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North Vietnam

Tam Dao and Ba Be National Parks

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Participants: Hans and Ann-Margreth Jornvall



White-eared Night Heron

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This brief trip to North Vietnam was in search of just two targets, Short-tailed Parrotbill and White-eared Night Heron. Despite the limited time and predictably awful weather at Tam Dao, we found both species without much effort.

We arrived into Hanoi International Airport in the mid-morning and headed straight for the hills, to Tam Dao National Park. Tam Dao is an old French hill-station well-known as one of the best sites to find a number of range-restricted species despite its lousy weather. The latter certainly didn't disappoint unfortunately as we were greeted by thick fog and heavy rain! As we walked along the trail we got thoroughly soaked but heard plenty of interesting species, including Grey Laughingthrush, Bianchi's Warbler and Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, although with limited time and a difficult target we had the luxury of not having to tease out or search for these other species. Though we failed to find our target, Short-tailed Parrotbill, on the walk in, it wasn't long into our return walk when a flock of David's Fulvetta sparked us back into life. First of all a couple of Sultan's Tits attempted to add colour to the afternoon but failed miserably due to the thick fog swirling around, then the distinctive high-pitched call of a parrotbill from the trackside bamboo had us searching for a short-tailed, bull-headed shape – and there it was! It hung around for a while although it was largely just a silhouette in the fog, nevertheless we had successfully found Hans's final parrotbill! The following morning we returned, with slightly better weather – it wasn't raining much at least! A sprinkling of birds livened up the walk; more Sultan Tits, fulvettas, wintering Pallas's Warbler and Chestnut Bulbul, and miraculously a beautiful white male Silver Pheasant walking along the track in front of us, rather nonchalantly until he finally noticed us and slipped off into

the dense vegetation. Thankfully we also located another pair of parrotbills and this time they really went wild, buzzing around us, twice circling us, regularly perching out, allowing all the features, including its tiny, thick yellow bill to be seen, even without the binoculars.



Mandarin Ducks and White-eared Night Heron, Ba Be National Park

Our second destination was far to the north, towards the Chinese border. Ba Be National Park had long been neglected by birders until a Birdlife survey in 2010 located a relic population of White-eared Night Heron which had until then been a near-mythical species that known only from a couple of sites in south-east China where sometimes it was possible to see a brief silhouette flying through the trees in the evening darkness. We sat patiently waiting for dawn on the rocky edges of a secluded bay, as the light improved we were rewarded with up to six herons flying in from their feeding areas, perching directly overhead in their staging trees, letting out their deep grunts to each other before heading off to their roosting sites.

After allowing the light to improve, the 'heron guardian', Mr. Chat pointed upwards from our boat to a pair of White-eared Night Herons actually nesting above the water. As they were on eggs we made a hasty retreated to the opposite side of the bay to observe the birds from a safe distance. It gave immense satisfaction seeing these little-known birds, particularly for Hans having missed them previously in China. During our time spent with the herons a few other species appeared – Limestone Leaf Warblers sang around us, a noisy group of White-winged Magpies flew along the opposite side of the valley and three pairs of Mandarin were welcome to see after seeing 5 (including just 1 male!) last year.

With no other targets at the site and satisfied with our views of the heron, we headed back to Hanoi to connect with our evening flights.



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