

# Red Panda & Eastern Himalayan Birding: Ilam, Dobate, and Sandakpur Ridge



## Trip Overview

The Red Panda & Eastern Himalayan Birding Expedition is an 11-day immersive journey into the lush mid-hills of eastern Nepal, designed for wildlife enthusiasts, birders, and nature lovers. Guests explore the verdant forests, bamboo belts, and tea gardens of Ilam, Dobate, and Sandakpur Ridge, focusing on the elusive red panda and a remarkable diversity of endemic and migratory birds. Guided by expert naturalists and local guardians, the itinerary balances ethical wildlife observation, hands-on conservation experiences, and scenic trekking along Himalayan ridges. Highlights include panoramic views of Kanchenjunga, interactive sessions with red panda monitoring teams, and encounters with mixed-flock birds, butterflies, and forest edge species. This journey offers a rare combination of adventure, education, and mindful immersion in one of Nepal's most biodiverse regions.

**Total Trip Days:** 11 Days / 10 Nights

## Trip Highlights

- Search for the elusive red panda in bamboo-rich habitats with expert local spotters
- Trek the Sandakpur Ridge, the highest point in eastern Nepal, with views of Kanchenjunga and other Himalayan peaks
- Birdwatch mid-hill endemics and mixed-flock species, including parrotbills, scimitar-babblers, Himalayan monal, and hornbills
- Explore Ilam tea gardens, Mai Valley streams, and forest edges for diverse wildlife and butterflies
- Engage in conservation initiatives, learning about community-led forest protection and wildlife monitoring
- Ethical, small-group wildlife viewing with strict photography protocols to minimize disturbance
- Comfortable stays in lodges and tea-belt accommodations surrounded by Himalayan landscapes
- Seamless transfers, domestic flights, and guided experiences with naturalists and local guardians

## Itinerary

### Day 1:

Your journey begins in Kathmandu, where you are welcomed at a heritage-style hotel. In the evening, your naturalist guide introduces the unique biodiversity of eastern Nepal, highlighting red panda ecology, the endemic birds of the mid-hills, and the mosaic of habitats from subtropical forests to alpine ridges. You also receive a briefing on ethical wildlife viewing, photography protocols, and trekking logistics for the coming days.

### Day 2:

A morning flight to Bhadrapur brings you closer to the verdant hills of Ilam, famed for tea gardens and rhododendron forests. From the airport, a scenic drive of three to four hours delivers you to your lodge perched amidst rolling hills. Upon arrival, you take a short evening walk along nearby trails, scanning bamboo thickets and forest edges for your first sightings of endemic bird species.

### **Day 3:**

Early dawn sees you in the Dobate area, a bamboo-rich habitat that shelters the elusive red panda. Guided by local guardians trained in monitoring these rare mammals, you quietly observe their feeding signs and, with luck, may catch fleeting glimpses of the animal itself. Midday offers a brief rest, followed by a late afternoon walk to observe mixed-flock bird activity, including sunbirds, parrotbills, and laughingthrushes that inhabit the mid-hill forests.

### **Day 4:**

You trek along the Sandakpur Ridge, the highest point in eastern Nepal, offering panoramic views of the Kanchenjunga and other Himalayan peaks. The ridge hosts a variety of birdlife including raptors, Himalayan monal, and pheasant species. The gentle slopes also harbor red panda habitats interspersed with oak and rhododendron forests. Afternoon tea breaks in scenic viewpoints provide excellent opportunities for photography and wildlife sketching.

### **Day 5:**

This day is dedicated to the ongoing monitoring of red panda populations using camera traps and direct observation. Dawn and dusk sessions focus on their feeding and movement patterns, while the intervening daylight hours allow for birding along streams and forest edges. Species likely to be observed include parrotbills, scimitar-babblers, and various flycatchers, making it a rich ornithological experience.

### **Day 6:**

Descending to the lower hills, you explore the tea gardens of Kanyam and surrounding farmland. Here, the blend of cultivated and natural habitats attracts a different set of species, such as rufous-necked hornbills, blue-winged minlas, and migratory songbirds. The interaction of local communities with these habitats provides insight into sustainable land-use practices that benefit wildlife conservation.

### **Day 7:**

The Mai Valley offers crystal-clear streams and dense riparian vegetation. Early morning walks along the streams allow observation of dippers, forktails, and small passerines. The afternoon is reserved for gentle forest edge hikes to observe butterflies, endemic reptiles, and small mammals, while keeping disturbance to a minimum in sensitive areas.

### **Day 8:**

Returning to the higher bamboo belts, you have another focused session to track red pandas. Expert spotters guide the group to likely feeding and resting zones. Photography is strictly ethical, avoiding flash and noise, and group size is limited to reduce stress on the animals. Birding continues in nearby oak and rhododendron forests.

### **Day 9:**

This day is reserved to ensure that no key species are missed. Additionally, you visit a local conservation project, learning about community-led forest protection and wildlife monitoring programs. Interaction with local guardians and field researchers provides unique insight into how red panda and bird conservation is managed on the ground.

### **Day 10:**

After a final morning walk in the forest edge, you drive back to Bhadrapur for a flight to Kathmandu. The afternoon is at leisure for souvenir shopping, and in the evening, a farewell dinner celebrates your journey through eastern Nepal's wildlife landscapes.

### **Day 11:**

You are transferred to the airport for your onward journey, carrying vivid memories of red pandas, Himalayan endemics, and the verdant eastern hills of Nepal. This trip offers a rare combination of wildlife observation, birding, cultural insight, and immersive naturalist experiences.