

Taiwan and the Philippines, 24 May - 13 June, 2008

Brief highlights from a trip to Taiwan and the Philippines with some new site information (Taiwan Partridge at Alishan, Mikado Pheasant at Anmashan, Philippine Eagle at Hamut)

Gavin Maclean • Andy Mears • Andy Rhodes • Chris Wilkinson

Many birders have a trip to Sichuan as a firm aspiration. The quality of the birding and landscapes is nothing short of legendary in birding circles and we had chosen 2008 to be our year. A serious setback was the closure of several key sites due to the political problems in Tibet but we'd restructured our itinerary accordingly, and still believed a visit in late spring would be very worthwhile. Then the devastating earthquake hit the province and the tragic scenes relayed to our TV screens made it clear that we could not go. The industry of the Chinese rescue teams was encouraging but the loss of human life simply terrible. We hope to make our visit some time in the future and are sure the resilient people of Sichuan will welcome us in due course.

And so a trip to Taiwan and the Philippines was hastily arranged. We'd talked about this trip over several years so deciding on a broad itinerary was reasonably straightforward. We were short on detail for Taiwan however, so when Dr Scott Lin offered to talk through our options on our first morning on the island, we gladly accepted. That Scott is based at Huben, one of the best sites for **Fairy Pitta**, was convenient to say the least.

Rob Hutchinson and Tim Fisher had indicated that the Philippines could be good at this time of year but perhaps hard work, and they were pretty much spot on. This was good enough for us however, and once we had an affirmative from Tim regarding logistics, the trip was on. Tim made all our Philippine ground arrangements and accompanied us to Hamut and Polis. Impeccable organisation as ever, and with even more anecdotes than in 2003.

24 May	Mt Makiling, Luzon, the Philippines (AM & CW)
25-26 May	Rajah Sikatuna, Bohol, the Philippines (AM & CW)
27 May	Travel day (all)
28 May	Huben & Alishan, Taiwan (all)
29 May	Alishan & Huisun, Taiwan (all)
30 May	Anmashan, Taiwan (all)
31 May	Anmashan & Wushe, Taiwan (all)
1 June	Wushe & Huben, Taiwan (all)
2 June	Km118, Route 3, Taiwan (all)
3-7 June	Hamut Camp expedition, Luzon, the Philippines (all)
8 June	Mt Polis, Luzon, the Philippines (all)
9 June	Mt Makiling, Luzon, the Philippines (AM & CW)
9-13 June	Palawan, the Philippines (GM & AR)



Philippine Falconet, Hamut

We targeted 14 of the 15 traditional Taiwanese endemics, opting to forego **Styan's Bulbul**. Other important birds were **Fairy Pitta** and **Malayan Night Heron**, and we were confident that many of the other Taiwanese forms would show along the way. After reading a few trip reports and the gen-packed BirdingASIA Number 2 (OBC 2004; trip reports listed below), we believed that 5 days or so would give us a real chance of a successful trip. We lost a day or so to rain but still saw all our targets with relative ease. This was in no small part due to some excellent information gleaned at short notice – and full details follow.

Armed with the Nelles map of Taiwan and the free maps available at Taipei Airport, we were in a good position to navigate the island in our hire car. Both maps are strongly recommended because place names vary and you have the best chance of understanding road signs if you have both.

The Taiwanese are an incredibly friendly and helpful people - don't be afraid to ask for help if you're trying to fix some sort of logistical dilemma (e.g. a broken front bumper!).

Three of the team had birded the Philippines in 2003 so our itineraries were variously designed to plug gaps for each of us. CW mopped up many good birds along the way, the ultimate surprise being good views of a **Philippine Eagle** at Hamut. The Hamut Camp leg was, perhaps, the main focus of the whole trip, and would produce some lifetime birding

highlights for us all.

The weather was hot and dry at most of the Philippine sites, with regular rain on Palawan only. Regular, heavy rain and mist were a feature of the Taiwanese uplands and we would have ventured higher at Wushe if the weather had been better.

Mt Makiling, Luzon

Two short days with **Ashy Thrush** being specifically targeted. The **thrush** is seen most often soon after dawn on the main forest track (i.e. soon after 5am). The first morning on site saw the track being used quite heavily by pedestrians and scooter riders alike, and it never felt as though a sighting was likely. The second attempt was much more promising but still no joy despite CW glimpsing a likely candidate. A lift up the hill in a jeepney at 7am allowed an hour or two in the gully noted by Rich Lindie and Hayley Wood in their web report. Despite the fantastic habitat, few birds were seen and the **thrush** did not make an appearance.

Makiling otherwise produced some nice birds including: **Philippine Hawk-owl, Spotted Wood & Indigo-banded Kingfishers, Grey-backed Tailorbird, Spotted Buttonquail, Red-crested & Scale-feathered Malkohas, Tarctic Hornbill** and a **Red-bellied Pitta** was heard.

Rajah Sikatuna, Bohol

Two full days with **Wattled Broadbill** a priority. The two **pitta** species present were a draw of course, and the park always gets very positive write-ups in trip reports. Landing at the tiny airport immediately instilled a relaxed feeling and it was indeed a welcome break from the incessant travelling of our previous 48 hours.

The birding varied from very slow to totally exhilarating. We heard **Wattled Broadbill**, with a brief flight view for CW only, but the following showed well: **Azure-breasted & Red-bellied Pittas, Silvery & Rufous-lored Kingfishers, Black-faced Coucal, Philippine Hawk-owl, Frogmouth & Trogon, Streaked Ground-babbler, Black-crowned Babbler** and **Yellow-breasted Tailorbird**. An afternoon of superb birding for AM culminated in a flushed **Mindanao Bleeding-heart** that briefly perched on a log before melting away into the forest. Three Colugos gave good views.

Our guide here was a young lad named Ryan. He's obviously an up and coming birder and already has a good knowledge of calls. If he has the opportunity to work with regular birding groups, then he might well become highly skilled.

Note that one of the most productive trails, perhaps because it remains damp and shady, was the first you come to on the left if you face the main forest at the ranger station and walk the road to the right. The **bleeding-heart** moment and fantastic, walk-away views of **Red-bellied Pitta** were both from this trail.



The Chocolate Hills, Bohol,
as viewed from the hotel balcony

Huben, Taiwan

We arrived at 5am and a bleary-eyed Scott Lin kindly led us straight to a **Fairy Pitta** nest site. This was a mere 300m from the Huben Pitta Café and after a short wait, a bird flew in and showed well on an exposed perch close to the nest tree – fantastic!

The rest of the morning was spent watching the **pittas**, birding the trail network and chatting to Scott. **Taiwan**

Partridge was heard and a few other birds seen.

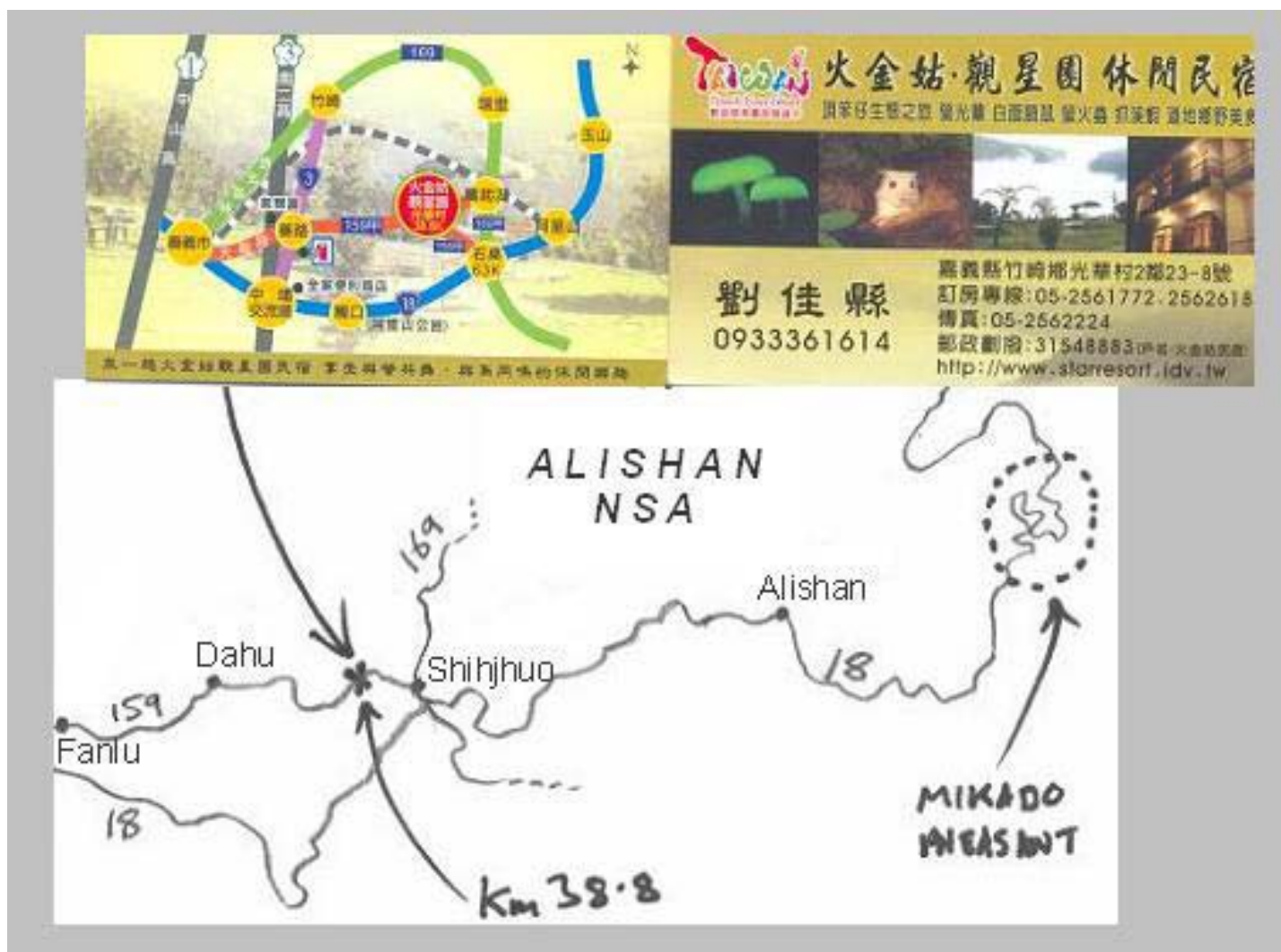
With spare time at the end of our 6 days, we returned to Huben for even more **pitta** views and an attempt to see **Mountain Scops Owl**. Scott arranged for a friend and local bird guide, Mr Jing-Kai Chang, to show us the **scops** after dark and what followed was quite surreal. Mr Chang appeared at 8pm as arranged and we jumped into cars, with a couple of research students tagging along. Five minutes later we all got out and after a few whistled imitations, he shone his spotlight into a large tree and immediately illuminated a **Mountain Scops**. Great views of this enigmatic **owl** for a few minutes and then back to the café and our basic guest rooms.

Good directions to Huben are available in other trip reports.

Alishan National Scenic Area (ANSA), Taiwan

Recommended by Scott and quite a well-known site it seems. The section of Route 18 (joins Route 21...) comprising tight hairpin bends and switchbacks on the east side of ANSA is a regular site for **Mikado Pheasants**, which come onto the road early in the morning. The road section is easy to spot on the maps. Also try the stretches just to the south with wooden boardwalks alongside the road. (Km135 and Km140 were quoted by Scott, and see our sketch below) Drive slowly and stay in the car is the recommended tactic. We failed here but only tried in the late afternoon. We did have some good birding though, including our only **Flamecrests** of the trip, a welcome group of **Brown Bullfinches**, a soaring **Greater Spotted Eagle** and **Collared Bush-robins** were common (as they were at Anmashan).

We spent the night at an excellent eco-guesthouse at Km38.8 on route 159 on the southwest edge of the ANSA. The guesthouse can be found by getting to Km38.8 and asking a local or showing the card details below - it's a few hundred metres along a very small side road. Dining here was an experience, the food being extreme-Taiwanese.



We were taken to a feeding station run by the guesthouse at dawn the next day where 2 permanent hides overlook a clearing in the forest. **Swinhoe's Pheasant** is regular and we were told there was a chance of **Taiwan Partridge**.

We cannot vouch for the regularity of the **partridges** but during our 2 hours, a single adult came in, and later 2 adults with a juvenile – all giving close, prolonged views. A male **Swinhoe's Pheasant** came in several times and surprised us once by suddenly appearing just 3m in front of the hide – spectacular.

Mountain Scops Owls called around the guesthouse after dark, including one bird that may have been perched on our bedroom's balcony. None seen however during a quick search.

Huisun, Taiwan

Robert Kelsh had visited Taiwan just a few weeks previously and had passed on some very useful information. He'd recommended Huisun for **Taiwan Blue Magpie** and as we drove into the car park, several birds were flying around in the large trees. A **Malayan Night Heron** showed quite well, plus **Maroon Oriole**, but we didn't spend long on site being keen to get up high as soon as possible.

The advantage of this site for the magpie is that it is close to the key mountain areas.

Anmashan, Taiwan

Another superb tip-off from Robert: **Mikado Pheasant** is known to come onto the road regularly close to Km47. Any time of day apparently, but we were keen to try early morning. A late afternoon attempt on 30th, trawling Kms 45 to 49 in the car in the mist was unsuccessful but an hour or so after dawn the next day, our tenacity paid off. After several passes of the key stretch, 2 birds flew onto the road ahead of us – a pair of **Mikados** (Km46.8). The hen quickly disappeared but the cock just strutted to the verge and allowed us to roll slowly up to him. He then began displaying, apparently to the car, and we watched from just a few metres for around 20 minutes – a trip highlight of course.

Our only **Taiwan Barwings** were seen along the well-known 210 trail, with **White-backed Woodpecker**, **Scaly-breasted Wren-babbler**, **Chinese Bamboo Partridge**, **Nutcracker**, **Malayan Night Heron**, **Little Forktail** and **Taiwan Bush-warbler** other highlights at Anmashan.

There's plenty of accommodation at Km44 and booking should not be necessary outside of weekends or holiday periods. The food here was distinctly average (in stark contrast to much of the Taiwanese food - that purchased from small cafes in towns being faultless).

Finding the Anmashan turn off is tricky. We recommend using BirdingASIA Number 2 and the maps to initially orient yourself, before using trip reports to help spot the turn off.

Peitungyenshan, Wushe, Taiwan

This appears to be one of the most reliable sites for **Yellow Tit**. We found an excellent home stay on the right hand side of the main road, just a short distance uphill from the Peitungyenshan turn off. Good directions to the trail can be found in other trip reports.

A quick drive down the road in the rain quickly showed that our low-slung saloon car would not cope with the 10km of heavily rutted surface. After some comical sign language exchanges with the home stay owners, and help from their daughter via an internet interpretation programme, they magically produced a 4x4 van and offered to take us at dawn the next day, with a 10am pick up agreed. They refused to take payment for this so we left a hefty tip in the bedroom before checking out. Internet access, laundry facilities, good food, cold beer and a spectacular view were all available at the home stay. There were even some birds, including **Rusty Laughingthrush** and **Spot-breasted Scimitar-babbler**, which were both seen from the premises during our stay.

We finally saw several **Yellow Tits** as we walked out of the main trail the next morning at 9.45am. None were seen on the main trail itself (after the wooden gate as per trip reports) but fleeting views of several **Swinhoe's Pheasants** and both **partridges** were particularly interesting, as was a brief **Island Thrush**.

Details of the home stay follow.



Home Stay at Wushe

Km118, Route 3, Taiwan

A leisurely morning spent drinking coffee, eating sausages and seeing **Hwamei** before driving to the airport. Another Scott Lin tip-off, any suitable habitat along Route 3 close to the intersection with Route 6 being recommended, or the road to Taian Hot Springs (see airport maps). We stopped at the first patch of roadside scrub and rank grass that looked right, which happened to be at Km118, and found a bird within minutes.

Hamut Camp expedition, Luzon

Just a few notes here as much has been written on Hamut previously. Because of our last minute arrangements, the flight schedule for Manila to Tuguegarao was of no use to us, so Tim suggested an overnight bus. A poor night's sleep followed by an uphill, 10km hike in the blazing sun left us all completely and utterly exhausted at the end of Day 1.

Two recent groups had seen **Philippine Eagle** in the large valley between Camps 1 and 2 so we purposely kept an eye open. We were lucky to see a fully-fledged juvenile on our walk down, flying and perched, a fantastic bonus for all. They had obviously bred in the valley and adult birds were seen by Ding Li et al just a few days after us.

A **Whiskered Pitta** heard calling late on our second afternoon came as a relief. A couple more were heard during the next morning but it wasn't until early afternoon that a bird came in, giving a few minutes of heart-stopping, close views in the gully left of the hunter's camp on the ridge.

Two or three **Luzon Bleeding-hearts** were flushed from various trails, none giving anyone a good view. These all became irrelevant however on Day 4 when a bird that had been calling flew in as we settled down for lunch close by. We scanned intensely, but it was Dodong our day porter who spotted the bird perched up mid-canopy. Ten minutes of jaw-dropping views followed, side on at times but largely of the bird facing us (outrageous).

Flame-breasted Fruit-dove was another big target and one bird obligingly perched in full view at short range on the ridge. Other good birds included **White-fronted Tit**, **Cream-bellied Fruit-dove**, **Spotted Buttonquail**, **Philippine**

Hawk-eagle and **Blue-breasted Flycatcher**. By no means all of our top targets were seen at Hamut (e.g. **Grand Rhabdornis** and **Rabor's Wren-babbler**) but we did not complain...

Mount Polis, Luzon

Good species seen during our very worthwhile morning on Polis included: **Luzon Water Redstart, Chestnut-faced Babbler, Green-backed Whistler, Mountain Shrike, Long-tailed Ground-warbler, Luzon Bush-warbler** and **Island Thrush**.



Rice paddy terraces, Mt Polis

Palawan

A pleasant 4 days spent in the tropical heat of this lush island. A boat trip around Rasa Island produced the hoped-for **Philippine Cockatoos**; both **Palawan Frogmouth & Scops Owl** showed after some effort; diligent searching eventually gave us views of all the other lowland endemics with the exception of **Falcated Ground-babbler**; and we were pleased to see **Malaysian Plover**.

The star of the show built up his part at St Paul's by remaining hidden for 1.5 hours from dawn, the cock **peacock-pheasant** finally emerging from the forest and giving the customary point blank views near the ranger's station.

We mainly used the following web reports, so thanks to all for posting:

- Bjorn Anderson, Club300, 2005
- Gruff Dodd, Birdtours, 2005
- Jon Hornbuckle, Jon's web site, 2004
- Rich Lindie & Hayley Wood, Travellingbirder, 2007

...there are lots more, of course.

Scott Lin can be contacted using: pitta.formosa AT gmail.com
Tim Fisher can be contacted using: timothyfisherph AT hotmail.com

Photos by Chris Wilkinson ©

For questions or more info please mail to: andy.mears AT wessexwater.co.uk or andysrhodes AT hotmail.com

Help on this trip was important and our thanks go to James Eaton (birdtourASIA), Tim Fisher (and all his staff), Robert Kelsh, Scott Lin (and all his staff) and Sarah Thompson (WildWings)