

# Tour Report



Mountain Weasel (Pale W) (*Mustela altaica*) pix by Chewang R Bonpo

**Faunal Survey of Sikkim plateau (Trans-Himalaya), Yumthang Valley & Yumesamdong (North Sikkim)**

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## About Sikkim Plateau

Sikkim plateau or Tso Lhamo Plateau –The Sikkim plateau is popularly known as TsoLahmo lies in the Trans-Himalayan region of the state, covering an area of about 400 sq. km and perhaps represents India's smallest biogeographic province (Rodgers and Panwar 1988). This province harbors populations of a few highly threatened mammalian fauna such as Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*), Pallas's Cat (*Felis Manul*), Tibetan argali (*Ovis ammon hodgsoni*), Tibetan gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*) and southern kiang (*Equus kiang polyodon*). This area has also been the historical range of Tibetan antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*). The plateau also holds a good number of avian species like Tibetan Snowcock (*Tetraogallus tibetanus*), Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) (*Gypaetus barbatus*), Himalayan Vulture (H Griffon) (*Gyps himalayensis*), Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Tibetan Sandgrouse (*Syrrhaptes tibetanus*) and Ground Tit (Groundpecker, Hume's G) (*Parus humilis*) and many more, the plateau is also used extensively by the native Dokpa herders for livestock (yak and sheep) grazing. Compared to Ladhak, this plateau is reported to have higher densities of Tibetan argali and Tibetan gazelle but these populations are susceptible to decline due to heavy human influx and livestock grazing. Given the strategic location of this area for national security and stake of local communities for pastures, this area would need more attention for conservation



Tso Lahmo Lake -5,330 m (17,490 ft) by Kuschel Gurung

## Day- to- day report

The tour started with a drive from Singhik (5,120 ft) to Thangu(13,000ft ) covering the sub tropical broad leaved forest between Singhik to Chungthang followed by temperate broadleaved forest before the village of Lachen and sub-alpine to alpine rhododendron and juniper scrub forest in and around Thangu (13000ft). The day was spent mostly in driving to reach Thangu with few stoppages in the forest before Lachen. The bird species sighted included the bamboo species the **Black-throated Parrotbills** (*Paradoxornis nipalensis* ), high altitude scrub birds the **Rufous –fronted Tit** (*Aegithalos iouschistos*) and a couple of **Blue-whistling Thrush** (*Myophonus caeruleus temminckii*) on the road sides.



Rare Rufous –fronted Tit (*Aegithalos iouschistos*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus himalayensis*) by Chewang R Bonpo

The next day was spent in an around the village of Thangu with the sighting of couple of resident and bold **Eurasian Wren** (*Troglodytes troglodytes nipalensis*) and the amazing sighting of **Mountain Weasel**(*Mustela altaica*), later part of the day was spent in exploring the hills opposite to Thangu the bird seen were a flock of **Snow pigeon** (*Columba leuconota leuconota* ), flock of **Plain-Mountain Finch** (*Leucosticte nemoricola nemoricola*), a **Rufous-vented Tit** (*Parus rubidiventris beavani*) , **Rufous breasted Accentor** (*Prunella strophciata strophciata* ) and a pair of **Spot-winged Grosbeak** (*Mycerobas melanozanthos*) .

The third day of the tour started with the early morning drive towards Tso Lahmo Plateau 5,330 m (17,490 ft). On reaching we got to see the heavenly view of the lake which was glittering at its best. The bird species that we sighted in the Plateau was a dozen of **Rufous-necked snowfinch** (*Pyrgilauda ruficollis ruficollis*) followed by more than hundred **White-rumped Snowfinch** (*Pyrgilauda taczanowskii*), ( some of the individuals with courtship display), a dozen of **Ground Tit** (**Groundpecker, Hume's G**) ( *Parus humilis*) were seen on feeding on the ground , countless number of **Horned larks** (*Eremophila alpestris*) with juveniles birds was also seen feeding on roadsides, three individual of **Güldenstädt's Redstart** (White-winged R) (*Phoenicurus erythrogaster*) was seen in different location , **Brandt's Mountain Finch** (Black-headed M F) (*Leucosticte brandti* ) and **Tibetan Snowfinch** (Adams's S) (*Montifringilla adamsi* )was found to be common in Tso Lahmo Plateau , a pair of **Saker Falcon** ( *Falco cherrug milvipes*) with a successful kill of the Tibetan snowfinch , **Alpine Chough** (*Pyrrhocorax graculus forsythi* ) & **Red-billed Chough** (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax himalayanus* )was commonly seen in garbage dumped area, a pair of **Golden Eagle** (*Aquila chrysaetos daphanea* ) flying in a distance .The mammals like **Tibetan Fox** (*Vulpes ferrilata* )(a individual sighted in Thangu in late evening) was also sighted in Tso-Lahmo and **Tibetan Woolly Hare** (*Lepus oiostolus*) .



Rufous-necked Snowfinch (*Pyrgilauda ruficollis ruficollis*) pic by Chewang R Bonpo

The fourth day of the tour was spent in Yumgthang and Yumesamdong area of Lachung with the following species of the birds such as *Grandala* (*Grandala coelicolor*) (around 100 individuals in flock of 4), *White-throated Redstart* (*Phoenicurus schisticeps*) a group of five to six birds (seems to be migrating down to low altitude), a pair of nesting *Himalayan Griffon Vulture* (*Gyps himalayensis*), an Individual of *Golden Eagle* (*Aquila chrysaetos*), *Ibisbill* (*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*) (four birds) in Yumthang River followed by 4 individuals of *White-throated Dipper* (*Cinclus cinclus*) (two sub-adult birds), a couple of *Black-face Laughingthrush* (*Trochalopteron affine*), a dozen of *Coal tit* (*Periparus ater*), *Rufous vented Tit* (*Periparus rubidiventris*), *Grey-crested Tit* (*Lophophanes dichrous*) and *Goldcrest* (*Regulus regulus himalayensis*).



White-rumped Snowfinch (*Pyrgilauda taczanowskii*) by Chewang R Bonpo

The last and the final day of our tour was spend birding around Shingik area at an elevation of 700-1500m with the birds like *Chestnut-headed Tesia* (*Tesia Tesia castaneocoronata*), *Slaty-bellied Tesia* (*Tesia olivacea*), *Great Barbet* (*Megalaima virens magnifica*), a pair of *Besra Sparrowhawk* (*Accipiter virgatus*), *Asian Barred Owlet* (*Glaucidium cuculoides*), *Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler* (*Pnoepyga albiventer*), *Barred Cuckoo-Dove* (*Macropygia unchall*) and *White-browed Piculet* (*Sasia ochracea ochracea*).

## Feedback & Suggestion about Tso Lahmo Plateau

- The Tso Lahmo Plateau is rich in the trans-Himalayas species and can be compared with Ladakh in the west Himalayas and is the only area in the East where such kind of habitat is accessible to India so the documentation of flora and fauna of the area need to be made priority for conservation and management of the place.
- A community based tourism model like Ladakh's Snow Leopard tourism can be worked out in future to conserve the local Dokpa's way of life along with flora and fauna of the region.
- The places like Thangu are heading to rapid deforestation so an alternate sustainable energy system needs to replace the firewood.
- The negative impact of mass tourism like heavy vehicle traffic, dumping of non-biodegradable material and pressure on local resources needs to be studied for this area and suitable solution must be implemented for sustainable development.
- The Road connectivity (at present in bad condition) and accommodation (at present very basic) in and around Thangu area needs to be upgraded to draw in the quality nature – oriented Eco-tourist (Birdwatchers, Bird Photographers etc) so as to minimize the impact on the place.

## Acknowledgement

We Sikkim Ornithological Society members would like to thank office of the District Magistrate and District Forest Officials, Mangan for granting us the permit to visit Tsho-Lahmu Plateau & Yumthang area for documenting the fauna of place.

We would also like to thank Indian army for granting us the permit to visit the above mention places. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of tour **Mr. Thinley Namgyal Lepcha, Mr. Kuschel Gurung ,Mr.Nosang Limboo , Jainy Kuriakose & Urgen Tamang** for all arrangements, support ,guidance and photographs to Sikkim Ornithological Society.



Grandala (*Grandala coelicolor*) pic by Nosang M Limboo

## SYSTEMATIC LIST OF FAUNAL SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

### BIRDS

1. Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*): a pair in Gurudongmar Lake
2. Himalayan Vulture (H Griffon V) (*Gyps himalayensis*): a pair nesting in Yumesamdong
3. Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*): a pair near Thangu and Individual in Yumesamdong
4. Besra Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter virgatus*): a pair in Shinghik in lower altitude
5. Upland Buzzard (*Buteo hemilasius*): on the way to Tso Lahmu lake
6. Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*): a pair hunting on Tibetan Snowfinches
7. Ibisbill (*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*): 4 individual in Yumgthang river
8. Snow Pigeon (*Columba leuconota*): A flock of 10 birds in Thangu and Yumthang
9. Oriental Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*): Common in lower altitude
10. Barred Cuckoo-dove (*Macropygia unchall*): An individual seen by Kuschel in Shinghik
11. Great Barbet (*Megalaima virens magnifica*): common in Shinghik
12. Little Owl (*Athena noctua*): Single bird was seen near Gurudongmar lake
13. Asian Barred Owlet (*Glaucidium cuculoides*): one bird seen in lower elevation Shinghik
14. Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*): common in Thangu
15. Alpine Chough (Yellow-billed C) (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*): 2 birds seen feeding on garbage dump.
16. Large-billed Crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos*): Commonly seen in Thangu
17. Grandala (*Grandala coelicolor*): 100 birds in a flock of 4 seen feeding and flying in Yumesamdong
18. Nepal House-martin (*Delichon nipalense*): Seen feeding flight in Shinghik
19. Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*): Seen in Thinley's House
20. Ground Tit (Groundpecker, Hume's G) (*Parus humilis*): a dozen feeding on the roadside on the way to Tso Lahmu
21. Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*): common everywhere in the Palteau area
22. Eurasian Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*): common in Thangu & Yumgthang valley
23. Hodgson's Treecreeper (*Certhia hodgsoni mandellii*): Seen & photographed by Kuschel & Thinley in Yumgthang Valley
24. Greater Yellownappe (*Picus flavinucha*): Lower elevation of Shinghik
25. White-browed Piculet (*Sasia ochracea ochracea*): Seen and Photographed by Kuschel & Thinley in lower elevation of Shinghik
26. Blue fronted Redstart (*Phoenicurus frontalis*): Commonly seen around Thangu and lower

27. Güldenstädt's Redstart (White-winged R) (*Phoenicurus erythrogaster*): 3 birds on the roadside in the Plateau and one in Gurudongmar lake
28. White throated Redstart (*Phoenicurus schisticeps*): 5 birds seen in Yumesamgdong
29. Blue Whistling Thrush (*Myophonus caeruleus*): common in lower elevation and on road side
30. Black-faced Laughingthrush (*Trochalopteron affine*): Seen a flock near Thangu and one bird photographed in Yumgthang valley
31. Scaly-breasted Wren-babbler (*Pnoepyga albiventer*): Heard several bird in lower elevation of Shinghik seen on a fulvous morph
32. Silver-eared Mesia (*Leiothrix argentea*): a flock in lower elevation of Shinghik
33. Nepal Fulvetta (*Alcippe nipalensis*): A flock in Lower elevation of Shinghik
34. Black-throated Parrotbill (*P. nipalensis*): 4 birds seen briefly below Lachen
35. Chestnut-headed Tesia (*Tesia castaneocoronata*): commonly heard and seen in Shinghik area
36. Slaty-bellied Tesia (*Tesia olivacea*): Seen one individual in Shinghik area
37. Chestnut-crowned Warbler (*Seicercus castaniceps*): In Shinghik Area
38. Broad-billed Warbler (*Tickellia hodgsoni hodgsoni*): One individual heard singing below Lachen
39. Rufous-vented Tit (*Periparus rubidiventris*): couple of birds in opposite hill of Thangu Village
40. Rufous-fronted Tit (*Aegithalos iouschistos*): A flock before Thangu Village .
41. Coal Tit (*Periparus ater*): a dozen in Yumgthang valley
42. Grey-crested Tit (*Lophophanes dichrous*): A dozen with Coal tits in Yumgthang Valley
43. Green-backed Tit (*Parus monticolus*): Commonly seen in lower elevation
44. Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus himalayensis*): an individual seen in Yumgthang Valley
45. White-throated Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*): 4 Birds (2 adult & 2 Sub-adult) in Yumgthang River
46. Tibetan Snowfinch (Adams's S) (*Montifringilla adamsi*): very common in Tso-lahmu Plateau
47. White-rumped Snowfinch (*Pyrgilauda taczanowskii*): very common in Tso-lahmu Plateau area
48. Rufous-necked Snowfinch (*Pyrgilauda ruficollis ruficollis*): very common in Tso-lahmu Plateau
49. Robin Accentor (*Prunella rubeculoides*): seen several birds in Plateau area
50. Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*): 3 birds in Shinghik on road
51. Plain Mountain Finch (*Leucosticte nemoricola*): 5 birds in the opposite hill forest of Thangu
52. Brandt's Mountain Finch (Black-headed M F) (*Leucosticte brandti*): common Bird in Plateau area
53. Red-headed Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula erythrocephala*): One female bird singing in Yumgthang valley



White-throated Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) by Thinley N Lepcha

#### **MAMMALS**

1. Black-lipped Pika (Plateau P) (*Ochotona curzoniae*): Common near Tso-lahmu lake area
2. Tibetan Woolly Hare (*Lepus oiostolus*): one individual seen running in Tso- Lahmu lake area
3. Mountain Weasel (Pale W) (*Mustela altaica*): One individual In Thangu Village
4. Tibetan Fox (*Vulpes ferrilata*): One individual seen hunting in Thangu Village in dusk and one seen in Tso-Lahmu lake area.
5. Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*): In the late evening before the vehicle above Chungthang town.



Ibisbill (*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*) pic by Thinley N Lepcha

## Pictures from the Tour



Alpine Chough (Yellow-billed C) (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Eurasian Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Ground Tit (Groundpecker, Hume's G) (*Parus humilis*) by Jainy Kuriakose



Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Tibetan Snowfinch (*Montifringilla adamsi*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Brandt's Mountain Finch (Black-headed M F) (*Leucosticte brandti*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Gldenstdt's Redstart (White-winged R) (*Phoenicurus erythrogaster*) by Chewang R Bonpo



Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*) pic by Kuschel Gurung



Pic By Nosang M Limboo



Scenic Drive in the Plateau pic by Nosang M Limboo



The Team in Yumgthang Valley pic by Nosang M Limboo