

## **Bhutan, April 2026**

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In April, I had the great fortune and privilege to guide the Eagle-Eye Tours trip to Bhutan. The itinerary we followed is at <https://www.eagle-eye.com/tour/bhutan-birding-tour/>; we are scheduled to run this tour again in 2026 should there be enough participants. It was my first time in the country and having travelled a good bit in the Himalaya, can say it absolutely lives up to the hype. People, scenery, wildlife and food were all utterly wonderful. The eBird trip report – which includes notes on mammals seen within each checklist – can be found at <https://ebird.org/tripreport/347297> and the blogpost which might give a feel for the trip, is on the EET website [here](#).



Mammal watching is still a tiny part of the ecotourism sector, although it is undoubtedly growing. Indeed, I did meet two visitors who were on an (unsuccessful) mission for cats, particularly Mainland Clouded Leopard, via a series of night drives. This short write-up is intended to provide info on what to look for, and what to expect to see, for those who join birding tours to Bhutan, as an update to Dion Hobcroft's previous notes on the [mammalwatching.com](http://mammalwatching.com). As such, I've broken it into sections that correspond best to the main areas visited. Hopefully, though, they'll be useful enough to anyone plotting a dedicated mammalwatching trip.

### **Pros and cons to Bhutan as a mammalwatching destination**

There are definitely a couple of advantages to looking for Himalayan mammals in Bhutan compared to, say, northeastern India. Primarily, fewer restrictions exist on accessing – and therefore spotlighting in – good habitat. There is also little disturbance, with little traffic by day and even less at night, in many areas. Being a Buddhist country, hunting pressure from native Bhutanese people is basically non-existent, so animals are common and seemingly largely unconcerned by the presence of humans.

On the debit side: you are largely confined to a very limited road network, and those roads cross elevational zones fairly rapidly at times. So there might only be a small amount of habitat accessible at a given altitude. Similarly, while access to national parks (particularly at night) might be less troublesome than in India or Thailand, only very small parts can be reached. As so little mammalwatching has been done in Bhutan, there's a lack of drivers who might be keen on long nocturnal excursions, especially given the sometimes long travel

times (by day) between destinations. Tour operators have a good handle on what birders want, less so for mammalers – even if the guides do have good knowledge on mammals themselves! Proximity to accommodations is also a consideration – only at a few locations could I really get out on foot directly into the habitat for an out-of-guiding-hours nocturnal exploration of my own.

### Timing

I was in this incredible place during the first three weeks of April, which felt ideal; at least in 2025 when, after relatively little snowfall during the winter, spring had arrived early. The end of April and into May are peak times for bird tours. While it won't be the same as busy periods elsewhere, there will be impacts on availability of guides and accommodations, plus you'll run into other groups, with the good and bad that might entail. November and December are apparently excellent times to visit in terms of weather and good for many mammals (based on my experience in Nepal, this should be a good time for Red Panda), although smaller species may be harder to find as temperatures drop.



*Capped Langurs at Morong (left) and Lingmethang*

### Routes

Most birding tours arrive and depart by air at Paro airport and, until recently, followed a fairly standard route through the higher parts of Bhutan: Chele La, the Punakha area, Pele La, Zhemgeng and the Lingmethang Road, and back. More companies are now looping round to the south at Gelephu, and heading to the Lingmethang Road via Panbang (rather than up to Trongsa), so as to explore the northern slope of relatively undisturbed forests at 800-1500m elevation. I've heard very good things about the birding by doing this, so assume it would be great for mammals too, but haven't heard it direct - if anyone has been mammalwatching there, I'd love to hear about it!

As you can see from the links in the intro, our itinerary followed a slightly different route to most, which has a few benefits. By arriving in Samdrup Jongkhar, our travels involved a minimum of backtracking, and we spent a good bit of time in foothills forest, which is naturally higher in biodiversity; Capped Langur, for example, is far more likely to be encountered if you have several days in the southeast. Starting in the lowlands and working uphill over the first week or so limits the chances of an adverse effects of altitude, rather than going straight in to 2,200m at Paro. This route would allow a trip to Bhutan to be combined

with Kaziranga and Nameri NPs in Assam; at present, Samdrup Jongkhar is the only town where entry by land into Bhutan is permitted for tourism.

### Taxonomic notes



Where Sikkim Pikas are mentioned below, I've assumed that's what they are based on this [study](#) (paper linked at the bottom) and on discussion on [mammalwatching.com](#). Everything I saw was a "Moupin Pika"-type, dwelling under shrubs (particularly rhododendron) in semi-open patches within forest. There are records of other species (eg Royle's and Large-eared Pikas) on iNaturalist, however I think most are misidentified (not that I feel qualified to try to correct them!).

*Sikkim Pika (Ochotona sikimeria), Thrumshingla*

Ungulate taxonomy is always vexed to say the least; for the gorals in Bhutan I've followed Ralf Burglin (often of this parish): <https://www.wilddocu.de/himalayan-goral-nemorhaedus-goral/>

As an aside – not wanting to be a downer with regards to one species people are keen on seeing in Bhutan, but... I was surprised that some individuals of Golden Langur and Capped Langur approached each other in hair coloration. I suspect if they had originally be described as subspecies rather than species, the clamour to split them wouldn't exactly be deafening...

### Samdrup Jongkhar

The immediate vicinity of this above this pleasant little border town produced two species not otherwise seen on this trip, albeit ones commonly seen elsewhere: a **Pallas's Squirrel** (near the customs checkpoint), and a few **Rhesus Macaques** (just above town). Birding the a few kilometres along the main highway to the north, we saw **Capped Langurs** near Tashi Gasel Lodge (apparently a regular hangout for a troop) and a pair of **Yellow-throated Martens** ([here](#) but this species seems possible anywhere).

### Morong

The next birding area heading north along the highway to Trashigang is around Morong, around 1700m elevation. From [the campsite](#) I took a walk east (downslope) in the evening,



*Ex-Euroscaptor micrurus*

but saw no mammals in slightly degraded roadside forest; the other way (north) might be more productive but noisy dogs around the houses were a deterrence. By day we had excellent views of **Capped Langurs**, **Assamese Macaques**, another pair of **Yellow-throated Martens**, and **Black Giant, Irrawaddy** (aka Hoary-bellied), and **Orange-bellied Squirrels**. Above the camp I found a recently-deceased Himalayan Mole.

## Kori La

The first higher pass we crossed (2100m), between Trashigang and Monggar, was more of a birding spot, but if you're staying in the latter town may be worth more exploration, particularly at night. We saw **Northern Red Muntjac** and the ubiquitous **Himalayan Striped Squirrel** here.

## Lingmethang Road - Lingmethang to Yongkhola

The Lingmethang Road is more of a sequence of sites, rather than one site, but most tours base themselves at one or two locations and cover the area over several days. This section covers the mixed Himalayan broadleaf forest from Lingmethang itself at around 600m above sea level, up to around 2000m elevation, while based in the village of Yongkhola. The best forest is west of Yongkhola, in the Phrumshingla National Park. Species encountered regularly over three days included **Capped Langur**, **Assamese Macaques**, **Himalayan Striped Squirrel** and (less commonly) **Irrawaddy Squirrel**. One morning we had a great view of **Himalayan Brown Goral** right by the roadside. We also made a couple of fairly short nocturnal excursions along the main road. The awesome **Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel** proved trickier than expected (it took nearly 25 minutes to get an excellent look), this being one of the more reliable spots for the species. Conversely, **Hairy-footed Flying Squirrel** was easier to find: I picked up singles on both nights using the thermal, one showing very well. In the same area we had good views of **Himalayan White-bellied Rats** (*Niviventer niviventer*) in the spotlight – this is of course a tentative identification, but the upperpart coloration and structure seems to fit this species more than Chestnut-bellied. I made a similarly provisional ID on a couple of rats seen on the fringes of Yongkhola village one afternoon: based on, habitat, shaggy fur on the back, tail length and slightly blunt snout I think these are **Himalayan Field Rats** (*Rattus nitidus*) rather than Asian House Rats. There were abundant signs of Eurasian Wild Pig in the forest, as well as scat from a smallish cat species; people have seen Serow here.

## Lingmethang Road - Sengor to Thrumshingla

The higher stretches of the Lingmethang Road, above 2500m elevation, run through more open rhododendron and coniferous forests. The campsite is at [Sengor](#); this is one of spots I was able to make a good nightwalk when I couldn't sleep. Perhaps not the best choice really, as a) mammal diversity is pretty low at 3000m altitude, and b) I was told the following morning that a large Tiger was present in the area. My only sightings were a **Himalayan Brown Goral** that I startled at close range and a couple of presumed voles in the meadow above the camp; I never got a clear view and have no idea what they were. By day, one of the group saw what I think may have been **Royle's Pika** down the road: it sounded like a bigger-eared animal than the other pikas we saw, and I've seen that species in the same habitat (among boulders in a gully) and at similar altitude in Himachal Pradesh.



*Western Red Panda, Thrumshingla*

Thrumshingla, and specifically the forests on the Sengor side of the pass, seems to be the place in Bhutan where **Western Red Panda** is seen most frequently, and our irrepressible driver Mr Tenzin spotted one way below the road at <https://maps.app.goo.gl/mHzw27YfZnxbzPhs5>. It or another was seen in the same area by a friend a couple of weeks later. I'm aware of sightings of Himalayan Musk Deer, Goral and Serow in the vicinity of Thrumshingla, and earlier in 2025 one birding group [saw Asian Golden Cat](#) here.

In the meadows on the Ura side of the past, we found the first **Sikkim Pikas** of the trip.

### Trongsa

This was just an overnight stop, but is worth mentioning as **Golden Langur** is remarkably easy to find as soon as you start heading southwards towards Gelephu. Our first troop was a very relaxed group by the road only around [7km south from Trongsa](#), and we encountered them regularly when heading on from here. **Assamese Macaque** is also fairly common along the highway.

### Zhemgeng-Tingtibi area

We were based southeast of Tingtibi, camping by the road to Panbang, at an altitude of around 500m. The lower areas are on the fringes of Royal Manas National Park and the mammalwatching potential must be huge; it's somewhere I'd love to explore more. However I saw very little day or night, and my night walk from the campsite produced nothing (except brief excitement before realising the cat in my thermal was *Felis catus domesticus*). Most of the forest close to accommodations here is somewhat disturbed and bamboo dominated, so not the best for mammals.

Higher up, people often bird along the old highway between Tingtibi and Zhemgeng (often focussing around 1500m elevation). Here we had some particularly good views of **Golden Langurs**; this is another Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel hotspot. On the stretch downhill back to Tingtibi we also saw a **Himalayan Brown Goral** in the road, and more **Assamese Macaques**.

### Pele La

One of the higher driveable passes, at around 3450 metres above sea level. Birding is generally done along an old road through conifer-rhododendron forest. Goral, Serow and Himalayan Musk Deer are all seen here, Asiatic Black Bear is possible, and we found scat of Leopard. The only live mammals were numerous **Sikkim Pika** and two **Northern Red Muntjac**.

Downhill from the Pele La, we had excellent views of a large troop of **Nepal Grey Langurs** in roadside broadleaf forest near Nobding.

### Punakha

Broadleaf forest at around 1400m elevation, along the Mo Chu river, within Jigme Dorji National Park, is accessible about an hour's drive north of town. Presumably it holds the usual set of mammals for this altitude/habitat, but we saw only **Assamese Macaque**.

Within the awesome Punakha Dzong, we found a European Freetail Bat via its audible vocalisations, roosting behind a windowframe in the southern courtyard. Smooth-coated Otters are often seen in the rivers around Punakha.

### Dochu La

We made a few afternoon birding sites close to this high pass east of Thimpu, with the only mammal being a roadside **Sikkim Pika**. The Royal Botanical Park is apparently good for Nepal Grey Langur, and the trails may be worth exploring for other species.

### Cheri Valley

The Chagri Dorjeden Monastery, generally known as Cheri Monastery, is an outstanding place to see **Himalayan Brown Goral**. The animals are tame and habituated around the monastery buildings, which is a fairly steep 1.8km hike up from the road; the trailhead is [here](#). Other species seen on the walk were **Orange-bellied** and many **Himalayan Striped Squirrels**. The gorals can be scoped distantly from the road a little way back from start of the trail for those unable to make the climb! On the road back to Thimpu, we had close views of **Nepal Grey Langurs** (at roughly [27.566027](#), [89.639417](#)).



*Himalayan Brown Gorals (Nemorhaedus [goral] hodgsoni), Cheri*

### Thimpu to Paro

The dry valley along the highway on the stretch up to Paro is another area where **gorals** are regularly seen. We saw one about 16km southeast of the airport, north of the road, [here](#).

### Paro area

The usual arrival and departure point for Bhutan is very scenic, but not particularly great for mammals. The valley bottom is largely farmed, with coniferous forests on the surrounding mountain ridges. The main birding area is the road up to the Chele La (3800m elevation); **Sikkim Pikas** were seen a few times in the transition between the conifers and birch alpine scrub. I've heard reports of Himalayan Brown Goral, Himalayan Musk Deer and Asiatic Black Bear from up here, and a friend saw (and photographed) a Hairy-footed Flying Squirrel at its roost hole along the road just after my visit.



*Punakha Dzong*