

Bhutan

Mammal Watching

A Greentours Itinerary

This is a tour that takes us on a journey to some of the least known parts of Bhutan. It is an itinerary that will give us a chance of finding some really special mammals and we'll concentrate our efforts on these. Many of the species we seek are at best elusive and downright uncommon though in Bhutan's magical landscapes it is very difficult to get a true picture of species abundance. Most of these species are either nocturnal or most active at dawn and dusk. Thus this tour, whilst not fully a spotlighting tour, will concentrate very much on those times of day and night. Some days we'll be out and about in the evening, have dinner, then into the night and sleeping from the early hours into the morning, and on other days we'll sleep very early and get up around 2am and go through the rest of the night and early morning before having a slap-up breakfast. We will need siestas with either scenario!

Day 1 To Delhi

Flights from Europe will arrive into Delhi during the day or evening and we'll head straight to a pleasant hotel close to the airport.

Day 2 Flight to Paro and thence to Dochu La

After a night in Delhi we've an early morning flight eastwards along the southern edge of the great Himalayan Mountains to Guwahati. If the weather is clear, which it normally is, we'll have fabulous views of many of the world's highest peaks including Kanchenjunga and Everest.

The spiral down into the Paro valley is one of the World's more spectacular descents to an airport! The quiet little terminal there is a fitting introduction to the country's distinctive and pleasing architectural styles and no doubt a few early photos will be taken even before you've passed through the very low-key entry formalities.

After some breakfast we'll start our journey east heading to the pass of Dochu La which has some of the finest views in Bhutan. Mossy forest here is dominated by Rhododendrons and *Quercus griffithii* forest and is home to amongst other animals the endearing Red Panda. Whilst careful scanning might reveal one from the pass a more likely route to success with this species lies down the hill a bit in the Lamperi Royal Botanical Park. Red Pandas are often spotted in the natural forest that abuts and rises above the park's superb collection of rhododendrons. Our first night of camp life will be here.

Days 3 & 4

Punakha & Tashithang – the edge of Jigme Dorji National Park

In the morning we'll again check the botanical park for Red Pandas before heading further east. We'll have to drive past the fascinating Phallus Bar in Lobesa and the stunning Punakha Dzong, fronted by impressive jacarandas. Heading up the Tashithang Valley we'll find ourselves in a pleasing environment where small villages and farms are intermixed with areas of natural forest along the river, the percentage of natural forest increasing as we head up the valley before we eventually reach the edge of Jigme Dorje National Park and the 'valley of Takins'. It would require trekking for us to see wild Takin so we'll concentrate on species that are more accessible. We'll have two nights in a lovely clearing in the forest next to a small stream. This will be our first camp of the trip. This will though be reasonably comfortable camping with good quality camp beds and tents that we can stand up in. Our team in Bhutan will have the camp sites ready for us on arrival and each day they'll be providing proper sit-down meals wherever we need them whether at the camp or in the field. Hairy-footed Flying Squirrels often visit the trees around our tents. We'll also find the impressive Hodgson's Giant Flying Squirrel here. Muntjac, Sambar and Wild Boar are also around the camp. We'll have our first attempts at finding the smaller cats here with Leopard Cat a strong possibility. Leopard too is found in the forest along the road here and this area offers one of our best chances of finding the elusive Dhole. Asiatic Black Bear is also spotted from time to time in Tashithang's lovely woodlands.

Days 5 – 8(am)

Pelela Biological Corridor

Around a third of Bhutan is within designated protected areas and there are considerable areas also given special status as biological corridors. It is one of these that we'll spend a these days exploring. A few years back an American birding group was camping on the Pele La. They noticed a dead Yak near their camp and they set out a trap camera and checked in the morning only to find that Tiger and Leopard had both visited the carcass in the night! Red Fox too. Since then it has become clear that Tigers in particular move through these areas regularly and indeed occur much higher still, reaching around 4000m. It is not those big cats though that attract us to this area as more recently trap camera evidence has shown that the Pele La biological corridor which links Jigme Dorji National Park and Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park is home to the Golden Cat. This cat has perhaps the most variable coat colour of all the felids with golden, melanistic, grey, cinnamon and even 'ocelot' forms all registering on trap cameras around the country.

This area is also good for Asiatic Black Bear and Red Panda inhabits the mossy woodlands laden with Rhododendrons. There's a chance of Musk Deer too though these animals are generally stay far from any roads. We'll have kept an eye open for Mainland Serow at Tashithang and here we've another chance of this strange goat-antelope and its relative Himalayan Goral is tolerably common in the area. Yellow-throated Martens are active through the mossy forest day or

night. Night though will be our chance to see two uncommonly observed flying squirrels both found here on the trip last year – the rather uniformly coated Himalayan Giant Flying Squirrel and the more beautifully coloured Grey-headed Giant Flying Squirrel. There's a good population of Dhole here too, indeed they are much easier to spot here as they follow tracks across the open pastures on the side of the ridgetops.

Days 8(pm)

Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park – via Trongsa to Urala

After a late breakfast at Pele La we'll spend the middle part of the day travelling east to Trongsa and then along the northern fringes of Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park to Urala. Both Himalayan Langurs and Assamese Macaque are common along the roadsides and we've a decent chance of seeing Brown Goral grazing the vertiginous slopes.

However it will be another Langur that we'll be keenest to see, the beautiful and rare Gee's Golden Langur. Bhutan holds much of the world population of this highly endangered primate and the one area where they are reasonably common in Bhutan's mid-altitude forests. We'll see them several times during our visit and can expect good photographic opportunities too.

Day 9

Yongkhola & the Lingmethang Road

The forests around Yongkhola and along the Lingmethang Road are simply stunning. Metre-long Yellow-throated Martens climb silkily through the epiphyte-laden trees. Malayan Giant Squirrels are an impressive and common animal too in these forests. Much of this road passes through the Phrumsengla National Park. Assamese Macaques are common along the roadsides. The birdlife is exceptional. Night time along forest trails will see us once again looking for Flying Squirrels and the habitats here are perfect for Red Panda.

Day 10 - 13

Sakteng

On the eastern fringes of Bhutan, adjacent to Arunachal Pradesh, lies the remote and little-known Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, a reserve that in years to come will likely become known as one of Asia's finest. For now though Sakteng's 750 square kilometres are home to a couple of thousand semi-nomadic Brokpas or "men of the pastures" – a cultural group who have a very different life style, traditions and dress to the rest of Bhutan - Sakteng doesn't see many Western visitors so the local villagers will be very intrigued by our visit!

Sakteng has probably the closest thing to a pure faunal assemblage in the whole of the Himalayan region. A sublime mix of coniferous forests, alpine pastures and broadleaved woodland in the valleys is home to very good numbers of Asiatic Black Bear, Leopard, Red Panda and Dhole. We'll camp amid this fabulous habitat and spend our time searching for these species and others. Yellow-

throated Martens are always a treat and tolerably common. At lower altitudes we'll find plentiful Gee's Golden Langurs, one of the world's rarer and more beautiful primates and it is Sakteng that is home to a population of the recently described Arunachal Macaque. Serow and Goral are common here. We'll likely glimpse a good number of Muntjac. At night we'll seek Hodgson's Porcupines and the fabulous Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel which are quite common here. This is an impressive and beautiful flying squirrel. We'll again be on the lookout for Golden Cat and Leopard Cat. Leopards move from forest through the pastures at night. The diminutive chipmunk-like Striped Himalayan Squirrel is common if rather hard to spot, and we'll see the rather local Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel here too. There's quite a list of what we might see here... Hog Badger, Crab-eating Mongoose, Masked Palm Civet and Parti-coloured Flying Squirrel among them. Recently camera-trapping surveys have shown that Marbled Cats are found in the area and often at surprising altitudes often around the 3000 metre mark. Clouded Leopards have also been recently found to inhabit the lower coniferous and rhododendron forest zones, even in areas with some pastoral activity. We should emphasise that seeing either of these two species would be an amazing bonus and you should not expect to see them! However we'll be amongst the first to look...

Day 14 (pm) to Samdrup Jongkhar

Our route takes us through rich forests as we descend to the Indian border at Samdrup Jongkhar. We'll have our last chance to see Gee's Golden Langurs on the way. We'll stop short of the town, camping in the forest twenty kilometres out. A night drive will give us another chance of Hodgson's Porcupine and the two Civets, Large India and Small Indian, in the open woodlands, farmlands and riverbanks – an uncommon habitat in otherwise mountainous and/or forested Bhutan.

Day 15 Samdrup Jongkhar to Guwahati and evening flight to Delhi

We'll have plenty of time to explore the forest above Samdrup Jongkhar in the morning – in particular we'll look for the rather beautiful Bhutanese form (subspecies *tenebricus*) of Capped Langur. It is just 3 hours (plus border crossing time) across the Brahmaputra floodplain to Guwahati through landscapes that could hardly be more different from Bhutan. Flat and full of people! In the afternoon we'll board our flight to Delhi where on arrival we'll be met by our local team who'll escort us to the hotel where we'll be able to enjoy some fine Indian cuisine before having a restful night's sleep.

Day 16 Departure Europe

Mid-morning we'll head to the airport to catch our flights back to Europe.

If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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