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MALAYSIA



Malayan Partridge – one of the highlights of our trip to Peninsula Malaysia © Colin Bushell

MALAYSIA

12-24 February 2023

Leaders: Lee Lok Chung and Colin Bushell

Introduction

What a tour! Three species of pitta (all seen very well), six broadbills, Buffy Fish Owl, Gould's Frogmouth, five trogons, eight hornbills, nine kingfishers, Red-bearded Bee-eater, Fire-tufted Barbet, fourteen woodpeckers, an all too brief Rail Babbler and the rare Straw-headed amongst a horde of bulbuls.

Fortune favoured us with the tropical weather and the lack of leeches, but we made our own luck, working the trails under 'Mr Lee's' expert guidance and aided by his incredible senses and organisational skills. Limosa's tried and trusted route, now with a one night stop at Bukit Tinggi (for Mountain Peacock-pheasant), served us well with lowland birding either side of a cooler montane climate interval.

The first chapter started with Shah Alam Botanical Gardens and the first of our feeding station visits giving us our first pitta plus a few other shy and retiring species, before heading for the mangroves. Mangrove Pitta was a nice bonus here and the eleventh-hour Mangrove Blue Flycatcher, just as we thought we had 'dipped', was maybe as much fun!

The cool air of Fraser's Hill was certainly a relief, even if we did have to endure some rather inclement weather. Blue Nuthatch, Red-bearded Bee-eater, Fire-tufted Barbet, Brown Wood Owl, Silver-eared Mesia and Long-tailed Broadbill spring to mind as star birds.

Fraser's Hill also had another feeding station and the Richmond Road site delivered some memorable moments with Malayan Partridges.

After our brief stopover at Bukit Tinggi, it was back to the lowland evergreen forests and the famous Taman Negara. We had picked up Helmeted Hornbill on the way and the rainforests here allowed to search for more. Often difficult and termed as "slow" or "quiet", lowland forest birding can be tricky; dense vegetation and high canopies a barrier to overcome to gain acceptable views of many birds. Rising to the challenge, we worked the trails, boardwalks and rivers in search of birds like Crested Fireback, Garnet Pitta, Green Broadbill, Rufous-collared Kingfisher and Great Slaty Woodpecker.

We had a great team, a lot of fun and some incredible wildlife encounters. Lee commented how strange it had been not to encounter some species such as Scaly-crowned and Rufous-crowned Babbler at Taman Negara (we didn't even hear them), and Silver-breasted Broadbills were silent at Fraser's Hill too. We were lucky to see many of the celebrity birds at

feeding station, but perhaps had to wait a little longer than usual for them to appear (although it was definitely worth the wait!), possibly affecting our opportunities to see some of the more common birds. All tours, however, are different, and we had a few surprises along the way, including a few checklist 'write-ins'.

Thanks to Lee and Azmil who went beyond the call of duty in the field and not forgetting Vincent, who drove us around the Peninsula so safely. This year's Peninsula Malaysia tour was so much fun and I really can't thank our enthusiastic, hard birding group enough for your dedication and good humour throughout the tour.

Trip Diary

12 and 13 February

Check-in at the Malaysian Airlines desk was nice and smooth, our group with considerably less luggage than some of the passengers in the queue with onward cruise bookings!

With boarding complete we departed punctually, heading east across Europe and over the Indian Ocean, clipping the Thai peninsula en route to our destination of Kuala Lumpur on the Malay Peninsula.

With the flight duration of over twelve hours, we were grateful of the in-flight entertainment, be it popular or classical music or current films. After a few meals drinks and a little shut-eye, we were landing in the rather more humid conditions of Kuala Lumpur.

In the last throws of daylight, we could see there had been some showers, something that was to become surprisingly rare over the coming two weeks. It was 30 degrees Celsius and rather warmer than at London Heathrow, to say the least !!

Setting our watches eight hours ahead of the UK, we proceeded to Immigration and then luggage collection, before meeting Lee, our guide for the duration of the tour in Peninsula Malaysia. In no time at all our driver, Vincent, met us in the bus outside arrivals, before a quick stop to pick up Azmil – a trainee guide and somebody I had experienced the pleasure of birding with during a Limosa tour to Borneo in 2018. It all looked very promising indeed!

In just a little more than an hour we had reached our hotel for the night. With the rather late arrival, Lee gave us the option of room service or meals at the bar. A few abstained as the airline had a snack service just a couple of hours prior to landing, while others took the opportunity to chat over a drink before retiring for the night.

14 February

We met for breakfast at 06:30 having just a ten-minute journey ahead of us to the Shah Alam Botanical Gardens; all very civilised. An hour later, we departed our hotel with our luggage on board, as we were moving on today.

We arrived at the Botanical Gardens – a mix of ornamental gardens, agricultural plots and lakes, with the roads lined by tall trees. A sizeable area of the gardens is still covered by remnant lowland forest – “tropical birding in an urban setting” to quote the new Malaysia field guide.

Seeing our first birds around the car park in rather overcast and humid conditions, we quickly became accustomed to what we be the ‘commoner’ bird species for the tour: Zebra Dove, Asian Red-eyed Bulbul, Javan and Common Mynas and Asian Glossy Starlings. Not so common and very much desired was the exquisite Black Bazas seen this morning.

Lee led us to a small feeding station in the forest where a few photographers were sitting quietly on their fold-away stools. It wasn’t long before a female Red Junglefowl made a brief appearance, followed by a Slaty-legged Crake, an individual that made repeated visits over the next hour or so. Smaller birds visiting the station infrequently, included a female Green-backed Flycatcher and a Siberian Blue Robin, the latter sadly not a breeding plumage male, but appreciated nevertheless. Distractions away from the feeding station included a rather furtive Raffle’s Malkoha and Sooty Barbets in the trees overhead, copulating Banded Woodpeckers, Greater Racket-tailed Drongos and Common Goldenbacks, while both Long-tailed Parakeets and Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots flew across the canopy.



Slaty-legged Crake at Shah Alam Botanical Gardens © Colin Bushell

After a while Lee suggested we move on. This proved to be a good decision as after only a short while we were watching a cracking Blue-winged Pitta at close range! What a stunning bird with its pale apricot underparts, green upperparts and black mask dividing a white throat from a fawn crown – a dead certainty for a ‘top 5 bird’!

With the first pitta ‘under the belt’, we moved into ‘standard birding mode’, checking tall trees and lakeside habitat around the gardens. Pittas may be great birds, and a bit of an enigma of course, but broadbills take a lot of beating in my humble opinion. Lee soon located a pair of Black-and-Red Broadbills, typically in lakeside margins. Another absolute stunner for the morning with their largely bright blue bills. The Banded Broadbill we heard would have to wait for another day, but more colour was provided by both Blue-tailed and Blue-throated Bee-eaters in the tall trees and those diminutive Black-thighed Falconets high on exposed stumps.

Lee continued to find birds wherever we stopped – Plaintive Cuckoo, Blue-eared Kingfisher, Lesser Green Leafbird and Yellow-bellied Prinia all logged before heading back towards the car park with Crested Serpent Eagle in the distance and taking one last look at the Blue-winged Pitta on the way.

A short ride in the bus took us to a local restaurant where we enjoyed some fine Malaysian cuisine, before another short hop to a track through some mangroves near Jeram. In around half hour of birding in the early afternoon, we saw some magnificent birds including Laced Woodpecker, White-breasted Waterhen, Red-wattled Lapwings, Pied Fantails and best of all, a Mangrove Pitta! Similar to the Blue-winged we had seen earlier, but with a huge bill and perhaps not as bright plumage. It showed very well at the edge of the mangroves only twenty metres or so from the group with further entertainment provided by a Smooth-coated Otter.



Mangrove Pitta – the second of three species of pitta seen on our Peninsula Malaysia tour © Colin Bushell

Half hour later, we were scanning the nearby mudflats for waders. The ‘usual fare’ here included Red-necked Stints and Terek Sandpipers plus distant a distant flock of Lesser Sand Plovers that also held at least 3 ‘Greater’s’. Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns dipped over the muddy channels and we also managed to pick out Intermediate Egret and Pacific Reef Heron.

Moving on once more (we had a very full first day), we checked into our hotel at Kuala Selangor, with time for a freshen up. An Oriental Pied Hornbill greeted us outside reception, with Coppersmith Barbets calling in the trees near our cabins. More good signs.....

We spent the late afternoon and early evening cruising the local rice paddies seeing more Whiskered Terns, Cinnamon Bitterns and a few Black-winged Kites. Best of all was a Changeable Hawk Eagle at the nest and its mate perched nearby which showed really well through the 'scopes! Lee tried very hard to entice a Spotted Wood Owl to call before we headed back to town for dinner, but it was having none of it. We took dinner in a riverside restaurant, before one last drive down a tree-lined road where a Buffy Fish Owl was waiting for us. This beauty was duly photographed and even posed well enough for 'scope views. What a day!

15 February

It was certainly going to be a hard act to follow our success of the previous day but we knew Lee would give it a go. With breakfast at a very respectful hour (07:00), we wandered out into the mangrove area near the hotel where the raucous sound of Collared Kingfishers greeted us, contrasting with the fluty sound of Black-naped Orioles from the riparian cover. Swinhoe's White-eyes buzzed around the canopy, Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker, Pied Triller and Ashy Minivet were located as Brahminy Kites soared overhead.

Lee worked hard to secure us views of two mangrove specialities – Mangrove Whistler and Golden-bellied Gerygone, as well as the Little Bronze Cuckoo that had been calling in the tall trees bordering the road.



Mangrove Blue Flycatcher – this handsome male was much appreciated © Colin Bushell

By mid-morning, we thought we had gleaned all we could from the hotel area and took the short drive to the Kuala Selangor Nature Park. Immediately on arrival we found our one and only Lineated Barbet of the trip, shortly followed by Olive-winged Bulbul and more Pied Fantails. Birds became harder to locate as the morning became hotter, but we enjoyed good views of a Black-capped Kingfisher before a White-bellied Sea-eagle broke the horizon. Working the banks of mangroves, we found Ashy Tailorbird and a Chestnut-bellied Malkoha gave us a bit of a run-around, before finally capitulating for all to see.

Lee had been trying hard to locate Mangrove Flycatcher throughout our walk, but there was no reply to his recording of this resonant, characteristic *Cyornis* song. Then, just as Lee uttered the words “not responding”, a flash of blue and orange right by the path, revealed a stunning Mangrove Flycatcher! What a superb looking bird (in nearly everyone’s ‘top 5’ list) and within seconds we had a pair close at hand and cooperating wonderfully well.

We watched the Mangrove Blue Flycatchers for some time (the male had started singing), before heading back to the bus. Vincent drove us back to our hotel where we had forty-five minutes to freshen up, gather our things and drive a short way to a restaurant for lunch.

We had a way to go this afternoon as we set off for Fraser’s Hill and a fresher climate. A short leg-stretch near Uyu Lam was a little ‘buggy’, so we didn’t hang around, although we did see our only Baya Weavers here. Climbing into the foothills, we stopped at Selangor Dam where we saw a single Rufous-bellied Swallow, our first Crested Honey Buzzard over the forested ridge, House Swifts and heard the first of many Pin-striped Tit-babblers.

By late afternoon we had reached the lower slopes of Fraser’s Hill. A few random stops on the way up to the hotel produced our first montane species of the tour like Grey-chinned Minivets (although we were low enough to see them side-by-side with Scarlet Minivets). Plain Flowerpecker, White-bellied Erpornis, Yellow-eared Spiderhunter and Buff-vented and Scaly-breasted Buleuls were all noted as Silver-rumped Spinetails and Plume-toed Swiftlets zoomed around the canopy. Closer to our hotel we chanced upon a Slaty-backed Forktail in the middle of the road. Just a taste of what was to come, arriving at the hotel with other birders around, excitement was mounting with high expectations for the coming days. We settled into the hotel, the first long stay of the trip with three nights here.

16 February

All change at Fraser’s Hill as shirtsleeves were replaced by a fleece or light down jacket. We started with some pre-breakfast birding not too far from the hotel searching for Malayan Whistling Thrush. It was practically dark as we set off as these birds are apparently very early risers! Unfortunately, they gave us the slip this morning, not that it wasn’t a lively dawn chorus – Chestnut-capped Laughingthrushes, Long-tailed Sibilias, White-throated Fantails, Dark Hawk-Cuckoo and Sunda Cuckoo all heard as the sun came up.



Large Niltava at Fraser's Hill © Colin Bushell

Thankfully the Sunda Cuckoo came into view, followed by a few of the sibilas and our first Mountain Fulvettas. Now that we had sufficient light, we ventured along the road with Streaked Wren-babblers, Streaked Spiderhunters and a Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo for company. The “Do-Re-Mi” song of Large Niltava could be heard from a dark forest recess and it wasn't long before Lee located it and we heard the word “scope!”. Sure enough, there it was!

Our first real feeding flock of the trip kept us busy trying to sort out Buff-breasted and Golden Babblers, Chestnut-crowned Warblers, but the Black-eared Shrike-babbler gave us the slip and Silver-eared Mesia remained a ‘heard only’ for the morning.

We took to the bus for our post breakfast excursion and drove to Richmond Road. Settling in on our stools, we steadied ourselves for a wait by a small feeding station. The ubiquitous Chestnut-capped Laughingthrushes were the first to appear, making me wonder why I struggled to locate them on a distant hanging tree vine only an hour earlier. I really should listen to Lee and Azmil – note to self! A Rufous-browed Flycatcher was next down but was immediately eclipsed by eight Malayan Partridges which scuttled out across the path and began feeding right in front of us! We watched the antics of this little group for quite a while before they disappeared once more into the forest, allowing us to concentrate on some of the other birds around us – White-browed Shrike-babbler, Black-browed Barbet and Black-throated Sunbird all showing well before we left.



Malayan Partridge – one of eight birds seen at Fraser's Hill © Colin Bushell

Later in the morning Lee took us along the road to The Pines, in hope of Pygmy Cupwing. The shrill monosyllabic song of this tiny bird could be heard but, unfortunately, there was no sign of it. Birds were appearing but disappearing just as quickly and the morning had become a little frustrating when a few Mountain Bulbuls put on a show, then Fire-breasted Flowerpecker and a nice male Little Pied Flycatcher. Better still, as we retraced our steps to the bus, three Wreathed Hornbills flew over. We also enjoyed great views of another Large Niltava, elevating it to a 'top 5 bird' for some, as well as a brief Rufous-browed Flycatcher. Time for lunch!

Refreshed after lunch and a bit of a siesta, we ventured out once again. The wind had dropped, but had been replaced by a hot and sunny afternoon. I had commented how "a nice still, overcast day" would be good - maybe I should be careful what I wish for.....

We spent the afternoon working the New Gap Road; Scaly-breasted and Cinereous Bulbuls, Yellow-bellied Warblers and White-bellied Erpornis appearing, but it was hard going. Then we located a feeding flock with Blue-winged Leafbirds, Black-crested Bulbuls, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrikes and Asian Paradise Flycatchers all being 'new tour birds'. Visitors from the north like Eastern-crowned, Arctic and Yellow-browed Warblers competed for attention (admittedly not for long) with Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers, and an Orange-breasted Trogon. A Rhinoceros Hornbill called in the distance, but alas, remained unseen.

Driving a short way, we came upon a pair of Blyth's Hawk Eagles performing beautifully over the forested hillsides, tumbling and calling, obviously engaging in some courtship ritual. Large Cuckooshrike, Green-billed Malkoha, Asian Fairy-bluebirds and Square-tailed Drongo-cuckoos were all seen and just when we thought it was all over – Lee found a sublime Red-bearded Bee-eater from the bus! We stopped the bus at a safe distance from this colourful bird before

retracing our steps to soak it up. What a bird to end the afternoon. It was getting late and it was time for dinner!



Red-bearded Bee-eater at Fraser's Hill © Colin Bushell

Back at base, we completed our bird list after dinner in the hotel. At least I thought we did. Lee had other ideas and invited us for a short post-dinner drive. A Common Palm Civet scabbling around on the branches of trees overhanging the road was a good start to the night drive and shortly afterwards we arrived at a nearby hotel where Lee searched the trees in the grounds with instance success – Brown Wood Owl. Bingo!

17 February

Overnight rain (often heavy) continuing into the morning didn't bode well for a good pre-breakfast birding session, although the rain had virtually stopped by the time we met in the lobby, being little more than 'leaf drip' as we stepped outside into the dark. It was still rather misty, with a hint of drizzle, as we made our way to the corner for another attempt for Malayan Whistling Thrush. This time we were in luck – there it was, in the middle of the road, a bulky, rather long-legged thrush. It looked better in the 'scopes for sure and we were back for breakfast by 07:30.

Lee sensibly tried lower down the mountain for our post-breakfast birding, hoping to lose the drizzle. This proved very difficult indeed and, in the end, we braved the mist just as a Sultan Tit started calling as Vincent parked the bus. In fact, there was quite a bit of activity in the drizzle – Verditer Flycatcher, Black-throated Sunbirds, White-bellied Erpornis, Black-crested Bulbuls and Mountain Fulvettas all making an appearance. Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher was a new bird for the tour, but it was difficult to make out any detail on the Fire-breasted Flowerpecker in the murk!

Walking on, we heard a Pygmy Cupwing singing from the forested slope and with a bit of enticement, we had some good views, even in the 'scope! Next up was Golden-whiskered Barbet, a bird we had heard but not seen. Fortunately, one found some of the closer trees attractive (more distant ones were by now invisible!) and another new bird for the tour came in the form of a Red-billed Malkoha. A Red-bearded Bee-eater called from higher on the slope, but finally the rain beat us and we retreated to the bus.

Lower still, we birded The Gap where there was a steady stream of Pacific Swifts through the valley. A small mixed flock consisted of some Scarlet Minivets, Blue-winged Leafbirds, Large Woodshrikes and Orange-bellied Flowerpecker and we also found a pair of Orange-bellied Leafbirds.

With the weather improving, we drove uphill once more hearing both Black Laughingthrush and White-browed Shrike-babbler as well as enjoying our first views of Siamangs clambering through the trees bordering the road. It had been the toughest morning of the tour, but we had still enjoyed some fantastic experiences.

We took lunch in a local restaurant, before returning for a break at the hotel today. By mid-afternoon, we were raring to go once again and the weather had improved somewhat, lifting spirits. Parking on the road by the entrance to the Hemmant Trail, we took a walk to the Bishop's Trail and beyond. Fire-tufted Barbets gave us our best views thus far and a lone Siberian Thrush appeared briefly. Birding was definitely easier this afternoon and those Long-tailed Broadbills looked so good with their rather comical 'Biggles helmet' head pattern. Less shocking to the eye was Asian Brown Flycatcher and what a shame the Bushy-crested Hornbills that had taunted us for so long with their calls, only showed briefly in the end. Heading back towards the bus, we had super looks at Greater Yellownappe, Streaked Bulbuls, Collared Owlet and a few Mountain Bulbuls.

Jumping in the bus again, we took a short ride to a little roadside feeding station where we enjoyed incredible views of Lesser Shortwing, Buff-breasted Babbler and another brief look at a Cupwing. We finished our day at the foot of the Telecom Loop. A Common Green Magpie kept us busy, only showing briefly, however, our wait was not in vain, with Black-and-Crimson Oriole, Grey-chinned Minivets, Streaked Wren Babbler, Silver-eared Mesia and Blue-winged Minlas all being logged.

18 February

Another pre-breakfast excursion, this time to the start of the Pine Tree Trail, in search of Malayan Laughingthrush. Unfortunately, only Chestnut-capped responded to Lee's recording, but the time was not wasted as Large Cuckooshrike, Grey-throated Babbler and Silver-eared Mesias were all seen and we also heard a Mountain Scops Owl. We returned to the hotel for a final breakfast there, before leaving with luggage loaded on the bus for our next transfer.

Not that our Fraser's Hill birding was done of course, oh no! Still misty, but we encountered one of our best bird flocks of our stay at Fraser's Hill just after leaving the hotel. Blue-winged Minlas, Long-tailed Sibias, Black-throated Sunbirds and Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers (the staple ingredients of the mixed species flocks here) were joined by a Blue Nuthatch. It was a shame it didn't hang around long, but good to see all the same. Mountain Imperial Pigeons flew over as we watched a Lesser Yellownappe, before taking the short journey to the Richmond Road once again.

The mist still lingered, and we saw very little but our search for Malayan Laughingthrush continued and after a bit of 'trawling' (with a recording) Lee located a couple for us. Relief all round !

Returning to the bus for the last time on Fraser's Hill, we found a couple of female Siberian Thrushes, one of which posed really well for photographers.

Showers accompanied us from the highlands as we drove towards Lanchang where Lee guided us into the forest to a small feeding station. The lower elevation was evident as the sun came out and the heat increased. A small group of Ashy Minivets adorned the roadside trees before we entered the forest, where the first birds to greet us were Hairy-backed Bulbuls. Fluffy-backed Tit-babbler, a very handsome Black-throated Babbler, Short-tailed Babbler and Black-naped Monach came to the feeding station with Cream-vented Bulbul (another new one for the tour) in the tall trees surrounding the small clearing.

Lee classified this as "quiet", so I would certainly like to see it when it is "busy", and urged us to try some roadside birding. As usual, Lee's instincts were right and we enjoyed some good birds such as Crimson-winged and Buff-rumped Woodpeckers, Raffle's Malkohas, Emerald Dove, Streak-throated Bulbul and a fantastic pair of Black-and-Red Broadbills.

We still had a way to go, so we pressed on to Karak where we enjoyed another tasty dinner before finishing our journey at Bukit Tinggi.

19 February

Our hotel at Bukit Tinggi was a strange affair, somewhat akin to a chateau complex with side stalls of shops and restaurants. Very difficult to explain – you will just have to go there Anyway, the breakfast was good and we assembled afterwards at Reception to hand in our keys as it was just a one night stay here. Once again, the weather let us down a little in the hills, with mist and drizzle as we left the car park for the short drive to the Japanese Village. Once parked up, we climbed some steps to a trail into the forest and settled in for a wait by the feeding station. Umbrellas were up, ponchos unfolded and the rain, in some form or other, be it drizzle or shower, never really abated.

As we sat quietly, a Rail Babbler called in the distance, Buff-breasted Babbler came to the feeding area, followed by a White-rumped Shama. An Orange-breasted Trogon perched on

the periphery of the clearing and Lee suggested we had a try for the Rail Babbler as our target bird – Mountain Peacock-pheasant – hadn't come to the feeding station. The Rail Babbler did come, but unfortunately didn't cross the 'clear' area close to us, instead strutting along a narrow open forest floor area viewed through a small gap in the undergrowth and, therefore, only seen by one of the leaders! Ugh!!!!

Some recompense was quickly at hand when two superb Mountain Peacock-pheasants appeared and continued to feed for fifteen minutes or so nearby. Shutters clicked, ponchos folded and umbrellas collapsed – sigh of relief for the leaders and everyone was happy.



Mountain Peacock-pheasant © Colin Bushell

Leaving the Japanese Village Botanical Gardens, we headed back to the bus, Lee trying for Silver-breasted Broadbill without success. A fruiting tree provided us with our next new birds in the shape of Yellow-vented Green Pigeon, Red-throated and Yellow-crowned Barbets and Eyebrowed Thrush before the weather drove us downhill once again, this time into some blue sky and sunshine.

Our first stop out of the cloud produced Buff-vented and Grey-bellied Bulbuls and then Lee saw a couple of Helmeted Hornbills flying across the far side of the valley. Thankfully they both landed, allowing us good 'scope views of these extraordinary birds with their large casques and long tail feathers. Superb! A couple of Large Woodshrikes popped into nearby trees where further scrutiny revealed Whiskered Treeswift, Yellow-vented Flowerpecker and we were reacquainted with Asian Red-eyed Bulbuls after 'losing' them in the highlands. A soaring Rufous-bellied Eagle was a fine sight against the blue sky and fluffy white clouds. Time for lunch.....

There was an air of satisfaction as we dined and supped a celebratory Tiger beer (or two) this lunchtime, but we had our finale to come and drove onto Taman Negara, stopping for the customary 'Magnum Stop' on the way. Reaching Kuala Tehan, we said farewell to Vincent for a few days as we boarded our boats for the short crossing to the resort. We would be on foot

for the three nights stay at Taman Negara, with only boats to take us around the national park.

Waiting by Reception for room allocation, we noticed the small fruiting tree by the boardwalk held Crimson-breasted and Yellow-vented Flowerpeckers. It was odd that this was the only time during our stay when we saw birds in this tree!

After a quick stop at our rooms, we met once again for a walk along the boardwalks to the Tehan Hide. Banded Woodpecker, Buff-rumped Woodpecker, Little Green Pigeons, Large Green Pigeons, Asian Dollarbirds and the comical looking Black-and-Yellow Broadbills were all logged, although a calling Green Broadbill wouldn't appear. We would just have to bank that one for another day and with four nights at Taman Negara, we settled in for a potentially very exciting few days.

20 February

Banded Bay Cuckoo called as we walked from our chalets to the restaurant in the dark. After a buffet breakfast and a few coffees, we headed out on the paths around the resort and along the boardwalks as our introduction to birding at Taman Negara. The paths around the resort were pretty birdy, but apart from a Chestnut-breasted Malkoha, it was mostly birds we had seen before, however, walking the boardwalks through the forest edge towards the Tehan Hide was very rewarding indeed with many of the species present in the nearby clearing including a Red-naped Trogon, a Wrinkled Hornbill and Sooty-capped Babbler.

Oriental Dollarbirds and Asian Fairy-bluebirds could be seen perched at the edge of the clearing and we heard a Banded Kingfisher, before making our way towards the trail to Mount Tehan. Several Crested Firebacks (what incredible looking pheasants!) appeared at the edge of the clearing as we arrived at the trailhead, a Plaintive Cuckoo perched for all to see.



Plaintive Cuckoo © Colin Bushell

Entering the forest along the boardwalk, bird activity seemed to drop until we located a White-crested Hornbill in a large emergent tree. We then experienced a rather frustrating series of 'heard only' birds, including Rhinoceros Hornbill (again!), Puff-backed Bulbul, Black Magpie, Maroon Woodpecker and Banded Broadbill. Lee set about to right these wrongs, and located the Banded Broadbill, even helping us to 'scope views.

Next up was Rufous-collared Kingfisher, an individual calling in the distance finally located not too far from the boardwalk with the aid of a recording. More 'scope views of a tricky forest species followed, before we decided to call it a morning and head back to the resort for a well-earned lunch and siesta.

Refreshed, we set out once again along the boardwalks and retraced our steps along the Mount Tehan trail as we hadn't got far in the morning. With Banded Broadbills still calling we walked on with Spectacled, Streak-throated and Buff-vented Bulbuls for company. A Purple-naped Sunbird (or Spiderhunter depending on your taxonomic stance), Black-bellied Malkohas and Checker-throated Woodpeckers all entering our notebooks for the first time on the tour.

We birded along the boardwalk as far as the Lubuk Simpon viewpoint over the river, where we rested a while. As expected, we encountered a couple of kingfishers – Stork-billed and Blue-banded, although the latter only briefly. A flowering tree across the river attracted Little and Grey-breasted Spiderhunters and a handsome male Blue-winged Leafbird as a Puff-backed Bulbul sang over our heads. Then a pair of Black-and-Red Broadbills appeared on our side of the river just as a pair of Black-thighed Falconets were spotted on a large dead tree in the distance. A calling Indian Cuckoo finally gave itself up and we were just enjoying good 'scope views (including the pulsating throat feathers with every note) when a Black Hornbill appeared! Busy, busy, busy

After a very productive afternoon, we headed back along the boardwalk for dinner. Those who went on the post dinner owling session were left empty handed, although the showers that evening hadn't helped our cause.

21 February

Meeting for breakfast at our usual 07:00 slot, we arrived at the restaurant prepared for a full morning excursion. Wearing our leech socks (hardly needed throughout the tour in truth), we boarded the boat to the Blau Trail, ten minutes or so along the river. There is no dock, but the largely dry recent weather meant the slope wasn't slippery and we set out along the trail as there was no boardwalk here.

We had the trail to ourselves all morning and the impact was instantaneous. A distant calling Garnet Pitta wet our appetite, Moustached Babbler came close for a look, Wrinkled Hornbill flew across the tree tops and one of our most wanted birds – Green Broadbill was heard. Lee

asked Azmil to go and locate the broadbill and within second he called us. What an absolute stunning bird. 'Scope views for all!

Chestnut-rumped Babbler, Rufous-winged Philentoma and a pair of Scarlet-rumped Trogons joined the show; it was a very busy and exciting start, to say the least! Inevitably, the action calmed down a little as the morning progressed, but there were Sooty-capped Babblers, Orange-backed Woodpeckers, Raffle's Malkohas and Common Tailorbirds to keep us occupied.

Lee tried hard for a Garnet Pitta as we started our return walk back to the river, but despite all efforts, it stopped just short of our viewing area. But 'project pitta' didn't stop here, as another started calling as we neared the boats. Never one to give up, Lee took us into the forest where we settled to wait and see if this bird would cooperate. A few fleeting glimpses were all it needed to give us some idea of its whereabouts, and we repositioned. Once again, Azmil spotted the bird, perched and singing strongly. It wasn't too long before this forest jewel was in the 'scope. Tiger beer celebrations back at the restaurant over lunch!

A few of us set out in the afternoon in humid and overcast conditions. We walked the Bukit Tereseq boardwalk for undoubtedly our quietest birding session of our stay at Taman Negara, and perhaps even the whole tour. Some falling branches in a gusty period woke us all up a little, but apart from that we added little to the day's tally. A Banded Kingfisher played hide-and-seek with us back at the Tehan Hide and with rain closing play, we decided to call it a day.



Gould's Frogmouth © Colin Bushell

Well, not quite. A post dinner spot-lighting walk along the boardwalks was rewarding with great views of a Gould's Frogmouth. We had waited quite a while for the bird to come close,

but as soon as it was clear the frogmouth had crossed the boardwalk, Lee 'red-lamped' it only twenty metres or so from its admirers, and deservedly a 'top 5 bird' after all that effort!

22 February

A rather humid morning greeted us as we gathered outside the restaurant. This morning would be spent on the River Tehan, mostly on boats, with a few selected stops. Abbot's Babblers called from the riverside as we made our first stop. We had barely left the boats when an Indochinese Blue-flycatcher began singing. It was a tricky customer, but we all saw it in the end as it flitted around the understory. Suddenly a Maroon Woodpecker called and was soon climbing up an old stump in front of us. What a smart woodpecker, with its sooty underparts, deep maroon back and contrasting bright yellow bill. Malayan Black-capped Babbler sang, but could not be coaxed into the open, so we made for a clearing to see what we could find around the edge.

By simply staying in one small area, we accumulated a very respectable bird list for the morning. Asian Fairy-bluebirds, Little Green and Large Green Pigeons, Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots, Black-thighed Falconets and Banded Woodpeckers could all be seen on emergent trees or the forest borders. It was useful to have the 'scopes here. Pacific Swifts and Brown Needletails whizzed over the canopy, defying all but the most skilful 'scopers.

With most of the expected species seen, Lee began to concentrate on some more tricky species, the first of which, Straw-headed Bulbul, could be heard nearby. It wasn't long before we were watching a few of these attractive birds, critically endangered due to the cagebird trade. Their melodic song doesn't really sit well for a bulbul, but what a pleasure it was to hear it on several occasions this morning.

In fact, we did well for bulbuls in this clearing with Asian Red-eyed, Creamy-vented, Streaked, Black-headed and Finsch's all seen. Some wanted species remained frustratingly out of view, included Rhinoceros Hornbill (again), Sunda Scimitar Babbler and, of course, the Great Argus which, as usual, called from somewhere in the depths of distant forest.

We were watching a fine Orange-backed Woodpecker hammering a stump, when it was eclipsed by a pair of the most incredible looking Great Slaty Woodpeckers. These huge birds came flopping across the clearing, perching on a forest edge stump beautifully. Strange and rather prehistoric in appearance, it was a pity they didn't linger longer to be appreciated. Never mind – the new birds just kept coming – Black-winged Flycatcher-shrikes, Plain Flowerpecker and a stunning Crimson Sunbird as the finale to our stay in the clearing. We had been so engrossed that over two hours had passed since we landed at the dock.

Moving along the river by boat, we finally caught up with Rhinoceros Hornbill in riverside trees, a Crested Honey Buzzard coasted across the canopy, our first Lesser Fish Eagle drifted down river and our second Buffy Fish Owl of the tour perched on a riverside stump. Dusky

Leaf Monkeys loafing in overhead trees, Blue-banded Kingfisher, Whiskered and Crested Treeswifts and the more familiar Grey Wagtail all made an appearance before we docked once again for a short walk along a trail.

By now it was sunny and becoming warm, but we managed to dig out a few last birds of the morning with a pair of Chestnut-winged Babblers showing exceptionally well.

Morning complete, we headed back to the boats and rode back to the resort restaurant hearing Bushy-crested Hornbill and seeing Crested Serpent Eagle and Red-throated Barbet on the way.

Halfway through our final full day, we discussed the last afternoon's activities over lunch. With limited time for birding the following day, we knew we would have to stay local to the resort. So, on this final afternoon we decided to return to the Blau Trail, an area that had held so many good birds on our visit a few days previously.

Green Broadbill © Colin Bushell

After a shorter than usual break, a few of us set off in the boats. A Slaty-legged Crake fluttered out from the riverside vegetation as the boat neared the bank. A good start and a bird we had only seen on our first full day of the tour. Of course, the trail was quieter than our previous visit in the morning, and we tried hard to see Large Wren-babbler and Malaysian Black-capped



Babbler. However, our fortunes changed when a Green Broadbill sang nearby and was soon located in the subcanopy. In my opinion, you can never get enough of these emerald jewels, and we soaked this one up for quite a while before moving on.

Following the forest trail, we encountered a few species from our previous visit plus a couple of skittish Ferruginous Babblers that were new for the tour. We tried hard to see a Banded Kingfisher at our furthest point from the dock, once again without joy. An Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher gave us the run around, but Lee finally located it in an area with more open forest floor. "Scope!" It perched rather nicely, giving ample opportunities for photography. Another great favourite, and a 'top 5 bird' for some.



Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher © Colin Bushell

The song of Garnet Pitta accompanied us on the return route back to the boat, but we had worked hard enough for views of that on our previous walk here and we still had unfinished business with Banded Kingfisher. Lee, never one to accept defeat, located the female in the arching tree branches overhead. We had just had our fill of this when a group of half a dozen Dusky Broadbills started calling. It wasn't too long before we were watching our sixth species of broadbill of the tour, with three or four in the canopy. Great 'scope views once again and a fitting end to a smashing afternoon on the trails. Black Hornbill was our last bird of the afternoon as we headed back to the resort by boat.

23 and 24 February

For our final day in Malaysia we had a simple plan: 07:00 breakfast, birding forest boardwalks near resort, return to cabins to freshen up, bags on balcony for collection, check-out, settle bills, early lunch and away!

Last mornings such as this with a late evening flight looming on the horizon can sometimes faze focus a little, however, I believe we experienced one of the best 'pre-departure mornings' I can recall. We started quite steadily around the chalets with our first views of Blue-rumped Parrot and a sublime Crimson-winged Woodpecker on a trunk right by the path. Scanning the slightly more distant trees, we found Orange-backed Woodpeckers, Golden-whiskered Barbets, Blue-throated Bee-eaters, Banded Woodpeckers, Black-thighed Falconet and Grey-breasted Spiderhunters. Pacific Swifts, Brown-backed Needletails, Grey-rumped Treeswifts and Oriental Dollarbirds swooped over the treetops indicating a hatch of flying insects.

Making our way along the boardwalks into the forest, Sooty Barbets, another bird last seen on our first day, made an appearance – a 'catch-up' bird for some who missed it previously. A female Diard's Trogon, another new bird for the trip, appeared along the boardwalk with

more great 'scope views. Rufous-tailed Tailorbird, a species we had only heard thus far, made an appearance – it is always satisfying to turn 'heards' into 'seens' on your last morning....

The Great Argus was not going to fall into this category, however, but 'firsts' for the tour kept coming with Buff-necked Woodpecker and Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker seen before we left the boardwalk. Red-naped Trogon (destined for a 'top 5 bird' for some) and Rufous-winged Philentoma were also good to get second looks at before we headed back to our rooms for the final time.

Our bags were safely collected while we took lunch and leaving our keys at Reception, we boarded the boats for the short hop across to Kuala Tehan where Vincent was waiting for us.

Our journey back to Kuala Lumpur was uneventful apart from some torrential downpours as we headed to our final dinner and then the airport. It highlighted just how lucky we were with the weather on this tour, with just a few interruptions at Fraser's Hill.

Check-in with Malaysia Airlines was very smooth and efficient once again, and a few drinks later we were on the flight back to London. Chicken Rangoon, a few films, a nightcap and a breakfast and we were landing in London with temperatures just above freezing. Luggage collection completed, we headed on our separate ways....