

## **CAMBODIA**



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### **Introduction:**

Following years of instability & domestic turmoil, Cambodia has recently re-opened its doors to the outside world. In recent years, it has become a premier birding destination to observe some of the Orient's rarest and most enigmatic species within a relatively short period of time. Thanks to the timely intervention by WCS and the subsequent education of local populations, as well as the sheer remoteness & mines, have meant that many of such species have managed to cling on to survival in what must be one of Asia's Last Frontiers.

On a personal level, the trip resulted from a simple toss-up between Taiwan & Cambodia to "utilise" the last week of Ding Li's Vacation. The latter was eventually ruled out due to time constraint & the mouth-watering prospect of seeing six Critically Endangered Species within a week, a feat otherwise nearly impossible to accomplish in the Orient & maybe the World. After picking up a few friends, our merry band of adventurers became only the 2nd Singapore Group to venture into this Last Frontier.

## **Itinerary:**

Kompong Thom/ Chi Krai Grasslands (2 Mornings)  
Tmat Boey (2 Full Days & 1 Morning)  
Chhep Vulture Restaurant (1 Evening & 1 Morning)  
White-winged Duck Site (1 Afternoon & 1 Morning)  
Angkor Complex (1 Afternoon)

As above, a variation to the normal circuit. We soon found out why most current birding groups do not visit the sites within the Preah Vihear Wildlife Sanctuary as the drive there is essentially driving on Hell's Highway with no less than ten solid hours of bone-jolting, tyre-puncturing & nerve wrecking "trails" to contend with in a 4WD. Definitely impossible to conquer during the wet season. It was a shame to have left out Kratie but due to the time constraints faced by some members of the group and the rather pricey detour we decided to drop it.

## **Logistics & Guiding:**

Our tour was put together brilliantly by the staff at Sam Veasna Center for Wildlife Conservation. Many thanks go out in particular to Seng Raksa & Karen Nielsen for the prompt email replies as we worked to sort the trip out at the last minute.

On the tour itself we were assigned a local guide named Sopheab, a freelance guide who also holds a job as a booking manager in a hotel. Overall, he did very well as he was a keen birder who is familiar with the birds and is a good interpreter as most of the local guides we met on the trip spoke no English. He wasn't too familiar with vocalisations but I am sure with more field experience he will do very well. Besides we were all based in the Orient so it was hardly an issue. He will learn.

## **Environment & People:**

Cambodia, especially in and around Siem Reap, is a land of stark contrast. Siem Reap is without doubt one of the most "glitzy" cities I have visited so far in the Orient, with the streets lined with massage parlours and hundreds of hotels ranging from homely guesthouses to 5-star accommodation. In fact, it looks more like a cultural melting pot as just sitting in the city centre one can observe all races of tourists from Westerners to Africans, Australians & Koreans to name a few.

However, after you leave the town, the landscape changes dramatically, and a more "hand-to-mouth" existence is observed where villagers live in nothing more than elevated huts made of wood & natural materials. They have precious few personal belongings & rice planting is basically their main form of living. The fact that we arrived in the dry season made the sight that much more humbling as we passed village after village where the only sign of life was the children running around the dusty roads or bathing in water that had the colour of a sewage outlet. It certainly doesn't help that due to the post-war baby boom, most families have five or more children and one wonders how they feed themselves, let alone their offspring. It is all put into perspective when you consider the volume of visitors to Angkor Wat & the 20 USD entrance fee. Corruption is certainly rife here in the upper echelons of society.

As such, it is very encouraging to learn how the WCS is working together with communities like Tmat Boey where the funds from eco-tourism are actually used to improve the lives of local communities. It was heartening to learn that at least in that village the funds have helped them achieve a year-round water supply, which for such a remote community that is certainly a luxury item itself.

### **Site Summaries:**

#### **Kompong Thom/ Chi Krai Grasslands:**

A huge expanse of paddy fields & grasslands sparsely dotted with numerous small irrigation ponds & a large seemingly permanent lake/ marsh. It lies about 50km west of Kompong Thom along the road to Siem Reap. After turning off the main road, a bumpy 10 minute ride through a small village ensues and eventually the vehicle will pass a small archway and stop in a grove of trees by an unfinished concrete structure. From here, it is possible to scan for Floricans and we picked out two within a minute of arrival on our first date here. We spent a very sweaty mid-morning from 11am-1pm birding here on 6-Jan as well as another more pleasant & productive early morning stint on 12-Jan, seeing quite a few surprises & only dipping the Manchurian Reed-warbler, which incidentally, a Hungarian birder named Atilla saw in one of the irrigation ponds in the area.



Birding in the grassland of Kompong Thom

### **Highlights:**

**Bengal Florican**- Excellent flight views of this trip target. We picked out two within minutes of our arrival on our first date albeit only because of their bobbling heads in the grass. Flushing them is a different matter entirely because some of them probably walk away on approach as opposed to flying. Nevertheless, flight views of a single male were obtained twice close to where the cars were parked as well as another much nearer the marsh on another date. Mega!

**Sarus Crane** – We did not plan to go to Ang Trapeang Thmor so basically had written this bird off until in Tmat Boey when Atilla told us he had observed them during his time here. During our morning session here while bashing around one of the ponds I looked up and out of the blue saw four of these breathtaking "Birds Of Heaven" flying elegantly across the horizon, with the bird at the head of the flock uttering its musical honking seemingly to advertise their presence. An otherworldly encounter that I will certainly not forget anytime soon.

**Great Bittern** – A totally unexpected surprise encounter. As time wore on and a certain *Acrocephalus* continued to remain elusive, our group was content to bash around the marshy banks of the large lake in that area. As Simon forged ahead, he flushed a massive bird whose size caused the rest of us to blink in unison. It was even larger than a florican! Cheers all around as we observed this rare winter visitor fly off rather laboriously before landing at the opposite end of the lake. Our group came up with a quote to celebrate the find- "A Great Bittern Spotted By A Great Briton"!

**Other Notables:**

- Small Buttonquail
- Bluethroat
- Red Avadavat
- "Burmese" Spot-billed Duck (numerous around the lake)
- Lanceolated & Palla's Grasshopper Warbler
- Yellow-breasted Bunting



Bengal Florican in flight



Bluethroat

## **Tmat Boey / Kulem Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary**

A conservation success story & a model for eco-tourism is the remote village of Tmat Boey in Cambodia's Preah Vihear Province. This isolated village is a must-visit for all birders travelling in Cambodia because it is the easiest place in the world to see the mythical Pseudibis Duo. The villagers themselves have benefited from this programme too, as working in tandem with the WCS they have been able to improve their quality of life with rewards such as a year-round water supply and a small network of roads for easier travel within the village.

As of 2007, the villagers & WCS worked in tandem to build a brand-new eco-lodge on the outskirts of the village to cater to the increasing number of birding groups visiting the region. According to the local WCS staff posted there, this has increased the number of visitor arrivals. One thing is for sure though, the amenities there are comparable to some of the simpler eco-lodges and include things like fans & light bulbs powered by a solar generator and twin-sharing rooms with an attached bathrooms. The whole complex can probably fit about 12 people comfortably and there is even a communal dining area. The old grouses about lack of sleep from Karaoke is no longer an issue as you are more likely to be lulled to sleep with the hoots of the various owl species!

We spent three very enjoyable days here, seeing four each of both the mythical Ibis species although our encounter with the Giant was extremely fortuitous to say the least. Attached below is a brief summary of some of the key areas we visited, which the very professional and knowledgeable local guides had apparently recce'd just days before our arrival. Although they spoke no English, they were keen spotters and certainly knew their birds as they pointed at the pictures in the field guide. To top it all off, they even carry mobile GPS with them, so you never have to worry about getting lost while Ibis hunting in this featureless dry dipterocarp habitat with its thick grassy understorey and scattered seasonal wetlands.



Dry dipterocarp forest of Tmat Boey



Trapeang

**Trapeang Kokoh Thnal** – Birding around this complex of Trapeangs (Seasonal Pools) on our first morning produced 4 each of both species of Ibis. Mega!

**Trapeang Trakon Prey Santhom Pii** – A stake-out for White-rumped Falcon, we found a pair at 2 different locales after some effort in this area.

**Chamras Khel** – This area is a known spot for Pale-capped Pigeon. The habitat here is slightly different with belts of evergreen forests & bamboo groves following a permanent river. The pigeons are by no means a sure-fire sighting, although they are supposedly regular when the bamboo flowers. (Our only dip from this area)

**Trapeang Don Suon** – We flushed a single Giant Ibis from this complex which is nearer the main village. There is also an active White-shouldered Ibis roost in this area. During our time there we watched a single from 5am in the morning till it flew off at the break of dawn.

Birding in this area is generally gruelling work. Though the temperature is very pleasant at night (around an estimated 20 °C), it rises exponentially as the sun rises and by mid-morning it is in the 30s. The bird density is also generally low although there are good numbers of woodpeckers.

### **Highlights:**

**Giant Ibis** - An encounter with this mythical bird is hard to put into words, although truth be told its physical appearance is "nothing fantastic" =P. Anyway, we had worked our socks off staking out a roost site, then subsequently a feeding site at a paddyfield in the middle of the forests, and finally to scouring at least a dozen different trapeangs in search of this bird. At 1030am, a full six hours since we started the day with the sole purpose of locating this bird, we were considering whether to turn back. The local guides noted that within walking distance there were still two trapeangs left to search, and so we came to a consensus that we would spend another hour in the relentless heat.

At 1130am, as usual we were sneaking up to another trapeang which had a decent amount of water and more than ample tree cover when out of the blue an explosion of feathers erupted in unison. As the group scrambled to get their bearings, my rewards for practising a "flush drill" of sorts for the whole morning paid off as I instantly managed to get my bins on the flying birds, having estimated a focus beforehand. Thankfully for everyone concerned, two of the birds landed literally above the trapeang itself and perched there for the next five minutes or so. Fist punching & Hi-5s were the order of the day as we revelled in our fortuitous find! Our next challenge was to try & photograph the birds although we failed miserably in this aspect as despite their size they were able to camouflage themselves extremely well in the canopy & were extremely wary to boot, often allowing only distant views through "windows" in the forest. It was certainly a masterstroke for us, as we only ever saw a single bird flushed at another site, and it didn't perch anywhere close by. A unique bird by all accounts with those bright red legs contrasting rather awkwardly with the generally dark tones of the rest of the body. "Bird Of The Trip"!

**White-shouldered Ibis** – An easier customer than his cousin, and a good boost to morale especially when they decide to show up at daybreak. Having staked out a known Giant Ibis feeding site without success, our group had ventured onto the middle of the field proper to inspect some of the puddles there when a unique call drew our attention to a bird soaring into the field proper. For the next couple of minutes we observed a trio of Ibis flying in one after another and forming a delightful V-shaped Formation over our heads as they circled over our heads, all the while uttering their unique call which seemed to translate into "Bipeds Spotted, Feeding

Site Compromised!" We later found out that they were addressing a fourth bird which had come from a different angle and the newly formed squadron eventually petered out as they split into two separate pairs and veered off at different angles. Our slightly bemused local guide speculated that if we had not moved from our spot, they may just have landed at the pond we were on at that very moment. For me, that is the beauty of birding, where the unexpected always occurs when you least expect it.

We never saw this species again until we decided to make a pre-dawn trip to a known roost site near the village on our final morning. Although four birds had been reported to have landed there the previous evening, we only found & observed one from a distance as it awoke from its slumber & carried out its pre-departure checks before eventually leaving. It was a philosophical experience for me, as I stood there thinking how not too long ago this lonely individual would probably have slept here in the company of dozens more like him, and how if not for intense conservation efforts this individual may not even exist, let alone have the comfort of the dead tree he was sleeping on at that moment.

**White-rumped Falcon** – A beauty which I never tire of looking. Having seen it in Cat Tien, of all places, it wasn't new for me but the views here were much better than my earlier ones. After spending an afternoon in slightly more open forest, our guides finally found a male perched silently and very unobtrusively feasting on the remains of unfortunate reptile. As such, the group managed excellent scoped views of the bird for more than 20 minutes although photography was difficult at such a distance. An hour later, as we visited a known site for Pale-capped Pigeon in the same area, a female promptly landed in the tree behind our group and started calling, presumably proclaiming ownership of the territory. A great end to a birding day which was preceded by the two Ibis species mentioned above.

**Red-headed Vulture** – The resident WCS staff at Tmat Boey Ecotourism Centre told us that a campaign was underway to introduce Vulture Restaurants in Kulem Promtep as well. Hence, it was certainly heartening to observe a single Red-headed Vulture soaring near the resort one afternoon by a few of the group while the rest took a siesta. A species which was recently uplisted from Near-threatened to Critical, Cambodia's Vulture Restaurants may indeed be the last stand for SE Asia's only viable vulture populations.

#### **Other Notables:**

Streak-throated Woodpecker  
Black-headed Woodpecker (Locally Common)  
Brown Fish-owl  
Rufous-winged Buzzard (Locally Common)  
Brown Prinia  
Lesser Adjutant & Woolly-necked Stork  
Chinese Francolin



White-shouldered Ibis in flight



White-shouldered Ibis at its roost



White-rumped Falcon



Rufous-winged Buzzard

### **Vulture Restaurant / Preah Vihear Wildlife Sanctuary**

The only place left in the Orient, and perhaps the whole of Asia since India's Vulture Crisis, where one can observe large groups of vultures feeding on "hand-outs", albeit rather expensive beef steak considering it apparently costs USD 250 to buy the full cow. The drive to the area was gruelling to say the least with at least eight hours fully on the road from Tmat Boey across what is undoubtedly one of Asia's worst roads as in some places it is a riverbed & in others more like a bullock cart pathway. Nevertheless, we made it in one piece although the vehicle came off far worse thanks to some rather haphazard driving and were treated to a spectacle which in the modern context would be difficult to observe anywhere in Asia. The habitat here is unique in that the large expanse of forest is separated by a huge area of permanent marshland. Accommodation here is either in tents loaned from WCS or in hammocks or sleeping bags in an elevated field house. For groups visiting this area, the cooks from Tmat Boey follow and cook excellent local cuisine using supplies bought from the market in the provincial capital Tbeng Mentchey. Definitely Cambodia's last frontier and it comes as little surprise that this whole area was Khmer Rouge's last stronghold until very recently.





Marshland at Vulture Restaurant



Accommodation at Chhep Restaurant

### Highlights:

**Vulture Feast** – What else? A magical experience which would have been more magical had it not been for the need to climb up to an elevated hut 15m above the ground and barely able to accommodate six people and certainly not someone like me who is above 6 feet tall. Nevertheless, the discomforts were all but forgotten as we rotated shifts around the viewing area & eventually everyone got their fill of the melee occurring 200m in front of us. The carcass, covered the night before to prevent Jackals from having a free meal was opened at first light & even before the sun rose vultures could be seen arriving in the nearby trees. However, it was still a lengthy wait as they stood there for no apparent reason, seemingly content to watch the jackals get their free meal anyway. It was not until 8am, a full 2.5 hours later, that a group of Large-billed Crows landed at the carcass and announced their presence with their raucous calls. It was then, just as mentioned in



Howie's report, that one by one the vultures swooped towards the carcass en-masse. The Red-headed Vultures arrived first but were quickly shoved aside by the tide of feathers that belonged to the hordes of Slender-billed & the most numerous White-rumped. Out of the blue, we watched in awe as the towering mass that is a juvenile Himalayan Griffon enter the fray and power its way to the centre of the pack and stand triumphantly at the top of the carcass as he picked off the choice cuts of meat around the ribs while the rest had to contend with squabbling with the jackals around the edges. Even the jackals seemed to be taken aback by the surge as they stood forlornly around the carcass, now and then harassing the odd vulture or two. By 9.30am, the carcass was stripped to the bone and the ribs of the cow could be seen gleaming in the sunshine. The spectacle consisted of no less than 50 vultures, of which White-rumped was the most numerous with 35 counted. Slender-billed numbered around a dozen or so individual while the less boisterous Red-headed numbered only half a dozen, most of whom content to pick scraps from the edges. Of greatest interest was the lone juvenile Himalayan Griffon, only Cambodia's third record & according to the local ranger in charge of the site it was the second consecutive year the species was recorded here, with the previous record dated 24 Feb 2007.



It's a waiting game



First to the feast



The grand vulture feast



Vulture and Jackal



Red-headed Vulture



Vulture Galore!

**Other Notables:**

Brown Prinia

Yellow-footed Green-pigeon (Large Group of a dozen or so in trees around the marshland)

Oriental Scops-owl (Heard only close to campsite)

Collared Falconet (Single @ Campsite)

Greater Spotted Eagle (1 soaring over restaurant site)

## White-winged Duck Site / Preah Vihear Wildlife Sanctuary

This site is situated just 6km from the Laos border & is so remote it does not even have a name. Even for our SVC guide, Sopheab, it was his first time here. The site is reached following a 2 hour drive from the aforementioned one and the campsite is near a river which proved to be extremely tricky to cross. Once across the river, the habitat changes dramatically to a mixed evergreen forest with a dense understorey which among other things included hazards like rattan. The landscape was once again dotted with forested pools and in these quiet water bodies all of us had our best views ever of WWD, even for those like me who had seen them before. The birdlife here was also very different from the surroundings and was more like that of a tropical forest. Babblers like Puff-throated & Scaly-crowned were present & Orange-breasted Trogon, Banded Broadbill & a host of other species was recorded here. However, the density & diversity is considerably lower than areas like Khao Yai because the area of forest is not particularly extensive & most likely occurs in close proximity to the river whilst the surrounding area is still largely dry dipterocarp forests. Ground birds like Siamese Fireback have been recorded here although during our time here only Ding Li saw Asian Stubtail. No pittas or partridges were heard although the area certainly has potential for them. There were quite a few ticks in the area too, thanks to the dry conditions.

### Highlights:

White-winged Duck – We struck gold on this one within 30 mins of our arrival and barely 400m into the forest from the campsite. Our local guides led us to a pool where we observed a pair of these enigmatic ducks. One was perched on a bank at the far end while two were much closer to the Viewing Hide (made of natural materials) that we were crouched in. True to their wary nature, both ducks eventually sensed our presence and flew away uttering that amusing honking call. The next day Kim Chuah, Ding Li & I were positioned in another hide facing another pool and here we watched another duck feeding alongside a White-breasted Waterhen. The waterhen seemed to make the duck more relaxed and we watched this particular one for more than an hour. The ones found here seems to have much more blackish blotches (for lack of a better word) on their head and neck compared to those in Way Kambas, where even the males seem to have a much whiter head. Another trip highlight!



White-winged Duck



White-winged Duck

**Night Birds** – The night bird density here is just extraordinary. Seated in the camp site after nightfall we heard at least half a dozen species & came very close to at least a pair of Oriental Bay-owls although ultimately not having a proper spotlight with us and the pair's decision to circle the recording meant we came up empty handed. Aside from the dip, at various points in the night we heard Brown Hawk-owl, Javan Frogmouth, Brown Wood-owl, Collared & Oriental Scops-owl, Collared, Spotted & Asian Barred Owlet and even what we believe to be a Green Peafowl calling from the grasslands near the river at 2am in the morning!

**Other Notables:**

Asian Stubtail  
Orange-breasted Trogon  
Banded Broadbill  
Siberian Blue Robin  
Possible Scaly Thrush  
Mixed Flock Species Like White-bellied Erponis, Scaly-crowned Babbler, Large Cuckooshrike & Grey-eyed Bulbul to name a few. (Mentioned Here as not likely to be recorded elsewhere in Northern Cambodia)

**Conclusion:**

Overall, it was a great trip with our target of seeing six Critically Endangered Species within a week being achieved amongst a list totalling more than 200 species. Special thanks go out to Sam Veasna Center once again for all the prior arrangements & services provided & they come highly recommended. Special thanks also to James Eaton for the helpful information on some of the species & finally to previous report-writers like Marc Ameels, Howie Nielson & John Engol (Apologises if I got your names wrong) who were kind enough to share your experiences with the community. Hopefully, with the continued interest of ecotourism to this exotic land, both the birds & the smiling Cambodia people will be able to maintain a harmonious co-existence for the foreseeable future.



Staff at Tmat Boey



Our capable cook – Chem Sokhy



Our guides and armed escort



Team members – from left Lim Kim Chuah, Horst Flotow, Simon Cockayne, Albert Low, Yong Ding Li