



PALAWAN, JULY 2015

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Fig. 1. A Hooded Pitta, in the gloomy shadows of Puerto Princesa Subterranean River Park forest.

In July 2015, 6th to 9th, I visited the island of Palawan, the Philippines, arriving in Puerto Princesa on a Philippine Airlines flight from Manila, at 6.40, and returning on another PA flight, at 19.30. The visit was a part of private RTW birding tour and I had arrived in the Philippines already four days ago, spending three days in Bohol before flying to Palawan, via MNL.

I had purchased the Philippine Airlines tickets in the Internet, at www.philippineairlines.com. The return flights cost PHP4.731 (€90), including a generous extra allowance for luggage, for a separate fee included in the total price. The flight departed at Ninoy Aquino T3 in Manila, and also returned there. In Manila, I had stayed at Salem Domestic Guesthouse, next to T4, a recommended place for €31 per night, with a shared (but clean) bathroom and no breakfast. After my return at MNL, I stayed at Red Planet, Aseana City, for €47 per night, without breakfast. In there, the room was quite good, even though a bit noisy, and tasty food could be obtained next door, at Family Mart and at a Korean restaurant with a take-away option. A taxi ride there cost PHP250 (€5).

On board, the Philippine Airlines flight was freezing cold like an ice box. Somehow the airline believes that uncomfortably low temperatures, both at their airport boarding areas and on board, are a feature of luxury service. Having already been alerted by an equally cold PA flight from Tagbilaran to Manila, I carried a large travel blanket with me, and wrapped it tightly around me, in order to keep cozy and warm. The flight staff had the same problem but at least they had their

work to do and were consequently able to move around in order to stay warm. At the airport, I had waited in a corridor, sitting on the floor rather than staying at the cold gate area. I was not there alone but had the company of some airport staff and other travelers, equally stunned by the conditions at the gate. I may come from a cold country, Finland, but do not enjoy being cold.

Palawan holds about 25 restricted range or endemic species, according to IOC taxonomy: **Palawan Peacock-Pheasant, Grey Imperial Pigeon, Blue-headed Racquet-Tail, Philippine Cockatoo, Mantanani Scops Owl, Palawan Scops Owl, Palawan Frogmouth, Palawan Hornbill, Spot-throated Flameback, Red-headed Flameback, Blue Paradise-Flycatcher, Palawan Tit, Sulphurbellied Bulbul, Palawan Bulbul, Ashy-fronted Bulbul, Melodious Babbler, Palawan Striped Babbler, Ashy-headed Babbler, Falcated Wren-Babbler, Palawan Blue Flycatcher, White-vented Shama, Palawan Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Leafbird, Pale Spiderhunter and Palawan Flowerpecker**. Out of them, only **Palawan Striped Babbler** is out of bounds for most birders, because it occurs in high altitudes which cannot be visited without a hard trek up to the mountains. **Grey Imperial Pigeon** and **Mantanani Scops Owl**, on the other hand, are found only in small islets off the coasts of Palawan, notably the ones at Honda Bay.

The fact that I scored with 22 of the targets during the short visit, and the missed three species were each out of bounds because of problems in access, tells volumes about the ease of independent birding in Palawan. For a field guide, I would recommend Kennedy et. al. 2014, *A Guide to the Birds of the Philippines*, OUP, even though it is a reprint based on year 2000 taxonomy. Oxford University ornithological publications invariably are outdated as scientific references, but may be useful otherwise.

CAR RENTAL

Unlike for example in Tagbilaran, Bohol (see my other report), professional car rental services are available in Puerto Princesa, the capital and gateway to Palawan. Sabai Car Rental (sabaicarrental@gmail.com) did their job admirably, being there at the airport on time both for the pick-up and the return. I got a new Mitsubishi Triton 4x4 with a full tank, insurance and unlimited kilometers for PHP12.000 (€229), for four days, and returned the vehicle without any damage. A large 4x4 would not have been strictly necessary for the visit but it allowed certain additional comfort on some smaller local roads, for example at Iwahigh Penal Colony and the access road to Cooper's Beach Resort. The car also had a rear view camera, a definite plus for tight parking situations (CBR, PP, Sabang). Gasoline costs were not a problem in Palawan. Half a tank of diesel, for the large car, cost me PHP1.200 in Sabang, about €23.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

In Palawan, I stayed all my nights at Cooper's Beach Resort, a place specializing in Honda Bay diving tourism. In the off season, the place was mine, as there were no other customers around. A Single Fan Room was reserved in the Internet (Agoda), for €33 per night, breakfast included. On site, I was upgraded to a double room, for the same rate. The room was nice and spacious, with a good bed and television.

There were problems with bathroom water pressure and door lock, both of which were fixed on request. The food at the restaurant was fine, including the take-away breakfasts, which I collected each evening, for an early departure the next morning. The cook closed the restaurant at 21.00, but patiently waited for me to arrive, once at 20.45. For a warm dinner I had to leave Sabang (more below) no later than 19.45, preferably a bit earlier.



Fig. 2. My spacious room at Cooper's Resort, Honda Bay. The door leads to a bathroom.



Fig. 3. A light dinner at Cooper's Resort; rice, vegetables and fried fish, with a sauce.

Some rather large and exceptionally loud frogs performed memorable evening concerts next to the fenced resort area, but did not disturb one's sleeping at all. The Honda Bay was empty but a few birds were recorded at the resort, especially in the last morning, when I stayed there late, till 8.00: three *collaris* **Collared Kingfishers**, a **Philippine Pied Fantail**, two **White-bellied Munias** and some **Tree Sparrows**.

The downside of the accommodation was its distance to Sabang and other birding sites. Coopers's Beach Resort is located on the northeastern coast of Palawan, at Honda Bay/Maruyogon area. The location may be better than in most other cases, excluding Sabang, but it took me one hour to drive to Sabang from there. The drive to Puerto Princesa (center) took one hour, too. Fortunately, the Puerto Princesa North Road was a fast highway there, especially if one did run an excessive speed (100+ km/h), and the Sabang road was paved with good tarmac, too. In Sabang itself, the accommodations were either very expensive or unresponsive to my emails.

I bought all my drinks, snacks and some take-away meals at Robinsons Shopping Center in Puerto Princesa (huge building on the right, by the North Road). It may be a good idea to visit there also on the way back to the airport. There was a good selection of goods, a bookshop and a reasonably clean public toilet. They also had some nice pizza, my choices however not being available on the second visit, because they had run out of pineapple! On the other hand, I could not buy anything at Jollibee, it was all trash food. The guards of the parking area were friendly but carried assault rifles, a feature which made one to wonder about situations when they actually needed them. Perhaps it was just for a show of authority?



Fig. 4. What are you doing?! In a second, the guard, with his hand on the gun, realized that the man in field greens (= me) was holding a camera, and smiled. Two other guards were behind me and another security check waited one at the entrance door. It is a bit like entering an international airport, Philippines style. I was, however, never stopped at the entrance.

BIRDS AND SITES

My itinerary included four classical Palawan birding sites, out of which only three received serious attention. I did not visit some other sites, such as the Zigzag Road area (an alternative to Balhasan Trail), because there was no need for that, and also eventually skipped the Balhasan Trail for the same reason. During my visit, the small islets were regrettably out of bounds, together with **Mantanani Scops Owl** and **Grey Imperial Pigeon**, because of rough seas, a result of typhoon Falcon (Chan-Hom) and other typhoons and storms causing havoc further east. The sea around Palawan was too rough for coastal boats which normally carry people to the islets.

Iwahigh Penal Colony

After my arrival in Puerto Princesa, I followed a plan to secure the necessary permits at once, to be able to focus on more important activities afterwards. It was a pity to waste a morning for red tape, but this was Philippines, a country known for its bureaucratic procedures such as applying for entrance tickets at administrative offices rather than on site. The first paper I needed was a permit to enter the Balhasan Trail, at Iwahig Prison and Penal Farm. The trail could not be visited just like that. One needed to get a permit at least one day prior the visit. A security guide would join the walk, free of charge. There is no shortage of labor at the farm, the convicts.

I gave the Sabai Car Rental lady a lift to a Jollibee at the Puerto Princesa North Road and Puerto Princesa South Road junction, and continued west on the latter. In Google Maps, orientation had appeared straightforward. In practice, it was everything but, in the densely populated area with high density of slow traffic. Eventually leaving the populated area, I continued south, but started to hesitate when the entrance to the penal colony did not immediately appear on the right, as anticipated. One kilometer before the entrance, as I later realized, I made a U-turn and started to look for people who could advice me. At a bus stop, I found them. Interestingly, it was the women and not the men, including a police officer, who knew where the penal colony was, and were able to give detailed guidelines on how to get there. In situations such as this in Finland, the setting invariably is the opposite!

At the gate of the penal colony, I left my passport to the guard, before driving in, through some extensive rice fields. The office was a welcoming place, where a chain of friendly and polite people immediately started to process a permit for me, in the middle of a weekly staff meeting. It was not, however, only the officers who were welcoming. Perhaps partly as a result of my military style attire, such a vest by Miltec Sturm, some of the convicts treated me like they would treat a prison officer, performing salutes and offering small services, such carrying an umbrella for me, when I needed to walk from the office to my car in rain. I do not know what their underlying motivation actually was, but nevertheless enjoyed the situation. Overall, it was an interesting place to visit.

In the end, I got my red tape done and had the necessary papers, but never returned to walk the Balhasan Trail. Towards the time of my reserved slot, the species I had hoped to see there had already been located along the Sabang Road. This was a relief, because the ground was muddy at Balhasan, and it would have been necessary to cross small rivers, which now had plenty of water.

Most likely, I could not have walked further than the first 500 meters. I did visit the trailhead (by Balhasan Pond) during the permit application visit, to see how the conditions were.



Fig. 5. Three **Chestnut Munias** at an Iwahig Penal Colony rice field.

While doing my business, and driving through the extensive rice fields in rain, a number of birds were recorded. They included: **Eastern Cattle**, **Little**, **Intermediate** and **Great Egrets**, a female **Barred Buttonquail**, a **Common Moorhen**, a pair of **White-headed Stilts**, **Zebra Doves**, a **Zitting Cisticola**, two **White-breasted Wood-Swallows**, a *leucophaeus* **Ashy Drongo**, more than 100 *jagori* **Chestnut Munias** and two dozen of **Scaly-breasted Munias**.

Puerto Princesa Subterranean River Park

The next permit to be applied was the entrance permit to Puerto Princesa Subterranean River Park. Believing in false information in the Internet, I searched for the office along the Puerto Princesa South Road, even though I had actually already passed the place in the center of Puerto Princesa. An hour was spent in vain, including discussions at another environmental administrative unit, where the correct location was explained to me. The office for entrance permits is located at City Coliseum, along a short street parallel to Puerto Princesa North Rd, opposite of Hotel Uno, in the center. It is a one way access, approached from the south and departed by the Peneyra Road. The fee was PHP150 (€2.80; such a trouble for a small fee!) per day, per person, and did not include transportation to the park. For that, one needs to buy a boat ride at Sabang.

Only towards the end of the red tape process, they told me the alarming news. The park had not been accessed for three days, because of rough seas, caused by the strong winds further east. The Coast Guard had consequently forbidden all boat traffic in the area. I therefore had to hurry to Sabang, after securing my room at Cooper's Beach Resort. In Sabang, I searched for boat operators, but failed, however meeting a female tour operator and some Coast Guard staff instead. Initially not enthusiastic about my plans, they eventually warmed up, even though not

immediately believing in my information that the center of the typhoon would move northeast at night. I had seen a CNN forecast in television and considered an entry possible in the morning.

The lady there was most helpful and promised to contact some boatmen, who would wait for me at 5.20 the next morning, if the Coast Guard showed green light before that. She would call to the reception of Cooper's Beach in the evening. The latter promise could however not be realized, because the staff at the reception had left early in the afternoon (only one guest!) and the reception was closed. Frustrated, I went to sleep and woke up at 4.00, arriving in Sabang at 5.15, as agreed. Quite unlike during the day, the seaside parking lot was empty and it was easy to find space there. I saw some men on the pier and even though they did not speak much English, it soon became clear, that we could go. With some difficulty, I managed to board the boat via some narrow and wobbly pontoons. I was going to be the first visitor in the park after the closure!



Fig. 6. Tourists, boats and boat crews at the PPSRP beach; the karst formations in the background may give some idea why walking along the shoreline is not going to take one there...

There was a lone dark phase **Pacific Reef Heron** on the beach. The single passenger ride, before normal service hours, cost me PHP1.200 (€23), a price suggested by me and readily accepted by the captain. Approaching the Ranger Station landing, I dropped myself into the warm ocean and waded to the shore, admiring the sunrise and the returning boat. There was a clear path there, a short walk to some buildings where people were having their breakfasts, together with a number of birds and animals. I got some advice from one of them and spend the rest of the morning on a

100 meter trail in the forest there, and on a short boardwalk in the end of it (Monkey Trail Mangrove). The area was small, but had a lot to see, especially during the first hours. Later on, hundreds of tourists swarmed the cave area, but only four of them visited the nature trail, for a short period of time. In practice, I had my own spot there.

The variety of the birds was well worth the trouble and the expense of getting there. The highlights included a **Malayan Night Heron**, fishing by a forest stream, and two **Philippine Megapodes** repeatedly walking on the trail, whereas two others called close by. The latter birds were accompanied by at least eight *palawanensis* **Hooded Pittas**, tame and visible during the first hour, when it was too dark for sharp photos, and absent afterwards. The resident male **Palawan Peacock-Pheasant** kept on displaying, noisily, on the right side of the trail, like a young male in its prime, despite his ripe old age! An **Ashy-headed Babbler**, a Philippine endemic and my only record of the species, hopped on the rocks by the boardwalk, with a resident pair of **White-vented Shamans**, another endemic, in the vicinity.

The area had breeding **Palawan Blue Flycatchers**, an island endemic I saw only there, with at least three individuals. Either their females sing, too, or immature males look like a female at that stage? A pair of endemic **Blue Paradise-Flycatchers** were perhaps the prettiest birds of the lot, at least for me. Learning their calls and songs, and of other birds, helped a lot later on, along the Sabang Road. Other birds recorded along the short trail were a *palawanensis* **Green Imperial Pigeon**, two *merulinus* **Plaintive Cuckoos**, a **Chestnut-breasted Malkoha**, two **Ameline Swiftlets**, a **Black-headed Bulbul**, six **Sulphur-bellied Bulbuls** (a Palawan endemic), five **Palawan Bulbuls** (a Palawan endemic) and a *persuasus* **Dark-throated Oriole**.



Fig. 7. A **Palawan Blue Flycatcher**, either a female or an immature male, and an endemic.

Returning to the beach at 10.30, I noticed my morning boat (they are numbered) among the twenty boats waiting for tour groups. Moments later, I was approached by the member of the crew who spoke some English. Guessing my thoughts, he asked if I wanted to return to Sabang. This we did, and the crew was able to earn some money during their waiting time. My return run cost PHP700 (€13), the during the 'office hours' rate.

The sea was rougher than early in the morning and we had to struggle a bit. They did not land in the pier, but helped me out by a beach, before proceeding to the pier, where dozens of hopeful visitors waited for a ride; more money for the crew. Having a private birding customer has its perks to the boatmen, who were eager to work after the jobless days. I found the helpful lady at the pier and thanked her. The next day, the access to the park was closed again, because of rough seas. This is something one should consider, particularly during the typhoon season.

The trail had some habituated monitor lizards and some mammals, too: about 50 **Long-tailed Macaques**, for once behaving well despite their many babies, and two **Northern Palawan Tree Squirrels**.



Fig. 8. The **Long-tailed Macaques** behaved well; a baby has fallen asleep, a nipple in his mouth.

Sabang Road (actually, Liyang Road to Sabang)

The 36.4 km access road to Sabang was a positive surprise. In the end, almost all the island endemics were observed there, the few remaining species being seen at Puerto Princesa Subterranean River Park. In other words, for Palawan, it can be perfectly sufficient to visit only the Sabang area and Honda Bay islets, if possible. For the key species, certain sites along the road deserve more attention than others. I will now describe the most important of them, according to July 2015 experiences: the Sheridan ATV Track, the Forest Regeneration Project, the Amazing Race

Fields and the Bellavista Hill. The Liyang Lookout, also along the road, will be discussed separately, in the next section.

Sheridan ATV Track: The track is located one kilometer south of Sabang gas station, on the left. First, there is an entrance sign on the left, even though the track there currently is the exit. At the other end of the maze of tracks, there is a wide access, with another sign with more obscure message, the current entrance, even though it may initially appear to be the exit. Do not block the entrance by your car, but park by the Sabang Road. Local cars may be parked there too, because there are some private lots behind the track area, and this is their access there, along the border of the Sheridan land.

The forest is relatively open at the track, especially on the ground. I saw only two ATVs there, once. When the track is empty, it is possible to enter and proceed with caution. If approaching vehicles are heard (they are loud), it is better to get far away from the track, to avoid collision or disturbing the paying customers of the lodge. The place is good both during the day and at night, with a variety of key target species.



Fig. 9. My Sabai Mitsubishi at the Sheridan ATV track entrance; do not park like this!

During the day, the best observations included resident woodpeckers such as a pair of **Spot-throated Flamebacks** and a pair of *hargitti* **White-bellied Woodpeckers**, all of them in view for proper close observations. The best discovery was, however, a male **Falcated Wren-Babbler**. Entering the track, I first heard it close on the left, walked a bit closer and played my recording shortly. Aggressively, the bird appeared on the bare, open ground, singing even more loudly and moving around me, trying to locate the intruder. No need to visit the Balhasan Trail, after all!

Pale Spiderhunter proved to be a problem bird for me while in Palawan, but I saw one at Sheridan ATV Track, too, my only record of the species.

Among the other day birds there were a **Thick-billed Green Pigeon**, **Green Imperial Pigeons**, a **Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo**, a **Plaintive Cuckoo**, a **Banded Bay Cuckoo**, a **Rusty-breasted Cuckoo**, a **Hooded Pitta**, **Black-headed** and **Palawan Bulbuls**, *woodi* **Pin-striped Tit-Babblers**, a **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird**, a *plateni* **Mangrove Whistler**, two male **Blue Paradise-Flycatchers** (together), **Ashy Drongos**, **Yellow-throated Leafbirds** and a **Slender-billed Crow**.

At night, the site was visited around sunset, twice. The track is easy to walk in darkness, too. It is, however, advisable to put a torch or headlamp on, to avoid stepping on something unlikely such as a snake and, more importantly, to be able to look for birds. The dominant owl of the forest was a rather vocal *palawanensis* **Brown Hawk Owl**. Once, a *wiepkeni* **Spotted Wood Owl** was heard. One to two **Palawan Scops Owls** were present, and both calls were heard.

On the first visit, right after a rain shower, three **Palawan Frogmouths** immediately arrived to my recording. On the second visit, no frogmouths were present. I guess I was at the right spot at a right time the first time. In other words, both the endemic nightbirds could be observed at this easy to visit site.

Forest Regeneration Project: Roughly two kilometers south of Sabang gas station, there is a section of forest on the left, readily identified by a number of signs propagating forest conservation. It is a section of regenerating forest, with thick undergrowth such as bamboo, and therefore ideal for **Palawan Flycatcher**, in and left beyond the signs, even though not many other birds were recorded there. Finding the flycatcher there saved a lot of driving time, as there consequently was no need to visit the Zigzag Rd or Balhasan Trail areas in the last morning.



Fig. 10. Approaching the Forest Regeneration Project, this sign stands on the right. In my mind, I also called the site a 'Propaganda Forest'. The message was clear, but could have been subtler.

Amazing Race Fields: About 7.6 kilometers south of Sabang, there is a site with impressive cliffs, a view and rice fields, the best scenery on the road. Most of the tourist vans stop there, to admire the muddy fields in which the Amazing Race contestants struggled a few years ago. The site may not be essential for birdwatching, but I nevertheless got my only good looks of the endemic **Palawan Hornbills** there, a party of six birds. Otherwise, the fields had a few **Eastern Cattle**, **Little** and **Intermediate Egrets**, and **Asian Palm Swifts**; the widespread species.



Fig. 11. A party of **Palawan Hornbills**, at the Amazing Race site.



Fig. 12. The Amazing Race Fields site is hard to miss!

Buenavista Hill: Located 28 km south of Sabang, or 8.5 km north of the Sabang Road junction (PP North Rd), the hill is relatively easy to recognize as the highest ground in a bend with houses, just before a substantial drop, or on top of a steep hill, depending from which direction one arrives. The forest is dry and open there, and attracts species otherwise not necessarily seen along the Sabang Road.

For me, it was the site for **Lovely Sunbird**, my last missing and realistically available target species. On the day before departure, I finally located a pair in a roadside tree there. Otherwise, I recorded several **Green Imperial Pigeons**, a **Pygmy Swiftlet**, about 10 **Philippine Swiftlets**, two **White-bellied Wood-Swallows**, a **Barn Swallow**, two **Black-headed Bulbuls**, a **Black-naped Oriole**, three *aurora* **Olive-backed Sunbirds**, a **Brown-throated Sunbird**, a **Pygmy Flowerpecker** and two **Palawan Flowerpeckers**, during two short stops at the site.

The birds randomly recorded along the Sabang Road included: **Eastern Cattle**, **Intermediate** and **Little Egrets**, a *palawanus* **Crested Goshawk**, a **Black-chinned Fruit Dove**, **Green Imperial Pigeons**, **Spotted Doves**, **Zebra Doves**, a **Philippine Cuckoo-Dove**, a **Large-tailed Nightjar**, two **Collared Kingfishers**, **Philippine Hawk-Cuckoos**, **Rusty-breasted Cuckoos**, a **Banded Bay Cuckoo**, a **Violet Cuckoo**, a *propinqua* **Philippine Pitta**, a **Yellow-throated Leafbird** (my first endemic in Palawan), **Hair-crested Drongos**, a *gutturalis* **Barn Swallow**, a **Melodious Babbler** (a Philippines endemic), *woodi* **Pin-striped Tit-Babblers**, **Black-headed Bulbuls**, five **White-vented Shamas**, ten **Blue Paradise-Flycatchers**, **Mangrove Whistlers**, a **Golden-bellied Gerygone**, **Asian Glossy Starlings**, **Slender-billed** and **Large-billed Crows**.

In the last morning, I also explored the two obvious side roads in the Baheli region, both ending at mangroves. One of them had a roadside pair of **Rufous-tailed Tailorbirds**.

The most mysterious bird of the Palawan visit was an unidentified drongo along the southern section of the Sabang Road. It was a spitting image of **Tablas Drongo**, as portrayed in Kennedy et. al., with a long, widely forked and narrow-tipped tail, and matt black plumage, but obviously not one, unless one had imported a **Tablas Drongo** in a cage and released it, which is rather unlikely. Do they have an introduction program in Palawan? Not a plausible explanation either, even though it might be a good idea. It will probably be one of those birds which haunt a globetrotting birder all the way down to his grave...

Along or on the road, few mammals were also recorded: a **Palawan Tree-Shrew**, two **Lesser False Vampire Bats** and a **Palawan Spiny Rat**, the last one at night. Many smaller bats had to be left unidentified.

Liyang Lookout

Also known as 'Sabang Lookout', even though it has nothing to do with Sabang, the private land lookout is located 13 kilometers south of Sabang, along the Liyang Road to Sabang, or about 22.5 km north of the initial Sabang junction, at a tight curve on the Puerto Princesa North Road. There is space for a car and a short but steep path up an obvious roadside hillock with a wooden bench

on top of it. The Liyang Lookout will be discussed separately because of the importance of the site, and the diversity of species recorded there.



Fig. 13. The Liyang Lookout entrance fee box.



Fig. 14. The lookout; bushes with berries and a grassy ridge, towards the tall tree in the back.

At the start of the path, there is a box for entrance fees, PHP10 (€1.90) per visit, per person. From the bench, the views are bit limited but there were several fruiting bushes around, attractive to bulbuls and flowerpeckers. For better views, the path continues 50 meters on a grassy, open ridge, from where observations are best made. When tired, I simply relaxed on the grass, for few

minutes, before starting to scan the slopes and valleys again. The downside of the grassy ridge was that I could not see the car anymore. From the bench, guarding it was easy.

The site did, however appear quite safe. There is a small farm right below it, behind some trees. I met the man of the house once, when he visited the observation point to see who the returning visitor was. Before that, I had already met the three friendly dogs of the family.

Weather permitting, I spent several hours at the Liyang Lookout: 16.15 – 18.00 (6th July), 15.00 – 18.00 (7th July) and 7.45 – 9.30 (8th July). Only in the first afternoon, I was unlucky with rain. Having been delayed by the boat issue in Sabang, I arrived at the lookout late, and hurried to the top, just when heavy rain hit it! Immediately drenched, I escaped to the car, slipping in mud, and waited there for a short while, after which the weather stayed good enough for observations. It is important to have the car close by, in case of rain showers.

The fruiting bushes (thousands of small, ripe berries) attracted many **Black-headed Bulbuls**, up to six **Palawan Bulbuls**, two **Ashy-fronted Bulbuls**, a **Sulphur-bellied Bulbul** and several **Asian Fairy-Bluebirds**. During my first 20 minutes at the lookout, I had already seen all the three endemic bulbuls of Palawan. The bushes were also a sure place to observe **Palawan Flowerpeckers**, up to fifteen birds simultaneously, a few *affine* **Striped Flowerpeckers** and a **Pygmy Flowerpecker**, all Philippine endemics.

In the evenings, one to two far away **Palawan Peacock-Pheasants** could be heard displaying towards the forested slope in the east. It was prime display season for them, the activity perhaps having been triggered by the rains, as also witnessed by the performance of the 'old gentleman' at the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River Park.

My only **Philippine Cockatoos**, a party of four, were recorded at Liyang Lookout, during the first visit, at 17.15. The other visits produced an ominous zero! **Blue-headed Racket-tails** (endemic to Palawan), on the other hand, were always present, with three to ten birds recorded on each visit. I once heard a **Palawan Hornbill** there, but never saw it. My only **Palawan Tits**, a party of three, were seen at Liyang Lookout, on the third visit, when I was already quite worried about missing the species. Leaving the island without seeing the tit would have been a disaster. The Liyang Lookout is a known stakeout but locating the tits may take time.

On the west side of the lookout, a swampy coastal flat with many dead trees attracted large woodpeckers. **Spot-throated** and **Red-headed Flamebacks**, both endemic, had a prolonged territorial fight there. On the first visit, I only saw the former but could hear the latter. The **Spot-throat** male was a funny sight on top of a huge tree; for 30 minutes, it popped up and down, like a deranged toy 'Woody', calling its heart out, without a break! On the second visit, the same tree was occupied by a pair of **Red-headed Flamebacks**, and the **Spot-throat** had moved to another tree, close by. The large trees at the grassy ridge, on the other hand, were favored by **Yellow-throated Leafbirds** and **Slender-billed Crows**.

A rather interesting phenomenon occurred in the evening of 7th of July. More than 100 **Pacific Swifts** descended from great heights, arriving from the north, and mixed with the resident smaller swiftlets. They could have been of the *kanoi* subspecies of Taiwan, forced 1.500 km southwest by the typhoon Falcon (Chan-Hom). Falcon hit Luzon and Taiwan from the east during the time of my visit. It gained one of its peaks on the 6th and 7th July. Gale force winds extended hundreds of kilometers from the typhoon's eye. Its winds reached 220 km/h close to Okinawa.

The other birds recorded at the Liyang Lookout were: **Philippine Hawk-Cuckoos**, **Lesser Coucals** and *bubutus* **Great Coucals**, **Pygmy** and (hundreds of) **Ameline Swiftlets**, two **Hooded Pittas**, **Intermediate Egrets**, an *erimacrus* **Thick-billed Green Pigeon**, **Green Imperial Pigeons**, a **Rusty-breasted Cuckoo**, a *xanthorhynchus* **Violet Cuckoo**, *mindanensis* **Asian Koels**, an **Ashy** and **Hair-crested Drongos**, an **Oriental Dollarbird**, a *palawana* **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch**, a *plateni* **Mangrove Whistler**, **Black-naped** and **Dark-throated Orioles**, and a **Brown-throated Sunbird**.

The second most mysterious bird in Palawan was observed at Liyang Lookout on the 7th of July. There was a tailorbird, which I saw in detail, agreeing with the identification criteria of **Grey-backed Tailorbird**. It had a combination of rusty cap, tail and thighs, cold grey back and rump, with greenish hue on greyish wings, pale whitish throat and extended vent area, and breast heavily streaked with white on grey. The bill appeared exceptionally long and the head elongated, more so than with other tailorbirds (I saw eight tailorbird species on my RTW trip).

The only potential confusion species could be **Philippine Tailorbird**, which does not occur in Palawan, and does not have grey rump. Neither should **Grey-backed Tailorbird** necessarily be there, even though at least one specimen has been collected in Palawan. Its status in Palawan is unclear. In the light of the Liyang Lookout record, it might remain a scarce resident?

AT THE END OF THE DAY

The visit to Palawan had been a success and confirmed the positive conclusions of previous trip reports. In the Philippines, Palawan is the most easygoing destination for birdwatcher and also supports the freedom of independent visits. The few problems I had were caused by my own mistakes, inadequate or misleading Internet information and, above all, the exceptional weather conditions. I left Palawan in a happy, satisfied mood.

In Manila, I however had to face a disappointment, albeit an anticipated one. Once again, **Ashy Ground Thrush** would not be added to my life list. Typhoon Falcon (Chan-Hom) had brought record rains to Luzon and La Mesa Dam was about to overflow, with a chance of collapse. The army had already started forced evacuation of areas below the dam and my chances of entering the La Mesa Ecopark were therefore close to zero. Never mind the people, I was missing a lifer!!

It did not help that I had reserved a full day for the job, now available for rest and sleep. Even though frustrated, I was nevertheless happy that we had been able to land in Manila, despite rain and strong winds. I slept a total of 16 hours, compensating some of the inevitable sleep deprivation 'on the road'.

Overall, I had been lucky in the past week, island-hopping between one volcanic eruption (Gunung Raung), two earthquakes, a tsunami warning, storms and typhoons. Not a single canceled or delayed flight had occurred, even though each evening brought more bad television news. A tropical storm had preceded Falcon (Chan-Hom) and there were two other typhoons tailing it.

Would JAL be able to take me to Tokyo, the next destination? The space between two typhoons was a narrow one and right on their normal flight route. Yes, JAL did the job, right on time, as could be expected from a Japanese carrier! I was able to visit Karuizawa, to see the **Yellow Buntings**.

Good luck for your visit in Palawan!



Fig. 15. A sight which attracts a tobacco-hater like me, and the first thing one sees on the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River Park beach. The penalties are €9.60, €57.60 and €96, respectively. The average annual income in the Philippines is PHP235,000, €4,514. PHP5,000 therefore equals one week's salary, on average terms. I paid PHP1,900 for my return boat ride to the park, to be share by a crew of three, with overheads. Not a bad business, as long as the tourists keep on coming.

