

Bhutan

Land of the Thunder Dragon

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 a great range of butterflies including some very special species, as well as a wonderful range of bird species, again with a number of very choice species. And especially for the first week of the tour the flora will be quite exceptional too. We'll also spend time enjoying Bhutan's remarkable cultural heritage. Those coming for the butterflies should note that the first four days offer relatively few species, but after that it gets very good!

Day 1 To Delhi

Days 2 & 3 Paro, Tiger's Nest Monastery & the Chele 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. We'll head straight to our hotel close to the airport and on the edge of Paro where Yellow-billed Blue Magpies will be one of the first birds we see amongst a scrub of cream-flowered *Rosa sericea*. After some breakfast and rest we'll take a trip along the river valley, stopping to look for Ibisbill, and here we will see our first butterflies, Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow and Indian Tortoiseshell. We'll head for the iconic Tiger's Nest Monastery, the most famous of Bhutan's monasteries, however we'll not be making the arduous walk up to the precipitously perched monastery, rather we'll just take a stroll along the first part of the track for there is much of interest to us here amid the Blue Pine forest. Amongst a shrubbery of *Berberis praecipua*, *Mazus surculosus*, *Clematis montana*, and the striking red-tinged *Euphorbia griffithii* are drifts of fine yellow *Primula sikkimensis* followed by mauve flowered *Primula denticulata*. Wet rocks are home to yellow *Mimulus nepalensis* while *Tiarella polyphylla* and *Viola bhutanica* bloom beside a small waterfall. Black Eagle soars above us whilst White-collared Blackbirds and Nutcrackers are both typically noisy in the conifers.

Immediately west of Paro the road ascends to the high Chele La pass. We'll drive up through beautiful *Abies densa* forest. Busy groups of White-throated Laughingthrushes cross the road as we stop to enjoy the stunning Mrs Gould's

Sunbird nectaring in the trumpets of much fine *Rhododendron triflorum*. As we stop to enjoy beautiful orange-red campanulate blooms of *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* we'll find more birds - Blue-fronted Redstarts are common and there's Rufous Sibia, and both Rufous-vented and Rufous-fronted Tits. Fine patches of the white buttercup *Oxygraphis endlicheri* decorate the pass itself. Here we've a good chance of seeing cute little Royle's Pikas in turf decorated with *Androsace strigillosa*, *Callianthemum pimpinelloides* and *Gentiana bryoides* as we admire lines of snow-capped peaks in the distance. European Swallowtail and Comma hilltop here as we walk through shrubberies of mauve-flowered *Rhododendron wallichii*. Descending we'll stop to enjoy swathes of impressive yellow *Primula smithiana*, superb purple *Primula calderiana*, and lots of the lovely yellow *Bryocarpum himalaicum*, a primula relative with hanging flowers. There are so many beautiful birds found on these habitats - Spotted Laughingthrushes, Long-tailed Minivets, Himalayan Bluetail and Red-headed Bullfinch among them.

Day 4

Lamperi Royal Botanical Garden

We'll start our journey east by heading over the pass of Dochu La where purple *Rhododendron hodgsonii* and yellow *Rhododendron falconeri* will be in impressive bloom. We'll come across our first Cobra-Lily here, *Arisaema nepenthoides*, a species with beautifully chequered blotches and an elegantly arching spathe. In the *Quercus griffithii* forest below the pass we'll look for Green-tailed Sunbird, Whiskered Yuhina and White-tailed Nuthatch. Here the trees are decorated with the green and red flowers of the mistletoe *Scurrula elata* and the lovely epiphytic orchid *Coelogyne corymbosa* which is common. In the afternoon we'll explore Lamperi Royal Botanical Garden which boasts a fine collection of Rhododendrons, with superb stands of *Rhododendron keysii* a highlight. There is also much native forest and this offers great birding with Black-faced, Striated, and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes all likely. Brown Parrotbill and the lovely Bar-throated Minla will be highlights and other species we'll enjoy include Rufous-bellied Niltava and Ultramarine Flycatcher.

Days 5 & 6

Punakha & the Tashithang Valley

Now we'll start seeing lots of butterflies!

First though we'll have to drive past the fascinating Phallus Bar in Lobesa and the stunning Punakha Dzong, fronted by impressive flowering jacarandas. We'll soon start seeing Spot Puffins but can hope for something much more unusual along roadsides here - *Callerebia annada* - a satyrid closely related to the holarctic genus *Erebia*.

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. During the first day we'll explore the lower parts of the valley where sunny corners

where damp patches are fading fast on the road bring in plenty of butterflies. We'll soon be photographing Staff Sergeant, Common Map, Bright Sunbeam, and metalmarks such as Orange Punch, Tailed Punch, and Mixed Punch. The strikingly elegant Stately Nawab will become a familiar sight and we'll start seeing the almost equally stunning Paris Peacock.

Slaty-backed Forktails frequent streams where parties of Black-winged Flycatcher-shrike feed through the trees above and dragonflies such as the Triangle Skimmer and attractive *Orthetrum pruinosum* pose on rocks for us. The vividly coloured Eastern Scarlet Darter will draw the attention of photographers however the glorious Red Lacewing or perhaps the local 'golden tortoise beetle' might wrest our attention back. We'll see the impressive skipper *Darpa hanria*, metalmarks such as Dark Judy and Punchinello, Chestnut Tiger, Hill Jezebel, Red Helen, Chocolate Commodore and many many Sapphires. Dark Caeruleans flash strikingly metallic in flight. New butterflies will now be coming thick and fast: Glassy Bluebottle, Nettle-tree Butterfly, Great Nawab, Spectacle Swordtail, Blue-tail Jester, Pale Hockey Stick Sailor and Green Commodore among them.

The next day we'll head further up the valley into the Jigme Dorje National Park and the 'valley of Takins' though we're not likely to see one of these in the areas we'll access. Butterflies there will be though. Butterflies will begin with sapphires, Common Jester, and Common Sailor, but as the sun warms up we'll start to see unusual nymphalids such as the Siren and the Tabby. Gorgeous swallowtails such as the Six-bar Swordtail and the Glassy Bluebottle *Graphium cloanthus* will soon be mud-puddling on the road. The gorgeous little Himalayan Striped Squirrel scampers through trees that are home to the impressive orchid *Dendrobium nobile*. We'll watch for Grey-sided Laughingthrushes and Crimson-browed Finch along the tracksides whilst higher up are Maroon Oriole, Lesser Yellownape, Black-tailed Sunbird, Mountain Hawk Eagle and Besra. The colourful ginger *Cucurma aromatica* flowers in dry ground by the road. We'll seek two rather special butterflies here, the unusual Brown Gorgon, a kind of swallowtail, and a very unusual nymphalid, *Calinaga buddha*, known as The Freak.

Day 7

To Trongsa

Our longish journey to Trongsa takes us through some memorable scenery. Most of it in pristine natural forests. We'll see large pendulous rock bee nests hanging from cliffs above the road. Here we hope to see the Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, a scarce, unobtrusive, and most unusual bird associated with the bees. Grey Langurs and Assamese Macaque are common along the roadsides and we've a decent chance of seeing Goral grazing the vertiginous slopes. Birds will bring many a stop today. Both Great Barbets and Golden-throated Barbets are numerous, and we'll see Crimson-breasted Woodpecker too. Others likely include Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrushes, Spot-winged Grosbeaks, Short-billed Minivet, the lovely White-browed Shrike-babbler, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, the stunning Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Red-billed Leiothrix, and Rufous-capped Babbler.

Days 8 & 9

Royal Manas National Park: Tingtibi & the Zhemgang Dzong

Manas is one of the most biologically diverse location in all of Asia. Habitats range from the grasslands of the Brahmaputra plain to mossy oak forests at 2000m as the Bhutanese hills rise into the snowy Himalaya. During these two days we'll explore the hillier parts of Manas.

The forests around Zhemgang and Tingtibi are simply stunning. Flowering Albizzias make splashes of colour in the verdant landscape and we'll soon notice the abundance of epiphytes loaded on each tree, with beards of lichens, masses of mosses and an abundance of ferns, orchids and the like. Streaked Spiderhunters and Rufous-bellied Woodpecker move through oaks decorated with the orchid *Vanda cristata*. This is Golden Langur territory and though they are one of the most endangered of primates they are thankfully common here and we'll see several troupes in the two days, and there will be wonderful photographic opportunities for they are rather curious of us! Yellow Orange-tips are abundant and we'll start to find Indian Fritillaries and Dark Blue Tigers. Special species in this area will include the Pallid Faun, a kind of old-world Morpho, and the lovely Orange Oakleaf. Every water course will have those striking White-capped Water Redstarts and forktails: Little, Slaty-backed and Spotted, and we'll look for the extremely rare White-bellied Heron

Rufous-necked Laughingthrushes and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes fossick around hotel in Tingtibi and just up the road the forest has Pin-tailed Green Pigeons, Crimson Sunbird, Red-headed Trogons and crazy gangs of White-crested Laughingthrushes.

We'll visit the beautifully-sited Zhemgang Monastery where we'll gain a small insight into the life and traditions of this Buddhist country. The quiet roadsides around Zhemgang take us through gorgeous mossy forest home to so many of Bhutan's more beautiful birds. We'll look for the aptly-named Beautiful Nuthatch as well as rare Black-throated Parrotbills and flocks of gorgeous Long-tailed Broadbills. Dappled sunlight will reveal goldenforks and Purple Sapphire, a picture in iridescent blue-purple and bright gold. In open areas we'll see the Yellow Pansy whilst the forests themselves will provide us with opportunities to see butterflies such as the impressive Spangle, Forest Pierrot and cryptically-marked satyrids such as the Bamboo Forester. Metre-long Yellow-throated Martens climb silkily up trees and as our eyes move up through the foliage we'll see the burnished Golden Babbler and gorgeous Red-tailed and Blue-winged Minlas, whilst at the top perch immaculate Pied Falconets on the lookout for a dragonfly meal. Oaks support the red flowered epiphytic *Agapetes serpens* and the orchids *Coelogyne corymbosa* and orange *Dendrobium densiflorum*. The yellow monocot *Hypoxis aurea* blooms on the forest floor along with magnificent *Arisaema tortuosum* and *Arisaema consanguineum*. We'll see fabulous Rufous-necked Hornbills as well as Bhutan Laughingthrushes, Rusty-fronted Barwings, Grey-throated Babbler, and Silver-eared Mesias.

Days 10 – 14

Royal Manas National Park: Gongphu and Panbang

Gongphu has hardly seen a Western visitor so the local villagers will be very intrigued by our visit! Perched on a hillside high above the valleys we'll walk tracks through beautiful forest. The monster-like *Rhaphidophora grandis* cascades from the large tree trunks and on the edge of village gardens flowers the striking *Amorphophallus nepalensis*. Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler skulks in the vegetation whilst in the trees we'll see White-browed Piculet, Asian Barred Owlet and Small Niltava. Indian Purple Emperor is a gorgeous butterfly, the shimmering blue on the uppersides suddenly visible from certain angles and here we'll see Club Beak, Orange Punch and the lovely Long-banded Silverline too. Both *Arisaema tortuosum* and *Arisaema concinnum* bloom under the trees and we'll find the very robust *Arisaema speciosum*, with purplish flowers and an appendix with a very long flagellum up to half a meter long!

Moving downhill into the lower valleys of Manas we'll start to find some amazing spots for mud-puddling butterflies. Common and Glassy Bluebottles are common and are joined by other swallowtails such as Paris Peacocks, Common Mormons, Great Mormons, and the Common Windmill. The variety of swallowtails is truly impressive – we'll also see Four-bar Swordtail, Common Mime, Tailed Jay, Common Raven and Veined Jay. The beautifully-marked Popinjay will be a highlight and we'll also see the Green Commodore, the strikingly-marked Striped Blue Crow, and the Great Nawab. There will be some very fine Lycaenids such as the Malayan, the Fluffy Tit, and the beautiful sapphire *Heliophorus epicles*. Pale Jezebels will be amongst a host of 'whites' such as Great Orange-tip, Tree Yellow, and hyperactive Spot Puffins. Other species we'll see here include Clear Sailor, Orange Staff Sergeant, Common Map, Himalayan Jester, Common Yeoman, Stately Nawab, Scarce White Commodore, Autumn Leaf and the Circe. We've a good chance of seeing the lovely Nepalese Cutia in these forests and another highly sought-after species we might encounter here is the Violet Cuckoo.

Having spent a night on a ridgetop in Gongphu the rest of our stay in Manas will be down in the valley bottom at Panbang. Here we'll be based a nice little hotel on the edge of town with quiet roads heading off down the valley – the approach road to the national park headquarters follows the banks of the now wide and beautiful Manas River down towards the Indian border. We'll spend a lot of time along this approach road as it passes through stunning forests full of great birds such as Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, Kalij Pheasant, Orange-headed Thrush, White-throated Fantail, brilliant Minivets and gorgeous Sultan Tits. Impressively large Black Giant Squirrel are common in the trees here. The impressive epiphytic orchid *Papilionanthe teres* is common and we'll see the cascading pink blooms of *Aerides multiflorum*. Oriental Greenwings flash their metallic colours at us as we stop by a number of streams that cross the approach road. These are fantastic places for butterflies - Scarce White Commodore, Yellow Jezebel, Common Purple Sapphire, Common Castor, Tailed Sulphur, Eastern Courtier and Tawny Rajah all come to mud-puddle and we might find the superb Three-coloured Kaiser. Ruddy Kingfishers fly up and down the streams and the satyrid Dusky Diadem, hangs on

leaves over the water. Orange-sided Skinks scuttle through the leaf litter as we photograph Elbowed Pierrot and Common Imperial, Vagrant and Common Map. There's more swallowtails too with Batwing, Spot Swordtail and Chain Swordtail. We'll look out for civet droppings on the tracks as they also attract many butterflies including the gorgeous Khaki Silverline and both Common and Fluffy Tits.

We'll cross the river (a little ferry) to the park headquarters. Overlooking the river here are the King of Bhutan's accommodations when he visits this park, a favourite residence for this keen wildlife-photographer. We'll picnic each day at tables nearby as Indian Rollers squawk from the teak trees and noisy parties of Red-breasted Parakeets scream through the air. Indian Great Hornbill is a truly magnificent bird, the swan-like whoosh of its wings telling of their approach from afar. We'll see them feeding in silk cotton trees sometimes with Oriental Pied Hornbills and Wreathed Hornbills too. These same trees are the favourite haunt of Blue-throated Barbets, Blue-bearded Bee-eaters, Greater and Lesser Yellownapes, and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, all of which are very common birds around the park HQ. Common Tiger and Common Rose flutter about the grounds and we'll hope to see the scarce Jezebel Palmfly, a satyrid that as its name suggests mimics a jezebel. The wide river gravels below are home to River Lapwings and we'll see the footprints of Fishing Cat here, whilst up among the buildings semi-wild Water Buffalo graze.

A walking trail takes us through beautiful lowland forest. Golden-fronted Leafbird, Asian Fairy Bluebird, and Rufous-necked Hornbills are common along the trail and we'll see Red-headed Trogons and Hooded Pittas too. Hoary-bellied Himalayan Squirrels scamper through the trees and Muntjacs stand quietly back under the trees, and nearer at hand the sandy tracks will give us plenty of chance to understand which animals have passed this way during the night! Satyrids flutter up as we walk - various *Ypthimas* and *Mycalesis* are common and there's *Orsotroiena medus* too, and plenty of little white Psyches seemingly hardly able to fly yet never stopping! We'll see swallowtails such as *Graphium chironides*, *Graphium cloanthus*, and *Graphium xenocles* and other butterflies attracted to the little streams include Indian Purple Emperors, Club Beak, Black Prince, Apefly, Leopard, Purple Leaf Blue, beautiful *Jamides elpis*, Orange Oakleaf, Blackvein Sergeant and the striking little skipper Tiger Hopper. We'll see the amazing sesiid *Melittia eurytion* with its crazily ornamented hindlegs looking rather like a minute humming-bird hawk.

An optional Elephant ride will allow us to explore further into the forest and we'll see Hog Deer and troupes of Assamese Macaques. Guar are quite common here but not easy to see. And we'll also try night drives along the park entrance road where we've a good chance of seeing Palm Civets and Yellow-throated Martens and we can hope for a sighting of Binturong or perhaps a Fishing Cat or Leopard Cat.

Day 15 to Guwahati

We can cross the border directly at Manas and head off across the Assamese plains to Guwahati. The landscapes could hardly be different from Bhutan. Flat and full of people! The birds are not surprisingly different and we'll see a host of new species for the trip today with storks a particular feature with Woolly-necked Stork, White Stork, Asian Openbill, and Lesser Adjutant all likely. Others we'll see include Lesser Whistling Duck, Grey-headed Swamphen, Red Collared Dove, Rufous Treepie and Black-hooded Oriole. 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.

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