

# Birding Snippets

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## A Pitta a Day! :Birding in Southern Thailand



**Gurney's Pitta** *Pitta gurneyi*, male.

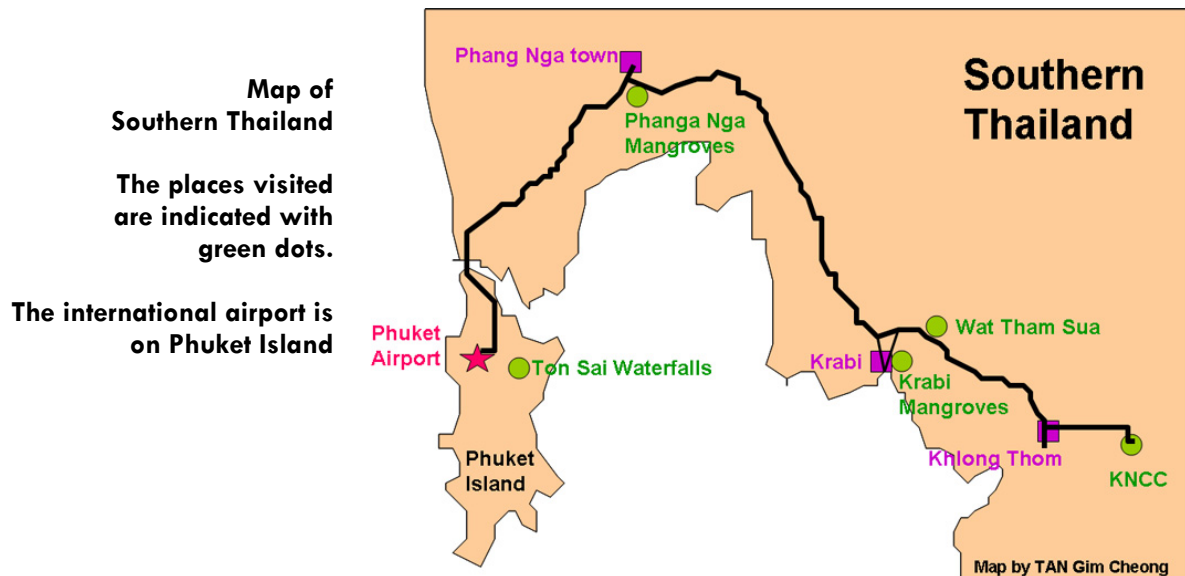
**A 4-day 3-night trip  
to find Gurney's Pitta.**

**Other highlights include  
Banded Pitta,  
Mangrove Pitta,  
Moustached Hawk Cuckoo,  
Brown-winged Kingfisher,  
Ruddy Kingfisher  
and  
Streaked Wren Babbler.**

Gurney's Pitta is one of the rarest birds in the world. It is listed as no. 12 in the "100 birds to see before you die" list. Rediscovered at Kha Nor Chuchi in 1986 after a break of 50 years, it created a sensation at the quiet rural site in Southern Thailand. It was subsequently realized that there was an overlooked 1952 specimen deposited at the American Museum of Natural History, reducing the "missing break" to 34 years. Nevertheless, that did not dampen the joy of its rediscovery.

For a period of time, conservationists were extremely worried for the survival of the species due to its small population, all concentrated within a limited area subjected to human disturbance. Fortunately, the

sizeable population subsequently discovered in neighbouring Tennaserim, Southern Myanmar seems secure, at least for now. However, for practical reasons, Khao Nor Chuchi remains the only accessible site for birders seeking to see this rare and beautiful bird. For Southeast Asian birders, it was a matter of time before a pilgrimage was made to see Gurney's Pitta.



### Pit Stop enroute – Phang Nga Mangroves (Mangrove Pitta)

**Day 1**  
**Weather: Rain!**



**Boardwalk at Phang Nga Mangroves**

After a short flight, Felix and I landed in Phuket airport. We picked up our rental car – a Honda Jazz and easily found our way to Phang Nga Mangroves after a 40 minute drive, following the roads signs. It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon when we pulled into the parking area in a drizzle, but we were not deterred for we had come "all the way". The big signboard, despite the lack of English words, is an indication that this is a park of some permanence. The 'boardwalk' was actually made of concrete! And, the smooth floor tiles which was wet due to the rain actually made the 'boardwalk' rather slippery. We saw a medium sized bird zip through the mangrove but saw little else.

After an hour, the rain eased and we went to the other side of the mangrove where a road leads to a small river to check things out. With the sun now out, it was not long before the 'uwuk-uwuk' calls of the **Mangrove Pitta** were heard. A small stream flowed between the mangroves and the road and we soon located 2 of the beautiful birds foraging here, on the mud, moving



**Asian Brown Flycatcher**  
*Muscicapa dauurica*

about amongst the roots. The birds must have been in view for about 15-20 minutes, giving us great front, rear and side views of its colourful plumage. The blue on the rump was especially alluring!



**Mangrove Pitta**  
*Pitta megarhyncha*

© Tan Gim Cheong



**Stripe-throated Bulbul**  
*Pycnonotus finlaysoni*

As we marveled at the pitta, two **Stripe-throated Bulbuls** made an appearance. A small flock of **Striated Swallows** flew about and, at times, rested on the rooftop of a house. A little brown job in the form of an **Asian Brown Flycatcher** sallied from a favoured branch. A **Dark-necked Tailorbird** skulked in the bushes and its fledgling soon betrayed its presence with rapid partial wing-spreading, begging for food. A **Little Egret** scoured the muddy riverbed and the calls of the Plaintive Cuckoo could be heard. The ubiquitous **Spotted Doves** and **Common Mynas** were also visibly present.



**Striated Swallow**  
*Hirundo striolata*



**Dark-necked Tailorbird**  
*Orthotomus atrogularis*  
fledgling

We left at about 5 o'clock, which was much later than we planned, and had 'noodles-dry' at a roadside stall at Krabi town. After dinner, we walked over to a 7-Eleven to stock up on snacks and water. After Khlong Thom town, we were driving along a dark country road when a nightjar suddenly flew across the road and landed by the roadside. We stopped the car and, looking through our binos, found it to be a **Large-tailed Nightjar**, a rather common Southeast Asian nightbird.

When the road turned into a dirt track, we knew we had overshot our accommodation! Fortunately, it was just a few hundred metres back up the road, the small lighted 'Morakot Resort' signboard was not that obvious to the uninitiated! While chatting to a group of birders in the dining area, we heard the call of the Oriental Bay Owl and we were right at the resort! Unfortunately, it started to drizzle and by the time we were ready to go find it, the bird had gone silent and unresponsive.

***Bird of the Day: Mangrove Pitta.***

## **Day 2 – Banded Pitta! (Khao Nor Chuchi)**

**Day 2**  
**Weather: Sunny**

Daybreak is at around 6 o'clock in the morning and that is also the time that breakfast is available at the Morakot Resort, however the girls manning the resort were kind enough to let us have breakfast 15 minutes earlier than usual.



**Banded Pitta**  
*Pitta guajana*  
male

**I'm sorry this is  
out of focus!  
I guess it just illustrates the  
difficulties of  
photographing these birds!**

We drove to the entrance and found our way to Trail B. Then, we crossed a partially broken wooden bridge and found ourselves on a well-defined, though narrow, trail through the forest. **Siberian Blue Robins** are typically active in the early morning and we saw both male and female on the trail. Felix was ahead when he suddenly stopped and said "**Banded Pitta! On the trail**". It took me a while before I managed to see the bird popping its head above the vegetation. A little of the breast could be seen and I was able to make out that it was a male. As we tried to get closer for better looks, the bird hopped along the trail keeping its distance. However, it remained on the trail for some time, offering pretty good views of its whole body.

A well camouflaged male **Green Broadbill** gamely appeared by the trail and a Felix saw a Black-capped Babbler by going off the trail a bit. We heard a Rufous-collared Kingfisher and as I ventured near a small stream, it flushed and took flight in a flurry of feathers. Other birds could be heard calling but the vegetation

was too thick to see much. Actually I did not put in effort to find these calling birds as I had seen them elsewhere. These included Chestnut-rumped Babbler, Black and Yellow Broadbill. Sooty-capped Babbler, Rufous-crowned Babbler, Spectacled Bulbul, Orange-breasted Trogon, Red-bearded Bee-eater, Red-throated Barbet and what sounded like Fulvous-chested Jungle Flycatcher. On the way out, we had nice views of a male **Rufous-winged Philentoma** by the trail and we bumped into a male **Banded Pitta** again!

**Rufous-winged Philentoma**  
*Philentoma pyrhoptera*  
male



**Siberian Blue Robin**  
*Luscinia cyane*  
male  
A typical early riser

The moment we hit the main track, we found 2 majestic **Crested Serpent Eagles** soaring right overhead. On the main track itself, we also saw **Peaceful Doves**. The musical call of the **Abbott's Babbler** was heard and we soon located an individual.



**Crested Serpent Eagle**  
*Spilornis cheela*

## The enticing Emerald Pool

**Day 2**  
**Weather: Sunny!**  
**Noon break by the pool**

By now it was getting hot and we strolled towards the Emerald Pool. On the short boardwalk leading to the pool, we could see clear water flowing under some sections. The shallow pool itself was a shimmering light emerald, very clear and terribly inviting. It was fed by clear running water which tumbled into the pool in a mini-waterfall, just nice to stand under and get an invigorating shoulder massage.

**The crystal clear waters  
of the  
Emerald Pool**



**Siberian Blue Robin**  
*Luscinia cyane*  
**female**

In fact, most visitors come here purely to relax in the pool. Sitting on the clean benches by the pool, I looked at my boots, leech socks, long pants and long-sleeve shirt and thought about how nice it would have been if I had a change of clothes! That would allow me to jump into the inviting waters and cool down. I resolved that I would have to come back another day, perhaps tomorrow. It was very clean all around the pool. We saw two caretakers sweeping the grounds and discovered that eating is not allowed! No wonder it was so clean.

## Afternoon at KNCC

**Day 2 Afternoon**  
**Weather: Sunny**

Back at the Morakot Resort, we saw a **Large-billed Crow** while having lunch. After having our fill, we escaped to the air-conditioned coolness of our cosy room. Outside our room, Felix found an Asian Brown Flycatcher and 2 Olive-winged Bulbuls calling actively.

Later, we went out to look for Mr. Somporn. We saw a group of people sitting at a little hut and asked but nobody seemed to know him. Then out of the blue, a

smiling man appeared from the little shop behind and it was him! He spoke absolutely no English, and I very little Thai but I managed to fix a meeting time tonight to do some owling.

Along the plantation road, we saw a flock of **Scaly-breasted Munias**. We drove up the rather rough and sometimes steep slope and explored a fair bit farther in before back-tracking to the U-trail.

### The Famous U-Trail

**Day 2**  
**Late afternoon**  
**Weather: Good**



**Only the 2 supporting poles  
of the U-Trail signboard  
remain!**

There was no signpost whatsoever at the U Trail, it was simply the first trail on the right as one drives in and the only clues came from the a few sticks at the entrance which were probably the remains of a signboard and a very small clearing at the roadside which was just big enough for one car to be parked.

It was a narrow trail and we found a small gully where countless others must have sat and waited. A single call of Gurney's Pitta raised the tension for a while. Unfortunately it came from behind thick vegetation and was not repeated. He trudged on and encountered an inquisitive **Orange-breasted Trogon**. An Asian Paradise Flycatcher called repeatedly but gave only flashes of feathers. A **Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker** was more cooperative and came low on the shrubs to feed. As it was starting to get dark, we saw an **Abbott's Babbler** searching for its last meal for the day.

After dinner, we went to meet Mr. Somporn and he brought us around the usual haunts of the nightbirds but it was all quiet tonight and we came away empty handed. We'll just have to try again tomorrow night!

***Bird of the Day: Banded Pitta.***

### B-Trail Gully here we come.....to wait.

**Day 3**  
**Weather: Good**

This morning, we went to stake out the often described gully off Trail B. A number of sightings of Gurney's Pitta had been made here and the location is well described in the bird log at the Morakot Resort. Basically, around 100m after the Trail B/C junction, there is a discernible trail to the left, go in for about 100m or so and there's a small but rather shallow gully, that's the place. Another birder joined us and we sat on the slope above the gully and simply waited.



**Moustached Hawk Cuckoo**  
*Cuculus vagans*  
at high ISO setting!  
I think the 'moustache' is quite clear in this pic.

**Grey-cheeked Bulbuls** came and went and a female **Green Broadbill** showed up to feed on the small fruits of a tree less than 10 metres away from where I sat. It was pretty quiet and Felix decided to check out Trail C. Moments later, a male **Red-throated Barbet** came to the same plant to savour the little fruits as well. It was nice to see this bird which we had been hearing the whole time the day before but did not get to see it, the usual experience with barbets!



**Green Broadbill**  
*Calyptomena viridis*  
female

Sitting at a spot quietly can sometimes be productive and this time round I was rewarded with a cuckoo which flew in, almost right over me. Perching with its back towards me, it had the 'jizz' of a Hawk-Cuckoo. As I looked at it through my binoculars, it turned to look at me, revealing a well defined 'moustache' – it was the secretive and seldom seen **Moustached Hawk-Cuckoo!** So secretive is this bird that Morten Strange wrote that it occurs in Taman Negara, Malaysia, based on call but nobody ever sees it!



**Red-throated Barbet**  
*Megalaima mystacophanos*  
male

We also saw the **Siberian Blue Robin** in the early morning, as usual. Black-and-Yellow Broadbills and Black-capped Babblers were heard calling; the broadbill from above and the babbler from the undergrowth. On Trail C, Felix found two Chestnut-winged Babblers, a Rufous-crowned Babbler and a Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker.

Back at Morakot Resort, we heard the **Red-throated Barbet** calling right above our room and after much searching, found it at the top of a tree partially blocked by some palm leaves. I was glad Felix managed to see it this time round. An **Asian Brown Flycatcher** was seen and a Plaintive Cuckoo heard.

## Krabi Mangroves. (Mangrove Pitta - what else?)

**Day 3 afternoon**  
**Weather: Hot!**

We drove to Krabi and found the signposted Maritime Resort quite easily. **Common Mynas** were everywhere and we found a **Black Drongo**. A call rang through the air repeatedly and after some time we saw the owner – a **Lineated Barbet**, flying about the degraded mangroves. There was even a couple of Ostriches in an enclosure, but that wouldn't be considered a tick.

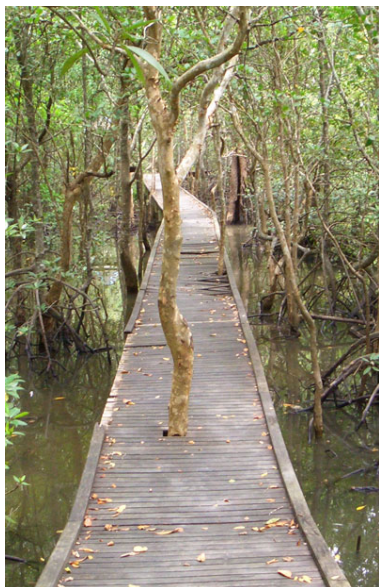


**Krabi Mangrove Park**

Farther down the road into town, we arrived at the Krabi Mangrove Park and found the boardwalk to be walkable despite a few broken planks here and there. It was close to high noon and activity was expectedly very low. Reaching the end of the boardwalk, we decided to proceed for lunch and return later.

We drove, or rather, 'felt' our way around town and found a few restaurants lining the river mouth, facing the sea. They were built on stilts, giving them a rather nice atmosphere. We had come here as fellow birders had seen the Mangrove Whistler while having lunch! Alas, it was not to be for us. Nevertheless, lunch was accompanied by the sweet musical notes of the **Flyeater** and the loud screeching of a **Collared Kingfisher**.

We returned to the Krabi Mangrove Park and the first bird to greet us was a **Pied Fantail**. A little farther in, we found a male **Ruby-cheeked Sunbird** (lifer) with extensive glistening green cap. Then, something flew and landed nearby – it was the female, completing the couplet!



**Boardwalk at Krabi Mangrove**

At the end of the boardwalk, I tried to relax at the pavilion but had to fend off mosquitoes. A little breeze gave some respite from both the humidity and the mozzies. I had only sat for a few minutes when our target bird – the reason for coming to Krabi Mangroves – flew in. It was the **Brown-winged Kingfisher** (lifer). The handsome bird sat on a branch surveying the inlet which was now dry as the tide had gone out. I snapped a few pictures and 'smsed' Felix to come over, quick! As the kingfisher made its way, in stages, up the inlet, I shadowed it like a spy so that I can point it out to Felix when he comes around (now where was he?) It turned out he was enjoying views of a Ruddy Kingfisher and arrived to see the Brown-winged Kingfisher before my sms finally reached his handphone!

**Brown-winged Kingfisher**  
*Halcyon amauroptera*



The boardwalk was one way in, same way out. On the way out, 'uwuk-uwuk' started to fill the air. We moved towards the call, looking up in the trees when suddenly a bright flash of a blue, green, red and buff erupted from the roots and landed farther away. The calls sounded like it had come from above but the **Mangrove Pitta** was actually down on the roots! It was now too far for pictures though still great for viewing. It was quite thrilling as we had so far seen a pitta everyday since arriving in Southern Thailand. Another individual called from a distance and was not seen.

Moving on, I saw a **Ruddy Kingfisher** perched on the top of a vertical pole. The shy bird quickly flew into the vegetation, out of sight. An Ashy Tailorbird bade us goodbye with its calls as we exited the mangroves.

### **Wat Tham Sua – Detour to a Limestone Temple**

**Day 3 Afternoon**  
**Weather: Sunny but shaded**  
**in the limestone areas**

We drove to Wat Tham Sua just out of town. It is signposted and just a short detour along the way back to KNCC. The temple is set amidst limestone outcrops and is a stakeout for a wren-babbler and a whistling-thrush. At the back of the temple grounds, we had to climb up about 80 steps up a flight of stairs and then down about 50 steps to reach the site.

Near the shrine, we bumped into a **Blue Whistling Thrush**, a bird which Felix wanted. The shy bird went behind a tree trunk. We rounded the tree trunk and found the bird on a fallen log. Another individual was seen perching quietly in the shadows of the leaves.

**Blue Whistling Thrush**  
*Myophonus caeruleus*



We arrived at a pretty steep limestone face. The habitat appeared promising and I attempted to lure out my target bird. It responded immediately and soon we were looking at a **Streaked Wren-Babbler** (lifer). Its choice of habitat was quite amazing. It actually clammers about the vertical limestone faces with ease, looking for food. In total, we saw two of these interesting little birds.

**Streaked Wren Babbler**  
*Napothera brevicaudata*



### Detour to a Marsh

**Day 3**  
**Late afternoon**  
**Weather: sunny but comfortable**

We still had daylight and decided to check out a marshy area on the way back to KNCC. We turned off the highway and found a pond. On the bunds stood several **Red-wattled Lapwings**. We also saw two **Watercocks** and **Pond Herons** in winter plumage. At the edges of the pond, we saw **Baya Weaver** and **Brown Shrike**. On the dryer areas, we had **Greater Coucal**, **Purple-backed Starlings**, **Red Turtle-Dove**, **White-throated Kingfisher**, **Spotted Dove**, **Lineated Barbet** and literally tons of **Scaly-breasted Munias**, in several flocks.

**Red-wattled Lapwings**  
*Vanellus indicus*



**Watercock**  
*Gallicrex cinerea*

### Checking out Khlong Thom town

We reached Khlong Thom at dusk and checked out the night market. From Khlong Thom it was just another 20 minutes to KNCC. Thereafter, Felix selected a promising looking restaurant for dinner. The menu was completely in Thai script and impossible for us to decipher. Also, the waitress spoke absolutely no English, which was not too surprising since few tourists visit this town. We struggled to communicate with the waitress in my feeble Thai and, sensing our troubles, a voice sounded from behind, "What would you like to eat?" It turned out this fellow customer seated behind us owns a restaurant in Krabi and deals with English speaking tourists all the time. It was a godsend and she cheerfully translated our requests and in no time our dinner was ordered. We also found out that we had unknowingly chosen the best restaurant in town, with the food being delicious and cheap. It was a satisfying meal and when we left we could see people standing around the front of the stall waiting for their dinner to be cooked and packed - "to-go".

When we arrived at Mr. Somporn's, our hopes were raised when he told us that an owl was seen earlier in the day. We went to the spot it was last seen but failed to locate the bird. It turned out to be another quiet night.

### *Bird of the Day: Brown-winged Kingfisher.*

At the Krabi Mangroves, the smart-looking lifer Brown-winged Kingfisher overshadowed the already seen Mangrove Pitta. It was a tough fight between the secretive Moustached Hawk-Cuckoo and the kingfisher. In the end, I had to give it to the Kingfisher for it was a more cheerful looking bird!

**Day 4 – Gurney's Pitta: Finally!****Day 4**  
**Weather: Good**

When one leaves it to the last day to find the most wanted bird, it creates much anxiety. At day break, Yotin led us to his hide. Felix went in first and I followed behind. I noticed the sloping ground but looked through one of the observation holes of the hide almost immediately and there it was – a brilliant male **Gurney's Pitta** feeding right in front of us!



**Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**  
*Cyornis tickelliae*  
male

I turned and saw Felix still trying to make himself comfortable on the sloping ground! I quickly got his attention and pointed to the front and said "the bird is outside"! He was equally astounded that the bird was already there! After a few moments, the female was located just a few metres away from the male. We spent one and a half hours savouring the brilliant colours of the male and the more subdued but also beautiful plumage of the female. I just could not walk away from the pitta, I had to let it leave first.



**Gurney's Pitta**  
*Pitta gurneyi*  
female

Leaving the hide, we found a male **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher** (lifer) sallying for insects. A few **Puff-throated Babbler**s were heard and seen briefly as they flew amongst the vegetation. While looking at a pair of **Red-throated Sunbirds** (lifer) busy building their nest, two **Black-headed Bulbuls** flew in. We also saw the male **Black-naped Monarch**, **Asian Paradise Flycatcher**, a male **Siberian Blue Robin** and what looked like a female **Yellow-rumped Flycatcher**. The birds heard included Orange-breasted Trogon, Red-crowned Barbet and Little Spiderhunter.

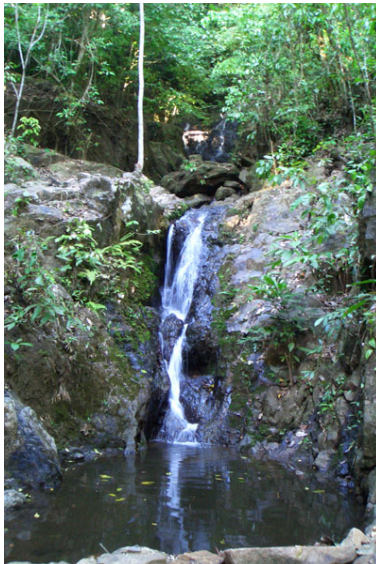
***Bird of the Day: Gurney's Pitta (what else?!)***

**Black-naped Monarch**  
*Hypothymis azurea*  
male



### Rambles enroute to Phuket Airport

We left KNCC and drove to Krabi for a celebratory lunch at KFC. As we approached Phang Nga, it started to rain again, just like the first day! There must be something about Phang Nga making it a magnet for rain. It was just as well, the car had collected quite some dust on the dirt tracks at KNCC. The rain did a good job to wash the front of the car as we drove but the back wasn't wet, so we pulled over at a petrol station to allow the rain to do its work on the back windshield! We stopped by Phang Nga Mangroves again and added a perched **Brahminy Kite** to our list.

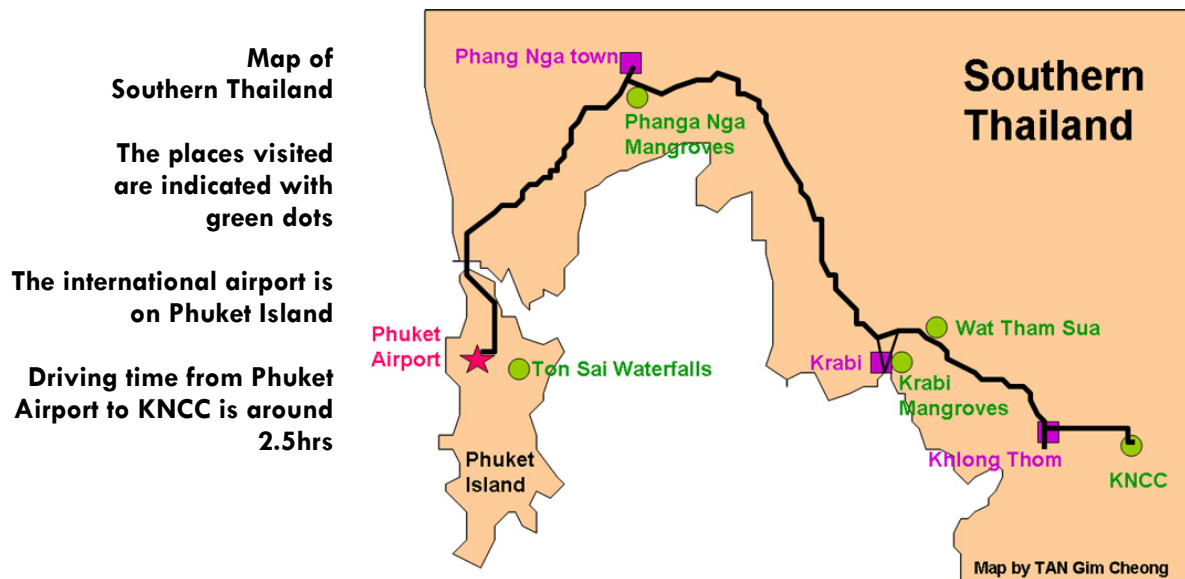


**Ton Sai Waterfalls**

Crossing the bridge into Phuket island, we found ourselves with some time to spare before our flight out, so we headed for Ton Sai Waterfalls. There were only a few people at the small waterfall. Here we added **Grey Wagtail** and **Forest Wagtail**. There was a fruiting fig and the Red-throated Barbet was calling away.

We left Phuket satisfied that we had found what we had come here for – namely Gurney's Pitta. I also found my secondary target, the Brown-winged Kingfisher and was treated to a Moustached Hawk-Cuckoo. Felix also found his Banded Pitta, Blue Whistling Thrush and Brown-winged Kingfisher. Most of the other species occurring here can also be found in Peninsular Malaysia, which for us, is easier to visit. Thus, we were glad to close this chapter of birding at KNCC.

# KNCC Practicalities



**Car Rental** Major international car rental companies have desks at Phuket Airport. There are also a number of local car rental companies on Phuket Island who offer lower rates and offer free delivery and drop-off of vehicles at the airport. I did a search on the internet and found one off-airport company that not only gave a better rate but also charged us just 3 days for our 3-day 5-hour hire. Their website is <http://www.kucarrent.com/> and email address is [info@kucarrent.com](mailto:info@kucarrent.com).

**Finding your way to Phang Nga mangroves** It is easy to get around by car, even without a GPS as the roads are pretty good. Exiting the airport, one can either turn left or right to go to KNCC. We chose to turn right as that led to the highway (turning left is shorter but goes through 'normal roads'). Just follow the black-and-white roads for Phang Nga town initially. After crossing from Phuket Island into Peninsular Thailand, signs for Krabi will start to appear together with those for Phang Nga, both showing the same direction, initially. When the roads indicate Phang Nga 'straight ahead' and Krabi 'turn right', make the right turn. About 50 metres from the junction, there is a bare concrete area on the right where vehicles can be parked. The small Phang Nga mangroves is right there.

**Finding your way to Krabi Mangrove Park** Driving towards Krabi, signs for the next major town 'Trang' will start to appear. There are 2 turn-offs to the right if one wishes to go into Krabi town. There are no foodstalls at the first turn-off. The second turn-off, is a much more lively junction with foodstalls and a 7-Eleven convenience store.

To get to Krabi Mangrove Park, take the second turn-off. After passing the well signposted Maritime Resort & Spa Hotel, keep left and look for a big wooden signboard on the left indicating 'Krabi Mangrove Park'. If a water channel parallel to the road appears on the left, you've missed the turnoff for the mangrove park! Turn left and drive the 100 metres or so to the end and the boardwalk will become visible.

#### Directions to Wat Tham Sua

To get to Wat Tham Sua from Krabi, head towards Trang from the 'lively' junction. Keep left and look for small black-and-white roadsigns indicating Wat Tham Sua. The turn-off (left) for the wat is only around 1km from the 'lively' junction.

#### Directions to Khlong Thom and Morakot Resort (KNCC)



Follow the signs for Trang and look out for signs for Khlong Thom, which is a small town with only one prominent intersection. Before the intersection, blue-and-white signs for 'Khao Pra Bang Khram Wildlife Sanctuary' will appear, indicating a left turn. 100m after this turn, there is a Y-junction, turn right here and put the blue-and-white sign to your left. Roadsigns for Morakot Resort will start to appear and there will be one last right turn to get to the Morakot Resort. KNCC itself is another 300 metres from the resort.

#### Ton Sai Waterfalls for those with time to spare!

Once on Phuket island (from Phang Nga), go straight at the junction which indicates a right turn for the airport. Ton Sai Waterfalls is well signposted along the road. It isn't particularly birdy, but could be used as a diversion to kill time if you are too early for your flight!

#### Accommodation

There are only a few bungalows at the Morakot Resort, so it may be prudent to make reservations. Their email is [pittagurney@yahoo.com](mailto:pittagurney@yahoo.com).

#### Bird Guide

Yotin Meekaeo is *the* guide for KNCC. His rates are not cheap but it would take a big stroke of luck to bump into a Gurney's Pitta without his help. His email is [yotinpitta@hotmail.com](mailto:yotinpitta@hotmail.com). His contact numbers listed in older trip reports maybe out of date, but the staff at the Morakot Resort should have his current phone number. He will take a maximum of 4 birders in his hide, though 3 would be more comfortable.

#### For Photographers

Yotin's hide has 1 big opening for a 500mm and above lens, on tripod. Maximum 2 photographers in the hide and they'll have to take turns. There are other observation holes where a 400mm f/5.6 can be used, but bring a tripod too, the light level is too low even with image stabilizer.