



Thailand 2018



Thailand arguably remains Zoothera's most popular destination, the 2018 tour being our twelfth in recent years. As expected it was fully booked well in advance and in view of the interest this tour generates could undoubtedly accommodate a larger tour party but staunchly limit it to a group to six.

Our group were all seasoned birders, that between them could muster over 170 years birdwatching experience. Five were British, although Martyn now residing in Trinidad, whilst our sixth member Scott was from Austin, Texas.

Most were similarly seasoned travellers, three of whom had already visited Thailand before. Martyn and Tim's previous visits several decades ago whilst Scott's three day stay just a few years prior in the company of our local guide Nick Upton had wetted his appetite to commit to the tour.

The tour package of seventeen days would follow the same successful itinerary as in previous tours. This is a split schedule whereby we'd start in the north, taking nine days to explore the highland forest regions

around Chang Mai of Doi Ang Kang, Doi Lang and Doi Inthanon followed by a short internal flight back to Bangkok. Our aim then to work several key sites in the central region, namely Khao Yai NP and Kraeng Krachan NP although a day around the salt pans at Phetchaburi for many the ultimate lure, as we search for the mythical Spoon-billed Sandpiper within the vast numbers of waders that overwinter here.

Lee our Zoothera guide for the tour would meet and greet Chris, Tim, Martyn and Gordon at the departure gate at Heathrow and on our arrival at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok be joined by Ian who'd taken an earlier flight. From here we'd take the short internal flight to Chiang Mai, arriving mid-evening in darkness. It had been a long days travelling so all settled in for a good nights rest at the nearby Maninarakorn Hotel, where Scott had checked into earlier that day. Breakfast was scheduled for 6am the next morning with a quick departure shortly after with our experienced Thai guide Nick Upton.

Day One Muang Sam Ma and Doi Ang Kang

After a pleasant breakfast all were eager at the prospect that lay ahead. Nick's arrival at 6:30 was perfectly timed and with bags stowed safely in the van we ventured forth just as daylight dawned.

Nick had proposed a minor change to our itinerary this morning. Rather than start our first morning cooped up in the vehicle for the three hour drive to Doi Ang Kang he'd planned a stop at Muang Sam Ma. This is an area of wetland and scrub just 20 minute drive from our hotel on the outskirts of Chiang Mai. It was a site never visited by previous Zoothera tours before but being a particularly birdy area made a great introduction to Thai birding, quenching our thirst for immediate action. On the short journey there he'd inform us it was particularly good for various Warblers, alluding to Dusky, Pallas's Grasshopper and various *Acrocephalus* species. We were sold by the idea and couldn't wait to disembark the vehicle and thus begin the tour in earnest.

Pulling up at Muang Sam Ma we'd stop beside a large fruiting tree that was adorned with birdlife. Dozens upon dozens of birds frequented it and although all were common northern Thai birds it was good to familiarise ourselves with the various Myna's, Starlings and Bulbuls on offer. Vying for our attention **Great (White-vented) Myna's** jostled with **Sooty-headed** and **Red-whiskered Bulbuls** and **Black-collared, Chestnut-tailed** and **Asian Pied Starlings** for the rich pickings, whilst dowdy winter plumaged **Baya Weavers** were also noted.

Moving along the path bushes and rank scrub littered the area, Nick almost immediately picking up and calling out that several **Dusky** and a few **Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers** were audible. The former would not take long to find, although the latter despite being confined to a small rank area just yards in front of us stubbornly refused to show. A similar outcome would play out only ten minutes later. A second singing bird would audibly announce its presence yet tenaciously avoided prying eyes, a few gaining tantalising glimpses. It was a tad frustrating but a behaviour symptomatic for this species and with other opportunities available over the coming few weeks we wouldn't dwell on it.

With everything potentially new it wouldn't take us long to once again stop, now at a area overlooking some wet vegetated scrub. Our primary focus centred around finding the two culprits in full song. Both **Oriental Reed** and **Black-browed Reed Warblers** were audible so we just stood, patiently waiting for the slightest of movement to enable us to latch onto both. The **Oriental Reed** was first to fall, while **Black-browed Reed Warbler** took a little longer but given time both seen well and during the wait would also add a supporting cast of **Eurasian Wryneck**, **Asian Koel**, **Brown Shrike**, **Taiga Flycatcher**, **Plain Prinia**, more **Dusky Warblers**, a perched Buteo, that when seen later in flight was confidently identified as a **Himalayan Buzzard** and a brief view of **Amur Falcon** as it quickly zipped past at full throttle.

Just behind this area was a large expanse of lily-clad lakes with a convenient pathway that bisected them. Several hundred **Lesser Whistling Ducks** were clearly evident, while the presence of a marauding **Western Osprey** clearly spooked a small party of approximately 30 **Garganey**, a species Nick stated he'd not expected to find here. We spent a leisurely yet enjoyable 30 minutes or so relishing the sights and sounds on offer, adding three **Yellow Bitterns**, several **Pheasant-tailed Jacana's**, the ubiquitous **Chinese Pond Heron**, an immature **Pied Harrier** which sauntered through and several **Grey-headed Swamphens**. In addition a small stand of tangle yielded more **Black-browed Reed Warblers** and **Yellow-bellied Prinia**.

Over this 90 minute period we'd probably covered just a few hundred yards yet were in no particular rush heading back, once again working the scrubby pathway. By doing so picking up **Plaintive Cuckoo**, **Coppersmith Barbet** and **Olive-backed Sunbird**. **Grey-breasted Prinia** would also be heard, a female **Siberian Rubythroat** seen by just two and a **Baikal Bush Warbler** albeit briefly had Nick reassuringly asserting all would be seen sometime later during the tour.

Having had a few hours birding under our belts it was then off to Doi Ang Kang. It would be a three hour journey, although unscheduled stops would perhaps be unavoidable. As we ate up the miles Nick fully conversent with the area would despite driving keep a watchful vigil. A few stops were made, the first to enjoy our only **Crested Treewiffs** of the tour, the same stop harbouring several **Himalayan Swiftlets**, **Cook's Swifts** and pair of raucous **Crested Serpent Eagles**. All were impressed by Nick's ability to bird whilst driving, ably demonstrated when he found a **Rufous-winged Buzzard** perched high atop a dead tree. We'd not make any further stops despite seeing several **Indian Rollers**, many more opportunities would lay ahead for this species.

Once at Doi Ang Kang our first stop was at the picturesque Ban Luang resort. It would be our stay for this evening, nestled in a small charming valley. We'd take lunch here, the open veranda an excellent place with cold drink in hand one could gain extraordinarily close views of the birds on offer. A small stream and feeding station supplemented by Nick's generous offering of mealworms and banana constantly attracted birds in. *Turdus* thrushes, so often difficult to find were easy pickings, at least four **Eye-browed Thrushes**, a **Grey-sided** and two **Black-breasted Thrushes** lured by the food waste. Closer still **Brown-breasted** and **Flavescent Bulbuls** vied with **Dark-backed Sibia's** and a lone **Olive-backed Pipit** for our attention, drawn forth by our offerings. While nearby at a more secluded area **White-capped Redstart** captivated an appreciative audience.

After lunch we'd jump back into our vehicle and make the short drive to the King's Project. Behind one building a small, dark recess that without local knowledge would be easy to overlook. It's a known feeding station although today was quiet. **Blue Whistling Thrush** and a couple of **Black-breasted Thrushes** limited our stay, with Nick suggesting we try a second feeding station. This from the outset looking a better option. It tucked away on the outer reaches of the resort, bordering a large wooded area and most importantly devoid of human interaction it just felt better suited. Continuing our thrush filled theme of the morning a **Scaly Thrush** would liven up proceedings. This secretive *Zoothera* Thrush was a good find, a species rarely noted on previous tours and to boot conveniently feeding in the open, allowing fantastic and prolonged views.



Scaly Thrush

Whilst many lapped up these great views others would be drawn away by **Yunnan Fulvetta** and a female **Vivid Niltava**. At the feeding station in hushed silence our group of eight stood motionless. A pair of **Hill Blue Flycatchers** the only birds showing interest in our supply of mealworms. Yet other birds were here, many lurking a bit deeper. A small party of **Blue-winged Minla's** would quickly pass through, whilst **Yellow-bellied** and **Marten's Warbler** were more secretive and raising the secretive stakes even further a party of three **Streaked Wren Babblers** unobtrusively foraged in the darker recesses.

Nick sensing a lack of productivity, perhaps due to the time of day ushered us out. Our stroll back saw Chris find a **Greenish Warbler**, while a flowering Bottlebrush plant in the well manicured gardens yielded **Japanese White-eye** and several **Mrs Gould's Sunbirds**, a few of the males close to full breeding plumage.

Our drive back towards Ban Luang saw us stop several times, our first upon hearing a **Bay Woodpecker**. This shy species lived up to its reputation, as sensing our presence wouldn't linger, taking flight only allowing flyby views. We'd stop twice more, encountering **Chestnut-vented Nuthatch**, more **Blue-winged Minla's**, **Japanese Tit**, several vocal **Davison's Leaf Warblers**, a pair of **Orange-bellied Leafbirds** and **Little Pied Flycatcher**.

Our first full day was starting to draw to a close. A quick 30 minute recce of the gardens back at Ban Luang produced **Streaked Spiderhunter**, female **Hodgson's Redstart** and a female **Slaty-backed Flycatcher**. The long day had gone according to plan although to finish would try our hand at a spot of night birding. At a nearby glade we stood and waited as dusk succumbed to darkness. A high flying **Grey Nightjar** made just a single overhead pass, while a distant **Brown Boobook** bellowed out in the darkness. The notoriously difficult **Mountain Scops Owl** would also resonate the airwaves yet despite our best efforts avoided detection.

Our dinner would be consumed late, some finding the chilli based condiment a little hotter than anticipated, while during our first evening bird log Tim would liven it up with a melodic 'da-da' when announcing a lifer.

Day Two Doi Ang Kang and Doi Lang (west)

We started the morning with a 6:30 cooked breakfast, many finding proceedings disrupted when Nick announcing he'd briefly seen a **White-capped Forktail** at the stream. This shy species would do an impromptu vanishing act, although some degree of compensation was gained when Lee found a male **White-tailed Robin**, surprisingly our only one of the tour.

With breakfast concluded we headed out, taking a short drive to a site known to hold **Giant Nuthatch**. The area was somewhat surreal, birding next to a village latrine although a bizarre location affording great panoramic views across a heavily vegetated hillside. A large, nearly dead tree was the nuthatch's known hangout but today did a no-show. But all was not in vain, far from it. Nick would take the lead but the party to a man was eager to find their own birds. A host of good birds would be noted over our hour or so stay, in no particular order we found- **Silver-eared Mesia**, a pair of **Spot-winged Grosbeaks**, **Silver-eared Laughingthrush**, **Striated** and **Flavescent Bulbuls**, **Grey Treepie**, **Maroon Oriole**, a grey looking **Brown Shrike** of the race *lucionensis*, **Grey Bushchat**, **Yellow-cheeked Tit**, **Long-tailed Minivet** yet best of all Scott's keen eye finding a pair of breathtakingly beautiful **Scarlet-faced Liocichla's**. The nuthatch would have to fall another day!

We then revisited the lodge with the intention of hopefully seeing the **Grey-winged Blackbird** that over the last few weeks had occasionally appeared at the feeding station. I could mention we failed, but that seems a harsh statement to make when recording at least six **Eye-browed Thrushes** and several **Black-breasted Thrushes** thrown in for good measure, while **Common Rosefinch**, **Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike** and **Long-tailed Shrike** noted around the gardens.

Looking at our watches it was unbelieveable to discovery it was still before 9am and sensing the blackbird would do a no show we headed back to the nearby King's Project. Here picking up new trip species in the form of **Blue-throated Barbet**, **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker** and female **Rufous-bellied Niltava** in or around the second feeding station we'd visited yesterday. But Nick deemed the area unusually unproductive and rather than waste more time suggest we move on, his years of guiding and intimate knowledge of the area was unquestionable and so we'd take his advice.

He proposed we head off to a site nearby, reliable for two new *Phylloscopus* Warblers. He'd take us to a military post, albeit minus any signs of military personnel on the Myanmar border. Here we'd walk past bunkers and razor-wired fences for our intended quarry. We'd stand practically at the border fenceline, no correction actually at the fenceline here picking up on a soft calling sound Nick pronounced was from **Yellow-streaked Warbler**. Its habit of foraging on or close to the ground had this Radde's Warbler lookalike quickly staked out. We'd focus our attention just the other side of the fenceline finding it almost immediately, its behaviour of remaining low to the ground as true as his word. Once seen we changed tact, a large nearby tree harboured a host of **Yellow-browed Warblers**, most occupying the upper reaches of the canopy although Martyn picked out a different species, plainer by comparison, more reminiscent to that of a Chiffchaff. Its uncanny knack of staying high, generally out of sight meant many took a while to latch onto the bird in question but the charade would not last and given time would reveal itself to all in the shape of **Buff-throated Warbler**.

Lunch was convened back at our lodge and with luggage stowed back on board the vehicle we were to say our goodbyes to Doi Ang Kang and head onto Doi Lang just after midday. The van at times would struggle to accommodate some of the more punishing inclines although would see us arrive at this fabled site just after 2pm.

At our first stop, Nick even before getting out of the vehicle got everybody's attention when announcing the stop was reliable for **Ultramarine Flycatcher**. It took less than two minutes to track down and would show incredibly well. Wow!



Ultramarine Flycatcher

Our first taste of Doi Lang had us salivating, yearning for more. Many rare or eye-catching species inhabit the area and with Nick's guidance it was hoped we could encounter the majority of them. The single, narrow tarmac road that meanders several miles through Doi Lang is all potentially excellent yet with limited time local knowledge and time management would ensure roadside birding could be optimised, key species targeted and found. Our second stop would bolster that claim, with a double whammy in quick succession. Two shy and potentially hard to find species in the form of **White-gorgeted Flycatcher** and **Spot-breasted Parrotbill** both seen extraordinarily well.



Spot-breasted Parrotbill

Our first hour here had began in whirlwind fashion, extraordinary views of extraodinary birds. It was a dream start, surely it couldn't continue, could it? Continuing by foot we'd find the forested section positively teeming with birds, encountering two **Slaty blue Flycatchers**, a **Verditer Flycatcher**, **Pale Blue Flycatcher**, **Humes Treecreeper**, **Marten's Warbler**, several adoreable **Black-throated Bushtits**, **Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo**, **Scarlet Minivet**, **Stripe-breasted Woodpecker**, yet star billing would be unequivocally reserved for a pair of **Himalayan Cutia's**, a highly coveted species that during previous tours invariable gets missed.



Siberian Rubythroat

We'd spend the remainder of the afternoon stopping at various stakeouts, augmenting our day with many more mouthwatering species, often at point-blank range. These would include **Rufous-gorged Flycatcher**, a female **Himalayan Bluetail**, **Slender-billed Oriole** and confiding male **Siberian Rubythroat**. Our only negative outcome a poor, untickable view of **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler**, although we were confident of stumbling across them later in the tour.

With the time nearing 17:00 we'd stop to check out a known pheasant stakeout on the offchance it may show but alas wouldn't. This wasn't a major issue, more akin to a small hiccup as plans were already afoot to try again in a few days time. Many found the stakeout memoreable in other ways for continuing our remarkable run of good fortune scored with a pair of **Giant Nuthatch**. They'd pass through very quickly, although most within the group could claim to have noted reasonable views.

On driving out, thinking our day had drawn to an inevitable end Nick alert as ever caught a glimpse of a male **Mrs Hume's Pheasant**. It foraging on the steep bank, next to but high above the roadside. The views were acceptable yet not great and during our futile quest to refind it compensated by finding **Rufescent Prinia** and **Greater Yellownape**.

Our night of refuge would be at Thatorn, arriving during darkness at the very pleasant Thatorn Garden Home resort, our base for the next three nights. An excellent family run enterprise and traditional place of stay, serving delicious food and supplying incredible packed lunches.

Day Three Chiang Saen area- Nam Kam, Mekong & Yonok wetlands

We'd begin our morning at 5am with a prompt departure, stopping momentarily at the local 7/11 for breakfast and arriving at Nam Kam just after 7am.

Our first port of call was overlooking an area of dry scrub and behind this an extensive bank of trees. Nick would reiterate that the starlings should receive particular attention for in recent times uncommoner species had been recorded. Standing room was rather limited and a tad fraught as we'd be required to stand on a narrow raised embankment. Most of the birdlife on offer seemed centered around the distant treeline and although much could be picked up using binoculars the use of a telescope was essential to acquire better views. Starlings and myna's were by far the most numerous, **Chestnut-tailed** and **Black-collared Starlings** accompanying **Great Myna's** although regrettably nobody from the group was fortunate to get on the **Red-billed Starling** seen by Nick. Of course other species were present: **Lineated Barbet**, two **Racket-tailed Treepie**, **Rufous-winged Buzzard** and **Freckle-breasted Woodpecker** affording distant views, whilst in the nearby scrub **Common Iora**, **Stejneger's Stonechat** and a male **Siberian Rubythroat** found by Gordon added a bit of variety to proceedings.

Next we'd recce an area along a reed fringed stream but it was generally quiet, for our efforts a party of four flyby **Pied Kingfishers** scant reward. So we'd not linger, moving on, trying our luck in the nearby more cultivated area's. Most of our success attained back within the vicinity from where we'd originally parked. A female **Laced Woodpecker**, initially heard would be tracked down to a large clump of bamboo stand where our first **White-rumped Shama** of the tour was also seen. A field adjacent to our vehicle held a calling **Thick-billed Warbler**, which steadfastly refused to show although we were somewhat distracted by a flyover *accipiter*, which after a bit of discussion was narrowed down to a female **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**.

We'd move on, our plan today littered with many quick stops and without a bit of time management could become quickly skewed. Our next stop at a location or should I say a river known to all, the mighty Mekong. Upon our arrival it was apparent the water levels were low, with large expanses of the riverbed exposed. The area just screamed out to be laden filled with wading birds but bizarrely this wasn't the case. Although

quiet it was not completely barren, four diminutive **Small Pratincoles** a species we'd deliberately targeted found with ease along with two **Little Ringed Plovers**. This latter species familiar to all in the Western Palearctic although this of the race *jerdoni*. It was interesting to learn that although most of the Thai population only over-winter, small pockets of localised Mekong birds are resident, alluding to clinal variation. Another new trip species recorded was **Grey-throated Martin**, while many would could also add Laos as a 'country tick', the Mekong the natural border between both countries.

We'd dabble briefly around the wetlands thereafter, picking up two **Crested Honey Buzzards**, ten **Grey-headed Lapwings** and three **Great Crested Grebes**, the latter a Thai tick for Nick, his 900th in fact, although conscious of the time drew a halt before venturing too far. We'd stop for Lunch, our backdrop overlooking the Mekong. Tim although rather outspoken on the red, additive filled soda drink seemed despite his indignation to consume his fair share!

The afternoon session would focus back around working the wetlands around Chiang Saen, stopping at a multitude of sites in a very birdy manner. Our first noting **Yellow Bittern**, **Indian Spot-billed Duck** and **Citrine Wagtail**, while nearby at a large expanse of water greater numbers of ducks could be seen but alas too distant. No Baer's Pochards had been recorded here this winter yet a genuine possiblity. Therefore efforts were taken to drive around the lakeshore but not before recording several **Burmese Shrikes** and our first **Intermediate Egret** of the trip.



Burmese Shrike

Upon arriving at the other shoreline it was somewhat disheartening to discover that over the intervening period the whole gathering had moved and relocated to an area by which we had just come from, typical! But with five scopes at our disposal it wouldn't necessitate a tedious drive back as they were clearly identifiable albeit distantly from where we stood. **Garganey** were far the most numerous, although good numbers of **Indian Spot-billed Duck** and **Ferruginous Duck** were also present along with four **Northern Shoveler** and two drake **Common Teal**, not a species to set the hearts racing but likewise a species never recorded over previous tours.

We'd move on but stay localised, working adhoc fashion pockets of wetlands that seemed interesting. A **Cinnamon Bittern**, our only one of the tour the highlight, plus our first **Bronze-winged Jacana**. Little else of

note was gleened apart from a history lesson from Nick on **Asian Openbill's**. Now abundant this hasn't always been the case, numbers increasing exponentially over the last ten years due to a greater availability of a large water snail.

Todays events were but a mere prelude, for the best was yet to come. Chiang Saen can enviously boast the claim of being Asia's largest Harrier roost. We'd arrive in good time, and despite it too early for the harriers gave us ample opportunity to endulge in working the wet grasslands for many other interesting and skulking species. Several **Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers** sang from stands of nearby cover, just occasionally breaking cover, while **Striated Grassbird** and **Thick-billed Warbler** also targeted and found. An educational lesson in snipe flight identification followed, several **Pin-tailed Snipe** readily separated from **Common's** along with a calling **Swinhoe's**.

As daylight began to ebb away so harriers would appear. Just the odd single at first, but would build in number. The early arrivals invariably **Eastern Marsh Harriers** were interspersed with the odd **Pied** but as time progressed and numbers qwelld a dramatic ratio change with a substantial shift towards **Pied Harriers**. It was an incredible spectacle, one we'd leave at 18:30 to a laden filled sky full of Harriers, numbers unquantifiable but a triple count for sure.

Day Four Doi Lang (east)

With a hearty 6am breakfast we were ready for a quick departure by 6:30.

Today we'd be back working the slopes of Doi Lang, although today would bird the eastern side. Due to the poor road surface on the upper section it would mean that we'd need to vacate our vehicle and transfer to another. Crammed now on bench seats, a firm grip was necessary to avoid sliding into each other and pounding against one another on the journey up. But with spirits high and broken up by two stops despite unpleasant wasn't intolerable.

Our first stop would see us disembark at a large bridge, giving reasonable canopy views of the pristine hillside. **Mountain Imperial Pigeon** and **Greater Racket-tailed Drongo** seen well although Nick would beckon us to walk on, along the bridge and delve into the darker recesses of the forest. We'd not walk far, for a drumming woodpecker at a large stand of Bamboo would grab our attention. We'd all be on high alert to get a view of this bird, fully expecting to encounter a Bamboo Woodpecker. It was initially picked up in flight but hadn't gone far and quickly relocated to another stand of Bamboo, nestled high. Concerns about its true identity were quickly raised by Nick, as he was alarmed at what he perceived as the warm colouration to the upperwing, his comments echoed by several others once the topic raised. The angle of view wasn't 100% ideal but it was indeed red-brown in tone and others had highlighted that when seen in flight it clearly had barring in it's primaries. Therefore we hadn't been watching a Bamboo Woodpecker but the similar looking yet much rarer **Pale-headed Woodpecker**. A species Nick declared has not officially been recorded in Thailand before yet he himself noting one from the very same location a few years prior, arguably the same individual. What a result!

Our second stop would in contrast be mundane, at an area of open semi-pastureland, known to be frequented by **Grey-faced Buzzard**. We'd scan any obvious perches where it may frequent but drew a blank so wouldn't linger.

We'd then drive until arriving at the checkpoint, unable to proceed further by vehicle, our arrival despite a military presence unhindered, in fact later that day a senior official beckoned our group over so that he could have his picture taken with us!

Despite this site being somewhat isolated, off the beaten track it regularly draws birding groups or photographers and this was somewhat apparent when Nick having placed a banana on a nearby tree drew an immediate response. From nowhere a pair of **Silver-eared Laughingthrushes** and **Scarlet-faced Liocichla's** would arrive to squabble and bicker over our offering, practically oblivious to our presence just a matter of 15 feet away.



Scarlet-faced Liocichla

We'd leave them to continue their antics by visiting a second feeding station, this one tucked right behind a nearby outbuilding. Once again upon placing a fresh batch of mealworms we'd not have to wait more than a few seconds until attracting a similar outcome. A **Chestnut Thrush** and a party of **Dark-backed Sibia's** quick to pounce on our offering, **Spectacled Barwings** joining the melee soon after. It was kind of a surreal scenario for those unaccustomed to such exploits, affording such point blank views of forest dwelling birds. A **Rufous-winged Fulvettia** would also be seen, although due to its small stature amid larger company would remain arboreal.



Spectacled Barwing

Walking back towards our original stop we'd linger, this time birding in a traditional manner. **Whiskered Yuhinas** and a **Yellow-bellied Fantail** easy pickings but a **Chestnut-crowned Warbler** less so. Somewhat coy it took time for some to gain acceptable views.

Nobody at the checkpoint seemed concerned when we'd circumnavigate our way around the barrier and we'd continue by foot along the track. We'd slowly walk only a matter of a few hundred yards, stopping frequently due to the sheer abundance of bird activity, this was a forest like no other in that respect. In no particular order we were to record a succession of quality birds, noting **Buff-winged**, **Davison's Leaf** and **Blyth's Leaf Warbler**, **Mountain Bulbul**, **Black-throated Sunbird**, **Yellow-browed** and **Yellow-cheeked Tit**, several **Himalayan Bluetails** including a fine male, **Little Pied Flycatcher**, **Large Niltava**, more **Rufous-winged Fulvettas**, **Mountain Tailorbird**, **Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher**, while Scott would note a **Crested Finchbill**, that although heard thereafter could not get pinned down.

Back at the checkpoint Nick fluent in Thai negotiated with the guards vehicle access to a viewing area, which was successfully granted. It was from here we'd stop for our delicious Pork sandwiches and jumbo bag of crisps, amid stunning 6800 feet panoramic views of the Thai/ Myanmar landscape. A **Mountain Hawk Eagle** and **Eastern Buzzard** would both drift past whilst doing so and a quick look for the range restricted **Fire-tailed Sunbird** would see most gain some kind of view of it, although with a limited viewing area some would not. Those having seen it kind enough to move away but the bird would not unfortunately put on a second showing.

Heading back down we'd make a few random stops, cover some ground by foot. At one such location we'd chance upon a flurry of activity, first finding **Crested Finchbill**, although it would be a little manic as within quick succession we'd also note **Grey-chinned Minivet**, more **Whiskered Yuhinas** and a pair of **Black-eared Shrike Babblers** seen at extraordinarily close range.



Black-eared Shrike-Babbler

Our only other worthwhile stop was a tad more frantic. The driver stopping and a bang on the rear window would signify he'd seen something. Some with direct access to the rear window and others peering out from the side of the vehicle had the briefest of views of a **Silver Pheasant**, yet with all clamouring to get out the bird had ample time to effortlessly just vanish back into the forest. Despite our forlorn efforts to refind it, many would come away happy when Nick upon hearing a **Blue-bearded Bee-eater** would miraculously despite restricted views pull a proverbial rabbit out of the hat, when finding it, allowing everybody to get a descent scope view of this monster. Otherwise the rest of the drive down was fruitless, long, bumpy and very tiresome.

We'd head back to Thaton, stopping at the 7/11 for munchies and the obligatory Ice cream, Magnums now becoming a firm favourite before exploring the vast rice fields that sprawl out behind the town. The usual array of common birds would be noted although it was Nick's intention to seek out an area he knew well, more rank, less cultivated yet threatened habitat on the off chance we may find the now critically endangered **Yellow-breasted Bunting** and the now equally scarce **Jerdon's Bushchat**. Stopping at the place in question, the area was indeed smaller than we'd imagined and over the years Nick stated been massively reduced to this one small stand. But **Yellow-breasted Buntings** were there, in fact in quite good numbers, some of the males heavy in moult nearing summer plumage. Alas we drew a blank, if not unexpectedly on the Jerdon's Bushchat. With a few hours til darkness we'd just linger, content to bird the area, recording a male **Pied Harrier**, **Siberian Rubythroat**, several warm faced **Red-throated Pipits** and two **Ruddy Shelducks**, found by Tim and another trip scarcity.

With the day drawing to a close we'd move to a bank overlooking a narrow stream, which was in hindsight a fortuitous call. We'd find several species we'd not record elsewhere on the tour, namely **Green Sandpiper**, **Yellow-eyed Babbler** and **Bluethroat**, although pulling out a secretive **Baikal Bush Warbler** was by far the best received by the group.

After our meal back at Thaton, several of our group would whilst trying to rest or get awoken by the sound of a calling **Brown Hawk Owl**.

Day Five Doi Lang (west)

Today would see another early start, gathering for a quick getaway at 5am.

Our primary aim, to arrive at first light in the hope we could quickly pull up at the pheasant stakeout, see it and move on. On our arrival we'd be confronted by a mistier day and although this would lower temperatures just a bit our confidence remained high. But 90 minutes later, having patiently and quietly stood practically motionless, using our vehicle as cover we felt we'd given it enough time so would move on and perhaps try again a bit later in the day. Although the pheasant had done a no show we could content ourselves with seeing four **Mountain Bamboo-Partridges**, **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Olive-backed Pipit**, **Grey-backed Shrike**, male **Slaty-backed Flycatcher**, **Spectacled Barwing**, a pair of gregarious **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babblers** and **Buff-throated Warbler**.

During our vigil several vehicles had driven by and so wishing to avoid them would head back in the opposite direction to the site where a few days prior we'd seen the **Ultramarine Flycatcher**. With the mist now having cleared and temperatures rising now was a great time to maximise our efforts. The flycatcher was seen with ease but not dwelled upon, our focus drawn away by other species. A flyover **Large Cuckooshrike** would make several passes, so show well. Yet the opposite may be said of the **Radde's Warbler** found by Ian. Despite everybody seeing it it would do what Radde's do and fairly quickly be lost to view. Continuing by foot another cuckooshrike, this time the dark, *saturata* race of **Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike** was flighty but given time allowed perched views, while a vocal **Giant Nuthatch** was tracked down but fairly quickly moved through, yet we conceded defeat at tracking down a calling **Grey-headed Woodpecker**.

Nick felt it would perhaps be worth giving the pheasant site another go. We'd only been gone from there maybe an hour but it was worth another try. Upon our arrival two photographers using hand gestures as we scaled the incline by vehicle clearly a promising sign. Departing our vehicle as stealthily as possible and by walking just a few yards there on the brow of the road was a male **Mrs Hume's Pheasant**, resplendant in all its finery and this time allowing everybody to gain exceptional views as it fed unconcerned by our presence for several minutes. Once it had had its fill and disappeared from view our attention would be drawn away and in doing so would add **Rufous-bellied Rock Thrush**, **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** and two grey headed female **Blyth's Shrike Babblers** to our ever growing triplist.

The remainder of the morning would see us concentrate of our efforts on the mid-section of the road. This an area we had birded just a few days ago with great success and yet it was surprising that although many of the great birds seen then were also seen today it still had much to offer, that I guess is the magic of forest birding. **Golden Babbler**, **Golden-throated Barbet**, **Asian Stubtail**, **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** all seen well, yet a small party of **Grey-headed Parrotbills** took pride of place. Although to give a better idea of just how productive the walk had been could bulk this out with additional sightings of **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher**, **Himalayan Bluetail**, **Spot-breasted Parrotbill**, **Black-throated Bushtit**, **Scarlet** and **Grey-chinned Minivet** and **Crested Serpent-Eagle**.

A little later on we'd actually leave the road, after hearing the distinct racious calls of **Eurasian Jay**. Taking a walk on a somewhat overgrown path up the hillside adjacent to the road. Although our primary reason for doing this was of course to see this distinctly dark crowned variant of Eurasian Jay it stands to reason that other opportunites must arise. Whilst the jays would remain in situ, calling like mad but only giving the odd fleeting glimpse as they'd fly and immediately get lost from view behind cover a whole host of different species would prove less challenging. Most noteably a male **Pale Blue Flycatcher**, female **Vivid Niltava** and better still Gordon latching onto a party of three **Himalayan Cutia's** before the jays would finally show. Our

descent back to the road interrupted when Nick heard a **White-browed Laughingthrush**, that unfortunately had only a handful of the group seeing.

A field lunch was taken in situ back at the van and delicious it was too, made all the more memorable by watching a pair of **Golden-throated Barbets**. Once nourished we'd take a short drive, no more than a few kilometres to a site at the end of the road by an army checkpoint. The change in habitat was obvious, it being much more open and as such should offer up plenty more opportunities to add to our triplist. The army outpost was manned by just a single conscript, he not cutting a very imposing figure as he lay in his hammock, although we'd not test his resolve by passing the checkpoint. We'd spent a few hours here, in truth not covering an area of more than a few hundred yards but much like this morning had a bird-rich time. In no particular order we'd encounter: a group of five **Long-tailed Broadbills**, **Crimson-breasted Woodpecker**, **Orange-bellied Leafbird**, **Burmese Shrike**, **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater**, **Rufous-bellied Eagle**, **Indochinese Cuckooshrike**, **Streaked Spiderhunter**, more **Crested Finchbills** and **Bylth's Shrike-Babblers**, plus would hear and just a few claim to see an **Aberrant Bush Warbler**, while **Russet Bush Warbler** and **Hill Prinia** were also heard, the latter rather bizarrely very coy.

We'd conclude a fantastic day back at Thaton. Spending our last hour around the rice fields but at a different location. This in the vain hope of stumbling across **Jerdon's Bushchat**. We wouldn't give it long. The habitat this species requires, much of which once so abundant, has over the years been whittled away to redeveloped cultivation. It was probably for this reason alone we'd fail and in a broader context raises serious doubts for its long term status, not just here but for the whole of Thailand. Without conservationary measures its future looks very bleak indeed. We would still see **Yellow-breasted Bunting**, **Eurasian Wryneck**, **Brown Shrike**, plus have **Richard's Pipit** and **Pin-tailed Snipe** flying over but it had been a quiet end to a very productive day.

Day Six Doi Lang (west) and Doi Inthanon

Today would be our last morning at Doi Lang, time would be precious and therefore would necessitate another 5am start. We'd once again cover the west side for Nick assured us that despite having spent almost two full days here even more goodies lay ahead.

We'd start our morning in close proximity to where we'd spent the previous afternoon although we were rather surprised to discover it would start at a raised military helipad. But the site clearly had real potential, the clearing presenting exceptional views across vast swathes of pristine forest habitat. Nick's primary reason for choosing this site had been relayed to us the previous evening, for over the last few months had regularly recorded a national rare in **Scarlet Finch**.

With the dawn of a new day it was exciting to just stand and watch as hungry birds fresh from roost would vie for our attention. **Crested Bunting** and **Hill Prinia**'s seen at close quarters, whilst **Great Barbet**, **Banded Bay Cuckoo**, **Streaked Spiderhunter**, **Ashy** and **Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo**'s, **Flavescent Bulbul**, **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**, **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch**, **Chestnut-capped Babbler** and **Mountain Imperial Pigeon** offered plenty of variety although for quality would be reserved for the **Scarlet Finch**. It seen well, even scoped as this large and vividly coloured male alighted long enough on an exposed branch, affording fantastic views.

It had been a great start but wishing to waste no time we'd relocate to the army checkpoint where we were once again treated to a plethora of great birds. A **Chinese Leaf Warbler** the pick of the bunch, although a supporting cast of **Crimson-breasted Woodpecker**, **Lesser Yellownape**, **Crested Finchbill**, **Eye-browed**

Thrush, Giant Nuthatch, Spot-winged Grosbeak, Burmese Shrike and Large Cuckooshrike just a selection of birds seen, adding a real quality of depth to proceedings.

Ever conscious of the time we'd make one last stop at the mid reaches of the road, once again filling our notebooks with a host of sightings, many of the birds seen a repetition from previous visits. Although credit must once again be given to Nick, when he rather animatedly got our attention to a calling *Phylloscopus* warbler. Although we'd only get flight views as it flew back and forth across the road above us, to Nick's trained ear the birds call although similar to Claudia's Leaf Warbler was in his opinion that of **Hartert's Leaf Warbler**. A species little known away from its breeding range in China and with just a handful of records in Thailand. Online accounts appear to convey passage observations from parks, while its true wintering status yet to be clearly determined, with rumblings muting it probably does winter in the highlands of Northern Thailand.

We'd have to say our farewell's to Doi Lang by 10:30, for we had a lengthy five hour drive ahead of us to our new destination Doi Inthanon. To break it up we'd stop for our packed lunch at a quiet rice field where we'd record 13 **Grey-headed Lapwing**, but would hit the road once again arriving at the Inthanon Highland Resort shortly after 15:30, our base for the next three nights.

We'd waste no time in offloading our bags, in the process of doing so stumble across an **Asian Barred Owlet** outside Tim, Martyn, Gordon and Scott's accommodation. The grounds are extensive and should have warranted greater merit but with our busy itinerary catered for we duly departed. But we'd not venture too far, stopping at a rather nondescript location that Nick confidently informed us was reliable as a pre-roost gathering for **Blossom-headed Parakeet**. We'd arrive much too early for this spectacle but needless to say our timing wasn't wasted. We'd use the intervening period well, finding good numbers of **Plain-backed Sparrows**, a male **Purple Sunbird**, a flock of **Rosy Minivets** and a few getting a brief view of **Grey-breasted Prinia**, and our first of many **Black-crested Bulbuls** of the tour the best pickings on offer. But the real fun began later, a few parakeets made a cursory flyby and shortly thereafter more would herald their arrival, calling away and conveniently perching on some exposed branches, allowing excellent scope views of perhaps some thirty individuals.

Before we'd settle in for the night we'd take the opportunity to meander around the outskirts of the gardens, seeing in dusk although not before finding a pair of **Spotted Owlets**. Darkness fell quickly, our efforts in vain, not a single owl would be heard and with a heavy bombardment of flying insects an annoying distraction we cut our losses and called it a night.

Day Seven Doi Inthanon

Breakfast was taken in darkness at the resort at 6am and we were somewhat taken aback by the earlier than expected dawn of a new day. Turning up at our first destination a little later than we would have hoped, concrete mixers thundering across the small bridge that overlooked a stream we intended to bird for the shy **Black-backed Forktail**. We'd fail to see one and through no reason of our own couldn't help contribute our failure down to the disturbance.

We'd cut our losses and move on, stopping close by at the popular Wachirathan Waterfall. It too would fail to result in either a forktail or surprising still a **Plumbeous Water Redstart**. The morning so far had been a bit of a disaster.

Our third stop by contrast would see us back on track. We'd pull off the road mid-elevation and work a track and the three and a half hour period would fly by. It starting well, calling out a **Chestnut-headed Tesia** upon our arrival and from then on little stood in our way with a succession of rewards. Tracking down a

singing **Slaty-bellied Tesia**, gaining obscenely close and prolonged views would rank as an undoubted highlight, but it would be sacrilege were we not to touch upon the fact we'd also see **Pygmy Wren Babbler**, **Silver-cheeked Mesia**, male **Large and Small Niltava**, **Asian Emerald Cuckoo**, **Clicking Shrike-Babbler**, **Rufous-backed Sibia**, **Spectacled Barwing**, **Long-tailed Broadbill** and another presumed **Hartert's Warbler**, amid a host of commoner forest species.

Lunch was taken at the nearby Mr Deangs birding centre and it was then off to the summit, Thailand's highest peak, officially recorded at 2565 metres above sea level. Unlike the relatively serene and quiet nature of birding Doi Lang, Doi Inthanon by contrast despite being a national park was much more geared towards tourism and littered with Thai's enjoying the scenery on offer, most with phone in hand, rabidly taking pictures at every available opportunity. We on the other hand were here to watch birds, our initial foray amongst the hordes of visitors on or around the summit yielding a displaying **Crested Goshawk**, **Short-billed Minivet**, **Rufous-winged Fulvetta**, **Bar-throated Minla**, **Grey-sided Thrush**, **Ashy-throated Warbler**, **Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush**, **Puff-throated Bulbul** and **Green-tailed Sunbird**, locally assigned as the race *angkanensis* (Doi Inthanon Sunbird) but would fail in our efforts to find **Ashy Wood-Pigeon**.

Tucked away although signposted was the Ang Ka nature trail, a boardwalk that takes an anticlockwise journey through a section of stunning cloud forest. Here we'd walk in relative silence and found the far reaches, particularly the wetter areas by far the most productive. With years of birding experience between us nobody needed reminding of the need to remain quiet and our reward first came with finding a female **White-browed Shortwing**, seemingly oblivious by our close attendance, while from the same location also affording us point-blank views of **Dark-sided Thrush** and a male **Snowy-browed Flycatcher**. Further down the trail most would gain a view of **White-capped Forktail**, although it wouldn't show for long and despite a search for it would never get seen again.

Our drive back down early evening would see us stop just once, to scope a group of at least 14 **Speckled Wood-Pigeons**, no doubt a roosting or pre-roosting assemblage and our arrival back at base would once again be in darkness. That evening Nick would relay news of rain at Bangkok. This of course had no direct bearing on matters at hand, but he would point out could have a major detrimental impact on some of the stakeouts at Khao Yai. Wet weather synonymous for birds abandoning stakeouts.

Pictures or news via family members or the social media from back home in the UK had shown the Beast from the East had arrived. It bringing a severe bout of cold weather and deep blankets of snow.

Day Eight Doi Inthanon

After yesterdays mishap of arriving perhaps too late at the Forktail site we'd start our morning with a 5:30 breakfast. Tim feeling just a single slice of toast with our cooked breakfast rather inadequate, dignified as ever sorted to address the issue. In light of his inability to convey this point to our ever helpful staff at the counter he'd walk back to our table and in a moment of pure comedy genious markedly point to a slice on Lee's plate to a barrage of uncontrolled laughter by the rest of us. Six more slices would be forthcoming and the irony was not lost on everybody when despite he taking the first piece the rest were pounced upon by the rest of us.

Today we'd gather at the same site as yesterday morning but this time when still dark. As dawn broke once again heralding a flurry of concrete mixers, an erstwhile search seemed doomed to a similar outcome until Gordon did the biz and found a **Black-backed Forktail**. It well away from prying eyes almost 100 yards upstream.

From here it was back to the summit, our aim with any luck to connect with three birds missed yesterday, **Ashy Wood-Pigeon**, **Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker** and **Rufous-throated Partridge**. For the most part it was a case of milling around, scanning a fruiting tree for the flowerpecker, behind a cookhouse for the partridge or behind the latrine for the pigeon, each in close proximity. **Ashy Wood Pigeon** would be seen first, four seen well perched. It took a little while for the other two to follow, the **Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker**, a male seen by everybody. Initial views would be limited to craning our necks for underside views but given time seen well. The **Rufous-throated Partridge** would finally show but not where steaked out. By pure chance, Nick having left the group encountered three at close quarters at the beginning of the Ang Ka trail. He'd politely asked a small group of Thai's to avoid walking past and maybe flushing them and hurried back to the group. The news generated a fairly speedy 30 second dash and thankfully the birds remained where he had left them, scurrying around in the scrub just a matter of yards from the trail. Other birds seen that morning would very much match what had been encountered yesterday, although worth reiterating would include two **Dark-sided Thrushes** and a spectacularly close **Pygmy Wren Babbler** down to a matter of about three feet, both on the Ang Ka trail.



Pygmy Wren Babbler

Looking at our watches it was still only 10:15, but we'd mopped up. We'd head down stopping just once, a selection recorded included **Scarlet Minivet**, **Yellow-cheeked Tit**, **Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike**, **Mountain Tailorbird**, **Blyth's Leaf** and **Chestnut-crowned Warblers** and **White-throated Fantail** before it was back to Mr Deang's for a spot of lunch.

This afternoon we'd work some of the lower elevation, starting first at an area by some lovely national park lodges. In a relaxed manner we'd stroll along the treelined road and back again, yet found the most productive area where we'd originally parked the van. **White-bellied Erpornis**, a male **Clicking Shrike-Babbler** and several **Ashy Bulbuls** were new trip additions, while **Black Bulbul**, **Black-naped Monarch** and **Verditer Flycatcher** the best of the rest.

We'd then make a quick stop at the 'Tesia' site we'd visited yesterday but found it to be quiet so wouldn't linger more than a few minutes before continuing down - it now being 15:30. Our plan to take a side road where we'd seen the forktail this morning and despite the building of a new road (hence the concrete mixers) spend the remainder of the day here. Despite the dust and at times heavy duty traffic we'd have an excellent few hours. For this wasn't just a random stop but a site well known as a reliable roost site for Collared Falconet plus a few other species. All would go according to plan; four **Collared Falconets** would been seen well plus three **Black-headed Woodpeckers**, a **Red-billed Blue Magpie**, **Black-naped Oriole**, **Lineated Barbet** and a pair of **Common Flamebacks**.



Collared Falconet



Black-headed Woodpecker

Day Nine Doi Inthanon (morning), flight back to Bangkok

The day started with a minor setback, the boot latch on our van had come loose and fully laden with all our bags was cause for concern. Luckily the matter quickly addressed.

We would then be back at the same location as last night, arriving just after 7am. Amid the din of the road construction we'd press on, a stroll despite the workings being somewhat fruitful. Gordon would pick up a **Black-hooded Oriole**, a vocal **Drongo Cuckoo** tracked down, **Green-billed Malkoha** and a pair of **Golden-fronted Leafbirds** were also new, although conscious of the time we'd stay less than two hours. We'd stop just once more, adding our first **White-crested Laughingthrush** of the tour to our list before it was time to draw a line under the northern part of our tour.

Nick would drop us off at Chiang Mai airport for our one hour flight back to Bangkok. He in turn would drive the vehicle back on his own and meet us at Bangkok following morning. The flight went without incident and by mid-afternoon we had all checked into the rather plush Amari Don Muang Hotel in Bangkok. **Java Sparrows** are known to frequent the area and although not all were captivated enough to go look for them a few would do so. Several were found, quite literally in a tree to the side of our hotel along with **Yellow-vented Bulbul** and **Asian Koel**, although a break in the weather and a spot of the damp stuff turning into a heavy one hour downpour many were thankful to be hotel bound.

Day Ten Wat Pra Phuttabaht Noi and Khao Yai

We'd start this morning at 5:30, Nick picking us up outside the hotel. We'd head north-east, our ultimate destination Khao Yai, although en-route would first call into Wat Pra Phuttabaht Noi to explore the limestone gorge.



Limestone Wren Babbler

Nestled within this imposing and mystical arena lies a Buddhist enclave and it was from here we'd pull up just after 7am, our quest to find the *calcicola* race of **Limestone Wren Babbler**. It would take a mere matter of minutes to track down a calling pair, but rather than hop straight back into the vehicle would linger a little longer, finding several more pairs. From here we made the relatively short drive to Khao Yai, the town itself bustling with new and fancy hotels, although our choice of stay at a more modest establishment. Before arriving stopping momentarily at some gardens to see several **Red-breasted Parakeets**.

Once checked into our hotel we'd leave immediately for the short driving to the National Park, this a UNESCO world heritage site. It's one of Thailand's premier birdwatching sites and therefore a must visit destination. With almost two days allowance given to birding the site it should give us ample time to explore its treasures although that said we'd need to cram in as much as possible for many of our target species could prove challenging.

Once within the park's boundaries the lower reaches of road snake through vast swaythes of great forest habitat although offer few places to stop and bird. Today this would not concern us, for first we'd matters to address elsewhere. Our emphasis from the outset to primarily target specific species deeper into the reserve. Nick had first class intel on arguably two of the most sought-after, Coral-billed Ground Cuckoo and Blue Pitta, the latter at a site unbeknown to many. It would be folly given our short duration of stay to apportion the appropriate allocation of time and our top priority to both. And so we'd make our first rudimentary stop at the pitta site. Disembarking the vehicle to the sight of a female **Banded Kingfisher**, a potentially tricky woodland based Kingfisher was an excellent start. The site in question was easy to overlook, a small path from the roadside would lead us direct to its stakeout, a makeshift screen a clear sign we were at the point we needed to be. It was now a waiting game. We stood motionless, hearing one albeit distantly was encouraging but as the minutes ticking away and an hour elasped we would reluctantly concede defeat and target it again another time. But despite this failing we could console ourselves with a male **Hainan Blue Flycatcher**, **Sulphur-bellied Warbler**, four **White-crested Laughingthrushes**, **White-bellied Erpornis**, **Puff-throated** and **Abbott's Babbler**, and best of all **Black-and-Buff Woodpecker**.

Our roadside walk back to the parked van, no more than 70 yards away would quickly banish any negative cognitions, for the place seemed positively jumping with birdlife. Martyn finding an **Orange-breasted**

Trogon, Tim some **Swinhoe's Minivets**, while a pair of **Red-headed Trogons**, **Claudia's Leaf Warbler**, **White-bellied Erpornis** and a brief view of **Asian Paradise Flycatcher** a selection of the best on offer.

Moving on we'd take a short drive back, stopping at the campsite. It was just after 13:00 and our efforts to tempt a Ground Cuckoo to show would draw a negative outcome, although in our defence little time was afforded to it. But we would enjoy seeing our first **Vernal Hanging Parrots** and **Black-headed Bulbul**, note the red throated *johsoni* race of **Black-crested Bulbul** and admire the sheer presence of the spectacular **Great Hornbill**. It was somewhat bizarre that we were turned away from the nearby restaurant, their reasons for doing so 'they had no food!'

Lunch remained our immediate priority. Fortunately we'd not need to leave the park's boundaries. A small restaurant within the headquarters area would cater for this eventuality and supplemented with a round of Magnum ice creams. And so with bellies filled we'd continue to bird, venturing by foot to a small area of land behind the buildings. We'd not stay long but were satisfied with finding **Moustached Barbet**, **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater**, **Thick-billed Green-Pigeon** and **Long-tailed Broadbill** before trying the pitta site once again at 15:10. We'd give it another hour and for our efforts noting an **Alstrom's Warbler** but once again failing with the pitta. With two failed attempts it now certainly had us feeling that time restraints could be a serious issue but would not abandon the idea of a third visit tomorrow.

Another walk of the roadside, this time covering more ground would have wonderful results. The presence of a **Coral-billed Ground Cuckoo**, its garrulous overtures announcing its close proximity immediately fixated everybody's attention. Nick hatched a plan to lure it out, setting his speaker on the ground and all stepped well back in the offchance it may entice the bird into view. It worked a treat, we'd caught its attention. A single bird left the forest confines and casually, unconcerned by our attendance strutted across the road, followed immediately by a second. Now that was a very big result and once vanished drew a steady stream of accolades for the group. Anything else from now on would be a mere bonus, adding **Ruby-cheeked Sunbird**, **Black-necked Tailorbird**, **Hill Myna** and a flyover **Wreathed Hornbill** to our ever growing triplist.



Coral-billed Ground-Cuckoo

Conscious of the time we'd move on, wishing to conclude the day by visiting one final site before nightfall. This at an open area beside a small lake. Good numbers of **Brown-backed Needletails** put on a spectacular display, wheeling over the lake, often coming down to drink, skimming the water at high speed. This would allow excellent opportunities to note the upperside pattern, in particular the contrasting rump and thankfully by doing so pulled out a surprise, unearthing a **Silver-backed Needletail** within them. It was marginally smaller, although the standout feature the much cleaner, paler rump seen well when dropping down to drink. To supplement our time it was fantastic to watch a pair of **Malayan Porcupines**. Worldie views were had, none more so than by Martyn when one sauntered past him a matter of feet away.



Malayan Porcupine

An immature **Large Hawk Cuckoo**, a flyover **Dollarbird** and several **Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters** would keep our attention until daylight began to fade and with that, what was hoped a final hurrah of the day. It would take a while, but come they did. Two **Great-eared Nightjar**, first heard and subsequently picked up in flight as they hawked high overhead. These huge nightjars, their size and jizz giving them a somewhat Harrier-type impression. It rounding off a day that although had had its low points could justifiably claim to be yet another incredible day.

Day Eleven Khao Yai

With breakfast deliberately taken early we paid our dues at the entrance gate at 6:20. Our initial aim again to bird the higher reaches of the park during the first hour of daylight. One of our missions to find roadside feeding **Siamese Firebacks**, once so common, although for some reason now much less so. Our outcome forlorn, none would materialize, although not dwelt upon as further along a group of five **Silver Pheasants** (male and four females) and a **Barred Cuckoo Dove** got the beginning of the day off to a relatively productive start. Several of the pale ear patched *gallus* race of **Red Junglefowl** would also be seen.

From here we were back on foot, stopping once again to explore the area around the pitta site. To begin matters a pair of **Heart-spotted Woodpeckers** would enthrall us, while a **Greater Flameback** briefly seen,

yet it wasn't particularly fruitful, matters not helped by the stakeout occupied by an overzealous or inexperienced photographer, whose playback call of the pitta excessively loud. A hive of activity on the walk back to our van, all highly anxious, scolding away alluded to maybe the presence of an owl, although could equally and most probably lay culprit to a tree borne snake caught our attention. **Yellow-vented Flowerpecker, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, Great Iora, Puff-throated Bulbul** and **Pin-striped Tit-Babbler** just a selection of the thirteen species recorded in the melee.

Next we'd explore albeit briefly the higher grounds, stopping at an army checkpoint. The clean looking **Black-throated Laughingthrushes** appear to favour this altitude locally and were quickly tracked down. Stunning vista views held little birdwise although were spectacular while this short interlude also produced **White-browed Scimitar-Babbler, Moustached Barbet, Hill Blue Flycatcher, Olive-backed Pipit** and **Ashy Drongo**.

Hitting the road once again our next port of call was back at the campsite. A fruiting tree acquired our greatest attention. Heavily laden with a rich bounty it was also thick with cover, to the extent that even species as large as a barbet could lurk deep within and easily go overlooked. But we stuck at it, given time seeing a pair of **Green-eared Barbets**, a **Blue-eared Barbet**, both **Yellow-vented** and **Thick-billed Flowerpeckers**, the latter a drab species although new for the trip plus a confiding male **Asian Fairy Bluebird**, **Greenish Warbler** and **Olive-backed Sunbird**, while Martyn observed a **Black-winged Kite** pass overhead. It seemed fitting that we should also check out the stakeout nearby. Another Ground Cuckoo would have been gladly welcomed but it was not to be although it would be churlish to say it was disappointing when you find a male **Siberian Blue Robin**!



Asian Fairy Bluebird

After lunch, again taken at the headquarters we made the briefest of stops at an area of grassland. A few **Golden-headed Cisticola's** our target of concern. A few were seen but many would concede these wouldn't rank highly as one of the birds of the tour!

Would it be third time lucky? Pitta duty once again beckoned. The unrelenting din made by the photographer this morning wasn't an encouraging sign yet we had to at least give it another try. Parking up it was somewhat encouraging to hear one call. This had us all excited yet likewise tempered. Lee, who had broken marginally away from the group would be the first to see it, although immediately lost to view. It had appeared to have moved left. Some anticipating this did the same, Chris picking it up and indicating it continued to move left. Nick would refind it a third time, some getting the briefest of views, most not. It was a tense situation but its movement towards the stakeout a positive sign. We'd waste no time, abandoning our roadside efforts in favour of the stakeout. Nervously we just stood there waiting. Then in a moment of pure drama - there it was, the unmistakeable sight of it, albeit tucked away in cover. Everybody had time to latch onto it, all elated, some no doubt relieved. An air of calmness still prevailed, motionless each stood rooted to the spot, collectively each no doubt subconsciously praying it to venture ever closer. Our wishes would be granted, coming ever closer until finally hopping up onto a fallen log no more than 25 yards away, WOW!



Blue Pitta

Also seen during this initially tense then euphoric episode would be a vocal yet mobile **Pale-legged Leaf Warbler**, for many another much targeted trip species along with the same male **Hainan Blue Flycatcher** and presumable same **Puff-throated Babblers** as yesterday.

Duly elated we left the stakeout, emotions high and would spend the remainder of the day walking the road. Here alerted by noise akin to something scratching around within the leaf litter had us all on fireback duty. Despite our best efforts we'd fail, this made all the more frustrating as Chris would see the bird in question, well part of it. Based on his brief and limited views it appeared the rest had somehow overlooked one. One final throw of the dice saw Nick in Jedi-like fashion try tapping into some mystical powers. The conclusion- 'the Force in you my child is not strong', although showed in light of this setback we could all remain light-hearted.

The rest of our walk was very quiet, with little seen but the meal and drinks would taste sweet tonight. The pitta done!

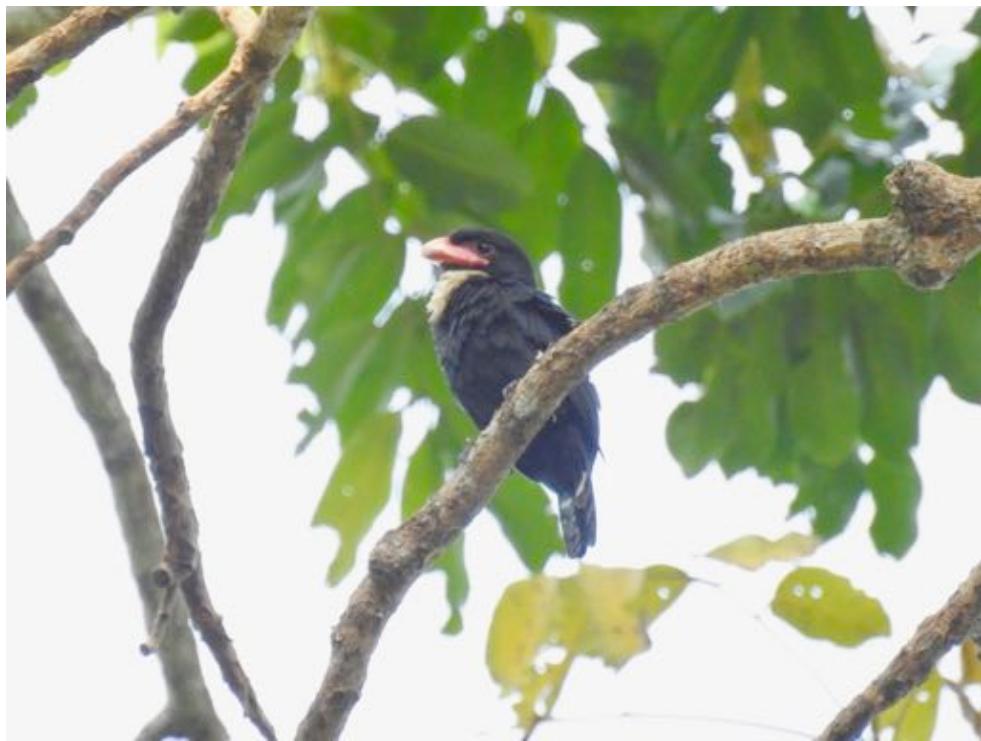
Day Twelve Khao Yai & Phetchaburi

This morning was our last at Khao Yai and with practically all the key species seen we spent the first hour of daylight driving the upper reaches in a final push to secure **Siamese Fireback**. Luck was again not on our side, we reluctantly conceded defeat and moved to the headquarters area. A circular trail was investigated on the slim chance we'd find an **Eared Pitta**. During so a noisy barrage of calling **White-handed Gibbons** echoed forth throughout our walk, a somewhat haunting melody while birdwise two **Austen's Brown Hornbills** our reward, a male **Laced Woodpecker**, **Greater Racket-tailed Drongo** and a few **White-crested Laughingthrushes** the best of the rest.

It was only mid-morning but it was time to leave. We'd stop twice within the parks boundaries, each within a few hundred yards of one another and both productive. Each stay combined only lasted about an hour but in the process we'd see several **Van Hasselt's** and two stunning male **Crimson Sunbirds**, a **Heart-spotted Woodpecker**, a group of at least five **Dusky Broadbills**, **Two-barred Greenish Warbler**, **Blue-winged Leafbird**, **Crested Goshawk** and **Oriental Honey Buzzard**.



Van Hasselt's Sunbird



Dusky Broadbill

From then on we were bus bound, heading in a south westerly direction. A journey that would see us skirt the outer reaches of Bangkok, affording spectacular views of the metropolitan skyline, with a scheduled stop at a vast hypermarket for lunch. Pressing on we'd finally arrive at Phetchaburi at about 15:30. The fabled salt pans ignored for that would come tomorrow in favour of an outlining area of fresh water lagoons. Here encountering our most prolific raptor accumulation of the tour. **Black-eared Kites** were by far the most abundant, although with scrutiny harboured several **Brahminy Kites** and a lone **Greater Spotted Eagle** and **Eastern Marsh Harrier**. But our focus would be centred upon working the lagoons, both **Spot-billed Pelican** (two) and **Black-headed Ibis** (two) targeted and found with comparative ease. Good numbers of commoner ducks, waders and terns were present, the latter two which would be pursued and seen in far greater numbers tomorrow.

The remainder of the day would see us target the ricefields, stopping at several promising locations. At one such location recording good numbers of **Cotton Pygmy Goose**, a **Javan Pond Heron** amongst the vast numbers of **Chinese Pond Herons**, **Stork-billed Kingfisher**, two flyby **Oriental Pratincoles** but alas and somewhat surprisingly failed to encounter a **White-browed Crake**. Roadside powerlines couldn't be ignored, myna's and to a lesser extent shrikes often the usual suspects but would yield several **Blue-tailed Bee-eaters** and **Pink-necked Green-Pigeons**. Some based on Nick's comments on how numbers of **Oriental Darter** have multiplied from just a handful as recently as five years ago and with a penchant for recording counts were taken aback by the streams of them passing over, noting at least 150 going to roost.

Our day would draw to a close watching weavers go to roost, several **Streaked** and a few **Asian Golden Weavers** noted before we called time at dusk and made our way to the hotel at Phetchaburi for a well deserved shower and meal before crashing out for the night.

Day Thirteen Phetchaburi Salt Pans

Today was the day everybody had eagerly been anticipating. For many today was essentially the key reason why they had joined the tour. A day built on great expectancy of seeing amongst a hoard of wading birds the critically endangered **Spoon-billed Sandpiper**. Although a supporting cast of **Nordmann's Greenshank**, **Asian Dowitcher**, **Malaysian** and **White-faced Plovers** were also over-wintering, albeit in small numbers and high on everyone's agenda.

Our morning would start at 5:30 with breakfast and small talk expectantly centred on the day ahead. Our morning would begin at Pak Thale, each bristling with anticipation as we'd pull up and scan an area deemed a 'spoonie hotspot'. Thousands of waders littered the area, sandpipers particularly numerous although initially passed over for the desire to concentrate on small subjects. We'd scour suitable flocks back and forth and after an initial, dare I say fruitless 30 minutes, the call we'd all craved to hear. Nick had found a **Spoon-billed Sandpiper**. Although not close it was certainly identifiable and with five scopes at our disposal everybody lapped up the views, each respectfully allowing one another ample scope time. Whilst doing this Nick would change tact, working the curlew roost, in doing so quickly finding a **Far Eastern Curlew**. It was then a case of personal preference as to what to watch, some on the curlew, others with the spoonie, others keen to show a passing interest in the **Lesser** and **Greater Sandpipers**, **Red-necked** and **Long-toed Stints**, **Red-necked Phalaropes** or **Broad-billed Sandpipers**.



It had been the perfect start yet we still had a lot to cram into the day. We'd leave, for the need to do so was imperative if we were to have any chance of seeing more. With waders so spread out over mile upon mile of salt pans it might require time and effort to find other target species.

We'd make a cursory roadside stop when encountering a gathering of larger waders, a few hundred in number. **Black-tailed Godwits** were the most numerous, although **Great Knots** were easy to discern, a cursory count would suggest about one hundred present along with a single winter plumaged **Red Knot**,

although most of our attention would be drawn to the two **Nordmann's Greenshanks** found within. These the only two of the tour.

The rest of the morning was taken mainly driving around, stopping when finding good groups of waders. Nick's contacts would imply no **Asian Dowitchers** had been recorded recently yet he stubbornly refused to enter the thought none were present. Our morning would encompass dozens more stops, each fruitless in this quest yet overflowing with views of other waders, a roosting group of c190 **Terek Sandpipers** a particular highlight, another noting at least four **Oriental Pratincoles**. **Painted Storks** and six species of tern adding some degree of variety.



Oriental Pratincole

After lunch we met up with Mr Deang, hopping onto two boats for the short journey to an inaccessible spit. En-route noting at least three **Black-headed** and three **Collared Kingfishers** in the mangroves. It would take just 10 minutes to arrive, undisturbed a large gull and tern gathering drew our immediate attention, **Greater Crested Terns** easy to pick up amongst the hordes of **Common's**, **Little's** and **Caspians**, a single **Lesser Crested Tern** less so. On the beach itself several **Malaysian Plovers** were quickly located, yet **White-faced Plover** needed a little legwork but ultimately didn't take too long to track down. The short walk back to our boat would flush a dark morph **Pacific Reef Heron** and better still two rather animated **Chinese Egrets**.



Malaysian Plover



White-faced Plover

After saying our goodbye's to Mr Deang rather than reworking the saltpans we'd instead focus our attention on a less salubrious site. A scrubby area that from all appearances appeared to be a dumping ground. At first glance it showed little promise although appearances can prove deceptive, for our stay would first see us find **Indochinese Bush Lark**, next some **White-shouldered Starlings** followed by **Plain-backed Sparrows**. We'd inadvertently kick up a **Blue-breasted Quail** and upon wishing to relocate it but failing to do so flush a roosting **Indian Nightjar**.

It was then back to the saltpans. Nick felt there was another area that was worth a try, an area potentially suitable for dowitchers. At our first stop we found a single flock of c90 **Pied Avocet**, this possibly one of the larger counts ever witnessed in Thailand, while way in the distance a large gathering of **Black-tailed Godwits** could have concealed a dowitcher or two but at such a range with heat haze wasn't manageable. By absolute pure chance our next stop addressed the issue at hand. For another **Black-tailed Godwit** flock was discovered, much smaller in number but there nestled unobtrusively within them a single **Asian Dowitcher**. Nick's dogged persistance and local knowledge of the area had once again borne fruit.

None of us could have wished more from the day yet with an hour or so's daylight left we recce'd a few crake/ rail haunts. High water levels would thwart us, although to round off an amazing day flushing a pair of **Greater Painted Snipe** seemed a fitting finale.

Any wader devotee must rank Phetchaburi as one of the worlds 'must-visit' wader destinations, huge numbers over-winter across this vast area. Today we could claim to have experienced this truly magnificent spectacle, for our efforts recording forty-one different waders. WOW!

Day Fourteen Kaeng Krachan

This morning we'd leave Phetchaburi just after 6:30am, our next and final destination Kaeng Krachan. It wasn't a long drive, therefore would arrive within the hour. This is Thailand's largest National Park, given this status in 1981 and according to Nick a site he ranks much higher than Khao Yai. Tall praise indeed.

We'd begin this morning on the lower reaches, birding the roadside at a suitable, rather open area. A pair of stunning **Black-and-Red Broadbills** along with **Great and Oriental Pied Hornbills** a good introduction. Further on a second stop, also less forested added **Black-thighed Falconet**, **Grey-rumped Treewift** and **Black-headed Kingfisher**, although matters were cranked up several notches further on. For next we'd truly be forest-bound, the road just beyond the Park head office engulfing us, thick with cover and just laden with birds. We'd spend the entire morning here, covering just a fraction of the track, aways mindful of traffic ferrying campers down from the campsite. Nick's earlier prophetic comments soon became self evident. As the mornings results in recording three **Silver-breasted** and a **Black-and-Yellow Broadbill**, a party of the enormously sized **Great Slaty Woodpeckers**, at least six **Tickell's Brown Hornbills**, **Drongo Cuckoo**, an elusive **Common Green Magpie**, numerous **Sultan Tits** and **Ochraceous Bulbuls**, **Rufous-fronted Babbler** and male **Chinese Blue Flycatcher** would testify.





Silver-breasted Broadbill



Great Slaty Woodpecker



Chinese Blue Flycatcher



Tickell's Brown Hornbill

Lunch was then taken at the Sumarn Camp and from here it was a short drive to the Lung Sin waterhole. Our intention a five hour vigil, in which we'd be cooped up behind a set of blinds, the requirement to remain motionless and as quiet as possible imperative. The time would race by, protocol immaculately upheld as we'd peer out watching the coming and goings of the birdlife attracted into the waterhole just yards away. The views would be extraordinary close allowing unpresidened views of many shy forest birds, a list that would include **Large Scimitar Babbler**, **Greater and Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush**, **Racket-tailed Treepie**, **Blue-naped Monarch**, **White-bellied Erpornis**, **Brown-cheeked Fulvetta**, three **Siberian Blue**

Robins, Scaly-breasted Partridge, Hainan's Blue and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher and Abbott's and Puff-throated Babblers.



Racket-tailed Treepie



Scaly-breasted Partridge



White-bellied Erponis



Large Scimitar Babbler



Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush



Siberian Blue Robin

Day Fifteen Kaeng Krachen

Today would see our focus centred entirely on birding Kaeng Krachen NP. A day starting at dawn and continue right through to dusk. The first two and a half hours had us birding the lower sections, roadside exploration along the tarmaced road. **Sakhalin Leaf Warbler** and **Golden-crested Myna** our only new trip

additions, a calling **Lanceolated Warbler** stubbornly refused to show but would not be dwelled upon. Other noteable species recorded would entail additional observations of **Black-thighed Falconet**, **Banded Kingfisher**, **Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker**, **Hill Myna**, **Two-barred Warbler**, **Sultan Tit**, **Black-naped Oriole**, **Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Black-and-Red Broadbill**, **Vernal Hanging Parrot**, **Greater Yellownape**, **Greater Flameback**, **Blue-eared** and **Green-eared Barbets**, **Great Hornbill**, **Blue-bearded Bee-eater**, **Asian Barred Owlet** and **Crested Goshawk**. Not a bad haul.



Banded Kingfisher



Asian Barred Owlet

From mid-morning through to midday we'd work the track just past the head office as per yesterday. At times covering the same stretch of road although also casing newer territory. It would be a little harder work today, certainly fewer birds yet not without success. An **Eastern Crowned Warbler**, pair of **Banded Broadbills** and a calling **Large Woodshrike** our reward, the latter obstinately remaining high within the tallest of trees, the views less than satisfactory.



Banded Broadbill

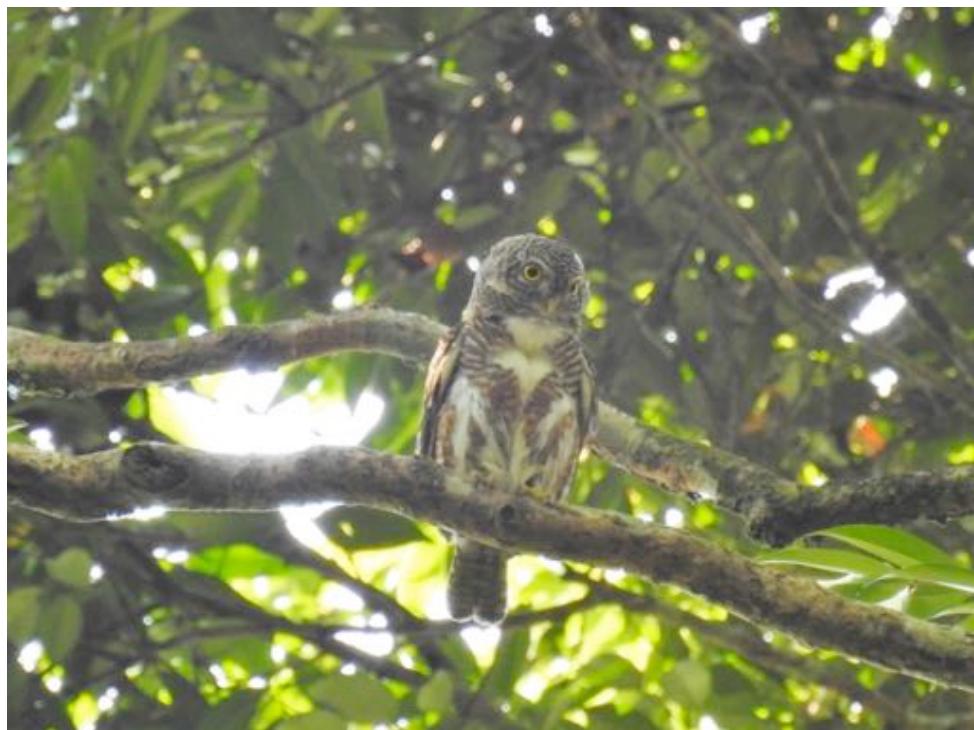


Orange-breasted Trogon



Dusky Langur

Lunch was taken at the headquarters, although a protracted affair for the vehicle booked to take us higher into the park our only means of transport to get there did a no-show. Contingency matters instigated by Nick swiftly resolved this issue and by 13:45 we were once again off, heading forth for pastures new. We'd stop short of the campsite, for good reason. News on a fruiting tree, always a magnet for birds was investigated although faired poorly. A calling **Collared Owlet** nearby had Nick hot on the scene, scaling a towering 12 foot bank and disappearing from view in search of it. We'd wait on the track, most half expecting him to return minutes later unsuccessful. To our utter amazement we could hear him call out he'd found it. Each took in turns tackling the risky incline and following his calls, covering a fair degree of terrain. Quite how he found it was astonishing, but there it was, high up still calling away and being mobbed by a **Black-throated Sunbird**.



Collared Owlet

After this precarious jaunt it was back to the track. A quick chat with a few milling around offering negative news on the elusive **Rachet-tailed Treepie**, while also learning that a **Sun Bear** had been seen and photographed earlier at the campsite today. Undeterred by the news on the treepie we wouldn't concede defeat just yet. The foliage in this section of the forest deep, dark and often impenetrable to view at times. The birding was much harder here, birds harder to come by but likewise present. **Silver-breasted Broadbills**, **Buff-breasted**, **Grey-throated** and **Collared Babblers** skulking away along with **White-browed Scimitar-Babbler**. Then another moment of pure drama. A small group of **White-crested Laughingthrushes** hurrily crossed the path in front of us. To many this would have not signalled anything yet Nick instantly became interested, very interested. He'd peer intently on where the birds had just come from, a tangle of thick cover, dark and foreboding. Experience had taunt him **Rachet-tailed Treepies** often follow laughingthrushes and his premonition was proven well founded. Calling out he'd found one had us all scurrying frantically towards him and although it remained tucked away all saw it. Sadly Scott wrestling with his conscious despite seeing it had not seen its tail felt he had untickable views. He'd take the disappointment well for finding it again or another seemed very unlikely.

The drive back down, a 55 minute journey would note male **Kalij Pheasant**, flyby **Large Hawk Cuckoo** and pair of **Wreathed Hornbills** plus **Dollarbird** and party of six-plus **Tickell's Brown Hornbills**. While our drive back to our digs afterwards seeing **Golden Jackal** and a **Large-tailed Nightjar**.

Day Sixteen Kaeng Krachen

Today would be our penultimate day of the tour and our last at Kaeng Krachen.



Large-tailed Nightjar

A perched **Large-tailed Nightjar** within the grounds of our lodgings at 6am was a nice begining to our day. Shortly thereafter we'd enter the park entrance, driving straight to the office area, here noting a perched **Crested Goshawk** and immediately switch transportation, this pre-arranged. We'd also waste no time on the incline, although would encounter two pairs of **Kalij Pheasants** on the way. The fruiting tree at K27, so poor yesterday deemed worthy of a second go today. Surely an early morning visit potentially held greater

promise. Walking the trail down towards it abruptly halted to the pleasant sight of a pair of **Grey Peacock Pheasants** scratching around the path in plain view. This had been a huge unexpected bonus, for this notoriously shy species isn't often encountered.

Once in sight of the fruiting tree it was soon apparent matters would be more favourable today. A **Mountain Imperial Pigeon** stood out like a beacon yet its smaller brethren littered the higher canopy. The views weren't ideal, dense foliage cover often thwarted us and much neck craning also didn't help. But we found that by targeting individual birds one at a time resulted in us confidently identifying **Wedge-tailed Green**, **Pin-tailed Green** and **Yellow-vented Green-Pigeon** along with a **Blue-throated Barbet**. That had been a real result. We'd come hoping to see one, maybe two but finding all three a great outcome as previous tours invariably miss the latter two. Sadly such a similar outcome would not pan out at a large stand of Bamboo. A drumming **Bamboo Woodpecker** despite continually banging away only briefly noted by both leaders before taking flight.

From here we made our way higher by vehicle, stopping just a few miles short of the campsite when hearing a **Rufous-browed Flycatcher**. It's yet another forest skulker, one that can be difficult to find and therefore on that merit alone highly prized. Would it show conveniently straight away? Of course not. It has a very unflycatcher-like trait in that it prefers dense tangle and often found just yards from the ground. A standoff ensued, we'd stand peering into a dark tangle of mass whilst the bird would call away. After a ten minute wrestling match the game was over. Movement caught our eye and despite its close proximity was easy to overlook whilst perched motionless.

Once at the campsite we'd first investigate a **Grey Nightjar** day roost. This proved fruitless so immediately changed tact and worked an area behind a cookhouse. It was yet another one of those bizarre locations, an area that seemed unpromising yet according to Nick has yielded some great birds. Unfortunately today was not one of them. Only **White-rumped Shama** and **Streaked Spiderhunter** were on offer, although a **Bar-backed Partridge** may well have been present but would not show.

The rest of the morning was slow, many choosing to just sit at an outdoor seating area watching the to-ing and fro-ing of birds coming into a small stand of trees. **Everett's White-eye** and **Cinnamon-vented Bulbul** would be new, the latter a drab bird but likewise at present a controversial hot potato. Once concidered the *cinnamomeoventris* race of Grey-eyed Bulbul many still debate its official classification.

The road up to the campsite instigates a strict oneway policy. Movement up and down denoted by the time of the day. Our next window of opportunity to leave during the afternoon wouldn't open until 16:00. Most took the opportunity to just relax, chat and enjoy the warm weather interspersed with the odd spot of birding. As the hours drifted away and 4pm beckoned it signalled time to make a move. Our journey down witnessed lots of birdlife, most fleeting glimpses although watching a **White-crested Laughingthrush** dart past us signalled time to stop, get out and investigate. Nick made a grating noise akin to that of **Ratchet-tailed Treepie** and immediately got a reply. Crikey! Much like yesterdays encounter this bird stayed well in cover, although gave clearer views. Finding it two days in a row was exceptional and within a beaming array of smiling faces one stood out a mile, Scott's. He took the disappointment with such dignity yesterday that made the sighting today all the more profound.

An additional stop would be remembered for finding a **Crimson-winged Woodpecker**. This found initially by our driver who was also an accomplished birder. This dazzling species, right on the northern limit of its range a very big surprise and the first recorded account on a Zooterra tour.

Further down rain! Not a problem if your hunkered inside the cab but not quite so pleasant if amassed in the rear. Tim, Martyn, Gordon, Scott and Lee would brave it out. Tim less so, for he being suitably prepared had packed a poncho.

Changing back to our regular mode of transport we'd make a cursory stop on the slightest off chance we could see the **Lanceolated Warbler**. It was there but sadly not seen, movement just yards in front of us noting its presence. Yet all was not in vain. The rapid onset from dusk into darkness first heralded two high-flying **Great-eared Nightjars**, fantastic birds in their own right but quickly forgotten when not one but two calling **Brown Boobooks** began to call close by. By now the light had pretty much gone yet one found and seen well by torchlight.

Day Seventeen Return to Bangkok

This was it, our final day. Would we succumb after sixteen days of non-stop birding by easing off... err NO!

Nick armed with news of **Indian Thick-knee** on the route back deemed it worth a try. Despite mile after mile of arid open dry country finding the spot in question was straightforward. A roadside marker K48 indicating we'd arrived at the necessary place. The vastness and enormity of suitable cover for the outset should have raised doubts over a quick hit and run scenario and so it proved. We'd spend 90 priceless minutes covering as much ground as possible, often the group fragmented to cover greater territory. Nick would find two although in the time taken for the group to reassemble and a search thereafter surprisingly failed to reconnect with them. Conscious of time we'd knock this on the head, for our efforts seeing **Vinous-breasted Starling**, while a few noting **Ashy Minivet** padded out with **Burmese Shrike**, **Indochinese Bushlark**, **Plaintive Cuckoo**, **Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker** and a flyby male **Pied Harrier**.

Originally our plan for this morning had been another spot of wader watching back at Pak Thale, Phetchaburi. This would not alter, although obviously our visit would now place greater time restraints upon us. Acting upon a chance conversation last night with a local guide back at the lodge we headed to the area discussed, a place where a **Milky Stork** had been seen within an assemblage of **Painted Storks**. Indeed lots of **Painted Storks** were present when we arrived at the very same location, many in full view along a raised embankment, others less so, partially hidden. An initial quick sweep of the entire group didn't bode well, although Nick had some reservation on one partially obscured bird that might just be it. Quite what happened next still baffles me, but several minutes later Ian pointed out a particularly obvious bird to the right of the group. Scopes were quickly trained on the bird and although obvious, a detailed examination was necessary to confirm whether it was a **Milky Stork**, rather than a hybrid as these look very similar and a genuine possibility. It would make the grade both sizewise and most importantly on upperwing uniformity. Even on our final day we'd pulled out another fantastic discovery, a species classified as Endangered. We had been very fortunate, especially when pointing out that 10 minutes later it took off alone and lost to view.

Our time watching waders in light of this was now taken to just scouring a handful of saltpans. In truth nothing was needed but interest was drawn by the much higher density of **Greater Sandplovers** compared to **Lessers**. Migratory birds we'd surmise, a great deal of them now showing signs of moult, the warm tones around the breast quite pronounced on some.

One site we'd neglected on our visit four days prior was an area of mangroves. This was just a few minutes drive away and home to two species that specialise in eking out an existence in this habitat. A steady onshore breeze meant birds would seek solace, remaining deeper in cover, to see them we would also need to do the very same. Luckily sandy sediment made underfoot conditions not too bad. A calling **Golden-bellied Gerygone** would be seen, a particular tardy looking individual, whilst **Mangrove Whistler** our

second target bird only noted by the leaders. The presence of a **Dusky Warbler** and **Malaysian Pied Fantail** certainly aggravated matters. Nobody seemed overly concerned by this, many perhaps more content by watching a feeding **Chinese Egret** on the mudflats.

And so that was it, the birding finished. We'd drive back to Bangkok amid heavy traffic, saying our farewells to Nick early afternoon when dropping us off at the hotel. He had been a star. Many took the afternoon to relax a little, repack and clean up and agree to meet for one final gathering over dinner that evening.

Chris and Ian had an early morning flight so would be first to leave, we'd say our goodbyes and wish them well at 9pm. Martyn, Gordon, Tim and Lee's flight would not depart until the early afternoon the following day. Another round of handshakes followed, as we'd leave Scott, for he'd have two more days in Bangkok to catch up on postcard writing and visit a few historic landmarks.

The tour had been incredible. I can't reiterate highly enough on Nick's enthusiasm and knowledge, but thanks must also be lavishly praised upon each participant. Everybody willingly played their part, everybody found a selection of good birds,

I wish you all well and thank you (Kob Khun Krup)

Lee Collins