

Thailand Birding & Nature | Trip Report

February 28 – March 14, 2019 | Written by Peg Abbott



With Guides Nick Upton and Carlos Sanchez and Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys, and 8 participants: Judy, Jerry, Walter, Susan, Laura, George, Pam and Tere



Early Arrivals

As the flight was long, several of the group came early, to rest up and explore a bit. We walked the streets of Chiang Mai, along a canal that surrounds the historic walled city that was full of life, street food, shops and vendors, enjoyed by a mix of locals and tourists.

We made our way to a really lovely restaurant, the House of Ginger. They were full, but found us a special room of our own, so we had a quiet spot to get to know each other and share the excitement of our coming adventure. Walter and Susan had stories to share from their several days in Bangkok. We all enjoyed time to study the menu and see the rich blend of lemongrass, ginger, garlic, Thai basil and other ingredients that we could enjoy in future days mixed into various dishes.

Wednesday, February 27 | Arrival in Chiang Mai Thailand / Exploring the City

All of our group arrived early to Chiang Mai and we were delighted to find out that exploring from the hotel was easy, we could readily walk to the old city with its historic temples (Wats) and shops and cafes. We could also ask the front desk for tours or taxis. Some focused in on the city, two went to the Handicraft Village where they could watch parasol making, jade carving, silk fabric production and lacquer. They really enjoyed learning the crafts as well as doing some shopping. As they had already had city time in Bangkok, Susan and Walter went off to the mountains to visit one of the most famous wats.

Several of the group followed Peg to the Zoo, as she wanted to see the Giant Pandas and we all figured out the aviaries would be a good place to get a handle quickly on some of the Thai birds. It was a fun morning, both for animal and people watching, and we got some exercise, nice after the many hours on planes to get here. The Zoo is on 200 acres and we figured we walked about 4 miles. Some of the wild birds we saw included Greater Coucal, both Lineated and Coppersmith Barbets, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Shikra, Oriental Honey-Buzzard, Blue Whistling Thrush (Yellow-billed), and Hill Blue Flycatcher to name a few. We loved watching the pandas with no rush or crowds, they have a male and a female which they have had for many years. We took pleasure in seeing the zoo celebrities: a big male Orangutan, an Indochinese Tiger, and a marvelous array of hornbills, many of which we could see in the field. Time passed quickly, but heat and mileage added up and by 1P.M. we took the red truck taxis (cheap!) back to the hotel.

After lunch many just relaxed or took a swim, four went out to look at fabrics and observe Chiang Mai's bustling street life. There were an abundance of food vendors making for wonderful smells of lemongrass, ginger and curry as we passed myriad street-side cafes. People gathered on outside chairs and couches to enjoy foot massage alongside a beer. The fabric stores were rich treasure houses with fabrics of varied style, many with very intricate patterns and stitching. Tere, being a master seamstress, quickly found those of high quality and it was fun to shop with her. Other stores held an array of items from flowers to trinkets to almost life-sized carved elephants.

We chose one of the restaurants while out and about for us to return to for our welcome dinner. It had covered outside seating and all of us enjoyed it a lot, several chose prawns, others curries, and some a salmon with a panang sauce that was quite good. Peg and Carlos welcomed all with a round of drinks, fresh juices, wine or beer. Nick went over our plans for the next day and still a bit jet-lagged we turned in early

eBird Hotspot: AM - Chiang Mai Zoo

Thursday, February 28 | Muang San Ma / Doi Pha Hom Pok National Park

We started the day at the ample breakfast buffet at our hotel, with both Thai and Western choices in abundance. Afterwards, we met in the lobby to load our suitcases, riding in two vans with plenty of space for our gear. Nick drove one and Pichit the other, with Carlos riding with him. We rotated seating each day.

Today, we crossed town ahead of the traffic and soon were at a wetland site, the Mueang Sam-Ma Swamp, accessed by walking first through a residential area. Quickly we found ourselves in an infusion of birds! Gray-headed Swampphen was called on the right, Chinese Pond Heron the left, then our eyes went aloft to several Asian Openbill and myriad (800+) Lesser Whistling Ducks circling overhead.



Their calls brightened up the day, constant and cheerful. We spotted 3 Ferruginous Duck in the mix and Little Grebe. Yellow Bittern was new for many of the group. The trees surrounding the ponds held Olive-backed Sunbird, Common Iora, Black Drongo, Asian Pied Starling, Red-whiskered Bulbul, and several species of doves, Red Collared-Dove being new for the trip. With some work we got very quick views of Pallas's Grasshopper-Warbler, while Oriental Reed-Warbler were a bit more cooperative and Peg got photos as they popped up to inspect our presence. Both Asian Pied and Black-collared Starlings were active, while Oriental Magpie Robins uttered sweet calls and Dusky Warblers proved to be common. A highlight for many was seeing a Eurasian Wryneck; Carlos explained their status taxonomically as primitive woodpeckers as we got clear scope views. We birded at this site until about 10AM, then started our drive north to the mountains. It was great fun watching the street life grade from urban frenzy to rural charm. Roads were excellent and we made good time. We started to see a rugged karst environment on our left-hand side, small sculptured monoliths of weathered rock covered by lush vegetation. Peg commented on how much it reminded her of the mogotes and fertile valleys of Cuba. We passed through a lot of agriculture including fields of strawberries, cabbages, mango trees, and rice paddies. We made a couple of pit stops, happy to find clean and modern facilities, this was nice!

Lunch was at a hotel we would return to after a couple of days. Nick ordered a selection for us that we shared, it worked great for both us and the kitchen. Today we tried four dishes, with rice: Tom Kha Gai Soup (with mushrooms and coconut milk), Prik Gaeng – Thai words for Chile and Curry – they made it “medium” after assessing our foreign faces, Pak Bwoong Fai Daeng – Morning Glory with vegetables and Gai Pad King - Chicken with Ginger. Very satiated, we started the drive up into larger mountains, one with many winding curves and overhanging bamboo and trees.



The afternoon was a wonder! We were concerned as we drove alongside small fires burning all throughout the woodland. Nick explained it was unseasonably hot and dry, and this had been going on for weeks, he sensed it would affect bird activity (and it did, though we did okay in spite of the lag from breeding activity this drought seemed to be causing). We pulled the vans over and immediately found an Ultramarine Flycatcher, one that seemed very acclimated to people stopping, indeed it came in readily to have little treats as photographers passed by, so it would come in even without the treats. This was our introduction to the in-situ feeders of the area. We had such good looks at birds in no small part due to regularly spaced little feeding areas all along a ridge. White-bellied Redstart, Hill Prinia, Silver-eared Laughingthrush, Spot-breasted Parrotbill ("Charley") and Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler were just a few of the species we got super quality time with today. Walking the road, we picked up Maroon Oriole, Slaty-blue Flycatcher and marveled at our first Lesser Racket-tailed Drongos and Long-tailed Broadbills. Hume's Treecreeper approached very close as we walked and at a station farther along the road a male Siberian Rubythroat put on a good show.

As we got back to the van, along the ridge, about 150 Cook's Swifts were swirling around overhead, quite a frenzy! We lingered until dusk, deciding to wait for a short time at a spot pheasants and partridge come to, and were amply rewarded by a male Hume's Pheasant strutting across the road. This is a very rare and local species – what a way to cap off our first full day!

Back to dinner, our checklist, and bed. *eBird Hotspots: AM - Mueang Sam-Ma Swamps P.M. - Doi Pha Hom Pok NP – Doi Lang (western slope) AKA Doi San Ju*



Friday, March 1 | Doi Lang Eastern Slope / Tha Ton Rice Fields

We gathered in our hotel's open-air (covered) dining room at dawn, enjoying coffee and family-style service of eggs, toast and vegetables, bacon to get us started on the day. We took our vans a short way to the Doi Pha Hom Pok National Park entrance on the east side of Doi Lang, where we got in high-clearance local vehicles to navigate a bumpy (dusty!) dirt road up into the mountains.

We had plenty of room with two vehicles which was good, it was bumpy and dusty, but being forewarned we were prepared. We made two stops on the way up to about 4500 feet (thanks to George for daily map readings with elevation) and a lovely ridge in a mixed pine and deciduous forest.

The first stop was a small agricultural area, with picturesque thatch huts and various animal sheds for the water buffalo they used to work the rice paddies. A young boy herded the buffalo as we watched Eurasian Stonechat, Paddyfield Pipit, Citrine Wagtail and in time a Gray-backed Shrike. There were perched raptors in view, so we trained the scopes on them and found several raptors, including a quick look at Gray-faced Buzzard, a circling Changeable Hawk-Eagle, an Oriental Honey-Buzzard and a juvenile Crested Serpent-Eagle, nice! Circling above was yet another distant raptor, an accipiter that we later determined from photos was a Crested Goshawk.

From here we drove up to a part of the forest with a varied height canopy and we had some good birds here. We stood on a bridge, built by the Thai military (very solid!) and looked over into neighboring Myanmar, our road being very close to the two-country boundary. The air quality had been very poor yesterday due to drought and burning fires, but today was much clearer and we got good views of the mountain landscape backed by blue

sky. Peg spotted our first leafbird which Carlos immediately recognized as Orange-bellied, what a beauty! We also had a Banded Bay Cuckoo fly by and then perch, not ideally in the sun, but enough to study it in the scope.

Onward! We had another 15 minutes or so up to the top, where we encountered another gate. At this time the road is closed here, except for walking, so to see the other side of the mountain, we'd need to drive around the following day. But despite the closure there was plenty here to keep us busy, including several informal feeding areas where acclimated birds saw us coming and flew over to see if we had brought them anything. They seem totally relaxed, with some normally elusive species here hopping about on logs and rocks. Our photographers lined up by height, one above the other, and we all got to watch behavior and really see the birds well. We found Scarlet-faced Liocichia (related to the laughingthrushes), Large Niltava, male and female, a female Himalayan Bluetail (later we'd see the male while we were walking the road), Chestnut-crowned Warbler, and Silver-eared Laughingthrush. With very good luck up here we also saw Whiskered Yuhina and, high on the adorable scale, Black-eared Shrike-Babbler.

We walked about 2.5 miles over the course of the morning, exploring a nice mix of vegetation that included some older large trees draped with mosses and orchids. Walter had a good eye for a few of which were in bloom. There were small saplings as well, tree ferns, and a shrubby understory. A few stately pines attracted our attention. We found some of the same birds we had seen at the feeding station.

After activity declined, and a picnic lunch with the local doggies and a golden Buddha statue, we drove back to the Tangerine Ville where we would stay for the next three nights. It was a more modern hotel than our last one, with spacious rooms; while not in nature per se, Peg had a pair of Lineated Barbets out the window to watch.

After a break, we headed out into the rice fields, where Nick was on a mission to find Yellow-breasted Bunting, an endangered species that has a little wintering population still doing well here. Success – we quickly got scope views, yeah! Scanning from this site, we also found White-breasted Waterhen, Plaintive Cuckoo, Chestnut-tailed Starling, Citrine Wagtail, Red-throated Pipit, both Eastern Marsh- and Pied Harriers, and at very close range, noisy Chestnut-capped Babbler. Green Bee-eaters delighted everyone, while Striated Grassbird was a notable find for us here. The sunset was lovely as was cool air at the end of the day.

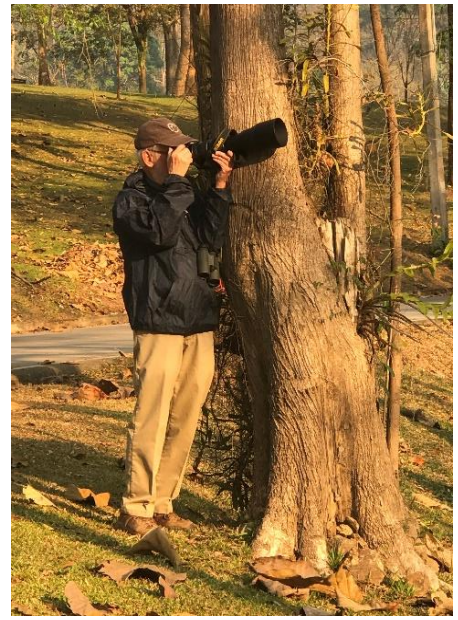
Back to the hotel, we had time for a break, then dinner (fresh strawberries for dessert!) and checklist.

eBird hotspots: AM - Doi Pha Hom Pok NP – Doi Lang (eastern slope) P.M. - Tha Ton paddies

Saturday, March 2 | Phang Hot Springs / Doi Lang West

We decided to have an easy morning, so chose Fang Hot Springs in Doi Pha Hom Pok National Park as it was both close and scenic. This section of this large national park is quite developed with walkways, a coffee shop and visitor center. We viewed the course of a rushing stream, then stood by a pond looking off to a to ridgeline.

With scopes trained on the taller trees we found a number of species. Great Barbet was a nice find, a surprise here, but somehow this oasis of water and minerals brings higher elevation birds down to elevations lower than expected. It actually perched in the same tree as a Lineated, giving us a nice size comparison. Blue-throated Barbet provided us a glimpse but the real surprise here was finding three species of green pigeons. There must



have been a fruiting tree in the area pulling them in; we witnessed them down on the ground, drinking and feeding. The first we saw was Pin-tailed, joined by a Wedge-tailed. Later we found a female Thick-billed posing up on the ridgeline. At one point a flock of sixty Pin-tailed Pigeon exploded overhead, Nick caught a photo of 40 or more, definitely the most he'd ever seen at this site.

Birding was quite active here. In the dry forest near the parking area we found a perched Asian Barred Owlet. A pair of Black Baza circled overhead as well, a species Jerry had really hoped to find. A significant find here was Spot-winged Grosbeak, a small group came into the trees as sun warmed them and we got excellent views. Blue Rock-Thrush posed for us on rocks of the valley and we got acquainted with our first colorful minivets, both Brown-rumped and Long-tailed. We enjoyed seeing the very different form of Eurasian Jay with a white face and keen-eyed Laura spotted their nest.

Geology here was interesting, though the geyser feature was human-contrived, there were naturally abundant hot pools and steaming streams. The odor was that of Yellowstone, the warmth of the ground encouraged bloom of several lovely wildflowers.

We had such great birds on the walk, it was time to take five, and Peg treated all around to a coffee or juice at the park's very nice coffee shop with a porch with a view. No need to stop birding here!

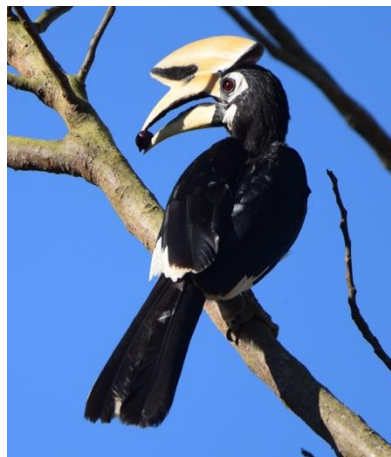
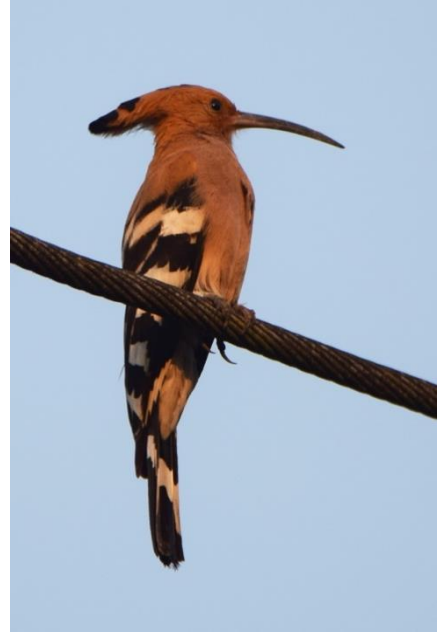


En route back to the hotel, we stopped at a well-known temple, named for the teak Budha it enshrined. There were a good number of monks in their orange robes, friendly and talking to us about their foods for sale, flowers, and aspects of the temple. Big tiger figures guarded the steps to the giant Budha statue. This one was unusual in having a large bee comb on one side of the face. This was a very ornate temple, just a 40-minute stop or so but really enjoyable to see and to photograph.

Lunch was at the Tangerine Villas hotel, today's menu included minced pork with basil, Yum Woon Sen (slippery noodles salad), Red Curry and a lovely plate of cooked mixed vegetables, fresh fruit for dessert. We enjoyed a break in our spacious rooms with time to sort our gear and make a few notes.

Back up the mountain, topping off about 5600 ft.) we went about 2:30P.M., with the intention of staying until dusk. At first it was quiet, though a Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher was a nice find right out of the bus. This was the same ridge we had walked a few days back, and it was excellent to recognize a few species with ease (Silver-eared Laughingthrush, Ashy Drongo). We got good looks at Spectacled Barwing probing in a large blooming red flower, one looked purplish even on the belly, it was so covered in pollen. We had a study in bulbuls, with Flavescent, Black, Black-headed, Brown-breasted and then, alerted by call, caught two Mountain Imperial-Pigeons in flight. We went from zero to a trifecta of nuthatches, getting really good looks at Velvet-fronted, two of which landed on the road. The most common was Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, and the most elusive was the Giant. We found two, but they were so active that only the swift binocular users got looks other than in flight. A pair of Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler put on a good show, delighting our photographers. A Mountain Hawk-Eagle gave us a really good view.





We headed down with a particular spot in mind, a place that pheasants frequent. We pulled off to the side of the road, stood close to the vans and waited. First to come out were four Mountain Bamboo- Partridge, then from the same spot, out stepped a Hume's Pheasant male. He was breathtaking! He strutted slowly, his black and white pinstriped tail held out so that his length was much of the road. The color pattern against his black body was dazzling. Carlos had warned us that after this trip we'd rethink our attitudes to pheasants and after this, we agreed, True!

We had dinner back at the hotel, a fish dish with sauce and vegetables, mixed greens, a delicious light coconut milk curry and more vegetables, nice healthy Thai food.

eBird Hotspots: AM - Doi Pha Hom Pok NP – HQ/Fang Hot Spring

P.M. - Doi Pha HOM Pok NP – Doi Lang (western slope) AKA Doi San Ju

Sunday, March 3 | Doi Ang Khan

Due to recent closures of the mountain road into Doi Lang, we had a 1.5-hour drive to get to our birding area this morning. We coped by getting up early, finding breakfast like foraging babblers at the local 7/11 store.

Departing early had clear rewards. The light at the top of the ridge (5800 ft.) when we stepped out of the vans was magical, warm sunlit tones gave us background for a pair of Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush, gleaming Short-billed Minivet, and a Verditer Flycatcher. Alerted by call we were thrilled to get a good show by a pair of Giant Nuthatch, one which posed ironically on a pine. We found Gray-capped Woodpecker and were surprise when a few moments later in the very same snag alit a Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, a bright male and a marvel to see. We sleuthed out a few skulkers, Black-breasted Thrush and a trio of Scarlet-faced Liocichla. We walked past the campground with a fresh breeze making for perfect birding conditions.

Our next stop was the King's Garden (4600 ft), just a beautiful site to bird, full of many distractions of scent and beauty. We parked by the Scent Garden and were drawn in to find Daurian Redstart flitting about lattice of flower towers. We walked the gardens, finding an elusive Black-breasted Thrush, a colorful Gould's Sunbird feeding in bottlebrush and a trio of Blue-winged Minla. We then walked back to a little feeding area, waited a few minutes and in came the star player here, a Silver-eared Mesia which has a rainbow plumage of beauty enough to match the garden. We watched two species of white-eyes, Oriental and Chestnut-flanked in a flowering tree.

Time passed quickly but as the sun rose and heated up the day, we took refuge in shaded coffee shop overlooking the garden. Iced fresh strawberry drinks were a hit, and despite the language barrier Laura and Susan each got a luscious coffee frappe drink with cream. This cafe had poppy seed scones (unusual in Thailand) which we gobbled up with relish. Carlos gave them high ratings. Walter spotted a gorgeous Verditer Flycatcher posed right off the balcony; its blue tones great against the sky.

Our next stop was a bit higher on the ridgeline marking the border with Myanmar. The military have the road closed at this time; we could see over to the neighboring military installation on a hill. Views of the mountains were lovely but obscured a bit by smoke, we could see several small fires burning. Locals came and went, a woman sold fruit to a truck full of local workers offering a ride to a passing monk. The walk down to the vans passed several artisan vendors, it was fun to browse the textiles and Laura found a pretty locally-made sweater.

Lunch was in a village of the Hill people, one where Yunnanese Muslim had settled, moving in from Laos and Myanmar. There was a number of craft booths and we tried some of the local goods, with excellent dishes. One

was a noodle dish with vegetables, another beef with chilies, lovely dark local greens and a vegetable that reminded us of chayote.

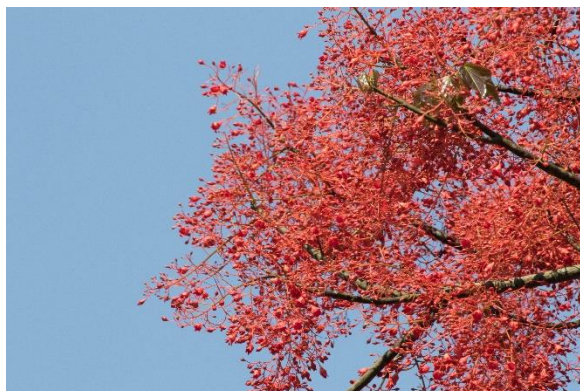
The area is known for dried fruits and we sampled them, kiwi, strawberry, mango, and even vegetables, carrots and tomatoes. This was a good spot to load up on snacks for future parts of our journey.

Our final stop was at a Chinese cemetery, where next to some intricate structures we saw Little Bunting and had even better looks at Brown-breasted Bulbul.

eBird Hotspot: AM & P.M. - Doi Pha Hom Pok NP Doi Angkhang (general area)

Monday, March 4 | Return to Doi Lang West / Fang Rice Fields

Back to 7/11 for breakfast, and then a drive back up the hill to the spot where Hume's Pheasant was likely to be active as sun emerges in the forest. We had seen the male all to ourselves in beautiful quiet two nights back, a good thing as on this Monday morning it was crazy busy at this spot. Thai photographers were lined up in portable photo blinds, alongside one very rude foreign visitor who came to lecture us on not being there at all if we did not bring our hides. In Thai style we diffused the situation, knowing full well how accommodating this group of five pheasants were. We got to see them and a number of other species, but as the rude photographer had set up his tent IN the display area, they kept to the shadows on the road below. Other birds we got to see here included White-browed Laughingthrush, Rufescent Prinia, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler, Olive-backed Pipit, Ultramarine Warbler, Buff-throated Warbler and a small flock of Mountain Bamboo-Partridge. Regrouping to get into our van, we had brilliant views of Northern Goshawk (unusual here) and Eurasian Kestrel aloft.





Working the road, we got into a small flock, finding Pale Blue Flycatcher, Streaked Spiderhunter, Slaty-backed Flycatcher, Yunnan Fulvetta and of course, several of the leaf-warbler clan. Alerted by calls, we got onto a flock of Long-tailed Broadbill, Yellow-cheeked Tit and two Black-throated Tit. A Hume's Treecreeper came very close to the road, and we again scored all three nuthatches.

Despite all these great birds, after 10 AM it was a struggle as activity radically waned. The drought was a stress to all, humans and birds alike. We went to the border where we could see off to a Myanmar police station. Jerry wanted us to pose by the razor wire put in place to block the road. Crested Finchbills came by in flock, accompanied by Flavescent Bulbuls. Nick looked longingly at the road track (in past years drivable with some good birding on the miles ahead...) but this season it was a no go.

Back to the hotel for lunch (Thai food!) and Carlos negotiated a ride to local cake and coffee shop. Pam got a big ice cream treat, Carlos got a delicate green tea cake, and all had fun exploring a bit. Others napped or got organized, took showers; some decided to relax for the rest of the day.

At 3:35 P.M. we headed out for a spin through the rice fields where we found Ashy Woodswallow, Red-rumped, Striated and Barn Swallow. We had Citrine and White Wagtail, then Common Snipe and Common Sandpiper alerted us to a small pond, where both Plain and Gray-breasted Prinia hung out with Dusky and Yellow-browed Warbler. It was a rural landscape decorated by the intense green of young rice growing. We watched people working the fields, moving cattle, and where we parked, watching us. Raptors included Black-winged Kite and a fine Pied Harrier male. Green Bee-eaters hunted for insects and we found a White-throated Kingfisher.

Back for dinner, checklist, and to bed!

eBird Hotspots: AM - Doi Pha Hom Pok NP – Doi Lang (western slope) AKA Doi San Ju

P.M. - Fang paddies north of the bypass road



Tuesday, March 5 | Doi Ang Khang / Drive to Doi Inthanon National Park

We debated our plan for the day, wanting to go back to Doi Ang Khang with its lush forests, but with the recent road closure it meant an added hour of driving and an early start. Fortunately we did, as we found, and photographed a rare bird for Thailand, Purple Cochoa. Nick had not seen one for six years, and had it only on a few trips. And spectacularly, it was hanging out with a male Green Cochoa, also a super find, one we knew to be so by the tone of Carlos' voice when he found it and called it out. We were able to see them several times, including scope views as they moved along the ridge, having come out of small fruiting tree. A two-cochoa day is notable anywhere in Asia. What a thrill!

Wonderful vistas, and a tall tree canopy were features of the ridgeline we spent much of the morning on. Walter spotted male Long-tailed Minivet perched in good light. We found many species seen in the previous days, with particularly good looks at Slaty-backed Flycatcher at close range. We enjoyed the fresh air, and late morning headed down to get a coffee at the King's Garden. En route, Nick screeched to halt and we piled out to get scope views of Blue-bearded Bee-eater, wow! At the garden we found Black-throated Sunbird, new for the trip, and Carlos got good shots of colorful Gould's Sunbird males.

We left the park at 11 AM, descending through lush forest much of the way until we were out of the mountains. In open dry woodlands we found Indian Rollers and a distant Rufous-winged Buzzard perched above fields of mangrove trees. While scoping it two more flew overhead, just before that we had clear views of a Shikra.

Lunch was at an open-air restaurant where we tried several dishes, many had Pad Thai, Peg and Carlos

had spicy noodles with Thai basil and chicken, and Walter tried a pork and papaya salad.

We then had a three-hour drive to the next park, Doi Inthanon. Time for shoes off, shut-eye, and for Peg, work on the trip report!

We arrived at the lodge area with time to go look at a nearby roost area for Blossom-headed Parakeet and timed it right to find good scope views of males and females. Plain-backed Sparrows also came in to view.

We got to the lodge at Doi Inthanaon close to sunset, and waiting for us were two species of owls, making for a fun arrival!

eBird Hotspots: AM - Doi Pha HOM Pok NP – Doi Angkhang (general area)

P.M. - Route 1340 near Ban Arunothai

P.M. - Doi Inthanon NP – Blossom-headed Parakeet pre-roost site

P.M. - Inthanon Highland and Touchstar Resorts vicinity

Wednesday, March 6 | Doi Inthanon National Park

We had two days to look forward to in this significant national park. We would work our way from dry forest to cloud forest, taking in the full spectrum of habitat types. The morning held numerous good sightings as we walked a trail in the lower reaches of the park. Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, Golden-throated Barbet, Clicking Shrike-Babbler, Slaty-bellied Tesia, and Long-tailed Broadbill to name a few. We walked uphill to a trail and road junction, joined by a precious small puppy that seemed well fed but on the run. Perhaps it was from the local village – or so we hoped. An accommodating Yellow-cheeked Tit put on a good show at this junction, delighting



our photographers. We also found some colorful butterflies and enjoyed the beauty of the forest we walked through.

We bypassed a crowded park restaurant, and had lunch instead at Mr. Daeng's, a decidedly local place beloved by birders. It was fun to see the business card of friend and former Naturalist Journey's guide, Narca Moore-Craig on the wall. The green curry got rave reviews here.

In the afternoon we had a grand time at the summit, where sun on the garden ignited the plumage of Green-tailed Sunbirds, one male seemed oblivious to us and perched so close you could nearly touch it. Chestnut-winged Minlas fed near the coffee and Visitor Center area; overhead in a fruiting tree Gray-sided Thrushes fed alongside a male Golden-throated Barbet. We found an Ashy Wood-Pigeon on a quiet, shaded roost and then walked up the road a bit, encountering Yellow-browed Tit in a flock of leaf warblers.

eBird Hotspots: AM - Doi Inthanon NP – Checkpoint #2

AM - Doi Inthanon NP – Mae Quam (KM 34.5)

P.M. - Suan Son Campgrounds

P.M. - Doi Inthanon NP Summit (Ang Ka)

Thursday, March 7 | Doi Inthanon National Park

This morning we left in time to get to the Speckled Wood-Pigeon roost area as sunrise lit the mossy branches of a massive prominent tree above the road. High in the mountains sun does not come that early so we got there in plenty of time. They flew out without perching, but with luck circled back and we had very good views of this large, notable species.

We then went back to the Summit area to walk the boardwalk trail, passing through a veritable fantasyland. The forest floor is a lush carpet of sphagnum moss, off part of the trail is a small stream and in other parts a peat bog. Rhododendron blooms in red and white complimented the trees silvery leaves, appearing like gems in the foliage. With patience we found some special birds, Dark-sided Thrush, Pygmy Cupwing, Snowy-browed Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Fairy-Fantail and Rufous-throated Partridge. We walked to the highest point in Thailand, passing a colorful shrine. Our friend the Silver-eared Laughingthrush was present once again. We stopped at a glorious waterfall in search of two species that remained elusive, but had fun taking photos of ourselves and enjoying coffees.

In the afternoon we left at 3:30P.M., heading to the waterfall for a second try for two stream-associated species. This time we had very good luck. The Plumbeous Redstart male put on a good show in a small pool at the base of the side of the falls where a narrow ribbon of water came in. The White-capped Redstart put on a good show on a high mossy shelf adjacent to the main falls.

Then down to the lowlands we went in search of Collared Falconet and Black-headed Woodpecker, both species of the dry diptocarp forest. Not only did we find the falcons but we found them mating on exposed perches close to the road, nice! We also had a Rufous-winged Buzzard in the area, and a Large Cuckooshrike. The woodpeckers did finally come into view, distantly, but seen well through the scopes. It was a pair and even at a distance, a very impressive species.

eBird Hotspots: AM - Doi Inthanon NP Summit (Ang Ka)

P.M. - Doi Inthanon NP Vachirathan Waterfall

P.M. - Doi Inthanon NP Mueang Ang (KM 13) vicinity

Friday, March 8 | Doi Inthanon National Park / Morning with Forktails

While today was a reposition day with a scheduled flight to Bangkok, we kept the morning for a special treat, time in a “hide” – what we call a blind – made of shade cloth and positioned where a small stream enters a slightly larger one, with lovely pools and downed logs, some of which have some nice worm treats, similar to a feeder. We crept in quietly and remained silent, a few thumbs up signals and big smiles as the celebrity birds came in: Lesser Shortwing, Plumbeous Redstart, Blue Whistling-Thrush, and the two superstars, both Slaty-backed and White-crowned Forktail. These were very shy but spectacular birds, highly sought after and just a treat to see with time to observe their behavior. They were close enough for Pam’s iPad videos, wow!

From here it was time to go, as we had to return to the Chaing Mai airport to fly to Bangkok for the next part of our journey. All went smoothly, and because Nick and Pri Chit drove the vans down (a 7/8-hour drive) we did not have to carry luggage, making for an easy time. We stayed at an airport hotel and ate in their restaurant.

eBird Hotspot: AM - Doi Inthanon NP Royal Agricultural Station and Siriphum Waterfall

Saturday, March 9 | Salt Pans Shorebirding / Boat Ride to an Island Sandspit

With luck our great quest to find Spoon-billed Sandpiper was a success but it took time this morning as several other birders had been working the area, and flocks were moving around. In the process of searching out this really important, globally endangered species, we were able to sample the region’s wintering shorebirds, a few at close range but many a long way off so scopes were certainly handy. The first batch we scanned held thousands of birds, the most abundant being both Greater and Lesser Sand-Plovers and Red-necked Stint. We all got good views of 3 different Red-necked Phalaropes, then sorted through scores of Marsh Sandpipers, Eurasian Curlew (with one discernable Far Eastern Curlew in the mob), Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwit, and Black-winged Stilt.



We then visited other wetland and salt pan sites, stopping for lunch at a roadside café Nick knew well. They specialized in fresh fish dishes which were well received, as were the fresh fruit shakes. After lunch we drove a short way to a fishing channel where we boarded two small boats to go to an offshore sandspit. The channel was safe harbor for numerous colorful fishing vessels. The mud flats at the river mouth were teeming with waders including some Javan Pond-Heron in breeding plumage. The sandspit island was a great place for terns: Susan admired the Great Crested with their yellow bills and punk hairdos. Joining them were other tern species: Little, Caspian, White-winged and Common. On this beach and rocky area, we found Malaysian Plover, one pair, of



which we got good views. We also spied a Pacific Reef-Heron, quite a dark one, perched up on the rock jetty. It graced us by flying the length of the jetty before perching at the end to hunt. Along the mangrove channel maneuvering back, we spied Collard Kingfisher and Racket-tailed Treepie. Brahminy Kite were agile fliers aloft.

Our final stop was at another of the King's Projects, this one experimental agriculture to cope with waste water treatment, perched on the edge of a mangrove area. We waited by a series of canals for views of Ruddy-breasted Crake, with good success. We also saw White-breasted Waterhen, Painted Stork, some bold Red-wattled Lapwing, and some very entertaining Malaysian Pied-Fantail. Carlos heard the call of a species at the north of its range, Golden-bellied Gerygone, calling from the mangroves and we were able to get fine looks at a pair.

We got back earlier today, with time for showers before dinner.

eBird Hotspots: AM - Pak Thale Salt Pans and mudflats

AM - Laem Phak Bia – Salt Pans

AM - Laem Phak Bia “abandoned building” wetland

P.M. - Laem Phak Bia – Sandspit

P.M. - Hat Chao Samran Soi Thetsaban 2 freshwater wetlands

P.M. - Laem Phak Bia – Environmental Development and Research Project (King's Project)





Sunday, March 10 | Wetlands and Salt Pans

We had breakfast at 6AM and headed out into a new set of rice fields, the Ban Khum fish ponds where we had wonderful views of some new species: Bronze-winged Jacana, Oriental Pratincole, Cinnamon Bittern, and putting on a great flight show – Stork-billed Kingfisher, what a bird! We got scope views of Yellow-vented Bulbul and Pink-necked Pigeon, another member of the beautiful clan of green pigeons for the trip.

From there we went a short way to a stop at Ban Pho Ngam where we looked at three species of weaver nests, Streaked, Baya and Asian Golden, all making nests – fun. Also here were Plain-backed Sparrows. While viewing, we were passed by ornately painted farm vehicles and an innovative motorcycle with a mowing attachment, a fun view at rural life. On wires we saw Blue-tailed Bee-eater and Black-capped Kingfisher, for which we stopped for photo ops and viewing.



Next, we passed a water impoundment just full of Painted Storks, some in really peak color. We then returned to the salt pans to scope out Nordmann's Greenshank, another endangered species. They were way out at the back of the salt-pan feeding areas, so we had an adventure balancing ourselves while walking out on the narrow burms that crisscross the ponds for better scope views. With the greenshanks were many of the species seen the day before, but in this area today we found many Great Knots, 200-300 in the group.



We had a coffee break at the King's Project as several wanted a chance to go into their shop and to look more at the temple there, a very impressive one. This gave Nick a chance to make a dash to try for a first record bird for Thailand, Sacred Kingfisher. He arrived to find 60 or more Thai birders waiting and hoping, turned back figuring it was not ago, then with luck and skill was the one to spot the bird this day, bingo!

One last stop at a bridge revealed many Lesser Whistling Ducks, Least Grebe, a troop of breeding plumage Garganey, and more herons, storks and egrets.

Lunch was at a fun local spot across from our hotel, with interesting dishes quite different from what we'd been having, good salads and minced beef and pork. Some tempting shops were nearby and several of us answered the call...

After a nice break, we left again at 4 P.M. to work through some drier fields interspersed with ponds. We hoped to find raptors and

were not disappointed, finding Black Kite, Black-winged Kite and a Steppe Eagle, being chased by a Large-billed Crow. We worked the ponds, finding Pheasant-tailed Jacana and for one van, a Watercock. Some of the group close to the vans on the road were lucky to see Smooth-coated Otters, a very quick view as four crossed the road. We saw a flock of mixed Scaly-breasted and Chestnut Munias alight in tall reeds, with a Zitting Cisticola in flight over head. We had a fancy yellow lizard on a fence post, and a Gray-headed Lapwing across a pond.

Back for dinner at a place next door, where Susan and Walter toasted Nick on finding his 910th species in Thailand with a special scotch they had packed along, fun! More interesting dishes were featured here, and ice-cream for dessert, yum.

eBird Hotspots: AM - Phetchaburi – Ban Khum fish ponds and paddies

AM - Ban Pho Ngam

AM - Laem Phak Bia – Salt Pans

P.M. - Bang Tabun OK Duck and Ibis Lake

P.M. - Nong Pia Lai paddies

Monday, March 11 | Kaeng Krachan National Park

We wanted to be back in the forest as early as we could get there, so guess what – back to 7/11 for breakfast, the only spot that is open early enough. By now we were really efficient at getting in there for our choices, some went for toasted cheese and ham sandwiches, other cereal or yoghurt with fruit and nuts. Hot coffee to go, it works!

And what a thrill for us that we made that choice. Right out of the van once inside Kaeng Krachan National Park we got out of the vans to watch a Great Hornbill. To the tune of “wow” and “oh my God!” this giant bird took our breath away. It was feeding on fruits and its fluted bill looked like a bloom of flowers. We then had five, including two young birds, fly across the road. We went just a bit farther and found a lone Asian Elephant feeding in a small clearing. We were able to get out, stay by the vans, but watch it makes its way around a log, eventually reaching a small pool where we watched it drink and then have a dust bath, using its trunk to blow dirt on its back and sides. Peg was able to get a video. All the time we watched the elephant there was a haunting chorus (a wailing!) of White-handed Gibbons too distant to see, but like an eerie symphony to hear. Birds were active here, an Indian Roller at a nest, a stunning Black-and-red Broadbill, and a family of Sultan Tit showing off their jaunty yellow crowns.

Walking up the road a bit we saw Common Hill Mynas attending a nest hole, on the same tree we were alerted to a female Oriental Pied Hornbill sealed up in her nest as a male approached with fruit – wow! This area had some big trees and we were able to spot Green-eared and Blue-eared Barbets, Blue-winged Leafbird, Asian Fairy Bluebird and a Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo. High on a ridge we spied a pair of Black-thighed Falconet. There were Thick-billed Pigeons perched high, and going back to the vans we found a Heart-spotted Woodpecker. We were on the prowl in general for woodpeckers, but were possibly a little late after our excitement with the elephant, so we opted to move on and return here tomorrow.

We birded some other areas, then went to the campground for a pit stop. It proved to be an oasis for birds, and we had super looks at Banded Bay Cuckoo, Crimson Sunbird, a Ruby-cheeked Sunbird pair and other species. Our walk on a forest trail was quiet, an Orange-breasted Trogon teased us with a call but disappeared into very thick vegetation. Dusky Leaf (Langur) monkeys were active in the treetops, enjoying fruits.

We went back to the lodge for lunch. The food at Baan Maka was really good, some of the best of our trip, and we sampled a lot of the dishes. Today's special was a Pumpkin Red Curry; also popular was Green Papaya Salad and their Panang Curry. Fruit shakes were relished too, papaya, mango, watermelon or pineapple.

One of the staff members, knowing we would love to see it, came over to report a snake in the garden. It was a bright green, long and thin, an Oriental Green Whipsnake. It was climbing up the bamboo poles of a fence, incredibly muscular to hold itself up on the smooth surface. It went through at a cross piece, and we watched it climb out the other side, balancing itself on a bucket handle and then crossing a colorful Thai broom to curl up in the stack of lifejackets hanging there for those that wanted to paddle at the lake. Someone trying on a jacket would have quite a surprise that afternoon!



The lodge at Baan Maka was so pleasant, with an open-air dining area, shaded well, with view of bird feeders and forest. It has a library with natural history titles and novels, and French presses for making real coffee, great for our afficianados. There was also a choice of beer: Fuller's London Pride and an IPA beer, a nice change from Singha that we'd been sampling since the start. We could easily stay longer here!

Back out at 3P.M., we went to a hide where we'd end up seeing 22 species! We got into them, got settled on chairs, photographers encouraged here to use tripods, a really good tip. The flow of birds was mesmerizing!





White-crested Laughingthrushes, both Greater and Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush, White-browed and Large Scimitar-Babblers, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, and the start of the show, a Ferruginous Partridge, quite a rare bird in Thailand to see. It stayed for some time, and near dusk a second individual came in to draw it away. Another star player here with audacious color was the Common Green-Magpie. This individual showed little fear, and along with the Racket-tailed Treepie put on quite a show. They bathed in the small pool and seemed to react to their own reflections. A Greater Racket-tailed Drongo came in and perched, dangling its wild-looking tail feathers like someone with too large a pair of shoes.

For many of us the Lesser Mouse Deer was a new mammal and a treat to watch, something in the size range of a dik dik of Africa but behaviorally like a New World Agouti. It was much at home with the bird activity but attentive to drongo alarm calls.

We stayed until 6P.M. when light was fading, then returned to ooh and ahh over our findings as we did the checklist. At the car park we did linger for hopes of nightjars calling, and we had two species, Large-tailed (seen both on the road and in flight) and Great Eared. The latter answered a call by coming down pretty closely, several were circling overhead so it was a treat to see them well.





More nice dishes to sample at dinner, Garlic Fish, Ginger Chicken, various stir-fry dishes, more curry. Nick came to get us as we lingered in the cool air, to get a view of a sleeping Little Spiderhunter under a palm, too cute!

eBird Hotspots: AM - Kaeng Krachan NP lower elevations

Mid-day - Naeng Krachang NP Baan Maka Nature Lodge

P.M. - Nueng's Main Hide

Tuesday, March 12 | Kaeng Krachan National Park

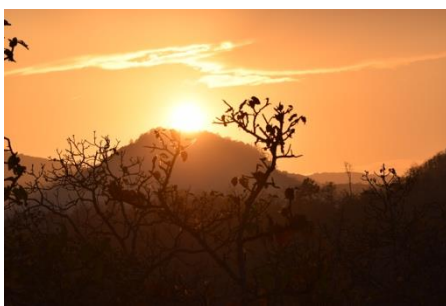
We had seen the difference an early start can make yesterday, so timed ourselves accordingly. We returned to the spot good for woodpeckers, and this day saw Gray-headed, both Greater and Common Flamebacks and a Greater Yellownappe. Both Common and White-throated Kingfishers hunted small ponds of the forest, and we worked through various smaller species. Walking uphill on a forested stretch, Nick heard Raffles's Malkoha, a bird very much like Squirrel Cuckoo of the New World tropics. It came in and we got very good looks, but we did not linger as Black-and-yellow Broadbill was also calling. This is a highly patterned broadbill, quite a small but striking species. Nearby we also found Banded Broadbill, finally getting good views at its purplish, patterned color tones.

Returning to the lodge, we found a troop of Stump-tailed Macaques. A female had a very young baby riding jockey-style on her back, it was a white as snow. Others were up in the tree ripping off fruits. We got out and watched their antics.

Lunch took some time, but we did not mind as the dining area was so pleasant, and around the feeders was a Blue Whistling-Thrush, several Dark-necked Tailorbirds and a pair of Little Spiderhunters.

Since we could not go into the high country due to the park road closure for construction, we had one less day here than originally planned, and with a free afternoon still, we opted to spend more time at another hide, hopeful of adding some other secretive species. We chose one that could hold us all (several exist but some are quite small) and were treated to another bird show. New at this location were Bronze Drongo, Abbott's Babbler (a small forest babbler not unlike Canyon Wren in jizz), both Bar-backed and Scaly-breasted Partridges, and true to life, wild chickens, or Red Junglefowl. The latter were really imposing strutting into the clearing, beautiful animals! Mammals included Northern Tree Shrew, Indochinese Ground Squirrel, and Gray-bellied Squirrel. This was a pretty setting for photography. We stayed late hoping for some rarities, but they did not show. Sounds at dusk are exquisite; White-rumped Shamas

continued uttering their flute-like songs almost into full darkness.



eBird Hotspots: AM - Kaeng Krachan NP lower elevations
P.M. - Kaeng Krachan NP Lung Sin's Hide

Wednesday, March 13 | Kraeng Krachan

What to do for a grand finale to such a good trip? Why not try for one of the truly secretive forest birds? A local farmer has been encouraging Blue Pitta to come in, and had one acclimated pair and a single, at a series of hides around a small pond. We started at one, with no luck, so moved quickly on to a second one. This had a very photogenic setting and he encouraged the birds in with a water drip. They seemed to know he was coming and the action started right in. White-rumped Shama, a quick visit by Siberian Blue Robin (a female), Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Puff-throated Babbler and then the celebrity came in. This show-stopper, the Blue Pitta, made two visits, and all got to see it well. Peg was able to capture some video and others got excellent still shots. Laura had really wanted to see a pitta, so she had a particularly big smile on today.

Driving back to the lodge we picked up one more new species, stopping to inspect some bee-eaters, Carlos



heard Indochinese Bushlark singing on a wire, we watched it there and then going up to do a bit of display flight. We then packed up at a leisurely place, enjoying the lodge a bit before departing.

We had lunch en route to Bangkok. A hint for anyone exploring Thailand on their own, Black Canyon Coffee, a chain restaurant encountered at rest stops, has good food and great coffees! We tried yet some new dishes, Carlos had Chicken with Thai Basil and Walter had a pork dish with minced lime, Judy savored prawns – a nice break from an otherwise driving-filled afternoon.

Dinner at the hotel restaurant gave us time to savor our sightings, compare notes on our favorite birds, and thank Carlos for all his input to the

guiding. The competition for favorite birds was intense, but in all 17 species were named, so that says there could be many! Two species got three votes: Common Green Magpie and Great Hornbill. Three others got two votes: Stork-billed Kingfisher, White-crowned Forktail and Ferruginous Partridge. Favorite moments were equally varied, with the boat trip into the Gulf of Siam (the sandspit outing), the bridge with elephant and sounds of gibbons at dawn, seeing wild chickens in all their glory, the peace and beauty of the King's Garden, nightjars swirling overhead, and time with "real birders talking real birding" mentioned to name a few.

Before drawing this report to a close, we have to mention our kind and tremendously helpful driver, Prijeet, who was there for us at every turn, carrying equipment, collecting left or lost items, smiling to encourage us, congratulating us for good finds, delighting in our smiles. He kept his van impeccably clean and was a pleasure to share the trip with. And Nick Upton, our guide, took us to birds with seeming ease, never letting up on what came across as a parade of Thailand's wonders. His knowledge of birds, and the locations to find them really made the trip. Our group was also most compatible, and that also made it particularly fun to explore and experience the country together.

Until the next adventure!

eBird Hotspot: AM - Kaeng Krachan NP Koson's Hides

Photo Credits:

All participants and scenic trip photos by Peg Abbott.

Green-billed Malkoha, George Bakken (GB); pair of Scarlet-faced Liocichla, GB; Common Green Magpie, GB; Streak-eared Bulbul, GB; Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, GB; Eurasian Hoopoe, GB; Spot-breasted Parrotbill, GB; Oriental Pied-Hornbill, GB; Black-naped Monarch, GB; Himalayan Bluetail, GB; Black-crested and Stripe-throated Bulbuls, GB; Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush, GB; Brown-headed Gull, GB; Elephant, GB; Chestnut-tailed Minla, GB; Chevrotain, GB; Black-and-yellow Broadbill, GB; Balancing on Berms, GB; Blue Rock Thrush, GB; Blue-tailed Bee-eater, GB; Bar-backed Partridge, GB; Black-naped Oriole, GB; Group birding, GB; Long-tailed Shrike, GB; Asian Golden Weaver, GB; Ferruginous Partridge, GB; Gray Squirrel black flag tail, GB; Green Bee-eater, GB; Sunset, GB; Racket-tailed Treepie, GB; Lesser Shortwing, GB; Little Egret, GB; Long-tailed Minivet, GB; Long-tailed Langur, GB; Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, GB; Rufous-bellied Niltava, GB.