Vietnam: Bird Photography Tour Report 2020

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by Pete Morris

Not only was this our first Wild Images bird photography tour to Vietnam, it was also the first Wild Images tour of its kind – an entire trip focused on photographing birds in tropical rainforest. Generally speaking this is an extremely difficult discipline, as most tropical birds are shy and difficult to approach, and light levels are low. However, in southern Vietnam, there are now a series of hides and photographic screens which have made photographing many species, that were previously tough to even glimpse, a real possibility. We took full advantage of these facilities, and also made a series of excursions on foot, both by day and by night, and, in Cat Tien National Park, we made some additional excursions in open-topped trucks. This diverse approach really increased the over all number of species we could get to see and photograph. Indeed, between us we photographed around 100 species of birds, which was way higher than the group's expectations, and the star performers, namely the pittas, pheasants, laughingthrushes and thrushes all put on stunning performances for us. Indeed, the variety of species and levels of activities around the hides and screens took many of the group by surprise! We also saw a number of interesting mammals such as the beautiful endemic Buff-cheeked Gibbon and an amazing Malayan Porcupine.

Throughout the trip, which was based in three different hotels, we were extremely well looked after. Comfortable and spacious vehicles, good roads, good quality and characterful hotels, and fine Southeast Asian cuisine added to the overall enjoyment. The overall pace of the tour was pleasant and relaxed, with plenty of individual choice when it came to photographic subjects, particularly when it came to going back for seconds or looking for something new, or even the chance to take a break and do some deleting or downloading!!

We began with a flight from Ho Chi Minh to Da Lat, and made the short journey from the airport to our comfortable resort. The main focus of our visit to Da Lat was the nearby Bidoup Núi Bà National Park, and a series of hides there. We all spent two full days in the park (though with a break for lunch), and some of us a third morning, and here we concentrated our efforts on two main hides. I should point out at this stage that the hides are made from mesh screening, and the atmosphere in them is fairly relaxed. Although maintaining a quiet and calm regime will always result in more birds appearing, it is not a strict environment, and occasional leg stretches while food or water is topped up has little or no effect on the photographic opportunities. Most birds are quite close; the only thing against you is the light! High ISO and slow shutter speeds are the order of the day, making action shots difficult, but with the use of a tripod, many excellent shots can be achieved.

The first of the hides we visited (and revisited a couple of times) was, like all of the hides we visited, well set up, with a drinking pool, running water and of course various rocks, logs and other perches, along with a few enticing worms! The star of the show at this first hide was probably the rarely seen Rusty-naped Pitta, an extremely shy and difficult to see species. Our first visit yielded great looks at the female, but it was not until the final morning that the smart male graced us with his presence, but for those of us that persevered, it was worth the wait. Other visitors to this hide included a rather bold Slaty-legged Crake, smart Large Niltavas, indigo-blue White-tailed Robins (one of which virtually shared the hide with us!), and numerous Mountain Fulvettas and smart Grey-throated Babblers. On our first visit, a superb pair of Spotted Forktails entertained us for some time, whilst on the second visit, charismatic Short-tailed Scimitar Babblers (also known as Indochinese Wren-Babblers) poked their unwieldy beaks into any crevice they could find, and invariably came out with something to feed to their attendant youngsters! This was also our best hide for the shy Lesser Shortwing.

Now we thought that hide was pretty good… But the second hide in Bidoup National Park, I guess you could call it the 'main' hide, was almost out of this world! As soon as we had arrived, and put a little food out, we were nearly knocked over (metaphorically at least) by the rush of colour and intensity of action. Many of the species from the first hide were again present, but they were joined by mobs of Orange-headed Thrushes busily chasing each other around and gangs of noisy White-cheeked Laughingthrushes and White-browed Scimitar Babblers. But it was really four more star performers that totally delighted us here. First were two rare and endemic laughingthrushes, both of which were striking in their own way. Collared Laughingthrushes dazzled with their gold, silver, black and

orange plumage, whilst the more delicate Orange-breasted Laughingthrush came in to its own when it was front on, revealing its fiery orange, striated breast. With all the thrushes came a quite stunning pair of Siberian Thrushes and both the male and female gave great views, and were both highly photogenic in their own ways, as they hopped on mossy logs, drank from the pool and foraged in the leaf litter. The best of the lot though was the pair of gorgeous Blue Pittas that made frequent visits to the hide. The intense blue and red of the male really glowed from the undergrowth, but the female was also a striking bird. The interesting form here, *willoughbyi* which is restricted to the local area, has a buff breast patch, unique amongst the races of this very attractive species!

A number of interesting flycatchers joined in on the party. Tiny Snowy-browed Flycatchers, subtly delightful Rufous-browed Flycatchers, a striking Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher and electric-blue Verditer Flycatchers all posed for the cameras, whilst other regulars included striking Black-headed Sibias, endemic Black-crowned Fulvettas, Mountain Bulbuls and that tiniest of tailless forest-floor denizens, the gorgeous little Grey-bellied Tesia. You really did need to be quick for that one! Overall our experiences in these hides was amazing, and I think we were all bowled over by them.

Whilst in Da Lat, we also made some ad-hoc bird photography visits to some other local areas to try and find some other species to photograph. As expected, this kind of photography was far more difficult, and getting birds to sit still for long enough and close enough to our lenses was a constant challenge! However, with perseverance, waiting near to flowering trees and attracting a few birds in, we met with some success. Highlights included dazzling Black-throated and Mrs Gould's Sunbirds, lovely Streaked Spiderhunters, Green-backed Tits, delicate little Black-throated (Grey-crowned) Bushtits and Grey Bushchat. Flocks contained photographic subjects such as smart Blue-winged Minlas, Kloss's Leaf Warbler and Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, and some of us also managed to photograph the endemic Grey-crowned Crocias and the attractive Black-crowned Parrotbill. We also made a semi-successful attempt to photograph Grey Nightjars around our hotel.

With many thousands of images already on our cards, we headed south the short distance to Di Linh. It was a very easy journey, and having dropped off our belongings at our lovely country hotel, we made our way up to the pass at Deo Nui San pass and spent some time at a small screen there. Here, we were once again entertained by a gorgeous pair of Orange-breasted Laughingthrushes, but a couple of other goodies made an appearance too! First a delicately marked female White-throated Rock Thrush showed up, and this was followed by our first Blue-rumped Pitta. Exciting though this was, there were more and better Blue-rumped Pittas to come!!

The following morning we were back up to the pass, but this time exploring a different and larger hide. Indeed it was another excellent spot, and we were happy to spend all morning and all afternoon peering out through the mesh at the amazing array of avian visitors! We began with another obliging Blue-rumped Pitta and a pair of hyperactive Bar-backed Partridges – not overly helpful in the dim early morning light, but they did at least pause from time to time. As the light improved, the numbers of birds visiting increased and we were in for some real treats, the best of which announced its arrival with some shrill shrieks! And almost like a weird apparition, an amazing, larger-than-life Indochinese Green Magpie appeared right in front of us. An outrageous combination of green, yellow, black and red, with a big spiky punk crest, and oozing attitude and charisma. He visited a few times and I'd dread to think how many pixels were created!! Another frequent visitor was the usually very shy Black-hooded Laughingthrush, and we again had multiple opportunities to point our lenses at this gem. Flycatchers included numerous smart Mugimaki Flycatchers and the interesting *klossi* form of Hainan Blue Flycatcher, and other species that kept the shutters clicking included smart Red-headed Trogons, an obliging Square-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo, the endemic Grey-faced Tit-Babbler, Buff-breasted Babbler, the endemic Black-crowned Parrotbill, Siberian Blue Robins, Grey-eyed and Ochraceous Bulbuls, Swinhoe's White-eye and several other by now familiar species such as White-tailed Robins and Orange-headed Thrushes. All in all, quite a treat! In between the two sessions we returned to our lovely base for lunch, and whilst waiting for the temperatures to drop a little, a few hardy fools amongst us pointed our cameras at the newly recognized Annam Prinia that was just down the track from our hotel.

On our final morning at Di Linh we once again visited the blinds where we had more opportunities to photograph the species we had encountered the previous day. We also tried a little ad-hoc roadside photography, though this was once again fairly tricky. We did manage to find some awesome birds such as Mountain Imperial Pigeon, stunning Long-tailed Broadbills, the endemic Indochinese Barbet and Vietnamese Greenfinch, Black and Ashy Bulbuls, and even the endemic Vietnamese Cutia, and although images of all were obtained, it's fair to say that none of them gave themselves up easily!

We had enjoyed a great, albeit brief stay at Di Linh, but as we bode our wonderful hosts goodbye, we couldn't help but get a little excited about what lay ahead. After a relatively short drive we left our vehicle, gathered our belongings, and made our way on to the ferry to take us across the Dong Nai River and into the mighty Cat Tien National Park. We checked into our simple but comfortable air-conditioned rooms, and then paid our first of many visits to the Yellow Bamboo Restaurant for a tasty Vietnamese dinner!

We had several days to explore the riches of this wonderful national park, though the bulk of our time was spent visiting four different hides. We visited each of the hides together on the first occasion, and after that, we pretty much had a free run on the hides, meaning that each of us could choose to visit the hide of our choice to improve upon whatever images we wished to. Each of the hides was similar in some respects – all were a short walk from the accommodation, and all had water, a little food and a big target bird!

The first hide we visited, we knew as the Germain's Peacock-Pheasant hide, for obvious reasons! This magnificent blue-studded pheasant was frequently to be found here, and indeed there was often a pair, with the male even engaging in some wonderful displays, raising and spreading his tail, flashing his true colours and wooing his mate. This hide was also perhaps the most diverse of the hides at Cat Tien. Another young Slaty-legged Crake was pretty much constantly in attendance, gangs of garrulous White-crested Laughingthrushes frequently rampaged through, a pair of timid Green-legged Partridges were frequently in and out, as were Common Emerald Doves, and a hulking Greater Coucal and some shy Red Junglefowls made the most of what was on offer. Smart White-rumped Shamas seemed to be omnipresent (as they were at all of the hides), gorgeous Indochinese Blue Flycatchers, Siberian Blue Robins and Orange-headed Thrushes came and went, subtle Puff-throated Babblers sneaked around, and a succession of birds were attracted to the water. These included gaudy Stripe-throated and more subtle Streak-eared Bulbuls, occasional Black-headed and Black-crested Bulbuls, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, and more occasional visitors such as Common Flameback, Black-and-red Broadbill, Racket-tailed Treepie, and Bronzed and Ashy Drongos. A number of other species were also photographed from the hide including Dark-necked Tailorbird, Pale-legged Leaf Warbler and Little Spiderhunter.

The second hide we visited, we knew as the Siamese Fireback hide, again for obvious reasons, and although they could take their time appearing, we enjoyed some wonderful time with these lovely pheasants. The contrast between the smooth, lead-grey male, and the chestnut, black and white females could not have been greater, and they were a real joy to behold. Germain's Peacock-Pheasants and Red Junglefowls also put in appearances, we found our first smart little Northern Smooth-tailed Treeshrew here, and a Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker was frequently to be found here.

The third hide we visited, we knew as the Bar-bellied Pitta hide, and yes, you guessed it, the pittas were the stars of the show here. Both the gorgeous male, and slightly more subtle female were frequently to be found near the hide. The incredible emerald green, turquoise, royal blue, yellow and black male really does epitomize the 'jewel birds' (pittas) and is arguably one of the very best in what is an incredible family of birds. This hide was a bit hit and miss for other species. Green-legged Partridges were frequent, and occasionally a flurry of birds would come to bathe, including the endemic Grey-faced Tit-Babbler. Overall though, it was really just more time with the stunning pitas that lured us back to this particular hide!

The fourth and final hide was the rather small Blue-rumped Pitta hide. Here, a rather showy male pitta was frequently to be found, allowing us to enjoy the real subtle beauty of this species. The lilac and chestnut on the head merged with green and gorgeous contrasting blue tones, all rather subtle pastel tones, but quite stunning when seen well. The rather intimate setting was also home to confiding Abbot's Babblers, and gave some of the best photographic opportunities for Green-legged Partridge, White-rumped Shama and the gorgeous Indochinese Blue Flycatcher.

Although we spent a lot of time in the hides, we also spent a fair amount of time exploring other areas. Generally the photography away from the hides was much tougher, though with one notable exception. We had several terrific encounters with a juvenile Brown Fish Owl, both at night and during the day, and this gorgeous creature allowed for some really special and intimate photography, and was another highlight of the trip!

We explored the nearby grasslands a couple of times, and here we found the rare Green Peafowl, though unfortunately they were too shy for any close images. We did find a few other bits and bobs to photograph in the grassland and adjacent forest edge, including smart Blue-bearded Bee-eaters, attractive White-throated Kingfishers, a fine male Orange-breasted Green Pigeon perched up, Lineated Barbet and Vinous-breasted Starlings that were visiting flowering trees, and numerous Sambar and Indian Muntjacs.

We spent some time exploring other areas of forest on foot. Again, it was tricky to line things up for the lenses, but we did meet with some moderate success. Stunning Banded and Black-and-red Broadbills were both tracked down and photographed as were a smart Orange-breasted Trogon, attractive Banded Kingfishers, and colourful Scarlet Minivets and Van Hasselt's Sunbirds. We also enjoyed rare up-close encounters with a male Violet Cuckoo and a pair of White-browed Piculets. We also came across a couple of rare mammals, namely a Grey-shanked Douc Langur and a family of terrific Buff-cheeked Gibbons. The latter we had been hearing daily, their gorgeous morning songs cascading through the forest to serenade us each morning, so it was with great glee that we got to watch a family of these wonderful primates swinging through the trees one morning!

The final thing to mention for our time in Cat Tien National Park was our time spent out at night. As already mentioned we saw the Brown Fish Owl, but we also found Collared Scops Owl and Brown Hawk-Owl (both less obliging), saw Great-eared Nightjars overhead, and even found an amazing Malayan Porcupine on the road. However, it was the brilliant encounter with an amazing Oriental Bay Owl that will really live in our memories, a really special moment for everyone!

Well Cat Tien National Park, and indeed Vietnam, had delivered the birds to the bird photographers, and after a final lunch at the Yellow Bamboo Restaurant (now inhabited by a huge Tokay Gecko), we made our way back to Ho Chi Minh airport, ready to commence our journeys. Complete with tens of thousands of images, the easy bit had been done, and we headed back home, complete with our haul! And as for those tens of thousands of images... at least we've all had something to keep us occupied through lockdown!!