

Bird Watching in Myanmar

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I organised a 12 day birding tour of Myanmar (previously known as Burma) for eight of us through Thiri Htin Hla of Wildbird Adventures Travel and Tours in February 2013. The itinerary was based on those organised by Thiri for bird tour companies such as Birdquest and Bird Tour Asia. Our guide, Gideon Sa Myo Zaw, a senior guide with the company did an excellent job and ensured that the tour went very smoothly.



We started in Yangon with a visit to the Hlawga National Park, formerly a wildlife park, and we saw many mammals such Sambar Deer and Muntjac, which we would not see again on the tour. On an island in the lake there were large numbers of Asian Open-billed Storks.

In the late afternoon we visited the Shwe Dagon Paya (pagoda) in Yangon, said to be 2500 years old, though it has been destroyed by earthquakes and rebuilt. The pagoda is spectacular with its 100 metre-high central stupa covered in gold-leaf and the top is encrusted with 4500 diamonds. The main pagoda with the adjacent shrines is the most sacred of Buddhist sites in Myanmar. The pagoda, which is reached by escalators or elevators, was full of local people visiting individual shrines, praying and making offerings. For birders there was a Peregrine Falcon perched on the main stupa. We descended in time to see the nightly exodus of millions of small Asian Wrinkled-lipped Bats from their day roosts within the temple. A hunting Common Kestrel succeeded in catching a bat.



The next day we took the flight to Bagan in the "dry zone" of central Myanmar for a two day stay. Over 2000 temples remain in a 26 square mile area around Bagan. Construction of these temples commenced in the 9th century. For birders, Bagan means four of the six endemic birds of Myanmar. These birds were found in the scrubland around the dry fields surrounding the Saytanargyi Pagoda, which is not visited by tourists. Easy to see were Burmese Bushlark (a



more brightly coloured version of our Horsfield's Bushlark) and White-throated Babblers. Eventually we saw the third and fourth endemics – the Hooded Treepie and the beautiful Jerdon's Minivet. Another highlight was finding a Spotted Owlet roosting on a stupa spire. Having ticked off the endemics as well as other birds, we went sight-seeing at the Ananda Pahto, where we saw the four huge Buddha statues, the Ananda Ok Kyaung, a small sanctuary featuring 18th century murals depicting life in Bagan, and a local market.

In the late afternoon we took a trip by launch along the Ayeyarwady River. Highlights were a group of Small Pratincoles, several Sand Larks, White-tailed Stonechats and four species of wagtail (White, Grey, Citrine and Yellow).



From Bagan we went west to Nat Ma Taung National Park (Mt Victoria) near Kanpetlet in the Chin State. The trip in three 4WD vehicles took all day along rough dirt roads. Along the way, in the deciduous teak forest, we searched without success for the White-rumped Pygmy-Falcon. However, we had great views of the spectacular White-bellied Woodpecker as well as Alexandrine, Red-breasted and Grey-headed Parakeets.

The drivers set up a picnic table and stools for our lunch with flasks of hot water for tea and coffee. We arrived around 6 pm at Pinewood Villa, an eco-lodge renowned for its friendly staff and good food on the edge of the national park. At 3095 metres, Mt Victoria is the highest peak in the Chin Hills, an extension of the eastern Himalayas. We spent two full days birding at various altitudes above the lodge



in the evergreen oak and rhododendron forest and a third day birding in partially cleared scrubland nearer to the Pinewood Villa at around 2000 metres. Gideon used the call of the Collared Owlet to attract birds such as Laughing Thrushes and Fulvettas. At the lower elevation we had particularly good views of the near endemic Chin Hills Wren-babbler when one bird danced on and called from a bare branch beside the path. Each night Chris Gladwin heard Hodgson's Frogmouth; on the last night he and Allan got up at 3 am, played the call and got views of this tiny frogmouth, which is about the same size as our Owlet-Nightjar. On the road back to Bagan, we saw a Himalayan Woodpecker and an Asian Barred Owlet as well as a pair of Giant Squirrels.

On the following day we flew from Bagan to Heho – only a 30 minute flight but the drive takes 12 hours! Heho provides access for tourists to Lake Inle. The lake is famous for its leg rowers, who row and stabilise their fishing boats by wrapping one leg around a single oar at the rear of the boat. We spent the day travelling by motor canoes on the lake looking at monasteries, fishermen and birds. We visited the Shue HinTha Monastery, better known to tourists as the “Jumping Cat” Monastery as the monks have taught their cats to jump for the tourists though, while we were there the monks were eating their lunch and the cats were more interested in sleep than in performing for tourists. The Monastery is on an island in the marshes and was surrounded by homes made of bamboo and built on stilts and by crops of tomatoes and other vegetables growing on floating beds in the marshes. We ate our lunch on the balcony of a restaurant overlooking the busy traffic along a canal.



Our last two days were spent travelling to and then birding around Kalaw, an ex-British Hill Station at 1335 metres. On the way we eventually caught up with the near endemic Collared Mynas as they fed with White-vented Mynas and Vinous-breasted Starlings in flowering Bombax trees. In the afternoon both the birders and the birds were discouraged by the heat and the wind on a fruitless walk looking for the

secretive Naung Mung Scimitar-Babbler . The next day we enjoyed a pleasant walk along a valley to the Yay Ayekan Reservoir. Our walk took us along narrow paths beside the rice paddies, where we saw a Ruddy-breasted Crake, and then along a road beside fields of vegetables and strawberries. Highlights were the near endemic Burmese Yuhina, a Speckled Piculet (a tiny woodpecker), the very colourful Long-tailed Broadbill and a pair of Asian Emerald Cuckoos. Along the stream were White-crowned Forktails and in the sky a displaying Crested Goshawk. Perched on the dam wall, we ate our hot lunch of fried noodles bought for us by scooter from a restaurant in Kalaw while watching a White-capped Redstart and a Grey Wagtail. Kalaw is Gideon’s home town and we were invited to join his family at his home for evening drinks and nibbles before dinner.



Everywhere the accommodation was comfortable with en suite bathrooms and air conditioning when required. At the Pinewood Villa in the Chin Hills, the girls generally enjoyed hot water bottles on the cold nights – though one bottle did leak! Hot water for showers was patchy in most hotels. We all enjoyed the food especially in Kalaw. Burmese food is full of subtle flavours and much less spicy than Thai food. For lunch, Gideon would phone ahead and the food would be on the table by the time that we had washed our hands.

A very memorable trip.