

NEPAL 2011 - FEBRUARY/MARCH

GOING IT ALONE - CLIVE ELLIS

Leaving the UK and heading for Nepal on the 25th of February was uneventful apart from the stop over at Abu Dhabi during which I saw three birds sp out the window. Anyway I arrived in Kathmandu on Saturday and got picked up by the LFP (Livelihoods and Forestry Programme) who my good friend Peter Branney works for. He let me use his house as a base over the next three weeks. The weather was humid with the obvious smell of a carbon polluted city that took its effect - don't know why I ever packed in smoking. The traffic is the most chaotic and it took some time to go a few miles. The electricity was also off 14hrs a day to save energy.

Day 1. Kathmandu City.

A visit to The Monkey Temple, Swayambhu Stupa in the Tamel area was a quiet day to catch up with my mate, but still produced 50 Black - Eared Kite (Pariah), Velvet - fronted Nuthatch, Spotted Dove, Red - vented Bulbul, Chestnut - bellied Thrush, House Crow, Oriental - white Eye, House Swift, Asian House Martin, Cattle Egret and a couple of Steppe Eagles.

Day 2. Kathmandu. Sheopuri Nature Reserve.

I met up with Rajendra Suwal and Ramesh Karki and we made our way to the military camp at the base of the hill. Within in minutes we had White-capped Water Redstart, Spotted Forktail and Blue Whistling Thrush. Ramesh is an expert at getting birds to come and see his Scops Owl impersonation followed by a bit of pishing. The walk was going to be slow over 10km and we would only get halfway up the hill and back to our waiting Taxi which cost a pittance for the day. So the slow trudge began. At the first bend Ramesh began to perform and then a hoard of Warblers, Piculets, Laughing Thrushes, Tits, & Flycatchers came from every direction. Well if this was a sign of things to come then I couldn't wait for the next bend, and so it was like that all the way to Nunnery situated halfway to the peak where we stopped and totted up the species which included, Speckled Piculet, Kalij Pheasant, Great Barbet, Oriental Turtle Dove, Eurasian Griffon Vulture, Black Eagle, Black Kite, Bonelli's Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Changeable Hawk-eagle, Orange - bellied Leafbird, Grey Treepie, House Crow, Large - billed Crow, Long - tailed Minivet, Yellow - bellied Fantail, Ashy Drongo, Rufous - gorgetted Flycatcher, Verditer Flycatcher, Grey - headed Canary Flycatcher, Small Niltava, Rufous - bellied Nitava, Golden Bush Robin, Blue - fronted Redstart, Slaty - backed Forktail, Grey Bushchat, Chestnut Bellied Nuthatch, Green - backed Tit, Black- lored Tit, Yellow-browed Tit, Himalayan Bulbul, Mountain Bulbul, Grey-sided Bush Warbler, Blyth's Leaf Warbler, Buff-barred Warbler, Hume's Warbler, Grey-hooded Warbler, Black-faced Warbler, Striated-, Rufous-chinned and Streaked Laughing-thrushes, Rusty-cheeked and Streak-breasted Scimitar Babblers, Black-chinned and Grey-throated Babblers, Blue-winged Minia, Nepal Fulvetta, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Green-tailed Sunbird, Black-throated Sunbird, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Barn Swallow and just one Spiny Babbler putting in a brief view. What a cracking first day out.

Day 3. Fly to Chitwan National Park.

As I waited for the taxi a Grey-backed Shrike showed up in the garden with the usual Tailorbirds, Whiteeyes and Bulebuls.

The flight took around half an hour and then a short journey to the Paradise Lodge for 3 days. Be warned not all guides here are what they say. The one I had on the third day could not wait to finish and get back to his mates and the lack of birding id skills was pretty obvious after the first Eagle. The temperature was warmer and a pre-dinner walk gave me White-browed Wagtail, Indian Roller, Greater Coucal, Spangled Drongo, Black-throated Sunbird, Scaly-breasted Munia, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Chestnut-backed Bee Eater, Cinereous Vulture, Oriental Magpie Robin, Black Bulbul, White-rumped Vulture, Bronzed Drongo, Red Collared Dove, Green Bee Eater, Indian Pond Heron, Peacock, Pied Bushchat, Sand Martin, Alexandrine Parakeet, Little-ringed Plover, Pied Kingfisher, Dark-throated Thrush(Black), Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, Coppersmith Barbet, Pompadour Pigeon, Ashy Woodswallow, Darter Great Comorant, Little-, Great-, White-, Intermediate-, and Cattle Egrets, Grey Heron, Spot-billed Duck, White-tailed Stonechat.....not to mention 2 Indian Rhino and a wild Elephant. A superb opening to Chitwan, what would tomorrow bring?

Day 4. Chitwan.

Early pre breakfast walk in the hotel grounds added Spot-winged Tit, Taiga Flycatcher, Pied Hornbill, Asian-pied Starling and Tickell's Leaf Warbler. Ten minute walk to the waiting dugout canoe on the Rapid River and a gentle trip to look for river birds. It was not long before the delights put in a show with Sand Lark, Citrine-, White-, and White-browed Wagtails, Common Greenshank, Common Stonechat, Little Grebe, LRP, Common Hawk

Cuckoo, Hoopoe, Common Sandpiper, White-throated Kingfisher, Lesser Coucal, Lesser Adjutant, Osprey, Paddyfield Pipit, Jungle Babbler, Rufous-rumped Grassbird, Black Ibis, Marsh Sandpiper, White-breasted Waterhen, Woolly-necked Stork, White Stork.....the guide needed help with id-ing Fork-tailed Swift.....Gharial and Marsh Muggler were also added to the morning tally. After alighting the canoe down stream the guide gave warning of the dangers of the larger mammals. Walking along a well used path between long grass you couldn't help but feel you were being watched. We were heading for a forest in the distance which looked very promising. Long-tailed Shrike (Black-headed) showed well and a Tickell's Thrush flushed out above us. Further along was a Hill Mynah and back over the river Pallas's Fish Eagle. Into the forest and a Short-toed Eagle broke into a clearing. From here we walked to town passing the elephant paddock. There above us another Eagle, this time Grey-headed Fish Eagle. Western-crowned Warbler, Slender-billed Oriole, Common Iora, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Fulvous-bellied Woodpecker all picked up before lunch.

Elephant Ride.

Birds were thin on the ground and not surprising with an elephant trudging about the place, but I did pick up White-rumped Sharma, Jungle Fowl and Plum-headed Parakeet. Went down to the river for a pint and to watch the sunset and added a couple new birds -Greenish Warbler, Dollarbird, Common Merganser, Blue-bearded Bee Eater and a female Koel.

Day 5.Chitwan(morning) Bus to Kathmandu (6hrs).

Walk in the nearby forest with one of the worst guides I have had the displeasure to be with. Black-headed Munia, Stork-billed Kingfisher, Crested -serpent Eagle (which he called Great-spotted), Water Pipit, Jungle Owlet being watched by a small group of birders who I bothered to ask, Pale-blue Flycatcher (which he called Velvet-fronted Nuthatch), Grey-breasted Prinia and Brown-fronted Woodpecker, Crested-Tree Swift. I can't blame the guide for trying because people need work here and poverty is high on the agenda and they need to feed their families. A lesson learned and not too much time lost. On to Kathmandu and the journey back produced some gems which included, Greater -spotted Eagle, Booted Eagle, Alpine Swift, Brown Dipper, Tawny Eagle, Eurasian Jay, Indian -spotted Eagle, Ultra-marine Flycatcher, Red-rumped Flycatcher, Long-tailed Broadbill, Common Buzzard, Crested Bunting, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch, Purple Heron plus a handful of species seen elsewhere.

Day 6.Kathmandu.Sheopuri Nature Reserve.

Made my own way to the park which was trouble free and took a slightly different route - the variety of birds changes over small distances in these hills. Straight away I picked up Plumbeous Redstart on the small stream a much wanted bird. Fantastic views of White-crested Laughing Thrush were quickly followed by new birds in this area which included Golden-spectacled Warbler, Maroon Oriole, Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Lemon-rumped Warbler, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Pygmy-blue Flycatcher, Indian-blue Robin, Whistler's Warbler, Great Tit, Yellow -browed Tit, Chestnut-crowned Warbler, Red-billed Blue Magpie and many more seen on the previous visit.

Day 7.Fly to Biratnager and drive to Kosi.

A one hour flight and a half hour drive to the birding mecca of Kosi Tappu camp. Aneesh a local and self taught guide certainly new his stuff. Got me onto a pair of Brown-fish Owls within twenty minutes. Spent the first few hours around the camp and used the hide to check out some cracking birds which I always thought to be difficult to pin down elsewhere. Unfortunately the two days I booked was never going to be long enough. Superb guides and brilliant meals at this tented camp surrounded by an electric fence. Birds came thick and fast with Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Shikra, Brown Shrike, Osprey, Spotted and Jungle Owlet, a pair of Brown Hawk-owls, Little Cormorant, Asian Openbill, Yellow Bittern, Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged Jacanas, Red-crested Pochard, Pied Wagtail, Moorhen, Blue-throated Barbet, Red-necked Falcon, Common Kestrel, Black-rumped Flameback, Fulvous-bellied Woodpecker, Large Cuckooshrike, Ring-necked Parakeet, Palm Swift, White-eyed Buzzard, Black Drongo, Yellow-legged Button Quail, Pheasant, Cinnamon Bittern and Orange-breasted Green Pigeonall this on the first day at Kosi.....Nepal was getting better by the hour - would this pleasure ever end?

Day 8.Kosi.

Today we took a raft down river with a packed breakfast, an early start before it got too hot out in the open. We soon were into the birding with Shikra on the way to the riverbank. Once on the raft I quickly got into my stride and pointed out an immature Pallas's Gull which was followed by River-, Little- and Black-bellied Terns, hundreds of Small Pratincoles and then the highlight of the trip so far an "INDIAN SKIMMER" found by yours truly which Aneesh with excited breath said had not been recorded for three years. Onwards we went with Eastern Imperial Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Eastern Marsh-harrier and a Peregrine. We moored up for breakfast

and quickly added Grey-breasted and Plain Prinia, but could not locate the very elusive and newly discovered Rufous-rumped Prinia. Back in the raft and making slow progress, a Bluethroat showed briefly and then Kentish Plover, Temmink's Stint, Olive-backed Pipit, Pintail, Mallard, Gadwall, Teal, Shoveler, Ruddy Shelduck were just a few more for the list.

We headed for the bank and were picked up for lunch before heading for the Kosi Tappu Barrage. On the way we stopped and checked out some pools and found Swamp Francolin, Black-headed Ibis, Purple Sunbird, Northern Goshawk, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Purple Swamphen, Oriental Skylark, Alpine Swift, and Jungle Mynah.....we headed for the dam and an adult plumaged Pallas's Gull greeted us. The wetlands here have been mostly drained, but still have a lookout tower from which a few River Lapwings could be seen. Back to the camp and a stroll around the pools showed Yellow-, Black and Cinnamon Bitterns, Hodgson's Bushchat, White's Thrush, and Black-shouldered Kite.

Day 9.Kosi and drive to Dharren Forest and Dhankuta.

The camp's top dog Badri Chaudhary took me out this morning specifically for Smokey Warbler and he came up trumps and more with a bucketful of birds - Blyth's Reed, Paddyfield, Whistlers, Blyth's-leaf, Clamorous, T hick-billed, Dusky, Humes, Greenish, and Spotted-bush Warblers; Chestnut -bellied Starling, Pied Harrier, Brown-backed Pygmy Woodpecker, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, White-throated Fantail, and Lesser-whistling Duck. There were many more species which had been seen at previous sites and so I will try not to make monotonous reading by repeating myself.

A long drive was ahead of us and going off the usual birding track.

Day 10. Dhankuta.

Much of my time here was spent with the Forestry Programme and birding was cut short, but still a Bengal Florican flyover, Asian-barred Owlet, Pine Bunting, Collared Grosbeak, Besra, Upland Buzzard, Chestnut-bellied Thrush amongst the regular sightings were added to now an already impressive list.

Day 11.Kathmandu. Phulchowki.

Phoned Rashendra to bird Phulchowki. He was reluctant after the recent muggings of tourists and birders on the hill. Phulchowki is Kathmandu's highest peak. He turned up with his son, a strapping six footer, the driver, who looked pretty mean and Shanker Tiwari a legend in these parts and beyond for his birding skills. We drove to the top and walked down. Shanker was first in with a Chestnut-headed Tasia and Rufous-breasted Accentor. It just got better as we descended - a Goshawk the size of a male Sparrowhawk caused some discussion, House Swift, Hill Partridge heard, Golden-throated Barbet, Red-flanked Bluetail, Oriental Scops Owl heard, Lesser-racket tailed Drongo, White-winged Redstart, White-tailed Nuthatch, Ashy-throated Warbler, Chestnut -crowned Laughing Thrush, Red-billed Loethrix, Rufous-winged- and White-browed Fulvetta, Stripe-throated and White-bellied Yuhina, Rufous Sibia, Black-throated Parrotbill, Green-tailed Sunbird, and Crimson Sunbird.

It just goes to show that the hills around Kathmandu hold certain birds. We made it down safely and said our goodbyes for now.

Day 12.Kathmandu. Naggunj.

Phoned Shanker and asked if he would be interested in hooking up for the day. A much quieter forested reserve cared for by the army. The fewer species were made up with quality. We soon had Sparrowhawk in the bag followed by a lift to the top and a fairly strenuous walk down. Amongst the regulars were Greater Yellowthroat, Tickell's Thrush, Grey-winged Blackbird, Orange-flanked Bush Robin, White-tailed Robin, Yellowish-bellied Bush Warbler, White-browed and Green Shrike Babblers, White-bellied Yuhina were added to the list of now regular birds. It is quite easy to pick up seventy species without trying too hard although many are the same. Most days are fantastic to say the least.

Day 13.Fly to Pokharra.

A three day visit alongside one of Nepal's largest lakes. Two more days would have been better. So much to see and not enough time. A twenty five minute flight from Kathmandu and a five minute taxi to the Kantipur Hotel which was first rate. Drop the bags off and out I went into the park. An Egyptian Vulture not more than twenty feet above and another, a Black-crowned Night Heron on the lake, the first of two Lesser Falcons sped by. Booked a paragliding flight at Sarangot for the next morning.

Day 14.Sarangot a.m. / Pokharra Forest p.m.

Headed up the hillside to 1500m or so to catch the thermals with the local Vultures. They didn't disappoint. We sat on the slope waiting for the thermals and then Himalayan Griffon appeared, much bigger than the Eurasian. We got to about 5000ft following the Vultures which now had a White-rumped amongst them and constantly

looking over their shoulders at us. And then out of nowhere came two Alpine Swifts followed by a White-rumped Needle Tail. We spent an hour in the air and my legs were like jelly when we landed. Never again! We headed up to the World Peace Pagoda that afternoon and saw a Red-headed Vulture. The forest on the way back was surprisingly quiet with one Collared Owlet. The hoped for Great Slaty Woodpecker could be heard.

Day15.Pokharra a.m. / Flight to Kathmandu.

A pre flight walk along the lake added a few to the ever increasing list with Tufted Ducks, Yellow Wagtail (Lutea), White Wagtail (leucopsis), Little Heron and Rosy Pipit being the highlights. The flight was delayed for two hours and the afternoon was lost.

Day 16.Kathmandu,Taudaha Pool and Bagmati River.

Shanker Tiwari helped me out at this site and I was glad he came along.

This was to be the last day to bird and a cracking day it was. Firstly the pool is well kept by the local community and held Great Cormorant, Teal, Gadwall, Pied Wagtail and a pair of Shoveler. Moving over the ridge and onto the river, well the smell was disgusting, but the birds more than made up for the stench with 50 Grey-headed Lapwing, 3 Northern Lapwing, Indian Pond Heron, Green and Common Sandpipers, Greenshank, LRP, Common Snipe, Black-crowned Night Heron, Red-collared Dove, Hodgson's Redstart, Black Redstart (which looks nothing like the one we're used to seeing in the North), Siberian Rubythroat, Rosy Pipit Common Stonechat, White-capped Water Redstart, Grey Wagtail, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch, White-tailed Rubythroat (h), Dark-throated Thrush, Eurasian Cuckoo all being watched over by hundreds of Black Kites with a few Steppe Eagles chucked in for good measure, but the star of the trip appeared here. A bird which fooled Shanker with its pale legs, a Tytler's Warbler he said, but no a more familiar bird to me it was, yes a WILLOW WARBLER a first for Nepal and probably the first for the Indian Sub-continent as the other two records have never been accepted.....What a delightful afternoon.

Day 17.Time to leave for home.

There was room for one more, while waiting for the taxi, a Blue-capped Redstart came through the garden. What a trip. There is so much more to see and I certainly would have stayed on were it not for work commitments.

Back in the UK on the 19th March.