

## Laos (Luang Prabang only) and Thailand (Ayutthaya only) trip report October/November 2023

We wanted a few days in Southeast Asia on our way back from our Australia trip. We felt we needed some of that wonderful culture, colour and human warmth that we love so much – and since the Covid lockdown we felt we needed to get back into practice with life without independent transport. Driving around Australia is one thing, but we thought hopping in and out of tuk tuks would be another. We booked seven nights in Luang Prabang and four nights in Ayutthaya.

The emphasis throughout was on relaxation, fun, culture and food but birding never stops for me and I managed to get out for a few hours each day, sometimes with disappointing results, often surprisingly good.

### Monday 23 October/Tuesday 24 October – Bangkok airport and Luang Prabang

In transit from Cairns to Laos we had to stay a night at a hotel opposite Suvarnabhumi airport, where I enjoyed looking at the abundant birds in the patchy green spaces between the concrete buildings. Red Collared-doves were particularly numerous, with at least one Zebra Dove among them. Common Mynas were accompanied by some White-vented Mynas and a Siamese Pied Myna. A Malaysian Pied Fantail sang constantly outside our window, and a perusal of the palm tree tops from the window provided an Ashy Drongo, a Long-tailed Shrike and some Asian Palm Swifts zipping around.

Arriving in Luang Prabang, we were met by our hotel's pickup and taken to the On the Mekong Resort a mile or two from the town centre. The hotel owner, Henry, greeted us and proudly introduced us to his rather different concept of a hotel, which we immediately fell in love with. Most of the buildings are old wooden structures, all his staff are local people, happy and friendly, the reception and dining areas are outdoors, the local food they serve for breakfast is delicious. There is plenty of green space there but he warned me I wouldn't see many birds in Laos, and this seemed true. Butterflies seemed to outnumber birds at the resort – nearly all of them big and beautiful.



Butterfly, On the Mekong Resort, Luang Prabang



View of Reception from our room, On the Mekong Resort.

In the grounds I managed to spot an Eastern Stonechat in reeds by the river and a group of Little Egrets flew down the Mekong but the birds I could hear calling remained determinedly hidden. Henry said that

hunting birds for food has been so common in Laos in the past that the few remaining birds stay out of sight.

### **Wednesday 25 October – Luang Prabang**

It didn't take long to discover that most of the birds around the hotel were Common Tailorbirds, but there were also Taiga Flycatchers and Oriental Magpie-robins plus, along the road, a Long-tailed Shrike. A walk around the museum (formerly royal palace) and some of the many temples confirmed that Tree Sparrows and Asian Palm Swifts were fairly common.

We booked a car and driver to take us to Kuang Si waterfall a few miles west of Luang Prabang. There had been recent rain and the falls were at their most impressive. The forest around seemed to have plenty of bird life, and Merlin picked up Blue-throated Barbet and Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher, both of which I believed but couldn't see. I did however see a Brown-cheeked Fulvetta thanks to Merlin and a couple of Yellow-browed Warblers. Butterflies were very abundant around the falls, with a great deal of variety.



Butterflies, Kuang Si Waterfall, near Luang Prabang

We stopped for lunch and a stroll around at Phounsouk Gardens, where there were more butterflies and a couple more Taiga Flycatchers, although I felt the mixed habitats including rice fields deserved more.

### **Friday 27 October to Monday 30 October – Luang Prabang**

We really loved spending time in and around Luang Prabang. It's a beautiful old city with more than its share of wonderful temples, and a colonial legacy in the centre which means lovely buildings for shopping, coffee, and eating. The resort pick-up would drop us anywhere in town, at any time, and we made our short way back by tuk tuk, showing the name of the resort in Laotian. During these days we walked up Phousi Hill, crossed the Mekong by ferry to Chouphet, visited craft centres providing employment for traditional textile-making, and completed our tour of the temples. There were a few birds up Phousi Hill including Yellow-browed Warblers, Grey-headed Canary-flycatchers, and a small flock of Crimson Sunbirds. A group of Sooty-headed Bulbuls were in Wat Xian Thong temple and some

Pond-herons (Chinese?) were at the confluence of the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers. In or near the resort I added Eurasian Kingfisher, Dusky Warbler, White Wagtail, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker and Brown Shrike to the list, and I puzzled over a female sunbird that could have been Brown-throated.

Our conclusion was that Luang Prabang is a fabulous place to visit for a relaxing few days, with plenty to see and learn, great photo opportunities, wonderful distinctive food and a really friendly, unhurried vibe. The Beerlao brew is excellent and we frequently enjoyed amazing coffee and western-style cakes. There are crowds in some parts but it's not difficult to avoid them. However, don't go expecting to see many birds!

### **Tuesday 31 October – Ayutthaya**

We'd arrived at our hotel the previous evening and in the failing light it was already apparent we were going to see a lot more birds here than in Laos. From the taxi we'd seen plenty of egrets and Asian Openbill Storks, and just from the hotel garden we clocked Oriental Magpie-robin, Common Myna and a roost of Intermediate Egrets in a tree on the far bank of the Chao Phrya River.

I was up early in the morning and headed straight for Srinagarindra Park, five minutes' walk from the iuDia hotel. Little, Intermediate, Great White and Eastern Cattle Egrets, Pond Herons and Red-wattled Lapwings were in the grassy areas and Common and Great Mynas, Red Collared Doves and Asian Koels were also plentiful. I found both White-breasted and Eurasian Kingfishers and, to my delight, a pair of **Black Bazas** – a new species for me - on this first visit and knew I would be back for more.



Red-wattled Lapwing, Chao Sam Phrya National Museum, Ayutthaya



Atrocious photo of Black Bazas, Srinagarindra Park, Ayutthaya

The rest of the day we walked around the historic island that comprises the old centre of the town, visiting many lovely old temples. Our route took us through Bueng Phra Ram Park with lawns, lakes and trees as well as through the temple grounds. We found many more species to be fairly common including Coppersmith Barbet, Taiga Flycatcher, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Black Drongo, Blue-tailed Bee-eater and Pied Fantail. We also saw smaller numbers of Green-billed Malkohas, Streak-eared Bulbuls, Striated Grassbirds, Hoopoes and a Paddyfield Pipit. Some of the temple grounds were lush with vegetation, especially Wat Ratchaburana. Iced coffee and mango milkshake were much appreciated at Sanoh Coffee, near Wat Mahathat, where we sat in the shade overlooking a lake in Bueng Phra Ram Park, watching birds and a couple of playful Finlayson's Squirrels (or Variable Squirrel!).



Finlayson's Squirrels at Sanoh Coffee near Wat Mahathat, Ayutthaya



Paddyfield Pipit, Wat Ratchaburana, Ayutthaya

### Wednesday 1 November – Ayutthaya

I headed straight to Srinagarindra Park, back to where I'd seen the Black Bazas the day before. They weren't there, but Merlin had been hearing calls of Small Minivet and although I'd looked I couldn't see or hear anything, so waited in the same spot. Sure enough, after a while a female **Small Minivet** appeared above me, followed by a male. I was delighted but too excited to manage a decent photo, and they soon vanished from sight. In the same flowering shrubs along a canal edge were four or five Olive-backed Sunbirds - now re-named Ornate Sunbird *Cinnyris ornatus* following a recent split.



Two-thirds of a Small Minivet and an Ornate Sunbird, both at Srinagarindra Park

After breakfast we walked out west of the Chao Phrya River to Wat Chaiwatthanaram. This was another ruined temple, largely destroyed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the invading Burmese Konbaung dynasty. As such, it was much like the other temples we'd visited the previous day, except for the many Thai visitors dressed up to have their photograph taken at a location used in a popular Thai film. It had been a long, hot walk from our hotel and by the time we'd finished we wanted to get back to somewhere shady and

cool. So we took a tuk-tuk back to Wat Mahathat and the wonderful Sanoh Coffee across the road. Loads more birds here today, this time including a Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker and a group of Striated Grassbirds at the edge of the lake.



Coppersmith Barbet, Srinagarindra Park, Ayutthaya



Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Wat Ratchaburana, Ayutthaya

#### **Thursday 2 November – Ayutthaya and Bangkok**

An excellent final visit to Srinagarindra Park before breakfast provided singles of Indian Roller, Black-naped Oriole, Hoopoe and Ashy Drongo, good views of 2 Green-billed Malkohas, and delightful views of a pair of Brown-throated Sunbirds, with the sun catching the male's not-so-brown throat. Also another female Small Minivet in a different place, an unidentified Swiftlet, and last views of the other wonderful birds I'd been enjoying over the last few days. The taxi ride back to Bangkok Airport was unmemorable and we went straight to the gate for our flight to Singapore and thence back to Heathrow.

We felt afterwards these 10 days in Southeast Asia on our way back from Australia had given us a perfect combination of culture, history, colour, sightseeing and food, with kind, friendly people everywhere we went. Luang Prabang is a brilliant, beautiful, manageable small city for anyone with an interest in eastern culture to visit and Ayutthaya had given us plenty of opportunity for peace, quiet and wildlife amid a bustling urban environment. And birds: hard work in Laos, effortless in Thailand, with a grand total of 55 species including, to my delight, two new species. And perhaps a third with the splitting of Olive-backed Sunbird: the form found in Thailand is now called Ornate Sunbird, while the race I had been watching in Queensland is now treated as a separate species, Sahul Sunbird *Cinnyris frenatus*.

Some final memories:



Preparing for Boun Lai Heua Fai festival at Wat Xian Thong, Luang Prabang



Wat Chaiwatthanaram, Ayutthaya



Sunset, On the Mekong Resort, Luang Prabang



Iced drinks at Sanoh Coffee, Ayutthaya

Geoff Upton, UK  
April 2024

**Birds seen in Southeast Asia, 23 October to 2 November 2023**

	LAOS			THAILAND	
	On the Mekong Resort and around, Luang Prabang	Luang Prabang	Kuang Si waterfall and Phounsouk Gardens	Bangkok Airport (Suvannabhumi)	Ayutthaya
Asian Openbill				10 from plane. c50 on journey to Ayutthaya	Several flying over
Chinese/Javan Pond-heron		4 from Viewpoint Cafe		1 on journey to Ayutthaya	8+ Srinagrindra Park Sev Bueng Phra Ram Park (unidentified)
Eastern Cattle Egret				1 Great White from plane. c100 unidentified on journey to Ayutthaya	30+ Srinagrindra Park
Great White Egret					2+ Srinagrindra Park
Intermediate Egret					Fairly common
Little Egret	17				2 Srinagrindra Park Sev Bueng Phra Ram Park
<b>Black Baza</b>					<b>2 Srinagrindra Park</b>
Feral Pigeon	2	Common		1	
Red-wattled Lapwing					3 Srinagrindra Park Sev Bueng Phra Ram Park 2 Chao Sam Phrya National Museum
Red Collared-dove				c10	Fairly common
Spotted Dove					2 Srinagrindra Park
Zebra Dove				1	
Asian Koel					4+ Srinagrindra Park
Green-billed Malkoha					2 Wat Ratchaburana 2 Srinagrindra Park
[Swiftlet sp]					3+ Srinagrindra Park (probably Germain's or Himalayan)
Asian Palm-swift	6+	10+	c20 Kuang Si village	3	
White-breasted Kingfisher					1 Srinagrindra Park
Eurasia Kingfisher	1				1 Srinagrindra Park 1 Bueng Phra Ram Park (Sanoh Coffee)
Blue-tailed Bee-eater					Fairly common, even flying along river at hotel
Hoopoe					1+ Srinagrindra Park 1 Wat Maha That
Indian Roller					1 Srinagrindra Park
Coppersmith Barbet					Fairly common
Lineated Barbet					1+ Srinagrindra Park (heard only)
<b>Small Minivet</b>					<b>3+ Srinagrindra Park</b>
Black-naped Oriole					1 Srinagrindra Park
Malaysian Pied Fantail				1	Fairly common
Black Drongo					Sev Srinagrindra Park

	LAOS			THAILAND	
	On the Mekong Resort and around, Luang Prabang	Luang Prabang	Kuang Si waterfall and Phounsouk Gardens	Bangkok Airport (Suvarnabhumi)	Ayutthaya
					Sev Bueng Phra Ram Park
Ashy Drongo				1	1 Srinagrindra Park
Eastern Jungle Crow				1	
Brown Shrike	1				
Long-tailed Shrike	1			1	
Crimson Sunbird		4+ Phousi Hill			
Brown-throated Sunbird					2 Srinagrindra Park
Ornate Sunbird					4 Srinagrindra Park
Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker	1+				1 Bueng Phra Ram Park (Sanoh Coffee)
Scaly-breasted Munia				1	
House Sparrow				c10	
Tree Sparrow	c20	Common		c20	?
Paddyfield Pipit					
White Wagtail	3+	2 Luang Prabang 2 Chouphet village			
Common Myna				Sev	Common
White-vented Myna				3	Fairly common
Asian Pied Starling				1	
Oriental Magpie- robin				1	Fairly common, even in hotel grounds
Eastern Stonechat	1				
Taiga Flycatcher	1+		1 Phounsouk Gdns		Common
Grey-headed Canary- flycatcher		2+ Phousi Hill (heard only)			
Sooty-headed Bulbul		4+ Wat Xien Thong			
Streak-eared Bulbul					Sev Bueng Phra Ram Park
Barn Swallow					2 Bueng Phra Ram Park 2 Srinagrindra Park
Dusky Warbler	1				
Yellow-browed Warbler	1	2 Phousi Hill 1 Chouphet village	2+		
Brown-cheeked Fulvetta	1				
Common Tailorbird	5+	2+ Phousi Hill			
Striated Grassbird					2 Srinagrindra Park 3 Bueng Phra Ram Park (Sanoh Coffee)