

Exhibition Guide

# **FEATHERS OF THE DRAGON**

BIFB 2019

August 23 - October 20

Mitchell Harris Wine Bar

38 Doveton St North - Ballarat

Ewen Bell & Ray Martin

Ray Martin and Ewen Bell travelled to Bhutan to capture a special collection of images from two perspectives, the birds that live in the forests and the Bhutanese who protect that habitat.

They met with farmers, monks, conservationists and rangers. What they discovered was a beautiful expression of conservation that has deep cultural roots, and yet is awakening to the modern world and a modern way to look at conservation values. Where they come together is the idea that the best way to protect wilderness is by local awareness of the wildlife who live there. When communities see the birds, they will act protect them.

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## WHY BHUTAN

Bhutan is land locked with the Himalayas to one side and the hills of Darjeeling to the other. It is a young country that has emerged from centuries of turmoil to establish a path dedicated to the cultivation of peace and wisdom. They have resisted outside influences and exercised caution when opening their border to visitors.

For over a decade Ewen Bell has been travelling to Bhutan and it has become a special place for his experience of art and humanity. “Spending time in Bhutan makes me feel like my life has meaning. These are generous people who remind me of the joy that comes from being a small part of something very big.”

The inception of this project was to bring a little of the Himalayas to Australia, but in doing so we have also brought a little of Australia to the Himalayas. Conservation is an emerging endeavour in Bhutan and the simple act of capturing images of birds has stirred a new awareness for many we met along the way. Images have the power to inspire, just as the ancient traditions of Bhutan have the power to teach and guide.

For photographers there are few places in the world that offer such depth and breadth of inspiration. Birds. Wilderness. Temples. Dzongs. Dancing. Monks. Students. Farmers. Rangers. Every day in Bhutan holds the possibility of a moment worth holding onto forever.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

### **Ray Martin**

Perhaps best known as one of Australia's most respected journalists, but is also a dedicated photographer in between donating his time to many charitable causes and the family he adores. He has travelled Australia and the globe in search of inspiration and was kind enough to accept an invitation to visit Bhutan. Ray's great gift is his ability to connect with people. He can take a complex series of emotions and distill them into a handful of sentences that beautifully convey the moment.

Ray's gentle and trusted voice is ever-present, even when working behind the camera instead of in front of one.

### **Ewen Bell**

More at home behind the camera than in front, Ewen has spent a lifetime capturing editorial images and mentoring others in the art. He shoots for a dozen international magazines including National Geographic, works closely with tourism boards across Australia and runs a handful of bespoke workshops and tours for genuinely small groups. For several years he was Editor at Large for Digital Photography magazine in Australia and continues to be a regular contributor to Digital Photographer UK and National Geographic Photography UK.

His guiding focus on photography is to share the beauty of this world. His mantra for students is simple enough: Go slow. Get closer. Look for the light.

## THE CAMERAS

Every image in this collection was captured with a Lumix S1R or G9. The new S-series model was still in pre-production when Ray got his hands on it for this exhibition. A brand new system and a brand new country to explore at the same time. The S1R offers a beautiful big sensor and lots of quality pixels that translate well to a generous size of print. The superb autofocus system and large viewfinder make this an excellent system for portrait work, not just landscape photography.

The bird shots in this collection are taken in the Lunlmix G9 with a 100-400mm Leica lens. It's an excellent tool for the job, bringing the equivalent of 800mm telephoto without the need for tripod stabilisation. In camera and lens stabilisation allows captures of extreme fidelity even at very low shutter speeds. You can dig deeper into the bird photography behind this exhibition by visiting [ewenbell.com/bifb](http://ewenbell.com/bifb) and taking a look at the special companion book to the exhibition called "Birds of Bhutan". Copies of this book can be viewed first hand at the exhibition as well.

There is one extra surprise in this exhibition from the Lumix G9. The large format print titled "Himalayan Habitats" is in fact a composite capture taken on the G9. With the help of a tripod this camera takes a series of 8 images with carefully calculated pixel shifts between each frame. In camera the images are built into a single RAW file with an 80MP footprint. The other large format prints are taken with the S1R.

All images have been processed in Capture One and printed on Ilford "Gold Fibre Gloss" by Prism Imaging. We are deeply grateful to Panasonic Australia and the Lumix range of cameras for sponsorship of this exhibition. It would not be possible without their support.



## EXHIBITION NOTES

The following pages include renders of the exhibition pieces, but shaded light so you can identify each piece in the collection without competing with the experience of the exhibition itself.



## SAFE LANDING

Flat land is rare in the Himalayas and proves valuable for both rice and airports. Bhutan has never been more open to the outside world than it is today, for travellers and ideas. Looking down across Paro Valley we meet Tshering Dorji and his friends, and explore his emerging awareness about conservation of habitats and species. Our journey through the Himalayas was guided by Tshering and his team, but his journey into the secret life of Bhutanese birds was guided by ours.

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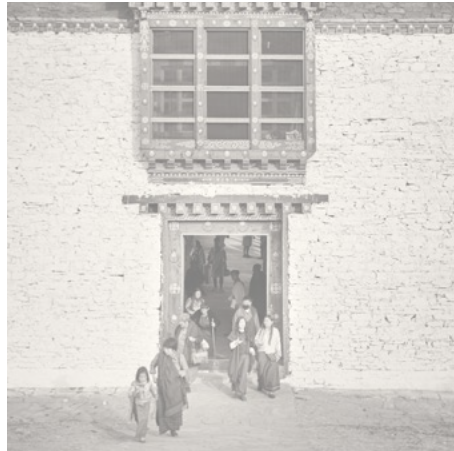
## CRANES AND POTATOES

Black-necked Cranes migrate from remote parts of China and Tibet to enjoy the mild winters of the Himalayas. In the valley of Phobjikha the local community once battled the cranes, because they dig through fallow fields in search of unharvested potatoes. Over the past decade that attitude has changed. Farmers see the crane as a symbol of their connection to the earth and greet them as old friends. Farmers now set aside habitat for the cranes, and some even toss out a few extra potatoes out of kindness.

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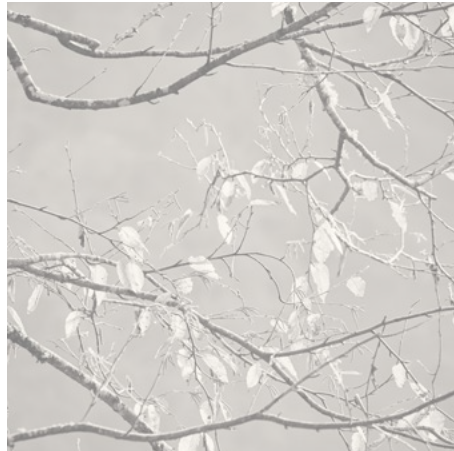


## COLOURS OF BHUTAN

The Rufous Sibia is a subtle creature that can be commonly found across the Paro Valley. Most visitors to Bhutan will never notice their fleeting presence, but they will see their colours everywhere. Their ochre hue is found in any temple and most homes, an earthy red that evokes a connection to the land itself. Their black feathers echo the black-hat dance performed in festivals as a symbol of power. Finally, a slate-blue tone runs the length of their primaries which echo the solid stone upon which so much of Bhutan is built.

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## EDGE OF THE FOREST

You are never far from the wilderness in Bhutan. It is a country that inhabits the very same wild spaces as its fauna. Most people in Bhutan live on the edges of wild places, but still struggle to see what lives within it. Their awareness of the birdlife that crosses between communities and wilderness is critical to appreciating the value of conservation. Photography is particularly powerful in bringing the smaller birds, like the Whiskered Yuhina, out of the wilderness and into our awareness.

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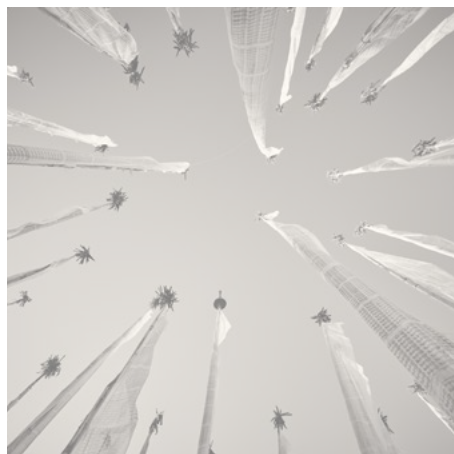


## DOMESTICATION

Animals in the Himalayas are traditionally considered only in the context of beasts of burden. They serve a purpose. While it is traditional to bare gratitude and respect for those animals, they are typically seen as domestic, not wild. Today the challenge for humanity is to learn respect for creatures that have no direct purpose for mankind, but to domesticate ourselves into the wilderness. The more we see human lives as part of a greater ecosystem, the more we understand the value of preserving all habitats.

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## DEDICATION

Religion is a daily expression in Bhutan, as necessary to everyday life as breakfast. At any temple across the country a steady stream of Bhutanese will visit through the day and offer prayers. They turn wheels, chant parables and walk in prayer, over and over. Some are more dedicated than others of course. Birds are the same. They are creatures of habit, and some have more stringent daily rituals than others.

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## **SOUTH OF GASA**

Families descend from the high meadows of Gasa to the warm fields of Punakha every winter. With the change of season the higher altitudes become harsh for people and their livestock. The same is true for wildlife, and many species of birds move up and down the mountain ranges every spring and autumn. They are altitudinal migrants. Habitats are rarely singular for a species, not even for humans.

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## IN PLAIN SIGHT

Often mistaken for a sparrow, the Plain Mountain Finch hangs with flocks of Rose Finches and Tits, and is almost invisible to the people who live amongst their habitat. Many species are hiding in plain sight in Bhutan, invisible to everyone except the few who look closely. The real challenge for conservation in the Himalayas is not the large and majestic birds such as the Black-necked Crane, but the hundreds of birds and mammals which are rarely seen and poorly recognised.

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## REMNANTS AND RICE

Birds such as the Bulbul have adapted to the changing environment. They thrive in the margins, on the edge of villages and the remnant forest in between rice fields. Birdlife reflects the status of the environment. They are the apex of evolutionary expression and markers of diversity. As humans change their environment, so too we change the habitat for wild creatures and birds.

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## THE UNSEEN BIRD

Many forest rangers have an interest in birds, not just trees. We showed a photo of the Brown Parrotbill to a few rangers, who told us they had never seen this bird before. Even a common bird such as these can go undetected in the Himalayas. We decided to spend more time with the rangers in Paro and Punakha to show them more of the birds in their forest, plus teach them skills to better observe the wildlife and capture on camera.

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## CLEANSING

Once a year every temple holds a festival and welcomes the entire community to attend. The foundation of these events is to purge evil spirits and renew the strength of the community. They are celebration and purification in one. There are now festivals to celebrate the wilderness and birds as well, to renew awareness and appreciation for preserving their wild places and the creatures that inhabit them.

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## **KINGDOM OF HARMONY**

Bhutan is a country gently transitioning from yesterday into tomorrow. They are doing with care for their people and care for the environment. A harmony must exist between humanity and wilderness because while the wild places can happily exist without us, we cannot exist without the wild places. The people and leaders of Bhutan understand this very well. Harmony is their natural state of being.

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## SPRING

With the arrival of spring the sunbirds start ramping up their plumage and boosting their metallic hues. Just like us humans, they dress up in their very best clothes for the special occasion. The country of Bhutan is very young, just over a century old in it's current form, and it feels like a country that is entering a new spring. Change is upon them, and mostly for the better.

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## INDIVIDUAL VOICES

Modern times are changing life in Bhutan, along with dedicated individuals who champion the love of wilderness and its creatures. The study of birds has grown with social media, for amateurs and professionals alike. A handful of individuals sharing their images and wisdom can transform the forests to a wider audience. Through these voices the wilderness is no longer just trees and mountains, it becomes a home to treasured species that once were invisible.

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## PHOBJIKHA VALLEY

Much of this valley has been transformed by farming on a very small scale. Villages grow potatoes and raise livestock to survive. The valley is too high for rice production. The marshlands provide ideal habitat for the migratory cranes in winter, and yet many other species thrive in this alpine elevation. Skylarks, Rosefinches, Greenfinches, Hoopoes, Woodpeckers, Tits, Raptors and Redstarts just to name a few. Diversity is found everywhere you look.

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## GOING GLOBAL

Things are changing in Bhutan, but very slowly. People are adopting global ideas and influences, while still trying to hold onto the depth and colour of their own traditions. Fashion, football and technology are the obvious changes in Bhutan, but western ideals on conservation are finding solid ground as well. Protection for the environment has roots in traditional ideals, it's not entirely new for Bhutan. The same geographic isolation that has preserved Bhutanese culture has also aided in the protection of flora and fauna.

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## HIMALAYAN HABITATS

Habitats are diverse in the Himalayas. From glacial valleys to tropical forests, there exists diversity of elevation, climate and flora that brings opportunity to a wide range of bird species. Hundreds of species of birds stay in Bhutan year round, and many more again are migratory. Some of the most famous birds of Bhutan stay only for a few months in the winter, and yet the forests are filled with an abundance of life all year round. Conservation in the Himalayas is not about a single kind of habitat, but every single one of them.

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THANKYOU

This exhibition was made possible by Panasonic Australia and their Lumix cameras. We are deeply grateful for their support in this project and for recognising the value of conservation to our community and those in Bhutan. We also love their cameras and hopefully the joy of our experience in the field is self-evident in the photos.

[panasonic.com/lumix](https://panasonic.com/lumix)

We also wish to thank Prism Imaging for their advice, support and sponsorship of the exhibition. Ewen has been using their services since his very first days of shooting on transparency film, and he is proud to be able to call on their expertise for this event.

[prismimaging.com.au](https://prismimaging.com.au)

Finally a quick word of thanks to Tshering, Rinzi and Eejay from Bhutan Scenic Tours. Ewen has worked closely with this team for so long they feel like brothers. They proved themselves once again to be the most dedicated and kindest team of soul one could hope for on such a journey. Every day is special with these guys.

[bhutanscenictours.com](https://bhutanscenictours.com)