



birdtour **ASIA**
specialists in asian birding tours

Central Vietnam

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Leader: James Eaton

Participants: Hans and Ann-Margreth Jornvall



Sooty Babbler, Phong Nha-Ke Bang

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This tour was seeking out 8 species that are primarily restricted to central Vietnam and neighbouring Laos, and which have become much more accessible in recent years. Needless to say we found all our targets along with a couple of bonuses and some nice primates to boot.

After a short flight from Saigon to Hue we drove north to Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, situated in north-central Vietnam. The park protects a vast area of limestone karst forest and although much of it remains heavily degraded due to the intense bombing the region received during the American War, it still hosts a number of mammals virtually unknown outside the park.

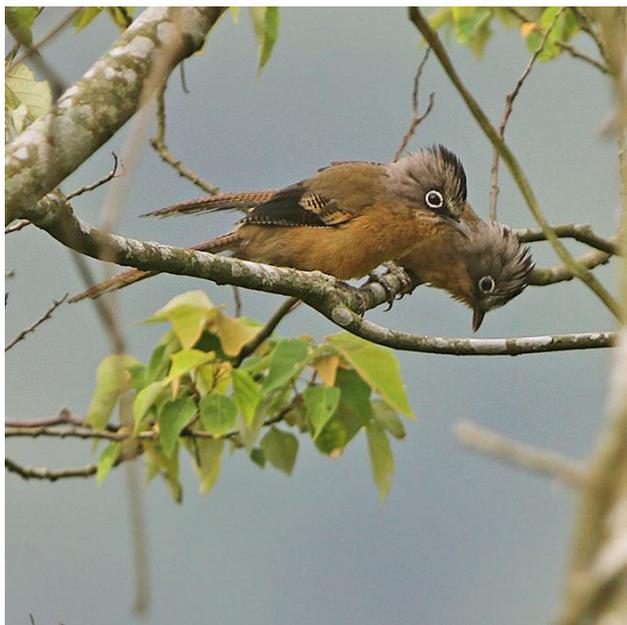
The jaw-dropping landscape comprises huge, limestone cliffs towering over each other with deep gorges and an abundance of greenery, but we had to ignore all this and bash our way through the bush in the sweltering heat of the early afternoon to reach the first site for our most desired, and potentially most dipable bird of the trip – Red-collared Woodpecker. We lifted our binoculars to look at a pair of Silver-breasted Broadbill busy building a nest below us when we suddenly heard some loud knocking followed by a faint, indistinct call – James having co-authored the description of the vocalisations of Red-collared Woodpecker just last year knew the significance of this and within a few tense minutes the whirring of wings close to us revealed something had 'come in', and after a further few anxious moments out popped a male Red-collared Woodpecker, sat motionless right in front of us, first on a broad trunk, then hopping about in the vines and tangles before flitting off – he would proceed to do this on four further occasions before we left, more than satisfied with our start!

Leaving the undergrowth behind, we birded the roadside, picking up a singing Chestnut-winged Cuckoo and a few other bits and pieces, along with a distant small troop of Hatinh Langur high up on the opposite side of the deep gorge, and on our side a stunning troop of 9 Red-shanked Douc – including 4 newborns, possibly Asia's most beautifully marked primate. Vietnam, twinned with neighbouring Laos is a melting pot for endemic primates, hosting the highest number in the world. Unfortunately both these species are endangered, with the Hatinh Langur population almost entirely restricted to this single national park.

Returning to the park the following morning we had another park speciality to find, the karst-loving Sooty Babbler. Our intended search area started off well, picking up a bonus Yellow-vented Green Pigeon, then after a short wait and scan several Sooty Babblers suddenly appeared on the rock face above us and after several minutes a pair dropped down to the roadside treating us to 10 minutes of outstanding views as they crept about quietly through the tangles, thick foliage and occasionally jumped up onto the karst, peering into the crevices to pick out breakfast – small, not-so-quick spiders.

Our intended drive south, along the coast to Bach Ma was broken by a short visit to a patch of exciting lowland forest that deserves greater scrutiny though unfortunately not by us as our time was short. After a flushed Malaysian Night Heron along the logging trail we were hearing Annam Partridge regularly though rather distantly each time before eventually, just as we decided to turn round a pair duetted just off the trail. A very patient 10 minutes followed, with one bird managing to evade detection as it called from the right, having been calling from the left just a minute earlier! Fortunately, one bird still had to reveal itself from the left, and that it did, very slowly and tentatively coming out of the thick undergrowth, twice giving us several, precious seconds, before it became aware of our presence.

After a 4-5 year wait, the summit of Bach Ma National Park is finally open, after resurfacing the old 16km road from the base to the summit. This \$1 million exercise was painful to see as we drove up as already cracks were appearing and the lack of drainage meant a lot of standing water, eroding the sides of the road – a sad indictment knowing that this was all very predictable. Anyway, with a morning at our disposal we had two targets in mind, so we went out before breakfast for a short walk. A singing *klossi* Blue-throated Flycatcher soon appeared and we made sure we got views of this bird, which will surely be split in the near-future, along with a pair of vocal Black-throated Laughingthrush. A dark, densely-foliaged gully soon had us rampaging in to find a quiet spot and after another patient wait, in popped a pair of Indochinese Wren Babblers – one bird choosing well concealed perches to call from while the other hopped about around us as it fed, noisily in the dry leaf-litter. We were caught in two minds at one point as a Blue-rumped Pitta began calling just before the wren babblers revealed themselves, but the pitta would have to wait. When we did get around to the pitta it kept us waiting for a considerable length of time, delaying our breakfast before deciding it had had enough and actually flew off over the canopy from the slope above us – quite amazing seeing a pitta do this! Fortunately, his mate was kinder to us, and opted to stand and hop through the open area we were already waiting in.



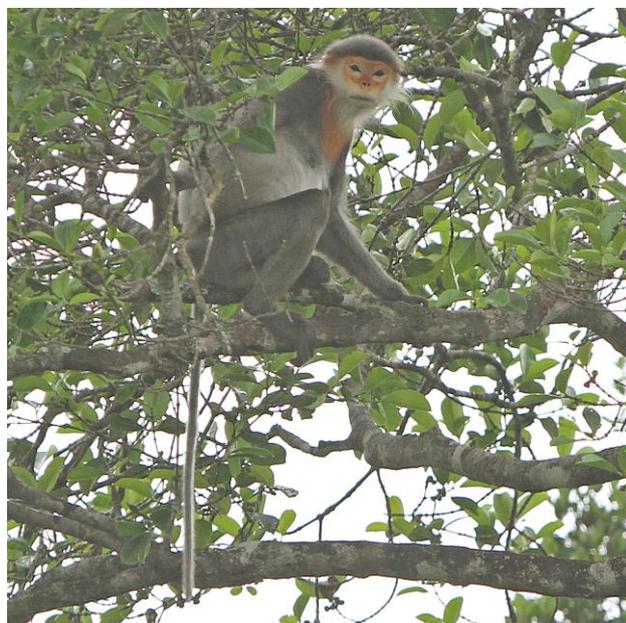
Black-crowned Barwing and Black-hooded Laughingthrush

With time on our side we headed for the next target a day early, which was timed to perfection as the moment we got out of the car, before we had even closed the doors an unmistakable silhouette fluttered across a gap in the scrub opposite us, our binoculars focussed on the spot and before we knew it three Black-crowned Barwing came into view as they fed on the banana tree, taking it in turns as they climbed up the tangles to glean under the banana leaves and looked stunning in the Swarovski. This species was discovered as recently as 1996 and described in 1999, in part due to the remote areas it then occurred in – as recently as 10 years ago Rob and James spent 2 days travelling to this area from the coast on motorbikes – it now takes just 3 hours in the luxury of an air-conditioned car!

We had two final birds remaining, further south again. Mang Den is, or until very recently was, a huge area of submontane forest, visited by very, very few people until the local government decided to have a 'Dalat of Kon Tum province' and open up the forest with lots of new roads, bulldozers and badly-planned hydro-electric dams. At the moment it offers perfect birding – quiet, new roads slicing through pristine forest with less disturbance than more developed birding areas. The main reason for our visit here was to find the recently discovered Chestnut-eared Laughingthrush, found in 1996, described in 1999 and since only known from a couple of sightings until being discovered in numbers here in 2010, by Simon Mahood and the Edward's.

We had an hour in the afternoon before we thought the rains would begin so we quickly went to work, hearing our other target, Black-hooded Laughingthrush almost immediately and managing reasonable views as they danced around the mid-storey and canopy all around us – they so rarely sit still however! Back on the road, a feeding flock contained several Grey-headed Parrotbills, Black-chinned Yuhina and Grey-crowned Tits before distant cackling had us dashing down the road to another flock of laughingthrushes, this time showing better, then the moment they flew across the road out popped a pair of Chestnut-eared Laughingthrush in the sparse undergrowth right in front of us! The male revealed itself in all his splendour just as the rain began – perfect timing! Though even more perfect was just a few minutes later we spotted two long, dangling tails from the roadside canopy – Grey-shanked Douc's – one of *the* rarest primates in the world now. A real surprise and particularly exciting for James, as he had only seen them fleetingly on a previous, dedicated trip for this species. The monkeys were little concerned by us as we counted 15, including several youngsters of various ages jumped several metres across a gap in the canopy. Large Hawk Cuckoo, Chestnut-tailed Starling, Stripe-breasted Woodpecker and Large Cuckooshrike were all noted from the dryness of the car before we called it a day as the weather worsened.

We had a couple of hours on our final morning for some relaxed birding. Our first birds were Black-hooded Laughingthrushes but this time they really performed, cackling away just in front of us, wings shaking as they called manically. Further along the road 2 pairs of Chestnut-eared Laughingthrush were too occupied with each other to worry about us among them, as they occasionally hopped up and about. As the heat soared we headed to Pleiku and our flight back to Saigon to end our trip. We toasted our 100% success with a bottle of wine and a fine dinner!



Red-shanked Douc and Grey-shanked Douc

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