

THAILAND 2013 - CENTRAL & NORTH TOUR

17th January to 5th February 2013

HIGHLIGHTS

Either for rarity value, excellent views or simply a group favourite.

- Rusty-naped Pitta
- Scarlet-faced Liocichla
- Himalayan Bluetail
- Spot-breasted Laughingthrush
- White-gorgeted Flycatcher
- White-bellied Redstart
- Bamboo Woodpecker
- Blue Pitta
- Black-headed Woodpecker
- Rufous-throated Partridge
- Siamese Fireback
- Silver Pheasant
- Bar-backed Partridge
- Scaly-breasted Partridge
- Hume's Pheasant
- White-fronted Scops-owl
- Slaty-legged Crake
- Spoon-billed Sandpiper
- Nordmann's Greenshank
- Asiatic Dowitcher
- Pied Harrier
- Giant Nuthatch
- Large Scimitar-babbler
- Limestone Wren-babbler
- Japanese Thrush
- Asian Golden Weaver
- Great Hornbill

Leaders: Nick Bray & Nick Upton

SUMMARY:

This year's tour once again visited the centre and north of what is one of our most popular tours, and produced a mouth-watering selection of south-east Asian birds. We began by flying to the north and a series of mountains that give easy access to a wide variety of superb species and with a new road at Doi Lang and more feeding stations this turned out to be a goldmine of rarely seen megas. With Rusty-naped Pitta, Spot-breasted Laughingthrush, Spot-throated Babbler, White-bellied Redstart and many others on offer our tour was off to a flyer. Another feeding station at Doi Ang Khang treated us to some amazing close-ups of a female Japanese Thrush amongst a frenzy of ten Black-breasted Thrushes. By the end of the week we had seen 238 species, with most giving very good views. Moving to the central hotspots of Khao Yai and Kaeng Krachen then gave us all the hoped for species, including a surprising pair of day roosting White-fronted Scops-owls, Siamese Fireback, Silver Pheasant, Blue Pitta and 6 species of broadbill. And due to our small group size we were able to visit a couple of photo blinds overlooking a small watering hole, which gave point-blank views of so many birds it was really quite incredible. And let's not forget 3 Spoon-billed Sandpipers, Asiatic Dowitcher, Nordmann's Greenshank and White-faced Plover. We finished with an overall total of 450 species seen and many fond memories of some truly amazing birds.



The number of feeding stations now available on the Thailand birding circuit really does open up a whole new world of possibilities. This enables birders to see some of the rarest and most skulking species not normally possible on a birding tour here – just as long as you know where to go. This Rusty-naped Pitta showed down to 10 feet away from our group – it is one of the most difficult species to catch a glimpse of under normal circumstances.

Days 1 - 2 17th - 18th January

Following an overnight direct flight from London we arrived in Bangkok in the late afternoon of Day 2 and spent a relatively comfortable night at a hotel close to Don Mueang Airport.

Day 3 Saturday 19th January

A quick walk around the hotel this morning in a very pleasant temperature resulted in some decent birds to kick-start the tour. I think pride of place goes to a small group of **Java Sparrows** knocking about in a dead tree. Although not native to Thailand they have been here for many years and probably what we in the UK would term a Category C species. Nice! Several **Asian Koels** were around and pretty vocal, whilst **Common** and **White-vented Mynas**, **Zebra Dove**, **Spotted Dove** and **Red Collared-dove** and **Common Iora** were all more expected. A male **Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker** lent a touch of exotic to proceedings before it was time to head inside, have breakfast and finish packing. A walkway took us into the airport and an almost uneventful flight got us to Chiang Mai just before midday. After loading the luggage into our minibus we set off towards Doi Ang Khang, a journey of almost 3 hours. A few **Indian Rollers**, **Rufous-winged Buzzard**, **Striated Swallow** and a flock of **Fork-tailed Swifts** were the only birds of note before the road began to wind its way up into the mountains. We made a quick rest stop alongside the road and had a brief **Black-throated Sunbird** and a **Hair-crested Drongo** before continuing ever higher. At the Chinese Cemetery we spent a pleasant couple of hours in the late afternoon sunshine. First up was a pair of **Large Cuckooshrikes**, followed by **Chestnut-flanked White-eye**, a stunning male **Mrs Gould's Sunbird** and a **White-browed Laughingthrush** showed briefly. Further along the road we found the first of several **Yellow-browed Warblers** to be seen today, **Himalayan Swiftlet**, **White-throated Fantail**, **Hill Prinia**, **Grey Bushchat**, **Japanese Tit**, **Ashy** and **Bronzed Drongos** and **Long-tailed Shrike**. A bit more perseverance was necessary to get decent views of a **White-browed Scimitar-babbler**, and even more for **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-babbler**. Our bulbul list began to grow with **Sooty-headed**, **Brown-breasted** and **Himalayan Black Bulbuls** seen well, along with a **Red-whiskered** as well. At the rubbish dump we also had **Silver-eared Laughingthrush**, and whilst trying to tease out a male **Siberian Rubythroat** that did show to some of us, also picked up a few **Olive-backed Pipits**. So not a bad start at all and with news of a few goodies to stake out tomorrow we retired to bed eager for the next day to come quickly.

Day 4 Sunday 20th January

It took ages for it to get light this morning and it was rather chilly as well. So when the sky became a little lighter we drove



Silver-eared Laughingthrush is relatively common in the northern mountains.



Chestnut-vented Nuthatch proved to be almost abundant in the northern mountains this year.



This female Black-breasted Thrush was just one of at least 10 individuals present at a feeding station on Doi Ang Khang.

down to the pheasant spot and waited in the minibus for **Hume's Pheasant**, but nothing was happening so drove on further. The forest was pretty quiet here today, but we got started with a little mixed flock containing several **Chestnut-vented Nuthatches**, **Long-tailed Minivet**, and a **Blyth's Shrike-babbler**. A **Little Pied Flycatcher** appeared next and we also had **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** and a brief **Blue-winged Minla** – but we'd see the latter species very well later in the day. Then we headed down to a couple of stake-outs where at the first a pair of **Black-breasted Thrushes** and a pair of **Large Niltavas** were coming down to mealworms. Both gave great prolonged views, but we also became distracted by a brief appearance nearby from an **Eye-browed Thrush**, as well as **Taiga Flycatcher**, **Little Bunting** and **Crested Finchbill**, plus plenty of **Common Rosefinches**. The next place was even better as we had point-blank views of 10 **Black-breasted Thrushes**, 3 **White-tailed Robins**, **Hill Blue Flycatcher**, **Rufous-bellied Niltava**, **White-rumped Shama** and unbelievably and best of all, a **Japanese Thrush!** Wow! Oh and there was also **Yellow-bellied Warbler** and **Scarlet Minivet** as well. What a great place and a real privilege to just sit down and watch all of this activity happening right in front of us. After lunch we birded the road on the ridge and had our first really decent flock with some showy **Blue-winged Minlas**, **Short-billed Minivet**, **Yellow-cheeked Tit**, **Pallas's Leaf-warbler**, **Buff-barred Warbler** and a flock of **Grey-cheeked Fulvettas**. A quick check along a trail produced several **Eye-browed Thrushes** flying over and not a lot else. So we spent the last hour of daylight birding the road close to the lodge and had **Flavescent**, **Ashy** and **Mountain Bulbuls**, **Davison's Leaf-warbler**, **Olive-backed Pipit** and a brief pair of **Scarlet-faced Liocichlas**. If I was excited about today then there are an unbelievable pair of star-quality birds to find tomorrow...

Day 5 Monday 21st January

We left Doi Ang Khang after breakfast and headed down to the lowlands where it was decidedly warmer, following a narrow road to a very special site. Here we got the day off to a flyer with a flock of 20+ **Spot-winged Grosbeaks** feeding in a large tree. The surrounding area also had a few **Pin-tailed Green-pigeons**, **White-capped** and **Plumbeous Water-redstarts**, **Yellow-vented** and **Plain Flowerpeckers**, **Olive-backed Pipit**, **Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher**, **Black-headed** and **Black-crested Bulbuls** and a few other common species. Then we drove up into the wonderful hills of Doi Lang full of optimism, as several very special birds have been seen here recently. Our immediate priority was to find **Giant Nuthatch** which had eluded us so far – and sure enough after a bit of a search we found a vocal bird calling from a large pine tree on the slope below us. It was really good to be able to look down on it and admire it properly! Then we drove on to a small feeding station that been set up by some Thai photographers and put out some mealworms. Within



This cracking male **Black-breasted Thrush** was part of the feeding frenzy on Doi Ang Khang.



Having 3 **White-tailed Robins** out in the open at a feeding station – can only be Thailand!



Even **Siberian Rubythroats** are coming out into the open to the feeding stations now.

seconds we had a few **Silver-eared Laughingthrushes** out in the open just 12 feet away from us, along with **White-gorgeted Flycatcher**, female **Siberian Rubythroat** and a male **Large Niltava** as well. A **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher** also put in an appearance as well, but when a pair of **Spot-breasted Laughingthrushes** showed up we only had eyes for them. A notoriously elusive and nigh on invisible species to catch a glimpse of elsewhere, here we were with two of them giving eye-ball popping views within touching distance. With nothing else on offer we walked back out to the road and amazingly a couple of us got a glimpse of a male **Rusty-naped Pitta** in the shadows but unfortunately it disappeared. A few minutes later we got a call and raced back to the feeding station, where we had just missed another **Rusty-naped Pitta**...! What was going on? So we sat down and waited patiently and sure enough this skulking bird reappeared at the far side of the feeding area but remained within the safety of the foliage. But we still had crippling views. Anyway, having left again we decided to give it another crack and this time the pitta came out into the open right in front of us. How lucky were we..? So that left us the rest of the afternoon to bird the ridge road and we picked up yet more goodies with pride of place going to a pair of **Spot-breasted Parrotbills** feeding on an open hillside. We also had **Grey-capped Woodpecker**, **Slaty-backed Flycatcher**, **Blyth's Shrike-babbler**, **Orange-bellied Leafbird**, **Buff-throated** and **Bianchi's Warblers**, **Davison's Leaf-warbler**, a flock of **Black-throated Tits**, and ended with a **Crested Bunting**. What a day!

Day 6 Tuesday 22nd January

We drove up the old road to Doi Lang this morning and got off to a very good start with a pair of **Mountain Bamboo-partridges** running along the road in front of us. At a large flowering tree we saw several **Hair-crested Drongos**, along with a few **Blue-throated Barbets** before moving on up the road a short distance. Our next stop was prompted by a large, perched raptor on the ridge above which turned out to be an **Oriental Honey-buzzard**. As we scoped it, another flowering tree was proving attractive to lots of birds. A **Maroon Oriole** was accompanied by a **Slender-billed Oriole**, whilst a **Great Barbet** was also very nice. Unfortunately both **Grey Treepie** and **Stripe-breasted Woodpecker** didn't play ball and a **Bay Woodpecker** was equally unresponsive. A fine male **Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrush** showed nicely beside the road as well before we made it up to the feeding station area. It was rather quiet to begin with whilst we put rice down at the various spots around the small huts and we suspected that all of the local photographers were not bothering here and going to the other sites on the new road. How wrong we were! First of all, 3 **Scarlet-faced Liocichlas** came down onto a mossy log speckled with rice and were quickly followed by a **Spectacled Barwing**



White-gorgeted Flycatcher is usually a hard-to-see bird, staying in the darkest areas of a forest. But not in Thailand!



Spot-breasted Laughingthrush has been something of a Holy Grail bird but even this shy and retiring species visits one feeding station now.



This female Rusty-naped Pitta was rather obliging at Doi Lang. Then icing on the cake of our many amazing closely observed quality species.

and we enjoyed wonderful views at close quarters. Over the road a male **Himalayan Bluetail** was offering point blank views and kept diving down for rice between a male **Large Niltava**, **Dark-backed Sibias** and a confiding **Eye-browed Thrush**. What a show they all put on and when confronted by such an amazing sighting all you can do is sit down and watch.... We then walked along the road and picked up quite a few birds in some mixed flocks including **Whiskered Yuhina**, **Davison's Leaf-warbler**, **Yellow-bellied Fantail**, **Blue-winged Minla**, **Mountain Tailorbird** and a **Black-eared Shrike-babbler** for some of us. Up at the viewpoint an **Aberrant Bush-warbler** was called in and we finally nailed a **Stripe-breasted Woodpecker**. Just as we were about to leave a flock could be heard inside the forest and we walked in and saw a **Yellow-browed Tit**, **Rufous-winged Fulvetta** and a close **Hume's Treecreeper**. Leaving here we drove back down the mountain to some ricefields in the lowlands, seeing a flock of **Cook's Swifts** along the way, and walked out between the rice paddies seeing **Green and Wood Sandpipers**, **Paddyfield** and **Richard's Pipits**, **Citrine Wagtail**, **Eurasian Wryneck**, and best of all, a male **Pied Harrier**. Then we drove to another site and scanned the tall grassland where we eventually scoped a pair of **Jerdon's Bushchat**. They were a bit distant but through the scope the views were acceptable, and whilst scanning picked up what may be only the 5th record of **Black-headed Bunting** for Thailand, when a pair flew down on to the waters edge. Then we walked to some closer grassland and also managed to get **Bluethroat**, **Chestnut-capped Babbler**, **Grey-breasted Prinia**, **Scaly-breasted Munia**, **Black-faced Bunting** and a few **Small Pratincoles** flying over.

Day 7 Wednesday 23rd January

The Doi Lang magic worked gain this morning with a **Hume's Pheasant** picking its way along the side of the road as we drove up to the feeding station area early this morning. Once at the top we found we had the place to ourselves and discovered two more feeding stations, so deposited some mealworms and waited. At the first there was a female **Siberian Rubythroat**, a couple of **Silver-eared Laughingthrushes**, **White-gorgeted Flycatcher** and best of all, a **Spot-throated Babbler**. The latter is another species you'd just never see usually. At the other site, just across the road we had another female **Siberian Rubythroat** and a superb **White-bellied Redstart** – all giving wonderful photo opportunities. Then we walked the road a short way, finding a **Marten's Warbler** giving its distinctive call and a **Sapphire Flycatcher**. A flock crossed the road here as well, with **Grey-chinned Minivet**, **Spot-breasted Parrotbill**, **White-browed Laughingthrush** and **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-babbler**. A short drive then took us to another patch of woodland where a male **Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrush** and **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker** were found. So



A group of Scarlet-faced Liocichlas showed very well on Doi Lang.



Spectacled Barwing on Doi Lang.



It doesn't get much better than this male Himalayan Bluetail on Doi Lang.

by now it was mid-morning and we decided to head out towards our next base at Doi Inthanon, a journey of some 4 hours. We called in to a site for **Burmese Shrike**, which showed nicely and ended the day with a pair of **Blossom-headed Parakeets** perched in some nearby trees, as well as **Japanese Sparrowhawk**, **Chestnut-tailed Starling** and **Plain-backed Sparrow** before reaching our next lodge. As dusk fell we could hear **Collared Scops-owl**, **Asian Barred Owlet**, **Spotted Owlet** and a couple of us saw a **Large-tailed Nightjar** flyby.

Day 8 Thursday 24th January

The day began with an **Asian Barred Owlet** in the hotel gardens, followed by a few **Red-billed Blue Magpies** beside the road as we drove up Doi Inthanon. Stopping beside the river produced the hoped for **Slaty-backed Forktail** – a beautiful species. Then we took a trail up into good forest and began strongly with a mixed feeding flock encountered almost immediately. **Grey-cheeked Fulvettas** were in the front, and we picked up **Golden Babbler**, **Spectacled Barwing**, **Sapphire Flycatcher**, a brief **White-browed Piculet**, followed by two cracking **Black-throated Parrotbills**. Further up the hill and a stunning **Clicking** (formerly **Rufous-fronted**) **Shrike-babbler** performed admirably in the canopy overhead. Both **Maroon Oriole** and **Claudia's Warbler** were also seen, along with **Hume's Treecreeper** and a flock of wonderful **Long-tailed Broadbills** passed by. Best of all was a cooperative **Slaty-bellied Tesia** that gave very good views as it 'danced' to the ipod tune amongst some low bushes...! Returning to the minibus we saw a male **Slaty-backed Flycatcher** high up in the canopy and a pair of **Golden-throated Barbets** were spotted by David L which looked very nice through the scope. A short drive up the mountain followed and we walked along the road a little way, finding a pair of confiding **Grey-throated Babblers**, **Mountain Tailorbird** and a **Chestnut-crowned Warbler**. A nearby trail held a large flock with **Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo**, more fulvettas, **Small Niltava**, **Yellow-cheeked Tit**, **White-bellied Erpornis**, **Blyth's Leaf-warbler** and other commoner species. Lunch at Mr Daengs failed to produce any hoped-for goodies at his feeding station apart from a female **Hill Blue Flycatcher** and **Blue Whistling-thrush** so we drove to the top of the mountain. Up at the summit we quickly nailed **Ashy-throated Leaf-warbler** and a surprise find in the shape of **Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker**, some **Green-tailed Sunbirds**, and then had a flock of **Bar-throated Minlas**, **Rufous-winged Fulvettas**, **Buff-barred Warbler** and the flowerpecker again. On the summit boardwalk the first of 2 **Dark-sided Thrushes** appeared, followed by a cracking **White-browed Shortwing**, **Snowy-browed Flycatcher**, **Eurasian Woodcock** and a superb **Northern White-crowned Forktail**.



We were rather surprised to see how bold this Eye-browed Thrush was on Doi Lang.



Crippling views of White-bellied Redstart was something that you could only dream about – until now.



Great views of Davison's Leaf-warbler on Doi Lang.

Day 9 Friday 25th January

It sure was freezing up at the summit of Doi Inthanon this morning, although our sighting of 10+ **Speckled Woodpigeons** and a **Striated Bulbul** on some sunlit trees on the way up kept us going! As the sun slowly crept over the trees at the edge of the summit car park, a few common birds began to appear although not the hoped for **Grey-sided Thrush**. So we headed down the road a bit and struck gold when a **Rufous-throated Hill-partridge** began calling and when it ran down the slope towards us and perched on a log, giving its haunting call we knew we were on a roll. Well a few cups of reviving, hot coffee later and we were watching one of the very few records of **Brambling** for Thailand along the boardwalk. A **White-browed Shortwing**, **Dark-sided Thrush**, **Green-tailed Sunbird** and hordes of tourists later and we were back up on the main road. This time enjoying **Ashy Woodpigeons** in the morning sunshine and a little later enjoyed even more the close views of a **Pygmy Wren-babbler** singing from a horizontal branch right in front of us. We then drove down the mountain and checked out a trail which was very quiet in the late morning heat, so continued down to our lunch stop. Still nothing coming to Mr Deang's feeding station so after a short rest we staked out the **Black-tailed Crake** site without any joy, and continued our dismal run of failures today with a complete blank. And even extended this run to some night-birding to draw the day to a close. Funny how birding is a great leveller and from a great morning the day petered out into a damp squib, but fortunately everyone was in good humour and we still enjoyed our day.

Day 10 Saturday 26th January

We had one last morning on Doi Inthanon so returned to our favourite trail just after first light and spent the next few hours having a very enjoyable time amidst some very nice forest. We hit a flock almost immediately with all the usual suspects present and also added a female **Vivid Niltava** to the list as well. We messed around with a group of **White-necked Laughingthrushes** that called back to the ipod a little bit but didn't want to show themselves and also saw a few previously seen species as well. We moved up to an area of pine trees and here Lynn spotted a **Silver-eared Mesia** feeding in a tree at eye-level and it turned out to be the leader of a flock of maybe 7 or 8 birds. Then we walked out above the treeline and checked the scrub where we had a flyby **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-babbler**, female **Siberian Rubythroat**, a **Streaked Spiderhunter** and also managed to call in a **Banded Bay Cuckoo** from about a mile away. So we walked back down to the minibus and returned to the lodge, where after loading the luggage aboard managed to finally see the reported **Lesser Shortwing** – finally! All that was left was to have lunch, drive back to Chiang Mai airport and fly to Bangkok.



A bit of 'old-fashioned' searching produced memorable views of this Rufous-throated Partridge on Doi Inthanon.



This Pygmy Wren-babbler came in quite close for a look at us on Doi Inthanon.



A female Hill Blue Flycatcher at Mr Daeng's feeding station.

Day 11 Sunday 27th January

We left Bangkok early doors and rather bleary-eyed, stopping at the nearest '7 and 11' for coffee and toasted sandwiches, before setting out on the hour or so drive to the limestone cliffs and the search for our next target species. It didn't take too long to locate a pair of **Limestone Wren-babblers** clambering around the rock face, and we watched them come lower and lower until they were only 20 feet away from us. What views we had and were able to study them in some detail for a good ten minutes before they moved off. With **Long-tailed Macaque** and numerous white **Variable Squirrels**, David was in his element! The next stop was on the way to Khao Yai NP and a few **Red-breasted Parakeets** made their way onto our lists before entering the park. We headed up to one of the campsites where a **Mugimaki Flycatcher** had returned for its 3rd consecutive winter and sure enough we spotted him straight away. The **White-throated Rock-thrush** took a bit longer to come in, so we walked down the road a short distance to scan the forest edge. A good move as it turned out as a flock of **Brown-rumped Minivets** were present and we then had a superb **Asian Emerald Cuckoo**, **Black-winged Cuckooshrike**, **Asian Brown Flycatcher**, **Sultan Tit** and a few other things. So we walked back up the hill and got the rock-thrush before driving to the campsite where the usual photo stake-out produced male **Siberian Blue Robin**, **Puff-throated Babbler**, **Olive-backed Sunbird**, **Yellow-vented Flowerpecker**, **White-rumped Shama** and **Black-naped Monarch**. We also had a fine **Asian Paradise-flycatcher** coming into the owl call, along with **Green-billed Malkoha**, and both **Puff-throated** and **Grey-eyed Bulbuls**. Lunch was taken at the small restaurant here and was rather timely considering the heavy shower that had been threatening for some time suddenly materialised. But with a scope we enjoyed terrific views of a **Moustached Barbet** chasing a **Blue-eared Barbet**, and a **Green-eared Barbet** was posing nicely here as well, plus a pair of **Greater Flamebacks** and **Red Junglefowl** also put in an appearance. When the rain stopped and the sun came out it became rather steamy but the heat encouraged an **Oriental Pied Hornbill** to perch out in the open and sun itself. Then a **Heart-spotted Woodpecker** appeared and a couple of **Mountain Imperial-pigeons** flew over. Leaving here we drove to one of our favourite trails and stumbled across a huge **Asian Elephant** that crossed the road in front of us, threatening at one point to turn and charge our vehicle! But once safely on the trail we spent a good hour and managed to locate a flock of around 30 **Long-tailed Broadbills** and a group of 6+ **Dusky Broadbills** as well, plus several **Asian Fairy-Bluebirds**. So by late afternoon we returned to the minibus and drove back down the road to a good spot for **Great Eared Nightjar**, and sure enough a pair appeared at dusk and hawked for insects nearby to round off a successful day.



Limestone Wren-babbler can be found at a few special sites on the way to Khao Yai.



We had several close encounters with Asian Elephants at Khao Yai.



Long-tailed Broadbill proved to be quite common this year.

Day 12 Monday 28th January

Well what a day! It began with thick mist, low cloud and heavy rain which ran right through the morning and only stopped a couple of times before mid-afternoon. We cruised the roads for **Siamese Fireback** without any luck at all and when we got bored with this drove up higher and amazingly had a male **Silver Pheasant** feeding quietly beside the road. This is a bird that always seems to elude us but not anymore and this stunningly beautiful pale ghost of a bird is definitely one of the highlights of the tour so far. Moving back down the hill we had **Lesser Coucal**, a flyover **Large Hawk-cuckoo** and a few **White-crested Laughingthrushes**, **Blue-winged Leafbird**, and in the forest a couple of **Pin-striped Tit-babblers**. Dodging the extremely heavy showers we set about finding a **Blue Pitta** and sure enough there were a couple calling. So knowing how difficult this species is for a group to see, even one as small as mine, we waited quietly at the edge of the forest. Playing the call a couple of times and waiting, then repeating the process a few more times. Nothing. One more try and it called off to our right, where a couple of us saw it skittling across the forest floor at a rate of knots. We moved position, then manoeuvred again to somewhere else, going deeper into the forest but only David got onto it. Having pushed our luck too far, the heavens opened again and it was time to retreat. After lunch at the Park HQ the weather appeared to be clearing up so we returned to our favourite stretch of road, stopping along the way to get cracking views of **Bright-capped Cisticola**. Another brief stop gave us more **White-crested Laughingthrushes**, **Greater Racket-tailed Drongo**, and a distant **Thick-billed Green-pigeon** perched on a dead snag. The pitta was again our main focus and this time success! We had an awesome male walking back and forth right in front of us across a relatively open patch of forest right beside the road. After this morning's efforts this was remarkable. We also got onto a **Banded Broadbill** as well, whilst an **Orange-breasted Trogon** also put in an appearance in the afternoon sunshine. Feeling buoyed by our success we walked further along the road and bumped into a flock with **Ashy**, **Grey-eyed** and **Puff-throated Bulbuls**, **Radde's** and **Two-barred Warblers**, **White-bellied Erpornis** and **Dark-necked Tailorbird**. From here we drove to a nearby campsite and walked down the road to view a clearing where **Gold-crested Mynas** have been coming to roost, but all we had were **Common Hill-mynas**, although **Crimson Sunbird** and a flyover **Wreathed Hornbill** was also nice. I also heard a **Coral-billed Ground-cuckoo** in the distance but the presence of an **Elephant** moving up the slope towards us prompted a hasty retreat and when it came onto the road and began to follow us the adrenalin kicked in and we were out of there! Driving out of the park at dusk we had to brake sharply when a herd of **Elephants** crashed out of the jungle right in front of us and crossed the road some 30 yards ahead. Ok well that was enough excitement today!



Mugimaki Flycatcher has been overwintering at Khao Yai for the previous 3 winters.



This White-throated Rock-thrush returned for another winter at Khao Yai – definitely a bonus bird.



We saw Orange-breasted Trogon at Khao Yai and Kaeng Krachen.

Day 13 Tuesday 29th January

We left the lodge full of optimism at 6am and headed to our breakfast stop, but upon arrival we could see the same thick mist covering the hills of Khao Yai and our hearts sank. However, as we drove up higher it was apparent that the road was quite dry and there was seemingly no chance of rain. We drove straight to our favoured road, only stopping to scope a few **Barred Cuckoo-doves** along the way, and did one pass along it and there right in front of us was a couple of male **Siamese Firebacks** feeding in the leaf litter. So we pulled up and watched them for a few minutes and really soaked up the sighting after yesterday's endeavours – ignoring the female **Red Junglefowl** nearby. We drove on some way and checked out another patch of forest where a pair of **Black-and-buff Woodpeckers** showed well and we also heard several **Scaly-breasted Partridges** calling before turning around and getting further fireback views on the road. We then drove on a little further and began walking along the road, listening to the cacophony of birdsong emanating from the surrounding forest. Amazingly we managed to ignore the calling **Blue Pittas** all around and found a superb male **Red-headed Trogon** which came in quite close. And as we watched this cracker a **Banded Kingfisher** called and we spent several minutes locating a female perched unobtrusively amidst a tangle of vines high up in the canopy. So with this big result under our belts we drove to the nearby campsite and saw a few things but nothing much of interest and then headed down to another site where we scoped a **Van Hasselt's Sunbird** singing from the top of a tree. Scanning of the river produced **White-throated, Common** and **Black-capped Kingfishers**, whilst a **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater** was also present. Then a **Heart-spotted Woodpecker** was found poking its head out of its nesting hole, a **Little Spiderhunter** showed briefly, and a **Collared Owlet** appeared nearby being mobbed by some **Stripe-throated Bulbuls**. So that was it and after lunch we drove back to Bangkok and an overnight stop en-route to Petchaburi – a much safer way of undertaking this journey rather than doing it all in one long 6 hour drive.

Day 14 Wednesday 30th January

We left Bangkok early doors and drove to Pak Thale along the shores of the Gulf of Thailand and the wintering grounds of the fabled **Spoon-billed Sandpiper**. The weather was still freaky with low cloud and some light rain but on leaving the minibus it cleared a bit and within a minute we had 3 spoonies teed up in the scopes. Wow! They were in company with some **Great Knots, Curlew Sandpipers, Red-necked Stints** and a few **Broad-billed Sandpipers**. Nearby a flock of **Eurasian Curlews** took to the air and at least two **Far Eastern Curlews** were picked up showing their dark underwings and rumps. It was all good with birds everywhere! We had a few **Indian Cormorants**



With some perseverance we nailed a group of Siamese Firebacks at Khao Yai – they seemed to like the mist and rain!



Spoon-billed Sandpiper is the lure for most birders to visit Thailand.



Long-toed Stint is always a treat to see and can be easily found at the wader mecca of Pak Thale.

flying over, but were soon back to the waders with **Spotted Redshanks**, **Marsh Sandpipers**, a flock of **Lesser Sandplovers** with a couple of **Greater Sandplovers** thrown in for good measure. But the 7 **Red-necked Phalaropes** were much appreciated and as we walked closer an immature **Black-tailed Gull** was found, which is a very scarce visitor here. Other waders around the salt pans included **Long-toed Stint**, **Grey Plover**, **Pacific Golden Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Avocet** and other commoner fare. At an area of mangroves we had **Mangrove Whistler** and **Golden-bellied Greygone** but the rain came in again, and with the sea looking very rough wondered if we'd get out to the sandspit this afternoon. We then moved down the road to our next site and after a quick couple of stops, located a flock of 30+ **Nordmann's Greenshank** and spent some time watching them before going for the hat-trick of awesome waders. That turned out to be **Asiatic Dowitcher**, and we found a flock 25+ at another area of salt pans and really gave them a good grilling. Funny but this species seemed to cause the most excitement mainly due to the fact that we didn't expect to see them. On the way we found a **Slaty-breasted Rail** skulking under some bushes which proved a little tricky to see clearly. After lunch the weather cleared and the sun came out so we went in two boats out to the sandspit at Laem Pak Bia in the early afternoon sunshine and quickly notched up **Malaysian** and **White-faced Plovers** – the latter species subject of some controversy. With a borderline DNA analysis suggesting it be lumped in **Kentish Plover** it is not only structure and a distinctive plumage that set it apart, but the fact it holds a wintering territory and spends all its time chasing away KP's and also runs with a horizontal stance exceedingly fast.... Mmmm maybe DNA is not the 'be all' or maybe they should simply retest it! Not rocket science is it? Anyway, we also had nice views of at least 2 **Chinese Egrets**, a few **Pacific Reef Egrets**, a 1st year **Heuglin's Gull**, a flock of **Whiskered**, **Little**, **Great Crested** and **Lesser Crested Terns** and several **Collared Kingfishers** as well. Leaving here we went off and found a few **Greater Painted Snipes**, **Lesser Coucal** and **Zitting Cisticola** at another area. Other goodies around the salt pans included **Brahminy Kite**, **Richard's Pipit**, **Painted Stork**, 4 species of egret, **Little Green Bee-eater**, and others. At the Royal Project a couple of **White-winged Terns** were picked out from the blizzard of **Whiskered Terns** present, whilst **Lesser Whistling-duck**, **Pintail Snipe**, a **Javan Pond-heron** in breeding finery, **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Black-crowned Night-heron** and many **Lyle's Flying Foxes** were seen. At the bird log this evening we counted up and discovered we'd seen 105 species today, with 37 species of wader.....

Day 15 Thursday 31st January

After searching for a reported **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper** (a rarity here), we drove into the King's Project and found a few more **White-winged Terns** amongst the large flock of **Whiskered**



There is some debate as to the provenance of White-faced Plover, as its DNA is a little too close to Kentish Plover. Despite the fact it looks different, its behaviour is diagnostic and it holds a winter territory and chases off Kentish Plovers!



Pacific Reef Egret at Laem Pak Bia.



Little Green Bee-eaters.

Terns. We drove around the lagoons, passing several **Black-crowned Night-herons** and rows of pond-herons waiting for their breakfast on the bamboo pontoons – like some avian diner! The problem with pond herons at this time of year is that they are indistinguishable in non-breeding plumage and dodgy id's like dusky wingtips etc just don't cut the mustard I'm afraid. Anyway, we found a **Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker** drumming on the roof of a building – and this bird some people are calling **Freckle-breasted Woodpecker** now. There were plenty of commoner birds such as a large flock of **Lesser Whistling-ducks** but nothing too fancy, although a **Thick-billed Warbler** and a flyby **White-shouldered Starling** both managed to elude my group. So we moved on and checked out a few other sites that gave us **Indian Nightjar**, **Golden-bellied Gerygone**, **Chestnut Munia**, **Oriental Skylark**, **Booted Eagle**, and a flock of newly arrived **Oriental Pratincoles** flying around the clear blue sky. The latter is noteworthy, the sky not pratincoles (but they were great too), as the weather seems to have cleared up and bodes well for our few days birding in Kaeng Krachen. From here we went to the coast and as the tide receded found 5+ **Terek Sandpipers** amongst a mass of hundreds of **Eurasian Curlews**, 3 **Far Eastern Curlews**, **Great Knots** etc. It was very hot here so we headed back inland to Phetchaburi and lunch. The afternoon was spent amidst the rice fields where birds were numerous and we found 2 **Black-headed Ibis** and a **Painted Stork** at a big lagoon. Moving on a marshy area held 10 **Grey-headed Lapwing**, whilst a lake further down the road held a spectacular congregation of 350+ **Cotton Pygmy-goose**. There were **Pheasant-tailed** and **Bronze-winged Jacanas**, a lone **Garganey**, **Eurasian Coot**, and a **Yellow-bellied Prinia** here as well. Then we were off to the raptor fields and managed to see a few **Greater Spotted Eagles**, a huge **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, **Eastern Marsh** and **Pied Harrier**, **Black-eared**, **Black-shouldered** and **Brahminy Kites**, a **Peregrine** and several **Red-throated Pipits** flying over uttering their high-pitched call. Leaving here we continued our exploration of this vast, open area and came up with **Plaintive Cuckoo**, **Ruddy-breasted Crake**, **Pink-necked Green-pigeon**, **Yellow Bittern** and flocks of **Eastern Baya Weavers**. And still managed to get back to our hotel at a reasonable time, with a few hours off before dinner for good behaviour!

Day 16 Friday 1st February

Our first port of call this morning was a dry dipterocarp forest on the way to Kaeng Krachen where we picked up a few absolutely fabulous **Black-headed Woodpeckers** that were associating with a flock of **Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrushes**. We had quite nice views of these stunning peckers feeding low down on the trunk of a tree and once they had disappeared set about searching for **Rufous Woodpecker** but this bird remained elusive. We found a number of other birds here such as **Spotted**



Booted Eagle



Oriental Pratincole



Germain's Swiftlet



Brahminy Kite

and **Asian Barred Owlets**, **Rufous Treepie**, **Red-breasted Parakeet** and **Lineated Barbet**. Leaving here we drove to our lodge near Kaeng Krachen and had a quick walk around the extensive gardens seeing **Olive-backed Sunbird**, **Common Flameback** and **Little Spiderhunter** amongst others. The open air restaurant had a banana feeder where **Oriental Pied Hornbill**, **Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush**, **White-rumped Shama** and a variety of squirrels were coming down to feed, whilst a **Stripe-throated Bulbul** was sitting on a nest nearby. The afternoon was spent 'up the hill' inside the National Park in search of some very special birds and we got the ball rolling quickly with a **Dollarbird** and better still, a mind-blowing views of a pair of day roosting **White-fronted Scops-owls**. I've waited years to see this species and here we were with a pair about 20 feet above our heads. Wow! Back up the hill we quickly nailed **Collared Babbler** and had repeated views, although the other 'biggie' **Ratchet-tailed Treepie** would keep us waiting until late in the day. During our walk we also saw **Great Hornbill**, **Mountain Hawk-eagle**, **Rufous-bellied Eagle**, **Ochraceous Bulbul**, a pair of **Bamboo Woodpeckers** which rather frustratingly didn't show well to everyone, **Rosy Minivet**, **Sulphur-breasted Warbler**, a few **Yellow-bellied Warblers**, **Lesser Racket-tailed Drongos**, and a few flocks of regular species. A little flock of babblers appeared which held **Grey-throated**, **Rufous-fronted** and **Golden Babblers** as we walked back down to the minibus at the end of the day, having just found a fast-moving **Ratchet-tailed Treepie**. On the drive out we pulled up alongside a **Large-tailed Nightjar** that refused to budge from the roadside.

Day 17 Saturday 2nd February

It was one of those mornings where everything falls into place and I can look back on our visit to Kaeng Krachen today with very fond memories. It did start quietly as the weather was cooler than usual and heavily overcast and dull, so the forest took a while to liven up – apart from our sightings of **Kalij Pheasant**, a couple of obliging **Common Green Magpies**, **Wedge-tailed Green-pigeon** and a **Grey-headed Woodpecker**. But once we reached the first campsite and heard the distinctive call of **Silver-breasted Broadbill** then I knew things would get better soon! Sure enough within the foliage of a large, leafy tree we found maybe a dozen of these stunning broadbills and spent some time watching them in action. Next up was a pair of **Black-and-red Broadbills** that gave repeated views and the stunning crimson really shone in the dark area of forest they were inhabiting. A **Chinese Blue Flycatcher**, **Sultan Tit** and **Rosy Minivet** all played second fiddle to this vision of black and red loveliness! But as we walked around the campsite a **Blue-bearded Bee-eater** kept up the quality of sightings and his beard shone electric blue as the sun tried to peek through the murky



This pair of White-fronted Scops-owls have been at the same roost for months. This was a new bird for all of us and a welcome addition to the list!



Collared Babbler is one of the key species at Kaeng Krachen.



Black-and-red Broadbill is always great to see but never guaranteed during the dry season.

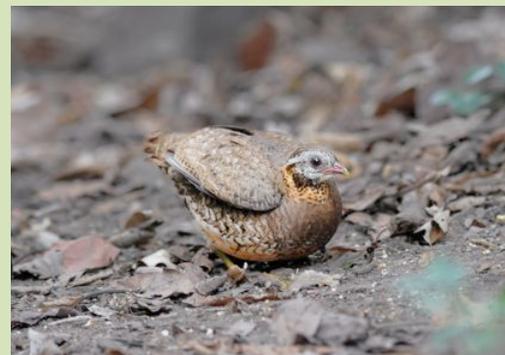
day. Moving on and we nailed our third broadbill of the day when a **Black-and-yellow Broadbill** was called in and landed high overhead in a leafless tree. Through the scope we studied its beautiful plumage and wondered if the day could get any better. So when a **Spot-necked Babbler** began calling and showed quite quickly we knew the answer and what a little cracker this is, with a bright white throat, rufous underparts, white-flecked supercilium and sexy neck spotting – this isn't your ordinary babbler at all! To cap it all a **Southern Brown Hornbill** began calling and we tracked it down and scoped it in a bare tree. What a morning! Lunch was taken at the campsite before driving up to the top of the mountain for a short raptor watch.... Well, in fact just the one raptor, a **Mountain Hawk-eagle** and maybe we should call it a barbet-watch with **Great, Blue-throated** and **Blue-eared** all giving cracking views in the few rays of sunshine to hit us today. A **Streaked Spiderhunter**, **Dark-sided Flycatcher** and **Grey Treepie** later and we were driving back down to the **Ratchet-tailed Treepie** stake-out but found it Treepie-less, although the usual gang of **Collared Babblers** showed well, a **White-browed Scimitar-babbler** performed admirably, and we managed to locate just the one **Black-throated Laughingthrush**. We'd also had a few noteworthy 'heard onlys' today with **Ferruginous Partridge** and **Great Slaty Woodpecker**.....

Day 18 Sunday 3rd February

Spent the first few hours of daylight on the approach road to the first campsite this morning and picked up a soe good birds, beginning with several **Southern Brown Hornbills** picking their way around some leafless trees in the valley below. There was also a **Greater Yellownap**, **Common** and **Greater Flamebacks**, **Golden-crested Myna** at last, an **Asian Drongocuckoo**, another **Black-and-red Broadbill**, **Orange-breasted Trogon**, **Large Woodshrike** and **Great Iora** but no falconets... During our lunch break back at the lodge a **White-shouldered Starling** was spotted in a flowering tree and equally unexpected was an **Orange-headed Thrush** that flew in next to us whilst we were drinking coffee in the dining area! In the afternoon we visited one of the hides near Kaeng Krachen which overlooks a small drinking pool, arriving around 2.30pm we settled in for a long wait. We expected to wait in a hot hide, getting bitten by mosquitos and only seeing the odd bird every so often. In reality there were no mozzies, and there was always activity, not only from a procession of great birds but by a variety of squirrels as well – which pleased some of us more than others! Upon arrival we were amazed to see the first of 3 **Lesser Mouse Deers** coming in to some fruit put out by the owners and what a little darling it was too! Inside the first twenty minutes a group of 4 **Bar-backed Partridges** appeared and quietly fed in the leaf litter off to our right, but they didn't hang around too long – and didn't return at all. So a great start indeed. Several **Black-naped**



Bar-backed Partridges at a watering hole near Kaeng Krachen.



Scaly-breasted Partridge showed well at the same watering hole.



Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush appeared regularly at the waterhole.



And a few Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrushes also came in to drink.

Monarchs came in for a bathe and, like everything else, perched up nicely for photographs. When a few **Greater-necklaced Laughingthrushes** flew in, they brought with them a pair of **White-browed Scimitar-babblers** and we really enjoyed studying these and all of the other birds, ‘up close and personal’. As well as the monarchs, a trickle of other ‘blue flycatchers’ were eventually drawn in with **Chinese Blue Flycatcher**, a few **Tickell’s Blue Flycatchers**, and a female **Blue-throated Flycatcher**. At times there was a riot of activity with numerous species all arriving simultaneously and then a short lull of a few minutes before the next burst. When 3 **Scaly-breasted Partridges** quietly crept in I was so pleased and relieved at the same time – a huge result. Another sprinkling of stardust came when a **Large Scimitar-babbler** appeared but it only stayed for a few moments, as it is one of the shyest denizens of the forest and a truly tough bird to get a decent view of under normal circumstances. Next up were a group of **Brown-cheeked Fulvettas** coming in for a bathe, followed by several **Pin-striped Tit-babblers** and later on a pair of **Abbott’s Babblers** as well. A **Pied Fantail** chose to fly through the hide we were sat in on occasion, whilst **Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush** joined a part of greater towards the end of the day. But the final piece de resistance came when a stunning **Slaty-legged Crake** appeared, not once but twice, to bathe in the pool. I was totally stunned to be honest and never have I seen this shy, retiring, exceptionally skulking species out in the open like this. What a day and if only the **Eared Pitta** had come in instead of calling from some distance away, well that would have been cool too!

Day 19 Monday 4th February

We left Kaeng Krachen after a late breakfast and did a last bit of birding around the marshes near Bangkok, which gave us 3 new trip birds: **Striated Grassbird**, **White-browed Crake** and best of all, **Asian Golden Weaver**. Our last trip bird turned out to be a **Black-headed Gull** and was number 450 that were seen by our group. What a tour we had experienced, with so many top quality birds and amazing views proving Thailand isn’t just about the Spoonie! So with our birding finished we went to our hotel near the airport for some rest before our final evening meal together.

Day 20 Tuesday 5th February

We flew back to the UK and arrived at Heathrow in the evening where our wonderful tour concluded.

Nick Bray.



White-browed Scimitar-babbler is a widespread species in Thailand.



One of the major prizes at the watering hole was this usually hard-to-see Large Scimitar-babbler.



Bird of the day at the watering hole was this amazing Slaty-legged Crake.

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