

My conference trip to Queenstown in New Zealand – about as far as it is possible to go from Oxford for a conference – provided a superb opportunity to indulge a spot of cheeky stopover birding in the Far East. Either end of my conference I'd spent a few days getting to grips with seabirds and endangered waders in NZ, finding Wrybill, Black Stilt and NZ Dotterel among a host of other goodies. What better way to round the trip off than to carry on with my endangered wader quest, spending some time in one of the richest areas for wintering waders in the world, the Gulf of Thailand. Prime target for me, as with almost all visiting birders, was Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

I first saw a pic of SBSP in my ancient Nat Geographic North American field guide. I bought this classic guide before I was a birder, in the days when I went around exotic places pointing a pair of inadequate compact Olympus porro-prisms at anything that moved, hoping that if I did manage an ID it would grip off SMR Young, even though I had no desire to enjoy the bird myself. Even back then my reaction to the plate was "what a funky looking bird", but I completely failed to realise that it was just a vagrant to North America (last seen in the 1970s) and rapidly approaching critically endangered status.

By the mid-late 2000s I had long since graduated from the juvenile pursuit of birding just to grip off Dr Young. I had been bitten by the bug myself and it was now primarily for me, with the occasional grip-off of Steve just a happy by-product. I was also of course also now much better informed about world birding, and I began to wonder whether a work trip to or via Hong Kong might yield a twitching opportunity for SBSP, but the work opportunities didn't arise and in any case I came to realise that Hong Kong was (increasingly so with the passage of time) very much an outside bet even at the optimal time of year. I was galvanised again by visiting Birdfair in August 2010 where a chat with James Eaton's father at the Oriental Bird Club stand made me realise Thailand in winter was my best bet. Thus, with a flight from Sydney to London stopping in Bangkok, I now had an ideal chance to see this near mythical creature, and one that had to be grasped with both hands before it became too late.

The flight from Auckland via Sydney was long and tiring and it was midnight by the time I arrived at my cheap but very upmarket hotel off the Sukhumvit Rd near downtown Bangkok. I grabbed as much sleep as I could, but at 4.30 my alarm woke me in time to be picked up by Peter Ericsson, whose guiding services I had engaged for 14<sup>th</sup>, with an option to extend to 15<sup>th</sup> depending on how things went.

## 14/11/10

At 5am Peter was waiting in the hotel foyer as arranged and soon after we were on our way through Bangkok to the expressway that would take us south west to Pak Thale. Around 6.30 we turned off the highway and began the journey along quiet, straight flat rural roads to the coast. The sun was just coming up when I scored my first lifers of an amazing day, Indian Roller, Blue-throated Bee-eater and Black-capped Kingfisher. Glossy Swiftlets and Barn Swallows zipped around the skies. We then drove past a sign that got my heart racing – "Pak Thale Shorebird Site" complete with a picture of the day's top target – and soon afterwards arrived at this large area of salt pans holding one of the richest assemblies of waders in the world.

Sadly, to my eye it was a bird free zone, at least in the immediate vicinity of the small parking spot to which we had pulled up. Scanning with bins we were able to pick up some

distant and diverse waders, including Rednecked Stint and Red-necked Phalarope, but it was clear the tide was not yet right for the birds to be closer to us and it would be an hour or so before conditions would be more favourable.

While we waited for the tide Peter suggested a trip to the nearby King's Project because the light would be good for photography there. This was an excellent diversion, and I surprised myself with how calm I felt in spite of our initial



"mini-dip". We drove along various bunds looking into mangroves, ponds, and rice fields and accumulated a very nice list and some decent photos in the clear, golden morning light. Waders were to the fore and included **Pin-tailed** and **Common Snipe** (Peter suggested distinguishing one from the other by the dark loral stripe – parallel in Pin-tailed, tapering to the eye in Common, but on reviewing lots of photos on the web, I can't see it myself),

Pacific Golden Plover, Wood and Marsh Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Little Ringed



Plover, Common Sandpiper, and Redwattled Lapwing. A huge monitor lizard sauntered across the track at one point. Many of the wooden posts in the water were occupied: Common Kingfisher, White-throated Kingfisher (a lifer if one counts the split of the Philippine race into a separate species), Black-crowned Night-Heron, Chinese and/or Javan Pond Heron (indistinguishable in winter plumage), White-breasted Waterhen, Brown-headed

Gull, Gull-billed Tern and Whiskered Tern all availed themselves of these convenient roosts. A Common Coucal lurked in a track-side tree, Asian-Pied and Black-collared

**Starlings** were noted along with **Zebra** and **Spotted Doves**, while a **Hoopoe** pottered about on the lawns near the entrance below a pair of **Red-collared Dove**.

After around an hour Peter suggested it was time to return to try our luck in the salt-pans again. Before heading straight back to Pak Thale, we paid a visit to the closer salt pans of Laem Pak Bia, as it turned out, a good and fortuitous decision.

We drove a track between pans and noted various species on the water or up on the banks, including Wood Sandpiper, Ruff, a lovely Long-toed Stint, Temminck's Stint, increasing numbers of Red-necked Stints, a Common Greenshank, Lesser Sand-plover, as well as a Paddyfield Pipit on the track. We came to a pan where there appeared to be a group of 20 or so Red-necked Stints, scuttling about, feeding like little clockwork toys. I scanned quickly through the group thinking I just needed to eliminate this bunch from our enquiries and move on. Suddenly one that had had its back to me turned, stood up and displayed a marvellous spatulate bill for me. Was it just mud stuck to the end? Nope, this was the real deal. I had found one! You bloody beauty, Spoon-billed Sandpiper!



Peter didn't even have his bins out at this stage. Thinking about this in retrospect, I now realise that he imagined the chances of finding one in this tiny flock pretty were unfeasibly small. With my unexpected announcement of success – that may just have had a few expletives thrown in – he immediately grabbed for his camera. For my part, I felt it was just out of sensible SLR range so snuck out of the car around to the boot to grab my scope. Now at up to 60x magnification I enjoyed fantastic views of this special bird, soaking in the experience and taking some video (<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV6uYPgvVm0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV6uYPgvVm0</a>)

along with numerous SLR pics. Though officially its feeding action – as befits the splayed bill – is side-to-side, like a Spoonbill, it is not the slow sweep of a Spoonbill. It is a much faster action, still dominated by the bobbing up and down like the stints – perhaps the difference between a straight and a zig-zag stitch on a sewing machine ③. Although its feeding pattern was thus more similar than I expected, and though it bore a strong resemblance to the Stints at first sight, as I watched I was able to pick out differences that by the end of the day had become "obvious", even when its most prominent feature – that amazing spoon bill – was submerged in the mud. It was slightly larger and dumpier than the stints, maybe slightly more oval body when viewed head on, while its face was whiter, more "open" looking from the white between the bill and forehead.

Twenty minutes later I had filled my boots with pics and video I decided we should drive on see what else we could find. Just a few hundred metres on, we parked and walked along one of the banks, finding a huge flock of mixed waders out on the pans. They were a bit distant but when a fisherman put up the flock I fired off numerous shots with the 30D, intent on capturing the spectacle of thousands of waders swooping and wheeling over the salt pans. A few Gull-billed Terns cruised around with the flock, and when it finally settled Peter and I set about working our way through it with scopes: scores if not hundreds each of Greater and Lesser Sand-plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Red and Great Knot; one or two Bar-tailed Godwit, Pacific Golden Plover and Marsh Sandpiper; best of all, Peter picked out a few distant, but tickable, Nordmann's Greenshank, another of the critically endangered waders that call the Gulf of Thailand home in the winter. They were too far for photography but later reference to photos of the flocks and I was able to pick out a few in flight.

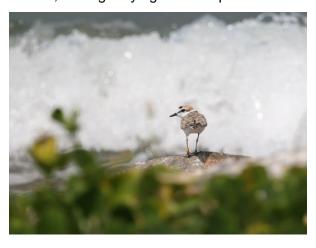


Making our way back to the car I paused for (poor) digi-scoped pictures **Painted Stork** (we also noted **Asian Openbill**) before we drove back to the road and the short distance to the famous Mr Deng's house for a boat trip out to the sand-spit.

This was one of those moments when as a birder you get to experience proper culture of a country in a way that the typical tourist rarely does. We strolled down the rickety wooden jetty from Mr Deng's living room / kitchen, jumped into his unstable craft. He then piloted us up a channel past brightly coloured fishing craft of various sizes, through the mangroves to a sand-spit, then back again, whereupon a home-cooked Thai meal of various spicy fish and vegetables was waiting, freshly prepared by Mr Deng's wife.



In between these touches of genuine rural Thailand, we had an excellent time out on the sand-spit. As we approached in the boat we picked out of the numerous *Charadrius* plovers one distinctive bird appeared that looked good for the undescribed so-called "White-faced" Plover. Peter bagged some distant record shots of this presumed juvenile (later confirmed by Dave Bakewell, the Asian expert on this "species") but it flushed as we disembarked, never to be re-found. Nevertheless I did get great views of my main target here, Malaysian Plover, most gratifying after a dip on Palawan earlier in the year. A few Sanderling and



Kentish Plover scuttled about on the shore and (grey phase) Reef Egret and Striated Heron were also noted, as well as Caspian Tern, Collared Kingfisher and Little Cormorant from the boat.

After lunch we paid a short visit back to the King's project where a short walk into the mangroves produced **Golden-bellied Gerygone**, then we drove back into Laem Pak Bia salt pans to try and relocate the Spoonie. Although it was now 2pm and the light unfavourable for photography, we soon

located a large flock of Red-necked Stints and without much trouble found two different Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Using the car as hide we were now able to get close enough for SLR photography – according to Peter, as close as he had managed in a long time, and for more than an hour we stayed with these special birds. I also managed some pics of lifer Broad-billed Sandpiper, and added Black-winged Stilt and Grey Plover to the day's epic list of waders. Other birds noted were Yellow Wagtail, Oriental Reed Warbler, Great Egret, Purple Heron, Grey Heron, and Black-crowned Night-heron. Raptors were not common during the day, but we did find Peregrine, Brahminy Kite and Osprey.



Finally at 3.30 we called time. Mindful of the cost of retaining a guide on my own, I had been in two minds about whether to go straight back to Bangkok. Peter for his part was prepared to be flexible. By the time we left Laem Pak Bia I had decided that – bugger the cost – my choice was drive back to Bangkok 3 hours in the motorway to where I had no hotel booked, or relax with a beer after a day in the field in some nice lodge, and bird the rainforest. It was no contest in the end.

We drove to Kaeng Krachan, Thailand's first and largest National Park, some 90 minutes inland. Birds of the journey were **Black Drongo**, **Brown Shrike**, **Ashy Woodswallow** and **Large-billed Crow**. We arrived late afternoon and Peter took me straight to Baan Son Nok where the owner has photography blinds set up by a small artificial waterhole. Thirty minutes before dark here produced a few lifers, the highlight of which was **Siberian Blue Robin**, though sadly not a splendid adult male. Also here was **Abbott's Babbler**, **White-rumped Shama**, **Puff-throated Babbler**, **Brown-cheeked Fulvetta** (7), **Oriental Magpie Robin**, **Streaked-eared Bulbul** and **Asian Brown Flycatcher**.

We arrived at Baan Maka, a comfortable lodge about as close as one can stay to the park (without camping), as it was getting dark and after showering I joined Peter for another lovely home-cooked Thai meal and several Sinha lagers. After dinner I wandered down to the entrance where – as predicted by Peter – a **Large-tailed Nightjar** was taking advantage of the streetlamp attracting moths and other flying insects.

## 15/11/10

With less than a full day available in the forest, Peter warned me I had to make a choice. We could either return to the blinds and hope for Kalij Pheasant which often comes (along with other birds) at dawn to feed; or we could go into Kaeng Krachan proper for dawn. Doing

both was not an option because at the blind we would be committed to staying still until well past dawn to avoid disturbance. This would mean missing the prime post-dawn hours at the top sites in the park, around and just beyond the first campsite.

I plumped for the blinds but in retrospect probably made the wrong call. For whatever reason, the Khalij Pheasant decided not to show. We were in place before it was light and on cue various stuff began to arrive to peck through the seed put out by the owner. I had great views of Greater- and Lesser-necklaced Laughing-thrush as well as Red Jungle-fowl, and Common Flameback, but no Pheasant. Other visitors included Taiga (Red-throated) Flycatcher and Hainan Blue Flycatcher

At 7.00 we cut our losses and made our way into the park. The drive in can apparently be quite birdy, but we did not dawdle as I was anxious to get to the prime sites before it got too late and hot. Asian Palm and Himalayan Swiftlets were noted on the way in, A Yellow-throated Marten enlivened the drive until we stopped at the Ban Krang campsite. By the western edge of the grass Peter played the call of Orange-bellied Trogon which he had

th no response he started to wander off. I enly, butterfly like, a bright shape swooped up

seen here recently. After a minute or two with no response he started to wander off. I lingered for a final few moments when suddenly, butterfly like, a bright shape swooped up from under a branch and there staring directly at me was a gorgeous male **Orange-bellied** 



**Trogon**, bird of the day from my first Thai rainforest birding. On the other side of the campsite a walk along a trail produced a cracking **Sultan's Tit** along with various bulbul species, **White-bellied Yuhina** and **Black-naped Oriole**.

We now carried on into the park, travelling as far as the third stream crossing. This part of the park is especially famous in birding circles because the stream crossings are well known as the sites of broadbills and pittas and pheasants and hornbills. Sadly today it was now quite hot and – wrong time, wrong season – the birding was rather slow. It was very frustrating to know that there were fantastic birds all around, but not active, not calling and not responsive to the tape. My frustration was not helped as at each stop Peter would recount the good birds he had had at each site.

Our time was enlivened by lots of Dusky Langurs (Leaf Monkeys) and thousands of butterflies that accumulated in dense packs to suck salt from the track. Though on a good day the rainforest is just about the richest birding of all, it can also be the dullest and most frustrating in the wrong conditions. Sadly today was one of those days. We did accumulate a few diverse species, a number of which were lifers, but none of the headline acts:

Coppersmith Barbet, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Greater Racquet-tailed Drongo, Bronzed Drongo, Black-winged Cuckoo Shrike, Scarlet Minivet, Black-naped Monarch, and an array of lifer bulbuls including Black-crested, Sooty-headed, Stripe-throated, Streakeared, Buff-vented and Ochraceuos Bulbuls – somehow not getting the juices flowing.



After lunch back at the campsite where there is a small café, we began to make our way back into more open country in the hope the birding would be easier and more rewarding, picking up a possible **Chinese Blue Flycatcher**, **White-rumped Shama** and **Green-billed Malkoha** on the drive out.

Just outside the park we stopped to photograph a small group of **Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters**, where we also noted **Ruby-cheeked Sunbird** (f) and we stopped briefly at another lodge (Peter was keen to check it out as a potential alternative to Baan Maka) where I noted **Indian Roller** (nice) and **Common Tailorbird**. We called in again to Baan Son Nok where Peter discussed the morning's dip with the owner.

The final birding of the afternoon came as we stopped in some agricultural land, with White-throated Kingfisher, Paddyfield Pipit, Plain-backed Sparrow, Baya Weaver, Scaly-breasted Munia the final birds of my brief layover. Although the second day had been a disappointment, the success of the previous day more than compensated and when Peter dropped me back at Suvarnabhumi Airport I could reflect on a highly successful long-range twitch for one of the world's rarest and most iconic species.

A few days after my return to Oxford I processed one of the better SBSP pics and sent it to SMR Young (who knew I was going to a conference in NZ, but not my stopover plan), with the tantalising subject "cheeky bonus bird" and advice to "Turn down the volume on the expletives before opening the attachment". His response: "----ing ----! My first words - spoken quietly in shock as well as on your advice. You ----ing ----! You've really done it now. Oh you absolute ----ing ----! ----!!". I could hear his voice as I read it and smiled: mission accomplished.

## Systematic list

Red Junglefowl	Gallus gallus		BSN
Painted Stork	Mycteria leucocephala	NT	LPB
Asian Openbill	Anastomus oscitans		LPB
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax		KP
Striated Heron	Butorides striata		LPB Sand-spit
Chinese Pond Heron	Ardeola bacchus		KP
Javan Pond Heron	Ardeola speciosa		KP
Eastern Cattle Egret	Bubulcus coromandus		
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea		
Eastern Great Egret	Ardea modesta		
Intermediate Egret	Egretta intermedia		
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta		
Pacific Reef Egret	Egretta sacra		LPB Sand-spit
Little Cormorant	Microcarbo niger		LPB Sand-spit
Brahminy Kite	Haliastur indus		
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus		
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		
White-breasted Waterhen	Amaurornis phoenicurus		KP
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus		LPB, KP
Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus		KP
Pacific Golden Plover	Pluvialis fulva		LPB
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola		LPB
Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius		LPB
Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus		LPB Sand-spit
Malaysian Plover	Charadrius peronii	NT	LPB Sand-spit
Lesser Sand Plover	Charadrius mongolus		LPB
Greater Sand Plover	Charadrius leschenaultii		LPB
Pintail Snipe	Gallinago stenura		KP
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago		KP
Eastern Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa melanuroides		LPB
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica		LPB
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus		KP
Marsh Sandpiper	Tringa stagnatilis		KP, LPB
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia		LPB
Nordmann's Greenshank	Tringa guttifer	EN	LPB
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola		KP
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos		KP
Great Knot	Calidris tenuirostris	VU	LPB
Red Knot	Calidris canutus		LPB
Sanderling	Calidris alba		LPB Sand-spit
Red-necked Stint	Calidris ruficollis		LPB
Temminck's Stint	Calidris temminckii		LPB
Long-toed Stint	Calidris subminuta		LPB
Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea		LPB
Spoon-billed Sandpiper	Eurynorhynchus pygmeus	CR	LPB
Broad-billed Sandpiper	Limicola falcinellus		LPB
Ruff	Philomachus pugnax		LPB
Red-necked Phalarope	Phalaropus lobatus		PT
Brown-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus		LPB

Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica		LPB
Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia		LPB
Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida		LPB
Rock Pigeon	Columba livia		
Oriental Turtle Dove	Streptopelia orientalis		KP
Red Collared Dove	Streptopelia tranquebarica		KP
Spotted Dove	Spilopelia chinensis		LPB
Zebra Dove	Geopelia striata		LPB
Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis		KP
Green-billed Malkoha	Phaenicophaeus tristis		KK
Large-tailed Nightjar	Caprimulgus macrurus		KK
Glossy Swiftlet	Collocalia esculenta		PT
Himalayan Swiftlet	Aerodramus brevirostris		KK
Asian Palm Swift	Cypsiurus balasiensis		KK
Orange-breasted Trogon	Harpactes oreskios		KK
Indian Roller	Coracias benghalensis		PT,KK
White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis		KP
Black-capped Kingfisher	Halcyon pileata		PT
Collared Kingfisher	Todiramphus chloris		PT
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		KP
Green Bee-eater	Merops orientalis		PT
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	Merops leschenaulti		KK
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops		KP
[Blue-eared Barbet]	Megalaima australis		KK
Coppersmith Barbet	Megalaima haemacephala		KK
Common Flameback	Dinopium javanense		BSN
Greater Flameback	Chrysocolaptes guttacristatus		KK
Golden-bellied Gerygone	Gerygone sulphurea		KP
Ashy Woodswallow	Artamus fuscus		KK
Black-winged Cuckooshrike	Coracina melaschistos		KK
Scarlet Minivet	Pericrocotus speciosus		KK
Brown Shrike	Lanius cristatus		
Black-naped Oriole	Oriolus chinensis		KK
Black Drongo	Dicrurus macrocercus		KK
Ashy Drongo	Dicrurus leucophaeus		KK
Bronzed Drongo	Dicrurus aeneus		KK
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	Dicrurus paradiseus		KK
Black-naped Monarch	Hypothymis azurea		KK
Large-billed Crow	Corvus macrorhynchos		
Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher	Culicicapa ceylonensis		KK
Sultan Tit	Melanochlora sultanea		KK
Streak-eared Bulbul	Pycnonotus blanfordi		KK
Black-crested Bulbul	Pycnonotus flaviventris		KK
Sooty-headed Bulbul	Pycnonotus aurigaster		KK
Stripe-throated Bulbul	Pycnonotus finlaysoni		KK
Ochraceous Bulbul	Alophoixus ochraceus		KK
Buff-vented Bulbul	lole olivacea	NT	KK
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	141	IXIX
Yellow-browed Leaf Warbler	Phylloscopus inornatus		KK
Eastern Crowned Leaf Warbler	Phylloscopus coronatus		KK
Oriental Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus orientalis		LPB
Common Tailorbird	Orthotomus sutorius		KK
Continuon railoibilu	Orthotomus sutomus		IVIV

Dark-necked Tailorbird	Orthotomus atrogularis	KK
[Large Scimitar Babbler]	Pomatorhinus hypoleucos	BSN
Puff-throated Babbler	Pellorneum ruficeps	BSN
Brown-cheeked Fulvetta	Alcippe poioicephala	BSN
Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush	Garrulax monileger	BSN
Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush	Garrulax pectoralis	BSN
Asian Fairy-bluebird	Irena puella	KK
Asian Glossy Starling	Aplonis panayensis	
White-vented Myna	Acridotheres grandis	KP
Black-collared Myna	Gracupica nigricollis	
Asian Pied Myna	Gracupica contra	
Oriental Magpie Robin	Copsychus saularis	BSN
White-rumped Shama	Copsychus malabaricus	KK
Asian Brown Flycatcher	Muscicapa dauurica	
Verditer Flycatcher	Eumyias thalassinus	
Hainan Blue Flycatcher	Cyornis hainanus	
Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	Cyornis tickelliae	
Chinese Blue Flycatcher	Cyornis glaucicomans	
Siberian Blue Robin	Larvivora cyane	BSN
Plain-backed Sparrow	Passer flaveolus	
Baya Weaver	Ploceus philippinus	
Scaly-breasted Munia	Lonchura punctulata	
Eastern Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla tschutschensis	KK
Paddyfield Pipit	Anthus rufulus	

BSN: Baan Son Nok KP: King's Project LPB: Laem Pak Bia PT: Pak Thale KK: Kaeng Krachan

127 sp. **46 lifers**