

# Birding Trip Report Philippines: Luzon & Palawan, 25.02.-11.03.2013

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This is a report about a quick trip to visit my girlfriend working in Manila, see some endemics around Manila and then spend some holidays together on Palawan with some birding and scuba diving. After the disappearance of [travellingbirder.org](http://travellingbirder.org), I found it very difficult to find newer, useful trip reports for the area, so I will try to give as much site updates as possible for the sites I visited. Highlights of my trip were Green Racquet-tail and both Malkohas in Subic Bay, Red-bellied Pitta and Ashy Thrush within 5 minutes in La Mesa Ecopark / Quezon, the tame beautiful Palawan Peacock-Pheasant and my bird of the trip, the ultra-cool Falcated Wren Babbler!

## Itinerary

I first planned to visit Mount Makiling but then my friend and bird tour organizer Bram Demeulemeester (<http://birdguidingphilippines.com/>) informed me that the mountain was closed due to an accident in December, so I decided to visit Subic Bay instead on Luzon.

25.02.2013	Zurich to Dubai
26.02.2013	Dubai to Manila, transfer to Baloy Beach
27.02.2013	Subic Bay birding (Nabusan area, Boton Falls trail, water station road, night birding at Nabusan area and water station road)
28.02.2013	Subic Bay birding (Boton Falls track, Apalin forest trail, water station road, night birding at Boton Falls track and water station road)
01.03.2013	Candaba Marsh birding, La Mesa Ecopark / Quezon birding, Angono Petroglyph Museum, Manila
02.03.2013	Manila to Puerto Princesa, Zigzag road birding (=old road to Narra), travel to Sabang
03.03.2013	Puerto Princesa Underground River National Park, underground river ranger station, Mangrove/Jungle/Stream trail, night birding Mangrove trail
04.03.2013	Puerto Princesa Underground River National Park, Mangrove/Jungle/Stream trail, night birding at Sheridan Jungle Trail
05.03.2013	Sabang to El Nido
06.-09.03.2013	Diving & island hopping El Nido
10.03.2013	El Nido to Puerto Princesa to Manila
11.03.2013	Manila to Zurich

## Transport

On Luzon, I hired a car plus driver known by a local contact of my girlfriend. Arnold Magbanua (+63 917 922 5403) was my driver and the 4-wheel jeep would have had easily space for another 3 pax. I paid 3500 PHP per day, plus fuel, food and accommodation for the driver. As Arnold is not a bird tour driver and does not know the sites, I prepared myself with some Google maps/directions for the area outside Manila. In the city area, Arnold felt much more comfortable and knew many shortcuts. On Palawan, we hired a car and driver for the day at the airport (transport halfway to Narra and then to Sabang) which needed much negotiation and was still a rip-off in the end. From Sabang, we took Lexus minibus services for the rest of the trip between the touristy sites at reasonable rates. Internal flights were smoothly with Cebu Pacific.

## Accommodation

### *Baloy Beach, Olongapo*

I stayed at Blue Rock Resort recommended by earlier trip reports. My room was good with AC and fan and the restaurant ran at 24h service. However as I realized later, the restaurant was utterly expensive compared to Palawan, but also Manila standards. Furthermore, I was strangely surrounded exclusively by mid-50 Westerners with mid-20 Filipino girlfriends. All in all the Baloy Beach area seemed a bit strange in that respect (lots of night clubs and supposedly prostitution) and I don't see the advantage to hotels in Subic itself or in the

birding area as it is a 30 minute plus drive from Baloy to the birding sites anyway. Just the 24h restaurant was a big advantage.

#### *Sabang, Palawan*

We stayed in Dab-Dab resort, quite basic, but clean and very cheap. The greatest thing was a Black-chinned Fruit dove in front of our cottage. Disadvantage was a big walking distance to the forest as it was even west to the Sabang harbor. However Mary's was full during our stay and Michi's did not seem to exist anymore (burnt down or something...). Daluyon Beach would be another close, more upmarket option and looked really great.

#### *El Nido, Palawan*

We stayed in Corong-Corong 10 min outside El Nido in the Greenviews Cottages – a rather cheap and very lovely place. Food and the staff were great and we did an island hopping tour directly from the beach.

## Diving

We went with Palawan Divers in El Nido, the first PADI center in town. Although they charge a bit more than others (3700 PHP for a full day 3 dive trip all inclusive) the quality and service was really great and we were very satisfied. Diving was great in the area and highlights included Seahorses and Ornament Ghost Pipefishes, Turtles, tons of different nudibranches with a 25cm monster on a night dive, Squids, Banded Sea Kraits, Blue-spotted Stingray, Blue-spotted Octopus, Lionfishes and much other crazy stuff.

## Varia

I expected leeches on Palawan, but there were none, equally so in Subic Bay. However, plenty of mosquitos in the National Park on Palawan.

## Useful reports

<http://www.birding2asia.com/W2W/Philippines/Subic.html>

Excellent account on Subic Bay, which was extremely helpful!

[www.joerl.se/philippines/woods2003.pdf](http://www.joerl.se/philippines/woods2003.pdf)

Exploration report by Sam Woods et al., although older, still useful, but beware of confusion regarding Zigzag road (see below).

<http://home.zonnet.nl/michiel.1/phils/notes%20on%20phils.htm>

This report has the best maps of the Puerto Princesa Underground River National Park you can find!

## Sounds

Xeno-canto has it almost all, I also took Jelle Scharringa's Birds of Tropical Asia 3 (a great collection) and Stijn de Win's recordings from the Philippines (<http://www.birding2asia.com/W2W/FBS/Philippines/Philippines.html>).

## Birding sites

I made a public Google map with the birding sites in case you want to print them out or want to use a GPS. Here's the link:

<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF&msa=0&msid=202769131798868517437.0004d57374a21e1823fe4>

#### *Subic Bay*

Unfortunately, the road to Hill 394 was blocked and locals said that now, a permit from "ecology" is needed to access the area. Tough shit for me, so I focused on the other areas described in Stijn de Win's site description. In the end, I discovered that if you follow the Boton Falls trail along the ridge, you would eventually come out at Hill 394 on the other side, so birding on both trails must be similar. I found the road to the water station rather productive at both night and day as it came closest to both primary forest and edge habitat. The best

birding areas in my view were the Boton Falls track that follows the ridge (not the track down to the falls) and the road to the water station.

### *Zigzag road*

I first had problems to find the correct site because the older reports write that it's a site along the road to Narra (km 35 marker). It's actually a site along the OLD ROAD TO NARRA (see GPS points in the Google map). So don't miss the turn-off after kilometer 33 to the right and follow the old "zigzag" road uphill where the kilometer signs still exist. The forest along the road looks great and although we did not get the Palawan Flycatcher in the heat of the mid-day, it must be around there. The Melodious Babbler was more responsive to tape, but a hard skulker.

### *Puerto Princesa Underground River National Park*

First, I found out in contrary to older reports, that there is NO BRIDGE to cross the river to the national park! There is a raft at a rope which you can use if it is at your river bank. But if it is at the other bank and there are no people at the raft (for example when you return from a night walk), you have to cross the river on foot, which is easily done downstream at the beach, where it gets very shallow at the entry / delta (knee-deep). However, I am not sure at maximum tide, if you are still able to conveniently cross at this point. Once in the park, my luck with closed trails kept up: Both Monkey and Jungle trails between Central Park Ranger Station and Underground River Entrance Ranger Station were closed and are currently "under construction", making the best birding areas inaccessible. Luckily, this meant that the walk to the Central Park Station did not require a permit and we walked in the national park "for free". The loop back to Sabang via stream trail, half of the jungle trail and mangrove trail was still possible and therefore made the forest birding still feasible. The stream trail is the trail heading south from the Central Park Ranger Station (see map in trip report from 2007) it is marked with orange/pink bands in the beginning until the trail climbs the first and only hill, where the banding suddenly stops. Ashy-headed Babbler was in the stream area, before the ascent. After crossing the ridge, the trail descends on the other side to reach flat ground again, where it comes into an intersection with the jungle trail. Turn right to go to Sabang. Exactly where the trails cross, there was a Falcated Wren Babbler territory. Following the Jungle Trail to the West / to Sabang brings some more Falcated habitat. After crossing a rocky area, the trail arrives at the mangroves, from where on other reports called it the mangrove trail. This section follows the hill/mangrove edge and is a bit trickier to walk as it goes up and down, is sometimes a bit narrow and is not so well-maintained. Once you come out of the trail, you know why it is so hard to find it from the raft crossing. For a night walk, I entered the mangrove trail about 200 meters, where I got a Palawan Frogmouth. When crossing the Mangrove River on the way back, some armed guards of Mary's resort picked me up as it was obviously not allowed to stay on the park side beach beyond 5 pm. From the Underground River Station, I followed the monkey trail a bit until the limestone cliff, where it was visible why the trail is definitely impassable: The wooden stairs across the cliffs were completely destroyed - no access without advanced climbing skills. Around the ranger station, I just criss-crossed the forest at around 9 am until I bumped into the Peacock-Pheasant, which happened 2 Hooded Pittas, 3 Philippine Megapodes and approx. 2 hours later. Watch out that you don't step on the Pheasant, he comes VERY close (100mm lens was just right to get it in frame). Honestly, it's just too zoo-like... I also birded along the main road out of Sabang and found the "Sheridan Jungle /RV trail" on the East side of the road some 3-4 km out of town very good for owling: Palawan Scops Owl was seen, Spotted Wood Owl and Palawan Frogmouth heard close-by.

### *El Nido*

No birding here...

### *Candaba Swamp*

See GPS map, don't access the site through Candaba, but from the South from Baliuag / Bahay Pare as the road out of Candaba is horrible and the one from the South is a tar road. The ponds are surrounded by trees and a trail leads through the middle of the ponds, where pretty much all things can be seen. A very bird-rich area!

### *La Mesa Ecopark, Quezon*

The good forest is at the East end of the park (direction "mountain bike trail"). After some listening for leaf-tossing, I found the Red-bellied Pitta a few meters next to myself and then entered the forest a bit and played the call of Ashy Thrush on xeno-canto, after which it showed itself quickly before returning to normal activity on the ground. I guess it might even be easier in the early morning when both are still singing / calling.

### *Angono Petroglyph Museum*

The site is at the other end of a tunnel and is surrounded by few big trees, where the juvenile Eagle Owl was often sitting during the day. When I arrived there, the guards told me that the juvenile left the site a few days ago as it is fully grown now and it has not been seen during the day for several days beforehand. They also told me that the adult might still hang around after dark, but I could not stay that long on site. Let's hope it breeds again successfully at this site so birders can watch the next juvenile in a year.

## **Annotated Bird List**

Abbreviations: CS = Candaba Swamp, SB = Subic Bay, PP = Puerto Princesa Underground River National Park, ZZ = Zigzag road, ME = La Mesa Ecoparc, Quezon

Philippine Megapode	3 around the PP Underground River Ranger Station, 2 on the trail entering the national park towards the Central Park Station.
Red Junglefowl	heard and a few seen in the SB forest
Palawan Peacock-pheasant	the tame male seen just behind the PP Underground River Ranger Station, after some criss-cross searching through the surrounding forest.
Wandering Whistling Duck	~100 CS
Philippine Duck	~50 CS
Eurasian Teal	4 CS
Common Pochard	1 male CS
Tufted Duck	~30 CS
Little Grebe	2 CS
Yellow Bittern	~20 CS
Black-crowned Night-Heron	100+ CS
Pond Heron sp. (Chinese/Javan)	10+ in the rice fields around CS
Eastern Cattle Egret	common everywhere
Grey Heron	60+ CS
Purple Heron	120+ CS
Great Egret	few around CS and on Palawan
Intermediate Egret	few on Luzon, more in rice fields in Palawan
Little Egret	many CS and rice fields on Luzon and Palawan
Pacific Reef Heron	Common around El Nido in limestone shore habitat. All dark morphs except a single white individual.
Osprey	1 PP at Sabang shore
Brahminy Kite	common SB area, 1 Sabang
White-bellied See-Eagle	1 Sabang and many around El Nido, Palawan
Philippine Serpent Eagle	3 SB from Boton falls trail
Eastern Marsh Harrier	1 juvenile CS
Harrier sp.	In CS, I saw a "female ringtail" harrier sitting first and then flying close-up across the marsh. Without much thinking, I identified it as juvenile male Hen Harrier as it had a pale iris, but still showed the darker secondaries of juveniles. It was much later that I discovered that this bird has no record

yet on the Philippines... That's why I leave the ID of this bird open as I unfortunately did not take any photos.

Besra	1 SB
Rufous-bellied Hawk-Eagle	1 juvenile on Palawan between El Nido and Sabang
Philippine Hawk-Eagle	1 perched adult SB at the intersection of the road to the airport and the Crown Peak hotel
Philippine Falconet	2 adults along the trail to the Boton falls. Despite intensive scanning, the only occasional / lucky encounter.
Common Kestrel	1 SB airport
Peregrine Falcon	1 adult of the dark ernesti race flying over Sabang
Barred Rail	~5 around CS, 1 ME
White-breasted Waterhen	1 SB, 4+ CS
White-browed Crake	1 CS
Purple Swamphen	6+ CS
Common Moorhen	10+ CS
Common Ringed Plover	~15 around CS
Pheasant-tailed Jacana	1 juvenile CS
Swintail Snipe	a few around CS
Wood Sandpiper	6+ CS
Grey-tailed Tattler	1-2 west of Sabang boat terminal
Common Sandpiper	few in Sabang and CS
Ruff	1+ CS
Oriental Pratincole	~20 CS
Whiskered Tern	10 CS, 30 at Angono / Manila lagoon
Rock Dove	Manila
Red Turtle Dove	2 SB area, ~80 CS
Spotted Dove	here and there a few individuals on both Luzon and Palawan
Emerald Dove	1 SB along road to water station
Zebra Dove	40+ CS and singles on Palawan
White-eared Brown Dove	1 seen and more heard ME and maybe many more in SB area
Amethyst Brown Dove	not sure about this species, but most likely many heard in SB area
Pink-necked Green Pigeon	1-3 in Sabang area
Philippine Green Pigeon	2-4 in SB area
Black-chinned Fruit Dove	1 in SB, Dab-Dab cottages – many more Fruit Doves were heard in SB, but unfortunately I never managed to see one
Green Imperial Pigeon	common in SB and PP
Philippine Hanging Parrot	2 seen in SB close to the Tiara hotel, many more heard and fly-over
Blue-headed Racquet-tail	heard on both days in the PP forest, unfortunately not seen
Green Racquet-tail	2 and 2 seen in SB along the water station road and at the airport edge, many more heard in the area
Blue-naped Parrot	commonly seen in the SB area and the PP / Sabang area

Guaiabero	4-6 seen in SB area, especially along the water station road
Rufous Coucal	Two groups of >2 and 10 individuals in SB area, at the forest close to Nabusan and the water station road
Greater Coucal	heard daily in the PP forest
Philippine Coucal	3-5 seen and many more heard in SB, especially in the Nabusan area and along the water station road
Chestnut-breasted Malkoha	2-3 seen in PP, one close to the Underground River ranger station and the rest on the jungle / stream trail
Rough-crested Malkoha	SB, with 1 overhead in the Nabusan area and a flock of 25 at the end of the water station road
Scale-feathered Malkoha	1 single bird in the vegetation surrounding the Boton falls (close to the river)
Asian Koel	common SB and PP area
Violet Cuckoo	2 males Zigzag road and more in Sabang / PP area
Plaintive Cuckoo	commonly heard in Sabang and El Nido
Square-tailed Drongo-cuckoo	2 seen along jungle trail in PP and more heard in Sabang / PP
Palawan Scops Owl	1 bird seen at Sheridan Jungle / RV trail outside Sabang
Philippine Scops Owl	1 seen and 3+ heard along the Boton falls track following the ridge in SB
Philippine Eagle Owl	1 distant bird heard along the water station road in SB
Spotted Wood Owl	1 heard at Sheridan Jungle / RV trail outside Sabang
Chocolate Bobook	1 heard along the Boton falls track following the ridge in SB
Philippine Hawk-owl	8+ and 10 heard in the Nabusan area, along the water station road and the Boton falls track following the ridge in SB. Many heard, but only one bird seen along the Boton Falls track and two birds seen along the road towards the Boton falls / hospital.
Philippine Frogmouth	1 heard along the water station road in SB
Palawan Frogmouth	1 seen along the Mangrove trail PP and one heard in the Sheridan Jungle / RV trail area outside Sabang
Great Eared Nightjar	3 in the Nabusan area, SB and one along the Boton falls track SB
Large-tailed Nightjar	2 flying at dusk over the Mangrove River in PP
Whiskered Treeswift	2 SB area
Glossy Swiftlet	supposedly everywhere
Pygmy Swiftlet	supposedly this species in SB area in forest close to the airport?
x-nest Swiftlet	many in PP over the forest, not clear which species
Swiftlet sp.	I did not pay close attention to the ID of swiftlets...
Purple Needletail	1 over Subic Bay Freeport zone
Oriental Dollarbird	4+ SB in Nabusan area
Stork-billed Kingfisher	1 at Mangrove River PP and more around El Nido
White-throated Kingfisher	common SB and on Palawan
Collared Kingfisher	1 SB, 1+ PP and Sabang and common around El Nido limestone coast
Common Kingfisher	1 SB, 1 daily around Sabang
Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher	heard several times on the Stream trail in PP

Blue-tailed Bee-eater	10+ CS
Blue-throated Bee-eater	50+ daily in SB area, most around the “bee-eater colony” on the way out of the Crown Peak complex towards the hospital / Boton falls track
Luzon Hornbill	6 and 4 in SB area, in the Nabusan surroundings and the water station road
Coppersmith Barbet	common SB area and in ME
Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker	2 from the look-out behind the Tiara hotel in SB and heard in the ME
White-bellied Woodpecker	1 female SB in the Nabusan area
Luzon Flameback	rather commonly (5-6 daily) seen in SB, in the Nabusan area, along Boton falls track and the water station road
Sooty Woodpecker	rather commonly (3-8 daily) seen in SB, in the Nabusan area, along the Boton falls track and the water station road
Red-bellied Pitta	1 bird ME in the same dark primary forest area as the Ashy Thrush
Hooded Pitta	2 birds behind the Underground River Ranger Station in PP and 3 plus more heard birds along the stream / jungle trails in PP
Golden-bellied Gerygone	3+ heard SB, more heard ME
White-breasted Woodswallow	common in SB, CS, ME and Palawan
Common Iora	1-2 birds daily in PP
Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike	Very common in SB, seen in most areas
Blackish Cuckooshrike	Rather common in SB, seen mostly in Nabusan area and Boton Falls area
Mangrove Whistler	once heard in PP
Brown Shrike	commonly encountered in Luzon
Long-tailed Shrike	~10 in open area around CS
Dark-throated Oriole	1 male in PP along the jungle trail
Black-naped Oriole	Very common in SB
Ashy Drongo	1 roadside bird between Sabang and El Nido
Balicassio	Common SB area at most sites
Spangled Drongo	2+ daily in PP trails
Blue-headed Fantail	only 1 bird in SB along the water station road
Pied Fantail	10+ CS and ME
Black-naped Monarch	2 birds in SB along water station road
Blue Paradise Flycatcher	2 around Underground River Ranger station in PP, more heard in PP forest
Slender-billed Crow	common SB and PP
Elegant Tit	4+ SB with three singing birds along water station road in SB and one bird seen along the Boton falls ridge track
Palawan Tit	only 1 bird heard along the road out of Sabang singing rather distantly in the hill forest
Oriental Skylark	heard singing in the CS area
Black-headed Bulbul	4 birds seen along the Zigzag road
Yellow-vented Bulbul	Common in SB area, ME, CS and Zigzag road
Sulphur-bellied Bulbul	4+ Zigzag road and 6+ daily in PP heard and seen

Philippine Bulbul	Rather common in SB area, one of the few easy birds to spot
Grey-throated Martin	several around CS
Barn Swallow	commonly seen on a daily basis
Pacific Swallow	commonly seen on a daily basis
Arctic Warbler	2 birds CS, I photographed one bird which seemed a bit “yellowish” to me, but called very “Sunbird”-like as the nominate would do. The photographed bird was in moult and seemed to have a rather short primary projection untypical for this species.
Oriental Reed Warbler	4+ CS
Clamorous Reed Warbler	2 CS
Striated Grassbird	many in the CS area
Tawny Grassbird	many (5+) in the CS area
Zitting Cisticola	roadside seen in Palawan
Bright-capped Cisticola	common around CS
Grey-backed Tailorbird	4 and 6 in SB area, mostly along the Boton falls trail down to the falls and along the water station road
Philippine Tailorbird	2 heard in ME
Rufous-tailed Tailorbird	several seen in PP and along Zigzag road and daily heard in PP and on islands around El Nido
Pin-striped Tit-Babbler	daily 6-8 seen in all areas of PP forest
Falcated Wren Babbler	a couple seen at the intersection of stream and jungle trail and another bird a bit west of it along the jungle trail in PP
Ashy-headed Babbler	a group twice heard along the stream trail in PP
Melodious Babbler	2+ seen at Zigzag road
Lowland White-eye	10+ seen ME and most likely this species overhead in Nabusan area of SB
Asian Fairy Bluebird	4+ Zigzag road
Philippine Fairy Bluebird	1 in Nabusan area of SB, more heard in the area
Asian Glossy Starling	common around settlements in Luzon and Palawan
Coledo	10-20 daily in SB, seen in almost all visited areas
Common Hill Myna	heard in PP forest
Crested Myna	6+ SB Freeport area
Chestnut-cheeked Starling	3 SB Freeport area
White-shouldered Starling	2+ seen CS and proof-photographs of this rarity taken
Stripe-headed Rhabdornis	10+ seen around the Nabusan area in SB and some other sites (Boton falls trail)
Ashy Thrush	1 bird in ME, in the same dark, primary forest area as the Red-bellied Pitta
White-browed Shama	SB, 1 seen along the Boton falls trail following the ridge, more heard there and 1-2 birds heard along the water station trail, but no reaction to tape there.
White-vented Shama	3+ birds Zigzag road and daily 4-10 heard in PP forest
Pied Bush Chat	~6 birds around CS



Blue Rock Thrush	1 male of the red-bellied taxon on the roof of the factory at the turn-off to the water station road in SB
Grey-streaked Flycatcher	2 birds along the Zigzag road
Palawan Blue Flycatcher	2+ heard daily in PP, with 1 female nicely seen along the stream trail
Mangrove Blue Flycatcher	1 male along the water station road forest in SB
Palawan Flowerpecker	2 males along Zigzag road and another male in PP
Red-keeled Flowerpecker	1 male in ME, many more heard
Pygmy Flowerpecker	1 male in SB along Boton falls track and 2 males Zigzag road
Olive-backed Sunbird	common around settlements in both Luzon (Angono) and Palawan (Sabang, El Nido)
Lovely Sunbird	1 male seen along stream trail in PP, another male along the jungle trail, plus several heard in PP forest
Pale Spiderhunter	1 taped in along stream trail, then heard daily in PP. One flying around our cottage at Dab-Dab in Sabang. Striking appearance: The prominent eye-ring is not depicted in books.
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Common commensal everywhere.
Chestnut Munia	Very common in and around CS.
White-bellied Munia	a few around El Nido.
(Eastern) Yellow Wagtail	a few in rice fields outside Sabang, with a rough call.
Grey Wagtail	one in a rice field in Sabang
Paddyfield Pipit	6+ around CS