

BIRDWATCHING IN THE PHILIPPINES

by Graham Thurlow

In April 2008 I joined a group of five fellow enthusiasts on a three week birdwatching trip to the Philippines. Although a holiday, I suspect that many would not have classed it as such, as it involved a great deal of hard walking and much of our accommodation was very basic - at one camp there were no facilities whatsoever. As one of the group observed, the trip overall was a good example of 'extreme birding'!

We made our way to Manila (some having stopped in Singapore for a few hours birding en route), where we assembled before leaving for Mount Makiling, an inactive volcano situated a few hours drive to the south-east of Manila.

We stayed overnight at Trees Lodge, where we had a few hours sleep and then got up before dawn to walk along a nearby track in the surrounding forest and were rewarded with sightings of a Philippine Hawk-Owl *Ninox philippensis* and, following daybreak, views of Black-chinned Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus leclancheri*, White-browed Shama *Copsychus luzoniensis*, Philippine Trogon *Harpactes ardens*, Philippine Hanging Parrot (Colasisi) *Loriculus philippensis*, two species of malkohas *Phaenicophaeus* spp, as well as flowerpeckers and sunbirds.

The climate was hot and humid, but the sights and sounds of the forest distracted us from any discomfort. The large forest butterflies were particularly noticeable and there was the constant "churring" of cicadas which, from time to time ceased, only to return in a sound version of the Mexican wave. The "buzzing" would be heard from far off and would gradually come closer and would become louder before dying away again - it was quite an assault on the senses!

From there we drove to nearby Los Banos and visited the botanical gardens, where we had good views of Indigo-banded Kingfisher *Alcedo cyanopectus* and, along a track bordered on each side by fields, saw Spotted and also Barred Buttonquail *Turnix ocellatus* and *T. suscitator* respectively. The highlight for me, however, was a Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida* watching us from a lower branch of a bush in nearby woodland.

Another start at an ungodly hour the next morning resulted in sightings of Tairctic Hornbill *Penelopides panini* and Philippine Serpent Eagle *Spilornis holospilus*. We then returned to Manila for a flight to Tuguegarao in the north-east of the island, where we were met by our guide for the next few days. He was driving a *jeepney*, a vehicle which passes for a bus in the Philippines. Open at the back and sides and with a canvas roof and wooden

benches running the length of the vehicle, it offers a natural form of air conditioning (albeit warm air) and a rather uncomfortable ride, exacerbated by the many unmade roads and tracks we encountered. Our guide took us to his home where we were met by a group of men who were to be our porters for the next leg of the journey. En route we passed fields in which maize was being harvested and laid out in the middle of the road on sheets to dry, regardless of any cars, lorries or *jeepneys* that might drive over it.

Our destination was a camp at Hamut, a remote birding site high in the Sierra Madre mountains of northern Luzon. We set off on foot for the foothills and our first camp in the late afternoon, taking three hours of very hard going to reach it, and arrived to find that the porters had already erected our tents. They were in the process of preparing our meal of rice and tinned tuna which, together with rice and omelettes, was to be our main diet for the next four days. How the porters managed to carry the loads, which they organised between themselves, I shall never know; it was desperately hot and the going was quite steep.

During the hike, as dusk approached, we had excellent views of Savanna Nightjars *Caprimulgus affinis* displaying and, at camp, fireflies glowing from a nearby tree gave it the look of a Christmas tree covered with fairy lights. The following morning we saw Rufous Coucal *Centropus unirufus* and both Luzon Striped and Golden-crowned Babblers *Stachyris striata* and *S. dennistouni* respectively in the vicinity of camp before setting off for Hamut. As we climbed higher we had good views of the surrounding countryside and saw the extent to which the lower elevations of this mountainous area had been cleared of trees to make way for agriculture.

It took us most of the day to reach the camp at Hamut and as the day wore on I began to wonder whether I would survive to see it. It was desperately hot, although the shade of the forest that we travelled through did give some slight relief, and birding became of secondary importance to the speed of my heartbeat and my aching legs. Pauses to catch breath did, however, provide an opportunity to observe and appreciate the countryside that we were travelling through, with huge trees covered in epiphytes and tree ferns and with a dense understory. It was the dense understory that made birding difficult - the birds could be heard but not seen - at least not by me. Those I did see included Yellow-breasted Fruit Dove *P. occipitalis*, Blue-throated Bee-eater *Merops viridis*, Rufous Hornbill *Buceros hydrocorax*, Tarictic Hornbill, Philippine Fairy Bluebird *Irena cyanogaster*, Blue-headed Fantail *Rhipidura cyaniceps* and Yellowish White-eye *Zosterops nigrorum*.

The camp proved to be very basic and entirely lacking in facilities. We slept in tents under a large canvas awning while the porters slept on poles lashed together and covered only by a blanket. Food was cooked on a camp

fire and anyone who wanted to wash had to resort to a nearby stream for a dip. I suspect we probably made quite an aromatic group by the end of our stay.

On the two mornings we were at Hamut a group of Rufous Hornbills flew into the tall trees surrounding the camp and made a welcome distraction from our regular breakfast of porridge. After breakfast we would set off into the surrounding forest or walk along the nearby mountain ridge looking for birds. Again, the dense vegetation made observing birds difficult - they certainly knew how to make the best use of the available cover - and I found it more productive to sit and wait in a particular spot, rather than being constantly on the move. On one such occasion, at a point on the ridge looking down onto the forested mountain slopes, a group of five Rufous Hornbills flew across the valley below me, their wings making a very audible "whoosh" as they flew. It was a truly memorable sight.

One bird that everyone wanted to see was the Whiskered Pitta *P. kochi* that inhabits the area and, although two members of the group did get a fleeting glimpse, it remained elusive. A popular method of enticing birds into view was to use a taped call of the bird in question - and we used this method for the pitta. It did respond and came quite close but remained annoying out of sight.

Our return to the lower camp was, from my viewpoint, welcome as the vegetation was less dense and the birds were easier to see. The journey down was almost as difficult as our ascent as the ground was quite slippery. Few birds were observed as we descended, although we did see a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* and a number of hanging parrots.

The following day was perhaps the hardest I have ever endured. On setting off from camp we took a detour from our set route to look for Green-faced Parrot Finches *Erythrura viridifacies* but unfortunately the bamboo was not at the correct stage of growth to attract them, therefore, we drew a blank. We then had a three hour walk back through the foothills to our guide's home and, as the morning wore on, it became increasingly warm until we were walking in a temperature of 39°C (102.2°F), with virtually no shade. I came as close to heat exhaustion as I ever want to. There were, however, highlights even at this temperature, with good views of Pied Harrier *Circus melanoleucos* and I was delighted to see Scaly-breasted Munia or Spice Bird *Lonchura punctulata* and Blue-breasted or Chinese Painted Quail *Coturnix chinensis*. Seeing these well-known cage birds in such an environment really did make one reflect on how these birds manage to cope with our British climate.

Our next destination was Mount Polis in north-central Luzon. As we walked towards the birding area we passed some houses with half a dozen

cockerels tethered outside, presumably destined as fighting birds, and also the only fat dog I saw in the Philippines. We saw a major passage of swiftlets *Collocalia* sp. while on the mountain, as well as, amongst other birds, Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus* and Chestnut-faced Babbler *S. whiteheadi*. We then drove a short way to where a swift flowing river bisected a valley and were lucky to see a Luzon Water Redstart *Rhyacornis bicolor*. The mountainous scenery was quite stunning with rice paddies terraced into the mountain sides and small villages of wooden huts clinging to the slopes. We then returned to Manila to accommodation best forgotten. On switching on the light in my room an army of cockroaches scuttled for cover and whoever was responsible for wiring the lights in the room was clearly unaware of health and safety. I was pleased to head off for Palawan the next day.

An early morning flight took us to Porta Princesa, Palawan, where we hoped to see the migratory Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes* and Palawan Peacock-Pheasant *Polyplectron emphanum*, amongst other species. Having seen the former at Garceliano Beach, we drove to Sabang, the gateway to St Paul's National Park on the west coast of the island, with the view to searching for the peacock-pheasant. Again the scenery was stunning with tropical beaches backed by forest or massive cliffs. It was also very hot and humid and when we eventually arrived at our beach-side villas, which were basic but very acceptable, the first item on the agenda was to raid the local bar for its cold bottled beer. En route we had sightings of Blue-headed Racquet-tail *Prioniturus platenae* (a species of parrot), Green Imperial Pigeon *Ducula aenea*, Blue Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone cyanescens* and Palawan Flowerpecker *Prionochilus plateni*.

To reach St Paul's we took a *banca* (small boat) along the coast and landed at the beach opposite the reception area, where we were greeted by a splendid male Palawan Peacock-Pheasant that had become habituated to visitors and came over to us hoping for titbits. We also saw the endemic White-vented Shama *C. niger* and some of us had a brief glimpse of a Tabor Scrubfowl *Megapodius cumingii*, before a very large Water Monitor *Varanus salvator* arrived and stole the show. This was also one of the few places where we had good views of monkeys - these were Long-tailed Macaques *Macaca fascicularis* which gather at the visitor centre for handouts.

Then it started to rain, monsoon style. It was to be a downpour that lasted into the next day, and resulted in all of us being soaked to the skin; it also did irreparable damage to the more sophisticated options on my camera, although thankfully it continued to take photographs. It was, apparently, caused by a typhoon off Mindanao.

The following day saw me dip (birding parlance for missing something others have seen) on Blue-naped Parrot *Tanygnathus lucionensis* (very



Graham Thurlow

Philippine Frogmouth.



Graham Thurlow

Mountain White-eye.

annoying), but later I was the only one to see a Philippine Cockatoo *Cacatua haematuropygia*, which raised one or two eyebrows. My record at identifying some of the small passerines was, I confess, not brilliant, but



Graham Thurlow

Male Palawan Peacock-Pheasant.

I do know a cockatoo when I see one. Other birds seen while on the island included Palawan Hornbill *Anthracoceros marchei* and the rare Little Curlew *Numenius minutus*.

Our final day on Palawan involved a visit to a penal colony where some trails within the prison grounds were said to be good birding territory. However, other than jail birds (scientific name unknown) we did not see a great deal, but just outside on some marshy ground spotted Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta* and Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* and, in a nearby field, a large flock of Chestnut Munias or Black-headed Nuns *L. malacca* together with some Scaly-breasted Munias or Spice Birds.

From Palawan we flew back to Manila and then to Davao on Mindao, from where we had a long drive to Bislig, on the east of the island, which was to be our base for a couple of days. We arrived at midnight and were up again at 4.00am (not an unusual occurrence on this trip) and drove to an area known as PICOP which is, in fact, an area of forest that is being logged by the PICOP Resources Co-operation. We wanted to look for Steere's Pitta *P. steerii* and the Mindanao Wattled Broadbill *Eurylaimus steerii*. We succeeded in seeing both species, though it meant sitting or standing for hours and, much as I enjoy watching and waiting for wildlife to appear, forest birding in which very little happens for long periods, can be very like watching paint dry. We also saw a White-eared Dove *Phapitreron leucotis* in

a small wicker cage hanging from the roof of a wooden shack. It was used, apparently, as a decoy to attract others that were caught using bird lime and were a source of food for the owner.

Other birds seen in the area included Amethyst Dove *P. amethystina*, Silvery Kingfisher *A. argentata*, Writhed Hornbill *Aceros leucocephalus*, a lovely Blue Fantail *R. superciliaris*, Asian Glossy Starling *Aplonis panayensis*, Guaiabero *Bolbopsittacus lunulatus* (a small parrot common in forested areas) and Coledo *Sarcops calvus*.

While driving around this area I was struck by the very basic standard of living of many Filipinos, particularly those living in the countryside. Houses built of bamboo poles and placed on stilts contrasted with the ultramodern shopping mall, with shops selling the latest fashions and electronic equipment, seen in Manila.

One of the highlights for me on this trip was the couple of evening visits to a disused airfield outside Bislig. We sat on the roof of our jeep and had excellent views across fields of rough grass and a pond with a reedbed around it. In the grassland large flocks of Chestnut Munias were clearly visible and Black Bittern *Dupetor flavicollis*, Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis* and Cinnamon Bittern *I. cinnamomeus* at the water's edge, together with Philippine Duck *Anas luzonica*, Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea* and White-browed Crake *Porzana cinerea*. A Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* flew overhead and we saw a Grass Owl *Tyto longimembris* in the distance.

Further birding in this area of Bislig resulted in us seeing Blue-crowned Racquet-tail *P. discurus*, Philippine Dwarf Kingfisher *Ceyx melanurus*, Everett's White-eye *Z. everetti* and Philippine Frogmouth *Batrachostomus septimus*, the latter sitting on a branch close to the roadside and appeared to revel in having its photo taken.

Our final destination was Mount Kitanglad, an active volcano in the Kitanglad Mountain Range, reached by driving to Malaybalay in Bukidnon Province to the north-west of the island. There we met up with a local official to obtain a permit and for the chicken sacrifice ceremony to ensure that all went well on our trip up the mountain.

We stayed at the Del Monte Lodge, which by the standards we had become used to, turned out to be quite acceptable. The ground floor was open on three sides and was where we ate. It also had a toilet and cold shower. The sleeping accommodation was above, on the floor in sleeping bags. Thankfully, there were no rats.

Birding entailed quite an uphill walk to our main observation point, en route passing through forested areas and cultivated fields in which we saw large flocks of Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava*. The observation point overlooked a valley with thickly forested slopes opposite and on our second

walk up the mountain we had clear, but distant, views of a Philippine Eagle *Pithecophaga jefferyi*, a 'must see' bird for the trip and quite splendid. Others species seen included Mountain Shrike *Lanius validirostris*, Black-and-cinnamon Fantail *R. nigrocinnamomea*, Apo Mynah *Basilornis miranda*, Short-tailed Starling *A. minor*, Plain Bush-hen *Amaurornis olivaceus*, Mindanao Racquet-tail *P. waterstradti*, flowerpeckers, Mountain White-eye *Z. montanus* and Red-eared or Mount Katanglad Parrot Finch *E. coloria* feeding on some flowering shrubs.

The above are but a few of the 304 species that were seen during the trip, in many cases hard won but well worth the effort

Avicultural Society Council Member Graham Thurlow retired last year from the post of Chief Advisor to DEFRA's (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) Animal Welfare Division.

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UK BREEDING RECORDS

Members who successfully bred birds in the UK this year (2009) are invited to list the birds they bred on the Foreign Bird Federation (FBF) Breeding Record Form that accompanies this issue of the magazine and return the completed form to: Reuben B. Girling, 11 Deramore Drive, Badger Hill, York YO10 5HW. Using the information supplied, Reuben will collate the Avicultural Society UK breeding records and these will be published in the magazine (but with the names of the individual breeders omitted).

The results will also, as usual, be forwarded to the FBF, which will publish the results in the *FBF Breeding Register*, with the names of the breeders published in a separate list at the end of the register. Breeders can, however, request anonymity and have their names omitted (no addresses are published).

The completed forms will ultimately give Reuben hours of "enjoyment" and, who knows, might lead to an article containing some real and encouraging surprises!

HORNBILL FAMILY ADOPTION REPORT

In 2008, the society again adopted two pairs of hornbills, a pair of Great Hornbills *Buceros bicornis* and a pair of Rhinoceros Hornbills *B. rhinoceros*, as part of the Hornbill Research Foundation's Hornbill Family Adoption Programme in Thailand.

The female of our adopted pair of Great Hornbills on Budo Mountain, part of Budo Sungai-Padi National Park, Bacho District, Narathiwat Province, was imprisoned in the nest cavity on February 1st and emerged 96 days later on May 7th. One chick fledged successfully on June 16th. A massive 99.6% of the food brought to the nest, which was observed by Dohha Panoh and Gorseem Dhauree of the Pacho team, consisted of fruit, especially figs.



Male Great Hornbill bringing fruit to the nest 20m (approx. 65ft) above the ground in a *Dipterocarpus* tree.

The female of our adopted pair of Rhinoceros Hornbills, also on Budo Mountain, was imprisoned in the nest cavity on May 27th and emerged 45 days later on August 26th. One chick fledged successfully on October 6th. Over 90% of the food brought to the nest, which was observed by Dohha Panoh and Jehsoh Bueraheng of the Pacho team, consisted of fruit, again

mostly figs.



Male Rhinoceros Hornbill bringing fruit to the nest 11m (approx. 36ft) above the ground in a *Shorea faguolina*.

There follows a summary of hornbill nestings on Budo Mountain along with, for comparison, summaries of nestings at the project's north-eastern research site at Khao Yai National Park and its western research site at Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary in Thailand.

The study area on Budo Mountain, which covers an area of 189sq km (approx. 73sq miles), was formerly covered by tropical rainforest, but is experiencing heavy encroachment and the clearance of forest to make way for fruit and rubber plantations. Approximately 40% of the remaining forest supports six species of hornbill: Great, Rhinoceros, Helmeted *B. vigil*, Wreathed *Aceros undulatus*, Bushy-crested *Anorrhinus galeritus* and White-crowned *Berenicornis comatus*.

Species	No. of existing nests	No. of nests sealed	No. of successful nests	Success of sealed nests
Great Hornbill	51	18	16	89%
Rhinoceros Hornbill	38	6	3	50%
Helmeted Hornbill	9	1	1	100%
Wreathed Hornbill	11	1	1	100%
Bushy-crested Hornbill	11	2	2	100%
White-crowned Hornbill	9	0	0	0%
Total	129	29	23	79%

Khao Yai National Park covers an area of 2,168sq km (approx. 875sq miles). Approximately 90% of forest cover (evergreen forest) supports four species of hornbill: Great, Wreathed, White-throated Brown Hornbill *Anorrhinus* or *Ptilolaemus austeni* and Oriental Pied Hornbill *Anthraceros albirostris*.

Species	No. of existing nests	No. of nests sealed	No. of successful nests	Success of sealed nests
Great Hornbill	43	29	29	100%
Wreathed Hornbill	35	16	15	94%
White-throated Brown Hornbill	24	13	13	100%
Oriental Pied Hornbill	51	29	29	100%
Total	153	87	86	99%

Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary, situated in the western part of Thailand, covers an area of 2,780sq km (approx. 1,075sq miles). Approximately 75% of the various forest types, including monsoon

evergreen, hill evergreen, mixed deciduous forest and secondary growth, are utilised by six species of hornbill: Great, Rufous-necked *A. nipalensis*, Plain-pouched *A.* or *Rhyticeros subruficollis*, Tickell's Brown Hornbill *Anorrhinus* or *Ptilolaemus tickelli*, Oriental Pied Hornbill and Wreathed Hornbill.

Species	No. of existing nests	No. of nests sealed	No. of successful nests	Success of sealed nests
Great Hornbill	21	18	12	67%
Rufous-necked Hornbill	10	4	4	100%
Plain-pouched Hornbill	7	5	5	100%
Tickell's Brown Hornbill	8	6	6	100%
Oriental Pied Hornbill	25	21	20	95%
Total	71	54	47	87%

Flocks of Wreathed Hornbills were recorded, but no nests were found during the survey.

Incidents of unrest in the southernmost provinces rendered some areas unsafe and work had to stop for a while, leaving some of the 2008 data incomplete. Work was also hampered by prolonged periods of heavy rain.

The Hornbill Research Foundation, headed by Pilai Poonswad, is based at the Faculty of Science at Mahidol University in Bangkok. Its Thailand Hornbill Project has received the overwhelming cooperation of local villagers in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, who previously earned extra money by robbing hornbill nests and selling the chicks. Now, villagers are employed as field assistants who, along with staff of the Thailand Hornbill Project, collect biological data, monitor hornbill populations and safeguard the hornbills throughout the year.

As noted above, the Hornbill Research Foundation also has research sites at Khao Yai National Park in the north-east of the country and at Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary in the western part of Thailand.

Pilai Poonswad has expressed the programme's gratitude to the Avicultural Society for its support in helping to conserve these fascinating birds in Thailand and, she says, it both needs and welcomes our continued support.

In 2009, we have again adopted two pairs of hornbills, this time choosing a pair of Wreathed Hornbills and a pair of White-crowned Hornbills.

IS PRINCE RUSPOLI'S TURACO THREATENED BY HYBRIDIZATION WITH THE WHITE-CHEEKED TURACO?

by Luca Borghesio, Tolera Kumsa, Jean-Marc Lernoald and
Afework Bekele

The Ethiopian plateau is home to two endemic species of turaco, the widespread White-cheeked Turaco *Tauraco leucotis*, with two subspecies *T. l. leucotis* and *T. l. donaldsoni*, and Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *T. ruspolii*, which has a small and restricted range on the southern part of the plateau. The ranges of *T. ruspolii* and *T. l. leucotis* abut along a narrow strip of land along the north-western edge of the former's distribution (see Fig.1). While the White-cheeked Turaco remains relatively abundant and is therefore not considered to be a threatened species, Prince Ruspoli's Turaco has for many years been on the Red List of globally threatened species.

In 1995, one of us carried out a survey of *T. ruspolii* and concluded that it remained reasonably common (population about 10,000 mature individuals) and was most abundant in the north of its small range of just 7,700sq km (approx. 2,975sq miles) (Borghesio & Massa, 2000). Although *T. ruspolii* and the closely related *T. leucotis* both occur in the same region, they were separated by their choice of habitat (*T. ruspolii* choosing woodland and the forest edge, with *T. leucotis* preferring closed-canopy forest); no evidence was found of hybridization.

In 2002, however, the first observations were reported of *T. ruspolii* x *T. leucotis* hybrids (Lernould & Seitre, 2002), whose hypothesis was that hybridization might have been the result of habitat barriers separating the two species having become blurred due to rapidly occurring habitat destruction. Hybridization might, therefore, be a new threat to the survival of one of Ethiopia's most charismatic endemic birds.

In 2007-2008, Tolera Kumsa (a student at Addis Ababa University) undertook a pilot survey of the northern part of the range of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco, to investigate the co-existence and hybridization of these two species of Ethiopian turacos. Here we briefly summarize his results and highlight the need for further research:

1. November 2007-March 2008 a total of 374 points were surveyed in an area of approximately 50km x 10km (roughly 30 miles x 6 miles), where the ranges of the two species abut (Fig.2).
2. At each point, recordings of vocalisations of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and the White-cheeked Turaco were played for 10 minutes. The recorded



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