

Philippines, Jan 23rd -Feb 8th

Ian Reid



On pages 4 and 5 of “Threatened Birds of the World” there is a map showing the density of Vulnerable (VU), Endangered (EN) and Critically Endangered (CR) birds. The Philippines is shown almost entirely as red, making it – together with Indonesia, SE Brazil, Madagascar and the eastern Himalayas – one of the most threatened birding destinations on Earth. This is a function of the high degree of endemism on the islands (120+ endemics are potentially possible in the areas we visited) and massive and on-going loss of habitat.

After returning from PNG in 2008 with a bug for world birding, SMRY and I fancifully discussed where would be next, and made a list of high priority places that we should visit sooner rather than later. Naturally most of the above were near the top of the list, and 2011 was very tentatively pencilled in for “somewhere”. Mid 2009 I began to realise that my sabbatical year 09/10 was going to provide the only chance for several years of getting away to the Philippines at the best time of Jan/Feb because normally this coincides with Hilary Term, a busy teaching time. Ian Merrill’s excellent report from 2006 of Birdtour Asia’s inaugural tour of the Philippines introduced me to the company, and after various email exchanges I had booked myself onto their “custom tour” for Jan/Feb 2010. Having been perhaps unfairly rushed into this by me, Steve showed some initial reluctance to bring the timetable forward by 12 or more months, but soon realised he now had no choice but to come too, or be gripped off forever.

23rd Jan

We met in the lounge at Heathrow and enjoyed a few drinks with fellow trip participant Keith Fisher; we’d never met him, but he was an easy spot decked out in camouflage clothing and poring over a copy of “Birds of the Philippines”. We both remarked how, after PNG had been 10 years (more for Steve) in the planning, it was odd to find ourselves embarking on another adventure barely 18 months later. The Cathay Pacific flight was uneventful and after a tight but makeable connection in Hong Kong we touched down in Manila late afternoon, met by Rob Hutchinson and his driver Gabby at the airport. We were booked for the night at the Best Western La Corona, a 30min drive away. Rob pointed out some **Whiskered Terns** as we crossed a bridge though a shanty-town area near the airport, for our first Philippine ticks, and our first indication that this otherwise mild-mannered, affable chap from Derbyshire is totally obsessed with birds and seeing *everything*!

Arrival in one of the big far-east cities, with the lights and noise and unfamiliar smells is a huge buzz. So after taking turns in the shower to freshen up, Steve and I decided to head out for a bite to eat to soak in the atmosphere. Rob had more punters to pick up from the airport but directed us to a bar around the corner where we enjoyed a decent enough steak and our first of many of the San Mig's that would be consumed over the next two weeks. It was still early, so I persuaded Steve – somewhat against his better judgement – that our next move should be a few more beers in a local nightspot; a short taxi ride later and we propping up the bar at the notorious LA Café. We spent about an hour here, observing with some fascination the workings of this infamous bar, and fairly regularly having to fend off advances. Mindful of jetlag and the rigours of the tour ahead, we restricted ourselves to only two more beers before, curiosity sated, we headed back on foot to the hotel, only a few hundred metres away.

In the hotel lobby we met John Eyres and Mike Ford and joined them for a last beer of the evening, with Keith arriving about 30min later. The famous Jon Hornbuckle put in an appearance in the bar too, anxious to get some advice from Rob in advance of his own inaugural tour. The sixth and final participant of our group, Graeme, was somewhat mysteriously staying at a different hotel and we would collect him en route to the airport the next morning.

24th Jan

A 6am rise to get to the airport for our flights to Mindanao seemed early, but by the end of the two weeks we would recognise this as a major lie in. Cagayan do Oro was sunny as we arrived at around 11am and immediately Keith was on the ball, picking up some typical common species scanning from the short walk from plane to terminal: **Paddyfield Pipit**, **Glossy Swiftlet**, **Pied Bushchat** and **Pacific Swallow**. Lunch was taken at a pleasant seaside hotel resort where we added **Brown Shrike**, **Pied Fantail** and **Chestnut Munia** in the gardens two **Little Egret** on the water, as well as a distant **Frigatebird sp.** (probably Greater). It was then about a 2-3 hour fairly dull drive south to the village of Damitan.

It is about a 2 hour walk from the village up to the Kitanglad campsite. Our flight had originally been scheduled for later in the day, but Rob wisely brought it forward meaning we could make it up to the campsite in daylight getting some good introductory birding done en route. While horses carried our luggage up ahead of us, we walked and birded through farmland. Some light rain blighted the early stages. Even so **Long-tailed Shrike** were deliciously common, with several seen well, a single **Buff-banded Rail** put in an appearance, as well as both **Striated** and **Tawny Grassbirds**, **Lesser Coucal**, **Eye-browed Thrush**, and **Yellow-vented Bulbul** as well our first endemics: **Mountain White-eye**, **Philippine Bulbul**, and the very cute endemic hanging parrot **Colasissi**. As the farmland gave way to denser forest the going got steeper and muddier and birds less evident, but this was just a sign that our destination was close. As I walked on with some purpose sensing we were nearly there, and imagining that first beer “Ice Cold in Alex” style, I realised that Steve had dropped back. I slowed down and waited for him to arrive, which he duly did, though worryingly he was walking slowly, panting short breaths and complaining of chest pains. He had already offloaded his scope to Gabby, so there wasn't much I could do. We hoped that this was a temporary thing, maybe a reaction to altitude (though we were not that high) and mercifully once we arrived at the campsite and he was suitably rested, he packed his big girl's blouse into his rucksack and suffered no

recurrence. It remains a mystery what afflicted him, but thank goodness it was not as serious as feared, nor ongoing.



Back in the camp

The campsite is in a clearing on the side of Mt Kitanglad at 1270m, owned by Carlito, the local Eagle expert. A **Mindanao (Tarictic) Hornbill** was calling unseen as we arrived in the clearing, and other interesting birds here included **Cinnamon Ibon**. At 6pm as the sun was just going down one of our key targets put in its first appearance, right on cue: a roding **Bukidnon Woodcock** alerted us to its presence with its distinctive loud, high pitched clicking, and soon we were enjoying a silhouetted view, then its

lovely buff/orange plumage in the torchlight as Rob expertly followed it as it circled the campsite. After an excellent meal prepared by Carlito's wife and daughter, and a cold beer for most (Rob's foresight extended to bringing good quantities of ice in eskies so we could enjoy a few cold ones each evening), and some local rum for Keith, Rob tried a few brief bursts of Philippine Frogmouth song without joy. We retired to the basic but comfortable mattresses on the floor of the camp building after an enjoyable first day.

It seemed like I had just drifted off to sleep when there was a commotion and sudden flurry of footsteps and activity, and word went 'round: Rob had located a Giant Scops Owl! As we all raced to get some clothes on and find boots I arrived downstairs to find my wellies missing. Some bugger had taken them! I wasted valuable seconds finding and lacing my walking boots before racing as quietly as I could through the mud to the back of the clearing where others had already gathered.

Above us, about 20m up on a high branch, a fantastic **Giant Scops Owl** was looking down at us. I savoured the moment taking in this superb bird; I knew Giant Scops was good, but I hadn't actually appreciated what a great find this was until I returned to the UK and realised that many trips miss this desirable species. Well done Rob! (I now know that night birds are very much his specialty). I had grabbed my bins and camera and took a couple of record shots but the built-in flash on the 30D wasn't up to the job of illuminating at that range, and the pics were disappointingly dark and noisy. At least I had bins and camera; Mike in his haste had rushed to the spot only to realise that not only was he in his pyjamas, he'd come without *any* optics; the stuff of twitching nightmares and providing some excellent comedy value. With the bird apparently fairly settled, I returned to the shelter for my



scope, and also borrowed Rob's top-of-the-range 530EX flash-gun, since he'd already filled his boots. Great scope filling views and some pretty decent SLR shots ensued until we retired once more to bed, about 20minutes after midnight. An "enjoyable" first day had just been promoted to "cracking".

25th Jan

Our first full day on Kitanglad had loomed large right from when we'd first booked the trip. This was our first shot at *the* target bird, Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle, national bird of the Philippines, cover species on the field guide, critically endangered, huge, iconic,... the list of superlatives goes on. Returning home without seeing this would be even more unthinkable than leaving Keki Lodge without the Bowerbird. The day started at 4.45, pre-dawn, for breakfast. I was up before most of the others, making sure my eyes were fitted: learning from mistakes in PNG (when I'd picked up an eye infection) I had come prepared with mirror, antiseptic wet-wipes and a head-torch, so that I could safely fit my contact lenses in the dark. Another bit of foresight based on a combination of experience from PNG and pre-trip research had led me to come prepared with cheap wellies and good quality in-soles, a combination that did me proud on the long wet, muddy walks on Mt Kitanglad. Though Birdtour Asia's official tour info suggests that water-proof boots will be essential it stops short of full recommendation for wellies. Steve took this at face value and was to regret it. I, on the other hand, had spent much time pouring over Merrill's report, not for nothing subtitled "The Trenchfoot Tour".



Steve regretting his choice of footwear

We set off up the mountain while it was just getting light, and stopped at a few spots en route to the eagle lookout. **Eastern Yellow Wagtails** were found in the gardens as we ascended, and a first rest stop was quite birdy with great views of **Colasisi**, and new birds **Olive-capped Flowerpecker**, **Buzzing Flowerpecker**, male and female **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker**. A **Buff-spotted (Greater) Flameback** was heard calling behind us, tracked down and scoped by Steve – I had a brief look through his lovely new Leica glass before it flew off out of sight. At this first stop we also had a pair of **Elegant Tit**, another attractive endemic that was important to get. **Whiskered Treeswift** is not endemic but was a target for both Steve and me, taking to two the number of taxa I have seen in this charismatic family (after Moustached, seen at several locations in PNG), though sadly attempts to digiscope in the dull early morning light were hopeless. **Short-tailed Glossy Starlings** were fairly common on dead trees in the open areas. A flypast **Philippine Coucal** (its unstreaked back separating it from Lesser) added to the endemics, but the personal highlight of the early/mid-morning endemics was the two or three small flocks of **Mindanao Racquet-tail**, totalling 10 birds, that screamed past (the first of my four Racquet-tail targets). Sadly we never had this species land, but even so it was a good one to get, Kitanglad being one of the few reliable places, and even here they are sometimes missed.

Into denser vegetation a mixed feeding flock held **Philippine Mountain Warbler**, and yielded brief but tickable views of **Yellow-bellied Whistler**, and also a smart **Black-and-Cinnamon Fantail**. We came past a site known for Red-faced Parrot-Finch but pressed on, though we did stop for an extended period when Carlito found a small flock of **White-cheeked Bullfinch**, a great find and another specialty of Kitanglad – one of Steve's birds of the day.

Mid-morning we had reached a clearing with a view across a ridge to a densely forested face of the mountain. 2010 was an “off” year in the breeding cycle so there was no nest site to visit. Instead we would be hoping for views of the Eagles (two adults and last year’s nearly fully grown chick) cruising up and down the valley and with any luck, perching within sight. The tension had been rising steadily as we got closer and closer and the first few minutes at the lookout remained tense as we scanned fervently with no joy. As time went on we gradually settled in for the long haul – we’d stay here for the next two days if needed. At various times each of us picked up a raptor over the south-east ridge, adding distant **Oriental Honey Buzzard**, **Brahminy Kite**, one or two **Philippine Serpent Eagles** and **Crested Goshawk**. Carlito would periodically mimic the Eagle’s call, and claimed to have had one of the birds answering him but very distantly. Then late morning one of the group landed bins on a large raptor higher up the valley to our right. This bird’s stance and slow wingbeat gave the impression of a huge bird and it seemed likely this was our most-wanted, but the distant views lasted only a few seconds and it had drifted out of sight before any of us could get scopes onto it. I was certainly not going to tick this view.

A few good birds were found at the lookout, including **Grey-streaked Flycatcher**, and **Mountain Verditer Flycatcher** (others had seen one or two of this beautiful blue flycatcher on the walk up but this was my first). When I found yet another flycatcher in a bush Rob locked on and called Mugimaki, though I think I was looking at a female **Little Pied** (digi-scoped, male seen also) and he was on a different bird that I never saw. The crazy-haired **Apo Myna** gave nice scoped views nearby and eventually one posed close and still enough for some mediocre digi-scoped shots. **Philippine Swiftlets** were fairly common zooming around at the watch-point.

Lunch arrived via some porters hired for just this: sandwiches, snacks and some chicken pieces. I had wandered off behind some long grass just for a slightly different view and something to do when I heard some more than usual banter and sauntered back. Despite the apparent lack of excitement, they had apparently located the eagle: a white speck on the distant mountain face was, sure enough, a **Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle**. It all seemed rather anti-climactic in the end.

Even to the naked eye it stood out clearly from the lush green vegetation, so it must have somehow arrived unnoticed, or perhaps simply moved slightly from dense cover into a more exposed perch, since it was inconceivable we could have missed it for all these hours. After a while it flew across the face of the mountain giving good, if distant scoped flight views, before perching again still around a kilometre away. Even at this range the sight of it through the scope – looking straight at us, crest erect and head shifting from side-to-side to work out range and bearing to our voices – sent shivers down my spine and stood the hairs on the back of my neck to attention.

I tried various combinations of eyepiece and adaptor (I had brought both my old 30x eyepiece and new 20-60x zoom acquired weeks earlier especially for this eventuality) for long-range photography but digi-scoping at this range proved almost impossible, as we were killed by heat-haze. Instead we just had to enjoy the views which were better than the photos would suggest. We must have watched it in three different locations on the far hillside over the course of 1.5 to 2 hours but for the latter part, mist was drifting across the valley occasionally obscuring the views and eventually we called it a day.

The walk back continued to bring some new good birds though. We stopped at the Parrot-finch site and had a frustrating time trying to get decent views as they stayed low in dense long reeds, but

eventually I had a brief but good look at a **Red-faced Parrot-finch**. A **Mindanao (Tarictic) Hornbill** was seen well, as well as **Mindanao (Spangled) Drongo**. Top bird for John and Mike was a **Stripe-headed Rhabdornis**; indeed the main reason this pair of family listers were on the trip was to add the endemic Rhabdornis family to their impressive world lists. We had seen a distant but barely tickable bird on the walk up, but now we had good scope views of one in a typical location, at the top of a dead tree.

At this point I thought that the birding was over and we were tramping back to the campsite. Rob had other ideas and we took a complicated diversion along a very rough track into some dense forest where we tried, somewhat hopefully, for the skulking and hardly-ever-seen Bagobo Babbler. Its call, a monosyllabic, monotonic high-pitched whistle was barely audible to me, and I couldn't tell if we'd heard one or if it was Rob's tape. I never came close to seeing one!

After giving up on the Babbler, we really did now head back to the campsite, arriving as the sun was setting, renewing our acquaintance with the **Bukidnon Woodcock**, and grateful for the possibility of a cold beer and freshening up, even if the "shower" was just a cubicle into which you took a bucket of water heated on the fire. While Rob took his turn in the shower a **Philippine Frogmouth** called from metres away from the campsite. Carlito wandered down with a torch and I followed. Almost immediately he located it in his torch at staggering close range. We returned up the short path and alerted Rob (who was none too pleased that Carlito had gone in without him) and the group trooped back in, relocating it for excellent views, though not at such close quarters as when it first appeared. It had been another superb day, though I have to admit that the Eagle was something of an anti-climax. A fantastic bird, yes, but not the eyeball-to-eyeball views we'd read and dreamed about.

26th Jan

Another pre-dawn breakfast had us heading back up the muddy trails as it was getting light.

Mountain Tailorbird was a good one to pick up; this is an interesting and often reclusive family of which we were to see several taxa, though not without much effort. Later, Rob and Carlito heard a distant call from a Blue-capped Wood Kingfisher and we stopped to try and entice him closer with the tape, but without joy. However not long afterwards we stopped again with the sound of a much closer **Blue-capped Wood Kingfisher**. The cover was dense and it was hard to see anything, yet Carlito managed to pick it out some way back. Rob got his scope on it, and we took it in turns to grab a 3-4 second glimpse, tensions rising all the time that someone might miss out. In the end it hung around for each of us to get enough to make out most of the bird in the partly obscured view,



most notably its prominent bright red bill and dark blue cap. Overall, tickable, but unsatisfactory. We persevered for better views as it called from a variety of perches all at fairly constant range from us through thick jungle. I followed Rob down the slope and was rewarded when suddenly, it flew to a low perch in full view and I enjoyed the great sight of this difficult, boldly marked and charismatic kingfisher. This was much more like it. I daren't call out to Steve that I had it for fear of flushing it, and

furthermore I had left both camera and scope up on the trail. Before it flew I did managed to improvise a digi-binned shot hand-holding the Fuji up to my binoculars. It developed a pattern of flying between two or three perches and we got better at relocating it, so eventually we got decent scope views at close range, and managed passable SLR and really quite good digiscoped shots. The way this had panned out, with the crap, snatched initial peeks, gradually getting better and better, until we had “walk away views” and the fact that this is one of the best but also most difficult of such a great family elevated this one of the birds of the trip for me.

The plan for today was to head for higher altitude for better chances of some of the remaining Mindanao montane specialties. However over dinner the previous day we had engaged in a lively debate as to the relative merits of better Eagle views versus a crack at Apo Sunbird, perhaps unfairly picked out as the “best of the rest”. Graeme, ever upbeat, did his best to put the case for Apo Sunbird but Steve was certainly planning to let the group carry on and stay at the watchpoint in the hope of better eagle views. I was minded to join him; if I am really honest with myself, this would have been a purely defensive manoeuvre, the urge not to be gripped by Steve’s cracking eagle views overwhelming my own desire to see the rare and rarely seen sunbird and add other new but somehow second-rate species to my list. In the end, however, the weather made our choice for us – when we passed the watchpoint it was drizzling and the mountain was bathed in dense fog – and we carried on for another hour and more to get to higher altitudes. Black-faced White-eye were elusive but seen at various points by everyone except me. I would later regret my lack of enthusiasm for this species since it is arguably the most interesting of this uninspiring family. A **Philippine Hawk-cuckoo** responded briefly to Rob’s tape and most of us got something on it. I had it flying between roosts but it was elusive while perched.

Gradually most of the higher altitude species yielded to our efforts and we had good views of **Macgregor’s Cuckoo-shrike**, and **Apo Sunbird**. A female was anticlimactic, but I scrambled up a slope with Rob and located a lovely-looking male. On the descent we had a long battle with an elusive, skulking **Long-tailed Ground-warbler**. It circled us calling tantalisingly until eventually Steve and I got a glimpse of as it crossed the track a few metres ahead of us. A few minutes later it popped out between the angles twin trunks of a nearby tree affording Keith a cracking view but dropped away out of sight before anyone else could get on it. In approximately the same area a similar duel with a **White-browed Shortwing** left us with a heard-only record.

The weather was better as we descended, and still some 5min walk from the eagle viewpoint a raptor calling was identified for us by Carlito – the eagle was on the wing not far away! Still in thick jungle with virtually no view of the sky we rushed down as quickly as we could to get to a spot with a decent view of the valley. Sadly, the calling had stopped and there was no sign of the magnificent creature by the time we could see beyond the dense vegetation into the valley. Steve and I regretted that we had not stayed at the viewpoint, because by now we would surely have been basking in crippling views of the beast. The tidy collection of high altitude birds notwithstanding, we had come halfway across the world for the eagle. I wondered to myself if we hadn’t spent quite so long nailing the Ground-warbler and in particular trying for Shortwing (both of are also found lower down so could have been targeted the following morning as it turned out) we might have been back here in time. I consoled myself with the fact that earlier the visibility was zero, and could have stayed that way all day – we had taken the only sensible decision in the circumstances.

Our descent was punctuated by a few stops as we picked up a few more important species. We had ticked off the endemic Rhabdornis family the previous day with views of a few **Stripe-breasted**, but another of the same species persuaded Steve to set up his digiscoping kit for some pics. These days I suspect they would all be binned, but at least there is some photographic record. Even less easy to photograph was a **Mindanao (Tarctic) Hornbill** but it was important to see this impressive and impressively ugly taxon having only heard one on our first afternoon on the mountain. Steve managed a couple of digiscoped pictures that it's hard to label even with "record shot".

We arrived back at the camp just a short while before sunset. After a brief rest and refreshment it was back up the muddy track to a clearing short way above the camp. Our target here was **Philippine Nightjar**. The silhouette of one calling bird drifted around on the far edge of the clearing. An additional bonus was a pair of roding **Bukidnon Woodcock** which performed wonderfully. I tried hard to get a photo, but the best I managed was a shot with a blurred shape showing eye-shine from my inadequate built-in flash.



Back at the camp there was even time for a spot more night-birding. Rob persuaded the **Philippine Frogmouth** to come back for a repeat performance, and while Steve grilled it with bins in one hand, beer in the other from the comfort of his perch at the dinner-table, I joined Rob and John for some superb photographic opportunities. I even managed some frame-filling digiscoped video of it as it puffed out its chest making its low growl.

27th Jan

Once again the day started early. I was first down before light, running through my new routine of contact lens insertion by torchlight, small vanity mirror, and disinfectant wipes. Rob of course was already up – does he *ever* sleep? Close by a **Philippine Scops Owl** called from within 50m of the camp and the two of us set off to try and track it down, but this widespread species was one of two or three night-birds that would elude us throughout the trip.

Today was really mostly about the travel. There was no time to go for any of the remaining targets on the mountain, nor for another crack at the eagle unless we got really lucky with one over the camp (it does happen occasionally), so instead we milled around in the campsite. Numerous **Cinnamon Ibon** sailed across the clearing, and a young **Yellow-breasted Fruit-dove** with a deformed bill posed for digiscoped pictures.

Once the horses were strapped up with our luggage and off down the hill it was time for us to follow, birding en route of course. A **White-eared Brown-Dove** finally gave nice views after being heard regularly throughout the previous two days. Once again **Long-tailed Shrike** were common and Steve and I competed to see whether he could line up his scope and adjust the digiscoping camera more quickly than I could extract SLR from my bag and take a picture. Another goodie on the descent was **Coppersmith Barbet**. Although widespread and common in South-east Asia this was my first, and had been a pre-trip target. Indeed it was my first of this family.

We finally made it down to Damitan, piled into the vehicle and headed back to Cagayan de Oro. At a nondescript pizza restaurant for lunch we looked out onto a road filled with Jeepneys, the pimped, colourful buses that enliven the streets of Philippines town and cities.



After lunch we boarded the pair of Land Cruisers for the long drive to Bislig, our base for the next 4 nights. Low-key birding all the way, we noted numerous Egrets, mostly **Intermediate**, but really there was little for us to do as we trundled through mile after mile of deforested, lowland agricultural land.

Bislig is the only town within sensible driving distance of the famous Paper Industry Cooperative of the Philippines (PICOP) logging concession. The concession expired in 2003 with the government banning all logging in the Philippines. It is therefore a deep and disturbing irony that when the logging company moved out amid government promises of a conservation reserve, the rate of deforestation actually increased many-fold. Without the protection of the company's security, the area became ripe for illegal logging activities. The government hasn't sufficient resources to police it adequately, and the logging provides an easy livelihood for a population that is mostly well below the poverty line. Although vast swathes of the original forest are now gone, and in spite of the constant accompaniment of chain saws and decrepit, loudly-revving trucks, the birding remains excellent. It has done so in spite of warnings that each year might be the last it's worth visiting. Arguably some specialties are even easier to see, concentrated in small pockets of remaining good forest, and others are adapted to the scrub and "useless" old growth that gets left behind. Nevertheless, whether it is next year, or it takes a few more, it seems sadly inevitable that at some point there will be insufficient habitat for some of the real gems of the lowland forest to sustain viable populations.

As we approached Bislig, Rob phoned Tim Fisher, ex-pat Brit and until his premature death in 2012, the best known figure in Philippine birding. He was helping lead a tour that had spent the last few days in PICOP. Rob's subdued conversation left me concerned and he confirmed our fears, relaying the information from Tim: a logging truck had got itself stuck broadside across road 42 preventing any access to that part of the forest. Unless it was removed in the next few days – extremely unlikely was Rob's verdict – we would have to make do elsewhere. This was a major blow: road 42 had some of the best remaining habitat and gave best chances for some of the key targets, including perhaps our only chance for Celestial Monarch, picked out from the field guide by Steve's daughter as his top target after the eagle. There was *some* good news. That group had explored a new area, known as road 83, and had lucked onto a Mindanao Wattled Broadbill. Though I too wanted the

Monarch, for me the Broadbill competed with Steere's Pitta for second-in-line after the eagle. It was not an area Rob knew, but surely worth a punt on one of our three full days.

It was dark by the time we rolled into the Paper Country Inn, a dilapidated place with a rather haphazard approach to electrical safety. Steve and I took photos of the alarmingly exposed wiring on the showerhead's built-in heater, but risked it anyway. We found out as we assembled for the bird call (and a surprisingly tasty and filling dinner) that some of the others had been more circumspect, and regaled us with stories of electrocution in dodgy Philippine showers.

28th Jan

5am starts at Mt Kitanglad were made to seem like a lie-in now that we were at PICOP. The nearest decent tracts of forest were between 45min and an hour away by jeepney, mostly along the rough forestry tracks that were cut by the forestry companies and now barely maintained. Consequently we were up at 3.15 and on the road 20-30 mins later so as to get in some night birding before dawn. We would spend the day birding from roads 1, 1-4, 4 and at the "quarry", occasionally going off-piste into the horribly degraded forest.

It took around 30min just to reach the turnoff to PICOP, and once on the rough road leading in (Rd 1) we headed to the link road 1-4 that joins roads 1 and 4 (they go with imaginative names here). We stopped on 1-4 and Rob played the call of Mindanao Boobook (Hawk-owl) and soon we had a response. Unfortunately in the gloom a shadow drifted over us and immediately away. Rob expressed surprise that it had carried on, but no amount of playback would bring it back. Thus the day started with a dip, UTV of a bird that would elude us all four days, and an owling pattern established that would only be broken a few times over the next week and a half.

As it started to get light, just up the road a **Philippine Trogon** put in an appearance. I missed the first instalment (as did most of the group) and so we dived in to the forest in search. As we took cover, Rob played the tape again and a beautiful female ghosted onto a branch in front of us. Her brown plumage was hardly as striking as the male's rich pink, but she still sported the yellow bill, bright blue bare skin around her eye, and intricately black-and-white barred wings; a top target, putting the day back on track, but far too dark in the dawn forest for photography.

As it grew lighter we were able to see with our own eyes the destruction of the forest that we'd read so much about before coming. No large trees were still present, and large tracts now covered simply by scrub and decaying worthless timber. It was heart-breaking. The sound of chainsaws would be a constant accompaniment to our birding over the next 3.5 days.



Nevertheless the forest still holds many good birds. Immediately after dawn we were training our scopes on a gorgeous **Rufous-lored Kingfisher** that performed brilliantly. At the time I had not appreciated that this is an endangered species. Soon after that Rob's

incredibly sharp ears picked up the call of **Streaked Ground Babbler**. With everyone in position he played the tape and a beautiful brown, black and white streaked bird bounded briefly into view, doing an impression of a neo-tropical antbird.

We continued to see some decent birds on Rd 1-4 picking up a couple of **Blue-crowned Racquet-tails**, the second of a potential 4 endemic species in this family that I was targeting during the trip. Off-piste we waded across fallen logs and through the scrub to a slightly denser part of the forest where we grilled a small flock holding a variety of “B-division” birds including **Yellow-wattled Bulbul**, **Rusty-crowned Babbler**, and **Brown Tit-babbler**. Steve decided that being a Tit-babbler was a vocation he would enjoy.

Back on the road we picked up various other species such as **Large-billed Crow**, **Mindanao Drongo**, **Red-keeled Flowerpecker** and **Orange-bellied Flowerpecker**, arriving at the famous quarry at around 8am. We grabbed our picnic breakfast and headed down the track. There was bad news here too. The track was flooded so we would not be able to carry on to better forest. Soon after a logging truck followed us and, also finding the way blocked by the flood, proceeded to try and turn around in a spot far too narrow. The revving of the huge diesel engine was even more oppressive than the chainsaws and threatened to drown out crucial birdsong. After what seemed like nearly an hour it finally extricated itself and trundled back up past us.

In spite of the degraded forest below the quarry, some key birds started to appear. A Steere’s Pitta that called from very close to the track couldn’t be persuaded to show itself, but further along we went off-piste again, following the call of another **Steere’s Pitta** that soon provided excellent views. Once it had been convinced by Rob’s tape there was a threat to its territory it called away regularly, eventually from a post where we could soak in the sight of the big azure stonker for several minutes. Steve was able to approach relatively closely and spent some time obtaining excellent digi-scoped photos of this key target.



While he was doing that, suddenly avian activity started to pick up and I realised a wave of birds was coming through. First, as is often the case, were the **Blue Fantails**, followed by **Scarlet Minivet**, **Philippine Oriole**, and **Philippine Bulbul**. Knowing a feeding flock was our best chance of the Broadbill (which, now that the pitta was in the bag, had become my top target) we grilled everything that moved, but sadly there was no Broadbill to be found. Steve sauntered back apparently unconcerned. He’d bagged some excellent pictures but now wondered what the fuss was about. He had missed a couple of birds that he would claw back over the coming two days, but crucially, had not realised the importance of the feeding flock and that he could conceivably have missed the broadbill too.

Our first PICOP rain arrived as the flock thinned, and we sheltered under umbrellas from the heavy but mercifully brief downpour. By the time we emerged the flock had departed. We made our way back to the jeepney and birded Rd4, finding **Guaibero**, **Philippine Leafbird** and the gorgeous, dainty

Philippine Falconet, which was another of my key targets. The birding had inevitably slowed as the day wore on and we stopped for our packed lunch, lazing about for an hour or so. Keith, suffering the effects of a dodgy tum took a nap in the jeepney while Steve and I tried digi-scoping **Oriental Magpie Robin** and **Metallic-winged** and **Grey-throated Sunbirds**. A **Rufous-fronted Tailorbird** was too agile for digi-scoping, and I failed to get the SLR settings right, horribly under-exposing (and irrevocably ruining) my photo ops of this taxon. I also tried unsuccessfully to get SLR pics of the fast-moving **Pygmy** and **Island Swiftlets**, practising for the hoped-for needletails.

Rob's hearing and his knowledge of calls and songs were consistently spot-on during the two weeks. As we pondered our next move Rob picked up a distant call from a hillside and we trooped up the road in the heat where Rob located a cracking (and rare) **Pink-bellied Imperial Pigeon** high in the canopy. One of the problems of going into a trip like this fairly inexperienced (in terms of world birding) and green (in terms of prep) is not fully appreciating certain moments and this was one. In retrospect, Pink-bellied was a very valuable addition to the trip list, not always seen and classified Near Threatened by Birdlife.

As we walked back down the hill to the Jeepney we noted a raptor atop lone tall tree. Rob initially called Hawk-eagle, but Steve, on the ball as usual, immediately questioned this on jizz, and once scoped everyone agreed it was clearly a **Steere's Honey Buzzard**.

For the afternoon we drove down to a spot known to Rob and others as "Monarch Wood". The birding gradually picked up after the heat of the middle of the day and though it was not easy, we started acquiring new and good birds. We began by concentrating on the Monarchs. Rob picked up the distant sound of a feeding flock and was able to entice it in with some judicious playback. The birds were flighty, and tough to pick out, staying high in the canopy usually out of sight, but eventually I got reasonable views of **Mindanao Paradise Flycatcher**, **Black-naped Monarch**, **Naked-faced Spider-hunter** and after being teased with fleeting untickable views, I finally locked onto a brilliant blue **Short-crested Monarch**, one of the two most desirable monarchs for which the wood was unofficially named. Later in the day we would get slightly better views but I was not fast enough on the trigger to get any usable image. Rob tried to persuade us (unconvincingly) that this was in fact the better looking, but in truth it only galvanised our desire to see Celestial even further.

At one point we dived into an area of slightly less degraded forest and clambered over eroded limestone into a collapsed sink-hole. At the time I thought (wrongly) that we were after Rufous-tailed Jungle-flycatcher in here, a rare stonker. As Rob played a recording of an unknown species, we then spent the next half an hour as an apparent mega-skulker circled us in the forest gloom, calling regularly but never still enough for me to get onto. Finally I picked up the bird flitting low down – it was not a jungle-flycatcher, but a **Black-headed Tailorbird** – a good bird, but I felt a bit short-changed.



As we descended further towards a clearing Steve cried out "Needletails" as 4 fantastic **Philippine Needletails** swooped over and proceeded to give us an excellent show. Just finding these speedsters in my view-finder was a challenge, so I was gratified to be able to take a record shot that shows the unmistakable and unique scimitar-like wings on its perfectly formed torpedo body.

In the clearing on prominent perches we found more **Philippine Falconets**, a **Stripe-headed Rhabdornis** (the second sp. of this endemic family for the trip), our first **Coletos**, and a pair of **White-bellied Woodpecker**. Late in the day large numbers of **Writhe Hornbills** (about 25) flew over the clearing, with the final bird before we started the journey back a **Philippine Fairy-Bluebird**.

We clambered back into the jeepney and braced ourselves for the slow, bone-rattling trip back to “civilisation” (if the Paper Country Inn in Bislig is worthy of such an epithet). It was dark as we approached the entry/exit point to PICOP, having picked up a **Great-eared Nightjar** on top of a tree on Rd 1 as our only nightbird.

It was nice to be back in our digs after a hot, long and extremely tiring day in the field. We’d seen some top birds, with a few bankers to go, but no sign of either the Broadbill or the top Monarch. Having ordered our dinner (Rob warned we should do this before anything, since the meal prep and service can be slow), we risked electrocution again, then feeling vaguely human we repaired for some beers, the evening bird-call, and a quite decent meal. Our decent list from day one led to Rob deciding (with Rd42 unavailable) that we should try the new area, Rd 83. This was even further away – about 1.5-2 hours in the jeepney just to get there – and we would need to leave at 3am tomorrow. Bollocks!

29th Jan

We managed – somehow – to drag ourselves out of bed at the requisite hour but dawdling over the barely drinkable but essential instant coffee meant Steve and I were 5 mins late to the jeepney. We could sense that Rob was not amused. I sat quietly, trying to get fresh air, but my lungs filled instead with the jeepney’s diesel fumes. My stomach churned after one more beer than was prudent the previous evening, but I managed somehow to avoid the embarrassment of having to call for a stop or lean out the window. After an hour I felt marginally better as the driver pulled the jeepney into a clearing, and we all piled out. I looked around in the pre-dawn gloom and realised we were back at the quarry: “Rob, what’s going on? This looks like the same place as yesterday.” There followed a tense and angry exchange between Rob and Zardo. It seems the latter had not bothered to contact the local tribe at Rd 83 for permission, so had unilaterally instructed the driver to bring us back to the quarry. Rob was livid, but there was nothing we could do now – to get to the other area would require retracing our path by an hour, then a further 1.5-2 hours to the other side of Bislig. It would just eat up too much time.

We aimed, therefore, to try to add to our tally from the same area. We began by owling around the quarry. Though four nightbird species were heard – **Great-eared Nightjar**, **Philippine Scops** (race *everetti*, these days known as **Everett’s Scops Owl**), **Chocolate Boobook** and **Mindanao Boobook** – the latter three eluded us (and we didn’t try to see the first) before the dawn rays put an end to our chances for another day.

A short way down from the quarry on the flooded track we’d heard the weird, mournful whistle of Red-bellied Pitta (still so agonisingly familiar from multiple dips and eventual success in PNG 18 months earlier) so settled into a spot just down a steep embankment that seemed to give us a good combination of cover but with a view and played the call. One was heard but it stopped responding. However within seconds of Rob switching to **Steere’s Pitta** on his iPod, the big endemic had bombed

in and was calling just a few metres above us; our second encounter with this top target, and still greatly enjoyable. Magic!

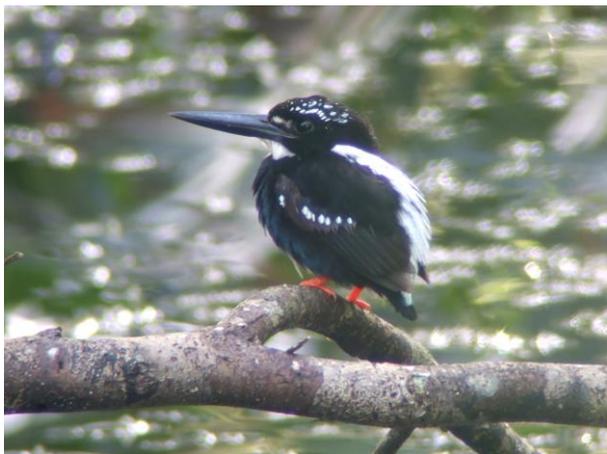
We worked Rd 4 on foot down to Monarch Wood. A gorgeous **Philippine Falconet** with daddy-long legs prey was one of the stars of the morning; John and I lingered to take some SLR photos when the others wandered off to find something new. New birds included **Philippine Cuckoo-dove**, **Yellowish Bulbul**, **Little Spiderhunter** and **Olive-backed Flowerpecker**. We got better views than yesterday of **Black-headed Tailorbird**, though further encounters with the endemic flycatchers – **Mindanao Paradise Flycatcher** and **Short-crested Monarch** – failed to produce a Celestial.



Rufous Hornbill – Near Threatened and not easily found – was one of the day's highlights. Two adults and a juvenile gave us good views in one of the few remaining large emergents near the Quarry but flew off before we could get our digi-scoping equipment set up. The adults were particularly striking with large rufous/brown bodies and huge red casques atop their massive red bills.

More prominent birds found on open branches and dead trees included more **Falconets**, a **Coppersmith Barbet**, and – new for me – a **Violet Cuckoo**. The day's raptors included a couple more **Steere's Honey Buzzard** and a **Philippine Serpent Eagle**, all seen in flight.

We began the journey back to Bislig much earlier today, making time for a daylight diversion to Rd 1 where another of the star birds of PICOP is regularly seen. We arrived at a small stagnant pond by the road and walked down between a few timber shacks. Within seconds we'd found a stunning **Silvery Kingfisher**. Surely this gorgeous black and deep blue and silver little stonker must vie for best



looking of this gaudy family. Certainly on rarity value, the fact that it is listed as Vulnerable, and the stunning views we enjoyed, this was bird of the day for me. We filled our memory cards with digi-scoped pictures and video.

Bislig airfield provided another diversion on the way home, and a welcome change from the forest with a new range of species attracted by the long grass, open agricultural fields to either side, and areas of water and reeds. From around 16:30 until it got dark we walked along

the airstrip. Though we noted some good species, many were flushed and running or flying for cover, so I did not enjoy the best of views. **Watercock** was seen poorly in flight, a few **Blue-breasted Quail** flushed from the edges of the runway into deeper cover, and likewise a couple of **Swinhoe's Snipe** (or at least, I took Rob's word for it that it was this taxon) flew high and far, as is common for snipe.

A key target here, because we would have few opportunities elsewhere, was the endemic **Philippine Duck**. We scored 20+, but all fairly distantly in flight, flying to roost in the late afternoon / early evening. Likewise we picked up 20 or more **Wandering Whistling Duck** fly-overs and a number of **Purple Heron**. Other birds noted included **Peaceful Dove**, **Bright-capped Cisticola** and a few **White-browed Crake** in the ditches on the northern side of the airstrip. The best of the waterbirds was a **Yellow Bittern**, seen rather fleetingly before it melted back into the reeds.

The key species at Bislig is **Eastern Grass Owl**. The way to see this is to wait until just before dark, and stand on the jeepney to get the best view of the area. We all dutifully clambered up on top of the beast, feeling rather precarious, and scanned the fields. Eventually we were rewarded with tickable, but distant views of a bird that quartered the fields at about 300-400m range. At least this had (temporarily) arrested our run of poor form with the night-birds, but not having good views was somewhat symptomatic of an overall disappointing day, that nevertheless had produced Silvery Kingfisher and Rufous Hornbill, two of the stars of PICOP.

Back at the PCI we resumed our routine of ordering dinner, showering, then doing the bird-call over a few beers and a surprisingly good meal. Rob was confident that tomorrow (our last full day in PICOP) we would be able to head to Rd 83 and try for the Broadbill.



Grass Owl viewing platform

30th Jan

Another very early start and this time we paid attention to the direction of the jeepney, which clearly left Bislig to the south, rather than north. An hour into what seemed like an interminable journey, rain began to fall and was pretty constant henceforth. Even though it was still dark at around 4am we began to pass logging trucks on the muddy track as the condition of the "road" got worse and worse. In places we struggled to pass the log-laden vehicles coming the other way, just avoiding pits of mud or sliding off into the ditch on the side of the road. Eventually after two hours,

still raining, the inevitable did happen and we slid slightly sideways into a deep rut. The gunning of the engine just resulted in a madly spinning wheel and we were stuck fast, axle deep in mud. Our driver and Zardo fiddled about but it did not look like there would be a rapid solution.

After about 10mins we all piled out of the truck and walked up the road a bit. It seemed there was little we could do to help so we might as well do some birding. The first rays of dawn were just appearing and I found a couple of **Great-eared Nightjars** quartering the field while waiting for the jeepney to be freed.

As it grew lighter we walked further up, and aided by the rain abating a bit, Rob was able to call in a cute *Ficedula* **Little Slaty Flycatcher**. At the time I didn't really realise that this is another of the tricky endemics, so good to get. My views were not brilliant, as the morning was dull and grey, while the bird itself was highly mobile and (funnily enough) largely slaty coloured above and usually in quite deep cover.

Finally the jeepney was free and we piled into the back of it, only to stop again in about 300m – turns out we were basically already at our destination by the time we got bogged. Now there followed another long wait as Rob and Zardo walked up a steep path to the tribal house to negotiate our entry. It was all beginning to produce unpleasant flashbacks to our all-too-common issues with logistics, weather and locals in PNG.

Initially we viewed a **Crested Goshawk**, wings spread drying itself as it perched above the track. Steve managed some digi-scoped pics, but soon we were hunkering under umbrellas again as the rain started again in earnest.

After what seemed like forever Rob and Zardo emerged and back in the jeepney we trundled through the gate and down into what looked to be the best forest we had seen since arriving in PICOP. It was not untouched, but at least there were vestiges of old growth forest that had not been systematically removed as in so much of the rest that we had seen.

Sadly, the birding would not live up to this initial promise, with the rain constant for much of the morning and so heavy at times that all we could do was sit in the jeepney and wait. Our instructions to Zardo were to take us to the place where the other group had seen the Broadbill a week ago. We walked along past a patch of rather degraded forest somewhat sceptically, watching in vain for any movement that might betray the presence of *any* bird, let alone our most-wanted quarry, but there was f-all. Was this really the place? No – apparently it was further back. Why hadn't we gone there first? It was all rather mysterious and in retrospect I can only put it down to a strange miscommunication, or perhaps a degree of obstinacy from Zardo, smarting from his rebuke the previous morning. Whatever the reality, in between the heavy downpours, we saw little.

After lunch we headed on foot down a side-track where the forest looked much more promising. We were still hampered by occasional showers, and the birding was really quite slow. I was not helped by both binoculars and scope fogging up badly in the steamy air. It felt like every time I tried to look at a bird I first had to extract my lens cloth and wipe, and even then it was a race to see anything until all the colours washed out or the focus was lost. It was all very demoralising and I found myself paying insufficient attention during the period that would be our last crack at my top target.

The only new bird seen this afternoon was **Pinsker's Hawk-Eagle**, a fantastic addition to the trip list. The endemic Philippine of races *philippensis* and *pinskeri* has recently been split by many authorities into Philippine and Pinsker's. While the former has a very prominent crest, my understanding from the literature and from various photos I can find, is that Pinsker's has a much more modest crest, sometimes just comprising a few black feathers poking out of the back of the head. It also appears that *pinskeri* is the more common form in Mindanao, replaced by *philippensis* further north. We found two different birds, one adult and one very pale, cream-headed juvenile. Both were the subject of much debate between myself and Steve some months after our return. Steve had re-examined his photos and was now of the belief they were of the much more common *Spizaetus*, Changeable Hawk-Eagle but I was (and am) content that at least one of his photos of each bird shows the black crest feathers that qualify the birds as the much rarer and Endangered endemic Pinsker's. We managed to scope a pair of **Mindanao Hornbills**, and scored our best views of **Rufous Hornbill**, with Steve once again managing worthy images. My equipment woes meant I had long since given up trying for photos. With the scope fogged and SLR tucked away out of the rain, I didn't take a single photo all day.

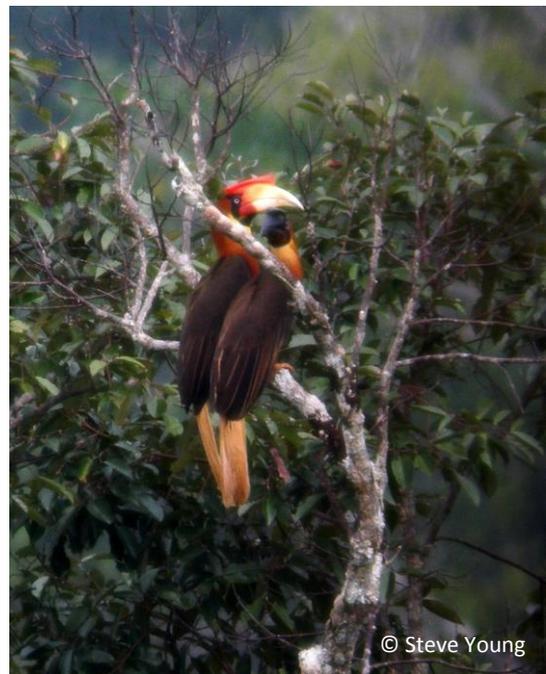
As the day drew on we finally resigned ourselves to the dip on the Broadbill and returned to the jeepney. By side of the road a **Red-bellied Pitta** called and we decided to try for this as a final compensatory fling before the two hour bumpy ride "home". The 6 of us lined up along the road and peered into the dark forest floor. After several minutes of giving us the run-around, it finally yielded as both Steve and I locked onto its dim outline at the base of a tree some 10m back into the forest. It called from there, then disappeared again into the gloom. We were the only two to get on it.

31st Jan

This being a BirdtourAsia tour, every available birding minute was used. Our flight from Butuan back to Manila was not until the middle of the day, so we used the dawn for more birding by the quarry and along Rd 1-4. In fact this turned out very well indeed, and though not quite making up for the disappointments of the previous two days, our final morning in PICOP meant we left Mindanao in a much better mood.

As was our usual routine, we were up well before sparrow-fart and bumping our way through PICOP's badly kept tracks. At the quarry the full moon showed impressively but a Mindanao Boobook failed to respond to the tape. I started to resign myself to the familiar pattern of the last few days with the owls: build-up of excitement and anticipation followed by subsequent disappointment. A couple of **Great-eared Nightjars** were scant compensation.

We wandered about 200-300m further west along Rd4 when a Chocolate Boobook called and we got ready (me somewhat sceptically) as Rob fired up his iPod and speaker. But now, in the nick of time, oh joy, Rob announced he had it. Before blasting it with his high-powered torch he made sure we



were all looking at the correct dead tree, about 60-70m away, on a horizontal branch about 2/3 of the way up. Yup, got it, and I can make out a shape sitting there. How Rob had seen it arrive I'll never know. When his torch went on, there was a gorgeous **Chocolate Boobook**, breast heavily streaked with dark brown, and bright yellow eyes. He was distant and didn't stay long enough for photos, but at last we'd had the kind of start to the day that each of our 7 ridiculously early mornings had deserved.

After sunrise we worked our way back gradually towards Bislig, mainly working Rd 1-4. Steve clawed back a few "minor" birds such as **Scarlet Minivet** that he'd missed while photographing the Steere's Pitta. We all enjoyed a **White-throated Kingfisher** eating a crab (the Philippine race barely has *any* white on the throat which rather threw me), a **Black-faced Coucal** sunning itself, and a crow that perched prominently created much discussion as we tried hard to turn it into the extremely rare Mindanao Crow (we were forced to conclude from the absence of bare flesh just behind the eye that it was just another **Large-billed Crow**). A **Whiskered Treeswift** was our first since day one on Kitanglad, while **Buff-spotted Flameback** (race *lucidus* of **Greater** for the splitters) was a new bird.

Back in Bislig by 8.00am, we loaded up the minibus that was waiting for us and cruised into Butuan in time for yet another pizza lunch. At this point, Graeme, who was leaving the group for a bit of a "holiday" in Subic Bay took issue with the reactionary bollocks and barely concealed racism some of the others had been spouting for much of the last week. Though I agreed with him, I had a lot more to lose with another week still in the same company, so I – shamefully – kept schtum.

Back at Manila airport we were met by Rob's driver Gabby and immediately set off for Mt Makiling, some two hours' slow drive south. Having dropped our stuff off in the rather upmarket hotel (at least, that's the way it seemed – maybe anything would seem upmarket compared to the PCI) we headed for Trees Guesthouse at the base of the trail up the mountain and into the forest reserve. **Grey-rumped Swiftlets** were nesting under the eaves, and then from 16:00 until nearly dark we gazed from the deck over the forest enjoying a new set of birds. Best find here was a group of 4 **Luzon Hornbills**, but sadly I missed the Scale-feathered Malkoha that put in a brief appearance. Other birds noted here were **Bar-bellied Cuckoo-shrike** and **Philippine Bulbul**. Hopes were high that we'd turned a corner with our owling, and we pushed our way through a narrow gap onto a short trail where Rob has regularly had a roosting Philippine Scops. But in a return to our previous poor form, it was not there.

A slap-up meal and a few beers in a local restaurant were followed by a few hours of fruitless owling, much of the time spent sat around on the roadside waiting for something to call or to respond to occasional bursts from Rob's iPod. He was certainly putting in the hard yards trying to get us the owls, but for whatever reason it was just not happening.

1st Feb

Our day started at 4.30 as we headed up the main trail of Mt Makiling, an inactive volcano covered by a forest reserve (and therefore holding some of the remaining decent forest in southern Luzon). First stop was again near the Trees Guesthouse, where, as usual, owls led us a merry dance. Rob began by playing the song of Philippine Boobook and elicited a response but could not get it to come closer or locate it. While this was going on I heard the distinct low, slow growl of a Philippine Scops, apparently very close. The pattern with these birds is that they call only once or twice, then go silent

for many minutes. I was surprised when the group did not readjust its attentions to the Scops. By the time we'd given up on the Boobook there was no further response from the Scops. A double-dip to start the day ☹.

Fortunately as we pushed higher up the track the Boobooks did come to play. Rob was able to locate a vocal pair of **Philippine Boobooks** on an exposed branch and we enjoyed cracking views. Sadly the built-in flash was not up to the job and I came away with almost impossibly dark images. Lots of post-processing when I got home yielded a very green, mediocre record shot. Using a very long multi-second exposure Steve was able to get a much better exposed digi-scoped picture, but as a result of one of the birds moving mid-shot, it looks like a strange beast with an eye in the back of its head!

As we ascended it was still quite dark and Rob warned that sometimes it's possible to see the elusive Ashy Ground Thrush on the road and roadsides early morning, before they are disturbed by villagers going up and down the road. We kept our eyes and ears open but had no joy on that front. Once it was light, yet again we had to work hard in the forest to score key birds, but we did end the morning with most of the key targets in the bag. In several places we heard Philippine Trogon, but disappointingly there was not the will to try harder – there were other birds not yet “on the list” that “had” to be prioritised, even though Steve and I craved better views (especially of a male).

Initially we picked up new, but to my mind mostly padder, species. One of our first birds after dawn was a **Lemon-throated Leaf Warbler**. I really should try harder to get more excited about *Phylloscs*, but somehow could not when there was so much more exotic stuff to be seen. A **White-browed Shama** (an endemic) was new for the trip, as were **Rusty-breasted Cuckoo**, **Grey-backed Tailorbird** and another endemic, the smart and uncommon **Flaming Sunbird**. A few funky looking **Red-crested Malkohas** added to the Scale-feathered from yesterday. One of the more common endemics was **Baliscassiao**, basically a Philippine drongo, and we had a few **Guaiabero** and **Stripe-headed Rhabdornis**. One of the morning's highlights was a flock of **Purple Needletails**. These were picked out above the trees and seen rather distantly, but easily identified by their huge size and white undertail coverts, not to mention their incredible speed and aerobatic skill. **Oriental Honey-buzzard** and **Philippine Serpent Eagle** were also picked up cruising above the forest.

As it did every day, the birding slowed down as the day heated up. We walked off on a side-track and inspected the mud-springs, a spot where 80deg mud bubbles with sulphur, a reminder of the dormant volcano that created this mountain. We picked up a pair of **Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker** nearby, but nothing else of note.

We began our descent to lunch back in Los Banos with a glaring omission from the list, one of the major targets for Makiling, Spotted Wood-kingfisher. We had heard a few call briefly but none had responded during the earlier morning. At around 11am, one called repeatedly from not far and we all intently scanned the forest hoping to lock onto this second of the endemic *Actenoides*, and one of my most desired of the whole trip. As ever, Steve's patience, great eyesight and field craft led to him finding it for the group. He announced he had it then within seconds was lining up his crystal clear new Leica glass onto it. Having grabbed an eyeful himself while trying to give us all directions he pulled me through the clamour of bodies around his scope to make sure I too got a view. What a gorgeous creature this **Spotted Wood Kingfisher** was: this was a male, large two-toned bill (dark above, orange below), sporting iridescent blue on its cheek and above its eye, a thick black stripe

through its eye sweeping down to meet the orange collar that circled its throat and nape. It was less gaudy below, with back and front of almost inverted colour-schemes, large white blobs on its belly giving a pale appearance, with yellow spots scattered over dark greeny-brown back and wings. One of the birds of the trip! It stayed put calling and we now enjoyed more leisurely viewing. Steve was able to employ our new digi-technique of long exposure yet again, using the stability of tripod to grab some excellent images with exposures of a second or more, bringing out the richness of the colours even in the very dark forest.

One final *major* bird tantalised us by calling briefly from below us down a steep embankment. On hearing the low hoot of a Luzon Bleeding-heart, Rob immediately tried some playback, hoping to lure it a little closer for us to have some kind of chance of picking up this rare, skulking and fantastic looking endemic pigeon, but there was no response so made this list as “heard only”. This was one that I (and most of us) had mentally assigned to the too hard basket so I guess hearing one was a bonus.



Over lunch, Rob broke some “bad” news for us. Our flight to Palawan had been rescheduled to later in the day. We could avoid compromising our already rushed Palawan itinerary by leaving Makiling earlier than planned, later this afternoon and take a flight to Palawan tonight. If we stuck with our scheduled flight, now leaving early afternoon, we would have to drop the planned boat trip for the restricted range small-island-specialist Mantanani Scops Owl. Perhaps influenced by our lack of luck so far with owls, the vote of the group (all bar Keith) was to stay in Makiling, and use the bonus of an extra morning to try again for Ashy Ground-thrush.

After lunch we explored the Los Banos campus of the University of the Philippines for two hours from 13:00—15:00. The birding began on arrival as we pulled up next to a small stream. Even before the bus had fully stopped I had spied our quarry sat quietly on a log over the stream: a gorgeous **Indigo-banded Kingfisher**. After feasting on this lovely fellow we then wandered the gardens, eventually picking up the key species Rob was keen for us to find here (pretty-much all “padders”): **Lowland White-eye**, **Red-keeled Flowerpecker**, **Purple-throated Sunbird** and **Striated Swallow**. We also noted **House Swift**, **Scaly-breasted Munia** and **Grey Wagtail**.

After 2 hours we boarded the minibus again and drove a short distance to the Animal Husbandry area of the campus to stake out a grassy track. Here we scored with our two target species, **Barred** and **Spotted Buttonquail**. While waiting for these Rob was kind enough to wander away from the main group with me to help locate a **Scale-feathered Malkoha**. It was great to claw this one back: Malkohas are big and gaudy and the endemic Scale-feathered is funkier looking than most. It was one that had jumped out of the field guide at me and I had been wrenched internally by being the only one to dip out the previous day.

Having scored with the buttonquails we then spent our “extra” time at some local rice fields, enjoying nice views of egrets (**Little** and **Intermediate** both common), various waders including **Little Ringed Plover** (10-20) and **Wood Spandpiper** (30+). A few **White-browed Crake** and a **Buff-banded Rail** put in appearances but the two bitterns, **Yellow** and **Cinnamon**, were the stars. Steve managed



some nice, close digi-scope pics of the latter. Both **Crested Myna** and **Black-headed Munia** were noted here and nowhere else – list padding at its finest.

After dinner we tried again for owls. I could see that Steve’s enthusiasm had gone completely as at one point I saw him lying on the pavement, eyes closed. I too struggled to keep the effort and excitement up and was relieved when at around 9pm we called it a night.

2nd Feb

We were in place on the trail pre-dawn hoping for the elusive *Zoothera* at 5.45. A Philippine Boobook called but with that particular owl in the bag we ignored it and concentrated on the track in front of us. Within a matter of minutes Mike announced in his Yorkshire drawl that he could see something moving on the track. We all peered with more intense gaze and sure enough, there was a thrush-shaped thing moving about on the right-hand edge of the track. This was it, but a ghostly silhouette was hardly a satisfactory view. Just then a couple of the locals appeared around the corner and it flushed into the forest. WTF were they doing out at this time? And how dare they walk miles down the mountain just for food and water before the heat of the day!? How inconsiderate. Did they not know we were just about to score one of the birds of the trip and they had shafted our chance? Sigh ☹.

We stayed put waiting for another several minutes hoping that no more locals would appear and that the thrush would resume feeding on the road. For once our prayers were answered and as it grew lighter, a chunky, cryptically marked

Ashy Ground-thrush bounded out into view and began pecking away at the road again. Slaty-grey above, with two prominent white wingbars that seemed to glow in the dark, its most distinctive feature was the dark vertical stripe through its eye (not unlike Southern Scrub-robin, but less subtle). We tried some video-scoping, often more successful in low light than photos, but also a fired off a few long exposure shots. Since the bird would stay very still then make short, sharp



movements, this had some hope of success: for one shot in particular, Steve was biting his nails as the shutter stayed open for a full 8 seconds. All the while we hoped the bird would stay stock still, and amazingly for this shot it did, yielding what at the time was one of the best images around.

We knew that most tour groups miss Ashy Ground-thrush (including the recent 2010 Birdquest trip) so this immediately elevated it into one of the birds of the trip. Events over the following years, when a very tame population has been located in suburban Manila at La Mesa Ecopark have meant that it is now a banker, there are outstanding images of the species from numerous SLR photographers who regularly go there (and even attract the birds with worms), and have disappointingly diminished the “value” of this bird on our list.

Later that morning we encountered Larry Wheatland and his girlfriend on the trail. Larry had been maintaining one of the longest and most-read threads on birdforum, blogging their exploits of travelling without planes – overland and by ship – from “Bristol to Kagu”, birding as much as possible along the way. He’d been in touch with Rob for some gen so it was not unexpected that we ran into him. While he and Rob chatted we picked up a few birds, including **Luzon Flameback** (the *haematribon* race of Greater), **Lemon-throated Leaf Warbler**, **Ashy Minivet** (which was new for the trip), more **Balicassiao** and a **Scale-feathered Malkoha**. Our first encounter with a **Sulphur-billed Nuthatch** since Kitanglad was a nice addition to the morning.

As Larry and his girlfriend headed up the hill (they would return the following day and score Ashy Ground-thrush as per our gen), we trundled back down to the hotel in our jeepney, transferred to the minibus and got on our way to the airport for our flight to Palawan.

Our arrival into Palawan seemed at first to be uneventful and we were going to go straight down to Garcelliano beach where we hoped the tide would be favourable for finding Chinese Egret. However as we boarded the bus Steve realised that he no longer had his precious Zeiss Dyalys with him – he’d left them on the plane. While we waited on the bus, Steve and Rob negotiated with the airline to go back on, where the plane had already been “cleaned” and loaded with passengers for the flight back to Manila. There was no sign of his bins back at “his” seat. A cleaner or maybe the new passenger had no doubt swiped them, probably not even realising their true value.

Fortunately Steve had brought Penny’s Leica 8x30s as a backup and so his viewing was largely uncompromised, but it left a sour taste in the mouth. I recall when he first got them, we were living Kingston Rd and I (not a birder then) was incredulous that one could spend £500 on a pair of binoculars. Apart from the inconvenience of having somehow to record the theft for insurance purposes, they clearly had much sentimental value for him, having been with him and providing the viewing pleasure for almost all of his great birds over the previous 20 years.

While Steve stayed to try to report the theft (as it turned out, unsuccessfully – he would have to try again at lunch-time the next day at the local police station) the rest of us drove the short distance to the beach. At the top of the track to the beach we spent some time with a gorgeous and confiding **Olive-backed Sunbird**. The local race in Palawan is particularly beautifully coloured with a rich flaming orange breast. Also by the minibus we noted a **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird**, much less skulking than its cousins in Mindanao.

By the time we’d grilled these, Steve had caught up and came with us down to through the mangroves to the beach where we set up scopes and scanned the mudflats. We noted various waders typical of the Asian (and Australian) coasts: **Pacific Golden Plover**, **Lesser** and **Greater Sand plover**, **Kentish Plover**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Grey-tailed Tattler**, **Ruddy Turnstone** and **Red-necked Stint**. But we were primarily here for one rare species. Amongst the dozens of **Little**, **Intermediate**,

and **Great Egrets** we picked out several pale phase **Pacific Reef Egrets**. Each of these was scrutinised carefully, and one bird looked to my eye good for **Chinese Egret**, classified as Vulnerable by Birdlife. We had been studying the identification features in the plane on the way over and Rob was happy with this one – bill shape, eye position and thigh length all factors in distinguishing from Reef Egret – though Steve (perhaps rightly being conservative for the life list) refused to tick it.

A **Common Kingfisher** and a **Stork-billed Kingfisher** (a huge and brilliant lifer adding to our impressive list of kingfishers for the trip) completed the list for this site, flying about in the mangroves and on the beach.

With the sun about to set it was time to head to our comfortable accommodation in Puerto Princesa for the night. We were in two minibuses (me and Steve in the second) and when the first one stopped there was much excitement: Mylene, the local guide who would be accompanying us together with Rob (but who sadly bore no resemblance to her IACGMOOH namesake), had seen a Spotted Wood Owl on an electricity pylon. Sadly, they stopped their bus much too close and the owl flushed into a nearby property. Rob played the call to try and tempt it to come back but it was having none of it. Our run of poor form with owls continued.

For once, after dinner we had no owling “assignment” so Steve and I took the opportunity to sample the local nightlife, finding an interesting bar about a km down the road for a few quiet beers to take Steve’s mind off the missing Dialyts, and enjoying some craic away from the group.



3rd Feb

First destination today – naturally well before dawn – was the Iwahig Penal Colony, around the bay from Puerto Princesa. This open prison sits at the foothills of the mountains that form the spine of the long thin, largely north-south island of Palawan. About 45ins after our dark departure in PP we were stopped at the gate and cleared to enter. As we drove in a few **Large-tailed Nightjars** flushed from the track ahead of us. We pulled up in the dark and followed Rob along the “Balsahan” jungle



trail. At 5.45 Rob played the call of **Palawan Frogmouth**, and for once our luck with the nightbirds was in – very soon we were enjoying cracking views of a small, slim, hairy-looking frogmouth.

As the light improved we began searching for some of the endemics. Rob was particularly keen to get us onto a **Melodius Babbler**, an elusive endemic for which the Balsahan trail is one of the more reliable sites. It did indeed possess a melodious song, but it was bloody difficult to get onto, hanging around in the dense vine tangles in bamboo thickets and scrub. When I finally did lock onto it, my view was brief and insufficient for any attempt at photography. Slightly shamefully my overwhelming feeling at getting onto it was phew, at least we can move on. My hazy memory of it was that it was fairly non-

descript, but in retrospect I now realise that it was in fact quite smart – not dissimilar to Rusty-crowned that we'd had in PICOP – and definitely a good one to get as it was eminently miss-able.

The next two key species came in such quick succession, with such similar names (though dissimilar appearance) that I mixed them up until consulting fieldguide and photos much later. First up was a **Palawan Flycatcher**, a characterful, gorgeous little *Ficedula* with an orange throat and breast, short orange tail and big brown eyes. As the group moved on, I stayed to get photos, and ended up with crap record shots of it, along with similarly shite pictures of **Palawan Blue Flycatcher**, a bigger *Cynornis* also with an orange throat but all deep blue above.

Abbott's Babbler, a rather plain but cute ant-bird-like babbler responded so well to playback that it came to within a metre of my foot, too close to focus with either bins or camera. Soon after a **Hooded Pitta** called and responded to our tape. I caught glimpses as it flew between perches trying to work out where the intruder was, but then it landed only a few metres away on an exposed perch in a way that was most un-pitta-like – at least, that's how it seemed from my limited pitta experience. I immediately went for the camera, imagining a cracking image of its chunky green body with azure wing flashes, topped by an all-black "hood". But through the viewfinder my experience was degraded and my shots all badly blurred and underexposed. As it flew I instantly regretted not enjoying it through bins instead, especially since I was probably the only one tooled up with a camera not to get a decent image. Though widespread in SE Asia, and not a difficult pitta, it was still one my prime targets and only my fourth of this desirable family.

The trail followed the path of a stream and we accrued a decent selection of birds, picking up **Palawan Tit** (a Palawan endemic, but not unlike the Elegant Tit that we'd seen in Kitanglad but with a solid black head) and **Palawan Crow**, **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha**, and **Bold-striped Tit-babbler**. At one point a **Striated Heron** flushed and at another on our way back a **Rufous-backed Kingfisher** sped past, the tiny jewel almost too fast for identification.

We also noted **Asian Drongo Cuckoo**, **Sunda (Ashy) Drongo**, **Black-chinned Fruit-dove**, **Green Imperial Pigeon**, **Lovely (Shelley's) Sunbird** and **Asian Fairy Bluebird**, but as we headed further along the trail we really only had one additional – but crucial – target in mind, Falcated Ground-babbler. One of the reports I'd read in detail in preparation for the trip was Paul Noakes's from 2009, in which he raved about their experience with FGB, one of their birds of the trip. It's skulking behaviour and ant-bird like appearance – much like the Streaked Ground-babbler from PICOP but with lovely chestnut neck – had elevated this to my top two or three targets for the Palawan leg. At what was presumably a previously known spot, Rob stopped and played the recording. We hushed and were excited to hear a response. Rob even saw movement, and our pulse rates increased a notch. We retreated to a bit of cover and lined up looking at the huge base of the largest tree around. Rob moved forward a little, using the trunk as cover to play the tape again, warning us to keep our eyes on the area behind the base, where it would come in low down or even on the ground to check out the sound. We'd spy it as it checked us out and then we'd punch the air in delight and congratulate each other. That was the plan at least. Rob played the recording again, 5 pairs of eyes strained to pick up anything on the dim forest floor, but no one saw anything and there was no further audible response.

We returned to the vehicle and began the drive back to PP for lunch. On our way in we'd driven past a series of rice paddies, worked by the inmates of the prison, but invisible to us in the pre-dawn

darkness. Now on our way out we drove slowly, stopping at a few places and noting a nice collection of waders and egrets: **Little Egret, Intermediate Egret, Cattle Egret, Wood Sandpiper 20+, Marsh Sandpiper 10+, Black-winged Stilt**. Star attraction here, especially for Steve who had dipped on a twitch for one of Britain's few records, was **Long-toed Stint**. We noted more than 10 of these lovely peeps.

After lunch back at our hotel in PP (and for Steve, a visit to the police station to try to get something formal about his bins for insurance purposes) we packed up and boarded the buses to drive across the island to the famous St Paul's National Park (now known as the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River N.P.) where we would spend the next two nights. The first part of the drive was pretty uneventful and we didn't do much birding, just enjoying the sights of brightly coloured jeepneys laden to the hilt carting backpackers, locals, dogs and even some livestock back to PP.

At the top of the pass we picked up a raptor and piled out. We'd had a pretty good look from within the car as it went low down almost directly over us, but by the time we were in a better viewing spot on the roadside it had slipped away. The chunky, broad-winged appearance and all pale unders had us scratching our heads for a while until we realised on consulting the field guide that this had to be a Rufous-bellied Eagle. The lack of rufous on the plumage had foxed us until we realised that juveniles are uniformly pale underneath, and it is the adults that have the rich rufous belly and underwing coverts.

On our descent to the village of Sabang we birded the roadsides. The top birds in the section were undoubtedly **Palawan Hornbill** and **Great Slaty Woodpecker**. Two groups of three of the former – medium-sized black hornbills with a white tail and large white casque atop white bill – were found and showed very well. A pair of big, impressive, grey Great Slaties landed on a dead tree and we



were able to observe them through scopes. Sadly, as if often the way, they flew just as we had digiscoping equipment set up. We also scored two other smaller woodpecker species: **Red-headed Flameback** (Greater, race *erythrocephalus*) and **Spot-throated Flameback** (Common, race *everetti*).

This whole section of the road, fringing the national park and good forest on our right, proved to be very enjoyable. As we progressed closer to Sabang we came across a large

Birdseekers group that was trying to get onto a Hooded Pitta that was calling from dense cover. We left them to it having enjoyed good views this morning, finding instead a variety of new species, including **Palawan Flowerpecker, Yellow-throated Leafbird, Black-headed Bulbul, Sulphur-bellied Bulbul** and **Dark-throated Oriole**. A striking male **Red Jungle-fowl** flew across the road behind our bus at one point, and both Steve and I were happy to count this wild looking bird bolting for the forest as a genuine tick.

On making it to Sabang we set ourselves up in the very comfortable Last Frontier Guesthouse (formerly Green Forest Guesthouse), where my individual cabin was adorned with a mural that included such goodies as Hooded Pitta and Philippine Falconet.

After dinner we headed out for owling. Our target tonight was Palawan Scops, a cute, dark scops professed by Rob to be among his favourites – he is, apparently, a sucker for deep brown eyes. Over the course of two hours or more we tried a few spots along the road near Lions Cave and along forest trails, coming up blank everywhere, though we did score another **Palawan Frogmouth**.

Nearly two weeks away from home of early rises and late night owl dips were taking their toll on my concentration, and my mind wandered to “other” things. On the roadside near the Lions Cave trail a bird responded to Rob’s tape, breaking the ennui, but it stayed hidden in deep cover. Though my instinct was to get as many torches on the area as possible (clearly the wrong tactic, but I was desperate), I followed the group protocol in waiting back while Rob became engaged in a personal – and ultimately losing – battle with the bird. Various shadows flittered above our heads, but were just bats, until at one point I saw a slightly larger, more bird-like direct flight overhead as a shape bombed from one side of the road to the other. When the Scops then started singing from there, it confirmed the shape as an UTV. Eventually we knocked it on the head and retreated to the Last Frontier. At least we could try again tomorrow night.

4th Feb

Up before dawn again, we had a new adventure planned this morning. Down at the boat harbour we boarded tri-marans in pairs and motored in near darkness around the bay, until, as dawn was breaking we cruised in to the beach at the Subterranean River Ranger Station. This was one of the most important trips of the whole tour, our visit to see Russell, the wild but habituated Palawan Peacock Pheasant.

After wading through the warm tropical water we dried our feet, donned our boots and made our way a short distance into the forest, where within minutes we had located the **Palawan Peacock Pheasant** that regularly wanders the clearing here. Though “easy”, this was by no means anti-



climactic, for there are few birds that can match the PPP for brilliant colouring. Sadly my 30D was not up to the task of taking photos without flash, and the effect of using the flash was to change its deep blue and purple iridescent plumage into an unrepresentative shade of green.

Walking the trails here we also picked up the difficult and normally skulking **Tabon Scrubfowl**, along with further views of **Ashy-**

headed babbler, and the Palawan endemic **White-vented Shama**.

From here we boarded the boats again and cruised over crystal clear waters to the next bay. On the beach here we picked up the large and impressive **Blue-naped Parrot** and Yellow-throated Leafbird before setting out on a steep uphill trail deep into the jungle. It was hot and sweaty work, and I was carrying both scope and hefty backpack with camera and other gear. Close to what ended up being the top of the trail Rob played the song of Falcated Ground-babbler but there was no response. A **Grey-cheeked Bulbul** and **Bold-striped Tit-babbler** were the only birds seen in this period.

Descending the other side Rob played the recording a few times until – oh joy – we heard the response of a FCB. The 8 of us (we'd been joined by a Japanese birder who was also searching for the elusive skulker) stationed in a tight cluster and looked into the jungle where Rob indicated he thought the bird would approach if it responded – but he warned that it would only come in closely once. We held our collective breath as he played the song again, and then we heard the response in the area predicted. But it was in deep cover, completely invisible. A second later it was coming from further away and we had missed our best chance. We persevered over what felt like an hour, though in reality was probably much less. It continued to respond to Rob's prompts, but now further away and always out of sight. Once or twice Rob waved his laser pointer somewhere, and I think that John may have had the briefest of glimpses. I saw nothing and grew more and more frustrated and despondent.

Eventually it went silent and trudged dejectedly along the trail, which apparently continued in the direction of Sabang. The heat was oppressive and the weight of my backpack and optics seemingly doubled by the dip. The narrow trail was overhung with spiderwebs and thorny vines that regularly snagged scope, clothes and even skin at times.

After what seemed forever, the trail finished its descent and joined another through mangroves, finally emerging onto a pristine white sandy beach. Even as the group was regathering after become somewhat staggered on the narrow windy trail, Rob was priming us to carry on to look for Malaysian Plovers. But I had had enough. Without giving a toss, and to the shock of everyone and undoubtedly to the embarrassment of Mylene, I simply stripped off and legged it into the stunning, clear, warm tropical water. Definitely a breach of BTA protocol but I was beyond caring and I was bugged if I was going to come to one of the most beautiful beaches I'd ever seen feeling hot, weary, sweaty and pissed off and *not* take advantage of the refreshing quality of the pristine turquoise water.



I emerged from the water a few minutes later realising I had not thought this through entirely. I made my way slightly sheepishly back to the group bollock-naked and without a towel to dry myself off. Rob was already striding off to look for more birds. I pulled on my trousers and shirt and caught up but the news was negative. We noted **Pacific Reef Egret** and **Stork-billed Kingfisher**, but no plovers.

After lunch back at the Last Frontier we were “permitted” a couple of hours respite from the main heat of the day and dozed in our rooms. By mid-afternoon it was cooler and we wandered off from

the guesthouse up into some agricultural land and sparse forest. In fact this was quite enjoyable after the events of the morning post-Peacock-Pheasant. Key target here was the Palawan endemic **Blue-headed Racquettail**. Rob played the call pretty regularly and eventually a couple swung by to check it out. I managed fabulous scope views of a male and female, the highlight of my afternoon. Other birds noted in a couple of hours **Philippine Cuckoo-dove**, **Emerald Dove**, **Dollarbird**, **Spot-throated (Common) Flameback**, **Fiery Minivet** (Palawan race of Small), **Olive-winged Bulbul**, and **Palawan Drongo**. Second place in bird-of-the-afternoon went to a **Blue-eared Kingfisher**, this lovely gem amazingly found by Rob resting deep in a bush.



Our usual post-dinner owling took us back to the Lions Cave where this time we walked the trail towards the cave entrance. Yet again though, two hours later we were fumbling our way in the darkness back to our beds empty-handed having heard, but not seen a Palawan Scops. I simply could not understand how the stories of point blank view and the amazing photos I had seen of this little belter had come about.

5th Feb

We were back on the Lions Cave trail before dawn for our last crack at the elusive Scops. An hour standing around, hearing a nearby Scops, hearing a distant Spotted Wood Owl and even hearing a Brown Hawk Owl, but seeing nothing. Given our previous form I was not surprised, but still gutted. I found myself wondering if they had been taped out by previous groups – this fate certainly befell the most accessible Mantanani Scops (which logistics had caused us to abandon).

As the group headed back up the trail towards the van, I lingered to have a slash and walked slowly back more than a hundred metres behind them. Suddenly I heard Steve hissing to me: “Ian, get here, quickly”. Shit! I quickened my pace, not knowing what was going on but needing to make sure I didn’t arrive in a commotion and flush whatever they’d found. Steve retreated from the group and grabbed me as I approached: “Red-bellied Pitta on the track!” he whispered urgently. I peered between the bodies and could see a shape on the track so moved as quickly but as silently and unobtrusively as I could then raised my bins: now by the side of the track and soon to disappear – but fortunately still around – was a scruffy looking juvenile **Red-bellied Pitta**. Ok, so it was a juv, and it was a common taxon, and it was a scruffily plumaged individual. But it was still a pitta and since any day you see a pitta can’t be completely bad, my spirits were raised somewhat, even if we had dipped on two of my three main targets for Palawan (FCB and the Scops, PPP being the other).

After breakfast we headed for the jungle trails we’d worked unsuccessfully yesterday. As we drove down to the beach through an open marshy field Steve and I noted (and stayed for quick digi-photos of) a **Yellow Bittern**. Ironically a plush new hotel complex now stands exactly on the site we saw the Bittern.

Sadly our only addition in 3 hours back on the narrow, humid, thorny trails was the endemic **Pygmy Flowerpecker**. A PPP – not Russell – was heard giving its distinctive call but of course was in deep cover and we stood no chance. Blue Paradise Flycatcher was also heard only. Back at yesterday’s

FBC site Rob played the call and amazingly, but floating towards us from the distance, was an answer. My pulse quickened. Rob played again, and the response appeared to approach. Steadily we seemed to be reeling it in over the course of several minutes. We stood stock still barely daring to breath, straining our optics in the direction of the sound, when from around the next corner on the trail emerged the Japanese dude from yesterday, iPod in hand. Oh Fuck! Rob was mortified and we resigned to another dip on a top target soon after.

As we walked back through the mangroves I tried to resurrect the day by finding a Ruddy Kingfisher but without any success. Back on the beach we paused again for photos. It was not just yesterday's ordeal that had made it seem so attractive. It really was one of the most stunning beaches I'd ever seen.



To return to the buses we had to negotiate the stream. I decided the athletic approach was best and leaped, gazelle like between the widely separated "stepping stones". Keith surveyed the situation and eventually followed suit, effective if less graceful. Now it was Mike's turn. He had watched the younger guns bound across and taken note of the route and technique required. He crouched, loading the springs of his fast-twitch muscles, steadied himself, then simply stepped off, planting his size 9s in the knee deep water and wading across. "Piece o' cake" he announced in his dry northern drawl as he reached the far bank.



Our transport back to PP was booked for mid-afternoon, and we spent the post-lunch hour or so surveying the productive little marsh below Last Frontier guest house: **Grey Heron, Little Egret, Javan or Chinese Pond Heron, Cattle Egret, Cinnamon** and **Yellow Bittern, White-breasted Waterhen, Brown Shrike**, and best of all **Greater Painted Snipe**.

Our drive back to PP there was enlivened by the combination of some more birding, as well as the company of the two lovely Philippina waitresses from Last Frontier with whom Steve and I nobly volunteered to share our transport. At the Buenavista lookout we targeted and found a beautiful **Copper-throated Sunbird**. Also here in a short but productive stop we noted **Pink-necked Green Pigeon, Spotted Dove, White-bellied Woodpecker, Fiery Minivet**, and **Little Spiderhunter**.

With a bit of time to kill before our flight to Manila we went back to Garcelliano beach, enjoying a selection of waders and especially the possibility of directly comparing **Lesser** and **Greater Sandplover**. Also noted: **Kentish Plover, Common Sandpiper, Red-necked Stint, Collared Kingfisher, Pied Fantail**, and a **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird**.

Soon afterwards, we headed the airport for an uneventful flight back to Manila and our final night at La Corona. While the others disappeared, perhaps sleeping off the effects of two weeks of early mornings, Steve, Rob and I decided to carry on burning the candle at both ends and celebrate the end of the tour in style at the one and only LA Café.

6th Feb

The final night of the tour morphed into morning and as beer followed beer, we surveyed the crowd with increasingly blurred gaze. Around 3am we were struck with the dangerous realisation that Steve needed to head to the airport *very* soon to be there in time for his early flight to the UK. Though less critical than potentially missing a flight, Rob and I would also have to be on our way very soon – unlike Steve, I was not heading home until the following day, instead heading off for a brief private post-tour extension.

When booking the tour and my flights I had arranged to allow one more day to take in an extra site and add a few extra birds. A “standard” tour takes about 3 weeks and covers a few key sites on Luzon, of which our two week custom tour visited only Mt Makiling. Subic Bay, a lowland forest site and former US military base, about 3 hours from Manila, was not on the itinerary, but doable as a day-trip. Steve was unable to join me (and not keen enough on any of the target birds there to risk

wrath of work and home by staying away another day), but Rob said he'd happily set me up with his driver who knew the sites.

Though Rob lived in Kuala Lumpur, he had another BTA Philippine tour starting in just a few days' time – this time the scheduled 3 week tour – so was staying on in Manila while he waited. Ever the manic birder he decided to join me in Subic. I was grateful as much for the company as for his expertise, though I realised once I got there, that without Rob's skill and knowledge it would have been a waste of a day.

Having bade a tearful farewell to Steve, Rob and I piled into the minibus with the sober Gaby at the wheel. Worryingly, rather than getting some sleep with the three of us were drinking, Gaby had simply sat around waiting in the hotel lobby. As we hit the road my eyes dropped and head rolled and I was out-cold. An hour and a half later, though, I woke and realised that Gaby was struggling to stave off the effects of having waited up for us; his head kept jerking back to upright and I kept myself awake to engage him, terrified that we would never make it to Subic, let alone back to Manila.

As we approached Subic, dawn was breaking and by the time we'd pulled up in the middle of the old American military base near Hill 394 at about 6.30, it was light. In a decidedly hungover, and probably still drunken haze I stared around this odd place, concrete bunkers sitting in a clearing in degraded but half-decent forest. Soon after a raptor speared overhead and bombed into a tree on the far side of the clearing. Grabbing the scope I trained it on a cracking **Luzon Hawk-eagle**.

I heard the rasping, almost parrot-like voices of a party of **Yellow-vented Bulbuls**. These were common enough over the previous couple of weeks that I now felt confident making the id without Rob's expert help, but it was gratifying to have my audio id confirmed when I landed my bins on them some time later. I also noted a single **Philippine Bulbul** on a dead tree, but no doubt there were many more present. A few **Philippine Green Pigeon** flew across the clearing at 7.30, with one finally landing and scoped in the trees opposite the bunker, and soon after a dozen or so fly-over **Green Imperial Pigeon**. A few **Grey-rumped Swiftlets** were bombing around in the sky also. However after an hour we had still not had any sign of the local specialties and a strong wind was picking up, making birding conditions less than ideal.

One of my main targets here was **Green Racquet-tail**. Having scored with the other three possibles from this family on the trip so far, I was keen to add this small, all-green, fast-flying parrot with funky tail-feathers. Subic Bay is one of the few remaining reliable sites. Rob played his recording at various intervals during the first couple of hours as we wandered around the bunker area up and down along the road. At around 7.45 finally a couple flew over giving flight-only but tickable views. A while later as we were about to wander along the Hill 394 trail we heard them again and saw them fly into nearby trees, but out of sight. We could not coax them into view with playback.

As the morning warmed up, the birding also picked up. I spent some time grilling and digi-scoping a **Coletto** at around 7.30, because this smart endemic Myna had been regularly overlooked for more exciting stuff at PICOP. But when a lovely pair of (northern) **Sooty Woodpeckers** flew in I switched the scope to them and managed some digi-scoped pics too. Now as I was enjoying these lovely endemic woodpeckers, a small black bird was observed to fly in and land in a tree near where we supposed the Racquet-tails to be. This was another of the Subic specialties, the all-black-with-a-

white-forehead, **White-fronted Tit**. Though it flitted about a bit, it then settled on top of a tree for prolonged scope views. A **Bar-bellied Cuckoo-shrike** was seen and heard in flight only, but we were now on a roll and quickly added **Ashy Minivet** and (lifer) **Blue-throated Bee-eater**, at least 3 of the latter and 20 or more of the former were feeding together near the bunkers.



We had done rather well in a short space of time, and feeling less hungover now that we had a swag-full of decent birds, we headed down the Hill 394 trail, picking up **Guaibero** and **Philippine Falconet** along the way (as well as **Red Junglefowl**, heard only). The piercing and squeaking, rather uncoucal-like sounds of a party of **Rufous Coucal** alerted us to another local specialty, and I had views of a few of these all-rufous birds with bulging yellow eyes as they shifted about in a dense stand of bamboo.

A few hundred metres down the trail, calls and various movement picked up in the trees suggested a feeding party. The first visible sign – as it often is – was a **Ballicassiao**, and Rob warned me to be on high alert, since there were a couple of other goodies that are often seen in such groups. First we were onto **Blackish Cuckoo-shrike**, with scoped views of the aptly named, rather dull-looking Cuckoo-shrike. Soon, however, Rob was pointing out a **White-lored Oriole** high in the canopy, one of the key Subic targets. Sadly its eponymous feature was not visible in the poor light, but we followed its progress and eventually I was able to get it in the scope for excellent unequivocal views of this local sub-species (split from Phil Oriole by many authorities).



Thus, after an unpromising start to the day, we had now secured most of the key local specialties that our groups usually allow two whole days to collect. As I reflected on this, Rob heard a **Philippine Tailorbird** calling and we pushed our way off the track into a sparse stand of bamboo to get a bit closer. It stopped calling. Rob tried his recording, but even as he did so he was telling me that based on typical behaviour it would be high up in the dense tangles and would probably not call again for 30 minutes or more.

No sooner had he stated this than to prove him wrong it started calling again. We proceeded deeper into the thicket, but then there was another lull. One more burst from the tape did the trick though and Rob pointed out the movement above us. I followed directly overhead, then lifted my bins:

pop, there it was in the open on a branch about 8m up. This family of small, often skulking insectivores are all fairly similar with green backs and long bills used for weaving their curious nests (hence their name, tailorbirds), with various combinations of rufous on tail and head distinguishing the various species and races. This particular species has slightly rufous tail, rufous head and a dark flecked chin, all features that showed uncharacteristically well for my final lifer of the trip.

After a virtual clean-up in a matter of a couple of hours, Rob commented that he wished it was always like this with tour parties at Subic. We began the walk back to the car with post-hangover munchies meaning that breakfast was firmly uppermost in our minds. We noted a few more **Rufous Coucal** and brief, barely identifiable views of a **Red-crested Malkoha**. Back in the clearing a **Philippine Serpent Eagle** cruised overhead and even put on some display flight, though it was slipping away by the time I had extricated my SLR from the car. A **Brahminy Kite** then sailed through followed by a final bonus: as I scanned the sky one last time I noticed a much bigger swift amongst the swiftlets: "Hey up, this looks interesting" I called as I locked bins onto it and noted the diagnostic white horseshoe of a **Purple Needletail**. Sadly it was gone too soon, and despite Rob's prediction that it would be back, it failed to show over the next 5-10 minutes.

Now we really did head for breakfast, a fabulous wind-down at the waterside café *Rafi's* where a slap up brekkie was washed down with a Green Mango smoothie (great hangover cure) before we started the trip back to Manila. Though we had the option of a side-trip to Candaba Marsh, I was conscious of the cost of Gaby's time and the fuel, and also the fact that I was running on about 2 hours' sleep. Much later, after two further trips to Manila over subsequent years and still no visit to Candaba I would regret this decision, but at the time all I could think of was the comfort of the bed back at the Corona for one last night in Manila.

