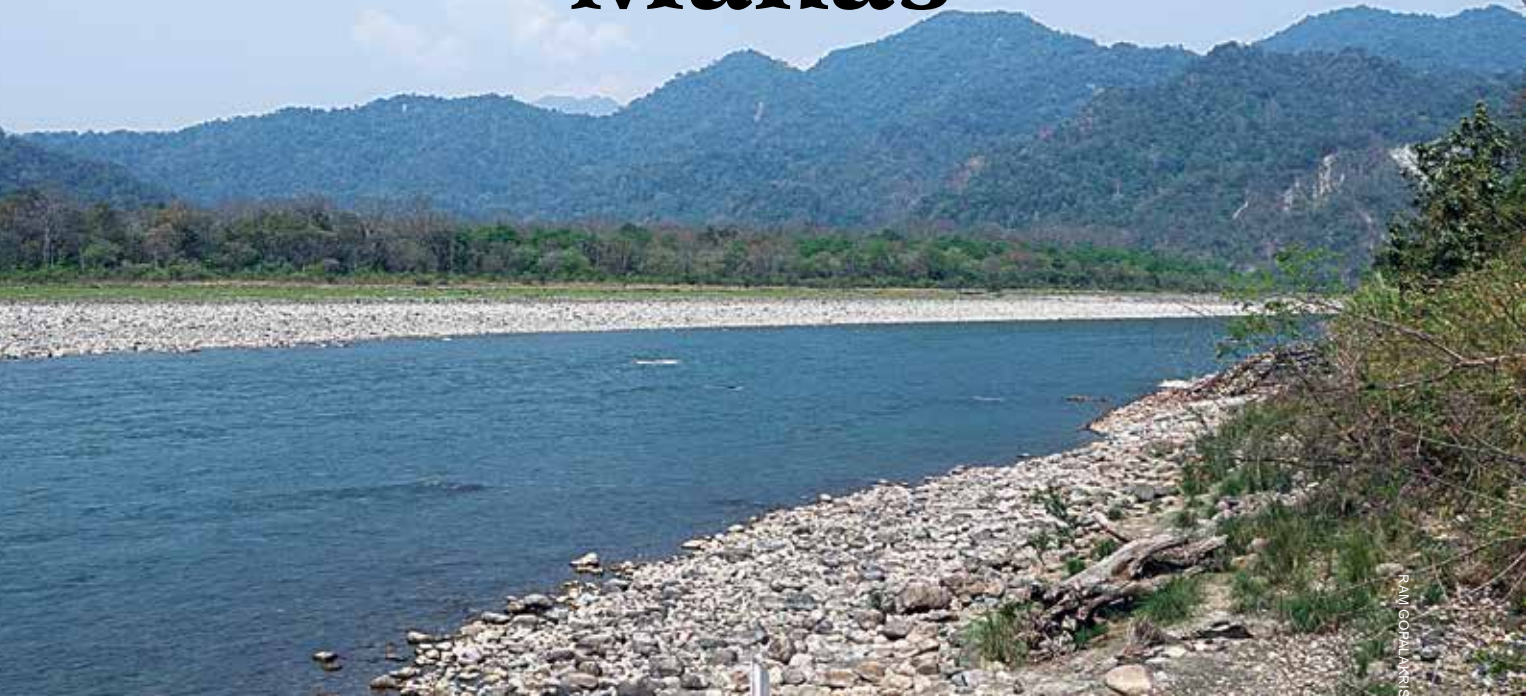


Mesmerizing Manas



The Manas river at Mothanguri

Text: **Ram Gopalakrishnan**

Can a wonderland go to the brink of annihilation, and then resurrect itself magically against all odds? Assam's Manas National Park and Tiger Reserve, on the India-Bhutan border, had experienced poaching and encroachments for a couple of decades as collateral damage from the Bodo agitation for a separate homeland. As the shrinking habitat vanished, highly endangered species that could not survive outside this habitat, such as Bengal florican, black-breasted parrotbill, Jerdon's babbler, slender-billed babbler, swamp francolin, and Finn's weaver – birds any birder would give away his right hand to see – were also vanishing!

When I last visited the national park in 2006, it was just stumbling its way out of years of destruction. Fifteen years later, when I returned for a birding trip, I had only one question in mind – would the park have resumed its status as one of

the last strongholds of the terai grassland habitat, which has been largely wiped out by agriculture in almost the entire northeast?

In search of the Bengal florican

When we visited Manas National Park, we were first on the lookout for the Bengal florican, which is best seen in the eastern grassland part of the Park. We set aside an entire day to look for the florican and other grassland specialists. Low grasses on either side as far as the eye could see and the mountains of Bhutan in front, with the background piercing call of the black francolin made for a sylvan setting for morning birding in the eastern Bhuyanpara range. Against this background, the magnificent black, white, and copper coloured male florican, with its black head sticking out like a periscope above the grass, was easily spotted from a distance. Although it appeared to be shy because of the presence of our

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A pair of male Bengal florican



ASHOK THAMPI

Pale-chinned flycatcher

vehicles, we still spotted half a dozen floricans. After such a wonderful sighting, breakfast tasted especially flavourful!

Grassland birding: sometimes tough, sometimes easy

In the tall elephant grass into which we headed later, striated babblers and Siberian stonechats were much easier to see than the rare ones we were after. Nonetheless, a succession of lifers ensued: the handsome slender-billed babbler with its variety of browns, followed by the chestnut-capped babbler with its striking snowy white head. The golden-headed cisticola yielded us only a fleeting glimpse.

We headed north into the forest, where a steady stream of forest dwellers interrupted our gypsy drives. A black-tailed crane that posed for the perfect shot in a forest pool was a memorable sighting. Because our guide Rustom Basumatary had an uncanny ability to hear bird calls beyond the engine's noise, our list of species swelled. All our sightings were based on visual and acoustic cues directly seen/heard; bird call playbacks were not deployed as our group leader Nikhil Bhopale was strictly against using them.

An amazing afternoon ensued after we headed to the former seed farm at Kokilabari, just outside the park. Seven more male floricans were sighted, but not even one of the well-camouflaged females. Hen and pied harriers,



ASHOK THAMPI

Black-tailed crane



ASHOK THAMPI

Grey-headed woodpecker

males with their stunning black and white patterns, systematically quartered their prey a few metres above the ground. A short-eared eagle owl was the sundowner for the day.

Floricans flushing out

Next morning, we headed straight north into the Bansbari range, initially through open grasslands. The piercing call of the black francolin alternated with peacock calls. Our vehicle startled a male florican by the roadside and soon enough, three floricans were flying around us! Their white wings were a giveaway even from a long distance and we feasted our eyes on them, content in knowing that the single largest population worldwide of this highly endangered bird is securely protected here.

Lunchtime was spent at the iconic Upper Bungalow at Mathanguri, watching the Manas river tumble out of Bhutan into India. This forest bungalow bids fair to be ranked as one of the most scenic places in India. We spent the afternoon enjoying the view at Mathanguri and idly photographing a common merganser fishing on the nearby riverbank. As we headed back, a group of kalij pheasants spent several minutes boldly foraging on the road in front of us, unaffected by our vehicles and cameras.

We started our birding the next morning in the thick broad-leaved forest adjacent to the Manas river. Broadbills are always a magical experience for any birder: it's a toss-up whether the silver-breasted or the long-tailed broadbill is prettiest, until you run into the red-headed trogon or the sultan tit in the next tree! A pair of great hornbills immediately took off on detecting our presence in the dense forest, and puff-throated babblers were easily seen in the forest undergrowth, but the cryptic Abbott's babbler, although heard easily, was seen just once.

After lunch, we cast a last throw of the dice in the Bhuyanpara grasslands, and to our delight, we were rewarded by the sightings of the Indian grassbird (formerly rufous-rumped) and Chinese rubythroat (formerly white-tailed), with its red throat shining like a beacon in a sea of brown



Greater one-horned Indian rhinoceros

grass. And of course, more floricans, which promptly took off on seeing us.

Most people visit Manas for the big mammals, as the population of the big three (elephant, buffalo, and rhino) is abundant. Tiger pugmarks reminded us that this was a tiger reserve. The rhino population of 30 re-introduced individuals (from Kaziranga and Pobitora) has swelled to 46, and a healthy population of swamp deer (also re-introduced) serves as the staple herbivore. A far cry from the situation a couple of decades ago, when poaching was rampant and large mammals almost wiped out: Manas has miraculously recovered to where it was in the 1980s.

Next time, if someone tells you grasslands are boring and lifeless, you know where to take them. With its charismatic large mammals, flocks of Bengal floricans and other extraordinary birding opportunities, Manas makes for a complete package, one to rival Kaziranga and perhaps surpass it one day! 🐦



Ram Gopalakrishnan is a physician practising in Chennai. He enjoys birding in remote locations and hopes to stimulate love for nature and its conservation through his writings.