

Birds of Bhutan

Companion book to the
“Feathers of the Dragon”
exhibition.

Ewen Bell



For those who want a closer look at the birds of Bhutan and to see what treasures are hiding in the Himalayas, this book is for you. This collection of images were captured over the period of a few short weeks in the winter time, with nothing more than a handheld Lumix G9, a 100-400mm telephoto and the help of some very fine companions.

Please enjoy.

#LUMIXG9

#HAPPYPLACES

#BIRDSOFBHUTAN

Birds of Bhutan

Ewen Bell

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Red-vented Bulbul

400mm
ISO 2000
1/200s
f/6.3

This is a very small collection of the birds we saw in the winter of 2019 and in no way should be regarded as comprehensive of what you might see if you visit Bhutan. I hope this collection does inspire you to visit however, and also consider the merits of a Lumix G9 for your bird photography.

For me personally it was amazing to realise what can be achieved with the equivalent of 800mm reach in such a compact and easy to hold camera. Even in flat light, with the rain drops tumbling past, I was ready to capture small moments of beauty.

Morning light reaches our hotel in Paro. We have just been travelling for a week and chasing birds through the forest, but a family of Rufous Sibia decided to join us at the hotel for breakfast and a quick chat.



There is so much in this world that we never see, until we really take a look. Bird photography helps you to slow down and enjoy nature around you. And every time you slow down there is always something special to be found.



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 500
400mm
White-capped Water Redstart



f/6.3
1/800s
ISO 200
400mm
Hodgson's Redstart (F)



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 640
400mm

Oriental White-eye





f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 200
400mm

Oriental Magpie Robin



f/6.3
1/320s
ISO 200
400mm

Winter Wren

Green-backed Tit

400mm
ISO 3200
1/160s
f/6.3



White-throated
Laughingthrush

400mm
ISO 500
1/200s
f/6.3



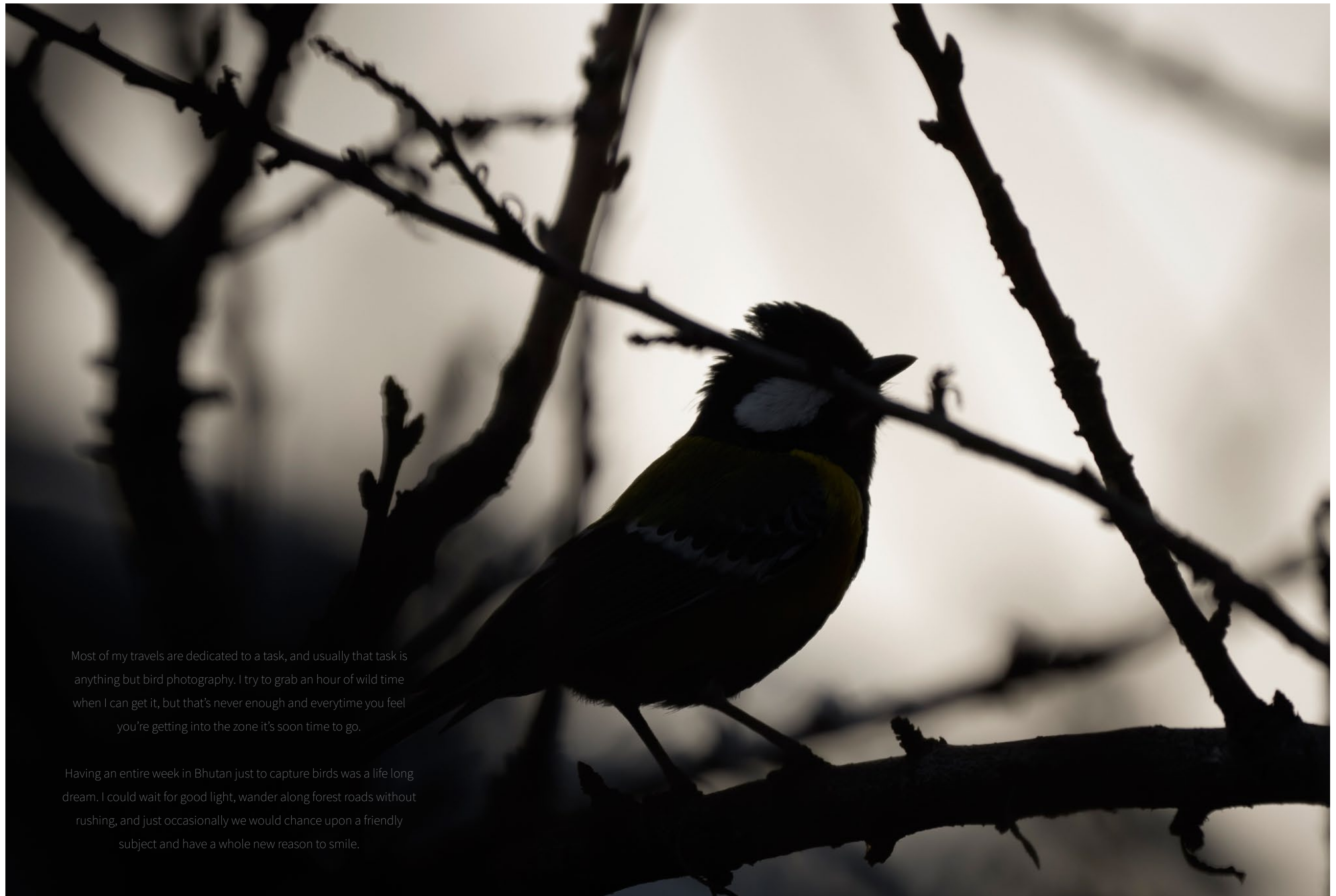
Green-backed Tit

400mm

ISO 640

1/200s

f/6.3



Most of my travels are dedicated to a task, and usually that task is anything but bird photography. I try to grab an hour of wild time when I can get it, but that's never enough and everytime you feel you're getting into the zone it's soon time to go.

Having an entire week in Bhutan just to capture birds was a life long dream. I could wait for good light, wander along forest roads without rushing, and just occasionally we would chance upon a friendly subject and have a whole new reason to smile.



Green-backed Tit

400mm

ISO 200

1/400s

f/6.3

Such tiny little creatures and yet they adapt to the freezing cold nights of the Himalayas. When the sun arrives the next morning they are ready to soak it up and get warm.

Photography is always about light. The subject is important but the light is critical. I try not to get caught up with photography for the sake of identifying the bird. Mostly I just want a really beautiful image that reminds me of how that moment made me feel.

It's the light that does all that.



f/6.3
1/320s
ISO 200
400mm

Himalayan Buzzard



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 400
400mm
Ruddy Shelduck

I nearly never saw this bird let alone photographed it. One of my tour group asked me, "What bird is that?" as we got on the bus. Being ready to respond quickly, and pre-loading the custom mode dial, has its advantages.



400mm
ISO 200
1/400s
f/6.3

Orange-bellied Leafbird

Orange-bellied Leafbird

400mm
ISO 200
1/400s
f/6.3



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1600
400mm
Blue Rock Thrush



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 400
400mm
Yellow-billed Blue Magpie



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 1250
400mm
Blue Whistling-Thrush



Most birds wan't nothing to do with humans and their cameras.
But we are patient and eventually we meet that one in a hundred
who is tolerant of the attention.

After sunset is my favourite time of day for slow shutter photography. The light very gentle and allows for slow exposures, yet there is enough glow in the sky to pull contrast into the water.



f/6.3
1/30s
ISO 320
400mm
Blue Whistling-Thrush



Chestnut-crowned
Laughingthrush
400mm
ISO 500
1/200s
f/6.3

Precision focus turns a crowded forest into an amazing moment captured. I love the detail of these feathers. This little chap probably thought he was invisible behind the branches and shrubs. The Lumix G9 not only has an excellent AF system and a generous viewfinder to drive it, but at the press of a button I can enter "scope mode" and train my focus within a magnification of the frame.

Absolute precision.



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 1000
400mm

Chestnut-crowned
Laughingthrush



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 320
400mm
Plain Mountain Finch



Beautiful Rosefinch
400mm
ISO 320
1/200s
f/6.3



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 640
400mm
Black-necked Crane



f/6.3
1/4000s
ISO 2500
400mm
Black-necked Crane

November in Phobjikha Valley is very special with the arrival of Black-necked Cranes. They fly over the Himalayas to find somewhere warmer to feed through the winter, and then head home to Western China in February.



f/4
1/4000s
ISO 320
100mm
Black-necked Crane



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 640
280mm
Black-necked Crane



f/6.3
1/4000s
ISO 2000
400mm
Black-necked Crane



f/6.3
1/4000s
ISO 800
350mm

Black-necked Crane



f/6.3
1/160s
ISO 3200
400mm

Dark-rumped Rosefinch



f/6.3
1/100s
ISO 3200
400mm

Blue-fronted Redstart



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 500
400mm
Rufous-vented Tit



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 200
400mm
Green-backed Tit



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 2000
400mm
Rufous-vented Tit



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 320
400mm

Rufous-breasted Accentor

Winter in the Himalayas is cool and dry. The morning light quickly
burns off overnight frost and the birds get busy searching for
something to fill their tummy.





f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 500
400mm
Common Hoopoe

Rufous-fronted Tit

400mm

ISO 640

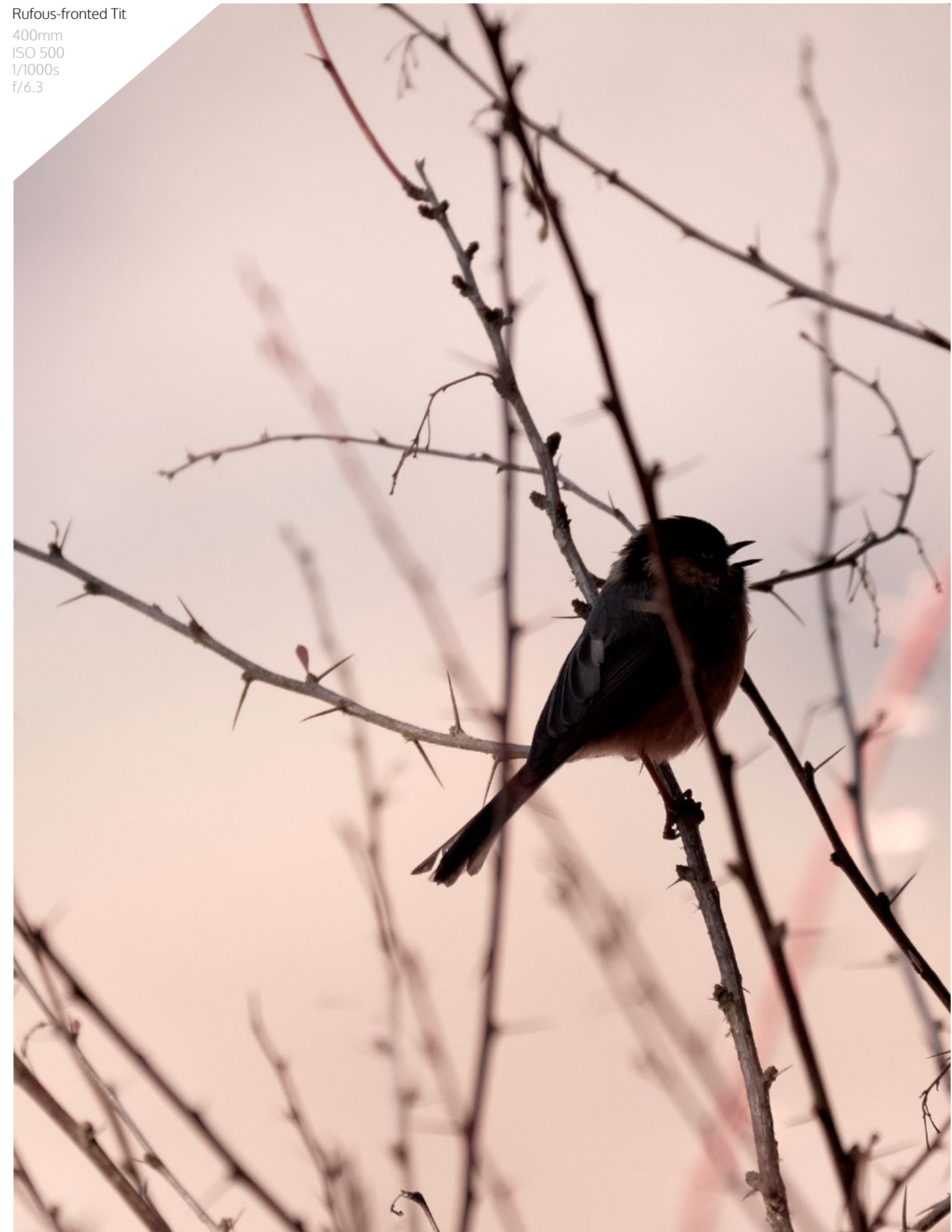
1/1000s

f/6.3





f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 1000
400mm
Rufous-fronted Tit



Rufous-fronted Tit
400mm
ISO 500
1/1000s
f/6.3

Ashy-throated Warbler

400mm
ISO 200
1/200s
f/6.3



Grey-hooded Warbler

400mm
ISO 200
1/250s
f/6.3



It took immense patience to capture this little Yuhina. We saw them way down the valley while walking along the roadside, and over the next 30 minutes watched them slowly work their way up the hill. Just at that moment the sunshine returned and I had 30 seconds worth of opportunity to shoot before this one flew away.



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 1000
400mm
Whiskered Yuhina

How fast is fast enough? Even at 1/1000th of a second the rapid head movement of a warbler can render your image blurry. It's very easy to miss that narrow moment in time when all of your subject is perfectly still.



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1250
400mm
Grey-hooded Warbler

The metallic shine of sunbirds is still one of nature's most marvellous tricks. As winter draws to a close the males start to elevate their colours.



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 2150
400mm
Green Tailed Sunbird

One of my objectives for this journey to Bhutan was not merely to photograph the birds, but to treat them as subjects of art. They are beautiful, but so are their surroundings, and so is the morning light reaching through a forest. Not every bird is best captured to fill the frame, sometimes it's nice to zoom back and make room for composition, light and bokeh.



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 250
400mm
Green-backed Tit



I love the way birds change their shape so dramatically, and seemingly so effortlessly. They ball up at night to reduce their surface area, and often fluff out feathers for warmth. Or stretch themselves to appear taller when feeling territorial.

Hodgson's Redstart

400mm
ISO 200
1/320s
f/6.3



Rufous-bellied Niltava

400mm

ISO 320

1/200s

f/6.3



f/6.3

1/1000s

ISO 1000

400mm

Bar-winged
Flycatcher-Shrike



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1000
400mm

Scaly-breasted Munia



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1600
400mm

Scaly-breasted Munia

Scaly-breasted Munia

f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1600
400mm



Some birds looks like a sparrow until
you point an 800mm lens at it.

#notasparrow



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 640
400mm
Red-vented Bulbul

Red-vented Bulbul
400mm
ISO 1250
1/200s
f/6.3



Most of my experience with wildlife photography has been trying to keep the shutter speed up to 1/1000th of a second. In the forests before dawn you simply don't have that much light, so you learn to make do around 1/200th. This really tests the effectiveness of your image-stabilisation system and the ISO performance.

Red-vented Bulbul

400mm
ISO 200
1/200s
f/6.3



Red-vented Bulbul are incredible subjects to practice your bird photography skills on. They are relatively easy to find in the wild, are often comfortable with humans being near, and provide the right balance of challenge and reward. I also think they're adorable and love the way they smile for the camera.



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1000
400mm

Red-vented Bulbul



f/6.3
1/500s
ISO 200
400mm

Red-vented Bulbul



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 320
400mm
Black Bulbul



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 800
400mm
Mountain Bulbul



Black Bulbul

400mm

ISO 250

1/200s

f/6.3



f/6.3
1/640s
ISO 200
400mm
Oriental White-eye



f/6.3
1/400s
ISO 200
400mm
Brown Parrotbill



We met dozens of park rangers on this trip and all but one of them had never seen this bird before. They knew the forest but not the feathers.

f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 1250
400mm
Brown Parrotbill

The way these birds flock and move together through a forest is an amazing sight. They flow through the branches, like a wave of wings.



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 500
400mm

White-throated Laughingthrush

Grey-hooded Warbler

400mm
ISO 400
1/1000s
f/6.3



Ashy-throated Warbler

400mm
ISO 200
1/250s
f/6.3



Plumbeous Water Redstart

400mm
ISO 200
1/30s
f/6.3



f/6.3
1/2500s
ISO 200
300mm
Plumbeous Water Redstart (F)

I do love a bird on a rock.



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 200
400mm
Plumbeous Water Redstart



I have to be honest and say that not every bird is beautiful.
Some are downright creepy, but none the less amazing.

f/6.3
1/320s
ISO 200
400mm

Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler

I have seen three kinds of kingfishers on this same patch of river bank. None of them seem to be friendly to us humans though, and take flight at the very sight of a camera.

f/6.3
1/320s
ISO 200
400mm

Common Kingfisher



f/6.3
1/250s
ISO 200
400mm

Oriental Turtle Dove

Bokeh is my favourite element in photography, and even with an f/6.3 lens you can get something nice to play with. A little distance between the subject and the background is half the trick, while having a very long lens is the other half.



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 200
400mm
Long-tailed Shrike



On this journey I had a chance to experiment with the 20fps pre-burst mode on the Lumix G9. It uses an electronic shutter to grab frames to buffer while you half-press the trigger. When I see the bird take off I comitt the trigger fully, and anything already in the buffer is recorded.

f/6.3
1/2500s
ISO 3200
400mm
Long-tailed Shrike



f/6.3
1/2500s
ISO 3200
400mm
Long-tailed Shrike

Brown Parrotbill


400mm
ISO 1250
1/1000s
f/6.3



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 200
400mm
Rufous Sibia



f/6.3
1/250s
ISO 200
400mm
Blue-fronted Redstart



That birds exist at all is utterly marvellous,
let alone with such varied kinds of beauty.
They are as different in character as they
are feathers.

f/6.3
1/250s
ISO 200
400mm

Asian Barred Owlet



They see everything. Every movement, blink and tweak of the lens. Never pretend that a bird didn't notice you creeping up closer towards them. They see everything. Each step you take is either tolerated or not, the choice is entirely theirs.

f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1000
400mm
Variable Sunbird (F)

Rufous Sibia

400mm
ISO 640
1/200s
f/6.3

The colours of the wilderness are also
the colours of the architecture in Bhutan.

Slate blue. Rufous Red. Silver white.

Charcoal black. Rhododendron green.





f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 640
400mm

Yellow-bellied Fantail



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 3200
400mm

Long-tailed Minivet



f/6.3
1/1000s
ISO 1250
400mm

Streak-breasted
Scimitar Babbler



f/6.3
1/250s
ISO 200
400mm

Grey Treepie



f6.3
1/200s
ISO 1000
400mm
White-browed Fulvetta

White-browed Fulvetta

400mm
ISO 640
1/200s
f/6.3



White-browed Fulvetta

400mm
ISO 1250
1/200s
f/6.3





f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 500
400mm
White-browed Fulvetta



f/6.3
1/200s
ISO 320
400mm
White-browed Fulvetta

The are moments while out in the wilderness when everything aligns. The winter light was about to disappear behind the Himalayas at dusk when Eejay heard the call of the fulvetta. He played their callback and they came flocking in, a dozen of them. For those few minutes it was mayhem and chaos and magical.

I didn't have time to think, instead all that practice and experience with the camera kicked in and everything just happened. Composition in such moments is innate, but the images captured will last me a lifetime.



Ewen Bell and the Lumix G9 with 100-400mm

Visit ewenbell.com for more information on bird photography, techniques and workshops.

Visit panasonic.com/lumix to learn about the Lumix G9 and 100-400mm DG Leica lens used to capture these images.

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My deepest thanks to the friends and colleagues in Bhutan who helped me come home with so many great moments.

Tshering Rinzi Eejay.

All images in this book were taken with the Lumix G9 and the 100-400mm Leica DG during just a few weeks of travel, in December 2018 and January 2019. One week of that was dedicated to bird photography with the help of one of Bhutan's loveliest and most talented bird guides, Eejay Eejay, and the team at Bhutan Scenic Tours.

#LUMIXG9
#HAPPYPLACES
#BIRDSOFBHUTAN