

THE FIREFOXES OF EASTERN NEPAL

A Six Day Search for Red Panda in the Foothills of the Himalayas.



Red Panda habitat; rhododendron and bamboo forest near Dobate (PT)

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The Firefoxes of Eastern Nepal

1 Introduction

This report describes the results of a six day search for Red Panda (*Ailurus Fulgens*) in the bamboo and rhododendron forests of Eastern Nepal. We set out on Tuesday 21st February and returned to the UK on Thursday 1st March, spending four days in the field. It took us five days to get to and from the target area, which probably gives some idea of how remote it is!

2 The Red Panda Network

Our trip was organised and led by representatives of the Red Panda Network; (for more information contact Nancy Whelan at nancywhelan@redpandanetwork.org). The RPN is doing sterling work in red panda conservation and runs periodic eco-trips to see the animals. They were good enough to put on a custom trip for Phil Telfer and I at fairly short notice and were a pleasure to deal with throughout.

We are grateful to Rajiv Paudel for his fantastic organisational and linguistic skills in getting us safely to and from Kathmandu to the panda area, for arranging very agreeable food and accommodation in the field and for patiently translating between Nepalese and English. We are also indebted to Pingu Sherpa, our hawk-eyed spotter and tracker, without whom we'd probably still be looking for our first panda!

3 The Target Area

We focused on a relatively small area of thick bamboo forest near the village of Dobate in Eastern Nepal. This tiny hamlet, set in the foothills of the Himalayas, comprises about ten houses and holds a population of, perhaps, forty or fifty people. At an altitude of 2660 metres, it is surrounded by dense rhododendron forests – interspersed here and there by rice and potato fields from other nearby hamlets. The forests contain patches of bamboo, mostly in the deep ravines between the undulating hills, and it is here that the Red Panda lives. In the area immediately around Dobate there are some four Red Pandas known to be present.

4 Results

We were delighted to get three sightings of Red Panda (two different animals), both at close quarters. The first animal obliged us, on two occasions, with exceptionally prolonged and close views – enabling us to take some nice photographs and video footage.

We recorded four other mammalian species: Assamese and Rhesus Macaque, Hoary-bellied Squirrel and Small Indian Mongoose. Mammals were generally difficult to see and we tried (unsuccessfully) to find Yellow-throated Marten and Himalayan Crestless Porcupine.

Intriguingly, we found tracks of a medium-sized cat near Dobate which we thought most likely to be a sub-adult Common Leopard, though much more exotic species like Clouded

Leopard, Temminck's Golden Cat or even Marbled Cat could not be ruled out. Other, more common, species like Indian Muntjac and Wild Boar did not come our way but were known to be present.

We put practically no effort into finding birds, though 34 species were amenable enough to present themselves to us, including the spectacular little Fire-tailed Myzornis and the uncommon White-capped Water Redstart.

5 Day-by Day Record

Tuesday 21st February

Our long journey started well enough on Gulf Air's 09.30 flight from London Heathrow to Bahrain, where after a tedious nine hour stop-over, we connected with another Gulf Air flight to Kathmandu. There, we were greeted by Rajiv Paudel, who escorted us to the domestic terminal for the next leg to Bhadrapur in South-eastern Nepal.

Wednesday 22nd February

We had hoped to see Everest on the flight from Kathmandu to Bhadrapur and accordingly Rajiv got us seats on the left hand side of the plane. However, the mountains were more or less lost in clouds and only a few snowy peaks were visible. Less than an hour after leaving Kathmandu we were on the ground in Bhadrapur where a taxi was waiting for us to take us three hours north to the busy tea-producing town of Ilam, our stop for the night.

Thursday 23rd February

We over-nighted at the Green View Guest House in Ilam, an establishment which boasts some of the hardest beds I have ever laid on. The promised hot running water turned out to be mythical and we were amused to see another guest, a young American lady, complaining to the manager that thick black smoke was pouring from the electrical switch on the wall! Evidently the Green View is Ilam's answer to Fawlty Towers.

By 10.00 we were in a jeep bound for Dobate and after a bone-shaking four hour drive along rough, vertiginous and pot-holed tracks we finally made it to our destination. Our accommodation for the next four or five days was a very cosy guest house built from traditional wooden materials and clad in corrugated iron. The landlady brought out chairs into the garden and served us tea. As we sat back, the first mists of the afternoon began to appear. We had arrived in bright sunshine and with temperatures almost in the twenties but in no time at all we found ourselves shrouded in thick freezing fog – a phenomenon which repeated itself at about 13.00 every day.

After lunch we attempted our first look for panda, though without Pingu (who was engaged on other business for an hour or two) and in the cold gloom of the fog, our chances seemed

poor. We gave up after a very short and unproductive foray into the forest and headed back to the guest house where we consumed more tea.



The Guest House in Dobate (SM)

Pingu returned and at 17.00 we set off for a short walk into the rhododendron forest. The area we chose was not likely to produce panda but, with only an hour of daylight remaining, it offered some prospects of finding a few birds and/or the odd smaller mammal. With the light becoming ever dimmer we did indeed find one mammal – an unidentifiable squirrel, which could have been either Hoary-bellied or Orange-bellied; (both species occur around Dobate). Darkness fell soon afterwards and, to our surprise, the fog began to disperse. In fact, this turned out to be a normal part of the daily cycle. The mornings would begin bright and clear and temperatures would rise quickly in the warm early sunshine, peaking at about 20 degrees by lunchtime. Then, the first wraiths of mist would appear and by 14.00 we would be lost in dense fog. Temperatures would plummet, sometimes dropping from 20 to 2 degrees in under an hour, prompting a scramble for warmer clothes. Finally, at dusk, the fog would clear completely and abruptly, revealing black, starry skies. The long nights that followed would be cold with temperatures dropping below zero (both inside and outside the house!). This pattern repeated itself every day and, apparently, is a normal feature of Spring hereabouts.

That evening we set small mammal traps (baited with biscuits and nuts) at supposedly strategic locations in the hope of catching rats or mice. However, this tactic was to prove unsuccessful, probably because most of the small mammals were still hibernating.

Friday 24th February

This was our first real opportunity to look for Red Panda and amid great anticipation we set out in the early morning sunshine with Pingu and Rajiv to search a known panda-holding area of bamboo forest. Indeed, this was the area where a family group of three pandas had been found on an earlier trip the previous December. Rajiv put our chances of success at “99%” and Pingu told us that pandas had been seen on 16 out of 17 previous attempts. Phil and I did not quite know what to make of such cheerful optimism – we had heard this sort of talk before, only to come unstuck!

We had quite a long downhill walk along the main track from the village before plunging down into the forest itself. The plan was that Pingu, being far more mobile than us, would forge ahead looking for panda – or at least signs of panda – returning to collect us if successful. Meanwhile, we would struggle on behind, trying not to lag too far in his wake. Of course, it would have been tremendous to have actually found a panda, but on this first day we would have settled for finding fresh scats, proving that we were at least looking in the right place.

Personally, I couldn't see why the pandas would want to move; they had plenty of bamboo to feed on, fresh water available from a stream at the foot of the ravine and good tall trees to rest in. Unless forced to move by human disturbance I felt sure they would still be around. And my instincts were vindicated when Pingu discovered fresh scats in a midden in the fork of a tree. His assessment was that they were probably two days old. Now, we surmised, it would be just a matter of time before we found them.

Pingu and Rajiv had radios to stay in contact, in theory enabling Pingu to direct us to the spot if he did indeed strike gold. But it soon became apparent that the topography of the land would prevent us from consistently staying in touch. We therefore lost Pingu for quite a long time in the late morning. When he eventually re-appeared he was empty-handed and so we reluctantly gave up the hunt and returned to the house for some lunch, our intention being to return to the area later in the day.

That afternoon we had two spotters, Pingu being assisted by the landlord of the guest house. The fog had returned but, undaunted, we pressed on. The landlord headed for an area slightly to one side of the ravine we had explored that morning while Pingu, Rajiv, Phil and I returned to where we had left off. We clambered down a long, steep hillside, zig-zagging our way round bamboo stands, boulders and other obstacles, till at last we came to a slightly more open and level area where we could wait while Pingu went pioneering off in search of panda. We found comfortable spots to install ourselves and stretched out to rest

aching limbs and eat snacks. All around us the cold, damp mists still clung to the hillside creating an oppressive and claustrophobic atmosphere. Time passed and five o' clock came and went. It began to look like our first day in the field was not going to deliver a panda after all. I lay back and considered taking a snooze.

Then, I noticed a buzz of activity somewhere to my right. Phil, who had got up to stretch his legs, was striding towards Rajiv and I, with Pingu a short way behind him. Pingu had found a panda! For the next ten or fifteen minutes we went hurtling off on a mad, adrenaline-fuelled rush through the forest. We had no idea how near or far the animal was, though on at least three occasions Rajiv said "not far". For quite a long while it was all uphill. Then, gasping for breath, we reached the brow of a ridge and had to slither down a steep grassy slope back into thick bamboo. Just as I was wondering how much further it could possibly be, it became obvious that we had arrived.



Our first Red Panda (SM)

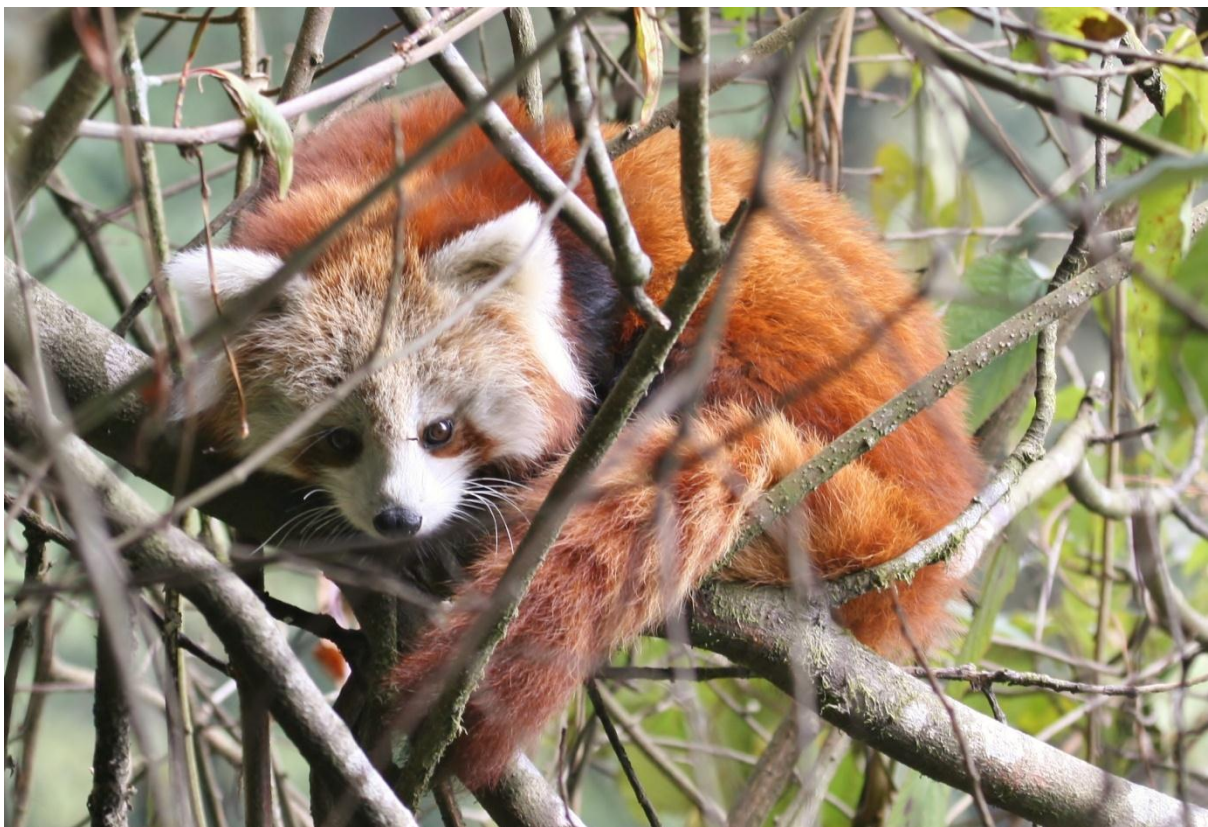
I gathered my wits and followed Pingu's *pointing* finger into the branches of a huge rhododendron tree. And there it was! A ball of reddish-brown fur and a white face peering back at me. Just like the picture in the book! I focused the binoculars and soaked up the detail: the white-fringed ears, the brown "teardrops" on the cheeks, the black button nose and the lightly banded brown tail. Exquisite! We all shook hands in celebration – then we got down to the serious business of taking photographs.

Pingu gradually manoeuvred us down the slope into better positions and eventually we were little more than five metres away. The animal, a young male, was incredibly tolerant of us and at one point actually walked along a branch to get a better look at *us*. It seemed to be far more curious than frightened. Eventually, it did retreat, but by then we had enjoyed some thirty minutes of its company and had photographs aplenty.

With the light beginning to fade rapidly we started the long hike back up the hillside and, by the time we reached Dobate, it was completely dark and Venus and Jupiter, the Milky Way and a thousand other stars were blazing down at us from an ink-black sky. The fog had disappeared and a clear, cold night lay ahead.

Saturday 25th February

The panda we had seen was one of a pair of sub-adults known to be in the area, along with two adults, (their mother and a co-habiting male). Bouyed by our success, we now hoped to see one or more of the adults. We were also a little concerned about the other youngster who on previous visits had always been seen close to its sibling. Its absence was worrying and Pingu and Rajiv were speculating on its possible demise.



Our second Panda sighting (PT)

We returned to the “hot” area, again in warm morning sunshine. Repeating our tactics of the previous day, we followed Pingu down the ravine to a good waiting area and then left him to press on alone. This time we didn’t have long to wait. Within fifteen minutes Pingu

was back with the happy news that he re-located yesterday's panda, very close to the place he had previously been. We set off on another mad rush through the forest, our final approach to the panda being blocked by an *almost* impenetrable wall of vegetation.

Inconsiderately, the panda had today positioned himself at the far side of another big rhododendron tree so that only a blob of reddish-brown fur was visible – and that only with difficulty. But, patiently working our way down the hillside, we got into a better position until finally we got reasonable views. Photography was still difficult, not least because of the number of branches and leaves that seemed to block our line of fire whichever angle we tried. But we did eventually get a few worthwhile shots, mainly because the animal moved out onto the more open branches where it was less obscured and where it was illuminated in bright sunlight. After about forty minutes it had had enough attention from us and it slinked away into the valley below – leaving us, or so we thought, with what would probably be our last look at a Red Panda.



The third Panda sighting (PT)

We didn't take the same route back up the hill as the previous day, this time taking a "short cut" up a very steep but shorter route. This proved fortuitous for, just as we had got into our stride, Pingu suddenly stopped and pointed to a big tree some fifty metres away. Incredibly, there was the other missing young panda! There wasn't really any way to get closer so we had to be satisfied with long-range photographs and after about ten minutes the animal disappeared stage left anyway. Nevertheless, what a relief to see that it was still alive and well!

An hour or so later, under a hot sun, we staggered back into Dobate, whereupon Rajiv and I celebrated with a bottle of strong Indian beer. As we waited for lunch, the first thin mists began to appear and by two o' clock, as usual, the hot sun had become a distant memory and thick, cold fog once again enveloped us.

We took a stroll in the afternoon up to some nearby ponds in the vague hope of seeing Indian Muntjac and to recce a few areas for potential spot-lighting later that evening. The walk produced only a few birds – White-collared Blackbird and Orange-flanked Bush-robin – and one small mammal which, after some debate, we agreed was a Hoary-bellied Squirrel. But we did find some interesting tracks in the dust that had been left by a medium-sized cat. The four pug marks and kidney-shaped pad were clear enough and the absence of claws confirmed that the perpetrator was feline rather than canine. Too big for Jungle Cat or Leopard Cat, the only other possibilities were Common Leopard (most probable?) or Temminck's Golden Cat, Clouded Leopard or Marbled Cat (a real outsider). The size of the pad suggested to me one of the Leopards but obviously we will never know for sure.



Downtown Dobate (SM)

We returned that evening in bitterly cold temperatures to see what nocturnal creatures we could find. Nothing was on the ponds but along a nearby track Phil found an Asian Barred Owlet and some small bats which might have been Nepalese Whiskered Bats. Their small size and steady, purposeful flight seemed *Myotis*-like but without a bat detector to hand

and without any real knowledge of which species occurred locally we had little chance of making a positive identification.

Sunday 26th February

After the exertions of the previous two days we intended this to be a “rest day” and when we heard over breakfast that a troop of Assamese Macaques had been seen “only a kilometre away” it seemed like a good idea to take a gentle stroll in search of them.

The Macaques turned out to be surprisingly hard to locate and it took several hours of hard walking and scrambling before Pingu eventually found them. The troop probably comprised around a dozen animals, though it was hard to be sure as odd individuals kept appearing from behind us. Seeing and hearing evidence of their movement was easy – whole trees would sway and branches would be thrashed about – but actually seeing the animals was harder. Mostly we were restricted to glimpses of animals leaping from branch to branch, but on occasion it was possible to catch one sitting on an open branch or moving in a slightly more open area. I had one particularly good view of an impressive male striding along a branch.

The Macaque area was actually quite close to the guest house; we had effectively walked a two mile loop around a ridge line adjacent to the village. And so we were soon back home and relaxing with a cup of tea. We took things easy after that, though Phil and I did manage a leisurely stroll up to the ponds just before dusk, finding one quite attractive bird: a Rufous-vented Niltava. Needless to say, the fog returned on cue at about half past one and equally predictably the night was clear and cold again.

Monday 27th February

Our last full day in the field saw us walk over the surrounding ridges to the nearby village of Hangetham, where we planned to spend our last night in the field. The terrain, Rajiv assured us, was “flat” except for the last couple of hours which would be sharply downhill. From Rajiv’s description it appeared that an eight or nine mile walk awaited us – along a route on which Pingu had seen Yellow-throated Marten on previous occasions. An undemanding hike with a reasonable chance of the Marten seemed appealing enough and we set off after a leisurely breakfast in good heart.

In the warm sunshine and with a pleasantly cool breeze it was very enjoyable walking. The going was fairly easy with gentle climbs and drops and good solid ground underfoot. The views were majestic: forested ridges extending tens of miles into the distance, lost eventually in faraway mist. Turning one corner, we found a gang of Himalayan Griffon Vultures circling upwards in a thermal, accompanied by a lone Steppe Eagle. The area hereabouts, we were told, was good for Asiatic Black Bear, though no end of scanning with binoculars in the following hour predictably produced nothing.

By midday we had reached a tea house, situated right on the border with India. The border was marked by a simple (unattended) metal bar gate and I took the opportunity to make an unauthorised and visa-free entry into Indian territory. After refreshment, we continued our march, the remainder of the route sharply downhill along a stony and fairly difficult track. The fog closed in at the scheduled time of course and the last hour of our hike was cool, damp and oppressive.

Just before we reached Hangetham, Pingu noticed movement in the trees off to our right. It was another troop of Assamese Macaques, which Pingu and I fought our way through the undergrowth to get a better look at.

By about half past two we were in Hangetham itself and settling into a comfortable guest house. Tea and paranthas were served, the latter being quite delicious, and a bottle of Indian beer was magically rustled up from somewhere. We enquired from the landlord and his family about what wildlife occurred locally and were told about Wild Boar in the forests and Porcupines (presumably Himalayan Crestless Porcupines) at night in the potato fields. The landlord claimed that his potato crop was raided continually and that his fields were “full of Porcupine quills”. Pinches of salt were taken and, after some debate, we declined the opportunity to go on a long nocturnal trek in search of these (probably) mythical creatures.

Another wild story concerned the fate of a cow which had been found dead nearby a few days previously. We were told that “it had been killed by a tiger” and that unwanted senile tigers from zoos had been released locally into the forest by the Authorities. Unsure how to respond to such a preposterous tale, I politely suggested that the culprit might have been a Leopard, an obvious possibility which was graciously conceded.

That evening we made a desultory attempt to spot-light the immediate area around Hangetham but found absolutely nothing. Nor were any of us eaten by tigers!

Tuesday 28th February

Our main objective for the day was to jeep ourselves back to Ilam in readiness for the long, long journey home the following day. Mindful of how little there would be to do in Ilam, however, we were keen not to begin the three or four hour drive too soon. Therefore we spun out the morning with a forest walk in search of the dead cow and to see if any tracks were still present that might reveal the true identity of the cat responsible for the kill.

An hour after setting out on the “twenty minute walk” we found ourselves high up on a forested ridge gazing out on a sea of rhododendron trees. A flock of Orange-flanked Bushrobins were flitting about in the canopy of a nearby tree and, even closer at hand, a vividly coloured Fire-tailed Myzornis materialised. Pingu and the landlord had forged ahead in a quest to find the dead cow and after half an hour, just as we were thinking of giving up, they returned to tell us that the cow’s carcass had disappeared. All that was left, evidently, was a

flattened area in the scrub. Even the tracks that the cat might have left had been long since destroyed by human footprints. Thus, not entirely surprised to hear this disappointing news, we returned to the village empty handed and consoled ourselves with another cup of tea.

The jeep would not be able to reach Hangetham itself, the track to the village being too narrow. We would therefore need to take another “twenty minute walk” albeit all downhill. It turned out to be a *Nepalese* twenty minutes and over an hour later we reached the jeep, having stopped at the landlord’s private residence along the way for refreshment. The drive back to Ilam was slightly less arduous than the outward one and we covered it in under three hours, the monotony being broken by the occasional good bird such as Oriental Honey Buzzard, Asian Barred Owlet and White-capped Water Redstart.

Our final night in Nepal was spent in a different hotel to the one selected for our first night. Superficially it looked quite good – it seemed a bit cleaner and smarter and it had panoramic views of Ilam from the alfresco eating area – but on closer inspection things were, if anything, even more chaotic. The menu, promising such delights as Pizza Marguerita and Tandoori chicken, didn’t live up to expectations, the beds were as rock-hard as before (the Nepalese apparently don’t believe in mattresses) and hot running water, as before, proved elusive. In fact, running water of any sort was problematic, the manager cum errand boy cum waiter cum general factotum having to boil up hot water in the yard at the back so that we could wash. The following morning, the splendidly eccentric plumbing, (reminiscent of the film “Brazil”), shuddered, groaned and then spat out its first shower water for twenty-four hours. And, against all odds, it was hot! I shall not forget the manager shrieking in bewildered astonishment “it’s working; it’s working!!” as if Lazarus himself had just risen from his deathbed.

Wednesday 29th February

We breakfasted, *eventually*, outside in warm sunshine and accompanied by Little Swifts, House Sparrows and Indian Robins. Our taxi turned up at about 09.30 and soon enough we were heading south on good roads to Bhadrapur.

We had feared the possibility of fog causing the closure of Kathmandu Airport and the cancellation of flights to and from Bhadrapur – a catastrophe which would cause us to miss our connection at Kathmandu to Bahrain and London. But, to our great relief, the early morning weather in Kathmandu, we learned, was fine. We reached Bhadrapur just too late to sneak on board the first flight but it didn’t matter much; we got the next at 14.50 and made Kathmandu with plenty of time to spare for our evening flight to Bahrain. We even had time for lunch in Bhadrapur where in the gardens of a hotel we found Red-vented Bulbul, Brown Shrike and Jungle Babbler.

Cloud once again ruined any chance of seeing Everest but at 20.45 we were safely on board Gulf Air’s flight to Bahrain and on our way home

Thursday 1st March

We reached Bahrain at midnight (local time) and, after a mind-numbing ten hour stop-over, took the 10.10 flight home to London. There, one last trial awaited us. Gulf Air had lost our bags – in fact they had lost quite a few bags – and we would have to wait to see if our belongings would ever return to us.

6 Summary of Mammal Sightings

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Red Panda	<i>Ailurus fulgens</i>	Three sightings of two different animals.
Assamese Macaque	<i>Macac assamensis</i>	Two sightings of two different troops.
Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	Group seen at Kathmandu Airport.
Small Indian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes javanicus</i>	One animal seen in Bhadrapur.
Hoary-bellied Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus pygerythrus</i>	Two sightings of two different animals.
Total Identified = 5		

7 Summary of Bird Sightings

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	One near Bhadrapur.
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Common in fields.
Himalayan Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>	Common around Dobate.
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	One between Dobate and Hangetham.
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Two at Kathmandu Airport.
Oriental Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	One between Ilam and Bhadrapur.
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	One between Ilam and Bhadrapur.
Asian Barred Owlet	<i>Glaucidium castanonotum</i>	Several in woods north of Ilam.
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Common around habitation.
Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	Several in Ilam and Kathmandu.
Asian Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasensis</i>	One in Bhadrapur.
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	Common in Ilam.
Crested Treeswift	<i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>	One at Hangetham.
Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>	One in Bhadrapur.
House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	Common in towns.
European Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Several around Dobate.
Yellow-billed Blue Magpie	<i>Urocissa flavirostris</i>	Common in Dobate.
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochrurus</i>	Several around Dobate and Hangetham.
White-capped Water Redstart	<i>Chaimarrornis leucocephalus</i>	One en-route to Bhadrapur.
White-collared Blackbird	<i>Turdus albocinctus</i>	Several around Dobate.
Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	Several in Bhadrapur.
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Common in towns.
Bank Myna	<i>Acridotheres ginianus</i>	Common in towns.
Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	Several in Bhadrapur.

Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>	Several in Ilam.
Orange-flanked Bush-robin	<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>	Two in Dobate.
Rufous-bellied Niltava	<i>Niltava sundara</i>	Two near Dobate.
Chestnut-tailed Minla	<i>Minla strigula</i>	Flocks near Dobate.
Rufous-fronted Tit	<i>Aegithalos iouschistos</i>	Flock near Dobate.
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	One in Ilam.
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Several in Ilam.
Fire-tailed Myzornis	<i>Myzornis pyrrhura</i>	One near Hangetham.
Stripe-throated Yuhina	<i>Yuhina gularis</i>	Flock near Hangetham.
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Common around towns.
Total Recorded = 34		