

# BIRDING UNDER BUDDHA'S GAZE

## Autumn in the Kingdom of Bhutan

**4 – 17 November 2018**  
**Guides: Josh Engel and Norbu**

**\$5795 per person based on double occupancy**  
**\$400 single supplement**  
**Maximum 10 participants**

**CONTACT US WITH QUESTIONS OR TO REGISTER: [JOSH@REDHILLBIRDING.COM](mailto:JOSH@REDHILLBIRDING.COM)**



### INTRODUCTION

Bhutan is a unique country, its history shrouded in mystery and legend, with extraordinary natural beauty and a short history of international tourism. Only opened to foreigners in the 1970s, it still feels like it is adjusting to foreign influence, and it is doing so on its own terms. With limited numbers of tourists allowed in annually, it is something of an exclusive destination, though it is not so difficult to visit as its reputation may suggest. But with its ethic of cultural preservation and forest conservation, not to mention the fact that it is nestled in the world's mightiest mountain range, it is one of the best destinations in the world to combine birding and cultural tourism.

This tour is scheduled for what could be called the "alternate" birding season. While many Bhutan tours go in spring, we've decided to run an autumn trip. The birding is still excellent, the air is at its clearest, and we stand a great chance to find a few birds that are very difficult on spring trips, like White-bellied Heron, Black-necked Crane, and Wallcreeper. This is a trip that has no camping, unlike many tours to Bhutan, staying

instead in charming hotels and taking in cultural sites, especially Bhutan's famous *dzongs*, along the route as time permits.

**Birds:** 220-250 species

**Mammals:** 15-20 species

**Photographic opportunities:** Good

**Physical difficulty:** Easy

**Pace:** Moderate

**Accommodations:** Good to excellent. Hotels in Bhutan will generally be of very high quality, although they will be simpler the farther we get from the main tourist areas. All will have electricity and hot water.

**Bird highlights:** Eastern Himalayan specialties like Rufous-necked Hornbill, Himalayan Monal, White-bellied Heron, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, Ward's Trogon. Wintering migrants including Black-necked Crane, Wallcreeper, and migrant thrushes. Himalayan residents including a wide variety of hawks and eagles, parrotbills, laughingthrushes, minlas, flycatchers, warblers, sunbirds, woodpeckers, and more. Some skulkers, like wren-babblers, can be difficult to find at this season.

**Mammal highlights:** Three species of langurs, including the nearly endemic Golden Langur. Himalayan Giant Squirrel and Yellow-throated Marten are likely. Possibility for rarer Himalayan mammals like Red Panda, Himalayan Goral, Himalayan Serow, or Himalayan Black Bear.

**About your guides:** Josh Engel has been leading birding tours to Bhutan since 2008. Norbu is one of the top Bhutanese birding guides. They have known each other since Josh's first trip to Bhutan.

## DAILY ITINERARY

### *Day 1. Arrive Paro and Transfer to Thimphu (Evening birding in Thimphu)*

After arrival at the airport in Paro (elevation 2200m; 7200 ft.), we will make the 1.5 hour drive to Bhutan's capital, Thimphu. We will immediately notice the characteristic Bhutanese architecture and the prevalence of Buddhist symbols that dot the countryside. There isn't much habitat for birds along the way, but if we see Ibisbill, one of the iconic birds of the Himalayas, we will come to a screeching halt for a better look. If we have time, we will do some birding around the capital, looking for waterbirds along the Thimphu River, like River Lapwing, Ruddy Shelduck and other waterfowl, Ibisbill, as well as pipits and wagtails, before enjoying our first Bhutanese meal.

### *Day 2: Thimphu – Dochula – Lamperi – Punakha (Morning birding around Dochula, Lamperi Botanical Garden and evening birding along Pho Chu River)*

We will wake early to get to Dochula (*la*=pass) before the crowds. The forest along the roadside can be excellent for birding, with birds like Green-tailed Sunbird, White-browed Fulvetta, and Red-headed Bullfinch typical. We will scout the road for mixed flocks that typically roam the forest in the fall. These flocks include warblers, babblers, sunbirds, flycatchers, finches, treecreepers, tits, woodpeckers, and more. We will get familiar with drongos, a variety of which will accompany us throughout the trip. We will

keep an eye out overhead for soaring raptors, like Rufous-bellied Eagle and Mountain Hawk-Eagle. We will also look hard for the rare Fire-tailed Myzornis, whose evocative, beautiful name is matched by its plumage.

We will stop in at the Lamperi Botanical Gardens which will give us a chance to take a walk away from the road. The grounds are excellent for birds. We may find Rufous-bellied and Darjeeling Woodpecker, Brown Parrotbill, Dark-breasted Rosefinch, and Black-faced Laughingthrush. Thrushes may be found hopping around on the lawns, including Gray-winged Blackbird and the ubiquitous Blue Whistling-Thrush.

Our day will end in Bhutan's "winter capital" Punakha, set in a gorgeous valley at the confluence of the Mo Chhu and Po Chhu (chhu=river). We will have some time in the afternoon to bird along the Po Chhu, looking especially for the world's rarest wading bird, the endangered White-bellied Heron. This is a great time of year to find this species, here at the best place in the world to find it. This is also one of the best areas in Bhutan for waterbirds, and we may come across a variety of waterfowl, including Red-crested Shelduck, Bar-headed Goose, and Eurasian Wigeon. River Lapwings are common along this stretch of river and we may find White-throated Dipper and Crested Kingfisher; we will also check the riverside scrub for Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler and migrants like Blyth's Leaf-Warbler and Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher.

### *Day 3: Full day birding inside Jigme Dorji National Park and Visit Punakha Dzong*

Today we will spend most of the morning birding the forests of Jigme Dorji National Park. This beautiful forest is off the beaten track, so the forest will be quiet except for the sounds of birds and the sounds of the rushing river. We will be on the lookout for mixed flocks, including understory mixed flocks featuring characteristic Asian forest birds like minlas, barwings, niltavas, fulvettas, bulbuls, and parrotbills. We will check streams for Slaty-backed and Little Forktails and White-capped Redstart. Inside the forest we will look for birds like Gray-sided Laughingthrush, White-gorgeted Flycatcher, Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, among many others. If we are lucky, we may come across interesting mammals in the forest here, like Goral or Yellow-throated Marten.

We will emerge from the forest in the afternoon and will tour one of Bhutan's most famous temples, the spectacular Punakha Dzong.

### *Day 4: Punakha – Nobding – Phobjekha (Morning birding around Nobding and evening birding Phobjekha valley)*

This morning we will climb in elevation as we follow the Punatsang Chhu Valley. We will bird the roadside forest, eventually ending the day in the "Valley of the Cranes." We will

be looking out for mixed flocks that include birds like Black-faced Warbler, Ultramarine Flycatcher, and Golden-breasted Fulvetta. We will look hard for the rare Ward's Trogon, which occurs only in high-quality forests of the Eastern Himalayas. We may find Crested Serpent-Eagle along the road, and perhaps will find Kalij Pheasant scratching around on the forest floor. We should encounter Capped Langurs, our first of three langur species, along the roadsides.

*Day 5: Phobjekha – Pelela – Trongsa – Bumthang (Morning birding Pelela old road and evening visit monastery in Bumthang to see Monal)*

Our first stop this morning will be at the high pass of Pelela. The “old road” offers a quiet respite from the main road, where we can slowly walk and soak in the scenery and the birds. Here we will look for Black-faced Laughingthrushes skulking in the roadside scrub and maybe find Fire-tailed Sunbird seeking out flowers. Brown Parrotbills can sometimes be found munching on bamboo seeds and Red-headed Bullfinches and various rosefinches on other seeds. Perhaps we'll get lucky with a Lammergeier soaring overhead in a flock of Himalayan Griffons. We will finish the day in the dry valleys of Bumthang, where we will make sure to have enough time to visit the temple where monks feed Himalayan Monal, the technicolored pheasant of the Himalayan highlands, one of the world's most spectacular birds.

*Day 6: Bumthang – Thrumshingla – Sengor – Yongkala (Birding Thrumshingla – Sengor – Namling)*

Today will be another long day of travel and birding. We will pass through some of the best roadside birding habitat in all of the Himalayas, finishing up in one of the mountain chain's premier birding areas, the famed Lingmethang Road in Thrumshingla National Park, where we will be based for three nights. Along the way we will cross the high pass at Thrumshingla, before dropping down into the subtropical forests of the national park. We will cross an extraordinary array of habitats along the way, including dry intermontane valleys, fir and rhododendron forests, rushing streams, and humid forest. Perhaps we will find some of those super-skulkers of such habitats—three species of tetsias, many wren-babblers, or even a Hill Partridge, which we will surely hear but would be lucky to lay eyes on. We will look for birds like flaming Scarlet Finch, the more subtle Crimson-browed Finch, and Yellow-rumped Honeyguide near its favored habitat of cliffs with rock bee hives. Our lodge here is right at the edge of the forest, so we will have birds around us all the time during our three nights based here.

*Day 7, 8 & 9: Yongkala – Namling – Limithang Road (Three full days birding Yongkala – Namling and Limithang Road)*

This area, much of it protected as part of Thrumshingla National Park, is known as one of Asia's and the Himalaya's greatest birding areas. With well-protected forests and a large elevational gradient, the birdlife here is nothing short of astounding. Mixed flocks here can be almost overwhelming, especially now as birds are preparing for winter, full of birds like White-naped Yuhina, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Lesser Yellownape, Speckled Piculet, Black-faced Warbler, and Black-throated Parrotbill. Many rare forest denizens call this area home, and we will make efforts to find them. This includes threatened species that need large intact tracts of forest, like Beautiful Nuthatch, Ward's Trogon, and Rufous-necked Hornbill. Other uncommon birds we will look for include Blue-winged, Scaly Laughingthrushes, and Gray-sided Laughingthrushes, Greater Rufous-headed Parrotbill, White-gorgeted Flycatcher, Blackish-breasted Babbler.

We will watch overhead for soaring raptors, hoping to spot Rufous-bellied and Black Eagle, Mountain Hawk-Eagle, Crested Serpent Eagle, and Crested Goshawk. Collared Scops-Owl comes out at dusk, and we will stay out at least once into the night to look for Mountain Scops-Owl. We might find a nocturnal flying squirrel as well while we are looking for owls.

This wild stretch of road is also good for interesting mammals, though it always takes some luck to find them. This includes Himalayan Black Bear, Himalayan Serow, or even a Red Panda.

#### *Day 10: Yongkala – Thrumshingla – Bumthang – Trongsa*

Today we begin the journey back west. It's a long driving day, but like all drives in Bhutan there is plenty of good birding along the way. As we return through high elevations, we will be on the lookout for mixed flocks which may include birds like Gold-naped and Crimson-browed Finch, and we will look for Giant Parrotbill in stands of bamboo. We will be eagle-eyed looking out for roadside "chickens," looking for the spectacular Himalayan Monal and Satyr Tragopan, as well as Kalij Pheasant. We will also be on the lookout for Wallcreeper and Yellow-rumped Honeyguide around rocky cliffs. We will end the day in the lovely town of Trongsa.

#### *Day 11: Trongsa – Paro*

Another travel day will see us passing two high passes, Pelela and Dochula, before dropping down into the Thimphu Valley. We will stop in the valley, home to Bhutan's capital, for a poke around the sewage ponds for birding and perhaps for a bit of sightseeing around the town. We will end the day in Paro, where we will have a three night stay to end the trip

### *Day 12: Morning Chelila Birding and evening birding around Paro River*

Today we will reach the trip's highest elevations, nearly 4000 meters (13,000 ft.) at Chelila, the highest road in the country. An early start will get us to the high elevations early, where birds will be getting active as the sun warms the high-altitude air. If the weather is good the views will be spectacular and birds will be active. It's very possible that the pass will be snowed in, making for spectacular scenery.

We will search the pass for birds of high-elevation scrub, birds like Blue-fronted and White-throated Redstarts, White-browed Rosefinch, and perhaps a late-departing Golden Bush-Robin. As we descend the pass, we will bird in the open coniferous forest, where we may come across Hodgson's Treecreeper, a variety of warblers, Goldcrest, and Collared or White-winged Grosbeak.

We will arrive back in town and have a rest at the hotel, before venturing back out for the afternoon. We will bird along the Paro River, where we may come across Black-tailed Crake, a rare denizen of high-altitude wetlands. Ibisbill is sometimes found along the river as well.

### *Day 13: Paro – Tiger's Nest Excursion*

For our last day in the country, we will visit Bhutan's most famous temple, Taktsang, or Tiger's Nest. Built on the side of a cliff, we will make the 2-3 hour hike through dry pine woodlands to get to this marvel of engineering, birding along the way. It's a spectacular hike, with a well-placed tea-house/restaurant half-way where we will have a tea break on the way up and lunch on the way down.

In the afternoon, we will visit the local cultural sites, including the national museum and Paro Dzong. We will also fit in some time for souvenir shopping in town.

### *Day 14: Departure*

We will have a final morning of birding around our hotel grounds before our departure.

## **IMPORTANT NOTES**

### **Contact information**

The Red Hill Birding **tour manager** for this trip is Amanda Zeigler. To sign up, or if you have any questions, please contact Josh at [josh@redhillbirding.com](mailto:josh@redhillbirding.com) or Amanda at

[info@redhillbirding.com](mailto:info@redhillbirding.com). Your spot on the trip will be confirmed upon our receipt of the [booking form](#) and deposit.

### Timing and Flights

The trip will **begin in Paro, Bhutan**, the site of the country's only international airport, on Sunday, November 4, 2018. This is an arrival day, with no activities planned. The trip will **end in Paro** on November 17, 2018.

### Tourism in Bhutan

Tourism is different in some aspects than in other countries. Our ground agent will book your flights into and out of Bhutan. You will need to book round-trip plane tickets from your home to either New Delhi, India, or Bangkok, Thailand. The ground agent will book the connecting flights between New Delhi or Bangkok and Bhutan; the cost of the connecting flights is not included in the price of the tour. Please contact our office for assistance and scheduling.

We cannot book international flights for you; however, we are happy to give advice on routes and timing.

### Passport and visa information

It is **always best** to check on the **latest visa and passport information** before you travel. Please contact us if you have any concerns. Visas are necessary for travel in Bhutan; these are arranged by our ground agent and are provided upon arrival. **VERY IMPORTANT: If you are flying through India, you will most likely need a visa. Please check on the Indian embassy website or contact our office for the latest regulations. This visa MUST be arranged ahead of travel. Although the process generally takes about a week, it is best to do it at least one month ahead of time in case issues arise in the application process.**

### Physical difficulty

This trip is **mostly physically easy**. Most of our walking will be on roads or on wide trails. That said, there is hardly a piece of flat land in the entire country, so we will walking along sometimes steep roads. Paro, where the airport is, is at an elevation of ~2,200m (7,200 ft), and most of the tour is at relatively high elevation. We will have time to acclimate to such altitudes before reaching our highest elevation at the end of the tour, ~4,000 meters (13,100 ft). We will also be taking a moderately strenuous hike on our last day of the tour to visit Tiger's Nest Monastery. This hike is optional, but we will walk slowly and if you decide to not complete the hike, the tea house/restaurant that is half-way up makes a convenient stopping point, with beautiful views of the monastery.

The roads in Bhutan are, out of necessity, extremely windy. If you are prone to motion sickness you will want to have a remedy handy.

### Pace

The pace of the trip is **moderate**. A typical day will have us up early to catch the peak early morning bird activity. We will often have hot breakfast and lunch in the field. Some days we will have an afternoon rest, on other days we will be traveling in the afternoon. There will be several opportunities for nighttime outings to look for owls and other nocturnal creatures. These will be optional.

### Price

The price of the trip is \$5795 and the single supplement is \$400. This price **includes** all meals (including soft drinks and bottled water), from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 14; all transportation and accommodation during that period; a Red Hill Birding guide and a local guide; Bhutan visa fees; tips to all local guides and drivers; and all entrance fees. It **does not include** airfare, alcoholic beverages, snacks, laundry, or other items of a personal nature.

A deposit of \$1200 will secure your place on the trip. Final payment is due by July 4, 2018. We can accept payment by check, bank transfer, or credit card (subject to a 3% processing fee). Upon completing the [booking form](#), we will send you an invoice and payment instructions.

### Hotels

The hotels we use in Bhutan are **generally excellent**. All have en suite bathrooms, hot showers, electrical outlets for charging electronics. Service at Bhutanese hotels is generally excellent. We will often be eating meals in the hotels. Most hotels will have free wireless internet, although the quality is sometimes unreliable. Electrical outlets are "Type D", with three round pins, though newer hotels may have American or European style outlets as well.

### Photography

The **photographic opportunities** in Bhutan are **good**. Photography inside the forest is always difficult, but much of our birding is along roads, where there is more light. We also will spend plenty of time in open habitats which are better for photography. Landscape and cultural photography opportunities are excellent and plentiful. That said, this is primarily a birdwatching tour, so while there will be ample opportunities for photography along the way, we will not be making special considerations for photographers. If you are a photographer, you are sure to go home with many great photos.

### Weather

This trip is scheduled to coincide with the Himalayan autumn. The weather will generally be **cool and comfortable**. Mornings could be especially cool, although the temperature is unlikely to be below freezing for long, except at the highest altitudes. Expect early mornings in the high-30s to mid-40s and daytime high temperatures in the 60-70s. This is the post-monsoon season that is typified by clear skies, although rain is possible at lower elevations and snow is possible at higher elevations.

## Food

The food is generally of a **very high standard** on this tour. The food is typically Bhutanese, with Nepali and Indian influences, and is adapted to western palates. While typical Bhutanese food is very spicy, they make it much milder for us, although the option to have it spicy is always there. Lunch and dinner will consist of rice, meat, and vegetables, sometimes with soup, lentils, or salad. Breakfast often consists of eggs, toast, and other western breakfast items. Bottled water will be provided throughout the trip. Alcoholic beverages are available for purchase in hotels. Vegetarian diets are easily accommodated; please let us know of that or of any other dietary restrictions when you complete the booking form. Indian snacks can be purchased along the way, but if there's a particular birding snack you like at home, feel free to bring some along.

## Packing considerations

You will generally want to wear **comfortable clothing** that you don't mind getting a little dirty. The dress for the tour is entirely casual. **Lightweight clothing, with layers**, and long pants and long-sleeved shirts are recommended for protection from the sun and to be prepared for various weather conditions. Comfortable walking shoes are a must, including something that you can wear on fairly steep trails. An umbrella and/or raincoat will be useful in the case of rain, which is a possibility. A mid-weight jacket or heavy sweater along with gloves and a hat for cold mornings are also important. There will be opportunities to do laundry along the way.

In terms of gear, apart from the usual binoculars, hat, field guide, etc., a flashlight or head lamp is very useful. Most people appreciate having a camera along. Sunscreen is useful. Biting insects are rarely a problem on this tour.

## Resources

There are two main bird field guides that cover Bhutan. One is the two volume *The Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide*, by Pamela Rasmussen and John Anderton. This title is excellent and extremely detailed, but may be difficult to find. The other is the series of books by Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp, and Tim Inskipp, *The Birds of India* and *The Birds of Bhutan*. *The Birds of Bhutan* is a Bhutan-specific version of the larger *The Birds of India*. It's a handy, small field guide that covers everything that would be expected on this tour.

There are also many accounts about Bhutan by long-term visitors. These books, such as *Beyond the Sky and Earth: A Journey into Bhutan*, will provide a good introduction to the country.

## Tipping

We aim to provide **exceptional service**, using guides that are knowledgeable, interesting, personable, and experienced. While tipping is never expected, if you feel that your guides went above and beyond, you are welcome to leave them a gratuity. Tips for local guides, drivers, and other helpers is included in the tour price.

## Money

The Bhutanese currency is the Ngultrum, usually called Nu. Its value is tied to the Indian Rupee, so 1 Ngultrum = 1 Rupee. Rupees are accepted in Bhutan, but change will usually be given in Nu. If you are traveling through India, you can get Rupees at an ATM in New Delhi. Otherwise you can change foreign currency upon arrival in Paro. Credit cards, especially MasterCard and Visa, are accepted for larger purchases in stores, but cash is more useful. You will need cash mainly for purchases of alcohol and souvenirs. Most tips are included in the price of the tour.

## Travel insurance

We do not require travel insurance for Bhutan trips. However, we recommend buying it as it is inexpensive and can protect you from unforeseen costs associated with missed, delayed, or canceled flights, sudden illness, damaged equipment, and other unexpected issues. We recommend Generali Global Assistance (<https://www.generalitravelinsurance.com/>).

