

Trip Report - Small cats with Robin Hamilton

Avijit Sarkhel & Nehal Gurung

Date: 28 March 25 to 13 April 25

Location: Bhitarkanika, Kailadevi, Kaziranga, Bhutan

Guests: Mr. Robin Hamilton

Mammals:

S/N	Common Name	Scientific Name	No	Comments
1	Fishing Cat	<i>Prionailurus viverrinus</i>	2	Bhitarkanika
2	Asiatic Wildcat	<i>Felis lybica ornata</i>	3	Kailadevi
3	Common Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus fusca</i>	2	Kailadevi
4	Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>	2	Kailadevi, one was a melanistic
5	Small Indian Civet	<i>Viverricula indica</i>	2	Kailadevi, partially leucistic
6	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	8	Kailadevi
7	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennantii</i>	15+	Kailadevi
8	Indian Gray Wolf	<i>Canis lupus pallipes</i>	9	Kailadevi
9	Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	9	Kailadevi
10	Indian Gazelle	<i>Gazella bennettii</i>	5	Kailadevi
11	Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>	2	Kailadevi
12	Indian Crested Porcupine	<i>Hystrix indica</i>	2	Kailadevi
13	Striped Hyena	<i>Hyaena hyaena</i>	2	Kailadevi
14	Eurasian Wild Boar	<i>Sus scorfa</i>	4	Kailadevi
15	Black-naped Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	10	Kailadevi
16	Malayan Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa bicolor</i>	2	Kaziranga
17	Indian Hog Deer	<i>Axis porcinus</i>	40+	Kaziranga
18	Eastern Swamp Deer	<i>Rucervus duvaucelii</i>	18	Kaziranga
19	One-Horned Rhino	<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>	6	Kaziranga
20	Asian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>	21	Kaziranga
21	Capped Langur	<i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i>	10+	Kaziranga
22	Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	25+	Kaziranga
23	Wild Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus arnee</i>	10+	Kaziranga
24	Himalayan Striped Squirrel	<i>Tamiops macclellandi</i>	4	Kaziranga & Bhutan
25	Hoary-bellied Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus pegerythrus</i>	6	Kaziranga & Bhutan
26	Bhutan Giant Gliding Squirrel	<i>Petaurista nobilis</i>	2	Bhutan
27	Orange-bellied Squirrel	<i>Dremomys lokryah</i>	2	Bhutan

Reptiles:

Burmese Rock Python | Salt-water Crocodile |

Birds: 180 species; A few highlights

S/N	Name	Scientific Name	Count
1	Blood Pheasant	<i>Ithaginis cruentus</i>	1
2	Satyr Tragopan	<i>Tragopan satyra</i>	1
3	Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	4
4	Spot-billed Pelican	<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>	1
5	Slender-billed Vulture	<i>Gyps tenuirostris</i>	1
6	Mountain Hawk-Eagle	<i>Nisaetus nipalensis</i>	1
7	Black Eagle	<i>Ictinaetus malaiensis</i>	2
8	Ward's Trogon	<i>Harpactes wardi</i>	1
9	Rufous-necked Hornbill	<i>Aceros nipalensis</i>	5
10	Brown-winged Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis amauroptera</i>	2
11	Stork-billed Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>	1
12	Black-capped Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon pileata</i>	3
13	Gray-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus canicapillus</i>	1
14	Darjeeling Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos darjellensis</i>	1
15	Mangrove Pitta	<i>Pitta megarhyncha</i>	4
16	Rufous-bellied Niltava	<i>Niltava sundara</i>	2
17	Mrs. Gould's Sunbird	<i>Aethopyga gouldiae</i>	1
18	Greater Painted Snipe	<i>Rostratula benghalensis</i>	4
19	Black Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus flavicollis</i>	1
20	Gray-Headed Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus ichhyaetus</i>	1

DETAILED ITINERARY & REPORT

My involvement in this trip was last minute since Avijit had to drop out of the 1st half of the trip due to last minute emergencies. I left for Kolkata on 27th to collect a thermal scope from Mr. Abhra's office and took a morning flight to our rendezvous point at Bhubaneshwar airport.



28th Mar'25 Fri Bhubaneshwar - Bhitarkanika

I met Robin at Bhubaneshwar airport and started our 5 hours' drive to Bhitarkanika. The day was sweltering hot only made worse by the extreme humidity. We stopped for lunch at a small roadside café to save time and had an ice breaking session over the lunch. We reached our stay by evening, later than our expected arrivals as the roads towards the end of the journey were not great.

We met Mr. Bijay - the owner of the homestay and the local boat safari guide - at Mangrove Pitta homestay. After a quick sip of hot tea and snack we immediately left for a short reconnaissance boat ride to get an idea of how our sightings were going to be for the night. After about 2 hours in the water, we came back for dinner and some rest. The food was amazing and in plenty for just two of us, prawns, chicken, mixed veg, rice, rotis, dal and the list goes on.

We left for the night safari at 20:30 hours, our plan for the night was to pull an all-nighter. Equipped with mosquito repellents and cameras we left for the night. It was a new moon night so only the stars were visible; the tide too was rising later than expected. Our target was fishing cats and leopard cats. We went around the mangrove islands for hours without seeing anything except for the occasional saltwater crocodiles swimming near the banks.



29th Mar'25 Sat Bhitarkanika

Hours of searching for the cats, the search was getting really tiring so Robin and I went below the deck to catch some sleep, even the crew rested for some time. Around 03:40 hours we were woken up by the guide, he had spotted an eye shine. We slowly moved towards the bank and shone the light, there it was looking straight at us, 2 fishing cats, one female and one cub. The excitement made us forget about the weariness. We followed the cats for some time until we could get a good view and nice photos. We stated heading back at 05:30 hours and reached our homestay by 06:30 hours. Both of us had dosas and omelet for breakfast and went to sleep.



We woke up around 12:30 hours for lunch and got ready for a day safari on boat. The day bright and the sun was scorching, but we were still excited to see what Bhitarkanika had to offer in terms of birds. Bijay, our guide made his mission to show us all the kingfishers found locally. We saw 2 Collared kingfishers followed by lovely Black capped kingfisher, then the rest followed; Brown-winged kingfisher, lots of pied kingfishers, White-throated kingfishers, and finally Stork-billed kingfisher. We also saw lots of shore birds along the banks. We continued the safari till late night, unfortunately we weren't lucky with cats today. So, we ended our safari by 20:00, had a very hefty dinner and went to rest.





30th Mar'25 Sun Bhitarkanika - Bhubaneswar - Jaipur

Today was the last day in Bhitarkanika so we went for an early morning birding session before leaving for airport. Bijay took us to the usual spot to see the famous mangrove pitta. On our way we made a quick stop to look at Chestnut-capped babblers. Bijay played some calls for Mangrove pitta at the sighting spot on his Bluetooth speaker, which I don't necessarily appreciate the invasive method but I digress, the pittas called back and came out from the bushes for Robin to take nice photographs. On our way back we saw lots of other lesser common birds like Yellow-bellied prinia, Greater-painted snipe, and Black bittern to name a few. Then after a good Odiya breakfast we left for Bhubaneswar airport to catch our flight to Jaipur.

We reached Ikaki Niwas, our stay in Jaipur by 1700 hours. The quaint boutique stay nestled in the middle of the city was a surprise to both of us. The place was tastefully decorated with minimal staff, the rooms were spacious and beautiful. We ended our day with a scrumptious Jaipur thali for dinner.



31st Mar'25 Mon Jaipur - Jhalana - Kailadevi Sanctuary

Today our aim was to look at leopards before leaving for Ramathra so we left early morning for a safari in Jhalana Leopard Park. This park is unique in the way it's located; a single concrete wall separates the wildlife from the bustling city of Jaipur, in the park there is a healthy population of Nilgais and Common leopards and ofcourse hundreds of species of birds. Although a small park yet the visitors were in plenty to see the leopards. We spotted 2 of them, first one was disturbed by the incoming traffic of safari vehicles so we couldn't get a good view of it but the second one was a huge male sleeping after a hefty meal of Nilgai. After looking at the leopards for a long time, we started for Ramathra at 10:00 hours.

We reached Ramathra fort at 15:00 hours, we were greeted as royalties in this heritage fort lodge. The fort converted to a lodge, was stunning with a view overlooking an expanse of scrubland. After a quick lunch we prepared for an evening safari, at 17:30 hours we left from the hotel in our jeep to explore the scrublands of Sapotara, Rajasthan. Our aim here was to track and spot small wildcats and wolves. Our 1st safari was uneventful, with sightings of Porcupine and sleeping Nilgais. We came back at 21:00 hours, had an assortment of dishes for dinner and went to sleep.

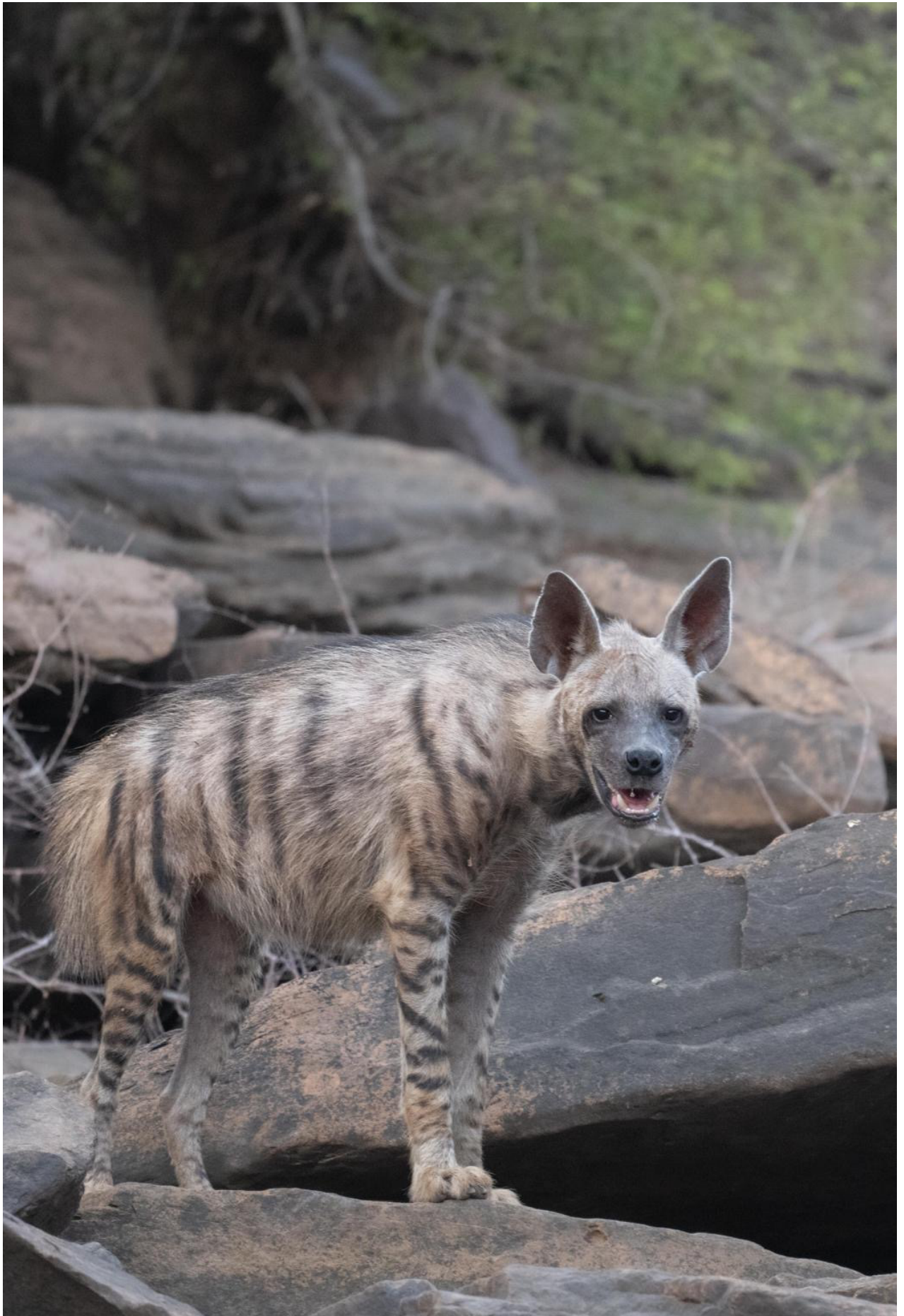




1st Apr'25 Tue Chambal - Kailadevi Sanctuary

Our day started at 0500, the morning plan was to go to a spot near a gorge where the Stripped hyenas had made its home. After a long ride without seeing much on the way we reached the spot. A small walk towards the edge of the gorge and we could see a male hyena sleeping on the other side. We sat there observing the hyena for few hours until the sun was up and the day got too hot. While looking at the hyena we enjoyed a hot cup of coffee and biscuits, the morning silence was occasionally broken by the call of laughing doves and the chirps of red-rumpled swallows and Dusky-crag martins perching right beside us. We went back to the lodge by 09:00 hours, enjoyed our continental breakfast.

Evening safari started at the 20:00 hours today, our aim was to have dinner and stay out longer. We saw our 1st small cat in Ramathra today, Asiatic wildcat. Robin got some good photos and we continued our exploration, at some point after not seeing anything for a long time we spotted a common leopard, standing tall and looking directly at us. On our way back we encountered a sloth bear as well, but as soon as it spotted us it sprinted off on the other direction. We reached hotel by 03:30 hours, had our dinner, and ended our day.



2nd Apr'25 Wed Kailadevi Sanctuary

Today we decided to skip the morning drive since we had a long night yesterday. After whole day of silence and rest we left for evening safari at 17:00 hours. We rode for few hours until the sun started to settle below the horizon, we stopped for a quick tea break near a vantage point

which gave us the view of the entire valley. We continued our safari and spotted our 2nd small cat here, a melanistic jungle cat, the cat was a fully grown massive individual but the distance was quite a lot and the sighting was short.

As we ventured further at one point, we heard the local free-ranging horses making lots of noise, cluelessly we scanned the area around with our torches to see a pack of wolves feeding on a foal. We quietly approached the scene and Robin managed to take lots of great photos of the hunt. We followed the wolves for some time until the pack split with each group taking away one half of the foal. We managed to track one of the packs all the way to the fields, after observing the pack for some time we left. On our way back we spotted a huge male leopard right outside the village, it looked at us stood for some time and continued its way. We also saw few Small Indian civets as well during the safari. We came back to the lodge by 20:30 hours, had a quick meal and went to pack our bags as we had to leave for Delhi by midnight.



3rd Apr'25 Thurs Kailadevi Sanctuary - New Delhi - Guwahati

We drove whole night from Ramathra fort to New Delhi airport; it took us 7 hours to reach our destination. We then got on our flight to Guwahati. We were welcomed by our driver at arrivals with a traditional Assamese 'gamucha,' after that we started for Kaziranga. We had lunch at a local restaurant on the way, both of us enjoyed some traditional Assamese cuisine. Our stay was in a remote place in the outskirts of Kaziranga, the Kathoni boutique stay. A beautiful two-room stay with amazing service and food to die for.



4th Apr'25 Fri Kaziranga National Park

At 06:30 hours we had breakfast and coffee and left for Kohora gate. Our morning safari started at 07:30, as soon as we entered the forest, we encountered a huge one-horned rhino right beside the road. We also saw lots of hog deer grazing on the green fields of Kaziranga. After looking at birds, deer, and rhinos we headed towards the exit, near the exit we spotted lots of Barasingha (Swamp deer). By the time we were out of the forest it was already lunch time so we headed to one of the local restaurants in Kohora and enjoyed some good Asian cuisine. We spent some time eating and reminiscing our sightings, at 13:30 hours we left for afternoon safari. No new sightings in the afternoon except for the huge herd of wild elephants grazing near the river. We went around looking at birds and spent a substantial amount of time looking for tiger, which unfortunately we couldn't find. We went back to lodge by 18:30 hours, had a nice evening tea. I went back to packing as this was my last day and Avijit was joining the tour for the last half.



5th Apr'25 Sat Kaziranga National Park - Samdrup Jhonkar - Narphu

We did a short morning safari - we had rhinos, hog deer, swamp deer a Burmese Rock Python - then we turned around and headed back to the lodge. We left at 1110 hours and headed to Bhutan via Samdrup Jhonkar. Our driver was Dhruba - a great guy who valued silence and spoke only when necessary - allowing me to catch up with sleep. We reached the border at 1700 hours and then crossed over. We then met Pema - finished our paper-work and then drove for nearly three hours to Narphu. Once in - we had a quick dinner and checked in to our cozy - tiny tents. A short rain kept us company in sleep.



06th Apr'25 Sun Nar Phu - Lingmethang

We started with a pair of Rufous-necked Hornbill near the campsite - what a great beginning!! Then a few Russet Sparrows entertained us and a Brownish-flanked Bush-warbler played peek-a-boo with us. We had a nice breakfast and then left camp - shortly we started birding and got our first bird on the road - a nice Blue-capped Rock Thrush! A few minutes later a Himalayan Cuckoo perched on a tree! In a few minutes a stop and this time we had mammals - a few Assam Macaques and suddenly Robin spotted a pair of Yellow-throated Martens - they were moving fast - bounding on the rocks and the open muddy slope but we managed some images. Then we carried on for a while and the next stop was with Rufous-fronted and Crimson-naped Woodpeckers. On the side of the roads - we had Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush, several Blue Whistling Thrush the regular Red-vented Bulbuls, Ashy Drongo etc. We stopped and played a call for a few minutes and got great views of the Green-tailed Sunbird, Mrs. Gould's Sunbird, Chestnut-crowned, Ashy-throated, and Black-faced Warbler along with Verditer Flycatcher and Long-tailed Minivets. Next up - we had a troupe of Capped Langur - the young ones really putting a show up for us. We spent quite a while with them - then we moved to Moshi and eventually stopped at a very nice restaurant in Kanglung for lunch. Post lunch we had a troupe of Assam Macaque near the road. Then we pressed on - crossing Trashigang and eventually reaching Mongar where we took a tea/coffee break. Robin needed a jacket to stay warm in the high passes - so we got a jacket for him. Then we headed down to Lingmethang - on the way a Mountain Scops Owl tested our patience. We reached camp-site at 2030 hours and immediately had a nice dinner with beans, broccoli and squash with rice and chicken. A Spot-bellied Eagle Owl called nearby to tell us - it is time to sleep!



07th Apr'25 Mon Lingmethang

We started at 0400 hours and headed up - from where we were camping a road went up to the Yeri la pass and then the road continued to Wama. On the way we started with a pair of Common Rosefinch and Eurasian Sparrowhawk. We went up slowly and making birding stops enroute - watching Rufous-necked Hornbills, a pair of skulking Red-faced Liocichla, Gray-winged Blackbird a few Bhutan Laughingthrush (the only endemic bird of Bhutan), a single Darjeeling Woodpecker, Banded Bay Cuckoo, a nice Lesser Yellownappe and a few commoner species like the White-throated Fantail, Gray Bushchat and Oriental Turtle Dove. We also heard the Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler and the Green-backed Tits. We drove with stops and in the next stop picked up - Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Striated Bulbul, Large and Rufous-bellied Niltava, Verditer Flycatcher, Black-throated Sunbird, Black-faced Warbler, Chestnut-crowned Warbler, Dark-sided Flycatcher, Blyth's Shrike Babbler etc.

We also added a nice Blue-fronted Redstart (male) and some Olive-backed and Rosy Pipits apart from our star bird the Satyr Tragopan. Our superb guide Pema found one by the side of the road - patience slowly paid off and two different males started responding to our call and we were rewarded with great views of a male. We managed a few photographs and enjoyed great views of it. Then we started heading down adding Scarlet Finch, White-naped and Whiskered Yuhina and a few other species. The lone mammal in the morning was a Orange Bellied Squirrel. Then we headed down reaching camp by 1100. We took a snooze and then were invited by a local resident to their house. It was a ceremony that was happening to their house and we were fortunate to be invited. The couple greeted us and then we had a great lunch - fiddle-head ferns, eggs with cheese, rice, lentils, potato with broccoli and a local chilly dish (not Ema Datshi) with buckwheat pancake was served and we cleaned things up fast. Then we rested a while in their house and finally went down to our camp.



08th Apr'25 Tue Lingmethang - Yonkola

We started at 0330 hours - we headed to the Yonkola area reaching there by 0500 hours and started looking for wildlife and birds. Pema heard a calling Hodgson's Frogmouth and tried to play back but no success. We also tried for the Beautiful Nuthatch but without any success. In a while with the sunrise, we started seeing some sign of life. I noticed a Brown Goral by the side of the road and almost immediately after that a pair of Yellow-throated Marten appeared. They bounded past the Goral scaring it and we tried to catch up with them without any success - a Pika showed up just after that and from the images it looked like a Royle's Pika. It was brown with a fair amount of grayish black coloration on the face and bigger than a Moupin's Pika. After that a pair of Satyr Tragopan scurried below Robin who was taking a leak from the edge of the road - he must be the first British gent to have urinated on a Satyr Tragopan and I am not very sure if he will be proud about it! We moved on - a Yellow-rumped Honeyguide teased us for quite some time and eventually we had great views. After that we slowly winded up and headed to Trogon Villa - our base for night. After a heavy brunch - we headed to Yeri la - a long drive, we realized that the habitat at Yeri la was perfect for the small cats and wished we were able to spend more time here. While the drive us was not that productive on the way down - I had a cat (sadly that will remain unidentified) - the cat was perched on a branch and it walked down. I picked it up with the thermal but could get the light on it. We also heard several time barking deer alarm calls. On the way back - we had a Hodgson's Frogmouth that showed well after some effort. It is a fantastic bird that I had never seen well - so in a way a lifer. We returned to our lodge tired but excited about the outing at 2215 hours - it was a long day and our driver Jamyang did a great job!



09th Apr'25 Wed Yonkola - Sengor

We started at a relaxed pace - almost at 0630 hours. We explored the area close to the Trogon Villa lodge (where we have overnighted) and then moved about 20 kms towards Sengor. Though the overcast conditions meant it was a relatively quiet morning - we had a pair of Rufous-necked hornbills that gave us great views. We had a few better views of birds like the Golden Babbler

and some new birds like the Rusty-fronted Barwing, a very skulking Lesser Shortwing and a brief view of a Large Niltava.

We headed back to Trogon Villa for breakfast and spent some time at the lodge - leaving at 1100 hours. The sun was out and we had few more views of the hornbills and then slowly moved to our lunch - set up by our two-men crew. Lunch today was local rice, egg curry, fried aubergines and a nice dry mixed vegetables - carrot and cauliflower. We finished lunch and headed back a bit towards Yonkola and we tried successfully for the Ward's Trogon. A female showed up and gave us brief views as it hid behind the vegetation each time it saw us. After that we had a Rufous-winged Fulvetta and Rufous-capped Babbler and then decided to slowly head to Sengor. Once at our camp site we enjoyed a few minutes of conversation over a drink and then called it a night after a nice dinner with local cheese and eggs, rice, carrots and beans and oyster mushroom.



10th Apr'25 Thurs Sengor - Trongsa

We were up at 0400 hours - from a distance once could clearly hear the calls of the Satyr Tragopans and the Hill Partridge. However, it started to rain very soon and as a result, neither birding, or any other wildlife watching was possible. So, we kept driving up at a slow pace with several stops, looking for both interest in species of birds and mammals. Our stops gave us some interesting birds - like the Great Parrotbill, Fire-tailed Myzornis, Gray-sided Bush Warbler, Black-faced Warbler, Ashy-throated Warbler, Buff-barred Warbler, a very nice, Gray-crested Tit, White-browed Shrike Babbler, and a few other species. We reached the area where previously we had seen red pandas, and we spent at least couple of hours going up and down looking for the pandas. But the weather did not help us at all. It was foggy, and there was no activity that we could find in the areas where we have previously seen the pandas. We did see a good Clearview of a pair of blood peacocks, which was nice. After that, we kept driving up and the weather did not get any better. Gradually, we reached Trongsa but just before reaching there - Pema noticed a male Satyr Tragopan by the side of the road. It disappeared fast - but I had a feeling that it will hurt because to me. It seems like it is turf of the bird. After waiting for a while, the bird returned and we positioned ourselves - the fog returned too - and much to our frustration - we had a Satyr Tragopan that disappeared in fog - right in front of us. So, what to do - we waited and

waited and finally got some views of an interesting bird – it was a nice compensation for the lack of mammals – all day. After reaching the hotel – we just got busy downloading images and charging our devices. Trongsa – has a nice hotel and after some days a bit of relaxation helped.



11th Apr'25 Fri Trongsa - Phobjika

After an early breakfast – we headed down on the road that heads towards Tingtibi – in a while we had had a Brown Goral that gave us good views. We saw it first and then once it realized it was being watched – it ran past us and disappeared in the forest below us. Then we found a troupe of Golden Langurs – at least 9 of them and we could spend at least an hour with the troupe. Though they are not always found in this area – in our last two trips we have found at least one troupe of langurs in the near vicinity of Trongsa. After watching and photographing them for a while – we finally left for Phobjika. Our objective was to spend the night at Pele la – but the incessant rain and the cold that it brought – changed our plans – our tents would not be able to keep us dry in the night with this kind of downpour and more importantly if a rock came crashing – in the night – we will be seriously injured in a remote area. On reaching Pele – la we witnessed something very interesting and sad! The road to Pele la from the stupa side was blocked by the government using huge rocks – as the local lodge builders in Gangtey and the villagers were logging the trees and taking them all the way down. So, in a way this will be good soon for mammal-watching as movement of vehicles will stop completely and animals will start using this area. But today after crossing the rocks – we walked for two hours – the rain came and left us and fog followed us – we had a no of Moupin's Pika playing hide and seek with us, a pair of Red-headed Bullfinch was nice, a few White-winged Grosbeaks gave us brief view. We kept hearing the Satyr Tragopans, saw a few Himalayan Monals from a distance (not great views) and then had a Southern Nutcracker that offered us great views. The rain caught up with us eventually and we did a fast walk back to our car – as we drive back a male Satyr Tragopan came out and gave us a good view but the light was very poor for any photography – we just enjoyed the view. We reached the hotel – in Phobjika and settled in our rooms – it was cold today and hence the heated rooms were a relief.



12th Apr'25 Sat Phobjika - Paro

Our plans were to start at 0400 hours and head to Pele la in the dark but the rains never stopped till 0630 hours - so the pre-dawn activities were lost. We reached Pele la and again walked for an hour - the area will certainly become a mammal hotspot but the time has not yet come - the tracks of leopards were there, and some other mammals - possibly civets but could not be sure.

I am sure that Himalayan Black Bears use the track as well. We found a troupe of Tarai Gray Langurs – at least 30 of them near the pass and spent some time with them. We headed to Paro after this with a stop at the Dochu la pass – on the way up – we had a Yellow-throated Marten that gave us a brief glimpse. We reached Paro and immediately looked for the Ibisbill in the Paro Chhu – as we walked all the way up and then down – Robin suddenly noticed one of them and immediately after that – another came in view. After spending about an hour with them – we headed back to our hotels and called it an end to the tour.

