

Nepal: Langtang, Kathmandu, & Chitwan

January 5-19, 2018

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Written by Michael McCloy

Introduction

Ethan Kistler, Billi Krochuk, myself, and Erin Sharkey departed for Kathmandu from New Delhi, India and Matt Daw met us in Kathmandu the same night that we arrived. As part of an extended south Asian birding trip we spent two weeks in Nepal, focusing our efforts in the Himalayas and the lowlands of Chitwan National Park. This was all of our first time to the Himalayas and therefore were focused as much on the common bird assemblages in different habitats as we were on finding the more uncommon and rare species. Special attention was put towards finding Nepal's only endemic bird, Spiny Babbler, as well as a select few other hyper-localized species.

January 5

Nepal Airlines caused us a five and a half hour flight delay at Indira Gandhi International Airport (New Delhi), so it was a long and needless to say aggravating wait. Most restaurants here were either severely limited in their food options or were completely out of food altogether- surprising for such a large and cosmopolitan international airport. It was a struggle but between Subway and Starbucks we managed to satiate our appetites. Once we finally boarded our Nepal Airlines flight it was a relatively quick flight to Kathmandu. I was happy to be provided with a complimentary Everest beer on board! Once we arrived in Kathmandu and were able to navigate the outdated visa and customs process relatively quickly and then got a taxi to our guesthouse in Thamel. After several failed attempts we finally found a working ATM that accepted our foreign cards. We got some dinner at Markham Bistro, a Tibetan restaurant just down the street and went to bed early. Night at Bed & Breakfast Thamel.

January 6

We spent our first day in Nepal birding **Mount Pulchowki**, taking a taxi from Thamel. It dropped us off at the bottom of the road by the park entrance and we walked/birded our way up. There's an entrance fee, but it's minimal- 150 NPR/person. We only made it about halfway up the road to the top but nevertheless had some interesting species. Bird highlights included NEPAL FULVETTA, HIMALAYAN SHRIKE-BABBLERS (5), two GRAY-SIDED LAUGHINGTHRUSH, RED-BILLED LEIOTHRIX (2), BLUE-WINGED MINLA (1), single LONG-TAILED and SCALY THRUSHES, and numerous GRAY-WINGED BLACKBIRDS.



Striated Laughingthrush, Mount Pulchowki

Night again at Bed & Breakfast Thamel.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41672745>

January 7

After a good breakfast we went out to find the TIMS office in order to purchase our expensive but necessary permits for the Langtang Trek. The entrance fee to Langtang National Park was 3400 NPR, and TIMS (independent trekking permit) was 2000 NPR. Afterwards we got a van taxi to Machha Pokhari bus stand where we went ahead and purchased our public Jeep tickets for the following day's journey up to Syabru Besi. By now it was midday, and after grabbing a snack we caught a taxi to **Nagarjun** where we spent the afternoon birding. We were surprised by the fairly hefty entrance fee as well as the requirement to have a guide, which cost an additional 865 NPR. Apparently this is a new practice here. Our guide was energetic and personable though, and was joined for part of the time by another guide who seemed to just want to tag along. Birds of interest here included numerous (22) KALIJ PHEASANTS, our first GREEN-BILLED MALKOHA, 11 LONG-TAILED MINIVETS, CHESTNUT-BELLIED, WHITE-TAILED, AND VELVET-FRONTED NUTHATCHES, MOUNTAIN BULBULS (3), and another SCALY THRUSH. We spent the night in same accommodation in Thamel.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41708520>



Himalayan Bulbul, Nagarjun

January 8

We arrived at the Machha Pokhari bus stand in Kathmandu by 06:30 to catch our Jeep to Syrabu Besi. Eleven of us crammed into the SUV's three rows of seats and endured a squished, slow, and very bumpy seven-hour ride (plus a stop for lunch) along the windy and twisty roads that commonly hugged the edge of a cliff. One good thing about being so cramped is that you're unable to sway back and forth with every curve, minimizing motion sickness (which has gotten worse for me with age). Music that sounded like a combination of Hindi/American Pop loudly emanated from the radio for the majority of the ride. The occasional Lady Gaga and Justin Beiber song would slip into the mix, keeping us entertained and on our toes!



The road to Syabru Besi, passing through a village that clings to the mountainside



The largely unpaved road to Syabru Besi gets precariously close to the cliff's edge on more than one occasion

Arriving in Syabru Besi around 14:30 we soon settled on accommodation at Hotel Village View for the night and proceeded to take a short birding stroll around town during the remaining daylight. Other than some SIBERIAN STONECHATS, STRAITED PRINIAS, CHIFFCHAFFS, and a large flock of EURASIAN CRAG-MARTINS it was pretty quiet. The town is set at the base of the Langtang Valley on the Langtang River, bordered by increasingly tall Himalayan peaks. We marveled in the views!



Late evening light filters down to the lower end of Syabru Besi along the Langtang River

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41739220>

January 9

Day 1 of the Langtang trek took us all the way to Lama Hotel, with a lunch stop at Bamboo Hotel where the veg egg noodles really hit the spot- along with some of the best masala tea of the whole trip.

We were kept on our toes by plentiful bird activity most of the day and ended up with 55 species by the time we reached Lama Hotel. Amongst an assortment of the area's common species the highlights included HILL PARTIDGE, ASIAN BARRED OWLET, BLACK-EARED SHRIKE-BABBLER, STREAK-BREASTED SCIMITAR-BABBLER, and SPOTTED FORKTAIL. The shrike-babblers and scimitar-babbler were part of a large, active feeding flock that we encountered several kilometers before Bamboo Hotel and also held a number of more common species. On a cliff face a couple kilometers before Bamboo Hotel we spotted a WALLCREEPER, a species we were all hoping for on this stretch of the trek! The river held a couple BROWN DIPPERS and just below Bamboo Hotel a LITTLE FORKTAIL. WHITE-CAPPED REDSTARTS and PLUMBEOUS WATER REDSTARTS were commonly seen along river's edge too. Additionally, we discovered two extremely skulky NEPAL WREN-BABBLERS (also known as Immaculate Cupwings) during the morning, though we would later get much better looks.



Plumbeous Water Redstart, Langtang trek

We spent the night at Jungle View Lodge in Lama Hotel and enjoyed a bountiful dinner of dal baat.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41859271>

January 10

An early morning start produced a vocal and cooperative NEPAL WREN-BABBLER in the brush immediately below the hotel. Despite it staying within dark and shaded surroundings the whole time (making the prospect of good-quality photos little more than a joke), we got terrific looks.

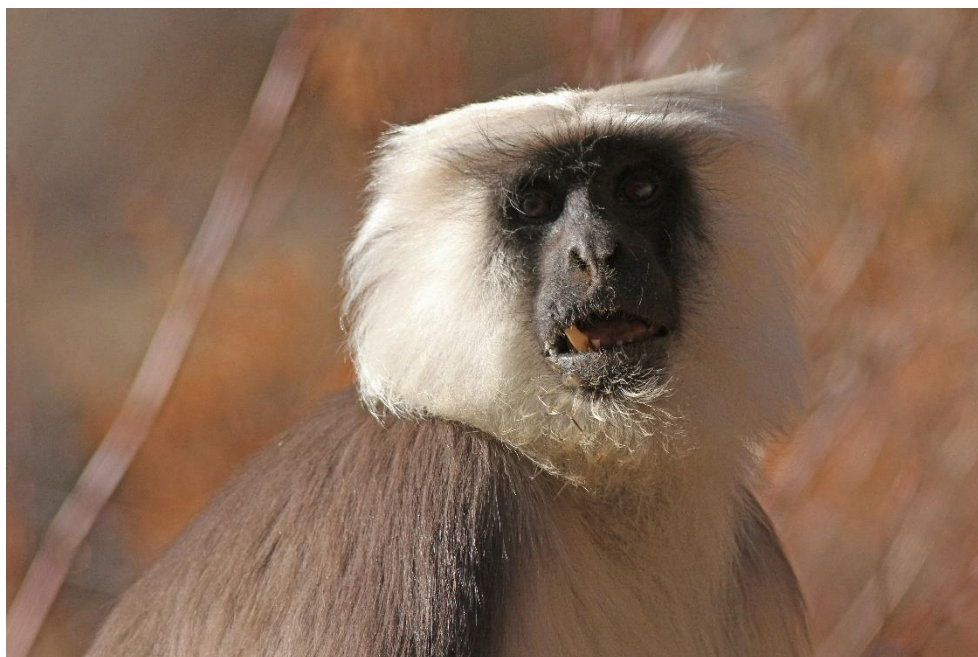
A carefully studied ALPINE THRUSH at the same spot provided an unexpected, and welcome, surprise. Two SPOTTED FORKTAILS fed in the small gully beside Jungle View Lodge and four PINK-BROWED ROSEFINCHES played on a wet rock by the lodge's spigot. As we started hiking up the trail towards Langtang Village we soon had our first BLACK-FACED LAUGHINGTHRUSHES and VARIEGATED LAUGHINGTHRUSHES, both of which would quickly become abundant as we hiked further up. STREAKED LAUGHINGTHRUSHES were also ubiquitous and we estimated a cool and conservative 80 individuals along the day's hike.



A blurry shot of a Nepal Wren-Babbler, more poetically known as Immaculate Cupwing



This muntjac was one of the more cooperative and photogenic individuals we encountered on the trip



We saw many Common Langurs along this stretch of the hike. This individual was particularly close to the trail and didn't seem very happy to see us!

As we climbed in altitude and the trees thinned out the bird life predictably began to change. Large flocks of rosefinches were comprised almost entirely of HIMALAYAN BEAUTIFUL ROSEFINCHES, though we were able to pick out two SPOT-WINGED ROSEFINCHES. PLAIN MOUNTAIN FINCHES were also common. Other notable birds from the upper end of today's hike included a MAROON-BACKED ACCENTOR, 4 WHITE-WINGED GROSBEAKS, several large groups of SNOW PIGEONS, a restless flock of around 40 GRANDALA, and two vocalizing HIMALAYAN MONALS late in the afternoon. Night at Tibetan Guesthouse in Langtang Village.

eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41859264>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41859247>

January 11

Day 3 of the Langtang Trek took us to Kyanjin Gumpa, a much shorter distance than the previous two days but with a steep elevational gain. Well above treeline, this section of trail held significantly fewer birds and we ended the stretch with under twenty species. However, many of these species are only found at high elevations and therefore were new for the trip. A BEARDED VULTURE and three HIMALAYAN GRIFFONS soared overhead and as approached Kyanjin Gumpa, and HIMALAYAN ACCENTORS were plentiful. Flocks of YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGHS were spotted flying to and fro along the cliffsides and good numbers of SNOW PIGEONS again graced us with their presence.



Himalayan Griffon, Langtang trek

Even with a slow pace while birding, it felt like we did the hike quickly- arriving in Kyangin Gompa shortly after 12:00. Part of the afternoon was spent hiking to the base of Langtang Lirung Glacier behind town, which wasn't a particularly birdy hike but rewarded us with breathtaking views and a maximum elevation of over 13,000 feet. In the distance to the northeast a Tibetan peak was visible.



Looking up at Langtang Lirung Glacier outside Kyanjin Gompa

The only other new bird we had during the afternoon and evening was a MOUNTAIN HAWK-EAGLE soaring overhead alongside several Himalayan Buzzards and a random HEN HARRIER. We enjoyed another relaxing evening and admired the multitudes of stars visible over the surrounding snow-capped peaks once darkness set in.

eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41859329>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41859285>

January 12

Kyanjin Gompa was our turning-around point and we decided to hike all the way back down to Lama Hotel today, as we had plenty of time. We quickly picked up RED-BILLED CHOUGH as we were descending from Kyanjin Gompa and continued to see small numbers of them until well below Langtang Village. Yellow-billed Choughs remained much more common though. Snow Pigeons were again abundant and we tried to get an accurate estimate of their numbers between Kyanjin Gompa and Langtang Village. This number ended up being 1100, largely from multiple flocks of several hundred each. Our first HIMALAYAN SWIFTLETS were flying around just above Langtang Village. Another MAROON-BACKED ACCENTOR, several more WHITE-WINGED GROSBEAKS and finally our first SPOTTED LAUGHINGTHROUGH were noteworthy on the return hike between Langtang Village and Lama Hotel. Just a hundred meters above Lama Hotel Matt spotted a COLLARED OWLET sitting inconspicuously on a branch not far from the trail. Night again at the Jungle View Lodge.



Collared Owlet, Lama Hotel



A skulky Spotted Laughingthrush

eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41889229>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41859204>

January 13

Our last day of the Langtang trek took us from Lama Hotel back to Syabru Besi. The largest feeding flock we encountered during the day was not far from Lama Hotel and seemed to follow us down the trail for several kilometers. RUFOUS SIBIAS and RUFOUS-VENTED YUHINAS dominated, but there were good numbers of STRIPE-THROATED YUHINAS, several WHITE-BROWED FULVETTAS, and a WHITE-BELLIED ERPORNIS as well. A large flock of 64 WHITE-THROATED LAUGHINGTHRUSHES moved through the trees and brush here from time to time and caused a great ruckus when they did.

Great looks at several HILL PARTRIDGES were nice today and the LITTLE FORKTAIL was again below Bamboo Hotel in the same place as several days prior. We also found another WALLCREEPER feeding on the large honeycombs hanging from a cliff across the river a couple kilometers past Bamboo Hotel (trying to imitate a honeyguide!). Otherwise, the birds today were similar to those encountered on the hike up and we only added a few new ones.



Can you spot the Wallcreeper on this honeycomb?

Night in Syrabu Besi at Buddha Guesthouse.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41859190>

January 14

We spent this morning birding around the outskirts of Syabru Besi with the primary goal of finding Spiny Babbler. Sure enough, after trying for less than ten minutes we were able to find two SPINY BABBLERS just outside of town. Nepal's only endemic bird species, they're localized and reclusive, preferring undisturbed hillsides of dense scrub. After finding our main target for the day so quickly we had the luxury of birding pressure-free for the rest of the morning. By the end of the vehicular bridge south of town we encountered a nice mixed feeding flock that contained a BUFF-BARRED WARBLER, several PALE-RUMPED WARBLERS, five PINK-BROWED ROSEFINCHES, an ORANGE-BELLIED LEAFBIRD, and a GOLDEN BUSH-ROBIN amongst the Black-throated Tits, Green-backed Tits, and Gray-hooded Warblers.

A walk north from town along the dirt road bordering the river produced several LONG-TAILED MINIVETS, two ALPINE SWIFTS, and a couple EURASIAN CRAG-MARTINS amongst a flock of Nepal House-Martins. Large flocks of crag-martins would appear over town later in the day as well. The wind picked up in the afternoon, rendering the birding relatively unproductive for the rest of the day. Instead we spent the afternoon indoors utilizing the WiFi and plentiful food options at our accommodation, Buddha Guesthouse.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41889196>

January 15

Today was mainly a travel day, we left early on a public jeep back to Kathmandu for a repeat of the windy and nerve racking 7-hour ride that we did a week earlier. Actually, the return trip took only a little over 6 hours. For 700 NPR (exchange rate at time of travel: 1 USD= ~103 NPR) a public jeep cost only 200 NPR more than the Super Express bus and is able to make the drive over an hour more quickly. After arriving back in Kathmandu and taking a taxi to Thamel we spend the evening catching up on laundry, shopping, and other chores and a few of us indulged in a bottle of local rum.

January 16

We had an early morning start in Kathmandu to catch a bus to Sauraha, at the edge of Chitwan National Park. Going with Chitwan Safaris private bus company, it only cost us 500 NPR apiece. Nepal's road conditions leave something to be desired (don't expect to ever go "fast"), and our trip was a very long and bumpy seven hours. We were sure glad when we arrived! Shortly after we got to our lodging at National Park Hotel we met up with our guide Thagu for a few hours of afternoon birding. Thagu is an expert local birder and he's contributed immensely to the knowledge of the avifauna in this part of Nepal. Thanks to Seejan Gyawali and Early Bird Birders we were able to be connected with Thagu for these couple days. Also joining us for most of our time in Chitwan was Arjun Khanal of Kathmandu, who is conducting his Master's research on Great Hornbill populations in Chitwan National Park.

Walking around the community forest and the outskirts of the park we had a surprising diversity of birds, some highlights of which were an unexpected LONG-BILLED PLOVER, JUNGLE OWLET, ORIENTAL PIED-HORNBILLS, BLUE-BEARDED BEE-EATERS, GREATER RACKET-TAILED DRONGO, CHESTNUT-BELLIED NUTHATCH, and RICHARD'S PIPIT. We also saw our first gharials and one-horned rhinos just outside the village.



Jungle Owlet, Sauraha Community Forest



One of several Greater One-horned Rhinos that we saw our first evening at Chitwan

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41960881>

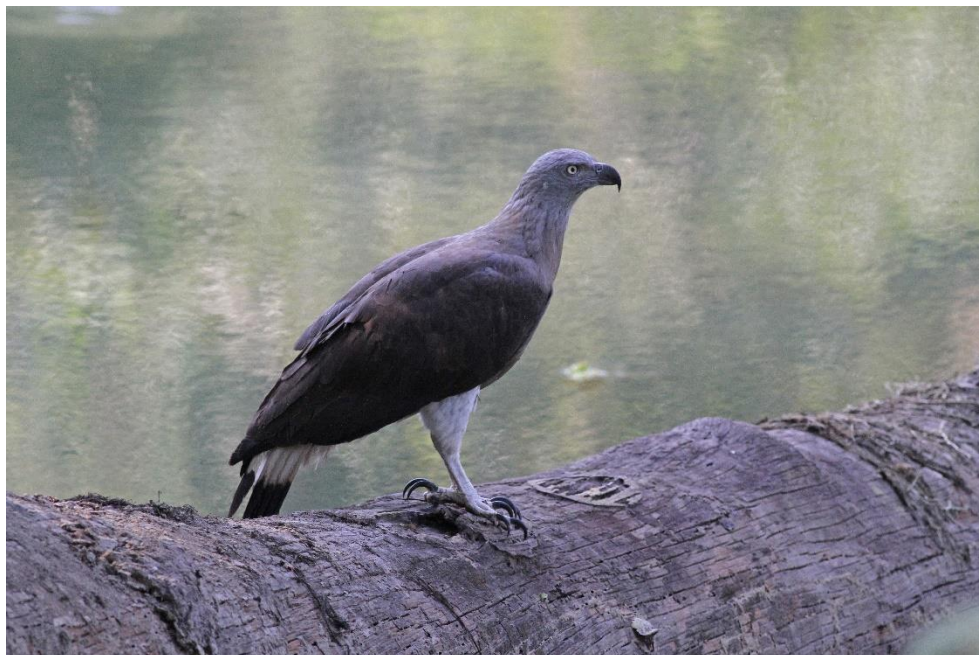
January 17

We spent today on all-day Jeep birding safari in the park, again led by Thagu. We covered a lot of ground, entering the park by Sauraha and making it all the way to Tiger Tops Lodge before eating lunch and turning around. This route is a popular one of many all-day Jeep safaris in the park, particularly those that are focused on birding. During our day in Chitwan we birded a variety of habitats, from broadleaf forest to tall grassland to river floodplain. Our species list for the day reflects this diversity with a total of 115 species.

One drawback to visiting at this time of year is the near-daily thick morning fog. Today was no different, and the fog didn't clear until about 10:30. However, we still had a very successful day of birding and also were treated to rhinos, sambar, spotted deer, and mugger crocodiles- along with brief looks at a sloth bear!

Bird highlights were many, and included the following: BLACK FRANCOLIN, RED-NAPED IBIS, CHANGEABLE HAWK-EAGLE, GRAY-HEADED FISH-EAGLE, SMALL PRATINCOLE, GREEN-BILLED MALKOHA, COLLARED SCOPS-OWL, GREAT HORNBILL, BLUE-EARED KINGFISHER, LESSER YELLOWNAPE, HAIR-CRESTED DRONGO, YELLOW-BELLIED PRINIA, WHITE-RUMPED SHAMA, and CRESTED BUNTING.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41960881>



Gray-headed Fish-Eagle, Chitwan National Park



Black Francolin, Chitwan National Park



Lesser Adjutant, Chitwan National Park



One of several Great Hornbills that we were lucky enough to encounter at Chitwan

January 18

We spent a couple hours early this morning canoeing the Rapti River along the boundary of Chitwan National Park. The fog was again dense and severely limited our ability to see birds from a distance, but we nevertheless had a variety of shorebirds and wading birds on the river, including a single RED-CRESTED POCHARD, a single BAR-HEADED GOOSE, and the ever-present Ruddy Shelducks- of which we counted 462!

The fog cleared right as we were being dropped off on shore around 10:00, which was fortuitous timing. From here we spent the rest of the day birding our way back by foot along the road through the Chitwan buffer zone. Along with several more GREAT HORNBILLS, perhaps the main highlight was a male RED-HEADED TROGON that Thagu found along a side trail. Nearby we also had a pair of BLOSSOM-HEADED PARAKEETS, a very difficult species to find in the immediate region.



A cooperative male Red-headed Trogon



Blossom-headed Parakeet, quite uncommon at Chitwan National Park

Other highlights of the day included BLACK STORK, WOOLY-NECKED STORK, ORIENTAL PIED HORNBILL, and ROSY PIPIT. Our total species list again easily topped 100 for the day, with a total of 116.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42041278>

January 19

We started the day with Thagu and Arjun on a mission to find Ibisbill along the river by Hetauda. Thagu conducts surveys for wintering Ibisbill along this stretch of river regularly, so we were very lucky to have him accompany us. From Hotel National Park in Sauraha we took a local shared taxi to the main road junction (25NPR/person) and then flagged down a bus heading to Hetauda (100 NPR/person thanks to Thagu's negotiating skills and local knowledge). It was standing room only in the back of the bus for most of us for the duration of the journey, though Erin ended up getting a seat up front by the driver alongside a local family. The four of us were jealous of her setup for the entire ride, until we learned that she got vomited on by a little girl made sick by the twisty road. Several older people sitting near us in the back of the bus also vomited at points during the bumpy ride, but luckily not on any of us. Our driver liked to brake and turn very abruptly.

Once we got to Hetauda we crammed into a rickshaw for a ride to a spot on the river several kilometers outside of town (50NPR/person for the rickshaw). There's one particular stretch of river that the Ibisbills tend to favor and that's where we were heading. Depending on the year, anywhere from 2-18 individuals winter here. This winter, only 3 had been seen during Thagu's surveys. Our hopes were still high though as we begin the 2km trudge up the rocky riverside.

We were immediately struck by the amount of truck and heavy machinery traffic in the river. Apparently it's common practice for locals to drive dump trucks, tractors, and front-end loaders up and down the middle of the river to harvest rocks. The military personnel stationed at a nearby post seemed uninterested and have chosen to let it continue unabated. As one could imagine, this severely impacts the water quality and aquatic health of this river and subsequently dampens its suitability for Ibisbills. Sure enough, after an hour or more of walking the river we hadn't turned any up.

We were in a time crunch and weren't expecting much difficulty in finding these birds, and were quite worried that we would end up missing them. However, Thagu's knowledge and sound judgment brought us to a spot about a kilometer downriver where, finally, we saw two IBISBILL! What striking birds. It was sad though as we watched them feed along the edge of the river against a backdrop of dump trucks carrying away the foundation of their habitat.



Heavy truck traffic in the river was ruining any remaining Ibisbill habitat



After a long search, we were finally able to turn up two Ibisbill!

After enjoying the Ibisbills for a few minutes we had to get going, and bid farewell to Thagu and Arjun. We caught another bus to the loud, dirty, and chaotic town of Birgunj on the Indian border. We crossed overland into Raxhaul, India where another chapter on our journey would begin.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42091401>

Total species list for Nepal: 287