

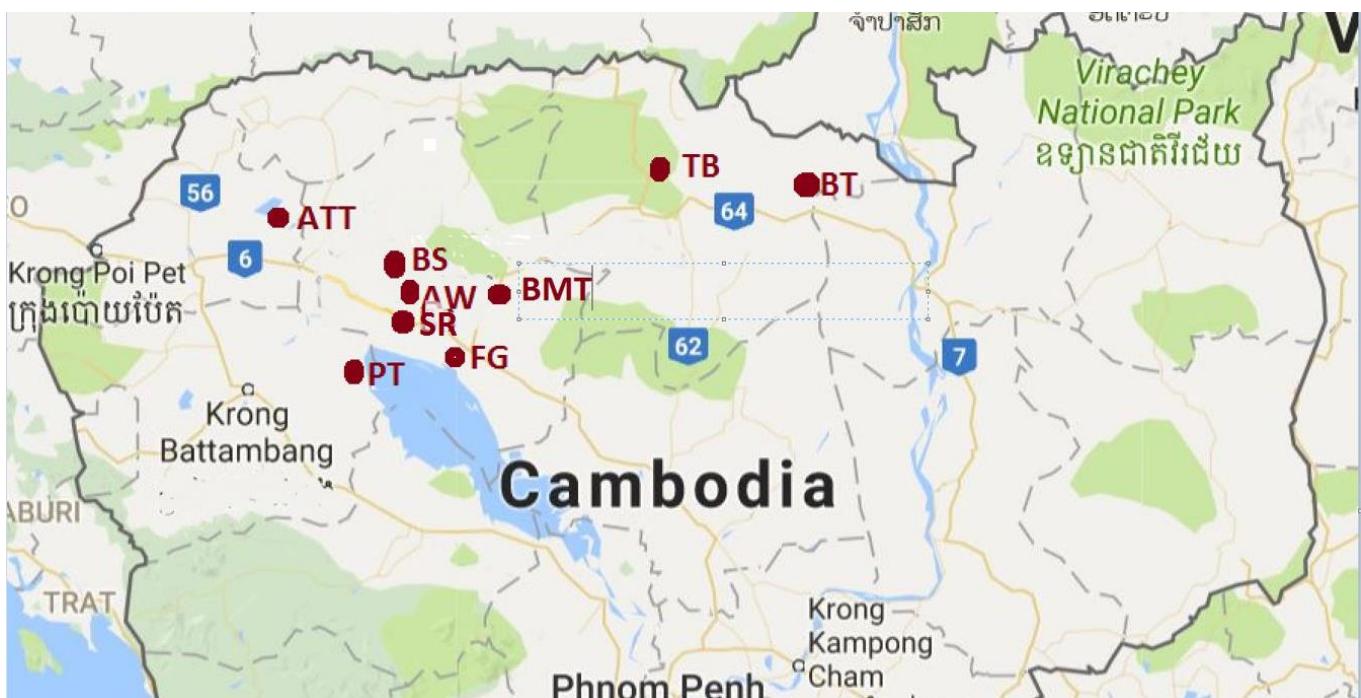
Cambodian Trip Report 1 to 6 December 2016

Peter and Robin Marsh

We spent 6 days birding and (to a lesser extent) visiting temples in the general vicinity of Siem Reap, Cambodia on a private trip organised through the Sam Veasna Centre (SVC).. We were accompanied by a guide, Mardy Sean, from the SVC and a driver, Mr Da, in a well presented 4X4.

Our program

Thursday, 1 December	a.m. trip to Prek Toal (PT); then transfer to Tmatboey (TB). Stay Tmatboey eco-lodge.
Friday, 2 December	Full day Tmatboey. Stay Tmatboey.
Saturday, 3 December	a.m. Tmatboey; p.m. transfer to Boeng Toal (BT). Stay Boeng Toal safari style tent.
Sunday, 4 December	a.m. Boeng Toal Vulture Restaurant and Beng Mealea Temple (BMT); p.m. Prohoot (Florican) Grassland (FG). Stay Siem Reap (SR).
Monday, 5 December	a.m. Ang Trapaeng Thmor (ATT); p.m. Angkor Wat (AW). Stay Siem Reap.
Tuesday, 6 December	a.m. Banteay Srey (BS).



Sites

Prek Toal

We left the hotel in Siem Reap at 3:45 and drove to a small harbour on the edge of the Tonle Sap, a very large lake with a most unusual ecology due to annual inundation through inflow of water from the Mekong River in the wet season. A quite large launch transferred us through a narrow channel between dense reed beds and then across the Tonle Sap to the floating village of Prek Toal. Here we transferred to a much smaller boat and ventured with a ranger, our guide

Mardy and a boatman into the Core Prek Toal Area of the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve. The area was completely under water with bushy vegetation poking out of the water between the well-spaced large trees. There are a number of platforms built in trees around the core area where rangers stay for a week at a time to protect the wildlife. This protection seems to be taken seriously judging by the sub-machine gun propped up in the corner of one of the platforms we visited!

The Tonle Sap and the Core Area were both alive with birds. Thousands of Darters, Egrets and Cormorants; swirling clouds of Whiskered Terns; and many Grey-headed



Greater Adjutant

Fish-eagles were a feast for the eyes. The big targets for this area, in the right season are Greater Adjutant and Milky Stork. There was far too much water for the storks to be attracted to the area, a fact attested to by the fact that we saw only one Painted Stork. The Adjutants however roost, and nest, in the larger trees and therefore were more likely. These birds had been seen recently from one of the platforms so we headed there and scanned with the scope provided by SVC. There were a couple of possibles but both were so far away that we were not confident enough to tick them. We had started back rather disappointed when Mardy pointed to one Greater Adjutant circling overhead showing the characteristic white upper wing patch. In the next 10 minutes or so we had 8 birds circling above us, some quite close so that the red neck and large pouch could be seen with the naked eye.



Platform tree in Prek Toal Core Area woodland

After our first delicious Cambodian lunch at a restaurant in the floating village we retraced our steps across the Tonle Sap and into the harbour on the Siem Reap side. Mr Da then drove us efficiently for around 4 hours to Tmatboey.

Tmatboey

Arriving in the vicinity of Tmatboey with about half an hour of light was perfect for a search for White-shouldered Ibis coming back into their roost trees. After a 5 minute walk off the main road we saw our first Ibis gliding towards the top of a leafed tree where it alighted in the crown. While the shoulder patch was visible in the flying bird the characteristic white neck bar was clearly visible in the perched bird. As the sun set another 25 or so Ibis arrived, many alighting in the leafed tree before moving in groups into a bare dead tree which was their preferred overnighting roost according to our local guide from Tmatboey village who had met us on site.



White-shouldered Ibis

After this wonderful viewing of the first of the Tmatboey target ibis species we were taken to the Eco-lodge set up by SVC and run by the local villagers who staff the lodge and cook the food in addition to providing the local guiding. The local villages thus earn money from those viewing the birds in their area in return for protecting the birds. This is a key component of the SVC strategy, and gives the locals a very good reason to protect the local wildlife. The villages, in our experience, do a very good job of it. The guides certainly knew the best areas for the key birds and the lodge was well run and the food delicious. The Lodge has space for 8 guests in cabins with en-suite facilities. There is a large eating area and solar power provides electricity sufficient to give lighting, fans in the rooms and charging for phones, cameras etc.



Cabins at Tmatboey Eco-lodge

At 5:00 the following morning we set off in pursuit of the Giant Ibis, the second of the key ibis species from this area. It is essential that one is in position close to the roost trees well before

daylight as the birds are very shy and will fly before full light if disturbed. Once in the general area of the roost trees the local guides cast around in the pitch dark seeking the trees in which the birds had that night chosen to roost. How they do this I have no idea but after drawing a blank at the first site we walked on for 10 or 15 minutes and heard a couple of the ibis give a loud bugling call which helped guide us. Eventually it was decreed that we were in the right place and Mardy somehow in the pitch blackness of the pre-dawn night got the scope pointing at the roosting birds, so he said – and so it proved to be! As the sky lightened we could see movement in the uppermost branches of a very large dipterocarp tree in front of us. As the movement continued and the light increased we could discern a long ibis like bill on a very large bird, and then a second bird nearby. They called and were answered by at least 4 other birds. The 2 birds in view moved together and engaged in mutual preening before copulating and giving a series of further calls.



Giant Ibis in early morning light

By now it was quite light and we were enjoying superb scope views of the birds. Mardy commented that they usually moved from the roost tree earlier than this but had possibly dallied in post-copulatory bliss! As the light increased we enjoyed a wonderful dawn chorus of other birds and we could now see them well. A tree full of Blossom-headed Parakeets, 3 Great Slaty Woodpeckers flying through and landing in a distant tree and a Burmese Shrike perched on a bare twig. We breakfasted in the field wolfing down a delicious omelette as a Common Flameback danced around the trunk of a nearby tree. A pair of Rufous-winged Buzzards showed nicely as did a Chestnut-capped babbler after some initial shyness kept it in the middle of a shrub.

After a break and lunch at the lodge we birded an area of rice fields interspersed with stands of woodland. Hidden in the branches of one of these woodland stands was a magnificent Spotted Wood Owl, found only because of the sharp eyes of Mardy. The dark chocolate breasted Burmese Nuthatch was seen on a tree in another rice field area.



Spotted Wood Owl

The following day our primary target was the White-rumped Pygmy-falcon. Quite quickly 3 of the falcons were seen in a distant tree. Miraculously, no sooner had we noticed them than they flew into a much nearer tree and provided superb views of 2 males and a female. We stopped nearby for another field breakfast and one of the local guides flushed a Brown Wood Owl which flew into thick vegetation. We were able to find it again after some searching and got slightly obscured scope views.

A final lunch at the lodge and we were off for a 45 minute drive to Boeng Toal and its "Vulture Restaurant".

Boeng Toal

Set deep in the Preah Vihear Protected Forest Boeng Toal is a tented camp with good communal facilities including a cold shower and a European style toilet. Beds are camp stretchers each provided with its own mosquito net. Meals are again cooked by local villagers trained by SVC and are eaten at a large table protected by a canopy. Again the meals we had were delicious Cambodian dishes followed by fruit.

Due to habitat change and prior hunting the mammals that used to be present in this part of Asia have vanished depriving the vultures of their former food source. In order to provide food for vultures SVC pays the villagers to slaughter cows on the 10th and 20th of each month and additionally when birdwatching groups are coming to the camp. The fee we had paid to SVC included the cost of having a cow slaughtered at 9:00 am on the day of our arrival. Typically, the vultures will gather in the trees surrounding the clearing where the carcass lies during the day and descend to it in the late afternoon. The vultures are unable to penetrate the skin of the animal so the initial afternoon does not see much of the animal consumed. During the night, after the vultures have departed, the villagers cut the skin of the carcass to allow the vultures to attack the flesh. The birds will typically descend onto the carcass again a bit after sunrise and stay until it is fully consumed. There is a very well constructed hide adjacent to the place where the cow is slaughtered which provides a comfortable and hidden place from which to watch the proceedings. One must enter the hide either while the birds are already feeding or under the cover of darkness. Entry in daylight while the birds are perched in trees around the site is likely to put them off landing for days.



Peter in the Boeng Toal Camp

Driving into the camp mid-afternoon we passed a small wetland area and spooked a Lesser Adjutant Once in the camp we were told that there were 8 vultures perched around the Vulture Restaurant site which is about 1 Km from the camp. We did a forest walk initially in the hope that the birds would descend onto the carcass. Unfortunately, they did not do so and we put off visiting the site until the following day. In the morning we left the camp pre-dawn and walked to

the hide. As the light rose we could see 5 White-rumped Vultures and 3 Red-headed Vultures roosted in the trees surrounding a large clearing behind the carcass. There was a bit of shuffling of individual birds before sun rise and the birds grouped together in a single tree some time after the sun had risen. A couple of Eastern Jungle Crows dropped onto the carcass and had a peck around but even this did not entice the vultures down. We waited for 2 hours after sun rise but the vultures showed no sign of descending onto the carcass. Mardy was very surprised by this as well as by the small number of vultures gathered around the site. The last regular feeding event had attracted over 30 vultures and the flock had included Slender-billed Vultures which we did not see. There are a number of Vulture feeding stations run by other organisations in the northern forests of Cambodia and it is possible the birds had eaten recently at one of those. It was a somewhat disappointing outcome but natural variability is what birding is all about!

Given that we would not be detained by the vultures engaging in a feeding frenzy, we left the camp early and drove 3 hours to a site that Mardy added into the itinerary, Beng Mealea Temple.

Beng Mealea Temple

This largely unrestored temple site has a lot of large evergreen trees in its grounds. Here we saw Hainan Blue Flycatcher, Asian Barred Owlet and Two-barred Warbler. We then drove 45 minutes to the Florican Grasslands south of Siem Reap.

Prohoot (Florican) Grassland

We were met by the local guides at the Florican Grasslands and they lead us through rice fields to an isolated small hillock. As we arrived a male Pied Harrier floated across the rice fields in close proximity to us. We waited on the hillock while the guides walked through further rice fields with a view to flushing a Florican. At this time of the year the rice harvest is in full swing but these fields had not yet been harvested. My thoughts were that our chances were slim given the difficulty of the guides finding the birds in the waist deep rice. Just as I was thinking this two male Bengal Floricans took to the air and provided excellent views.

The fields sported a good array of the more common birds however we had another target in Red Avadavat. In searching the grasslands around the village Mardy noticed a Yellow-breasted Bunting, a rare bird in Cambodia and a welcome find. We pressed on in our search for the Avadavat driving a bit along a side road from the village. After some diligent scanning of the rice fields we came upon a small flock of Red Avadavat which tended to rise quickly and dive back into the deep vegetation with equal alacrity. A small flock of Great Myna were noted on the drive back to Siem Reap.

Angkor Wat

The enormous temple complex surrounding the Angkor Wat needs no introduction from me as it will be on everyone's touristic wish list. We did pick up both Alexandrine and Red-breasted Parakeets here.

Ang Trapaeng Thmor (ATT)

We heard that a Milky Stork had been seen at ATT in the company of a very large flock of Painted Stork. As we had dipped on this species in Prek Toal we decided to vary our program and cram an additional site in before going to Angkor Wat. It is an hour north west of Siem Reap so we set off at 5:20. On the road into ATT the rice had generally been harvested and some fields had been ploughed. In these muddy fields there was a wealth of bird life including a large flock of Painted Storks. We spent a considerable time scanning this flock through the scope without success. This was the only flock of Painted Storks we could find in the area so we had to proceed to Angkor with a nice list of birds but no new stork!

Banteay Srey

Banteay Srey is a small temple complex but an absolute gem. The carving on the stones is deeply incised and beautifully executed. There is a large waterlily covered lake beside the temple. Here we saw Bronze-winged Jacana, Cotton Pygmy Goose and Osprey.

Sam Veasna Centre

SVC manages wildlife viewing trips with exclusive access to Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) sites across Cambodia. Their goal is to provide an alternative sustainable livelihood from ecotourism for the local communities at the sites that WCS prioritises for conservation. In return for the income and employment received the communities are asked to sign no hunting and land use agreements, which are monitored by Ministries of Environment and Forestry patrol teams advised by WCS.

SVC is a Non-Profit Organisation. Any profit from providing ecotourism services is invested into local community development in return for good environmental stewardship. They believe that it is necessary to provide alternative livelihoods in order to achieve sustainable conservation. By choosing to see Cambodia's spectacular birdlife with SVC birders are giving local communities those alternatives. The fee we paid was very good value and far cheaper than doing the same trip with one of the major overseas birding companies. SVC publish a figure of 24% as being the amount of birding fees paid to them which goes on conservation (as compared with 5% on administration) which is a fine effort.



Robin and Mardy Sean outside the Sam Veasna Centre office

Sam Veasna was a pioneering Cambodian naturalist who tragically died of malaria in 1999 aged 33 while surveying the Northern Plains of Cambodia for the now extinct Khouprey. During his short life he was responsible for discovering and cataloguing many of the most important sites for conservation in Northern Cambodia, including the discovery of large numbers of Sarus Crane at Ang Trapaeng Thmor. The Sam Veasna Centre was set up in his memory to promote conservation throughout Cambodia and find ways to continue his work protecting the endangered species of the country.

We were very happy with every aspect of our interaction with SVC. My initial e-mail enquiry (info@samveasna.org) was handled most expeditiously and very knowledgeably. When our flight times were changed by the airline SVC rejigged our program extremely quickly. There is good information on their web-site (www.samveasna.org). The hotel provided in Siem Reap was a most comfortable small hotel close to the old market area.

Mardy Sean was an excellent guide. His English was near perfect, his birding skills were of a very high standard. Mardy came equipped with all the gear one could hope for including a

scope, good calls, high quality torch not to mention great eyes and ears! He was very flexible in the arrangements and was very quick to suggest alternative or additional sites to maximise the new birds. He was also most knowledgeable about Khmer culture and the temples for which he is a registered guide. A most pleasant companion for a birding trip.

Our timing meant that we were in Cambodia a bit early for a number of desired species. This is because the area dries out very considerably as the winter progresses. This means open water is more concentrated and ground dwelling birds are easier to see. Some migratory birds do not arrive until later in the winter. Mid-January to Early-February is said to be the best period. The most desired birds that we dipped on were Milky Stork and Slender-billed Vulture. There were 2 potential new birds that were heard but not seen and another 16 that I had identified as possibles based on previous trip reports. We could have picked up a few additional birds by going to additional sites in Eastern and Southern Cambodia which were not possible for us due to time constraints.

Species List Lifers in bold		Where First Seen
Lesser Whistling Duck	Dendrocygna javanica	Boeng Toal
Cotton Pygmy Goose	Nettapus coromandelianus	Banteay Srey
Indian Spot-billed Duck	Anas poecilorhyncha	Prohoot Grasslands
Chinese Francolin	Francolinus pintadeanus	Tmatboey
Painted Stork	Mycteria leucocephala	Tonle Sap
Asian Openbill	Anastomus oscitans	Tonle Sap
Woolly-necked Stork	Ciconia episcopus	Tmatboey
Lesser Adjutant	Leptoptilos javanicus	Boeng Toal
Greater Adjutant	Leptoptilos dubius	Tonle Sap
Black-headed Ibis	Threskiornis melanocephalus	Tonle Sap
White-shouldered Ibis	Pseudibis davisoni	Tmatboey
Giant Ibis	Pseudibis gigantea	Tmatboey
Striated Heron	Butorides striata	Tonle Sap
Chinese Pond Heron	Ardeola bacchus	Tonle Sap
Eastern Cattle Egret	Bubulcus coromandus	Ang Trapaeng Thmor
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	Tonle Sap
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea	Tonle Sap
Great Egret	Ardea alba	Ang Trapaeng Thmor
Intermediate Egret	Ardea intermedia	Tonle Sap
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	Tonle Sap
Spot-billed Pelican	Pelecanus philippensis	Tonle Sap
Little Cormorant	Microcarbo niger	Tonle Sap
Indian Cormorant	Phalacrocorax fuscicollis	Tonle Sap
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	Tonle Sap
Oriental Darter	Anhinga melanogaster	Tonle Sap
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus	Banteay Srey
White-rumped Vulture	Gyps bengalensis	Boeng Toal
Red-headed Vulture	Sarcogyps calvus	Boeng Toal
Eastern Marsh Harrier	Circus spilonotus	Prohoot Grasslands
Pied Harrier	Circus melanoleucos	Prohoot Grasslands

Grey-headed Fish Eagle	Haliaeetus ichthyaetus	Tonle Sap
Rufous-winged Buzzard	Butastur liventer	Tmatboey
Bengal Florican	Houbaropsis bengalensis	Prohoot Grasslands
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	Tonle Sap
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	Ang Trapaeng Thmor
Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus	Boeng Toal
Bronze-winged Jacana	Metopidius indicus	Banteay Srey
Pin-tailed Snipe	Gallinago stenura	Prohoot Grasslands
Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus	Ang Trapaeng Thmor
Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida	Tonle Sap
Rock Dove (Feral)	Columba livia 'feral'	Ang Trapaeng Thmor
Red Turtle Dove	Streptopelia tranquebarica	Tmatboey
Spotted Dove	Spilopelia chinensis	Tmatboey
Zebra Dove	Geopelia striata	Boeng Toal
Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis	Tonle Sap
Lesser Coucal	Centropus bengalensis	Tonle Sap
Green-billed Malkoha	Phaenicophaeus tristis	Tmatboey
Spotted Wood Owl	Strix seloputo	Tmatboey
Brown Wood Owl	Strix leptogrammica	Tmatboey
Collared Owlet	Glaucidium brodiei	Tmatboey
Asian Barred Owlet	Glaucidium cuculoides	Beng Mealea Temple
Crested Treewift	Hemiprocne coronata	Tmatboey
Asian Palm Swift	Cypsiurus balasiensis	Prohoot Grasslands
Indian Roller	Coracias benghalensis	Tonle Sap
White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis	Banteay Srey
Pied Kingfisher	Ceryle rudis	Ang Trapaeng Thmor
Green Bee-eater	Merops orientalis	Tmatboey
Blue-tailed Bee-eater	Merops philippinus	Tonle Sap
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	Boeng Toal
Lineated Barbet	Psilopogon lineatus	Tmatboey
Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	Yungipicus canicapillus	Tmatboey
Rufous-bellied Woodpecker	Dendrocopos hyperythrus	Tmatboey
Black-headed Woodpecker	Picus erythrropygius	Boeng Toal
Common Flameback	Dinopium javanense	Tmatboey
Greater Flameback	Chrysocolaptes guttacristatus	Tmatboey
White-rumped Falcon	Polihierax insignis	Tmatboey
Collared Falconet	Microhierax caerulescens	Tonle Sap
Blossom-headed Parakeet	Psittacula roseata	Tmatboey
Red-breasted Parakeet	Psittacula alexandri	Angkor Wat
Alexandrine Parakeet	Psittacula eupatria	Angkor Wat
Common Woodshrike	Tephrodornis pondicerianus	Tmatboey
Indochinese Cuckooshrike	Coracina polioptera	Tmatboey

Small Minivet	Pericrocotus cinnamomeus	Tmatboey
Burmese Shrike	Lanius colluriooides	Tmatboey
Black-naped Oriole	Oriolus chinensis	Tmatboey
Black-hooded Oriole	Oriolus xanthornus	Tmatboey
Black Drongo	Dicrurus macrocercus	Tonle Sap
White-browed Fantail	Rhipidura aureola	Tmatboey
Malaysian Pied Fantail	Rhipidura javanica	Tonle Sap
Black-naped Monarch	Hypothymis azurea	Tmatboey
Rufous Treepie	Dendrocitta vagabunda	Tmatboey
Eastern Jungle Crow	Corvus levaillantii	Tonle Sap
Indochinese Bush Lark	Mirafrla erythrocephala	Tmatboey
Sooty-headed Bulbul	Pycnonotus aurigaster	Boeng Toal
Yellow-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus goiavier	Prohoot Grasslands
Streak-eared Bulbul	Pycnonotus blanfordi	Tmatboey
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	Tonle Sap
Striated Swallow	Cecropis striolata	Tmatboey
Dusky Warbler	Phylloscopus fuscatus	Prohoot Grasslands
Two-barred Warbler	Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus	Beng Mealea Temple
Oriental Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus orientalis	Prohoot Grasslands
Brown Prinia	Prinia polychroa	Tmatboey
Rufescent Prinia	Prinia rufescens	Tmatboey
Dark-necked Tailorbird	Orthotomus atrogularis	Tonle Sap
Pin-striped Tit-babbler	Macronus gularis	Tmatboey
Chestnut-capped Babbler	Timalia pileata	Tmatboey
White-crested Laughingthrush	Garrulax leucolophus	Tmatboey
Burmese Nuthatch	Sitta neglecta	Tmatboey
Great Myna	Acridotheres grandis	Prohoot Grasslands
Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis	Tonle Sap
Black-collared Starling	Gracupica nigricollis	Tmatboey
White-shouldered Starling	Sturnia sinensis	Ang Trapaeng Thmor
Oriental Magpie-robin	Copsychus saularis	Boeng Toal
White-rumped Shama	Copsychus malabaricus	Tmatboey
Hainan Blue Flycatcher	Cyornis hainanus	Beng Mealea Temple
Siberian Stonechat	Saxicola maurus	Prohoot Grasslands
Pied Bush Chat	Saxicola caprata	Prohoot Grasslands
Golden-fronted Leafbird	Chloropsis aurifrons	Tmatboey
Purple Sunbird	Cinnyris asiaticus	Tmatboey
Olive-backed Sunbird	Cinnyris jugularis	Tonle Sap
Plain-backed Sparrow	Passer flaveolus	Prohoot Grasslands
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus	Tonle Sap
Baya Weaver	Ploceus philippinus	Boeng Toal
Red Avadavat	Amandava amandava	Prohoot Grasslands

Scaly-breasted Munia	Lonchura punctulata	Prohoot Grasslands
Yellow-breasted Bunting	Emberiza aureola	Prohoot Grasslands