Bazar guest house. It was an easy, almost leisurely, walk but not without interest. With some effort on his part, Suchit managed to find us both Spotted and Little Forktails together on the river and we had a good few minutes viewing them through Ian's 'scope. We saw our last Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker of the trip and, after exercise of a great deal of patience all managed to get good views of a skulking Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler. A Little Pied-flycatcher was much easier. A Peregrine and a single Red-headed Vulture put in an appearance and, as we came to the road end at the top of Sayauli Bazar we found a Blue-capped Rock-thrush singing from a tree-top. As we neared Naya Pool we had the first rain of the entire trip, which apart from the odd cool morning, had been constantly sunny and warm or hot until then. Fortunately it was light and lasted less than half an hour, and did not stop Suchit finding a bird we had all been looking for without success since the start of the trek – a Crested Kingfisher. Once back at Naya Pool it was a quick cup of tea and then a short drive back to Pokhara and our hotel. There we found ourselves in large comfortable rooms with, luxury of luxuries, decent sized baths and a constant supply of hot water. Dinner was excellent too, with fresh carp from the nearby lake.

Day 16: At 06.00 Ian, Wendy and I met up and went down to the lake to look for the Black-backed Forktail that had frequented the area in the past, unfortunately without success. The usual birds were there, only a pair of Large Cuckoo-shrikes being anything out of the ordinary. Suchit joined us after breakfast but the forktail remained stubbornly absent. We did see a Green Sandpiper. After that it was time to put our kit in flying order, and buy and write our postcards. The flight from Pokhara was late taking off but we were back at our Kathmandu hotel by mid-afternoon. There we said our farewells to Suchit, who was returning to a well-earned break with his family. The remainder of the day was spent exploring the nearby part of Kathmandu and enjoying the evening barbecue in the Marsyangdi, eating the latter in the hotel dining room rather than outside because of a thunderstorm and accompanying rain.

Day 17: After a 05.30 breakfast we were collected by a colleague of Suchit's and taken to the airport. The flights home were straightforward, even if the number of security checks was irksome, and we arrived back at Heathrow 10 minutes ahead of schedule.

Overall View: This was a very good birdwatching and wildlife holiday, very much made by Suchit's ability and enthusiasm. We all saw at least 340 species of bird, and none of us missed more than one or two at most. We also saw most birds very well, the small size of the party undoubtedly helped here. The accommodation was fine and the food enjoyable, I think I speak for everyone in saying that. The weather was brilliant and the country itself fascinating. Disappointments – no serious ones. There are always birds one would have liked to see but didn't, but these were few – and we can always go again!

Mike Lofthouse