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Myanmar (Burma) Custom Tour

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Jerdon's Minivet, Bagan

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This custom tour to Burma took us to Bagan, Mount Victoria, Kalaw and Lake Inle, wonderful introduction to this country and its host of endemic and specialty birds. At Bagan we found all the hoped for dry-zone endemics – Hooded Treepie, Jerdon's Minivet, Burmese Bushlark and White-throated Babbler together with White-tailed Stonechat along the Irrawady river. Mount Victoria allowed us wonderful views of the endemic White-browed Nuthatch and other specialties such as Chin-hills and Scaly-breasted Wren Babblers, Spot-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Brown-capped, Assam and Striped Laughingthrushes, Red-faced Liocichla, Mount Victoria Babax, Rusty-fronted and Streak-throated Barwing, Kalij Pheasant, Black-browed and Black-bibbed Tits, Yellow-billed Blue Magpie and the increasingly rare Mr's Hume's Pheasant.

At the pleasant hill-station at Kalaw we found Spectacled Barwing, Black-backed Sibia, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler, Collared Myna, Brown-breasted Bulbul and Black-headed Greenfinch. We finished the tour at the immense Lake Inle with excellent views of Jerdon's Bushchat, yet more Collared Mynas and congregations of wintering wildfowl which included at least 2 Baikal Teal. Our species total was 293 in 11 days.

After an overnight stop in the attractive capital city of Yangon we took a short flight early next morning to the town of Bagan on the banks of the mighty Irrawady River. In the afternoon we began our exploration of this fascinating landscape – where the semi-desert landscape with scrub and scattered acacia trees is home to a spectacular archeological treasure with hundreds of ancient pagodas which draw many tourists to the area. Our first afternoon found an excellent variety of dry-zone species including our first endemics – White-throated

Babbler and Burmese Bushlark giving excellent views. The area is home to many wintering species and we soon notched up a good selection including Dusky, Yellow-browed, Tickell's and Buff-throated Warblers, Wryneck, Burmese and Brown Shrikes, Thick-billed Warbler and a flyover Oriental Honey-Buzzard.

Despite superb camouflage we managed excellent views of a group of 6 Indian Thick-knees.

The following morning we birded another area nearby and found some excellent birds including Yellow-eyed Babbler, Plaintive Cuckoo and 3 flushed Rain Quail before we struck lucky with our two remaining endemics appearing in quick succession; firstly a small party of furtive Jerdon's Minivets passed through, including a super orange-bibbed male, then a dapper grey and black Hooded Treepie with characteristic spoon-shaped tail appeared nearby allowing us excellent views before disappearing just as quickly. Further exploration produced more exciting winterers including Blue-throated Flycatchers, Durian Redstart and Siberian Rubythroat. Overhead we saw Eastern Marsh and Pied Harrier, Peregrine and Shikra were new.

In the afternoon we took a relaxing boat journey south along the Irrawady River. Good numbers of shorebirds here included a single Curlew and good numbers of Common & Wood Sandpipers, Temminck's Stint and Little Ringed Plover but the highlight were the 2 River Lapwing which gave nice views on the sandy river bank. Careful scanning of the banks also produced many scuttling Sand Larks, Eastern Yellow Wagtail and three different forms of White Wagtail (*albifrons*, *baicalensis* & *alboides*)

Stopping on a large grassy island we found small flocks of Red Avadavat including some gorgeous red males, our first Striated Prinia and several sightings of White-tailed Stonechats although the males were frustratingly elusive. On the return journey the many pipits and wagtails venturing out onto the shore to feed were being constantly harried by a hunting Laggar Falcon.



Brown-capped Laughingthrush, Mt Victoria



Streak-throated Barwing, Mt Victoria

The next day we departed early, initially heading south to cross the Irrawady at Chauk before heading west into an undulating landscape of sparse scrubby forest and we made our first stop of the day when sharp eyes spotted a pair of White-eyed Buzzards perched by the roadside which gave great views and we also located a Long-billed Pipit and a surprise flock of White-shouldered Starlings.

Continuing onwards we made several birding spots en route which produced Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Rose-ringed and Grey-headed Parakeet, Indochinese Cuckooshrike, Brown and Rufescent Prinia, Bronzed and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, Rufous-fronted Babbler, Pin-striped Tit-Babbler, Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, White-browed Fantail and a female Kalij Pheasant which surprised us by exploding from the gully below and giving great views as she glided across the road in front of us before scuttling up the slope into the forest. Approaching Kampetlet, the last town on our journey a Red-billed Blue Magpie showed perched in the open at the roadside before we arrived just before dawn at our comfortable rustic lodge on the edge of Mount Victoria National Park.

Arguably the star bird at Mount Victoria is the endemic White-browed Nuthatch, found only on the upper slopes of Mount Victoria and other nearby peaks, thus we departed predawn the next morning seeing Jungle Cat on the track and prolonged views of a Grey Nightjar perched on a roadside stump (a daily feature thereafter). In the rather chilly stunted oak and rhododendron forest we eagerly awaited sunrise and were not disappointed as the

birds suddenly burst into life and we soon picked out the distinctive piping calls of the White-browed Nuthatch and enjoyed fine views as they fed above our heads on the mossy oak trunks. As the nuthatches finally melted away we began to concentrate on the other specialties; calling Brown-capped Laughingthrushes, a near-endemic found only in west Burma and Assam in India, were teased closer and finally gave excellent views as did 2 restricted range species which following recent taxonomic changes are similarly shared only with Assam; an active Chin Hills Wren-Babbler (split from the 'Long-tailed' Wren-Babbler complex) came in at super close range although good binocular views of this fast moving bird were difficult then we enjoyed great views of a noisy group of Assam Laughingthrush (split from the 'Chestnut-crowned' complex). As we made our way down the birds continued to perform; both Whiskered and Stripe-throated Yuhinas, an amazingly cooperative Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler, a smart Ashy Wood Pigeon and striking Chestnut-headed Tesia bouncing in the understory, together with more widespread species which were to become very familiar; Rusty-fronted Barwing, Green Shrike Babbler, Red-flanked Bluetail, Yellow-bellied Fantail, Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher, Grey Bushchat, Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, Mountain Tailorbird, Black-faced, White-tailed Leaf and Ashy-throated among an abundance of Buff-barred Warblers, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Rufous-winged and White-browed Fulvetta and the ubiquitous Grey Sibia. Several Hill-Partridges calling nearby were impossible to see in thick undergrowth on the steep slopes but Black Eagle, Common Buzzard and Mountain Hawk-Eagle were seen very well. The day finished in style with the recently-split, near-endemic Mount Victoria Babax (split from Chinese Babax) and an entertaining group of Streak-throated Barwings.



Black-throated Tit, Mt Victoria, Burma

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Moving lower down into the evergreen forest over the next two days added a variety of new species including Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babblers in bamboo, a shy Yellow-billed Blue Magpie, Eurasian Jay, Golden-throated Barbet, Maroon Oriole, 3 species of Minivet (Grey-chinned, Long-tailed and Short-billed), Large Niltava, Pale Blue Flycatcher, White-tailed Nuthatch and a strangely disjunct population of Black-bibbed Tit. Taxonomic interest continued with sightings of Bianchi's and Whistler's Warbler, both recent splits from the *seicercus* complex. The highlight here however was the group of 4 Mr's Hume's Pheasant (3 males and a female) which crossed the road ahead of us and were fortunately refound in the nearby forest, including a close flyby from a spectacular male.

Moving down into the lower altitude on our final day provided yet more thrills, in scrubby clearings here Assam and Brown-capped Laughingthrushes were joined by Red-faced Liocichla which frustrated by delivering their sweet whistled song from the densest thickets before we found a nice group feeding by the roadside which proved much more cooperative. In these dense thickets we also finally found the recently split Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler – the birds here retaining this name following the splitting up of the complex of the same name – which is found only in west Myanmar and Assam – yet another regional specialty for this fantastic area.

Striped Laughingthrush was strangely silent and it was not until the late afternoon that we finally found them moving through a nearby scrubby area, albeit still silently.

Pines and blossoming trees in the area attracted large numbers of Common Rosefinch, Slender-billed Oriole and Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush with Crested Finchbill, Flavescent Bulbul, Common Hill-Myna and Black-throated Prinia (split from Hill Prinia) in the scrubby grasslands.

While remaining deciduous forest held Stripe-breasted and Bay Woodpeckers, Grey-hooded and White-spectacled Warblers. Rusty-capped Fulvetta and Grey-throated Babbler.

Even a short interlude at the lodge for lunch was productive with a flyover Eurasian Hobby the only one of the tour.

The return drive back to Bagan was again broken by several birding spots, the first being particularly productive with no less than 3 huge White-bellied Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Parakeets, Crested Treeswift, Red-billed Blue Magpie, Rufous Treepie and both Lesser & Greater Necklaced Laughingthrushes.

Further on we had distant views of a smart Yellow-footed Green Pigeon perched high in a treetop and closer to Chauk another spoon-tailed Hooded Treepie swooped low across the road in front of our jeep.



Collared & White-vented Myna, Kalaw



Collared Myna, Kalaw

The following morning we took a flight to Heho via a short stopover in Mandalay and made our way to the pleasant climes of Kalaw hill station. The first afternoon we explored several areas close to town and found several interesting species; several Brown-breasted and Sooty-headed Bulbuls performed well and we saw our first Black-headed Greenfinch, Oriental Turtle Dove, Chestnut Bunting, White-browed Laughingthrushes, Blue-throated Barbet and Dark-backed Sibia, here of the distinctive race *castanoptera* with bright rufous markings on wings coverts and tertials.

We spent the whole of the next day walking to and from Yay-aye-kan Reservoir and birding in the surrounding remnant evergreen forest. Pin-tailed Green Pigeon, Orange-bellied Leafbird, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, Slender-billed and Black-hooded Orioles, Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Ashy, Black and Mountain Bulbul, Blue Whistling Thrush and White-crowned Forktail on the forest streams. Among a variety of wintering warblers, Greenish were new and good numbers of *seicercus* warblers included the recently described Martens's Warbler (*Seicercus omeiensis*) the first record of the species in Burma.

On the forest edge we found several Spectacled Barwing, Siberian Rubythroat, Daurian Redstart, showy White-browed & Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babblers and a singing Silver-eared Laughingthrush (another split from the former Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush) in the early morning and a fruiting tree here attracted our first Silver-eared Mesia, Blue-throated Barbet and Brown-breasted Bulbul. In the afternoon the area held large flocks of Common Rosefinch, Little and Chestnut Bunting and 2 Chinese Francolin.

The next morning was spent around the town where we saw our only Black-collared Starlings of the tour and a large White-vented Myna flock held at least 2 of the rather localized Collared Myna which is surely easier to see in Burma than anywhere else in the world.

After driving to the town of Nyaung Shwe on the north shore of Lake Inle we spent our final afternoon exploring this immense lake by boat – the lake is a popular tourist attraction for visitors wishing to see the beautiful Buddhist pagodas and the famous 'leg-rowing' style of the local boatman but is an important bird area holding large numbers of wintering wildfowl and other specialties. Our time was spent exploring the lake fringes where the less disturbed areas held many thousands of wintering wildfowl – Lesser Whistling-Duck, Garganey, Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and Coot predominated with smaller numbers of Indian Spot-billed Duck and Ruddy Shelduck. *Aythya* duck were scarcer with only Tufted Duck identified. Diligent searching of the flocks was well rewarded however when we located 2 Baikal Teal – one male still in partial summer-plumage, among a large group of Common Teal and Garganey – a very rare vagrant to south-east Asia.



Brown-breasted Bulbul, Kalaw



Jerdon's Bushchat, Lake Inle

Floating mats of vegetation lining the lake fringes were home to excellent numbers of herons and egrets including several Purple Heron and a single Yellow Bittern, yet more Eastern Yellow and Citrine Wagtails, large numbers of Pheasant-tailed and smaller numbers of Bronze-winged Jacanas and a single Indian Swamphen posing in the open.

Several Eastern Marsh Harriers and a single Pied Harrier hunted the reedbeds which held many Siberian Stonechats, Black-browed Reed Warblers, Striated Prinia and a single Striated Grassbird.

Amongst the Vinous-breasted and Common Mynas we saw several flyover groups of Collared Myna including an impressive group of 60+ going to roost in the reedbed.

After lots of searching without success it was late afternoon (as seems typical) before we located our first Jerdon's Bushchat but by dusk we had seen more than 12 with excellent views of both male and female birds.

Our final morning left little time for birding before our flight back to Yangon but we added Collared Kingfisher to the trip-list and yet another group of Collared Mynas over the town. Our final few hours in Yangon waiting for international flights gave the final additions in the form of House Swift, Coppersmith Barbet and Black-eared Kite.

Our total in 11 full-days of birding was 305 species including 12 which were only heard.



Sunset at Bagan

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