

Philippines: Luzon, Bohol, Cebu & Palawan July 2014

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Introduction

This report outlines a birding trip to the Philippines in July 2014. Being a first visit to the country, and knowing that putting time in would be important at each location, I concentrated on some of the better-known, easier to get to sites and opted to forgo Mindanao for another trip. There are a lot of trip reports available online with varying degrees of details concerning ground practicalities. However, as this visit is during an off-peak period and was conducted independently and with just one day of pre-arranged guiding (although we benefitted from some guiding arranged ad-hoc en route), I thought it may be useful to others to outline the details.

Itinerary overview

1 Luzon

- **Quezon City**, metro Manila (one night; one hour via taxi from airport) to visit **La Mesa Ecopark** next morning;
- **Subic Bay** (4 nights; 3 hour drive from Quezon City but take the NLEX all the way to Angeles; don't go cross country via San Fernando)
- On departing Subic, a stop at **Candaba Marsh** en-route to
- **Mt Makiling** at University of the Philippines, Los Banos (in total about six hours driving from Subic; two nights)
- Next to **Bangkang Kahoy / Mt Banahawe** (two nights; a 2 hour drive from Mt Makiling via Lake Taal, where we stopped for a boat trip and to visit the crater).
- Finally one night at **Pagsanjan** to visit the famous waterfalls nearby (one hour from Bangkang Kahoy and next day less than 2 hours back to Manila airport via Los Banos)

2 Bohol Four nights at **Simply Butterflies, Bilar** (one hour drive from Tagbilaran airport and a further 10 minute drive to Magsaysay clearing (the HQ for Raja Sikatuna Protected Landscape).

3 Cebu Two nights (one full day only here): visit to **Tabunan forest** (one hour from Cebu City by car)

4 Palawan We visited **Sabang** (4 nights; 2 hour drive from Puerto Princessa) and then three nights based back in **Puerto Princessa**.

Visas Contrary to information given in many earlier reports, and online on at least some Philippine embassy websites, 30-day visas are now given out as standard on arrival in Manila (at least to UK passport holders). Formerly, the allowance was 21 days.

Getting between islands We made three internal flights, each a little over an hour long:

1. **Manila to Tagbilaran, Bohol**
2. **Cebu to Puerto Princessa, Palawan**
3. **Puerto Princessa back to Manila.**

All were booked over one month in advance from Cebu Pacific and were fairly cheap. All left on time and proceeded smoothly. There were several daily departures to choose from on each route. To get from **Bohol to Cebu we took the fast ferry in the afternoon** (there were a number of departures) – this two hour trip was booked by turning up an hour ahead of time and buying a ticket on the jetty at Tagbilaran; Simply Butterflies were able to advise. Bring warm clothes to fight the air con and ear plugs and an eye mask to cope with the trash movies and tuneless Filipino 'singers' that will be blasted out at high volume to the whole boat for the entire journey. There is no escape, nor any birds to see, as there is no outdoor deck.

Getting around Having taken some advice from friends who know the Philippines well, we elected, after some thought, to self-drive on **Luzon** (doing this seems to be unusual, but proved doable, if somewhat challenging at times) and in Palawan (where self-drive is easy). Car rental company details are given below; both were easy to deal with via email and happy just to get a scanned copy of an international driving license by email beforehand (although a UK license would probably have done too). On Luzon, having your own transport is essential to get about at Subic Bay and to get to Candaba swamp; it also saved a lot of time when transferring to Mt Makiling and Bangkang Kahoy and allowed us to easily take short-notice side-trips to Lake Taal and Pagsanjan. Although not essential for getting to or birding at Sabang, **Palawan**, driving oneself was also very useful there and made getting to the other Palawan sites

around Puerto Princessa either simple and easy (Honda Bay) or possible at all (Iwahig and the Zigzag Road). On **Bohol** a car was not necessary as Simply Butterflies can arrange all pick-ups and drop-offs at a very reasonable cost and on **Cebu** I had a day guided by Nilo (details below) who provided transport.

As well as saving us loads of time (avoiding days spent on and changing buses), given that it was rainy season, a car made life much easier and meant that we could dodge or wait out the weather when necessary and without getting completely saturated. Some transport specifics are presented below.

- **On Luzon:** A taxi from the airport on arrival to Quezon City was easy and cheap, as was one the next morning to La Mesa Ecopark.
Car Hire: We got a good deal from <http://www.toycorentacar.com/> at about 1500 PhP per day – much cheaper than renting a car and driver. This included a bonus sat-nav and, although that was as confused as us in the middle of Manila, was still very useful at all times. The company was happy to drop off the car at our Quezon city hotel and pick up at our airport hotel for a nominal charge. Driving on the main freeways (NLEX and SLEX) was fast and easy; getting to them varied from either tedious and time-consuming (count on an average speed of 30 kph anywhere off the highway) and requiring good powers of concentration or, in the middle of Manila, was simply pot-luck. We came well-armed with lots of Google Maps and these, combined with the sat-nav and road signs (when there were any) being in English made getting about manageable (with patience and humor...) The infrastructure (i.e. roads and surfaces) is actually far better than, e.g., India but very busy with jeepneys pulling out all over the place, 3-wheelers racing up the inside etc.
- **On Bohol** we relied on pick-ups and drop-offs from the friendly staff at Simply Butterflies; this was all dead easy (including 5am birding departures) and tourist visits to the Tarsier sanctuary, Chocolate Hills etc. are all standard and reasonably priced.
- **On Cebu** we took a taxi to and from the accommodation to and the airport (cheap and time-consuming in dreadful traffic, just like Manila) and Nilo drove for the trip to Tabunan.
- **On Palawan** we rented from Sabie Car rental (email: sabaicarrental@gmail.com). This was much more expensive than on Luzon (15000 PhP for a week) but driving on Palawan, even in the rainy season, is easy; you can even self-drive to El Nido in the north (although we didn't realize this until we got there). Away from Puerto Princessa there is little traffic and the roads, at least as far as Sabang, are in good condition.

Hotels used With the exception of Pagsanjan (which we decided to visit on a whim) and Sabang all hotels were booked in advance, mostly using <http://www.booking.com/> and hotel contact details are noted below. For the other two places, we just rolled up and found somewhere. 1 to 6 below are all on **Luzon**; 7 on **Bohol**; 8 on **Cebu**; 9 and 10 on **Palawan**.

1. **Fersal Hotel**, Quezon city (metro Manila). Email: reservations@fersalhotelgroup.com. Basic but fine; very close to the scary mammoth roundabout in the middle of Quezon city and, being well north of the Manila centre, a handy launch pad for driving north to Subic (NLEX is about 20-30 mins away, traffic permitting). More importantly, La Mesa Ecopark and its Ashy Ground-Thrushes are just a 15 min taxi ride away.
2. **Remington Hotel**, metro Manila. Email: reservation@rwmanila.com. Right by Manila airport; and very easy to reach from SLEX if self-driving from, for example, Mt Makiling. Big and plush but ok rates online.
3. **Subic Bay: Mountain Woods Resort**. <http://www.mountainwoods.com.ph/>. I got no reply to several emails but just went ahead and booked it direct from <http://www.asiatravel.com/> where the price was much cheaper than on the website. Quiet and a little musty but nice place with great views from the patio and an easy 15 min drive to the best birding spots at Subic
4. **Mt Makiling:** We stayed at **TREES Hostel**, on the university campus. Email the helpful Annie: treeshostel@gmail.com Cheap and grungy but also quiet and peaceful and the trail up the hill is right at the front door. No food available but a few good restaurants (and lots of bad ones!) right outside the main gate.
5. **Bangkang Kahoy / Mt Banahawe** I'm not sure if there is a website but this was booked by emailing Dion at bkvalley@gmail.com. Nice place; remote but tarred road virtually all the way and great doorstep birding once you stumble out of bed.

6. **Pagsanjan:** We hadn't booked this but just rocked up late afternoon and found somewhere on the riverside. Arranging a boat to the waterfalls (highly recommended) for early next morning was equally easy.
7. **Bilar, Bohol.** We used Simply Butterflies / Habitat Bohol. Email Cristy at : boholhabitat@gmail.com. We had a rustic wooden chalet in the grounds for four nights. Cheap, comfortable and great food in the café across the garden.
8. **Henry Hotel, Cebu.** Wacky and eclectic and well worth a try. Email: asucaldito@thehenryhotel.com.
9. In **Sabang**, we struggled to find anywhere online beforehand. That is unless you are prepared to splash out on either of the two big plush resorts that are on the beach there (both easily found online and both well overpriced by local standards). We arrived in torrential rain and had three places to choose from, all right on the only parking lot town, just by the jetty. All were similar with simple but clean rooms. After two nights in one of these, once it had dried out a bit we moved to the **Green Verde Inn**, a walk of about 200m north from the parking lot along the beach path towards the Mangrove river trip and Zipline. Here we had a reasonable cabin and large quantities of fantastic food in the restaurant.
10. **Deep Forest Garden Resort, Puerto Princesa.** Email: jeanpierre_riccio@yahoo.com. Being 5 mins south of the airport, this is on the wrong side of Puerto Princesa for getting to anywhere else, so be prepared for a 20 min fight in heavy traffic through the town if you stay here and want to get to Honda Bay, Iwahig etc. However, a good value and friendly place with pool and nice bar, whilst, for comedy value, the décor and outdoor 'ornaments' scattered around the gardens and pool have to be seen to be believed. On the last morning before flying to Manila I took a walk down the road outside and found Blue Paradise Flycatcher only a 10 mins away.

Weather and birding in general The Philippines are famously rainy for a lot of the year and, again, we took some serious advice from local contacts before we decided to go for this trip at this time of year. In the end things worked out fine, although we had a mixed bag and, in some ways perhaps, a lot of luck. We had showers for up to a few hours per day for our first two days at Subic Bay (due to being on the fringe of a typhoon that was slamming into southern Japan at the time) but otherwise fine, settled weather the rest of our time on Luzon. There was just the odd shower and, with quite a lot of cloud cover, it was neither excessively hot nor humid. The day after we left Manila for Bohol another typhoon arrived, this time crashing straight into Manila and causing serious damage (and loss of life) but some 500 km south on Bohol we merely got grey skies and bursts of heavy showers for day or two, then it settled again. Our only day on Cebu became very wet by lunchtime (but by then we'd finished at Tabunan) and, still raining, the next day we flew to Palawan. It was only here that the weather actually stopped us doing things: we had two days of solid and torrential rain and then one day of showers before settled, fine weather resumed for the last four days.

In some ways we benefitted from the weather as the often cloudy skies kept bird activity higher than normal during the day and it was rarely excessively hot or sweaty. I had heard horror stories about how tough birding in the Philippines was and was pleasantly surprised to find that bird activity and finding stuff ok in many places – even without a guide it was generally not much harder than at Danum, Borneo or Mt Kerinci, Sumatra. The only exception to this was Raja Sikatuna Protected Landscape, Bohol; this proved unquestionably the closest to total teeth-pulling I have ever found birding to be although, in the long run, it proved very rewarding. To try and maximize chances at each site and to counter time lost to adverse weather (and to have a more relaxing trip with some flexibility) we tried to factor at least a couple of days (up to four) at each site. Bird activity sometimes significantly increased right after squalls as things started moving to feed and dry off. Many birds had clearly just finished breeding and we saw a lot of juveniles recently fledged as well as quite a lot of singing still ongoing. One aspect that did take a hit due to the weather was night-birding – rain at dusk virtually daily at Subic Bay prevented any progress there on several days and didn't help at times on Bohol as well; at Sabang the famous Sheridan ATV track was underwater for a couple of days so getting in there to try for frogmouths etc. was not pleasant (nor successful).

What to bring As well as bins, I sometimes used my 'scope – the latter is worth bringing for roadside forest at Subic Bay and Sabang plus at Candaba and, for example, the Makiling buttonquail track. I didn't do much photography, limiting myself to digiscoping as and when. Tapes are really important, especially if you are going

independently and I also had a lot of fun, for the first time, making sound-recordings – being able to record and instantly playback definitely got me a few very good birds. To survive the rain, it is essential to come fully prepared with decent backpacks and lots of ziplock bags to seal electronics in; an umbrella is far more useful than a raincoat. Decent walking boots sufficed everywhere (trails were never too muddy) whilst hat and sun-screen were optional. However, insect repellent was very useful in a few places but mosquitoes were really only bad on the (few) enclosed forest trails at Subic Bay and on the shady forest trails at Bangkang Kahoy; leeches were surprisingly non-existent save for when we reached a certain height on Mt Makiling, when we were suddenly infested with them as they went from zero to well over the speed limit within about 100m of trail.

Useful trip reports and other literature A couple of trip reports and a website that really helped out with practical details are:

- **Philippines generally** <http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/philippines/philippines-17/philippines-09-11.htm>
- **Subic and Palawan**, including a Google map of key sightings, and, for example, the location of Candaba Swamp <http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/philippines/philippines-18/philippines-feb-2013.htm>
- **Palawan:** http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=2406
- Very good, clear site information is provided by Stijn de Wijn for **Subic Bay** (<http://www.birding2asia.com/W2W/Philippines/Subic.html>) and for **Raja Sikituna** (<http://www.birding2asia.com/W2W/Philippines/RajahSikatuna.html>). These notes are referred to again below.

The standard Philippine field guide, Kennedy *et al*, is fine for most stuff but, published in 2003, is now totally out of date with regard to taxonomy. For this reason, I cross-referenced it against (and annotated it with) a current Philippine checklist (downloadable from <http://www.birdwatch.ph/html/checklist/checklist.html>) and also used a recent Birdquest trip report checklist to try and keep up to date with all the splits. Recent issues of **Forktail** and **Birding Asia** from the OBC (<http://orientalbirdclub.org/>) also have some very good papers on various aspects of the Philippines, ranging from birding sites to taxonomic advances and developments.

I got loaded up pretty fully from www.xeno-canto.org for any calls that I thought I might need. 32 recordings of 29 species made by me on this trip and uploaded to **xeno-canto** are available by clicking on [this link](#).

Guides

- **On Luzon:** No guides used, save for **Chris at Bangkang Kahoy** – he lives nearby and is easily contacted at the accommodation (or, I guess, by emailing Dion beforehand – details as per above). Chris is a very good local guide and was well clued up with calls etc.; I spent two mornings in the forest with him where, importantly, he also knows all the minor trails.
- **On Bohol:** I tried contacting **Ryan Sugala** (email: ryan_sugala@yahoo.com) whilst planning the trip but got no reply. However, I bumped into him the very first afternoon I arrived at Raja Sikituna and he agreed to guide me for the next four mornings, and one afternoon. This was very fortuitous; Ryan was a great help and I saw a lot more due to his great local knowledge and razor eyes. He is happy to be contacted by SMS if you don't get a reply by email – the number he gave me when I met him is 0920-827-6374. Note that I never needed to try this, so haven't checked that it works.
- **On Cebu:** I had contacted **Nilo Arribas Jr.** (email: ph_photo_97@yahoo.com) beforehand and found him very helpful and great company in the field. Highly recommended for a day on Cebu (and I think Nilo can guide all over the Philippines, work permitting). He is a busy guy so the more notice you can give him the better.

Birding details Below I have provided brief notes on each location visited, and any particular comments with regard to practicalities.

1 Luzon

A. La Mesa Ecopark

Easily reached from Quezon city by taxi (15 mins from Fersal Hotel) and a nice, easy place to start Philippines birding. This tiny urban nature reserve is now famous for the Ashy Ground-Thrush and pittas that nest here and are usually easily seen. The best area to find such species is the tiny remnant forest patch with criss-crossing trails reached by walking through the site, through the botanical garden patch and out the far end – the furthest bit you can get from the car park without actually leaving the park. Here we had repeated excellent views of several each for **Hooded Pitta** and **Ashy Ground-Thrush**, although we failed to find Red-bellied Pitta (this was to become a recurrent theme for the trip!). This is also a good place to get to grips with **Philippine Magpie-Robin**, **Lowland White-eye** and **Golden-bellied Gerygone** (latter two both very scarce away from metro Manila), **Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker** etc. amongst others.

B. Subic Bay

[Stijn's information](#) is very thorough and helpful. In summary, Subic Bay is really great, and, by Philippine standards, rather easy birding; we had a lot of species without difficulty and many of those we didn't see anywhere else. For example **Philippine Serpent-Eagle**, **Luzon Hornbill**, **Rufous Coucal**, **Rough-crested Malkoha** and all four species of **woodpecker** were all seen repeatedly and very well. Species such as **Guaiabera**, **Elegant Tit**, **Stripe-Headed Rhabdornis** and **White-eared Brown-Dove** were all much easier here than anywhere else in the country.

Just a couple of specific comments:

- There now appears to be no access to the last bit of the **Hill 394** area – it is firmly gated off. I spent some time on the road between here and the abandoned botanical garden, seeing very little.
- Much better was the **road to Ocean Adventure** – I made many stops on several days here and it was consistently good with quite a few roadside flocks. The area around Bunker Bob's proved prolific for the latter plus, during a dinner stop, **Philippine Green Pigeons** (many) for starters and, even better, flyover **Purple Needletails** for dessert. Right by the security gate for Ocean Adventure, a trail leads off to the left – this produced lots of **cuckooshrikes**, perched **Green Racquet-tail** (also seen along the actual road) and two **Hooded Pittas** seen very well, all despite heavy rain and only 50m from the security hut. **Philippine Pygmy**, **White-bellied** and **Sooty Woodpeckers** and **Luzon Flameback** were all here.
- **Nabusan Road Loop** had a similar variety of species, albeit at lower densities, to the Ocean Adventure road, including **woodpeckers** and **racquet-tails**. Also good for the rather splendid **Whiskered Treeswift**.
- **White-browed Shama** are common everywhere once you know the call but only easy to see at the start of **Apallin trail**, preferably early morning and with a loud tape. **Philippine Tailorbird** and **Blue-headed Fantail** also put in a first appearance here. We took a guided walk here all the way to the sea – about an hour away. The trail goes through some great forest en-route.
- The road from **Crown Peak to the Boton Falls track** was very good early morning. Amongst many commoner species, I also had **Plain Bush-Hen** twice (not seen elsewhere) and **Peregrine Falcon**; **Blue-naped Parrot** are easy here (especially late afternoon). However, no sign of any bee-eaters – they may disperse post-breeding? In contrast, the actual trail to Boton Falls was hard work – lots of mosquitoes and few birds in evidence.
- Scoping from **Mountain Woods Resort** produced goodies such as **Philippine Falconet** (otherwise elusive and distant at Ocean Adventure road and on the airfield lights) and a flyover **Grey-headed Fish-Eagle**. **Rhabdornis** appeared here too.

C. Candaba Swamp

Even in summer this site is worth visiting. It is clearly signposted from NLEX but then you are on your own – count on about 45 mins to one hour of driving to get to the actual site and be sure you have good maps telling you exactly where to turn (see google map referenced on page 5 above). The last couple of kms are rutted and may be difficult to pass in a salon car if it has been raining; walking may be advisable. You can locate the marsh from a distance as it is surrounded by obvious (gum?) trees. Once there, the pools are easily viewable by walking round the raised bunds. Even just 90 mins in the middle of the day produced rather a lot of birds; in winter it would probably be well worth investing a lot more time in Candaba. The key species present for me was (of course) **Philippine Duck** (but only 3!); **Wandering Whistling-Duck** were much more numerous and obvious, as were **White-browed Crake**, **Barred Rail** and breeding plumaged **Pheasant-tailed Jacanas**. **Oriental Pratincoles** were present (nesting?) and I also had five species of **heron** and a fair selection of open country birds.

D. Mount Makiling Several specific sites, all within the confines of UPLB, are worth commenting on:

- I. Best spot on the **actual campus** was the bridge where the road crosses the stream down near the library. This is busy with traffic so go early! I had **Indigo-banded Kingfisher** here after a short wait and it was a good place to look for common **sunbirds**, **Red-keeled Flowerpecker**, **Philippine Coucal** etc.
- II. **Botanical gardens**: There are probably some good fruiting trees in here, but I never found them. Instead I spent most time creeping round on the quiet trails through the forest; these looked great for Red-bellied Pitta or wood-kingfisher but produced rather little. However, it is a very nice site and well worth a look. The stream in the valley bottom looks good for Indigo-banded Kingfisher too, if the bridge by the library doesn't do the trick.
- III. **Mt Makiling track**: entrance is right by TREES, where you need to sign in. Contrary to other trip reports, there was no need to book or apply for a permit; just turn up and go. This is worth a full day walk. The main track up produced very little but things got much better once we got onto the footpath beyond Aigle Camp. A few flocks here yielded **Flaming Sunbird**, **Sulphur-billed Nuthatch**, **Lemon-throated Leaf-Warbler**, and **Yellow-bellied Whistler** amongst commoner things like **Rhabdornis**, **tits**, **fantails**, and **Rough-crested Malkoha**. We turned round at about Post 18 – 19, by when we were under serious attack from leeches. The descent gave a brief view of a close **Spotted Wood-Kingfisher** and a rather more pleasing male **Philippine Trogon**. Apparently there is a good chance of Red-bellied Pitta on the trail here too, not far after Aigle Camp. We also looked along the mudspring trail for this one, but had to settle for **White-browed Shama** singing very close by.
- IV. **Buttonquail track**: this is worth visiting for a totally different range of species. To get to it, you need to find the Dairy / Animal husbandry building – this is basically on the diagonally opposite side of the campus from TREES and would be a several km drive from there – it is out beyond the university playing fields. At the building there is a quiet track leading away from the road – the sensible strategy is to wait at the T-junction about 100m down this track, and scan in all directions. Although Spotted Buttonquail didn't show, I had marvelous looks at **Barred Buttonquail** and ditto for **Slaty-breasted** and **Barred Rails**, **Philippine Magpie Robin** and puddle-bathing **munias**. **White-browed Crake** was blatant in the marshy field and open country things like **Golden-headed Cisticola**, **bee-eaters**, **Striated Swallow** etc. also showed up.

E. Lake Taal

We visited this site en-route from Makiling to Bangkang Kahoy and it made for a good stop. We organized a boat out to the crater in the lake by simply turning up at the sailing / yacht club and asking there; that and the walk to the crater lake took about 4 hours in all. Birding is incidental, but the scenery and swimming make for a great trip. Species seen included **Golden-headed Cisticola** (abundant), **Pied Stonechat**, **Striated Grassbird** and, in the rain on the way back to the boat, two **Hooded Pittas** calling in degraded, scrubby gullies. Also lots of herons on the fish-farms on the lake, with **Black-crowned Night-Heron** abundant.

F. Bangkang Kahoy

This is a great spot, a bit off the beaten track and pretty quiet. The road is tar almost all the way to the top and once there you can abandon the car for a few days. The lodge is situated in a saddle between two hills and is at reasonable altitude (1100m) so gives easy access to a selection of species that either don't occur on or are difficult to easily reach at Makiling. There is lots of good forest right around the lodge, including a good elevated viewpoint that was great for feeding flocks soon after dawn. The nucleus of these comprised **Mountain** and, especially, **Yellowish White-eyes**, soon followed by **Sulphur-billed Nuthatch** and **Blue-headed Fantail**. The elevated viewpoint is handy for **flowerpeckers** with **Bicolored** and, especially, **Buzzing** rather frequent. Also quite easy are **Citrine Canary-Flycatcher**, **Black-naped Monarch**, **Lemon-throated Leaf-Warbler**, **Elegant Tit** and **Balicassio** whilst **Pygmy Swiftlets** are whizzing about everywhere. By walking up into the forest with Chris other species that appeared included **Turquoise Flycatcher**, **Chestnut-faced Babbler**, **Negros Leaf-Warbler**, **Mountain Tailorbird** plus singles of **Luzon Sunbird** and the rather tedious **Green-backed Whistler**. Chris has a site utilized by nesting Whiskered Pitta in 2012, but had not seen the birds there for some months during our visit; we failed. The walk to the location, a small waterfall in a gully, is less than two hours but quite challenging, on very steep and narrow paths. **White-browed Shortwing** is common on voice in the forest here and Chris has a habituated female that comes out for mealworms and gives great looks. Reasonable views of **Philippine Cuckoo-Dove** and **Snowy-browed Flycatcher** were also achieved.

Back around the lodge, it is worth playing the tape for the rather skulky **Tawny Grassbird** (in the hedges and grassland just below the parking area) and I also had a squadron of **Purple Needletails** zooming about one afternoon. **Luzon Hornbill** appeared one morning and **Luzon Hawk-Owl** was noisy in the evenings

G. Pagsanjan

As at Lake Tal, that was a scenery / tourist stop, rather than birding. It was well worth doing, however; the canoe trip up the rapids and to the waterfall was excellent; the sensationally steep-sided and forested gorge is very scenic. From the boat, **Indigo-banded Kingfisher** allowed close approach on a rock, and there were lots of **White-throated Kingfishers** and **Pacific Swallows**, not to mention demoiselles. An early walk through some junk farmland on the other side of the river from the hotel (accessed by a footbridge not far from the T-junction in the town centre) produced the only **Grey-backed Tailorbird** of the trip.

2 Bohol

A. Raja Sikituna Protected Landscape Good luck, as you'll need it. This is a fantastic-looking karst forest and is dry, fairly open and bug-free. There are plenty of good birds, including many species typical of Mindanao lowland forests but, just like on Mindanao I guess, they are all very hard to extract. You need to mentally prepare for long hours of nothing and very low species tallies. Basically, even with Ryan's help, a good view of anything is a bonus. Ryan reckoned that April and May was a little easier as generally birds are nesting and more tape-responsive; otherwise get ready for a lot of dental work. See [Stijn's notes](#) and here are just a few additional comments:

- **Philippine Trogon**, **Black-faced Coucal** and **Yellow-breasted Tailorbird** are both common by call anywhere, but, like everything else, devils to see.
- Long stints in the Magsaysay clearing, for example whilst waiting for the forest interior to lighten up eventually produced **Samar Hornbill** and **White-bellied Woodpecker**. **(Northern) Silvery Kingfisher** is definitely feasible here in either pond but go early and very easy.

- The trail from Logarita waterfall pool back towards the HQ produced the goods, eventually, over several visits. **Visayan Broadbill** appeared soon after the start of the track one morning and further in we had both **Visayan Blue Fantail** and **Rufous-tailed Jungle-Flycatcher** in quick succession. A **Black-chinned Fruit-Dove** male was seen on the walk to Logarita pool from the junction.
- After no little effort, **Steere's Pitta** did appear, although not, of course, on the clearly sarcastically named Pitta trail. Instead we got it on the third evening somewhere along the loop trail behind the HQ – it was the only bird seen in 90 minutes of walking. Although it did not call back or fly in to the tape, it did leap up off the floor and onto a prominent perch, so fishing with the tape did do the job in the end. Even by pitta standards, this is a fabulous bird and you don't want to leave Bohol without it!
- Wet evenings and bad luck meant that **Everett's Scops Owl** and **Luzon Hawk-Owl** went unseen although **Colugo** put on a good show. Both owls were also calling in the garden of Simply Butterflies, which, during the daytime, also had **Yellow-wattled Bulbul**, **Philippine Magpie-Robin**, **Purple-throated Sunbird** and a distant vocalizing **Hooded Pitta**.
- Another good reason for enlisting the help of Ryan is because he has a very reliable **Rufous-lored Kingfisher** site in a forest patch near the main road at Bilar – see front cover of this report for further information!

B. Loboc Watershed road In the interests of sanity, you will certainly want to try here as well – it has many similar species to RSPL (although interior forest species such as the broadbill and, perhaps, the tailorbird are less likely) and is much easier birding. Ryan knows this site well, but it didn't feature in any trip reports I consulted. To get to it, simply turn left off the Bilar – Chocolate Hills road exactly where you would have turned right to go to RSPL. The road is a reasonable track, initially through farmland and rice paddies but eventually, after 3km (approximately) you come to a coconut plantation on both sides (full of **sunbirds**, including **Bohol** and **Handsome**) and, soon after, the road rises a little. There is a small quarry on the right and, a little further, a massive, eroded cliff face on the left. The short stretch between these is good forest, with an intractable **Red-bellied Pitta** singing each morning on the slope on the left. Although that did not show, the rather neat **Striated Wren-Babbler** did along with, on the last morning, another **Steere's Pitta** – calling loudly and then came right in to playback for a great view. Beyond the eroded cliff face, the track runs through good forest with wide horizons and a few shadier patches further on. Here we had great views of **Black-faced Coucal**, **Philippine Oriole** (two mornings), many **Philippine Green-Pigeons**, **Whiskered Treeswifts** and several **Philippine Trogons** (clearly nesting on the right in the shade about 1 km beyond the eroded cliff). Quite a few commoner species appeared in roadside flocks and included **Everett's White-eye** and **Yellow-wattled Bulbul**. **Philippine Drongo-Cuckoo** and **Philippine Duck** also give very brief flyover views.

3 Cebu

Only site: Tabunan Forest: It may be possible to get here on your own by contacting Oking at Tabunan reserve and arranging transport from Cebu city, but it is much easier and a lot of fun to go with Nilo. We had a 0330 departure to get there in time for the rare and recently described **Cebu Hawk-Owl**, which duly appeared and gave a very good view. After dawn broke we walked to the degraded forest patch and climbed up to the flowerpecker platform for an hour or two until the rain began. Cebu Flowerpecker has, apparently, not been reported since autumn 2013 (at the latest); however, there was a small but interesting collection of other species. Pride of place goes to **Black Shama**, quite common by voice but requiring some effort to see. **Streak-breasted Bulbul** is the other key species here, noisy but scarce and we also had **White-vented Whistler**, **Magnificent Sunbird**, **Everett's White-eye**, the white-bellied form of **Balicassio** and **Mangrove Blue Flycatcher** amongst commoner species. **Red-bellied Pitta** was calling, but not for long.

4 Palawan is rather different to Luzon or Cebu (and, I guess, many other Philippine islands other than Bohol) in that there are a lot fewer people and a lot more forest. On average the birding is a good bit easier too. All endemics bar one can be found by birding the Sabang and Puerto Princessa areas and there also is a good range of species more typical of nearby Borneo or mainland south east Asia for added interest. Birds such as **Ashy** and **Hair-crested Drongo**, **Yellow-throated Leafbird**, **Asian Fairy Bluebird**, the aurally intriguing **Slender-billed Crow**, **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird**, **Hill Myna**, **White-vented Shama**, **Lovely Sunbird** and **Palawan Flowerpecker** proved common and easy to find in good forest anywhere around Sabang. Along the coast and beach, I saw **White-bellied Sea-Eagle** daily, plus **Pacific Reef Egret** near the zipline. Some additional specifics are presented below.

A. Sabang area

- I. **Roadside birding:** the only road in / out of Sabang has a lot of good forest within a few km of the village. I spent quite some time walking the road, starting from the Sheridan ATV trail entrance. Amongst others, interesting species included **White-bellied Woodpecker**, **Palawan** and **Ashy-fronted Bulbuls**, plus many of the species listed above. The Sheridan ATV trail (clearly signed) and a few nearby trails provide access to degraded roadside forest. These trails were flooded out most of the time I was there but did give great views of **Hooded Pitta** and, eventually, **Ashy-headed Babbler**. I had very brief view of **Blue Paradise Flycatcher** from the road nearby.
- II. **Cockatoo lookout:** this site is 12km back on the road out of Sabang; look for a small pull-in and steps up to an elevated viewpoint (on the right as you drive from Sabang). Views of **Philippine Cockatoo** were rather distant and only in the morning (no sign during two afternoon visits) but these are only a minor reason to visit this site. There is fantastic roadside forest for several km either side of the lookout (mainly back towards Sabang). Key species here included **Palawan Tit** (two flocks seen, including a family group right by the road), **Striped Flowerpecker**, **Pale Spiderhunter**, **Ashy-headed Babbler**, **Palawan Hornbill**, **Spot-throated Flameback** parties twice, **Brown-backed Noddy**, and three species of **smaller cuckoo**. **Philippine Cuckoo-Dove** was rather easy to see, **Blue-headed Racquet-tail** parties flew over several times, but I had only two brief views of **Blue-naped Parrot** (far easier at Subic Bay – above - or on the Zigzag road, for which see below).
- III. **Subterranean River area:** giving that this is a major tourist attraction, visiting here is bizarrely complicated, so plan ahead. On arrival in Puerto Princessa you need to go to the Parks office in the City Hall (on the main drag, open office hours 7 days a week and anybody at PP airport can direct you) and apply for your permit for the subterranean river trip and, if desired, for an early birding trip to the ranger's station. Armed with these, you can then go to the office on the jetty at Sabang (open from 8am) and hand the permit over. It was not clear to me if you can get the initial permits at Sabang and bypass the office in PP but people we spoke to didn't recommend this. Once you have been to the office on the jetty and had your permit stamped, you can go to the nearby boat desk and arrange a boat (cost 800 PhP in total) for the 15 min trip to the ranger station. Many dozens of these leave daily all morning; it would be a good idea to go as early as possible (before the rat run from PP arrives) or mid-afternoon when that lot have been and gone. The subterranean river trip is fantastic and well worth doing, although bring a hat as protection from the thousands of bats and echo-locating **swiftlets**. To stand any chance of seeing Palawan Peacock-Pheasant, you need to go to the jetty the day before and arrange a very early (0545 departure) from the jetty (boat cost for this early run was 1200 PhP). This will give you 2.5 hours of peace and quiet to try and find the peacock-pheasant before the first grockles arrive. The bird sometimes appears right by the ranger station, although when I was there the rangers didn't seem to think it had been very reliable recently. The area of accessible forest to search through is not very big but 2.5 hours was not enough time for me and I left empty-handed. Torrential rain for the first couple of days in Sabang during our visit had prevented boat trips so I only had one attempt on our last morning and couldn't try again. In the forest interior, **Hooded Pitta** are ridiculously easy to see, if not trip over, with several sightings of the much shyer **Philippine Megapode**. **Palawan Hornbill**, **Palawan Blue Flycatcher** and **White-vented Shama** were the other key species seen. A trail from the ranger station leads up some steep karst cliffs and, eventually, back to Sabang via the mangroves kayak office. This had been closed for over a year but, apparently, was due to reopen just after I left. If it does reopen, it will then be a 5km walk in very nice forest from Sabang jetty to the ranger station.

- IV. **Mangroves:** You can get to these by following signs for the zipline along the beach and going for a guided paddle. Early morning birding would be good here, but our midday visit yielded only **Mangrove Whistler** (singing) and **Stork-billed Kingfisher**. Beautiful forest, however.



B. Puerto Princessa area

- I. **Zig-zag Road:** This is 33.5 km out of PP, on the Narra road. From PP airport, veer left at the fork at the gas station and keep going, past Iwahig. Pay attention to the km posts; you need to turn right just after the 33km post, onto a very quiet road that runs uphill and then backdown to rejoin the main road after a few km. This was excellent early morning birding, although it was mostly game over, unless you are into cicadas, by 0900. My best species included **Black-chinned Fruit-Dove** scoped at eye level, **Blue-naped Parrot** (many), **White-bellied Woodpecker** (of course!), **Chestnut-bellied Malkoha**, **Hooded Pitta** (right on the road!), **Red-bellied Pitta** (two calling, but you know by now what didn't happen next), **Black-headed** and **Ashy-fronted Bulbul**, **White-vented Shama** and **Palawan Flowerpecker**.
- II. **Iwahig Penal Colony – rice paddies and Balashan trail:** Like the subterranean river, this requires some planning. The access point is 20 mins out of PP, on the Narra road as per above and is marked by a big sign. On arrival, the guard at the gate let me through cheerfully and directed me to the main admin offices, situated 2km down a rather rutted road. Here I asked for access to the Balashan Trail and, once the superintendent and about three other people had agreed, this was all fine. I had to go with a local guide (a former convict!) and they found him for me too. In reality, the person I was paired up with was good company and told me a lot of interesting things about himself and the set-up at Iwahig, where he had been incarcerated for a long time (I didn't ask what for...) Making the above arrangements took about an hour and was completed mid-morning the day beforehand, then I rolled up at 0600 the next day. The guard at the gate and another at the Balashan trail examined copies of the permission slip before letting me in. On the whole, all the paperwork did prove worth the trouble. Between the entrance and the admin buildings were some **wet paddies** that, even in late July, produced a few good waders, most notably **Long-toed Stints**, **Wandering Whistling-Duck**, **Whiskered Terns**, **egrets**, and **White-bellied Munia** also featured. The **Balashan Trail** runs for several km along a beautiful wooded stream in good quality forest. There are many small streams to splash through so sandals are far more convenient than boots. Key species here are Palawan Flycatcher (not for me) and **Melodious** and **Falcated Wren-Babblers** (former common on voice; latter needed lots of taping). Both of these are hard skulkers and took no little time and effort but both eventually gave good views. **Falcated Wren-Babbler** is a real monster and must be one of the best Palawan endemics (at least if you missed the pheasant...) Other species were not too prolific but included **Yellow-throated Leafbird** and both **Oriental Dwarf** and **Blue-eared Kingfishers** (glimpsed along river).
- III. **Honda Bay – Cowrie and Pandan Islands:** This is a very easy trip – just turn up at the pier, 14 km north of PP on the Sabang road, book a boat (1200 PhP for the day) and hop on. Honda Bay is worth at least a half-day trip but we liked it so much that we returned the following afternoon for the same again. It was very relaxing and we enjoyed excellent snorkeling (off Pandan Island) as well as some good birds. By wandering off to the mangrove edge at **Cowrie Island** and playing the tape for 5 mins, **Mantanani Scops Owl** soon came flying right in for a terrific view, along with a rag-tag band of **sunbirds** and **fantails** in attendance. This proved unexpectedly easy and meant we didn't need to try and find the bird on the rather bigger and much better vegetated **Pandan Island**. Apparently the latter does not welcome birders (or, at least, organised groups of them) but by being circumspect and keeping a low profile I had no problems there. **Grey**

Imperial Pigeons were calling in the big trees behind the beach and to the right as you land (above and around the small village huts) but proved very shy and getting a good view took some time. The call is obviously that of an imperial pigeon, but not quite as drowsy or gurgled as Green Imperial. **Great-billed Heron** was easy once the tide fell (five seen on one afternoon) and the exposed muddy shoreline at both islands produced a small number of waders, including **Grey-tailed Tattlers**, **Greater Sandplover** and **Red-necked Stint**. A small gang of **Black-naped Terns** were present off Pandan beach on both afternoons.



- IV. **Near Graceilosa beach:** The google map co-ordinates that I had for this site [9.729699,118.772764] put it within an easy walk of our PP hotel so I tried this before our morning flight back to Manila. However, on arrival, accessing the shore proved very tricky due to development of several big and tasteless resorts and, once I had found a way through, there was little to see anyway, with grubby mangroves flooded and no exposed mud or shoreline. The trashy habitat of scrub and secondary forest nearby did yield a few things, such as **White-vented Shama** and both **White-bellied** and **Chestnut Munias**. **Hooded Pitta**, like everywhere in Palawan, was common on voice and I finished, only 10 min from the hotel with a proper look at a female **Blue Paradise Flycatcher**, busy mobbing a **Greater Coucal** in some roadside palms.