

## Myanmar, 4 - 15 November 2017

We'd always wanted to go to Myanmar, and now seemed a good time to do it, as the country is going through changes, including a rapid increase in internet connectedness - always an important factor these days. We booked the holiday before the well-publicised issues arose in Rakhine state over which Aung San Suu Kyi has been heavily criticized in the west; otherwise perhaps we wouldn't have gone but we were very glad we did.

As with all our holidays, the birds are an important aspect, but not the main focus. Myanmar is special for its temples and monasteries and the birding fitted in around the main tourist route. Many of the peripheral states are not suitable for casual visiting because of continuing strife (there are various border conflicts apart from the current one in Rakhine) but the main tourist sites in the central area and Shan state are well geared up for tourism and are easy to get about in.

We did not travel independently, but arranged the trip through the excellent Myanmar-based company Tour Mandalay <http://www.tourmandalay.travel>. Despite the name, they cover the whole of Myanmar and they arranged all our hotels, pick-ups, transfers, internal flights and day trips. They do have recommended itineraries but were happy to arrange a bespoke one for us, and we could choose our own hotels which they booked. We tended to stay in mid-price or better hotels and found their quality excellent. Everything Tour Mandalay arranged worked out very well, and we still felt we were in charge of planning the details of the whole trip rather than leaving it to them. We often found that we could improve on their suggested flight times, for example, and they were always happy to adopt our changes. The total cost worked out a lot less than if we'd gone on a tour from one of the UK brochure companies and we felt our money was going more directly into the local economy.

We booked our own flights to and from Yangon with Emirates, stopping at Dubai; we came back via Bangkok to get better flight times to Dubai.

### Saturday 4 November - Yangon

Looking from the window of our room in the Chatrium Hotel I was initially puzzled by the vast numbers of all-black crows emerging from their roost in the large trees around Kandawgyi Lake. These turned out to be house crows of the Myanmar endemic race *insolens*, in which the grey of the nominate race is almost black, barely visible except on the back and sides of the neck. An early morning walk to the lake produced a black-naped oriole, taiga flycatcher, oriental magpie-robin, spotted dove, little cormorant, common mynas and house swifts as well as hundreds more house crows.

After breakfast we walked to the Shwedagon Pagoda. By chance, it was a full moon as well as a Saturday, so the temple area was thronged with families, all dressed in their best outfits, making devotions and water-pouring - a wonderful spectacle, and at that hour we were the only tourists there! Our return walk to the hotel took us round the south side of the lake, where we saw a pond heron (Indian or Chinese -willing to take advice from the photo below), and some black kites and Asian palm swifts. Later that evening I saw a coppersmith barbet in lakeside trees near the hotel.



*house crow of endemic race insolens, Kandawgyi Lake, Yangon*



*black drongo, Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon*



*pond heron (Chinese or Indian?), Kandawgyi Lake, Yangon*



*coppersmith barbet, nr Chatrium Hotel, Yangon*

## **Sunday 5 November - Yangon and Mandalay**

Another early morning walk to the lakeside gave me better views of some taiga flycatchers, which were to become one of the commonest and most recognizable birds of the trip, with their constant dry rattling call.

Our short flight by turboprop plane to Mandalay with the Myanmar company Air KBZ was fine and they even managed to serve a free snack on board. At Mandalay airport we were met by our Tour Mandalay driver Francis, who took us to our hotel and then on a quick tour of some of the sights in central Mandalay, culminating in Mandalay Hill at sunset. Here a gathering of ashy woodswallows and house swifts over the hilltop pagoda added to the spectacle of the Ayeyarwaddy plain below.

## **Monday 6 November - Mandalay, Amarapura and Sagaing**

There isn't much green space in central Mandalay the but Bagan King Hotel where we stayed was close to the south gate of Mandalay Palace, which is a vast green space in the heart of the city. Because the Palace grounds are now occupied by the military, this gate is closed to foreigners (the only gate open is the east gate, too far to walk). However, I was allowed to walk across the moat and along a track outside the wall, where I saw more taiga flycatchers and heard some yellow-browed warblers.

Francis was ready for us after breakfast and we set off on what was to be one of our fullest and most interesting days. Although we'd only hired him as a driver, Francis spoke very good English and was an excellent source of information and advice. He took us round traditional workshops, monasteries, a nunnery and even a monastic school - places where gawping and taking pictures would be unthinkable in another country, but here we were ignored or welcomed.

But first we went to U Bein Bridge in Amarapura. We'd heard it gets very busy with tourists at sunset so we went in the early morning, when it was quiet and serene, with hundreds of fishermen in boats out on the lake. Here I saw my first new birds: **vinous-breasted mynas** among the common mynas and a single **grey-throated sand martin** among the many barn swallows. Little green bee-eaters, black kites and Indian cormorants flew overhead and there were white wagtails, little egrets and pond herons at the water's edge.



*white wagtail ssp leucopsis, from U Bein Bridge*



*white-throated babbler, Aye Yar River View Hotel, Bagan*

## Tuesday 7 November - Ayeyarwaddy from Mandalay to Bagan

The boat Tour Mandalay uses for its river cruises, R V Panorama, is quite comfortable with aeroplane-style reclining seats below deck and café-style tables and chairs on deck. Although we departed at first light (6.30 am) we didn't see as many birds from the boat as I'd hoped - single glossy ibis and ruddy shelduck, a flying group of Indian spotbills, lots of black (or black-eared?) kites resting on the mudbanks with a few black- and brown-headed gulls. We stopped to walk through a riverside village mid-morning which was interesting, and I saw a few birds here too - common tailorbirds, pied bushchat, black-shouldered kite and my first **yellow-streaked warbler**. I've since learned there are river dolphins on the river, usually seen in a protected area upstream of Mandalay.

Arriving in Bagan at dusk I encountered another endemic in the grounds of our hotel - **white-throated babbler**, which were plentiful and tame there.

## Wednesday 8 November - Bagan

I had an early morning stroll from the hotel around the outer walls of Old Bagan and the gully (former moat?) that runs alongside. There were plenty of birds here - a white-breasted kingfisher, a hoopoe, a couple of brown shrikes, some little green bee-eaters, streaked-eared bulbuls (endemic race *blanfordi*, which some consider a full species, although it looked pretty similar to me), scaly-breasted munias, lots more white-throated babblers, another yellow-streaked warbler and a small group of **plain-backed sparrows**.



After breakfast our driver Mojo took us on a day tour of Bagan, visiting the sites we'd decided we wanted to see. First we went to Sitana Gya Hpaya Pagoda, where birders have had success with some of the local endemics. Here we found more white-throated babblers, some little green bee-eaters, a blue rock thrush, a pied bushchat and a grey-breasted prinia.

During the rest of the day we saw a few more birds at various ancient temples - streak-eared and red-vented bulbuls at Nagayon Pagoda; little green bee-eaters at Mingalazedi and Shwezigon Pagodas; white-throated babblers and vinous-breasted starlings at Upali Thein. We ended the day at a man-made hill near Sulamani Pagoda to watch the sun set over Old Bagan. Cattle egrets arrived at a small lake directly behind the mound to roost, where there were a few lesser whistling-ducks, Indian spotbills, ruddy shelducks and little grebes. Also at the lake were barn swallows, grey-throated sand martins, little green bee-eaters and a collared dove.



*house sparrow ssp indicus, Shwezigon Pagoda, Bagan*



*vinous-breasted myna, Upali Thein Pagoda, Bagan*

#### Thursday 9 November - Bagan

We were both out early at Shwegugyi Pagoda in Old Bagan to watch the hot air balloons going up over the site. It was an easy walk there and back from the hotel, and we saw and heard various interesting birds that seemed to be common wherever we went, such as streak-eared bulbuls, white-throated babblers, yellow-streaked warblers, little green bee-eaters and vinous-breasted starlings. We also frequently saw prinias that looked to be grey-breasted in various different plumages.

We took a taxi from the hotel to the area east of the old city, so that we could walk back across the fields. Unfortunately our plans went slightly awry - to start with, I asked the driver to take us to the viewing mound near Sulamani, which he did, but it wasn't the same mound, this was smaller one. Instead of capitalising on that and adjusting our route back, I chose to march us to the other viewing mound, and from there I managed to get us properly lost, and the weather turned hot, and we walked miles before we reached the Ananda Pagoda and civilisation.

It wasn't completely in vain though: in the fields we saw a couple of Burmese shrikes, a hoopoe, another plain-backed sparrow, another yellow-streaked warbler, olive-backed and Richard's pipits, and some **Burmese bushlarks**. I was looking out for Jerdon's minivets but didn't manage to find one.



*Burmese shrike, near Sulamani Pagoda, Bagan*



*brown-headed gull, Inle Lake*

We spent the rest of the day and evening in and around Old Bagan, visiting more temples and becoming more familiar with the commoner birds of the area.

### **Friday 10 November - Bagan to Kalaw**

Mojo drove us to our next destination, the hill town of Kalaw in Shan State, where we arrived in the afternoon. The town was popular with the British as a hot season retreat during the colonial era and we could see why - the cooler air was noticeable as we walked around the hotel, seeing olive-backed pipits, red-whiskered bulbuls and grey tits. In the evening a couple of **Oriental hobbies** hawked for dragonflies over the hotel.

### **Saturday 11 November - Kalaw**

Our short stay in Kalaw was intended as a break from the rather intensive sightseeing programme we had given ourselves, and here we had a little more time for birding the local area on foot. In the grounds of the Kalaw Heritage Hotel I saw **chestnut-flanked white-eyes** (with Oriental white-eyes), dusky warblers, common iora and a **slender-billed oriole**. Close to the hotel I found a pair of grey bushchats, a crested honey-buzzard, and one of last night's Oriental hobbies resting in a pine tree.

We walked up to a nearby cave pagoda and down into Kalaw town, where we had to shelter from a heavy and prolonged rain shower in the excellent Elpis Café. Emma, the owner, cooked us a wonderful Shan noodle meal, chatted to us about Shan cooking, the town and the trekking tours she operates, and lent us her umbrella for our walk back to the hotel. I ventured out again when the rain stopped in the late afternoon and saw some black-collared starlings.

### **Sunday 12 November - Kalaw to Nyaung Shwe**

Near the hotel in the early morning I added long-tailed shrike, besra, red-rumped swallow and a pair of grey bushchats to the trip list. We walked into town via the British-era railway station and market, seeing another party of black-collared starlings en route, and after returning the umbrella walked through forested hills to the Simple Life Café, where we enjoyed a coffee. The owner here was committed to offering local people a taste of the west at affordable prices. She was making pizza, waffles and pastries and outstanding cappuccino and the place was full of young locals eager to sample these exotic delights. Near the café we saw a Himalayan buzzard and some large-billed crows.

After lunch a driver from Tour Mandalay took us to our hotel in Nyaung Shwe. The Thanakha Inle Hotel is slightly south of the town, beside the river that connects to the lake. Arriving in the early evening there was quite a racket as long-tail boats roared past, taking tourists back to Nyaung Shwe. But on the other side of the hotel were rice paddies with common, white-vented and vinous-breasted mynas and pond herons.

### **Monday 13 November - Inle Lake**

In the paddy field nearest the hotel there were two **striated grassbirds** which vanished after a two-second view, unfortunately. In the same area were little cormorants, eastern stonechats, red-whiskered bulbuls, black drongos, dusky warblers and a long-tailed shrike.

Our boat was at the hotel dock after breakfast, and we set off on a full day tour of the lake. I asked if we could look first at the birdwatching centre in the northern part of the lake, which we did but there were only a few birds there. Our guide said the bird tours come at first light to see the roosting birds disperse.

Our first stop was Nga Hpe Kyaung monastery (known as the 'Jumping Cat' monastery as the monks used to train the cats), amongst a mass of floating farms and gardens. Many birds were visible from the monastery terrace: ashy woodswallows, white-vented mynas and black drongos on the temple roof, Asian palm swifts and barn swallows overhead and a grey-backed shrike on a perch above the floating fields. While watching that, a flock of mynas flying into a tree looked different; these were collared mynas, and were soon joined by a black-shouldered kite. Near here were brown shrike and eastern stonechats, and three Asian openbills flew over.



*grey-backed shrike and collared mynas, Nga Hpe Kyaung monastery, Inle Lake*

The rest of the morning we visited the main monastery and a variety of handicraft workshops around the lake, then headed up one of the smaller rivers to Indein where we had lunch and walked around the ancient stupas. Heading back to Nyaung Shwe in the late afternoon there were many gulls on the lake - mainly brown-headed but with some black-headed mixed in.

### **Tuesday 14 November - Nyaung Shwe**

I walked a little further south from the hotel than yesterday, and came to a monastery adjacent to the lake edge. In the distance I could see some interesting-looking ducks amongst a flock of coots. They looked like ferruginous ducks but I took loads of pictures to make sure, and they confirmed there was nothing else amongst them. I'd only ever seen ferruginous duck in the UK so I was pleased to come across them in the wild, so to speak.

Sarah and I went for an interesting walk westwards from our hotel, through paddy fields and into villages and a monastery, then headed into Nyaung Shwe for a nice lunch at the Thanakha Garden Restaurant. In the late afternoon I had another look at the paddy fields and found a fine male bluethroat and a black-capped kingfisher, both very near the hotel.

### **Wednesday 15 November - Nyaung Shwe to Heho and flight to Yangon**

A last look at the nearby paddy field produced a male citrine wagtail, and a flock of Asian openbills flew over.

Soon we were on our way to Heho airport for our Air KBZ flight to Yangon. Arriving at the airport, we learned that our flight would be one hour delayed because of bad weather. It was a proper tropical rainstorm and all the flights were delayed, so the tiny airport departure lounge was very crowded. Although there was a large screen in front of the seats, it only carried adverts - the only notification of flights was by a man with a megaphone, plus for some but not all flights, a handwritten piece of A4 sellotaped to the wall. But somehow the tourists managed to find their way onto the right planes, including ours eventually, two hours late but it couldn't be helped and didn't affect us too badly. We were very glad we were stopping the night in Yangon and had no connection to make there.

We stayed at the Mango Hill Hotel near the airport - a small family-run place which caters well for people between flights. Walking round the streets there gave us an insight into life in this fairly affluent suburban part of the city - so very different from village life, with modern buildings, security gates and dogs on leads! On our walk we heard a koel and saw several singing oriental magpie-robins and a coppersmith barbet.

From Yangon the next morning we flew by Air Bangkok to Bangkok, where we transferred to an Emirates flight to Dubai. We stopped for a couple of nights in Dubai and I managed to see a few more birds there - written up in a separate short report.

### **Conclusion**

We really enjoyed our time in Myanmar. It's a beautiful country and there is much to see. The people are delightful, the temples and monasteries are amazing, and Inle Lake is exceptional. Tourism is taking off now and the main destinations in the areas we visited are very well geared up in terms of hotels, restaurants, tour guides, drivers etc. Also, mobile phone and 4G coverage has exploded in the last five years, and all the places we stayed in had wi-fi (excellent in some hotels, slow but usable in others).

The people we met were indeed delightful -invariably charming, polite and happy to talk - but that's only part of the picture. They've suffered under the military government and the new de facto leader (whom they really do call 'The Lady') has given them freedom and hope, but nearly everyone is still very poor. Conditions we saw in the rural areas are largely unchanged from a century ago and the opportunities to lift themselves from poverty are limited. Many families send their children to monasteries and nunneries where they are well looked after and educated, while for other families sending their children to school requires working long hours for very low pay. The drivers and guides we got to know were worried about the impact a loss of tourism would have on their already difficult lives. Nevertheless, we encountered a very friendly welcome wherever we went, and many people went out of their way to help us.

The weather during our trip was near-perfect: we only had rain on two days, when it didn't matter - a heavy lunchtime shower when we were in Kalaw town and a deluge the day we flew from Heho to Yangon. The rest of the time the weather was nearly always between 25 and 30 degrees - slightly hotter at mid-day in Bagan, a bit cooler early mornings in Kalaw. We were very lucky - on a boat on Inle Lake in pelting rain wouldn't have been any fun.

I didn't find the birding as exciting as in some of the other South East Asian countries I've visited, but we didn't go to birding hot spots like the Chin Hills or the Shan State upland forests, which could easily be included in a more bird-oriented itinerary. On the other hand, I really enjoyed our visits to the villages, monasteries and craft workshops - these were not the typical sales-based experiences for tourists that I feared, but were a fascinating insight. I'd highly recommend Myanmar as a destination for someone looking to combine cultural and scenic interest with birding. My trip list ended up at 84, of which 11 were life birds for me (shown in **bold** in the text above and table below).

### Birds seen in Myanmar, 4 - 15 November 2017

Species	Yangon	Mandalay area	Ayeyarwaddy River	Bagan	Kalaw	Inle Lake and Nyaung Shwe
Lesser whistling-duck	-	-	-	2 Sulamani	-	-
Ruddy shelduck	-	-	1	2 Sulamani	-	-
Indian spot-billed duck	-	-	C12	3 Sulamani	-	C100
Ferruginous duck	-	-	-	-	-	7
Little grebe	-	-	-	2 Sulamani	-	-
Glossy ibis	-	-	C10	-	-	-
Little egret	-	5 U Bein Bridge	5+	-	-	-
Chinese /Indian pond heron	1 Kandawgyi Lake	-	-	2 Sulamani	-	C15
Eastern cattle egret	-	C10 nr airport	-	C30 Sulamani	-	C10
Great egret	-	2	-	1 Sulamani	-	5+
Intermediate egret	-	-	-	-	-	12
Little cormorant	2 Kandawgyi Lake	1 nr airport	-	-	-	C100
Indian cormorant	-	2 U Bein Bridge	-	-	-	-
<b>Oriental hobby</b>	-	-	-	-	2	-
Kestrel	-	1	-	1 Sitana Gya Hpaya	-	-
Oriental honey-buzzard	-	-	-	-	1	-
Black-shouldered kite	-	-	1 at village	-	-	1 'Jumping Cat' monastery
Black kite	3 Kandawgyi Lake	5+ U Bein Bridge	C200	2	-	-
Shikra	-	-	-	1 nr Sulamani	-	-
Besra	-	-	-	-	1	-
Himalayan buzzard	-	-	-	-	1	-
White-breasted waterhen	-	-	-	1 Sulamani	-	-
Coot	-	-	-	-	-	C50
Common sandpiper	-	-	1	-	-	-
Brown-headed gull	-	-	1+	-	-	200+
Black-headed gull	-	-	5	-	-	2+
Feral pigeon (rock dove)	C100	Common	-	Common	2	100+
Collared dove	-	-	-	10+	-	-
Spotted dove	1 Kandawgyi Lake	2	1 at village	Several	Several	Several
Asian koel	1 N Yangon	-	-	-	-	-



Species	Yangon	Mandalay area	Ayeyarwaddy River	Bagan	Kalaw	Inle Lake and Nyaung Shwe
Asian palm swift	10+ Kandawgyi Lake Sev N Yangon	C20 Sagaing C10 Mandalay boat dock	-	Several	-	-
House swift	5+ Shwedagon Pagoda	10+ Mandalay Hill Sev Sagaing	-	-	2	-
White-throated kingfisher	-	-	-	2	-	-
Black-capped kingfisher	-	-	-	-	-	1 near Thanakha Inle Hotel
Little green bee-eater	-	-	8+	C20	-	-
Hoopoe	-	-	-	2	-	-
Coppersmith barbet	3+ Kandawgyi Lake 1 N Yangon	3 Mandalay boat dock	-	-	-	-
<b>Slender-billed oriole</b>	-	-	-	-	1	-
Black-naped oriole	1 Kandawgyi Lake	-	-	-	-	-
Ashy woodswallow	-	50+ Mandalay Hill	-	-	-	2 'Jumping Cat' monastery
Black drongo	1 Shwedagon Pagoda	C10 airport 2 Mandalay	-	2+	-	C20
House crow	C1,000 Kandawgyi Lake	Sev Mandalay Sev Sagaing	Several	Common	-	C100
Brown shrike	-	-	-	2	-	1 near 'Jumping Cat' monastery
Burmese shrike	-	-	-	2 near Sulamani	-	-
Long-tailed shrike	-	-	-	-	1	1 Thanakha Inle Lake
Grey-backed shrike	-	-	-	-	-	1 'Jumping Cat' monastery
Scaly-breasted munia	-	-	-	C10	C10	C10
House sparrow	-	Many Mandalay and Sagaing	Sev village	Common	-	Common
Tree sparrow	4 Chatrium Hotel	-	-	C10 Shwezigon Pagoda	C20	1
Olive-backed pipit	-	-	-	1 near Sulamani	2+	-
Richard's pipit	-	-	-	1 near Sulamani	-	-
Paddyfield pipit	-	-	-	-	-	2
White wagtail	-	C20 U Bein Bridge	-	1	1	C10
Grey wagtail	1 Chatrium Hotel	1 Mandalay Palace	1	-	2+	-
Citrine wagtail	-	-	-	-	-	1
White-vented myna	-	-	-	Several	-	20+
<b>Collared myna</b>	-	-	-	-	-	6+ 'Jumping Cat' monastery
Common myna	20+	C50 U Bein Bridge	C40 Mandalay boat dock C20 from river	Common	-	C20
<b>Vinous-breasted myna</b>	-	5 U Bein Bridge	-	C40	-	2
Black-collared starling	-	-	-	-	C30	-
Blue rock thrush	-	-	-	1 Sitana Gya Hpaya	-	-
Bluethroat	-	-	-	-	-	1 Thanakha Inle Lake
Grey bushchat	-	-	-	-	2	-
Eastern stonechat	-	-	-	-	-	10+
Pied bushchat	-	-	-	6+	-	2
Taiga flycatcher	3+ Kandawgyi lake	2 Mandalay Palace Gate	-	3+	4+	1
Oriental magpie-robin	4+	-	-	-	4+	3+

Species	Yangon	Mandalay area	Ayeyarwaddy River	Bagan	Kalaw	Inle Lake and Nyaung Shwe
Grey tit	-	-	-	-	2	-
<b>Burmese bushlark</b>	-	-	-	3	-	-
Streak-eared bulbul	-	-	-	C20	-	-
Red-whiskered bulbul	-	-	-	-	4+	6+
Red-vented bulbul	-	-	-	1 Nagayan Pagoda	-	-
<b>Grey-throated sand-martin</b>	-	1 U Bein Bridge	-	3+ Sulamani	-	-
Red-rumped swallow	-	-	-	-	C10	-
Barn swallow	-	C100 U Bein Bridge	C10	C10	-	10+
Yellow-browed warbler	-	4 heard	2 heard	Sev heard & seen	Many	Sev heard & seen
<b>Yellow-streaked warbler</b>	-	-	1 in village	5+	-	-
Dusky warbler	-	-	-	-	3+	20+
<b>Chestnut-flanked white-eye</b>	-	-	-	-	1+	-
Oriental white-eye	-	-	-	-	5+	-
<b>White-throated babbler</b>	-	-	-	C30	-	-
<b>Striated grassbird</b>	-	-	-	-	-	2 Thanakha Inle Lake
Common tailorbird	-	-	2 in village	2	1	1
Grey-breasted prinia (or possibly rufescent)	-	-	-	4+	-	-

*Geoff Upton, Southern England*