

Mu Cang Chai Species and Habitat Conservation Area, NW Vietnam - 6-8 March 2019

Sander Lagerfeld, 12 March 2019

Introduction

I made a birding trip to Vietnam from 16 February until 9 March 2019. I started in Pleiku, catching up with Lonnie Bregman who had birded South Vietnam previously. We went to Mang Den, Ngoc Linh, Bach Ma, Cuc Phuong, Tam Dao, Ba Be and Mount Fansipan. After that Lonnie went back to Hanoi. At Mount Fansipan we had missed our prime target for the trip, the White-throated Wren-Babbler. Annoying, however, we had anticipated the miss as the bird had apparently not been seen there for years. Therefore, I had contacted Simon Mahood and Jonathan Eames before who had found the Wren-Babbler at the Mu Cang Chai Species and Habitat Conservation Area (MCCSHCA) in 2010 [1]. They didn't know the exact location of their sighting; it was somewhere in the mountains south of a small village located at N 21.679 E 104.090. Although they considered it likely that I would be sent away by the locals, I gave it a try. On my third day in the area I found the White-throated Wren-Babbler at an accessible location close to the road. In addition I saw several other interesting species in the same area.

Daily log

6 March

Said goodbye to Lonnie in Sa Pa and took the 7:45 bus to Than Uyên arriving at 10:45 (150.000 VND). At 11.45 I took another bus to Mu Cang Chai (50.000 VND) arriving at the Mu Cang Homestay at 13:00; a nice place: clean, good food, hot shower and run by a friendly and helpful couple (200.000 VND per night for a room). I rented a motorbike (200.000 VND per day) and was soon on my way in the direction of the village from where Simon and Jonathan had started their exploration. I didn't reach this village (I ended at N 21.721 E 104.033), but on the way I had seen an area with very promising habitat at the right altitude, and a trail going in. I decided to focus on this area. Back in Mu Cang Chai at 19:00.

7 March

At 5:00 I was on my way arriving at 6:00 at the pass (Map 1). The conditions were not good at all: it was cold with a dense fog and rain. I did some roadside birding until the rain stopped. Then I went onto the trail. The first part had a few steep and slippery sections. At the first clearing I found a pair of Golden Parrotbills. Much appreciated as I had missed these at Mount Fansipan as well. After that the trail was significantly overgrown and I had to crawl several times through bamboo tunnels. Pale-throated Wren-Babblers appeared to be common here. At the gully (Map 2) I found a pair of Streaked Barwing!



Golden Parrotbill - *Suthora verreauxi*



Streaked Barwing - *Actinodura souliei*

I stayed on the trail until 15:00 playing the Ward Vercruysse recording (<https://www.xeno-canto.org/408059>) every 10 meters or so, but no sign of the White-throated Wren-Babbler. After that I did some roadside birding again and arrived at 18:30 back in Mu Cang Chai.

8 March

Overcast and cold again, but only a little rain and a good visibility. At dawn at the pass I immediately found a pair of Purple Cochoas! Then wasted a lot of time and energy to find a trail at the opposite side of the pass. Apparently there was no trail there and I went back to yesterday's trail. At the gully (Map 2) around 10:30 I suddenly got a response to the recording! The bird responded strongly and came down into the gully. It approached me to 1 meter, but stayed hidden for most of the time close or on the ground. I made a few sound recordings (<https://www.xeno-canto.org/460948>, <https://www.xeno-canto.org/460947>, <https://www.xeno-canto.org/460946>). The bird flew across the trail a few times. One time it perched a few seconds on a log 5 meters away facing me. Brief but excellent views, breast, head and bill seen well. After he had seen me, the bird stayed hidden. Then I used prolonged tape playback in order to photograph the bird, without success though. It did not respond anymore and moved away.



The location of the sighting: evergreen forest with an understory dominated by dwarf bamboo at an altitude of 2200 m.

I stayed on the trail until 13:00 and after that did some roadside birding again. I arrived at 17.00 at Mu Cang Chai and celebrated the Wren-Babbler with my hosts, some fellow travellers and quite a few rice wines!

9 March

Took the direct 6:45 bus (250.000 VND) to My Dinh bus station in Hanoi, arriving there at 14.00. Then a taxi to the airport (340.000 VND) and a flight back home to Amsterdam.

Observed species

Nr	Species	Comments
1	Crested Goshawk - <i>Accipiter trivirgatus</i>	
2	Greater Coucal - <i>Centropus sinensis</i>	
3	Square-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo - <i>Surniculus lugubris</i>	
4	Large Hawk-Cuckoo - <i>Hierococcyx sparverioides</i>	
5	Great Barbet - <i>Psilopogon virens</i>	
6	Golden-throated Barbet - <i>Psilopogon franklinii</i>	
7	Speckled Piculet - <i>Picumnus innominatus</i>	
8	Short-billed Minivet - <i>Pericrocotus brevirostris</i>	
9	Blyth's Shrike-babbler - <i>Pteruthius aeralatus</i>	
10	Clicking Shrike-babbler - <i>Pteruthius intermedius</i>	
11	Red-billed Blue Magpie - <i>Urocissa erythroryncha</i>	
12	Large-billed Crow - <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	
13	Yellow-bellied Fantail - <i>Chelidorhynch hypoxanthus</i>	
14	Yellow-browed Tit - <i>Sylviparus modestus</i>	1 at the first clearing
15	Yellow-cheeked Tit - <i>Machlolophus spilonotus</i>	
16	Striated Bulbul - <i>Pycnonotus striatus</i>	
17	Red-whiskered Bulbul - <i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>	
18	Brown-breasted Bulbul - <i>Pycnonotus xanthorrhous</i>	
19	Flavescent Bulbul - <i>Pycnonotus flavescens</i>	
20	Mountain Bulbul - <i>Ixos mccllellandii</i>	
21	Black Bulbul - <i>Hypsipetes leucocephalus</i>	
22	Pygmy Cupwing - <i>Pnoepyga pusilla</i>	
23	Black-faced Warbler - <i>Abroscopus schisticeps</i>	
24	Mountain Tailorbird - <i>Phyllergates cucullatus</i>	
25	Broad-billed Warbler - <i>Tickellia hodgsoni</i>	
26	Brown-flanked Bush Warbler - <i>Horornis fortipes</i>	
27	Grey-bellied Tesia - <i>Tesia cyaniventer</i>	
28	Black-throated Bushtit - <i>Aegithalos concinnus</i>	
29	Ashy-throated Warbler - <i>Phylloscopus maculipennis</i>	
30	Yellow-browed Warbler - <i>Phylloscopus inornatus</i>	
31	Pallas's Leaf Warbler - <i>Phylloscopus proregulus</i>	
32	Buff-throated Warbler - <i>Phylloscopus subaffinis</i>	In the valley N 21.813 E 104.060 and N 21.8131 E 104.057
33	Bianchi's Warbler - <i>Phylloscopus valentini</i>	
34	Blyth's Leaf Warbler - <i>Phylloscopus reguloides</i>	
35	Russet Bush Warbler - <i>Locustella mandelli</i>	
36	Hill Prinia - <i>Prinia superciliaris</i>	
37	Pale-throated Wren-Babbler - <i>Spelaeoris kinneari</i>	At least 3 territories along the trail
38	Rufous-capped Babbler - <i>Stachyridopsis ruficeps</i>	
39	Rufous-winged Fulvetta - <i>Alcippe castaneiceps</i>	
40	Brown-cheeked Fulvetta - <i>Alcippe poioicephala</i>	
41	White-throated Wren-Babbler - <i>Rimator pasquieri</i>	See daily log 8 March
42	White-browed Laughingthrush - <i>Pterorhinus sannio</i>	4 in the valley N 21.786 E 104.050

Nr	Species	Comments
43	Silver-eared Laughingthrush - <i>Trochalopteron melanostigma</i>	A pair at the pass
44	Blue-winged Minla - <i>Actinodura cyanouroptera</i>	
45	Bar-throated Minla - <i>Actinodura strigula</i>	
46	Red-tailed Minla - <i>Minla ignotincta</i>	
47	Spectacled Barwing - <i>Actinodura ramsayi</i>	7 along the road N 21.762 E 104.047
48	Streaked Barwing - <i>Actinodura souliei</i>	A pair at the gully
49	Red-billed Leiothrix - <i>Leiothrix lutea</i>	
50	Black-headed Sibia - <i>Heterophasia desgodinsi</i>	
51	Golden-breasted Fulvetta - <i>Lioparus chrysotis</i>	
52	White-browed Fulvetta - <i>Fulvetta vinipectus</i>	
53	Manipur Fulvetta - <i>Fulvetta manipurensis</i>	1 (possibly more) at the trail near the first clearing
54	Golden Parrotbill - <i>Suthora verreauxi</i>	2 pairs at the first clearing
55	Whiskered Yuhina - <i>Yuhina flavicollis</i>	
56	Purple Cochoa - <i>Cochoa purpurea</i>	A pair at the pass
57	Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher - <i>Ficedula strophciata</i>	
58	Sapphire Flycatcher - <i>Ficedula sapphira</i>	A male in a dry streambed along the road N 21.767 E 104.044
59	Siberian Stonechat - <i>Saxicola maurus</i>	
60	Grey Bush Chat - <i>Saxicola ferreus</i>	
61	Mrs. Gould's Sunbird - <i>Aethopyga gouldiae</i>	
62	Red Avadavat - <i>Amandava amandava</i>	In the valley N 21.794 E 104.055
63	White Wagtail - <i>Motacilla alba</i>	
64	Olive-backed Pipit - <i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>	
65	Black-headed Greenfinch - <i>Chloris ambigua</i>	
66	Crested Bunting - <i>Emberiza lathamii</i>	In the valley N 21.792 E 104.053
67	Little Bunting - <i>Emberiza pusilla</i>	

All my sightings can be found here: <https://vietnam.observation.org/user/view/10709>

Accommodation

Mu Cang Homestay

Mồ Dề, Mù Cang Chải District, Yên Bái, Vietnam

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There are also several other homestays and hotels in Mu Cang Chai.

Final Thoughts

I think it is a waste of time to spend multiple days at Mount Fansipan when going to NW Vietnam. The habitat along the trail is trashed significantly. Focus here just one day on the high altitude species. Take the cable car up and walk down to the pass; it is a 3-4 hour straight walk, plenty of time for birding on the way. Do the mid-altitude species at MCCSHCA, which is a much more productive area. Pale-throated Wren-Babbler is virtually impossible to miss here and I think you have a good chance to find the White-throated Wren-Babbler. Other interesting species seen by me are Streaked and Spectacled Barwing, Purple Cochoa, Silver-eared and White-browed Laughingthrush, Golden Parrotbill, Manipur Fulvetta and Sapphire Flycatcher. According to Simon Mahood Beautiful Nuthatch, Spotted Elachura and Blue-winged Laughingthrush also occur in the area.

I only met smiling and friendly people here, and no questions asked. I think it is unlikely that that you will be send away in the pass area.

A machete is useful in the bamboo tunnels.

Good luck!

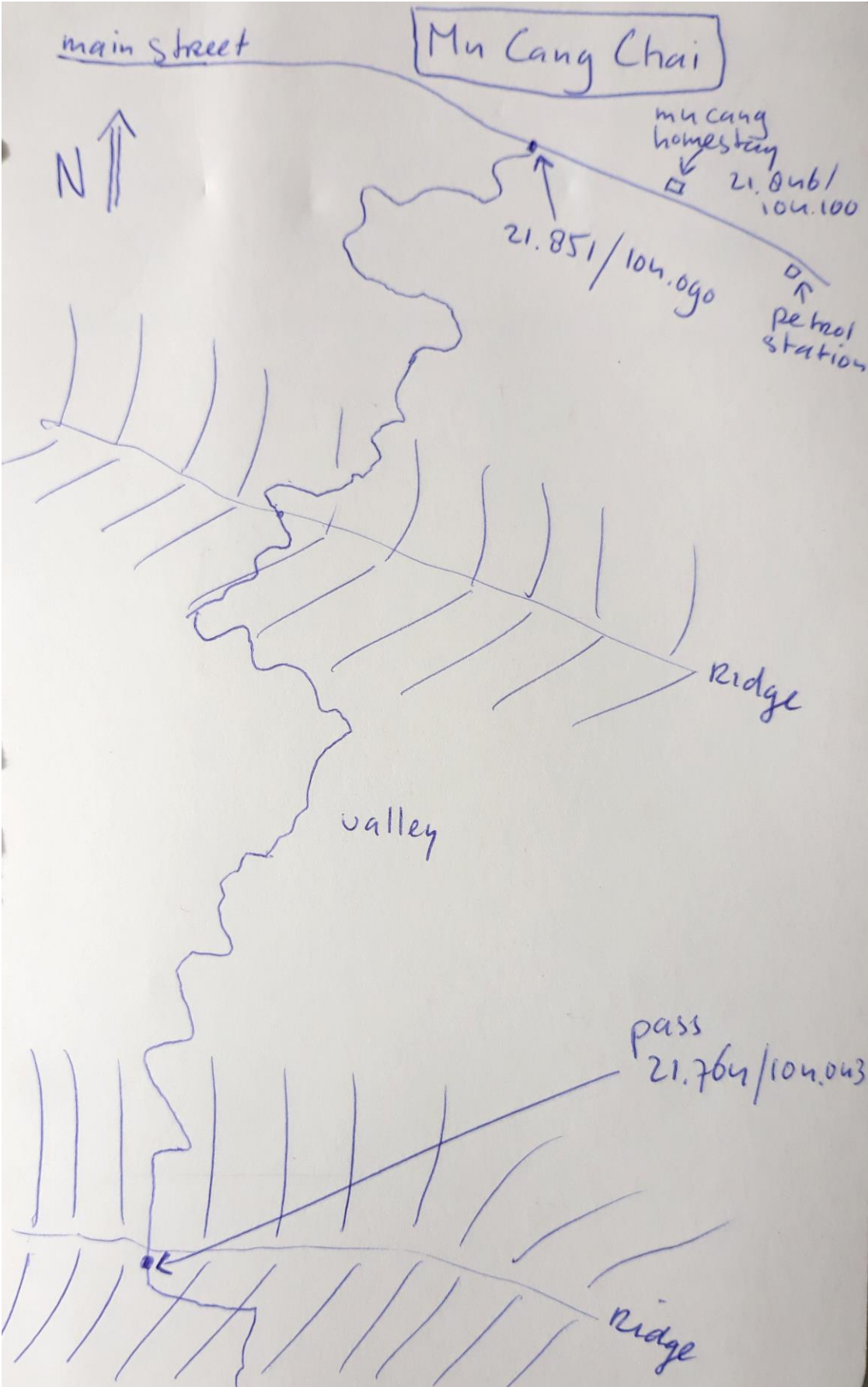
Acknowledgements

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Literature

- [1] Eames J.C. & Mahood S. White-throated Wren Babbler *Rimator pasquieri*: Vietnam's rarest endemic passerine? *Birding Asia* 15 (2011): 58–62.

Map 1: from Mu Cang Chai to the pass



Map 2: trail and pass area

