Naturetrek Singapore Tour September 2010 Trip Report

By Lim Kim Seng

Trip Participants:

Michael & Roberta Clifford (UK)



The gaudy White-throated Kingfisher Halcyon smyrnensis at MacRitchie Reservoir

Day One (September 19)

The flight from Brisbane arrived on time and eventually Michael and Roberta Clifford appeared with their luggage for their Tropical Singapore Tour. Unfortunately, Michael and Roberta were not looking too well, having suffered from a bout of food poisoning that also disrupted their rest on the flight. In view of their condition, I suggested a rest for the day and to resume the tour once they have had time to rest. Our short walk to the airport carpark produced the first bird of the day, a tiny Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker, pecking on a rain tree just next to the car.

The drive to the hotel was short and we were there within half an hour. Despite talking with the hotel reception, we were not able to get an early check-in. Apparently, all hotel rooms in Singapore have been fully booked due to the F1 Singapore Grand Prix of the following weekend. I suggested a quick visit to the Singapore Botanic Gardens, just fifteen minutes' drive away, while the hotel staff did their best to let Michael and Roberta have their room early.

As it was a Sunday, the carpark nearest to the Visitor Centre of the 150-year old Singapore Botanic Gardens was full, and we had to park a short distance away. Walking to the Gardens, we spied our first White-vented Mynas, Singapore's most common bird, and a friendly Plantain Squirrel, a common arboreal mammal that we were to see every day. We walked to the Orchid Garden, seeing a female and then a male Pink-necked Green Pigeon, perched on a palm, in the glory of the tropical sunshine, a Yellow-vented Bulbul, the red-eyed Asian Glossy Starlings, Common Myna and a flock of screeching fly-by Rainbow Lorikeet. Birds weren't the only animals that were visible. We also saw the striking black-and-yellow Common Birdwing and the smaller white, yellow and orange Painted Jezebel – two remarkable butterflies in the Gardens. Just as impressive was the massive collection of orchids and orchid hybrids at the Orchid Gardens.

The short one-hour visit was all we could spare for an introduction to the flora and fauna of Singapore as we decided to hop back to the hotel. Luckily, after a short drive, we found that the room was finally ready and opted for a day of rest.



The amazing Common Mormon Papylio polytes at Singapore Botanic Gardens

Day Two (September 20)

Despite a slight delay to start of our first full day of the Singapore Tour, we were able to reach the carpark at the starting point of our hike to the Central Catchment Nature Reserve in the cool of the morning. Dawn was breaking and our first animals were a troupe of Long-tailed Macaques that seemed to have just awoken from their slumber at the carpark itself. As it was still dark, we got torches and started walking the undulating forest trail to a lake called MacRitchie Reservoir. The owls and nightjars were not calling. It was almost full moon and not the best time to see or hear them. In any case, the sky brightened rapidly and we were soon hearing the diurnal birds and their dawn chorus. Red-crowned Barbets and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos were already calling and proclaiming their individual territories.

Near an old pumphouse, we saw our first rainforest birds. We stumbled across a small flock of Striped Tit-babblers and struggled to get a good look as they moved stealthily through the dense foliage. We moved on after getting decent looks and were soon on to wider, more even tracks. The sky was now clear enough to see and we were delighted by the sight of a group of Short-tailed Babblers squabbling in much the same manner as the gangs in Michael Jackson's Beat It music video, only this time the actors were birds. They were close enough to see with our naked eyes, and we saw the rivals throw themselves at each other before they disappeared into the forest. Another bird, the beautiful Common Emerald Dove, also afforded excellent views as it posed seemingly unafraid within four metres.

Camping ourselves at the southern shores of MacRitchie Reservoir, we were soon busy sorting out the birds. A White-throated Kingfisher perched on a dead tree with Pacific Swallows provided the first excuse to use the spotting scope – and to great effect! We also saw a handsome Brown Shrike, Yellow-vented and Olive-winged Bulbuls hiding in wild cinnamon trees, the rare Black-headed Bulbul, and a male Brown-throated Sunbird.

Moving along the edge of the lake, we added many more birds including Pinknecked and Thick-billed Green Pigeons, Black-naped Oriole, Common Iora and Dark-necked Tailorbird. We also got close-up views of a handsome male Orangebellied Flowerpecker gorging itself on the ripe berries of the Singapore Rhododendron. The short grass at the edge of the lake also gave us an opportunity to examine the myriad silver webs of the tiny Wolf Spider, each just a few centimetres from its neighbour.

As it was becoming increasingly warm and humid, we decided to retreat to the forest trail. Back at the old pumphouse, we spotted and scoped the mysterious-looking Greater racket-tailed Drongo, with its spiky hair-do and racket-shaped tail.

Our second site of the day was the waterbird haven at the 130-hectare Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, in the north-west of Singapore. We had a quick breakfast along the way and arrived at the reserve shortly after noon. When we got to the river, the

tide was already rising and we took our time to scan the mangroves that lined its shores.

We found several Little Egrets perched on some mangroves and shortly after, a spectacular Stork-billed Kingfisher in another low tree, partially obscured by branches. In the fast flowing waters below the bridge, we found schools of needlefish and archer fish.

At the main hide, we were besieged by sights of hundreds of waders, mostly roosting in the mudflats all around us. There were six species. Most numerous were Whimbrel, Common Redshank and Lesser Sand Plover. We also spotted the very white subspecies of the familiar Grey Heron and a distant Purple Heron.

Along the gravel track round the main pond, we soon found Ashy Tailorbird, a mangrove specialist, and a pair of Pied Fantails, that invited investigation with their continuous antic of hopping through branches. Eventually, we found what they were doing. They were busy feeding their foster young – a juvenile Rusty-breasted Cuckoo! The cuckoo perched close by for long periods, allowing us fantastic views. Malayan Water Monitors were also very common along the bund, a few of which allowed us very close views!

Back at the river, we scoped Collared and Common Kingfishers, and then found to our delight, a perched Grey-headed Fish-eagle, a globally near-threatened species, and another Stork-billed Kingfisher, this time much nearer and hungrier, as it dived into the water a few times in clear view. Not to be outdone, a small (1.5 metres) Estuarine Crocodile also showed itself near a bank, revealing its scaly head and menacing green eyes.

As it was a very warm and humid day, we allowed ourselves a long lunch stop to sample the culinary delights of a food court that offered all kinds of food imaginable in air-conditioned comfort. Eventually, we settled for chicken noodles and rice with sliced fish soup along with ice-cold water. Our tummies satiated, we headed once again to the outdoors, this time to the rural countryside of Kranji.

Situated near to Sungei Buloh, Kranji is a small nature area of marshes and grassland that spans the western shores of Kranji Reservoir. We parked our car and quickly got our gear for the final destination of the day. It was a pleasant walk along a deserted country road amidst cloudy and slightly breezy conditions. The first bird to greet us was a noisy Red-wattled Lapwing that flew about in long loops. We also found a Common Tailorbird, a flock of Baya Weavers and a Long-tailed Shrike. About half way along the road, we were thrilled to find a Slaty-breasted Rail preening by the road. This rail is common but rarely seen due to its skulking habits.

At the pond at the end of the road, we found the local race of the Purple Swamphen amongst low ferns and another Brown Shrike. A Lesser Coucal gave us the run around without allowing anything more than glimpses but we were happy to obtain good views of a Banded Woodpecker and two Common Goldenbacks on the way out. A brilliant male Olive-backed Sunbird perched on a TV antenna bidded us goodbye as we left in the fading daylight for the hotel.

It was a good day and we ended it with 71 species of birds!



A Malayan Water Monitor Varanus salvator on the alert at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve

Day Three (September 21)

We met at the hotel lobby at 5.30 am as agreed and promptly headed for the border with Malaysia, in a town called Woodlands. Roberta was not able to join us as she was not well. We got past customs at both sides speedily despite the sleepy-faced custom officers and were soon having our breakfast in a 24-hour restaurant in Kota Tinggi, after an hour's drive.

Another half an hour's drive saw us entering Panti Bird Sanctuary, an area of protected lowland rainforest about half the size of Singapore and boasting a bird list of over 300 species. The first animals to greet us were a troupe of Dusky Leafmonkeys. There were about a dozen of them and looked utterly adorable with their white-rimmed eyes and mouths. They were busy eating leaves, as name implies.

Our first birds were a flock of Hairy-backed and Cream-vented Bulbuls perched low along the trail. At a swampy area, we saw a group of six Common Emerald Doves, Little Green Pigeon and several Field Frogs, our first amphibian.

At another spot with older forest and streams, we eventually saw our bird of the day, a male Scarlet-rumped Trogon, perched low in the forest and almost invisible despite its plumage of scarlet, black and brown. It was accompanied by a juvenile and a female.

Another spot along the trail gave us close views of a Red-crowned Barbet, Raffles's Malkohas, a Checker-throated Woodpecker and a flock of Brown Barbets.

At the 5 km mark, we had our best birding as a bird wave passed through and produced in a matter of minutes, Lesser Green, Greater Green and Blue-winged Leafbirds, Scarlet and Fiery Minivets, Lesser Cuckooshrikes, Black-headed, Buffvented, Streaked and Spectacled Bulbuls, Dark-necked Tailorbird, Green Iora, and Thick-billed and Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers. Past the stream, at a fruiting Eurya tree, we found a male and two female Yellow-rumped Flycatcher, a migrant from Siberia, and had great views of a male Asian fairy-bluebird, stunning with its combination of black and turquoise. Also seen well here was an adult Crested Serpent Eagle.

All this while, the forest resonated with the howling songs of the unseen White-handed Gibbon as well as the presence of an assortment of squirrels – Plantain, Slender, Grey-bellied and Cream-coloured Giant. Insects were also spectacular. We saw a few of the massive Rajah Brooke's Birding, with its band of emerald spots on velvet wings, and the polka-dotted paper like Common Wood Nymph.

In three hours, we recorded 51 species of birds, a good total but still just one-sixth of the amazing bird diversity in this forested jewel of southern Malaysia.

We were back in Singapore after a short drive, and had lunch in a family restaurant to cool off from the tropical heat. In the early afternoon, we moved on to our next site, Bukit Batok Nature Park, a hilly nature park in the centre of the island.

We moved through the wooded park for about an hour without seeing very much due to the mid-afternoon stupor of the birds, with the exception of the cicadas which assailed us with their endless buzzing. It was hard work and made all that much harder by the stifling heat and humidity.

We saw Striped Tit-babbler in the forest, and spotted two White-throated Kingfishers at the quarry pond, at the bottom of the hill. Another smaller kingfisher, the Blueeared, was less cooperative as it appeared briefly twice but did not allow anything more than glimpses.

An hour later, we had only added close views of a female Crimson Sunbird and a male Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker to that of a flying Changeable Hawk Eagle, and was about to leave disappointed when another bird wave occurred. We were soon having 4-5 White-crested Laughingthrushes hopping literally and figuratively at our feet, a Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, a pair of Straw-headed Bulbuls, a globally threatened bird, and a Rufous Woodpecker. We left happy after picking out a few Glossy Swiftlets skimming the tree-tops.

Our last stop was the Botanic Gardens. We tried to look for a Spotted Wood-owl at a well known roost but construction work meant that it was a lost cause. Moving on, we checked the Ecolake for birds. Ignoring the Black swans, we soon found a flock of Lesser Whistling-ducks, numerous White-breasted Waterhens with young in tow, Ashy Tailorbird, a male Brown-throated Sunbird displaying in close proximity with his harem of five females, Blue-throated Bee-eater and, last but not least, the star of the afternoon, a Coppersmith Barbet perched at the top of a tree.

Day Four (September 22)

Our last day saw us spending the entire morning at the small island of Pulau Ubin, located at the eastern end of Singapore.

We had breakfast at a roadside cafe in Changi Village and then after studying Redbreasted Parakeets in the angsana trees, walked to the nearby ferry terminal for our morning on Pulau Ubin. The boat journey took just ten minutes.

Pulau Ubin was a quaint island lost in time. In place of gleaming skyscrapers and the snarl of urban traffic, we had old wooded houses on stilts, swaying coconut trees, the sound of waves hammering on granite rocks and a feeling of tranquillity. Ubin houses just 100 residents and it survives almost entirely on ecotourism.

We chartered a van to take us to Chek Jawa, a coastal protected area at its eastern end. The journey through abandoned rubber plantations, fruit orchards and secondary forest was over in 15 minutes. We explored the coastal and mangrove boardwalk that skirted the coast of sand flats, coral rubble and seagrasses. The coast was fringed by mangroves and coastal forest. It was a beautiful day with few clouds and cooled by the sea breeze. We spotted a group of Swift Terns and Whimbrels roosting on rocks on an offshore islet, oblivious of the presence of two White-bellied Sea Eagles resting in a tree nearby.

We also explored the quaint visitor centre at Chek Jawa. It was a Tudor-style building complete with a fire-place(!), built by an English surveyor in the 1930s. Perhaps he missed home!

Back at the main town of Pulau Ubin, we decided to take a break and had fresh young coconuts to quench our thirst. The old town was over a hundred years old and boasts Singapore's only opera house and an old Chinese temple. There were also restaurants and numerous bicycle shops.

After a short rest, we opted for a walk on the quiet roads and soon reached the Ubin Quarry, an abandoned granite quarry that was flooded with rainwater and had up to 20 Grey Herons roosting along with one Little Egret.

Moving on, we walked at a slow pace in an area of fruit orchards and were heading back to town when we spotted a pair of Oriental Pied Hornbills perched close by.

Back on the mainland, we had lunch at a hotel restaurant and then proceeded to the Botanic Gardens in the early afternoon. We stopped at the Orchid Garden just in the nick of time as a tropical thunderstorm soon started. Half an hour later the rain stopped and we took the chance to walk back to the main visitor centre of the Botanic Gardens, browsing in the shops, before another series of thunderclaps meant that we had to leave, as the thunderstorm resumed in earnest. We decided to call it a day and returned to the hotel.

Day Five was a free day for Michael and Roberta as they took the opportunity to explore Little India, the National Museum and Botanic Gardens. Late at night, I bade them farewell as they arrived at Changi Airport for their flight back home.

It was a very successful trip with 136 species of birds (120 seen) recorded in addition to eight mammals and six reptiles as well as many other interesting animals and plants. We also got to enjoy the varied ecosystems ranging from pristine lowland rainforests to coastal mangroves and mudflats, marshes to grasslands, plantations to fruit orchards, and islets to botanical gardens. Indeed, the tropical paradise that is Singapore beckons!



The shy Common Sun Skink *Mabuya multifasciata* was the most ubiquitous reptile in Singapore

Checklist of the Birds, Mammals and Reptiles Recorded During the Naturetrek Singapore Tour, 19-22 September 2010

A: Birds

#	English Name	Scientific Name
1	Red Junglefowl	Gallus gallus
2	Lesser Whistling Duck	Dendrocygna javanica
3	Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker	Dendrocopus moluccensis
4	Rufous Woodpecker	Celeus brachyurus
5	White-bellied Woodpecker	Dryocopus javensis
6	Banded Woodpecker	Picus miniaceus
7	Checker-throated Woodpecker	Picus mentalis
8	Laced Woodpecker	Picus vittatus
9	Common Goldenback	Dinopium javanense
10	Lineated Barbet	Megalaima lineate
11	Red-crowned Barbet	Megalaima rafflesii
12	Coppersmith Barbet	Megalaima haemacephala
13	Brown Barbet	Calorhamphus fuliginosus
14	Oriental Pied Hornbill	Anthracoceros albirostris
15	Scarlet-rumped Trogon	Harpactes duvaucelii
16	Oriental Dollarbird	Eurystomus orientalis
17	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis
18	Blue-eared Kingfisher	Alcedo meninting
19	Banded Kingfisher	Lacedoa pulchella
20	Stork-billed Kingfisher	Pelargopsis capensis
21	White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis
22	Collared Kingfisher	Todiramphus chloris
23	Red-bearded Bee-eater	Nyctyornis amictus
24	Blue-throated Bee-eater	Merops viridis
25	Rusty-breasted Cuckoo	Cacomantis sepulcralis
26	Little Bronze Cuckoo	Chrysococcyx minutillus
27	Violet Cuckoo	Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchus
28	Asian Koel	Eudynamys scolopacea
29	Raffles's Malkoha	Phaenicophaeus chlorophaeus
30	Lesser Coucal	Centropus bengalensis
31	Rainbow Lorikeet	Trichoglossus haematodus
32	Tanimbar Corella	Cacatua goffiniana
33	Blue-rumped Parrot	Psittinus cyanurus
34	Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot	Loriculus galgulus
35	Red-breasted Parakeet	Psittacula alexandri
36	Long-tailed Parakeet	Psittacula longicauda
37	Glossy Swiftlet	Collocalia esculenta
38	Brown-backed Needletail	Hirundapus giganteus
39	House Swift	Apus nipalensis

40	Grey-rumped Treeswift	Hemiprocne longipennis
41	Common Pigeon	Columba livia
42	Spotted Dove	Streptopelia chinensis
43	Common Emerald Dove	Chalcophaps indica
44	Zebra Dove	Geopelia striata
45	Little Green Pigeon	Treron olax
46	Pink-necked Green Pigeon	Treron vernans
47	Thick-billed Green Pigeon	Treron curvirostra
48	Slaty-breasted Rail	Gallirallus striatus
49	White-breasted Waterhen	Amaurornis phoenicurus
50	Purple Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio
51	Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus
52	Common Redshank	Tringa tetanus
53	Marsh Sandpiper	Tringa stagnatilis
54	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia
55	Common Sandpiper	Tringa hypoleucos
56	Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea
57	Pacific Golden Plover	Pluvialis fulva
58	Lesser Sand Plover	Charadrius mongolus
59	Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus
60	Swift Tern	Sterna bergii
61	Osprey	Pandion haliaetus
62	Brahminy Kite	Haliastur Indus
63	White-bellied Sea Eagle	Haliaeetus leucogaster
64	Grey-headed Fish Eagle	Ichthyophaga ichtyaetus
65	Crested Serpent Eagle	Spilornis cheela
66	Changeable Hawk Eagle	Spizaetus cirrhatus
67	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta
68	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea
69	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea
70	Striated Heron	Butorides striatus
71	Golden-bellied Gerygone	Gerygone sulphurea
72	Asian Fairy-bluebird	Irena puella
73	Greater Green Leafbird	Chloropsis sonnerati
74	Lesser Green Leafbird	Chloropsis cyanopogon
75	Blue-winged Leafbird	Chloropsis cochinchinensis
76	Tiger Shrike	Lanius tigrinus
77	Brown Shrike	Lanius cristatus
78	Long-tailed Shrike	Lanius schach
79	House Crow	Corvus splendens
80	Large-billed Crow	Corvus macrorhynchos
81	Dark-throated Oriole	Oriolus xanthonotus
82	Black-naped Oriole	Oriolus chinensis
83	Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike	Corcina striata
84	Lesser Cuckooshrike	Coracina fimbriata

85	Pied Triller	Lalage nigra
86	Fiery Minivet	Pericrocotus igneus
87	Scarlet Minivet	Pericrocotus flammeus
88	Pied Fantail	Rhipidura javanica
89	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	Dicrurus paradiseus
90	Asian Paradise-flycatcher	Terpsiphone paradise
91	Common Iora	Aegithina tiphia
92	Green Iora	Aegithina viridissima
93	Yellow-rumped Flycatcher	Ficedu zanthopygia
94	Oriental Magpie Robin	Copsychus saularis
95	White-rumped Shama	Copsychus malabaricus
96	Asian Glossy Starling	Aplonis panayensis
97	Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis
98	White-vented Myna	Acridotheres javanicus
99	Common Hill Myna	Gracula religiosa
100	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica
101	Pacific Swallow	Hirundo tahitica
102	Straw-headed Bulbul	Pycnonotus zeylanicus
103	Black-headed Bulbul	Pycnonotus atriceps
104	Yellow-vented Bulbul	Pycnontous goiavier
105	Olive-winged Bulbul	Pycnonotus plumosus
106	Cream-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus simplex
107	Asian Red-eyed Bulbul	Pycnonotus brunneus
108	Spectacled Bulbul	Pycnonotus erythropthalmos
109	Yellow-bellied Bulbul	Alophoixus phaeocephalus
110	Hairy-backed Bulbul	Tricholestes criniger
111	Buff-vented Bulbul	lole olivacea
112	Streaked Bulbul	Ixos malaccensis
113	Yellow-bellied Prinia	Prinia flaviventris
114	Everett's White-eye	Zosterops everetti
115	Common Tailorbird	Orthotomus sutorius
116	Dark-necked Tailorbird	Orthotomus atrogularis
117	Rufous-tailed Tailorbird	Orthotomus sericeus
118	Ashy Tailorbird	Orthotomus ruficeps
119	Arctic Warbler	Phylloscopus borealis
120	White-crested Laughingthrush	Garrulax leucolophus
121	Black-capped Babbler	Pellorneum capistratum
122	Short-tailed Babbler	Malacocincla malaccensis
123	Chestnut-winged Babbler	Stachyris erythroptera
124	Striped Tit-babbler	Macronous gularis
125	Fluffy-backed Tit-babbler	Macronous ptilosus
126	White-bellied Yuhina	Yuhina zantholeuca
127	Thick-billed Flowerpecker	Dicaeum agile
128	Orange-bellied Flowerpecker	Dicaeum trigonostigma
129	Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker	Dicaeum cruentatum

130	Brown-throated Sunbird	Anthreptes malaccensis
131	Copper-throated Sunbird	Nectarinia calcostetha
132	Olive-backed Sunbird	Nectarinia jugularis
133	Crimson Sunbird	Aethopyga siparaja
134	Little Spiderhunter	Arachnothera longirostris
135	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus
136	Baya Weaver	Ploceus philippinus

B. Mammals

#	English Name	Scientific Name
1	Dusky Leaf Monkey	Prebytis obscura
2	Long-tailed Macaque	Macaca fascicularis
3	White-handed Gibbon	Hylobates lar
4	Plantain Squirrel	Callosciurus notatus
5	Grey-bellied Squirrel	Callosciurus caniceps
6	Cream-coloured Giant Squirrel	Ratufa affinis
7	Slender Squirrel	Sundasciurus tenuis
8	Asian House Mouse	Mus castaneus

C. Reptiles

#	English Name	Scientific Name
1	Estuarine Crocodile	Crocodylus porosus
2	Clouded Monitor	Varanus nebulosus
3	Malayan Water Monitor	Varanus salvator
4	Green Crested Lizard	Calotes cristatellus
5	Changeable Lizard	Calotes versicolor
6	Common Sun Skink	Mabuya multifasciata