

BIRDS AND PEOPLE

Bird hides and water holes: a model conservation project near Kaeng Krachan National Park, Thailand

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In July 2008, KB and Captain Kittayarn Sumpantaluk heard of a number of water holes near Kaeng Krachan National Park (KKNP) in western Thailand, and suspected that poachers had devised them to capture wildlife. Upon investigation we learned that the poachers were shooting birds to eat including Green-legged Partridge *Arborophila chloropus* and Chinese Francolin *Francolinus pintadeanus*, while trapping others such as White-crested Laughingthrush *Garrulax leucolophus* and White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus* to sell in local markets for their ability as songsters. Lesser Mouse Deer *Tragulus kanchil* and Barking Deer *Muntiacus muntjak* were also taken.

The poachers were local people who knew that, in the dry season, simply digging a series of small water holes about 40 cm long by 25 cm wide by 6 cm deep in the forest, and placing fruit such as papaya and bananas nearby, will attract many species of wildlife. Access to the water holes was easy, being constructed along dry stream beds. These dry watercourses lacked vegetation and were a natural pathway through the scrub forest. The poachers returned to the holes each day and replenished water and fruit as required. As a result, birds, mammals and even snakes such as King Cobra *Ophiophagus hannah* came to drink on hot days, while several species of squirrel and tree shrew ate the fruit nearby. Any of these could be easily harvested by a patient hunter willing to sit in a nearby hide or blind for an afternoon. This is a traditional way of hunting in the area and has been in use in the KKNP area for at least five years.

Since the water holes were located on military land, we had some hope that we if could secure the cooperation of the local army command to sanction the water holes officially, we might entice the poachers to participate in a conservation-oriented project to protect instead of harvest wildlife. We hoped to convince the poachers that they might actually do better for themselves financially by attracting Thai photographers and birdwatchers from all parts of the world to come and observe the wildlife at the water holes during the dry season.

At first the poachers were sceptical. They were puzzled why anyone would want to pay money to sit in the forest just to look at birds! However, we now work with five former poachers and have interest from at least 20 more. All are men, each heading a relatively poor family that farms on a small scale. These families have lived in the area for the last 20 years, moving here after the logging companies finished their work in KKNP and its environs.

Persuading the poachers to take up the cause of conservation proved not too difficult, once the first visiting birdwatchers had a bit of luck. After the first water hole was set up for observation, using only a 300 mm lens a photographer secured a good image of Slaty-legged Crake *Rallina eurizonoides* (Plate 1), rarely seen in Thailand. Once other bird photographers saw the results, we quickly had to create a waiting list for those who also wanted an image of this sought-after bird in Thailand. Indeed, one water hole became so popular with photographers that the former poacher who now protects wildlife there quickly had to sign a contract for a cell phone! He had to schedule more than 250 visits by birders and photographers to his water hole just from February to October 2009.

From our viewpoint, we are sure that poaching has ceased at the seven water holes we have access to, and birdwatching and photography are now the rule. There are two to four hides at each water hole, each comfortably sitting one or two people. The best time to see wildlife is in the afternoon of a hot day, so arriving after 14h00 is fine—most activity occurs between 15h30 and 18h30. We wear shorts and a t-shirt, and use a small amount of insect repellent to keep the bugs away. For more information about availability, and to book a bird hide for yourself, contact KB at his email address below, or visit the Baan Maka website at www.BaanMaka.com.

From a scientific perspective, results to date have been remarkable. Species that were once thought to be rare in this area, such as the Red-legged Crake *Rallina fasciata* (Plate 2), have been found to be common at certain water holes. We have seen as many as six to eight individuals of



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Plate 1. Slaty-legged Crake *Rallina eurizonoides* at water hole near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, February 2009.

Plate 2. Red-legged Crake *Rallina fasciata* at water hole near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, November 2009.



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Plate 3. Green-legged Partridge *Arborophila chloropus* at water hole near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, February 2009.

Plate 4. Large Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus hypoleucos* at water hole near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, November 2009.

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Plate 5. Abbott's Babbler *Malacocincla abbotti* at water hole near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, January 2009.

Plate 6. Striped Tit Babbler *Macronous gularis* at water hole near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, February 2009.



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Plate 7. Lesser Mouse Deer *Tragulid kanchil* at water hole near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, January 2009.

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Plate 8. Typical water hole built on dry stream bed near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, November 2009.

Plate 9. Two bird hides in the forest near Kaeng Krachan NP, Thailand, the one on the left for those with 300–400 mm lenses, the one on the right for longer lenses, November 2009.

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different ages and both sexes coming to bathe and drink at one location. Juvenile Slaty-legged Crake have now been observed, suggesting that this species may be breeding in the area. We have photographed Green-legged Partridge (Plate 3), Large Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus hypoleucos* (Plate 4), Abbott’s Babbler *Malacocincla abbotti* (Plate 5), Striped Tit Babbler *Macronous gularis* (Plate 6), Eared Pitta *Pitta phayrei*, Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina* and the rarely seen Lesser Mouse Deer (Plate 7).

We would very much like to have more international birders visit the water holes to see the birds in the future. The best time to visit is from mid-November to April. The charge is Baht 200 per person per day and all of the money is paid directly to the former poachers. If this project continues to be a success, we would like to expand it to different habitats in the area. We would also like to set up water holes within nearby KKNP itself. Park officials there currently believe that by providing water holes and food to wildlife, we are ‘taming’ them, and the birds and mammals are no longer wild. Yet we have seen how well hides and man-made water holes work in other parks in Thailand such as Phu Kheo national forest. There we have photographed trogons, pittas and broadbills coming to drink and bathe—and then have watched them disappear back into the forest. Time will tell if our plan will continue to move forward. In the meantime, do come to watch and photograph wildlife at the water holes just outside KKNP. Your support makes for a win-win-win situation for birds, people and conservation.

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