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THAILAND

Gulf Coast, Kaeng Krachan, Khao Yai and Northern Mountains

TRIP REPORT



Spoon-billed Sandpiper is now considered to be critically endangered with only about eight individuals in Thailand during winter 2023/24 and the group enjoyed some fantastic views of a lone bird at Khok Kham salt pans © Wich'yanan Limparungpatthanakij

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Gulf Coast, Kaeng Krachan, Khao Yai and Northern Mountains

5 – 21 January 2024

Leaders: Wich'yanan Limparungpatthanakij ("Jay") and Derek Barber

Trip Report: Derek Barber (with special thanks to Kevin Bryan for the report on Reptiles and Amphibians)

Participants: Kevin Bryan, Martin Hosier, Paul Johnstone, Paul Mostyn and Anne Strahan

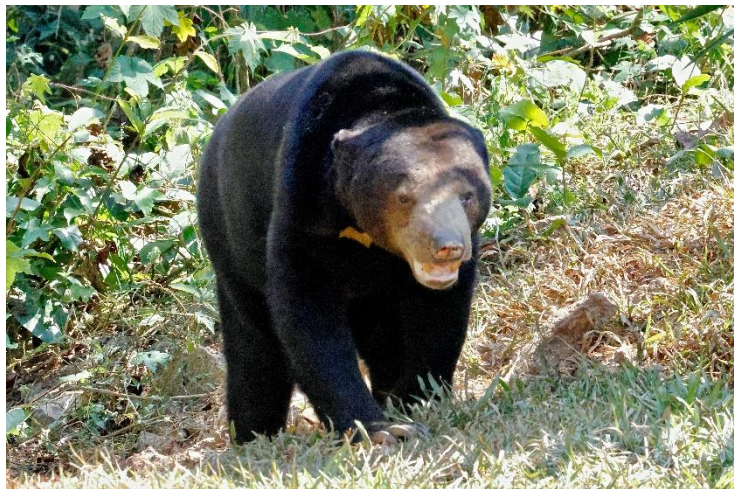
Introduction

Thailand has a mouthwatering selection of birds and mammals and this trip, with the amazing "Jay" as co-leader, did not disappoint. The country also has fantastic food, accommodation and travel infrastructure making it a delight to visit.

With the group having arrived from the UK and Australia in good time, we started the trip on a high with a short drive to the Khok Kham salt pans where we connected with a Spoon-billed Sandpiper. We then had two nights in Pak Thale to further our wader quest, which included an incredible 800+ Asian Dowitchers and 200+ Nordmann's Greenshanks, before heading west to the wonderful Kaeng Krachan National Park. Here, we covered different elevations in the park taking in various habitats, including an afternoon in one of the hides. The hides are just incredible and provided us with eyeball-to-eyeball views of some of the more difficult forest birds including Green-legged Partridge and Slaty-legged Crake. A male Sun Bear was also a major highlight.

Sun Bear was one of the mammal highlights of the tour © Martin Hosier, tour participant

After our three nights at Kaeng Krachan, we headed east to Khao Yai National Park, taking in a site for Rufous Limestone Babbler on route. Our very comfortable lodge was just outside the park entrance, allowing us easy access first thing in the morning. Again, we spent our time at different elevations



and habitats during our three-night stay, with the undoubted highlights being a flock of about 20 Long-tailed Broadbills and a male Asian Elephant.

It was then time to head back to Bangkok for our internal flight to the north of the country, which went without a hitch, even allowing us time to bird near our resort at Tha Ton in the afternoon. Here we found the rare and sought after Jerdon's Bush Chat feeding near the river. Staying in Tha Ton gives easy access to the northern mountains, and we enjoyed two full days exploring Doi Lang, Doi Ang Khang and surrounding habitats, even finding time to visit the rice paddies at Mai Ai. Highlights were many but included Mrs Hume's Pheasant, Crested Finchbill, Giant Nuthatch and Scarlet-faced Liocichla.

Our final three nights were spent at the famous Doi Inthanon National Park. Again, we birded the park at various elevations, starting in the wet forest at the top on our first morning and working our way down, ending up in the lower elevation dry forest. We enjoyed great views of Rufous-throated Partridge, Silver-eared Laughingthrush, Clicking Shrike-babbler, Slaty-bellied Tesia and Collared Falconet to name but a few.

We saw 426 species of birds and 23 species of mammals during our two weeks in Thailand and I for one can't wait to return to this wonderful country.

I would like to thank Jay for his fantastic organisational skills and knowledge of 'everything'. Jay's spotting and identification skills are just incredible and he is an absolute pleasure to work and travel with. I would also like to thank our wonderful group for their enthusiasm and also their spotting skills. We found some fantastic wildlife between us and had great fun in the process. It was so lovely to have a group of people who fully participated in the tour and I really hope I get to travel with you all again sometime in the future.

Derek Barber February 2024

Trip Diary

Saturday 6th January

After our overnight flight from Heathrow, via Abu Dhabi, the UK-based members of the group made good time in negotiating security and immigration at Bangkok International Airport and were met by Jay, our driver Erth and Paul J, who had arrived the day before from Sydney, Australia.

Jay had already shared the news by text, when we were transiting in Abu Dhabi, that we would be heading straight to Khok Kham salt pans in an attempt to find the single Spoon-billed Sandpiper present in the area this year. So that is exactly what we did, arriving at the site just over an hour and half after leaving the airport.

With the news that there were only around 8-9 'Spoonies' in Thailand this winter, we knew it would be our best chance to see this iconic species. On arrival, we headed out on to the salt pans using the bunds as footpaths. It was sunny but there was a cool breeze, so it was quite comfortable. We soon had our first Tibetan Sand Plovers, of which there were many, along with Curlew Sandpipers, Red-necked Stints and a sizeable flock of Broad-Billed

Sandpipers. There were also smaller numbers of Marsh Sandpiper, Ruff and Common Greenshank present.

Jay then told us that he had located a 'Spoonie'. We were lucky as the bird was quite close but the light wasn't great. Once everyone had seen the bird through the scopes, we repositioned and got a little closer with the sun behind us. We watched the bird happily feeding for about half an hour. Everyone was delighted and a little relieved to have seen this rare little wader. It is thought that there are approximately 800 Spoon-billed Sandpipers left in the world, but numbers may be a lot less and, with only 8-9 known to be wintering in Thailand, the future of this enigmatic little bird is not great. It was, however, an excellent start to our trip.

We headed back to the minibus and then off to some local mangroves. Access was via a boardwalk, and we managed to get good views of a couple of species which would not be seen again on the trip, namely Golden-bellied Gerygone and Mangrove Whistler. In addition, we had Malaysian Pied Fantail, a few fly-over Swinhoe's White-eye, Dusky Warbler and our first Dark-necked Tailorbirds of the trip.

Lunch was taken at a very nice local restaurant where we enjoyed our first taste of the local cuisine, after which we headed to Phraek Nam Daeng marshes. Here, we enjoyed stunning views of the normally skulking Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, plus Yellow-bellied Prinia, Black-browed Reed Warbler, Asian Golden Weaver and Chestnut Munia. We also saw a good selection of marshland birds with both species of jacana noted, Red-wattled Lapwing, Grey-headed Lapwing, a selection of the commoner Egrets, and even a White-browed Crake eventually showed to everyone in the group. A pair of Greater Painted Snipe were just fly-bys and, frustratingly, only seen by a few of us.

It had been a long day and, with all the travelling, we decided to make tracks for our resort in Phetchburi just a short distance away. Our evening meal was excellent, which would be the theme for the rest of our trip. After the log call, we retired to our very comfortable rooms in anticipation of the next day of our 'wader quest'.

Sunday 7th January

We rose to another fine day with blue skies and a light breeze, which had the added bonus of keeping the temperature down.

After breakfast in the resort, we drove the short distance to some nearby saltpans at Pak Thale. Before we arrived at the 'traditional' viewing area, however, we noted a very large roost of waders by the road and thought it would be rude not to stop and have a look. A good move indeed as almost immediately we were on to another of our main wader targets, Asian Dowitcher. It soon dawned on us that there was a large number of this rare wader. They were spread out in groups across the pans but eventually we concluded that between 800-1000 individuals were present. With the global population estimated at around 20,000, this was a significant find and the most Jay had ever seen in one location.



Part of the unprecedented wader flock which included over 800 Asian Dowitchers © Martin Hosier, tour participant

Also present was a very nice flock of 200+ Nordmann's Greenshanks, again a highly significant number bearing in the mind the global population of this rare species is estimated at approximately 2,000 individuals. With two of our 'most wanted' found, we started scanning through the flocks of waders. The sheer number of birds present was just incredible and the likes of Grey Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Great Knot and Ruddy Turnstone were soon added to our list.

It was hard to pull ourselves away from this "wader-fest" but eventually we did and headed down to Wat Khom Noran with its temple and surrounding wetland; well I say wetland, but it had pretty much dried up since Jay had last been there. Anyway, we managed to find our first and only Blue-tailed Bee-eaters of the trip, plus Oriental Skylark, a brief Zitting Cisticola and a few Temminck's Stints in a drying out ditch. We moved on just a few miles up the road to Hat Chao Samron marshes which, thankfully, were still quite wet, and soon located Yellow Bittern, our first Long-toed Stints, Garganey and really good looks at Oriental Reed Warbler.

A very enjoyable lunch was taken in a restaurant overlooking some fishponds before we headed down to Laem Pak Bia to connect with our boat trip out to the sandy peninsular at the head of the inlet. The boat ride alongside the mangrove forest produced sightings of around 100 or so roosting Lyle's Fruit Bats, both Collared and Black-capped Kingfisher and, with a dry landing thanks to our boatman, we were soon on to some fine Malaysian Plovers at the edge of the sandspit. The area is suffering from high human disturbance, mostly from motorbike users but, thankfully, today was not too bad with hardly anyone around. Soon

enough, our boatman located a single White-faced Plover running along the water's edge with Malaysian and Kentish Plovers. We had great views of this much sought after and recently described bird before we headed back to the boat and the return journey.

We had not connected with Chinese Egret on the sandspit, but our boatman tipped us off that there was one present back at Pak Thale so, once back in the minibus, we headed that way. A short walk across the saltpans followed and soon we had Chinese Egret in the bag. We also found a good number of waders including a small flock of Red-necked Phalaropes and another 4 Asian Dowitchers to add to our previous tally.

Late afternoon saw us at Laem Pak Bia Royal Project, a set of ornamental gardens and lakes near our resort. There were some very large Water Monitor Lizards present, along with a Monocled Cobra. We had good luck with a Ruddy-breasted Crake, which showed really well and, as the sun went down with the backdrop of thousands of Fruit Bats going out to feed, views of at least 10 Indian Nightjars. A fine ending to the day.

Monday 8th January

This morning was time to leave the coast and head east inland to Kaeng Krachan National Park, with stops on the way. The first of these was at the fields and rice paddies at Ban Ton Maphrao, where we soon connected with the critically endangered Yellow-breasted Bunting, one of our main goals. It was great to see upwards of 300+ birds and, with the global population of this species having thought to have fallen by over 99% since the 1980s, this is obviously a significant wintering area for this bird. It was also good to hear that the local farmers are highly protective of the species and take pride in the fact that it has chosen their farmland to use as its wintering quarters. Long may this continue.

We also saw at least two Indian Nightjars flying around, a confiding Baikal Bush Warbler and had good looks at Pied Harrier, Eastern Marsh Harrier, Great Spotted Eagle, Black-headed Ibis and Brown Shrike. It was sad to see such a drop in the population of Plain-backed Sparrow since I was last in Thailand, but the pressure from the increasing number of House Sparrows seems to be too much for them. Today, we saw just one Plain-backed Sparrow, a male, and this transpired to be the only one of the trip. Eventually, we nailed a Red-throated Pipit on the ground, having seen quite a few flying over, and we were also treated to really good views of Richard's Pipit.

It was late morning and time to move on to the next stop, a stakeout for Indian Stone Curlew. Initially, we could not locate them, although we did find a large flock of Lesser Whistling Ducks, and Martin found us our first Indochinese Bush Larks. Getting better views of the Bush Larks also produced our first Paddyfield Pipit of the trip.

Back in the bus, we repositioned and there they were, at least 15 Indian Stone Curlews spread out along the banks of the largest pond, sheltering from the midday sun under the cool of the trees. Pleased with our morning stops, we headed to our resort located just outside Kaeng Krachan National Park, where we checked in and had lunch.

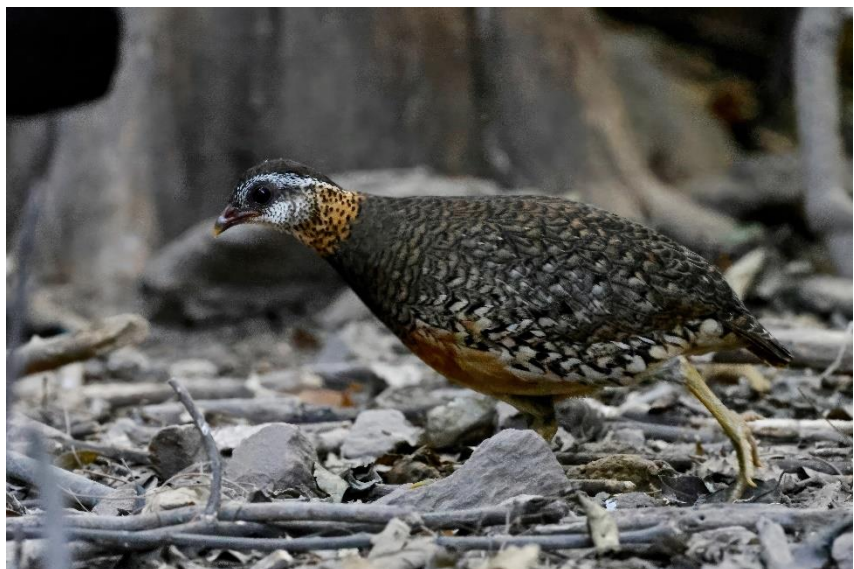


Kalij Pheasant © Martin Hosier, tour participant

In the afternoon, we headed into the park for our appointment with one of the famous bird hides. We were soon in position and the action then began. Plenty of Red Junglefowl were already present and, as things settled down, we started to get some really good birds. A male Kalij Pheasant was much appreciated, and two Green-legged Partridges were somewhat unexpected. A mixed group of Laughingthrushes was an awesome sight, with White-crested being a particular favourite, and it was a great opportunity to compare both Greater and Lesser-necklaced Laughingthrushes at such close range. White-browed Scimitar-Babbler and Puff-throated Babbler also put in an appearance. Siberian Blue Robin showed really well, along with a good selection of 'blue' flycatchers (Chinese, Hainan and Indochinese). Then everything disappeared but why?

Green-legged Partridge © Martin Hosier, tour participant

We soon got our answer when one, and then a second, Yellow-throated Marten appeared and hung around for a while.



They moved on after about fifteen minutes and it took a while for the birds to start appearing again. We thought this would put pay to any more partridge or pheasant species appearing but Paul J spotted something skulking in the dark, out to our right. It turned out to be a Slaty-legged Crake which, eventually, came in to bathe in the pool in front of the hide before skuttling off into the dark again.

It was now time for us also to leave and we had brief views of Large-tailed Nightjar on the drive back to the resort and, after dinner and the log call, there was an optional owling session which everyone joined. No owls were found but we enjoyed great looks at a White-lipped Pit Viper and a Bengal Slow Loris which was ample compensation.

Tuesday 9th January

This morning was to be an early start and, after breakfast, we were picked up in an open top jeep to take us to the upper elevation of Kaeng Krachan National Park. This was, however, not before taking a look at a couple of snake species which had been located in the grounds (Siamese Red-necked Keelback and Jodi's Pipe Snake). We made an encouraging start on the drive when, soon after we left the resort, Jay managed to spotlight a Brown Boobook sitting on a telegraph post.

The plan was to stop and bird at various locations on the way up, before reaching the upper camp and the end of the road. As it started to get light, we had amazing views of a pair of Kalij Pheasants feeding by the side of the road. Further up, we stopped at a hot-spot for Red-bearded Bee-eater, which we heard but it would not show. At this spot, we also heard a very close Grey Peacock Pheasant, Blue Pitta and Banded Kingfisher, but just a very vocal Red-throated Barbet was actually seen.

Red-headed Trogon © Martin Hosier, tour participant

Once we had made it up to the top camp just in time before the road reverted to 'down only' for the rest of the morning, we started birding. A pair of Lar Gibbons in a nearby tree were a distraction and a Greater Leafbird was a really good find which, despite doing its best to hide, did eventually show. Mountain Imperial Pigeons were seen in small numbers and both Red-headed and Orange-breasted Trogons put in an appearance.



We had a nice selection of Hornbills with Great, Wreathed and Oriental Pied all being seen well (the woosh of wing beats from the Great Hornbill being particularly evocative). We lucked in on Piculets with both Speckled and White-browed, and started to tick off a number of bulbul species for the trip seeing Ochraceous, Olive, Mountain, Black-headed, Black-crested, Stripe-throated and Flavescent.

After lunch, and back in the jeep, we slowly headed downhill with stops at regular intervals adding a number of additional species including Golden and Rufous-fronted Babblers and Hill Blue Flycatcher. Back at the Red-bearded Bee-eater site, we could still hear the bird, so tried again. This time, we enjoyed more success as the bird responded and gave great views perching above us.

Heading out of the National Park, we had much better views of around three different Large-tailed Nightjars, before arriving back at our resort in good time for a freshen up before another lovely dinner.

Wednesday 10th January

Today, we covered the mid-elevation locations within Kaeng Krachan National Park, concentrating on the tracks and trails around “middle camp” along with some roadside stops, the first of which gave us views of Black-thighed Falconet, Common Flameback and Greater Flameback. Unfortunately, a pair of Heart-spotted Woodpeckers did not linger but a Thick-billed Warbler, calling nearby, showed reasonably well.

Further up the road, at a fruiting tree, we at last saw the ‘guaranteed’ Green-eared Barbet, and a Yellow-throated Marten (our third of the trip) appeared in the road picking up fallen fruit. Just a short distance away, another fruiting tree was being attended by a large number of photographers, and little wonder why! It was attracting Great and Oriental Pied Hornbills plus a flock of about twelve rather shy Tickell’s Brown Hornbills, which kept flying in, snatching some fruit and then flying off again. We spent some time here adding Blue-winged Leafbird, Thick-billed Flowerpecker and Yellow-vented Flowerpecker to our list. A tree opposite contained a large flock of Thick-billed Green Pigeons and, amazingly, a flock of around ten rare Golden-crested Mynas.

Birds of prey had been a bit thin on the ground so far but today we saw Jerdon’s Baza, Crested Honey Buzzard, Black Eagle, Crested Goshawk and Shikra. One of the best birds of the day was a very nice male Asian Emerald Cuckoo, glinting emerald green in the morning sun. Later on, to complement this, Jay also found us a male Violet Cuckoo which also showed really well.

We had lunch at the middle camp and were told by the staff that we had just missed a Sun Bear by a couple of minutes which was very frustrating. Anyway, we had a really lovely meal and, just as we were thinking of moving on, the Sun Bear reappeared. What an amazing animal and a real bonus. We watched him for about half an hour before he disappeared back into the forest.

We now concentrated on the areas around middle camp, finding Large Woodshrike almost immediately and then Banded Broadbill and Black and Yellow Broadbill, with both showing exceptionally well. A Blyth's Paradise Flycatcher, however, played hard to get and was only seen by a few of the group.



White-fronted Scops Owl © Martin Hosier, tour participant

The afternoon trail nearby was fairly quiet (apart from another pair of Yellow-throated Martens), with the highlight being the male Violet Cuckoo mentioned before. As we got back to the main road, however, a local guide informed us that a day roosting White-fronted Scops Owl had been located a short distance away. We headed straight for the minibus and off we went. After being dropped off, we had to cross a couple of streams by foot, managing this with ease, before arriving at the location for the bird. Thankfully, a couple of birders were there to show us the exact location and there it was, a beautiful White-fronted Scops Owl. A great find by the locals and a real bonus bird for us.

It was now time to head back to the resort where, after dinner and the daily log, some of us went out for a spot of owling, with a Collared Scops Owl in the grounds being the highlight.

Thursday 11th January

Today was going to be spent mostly on the road as we had the long drive to our next destination, Khao Yai National Park. Post breakfast, we managed to get in a wander around the grounds of our resort before making tracks, during which most of the group connected with a very elusive Abbott's Babbler and our first Little Spiderhunter of the trip. A male Black-headed Oriole looked fantastic in the early morning sunshine, as did the Lineated Barbets

which, very obligingly, perched up on some telephone wires close to the resort boundary. Most of the birds this morning were 'repeats', until we crossed the road to explore some scrub and scattered forest. We were soon on to a fine Siberian Rubythroat, which perched out in the open for quite some time, and then our first Grey-breasted Prinia made an appearance. In this area, we also saw a Grey-faced Buzzard and enjoyed prolonged views of Indochinese Bushlark.

It was now time to load up and move out. We made good time around the outskirts of Bangkok and stopped for lunch in a very nice restaurant before heading for our first birding stop. There are very few endemic birds in Thailand but this afternoon we had a chance of connecting with one of them. Our destination was Wat Phra Phuttabat Wai with its fantastic Buddhist temple set amongst limestone cliffs. It was quite hot and bird activity was a little subdued but we stuck to our task, trying a couple of likely locations without success.

We decided to try some magnificent 'dragon' steps which took us up the side of the cliffs and, within a short climb, we had our quarry, a pair of Rufous Limestone Babblers. Both birds showed really well before disappearing in to a cave 'and away'.

Pleased with our efforts we headed on. Our final birding destination before heading to our nearby resort was for an evening roost of Red-breasted Parakeets at the Moo Si Sub-District Municipal Offices. Just before we arrived, it rained heavily and we thought our chances of seeing the birds would be remote, however, the rain abated and we soon had around twenty very soggy and noisy parakeets at the roost. An excellent end to the day.

Friday 12th January

The weather had cleared completely overnight and we awoke to clear skies. Our resort was located just outside the entrance to Khao Yai National Park, allowing us easy access and reducing driving time considerably. We entered the park before sunrise, with our packed breakfast, and with plenty of anticipation for the birding ahead.

At our high elevation stop, we walked a trail around the back of the food outlet area and had a well grown immature Buffy Fish Owl on the nest which, despite its size, was quite well hidden. Anne then asked us why we were not watching the adult bird perched out in the open behind us...why indeed? What a stunning bird and a great start to the day!!

A Radde's Warbler then played hard to get but most of us got some sort of view. We followed this with Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Laced Woodpecker, Common Green Magpie and a selection of minivets, green pigeons and barbets before heading to the picnic tables for breakfast.



Buff-breasted Fish Owl © © Wich'yanan Limparungpatthanakij

Next, we did a boardwalk through the high-altitude jungle, which was a little bit quiet, although the scenery was breathtaking and we did manage to call in a Banded Bay Cuckoo (at last), plus Ashy Bulbul and a few other bits and pieces. Barred Cuckoo Dove remained heard only. At the upper checkpoint, we had coffee and fantastic looks at a very tame Radde's Warbler, so different in habit to the previous one.

In the afternoon, we had a stakeout for Yellow-vented Pigeon, which was a success, and then, whilst heading to the river, we encountered a road block in the form of a large male Asian Elephant. The river walk was, again, fairly quiet but we got much better views of a Heart-spotted Woodpecker, which was much appreciated, followed by a male Banded Kingfisher which we managed to call in.

During the day, we also connected with some other 'big and hairies' in the park with both Northern Red Muntjac and Sambar Deer roaming the grounds and small troupes of Northern Pig-tailed Macaques trying to nick peoples packed lunches.

Heading back down late afternoon and the male Asian Elephant was still causing a traffic jam along the road as it searched for company. We stayed late in the park hoping that the needletails would come down to drink at a nearby lake but, alas, just a few Brown-backed Needletails flew over with no 'mass quenching' tonight. Staying on until dusk, a Great Eared Nightjar was firstly heard and then seen well in flight. Time to head back to the resort in time for a freshen up before dinner and the daily log.

Saturday 13th January

Another bright sunny morning saw us heading into Khao Yai National Park again. We had further views of Mountain Imperial Pigeon whilst we birded an open area of the park originally designated as a camping ground but now closed due to Elephant activity. We soon had one of our main targets, Cambodian Flowerpecker, a recent IOC split from Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, but Hume's White-eye took a bit of finding, eventually being located in a feeding flock of mixed species in amongst mistletoe growing in a tree by the side of the road.

We then headed off on one of the park trails, which first took us through some nice forest. Although quiet to start off with, we eventually came across a feeding flock which contained a calling Large Scimitar-Babbler. Whilst trying to locate this, a White-browed Scimitar-Babbler popped up, and then panic when a flock of twenty or so Long-tailed Broadbills appeared. At first, the flock went through so quickly that some of us failed to get on to any of the birds but, thankfully, with a bit of playback, they returned. Absolutely stunning birds and definitely a trip favourite with the group. With the understandable focus on seeing the Long-tailed Broadbills, we had lost the Large Scimitar-Babbler and, despite trying hard, we could not relocate it.

As the forest started to open out, a pair of very vocal Sultan Tits were scoped in a nearby tree, and as we entered open grassland, we found a family group of Rufescent Prinias. We also had great looks at Rufous-winged Buzzard and found a number of Red-whiskered Bulbuls, our first for the trip. Overlooking a nearby lake, Kevin thought he had seen some otters disappear around a corner. We repositioned and, sure enough, three Smooth-coated Otters came in to view, a great find indeed.

The afternoon saw us walking another short forest trail which ended at a river crossing. Here we lucked in by finding a pair of Slaty-backed Forktails downstream from our viewpoint. We then returned to try again for needletails at the lake. A sizeable flock of around one hundred Brown-backed Needletails came over but failed to come down to drink.

As we drove out of the park, it was still light and our driver, Erth, suddenly pulled over saying that he had just seen a porcupine. It would have been rude not to have a look, so we piled out of the minibus and found it feeding by the side of the road. What a great way to finish the day!!



Malayan Porcupine © Martin Hosier, tour participant

Sunday 14th January

It was time to say our goodbyes to Khao Yai and head North. Our drive to Bangkok Airport was uneventful, although we added Little Swift to the list (seen from a window as we exited Airport Security) and, after a short delay, we landed in Chaing Rai. Whilst the minibus was being loaded, we twitched Burmese Shrike in the car park, a reliable site for this species which is becoming harder to find.

The drive to Tha Ton was pretty straight forward and we had time to check in to our resort before heading out to the nearby farmland for a bit of birding. After parking up, we took a stroll amongst the fields, picking up Long-tailed Shrike, Pied Bush Chat and Black-collared Starling. A few Striated Swallows flew by and, as we approached the river, a nearby tree held a flock of Chestnut-tailed Starlings. We also had three Small Pratincoles fly over. By the riverbank, we found a Eurasian Wryneck, which popped up on a bush and, whilst scanning the riverside vegetation, an unusual looking chat was noted flycatching from the reed covered opposite bank. Close inspection revealed it to be the uncommon Jerdon's Bush Chat, a bird Jay had not seen in the area for a least a couple of years and a good find.

The sun was now starting to set and it was time to return to our resort. Tomorrow had the potential to be a big day and we needed to make an early start.

Monday 15th January

It was indeed an early start as we had to be in place at a stakeout for some 'chickens'. We drove up into the mountains on the Western slope of Doi Lang, with the anticipation and mist

rising. Arriving in good time, we positioned the van behind the photographers' hides and waited patiently. There were plenty of Olive-backed Pipits, along with a least one pair of Grey Bush Chats to keep us alert and then, as if by magic, a female Mrs Hume's Pheasant appeared, what a relief! The first female was followed by another two females.



Mrs Hume's Pheasant © Martin Hosier, tour participant

Due to the positioning of the hides, we had to move around the vehicle to get views, but we all managed it and the birds hung around for ages. A Giant Nuthatch put in an appearance as did a Hume's Treecreeper. At last, a male Mrs Hume's Pheasant showed itself, but only briefly, so not everyone got to see it.

We stayed in the bus a little while after the pheasants had moved off, until it was obvious that they were not coming back. We took a short walk to stretch our legs and then headed up to the main security control gate at the top of the pass. Jay said that this area can sometimes be a hot spot for some of the rarer mountain residents and he wasn't wrong. We soon located, and had great looks at, a pair of Crested Finchbills. This was followed by great views of Spectacled Barwing, Dark-backed Sibia and then a pair of stunning Scarlet-faced Liocichlas popped up behind us. In addition, we also added Chestnut-vented Nuthatch and Cook's Swifts.

Walking the road a little further down, we tried, but failed, to connect with Buff-throated Warbler, which was calling nearby, a theme that would continue for this species over the next few days. In the process we did manage to see Hill Prinia and White-bellied Redstart but the best bird was a Spot-breasted Parrotbill, which was initially quite elusive before popping right out in the open; a cracking bird and a firm favourite with the group. Later, a distant pair of Spot-winged Grosbeaks were discovered in an isolated tree and scoped.

In the afternoon, we birded some woodland from the road and added a good selection of flycatchers to our list including Rufous-gorgeted, Ultramarine and the 'not so easy to come by' Sapphire Flycatcher. We also lucked in on a White-spectacled Warbler which was associating with a feeding flock and gave excellent views. A rare bird in Thailand and a great addition. Later, as we drove down to exit the park, Martin spotted a small party of Mountain Bamboo Partridges by the side of the road. We stopped, reversed up and some of us got good views as they skuttled off. We tried to relocate them on foot but only a few of us saw them as they disappeared off into cover. So ended what was one of the best days of the trip.

Tuesday 16th January

Not quite so early this morning as we headed up to Doi Ang Khang and its incredible vistas, starting our birding in the campsite at the top where we picked up our first White-browed Laughingthrushes and, in a mixed species flock, Chinese Leaf Warbler and Blue-winged Minla. In the grounds of a nearby monastery, where they put out food for the birds, some of us had a very brief view of a Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush and we all had nice scope views of a male Black-breasted Thrush and a male and female Large Niltava.

A group of photographers turned up just as we were about to leave the monastery grounds and shared the news that they had just seen some good birds in a large area of blossoming cherry trees a short distance away. Acting on this information, we drove down the road and were soon enjoying a group of Brown-breasted Bulbuls and nomadic White-headed Bulbuls. Repositioning to get better views, a Grey Treepie flew over and thankfully landed in nearby trees. We were now a lot closer to the cherry trees where the birds were feeding and had much better looks at the two bulbul species. We then realised that there was also a small group of Grey-headed Parrotbills present, along with a flock of Silver-eared Mesias feeding on the blossom. With the number of good birds set against a backdrop of pink cherry flowers, it was a very memorable hour.

We lunched at a nearby formal gardens, seeing White-tailed Robin and Daurian Redstart in the grounds (although the redstart did give us the run around), then headed briefly back to the monastery where we managed to find more Black-throated Thrushes and a male Orange-bellied Leafbird. It is worth mentioning that during our time at Doi Ang Khang, we also managed to see four species of minivet in the form of Grey-chinned, Short-billed, Long-tailed and Scarlet.



Radde's Warbler © Martin Hosier, tour participant

It was now time to head back down as we had a date with some paddy fields at Mai Ai. With the sun slowly going down, we had a single Pin-tailed Snipe in flight, along with a large number of Common Snipe. A Striated Grassbird sat out on a tall bush singing its heart out and a very sneaky pair of Chestnut-capped Babblers played hard to get. We tried for Lanceolated Warbler, with some success, before it was time to make tracks and head back to our resort. After another delicious meal, we completed the log and headed back to our very comfortable rooms.

Wednesday 17th January

Today we transferred from Tha Ton to Doi Inthanon for the final leg of our trip, with a number of birding stops planned on route. We had time after breakfast for a bit of birding around the grounds of our lovely resort and, at last, added Asian Barred Owlet to the list when an adult bird flew in and showed beautifully. We also connected with White-rumped Munia and added Purple Sunbird before loading the minibus and heading off.

We made pretty good progress and arrived at our first stop, Mae Taeng Irrigation Project, in very good time. We soon found a small group of Little Ringed Plovers and Small Pratincoles around the edge of the river, and a further Pin-tailed Snipe. Also present was a very obliging perched Black Baza and a couple of flyby Wire-tailed Swallows. It was a bit worrying that we could not find our main quarry, even though the locals said that 'they had been here earlier', but eventually persistence paid off. Exploring a little further downstream paid dividends when three Long-billed Plovers were located resting on the shingle close to the river edge.

Job done, we headed back to the bus where Bobby, our driver, had set up coffee and biscuits, which was much appreciated. Whilst enjoying our coffee, we had some flyover Crested Treeswifts before heading off. Soon after leaving the site, we had a single adult Black-winged Kite hunting in nearby fields (sad to say this was the only Black-winged Kite of the trip as they are under enormous pressure from the pet trade).

Our next stop after lunch was Nong Khang Reservoir, where a flock of Spot-winged Starlings, a rare bird in Thailand, had been regularly seen feeding in a flowering tree over the past couple of weeks. Although the birds could disappear for hours at a time, we got lucky, with about a dozen individuals on show immediately, along with a good number of Chestnut-tailed Starlings. We also connected with a pair of Rosy Minivets.

Having made good time on the journey and connected with the Spot-winged Starlings so quickly, we now had a bit of spare time on our hands. So after a bit of discussion, we decided to make a short detour and pop in to Bang Hong Non-hunting Area to see the Green Peacock lek. Good choice. The birds performed perfectly and were another firm favourite for the trip.

Our last stop of the day, close to our resort at Doi Inthanon National Park, was for the roosting Blossom-headed Parakeets, which duly obliged, and Jay managed to call out a very unusually obliging Yellow-streaked Warbler.

After dinner some of the group did some night birding in the grounds of the resort and added Spotted Owlet and a Phayre's Flying Squirrel.



Green Peacock © Martin Hosier, tour participant

Thursday 18th January

An early start saw us heading up towards the misty summit of Doi Inthanon, the highest point in Thailand at just over 2,500m above sea level. Luckily, the mist started to clear in patches and, although we dipped on Speckled Wood Pigeon on the way up, we did manage to see a perched up Ashy Wood Pigeon at the top.

It was time to hit the trail and our three circuits of the high-altitude boardwalk turned up some good species. Three Rufous-throated Partridges were the undoubted highlight of the first circuit, but other gems kept popping up at regular intervals. We added Buff-banded Warbler, Ashy-throated Warbler and Blyth's Leaf Warbler to our ever-expanding warbler list. A very active Yellow-bellied Fantail was in with a feeding flock of Rufous-winged Fulvettas, Bar-throated Minlas and a single Yellow-browed Tit. We managed to find a Slaty-bellied Tesia, which was consistently calling, and had stonking views of a male Himalayan Shortwing. We also added Green-tailed Sunbird and Himalayan Bluetail but, alas, the Dark-sided Thrush, which we knew was in there, just wouldn't show.... you can't win them all!

Happy with our haul, we headed back up to the café for a much-appreciated hot chocolate, followed by a short walk which rewarded us with a pair of Silver-eared Laughingthrushes. We then had great views of a small flock of Grey-sided Thrushes, which included a single Eyebrowed Thrush in a fruiting tree next to the café. In the same area, a small feeding flock moved through and included Bar-throated Minlas and our first look at a Yellow-cheeked Tit.



Silver-eared Laughingthrush © Martin Hosier, tour participant

Our lunch stop was located by one of the many streams running through the park, where both Plumbeous Water Redstart and White-capped Redstart were seen, before we headed down to some trails at a slightly lower elevation. Although these were somewhat quiet, we did connect with a couple of bird waves which produced our first Indian White-eye, Clicking Shrike Babbler, Little Pied Flycatcher and a Golden Babbler, which quite a few of us had missed earlier at Kaeng Krachan. We 'invested' some time on a Pygmy Cupwing and, despite it getting really close at one stage, only a couple of us got tickable views.

It was now time to head back to our resort for another sumptuous dinner, followed by the checklist.

Friday 19th January

Thankfully it wasn't misty this morning so our planned revisit to the Speckled Wood Pigeon roosting site was a success with about a dozen birds present. After such a positive start, we relocated a little further down and started birding some tracks and the roadside. A male Chinese Vivid Niltava put in a brief appearance before flying off, Hill Prinia was seen again but Spot-throated Babbler stubbornly refused to show. We tried our hand at another Pygmy Cupwing with much more success than the previous day, although it was still a skulking little devil. Mountain Tailorbird also gave us a bit of a challenge but eventually we all had some sort of view.

A nearby formal park was our next stop and gave us our first Black Bulbul of the trip and a female type Slaty-backed Flycatcher. Although we heard Maroon Oriole throughout much of the morning, the closest we got to seeing one was one flying out of a tree. The same thing happened with the shy Bay Woodpecker, with just flight views obtained.



Snowy-browed Flycatcher © Martin Hosier, tour participant

After lunch, we visited a hide set up by a local farmer, where a feeding station and drinking fountains had been established. We enjoyed a fantastic couple of hours here, having great views of a number of new species and some repeats from earlier in the trip. Grey-

throated Babbler and Buff-breasted Babbler were some of the first species to put in an appearance and these were soon followed by Siberian Blue Robin, White-tailed Robin, Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, a male Snowy-browed Flycatcher and a bright male Rufous-bellied Niltava.

We also had prolonged and much better views of previously seen Little and Streaked Spiderhunters as they came in to have a drink.

White-tailed Robin © Martin Hosier, tour participant

All too soon it was time to leave for our final session of the day, which was spent at a recent roosting site for White-rumped Falcon. We were unsuccessful with the falcon but, in the nearby dry forest, did connect with a Collared Falconet and, heading back out of



the area, we saw a pair of Black-backed Forktails from the road at a river crossing.

We raised a glass to Jay this evening and celebrated what had been a most enjoyable and successful couple of weeks in his company.

Saturday 20th January

Sadly, this was to be our last day together in Thailand, but we ended the trip on a bit of a high and with some time spare before we needed to head to Chiang Mai Airport, we returned to the dry forest where we had been the previous evening. No falcon, but a fly over Shikra got the pulses racing for a second or two. A nearby tree held Golden-fronted Leafbird and a Purple Sunbird, and a couple of Blossom-headed Parakeets flew through.

In the dry forest proper, we could hear both White-bellied and Black-headed Woodpeckers but neither would respond. A Eurasian (White-faced) Jay did show, very different from our Jay and a potential split, and a fly through Red-billed Blue Magpie was a nice addition. Paul M then said he had a Black-headed Woodpecker and, with excellent directions, we all got on to the bird before it dropped out of sight.

It was now time to board our minibus and head to the airport. We made this in good time and arrived in Bangkok on our domestic flight as scheduled. Here, we said our farewells to Jay before heading for our international flights and home.