

# India & Nepal - A Red Panda Quest

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 March - 11 April 2018



Report and compiled by Aly Rashid



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Tour participants: Aly Rashid (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

## Summary

The 'Red Panda Quest' was a very successful tour, with several sightings of Red Panda and other Eastern Himalayan species. We saw a total of three different Red Pandas during the trip. We were also lucky to see Yellow-throated Marten on a number of occasions from the in-house bird hide at Habre's Nest, together with bird species that included Black-faced, Chestnut-crowned, Spotted and Scaly Laughingthrushes, Hoary-throated Barwing, Yellow-billed Blue Magpie and Blue Whistling Thrush. Other species of birds were seen during nature walks to various parts of the Singalila Ridge.

April is also the month for Rhododendron flowering. This is a spectacular phenomenon in Singalila National Park which boasts over 25 species of Rhododendron. These flowers also attract several species of birds, making bird viewing easier. Because of unusual winter rain and hailstones, the Rhododendron flowering was not as widespread as in other years, however certain valleys had good blooms and we were lucky to see two Red Pandas with the Rhododendron flowering in the background.

### Day 1

**Saturday 31st March**

The tour started with an overnight British Airways flight from Heathrow airport to Delhi.

### Day 2

**Sunday 1st April**

Our overnight flight landed in the morning at Delhi airport. We transferred to the Holiday Inn hotel and had the rest of the day to explore.

### Day 3

**Monday 2nd April**

This morning we returned to Delhi airport and caught a morning Jet Airways flight to Bagdogra. At Bagdogra airport we met Aly and transferred to Sinclair's Hotel, Siliguri. We had lunch at the hotel and then an afternoon at leisure.

We met again at 7pm and were given an expedition orientation and presentation on the Red Panda. Dinner was served at 7.45pm, after which we retired to bed ready for an early start tomorrow.

### Day 4

**Tuesday 3rd April**

Today was cold and foggy. We had breakfast at 7am and then set off to Singalila National Park. The drive from our hotel to Manebhanjen, the entry gate of the park, took three hours and we arrived around 11am. We changed vehicles to the Land Rovers which are used for guests to be taken to Habre's Nest, and arrived there at lunch time.

After lunch we did a birding walk while the trackers went out searching for Red Panda. Whilst we did not see a Red Panda today, we were fortunate to see some good high altitude Eastern Himalayan birds including Spotted

Nutcracker, Yellow-billed Blue Magpie, Spotted Laughingthrush, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, Black-faced Laughingthrush and Hoary-throated Barwing. After a long day, we had an early dinner before retiring to our rooms.

## Day 5

Wednesday 4th April

It was cold and foggy today. The trackers went out early to look for Red Pandas, and before breakfast some of us decided to sit in the in-house bird hide and observe the bird activity. Some interesting birds including Blue Whistling Thrush, Spotted Laughingthrush and White-browed Fulvetta were seen.

We had breakfast at 7.30am. After breakfast the trackers again went out to search, and this time we got lucky. We were able to see our first Red Panda today, with a good long view of a sub-adult male Red Panda for almost two hours. This Panda was located about a kilometre away from the homestay and we were able to easily walk to the site to see it. After the sighting we came back to the homestay for lunch, which was served at 1pm.

After lunch we had planned a birding walk, but the weather became really foggy and no activity could be safely done. Because of the fog, even wildlife activity became less. We conducted our daily checklist at 7pm which was followed by drinks and dinner at 7.30pm.

## Day 6

Thursday 5th April

The weather today was a cold and clear morning and a foggy afternoon. We decided to serve breakfast every day at 7.30am and start activities after breakfast, with an optional activity to go to the bird hide early morning. The homestay and its surroundings are at an altitude of approximately 2,900 metres above sea level and mornings are quite cold, leading to Red Panda and wildlife activity starting mostly after 9am. This morning those who went to the bird hide were pleasantly surprised with a great view of two Yellow-throated Martens that came searching for food waste, and perhaps for an opportunity to hunt the birds that came to the hide.

After breakfast the trackers went out again to search for Red Panda and found the same Red Panda again. Red Pandas are usually nocturnal so it is very rare to see them active during the day. They usually awaken early afternoon to eat their primary food, Bamboo. Today we were lucky enough to see this young adult eating Bamboo and we observed this activity for nearly an hour. As we were watching the fog came in, so we left the Panda.

We had lunch a little late today as a result of the sighting. Again, due to the foggy weather, we could not do any activity in the afternoon. As usual we met at 7pm for the daily checklist and dinner was at 7.30pm.

## Day 7

Friday 6th April

After breakfast we set off to go the Tinchule Forest in Nepal, to explore another part of the park. Tinchule is good for birds and the idea was to look for species we had not seen on the trip so far. We set out slowly because of a hilly descent. The idea was for us to search for birds while the trackers still searched for Red Pandas in and around Habre's Nest. On the way to Tinchule Forest we saw Fire-tailed Sunbird and Spotted Laughingthrush, among other interesting birds. As we reached our destination we heard from the trackers that a Red Panda had

been seen. We returned to find the same sub-adult Red Panda close to the area we had left him yesterday. Since we had seen him on two occasions on two consecutive days, we decided not to disturb him and let him go about his day.

Lunch was served at 1pm and after lunch, although it did get foggy, we went for a walk. Unfortunately, due to the weather, we did not see much on the walk! As usual we met at 7pm for the daily checklist with dinner at 7.30pm.

## Day 8

### Saturday 7th April

Today the weather was cold and rainy in the morning, clearing around midday but becoming foggy later. Breakfast and a wake-up call were at the usual time. As part of the programme we try to explore different parts of the forest on different days. Today, after breakfast, we headed for Goribas, a small hamlet below Habre's Nest. Goribas can be good for low altitude birds so we set off on a trail. As we began descending it started to rain and the path became really slippery. As people were not comfortable walking down, we decided to stop and return to Goribas. At Goribas we had tea and snacks at a local café, including momos, a local speciality.

By this time the weather had cleared up and we again got word from the trackers that they had spotted a Red Panda, so we got into the Land Rovers and went to the spot. This time the Red Panda was spotted from Habre's Nest itself, but it was a long way away. We all saw this Panda, but because of the distance it was not the best of views.

After lunch we stayed close to the homestay, watching birds and other wildlife. As usual we met at 7pm for the daily checklist with dinner at 7.30pm.

## Day 9

### Sunday 8th April

The morning routine remained the same. Today some went and sat in the bird hide before breakfast and were lucky to see a pair of Yellow-throated Marten. The weather was damp and hazy so we decided to stay close to the homestay while the trackers went out searching. Since most sightings of Red Panda were close to Habre's Nest, it also made sense to conserve energy as most were tired with walking reasonable amounts in the high altitude.

We took short bird walks before and after lunch and also used the bird hide. Today the birds seen were Khalij Pheasant, Satyr Tragopan, Green-backed Tit, Robin Accentor and others.

Because of the foggy weather and intermittent showers we did not see a Red Panda today and our level of activity was also restricted. As usual, we met at 7pm for the daily checklist with dinner at 7.30pm.

## Day 10

### Monday 9th April

Today we decided to do some birding close to the homestay while the trackers went out on their search for Red Panda. After lunch we also searched for Pandas without success. In the late afternoon some trekkers, who were planning to go to Sandhakphu, reached the homestay. They were already too late to trek so asked our drivers to

give them a lift. On their way to Sandhkaphu they found a Red Panda and sent word for us. We went to try and see it. Luckily for us, we found a beautiful Red Panda in a valley where there was a full bloom of Rhododendron in the background. It was a wonderful way to end the trip. The sighting lasted almost an hour and the sun started to fade as we left the spot. Later we met for the daily checklist and dinner.

## Day 11

Tuesday 10th April

Today we had breakfast by 8am and then set off in our Land Rover to Manebhanjen. We arrived at 10am and were met by our drivers, who drove us to Bagdogra airport. We had lunch at the airport before boarding our Jet Airways flight to Delhi. At Delhi airport we said our thanks to Aly before some transferred to the Holiday Inn hotel for an overnight stay and some continued for a private tour extension.

## Day 12

Wednesday 11th April

In the morning we returned to Delhi airport to catch our British Airways flight back to the UK, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

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Satyr Tragopan

## Species Lists

### Mammals

Red Panda

Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel

Yellow-throated Martin

### Birds

Altai Accentor

White-collared Blackbird

Grey Nightjar

Hoary-throated Barwing

Green-backed Tit

Black-throated Tit

Grey-crested Tit

Himalayan Vulture

Green Shrike-Babbler

Black-faced Laughingthrush

Spotted Laughingthrush

Jungle Crow

Blue Whistling Thrush

White-browed Fulvetta

White-browed Rosefinch

Himalayan Bluetail

Darjeeling Woodpecker

White-browed Rosefinch

Satyr Tragopan

Oriental Turtle Dove

Rusty-flanked Treecreeper

Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush

Great Parrotbill

Verditer Flycatcher

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker

Black-throated Parrotbill

Bar-headed Goose (vagrant / migrating)

Robin Accentor

Yellow-billed Blue Magpie

Rufous Sibia

Striped-throated Yuhina

Rufous-vented Tit

Yellow-browed Tit

Spotted Nutcracker

Red-headed Bullfinch

White-tailed Nuthatch

Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush

Scaly Laughingthrush

Black Eagle

Spotted Laughingthrush

Blue-fronted Redstart

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher

Golden Bush Robin

White-browed Bush Robin

Kalij Pheasant

Collared Owlet (heard)

Long-tailed Minivet

White-browed Scimitar-Babbler

Plain-backed Thrush

Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher

Yellow-bellied Fantail

Bar-throated Siva

Black-throated Thrush

Fire-tailed Sunbird