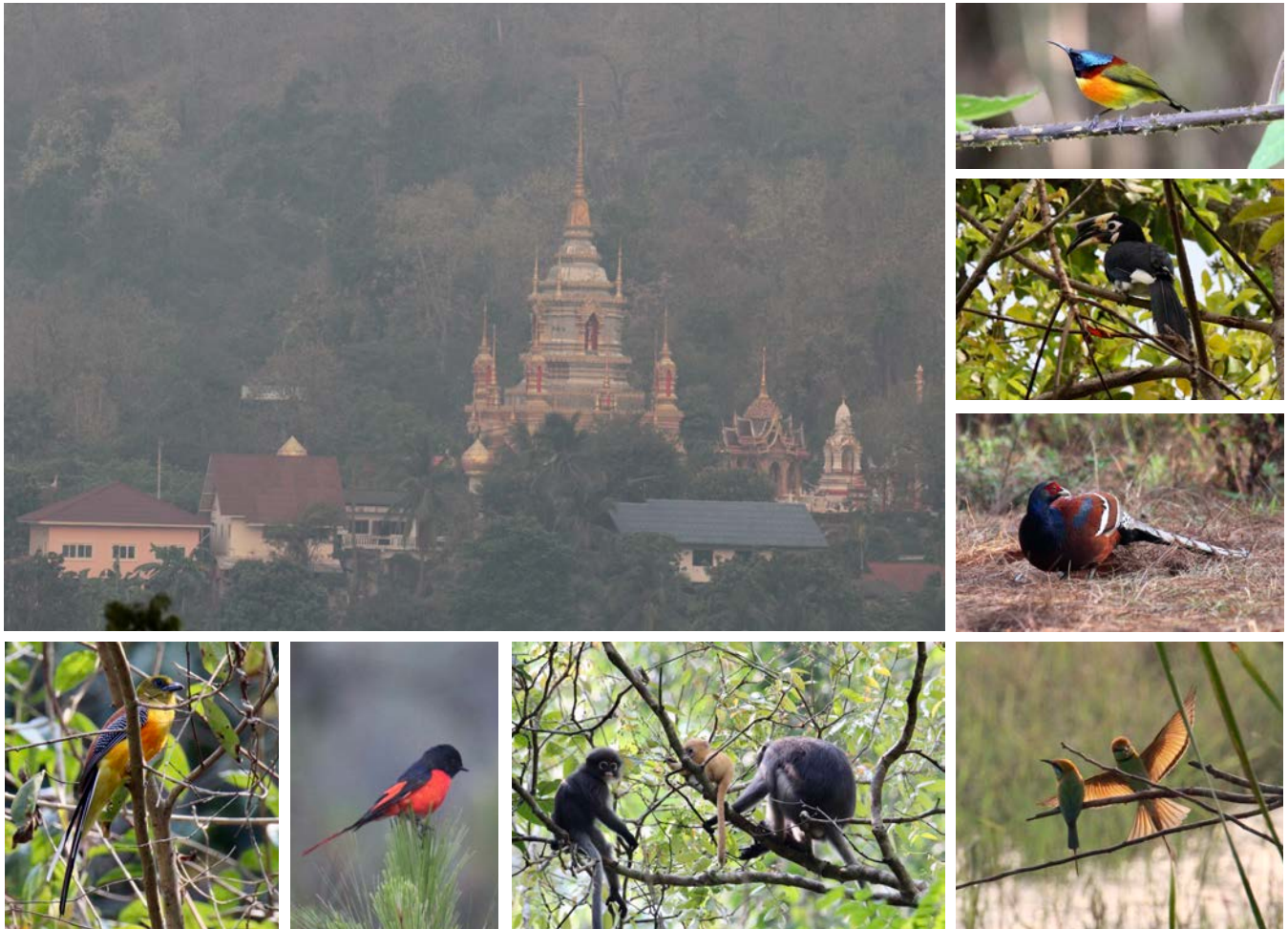


# Thailand Birding & Nature | Feb. 17 – Mar. 11, 2023 Trip Report | by Carlos Sanchez



**With guide Carlos Sanchez, local guide Nick Upton and participants: Beth, Cindy, Lise, Steve, Brent, Velma, Judy, Jim, Eileen, and Jeff**



## **Fri., Feb. 17 – Mon., Feb 20**

## **Mae Ping Pre-tour Extension**

We gathered in the early evening at the lobby of our hotel in Chiang Mai – Beth, Cindy, Jeff, Eileen, Steve, Lise, and myself – to join our guide Nick Upton on a delicious dinner in town. The group got to know each other, and Nick and I provided a brief orientation on what was to come on the following days. Mae Ping National Park features dry dipterocarp forest, a seasonally dry forest type previously much more widespread in Southeast Asia

In the early morning hours on the following day, we departed for Mae Ping NP via the Doi Lo paddies. The scrubby vegetation, agricultural plots, and wet areas provided an excellent introduction to tropical Asian birding, including Asian Green Bee-eater, Brown Shrike, Siamese Pied Starling, Black Drongo, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, and many other soon to be familiar species. We also saw several more specialized species, including the diminutive



Red Avadavat and charismatic Chestnut-capped Babbler. At a nearby site, we saw the excellently camouflaged Savanna Nightjar on a day roost. What a fantastic start! After having a delicious lunch in the town of Li, we checked into our hotel and took a late afternoon break. We headed out in the late afternoon on our first venture into the national park, and we were quickly rewarded with excellent views of Collared Falconet and Burmese Nuthatch.

The following two mornings and one evening repeated the same pattern, as we continued to explore the main park road and campground of the national park for the dry dipterocarp forest specialties. We managed to see nearly all of them: Black-headed and White-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-footed Green-Pigeon, Gray-headed Parakeet, White-crested Laughingthrush, and others. At the campground, we came across a small family group of Golden-fronted Leafbird feeding in some low decorative trees – their vibrant verdant plumage almost sparkled. We took breaks during the middle of the day to cool off, rest, explore the town of Li, or do some reading. It took a little bit over two hours to drive from Li to Chiang Mai on our final afternoon of the extension.

## **Tues., Feb. 22                      Doi Lang (West)**

Brent, Velma, Jim, and Judy joined us for the main tour today. After a buffet breakfast at the hotel in Chiang Mai, we started to make our way eastward towards Doi Lang (West). Our first stop was the Mae Taeng Irrigation Project, where the rest of the group got an excellent introduction to the wide variety of birds that inhabit rice fields and agricultural areas: Greater Coucal, White-throated Kingfisher, Hair-crested Drongo, Wire-tailed Swallow, Amur Stonechat, and more. Highlights included a male Pied Harrier and a flock of Small Pratincole. Afterwards, we headed to the town of Thaton where we checked in for the next two nights before making our first visit to the famous Doi Lang (West) birding site in the mountains. Here, right within view of Myanmar, the montane forest yielded views of so many memorable bird species: Rufous-bellied Niltava, Giant Nuthatch, Rufous-backed Sibia, and Mountain Bamboo-Partridge. We would continue to see many other species on subsequent visits to this amazing site.

## **Wed., Feb 23.                      Doi Lang (West)**

After an early breakfast, we headed back up Doi Lang (West) to continue birding in the upper reaches of the road. There was no shortage of beautiful and charismatic birds, as we spotted White-browed Scimitar-Babbler, White-bellied Redstart, and Ultramarine Flycatcher attending worm feeders. In a large and busy feeding flock, we spotted Gray-headed Parrotbill and Himalayan Cutia – two fantastic finds! As the day wore on and the activity slowed down, we began making our way down the mountain and towards Chiang Rai. We had some nice



afternoon birding in the Mae Ai rice paddies, where we saw a flock of Gray-headed Lapwing, several Pin-tailed Snipe, and the critically endangered Yellow-breasted Bunting.

## **Thurs., Feb. 24                      Fang Hot Springs | Chiang Rai**

We visited Fang Hot Springs in the early morning hours, putting us at a good time to enjoy the park before the heat and crowds of tourists. Although the hot springs themselves are naturally heated by geologic forces deep underneath the ground, the geysers are a human-made attraction. We saw our main target fairly quickly, Spot-winged Grosbeak. We also enjoyed watching a very busy line of flowering coral trees buzzing with great birds: Chestnut-tailed Starling, Black Bulbul, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Great Barbet, Pin-tailed Green-Pigeon, and others.

Afterwards, we headed to Chiang Rai where we had lunch at a fun, traditional restaurant on the Mekong River with Laos just on the other side. We would later be tourists at the Golden Triangle, the spot where the borders between Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand meet, and enjoy some ice cream. It was then time for a break in our rooms during the heat of the day, followed by an easy afternoon at a famous Pied Harrier roost with dozens of the striking raptors plus several other wetland specialties such as White-browed Crake, Citrine Wagtail, and Bronze-winged Jacana.

## **Fri., Feb. 25 – Sat., Feb. 26                      Chiang Rai**

Over the next couple of days, we explored the various wetlands and lakes dotted along Chiang Rai in search of wintering waterfowl and wetland specialties. These lakes host impressive numbers of wintering waterfowl, often joined by the odd stray from further north for extra excitement. Species we encountered included Garganey, Ruddy Shelduck, Cotton Pygmy-Goose, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, and Lesser Whistling-Duck (thousands!). Lanceolated Warbler and Baikal Bush Warbler, proverbial 'LBJs', skulked in the low bushes. One of the great highlights of our birding in this area was seeing Baer's Pochard, a Critically Endangered diving duck with perhaps only 150-500 individuals left in the world. After our morning birding, we enjoyed a delicious Thai lunch at a restaurant right by the Mekong River.

The following day, we paid a visit to Mae Fa Luang Arboretum before heading back into Chiang Mai province. The manicured grounds provided us with our first taste of mountain birding in this fabulous country, including Gray-backed Shrike, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Black-breasted Thrush, and Himalayan Bluetail.



## Sun., Feb. 27 – Wed., Mar. 1

## Doi Ang Khang

Over the night three days, we explored Doi Ang Khang. This mountain is part of the Daen Lao Range that straddles the border between Myanmar and Thailand, and we would see Myanmar several times during our exploration of this area. Biogeographically, it is an extension of the Himalayas. Much like the Andes of South America, these mountains and foothills are home to some of the most diverse assemblages of birds in the world – bulbuls, babblers, laughingthrushes, nuthatches, sunbirds, and more. On our first morning on the mountain, we walked along a rather open paved road where we saw Striated Bulbul, Crested Finchbill, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Black-backed Sibia, Silver-eared Mesia, and Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher. A large and fast-moving feeding flock provided us with excellent views of both the starling-sized Giant Nuthatch and the colorful Himalayan Cutia. Afterwards, the agricultural research station ('king's project) provided us with some opportunities for nice coffee with Scaly Thrush and Streaked Wren-Babbler foraging in the back of the café.

The following morning, we headed up the mountain pre-dawn to try for Mrs. Hume's Pheasant. After what seemed like a long wait, we were successful in seeing both male and female birds feeding on corn on the roadside. Asian pheasants are always such a special treat to see due to their elusive nature and brilliant colors. As we continued to explore Doi Ang Khang that morning, we also came across Black-throated Tit, Gray-headed Parrotbill, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler, Scarlet-faced Liocichla, and Ultramarine Flycatcher. Before heading to Doi Inthanon on our last morning, we went to a site called the Chinese cemetery where we had good looks at Daurian Redstart, Common Rosefinch, Gray Treepie, and Brown-breasted Bulbul. After a several hour drive, we were looking at Spotted Owlet right near our rooms at the Doi Inthanon Highland Resort. Dinner here was in an open air restaurant by a garden pond.

## Thurs., Mar. 2 – Sat., Mar. 4

## Doi Inthanon Region

At about 8,400 feet, Doi Inthanon is the highest mountain in Thailand and part of a mountain system called the Shan Hills. Lush tropical montane forests blanket the upper slopes of this mountain, turning into a more temperate forest near the top complete with a small bog. On our first morning here, we visited the Mae Ouam trail (more a wide dirt road) where we saw Large Niltava, Himalayan Shortwing, and White-gorgeted Flycatcher at a small forest feeding station. Around lunch time, White-capped Redstart and Slaty-backed Forktail offered nice views in a nearby mountain stream. Afterwards, we took some time sitting at a hide where Asian Emerald



Dove, Puff-throated Bulbul, Gray-throated Babbler, Siberian Blue Robin, and Streaked Spiderhunter all dazzled us. We ended this very active day at Ang Ka Summit Trail, where we saw our first Pygmy Cupwing.

We would pay another visit to the Ang Ka Summit Trail the following morning. Epiphytic orchids of two species, as well as rhododendrons, were in full bloom much to the delight of the resident Green-tailed Sunbird. We also caught up with Snowy-browed Flycatcher and Rufous-throated Partridge in the dim understory. On our last morning before our domestic flight, we visited the Parakeet Conservation Area where we got to learn about the plight of the Blossom-headed Parakeet. We saw several parakeets in the surrounding forest from the miniature tower, as well as Eurasian Hoopoe and Golden-fronted Leafbird. The flight to Bangkok was smooth and uneventful, and we had a relaxed night in the big city.

### **Sun., Mar. 5 – Mon., Mar. 6**

### **PakThale | LaemPakBia**

The following morning, we drove in the predawn hours to Pak Thale on the shores of the Gulf of Thailand. This large, open area of mudflats, salt pans, and mangrove patches provides habitat for thousands upon thousands of wintering shorebirds and waders migrating down from East Asia. We tallied 27 different species of shorebird in a morning's birding on these salt pans, including Nordmann's Greenshank and Asian Dowitcher. Spoon-billed Sandpiper, a big target and highlight for any visiting birder to the area, showed well in the scope for the entire group. Among the hundreds of Painted Stork present, we also managed to pick out a rare Milky Stork. After a nice cool off at lunch with some cold lemongrass lemonade, we took an easy afternoon boat ride to the Laem Phak Bia sandspit with Mr. Daeng in order to see Chinese Egret, White-faced Plover, and Malaysian Plover.

The following day, we continued our exploration of these hot lowlands at the Nong Pla Lai rice paddies. Right by the road in the early morning, we saw both Pink-necked Green-Pigeon and Stork-billed Kingfisher right on the wires. A Stump-tailed Macaque made a brief appearance as it climbed down a palm tree. The mosaic of brushy edge and rice paddies was very productive, as we enjoyed good views of Siberian Rubythroat, Freckle-breasted Woodpecker, Yellow-breasted Bunting, Spot-billed Pelican, Black-headed Ibis, a variety of raptors and shorebirds by the thousand. We ended the day just outside Kaeng Krachan National Park at Baan Makka Lodge where we quickly saw a Ruddy-breasted Crake coming into rice.



## Tues., Mar. 7 – Thurs., Mar. 9

## Kaeng Krachan National Park

Kaeng Krachan National Park, straddling the border with Myanmar, is the largest national park in Thailand and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since July 2021. Over the next three days, we explored this magnificent park along the main park road from the park entrance, to the campground, and through the famous stream crossing area. Birding in the early mornings is a must, and early starts rewarded us with views of Green-billed Malkoha, Orange-breasted Trogon, Heart-spotted Woodpecker, Sultan Tit, Vernal Hanging-Parrot, Raffles' Malkoha, and more. Great Hornbill, the size of a swan, swooshed overhead as they clumsily landed in trees to pluck fruit. Great Slaty Woodpecker, the largest of all extant woodpeckers, provided nice scope views, while a pair of Banded Kingfisher stole the show on the second morning with their brilliant blue and red colors.

Broadbills are also often a major highlight for most birders, as they almost look like they are made of plastic – almost unreal! We did well with them, seeing Banded, Black-and-yellow, Silver-breasted, Black-and-red, and Long-tailed. Lunch was always carefully prepared by Ban Makka Lodge, always a nice stir fry of your choosing. Arguably, the best picnic lunches I have ever had anywhere in the world. In the afternoons, we took it easy by sitting quietly at hides where we got to see Kalij Pheasant, Black-naped Monarch, Large Scimitar-Babbler, Ferruginous Partridge, and more.

## Fri., Mar. 10 Departures | Bangkok

Today was mostly a transfer day, as we made our way out of Ban Makka and back across the Nong Pla Lai rice paddies. Along the way, we added one new bird – a Greater Spotted Eagle – soaring overhead. We arrived in the late afternoon in Bangkok, where the group enjoyed dinner together one last time before heading home the following day.

*Photos by Brent Mann: Hazy Scenic, Green-tailed Sunbird, Oriental Pied-Hornbill, Mrs. Hume's Pheasant, Orange-breasted Trogon, Long-tailed Minivet, Asian Green Bee-eater, Dusky Leaf Monkey, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Exploring, Red Junglefowl, White-bellied Redstart, Black-winged Stilt, Owl, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Silver-eared Laughingthrush, Spotted Owlet, Scarlet-faced Liocichla, Spot-breasted Parrotbill, Little Spiderhunter, Large Niltava, Green-tailed Sunbird (repeat), Himalayan Bluetail, Green-billed Malkoha, Nile Monitor Lizard, Common Flameback, Bar-backed Partridge, Banded Broadbill, Great Hornbill, Black-and-yellow Broadbill, Banded Kingfisher, Asian Emerald Cuckoo*