Birds & Mammals of Manas National Park
With notes on Khasi Hills, Meghalaya & around Guwahati, Assam
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ITINERARY

19/1  Early domestic flight Delhi directly to Guwahati. 09.00-13.30 drive
       Guwahati to Koklabari. 13.30-15.00 Manas Jungle Camp (Koklabari). 15.00-17.30
       Seed farm (Koklabari).

20/1  06.00-13.50 drive to grassland, 13.50-15.00 Manas Jungle Camp
       (Koklabari), 15-17.30 drive to Bhutan border, 16.30-16.45 walk in Bhutan.

21/1  06.15-08.45 walk from Manas Jungle Camp (Koklabari), 09.00-13.45 drive
       to Mothanguri, 13.45-18.00 around Mothanguri.

22/1  06.00-11.00 drive to grassland near Uchlia, 11.00-13.30 Mothanguri,
       13.30-15.10 drive Mothanguri to Bansbari, 15.10-16.40 elephant ride near

23/1  05.40-07.00 drive Mothanguri to Bansbari, 07.00-07.15 Bansbari, 07.15-
       12.00 drive Bansbari to Ultapani, 12.00-17.30 Ultapani, 17.30-21.15 drive (after
       dark) Ultapani to Koklabari.

24/1  06.15-09.30 Manas Jungle Camp (Koklabari), drive to Guwahati 09.30-
       14.00, 10.30-11.00 stop E of Singimari village (app. 10 km N of bridge), 14.00-
       17.30 drive to Guwahati.

25/1  Daybreak and early morning at Mawjrong View Point. Midday around
       Nohkalikai Falls (Cherrapunji). Late afternoon Shillong Hills.

26/1  09.30-10.00 Deepor Beel, 10.15-10.25 Guwahati dump, 10.25-10.45 drive
       to Airport. Domestic flight 13.00- 17.00 Guwahati to Delhi (with stopover in
       Bhagalpur (Bihar)).

INTRODUCTION

This report deals with notes on birds and mammals (and a few reptiles & one
amphibian) from a visit to Assam and Meghalaya during the period 19-26/1
2011.

Manas National Park was the main goal of this visit – this legendary park has
been high on our priority list of areas that we wanted to see, ever since our first
visit to India 25 years ago. Finally this was possible, and we were not
disappointed. Manas NP is a fabulous area with a mixture of grassland and forest,
which is second to none. Due to tribal conflicts Manas NP has been out of reach
for a number of years. This has now changed, and a number of community- based
projects are rapidly improving the opportunities for visits to the area. We stayed
at Manas Jungle Lodge owned by the Manas Maozigendri Ecotourism Society.
Recent information about birding and mammaling in Manas is scarce, but we
improvised during our field days in good collaboration with the staff at Manas Jungle Lodge.

A number of the top-mammals were seen: Tiger, Indian One-horned Rhino, Asian Elephant (daily), Golden Langur, Capped Langur and Wild Buffalo. We tried to find the Pygmy Hog and Hispid Hare but without success. Grass was high everywhere during our visit, and the rest of Manas is dense forest. This makes mammal-spotting difficult. Besides, numbers of mammals are still quite low - but they are now recovering after the rebel years, where widespread poaching took place. For the time being Manas is not the place to expect large numbers of mammals – but whenever you find some, they are sure to be interesting.

Birding in Manas is excellent with many prolific species including mega-birds like the threatened Greater and Lesser Adjutant Storks, Swamp Francolin, Black-breasted Parrotbill and Finn’s Weaver. In addition we very much enjoyed species like Spot-bellied Eagle Owl, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Long-tailed & Silver-breasted Broadbills, White-tailed Blue Robin, Rufous-rumped Grassbird, Sultan Tit, Spot-winged Starling and many more.

Flying in and out of Guwahati, we also decided to make a brief visit to the nearby Khasi Hills – well knowing that is was not the optimal season and likely to give only an incomplete experience of this unique area. Indeed, birding proved difficult, and furthermore our brief visit was hampered by an upcoming general strike which we just managed to escape (see ‘Practicalities’). But we did find the endemic Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler and moreover came across fine species like Crested Finchbill, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Grey Sibia, Assam Laughing Thrush and the ‘Khasi Hills’ Prinia – the distinct subspecies of Black-throated Prinia, which may well be a separate species.

Northeast India holds many other interesting places, but as our visit was limited to these few days we had to focus.

PRACTICALITIES

Technical arrangement: We placed the responsibility for the overall technical arrangements in the safe hands of Wild World India (www.wildworldindia.com). Vikram Singh did an excellent job, which completely fulfilled our expectations. Furthermore, when two unforeseen problems occurred, they handled these issues efficiently in collaboration with our guide Abidur Rahman: (1) Soon after returning to our hotel in Shillong after dark on 25/1 it became clear that a general strike in the entire state of Meghalaya had been declared for the next day (Republic Day). This meant that roadblocks could be expected, and we were likely to get stuck on this our final day where we had a scheduled late afternoon flight back to Delhi from Guwahati. Within 15 minutes we evacuated the hotel and started driving towards Guwahati. Fear of roadblocks being established already during the evening proved to be unfounded – however we did have problems finding an open gas-station, where we could have the almost empty tank filled up. Before the evacuation as well as during the drive we were in close contact with WWI over the phone, and we had hardly left Shillong, before the booking of a new hotel in central Guwahati was confirmed. (2) Our late afternoon domestic flight to Delhi was advanced four hours, i.e. cutting out most
of the available field-time on our final day. An improvised programme was decided with brief visits to the wetland Deepor Beel and the famous Guwahati dump with Greater Adjutants.

Accommodation: We were based at Manas Jungle Camp at Koklabari (the first two nights and the last night). It is a well-working community-based lodge with a few roomy bungalows (each having attached bathrooms with hot water). There are mosquito-nets over each bed. The nice food is local and vegetarian. In addition we spent two nights at the Government Rest House at Mothanguri. It will be difficult to find any rest house with a better location: On a high bank overlooking the border river to Bhutan. We had an excellent room with attached bathroom. Hot water was provided in a bucket. Good vegetarian food was served in the local cantina. At both places, beer can be provided upon request – and it was Bhutanese! For the time being there is no accommodation around Ualtapani (the west of the wider Manas area). Other options for accommodation are found around Bansbari. The cities of Shillong and Guwahati have plenty of hotels.

Season: Mid-winter is OK for a visit to Manas but March-April is better for a number of breeding birds, e.g. Bengal Florican. Mid-winter seems definitely too early for the Khasi Hills. Not only did we experience a bitterly cold morning, but bird activity was mainly restricted to early morning and late afternoon.

Transport: We had a pre-hired vehicle with driver for the transfer from the Guwahati airport to/from Manas and for the visit to Meghalaya. For all transport in Manas we used a small open jeep belonging to Manas Jungle Camp. For the longer drive outside Manas NP from Bansbari to Ualtapani and back to Koklabari, the jeep was replaced by a small hardtop vehicle. There is only one bridge crossing the Brahmaputra River near Guwahati and it can be a serious bottleneck for the traffic. En route towards Manas early in the morning there were no problems but when we were heading for Khasi Hills and had to pass in at mid the day it took us three hours to cross the river.

MANAS NATIONAL PARK

If you are a dedicated birder, we cannot too strongly recommend that you are based at Manas Jungle Lodge. This lodge is located at a stream right at the Park boundary. Birding from the lodge and around it is excellent. Elephants can be heard from the lodge in the evening! The nearby Koklabari village has a lively market.

Birds are found everywhere, but we give a few comments to some of the areas visited within the core- area of Manas National Park (see map). Seedfarm: Farmland with many birds. It is a key-site for Bengal Florican, but the species is difficult to see in mid-winter, when the males are not displaying. Three species of harrier, Pied Harrier being the most numerous. Grassland: Here is a forestguard post with a watchtower. An (abandoned) colony of Finn’s Weaver was visible from the post. The area is reached through very good forest. Good forests: Old forest with Long-tailed Broadbill, Greater Necklaced Laughing-Thush and a good chance to see Red-headed Trogon. Grassland near Uchilia: The road runs on a dike through dense grassland with ponds next to the road. Multiple
waterbirds, incl. crakes, Yellow Bittern etc. Black-breasted Parrotbill and other skulking birds can be found.

Top-guide is Rustom Basumatary (3rd from right above). Rustom is brilliant in the field and knows Manas very well. He is dedicated and just as eager as yourself to find both birds and mammals. The Manager Haribilash Basumatary (4th from left) is also very helpful - he and the rest of the team did their utmost to fullfill our wishes. Visiting birders are still few and no doubt detailed knowledge of the area will improve in the years to come.

MANAS BIOSPHERE RESERVE

From the Mothanguri Rest House it is possible to see Golden Langurs across the border-river on the Bhutanese side – but pretty far away. We wished to have a better look, and Rustom & Haribilash quickly arranged a visit to the forests west of Manas National Park. These forests are part of the more than five times larger Manas Biosphere Reserve (in which Manas NP is the core-area). We visited another community-based project in the village of Ultapani. From Manas NP it is a long drive on the main road towards West Bengal (see map) to reach Ultapani. Already when we entered the forests and were approaching the village we had the first of six troops of Golden Langurs. Obviously the protection of this species has improved dramatically as the troops are rather habituated and allow you to have close look. One troop crossed from one side of the road to the other along branches right above us. The people from the Biodiversity Conservation Society in Utalpani were exceptionally helpful, Baba Kumar Brahma Chaudhury (1st from left in front row on photo p. 6) and Khanga Bahadun Magan (2nd from left in front row). BKBC took us around the forest with more langur-troops and plenty of birds. Further we met with Nirmal Kanti Dey (1st from right in front row), who is actively working to have the local communities more involved in nature protection. Our guide, Rustom Basumatary, is 2nd from left in rear row.

KHASI HILLS (MEGHALAYA)

Khasi Hills is a fairly isolated highland – south of the Brahmaputra plains and north of Bangladesh. Reaching an altitude of almost 2000 m this highland makes an interesting ‘island’ – which is also shown by the presence of at least one endemic bird species (Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler). Unfortunately most of the original forest is gone, but it is possible to visit patches of good habitat still holding a number of the interesting species characteristic for the southern part of NE India. Like the tribal people here, the birds also have Burmese affinities.

Our birding became restricted to only one full day (see details under ‘Practicalities’). We visited three classic sites: Mawjrong Viewpoint, Nohkalikai Falls and Shillong Hills.

GUWAHATI AREA

During our last few hours before checking in at the Airport we visited two sites near Guwahati: The wetland Deepor Beel and the famous rubbish dump holding one of the highest known concentrations of Greater Adjutant Stork.
During the visit to Khasi Hills and Guwahati, we were accompanied by the top-professional and dedicated birder, Abidur Rahman. Abid is based at Kaziranga, but is taking birders to all the top-sites in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. He has fabulously good ears and knows the calls of every local bird. He is always working on tape-recording the birds in NE India.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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OBSEvationS


During the trip we managed to get photos of 11 species of mammals and 52 species of birds. This is indicated by an * in front of the name of each of these species (or subspecies).

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See PDF Checklist of Birds & Mammals