

THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

19 - 31 JULY 2005

TOUR REPORT

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This was just the second Birdquest to the Western Himalayas of Pakistan, an exploration of part of the world whose birds are poorly known and rarely seen. Just a seven hour flight from London and only a four hour difference in time-zones, it seems like a short hop from Europe compared to many other birding destinations. We were able to enjoy some great birding in world-class scenery, recording 190 species, a birdlist rich in quality with many near-endemics and regional specialities such as Koklass Pheasant, Brown-fronted and Himalayan Woodpeckers, Pied, Lesser and Grey-bellied Cuckoos, Slaty-headed Parakeets, White-eyed and Himalayan Buzzards, Indian Golden Oriole, Tibetan Blackbird, Chestnut Thrush, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, White-tailed Rubythroat, Himalayan Red-flanked and Golden Bush Robins, White-bellied Redstart, Kashmir and White-cheeked Nuthatches, Bar-tailed Treecreeper, Spot-winged, Rufous-naped, White-throated and the near-endemic White-cheeked Tits, Streak-throated Swallow, Indian Reed Warbler, Tickell's Leaf, Sulphur-bellied, Lemon-rumped, Hume's, Large-billed Leaf, Tytler's Leaf and Western Crowned Warblers, Variegated Laughingthrush, Black-chinned Babbler, Upland and Rosy Pipits, Fire-fronted Serin, Grey-headed Goldfinch, Spectacled Finch, Pink-browed and Himalayan White-browed Rosefinches, Black-and-Yellow Grosbeak and White-capped and Chestnut-eared Buntings. Mammals were quite visible and we saw Common Goral, Kashmir Grey Langur, Golden Jackal, Long-tailed Marmot, Stoat and Kashmir Flying Squirrel. All this was easily accomplished in a nation that is remarkably friendly and we were well looked after, allowing us to have a safe, productive and comfortable visit.

We arrived in Islamabad with the dawn, and immediately made for the Margalla Hills, the scrub covered foothills that stand above this clean new city. Before the morning heated up we found our first Pakistani birds with Common Hawk and Grey-bellied Cuckoos, Eurasian Griffon, Booted Eagle, White-eyed Buzzard, Shikra, Himalayan Bulbul, Grey-breasted Prinia, our first Western Crowned Warbler, Streaked Laughingthrushes and Crested Bunting. As it cooled a little in the afternoon we visited Rawal Lake (just a stone's throw from our hotel) where we found Grey Francolin, Blue-throated Barbet, Indian Golden Oriole, Indian Robin, Bank Myna and Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, while Streak-throated Swallows hawked around the shore.

An early-morning return to the Margalla Hills produced Brown-fronted Woodpecker, Speckled Piculet, Rufous Treepie, Long-tailed Minivet, a gorgeous white Asian Paradise Flycatcher male with full tail, Blue-capped Rock Thrush, Blue-throated Flycatcher, Striated Prinia and Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babblers. We headed northwards into the cooler mountains, and into the Kaghan Valley that sits at the very western fringe of the Himalayan range separated from the Hindu Kush and Karakorum ranges by the mighty Indus River. In the drier parts of the valley floor we found numerous European Rollers and some dapper White-capped Buntings, before reaching the cool hill station of Shogran, perched high above the deep valley of the Kunhar river at 2450m. A short walk before dinner provided us with our first Slaty-blue Flycatcher, Rufous-naped and Black-throated Tits, Russet Sparrows and Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler, while just outside our well-appointed hotel we saw our first Black-and-Yellow Grosbeaks busily feeding in a cherry tree.

The mountain scenery in this part of the world is absolutely stunning, with forest somehow clinging to impossibly steep slopes and valley sides. Our focus was on areas that we could access easily (without being roped together!) and above Shogran we drove up a jeep track to the high ridge and meadows of Seri Paya, perched above the world at 3100m. Here along the upper edge of the forest and the tree-line scrub we found Himalayan Woodpeckers, a Eurasian Wryneck carrying a mouthful of grubs to a nest hole in a massive tree, Lesser Cuckoo, White-throated Needletails, Golden Eagle, Chestnut Thrush, Dark-sided and our first Rusty-tailed Flycatchers, White-tailed Rubythroats (that were singing from the juniper scrub), Himalayan Red-flanked Bush Robins, White-cheeked Nuthatch, Spot-winged and White-throated Tits, Grey-sided Bush Warbler, Tytler's Leaf Warblers with attendant begging juveniles, Tickell's Leaf, Lemon-rumped and noisy Western Crowned Warblers, some gorgeous Variegated Laughingthrushes, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch, Plain Mountain Finch, Common, Pink-browed and Himalayan White-browed Rosefinches, more Black-and-Yellow Grosbeaks and the remarkably common Rock Bunting.

We crossed the valley and drove up to Sharan, set in a secluded forested bowl just 8km from our hotel and visible across the chasm, yet separated by the roaring river 1000m below us. We began our birding briskly with a quartet of whingeing Kashmir Nuthatches and a splendid Indian Blue Robin blasting out his nightingale-like song. We walked along the various trails through this beautiful forest, and saw first-hand evidence of the massive snowfalls and avalanches that occurred in the area the previous winter, with large numbers of trees ripped down and heaped like matchsticks in the gullies. We found Large-billed Leaf Warbler, Blue Whistling Thrush, Bar-tailed Treecreeper, more White-cheeked Nuthatches, Green Shrike Babbler, Oriental Turtle Doves and Himalayan Black Bulbuls. We sheltered in the colonial period resthouse with our picnic while the heavens opened, then we were treated to a vocal White-bellied Redstart that emerged after the rain. We found the newly-split Kashmir Grey Langur here, indeed looking very different to its lowland cousins particularly in its large size, and saw three Common Gorals standing a near-vertical cliff face. We paused at the top of steep grassy slopes and cultivation and found our first Scaly-bellied Woodpecker, Grey-capped Goldfinches, a fine Chestnut-eared Bunting (singing away from a pine), and the 'rusty gate' song of Upland Pipit drew our attention to where a bird sat on a treetop below us scolding a White-eyed Buzzard. Lower still, Slaty-headed Parakeets squawked from walnut groves while Common Swifts flew overhead.

It was at this point in time that we discovered our onward travels to the Karakorum Highway would have to be cancelled, due to 'bandit-trouble' and a total curfew in Gilgit town. So, time to explore the Kaghan Valley further and make new discoveries!

As planned we spent another morning up on the high pastures around Seri Paya, seeing our first Himalayan Griffon and Eurasian Hobby, Goldcrest, several Grey-sided Bush Warblers, Tickell's Leaf Warblers and some gorgeous Golden Bush Robins singing from the tree line scrub. Alas there was no sign of the Orange Bullfinch, although we probably heard some calling from way down a precipitous

slope. Shifting focus and altitude by 1000m, we birded along a forest road below Shogran, finding more Kashmir Nuthatches, Ultramarine Flycatcher, Rufous-bellied Niltava and Oriental Honey Buzzard. Adding an extra night here with the revised programme, we explored another jeep road that ascended a seemingly un-navigable slope in old-growth conifer-dominated forest up to 2800m, and although the day seemed hot and quiet, we saw our only Spectacled Finch, numerous Rusty-tailed Flycatchers, Great Barbet, Yellow-billed Blue Magpies, Blue-capped Rock Thrush, Lemon-rumped Warblers, and a Kashmir Flying Squirrel in the middle of the afternoon peering sleepily out of a hole in a thick tree trunk. Lower down in the drier areas we found a female White-capped Bunting on a nest that held a brood of very young chicks.

An early start was in order to catch the Koklass Pheasant, and on the forest road near Shogran we listened as up to four males barked raucously from the forest undergrowth. We startled a well-grown juvenile, and then a bull of a male exploded out of the bushes above us and powered past us and down the slope. After some breakfast we continued our journey, to *terra incognita* and the upper reaches of the Kaghan Valley. As we headed for the town of Naran, we passed deep deposits of packed snow from the recent winter, with the road often cut metres deep through them. At the roadside we found Masked, Himalayan, and our first *calcarata* race Citrine Wagtails and Plumbeous and White-capped Water Redstarts. Above Naran at 3200m lies the very scenic Lake Saiful Maluk that demanded a visit, though unfortunately hordes of Punjabi tourists thought so too! We snuck away from the crowds and found Tibetan Blackbird, our first Fire-fronted Serins, Winter Wren, Blue Rock Thrush, Northern House Martin and Black Redstarts of the race *phoenicuroides*.

We spent a good day further up the valley, with a good jeep road that (allegedly) led to Kashmir taking us to a high pass at 4000m. The rocky slopes were busy with Fire-fronted Serins and Plain Mountain Finches, Common Rosefinches of the *roseatus* race, Rufous-breasted Accentors, Siberian Stonechat, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, many White-tailed Rubythroats (holding territories far from any bushes), Eurasian Crag Martin, Rosy Pipits, Himalayan Buzzard, Brown Dipper, and at the very summit we found Alpine Accentors and Horned Larks. A Stoat was 'squeaked-in' until it was at our feet, plus we saw many handsome Long-tailed Marmots.

After some final early birding around Naran that yielded Yellow-billed Chough and another fine Indian Blue Robin, we headed out of the valley southwards. We paused to watch a stream of Himalayan Griffons, found the nest of Blue Whistling Thrush with young and we met our first noisy group of Alpine Swifts. We headed into the Murree Hills from Abbottabad, noting Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Verditer Flycatcher and Bay-backed Shrike as we went. Our next night's stay was at Nathiagali, in a hotel set amid mixed broad-leaved forest at 2400m where Asian House Martins flocked overhead. A morning spent birding on a conveniently contouring trail was productive, and we found many 'old friends' such as Brown-fronted, Himalayan and Scaly-bellied Woodpeckers, Slaty-headed Parakeets, Great Barbet, Russet Sparrow and Streaked and Variegated Laughingthrushes, while just below our hotel we found a vocal pair of Upland Pipits on a grassy slope. A short ride from here took us back to Islamabad, and we spent the last hours of the day around Rawal Lake. Recent heavy rain seemed to have precipitated a lot of movement, with flights of Blue-tailed Bee-eaters heading west and we also saw Plain Martin, Streak-throated Swallows and a single Wire-tailed. Brahminy Starlings, Greater Coucal, Indian Roller and Shikra added to the picture, as did a pair of Golden Jackals and a Eurasian Wild Boar (the only sighting of pork on the whole trip!). As dusk fell we found some noisy Spotted Owlets and Savannah Nightjars floated by.

We began our last day of Pakistani birding with another visit to the Margalla hills that quickly yielded a handsome group of the near-endemic White-cheeked Tit. We found Grey Treepie, Blue-throated Barbet, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler, Speckled Piculet and a number of Eurasian Cuckoos, the latter seemingly already on their way back to Africa from the Himalayan forests. We sweated around Rawal Lake in the late morning, finding Yellow-bellied and Ashy Prinias, Indian Reed Warbler and

Yellow-eyed Babbler. Returning in the late afternoon, we watched thousands of Barn Swallows congregating around their reed-bed roost, saw Black-crowned Night Herons flying in the dusk alongside Indian Flying Foxes, and a showy Pied Cuckoo sang and posed around us.

Once again we enjoyed a great trip to Pakistan. This is a tour that will appeal to those who want something different, a chance to experience a host of great birds in a seldom-visited country against the backdrop of some of the worlds most dramatic mountain scenery. We were very professionally looked-after by our hosts, ate well, and experienced friendliness everywhere. With recent events in the region marginalising it as a tourist destination, we can only hope that it remains as safe and untroubled in the future.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H)

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL)

PHASIANIDAE

Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus* (H): Heard in the Margalla Hills but never close enough for us to perform an extraction!

Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*: A single bird up a tree was seen on our first afternoon in Islamabad, then another two seen on our return there, by Rawal Lake.

Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*: A female or juvenile was seen flying out of the undergrowth in the forest below Shogran, and then a bull of a male came clattering out of the bushes and headed fast down slope. Some three to four males were calling loudly there in the dawn.

ANATIDAE

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: A single distant bird was seen on Rawal Lake on our last day.

PICIDAE

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*: An obliging fellow was seen on two days at Seri Paya, carrying food to his nest hole in a very large tree at 3100m.

Speckled Piculet *Picumnus innominatus*: Several sightings of this diminutive 'pecker in the Margalla Hills.

Brown-fronted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos auriceps*: Several examples of this Western Himalayan bird were enjoyed in the Margalla Hills and at Ayubia N.P.

Himalayan Woodpecker *Dendrocopos himalayensis*: Found to be numerous in the Kaghan valley and Ayubia forests.

Scaly-bellied Woodpecker *Picus squamatus*: Our first was a female that showed well on the partly-cultivated slopes below Sharan, then we had multiple sightings at Ayubia N. P.

Black-rumped Flameback *Dinopium benghalense*: One or two seen in flight in the woods around Rawal Lake

MEGALAIMIDAE

Great Barbet *Megalaima virens*: Heard at Shogran and Sharan, and then seen well in the forests of Ayubia N.P., at the very western limit of their range.

Blue-throated Barbet *Megalaima asiatica*: Several of these beauties seen in the Margalla Hills and at Rawal Lake.

Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala* (H): One heard calling in the woods around Rawal Lake.

UPUPIDAE

Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops*: A couple seen at Rawal Lake, and also much higher up at Naran.

CORACIIDAE

European Roller *Coracias garrulus*: Here at the south-eastern limit of its range, we saw quite a few along the lower and drier sections of the Kaghan valley.

Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*: A single bird was seen at Rawal Lake.

ALCEDINIDAE

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*: Two or three seen at Rawal Lake at the end of the trip.

HALCYONIDAE

White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*: Seen several times around Rawal Lake, plus a pair on a wire near Balakot.

CERYLIDAE

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*: Several seen fishing around Rawal Lake.

MEROPIDAE

Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*: A few seen around the fields at Rawal Lake.

Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus*: Good numbers of these around Rawal Lake, with many seen moving in the late afternoon after a welcome rainstorm.

CUCULIDAE

Pied Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus*: Heard near Sharan in the Kaghan valley, then we had several views of a vocal bird on our last evening at Rawal Lake.

Common Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx varius*: A single bird was seen in the Margalla Hills, with others heard there.

Eurasian Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*: Heard at Sharan after a heavy shower, with many others that seemed to be all of this species seen in the Margalla Hills, presumably post-breeding and on their way back to Africa already!

Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus*: A single juvenile bird was seen high up at Seri Paya, and also it was heard at Shogran and Nathiagali.

Grey-bellied Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus*: Two birds were seen on our first morning in the Margalla Hills, one of which was a hepatic morph of the female. Seen again there the following day.

Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*: A single bird was seen at Islamabad.

CENTROPODIDAE

Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*: Two were seen close to Rawal Dam.

PSITTACIDAE

Rose-ringed Parakeet (Ring-necked P) *Psittacula krameri*: The 'default' Parakeet of the plains, we saw plenty around Islamabad.

Slaty-headed Parakeet *Psittacula himalayana*: Several were seen around the Walnut groves in the Kaghan valley, then more at Ayubia N.P. where they showed well.

APODIDAE

White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*: Some great views of birds around the old growth trees at Seri Paya and Nar Gali.

Alpine Swift *Apus melba*: Excellent views of a noisy group of these in the Kaghan valley, then many more at Ayubia N.P. and around Rawal Lake.

Common Swift *Apus apus*: Quite a few of these were seen in the Kaghan valley skimming over the high ridges.

House Swift (Little S) *Apus affinis*: Only seen around Islamabad.

STRIGIDAE

Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*: Two birds noisily appeared during our twilight vigil by Rawal Lake.

CAPRIMULGIDAE

Savanna Nightjar *Caprimulgus affinis*: Two or three birds were seen at dusk around Rawal Lake.

COLUMBIDAE

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*: Several singles were seen in the Kaghan valley and at Ayubia N.P., of the Central Asian and Western Himalayan race *meena*.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*: Several birds seen around the scrub and fields around Rawal Lake.

Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*: Not uncommon at low altitudes.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: A few examples seen in the Islamabad area.

RALLIDAE

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*: An adult and a juvenile seen at Rawal Lake.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: A single seen at Rawal Lake.

Common Coot *Fulica atra*: Three seen on Rawal Lake, a rather early winter visitor?

SCOLOPACIDAE

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*: A single seen at Rawal Lake at the beginning of the trip.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: A couple seen at Rawal Lake, also seen in breeding habitat higher up the Kaghan valley at 3100m along the Kunhar river.

CHARADRIIDAE

Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*: Visible and vocal in the lowlands around Islamabad.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus*: A couple of birds seen over the forests below Shogran.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*: Only seen in the Islamabad area, where all birds related to the race *govinda*.

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*: Our first was a single immature over Seri Paya, then we saw many more soaring over the high valley sides near Naran, with a loose flock of 24 counted in one area.

Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus*: A single bird was seen on our first morning in the Margalla Hills.

Shikra *Accipiter badius*: Some excellent views of several of these seen in the Islamabad area.

White-eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa*: Some good looks at these, an Indian sub-continent endemic. Two or three were seen in the Margalla Hills that included a juvenile, plus another bird perched up at 2300m near Sharan.

Himalayan Buzzard *Buteo burmannicus*: A couple of birds were seen at higher elevations in the upper Kaghan valley. This is split from Common Buzzard *B. buteo* in the 'Birds of South Asia'.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: An adult was seen soaring over the hillsides from Seri Paya.

Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*: Several birds seen well, in the Kaghan valley and over the Margalla Hills.

FALCONIDAE

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: Single birds were seen fairly frequently, plus we saw two different family groups in the Kaghan valley with three or more fledged juveniles each.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: A single was seen prowling the forest edge at Seri Paya, two along the jeep track at Nar Gali plus another single at Nathiagali.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: A single bird was seen soaring over the ridge in the Margalla Hills.

PHALACROCORACIDAE

Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*: Quite plentiful around Rawal Lake.

ARDEIDAE

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*: Not uncommon around the shores of Rawal Lake.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*: Odd birds in breeding dress were seen around Rawal Lake.

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*: Not uncommon around Islamabad, all in breeding plumage.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: Good numbers seen around Rawal Lake, flying in to feed from their daytime roosts.

LANIIDAE

Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus*: An adult and begging juvenile were seen in the hills behind Abbottabad.

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*: Seen in open country throughout much of the tour.

CORVIDAE

Yellow-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa flavirostris*: Some great views of these at middle altitudes in the Kaghan valley forests and again at Ayubia N.P.

Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*: We found a few around Islamabad.

Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae*: A single bird in the Margalla Hills on our last morning, here at the very western extreme of their range.

Yellow-billed Chough (Alpine C) *Pyrrhocorax graculus*: A group of six seen high on a mountainside above Naran.

House Crow *Corvus splendens*: Commonly available in the lowlands.

Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*: Most frequent in the mountains, an accompaniment to any good picnic!

Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus kundoo*: Several encountered in the Islamabad area, a long-anticipated split from Eurasian Golden Oriole which it differs from by having a bigger black eye patch and less yellow in the wing.

Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus*: A colourful addition to the Margalla Hills and Kaghan Valley forests.

White-throated Fantail *Rhipidura albicollis*: One seen and others heard in the Margalla Hills.

Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*: Found exclusively in lowland open country.

Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*: A few of these in the Margalla Hills, Kaghan Valley forests and Ayubia N.P.

Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*: Several examples seen at lower altitudes, our first in the Margalla Hills was a fully-tailed white male.

CINCLIDAE

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*: A couple of birds were seen on mountain streams in the Naran area.

MUSCICAPIDAE

Blue-capped Rock Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus*: Several splendid examples were encountered along our route, from the Margalla Hills right up into the Kaghan valley, with a few spotty juveniles seen also.

Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush *Monticola rufiventris*: A pair performed well for us in typical habitat at Ayubia N.P.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*: Several seen, including some lovely powder blue males, in rocky habitat at higher altitudes around Naran and up towards Nuritop.

Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*: Seen often in the middle altitude forests, with a nest containing two well grown young visible on a rock ledge by the Kunhar river near Naran.

Tibetan Blackbird *Turdus maximus*: We saw one or two on the high slopes above Lake Saiful Maluk. Split from 'Eurasian' Blackbird in the new 'Birds of South Asia', it is somewhat larger and has a very different song, and ranges from Pakistan to SE Tibet.

Chestnut Thrush *Turdus rubrocanus*: Several nice examples of these seen well around Shogran, Sharan and Nar Gali. He sings so very much like the Song Thrush *T. philomelos*!

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: Remarkably, we saw two or three distantly on a high mountain slope from Nuritop at 4000m!

Dark-sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*: Not uncommon along the upper edges of the forest at Shogran, also seen at Nar Gali and higher up near Naran.

Rusty-tailed Flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*: Some nice looks at this western Himalayan and Central Asian speciality, at Seri Paya where we found an adult and a juvenile, and then several more at Nar Gali showed well, alarm-calling at our Collared Owlet lure!

Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris*: Just three or so seen, in the middle altitude Kaghan valley forests.

Slaty-blue Flycatcher *Ficedula tricolor*: Certainly numerous around Shogran and Seri Paya where a few were seen (mostly males and a few juveniles) but many more could be heard calling from dense thickets.

Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina*: Singles were seen at Shogran and Sharan, plus a pair at lower altitudes near Abbottabad.

Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara*: A male showed well and was very vocal in the forest below Shogran, one of two birds present.

Blue-throated Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides*: A couple of females and a juvenile were all that we managed to see in the Margalla Hills, a summer visitor here at the very western extremity of their range.

Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*: Our first was on the Malakundi forest road, then we saw a further three at Nar Gali.

White-tailed Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis*: Some great encounters with this sweet-voiced jewel, in scrub above Seri Paya, and further up the Kaghan valley at high altitude they were common in rocky alpine habitat.

Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea*: A frequently heard Nightingale-like song in the Kaghan valley forests, we saw some obliging males at Sharan, Naran and Ayubia N.P.

Himalayan Red-flanked Bush Robin (Orange-flanked B R, Red-f Bluetail) *Tarsiger rufilatus*: Very visible and fairly common along the tree line at Seri Paya. Split from the Northern Red-flanked Bush Robin *T. cyanurus* that breeds from Finland across to Japan, wintering to northern South-east Asia.

Golden Bush Robin *Tarsiger chrysaeus*: We found at least three of these gorgeous birds in the alpine scrub at Seri Paya. Check out the latest issue of 'Birding Asia' (the OBC bulletin) for a stunning cover photo of one of these!

Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis*: A handful of singles were seen in the lowlands.

Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*: Several birds in the dry country around Rawal Lake.

Blue-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus* (H): A songster could be heard distantly from the top of a precipitous slope at Seri Paya.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*: We found these in the upper reaches of the Kaghan Valley, where they were not uncommon in rocky habitat at higher altitudes. These red-bellied birds refer to the race *phoenicuroides*.

White-capped Water Redstart (River Chat) *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*: Fairly numerous at higher altitudes along mountain streams and rivers, from Seri Paya up to Nuritop.

Plumbeous Water Redstart (P Redstart) *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*: Only a couple seen, on the Kanhar river near Naran.

White-bellied Redstart *Hodgsonius phaenicuroides*: We had a splendid encounter with a very vocal male in an area of young conifers at Sharan. This bird showed brown wings and was perhaps a first-summer bird. We heard another there in a forest clearing, and a couple more in alpine scrub at Seri Paya.

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maura*: A few noted in areas of cultivation and rough ground in the Kaghan valley, and also on the Thandiani road near Abbottabad.

Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*: Numerous examples in the Margalla Hills and around Islamabad.
Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea*: We found these in the open areas and forest edges around Shogran and Sharan where they were plentiful.

STURNIDAE

Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum*: A healthy sized group of these were seen near Rawal Dam.
Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*: Seen daily, even up to 3100m!
Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus*: Several of these subcontinent endemics frequented the fields around Rawal Lake.

SITTIDAE

Kashmir Nuthatch *Sitta cashmirensis*: Some fantastic views this year, with a foursome to get us started at Sharan, then several others all being very vocal along the Malakundi forest road and at Nar Gali. These birds are virtually endemic to the Pakistan and Kashmir, with an isolated population in western Nepal.
White-cheeked Nuthatch *Sitta leucopsis*: Numerous and visible around Seri Paya, with others seen near Shogran, Sharan and Nar Gali. Another Western Himalayan speciality, and in the new 'Birds of South Asia' it is split from the population in China that is now called Przevalski's Nuthatch *P. przewalskii* (which is a bit of a shame, as I need that one for the set!)

CERTHIIDAE

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*: Several found at higher altitudes around Seri Paya, a little bit confusing with the following species around too!
Bar-tailed Treecreeper *Certhia himalayana*: More numerous than the above with a greater altitude range, we had several good looks in the Kaghan valley forest and at Ayubia.
Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: A single was seen above the tree line at Seri Paya, and then more were seen in the higher country above Naran where we noted some juveniles.

PARIDAE

Spot-winged Tit *Parus melanolophus*: Common and very visible in the coniferous-dominated forests, always the first to take exception to the call of the Collard Owllet!
Rufous-naped Tit *Parus rufonuchalis*: Slightly less numerous than the very similar above species that they live alongside.
Great Tit *Parus major*: Several seen at lower altitudes, the population here is of the *cinereus* group, a. k. a. 'Grey Tit'.
Green-backed Tit *Parus monticolus*: Coloured more like 'our' Great Tit, we found a few in the forest of the Kaghan Valley and Ayubia.
Black-throated Tit (Red-headed T) *Aegithalos concinnus*: Another bird at its western limit, we twice found these near Shogran.
White-cheeked Tit *Aegithalos leucogenys*: A thrilling finish to the tour when we found up to five of these little-known jewels in the Margalla Hills. Virtually endemic to Pakistan.
White-throated Tit *Aegithalos niveogularis*: A group of four seen well amid a scolding flock at Seri Paya. Another two were also seen at Nar Gali. A Western Himalayan speciality, whose range extends across to western Nepal.

HIRUNDINIDAE

Plain Martin *Riparia paludicola*: Some ten joined the hordes of hirundines at Rawal Lake on our penultimate evening.
Eurasian Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris*: We found at least two flying round a rocky cliff at high altitude near Nuritop.

- Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Only seen around Islamabad, where on our last evening we saw thousands congregating to roost in the reedbeds there.
- Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii*: A single of this handsome hirundine near Rawal Lake.
- Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*: A handful seen around Islamabad.
- Streak-throated Swallow *Hirundo fluvicola*: Good numbers seen around Rawal Lake joining the multitude of hirundines.
- Northern House Martin *Delichon urbica*: Quite a few seen around the rocky alpine slopes above Naran and en-route to Nuritop.
- Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus*: A couple of small groups were seen around our Nathiagali hotel and at Ayubia N.P.

REGULIDAE

- Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: A few seen in the high coniferous forests.

PYCNONOTIDAE

- Himalayan Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*: The commonest bulbul below about 1300m, but also found to go higher.
- Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus caffer*: Available in good numbers around Islamabad
- Himalayan Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*: Occasionally seen in the middle altitude woods such as around Sharan. This is split from the Square-tailed Black Bulbul *H. ganeesa* of Peninsula India in the new 'Birds of South Asia' guide.

CISTICOLIDAE

- Striated Prinia *Prinia criniger*: Found in rank grass and on scrubby hillsides, we saw one or two in the Margalla Hills.
- Grey-breasted Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii*: Fairly common around Islamabad.
- Yellow-bellied Prinia *Prinia flaviventris*: One perched up and sang for us on a hot visit to Rawal Lake.
- Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis*: At least one singing by the lakeshore at Rawal Lake.
- Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*: A few were seen around Rawal Lake.

ZOSTEROPIDAE

- Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*: Fairly common and visible in the Margalla Hills.

SYLVIIDAE

- Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler *Cettia fortipes*: One was seen well on our first evening at Shogran and also seen at Sharan, their distinctive song was frequently heard coming from the forest typically around 2400m.
- Grey-sided Bush Warbler *Cettia brunnifrons*: Several songsters performed for us in the juniper scrub above Seri Paya.
- Indian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus [stentoreus] brunnescens*: We saw a single bird singing from the reeds at Rawal Lake. The new 'Birds of South Asia' splits the Asian form from the Western Palearctic *stentoreus* and the Australasian Reed Warbler *A. australis*.
- Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* (H): One heard at Rawal Lake
- Tickell's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*: Some good views of this mustard-coloured bird in the tree-line scrub at Seri Paya, also en-route to Nuritop and at Lake Saiful Maluk.
- Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus*: A single bird was found at high altitude near Nuritop.
- Lemon-rumped Warbler *Phylloscopus chloronotus*: Fairly common in the Kaghan Valley forests.
- Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*: A few found but not commonly, seemingly restricted to the tree line scrub at Seri Paya.
- Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*: A single bird came to investigate us at 3200m at Seri Paya.

Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*: Just one was seen, in typical riverside forest habitat at Sharan.

Tytler's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri*: Another speciality, breeding only in the Western Himalayas and wintering in the Western Ghats of Southern India. We found a few along the tree line at Seri Paya, often seen feeding near the ground with begging juveniles in attendance.

Western Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus occipitalis*: The commonest (and noisiest) leaf warbler in the Kaghan Valley, with a few at Ayubia and in the Margalla Hills.

Whistler's Warbler *Seicercus whistleri* (H): At least one and maybe two birds were singing from the tree line at Seri Paya. This is at the very western part of its range here with only a handful of records from the country as a whole, with most of those in winter.

Grey-hooded Warbler *Seicercus xanthoschistos*: Not uncommon in the Margalla Hills woods.

Streaked Laughingthrush *Garrulax lineatus*: Frequently seen around Shogran and Seri Paya, Ayubia N.P. and in the Margalla Hills.

Variiegated Laughingthrush *Garrulax variegatus*: We had some superb looks at these fine looking birds at Seri Paya and at Ayubia N.P. Another West Himalayan speciality, with a range that extends as far as western Nepal.

Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus erythrogenys*: A handful of noisy but secretive birds performed for us in the Margalla Hills.

Black-chinned Babbler *Stachyris pyrrhops*: A couple were seen by the roadside in the Margalla Hills on our first morning.

Yellow-eyed Babbler *Chrysomma sinense*: A good look at a pair carrying nest material on our last morning by Rawal Lake.

Common Babbler *Turdoides caudatus*: A few were encountered in the dry scrub around Rawal Lake.

Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus*: Some typically noisy and active groups around Rawal Lake.

Green Shrike Babbler *Pteruthius xanthochlorus*: Another edge-of-range Himalayan bird that is scarce in Pakistan, we found two at Sharan and then another two on the Malakundi forest road.

ALAUDIDAE

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*: We saw one on the south side of Rawal Lake.

NECTARINIIDAE

Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*: Fairly numerous and visible around Islamabad.

PASSERIDAE

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Seen frequently in typical habitats.

Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans*: Seen often around the Kaghan valley and also around Ayubia adding a cheery and colourful element to our birding.

Chestnut-shouldered Petronia *Petronia xanthocollis*: Two were seen by Rawal Lake.

Masked Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] personata*: Several birds of this grey-backed taxon were found higher up in the Kaghan valley.

Himalayan Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alboides*: We also found a single of this black-backed taxon near Naran, overlapping with the above in what is apparently a hybridisation zone. There is still some debate over the splitting of these forms of *M. alba*.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*: One of the best-looking birds on our route, we found numerous examples of the stunning black-backed *calcarata* race once we got into the higher reaches of the Kaghan valley.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: Only found in the higher reaches of the Kaghan valley, and well above the treeline in some cases.

Rosy Pipit *Anthus roseatus*: We found a handsome group of these in the high valley en-route to Nuritop.

- Upland Pipit *Anthus sylvanus*: A nice surprise to find this twice on our tour. Both were at the same altitude of 2300m, our first was on the grassy slopes near Sharan where apart from giving snatches of its distinctive song, it spent its time alarming at a White-eyed Buzzard. Our second was conveniently just below our Nathiagali hotel, this time alarming at a marauding cat, showing well to us before the mist rolled in!
- Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*: The highest bird of the tour, we found three rather worn birds hopping about above the Nuritop pass at 4000m.
- Rufous-breasted Accentor *Prunella strophhiata*: Quite common at the higher altitudes of Seri Paya and as we ascended to Nuritop, vocal and visible with many juveniles seen.
- Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*: Not uncommon around Islamabad.

FRINGILLIDAE

- Fire-fronted Serin (Red-fronted S) *Serinus pusillus*: Pleasingly common on the high altitude hillsides above Naran and up to Nuritop.
- Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides*: Quite common in the Kaghan valley in a wide range of altitudes, very pretty if a little too bright!
- Grey-capped Goldfinch *Carduelis caniceps*: Quite a few seen, on the open slopes near Sharan and also higher up around Naran. This split from European Goldfinch ranges from Central Asia to Nepal, and lacks the black nape and collar of the western birds.
- Plain Mountain Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola*: Quite a few birds seen at Seri Paya, and many more in high rocky country above Naran and up to the Nuritop pass.
- Spectacled Finch (Red-browed F) *Callacanthus burtoni*: A struggle to find this one, we had to make do with a flight view of a male at Nar Gali.
- Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*: We saw a couple of females at Seri Paya, then we found many more in high rocky country above Naran and up to the Nuritop pass. These red-bellied birds refer to the *roseatus* race.
- Pink-browed Rosefinch *Carpodacus rodochrous*: Numerous in the high scrub and forest edge of Seri Paya, though not seen elsewhere.
- Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch *Carpodacus thura*: A great look at a pair at the upper tree limit at Seri Paya. This is split in the new 'Birds of South Asia' from the Chinese White-browed Rosefinch *C. dubius*.
- Black-and-Yellow Grosbeak *Mycerobas icteroides*: Another Western Himalayan speciality, the first we saw were a lovely pair feeding in a cherry tree just outside our Shogran hotel. We found more around Seri Paya, and heard others around the Kaghan valley.
- White-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas carnipes* (NL): One was seen flying-by at Lake Saiful Maluk.
- Crested Bunting *Melophus lathami*: A few were seen in the Margalla Hills, all smart males singing from pines.
- Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*: One of the commonest passerines in the mountains anywhere above c1600m.
- White-capped Bunting *Emberiza stewarti*: Plenty of these handsome birds on our route, favouring the dry hillsides above c1400m. We were fortunate enough to find a nest on the ground beneath a semi-prostrate bush containing some very young downy chicks.
- Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*: An exquisite male sang his heart out from a pine, on the grassy slopes near Sharan.

MAMMALS

Himalayan Pika *Ochotona roylei*: Often seen scuttling about in rocky patches around Seri Paya.

Long-tailed Marmot *Marmotta caudata*: Many of these attractive animals on the alpine slopes around the Nuritop pass.

Kashmir Flying Squirrel *Eoglaucomys fimbriatus*: A sleepy head that peeked out of a big hole in a big conifer at Nar Gali was almost certainly this species, although good identification material is hard to find!

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*: Two emerged from the bushes by Rawal Lake at dusk as we waited for Nightjars.

Stoat *Mustela erminea*: A total of three including a rusty juvenile in the rocky slopes around the Nuritop pass.

Indian Flying Fox *Pteropus giganteus*: Dozens if not hundreds were seen emerging at dusk around Rawal Lake.

Kashmir Grey Langur (Hanuman L, Common L) *Semnopithecus ajax*: Some half-a-dozen were seen in the forest at Sharan, plus a single at Seri Paya. The 'Common' Langur complex has been split six ways in the 'Mammals of the World' checklist by Duff & Lawson, and these animals certainly looked very big and robust compared to the lanky fellows one sees in India!

Rhesus Macaque *Macaca mulatta*: Several groups of these scruffy animals were seen, in the Margalla Hills and around Ayubia N.P.

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*: A single animal came out for a look at us right after the above Jackals. (Mmm.... bacon!)

Common Goral *Nemorhaedus goral*: A nice find of three animals on a (typically) ludicrously steep slope at Sharan.