

Panti Bird Sanctuary, Johor

30th July – 2nd August 2014

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Introduction This short trip report outlines a visit to Panti Forest, Johor, made from Singapore, in summer 2014. I found Panti to be really excellent birding, and this brief trip was one well-worth making, even on a short stopover in Singapore. And that isn't just because of the incomparable Malaysian Rail-Babbler. Details on logistics and birds seen are detailed below.

Getting to Panti forest from Singapore As long as you know what you are doing, this is easy and cheap and, on public transport, should take no more than four hours - and more likely 2.5 to 3 if the border is quiet and connections fall into place. However, it may be best not to try this at the weekend, when there can be very long delays due to Singaporeans vacationing on the mainland. There are various ways to get to the border post and causeway in Singapore but we took a big yellow bus from the terminus near Rochor Centre / Queen Street (cost SD2.5), which is fast and direct. At the Singapore passport counter you disembark, go through the formalities and get back on (either the original bus, or another of the same company – it doesn't matter as long as you keep your ticket). There are a fair few signs, and, usually, crowds of people doing the same. This bus takes you across the causeway where you disembark and get your Malaysia entry stamp, walk through the over-the-top arrivals hall, down the steps and eventually arrive at a bus stand. From here bus #227 (MR 5) takes a little over one hour to the bus terminal at Kota Tinggi. There are a few places to stay in the middle of Kota Tinggi itself but we had booked the **Kota Rainforest Resort** (see below) – this is a 15-20 min taxi ride along the waterfalls road and there are plenty of taxis and friendly drivers at the bus station; the taxi fare was MR 25-30.

For the return journey, take any bus from Kota Tinggi that is going to JB Sentral, but make sure you get off at the border (as the main bus station in Johor Bharu is a bit further on). Then follow signs for *Woodlands*, which takes you through Malaysian passport control, and hop onto the yellow (or any) bus to cross the causeway. A quick visit to the Singapore entry counter is the final hurdle to overcome.

Where to stay & getting to the Bunker Trail There are a few nondescript hotels in Kota Tinggi but, apart from millions of confusing swiftlets (see Cranbrook *et al* in *Forktail* 29 (2013): 107-119 **before** wasting time trying to identify them) and some good food stalls, little else to do. That would be fine if you are spending 100% of your time on the Bunker Trail but, particularly if you have a non-birding partner, a better bet – not mentioned in any trip reports I found – might be the **Kota Rainforest Resort**. This is on the waterfalls road, about 3km short of the waterfalls resort. The proprietor, Paul, is very friendly and runs a high standard operation, complete with swimming pool, relaxing gardens and nearby Black Magpies. Birding generally right on your doorstep is quite decent (although, at least when I was there, not nearly as prolific as the Bunker Trail). Paul's contact details are **Email:** paul@kotarainforest.com; **website:** www.kotarainforest.com.

The disadvantage of Kota Rainforest Resort is that it is on the south side of Panti forest, whereas the Bunker Trail is on the east side, accessed from the Kota Tinggi to Mersing road. Paul was able to arrange a taxi driver to drop me off and pick me up at the either end of the day (0600 departure no problem) for MR 140, which seemed tolerable for a full day out. Journey time was less than 30 minutes. The taxi drivers seem familiar with the well-named Bunker Trail but, in any case, its entrance is hard to miss (the clue being in the name).

What to bring A telescope was very useful on both on the Bunker Trail and the open areas around the Kota Rainforest Resort. Tapes were helpful for some of the (many) babblers, Banded Broadbill etc. and I also had fun making some sound recordings. A few of the cuts made on the Bunker Trail can be accessed by [clicking on this link](#). I used Robson's *Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia*. Mosquitoes were plentiful and blood-thirsty in the forest and shady bits around the Kota Rainforest Resort but oddly absent on the Bunker Trail. In contrast, there I managed to fall in with two leeches, but they were during Rail-Babbler at 5m and seemed a small price to pay.

Birding

1. Bunker Trail First and foremost, this is a marvelous place to enjoy Sundaic lowland forest birds. At least on the day I visited (early August), bird activity was exceptionally high; this may have been partly because I was on the bounce from almost four weeks in the Philippines but it really did seem good compared to my memories of Taman Negara, Danum etc. Singapore (and Johor) had experienced prolonged heavy rainfall on several afternoons prior to my visit and this may have helped, as did a fair degree of high cloud cover during the afternoon of my visit. I spent almost 11 hours covering a mere 3-4 km along the main trail and had flocks and good activity virtually perpetually. Less than 100m in 1.5 hours at one point was probably the record! As well as edge and canopy species being highly visible, there are many tiny trails leading off the Bunker Trail and, in any case, the forest floor is fairly sparse and easy to get through as and when needed. In all, it was fantastic and prolific birding and, despite doing very well indeed, I could easily have enjoyed one or two further days on the same trail doubtlessly with additional good birds.

The show-stopping must-see at Panti is, of course, **Malaysian Rail-Babbler**. I heard one (or two) whistling from about 0730 and went for the first that seemed fairly close to the edge, walked off the trail about 10m, sat down and taped and whistled. Within 5mins this monster skulker had appeared on small bare mound just in front of me. I had several good views over 15mins before losing it. Despite this very promising start, I heard no others calling all day but a return visit at 1600 at the same point and some taping eventually got him (?) going again and, with patience, I had much better views still – at one point he walked right round me (invisible) at about 4 metres before pausing on a bare patch to call incessantly for over 5mins. Watching virtually unobstructed, as this gorgeous and amazing

repeatedly called, bowing and inflating those amazing purple-blue neck sacks from only a few metres away was easily the bird of the entire summer, Steere's Pitta notwithstanding. The exact spot was on the left of the Bunker Trail just where the clearing with the small temple or rain shelter begins on the right – I guess no more than 500m or so from the main highway.

This was plenty for any day out but notable species also rounded up included **Great Argus** (two calling on the left near the streams several km in), **Lesser Fish Eagle** (soaring low over the forest alongside **White-bellied Sea-Eagle**), **Wrinkled Hornbill** (in canopy near the temple clearing), **Banded Broadbill** (very noisy; group of five seen closely), **Banded Bay Cuckoo** (low off trail beyond the streams), **Banded Kingfisher** (surprisingly high in the canopy in a mixed feeding flock), **Red-crowned Barbet** (common on voice; several seen; only other barbet identified was **Brown**) and **Banded** and **Chequer-throated Woodpeckers**. Both **Whiskered Treeswift** and **Brown-backed Needletail** showed along the main trail, as did three species of malkoha (including **Chestnut-bellied**).

Babblers were well-represented (seven species in all) and included several fine looks at both **Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler** and **Black-capped Babbler** plus **Short-tailed Babbler** very close. Other species logged included **White-rumped Shama** (pair), **Hill Myna**, **Hairy-backed** and **Buff-vented Bulbuls** (latter common on call), **Green Iora**, **Lesser Green Leafbird** (probably many), **Long-billed Spiderhunter**, **Purple-throated Sunbird** plus **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird** (along with lots of **Dark-necked Tailorbirds**).

2. Around Kota Rainforest Resort I had one full day and one morning birding here. The dead trees and forest edge in front of the resort were worth a look, and I also found a trail seemingly leading well into the forest interior, running from the road about 100-200m before (KT side of) the resort entrance. As well as here, we spent a few hours walking the road up to the waterfall resort – quite good roadside forest for about 2 km but then



shockingly devastated by an enormous mining / quarrying operation just by the resort – it is hard to believe how this could be legal, even somewhere as prone to cronyism and vested interests as the tinpot sheikdoms of Malaysia. Birding highlights detailed below:



- **Dead trees and around resort:** **Red-crowned Barbet** and **Buff-rumped Woodpecker** perching up nicely, **Changeable Hawk-** and **White-bellied Sea-Eagles**, **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha**, **Black Magpie** (seen twice), **Hill Myna**, **Baya Weaver** nesting and both **Spectacled** and **Yellow-eared Spiderhunters** seen in the telescope. **Malaysian Eared-** and **Large-tailed Nightjars** were equally obvious at dusk. I also noted a **Javan Munia** in the resort grounds, a minor and predictable north-eastwards extension from the records given by Robinson in *Forktail* 28 (2012): 159-160.
- **Track to forest:** **White-bellied Woodpecker**, **Blue-throated Bee-eater**, **Dollarbird**, **Little Green Pigeon** very close and a few flocks yielding the likes of **Banded Woodpecker** and **Black-winged Flycatcher-Shrike**; also **Spectacled Bulbul**.

- **Along waterfall road:** **Banded Broadbill** (heard), **Raffle's Malkoha**, **Blue-winged Leafbird**, many **bulbuls** including **Hairy-backed**, **Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker** and **Crimson Sunbird**.



3. Birding Singapore Actually, I didn't do too much over the few days we were here. There are lots of other things to do on this green, well-organised, easy going and historically very interesting island, although reading around made the birding seem quite good too. I settled for a couple of early morning visits to the beautiful and very birdy **Botanical Gardens** in search of Red-legged Crake. Lacking specifics, a lucky encounter didn't happen but the place was an easy site for quite a few common south-east Asian garden and city birds. Notable species included **Lesser Whistling Duck**, **Banded** and **Laced Woodpeckers**, **Common Flameback**, **Grey-rumped Treeswift**, **Long-tailed Parakeet**, abundant **Pink-necked Green-Pigeons** and **Large-tailed Nightjar**. All of these were easy to see and watch, with the climax being an exceptionally tame and obliging in **Grey-headed Fish-Eagle** on the island of the third lake, totally oblivious to the hordes of early evening picnickers on the lawns. Elsewhere, whilst doing touristy things, we added **White-bellied Sea-Eagle**, **Brahminy Kite**, **Asian Koel** etc.

In Singapore we stayed at **The Daulat Hotel**, **16 Madras Street, Little India**, email: reservation@thedaulat.com. Low key but very nice and the MRT system made getting round a breeze.

