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CENTRAL PENINSULAR THAILAND CUSTOM TOUR – TRIP REPORT, APRIL/MAY 2015

This was a custom tour for a British couple, John and Pam, who had never visited Southeast Asia, so the bulk of the forest birds would be new, whereas they had visited India, Australia, and Africa many times, so few of the open-area birds would be new. Due to this fact the itinerary did concentrate on forest birding. The timing was chosen as these months are a good time for pittas and broadbills and other forest birds, as many breed at this time of year. The pace was to be slow, as both Pam and John were in their mid-seventies. Most days consisted of three to four hours birding in the morning, a long lunch break, and then a couple more hours of birding in the late afternoon.

Day 1, 28th April. Ban Nai Chong and Krabi Mangroves

John and Pam had requested a late start, as they had had a long journey the day before to get to Krabi from the UK.

We arrived at Ban Nai Chong at 9:00 a.m., and at first the forest seemed quiet. It didn't take too long to start off our account with a pair of **Raffles's Malkohas** which eventually showed very well. An **Orange-breasted Trogon** was then heard and found through some small windows sitting low on a liana. **Little Spiderhunters** took nectar from ginger flowers growing straight out of the forest floor.

On our walk back to the car a **Rufous Piculet** came in, and then a flurry of small birds came through, including **Purple-naped Sunbird**, **Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker**, **Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker**, **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike**, and **Ruby-cheeked Sunbird**. A pair of **Great Ioras** joined them, and a **Grey-breasted Spiderhunter** made a fleeting appearance. A male **Red-throated Barbet** showed nicely too.

In the afternoon we visited the mangroves at Krabi town. We started along the walkway with an **Arctic Warbler**, which was singing in preparation of finding a mate after its northerly migration. The rest of the walkway was very quiet, but we had arranged a boat trip with Diaw, son of Di. He learned his trade from his father, who was famous in the area twenty years ago for being able to whistle the birds in. Diaw earned his crust well by first finding us a pair of **Spotted Wood Owls** with a young bird at their day roost. At the same spot a very aggressive **Ashy Tailorbird** entertained us for a few minutes. Then Diaw whistled in a **Mangrove Pitta**, which posed for a few minutes. He also tried for **Ruddy Kingfisher**, which called back but did not show.

Three **Brown-winged Kingfishers** were seen on the way back to the car, as were **Brahminy Kite**, **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, **Rufous-bellied Swallow**, **Germain's Swiftlet**, and **Pacific Swallow**.

Critter list: crab-eating macaque, gray-bellied squirrel, common garden lizard, common gliding lizard



Spotted Wood Owl

Day 2, 29th April. Phi Phi Islands

John and Pam opted for a late start, so we did no birding before taking the ferry to Phi Phi from Krabi. Soon after arriving we got very close to a nesting pair of **Pied Imperial Pigeons**.

In the late afternoon we took a longtail boat out to Koh Bida Nok to look for frigatebirds. Along the way we found a few breeding pairs of **Black-naped Terns**, and **Bridled Terns** fed around the small islands. We were disappointed not to see big numbers of frigatebirds, but in all about seventy birds were seen. Of the few that came in low we identified a pair of **Lesser Frigatebirds** and a pair of **Christmas Frigatebirds**.

Day 3, 30th April. Tiger Temple and Khao Banthat

The morning was spent transferring back to the mainland, and nothing of note was seen from the ferry.

After lunch we had a quick look around the old forest at the Tiger Temple just outside Krabi town. Many of the large trees had recently come down in a storm, giving us more open views of the area than there had been before. Through one opening a **Banded Woodpecker** was seen working the twisted stump of one of the smashed trees. Just around the corner a **Blue Whistling Thrush** sat low and still in the forest. While we were watching him we noticed some movement on the ground, which turned out to be a small group of **Streaked Wren-Babblers**. Then a flycatcher sung, and we got a **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher** to come within a couple of meters of us. At Khao Banthat in the late afternoon the road was quiet, but we found a **Blue-winged Pitta**. **Hooded Pittas** called in the area too, but did not show. Towards dusk a pair of **Brown Wood Owls** started calling and finally came right in to us. A **Tiger Shrike** took a dislike to them and buzzed them.

Critter list: Asian giant tortoise, Asian black-spined toad, four-lined tree frog, banded bullfrog, clouded monitor



Blue-winged Pitta

Day 4, 1st May. Peninsular Botanic Gardens and Thale Noi Waterfowl Reserve

As we prepared for our morning walk we spotted some **Thick-billed Green Pigeons** preening in a tree at the car park of the Botanic Gardens. A **Banded Woodpecker** showed better than the previous day, and another **Blue-winged Pitta** was seen on the way to the forest. A **Puff-throated Babbler** showed well, but it took us a little longer to get a couple of **Abbott's Babblers**.

The canopy walkway was fairly quiet, but there were some **Black-headed Bulbuls** and some **Asian Red-eyed Bulbuls** around. A **Crested Goshawk** flew into a tree in front of us and sat

watching its mate in a display flight above us. The best bird, though, was a male **Van Hasselt's Sunbird** that really put on a show for us in the morning light. In the swamp forest we investigated a din coming out of a tree, which we thought must be some mammals, but it turned out to be a full-on fight between a **Red-throated Barbet** and a **Red-crowned Barbet**, probably over nesting rights. At one point they had a hold of each other and came tumbling through branches in a magnificent free fall.

In the late afternoon we birded from the elevated road at Thale Noi Waterfowl Reserve. We stopped at a few of the viewpoints and scanned the marshes. Seven **Black-headed Ibis** were seen, along with **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, **Bronze-winged Jacana**, **Yellow Bittern**, **Asian Openbill**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Chinese Pond Heron**, **Javan Pond Heron**, and a variety of other herons and egrets.

Critter list: many-lined sun skink, trefoil horseshoe bat

Day 5, 2nd May. Thale Noi and Krung Ching Waterfall

By 7:00 a.m. we were on a tiny boat cruising through the lotus beds on Thale Noi Lake. **White-winged Terns** and **Whiskered Terns** were in full breeding plumage and easy to tell apart. We did a tour of the lake and ended up in a long channel through an area of swampland. Along the way we added **Lesser Whistling Duck**, **Cotton Pygmy Goose**, **Cinnamon Bittern**, **Black Bittern**, **Black-crowned Night Heron**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Pacific Golden Plover**, and **Brown-headed Gull** to our list.

The plan for the afternoon was to spend an hour at the bird bath at Krung Ching before birding the road for the last two hours of daylight, but unluckily the bath was busy with other birders when we arrived, so we just started looking around the hilltop to see what was around. We did very well, despite an approaching storm, with **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha** and **Lesser Cuckooshrike** first, quickly followed by **Black-and-yellow Broadbill**. **Plaintive Cuckoo** was next up and a whole family of **Red-bearded Bee-eaters**, including two juveniles with distinctly green beards. A **Green Broadbill** showed very nicely, and a whole crowd of **Brown Barbets** came through and back again. Strangely, four or five **Square-tailed Drongo-Cuckoos** seemed to be moving as a group. A **Red-billed Malkoha** strained our necks by not coming down from the canopy, but we had long looks at a male **Grey-and-buff Woodpecker** making final arrangements to a cavity at the top of a tree stump.

Down at the "bus stop" a **Violet Cuckoo** would not leave us alone once called in, and we enjoyed watching the following mammals in some distant trees.

Critter list: dusky leaf-monkey, black giant squirrel



Dusky leaf-monkey

Day 6, 3rd May. Krung Ching Waterfall

The bulk of the day was taken up with walking the waterfall trail. We came out shortly before a storm passed through, which was lucky, as the track can become very slippery when wet. We managed to see a good variety of birds, including **Spectacled Spiderhunter, Rufous-winged Philentoma, Scarlet-rumped Trogon, Banded Broadbill, Crested Jay, Purple-naped Sunbird, Blyth's Hawk-Eagle, and Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler.**

Before dinner we went out looking for frogmouths, and although we found a **Blyth's Frogmouth**, we only managed to get poor views before we lost it again.

Critter list: forest garden lizard, slender squirrel

Day 7, 4th May. Krung Ching Waterfall

A leisurely morning around the park headquarters and the entrance road gave us **Crimson Sunbird, Scaly-breasted Bulbul, Spectacled Bulbul, Golden-whiskered Barbet, Vernal Hanging Parrot, Crested Serpent Eagle,** and plenty more common species. A few trees were in fruit, so there was no shortage of birds to look at.

After lunch we sat in a hide for an hour and watched a **Blue-winged Pitta** throwing leaves around the forest floor, looking for bugs. Another walk down the entrance road got us **Moustached Babbler** and **Square-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo.**

A short owling walk before dinner got us close to a couple of **Sunda Scops Owls**, but we didn't get to see one.

Critter list: Himalayan striped squirrel, Low's squirrel, common treeshrew

Day 8, 5th May. Krung Ching Waterfall and Khao Sok National Park

We only had a couple of hours at Krung Ching in the morning, so we concentrated on finding a Dark-throated Oriole, as we would soon be driving out of its range. As we started our walk we

heard an **Indian Cuckoo** calling behind us. It came in to the call, but overshot, so we only saw it in flight. A **Grey-breasted Spiderhunter** fed around some banana trees, and then we found a male **Dark-throated Oriole** sitting quite low at the edge of the road. Plenty of other birds were seen on the walk, but little was new for the trip apart from **Rufescent Prinia** and **Asian Fairy-bluebird**.

In the early afternoon we boarded a longtail boat at Khao Sok pier and headed out over the lake towards our floating bungalows in the Khlong Saeng Wildlife Sanctuary. On the way we enjoyed the scenery but got rather wet due to the choppy water. Once there we had a quick break and then went out birding from the boat. We had a very good time with hornbills, encountering **Oriental Pied Hornbill**, **Wreathed Hornbill**, **Helmeted Hornbill**, **Great Hornbill**, and **Bushy-crested Hornbill**. We didn't do badly with the raptors either, with **Lesser Fish Eagle**, **Grey-headed Fish Eagle**, **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, and **Western Osprey**.

After dinner we went out in the boat again on a night safari. No birds were seen, but we got a good list of mammals as can be seen below.

Critter list: gaur, pig-tailed macaque, sambar, Asian palm civet



Great Hornbill

Day 9, 6th May. Khao Sok National Park

Before breakfast we were out on the boat again, looking for the last remaining **Hornbill**, the **White-crowned**. We heard a pair calling but couldn't get them to respond. We had repeat views of **Great**, **Oriental Pied**, and **Helmeted Hornbills**, together with **Lesser Fish Eagle**. **Asian Palm Swifts** were seen flying around their roosting tree, a sugar palm. Three troops of white-handed gibbon were heard too, but we could not find them. We had a really nice time with a **Blue-eared Kingfisher**, as it showed us every angle it had in the early morning sun.

After lunch our target was Hooded Pitta, and we had heard that one was staked out in a nearby bamboo thicket. We waited in the hide for an hour, but nothing showed, so we decided to go and

look for our own one. A few hundred meters away in the same forest we got a few interested, but failed to get John onto one, so we went for a short walk, where we found **Stripe-throated Bulbul** and **Yellow-bellied Prinia**. Back at the bamboo area we tried again, and thankfully one **Hooded Pitta** showed really well in the fading light. So we then headed back to the restaurant to celebrate over a cold beer.

Day 10, 7th May. Khao Sok, Kapong bridge, Sri Phang Nga National Park

On the main trail in the Khao Sok headquarters area we first picked up a couple of common forest birds we had yet to have good looks at, **Yellow-bellied Warbler** and **Grey-eyed Bulbul**. A little further down we added **Rufous-fronted Babbler** and **Black-bellied Malkoha**. A **Blue-eared Kingfisher** was feeding a young bird at a little pond, and we got a male **Banded Kingfisher** to come in. The highlight was three **Black-and-red Broadbills** sitting together above the trail. On the way back a pair of **Red-bearded Bee-eaters** was seen well on an overhanging bamboo.

At Kapong Bridge a **River Lapwing** flew up towards us and let us see him well before flying downstream again. **House Swifts** were feeding under the bridge, and as we left a **Red-wattled Lapwing** flew over. Near the car a **Golden-bellied Gerygone** was seen in a rubber plantation, and a **Van Hasselt's Sunbird** surprised us by its presence.

We next parked at the start of the forest at the Tung Chalee substation of Sri Phang Nga NP. The area was full of more common forest-edge birds, including **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**. Pam spotted some movement behind us in the field and got us onto a pair of **Barred Buttonquail**. The walk to the headquarters was busy with birds, but mainly bulbuls we had seen before. At the headquarters there were some **Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters** hawking from a large tree, and a **Blue-winged Leafbird** preened below. A **Thick-billed Flowerpecker** seemed to be chasing the bee-eaters, but it wasn't clear why.

A little later a long-tailed, white-morph **Asian Paradise Flycatcher** flew in front of us.

Critter list: plantain squirrel, spotted forest skink, tokay gecko



Chestnut-headed Bee-eater

Day 11, 8th May. Sri Phang Nga National Park and Laem Pakarang

Our day started well with a **Rufous-collared Kingfisher** at the start of the trail across the streams. It almost got better when we heard a **Malayan Banded Pitta** calling after the first stream crossing. It was close but managed to get away from us without being seen. At the second crossing it took us a while to get everyone onto a **Black-capped Babbler**, but that is usual with this little skulker. The stakeout was quiet as the pittas had all gone AWOL a week before, probably due to nesting. An **Abbott's Babbler** came in to look for a free breakfast but was disappointed.

On the way back we found a **Chestnut-naped Forktail** working the stream, and we had another babbler workout with **Grey-throated Babbler**, which eventually gave itself up. Back at the dam we found a **Whiskered Treeswift** hawking on high.

After lunch Pam and John sat in the hide at a bird bath for an hour, where a **Blue-banded Kingfisher** stopped briefly.

At about 4:30 p.m. we hit Laem Pakarang, looking for shorebirds. It was late in the season, but there were still a few around. We started scoping from a shady spot near the parking area and picked up **Grey Plover**, **Lesser Sand Plover**, and **Greater Sand Plover**, the latter two in breeding plumage. **Whimbrels**, **Ruddy Turnstones**, and **Red-necked Stints** were seen, and a couple of **Terek Sandpipers** and a **Eurasian Curlew**.

We then walked the sand spit and added **Little Tern** and **Lesser Crested Tern**. Along the road to the hotel we found **Common Flameback** and **Zebra Dove**.



Abbott's Babbler

Day 12, 9th May. Ao Phang Nga National Park

As we were staying at a fancy hotel and we had been going hard for over a week, we gave John and Pam the option of a lie-in, which they opted for, so we all had a lazy morning around the hotel before moving on to the mangroves at Ao Phang Nga.

Our sloth was well rewarded. At the end of the side road outside Ao Phang Nga NP headquarters we first had a **Black-and-red Broadbill** come in, then great looks at **Ruddy Kingfisher**, then a **Mangrove Pitta** sat for us, and then a pair of very angry **White-chested Babblers** zipped around us at knee level, looking for the intruder. A pair of **Oriental Pied Hornbills** flew over, and **Brown-throated Sunbirds**, **Ruby-checked Sunbirds**, and an **Arctic Warbler** formed a small flock.

In the headquarters area three **Chestnut-bellied Malkohas** came in to the call.

Over at the Queen's Park we saw two **Indian Pond Herons**, which are very rare in Thailand.

Day 13, 10th May. Bang Phat mangroves and Thai Muang marsh

During breakfast we heard a **Lesser Coucal** calling from the adjacent grassy area and managed to get onto it before leaving for Bang Phat, where our luck of the previous afternoon continued.

At the start of the walkway we had **Collared Kingfisher**, **Ashy Drongo**, **Mangrove Whistler**, and **Golden-bellied Gerygone**. At the first rest area we had **Copper-throated Sunbird** followed by **Oriental White-eye**, and back towards the car we heard a **Little Bronze Cuckoo** calling and got some photos. Along the way other birds like **Brown-winged Kingfisher**, **Chestnut-bellied Malkoha**, and **Ruby-cheeked Sunbird** were seen again.

We returned to Ao Phang Nga to look for **Streak-breasted Woodpecker**, but there our luck ran out and we only heard it.

At the Thai Muang marsh in the afternoon we had a pleasant couple of hours scanning the ponds of the morning glory farm, where we found another **Indian Pond Heron**, a few **Watercock**, and

a **Ruddy-breasted Crake**. Other new birds in the area included **Lineated Barbet** and the highlight of the afternoon, a few **Blue-throated Bee-eaters**.

Day 14, 11th May. Ton Pariwat Wildlife Sanctuary

On our last morning we walked the road at Ton Pariwat, looking for a few more forest birds. We arrived at 7:00 a.m., but things were a lot quieter than usual. It took a while to find anything at all, but we then got good views of **Blue-winged Leafbird**, **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha**, and **Vernal Hanging Parrot**. A couple of **Crested Honey Buzzards** started circling above, and while watching them we latched onto some **Grey-rumped Treeswifts**. A little later we found a group of **Large Woodshrikes**, and up at the waterfall a **White-rumped Munia** came to drink out of a puddle.

Critter list: streamside skink, green crested lizard

In all we had seen well over 200 species, the bulk of them forest birds, and both John and Pam were delighted with their trip.