

MALAYSIA – TROGONQUEST VIII – “The Final Bird”



White-necked Babbler

November 2023

Participant – Jules Eden

Guide – Liew Kong from Endemic Guides

BACKGROUND

And so 30 years after my first trogon in a Costa Rican forest, we come to the final one here in Malaysia. Cinnamon-Rumped Trogon – CRT – for short here.

Since my last report from India where we bagged the Ward's, there has been Hispaniolan in the D.R. and both Javan and Sumatran in their respective islands. I was set for the CRT. [The devastating news of the 4 way split on Black-Throated was fortunately countered by the biggest luck a birder could ever have, as I was in the Atlantic forest of Brazil when the IOC announced it and was able to get the only one of the 4 that I was missing, “Atlantic Black-Throated Trogon” the very next day up Pernambuco.]

So I was on a roll – CRT will put the “Trogonquest” to bed and I can move onto other leisure pursuits like drinking and smoking or spending more time with Mrs Eden

DAY 1

I had arrived in Kuala Lumpur a day and a half before enjoying the delights of the Mandarin Oriental and an Irish Bar down the road. Culture was supplied by the National Gallery of Malaysia a short ride away, but that was all chaff

really, the CRT was way more important than the Guinness and “Still Life of Rambutan and Mangosteen”

Guide Liew arrived at 05:30 for the first run to a lowland forest – Krau Forest by the Deerland Zoo about 2 hours from the capital.

Truthbomb #1 – “why are you here now?” he asks by the open door of the Toyota.

“Because you are meeting me for the CRT quest” I reply.

He explains that it is Rainy Season and no birder comes at this time. A quick look up reveals blue skies and no clouds. I thought El Nino and Climate Change ran all the global weather now, so a bit of rain was as unpredictable as a Rishi Sunak cabinet re-shuffle.

He is adamant that this is the worst time of year to come to Malaysia.

I didn't know that.

And so to Krau Forest by Deerland Park. We scramble through to an old pitta feeding station, where once a local photographer had the ultimate shot of a Garnet and Giant Pitta with and Rail Babbler on the same wormy log. A week later it was destroyed overnight, all hides and logs trashed. The main suspect who runs Deerland Zoo still remains a happy man as the volume of photographer's cars that were there have now gone.

Liew and I head into the Krau Forest to be met with some babblers.

Short-tailed Babbler, Malaysian Black-Capped Babbler, Black-throated Babbs, Sooty-Capped Bobs and a singing Large Wren-Babber as well. A true Babble-Fest, but no trogon.

Next forest is a few hours east on the coast. Gunung Arong. This is a special road here in Malaysia, as it is the only road that cuts through coastal wet peat forest. It supposedly holds the mythical Black Partridge, a bird Liew has never seen before. We get fly over Great Slaty Woodpecker and perhaps a CRT call but no matter how we wait and play back we never hear it again. It could have been a White-rumped Shama, that forest mimic.

We have to pull out as the drive to Mersing – our base for 3 nights is still a fair drive away.

Mersing Merlin Inn should be a 2 star, but has 3 as there is a pool in the grounds. Wifi is good though and there's a working fridge, for your beers bought in KL before getting here. So a blank on the first day – no worries, plenty of time left.

DAY 2 – LENGGOR FOREST

This is “the spot” where we hope to get it. Liew has had most views here, and most of the decent photos of CRT come from here, so our eggs are in this basket for the next couple of days.

Truthbomb #2 – “it's raptor migration time” Liew informs me.

“Does that matter?” I ask “they all just fly past overhead surely”

Turns out a few thousand sparrowhawks over night in the forests here and across Johor. No wonder the little birds dig deeper into the forest and remain quiet.

And it is – an absolute silent area. There are 2 or 3 good trails to walk here playing the tape and at one point we hear a Scarlet-Rumped Trogon and I get onto it dug deep and low in a dank recess of a bush. And front on it looks totally like a CRT, and for a moment my hope's raise that we have “2 bird theory” here – but when you hear the call, this little fella's tail is pumping in harmony. An SRT for sure, not my CRT.

An hour later with little to see, Liew hears a mega babbler. A pair come in to a cleverly placed speaker and Liew gets his best ever shots of White-Necked Babbler. A newbie for me. Another tick follows with a Brown-streaked Flycatcher, now called “Umber Flycatcher” in a fruiting bush, where finally we get a bit of activity. The sparrowhawks must have gone.



A Mega-Babbler

A few more hours of trogon silence and we call it a day. Still plenty of time left though.

DAY 3 – LENGGOR

Truthbomb #3 – if I was here at the right time of year and there weren't roosting sparrowhawks, my odds for this bird is 1 in 5. Liew, who loves his stats reckons it's 1 in 10 to 20 for me.

That hurts

The monsoon finally turns up in the late morning and we are both soaked. The afternoon is spent at a nearby café stuffing most of their paper napkins into my sodden shoes.

We still have a couple of hours after the storm subsides and go back to the forest. Here we meet "The Lenggor Tigerman". There are tigers in this forest, but nocturnal and very wary of humans. Tigerman's job is to patrol at night, checking for poachers and trying to get a sighting. In the last 5 years he has never seen one. I know how he feels!

Opposite Lenggor is another forest. It looks pristine, but Liew explains that it is owned by some shady people and no-one is allowed in. In fact they are allowed to shoot anyone who trespasses. Despite my protestations that this cant really be the case – he is adamant and wont go anywhere near it.

I suppose the warning signs should be believed!



Don't shoot – I'm only birding

A huge leech attacks my sternal area, a parting gift from Lenggor. Still time. Liew is an optimist.

DAY 4 – Panti forest

Walking the same silent trails for 2 days is driving us both nuts, we make the decision to go down the peninsula to the famous Panti Forest. I have been there before 4 years ago but we nixed the CRT then as we were focused on the Rail Babbler which took 2 days to get. With renewed vigour we head South.

Truthbomb #4 – Liew has found a gizmo on eBird that can predict our chances of seeing a bird. It is 0.7%. I wish he hadn't looked at that.

Panti is as silent as Lenggor. Not just a silent CRT but completely bird silent. There are signs hung around some of the trees from The Panti Birdrace 2023 which was on last week. Liew checks the results online.

100 competitors. A 48 hour race. CRTs seen: Zero. The same result as us for that day.



Trogon-free Competition

DAY 4 – Panti to KL

A last throw of the dice here, and it starts promisingly. A Malaysian Crestless Fireback crossing the road. I first thought it was a black chicken until commonsense took hold. New for me though.

Let this be the start of good things...

It wasn't. Silence ensued as with every day before. Liew is out of Truthbombs but does tell an odd story of guiding here before with a Dutch couple who would not let him use playback or go to staked out feeding sites. Yes they missed a whole lot of species, but guess what they did see?

Yup - CR bloody T. This is so not going to plan at all for me.

We drive back to KL via Gunung Arong where we thought it might have called on Day 1. This was a huge mistake as of course we never heard it there and it delayed our drive into KL, which being Deepwali Weekend resulted in a stupid late arrival. Sadly not the Mandarin Oriental for me, but the Royal Chulan in downtown. This is a smoke free hotel, but the rooms all have balconies and frankly I have never been one for sanctimonious rules.

Tonight I have to make the call. Back to Krau Forest near Deerland or try something totally different and cut our losses and go for something else.

DAY 6 – Fraser's Hill

Time to face up to reality. I am not going to see the trogon at all and we are both fed up of listening to its call on the tape. Best for our mental wellbeing to change the mission, change the scene and get frustrated by a different set of birds. We head up to the Highlands.

We hit an early motherload with a pair of displaying Chestnut-naped Forktails. A newbie for me and an emotional tick. I had missed this at Danum Valley in Borneo years ago as I had taken the day off birding to entertain my son whom I was with. Got that one back at last!

We head to the top of the Hill as Liew has a spot for a rare pitta. It's a tough one as a mate of his had been here all last week and missed it several days in a row. The spot is up behind a car park and today the area is full of campervans as the public holiday is in full swing. We get to the spot and Liew has 2 little pop-up hides for us. He puts out the worms and in come Chestnut-capped Laughingthrushes with Buff-breasted Babblers. They eat most of the worms, so a re-worm is in order but the wrong birds come. A pair of White-tailed Robins. Very nice.



White-tailed Robin

We have about 2 hours here for our target. After an hour its paydirt. In comes a Rusty-naped Pitta. At last – a mega.



Rusty-naped Pitta

One more newbie was to follow with a Bamboo Woodpecker on the road below Frasers Hill. Not a bad day considering the lack of birds over the previous 5. Liew was happy to bird for longer but with memories of yesterdays late return to KL, I declined as there were Irish Bars to hit up in the capital.

That was it – 6 days – 6 ticks and zero Cinnamon-rumped Trogons.

My thanks to Liew and dear reader – never ever go birding in Malaysia in November. You have been warned!

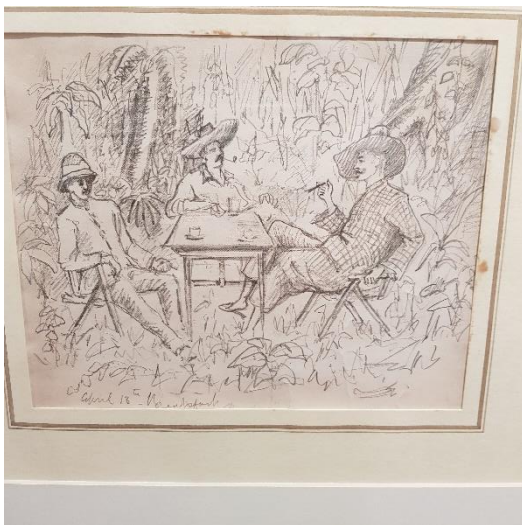
Jules Eden



Smoking hides are available!



Poignant picture- National Gallery, K.L.



Early birders – 1845, National Gallery, K.L.

