

## **Eastern Ladakh**

**late March 2023**

Winter snow leopard trips in the Leh area have long been on the mental map of traveling naturalists, but only recently has the opportunity to combine them with some high-altitude birding emerged. Given how fast things are changing in these parts, I thought a quick update was useful for future visitors. Most visitors, including me, come on organized trips, be it only because one needs the enroll the help of local spotters to increase the chances of snow leopard sightings. Since I was a bit disappointed with my spotters and ground agent (even if there was no major miss in terms of species), I will not mention their names. Instead I discuss what to ask from a Ladakh wildlife travel agency.

### **My trip highlights**

Snow leopard (on prey, calling for mate, but mostly sleeping or just rudely eluding), Tibetan wolf (hunting), Siberian Ibex, Argali, Tibetan Gazelle, White-browed Tit-warbler, Solitary Snipe, Ibisbill, Mountain Chiffchaff, Ground Tit, Blanford's, Black-winged, and White-rumped Snowfinches, Tibetan Sandgrouse, Tibetan and Hume's Larks, Great, Streaked, and Blyth's Rosefinches, Tibetan Partridge, Tibetan and Himalayan Snowcocks, Brown and Robin Accentors, Mongolian Finch. (67 species of birds and 14 species of mammals in 13 days)

### **How many days**

I planned for 13 days: 2 days in Leh acclimatizing and birding, then 7 days in Rumbak valley for my snow leopard experience and a few birds, 3 days in the Hanle area for birds of the Tibetan plateau, Pallas's cat and other mammals, and a final night in Leh. Although 7 days in Rumbak was a long time, I do think that one needs at least that to guarantee a good sighting and also to make it a truly immersive experience.

### **What to bring (non exhaustive)**

In March, the temperatures were cold but not extremely cold. Bring winter undergarments (especially undergloves), lip balm, your ski outfit and snowboots. If you sleep in homestays or camp, your sleeping bag should be rated for -20°C only, no need for more, especially if you have one of these thermo sheets (did not need mine at all). If you can bring your own spotting scope, you can look for snow leopards instead of waiting that your spotters find them, and/or you can create some healthy competition with them in order to keep them motivated which in my experience they need.

### **Locations**

#### **Leh surroundings**

Most people need to acclimatize for 48h except if they come from another high-altitude area (meaning 3500 or above). During this time there is Solitary snipe (34.15709634975723, 77.56827500386336), Ibisbill (watch from here 34.09704163164492, 77.59531526715129), and White-browed tit-warbler (34.13295270461554, 77.44980786256204; playback necessary) to look for. The first Mountain Chiffchaff will arrive in the last days of March and be ubiquitous (reportedly) in spring. In the tit-warbler location, I got a nice range-restricted blocker: Blyth's Rosefinch which is not to be expected however. Leh also has a dense population of Eurasian Magpie and some Carrion Crow, so be careful not to get over-excited over those, you need to rest.

If you have one or two extra days in Leh, you can organize visits to “snow leopard valleys”. The village of Mangyu (34.23304861917835, 77.04970433461789), c1.5 hours from Leh, had Ibex and Urial in addition to snow leopard. Sakti valley (33.99764850989903, 77.85930730472089), also c1.5 hours from Leh but in the opposite direction, had snow leopard (which I missed by 24 hours), urial-hunting wolves, woolly hare, and wild-looking domestic yaks. Other options include Shang valley (33.866568971425295, 77.658831020817161; Brown Dipper, Streaked Rosefinch) and Ulley valley.

There are accommodation options in or near all these valleys, that you can contact directly. Beware that the accommodations vary in price. Some are extremely luxurious (Ulley), some are Decathlon tents in front of a homestay (Shang). Importantly, contrary to Rumbak, in those valleys you will typically need a car to go from the accommodation to the snow leopard scanning points. Anyway, these are all names I wish I could have dropped when discussing with travel agents.

If I had to do the trip again, instead of 7 days in Rumbak I would try and do 4 days in Rumbak and then 4 days with a car based in Leh and just following up on recent leopard sightings in these valleys.

### **Rumbak valley 34.055545397379326, 77.42754821158938**

Rumbak valley is one of the original areas where snow leopard tourism started. The valley still offers almost 100% success rate. The immense advantage of Rumbak compared to locations closer to Leh is that in Rumbak, the accommodation is INSIDE the best snow leopard habitat. You just walk from the accommodation to the snow leopard vantage points.

That said, things have changed a lot since the early days. First, most sightings now occur higher than what used to be in 2010-2017. The best area is now much closer to the village, maybe because of climate change. Second, a recent flood washed away the old campsite and the scrub habitat that used to hold picas, weasels, and some birds. Most importantly, now there is a road directly into the village of Rumbak. The village is now just 2 hours from Leh. It used to be a full day trek. The road will soon also go into the one-household village of Urutse and beyond, destroying one of the most famous summertime trek routes in the process. That’s progress I guess?

Instead of camping below the village, tourists now stay in (very basic) homestays in Rumbak village. This makes things a lot easier (for example, no ponies, you take your luggage directly from the trunk of the car to your homestay). But this ease of access also means that, upon finding a snow leopard, travel agencies WILL send day trippers from Leh to partake in the sighting. In other words, the experience is not one of extreme wilderness anymore. Maybe the upside is that any travel agency in Leh can organize that, making it possible to shop around and organize things last minute.

In terms of birds, Rumbak was the only place on my itinerary that hold (a lot of) Tibetan Partridges. There was also a chance of Tibetan Snowcock (seen on the first two days only, here 34.05962527617167, 77.40911274017962 but first detected from the main snow leopard scanning which is here 34.05830699187904, 77.42229912904335). Both species are hard to come by elsewhere in Ladakh, to my knowledge. Other birds of note included up to 6 golden eagles together on most days, and multiple lammergeier each day too.

In addition to snow leopard, mammals of note included blue sheep everyday, woolly hare, one pica (large-eared maybe, above Rumbak village 34.04843802164322, 77.44233556372582), mountain weasel (very brief sighting only, below Urutse 34.04315787110834, 77.41088180365661). Ibex and Urial are not found in Rumbak valley.

NOTE: There were active ongoing roadworks just below the main snow leopard scanning point in Rumbak. My ground agent, which I had selected based on a glowing report on cloudbirder.org, had zero fallback plan. He had us scan for snow leopard for entire days with a noisy digger just below us. Snow leopards were still around and we did see them a few times in the morning and evening when the roadworks stopped, but the experience was not great. I'm mentioning that for context. That's India for you.

NOTE2: When negotiating with travel agencies, be careful what's included. It is a jungle out there and small agencies, while often first on price, are not always superb at experience-building -- cf above. Elements to look for are: number of spotting scopes, number of spotters and their experience and reputation, option to change valley if there is no snow leopard after 2 or 3 days -- or in case of roadworks. Then there is the tricky question of whether you have exclusive access to the animals that your group self-finds, and whether you are OK with additional trip mates to join for part of the trip. These are two ways by which agencies more than make up for any discount they offered. I was OK with both practices in principle, but was very annoyed not to be warned upfront.

### **Hanle floodplain and plateau**

Hanle is a village in extreme east Ladakh. The area came to prominence for sightings of the very cute Pallas's cat, and then birders discovered that birds of the high Tibetan plateau were common there, with many species being found there and nowhere else outside of the Republic of China.

Unfortunately, there are severe restriction on foreigner travel in this area, for the same reason that it is near the disputed border with China. It is possible to come visit for the day but it is forbidden to spend the night in Hanle. Nyoma, about 1-1.5 hours away from Hanle, was the last settlement in which the Indian government authorized foreigners to spend the night at the time of my visit. So every morning and evening, we did a 1.5 hour drive. Nyoma is 3 hour from Leh on excellent and barely used roads, with a few river crossings (Brown Dipper) and views over the Indus valley and general outstanding landscapes. There were some birds between Nyoma and Hanle that I did not see in Hanle itself: Pallas's gull, Mongolian finch, Saker falcon. There were also a few spots with Pallas's cat habitat (rodent towns) along the highway between Nyoma and Hanle.

There are two main habitats in Hanle. In the floodplain around the village, the target species are Black-winged Snowfinch, White-rumped Snowfinch (rare), Upland Buzzard, Tibetan Lark, Hume's Lark, Mongolian finch (irruptive). Not a lot of species at these altitudes, but special ones. From late April onwards, the area is known for Black-headed Crane. Secondly, you can access the actual Tibetan plateau ecosystem at a spot known as Nurbula Top: 32.62258520427265, 79.07899366716705. Access via an off road track through the desert that starts about here 32.74137654161701, 78.96142476863145 and then follows the main dry riverbed up to the plateau, past a few nomad settlements. On the plateau, you can find a few more species: Ground tit, Blanford's snowfinch, and Tibetan Sandgrouse. These species can come down into the floodplain depending on the season and weather, but at least the first two were definitely more reliable on Nurbula Top.

Mammal wise, in the floodplain, I can confirm that the odds of seeing Pallas's cat are excellent. However the typical sighting is >1km away, through a scope, and after hours of scanning in sub-zero temperatures. The ubiquitous Kiangs and (normally) frequent sightings of Wolves gave a Serengeti feel to the place, at least until somebody opened the car doors. There is also Tibetan Sand-fox and millions of rodents and pika (hard to spot as they spend most of their time underground in winter). Nurbula top had Tibetan Argali, Tibetan Gazelle, and more Kiangs and reportedly, wolves.

**Logistics:** The ground agent I used for Rumbak also arranged everything for Hanle. Due to the proximity with China, foreigners need a permit to visit Hanle. There are numerous checkpoints on the highway. This permit seems to be awarded via travel agencies in Leh only. I would expect it is possible to obtain it independently -- however, I do not know where the office is in Leh, and I do not know whether you are allowed to drive on Ladakh roads without an Indian driving license, ie, whether you need to quote your driver's name to get the permit. Car wise, any car can make it to Hanle village. Refilling in Hanle or Nyoma seemed to not be an issue. If you want to go to Nurbula Top and explore, a high clearance 4 wheel drive is needed.

GPS points: To scan for Pallas's cat there are two main locations: one on a tar road at (32.78099667860502, 78.95175926400981) and another off road at about (32.742265489516626, 78.95578045988172). Both also had Tibetan sand-fox, especially the second one had them on all visits. We got a typical view of the cat in the first location only. The sighting was very distant but lasted for as long as we wanted to, and included two predation events (on a small rodent and a bird). I got a much closer than typical view about here: 32.77485851700475, 78.94832801247533, in a fenced off area. The cat, looking like a male, was seemingly waiting off two annoying red foxes. Our guide assured that this was not a typical place for them. Please do not disturb the cats, do not walk into the habitat for photos, do not climb on rocks where they may have their dens, etc.

If you need help finding Nurbula Top, I recommend to show up at this house in Hanle village (32.770496997982264,78.984517017379403) and ask for Kesang, or simply show your binoculars. He's the one who showed us Argali. He also had a spot for Tibetan Sandgrouse near Hanle (a relief as we had dipped previously). He also showed a nice spot for close views of Tibetan Lark. He seemed to know all the birds from the area. The only issue is that cutting the middle man by contacting him directly could raise some eyebrows.

If you have questions, spotted an error, or want to invite me on your all-inclusive tour of remote Polynesia: peron UNDERSCORE guillaume AT yahoo DOT fr

## Munsyari, Uttarakhand, India

Early April 2023

Munsyari is a relatively well-known birding hotspot in India, but still rarely visited by foreigners. This is why I thought this report would help someone at some point. The main draw to Munsyari, besides the outstanding landscape of snowcapped peaks, is the very good chance of Satyr Tragopan, amidst a thorough supporting cast of Western Himalayan specialties, including the rarely seen West-Himalayan Bush-warbler and the spectacular Himalayan Monal.

### My trip highlights

*\* indicates a rare nomadic species that I just chanced upon and is not guaranteed to occur in the area*

Satyr Tragopan (3 different times), Koklass pheasant (displaying), Cheer pheasant, Himalayan Monal (10 to 30 different ones every day), Hill Partridge, Spectacled Finch\* (25+ flock), Scarlet Finch\*, Grandala\*, Spot-winged Rosefinch, Pink-browed Rosefinch, Himalayan Beautiful-Rosefinch, Dark-breasted Rosefinch, Red-headed Bullfinch, Grey-crested Tit, White-throated Bush-tit, Long-billed Thrush, Pied Thrush, Spotted Laughingthrush, White-throated Laughingthrush, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler, Speckled Pigeon, West-Himalayan Bush-warbler, Immaculate Cupwing, Tytler's Leaf-warbler (migrant), Spot-backed Forktail, Black-headed Jay, Upland Pipit, Rosy Pipit, Olive-backed Pipit, Red Goral, Himalayan Musk-deer, Yellow-throated Martin. (109 species in 5 days)

### Getting there

Most visitors come with their own car or transport. Local people have a system of shared jeeps that make the strenuous journey between Haldwani (which has a direct rail connection with Delhi) and Munsyari. This takes 10 to 12 hours, so not a stroll in the park. In Munsyari, the jeeps depart at about 6am from the main square. They should be booked one day in advance by asking the owner of your accommodation the contact detail of the driver. In Haldwani, the jeeps depart from nearby the bus station. Unfortunately, the area is the expected complete mess. I was never able to locate the jeep stand in Haldwani, or to extract the contact for one of the drivers. Instead, I took a bus to Almora, then a jeep to Berinag, then another jeep to Thal, then another one to Nuchini, and eventually after a long wait in Nuchini, I ended up on the roof of a jeep to Munsyari as the sun was starting to go down. Not advised, even if I did get Crested Kingfisher and Cheer pheasant from that jeep rooftop. The correct way to proceed would have been to book my Munsyari accommodation in advance, and ask the owner to help with transportation, such as to give the phone number of a jeep driver and organize to be fetched at my hotel in Haldwani. The other smart way is to hire a local guide. I got a quote for about 800€ for five days plus journey to and from in a rental SUV.

### Recommended accommodation

I mostly stayed at the Pandey Lodge which is conveniently located just by the main square in Munsyari. This way I could hitch a ride on departing jeeps every morning to get me to the trailheads, and also connect with fellow travelers for dinner.

I recommend the much more beautiful and peaceful Jayanti Mother Nature Homestay (check contact details on google, facebook, and booking). This homestay is not super easy to get to and from without your own transport since they are about 350m above the jeep stand. That is about 30 minute walk if in shape. I found that to be a lot after spending my days hiking already. However, the owner says he can provide scooters and was generally super friendly and helpful. I definitely recommend for longer

stays. They have a kitchen and nicely decorated common areas for guests to use. They are located just by a large temple that gives nice ambiance during prayer time.

Another good alternative is Munsyari Eco Cottage (facebook only). They are almost by the trailheads for Kaliya Top and Thamri Khund. However, they are 600m above the jeep stand in Munsyari (more than one hour hike if on foot), and they seem to only cater to families with their own car. I ended up not using this accommodation.

## **Birding sites**

### **Khaliya top trail**

Khaliya is the easiest to access peak in the Munsyari area. It has an organized campground and tea stall below the summit and even some basic downhill skiing in winter. The trailhead is at Balati bend (30.05920480483915, 80.22090590807822), easily found just after the pass and before the descent into Munsyari. The trail is very well maintained and signposted all the way. It gets extremely crowded on week-ends and holidays, but not until 8 in the morning. Entry attracts a small fee. Despite the overgrazed and overcrowded aspect, most of the target birds that I listed above can be found from that trail between 6 and 9am. The summit sometimes has Grandala and Snow Partridge in addition to the ubiquitous Monals. For tragopan, I made a beeline to the North once I reached elevation 3050masl. This proved successful once and unsuccessful once. I also got Musk-deer in the chaos of rocks. Beware that this hike is for experienced hikers. Do not be fooled by the hordes that attempt it on week ends. The elevation difference is 1000m over just 4km. Most people stop after the first third.

### **Thamri Khund / Betuli Dhar trail**

This is another, much easier and shorter, hike that starts at 30.04859369118954, 80.22707525490279 and follows a ridge up to a series of small lakes, and past them towards a pass and shortcut to the hamlet of Harkot and onwards to Munsyari. I got Tragopan once again on the ridge early morning. This is apparently not usual and depends on the pheasants' migratory patterns (they were apparently on the move while I was there). I got more understory skulkers on this trail than Khaliya top, and also more Monals and Hill Partridge (the latter easy to see even without playback). The pass area had Gorals and the very steep slope to the south of the ridge had Musk-deer.

### **Long-billed Thrush stake-out**

I am mentioning this spot just to advertise the possibility. I prefer not to post this stake-out that I stumbled upon in Munsyari town. Just look on eBird or hire a local birding guide. Other good birds in this garbage-laden gully included Spotted Forktail and Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush.

### **Cheer pheasant stake-out**

Cheer pheasants seem to come onto the road every night just after dusk and maybe at dawn too, in the flattish section between 30.049594298386523, 80.19893579293706 and 30.050468390375563, 80.22252239579392. I also saw a major blocker, White-throated Bushtit, and Rufous-vented Tit there.

### **Meshar Khund**

There is a small concrete trail starting at 30.07518233980827, 80.23158683800429 and leading through nice secondary forest to a lake and then connecting with the ridge that goes down from Khaliya top. I found this area nice for an afternoon stroll whenever I had finished my morning hike early. Good possibilities included Speckled pigeon (heard only at this location), Rusty-tailed Flycatcher (which raised an eBird flag though), various Woodpeckers, and time to delve into the common *Phylloscopus* in detail.

**Birthi Waterfall 30.039903057976534, 80.16117127347931**

On my way in, we almost got stranded behind a truck that had gotten stuck in an incline and did not want to let other vehicles go. While waiting for the situation to become normal again, I got a few Scarlet Finches. This area is worth a stop.

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## **Mishmi hills, Arunachal Pradesh, India**

**mid-April 2023**

Since I struggled to find precise information about the area's birds prior to my own trip, I thought that even a draft report might help somebody at some point. In addition, I learnt about a new birding location with easy Bengal Florican (details below), and it seems like enticing more visits to that location would help with the conservation of this species.

The "Mishmi Hills" correspond to the section of mid- to high-altitude forest accessible from the relatively new Lower Dibang Valley Highway between Roing and Hunli, the "Mishmi road" hereafter. Overall, the Mishmi Hills host much the same Eastern Himalaya specialties as the more established Eaglenest sanctuary, but with a few twists, a few misses, and a small chance of seeing takins. The main drawback of Mishmi Hills compared to the Eaglenest area is that there is no access to very high elevations. So no Grandala, no Blood Pheasant, no Blanford's finch, and the habitat for Gould's Shortwing is very small in surface. Some of the other altitudinal migrants, such as Fire-tailed Myzornis, can also be hard to spot along the Mishmi road depending on the season because of the reduced elevational range. There are a few other things one might see in Eaglenest that are missing from Mishmi Hills: the Bugun Liocichla (obviously), Chestnut-breasted Partridge (occurs but the terrain is not conducive to a sighting), Rufous-necked Hornbill (occurs but definitely very rare), Black-browed Tit (inexplicably missing from the whole valley despite occurring west and east), and probably others that I did not even notice I was missing up on.

### **My trip highlights (detail about locations below)**

Blyth's Tragopan (long view), Bengal Florican (displaying), Ward's Trogon, Gould's Shortwing, Rusty-bellied Shortwing, Fire-tailed Myzornis, Himalayan Cutia, Mishmi wren babbler, Long billed wren babbler, Spotted elachura, Bar winged wren babbler, Cachar Wedge-bill-babbler, Slender-billed scimitar-babbler, Black-capped Scimitar-babbler, Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler, Scaly Laughingthrush, Blue-winged laughingthrush, Black-faced laughingthrush, Grey-sided Laughingthrush, Red-faced liocichla, Red-tailed Minla, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Yellow-throated Fulvetta, Black-throated Parrotbill, Pale-billed Parrotbill, Beautiful Nuthatch, Blue-fronted Robin, Broad-billed Warbler, Scarlet Finch, Crimson-browed Finch, Pale-headed Woodpecker, Black-breasted Parrotbill, Jerdon's Babbler (188 species in 5 days)

### **Other target birds**

Purple Cochoa (neither seen nor heard), Yellow rumped honeyguide (neither seen nor heard), Hodgson's frogmouth (not seen), Rufous necked hornbill (brief flight view), Rufous-breasted partridge (not seen), Blue-naped Pitta (neither seen nor heard), White-hooded Babbler (neither seen nor heard), Grey-headed Parrotbill (neither seen nor heard), White-breasted Parrotbill (neither seen nor heard)

### **Formalities and costs**

Arunachal Pradesh is actively disputed by China. As a consequence, foreign tourists must undergo special formalities. When I say formalities, I mean formalities. 1) You need a PAP permit that is only emitted by the central office in Guwahati (600km or 15 hours away from the Mishmi Hills). 2) You need to report at the local police station in each town that you spend the night in, and report again before leaving. The police officers do not speak English. They have restricted office hours, e.g., they appointed me a meeting at 10:30am. 3) There is a list of accommodation options that you can use. If you pick a random guesthouse, there is almost zero chance that it is on the list. The list is not publicly available. 4) You are not allowed to drive without an Indian driving license. 5) GPS are not allowed (smartphones



are OK though). 6) You are not allowed to walk out of sight of the highway without a permit from both the local police and local forest office. 7) Your guide, driver, and any person you talk to for more than 5 minutes will be receiving a long call from the police asking them the detail of your schedule for the day. In addition, none of the birding locations are realistically reachable by public transportation. You need your own car. I strongly recommend a high clearance vehicle with enough torque, meaning do not cut cost on the car.

This makes it challenging to organize the trip by yourself, at least within a reasonable timeframe. I hired an Assam-based non-birding tour company. The package, which I prepaid from France, involved sorting my PAP permit, booking accommodations from the list, an English-speaking driver who knew his way around the Arunachal Pradesh formalities, a very comfortable car, and picking me up at the airport in Dibrugarh (which is the closest airport to Mishmi Hills).

For several reasons, I do not recommend the tour company I selected, at all, for birders or for anyone really. So I won't be mentioning their name here. However, in the very broad strokes, they did deliver the aforementioned package.

The package was expensive (although everything is relative): about 145€ per day for 5 days on the Mishmi road and 2 days traveling from and to Assam (with birding), and not including food. I made it even more expensive by adding an extension to eastern Assam's lowland forests and grasslands which hold a few additional range restricted specialties (not discussed in this report). I do believe 100€ is much closer to the actual price one should pay.

If I had to do it again, I would make it cheaper by sorting the PAP in Guwahati by myself, then take a night bus to Roing, and have a meeting with a local guide in Roing, of which there is a few, all likely connected with tourist accommodations.

### **Recommended accommodation in Roing and new birding location nearby**

Roing is the last town before entering the Mishmi Hills proper. The Mishmi Hill camp (28.158314, 95.854308) is located at the northern end of Roing near the (closed) Igu Museum and dilapidated minizoo. The camp is a collection of huts that are made of traditional material, that may or may not have running water at the time of your visit, but have an attending restaurant where you can order fresh meals with 1-2 hour notice. The owner of the place, Mr Jibi Pulu, was very welcoming, always up for a late-night discussion about his conservation endeavors and efforts to revive the animist connection with nature.

Importantly for birders, Jibi Pulu also heads the Elopa Community Reserve project (28.22676569819802, 95.74555218206736), that conserves a large tract of grassland in the Brahmaputra floodplain about 40 minutes from Roing. Displaying **Bengal Floricans** are almost guaranteed in late April-early May. The species can be seen year round but is harder work if they are not displaying. In mid-April, I saw five birds total (3 males 2 females) which is 25% of the known population at this location. Jibi Pulu can organize the visit to Elopa as a day-trip from Mishmi Hill camp, by lending you his personal 4WD vehicle (a decommissioned Kaziranga safari jeep) and either guiding you himself or sending someone from the project along with you. This needs to be arranged a few days in advance. The project requests a Rs1000 community fee. However, I would advise giving at least twice this amount to cover the fuel, 4x4 loan, and guiding.

Other good birds that seem to be regular on the reserve included Black-breasted Parrotbill, Chinese Rubythroat, Crested Bunting, Thick-billed Warbler, Indian Thick-knee, Blue-breasted Quail, and Jerdon's Baza were nice additions. On the access road, there were some bamboo and degraded forest

stands; a Pale-headed Woodpecker crossed the road as if on cue. Also check for parrotbills. White-hooded Babbler and Blue-naped Pitta seem possible (but not seen by me). Wild buffalo and Hog deer occurred (tracks seen). There is also reportedly a trail to higher elevations where Himalayan Serow is seen every morning.

They are in the process of building basic wooden accommodation, intended for project volunteers and visiting researchers. The accommodation will be complete with streamwater shower. So, should you need to spend more than a few hours in Elopa to make it less of a twitch and more of a discovery, it will be possible.

### **Contact details**

Jibi Pulu / Mishmi Hill Camp

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### **How many days**

If you just want Mishmi Wren-babbler and Cachar Wedge-bill-babbler, and if you are using playback, a single morning is more than enough.

If you need all the Eastern Himalaya targets, and if you want to visit Elopa for Bengal Florican, then you need at least 5 full days. Indeed, many of the good species occur at low density, move around a lot, and require a chance encounter.

### **Locations around Roing**

#### Overgrown river bank near Mishmi Hill camp

A trail towards remote villages starts from near Mishmi Hill camp at 28.158197, 95.854839. Walking it one morning for 30 minutes until the first river crossing, I saw Blue-winged LT, Rufous-necked LT, Red-tailed Minla, Silver-eared Mesia, etc. I'm mentioning that here because Blue-winged LT did not show up anywhere else for me, and Red-tailed Minla is actually kind of a range-restricted species.

#### Jia grassland 28.0662302,95.7128684

The main targets are tall grass specialists: Jerdon's Babbler, Marsh Babbler, and Black-throated Parrotbill. Playback necessary. Chestnut-capped Babbler and Siberian Rubythroat were common. The margins of the grassland reportedly host Spot-breasted Scimitar-babbler but I did not see them. I only saw some Spotted Bush-warbler and Bengal Bushlark. Swamp francolin is supposed to occur but hard to see in the tall grass. With luck, some people have seen a fly-over Bengal Florican.

Turn west on a small tarred road in the village of Jia about 30 min south of Roing, then drive to the end of that road. I walked a footpath from there. The path was relatively obvious although there was an ankle deep river crossing to get to the actual tall grass habitat. I saw a birding group driving straight through the grassland though.

Note: when coming from Tinsukia, before the Assam-Arunachal border checkpoint, one passes over the Brahmaputra on the huge Bhupen Hazarika Setu bridge. This area was good for Lesser Adjutant (roadside on both times) and Sand lark (if stopping at the right location of which I lost the coordinates).

## **Locations along the Mishmi road**

### Bamboo forest

Lowland bamboo forest used to occur in the first 15 km of the Mishmi road, but has mostly been converted to agriculture now. However, from eBird reports, some good patches must remain, because people still report Blue-naped Pitta, White-hooded Babbler, White-breasted Parrotbill, Grey-headed parrotbill, and Pale-headed Woodpecker. Worth investigating if you have time but will probably require formal authorization from local landowners.

In my case, a random late afternoon stop below the large petrol station which is at (28.190094355177674, 95.80387581910779) just produced Long-tailed Sibia, Crimson finch, 2 different Spotted Elachura in (sub?)song, Sapphire Flycatcher, and 4 Red-headed Trogon roosting together. As mentioned above, I did get some actual bamboo species on the road to Elopa community reserve.

### Tiwarigaon

Tiwarigaon or KM27 is a small mid-altitude settlement midway between Roing and Mayodia pass. The last gully below Tiwarigaon hold Cachar Wedge-bill-babbler. I also saw groups of this species without playback above the village at dusk. Above Tiwarigaon the double gully at 28.217765, 95.838377 had Long-billed Wren-babbler, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Lesser Shortwing, Pygmy Cupwing, and a flyover Hornbill. Also leaches. People have reported Red-faced Liocichla from there as well, but it was clearly not there during my visit. Walking up some more along the road, I got a pair of Green Cochoa and many Beautiful Sibias, Large Niltavas, Yellow-throated Fulvettas, etc. I also saw a group of Hoolock gibbon one morning and heard them each time I drove through.

The road between the km21 and km20 markers (on both sides of a small road gate) is a good spot for nightbirding, although not many groups are successful at getting the Hogdson's Frogmouth out in the open (overtaped? Or maybe just behaving like a normal frogmouth).

### Chikopani bridge 28.242663, 95.889312

This bridge is another landmark before Mayodia pass. Above it and up until the pass, you start to find the mossy open forest that holds Ward's trogon, Beautiful Nuthatch, Himalayan Cutia, and reportedly Purple Cochoa (not seen by me). These species also occur on the other side of the pass around KM65 and below. When you reach elevation 1900masl is the time to start trawling for Mishmi Wren-babbler which responded very well. I could actually see some specimens without any playback, which is unusual for this genus. Also, Scaly LT and Grey-sided LT popped up from roadside vegetation around this kind of elevation, and gold-naped finch was often feeding in the roadside (also at the pass itself).

### Coffee house 28.23268450079836, 95.90911405036023

This used to be a government-run guesthouse, now completely dilapidated but theoretically still possible to spend a night if all you need is a roof. Food was available upon request.

The bamboo around the settlement hosts all of the region's parrotbills. I only saw a large flock of Black-throated and a single Pale-billed, but there are more species, reportedly. Where the bamboo becomes patchy, try for Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler. In an isolated stand of mossy forest a bit below the Coffee House, I saw a pair of Beautiful nuthatch. Later in season, Spotted Laughingthrush, Blue-winged Laughingthrush, and Red-faced Liocichla reportedly come to breed but they were not apparent at the time of my visit. At night, people who chose to spend the night in the Coffee House report easy Himalayan Owl.

### Mayodia pass 28.242049625142332, 95.9250760082424

Mayodia pass or KM52 is a very small settlement and army base where tea is available. In the “Maya house” tea stall, if you look down the drain when they throw out their garbage (not that dirty, mostly dish washing water) you’ll see dozens of birds coming for scraps, like Black-faced LT, Streak-throated Barwing, Dark-rumped Rosefinch. Walking down towards KM65 yielded Gould’s Shortwing (nest building in the small area of yellow grass and boulders surrounded by evergreens), Fire-tailed Sunbird, Crimson-browed Finch (feeding on leaf buds), Rufous-breasted Bush-Robin, Blue-fronted Robin (in small bamboo or tall grass, needs playback and a good-willing individual), Bar-winged Wren-babbler (not responsive), Alpine thrush, Hume’s Bush-warbler (often overlooked), Golden Fulvetta, and large flocks of true fulvettas, Yuhinas, Minlas, Leaf-warblers, and Tits. I did not see Fire-tailed Myzornis but this is where it is seen when the rhododendron are in bloom (in march??).

The star bird of the area is, without doubt, Blyth’s Tragopan. I heard it twice and saw it once. They are only active in the early hours apparently and then retreat to dense bush for the day. Unfortunately, the road is nowadays too busy for a decent chance to see them in the road before dawn, which is how most birders connected a few years back. I would still advise to try and spot them by driving around just before dawn. This requires a very early start and night drive from Roing (or Hunli, which is about the same driving time). Most sightings nowadays occur by spotting a calling bird after dawn. I’m not going to lie, doing so involves some help from the birding gods. But what a reward is that sweet neon orange and green wattle, and the gods are quite generous in this part of the world.

Lastly, Sclater’s Monal is a possibility. There is even an eBird hotspot that’s called “Monal point”, so it must be real. People report it in November mostly. Sometimes the monal is also spotted on the very distant snow-capped mountain that one can see from the pass, however that’s going to be a black spot with a white spot trailing behind.

### KM65 (28.279808563015557, 95.91263070723862) and beyond

KM65 is a small settlement and obvious landmark on the far side of the pass. There is very basic but clean enough accommodation there, which in theory could replace the Coffee House as a base for Blyth’s Tragopan drives. Using this accommodation probably requires some rule-twisting.

I got Rusty-bellied Shortwing, a major blocker if not a spectacular species, in the brush between KM65 and KM67. Lower down in the forested area, I finally connected with Ward’s Trogon, Black-crowned Scimitar-babbler, and Red-faced Liocichla. The trogon was a big relief as this is one of the top targets of a trip in the area that had eluded me so far (except for a brief fleeting view on the first day). As I continued down towards Hunli past the dreadful hairpins, there were some singing Spotted Elachura in the mossy roadside overhanging cliffs, and Himalayan Shortwing and a confusing-looking female Rusty-bellied Shortwing in a gully. This side of the pass looked less interesting.

If you have questions, spotted an error, or want to invite me on your all-inclusive tour of remote Polynesia: peron UNDERSCORE guillaume AT yahoo DOT fr