Vietnam: Bird Photography Tour Report 2023

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by Pete Morris

Following on from the success of our inaugural 2020 Wild Images bird photography tour to Vietnam we returned to repeat our adventure early in 2023. The tours were three years apart, but more importantly than that, they were covid apart. This of course meant that there had been virtually no birding or photography trips in the intervening period, and consequently things had changed a little. Thanks to our excellent local support team, we were able to slightly rejig things and ended up with an extremely rewarding adventure once more.

This is still more or less the only 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 overall number of species we could get to see and photograph. Indeed, between us we once again photographed around 100 species of birds, and the star performers, namely the pittas, pheasants, laughingthrushes and thrushes again put on stunning performances for us. We also saw a few interesting mammals including the beautiful endemic Buff-cheeked Gibbon.

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.

We began with a flight from Ho Chi Minh to Da Lat, and made the short journey from the airport to our comfortable and very pleasant rural 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 spent the first day at a couple of hides about an hour's drive from our base. 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 main 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 turned out to be a quiet introduction, and our main quarry did not appear. Like all of the hides we visited, it was fairly well set up, with a drinking pool, running water and of course various rocks, logs and other perches, along with a few enticing mealworms! We got familiarised with some of the regular photographic posers such as smart Large Niltavas, indigo-blue White-tailed Robins (one of which virtually shared the hide with us!) and charismatic Rufous-browed and Snowy-browed Flycatchers, but it was a no-show from the hoped-for laughingthrushes, so we moved on.

After a short walk, we arrived at the second hide, and this one was way more busy, with several superb photo subjects. The star of the show at this hide was probably the rarely seen Rusty-naped Pitta, an extremely shy and difficult to see species, and we had great opportunities with both the male and female. A pair of pretty Rufous-throated Partridges were also obliging, and an impressive Dark-sided Thrush also posed! Other visitors to this hide included charismatic Short-tailed Scimitar Babblers (also known as Indochinese Wren-Babblers), poking their unwieldy beaks into any crevice they could find, and White-browed Scimitar-Babblers. More smart Large Niltavas and White-tailed Robins posed, and numerous pretty Black-headed Sibias, Mountain Fulvettas and smart Grey-throated Babblers were busy all around. This was also a good hide for the shy Lesser Shortwing and the virtually tailless Grey-bellied Tesia.

After lunch, we moved to a third hide. This again proved to be a little quiet, though some stunning Orange-headed Thrushes were much appreciated, more partridges and dinky tesias appeared, and a good variety of the more regular species were also present. Not much was coming to drink and the light was fading, so we decided to head back to base for a couple of beers and some very nice Vietnamese cuisine.

The following day we headed to a different area of the park, a little further from Dalat. This time we were stationed in a hide that overlooked a small river. Our prime interest was to see the amazing Collared Laughingthrush, and after a while these spectacular birds obliged, dazzling us with their gold, silver, black and orange plumage. Sadly this species has declined massively due to trapping for the cagebird industry, and is becoming harder and harder to find, so we were pleased to get our first chance with this beauty. Also present at the same hide were two more favourites, the excellent Slaty-backed and Spotted Forktails. Both species are usually very shy, but we were treated to multiple opportunities with these great birds, even if the weather was a little wet and gloomy. In the afternoon we visited a nearby hide which was extremely busy with boisterous White-cheeked Laughingthrushes and numerous fulvettas, including the smart endemic Black-crowned Fulvetta. On the way back we bumped into an impressive Mountain Hawk-Eagle which posed in a roadside tree. In the evening, we spent some time trying to photograph the vocal Asian Barred Owlet around our lodge.

The following morning I had a little treat in store, and we began the day with a very cute Oriental Scops Owl on its day roost. We then made our way to some other local areas to try and find some other species for some 'ad-hoc' bird photography. 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 smart endemic Vietnamese Cutias, lovely Streaked Spiderhunters, electric-blue Verditer Flycatchers, endemic Indochinese Barbets, dazzling Black-throated and Mrs Gould's Sunbirds, Green-backed Tits and Grey Bushchat.

After an interesting morning we made our way back into the mountains. Our first stop produced some obliging Red Crossbills coming down to drink and less obliging Vietnamese Greenfinches and Kloss's Leaf Warblers. We then headed back to the very first hide that we had visited and this time it was much better. Some subtle Streaked Wren-Babblers showed well, and a trio of superb Collared Laughingthrushes gave us much better opportunities!

With many thousands of images already on our cards, we left Dalat early the following morning, and headed south the short distance to Di Linh. We made our way straight to a hide where we had high hopes of some more colour! We were not let down, as both here, and in another hide nearby later in the day, we were entertained by gorgeous Blue Pittas that made frequent visits to the hides. 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 buffy red breast patch, unique amongst the races of this very attractive species! During our day at the two hides around the Deo Nui San pass we had a number of other interesting subjects too, including a fantastic pair of Bar-backed Partridges and our first smart White-throated Rock Thrushes. There were also plenty of other regular favourites on offer. As the light faded we made our way to our lovely country hotel for another fine meal.

The following morning we were back up to the pass, but this time we were mostly exploring a different and larger hide. Indeed it was another excellent spot, and we were happy to spend plenty of time peering out through the mesh at the amazing array of avian visitors! We began with more pittas with both Blue Pittas and an obliging pair of gorgeous Blue-rumped Pittas both performing well. Flycatchers included numerous smart Mugimaki Flycatchers and the interesting *klossi* form of Hainan Blue Flycatcher were both frequently present, and other species that kept the shutters clicking included Buff-breasted Babbler, Siberian Blue Robins, Grey-eyed and Ochraceous Bulbuls, and several other by now familiar species such as Orange-headed Thrushes that were present in an infinite variety of colours and patterns. All in all, quite a treat!

We left Di Linh early after our second night and made our way to a new area near to Cat Tien National Park, known as Tan Phu. In fact, it was an excellent area, and we ended up coming back to the hides for a second go from our base in Cat Tien National Park. During our two days here, we had ample opportunity to photograph stunning Bar-bellied Pittas. Both the gorgeous male, and slightly more subtle female were frequently to be found near the hides. 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. Blue-rumped Pittas were frequently obliging too, and a new favourite was the tiny Black-backed (Oriental Dwarf) Kingfisher which also gave us some amazing views. On one occasion some Siamese Firebacks popped in, though these were better in Cat Tien, and other visitors included bulky Greater Coucals, some shy Eye-browed Thrushes that eventually came down to feed, delightful White-throated Rock-Thrushes, smart Siberian Blue Robins (including full males), numerous babblers and bulbuls (including noisy Ochraceous Bulbuls) and a sneaky Pale-legged Leaf Warbler. They really were productive ides, and there was seldom a time when there was nothing to entertain us.

After our first visit to Tan Phu we drove the short distance to the ferry to take us across the Dong Nai River and into the mighty Cat Tien National Park. Here, 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, with some time spent in largely one productive hide. Post covid, the number of good operational hides at Cat Tien has diminished somewhat, hence our two days visiting the hides at Tan Phu. That said, we still had some great experiences in this important national park.

Our time in the main hide was largely spent looking at gamebirds, with the real star of the show being the stunning Germain's Peacock-Pheasant hide. 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 the place to see the wonderful Siamese Fireback, and we enjoyed some quality 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. White-rumped Shamas and Indochinese Blue Flycatchers were seldom absent, and a pair of Greater Coucals seemed to be semi-resident. Timid Green-legged Partridges were another frequent visitor, and Common Emerald Doves, a species we had also seen elsewhere, gave us some great opportunities. Subtle Puff-throated and Abbot's 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-crested Bulbuls, Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, and more occasional visitors such as smart Laced Woodpeckers.

We also spent some time close to the lodge where species such as Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Racket-tailed Treepie, Bronzed and Ashy Drongos, a fabulously obliging Ferruginous Flycatcher, Dark-necked Tailorbird, Ashy Prinia, and Little Spiderhunter were all found. We also spent some time with the terrific Buff-cheeked Gibbons, and nearby, some rather less-endearing Pig-tailed Macaques. The former we had been hearing daily, their gorgeous morning songs cascading through the forest to serenade us, so it was with great glee that we got to watch a family of these wonderful primates swinging through the trees!

We also had a couple of sessions venturing deeper into the forest. Again, the 'ad-hoc' photography proved a challenge, and it was tricky to line things up for the lenses, but we did meet with some moderate success with smart species such as stunning Banded and Black-and-red Broadbills, impressive Oriental Pied Hornbills, Green-billed Malkoha, Orange-breasted Trogon, Green-eared Barbet, attractive Banded Kingfishers, a pair of White-browed Piculets, delightful Heart-spotted and Black-and-buff Woodpeckers, huge Great Slaty Woodpeckers and the endemic Grey-faced Tit-Babbler all giving some opportunities.

We also explored the nearby grasslands a couple of times, and here we found the rare Green Peafowl, and although they were too shy for any close images, we got some reasonable shots. We did find a few other bits and bobs to photograph in the grassland and adjacent forest edge, including smart attractive White-throated Kingfishers, Lineated Barbet and numerous Sambar and Indian Muntjacs.

The final thing to mention for our time in Cat Tien National Park was our time spent out at night. A superb Blyth's Frogmouth was a great treat, and a Brown Hawk Owl good to see, but it was the brilliant encounter with an amazing Oriental Bay Owl that will really live in our memories, a really special moment for everyone and the best encounter I have ever had with this superb species.

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, we made our way back to Ho Chi Minh airport, ready to commence our journeys. Complete with tens of thousands of images, we headed back home, complete with our haul and with very fond memories of this great destination!