

Thailand

Bargain Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 In flight to Bangkok

Day 2 Khok Kham

Day 3/5 Khao Yai National Park

Day 6/8 Doi Inthenon

Day 9 In Flight

Day 10 London

Departs

February and November

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code THA01) or brochure

Grading

A/B. Birdwatching day walks.

Focus

Birds

Highlights

- Oriental birdwatching at its best
- Excellent chance of seeing Spoon-billed Sandpiper
- Encounter Himalayan species on Doi Inthenon
- Enjoy wintering 'Sibes' such as Eye-browed Thrush, Radde's & Dusky Warblers
- Long-tailed Broadbill, Green Magpie, hornbills and pittas
- Explore Khao Yai National Park – Thailand's top reserve
- Gibbons and possibility of other forest mammals
- Impressive scenery & fascinating Hill Tribe culture
- Escorted by a top Thai birder



Images from top: Green Magpie (S. Y. Phanich), Great Hornbill (S. Y. Phanich & Spoon-billed Sandpiper (Nuwat Phunsuwan).



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Introduction

Thailand's many natural history attributes have made it one of the most popular Far Eastern destinations for European birders. This exciting Naturetrek tour visits some of Thailand's premier birdwatching locations, including the wetlands of Khok Kham in Samutsakhon province and Baan Paktale, Laem Pakbia in Petchburi Province where attractions include Long-toed Stints and Spoon-billed Sandpipers; Khao Yai, one of Thailand's best-known national parks; and the montane forests surrounding the northern capital, Chiang Mai. Here we can hope to find many of the wintering species from Siberia which send pulses racing when they occur as vagrants in Britain: birds such as Eye-browed Thrush, Scaly (White's) Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, and Radde's Warbler. The exotic residents of Khao Yai's evergreen forests and grasslands include trogons, pittas, broadbills, hornbills and other characteristic birds of South-east Asia, and mixed with these are more winter visitors from the north including Thick-billed Warblers and Brown Flycatchers.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

In flight

We depart London on a scheduled service flight to Bangkok via Dubai.

Day 2

Petchburi

We'll be met on arrival at Bangkok by our guide and we will then drive approximately 50 kilometres to the salt pans, tidal mudflats and mangroves of Khok Kham, which attract a tempting selection of migrant waders. In particular we will be hoping to see the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper as well as other waders. The Spoon-billed Sandpiper migrates from its northern breeding range down the Pacific coast to its main wintering grounds in South and South-east Asia. Spoon-billed Sandpiper has been a regular wintering species at Khok Kham in recent years and we will be hoping to find this small attractive bird - we'll keep a look out for their distinctively shaped bills and feeding style, which consists of a side-to-side motion of the bill as the bird walks forward with its head down.

A day spent at Khok Kham could produce a wide variety of birds including Pond and Little Green Herons, Brown-headed Gull, Whiskered Tern, Pacific Golden, Greater Sand and Lesser Sand Plovers, Wood Sandpiper, Temminck's, Red-necked and Long-toed Stints, White-breasted, White-collared and Black-capped Kingfishers, Yellow-vented Bulbul, Flyeater, Pied Fantail Flycatcher, Black-browed Reed and Great Reed Warblers, White-vented Myna and Asian Pied Starling, plus Brown-throated and Yellow-bellied Sunbirds. As the tide recedes, dozens of fascinating Mudskipper fish temporarily become terrestrial creatures, grazing on the exposed vegetation as brightly coloured crabs scuttle over the mud.

In addition to the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, many rare visitors have been recorded at Khok Kham, including Asiatic Dowitcher and Nordmann's Greenshank.

After our visit to Khok Kham we will then continue to our accommodation by the beach near Laem Pakbia, Petchburi where we will stay for one night.

Day 3

Petchburi/Khao Yai

Today, at Leam Pakbia, we will take a boat to the sand spit (tide and calm seas permitting) to look for the Malaysian and White-faced Plovers as well as seabirds such as Pallas's Gull, Great and Lesser Terns among others.

From Petchburi we will drive the 350 kilometres to our next base near Khao Yai National Park, via Saraburi where we will look for the Limestone Wren-babbler.

Days 4 – 5

Khao Yai

The 542,000 acres of hills which comprise the reserve embrace dry deciduous areas on the lower slopes and damp evergreen forest at higher elevations, interspersed by patches of open grassland. Among the mammals found here are herds of Sambar Deer, Muntjac, Pig-tailed Macaque and noisy White-handed Gibbons which announce each dawn with a frenzy of hooting. Each evening millions of Wrinkle-lipped Bats emerge from their roosting caves to extend like a plume of smoke over the forest as they set off to begin feeding, and on our way back from a first afternoon in the park we will be able to witness this extraordinary phenomenon.

A surfaced road ascends to the highest point of the reserve at over 1,300 metres and from this a network of trails provides access to the forest. Some of these are no more than short tracks, while others can be explored for 10 kilometres or more through pristine jungle, following the course of rushing streams which tumble over picturesque waterfalls as they wind along the contours of the hills. Blue Whistling Thrushes may be found along these streams whilst both Slaty-backed and White-crowned Forktails inhabit certain favoured stretches where forest vegetation forms a canopy over the water. The diversity of birds to be found in the park is impressive but, like all forested areas, Khao Yai does not easily reveal all its secrets and a degree of patience is needed to find some of the more retiring inhabitants. Mixed species feeding flocks are a feature of tropical forests and an encounter with some of these is likely to introduce a number of new birds with each successive wave. The arrival of such a flock is often presaged by the manic chuckling of laughing-thrushes, of which three or four species occur, and Hair-crested or Racket-tailed Drongos swooping from tree to tree as they capture large insects disturbed by the flock. Soon the canopy is filled with dozens of constantly moving small birds all united in a common search for food. For several hectic minutes your binoculars move from one new bird to another, as Striped Tit-babbler and White-bellied Yuhina are replaced by Red-headed Trogon and Verditer Flycatcher, then suddenly the flock has moved on and only a few stragglers remain. The components of each flock vary and sometimes they attract larger spectacular birds like the beautiful Long-tailed Broadbill or the shy Green Magpie. Elsewhere, among the leaf debris of the forest floor we may chance upon a Blue Pitta, a Forest Wagtail or perhaps a superb Scaly Thrush quietly scratching at the litter. Looking for birds

inside the forest is never easy but from the road we can scan over the tops of the trees or watch the forest edge and here we often experience our most memorable encounters. Indian Pied, Wreathed and Great Hornbills may choose to flap from one fruiting tree to another, Moustached Barbets contribute to the chorus of bird calls, and Mountain Imperial Pigeons cluster, plump and contented-looking, in a favourite tree. Seven or eight species of bulbul invite identification, Indian Hanging Parrots hurtle overhead and tapping noises may draw our attention to one of several woodpecker species. Phylloscopus warblers are common in these forests, not just the more familiar Yellow-browed but a confusing mixture of individuals sporting wing bars and crown stripes which require careful watching to separate into species. Three or four species are likely and the subtle differences make identification a tricky process. Rather easier to identify are the wintering Radde's Warblers skulking in roadside vegetation, or the Thick-billed Warblers inhabiting a similar habitat near one of the reserve pools. This same area also witnesses an evening gathering of Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters heading to a communal roost, whilst at dusk, harrier-sized Great-eared Nightjars emerge to glide over the forest.

Over 200 bird species have been recorded at Khao Yai, ensuring that even with the limited time at our disposal we are guaranteed a tremendous start to our Thailand holiday. Some of the residents are widely distributed throughout the reserve, others confined to particular elevations or habitats but among the birds we could hope to find are Red Jungle Fowl, Green-legged Tree-partridge, Crested Serpent-eagle, Thick-billed Green Pigeon, Green-billed Malkoha, Silver-breasted Broadbill, Banded Kingfisher, Indian Roller, Fairy Bluebird, White-rumped Shama, Olive-backed Pipit, Dark-necked Tailorbird, Red-headed and Orange-breasted Trogons, Black Eagle and Buff-bellied Flowerpecker to name just a few more of the possibilities. We will also try to find challenging species such Siamese Fireback, Silver Pheasant and Red-billed Ground Cuckoo, though these can prove elusive!

There is, however, much more to Khao Yai than just the birdlife, stunning though it is. Although only a few hours from Bangkok the reserve represents some of the best remaining tracts of lowland forest in Thailand and is a haven for all forms of wildlife. The flora is impressive, butterfly enthusiasts will find scores of brightly coloured insects to delight them, and herpetologists will not feel neglected as they search for the many reserve reptiles, which range from Flying Lizards and Geckos to various species of snakes.

Day 6

Chiang Mai

We leave Khao Yai after an early breakfast and drive back to Bangkok International Airport to catch a mid-morning domestic flight to the northern city of Chiang Mai. On arrival at this capital of the hill country we transfer to Doi Inthenon Resort Hotel where we will stay for four nights, but before doing so we shall investigate some of the birding sites close to the city. The hills of northern Thailand, which also extend across the national border into Burma, are rich in birdlife, many of the species spending the winter here from further north in Asia, augmenting the resident avifauna which has many affinities with the Himalayan region. An excursion into the paddy fields and scattered bushes just outside Chiang Mai could provide a diverse selection of birds including Chinese Pond Heron, Black-winged Kite, Little Green Bee-eater, Palm Swift, Rufous-winged Bush-

lark, Wire-tailed Swallow, Richard's Pipit, Brown Shrike, Burmese Shrike, Streak-eared Bulbul, Pied Bushchat and Plain-backed Sparrow. Wintering Dusky Warblers are common in this habitat, often revealing their presence in roadside scrub by insistent sharp call notes.

Later we make our way to Doi Inthenon Highland Resort. If we have time we will do some birding in the resort compound in the evening to look for Red-rumped Swallow, Crested Treeswift, Rufous Treepie, Chinese Francolin, Spotted and Asian Barred Owlet among other species.

Days 7 - 8

Doi Inthenon

Doi Inthenon is the highest mountain in Thailand and rises to over 2,500 metres. We will stay at the nearby Highland Resort for four nights and fully utilise our time to explore the dry dipterocarp forests of the lower slopes and the evergreen tracts nearer the summit. Inthenon has a remarkable reputation as one of the best birdwatching locations in northern Thailand and a small patch of swamp near the radar station which crowns the summit has produced many rare birds for visiting birdwatchers. Like Khao Yai, a surfaced road winds from the base of the mountain to the summit permitting easy access to the various levels of vegetation. Any tour member with experience of the Himalayas will find some familiar birds at the higher elevations of Doi Inthenon, species such as Ash-throated Leaf-warbler, Chestnut-crowned Laughing-thrush, Silver-eared Mesia, Chestnut-tailed Minla and Black-headed Sibia. Here too, we should find flocks of Eye-browed Thrushes foraging for berries, and perhaps other scarcer visitors from northern Asia such as Siberian Thrush or Red-flanked Bluetail. A peevish churring call may draw our attention to a curious little Slaty-bellied Tesia bouncing from branch to branch like an animated golf-ball, another bird also found in Himalayan evergreen forests. Green-tailed Sunbirds are common at this altitude, the male a stunningly beautiful bird with maroon mantle, crimson breast and iridescent blue-green head and tail.

As we explore the forested slopes of the mountain we will again be looking for mixed species feeding flocks which are likely to have different components to the bird waves encountered at the slightly lower elevations of Khao Yai. Rufous-winged Fulvetta, Striated Yuhina, White-bellied Yuhina and Grey-headed Flycatcher are four typical members of these flocks, whilst associated species may include Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo, Grey-cheeked Nun-babbler, Rufous-fronted Tree-babbler, Red-billed Scimitar-babbler and Chestnut-fronted Shrike-babbler. Elsewhere in the forest there are many other interesting birds with life styles which do not include habitually joining the feeding flocks, although all birds are opportunist feeders and some individuals may attach themselves to such a flock as it passes by. Some of the other forest residents include Greater Green-billed Malkoha, Golden-throated and Great Barbets, Rosy Minivet, Scarlet Minivet, Blue-winged Leafbird, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, Blue-winged Siva, Black-capped Bulbul, Mountain Bulbul, Ashy Drongo, Maroon Oriole, Grey Tree-Pie, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Golden-spectacled Warbler, Grey Bushchat, Little Pied Flycatcher, White-throated Fantail Flycatcher and Black-naped Monarch.

Wherever there are suitable clearings in the forest we are likely to find Olive-backed Pipits quietly searching for insects below the trees. These are spending the winter months in Thailand from

northern breeding areas, as are the Yellow-browed Warblers which constantly call from the canopy, and the shy White's Thrushes which merge so readily into the background of dead leaves with their marvellously cryptic plumage. As at Khao Yai, Phylloscopus warblers abound in the forest and with over a dozen species possible, enthusiasts will find plenty of wingbars and supercillaries to sort through on frustratingly active little birds. Separating White-tailed from Blyth's Crowned is not the easiest of tasks and is made even harder by the hyper-active behaviour of these canopy dwellers!

At the summit (2,565 metres) we may see White-browed Shortwing Pygmy Wren Babbler and Snow-browed Flycatcher, and we will then descend - at middle elevation we will look for Chestnut-vented Nuthatch as we walk to the lower slopes of the mountain, passing through forests inhabited by six or more species of bulbul, woodpeckers, barbets, warblers and a selection of flycatchers including Verditer, Yellow-bellied Fantail and Large Niltava. Other surprises might include a shrike-sized Collared Falconet, Brown-throated Tree-creeper or perhaps a Chinese Francolin uttering his monotonous 'song' from a concealed perch. Slaty-backed Forktails add their grace and beauty to little streams bubbling through the trees and Black Eagles occasionally soar on broad wings over the canopy. Two other water-lovers that we should find along the tumbling streams are the Himalayan duo of White-capped and Plumbeous Redstarts.

The abundant birdlife of Doi Inthenon will keep us fully occupied during our stay and we will attempt to see as much as we can in the time available. As always in forest habitats, some birds can be frustratingly elusive whilst other unexpected species may suddenly appear but with so much to look for we are unlikely to be disappointed. Apart from the birds mentioned above other possibilities include Common Hawk-cuckoo, Chestnut-crowned Warbler, Rusty-cheeked and Yellow-billed Scimitar-babblers, Spectacled Barwing, Chestnut-backed Sibia, Black-headed Shrike, Chestnut-flanked White-eye, and Common Rosefinch. We are unlikely to find many mammals apart from squirrels, but lovers of butterflies will find another profusion of insects to supplement the earlier observations at Khao Yai.

Day 9

In flight

We will spend one final morning at Doi Inthenon, returning to the hotel for lunch after which we'll drive back to Chiang Mai. Depending on the time available we may be able to do a little shopping or sightseeing before catching an early evening flight to Bangkok, which will connect with our onward flight to London.

Day 10

London

We arrive back in London late morning.

Tour grading

A/B. Birdwatching day walks but at some locations these may be extended to spend maximum time in the field.

Weather

The weather should be pleasantly warm or hot by day. It can feel humid in Bangkok and at Khao Yai although evenings are usually cooler at the latter. In the northern hills it will be generally cooler, when it may become particularly cold at night around Doi Inthenon. Precipitation is unlikely.

Food & accommodation included in the price

The tour cost includes breakfasts, but lunches and evening meals are NOT included. Please allow £10-£20 per day for meals.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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