

Da Lat Plateau, South Annam, Viet Nam

(Endemic Laughers, Greenfinch and Crocias)



The hiding Black-hooded...



...and the mobile Collared...



...and the sub-canopy Crocias...



...and a poor Orange-breasted.*

24-31 Dec 2005

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* Sorry for not bringing adequate photo gear on this trip.

General

This was a combined tourist and birding trip to South Viet Nam with my family and also my relatives from Sweden. The birdlist is therefore not representative for a hard-core birding trip. Still I got all my reachable target birds and in spite of a total of only nine effective hours of birding at four sites, I managed the full bag of Da Lat specialties. The Da Lat plateau in South Annam hosts a number of endemic or near-endemic species and subspecies, which are impossible or very difficult to see anywhere else. I had stunning views of four new local Laughers: Orange-breasted and Black-hooded at Di Linh, White-cheeked at Datanla Falls and Collared at Mount Lang Bian. I was also treated to some luxury views of the rare Grey-crowned Crocias. Vietnamese Greenfinch proved harder to get good views of. More widespread lifers were eyeball-to-eyeball views of White-gorgeted Flycatcher and also the near-endemic Red-vented Barbet.

Itinerary

23/12

Afternoon departure from Beijing and after a stop-over in Hanoi, we arrived at Ho Chi Minh City very late in the evening.

24/12

The morning was spent sightseeing in HCMC and after lunch we drove for almost four hours to Mui Ne, which is a beach resort just beyond (northeast) of Phan Thiet.

25/12

All day at Mui Ne.

26/12

At 3.00 in the morning we left Mui Ne and drove towards the Da Lat plateau, more specifically Di Linh. Initially the road was extremely poor and with an over-cautious driver it took us three hours to reach the birding habitat around the pass. I birded for three hours until 9.00 before returning the same way to Mui Ne, where we met up with the others who not opted for a 3.00 start.

27/12

All day at Mui Ne.

28/12

We left Mui Ne at 9.00 and drove north along the coast and later inland on rather poor dirt-roads until we climbed the Da Lat plateau. All in all it took us four hours to go from Mui Ne to Da Lat. After lunch we did some sightseeing in and around Da Lat, most notably to Datanla Falls, where I managed to rather quickly find a sizeable flock of the much-desired White-cheeked Laugher.

29/12

I left hotel Novotel at 5.00 in the morning with a taxi to the base of Mount Lang Bian. By dawn at 6.00 I was walking the trail in search of Collared Laughingthrushes and to my luck a pair was found only 10 minutes walk into the evergreen forest. I spent the next hour watching them and did some general birding in the evergreens, before moving back down the trail into the pine forest. At 10.00 the jeep picked me up and drove me to the base of the mountain, where I took the taxi back to Da Lat. The rest of the day was spent sightseeing in Da Lat.

30/12

This was my morning of the last field excursion for the trip. I left hotel Novotel at 4.45 and after some struggle I found the birding site in Ta Nung valley shortly after dawn at 6.00. It did not take me more than 15 minutes before I saw my first Grey-crowned Crocias and could enjoy good views of a pair. I birded the area for another two hours, before it was time to head back to the others at the hotel. At 10.00 we left Da Lat and set off for the 6.5 hours journey to Ho Chi Minh City.

31/12

New Years Eve. We visited the Cu Chi tunnels, which was a very interesting, although tragic, sight.

1/1

After a couple of hours sleep we took the 6.30 flight from Ho Chi Minh City via Hanoi and arrived Beijing in the afternoon.

Weather

The weather was very pleasant for most of the time. In Ho Chi Minh City and at Mui Ne it was rather hot during the middle of the day and sometimes it rained just a little bit in the afternoons. On the Da Lat plateau it was nice and cool and a fleece jacket was convenient in the early mornings, especially at Lang Bian, which was covered in clouds.

Logistics

Most of our basic logistics such as hotels and transport between the hotels were arranged in advance. It was very easy to arrange cars with drivers or just a taxi to go to the birding sites at Di Linh, Datanla Falls, Lang Bian and Ta Nung.

Site descriptions

Di Linh (site for Orange-breasted and Black-hooded Laughers), 1130 m

Most birders visit Di Linh (pronounced Yee Ling) from the Da Lat direction, but as we were staying at Mui Ne near Phan Thiet, I decided to give it a go from this direction. The road between Di Linh and Phan Thiet is being improved with the result of shorter driving time, but with the negative consequence of roadside vegetation being demolished. From our hotel at Mui Ne it took us three hours to reach a good birding area, which is approximately at 1130 meters and 13-15 km from Di Linh village, although the driver was *extremely* slow and I think I could have done it myself in half the time. Once leaving Highway 1 the road uphill was extremely poor with huge potholes. About halfway it had improved and was in a reasonable condition due to the roadwork. We stopped just short (southeast) of KM 76 where there is a tiny and lonely hut, selling snacks. Just as I got out of the car at dawn, I heard the wanted Orange-breasted Laugher singing just behind the hut. After quickly getting organized I obtained some very poor sight-views, as it stayed mostly out of view in the dense vegetation. Only half an hour later I heard another bird singing in the small clearing immediately beyond KM 76. This pair provided some absolutely excellent and lengthy views. Happily I continued walking along the main road enjoying some Red-vented Barbets and after only a couple of hundred meters I soon heard some Black-hooded Laughers calling among some higher trees. The small group of birds soon made a real high-profile performance. As it was still early morning and a lot of activity, I slowly walked back along the road and soon heard a couple of Vietnamese Greenfinches calling from a high tree. Unfortunately I only saw them when flying out of the tree. Between KM 76 and the hut there is a tiny trail leading down the hillside along a small ridge. I walked this trail down for a few hundred meters and saw one male Silver Pheasant and best of all a very confiding White-gorgeted Flycatcher in the

understory. There was however not a sniff of the hoped for Rusty-naped Pitta. By then it was time to return to the hut where my parents were waiting by the car. My mother had by then spotted a couple of Great Hornbills flying back and forth. By 9.00 we left and returned to the coast at Mui Ne.



The small hut at Di Linh

Datanla Falls (site for White-cheeked Laughler)

Datanla Falls is a tourist site just a few km outside Da Lat. Driving time from Hotel Novotel is about ten minutes. We visited in the mid-afternoon. I did not find any Laughingthrushes on the walk down to the falls, so instead I walked up again and crossed the main road and took a small path, which is opposite the road about 30 meters downhill. I then found a flock of the sought-after White-cheeked Laughingthrush after only a few seconds. The large flock of at least 30 birds moved rather quickly and noisily through the undergrowth in the pine forest, but provided excellent views. I tried a tape of Black-throated Laughler, which seemed to stir up some interest.

Mount Lang Bian (site for Collared Laughler), 1800-1950 m

This is one of the highest mountains on the Da Lat plateau and a well-known site for the endemic and fabulous Collared Laughingthrush. Most trip reports from Da Lat provide some good site descriptions, but anyway here comes another one: I left hotel Novotel with a taxi at 5.00 and reach the parking area at the base of the mountain at 5.25. As the gate was open, I asked the driver to just carry on up the mountain, but this is apparently not allowed for non-authorized vehicles. Fortunately one of the jeep-drivers was awake and accepted driving me up the mountain immediately. After quickly sorting out the combined entry-ticket/jeep-cost (160.000 VND), I was soon on my way up the mountain. Most trip-reports recommend taking a jeep rather than walking through the pine-forest and I certainly agree to that. Normally the jeeps do not start going until 7.00, but apparently this is not always the case, so it is definitely worth trying to go earlier. At 1800 meters altitude and after 10-15 minutes drive there is a well-marked track leading off to the right (actually it is straight, as the paved road switches back to the left). The track is sign-posted with a blue sign on one of the large pine-trees. The jeep-driver promised to pick me up at 10.00. From here I walked uphill through the pine forest. The track gets smaller and narrower once it reaches the saddle/ridge. There are a few minute paths leading off to the left, but I ignored these and kept following the main path. In some reports, this path is said to split once, but I could not find this fork. Once on the saddle/ridge the path soon leaves the pine forest and leads through some low evergreen scrub and at the same time descending towards a gully. From this gully it is then uphill through more excellent mature evergreen forest. It did not take me long before I heard the first Collared Laughingthrush, approximately some 100 meters

uphill from the bottom of the gully. I was then treated to some superlative views of a pair of this most beautiful Laugher. Further uphill I later found another pair feeding silently on the forest floor next to the path. After some more birding in the evergreen forest up to 1950 meters, I turned around and walked downhill through the mature pine forest in the hope of finding Vietnamese Greenfinches. These however proved elusive and I only heard them a few times.

Ta Nung valley (site for Grey-crowned Crocias), 1300 m

The name is actually incorrect as it is sign-posted with the name Di Nong Trai from the main road. Ta Nung is however still a useful nomination as it is in the direction of Ta Nung from Da Lat and the taxi drivers seem to know that village. The birding site is around 10 km from Da Lat and it takes about 20-25 minutes to reach from Hotel Novotel in central Da Lat. Drive for a few km towards the old airport at Cam Ly [pronounced Kam Li] and drive past the entrance road to your right. This was confusing to me as it is not signposted. Shortly after Cam Ly old airport there is a major Y-fork with Ta Nung sign-posted towards the left. This paved road is soon winding down towards Ta Nung valley. About 4 km from the Y-fork, between KM –marker 5 and 6, there is the first road going off to the left down to the valley. It is a small but drivable dirt road and it is sign-posted Di Nong Trai. In most site-descriptions, there are four large pine trees mentioned as a marker for the turn-off. I failed to find these and the first time we actually dismissed this road and went all the way down to Ta Nung before turning around. Probably the pine trees have been cut recently. The dirt road leads a few hundred meters down the valley past a couple of small houses. At the bottom of the valley there is nowadays a small camp with people working at two new quarries at the forest edge. I found one trail leading up along the small stream at the far end of the clearing and it was 200 m up this trail where I found the first pair of Crocias (and also heard Black-hooded Laughers). I also saw a group of six Crocias flying across the clearing just by the small concrete walkway across the stream. There is also another trail leading up the far slope when crossing this walkway. Both these trails were rather overgrown at the time of my visit. Unfortunately I only had the possibility to spend about two hours at this site, which is doubtless worth much more exploring.



The settlement at the Crocias site.

Birds

Most subspecies have been assigned based on literature references, rather than actual field characters.

Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

Common around Phan Thiet.

Javan Pond-Heron, *Ardeola speciosa continentalis*

20+ seen mostly on the Da Lat plateau.

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis coromandus*

Common around Phan Thiet and in most lowland areas.

Striated Heron, *Butorides striatus ssp*

Two between Ho Chi Minh City and Phan Thiet.

Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*

One at Mui Ne.

Black-shouldered Kite, *Elanus caeruleus vociferus*

One at Da Lat.

Crested Serpent-Eagle, *Spilornis cheela burmanicus*

Two near Di Linh.

Eurasian Buzzard, *Buteo buteo ssp*

Three together north of Mui Ne.

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus interstinctus*

Two at Mui Ne.

Silver Pheasant, *Lophura nycthemera annamensis*

One male seen along the trail at KM 76 at Di Linh. The driver also saw a female on the return journey to PhanTiet.

Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*

About 30 at Mui Ne.

Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*

One at Mui Ne.

Spotted Dove, *Streptopelia chinensis tigrina*

A few around Mui Ne.

Wedge-tailed Green-Pigeon, *Treron sphenura delacouri*

One male perched behind the hut at Di Linh.

Mountain Imperial Pigeon, *Ducula badia griseicapilla*

Three at Di Linh.

Banded Bay Cuckoo, *Cacomantis sonneratii sonneratii*

One at Di Linh.

Collared Scops-Owl, *Otus lettia lettia*

One heard before dawn near Ta Nung valley.

Collared Owlet, *Glaucidium brodiei brodiei*

One heard at Di Linh.

Asian Barred Owlet, *Glaucidium cuculoides deignani*

One heard at Di Linh.

Germain's Swiftlet, *Aerodramus germani*

One between Ho Chi Minh City and Phan Thiet.

Swiftlet sp, *Aerodramus sp*

Two near Phan Thiet appeared larger than *germani*.

Asian Palm Swift, *Cypsiurus balasiensis infumatus*

A few near Phan Thiet.

House Swift, *Apus nipalensis nipalensis*

Several at Da Lat.

Red-headed Trogon, *Harpactes erythrocephalus annamensis*

Two to three heard at Di Linh.

White-throated Kingfisher, *Halcyon smyrnensis perpulchra*

Three seen between Ho Chi Minh City and Mui Ne and a few north of Mui Ne.

Blue-bearded Bee-eater, *Nyctyornis athertoni athertoni*

One pair at a termite nest at Di Linh.

Green Bee-eater, *Merops orientalis ferrugeiceps*

10+ between Di Linh and PT, one at Mui Ne and common in the lowlands between Mui Ne and Da Lat.

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, *Merops leschenaulti leschenaulti*

Two at Di Linh.

Indian Roller, *Coracias benghalensis affinis*

Two between Ho Chi Minh City and Mui Ne, one between Di Linh and Mui Ne and about five north of Mui Ne.

Great Hornbill, *Buceros bicornis*

One seen at Di Linh and another seen at the same site by Mum.

Red-vented Barbet, *Megalaima legrandiei langrandieri*

Two seen and another two heard at Di Linh. One heard at Ta Nung valley.

Golden-throated Barbet, *Megalaima franklinii auricularis*

Two at Mount Lang Bian. Several unidentified Barbets were heard calling occasionally.



Golden-throated Barbet

Grey-headed Woodpecker, *Picus canus hessei*

One at Mount Lang Bian.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica* ssp

Fairly common in the lowlands around Phan Thiet and at Da Lat plateau.

Red-rumped/Striated Swallow, *Hirundo daurica/striolata*

A few seen between Mui Ne and Da Lat.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea* ssp

Two at Di Linh.

Olive-backed Pipit, *Anthus hodgsoni* ssp

Three at Mount Lang Bian.

Indochinese Cuckooshrike, *Coracina polioptera* ssp

One at Di Linh.

Long-tailed Minivet, *Pericrocotus ethologus annamensis*

About five at Mount Lang Bian.

Scarlet Minivet, *Pericrocotus flammeus semiruber*

One near Di Linh.

Minivet sp, *Pericrocotus* sp
Ten at Di Linh.

Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, *Hemipus picatus picatus*
Two at Di Linh.

Black-crested Bulbul, *Pycnonotus melanicterus johnsoni*
Four at Mount Lang Bian and two at Ta Nung valley.

Sooty-headed Bulbul, *Pycnonotus aurigaster germani*
One north of Ho Chi Minh City.

Flavescent Bulbul, *Pycnonotus flavesens sordidus*
10-15 at Di Linh, about ten at Mount Lang Bian and two at Ta Nung valley.

Puff-throated Bulbul, *Alophoixus pallidus khmerensis*
One at Di Linh.

Ashy Bulbul, *Hemixos flavala remota*
One at Ta Nung valley.

Black Bulbul, *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* ssp
About ten at Di Linh. Both black-headed and at least on white-breasted with blotchy border between white breast and black belly. 10-20 at Mount Lang Bian.

Blue Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus caeruleus eugenei*
One at Di Linh.

Eyebrowed Thrush, *Turdus obscurus*
Two at Mount Lang Bian.

Lesser Shortwing, *Brachypteryx leucophrys langbianensis*
One seen and about another five heard at Mount Lang Bian. Two at Ta Nung valley.

Hill Prinia, *Prinia atrogularis klossi*
Two at Mount Lang Bian and one at Ta Nung valley.

Dark-necked Tailorbird, *Orthotomus atrogularis nitidus*
About five at Di Linh.

Yellow-browed Warbler, *Phylloscopus inornatus*
Common at Di Linh, between Di Linh and Mui Ne, at Da Lat and at Mount Lang Bian.

White-tailed Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus davisoni klossi*
One at Di Linh showed significant amount of yellow on upperparts and underparts. About five heard at Mount Lang Bian and one heard at Ta Nung valley.

Taiga Flycatcher, *Ficedula albicilla*
One at Datanla Falls and one at Da Lat.

White-gorgeted Flycatcher, *Ficedula monileger leucops*
Wonderful views of a bird in the relatively open understory some 100 m down the trail at KM 76 at Di Linh. It stayed in view for several minutes at close distance and was a most wanted lifer. The white throat-patch was shaped like an upside-down fat T and blending white and contrasting with the narrow black border. The eyebrow was warmly coloured. The head was unusually large for a *Ficedula* and the legs for rather long and strong and fairly bright pink. The jizz is not well captured in the literature. This species is not mentioned from S Annam by Robson (2000).

Verditer Flycatcher, *Eumyias thalassina thalassina*
One at Di Linh and one at Mount Lang Bian.

Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, *Culicicapa ceylonensis calochrysea*
One at Di Linh and four at Ta Nung valley.

Large Niltava, *Niltava grandis decorata*
One heard at Di Linh.

Grey Bushchat, *Saxicola ferrea*
One female at Datanla Falls.

White-throated Fantail, *Rhipidura albicollis cinerascens*
Two at Di Linh.

Black-hooded Laughingthrush, *Garrulax milleti*

A small party of about five birds provided super views just beyond KM 76 at Di Linh. The pale bluish-white post-ocular patch was slightly larger than in Robson (2000). The flock came in close to playback. The species is near-endemic to south and central Viet Nam and a stunning Laugher indeed. One was also heard calling at Ta Nung valley.

White-cheeked Laughingthrush, *Garrulax vassali*

A flock of at least 30 birds moved through the understory in the pine forest at Datanla Falls. In the afternoon I failed to find any on the way down to the falls, so I tried along the path across the road near the parking area and struck gold within seconds. The flock moved rather slowly and noisily and provided stunning views of this south Viet Nam near-endemic.

Orange-breasted Laughingthrush, *Garrulax annamensis*

One of the first birds we heard when getting out of the car at the small hut near KM 76. The thick vegetation did only allow fleeting glimpses, so another pair heard and seen incredibly well half an hour later at KM 76 was a most pleasant experience. Later another bird was heard singing some 100 m further on. This is also a smart endemic to the Da Lat plateau. It was previously considered the same species as Spot-breasted Laughingthrush. One caged bird was seen in Da Lat.

Collared Laughingthrush, *Garrulax yersini*

Two pairs were seen incredibly well at the usual stake-out at Mount Lang Bian. The first pair was singing and allowed good recording possibilities and the second pair was seen feeding quietly at close distance on the forest floor. Both pairs were seen along the trail about 100-200 m uphill from the gully once the trail enters the evergreen forest. This endemic species is one of the most stunning Laughers and principally Mount Lang Bian is the only site where it is regularly seen.

Scimitar-Babbler sp, *Pomatorhinus* sp

One heard at Di Linh.

Pygmy Wren-Babbler, *Pnoepyga pusilla annamensis*

Three heard at Mount Lang Bian and one heard at Ta Nung valley.

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps pragana*

About five at Mount Lang Bian and two at Ta Nung valley.

Grey-throated Babbler, *Stachyris nigriceps rileyi*

Two at Di Linh.

White-browed Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius flaviscapis annamensis*

One at Di Linh.

Blue-winged Minla, *Minla cyanouroptera orientalis*

Three at Ta Nung valley.

Mountain Fulvetta, *Alcippe peracensis annamensis*

Three at Di Linh and one at Mount Lang Bian.

Grey-crowned Crocias, *Crocias langbianis*

One pair was seen well when singing from the canopy about 200 m along the trail at Ta Nung valley. They hung around the area for at least half an hour and gave stunning, though neck-breaking views. These or another bird was later heard at a distance further on. Just before leaving the area at 8.00 a small group of six birds flew across the clearing at the bottom of the valley and landed in some lower trees. The distinctive nuthatch-like song (a loud and clear whistling hui-hui-hui-hui-hui-hui...) is probably the best way of locating this sought-after bird. After having been described in 1938 by the Swede Bertil BJORKEGREN, the species went "missing" until its rediscovery in the early 1990-ties. The species is endemic to the Da Lat plateau with extremely few known sites, of which Ta Nung valley seems to be the most reliable. The evergreen forest at this site is tiny though and during my visit a new small settlement was established in the clearing in the bottom of the valley. Two

new quarries were excavating the forest edge, so there is probably an urgent need for protection of this site.

Rufous-backed Sibia, *Sibia annectens eximia*
One at Ta Nung valley.

Black-headed Sibia, *Sibia desgodinsi robinsoni*
Four at Di Linh. This taxon is strikingly different from the one in China in having a prominent broken white eye-ring and white-streaked ear-coverts.

White-bellied Yuhina, *Erpornis zantholeuca sordida*
Two at Di Linh.

Grey-headed Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis gularis margaritae*
Two at the hut at Di Linh. Yet another taxon that is very different from China. Instead of a black throat and grey cap, this one has a pale throat and complete black cap as well as streaked cheeks. The behavior was typical of the species as it was seen feeding in the canopy with a mixed species flock.

Black-throated Tit, *Aegithalos concinnus annamensis*
Two at Di Linh. This taxon is potentially a separate species, Grey-crowned Tit.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus legendrei*
Two at Mount Lang Bian.

Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, *Sitta nagaensis grisiventris*
Four at Mount Lang Bian.

Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, *Sitta frontalis frontalis*
One pair at Di Linh.

Brown-throated Treecreeper, *Certhia discolor meridionalis*
One at Mount Lang Bian. Responded well to the tape (wherever that is recorded).

Olive-backed Sunbird, *Cinnyris jugularis ssp*
Common around Mui Ne.

Gould's Sunbird, *Aethopyga gouldiae annamensis*
Four at Mount Lang Bian.

Streaked Spiderhunter, *Arachnothera magna remota*
Three at Di Linh.

Flowerpecker sp, *Dicaeum sp*
One female-coloured at Di Linh.

Maroon Oriole, *Oriolus traillii robinsoni*
At least five at Di Linh.

Brown Shrike, *Lanius cristatus superciliosus*
Two on the Da Lat plateau.

Burmese Shrike, *Lanius collurioides nigricapillus*
Two roadside birds on the Da Lat plateau.

Black Drongo, *Dicrurus macrocercus thai*
A few between Di Linh and Mui Ne.

Ashy Drongo, *Dicrurus leucophaeus ssp*
One at Mount Lang Bian.

Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, *Dicrurus remifer tectirostris*
One at Di Linh.

Ashy Woodswallow, *Artamus fuscus*
About ten near Di Linh and two at Da Lat.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius leucotis*
One at Mount Lang Bian.

Racket-tailed Treepie, *Crypsirina temia*
One near Di Linh.

Black-collared Starling, *Sturnus nigricollis*
One between Ho Chi Minh City and PhanThiet and a few at Da Lat.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus malaccensis*

Common in most populated areas.

Red Crossbill, *Loxia curvirostra meridionalis*

One heard at Mount Lang Bian.

Vietnamese Greenfinch, *Carduelis monguilloti*

Two first heard in the canopy and then seen flying away at KM 76 at Di Linh. Heard at four occasions in the pine forest at Mount Lang Bian, but none of them behaved.

Brown Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula nipalensis* ssp

One or two at Mount Lang Bian.

Bunting sp, *Emberiza* sp

One bunting, most likely a Little Bunting by call, was flushed at Mui Ne.