

## **TROGONQUEST V**

### **ASSAM AND ARUNCHAL PRADESH, NORTH EAST INDIA**



## **MAY 2022**

### **Participants:**

**Jules Eden + Steve Ridley**

### **Arrangements:**

**Peter Lobo from "All India Birding"**

### **Guide and driver:**

**Rofeeq Islam and Punjab Bobby**

**Once again a kicked down trip from '20 to '21 and eventually a go-ahead for 2022.**

**Steve and I have missed the target bird twice on trips before.**

**First in Bhutan [weather] and a second time in Yunnan, China [Zoothera – tickbait\*]**

**We were going for Ward's Trogon and the joy of a private trip like this is that we were going to get it, as the plan was to stay until that moment and if it**

dragged on, to buy a house there, marry a local , get residency and only clear out of the mountains when the job was done.

That was the plan anyway – but as this was Steve’s first ever trip for a year or so, since we left him in a hotel room in Duluth, Minnesota where he had finally gotten the virus after a full year of professional Anti-Vaxxing, he wanted to see some more birds than me.

I would have to be patient and accommodate the wishes of others. FFS!

[\*tickbait – the art of filling a tour description with species not seen for many years at the area being described in the hope of getting a client to part with a deposit. Similar to “clickbait” where a website entices a visitor to click on a page by showing a kitten or a scantily clad lady.]

### DAY 1 – ARRIVAL

Steve had arrived the night before on a decent airline and was parked in a hotel not 100 metres from the airport. He had kindly booked a room for 2 as my arrival was at 2 a.m and allowed me time to meet him and freshen up before our local flight. Sadly he failed to mention his hotel was actually 5k’s from the airport in reality and I looked like an idiot pulling a suitcase in 4 different directions trying to find a Holiday Inn a short walk from the Terminal and disbelieving all the taxi drivers saying it was a ways away. Steve could have told me before but failed to make a simple text!

I gave up eventually but was able to check in for an IndiGo flight to Dibrugarh in Assam way early. After my airport lounge free breakfast of tofu curry, Steve rocked up for a 4a.m pizza. We got there easily to meet the team.

Rofeeq on time and Punjab Bobby at the wheel.

Let’s go birding.

A short drive in the 4x4 gets us to Digboi, where we hotel up out of town, curry up for lunch and hit the trails of a hillside called Motri Mindi. It’s a tough old hike but a BUFF-CHESTED BABBLER shows along with COLLARED TREEPIE. There are rollers rolling which give a Latin conundrum of *Benghalensis* vs *Affinis*. Latter is correct, they are Indochinese Rollers in this hood.

The day ends oddly at dinner where the chef has come out and asks if I enjoyed the 2 poppadums I have only eaten and makes a scratching motion near his genitalia. It turns out that he is asking for a tip after he has simply done his job.

The local hooch, Kingfisher Assam Brew is kicking in at 8% and after a few of these I retire to bed for the next day's birding proper. A knock at my door at 10 p.m. which wakes me and the chef is back making these odd fingertip innuendos whilst now dressed in only his underpants. I point out Steve's room 3 doors down and tell him the Essex boy will sort him out.

At least the garden here is phlegm free!



*It spreads the TB, you know*

## DAY 2 – SORAI PUNG N.P

Curry breakfast and we are off to this local spot where someone has found a nest of the rare hornbill. We do a stake out and lo' and behold Mr Ridley has bought a bloody stool to sit on. He is there in comfort and I stand for an hour or so – but we get BROWN HORNBILL alongside a showy White-Browed Piculet and Crested Serpent Eagle. Bored of watching Steve-on-a-stool we find some more forest for Rufous-throated Fulvetta and a PALE-CHINNED FLYCATCHER.

A few more flies and babbs end with a CHESTNUT-BACKED LAUGHINGTHRUSH spotted by the local guide we have to have here. He has an old gun last used in the Moghul invasion of a half century ago - in case of tigers. He does not get to use it, but whilst examining it's rust a LARGE SCIMITAR-BABBLER shows across a valley to us all.

Steve gets a Ruddy Kingfisher and Pied Falconet and a White-winged Duck. I miss the duck due to a comedy fall on the muddy slope down to the lake which ended with a "crack" from my right ankle and needing to be hauled up

by both of them. It still hurts now, 10 weeks later. But with Alaska and the Amazon now under my belt since with flare ups on long trails, this is the beginning of an arthritis I never wanted to have. Thanks be we have the NHS at home to sort out this sort of problem!

A last night in Digboi – the Oil Capital of India is eventless as I have found a weaker beer and Chef is perving somewhere else tonight.

### **DAY 3 DIGBOI to ROING**

This is the drive from Assam into Arunchal Pradesh. I never knew the Indians were as state-orientated as the Americans until coming to this area. Different rules across state lines. Before the AP border we crossed Asia's second longest bridge across the Mighty Brahmaputra River. I use the sobriquet "Mighty" here wisely as it is the river that floods frequently with high death tolls whilst at this time of year looking sleepy and dormant. Steve gets on to a couple of SAND LARKS on a river island which keeps us ticking over before a pit-stop to Xerox our passports and have more border shenanigans before entering this new state.

[Brahmaputra River. Assam, Arunchal Pradesh - YouTube](#)

Fortunately the cane juice sellers are by the border to sugar us up as Rofeeq has to probably bribe all those around.

[Sugar Daddy - YouTube](#)

We make it to \*Roing in time for lunch as well as more beurocratic nonsense, i.e secondary visa photocopies and proof of parents names.

At least there is some entertainment whilst we wait. A Cinereous Tit in a tree outside of the "Arunchal Pradesh Border Police Department of Visitor Visas and Control"

We checked into to the campsite we would be using tonight. Brick-back loo and shower and on a raised platform. Nice.

We then headed to Tiwari Gaon about 30 clicks up the road where we would be driving up tomorrow.

[\*Roing – the only town in the world to purely rhyme with Boing – if you are into that sort of thing! ]

Rofeeq now comes into his zone as he knows the road well and the spots, and pulls out a CHEVRON-BREASTED [used to be a Manipur/Cachar] WREN-BABBLER. Great for Covid Steve and me as it was a big miss in China before. A GREEN COCHOA also calls from a big tree nearby and is teased in by the tape. This is followed by a pair of RED-FACED LIOCHICILAS playing hard-to-get through the secondary scrub.

Not a bad haul for the afternoon session in this sort of habitat. Back to the Frogmouth Campsite.

Tonight's night birding would have been right where we were, but since creating this tented hacienda, the froggers have buggered off elsewhere.

We could not pull out a Mountain Scops Owl from its perch, but with huge skill and patience Roffy got us onto a fly in HODGSON'S FROGMOUTH by the road side.

We had been also joined by a young lad on a motorbike who seemed to be shadowing our every move. Turns out that the locals can be a bit unfriendly in these parts. A few years ago some local Roingers did a Deliverance style "you're not from these parts" to the birding team as well as attempted night-time robbery of owlers. Peter Lobo now has his own local security here, a good thing.

#### DAY 4 – ROING TO MISHMI HILLS

We went the other way to start, not up but down the mountain to go to Jia Grasslands. This is a recently discovered spot for a host of birds that saves a lot of time elsewhere here in AP and Assam. And it delivered. BLACK-BREASTED PARROTBILL, MARSH BABBLER, JERDON'S BABBLER and a SPOT-BREASTED BABBLER all showed well and easily in the head high reeds. We also got Black-faced Bunting and Clamorous Reed-Warbler in the mix.



*Black-breasted Parrotbill*

Both ecstatic, but Steve got even ecstaticer [if that is a word] when a local equivalent of a KFC presented itself for lunch. A bucket of chicken-strippers and 2 litres of Coke refuelled Mr Ridley whom had not eaten a whole lot since arriving in India. I was now acclimatised to “Thali” which here is a generic bowl of rice/ veggy stuff/ dal and some “meat” I would not touch.

Lowlands done – time for the run up to the Mishmi mountains for the big target.

After about the 2000m mark the habitat and trees all change. It’s called the Mayodia Road as it nears the famous Coffee House Hotel where all birders stay in this part of AP.

On the way we birded each looping turn of the road and got spectacular PURPLE COCHOAS and the MISHMI WREN BABBLER. Rufous-winged Fulvetta was seen along with Golden-breasted and Yellow-Throated Fulvetta and Black-Faced Warbler. But we wanted to check in to the accommodation before the big search for one we wanted.



*Perfectly pretty pair of Purple Cochoa*

Coffee House in Mayodia is actually pretty good. I had imagined an utter dump with a tent pitched in a defunct hotel room before coming, but here

was a reasonable hotel - a bed, a normal loo and decent ambience. I gave Steve the better room as it had a double bed to accommodate his giant Essex frame, mine has 2 singles, but it was an actual room in a building. Not camping. Hallelujah!

[Mishmi Hills, Coffee House Hotel - YouTube](#)

Punjab Bobby spun us back down the hill for a few kilometres to get to the target spots. He has developed an itch to find it first and keeps stopping to point out large-ish birds which always turn out to be Blue Whistling-Thrushes. Hopefully he will get it right soon.

We stop at a promontory and Rofeeq hits the tapes. There's a call back, and soon it is nearer and nearer. He sets off down a steep tree rooted track off the road and we see a fly-by. Rof-meister scrambles up and down and does that Asian guide-thing where he sets it up in the scope for presentation to the clients. But we are still a couple of minutes away from the scope set-up, what with my guarded right ankle and Steve's gouty arthritis however we are just in time.

**WARDS TROGON.**

I will say that again. **WARDS BLOODY TROGON.**

At last.

The female.

No disappointment there really. It's all equal now isn't it. Women's football has the same billing as the Premier League. It could be a transgender one and counts the same. The new normal. Sexual dimorphism is a thing of the past if you and the bird identify whichever way you want.

Tick it and move on Julesy.

#### **DAY 5 – MAYODIA PASS**

This was to be our Big Day. The fact that the generator that they ran to kick in the power sunk more carbon monoxide into the rooms and eating area was noted. Having gotten anosmia from Covid myself I could not smell it, but Steve's coughing and respiratory agony set us all up for a team whinge and inspection of the power source. It could not be fixed from its cemented-in position.



It got us out early though to go over the Mayodia Pass to the birds that lay there beneath.

GOULDS SHORTWING and then BROAD-BILLED WARBLER, followed by a Fulvous Parrotbill with Manipur Fulvetta and Blyth's Leaf Warbler were up first. Follow that with 3 yuhinas, 2 minlas before a RUSTY-BELLIED SHORTWING and PYGMY BLUE-FLYCATCHER. We are in Himalayan bird-flock heaven here.

Black-throated Parrotbill, Ashy-throated and Buff-barred Warblers as well as a Large-Billed Leaf-Warbler. It came on as thick as a custard pie in yo' face back when that was funny.

LUDLOWS FULVETTA and a showy BLUE-FRONTED ROBIN sealed the morning session.

Another Thali lunch with me eating only the poppadums and Steve in his room crunching on Hob Nobs preceded the last session of the day.

There was only 1 last target here – and you can guess what it was.

Back down the mountain to the loops, playback at each corner. Nada.

Back up - the same. And back down. We got a call back eventually but very distant. A wait....then a shout from the man in the turban. Punjab Bobby has it. A male WARDS TROGON.

OMG – it sat perched for over 20 minutes. Close, real close..all pinky funky eyebrows and a total 360 view as it rotated to our pishing.



*Helloooo gorgeous. Ward's Trogon. Male*



Time to go home – except for the 8 more days we have here.

Read on though.

#### **DAY 6 – EARLY BACK TO ROING**

We pulled out of the Coffee House before anyone died of CO poisoning and went for the campsite instead. Rofeeq gave us both the option and it's not often birders will beg for a campsite rather than a bricks and mortar hotel, but needs must as we had cleaned up here, bar a treecreeper which I was not gonna die for.

A foggy drive down the mountain threw up a BLYTH'S TRAGOPAN and then a few more. We got good views with the headlights eventually, before the usual idiots on a passing motorbikes scared them off each time.

Now lower on the mountain, but it seemed Roffer had a new way to guide for us.

He would go off quietly and play calls, leaving Steve and I thumb-twiddling on the roadside.

We figured it out eventually – Steve's voice carries a good 50 metres – about the same as my cigarette fumes. I think Roffer was cracking from this double whammy.



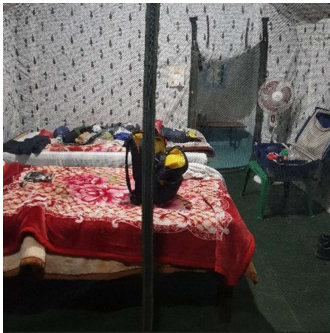
*Luv dat Himalayan Rap, Bro*

Anyways he piped in a LONG-BILLED WREN-BABBLER along with a Golden and Rufous-capped Babbler and Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler.

A HIMALAYAN CUCKOO was new for me and we ended the drive downhill with a LARGE BLUE-FLYCATCHER before our arrival at Frogmouth Camp.

Night Birding was Nowt Birding as the Mountain Scops would not fly to our sexy calls. This is a terribly stubborn owl and now it is about 20+ heard only's from me.

A quick dinner in the campsite eating area, where I Hoover up the poppadums and Steve stays in his tented warm heaven eating yet more Jaffa Cakes, throws up a new one for the mammal list. A big old rat in my tent!



*Rat-a-drome*

Now luckily, this is one of the few species I am not terrified of and a quick “ratty, piss off” and it disappeared down a hole it had gnawed into my tent. I sealed it in seconds with my can of “Doom Spray”, always carried since Ghana - happy to sleep in the knowledge that it will kill everything.



*Never camp without it*

## **DAY 7 – ROING TO TINSUKIA**

It's a long drive back to Assam, and as I clear my clothes off the floor of the tent, where there are clear Doom Spray tracks from ratty last night. [He had come back in to make sure I slept fine. Second tent on the right in case you want to meet him] We were off for the gravy now after the male Wards.

For those not used to English expressions – “gravy” is the same as the “cherry on the cake” or as I have just recently learned in Alaska “ the trapped Beluga in an ice-hole”. Something extra.

Tinsukia is a proper town, a proper hotel with a balcony and a shower I could not work. And Wifi at last , as long as you hang out nearby reception. A quick check in and lunch and we head back out to the grasslands.

Striated Babbler and Grassbird as well as a Swamp Francolin and Thick-billed Warbler brought the day to an end. Tomorrow we have a boat trip.

#### **DAY 8 – MADURI SWAMPS, BAGHJAN ISLAND AND THE MIGHTY BRAHMAPUTRA**

Oh yes!, we nail a cheeky BROWN-EARED RAIL on the way to the boat place. New for me and Steve. Our next target lies on a grassy river island and we have to be rowed on a small wooden pirogue by a very thin local fella. The current is strong and he paddles like crazy to get us there. Steve starts panicking and tries to wear all the flotation devices, which include an old Coke bottle and a sponge. But after a 20 minute paddling we are there and he disembarks to dry land faster than my little room rat would have done during the black plague spread.

It’s wet, it’s grassy and it’s devoid of human life. A Chestnut-crowned Bush-Warbler is the appetiser for the SWAMP PRINIA. This is a killer bird for all “Priniastas” as they are known – but good gravy for us.

Boat Trip No.2 for us later, and having pointed out to Stevo that the guy is punting, and it is only 2 feet deep he relaxes and takes off his arm-bands.

PALLAS’ GRASSHOPPER WARBLER was seen along with an Eastern Grass-Owl.

Our last evening in Tinsukia was spent “being the only 2 Londoners looking for amusingly named snacks ” before a more remote part of Assam tomorrow.

A good result though!



*Most amusing, Sir*

### **DAY 9 – KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK**

We were aiming for the Bonhabi Resort in this area, which seems to pull a lot of locals in for the big mammals. Rhino, elephants, deer and rabbits are their quest. Ours were BLOSSOM-HEADED PARAKEET, SLENDER-BILLED BABBLER and Abbot's Babbler. Gottem in the afternoon.

### **DAY 10 – KAZIRANGA**

Up and attem from this joyous lodge, we were going to start at a tea plantation and move higher through dense foliage and the possibility of snakes. Roffiq heard the callback from the tape, but this little bird gave us a total runaround for over 2 hours. Dense forest birding is not also helped by Steve's insistence on wearing a huge back-pack at all times. Not for a scope. Not for Asda bought snacks, but for a relief on lower back pain. An interesting cure for L4/5 issues – add extra weight!

Clearly his Chiropracter is a retard. But we got the BLUE-NAPED PITTA eventually. It flirted with us by the roadside, did a couple of crosses over – but happy views in the end. We hung out later by Roffi's sister's house where Yellow-vented Flowerpecker showed and she made the finest Chai for us as now the rains were to fall hard.

I was the only partaker of the Kaziranga N.P afternoon open top LandRover session as Mr Ridley's gout has kicked back in. Tophi as large as a cauliflower and pain as high as a triplet-birth without anaesthesia – he was bed bound. I had Hooded Pitta, Ashy Prinia, Brown Crake - both Pallas' and Grey-Headed Fish-Eagle and for me – double DUSKY-EAGLE OWL.



*Hooded Pitta*



*Dusky Eagle-Owl*

As Kaziranga is Roffers home town, he is back home with Mum and Dad for our stay here. Steve and I have to go it alone for our final target. We meet at the allotted time, where I am drinking a beer at a bug-ridden gazebo and he rolls up with the ridiculous back-pack and hit it. Where do you look for a little owly? Car park tree – that's where.

And like a couple of Keystone Birders it happened. Owl came in immediately to the call. I shone my torch – but had forgotten to put the batteries in. Steve had a spare - but at the bottom of his rucksack – a huge crunching sound as he rummaged through 8 packs of marshmallows to find it – and at last, with thanks to the owl's patience for our total ineptitude – ORIENTAL SCOPS-OWL.

#### DAY 11 – KAZIRANGA to MANAS

This is the last leg of the journey. Just a couple of more nights. It starts disastrously – Steve is in his gouty house slippers, the only ones that now fit the tophic deformed feet. He slides on a tiny algae covered piece of concrete and goes down like a WWE Wrestler faking a fall. A shocking thud as his occiput hits more concrete and a scream. I assume he is just seeking attention and carry on putting the rest of my beer in the coldest part of the car-boot - but was wrong this time. Roffy and Bobby get him up slowly but he is off games, birding and pretty much everything else for a bit. We get a CHESTNUT-WINGED CUCKOO at the tea plantation later though, so I was happy. Steve is too by now as he is now on my illegal supply of Tramadol bought from a Thai Pharmacy years ago. Time to move on.

#### DAY 12 – MANAS N.P

It's a campsite – but pretty bloody cool. Brickback canvas tents and no holes for rats here in mine. Steve has a hole in his one though, but I have always thought cockroaches as our friends and offer to switch habitation as his is now infested. He passes the offer as the last remaining Asda snacks are in

alphabetical order on the spare bed. Too much hassle to take Aniseed Balls through to Yum-Yums elsewhere. Our day is spent in another open top vehicle getting on to Indian Grassbird, Chestnut-Capped Babbler and the biggie of this part of the tour – only a BENGAL FLORICAN. Close and then a long flight-view.



*Bengal Florican, clearly flying.*

A big flock of Small Pratincoles are on the river as well as River Lapwing. We can see the Bhutan Immigration guards patrolling on elephants from this side of the water. There must be a big cross-river market for cheap cigarettes one way with their heinous Yak Cheese in the other direction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGIFQYwPMzk>

### DAY 13 – MANAS and back HOME

An early morning sojourn gets a ROSY MINIVET along the Tiger Trail at the Tiger Reserve at Tiger Point that clearly has no tigers. Such was our need for carpets back in them Victorian times.

Guwahati airport and home for me, Calcutta and 5 more days of gouty pain for Steve.

It had been good – and Ward's Trogon on the Trogonquest. It delivered!

3 more troggers left – then I stop and go back to SCUBA Diving.

Apart from the 2 bee-eaters remaining!

And maybe a jacamar.

Thanks to all involved:

Steve – the first human to beat me in Scrabble in 30 years.

Rofeeq for his patience.

Punjab Bobby's roadside ghat dealers for keeping him awake.

**Jules Eden. May 2022**



*Hangin' in a truck park*



*Hangin' in a National Park*