

Birding Singapore and Malaysia

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Rail Babbler – the holy grail of Panty Forest Reserve! Photo © Colin Campbell

Introduction

The best laid plans in life are prone to unforeseen disruptions. And so it was with this eventful trip. Don Roberson first contacted me about the feasibility of seeing Rail Babbler at Panty Forest Reserve over two days. I replied that it was doable. He was keen to connect with the bird as it was a single member family. He's a very keen birder who was trying to see all the bird families of the world and he only had five to go – including the Rail Babbler which was now in a family of its own - Eupetidae. Joining him on this quest was Brian Beers from Washington.

Day One

We could not have had a worse start! Don called me the evening before to say that he had missed his connecting flight to Singapore from Hongkong, as it had been cancelled! The earliest flight he could get on was a noon flight. It meant a need to change plans as Brian

had got to Singapore without incident. More critically, it also meant less time to find the Rail Babbler.

At 5.30 am, I met Brian and, after a brief discussion, he agreed to try and see the birds he needed from Singapore before picking Don from the airport. There were about a dozen or so, including Little Bronze Cuckoo, Collared Scops Owl, Thick-billed Green Pigeon, Tiger Shrike and Yellow-rumped Flycatcher.

We arrived at Rifle Range Road shortly before 6.00 am, and walked into the darkness of the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, with only a dim crescent moon above us. About ten minutes later, we heard our first Collared Scops Owl. It was calling about 100m inside the forest. I played a few rounds of my tape and it went quiet. I held my breath and shone at the most likely spot. Sure enough, the owl was perched on a low branch just 5 m from us. Brian had a good ten second look at his life bird before it flew off.

Eventually, we arrived at the placid surrounds of MacRitchie Reservoir. It was just beginning to get light and we scan its shores. We were fortunate to see both White-bellied Sea Eagle and Grey-headed Fish Eagle as well as passing Long-tailed Parakeets. We scoured the trees for Thick-billed Green Pigeon but couldn't find any. The figs at the reservoir were ripe and there was little activity.

We also checked out Jelutong Tower and checked every pigeon we saw but none were Thick-billed. Other birds of interest seen during the hour at the tower were good views of Blue-rumped Parrot, a few Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots and several Long-tailed Parakeets. It is THE place to see native parrots in Singapore after all!

The walk out of the forest was uneventful except near the end where we saw two Red-crowned Barbets real close and then, a female Yellow-rumped Flycatcher for Brian. Satisfied at connecting with two lifers in the forest, we moved on to a nearby coffee shop for some breakfast.

Around 11.00 am, we reached Lorong Halus and birded the area of the crake pond. We were greeted by about a dozen Baya Weavers, up to three Golden-backed Weavers, an African exotic, and two Javan Munias, another of Brian's targets. Despite the lateness, there was some bird activity at the pond and we found Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker, Pied Fantail, Common Iora, Oriental Magpie Robin, Ashy Tailorbird and then, an immature Tiger Shrike, another lifer for Brian.

It was a fruitful hour with two more lifers and we decided to try and find Little Bronze Cuckoo at nearby Pasir Ris Park. Despite finding 2 Golden-bellied Gerygones, we could not locate any cuckoo, and soon it was time to move on to the airport.

We picked Don from the airport shortly after 1.30 pm and sped towards the Malaysian border. About 90 minutes later, we were in Kota Tinggi for a quick lunch and then at the famed Bunker Trail by 4.30 pm. The cloudy weather was affecting bird activity and even though we located Banded Woodpecker for Don, there was no calling Rail Babbler.

We opted to try for night birds at the first stream but bird activity remained low. We heard Dusky Broadbill, a target for Don, but they never came in. As dusk fell, we saw a Malaysian Eared Nightjar flying high over us. At 7.40 pm, we decided to call it a day. As we moved out in near total darkness, we heard loud mewing from the side of the trail before a ghostly figure flew out to reveal itself as a Buffy Fish Owl. It had apparently just emerged to hunt and was soon lost to view.

We had a quick dinner at the local pizzeria before retiring to our hotel. We now had only one day to try and see Rail Babbler.

Day Two

We woke up at 5.30 am and headed to the roti prata shop for our breakfast. Since we were not after owls, we took our time and eventually arrived at the HQ of Panti Bird Sanctuary around 6.45 am. It was getting light and we soon at the tower trail hoping to hear Rail Babbler. Instead, we heard at least two Rufous-collared Kingfishers. In the semi-darkness of the forest, we could not find it even though Don glimpsed one flying off.

We bumped into Con and gang a few times, and drove all the way to the second stream. We managed to more lifers for Don – Buff-rumped Woodpecker, Tiger Shrike, Olive-winged and Grey-bellied Bulbuls, and White-chested Babbler. A calling Great Argus and an overflying White-bellied Sea Eagle were the only signs of bird activity at the second stream and we left quickly.

The rest of the morning was spent trying to find a calling Rail Babbler. We tried all the likely spots but could not locate any bird. We thought we had nailed two birds at the tower trail only to be disappointed to discover that these were made by bird photographers using tape! They too were after Rail Babbler.

Time was running out and there was an increasing sense of desperation in our search. Noon had arrived and gone without any improvement in our search for the Rail Babbler. We tried the dip trail for the third time without any luck even though we encountered an active bird wave comprising three species of woodpeckers, two malkohas, a pair of Rufous-winged Philentoma and a babbler. We also tried the leech-infested elephant trail. About 200 m in, we heard a weak call and tracked it for half an hour. Just as we thought we were close, the bird went silent. We waited another fifteen minutes but to no avail.

We drove back to the HQ and tried the tower trail for the third time just as the clock hit 2.00 pm. It was now or never! There were no photographers present at the trail but, after waiting fifteen minutes, we could not find any calling Rail Babbler. There was the consolation of seeing a roosting Javan Frogmouth but we didn't linger and left quickly after Don had taken some record shots.

As we trooped back to our car, ready to pack our bags and return to Singapore, the sweetest sound came to our ears: it was a calling Rail Babbler! The whistle came from across the road. Quickly, the three of us dashed into the forest. Yes, it was close by. I played a short burst of its call. After five anxious minutes, I found the bird walking and it was headed towards us. I motioned to Don and Brian to come nearer and pointed to the ground just 3m in front of us. Luckily, both of them quickly nodded their heads and we exchanged hand-shakes and smiling faces. The jinx had been broken! We had seen the real Rail Babbler! There was no time for photography as it was already 2.30 pm and we had to be at Changi Airport by 4.30 pm for their onward flight.

It was a much happier group that got back into the car as we sped towards the Johor customs and thence, Changi Airport. We arrived at exactly 4.30 pm.

We ended the two-day tour with 60 species from Singapore, 68 species from Malaysia and 106 species overall. It didn't matter that the species tally was on the low side. For example, we succeeded in seeing an owl, a nightjar and a frogmouth at Panti despite not trying very hard to see the nocturnal birds. Most important of all, was that the chief target of seeing Rail Babbler was achieved.

Species List

Great Argus *Argusianus argus*
Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopus moluccensis*
Rufous Woodpecker *Celeus brachyurus*
White-bellied Woodpecker *Dryocopus javensis*
Banded Woodpecker *Picus miniaceus*
Crimson-winged Woodpecker *Picus puniceus*
Checker-throated Woodpecker *Picus mentalis*
Common Goldenback *Dinopium javanense*
Buff-rumped Woodpecker *Meiglyptes tristis*
Red-crowned Barbet *Megalaima rafflesii*
Black Hornbill *Anthracoceros malayanus*
Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*
Red-naped Trogon *Harpactes kasumba*
Blue-eared Kingfisher *Alcedo meninting*
Rufous-backed Kingfisher *Ceyx rufidorsa*
White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
Banded Kingfisher *Lacedo pulchella*
Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris*
Rufous-collared Kingfisher *Actenoides concretus*
Red-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis amictus*
Malaysian Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx fugax*
Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*

Raffles's Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus chlorophaeus*
Red-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus javanicus*
Chestnut-breasted Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus curvirostris*
Blue-rumped Parrot *Psittinus cyanurus*
Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot *Loriculus galgulus*
Long-tailed Parakeet *Psittacula longicauda*
Glossy Swiftlet *Collocalia esculenta*
Brown-backed Needletail *Hirundapus giganteus*
Whiskered Treeswift *Hemiprocne comata*
Collared Scops Owl *Otus lempiji*
Buffy Fish Owl *Ketupa ketupu*
Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata*
Javan Frogmouth *Batrachostomus javensis*
Malaysian Eared Nightjar *Eurostopodus temminckii*
Large-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus macrurus*
Common Pigeon *Columba livia*
Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*
Zebra Dove *Geopelia striata*
Pink-necked Green Pigeon *Treron vernans*
White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
White-bellied Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*
Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*
Changeable Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus*
Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*
Dusky Broadbill *Corydon sumatranus*
Golden-bellied Gerygone *Gerygone sulphurea*
Asian Fairy-bluebird *Irena puella*
Greater Green Leafbird *Chloropsis sonnerati*
Tiger Shrike *Lanius tigrinus*
Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*
Rail Babbler *Eupetes macrocerus*
Crested Jay *Platylophus galericulatus*
House Crow *Corvus splendens*
Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*
Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis*
Pied Fantail *Rhipidura javanica*
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*
Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*
Rufous-winged Philentoma *Philentoma pyrhopterum*
Yellow-rumped Flycatcher *Ficedula zanthopygia*
Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis*
White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*
Asian Glossy Starling *Aplonis panayensis*
Daurian Starling *Sturnus sturninus*
Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
White-vented Myna *Acridotheres javanicus*

Common Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa*
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
Pacific Swallow *Hirundo tahitica*
Black-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus atriceps*
Grey-bellied Bulbul *Pycnonotus cyaniventris*
Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus goiavier*
Olive-winged Bulbul *Pycnonotus plumosus*
Cream-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus simplex*
Asian Red-eyed Bulbul *Pycnonotus brunneus*
Yellow-bellied Bulbul *Alophoixus phaeocephalus*
Hairy-backed Bulbul *Tricholestes criniger*
Buff-vented Bulbul *Iole olivacea*
Streaked Bulbul *Ixos malaccensis*
Ashy Bulbul *Hemixos flavala*
Yellow-bellied Prinia *Prinia flaviventris*
Dark-necked Tailorbird *Orthotomus atrogularis*
Ashy Tailorbird *Orthotomus ruficeps*
Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*
White-chested Babbler *Trichastima rostratum*
Short-tailed Babbler *Malacocincla malaccensis*
Black-capped Babbler *Pellorneum capistratum*
Moustached Babbler *Malacopteron magnirostre*
Sooty-capped Babbler *Malacopteron affine*
Rufous-crowned Babbler *Malacopteron magnum*
Grey-headed Babbler *Stachyris poliocephala*
Chestnut-rumped Babbler *Stachyris maculata*
Striped Tit-babbler *Macronous gularis*
Fluffy-backed Tit-babbler *Macronous ptilosus*
Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker *Prionochilus maculatus*
Orange-bellied Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trigonostigma*
Brown-throated Sunbird *Anthreptes malaccensis*
Purple-naped Sunbird *Hypogramma hypogrammicum*
Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis*
Crimson Sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja*
Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostris*
Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*
Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*
Javan Munia *Lonchura leucogastroides*