

Inside this Issue

- 1** Welcome
- 2** Regional news
- 5** Spotlight organisation
- 7** Rarest of the rare
- 8** Project update
- 10** Recently published
- 12** Protected areas
- 12** Staff news

The Babbler

BirdLife International
in Indochina



Welcome to *The Babbler*. This is the second issue of our new-look quarterly report, which we hope you will enjoy reading.

The Babbler will bring to your attention news relating to bird conservation issues in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. For the Regional News section, we will take you to Thailand with long article by Phil Round, and news on the rehabilitation of U Minh Thuong National Park in Vietnam following devastating fires. The Rarest of the Rare in this issue is White-shouldered Ibis, which has an extremely small and rapidly declining population.

The *Babbler* also contains lots of news on project developments, in particular, news on our JBA project, which covers Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. There are reports on a new protected area proposed for Sarus Cranes in Cambodia, as well as a new site for Saola found in Quang Binh province and the recent declaration of Chu Yang Sin National Park in Vietnam.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please let me know at Phuong@birdlife.netnam.vn

The Babbler is also available on the BirdLife website:
www.birdlifevietnam.com (English)
or www.birdlifevietnam.org (Vietnamese)

A Bright-Green, Poisoned Landscape

By Phil Round

I have fond memories of times spent birding in the northern plains of Thailand. It was there that I saw my first Thai Mandarin Duck, Ferruginous Duck and Baer's Pochard in 1983. The bits of northern plain wetland I saw excited me tremendously, since they were full of birds with numerous native trees scattered among the paddies.

It was therefore with a sense of high expectation that Andy Pierce and I, together with Stephen Rumsey and John Willsher of The Wetland Trust, made a tour of Sukhothai Province wetlands during mid-December, 2001. As we motored on towards Sri Satchanalai the unbroken emerald green expanses of bright green 'super-rice' were more or less birdless apart from occasional egrets and there were precious few of those! We found a few bits of traditional paddy stubbles here and there which, in contrast to the avian desert elsewhere, teemed with Barn Swallows, Black Drongos and other insectivorous birds.

The single best wetland site we found was an uncultivated marsh around the outskirts of the newly constructed Sukhothai Airport. We counted 1,200 Little Ringed Plovers flying in to roost on the runway. There were also a further 5,000 Lesser Whistling Duck and 400 or so Garganey roosting on a water body in this area. A lake a few kilometres to the north, Bung Mae Rawing, was disappointing, owing to part of the site having been turned into a picnic area and the lakeshore developed. There were about 2000 Lesser Whistling Duck and a couple of hundred Intermediate Egrets in a swamp at the NE corner. Our attempts at sighting a White-eyed River Martin were unsuccessful. Bung Chorakhe, west of Bung Mae Rawing, looked more promising as it was surrounded by dense growth of reeds. There, we found a roost of Eastern Marsh Harriers. Roughly 1,000 Barn Swallows gathered over the marsh but did not roost here.

Although we found a few things to look at, overall bird numbers in the paddies of the Sukhothai area were disappointingly low. The various bits of rough growth we found here and there held a fair few Long-tailed Shrikes, with totals of up to 40 birds per day, which was mildly encouraging, since this is a species which has declined very sharply in the southern central plains, around Bangkok. But where were the Red-whiskered Bulbuls? Although the extensive areas of tall marsh grasses in this well-watered landscape should have been ideal for them, we found none. So where were they? Had they been reduced to vanishing point by trapping for the bird trade? It wasn't until our sixth day systematically working around the area that we found a few Grey-headed Lapwings. Red-wattled Lapwings were also thin on the ground: we saw just one or two in the same period. In the case of the latter species, though, it is likely that human persecution (taking eggs and young for food) has exerted more of a toll than habitat modification.

The contrast between the relative sterility of the bright green, irrigated, high-yield paddies around Phitsanuloke and Sukhothai, and the richness of traditional paddies, was brought home to me when, I made a visit to Doi Saket District, Chiang Mai Province. There, the paddies are still planted with a traditional variety of glutinous rice, and at the time of my visit in January were classic dry stubbles, with wet patches, and some burnt areas, on which a few water buffaloes grazed. This area still teemed with birds. My ears were assailed with the song of Oriental Skylarks: I estimated minimum 10 pairs in one small area of a few hectares. Flocks of Red-throated Pipits were on view where the stubble was burnt low enough to see them, as were a few migratory Richard's Pipits and the odd pair of resident Paddyfield Pipit. A Yellow-legged Buttonquail was flushed; there were 10 Grey-headed Lapwings on a wet patch, along with Common and Pintail Snipes. Other birds included Indochinese Bushlark, Bluethroat and a

couple of Chestnut-eared Buntings; many Brown Shrikes, Pied Bushchats and Stonechats. In other years I have also had Small Buttonquail and Australasian Bushlark there.

A lot of attention is given to conservation in forests. Yet scant attention is given to the conservation of biodiversity in farmland, and especially in rice paddies, which is as much wetland as farmland. After all, cultivated and settled areas of one sort or another occupy more than 60% of the land area of the country, and still support a great deal of smaller wildlife. Rice paddies are a particularly important habitat for birds, both migrants and residents; waterfowl and a variety of smaller, insectivorous and granivorous birds. Some of the concentrations of migrant waterfowl on rice paddies in Thailand, such as egrets, pratincoles, other waders and ducks, are enough to qualify as internationally important.

We tend to take rice paddies for granted. But in Thailand, as elsewhere, insidious forces are ceaselessly pushing for greater agricultural intensification. This means two or even three crops of irrigated super-rice per year, instead of one crop of floating or deep-water rice as formerly. Whereas traditional rice obtained all the nutrients it required from river-borne silts, and from the dung of animals which grazed on the fields in fallow periods, modern rice varieties, require applications of chemical fertiliser instead. This increases cash outlay, and requires more herbicides to kill weeds, insecticides to kill plant hoppers and other insect pests, and rodenticides to kill rats.

A continuation of present trends will see massive diminution in biodiversity in the rice paddy zone. Rice cultivation, of the "poison-green" sort, will continue in the best irrigated areas, productivity being increased at the cost of the environment, as ever larger quantities of agrochemicals pour into the waterways and rice fields are turned into sterile deserts that support scarcely any living things apart from the rice itself and the



“UMT is a unique ecosystem, and ranked one of the most important wetlands for biodiversity in the Mekong Delta, and thus in all of Vietnam. The site qualifies as an Important Bird Area and as a Ramsar site. This biodiversity is seen in the presence of rare and threatened species of fauna and flora, almost-extinct plant and animal communities, and remarkable biophysical features such as the peat dome itself.

Whilst a large percentage of UMT has been affected by fire, recent observations have shown that the effects have been variable, and much biodiversity has survived. The current level of commitment to UMT by the Government of Vietnam and donors remains strong. This gives a very great opportunity to regain, and to enhance, the previously existing biodiversity.

To assist decision making it is important to always remember that U Minh Thuong is a national park. The management decisions taken must therefore take into account the law and management principles relating to national parks. For example, management objectives of national parks are to conserve representative landscapes, habitats and biodiversity. These objectives are quite different from management objectives for commercial forestry plantations where the objectives may include producing wood for commercial use and making a profit. Management options that may be suitable for commercial forestry plantations can be disastrous and are invariably unsuitable for national parks.

Based on the experience of BirdLife International and others including the Royal Holloway College (which has had an involvement at UMT since 1997), we would like to propose the following management principles for consideration by the workshop:

1. No new canals should be constructed. The construction of new canals will increase rather than reduce the fire risk. Building canals will dry out the peat swamp, by

lowering the water table and allowing faster drainage of the peat. When peat dries, it shrinks. This creates large cracks, which allow air to penetrate. It is this combination of dryness and cracks (shown to UMT and Care staff in 2000 by Professor Edward Maltby, consultant to the Care project) that led to the severity of the 2002 fires. Further drying caused by new canals may make future fires even more severe. Increasing the number of canals will also facilitate access to UMT by poachers, whose cooking fires, cigarette smoking and use of fire to smoke-out bees nests will all increase the fire risk. Management of water levels, rather than building canals, is the key to controlling fire and restoring biodiversity at UMT.

2. A new hydrological management regime is needed, in order to keep the peat wet all year round. This will require careful use of water-gates (sluices). Management of water levels in relation to the soil level will require careful consideration. Good hydrological data already exist at UMT, and data collection must continue. Changes have occurred since the UMT monitoring programme was set up, and so a return visit by a wetland hydrologist and a wetland ecologist is strongly recommended, to guide hydrological restoration efforts before the next dry season. One reason the peat has dried is water off-take by surrounding local communities. Restoring and managing the water table at UMT will therefore increase the hydrological value of the site for local people whose agriculture depends on year round access to freshwater.

3. The high biodiversity of UMT is a reflection of the mosaic of vegetation types found within the national park; management must attempt to maintain or re-establish this mosaic. Species-rich non-forested habitats include various grassland types, and floating aquatic vegetation. Vegetation also differs between peat and mineral soil areas, adding a further dimension to the

site’s biodiversity which management should aim to conserve.

4. *Melaleuca* forest should be allowed to regenerate by itself. Re-seeding is not necessary. *Melaleuca cajuputi* is a robust species, tolerant of fire, drought and poor soils. It rapidly re-grows and colonises areas after fire; new shoots have already been seen at UMT. Re-seeding or replanting, and especially aerial “seed-bombing”, will be financially costly and the job would be better left to natural recolonisation by *Melaleuca*. If this advice is disregarded and you elect to plant or sow *Melaleuca*, it is vitally important that it is of a local (UMT) provenance.

5. It may be neither possible, nor desirable, to prevent all fires. Fire is part of *Melaleuca* ecology and controlled fires should be considered a useful management tool. Make fire your friend not your enemy! However, in dry, cracked peat, fire probably cannot be controlled. Hydrological restoration is essential for the proper control, management and use of fire.

6. Animal life has probably been lost, but no animals should be released in UMT to compensate for this, unless known to have come from UMT in the first place. If any animal species have been lost, they should be able to re-colonise naturally.

7. The fires were a trauma for the ecosystem, and further effects must be expected. For example, some of the peat that appears to have survived has probably been transformed into a hard crust or granules, which will be removed by wind and rain, layer by layer, until either intact peat, mineral soil, or the water table is reached, or the soil is stabilised by re-vegetation. One possible consequence of the fires may be that *Mimosa pigra*, an invasive alien plant species may begin to colonise the national park. In the event of this management advice should be sought.”



Poets and musicians have drawn on birds for inspiration. The model for the mythical *Garuda* is thought to have been the colourful Brahminy Kite – once widespread along rivers throughout the country but now largely restricted to seacoasts, and even there declining.

Birds are important allies of the farmer: by day, Black-shouldered Kites, and by night, Barn Owls, help rid our fields of rats. But we repay their kindness by stealing their young from the nest, for sale as pets. Even those species persecuted because they eat grain, such as Baya Weaver, also eat large quantities of insects, destroying many harmful agricultural pests in the process.

Bird study and conservation

Many birds have small geographical ranges and highly specific habitat requirements. Studies of such birds by BCST members have identified gaps in the coverage of the nation’s protected areas and led to new wildlife sanctuaries being set up. Studies of bird ecology and behavior have helped unlock many mysteries of nature, and taught us the inter-dependence of all living things. In order to protect birds we must protect their habitats. By protecting their habitats, we protect the many other animals and plants which live there too, and ultimately the life-support systems of our planet. Protecting birds is about people!

Bird protection

Almost all bird species in Thailand are already fully protected by law (under the Wild Animals Reservation and Protection Act 1993). Yet there is widespread apathy, and ignorance of wildlife laws, both among government officials and the general public. A wider awareness of the law and better enforcement would enable many birds, whose numbers have been reduced, to recolonize areas from which they have disappeared.

Thailand’s international responsibility

Almost one-third of all birds in Thailand do not stay here to breed but are visitors from Siberia or the Tibetan Plateau. Such migrant birds may actually spend more of the year in Thailand than in their temperate and or arctic breeding grounds, and they depend upon the shelter and food resources provided by our fields and forest, coasts, lakes and marshes. Tens of thousands of ducks, and countless millions of small insect-eating birds, such as swallows, warblers and thrushes, stay throughout the winter.

For others, mainly long-billed wading birds, Thailand is a critical migratory refueling stop en route to Indonesia or, even, Australia. Much of the world population of Asian Dowitcher, feeds on the coastal mudflats at the mouth of the Tachin River, west of Bangkok during the April migration from its Sumatran winter home to its breeding areas in Mongolia and southern Siberia. Yet this internationally important site is completely unprotected.

Thailand must, therefore, join with other Asian countries in collaborating to protect migratory birds. In one sense, migrant birds are roving ambassadors for conservation, helping to promote ever-closer links among close neighbors.

The Bird Conservation Society of Thailand

BCST is the oldest non-governmental wildlife conservation organization in Thailand still in existence. It was first set up in 1962 as the Bangkok Bird Club by a group of expatriates. Close collaboration between this group and the “Father of nature conservation in Thailand”, the late Dr. Boonsong Lekagul, led to the incorporation of birdwatching activities into Dr. Boonsong’s Association for the Conservation of Wildlife. The group was then known by a Thai name Klum Chom Nok Krungthep (Bangkok Birdwatching Group) and later became the Chom Rom Duu Nok Krungthep (Bangkok Bird Club).

In order to enable it to play a fuller role in promoting bird conservation, the club registered as a legal entity and received a permit to become the Bird Conservation Society of Thailand on 12 July 1993. BCST is the BirdLife International, partner for Thailand.

The society’s conservation program

- Birdwatching and nature education camps, and workshops
- Education brochures and other materials
- Exhibitions
- Bird surveys and information gathering
- Surveys of birds in trade
- Donation of funds and equipment to hard-pressed protected area staff
- Lobbying government for better laws and improved conservation action on the ground
- Publicizing threats to birds and their habitats in the media
- Supplying information to, and working closely with, Thai government agencies and international conservation bodies on bird conservation matters in Thailand and the Asia region

Why join?

Make your voice, and your vote, for conservation count by joining the society. As a member of BCST you will be able to:

- Vote during the two-yearly elections for the society’s President and Committees
- Receive the society’s informative monthly bulletin
- Have access to a database of bird species found in all protected areas in Thailand
- Enjoy a members’ discount on field trips and on the wide range of equipment sold by the society [bird identification guides, camping gear, backpacks, belt pouches, T-shirts, gifts and souvenirs]
- Participate fully in the society’s activities.



Rarest of the rare

White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni*

This species has an extremely small, extremely rapidly declining, severely fragmented population as a result of deforestation, drainage of wetlands, hunting and disturbance. It therefore qualifies as **Critical**.



White-shouldered Ibis
Photo: Seng Kim Hout

Identification 75-85 cm. Large, dark ibis with distinctive pale collar, bluish-tinged at close range. Dark overall, blackish, naked head, dull red legs and clean white patch on inner forewing. **Similar species** Red-naped Ibis has red patch on hind crown and nape and lacks white collar. Giant Ibis is much larger with uniformly paler, dark-barred head, upper neck, wing-coverts and secondaries. **Voice** Territorial birds utter loud, hoarse screaming *errrrrh* or *errrrroh* and moaning *errh errh errh*. Also screams mixed with honking *errrh owk owk owk* and more subdued *ohhaaa ohhaaa* and *errr-ah*. **Hints** Search permanent wetlands in the Mekong lowlands during the dry season or remote forested rivers in Kalimantan.

Range and Population White-shouldered Ibis occurs at a few sites in northern **Cambodia**, southern **Vietnam**, extreme southern **Laos** and East Kalimantan (**Indonesia**). It was previously widely but patchily distributed across much of Thailand, Laos, south and central Vietnam and Cambodia, parts of Myanmar, Kalimantan (Indonesia), Sarawak (Malaysia) and south-west Yunnan, China, but has declined dramatically during the 20th century. It is extinct in Thailand and there are no recent records from Myanmar. In 1997, its population was estimated at < 2,500 birds, but it is more likely to be < 250 mature individuals.

Ecology It inhabits lakes, pools, marshes and slow-flowing watercourses in open, level lowland dipterocarp forest, often subject to seasonal flooding. It also occurs in sparsely wooded, dry or wet grasslands and wide rivers with sand and gravel bars.

Threat It has declined as a result of habitat loss, through logging of lowland forest and drainage of wetlands for agriculture (most of the Mekong floodplain in southern Laos has been converted to rice-paddy), livestock-grazing, grass harvesting, and development. Habitat loss has been compounded by hunting for food and disturbance, leading to the loss of secure feeding, roosting and nesting areas. Disturbance and persecution are probably now the greatest threats.

Conservation It occurs in several protected areas, including Cat Tien National Park, Vietnam, where it probably breeds, Ang Trapeang Thmor, Cambodia, and Xe Pian Protected Area and Dong Khanthung proposed protected area, Laos. It is depicted on public awareness material distributed in Laos and Cambodia.

Project update

PARC: Survey of Yok Don National Park

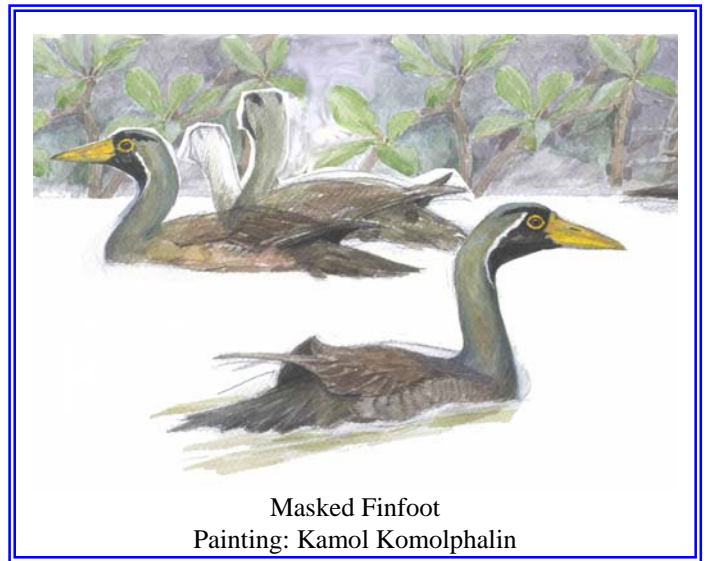
During May 2002, as part of the *Creating Protected Areas for Resource Conservation using Landscape Ecology* (PARC) Project, scientists from BirdLife International conducted a rapid biodiversity survey of Yok Don National Park.

The field survey recorded a total of 14 mammal species, 178 bird species and seven reptile species. In particular, a number of significant discoveries from a conservation perspective, were made during the survey. Firstly, the presence of the globally vulnerable Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personata* was confirmed on the Serepok River. The occurrence of a male in breeding condition at this time of year strongly suggests that the species may breed in the national park. This represents only the fourth recent record of this species from Vietnam. In addition, the presence of populations of the globally vulnerable Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* and near-threatened Grey-headed Fish Eagle *I. ichhyaetus* and Lesser Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis* all increase the conservation importance of the Serepok River.

A threat evaluation identified the major threats to biodiversity at the site to be inappropriate and ill-considered infrastructure development, in particular the construction of a dam on the Dak Ken River, and the construction of surfaced highway to Yok Don hill. On the Serepok River we discovered moderate to high levels of commercial fishing by local people, who were using both gill nets and electro-fishing equipment. The clearance of forest for agriculture,

Taiwanese support for IBA programme in Vietnam

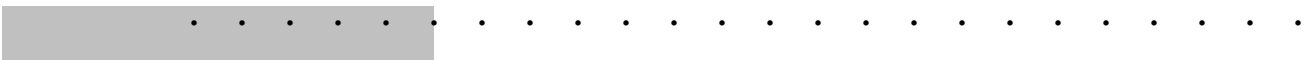
In July 2002, the Taiwan Council of Agriculture provided a US\$5,000 grant in support of the IBA programme in Vietnam. This grant is matching funding to the project *Improved Conservation Planning through Institutional Strengthening in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*. The grant will allow the IBA programme in Vietnam to be expanded to include additional innovative conservation activities at key IBAs, in particular the development of IBA Support Groups. BirdLife International in Indochina would like to express its thanks to the Taiwan Council of Agriculture for its support.



hunting, over-exploitation of non-timber forest products, timber extraction, and isolation from nearby forest areas were also identified as issues facing the national park. Based on the results of the survey and threat evaluations, a serial of conservation recommendations were made by the team in order to contribute to the on-going efforts of the PARC Project to protect the unique biodiversity values of Yok Don National Park.



Mr Huang Nan Huei, Representative of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, Hanoi, Vietnam, presenting Jonathan Eames with a cheque on Tuesday 16 July



IBA PROJECT: MORE NEW SITES FOR SARUS CRANE IN CAMBODIA

During May 2002, a series of rapid field surveys were conducted in Cambodia by BirdLife, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Department of Forestry (DoF) and the Nature Conservation and Protection Department (NCPD). These surveys resulted in the discovery of two new non-breeding sites for the globally threatened Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*.

Sarus Crane breeds in forested areas of northern and eastern Cambodia, where it has a scattered distribution. During the non-breeding season, the bird congregates at a number of wetland sites in Cambodia and Vietnam. Prior to 2001, only three major non-breeding sites were known in the region: Ang Tropaeng Thmor in north-western Cambodia, and Tram Chim and Kien Luong in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. Then, in 2001, surveys by BirdLife, WCS, DoF, NCDP and the International Crane Foundation (ICF) resulted in the discovery of a major non-breeding site in Takeo province, in the Mekong Delta region of Cambodia. Most recently, the May 2002 surveys revealed the presence of two additional sites: in Kampong Trach district, Kampot province, and in Sre Ambel district, Koh Kong province.

The site in Kampong Trach district is an area of seasonally inundated grassland and *Melaleuca* scrub, close to the border with Vietnam. This area is an extension of the Ha Tien plain, in Kien Giang province, Vietnam, which, in recent years, has supported the largest known non-breeding concentrations of Sarus Crane.

According to information from local people, the site supports between 80 and 150 cranes each year. Unfortunately, large areas of natural habitat at the site have already been converted into aquacultural ponds and agricultural land, and drainage canals have been dug into the largest remaining areas of seasonally inundated grassland. Without immediate and concerted conservation action, it is likely that importance of the site for Sarus Crane will decline dramatically within the next few years.

The site in Sre Ambel district is an area of *Melaleuca* woodland, interspersed with patches of agricultural land and seasonally inundated grassland, bordered by an area of mangrove forest. On a previous visit to the site, in December 2001, the survey team saw a small flock of Sarus Cranes in flight over the Sre Ambel river but were unable to determine where the birds were coming from or going to. During the May 2002 survey, the team visited Veal Kriil village, which is Khmer for "Sarus Crane swamp". The team observed Sarus Crane and Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*, and received reports that Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* also occurs along the coast. Information from local people indicates that only around 10 Sarus Cranes visit the site each year. Moreover, the seasonally inundated grassland patches are threatened with conversion to agricultural land. While not being the highest conservation priority, the site does, however, support a unique mosaic of habitats, and is worthy of further study..

At last, a population of White-shouldered Ibis!

Of all the large waterbirds in Indochina, the species that has undergone the most dramatic decline is White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni*. In the first half of the twentieth century, the species was described as "common" in parts of Cambodia, and also occurred in Thailand and Vietnam. The species is now believed extinct in Thailand and known from only two sites in Vietnam, neither of which is believed to support a viable population. In Cambodia, where recent years have seen a resurgence of fieldwork following decades of instability, there have been only a few, scattered records of this species. The lack of recent records contrasts markedly with the discovery of significant populations of Giant Ibis, a species previously considered rarer than its smaller relative.



White-shouldered Ibis
Photo: Jack Tordoff

In May 2002, a team from BirdLife, WCS, DoF, NCDP and Virachey National Park spent five days in western Siem Pang district, Stung Treng province, northern Cambodia. This site was selected as the focus of a survey for White-shouldered Ibis

because two captive juvenile birds, reportedly taken from a nest in the west of the district, were seen during a previous survey. In addition, the site is bordered to the north by Xe Pian Protected Area in Laos, the only site in that country with confirmed recent records of White-shouldered Ibis.

On the first day of the survey, one member of the team made a reconnaissance trip to a seasonal pool, in an area of rice fields, close to Siem Pang town, where he saw two White-shouldered Ibis feeding among domestic buffalo and cattle. The following day, the team waited at this pool, in an attempt to photograph the birds. While the team was waiting, a group of local people passed through the area. When interviewed, they reported seeing a flock of White-shouldered Ibis

BirdLife International in Indochina

earlier that morning, at another pool, further from the town. On the way to check out these reports, the team flushed a group of four White-shouldered Ibis from a rain-filled ox-cart track. Later on that same day, a further two birds were seen at the pool mentioned by the local people. On the following day, a single bird was seen and photographed at this pool.

Four records, of a total of 10 birds, over only three days are quite unprecedented. These records were particularly surprising given that they

were all within 8 km of Siem Pang town, and at wetlands with moderate to high levels of human disturbance. However, the records lend credence to reports by local people that White-shouldered Ibises visit their rice fields at the start of the dry season, in flocks of 10 to 15, in the company of Woolly-necked Storks *Ciconia episcopus* and other large waterbirds.

To date, western Siem Pang district is the only site in Indochina known to support a significant population of White-shouldered Ibis, a critically endangered species. In addition, the

site supports a number of other species of conservation concern, such as Giant Ibis *Pseudibis gigantea*, Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*, Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* and a suite of riverine species, including Great Thick-knee *Esacus recurvirostris*, River Tern *Sterna aurantia* and Mekong Wagtail *Motacilla samveasnae*. Furthermore, local people report that the site supports a significant population of Eld's Deer *Cervus eldi*. The site should, therefore, be considered a priority for conservation action.

NEW SITES FOR SAOLA FOUND IN QUANG BINH PROVINCE

Between 16 and 26 June 2002, Birdlife International in Indochina, the Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources and Quang Binh Provincial Forest Protection Department conducted a bird and mammal survey in Le Thuy and Quang Ninh districts, Quang Binh province. This survey formed part of the Danida-funded project *Improved conservation planning through institutional strengthening in Cambodia, Lao and Vietnam*.

Although no detailed zoological studies had been carried out prior to the survey, Le Thuy and Quang Ninh districts were predicted to support a number of endemic taxa, due to their location within the Annamese Lowlands Endemic Bird Area (EBA). These predictions turned out to be correct when the survey team found four pairs of Saola *Pseudoryx nghetinhensis* horns in the possession of local hunters, two of which belonged to animals hunted in the previous two months. Saola, which was only described by western scientists in 1992, is known from a few sites in the Annamite mountains, along the Vietnam-Laos border. The records from Le Thuy and Quang Ninh districts reveal the presence of a previously unknown population, possibly one of the most significant remaining in the world.

Other exciting zoological discoveries made during the survey included a specimen of the recently discovered Annamite Striped Rabbit *Nesolagus timminsi*, collected in Le Thuy district, and the horns of a Giant Muntjac *Megamuntiacus vuquangensis*, seen in a hunter's house in Quang Ninh district.

Regarding the bird fauna of Le Thuy and Quang Ninh districts, the results of the survey indicate that it is typical of the Annamese Lowlands EBA. Three restricted range species were recorded: Annam Partridge *Arbophila merlini*, Crested Argus *Rheinardia ocellata* and Short-tailed Scimitar Babbler *Jabouilleia danjoui*. In addition, the area supports suitable



Saola horns found in Quang Binh.

habitat for three other restricted-range species (Edwards's Pheasant *Lophura edwardsi*, Imperial Pheasant *L. imperialis* and Sooty Babbler *Stachyris herberti*), although precise information about these species could not be obtained. Other key species recorded during the survey included Lesser Fish-eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis*, Brown Hornbill *Anorrhinus tickelli*, Red-collared Woodpecker *Picus rabieri* and Long-tailed Broadbill *Psarisomus dalhousiae*, all of which are listed in the *Red Data Book of Vietnam* or the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*. Based on the results of the survey, the area qualifies as an Important Bird Area (IBA), an internationally important site for the conservation of birds. Unfortunately, Saola and many of the other key species in the area are under high hunting pressure. This pressure is being exacerbated as the area is exposed to outside market forces, a process that is likely to accelerate once the Ho Chi Minh National Highway, which bisects the area, is completed. Now that this area has been brought to the attention of the local government and the conservation community, it is to be hoped that immediate conservation action will be forthcoming to protect this excellent example of the Annamese lowlands ecosystem.

NEW PROTECTED AREA PROPOSED FOR SARUS CRANES

The floodplain of the Bassac river contains some of the largest areas of seasonally inundated grassland remaining in the Mekong Delta. This habitat, which is important for a number of globally threatened bird species, was once widespread throughout the delta but has been reduced dramatically in extent as a result of conversion to agricultural land.

One of the largest remaining areas of seasonally inundated grassland is in Borei Chulsar and Koh Andeth districts in south-eastern Takeo province, Cambodia, along the international border with Vietnam. During 2001 and 2002, a series of surveys were conducted in this area by BirdLife International, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the International Crane Foundation, the Wildlife Protection Office of the Department of Forestry and Wildlife, the Department of Nature Conservation and Protection of the Ministry of Environment, and Takeo Provincial Forestry and Wildlife Office. The results of these surveys revealed that the area is important for a number of key

bird species. In particular, it supports a hitherto unknown major non-breeding population of Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*. In fact, the area is the second most important dry season site for the species in Cambodia after Ang Tropeang Thmor Conesevation Area in Banteay Meanchey province.

In response to the discovery of the importance of the area for wetland conservation, the Department of Forestry and

Improved conservation planning through capacity building in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. All participants at the workshop strongly supported the establishment of a protected area, for the benefit not only of Cambodian people but also of the world. The participants proposed that this protected area should be called Prek Lapouv Sarus Crane Conservation Area.

Following the workshop, the Department of Forestry and Wildlife prepared an official proposal for the establishment of a 9,275 ha protected area. This proposal has been approved by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and is currently awaiting approval by the Council of Ministers. The next step will be to set up a conservation team comprising staff from the Department of Forestry and Wildlife, Takeo Provincial Forestry and Wildlife, and Fisheries Offices, and the police and military police in Borei Chulsar and Koh Andeth districts. This team will be responsible for protecting the birds and eliminating all illegal activities occurring at the site.



Sarus Crane. Photo: Doan Hong

Wildlife, organised a workshop to gather ideas and comments from all stakeholders related to the establishment of a protected area in Borei Chulsar and Koh Andeth districts. This workshop was held in Takeo province on 10 May 2002, with the support of the Danida funded project

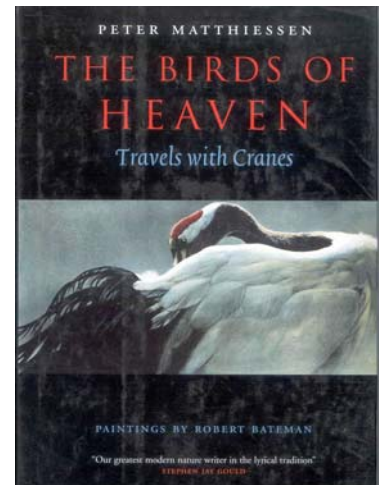
Recently published

The Birds of Heaven: Travel with Cranes. By Peter Matthiessen (2001). The Harvill Press, London.

Once regarded as messengers from heaven, presaging longevity and good fortune, cranes appear in the ancient myth and legend of many

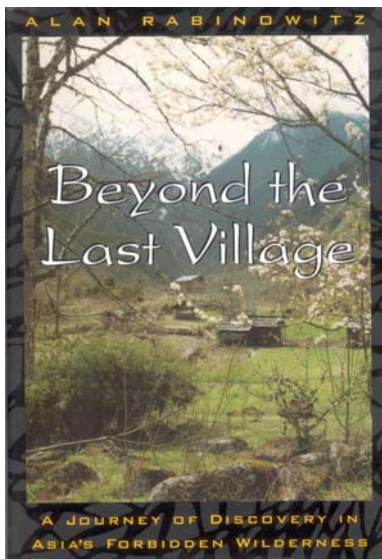
cultures. Today, they evoke the retreating wilderness, the vanishing horizons of clean water, earth and air upon which their species-and ours too-depends for survival.

In *The Birds of Heaven*, Peter Matthiessen has woven his accounts of jounries undertaken over more than a decade in search of the 15 remaining species of crane. From the scarcely populated Amur Valley in



Siberia, he travels gradually west and south across Asia, through Australia, Africa and Europe (where the crane population has made a resurgence), ending up on the American Gulf Coast. He is joined by conservationists, scientists and enthusiasts of all nationalities, along with indigenous people—from Mongolian herdsmen to Aborigines in Australia-whose fates are entwined with the cranes. Illustrated with colour plates by the renowned Canadian wildlife artist Robert Bateman, *The Birds of Heaven* captures the beauty of endangered species and the dilemma of a planet in ecological crisis.

Beyond the Last Village: A Journey of Discovery in Asia's Forbidden Wilderness. By Alan Rabinowitz (2001) Island Press / A Shearwater book, Washington, Covelo and London.



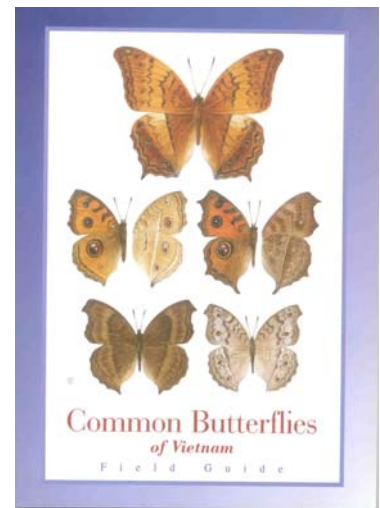
This is a book about exploration, danger, and discovery in a remote area of the planet where the greatest necessity is salt, where people plow the earth using themselves as the beasts of burden, and where the main source of meat is a group of primitive species that are little known outside of the region.

In 1993, Alan Rabinowitz, called 'the Indiana Jones of wildlife science' by the *New York Times*, first set foot in Myanmar, the country known until 1989 as Burma, hoping to survey the country's wildlife and convince the government to establish protected areas. In the event-filled years that followed, as the Myanmar government allowed Rabinowitz and his Wildlife Conservation Society team to travel to increasingly remote areas, he succeeded beyond all expectations, not only discovering species new to science but also playing a vital role in wildlife preservation, including the creation of Hkakaborazi National Park, now one of South-East Asia's largest protected areas.

As we travel with the author on a 500 mile trek through this "lost world" of northern Myanmar-located at the south-east edge of the Himalayas, where tropical rainforest and snow-covered mountains join, we meet the Rawang, a former slave group, the Taron, a solitary enclave of the world's only pygmies of Asian ancestry, and Myanmar Tibetans living in the furthest reaches of the mountains. We enter the territories of strange, majestic-looking beasts that few people have ever heard of and fewer have seen: Golden Takin, Red Goral, Blue Sheep, and Black Barking Deer. And we glimpse an inner territory as well. Interwoven with his scientific expedition in Myanmar and helping to inform his understanding of the people he met and the situation he encountered, is a more personal journey of discovery. The extraordinary people the author befriended and his experiences in the rugged landscape of the region help him come to grips with the traumas of his past and recognize that the world stops being a wonderous place only when we stop thinking of it as such. *Beyond the Last Village* is a story that is at once scientific adventure, personal journey, and passionate account of successful

human and wildlife conservation, written by one of the world's great modern explorers.

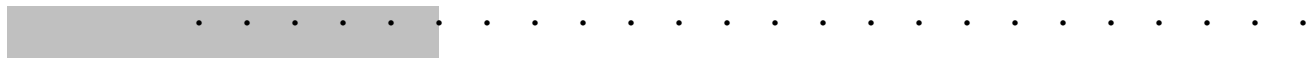
Common Butterflies of Vietnam: Field Guide. By Alexander Monastyrskii, Alexei Devyatkin and Wendy Gibbs (2002) Labour and Social Affairs Publishing House, Hanoi.



This long awaited field guide, written by the leading authorities on Vietnam's butterfly fauna and beautifully illustrated, represents the first illustrated guide to the butterflies of Vietnam.

Beginning with a brief overview of basic aspects of butterfly morphology, lifecycles, behaviour and conservation, the guide provides clear and concise information about 105 of the most common and widespread butterfly species found in Vietnam, which represents around 10 percent of the fauna of the country.

Available in both English and Vietnamese versions, this attractive and informative guide is highly recommended and suitable for those with a casual interest and more serious researchers alike. Copies may be obtained from the IUCN office



Protected areas

Chu Yang Sin is upgraded to National Park

The Vietnamese Prime Minister, Phan Van Khai recently made a decision to upgrade Chu Yang Sin Nature Reserve to National Park status. The new National Park will be managed by Daklak Provincial Peoples's Committee.

This is the latest in a series of protected areas to be upgraded to national park status. Chu Yang Sin now becomes the second national park in Daklak province, together with Yok Don, which was decreed in 1991.

Staff news

Neil Furey has recently joined BirdLife to assist with the implementation of the Danida-funded project *Improved conservation planning through institutional strengthening in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*.

During the coming months, Neil will be principally involved in desk research and compilation of the *Directory of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Vietnam*, which is planned for publication later this year.

Neil graduated with an honours degree from Cranfield University in 1999. Following this, he served almost three years as a conservation biologist with the Frontier-Vietnam Forest Research Programme, leading several expeditions in protected and non-protected areas in northern Vietnam.



Compiled and edited by Vu Thi Minh Phuong, Communications Officer

For more information, contact: phuong@birdlife.netnam.vn
#11, Lane 167, Tay Son, Hanoi; Tel/Fax: ++844 851 7217;
Website: <http://www.birdlifevietnam.com> (English)
<http://www.birdlifevietnam.org> (Vietnamese)