

# The Best of Bhutan, Manas and Kaziranga

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

---

### Outline Itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Depart London	<b>Day 14</b>	Transfer to Kaziranga
<b>Day 2</b>	Arrive Kolkata	<b>Day 15/17</b>	Kaziranga Tiger Reserve
<b>Day 3</b>	Fly Paro (Bhutan)	<b>Day 18</b>	Fly Kolkata
<b>Day 4</b>	Paro	<b>Day 19</b>	Fly London
<b>Day 5/6</b>	Punakha	<b>Sunderbans Extension</b>	
<b>Day 7/8</b>	Gangtey	<b>Day 19</b>	Transfer to Sunderbans National Park
<b>Day 9/10</b>	Thimpu	<b>Day 20/21</b>	Sunderbans National Park
<b>Day 11</b>	Fly Guwahati; transfer to Manas	<b>Day 22</b>	Depart Kolkata
<b>Day 12/13</b>	Manas National Park	<b>Day 23</b>	Arrive London

### Dates

#### 2021

Sunday 7th March – Thursday 25 March 2021

Sunderbans extension to: Monday 29th March 2021

Wednesday 3rd November – Sunday 21st November 2021 (Bhutan's Black-necked Cranes Festival is on 11th November in Phobjekha Valley, Gangtey)

Sunderbans extension to Thursday 25th November 2021

#### 2022

Sunday 6th March – Thursday 24th March 2022

Thursday 3rd November – Monday 21st November 2022

Sunderbans extension to Friday 25th November 2022



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

**Cost**

£5,495 (London/London); £4,995 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

Extension: £695

**Single room supplement**

£895 (extension: £195)





Black-necked Crane



Greater One-horned Rhino



Eurasian Sparrowhawk - Paro Dzong



Green-tailed Sunbird



Western Hoolock Gibbon



Tiger



Black-necked Crane



Blood Pheasant

## Introduction

The state of Assam is the gateway to north-east India. During our tour we will be journeying to one of the most spectacular regions of the north-eastern Himalayas as well as the flood plains of the Brahmaputra basin before experiencing the states of Assam in the eastern Himalayas at their best.

This tour is a perfect blend of faunal, floral and cultural diversity and during the holiday we will encounter an exciting array of wildlife. Even for those who have already visited this part of India, the remote plains and mountains of the north-east offer a treasure chest of spectacular birdlife. Our wildlife journey will begin in Bhutan after flying to Paro, then from Bhutan we will travel Manas National Park in Assam. It is an UNESCO Natural World Heritage site, a tiger reserve, an elephant reserve and a biosphere reserve – all at the same time. Our final wildlife destination of the trip is Kaziranga National Park in Assam. The park is a World Heritage Site and famed for its population of One-horned Rhinoceros. Most recently, Kaziranga has been named as a hotspot for Tiger, with one of the highest density Tiger populations in India. The tall grass and thick forest of the park make sightings of India's 'king of the jungle' very difficult but sightings of the One-horned Rhinoceros are almost guaranteed.



Despite its small size, about 770 species of birds have been recorded in Bhutan and the kingdom is recognised as one of the 221 global Endemic Bird Areas (EBAs). These areas are recognised as crucial landscapes for habitat-based conservation of birds and for maintaining global avian diversity. Within the country's borders there is an extraordinary range of habitats, from some of the Himalaya's most extensive and least disturbed tropical forests to cool broad-leaved and towering evergreen forests of fir, hemlock and spruce. Bhutan is an unspoilt, sparsely populated country that offers not only the finest birding in the Himalayas but also a wonderful cultural and travel experience. Nearly two-thirds of Bhutan is forest; the remaining fraction is either above the treeline or under agriculture in the narrow valley bottoms, most of the land being too steep for any settlement or farming. The Buddhist values of the Bhutanese people mean that they have for centuries led their lives in harmony with their environment. Their beliefs show a deep reverence and respect for all sentient beings, making them perfect guardians of what is now emerging as one of the ultimate birding locations in the mountains of south Asia.

The country has only opened its doors to foreigners relatively recently, and although it does so with outstanding hospitality, it is not without some reserve, wishing to avoid the negative side-effects of uncontrolled tourism apparent in other developing nations. Numbers of visitors are restricted to a strict quota and the government imposes a fixed and high daily tariff.

The Bhutanese people still dress in traditional garb and their customs and lifestyles are preserved with enthusiasm and pride. All these factors combine to make this country one of the most rewarding and thrilling bird tour destinations available today.

The entire country is bisected by a well-maintained paved road. Birding, especially in mid to late spring (late March



to late May), is good virtually anywhere below 3,100 metres. Unlike in many parts of Asia, exciting birds are visible at any stop, even in the midst of farmland and not just in parks, reserves or remnant patches of 'suitable-looking' habitat. The mixed broadleaf forests in particular make for rich and exciting birdwatching. We will be birding among some of the least westernised and most fascinating cultures on our planet, as well as allowing time to enjoy the best of Bhutan's cultural sites.

**Our November departure coincide with the Black-necked Crane festival in Phobjekha Valley. It is Bhutan's largest wetland area making it the most favoured wintering habitat of Black-necked Crane in the country.**

It is hard to tear yourself away from the Indian subcontinent. If you want to stay longer, and to experience wildlife-viewing in the world's largest delta, we are also offering an extension to the Sunderbans – an area of outstanding natural beauty where the mighty Ganges reaches the sea!

## Day 1

### In Flight

We depart London Heathrow at 9.10am on a scheduled Emirates flight bound for Kolkata via Dubai (where duty-free shopping at Dubai airport is amongst the best and cheapest in the world). We will be in flight overnight.

## Day 2

### Kolkata, India

Arriving in Kolkata at 7.40am, we will transfer to the 5-star Hyatt hotel (the premier hotel in Kolkata) for an overnight. The hotel has all the modern amenities and enjoys a good location in this bustling city. Its rooms are all en suite and have air-conditioning.

## Day 3

### Fly to Paro, Bhutan; Taktsang Monastery Excursion

Today we will board our Druk Airways flight (KB121) to Paro. The beautiful little hill town of Paro is the entry point for anybody coming to Bhutan by air. Situated in the Paro Valley of the eastern Himalaya, the town is full of legends, heroism, and natural splendour. The capital of Bhutan is Thimphu, but during Bhutan's history Paro has played a more significant role in controlling this part of the country. The town is located at an altitude of 2,250 metres above sea level and has a river flowing gently through it; this is generally considered the most beautiful valley in the country. Just a mile long, and with only one street, Paro is one of the smallest towns in the world to have an international airport. Most of the residents here live in the beautiful valley that surrounds the town.

Later in the day, or tomorrow, we will enjoy an optional excursion to Taktsang Monastery, arguably the holiest monastery in Bhutan. Birds that can be seen in the valley here include Blue Whistling Thrush, Hodgson's and Blue-fronted Redstarts, Hoopoe, Rufous Sibia, White-collared Blackbird, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Long-tailed and Grey-backed Shrikes, and Yellow-billed Blue Magpie.



Taktsang, the 'Tiger's Nest' Monastery, appears to cling magically to the sheer rock face 915 metres above the valley. It is a steep climbing at an altitude. Legend has it that the Guru Padma Sambhava, riding a flying tiger, landed on the cliff when he came from Tibet in the 8th century. There he, and later his follower Dubthok Singye, meditated in a cave around which, 300 years ago, the monastery was built to celebrate his arrival. We will take our time here and are likely to spend most of the morning in this wonderful setting and its surrounding forests. On our way up, we will make regular birding stops while enjoying the scenery. We will return to Paro via Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest and most sacred shrines in the Kingdom of Bhutan. This excursion takes between five and six hours.

In the late afternoon we may visit the National Museum and the enormous Paro Dzong (a dzong is a type of fortress). The latter is situated in a stunning location on a little knoll which rises sheer above the river and

commands a view of the whole Paro Valley. It is now the seat of the district commissioner and judge, and is accessible only by means of a wooden bridge across the Paro Chu River! The National Museum was once the watchtower that guarded the valley. It stands high above the Dzong and now houses a magnificent collection of Bhutanese artefacts: costumes, *thankas* (painted or embroidered Buddhist ceremonial banners used in monasteries or family altars), arms, textiles and a huge collection of Bhutan's beautiful stamps, among other things of interest.

During our time in Bhutan we will be staying in comfortable hotels with en suite facilities.

## Day 4

### Paro; Chele La Excursion

We will set off very early for the long drive up to the impressive Chele La Pass on the road to Haa, which at a breathtaking 3,780 metres is an excellent spot for seeing the spectacular Himalayan Monal. This has to be one of the most colourful and strikingly patterned of all the world's many pheasants. We hope to see the adult male at relatively close range as it shows off its iridescent blue, indigo, green and black plumage. It is an extraordinary experience to see one flying off, displaying its white back patch and uttering its wild, ringing cry, and is a spectacle that seems to epitomise high Himalayan birding. Typical species here include Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Yellow-billed Blue Magpie, Spotted (or Eurasian) Nutcracker, Long-tailed Minivet, Coal, Grey-crested and Rufous-fronted Tits, Black-faced Laughingthrush, White-browed Fulvetta, Rufous-vented Yuhina, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Buff-barred Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail, Blue-fronted Redstart, White-collared Blackbird, Mrs Gould's Sunbird, Oliver-backed Pipit, the huge Collared Grosbeak, White-winged Grosbeak, and White-browed and Dark-rumped Rosefinches. With a bit of luck, we will find some Altai Accentors lingering in their winter quarters.

From Chele La we will drive for a couple of hours to Paro, at an altitude of 2,150 metres, with some birding stops en route. Then it will be time for a well-deserved rest!

## Day 5

### Punakha, Bhutan

We will start very early in order to give ourselves the best chance of viewing the Himalayas as they are gradually revealed in the morning light. Our aim today is to begin our exploration of Bhutan's high elevation, mixed evergreen and broad-leaved forests, which are home to a wonderful variety of birdlife. There is a slim possibility of seeing the fabulous Fire-tailed Myzornis converging on a flowering rhododendron, together with a galaxy of Mrs. Gould's and Green-tailed Sunbirds, Lemon-rumped Warblers, Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers and Green Shrike-babblers. We will also be looking for the incredibly beautiful and rarely observed Plain-backed Thrush.

Common birds here include Darjeeling Pied and Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers, Black-capped Sibia, Stripe-throated and Rufous-vented Yuhinas, Common Hill Partridge, White-browed Fulvetta, a variety of leaf warblers, Golden Bush-robin, Blue-fronted Redstart, White-collared Blackbird, Olive-backed Pipit, Green-tailed Sunbird, Dark-breasted Rosefinch, Red-headed Bullfinch, Nutcracker and the extravagantly plumaged Yellow-billed Blue Magpie. Among the more elusive Himalayan specialities that our groups have seen in this region are Mrs Gould's Sunbird, Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler, White-browed Rosefinches, and Plain-backed and Long-tailed Mountain Thrushes. Mammals we have seen here previously include Leopard, Red Panda, Muntjac, Orange-bellied Squirrel

and Yellow-throated Marten, though a great deal of luck is required for any mammal sightings in Bhutan's thick forests!

At lower elevations we should encounter a number of different species, including Mountain Hawk-eagle, Eurasian Treecreeper, Slender-billed Scimitar-babbler, Little and Slaty-backed Forktails. Kalij Pheasants may sometimes be seen in the road, while Little and Spotted Forktails, Himalayan Bluetails and even Rufous-bellied Bush-robin may be seen in roadside ditches and culverts. In the relatively open habitats adjoining the impressive Tsang Chu (Tsang River) we will search for the characterful Crested Kingfisher, in addition to any migrant waterfowl present on the river's gravel bars.



Today, or tomorrow afternoon (depending on our schedule), we will also be visiting Punakha Dzong, a combined fortress and monastery, built in 1637 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651) who unified Bhutan and created it as a nation state. Punakha Dzong served as Bhutan's capital until it

transferred to Thimphu in 1955. This photogenic dzong, sitting between the Po-chu and Mo-chu ('male' and 'female' rivers), houses many sacred temples, including the Machhin Lhakhang where Shabdrung lies embalmed.

At just 1242 metres above sea level now, you will discover a completely different flora and fauna. We should see an impressive array of species here including White-bellied Heron, one of Bhutan's rarest birds. Eurasian and White-breasted Kingfishers, Common Mynas and Red-vented Bulbuls are indicative of these lower altitudes. We are sure to encounter several parties of brightly coloured minivets, noisy Striated Laughingthrushes and we may see Ibisbill.

## Day 6

### Punakha; Tashitang Valley Excursion

We will rise early in the morning to arrive at these beautiful forests before dawn. Here, at an elevation of approximately 1,400 metres, it is noticeably warmer than at most of the elevations encountered so far on the tour. As a consequence, bird activity is at its greatest in the relatively cooler early morning. We will spend most of the morning birding along a broad track that follows the thunderous Mo Chu River through delightful tracts of broad-leaved forest. The Mo Chu River and its stony banks and islands often harbour many of the special birds that make Himalayan rivers such a joy for birdwatchers. Plumbeous Redstarts and White-capped River Chats feed from boulders, Brown Dippers flash noisily up and down, Blue Whistling Thrushes look rather ungainly, and less demonstrative species such as River Lapwing, the giant Crested Kingfisher, Slaty-backed Forktail and Ibisbill may also be found. We will be focusing on nesting Ibisbill, the very rarely observed and globally threatened White-

bellied Heron, River Lapwing, Red-headed Trogon, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Striated Bulbul, the glowing Little Niltava, all three tesias (the Chestnut-headed is a gem), Pygmy Wren-babbler, the infrequently seen and very striking Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush and the stunning Scarlet Finch. The Tashitang Valley is a truly beguiling spot, full of wonderful colours and soul-enriching scenery.

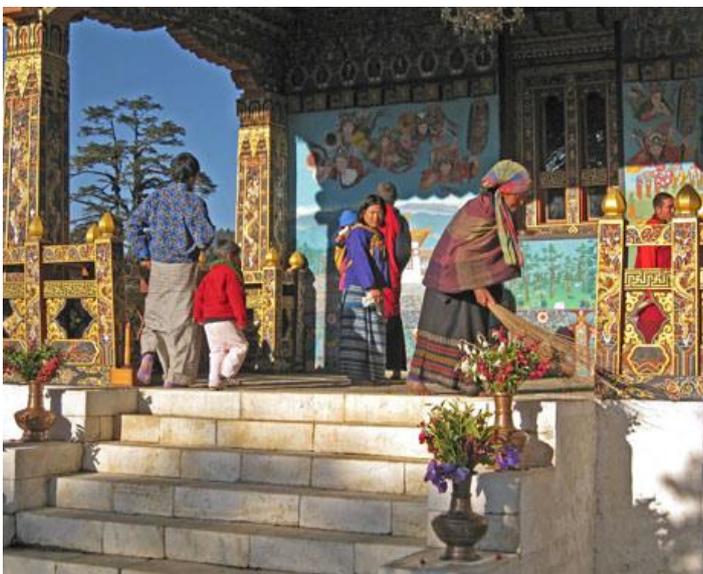
In the forest we may see Himalayan Swiftlet, Great Himalayan, Blue-throated and Golden-throated Barbets, Greater and Lesser Yellow-naped Woodpeckers, Maroon Oriole, Ashy and Hair-crested Drongos, and a wide variety of attractive Himalayan flycatchers, leaf warblers, flycatcher-warblers, nuthatches, flowerpeckers and sunbirds. Among the more unusual forest species recorded here are Bay Woodpecker, Long-tailed Broadbill and Red-headed Trogon.

We will then return to Punakha and later in the afternoon explore further along the river, where we will be on the lookout for Ibisbill and Bar-headed Geese on the surrounding gravel beds, as well as migrants such as the lovely Ruddy Shelduck. This valley is an important migration conduit, and almost anything could turn up.

## Day 7

### Gangtey/Nobding, Bhutan; via Wangduephodrang

In the morning we will travel eastwards through the Black Mountain region for three hours to Gangtey or Nobding, via Wangduephodrang. The drive is relatively short and we will make a series of brief stops to scan the river channel. We may see Pallas's Gull and Pallas's Fishing Eagle here and add a number of other species to our Bhutanese list. We will check forest edges and explore some of the small patches of cultivation then continue our search in areas of productive forest near the end of our journey; here we will be looking for rare species. Past



highlights at this location have included Himalayan Honeyguide, Crested Kingfisher, Tibetan Serin, Short-billed Minivet and Rufous-bellied Bush-robin. Spotted Laughingthrush, Rusty-flanked Treetreeper, White-browed Bush Robin and White-winged Grosbeak also occur here.

We will stay in Gangtey, in the heart of the Phobjika Valley or Nobding, in the middle of the forest. Nobding is around 20 kilometres from Gangtey. It gives an easy access to old road at Pelela pass that host many high altitude species like Himalayan Monal, Rufous-breasted and

Darjeeling Woodpecker, Collared and White-winged Grosbeak, White-browed and Dark-rumped Rosefinch, Spotted and Black-faced Laughingthrush, Brown Parrotbill, Himalayan Griffon just to name a few.

## Day 8

### Gangtey/Nobding, Bhutan

Today, we will have full day to explore the Phobjika Valley and enjoy the impressive birding it has to offer. The fascinating village of Gangtey sits on the ridge overlooking the large green expanse of the Phobjika Valley. A large flock of Black-necked Cranes winters here, making this valley one of the most important wildlife reserves in the country.

Every November, local children, farmers, and monks flood the monastery's courtyard to celebrate the arrival of some beloved visitors: black-necked cranes, among the rarest cranes in the world—several hundred of which migrate here each year. The cranes travel from their summer breeding grounds on the Tibetan Plateau to this picturesque Bhutanese valley, where they feed on the dwarf bamboo that grows in the valley's alpine wetlands. During the winter months, as they roost amid the farms and cottages of Phobjikha, they form an integral part of life for the people who live here.

The only alpine crane species in the world, the black-necked crane is considered a sacred bird in Bhutan, revered as a symbol of longevity. With a bright red crown, black neck, and up to eight-foot wing span, the birds are both distinctive and majestic. They are the subject of Bhutanese folktales and songs, and are painted on the walls of temples throughout the country. In the Phobjikha Valley, residents protect these graceful creatures, whose presence is believed to bring about bountiful harvests and prosperity. In recent years, Bhutan has taken steps to ensure the protection of the cranes and safeguard their passage to the valley. In 2008, when the introduction of electrical power lines threatened the cranes' migration route, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), a nonprofit organisation in Bhutan, successfully lobbied for an underground power grid instead. RSPN has also spearheaded projects with the local community to ensure a peaceful coexistence between birds and people, such as expanded protection of their wetland habitat.

The Black-necked Crane Festival, which began in 1998, draws an increasing number of travellers to this remote valley each year, creating a valuable revenue stream for Bhutanese residents. The festival happens on 11th November every year. This one-day event at Gangtey Goemba provides an opportunity for locals to celebrate the arrival of the cranes, showcase their cultural heritage through masked folk dances and songs, and raise awareness about conservation issues. For visitors, it's not only an opportunity to experience one of Bhutan's most famed festivals—it's also a chance to pay homage to this sacred bird while supporting a community that is working to protect it.

## Day 9

### Thimphu, Capital of Bhutan

We will start our long drive (a journey of about seven or eight hours) to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, which sits in a broad valley at an altitude of 2,350 metres. We will spend the day driving and birding through a wonderland of vast forests occasionally interspersed with farmlands and beautiful waterfalls. We may see Great Cormorants and Common Mergansers near the river, and our final stop before Thimphu could add Red-crested Pochard, Ruddy Shelduck, Eurasian Wigeon, River Lapwing and wintering Oriental Skylarks to our list.

On our November 2021 departure, we will attend the festival in the morning and will leave for Thimphu in the afternoon.

## Day 10

### Thimphu, Bhutan

Today we will visit some of Thimphu's cultural sights, which may include the Textile Museum, Heritage Museum, Handicrafts Emporium, Memorial Chorten (built in 1974 as a memorial to one of Bhutan's kings), Zilukha Nunnery or the Painting School.

We will also do birding around sewage pond in Thimphu searching for one of the main target bird, Ibisbill, other birds we'll be searching here include Black-tailed Crake, Brown Dipper, Ruddy Shelduck, Common Merganser, White-capped and Plumbeous Water Redstart, White Wagtail, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Common and Green Sandpiper, Common and Crested Kingfisher just to name few...

## Day 11

### Paro (Bhutan); fly to Guwahati (India)

In the early morning, we will be transferred to Paro airport to board KB540. It is a short one hour flight. After arrival in Guwahati we will be transferred by road to Manas National Park (approximately 5 hours). We will stay at Musa Jungle Retreat for three nights. It is spread across eight acres and offers comfortable accommodation with all modern amenities, situated at the closest southern proximity of Manas National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the Bansbari range.

## Day 12 – 13

### Manas National Park, Assam

We will enjoy the morning and afternoon safaris inside the Manas National Park by jeeps during our stay. Contiguous with the Royal Manas National Park on its borders in Bhutan, this park in the North Eastern State of Assam will leave you absolutely enchanted and is historically at least, the only park in India where, if lucky, you could see the 'big five' on the same game drive – herds of elephant, wild water buffalo, leopard, tiger and the Indian one-horned rhino – making it singularly unique as a safari destination. This is one reason it has also been designated a UNESCO Natural World Heritage site, a tiger reserve, an elephant reserve and a biosphere reserve - all at the same time. Against the backdrop of the Himalayan foothills, it is named after the Manas River, which in turn borrowed its identity from the serpent goddess, Manasa. The river meanders through the heart of the park and supports one of the richest flora and fauna biodiversity in the world. It is interesting to know that Manas National Park is also an important migratory corridor for the elephant population of the entire Indo-Bhutan region, and a huge 380 species of birds have been recorded here. Spread across 3150.92 sq. km., Manas is lush with patches of dense jungle interspersed with grassland and thick undergrowth. It is best known for its rare and endangered wildlife, more than any other park in India, like the pygmy hog, Bengal florican, golden langur, Assam roofed turtle, and its population of wild water buffalo.

## Day 14

### Kaziranga National Park, Assam

Today we leave Manas and proceed to Kaziranga. It will be a long drive with intermittent stops. We will board our transport and spend the remainder of the day driving to Kaziranga Tiger Reserve (8-hour drive), where we will settle into the Infinity Lodge or Wild Grass Lodge. These are small, comfortable lodges which offers en suite rooms with showers and is set in a pleasant garden. It is surrounded by open grassland and some wooded areas, both of which are good for birding.

Kaziranga, with an area of 430 square kilometres, is one of the world's most beautiful national parks. It lies on the south bank of the great Brahmaputra River and is one of the last haunts of the Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros. The area was first given protection as a forest reserve in the early years of this century, but it was not opened to visitors until 1938, and it was not until 1954 that the Great Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros was given complete statutory protection, allowing Kaziranga to become one of the most important refuges for this endangered mammal. The wildlife sanctuary was given National Park status in 1974 and today there are over 1,100 rhinos in the park, a figure which represents over 70% of the world total. Kaziranga is also home to the Asian Elephant, wild Water Buffalo, Swamp Deer and the endangered freshwater Ganges River Dolphin.

## Day 15 – 17

### Kaziranga Tiger Reserve, Assam

We will spend our three full days in Kaziranga exploring the reserve, mostly by jeep. There will be ample time for birdwatching and photography as well as opportunities to learn about the work of the reserve patrols.



Kaziranga is a vast area of swamps interspersed with broad tracts of tall elephant grass, open forests, watercourses (known as 'jheels') and reedbeds. To the south the ground rises to 1,200 metres to form the Mikir Hills, an important refuge for the reserve's wildlife when the lowlands flood during the annual monsoon.

In addition to seeing the endangered Greater One-horned Rhinoceros, we also hope to see Kaziranga's important population of Water Buffalo, (one of the last remaining wild populations), and a variety of other mammal

species, such as Rhesus Macaque, Common and Capped Langurs, Sambar, plus Swamp, Barking and Hog Deer, Common and Clawless Otters, and Wild Boar. We will make every effort to locate other more elusive inhabitants of the Reserve such as Asian Elephant and Hoolock Gibbon. Birdlife is equally diverse and among the bird species found here is an exceptional range of waterbirds – cormorants, herons, egrets, storks, geese, ducks, waders, terns and birds of prey. Other regional specialities include Swamp Partridge, Bengal Florican, Abbott's Babbler, Sultan

Tit, Black-breasted Thrush, Bristled Grass Warbler, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker and Little Spiderhunter. It really is a wonderful place to visit.

## Day 18

### Transfer to Guwahati & Flight to Kolkata

We will leave Kaziranga today then travel by road to Guwahati or Jorhat where we will board our flight to Kolkata. On arrival in Kolkata we will transfer to the Hyatt Hotel, where we'll spend our final night in India.

## Day 19

### London

We will be transferred to the airport to board our flight back to London, via Dubai. Arrive London at 8pm.

**NB. Please note that the itinerary offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some reordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.**

---

## Sunderbans Extension

(The minimum number of people required to run this extension is five; however, we may decide to operate it with fewer people, at our discretion, with local guides.)

### Introduction

Sunderbans is a unique area. Extending for over 10,000 square kilometres it is the world's largest delta, formed by the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghana rivers, and spanning two countries – India and Bangladesh (the latter having the lion's share). The contours of the landscape remain in a constant state of flux because of annual monsoon flooding. Roughly one third of the delta is water, consisting of rivers, channels and tidal creeks that can be up to 5 kilometres wide. Here, in the region's extensive mangrove forests, remains the world's largest concentration of Tigers. On the Indian side of the delta, Sunderbans National Park overlooks the Bay of Bengal.

## Day 19

### Kolkata to Sunderbans

The Sunderbans is accessed from Kolkata by travelling south-east by road for 86 kilometres, through wetlands and agricultural land, to Godkahli. From here we will take a 1½-hour boat ride from Godkahli jetty to our lodge, Jungle Camp, on Bali Island.

Set in a remote and beautiful watery location this island gives visitors the feeling of being transported back in time, and it is hard to believe we are only five hours from the busy and cosmopolitan city of Kolkata. Jungle Camp

provides simple cottage-style accommodation with en suite facilities, and hot water on request. The lodge also takes an active role in supporting conservation initiatives and promoting local projects.

## Day 20 – 21

### Sunderbans

The Sunderbans is steaming and untamed, a vast area covering 4,264 square kilometres in India alone, with a larger portion (60%) in Bangladesh. The 2,585 square kilometres of the Indian Sunderbans that are protected within Sunderbans National Park form the largest protected area in India. The region received UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1997, and is the world's largest estuarine forest – a stretch of impenetrable mangrove forest of great size and harbouring an incredible biodiversity. Fishing, timber extraction and honey collection are the main human activities allowed within Sunderbans.

To the naturalist, the best known inhabitant of Sunderbans is the Tiger and the delta is home to the largest single population in the world (estimated at 300 individuals). The Tigers inhabiting this mangrove wilderness have become adept at living a semi-aquatic lifestyle. Despite their relatively large numbers, Sunderban Tigers are not easy to see and are generally strictly nocturnal, resting up during the heat of the day. Mammals that are easier to spot include Wild Boar, Spotted Deer and Rhesus Macaque, while interesting smaller mammals such as Fishing Cat and Small-clawed Otter are occasionally seen. The mangroves also provide a home for many large reptiles such as the Indian Rock Python, King Cobra, Water Monitor and Estuarine Crocodile. The endangered Olive Ridley Turtle also nests here. Regrettably, Leopard, Javan Rhinoceros, Swamp Deer and Water Buffalo have all become extinct in the delta in recent decades, which only serves to emphasise the urgent need for conservation in this globally significant area.

Birds will be among the highlights in this watery national park, especially a wide range of wetland birds, colourful kingfishers, and many mangrove specialists such as Masked Finfoot, Mangrove Pitta and Mangrove Whistler. We also have a slim chance of encountering dolphins. Three species regularly occur here – Ganges River Dolphin, Irrawaddy Dolphin and Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin. We will need good fortune to observe a Tiger during our excursions, but this extension does allow participants to view a unique and severely threatened aquatic habitat, mostly by means of boat excursions.

## Day 22

### Kolkata

After a final excursion in Sunderbans National Park, we will drive back to Kolkata airport to board our Emirates scheduled evening flight back to London via Dubai.

## Day 23

### London

We will arrive in London in the early morning.

---

## Grading

A (easy). This is an adventurous tour based around simple living conditions. However, you will not need a high level of fitness to participate in the walks and jeep drives on this tour.

## Weather

The February/March departure takes place at the end of the winter/early spring and in the dry season (though as Assam has the highest rainfall on earth there is perhaps no season that can genuinely be considered a dry season). Although cloud is likely in the hills, and perhaps some rain, we should also get plenty of clear weather, with warm days in the lowlands but chilly nights. Morning mists are a feature of the Himalayan foothills at this time of the year; they can be cool and damp, but usually clear during mid-morning. In Bhutan, the days and nights will be cool, where temperature could go well below zero.

If good weather is as important as wildlife sightings to you, the post-monsoon period of late October/ November offers the very best weather the Himalayas have to offer. Clear days and blue skies are expected for much of the time during this period and rain is infrequent. In the hills, days will generally be warm (15-23°C), and nights will be cool, dropping to about 2-5°C. In the lowlands, days will be warm to hot (up to 26°C), and nights mild to cool. Visibility is exceptional at this time of year, and it is the best time for mountain views.

## Inclusions / Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- International and domestic flights in economy class.
- Full board accommodation throughout (i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner) except for main meals in Kolkata. A 5-star hotel in Kolkata, and a comfortable wildlife lodge in Kaziranga. The details of accommodation in Bhutan will be confirmed nearer the time of departure. All rooms have private facilities.
- All transport and guiding.
- All wildlife excursions, park fees and reserve entry fees.

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Indian e-visa (currently US\$40) and Bhutan visa (currently US\$40).
- Drinks (though most lodges in the national parks provide boiled drinking water or a bottle of water with their compliments).
- Discretionary tipping (leaders and drivers). During the course of your holiday you will receive periodic assistance from a wide variety of enthusiastic, friendly and helpful local guides, jeep drivers, trackers, hotel porters, waiters and other local people. The tipping of these individuals will be handled by your tour leader(s) and its cost is included within the price of your holiday.
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, laundry, camera fees. In Bhutan camera fees is included.

## Flights

We use scheduled Emirates flights for this tour. This airline offers an excellent all-round service, including departures from Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. Please note that departures from regional airports are subject to an additional charge of **£150**. If you would prefer to travel in Business Class, it's normally available at a

supplement charge of around **£2,695**. The flights are not direct and have a stopover in Dubai. If you would prefer to travel from one of these regional airports or fly in business class, please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements.

## Mammal & Bird Lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and we will gladly send these to you before booking if you would like to see a more detailed preview.

## Passport & Visa Requirements

All nationalities require a multiple entry visa for India, and a visa for Bhutan. At the time of accepting your booking we will send you the appropriate details for obtaining your Indian visa. When applying for an Indian visa please make sure to apply for a **'Multiple Entry One Year E-Visa'** – this is vital as it allows you to visit re-enter India after your Bhutan trip. According to current regulations, our ground agents in Bhutan are able to obtain your Bhutan visa for you. To apply for your Bhutan visa, we will require a **photocopy of your passport in colour** clearly showing your photograph, passport number, date of issue, date of expiry and your date of birth, and a colour passport-sized **photograph**. We will require these details immediately after you have booked this holiday.

## How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

**Please provide us with your passport details (passport number, date of issue, date of expiry and your date of birth) at the time of booking. It is important to note that game safaris will be booked using the same passport details that you provide us at the time of booking, and it will not be possible to change these details once they have been booked. (If you renew your passport after booking, please also bring the old passport whose details you gave us at the time of booking as this will also be required.)**