

# **Singapore and Palawan, Philippines**

## **May - June 2023**

A trip report by Daniel Watson

## Introduction

Aside from a couple of brief trips to Europe, this was the first major trip Kathi and I had made together since the Covid-19 pandemic, and more importantly was our belated honeymoon after spending too much money on our wedding in 2022!

Our original plan had been to spend a week in Singapore, followed by a return to Sabah for a slightly longer trip, but the escalating prices as a result of the global cost of living crisis following the pandemic combined with unworkable logistics meant we had to discount that idea fairly rapidly. Further logistical challenges were posed by the flights to Palawan, eventually we managed to make a workable schedule by flying out via Manila, and returning via Cebu.

Having last visited South-East Asia in 2015, a return was overdue, and following a few recommendations we settled on the island of Palawan as a compromise of decent birding, excellent snorkeling, and generally looking like a stunning place for a honeymoon, with the added bonus of Philippine hospitality. Unfortunately, the outlook for our trip didn't look too good a week or so before we headed out, with Typhoon Mawar moving west across the Pacific bringing an increased chance of high winds and heavy rain. Luckily, the typhoon was downgraded and moved north away from the Philippines during our visit, resulting in mostly fine weather.

Prior to the trip, I had agreed that it wouldn't be 24/7 birding given the fact it was our honeymoon, and that I would limit my birding mostly to mornings, save the odd half day or dusk/nocturnal escapade. As a result, that meant that some species were completely off the cards due to logistics (such as Mantanani Scops Owl, Palawan striped-babbler and Philippine Shortwing) and despite booking a couple of days at the Subterranean River National Park, the "holy grail" bird that is Palawan Peacock-pheasant was very unlikely, particularly since the habituated male bird died in 2021. As a result, I had to limit my horizons, and my key targets for the Philippine leg of the trip were; Hooded and Philippine Pittas, Falcated wren-babbler, Red-vented cockatoo, Blue Paradise flycatcher, and whatever other endemics I could stumble onto.

The week in Singapore was shortened to 3.5 days due to a combination of logistics and price (I clearly hadn't done my research on the world's most expensive city!), but the schedule was more open to birding, and I had hoped to target the following; Jambu fruit-dove, Sulphur-headed bulbul, Mangrove and Blue-winged Pittas, Brown Wood-owl and Red-legged Crane. Rather helpfully, I had exchanged some gen with Pete from Birdforum (@foresttwitcher) who very kindly reciprocated by sending me pins for several species a couple of weeks before I was due to fly out.



## Useful information

### *Singapore*

There are a range of excellent resources online to keep up-to speed with the Singaporean birding scene, with a particularly active [ebird](#) community. A useful (if out of print) book is [A Naturalist's Guide to the Birds of Singapore](#), which despite being a photographic guide has some useful information on locations, as well as providing the status of some 280 most commonly occurring species in Singapore. It is also less unwieldy than the larger (but otherwise excellent) Helm series covering Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, making a useful reference (and weight saving alternative) if you are only visiting for a short period of time.

The following websites are also highly recommended:

<https://singaporebirds.com/>

<https://singaporebirdgroup.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/271298636396487> (Singapore Birders)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/5202818212> (Singapore Nature Group, good for other wildlife)

### *Palawan*

Recent information on Palawan is somewhat more limited, and I am indebted to Rob Hutchinson of [Birdtour Asia](#) for very kindly providing me with some recent information for several species, as well as hints and tips for seeing some of the trickier species. As always, [ebird](#) was useful in providing updates from others birding around the same time, giving some suggestion of what had been seen and where. During my last visit to the Philippines the only guide available was the Kennedy book, which I am pleased to say has been substantially superseded by the excellent [Lynx edition](#) - taxonomically up to date at the time of my trip, with excellent maps, status information and accurate illustrations - highly recommended!

I did find the following reports which have some really useful information:

[https://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=2406](https://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=2406)

<http://www.surfbirds.com/mb/trips/philippines-campbell-0814.pdf>

<https://budgetbirders.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/philippine-trip-report-2016.pdf>

<https://penguinbirding.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/tripreport-philippines.pdf>

[https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=RADSTAAK\\_Philippines\\_0103\\_2013\\_v2.pdf](https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=RADSTAAK_Philippines_0103_2013_v2.pdf)

### *Palawan trails and access update 2023*

Following the covid pandemic, a number of trails frequented by birders have fallen into a state of disrepair – in particular the trail systems around Sabang and the Underground River National Park.

#### *Sabang ATV trail*

This trail is effectively defunct, with very limited access along the first 50m at the northern most trail head, and effectively no access at the southern trail head. I spent a bit of time attempting to access these areas, but eventually gave up. I did not attempt nocturnal birding in these areas, so cannot comment on the presence/absence of those target species. Sadly Falcated wren-babbler was absent from this area, and appears to be in decline – playback attempts in suitable habitat did not return any responses.

### *Underground River National Park*

The jungle trail that leads from directly behind the toilet block at the park HQ was accessible for only the first 150m or so – it is no longer possible to go beyond the raised boardwalk over the swamp before the trail leads up into the reserve. A second smaller trail is navigable for approximately 200m behind the right-hand most building, which was fairly good. The jungle trail is now also defunct as accessed from the mangroves in Sabang, and impassable. The Zip-line trail is still active, but is probably only worth birding early or late, as activity is high along here.

Much has been written previously on the complexities of accessing the park HQ, but I am happy to report that significant progress has been made. A permit is still required to visit the cave network (either via the office in Puerto Princesa or alternatively stay at the Daluyon who can organise), but to access the park HQ solely for birdwatching, simply call into the ticketing office in the harbour (W3W: purely.megawatt.reminisce) before 2pm the day before and ask for a birdwatching permit (150php) and arrange an early boat (1500php private hire) – I was told that 6am was the earliest, but arrived at the harbour at 05:20 and the boatman was already there.

### *Sabang alternative trails*

Birding is now best along the Sabang road, with particularly good birding possible between the checkpoint at Cabayugan and the Cockatoo lookout.

There is a small trail where the forest can be accessed from the obvious bend in the road (W3W: locally.stingray.central) which climbs steeply uphill before heading east north-east into primary forest, the first 500m or so were particularly productive.



*Above: Trail location from W3W///locally.stingray.central with trail head show insert*

### *Zig-zag road*

Again, birding is very good along the roadside generally, and the two trail heads previously mentioned in other reports are still somewhat passable (W3W: quilters.womankind.thirdly and seizure.undefeated.infusions) with the latter being particularly productive.

### *Other information*

We had decided to shop around to hire a car for the Palawan leg of the trip, and most places were quoting 1500 - 2500 php per day for a basic car. We tried booking in advance via Sabai car rental (recommended elsewhere) but sadly ended up going in circles without receiving confirmation or info on how to pay. In the end we opted for [Rent-a-car Palawan](#), Rey (+63 992 385 7487) was very helpful and responsive with booking, and we were able to pay in advance via Paypal - 13,500php for five days rental, including deposit, meet and greet at Puerto Princesa Airport and collection from our hotel in Sabang.

We were led to believe that cash machines were apparently not present on Palawan, which meant that we had to carry a large amount of php around with us for the first leg, not ideal. Again, this situation has improved, and there are several cashpoints (Puerto Princesa, Sabang, El Nido etc). In Sabang, we decided to stay at the rather upmarket (for us) Daluyon Beach Resort, as this was the only hotel to offer tours of the Underground River without the bureaucracy of having to obtain tickets and permits in advance from the park HQ in Puerto Princesa. The price was substantially higher (2000php v 1200php) doing it this way, but it saved additional stress and time spent doing less fun activities. The hotel grounds were quite good for birding, and is probably the best option in Sabang.

Island hopping from El Nido is good fun, particularly if you have a non-birding partner. We did a 3D 2N package with [Buhay Isla](#) which took us away from very touristy locations, and allowed some world class snorkling on near-pristine reefs – highly recommended.

We stayed at the Riverhouse on Isla Coron before heading back to Singapore, this is an excellent base and is partnered with the diving center which offers tours to try to see Dugong. The birding around the hotel grounds and access road/road to the dock is fantastic, and you can also hire a canoe to explore the mangroves (even at night).

In Singapore, we opted to stay at the Changi Village Hotel. Again, this was a somewhat more salubrious accommodation option for us, but we decided that the proximity to the airport and fairly decent transport links would make for a better option than staying downtown - also within our budget, most central options were overpriced and a bit crap. Getting around in Singapore is relatively easy thanks to the cheap cost of taxis - the Grab app seems to be the best way of getting around and also allows you to budget for each journey without any risk of being overcharged.

The ferry to Pulau Ubin runs from 05:30 and costs \$4 each way. Note that the ferry will not depart from either the mainland or the island until the quota of 9 people has been achieved – this can result in a long wait if you just miss out, and should be considered if you are on a tight timescale – I waited 2 hours to leave on my second visit, time that could've been spent birding, frustrating, but potentially more serious if you decide to visit ahead of a flight!

I took a telescope with me on the premise that it may be best to have one and not need it, than the other way around, in the end it stayed in my backpack. A torch suitable for spot-lamping is recommended. I used the Bird Call Xeno app to download calls onto my phone in the hope that listening to some of the targets before the trip would stick, the app was very useful for comparison in the field as well as for playback on a couple of occasions. I also preloaded locations for trail heads and viewpoints into google maps to use (particularly in Palawan) as some locations seem to have fallen into disrepair in the last few years and have been tricky to locate on the ground (see above).



## Selected highlights



## Palawan and Coron

The standout highlights were excellent views of both **Philippine** and several **Hooded Pitta**, with particularly good views of the latter. A calling **Mantanani Scops-owl** at a new location was unexpected, whilst four very showy **Philippine (Red vented) Cockatoo** seen early morning along the Sabang road were arguably the rarest birds of the trip. A brace of endemics including **Palawan Hornbill**, **Palawan** and **Sooty Drongo**, **Yellow-throated Leafbird**, **Palawan Crow**, **Red-headed** and **Spot-throated Flameback**, **Blue headed racquet-tail**, **Palawan** and **Sulphur-Bellied Bulbul**, **Palawan Flowerpecker**, **Lovely Sunbird**, **Palawan Spiderhunter**, **Palawan Tit**, **Palawan Blue Flycatcher**, **Paradise Blue Flycatcher**.

Good views of species which I've missed elsewhere included **White-bellied** and **Great Slaty Woodpecker**, **Striated Grassbird**, **Oriental Hobby**, **Tabon Megapode**, **Black-chinned Fruit Dove** and **Grey Imperial Pigeon**.



## Singapore



The opportunity to reacquaint with widespread south-east Asian species after more than eight years was relished, with many familiar favourites seen particularly well – the population of **White-rumped Shama** on Pulau Ubin afforded my best views of this species.

Once again, it was a skulking ground-dweller that stole the show, with some memorable encounters with **Blue-winged Pitta** on Pulau Ubin which stole the show. A close second was encountering no less than five **Colugo** in the surrounds of Singapore zoo, a most wanted mammal tick for us both. **Black-naped Tern** was a welcome addition to my life list, with some excellent views of this graceful species. Surprisingly both **Savannah** and **Large-tailed Nightjar** were seen well given the urban surroundings. **Laced**, **Rufous** and **Sunda Pygmy Woodpeckers** were all new species, and proved much more confiding than other woodpecker species seen elsewhere in Asia.





## Day 1 (30/5): Singapore

This was our first long haul trip where we had booked onto a direct flight, and as a result we had managed to ensure a full day in Singapore before continuing onto the Philippines on an overnight flight. As a result of spending so long in the confines of the plane, and having to fly out again later the same day, we had agreed that a day on Pulau Ubin was a good option, being close to the airport and being somewhat more relaxed than heading into downtown Singapore.

There had been a number of good sightings from Pulau Ubin recently, with a female White-crested Hornbill and no less than two Black and Red Broadbill reported from the area around Chek Jawa. Of much more interest to me were multiple calling Blue-winged and Mangrove Pitta in the area - what would be two new species in my most desired family, in addition to another significant target known to be present on the island, the critically endangered Straw-headed bulbul.

The first species were added as the plane taxied along the runway after landing, with the expected **House Crow**, **Tree Sparrow**, **Javan** and **Common Myna** present and correct around Singapore airport. We managed to locate the bag store in the airport (\$30 for two backpacks), hopped into a taxi and made for the ferry at Changi village. Raucous calls greeted us from the car park, with introduced **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo**, **Tanimbar Corella** and **Red-breasted parakeet** all doing their best to drown out the chorus of **Red Junglefowl** – this species is also present on Pulau Ubin where it is apparently wild, but I couldn't discern any plumage differences between the two populations.

The ferry crossing brought the first **White-bellied Sea-eagles** of the trip, whilst a host of **Asian Glossy Starling** called for anything edible from the covered dock. It was already later in the day than I had hoped (nearly 10am by the time we landed on Pulau Ubin) and beginning to hot up – even after such a long flight any strenuous activity was clearly going to be too much. We opted for a wander around the Sensory trail, and were quickly rewarded with some of the typical birds of south-east Asia; **Yellow-vented Bulbul**, **Oriental Magpie Robin**, **Spotted Dove**, **Pink-necked Green Pigeon**, **Collared Kingfisher**, **Olive-backed Sunbird** but better yet were several very showy **White-rumped Shama**, a beautiful species I had seen previously in Thailand, which is sadly in serious decline largely due to the illegal trade in wild birds across Asia.



*Left: White-rumped Shama, a beautiful songster generally much easier to hear than to see – try telling that to the population on Pulau Ubin!*



Whilst enjoying excellent views of territorial Shama, a loud and slightly yelping staccato call emanated from a nearby patch of slightly trashy forest – the unmistakable sound of a displaying **Blue-winged Pitta** one of my top targets for the trip within the first 30 minutes of arriving on Pulau Ubin! The bird continued calling for approximately 20 minutes, but try as I might, I was unable to get into a position where I could see the bird calling away some 5 meters above my head. After a bit of whistling, I glimpsed a whirr of blue, green, black and white as the bird descended to the ground to investigate my poor attempts at mimicry, but once again the bird was one step ahead, flushing from around the base of a particularly large tree and proving untickable views of its admittedly colourful behind as it flapped back up into the canopy.

Having being caught up in the moment, I had absent-mindedly forgotten my ever patient wife, who was waiting in the shade and remember where I was, and more importantly, why I was here. We continued on our walk, adding some nice species such as **Brown-throated sunbird**, **Common Flameback** and **Olive-winged bulbul**, whilst a persistent call from a patch of mangroves added **Ashy tailorbird** to the day's proceedings.



*Above: Ashy tailorbird can be located by its persistent call.*

A little further on, Kathi drew my attention to several **Oriental Pied Hornbill** gliding between fig trees, whilst **Yellow-vented Bulbul** gave their yaffling, but occasionally melodic calls from trackside vegetation. Two more species were observed but avoided confirmation of their identification, with a small *Accipter* seen gliding overhead, and a silent *Bee-eater spp* doing much the same. A quick look over over Pekan quarry provided the familiar **Grey Heron**, as well as a surprise **Cinnamon-headed Green Pigeon** – the only one of the trip.

Having spent a pleasant few hours wandering slowly around the island, thoughts turned to a late lunch, and we decided to explore the myriad culinary opportunities available at the nearby Changi Hawker market. The return boat journey brought the first **Little** and **Black-naped Tern** of the trip, the latter a new species, and a super smart one at that. Having satiated our gastronomic requirements courtesy of some fine spicy Udon Noodles (Kathi) and Nasi Lemak (yours truly) washed down with some wickedly sweet sugarcane-derived iced syrupy drink, we took a short

stroll through Changi Point park, where I added a few more avian delights; a trio of **Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker** were too engaged in territorial despites to mind me grabbing a few photos.



*Left: Two out of three Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker which gave great views at close range in Changi Point Park.*

More **Pied Hornbill** were busy fig-foraging, joined by some showy **Black-naped Oriole** and **Red-breasted Parakeets**, whilst a group of **Blue-crowned hanging-parrot** frenetically called from tree tops, before launching themselves like little green torpedoes to continue their activities elsewhere. The strident calls of **Olive-backed** and **Brown-throated Sunbird** brought better views of both species, whilst a wander along Changi Creek rewarded us with better views of **Collared Kingfisher** and our first **Striated Heron** of the trip.

*Right: The handsome Red-breasted Parakeet is native throughout much of Asia, with wild populations found as close as southern Thailand and Sumatra. The birds present in Singapore are of a more dubious origin, having naturalised as a result of escapes from the illegal pet trade.*



Soon enough, our short break in Singapore drew to a close, and we headed back to the airport in preparation for our late afternoon departure to the Philippines. Luckily for me, our view from Terminal 3 presented a few further opportunities for some sneaky birding, with the first **Eastern Cattle** and **Intermediate Egrets** of the trip, better still was a hunting **Black-winged Kite** which hovered over the airfield. A slightly rougher patch of grass provided several sightings of **Paddyfield Pipit**, but best of all were two small groups of **White-headed Munia** feeding on seeds.



Two distant birds remained just too far to clinch the identification, but were either **Milky** or **Painted Stork** (or possibly some hybrid combination due to the influence of feral birds which escaped from Jurong during the relocation of the bird park).

It had been a very pleasant first day familiarising myself with some of the species and calls of the region ahead of a slightly more intense travel period (flight to Manila, then five hours of not quite sleeping on the airport floor, before a 4am flight to Puerto Princesa, followed by a day of island hopping – not quite the relaxing and romantic first night of our honeymoon we had anticipated!) however our next stop would be the island of Palawan, our base for the next seven days. There would be ample opportunities for more honeymoon oriented activities, and hopefully the odd hour or two for some birding in the coming week – who needs sleep anyways!

## Day 2 (31.5): Puerto Princesa and Zig-Zag road

Following an overnight flight to Puerto Princesa via Manila, we were due to arrive on Palawan early morning. Given this was something of a spare day, we decided to arrange a hire car with the aim of visiting Pandan island for a few hours before driving across to our accommodation near to the old Zig-Zag road.

Having been met at the airport and now with a set of wheels for five days, we headed north out of Puerto Princesa to Honda Bay harbour – the jumping off point to visit the offshore islands here. There are a range of options that can be done, with a set rate of approx 1500php for a private boat for the day, and landing fees/conservation fees varying between 100php and 900php depending upon which islands you visit.

It is currently not possible to visit Pandan island as there is some legal issue over ownership of the island, and therefore the chances of encountering Mantanani Scops Owl is reduced. We opted to visit Starfish and Cowrie Islands to enjoy some time in the water. Starfish Island has some decent mangroves along its eastern side, and **Grey Imperial Pigeon** was easy to catch up with here. Other species recorded included the first **Golden-bellied Gerygone** and **Philippine Pied Fantail** of the trip, whilst a group of three **White-breasted Woodswallow** showed well whilst we enjoyed brunch.



*Left: The aerobatic feeding behaviour of White-breasted Woodswallow is always a pleasure to watch.*

After enjoying another post-brunch session of Snorkling, we headed across to Pandan Island, where the only new bird of note was **Garden (Olive-Backed) Sunbird**, a distinctive and attractive race endemic to Palawan and its satellites, differing from Olive-backed by the red border to the gorget contrasting against the yellow underparts. After a few hours of splashing about and generally having a nice break, we boarded the banca to return to Honda Bay harbour, where we were accompanied by a mixed flock of **Whiskered** and **White-winged Black tern**, including a smart adult (or 2cy) for much of the journey, briefly departing our course to mob a low flying **White-bellied Sea-eagle**.

Our next stop after some discussion was to be a brief stop so I could walk the trails at the back of the Crocodile Farm (Palawan Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Center as it is rather grandly called now) but this proved to be a thoroughly depressing experience, with clueless tourists gawping at massive (and admittedly impressive) crocodiles crammed into small units with no vegetation or other form of cover – the very worst and most exploitative type of “conservation centre”. We were unable to forgo the tour and just visit the trails, and as a result wasted 45 minutes being led around the exhibits before reaching the trails at the precise time of a huge downpour. **Asian Koel** and a few **Brown-throated Sunbird** were the only species noted here, and I’d probably advise against visiting.

We continued on our journey to our base for the night, Al Hamra Jungle resort, handily located just 10 minutes drive from the old Zig-Zag road. After a few hours rest and relaxation, I decided to scout out the trails and situation at Zig-Zag, with the caveat that I’d be back in time for dinner at half 6.

The site was easy to find, and I parked up at the obvious pull in on the first left hand S-bend – the view over the forest here was quite spectacular (see front cover!) and immediately began birding. First up was a showy pair of vocalising **Hill Myna**, joined by both **Sooty (Ashy)** and **Palawan (Hair-Crested) Drongo**, and a brief **Pygmy Flowerpecker**. Atop a nearby tree was a smart **Blue-naped Parrot**, whilst a trio of **Palawan Hornbill** glided across the view.



*Above: Common Hill Myna and Palawan (Hair-Crested) Drongo showed well in the afternoon along the Zig-Zag Road. Both species are widespread, and form a familiar component of the forest soundscape.*



A bat-like **Pygmy Swiftlet** hawked along the road at eye-level, whilst some strident calls betrayed the presence of **Palawan Tit Babbler** – not bad for the first five minutes out of the car. Several **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird** were also easy to locate once I'd clocked the call, whilst **Common Iora** was observed feeding young. I headed for the lower trail picking up a distant calling **Hooded Pitta**, and the only **King Quail** of the trip in a small agricultural area around some houses along the first section of the trail. I attempted to call in both Palawan Flycatcher and Striated Wren-Babbler in suitable areas of habitat but without success. The first **Palawan (Grey throated)** and **Sulphur-Bellied Bulbul** of the trip providing some compensation, though I was surprised by how elusive both these species were, despite being well represented at most locations I visited.



*Above: Sulphur-bellied Bulbul proved to be a tricky species to photograph, whilst by contrast Palawan Crow was relatively straightforward – this shot taken hand-held with my phone through binoculars!*

Working my way back along the trail, I was treated to great views of a smart **Red-headed Flameback**, a tricky endemic that is surprisingly easy to overlook. A few more views of **Garden Sunbird** and **Palawan Tit Babbler** and it was time for dinner and our first nights sleep in a bed for approximately three days. Around 2am I awoke to hear a deep booming call coming from somewhere with the hotel grounds, and whilst I suspect that this was most likely *Spotted Wood-Owl*, I managed to turn my recorder from “on” to “off” in my sleepy state, and so had no recording to review the following morning!

### **Day 3 (1/6): Zig-Zag road and Sabang**

The day was to start with an pre-dawn visit (the first of many throughout the trip!) to the Zig-Zag road in order to get a first proper introduction to some of the island specialities and enjoy some fairly relaxed birding along the road and the old trail network. I parked up at the same location as the previous day, with **Palawan Crow** making its first rather vocal appearance in the gloom. Yesterday's **Hooded Pitta** was still calling from the same gulley by the road, but I became distracted at a pair of **Purple-throated Sunbird**, **Golden Bellied Gerygone** and **Striped (Thick-billed) Flowerpecker** feeding at eye level from the road. More **Sooty Drongo** were present, with their impressive vocal repertoire ringing through the air. Walking back down the road towards the lower trailhead I enjoyed better views of both **Sulphur-bellied** and **Palawan Bulbul**, both still

diving into thicker cover as I lined them up in my camera viewfinder, the little divas. An interesting hunched shape foraging in the roadside leaf litter briefly got the heart-rate up, although I felt a slightly guilty pang when the bird in my binocular view resolved into a smart **Grey-capped Emerald Dove** rather than the hoped for Pitta. Back along the trail, attempts yet again for Striated Wren-Babbler and Palawan Flycatcher drew another blank, but there was plenty of interest otherwise; **Philippine Pied Fantail**, **Asian Koel** and **Common Iora** joined by more interesting interlopers including **Green Imperial Pigeon**, **Spot-throated Flameback**, **Yellow-throated Leafbird**, **Blue-naped Parrot**, **Palawan Hornbill** and more showy **Palawan Drongo**. Heading back to the road, I drove a little further along the road to try a different area. Of interest, there was a relatively newly created trail (W3W: popularly.galaxies.solder) which is quite easy going, with some suitable habitat for Striated-Wren Babbler (plenty of bamboo), birding along here produced a similar suite of species to further down the road, with a bonus **Palawan Fairy-Bluebird** quietly moving through the canopy. More **Hooded Pitta** called from the deeper recesses and well vegetated gullies, but remained invisible for the time being. A little further along the road I picked up a distant calling **Philippine (Blue-breasted) Pitta** calling from a neighbouring ridge, unfortunately too far to even attempt to go off-piste. The first **Lovely Sunbird** made its appearance, suitably named for its pleasant yellow and red plumage tones, before being moved along rather rapidly by a resident pair of **Garden Sunbird**. By this time, I had already been birding for a couple of hours, and the day was beginning to heat up, so I decided to head back along the road to try the second trailhead. Stepping out of the car, I became aware I was being watched, and looked up to find a cracking **Palawan (Crested) Serpent Eagle** staring at me from a perch not 20m above where I was standing, the bird watched me carefully with piercing eyes, but after a while decided that I didn't look very appetising, and continued scanning for something more palatable.



*Above: A particularly showy Palawan (Crested) Serpent Eagle. Philippine Serpent Eagle was split from Crested recently, and further studies may yet show palawanensis to be a valid taxon in its own right.*

After admiring the raptor for a while, I began once again birding along the road due to the increased activity, with further sightings of **Palawan Bulbul** and **Palawan Tit Babbler**. A flurry of



activity in a nearby tree betrayed the presence of a wonderful **Thick-billed Green Pigeon** engaged in nest building. This was a species I had seen previously, but I spent some time watching the bird carefully selecting the appropriate twig for its rather messy structure, getting my best views of the species.

*Right: Thick-billed Green Pigeon. A scarce species on Palawan, despite the colourful plumage this species is able to disappear into the canopy.*



A loud call drew my attention away from the activities of the pigeon, just in time to witness the formidable grey mass of a **Great Slaty Woodpecker** bounding between trees. The species briefly alighted in a tree, and to my regret, I spent too much time messing about with my camera rather than enjoying this prehistoric looking species, with the result that I managed neither a photo of any kind, or good views as the bird sat momentarily in the open, amateur hour yet again!

Another quick time check, and I had only 30 minutes before I had agreed to meet Kathi for breakfast, I'd factored in 15 minutes for driving and general faffing about, plus 5 minutes to walk back to the car, which optimistically left me with 10 minutes of birding time. Rather than run the risk of being late on our first proper day, I decided to head straight back. I was writing my notes and opening the car door, when a vaguely familiar call resounded from the gulley next to me – I still had the 10 minutes, so I thought I could follow up on it.

I clambered down the gulley into a thickly vegetated area, filled with ratan, universal burden of tropical birders. I waited for the call again before attempting my own whistled version, and the call resounded again, this time much closer. Crouching down, the call came yet again, now only a matter of meters away. In the shadow of the dense understory that much hoped for and unmistakable bounce (poor video [here](#)) – a superb **Philippine Pitta** appeared in my field of view. I quickly learned from my failings just moments before, and just sat on the forest floor as one of my major targets for the trip hopped around completing two loops around me, calling all the while, and occasionally stopping to gulp down a tasty insect that appeared. The bird was a vision of green, red and blue, with a contrasting rusty brown head housing inscrutably large eyes. On the bird's third loop, I dared reach for the camera, capturing a handful of mostly blurred, and generally obscured images of this most sought after species, but I didn't care; day one, morning one and a top target in the bag, along with a host of other goodies. Better yet, the drive back was quicker than I remembered, and I arrived for breakfast with a cool three minutes to spare!

*Below: The “best” images I managed of Philippine Pitta, major kudos if you can find it in both images!*



During breakfast I pointed out a few **Garden** and **Purple-throated Sunbird** to Kathi who made the appropriately impressed noises, though she didn't quite share my enthusiasm for the first **Philippine Jungle Crow** of the trip, I suppose the relative ratios of primary projection against tail length in corvids aren't everyone's idea of a fun honeymoon breakfast conversation topic...

Having packed the car up, we were ready for our next destination of Sabang, which would be our base for the next three nights. With a bit of time to spare, I suggested that we may have a drive up the Napsan road to take in some more of the island that we may otherwise not see, and was delighted when Kathi approved. The journey was a pleasant one, with a few stops at various locations along the road producing **Oriental Dollarbird**, **Collared Kingfisher**, **Oriental Honey-Buzzard**, and a few **Blue-naped Parrot**, whilst some scrutiny of the various dark flapping shapes overhead produced both **Germain's** and **Palawan Swiftlet**.



*Left: Blue-naped Parrot is a declining species, with a range restricted to the Philippines, Borneo and Sulawesi.*

We continued along the road to Sabang, noting the first **White-vented Shama** of the trip, whilst a brief stop at some rice paddies just off the Iwahig junction produced a flock of **Whiskered Tern**, along with a trio of egrets; **Great**, **Intermediate** and **Eastern Cattle**. A few **White-breasted Woodswallow** hawked over the drier areas, whilst the only **Zitting Cisticola** of the trip gave its familiar repetitive call. Small family parties of **Asian Glossy Starling** also foraged through the area, whilst a shout from Kathi produced a brief view of a male **Palawan Fairy Bluebird**.

After a slightly longer journey than expected, we finally arrived at Daluyon Resort in Sabang around mid afternoon. Having checked in and freshened up, there was only one thing to do – no, not head out again to look for endemics – try out the pool and enjoy my first experience at a swim bar. I decided to opt for just one beer so that I could head out again later if the opportunity arose, and enjoyed cooling off to the sound of **Ashy-fronted Bulbul**, **Sooty Drongo** and **Collared Kingfisher**, whilst a **Pygmy Swiftlet** cooled off and took sips from the pool inches away.

Having earned brownie points earlier by arriving early for breakfast, I headed out for a quick recce to the ATV trail, located about 1km down the road. Historically this site has been the go-to location to bird in the Sabang area outside of the National Park, but images on [google maps \(November 2022\)](#) suggested that this has fallen into disrepair, and some observers on ebird mentioned how difficult the trail is to find. The entrance is located on the left side of the road out of Sabang, about 50m south of the Iglesia Ni Christo church at W3W ///elaborate.vicarious.kneel with the track directly opposite a powerline pole marked “PLW0387”. Eventually I managed to find the trail entrance, but as suspected, the trail was impassable beyond the first 50m or so. Further views of **White-vented Shama**, and two great looking additions to the trip – **Palawan Flowerpecker** and **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha** were the best on offer, and despite a closely calling **Hooded Pitta** (unseen as usual) it proved to be a rather frustrating hour or so, so I returned to the hotel via some rice paddies (**Little**, **Intermediate** and **Eastern Cattle Egret** the supporting cast to **White-breasted Waterhen** and **Scaly-breasted Munia**) and finally enjoyed some downtime and a few beers.

## Day 4 (2/6): Underground River National Park and Sabang

Once again it was a pre-dawn start, but not through lack of trying – it appeared that my body clock hadn’t reset, and as a result I was waking up (briefly) around 2am, before waking up properly around 5am. I left Kathi to her sleep, and headed for the Liang lookout some 10km south of Sabang for some early morning birding. A very quick stop at the ATV trail entrance once again provided heard only **Hooded Pitta**, but after failing yesterday I decided to move on quickly. The lookout is quite well known as a good location to see Red-vented Cockatoo flying to roost within the national park, but it also offers some good general birding. Time was a little limited as I needed to be back at the hotel for 8am for the underground river tour, but I wanted to at least scope the area out ahead of returning later to try for the Cockatoos. Parking the car along a section of road cutting through some good primary forest, I immediately lucked in with a pair of **White-bellied Woodpecker** noisily working their way up a tree in the pre-dawn light. An sweet song interjected with rattles betrayed the presence of a male **Palawan Blue Flycatcher**, another top endemic bird seen with minimal effort. **Green Imperial Pigeon** was seen and heard several times, whilst I was unable to pin down a calling **Metallic Pigeon**, despite its deep booming call originating only a short way into the forest. The typical mixture of forest species was in attendance, with good views yet again of **Striped Flowerpecker**, **Lovely Sunbird**, **Palawan Tit Babbler**, **Sooty** and **Palawan Drongo**, and a **Palawan Bulbul** which appeared for just long enough for me to grab a poor record shot. Another **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha** crashed around in the canopy, in the process gaining the attention of a smart **Yellow-throated Leafbird**. The raucous calls of **Collared Kingfisher** reminded me that this family weren’t restricted to riparian habitats, being at home within forest



environments as well. I had a quick scout of the lookout area to get my bearings for later, and headed back to Sabang.

Our trip to the underground river was enjoyable enough in a touristy way, but arriving after 9am when there were already a fair few people around meant that there were limited opportunities for birding. A showy **White-vented Shama** and a distant **Palawan Hornbill** were about the highlights, whilst plenty of *Swiftlet* spp. buzzed in and out of the caves, defying identification. Having enjoyed the tour but been somewhat frustrated by the lack of birding opportunities, I managed to secure a private boat in the harbour office for 6am the following day.



*Left: White-vented Shama is a smart endemic, and not uncommon in suitable habitat. The species can be surprisingly confiding, responding well to general whistling.*

The afternoon was spent enjoying some seafood and a lengthy session in the pool, before I headed out for a few hours birding around 4pm. I arrived at the lookout for 4:20pm, and seven minutes later was treated to three **Philippine Cockatoo** flying to their roost, contrasting nicely against the green of the forest and the grey cliffs. Several **Philippine Jungle Crow** were obvious and very vocal, as was a fine **Palawan Drongo**. I had good views of a trio of **Green Imperial Pigeon** foraging for fruits and flying between the trees. Once again a calling **Hooded Pitta** took me off-piste and into a vegetated gully, but I eventually became distracted by a very showy **Palawan Blue Flycatcher** singing just meters above my head. I followed a trail a short way (see notes under Palawan trails and access) where the same suite of species was present, along with a smart **Black-naped Monarch** and an incredibly showy pair of **Palawan Flowerpecker**, a vastly underrated species, and one which illustrations don't quite do justice. A fly-by **Blue-headed Racquet-tail** was to be one of only two seen during the trip, and sadly didn't linger for better views or any attempt at photos. Both **Sulphur-bellied** and **Palawan Bulbul** showed a little better, whilst a scolding trill followed by a slightly discordant and somewhat melancholy melody betrayed **Melodious Babbler**, which gave only partial and heavily obscured views as it moved around at low levels. A pair of fine **Spot-throated Flameback** rounded the day off well, whilst the earlier calling **Hooded Pitta** had clearly been taking notes from its cousin on Pulau Ubin, as a shadowy rounded mass hopped off the trail in front of me just as I reached the car. I arrived back at the

hotel at the very sociable time of 7pm, ready to enjoy another fine dinner and a few drinks – it was meant to be a honeymoon after all!

## Day 5 (3/6): Underground River National Park, Sabang

Yet another early start saw me arriving at the harbour in Sabang for 05:30. Having read a few trip reports previously where early boats had been booked but the crew didn't materialise for some time afterwards, I must admit I was a little skeptical. It transpired that my cynicism was misplaced, as I was greeted by the boatmen half an hour early, and was on my way to the park HQ. At least I was for the first five minutes until there was an issue with the propellor. Undeterred, we switched boats with more success, and after a five minute delay we were on our way – still earlier than arranged I may add.

Arriving at the park HQ, I was pleased to note I was the first person around, as not even the park staff were awake! The birds came thick and fast, with a slightly frustrating observation off the boat – a pair of small crane or possibly partridge type birds which disappeared into the undergrowth before I could lift my bins. Much easier were the several **Tabon Scrubfowl** in the vegetation immediately behind the beach, occasionally giving their police-siren calls. Up in the canopy two separate calling **Black-chinned Fruit Dove** remained out of view, a shame given their beautiful appearance. A pair of **Palawan Blue Flycatcher** gave good calls until they were chased off by a **White-vented Shama**. A very distinctive rattling call led me to one of my top target species for the trip, with a stunning **Blue Paradise Flycatcher** calling in the open – as it opened its bill a shocking yellow gape positively glowed in the dank understory.



*Above: Paradise Blue Flycatcher is a sought after endemic, so this bird showing within the hotel grounds was a pleasant surprise.*

Further activity in the treetops revealed **Green Imperial Pigeon**, until my eyes were drawn to some activity on an exposed bough – a pair of **Spot-throated Flameback** were engaged in a dispute with a **Red-headed Flameback**. There can be few other people lucky enough to have seen these two species perched together in the same tree.





*Left: Whilst far from the best photo of either species, it was quite unexpected to chance upon both Red-headed and Spot-throated Flameback sharing the same tree.*

I wandered back along the Jungle Trail towards the cave entrance, enjoying another close encounter with **White-vented Shama**, when I picked up a mixed species flock comprised of **Palawan Tit Babbler** and **Sulphur-bellied, Ashy-throated** and **Palawan Bulbul**. A persistent call from the treetops brought the first **Palawan Spiderhunter** of the first trip. A wander around the cave entrance brought a few more sightings of yesterday's *Swiftlet* species, but whilst pondering their identity a combo of **Palawan Hornbill** and **Collared Kingfisher** drew my attention away. A flash of colour and a high pitched call were the only tell-tale evidence of an incredibly brief **Oriental Dwarf-kingfisher** which blasted through the forest without stopping. A brief movement a few meters into the jungle at ground level stopped me in my tracks – I'd heard a few already this morning (and quite a number already over the last few days) but finally a shape I'd last seen from a boat on the Kinabatangan river years ago came into sharp focus – a knock-out **Hooded Pitta!**



*Above: Whilst not the best photos, there is no mistaking Hooded Pitta. Birds don't get better than this.*

Astonishingly, no less than three Hooded Pitta appeared over the next 15 minutes or so, all of them behaving in a completely un-pitta like fashion, parading up and down the main trail foraging, calling and posing for quite frankly astonishing views. One individual was particularly bold, and



approached me within 3 meters - a better photographer than me (not difficult!) would have absolutely nailed the bird as subjects, but once I'd gotten a few acceptable images, I was more than content to just crouch on the floor and watch the birds behave in a completely natural manner. It was already nearly 30°C and having forgotten my insect repellent I was being absolutely eaten alive, but I was in birding nirvana – there were no leeches either, bonus!

Having had my fill of Hooded Pitta and a generally enjoyable morning exploring as far as was physically possible given the state of the Jungle Trail, I took my leave back once the first tourists began arriving around half eight. The remainder of the day was generally spent lounging around at the pool, though I still managed a few birds; the seemingly resident **Collared Kingfisher**, **Sooty Drongo** and a handful of **Pygmy Swiftlet** were all present and correct around the pool, whilst a slightly more vegetation area near to our room held a few **Ashy-fronted Bulbul**, as well as **Garden Sunbird**, and a small group of **White-bellied** and **Scaly-breasted Munia**. A **Palawan Hornbill** put in a brief appearance in one of the fruiting trees within the hotel grounds, whilst the best held out until near dusk, when I picked up another **Paradise Blue Flycatcher** singing just a few meters from our cabina – again that yellow gape was almost illuminating as the bird sang.

## Day 6 (4/6): Sabang to El Nido

Another day, and another pre-dawn start. Having enjoyed some fine birding in the vicinity of the Liang Lookout, I decided that a final early morning session before we left Sabang was in order. The morning started strongly with a calling **Palawan Tit**, my first and only of the trip – I was surprised by quite how tricky this species had been to pin down. Sadly the bird kept to the canopy allowing for only neck-breaking views as I strained to follow its progress through the foliage. There were a number of other birds up there too; **Lovely Sunbird** which was yet again being terrorized, this time by a combo of **Striped** and **Palawan Flowerpecker**. The calling **Hooded Pitta** was still present and correct in the heavily vegetated gulley, and was responding well to my impressions until a particularly loud motorbike flushed it back into the deeper recesses of the forest. Luckily the same could not be said of the **Palawan Blue Flycatcher**, which was completely nonplused by such anthropogenic activities.



*Above: Palawan Blue Flycatcher and Palawan Tit Babbler both performed well along the Sabang Road.*

A noisy group of **Palawan Tit Babbler** moved through, pulling in a **Copper-throated Sunbird**, the male flashing his impressive yellow auxiliaries when a **Garden Sunbird** got a little too close.

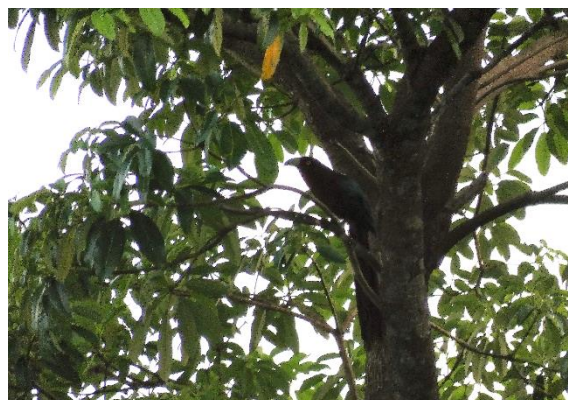
Continuing along the road, what was presumably the same **White-bellied Woodpecker** was showing well in the same general area as previously, with a brief **Purple-throated Sunbird** also putting in an appearance. Whilst looking at the tree tops, I was stopped in my tracks by four creamy-white shapes perched up some 40m north of the lookout – **Red-vented Cockatoo**!



*Above: Initial views of the critically endangered Red-vented Cockatoo were improved with a bit of fieldcraft.*

Although this species can reliably be observed within Puerto Princesa, seeing these four birds in the early morning light of primary forest just felt more real, and it was a real pleasure to watch the species at relatively close range behaving in a natural manner in such beautiful surroundings. With just 430-750 mature individuals Red-vented Cockatoo easily represents one of the rarest birds I've seen in the wild.

After a while the birds moved off, and I continued walking along the road. After a brief lull in activity, things picked up again with yet more **Palawan Drongo** investigating a family party of **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha**, which in turn did their best to avoid my camera. Much more obliging was a fine **Yellow-throated Leafbird**, which posed rather well on a wayward branch protruding over the road.



*Above: Yellow-throated Leaf bird showed well enough to photograph, whilst the same couldn't be said of Chestnut-breasted Malkoha.*

More **Green Imperial Pigeon** were actively foraging, whilst yet again **Metallic Pigeon** called unseen in virtually the same location as two days prior. **Pygmy Swiftlet** continued to forage along the road in their bat-like fashion, whilst both **Palawan** and **Germain's Swiftlet** fed over the forest.



Re-tracing my route back towards the car brought a few of the more regular species to the day's proceedings, with **Ashy-throated** and **Palawan Bulbul**, **Black-naped Oriole**, **Rufous-headed Tailorbird**, **Spotted Dove**, **Asian Koel**, **White-vented Shama** and **Black-naped Monarch** all present and correct, whilst a bit of time scanning the canopy revealed small numbers of **Striped** and **Palawan Flowerpecker**, as well as a smart **Palawan Spiderhunter**, deftly gleaning invertebrates from the blossoms with its preposterously ungainly bill.

Once again time was ticking on, and with activity beginning to wane around 9am, I headed back in the direction of Sabang to prepare for what would essentially be a long travel day to El Nido. One final stop overlooking the rice paddies near to Lion Cave brought a final treat for the morning, with a highly vocal pair of **Oriental Hobby** engaging in break-neck courtship flights and occasional bouts of copulation. These sleek and swarthy falcons were technically a new bird for me, with poor views of a distant bird (read as hazy rufous and sooty blob 2km away) in Thailand the only previous experience I had had during my travels in Asia, and I was pleased to enjoy good views of the bird as they flew as close as 15m from where I was standing.

Having packed and checked out of our very pleasant base in Sabang, our next stop would be at Salvacion junction to drop off our hire car and catch a ride in a private minivan to El Nido. One final avian highlight came as we neared the junction, with Kathi pointing out a smart **Oriental Honey Buzzard** which flew over the car and landed in a tree, a bit of minor maneuvering and I managed a record shot, all without causing a major traffic incident too.



*Left: Oriental Honey Buzzard is always a treat on any trip to Asia, this individual shows characteristics of the Orientalis race, a scarce passage migrant to the Philippines.*

Roughly five hours later (including one stop to enjoy a delicious cucumber and lime smoothie) we finally arrived in El Nido, which was to be our base for the next three nights before leaving Palawan to island hop our way across to Coron. Birding was to take a bit of a backseat over the next five days, with more time on (and in) the ocean, as well as some downtime to enjoy more “normal” activities.

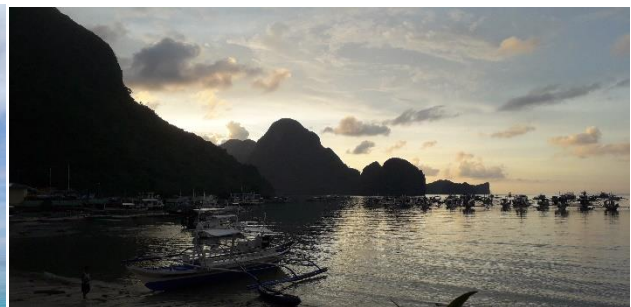


## Day 7 (5/6): El Nido

Finally, a bit of a lay-in ahead of undertaking our first trip ("Tour A") with just two bird species noted from our accommodation during breakfast; **Ashy-fronted Bulbul** and **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird**. Tour A visited Big and Secret Lagoons, Nine Commando Beach and Shimizu Island, with birds seen during the day including **Black-naped Tern**, **White-bellied Sea-eagle**, **Asian Glossy Starling** and **Purple-throated Sunbird**.

## Day 8 (6/6): El Nido

Another day to be spent out on and in the water, this time enjoying Tour C which offered some fantastic snorkeling, with interesting encounters with **Ocellaris Clownfish**, various **Parrotfish**, **Copperband Butterfish**, **Black-spotted Pufferfish** and **Cigar Wrasse**. It was another quiet day for birds, with the first **Eastern Reef Egret** of the trip – a smart dark morph – being the main highlight, whilst six **Black-naped Tern**, a pair of **Collared Kingfisher** and a few **House Swallow** being the best of the rest.



*Sometimes taking a break from birding is acceptable, such as when visiting Isla Cagdanao (left) or El Nido (above).*

## Day 9 (7/6): El Nido to Coron cruise (El Nido to Darocatan)

After a couple of days attempting to get my sea-legs, I was to be thrown in at the deep end (often quite literally) with the start of a three-day cruise from El Nido to Coron with Buhay Isla. These cruises were marketed as a unique opportunity to visit some of the more remote islands, and explore higher quality reefs without hordes of tourists – a bold claim, but I'm delighted to say that they delivered, and then some. As we would be heading on and off the boat for activities multiple times, we were informed to pack a small bag with just what we'd require for the three days, with our remaining luggage stored safely in the hold. Unfortunately I decided to stow my camera away, and as a result missed out on a few photo opportunities. Our route took us to some relatively unblemished reefs which got better as each day passed, whilst occasionally providing some opportunities for birding. A calling **Hooded Pitta** was remarkable from a tiny speck of an island with approximately 50m<sup>2</sup> of vegetation, I'm sure the bird would've been fairly easy to locate had I

managed to drag myself away from the shoals of tropical fish just offshore. **Black-naped Tern** became a daily fixture throughout the cruise, with some vocal pairs seen well nesting on rocky coastal cliffs. **Collared Kingfisher** were also regular, with birds regularly seen hunting the shores of most islands we passed. After a fine day at sea, we made it to our camp on Isla Darocatan (I think) an hour or so before sunset – just enough time for me to sneak off for an hours birding before dinner. First up was a persistent down-slurred rather nasal call which lead me to my first **Ashy-headed Babbler** of the trip which was undertaking a snazzy little side-step along the floor. A few **Ashy-fronted Bulbul** were also in attendance, as were a pair of **Palawan Drongo**, upsetting the local **Collared Kingfishers**. The rather raucous calls of **Philippine Jungle Crow** reverberated around a small clearing, whilst a **Garden Sunbird** whizzed around extracting the last drops of nectar before nightfall. As I walked back to the camp to enjoy a rum and coke, another dark morph **Pacific Reef Heron** glided past, before alighting in the shallows to pick out small fish. A few rum and cokes later and I was ready for an early night, though my age was beginning to catch up with me – around 2am I had to answer the call of nature, only for the laser gun response to come from a **Large-tailed Nightjar** calling unseen near the camp toilets.

## **Day 10 (8/6): El Nido to Coron cruise (Darocatan to Linapacan)**

The next morning I was up early and slightly hungover, and as a result a spot of pre-breakfast birding was in order to clear my head. First up a singing **Melodious Babbler** was just the antidote needed to start the day on a positive note, whilst good views of a **Palawan Spiderhunter** also lifted the fog somewhat. A few other key players of the forest put in an appearance, with **White-vented Shama** and **Pygmy Flowerpecker** joining yesterdays **Ashy-fronted Bulbul**, **Philippine Jungle Crow** and **Collared Kingfisher**. Around camp, a couple of **White-bellied Munia** appeared after breakfast to beg for scraps. Once again it was time to board the banka, and head out for another day on the high seas.

An early stop was “Angry-bird Island” whose name was sadly lost somewhat in translation. There weren’t many angry birds to be seen, with five pristine **Pied Imperial Pigeon** and a **Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo** giving its persistent and rather toneless six-note call.

A morning of snorkeling following a poor nights sleep courtesy of the Tanduay Rhum cooperation meant that the afternoon was spent dosing, with the outcome that I slept through the best part of three quarters of our visit to Isla Cagdanao. Luckily, Kathi had a wonderful snorkeling experience involving a **Hawksbill Turtle**, and heading back to the boat noticed “loads of birds” and decided I may want to be conscious to experience this beautiful place. I dragged myself off the boat onto the powdery white sand, and then experienced one of the most frenetic 15 minutes birding of the trip; huge mounds of sand eluded to the presence of **Tabon Scrubfowl**, but it was the species physically present which made a big impact; **Hooded Pitta**, **Philippine Pied Fantail**, **Collared Kingfisher**, **Common Hill Myna**, **Asian Glossy Starling**, **White-vented Shama** and **Garden Sunbird** were all very pleasant if not unexpected; **Grey** and **Pied Imperial Pigeon** were much more notable, whilst a day singing **Large-tailed Nightjar** was an additional bonus. A couple of **White-breasted Wood Swallow** and a fine male **Lovely Sunbird** rounded off a very pleasant quarter of an hour, it was just a shame that I’d slept through much of our time there.

A few more stops to enjoy the marine life, and we made our final port of call at the Buhay Isla camp just west of Bulawit, Linapacan. The camp consisted of a few traditional bamboo huts scattered along a beach opposite the beautiful Gintu island, and another pre-dinner amble highlighted the fairly abundant bird life within the vicinity; **Black-naped Oriole** and a few **White-breasted Wood Swallow** were joined by **Palawan** and **Sooty Drongo** in the tree tops, whilst lower down **White-vented Shama**, **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird**, **Garden Sunbird** were joined by **Pygmy Flowerpecker**, **Asian Glossy Starling** and a brief, interesting view of a pale grey moderately sized passerine which disappeared quickly. Another evening, and another session on the local rum, until we were whisked away by our hosts to a quiet location – had they some bad news to inform us? It turned out that they had found out it was our honeymoon, and had constructed a beautiful private dining area (complete with bottle of wine!) encircled by a flaming heart – a really genuinely beautiful surprise, and once again showing the kindness of Philipinos.



*Above: A wonderful surprise courtesy of Buhay Isla, and the view at sunrise the following day.*

Having enjoyed this thoughtful moment, I took a romantic stroll over to the toilets before bed, and was somewhat shocked to hear a deep, growling bark coming from some nearby trees. I whistled a poor version and the call got louder – whatever it was, it was clearly interested. I quickly scrambled to retrieve my spotting torch from the depths of my pack. I whistled the bird in, and was somewhat astonished to see a small owl glaring back at me. Having no access to my camera I was determined to document the record somehow, and I managed to obtain a [very poor recording](#) on Kathi's mobile. The following morning I was able to confirm my suspicion by cross-referencing the recording against the downloaded calls on the birdsounds app – the bird was a cracking **Mantanani Scops Owl** – a tricky and highly localised species I hadn't at all expected to catch up with. In the event that anyone should find themselves in this area, the bird frequented the patch of forest containing *Ficus* and bamboo immediately behind the beach (and the toilet block) at W3W//pollinated.empire.carbon.

## **Day 11 (9/6): El Nido to Coron cruise (Linapacan to Coron)**

Another beautiful day dawned, and with it a pre-breakfast wander around the camp grounds. Sadly there was no sight nor sound of last night's *Otus*, but there were plenty of other birds around. Yesterdays mystery grey passerine transpired as a pair of beautiful **Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike** –



something of a “tarts tick” given I’d previously visited no fewer than 4 countries where the species occurs, but still subtly beautiful in a subdued fashion. The same species recorded the previous afternoon were all still present and correct, whilst new birds included a smart **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, **Ashy-fronted Bulbul**, **Purple-throated** and **Copper-throated Sunbirds**, **Philippine Jungle Crow**, **Pink-necked Green Pigeon** and brief views of **Black-naped Monarch**.

*Right: White-bellied Sea Eagle is an impressive species, and can regularly be seen fishing along the coast and occasionally further out to sea.*



Our final day at sea proved to be one of the most successful in terms of marine life, with the undisputed standout a rather brief adult **Black-tipped Reef Shark** cruising along the edge of a drop off. Snorkeling around the Lusong Coral Garden was one of the standouts, with a diversity of marine life that neither of us had experienced previously, whilst a surprise **Brown-breasted Kingfisher** along the coast here was a bit of a surprise – this species appears to be absent from the area. Other species recorded en-route to Coron included numerous **Black-naped** and **Sooty Tern**, the latter occasionally passing the boat close enough to obtain a few images.

*Below: Sooty (left) and Black-naped Terns (right) were frequently observed during the cruise, sadly too fast for much more than the occasional record shot.*



We arrived on Coron around 6pm, and negotiated a tricycle to take us to our accommodation at the Riverhouse, an hour’s drive away in Decalachao. The journey took us through some breathtaking mountainous scenery, noticeably different from Palawan, though views were short-lived as the sun set. Arriving in darkness, our tricycle couldn’t make it the last 500m up the steep and rocky track so there was nothing for it but a hot and sticky hike the remainder of the way carrying both backpacks – a casual additional 35kg in the 32° evening heat. We were greeted by cold beer and vegetable adobo, as well as a singing **Large-tailed Nightjar**, a very pleasant way to cool off after the brief but intense exercise.

## Day 12 (10/6): Coron

The main reason for our visit to Coron was to attempt to see Dugong, with success rates of between 50% – 80% it appeared that there was a more than reasonable chance to catch up with this species, a much desired mammal tick for Kathi. Once again I opted for a gentle morning wander to explore the immediate environs around our accommodation, almost immediately managing to flush a feeding **Hooded Pitta** from outside our room. This individual was the first of at least four birds present immediately around the hotel grounds, with one individual later observed singing from our bathroom window whilst I used the facilities – undoubtedly the best birds I've even seen from a toilet. Some of the regulars were out in force, with **Purple-throated Sunbird**, **Asian Glossy Starling**, **Sooty Drongo**, **White-vented Shama**, **Palawan Flowerpecker**, **Ashy-fronted Bulbul** and **White-bellied Munia** all noted, whilst a singing **Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo** provided some interest during breakfast.



*Above: This particular branch next to the dining area proved popular with a range of species, with Sooty Drongo and Ashy-fronted Bulbul showing particularly well.*

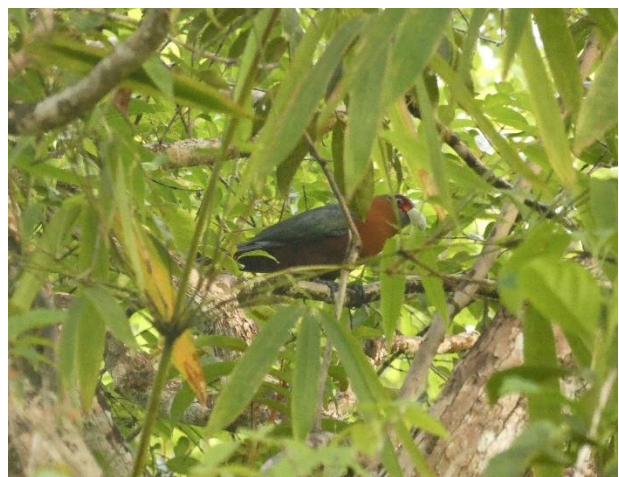
Soon enough it was time to head out onto the water once more, this time for more mammalian targets. A couple of passerines heading rapidly onshore resolved into **Red Collared Dove**, whilst another *Columbidae* feeding along the shoreline at the Dugong Dive Centre was the first **Philippine Collared Dove** of the trip, a rather scarce bird now. Heading out to sea, a mixed flock of **Whiskered**, **White-winged Black** and **Black-naped Tern** were feeding on small fish fleeing Tuna. We spent approximately two hours searching for Dugong, but sadly they just weren't playing ball today, with our sharp eyed guides managing to pick out the snout of a male occasionally coming up for air, by pure fluke I managed a sequence of photos showing this, but we couldn't really claim to have seen it. Undeterred, we headed out to Dimaqui Island to enjoy arguably the best snorkeling of our entire trip, encountering **Stingray**, **Green Turtle**, huge shoals of **Jackfish** as well as a whole assortment of clownfish, angelfish, wrasse, parrotfish, corals and clams – truly spectacular. Although the island is private and we were unable to land, that didn't stop us from enjoying good views of a large colony of **Palawan Fruit Bat** which roost on the island. Another attempt to see Dugong on the return loop was hampered by a stiff breeze whipping up the water, and despite the best efforts of our guides, we had to admit defeat and returned to our hotel without the hoped for encounter with the Sea-Cow.

Another long day on the sea had pretty much wiped me out, so I opted to enjoy some more good food and a few beers with Kathi rather than heading out for an evening wander in search of more birds.

## Day 13 (11/6): Coron to Singapore

Our final day in the Philippines dawned cooler than previously, and was ideal for my last few hours of birding before heading off to Singapore. Having managed to check the surrounding environment briefly on google, I decided that a walk down the access road to the river dock may be a fairly relaxing way to start the day, once again the Philippines were to deliver beyond all expectations. The regular **Large-tailed Nightjar** was still calling behind our room, whilst the early risers providing the initial soundtrack included **Asian Koel**, **Ashy-fronted Bulbul** and several **Hooded Pitta**. A bit of stirring movement came from a **Pink-necked Green Pigeon** leaving its roost, whilst a quartet of **Palawan Drongo** called wildly at their own reflection on a metallic water tower, confused by the interlopers precisely matching their every move and call. Heading down the access road brought no less than two **Hooded Pitta** foraging along the roadside, and I spent a while watching their early morning routine with interest. A pair of **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird** mobbed a **Sooty Drongo** that was clearly too close to their nest, whilst a **Rufous Kingfisher** passed through the trees like some terrestrial comet. A few **Pygmy Flowerpecker** joined a trio of sunbirds – **Lovely**, **Garden** and **Purple-throated** - as well as a **Black-naped Monarch** in a fruiting tree during a brief downpour, whilst yet another **Hooded Pitta** (at least the fifth individual this morning!) enjoyed a bath in a roadside puddle after the road had passed.

*Below: Chestnut-breasted Malkoha proved a tricky species to photograph during the trip, but was nonetheless a rather attractive species to spend time observing.*



A little further down the road, a bit of pishing brought in a fine **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha** which patiently posed for some (obscured) photos. A small side trail just before the dock lead through an area of low vegetation dominated by Ratan and Bamboo which looked great for Palawan Flycatcher, but again this species refused to play ball. The sixth **Hooded Pitta** of the morning was some form of compensation, and looked a lot better amongst the tangle of vegetation than the previous individuals how had abandoned the forest for the seemingly more attractive dirt roads.



A couple of endemics turned up, with the best views of the trip of **Palawan Crow**, as well as a more retiring **Yellow-throated Leafbird**. Overhead the calls of **Blue-tailed Bee-eater** announced the arrival of a group of twelve individuals, deftly dispatching several dragonflies with unparalleled aerial prowess. **Palawan Bulbul** was joined by a fine **Sulphur-bellied Bulbul**, the latter species seemingly either under recorded or previously unknown from Coron.



*Above: Garden Sunbird (left) and Palawan Drongo (right) enjoying a refreshing downpour.*

**Philippine Jungle Crow** and presumably the same **Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo** remained vocal yet unseen during the morning, whilst **Brown-throated Sunbird**, **Asian Glossy Starling** and **White-bellied Munia** rounded off the pre-breakfast stroll in a more low-key manner.

As we didn't necessarily have much to do before our mid-afternoon departure back to Singapore via Cebu, Kathi opted to relax with a book, and I spent a few hours watching from our balcony which had great views over the forest and river, just letting the birds come to me. This proved to be a relatively successful venture, with the changeable weather providing a good level of activity, with common species such as **Asian Glossy Starling**, **Garden Sunbird**, **Sooty** and **Ashy-fronted Bulbul** in view much of the time, whilst species passing through included more **Blue-tailed Bee-eater** and **Eastern Cattle Egret**, as well as a single **Striated Heron**. More unusual species inevitably put in an appearance, with two more sightings of **Hooded Pitta**, as well as **Oriental Dollarbird**, **Palawan Flowerpecker**, **Red Collared Dove**, and two male **Paradise Blue Flycatcher** engaged in territorial disputes. Better still, a lovely little female **Violet Cuckoo** appeared at eye level which upset the resident sunbird population.

All too soon, our time in the Philippines had drawn to a close, and we departed our accommodation for the rather brief taxi journey to Coron Airport. It transpired that arriving at least two hours prior to a flight was not really necessary, as the airport had a single runway and a terminal building not much larger than my work office! The location of the airport within an agricultural landscape of grazing pasture and rice paddies seemed like a final opportunity to add a few more species to the Philippine leg of our travels, and after gaining verbal permission to walk

back through security (try doing that at any other airport!), I headed back into the heat one last time, whilst Kathi sensibly enjoyed air-con and ice cold drinks.

First up was an absolutely stonking **nautus Long-tailed Shrike** which provided walk away views, hunting for grasshoppers down to just a few meters. Next up was a song I couldn't quite place, being slightly reminiscent of a lark, with the bird eventually flying up onto an overhead wire where I could positively identify it as a **Striated Grassbird**. There were several singing from an overgrown grassy field, their languid flight reminding me of Corn Bunting back home.



*Clockwise from bottom: Lesser Coucal, Long-tailed Shrike (nautus) and Striated Grassbird. Fairly typical species of agricultural areas across Asia, but much better than local TV in an airport lounge.*

Next up I turned my attention to the **Swiftlets** (finally) with **Pygmy, Philippine** and **Germain's** all present and correct. Widespread species such as **Red Collared Dove, Tree Sparrow, Spotted Dove, Pacific Swallow, Asian Glossy Starling** and **Philippine Pied Fantail** also provided some distraction ahead another long period of travelling, whilst there was one last treat in store. A chestnut and black bird with a long tail flew across the field and landed in a tangle a few meters away, the delicate striations to the mantle confirming the bird as **Lesser Coucal**, another widespread, but new bird for me.

An early arrival at Cebu airport gave me my last chance to add to my Philippine list, though the species list composition was virtually the same as at Coron; **Striated Grassbird, Long-tailed Shrike** being the best on offer, with other species including **Spotted Dove, Tree Sparrow, Philippine Swiftlet** and **Asian Glossy Starling**.

## Day 14 (12/6): Singapore

Safely in Singapore after a rather arduous journey involving a maximum of four hours (not-quiet) sleep on the floor of Cebu Airport and some tasty waffles, we were now well into the final leg of our journey. We had only a vague plan of what we wanted to do, with the only “essentials” being a return to Pulau Ubin (for me), Singapore Zoo (for Kathi) and Gardens by the Bay (mutual interest). Arriving around 2am, the very last thing I was interested in was another dawn start, but unfortunately my body thought otherwise, shocking me awake after a measly three hours of sleep. I was knackered, but my restlessness wouldn't be appreciated by my better half, so I crept out of the hotel for a couple of hours around Changi village, with a plan to return valiantly with some nice stuff for breakfast around 8am.



*Above: White-throated Kingfisher and Oriental Pied Hornbill are common in Singapore, giving a taste of the exotic avifauna even within an urban environment.*

In the early morning light, bird activity was high, surprisingly so for a tree lined car park outside of our hotel, with **Oriental Pied Hornbill**, **Asian Glossy Starling**, **Tree Sparrow**, **Javan** and **Common Myna**, **Collared Kingfisher**, **Red Junglefowl** and **Yellow-vented Bulbul** ubiquitous in pretty much any vegetated area. A smart **Pink-necked Green Pigeon** flapped overhead in the direction of Changi Point, whilst noisy groups of **Long-tailed** and **Red-breasted Parakeets** joined with the chorus of raucous calls given by **Tanimbar Corella** and **Yellow-crested Cockatoo**. Thanks to the pet trade, Singapore is a hotbed of all manner of exotic escapes, many of which have become established, occasionally to the detriment of native species. Continuing towards Changi Point, a **White-bellied Sea Eagle** drifted silently overhead and out over the channel, whilst the chipping calls of **Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker** rang out from some of the larger trees. Into the park, and more common species appeared in due course, with **Black-naped Oriole**, **Common Iora**, **Oriental Magpie-robin** in the more vegetated areas, whilst **Large-billed** and **House Crow** joined the ranks of **Asian Glossy Starling**, **Tree Sparrow**, **Spotted** and **Zebra Dove** scrabbling for scraps handed out by an elderly gentleman. The gentle cooing of introduced **Red-collared Dove** was disturbed by the shrill piping calls of **White-throated Kingfisher**, which flew down to grab an insect from the sand before perching atop a discarded sandcastle, posing superbly for photographs. Another large raptor sailed overhead and raising my binoculars for the expected pied plumage of a certain large eagle, I was surprised to see the contrasting grey, brown



and white of an adult **Grey-headed Fish-eagle** heading for Pulau Ubin. Continuing west through the park and back in the direction of our hotel further passerine activity was obvious, with **Common Tailorbird**, **Olive-backed Sunbird**, **Golden-bellied Gerygone**, **Pied Fantail** and a smart male **Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker**, whilst movement higher up in the canopy caught my attention and an unfamiliar bird appeared in my field of vision; **Black-throated Laughingthrush** as I would later find out, my initial research suggesting this to be something of a rarity, before confirmation from a friend who cross-referenced ebird that this was yet another species which had become established in the wild. Activity began to tail off a little, and I felt a need for caffeine – it was time for breakfast.

Later that morning we had finally decided to visit Pasir Ris park (where there was a resident family of Spotted Wood-owl) before heading to Gardens by the Bay for the afternoon. Sadly no sign of the Owls, with **Red Junglefowl**, **Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker** and only the second **White-breasted Waterhen** of the trip the only birds seen within the park. Heading towards the mangrove boardwalk, we had noted that the clouds were building, and less than 15 minutes later we were running for the cover of one of the canopy shelters dotted around. The rain was unrelenting, and with no sign of it abating, we both promptly fell asleep on the benches! An hour later I awoke, and it was still raining, looking up at the sky confirming that there was still no shortage of water to fall, as well as providing views of **Germain's Swiftlet**, **Palm Swift**, **Pacific Swallow** and best of all, the formidable scything form of a **Brown-backed Needletail**.



*Above: Black-naped Oriole and Yellow-vented bulbul, both common species but good subjects even on a rainy day.*

Eventually the rain did stop, and we continued along the boardwalk, enjoying several large **Monitor** as well as **Fiddler Crab** within the mangroves. A brief stop at the birdwatching tower provided a somewhat unlikely addition to the trip list in the form of **Purple Heron**, whilst more expected species included **Blue-tailed** and **Blue-throated Bee-eater**, **Little Spiderhunter**, **Brown-throated Sunbird** and **Common Iora**. Our journey back towards the taxi rank by the park entrance was once again curtailed by a huge downpour, which we decided to brave after roughly 50 minutes due to the sheer boredom of being trapped once again under the pagoda.

Our last port of call for the day were the renowned Gardens by the Bay, as the synthetic mega-trees were one of the touristy places we didn't want to miss. Unfortunately the rain also scuppered our plans here, with the super-tree observatory only partially open, and the tree-top walkway closed due to "inclement" weather. We enjoyed a walk through the grove and around the various

gardens and water features, all of which were very pleasant, if highly manicured. There were birds here too, though the composition was effectively the very same as at Changi Point and Pasir Ris, with the only additional species of note being **Oriental Dollarbird**, **Crested Goshawk**, **Ashy Tailorbird**, two **Little Tern** and a smart **Red-whiskered Bulbul** – yet another naturalised species, albeit a very smart one.



*Above: Tanimbar Corella and Red-whiskered Bulbul, just two of 22 naturalised species in Singapore.*

It had been a rather wet day with some highs and lows, though dinner at Changi Hawker market found us enjoying delicious food and cold beer with one final surprise in store – my first taste of the infamous Durian fruit. Once tried, never forgotten, even if it did result in me having to walk 10 feet behind Kathi and brushing my teeth three times before bedtime!

## **Day 15 (13/6): Singapore**

The final full day of our trip, and my last chance to catch up with some of my target species. There was only one destination on my radar this morning, and at five AM, I joined a few other intrepid birders boarding the first boat of the day to Pulau Ubin. Having staked out a highly vocal pitta two weeks previously, I was in place behind the police building well before sunrise. The first bird of the morning was something of a surprise – a calling **Savannah Nightjar** hunting insects, occasionally illuminated by a street lamp. **Asian Koel** and **Oriental Magpie** were the next to awaken, shortly to be joined by a singing **White-rumped Shama**.

By 06:45 I had already heard a number of Pittas calling from other areas, but my “done-deal” bird had seemingly either done a bunk or remained silent. With daylight increasing, I opted to begin my loop of the sensory trail in the hope that I would simply bump into an unsuspecting pitta feeding on the trail à la Hooded Pitta.

I continued along the trail which remained pitta free, though there were other species around to keep my enthusiasm levels up; **Pink-necked Green Pigeon** and **Pied Hornbill** were pleasant, but somewhat old hat by this time, much more pleasant were **Olive-winged Bulbul** and the first **Stork-billed Kingfisher** of the trip. Even better were a duo of woodpeckers, a brief **Rufous** which alighted on a tree before continuing on its rounds before I could even lift my bins, and a slightly more showy **Laced Woodpecker** which flew in and landed so close to me that I had to carefully swing my camera around at hip level to grab a photo to avoid flushing this smart bird.



*Left: Laced Woodpecker, a new member of the genus for me, and my 43<sup>rd</sup> species of woodpecker.*

Continuing along the trail towards the midpoint, it became clear that **Blue-winged Pitta** activity was hotting up, with no less than 3 birds within earshot. I hurried along to where the trail joins the road, and finally that double note call was ringing loud and clear from some trees to my right. Taking great care not to move too quickly, I scanned all the exposed perches around 5m above ground level until I noticed a black colour oddly out of place in the green of the canopy – I was looking at the back of the head of a calling bird! Reaching for my camera a little too fast, the bird spooked, but it wasn't me that was the issue, as a flash of colour flew to the perch from the opposite direction – a second individual! Having read the Pitta Bible, I knew this to be an ideal situation, and with patience I was rewarded with not only wonderful views of this highly desired species, but insights into the behaviour of territorial birds. Calling birds would gradually fly closer toward one another, with the calls increasing in volume and frequency. The original bird I had seen then swooped back in, displacing the interloper, before continuing the pursuit through the trees. The second bird then flew off to a safer distance, whilst the original bird perched prominently, angling its wings down and shivering its primaries as if to relieve the adrenaline.



*Above: Blue-winged Pitta, the third Pitta species observed during the trip. What a stunner!*

Following the pitta performance, pretty much anything else was redundant – it would be impossible to top such a fantastic insight into these secretive birds. The birding continued in a rich vein, with a brief look over the sensory lake revealing **Stork-billed** and **White-throated Kingfisher** sharing a tree with two **Oriental Dollarbird** and no fewer than five **Blue-tailed Bee-eater**, a riot of colour against a steel grey sky. Heading to one of the cafes near the dock I negotiated a bike for \$6 to speed me around the island. My first stop was at Pekan quarry, where the omnipresent **Grey Heron** population had been joined by an **Oriental Darter**, all bottomlessly black velvet on the underparts contrasting with the sinewy grey head. Overhead a few **Germain's**



**Swiftlet** hawked for insects, whilst the/a mystery small/medium *Accipiter* once again put in an appearance – does Shikra breed in Singapore?



*Above: Stork-billed Kingfisher and Oriental Darter, both scarce species in Singapore.*

Speeding west along Jln Jelutong, I crossed the bridge onto Jlt Endut Senin where I heard a slightly slurred double note call of a pitta – could that have been a Mangrove? Noisy brakes brought me to a rapid stop, but also silenced the locals, after 10 minutes, I decided to continue west. Up ahead a plump and rotund figure was hunched at the roadside, again morphing into the second **Grey-capped Emerald Dove** of the trip, this time a female. Whilst I rattled off a few shots, an **Abbott's babbler** gave its surprisingly Eurasian Blackbird like song, but remained hidden somewhere at the bottom of some vegetation. I always think babblers sound better than they look, and having dipped Falcated Wren-babbler, I've no reason to change my mind (yet!).

I fired past the Living Lab, noting two **White-bellied Sea-eagle** drifted back in the direction of the city, and finally I arrived at my next port of call – Jln Wat Siam, realm of the Mangrove Pitta. To cut a long story short, I had neither sound nor sight of the species at this most reliable location, though there was some compensation with the tropical tones of a **Mangrove Whistler** calling from just beyond the bridge. Another raptor drifted over, this time a fine **Brahminy Kite** – I was very surprised how few of these attractive raptors I connected with during the trip. A noisy party of **Pied Hornbill** were one of the last birds around the mangroves, and once they departed the drones of the cicada began, and it was time to head for the dock to return for breakfast.

Annoyingly I arrived just as a boatload were being ushered aboard, but a grumpy boatman refused to let me board (I argued the maximum of twelve people hadn't been reached) and I ended up wasting two hours and ten minutes of my life silently scowling at the old bastard, wished that I'd either just risked disappearing to do more birding whilst I waited, or that I'd spend five minutes less whistling like a pitta along Jln Wat Siam – take note if you plan to visit ahead of a flight, not recommended!

Our main destination for the day and a chunk of the evening was the renowned Singapore Zoo. This location is considered to be one of the best places in the world to see wild **Colugo**, and it certainly didn't disappoint on that front, with no less than five seen roosting during the day, and an additional three (including a female with infant) seen during the night. This was a top target for both Kathi and I, and their bizarre appearance went some way to make up for missing Dugong.



*Left and below: Sunda Colugo – a bizarre nocturnal mammal found only in south east Asia. Despite their presence within the zoo, these are wild animals.*



The zoo is highly recommended, with a selection of more unusual animals present in addition to the standard big mammals, whilst the enclosures are second to none, particularly as a result of being situated within the Central Catchment Rainforest Reserve. Sadly I also missed out on Straw-headed Bulbul, which was a top target. Had rain not affected the previous day so much, we would likely have made it to Bukit Timah where we could have caught up the species and likely others too. As it stood, the birding around the zoo was fairly limited, with plenty of **Olive-winged Bulbul** and several **Crimson Sunbird** present, whilst a few **Oriental Magpie Robin**, **Zebra** and **Spotted Dove** pottered around the captive animals. A distant eagle species seen sat atop a tree on a far shore of the Upper Seletar Reservoir was either **Grey-headed** or **White-bellied** but remained too distant to identify to species level.

One final avian treat was in store during the Night Safari, when a calling **Large-tailed Nightjar** alighted on the Asian Elephant fence post, despite hearing numerous individuals throughout the trip, this was the first I had properly clapped eyes on.

## **Day 16 (14/6): Singapore to Home**

The final morning of any trip is usually a bittersweet time, with one last chance to experience the exotic (or add any new birds to the trip list) mingling with the notion that the wonderful sights, sounds and smells will be a memory in a matter of hours. A rather dreary morning was in store when I awoke (8am – result!) and I opted for a quick wander around the hotel grounds in Changi. All the usual suspects were present and correct, whilst a fly over **Osprey** was the final addition.

The honeymoon had been a resounding success, with plenty of quality time doing enjoyable activities, some top snorkeling, and of course, world class birding. Now, Luzon or Mindanao next?

## Systematic list

<b>Tabon Scrubfowl</b>	-	At least 3 heard and one seen, URNP Sabang
<b>King Quail</b>	-	One heard from trail off of Zig-Zag Road
<b>Red Junglefowl</b>	-	Abundant in Singapore, wild individuals on Pulau Ubin
<b>Metallic Pigeon</b>	-	Heard along Sabang Road, north of Liang Lookout
<b>Philippine Collared Dove</b>	-	One seen well along shoreline of Dugong dive centre
<b>Red-collared Dove</b>	-	Widespread both Singapore and Coron
<b>Eastern Spotted Dove</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Zebra Dove</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Grey-capped Emerald Pigeon</b>	-	Singles Zig-Zag Road and Palau Ubin
<b>Pink-necked Green Pigeon</b>	-	Fairly common throughout
<b>Cinnamon-necked Green Pigeon</b>	-	Single at Pekan Quarry
<b>Thick-billed Green Pigeon</b>	-	Single nest building on Zig-Zag Road
<b>Green Imperial Pigeon</b>	-	Widespread in suitable habitat (Palawan)
<b>Grey Imperial Pigeon</b>	-	At least three noted Starfish Island
<b>Pied Imperial Pigeon</b>	-	5 "Angry Bird" Island, 4 Isla Cagdanao
<b>Black-chinned Fruit Dove</b>	-	Two calling at URNP HQ
<b>Large-tailed Nightjar</b>	-	Widespread, with one seen Singapore Zoo
<b>Savannah Nightjar</b>	-	Single seen and heard Palau Ubin
<b>Brown-backed Needletail</b>	-	Single over Pasir Ris Mangrove boardwalk
<b>Pygmy Swiftlet</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Glossy Swiftlet</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Palawan Swiftlet</b>	-	Widespread (Philippines)
<b>Philippine Swiftlet</b>	-	Widespread (Philippines)
<b>Germain's Swiftlet</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Palm Swift</b>	-	Fairly common Singapore
<b>Lesser Coucal</b>	-	Several individuals around Coron Airport
<b>Chestnut-breasted Malkoha</b>	-	Liang Lookout (5), Sabang, Riverhouse
<b>Asian Koel</b>	-	Fairly common
<b>Violet Cuckoo</b>	-	Single seen at the Riverhouse, Coron
<b>Philippine Hawk-cuckoo</b>	-	Singles heard Coron and "Angry Bird" island
<b>White-breasted Waterhen</b>	-	Singles Pasir Ris and Sabang
<b>Oriental Darter</b>	-	Single at Pekan Quarry
<b>Grey Heron</b>	-	Common at Pasir Ris
<b>Purple Heron</b>	-	Single over Pasir Ris Mangrove boardwalk
<b>Great Egret</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Intermediate Egret</b>	-	Fairly common Palawan
<b>Eastern Cattle Egret</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Little Egret</b>	-	Singles Sabang and Iwahig
<b>Pacific Reef Heron</b>	-	Three individuals seen El Nido and on cruise
<b>Striated Heron</b>	-	Singles Singapore and The Riverhouse
<b>Milky/Painted Stork</b>	-	Pair seen Singapore airport unassigned to species
<b>White-winged Black Tern</b>	-	Several small parties seen at sea, including an adult bird
<b>Whiskered Tern</b>	-	Small feeding flock seen Irawan rice paddies
<b>Sooty Tern</b>	-	Common offshore
<b>Black-naped Tern</b>	-	Common offshore



<b>Little Tern</b>	-	Pulau Ubin and Gardens by the Bay
<b>Mantanani Scops Owl</b>	-	One seen and recorded near Bulawit, Linapacan
<b>Osprey</b>	-	One seen Changi Village
<b>Grey-headed Fish Eagle</b>	-	Pulau Ubin
<b>White-bellied Sea Eagle</b>	-	Widespread along all coasts
<b>Brahminy Kite</b>	-	Singles seen Pulau Ubin
<b>Black-winged Kite</b>	-	Singles seen Singapore Airport
<b>Crested Goshawk</b>	-	Single Gardens by the Bay
<b>Palawan Hornbill</b>	-	Widespread in suitable habitat on Palawan and Coron
<b>Oriental Pied Hornbill</b>	-	Fairly common throughout
<b>Blue-tailed Bee-eater</b>	-	Fairly common throughout
<b>Rufous-crowned Bee-eater</b>	-	Small numbers Coron
<b>Blue-throated Bee-eater</b>	-	Pasir Ris
<b>Oriental Dollarbird</b>	-	Widespread throughout
<b>Oriental Dwarf-kingfisher</b>	-	One URNP, probably a second heard only Liang Lookout
<b>Stork-billed Kingfisher</b>	-	Two seen Pulau Ubin along sensory trail
<b>Ruddy Kingfisher</b>	-	One seen The Riverhouse access road
<b>Brown-breasted Kingfisher</b>	-	One seen Lusong Coral Garden, first for Palawan?
<b>White-throated Kingfisher</b>	-	Fairly common Singapore
<b>Collared Kingfisher</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Common Flameback</b>	-	One seen Pulau Ubin sensory trail
<b>Red-headed Flameback</b>	-	Singles Zig-Zag Road and URNP rangers HQ
<b>Spot-throated Flameback</b>	-	Singles Zig-Zag Road and pair at URNP rangers HQ
<b>Great Slaty Woodpecker</b>	-	Single Zig-Zag Road
<b>Rufous Woodpecker</b>	-	Single Sensory trail, Pulau Ubin
<b>Laced Woodpecker</b>	-	Single Sensory trail, Pulau Ubin
<b>White-bellied Woodpecker</b>	-	Up-to three birds near Liang Lookout
<b>Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker</b>	-	Fairly common Singapore
<b>Oriental Hobby</b>	-	A vocal pair near Lion Cave, Sabang
<b>Red-vented Cockatoo</b>	-	3 going to roost, followed by 4 early am Liang Lookout
<b>Tanimbar Corella</b>	-	Common Changi Village
<b>Sulphur-crested Cockatoo</b>	-	Common Changi Village
<b>Red-breasted Parakeet</b>	-	Common Changi Village
<b>Long-tailed Parakeet</b>	-	Occasional Changi Village
<b>Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot</b>	-	Small group Changi Point Park
<b>Blue-headed Racquet-tail</b>	-	Two singles seen near Liang Lookout
<b>Blue-naped Parrot</b>	-	Not uncommon around Sabang and Zig-Zag Road
<b>Philippine Pitta</b>	-	Two heard, one seen exceptionally well Zig-Zag Road
<b>Hooded Pitta</b>	-	Not uncommon Palawan and Coron, amazing views
<b>Blue-winged Pitta</b>	-	Not uncommon Pulau Ubin (sensory trail) excellent views
<b>Golden-bellied Gerygone</b>	-	Widespread Singapore, single Starfish Island, Palawan
<b>Black-naped Oriole</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Mangrove Whistler</b>	-	Pulau Ubin (sensory trail)
<b>Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike</b>	-	A confiding pair near Bulawit, Linapacan
<b>White-breasted Woodswallow</b>	-	Starfish Island and Iwahig rice paddies
<b>Common Iora</b>	-	Widespread throughout
<b>Philippine Pied Fantail</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Oriental Pied Fantail</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Singapore)
<b>Sooty Drongo</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)

<b>Palawan Drongo</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Black-naped Monarch</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Blue Paradise-flycatcher</b>	-	URNP, Sabang and The Riverhouse
<b>Long-tailed Shrike</b>	-	Singles at Coron and Cebu Airports
<b>Palawan Crow</b>	-	Zig-Zag Road and The Riverhouse
<b>Philippine Jungle Crow</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Large-billed Crow</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Singapore)
<b>House Crow</b>	-	Widespread throughout
<b>Palawan Tit</b>	-	Two seen near Liang Lookout
<b>Zitting Cisticola</b>	-	Single Iwahig rice paddies
<b>Rufous-tailed Tailorbird</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Ashy Tailorbird</b>	-	Gardens by the Bay, Pulau Ubin
<b>Common Tailorbird</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Singapore)
<b>Striated Grassbird</b>	-	Singles at Coron and Cebu Airports
<b>Pacific Swallow</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Palawan Bulbul</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Sulphur-bellied Bulbul</b>	-	Zig-Zag Road and Riverhouse access road
<b>Ashy-fronted Bulbul</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Olive-winged Bulbul</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Singapore)
<b>Red-whiskered Bulbul</b>	-	Single seen Gardens by the Bay
<b>Yellow-vented Bulbul</b>	-	Abundant throughout (Singapore) occasional Palawan
<b>Swinhoe's White-eye</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Singapore)
<b>Black-throated Laughingthrush</b>	-	Single seen Changi Point Park
<b>Palawan Tit babbler</b>	-	Widespread throughout (Philippines)
<b>Melodious Babbler</b>	-	Singles near Liang Lookout and on Isla Darocatan
<b>Ashy-headed Babbler</b>	-	Single on Isla Darocatan
<b>Abbott's Babbler</b>	-	Single Palau Ubin
<b>Javan Myna</b>	-	Abundant (Singapore), widespread (Palawan)
<b>Common Myna</b>	-	Abundant (Singapore), widespread (Palawan)
<b>Common Hill Myna</b>	-	Small numbers Zig-Zag Road and Isla Cagdanao
<b>Asian Glossy Starling</b>	-	Abundant (Singapore and Palawan)
<b>Oriental Magpie-robin</b>	-	Abundant (Singapore)
<b>White-vented Shama</b>	-	Widespread (Palawan and Coron)
<b>White-rumped Shama</b>	-	Up to five present along Sensory trail, Palau Ubin
<b>Palawan Blue-flycatcher</b>	-	Singles URNP, Sabang and Liang Lookout
<b>Palawan Fairy-bluebird</b>	-	Singles URNP, Sabang and Riverhouse access road
<b>Yellow-throated Leafbird</b>	-	Singles Liang Lookout, Sabang, Riverhouse access road
<b>Palawan Flowerpecker</b>	-	Not uncommon in suitable habitat Palawan and Coron
<b>Striped Flowerpecker</b>	-	Singles near Liang Lookout
<b>Pygmy Flowerpecker</b>	-	Zig-Zag, Bulawit, Darocatan and Riverhouse access road
<b>Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker</b>	-	Singles Pasir Ris and Changi Point Park
<b>Palawan Spiderhunter</b>	-	Singles URNP Park HQ, Darocatan and Zig-Zag Road
<b>Little Spiderhunter</b>	-	Singles Pasir Ris Mangrove boardwalk
<b>Brown-throated Sunbird</b>	-	Widespread (Palawan and Coron)
<b>Purple-throated Sunbird</b>	-	Widespread (Singapore and Palawan)
<b>Copper-throated Sunbird</b>	-	Liang Lookout and near Bulawit, Linapacan
<b>Garden Sunbird</b>	-	Abundant (Philippines)
<b>Olive-backed Sunbird</b>	-	Abundant (Singapore)
<b>Lovely Sunbird</b>	-	Singles Zig-Zag Road, Liang Lookout and Isla Cagdanao

<b>Crimson Sunbird</b>	-	Singles Gardens by the Bay, Pasir Ris and Singapore Zoo
<b>White-bellied Munia</b>	-	Widespread throughout
<b>Scaly-breasted Munia</b>	-	Widespread throughout
<b>White-headed Munia</b>	-	Small numbers Singapore Airport
<b>Tree Sparrow</b>	-	Abundant
<b>Paddyfield Pipit</b>	-	A few individuals Singapore Airport

**Orange** denotes escaped or naturalised species

\*denotes heard only

## Mammals

**Brown Spiny Rat**  
**Long-tailed Macaque**  
**Sunda Colugo**  
**Palawan Fruit Bat**  
**Lesser Short-nosed Fruit Bat**  
**Plantain Squirrel**  
**Variable Squirrel**  
**Common Treeshrew**  
**Dugong\***

*\*Photographed but not seen*

