

Trip report: Laos (26/02/2024 - 02/03/2024)

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A quick solo trip to Laos, a nation that is ornithologically rather underexplored. My birding targets included the endemic Bare-faced Bulbul, almost endemic Sooty Babbler, habitat specific Limestone Leaf Warbler, isolated population of Green-backed Tit, and call me unrealistic, but Spot-bellied Eagle-owl. The Laotian Langur, while not a feathered animal, was high on my wish list too. My main objective, though, was just to relax as much as possible and take life easy, so I made a conscious effort to not potentially trigger a heart attack by checking my work email. I also tried to keep the intensity of my birding as low as possible, which honestly wasn't too difficult given that there weren't that many birds to begin with...

Much has been written about the state of wildlife in Laos which I'll refrain from repeating here. If you are unfamiliar, search "Laos hunting" online and either watch the many YouTube influencers in action or read the less visually painful reports. Even though there were many species on the Laos list that I've not seen before, I visited with the mindset that anything new to me was a bonus worth a celebration.

Itinerary

26 February: Arrive in Laos via Vientiane, travel to Ban Na Hin (= Na Hin Village).

27 February: Morning around Rock View Point, afternoon and night birding at Namsanam trail.

28 February: Morning around Rock View Point, afternoon and night birding at Km46 trail.

29 February: Morning at Dragon Cave, afternoon at Rock View Point, night birding at Namsanam trail.

1 March: Short morning at Namsanam trail, travel to Vientiane.

2 March: Morning birding at Mekong River with Bram Piot and Edward Vercruyse. Depart Laos.

Resources

[Stijn's birding2asia page](#), while outdated, was an excellent resource that oriented me well with the birding sites around Na Hin. The following trip reports were also helpful: [Bill Simpson \(Feb 2023\)](#), [Peter Collaerts \(Dec 2012\)](#), [George Wagner \(Dec 2009\)](#), [Albert Low \(Dec 2009\)](#). Last but not least, my friends Movin and Bram offered me various advice that I am very grateful for.

Money

My flight arrived at Vientiane airport around 8AM and the two money changers were closed, so I exchanged cash at the Unitel SIM card kiosk. They gave me a rate that was, confusingly, better than the online rate at that point (21,500 kip/USD while Google said 20,847 kip/USD).

I was doubtful that I could easily exchange Laos currency back home and wanted to shed it off before departing the nation. Both money changers at the airport (ST bank and Phonsavanh) were open but annoyingly refused to sell any Singaporean dollars or USD for whatever reasons. I had no much choice but to exchange my money at the Taxi and Information counter at a completely rubbish rate.

SIM card

Unlike the money changers, the two SIM card kiosks were thankfully open when I arrived at the airport. The 15GB Unitel SIM card plan effective for 7 days was 50,000 kip. Signal was very good throughout my stay in Laos except at some sections around the Rock View Point and deep in Namsanam trail.

Transport

I travelled from the airport to the [Southern Bus Terminal](#) using the Loca app, the local equivalent of Uber/Grab (~190,000 kip).

From the Southern Bus Terminal, I boarded the bus towards Kong Lor that departs once a day at 10AM (180,000 kip). The journey to Ban Na Hin was about 7 hours and I alighted at the [T-junction](#) nearest to my accommodation.

I was based in Ban Na Hin for the next four nights and birding was all done on a scooter rented from the homestay for 200,000 kip/day.

I boarded a bus from the same T-junction back to Vientiane. Buses that depart Lak Sao, a village east of Ban Na Hin, supposedly passes by around 1030AM and 230PM each day. There is apparently no way to pre-book a seat, so I just waited along the junction, waved at the first ~~bus~~ mini-van with a signboard that passed by, did a call and response of "Vientiane!" a few times and hopped on (170,000 kip).

Accommodation

26 February to 1 March: [Sanhak Homestay](#) at Ban Na Hin. Comfortable, convenient, has a restaurant and water refill services. The restaurant did not open early enough for breakfast before birding so I settled on biscuits bought in the village.

1 March to 2 March: [Nana Backpacker Hostel](#) at Vientiane. Several convenience stores and many food options nearby. Also close to the night market if you want to buy an Adidas shoe, Gucci bag, Rolex watch, or bully some kids on a bumper car.

Language

I speak zero Lao and all locals I met except the homestay owners did not speak English. Google translate came in handy. In general, everybody was helpful and friendly.

Food

The Na Hin area is very popular among backpackers exploring the [Thakheck loop](#), so the few restaurants I visited in and around Ban Na Hin had English menu. Prices were reasonable, ~50,000 kip for a meal and drinks, and food was delicious. Food at Sanhak Homestay was at a very slightly pricier rate but still perfectly reasonable and tasty (get the curry rice!!!). They offered packed food too.

Birding

The sites I visited were primarily based off Stijn's website. The sites, from west to east, were:

[Rock View Point](#) (point 8). There is a loop boardwalk behind the viewpoint that was only recently built. It apparently has an entrance fee of 50,000 kip but I didn't even know about it until leaving Na Hin since it was never collected even though many staffs were present.

Namsanam trail (point 6). Starts [here](#) (there is no booth of any sort despite the Google maps name). Vehicles can drive along this access road [for ~1.5km](#), beyond which the trail narrows and continues on towards two waterfalls. I did not venture further but descriptions from the backpackers I met sounded like the terrain was not ideal for birding. There were many side trails along the access road.

Km46 trail (point 3). Starts [here](#). Very degraded forest with signs of (recent?) landslides.

Km48.5 trail (point 1). Starts [here](#). Seems unbirdable, see descriptions below.

Separately, I visited [Dragon Cave](#) in search for Limestone Leaf Warbler. Spoiler alert: I couldn't find it.

27 February

I started at the Rock View Point and birded ~1km along the road westwards. Among the low numbers of common species I had my first bonus, a **Great Iora**. There was also a very skittish **Blue Whistling Thrush**, but otherwise nothing much apart from untickable Sooty Babblers. I then headed to the loop boardwalk behind Rock View Point and immediately regretted not starting my morning there. The boardwalk was built on the limestone karst itself and offered unbeatable views of the unique habitat. The bizarre looking **Bare-faced Bulbul** was very easy. I managed okay views of the **Sooty Babbler**, heard an **Orange-breasted Trogon**, and had my second bonus in the form of a **White-throated Rock Thrush**. Attempts at Limestone Leaf Warbler and Green-backed Tit were futile.

Afternoon birding along Namsanam trail was fairly plain but a trio of vocal **Long-tailed Broadbills** performed well. A **Thick-billed Flowerpecker** also showed on a flowering tree, and I couldn't help but laugh out in the field when it did its characteristic sideward tail wag very rapidly just as it took flight, making it look almost like it was launched forward by an accident. A mixed flock of **Brown-backed** and **Silver-backed Needletails** were also enjoyable to watch. There were no Green-backed Tits. Night birding did not yield the Eagle-owl but I heard a **Brown Boobook**, two **Oriental Bay Owls**, a **Collared Scops Owl** and multiple **Mountain Scops Owls**.

28 February

I reached the Rock View Point boardwalk at sunrise and had amazing views of **Sooty Babblers** foraging on the limestone karsts and even on the boardwalk. The **Bare-faced Bultuls** showed well again, but I still could not find the Tit nor the Leaf Warbler. I slowly birded down the road from until Km36, continued failing to find the two small passerines, but had okay views of a calling **Green-billed Malkoha**.

I had my dinner packed from the homestay as I planned to hit the Km48.5 trail in the afternoon and stay for owling. The first 30m of the trail was already quite overgrown, so I decided to visit the Km46 trail instead because bashing out in the dark sounded like effort.

The Km46 trail was disappointing. The road was fairly wide [all the way in](#) and the forest was heavily degraded. Apart from a flock of **Nepal House Martins**, there wasn't much. For what it's worth, there was a **White-rumped Shama** mimicking an Eared Pitta at the end of the trail. Owling was poor. An uncooperative **Asian Barred Owlet** called at dusk, and some **Mountain Scops Owls** called once it got darker, but they were all from a forest patch beyond a huge landslide.

29 February

Birding at Dragon Cave was quite enjoyable. I first walked ~1km along the road and added **Grey-throated Babbler** and **Peregrine Falcon** to my trip list. At the carpark a flock of **Scarlet Minivets** gave amazing eye-level views. I then spent the rest of my morning in the Dragon Cave premises (50,000 kip entrance fee). I would not recommend the trail through the cave for those with claustrophobia or a bad back, and similarly will not recommend continuing to the viewpoint for those with heavy gear or bad knees. There's quite a flight of stairs and some mild bouldering needed. The trail system that connects to the viewpoint can also be accessed by turning left from the entrance towards the pond (instead of towards the cave x temple junction), then continuing on until an obvious trail into the forest.

I toured my way through the cave and up to the viewpoint anyway and had a **Crested Goshawk** there. At the trail I had **Buff-breasted Babblers** and my only **Black-throated Sunbirds** and **Hill Blue Flycatchers** seen on the trip. I also heard a **Collared Owlet**. Near the entrance a mixed flock of **Brown-cheeked Fulvettas** and other common species kept me entertained. A few **Sooty Babblers** hopped around the Buddha statues, but I still couldn't find the two small yellow birds.

I headed to the Km48.5 trail again in the afternoon to try bashing my way in but was unable to find the weather station or actually do any birding at all. I followed what looked to me like the clearest path from the entrance down to a dry riverbed but found no sign of a path and gave up.

I returned to Rock View Point once again and had another **White-throated Rock Thrush** as well as the only **Grey-backed Shrike** of my trip. I then fortuitously bumped into Craig Robson and his bird tour group. Just as we were chatting, Craig amazingly heard and pulled in a pair of **Green-backed Tits** that offered fantastic views from the boardwalk. I was glad to see my target, but at the same time felt like a complete noob. I was very sure I studied their calls properly and was doing my best over the past three days to find this bird. The individual which showed up was singing the exact songs I remembered as well, so I really have no clue how it took me three full days to finally see one. To make things better he also found a group of **Laotian Langurs** far away on a cliff – again at the very same spots I must have scanned many times during my past two visits. As much as I was mind-blown I also couldn't tell if I was just unlucky or completely incompetent when birding alone. One thing for sure is that I definitely wouldn't have seen the Tits and Langur without Craig, and am extremely thankful...

A flock of **Himalayan Swiftlets** flew over the boardwalk soon after. I generally feel uncomfortable ticking *Aerodramus* away from their nests where multiple species overlap, but *rogersi* apparently breeds in/around the limestone karsts (?), and the probably indistinguishable Germain's Swiftlet is apparently restricted to urban Laos, nearer to Thailand. My time was running out and I was still missing the Leaf Warbler, but I decided to screw that and just watch the **Green-backed Tits**, **Sooty Babblers**, and **Bare-headed Bulbuls** all perform simultaneously in the evening sun. I'll see that yellow bird in some other lifetime maybe.

Night birding at Namsanam trail was uneventful, with only one **Mountain Scops Owl** and **Oriental Bay Owl** calling in the very windy forest.

29 March

My final morning at Namsanam trail produced a **Black-winged Cuckooshrike**, **Shikra**, and a heard only **Two-barred Warbler** that were all new to the trip.

1 March

My short morning before departing Laos was spent birding together with Bram and Ward. Bram very kindly brought us to his [usual sites west of Vientiane](#) along the Mekong river. It was a very productive morning – my most speciose one actually – and we had nice views of **Small Pratincoles**, the locally breeding **Little Ringed Plover**, as well as my main target for the morning – the range restricted(ish) **Jerdon's Bush Chat**! We also found **Wire-tailed Swallow** and **Grey-throated Martin** among the many **Barn Swallows**. My other target, River Lapwing, was a no show, but again I'll see that in another universe probably maybe. I just felt really happy to be out in the field.

Final notes

Laos might not be the most heavily featured nation in Indochinese birding, largely due to the fairly bleak situation the wildlife there faces, but it's a place that certainly deserves much more attention due to the potential it holds. Bare-faced Bulbul was only [described to science](#) in 2009 (and also [independently](#) by Stijn around the same time)!

I wrote this piece of word salad on my flight back home (+ cleaning up and formatting later on of course) and hope it's coherent enough if you're reading this to plan a trip. Feel free to contact me if you have anything question that I could potentially answer.

Finally, I once again want to express my huge thanks to the birders I met during this trip – Bram, Ward, and Craig – and hope to see you all again in the field soon.