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Cambodia 2015 Trip Report **Jan. 7-19, 2015**

Guides Nara Duong and Narca Moore-Craig with six participants: Bob, Margie, Bob, Marsha, Marcyes, and Regina



Day 1, and earlier — Welcome!

After our various flights from the States (all of them seeming long!), we gather at our idyllic, peaceful hotel in Siem Reap. All of us have planned to come early by an extra day or two, to be able to adjust to the local time and venture out a bit on our own. Marsha and Bob, Margie, and Regina have added pre-

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trip tours to several of the amazing temples close to Siem Reap, impressive relicts of the ancient Angkor empire. Our two Bobs start their natural history exploration along the river that meanders through Siem Reap, finding birds and butterflies.

Narca joins a guide-training session conducted by her friend Howie Nielsen, who has worked with the local ecotourism nonprofit, Sam Veasna Center for Wildlife Conservation, to train a cadre of very fine Cambodian birding guides. We spend a morning in a wetland not far from Siem Reap, and at the edge of the immense Tonle Sap floodplain. Here Howie drills the new guides on bird identification, and we discuss some of the subtleties important in working with clients. A Siberian Rubythroat, whose scintillating throat shimmers with light, joins the Yellow Bitterns and rails in the wetlands, as distant wedding music interweaves with birdsong. January is wedding season in Cambodia! We are to hear the music everywhere.

The trip officially starts with a Welcome Dinner at Kitchen Angkor Chey, offering very tasty fare, only a



short ride from our hotel. Throughout the trip, the quality of the food surprises us — it is excellent!

Day 2 — Angkor Wat

As always in the tropics, our day's outing to Angkor Wat (and the woodland around it) begins very early, in the cool of the morning; we take a packed breakfast with us. Daybreak finds us at the edge of the temple complex, watching Greater Racquet-tailed Drongos, and Black-capped Kingfishers. Asian Barred

Owlets are abundant — we see and hear at least 11! Among many superlative species are the trip's only Forest Wagtail and Hainan Blue Flycatchers. A flock of beautiful Black-naped Orioles converge on a fruiting tree.

Today is also the group's introduction to Nara Duong, our very skilled Cambodian guide, whose company and talents we will all come to esteem highly. (At the end of the trip, Bob Behrstock pronounces him "astonishing." He is!)

After a couple hours' birding, we enter the main temple complex. In Narca's opinion, Angkor Wat is the finest of all the ancient wonders of the world. The immense towers of Angkor are shaped like lotus buds, and the many thousands of projections adorning the towers represent serpents. Nearly every surface is



covered in bas-relief carvings that depict stories from the Hindu Mahabarata.

We explore not only Angkor Wat, but the adjacent temples of Angkor Thom and Ta Prohm, encountering both antiquities and birds. Blue Rock Thrushes perch on the ruins, and a Black Baza hunts for prey around them. In one alcove, the large trees overhead house nesting Lineated Barbets and loud, lovely Alexandrine and Red-breasted Parakeets.

Our people find the heat intense during the brief half-hour walk back to the vehicles — but, amazingly, that is the only spell of heat for the whole trip! The temperatures this year are about 15° cooler than Narca's previous experience in Southeast Asia, so that our time in the field is quite pleasant.

After a lovely, late lunch in an air-conditioned restaurant, we return to our inviting hotel for a rest before dinner.



Day 3— Tonle Sap Lake

Still based in Siem Reap at the wonderful Sonalong Boutique Village, we make a day trip to Tonle Sap Lake and its immense stork colonies. At daybreak, we are boarding our shaded motorboat at one of the floating villages, for the couple hours' ride to one of the stork colonies. Tonle Sap is a Biosphere Reserve and the largest natural lake in Southeast Asia. Each year monsoonal rains and runoff from the Himalayas overwhelm the Mekong River, and it backs up into Tonle Sap, creating an immense natural reservoir and wetland. Here is the largest nesting colony of big waterbirds in all of Asia. Five species of stork join various ibises, darters, egrets, bitterns, and pelicans to nest in hummocks of vine-covered emergent trees that tower above the surrounding wetlands.



We stop in a floating restaurant en route to the stork colony, to enjoy our packed breakfasts and a nice, if quick, shopping opportunity. (After it became obvious at yesterday's breakfast that we would be



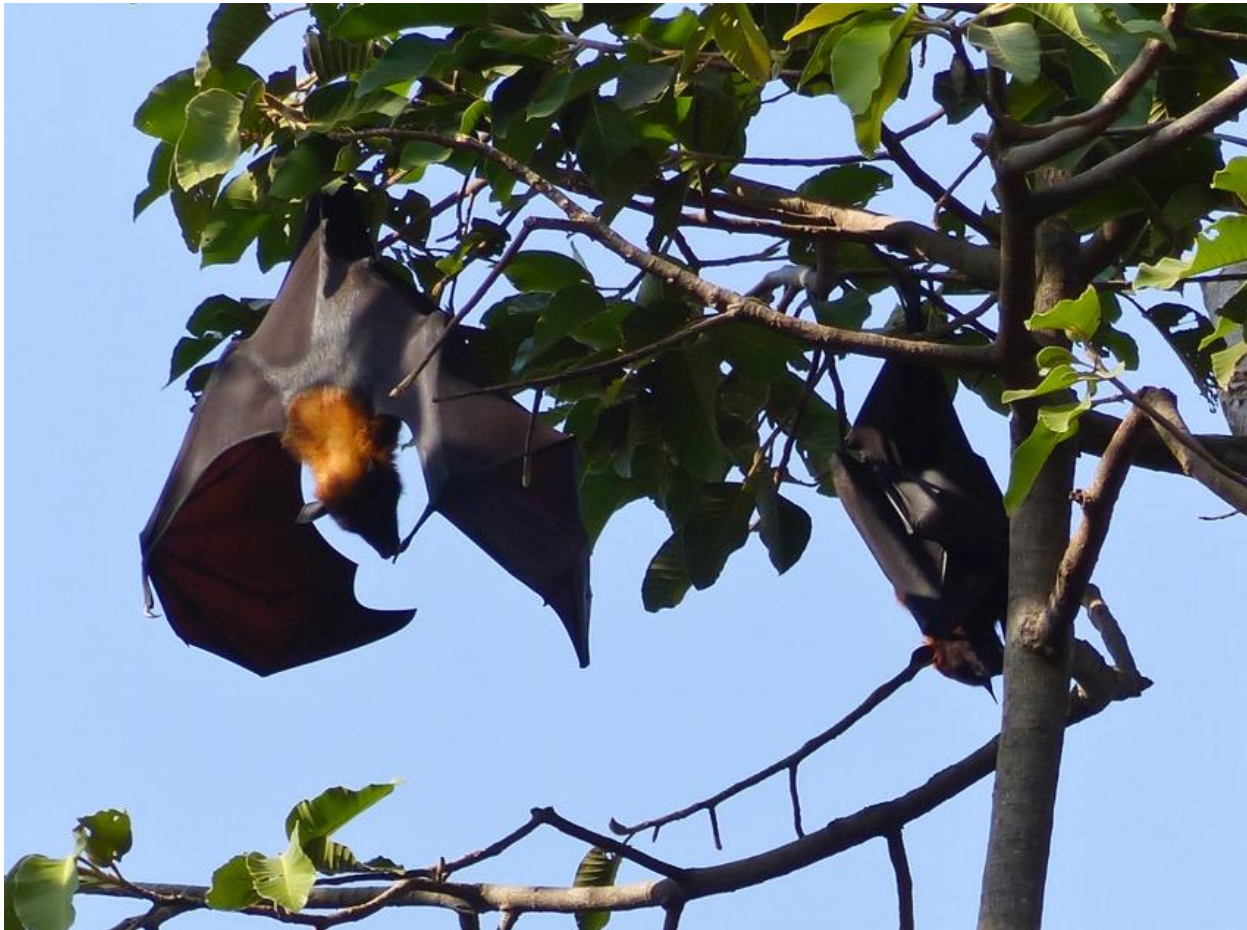
needing a protein course, Narca has added hard-boiled eggs from our hotel to the breakfast croissants and other fare, meeting with everyone's enthusiastic approval!)

Continuing the boat trip, we are escorted by hundreds of Asia Openbills and three species of



cormorants. Wings flail continuously around us. Near our destination, we board smaller boats to work into the narrow channels to a viewing platform. From atop the platform, we can scope nearby Painted and Milky storks, and a distant pair of critically endangered Greater Adjutants, a primary goal for today's birding. A pair of Gray-headed Fish-Eagles observes us from their nest next to the platform.

By mid afternoon, we are back in Siem Reap — in the city park, where perhaps 1000 Lyle's Flying Foxes hang suspended from the trees, in daytime rest, punctuated by a bit of squabbling and stretching. Nara's sharp eyes pick out at least two Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bats among the Lyle's. Nara sets up the scope



on the fruit bats, and very soon we have a long line of Chinese tourists queuing to see them too!

Day 3 — Florican Grasslands and Prey Veng

This morning we set out from Siem Reap to investigate other regions. First on the list is the Florican Grasslands, home to more than half of the world population of critically endangered Bengal Floricans, the world's rarest bustard. (By now we are recognizing just how important Cambodia is as a refuge for some of the world's most endangered birds!)

Yesterday we explored Lake Tonle Sap, and today we are seeing a related habitat — the wildlife-rich floodplain of that lake. We arrive in the grasslands shortly after dawn, and linger over Siberian Stonechats, Pied Bushchats, and Paddyfield Pipits. Spectacular Pied Harriers and Eastern Marsh Harriers course above the grasses. A kiting Black-shouldered Kite is a familiar friend, and a hunting Peregrine zooms by. After today's packed breakfast (the last field breakfast of the trip), we walk abreast through the grasses. Before long, a female florican flushes, followed in a while by the truly splendid male. Both drop back into the grasses, and we leave them to their foraging, while we seek Bluethroats, Oriental Skylarks, and Indochinese and Australasian bushlarks.

Here in the Florican Grasslands, as in other special habitats of Cambodia, the help of the local people is enlisted to protect the endangered birds. In exchange, the villages receive payment each time tourists visit, and such in an impoverished country that revenue helps appreciably to build village infrastructure. The villagers are able to use tourist dollars to drill wells for clean water, build schools and clinics, and repair roads and bridges. During the nesting season, these critically endangered species are strictly protected and are not disturbed.



After our morning in the grasslands and a delicious lunch in a restaurant en route, we drive to Prey Veng, located within Khulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary. Here the villagers have built a small safari camp with several cabins and a dining / kitchen area. The camp is perched at the edge of an ancient baray, one of the artificial wetlands constructed centuries ago by the Angkor empire. This small wetland, maybe a mile long, is surrounded by dipterocarp forest, an important, wildlife-rich habitat. The trees are mostly deciduous because of the annual dry season. Cambodia has the largest remaining contiguous block of dipterocarp forest in Southeast Asia.

Before settling into the camp, we stop in late afternoon at a spot where very rare White-winged Ducks often roost in the trees. Today they fail to come to the appointed roost, although we enjoy a boisterous group of White-crested Laughingthrushes around the blind.

Day 4 — Prey Veng

After a tasty breakfast in camp, we pass the rest of the morning and the late afternoon hiking around the baray, where highlights include an unusual Wreathed Hornbill (normally at higher elevations), a stunning Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, a huge White-bellied Woodpecker, rare Black-headed Woodpeckers (a regional specialty), Burmese and Velvet-fronted nuthatches, Radde's Warblers, White-rumped Shamas, beautiful views of Golden-fronted Leafbirds, and an array of fetching sunbirds and

Scarlet-backed Flowerpeckers, probing the flowers. The fancy pigeons and kingfishers — White-



throated, Stork-billed, and Common — wow us.

It's relaxing to have a day in the woodland, entirely on foot, and to enjoy at night the voices of Spotted Wood-Owls and Brown Boobooks. Indeed, a boobook flushes from a thick clump of bamboo, as the last hikers return for lunch. Amazingly, Nara relocates the owl in the mass of vegetation, and we study it in the scope.

This evening, we linger near camp until Great Eared and Large-tailed nightjars emerge in the dusk. A beautiful Crested Serpent-Eagle also settles nearby for the night.

Day 5 — Prey Veng / Tmatboey

Bob B, Bob R, and I rise very early to try to see the elusive White-winged Duck at another roost; the others have opted for a relaxed morning, sleeping in. We drive about a half hour in the dark, walk a trail into the forest, and Nara focuses the scope where he knows the ducks will be. As the light grows, the indistinct forms of a pair of White-winged Ducks resolve into two beautiful, white-speckled birds, at surprisingly close range. They preen, stretch, and fly before it is fully light.

As we drive back to camp, we encounter one other very fine highlight: a family of four Great Slaty Woodpeckers is demolishing a large tree stump, as ants swarm over their bills. Great Slaties are the largest extant woodpecker in the world, and their look is strangely prehistoric. Overall, we have amazingly good luck seeing woodpeckers on this trip, the tally eventually reaching 13 species!

Reunited with our group and nourished by breakfast in camp, we all set out for the next destination: Tmatboey, also within the dry dipterocarp woodlands of Cambodia's Northern Plains. Tmatboey has been crucial to conservation efforts in Cambodia. Here villagers protect the critically endangered Giant and White-shouldered ibises, and many other species thrive as well.

We settle into our new abode, the recently-upgraded duplex rooms which the village provides for ecotourists. After lunch and a siesta (when Bob B prowls the grounds, photographing butterflies and



dragonflies), we depart for nearby fields and forest, where the village guides have recently seen the ibises. Indeed, we find both! Our scope views of the Giant Ibis are exceptional: their wings shimmer with silver, the coverts crisply edged in black.

Soon we turn our attention to smaller delights: lovely Small Minivets, fantails, and Olive-backed Pipits. At the end of the day, we wait near a nest of Spotted Wood-Owls, but the owl emerges quickly, and we postpone seeing them well until tomorrow.

Day 6 — Tmatboey

Because yesterday we had such fine luck seeing the two ibis, we are able to start the day with breakfast in camp, then drive back to the woodland abode of the Spotted Wood-Owl. Today's try for owls is a rousing success, culminating in views not only of the Spotted Wood-Owl, but also Brown Fish-Owls at a



nest!

From the deciduous forest (where a splendid pair of White-rumped Falcons perches in a nearby snag), we hike into gallery evergreen forest along the river, and there keep quiet vigil. A Changeable Hawk-Eagle suns downstream. A pair of Woolly-necked Storks occupies a high snag, as others soar nearby. Lesser Adjutants bring the trip's stork total to six species! Cuckoos are also conspicuous: Banded Bay Cuckoo with its striking call, large Green-billed Malkohas, and Greater Coucals.

Refreshed by an afternoon siesta, we head to another section of Tmatboey, for a magical late afternoon and evening of, yes, *more* woodpeckers and owls! Leaving the SUVs parked at the main road, we hike about a mile on a dirt road along a woodland edge. (In Cambodia, almost all the hiking is on flat ground!)

Parts of the small rice fields along the route have already been burned, to ready them for the next planting. Woodpeckers drum and fly between scattered trees—Gray-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers, Greater Yellownapes, Streak-throated Woodpeckers, Greater Flamebacks, and our favorite, the spectacular Rufous-bellied Woodpecker. As we return through the dusk, we find a lovely little Oriental Scops-Owl, perched just above our heads.

Day 7 — Tmatboey and Veal Krous

Today we make a special effort, involving tromping through dry rice paddies into forest, to find Brown Wood-Owls. The walking is a challenge, reminiscent of hiking in tussock tundra. But thanks to everyone's persistence and the keen eyes of Nara and our village guides, we eventually see the owl very well indeed, and even flush a Lesser Coucal in the process.

After lunch, we say farewell to the Red-billed Blue Magpies, and to the villagers who have made our stay



so pleasant, and continue on to the Vulture Restaurant of Veal Krous.

Old World vultures are in crisis because they are being poisoned by diclofenac, a chemical used in Asian cattle dips, but which is banned in Cambodia. In order to prevent the vultures' extinction, uncontaminated cattle carcasses are left regularly at several sites in Cambodia, so that the vultures can feed safely within the country's borders, and not roam to regions where the poison is still used. As a result, only in Cambodia are Asian vulture populations robust, and this country is critical to their



continued survival.

Veal Krous hosts one of the Vulture Restaurants.

Here the villagers house us in a tented safari camp, with gear imported from South Africa. A nearby kitchen area provides very good meals during our brief stay, and a bush toilet and bush shower are available. Oops—no toilet paper! That detail has been forgotten, but we are able to supply our own, so no worries.

Nara guides us on an afternoon hike past a small pond, where a dazzling Common Kingfisher loafs, and a Lanceolated Warbler mouses through the grasses. In the late afternoon, as we return to camp, the air is filled with Germain's Swiftlets, Asian Palm-Swifts, two Himalayan Swiftlets, and very elegant Crested Treeswifts.

Our cool weather, which has made the days so pleasant, continues through this very cold night. We hadn't expected to be able to see our own breath in tropical Cambodia! As hospitable as the villagers



are, we are ready, after our night in the tents, for a warm hotel bed!

Day 8 — Veal Krous Vulture Restaurant, and onward!



Before dawn we leave our chilly tents, glad for the exercise, and hike about a half mile to the two new blinds erected for viewing the feeding site. Both blinds are built on elevated platforms. From within, we scan the area. When it is still rather dark, a Golden Jackal checks out the cow carcass, but doesn't stay long. As light grows, a magnificent Red-headed Vulture alights to feed. (Margie, who has a special affection for raptors, is thrilled.) Is it going to be the only vulture this time? Not quite—one White-rumped Vulture also comes, though it doesn't challenge the dominant Red-headed. Narca is surprised not to see a throng of vultures, but at least a representative of each of the main species has appeared!

As we return to camp, a troop of Chestnut-capped Babblers enlivens the walk. Malaysian Pied Fantails and Indian Rollers add pizzazz.

After breakfast, it's time to say good-bye to two of our compadres: Margie and Marcyes are returning to Siem Reap today for their flights home, while four of us continue to Kratie on the tour extension. A very



fun Rufous Treepie is the last bird we share as we drive out of Veal Krous.

After we've checked into our hotel in the riverside town of Kratie, Nara takes us to a quiet agricultural area near town—at least quiet in terms of human activity, but buzzing with birds! Here we find Black-browed Reed-Warblers, prinias, and a Common Tailorbird. Asian Golden Weavers are constructing nests. We admire Plain-backed Sparrows, whose name gives no hint of their beauty. After several marsh birds have teased us with glimpses and sounds, Nara jumps into the flooded rice field and wades the narrow pathways, flushing a couple of Cinnamon Bitterns. It has been a relaxing and fun start to the trip's new chapter!

Tour Extension

Day 1 -- Mekong River and Seima Protection Forest

After an early breakfast at the hotel, we drive to a nearby village and board our boat for a river cruise to the Kampi Pools on the Mekong, in search of Irrawaddy Dolphins and Mekong Wagtails. The Mekong is an extraordinary river. The lifestream of Southeast Asia, it is considered the most productive river in the world. The Mekong rivals the Amazon in sheer diversity: it boasts more families of fish than any other river, and a quarter of its fish are endemic.

The air in our faces feels great as we motor into the current. Little islands of vegetation are home to the Mekong Wagtail, a species that was only recognized and described in 2001. Their habitat is very distinctive: sections of the river channel where the fast-running water braids around shoals, sandbars, and islands. Very soon we begin to see them. The territorial males are in full song, and ignore our



intrusion into their realm.

We land on a sandy, vegetated island in the middle of the river. Little Ringed Plovers patrol the sandbars, and Yellow-bellied Prinias skulk in the shrubs. Common and Pied Kingfishers plunge after small fishes; colorful Blue-tailed Bee-eaters flash past.

The dolphins we seek are another critically endangered species. Although they are related to Orcas and



live mainly in brackish water and estuaries, Irrawaddy Dolphins have adapted to a 120-mile stretch of freshwater in the Mekong River. When we board the boat again, we don't have to go far: here are the dolphins, all around us! We drift with them for perhaps a half hour, alert to their surfacing and spy-hopping.

After that marvelous morning, we return to the hotel to lunch and to gather our belongings. Next stop:



Seima Protection Forest!

Narca is eager to return to Seima's mixed evergreen forest, where both mammals and amphibians new to science have been discovered in recent years. However, it's quickly apparent that the level of disturbance has increased dramatically in the three short years since she was here last. Illegal logging and poaching are now rampant, and the local people who secretly object to the illegal activities, also fear reprisal if they say anything. We only walk a short way on the intended trail, because motorbike

after motorbike is bouncing down the trail, laden with illegally-cut logs, hewn into rough blocks of wood. A few Green Imperial Pigeons wing past, and we see tiny Vernal Hanging-Parrots. The Gray-faced Tit-Babblers and Rufous-throated Fulvettas are quite entertaining, but we are left fearing for the future of the forest.

Before retiring for the day, we stop at an overlook and wait for dusk to fall. Here, too, a new encampment of people squats within the once-protected forest. But off to the side, Nara spots a magnificent male Green Peafowl as it ascends its roost tree for the night. At least they are still here, for a while!

We next find ourselves in a hotel on a hill in the city of Sen Monorum. It's very comfortable, and we take our meals in a nearby restaurant, where the food is excellent. Here we have several occasions to sample the menu, and discover hot, sweet pumpkin soup! Outstanding! Throughout much of the trip, we've enjoyed the fruit smoothies, which they term "shakes", and now we even find burritos! Mexican food has penetrated every culture. In Sen Monorum, they even cook it well!

Extension Day 2 -- Seima Forest and Dak Dam

After yesterday, we have some misgivings about this morning's hike in Seima, yet when we begin, it's pure Seima! A stunning pair of Orange-breasted Trogons joins an equally stunning Banded Broadbill. Tiny Heart-spotted and Black-and-buff woodpeckers add to the still-growing woodpecker count. Before long, we have scoped several barbets and bulbuls, a Dollarbird, and a grand Blue-bearded Bee-eater. Streaked Spiderhunters skulk along the path. Today, too, our hike is interrupted by illegal logging, but not before we've tasted the possibilities of this forest.

As we turn to hike back to the road, a shout from Bob Behrstock draws us back immediately: while



searching out grasshoppers and butterflies, he nearly stepped on a huge python! (Those who know Bob can imagine what he had to say about that!) The snake lies quietly as we photograph it — and the big tick attached to the scales by its eye.

Seima has more in store for us. A few steps more, and Narca spots what looks like a red arum flower in a tree by the path. It's actually the penis of an endangered monkey, the Black-shanked Douc! What a treat! The small troop of monkeys stirs in the tree, then clambers away.

Lunch calls us back to that fun restaurant in Sen Monorum, where we diligently continue to sample the menu. Then it's siesta time, before our last real outing of the tour, a brief exploration of Dak Dam, near



the border of Vietnam.

Clouds are threatening as we enter the relatively higher elevations of Dak Dam. Lovely Ashy Woodswallows are gathering on the wires and branches; they are in a bird family that's new for most of our group. Through the scope we can fully appreciate their subtle beauty.

Soon we're on a small forest road, where little, brilliant Emerald Doves forage along the edges. In addition to other highland specialties, we stumble across an enormous, tailed, yellow moon moth, hanging suspended from a big leaf. It is the most magnificent lep of the trip! Bob is happy, too, to find an interesting slant-faced grasshopper.



Extension Day 3 — Return to Siem Reap

Our trip is truly drawing to an end. We have one final, long drive, back to Siem Reap and our jewel of a hotel. Handsome Thick-billed Pigeons fly over the road at Seima, where we also enjoy scope views of Blue-eared and Green-eared barbets. A tiny Collared Falconet, Golden-crested Mynas, and a Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher entice us to linger, but a brisk wind is also blowing, and we need to be on the road.

Trip Report and all Photos by Narca Moore-Craig



A very fine trip indeed!

Extension Day 4 — Departures

Narca would like to add a tip for anyone contemplating a journey here: you will have a choice of which international airports to use in transit to the region, and she discovered that Incheon, the international airport for Seoul, South Korea, has the finest transit lounge imaginable! She recommends it highly. (Singapore's airport is very good, too.)

Until the next Adventure!