

Bhutan 2004 May

A Partner Friendly Birding Trip To the United Arab Emirates, Bhutan And India – 15 May To 6 June 2004 – Arab Emirates, Bhutan & India

This report is from (the late) John McAllister and is about a trip mostly organised through Fatbirder's Anytime Tours. It took place between 15th May to 6th June 2004 and combined birding with culture. The participants were the "Chicken Chasers" (Birders who had Red Jungle Fowl as a major target species) – John McAllister and Elize McAllister of Wakkerstroom, South Africa and Jo Johnson of Cape Town, South Africa and the "Culture Vultures" (the Non-birders) – Shirley and Lisa Johnson of Cape Town, South Africa.

Planning and Logistics

Our initial planning started way back in early 2003 when Elize and I were looking for a reasonably affordable place to spend our Silver Wedding on 31st May 2004. Our first thoughts turned to Nome or Point Barrow in Alaska – icebergs after all seemed suitably silver in colour. This proved to be way too expensive, particularly with the weak South African Rand of the time.

Other thoughts included Svalbard off northern Norway and a cruise from Iceland to the Faeroe Islands and Denmark. These were likewise far above the limits set by our pockets. Our thoughts then turned to the southern hemisphere and we gave the Falkland Islands some serious consideration. Unfortunately May was a really bad month for here – the austral winter is just not a good time for these fascinating islands. The austral summer is our busiest time in South Africa so this was not a proposition either.

It took the visit of two Sri Lankan birders who were working in Mafikeng, South Africa, to our B&B in Wakkerstroom, to turn our thoughts to the East. This rekindled a boyhood dream of mine to one day visit the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon – Bhutan). It then became a series of short steps and many enthusiastic e-mails via Bo Beolens' excellent [Fatbirder](#) website to find two wonderful birding tour operators in Bhutan and India – [Karma Jamtsho's](#) Nature Tourism-Bhutan and [Mohit Aggarwal's](#) Asian Adventures respectively. The next step was to invite close friends Jo and Shirley Johnson from Cape Town and Dries and Julia Laubscher from Johannesburg to join us. In the event Jo and Shirley and their daughter Lisa joined us, but Dries and Julia were unable to do so.

Sure Travel in Newcastle and Fish Hoek were responsible for flight bookings from Johannesburg to Delhi, hotel accommodation and car hire in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and getting the necessary visas for the UAE and India. Nature Tourism-Bhutan organised visas for Bhutan and booked the flights from Delhi to Paro and back. Return flights from Johannesburg to Delhi were with Emirates with a 24 hour stop-over in the UAE on the outward-bound flight. Flights from Delhi to Paro and back were with Druk Air, the Royal Bhutan Airline and the only airline to fly into Paro International Airport.

In the UAE we stayed over in the Emirates Wing of the Airport Hotel on a room only basis. The very comfortable accommodation was more than adequate for our needs. A really great feature was that the rooms were available to us from the time our flight from Johannesburg landed at Dubai International airport (00:25 on 16th May) until we took off for Delhi at 22:40 on the same day. This was very useful and allowed us Chicken Chasers to go off at 'sparrows' after new birds while the Culture Vultures could sleep late and visit the souks of Dubai at their leisure without having the hassles of luggage to look after. We hired a car through Thrifty Car Hire in Dubai who gave us a very comfortable and new Toyota sedan for the day.

In Bhutan we followed a very well-organised itinerary arranged especially for us by Nature Tourism-Bhutan. It was really two itineraries in one. The Chicken Chasers were very ably guided by Tshering and driven in a Toyota Hi Ace van by star driver Shatu. The Culture Vultures were guided by Karma himself and driven in a Musso 4-wheel drive vehicle by Dawa.

In India we followed a similarly smooth itinerary arranged for us by Asian Adventures. On 17th May we were guided and driven by Sibi and visited a local Park on the outskirts of Delhi for a few hours birding while waiting for the onward connection to Paro. On 31st May we were met at the airport by Iqbal in a 10-seater minibus.

Shirley had broken her hip in a fall in Bhutan and she and Lisa had stayed behind in Thimphu so the three of us changed at very short notice to a smaller vehicle very ably driven by Singh. The changeover went very smoothly indeed and Iqbal had changed all our reservations by cell-phone by the time we got to the change-over point in downtown Delhi.

Singh drove us along India's incredibly congested roads with their seemingly chaotic traffic to Agra and Bharatpur over the next two days. Driving in India was easy he told us – all you needed was a good horn, good brakes and good luck. Our expert Bird Guide, Rattan Singh, met us at the entrance to Keoladeo Ghana National Park and accompanied us on the rest of our Indian adventure. We travelled by train (1st Class Air-conditioned) from Agra to Lal Kuan where we were met by Anil Tiwari, our driver for the rest of the trip.

Books & Maps

I bought a copy of Birds of the Middle East by Porter, Christensen and Schiermacker-Hansen for the United Arab Emirates which is probably the best available for the region. I found the book on the web through [Book Brains](#) at Unfortunately the distribution maps only show breeding ranges for the birds and this can be quite confusing. Unlike Southern African Field guides the illustrations, status and habitat descriptions are separate from the description of the birds and I found this quite frustrating.

The Shell Birdwatching Guide to the United Arab Emirates by Colin Richardson is a MUST for anyone visiting the UAE. I got a copy together with a UAE road map by GeoProjects from [Subbuteo Books](#) in the UK but be sure to get the latest updates from [Colin Richardson](#) in Dubai.

For Bhutan and India I bought A guide to the birds of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives by Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp as well as a road map for Bhutan from [Amazon](#) but this is a very comprehensive, heavy book along the lines of Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. I have the same criticism of it as I have of the Middle East book – the distribution maps show breeding ranges only and the text and illustrations are in different parts of the book. There is a much lighter field guide version of the same book and this is adequate for normal use. Jo bought a copy of Birds of Bhutan by the same authors through a request he put out on UK Birdnet. I bought a copy in Thimphu for future use. It could probably be ordered through Nature Tourism-Bhutan. This is a very useful book for birders going to Bhutan only, but it has no distribution maps – only text describing in which Bhutanese provinces the birds have been recorded.

Accommodation & Food

The food on the Emirates flight from Johannesburg to Dubai and back to Johannesburg was excellent – nothing short of amazing for airline food. On the flight to Delhi and back to Dubai the food was more typical of airline food – very iffy. Unfortunately the food on Druk Air was very mediocre even by airline standards.

The accommodation in Dubai was very comfortable. We had some delicious sandwiches and chips at the Picnic Café in Um al Qawain mentioned by Colin Richardson in his very useful book – the Shell Birdwatching Guide to the United Arab Emirates. We had a very good, if quite expensive, Club Sandwich for an evening meal at the airport.

While accommodation establishments and restaurants in Bhutan are often somewhat frugal by western standards they were always adequate. Contrary to trip reports we had read, we found the accommodation very comfortable. In stark contrast to the comments in the Lonely Planet Guide we found the food in Bhutan very good indeed. If you do not like spicy food however it might be a bit bland when these are omitted from the cooking. Jo, Elize and particularly me enjoy spicy food and thoroughly enjoyed the different cuisine. My favourite dish was a concoction of bracken shoots, cheese and chillies. I even managed to eat cabbage and cauliflower – something I'd never dream of doing at home – when they were prepared with cheese and chillies.

I never managed to follow Tshering's example and eat raw chillies with salt though. Butter tea was drinkable, but nothing to write home about. The tea was generally great if drunk black, but unfortunately the coffee was all of the instant variety. The camping on the Lingmethang road was a bit rough (smallish tent with a sleeping bag laid on two 'duvet' type things on the tent floor). Foodwise we were excellently catered for by Leki and his camp crew, however.

Accommodation in India varied from comfortable at Jungle Lore Birding Lodge to opulent and even deliciously decadent at the Jaypee Palace. I am a great fan of Indian food so was really in my culinary element with the food through-out India. I could not bring myself to drink masala tea though.

In both Bhutan and India all the accommodation establishments were extremely birder friendly.

Everywhere, with the exception of the Jaypee Palace Hotel in Agra, there was staff available to make and serve us breakfast at whatever time we wanted it – whether it was at 04:00 or 10:00. Only at the non-birding Jaypee Palace were we told that breakfast is served between certain hours only.

Accessibility

None of the accommodation on the entire trip was accessible to wheelchairs. Shirley had a bad fall at Gangtey Goempa and was unable to walk or get in and out of vehicles for the rest of the trip and, if you are prepared to suffer the indignities of manhandling, the guides and drivers managed this very well indeed. Showers and loos would pose problems though. The camps would be impossible for anyone with mobility problems.

Climate & Birding

While the trip was definitely a birding trip it was primarily organised as a celebration of our 25th Wedding Anniversary. This meant that we were limited to May/June which was far from the ideal time of the year. India in particular was extremely hot and waiting desperately for the onset of the monsoon.

The TV news consistently reported maximum daily temperatures of 45°C and over for the Gangetic plains (Delhi and Agra) with minimums in the low to mid 30s. In the higher altitudes of northern India and Bhutan the temperatures were quite pleasant with maximums in the high 20s for the most part. In Bhutan it rained most days and this disrupted the birding somewhat although we were able to get at least some in on each day. The high Himalayas were always under a heavy blanket of cloud so we got none of the views of the high mountains mentioned in the Lonely Planet Guide Book for Bhutan.

On the return flight from Paro to Kathmandu, however, the weather cleared and we got wonderful views of Jhomolhari Bhutan's highest peak, and a whole range of peaks in Nepal including Kanchenjunga, Makalu and Everest itself. There were a load of other peaks whose names remained unknown to us.

Many Himalayan birds are altitudinal migrants and move up to around 5 000 m during the summer months. Intra- and inter-continental migrants are for the most part winter or passage migrants to the area. The best time to visit the area appears to be during March-April with the winter months being a close second. Once the monsoon starts in mid-June I would imagine that many places become totally inaccessible. Corbett National Park is closed during this period. In spite of all this we still managed to see a total of 324 birds which, from the trip reports that I have read, seems to be about par for the course for a three-week trip.

Contrary to what some trip reports and promotional material suggest we did not find the birds tame and easy to see – not by African standards at least. Many were super skulkers that were very vocal, but took a great deal of time and patience to see. The one exception was Keoladeo where the birds were indeed easy to see. This must be a wonderful birding spot at the right time of year and I look forward to returning sometime.

Itinerary in Brief

DAY 1 – 15 May

14:15 – Depart Johannesburg International Airport aboard Emirates Flight EK 762 for Dubai, UAE

DAY 2 – 16 May

00:25 – Arrive Dubai International Airport, clear Customs and Immigration, collect hire vehicle and transfer to Airport Hotel.

06:30 – Leave hotel for Khor al Beidah, Um al Qawain. My somewhat ambitious plans to visit the interior of the UAE and Dibba on the east coast were severely curtailed and we returned to the hotel for some dearly needed sleep by

15:30. Birded in the hotel gardens from 17:30 until dark. Took the shuttle to the airport.

22:40 – Depart Dubai International Airport aboard Emirates Flight EK 512 for Delhi, India. Saw 34 birds for the day

DAY 3 – 17 May

03:15 – Arrive Indira Gandhi International Airport, Delhi. After clearing Customs and Immigration we are met by Sibi and another driver from Asian Adventures. Go birding in Sanjay Van Park after an hour's drive through Old Delhi.

11:30 – Depart Indira Gandhi International Airport aboard Druk Air Flight KB 203 for Kathmandu, Nepal and Paro, Bhutan.

15:05 – Arrive Paro International Airport. After clearing Customs and Immigration we are met by Karma (MD and Cultural Guide), Tshering (Bird Guide) Shatu and Dawa (drivers) of Nature Tourism-Bhutan. Culture Vultures leave us and we do some local birding before leaving for Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan.

Overnight Hotel River View, Thimphu

Saw 49 species for the day, 37 of which were new for the trip

DAY 4 – 18 May

04:30 start. Birding at the summit of Dochu La (La is a mountain pass in Dzongkha, the official language of Bhutan) at around 3 140 m. Breakfast at Dochu La Café. Birding from Dochu La to Punakha for overnight stop.

Overnight Meri Puensum Resort

Saw 62 species for the day, 44 of which were new for the trip

DAY 5 – 19 May

After an early breakfast at the hotel we birded along the Mo Chhu (Chhu is river in Dzongkha) valley up to Tashithang and the Jigme Dorji National Park. Meri Puensum burnt down while we were out birding so we had to change hotels when we got back. Tonight we were reunited with the Culture Vultures.

Overnight Zangdho Pelri Hotel

Saw 62 species for the day, 28 of which were new for the trip

DAY 6 – 20 May

Morning spent birding along the Mo Chhu valley again. Return to the hotel for lunch and spent the afternoon birding south of Wangdi Phodrang along the Puna Tsang Chhu valley as far as Kamichu.

Overnight Zangdho Pelri Hotel

Saw 64 species for the day, 11 of which were new for the trip

DAY 7 – 21 May

Spent the day birding along the road past Wangdue Phodrang, up the Dang Chhu valley and across Lawa La (3 360 m) to Gangtey Goempa (Gangtey Monastery).

Overnight Gangtey Goempa Guest House

Saw 68 species for the day, 14 of which were new for the trip

DAY 8 – 22 May

Birding along the road to Trongsa crossing Pele La (3 420 m). Shirley had a bad fall at Gangtey and later proved to have a broken hip. Karma took her on to Trongsa where she was examined by a Doctor and referred to the hospital at Jakar for X-rays.

Overnight Sherubling Lodge

Saw 44 species for the day, 12 of which were new for the trip

DAY 9 – 23 May

Jo joined Shirley for the drive to Jakar. Elize and I had some early morning birding along the Trongsa-Shemgang road, returning to Trongsa for a late breakfast. Later birding along the road to Jakar and the Bumthang Valley. Cross Yutong La at 3 425 m. Shirley had been x-rayed at Jakar Hospital, but the X-rays picked up no fractures. She still could not walk so she and Lisa did not go on the three-day hike in the Bumthang Valley that had been planned for them.

Overnight Mephang Guest House

Saw 62 species for the day, 13 of which were new for the trip

DAY 10 – 24 May

Make an early start from Jakar, cross Sheltang La (3 590 m) into the Ura Valley and climb over Thrumshing La (3 750 m), past the village of Sengor.

Overnight at a campsite on the Lingmethang road.

Saw 52 species for the day, 10 of which were new for the trip

DAY 11 – 25 May

Birding mostly in the vicinity of our campsite.

Overnight at a campsite on the Lingmethang road.

Saw 58 species for the day, 15 of which were new for the trip

DAY 12 – 26 May

A.M. birding along the road above the campsite. Afternoon birding lower down at Yonkala.

Overnight at a campsite on the Lingmethang road.

Saw 84 species for the day, 9 of which were new for the trip

DAY 13 – 27 May

Birding along the long drive back to Jakar where we were reunited with Shirley and Lisa. Shirley was still unable to walk.

Overnight Mephram Guest House

Saw 60 species for the day, 11 of which were new for the trip.

DAY 14 – 28 May

Today is essentially a cultural day visiting Kurjey Lhakang (Kurjey Temple), Jampa Lhakang and Jakar Dzong (Jakar Monastery-Fort) in the morning. Shirley and Lisa joined us for the drive back to Trongsa.

Overnight Sherubling Lodge

Saw 49 species for the day, none of which were new for the trip

DAY 15 – 29 May

Essentially a driving day as we take on the long and winding road to Thimphu. Shirley taken to the Thimphu Hospital where the x-rays showed a fractured femur. Tonight we had a farewell dinner with Karma, his wife Pema, Tshering and Shatu.

Overnight Hotel River View

Saw 30 species for the day, 1 of which was new for the trip

DAY 16 – 30 May

Morning spent at the Craft Market and Emporium in Thimphu followed by a visit to the Thimphu Zoo to see a Takin – Bhutan's national mammal. After many phone calls to and from the travel insurers – Discovery Heath and First National Bank in South Africa – it was decided that Shirley and Lisa should stay in Thimphu from where they would be evacuated to Bangkok in Thailand for further medical examination. Later Jo, Elize and I drove to Paro and got views of Paro and Drukgyel Dzongs (the latter a ruin) and Taktshang Goempa or Tiger's Nest Monastery. Visit Kyichu Lhakang.

Overnight Rinchen Ling Lodge

Saw 10 species for the day, none of which were new for the trip.

DAY 17 – 31 May

07:30 – Depart Paro for Kathmandu and Delhi. Met at Delhi by Asian Adventures representatives and driven to Agra. Paid a late afternoon visit to the Taj Mahal and a marble craft shop.

Overnight Jaypee Palace Hotel

Saw 22 species for the day, 2 of which were new for the trip.

DAY 18 – 1 June

Due to misunderstanding with the driver made a late start for Bharatpur and Keoladeo Ghana National Park where we met Rattan Singh, our Bird Guide for the rest of our trip. Birded until around midday when we retreated to the Bharatpur Forest Lodge. By 16:00 the temperature was still well over 40°C so we decided to give up birding and head for the air-conditioned comfort of the Jaypee Palace before catching the 21:30 overnight train from Agra Fort Station to Lal Kuan

Overnight on the train

Saw 62 species for the day, 31 of which were new for the trip.

DAY 19 – 2 June

08:30 – arrived Lal Kuan and were met by Anil Tiwari, our driver for the next four days. Anil and Rattan took us through Haldwara, Kathgodam and Naini Tal to the tiny village of Pangot high in the Himalayan foothills. Later in the afternoon we went for our first walk in the rain forests that surround the village.

Overnight Jungle Lore Birding Lodge

Saw 36 species for the day, 9 of which were new for the trip.

DAY 20 – 3 June

Birding in the forests above and below the lodge.

Overnight Jungle Lore Birding Lodge

Saw 53 species for the day, 11 of which were new for the trip.

DAY 21 – 4 June

Today we descended the Himalayan foothills to the edge of Corbett National Park. We were to stay in Tiger Camp on the edge of the Park. In Mohit's words they had a rather noisy group staying over so he had us moved to the rather upmarket Corbett River View Retreat. In the late afternoon we went birding in the Corbett National Park buffer zone.

Overnight Corbett River View Retreat

Saw 78 species for the day, 20 of which were new for the trip.

DAY 24 – 5 June

An early morning start saw us waiting in a 4-wheel drive vehicle at one of the entrances to Corbett. We birded in the Park from 05:30 until 10:00 after which we returned to the Retreat for a late breakfast and packed up for the long trip back to Delhi and onwards to South Africa.

After a nightmare drive to Delhi we stopped at the Hotel Sunstar. We were able to freshen up here before going on to dinner at the Delhi-o-Delhi Club with Mohit and Suchita Aggarwal. After dinner we bade farewell to Rattan. Anil took us out to the Indira Gandhi International Airport for our flight back to South Africa and we said goodbye there. Saw 60 species for the day, 11 of which were new for the trip.

DAY 25 – 6 June

04:30 – Depart Delhi for Dubai aboard Emirates Flight EK 513 for Dubai.

06:45 – Arrive Dubai International Airport

09:55 – Depart Dubai for Johannesburg aboard Emirates Flight EK 763

16:15 – Arrive Johannesburg International Airport where, after clearing Customs and Immigration, we are met by Cheri Heber-Percy, Julia's mother. Jo flew on to Cape Town with a British Airways (Comair) flight. We stayed at the Laubscher's Johannesburg home for another two nights before returning to Wakkerstroom.

Lisa and Shirley were evacuated by charter aircraft to Bangkok where Shirley had a hip replacement before being flown back to South Africa – a good example of why all travellers should take out adequate travel insurance.

Day by Day

15th May

Today was the start of our odyssey. Dries took us to Johannesburg International Airport. After checking our luggage in at the Emirates counter we walked to the Domestic Arrivals Terminal where we met the Johnsons off their flight from Cape Town. We ate an extremely expensive toasted sandwich and drunk an equally expensive beer in the 'duty free' area while waiting to board the flight. The plane departed on time at 14:15 local time and we had a rather uneventful 8-hour flight to Dubai.

16th May

We landed on time at Dubai International Airport at 00:25. The queues at the immigration counters were horrendously long and by the time we had cleared Customs and Immigration, collected our hire car from Thrifty Car Hire and checked into the Emirates Wing of the Airport Hotel (the lady behind the check-in counter was a Zulu from Johannesburg!) it was 03:00 and we were desperate for a few hours sleep.

Jo, who had been unable to sleep, knocked on our door at 06:00 – 45 minutes before the agreed time – and suggested that we go out birding. I had planned a very ambitious day for us including Khor al Beidah, Um al Qawain Breakwater on the Arabian Gulf, Masafi in the UAE interior and Dibba on the Gulf of Oman with a brief excursion into the Sultanate of Oman north of Dibba. We were led to believe (by various guide books and the lady at Thrifty Car Hire) that the signage in the UAE was excellent and we could not possibly get lost. Think again! Signage in Dubai and Um al Qawain was indeed excellent. The problem was that the emirates of Sharjah and Ajman lay in between the two and signage here was non-existent.

Our problems were compounded by yours truly who left the UAE road map in the hotel bedroom! Anyway to cut a long story short we eventually managed to get across Sharjah and Ajman with the help of many very friendly and helpful petrol pump attendants. At one of these filling stations we saw our only INDIAN SILVERBILL of the trip. Once past this hurdle we found our way to Khor al Beidah (after stopping at the Picnic Café for a delicious burger and chips – far superior to the American version) with the aid of Colin Richardson's excellent guide to birding in the UAE. We rather nervously skirted the security wall of the Um al Qawain Ruler's Palace and reached the Khor (lagoon) at just about the ideal time – two hours before high tide.

The khor is a prime winter site for Crab Plover (which Jo had not yet seen) and this was a major target species for us. The main summer site, according to Richardson, is however at Dhabbiyah around 200 km south of Dubai in Abu Dhabi. As luck would have it I got a brief glimpse of two birds flying over the mangroves on an island in the khor.

I could not get Jo or Elize onto them in time and they never made another appearance. We saw 18 species around the khor. From our point of view the most interesting of these were GREEN (Little Green) BEE-EATER, KENTISH PLOVER, LESSER SAND-PLOVER, RED-WATTLED LAPWING, CRAB PLOVER (not a lifer for me or Elize) WESTERN REEF HERON (a lifer for Elize), CRESTED LARK, ISABELLINE SHRIKE (a lifer for Elize), SOUTHERN GREY SHRIKE, CLAMOROUS REED WARBLER and PURPLE SUNBIRD. We also got brief views of a Short-toed Lark, but not good enough to decide whether it was a Greater or Lesser Short-toed.

From the Khor we made our way to the beachfront at Um al Qawain. We intended to go out onto the breakwater, but it was a looong walk in the blistering heat so we settled for a short walk on the beach instead. While on the beach a Great Cormorant flew past and was quickly followed by a Bank Cormorant – wait a minute what was a Bank Cormorant doing here? Of course it was a SOCOTRA CORMORANT! Other good birds for us at Um al Qawain included WHITE-EARED BULBUL (introduced from India?) and BLACK-CAPPED BULBUL. Sleep deprivation and depression brought on by the heat and the huge amounts of litter lying around resulted in our decision to can the rest of the day's planned birding and head back to the air-conditioned Airport Hotel for some more sleep. One day we'll get back during a cooler time of the year and explore the rest of the UAE and perhaps Oman.

When we eventually got back to Dubai (with the help of many petrol attendants again) Elize and I opted for a sleep while Jo joined Shirley and Lisa for another bout of shopping in downtown Dubai. Later Elize and I went walkabout and had STREAKED SCRUB-WARBLER, EURASIAN HOOPOE (a lifer for Elize) and the introduced RED-VENTED BULBUL in the hotel gardens. I did not have the courage to face the Dubai traffic again so I phoned Thrifty and asked them to collect the car while we made use of the hotel's shuttle service to the airport. Our flight to Delhi took off on time at 22:40 local time.

17th May

After and uneventful 3 hour flight we landed at Indira Gandhi International Airport at 03:15 local time. After clearing Customs and Immigration we were met by Sibi and another driver from Asian Adventures. They whisked us through the congestion of old Delhi. Even at that hour things were buzzing – street vendors were waking up after a night on the streets, cows were wandering around the streets in search of edible refuse, dogs were all over the place and the ever-present motorised and cycle rickshaws were plying their trade taking people to their place of work for the approaching new day.

We arrived at Sanjay Van, a large urban park, before daybreak. Sibi advised us not to venture into the park before light, but to stay near the relative safety of the cars. Whether his concerns were about possible wild animal attack or human predators was not clear. Soon we were in the middle of one of the most wonderful dawn choruses I have ever heard. Asian Koels, Common Pea fowls, Coppersmith Barbets, Oriental Magpie and Indian Robins, White-eared and Red-vented Bulbuls among many others were all competing with each other to have their voices heard. With first light we saw our first ORIENTAL MAGPIE ROBIN soon followed by RUFIOUS TREEPIE and the endemic INDIAN ROBIN. We saw a total of 33 species in this lovely park in the short

two hours or so that we were there. Other lifers for us included COMMON PEA FOWL, SPOT-BILLED DUCK, BROWN-FRONTED WOODPECKER, our first really wild ROSE-RINGED PARAKEET and COMMON MYNA, RED COLLARED-DOVE, YELLOW-FOOTED GREEN-PIGEON, WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN, INDIAN POND-HERON, the long-tailed BLACK DRONGO, BRAHMINY STARLING, BANK MYNA, ASHY PRINIA and JUNGLE BABBLER. The most exciting sighting of all was a SPOTTED OWLET found hiding deep in the Acacias by eagle-eyed Sibi (as a driver he is often not recognised as the up and coming top class birder that he really is – he does not even possess a pair of binoculars). We also saw our first NORTHERN PALM SQUIRREL of the trip. All in all it was a wonderful introduction to birding on the Indian sub-continent. We headed back to the airport and proceeded to check in for our Druk Air flight to Paro.

It was with a modicum of relief that we heard that the flight was indeed happening. Paro Airport is a fair weather airport and the aircraft only land if they have visual contact with the landing strip. Delays of a few days can happen simply because there's too much mist at Paro. My heart was in my mouth when the Druk Air agent at Delhi refused to allow us to board the plane unless we had the visa authorisation numbers from Immigration in Bhutan. I phoned Thimphu and fortunately Karma was in his office. He was most surprised that this had happened as the visas had been issued and were waiting for us at Paro airport as is the normal custom. Anyway he had the required numbers with him and we were able to satisfy the man at the Druk Air desk. To this day we don't know whether the Bhutanese Immigration Policy had been changed or whether the man was just being ultra-cautious. We managed to get window seats on the left side of the aircraft where we should have great views of the Himalayas, including Everest. Alas this was not to be – the high Himalayas were under a thick blanket of cloud. Fortunately the ground below us was open and we were able to land on time at Paro International Airport.

You knew you were in a place that time had passed by when you looked over to the landing strip to what looked like a Dzong and suddenly realised that this was the Airport Terminal Building. This knowledge was reinforced when, after clearing Customs and Immigration, we met Karma, Tshering, Shatu (who was promptly nicknamed Schatzi because of his endearing personality and diminutive size) and Dawa. After the usual welcome we were told that Thimphu, the Bhutanese capital, was 57 km away and it would take us two hours to drive there!

The Culture Vultures were whisked off by Karma and Dawa while we started birding almost immediately along the banks of the Paro Chhu. Our exhausted spirits were given a tremendous boost when among the first birds that we saw were RIVER LAPWING and the almost mythical IBISBILL. Other interesting birds that we saw before leaving Paro included ORIENTAL TURTLE DOVE, GREY-BACKED SHRIKE, RED-BILLED CHOUGH, LARGE-BILLED CROW, PLUMBEOUS WATER REDSTART, BLACK BULBUL and RUSSET SPARROW. We heard, but could not see, Black-tailed Crake skulking in a small reedbed. Jo complained of chest pains here while looking for the crake, but insisted that there was nothing wrong and that it was something he experienced quite frequently. By the time we got to Thimphu we had added BLUE WHISTLING THRUSH, WHITE-COLLARED BLACKBIRD and WHITE-THROATED LAUGHING THRUSH to our fast-growing list of trip birds. Our overnight

stop was in the River View Hotel overlooking Thimphu. After a lovely meal we all retired rather rapidly to bed for some much needed sleep. While we liked the firm beds in Bhutan the pillows were rather too firm and were quite uncomfortable in most cases.

18th May

We met for tea and biscuits in the hotel foyer at 04:00. The intention was to be at the summit of Dochu La around dawn.

Jo was not feeling at all well and as we climbed up the pass he became progressively worse and his eyes became very bloodshot. Tshering felt that it was altitude related and that he would improve as we descended the other side of the pass. At the summit he and Schatzi stayed with the vehicle while Tshering, Elize and I went off for a walk into the forest.

Our first walk was of necessity slow as the altitude (3 140 m) was also having its effect on us. I was distinctly drowsy, short of breath and developed a slight headache.

These symptoms disappeared if I stopped every now and again and pretended to be searching intently for a bird in the shrubbery. The forest was truly beautiful. The rhododendrons were unfortunately nearly over, but the bit that was left gave an idea of how magnificent it must be with everything in flower. Our first forest birding experience was initially a bit disheartening. Tshering continually pointed out invisible birds in the forest.

Finally we did get to see a bird, and another and another. Our eyes adapted somewhat to forest birding and we decided that Tshering was not really Dzongkha for “stringer” – there REALLY were plenty of birds in the forest. One problem of course was that all the warblers were green and most of the smaller ground dwellers like wren-babblers, etc. were dark brown.

We returned to the vehicle to find Jo no better than before. Tshering still felt that his condition was altitude related and that it would improve as we descended the pass towards Punakha. We decided to continue with the original ‘game plan’ and had breakfast at the small restaurant at Dochu La summit. After a very tasty breakfast (I had my first taste of butter tea and decided it did not matter greatly if I never tasted it again) we started our descent of the pass, birding on the way.

Jo did indeed perk up a bit as we descended the pass, but was still not well and became quite unsteady on his feet. We stopped at a local basic health clinic. The medic here was also of the opinion that his discomfort was altitude related. He gave Jo some tablets which he said would temporarily give some relief. He also telephoned the hospital at Punakha and warned them that we would be coming in to them as soon as we arrived in the town. In the event the doctor at the hospital concurred with the medic – that Jo’s blood pressure had “gone through the roof” and that this was probably the result of a combination of the sudden altitudinal changes and physical exhaustion brought on by lack of sleep and the long flight from South Africa.

After our visit to the hospital we checked in to our overnight accommodation at the beautifully situated Meri Puensum Resort. Our rooms were in stand alone cottages downhill from the main building.

All in all we saw a total of 51 birds on our walk and on the pass. The most interesting of these were KALIJ PHEASANT, SPOTTED DOVE, BLACK EAGLE, LONG-TAILED SHRIKE, GREY TREEPIE, SPOTTED NUTCRACKER, BLACK-WINGED CUCKOOSHRIKE, LONG-TAILED MINIVET, SCARLET MINIVET, ASHY DRONGO, CHESTNUT-BELLIED ROCK-THRUSH, BLUE-CAPPED ROCK-THRUSH, RUFOUS-GORGETED FLYCATCHER, VERDITER FLYCATCHER, PALE BLUE FLYCATCHER, CHESTNUT-TAILED STARLING, CHESTNUT-BELLIED NUTHATCH, FIRE-CAPPED TIT, GREEN-BACKED TIT, YELLOW-BROWED TIT, BLACK-THROATED TIT, MOUNTAIN BULBUL, HILL PRINIA, ORIENTAL WHITE-EYE, ASHY-THROATED WARBLER, GREENISH WARBLER, LARGE-BILLED LEAF-WARBLER, WHISTLER'S WARBLER, GREY-HOODED WARBLER, BLACK-FACED LAUGHINGTHRUSH, CHESTNUT-CROWNED LAUGHINGTHRUSH, WHITE-BROWED FULVETTA, STRIPE-THROATED YUHINA, RUFOUS-VENTED YUHINA, BLACK-CHINNED YUHINA, RUFOUS SIBIA, FIRE-BREASTED FLOWERPECKER, GREEN-TAILED SUNBIRD and WHITE-WINGED GROSBEAK. In the forests of Dochu La we also saw our first HIMALAYAN STRIPED SQUIRREL.

On approaching Punakha we had good scope views of two BLACK-TAILED CRAKES in the paddy fields at Metshina near the turnoff to Punakha. From a viewpoint overlooking the Puna Tsang Chhu we had good views of two very late RUDDY SHELDUCK and some magnificent WHITE-THROATED KINGFISHERS. We also got some more great looks at River Lapwing and Ibisbill.

19th May

The day was spent birding in the Mo Chhu valley along the road from Punakha to Tashitang. On the way we picked up Ram, a Forest Guard and friend of Tshering's. Ram had a wonderful knowledge of the plants in the forest and we thoroughly enjoyed his company. The road passed through some very beautiful scenery along the banks of the fast-flowing Mo Chhu. The river has apparently been classified as a Class A1 rafting river.

We saw a total of 62 bird species today. Of these three are considered to be globally threatened – the Endangered WHITE-BELLIED HERON (Bhutan's most threatened species) and the Near Threatened TAWNY FISH-OWL and YELLOW-VENTED WARBLER. It was a real toss up between White-bellied Heron or Tawny Fish Owl for bird of the day. It was only the second time that Tshering had seen this bird while on a birding trip and only the third time ever for him so he was of course very excited about this. On the basis of its rarity though I guess the honours really have to go to the heron, although I must confess the owl won hands down on charisma. Other lifers included LESSER YELLOW-NAPE, GREAT BARBET, GOLDEN THROATED BARBET, BLUE-THROATED BARBET, COMMON KINGFISHER, CRESTED KINGFISHER, LESSER CUCKOO, HIMALAYAN SWIFTLET, WEDGE-TAILED PIGEON, ORANGE-BELLIED LEAFBIRD, SLENDER-BILLED ORIOLE, MAROON ORIOLE, SMALL NILTAVA, SLATY-BACKED FORKTAIL, HILL MYNA, WHITE-TAILED NUTHATCH, SLATY-BELLIED TESIA, STRIATED LAUGHINGTHRUSH,

RUSTY-CHEEKED SCIMITAR-BABBLER, NEPAL FULVETTA, WHISKERED YUHINA, BLACK-THROATED SUNBIRD and EURASIAN TREE SPARROW. Today was also the first time that we saw ASSAMESE MACAQUES on the trip.

On returning to Punakha we found that the main building of the Meri Puensum Resort had burnt down during the day. The Culture Vultures had in the meantime arrived in Punakha and Karma had already made alternative arrangements for us at the nearby Zangdho Pelri Hotel.

20th May

After an early breakfast at the hotel we got underway at around 05:30. Tshering had a few arrangements to make at the hotel so the three of us started walking down the road towards Punakha. Our first new bird for the day was GREATER COUCAL, seen along the roadside here. On the outskirts of Punakha we were pulled off the road by a local traffic policeman. The road was lined by schoolchildren who were soon joined by adults approaching from all directions. The main monastic body has its winter headquarters at Punakha Dzong and we had come across their annual trek to the summer headquarters at Thimphu. We were treated to close up views of the procession which included the Je Kenpho, the religious head of Bhutan. Only the Je Kenpho and the King, the secular head of Bhutan, are permitted to wear yellow kabneys (scarves).

The morning was spent birding along the Mo Chhu valley again. We headed back to the area where we had seen the White-bellied Heron, but no sign of it this morning. Jo, however, did find the Tawny Fish-Owl roosting in a tree on the opposite riverbank. While we were still admiring the owl in the scope the Musso with the Culture Vultures made an appearance and they soon joined us on the river bank.

The owl was a lifer for Karma, another indication of how lucky (skilful?) we were to find this bird on two successive days. Karma soon revealed the true reason for joining us. He had been to the Punakha Hospital to find out more about their diagnosis of Jo's problems. The doctor there stated that Jo should have at least one day's absolute rest before we continued on our journey and Karma had come to collect him and take him back to the hotel by force if need be. Jo surprised us all by leaving quietly with Karma who took him back to the Zangdho Pelri. Life birds for the morning were BAY WOODPECKER, MOUNTAIN HAWK EAGLE, GREY-CHINNED MINIVET, CROW-BILLED DRONGO, BLUE-THROATED FLYCATCHER, SCALY-BREASTED MUNIA (me only as Elize could not get onto them before they disappeared) and CRESTED BUNTING. Today was also the first time that we saw the very attractive CAPPED LANGUR or Capped Leaf Monkey.

We returned to the hotel for lunch and took an afternoon trip along the road leading south past Wangdue Phodrang.

We drove past the construction site for the Basochhu hydroelectric project and carried on for a while towards Kamichu. Our target species here was Great Hornbill. Tshering knew of a roosting site for these birds, but unfortunately we did not find them this afternoon. Life birds for the afternoon were HOUSE SWIFT (a possible split – Apus

nipalensis – from our Little Swift) and SPOT-WINGED STARLING. Tshering was quite excited about the latter as, while he had seen them here before, they were listed in Birds of Bhutan as ‘rare’ and only recorded from Tashigang Province in the far east of the country. We returned to Punakha for another overnight stop at the very comfortable Zangdho Pelri Hotel.

21st May

Jo joined us for an early breakfast. He was feeling and looking much better after the forced rest yesterday and we set off at around 06:00. Our first stop was 21 km later at Wangdue Phodrang, the nearest filling station to Punakha.

From here we made our way up the Dang Chhu valley to Nobding and the Gaden Tashiding Restaurant for lunch. At first the habitat was quite different to what we had been in over the last few days. The hillsides here were comparatively sparsely covered with smallish shrubs and open grassy areas. Here we saw our first BAR-WINGED FLYCATCHER-SHRIKE of the trip. Soon the vegetation became denser, however and we made several stops, birding from the roadside. At one of these we stopped at the base of a high cliff where Tshering pointed out some very large beehives on the cliff face. “Check all the shrubs and bushes in the area” he instructed.

We scanned all the likely-looking shrubs and suddenly there was a slight movement and a flash of yellow in one of the cliff-side shrubs. “Got it” I yelled. “YELLOW-RUMPED HONEYGUIDE.”

We saw a total of 59 species of birds along the roadside on the long climb out of the Dang Chhu valley. Other life birds seen along this stretch of road included FORK-TAILED SWIFT, YELLOW-BILLED BLUE MAGPIE, WHITE-THROATED FANTAIL, WHITE-CAPPED WATER REDSTART, STRIATED BULBUL, LEMON-RUMPED WARBLER, BLYTH’S LEAF-WARBLER and CHESTNUT-CROWNED WARBLER. After lunch we continued over Lawa La to Gangtey Goempa and our overnight stop at Gangtey Goempa Guest House where we were reunited with the Culture Vultures. It rained on and off all day and we arrived at Gangtey in quite heavy rain. At the turn-off to Gangtey and the Pobjika Valley we saw our first OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT and DARK-SIDED FLYCATCHER. In the forest between the turn-off to the Lawa La summit we saw a total of seven birds before rain stopped play for the day.

22nd May

After another early start we were birding in the wide expanse of dwarf bamboo between Gangtey Goempa and Lawa La. The antennae-eared Tshering told Schatzi to stop. He had heard BROWNISH-FLANKED BUSH-WARBLER calling in the roadside shrubbery. Over an hour later and several brief glimpses of a small brownish bird darting around a few centimetres off the ground in the dense shrubbery, calling loudly all the time, we decided that this was probably as good a view as we were going to get.

The next bird heard was HIMALAYAN MONAL. Suddenly a single bird rose out of the dwarf bamboo on whirring wings and flew over to a lone roadside conifer. This large bird was surprisingly well hidden in the topmost branches of the tree and we only got

views of small, but very colourful, parts of the bird. Suddenly it decided to fly again and we were treated to magnificent flight views of this magnificent bird.

Tshering spotted a GREY-SIDED BUSH-WARBLER flying low and fast over the bamboo before disappearing again. After staring at the patch of bamboo described by him the bird did another flight for us. As with the Brownish-flanked Bush-warbler we would have liked a better view, but decided that this was probably as good a view as we were going to get given the time constraints imposed by a birding trip. Other life birds that we saw in the dwarf bamboo included DUSKY WARBLER and GOLDEN-SPECTACLED WARBLER.

It was while looking at the Grey-sided Bush-Warbler that the Culture Vultures caught up with us and stopped at the roadside. Shirley had taken a step backwards while talking to an American fellow-guest at Gangtey and had fallen off the step at the entrance to the guest house. She was unable to walk and had to be carried into the vehicle. Karma thought that it may well be a bad bruise or sprained muscle and was going to take her straight through to our next stop at Trongsa where there was a doctor who could examine her. We would meet up with them there later in the day.

After crossing Lawa La we were back in coniferous forest again. On a short walk through the forest we found many more Dark-sided Flycatchers, Olive-backed Pipits with their heavily streaked underparts and colourful Collared Grosbeaks. Among the many Green-tailed Sunbirds there was a single MRS GOULD'S SUNBIRD. Other lifers here included RED-TAILED MINLA, COMMON ROSEFINCH and RED-HEADED BULLFINCH. On the way up to the summit of Pele La we saw a flock of NEPAL HOUSE MARTINS.

Below Pele La we searched a dense stand of bamboo for Parrotbills. We had good views of GREAT PARROTBILL and STREAKED LAUGHINGTHRUSH, but Brown Parrotbill eluded us for the moment. After lunch at Tshering's Restaurant (nothing to do with our guide) at Sephu the rain set in once more putting a virtual end to the day's birding. We drove straight through to Trongsa where we joined up with the Culture Vultures once again at the Sherubling Lodge.

When we arrived Shirley was being examined by the Bhutanese doctor and her nurse. It was decided that she should go through to the Bumthang Hospital near Jakar for X-rays the following day.

The total number of bird species for the day was a humble 44 species, but taking into account that all of these were seen during the course of the morning this was probably not too bad a total.

This evening we had our first taste of Bhutanese whisky. Even for one of Scottish descent I have to admit that Special Courier was not a bad whisky at all!

23rd May

Jo decided that he wanted to go with Shirley and Lisa to the Bumthang Hospital today so Elize, Tshering and I transferred to the 'culture mobile' with Dawa as our driver for

the day. We initially headed south of Trongsa along the road to Zhemgang and southern Bhutan. We drove south until we reached a waterfall and some high cliffs with a group of beehives – another site for the Near Threatened Yellow-rumped Honeyguide. We saw two birds high up on the cliff near the beehives. We also spent a lot of time trying to lure a PYGMY WREN_BABBLER into view. Eventually I got a brief view of a small dark brown bird calling incessantly in the dark brown undergrowth. While I would have liked a better view I decided to settle for this rather than spend an inordinate amount of time searching for the bird. There was a very high probability that I would not get a better view in any event. We later had a similar experience with a SPOTTED WREN-BABBLER – another Near Threatened species. Other life birds seen on this excursion were RUFOUS-VENTED TIT, YELLOW-BREASTED GREENFINCH, the immaculate GREY-WINGED BLACKBIRD and the equally elegant SPOTTED FORKTAIL. Elize, Tshering and Dawa also saw a YELLOW-THROATED MARTEN come to drink at the stream while I was away in the forest having an “Imodium Moment”.

We returned to Sherubling Lodge for a late breakfast, before crossing the 3 425 m high Yuthong La. In the forests above Trongsa we found RED-BILLED LEIOTHRIX and CHESTNUT-TAILED MINLA.

From Yuthong La we entered the Bumthang District and descended into the Chhume Valley. Here we had our first Black-billed Magpie of the trip. In Bhutan these birds are only found in Bumthang and are sometimes known locally as Bumthang Magpies. Life birds in the Chhume Valley included YELLOW-BELLIED FANTAIL and SPOTTED LAUGHINGTHRUSH. As we approached Jakar the road hugged the Bumthang Chhu. From a roadside vantage point we found a straggling Mallard and saw yet another Ibisbill.

Jo saw a LITTLE PIED FLYCATCHER on the road from Trongsa to Jakar.

We continued on to our overnight stop at the brand new and well decorated Mephram Guest House. Shirley had been X-rayed and no fractures were detected. She still could not walk so it was agreed that she and Lisa would stay with Karma and Dawa at Mephram Guest House for the next four nights. Karma would take them to various places in Bumthang as and when they felt up to it.

That evening at dinner we met Leki, the camp chef who was to look after us for the next three days on the Lingmethang road. He and the camp crew had just arrived with the camping equipment from Thimphu. They were to spend the night at Jakar before going on ahead of us to our campsite the next morning.

24th May

A 04:30 breakfast saw us on the road shortly after 05:00 on our way to our camping experience on the Lingmethang road. It was to be a long drive across the two highest passes on the trip – Shertang La at 3 590 m and Thrumshing La at 3 750 m – so there would not be a lot of time for birding along the way. We all experienced some effects of the altitude. For the most part these manifested themselves in the form of headaches and extreme drowsiness which was also helped on by the incessant

rocking and swaying motions of the vehicle negotiating potholes, road works and hairpin bends.

The weather prospects were not good and we were looking forward to both the journey and the camping with some trepidation. There was, however, never a thought of not going to this area that we had been hearing and reading about for well over a year now. Between Jakar and Ura we crossed Shertanf La. Shortly after passing the picturesque village of Ura we entered Thrumshing La National Park.

The road wound tortuously through coniferous forests and across mountain streams until we eventually reached the summit of Thrumshing La itself. It was raining off and on for the entire journey and we saw only seven bird species on this portion of the trip. We tried very hard to turn a young Grey-backed Shrike into a Brown Shrike, but the bird was totally uncooperative. The only lifer in this section was a BLUE-FRONTED REDSTART on the Lirgang Chhu near the Liri Zam (Liri Bridge).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the rain, the descent from the summit of Thrumshing La down to the village of Sengor was both spectacular and hair-raising. There were major road repairs being undertaken at the time and the road at these points was very muddy and churned up. The many heavy construction vehicles had created deep ruts in the mud and while we slithered and slid through them well enough on the way down, we were rather concerned about how we were to negotiate them on the way up in three days time. Shortly after the summit we saw our first FIRE-TAILED SUNBIRD. The road left the forest and entered an area of open meadows. The sharp-eyed Tshering spotted a movement in a roadside field and we stopped, got out and scanned the field hoping for a Rosy Pipit. In the event the bird turned out to be an almost as good ORIENTAL SKYLARK.

Our roadside lunch stop near Sengor was in a lovely patch of open meadow. Tshering told us that they normally camp in this meadow, but this year the farmers had fenced off the fields and did not want campers here. The meadow was going to be converted to fields. After lunch, during which the rain mercifully stopped for a while, we headed on down the spectacular road to our forest campsite at Norbugang. It had started raining once again and we slept through most of this spectacular part of the trip. Fortunately the weather would clear for our return trip and we would enjoy the scenery and the birding on the way back.

By the time we reached the camp Leki and his crew had got everything set up – two sleeping tents for us, a dining tent, a kitchen tent in which the camp crew were to sleep, and a loo tent – a small tent over a hole in the ground.

After a cup of hot tea and some biscuits the rain stopped for a bit and we went for our first birding walk along the road. Life birds here included RUFOUS-NECKED HORNBILL (a species classified as Vulnerable on a global scale), RUFOUS-BELLED NILTAVA, GREY-HEADED CANARY-FLYCATCHER, ASIAN HOUSE MARTIN and CHESTNUT-HEADED TESIA. From Thrumshing La to the camp we had seen a total of 45 species of birds.

25th May

Once again it rained for much of the day, but we were able to get out for walks in between the showers. We also paid a visit to the local store – Changla Shop – where we bought sweets for the local kids and some Tiger beers for us. In total today we saw 58 bird species of which the following were lifers – GREY-FACED WOODPECKER, BLUE-BEARDED BEE-EATER, INDIAN CUCKOO, SHORT-BILLED MINIVET, SPANGLED DRONGO, YELLOW-CHEEKED TIT, WHITE-SPECTACLED WARBLER, GREY-CHEEKED WARBLER, BROAD-BILLED WARBLER, RUFOUS-NECKED LAUGHINGTHRUSH, RUFOUS-CAPPED BABBLER, GOLDEN BABBLER, CUTIA, BLUE-WINGED MINLA and the Near Threatened YELLOW-THROATED FULVETTA. We also saw a Little Pied Flycatcher in the trees above the forest so Elize and I caught up one species on Jo again. Mammal wise we had our first sighting of the threatened GOLDEN LANGURS.

26th May

Today the weather started clearing. We birded above the camp this morning with our main target being the two trogons that are found in these forests. I got a fleeting view of the whitish undertail of a perched bird and a distant view of a RED-HEADED TROGON. Jo got a look at WARD'S TROGON – a species classified as Vulnerable on a Global Scale. Other life birds that we saw in the forest this morning include GREY-CAPPED WOODPECKER, HODGSON'S HAWK-CUCKOO, ASIAN DRONGO-CUCKOO, BRONZED DRONGO, LARGE NILTAVA and HOARY-THROATED BARWING.

Later we drove downhill toward Yongkola. We were surprised and to some extent slightly embarrassed to find Leki and the camp crew waiting with lunch for us at the roadside just opposite a newly built VIP rest house. Not only had they brought lunch but they had laid a table for us complete with tablecloth and three place settings. Later we drove further down into the valley and stopped at a small stream before turning back and heading up to our camp for our last night in eastern Bhutan. Life birds that we saw at the lower altitudes of the valley included 12 soaring WHITE-RUMPED VULTURES, a lone CRESTED SERPENT-EAGLE in flight and several noisy flocks of WHITE-CRESTED LAUGHINGTHRUSHES. We also saw two Yellow-throated Martens along the road so Jo and I caught up to Elize on the mammal front.

27th May

The plan was to leave at 04:30 this morning for the long drive back over the high passes of Thrumshing La and Shertang La to Jakar. Leki and the gang had hot tea and biscuits waiting for us at 04:00. For various reasons the plan did not come together too well and we ended up leaving the camp at around 05:15. We birded the forest road up to Sengor listening at likely spots for Satyr Tragopan. At a point where we actually heard one we scrambled down into the forest in a vain attempt to find them. It was at this point that Elize and I were lucky enough to spot a pair of EYE-BROWED WREN-BABBLERS on the forest floor.

Tshering heard a bird calling from inside the dense forest undergrowth and dashed off down the steep roadside bank to find it. Elize was away somewhere, but he excitedly beckoned Jo and me to join him. After much agonising and desperate staring in the dark undergrowth searching for a bird that was singing loudly trying to tell us where it

was we saw it – a WHITE-BROWED SHORTWING. This dark navy blue bird with a small, but brilliantly white, supercillium was incredibly difficult to see in the dense, dark undergrowth.

While everyone else was off watering trees I got wonderful views of a RUFOUS-WINGED FULVETTA. Unfortunately I was the only one to see this lovely little bird. Not to be out done Jo and Tshering saw a BARRED CUCKOO-DOVE fly across the road in front of our van. Despite a subsequent search the bird was not seen again. We finally stopped for a roadside breakfast at our lunch spot of a few days ago, just east of the village of Sengor.

Leki and the gang, who had in the mean time broken up the camp, caught up with us at Sengor. We were quite relieved to see them in their four-wheel drive vehicle as the road works of Thrumshing La still lay ahead of us. The rain of the last few days could certainly not have improved the road quality any. We needn't have worried though. Schatzi, our champion driver got us through the now VERY muddy patch without any problem at all. Only once did we need a little push from Tshering. It was nevertheless reassuring to have the 4x4 behind us. After we had successfully negotiated the road works Leki and co passed us. We met them later on the banks of the Lirgang Chhu where they had once again laid the table and prepared lunch for us.

Of the 56 species we saw between our camp and the summit of Thrumshing La the following nine were lifers – the four above plus SPECKLED WOOD-PIGEON, ULTRAMARINE FLYCTACHER, TICKELL'S LEAF-WARBLER, BUFF-BARRED WARBLER and HUME'S WARBLER.

After crossing Thrumshing La summit we walked down the road a bit admiring the beautiful rhododendrons that were still in flower here. "FIRE-TAILED MYZORNIS" Tshering shouted excitedly. We desperately searched the 'rhodos' that he was pointing at. Sure enough there it was – a multi-coloured jewel on a beautiful orange rhododendron bush. Unfortunately we were not able to put Elize on it in time for her to see this marvellous little bird. The rest of the trip back to Jakar was relatively uneventful. Near the Guest House we stopped at a vantage point overlooking a dense thicket of bamboo studded with the occasional conifer. After scanning the bamboo somewhat hopefully we were rewarded with a whole bunch of BROWN PARROTBILLS – birds that we had missed earlier near Pele La.

Karma welcomed us back to Mephram Guest House. He was going to leave us the following morning and return to Thimphu where he had some matters to attend to, including getting an appointment at Thimphu Hospital for Shirley who was still unable to walk and confirming our flights back to Delhi on Druk Air. Shirley and Lisa would join us in the Hi Ace for the remainder of the trip.

This was the de facto end of our birding trip in Bhutan – from here on out it was to be cultural activities and buying souvenirs with birding only being an incidental activity.

28th May

This morning we visited two temples – Kurjey Lhakang and Jampa Lhakang – and Jakar Dzong.

Jampa Lhakang is believed to have been built in 659 AD on the same day as Kyichu Lhakang in Paro making these the two oldest temples in Bhutan. These temples were two of many that were built on the same day by Songtsen Gampo, King of Tibet, to subdue a demoness who was lying on her back across the Himalayas. Jampa Lhakang pins down her left knee.

Kurjey Lhakang is built on one of the holiest sites in Bhutan and encloses a cave on which the body print of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), an eighth century saint who is worshipped in Bhutan as the second Buddha, can be seen. The temple was built in 1652 by the then Penlop (Governor) of Trongsa.

Jakar Dzong is situated on top of a hill overlooking the Choskor or Bumthang Valley. It was built in 1667 and is the largest dzong in Bhutan. Apart from housing the rabdey (district monk body) in summer the Dzong houses administrative offices of the District Government and the District Court.

We returned to Mephram Guest House for lunch where we heard that Karma and the others had to spend the day in Trongsa as there had been a landslide on the Trongsa Thimphu road. It was expected that this would be cleared by the late afternoon when they would continue on their way.

During the afternoon we drove to Trongsa for another overnight stay at Sherubling Lodge. On the way we stopped at Zungney to look at the woollen cloth and garments made by the local weavers. I wanted a jersey incorporating some of this cloth, but all the available ones were too small for me. I decided rather to order one from the lady at Sherubling lodge. She would make a larger one up for me and get it to Karma in Thimphu who would in turn send it on to me in South Africa.

Of the 24 species of birds we saw today none were new for the trip. We did however see a WILD BOAR on the road.

29th May

Today was a travelling day as we wanted to arrive in Thimphu in time to get Shirley to the hospital for more X-rays and another examination that afternoon. We saw a total of 30 species of birds along the road. Of these a lone SPOT-WINGED GROSBEAK was a lifer. We also saw a MUNTJAC or barking deer at the roadside. Our lunchtime stop was at the Gaden Tashiding Restaurant again and we stayed overnight at the Hotel River View in Thimphu once more.

Elize, Lisa and I spent the afternoon walking around downtown Thimphu while Jo and Shirley were at the hospital. This time Shirley's X-rays showed a broken femur in her hip. The Orthopaedic Surgeon at the hospital maintained that she would still be able to travel in the Business or First Class section of the normal commercial airlines provided that there was a wheel chair to meet her at each airport on the way. On

contacting the travel insurance people in South Africa they said that they did not think that this was a good idea and would come back to us.

Karma, his wife Pema, Tshering, Shatu and Dawa joined us for an excellent dinner at the Hotel River View this evening. This was the formal end to our visit to this amazing country. All of us hoped to be back some time in the not too distant future and both Karma and Tshering said that they intended visiting South Africa. We felt that we had made some very good friends over the last two weeks and were quite sad to be parting so soon.

30th May

This morning was spent at the Thimphu Craft Market, the Craft Emporium, the National Memorial Chorten and the Zoological Gardens to see some Takins, Bhutan's national mammal. The travel insurance people phoned us from South Africa and insisted that Shirley be confined to her bed in the River View Hotel until they could send a doctor out from South Africa to assess the situation. They would only pay the expenses of one other person to stay with her so it was decided that Lisa would remain with her mother in Thimphu while Jo would accompany us on the Indian portion of our trip.

Elize, Tshering and I enjoyed a wonderful lunch at a restaurant in downtown Thimphu while Shatu took Jo, Shirley and Lisa back to the River View Hotel. Later we collected Jo, said our goodbyes to Shirley and Lisa and drove to Paro. Here we paid a brief visit to Kyichu Lhakang where Jo lit a butter lamp for Shirley. The Lhakang is believed to have been built on the same day in 659 as Jampa Lhakang in Bumthang. It pins down the left foot of the same demoness. Later we drove to Rinchen Ling Lodge for our last night in Bhutan.

We only recorded 10 bird species today with none of them being new for the trip.

31st May

For Elize and I this was the big day – our 25th Wedding Anniversary. Our flight to Delhi left Paro Airport at 07:30 and we had to check in two hours in advance so it was another early start to the day for us. We met Tshering and Shatu for tea and biscuits at 04:15. They had been out on the town last night so were not as fresh as they could have been. We were invited to join them, but thought better of it and stayed at the lodge for the evening.

When we got to the airport the two of them very graciously presented us with two bottles of Special Courier whisky – an excellent Bhutanese whisky that they had heard we intended buying for ourselves. They also presented each of us with a white kabney or scarf.

The flight took off on time. The weather was wonderfully clear and we had great views of several snow-capped peaks and their glaciers from the plane (something silver after all) on an otherwise uneventful flight via Kathmandu to Delhi.

After clearing Customs and Immigration we were met by Iqbal from Asian Adventures. They had not got the message that there were only three of us now and not five so

were there to meet us in a very comfortable 16-seater bus. Iqbal suggested we change vehicles as they had a smaller one available and we could meet it on the way from Delhi to Agra. We agreed and Iqbal set the wheels of change in motion. By the time we got to the meeting point for the new vehicle he had contacted all the accommodation establishments en route and changed all our bookings. We were of course suitably impressed with all this efficiency in a country that we had been led to believe was consumed with red tape and beurocracy in all walks of life.

The drive along the highly congested roads from Delhi to Agra with Singh, our new driver, was relatively uneventful. We momentarily stopped on the way at Shah Akbar's tomb on the outskirts of Agra. Akbar was the son of Shah Jehan, the builder of the Taj Mahal.

Finally we reached the Jaypee Palace Hotel in Agra where we were to spend the night. After completing the check-in formalities we were whisked off on our all too brief tour of the Taj Mahal. No photographs or words can do justice to this magnificent monument to a great love and I'm not going to try and do so here. Suffice to say that it exceeded all our expectations and is well worth a visit by even the most hardened birders. We saw a total of 22 bird species on this non-birding day and two of them – Woolly-necked Stork and EGYPTIAN VULTURE (a lifer for Elize) – were new for the trip.

The Jaypee Palace was deliciously decadent and a perfect place to celebrate a Silver Wedding. We had a wonderful Indian dinner and a most enjoyable evening at the Spice Pavilion Restaurant. It was just sad that Shirley and Lisa could not be here to share this occasion with us.

1st June

Due to a misunderstanding we left the Jaypee Palace at around 08:30 this morning and still had a 90 minute drive to Bharatpur and Keoladeo Ghana National Park. When we eventually got there Rattan Singh, our guide for the rest of the trip was waiting for us. He had been waiting for us since 05:30, but we had been unaware of this. We set off into the Park on two cycle rickshaws in the stifling heat – the weather forecast had the maximum temperature as being over 45 degrees C today and it was at least this by midday. There were still some pools of water around and these gave a hint of what the park must be like at a better season.

Despite the adverse conditions we saw 58 species in approximately two hours during the "quiet" period of the day. Of these GREY FRANCOLIN, BLACK-RUMPED FLAMEBACK, INDIAN ROLLER, COMMON HAWK-CUCKOO, ASIAN KOEL, SARUS CRANE, PURPLE SWAMPHEN, GREATER PAINTED SNIPE (lifer for Elize), BRONZE-WINGED JACANA, EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK, ORIENTAL DARTER, BLACK-HEADED IBIS, PAINTED STORK, BLACK-NECKED STORK, PIED BUSHCHAT, ASIAN PIED STARLING, PLAIN PRINIA, CHESTNUT-SHOULDERED PETRONIA and TAWNY PIPIT were lifers. We also saw six mammal species of which RHESUS MACAQUE, GOLDEN JACKAL, INDIAN GREY MONGOOSE, CHITAL (or Spotted Deer), and NILGAI (or Blue Bull) were lifers. By 12:30 we were back at the Bharatpur Forest Lodge – a very rundown Lodge run by the Indian Government –

which had obviously seen better days. It was far too hot to go out again so we decided to wait until 16:00.

Four p.m. came and it was still far too hot – even the mad dogs were lying in the shade. We decided to call it a day and return to the decadent and air-conditioned luxury of the Jaypee Palace for another delicious meal before taking on the chaos that was Agra by night.

By some miracle we got to Agra Fort Station and to the right platform well before our 21:30 train – the Kumaon Express – was due to depart for Lal Kuan and beyond. The train ride was an experience. Thank goodness we were booked into a 4-berth First Class Air-conditioned compartment. The rest of the train was unbelievably crowded. Even in First Class the loos were a place best avoided if at all possible.

2nd June

Our train arrived at Lal Kuan almost dead on time. We were still wrestling our luggage down the narrow train corridor when a jovial voice declared “Welcome to Lal Kuan. I am Anil Tiwari, your driver, from Asian Adventures.” I don’t know when I’ve been so relieved to see a friendly face!

Rattan and Anil whisked us away from Lal Kuan through seemingly endless built up areas which included the towns of Haldwana and Kathgodam. We stopped to look at a tree full of “Flying Foxes” – in real life fruit bats of some unknown species. After a great breakfast at a restaurant in Kathgodam we eventually left the urban areas and the plains of India and took to the hills.

After climbing up a narrow, winding road we eventually reached the resort town of Naini Tal on the edge of its own mountain lake. In earlier years Naini Tal (literally Naini Lake) had been a hill station during the British Raj. Now it looked for all the world like a British seaside resort complete with two person paddle boats on the lake. We fortunately passed through what has been described as “the madness of Naini Tal” and continued along a narrow mountain road reminiscent of Bhutan to the tiny village of Pangot and our base for the next two nights – Jungle Lore Birding Lodge.

Mohit Aggarwal, MD of Asian Adventures was there to meet us and welcome us to the delightful lodge in its beautiful surroundings. He unfortunately had another, rather noisy group at Tiger Lodge on the Corbett National Park border that he was looking after as well so could not spend too much time with us.

After lunch we had a break until 15:30 when we went for a birding walk with Rattan and his nephew Hari Mohan who is employed by the lodge and is a birder in his own right. Of the 36 bird species we saw today BLACK FRANCOLIN, SLATY-HEADED PARAKEET, BLACK-HEADED JAY, RED-BILLED BLUE MAGPIE, BLACK-LORED TIT, RED-RUMPED SWALLOW (lifer for Jo only), HIMALAYAN BULBUL and STRIATED PRINIA were lifers for us and Lammergeier was new for the trip. We also saw our first HANUMAN (Black-capped) LANGUR.

That evening Rattan introduced us to his son, Lokesh, who is the Naturalist for a rival company.

3rd June

This morning started with a pre-breakfast drive/walk to try and find Koklass Pheasant before the day's human activities along the road resulted in them retreating into the inner depths of the forest. In the event we did not even hear the birds, but Jo and Rattan got fleeting views of HILL PARTRIDGE. Elize and I had to be satisfied with only hearing the mournful calls of the birds which remained hidden in the forest undergrowth.

After a roadside picnic breakfast we were treated to wonderful views of Spotted Forktail along a forest stream, by far the best views we had had of this lovely bird. A flying CHANGEABLE HAWK-EAGLE perched in a dead tree on the forest edge and promptly changed into a dead tree. Even in the scope the birds camouflage was so effective that it was only when it moved its head that we realised that we were looking at the bird all the time. Common Raven was new for the trip. We returned to the lodge for another excellent lunch.

We went on another late afternoon walk/drive down the road that passes the lodge. While the birding started off quietly it picked up dramatically as soon as the air temperature cooled down a bit. Apart from wonderful views of Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler the following birds were lifers for us – BROWN-CAPPED WOODPECKER, RUFOUS-BELLIED WOODPECKER, HIMALAYAN WOODPECKER, GREATER YELLOWNAPE, SCALY-BELLIED WOODPECKER, ASIAN BARRED OWLET (Elize and me only), HIMALAYAN GRIFFON, and JUNGLE MYNA. All in all we saw a total of 53 bird species today.

4th June

After tea and biscuits at the lodge we set off to Corbett National Park via Naini Tal. Before we left the forest-clad hills we had seen 35 species of birds and heard our first Red Junglefowl. Lifers in the hills included ROSY MINIVET, BAR-TAILED TREECREEPER and SPOT-WINGED TIT. We also had some fantastic views of some hard to find birds that we had seen in Bhutan.

Once out of the hills we headed to Tiger Camp for lunch. A very obliging COMMON TAILORBIRD was a lifer here. From Tiger Camp we headed to our overnight stop at Corbett River Lodge. Originally we were to stay over at Tiger Camp, but with the presence of the rather noisy group there Mohit very wisely decided to transfer us to Corbett River instead. We had great views of Asian Koel in the lodge gardens and PLUM-HEADED PARAKEET, TICKELL'S THRUSH and RED-WHISKERED BULBUL were life birds here. A lone Eurasian Golden Oriole was a new bird for the trip.

Later we birded in the indigenous plantations in the Corbett National Park buffer zone. The plantations are harvested by the local people and in this way the vegetation within the Park itself is spared. The birding here was very good and in a very short time we had added RED JUNGLEFOWL, HIMALAYAN FLAMEBACK, DOLLARBIRD, CHESTNUT-HEADED BEE-EATER, RED-BREASTED PARAKEET, CRESTED

TREESWIFT, ORIENTAL HONEY-BUZZARD, BLACK-HEADED CUCKOOSHRIKE, WHITE-RUMPED SHAMA and GREY-BREASTED PRINIA to our life lists.

Our overnight stop at Corbett River Lodge was very enjoyable indeed and we had a lovely Indian dinner at the open air poolside restaurant.

5th June

On the last birding day of our trip we made an early start from the lodge in order to be at the Amdanda Gate entrance to the Park before 05:00. Private vehicles are not allowed within the park and visitors have to travel in four-wheel drive vehicles belonging to contracted operators only. The visiting times for these vehicles were from 05:30 to 10:30 and 14:30 to 18:30 and only 30 vehicles were allowed in this part of the park at a time. Although we arrived at the gate at 04:45 (and our 4x4 vehicle had got there even earlier than that) we were still quite far back in the queue. Like many things in India it seemed that total chaos reigned in the issuing of permits. As always though things took their course and we entered the park in a surprisingly short time and started our birding for the day. It wasn't long before we added BLUE-TAILED BEE-EATER and CRIMSON SUNBIRD to our growing life list.

We drove further into the park and made a brief stop at the very basic Bijrani Forest Rest House where Alexandrine Parrots are allegedly common. They were certainly not common today and we failed to see them. We also failed to spot a White-browed Wagtail that Rattan was trying to point out to us. The bird flew off before we could get on to it – sorry Rattan! The curio shop here had T-shirts for sale with AFRICAN Elephants emblazoned on the front of them!

Continuing on into the park we added INDIAN GREY HORNBILL, SMALL MINIVET, WHITE-BROWED FANTAIL and COMMON IORA to our life lists. We also had Red Junglefowl coming out of our ears and, much to Elize's delight (she has a thing about domestic fowls and was hoping to see a real live wild one) got really great views of male, female and juvenile birds. The park sounded like a farmyard at times with all their calls (songs?). Our local driver/guide called a flash of blue that disappeared into the jungle a Blue-naped Pitta, but we could not find the bird again. After leaving the Park we paid a visit to the bridge over the Ramganga River near Ramnagar. Here we added LITTLE CORMORANT to our life lists and Pied Kingfisher to our trip list.

All in all we saw 50 bird and 4 mammal species in our all too brief visit to Corbett. The Park was beautiful and we'd both like to go back some day. We are sure that given cooler weather and more time in the Park we would substantially increase our list for the area. Even more than a Tiger I would like to see a Gharial (a fish-eating crocodile), a Dhole or Indian Wild Dog and an Asian Black Bear. Perhaps next time we shall stay overnight in the Park, which offers some basic accommodation facilities. We returned to Corbett River Lodge for a late breakfast and finished our packing for the long journey back to South Africa. On the manic dice with death on the road back to Delhi we had great views of RIVER TERN and added Black-shouldered Kite to our trip list. On the way we stopped at a roadside dhaba or restaurant named Gan Patti after Ganesh, a Hindu deity. The dhaba was reputed to be well known for the quality of their food. We were saving up our appetites for tonight's dinner in Delhi and did not want to spoil our

appetite by having too much to eat here so we settled for a paratta aloo – a delicious sort of hash brown made with potatoes.

In Delhi we were able to shower and clean up at the very comfortable Hotel Sunstar before meeting Mohit and his wife Suchita for a wonderful dinner at the Delhi-o-Delhi Club. After this plush luxury it was quite a shock when Anil dropped us off at the Indira Gandhi International Airport at around midnight. Here we had to wait until 04:30 for our Emirates flights to Dubai and on to Johannesburg.

Concluding Remarks

May/June was definitely the wrong time of year to visit Bhutan and India. Weather-wise it rained almost every day in Bhutan and both the UAE and India, especially on the Gangetic Plains, was almost unbearably hot with temperatures in the up to 40 degrees Celsius. Keoladeo Ghana National Park was almost dry as well as being hot. Bird-wise many species are winter migrants to the areas visited – some inter- or intra-continental and some altitudinal migrants summering and breeding in inaccessible areas at even higher altitudes than those that we visited.

What we saw of the UAE was disappointing – unbridled “development” and litter everywhere, even at Khor al Beidah which surely has the potential of being registered as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. We did not manage to get into the interior of the country, however and we’d like to go back there some day to see this.

Bhutan was truly a land of superlatives. The scenery (what we could see of it) was stupendous, the birds great, the people wonderfully warm and friendly, the architecture amazing and the peace and beauty of the forest indescribable.

Despite the rain we managed to see 194 bird species in essentially 11 days in the country. In India we found the squalor and filth quite off-putting at times, but this was more than compensated for by the sheer magnificence of the Taj Mahal, the beauty of Pangot and Corbett and even the buzz and hubbub of Delhi with its many parks and green belts. We realise that six short days is far too little time to spend in the country. It was really just an opportunity to sample the wonderful food and to visit the Taj Mahal. Even though the time was so limited we saw 173 species of birds during our lightning tour. Many of these we had of course also seen in Bhutan.

In spite of the timing Elize and I saw 324 birds (Jo saw 295 species) and 17 mammals. Of the birds over 260 were lifers for us and we hadn’t seen any of the mammals before. Elize and I certainly hope to go back to all three countries at some time in the not too distant future.