

Bhutan

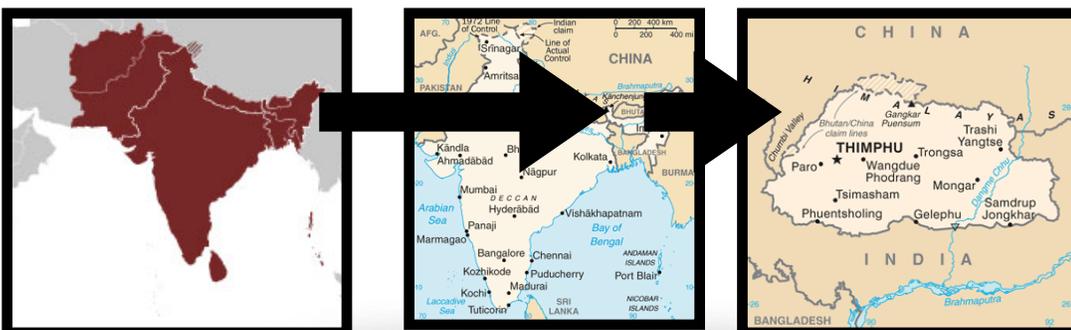
A Trip Report from November 2016, created from the pages of www.btona.org.



Birding for a few weeks in Bhutan

The material in this trip report has been extracted from The Journeys of Bob Barnes website, www.rabarnes.org.

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Incredible
Creatures



Mountains
-Range After
Range



A Land of
Buddhism



Yak Butter Tea
and other
Delights

Logistics

It is easy to get around in Bhutan, but not easy to get any place...

During November 2016 I made a three-week trip to Bhutan. I flew into Paro (which is the only international airport in Bhutan) and travelled eastward across the center of the country. The following draws heavily from those posts. The video portfolio entitled, **The Birds of Bhutan**, includes video of individual species recorded in Bhutan.

Bhutan is not a country which can be easily placed in a “pigeon hole”. That is one of the things which made this trip so rewarding. Bhutan is like a giant Gordian Knot, each bit of the experience can be remembered discretely but it is the whole of the complex intricately related “cord” which is most enticing.

Video: **Bhutan Overview**

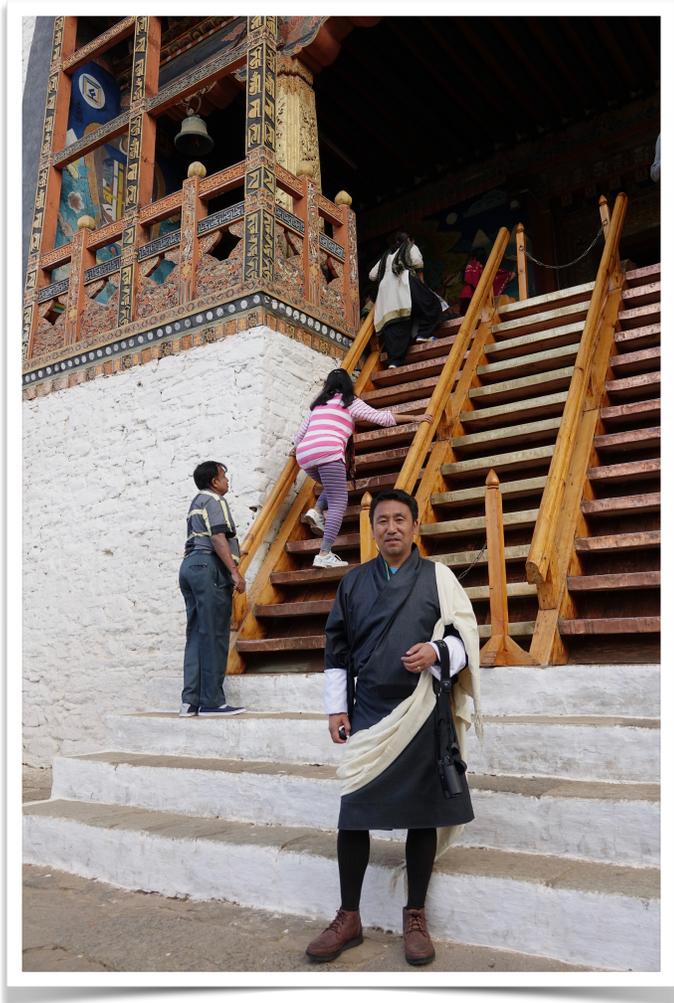
Norbu, who owns “Off to Bhutan”, was my guide on this trip and I had two different drivers (Pema and Ugyen Tshering).

Testimonials from previous customers are very laudatory of Norbu’s expertise, describing him as the best guide in Bhutan. I can’t address the relative nature of his expertise since I have no experience with other guides in the country.

What I can say is that he is an excellent guide, finding many birds by sound (in that he is like a world-class tropical birding guide). He has an extensive knowledge of bird calls and songs and, I might add, excellent hearing - able to pick very quiet sounds out of all of the background noise. As far as I could tell he did not miss a bird identification and had substantial knowledge of their range (both elevation and geographically). As a videographer I often have a certain difficulty with guides until “I get them trained”. Most bird guides are hard wired into servicing birders who are there for the count; fleeting sight, check it, move on. Sometimes you run across a guide who is a photographer (and Norbu is an excellent photographer) who

TO TRAVEL IN BHUTAN...

First some of the logistics, I arranged the trip through **Off to Bhutan**. If you are not a citizen of the Indian sub-continent then you must arrange your visit to Bhutan with one of the licensed tour companies in the country. This is not a point of advice, it is a fact of law. A standard daily rate is imposed. My understanding (subject to correction) is that this is a minimum rate which can increase depending on the embedded costs of choices you might impose on the tour operator - excessive lodging requirements for instance. The fee covers guide, driver, transport, lodging, food, and site fees. Many people react to the Bhutanese approach to tourism as expensive and inflexible. My perception is that it is more expensive than a lot of places in the world but much less expensive than the typical “African Safari”. The approach which “Off to Bhutan” uses allows a lot of customization of the tour - see their website for particulars. Visa’s are required for entry into Bhutan and tour operators assist in obtaining them.



understands that you want to work with a bird for a long time to get your image. Video work is a step beyond that required by most photographers, all of the work is done on tripod which brings its own sets of problems and delay - this work is not quick to seize the moment, that means a lot of missed birds. And when you manage to get on a bird it can take a long time to get a video clip which is of suitable duration. What does this mean for a guide, it means that it looks like a lot of birds are being missed, that the typical measurements of success, as a guide, are not being met. As a result guides often get frustrated and expressing my satisfaction with progress doesn't really dispel that hard-wired response that they feel in their gut. Norbu got it, and got it quickly. I came away with video of several mammal species and 144 bird species

(exceeding my goal, for a trip of this type and duration, of usable video of 100 bird species). The total number of species I saw? Not a clue. From the video/birding experience I consider the trip to be a resounding success. As for the logistics, everything worked like clockwork, my lodging, food, everything was taken care of and I did not have the stresses associated with wondering where I would sleep, and what it would be like, and if I was going to starve to death. I cannot recommend Norbu, or "Off to Bhutan" highly enough - this is a good arrangement under any circumstance. Norbu is pictured to the left in front of the Punakha Dzong in Bhutan (more about singular names and traditional clothing later).

The number of airlines which can fly in to and out of Paro, which has the only international airport in the country, is limited. Some travel websites consider the Paro Airport to be the 6th most dangerous in the world, others consider it to be the most dangerous. This because of the steep approach, flying up valleys, etc.. I did not feel uneasy about my flights in/out of the country. In my case, I was flying between Paro and Kathmandu, Nepal when I entered and left the country. The scenery on this flight, which is of much of the Himalayan range (including Everest and other 8,000'ers) is incredible.

There were ample opportunities to see a beautiful countryside, the photo below is from the general area of Cheli La ("La" means pass). It was a real pleasure to learn about a culture which is quite different from the one which I live in, and arguably more positive.



From Paro my tour traveled east (with side trips to the north and south) to Yongkala and the area just east of there. This route is basically an west-east transit of the country. Elevations along the route varied between about 6,000 feet and 14,000 feet. On a few occasions we took a short cultural break to learn a bit about the country and its people.



The roads are narrow, with significant relief on either side, driving is slow and it takes time to get from one place to next. There is relatively little traffic, so much of the birding was done from the road (except in places like the Royal Botanical Garden - photo above). As a result the physical exertion is not great, although we would walk for a couple of kilometers at a time. The significant relief along the roads meant that looking up hill was definitely a strain on the neck. Looking down slope was like being



on your own birding tower - often looking directly into the canopy.

The Weather

The weather in Bhutan is highly variable. The monsoons usually start in mid-June and end about the end of September - as here in New Mexico, the start/stop dates are unpredictable. In general, the period of October to May is reliably good for birding with clear skies and moderate temperatures. Temperatures change quickly with the elevation, so dress in layers. The lowest pass we crossed was about 9,500 feet in elevation, comparable to Emory Pass just up the road from my home. The highest was about 14,000 feet. On several occasions we were at a high pass by early morning for the high-elevation birds. It was cold (down to -4 C) at such times but easily manageable with just a bit of layering. The only real "problem" I experienced was with my hands because I could not wear gloves and work the camera/tripod. Working the equipment in those temperatures, with a lot of "metal touching", was uncomfortable.

Currency

Bhutan, of course, has its own currency. US currency is universally accepted. However, the \$20 USD bill printed in 2006 is not accepted in Bhutan, apparently it was a series which was widely counterfeited - a word to the wise, check your \$20 before you go to Bhutan.

Tourist Infrastructure & Internet

The tourist infrastructure is well developed and defined. Other than having to have a guide, which in this case is very desirable, the travel

restrictions are not noticeable. Wireless internet service is available at most, but not all, of the hotel facilities - enabling e-mail, surfing, and wireless international calls.

English

Nearly all Bhutanese seem to speak some English and many speak that language very well, nearly all of the signage (and all official signage) is in English. The third king decreed that English would be the language of instruction in the schools. In the 1970's a Canadian Jesuit, Fr. William Mackey, was invited to the country to set up the high school system in Bhutan. Now it is the language of schools and lots of other things (government transactions, for instance). Even at an early age the children know some English. There are a number of reasons this works well in Bhutan, not the least of which is it eliminates bickering between the different language groups in the country.

Road System

There are not many signs along the roads of Bhutan, once you are outside the larger towns. Signs indicating curves, for instance, serve no real purpose when there is a hill or curve every few feet. One thing which is striking about the signage, however, is that the signs are not full of bullet holes like they would be in the United States. There are fairly frequent signs (below) indicating the number of kilometers to the next settlement (2 km. to Sengor, for instance). I spent the 16th and 17th traveling along the highway from Punakha to Trongsa, this section of road is being widened as part of a national effort. Many of the roads have been/are one lane/two-way traffic roads with pull outs and occasional wide spots.



To say that Bhutan is mountainous is the classic understatement, other parts of the Himalaya are undoubtedly comparable but I know of no other place in the world which comes close to matching the topography in the Himalayas. The mountains are continuous and very steep. The valleys between the mountains (what would be called ranges elsewhere) are deep and at the bottom of each is a mass of white water that would shame the Rio Grande in the U.S. and Mexico. And my trip was during the dry season.

The roads are cut into narrow slivers along the sides of the mountains. In most places the old road is still a pleasure to drive on (see right), except when there is oncoming traffic. In many places, however, the roads are cut through landslides, through long steep slopes of rockfall which seemed to me to be well beyond the slump line. The road is typically one track wide with the outside tires running along the edge of the unconsolidated slope. There is ample evidence of the slope slumping and the road having disappeared in times past. Driving this section of road, at this time, is truly an act of faith. I cannot imagine driving on this road during the monsoons. All of that water (even during the dry season) on steep slopes causes

frequent landslides and rockfall. I have been on some of the most notorious roads in the world and this ranks in the top tier.



These roads are the lines of commerce and if the consequences of a mistake were not so extreme would be great rally roads. Early in the trip we drove on a completed widened road and it was very comfortable and to western standards. I assume the roads will be the same here following the widening, but there will always be landslides and slumping. The project is scheduled for completion at the end of 2017.

Dump trucks are used to haul all sorts of goods, not just for construction. The road widening which was going on over much of our route meant that sometimes the most common vehicle on the road was a dump truck.



Language and The Name of The Country

Bhutan is the official westernized name of the country and “Bhutanese” refers to both the people of Bhutan and the language. The national language is Dzongkha, which is a language of western Bhutan. Druk yul is the official name of the country (which translates variously as The Land of the Thunder Dragon or the country of the Drukpa Lineage). Druk is a word you see everywhere (in fact it is the name of the airline I flew in on) and means Dragon. Bhutan is often referred to as the Dragon Kingdom.

Education and Medical Systems

Public education in Bhutan is free and merit based. There are boards at grade 10, grade 12, and at the BA level. Passing the board (some quotas apply) entitles the individual to a free education at the next level. There is also a private education system which is not merit based in its financing. (See “English” usage above.) Medical care is free in Bhutan and there is an extensive medical infrastructure.

Singular Names

Many individuals in Bhutan have only one name, like Pema who was the primary driver on this trip or Norbu, the owner of “Off to Bhutan” and who served as my guide on the trip. Their names are given to them by a lama at the local monastery who, after learning the time and day of the birth, consults sacred text to derive the name. Their names may also be given to them by an astrologer who, after learning the time

and day of birth, consults the astrological charts. Only the king has a family name in Bhutan, otherwise the concept is not utilized in the country. There are two instances when an individual may have a second name (but not a family name). In the first case, the parents may have prayed at a particular temple for conception. In that case the second name, the name of the temple, may be given. In larger cities where many people may have the same (singular) name, some individuals add the name of their village to their given name. But for the most part, a singular name given in the fashion described above is used by the Bhutanese.

Governance

Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy and the king is truly revered by the people. It is an amazing thing to witness, when they talk about their kings (the current one is their 5th) they really seem very proud and pictures of the King, his father (the 4th King), and the Queen are in every home, every store, everywhere -- and not by mandate. The photograph below is a typical calendar, photographed at random in a typical store. It depicts the current King and his father.) It would be very difficult to find another country where the head of state is so honored and loved. Democracy, and a constitution, came late to Bhutan and caught many people in the country by surprise. In most instances, when a ruler has absolute power the reduction of that power by enabling democratic institutions only happens by the forceful intervention of those ruled. In Bhutan, the fourth king, simply decided that the people should have a more significant role in the ruling of the country. When he announced the concept many people were taken aback, the prospect of democracy created a great deal of



uncertainty. The king had a special committee draft a constitution, after reviewing numerous models from around the world. Then in preparation for the election, to determine if the constitution would be adopted or not, the King went about the country explaining the democratic concept and the constitution. A mock election was held to give people the idea of how the voting process occurred and what their role in it was to be. In the mock election, the populace voted on four colors, and an overwhelming number voted for “yellow” the color associated with the King.

In Bhutan there is a lower house which proposes legislation, this house is a political

animal composed of members of various political parties. The upper house, has a representative from each of the regions in the country and five representatives appointed by the King. The representatives in the upper house must be apolitical in philosophy and are elected in a general election. It is the upper house which votes on whether to enact legislation proposed by the lower house. Should the process reach an impasse on some issue, the King is the deciding official.



Both houses were holding their annual council meetings during my visit. The meetings are broadcast on television and radio and wherever I went people were watching and listening. Such political diligence by the populace is certainly rare in such places as the United States where electioneering is nothing more than sound bite politics and efforts to misrepresent the deeds of your opponent.

The administrative centers for religion and government are located in the regional dzongs, like Punakha Dzong pictured above.



The idea that some Americans have, that we (the US) should export democracy, is a hard sell in many places of the world at the moment. After watching our recent presidential election the rest of the world is likely to say “no thanks, we can do better”. And it would not take much.

Archery

Archery is the national sport of Bhutan and is extremely popular. When I speak archery I do not mean shooting at huge target posters from fifty feet which is how I learned the sport in high school. Nope, these guys shoot at a target about the size of a dinner plate from 145 meters (that is 1 and 1/2 American football fields without the end zones) and there are always an amazing number of arrows in the circle. I did not see any contests but did see a number of men practicing and not with little bamboo bows either - with big fiberglass compound bows which looked incredibly high tech.

Religion

In Bhutan, Religion means Buddhism. It is an integral part of the daily life of Bhutanese, not like the religion of many other countries where it is turned on or off, as convenient. In addition to the behavioral and ceremonial manifestations of the religion there are many physical reminders of it throughout the country. The countryside is full of prayer flags and stupas. Stupas mark holy sites and because they can be of many types it is not easy to describe their place in the Buddhist Religion. In Tibet, and in much of Bhutan, they are also called Chorten. Stupas are found in markets, at the tops of passes, along the road, just about everywhere. Always circle or pass a stupa going clockwise, this will turn the symbolic prayer wheel.

Dochu La (pictured above and below) has an elevation of 3,100 meters (10,200 feet) and is the site of the Druk Wangyal Chortens. This site has 108 chortens and commemorates the Bhutanese soldiers killed in “Operation All Clear” which was conducted to force Assamese separatist groups out of Bhutan (which they were using as a safe haven for their attacks in India).

The Chendebji Chorten (photo next page) is located 41 km west of Trongsa. When we passed, a festival was in progress at the site. I wandered about the site, mingling with the monks and other visitors. There were many merchandise stalls and I bought some prayer flags at one. But the stalls were not limited to religious paraphernalia, it seemed that just about anything was for sale, including plastic



water pistols. There were pavilions set up with row upon row of sleeping mats for the monks and there were areas for tents which some monks had brought.



In contrast, along the road there were often very simple stupa. Some of these were more elaborate than others. In some cases stupas are placed in the road and the road is designed so that it is possible to pass the stupa in a clockwise fashion (remember that Bhutan is a left side drive country).

Mountaineering

Gangkhar Puensum (7541 meters) is the highest peak in Bhutan and the highest unclimbed mountain in the world (the snow peak pictured on page 4 is Kula Kangri, the second highest peak in Bhutan at 7,538 meters). Several of the highest unclimbed peaks in the world are in Bhutan and the reason is relatively straightforward.

Mountaineering in Bhutan is banned, this after a brief period when it was allowed. The ban followed religious sector complaints that climbing was dishonoring the mountain deities. Thus, there are many unclimbed peaks in Bhutan and it is likely to stay that way. Nepal, on the other hand, is finding that the fees that they charge climbers for attempts on Everest are not sufficient to cover the cost of removing all the trash (oxygen bottles, tents, bodies, etc.) from the mountain.

Agriculture

The agriculture sector officially accounts for about 36% of the GDP of Bhutan but, as explained below, that computation probably underestimates the contributions of the sector. The main crop of Bhutan is maize, followed by rice. Bhutan produces a diverse set of crops including wheat, potatoes, vegetables of all sorts, and various fruit crops. These crops are grown along the river bottoms and in terraces where the valley slopes are less steep. Every



inch of ground is used, some of the rice fields are 10'X3' in size. Rice is grown around boulders and other obstacles. There is little mechanized agriculture going on in this area. Rice is planted, tended, and harvested by hand.



Lots of these little fields adjoining each other and cascade down the hillsides - and they probably do not all belong to the same person, lots of families may have ownership in a series of terraces. There are some fairly wide valleys, but in my experience they were limited in number and amount of arable land.

In the highlands, buckwheat is grown extensively. At Norbu's mother's house I had buckwheat pancakes; the buckwheat had been grown in their field, harvested, ground, and made into bread at the homesite. It is a staple of every meal.



In 2011, Bhutan announced its goal of having a completely organic agricultural sector by 2020. With no large agricultural corporations in their way they may meet the goal. “When we say happiness, it's not just happiness of humans. It's happiness of the soil, happiness of the animals, happiness of all sentient beings,” Appachanda Thimmaiah, Bhutan's agricultural adviser from 2008 to 2013 and associate

professor of sustainable living at Maharishi University of Management in Iowa, USA, told ThinkProgress. “Organic farming was very much part of the gross national happiness. You cannot think about applying chemical fertilizers and pesticides and say that your country is happy.””

Food (General)

The food served in the hotels is buffet style and westernized, although it sometimes reflects the local fare it is always "toned down". My last breakfast in Bhutan was a hotel buffet where I had the "traditional Bhutanese offering" of tea, toast, fried eggs, beans, and the sliced hot dogs they call meat in much of the world. My conclusion, a lot of Brit tourists must come through this place. The boxed breakfast provided by the hotels for early leavers consisted (almost universally) of two hard boiled eggs, two cheese sandwiches, a banana, a box of juice, and tea/coffee. For lunch, a piece of chicken was added to the mix.

More than once I found that at the noon hour I had a choice of tourist food or Bhutanese (referred to as "local") food. I always picked the later. For instance, one day we pulled in to a way-stop along a road, miles from anything else. Most of the facility was dedicated to a tourist restaurant, full of people from the tour buses parked in front. Tucked to the side was the "local place" where the drivers, guides, and construction workers ate - that is where we headed. Sometimes I worry that the people in such "local" establishments might think I am some type of voyeur, but when discrete inquires occur between the guides and the others at the table understand that I like the food they are eating better than what is being fed to the tourists, there are smiles all about and they

seem quite pleased. Without exception, I am the only westerner - even tourist - at these places.

The lunch options were often boxed lunch from the hotel or local fare from a shack along the road (and there were few of these). I always opted for the local shack, where we would have noodles (of the ramen variety). Simple, with chilies and green onions added and whatever they could scrounge up, if anything. I enjoyed these stops a lot, we were generally sitting on a crude bench in front of the kitchen swooshing flies away but I must say I preferred it to manicured food. And no, I did not get sick.

There is a lot of Indian influence in Bhutan but there are few restaurants which advertise themselves as “Indian”. My notes show that in Paro “We stopped for Indian food for lunch, pretty good, especially a well roasted potato in a peanut sauce with a few raisins and other things - also a rather mild chicken curry.”

Food (Specific)

Rice is eaten at least twice a day by everyone.

Chili Cheese (Ema datshi) seems to be offered at about every meal and is probably the most liked, and most eaten dish in Bhutan. This dish consists of chilis in a cheese sauce, to which they sometimes add potatoes, mushrooms, **bitter gourd**, and any other thing which suits their fancy - eaten over rice. For much of my trip I was in daily e-mail contact with Rebecca at home and she consistently told me that I had to sample the “national dish”, ema datshi. I could never remember the name, however, and when I asked about a national dish I was greeted by blank stares - “Well, we eat Chili Cheese all the time, maybe that is it.” Showing

my cultural sophistication, I responded, “No, it didn’t sound like that...”.



Chilies and mushrooms are regularly seen drying on the roof tops of sheds and small stores along the road.

Yak Butter Tea is the mythical drink of Bhutan, it is the drink served early plant hunters and myriad explorers. It has received more than its fair share of comment in the travel history books of Asia. An encounter with the legendary drink is perhaps a bit less dramatic, it tastes



like salty morning tea at my house. The salt taste replaces the sweet taste and makes it distinctive. It is a favorite tea of the Bhutanese who often drink a cup or two at the beginning of the day. The general theory about its popularity focuses on the fat content of the Yak Butter which furnishes much needed calories for a people working hard in cold high places. **Yak Butter Tea** has been added as an entry on the **Foods and Markets of the World** page of the www.bobbarnes.us website.

At Norbu’s mom’s house I was offered some wine after lunch. I deferred. Then Norbu’s

nephew said “local wine”. At that moment I understood two things: one it was an offer I could not refuse without insult; and two this was the wine which Norbu’s mom makes. It was a clear almost colorless liqueur which reminded me of ouzo or sambuca although it did not burn and the anise flavor was more subdued. It was very good. One of the ways that the local home-made wine/liquor is served is with a fried egg. The two are emulsified, the only taste that I got from it was alcohol.

I found a variety of fruit to eat throughout Bhutan, we would often find Orange groves in the lower elevations, lots of apples, and roadside stands were a dependable source of guavas. The **guava**, *Psidium guajava*, is native to Central America, Mexico, and the northern part of South America. It is now grown in many subtropical and tropical areas of the world, including Bhutan and India (which is



now the largest producer of the cultivated crop). There are many cultivars of guava so the ones pictured to the left from Bhutan are not the same as those native to the Americas. An excellent example of the globalization of agricultural products. The guavas shown above were purchased at a roadside stand in Bhutan and (along with some oranges purchased at the same time) served as snacks for several days. The fruit was larger than those I was familiar

with in the Americas, the flesh was more solid, and the seeds were not as hard. The entire fruit was edible, except the small attachment nubbin. Undoubtedly the best guavas I have ever had.

Momo (moo-moo) is an old Bhutanese dumpling recipe, no sweet fillings here, just spicy ones - and you put chili paste on it, very good. Speaking of chili paste, it is like a finally minced dry salsa, not like a tomato paste.

From my notes: “This evening I had some fry bread, the third type of bread that I have had here, 4 if you count pancakes. It is of course called something with many more letters than fry bread, but I know fry bread when I eat it.” There is a wheat loaf bread, a wheat pita type bread (naan), and a bread very similar to the pita bread only thicker and without a pocket, like that seen with tortas.

Dhal (or Dal) is the lentil soup which is served with the mid-day and evening meals. It is often a little spicy and very delicious. It comes to the table in a large bowl. Those feasting later the dhal from the large bowl into smaller bowls which are brought to the table with the soup. Dhal is sipped (or drunk) from the small bowl, no spoons involved.

And lastly, for purposes of this report, the **tamarillo**, or tree tomato. It is a native of the Andes but is now grown in many places in the mountains of the world - including Bhutan. See photo below taken at one of our lunch spots.



The Tamarillo or Tree Tomato - An old friend from the Andes.

Per Capita Income/ “Subsistence Farming”

In absolute terms, the per capita income in Bhutan is low but that figure is misleading on three fronts. First of all, it is not a relative assessment and does not reflect the purchasing power of currency in the country. Secondly, it does not reflect the fact that society provides at least two major services (that are financial burdens in the United States - for instance) free of charge, education and medical care. And lastly, in the rural areas, especially, subsistence farming and barter are ways of life. The term “subsistence farming” is misleading because the practice is robust and much of the food needs of the rural population are met by their own efforts. The food provided in this way is diverse and apparently plentiful.

Swastikas

How would you feel if your traditional symbol of well being and good fortune was highjacked by a hate group? A symbol which was sacred and auspicious for 11,000 years in at least three major religions (Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism) - photo below. Welcome to the world of the Indian Subcontinent. The swastika, transliterated as “svastika”, स्वस्तिक in Sanskrit, is found in many parts of Bhutan and elsewhere in Asia. It is a traditional symbol with only good associations. In recent history, the Nazi’s latched on to it. Following the second world war it was generally suppressed as a symbol in the west but is now reemerging as right-wing hate groups came out of the woodwork in the last U.S. presidential election. How do the people of Bhutan feel about the



symbol, new depictions of it are seen much less frequently now and in general they would like their old symbol back and untarnished. The symbol has traveled the world, retaining its heritage in its home land but has mutated into a more evil form elsewhere. Globalization is like digital material, once it is released into the world you loose control over what it is.

Places of Commerce

Outside of the urban areas, the stores in Bhutan were small but well stocked with food stuffs. In the photo below, food and liquor is



available from a small outlet at a hotel. These small stores generally performed more than one function, serving as a “take-out” restaurant was commonly another role. Bhutan is justly famous for its textiles and there are small outlets in the areas which are especially known for their products. The Bhutanese decorate many of their structures with elaborate woodwork. Don’t be surprised when you walk into a roadhouse restaurant and find elaborate scroll work brightly painted.

Structures

Like most places in the world the structures that people lived and worked in varied greatly in size, form, and material. Unlike most other places in the world I saw no evidence of overt poverty (although there was undoubtedly some there somewhere), the structures were always clean, sufficient, and adequate to purpose. The structure shown below is a workshop beside the road in Mangar. Asphalt is transported in the drums seen at the front of the workshop. Locals gather them up after the road crews leave them beside the road. The views from even the simplest structures were phenomenal and well worth the price of admission.



The Bhutanese use a lot of wood (and rammed earth) in their construction. Wherever there is wood it is (generally) finely carved and painted.

In new apartment complexes I saw electrical conduit and waste water pipes running on the outsides of the buildings. Not something that you would see in many other places but a remarkably simple solution to some of the most basic maintenance issues.

Natural History

As mentioned above, Bhutan is mountainous with mountain ridge after mountain ridge, narrow valleys, significant relief, and flora and fauna which vary with elevation and the general east-west speciation cline found within the country. Coming from a very dry place,

however, it was the water that most impressed me.

Waterfalls, Streams...

There is water everywhere, during our drives between birding spots I saw many, as in MANY, streams, cascades, and waterfalls -mostly unnoticed and generally unnamed. Any one of

The stream which is the source of the waterfall runs under the road and plunges immediately to the rocks below. Along side the road at the top of the waterfall is a Chorten (photo next page) which is a memorial to monks in a truck which went over the side of the road at this location. In June 1998, 58 passengers on a bus were killed when it went over the side in this area.



which would be major tourist attractions in the United States, certainly in my home state of New Mexico. One exception to the lack of “naming” is the 150’ high Namling waterfall which we passed in route from Bumthang to Yongkala. (In the photo below, the main east-west road snakes along the mountain side above Namling waterfall.) This is a high waterfall with substantial flow.

This section of road took twenty years to construct. Roughly 240 construction workers were killed in one mud slide.



At the base of the chorten is a pull-out, it is the widest point in the road in miles. It is here that Norbu, Pema, and I had a boxed lunch one day. It was an incredible and beautiful setting for a boiled egg and some tea.



This section of road is the traditional one-lane two-way traffic highway and is the main route east to west in Bhutan. Inches from the right hand side of the car (where I sit behind the driver) is a plunge of a thousand feet or more. "Lonely Planet" says that more than 300 workers died constructing this section of road. By the end of the trip I was wondering about the trade off between the problems with head-on collisions on the old roads and the problems created by the speed that the new roads seems to invite. No doubt commerce will be enhanced by the new roads but it will be interesting to see what the differences are in the types of

accidents and the frequency of accidents between the old and the new.

Tourist Sites & Experiences

There are many physical sites and cultural experiences which await the tourist in Bhutan. The focus of my trip was on bird video so I did not visit many of the sites or take time for cultural experiences (other than those that happened as a matter of day-to-day discourse). I did visit Punakha Dzong and make the walk to Takstang, described below, however.

Takstang - The Tiger's Nest Monastery

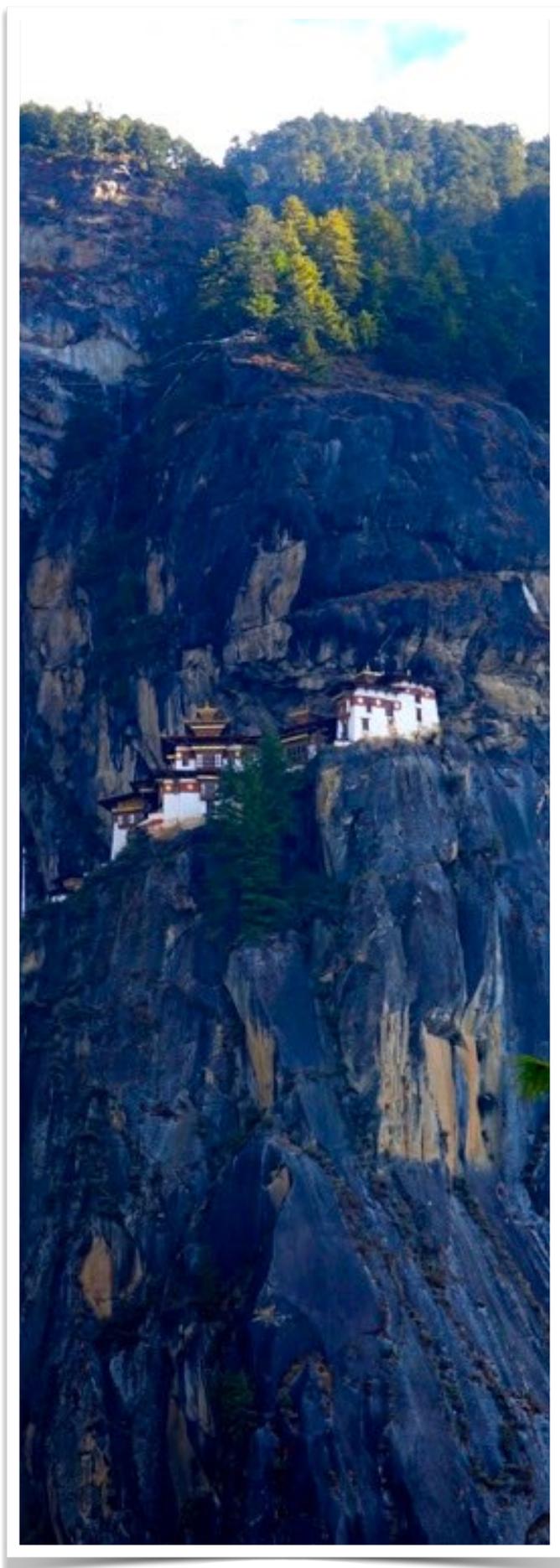
The Tiger's Nest Monastery is one of the major tourist (and religious) sites in Bhutan. The following are my notes from November 12: "Much of my first full day in Bhutan was dedicated to a walk to the Tiger's Nest Monastery. The trail is gorge-like (referring to the Columbia Gorge between the states of Washington and Oregon in the United States of America), 2.6 miles up and 2.6 miles down with an elevation gain of about 1,700 feet. It is unrelentingly steep. I started out carrying a full complement of gear but at about a third of the way up I gave in to the offers to carry the backpack which had the big camera/lens and tripod in it. At about the half way point there is a tea house (a.k.a. cafeteria) with welcome tea - and on the way down lunch. (The tea house is reached after gaining 973 feet in elevation. It is 1.3 miles from the parking lot and sits at an elevation of 9,498.) It was here that I took video of Rufous-fronted Accentor. Turning to the guide at the end of the shot, I said "Excellent, well worth you carrying the camera

up the hill." And for the first time, Norbu who is very amiable but quite serious, smiled. The trail was very very crowded.

The monastery is considered the 10th most sacred place in the Buddhist religion and is, thus, a major pilgrimage site - as well as being stunning. Through the sweat I am pretty sure that I saw many prayer flags of six basic colors. The hike is through an oak and rhododendron forest (several species of each) topped by very tall pines. When there are views down into the valley, and there were many, the villages and rice fields, which had just been harvested were visible. I should feel pretty good about the walk up (from a conditioning standpoint), but those pilgrims included a lot of grandmothers and their granddaughters - most were in the same mode as I, one step at a time. The maximum elevation on the walk is 10,232.

Punakha Dzong

The regional dzongs are divided into two parts; a religious center; and an administrative center. There is a temple which divides the two parts of the dzong. The art and ambiance of Punakha dzong is striking, very beautiful. And there are rhythms to the place which remind a non-Buddhist that he/she is in a different place. For instance, when encountering a stupa or religious structure, always pass clockwise - as in spinning a prayer wheel - to do otherwise is disrespectful and brings bad luck. No shoes or photographs are allowed within the temples so tread lightly and open your eyes. The many candles in the temples were in the past made from yak butter, now they are mostly imported from India and are made of soy. Many of the structures, including Taktsang and Punakha Dzong have been damaged by earthquake and fire over the years and the damaged areas have



been rebuilt as exact replicas of the historical objects.

To say that Dzongs are associated with rivers is misleading - there are rivers everywhere. In

between Trongsa and Paro, Bhutan we came across a game of Khuru, the traditional Bhutanese dart game. My notes from that evening read: "I watched a game of darts along the way. First the dart, the dart is about a foot



some cases, a river and dzong make for a very dramatic setting, like that of Punakha Dzong and the Mo Chhu, pictured above.

Khuru



One of the cultural experiences which I enjoyed was watching a game of Khuru. As we traveled

long, feathered (usually plastic veins) at one end and sharply pointed at the other. About two inches behind the point there is a large piece of metal (or heavy wood). The target is a board roughly the size of a 4 by 4, it is sunk in the ground with about two feet sticking above the surface.

The part of the stake above the surface is covered in what looks like tin, painted white, with a circle (Bhutanese are especially fond of circles it seems) about the size of a small saucer painted on one side. The side of the target with a circle faces another target of the same nature 20 meters away. There are two teams, it looked like about ten members each but it was hard to tell. Each member of each team stands by one

target and throws a dart at the other target. Meanwhile, each target is surrounded by players, about half from each side, who encourage, mock, etc. the hurler of the dart. If a dart lands within about six inches of the target a point is awarded, if it hits and sticks in the target (outside of the circle) the thrower is awarded two points, and if the dart sticks in the circle three points are awarded. The players are in traditional Bhutanese dress, and large ribbons (sashes) are draped from a cloth belt. The sashes are of many different colors with each color representing the number of points that player has earned. They play to 20 points (a set) at which time a ceremony with dancing and singing takes place. A game generally is three sets long. Pretty damn cool if you ask me.”

Cheli La

Just where to post my visit to Cheli La is problematic. It embodies the natural history of the high passes that have shaped the cultural history of Bhutan and it is a favorite tourist destination because of its day-trip access from Paro and incredible scenery.

On my second full day in Bhutan, we traveled to Cheli La (Pass). The Pass is the highest point on the road between Paro and the Ha Valley. By the time we had reached the top of the pass (3,780 meters or 12,402 feet) I had already photographed and videoed Blood Pheasant and Kalij Pheasant. We were on our way to bird the area near the summit for Rose Finches. (Alternate spellings of the pass name include Chele and references to “Cheli La Pass” are often seen in western print, but “La” means “Pass”.) The views from the pass area are phenomenal.



I am generally loathe to add quotes to my posts, they are supposed to be original after all, but Wikipedia has an excellent quote about the prayer flags of Bhutan:

“Prayer flags belong to the Himalayan landscape, as much as mobile phones antennas belong to ours. Rather than distributing electromagnetic waves, they distribute prayers and mantras along the wind. Rather than helping people babble with each other, they help people stay tuned with their inner self and with the gods. While people here are concerned with bad consequences on their health if they live in the vicinity of mobile phone base stations,

...(they)...plant as many as they can all around, knowing by tradition that they bring happiness, long life and prosperity to the flag planter and those in the vicinity.

Such forests of prayer flags are found everywhere in Bhutan, on hilltops, in forest clearings, on top of rocky outcrops, at river confluences and near temples. They are replaced once or twice a year by local people, who print them from wooden blocks, take them to a lama to be consecrated, and fix them to bamboo poles.”

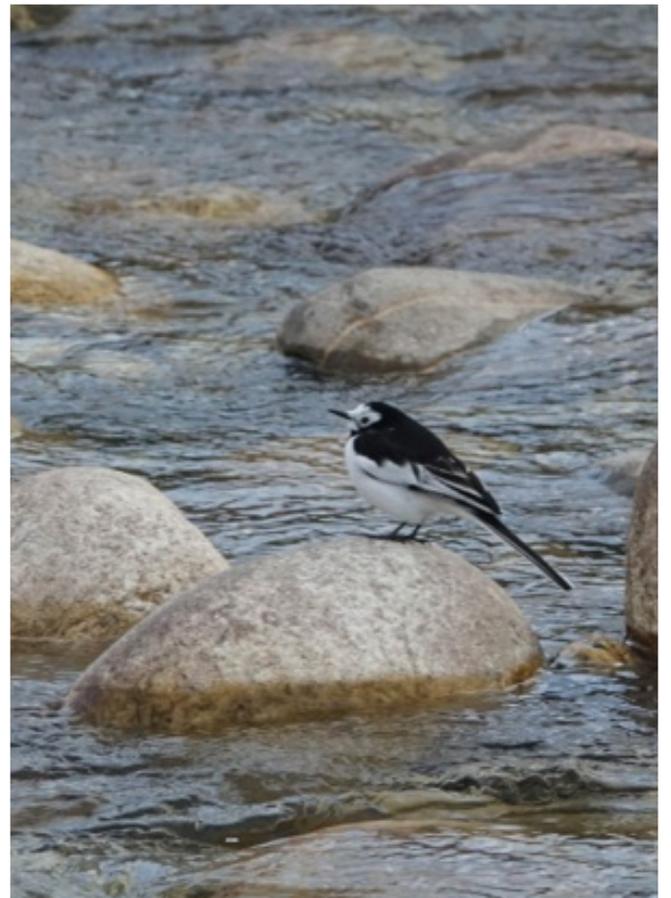
The prayer flags in the photo above are at the pass, turning to look another way you will see even higher vistas overwhelm the senses.



Birds/Birding

My flight from Kathmandu landed in Paro in early afternoon. My notes from my arrival read like this: “Had wonderful views of the Himalayas, including Everest, on the flight to Paro from Kathmandu. Visa, bag arrival, customs were very low key. When I walked out of the terminal there were lots of drivers holding signs, none with my name, that is because my guide walked up to me and said “Hello, Bob”...(I arranged the trip through Off to Bhutan.)...Very nice hotel, not quite a hotel

in some senses, I have a small chalet in a pine forest for my room, with hot water...As soon as I checked in and I dropped my bag off in the room we went to bird. I managed nice video of White Wagtail and Plumbeous Water Redstart. I had video of these birds from India but I think today's was much better quality...I have a driver and a guide, a Toyota Land Cruiser for transport. I like all three.”



In retrospect, this note captures the trip quite well. The first bird species I was able to photograph was the **White Wagtail**, *Motacilla alba*, pictured above on the Mo Chhu near Paro. We were looking for Ibisbill on this first afternoon and I think that Norbu was looking for a “home run in his first at bat” but it was not to happen. I would have to wait until the next day for the Ibisbill, a bird which I saw several times during this trip.

The next morning, as I awaited my trip to The Tiger's Nest Monastery I walked the hotel grounds I took several photographs of the **Green-backed Tit**, *Parus monticolus*.



Near the start of the trail to the Tiger's Nest Monastery, I photographed the **Blue-fronted Redstart**, *Phoenicurus frontalis*, pictured above. Near the bottom of the Tiger's Nest Monastery trail I was able to record **Spotted Nutcracker** (quite good, I think) and **White-throated Laughing-Thrush** (briefly).



I am a birder, or more particularly a bird videographer, so the bird I wanted to see was the Ibisbill. The **Ibisbill** is one of the world's "mega-species", almost mythical in its allure. In my mind I was not placing the Ibisbill on my wish list because chances of seeing it were not good. It is a large sandpiper about the size of a dowitcher, white with black markings about the head, and a long decurved red bill. After we came down from the Monastery we spent three hours working the Paro River, this is the place

we birded the afternoon before. We walked about two miles of the river and finally found an excellent location, just outside of Paro. I was able to record **White-capped Water Redstart**, **Plumbeous River Redstart**, **Brown Dipper**, and Ibisbill. I eventually spotted the Ibisbill, within ten feet of us and was able to get close to 10 minutes of video. The picture of the Ibisbill, just above, was taken on the Mo Chhu. In Bhutanese, Dzongkha is the non-western term for the language, Chhu means river. So Mo Chhu River is redundant, it is like someone saying Rio Grande River. Mo means female.

There is nothing like uncertainty and when it comes to the **Large-billed Crow** there is lots of it. The species currently described as *Corvus macrorhynchos* has at least 11 sub-species, several of which are probably full species. The individual pictured below is most likely *C. m. intermedius*. The people of Bhutan love chilies



and Large-billed Crows seem to be everywhere in the country so it is to be expected that chilies and crows would cross paths. I photographed this individual in the Phobjekha Valley of Bhutan where I had gone to video **Black-necked Cranes**.



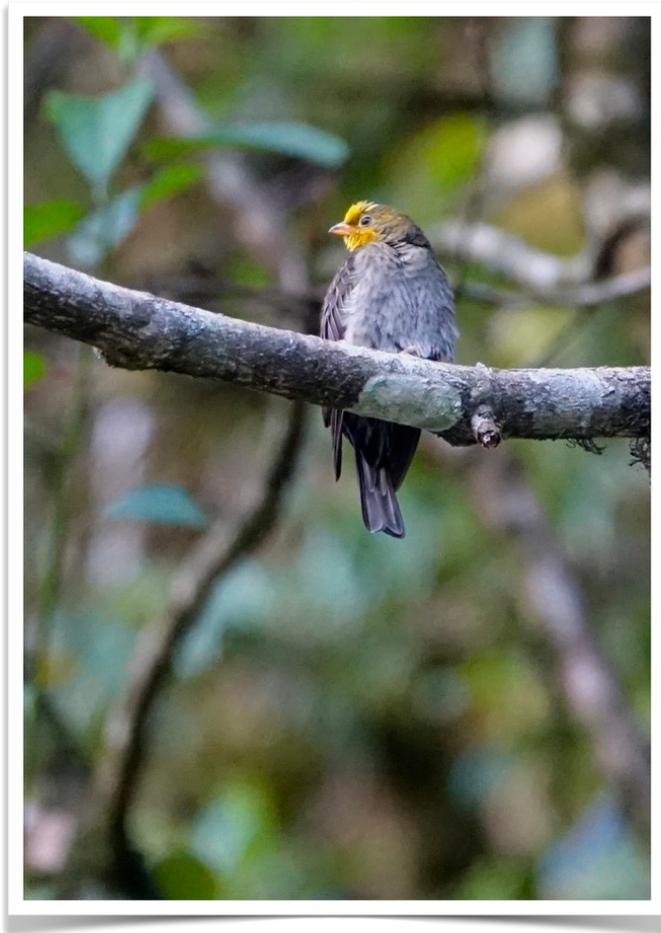
Sometimes a bird species and an insect species seem to be irrevocably linked. Such is the case of the Honeyguide and the Himalayan Cliff Honey Bee. It was on the way to Phobjekha Valley that I found Himalayan Cliff Honey Bees and their wonderful honeycombs (photo above). In truth, we were looking for Honeyguides (which we eventually found) but I was (am) fascinated by these bees. They are the subspecies *Apis dorsata laboriosa*, it is especially adapted to high elevations. A bit later I was able to photograph more bees at the at the Punakha Dzong ([see photo gallery](#)).

But back to the Honeyguide. I photographed the **Yellow-rumped Honeyguide**, *Indicator xanthonotus*, shown to the right at one of the cliff bee hives at around 10,000'. The Honeyguides were not always found at the bee hives but that is the easiest and “traditional” way for birders to locate them. For the local people the situation is almost opposite that of the birder. The locals follow the Honeyguides to locate the hives (and thus the honey). And -- thus the bird’s name.

The **Rock Dove** (in some sources Rock Pigeon or simply Pigeon), *Columba livia*, is almost cosmopolitan in its distribution and requires no introduction if you live in a city. I saw this species in numerous locations during this trip.

Bhutan is within the native range of this species.

I saw the **Crested Kingfisher**, *Megaceryle lugubris*, perched above the Po Chu during my visit to the Punakha Dzong and at several other river locations.



The **Common Myna**, *Acridotheres tristis*, has a range which is traditionally limited to the Indian Subcontinent - and north, as well as much of Southeast Asia. It has recently been expanding its range significantly, however. The picture on the following page was taken at the Punakha Dzong during my visit to that wonderful place. This species has been introduced into many parts of the world, but here in its home territory it is not simply an exotic, it is exotic. I no longer “chase” bird species, preferring to see them in their home range, so this bird was very rewarding.



I saw two groups of **Blood Pheasants**, *Ithaginis cruentus*, on my trip to Bhutan in November. Luckily, one group was in the west of the country and the other farther east. Luckily, because the incredible red color of their breast is clinal, becoming more intense the farther east the individual is found. The framegrab below is from the video of this species in my Vimeo portfolio of the **Birds of Bhutan**.

I found **Crested Serpent Eagle**, *Spilornis cheela*, (photo right) on the 24th of November between Tingtibe and Trongsa, Bhutan.

Much of the birding in Bhutan is done from the narrow roads of the country. On the downhill side of the roads you look into the canopy or at least the upper part of the forest. It is great from birding. Near Trongsa, I photographed the White-browed Scimitar Babbler,

Pomathorhinus schisticeps, pictured on page 26.

The Wallcreeper, *Tichodroma muraria*, is one of those species I have longed to see. I first saw an image of it in some field guide on the birds of Europe and I was entranced. The color was so striking and the idea that this was a wren-like bird which crept along cliff faces (generally pictured below some castle on the bluff above) was intriguing. I saw around 20 birds of this species on this trip and an advance peek of the video of this species can be seen on



(Himalayan) Blood Pheasant
Ithaginis cruentus cruentus

the “**Bhutan Overview**” video and/or in **The Birds of Bhutan** video portfolio.

There were many instances like this in Bhutan, where I would suddenly find myself looking at a bird which I had often looked at in a field guide and dreamed about seeing in the wild. I was able to photograph and video the Rufous-necked Hornbill, *Aceros nipalensis*, like that shown above, on several occasions We



typically found this species in large noisy flocks, often tipped off to their presence by the loud sound made by their wings as they flew.

The Blue-bearded Bee-Eater pictured below was photographed as the light faded at the end of a long day.

White-browed Scimitar Babbler

A big camera, an old fat guy, and a guide tends to be a draw in the remote regions of the world. Such was the case in Bhutan and I love the experiences which flow from the curiosity. Two events on this trip come to mind in particular. The first event occurred as I sat by a narrow farming road above a river. The tripod legs were spread so that the camera was only inches



above the ground, to provide stability in the wind and during high magnification video. I was hunched over the viewfinder, oblivious to the world. At some point I became aware of a great deal of chatter and quiet laughter, I looked behind me to find a traffic jam had developed on this one lane road where we had seen no traffic before. People were out looking at the White-bellied Heron (with a world



population of less than 100) I was videoing

across the river. They knew the bird was extremely rare, that there was a conservation area, but they had never had the chance to see it well. I raised the tripod, refocused on the perched bird, and stood aside. A queue quickly formed. Each person stepped forward to the camera and watched until content, their oohs and aws creating more anticipation in the crowd. At some point the Heron dropped to the river for lunch. If it moved out of the frame, the person viewing the bird would look up to get my attention, others would show me where the bird had moved to and a bit of refocus and reframing starting the process over again. We spent a long time at that location, until everyone was satiated, and had said their thank yous and goodbyes. The second event occurred as Norbu and I walked along a narrow farm road in pursuit of a Crested Kingfisher. As we walked along I noticed a group of school girls (maybe 10 or 11 years of age) on the hillside giggling and laughing. As we came closer they ran down the hill and as we walked along they formed a dancing ring around us and in a perfect imitation of a Japanese girl band they sang their unending love to me complete with emotive arm gestures of upmost admiration. They managed to keep this up for several minutes before they scampered back up the hill with more giggles and laughter.

Non-Avian Fauna

The domesticated Yak (photograph below) is the bovid which comes to mind when most people talk about the livestock of the Himalaya Region. Yak are found at the higher elevations in Bhutan. It is a majestic beast and furnishes the milk which is used to make that wonderful stuff - Yak Butter.

The domesticated cow is the most common bovid in Bhutan. I frequently saw them in the

rice patties feeding on the stubble, harvest had just been completed. The straw from the fields is generally placed in the stalls and compounds used by the cows. After it is well used it is gathered up and the mixture of straw and manure is spread on the fields.

There are several species of squirrel in Bhutan. I found the Black Giant Squirrel, *Ratufa bicolor*, pictured above, was - like squirrels worldwide - full of antics.

During this trip, I saw three primate species; the Capped Langur, *Trachypithecus pileatus*; the Assam Macaque, *Macaca assamensis*, and the Gee's Golden Langur, *Trachypithecus geei*.

One of the most iconic Bhutanese mammals is



a primate, *Trachypithecus geei*, Gee's Golden Langur. This species is found only in a small area of western Assam, India and the Black Mountains of Bhutan. The species was first described by Pemberton in 1838 but the work was lost, being found only in the 1970's. The species was reportedly sighted by Westerners again in 1907 and by 1919 an unidentified species was being reported from the area. Finally, in 1954 E. P. Gee described the species (pictured above).

Departing

When a pair of my boots is about to be decommissioned I set them aside at the point where I think they have about 30 days of wear left in them. I save them for the next trip, whatever that may be, to be worn out and left behind in some other part of the world. I left the boots pictured here in Paro as I departed Bhutan. The stitching on the uppers was ripping out and the soles were cracked through (got to love the new boots with non-replaceable soles). It is a strange ritual perhaps but it is not limited to boots, other pieces of clothing are treated the same way. It is not only a symbolic leaving of the place but it makes room in the luggage (crammed with gear) for the few mementoes I am able to bring back to my home in Hillsboro.

This post used material original posted on the www.bobbarnes.us website. The original material can be found at:

- [Bhutan - November 2016](#)
- [General Notes on Bhutan](#)
- [Roads of Bhutan](#)
- [Bhutan - Food](#)
- [Bhutan - A Wrap Up of General Comments](#)
- [Taktsang - The Tiger's Nest Monastery](#)
- [White Wagtail, Green-backed Tit, and Blue-Fronted Redstart](#)
- [Large-billed Crow, Indian Rock Bee, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide](#)
- [Khuru - The Bhutanese Dart Game](#)
- [Common Myna, Rock Dove, and Crested Kingfisher](#)
- [More Food Stuff - Bhutan](#)
- [Blood Pheasant, Crested Serpent Eagle, and Rufous-necked Hornbill](#)
- [Dzongs](#)

The Original Posts



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[Cheli La, Bhutan](#)
[Bhutan Stupas](#)
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[Bhutan Video: Gee's Golden Langur; A Shrike; & A Scimitar-Babbler](#)
[Bhutan Video: Magpie-Robin, Yellownape, Greenfinch...](#)
[Bhutan Video: Bulbuls, Canary-Flycatcher, Nuthatch...](#)
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[Bhutan Wrap-Up: Barwing, Yuhina, Fulvetta, Laughingthrush...](#)

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Photo Gallery: **Bhutan**

Photo Gallery: **The People of Bhutan**

Video Portfolio: **The Birds of Bhutan**

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Bob Barnes - August 6, 2017