

# Trip Report

A PHOTO TREK TO PANGOT AND SAT TAL

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## BIRDS OF HIMALAYA

India's Caesar Sengupta travels to the wooded foothills close to Corbett National Park in search of rare avian subjects



**Black-throated Sunbird** *Aethopyga saturata*  
This species is found in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, and Vietnam.  
Opening spread: **Steppe Eagle** *Aquila nipalensis*, a large and imposing raptor of the Himalayan foothills.



**Rufous-bellied Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos hyperythrus*  
 Found in the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, ranging across Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, North Korea, South Korea, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, and Vietnam.

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
 BY DR. CAESAR SENGUPTA

I can't recall when I had fallen asleep. Woke up with a few cold raindrops wetting my nose tip. Could feel a gush of cold air as I looked out of the window. The car was adequately speeding on the hilly road. I looked at my watch... it was 6:30 am in the morning and we had reached Kathgodam. The fresh morning air had an earthen smell typically reminding that it rained just sometime back. While the feel was quite intoxicating, it was difficult to avoid the obvious worry of the possibility of the rains spoiling the entire trip because we were on one of our major birding expeditions... Pangot and Sat Tal, for the birds of the Himalayas.

Birding in the forests of the Western Ghats had become almost a routine weekend exercise. Trip reports of Rakesh Dhareshwar and Clement Francis had already created enough inquisitiveness about the Himalayan avian fauna. This exclusive birding expedition was planned almost 2 months back over a cup of coffee while returning from Karjat to Mumbai. Availability of leaves was a challenge for each of us and it wasn't until late we could get a confirmation from all three members. Getting geared up with better gadgets, although was on the books, but wasn't a feasible option at least for me, when the decisions were dwindling. Except for Parag, who was loaded with his brand new 7D and 500 mm prime, the rest two of us,

me and Amit, somehow managed with our existing gadgets and Parag, in a state of elation with his 500 mm was ready to lend his 100 – 400 mm to me for the entire trip and my job was done.

The flight was sufficiently delayed... we were the 9th in the queue on the runway. Sitting inside the aircraft, dreaming about the next few days of absolute bliss, I was feeling dizzy. Woke up with a jerk and realized that we had waited for almost an hour in the runway itself before we actually flew. By the time we reached Delhi airport, it was almost midnight. There weren't any plans to halt for the night. Against all apprehensions, our driver was waiting for us. "Good evening, sir" he greeted. Amit lighted a cigarette. "It would take 8 / 9 hours to reach Pangot" ... our driver declared... a long overnight drive was anticipated. A comfortably spacious Toyota Innova ensured that the luggages were adequately placed at the back and we had enough advantage to fall asleep fast. I didn't realize when I slept and woke up with the few cold raindrops wetting my nose tip... Kathgodam.

Jungle Lore birding camp of Pangot was a surprise package. We could see only a signboard and no resort in the vicinity as the car stopped. Soon I realized that the resort has been constructed nestled in the slope of the hill and one needs to walk

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### Scanning the slopes

Bird and wildlife guide Hari Lama checks the wooded valleys of the Himalayan foothills through his binoculars.



**Blue Whistling Thrush** *Myophonus caeruleus*

Found in temperate forests and subtropical or tropical moist montane forests in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

down for a few steps to reach the reception. As soon as we stepped in, the warm welcome by the staff got added to the list of the feel good factors. I had seen a resort for the very first time, which is exclusively made for birding. The moment I stepped in, I saw the attic. I walked up and checked the attic. It could accommodate two extra people and I decided to have my bed there. The wooden cottage had an elusive internal furnishing which gave a very magical wild feel. A cup of hot coffee added to the magic. By the time the coffee was over, I had already fitted the lens on the body for the next few days. "Good morning sir... we can leave if you are ready" ... someone called from behind. We turned to meet the most highlighted member of the entire trip ... it was Hari Lama, our guide, a complete encyclopedia for the local birds.

Pangot is a small village 15 km from Nainital, 50 km from Kathgodam and 80 km from the very well known Corbett National Park... very picturesque. Lama said – "We shall go to the woodpecker point first" and we started our birding trip of Pangot.

The location where Lama took us was quite interesting. No sooner had I got down from the car and got busy gearing up my gadget mounting on the tripod, I heard Lama passing a loud whisper to us – "Woodpecker ... ekdum Nazdeeg me" (meaning "Woodpecker... very near"). We rushed

towards him and he was pointing towards a tree branch. A beautiful magically coloured Rufous Bellied Woodpecker was sitting on a low branch for the welcome shoot. We shot for more than twenty minutes only to realize that there were so many of them around... and we spread out. The quarrel of the White-throated Laughing Thrushes vibrated all throughout the forest canopy as we moved up the hills. A Great barbet was calling constantly from a distance. A pair of Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers was playing around on the tall tree in front of me. I was watching the pair for quite sometime... suddenly a Verditer flycatcher flew passed to draw my attention. I saw Parag with his camera tracking its movement. I turned towards the woodpeckers... they were gone. I heard some chirping behind... a Brown-fronted Woodpecker was knocking its beak hard against the wood wall of a tree, I hardly could recognize. Clicked a few photographs and it gave me adequate time to place my tripod from at least three different positions. Wasn't sure about the outcome... I had clicked quite a few pictures; the results had made me happy later on.

We had spent quite some time there. Started feeling hungry and had to return to the base camp. After a not so heavy lunch, we were ready again for the evening session of birding and this time we had to drive for quite a distance to reach a sort of open area and the area was studded with Red-billed Blue

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**White-throated Laughing Trush** *Garrulax albogularis*

Found mainly in the northern regions of the Indian Subcontinent, primarily the Himalayas, and some adjoining and disjunct areas. It ranges across Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Tibet and Vietnam. Its natural habitat is subtropical or tropical moist montane forests.



**Blue-throated Flycatcher** *Cyornis rubeculoides*

Found across much of the Indian Subcontinent, all through the Himalayas, the plains and Western Ghats of India in the cold months, and also extends eastwards into Bangladesh, and to Arakan and the Tenasserim Hills in Myanmar.

Magpies. A few Grey bush chats chirping here and there and one or two Himalayan Bulbuls kept us busy till it was dark enough to pack up the camera. So many lifers (as we call it – a bird which you are likely to see only once in your lifetime) on the very first day, was a bit unexpected and we were quite elated while returning to the resort. A chat over an evening cup of hot coffee, creating the bird list for the day one, downloading the images on laptop, trying to find out a free charge point for the battery ... it was dinner time before even we realized.

We were not quite finished with Pangot and next morning we went further ahead... in search of Cheer Pheasant. I don't think even the slightest glimpse that I could get of the elusive Cheer Pheasant would have been possible without Lama. That man has eagle eyes. "Look sir!" he pointed out his fingers. They were difficult to spot even with binoculars but the glimpse was enough to make all of us happy. Whiskered Yuhinas kept coming again and again to the branch on the slope of the elevation we were standing on... and suddenly I saw the long awaited Himalayan Griffon. I always wanted an image of this bird, with the valley in the backdrop and the Griffon in flight... ah a dream shot it could have been. But I shook. ... On the way back, we thought of paying a visit to the woodpeckers again.

We had planned to move to Sat Tal after the

lunch. Pangot is totally disconnected from the rest of the world as there are only a few selected patches where one could find network signal. On the way, we stopped at Nainital. Amit had to withdraw some cash, Parag had to take a few antacids and I had to call home. Lama reminded of the Nainital dumping ground before we proceeded to Sat Tal and to our surprise, the dumping ground gave us ample opportunities to photograph so many Steppe Eagles in flight. Honestly speaking this was my first close shot of a Steppe. By the time we reached Sat Tal, it was already evening. I saw a Lesser Yellow-naped Woodpecker, stilling on the tree trunk just front of me but light conditions weren't sufficiently worth taking the effort of unpacking the gadgets. We reached the Sat Tal birding camp resort. Located at a 4400 feet altitude in the village of Bhakgtura. This was a tent accommodation this time. Interior was quite impressive, with a cozy bed; hot water supply and a modernized shower in side the tent were something that I could not presume at the first glance. Talks, jokes and laughter over high spirit dragged the evening a bit too long. The next day photography started by around 7 am in and around the resort. A Grey tree pie called with its shrilling voice. Lama knew he had to wait... maybe for hours. So did he. He had shown a place in the vicinity, where we spent almost 2 hours and some Bar-tailed Tree Creepers kept us busy while the Black-headed Jays were watching being ignored.

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**Himalayan Black-lored Tit** *Parus xanthogenys*  
 A passerine bird in the tit family *Paridae*, a resident breeder in the Himalayas. It is an active and agile feeder, taking insects and spiders from the canopy.



**Mountain Bulbul** *Ixos mcclllandii*  
 A songbird species in the family *Pycnonotidae* which ranges across the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, and is not considered a threatened species by the IUCN.





I am sure they were jealous. We would have spent the whole day there if Lama didn't indicate that there were better places and we proceeded towards Laxman Tal. Although the place didn't look quite impressive in the beginning, we soon realized that we were missing something in life till date. This is the place where I had shot most of my photographs of the Pangot / Sat Tal trip and the most beautiful ones... thanks to Lama for showing me the studio... yes as I call it. We sat silently for almost eight hours and it wasn't tiring ... couldn't have been... as it was a lifetime experience of witnessing more than ten lifers (Ah ! I hope I explained what is lifer) in a single day... next day's agenda was already decided. This place was to be extracted as much as we could. We spent the entire next day too in the same place only to realize that the count of the lifers grew to eighty-one and we had identified 105 species by then. We were coming to an end of the dream journey to the Himalayas. We had our flights back to Mumbai booked for next day from Delhi. Can't recall when I had fallen asleep. Woke up with the loud honking of the TATA Sumo obstructing the way. Could feel a gush of hot air as I looked out of the window. The car was at a standstill. I looked at my watch... it was 11:30 am - we had reached Delhi.

**Crested Kingfisher** *Megaceryle lugubris*

A resident of the Himalayas and foothills of Northern India, Bangladesh, northern Indochina, Southeast Asia and Japan. It is a very large (41 cm) black and white kingfisher with evenly barred wings and tail.

**Blue-throated Barbet** *Megalaima asiatica*  
Commonly found across the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.



**Himalayan Bulbul** *Pycnonotus leucogenys*  
Found in Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Tajikistan.



**Red-billed Blue Magpie** *Urocissa erythrorhyncha*  
Has the longest tail of any corvid. It is 65–68 cm (26–27 in) long.



**White-crested Laughing Thrush** *Garrulax leucolophus*  
Found in forest and scrub from the Himalayan foothills to Indochina.



**Crested Kingfisher** *Megaceryle lugubris*  
This large bird is mainly found in mountain rivers and larger rivers in the foothills. It is commonly encountered in Corbett National Park.



**Mountain Bulbul** *Ixos mcclllandii*  
A songbird species in the family *Pycnonotidae* which ranges across the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.



**Himalayan Bulbul** *Pycnonotus leucogenys*  
This very elegant species is found in Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Tajikistan.



**Blue-winged Minla** *Minla cyanouroptera*

Also known as the Blue-winged Siva, it is found in the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, ranging across Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, Tibet, and Vietnam. Its natural habitat is subtropical or tropical moist montane forests.



**Yellow-billed Blue Magpie** *Urocissa flavirostris*  
 The species ranges across the northern parts of the Indian Subcontinent including the lower Himalayas, with a disjunct population in Vietnam.



**Black-throated Sunbird** *Aethopyga saturata*  
 This beautiful species is found in subtropical or tropical moist lowland forests and subtropical or tropical moist montane forests.



**Oriental White-eye** *Zosterops palpebrosus*

A small passerine bird in the white-eye family. It is a resident breeder in open woodland in tropical Asia, east from the Indian Subcontinent to Southeast Asia, extending to Indonesia and Malaysia. They forage in small groups, feeding on nectar and small insects.



**Himalayan Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos himalayensis*  
Found in the northern regions of the Indian Subcontinent, primarily the Himalayas and some adjoining areas, across Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan.



**Lesser Yellow-naped Woodpecker** *Picus chlorolophus*  
Widespread in tropical and sub-tropical Asia, primarily the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.