

NORTHERN THAILAND 2012

13th January to 22nd January

HIGHLIGHTS

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

- Rufous-throated Partridge
- Mrs Hume's Pheasant
- Mountain Bamboo-partridge
- Baer's Pochard
- Black-tailed Crake
- Long-billed Plover
- Purple Cochoa
- Pied Harrier
- Scarlet-faced Liocichla
- Spot-breasted Parrotbill
- Himalayan Bluetail
- White-gorgeted Flycatcher
- Lesser Shortwing
- White-tailed Robin
- Dark-sided Thrush
- Giant Nuthatch
- Slaty-bellied Tesia
- Scaly Thrush
- Black-breasted Thrush
- Crested Finchbill
- Bay Woodpecker
- Rufous-backed Sibia
- Asian Stubtail
- Spectacled Barwing
- Fire-tailed Sunbird
- Jerdon's Bushchat
- Cook's Swift

Leader: Nick Bray

SUMMARY:

Our second tour to Thailand this year visited the forest-cloaked mountains and secluded valleys of northern Thailand. We began on Thailand's highest mountain at Doi Inthanon where the cool air of the summit was much appreciated, almost as much as the first of three Dark-sided Thrushes we found. Very showy Black-tailed Crakes and Rufous-throated Partridges were the icing on a cake full of stunners! The avifauna was totally different to what we had experienced during the central tour and there were numerous goodies for us to get our teeth into. We then headed to Doi Ang Khang via the Green Peafowls at Huai Hong Krai and at our first stop on this mountain found a pair of Giant Nuthatches beside the road. A great start! With Spot-breasted Parrotbill, Hume's Pheasant, White-tailed Robin and Black-breasted Thrush it was all about the quality here. As usual with a Zoothera tour we try and add something a little different and by birding the seldom visited Doi Lang we did just that! Some feeding stations allow such wonderful views of White-gorgeted Flycatcher, Spectacled Barwing and Himalayan Bluetails and it was a rare treat to be able to study these species (and more) up close and personal. Our visit to Northern Thailand was very successful, set amidst amazingly beautiful mountain scenery full of some exceptionally stunning birds.



It is a real privilege to get such amazing views of so many species as we did on this tour to Northern Thailand. This White-tailed Robin is usually a shy and hard-to-see bird, but this one perched out in the open at a special site on Doi Ang Khang.

Days 1 - 2 13th - 14th January

Overnight flight from London and early evening arrival in Bangkok.

Day 3 Sunday 15th January

Following an early morning flight to Chiang Mai we picked up the hire vehicle and drove to Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest mountain. After dropping our luggage off at the Inthanon Highland Resort located at the base of the mountain we made our way towards this famous birding site, stopping to search for a **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** along the way. A **Black-naped Monarch**, **Racket-tailed Treepie** and **Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker** showed well, and a nearby flowering tree held a large flock of **Chestnut-tailed Starlings**. On entering the National Park we drove ever upwards, but unfortunately our progress was delayed when our vehicle was hit by a minibus. With several hours delay promised we didn't hang around and promptly flagged down a passing truck which kindly took us several kilometres further up the mountain to Mr Daeng's restaurant – a famous birder's location. Having seen **Japanese Tit** earlier, we were eager to kick start our birding and settled down at his viewing area where after a short wait both **Lesser Shortwing** and **Asian Stubtail** appeared below us. A very close **Little Spiderhunter** and **Black-throated Sunbird**, **Pallas's Warbler**, and a mixed flock of **Chestnut-flanked** and **Japanese White-eyes** were also much appreciated. After lunch we hopped into a local bus which took us right up to the summit and after buying some snacks in a shop were treated to point blank views of **Silver-eared Laughingthrush** and **Bar-throated Minla** hopping around the picnic tables. Then we explored the famous Summit Boardwalk across the road where the first of three **Dark-sided Thrushes** to be found today was observed feeding in the leaf-litter below the trail. It was pretty quiet along the boardwalk yet we found the treasure at the end of the rainbow when a **Purple Cochoa** was spotted perched high up in a tall tree above the trail. Leaving here totally elated we continued our good fortune with 6 **Rufous-throated Hill-partridges** feeding quietly in the forest understorey. From the nearby car park a burst of activity resulted in **Flavescent Bulbul**, **Dark-backed Sibias**, extremely confident **Buff-barred** and **Ashy-throated Leaf-warblers**, as well as a single **Yellow-browed Tit**. Driving back down the mountain in our recently arrived new vehicle we visited the campground where we parked up, sat quietly in the grass and after a short but nervous wait a superb **Black-tailed Crane** appeared at the appointed time and gave astonishingly close views as it fed right out in the open just a short distance away from us. A pair of **Grey Bushchats** and flock of **Grey-cheeked Fulvettas** were also present here to round off a rather unexpectedly adventurous day's birding.



Bar-throated Minla is a relatively common species in the higher altitude forests of these spectacular mountains.



Silver-eared Laughingthrush is now split from Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush. Another frequent sighting in these mountains.



The beautiful Ashy-throated Warbler is a major component of any mixed feeding flock in high altitude forest.

Day 4 Monday 16th January

As the sun's rays slowly crept over the ridge we began our birding on Doi Inthanon and the morning turned out to be extremely productive. A flurry of new birds began with close **Grey-throated** and **Golden Babblers**, followed quickly by **Maroon Oriole**, **Davison's Leaf-warbler**, **Black-winged Cuckooshrike**, **White-browed Shrike-babbler**, **Grey-chinned** and **Short-billed Minivets**, **Yellow-bellied Fantail**, **Little Pied Flycatcher**, **Large Niltava**, **Brown-throated Treecreeper**, **Yellow-cheeked Tit**, **Mountain Bulbul** and **Rufous-winged Fulvetta**. Pausing for breath at the summit, a **Golden-throated Barbet** was scoped at the top of a tree which was very much appreciated after only hearing it for the first few hours of the day and then a **Blyth's Leaf-warbler** was also seen well. Another search of the summit boardwalk produced another sighting of **Dark-sided Thrush** but apart from that it was quiet. We then drove downhill and scored with a confiding pair of **Slaty-bellied Tesias** that came to within 3 metres of our feet! A flock of **Grey-cheeked Fulvetta** and a **Streaked Spiderhunter** were also seen along the same trail. Driving down the mountain for lunch we stopped to admire the stunning scenery of forested mountain ridges stretching towards the horizon and found a **Wedge-tailed Green-pigeon** perched in a close tree. The **Lesser Shortwing** was still showing well behind the restaurant and also here was another **Dark-sided Thrush**. After lunch we visited a river where **White-capped** and **Plumbeous Water-redstarts** and a **Slaty-backed Forktail** all showed within a few minutes and a nearby fruiting tree held both **Orange-bellied** and **Blue-winged Leafbirds**, as well as a **Black-throated Sunbird**. Other goodies seen this afternoon included **Grey-backed Shrike** and a flock of **Pacific Swifts**. After a quick visit to the summit marsh again drew a blank for any shortwings we managed to nail a beautiful **Green-tailed Sunbird** before checking out the campground once again but didn't find anything new, so enjoyed further views of the obliging **Black-tailed Crake**.

Day 5 Tuesday 17th January

A rather frustrating drive through the Chiang Mai early morning traffic was eventually worthwhile when we reached the Huai Hong Krai Project where a few **Green Peafowl** showed quite well. Also here was **Asian Barred Owlet**, **Red-breasted Parakeet**, **Taiga Flycatcher** and **Black-naped Monarch**. Our next destination was Doi Ang Khang and along the way we made a brief stop alongside some fields where we failed to tease out a calling **Siberian Rubythroat** but some compensation came in the form of a flock of low flying **Himalayan Swiftlets**. As the road began to rise steadily upwards we saw a **Rufous-winged Buzzard** perched on top of a tall tree, a close **Oriental Honey-buzzard** soaring across a valley and a little later a **Black Eagle** was also spotted. A random roadside stop when a **Chestnut-**



This was just one of three excellent **Dark-sided Thrushes** we found skulking near the boardwalk at the summit of Doi Inthanon.



This **Black-tailed Crake** gave amazing views at the regular stake out on Doi Inthanon. I do not think you get better views of this skulker anywhere else!



The views are absolutely spectacular in Northern Thailand.

bellied Rock-thrush was seen resulted in an amazing performance by a **Giant Nuthatch** that was calling and feeding in the roadside trees. At the same location **Stripe-breasted Woodpecker**, **Grey-chinned** and **Scarlet Minivets** and **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** were also present. Leaving here we continued ever upwards making a few more stops before arriving at a restaurant for lunch and from the dining table saw a close **Two-barred Greenish Warbler**. Afterwards we drove to the border post and added **Grey Bushchat** to our Myanmar lists and also **Daurian Redstart** to our Thai lists! Moving back down the mountain we added **Hill Prinia** and **Olive-backed Pipit**, as well as seeing **Mrs Gould's Sunbird** before driving to our lodge where we were to stay for the next couple of nights and saw a **White-capped Water-redstart** and **Hill Blue Flycatcher** along the way.

Day 6 Wednesday 18th January

We began another exciting day in the mountains parked along the road waiting for the sunrise and our date with **Mrs Hume's Pheasant**. Sure enough a rustling in the leaf litter near our parked vehicle resulted in good views of a superb male and a little later a female as well – and we didn't have to wait too long at all. Leaving here we drove back up to the ridge and as the sun's rays slowly lit the hillside more and more birds were on the move, beginning with a few **Little Buntings** that flew into a bare tree and several noisy **Brown-breasted Bulbuls**. Across the road a fine male **Daurian Redstart** was found and then several **Pallas's Warblers** appeared in a close tree, before an abrupt alarm call from the dense low vegetation beside us led to some views of an extremely skulky **Aberrant Bush-warbler**. So we walked along the road to scan a much warmer and very scenic sun-drenched hillside where we were privileged to get close views of a calling **Spot-breasted Parrotbill** that used a small leafless sapling for his song perch. As well as this superb bird, we also saw **Greater Yellownape**, **White-browed Scimitar-babbler** and a pair of **Grey Treepies** in the same area. Then we hit the trails and almost immediately came across a **Himalayan Bluetail** on the path in front of us before finding a bird wave that held a **White-browed Piculet** and **Rufous-backed Sibia** amongst more common species such as **Grey-backed Shrike**, a calling **Pygmy Wren-babbler** and **Rufous-bellied Niltava**. Then we drove a short distance and visited a special site in one of the tourist complexes where a small feeding station had been set up, so we made our own contribution with some mealworms and sat on the ground and waited patiently. Well for five minutes at least! As all of a sudden a **White-tailed Robin** flew in and perched right out in the open just a few metres away and we were all suitably stunned. As if that wasn't enough a **Black-breasted Thrush** then came in and scared the robin away and began feeding. To cap it all off a male **Hill Blue Flycatcher** appeared and just sat there looking at us! Behind the nearby



This Giant Nuthatch was literally one of the first birds we found upon arrival on the upper zone of Doi Ang Khang.



Spot-breasted Parrotbill is another key species at Doi Ang Khang which we saw really well on this tour.



Yet another feeding station provided us with this cracking Black-breasted Thrush.

restaurant we again waited for a few minutes and this time a **Scaly Thrush** appeared and began to feed amongst the leaf litter allowing the most extraordinary views. So after an oversized lunch which we spent watching white-eyes, a quick walk nearby produced **Blue-winged Minla** and **Yellow-bellied Warbler**. We then visited a nearby trail where almost immediately we came across a large bird wave on the slope below us but it was moving away, yet we still managed to pick out a **Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbill** before the flock disappeared. Then everything went quiet and our walk only produced **Striated Bulbul**, **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher** and another **Rufous-backed Sibia**, so we drove to another trail. Immediately we found both **Slender-billed** and **Maroon Orioles** and a couple of **Velvet-fronted Nuthatches** which could be watched at eye-level as we were standing at the top of a steep slope. Moving on down into the valley the light wasn't too good as the sun had dipped over the surrounding hills but there was a fair amount of activity and we found a nice **Slaty-backed Flycatcher**, **Bianchi's Warbler**, **Ashy** and **Mountain Bulbuls** and heard a **Bay Woodpecker** in the distance before returning to the vehicle.

Day 7 Thursday 19th January

We began on the ridge after a later breakfast with the sun creeping over the distant hills providing us with some welcoming warmth, as well as a couple of **White-browed Laughingthrushes** feeding on the grassy verge beside the road. Just along the road a short distance we keyed in on another **Aberrant Bush-warbler** that eventually showed quite well and then a **Siberian Rubythroat** was spotted as it hopped out into an open area along a narrow track. From here we drove over to the border post again and tried to boost our Myanmar list but only succeeded in finding **Yellow-streaked Warbler** and **Grey-breasted Prinia** to add to our Thai list, and there was also **Olive-backed Pipit** and **Daurian Redstart** here as well. From here we drove to another trail and slowly walked down into a superb valley with excellent forested habitat where a flock of **Silver-eared Mesia** were much appreciated. As we watched them a pair of **Mountain Tailorbirds** and **Yellow-bellied Warbler** appeared and then we had an amazing half an hour display from a group of four **Bay Woodpeckers** as they called, flew over, called some more and perched in various trees around the car park. Not something you see very often! And then we headed down into the valley where a calling **White-necked Laughingthrush** remained just a voice in the undergrowth which was a bit disappointing, although the views of 4 **Speckled Piculets** which were part of a mixed feeding flock were superb. There was also **Small Niltava**, **Slaty-backed Flycatcher**, **Chestnut-vented** and **Velvet-fronted Nuthatches**, **Himalayan Black Bulbul**, **Scarlet-faced Liocichla** and **Davison's Leaf-warbler** present. After lunch back at the lodge, during which time we saw 2 **Rufous-bellied Niltavas**, **Slaty-backed Forktail**,



This Scaly Thrush was wintering behind a restaurant at Doi Ang Khang.



A regular sound of the forests is the call of Large Niltava, but you don't always get to see one feeding out in the open like this individual!



This male Himalayan Bluetail is absolutely gorgeous.

Hill Blue Flycatcher and **White-capped Water-redstart** we headed down to the fields near Thaton. Driving along we saw **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Black-winged Cuckooshrike** before reaching the lowlands where **Black-shouldered Kite**, **Paddyfield Pipit**, **Black-collared Starling** and **Grey-faced Buzzard** showed well. Our best sighting was of a female **Jerdon's Bushchat** that was scoped at a stake-out and along the same riverine area dominated by tall grasses we also saw **Yellow-bellied Prinia**, **Dusky Warbler**, **Bluethroat** and a couple of **Barred Buttonquails** as well.

Day 8 Friday 20th January

Another day and another mountain – this time Doi Lang. The continuing feature of this tour is the availability of feeding stations set up by Thai photographers and there were two here today, the first of these was behind some huts strung along the road. At first just groups of noisy **Dark-backed Sibias** arrived, but soon after a superb **Spectacled Barwing** appeared and began to tuck into the fruit put out for the birds. Then a female **Himalayan Bluetail** flew in, and a male **Large Niltava** followed soon after. Just a few hundred metres further along the road at another feeding station, two normally shy, retiring and extremely skulking **White-gorgeted Flycatchers** fed out in the open, along with a pair of **Himalayan Bluetails**. Overhead a few **Cook's Swifts** (recently split from **Pacific Swift**) flew over. Dan spotted **Chestnut-crowned Warbler** and **Black-throated Tit** which gave nice views and then we birded along the road for several kilometres finding a fruiting tree with **Crested Finchbill**, **Rufous-backed Sibia** and **Striated Bulbul** present. Other birds seen included groups of **Grey-cheeked** and **Rufous-winged Fulvettas**, **Streaked Spiderhunter**, **Whiskered Yuhina**, **Brown-throated Treecreeper**, **Eurasian Jay**, **Shikra** and **Mountain Hawk-eagle**. A **Black-eared Shrike-babbler** was found by Frank before we stopped at a scenic spot along the ridge where we could look over into Myanmar and countless forested ridges stretching to the horizon. The afternoon was a little slower so we headed down the mountain, stopping to view a male **Rufous-bellied Niltava** at a stake-out before reaching an open area of paddyfields half way down the mountain. Here we saw **Himalayan** and **Grey-faced Buzzards**, as well as our first **Oriental Turtle-doves**. Further down we stopped by a large tree to look at some **Bronzed** and **Spangled Drongos**, as well as a **Grey Treepie** and whilst here we heard the distinctive call of **Mountain Bamboo-partridge** somewhere close by. After half an hour we managed a few glimpses of these shy birds before we had to leave.

Day 9 Saturday 21st January

We drove for around an hour to the Golden Triangle, the border area where Myanmar, Laos and Thailand all meet and in



Spectacled Barwing can be found at mid to high elevations across south-east Asia. This bird on Doi Lang was with a flock of Dark-backed Sibias beside the road.



An amazingly confiding pair of White-gorgeted Flycatchers were present on Doi Lang.



Another incredibly confiding Himalayan Bluetail from Doi Lang. This time a female gave point-blank views.

particular a large lake where we boarded a boat to explore the area. Wildfowl were particularly flighty, possibly due to one or two other small boats present with people fishing and it took a while to get decent views of any ducks at all and initially all we saw were **Indian Spot-billed Duck**, **Northern Pintail**, **Mallard** and **Gadwall**. But when a group of 20+ **Ferruginous Ducks** were seen we thought things were beginning to look up and they sure were, as all of a sudden a shout of “**Baer’s Pochard**” rang out and people jockeyed for position on the rolling boat, scopes trained and binoculars raised in a state of high panic. But there it was, possibly not going over board to describe this as one of the ‘Holy Grails’ of the wildfowl world swimming leisurely with its cousins several hundred metres away. Well it doesn’t get much better than that and we then had time to enjoy the beautiful sunny day and plenty of other commoner species around the lake such as **Purple Swamphens**, **Eastern Marsh Harriers**, **White-throated Kingfishers**, **Oriental Reed-warbler** and others. Once back ashore both **Purple** and **Olive-backed Sunbirds** and a fine **Burmese Shrike** were seen before we drove off to the border area and enjoyed another excellent meal in a restaurant overlooking the Mekong River, during which we watched an **Osprey** fly from Laos, over the slim strip of Myanmar and into Thailand – quite an unique sighting. Afterwards we checked out the riverbank and hadn’t walked more than a hundred metres when a pair of **Long-billed Plovers** were sighted and we spent some time watching them in the scopes. A flock of around 200 **Small Pratincoles** flying around the large sandbanks in spectacular fashion was very distracting and a **River Lapwing** was a nice find as well. After checking out a small grassland reserve during the heat of mid-afternoon we drove through the tranquil Thai rural countryside to a temple overlooking a marsh and scrubland and waited for an hour or so. Eventually the reason for our visit became apparent when firstly several **Eastern Marsh Harriers** appeared and then more and more. Finally a ghostly black and white apparition appeared over the opposite hill and the unmistakable black-hooded form of a male **Pied Harrier** came into view. Not one, or two but at least 30 stonking males, as well as several females all came in to roost. They flew past us continuously for over an hour, hunting the grassland opposite our vantage point before settling on the bare ground and allowing us perfect scope views, before heading off into the taller grass to roost. What a way to end one of the best days of the tour.

Day 10 Sunday 22nd January

A last fling in the mountains saw us birding Doi Lang again this morning and almost immediately bumped into a what was probably the best flock we had encountered during the week. At least 3 **Scarlet-faced Liocichlas** flew across the road in front of us got the ball rolling, and then we had **Spectacled Barwing**, **Crested Finchbill**, **Large Niltava**, **Rufous-gorgeted**



Dark-backed Sibia is another common bird of the northern mountains.



This Burmese Shrike was particularly cooperative!



It is always a delight to get decent views of Speckled Piculet.

Flycatcher and **Rufous-backed Sibia** all in the same large tree. From here we drove up to the top ridge where the sun was just warming the hillsides and **Mrs Gould's Sunbirds** began calling and feeding around us. It took a while but eventually a pair of **Fire-tailed Sunbirds** were found feeding in a flowering tree beside the road, followed by a flyby **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** – a scarce bird here. With time passing all too quickly we worked our way back down the mountain seeing **Stripe-breasted Woodpecker**, **Chestnut-crowned Warbler**, **Davison's** and **Buff-barred Leaf-warblers** and a mixed flock of **Fork-tailed** and **Cook's Swifts**. Eventually we had to leave and return to the hotel for lunch before driving to Chiang Mai and taking the short internal flight back to Bangkok and prepare ourselves for the next Central Thailand tour starting tomorrow.

Nick Bray.

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