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The Birds of Malaysia

2019



I was sure the quest for the Rail-babbler was going to be as tricky as that for the Bristlehead. My research had told me that the best spot was Panti Forest just some 70 kilometres north of Johor but there were chances at three other forests including the renowned Taman Negara. I had allowed two full days at Panti desperately hoping that would be long enough. Ten days in total was all I could persuade Stephanie to spend in Malaysia. Our accommodation was a twenty minute ride from Panti and dawn only broke at 7.00am an hour later than Borneo, so at

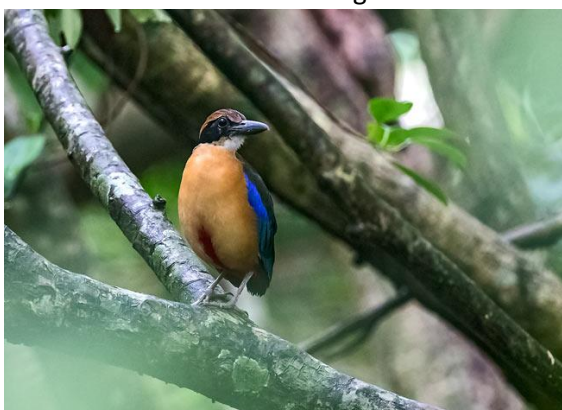


Banded Broadbill

7.15am we turned off the tar onto a dirt road that ran along the edge of Panti forest. We were going to spend the morning birding here. Photography had been extremely difficult all through Borneo The two hours after dawn when the birds are most active you rarely got below 10000 ISO and at times I was shooting at 40000 ISO – hardly worth the effort. Then just as the light started to improve the birds would start to quieten down. Such is life in the rainforests!

The first bird we met was a White-rumped Shama standing in the middle of the road. He seemed quite tame as we drove quietly past peering into the forest in the early morning gloom. Then 15 minutes later we heard him- a long slow whistle fairly close to the road. Weng and I looked at each other- we both knew who that was. We hopped from the car and started playing the call. The forest was dense here and we moved 30 metres up the road where there was a bit of a clearing. He was responding to the call and moving ever closer. Then suddenly I had him. He was walking in a gully and I could only see the head but the long white eyebrow above the eye and the black streak through the eye was unmistakable. The bird walks quickly with an odd chicken like strut, he disappeared behind a tree and did not emerge on the other side. But now we had the location; he was still calling and 30 seconds later he reappeared 10 metres away walking towards us before turning right – now we all had him and watched as he walked through some fairly thick undergrowth but now his whole body was visible . Two seconds later he was gone again whistling his way back into the forest. How absolutely unbelievable- only our second bird in Malaysia and the Rail-babbler was in the bag at 7.45am.

This was the start of quite an amazing morning in Panti. Next up were Yellow and Red crowned Barbets, Olive-backed Woodpecker, White-necked Babbler, and a very special bird- a Crested Partridge flew across the road in front of us. We left at 10.30 as things quietened down still dazed at our good fortune with the Rail-Babbler. I need to add that that was only time we saw or heard the bird- not that we were looking too hard after that. We changed our plans in the afternoon and



Mangrove Pitta

decided not to return to Panti but chase the Mangrove Pitta back down in Johor.

The mangroves are not going to survive much longer here- there was development all around them. A small boardwalk ran down to a jetty and we could hear a Pitta calling as soon as we got there. One played call and two birds were right there in front of us- one of the easiest ticks ever. Stephanie wandered off to the jetty while I was taking pics and came back to say she had seen a



Blue-breasted Kingfisher

small woodpecker entering a hole on a stick in the water. Sunda Pygmy Weng cried- a bird we needed but he had disappeared by the time we got there and despite waiting half an hour he never came back. We did however find a Copper-throated Sunbird another mangrove specialist. Dusk was approaching and we could hear the Barred Eagle-Owl calling. We tried to lure him out with no luck but the Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker pitched up to wish us farewell and we drove the 60 kilometres back with 10 new birds for the day under our belt. What a brilliant start to our

Malaysia trip.

Panti was different again the following morning- very quiet and we saw nothing new. We moved on to Gunung Arong but the afternoon visit there was also desperately quiet. Day 3 too proved to be very quiet- a Blue-naped Parrot our only reward. This was really a driving day- it was a long six hour haul up to Kuala Tahan our next location just across the river from Taman Negara. We decided to look for Blythe's Frogmouth and left Stephanie behind, which was a shame because while driving through "Hornbill valley" we found three White-crowned Hornbills- the last Hornbills we needed. The Frogmouth was not cooperative but we tried again before dawn the next morning and this time we were lucky. We tried for the hornbills again with no luck but did pick up an Orange-backed Woodpecker.

It was time to check out and cross the river and enter Taman Negara the major national park in Malaysia. You find pristine rainforest here but interestingly they have made all trails here into boardwalks and you can walk for kilometres on boardwalks with hundreds of steps up and down following the hilly slopes of the rainforest. We had nice accommodation with a bar fridge for the beer. The place was packed with tourists and the noise of the boats going up and down the river was quite deafening at times- so much for listening to the sounds of the rainforest. Our pre-lunch and late afternoon walks were desperately quiet- we hardly saw a thing.

We had an early morning boat ride booked- I wondered if it was worth it – there were so many boats on the river. Weng insisted- we will be the first boat to leave and it should be quiet. As we wandered down to the jetty, a Bird Quest group of 9 people headed off into the forest- good luck to them! Our first bird on the river was a great bird- Blue-banded Kingfisher- the bird had been spotted by Bird Quest as well and all the stragglers were running along the beach to catch up. We had nice views and a good photograph but the bird flew as we headed off leaving some exasperated birders behind.

The birding from the boat was far better than birding on the trails. Greater Coucals flew across the river and Black and Red Broadbills perched in view. We moored and spent some time on a landing jetty picking up Yellow-bellied and Straw-headed Bulbuls- at last the Bulbul list was getting



Greater Coucal

shorter. We turned around and had just started back when Weng called - Crested Jay. He was calling from some riverside vegetation. We spent 10 minutes trying to lure him out and were just about to give up when he flew right above our heads from one side of the river to the other. A clean sweep- how simply fantastic!! So a great morning on the river produced 4 new birds but back on the trails – they were as disappointing as ever. The best bird of the afternoon was a Mouse Deer.



Mountain Peacock Pheasant

Krau gave us another opportunity for the Rail-babbler but like all the forests over the last 4 days it was quiet and we never heard the call. We headed on for Bentong. A comfort break saw us stop outside a MacDonalD's and here we picked up our only new bird of the day- a Pied Triller- a common garden species in Malaysia but one we had not bumped into before. We continued through Bentong and overnighted just short of our next destination- Bukit Tingii home of the Mountain Peacock Pheasant.

We were up before dawn heading for the MPP site where we would also stand a chance of Ferruginous Partridge. A Swedish guy was waiting patiently when we got there and we were soon joined by another 3 long lenses from Singapore. Half an hour passed and no bird, but 10 minutes later a male emerged and very cautiously started scratching the ground. He was supposed to jump on to the log and start eating the meal worms there. He would suddenly rush off back into the scrub and disappear but he was back 5 minutes later and with patience we all managed decent photos. A female emerged for a second and he chases after her. She was never seen again. The Ferruginous Partridge could apparently appear at any time. Yesterday it was 10.30. We gave it to after 11.00 before leaving- it was a long slow drive up to Fraser's Hill.

We could not check in until 3.00pm so with half an hour to spare we went off to check one of Weng's sites. Out came the mealworms and in came a family of Large Niltava, Buff-throated Babblers, and the birds we wanted- Chestnut-capped and Malayan Laughingthrushes. A great start to two days of exciting birding at Fraser's Hill. We were up at 1500 metres and the weather was beautiful- like the highveld on a spring morning- no humidity and a pleasant 18 degrees- cold by Malaysian standards. What's more there were birds around us moving through the forest all afternoon. We picked up Lesser racket-tailed Drongo, Sultan Tit, Ochraceous and Mountain Bulbuls. We stopped at another feeding site- more meal worms and along came Grey-throated Babblers and an opportunity for me to photograph my first ever Cupwing- a lightning fast Pygmy Cupwing.



Pygmy Cupwing

Oriental Magpie Robins, Rufous-browed Flycatchers and White-rumped Shamias joined the feast and we had brief views of Mountain Fulvetta. We had one more target bird for the day- Grey-breasted Partridge. We arrived at the spot to find 3 more long lenses busy shooting a small flock- we were lucky we were told – they had been waiting an hour for the birds to pitch up.

There were quite a few birders staying at the hotel and when we left before dawn for our next target-



Rufous-browed Flycatcher

Malayan Whistling Thrush- a bird which disappears as soon as dawn breaks we were joined by a gang of birders all with the same intent. A Mountain Scops Owl called very close by , but 10 birders all peering into the gloom could not find it. Along came the Whistling Thrush- some tried to turn it into a Blue Whistling thrush but Weng assured us they had got it wrong- this was a much smaller bird. Back for breakfast giving time for the light to improve we discussed our next target- Marbled Wren-Babbler. It was only 50 metres off the tar but Stephanie did not fancy the trail.- so Weng and I spent a very frustrating 45 minutes trying to bring the bird in. He only moved

twice and I got a glimpse as he changed position- he never stopped singing once for 45 minutes but refused to reveal himself- we would try again later.

Black-browed Barbets were calling in the canopy but we were after another barbet who liked panino's, apples and even water melon. Another site by an old pumping station- out came the fruit and in came more Chestnut-capped Laughingthrushes, Long-tailed Sibilias and Silver-eared Mesias. Then along he came- a very attractive Fire-tufted Barbet to join the feast. He was very close and posed well for the camera.

We were running out of birds to find but there were two I was keen to see- Blue Nuthatch and Black Laughingthrush. We looked long and hard that afternoon without any luck. We now had one full day left and the morning we were leaving. We checked the Nuthatch sites again and then gave the Wren-babbler another go with much the same result-lots of calling but never coming close enough for a good view. He flew across the path 5 metres in front of us and we decided that was going to be as good as it got. Back on the tar several Red-headed Trogons showed well and we watched a Rufous-browed Flycatcher hawking insects.

Then a bird party passed through (Weng called them a bird wave- not a bad term) and amongst them he heard a Blue Nuthatch- this guy has incredible ears- We followed the party through several trees desperately trying to pick up our bird- and finally we had him – a quick view before they all moved on and out of sight. Next up the Laughingthrush. We had tried this site twice already but this time he was much closer. Black Laughingthrush has to be one of the most secretive laughingthrushes of all- he came in to a dense tree 3 metres from us. he moved through the back and flew across the road where we had one decent view before he moved to the back of that one and headed off down the valley.

One afternoon left and not much else to find- we decided to drive an hour back down the hill to look for Grey-bellied Bulbul- Stephanie was still trying to recover from a bug she had picked up and never being much of a Bulbul fan we left her behind and headed for just one particular fruiting tree. The birding network was strong at Fraser's Hill and we arrived to find the Grey partridge long lenses already there. A nice Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot was in the tree which I was slow to get on to, the Ochraceous Bulbuls were there and finally in came a Grey-bellied as if on cue. Chestnut-naped Forktails scurried around on the



Grey-breasted Partridge

other side of the road and we tried rather hopefully for a Maroon-breasted Philemtoma with no luck. It had started to rain so we started wending our way back up the hill to our hotel.

We had to come back past the same tree the following morning and Stephanie got her bulbul just 12 hours later along with a good looking Scaly-breasted Bulbul. With some birds you just have to find the right fruiting tree- something very true for most of the Flowerpeckers and Spiderhunters at that time of the year. We were on our way back to overnight in Kuala Lumpur We had a late evening flight back to Singapore the next day which gave us one more morning of forest birding with Weng In the Kuala Lumpur suburbs.

We had three more target birds- Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker, Horsfield's Babbler and Silver-breasted Broadbill. The Broadbill was easy – Weng knew an active nest site in a busy carpark close to people yelling away as they used a zip line through the forest. The Babbler proved difficult but he came in close at our third site for good views. The Flowerpecker we never got close to. We had lunch in a smart restaurant with a Black-thighed Falconet sitting on a pole outside before leaving with plenty of time to get to the airport. Weng however was not finished yet- we still have time to try for the White-headed Munia he said, and true to his word we picked up the very bird on the way to the airport- a great way to finish the trip.

So ended a very successful trip. The accommodation in Malaysia was good -in Borneo it was great, the climate was not as oppressive as we had expected; most of birding was done from the tar or good dirt roads. We got our three families, we finished off all our needed Kingfishers, Broadbills, Hornbills, Barbets, Woodpeckers and left only one Bulbul on the table- the difficult Black and White. I photographed two more families- The Asian Fairy Bluebird and the Pygmy Cupwing. I have missed photographing just 18 families now including the five in Madagascar I saw before I was a photographer.



Velvet-fronted Nuthatch