

Nepal – Red Panda Expedition

6th- 15th March

Report by Paul McDougall

Tour participants Paul McDougall (photographic Guide) with 4 Touch the Wild clients

Summary

Native to the Eastern Himalayas, the Red Panda is a rare, arboreal mammal and a highly sought after species for photographers across the globe due to its elusiveness. With a strong team of on the ground local naturalists, we have been conducting successful Red Panda Expeditions over the past few years, with successful sightings each time. The Singalila National Park in Darjeeling, West Bengal is one of the handfuls of places where wild Red Pandas are still found in the world. With a temperate and subtropical habitat 7000 feet above the sea level, this park is a hotspot for Red Pandas to thrive.

Singalila Mountain Ridge on the Nepal side as Tinchuley Forest & Singalila National Park on the India side is one of the most exotic Himalayan forests in eastern Indo-Nepal region. It is a broadleaf montane rain forest habitat one of the last remaining ideal habitats for the Red Panda. We work between altitudes of 5000 feet to 12000 feet above sea level, in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal & Ilam district of Nepal. Both the places are famous for the trekking route to Sandakphu that runs through it, tea and of course the mesmerising Himalayan mountain range..

We enjoyed exclusive occupancy at Habres Nest, which is an authentic and local homestay experience with modern amenities. This was home to all of us, around 22 Local people who made the Homestay themselves & monitor the surrounding Red Panda habitat for Red Panda conservation and research. These guys are Undoubtedly the best trackers around with 100% success rate. An experiential homestay which provides the highest quality Red Panda tour experience above 10,000 ft bordering India (Singalila) & Nepal (Ilam). Unlike in resorts & lodges, guests are taking part in the Research & Conservation of the wild Red Pandas.



Day 1 Friday 6th March

All of the group and myself arrived on either the Wednesday or Thursday so the Friday instead of being arrival day was more of a day to relax or do own activities in Kathmandu or around the

Gokarna Forest Resort where we were staying. After a really good nights rest 2 of the group who had visited Nepal previously went into Kathmandu to explore. The other 2 group members stayed at the hotel, and we did a short bird walk around the hotel grounds where we saw and photographed many unique species of birds including Fire-Breasted Flowerpecker, Grey-Headed Canary Flycatcher, Blue Throated Barbet and Great Barbet. We met for drinks and dinner at 6:30 and after a delicious traditional Nepalese meal headed to bed as we had an early start the next morning.







Day 2 Saturday 7th March

Our flight to Bhadrapur was scheduled to depart at 7am. This meant leaving the hotel at 5:30am. We all met at 5:15am and were soon on our way to Kathmandu Airport. We checked in for the flight quickly and didn't have long to wait for our flight. The flight took off a little late but we were soon airborne. It was a beautiful sunny clear day and for those sat on the left of the plane the views of the Himalayas were breathtaking. We landed in Bhadrapur and after a short wait to retrieve our luggage were loaded in to 2 vehicles ready for our journey North to start our Red Panda search. We had a brief stop in Fikkell for a late breakfast changed vehicles in to 2 4x4's and were then soon on our way again. After a drive of 3 hours we stopped at Tumling, where the luggage was transferred to 2 more vehicles owned by Habres Nest where we are staying. Due to the dispute between India and Nepal over the border road, we had to walk and meet the vehicles further along the road (tourists are not permitted on the road in any part where the road crosses in to India). The walk is not that long in distance but it is mostly uphill, I often find that this first walk is a good way to start the Red Panda experience, it is tougher than most of the treks and certainly gives you a taste of the unique ecosystem and environment that the Red Panda lives in. Everyone made it back to the vehicles and then we continued to Habres Nest which was to be our home and base for the next week. I have been here many times and it always feels like coming home, the same people and same atmosphere greets you every year and it is a wonderful place. After a lunch and a brief run down of the property due to the very low cloud everyone elected to go to their rooms to unpack and relax. We met for soup at 6:30 around the fire and then had dinner. Everyone was tired after a long day of travelling and an adjustment to high altitude, so we all had an early night.



Day 3 Sunday 8th March

I woke at 6am and looked out of the window and once again it was thick cloud. Usually the mornings are bright and clear with only the afternoons being affected by the low cloud cover, but it looked like today was going to be a tough day for Red Pandas.

I could hear my group members starting to move around at 6:30am and so I headed down to the bird hide. I spent a few hours in the hide before breakfast going through camera settings and making sure everyone was confident with their camera settings in the hope that we would get Red Pandas later on in the day. At 8:30 it started to brighten up a bit. We had breakfast and all of the trackers went out looking for Red Pandas. Some of the group went back to their rooms to relax and some joined me back in the bird hide, again I went through more settings and helped everyone practice. Whilst in the hide we saw several endemic Himalayan birds including Spotted Laughingthrush, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, White – browed Fulvetta, Blue Whistling Thrush and Hoary-Throated Barwing.

The morning period saw no Red Panda sightings so after lunch we all retired to our rooms and some started to download bird images, some slept and some read and relaxed. The low cloud and unpredictable weather in this very remote area can be frustrating, when you are looking to try and see one main species and are so remote it can mean a lot of down time whilst the trackers are out, but it never does anyone any harm to disconnect from technology and relax and acclimatise to the high altitude.

After a relaxing afternoon which also saw no Red Pandas we had dinner at 7 and then had an early night in the hope that tomorrow would bring us our first Red Panda of the trip.



Day 4 Monday 9th March

I woke at 6am and headed down to the hide. I was soon joined by some of the group members. We had a very brief view of a yellow throated marten but unfortunately it did not stay for long and so nobody was able to get any images. As it got later the rest of the group joined and we spent some time photographing the many birds.



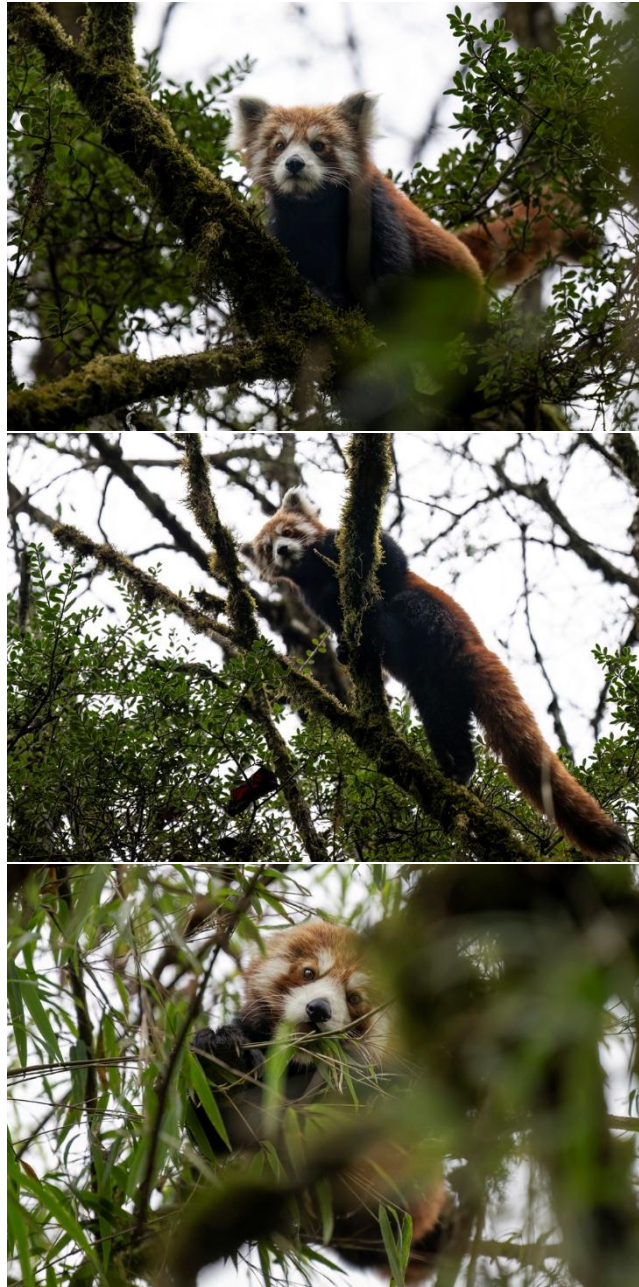


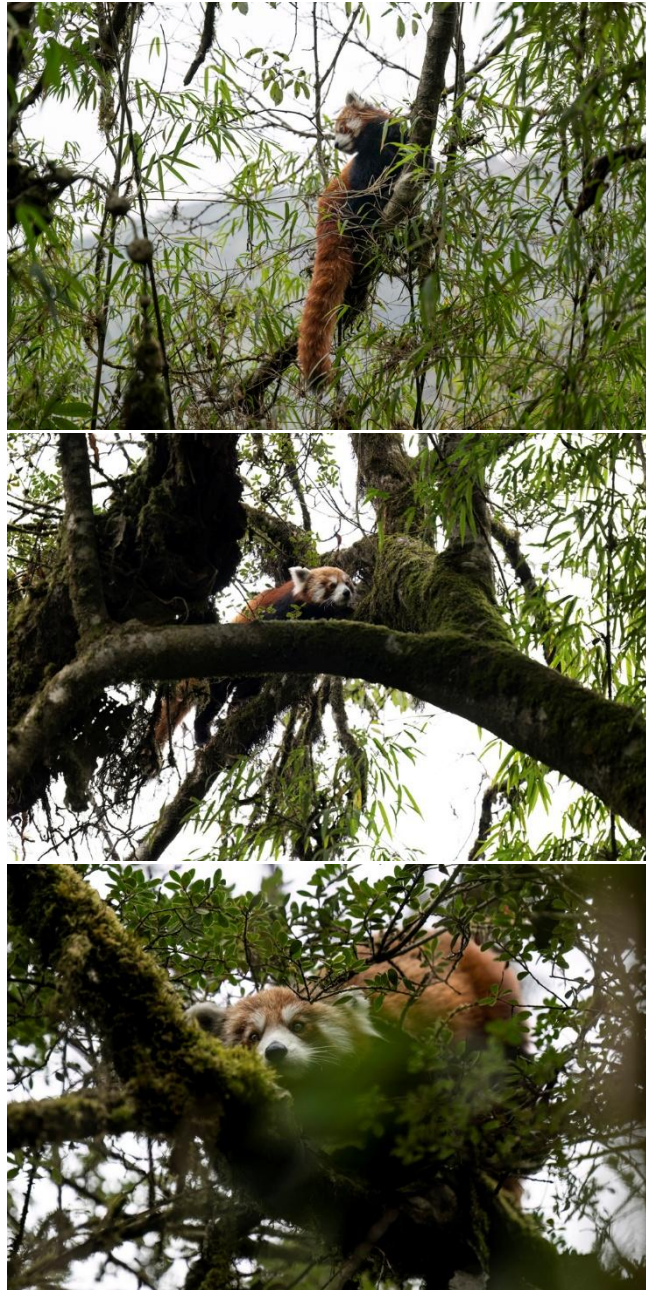
We had breakfast at 8:30am and then everyone went back to their rooms to relax and look at the morning's images. At around 10am our peace and relaxation was interrupted by shouts of "panda" "panda". This was it the trackers who had been out since early morning had found our first Red Panda. We all quickly got ready to leave and assembled outside. You could feel the excitement in the group. We were informed that this Panda had been located quite close and the walk was relatively easy and short. This was ideal as some of the group members had physical conditions that made some aspects of this trip even more challenging. We all set off with each guest being given a guide/porter to help them negotiate the paths and carry any equipment. After no more than 15 mins we saw the Red Panda in a tree eating bamboo, It was less than 5 metres away. Within minutes all of the group arrived and myself and all of the guides got everyone in to a position where they could photograph the Panda. Where I was positioned myself was not ideal as I was a little too low down, but on a thin path it was more important to position the group in the ideal location which we did and they all got beautiful eye level images of the Red Panda with a lovely background. We stayed with the panda for 30 minutes and then

left it to continue eating its bamboo. We only spend 30 minutes with the Red Panda to minimise any disturbance and that is usually plenty of time to capture images.

We then walked back to Habres Nest. Everyone was excited and happy with their first Red Panda. When we got back we looked from the upstairs balcony and saw the same Red Panda from a distance making its way through the trees. Really nice to see it from this distance in the environment.

Everyone went back to their rooms to review their images, and it was so nice to hear all the groups “wows” and “look at that’s”.





In the afternoon we had arranged to go for a walk along one of the trails in the park. We set off and it was a beautiful sunny afternoon. It was lovely seeing the Magnolia Trees, Daphne and Rhododendrons starting to flower adding lovely patches of colour in the lush green environment. The walk was largely uneventful with a few birds and stunning scenery. After an hour we turned around to start our walk back and as we walked around a corner one of our guides shouted “panda” sure enough there was a panda sitting in a tree some distance from the path. 2 of the group had decided not to bring their cameras and one had stayed behind but myself and one of the group took a few distant environmental images of the Red Panda in the tree, then through the lens I saw another Panda put its head up, this was a mother and cub. WOW!. One of the guides said to us did we want to try and get closer, but we were warned that it would be particularly tough with a very steep climb. We agreed to give it a go and so set off. I went ahead and we climbed up an almost vertical slope using the bamboo to pull ourselves up.

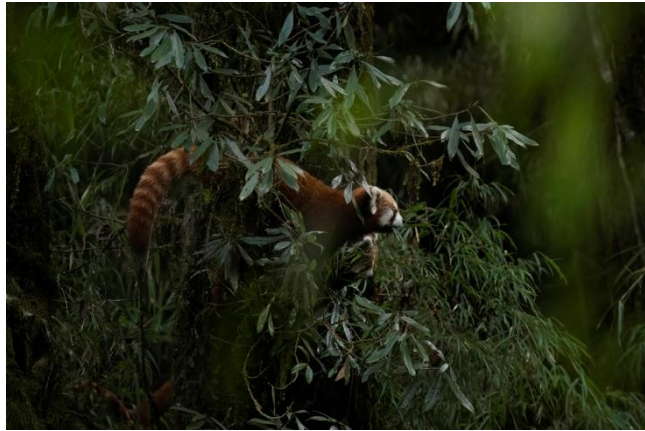
When I got to the tree the Red Pandas were sat there but with a thick covering of bamboo. The guide with me then took me even higher up the slope and we went around to a different clearing and although the pandas were more distant the views were much better. The other group member who had made it to the top of the slope decided to stay by the tree to see if the pandas would become visible. By this time word had reached Habres Nest and the group member who had stayed behind joined for the sighting. The other 2 who didn't have their cameras and didn't think that they would be able to negotiate the steep climb returned back to habres nest. I had a great view but frustratingly I could not get the 2 pandas together very clearly in the same frame. I was then told that there was a third panda, this was actually a mother with 2 cubs. The same frustrations were there but I was able to get some nice images of the pandas individually and was able to do some quite creative images using the foliage in the foreground.

We had our 30 minutes with the pandas and then started to make our way back. For me it wasn't too hard as my descent was quite gradual. For the other 2 group members it was a different story as they had to descend an almost vertical slope to reach the road. It was now starting to get dark as I waited for the group to return after some time they made it down and we walked back. What a day 4 Red Pandas in one day!!

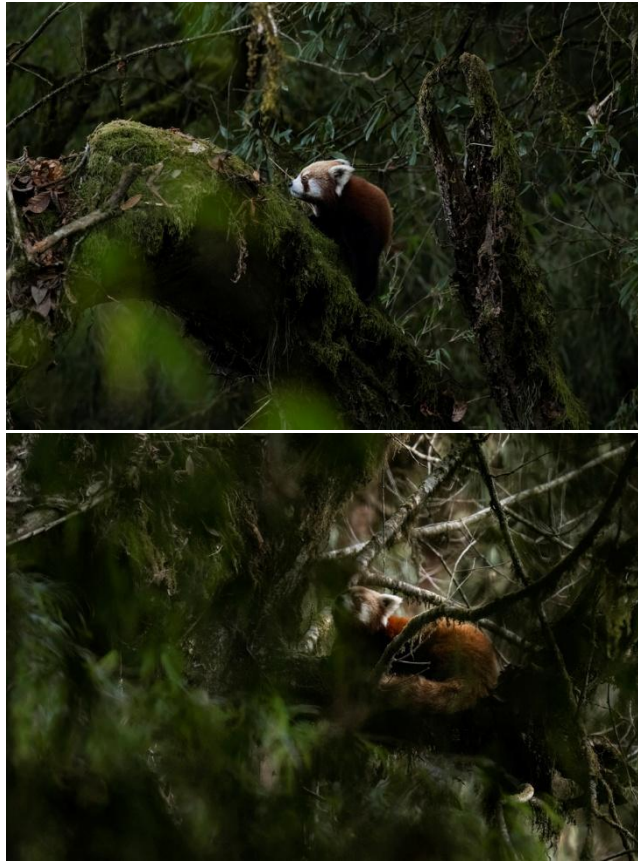
We got back late and went straight for dinner elated at the sightings we had and the sense of achievement of being able to photograph these rare and elusive animals.

Very few people in the world have seen or photographed a Red Panda in the wild and 4 new people are now added to this list.









Day 5 Tuesday 10th March

I woke at 6:15am and headed down to the hide. 1 of the group was already in the hide determined to see and photograph the Martens. 2 of the group also arrived shortly after me. It was a lovely sunny morning, and the birds were looking stunning in the light. After about half hour everything went quiet usually a sign that the martens are near and sure enough one, two and then three appeared it was the mother Yellow throated Marten and her 2 large kits. Everyone got images of the martens and at 8am we all left the hide to go for breakfast.

The remainder of the morning everyone did their own thing, some people relaxed whilst others went back to the hide. I went down to the hide at around 12:15. Nobody was in the hide which meant that I could get a few images myself and try a few different things, mainly zoom bursts and some low-key images. I had only been in the hide for 15 minutes when the Martens appeared. I switched my camera to silent and took a few images of them before they all disappeared. After a short wait they came back again and one attempted to climb up a tree. They then disappeared into the bamboo. They then appeared again right in front of the hide. I quickly put a message in the group WhatsApp – letting everyone know the martens were here. The network here as it is so remote is generally poor, but I hoped it would send. The 3 martens were all right in front of the hide. It was an incredible experience. I got a few images and then after about 10 minutes the Martens left, ironically just as the first members of my group appeared. Everyone then appeared, I hoped that the Martens would come back again but unfortunately, they didn't.









The cloud then came down thick and visibility was very poor. We returned to our rooms and then it rained and we even had hail. We were hoping to go for a walk at around 3:30pm again and hoped it would clear. At around 3:45pm the cloud had lifted and so we decided we would go for a short walk. We set off and the cloud started to descend again so we turned around and started to walk back. Along the path our guide stopped still and tried to get our attention we looked where he was pointing but saw nothing, he had seen a Golden Cat briefly appear in the forest before disappearing again.

The cloud descended further making visibility poor and it extremely difficult to see anything, so the remainder of the day was spent processing and reviewing images. We followed our usual plan of dinner at 7 and then an early night hoping for more pandas tomorrow.

Day 6 Wednesday 11th March

In the morning everyone chose to do their own thing 2 of the group went in to the hide in the hope of seeing the Martens again. The other 2 decided to just relax and sleep in a little. I decided to go for an early morning walk to look for the Satyr Tragopan which is a bright red pheasant. I had always wanted to see this bird and photograph it but on previous trips had only ever caught fleeting glimpses of it. So, at 6am we set off on a walk to search for it. Unfortunately, luck was not with us for the Tragopan but we did see many lovely birds the Scarlet Minivet, Sunbird, Bullfinch and Nutcracker.



We all met for breakfast at 8:30am and then returned to our rooms to relax. Around 11am we got the shouts of “panda” “panda”. Brilliant another Red Panda sighting. We were advised that it was the same panda family from Monday in a similar area. So we set off on our walk to get to the area where they had found. On these walks everyone has their own pace and there is never any rush as we do not attempt to approach a panda until everyone is there and until we know where the panda is, some locations are just not possible for some people to physically get to – no matter how much they want to. We reached the location and we were told that it would mean climbing up the steep slope again. 3 of us elected to go and 2 remained on the road hoping to see the pandas from there. I reached the top first and there were 2 pandas in the tree – mum and one of the cubs. I started to take a few images whilst I waited for the rest of the group. They made it up the slope and I moved places to allow them a good view of the pandas. The Mum and Cub then sat on a branch and started to touch noses and groom each other – the light was a little tricky but it was a truly incredible sighting. For the next half hour we 20 minutes we watched the pandas interacting and then moving around in the tree tops. The tree they had picked was a stunning old knarled tree and it made for some lovely images. We were then joined by 1 of the group that had decided to stay behind on the road, they made it up there – incredible. We stayed slightly longer so they could also get some images and see the pandas and then we started our descent. It was again very steep and slippy and sometimes as much as it may not look the most impressive the easiest way down is to just sit and slide!!

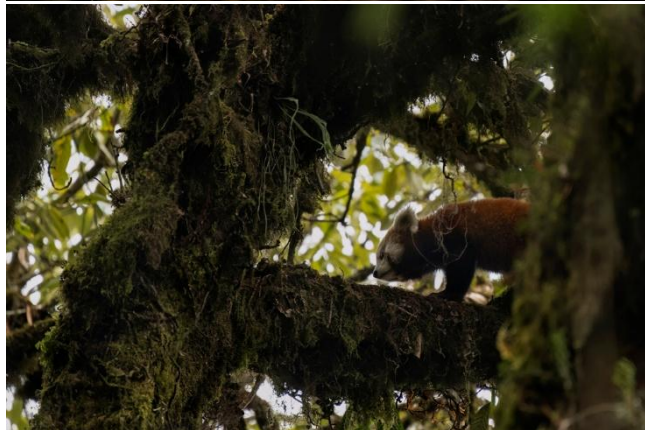
This was a really incredible Red Panda Sighting and one of the best that I have had in years of doing this. It was a great moment and everyone got some images to remember it by.

We walked back and had a delicious lunch and then retired to our rooms for the afternoon. Those that had taken a lot of images used the time to go through them and start the lengthy process of sorting through them.

The afternoon was cold and wet with very low cloud cover and so there wasn't much more that we could do or organise. Nobody seemed concerned and were happy looking at images. Late afternoon I spent some time with one of the group going through her images and processing some of them and showing her how to deal with the tough light conditions from the morning.

We then had dinner and slept early.



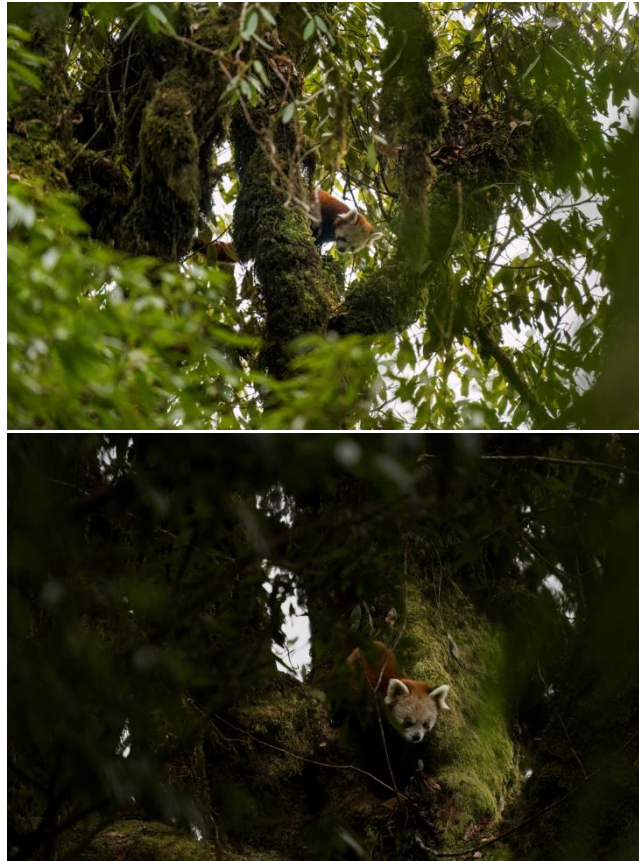












Day 7 Thursday 12th March

I had planned to go for another early walk but when I woke up the cloud cover was again very low, so I decided to sleep in as that is what everyone else had planned to do. We had breakfast at the usual time and it really did not look like the weather was going to improve, so everyone decided that they were happy just doing their own thing and so retired to their rooms. At around 11:30 one of the guides came to my room to get me and tell me that there was a Tragopan in a nearby tree. The group were all sleeping and relaxing, so I didn't disturb them and as this was something that I had always wanted to photograph I grabbed my camera and went with the guide. After around 15 minutes of walking through the jungle we came to the tree that the Tragopan was in and although none of the images were amazing, I did get a few reasonable images of the Satyr Tragopan – a bird I had always wanted to photograph.

The rest of the day was again significantly weather impacted, so it was a slow and relaxed day looking at images, reading and relaxing. We then had dinner and slept early.



Day 8 Friday 13th March

I had planned to go for another early walk but again the cloud cover was very low and therefore visibility was very poor. We had breakfast at the normal time and discussed the plans for the day. We all hoped that the cloud would lift for our last day but it did look unlikely. 2 of the group just wanted to relax and look at their images from the last few days. 3 of us went down to the hide and although a little misty the visibility was still pretty good. I went through some different settings concentrating on the creative elements of photography, creating black backgrounds and trying zoom bursts and motion blur. It was a lot of fun trying some different things and we all got a few nice images. The martens also put in another brief appearance which was really nice to see. The cloud unfortunately didn't lift so the afternoon was spent relaxing and packing ready for the next stage of our journey. That evening we all had a last meal together as a group and discussed the trip highlights. We all agreed that it would have been great to see more Red Pandas but that the sightings we did have really made up for it and we really did have some amazing experiences with the pandas.





Day 9 Saturday 14th March

We woke up early as we were leaving shortly after 6am. Of course, the weather was lovely with a fantastic sunrise and the light was beautiful. We could see for miles and there was no cloud cover – typical! 2 of the group were leaving with me to India for my Fishing Cat Trip where we would be joined by 3 new people. The other 2 were going back to Kathmandu and were then travelling Nepal independently. We travelled in convoy to Fikkel and then said a final goodbye to the 2 staying in Nepal before leaving for the India/Nepal border.

As we left in the old rickety landrovers the mighty Kanchenjunga was clearly visible and it made me consider how lucky we all were to see and spend time with wild Red Pandas in such an incredible environment. This trip is such a unique experience right up in the cloud forests of the Himalayas you feel like you are on top of the world and then look up at the horizon and see that there is still more above you. The trip itself was excellent with some brilliant experiences with the amazing Red Pandas and seeing the panda family together really was a very special moment. The Martens were also a bonus which everyone took advantage of. Despite the weather everyone had a good time and got some incredible images. Very few people in the world have seen a Red Panda in the wild and even less have photographed it so it is an absolute privilege being able to bring people here to experience it for themselves.

I will be running the trip again in March 2027 as this is the best time to get Red Pandas with cubs and then I will also be running a November trip for the first time for the Autumn colours.





