

## Mammals in Bhutan

08-25 April 2013 (17 days)

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### Introduction

I have been keen to do a trip to the Himalayas in Nepal since I first heard stories of exciting scenery and birds back in 1980. As the years progressed I heard tales of possibilities of seeing monals and tragopans further east in Bhutan. My interests have broadened over the 30 years that I have had to plan this trip and I now enjoy all forms of wildlife. I have been lucky to join Richard Webb and Nigel Goodgame on some very special mammal-watching trips and my enthusiasm to write this report came from those experiences. I settled for a high altitude trip to Bhutan and a low altitude trip to the Terai in Nepal. I have produced a report for each trip.

The timing of the trip was to go before the monsoon season. Most birdwatching trips go earlier to see the Black-necked Cranes that winter in Bhutan. I had already seen this species in Tibet and so I could be more flexible. During April, many of the fields in the Indian subcontinent were being burnt in preparation for the new growing season and that created a white haze most of the time. This made less favourable conditions for photography.

### Logistics

#### Flights

I used Air India from London Heathrow to Delhi and then Delhi to Kathmandu, Nepal.

I then flew Druk Air from Kathmandu to Paro, Bhutan. Druk Air are the main airline to fly into Bhutan. They fly from Delhi, Kathmandu and Bangkok. It is possible to enter Bhutan overland from India via the southern and eastern borders.

#### Travel

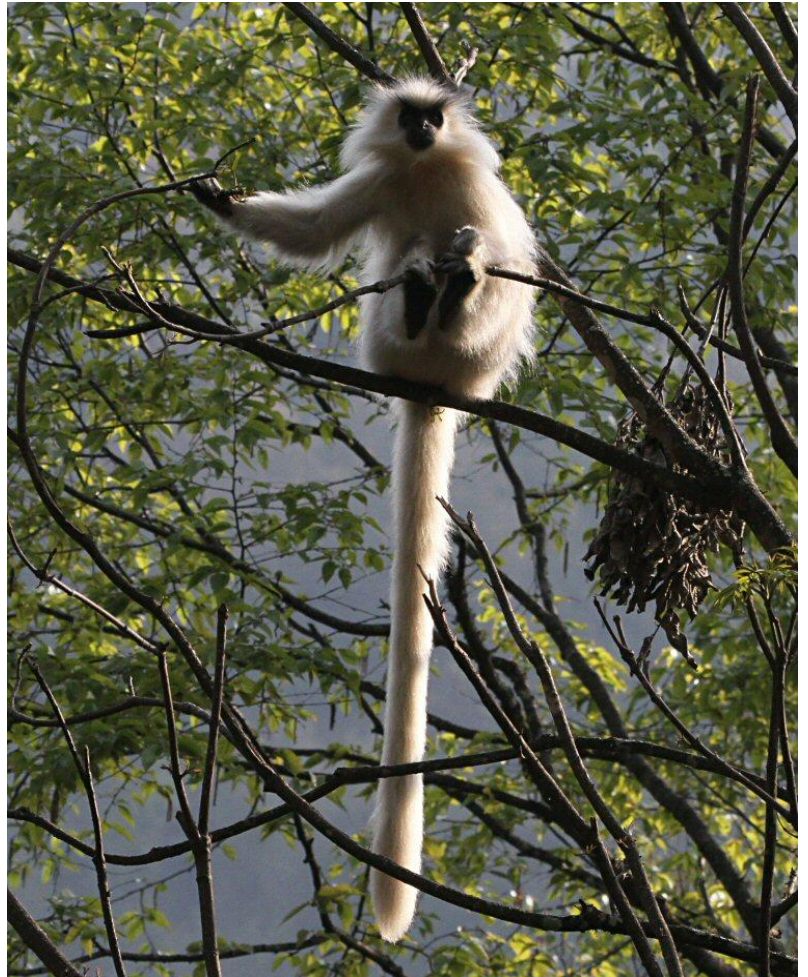
I booked the trip by looking for a company in previous trip reports and contacting them by email. I booked a fully inclusive tour. I used Bhutan Birding & Heritage Travels. I communicated with Hishey Tshering at [hishey@druknet.bt](mailto:hishey@druknet.bt). I got my own guide and a driver for the whole of the trip.

#### Money

This is not a cheap trip. It was even more expensive as I was travelling on my own. I had to pay US\$250 a day to be in Bhutan as part of Bhutan government tourism policy. However, all of the costs of the trip were taken from this money and presumably the money left over goes to the Bhutan government. The excessive costs serve to restrict the number of tourists.

#### Itinerary

BB&HT were happy for me to offer an itinerary and they then suggested details and improvements. They booked the flights with Druk Air although it is possible to book this over the Internet. BB&HT organised the visa. This includes all travel and accommodation details and is a printed sheet, not a stamp in a passport. The visa needs to be shown before you get on the Druk Air flight.



Golden Langur *Presbytis geei* - Pelela Pass - 12/04/13

## Accommodation

Very good quality hotels are available in all of the main tourist areas. It is expected that tourist stay in these hotels. Camping is required on the Lingmethang Road and the Zhemgang Road because there are no very good hotels. We swapped from camping to less good quality accommodation that was still better than I am used to.

## Food

Every day there was an excessive amount of extremely good quality food made available three times a day. This is part of the high quality tourism expectations that are in place in Bhutan and was most enjoyable. It was not what I am used to and I could have done with less time eating.

## Itinerary

08/04/13	Arrival at Paro Airport. Afternoon drive to Chelela Pass.	Overnight Paro
09/04/13	Morning drive to Chelela Pass and afternoon drive to Thimphu.	Thimphu
10/04/13	Morning Dochula Pass and lower down for the Botanical Gardens. Drive to Punakha to look for White-bellied Heron.	Punakha
11/04/13	Morning in the forests of Jigme Dori National Park, Later drive to the Pelela Pass area.	Pelela area
12/04/13	Early morning on the lower slopes of Pelela and then on to Trongsa. Drive over Yotongla Pass and evening visit to Tharpaling Monastery for Himalayan Monal.	Chummey
13/04/13	Drive over the Thrumshingla Pass and then down the Lingmethang Road to Yongkola for the night.	Yongkola
14/04/13	Birds and mammals on the Lingmethang Road.	Yongkola
15/04/13	Birds and mammals on the Lingmethang Road.	Yongkola
16/04/13	Birds and mammals on the Lingmethang Road.	Yongkola
17/04/13	Sengor area and then drive over the Thrumshingla Pass and on to Bumthang.	Bumthang
18/04/13	Day repairing hand.	Bumthang
19/04/13	Drive to Trongsa and then on to Zhemgang	Zhemgang
20/04/13	Birds and mammals on the Zhemgang Road	Zhemgang
21/04/13	Birds and mammals on the Zhemgang Road	Zhemgang
22/04/13	Return to Trongsa. Visit to the Dzong for Assamese Macaque and more Golden Langur.	Trongsa
23/04/13	Drive to Dochula and stop for the night at the pass.	Dochola
24/04/13	Early morning at the Dochula Pass, then drive to Paro via Thimphu.	Paro
25/04/13	Departure	

## Sites Visited

**Chelela Pass** 3988m, 13084ft.

This is west of Paro on the road to Ha. The climb passes through Blue Pine forest with a transition into Silver Fir and a narrow birch band just below the pass that has an alpine flora. The pikas were in the last 15km on the way up and in the juniper forest about a kilometre over the pass. This is not a busy road. An early start will get you at least 2 hours with little or no traffic. If you are birding, then look for Kalij Pheasant from 24km before the top, Hill Partridge from 20km upwards, Blood Pheasant in the last 7 kms, Satyr Tragopan in the higher fir zone and Himalayan Monal in the top 4 kms.

**Dochula Pass** 3050m, 10000ft.

This is 30km east of Thimphu on the main east-west road. There is lots of traffic all day. The pass is dominated by rhododendron/fir forest. Pikas and Nepal Grey Langur can be found here. On a good day there are excellent views of the high Himalayan peaks in northern Bhutan.

**Jigme Dori National Park**

This is north of Punakha. It looked good, but I did not have long enough there. Recently the road has been disturbed by improvements and developments higher up.

**Pelela Pass** 3350m, 10990ft.

This is 50km east of Punakha and the main east-west road. There is lots of traffic. The pass is dominated by rhododendron/fir forest with an under-storey of dwarf bamboo. Pikas and Nepal Grey Langur can be found here. There is plenty of good habitat on both slopes of the pass and it is possible to find Golden Langur on the lower eastern slope.

### **Trongsa** 2170m, 7120ft.

Is a town situated centrally in Bhutan. To the east lies the route to the Lingmethang Road, to the south lies the Zhemgang Road. It has an impressive Dzong built in 1648. Assamese Macaque can be seen in and around the Dzong and Golden Langur can be seen in the valley below the Dzong.

### **Yotangla Pass** 3400m, 11,155ft.

This is the main pass east of Trongsa on the main east-west road. The pass is dominated by rhododendron/fir forest with an under-storey of dwarf bamboo. It should have pikas and has lots of rhododendrons.

### **Thrumshingla Pass** 3800m, 12,465ft.

This is the high pass east of Bumthang on the main east-west road. It separates central and eastern Bhutan. The pass is dominated by rhododendron/fir forest. It has pikas. Just west of the top of the pass is a rhododendron garden with 22 species of rhododendron.

### **Lingmethang Road**

One of the best roads that I have ever visited for birds. Technically it is not one site; my definition of the Lingmethang Road starts at the Thrumshingla Pass and heads south-east, through the Thrumshingla National Park and ends at Lingmethang, a distance of about 70km. During this journey the altitude drops from 3800m to 1425m so you pass from high altitude rhododendron/fir forest to sub-tropical deciduous forest. Most people camp, but we stayed at a perfectly good hotel at Yongkala, situated just outside the Eastern Boundary of the National Park, about 40 minutes drive before Lingmethang. A new lodge for birdwatchers will open soon in this area. I did not see Golden Langur here although others have. I did not see Capped Langur or Assamese Macaque inside the national park, but I did see them each time I drove south-east of the park, between Yongkala and Lingmethang. Daytime squirrels were seen, but were thin on the ground. Spotlighting was successful only for flying-squirrels. We spotlighted from Sengor to Yongkala on one night, the best area was the 15km section above Yongkala. We were finding flying-squirrels at the rate of about one every 15 minutes. I found pikas in the 5km section above and below Sengor.

I managed to swallow-dive off of the road here and need stitches in a cut on my hand. I went to an adequate basic medical unit at Lingmethang. For the next few days I visited hospitals and medical units to clean the wound, this cost me at least 2 hours a day and curtailed my spotlighting. My advice is probably not to need medical attention here; it is a long way from nowhere.

### **Zhemgang Road**

The Zhemgang Road is a region of sub-tropical forest covering about 40km of road above and mostly below Zhemgang. It has less mix of habitats than the Lingmethang Road but it does have a different range of tree species and hence a different set of birds. The drive from Trongsa to Zhemgang passes through 5 different hydro-electric developments and is devoid of life. It may improve once the development ends, but the disturbance to the area has been significant. Most people camp. We stayed in Zhemgang and my guide and driver cooked because there was no suitable tourist food outlet.

Undoubtedly Golden Langur is the mammalian highlight of this area. It would be impossible to miss this enigmatic creature. As I enjoyed their large numbers my only disappointment was to realise how suspiciously close they appear to be to Capped Langur; they must be very closely related. I counted the Golden Langurs on the 35km drive south of Zhemgang. I counted 83 and was disappointed not to get to 100, two large troops that were near to the village the evening before were nowhere to be seen. Daytime squirrels were seen, but were again thin on the ground. We spotlighted the 15km stretch south of Zhemgang during which a highlight was a Himalayan Goral on a ledge above the road and some very close flying-squirrels. The road is at too low an altitude for pikas.

## **Mammals Seen**

<b>Species</b>	<b>Records</b>
<b>Assamese Macaque</b> <i>Macaca assemensis</i>	The most widespread of the monkeys in Bhutan. The Dzong at Trongsa has a large troop which that problems on a regular basis; a pineapple was stolen from the temple whilst I was there. 12/04/13 - 3 on the eastern slopes of Pelela. 12/04/13 - 4 west of Trongsa. 14/04/13 - 2 south of Yongkola. 16/04/13 - 2 south of Yongkola. 19/04/13 - 4 at Trongsa Dzong. 20/04/13 - 7 north of Zhemgang. 21/04/13 - 8 south of Zhemgang.

	22/04/13 - 22 at Trongsa Dzong.
<b>Golden Langur</b> <i>Presbytis geei</i>	They are restricted to the foothills of the Black Mountains in southern Bhutan. It would be possible to see this without going down the Zhemgang Road; I saw them at Trongsa and on the eastern lower slopes of Pelela. 12/04/13 - 3 on the eastern slopes of Pelela. 19/04/13 - 22 north of Zhemgang. 20/04/13 - 15 south of Zhemgang. 21/04/13 - 83 on the 35km stretch south of Zhemgang. 22/04/13 - 30 south of Trongsa. 22/04/13 - 19 at Trongsa.
<b>Capped Langur</b> <i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i>	They are restricted to the south-east of Bhutan. I saw them on the Lingmethang Road, below Yongkola. 14/04/13 - 3 south of Yongkola. 16/04/13 - 15 south of Yongkola.
<b>Nepal Grey Langur</b> <i>Semnopithecus schistaceus</i>	They can be seen at higher elevations in the west of Bhutan. Best looked for at Dochula and Pelela. Of the four species of monkey to see in Bhutan this is present in the smallest numbers. 11/04/13 - 11 on the western slopes of Pelela.
<b>Yellow-throated Marten</b> <i>Martes flavigula</i>	Widespread throughout Bhutan. Most people see a few of these relatively common mustelids. I began to think I might miss it and only saw it on my last but one day. 21/04/13 - 1 running along the road south of Zhemgang.
<b>Indian Muntjac</b> <i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	Probably in most of the fir forests. I did not see it in the drier pine forests. 09/04/13 - 1 on the lower slopes of Chelela. 12/04/13 - 1 on the track to Tharpaling Monastery.
<b>Himalayan Goral</b> <i>Naemorhedus goral</i>	Widespread throughout Bhutan. 08/04/13 - 1 just over the top of Chelela. Disturbed from its resting place and moved off quickly. 20/04/13 - 1 seen five kilometres south of Zhemgang whilst spotlighting. Seen on a ledge just above the road, still there on our return over an hour later.
<b>Black Giant Squirrel</b> <i>Ratufa bicolor</i>	In the deciduous forests of southern Bhutan. 21/04/13 - 1 40km south of Zhemgang.
<b>Hoary-bellied Squirrel</b> <i>Callosciurus pygerythrus</i>	In the deciduous forests of southern Bhutan. 21/04/13 - 2 40km south of Zhemgang.
<b>Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel</b> <i>Dremomys lokriah</i>	Widely distributed in most forests of Bhutan. 13/04/13 - 1 on the Lingmethang Road. 14/04/13 - 3 on the Lingmethang Road. 15/04/13 - 1 on the Lingmethang Road. 16/04/13 - 1 on the Lingmethang Road.
<b>Himalayan Striped Squirrel</b> <i>Tamiops mcclllandii</i>	Widely distributed in most forests of Bhutan. 15/04/13 - 1 on the Lingmethang Road. 16/04/13 - 1 on the Lingmethang Road.
<b>Hodgson's Flying Squirrel</b> <i>Petaurista magnificus</i>	Deciduous forests of southern Bhutan. 13/04/13 - 6 on the Lingmethang Road north of Yongkala. 20/04/13 - 5 south of Zhemgang.
<b>Parti-coloured Flying Squirrel</b> <i>Hylopetes alboniger</i>	Deciduous forests of south-east Bhutan. 13/04/13 - 1 on the Lingmethang Road 14km north of Yongkala.
<b>Moupin Pika</b> <i>Ochotona thibetana</i>	High altitude rhododendron/fir forests. I found them near the top of each of the passes on the main east-west road. 08/04/13 - 4 at Chelela, 2 on the way up and 2 just over the top of the pass in the juniper forest.

	11/04/13 - 2 near the Pelela Pass. 13/04/13 - 1 west of the Thrumshingla Pass. 13/04/13 - 1 two km south of Sengor Camp. 17/04/13 - 3 two km south of Sengor Camp.
14 species	

### **Selected other mammal possibilities**

Jungle Cat *Felis chaus* - occurs here and must be possible. I saw a suitably marked cat in the long grass at the airport as my plane was leaving. I did not see it in binoculars.

Asiatic Golden Cat *Pardofelis temminckii* - I met two people who had seen this species in Bhutan crossing the road.

Himalayan Serow *Capricornis thar* - has been seen by other observers on other trips.

Hispid Hare *Caprolagus hispidus* - possible down the Zhemgang Road.

Sambar *Rusa unicolor* - has been seen by other observers on other trips.

Himalayan Musk Deer *Moschus leucogaster* - must be possible.

## **Other Wildlife**

### **Birds**

Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus*

Satyr Tragopan *Tragopan satyra*

Blood Pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus*

Kalij Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos*

White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*

Black-tailed Crake *Amaurornis bicolor*

Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota*

Ward's Trogon *Harpactes wardi*

Yellow-rumped Honeyguide *Indicator xanthonotus*

Sultan Tit *Melanochlora sultanea*

Chestnut-headed Tesia *Tesia castaneocoronata*

Beautiful Nuthatch *Sitta formosa*

Himalayan Cutia *Cutia nipalensis*

6 species of yuhinas

### **Plants**

*Rhododendron barbatum*

*Rhododendron dalhousiae*

*Rhododendron edgeworthii*

*Rhododendron griffithianum*

*Rhododendron kesangiae*

*Rhododendron falconeri*

*Magnolia campbellii*

### **Insects**

Indian Luna Moth *Actias selene*

## **References**

Lonely Planet Bhutan (2011), Bradley Mayhew.

Gizi Map - Map Series China 5 - Tibet Autonomous Region. Although only a small part of this map is Bhutan, there is enough detail to plan a trip.

A guide to the Mammals of China (2008), Andrew Smith, Yan Xie and Frederico Gemma.

Field guide to the Mammals of the Indian Subcontinent, K K Gurung and Raj Singh.

Birds of Nepal (2000), Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp and Tim Inskipp.

Birds of Bhutan (2004), Carol Inskipp, Richard Grimmett and Tim Inskipp.

Field guide to the Birds of China (2000), John MacKinnon, Karen Phillipps and Dave Showler.

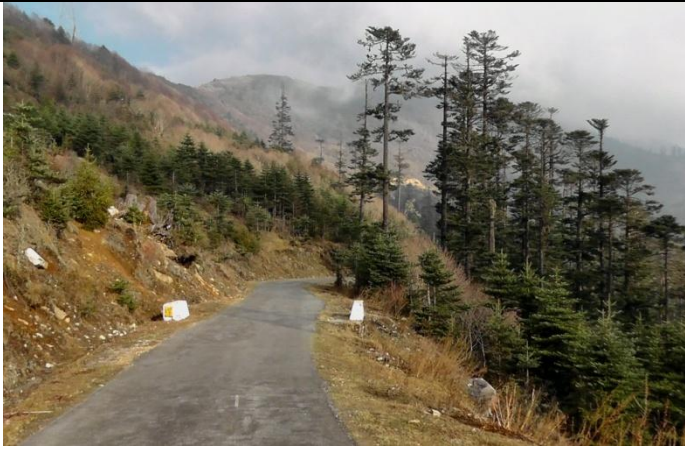
Trees and Shrubs of Nepal and the Himalayas (1998), Adrian and Jimmie Storrs.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks go to Richard Webb and Nigel Goodgame for background knowledge and advice.

Thanks go to Jon Hall and other report writers at mammalwatching.com.

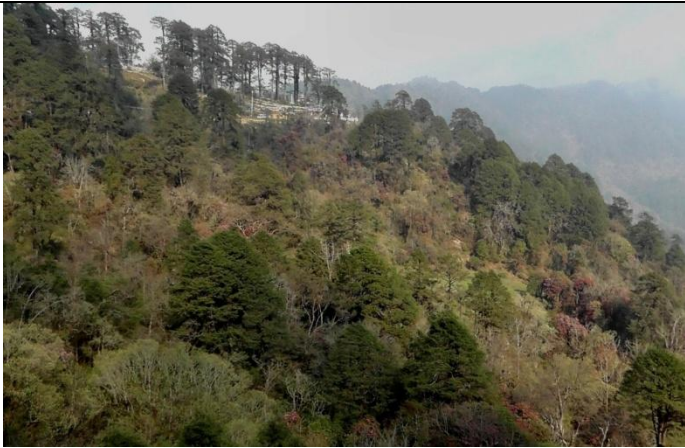
## Photographs - Sites



Chelela Pass - near the top



Chelela Pass - Silver Fir forest



Dochula Pass



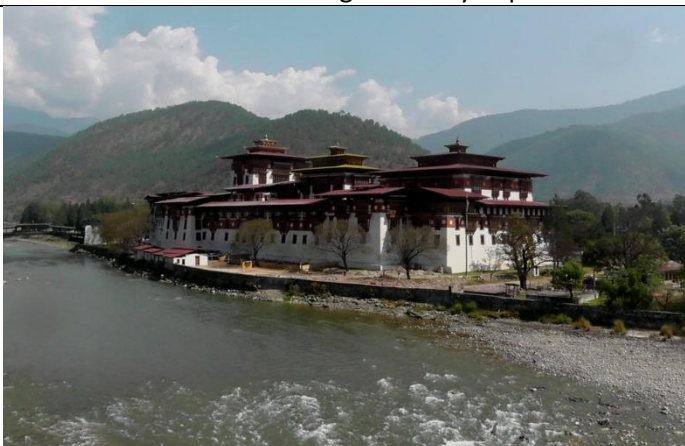
Dochula Pass - looking down to the botanical gardens



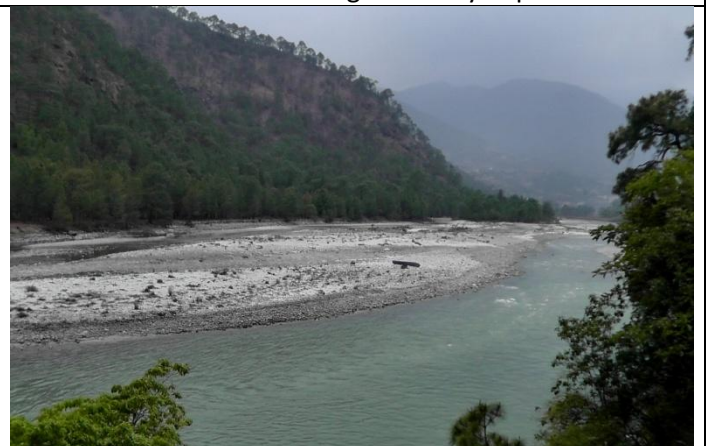
Dochula Pass - view of the high Himalayan peaks



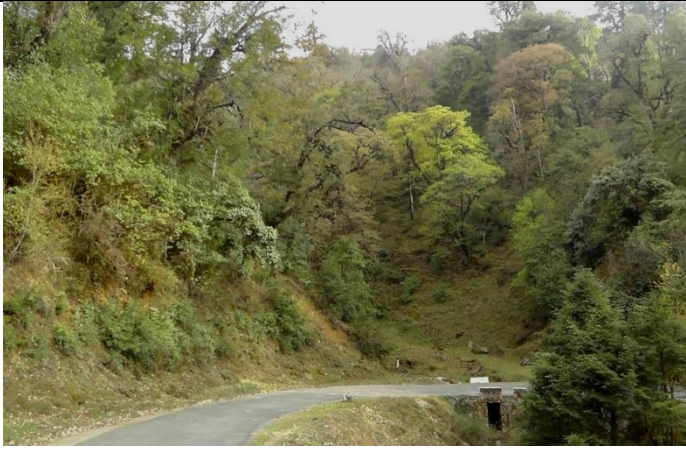
Dochula Pass - view of the high Himalayan peaks



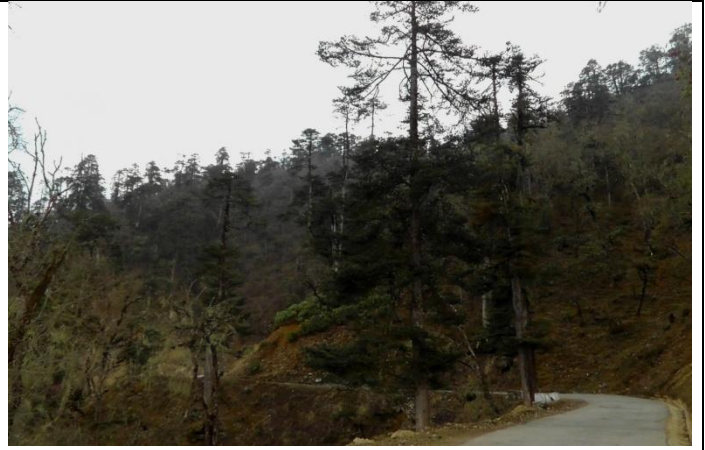
Punakha Dzong



Phochu River near Punakha



Pelela Pass - Nepal Grey Langur site



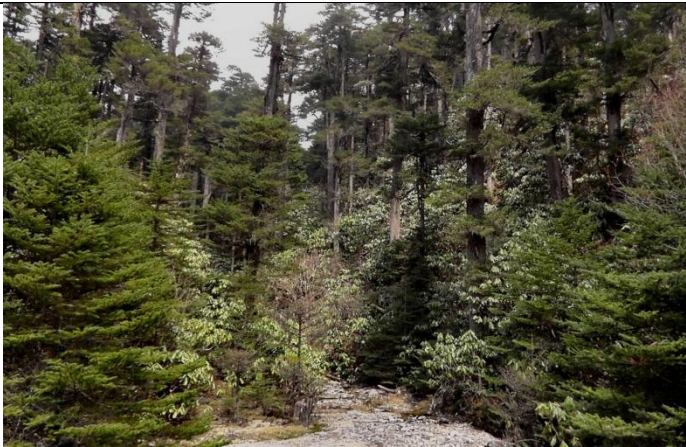
Pelela Pass



Trongsa



Bumthang Dzong



Thrumshingla Pass



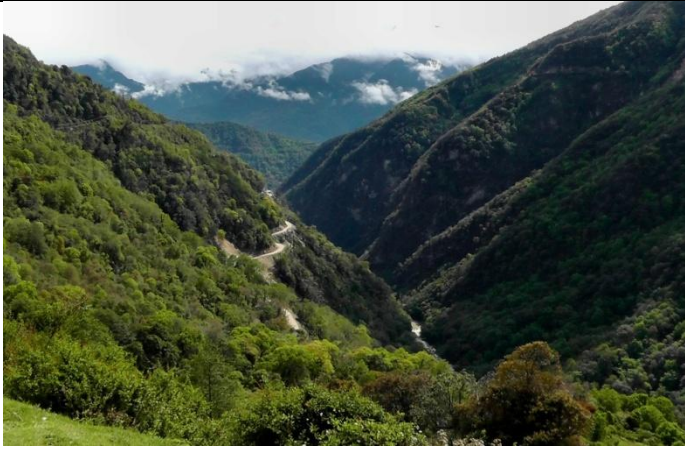
Thrumshingla Pass



Sengor



Bridge on the Lingmethang Road



South of Trongsa - on route to Zhemgang



North of Zhemgang

### Photographs - Mammals



Assamese Macaque *Macaca assemensis* - Zhemgang



Assamese Macaque *Macaca assemensis* - Zhemgang



Assamese Macaque *Macaca assemensis* - Trongsa Dzong. Party of a 22-strong group.





**Golden Langur** *Presbytis geei* - Zhemgang



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**Golden Langur** *Presbytis geei* - Zhemgang



**Capped Langur** *Trachypithecus pileatus* - Lingmethang



**Capped Langur** *Trachypithecus pileatus* - Lingmethang



**Capped Langur** *Trachypithecus pileatus* - Lingmethang



**Capped Langur** *Trachypithecus pileatus* - Lingmethang



**Nepal Grey Langur** *Semnopithecus schistaceus* - Pelela



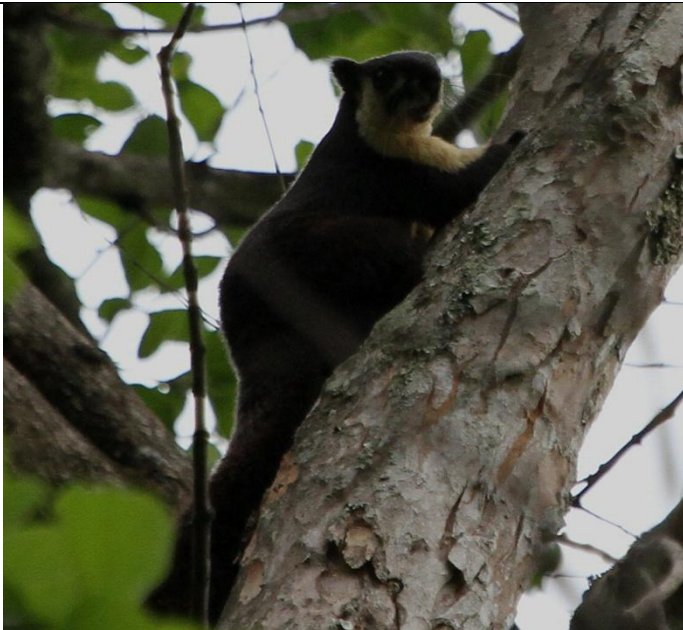
**Nepal Grey Langur** *Semnopithecus schistaceus* - Pelela



**Himalayan Goral** *Naemorhedus goral* - Zhemgang



**Himalayan Goral** *Naemorhedus goral* - Zhemgang



**Black Giant Squirrel** *Ratufa bicolor* - Zhemgang



**Hoary-bellied Squirrel** *Callosciurus pygerythrus* - Zhemgang



**Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel** *Dremomys lokriah* - Lingmethang Road



**Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel** *Dremomys lokriah* - Lingmethang Road



**Himalayan Striped Squirrel** *Tamiops mcclllandii* -  
Lingmethang Road



**Himalayan Striped Squirrel** *Tamiops mcclllandii* -  
Lingmethang Road



**Hodgson's Flying Squirrel** *Petaurista magnificus* - Zhemgang



**Moupin Pika** *Ochotona thibetana* - Chelela



**Moupin Pika** *Ochotona thibetana* - Chelela



**Moupin Pika** *Ochotona thibetana* - Pelela