

Thailand Birding & Nature | Feb. 21 – Mar. 9, 2024 | Trip Report | by Carlos Sanchez



With Nick Upton, Carlos Sanchez and 8 participants: Andrew, Dan, David, Lee, Linda, Michele, Sukon, Therese



Feb. 21-22 Mae Taeng Irrigation Project | Doi Lang (W)

The journey begins! We enjoyed a sumptuous dinner together near the beautiful Buri Striping Resort on our first evening, with explanations on activities and travels over the following several days.

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, the group got an excellent introduction to the wide variety of birds that inhabit rice fields and agricultural areas of Thailand such as Asian Green Bee-eater, White-throated Kingfisher, Wire-tailed Swallow, and Black-collared Starling. Highlights included Chestnut-capped Babbler, Small Pratincole, Red-billed Blue-Magpie, and Eurasian Wryneck – most of these we would not see again on the tour. 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 several high profile species such as Himalayan Cutia and Hodgson's Frogmouth. We also began to familiarize ourselves with classic montane species of northern Thailand such as Golden Babbler, Asian Tit, Scarlet Minivet, and Chestnut-vented Nuthatch. We would continue to see many other species on subsequent visits to this amazing site.

Feb. 23 Doi Ang Khang

We spent the day birding Doi Ang Khang today. 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. We started our exploration of this mountain in the early morning hours at a campsite, where the cool mountain air was quite refreshing compared to the lowland agricultural areas. Golden-throated Barbet, Verditer Flycatcher, Silver-eared Mesia, and Rufous-backed Sibia all showed well on our walk. A surprise (and exciting) appearance of a fast moving flock of Fire-capped Tit provided some adrenaline. These migratory and highly unusual members of the chickadee family gave us satisfactory views as they stayed high up in the pine trees. Later, we stopped at the old Chinese cemetery where a fruiting tree had our first Crested Finchbill and Brown-breasted Bulbul. We also had a brief explanation of the historical presence of Chinese settlers in this region and the cultural significance of the tombs.

After lunch in a Chinese village, the agricultural research station ('king's project) provided us with some opportunities for nice coffee with Black-breasted Thrush and Streaked Wren-Babbler foraging in the back of the café. A blooming Australian bottlebrush tree was full of sunbirds and white-eyes, and we got excellent studies of both Indian and Chestnut-flanked White-eye, as well as Black-throated and Gould's Sunbird.

Feb 24. Fang Hot Springs | Chiang Saen

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. It also offers some easygoing birding with some highly localized species. As we walked around the grounds, our careful watch on the various flowering coral trees rewarded us with sightings of Asian Barred Owlet, Great Barbet, Spot-winged Grosbeak, Blue-bearded Bee-eater, and Pin-tailed Green-Pigeon. A single Wedge-tailed Green-Pigeon tried its best to blend in with the Spotted Doves walking around the heated pools. A pair of Black Baza also gave us amazing views -- a very striking raptor!

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. 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 where we saw several Pied and Eastern Marsh-Harrier, as well as wetland specialties such as Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Striated Grassbird, and Gray-headed Swamphen.

Feb. 25-26 Chiang Saen

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!). Thick-billed, Dusky, and Baikal Bush Warbler, proverbial 'LBJs', skulked in the low bushes. Other wetland and open country specialty highlights included Gray-headed Lapwing, Freckle-breasted Woodpecker, and Oriental Pratincole. Unfortunately, Chiang Rai province is rapidly developing these freshwater wetlands for agriculture. On the second day of searching, we managed to find where a significant percentage of Thailand's waterfowl population was spending the winter – in a partially filled lake for development. There were about 1,500 individuals, including Greater White-fronted Goose, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Wigeon, and Tufted Duck. 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. We headed back west to the town of Thaton for the evening.

Feb. 27–Feb 28 Doi Lang (W)

The following morning, we headed up Doi Lang (W) 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 Lang (W) that morning, we also came across Long-tailed Broadbill, Gray-headed Parrotbill, Giant Nuthatch, and Ultramarine Flycatcher. As the day wore on and the activity slowed down after our picnic lunch, we began making our way down the mountain. We had some nice afternoon birding in the Mae Ai rice paddies, where we saw Bluethroat, Little Ringed Plover, Black-winged Kite, and the critically endangered Yellow-breasted Bunting. After an early breakfast the following day, 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 Scarlet-faced Liocichla, Spot-breasted Parrotbill, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Slender-billed Oriole, and Sapphire Flycatcher. In the afternoon, we visited another area of rice paddies where we had great views of Oriental Skylark doing display flights.

Feb. 29 Doi Ang Khang

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, and Brown-breasted Bulbul. We also inadvertently flushed a small covey of Mountain Bamboo-Partridge. Continuing up the road in an area of pines, we had incredible views of several White-browed Shrike-Babbler right over our vehicles, as well as a very dapper Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush. After a several hour drive (and a brief stop to look at a Rufous-winged Buzzard), we were looking at Spotted Owlet not far from our lodging for the night. Dinner here was in an open air restaurant – delicious, as per usual Thailand standards.

Mar. 1–3 Doi Inthanon National Park

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 Hodgson's Frogmouth (again!), Speckled Piculet, Silver-breasted Broadbill, Clicking Shrike-Babbler, White-necked Laughingthrush, and Green Cochoa. Around lunch time, White-capped Redstart offered nice views in a nearby mountain stream. Afterwards, we took some time at a feeding station where we observed several normally shy species such as Pygmy Cupwing, White-gorgeted Flycatcher, and Slaty-bellied Tesia. In the afternoon, we headed up to the top of the mountain where it was noticeably cooler. Our first walk around the Ang Ka Summit Trail yielded Snowy-browed Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Fairy-Fantail, and a cooperative Scaly Thrush.

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 Himalayan Bluetail and Rufous-throated Partridge in the dim understory. In the afternoon, we enjoyed some easy birding 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 a bridge in the lower elevations of the park, where we had distant views of Collared Falconet in the dry dipterocarp forest.

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 Green Peafowl and Golden-fronted Leafbird. The flight to Bangkok was smooth and uneventful, and we had a relaxed night in the big city.

Mar. 4–5 Pak Thale | Nong Pla Lai

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. We saw hundreds of large waders, including the rare and local Chinese Egret. 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 Malaysian Plover. We also had excellent studies of various tern species loafing on the sandy beach, including White-winged Tern. A dark morph Pacific Reef-Heron also made a showing.

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, Yellow Bittern, Javan Pond-Heron, a variety of raptors and shorebirds by the thousand. By the early afternoon, we checked in at our lodge near Kaeng Krachan National Park and enjoyed some easygoing birding at another local hide where we enjoyed views of Kalij Pheasant, Slaty-legged Crake, Greater Yellownappe, White-crested Laughingthrush, and over twenty other bird and mammal species.

Mar. 6–8 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 Black-thighed Falconet, Chestnut-breasted Malkoha, Orange-breasted Trogon, Heart-spotted Woodpecker, Sultan Tit, Greater Flameback, Asian Fairy-bluebird, and more. Great Slaty Woodpecker, the largest of all extant woodpeckers, provided nice scope views, while a pair of Banded Kingfisher stole the show on the third day with their brilliant blue and red colors. A White-fronted Scops-Owl, a very local species, was also showing well at a roost during our visit.

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, Dusky, 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 Gray Peacock-Pheasant, White-browed Scimitar-Babbler, and various other bird and mammal species at close range.

Mar. 9 Departures

Today was mostly a transfer day, as we made our way out of the Kaeng Krachan area and back across the Nong Pla Lai rice paddies. Along the way, we stopped at the Bang Tabun Ok Lake where we added Spot-billed Pelican, Black-capped Kingfisher, and Golden-bellied Gerygone to our impressive list of sightings. 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 Carlos Sanchez: Bronzed Drongo, Asian Elephant, Scarlet-faced Liocichla, Asian Emerald Dove, Hill Blue Flycatcher, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Collared Kingfisher