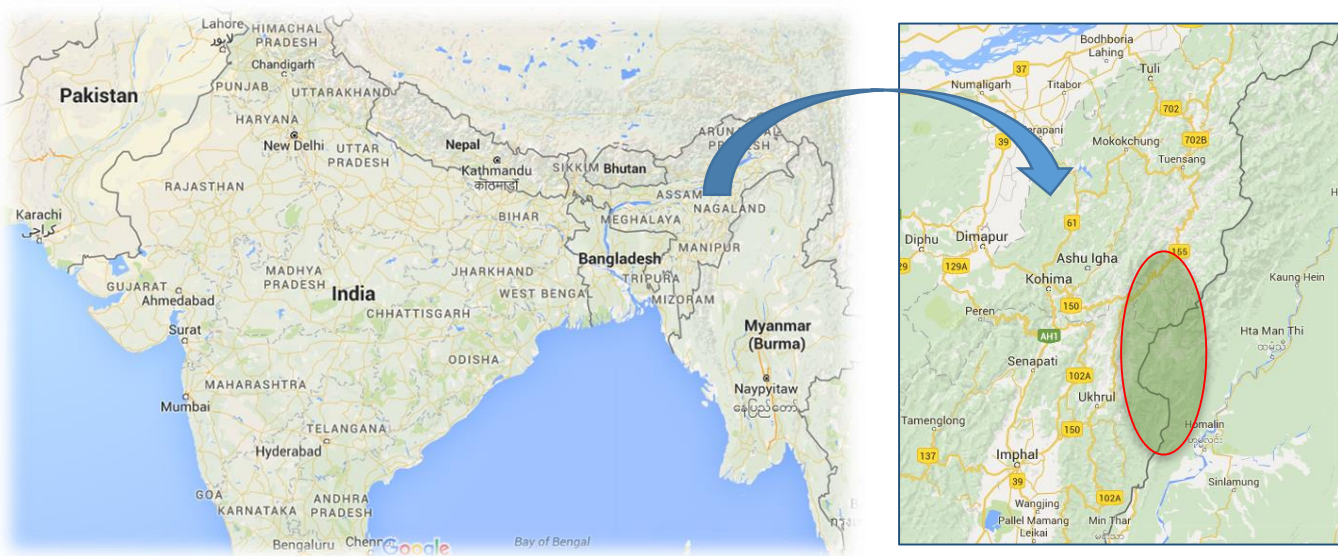


Finding Mrs. Humes Pheasant in North-East India

Prasad Basavaraj, Rofikul Islam, Rushi Tambe

Having spent most of my birding days in north east India, it was time to try and photograph the rare Mrs. Humes Pheasant in India. Though there were few records of this pheasant from Nagaland and Manipur border areas, there were no photographs in the wild. Nagaland has not been explored well enough by bird photographers, especially the border areas. All these facts were enough to motivate me to go for it.



Map showing the target area for our search

This needed a good team. It was obvious that Rofikul Islam of allindiabirdingtours.com; one of the best birding guides in northeast India, had to be on the team. Pheasant was high on his wish list. Having done several trips together earlier, I could squeeze some time from his busy schedule. Several discussions later we had short listed few locations to explore.

Pheasants are shy and alert, so having just one photographer was to risk a missed shot. Rushi Tambe, who had gotten into bird photography just by having one look at the rare bird list, readily jumped in rescheduling all his current assignments.

Rofik got Ase from allindiabirdtours.com. She is an extremely resourceful person with friends all over Nagaland. She could start conversation with any tribe and get us out of any situation in Nagaland. Dilipji agreed to drive when all the other drivers would laugh at the idea of reaching the Indo-Myanmar border deep within Nagaland.

Team was set, dates finalized. Rofikul, me, Rushi, Ase and Dilipji set off to the reach the village on Indo-Myanmar border in south Nagaland.



Shopping for essentials on our way. Prasad Basavaraj, Ase and Rofikul Islam

It would take us 3 days of continuous driving on hills, the roads got worse day by day. Unlike Arunachal Pradesh the landslides do not get cleared for days due to fewer army movement. There were several situations such as impossible roads, instant bandhs, permissions and council jurisdiction issues which almost aborted our trip mid-way. But luck favored us all the time.



Hard to imagine these roads in rainy days

Finally on reaching the village, we were pleasantly surprised at the warm welcome we received by the villagers and its chairman. We were given a place to stay and hot dinner served. Getting to work instantly, we started showing the Mrs. Humes pheasant drawings to the locals.



Helpful locals trying to identify the species

But it was the preserved feathers at a hunter's place that caught our attention. Then we knew we were at the right place, now it was all about going for it.



Mrs. Humes Pheasant feathers preserved by locals

The local hunters agreed to help us, but they were certain that it was an extremely shy bird and it would be tough to photograph it during daytime especially with our tight schedule.

The locals came up with a plan! Locate a roosting bird in the hills and photograph in dark! Sounds simple but it would mean that we trek those steep hill forests with no trek routes in complete darkness and scan every tree in torch light for our roosting pheasant! Anybody would laugh at this idea, but it was the only way to photograph in our tight schedule. Given the excitement we were in, even this crazy plan sounded good.



Locals chose few hills based on their hunting history and we started moving climbing in their regular trek routes.



Our hunter guide

At the foothill we waited until it was dark.



Waiting for darkness

The search began when we had to leave the trek route and started climbing the steep hill forest holding whatever we can grab. But we were told not to touch any tree as it would disturb the pheasant. Armed with only headlamps, we grabbed whatever we could, be it small shrubs or tiny grasses. The fact that we couldn't see the depth behind us reduced the fear. We would stop and scan every possible tree with a torch and continue climbing. We had reached the hilltop in next few hours. No sign of the pheasant!

Everything till now was a repetition of the way I had photographed the first images on Sclater's Monal in wild in 2007. Finding the village, discussing with hunters, the trek and everything reminded me of the Monal trek in upper Dibang, Arunachal. Will this trek yield or be one of my many failed treks?

We decided to climb down in a different direction, when one of the hunter hissed and showed thumbs up! Everyone froze. He had spotted a female pheasant. Within next few seconds our cameras had captured enough shots. Our hunter flushed the pheasant on our request so that the other hunter in our group wouldn't hunt it tonight. The pheasant took off into the darkness and got to die another day.



Female Mrs. Humes Pheasant

We don't even recall the difficulty we had while climbing down the steps in joy. At the same time we were pained by the extent of hunting in these hills.



Happy team! Rofikul, Prasad, Guides and Rushi