



NORTH THAILAND TOUR REPORT

17th Jan to 28th Jan 2014

TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

Either for rarity value, excellent views or simply a group favourite.

Rufous-throated Partridge
Hume's Pheasant
Baer's Pochard
Bay Woodpecker
Blossom-headed Parakeet
Cook's Swift
Black-tailed Crake
Pied Harrier
Burmese Shrike
Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush
Dark-sided Thrush
Black-breasted Thrush
Chestnut Thrush
White-gorgeted Flycatcher
Sapphire Flycatcher
Rufous-bellied Niltava
Siberian Rubythroat
Northern Red-flanked Bluetail
Himalayan Bluetail
Lesser Shortwing
White-browed Shortwing

Golden Bush-robin
White-bellied Redstart
Black-backed Forktail
Giant Nuthatch
Fire-capped Tit
White-headed Bulbul
Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler
Chestnut-headed Tesia
Chinese Leaf-warbler
Scarlet-faced Liocichla
Red-billed Scimitar-babbler
Pygmy Wren-babbler
Himalayan Cutia
Clicking Shrike-babbler
Spectacled Barwing
Spot-breasted Parrotbill
Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbill
Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker
Fire-tailed Sunbird
Black-headed Greenfinch
Spot-winged Grosbeak

SUMMARY:

The magnificent northern mountains of Thailand provide a total contrast to our other tours to this wonderful country. There is an amazing selection of rare, localised, and usually hard-to-find species on offer, in no small part due to the number of feeding stations now being set up by the local birdwatching community. We visited the three best mountains of Doi Lang, Doi Ang Khang and Doi Inthanon and were extremely successful in finding some of Asia's best birds and enjoying incredible close views of pretty much everything. Our visit this year coincided with an area of cold weather that had moved across from China and no doubt contributed to some of our sightings, such as Grey-winged Blackbird, Siberian Chiffchaff (2nd record for Thailand) and certainly the bizarre sighting of a pair of Long-tailed Ducks – another extremely rare record for Thailand! Northern Thailand continues to offer great food, good roads and some of the most exciting birding you will find anywhere in Asia.

Days 1 - 2 17th – 18th January

These were travelling days from the UK for some of the group, and upon arrival in Bangkok took a taxi to the Amari Don Muang Hotel to meet up with Nick Bray and the rest of the group, who had just finished the first Central Thailand tour of the year.

Day 3 Sunday 19th January

We took a 10.30am flight north to Chiang Mai, which meant we had a little later than usual start. But some of the group had a few commoner birds around the hotel and this did include a couple of **Java Sparrows** – a species that was also seen at the airport as well. The flight only took just over an hour and we were out of the airport with our luggage and in the minibus in double quick time, arriving at our first stake-out around 3.45pm. As I have always stated, this tour is about getting really nice views of birds, and with the relatively recent phenomenon of numerous feeding stations you get to see some stunningly rare and beautiful species quite easily. When you consider that you would not see most of the ‘staked-out’ birds usually, then this is a winning combination. However the first good bird was **White-headed Bulbul** in the gardens of the resort we were staying at tonight, and having seen the white-headed race of Black Bulbul on the drive up (which is also quite a scarce bird in Thailand) it made for a nice comparison. Also in the garden was a **Grey Wagtail**, **Grey Bushchat** and **Sooty-headed, Red-whiskered** and **Brown-breasted Bulbuls**.



White-headed Bulbul - Doi Ang Khang

Then we set in for a short wait and were rewarded with a male **White-tailed Robin**, stunning male **Black-breasted Thrush** and a female **Rufous-bellied Niltava** all putting on a fine show at a little feeding station in the garden. We followed this with some **White-headed Bulbuls** that came down to the ground beside a small stream and showed exceptionally well. Nearby we sat on the ground and waited patiently for all of 10 seconds before a male **Grey-winged Blackbird** came in to feed on mealworms, followed by a **White-capped Water-Redstart** and a pair of **Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrushes**.

Wow! The blackbird is incredibly scarce in Thailand, whilst the rock-thrushes are normally seen on a regular tour, but often distantly and in the scope – and not 10 yards away... So that was it for today and everyone was early to bed ready for an exciting day tomorrow – and to hide under their duvets as the temperature plummeted to just above freezing!

Day 4 Monday 20th January

After a bitterly cold night we had breakfast and then drove along the road through pine forest where we pulled the minibus onto the verge and sat and waited for a while. We were waiting for **Hume's Pheasant** which suddenly appeared after around 20 minutes and we saw two males feeding inside the forest not too far away from us. The views weren't good at all but shortly after another male and a female appeared on the grassy verge downhill from us and proceeded to feed right out in the open. They weren't that close but we enjoyed the opportunity to see them as our

hopes weren't that high to begin with. But unfortunately a car drove past us (driven by another bird guide!), flushing them and they failed to reappear after some more time staking out the area. So we hopped out of the minibus and had a look at a **Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher** and **Blyth's Shrike-babbler** that were calling from nearby. Further up the hill we birded on a sunlit piece of hillside and found quite a lot of activity with a few **Chestnut-vented Nuthatches**, **Japanese** and **Yellow-cheeked Tits**, **Grey-cheeked Fulvettas**, a pair of **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-babblers**, **Mrs Gould's Sunbird**, **Grey-backed Shrike**, and a fine **Golden-throated Barbet**.



Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush (male)

Leaving here we drove back to our lodge and enjoyed more views of the **Grey-winged Blackbird** and **Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrush** again, but this time in much better light than yesterday and a few **Olive-backed Pipits** were also present. We spent a while enjoying the other garden birds here, such as **White-headed** and **Brown-breasted Bulbuls**, **White-capped Water-redstart**, **Maroon Oriole**, **Common Rosefinch** and others. A short drive took us to another stake-out where we saw several more **White-tailed Robins** and **Black-breasted Thrushes**, plus this time a stunning male **Rufous-bellied Niltava**. However, new for us was a male **Hill Blue Flycatcher** and a juvenile

Siberian Blue Robin all feeding some 20 feet away – the latter is a species always much appreciated by European birders. Meanwhile, in the surrounding trees there was **Blue-winged Minla** and **Yellow-bellied Warbler** present as well to keep us entertained.

After lunch we drove up to the border post which overlooks Myanmar and found a pair of **Daurian Redstarts** and a female **Slaty-backed Flycatcher** but not a lot else, so we set off down into the lowlands and headed to Thatorn ricefields. It was unusually cool here and there was a lot of bird activity and as soon as we arrived an immature **Pied Harrier** flew by and landed not too far away. A good start! However, I think the male **Siberian Rubythroat** that sat out in the open for ages along a drainage channel takes some beating though. We also had a **Green Sandpiper**, **Long-tailed Shrike**, **Black-collared Starling**, several **Dusky Warblers** and **Chestnut-tailed Starling**. Keeping our run of good luck going Nick Upton found us Thailand's 2nd ever **Siberian Chiffchaff** as well!



Siberian Rubythroat (male)

Day 5 Tuesday 21st January

Doi Lang provides an experience like no other, due to the many feeding stations set out by the local Thai birding community. So you get opportunities to see a number of very scarce, rare and skulking species that are almost impossible to see any other way over here – and it is a real privilege. So here I thought it would be good to set out exactly what we saw at each stake-out. It is about an hours drive to the top ridge where this veritable goldmine of feeding stations is located and here is the summary of what the ZOOTHERA group witnessed at each one. Please bear in mind nothing is guaranteed and you need a little patience but.....

Sites 1 and 2 are very close together and birds move between them:

2 **White-tailed Robins** - females
4 **White-browed Laughingthrush**
2 **Hill Prinias**
Slaty-backed Flycatcher - female
White-bellied Redstart - female
Siberian Rubythroat - female
1 **Spot-breasted Parrotbill**
2 **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-babblers**
Slaty-blue Flycatcher – female/immature male

Site 3:

Rufous-bellied Niltava - female

Site 4:

2 **White-gorgeted Flycatchers**
2 **Himalayan Bluetails** - females
Siberian Rubythroat - juvenile
3 **Silver-eared Laughingthrushes**
2 **Large Niltavas**



Spot-breasted Parrotbill



White-gorgeted Flycatcher

As well as these stake-outs, which are surrounded by mature forest, there was a flock moving around here with **Chestnut-crowned Warbler**, lots of **Pallas's Warblers**, and both **Golden** and **Rufous-fronted Babblers**. Also, **Spot-breasted Parrotbill** was also seen several more times this morning as well and seemed to be much easier to locate than in previous years. A short walk along the road in lovely warm sunshine turned up an immature **Sapphire Flycatcher**, as well as a pair of awesome **Blue-bearded Bee-eaters**.

Leaving here we drove along the road quite some distance, and had a quick look around the army check-point where lots of **Crested Finchbills** and **Spectacled Barwings** were feeding in a flowering tree. There was also a male **White-bellied Redstart** skulking at the side of the road, a cracking male **Rufous-bellied Niltava**, and as we drove away a pair of **Yellow-throated Martens** ran across the road in front of us.

Stopping at an open grassy area for our picnic lunch turned out to be an inspirational decision as amazingly a flock of 20+ **Black-headed Greenfinches** flew around and landed below us. This is a bird I have wanted to see for such a long time and to finally get great views through the scope as they fed on seed heads was amazing. A **Buff-throated Warbler** was also called in here, a flock of **Cook's** and **Fork-tailed Swifts** flew over, and all these good birds, plus breath-taking views down into Myanmar made this a very memorable lunch stop. So leaving here we continued driving and found a **Collared Owlet**, a flock of **Whiskered Yuhinas**, and our first **Rufous-backed Sibia**. A short while later we came upon a few cars parked along the road with several Thai photographers looking excited about something – and that something turned out to be a female **Blue-fronted Redstart**, yet another rare bird here.

Upon reaching the viewpoint where there are a few more feeding stations we had cripplingly close views of a **Golden Bush Robin** – approx. 5th for Thailand, and yet another **Himalayan Bluetail**. Just 30 metres away was another stake-out where we saw Thailand's 3rd or 4th ever **Northern Red-flanked Bluetail**. Wow! The surrounding bushes were flowering and an incredible number of **Mrs Gould's Sunbirds** were feeding on them. Normally very shy, they don't usually allow a close approach but I think due to the very cold weather they were too intent on feeding than worrying about us. We also managed to pick out a few **Fire-tailed Sunbirds**, and this is the only place to see the species in Thailand. We also found our first **Chinese Leaf-warbler** and **Orange-bellied Leafbirds** here as well. What a day!



Northern Red-flanked Bluetail



Golden Bush-Robin

The last stake-out of the day was just a 10 minute drive away and we saw:

Chestnut-headed Tesia,
2 Scarlet-faced Liocichla
Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher
White-gorgeted Flycatcher
Himalayan Bluetail - male
2 Blue Whistling-thrushes
4 Silver-eared Laughingthrushes
2 Spectacled Barwings

What a collection of birds and once again all at incredibly close range and we were particularly pleased with the tesia as, until now, it's almost unheard of to see one of these little sprites at a feeding station.



Chestnut-headed Tesia



Scarlet-faced Liocichla

Following this, we birded from the road and came across a flock of **Chestnut-flanked White-eyes**, a superb **Black-eared Shrike-babbler**, a skulking **Pygmy Wren-babbler**, and our first **Bianchi's Warbler**.

Driving down the mountain we had an **Eye-browed Thrush** feeding in the leaf litter beside the road, plus **Puff-throated Babbler**, **White-rumped Shama**, several more bluetails (making a grand total of 15 seen today) and another **Large Niltava**. This was certainly a day none of us will ever forget and I'm certain a very unique experience to see so many rare, scarce and localised species so well.

Day 6 Wednesday 22nd January

Another day in the wonderful mountain forests of Doi Lang began in freezing conditions as the freaky weather continues – and I must make it clear that the current weather conditions spread over most of Thailand are extremely unusual. But driving up we had a couple of **Mountain Bamboo-partridges** cross the road in front of us, 3 more **Grey-winged Blackbirds** and several other commoner species on the road as well. We had been doing very well so far but even I didn't expect to find a flock containing **Collared Babbler**, **Red-billed Scimitar-babbler** and **Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbill** moving across the hillside

below us. At a bridge overlooking the forest we found a sleeping **Slow Loris** which was something of a surprise, along with **Little Pied Flycatcher**, a flock of **Long-tailed Broadbills**, **Golden-throated Barbet**, **Blue-winged Leafbird** and **Grey Treepie**. A little further on we also saw an **Eastern Buzzard** and an **Oriental Turtle Dove**.

At the checkpoint a fine **Chestnut Thrush** was feeding on some fruit put out for it, along with a dozen **Dark-backed Sibias**, whilst **Striated Bulbul**, **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher**, **Davison's Leaf-warbler** and several **Himalayan Bluetails** were in the area as well. We walked down to the tesia stake-out but it failed to appear, although many of the same birds were present as yesterday, including a superb male **Himalayan Bluetail** and **Scarlet-faced Liocichla**. A



Chestnut Thrush

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker was found nearby before we returned to the minibus for our picnic lunch, during which we once again had a good comparison when a flock of **Cook's** and **Fork-tailed Swifts** flew over. In the afternoon things were much slower but were enlivened by a displaying **Mountain Hawk-eagle**, and we even had a flyby from the usually secretive **Bay Woodpecker**.

We ended the day with nice views of a **Slaty-backed Forktail** along the river, on the way back to the hotel.

Day 7 Thursday 23rd January

A very early departure saw us arrive on the banks of the Mekong River at around 7am and with the mist rising we stared in horror at the devastation that has been done, with a massive construction effort aimed at concreting the banks and removal of those pesky sandbars and islands so loved by birds! We did see **Grey-throated Martin**, a flock of **Small Pratincoles** flying over and a **Peregrine**. The fields had a flock of **Scaly-breasted Munias**, with a fine male **Red Avadavat** and a **Racket-tailed Treepie** as well. So we left here pronto and drove the short distance to Chiang Sain lake where we drove around the edge and found the long-staying pair of **Long-tailed Ducks** (what?!), a 2nd record for Thailand. There was also **White-browed Crake**, a flock of **Lesser Whistling-ducks**, our first **Burmese Shrikes**, and some others before returning to the HQ. As luck would have it a flock of **Ferruginous Ducks** flew in opposite us and unbelievably the drake **Baer's Pochard** that had been reported a few days ago suddenly appeared amongst them. Wow! This is one of the rarest ducks in the world and is one of the rare occasions on my Thailand tours that the spoonie isn't the rarest bird! Wow again!

Following lunch back up near the Golden Triangle we returned to the lake for a short boat ride, during which we had closer views of the **Long-tailed Ducks**, along with a bunch of

commoner wildfowl including **Pintail**, **Eurasian Wigeon**, more **Ferruginous Ducks**, **Garganey**, **Indian Spot-billed Ducks**, and some **Ruddy Shelducks**. Leaving here we had a couple of **Mallards**, much to Mike's delight, before heading to some marshes. The habitat here has been altered too but it still seemed ok and lots of **Eastern Yellow Wagtails**, a few **Citrine Wagtails**, **Paddyfield Pipit**, and an **Eurasian Wryneck** found it to their liking. We then spent the remainder of the late afternoon watching for a male **Pied Harrier**. Rather frustratingly we only found females and immatures to begin with but at 5.45pm the first of four males flew to an area that they roost in and we had very good views. What a stunning bird. Also here was a **Striated Grassbird** singing from the top of a bush out in the marsh, and we had several brief views of at least 5 **Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers**.

Day 8 Friday 24th January

Our final morning on Doi Lang saw us watching a flock of over 30 **Spot-winged Grosbeaks** sunning themselves on the top of some tall trees at a lowland forest. They certainly are great birds and really rather scarce in Thailand. Whilst here we also had a group of **Fire-capped Tits** perched in a leafless tree, and they must have been forced down to this low level by the very cold conditions. There was also a **Grey-faced Buzzard** perched in the sunshine and a **Plumbeous Water-redstart** nearby as well. So leaving here we drove higher in search of **Giant Nuthatch** and spent the next couple of hours walking along the road and at one point as we were watching some fine **Rufous-backed Sibias** feeding in a moss-covered tree, a pair of **Himalayan Cutia** appeared next to them. That really brought an adrenalin rush to proceedings and after a frantic few minutes everyone got on them and we could celebrate!

Well that is definitely a scarce bird in Thailand and a great substitute for the nuthatch – or so we thought. But within a few minutes and a short walk later we had found a superb **Giant Nuthatch** calling from the top of a large, dead tree. Wow! So with three great birds in the bag we drove up to the stake-outs and enjoyed one last view of species such as **Himalayan Bluetail**, **Large Niltava**, **Slaty-blue Flycatcher**, **Siberian Rubythroat**, and other previously seen species. A flock also passed by with **Chestnut-crowned Warbler**, **Golden**



Slaty-blue Flycatcher

Babbler and **Yellow-bellied Fantail** as well. So by now it was time to leave and we set out on the long drive back to Chiang Mai where we spent the night.

Day 9 Saturday 25th January

It took about an hour to reach the entrance gate to Doi Inthanon National Park and we headed straight to one of our favourite trails high up the mountain. As the sun began to peak over the surrounding forested ridges there were many birds singing and we quickly picked up **Grey-chinned** and **Short-billed Minivets**, **Black-winged Cuckooshrike**, **Bronzed Drongo**, and a couple of superb **Silver-eared Mesias**. Walking along the trail our first stab at **Slaty-**

bellied Tesia only resulted in a bird calling back at us from down the slope, but we made do with prolonged views of a **Hume's Treecreeper** instead. Nearby a very obliging **Pygmy Wren-babbler** (I do hate the new name of Pygmy Cupwing) was watched for around five minutes as it sang and called from some favourite perches right next to the path. Moving on, there was a much more co-operative pair of tesias, lots of **Olive-backed Pipits**, and out in an open area a **Plain Flowerpecker** flew in to check out the owl call from my ipod, along with several **Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers**.

We had lunch at Mr Daeng's restaurant where you can eat some delicious food overlooking a little feeding station where there was a female **Rufous-bellied Niltava**, male **Hill Blue Flycatcher**, brief **Dark-sided Thrush**, **Blue Whistling-thrush** and a tiny **Lesser Shortwing**. Out in the gardens we called in a **Banded Bay Cuckoo** that flew around us before landing in various trees around the car park. Whilst watching this, a **Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker** was spotted feeding in some mistletoe right over our heads, a flock of **Common Rosefinches** feeding in a flowering tree were joined by some **Oriental White-eyes**, and a **Grey-breasted Prinia** showed well. Not a bad lot considering the soaring temperatures at this time of day – but it is good to see the cold snap may be ending....?



Lesser Shortwing

We spent the afternoon at the top of the mountain enjoying nice views of **Bar-throated Minlas**, **Green-tailed Sunbird** (here of the endemic blue-tailed race only found on this mountain), **Rufous-winged Fulvettas**, **Dark-backed Sibias**, and both **Ashy-throated** and **Blyth's Leaf-warblers**. A walk around the boardwalk was also productive as we nailed a couple of **Dark-sided Thrushes** skulking in a damp area and it is always a good feeling to see a *Zoothera* thrush on a *Zoothera* tour right..?! An **Eurasian Woodcock** was also a nice sighting here as well but apart from that there wasn't much else doing, so we went back up to the restaurant area. A fine **Golden-**

throated Barbet gave point-blank views, but a nervous **Rufous-throated Partridge** was only seen by a few of the group. Still we finished with better views of **Ashy-throated Leaf-warbler**, extremely close minlas and our first **Yellow-browed Tit**.

So we drove back down the mountain and stopped to check out a feeding station beside the main road, where a male **Large Niltava** was stood sentinel. As we approached it disappeared but was replaced by another female **Rufous-bellied Niltava** and an extraordinarily bold **Lesser Shortwing** that came out to feed on our mealworms repeatedly.

Day 10 Sunday 26th January

After a full English breakfast we headed back to the summit of Doi Inthanon, making a stop on the way to successfully locate a pair of **Speckled Woodpigeons**. There were crowds of people here this morning to see the sunrise and photograph themselves next to patches of

frost, and that is something of a major rarity here! Despite all of these people we found a group of 4 **Rufous-throated Partridges** feeding in the leaf litter – and they were absolutely unconcerned by our presence. Buoyed by our success and the warmth of the sun we walked down to the boardwalk and kept our run of good fortune going as we found a **Dark-sided Thrush** feeding in a relatively open area below us, a very close male **White-browed Shortwing** and a male **Snowy-browed Flycatcher**.



Rufous-throated Hill-Partridge

So we left here and went down to the checkpoint where yesterday's stake-out had swapped a **Lesser Shortwing** for a **Pygmy Wren-babbler** that appeared from underneath a car parked right next to the feeding station and quickly grabbed a mealworm before disappearing. A **Pygmy Wren-babbler** hopping along the tarmac – truly surreal and bizarre! A bunch of **Grey-cheeked Fulvettas** were also out in the open right in front of us and were joined by a single **Grey-**

throated Babbler giving excellent views. This is another skulker that you can sometimes struggle to see. A short walk along the trail failed to produce anything new so we went down to Mr Daeng's for lunch and was very pleased to see another **Dark-sided Thrush** feeding right out in the open below us.

Following another tasty gastronomic delight we returned to the same trail and finally found a singing **Small Niltava** before returning to the minibus and dropping down to the base of the mountain. A short stop and some **Chestnut-tailed Starlings** and **Little Green Bee-eaters** later, and we were scoping several parties of **Blossom-headed Parakeets** perching in the treetops to round off another successful day.

Day 11 Monday 27th January

Our final day at Doi Inthanon started along a fast-flowing river where a pair of **Black-backed Forktails** showed repeatedly, despite being rather shy. We then spent the next few hours birding our favourite trail in the hopes of finding a big flock, which never really materialised so had to content ourselves with a few smaller flocks. The best new bird along here was a **Clicking Shrike-babbler** calling from right over our heads, and we also saw **White-throated Fantail**, **Spectacled Barwing**, **Black-winged Cuckoo-shrike**, brief **Martens's Warbler**, **Grey-throated Babbler** and plenty more species we'd already seen. A **Bay Woodpecker** was calling but remained unseen as well. So by now it was 11am and we decided to check out the feeding station by the checkpoint and it was really nice to get lengthy views of **Pygmy Wren-babbler** again. This time there was also a male **Small Niltava** putting on a show, whilst a male **Large Niltava** was present constantly here as well.

After lunch we didn't have much time before we had to leave for the airport so made a last-minute decision to check out the **Black-tailed Crane** spot just down the road. With no sightings for several months it was really a time-filling exercise but when we arrived a bird responded to my ipod and after repositioning ourselves a pair appeared in a small pool and everyone had a decent view. A great result and high five's all round before we had to hotfoot it to Chiang Mai and our evening flight back to Bangkok after a very successful northern Thailand tour, where we had seen 277 species.

Nick Bray.



Pygmy Wren-Babbler – Doi Inthanon



Dark-sided Thrush – Doi Inthanon



Mrs Gould's Sunbird – Doi Lang



White-bellied Redstart – Doi Lang

All photos in this report © Nick Bray



Grey-winged Blackbird – Doi Ang Khang



Hill Blue Flycatcher (male) – Doi Ang Khang



Himalayan Bluetail – Doi Lang



Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher – Doi Lang



Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-babbler – Doi Lang



Silver-eared Laughingthrush – Doi Lang



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