



## BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 11/2016

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# LA MESA ECOPARK, MANILA, THE PHILIPPINES

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016, I was able to visit La Mesa Ecopark, Metro Manila, to see an **Ashy Thrush**. In the Internet, there are some guidelines on how to visit the park, available after some searching. The details are, however, not quite correct in the sources I have been able to identify, in terms of locating the **Ashy Thrush** territory. At least, it is possible to misinterpret them. Moreover, there are neither photos of the 'trail markers' on the way, nor the coordinates of the site.

The following short report is an attempt to correct the situation, for those first timers who plan to visit the site independently, without a guide. It may be a good idea to go there sooner than later, because the pressure of human population increases in Manila year by year, causing an excess of activities in the park. Do not follow my bad example! (More below)



**Fig. 1.** Manila, early in the morning, when traffic is light.

## EPILOGUE

Already since my first visit in the Philippines, during the Marcos era in 1990, I had been dreaming about the skulking **Ashy Thrush**, so attractive but difficult to see. An attempt in Quezon National Park failed that time. Afterwards, it became clear that La Mesa Ecopark in Manila was the easiest site for the species. Out of several unrealized plans, the best one also failed in 2015, when successive typhoons had filled the La Mesa Dam (main freshwater source in Manila) to bursting point, on the day when I should have visited the park. La Mesa Ecopark was closed just like several sections of the city around it, with army evacuating the area.

Therefore, I could do nothing but give up and spend the day in my accommodation, frustrated. Would I ever see the bird? Giving up was made easier by the fact that I had been very lucky during the past week, barely missing two major typhoons, one earthquake and a volcanic eruption in East Java, Palawan and Bohol, without any canceled flights or life-threatening situations. The next night, my Japan Airlines flight to Tokyo would be able to squeeze through between two typhoons, including the Chan-hom (Falcon), which reached peak winds of 165 km/h. Still, I kept on dreaming about the thrush.

## ACCOMMODATION

At the time of my 2015 stay in Manila, during transits between destinations in the Philippines and abroad, I had come to a conclusion that it was best to stay in the airport area, at the enclave of Salem Center, opposite of the NAIA Domestic Terminal (T4). The center had all the necessary services and was secure. Importantly, it had the Salem Domestic Guesthouse, a budget accommodation venture which has recently expanded into two buildings. Their web page is at [www.domesticguesthouse.com](http://www.domesticguesthouse.com) and their phone number is +63 2 834 2321.

Nowadays, the guesthouse has rooms with private toilets and showers, too, for PHP 2.500 (€46) per night. I myself did, however, know enough from experience to choose a more economical option with shared services. The toilets and showers are, after all, not shared by more than four rooms, oftentimes less, and are constantly kept clean by the staff. The rooms themselves may be small and basic but have everything I need, for a good rate of €26 per night (an Agoda price, slightly less than the list price of PHP 1.500).

In the small Salem Center, it is possible to rest, eat (several restaurants, fast food joints, a pastry shop) and shop for groceries. The guesthouse has a shuttle service for the airport terminals (call them at arrivals tourist information desk, ask where to stand and check their license plate), for a lower fee (PHP 150, €2.90) than the airport taxis (PHP 200, €3.80), and there is also a free shuttle bus from other terminals to the Domestic Terminal. The last option will take some time and one also needs to cross the street to the Salem Center (gated area, with guarded check points).

A taxi is the fastest option, unless the customer lines are long in front of departure gates. They often are. What is more, having a taxi may involve some hassle afterwards, not to mention a (slight) security risk. I have both perfect and less than perfect taxi service at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport. The guesthouse shuttle can be trusted. The PHP 50 difference in price is not an important issue for most of us, but trouble-free service may well be.

## TRANSPORTATION

It is possible to visit La Mesa by public transportation and information in other Internet trip reports will tell how to do it, if those reports are still available and their advice up-to-date. The method does, however, have its drawbacks. First, one has to change between different modes of transportation (bus, jeepney, walking) and their routes and timetables may change. Second, it is a rather time-consuming way to do the visit (full day), with less reliability on early arrival. Third, one mistake on the way may lead to getting lost, and the consequent stress and delay. Fourth, all this exposes one to the elements (e.g. rain) and the security risks of a large city, especially if traveling solo.

Having almost completed a seven week RTW tour, without serious trouble, I was ready to reward myself by doing the last trip of the journey in style, by a taxi. Already a week earlier, during a transit in Manila, I had informed a driver working for Salem Domestic Guesthouse, Bon, that I had an interest in such a trip and that we could discuss the details after my return, if he was interested to be my driver. As a result, he agreed to take me to La Mesa at 04.45, before traffic jams, wait there for 1,5 hours, and take me back to the guesthouse later, through the perpetual mid-day traffic jam which covers most of the Manila metropolitan area. For this service, he would charge PHP 2.500 (€46), which was a fair rate for both of us.

In the early morning, the drive took only an hour, even though Bon had to ask for directions, towards the end. The last few hundred meters go as follows: Marlboro Street – left to Dunhill Street – left to Quezon City Drive – right to La Mesa Ecopark parking area. I paid PHP 20 (€ 0.40) as an entrance fee for the car, but not the PHP 50 (€ 1) for my personal entrance, because there was nobody there to collect it, not to mention to do a security inspection. It was too early.

The return drive was, however, a completely different matter! Even though Bon was a very experienced driver and with detailed knowledge of that part of Manila, not to mention ready to break against any traffic rule to get forward faster, it took us 4.5 hours, mostly in rain. It was typhoon season, after all. The distance between Salem Center and La Mesa Ecopark is 28 km. The fact that our average return driving speed was 6 km/h, tells a lot about the daytime traffic on the streets of Manila.

In the end I had one hour at the guesthouse, to pack my bags, have a shower and rest a bit, before a shuttle to the airport, for a Cathay Pacific flight to Hong Kong. No seats and a bad lunch at the

departure area, but also a one peso reduction for the price of bubble gum, to help me to spend all my remaining pesos before leaving the country!

## THE ASHY THRUSH SITE

How does one locate the correct site? From the La Mesa Ecopark car park, follow the main track (tarmac) up and turn right, downhill to the Main Rd La Mesa Ecopark (see Google Maps). Right in the beginning, there is a shed where entrance fees are collected and security checks performed. Those functions will start late, at around 07.30. Walk past the entrance point and follow the track for exactly 400 meters. On the way, there will be some swimming pools and then also picnic facilities on the right.

In the end, one leaves the big trees and arrives at an opening on the left, the La Mesa Shell Flower Terraces, on the dam wall. On the right hand, there is a rectangular fishing pond, right by the track. Walk past it, immediately taking the right at a Y-fork, and immediately leaving the main track to the right, to an area with some stalls.

Walk right for 30 meters, along the above-mentioned fishing pond. The ground is gravel here, and may be a bit wet and muddy. On the left, a wide path starts by crossing a small stream on a small and low bridge. You have arrived at the right spot, at 14.711592, 121.075852. Place the coordinates at Google Maps search function and the program will show the location. The following photos will also help in identifying the area.



**Fig. 2.** The entrance point, at the Main Rd La Mesa Ecopark.

The spot has open, exposed mud along the stream and semi-open undergrowth. Unfortunately, at the time of my visit, somebody had also made a camp right next to it, with a fire, and was cutting



firewood there. His chickens (many) had also occupied the habitat which has been favored by the thrushes, **Slaty-legged Crakes** and **Red-bellied** and **Hooded Pittas**.

If possible, it probably pays to bird the park for several hours because it also has potential for occasional visitors such as **Indigo-banded Kingfisher**, **Pechora Pipit**, **Rufous Paradise-Flycatcher** and **Naked-faced Spiderhunter**. It will be busy, though, because many (university) people like to jog there, weather permitting. After 07.20, I met dozens of them on my way back to the car park, including some U.S. citizens.



**Fig. 3.** La Mesa Shell Flower Terrace, the dam wall, the rectangular fishing pond on the right.



**Fig. 4.** The rectangular fishing pond. The Ashy Thrush site is on the left.





**Fig. 5.** The Y-fork; turn right and leave the main road here.



**Fig. 6.** The small bridge across a stream; the **Ashy Thrushes** are immediately beyond it.

Did I see the **Ashy Thrush**, my target species? Yes, there was a pair right next to the bridge and after I sat down on some logs, excellent and very close views could be obtained with ease. What a beautiful species! The one close to me filled the view of my camera. Unfortunately, there was not enough light for photography, as the sky remained overcast, with an anticipation of serious low

pressure and the rain which lasted for the rest of the day. I did not want to use my flash because that would have disturbed the birds even more than my presence.

Overall, it may be a good idea to go down and stay absolutely still, for this shy but inquisitive species.

According to Internet information, there should be about five breeding pairs of **Ashy Thrushes** at the La Mesa Ecopark at the moment, but the others are probably more difficult to see well. The species is, after all, a major skulker in situations of thick undergrowth and infrequent exposure to human beings. The ones at the exposed site are clearly well used to people, both the general public and camera-toting birdwatchers.

What about the rest of the birds, in addition to chickens and **Ashy Thrushes**? No pittas or crakes, despite careful scanning. A few widespread species such as **Lowland White-eyes** were seen by the main track, but overall the avifauna of the park appeared understandably impoverished. The deteriorating weather did certainly not improve the situation.

But what was the squirrel present at the site? It looked like a **Philippine Tree Squirrel**, but there should be no squirrels in Luzon, unlike most other Philippine islands. Perhaps somebody has released a pet in the park? That would not be surprising in a large city such as Manila. Anything and more may be expected in this huge anthill of human activities.

**Good luck with your visit at the La Mesa Ecopark!**

