

# BHUTAN – A DELIGHTFUL DESTINATION FOR BOISTEROUS BIRDS

By N. Shiva Kumar

*Wagtails are frisky small birds with a long bobbing tail. They are mostly insectivores as they feed on both ground and aerial invertebrates.*

**F**LYING like a big metallic bird, Drukair landed without a shudder at a small airport, an airfield with remarkable surroundings. I was in Paro in Bhutan, a valley skirted by hills and the runway was snug in the middle. Strangely the remarkable international airport is said to be a football field once.

As I stepped out of the

airbus, I was welcomed by a refreshing whiff of crisp air laden with loads of oxygen. Flying in from New Delhi, one of the most polluted cities in the world, Bhutan's atmosphere was literally a breath of fresh air that swirled into my starved lungs. The blaze of balmy sunshine from the azure sky combined with sparkling air was indeed invigorating. There

was, within me, a strange feeling of being blessed by the Buddha on my arrival in Bhutan.

Even before I landed in the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon, there were awesome views of the Himalayas with sparkling snow-decked peaks as I peeped through the aircraft's window. We were five friends visiting Bhutan for the first time





to contemplate the avifauna of landlocked Himalayan country 70% of whose land is under forest cover. Our tour operator, a qualified environmentalist, was forewarned about our specific interests and he planned it considerably. He not only took us on a whirlwind trip of Bhutan searching for elusive birds but also showcased iconic sights and sounds of Paro, Chelela, Thimphu, Pelela, Dochula, and Punakha.

Merely a kilometre from the airport, we stopped at the Paro Chu (river) to watch Dipper birds. As the name connotes, they dive into the fast-flowing river to feed. The Dipper is small chunky birds, constantly on the move with characteristic bobbing when perched on boulders abutting running waters. As an aquatic bird, it was often encountered all along the flowing rivers during our seven-day trip to Bhutan. Like a harbinger, the

Dippers were constantly putting up a show and regaled us with their dipping, feeding, and melodious calls.

Right from day one, within the first hour, after the delightful Dippers, we spotted a rarity, the Ibisbill, at another junction of the Paro Chu. The Ibisbill looks like a combination of two birds, a Tern (another water bird) sporting the bill of an Ibis bird. Hidden in the shingles of the Paro Chu, well camouflaged and resembling



The Red-billed Chough



The Rufous-breasted Accentor



The Ibisbill



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The Red-billed Blue Magpies



The Rufous-necked hornbill

a pebble, it was tricky to locate the bird. The Ibisbill is related to the waders but adequately distinctive to merit its own family Ibidorhynchidae. At sunset, the Ibisbill started to stir, searching for meals in the mineral-rich waters and we went trigger-happy taking pictures before daylight dimmed.

The next day at 4:30 am, we ventured into the darkness to hunt for more evasive bird species. Driving uphill in the

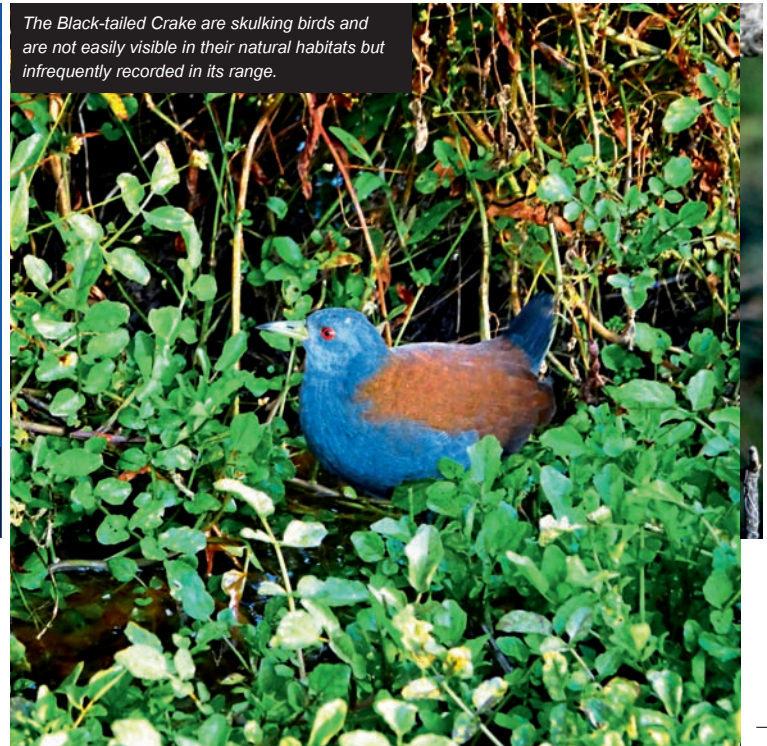
cold weather to Chelela Pass at an elevation of nearly 14,000 feet on the Paro-Haa Highway was initially discouraging in the cold weather touching the freezing point. Our morning trip was specifically to look for pheasants that are stocky but stunning ground birds. Chelela is about 40 km southwest of Paro and the higher we reached, the more interesting it was for sighting birds. At the crack of dawn, warm sunshine lit up the valley and we saw

a pair of Blood Pheasants Saunter by the roadside. A little later, five kilometres on the curvaceous road, we espied Monal Pheasants that swiftly disappeared into the jungles. However, the more beautiful Satyr Tragopan did not show up.

At the top of the Chelela Pass, we stopped for a picnic breakfast under the open sky, devoured refreshments washed down with hot coffee. A mob of Red-billed Choughs flew in to



The White winged Grosbeak is a sparrow-sized bird with a fat beak suitable to eat seeds and seed pods and usually move in groups.



The Black-tailed Crake are skulking birds and are not easily visible in their natural habitats but infrequently recorded in its range.





*The Grey Heron: Birdwatchers easily get fooled by its looks as the tall, lanky bird resembles the rare White-Bellied Heron found in Bhutan.*

check us out and disappeared behind the high hills.

The short break energised us to continue our journey eastwards towards Haa valley. Before we could get there, Black Eagles appeared in the sky and wheeled in circles giving us views of their flight patterns. Another raptor was

sighted plonked on a pylon and troubled us with its identity.

After scrutiny, it was identified as the White-eyed Buzzard which looked bigger than it usually is because of ruffled feathers. Nearby, a flutter of wings indicated that the White-winged Grosbeak was on the treetops and were shoosed

away by grunts of feral horses grazing on the hillside.

As we reached the rim of the Haa valley, a flock of Snow Pigeons made their presence with loud wing beats. We returned to Paro for lunch and proceeded to the National Museum perched on a high point that offered fabulous



*The Blue-fronted Redstart*



*The White-capped Redstart*



*The Spotted Laughing Thrush*





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views of the Paro valley. At a distance, Ravens rejoiced mid-air playing pranks.

On the third day, we went early photo-hunting for another uncommon bird, the Black-tailed Crake. Fortunately, the location was close to our hotel. At the attractive swamp, a single Crake peeped but very briefly as it departed into the marshes. The Crake, because of its sulking habits, is infrequently recorded in its range and the global population is not estimated as the destruction of wetlands is a threat to its survival. The riverside marsh also had noisy River Lapwings, Dippers, Pied Kingfishers and White-capped Redstart enjoying the gentle morning sun. Stray specimens



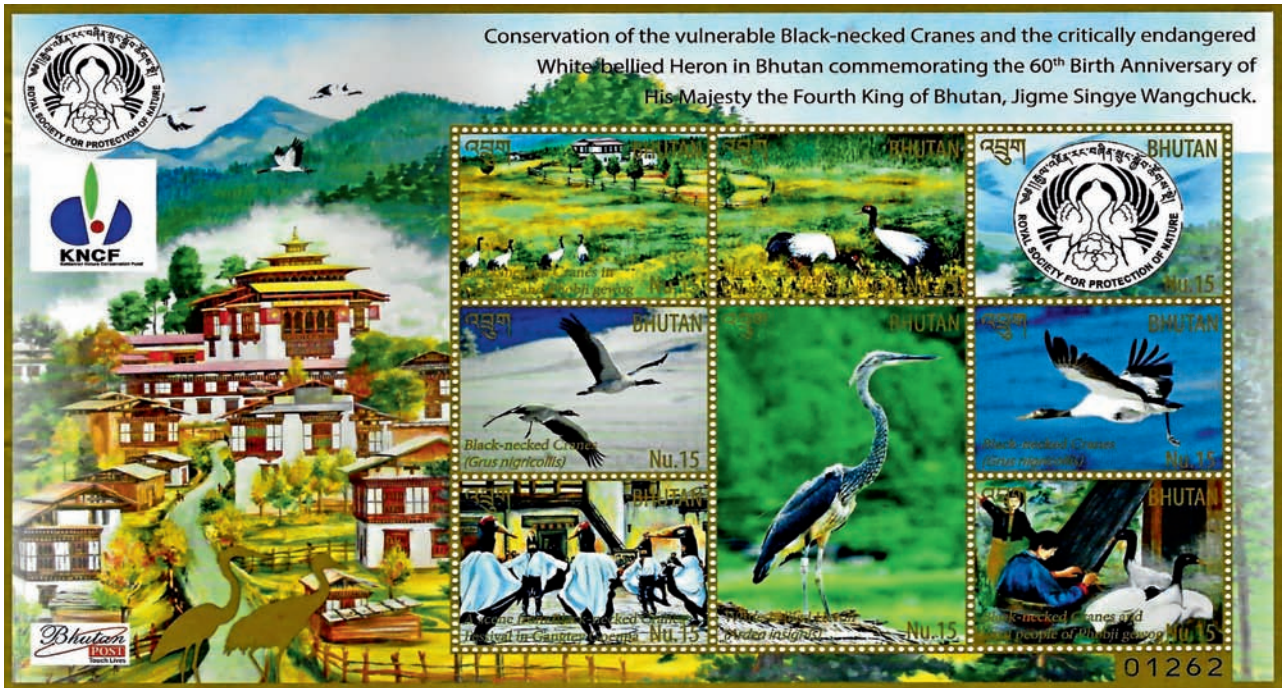
The Himalayan Monal Pheasant (Male): The male bird has blazing blue colours; comparatively, the female is dull brown and pale looking.

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of Sandpiper also drifted on the riverbank picking up morsels and, further afield, a big group of Snow Pigeons took off

towards the tiger hill as if in salutation.

The next day, we travelled to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan,



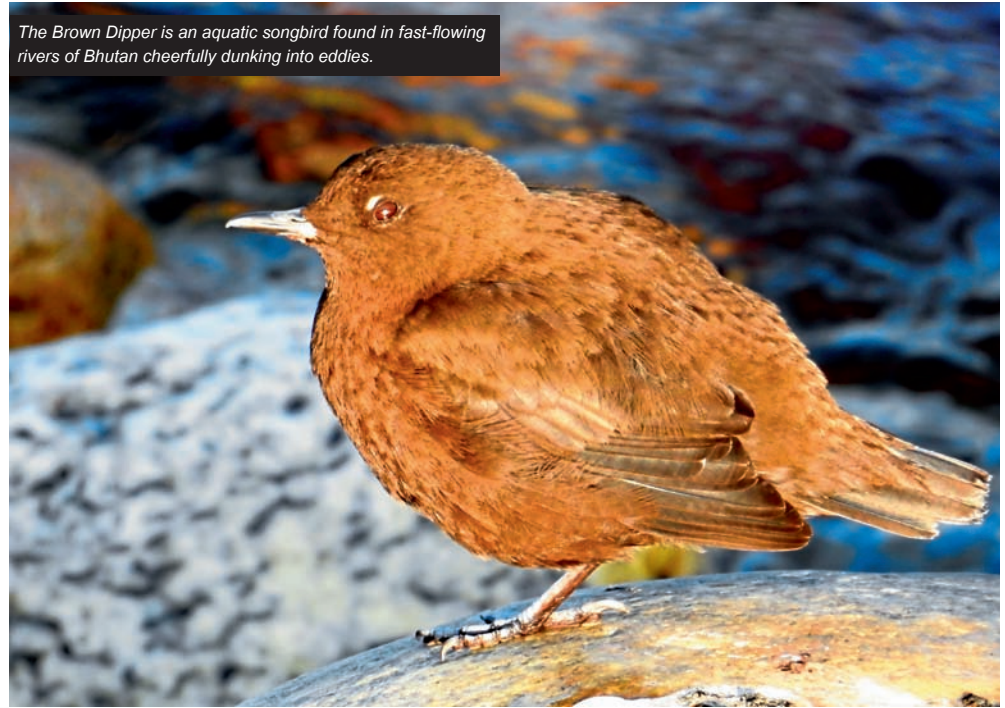
A set of eight stamps were issued to aid Nature Conservation of White-bellied Heron and Black-necked Cranes by Bhutan Post.





*The Parrotbill, as its name suggests, has a beak that resembles a parrot and feeds on berries.*

*The Brown Dipper is an aquatic songbird found in fast-flowing rivers of Bhutan cheerfully dunking into eddies.*



located some 56 km away in a valley with impressive modern and traditional buildings jostling for space.

Later, moving away from the capital environs, we were on lookout for the mysterious White-bellied Heron, a critically endangered species that are sighted in Bhutan's river basins. Habitat degradation and increased disturbance by humans are seen as causes for its population decline. Driving along the river for many kilometres, we finally came to the possible spot where the big bird lives. After a four-hour in watch-and-wait situation at the bifurcation of the river, we sighted the White-bellied Heron hunting for fish, standing very still in the river. Ecstatic, we

eagerly got out of our minivan to inspect the bird but the commotion was enough to alert the bird which took off into the vegetation on the river bank.

On the morning of the fifth day, we once again went searching for White-bellied Herons along the Wang Chu River but five hours of exploration did not yield anything. Instead, we got overenthusiastic about a Grey Heron presuming it to be a White-bellied Heron. Enroute to the countryside, we spotted a group of Buntings, Sparrows and other passerines playing hide-and-seek among the reeds. A flock of Finches, Drongo on the wing were joined by Doves, Sunbirds and Black Bulbuls with their melodious tweets.

Later, our morning disappointment turned to delight as we explored Royal Botanical Park at Lampelri which forms a biological corridor of 120 square kilometres between two National Parks. The extensive botanical spread perfectly forms the "tri-junction" of Sinchula, Helela and Dochula Pass ranges.

As we surveyed a few of the trekking trails in the park, we encountered an assemblage of Parrotbill, Woodpeckers, Finches, Red-billed Leothrix, Wrens, and Fire-tailed Myzornis, among others. The park has kept its reputation as a preferred bird observation space.

The sixth day was the



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*The Rufous-vented Yuhina: A pretty little bird with a wonderful cap like crest and often seen in small parties parrying and playing on tree tops hunting for tasty morsels of insects.*

*A group of foreign Twitchers, as consistent birdwatchers, are referred for their constant lookout for birds of feather. At Dochula pass appreciating the valley.*



most fruitful due to the sheer number of birds spotted and the fabulous views of the snow-covered mountains from Dochula Pass. Our travel agent had wisely chosen a hotel perched on an elevation that offered fantastic views of snowy mountains changing colours from a range of pink to orange as the sun moved from the east to the west. At Dochula, we observed the White-throated Laughing Thrush, Scarlet Finch, Oriole, Minivets, Bhutan Laughing Thrush, Niltavas, Spotted Laughing Thrush, Nutcracker, Tree creeper and a whole lot of winged wonders with musical musings but some were difficult to identify as they were fleeting and flirting from tree to tree.

By the end of the seventh day, we had covered about 800 km searching for boisterous birds in Bhutan.

On the penultimate day, over the last supper in Bhutan, celebrating our successful trip, we collectively made a list of 70 birds in seven days, which was a pittance when nearly 700 species have been recorded in Bhutan. That night, we reflected on Bhutan, the land of Happiness, as a desired destination for birdwatchers. It was already beckoning to us for another trip to score a century of birds. A tentative travel plan was drawn and hopefully it will materialise in March of 2018 for another cross-country romance with Bhutan and also meet the revered Black-necked

Cranes. We bid 'adios amigo' to our jovial naturalist-guide and boarded the next morning Drukair flight headed to our home in Delhi.

*All photographs by N. Shiva Kumar and Mincha Wangdi.*



**N.SHIVA KUMAR** is an independent scribe and trigger-happy photographer focussed on wilderness and wanderlust. He has published 700 articles embellished with 1,000 photographs in print media, including an award-winning coffee-table book on Ecological Parks. He has five international exhibitions choreographed and two solo photo-exhibitions conducted in Delhi titled "Winged Wonders on Wane" and "Lions of the Landscape" respectively. So far, Kumar has accomplished 100 travel trips over the years covering 600,000 km of road journeys and intend to package the experience into another book.

