

Trip report: Thailand – Kaeng Krachan and Pak Thale (15/01/2024 - 19/01/2024)

By Okamoto Keita Sin, with comments by Geraldine Lee and Yap Bao Shen

Blog: keitasin.wordpress.com | Instagram: [okamoto_keita_sin](#)

I wanted to start the year with a short trip but had no time to do any proper planning, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly and worryingly common in my birding life. I hence decided to visit the logistically relatively straightforward and yet still very attractive Kaeng Krachan and Pak Thale.

The two sites are extremely well visited. We met many birders at both locations and there are plenty of information online, so this is another lazy report I'm drafting on my flight back. Make of it what you will, but I hope it will at least contain bits and pieces of information useful for your planning.

Before getting into the details, I'd like to express my utmost gratitude: Yenyi and Movin for various details regarding both sites; Ayuwat for informing us about the Yellow-breasted Bunting roost as well as for sharing other information about Kaeng Krachan (it was so great to finally meet you in person!!!!); and Games from Baan Maka for showing us the roosting White-fronted Scops Owl. Thanks also to the multiple groups of birders we met for the friendly chats and information shared. And most importantly, huge thanks to Darryl for helping us get in touch with Bird to visit his hide, for the amazing gems of information, and for the many great stories (also for lending us your room's shower when ours went on strike...). Darryl's works include a suite of fantastic wildlife films with a focus on Thailand. They can be found at [his website/YouTube channel](#) and I recommend checking them out.

Resources

This was my first visit to Kaeng Krachan, and to plan our trip we mainly referred to Nick Upton's [website](#) which contained excellent pointers. We spoke zero Thai, so the Google translate app (which, if you didn't know, has a download function for offline usage) was a life saver. People we met were all super helpful despite our language barrier. Make sure to remember how to say hello and thank you. Additionally, the phrase "roi mak mak" (which means "very delicious") never failed to bring smiles to the faces of many food stall owners. It was also the perfect description for the meals we had. Also all the sites we visited did not accept credit card, so make sure you have sufficient cash.

Itinerary

15 January 2024: Arrive in Thailand. Drive from Bangkok to Kaeng Krachan. Late afternoon birding at Baan Maka. Night at [Kum Nangpaya](#).

16 January 2024: Full day birding at Bird's Hide. Night at Kum Nangpaya.

17 January 2024: Full day birding at Kaeng Krachan. Night at Phanoen Thung Campsite.

18 January 2024: Full day birding at Kaeng Krachan. Night at [2N Guesthouse](#).

19 January 2024: Morning birding at Pak Thale area. Drive to Bangkok and depart Thailand.

Vehicle

We rented a Toyota Fortuner (an SUV) from [Thai Rent A Car](#). This was our third collective time renting from them. The car was in great condition and administrative procedures were smooth. The drive to our birding sites were straightforward with Google maps, but constant rerouting around traffic near Bangkok was annoying. It made us needlessly weave in and out of the highway for intangible gains. When driving from Bangkok towards Phetchaburi and back, just stick to Highway 35 (or Rama 2 Rd). There are no turns.

Signal

Most of us had either e-sims or overseas roaming plans. Within Kaeng Krachan, only the two campsites had reliable signal. Everywhere else we visited had no connectivity issues.

Logistics

Kaeng Krachan

The two accommodations frequented by birders, Baan Maka and Samarn Bird Camp, were both full during our visit, so we booked a room at [Kum Nangpaya](#) via booking.com instead. It was conveniently located just outside the national park. We booked a room for four and it was excellent. Clean, spacious, towels and soap provided, hot shower, plenty of power plugs. They served great food too and we were able to request packed breakfast.

There are two campsites in the national park, [Ban Krang Campsite](#) (lower) and [Phanoen Thung Campsite](#) (higher). Driving to Ban Krang Campsite, and slightly further to the first of three stream crossings, is possible with a sedan. Anything beyond would involve an SUV unless you take pride in wrecking cars. After the three stream crossings there is a [big open area](#) (confusingly also labelled Ban Krang campsite on Google maps). The road connecting this place to Phanoen Thung Campsite is a one-way road. This comparatively narrow road is rougher and steep at some sections but still easy to drive. Cars are only allowed to up from 0500 to 0800 and 1300 to 1500, and down from 0900 to 1130 and 1600 to 1700. The timings seemed enforced by individual responsibility.

Both campsites had a visitor centre, simple but good camping facilities (clean toilets and showers), and a restaurant x provisional shop. The shops were not well stocked but had basic necessities such as water. We camped at the higher Phanoen Thung Campsite and rented two tents, as well as mattresses, pillows and sleeping bags for each person. The total cost was 790 baht. They were clean and well maintained, and I understand that the lower Ban Krang Campsite also provides such rental services. We didn't have any mosquito problems during our stay up there. The restaurant at Ban Krang was open during both our lunch visits, and I strongly recommend stating that you prefer your food less/non spicy if your tolerance is low. The restaurant at Phanoen Thung was closed when we arrived slightly past 1800, but the owners very kindly prepared food for us still. It opened at 0600 in the morning and hot water for our cup noodles was available upon request.

Pak Thale

We booked a room at [2N Guesthouse](#), located about 30 minutes from the shorebird site, via booking.com. It was our third collective time staying here, and like our first two visits, we were very satisfied with the overall quality of the accommodation. Packed breakfast was available too. A delicious Mookata buffet restaurant was within walking distance from the accommodation (159 baht/pax). It was open until 2200, and just 500m down the road there was also a 24-hour convenience store.

Birding

Kaeng Krachan

The main attractions at the Kaeng Krachan area include the many hides (that do not require entering the national park) and of course the national park itself. There are multiple pins on Google maps but the entrance to the park is [here](#), with a one-time entrance fee of 200 baht/pax and 30 baht for the vehicle.

Enroute Kaeng Krachan we made a brief stop at an [Indian Stone-curlew Stakeout](#). We successfully found a group of them hiding under the trees across the pond, staring back at us with their judgemental expressions.

We only managed to arrive at the Kaeng Krachan area in the late afternoon, so rather than entering the national park, we birded [Baan Maka's](#) trail system instead, which we were allowed to access even though we were not staying there. (Baan Maka apparently used to have bird hides until several years ago, but not anymore). We didn't have much bird activity, but we managed to get neck-breaking puzzle-views of an Asian Barred Owlet at the carpark after painfully tracking it down. Owling after dinner produced a Brown Boobook right at Baan Maka's entrance along with some heard-only Collared Scops Owls. We also heard an Oriental Bay Owl at [GPS: 12.851476,99.581267](#). Driving up and down the road until [GPS: 12.875668,99.588935](#) produced nothing.

Our second day was fully spent at Bird's Hide. Different hides are reliable for different species, but these are all extremely dynamic across the seasons and even just time of day. It's best that you ask around before deciding which hide to visit. Baan Maka and Samarn Bird Camp, I've heard, can provide such information and help arrange visits. We only visited one hide that was owned by a person who goes by Bird. We had to arrange our visit beforehand due to its popularity, which Darryl kindly helped us with. Bird speaks English and can be contacted at 092-3782-703 or via Line at the same number. The entrance fee was 200 baht/pax/day, which as far as I understand is a universal rate across the hide community. It takes a bit of effort to find the hide even with a GPS pin, which I will not be providing here, but Bird will guide you there once you arrange your visit. There was a nice [noodle shop](#) very near Bird's hide where we had our lunch. We had no clue what we were ordering but enjoyed the food.

Bird's hide was clean, equipped with chairs, and well maintained. He topped up the food and changed the pool's water once in the morning and again in the afternoon. During our full day there we were able to see a large majority of our key hide targets: **Bar-backed Partridge**, **Green-legged Partridge**, **Ferruginous Partridge**, **Kalij Pheasant**, **Grey Peacock-pheasant**, **Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush**, **Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush**, and **White-browed Scimitar Babbler**. We encountered none of these birds in the national park with the exception of heard only Green-legged Partridges. Activity in the morning and evening differed, with the latter being more speciose because of the many bathing birds. However, the Grey Peacock-Pheasants showed only in the morning during our visit, so it was definitely worth our time spending the whole day there. The female was apparently frequenting the hide for quite a few weeks – but even so still unpredictable – and the male was apparently a newcomer. We dipped Large Scimitar Babbler and Slaty-legged Crake and did not encounter either in the national park either. The three tricky-to-identify Blue Flycatchers (**Chinese**, **Indochinese**, **Hill**) gave excellent views which were also never replicated in the national park. I've never really been a fan of hide birding, perhaps because my experience so far has generally been either average at best but usually below that, but Bird's hide was different. It was truly enjoyable, and for the first time I felt that I wasn't just there to add a bunch of species onto my lame list. There was a constant wave of activity, not just of birds but also of various mammals, and it was overall a fun experience observing the many animals clowning

away. A single Great Eared Nightjar soaring across the parking space as we exited the hide was, unexpectedly, the only encounter of the trip.

We either used up all our luck at the hide or are just terrible at this hobby because birding in the national park was unfortunately relatively pedestrian from a birding perspective.

We started our first day at KM9 that was easily recognisable via the road marker and a prominent sign warning drivers not to pancake birders. We didn't pick up much there but a single Gold-crested Myna was nice. We then visited a massive fig tree at [GPS: 12.810408,99.504697](https://www.google.com/maps/@12.810408,99.504697) that Darryl found a day earlier. The fruits there attracted many **Oriental Pied Hornbills**, two **Great Hornbills**, and crucially, a pair of **Tickell's Brown Hornbills** which we otherwise did not encounter at all.

The drive up to Ban Krang Campsite in the late morning did not yield much, and there the only significant bird was a young male **Asian Emerald Cuckoo** at the camping ground. Much more fascinating was a Sun Bear that has been regularly visiting the restaurant.

Birding at the three stream crossings was very quiet as well but involved one of our trip's highlights - a roosting **White-fronted Scops Owl** that Games (who guides for Baan Maka) showed us. We were birding ~200m away from her and her clients, but she very kindly walked all the way to call us over!! The bird was sleeping just two metres from the road at eye level, ~50m after the first stream. The roosting site seems only semi-reliable. It supposedly moves around and was apparently at the same location the day before we saw it, but was no longer there when we visited again the next day. Apart from the owl, we also had an **Orange-breasted Trogon** just before the second stream, and some high up **Sultan Tits** there too.

A late afternoon stop at KM27.5 did not produce anything interesting apart from some **Collared Babblers** (and A LOT of mosquitoes). Our evening at Phanoen Thung Campsite was quiet, but night birding there led to two **Brown Wood Owls** – one in the first carpark and another ~50m from the visitor centre/restaurant. We heard three **Mountain Scops Owls** too, but none were near enough to even dream of spotting it. Attempts to find a Spot-bellied Eagle-owl were unsuccessful.

We spent the next morning searching for Ratchet-tailed Treepies around the Phanoen Thung Campsite but failed successfully. Slim pickings included a **White-browed Piculet** and disastrous views of a **Common Green Magpie** at the end of the Orchid Trail, a short looping trail into the forest which entrance is located at the first carpark.

Post-lunch birding at the streams and KM9 were similarly disappointing, though a pair of **Streak-breasted Woodpeckers** at the fruiting fig tree slightly provided some consolation as we departed the national park.

Pak Thale area

Pak Thale is theoretically simple – park at [GPS: 13.149157, 100.059745](https://www.google.com/maps/@13.149157,100.059745), search for birds (there is a hide at [GPS: 13.148595, 100.062958](https://www.google.com/maps/@13.148595,100.062958)), and celebrate/despair. We only had a morning to bird the area due to our flight and ended up having a very rushed schedule. I strongly recommend allocating at least two days to bird this site and its environs.

Upon arriving we scanned the nearest ponds to the parking spot before a pair of birders called us over for the **Spoon-billed Sandpiper** (we couldn't get your names, but thank you 😊). The views were terribly brief because a **Brahminy Kite** decided to ruin it for all of us.

We then zoomed to a known **Yellow-breasted Bunting** [day roost site](#) (about 30-minutes drive from the salt pans, apparently best visited ~0900 onwards) where ~150 birds flew around. Getting proper views were difficult because they never perched in the open.

We returned to Pak Thale again and attempted to find some Nordmann's Greenshank at a reliable saltpan following advice from the locals there but failed. A separate group of birdwatchers then found the **Spoon-billed Sandpiper** (we again couldn't get your names but thank you!) which we enjoyed for a slightly longer duration before a **Brahminy Kite** happened again. Seriously, if it's going to flush the birds away, maybe it could at least provide us some entertainment by hunting some Spoonies down? (Yes, it's a morbid joke, don't be offended, I'm just sad it didn't stick around for longer.)

Our birding time soon ran out, and a low flying **Painted Stork** watched us take a final birding group selfie, before we soon found ourselves dragged back to reality as our flight arrived in Singapore.