Trip to Pangot, Western Himalayas
Nov 26th Until 30th 2007

Panchkuli range – View from Vinayak, western Himalayas

I am writing this after almost 2 months of slumber…

For all most 3 months or more the only thought process that was going on in my mind was the trip to Pangot which Niranjan and myself was planning. The D-day arrived and we both boarded the Jet Airways flight to Delhi and arrived there on time to be picked up by Mohit Agarwal's car. We headed to Mohit's house for a cup of tea and chit-chat and hit the roads to head to Pangot. The traffic on the way to Pangot was pathetic, slow and chaotic. Our driver was very used to this journey as he ferries hungry birders and photographer to this magical destination called Pangot. He stopped at the very right places for us to have good/quality food, to get us refreshed on this long 10 hours journey. We reached our destination at around 10PM and we warmly taken in at the Jungle Lore Biring Lodge by the well trained men of Mohit. They prepared us a fantastic dinner and the tiredness of the journey vanished after a good night of sleep.

White-throated Laughingthrush

Black-headed Jay

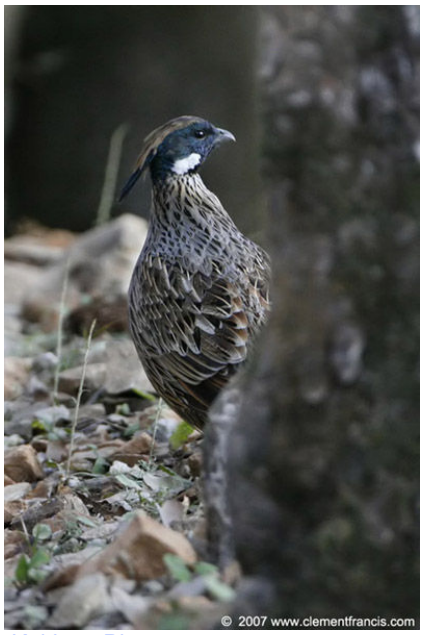
As planned before the trip, we wanted to photograph and watch the commonly found birds of Pangot and surrounding areas instead of going in for lifers and rarity. Day 2 of the trip started with great photo opportunities at the resort itself. The White-throated Laughingthrushes, Streaked Laughingthrushes, Black-headed Jays and Blue-whistling thrushes were singing and hanging around the resort and were very bold, hence we made some great start to the photography trip with some good images. Sun was playing hide and seek behind the clouds so we played with the ISO & Exposure settings too to make the best of the available

opportunities. The afternoon was spent on a higher elevation called Vinayak at an altitude of around 9000ft and above at the request of our bird guide Lokesh.

Lokesh (Bird guide)

Blue Whistling Thrush

One cannot describe enough of Lokesh, he is enthusiastic, an expert on the local area avi-fauna, high on energy, never satisfied with the species that occur there, a Sherpa when you get tired carrying the heavy equipment and over all a great human being and always willing to give a helping hand. A tour operator's dream employee. The Journey from Jungle Lore Birding Lodge to Vinay took only 30mins and Lokesh told us that the route produces the rare Cheer pheasant and Koklaas pheasants. Also the place is great for raptors. As we nearing the spot and in the pine forest just around 100 feet from our car, we did see the Koklass Pheasant standing behind a tree in a very alerted manner, at ISO 1600 speed setting, I did click few images in the darkness and the bird vanished in to the forest. We were greatly thrilled to see the rare Himalayan beauty.



Koklaas Pheasant

Pink browed Rosefinch

We did see the Himalayan Griffons and Hen Harriers, the hen harrier being the only high altitude grassland inhabitant among harriers. We also saw small groups of Altai Accentors but the Cheer pheasant eluded us. We returned to Camp with memories of some great colors on the mountain ranges left by the setting Sun. What can one tell about the great Himalayas even many a great poets have tried but they couldn't do any justice to her awesomeness and beauty. When ever I see her, its more of a spiritual experience to me than anything else. We reached camp and the great food and hospitality welcomed us their.

We left day 3 entirely to Mr.Pangot (Lokesh the bird guide) and he took us to few streams which were only an hours drive from Jungle Lore. He told us there we were in there for a treat of Redstarts and we did see many

there. The Black Redstart was shy, but we got the White-capped, Plumbeous and Blue-fronted. Also the rare Upland Pipit was seen there on the grassy areas along with scores of Pink-browed Rose Finches, Black-throated Tits, Black-lored Tits, Rufus-breasted Accentors, Black-throated Accentors, Common Rose fnches, Great Barbet, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler, Black-throated Thrush, Streaked-throated Woodpeckers, Brown-fronted Woodpeckers and the fork-tails were not there as seen commonly most times. That place was a magical one, absolutely no human disturbance and we headed to camp for Lunch. We wanted to spend the afternoon close to camp to get better images of the available common species like Laughingthrushes, Tits and finches.

Black-throated Tit

Rufus breasted Accentor

Day 4 was planned for Sat Tal and adjoining areas comprising of streams and small forested patches. Our target here was to see the Siberian Ruby-throat and we did see one due to the efforts of Lokesh. His energy levels were too high for us and we couldn't catch up with him as tiredness was taking toll on us due to carrying our heavy photo gear. He motivated us enough to move around and due to his efforts, we did see the Small Niltava and were lucky to see a pair of Himalyan Yellow-throated Martens running across the road and they too fast for our cameras to capture, they disappeared as they appeared in to the thickets. While going down the grassy valley I had a fantastic fall and have a 10 inch long scar on my left leg as a remembrance of this trip and my attempt to photograph the Slaty-blue flycatcher. But the bird was merciful enough to stay close by and allowed us to click few record images at least before vanishing across a stream which was too treacherous to cross with the equipment. This place at SatTal is a birder's paradise and one can have a great number of species out here. The weather kept playing its tricks almost at a blinking of an eye. Near the Sat Tal lake area there are good restaurants so barged in to one to have some hot paratas (bread) to fight the hunger and cold and some great tasting masala tea too.

Lokesh was again jumping on us to finish our food soon so that he can take us to another stream where he had seen good number of Forktails which we missed at other places. On the way, there were some garbage dumps and we found a few Steppe eagles feeding on offal and one individual was very co-operative and did give us some close shots. Also at this place I saw my first Speckled Piculet which I have missed many times while going birding with my friends in the Westernghats. We hit the streams by around mid afternoon and thank god, the Sun hid itself among clouds so photography was possible throughout. We did manage to see the Spotted & Slaty-backed Fortails out there with Crested Kingfisher and scores of Redstarts. The Small Forktail which is commonly seen at this place eluded us and also the drizzle stopped us from venturing in to new areas as we had no rain protection for our gear also we were quiet far away from camp, so around 3PM when darkness started to fall we headed to Pangot awe struck by the beauty of Himalayan birds.

The last day of our Stay at Pangot was planned by Mr.Birdman (Lokesh) himself. He wanted us to scout the hills and valleys around the camp and told us to keep our fingers crossed as anything can occur at these wonderful places and they did happen. I was the lazy guy among the lot (the lot consisted of Niranjan Sant, Satyendra Sharma & Lokesh off course) so I requested everyone that we should use the Car most times and walk only if the place is good enough to do some photography and they were all kind enough to me. So we drove for around 5kms or so from the Camp and the Road ended out there in to a ravine so we took our gear and walked along a pathway. To our surprise a group of Longtailed minivets just landed on a tree in the valley and we were lucky to click few images of this air boreal bird at eye level. Also there was a hutment near by and an Asian Barred Owlet gave us some great poses. We walked a kilometer or so and I was too tired to walk with the High energy men so I told them that I will halt there and slowly walk towards the Car to drink some

water and to eat chocolates to get some energy back, so I walked alone towards the car, as I was nearing the

Khaleej Pheasant

Long-tailed Minivet

Car, one adult male Khaleej pheasant was crossing the path way and running in to the pine forest. As experience goes, if you see one, you have to see some more as they are usually seen in groups, so I focused on the bush from where the pheasant emerged and just waited there, to my amusement after few second there emerged around 9 pheasants and as the light was very low, I just switched over to ISO 800 and just kept clicking and out of around 40 clicks that I made, I got around 3 good image and was overjoyed. After an hour or so, Niranjan, Satie and Lokesh walked back to the Car and when I told them about my Pheasant experience, they yelled at me and cursed their luck as they couldn't shoot a single frame when I was away from the group. We drove back to the camp for some tea and wanted to try for the Cheer pheasant at Vinayak one last time. When we were on our way back to the camp we were lucky to spot the not so common Chestnut Thrush along with Grey-winged Blackbirds. Again I was at the mercy of the birds to give me some pictures and as always they did oblige. After the team time at camp we headed to Vinayak and were not so lucky with the Cheer pheasant, in fact on that day the Sun disappeared behind thick clouds by around 5PM itself and it was bone chilling at the hills in the darkness. I had one last look at the Panchkuli range and was awe struck again of the mighty Himalayas and her beauty. The trip did give us around 100 species of birds and more than half of that number we got them on the camera.

Guys this how the trip ended at Pangot, the plan for next day morning was to head to Delhi and fly back to Bangalore so that Niranjan could catch the late evening bus to Belgaum. On the way back to Delhi we got stranded on the highway for around 4hrs due to traffic jam. Our driver had to apply all the skills that he possessed to reach us to the Airport and we did land up there on time and our Aircraft was stranded at the tarmac for around 90mins due to take-off clearance issues. We arrived at Bangalore 2 Hrs late and rushed out of the Airport towards the Bus stand and found that the bus had already left, so we hired a taxi to chase down the run-away bus and Niranjan caught the bus at Tumkur and thank God the driver had stopped there for Dinner. When I got a call at mid night from Niranjan that he was on the bus to Belgaum - the adventure that started at Pangot continued till Tumkur.

I would encourage any one who loves birds to go to Pangot and get in touch with Mohit and team at Asian Adventures Web: www.pangot.com and you will never regret on your decision, you will be taken care so professionally and skillfully. The hospitality is just mind blowing.

My heart felt thanks to Lokesh, Mohit Aggarwal, Biks & Sumit Sen for their guidance. Also like to thank Niranjan Sant my friend for putting up with me during this trip ☺.

You can view all the pictures at http://www.clementfrancis.com/pangotnov2007.shtml also http://www.clementfrancis.com/new.php