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Philippines Custom Tour –

Hamut Camp [Luzon], Cebu, Bohol

6th – 17th April 2007

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Participants: Magnus Jaderblad & Eja Blomqvist



Steere's Pitta – Rajah Sikatuna National Park, Bohol (Rob Hutchinson/Birdtour Asia)

This short custom tour visiting Mount Dos Cuernos (more commonly known as Hamut Camp), Tabunan Forest on Cebu and Rajah Sikatuna National Park on Bohol was designed to find some of the species and distinct sub-species not seen by Magnus during his two previous visits to the Philippines.

At Hamut Camp, Whiskered Pitta, Philippine Eagle Owl, Green-faced Parrotfinch, Rusty-faced Babbler, Golden-crowned Babbler and Luzon Striped Babbler were all new while Philippine Scops Owl and Luzon Bleeding-heart had only been heard previously.

On Cebu the expected Black Shama and Cebu (Streak-breasted) Bulbul performed well but the very rare Cebu Flowerpecker was not recorded despite considerable effort.

Bohol produced a whole host of hoped-for specialties and we had great views of Steere's Pitta, Visayan Wattled Broadbills, 'Samar' Hornbill, Blue Fantail, Yellow-breasted Tailorbird, Rufous-lored Kingfisher and an amazing encounter with the rare Mindanao Bleeding-heart. Mention should also go to two special endemic mammals – Philippine Colugo and Philippine Tarsier.

The arrival over the Easter weekend had led to the cancellation of our flight north to Tuguegarao so we instead made the journey by road. Fortunately traffic was almost non-existent and by late afternoon we were already relaxing in our comfortable hotel. There were few opportunities for birding during the journey but White-breasted Wood-Swallows, Brown and Long-tailed Shrikes, Striated Grassbirds and both Blue-tailed and Blue-throated Bee-eater regularly graced roadside perches and a single Oriental Pratincole, Philippines Serpent Eagle and a stunning male Pied Harrier were also spotted from the vehicle.

We departed early the next morning heading east into the foothills of the northern Sierra Madre Mountains, utilizing the classic Filipino 'Jeepney' to cope with the rough roads. Both Buff-banded and Barred Rails were spotted feeding on the track from the vehicle before arriving at our destination of Baliway Village where Oriental Reed Warblers were singing in scrub close to the village. With our team of porters soon organized and ready to go, we began the long trek into the mountains. The first part of the walk is through almost completely denuded foothills and we were grateful to the clouds which made the walking conditions much more pleasant. The extensive grasslands in this area were home to many Paddyfield (Oriental) Pipits and we had nice views of Oriental Skylarks, one of which gave prolonged views as it sang from the ground on a nearby ridge. The habitat is also perfect for grassbirds with Tawny and Striated seen, Black-headed and Scaly-breasted Munia, Long-tailed and Brown Shrikes, Golden-headed Cisticola, White-breasted Wood-Swallow, Blue-tailed and Blue-throated Bee-eaters, several Crested Mynas (an introduced species) and two Island Collared-Doves – now a scarce species elsewhere in the Philippines. Overhead we noted Brahminy Kite, Philippine Serpent Eagle and our first Island Swiftlets while patches of secondary forest held the ubiquitous Philippine Bulbul, Philippine Coucal, Red-keeled and Buzzing Flowerpecker, Coppersmith Barbet and several luminous-yellow Black-naped Orioles.

Near the forest edge we spent some time staking-out an area of flowering bamboo which had a large group of White-bellied Munia and our first Lemon-throated Leaf-Warbler but no sign yet of the hoped-for parrotfinches. Another short trek brought us to our pleasant camp on the forest edge with Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker and White-eared Brown-Dove seen nearby and a brief flyover Luzon Hawk Eagle during lunch. Our afternoon birding in the forest here was typically rather slow but we added Luzon Blue-headed Fantail, White-browed Shama, Luzon Balicassiao, 2 spectacular perched Rufous Hornbills, our first Cream-bellied Fruit-Dove of the distinctive crimson-crowned *faustinoi* race and best of all great views of a confiding group of Luzon-striped Babblers apparently settling to roost. As dusk arrived the Spotted Wood-Kingfishers became active but we only managed to see them shooting through the canopy. As darkness arrived Philippine Scops Owls were particularly vocal and venturing into the forest it was not long before one of these huge scops-owls was staring down angrily from overhead with ear-tufts erect and huge red-eyes watching. These owls have a reputation for being difficult to see and rather non-responsive to playback so this bird made a pleasant change.

The night-birds continued to be vocal during the night with Great-eared and Philippine Nightjars, Philippine Scops-Owls, Philippine Boobook and Philippine Eagle-Owls calling regularly throughout the night, the latter a new bird for Magnus.

After a nice performance by Great-eared Nightjars over our camp at dawn the next morning, daylight in the lower forest was much more active with many birds vocal and our last major target here was no exception; Furtive Flycatcher is typically found in secondary habitat or forest with thick bamboo undergrowth and is very difficult to locate when not singing but this morning we were in luck with no less than 4 individuals heard, 2 seen briefly, one remaining completely hidden and one which after a long and patient search finally gave excellent views as it fed at close range in the bamboo. Other birds in the area of the camp included Yellowish White-eye (another new bird), Philippine Trogon, our first views of Philippine Tailorbird, Flaming Sunbird and yesterday's Luzon Striped-Babblers which appeared to be attending a nest and the expected Luzon Blue-headed Fantails, Lemon-throated Leaf-Warbler and Sulphur-billed Nuthatches. With no sight nor sound of the regular Whiskered Pitta in the area we decided to set off further into the mountain in the hope of catching more bird activity before the temperature became too high. The open areas produced Grey-rumped and Pygmy Swiftlets, vocal Blackish Cuckoo-Shrikes and a Philippine Falconet munching dragonflies on a dead stump. In the forest a calling group of Luzon Hornbills remained hidden but while searching we heard the distinctive calls of Whiskered Pitta's from the valley below. Unfortunately the pitta was too far to tempt out of the valley so we took the plunge and scrambled down the steep valley. As we carefully inched our way towards the calling birds we came tantalizingly close but they always remained out of sight and after a long and patient pursuit they became silent and we admitted defeat.

Continuing along the trail we added a wintering Pechora Pipit feeding on the trail, two groups of Rufous Hornbills, another pair of Luzon Striped Babblers and a superb male Spotted Wood Kingfisher taped in at close range. Clearings along the trail allowed views of Whiskered Treeswifts, fly-by Philippine Cuckoo-Doves,

Philippine Swiftlets at higher altitudes and the resident *philippensis* race of Oriental Honey Buzzard, another potential future split. We arrived at the top camp late in the afternoon with plenty of bird activity including our first views of Philippine Fairy Bluebird after hearing several during the day.



Luzon Striped Babbler – Hamut Camp, Luzon (Rob Hutchinson/Birdtour Asia)

The following morning we set off early up the mountain and quickly added our first new bird with 2 Golden-crowned Babblers feeding on fruits overhead. It soon became apparent that Whiskered Pittas were very vocal with at least three individuals calling within the first half an hour of our walk. Most were distant but just a short way along the ridge trail we realized that one was calling close to the trail ahead and we excitedly crept forward. As we rounded a corner the bird was clearly very close and it was just minutes later that it was spotted calling from deep in the thick forest and with careful maneuvering we enjoyed good views with the bright-red underparts and diagnostic white ‘whisker’ of this large pitta clearly on view. Continuing onwards the noisy wing beats of flushed pigeons drew our attention to two Flame-breasted Fruit-Dove and later a similar experience with two Cream-bellied Fruit-Doves. Amethyst Brown-Doves were calling regularly along the trail and with patience we enjoyed brief views of one vocal bird followed by better views of one feeding on small red flowers. Rounding a bend in the trail we flushed a small pigeon which quickly dropped again out of sight on the trail ahead. With our suspicions aroused we sneaked forward and had nice views of a Luzon Bleeding-heart wandering casually along the trail ahead of us for several seconds before disappearing into the forest, a big bonus bird which had only been heard by Magnus on previous visits. Another big target appeared soon after when a Sierra Madre Crow calling from far down in the valley responded very well to our recordings by appearing right overhead on the ridge-top. This species is now generally accepted as one of the splits from the ‘Slender-billed’ Crow complex in Asia, a decision which seems well justified given the distinctive vocalizations, behavior and ecology compared to other species in the region including two other species within the Philippines (in Greater Mindanao and Mindoro/Palawan). We also enjoyed three sightings (four individuals) of Blue-breasted Flycatcher, a little known species which is still rarely recorded away from this area of the Sierra Madre and as usual in good weather there were many other birds to see along the ridge and some of the highlights included several Luzon and Rufous Hornbills, Philippine Fairy Bluebird, Philippine Trogon, Blackish Cuckoo-Shrike, Stripe-sided Rhabdornis, yet more Luzon Striped-Babblers, Scale-feather Malkoha, male Spotted Wood-Kingfisher, Bicoloured Flowerpecker, Metallic-winged and Handsome Sunbirds. Woodpeckers were very active with two sightings of Philippine Pygmy, two separate sightings of Sooty Woodpeckers and good prolonged views of an excited group of three Greater Flamebacks, the later of the endemic race *haematribon*, one of the extremely distinctive Philippine forms which must deserve full-species status. We also note some species more commonly found at higher altitude with a calling Island Thrush and several Luzon Montane Racquet-tails passing noisily overhead, one of which was spotted through a gap in the canopy. In the afternoon we headed some way back down the mountain to check the viewpoints for Grand Rhabdornis. On the way down we heard the distinctive high-pitched song of Rusty-faced Babbler (a recent

split into two species of the former Rabor's Wren-Babbler) which gave typically fleeting views as it crept rat-like among the grassy vegetation. Further down we again flushed a Luzon Bleeding-heart from the trail – on this occasion the bird flew up to land on a low open branch allowing good views before it again dropped to the forest floor. Another ground dweller was a Pechora Pipit creeping among the leaf-litter while overhead an Oriental Honey-Buzzard was seen in rolling display flight. Unfortunately our scanning at the viewpoints didn't produce any rhabdornis sightings but we did see Whiskered Treeswift, fly-by Philippine Cuckoo-Doves and distinctive *novus* Scarlet Minivets – another complex which merits further attention within the Philippines with several very distinct forms found in the archipelago.

On the way back to the camp we finished the day with yet another flushed Flame-breasted Fruit-Dove with the diagnostic white tail-band clearly seen.

After brief sightings of the Rufous Paradise Flycatcher which was again calling around our camp, our final morning was again spent along the ridge trail and although our two remaining targets remained elusive (the rarely seen Ashy-breasted Flycatcher and Grand Rhabdornis) and all of the three calling Whiskered Pittas were too distant for us to tempt closer we did enjoy some great birding with our best views yet of Golden-crowned Babbler, more sightings of Blue-breasted Flycatcher, Yellow-breasted, Flame-breasted and Cream-bellied fruit-Doves, Amethyst Brown Dove, Luzon and Rufous Hornbills, Philippine Fairy Bluebird, Scarlet Minivets and Luzon Striped Babblers. A fly-by Philippine Hawk Cuckoo in response to playback was new for us, and we again had brief views of Rusty-faced Babblers moving quickly through the undergrowth and two fly-over Luzon Montane Racquet-tails.



Sooty Woodpecker (left) and Philippine Scops Owl (right) – Mount Dos Cuernos (Hamut Camp), Luzon (Rob Hutchinson/Birdtour Asia)

Our walk down the mountain in the afternoon began with a memorable encounter with a family party of Rusty-faced Babbler (2 adults, 2 juveniles) which gave reasonable views, and it was particularly interesting to see the distinctive rufous plumage of the immature birds. Two encounters with noisy but typically skulking groups of Rufous Coucals followed and Philippine Trogon, 2 more Pechora Pipits, several Bicolored Flowerpeckers and the now expected Luzon Striped-Babblers were seen. Persistent scanning of bare tree tops produced Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker, Coppersmith Barbet but unfortunately the only Rhabdornis on show were the widespread Stripe-headed.

Raptors were active with sightings of Oriental Honey Buzzard, Luzon Hawk Eagle and an all too brief sighting of a probable Philippine Eagle for Magnus – a species which has been seen quite regularly in the area in recent years. We luckily made it back to the camp just in the nick of time before a huge storm blew in with torrential rain and gale force winds forcing our helpers to cling onto the camp roofing for the next hour to prevent the whole thing blowing away!

Philippine, Great-eared and Savanna Nightjars all called overnight and our final morning thankfully dawned fine. After an early breakfast we made our way again into the dying bamboo near the village and we didn't have too long to wait for our first Green-faced Parrotfinches – a noisy group of at least 30 birds which flew

overhead but frustratingly landed out of sight to feed. Waiting patiently however several birds joined the nearby White-bellied Munias to feed on the flowering bamboo and we were rewarded with good views of these nomadic species which was a near-mythical species seen by very few birders prior to a huge invasion into these parts of the Sierra Madre mountains in 2004. In the area we also encountered calling White-lored Oriole, a Scale-feathered Malkoha, several Balicassiao and calling Black-chinned Fruit-Doves.

The walk back to the village produced the usual grassland species with excellent views of Golden-headed Cisticolas the highlight, Crested Myna, Philippine Serpent Eagle and a frustrating probable Spotted Buttonquail flushed from near the trail which disappeared without trace.

In the afternoon we flew back to Manila connecting with a flight to Cebu City where a soft bed, warm shower and varied restaurant menu awaited us, welcome luxuries after four nights under canvas. We departed early the next morning for Tabunan forest, a tiny remnant of forest in the mountainous spine of the island, made famous by the rediscovery of the Cebu Flowerpecker in 1992, prior to which it had been considered probably extinct. Tawny Grassbirds and calling Plain Bush-hens were noted during our walk to the forest and shortly after dawn we were already strategically positioned on a limestone pinnacle which allows rare views into the forest canopy and has resulted in regular sightings of the flowerpecker in recent years. Here we sat for the next 12 hours, splitting our time between diligent scanning of the nearby canopy and trying to find a comfortable seating position on the razor sharp rocks! During the day many birds appeared with White-vented Whistler, brief views of Cebu (Streak-breasted) Bulbul, the distinctive white-bellied Visayan Balicassiao and the endemic form of 'Mangrove' Blue Flycatcher (a very likely split) the highlights as they were all new to Magnus despite a previous visit to the island as was a Magnificent Sunbird which gave rather unsatisfactory views as it zoomed by in the late-afternoon. Biggest surprise was hearing the distinctive calls of the *spilonota* 'Visayan' Boobook which is also found on Tablas and perhaps Camiguin Island off north Mindanao although the latter is still pending on voice recordings. A Chinese Goshawk was seen briefly perched and another *accipiter* was considered probably a Besra but views were too brief to be sure. Other species included the distinctive red-faced *cebuensis* Coppersmith Barbet, Everett's White-eye, Yellow-breasted Fruit-Dove, White-eared Brown-Dove, Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker, Oriental Magpie Robin (endemic sub-species *deuteronymus*), wintering Grey-streaked Flycatcher, Elegant Tit, both Arctic and Lemon-throated Leaf-Warblers, a single Coletto. Sadly no Cebu Flowerpecker were spotted among the common Red-keeled relatives. Leaving the forest at dusk at least 2 pairs of the 'Visayan' Boobooks were heard calling along with Philippine Nightjars and Hooded Pitta.

The next day followed the same form although we bought considerably more padding for the hard limestone seat! We spent the early morning and late afternoon again at the viewpoint and saw most of the species from the previous day although Colasisi, Rusty-breasted Cuckoo and Philippine Coucal were seen having only been heard before and we had the views of Cebu Bulbul and White-vented Whistler were much more satisfactory. During the day we hiked up onto the ridge to check some different areas where the flowerpecker might be found, getting better views of bright-red Magnificent Sunbirds but not the flowerpecker and we left without any sight or sound of this rare bird.

The following morning we took a fast-craft ferry across to the neighboring island of Bohol seeing Great-crested, Common and White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns around the harbors and from the boat. From the port at Tagbilaran, Bohol we transferred to the Chocolate Hills resort seeing 3 species of egret (Intermediate, Little and Eastern Cattle), Greenshank and many White-collared Kingfishers during the journey. The 'Chocolate Hills' are a popular attraction for visitors wishing to see the hundreds of bare, rounded hills which dot the surrounding landscape and we took the opportunity to soak in this amazing sight on our arrival.

Our first afternoon excursion into the nearby Rajah Sikatuna National Park started well with an immediate response to our Steere's Pitta tape. The bird was high up in the limestone forest but we soon found a small forest trail giving access and the bird responded this time by sailing overhead on spread wings to originally landing out of sight but soon floating in again to land right overhead and proceed to call back from various perches nearby giving great views of the striking azure underparts contrasting with dark upperparts and bright crimson stripe on the belly.

Returning to the clearing nearby produced several 'Samar' Hornbills, calling Philippine Trogon, several Black-faced Coucal and great views of a pair of *rufopunctatus* Greater Flameback – the Philippine forms of which seem certain to be split into several endemic species.

Moving to another area didn't produce the hoped for Rufous-lored Kingfisher which didn't begin calling until dusk and couldn't be tempted closer although a cute pair of Philippine Boobooks were more obliging giving prolonged views perched overhead. Nearby a major surprise was a migrant Ruddy Kingfisher perched high in the canopy which gave great views in our spot-light! A stop to search for Philippine Frogmouth produced only a few distant calls but an Everett's Scops Owl called nearby and best of all, a Rufous-lored Kingfisher was roosting right above the road on exactly the same branch as our previous visit in February!



***Mindanao Bleeding-heart (left) and Visayan Wattled Broadbills (right) –
Rajah Sikatuna National Park, Bohol (Rob Hutchinson/Birdtour Asia)***

We started pre-dawn the next morning and found the frogmouths silent again but fortunately one was spotted flying in the half-light of dawn and we enjoyed nice views in the spotlight as it sat high overhead – another bonus as this had only been heard by Magnus on previous visits.

As the light began to improve the distinctive calls of Streaked Ground-Babblers emerged from the forest. They were typically responsive and we were soon enjoying these charming birds at close range and although they were usually quick moving one bird obliged by sitting on the same root for a couple of minutes allowing excellent views of the neat white streaked plumage with bold white supercilium and throat patch. Next followed one of Bohol's true specialties when a Yellow-breasted Tailorbird camp in well to our tape and sang from close-by, this species is elsewhere found only on Samar and Leyte and Bohol is thus by far the most accessible place to search for this most attractive yellow, black and white tailorbird. Next was a fine male Philippine Trogon (the first of three during the day) followed by the previous days Rufous-lored Kingfisher which showed well, and allowed us to see the characteristic rufous lores which had been well hidden on the sleeping bird of the previous evenings. Amazingly we then had a further two sightings of Yellow-breasted Tailorbird, and both birds gave good views – an unusually good showing for this normally shy and skulking bird which seems very responsive here at this time of year. It was now time for us to hit the trails in search of some of the other forest specialties and we began with brief views of a singing Rufous-tailed Jungle-Flycatcher, a near-endemic which is also found on Borneo but rarely seen there. Continuing along the trail we flushed a pigeon from the thick undergrowth nearby which flew up and landed on a large open bough – a Mindanao Bleeding-heart! Fortunately everyone was onto the bird quickly although we needn't have panicked as this amazing bird spent the next few minutes parading back and forth along the large branch in plain view, an incredible show which was captured brilliantly by Magnus's video sequence. In addition to being very shy this species has suffered heavily from hunting here and sightings are now very rare so we were extremely fortunate not only to see one but to get such amazing views.

Deeper into the forest we encountered our first feeding flock with Blue Fantail, several Philippine Leaf Warblers, Brown Tit-Babblers and Yellow-bellied Whistler. A short while later some quiet calls drew our attention to our final major target on Bohol when we located a Visayan Wattled Broadbill perched high in the canopy. As we enjoyed the bird another appeared nearby, then another, and another..... until finally we were enjoying a delightful family party feeding all around. We finished the morning with a nice calling Amethyst Brown Dove appearing overhead in response to playback and 2 Red Junglefowl flushed from the forest floor. Other species seen during the morning were an impressive White-bellied Woodpecker, a single Philippine Fairy Bluebird and more Black-faced Coucals.

Our afternoon excursion into the park was equally successful although this time it was the mammals that were arguably the stars of the show with fantastic views of the endemic Philippine Colugos (flying-lemur). They put on a fantastic display become active as early as mid-afternoon and we were able to watch them roosting, climbing and 'flying' around in broad daylight. By the end of the day we had seen no less than 6 adult Colugos, one of which could be observed at close range with a large young still clinging to the mother's belly.

There were also some excellent birds to be found with several 'Samar' Hornbills, at least three Philippine Serpent-Eagle circling over the clearing and a pair of Steere's Pittas the highlights.

As dusk fell we again saw a pair of Philippine Boobooks but the Everett's Scops Owls were unusually quiet with just a single bird heard in the distance and we were grateful to have heard one so close by the previous evening. Great-eared Nightjars hawked overhead among a throng of huge, impressive fruit-bats. With almost all our targets seen the previous day our final morning was rather relaxed but still extremely productive. Three Yellow-breasted Tailorbirds were again seen and one male gave particularly good views singing in the open for a long period and allowing Magnus to make some excellent and probably unique video sequences. We also again located a family group of Visayan Wattled Broadbills in a different location and containing at least 6 individuals. A group of four smart Streaked Ground-Babblers were again seen very well along with two Philippine Trogon, two Rufous-tailed Jungle-Flycatcher, a female Red Junglefowl flushed from the forest and the Amethyst Brown-Dove from the previous day was still calling as were Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo, Plaintive and Rusty-breasted Cuckoo and a single Philippine Drongo Cuckoo. The highlight of the morning however was a fantastic Steere's Pitta which gave fantastic close-range views at it called from various perches, sometimes right over our heads! A final stop didn't produce the hoped-for 'Visayan' Silvery Kingfisher due to low water levels in their favoured river but we did find Bicoloured and Buzzing Flowerpeckers and two Coleto.

Before returning to Manila we found time for a visit to the Philippine Tarsier Research Centre at Corella. Birds included calling White-eared Brown Dove and Yellow-breasted Fruit Dove, our first Colasisi on Bohol and our first Purple-throated Sunbirds of the tour. The highlight of course were wonderful views of 4 individual Philippine Tarsiers at their daytime roosts, a wonderful creature with an adorable combination of huge eyes, continually moving ears and permanent smile – a perfect end to the trip.



Philippine Colugo – Rajah Sikatuna NP, Bohol Philippine Tarsier – Corella, Bohol