

# Birding Panti Forest – 26<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> September 2015

## (The Rail-babbler Tour)

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The enigmatic Rail-babbler remained silent and invisible until our final day at Panti! Photo © Lim Kim Seng

Rob Hunt, a birder from London contacted me two years ago about the possibility of doing a short trip to Panti Forest Reserve in Malaysia to see the monotypic Rail-babbler. However, fate intervened and he had to postpone the trip due to health issues. After being given a clean bill of health by his doctors, Rob's immediate task was to contact me for another attempt in September 2015. It wasn't ideal as it was the end of the breeding season and this was made complicated by the ongoing smoke haze from burning forests in Sumatra that was being blown into Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore by the South-west Monsoon.

Day One began with an early morning drive to Panti from Singapore. The border crossing took almost an hour but we were across just as it was starting to get light. We stopped for a quick breakfast of *roti canai* and coffee, and were inside the famed Bunker Trail by 8.00 am. The forest was quiet and hazy and birding was slow. We got to about one km inside the trail before getting any action. Red-crowned Barbets were calling actively and since it was one of Rob's targets, we spent some time trying to locate one of three calling birds. Eventually, we got a view of one hopping in the canopy. We also saw a Pale Blue Flycatcher well and followed this with another of Rob's target birds, a Chestnut-bellied Malkoha. As we got in the car, we saw a flock of Blue-rumped Parrots flying overhead, yet another tick for Rob.

We made a stop at the shrine area and also at the 5 km stream. Birds seen included Banded, Checker-throated and Grey-and-buff Woodpeckers, a Banded Bay Cuckoo and Dark-throated Oriole. We also saw migrants in the form of juvenile Tiger Shrikes and a first-winter Dark-sided Flycatcher. At 11 am, we turned around and spent a bit of time at the headquarters exploring the tower area but encountered little activity. More importantly, we had not heard any calling Rail-babblers. We left Panti at 12 pm and headed for Kota Tinggi where we had a good seafood lunch and then we checked into our hotel.



A male Rufous-collared Kingfisher in the gloom of the forest. Photo © Lim Kim Seng



At 3.50 pm, we were back at Panti again. The heat was oppressive and the forest was silent except for wailing cicadas. That didn't help our cause of listening for calling Rail-babblers. We did spend some time exploring the promising shrine area but we found only a pair of Rufous-collared Kingfisher excavating a nest. We stayed till 6.30 pm and managed to add lifers in the form of Red-throated Sunbird and the stunning Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker.



The beautiful male Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker. Photo © Lim Kim Seng

We started earlier on Day Two and were in the forest by 5 am. In the next hour, we tried to listen for nightbirds but apart from nightjars we did not hear any birds at all. By dawn, we were at the 8 km clearing but it was really hazy and we narrowly missed a calling Malaysian Eared Nightjar. At 7 am, we drove back to the forest all the way to the headquarters but no rail-babblers were calling. We tried again and drove all the way to the 5 km stream, making stops at a few likely spots. However, no rail-babblers were heard even though we did see some interesting birds such as White-bellied and Maroon Woodpeckers, the first being another lifer for Rob. We also saw two Green Imperial Pigeons flying over. We stopped at 12 pm.

At 4 pm, we were back at Pantl and once again we listened but there was no sign of the rail-babbler. At 5 pm, the rains came and we gave up at 5.30 pm, as the rain went on.

On Day 3, we were at Pantl by 6 am and we drove all the way to the 8 km clearing where we hoped to see Malaysian Eared Nightjar. The hazy and misty conditions foiled us again as we could not see the bird even though we could hear it clearly. At 6.45 am, we were back in the forest driving towards the headquarters. At 8 am, I decided to check a promising side trail and tried to induce any rail-babblers present to call by playing my tape judiciously. At 8.05 am, there was a response! I called Rob and about five minutes later, we saw a Rail-babbler walking on the forest floor for a few seconds before it went off. Jackpot! Rob had his holy grail and we exchanged handshakes as we got out of the trail. Flicking a few leeches of my pants, we could now enjoy our remaining time at Pantl, so we drove towards the 5 km stream. We parked the car and walked, trying to see what else we could find in the still hazy conditions. It was very quiet and we decided to turn back after an hour. About 100 metres from the 5 km stream, we heard another calling Rail-babbler. I looked at Rob and motioned him to try and see it again as it was quite close. About 15 minutes of tracking in the forest produced another fantastic view of the Rail-babbler, this time for longer. Unbelievable! We had hoped for one but had now seen two different Rail-babblers! Other birds of note seen that magical morning included Blue-eared Kingfisher, a male Asian paradise-flycatcher, a male White-rumped Shama and a pair of Grey-bellied Bulbuls.

We left Pantl at 11 am in high spirits, stopped by Kota Tinggi for lunch and were back in Singapore by 1.30 pm. Ultimately, it was a very successful trip as we saw our main target bird in somewhat challenging conditions – the haze, the unseasonal timing and an evening downpour all making birding really tough. We also succeeded in seeing about a dozen of Rob's other targets. Over three days, we recorded 95 species. It was on the low side but we didn't care as we had seen THE BIRD!

### A Checklist of the Birds Recorded in Malaysia on 26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> September 2015

Nomenclature, sequence and taxonomy follow IOC. Species highlighted in yellow indicate those that were "heard only".

#	English Name	Scientific Name
1	Crested Serpent Eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>
2	Rock Dove*	<i>Columba livia</i>
3	Zebra Dove	<i>Geopelia striata</i>
4	Little Green Pigeon	<i>Treron olax</i>
5	Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>
6	Raffles's Malkoha	<i>Rhinortha chlorophaea</i>
7	Chestnut-breasted Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus curvirostris</i>
8	Chestnut-bellied Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus sumatranus</i>
9	Asian Koel*	<i>Eudynamys scolopaceus</i>
10	Violet Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchus</i>

11	Banded Bay Cuckoo	<i>Cacomantis sonneratii</i>
12	Malaysian Eared Nightjar	<i>Lyncornis temminckii</i>
13	Large-tailed Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus macrurus</i>
14	Whiskered Treeswift	<i>Hemiprocne comata</i>
15	Glossy Swiftlet	<i>Collocalia esculenta</i>
16	Rufous-collared Kingfisher	<i>Actenoides concretus</i>
17	Banded Kingfisher	<i>Lacedo pulchella</i>
18	Blue-eared Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo meninting</i>
19	Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher	<i>Ceyx erithaca</i>
20	Red-bearded Bee-eater	<i>Nyctyornis amictus</i>
21	Blue-throated Bee-eater	<i>Merops viridis</i>
22	Black Hornbill	<i>Anthracoceros malayanus</i>
23	Helmeted Hornbill	<i>Rhinoplax vigil</i>
24	Red-crowned Barbet	<i>Megalaima rafflesii</i>
25	Brown Barbet	<i>Caloramphus fuliginosus</i>
26	Grey-and-buff Woodpecker	<i>Hemicircus concretus</i>
27	White-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus javensis</i>
28	Banded Woodpecker	<i>Chrysophlegma miniaceum</i>
29	Checker-throated Woodpecker	<i>Chrysophlegma mentale</i>
30	Maroon Woodpecker	<i>Blythipicus rubiginosus</i>
31	Orange-backed Woodpecker	<i>Reinwardtipicus validus</i>
32	Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot	<i>Loriculus galgulus</i>
33	Blue-rumped Parrot	<i>Psittinus cyanurus</i>
34	Banded Broadbill	<i>Eurylaimus javanicus</i>
35	Dusky Broadbill	<i>Corydon sumatranus</i>
36	Golden-bellied Gerygone	<i>Gerygone sulphurea</i>
37	Large Woodshrike	<i>Tephrodornis virgatus</i>
38	Rufous-winged Philentoma	<i>Philentoma pyroptera</i>
39	Green Iora	<i>Aegithina viridissima</i>
40	Scarlet Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus speciosus</i>
41	Tiger Shrike	<i>Lanius tigrinus</i>
42	White-bellied Erpornis	<i>Erpornis zantholeuca</i>
43	Dark-throated Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthonotus</i>
44	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>
45	Malaysian Pied Fantail	<i>Rhipidura javanica</i>
46	Asian Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>
47	House Crow*	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
48	<b>Rail-babbler</b>	<i>Eupetes macrocerus</i>
49	Black-headed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus atriceps</i>
50	Grey-bellied Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cyaniventris</i>
51	Olive-winged Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus plumosus</i>

52	Cream-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus simplex</i>
53	Asian Red-eyed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus brunneus</i>
54	Spectacled Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus erythrophthalmos</i>
55	Yellow-bellied Bulbul	<i>Alophoixus phaeocephalus</i>
56	Hairy-backed Bulbul	<i>Tricholestes criniger</i>
57	Buff-vented Bulbul	<i>Iole olivacea</i>
58	Streaked Bulbul	<i>Ixos malaccensis</i>
59	Cinereous Bulbul	<i>Hemixos cinereus</i>
60	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
61	Pacific Swallow	<i>Hirundo tahitica</i>
62	Arctic Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus borealis</i>
63	Dark-necked Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus atrogularis</i>
64	Rufous-tailed Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sericeus</i>
65	Grey-headed Babbler	<i>Stachyris poliocephala</i>
66	Chestnut-rumped Babbler	<i>Stachyris maculata</i>
67	Chestnut-winged Babbler	<i>Stachyris erythroptera</i>
68	Pin-striped Tit-Babbler	<i>Macronous gularis</i>
69	Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler	<i>Macronous ptilosus</i>
70	Horsfield's Babbler	<i>Malcocincla sepiaria</i>
71	Moustached Babbler	<i>Malacopteron magnirostre</i>
72	White-chested Babbler	<i>Trichastoma rostratum</i>
73	Black-capped Babbler	<i>Pellorneum capistratum</i>
74	Asian Fairy-bluebird	<i>Irena puella</i>
75	Velvet-fronted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta frontalis</i>
76	Asian Glossy Starling*	<i>Aplonis panayensis</i>
77	Common Hill Myna	<i>Gracula religiosa</i>
78	Javan Myna*	<i>Acridotheres javanicus</i>
79	Common Myna*	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
80	White-rumped Shama	<i>Copsychus malabaricus</i>
81	Dark-sided Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa sibirica</i>
82	Pale Blue Flycatcher	<i>Cyornis unicolor</i>
83	Yellow-rumped Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula zanthopygia</i>
84	Greater Green Leafbird	<i>Chloropsis sonnerati</i>
85	Lesser Green Leafbird	<i>Chloropsis cyanopogon</i>
86	Blue-winged Leafbird	<i>Chloropsis cochinchinensis</i>
87	Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker	<i>Prionochilus maculatus</i>
88	Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker	<i>Prionochilus percussus</i>
89	Orange-bellied Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum trigonostigma</i>
90	Plain Sunbird	<i>Anthreptes simplex</i>
91	Red-throated Sunbird	<i>Anthreptes rhodolaemus</i>
92	Purple-naped Sunbird	<i>Hypogramma hypogrammicum</i>



93	Temminck's Sunbird	<i>Aethopyga temminckii</i>
94	Little Spiderhunter	<i>Arachnothera longirostra</i>
95	Eurasian Tree Sparrow*	<i>Passer montanus</i>



Long-tailed Macaques on the road. Photo © Lim Kim Seng