

Trip report Vietnam 2004

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1 Introduction

Participants and leaders agreed in that this 3-week Aves Tour to Vietnam (Spring 2004) far exceeded our expectations: During only 19 field days, we encountered 370 bird species, of which 355 were seen. A big part of the success was the fact that the overwhelming majority of target species (endemics, local rarities) were actually found on this trip.

2 Cat Tien

After all four participants had been given a warm welcome at Saigon Airport by our two leaders, we set off into the jungles of Cat Tien National Park the following morning, where five field days were going to provide us with a good introduction to Vietnam lowland birding. En route we picked up several common species that we were going to encounter again and again throughout the trip, such as Red-rumped and Barn Swallow, Streak-eared Bulbul, Dark-necked Tailorbird, Red Collared Dove, Cattle Egret, Asian Palm and House Swift, Indian Roller, Tree Sparrow and Large-billed Crow. On account of the near-total absence of leeches, Cat Tien was way more pleasant in this season than during our last visit in the fall. Our first few sorties into the jungle already took off a lot of pressure by producing splendid views of both Blue-rumped and Bar-bellied Pitta. Perseverance and a bit of good luck helped us pin down a number of other shy forest dwellers, such as a covey of Scaly-breasted Partridge (of the local race *cognacqi*), a female Orange-breasted Trogon, a Banded Broadbill, Emerald Dove, Great Iora, Bronzed Drongo, Purple-naped Sunbird, a pair of Blue-throated Flycatchers, terrestrial Siberian Blue Robins, Scaly-crowned and Abbotts Babbler, flocks of roaming White-crested Laughingthrushes, Large Woodshrike, Asian Paradise-Flycatcher, Ochraceous Bulbul, White-bellied Erpornis (formerly erroneously considered a *yuhina*), the regionally endemic Gray-faced Tit-Babbler as well as shy Pale-legged Leaf Warblers. One of the highlights of Cat Tien was a night and a morning at Crocodile Lake, where Green Peafowl and Red Junglefowl foraged for food around the lakeshore before noon. The lake was inhabited by numerous waterfowl, such as Lesser Whistling-Duck, Pied, White-throated and Common Kingfisher, Purple Swamphen, Common Moorhen, Bronze-winged Jacana, White-breasted Waterhen, Common Greenshank, Green and Wood Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Red-wattled Lapwing, Osprey, Little Egret, Gray and Purple Heron, Intermediate Egret and Chinese Pond Heron, Cinnamon and Black Bittern, Darter, three Lesser Adjutants, Black-browed and Oriental Reed Warblers. In the evening, Large-tailed Nightjars flew in. The lakeside vegetation was teeming with birds in pursuit of food, amongst them Great Horn-

bill, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Spotted Dove, Oriental Honey-Buzzard, a Crow-billed Drongo, a flock of the bright and shining Asian Golden Weaver, aggregations of the highly coveted Vinous-breasted Starlings, migrating Dusky Warblers, Richard's Pipit and Siberian Stonechat. It took a lot of patience to finally get a good look at a Chestnut-capped Babbler. Jeep rides through the national park and hikes through bamboo and agricultural land around the other side of the park were very worthwhile and produced some of the best observations in Cat Tien, namely a male and five female Siamese Firebacks, a pair of the rare endemic Germain's Peacock-Pheasant, a few Woolly-necked Storks, a Lesser Fish Eagle, a Shikra, a Drongo Cuckoo and a male Violet Cuckoo, Green Imperial Pigeons, Pompadour Green Pigeon, Wreathed Hornbill, Silver-backed Needletails, Green Bee-eater, Crested Serpent-eagle, Brown Shrike, Black and Spangled Drongo, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Plain Prinia, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch and a few bamboo specialists, such as Yellow-bellied Warbler, Buff-breasted Babbler, Black-browed Fulvetta, Scaly-breasted Munia and a band of tremendously beautiful Pin-tailed Parrotfinches which were carrying nesting material. The forest edge around the lodge and along the road/river was frequented by Chestnut-headed and Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Green-billed Malkoha, Dollarbird, Red-breasted Parakeet, Vernal Hanging-Parrot, Thick-billed Green Pigeon, Lineated, Coppersmith and Blue-eared Barbet, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Blue-winged and (in more open space) Golden-fronted Leafbird, Black-hooded and Black-naped Oriole, Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, Black-winged and Large Cuckooshrike, Scarlet Minivet, Black-crested, Gray-eyed and Stripe-throated Bulbul, Gray-breasted Prinia, Two-barred Leaf Warbler, Asian Brown and Red-throated Flycatchers, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker, an astounding number of Golden-crested and Hill Mynas and even Dusky as well as Black-and-red Broadbills, besides two single Collared Falconets. It did not prove too difficult to locate Ashy and Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Racket-tailed Treepie, White-rumped Shama and White-rumped Munia in secondary growth. Fruiting trees and bamboo thickets around the lodge were the place-to-be for Yellow-vented and Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Ruby-cheeked, Crimson and Olive-backed Sunbird, Little Spiderhunter, Black-naped Monarch, Yellow-browed Warbler, Oriental Magpie Robin, Lesser and Greater Coucal, Striped Tit-Babbler as well as Common Iora. A Tickell's Blue Flycatcher tried to make our lives hard, but eventually surrendered to our persistence and showed in great splendour. In the evenings, we sighted numerous Great Eared Nightjars and had a brief encounter with an Asian Barred Owlet. A Brown Hawk Owl came in nicely to our imitations of its call. Crested Goshawk was one of the more common birds of prey, and after some of us had repeatedly had good views of a perched Black Baza, all of us eventually caught up with the species when we

sighted a few birds circling kilometers away. Some of the woodpeckers remained elusive during this visit, but we still managed to pick up White-browed Piculet, Greater and Common Flameback, Lesser Yellownappe, Heart-spotted, Laced and Gray-headed Woodpecker. White-bellied and Pale-headed Woodpecker stayed out of sight, though we heard them well. (The same applied to two other shy species in Cat Tien, Large Scimitar-Babbler and Banded Kingfisher). Apart from birds, a family of douc langurs, long-tailed macaques as well as the eery sight and sound of a tokay giant gecko were amongst the most memorable fauna we encountered in Cat Tien.

3 Dalat plateau

From the relentless heat of the lowlands, we finally emerged in the cooler montane forests of the isolated Da Lat Plateau which is characterized by a high degree of endemism. A pass around the periphery of the high plains (near the town of Di Linh) is currently the only reliable site for Orange-breasted Laughingthrush, and indeed this time all of our participants managed to have fantastic views of several individuals of this mega-shy bird. One participant opted to split from the group and was rewarded with a band of inquisitive Black-hooded Laughingthrushes. This secretive species was otherwise only seen by one of our leaders. For compensation all of us managed to log on to large flocks of White-cheeked Laughingthrush, as well as other skulkers, such as Red-billed Scimitar-Babbler, Streaked Wren-Babbler, the distinct *decorata* subspecies of Large Niltava and Bay Woodpecker. The endemic Vietnamese Greenfinch (which is rarely found at this particular Da Lat site) was a little bit of a surprise. Other goodies included Black-browed Barbet, Red-headed Trogon, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon, Barred Cuckoo-Dove, Long-tailed and Silver-breasted Broadbill, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, Maroon Oriole, Gray-chinned Minivet, White-throated Fantail, Blue Whistling-Thrush, Verditer and Gray-headed Canary Flycatcher as well as Flavescent, Ashy, Mountain and Black Bulbul. Furthermore we were delighted to see the endemic *klossi* race of White-tailed Leaf Warbler, as well as Chestnut-crowned Warbler, White-browed Scimitar-Babbler, Rufous-capped and Gray-throated Babbler, Chestnut-fronted Shrike-Babbler, the plain *orientalis* subspecies of Blue-winged Minla, Mountain Fulvetta, wintering Gray Wagtails, Streaked Spiderhunter, and – as a special treat – the local *margaritae* subspecies of the rare Gray-headed Parrotbills and the *johnsi* race of Black-throated Sunbird. We tried hard to catch glimpses of vocalizing Collared Owlets and Blue Pittas, but our efforts were in vain. Upon arriving in the pleasant highland metropolis of Da Lat, we were drawn to some isolated patches of montane forest in the vicinity of the Tuyen Lam Reservoir

the next morning for an excellent day of birding. Every time we come here the patches seem to have shrunk a bit more. After boarding a small boat (White Wagtail), the short boat ride produced both yawns (Osprey, Little Grebe) and excitement (Black-collared Starling, Scaly-breasted Munia and Eurasian Jays of exotic appearance). The boat got us safely to our destination, a conifer prairie with surrounding patches of broadleaved evergreen forest. The conifers teemed with rare: a *Cutia* (the bird of the day – for some), Slender-billed Orioles, Burmese Shrikes, Gray-capped Pygmy-Woodpecker, Gray Bushchat, Chestnut-vented Nuthatch and the peculiar local form of Red Crossbills were equally thrilling as the soon-to-be-split meridionalis race of Brown-throated Treecreeper, Green-backed Tit, Changeable Hawk-Eagle, the widespread but elusive Oriental Hobby and Hill Prinia. More time was spent in the little patches of lush montane cloud forest, where additional species were added to our list, among them Greater Yellownape, the shy Orange-headed Thrush, wintering Ferruginous Flycatchers, a non-cooperative Rufous-browed Flycatcher, Black-headed Sibia's local *robinsoni* race, Mrs Gould's Sunbird as well as the local taxon of *Seicercus* that is currently considered a form of White-spectacled Warbler, but that will certainly prove to be a good species. For most, however, the day's highlight was a party of the rare Yellow-billed Nuthatch, which is very patchily distributed over Vietnam, Laos and the Chinese island of Hainan. The following day, unusually strong winds greeted us at Mt Lang Bian and made birdwatching a task of its own. The local target bird Collared Laughingthrush showed three times, but only for a few seconds, respectively. Nevertheless, we did add several new species to our list: Mugimaki and Little Pied Flycatchers, White-tailed Robin, chattering Black-throated Tits and Olive-backed Pipits stayed around the lower and more degraded elevations of the mountain, while moss-clad trees at higher altitudes yielded Ashy-throated Warbler, Golden-throated Barbet, Yellow-browed Tit and the fascinating Rufous-winged Fulvetta. Around mid-day, those with a surplus of energy skipped noon break to ascend the final few hundred meters to the peak and enjoy spectacular views of the plateau, while the lazy lot stayed below, lingering around a beautiful clearing where Siberian Thrush and Dark-sided Thrush lost their shyness for five minutes to compete against each other in a "Who's the most confiding skulker" contest. The last day in Da Lat saw us descend into the Valley of Ta Nung, one of the last strongholds of the Gray-crowned Crocias, which had been deemed extinct for quite a while. The crocias made for quite some suspense by staying out of sight the whole day, until – at long last – we spotted a pair in the late afternoon. The rest of the day was not lost, though, as we were kept busy by rich bird flocks that held interesting additions to our trip list, such as Rufous-backed Sibia, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Blyth's Leaf Warbler and Long-tailed Minivet. Prolonged views

of Gray-bellied Tesias and looks at Spot-throated Babblers (of the shorter kind) were noteworthy, too. A soaring Black Eagle and a Black-capped Kingfisher at a little lake were a good way to say good-bye to Da Lat and its fascinating avifauna.

4 Cuc Phuong

After a quick domestic flight we landed in Hanoi and immediately boarded our bus to make our way through Tonkin's rice paddies to the birdy lowland forests of Cuc Phuong National Park. This park encompasses the last virgin forests of their kind in the densely populated lowland plains around the Red River. A good proportion of species that we encountered at Cuc Phuong had already shown up at Cat Tien, yet a substantial part of our bird harvest comprised new species: En route, our first Blue Rock Thrush showed up, and in the immediate vicinity of the lodge we found wintering passerines such as Japanese White-eye, Gray-backed Shrike as well as Black-breasted, Scaly and Japanese Thrush. Rufescent Prinias were omnipresent in the lodge clearing, and Puff-throated Bulbul was one of the more dominant species of the forest interior. Giant trees along the road provided additions to the trip list in the form of Banded Bay Cuckoos, the locally endemic White-winged Magpie, Ratchet-tailed Treepie and the breathtaking Sultan Tit. The forest interior stayed quiet at times, but with patience we finally extracted its best, such as Limestone Wren Babbler, one of the local rarities, as well as White-tailed and Hainan Blue Flycatchers (with near identical songs), displaying Fork-tailed Sunbirds, cryptic Asian Stubtails, warbler flocks containing wintering Sulphur-breasted and Gray-crowned as well as resident White-tailed Leaf Warblers (the latter of the nominate race at this site), Rufous Woodpecker, Puff-throated Babbler and the endangered Rufous-throated Fulvetta. On the way out we finally got our eyes on the frequently heard Red-vented Barbet, and we saw a few Silver Pheasants crossing the road as a final treat.

5 Xuan Thuy

The mangroves, shrimp ponds and mudflats around Xuan Thuy which we next visited were recently declared a national park. Our main target here was the Black-faced Spoonbill, of which fewer than 1000 individuals survive globally. As opposed to our visit last fall, we only managed to see 10 individuals this time, but one of the spoonbills approached us at close quarters, such that a scope was not needed to make out fine details of the plumage. However, our scope did prove

helpful to identify the myriads of birds in and around the wetlands of Xuan Thuy. Among the new species to our list many were well-familiar, such as Wigeon, Mallard, Garganey, Teal, Black-tailed Godwit, Spotted and Common Redshank, Marsh, Curlew and Common Sandpiper, Kentish and Gray Plover, Black-headed Gull, Common Kestrel and Great Egret. Others were unfamiliar to all but the more widely traveled birdwatchers, such as Spot-billed Duck, Eastern Marsh Harrier, Ruddy-breasted Crake, Red-necked Stint, Lesser Sandplover, Oriental Pratincole, Heuglin's Gull, Long-tailed Shrike, a wintering Eyebrowed Thrush, Light-vented Bulbuls of the local subspecies *hainanus* as well as Yellow Wagtails of the eastern subspecies complex *macronyx* (with strident calls), which DNA shows to be more distantly related to our Yellow Wagtails than for example Citrine Wagtails, and which therefore merits species rank. The sighting of a Great Bittern was a remarkable record for this part of Asia. On the way out, large flocks of wintering Red-billed Starlings came in handy.

6 Tam Dao

The little mountain resort of Tam Dao is considered the most cloudy place on earth by many a visitor. Birdwatchers love this place for its avian jewels, but on the other hand they fear it for its everlasting fog that can just turn up anywhere at any time, including hotel receptions. Within the two days and one morning we spent around Tam Dao, we experienced everything from 10 hours of continuous fog through heavy downpours to sunny and dry conditions. Birds are notoriously shy here, because the area is ripe with hunting. Daily harvests of 30 (seen) species and less are not unusual, yet some of our most memorable observations from this trip were made here in Tam Dao. The greatest highlight was a wintering Wood Snipe flushed several times from along the path. This breeding resident of high elevations in the Himalayas is nowhere reliably seen within its winter range these days. It is all the more ironic that we sighted this bird on a very foggy day with sight distances rarely better than 20m, when only 11 other species were seen by the whole group! Other highlights at Tam Dao included the clown-like locally endemic Chestnut Bulbul, obliging Gray Laughingthrushes, Coral-billed Scimitar-Babblers, Spot-necked Babblers, White-gorgeted and Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, Black-chinned and Striated Yuhina, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Silver-eared Mesia, wintering Pallas' Leaf and Bianchi's Warblers, Gray-cheeked Fulvetta and Golden Babbler as well as migrating Gray-faced and Common Buzzards.

7 Sa Pa

Our last destination was Sa Pa near the Chinese border and at the base of Mt. Phan Si Pan, the highest mountain in Vietnam. The leaders had been particularly looking forward to Sa Pa, as this is the first time we have incorporated Sa Pa into our trip itinerary. Sa Pa was a full success, as it produced sightings of many rare species that can otherwise only be seen in China – and not always with such ease. Therefore, we will definitely continue to visit Sa Pa on our future Aves Tours to Vietnam. An almost full day was spent in seemingly degraded secondary habitat near the pass, with birds galore. The local avifauna is decidedly Palearctic with a strong Himalayan element. New species came in fast: Large Hawk Cuckoo, Red-billed Blue Magpie, Brown-breasted Bulbul, Collared Finchbill, colorful Yellow-cheeked Tits, Brownish-flanked and Russet Bush Warblers, Buff-throated Warblers, White-browed Laughingthrush, Spot-breasted and Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, Chestnut-tailed Minla (as well as Blue-winged Minla's Himalayan subspecies), melodious Spectacled Barwings, Spot-breasted and Ashy-throated Parrotbills, Whiskered and White-collared Yuhinas, Black-headed Greenfinches and wintering Little Buntings. At night, a visit to a breeding place of the Gray Nightjar paid off with the sighting of a few individuals. A full day in forest fragments around the pass added more avian gems to our list: Yellow-bellied Fantail, Snowy-browed and a pair of the fantastic Sapphire Flycatcher, a streamful of Plumbeous and White-capped Water-Redstarts, a White-tailed Nuthatch, Red-tailed Minla, Golden-breasted and Streak-throated Fulvetta, Green-tailed Sunbird, Mountain Tailorbird, the intriguingly plain Yellow-browed Tit (for those who hadn't seen it before), as well as Buff-barred, Black-faced and the enigmatic Broad-billed Warbler. A last morning in the Botanical Gardens of Sa Pa was worthwhile, as we watched Small Niltavas, an Orange-flanked Bush Robin, unusually confiding Rusty-capped Fulvettas and Vinous-throated Parrotbills, a few Common Rosefinches and a female Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush.

8 Conclusion

After this extremely successful Aves Tour, we are anticipating our upcoming trips with much excitement, as these will doubtless benefit from our past experience. In future planning of our Vietnam Aves Tours, we will give 3-week trips a higher priority, since we feel that this amount of time is necessary to satisfactorily cover our trip destinations. Sa Pa will feature on all of our upcoming 3-week trips as an additional destination.

9 Species list

XT = Xuan Thuy, CP = Cúc Phương, TD = Tam Dao, CT = Cát Tien, TN = Ta Nung, LB = Lang Bian, DL = Di Linh, BV = Ba Vì; cm = common; ho = heard only

In almost all species, taxonomy follows Robson, C. 2000. *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-east Asia*. New Holland Publishers. Deutsche Namen richten sich nach Slatosch, H. 2001. *Die Vögel Südostasiens*. Ornithologischer Sprachführer Englisch Latein Deutsch. Christ Media Natur.

Amounts refer to our best estimates, and not necessarily to counts.

Large mammals heard and seen