



Sunrise Birding LLC

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# THAILAND TRIP REPORT

January 2015

**Leaders: Kevin T Karlson & Nick Upton**

## Overview

This 11 day Sunrise Birding tour of Central Thailand was my second for Gina and Sunrise Birding. It was easier and more relaxed than the first (January 2013) due to my familiarity with the birds and locations, and because we only had one van, which removed a great deal of stress from the second driver not being able to keep up with Nick Upton's efficient, quick driving style.

Nick was really on his game during this tour, and his relaxed mood added to a great job of spotting, hearing and knowing the location of many target birds. He even orchestrated the trip list every night before dinner, which is usually not his preference or required duty. The trip list was completed anywhere from 15 minutes to ½ hour each night, which allowed everyone to get ample sleep for the next day's activities.

I would rate this tour very high in efficiency and success in getting virtually all the group's target birds, including very close looks at the Spoonbill Sandpiper 30 feet from the van, and without the need for a telescope! Everyone got along fairly well, which is not always the case in a long tour like this when people are grouped close together for most waking hours of the day. I think everyone had a good time overall, and the bird trip list had about 22 species more than the last tour in 2013.

A few birds were regularly seen during the tour, especially Black-crested Bulbul, Stripe-throated Bulbul, Verditer Flycatcher, Ashy Drongo, Black Drongo, Hair-crested Drongo, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Indian Roller, Asian Palm Swift, Spotted Dove, Red-collared Dove, Little Egret, Chinese Pond Heron, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Taiga Flycatcher, Blue-winged Leafbird, Ashy Woodswallow, Yellow-browed Warbler, Common Myna, and Pin-striped Tit Babbler. Chinese Pond Heron and Little Egret were so common and kept appearing in unexpected places, like watery ditches on the sides of the road in mountain habitats. Nick ignored these birds after a while, and would not call out their names, but many of us were happy to see them over and over again.

## **Day 1: Trip Start – Wat Praputtabaht Noi/ Kao Yai National Park, January 8**

After arriving in Bangkok at 11:30 PM, and then to our hotel at 1AM, I got about 3 hours sleep before joining the group of 5 participants and Nick Upton for a 5:30 AM departure from the outskirts of Bangkok. This early departure is critical for avoiding the massive traffic problems that exist in this large city of about 30 million people every day. When we stepped out the door to load the van, it was pouring rain, which baffled Nick since he said that it does not rain in January in Central Thailand. We drove through fairly heavy rain for about an hour, and then steady drizzle en route to Wat Praputtabaht Noi, a Buddhist temple grounds where the often hard to find Limestone Wren Babbler lives among the rocky limestone cliffs. A gas station stop for restrooms gave us decent looks at some of the common urban birds, including Red-collared

Dove, Zebra Dove, Common Myna, White-vented Myna, Chestnut-tailed Starling, White-shouldered Starling and Eurasian Tree Sparrow.

Getting out in light rain and wind on the temple grounds and wearing windbreakers and light coats (very unusual for Thailand), we immediately went to the base of the cliffs where Nick had recently seen the Wren Babblers. We spotted two of them right away, but a few members of the group did not see them well, so we walked the long stairs bordered by two long dragon tails. In a light rain, we viewed the often elusive species at very close range, and photos were gotten by a few participants.

After generally slow birding on the grounds, we drove out along the entrance road where we had great looks at some superb birds, including Burmese Shrike and a Plain Prinia that sat up and preened for several minutes. An unusual sighting was the Asian Koel that sat in the top of a bare tree for a few minutes preening its moist feathers, and allowing for a few photos. This species is usually heard but not easily seen, except for city parks, where it is more accustomed to people, and where brush cover is minimal. Other birds seen well included Coppersmith Barbets, Common Ioras, and Hair-crested and Ashy Drongos. Beautiful Buddhist temples and statues provided a great background for our first birding excursion.

After several hours of driving, we checked into our lodge near Kao Yai National Park. A stunning male Pied Bushchat near the entrance gave us all great looks at a bird that we would not see again, and a Paddyfield Pipit landed near the van as we unpacked our luggage. I crashed in my room for a few hours needed rest after my 29 hour travel day and 3 hours sleep while most other members of the group drove into the park for the late afternoon. I can't recount the play by play, but the group had good looks at Blue-bearded Bee-eater, a stunning male Mugimaki Flycatcher, and several extremely large Great-eared Nightjars just before dusk. A shared dinner with beer and drinks capped off a good first day, in spite of the rain, wind and unseasonably cool weather.

## **Day 2: Kao Yai National Park, January 9**

A pre-dawn journey to Kao Yai National Park found us once again with cool, overcast weather and moderate winds. Once inside the park, we saw some gorgeous Red-wattled Lapwings sitting quietly in the dawn sunlight. One of our target birds, Siamese Fireback, would not venture out into the road for us, despite other groups having seen about 5 of them only minutes before. Nick worked hard to get us on a few special birds, including Heart-spotted Woodpecker, Red-headed Trogon, Banded Kingfisher, Black-naped Oriole, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, and Verditer Flycatcher. Brown Shrike sat on the wires near our van. We heard Blue Pittas in a number of locations, and tried hard to get glimpses of one as it came closer to Nick's recording of their call, but nobody had any luck with this difficult to see bird. During the breeding season in spring, they respond readily to tapes of their call and are easily seen, but in winter they are very hard to see.

We drove to the staff housing area to get great looks at the stunning male Mugimaki Flycatcher, which was wintering in the same location where we saw it two years before, even in the exact same group of open trees! On the way into the housing area, a very large, stunning Sambar buck was casually lying by the side of the road, and resembled a statue because of its unusual location and somewhat stationary pose. Northern Pig-tailed Macaques wandered around the grounds with total disregard for the humans nearby.

Next we went to an open field to look for Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, and we saw two at a distance. Also present were close perched Ashy Wood Swallows and the ever present Barn

Swallow, which we saw in large numbers every day during the tour. Nick and I spotted the only Eurasian Kestrel of the trip, which was surprising considering its common status.

After lunch, we drove to the parking lot near the tent camping area, where we got good looks at some colorful birds in the parking area. We then made our way towards the location for the Orange-headed Thrush, which was in a ravine behind the campground bathrooms. Because of the large amounts of recent rainfall, Nick had not seen the bird recently, and he did not have much hope today.

After negotiating a steep, very muddy hill down into the ravine, we were fortunate to have a Thai photographer set up in a blind for photographing birds, and he was putting meal worms out to attract them. As is the case with Thai photographers, he graciously allowed six of us to stand behind his blind and get great looks at the Orange-headed Thrush, male Siberian Blue Robin, male Hill Blue Flycatcher, Puff-throated Babblers and White-rumped Shama. If the photographer had not been there, we probably would have missed the thrush and a few other species.

In the parking lot of the camping area, a female Blue Rock Thrush posed for a long time on the top of a pavilion. A short walk up the hill brought good looks at Red Jungle Fowl and a flock of feeding songbirds, including a male Hill Blue Flycatcher and the red-throated subspecies of Black-crested Bulbul, which is a stunning bird.

Nick identified some small leaf warblers during the day, and some of them started to make sense to the participants after seeing them several times. These small warblers in the genus *Phylloscopus* are notoriously hard to identify, but recent close observation of them by experienced birders has allowed for some confident IDs. Nick pointed out some of the defining field marks on the ones that could be positively identified. Some of these were Yellow-browed Warbler, Two-barred Warbler, and Sulphur-breasted Warbler.

Near the end of the afternoon, we walked down a very steep hill to reach a vantage point for the late day roost stopover trees for Hill Myna and Golden-crested Myna. Both species were seen here, and we also saw male and female Asian Fairy Bluebirds. We then hurried up the hill to avoid a possible encounter with the sneaky and dangerous Asian Elephant, which was known to show up at this spot in late afternoon. Other birds seen during the day included Thick-billed Green Pigeon, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, and Red-rumped Swallow

We tried again for Siamese Fireback Pheasants near the end of the day, but had no luck again. This would be a nemesis bird for us, and it eluded us several times later on as well.

### **Day 3: Kao Yai National Park, January 10**

We departed earlier today to try again for the Siamese Firebacks, and the weather was a bit clearer with light winds, but still chilly for Thailand. We heard Blue Pitta again, and saw a few good birds while waiting for the pheasants, including White-browed Scimitar Babbler, but the Firebacks eluded us once again. Next we drove up to the top of the park mountain to look for some specialty birds, and were rewarded with fine looks at Black-necklaced Laughing Thrushes, Alstrom's Warbler, a stunning White-browed Scimitar Babbler, and a very close, long look at Radde's Warbler in a small bush near the ground. A few of us saw the immense Black Eagle fly across the road, and all enjoyed extended looks at Black-winged Cuckoo Shrike, a bird that we would see in many places throughout the tour. The weather was very cold for Thailand, even in January, and the winds made it hard to see many of the expected birds at the mountain top, but everyone was happy with the great looks we had of a handful of species.

We walked down a long boardwalk in a bamboo forest just below the summit, but all it yielded was beautiful scenery from the overlook and close views of a female Red-headed Trogon. Another stop near a fruiting tree gave us good looks at Vernal Hanging Parrots, Black-naped Orioles and a few species of bulbuls. Two Rufous-bellied Eagles flew past, verified by Kevin's photos.

Another visit to the parking lot near the camping area brought good looks of some birds, including Verditer Flycatcher and Blue-eared Barbet. A special highlight of the trip was the Great Hornbill spotted coming towards us, and everyone got long looks at this huge bird in flight in the open while its wingbeats made a very loud rushing sound.

We headed back to the lodge for lunch, and some participants birded with Nick along the entrance road. Some birds seen here were Scaly-breasted Munia, Baya Weaver and Plain-backed Sparrow. We drove out in late afternoon to look at the Blossom-headed Parakeets, but the overcast sky and cool weather resulted in their absence from a reliable location where Nick had never missed them. They had gone to roost very early, or had retreated to the comfort of their nest holes and would not come out for us.

Our bad luck continued when a security guard at a usually benign checkpoint would not allow us to drive into a subdivision where tens of thousands of Wrinkle-lipped Bats exited their roost cave at dusk. Nick had never been turned away from this road, which was probably closed due to a large party going on in the subdivision, and the fact that it was a weekend night with plenty of tourists around. We drove down some sketchy roads until we found a vantage point to watch these bats exit their cave in huge swirling waves. Although not as close as we wanted to be, at least we witnessed the phenomenon. An unexpected treat was a handful of Great-eared Nightjars flying past.

While driving back to the lodge in the dark, we heard a Collared Scops Owl calling, and tried in vain to call it in. It was weird as always huddling around in the dark by our van near people's homes trying to attract an owl to our site with odd, loud sound recordings. We finished the day with a good dinner and drinks for all.

#### **Day 4: Kao Yai National Park (morning) and drive to Bangkok (afternoon), January 11**

We spent the morning birding Kao Yai National Park again, and while we saw some more special birds, Nick commented that this location has not been a reliable location this winter for birding. Birds were unusually hard to come by, and the numbers were not what they should be. I can echo his words based on our visit two years prior, but Nick said that our prior visit was not very productive either. Everyone showed a positive attitude in spite of the seemingly low bird numbers, and we were all happy to get great looks at the birds that we saw. In spite of the low bird numbers early on, our list on this trip is over 20 species higher than our tour in 2013.

Some highlights of our morning included wonderful looks at Blue-winged Leafbirds, White-throated Rock-thrush, Gray-eyed Bulbul, White-bellied Erpornis, and Pale-legged Leaf Warbler. A stop at a bridge over a river yielded good looks at White-breasted Waterhen and a few close Linneated Barbets. A nearby flowering tree was full of Crimson and Van Hasselt's Sunbirds, and both shone brightly when the sun hit them just right. At our lunch stop before leaving the park we got excellent looks at Vernal Hanging Parrots, Little Spiderhunters and White-rumped Munias.

The drive to Bangkok was wonderfully uneventful, and the traffic was a non-issue, unlike two years ago when we sat in stifling traffic for about 4 hours. Asian Openbills were seen in large numbers soaring in the sky, and Nick's story about how this bird was rare in Thailand as

recently as 25 years ago made us appreciate the huge numbers of this species seen throughout the lowland areas. Many herons and egrets were seen along the numerous waterways surrounding Bangkok and these included Great, Little and Cattle Egrets and the ever present Chinese Pond Heron. It is possible that some of these are Javan Pond Herons, which are resident around Bangkok, and resemble Chinese Pond Heron perfectly in nonbreeding plumage.

We checked into our hotel in Bangkok city, and some of us went strolling around to see the sights and sounds of this unusual city. Nick took Warren and me to the Bavarian Beer Garden for a few beers before dinner, which allowed us to see what goes on behind the scenes. After a good meal in the hotel, we all settled in early for our pre-dawn departure to Lam Pak Thale.

### **Day 5: Pak Thale and Laem Pak Bia, January 12**

A very early departure allowed us to escape from the Bangkok area without much traffic, and we arrived at the salt drying impoundments of Pak Thale just after sunrise. These drying pools and adjacent Gulf of Thailand attract possibly the largest number of shorebird species in the world in winter, and this day alone we would see 38 species (5 more species were seen the next day, for a total of 43 shorebird species for the tour)

. A very unusual weather pattern greeted us this morning, with 65 – 70 degree temperatures and winds gusting up to 30 mph. Usual conditions are temperatures in the mid-80s to 90 degrees F, with little to no wind. A normal day would find us sweating immediately, but today we had on long sleeve shirts and windbreakers.

Nick drove by numerous shallow water pools full of shorebirds, and we could see plenty of Black-winged Stilts, Wood Sandpipers and assorted other large shorebirds. His primary task at this location was to find us the disappearing Spoonbill Sandpiper, and until that occurred, all other viewing was secondary. As we pulled out into the open areas adjacent to a few shallow water pools, Nick looked at me with a hint of discouragement that suggested that it was going to be difficult to find the bird in this high wind, since shorebirds are very jumpy in windy conditions and seek shelter in protected areas.

Just then I looked out his side window at several birds that were feeding close to the van and thought I was imagining the Spoonbill Sandpiper feeding very close to us alongside a single Red-necked Stint. After regaining my senses, I quietly said to the group “the Spoonbill Sandpiper is very close on the right side of the van. Don’t point or shout, but get on the bird right away!” We all enjoyed close looks at the bird with only binoculars needed for about 20 seconds before it flew about 100 feet away. After a minute or so, it flew back towards us and started feeding about 50 feet away with a Kentish Plover and Red-necked Stint.

I turned to the group and asked them if this bird was the main reason that they came on this trip, and everyone said emphatically that it was. Moments like this don’t come along every day in the birding world, so we basked in the glow of success for several minutes before Nick spotted the first-winter Red Phalarope that had been found several weeks prior. This was only the second record of this species for Thailand, and we enjoyed it as icing on the cake of the Spoonbill Sandpiper. A nonbreeding Red-necked Phalarope was also seen a few minutes later.

The winds and chilly conditions continued through the morning, which made it difficult to look through our scopes at distant birds. We enjoyed a small flock of Painted Storks flying close by, and carefully identified some of the more common shorebirds for the group in side by side comparison, which is the best way to really learn what these winter plumaged birds truly look like. Lesser and Greater Sand-Plovers were compared to each other, and the many Curlew

Sandpipers were viewed adjacent to the slightly smaller Broad-billed Sandpipers. Red-necked Stints were numerous, but nowhere near the numbers from two years ago due to the strong winds. Great Knots were seen close by, but Red Knots were hard to come by today, with only a few birds spotted along the main road - quite a difference to the hundreds of Red Knots seen two years ago.

Spotted Redshanks were seen in moderate numbers, as were Common Greenshanks. Nick spotted Greater and Lesser-crested Terns sitting near each other at a distance, and a Chinese Egret feeding close to the group was a nice surprise. I spotted a very small Dunlin feeding with numbers of Broad-billed Sandpipers, and it was possibly one of the small races from Greenland or England. I got some good photos and will work on its origin, since Dunlin is a relatively rare bird in Thailand.

We then drove out to the main road, where we spotted a large flock of resting curlews. Most were Eurasian Curlews, but Nick picked out a few Eastern Curlews in the flock by their heavy markings on the underparts. We ate lunch in a wonderful local hole in the wall, and sampled some of the real Thai food in the form of Thai fried rice. We got incredible close looks along the road of Pacific Golden-Plover, Wood Sandpiper, Long-toed Stint and Temminck's Stint, and then explored a few impoundments where we saw numbers of Common Redshanks, a few Spotted Redshanks, and a number of Ruffs. Feeding alongside the pools were large numbers of White-winged Terns, which we only saw a couple of two years ago.

After driving around more impoundment pools, we were treated to a quick look at a Brahminy Starling, which is a rare bird in Thailand. We also got close looks at Richard's Pipit and a full breeding plumage male Curlew Sandpiper, which was a surprise in January. A couple of Green Bee-eaters posed close to the van, and a flock of Asian Pied Starlings bathed in a nearby pool, along with a few White-shouldered Starlings.

After finding a flock of almost 100 Pied Avocets, Nick took us to a wet field where he walked among the tussocks to flush a few snipe. We all saw Pintail and Common Snipe flush and fly right in front of us, and then Kevin's only new shorebird for the trip, a Greater Painted Snipe, flushed from the grass and gave us an extended view in flight. Other special birds seen today included Paddyfield Pipit, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Zitting's Cisticola, and Oriental Reed Warbler. It was an amazing day that including many fabulous birds, of which most participants got great looks at.

#### **Day 6: Rice Fields and Laem Pak Bia, January 13**

After an early breakfast at the hotel, we drove out to some nearby rice fields to look for birds. We got great looks at Scaly-breasted and Chestnut Munias, and saw a large flock of Baya Weavers that also included Streaked Weaver and Asian Golden Weaver. A small number of Little Grebes were seen in the shallow water of a flooded rice field ditch, and a Thick-billed Warbler was seen for several minutes at close range by everyone. Yellow-bellied Prinia gave us all good looks, and Oriental Magpie Robin was also seen.

A stop at a nearby pond yielded a large number of Cotton Pygmy-geese and a few Garganey that swam out of view quickly. Sitting on a wire by the pond was a beautiful Yellow-vented Bulbul as well a gorgeous Long-tailed Shrike. Several Black Bazas flew by at fairly close range, giving everyone good looks. Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged Jacanas were also seen here.

We took a few participants back to the hotel for a late morning rest, but the rest of us went to a large lake to look for waterfowl. Distant views gave us large numbers of Northern Pintails,

Lesser Whistling-ducks (difficult distant scope views), and small numbers of Garganey and Eurasian Widgeon.

A short drive to some more agricultural fields gave us decent looks at Oriental Honey Buzzard and a Greater Spotted Eagle that perched in a distant tree. A fly-by dark morph Booted Eagle was also seen.

After lunch, we drove to a coastal lagoon where we boarded two narrow boats for a trip to the sand spit. With the winds finally subsiding a bit, the choppy waves were not as bad as they could have been, and we made it to the sand spit in the Gulf of Thailand in about ten minutes. Roosting on the exposed mud were hundreds of Great Knots, with smaller numbers of Kentish Plovers and Greater and Lesser Sand-Plovers. We made a wet landing and proceeded towards the beach where the White-faced Plovers are usually found. Suddenly the local guide spotted a large bird flying towards shore, and Kevin immediately identified it as a juvenile/1<sup>st</sup> winter Lesser Frigatebird due to a cinnamon wash to its upper breast. This was truly a special surprise for the tour.

After a short walk to the exposed beach, we all got great looks at a handful of Malaysian Plovers and at least two White-faced Plovers (male and female). These birds are currently grouped with Kentish Plovers, but it seems that they should be listed as a separate species, with physical features and behavior very different from both Malaysian and Kentish Plovers. Another Chinese Egret was seen fishing in a shallow pool, and numerous Brown-headed Gulls were seen roosting on the sand, along with Common Tern, Little Tern, and a few Pallas's Gulls.

After the boat trip, we stopped at the same wet fields that yielded the snipes on the previous day, and Nick played a tape of a Eurasian Wryneck, which flew in and perched for good looks by all. We then walked out to the road and saw an Indochinese Bushlark at very close range (a few feet for some) that responded to its taped call.

We ended the day at a water treatment facility run by the government, and this location had a large number of birds present. Dozens of White-winged Terns were mixed in with some Brown-headed Gulls, and we spotted a few Black-headed Gulls as well. A few Ruddy-breasted Crakes were seen before dark, and then an amazing flight of Lyle's Flying Fox (very large bats) occurred just after sunset. Thousands of these huge fruit bats flew over our heads and in the distance as they made their way to nearby feeding areas. A long but rewarding day ended with a great meal at our hotel.

#### **Day 7: Khao Luk Chang; Kaeng Krachan National Park; Lung Sin Hide, January 14**

We departed before dawn for the dry forest habitat of Khao Luk Chang to look for Black-headed Woodpecker and other birds are found in this area. Woodpeckers are never easy to locate, and we missed these birds two years ago. With the ground cover of dry leaves, it was hard to stay quiet during our walk, but this group was especially quiet and we saw a number of sought after birds. A few Eurasian Hoopoes perched near the top of a tall dead tree, and a Rufescent Prinia and Common Tailorbird were seen well foraging near the ground. Nick's sharp eyes picked out a Spotted Owlet sitting among heavy tree cover, but everyone saw this lovely small owl in close scope views. A Red-breasted Parakeet gave us good looks sitting in the top of a tree.

After seeing yet another Green-billed Malkoha, which does an amazing job at not showing its entire very large body and tail while foraging in light leaf cover, Nick heard the Black-headed Woodpecker respond to his taped call. We were treated to great looks of both the male and female in the scope, and a few of us got decent photos. We then visited a shallow marsh habitat surrounded by woodlands, and saw a number of nice birds. Common, Pied and White-throated

Kingfishers were seen here, as well as very special views of Forest Wagtail and Gray Wagtail. Nick found a full breeding plumaged Little Ringed Plover, which has a small resident population in Thailand, and a beautiful Racket-tailed Treepie sat in the open for all to enjoy. As we left, a small flock of Greater Necklaced Laughing Thrushes noisily moved through a dense bush.

We drove to our beautiful lodge near Kang Krachan National Park after stopping at the Visitor Center to watch dozens of birds feeding in a fruiting tree. It was hard to get glimpses of the birds in the tree due to the heavy leaf cover, but some were seen sitting nearby after grabbing a small fruit. A few Coppersmith Barbets called from the garden, and a Pied Fantail performed for our group on the open lawn near the parking area. During lunch at our lodge, Gun, the owner, told Nick that we had to visit the bird blind (hide) that afternoon due to schedule conflicts during our four day stay here. With temperatures below normal, and after fairly heavy rain in the days preceding our visit, Nick was not sure that birds would be coming into the water feature in front of the blinds. However, this was our time, so off we went.

We were to sit in our small blinds for almost four hours, which would be a new experience for several of our participants. As a photographer, I often sit in blinds for extended periods, but it is an exercise in patience that is often rewarded with special sightings not possible otherwise. Nick demanded full silence, since many of the birds coming to the water feature were very secretive and would react to any abnormal noise. The group behaved in an excellent fashion, especially during the first hour and a half when almost no birds came to the water feature. I was especially nervous about our visit to the blinds after the slow start since two years ago we had constant bird activity from the moment we entered. This was due to the hot, dry conditions and lack of wind back then, which was not the case today.

After almost two hours, birds started to appear at the water feature. From the beginning, the ubiquitous Black-crested Bulbuls were present in numbers, as were a few Black-headed and stunning Stripe-throated Bulbuls. A surprise for Nick and everyone else was the female Blue-winged Leafbird that briefly came in early on. Brown-cheeked Fulvettas were also present for most of our visit. A few of us saw a sneaky large bird moving in the distance, and later all of us were treated to very close views of male and female Kalij Pheasants.

As activity started to pick up around 3:30 pm, Black-naped Monarchs, Gray-eyed Bulbul and Pin-striped Tit Babblers came in and out of the area in front of the blind. Someone whispered that a snake was in view, and Warren quietly said that it did not have a viper's head shape, so I did not look for it. Those lucky enough to locate the snake were treated to views of a very large King Cobra, which proceeded to slip across the opening and up a nearby tree. Since Judy was especially afraid of snakes, it is a good thing that we did not see this poisonous snake from where we were sitting.

A few tiny Lesser Mouse Deer nervously came in for a drink. These tiny creatures are the smallest members of the animal family that includes pigs, hippos, camels, deer, antelopes, sheep and goats. Adults are 45 to 55 centimeters long (18 to 22 inches) and can live for about 12 years. After a close visit by a male and female Kalij Pheasant, our luck started with an appearance from a Large Scimitar Babbler, who uncharacteristically came to the water feature three times. They usually dart in for a drink and quickly disappear.

Soon after, around 4:30 pm, a group of gregarious Lesser Necklaced Laughing Thrushes appeared, and proceeded to curiously explore every inch of the feeding space in front of the blinds. Later a group of Greater Necklaced Laughing Thrushes would come by and treat us with fabulous close looks. These birds are like a pack of impish jays or magpies, and they move and

forage like a band of mischievous teenagers. I picked these birds as my favorite birds of the trip, not because they are rare, but because of their personalities and entertaining behavior.

Things were now going hot and heavy, and a few Bar-backed Partridge moved in to scrape away at the soil around the water feature. A bit shy were the Scaly-breasted Partridges, but a few came into view after a while. A Greater Racket-tailed Drongo appeared just before 5 pm, followed by a stunning male Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. Abbott's Babbler came in for a quick drink just after 5 pm, followed by a stunning male Chinese Blue Flycatcher, which is a recent split from Blue-throated Flycatcher (*C.r glaucicomans*). A very large Racket-tailed Treepie came in briefly afterwards, followed by a male Siberian Blue Robin at 5:38 pm. The EXIF data from my digital photos allows me to give a play by play with time to the blind activity.

As the day wound down, a female Blue-throated Flycatcher came in briefly at 5:42 pm, followed by some late Greater-necklaced Laughing Thrushes. The experience we had in the blinds was unforgettable, with great looks at many birds that are difficult, if not impossible, to see in the forest.

### **Days 8, 9, 10, 11 – Kang Krachan National Park, January 15 – 18**

We spent the next four days exploring various habitats and elevations of Kang Krachan National Park, and the birding here was much more productive than Kao Yai. There are many highlights from these days in the park, so I will give a few of the more memorable experiences before listing some of the very special birds that we saw.

The first morning in beautiful light gave us a tree full of feeding Black-crested and Black-headed Bulbuls, as well as numbers of Green-eared Barbets. Several Wedge-tailed Green Pigeons perched up in full view, and the first of many stunning large Sultan Tits were seen well by everyone. A few tiny Black-thighed Falconets were spotted perched nearby, and we were all treated to a close soaring Crested Serpent Eagle. A tiny Gray-capped Woodpecker appeared briefly, and Great loras were seen along with Swinhoe's Minivet. A tree full of Gray-rumped Tree Swifts came next along the road, followed by good looks by some of an Eastern Crowned Warbler. We all then watched a Blue-eared Barbet excavating a nest hole near the check station.

Lunch at the lodge brought an Oriental Pied Hornbill to a tree right next to the dinner table, as it was looking for a wild banana meal from the feeding station nearby. Our afternoon excursion into the park brought good looks at a pale morph perched Oriental Honey Buzzard, followed by a great job of driving up the pot-holed roads to the top of the park by Nick. Near the overlook at the top of the mountain we had great close looks at Mountain and Flavescent Bulbuls, and a Streaked Spiderhunter feeding on some wild bananas right in front of us. A Little Cuckoo Dove was spotted feeding at a distance, but we got good close looks at this special bird later on.

Blue-throated Barbets were seen foraging in a nearby tree, and a Gray-backed Shrike was seen sitting on a wire. On the way down the hill, we saw a Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo with its odd-shaped head, and Bronzed and Ashy Drongos. As dusk approached, we saw close Black-thighed Falconets again, and during our drive back to the lodge in the dark, we had great looks and plenty of photo opportunities of a Large-tailed Nightjar perched on a post next to the road. We illuminated the bird with Nick's flashlight, and photos were taken by several people.

During our visits to the park, we saw a number of woodpeckers very well, including Greater Yellownape, Lesser Yellownape, Common Flameback, Greater Flameback, Gray-capped and a quick flyby look at a pair of the largest woodpeckers in the world, Great Slaty Woodpecker. We also had great looks at Asian Barred Owl and Brown Hawk Owl, which ended our day on

January 17 with a close encounter, including a few photos. Broadbills were hard to come by this trip, but we got good looks at Black-and Yellow Broadbill and Dusky Broadbill. We fared well with piculets, and saw both Speckled and White-browed well, and the Velvet-fronted Nuthatch gave us wonderful looks as it crept back and forth along limbs. The van finally got decent looks at a very large Greater Coucal that flushed from the grass at the side of the road as we drove by.

Some of the high elevation highlights included short but decent looks at the very rare Ratchet-tailed Treepie as it followed a flock of feeding birds that included numbers of White-hooded Babblers (formerly Collared Babbler) and a few White-browed Scimitar Babblers. The Treepie was frustratingly hard to get good looks at as it moved from branch to branch just as we got our binoculars focused on it. Once it sat for about 5 seconds and allowed our group decent views.

Besides the mammals and other creatures mentioned, we got decent looks at some Golden Jackals stalking a group of Stump-tailed Macaques, and Nick and I had a surreal experience from the front seat of the van when we saw an Asian Sun Bear standing upright next to a pole alongside the road on our last afternoon in Kang Krachan. I tried to get a photo of this hard to see creature, but my fancy camera's autofocus would not attain a focus point from the solid black back that I was pointing at. We saw an assortment of Macaques, gibbons, squirrels, Javan Mongoose, and a Porcupine couple with a small baby in tow.

## **Summary**

In summary, I have almost written a book about our trip, and it took me about 5 days to complete the memories with the digital photos that I took to recreate the experience of the tour. I did not keep notes during the tour, as it was exhausting at the end of the day after birding most of the day and eating somewhat late. However, writing this report brought back some of the fabulous experiences that we had on the tour for me, and allowed me to study my photos to verify the ID of some birds. In my opinion, this tour was a complete success in the number of birds that we saw, but more importantly, with the great looks we had of some very special birds. I personally don't keep a bird list anymore, but I cherish the visual memories that I have of satisfying looks at the birds that I do see.

Nick Upton did a superb job organizing the tour schedule and keeping us in line, both in proper birding behavior and with a fine tuned timing scheme. He also did a stellar job locating and identifying birds for us, and making sure that we all got on the birds. You rocked on this tour, Nick.

I want to thank all the participants for their patience and good behavior, with only a few uneven words exchanged between members of the group. When strangers and casual friends get together for 11 days of full time company, it is inevitable that some personality conflicts will occur, but these were at a minimum on this tour, and I want to thank all of you for that. I will process some of my favorite photos from the tour soon and send them to Gina and all the participants as low res jpegs. Looking back on this tour, I feel that not only did I see a lot of great birds, but I got to experience a wonderful country in Thailand again, and I have a boatload of great memories and visual impressions from the tour. Thanks Nick, Judy, Jonni, Sonya, Skip and Warren. It was a blast!

I asked the group what their favorite bird of the trip was, and the response was as follows:

Jonni – Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker

Sonya – Spoonbill Sandpiper

Judy – Malaysian Plover

Skip – Ratchet-tailed Treepie

Warren – Spoonbill Sandpiper

Kevin – Greater and Lesser Necklaced Laughing Thrush

Nick – Eurasian Wryneck

Thanks for the memories everyone!

Kevin T. Karlson  
January 2015