

# Nepal: Birding the Central Himalayas



*Red-billed Leiothrix*



*Rufous Sibia*



*Grey-winged Blackbird*

Nepal is an incredible birding destination. The remarkable diversity of altitude and habitat, from grasslands at little more than sea level to the highest peaks of the Himalayas, is reflected in the rich diversity of species. Over 850 species of birds have been recorded here, more than in any other region of comparable size in Asia.

Straddling the central Himalayas, Nepal is one of Asia's most scenic countries, dominated by mountains which provide a universal backdrop punctuated by colorful Buddhist stupas, Hindu temples and royal palaces. Once one of the most isolated and inaccessible places on earth, both geographically and by choice, Nepal opened its borders little over half a century ago allowing birders to explore some of the best birding locations anywhere in the Indian subcontinent.

Our comprehensive birding tour begins on the forested slopes of **Phulchowki Danda**, the highest of the peaks surrounding the **Kathmandu Valley**. From subtropical forest at lower levels to moss-draped oaks, firs and rhododendrons towards the 2767 meter peak, Phulchowki offers an excellent overview of Himalayan birds across the elevations and their associated habitats. Key among these are Himalayan Cutia, White-crested Laughingthrush, Scaly-breasted Cupwing, Spiny Babbler (Nepal's only endemic bird) and Mountain Scops-Owl. We then fly southwest to the terai zone at the base of the Himalayas to **Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve**. Here, vast riverine grasslands and internationally important wetlands beneath the Kosi barrage are a vital refuge of grassland specialties and Nepal's largest concentrations of water birds, notably White-tailed Stonechat, Swamp Francolin, Comb Duck, Bar-headed Goose and Lesser Adjutant, plus birds of prey including Pied Harrier and Imperial Eagle and a fine list of mammals including Wild Water Buffalo and Ganges River Dolphin. Staying in the terai we move west to **Chitwan National Park**, looking for Ibisbill among the shingle banks of the Rapti River as we drive. Chitwan hosts the richest assemblage of birds anywhere in the country and we will encounter a rich selection of forest birds such as Great Pied Hornbill, Common Green Magpie, Red-headed Trogon and Collared Falconet plus an important selection of grassland species including Slender-billed Babbler, Grey-crowned Prinia and Bengal Florican in the most extensive protected lowland grasslands in Nepal. We will also see Indian One-horned Rhinoceros, with a chance of Sloth Bear and Tiger. Finally, we travel into the mountains to **Thulo Kharka** at 2060 meters in the foothills of the **Annapurna Conservation Area**. In spectacular temperate forests we will see a variety of resident and wintering birds, such as Kalij Pheasant, Snow Pigeon, Chestnut Thrush, Snowy-browed Flycatcher, Altai Accentor, Scarlet Finch, Wallcreeper, Bearded Vulture and Himalayan Griffon.

This tour offers a comprehensive overview of the exceptional birdlife of the central Himalayas up into the bird-rich mid-altitudes, passing through a variety of landscapes with a backdrop of Nepal's rich culture and stunning mountain scenery and the added attraction of some of Asia's most iconic large mammals.

## **Day 1: Arrivals in Kathmandu; PM Birding Kathmandu Valley**

Arrivals at Kathmandu International Airport in the morning. We will spend the afternoon exploring the surrounding Kathmandu valley where we can expect a good introduction to Nepal's more common species, such as Red-vented Bulbul, Jungle Myna, House Swift, Steppe Eagle and Black Kite. Time permitting, we will explore the surrounding hillslopes, looking for Himalayan Bluetail, Himalayan Aberrant Bush Warbler, Red-billed Leiothrix, Grey Bush Chat, Spotted Forktail and Red-billed Blue Magpie.

## **Day 2: Birding Phulchowki Danda**

On day 2 we will explore Phulchowki Danda up to the peak at 2767 meters above sea level. Here subtropical and temperate forests at varying elevations host a plethora of Himalayan specialties, and we will look for various laughingthrushes including Striated Laughingthrush, White-crested Laughingthrush and White-throated Laughingthrush, plus Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler, Streak-

breasted Scimitar Babbler, Black-chinned Babbler, Grey-throated Babbler, the Nepal-endemic Spiny Babbler, Scaly-breasted Cupwing, Scaly Thrush, Grey-winged Blackbird, White-collared Blackbird, White-browed Bush Robin, Golden Bush Robin, Himalayan Cutia, Rufous Sibia, Fire-tailed Sunbird, Black Eagle, Mountain Hawk-Eagle, Collared Owllet and Mountain Scops-Owl.

#### **Day 3-6: Fly to Biratnagar; Three Full Days Birding Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve**

On day 3 we will fly to Biratnagar in the country's southern lowlands before driving to Koshi Tappu for a four-night stay. Koshi Tappu is a vital remnant of a once impenetrable tract of swamp forest, among the most fragile and threatened habitats in the subcontinent. This area is home to White-tailed Stonechat, Striated Grassbird, Bright-capped Cisticola, Yellow-bellied Prinia and Swamp Francolin in riverine grasslands. We will also be in search of Lesser Adjutant, Black-necked Stork, Red-naped Ibis, Black-headed Ibis, Bar-headed Goose, Comb Duck, scarcer Falcated Duck and Baer's Pochard, Black Bittern, Greater Painted-snipe, Grey-headed Swamphen and Grey-headed Lapwing. In the vast wetlands and reedbeds beneath the Kosi barrage, we may encounter Wild Water Buffalo and possibly Ganges River Dolphin. The impressive selection of waders and waterfowl we see here will be complemented by species such as Siberian Rubythroat, Abbott's Babbler and Oriental Pied Hornbill in patches of woodland, plus birds of prey including Cinereous Vulture, White-rumped Vulture, Pallid Harrier, Pied Harrier, Imperial Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Pallas's Fish-eagle and Short-toed Snake Eagle.

#### **Day 7-10: Transfer to Chitwan; Three Full Days Birding Chitwan National Park**

Day 7 will take us on a long drive to Chitwan where we will have a four-night stay. During our drive, we will be looking for Crested Kingfisher, Little Forktail and Ibisbill on the shingle banks of the Rapti River. At Chitwan, the avifauna of the Himalayas meets that of the Indo-Gangetic plains creating the richest assemblage of birds anywhere in the country. Over the next three days we will explore dense forests and riverine grasslands in various parts of the park on foot and by open jeep, making a special effort to track down grassland specialties such as Slender-billed Babbler, Grey-crowned Prinia, Indian Grassbird and Bengal Florican. Other highlights here include Great Pied Hornbill, Common Green Magpie, Red-headed Trogon, White-browed Piculet, Speckled Piculet, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Pin-striped Tit-Babbler, Spotted Bush Warbler, Collared Falconet, Black Baza and Grey-headed Fish Eagle. Also possible are One-horned Rhinoceros, Sloth Bear and Tiger.

#### **Day 11-14: Transfer to Thulo Kharka; Three Days Birding the Annapurna Conservation Area**

A long drive on day 11 will take us north and up to 2060 meters in the mid-altitude Himalayas of central Nepal. We will be near the trekking gateway of Pokhara to Thulo Kharka for a three-night stay on the edge of the Annapurna Conservation Area. Against the stunning backdrop of the snow-capped Annapurna range we will explore the temperate forests and scrubby slopes of the surrounding area, looking for montane specialties associated with the higher altitude. These birds include Snowy-browed Flycatcher, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Slaty-headed Parakeet, Barred Cuckoo-Dove, Scarlet Finch, Chestnut-headed Tesia, Black-faced Laughingthrush, Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush, Blue Whistling Thrush, Chestnut Thrush, Blue-fronted Redstart, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Tibetan Serin, Altai Accentor, Snow Pigeon, Kalij Pheasant, Wallcreeper, Black-backed Forktail, Slaty-backed Forktail, White-capped Redstart, Asian Barred Owllet, Bonelli's Eagle, Bearded Vulture, Slender-billed Vulture, Red-headed Vulture and Himalayan Griffon. We will leave Thulo Kharka in the afternoon of day 14, flying from Pokhara back to Kathmandu for an overnight stay.

#### **Day 15: Depart Kathmandu**

Departures from Kathmandu international airport today.