In February 2015, I travelled with my wife Heleen to north Bengal, Sikkim and Manas NP in west Assam. On 12th February we landed in Bagdogra, the airport that serves Siliguri, the main town of North Bengal, 12 km away.

This is an independent trip report and it covers areas that were not reported before by other birders or tour operators. It is also an update of the current situation of familiar sites, as most of the information I found, is from about 10 years ago and none covered late winter visits.

I live in Goa, south India, and this is my third visit to the area. I visited Lava in September 2006 and in June 2007, I went to Lava, Pelling and Sukna. Since 2010, I am producing films about Indian birds and birding sites and you can watch my work on https://www.youtube.com/user/mrdavidstanton

I had high expectations from this trip, especially with regards as to seeing Flycatchers, Thrushes and Laughing Thrushes. This was not to be. Numbers of birds however were very impressive, with feeding parties of over a hundred.

I try to build this report to suit Indian and foreign birders with many tips about costs and about how to do the trip by yourself. All the sites can be reached by public transport, but I would strongly advise renting a car as it saves time and you can reach the sites very early in the morning.

Entrance fees.

Like many other developing countries, India has separate fees for Indians and foreigners when it comes to any tourist site. Parks and sanctuaries are no exception. In West Bengal and Sikkim it is neglected but in Assam, foreigners pay 500 rp per day. This is ten times more than Indians. Expats with a resident permit are supposed to pay Indian price. Sometimes it works and sometimes not.

Weather

In the plains it was very pleasant. Not too hot and not cold at all. Misty with short visibility most of the time, but not in anyway to affect birding. In the hills it was mostly cloudy and therefore cold in the day and very cold at night, but much less cold than in the western Himalayas, which are few hundred km more north. Sometimes little rain and sometimes little sun, misty with short visibility but not in a way to affect birdwatching.

Car rental

We could not find anybody to rent us a car for self drive. There are plenty of travel agents in Siliguri and they can arrange a car with a driver. We rented a Tata Sumo, a jeep-type car, for 1800 rp per day. That included the drivers expenses but excluded petrol. You can get smaller cars for less, but you will have problems convincing the driver to go off road. Even if the agency promises, don’t expect the driver to speak English. Our driver Pindu did not speak English and did not know the way.

In India, every state has its own rules about allowing taxis and rented cars from other states. In our case, they made it clear that the car is not permitted to enter Assam. We later found out that in Sikkim, a car from West Bengal is very limited.
Visiting Sikkim
Visiting this state usually involves many permits. Don’t let it put you off. Permits to enter Sikkim can be arranged in Bagdogra airport and take about 10 minutes. To visit sites in restricted areas, you need another permit that can be arranged by a travel agent in the capital Gangtok. Sikkim is divided into three districts; west, east and north. Most tour operators will take clients to west Sikkim as it does not require a second permit and cars from West Bengal are allowed in too. To visit other parts of the state, you basically have to go to Gangtok, go to a travel agent that within an hour will arrange everything for you: the permit, the car and accommodation. To visit any protected areas you will need a permit from the forest department, which is in M.G. Marg under the tourist office. This is not a problem, only that they close at 2 pm. Cars from West Bengal are only permitted up to Gangtok.

Homestays
In recent years, the government encourages the establishment of homestays in remote areas, many of them close to birding sites. While in many countries a homestay is usually a cheap alternative to a hotel, in India it is considered a luxury. Usually you will get a very small basic room with a bathroom with very limited hot water for 1500 to 2500 rp. Very basic meals are extra and so is everything else like a heater or a guide. Many of these homestays are actually investments of people from the city and the locals are only working there. Booking is usually done on the Internet where you will see very nice pictures. My advice is not to book in advance and bargain hard when you arrive. Most places are only busy in peak tourist time and will go down with the price.

Sukna Reserve Forest
I had great expectations from this site as on my last visit in June 2007 I saw great birds like Malayan Night Heron, Crow-billed Drongo and Black Baza. This is a large mixed forest on the foothills of the Himalayas attached to Mahananda WLS only 10km from Siliguri on the road to Darjeeling. Since it is a Reserved Forest and not a protected area, you do not need any permit and there are no time or other restrictions. Siliguri has plenty of hotels, but I would suggest staying as close as possible to Darjeeling Moore (Darjeeling junction) from where there are shared rickshaws to Sukna village for 10 rp. From Sukna, walk out of town towards Darjeeling and after 200m you will see the offices of the forest department on your right and on the left there is a path leading to a nursery. Walk around the nursery from the left and go through the forest for about half a km until you reach the dry riverbed. The other side of the river is a good habitat for birds. You can follow the river upstream into the hills. I spent three days birding here.

Bird list; http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22206312

Tiger Hill (Darjeeling)
After three days in Siliguri and Sukna RF, we rented a car and went to Darjeeling. It takes about three hours for a car to cover 70 km and a climb from 100 m to 2000 m.
Darjeeling is a very famous hill station with many hotels. The birding site is in Tiger Hill and it is described well in other trip reports and in Krys Kazmierczak and Raj Singh’s book “A Birdwatchers Guide to India”. At 2600 m, Tiger Hill is very cold in winter, so we arrived after sunrise just as all the tourists who came to watch the sunrise over mount Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world, were leaving and within moments we had the place to ourselves. The areas around the top where garbage is dumped are good for birds, as is the temple a little way down the road. We had no problem finding the circle birding route described by Kazmierczak. It is now mostly thick bamboo with few birds, but we found two groups of Brown Parrotbills. The path through the bamboo split after a while and we decided to walk back.

After a morning in Tiger Hill, we continued to Sikkim. The road goes down towards the Teesta river from Ghom, the getaway village to Tiger Hill, so we did not have to go back to Darjeeling. On the way we stopped at a homestay in Lamahatha for lunch, where I saw a group of seven Red Crossbills.

Bird list; http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22206414

Gangtok
From Lamahatha we went down towards the Teesta river where it was warm again and once more we were in tropical climate with coconut trees. We drove up to the border in Rangpo where you can get a permit to visit Sikkim if you did not already obtain it in the airport. We drove to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim and probably the cleanest city in India. The city is built on the mountain slope and while it is warm in the lower parts, it can be freezing higher up. The city center is around M.G. Marg where there are good restaurants and hotels and where the tourist and forest department offices are. We used the help of Naresh (tel 9733063555) from Sunrise Tour & Travel (03592-202647, 9434144237 sunrise_travels@yahoo.co.in) to book our trip to Fambong Lho WLS. They can also book other destinations like Changu lake, Kyongnosla WLS and sites in Yumthang region.

Gangtok zoo on the higher part of the city is a prime forest and good for birdwatching. It has a few interesting Himalayan animals like Snow Leopard and Red Panda.

Fambong Lho WLS
The headquarters of this sanctuary are in Golitar only 10 km from Gangtok. There is now a road going all the way up to Golitar at 2100 m where there is a log hut with two single and one double room. You need to bring your own food but there is cooking equipment and a cook is available. You no longer have to bring your own bedding. Four luxury accommodation units and a cafeteria are now in the process of being built. Golitar is in the middle of the forest and it is here where we saw most of the birds including Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler, the target bird of this trip. We stayed two nights in Fambong Lho. There is a short trek of about one km that you can walk near the camp and another for 5 km that leads up to a watchtower in Tinjurey at 2600 m. Unfortunately, the day we walked there was the worst weather of the trip. A guide is compulsory and easily arranged at the headquarters. Costs are very low.
Here is the only place where our resident permit did not help and we had to pay the tourist price and yet still, we only paid 1000 rp for the two nights.

Bird list; http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22224734

**Kitam Bird Sanctuary**

We drove back to Gangtok, Rangpo, where we exited Sikkim and along the Teesta river to Melli bazar where we entered Sikkim again. Now we were in west Sikkim and our driver felt comfortable again as in this area cars from West Bengal are permitted. We drove along a river towards Pelling and after about 15 km reached a place where a big sign declared that this is Kitam Bird Sanctuary. A road climbing through planted forest with little undergrowth leads to Kitam village where the sanctuary ends and where there is basic accommodation. This is the only bird sanctuary in Sikkim and its website promises much. However, the planted forest looks very unsuitable for birds. I believe the declaration of Kitam as a bird sanctuary was more politically motivated than actually a suitable place for birds and the only bird we saw after an hour was Red Junglefowl. We decided to carry on. We skipped Pelling and Pemayangtse, (the main birding sites in west Sikkim) where I had visited in a previous trip and continued towards Lava.

**Lava**

Kalimpong is the main town in the hills district of West Bengal. It is about 1000 m high and much warmer at night than Lava, about an hours drive further on. We stayed there at night and left very early in the morning to reach Lava at first light. Lava is a small town at 2000 m. Up to the opening of Arunachal Pradesh and Eaglenest WLS for birders about 10 years ago, it was the most popular birding spot in the eastern Himalayas and it is well described in trip reports and in Kazmierczak’s book.

The road approaching Lava is being widened and the entire habitat along its side is being destroyed. The first 6 km of the road from Lava towards Kalimpong was one of Lavas best birding sites and now it does not exist anymore. I had to change my plan and decided to go to another famous route, the pipeline route. There is a pipeline leading down from Lava that after a few km crosses the road to Lolaygaon. Our driver dropped us on the Lolaygaon side of the site and we walked up towards Lava. Almost immediately we saw a family of Yellow-throated Martens. After that however, we did not see any interesting birds except for the Brown-throated Treecreeper. The pipeline route looked very degraded and nearly all the undergrowth had gone.

I remembered the accommodation in Lava being very miserable, so I searched and found an alternative place in Kolakham village, 8 km down the road to Neora valley NP. We met our driver near the monastery in Lava and drove there.

Bird list; http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22224770

**Neora valley NP**

Just outside Lava, in the direction opposite to Kalimpong, there is a track road on the left, with a gate and a check-post. This is the getaway to Neora valley NP and to Kolakham village on its fringe. After paying 100 rp at the check-post we drove on
and took the left fork and drove down for about 8 km on a rough jeep road to Kolakham. This village is about 400 m lower than Lava and if weather permits, there is great view of Mt. Kanchenjunga. In 1991, “Help Tourism”, a leading tour operator company, established their eco camp here, which is the best place to stay. Later, locals and investors from outside built homestays and now Kolakham considers itself to be an eco village. To get to Neora valley NP, you have to walk from the entrance of the eco camp on the top of the village back towards Lava. After about 200 m there is a road to the left and shortly after, another road to the left. Take the second road and follow it. It climbs the mountain and ends in a small cattle farm. This is where the degraded forest ends. From here you can only walk. About a km or two further there is another cattle farm. The path goes on a little further and then disappears. Between the two cattle farms I found the best birding area. There were feeding parties with hundreds of birds, mainly Whiskered Yuhina, Rufous Sibia and Fire-tailed Sunbird. Birds move very fast, so consider yourself lucky if you get a good view for more than three seconds. You would need to spend a long time here to see any of the rarer species. It was here that I found three Grey-headed Babblers, a very little known bird. There are probably more roads into Neora valley NP. I believe that “Help Tourism” would be the best source for information. We stayed two nights in Kolakham. The first day we hired a guide and drove up to the cattle farm and birded the area above it. The second day I went walking and birded the lower area until the cattle farm and little further. If you are a photographer and have time, try to locate streams where birds come to bathe and drink. This is your best chance for photos. Bird list; http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22225016

**Gorumara National Park**

After a morning birding, we drove from Kolakham back to Lava and down back to the plains of North Bengal, only 100 m above sea level. At a lower altitude it started to get hot and we were very happy to take off all our winter clothes and get back into shorts. There are a few protected areas in the lowlands of North Bengal, commonly known as Dooars. Gorumara NP is maybe the most visited and closest to Siliguri. It is a small park and has a road going through it. The entrance is on the north side, but the headquarters are on the south side of the road where there is plenty of accommodation suiting everyones budget. The park is a mixture of planted and natural forest, with areas of grassland mainly near the riverbed. It is only permitted to enter with a jeep that can be rented by the headquarters and only for a trip of 90 minutes. You are only allowed to get out of the jeep in two places, which gives little option for birding. There is a Forest Rest House inside the park near the river, which is the best place to stay. We had one jeep safari early morning and were lucky to see two rhinos in the distance. This has to be booked early morning at 6 am from the office at the headquarters. Entrance fee, jeep and a compulsory guide cost 1500 rp. Foreigners pay slightly more. As we were leaving our hotel at 9 am, we saw our first Collared Falconet on an electricity line posing for a picture. Bird list; http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22226387
**Buxa Tiger Reserve**

As we were not allowed into protected areas in North Bengal with our rented Tata sumo and the car had no permission to go to Assam, we said goodbye to our driver Pindu and continued by public bus 100 km east to Alipurduar. Buxa TR is only 20 km from Alipurduar and the forest starts just out of town. Rajavathkhwa is the entrance point where you pay a moderate entrance fee. Joyanti, a few km further is a small village with a big army camp in the middle of the forest on the side of a dry riverbed. The village is on the plains, but the mountains of Bhutan start less then a km away. There are a few private lodges in Joyanti. We stayed at Banante GH, a place with a river view, for 1300 rp. Here we had the best Bengali food of the trip. The beauty of Joyanti is that you can walk on the riverbed and into the forest, a privilege not usually permitted in tiger reserves. Buxa is very good for Hornbills. We saw a few Oriental, 14 Pied and 2 Wreathed. Collared Falconet was common with five birds sighted. We had time for only one morning in Buxa and I would recommend spending a few days here. There is a lot to explore including Buxa fort in a reserve that claims to have 60 tigers.

We went by taxi back to Alipurduar to catch the Brahmaputra mail train at 2 pm. The train was four hours late and we arrived at Barpeta road in Assam late at night. We checked into the first hotel we found near the railway station.


**Manas National Park**

Prior to our visit to Manas, we made a reservation to stay four days in Mathanguri Forest Rest House in the heart of the park on the Manas river near the border with Bhutan. On 26th February morning we went to the office of the field director in Barpeta road and collected our permits. From there we went by taxi for 20 km to Bansbari, the main entrance to the central part of the park, from where we got another permission from the forest department and paid our entry fee for five days inside the park. We entered the park and went on for another 20 km to Mathanguri. Most visitors to Manas stay in Bansbari where there are plenty of private resorts. There are two rest houses in Mathanguri, lower and upper. Usually people stay in the upper RH, which has two floors with six available rooms. The British built the RH about 80 years ago. The rooms are big and have attached bathrooms and there is a big balcony on the second floor with a superb view over the Manas river and the mountains of Bhutan. It is a popular place to stay and food is available. The RH can be booked with the field director of Manas NP in Barpeta road (03666-261413). Behind the RH are buildings belonging to the forest department and from there you should arrange for an armed guard to go anywhere in the park.

Manas NP was one of India’s best NPs until the 1990s when it was taken over by militants that wiped out all its wildlife. Since 2001 there is an agreement between the government and the militants and the park is recovering. Rhinos were reintroduced, but deer population is very low. We only saw four deers in five days, which explains the low number of only 18 tigers. For wildlife you should go to Kaziranga, but for birds, I find Nameri WLS in central Assam better.

The landscape is flat and the mountain starts from the border with Bhutan where
the park continues. Silk cotton is the dominant tree in the grassland. There are large areas of forest merging with the grassland. The Manas river is fast flowing and has birds like Great Cormorant, Common Merganser and Daurian Redstart on its banks. Over the border with Bhutan the forest starts to climb into east Himalayan forest.

In Mathanguri we met with Nirjhar Das, our old wildlife photographer friend from Calcutta who was travelling with his uncle. Nirjhar hired a Gypsy (small Suzuki 4WD jeep) from one of the resorts in Bansbari for 1800 rp a day. Petrol and meals for the driver were extra. Every morning we went on safari. Usually we came back for lunch and in the afternoon we went on another drive. Manas is still not overcrowded with visitors, so many things that are usually prohibited in tiger reserves are possible here. The most important for birders is that it is possible to leave the jeep and walk. The armed guide will escort you and the jeep will follow behind. It is also possible to enter with your own vehicle. In the dry season it does not have to be a 4WD.

The park is dotted with watchtowers with living quarters for the forest guards. These are called beats. Each of these beats has a patrol unit and armed guards are patrolling the forest on the back of elephants. There are more beats in rhinos areas and it looks like the Assam government is doing all it can to protect its national animal. There are currently 27 rhinos in the park, the same number as was introduced a few years ago. The population did not increase due to poaching. The beats have names and this helps with locating yourself. Kuri-Bheel beat is an area of grassland where you can find Bengal Florican, the main bird Manas is famous for. We saw three males in breeding plumage. We also saw Little Bunting and Lesser Coucal in this area and near Usla beat we saw Finn’s Weaver.

Next to Mathanguri FRH is the border with Bhutan. I did not know if foreigners would be allowed entry, but Indians have no problems to travel into Bhutan side of the park. Our resident permit helped and we travelled for 14 km until Panbam where the park in Bhutan ends. The road follows the Manas river and climbs upwards. Soon it enters low altitude east Himalayan flora with many wild banana trees. A small palace of the king of Bhutan can be seen on the other side of the river. Here we found a roosting place of Great Hornbill where I counted 32 roosting birds.

On another day, we drove from Mathanguri for 22 km to Doimari beat. This road goes through dense evergreen forest. We continued further through moist deciduous forest similar to Western Ghats forest for more than 27 km and exited the park at Koki Labara on its eastern side, not far from the seed farm.

On 2nd March after a second mornings visit to Kuri-Bheel beat, the jeep took us to Bansbari from where we went by taxi to Barpeta road and onwards by bus to Guwahati, the capital of Assam where we stayed in the Tourist Lodge near the railway station (0361-2454421/2454570/2544475).

Bird list; http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22227950

**Greater Adjutant nesting site**

Our flight from Guwahati to Goa was at 2.30 pm and we had all the morning free. We rented a taxi from our hotel and drove over the Brahmaputra river to Dadara village only about half an hour away. This village has a colony of Greater Adjutants
nesting in its back yards. The locals understand that this is a very rare bird. They protect it and nurse chicks that fall from nests. From roofs of houses it is possible to get very good view over the birds, their nests and chicks as this was the peak of their breeding season.

The world population of this bird is estimated at 1000 individuals with 2/3 of this population around Guwahati. This stork feeds on carrion and lives very close to people. Identifying and protecting nesting sites like the one at Dadara are essential to their survival.

If you visit this site and have to catch a plane or a train later in the day, make sure you leave enough time to cross the Brahmaputra bridge in time. It will be another five years before the government completes a new bridge and traffic is very slow.