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Birds of Phu Lon Le Island, Thailand

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The birds of Thailand are relatively well known, although much of the research was done in selected national parks and well known birding sites (Round 1988, Boonsong Lekagul and Round 1991). However, many of the large number of offshore islands still remain unexplored. The avifauna of Bulon Le island is described, based on a study carried out from 4-22 November 1997.

Birds were identified using standard literature (King *et al.* 1975, Boonsong Lekagul and Round 1991). Nomenclature and sequence of species follows Inskipp *et al.* (1996).

STUDY SITE

Phu Lon Le (Bulon Le) is a small island (c. 2 x 1.2 km), located in the south-east Andaman Sea, c. 6°49'N 99°32'E. It is located 15 km north-west of the island of Tarutao, and 20 km west of the mainland of the Thai-Malay Peninsula (see Anon. 1987). Administratively it is part of the province of Satun, Thailand. The island is accessible by boat from Ban Pak Bara.

The island is dominated by two hill chains, reaching a maximum height of 159 m. Both hills are largely covered with tall evergreen forest. There is an active plantation of rubber trees in the broad saddle between the two hill chains, and an abandoned rubber tree plantation at Pansand Resort on the eastern shore of

the island. The shores of the island are rocky, usually steep, but flat in the north-east part. Low tide exposes rocky flats, particularly extensive at Muang Bay in the south, at Panka Noi Bay in the north, and at Pansand Resort in the north-east. These flats are partly formed from (mostly dead) coral reefs. A small patch of mangroves survives in the Panka Noi Bay.

The weather was relatively mild during the visit in November 1997. Afternoon temperatures usually reached 35-36°C, dropping at night usually to 27-28°C. Rain showers were frequent, but usually short.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

[DOMESTIC FOWL Regularly encountered inside the forest, far from villages, ecologically replacing Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*, which was absent from the island.]

ORIENTAL PIED HORNBILL *Anthracoceros albirostris*. Common in the forest. The birds belonged to the nominate subspecies.

BLACK-CAPPED KINGFISHER *Halcyon pileata*. One individual was observed on 8 November perching in the trees on the shore.

STORK-BILLED KINGFISHER *Halcyon capensis*. One individual was seen on 7 November at the forest edge near mangroves at Panka Noi Bay.

COLLARED KINGFISHER *Todiramphus chloris*. Common on sea shores.

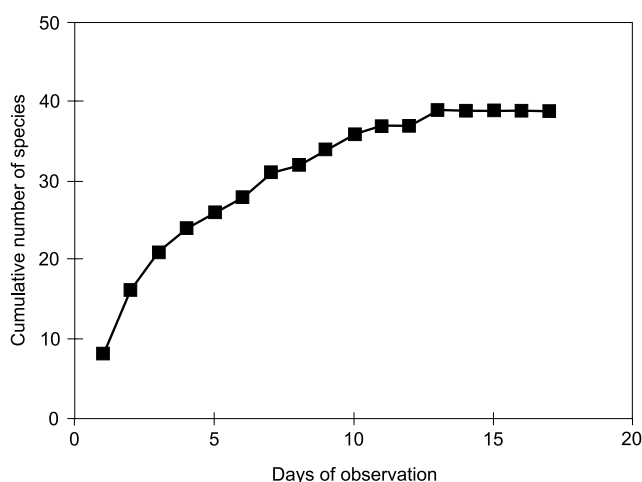
ASIAN KOEL *Eudynamis scolopacea*. Common in the forest.

HOUSE SWIFT *Apus affinis*. An occasional visitor to the island, seen on 6, 8 and 10 November.

BROWN HAWK OWL *Ninox scutulata*. One individual was regularly seen hunting after dusk by the bungalows.

NICOBAR PIGEON *Caloenas nicobarica*. One individual was observed in the forest on 7 and 14 November. This species is considered near-threatened by Birdlife International (2000).

GREEN IMPERIAL PIGEON *Ducula aenea*. Occasionally seen inside the forest.



PIED IMPERIAL PIGEON *Ducula bicolor*. Common on the steep, forested shore at Panka Noi Bay, but absent from the rest of the island.

WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus*. One individual was seen on the rocky shore at Panka Noi Bay on 7 November.

LITTLE TERN *Sterna albifrons*. Four individuals were seen fishing ca. 100 m offshore on 17 November.

BRAHMINY KITE *Haliastur indus*. Regularly seen flying above the island.

WHITE-BELLIED SEA EAGLE *Haliaeetus leucogaster*. An occasional visitor to the island, seen on 11 and 15 November.

SHIKRA *Accipiter badius*. Two individuals were seen perching in the canopy on 9 November.

JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK *Accipiter gularis*. One juvenile was observed hunting in the early morning of 13 November by the bungalows.

PACIFIC REEF EGRET *Egretta sacra*. Frequently observed in small numbers on rocky shores, particularly at Panka Noi Bay. All individuals observed belonged to the dark morph.

CHINESE POND HERON *Ardeola bacchus*. Occasionally seen on rocky shores.

LITTLE HERON *Butorides striatus*. One juvenile was observed on the rocky shore at Panka Noi Bay on 7 November.

MANGROVE WHISTLER *Pachycephala grisola*. Occasionally seen in the forest understorey.

LARGE-BILLED CROW *Corvus macrorhynchos*. A few individuals were regularly observed.

BLACK-NAPED ORIOLE *Oriolus chinensis*. Regularly seen in forest canopy.

ASHY MINIVET *Pericrocotus divaricatus*. A flock of at least three individuals was seen in the forest canopy on 11 November.

ASHY DRONGO *Dicrurus leucophaeus*. Repeatedly seen between 6-10 November, but not thereafter.

BLACK-NAPED MONARCH *Hypothymis azurea*. Occasionally seen in small numbers in the forest.

ASIAN PARADISE-FLYCATCHER *Terpsiphone paradisi*. One short-tailed individual was seen at the forest edge on 15 November.

ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER *Muscicapa dauurica*. One individual was seen in canopy at the forest edge on 14 and 15 November.

ORIENTAL MAGPIE ROBIN *Copsychus saularis*. One individual was observed in dense forest understorey on 10 November.

PURPLE-BACKED STARLING *Sturnus sturninus*. Two adults were observed in forest canopy on 11 November.

COMMON MYNA *Acridotheres tristis*. Very common by the bungalows, but did not enter the forest interior.

PACIFIC SWALLOW *Hirundo tahitica*. Common. Large flocks were often flying high over the canopy and may have included other *Hirundo* species.

RED-RUMPED SWALLOW *Hirundo daurica*. One individual was seen flying over canopy at the forest edge on 14 November.

YELLOW-VENTED BULBUL *Pycnonotus goiavier*. Common.

DUSKY WARBLER *Phylloscopus fuscatus*. An individual was observed on 7 November in shrubs at forest edge near the Panka village. The bird was brownish, with well-marked supercilium, lacked wing-bars, and had a slender bill. Its call was a hard, repeated *chac*. Dusky Warblers are common migrants to northern Thailand, but there are no previous records from peninsular Thailand (Boonsong Lekagul and Round 1991). I am familiar with this species from my long-term field research in Buryatia (East Siberia), conducted in 1991-1994. It is possible that this species is more common in the Malayan peninsula than is currently appreciated, because another individual was observed on 23 December 1997 in mangroves at Kukup Forest Reserve, Johor, Peninsular Malaya (S. Rajathurai in Robson 1998).

ARCTIC WARBLER *Phylloscopus borealis*. Regularly seen in small numbers from 8 November onwards.

SCARLET-BACKED FLOWERPECKER *Dicaeum cruentatum*. Occasionally observed in small numbers.

BROWN-THROATED SUNBIRD *Anthreptes malacensis*. Regularly seen on a flowering tree on 13-15 November. Not observed otherwise.

PURPLE-THROATED SUNBIRD *Nectarinia sperata*. Regularly seen on a flowering tree on 12-15 November. Not observed otherwise.

OLIVE-BACKED SUNBIRD *Nectarinia jugularis*. Common outside of the forest. Courtship display was repeatedly shown by a male on 15 November, but no signs of courtship behaviour were seen on other days.

DISCUSSION

Composition of the avifauna

Although only three weeks were spent on the island, the resulting avifaunal list is reasonably comprehensive. A relatively high number of recorded species apparently reflects the close proximity of the mainland and the presence of autumn migrants and/or winter visitors. The only sign of breeding activity observed was courtship display shown by a male Olive-backed Sunbird on 15 November.

Most of the species were more or less limited to the canopy and/or understorey of the evergreen forest. Forest ground birds were limited to the Nicobar Pigeon and domestic chicken. Only two species, Common Myna and Olive-backed Sunbird, were found almost exclusively outside the forest, frequenting man-made garden-like habitat at Pansang Resort. Rubber tree plantations were avoided by birds, although Oriental Pied Hombills occasionally visited their canopy layer. A number of species, mainly egrets and large kingfishers, were limited to rocky shores of the island. The only species of open sea bird observed in the close vicinity of Phu Lon Le Island was Little Tern.

Conservation

Human population is limited to two small villages of 'sea gypsies' located at Panka Bays in the north, and at

Muang Bay in the south. In addition, tourists visit the island during the dry season, being concentrated at Pansang Resort on the north-east shore of the island. Neither native inhabitants nor tourists normally enter the forest, which makes it a safe harbour for forest birds. No recent logging was observed, but small fields were found at the forest edge, particularly at Panka village and at Pansang Resort. Also, no persecution of shorebirds by local inhabitants was observed.

Domestic animals seemed to be no threat to the birds, although one pair of domestic cats with three kittens (one of them in very bad condition), housed at Pansang Resort, is potentially endangering the existence of the near-threatened Nicobar Pigeon on the island.

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Merlin *Falco columbarius*, the first record for Thailand

A. ROADHOUSE

When birdwatching on an area of dry, stubble-covered, rice paddies c. 1-2 km south of Ban Tha Ton, Mae Ai District, Chiang Mai on 4 December 1999, I found a Merlin *Falco columbarius* at 07h30. I was watching a female Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus (aeruginosus) spilonotus*, and two Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* in flight, when a smaller falcon flew across my field of view and started mobbing the Eastern Marsh Harrier; it continued this for about ten minutes. The bird eventually flew off to the west. I immediately identified the small falcon as a Merlin *Falco columbarius*, a species not depicted in Boonsong Lekagul and Round (1991) and it was assumed, therefore, to be an addition to the Thai faunal list. The bird was also seen by a second observer, Rob Smith.

On the following day, while birding alone in similar habitat about 1 km further south, c. 13h00, I again encountered the Merlin, once again mobbing an Eastern Marsh Harrier. This time, however, it perched in a tree for c. 2 minutes, before darting off in pursuit of a Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, which it missed; it then flew on northwards and was lost to sight after less than 10 minutes. All observations were made with a 10 x 42 binocular at a range down to roughly 100 m.

I am highly familiar with the Merlin from the northern U.K., having seen adult birds on the breeding grounds, and many immatures on passage in spring and autumn on the coast.

Description: A small, compact falcon, smaller than Common Kestrel with shorter wings and tail. The flight

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was distinctive with fast, fluttering wing-beats interspersed with short glides, rather than the slower flapping and longer glides of, for example, *Accipiter* hawks. When mobbing the Eastern Marsh Harrier it regularly fanned its tail as it turned swiftly in flight.

Mantle and upperwing uniform mid-brown, not as warm as Common Kestrel and lacking the contrast between the blackish primaries and the paler rest of the upperwing of that species. Cap mid-brown; a thin, distinct moustachial stripe. Tail barred with bold, broad bars. Underparts pale with thin but obvious dark streaks on a creamy-buff ground colour. The streaks were much finer than those on the underparts of Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*. It was immediately distinguished from Peregrine Falcon *F peregrinus* by its smaller size and lack of a broad blackish moustachial stripe.

The Merlin breeds in the northern Holarctic and NW China, migrating south to temperate and northern tropical latitudes, with previous South-East Asian records from north Laos and Central Annam (Robson 2000).

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