

## Panti Forest, Peninsular Malaysia, 28/8/11

Ian Reid

Another work trip, another chance to squeeze in some birding between commitments. This time I found myself in Singapore en route from work in Adelaide back to England with a Sunday at my disposal while I waited to give a seminar at NTU on Monday. I joined Singapore-based ex-pat Pommie birders Martin Kennewell, Simon Cockayne and Richard Carden for a day at Panti Forest, not far onto the Malaysian peninsular. In order to give ourselves a crack at some night birds we arranged for a 4am meet at Martin's condo, which necessitated a 3.10 rise at my hotel in Orchard Rd. There was no queue at the border controls and the route is basically directly along the #3 through Johor Bahru, to Kota Tinggi and a few miles beyond, so not long after 5am we arrived at Bunker Rd, so named because of the two large concrete bunkers stationed either side of the main road. We were greeted at the gate by the first mammalian "tick": several stray dogs lay across the track. They scattered as we approached, but one irritatingly decided to run ahead of the car. Finally after 3km he seemed to tire and we were able to overtake him. Ominously, a few drops of rain appeared on the windscreen.

We drove on a little further then worked our way back, and fortunately the rain abated. Occasionally Simon played recordings of Javan Frogmouth and Oriental Bay Owl. A frogmouth called back briefly, but was not seen, and a Bay Owl was heard well from the car close to the track as dawn started to break, but could not be located (though a shape flying left high in the canopy could well have been it), so both sp. had to go down as heard only.

After dipping on the night birds, I had high hopes for dawn, but the day took quite a while to get going. Even when birds did start to appear, I was finding it tough to get on them. Eventually at 7am I got decent views of a **Lesser Green Leafbird** and **Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker** for my first unequivocal birds of the day, the former the first lifer. Various Bulbul species were also flitting around in the foliage, though nothing was showing well and I was having trouble getting sufficient detail for ticks. Species noted with any degree of certainty here were **Spectacled** and **Buff-vented Buleuls**, and a second species of lifer leafbird, **Blue-winged**, posed well enough for some pics, ultimately proving to be one of the commonest birds of the day. But with this apparently slow start over the first hour and half of daylight I began to worry how dead it would become by midday.

One of my target species was the fantastic looking Banded Kingfisher and at various points along the road Simon had played the call, but we'd had no response, when just before 8am somewhat out of the blue Richard said he had a kingfisher on a branch above the track. Sure enough, a cracking male **Banded Kingfisher** had arrived unnoticed and was now perched unobtrusively almost directly overhead. I whipped out the scope and had great views, but on reaching for the digiscoping equipment I was horrified to find the camera's battery completely dead. I had set it to charge the night before but it seems all I succeeded in doing was actually draining the battery. Sigh. I made do with some dark, distant record shots with the SLR and enjoyed the view in the scope.

We now split up, with Richard heading down a side track while I stayed with Simon and Martin. We crept a few metres from the track into the jungle when Simon stopped and alerted us to something on the ground ahead. Simon and Martin were both quickly onto it, but I took a bit more time. Luckily it circled around and I eventually I managed great views of a **Black-capped Babbler** that

skulked quietly on the ground. Simon's description, "F\*\*kin Mega", which he repeated to Richard over their two-way radio, though he was to be gripped off in return; Richard had just had a party of several White-necked Babblers, one of the few lifers available in Panti for Simon and Martin, and a rare and great looking bird. Hopeful of scoring this too, we walked quickly down the road and then onto a broad secondary track to the north for 300m to where Richard was standing. The Babblers had moved further down into the forest and we followed off the track, but without connecting.

Fortunately for me, we did connect with another of my targets, **Banded Broadbill**, my first ever species of this brilliant, cartoon-like family, and especially welcome after having dipped on one of my key Philippine targets in '10, the very closely related Wattled Broadbill. The light wasn't great, but there was just enough to get some passable pics of this fantastic individual in a few poses.

Breakfast of choc-milk and egg sandwiches kindly prepared by Martin beckoned so we made our way back towards the car, but we stopped again as Simon had picked up a White-bellied Yuhina. As I scanned looking for this for the trip list (I didn't see it but connected with one later) a bright red blob stuck out and I realised I'd found our first Trogon of the day, this one a **Scarlet-rumped Trogon**. At the same spot we also picked out a **Spectacled Spiderhunter**, before remembering that we'd been en route for some refreshments.

Back at the car by the stream we now enjoyed some food and drink and birds started to appear. A **Scarlet Minivet** posed nicely. Then another great lifer target **Raffles Malkoha** appeared, both male (brown/tan head) and female (grey head) and a much bolder **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha**, before around 10am another biggy, **Black-and-yellow Broadbill**, put in an appearance to check out the recording Simon had played. Three birds buzzed about giving superb views and photo opportunities. The guys also pointed out a nasty red stain on my trousers: I had been attacked by leeches while watching the Banded Broadbill, with at least two crawling up inside my trouser leg and sucking away just above the knee, and with another two burrowed into my socks. Of course the nasty buggers had dropped off engorged with my blood before I was even aware of them.

New birds continued to come even though it was warming up and now after 11am. **Buff-rumped Woodpecker** was another nice addition to the trip list (and another lifer), then another mixed flock of Bulbul's contained mostly **Hairy-backed**, but Martin picked out a different one and in the end we all had good views of a rare **Finsch's Bulbul**. Still later we had another Trogon, this time a female **Scarlet-rumped** added tropical colour. It was time to crack open the Tim-Tams; another great bit of foresight from Martin.

We drove to a new site, further into the park near the second stream where Blue-banded Kingfisher had been reported a few days earlier, but had no joy on this front. Number one target of the day was Malaysian Rail-Babbler, an enigmatic forest floor dwelling skulker, not unlike the Jewel-Babblers of New Guinea, and this "Blue-banded" site had also yielded Rail-Babbler in the past for a couple of the guys. We dived along a narrow muddy track (the "yellow trail", presumably named for the yellow signpost nearby) next to the stream, seemingly prime Rail-Babbler territory. However despite trolling with the iPod we had no luck here, though **Abbott's Babbler** was another nice non-lifer addition to the trip list. It was now nearly 2pm, and out of luck at this site we began to wonder whether today would not be a Rail-Babbler day.

Apart from one or two walking tracks off the left and right sides of the Bunker Rd, birding is pretty much done along the road in Panti, with no access elsewhere. We backtracked in the car towards the first stream where we stopped because a Pig-tailed Macaque was in the open on a log next to the road. Sadly as soon as it noticed the car it moved a few metres into denser forest meaning I was unable to get a clear view for a photo, with Martin experiencing similar difficulties with his video camera. He joked that Rail-Babblers have been known to forage after Pig-tailed Macaques.

Amazingly, almost as soon as we had piled out of the car, next to the TP8 signpost, the distinctive single note of a **Malaysian Rail-Babbler** drifted towards us. We immediately moved quietly into the forest and it called again. It was close! Knowing the importance of really looking deeply rather than just relying on movement on the dark forest floor, I scanned with bins and almost instantly I picked it up at about 15m range. Soon everyone was on it and as we watched the stonker came closer and closer, responding to Simon's iPod. It spent the next 10-15 mins circling us, alternately feeding and calling. The long neck, body and tail were fairly plain brown but the head was boldly striped in orange, black and white. Every time it sang it would push its neck down and tail high so that its whole body took on an S-shape, then it would puff out mauve air sacks on the side of its neck for an irresistible combination of colours as it squeezed out its thin, high, monosyllabic note. I took dozens of photos but on the gloomy forest floor even at 800ISO and maximum f-stop I could only get 1/20s shutter. As Martin gorged himself with HD video footage, I managed to hold my shaking hands steady enough for one or two passable pics, before we decided it had had enough stress and we retired to the car.

Back at the first stream we added to the list of bulbuls and babblers, notably **Streaked Bulbul** and **Chestnut-winged Babbler**, though again I didn't get onto everything. I also clawed back **Brown Fulvetta** that I had missed earlier in the day. In spite of the time – it was now after 3pm – good birds continued to appear. We located another **Banded Broadbill**, and short while later a small group of three or so **Dusky Broadbills** called loudly, with one seen very well. Both male and female of the apparently uncommon **Dark-throated Oriole** were noted. More colour was added with another goodie, **Red-crowned Barbet** clinging to the trunk of a tree low down next to the track, and then three Trogon's: male and female **Red-naped Trogon** and a female **Scarlet-rumped**. The day's second **Checker-throated Woodpecker** posed for photos, and a pair of diminutive **Rufous Woodpeckers** showed well but were harder to photograph. **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** also put in an appearance right on cue as I asked the guys if they occur in Panti.

Deeper in the park we reached a closed gate where some unfriendly chaps would not let us pass. Instead we turned off onto another drive to the quarry where there was a sufficiently large vista to show some very nice looking primary forest to the north-west, but sadly inaccessible. There were still a few locations in the park closer to the entrance we had not visited that potentially held new goodies, so we started back. A drongo had us going for a minute thinking we had a Black Magpie, and we were unsuccessful in attempts to lure a Rufous-collared Kingfisher. At the parking/picnic area just inside the reserve we stopped again since this supposedly can be good for Brown-chested Jungle Flycatcher and Red-and-black Broadbill. However just as we arrived the heavens opened in a massive downpour for the first significant rain of the day and as it had just turned 6pm – not that much light left anyway -- we decided to call it a day and head back to Singapore.

The drive back was much slower than the outward one, with dense traffic and border controls adding more than an hour to the morning journey time. We rocked up at Martin's soon after 8 and by 8.30 I was back in the hotel cleaning up and reflecting on what had turned out to be a superb day with a list of wow-factor birds to rival some of my best ever days birding.

### Systematic list

[Great Argus]	<i>NT</i>	One heard early afternoon
{Banded Woodpecker}		Too slow to get on it and it flew. Untickable flight views.
<b>Checker-Throated Woodpecker</b>		2 different individuals
<b>Rufous Woodpecker</b>		2 together
<b>Buff-Rumped Woodpecker</b>		Nice view and pics of one in the canopy
<b>Buff-Necked Woodpecker</b>	<i>NT</i>	An unobtrusive bird was hard to pick out in the canopy
<b>Red-Crowned Barbet</b>	<i>NT</i>	Behaving like a woodpecker, great views
<b>Red-Naped Trogon</b>	<i>NT</i>	Both male and female
<b>Scarlet-Rumped Trogon</b>	<i>NT</i>	Male and female, at least three different individuals
Black-Backed Kingfisher		One shot past for untickable views
<b>Banded Kingfisher</b>		One of the birds of the day. Cracking
Violet Cuckoo		Juvenile which I initially called as a Bronze-Cuckoo, then and adult later
<b>Raffles's Malkoha</b>		Male (brown head) and female (grey head) at the first stream
Chestnut-breasted Malkoha		A few individuals, some very confiding
{Blue-Crowned Hanging Parrot}		Picked out by Simon early on in the day but missed by me
Edible-Nest Swiftlet		Lots of swiftlets presumed to be this common sp.
<b>Brown-Backed Needletail</b>		A few on these stonking swifts
Whiskered Treeswift		Only a few, but always nice
[Oriental Bay-Owl]		Heard close to the track from the car at around 6am but could not be located
[Javan Frogmouth]		Brief snatches heard
Changeable Hawk-Eagle		One called at dawn and a large unident raptor was probably this also
<b>Banded Broadbill</b>		My first ever broadbill. 2 different individuals seen at different times
<b>Black-And-Yellow Broadbill</b>	<i>NT</i>	3 at the first stream around 11am. Superb!
<b>Dusky Broadbill</b>		A few birds. Two singles and a small group (though only one seen)
{Asian Fairy-Bluebird}		
<b>Lesser Green Leafbird</b>	<i>NT</i>	First lifer of the day
<b>Blue-winged Leafbird</b>		Several seen

Greater Racket-Tailed Drongo		A few seen, including one with racquets intact
<b>Malaysian Rail-Babbler</b>	<i>NT</i>	Bird of the day, a great performance
<b>Dark-throated Oriole</b>	<i>NT</i>	Both male and female of this apparently uncommon sp. showed very well
<b>Green Iora</b>	<i>NT</i>	One seen early on in the day
<b>Lesser Cuckoo-Shrike</b>		Two or three seen over the course of the day
Fiery Minivet	<i>NT</i>	I thought we had one of these very early on
Scarlet Minivet		Male and female at the first stream
White-rumped Shama		One seen on the side track as we walked to join Richard
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch		A pair seen late in the day
{Grey-Bellied Bulbul}	<i>NT</i>	
Yellow-vented Bulbul		Seen at NTU in Singapore
<b>Olive-winged Bulbul</b>		
<b>Cream-vented Bulbul</b>		Common
<b>Red-Eyed Bulbul</b>		
<b>Spectacled Bulbul</b>		Common
<b>Finsch's Bulbul</b>	<i>NT</i>	Good views of this rare Bulbul
<b>Yellow-bellied Bulbul</b>		One of this quite smart Bulbul showed nicely
<b>Hairy-backed Bulbul</b>		
{Buff-Vented Bulbul}	<i>NT</i>	
<b>Streaked Bulbul</b>	<i>NT</i>	Brief but unequivocal views
{Ashy Bulbul}		
Common Tailorbird		
Rufous-tailed Tailorbird		
<b>Everett's White-Eye</b>		
Abbott's Babbler		One -- or was it Horsfield's? -- seen on the Yellow Trail
<b>Short-tailed Babbler</b>	<i>NT</i>	Diagnostic thin black moustachial stripe seen well
<b>Black-capped Babbler</b>		A ground-dwelling skulker seen well
{Scaly-Crowned Babbler}		
{Chestnut-Rumped Babbler}	<i>NT</i>	
<b>Chestnut-winged Babbler</b>		Noted in a mixed flock of Babblers
<b>Brown Fulvetta</b>	<i>NT</i>	
White-Bellied Yuhina		

Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker		A few throughout the day
Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker		Ditto
{Plain Flowerpecker}		
Brown-Throated Sunbird		Only seen by me and Richard
Purple-naped Sunbird		
Little Spiderhunter		Brief views of one bird
<b>Spectacled Spiderhunter</b>		Nice views of a single individual

54 species seen by me of which 32 were **lifers**; 3 species heard only.

[...] heard only

{...} seen by others but not me



Photos © Ian Reid, Canon 30D @ 400mm. Clockwise from top-left: Black-and-yellow Broadbill, Malaysian Rail-babbler, Red-crowned Barbet, Red-naped Trogon, Checker-throated Woodpecker, Banded Broadbill. Further photos at <http://www.robots.ox.ac.uk/~ian/Birding>