

Malay Peninsula Trip Blog

Saturday, August 11, 2012: Kuala Lumpur

Our first view of KL, as it seems to be universally known, was from the air as we descended for a landing after a short flight from Borneo. After our final morning of birding, we had driven to Lahad Datu, the nearest airport to the Danum Valley, to fly to KK. Then we had a layover of a couple of hours before heading to KL.



From the air, we observed a huge, sprawling city, but one with fewer lights than we might have seen in other parts of the world. The main lights were along the many major thoroughfares snaking thru the city. By the time we landed and walked to the Pan Pacific hotel it was nearly 10:00pm, and we were ready for bed. Of course, despite the fact that we found ourselves back in the 21st century in a modern, luxury hotel catering to airline passengers, it still took a while to get organized. This gave Linda a chance to take photos of the lobby, shown above.

We had a good internet connection in the room, and thought about calling everyone using Skype. However, given the time difference, we decided to wait until early the next morning. We were due to meet for breakfast at 7:00, and as we were used to waking at 4:45, this posed no real problems.

We watched Olympic highlights for a bit, then slept soundly.

Sunday, August 12, 2012: Kuala Lumpur to Kuala Selangor

We carried out our program of calling with only minor problems. Claire and Ron were away from the phone when we tried them, but we contacted Charles on his mobile in Austin, Granny in Houston, and the Marshalls in Oakland. The latter was to make sure the pets were OK, which they were.

As we were using Skype, I noticed that Terry Cloudman was online, so I clicked on his name. In seconds, we heard Jenny Cloudman's voice, and a bit later, we had a video connection. All things considered, that is pretty amazing.

We had a brief chat with Claire shortly before time to head down for breakfast, so Skype proved its worth again.

Breakfast was a feast.

By 9:00, we had managed to get more Malaysian Ringit from an ATM machine in the airport and meet the other members of the tour group. Linda and I, the Englemans, and Jim Martin from Borneo, as well as Chris Kehoe, our Borneo guide, continued onto the Malay Peninsula portion. Joining us were Christine Churchill, a retired librarian (from the Bodeleian no less), Gordon Bonnet, a high school biology teacher from upstate New York, and a new guide, Simon Harrap, from England. Chris is a "trainee" on this trip; he is not familiar with the Malay Peninsula, though he certainly knows the birds. In effect, we have two guides for a small group, a definite plus.

Our local contact, Suresh (no last name given), and our driver (who presumably has a name, but we weren't given it) packed us into a van that had just enough seats for everyone for a drive of about one hour to the De Palma hotel in Kuala Selangor. (Kuala means "the junction of two rivers," or something like that.)

After dropping off our luggage, it was time for some birding at the Kuala Selangor Nature Preserve, an Important Bird Area according to a sign at the entrance.

We set out late in the afternoon. We have moved from the eastern portion of the time zone to the western end. As a result, we get to sleep in as it doesn't get light until about 7:00. However, it stays light until almost 8:00 in the evening, so our day is just as long, just different.

The nature preserve protects some mangroves along the Malacca Strait. That meant liberal application of DEET and lots of damp clothing by the time we finished. We took a long loop along a canal, trolling for special birds by playing recordings of the Mangrove Pitta, Mangrove Whistler, and Mangrove Blue-flycatcher repeatedly. The latter two showed up, but the Pitta, as usual, refused to cooperate. Still, we finished the day with a reasonable haul of new lifers. If we had been able to identify bats, we would have added two more mammal species: there were the small, fast flying ones, and the larger, slower ones.

We returned to the hotel for dinner, finding the dining room filled with Muslims breaking the Ramadan fast. Curiously, despite fasting from dawn to dusk, we learned that the consumption of food increases by 20% during Ramadan. I wonder if this is what Mohammed had in mind.

Monday, August 13, 2012: Return to the Nature Preserve and onto Fraser's Hill

We ate an early breakfast, and returned to the nature preserve. We followed a different path thru the mangroves today, still searching for the Pitta. The best part of the preserve has a nice boardwalk thru it. The base is concrete and in good shape, but the railings had fallen down in many places. A portion of the walk leading deeper into the marsh was completely gone to Simon's dismay. Yesterday, we had made the full circuit of the boardwalk, about 300m. Today, we walked along one of the canals bordering the mangroves until we came to an agricultural area. It appeared to be a shrimp farm. (Prawns to be precise. I have learned that there is a subtle difference between the two not evident in the eating.)

We still had no luck with the Pitta. I was feeling a bit under the weather with traveler's distress. When the group passed the turn to go back to the van in favor of another try on the boardwalk, I excused myself and walked back. I had time to buy a lemon iced tea which helped considerably before the rest of the group returned.



After lunch, we drove to Fraser's Hill, a resort area in the hills north of our location. Linda had an accident with the camera after lunch, and it died. Kaput. Totally out of commission. So, we have only cell phone pictures for the rest of the Malay Peninsula portion of the trip. I was able to get all the photos off the chip in the camera, though, and discovered some good ones. I've shared one of them, a nice picture of my favorite bird from Borneo, Black-and-yellow Broadbill, sitting on one of the cables holding up the canopy walkway. Linda nicknamed this bird, Bornean Flying Penguin for the tuxedo-like plumage.

We got to "The Gap," where you turn to go to Fraser's Hill (aka Bikit Fraser) in time for some last minute birding. We had great luck to find a Collared Owlet sitting out and singing his monotonous song. The song sounds like T-I-T in Morse code. Dash-Dot-Dot-Dash, over and over. I claimed that the owl was calling for his supper. Our new guide, Simon, spent considerable time trying to get a photo of the bird by digiscoping, and also recording the

song. Linda, Lorna, and I wandered off searching for something more interesting and finding nothing. Finally, we mounted up again and drove to our hotel in Fraser's Hill in time for a wash up and dinner.

Tuesday, August 14, 2012: Birding the roads and Bishop's Trail



Here's a photo of a spider in our room in Borneo that Linda took with her camera before it broke. We haven't identified the spider,

Today, was a dictionary day (birding before breakfast) as we headed down the road briefly to try for some Malay specialties. We were successful, and duly tallied the Malaysian Whistling-thrush and Malaysian Laughingthrush. I like Laughingthrushes. They are easy to see and often colorful. The common one here, Spectacled Laughingthrush, is similar to one we saw in Borneo, and is considered the same species by the Clements' checklist we are using. It should be split sometime in the future, yielding an *armchair lifer*.

After breakfast, we birded along the road most of the time. The forest comes surprisingly close to the road, and many of the more common birds are easy to find that way. There are many different squirrels to see in the area. We wound up with a total of four of them, the cutest is a tiny chipmunk-like one we saw in Bhutan, Himalayan Striped Squirrel, which we called *Tamiops*, after its scientific name. It is slightly bigger than the Plain Pygmy-squirrel we saw in Borneo, but just as fun to watch.

Ultimately, we canme to Bishop's Trail, a steep, slippery trail thru the forest.. Bishop of Singapore, the Right Reverend [foobar] road his horse from his cottage in the Gap (now known as Bishop's Cottage) to visit friends in Fraser's Hill. The route he took has been immortalized in part as the trail. We had to proceed single file down the trail, which means that we changed places on a regular schedule. I stayed with Linda, as sometimes I had to help her up or down on the steep parts.

During the walk, we had a 5-star view of Pygmy Wren-babbler. Wren-babblers as a group are hard, skulking in the undergrowth, seldom showing themselves. The Pygmy, a tiny bird like a brown egg on legs with white spots on its back is an exception. It frequently responds to a recording of its call by coming to challenge the intruder. This was the third time we have seen the species and the second 5-star view. We also saw the bird in Thailand at Doi Inthanon, where we took this photo.

We picked up another half bird today, Rufous-backed Kingfisher, which Linda saw but I didn't. In fact, most of the group caught only glimpses of the bird as it shot from one perch to the next. However we are cleaning up half birds at a nice pace, one for Linda and two for me. We will have other chances for the Kingfisher.

The trail made a loop after something like a mile, depositing us back onto a different road. Our bus waited for us to take us back to the hotel for lunch and an all-too-brief siesta. Then we birded some more on the roads before staggering home at dark for a late meal and bed.

Wednesday, August 15, 2012: Birding the New Road, The Gap, and Bishop's Trail

Today, I saw three lifers, bringing my total to 4301. Despite my best efforts, my century bird was not the plain brown bird I hoped for (Rufescent Prinia) but the gaudy, colorful Black-browed Barbet. Both these birds were spectacular sightings, but the highlights of the day were two mammals. More on that below.

We started after breakfast for a change, driving to the top of the New Road. Now that the road has been finished, the main road from the Gap is for uphill traffic only. The New Road is reserved for downhill traffic. We left the bus at the top with instructions to wait for an hour, then follow us down.

We began by getting a good look at a Black-browed Barbet, a bird we have heard frequently. We all now recognize its "soda pop" call. We scoped one and watched as it puffed out its throat patch to make the characteristic barbet sound. (Actually, there are now three distinct families of barbets, each with a different sound, Africa, Asia, and the neo-tropics.)

As we walked down the road, Chris said, "There's a mammal in a tree." He got the scope on it, and we all agreed that it was a Binturong, aka Bearcat, which had never been seen on this tour before. The animal was sleeping with its body on the trunk of the tree, its legs dangling over. As we watched, another Binturong appeared and climbed up into the tree. We thought we might get an automatic 5-star view (for copulation), but were disappointed slightly. The two nuzzled, but no more. Someone suggested that they were only friends. I replied, "Friends with benefits at least." The two of them disappeared into the foliage for some privacy.

We had not gone far when Linda said, "Stop. There's a Gibbon in this tree." And so there was, a Siamang, local to the Malay Peninsula. This was a solitary individual, probably a non-breeding male, who mostly just slept and ate a few leaves.

Then, we heard more Siamangs. A family group advertised its presence for all the hear, beginning with the deep hoot of the dominant male, then other members of the family joined in, culminating in the calls of a young one. After a short wait, the performance was repeated. We scoped them and watched as they moved about the tree and called, at least fifteen minutes.



Any of these sightings would be noteworthy. The combination was so spectacular that even the most hardened birders in the group, by which I mean Dodge, were content to watch for a while. The group recognizes Linda and me as mammal aficionados, even interested in identifying all the squirrels in the area. They tolerate this strange attraction for "furry birds," but may not understand it.

We are also interested in reptiles in the area, such as this small monitor lizard Linda photographed.

After a while, the bus arrived and took us back to the Gap, where we birded along the road until [well past] the time for lunch. We got back about 1:00pm to eat a mediocre offering. At lunch, the meal is ordered from a menu (by

Suresh, our local contact), rather than being a buffet. We have a choice of fish or chicken, except for Christine, who gets some vegetarian dish.

Then, we had time for a brief siesta before setting out again at 3:30 pm. We headed back to the end of Bishop's Trail. Thankfully, we saw the Rufous-backed Kingfisher perched on a vine over the trail. Everyone got a 4-star view, so we didn't have to go very far down the trail. We went down another connected trail for a while, but found nothing new, so we returned to the road.

We weren't ready to quit birding. I commented to Christine that our birding reminded me of a soccer match where the referee delays ending the game until the losing side has one last chance at a score. We stay out as long as there is the slightest possibility of adding another bird to the list.

Thursday, August 16, 2012: Owling, The Gap, and the Telecom Loop

Got up before breakfast and walked down to the spot where we had birded on the first morning in Fraser's Hill. Today, our target was the Mountain Scops-owl. We heard it calling, but were unable to find it despite spending 20 minutes on the task, so we returned to breakfast before setting out again.

We drove down the New Road to the Gap, then walked up the Old Road. Despite several signs indicating that it is illegal to stop before getting to the top, we planned to have the bus pick us up later. As the lodge was 9km from the Gap, and all uphill, we thought that a very good idea.

The morning produced quite a few birds, but only one new one, Yellow-bellied Warbler. We were surprised to find out it was a lifer. There are several small warbler-like birds with yellow underparts. Only one of them is this bird.

Instead of a bird photo, here is a really cool insect, a Mantid of some kind, that we photographed on the railing of the canopy walkway in Borneo, following our plan of showing photos salvaged from the wrecked camera. We took this photo shortly after the one of the Black-and-yellow Broadbill. In fact, we discovered the insect when we were positioning ourselves for the Broadbill photo. Until it moved, it looked exactly like a dead leaf. Until it turned its head, we didn't realize it was a Praying Mantis.



Returning to our narrative: During lunch, it rained heavily, which modified our plans slightly. We didn't go down any forest trails. Instead, we birded along a road near the top of Fraser's Hill. The real name of the road is Jalan Girdle, which means Girdle Lane, but it is known to birders as the Telecom Loop. There is a telecom tower visible at one point, which I guess is where the name comes from.

We had some nice looks at birds we have become familiar with, and a new squirrel, Slender Squirrel, but otherwise nothing new.

Friday, August 16, 2012: Traveling to Taman Negara

This morning, by popular demand, we made another try at seeing Mountain Scops-owl. As we had heard one close yesterday, there was always a chance that we would be able to coax one into view.

Success! At about 6:25, Simon managed to find one of the three owls that had been calling for several minutes and we all had a great look at the bird in the spotlight before it flew off.

After high-fives all around, we returned to the hotel for breakfast. In the evening, I had a chance to check our records and found a sighting of Mountain Scops-owl in Bhutan without a rating. That usually means it was only so-so at best, rather than the view we had this morning. It was too brief to rate more than a 3.5 on Linda and my scale, though Dodge argued for a 4 at least. I was slightly disappointed to discover that it wasn't a lifer. We heard the bird calling in Bhutan many times and seen it once.

After breakfast, we returned to the Telecom Loop area where we were yesterday afternoon. We added no new birds to the list, but did find another new squirrel. We now have logged five squirrels in the area, including my favorite, the cute *Tamiops mcllendandii* or Himilayan Striped Squirrel.



Linda spotted this interesting slug beside the trail. The pattern on its back reminds us of a yin/yang symbol. (OK, you have to use your imagination.)

We spent the rest of the day traveling to our new home for several days Taman Negara National Park. I would like to know what that means, and plan to find out. Getting there involved driving for a total of 3 hours and riding in a boat for two more up the Tembeling River. We arrived late in the afternoon, with time for a quick shower before a leisurely walk to dinner. Along the way, we saw the amazing creature pictured below, a Malaysian Tapir. It was quire tame, and even with only a cell phone, we got a decent

photo. Turns out the creature was released here after being rehabilitated, so we may not count it.

Saturday, August 18, 2012: Bukit Teresek Trail, Boat ride in the afternoon up Tahan River

How to describe this place? Hot and humid? Not good enough.

It is so hot and humid that you can work up a sweat just breathing. Linda is considering eye surgery because her glasses keep fogging up. The cabin has air conditioning, but it labors just to keep the temperature tolerable until early in the morning, about 2:00am usually, when we wake up cold and turn it off. We have to remember to switch it back on when we leave so the place will be tolerable when we return, usually about 1:00pm or later in the afternoon.



This morning, after breakfast, we set off on the trail to Bukit Teresek. Having just arrived from Bukit Fraser, we knew that *Bukit* meant *hill*, and were not surprised to see the boardwalk turn into a series of steps heading uphill. I was a bit surprised to see our guide, Simon, casually lift caution tape out of the way so we could attack the hill. Soon, the reason for the tape across the way became obvious. The boardwalk was a work in progress, and had a lot of progress to go.



It started out looking reasonable, but before we completed the loop, the trail turned into a disaster. Here is a bridge we crossed, as photographed using Linda's cell phone. The alternative was to descend to the bottom of the gorge and climb back up the other side. About half the group, especially those uncomfortable with heights, chose the latter option. Linda and I walked carefully across the concrete slabs. The fall probably would not have been fatal should we have slipped, but we made it without incident.

The unfinished portion of the boardwalk covered up much of the existing trail, forcing us to walk next to the metal bars that would hold the slats when completed. This was not easy. We got to a long downhill portion of the trail, followed inevitably by a long uphill portion. The result was that a moderately difficult walk in the forest turned into a long, grueling and hazardous slog. We finished, exhausted, with four lifers, not much for such a trek.

After lunch, we saw this Red Muntjac, a kind of deer, walking past the cabins.



In the afternoon, we took a boat ride up the Tahan River, actually more like a shallow creek, a tributary of the Tembeling River. We motored steadily upstream in three canoes with outboard motors then drifted downstream looking for birds on the shoreline. We didn't find much in the way of



avifauna of interest, except for Dodge and Lorna in a different canoe, who spotted a Straw-headed Bulbul, a species on their most-wanted list.

It was a lovely river, though. It was much cooler on the river than in the forest. Here's a picture of Dodge and Lorna with Simon in the lead canoe.

Sunday, August 19, 2012: Gould's Frogmouth, Jetty Blau Trail, around the cabins.

Up before dawn to search for Gould's Frogmouth.

I admit I didn't expect much, but the result was spectacular. After spying it flying and getting a butt view of it sitting in a tree, we were lucky and saw it again perched on a vine near the boardwalk behind the cabins. Watched it for quite a while as Simon tried to get a photo. I'm sure Terry would have nailed it. I'll wait to see what Simon produced. He said later that it was the best view for him in 25 years.

After breakfast, we took a short boat ride to a jetty along the Tembeling River. Ashore, we scrambled up a steep slope (what else would you expect?) to a trail thru the forest. We spent the entire morning slogging around the forest, managing to see a Rufous-chested Flycatcher, a new bird. I rated it 4-stars. Linda insisted that we give it an extra ½ because it was *cute*. Unfortunately, Simon heard a Banded Pitta, a bird I have taken to calling mentally the Banded [expletive deleted] Pitta because whenever Simon hears one, we spend the next 30 minutes trying to coax it out of the undergrowth.

This time was no exception, except that it was worse than usual. When the Pitta didn't appear after being summoned, Simon suggested, "Just wait here quietly for a few minutes and see if it comes in." I had the presence of mind to check my watch. 29 minutes later, we gave up. I commented that it felt like I was an unwitting participant in a psychology experiment, to see just how long we would wait before we quit standing quietly.

After that, we hiked to a second jetty where the boat returned to pick us up.

The plan for the afternoon was to stay around the cabins. In particular, there was a fruiting tree right outside the cabin Chris and Simon shared. Last night Simon gleefully recited all the birds they had seen in the tree from their porch after lunch when we were lying exhausted on our beds with nothing on except the fan at high speed.

The tree proved to be very productive, and well worth organizing the afternoon around. I also spotted a Common Tree-shrew on the roof of a neighboring building.

After about an hour, we had seen almost everything they had noted the day before, so we went in search of new worlds to conquer. We started at a *hide*, which is British for *blind*. There, we had a distant scope view of a Black-thighed Falconet, the smallest bird of prey in the world. Linda and I had seen one yesterday from the boat (with Chris) but the rest of the group had missed, so this was a good bird to get.

Then the inevitable Banded Pitta called and we set off in pursuit. Simon asked us to please refrain from "stomping on the boardwalk," so we went as quietly as possible. Of course, there was no Pitta. However, we had a superb look at a Great Slaty Woodpecker, the largest woodpecker in the world. A nice set of bookends for the afternoon. We took the long way around on the boardwalk, making a big loop.

I heard thunder in the distance and realized that I had come off without an umbrella. Usually, I carried a daypack with all the essentials in it. As the plan had been to stick close to the cabins, I had left it behind and brought only a bottle of water. When we passed the exit to go back to the cabins, I excused myself and got the backpack. While I was at it, I packed the computer and paper checklist we use after dinner, along with a cold beer.

I returned to the hide, where everyone else had gone, to find that I had missed seeing a Large Green-pigeon, a lifer. So it goes. After a few minutes at the hide, Linda complained that she was tired. I suggested dinner, as it was almost 7:00pm. No way! Dinner was at 8:30 to leave time to look for nightjars at dusk. I managed to negotiate 8:15, but that was the best I could do.

Linda and I returned to the cabin, after notifying Dodge and Lorna, who had also split, about the earlier dinner plans.

We were in the cabin, Linda lying in bed while I typed this blog entry, when the sky opened, a real frog-strangler.

We just smiled at each other. Sometimes you get lucky.

Monday, August 20, 2012: Incredible morning, afternoon repeat of yesterday

The instructions for this morning were to report for breakfast with all the gear for the morning as, "we will be walking away from the dining hall." Our cabin is a good 10-15 minute walk from the dining hall, so we don't want to go unnecessarily.

After breakfast, we hiked out in a new direction, but quickly came to caution tape again. I had a bad feeling. A short distance later, I found myself staring at the same “bridge” we had crossed the other day. We were on the Bukit Teresek trail again, but from the other end.

For some reason, I simply crossed the bridge. It was even more dangerous this time, as all the rain had left the surface slick. The rain made the alternative route, down the hill to the bottom, then up the other side, much more difficult than before. I gave Simon a piece of my mind when we got together again. I asked whether we planned to take this route again. He replied, “Probably not.” I said, “Let’s make it *definitely* not. This path is dangerous. No bird is worth this.” I spent the next hour castigating myself for not simply refusing to cross the bridge in the first place. Peer pressure operates even at this level, and I felt obligated to the group to carry on.

The hike was torture. The trail, bad enough to begin with, was slick from the rain.

Toward the end of the hike, close to 1:00pm, meaning that we’d been hiking almost birding almost 6 hours (80 minutes of which were spent on a single bird, see below), we came to uphill part of the trail described earlier, but from the other direction and when we were already tired. I joked that this brought out everyone’s piety, though impiety is more accurate. First, we climbed up a series of steps using holes dug to support the boardwalk. When we thought we were at the top, we looked and saw still more to climb. “Jesus!” was a common reaction.

As I mentioned, we had spent 80 minutes trying to get a look at Malaysian Rail-babbler. I am guessing the name comes from the fact that rails are hard to see and so are (some) babblers. Put them together and you have a really hard bird. First, Simon thought he heard a Garnet Pitta calling, then said, “It may be a Rail-babbler.” He proceeded to play a tape of the bird’s call over and over as the bird answered, like the Invisible Man, from some unknown location.

After moving around in an attempt to get the bird out in the open, Simon began mouthing what I think was, “It’s right here,” while pointing to some brush in front of him. “I see it,” said Christine. “It’s walking on the ground.” Dodge behind me said, “I can barely see it.” I looked where he pointed in time to see a rusty brown tail go past the gap. Linda didn’t even get that good a look. We had been looking for a Garnet Pitta, but this was a Rail-babbler. When Linda noted that we thought we were looking for the Pitta, Simon said, “We were looking for the Rail-babbler all along.”



Without any birds to photograph, Linda has been active creating a record of all the fungi we encounter. Malaysia is a mycologist’s dream. (Among other things.) Here is one that we have seen a couple of times on the trail.

At dinner, we debated whether I had a “countable tick” for the Rail-babbler. I felt that I hadn’t seen enough of the bird to count. Linda, Lorna, and Dodge argued that as we knew what the bird was, I could count it. At present, I have the bird marked as countable with a rating of 0.5, the lowest I have ever given for a bird I have seen. I commented that it was a lot of work for “a piece of tail.”

In the afternoon, we stayed close to the cabins, checking out the fruiting tree outside cabin 92, then walking to the *hide* nearby. As it was 2:00pm by the time we ate lunch, we were happy to take it easy a bit. We saw a lot of good birds, but no new lifers, without having to walk far.

Tuesday, August 21, 2012: Owl hunt, Return to Jetty Blau Trail, Boat trip in the afternoon.

Today, we got up before dawn to try to see the Reddish Scops-owl, which we have heard calling for several days. I didn’t expect to see it, as owls are hard to begin with, and this one notoriously so. However, I was surprised when Simon located it sitting on a branch right over the boardwalk. I gave it a 3-star rating as I was looking at its back. I thought about moving around to try to see it from the other side, but the owl beat me to the punch. It bent over and looked me right in the eye *under the branch it was standing on*. That performance elevated the rating to 5 and put the cute little guy on my top five list.

After breakfast, we returned to the Jetty Blau Trail where we had spent Sunday morning. The results were similar to Sunday’s. We stayed in the forest until 1:00pm and managed to add Gray-breasted Spiderhunter to our list. This is another

poorly named bird. You might suspect that it lives on spiders, but in fact it is a nectar feeder. We have now seen all the Spiderhunters on the list.



In the afternoon, we repeated the boat trip on the Tahan River. The rain we had raised the water level considerably, which made it harder for the boatmen to deal with the rapids. The rotation of the seating in the canoe meant that Linda and I were in the middle canoe, without either of the guides. I joked that this was “stringer’s delight.” (Stringer is a term for someone who makes up a sighting, or clings to one after knowing it is wrong.) I said that Linda and I already had our list ready and the boat ride was a mere formality. Lorna snapped this photo of the two of us. We are smiling because we saw a Blue-banded Kingfisher that zipped past our canoe at warp 2, but was easy to ID regardless. It had been on our list of birds we wanted to see on the river, so we didn’t have to cheat.

Wednesday, August 22, 2012: Another Pass on Jetty Blau Trail. Pittas

This morning, Orni, the capricious goddess of birding decided to punish me for complaining about Pittas. She put not one, but two in our path for the day, gave Linda superb views of both birds and me a so-so look at one and a miserable look at the other.



We tried the Jetty Blau Trail again. It was overcast and a bit cooler than before, but the birding was a slow as ever. After seeing some of the usual stuff, we heard Banded Pitta calling. (We know the Pitta calls by this time.) Another agonizing wait ensued. I find it difficult to stand still for long periods of time. My left leg starts to hurt, a remnant of back surgery 10 years ago. Normally, this is not problem; I just walk around a bit. However, when forced to stand still, it becomes an issue. I *have* to shift my weight to the other leg.

After a few such maneuvers, Christine, the shortest member of the group with a definite flair for spotting Pittas (and the Rail-babbler as well) said, “I see the bird. It’s a colorful bird walking on the ground.” That was nice to know, but not much help seeing the bird. I finally managed to spot the head of the bird with the rest concealed by vegetation. Linda didn’t see that. Then Christine said that she saw it sitting on a log. Linda spotted it at once and tried to tell me where to look, but the slight difference in our positions meant I didn’t get a good look. Simon tried to get the bird to cooperate for me with just the two of us watching, but it had moved off.

Dodge then informed me that I had seen “the critical field mark,” a flame colored crescent on the bird’s head. Thus, there was on question whether I should count it. He argued that it deserved a 2, as I had, after all, seen enough to ID the bird. Ultimately, I gave it 1.75. Linda gave it a 5 and put it down as her New Favorite Bird®.

Then, a short while later, after only about 20 minutes of playing the bird’s call, Christine again spotted the Garnet Pitta. Whoopee! I saw it. Then, I saw it again, its red head blazing in the dim forest light. Linda also saw it, but when Simon asked if everyone had seen it, she joined the group hoping to get a better look. I was happy to record a 3-star for a bird that still coaxed an expletive from me when I saw it. Linda returned from the second chance beaming, reporting that the bird sat on a branch and she looked at it for quite a while, 4.5. (At least it wasn’t another 5.)

Thus chastened, I quit bad mouthing Pittas. No others appeared for the rest of the trip.

Orni rewarded us by sending some gorgeous Crested Fireback pheasants to our cabin. I made them my top bird of the trip on the Malay Peninsula. Unfortunately, Linda’s cell phone, which is serving as our camera, was so fogged up from the humidity that we couldn’t get a picture.

We did get a photo of Linda with a Great Hornbill feather.

On our way to dinner, we had the great good luck to see a large owl fly into a tree with almost no leaves on it. It was almost dark, but we were able to see that it was an Eagle-owl, the name for what we call Horned Owls in the US. The only possibility is the Barred Eagle-owl, and we happily added it to our list. Chris and Simon tried to get a good look, but the owl flew without perching where it was visible.

Thursday, August 23, 2012: The last day

We got up before dawn again to try once more for the Collared Scops-owl, or Sunda Scops-owl to use the latest name. We heard it calling very close, but Simon had no luck finding its perch. Typically, this owl sits at the top of a tree, making it very hard to locate.

After breakfast, we birded for a few hours, managing to collect one final lifer, Streaked Bulbul, and another 5-star, Chestnut-breasted Malkoha. The latter showed us something we haven't found illustrated in the guide yet: one of the birds had a bright yellow iris. Another had a blue iris. Interesting.

We boarded the boat at 11:00 for the two-hour trip downstream to catch the bus to KL. We stopped for lunch at a wonderful Chinese restaurant that Suresh, our local contact, found for us. We were pretty hungry by the time we got there and quickly consumed all the food. Then *durian* came out for dessert. This fruit has the reputation of being delicious but having a decidedly unappetizing smell. I can attest to the smell part of the description. I managed to get a few bites past my nose and found it interesting, but not worth all the hype. For the remainder of the trip to KL, every time I burped I tasted the durian. Not my favorite fruit.

We returned to the Pan Pacific hotel for a final dinner. The food there is so good that we ate more than we should have even though it was only a few hours since lunch. The Londoners left for a plane leaving later in the evening. The rest of us spent the night and left the next day.

Friday, August 24, 2012: Petronas Twin Towers, Bird Park, Batik

Our flight to Hong Kong didn't leave until 5:20 in the afternoon, so we had time to see some of KL. Suresh picked us up in his car and took us into town to the Petronas Towers. The airport is a considerable distance from downtown, and it took over an hour even though we had a good toll road most of the way.

The towers claim to be "the tallest twin towers in the world." They are not the tallest buildings. That title currently belongs to a much taller tower in Dubai. The architecture of the towers is fascinating, and we enjoyed the tour.

We then went to a nearby Bird Park, which has a large free-flight aviary and a lot of caged birds. Amazingly, we have seen the majority of the birds there already. However, we had a great look at a Blue-winged Pitta, which even flashed a treat display at another bird in the cage. We were happy to get back to air conditioning, though.

We stopped at a Batik gallery Suresh knew about and bought some shirts and tablecloths. I bought a lovely shirt for me, but Linda passed on a blouse when I wasn't sufficiently enthusiastic about how it looked.

Then we drove back to the airport where we learned that our flight was delayed. All that means is that we have a shorter time to wait in HK before heading on to SFO. I am finishing this draft while sitting in the Traveler's Lounge, another of the pay to get in lounges in the airport.

Linda says she needs to edit this report, so consider this a preliminary output.