

## Realm of the Red Panda

**Destination:** Dobate, Nepal    **Duration:** 13 Days    **Dates:** 21<sup>st</sup> April – 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2015

-  Spotting a Red Panda relaxing and sunbathing in the canopy of a large tree
-  Tracking the elusive red panda with the expert guide Phinju Sherpa
-  Great bird sightings like White-headed Laughing-thrush & Mountain Crested Eagle
-  Hiking the spectacular forests and bamboo groves of North Eastern Nepal
-  Staying and experiencing the local lifestyle in a quaint home-stay in Dobate
-  Driving through spectacular Himalayan valleys and bamboo forests
-  Seeing the recent evidence of a Leopard kill in the forest & on camera traps
-  Whilst not a highlight, experiencing several earthquakes will live in the memory
-  Seeing some of the highest and most impressive peaks in the world on the flights
-  Tracking red pandas through a very unique, primeval and charismatic ecosystem



### Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)  
 Sonam Tashi (Red Panda Tour Leader)  
 Phinju Sherpa (Head Red Panda Tracker)  
 Sangay (Red Panda Tracker & Home-stay Owner)  
 Nima Dewar & Dev (Extra Red Panda Trackers)  
 Sanjay, Phulba Sherpa & Nissar (Drivers)

### Participants

Ms. Beatrice Potter  
 Ms. Karen Rotherham (honouree tour member)

### Overview

**Day 1:** Kathmandu

**Day 2:** Ilam

**Days 3-5:** Dobate

**Day 6:** Ilam

**Day 7:** Kathmandu

**Days 8-11:** Bardia NP\*

**Day 12:** Kathmandu

**Day 13:** Home



# Day by Day Breakdown

## Overview

For anyone interested in wildlife and travelling far and wide to see some of the rarest species in the world; the red panda has long been high on most people's lists. However up until very recently there was not a reliable place or people who were skilled in finding them. That all changed once the Red Panda conservationists started their incredible work in the oak, rhododendron and bamboo forests of North-East Nepal. Their overall aim is to protect a continuous corridor of red panda habitat from the border with Yunnan, China in the north, through the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area and into Singhalila National Park in India (as well as studying and protecting red pandas in other locations in Nepal and China). This protected corridor would be linking two very important red panda populations outside of Nepal with 4-5 distinct populations in Nepal that are all in danger of becoming fragmented and isolated.

Whilst working to this goal they have employed local people as 'forest guardians' to help collect data, protect the forests and wildlife and also help to educate and change the attitudes of the local people so that they start sustainably using the forests' resources as opposed to the exploitation that goes on throughout the Indian Subcontinent. Whilst the forest guardians were trained and employed in their work they began to see more and more red pandas and a handful of these local people are now amongst the world's best red panda trackers.

Since the start of the project here in Nepal they have an incredible 95% success rate in showing people red pandas, however (as we found out) they can be much harder to find when conditions are not ideal.

For this tour we arrived at the best time of year, Spring. The red panda has a very slow metabolism as their diet is very poor in nutrients, as a result of this they are very temperature sensitive and cannot tolerate temperatures above 25°C very well. So usually spring time is a good time as the daytime temperatures rarely reach this mark and the red pandas spend longer sprawled out on the branches of tall trees so that they can warm up in the sun. Otherwise they spend time the day curled up in the canopies protected from the sun by the leaves or inside tree hollows out of sight. However this year the monsoon arrived early, the first torrential storms arrived 6 weeks early and then the near constant rain and drizzle (and even heavy hail stones) lasted most of the time we were in Dobate. These are far from ideal red panda spotting conditions. But this was the least of our worries as Nepal suffered its worst ever natural disaster in recorded history. Three massive earthquakes, two whilst we were there and one a week after Beatrice left; and dozens (over 100) smaller quakes all over 4.5 on the Richter Scale hit the country. This was devastating to the entire country. With a death toll that continues to rise today and ongoing problems such as food shortages (missing the crucial rice planting season for next year) and the spread of disease through poor water quality. Unfortunately the effects of these quakes will be felt by the Nepalese for many years, if not a decade or more. We did what little we could in order to help out but the reality was that we were out of our depth in terms of rescue expertise and so instead of continually using up valuable resources that are better off going to the suffering local people who have nowhere else to go, we left on our scheduled flights and left the rescue teams and their expertise try to get the situation under control.

But before all of the turmoil caused by the tectonic activity we had red pandas to find, the best way of finding them comes in the morning when they find exposed branches on the tops of large trees and sunbath in the sun. This is their way of warming up and getting their slow, bamboo driven metabolisms going. But with the early onset of the monsoon it would prove difficult to find the red pandas sunbathing (with the lack of sun for most of the time we were there). In hindsight (despite the sighting we did have of a red panda) it was probably the worst time to have visited Nepal, the combination of monsoon, cold snaps (bringing hail) and the earthquakes all resulted in very poor red panda watching conditions and terrible human conditions for the majority of the Nepalese population (if not for us).

But despite these rather unfortunate and completely unforeseen and unavoidable circumstances both Beatrice and Karen were and are still keen to come back and experience Dobate and Nepal again. The work that the Red Panda researchers are doing cannot stop or be hindered by such natural disasters as the fate of the Nepalese red pandas is firmly in their hands. Amongst the multitude of tasks and projects that they are responsible for protecting the forest from the long list of human made problems. Deforestation, over grazing and poaching are all occurring here and all in all make the work done here more important than ever and increasing the importance of sustainable eco-tourism in the region. Long may they continue to fight this fight for the red pandas and long may they continue to welcome and host tourists on their quest to find one of the world's most adorable, endangered and little known species.

This trip report documents on a day by day account the highlights of the tour as well as including a sightings log of all the species seen and identified.



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## Day 1 **Kathmandu**

## *Arrival*

Today Martin met Beatrice at the airport, the flight from Delhi was on time and a nice sunny day in the Kathmandu Valley awaited us. We made the short journey from the airport to Dwarika's Hotel and then spent the rest of the afternoon resting and relaxing. During the evening the heavens opened and a torrential thunderstorm (an early indicator of the monsoon arriving) erupted. But other than chatting about the tour, conservation in Nepal and internationally and discussing the prior trip Beatrice had booked with Royle Safari we didn't do anything today. Instead just resting and preparing for the long journey to Ilam in the far east of the country tomorrow.

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## Day 2 **Ilam**

## *Travelling*

This morning after breakfast Martin and Beatrice went with Sanjay to the airport where we checked into the flight and met Sonam Tashi Lama shortly before boarding the flight. Just after meeting Sonam (the ground operations manager and red panda ecologist) we met Karen, also travelling to Dobate with the and a zoo keeper in Perth. Having been responsible for red pandas (amongst other animals) for many years she hoped to see one in the wild, along with us. As the drive close to Dobate is very steep and on a road that would be better served being described as a rural foot path in places, we always break this journey up into 2 days. Today we would fly from Kathmandu as far as Bhadrapur; before driving up into the foothills and to the dairy industry town of Ilam. The next day we would continue climbing and on to Dobate from Ilam. During the flight we had some brief views of the Himalayas (the cloud cover being very thick today). Only some of the numerous 7,000m plus peaks were clearly visible. This included great views of Mt. Everest, its 8,000m plus neighbour Lhotse and then Kachenjunga which is the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest mountain in the world. In fact throughout this flight it can be possible flight to see 7 of the 10 tallest mountains in the world. We landed in the shadow of Kachenjunga, although Bhadrapur is located in the Terai region and very close to sea level. On arrival we met our new driver Nissar and loaded up the vehicle to take us into the heart of red panda habitat we began the climb towards the Himalayas. Of course we wouldn't be travelling into the true Himalaya but we would be spending time in the shadow of these incredible and imposing mountains right in the North East corner of Nepal and close to both India (1-2 hour walk away) and China (2 day walk away). On leaving Bhadrapur we began travelling through tea plantation country and over the first hill range. Along the way we saw several species of lowland bird species, such as black drongos, Asian pied starlings, bank mynahs, cattle egrets, spotted doves, red-vented bulbuls, Indian pond herons black kites, white-whiskered bulbuls and many barn swallows including some nesting inside the tea house we stopped for lunch at. The little café we stopped at is located on the top of a hill surrounded by tea plantations. It was a great place to stop and have some of the local tea although the mists set in and the visibility was reduced to near zero. We carried on for around 2 hours after this stop and descended a valley before crossing over and up the other side towards Ilam. Ilam is famous in the Indian Subcontinent for making the best cheese, dairy is a rarity in most of Asia and here the cheese is a very good quality. Ilam and the surrounding areas are also prime tea growing locations and so the small town has a large export industry, providing cheese, milk, cream and tea all over Nepal and the rest of the Indian Subcontinent. Whilst the roads from Bhadrapur to Ilam are all relevantly good, well maintained and largely paved we could not risk heading further north towards Dobate as the light was fading and the road up to the village is very poor and the drops on either side serious. So we stopped at the tea guest house for the night, having dinner here and relaxing after a few hours of bumpy roads before heading to bed.

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## Day 3 **Dobate**

## *Travelling & Wildlife Watching*

This morning we breakfasted with the great view out over Ilam and more of the tea plantations that make this region so famous. It was another glorious day in Nepal and Beatrice spotted an Indian hare darting through the tea plantation. After breakfast we met with Phinju Sherpa who lives in Ilam and is the head red panda tracker (and probably the best red panda tracker in the world) and spotted a flock of barn swallows all perched in a line on a telegraph wire over the car park. There were some nice common birds around this morning including the white-whiskered and re-vented bulbuls, common mynahs and purple sunbirds. We then left the town of Ilam and headed downwards towards the river, then after crossing the river (which is being harnessed by an impressive looking hydroelectric dam project). After crossing the river we began to rise high into the hills and towards the small farming



village of Dobate. Whilst travelling through here we saw lots of deforestation, the increasing populations in rural Nepal is leading to more and more habitat destruction. This is very evident in this region of Nepal and as forest clearing for cattle grazing, fire wood and farming climbs the hillsides it will not be very long before the prime red panda habitat is destroyed. That is if the Red Panda conservationists don't adequately protect these forests in the same way that they have successfully protected the forests around Tapeljung around the Kachenjunga Conservation Area. This is the first protected area in the world that is dedicated to red pandas and Dobate is a natural extension of this conservation work, but the importance of this conservation work has never been so evident. Along the way we did spot some birds including a red-billed blue magpie and a large flock of foraging white-crested laughing-thrushes. The village of Dobate is located on the top of a ridge, with a north facing and south facing slope on either side of the village. Due to the presence of the sun the bamboo (around 95% of the pandas diet) grows thickest and most frequently on the south side) red pandas have only been seen on the south facing slope but there are reports of other wildlife (including some of the intriguing carnivores) from the north facing slope. Because of the presence of at least one leopard in the area (known from past camera traps, scats, tracks and the occasional killed cow and goat) and other mammals such as yellow-throated marten, leopard cat and maybe also Indochinese clouded leopard we would set up a couple of camera traps around the forest to see what we could get (if anything in such a short amount of time). On the drive we saw many butterflies feeding on the salts and other minerals that are present on the top of the clay soil after heavy rain. We stopped for some tea half way up the hillside towards Dobate, here another barn swallow had nested inside the building and no less than 5 hungry and nearly fully fledged chicks clamoured and struggled for space in the tiny space. Once we arrived at the small village (located at around 2,655m above sea level) it was mid-afternoon and the clouds had already set in over most of the hillsides. This is normal for the afternoons here and the lack of visibility makes seeing a red panda now very difficult, so we decided to try and find somewhere to place our camera traps. The idea of these camera traps is to see if we can capture pictures or videos of some of the really rare and never seen nocturnal species that inhabit the forests as well as red pandas. We were particularly hoping for predators as there is in an impressive list of wild cats, including leopards, Indochinese clouded leopards, marbled cats, Asiatic golden cats, jungle cats and leopard cats. However with the amount of human activity we saw around here we didn't hold much hope that we would get one of these with only 3 nights of camera trapping. We left after lunch into the forests east of the village (our highest point today being 2,860m) with Sonam, Phinju and Sange (the home-stay owner) they knew of the exact places which could be beneficial to our wishes. We walked uphill from the village for 10 minutes and met one of the other forest guardians Nima. Nima had camera trap he had just collected and on the trap were pictures of the leopard from a cattle kill that they had found around 2 weeks ago and set the camera up overlooking it). This is incredible to know that apex predators such as leopards live in this relatively unprotected forest and one that has a decent population of people. The cow had belongs to Sange and after asking him how he felt about the leopard killing his livestock. He explained that this year the leopard had killed 10 of the villages cows and they accept that the leopard has to eat just as they do and so they have no retribution against the leopard. As long as this attitude and belief remain, so will most of the wildlife in this region. However I have a feeling that eventually there will be a tipping point when too many dead cows is too much money lost and something will have to be done. After collecting the SD card from this camera trap (we checked the pictures on our return to the village later) we entered into the north-east side of the ridge and down a little way into a very dense oak / rhododendron forest (some of the rhododendrons were still in flower, maybe 1 in 10 trees). We arrived at a crossroads of 4 different game trails surrounded by two small streams flowing close to the trails. We set one up here and then one further up the slope on the top of the ridge and just on the south facing side. This one was located near some good red panda sign that Phinju had spotted. Including scratch marks on the tress, bear patches of lichen on the branches where the pandas regularly move as well as dung and bamboo stems ripped off and scattered in crevices and boughs of the tree. All of the time we did try and spot mammals, but we only found birds, including white-collared blackbirds, great-backed tits, little buntings and yellow-billed blue magpies. Our highlight was a quick fly by from a beautiful Himalayan monal, a mountainous pheasant with fantastic iridescent feathers. But as the mist was really coming in thick now and the light was fading we headed back to the village for dinner. After dinner we had a brief spotlighting walk up the same way, however the temperature was unseasonably cold and the mist was still heavy. A lightning storm over on the Indian side of the forest lit up the sky but we found no eye shine and so headed back for a well-deserved nights rest. Tomorrow we would head into the forest to try and find a sunbathing red panda.





After breakfast this morning we enjoyed three feeding yellow-billed blue magpies that visit the farm every morning. We then left and headed back uphill for around 40 minutes along the main road and towards one of the best red panda watching areas. Close to the area that Phinju had seen the red panda sign yesterday afternoon. Phinju, Sange, Dev and Nima had already gone out just before dawn to scout out the area and we would be going to a location close by them all so that they could contact us easily if they found a red panda. The morning was quite pleasant with some mist around but it was burning off to the north. Whilst walking in the day light and with visibility for the first time we could compare the two different hill faces, the warm south facing slope having much more bamboo and rhododendrons whilst mosses and lichens dominate the trees on the north facing slope. This is what you would expect and also explains why the red pandas much prefer the south facing slopes, as bamboo makes up around 60% of their diet throughout the year and during the late spring (when their favourite species of bamboo) is flowering it can be as much as 95% of their diet. We also saw some nice birds including the common green-backed tits and white-collared blackbirds. But the birding highlight of this morning was a beautiful male verditer flycatcher and his slightly less attractive mate. However the most obvious bird was the most elusive, the loud and distinctive calls of the Eurasian cuckoo echoed through the forest nearly all day every day we were there, however it took us a while to find the culprit. We arrived at our agreed upon waiting location and sat and waited in a small clearing, all waiting and hoping for 'Punde Kunde' to come through the radio. This didn't happen today and instead we watched as a thunderstorm approached, scattered rain showers came and wait and in between the sun would peer out from the clouds and warm us up again. The seemingly ever changing weather had us putting on and taking off our waterproofs every few minutes. As the rain increased we decided to head back towards the village, it was also approaching lunch time and with 4 red panda trackers out there it seemed that if a red panda was going to be seen today we would have already found one. Not long after setting off back towards the camp the rain really started to come down hard, then the hail. The hail got to around 2cm in diameter and hurt when it hit you, this lasted for around 15 minutes and by the end of it our path was become a torrent and the hail stones looked like a fresh layer of snow had fallen throughout the subtropical forest. This was not good weather for red pandas (or us), and would severely hinder our chances of seeing any. We arrived back at the village at 13:30 and were soaked to the bone, we changed out of our wet clothes, placed them in a warm hut at the back of the homestay where a fire is kept burning day and night. We then went into the main house and had some lunch, catching up with Phinju, Sange, Dev and Nima and hearing that they had seen some evidence of pandas but no actual sightings from our guides, however Nima's father in another part of the forest had seen one this morning. We planned to head back out there and to the area Nima's dad had seen one in a few hours once the rain had settled down. But the rain didn't die down, the torrential rain set in for the majority of the day. We did head out though for a short walk, just to get out of the house more than anything as the chances of seeing a red panda in these conditions is extremely unlikely. On this walk the mountains to the north (the ridge that separates Dobate from Kanchenjunga) was visible, the clouds and mist all blanketing the southern ridge had left the steep Himalayan ridges exposed for the first time on this trip. But this was the only thing we did manage to see today and with the mist once again setting in and the rain not really letting up at all we decided to call it a day. Going back down to the homestay we had the rest of the afternoon and evening to relax and pray to the sun god that tomorrow would bring us much better red panda spotting conditions.

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## Day 5 Dobate

## Wildlife Watching

This morning was a little better, the clouds were higher in the sky and despite some drizzle it was a lot brighter and a lot better conditions for red panda watching. We decided to stay around the village this morning and only head out if the weather looked significantly better, the thinking here being that with already damp clothes and constant cold weather we didn't want to get ill by being caught in another downpour and not have any quick and efficient way of getting dry. It is worth noting that this weather is not normal for this time of year, the monsoon had arrived a full 6-7 weeks early. We were being very unlucky to not have sunshine in the morning and then the mist come in during the afternoon, with the occasional shower in the evening. But the weather is one thing that cannot be controlled and so we had to make the best of the situation. So whilst Martin, Beatrice and Karen stayed around the village this morning Phinju, Sange, Nev and Nima all went out to search different areas. The day was miserable, the fog came in from the west and the rain did not stop all day long. We were joined at the homestay, which also acts as a guesthouse and restaurant to passers-by, by many local women from the nearby villages. The doctor was in and she makes a little weekly clinic at the homestay and so many people come from all over to get treatment and medication. Even with this distraction we still prayed and hoped for a break in the rain, but that didn't come. But this was to be the least of our worries (not that we would understand the full implications of what was about to happen for many days) as at lunch time the whole ridge started to shake. At first it was a very light rumble, your chair shaking a little as you sat the table. But for around 2.5 minutes the shaking got stronger and stronger and we left the building and went outside. Once outside just standing perfectly still and getting your balance became difficult. The strength of the earthquake was intense, more intense than anything any of us here and the locals in the village had ever experienced before. In fact it was so strong that we naturally assumed we were near the epicentre and that we had suffered the worst of it. The fact that we were on the top of the ridge we didn't suffer any avalanches or landslides and because the houses here are mostly wooden and corrugated aluminium and



short (1 or 2 storeys at the most) nothing collapsed. We were all fine and there was no sign of damage or injuries to anyone so we generally passed it off as an interesting part of the day, but nothing much more than that. We knew that there was a chance that there had been landslides further down the ridge and maybe even along the road were to take to get back to Ilam in a couple of days; but as the area suffers from landslides regularly we knew that the local people would have it cleared up and usable again pretty quickly. Smaller aftershocks continued throughout the day and it became apparent that the tectonic activity was not dying down, to stop and put your hand on a rock would show you that the earth was nearly constantly moving and vibrating. So even this we didn't pay much attention to. It was only later that afternoon when the local radio news broadcast came on that all of the Nepalese speakers started to congregate around the radio and talking to each; that we realised the extent of the earthquake. At this early point all we knew was what was being broadcasted on the radio, that was that a quake of 7.4 on the Richter scale (later elevated to 7.8) hit a region around 50km from Pokhara (the epicentre was later clarified in the Gorkha region south of Kathmandu), 28 districts had been affected (this was later expanded to include over half of the entire country) and that there was a death toll of around 300. Most of the dead happened to be in Durbar Square and Thamel in Kathmandu. This is the busiest areas of the entire country as they are the major cultural and historical sites in Kathmandu and the backpackers hotspot respectively. The buildings here are poorly constructed and the streets more like alleys, if buildings were coming down here the affect could be like dominos and falling debris would have covered all of the roads and paths. As we realised what was going on (with more and more aftershocks occurring where we were), the death toll continued to rise and by that evening was over 650. However we suspected that this was just the tip of the ice berg and the last I heard the earthquakes had taken over 7,000 lives with many more to come no doubt. Sonam tried to contact his family and friends and many live in Kathmandu as well as other parts of the country. Eventually he did manage to get hold of everyone. The difficulty was that everyone was staying outside, people started to camp in the streets, parks, the one golf course in the country and anywhere that wasn't overhung by buildings. So people were no answering any landlines and people's mobile phones died and they had no way of charging them. But sooner or later he managed to contact everyone using the one area of signal available on the ridge. We all also got in contact with our families back home, by now it was apparent that this would be international news and that people back home could be panicking. We also made the call that at the moment we were best off over here and out of the way, the descriptions coming in about Kathmandu were not great and so we decided to stay out in Dobate until we were scheduled to go back the day after tomorrow. So tomorrow we would go our again in the morning and search for pandas and then head back to Ilam and spend the night there and try and get hold of our hotel in Kathmandu, see the news on the TV and work out whether we had better go direct to the airport, stay in Kathmandu, if Beatrice was best off going onto Bardia or looking to arrange a flight home. Where we were up the ridge we were almost blind to the full extent of the problems facing people and were unable to fully gauge what we should or shouldn't be looking to do. Martin and Sonam had made some arrangements as back up, such as ordering a jeep that could drive us from Bhadrapur to Kathmandu if the flights were not running (we were getting reports that flights in and out were sparse and rescue and aid flights were getting priority (rightly so). So we didn't know if we would even be able to get back to Kathmandu in time to make some of our flights as the drive would be a minimum of 24 hours over some of the most dangerous roads in the world (at the best of times). It also seemed like thousands of people (mostly Indian nationals, as their government had offered free flights to India for all Indians) were waiting at the airport (without tickets) looking to get on any flight out. So Martin had planned to buy a lot of food and drinks to take in case we had to camp outside the airport for a couple of days. It was impossible to plan as we had no idea what to expect when we arrived. But we had as many contingency plans as possible and were confident that between Martin and Sonam there was enough resources and local knowledge to get everyone out of the country and also help as much as possible.



## Day 6 **Dobate / Ilam**

## *Wildlife Watching & Travelling*

This morning was relatively clear with some mist to the east but the clouds were patchy and this was the best weather we had so far for red panda spotting. We had our 4 trackers out early as we had breakfast; 3 had gone to the east and one to the west to cover all of the bases as we knew we only had half a day left to try and find one. As we headed east (which was the most likely location) we spotted an upland buzzard soaring away on the first thermal of the day and also the first thermal for a few days. The poor raptor was probably hungry from not being able to fly very much over the last couple of days and today he was being mobbed by many eastern jungle crows until it got high enough into the sky that the crows decided he was no longer a threat to them and gave up. Along



the way we stopped at some very old rock carvings, the Tibetan Buddhist mantra of Om Mane Padme Hom had been carved out over and over again all around the rock in letters some 30cm high. This was around 200-300 years old and many of these large rock carvings can be found if you hike around the Himalayas and foothills. Left by monks and Buddhist's on pilgrimages as a mark of respect to Buddha and also when you circumnavigate the rock and recite the mantra you are being blessed many times from Buddha and your journey will be danger free and successful. The weather was dry, cool with occasional sun breaking through the thin veil of cloud today. We walked up towards the Indian border, we would walk further than we had so far as were searching far and wide for pandas today. Along the way Sonam spotted a Himalayan wood owl sleeping in a tree hole in a huge rhododendron, the owl was maybe 25m up in the tree but the tree was on the slope and so from the path we were at eye level of this beautiful and well camouflaged owl. Being around 5m away from this very elusive and strictly nocturnal species was amazing, very rarely seen we were surprised how relaxed it was as we took pictures and viewed the intricate pattern on its feathers through binoculars. Presumably thinking that its camouflage was still working and that we had not seen it and that we were not posing any immediate threat the owl decided to completely ignore us. We spotted the owl at an altitude of around 2,850m and we continued upwards towards a small border crossing point a few of more kilometres away. We also had nice views of a few Mrs. Gould's sunbirds as they flitted between the few flowers in the trees, the males being absolutely dazzling with their red, yellow, purple and blue colourations and the females as dull as the males are spectacular. As this was the first dry and sunny morning for a few days the birds were out in force and we also saw many white-collared blackbirds, bluethroats, green-back tits, rufous-backed nilvatas, rufous-vented tits, whiskered yuhinas as well a plain-backed thrush, grey-throated babbler and a verditer flycatcher. As we stopped to wait for any news from Phinju and the other trackers we scanned the horizon and the various large 'sunbathing' trees which Sonam knows are popular with red pandas. As he was scanning he noticed a red panda sunbathing, sprawled out along a large lichen covered branch. The tree was around 100m distant from our vantage point in a straight line, however to get closer would require a walk around the edge of the valley and then heading down into the dense bamboo forest and try to find the same tree from underneath. We watched the panda for a while before deciding to go and see if we could get a closer look. Sonam moved off first and Martin, Beatrice and Karen followed behind. We made it to the ridge that the red panda was on and headed directly down the ridge. Judging from what we could see the tree was around 100m down the ridge and a little further down from a large red rhododendron still in flower which was further up the slope from a group of around 3 magnolias (again still in flower). So we knew to look out for the colourful flowers above us and not go too far down the ridge. However after around 2 hours of hiking around the bamboo and Sonam and Martin going off and scouting the area in depth, we couldn't find the tree or red panda. In fact with the subsequent noise we had been making in getting through the very dense bamboo, it was very possible that we had found the tree. But that the panda had moved off disturbed by our presence. We stayed for a while but the weather threatened to close in on us again (and then the fog did descend and reduce the visibility considerably) and we were also mindful of the fact that we had to get down to Ilam before dark (and that there may be road closures or landslides blocking our progress from the earthquakes). So we headed back up the slope and before going back towards Dobate we would go and try and get hold of our trackers, so we walked a little further up the slope and to the Indian border. We found old leopard scat at the border check point (evidence that the leopards here are very used to and comfortable around people as the scat was no more than 50m from the border post). There was more good birding here as we waited a while before Sange and Phinju came back and we headed to Dobate, collecting Martin's camera traps along the way (the camera traps didn't capture anything), but we did have a very nice hoary-bellied Himalayan squirrel foraging around the stunted, lichen covered trees. Speaking to Phinju it turned out that he had found a panda, but the ridge he was on was too steep and the radio didn't work. When this happens the trackers use a system of whistles to communicate, but for some reason there was a breakdown in the communication and eventually Phinju had to leave the panda and ascend. So two pandas were spotted today, but neither very well. I wonder if the earthquakes (and the fact that it is widely accepted that animals predict and react to these kind of events) was a factor in our lack of luck, the early monsoon like weather was definitely not a help. On the walk back to the camp we spotted the Eurasian cuckoo that had provided us with the ever present sound track to our days in the forest. The migratory bird was perched in the fog above the pathway, the silhouette distinctive and then it took off and flew away down the pathway. Getting to Nima's house we met him and he told us of leopard cat tracks he had seen on his land this morning (another welcome sign of the presence of predators here, predators are a very good sign of a healthy ecosystem). Back in Dobate we had lunch before saying our farewells and loading up the jeep and going downhill to Ilam. We didn't know what to properly expect but we knew that today we would be busy contacting as many people we knew at home, to let them know we were safe, as well as assessing the possibility and need for getting earlier flights and also buying some extra food and water in case we had to wait outside the airport or basics were already in short supply in Kathmandu. The journey to Ilam was good and uneventful, we did have various large rocks and boulders on the road but they were navigable and we were lucky that we didn't have any further large earthquakes whilst on the narrow mountain roads. Along the way we did also have great views of a mountain hawk-eagle perched on a tree next to the road and at eye-level with us. After we arrived at Ilam we spent a long time making phone calls, sending emails and searching the internet for as much and any information we could get. Karen and Martin also walked down into Ilam and bought some snacks and water in



case and we had dinner. The information we were receiving was not good at all, still unable to get hold of our hotel and many people in Kathmandu, we began to realise that the extent of the devastation was far wider reaching than we realised. We went back bed in shock at the fact that it seemed our worst thoughts about what had happened in Kathmandu seemed to be true. But it wasn't long after going into the rooms that the second large earthquake struck (at 6.8 on the Richter scale) and we all evacuated the concrete buildings. After the initial aftershocks died down we tried to get as much sleep as possible, however this was impossible as we just lay there waiting for the inevitable earthquake. No more 'large' ones struck that night and we prepared for the final leg of our journey to Kathmandu tomorrow, Sonam had decided that he would stay here and not come back to Kathmandu with us as his family's village was closer to Ilam and he wanted to go there as they had also been struck badly by the earthquake. So Martin collected as much information, numbers and contacts as possible for Sonam before we would split tomorrow.



## Day 7 **Dobate**

## *Wildlife Watching*

Today we left the guest house in Ilam after saying our goodbyes to Sonam and Phinju and headed further down the hills towards Bhadrapur. We had checked online about the internal flights and the only information was there the flights had not been cancelled. We contacted the airport in Kathmandu and found out that the emergency and rescue flights were getting priority for internal flights (rightly so) and that if possible and room became available then the routine internal flights would run. Whilst this was understandable it didn't really help us in finding out what we needed to do today. So we decided to head to the airport and then assess the situation once we were there. On the way Martin spoke to Sonam and arranged for the jeep and driver to prepare the vehicle in case we had to drive from here to Kathmandu. This is because we wanted to try and get back to Kathmandu by tomorrow morning so that Beatrice could possibly get her flight to Nepalgunj in the far west (and unaffected area of Nepal) and so that Karen and Martin could catch their scheduled flights home. Of course missing any of these flights would mean that (1) Beatrice would have to stay in Kathmandu (as we had already looked into getting an earlier flight home and this was not possible) which we didn't know how safe or secure this would be and (2) Martin and Karen would struggle to get another flight arranged as we would be in the queue with several thousand other people for the next available flights out of Nepal. So as much as possible we had to make it to Kathmandu today. The drive would be around 18 hours, in good conditions, so with landslides, ongoing earthquakes (the smaller ones (4 to 5 on the Richter Scale) had become so common now that we barely noticed them anymore) and increased traffic on the roads this journey could take us a very long time and we would not be guaranteed of getting there in time for these flights anyway. But at least it was an option if internal flights were not running. So Martin arranged the fee and asked the driver to get new tyres and get the oil and water checked and fuel up and buy extra supplies in case we had to do this, once we got to Bhadrapur. When we arrived at the airport we found a lot of other people there and on speaking to the air crew on check in we found out that the planes are due to take off but they didn't have any departure times from Kathmandu. We were repeatedly told 15 more minutes and eventually Martin managed to speak to the manager of Buddha Air here and found out that the flight was unlikely to take off and that no flights had made it here for the previous 2 days and they didn't expect that to change. So at this point Martin spoke to the other 3 airlines and found out that the situation was not much different. Martin then told the driver to make the arrangements and we would depart for Kathmandu within the hour. Almost as soon as this happened we heard of a flight with Yeti Airlines taking off from Kathmandu and coming to Bhadrapur. What we did know was that a flight took off from Kathmandu to Bhadrapur and it arrived before 5pm it would be going back to Kathmandu (later than 5pm and the flight would overnight in Bhadrapur as it is too dangerous for these planes to fly at night – as they are often lower than the mountains and visibility is vital when flying in Nepal). So Martin went to Yeti Airlines and looked to get our tickets moved to this airline, during the money exchange and formalities of this we heard that Buddha Air (and in fact all of the airlines) had their flights in the air and that we would be able to fly back to Kathmandu on our original ticket. So we quickly checked in, went through the security and once the flights had landed, everyone got off (the sight of seeing injured people on crutches, wheelchairs and with limbs in casts and bandaged heads and bodies was a reminder that we were definitely the lucky ones and had been unscathed from everything) and turned around he boarded and headed to Kathmandu. Once we got to Kathmandu the first things that we noticed the sea of tents and canvases spread out in the fields, courtyards, gold course and every open space, the entire population of Kathmandu (and the surrounding villages) were living outside in these makeshift camps in fear of going back inside in case of another large earthquake. We could also see some of the damage, some collapsed buildings dotted around. The Indian and US Air Forces had a presence in the airport, but once we debarked and got into the terminal we found the domestic airport empty. It didn't make sense at first, but obviously the domestic had seen very few flights come or go recently and everyone seemed occupied with trying to leave the



country and not going around the country. Before we got a taxi, Martin went to look at the situation at the international terminal, there were lots of people, a few tents and people looking like they have been sleeping here since this all began. But the reports of tens of thousands of people and the airport being non functioning were wide of the mark, from what we could see there were delays and the scheduled flights were not getting priority but they were coming and going and so we should be able to make our flights home and as long as the flight to Nepalganj was running Beatrice could escape to Bardia National Park for a few days and wait for things to calm down further. We had made arrangements with Karen to stay at the Dwarika's hotel as her hotel was located in Thamel, which was one of the most affected areas and when we arrived at Dwarika's we found a lot of people who were in the same boat. The hotel was functioning very well considering, the staff were working hard to accommodate everyone, they had moved beds outside and created a large covered outside sleeping area, basic meals were being provided the day we arrived and we spent the afternoon speaking to other people who had been here and getting an idea of what was going on and what to expect. Amongst the people we met, was a French-Canadian women who was a mountain rescue team member, she was due to be working on Camp 2 on Everest but there had been a problem with her visa and so she was delayed. As it happened this saved her life as nearly everyone on camp 2 was killed when an avalanche took out the entire set ups at camps 1 and 2. The sense of guilt and relief was a weird combination to grasp, she was now waiting for a rescue team to be able to take her up to the mountains as she wanted to use her skills in order to help out. Another person we met was a man who had just arrived and was still inside the airport when the massive earthquake struck, he described scenes of panic, people trampling over people, people jumping through glass windows to get out and people grabbing onto the concrete pillars to stay from being knocked off your feet and trampled. It sounded terrifying and once again we were reminded how lucky we were. Stories like this were common, nearly everyone there at the hotel had been in Kathmandu throughout the entire experience. We also saw the film crews come and go, CNN, Al Jazeera and BBC were there in the short time we were there, rescue teams were also present here as they waited to get orders as to where to go. The hotel is next door to the Spanish embassy and they had an agreement to house the Spanish citizens as they waited for the flights that the Spanish were putting on for them. So the hotel was a constant hustle and bustle of people. We had dinner and then settled down for a night outside, Beatrice's flight was due to leave tomorrow and so we would go our separate ways tomorrow, we had contacted the lodge in Bardia and they had been unaffected and so they were perfectly equipped to look after Beatrice and take her into the park during her stay there. There had been more quakes this afternoon and evening and the hotel was deemed too dangerous to sleep in, so we were allocated beds outside and got as much sleep as possible.

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## Day 8 Kathmandu

## *Travelling*

This morning Beatrice left for the airport in a pre-paid taxi and after lunch with Karen, Martin went to the Thamel district, here he gave away the excess food and water they had bought in case and donated all of the cash he had to the various people who had seemed to suffer the most. Various buildings had collapsed and it was very strange to see what is usually the beating heart of the city so quiet and empty. 90% of the shops closed and every looking sullen, like nobody knows what to say or do and to a great extent that is the case. Martin returned to the hotel in the afternoon in time to get his bags and leave for the airport, just about to leave he checked his email and had an email from Beatrice. Explaining that whilst the flight had taken off they got a short way into the flight and the weather in Nepalganj had gotten so bad that they had turned around, so she was back at the hotel. Martin met her briefly before having to leave for the airport and made arrangements with Dambar for the cost of the hotel for the coming days to be covered and also to let Karnali Lodge in Bardia know that she would not be arriving the next day. Beatrice had rightly decided that the fickle nature of the weather now (with the monsoon seemingly here to stay 6 weeks ahead of schedule) and the possibility of more earthquakes closing the airport, that it was better to be in Kathmandu and ready to leave when her flight was due to depart than possibly stuck in the far west of Nepal. So with Beatrice's situation with accommodation sorted as best as it could (she would stay at Dwarika's until her flight in 5 days time) Martin left and after some delays, seeing coffins being brought in and loaded onto the planes, the flight took off. However it was nearly empty, the outrage on board was tangible, we had seen thousands of people waiting for flights out of Nepal, thousands of people sleeping outside and inside the airport and had been doing for days. We had heard rumours of some flights being empty or with lots of empty seats, but didn't believe them as this seemed ludicrous that an airline would not be trying their best to sell all of the empty seats to the thousands of people willing to pay anything to get out and with embassies purchasing as many seats and even chartering flights to get their citizens out of Nepal. But there must have been over 100 empty seats on board, this was far too many for it to be people who had missed the flight and Martin couldn't believe it. But it was just one more incidence in many that would become apparent over the next week or so, in the inadequacies of the way the Nepalese were handling the situation.

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## Days 9-13 Kathmandu

## *Waiting*

For the next five days Beatrice kept busy at the hotel, helping the staff with their various responsibilities, many they had already with dozens of staff members and hundreds of guests to look after and many that they took on off their



own back to try and help their countrymen in the most difficult period for over 80 years. However with the sheer number of earthquakes, the timing of it all (just as the harvest was due and the next crop of rice to be planted) and the early monsoon, it is very likely that this is the worst disaster than Nepal has ever experienced. Martin, Karen and Beatrice stayed in regular communication via email in these days, and it was pleasing to hear that Beatrice was doing well in Kathmandu and that Karen had managed to get her flight home, sleeping like Martin for 24 hours. The lack of sleep since the first earthquake, the long days, stressful days, having to be constantly alert, on edge and ready to evacuate and restart your plans for the day, week and possibly longer at any time was physically and mentally exhausting and only once we all got home did the true impact of what we had seen and been through hit us. But once again we were so lucky compared to hundreds and thousands of people who were caught up in the worse of it, who have lost family and friends, homes, livelihoods, food and who cannot just leave the country and go home. According to a report from Beatrice the hotel was a hub for various types of coordination. Rescue teams were arriving from all over the world, including Oman. They were using the hotel as a base before getting directed to various parts of the country, film crews were still around and getting stories from all over the country, and the hotel had begun their own aid relief. There was a group of Portuguese students who were actively engaged in going out to remoter villages with food parcels containing the basics for a family of four for five days. In exchange for bed and board they helped distribute food to the very needy villagers. The owners of the hotel are quite remarkable and are actively working with the students organising the purchase of these parcels, transport and the means to get to one remote village. They have dug deep into their own pockets to provide enough cash for this. One dollar buys a food parcel. Needless to say I have made a financial contribution to this effort as there are no middlemen and they know their own town and surrounding countryside intimately. Dwarika's widow is 81 years old and is working tirelessly. Herself and her daughter worked endlessly from dawn till dusk to get things organised and help as much as possible, the government is not happy with their efforts as it would like all the money to be put into the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. Which would probably result in much of the money going 'missing' or the aid being stuck for days before the paperwork is completed and it can be moved on to somewhere needed. In the UK there were news reports of trucks full of aid being told to wait the airport for the 3 days it took for the paperwork to be completed. This is just pathetic and another example of the lack of organisation in Nepal at the best of times and when this kind of thing happens everything just falls apart and nothing gets done. The faith in the Nepalese government and 'official' systems in recovering from this has all but evaporated and it is only the local people who will suffer. But it was not just the rich and corrupt Nepalese that were causing issues. The hotel had opened its doors to young backpackers from Spain who are waiting to be evacuated. So much so that they were given a courtyard with shelter and beds. They were given food and a sanitary block, however some were taking advantage of this in the wrong sense of the word. Today they have been told to go rather than sit around playing guitars and acting like later day hippies! With everyone in the hotel, staff, guests and management all looking for practical ways of helping there was no room for freeloaders in Kathmandu and these people should have been ferried out on the first available flight. But also some well-heeled people have been positively rude and less than understanding. One man, on day two, refused to accept that the place was not really functioning as a five star hotel should. He was unhappy at set meals etc instead of the normal vast array of options on offer. These people upset the owners no end. Some people are completely deluded and so self-absorbed. The owners were also attending to the needs of their own members of staff who have lost their homes making sure that they have shelter and food as well as the money to help them deal with the situation. They own two large Eco-farms and everyday a truck goes out to get produce for the hotel and now also for the local people. The children now have no schools to go so the parents bring them here during the day. There were uniformed people everywhere. Beatrice met a Danish pilot eating. It turned out that he is in charge of ensuring that the Nepali aircraft are airworthy, all they needed were air disasters to add to this situation. Representatives from various embassies have been turning up at regular intervals making sure that their nationals are ok. Not one person from the UK embassy has been seen. In fact the Spanish, US, Australian and German embassies seemed to be the best in terms of the people Martin spoke to, in getting help and giving people shelter, food and where possible a flight home. But the lack of foreign government help for the nationals stuck, injured or dead in Nepal was in fantastic compared to the lacklustre help and aid that the Nepalese received from their own government. A number of members of the so-called government were out of the country when the earthquake happened (including the prime minister himself) and they took four days to actually get out there to see the state of the place for themselves. There was no constitution and in reality little or no government, this is one thing when the country is coping on a day to day basis with increasing levels of tourism and decent trade with neighbouring countries (granted Nepal is no world power but it was getting along ok and the economy was increasing) but when the country is hit with a disaster such as this then the lack of infrastructure and rife corruption in the government just makes matters so much worse than they should be). Intense criticism has been levelled at the politicians for having had no emergency plan in place to deal with a catastrophe on this scale. They have been fearing just such an earthquake for twenty years but complacency and the chaotic nature of the political scene has left the country in a state of utter confusion, this is especially shocking considering that only 2 weeks before the first quake hit Nepal they had had an international forum about how best to deal with an earthquake as it was feared one was due. But when the so-called politicians seem to change every six months or so there is no hope for continuity and it is of no surprise that the state of the country is so bad in dealing with this disaster. Whilst we were in Dwarika's Martin spoke to a woman



who was working with the US Geological Survey and she was showing the seismographs of the quakes, apparently any quake over 4.5 on the Richter scale is officially an independent earthquake and not a tremor or aftershock. In the 4 days that Martin was there since the first quake there was 37 earthquakes and Beatrice experienced well over 50 of and everyone just got on with their business paying little attention to them. The mountains we were in around Dobate (as most of the Himalayas) have now move around 500m further north and even Kathmandu has moved by about 2m since the earthquakes occurred. But once again it is very important to stress that we were all very much the lucky ones here and since this we have all been thinking of the people we left behind in Nepal and Martin has worked hard on fundraising for Nepal. Come the end of the scheduled trip Beatrice was taking to the airport and made it back to the UK in one piece.

# Species List

Realm of the Red Panda / Apr 2015

## Mammals (\* = heard or signs only / CT = Camera Trap images)

|   | Common Name                      | Binominal Name                  |
|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Red panda                        | <i>Ailurus fulgens</i>          |
| 2 | Hoary-bellied Himalayan squirrel | <i>Callosciurus pygerythrus</i> |
| 3 | Five-lined palm squirrel         | <i>Funambulus pennanti</i>      |
| 4 | Indian hare                      | <i>Lepus nigricollis</i>        |
| 5 | Rhesus macaque                   | <i>Macaca mulatta</i>           |
| 6 | Red muntjac                      | <i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>        |
| 7 | Leopard                          | <i>Panthera pardus</i>          |
| 8 | Leopard cat                      | <i>Prionailurus bengalensis</i> |
| 9 | Indian flying fox                | <i>Pteropus giganteus</i>       |

| April |     |        |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | May |   |
|-------|-----|--------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|---|
| 2     | 22  | 23     | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 1   | 2 |
|       |     | *      |    | *  | 2  |    |    |    |    |     |   |
|       |     |        |    | CT | 1  |    |    |    |    |     |   |
|       | 2   |        |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |   |
|       |     | 1      |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |   |
| ~10   | ~10 |        |    |    |    | 16 |    |    |    |     |   |
|       |     | *      |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |   |
|       |     | CT (*) |    |    | *  |    |    |    |    |     |   |
|       |     |        |    |    | *  |    |    |    |    |     |   |
| 3     |     |        |    |    |    |    | 2  |    |    |     |   |

## Birds (\* = heard or signs only / CT = Camera Trap images)

|    | Common Name           | Binominal Name                  |
|----|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1  | Bank mynah            | <i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i> |
| 2  | Common mynah          | <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>     |
| 3  | Rufous-fronted tit    | <i>Aegithalos iouschistos</i>   |
| 4  | Himalayan swiftlet    | <i>Aerodramus brevirostris</i>  |
| 5  | Mrs. Gould's sunbird  | <i>Aethopyga gouldiae</i>       |
| 6  | Hill partridge        | <i>Arborophila torqueola</i>    |
| 7  | Indian pond heron     | <i>Ardeola grayii</i>           |
| 8  | Cattle egret          | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>            |
| 9  | Upland buzzard        | <i>Buteo hemilasius</i>         |
| 10 | Purple sunbird        | <i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>       |
| 11 | Speckled wood pigeon  | <i>Columba hodgsonii</i>        |
| 12 | Feral pigeon          | <i>Columba livia</i>            |
| 13 | Oriental magpie robin | <i>Copsychus saularis</i>       |
| 14 | Eastern jungle crow   | <i>Corvus leuillanti</i>        |

| April |      |      |    |    |    |      |      |      |      | May  |      |
|-------|------|------|----|----|----|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 2     | 22   | 23   | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27   | 28   | 29   | 30   | 1    | 2    |
|       | ~10  |      |    |    |    |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|       | ~25  | ~50  |    |    |    | ~100 | ~25  | ~25  | ~25  | ~25  | ~25  |
|       |      |      |    |    | 2  |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|       | 1    | 3    |    |    |    |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|       |      |      |    |    | 1  |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|       |      |      | *  |    |    |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|       | 4    |      |    |    |    | 1    |      |      |      |      |      |
|       |      |      |    |    |    | 8    |      |      |      |      |      |
|       |      |      |    |    | 1  |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|       |      | 1    | 2  |    |    |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|       |      |      |    |    | 8  |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| ~100  | ~100 | ~250 |    |    |    | ~100 | ~100 | ~100 | ~100 | ~100 | ~100 |
|       |      | 2    | 3  | 3  | 9  |      |      |      |      |      |      |



|    |                           |                              |
|----|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| 54 | Yellow-billed blue magpie | <i>Urocissa flavirostris</i> |
| 55 | Whiskered yuhina          | <i>Yuhina flavicollis</i>    |

|  |  |  |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|---|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|  |  |  | 6 | 3 |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |   |   | 2 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Reptiles** (\* = heard or signs only / CT = Camera Trap images)

|   | Common Name          | Binominal Name              |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Indian garden lizard | <i>Calotes vericolor</i>    |
| 2 | Tropical house gecko | <i>Hemidactylus mabouia</i> |

| April |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | May |   |
|-------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|---|
| 2     | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 1   | 2 |
|       |    | 1  |    |    |    | 1  |    |    |    |     |   |
|       |    |    |    |    |    | 1  |    |    |    |     |   |