

Birding Snippets

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Marathon birding in NW Thailand Part 1 : Mae Hia Agricultural Research Centre



Green Bee-eater
Merops orientalis
A common open country species

Mountains have always managed to draw people. The Dois (mountains) of northwestern Thailand are no different. Doi Inthanon is the highest mountain in Thailand and hosts some of the higher altitude species not found elsewhere in the kingdom. Also the area is at the most southeastern end of the Himalayan foothills. As such, it is host to an interesting array of avifauna with affinities to Himalayan species.

Ben Lee and I spent a week birding Doi Inthanon, Mae Hia, Doi Chiang Dao, Doi Angkhang, Doi Lang and Huai Hong Khrai, the royal project just outside Chiang Mai. We also took in Sri Lanna National Park en route. And we managed to cover all these sites in just 7 days! Whew!

Map of
northwest Thailand

The places visited
are indicated with
green dots.

The international airport
is at Chiang Mai city



1st Stop – Lowland Birding at Mae Hia

We landed in Chiang Mai International Airport in the morning and got hold of our rental 4WD vehicle. We needed a 4WD because we would be going up the rutted road of Doi Chiang Dao. We saw **Red-whiskered Bulbul** just outside the airport's car park. Then we stopped at one of the many 7-Eleven convenience stores in town to get some supplies and after missing a turn, found our way onto the 'canal road' that leads to Mae Hia Agricultural Research Centre. The entrance was located along a bend and we naturally missed the turn-off! No worries, we just needed to make a U-turn, somewhere in front. Reaching a traffic junction not far off, I noticed some foodstalls and reckoned that this place would make a possible lunch-stop later on. Driving into Mae Hia at 11:15am, I waved my binoculars to the guard and we were allowed in. It was a sunny day.



The environment at Mae Hia.

Mae Hia is located at approximately 500m above sea level. The habitat is mainly open country with a few trees and some bushes. There are also ponds and a wooded area at the back.

Siberian Stonechat
Saxicola maura
male



We drove slowly and were soon greeted by **Green Bee-eaters** and **Black Drongos** perched on the electric wires. Somehow the **Spotted Doves** looked more attractive than the ones back in Singapore. Small flocks of **Scaly-breasted Munias** moved among the long grass.



Black Drongo
Dicurus macrocercus

We mainly drove on the roads, dirt tracks and grassy paths between the fields using the vehicle as a hide, getting out when there were raptors soaring overhead. A number of **Siberian Stonechats** (split from Common Stonechat) were seen amongst the short grass and small bushes. I counted 3 male **Pied Bushchats** and a female. A pipit foraged in the fields – I was hoping for a Richard's but it was a **Paddyfield Pipit** after all.



Paddyfield Pipit
Anthus rufulus

A few **Red-wattled Lapwings** stood quietly under the hot sun and juvenile **Chinese Pond-Herons** skulked among the grasses. It was nice to see a few **Grey-breasted Prinias** as well.

Red-wattled Lapwing
Vanellus indicus





Common Kingfisher
Alcedo atthis

Ashy Woodswallows
Artamus fuscus

Near a pond, several **Ashy Wood-Swallows** perched on electric cables and a **Common Kingfisher** wisely perched in the shade of a man-made structure, overlooking the pond.



Oriental Honey Buzzard
Pernis ptilorhynchus

As it got hotter, a raptor was soon seen soaring in the blue sky. It turned out to be an **Oriental Honey Buzzard**. Soon after, a smaller raptor was soaring in circles and it would prove to be a **Common Kestrel** (lifer).

More Green Bee-eaters were seen and then 4 **Coppersmith Barbets** showed up on a tree. A juvenile **Brown Shrike** surveyed the grasses from a small tree and a little **Common Tailorbird** foraged amongst the leaves.

Chinese Pond Heron
Ardeola bacchus
winter plumage





Common Kestrel
Falco tinnunculus

Moving on towards the edge of the wooded area, a **Greater Coucal** was seen by the roadside. We found some bird activity on a flowering tree – the flowers were red in colour. Amongst the little honey seekers were a single male **Purple Sunbird** (lifer) and a few **Olive-backed Sunbirds**. Then there was one with a distinctly long tail – woohoo – it was a brilliant male **Mrs Gould’s Sunbird** (lifer)! It is supposed to be a montane species occurring above 1200m but this gem was feeding right here at 450m above sea level (according to my Casio triple sensor watch anyway). I guess this must be a low-altitude record for the species - incredible!

Mrs Gould’s Sunbird
Aethopyga gouldiae
male, at Mae Hia
– an altitudinal
aberration?



Golden-fronted Leafbird
Chloropsis aurifrons

We also had a nice pair of **Golden-fronted Leafbirds** (lifer). **Sooty-headed Bulbuls** were very much in evidence, as were a number of **Japanese White-eyes** (lifer). Driving into the wooded area, we had a **Red-billed Blue Magpie** (lifer) flying across the road.

Japanese White-eye
Zosterops japonicus



How can I forget to mention the ubiquitous **White-breasted Waterhens** and another species I often ignore – **Rock Pigeon!** The distinctive calls of the Asian Koel were also heard.

Sooty-headed Bulbul
Pycnonotus aurigaster



We had planned to bird til 1pm but stayed until 3pm and were quite hungry by then! We went back to the foodstalls which we had seen earlier when we overshot the entrance to Mae Hia. There were few customers as lunch time was over. We ordered *mi haeng* and it was the most delicious bowl of noodles I've had for ages – *aroy maak!* (means very delicious in Thai). I couldn't help but to order a second bowl. Typical of Thai fare, the portion is not big but it is equally inexpensive – 25 baht a bowl.

Mi Haeng
(noodles, dry)
Simple but delicious!
The soup was heavenly!



After a most satisfying lunch, we made our way to Doi Inthanon National Park – an hour plus drive away...