Plain-pouched Hornbill © Wilbur Goh / Birdtour Asia

Plain-pouched Hornbills are one of the least known species of Asian hornbill. Often confused with the similar looking Wreathed Hornbill, it is now known that its core (and only!) range is the narrow stretch of land from Southern Myanmar to northernmost Peninsular Malaysia. With almost consistent yearly sightings in this part of the world, this tailor-made tour to the wilds of Ulu Muda was designed to see this enigmatic hornbill plus a handful of other possible lifers while spending as little time as possible. Once at the right spot, we counted a total of 360 birds flying to their roosting grounds (and this is a low count!), truly one of Malaysia’s best nature spectacle.

Picking up Hans from the airport, we took a drive on the North-South Highway on the Western coast of Peninsular Malaysia, arriving in Penang in time for a late-ish dinner after checking into our hotel for the night. We managed some sleep before an early check out to drive to Pedu Lake for some predawn birding. Hearing Blyth’s and Gould’s Frogmouth while walking along a road, it was the hoots of a Reddish Scops Owl that we were truly after. Unfortunately, it didn’t stay long enough and we only managed flight views of it, but more to come later. Then it started to drizzle and shortly after it was pouring so we decided to have breakfast in the car and hoped for some clear weather. We managed some birding in the overcast weather once the rain stopped, seeing mostly common birds, such as Blue-winged Leafbird, Spectacled Bulbul, Rhinorhtha (Raffles’s Malkoha), Oriental Pied Hornbill, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo and Asian Fairy Bluebird. We got to the jetty for a simple lunch and were soon on a boat plodding our way into the inner parts of Muda Lake. Along the shores of this man-made reservoir were Grey Herons stalking their prey, dead trees in the middle of the lake provided perches for Lesser Fish and White-bellied Fish Eagles. Kingfishers were represented by White-throated and the aptly named Stork-billed Kingfisher and we also glimpsed Black-and-red Broadbills from the boat. One mammal highlight would be seeing...
an Asian Elephant scrambling into cover when it spotted us. The boat ride took about an hour and as soon as we arrived, a Plain-pouched Hornbill flew above us, giving out its distinctive three-note call. As we checked in, we could hear these large birds flying over the resort; their loud wing beats whooshing as they passed us. We went out to a viewpoint later in the afternoon, slowly drifting down river. Brown-backed Needletails swooped down to the water to drink, Large Green Pigeons flying back to roost and both of the largest woodpeckers here; Great Slaty and White-bellied were seen in flight but the major draw here were the flocks of Plain-pouched Hornbills flying back to their roost. We counted a total of 361 birds split into small flocks less than 10 birds, flying across the sky and the forest backdrop, what a sight! Back in the lodge for the night, we heard more Blyth’s Frogmouth, Collared Scops Owl and Reddish Scops Owl, the latter still eluding us.

Lesser Fish Eagle and Red-crowned Barbet

Predawn birding was for only one target in mind, the Reddish Scops Owl. Having heard one calling but not coming in frustrated us and when it remained silent, we thought of giving up. Suddenly we heard one calling above us and it was real close so we positioned ourselves and was finally rewarded with clear views for several minutes, even watching it hoot a few times. Success! We even had time to spotlight a Blyth’s Frogmouth in the lodge’s grounds before breakfast. The dawn chorus of several babblers serenaded us while having breakfast with Black-throated, Chestnut-rumped, Chestnut-winged and Puff-throated all present. Hooded Pittas were also heard distantly though we didn’t spend time to search for it. We left the lodge shortly after breakfast, hoping to put an hour or so of birding in Pedu Lake’s surroundings. On the way, a Grey-headed Fish Eagle was a nice sighting along with a pair of Rhinoceros Hornbills. Once at Pedu Lake, we walked the forested roads and saw Black-bellied Malkoha, Red-crowned Barbet, Erpornis and Purple-naped Spiderhunter. Plain Sunbird was the last bird that we saw before we had to leave to catch a flight, so we drove to the airport with lunch en route. It was a successful twitch for a wonderful bird and though the tour seemed short and hurried, it was time well spent!
## Systematic List

### GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae
- Great Argus (Argusianus argus)
- Heard only

### COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae
- Spotted Dove (Stigmatopelia chinensis)
- Asian Emerald Dove (Chalcophaps indica indica)
- Zebra Dove (Geopelia striata)
- Large Green Pigeon (Treron capellei)

### CUCULIFORMES: Cuculidae
- Asian Drongo Cuckoo (Surniculus lugubris brachyurus)
- Raffles’s Malkoha (Rhinortha chlorophaea)
- Red-billed Malkoha (Zanclostomus javanicus)
- Chestnut-breasted Malkoha (Phaenicophaeus curvirostris)
- Black-bellied Malkoha (Phaenicophaeus diardi)

### APODIFORMES: Hemiprocidae
- Grey-rumped Treeswift (Hemiprocne longipennis harteti)
- Whiskered Treeswift (Hemiprocne comata comata)

### APODIFORMES: Apodidae
- Brown-backed Needletail (Hirundapus giganteus)
- House Swift (Apus [affinis] nipalensis)

### CAPRIMULGIFORMES: Podargidae
- Gould’s Frogmouth (Batrachostomus stellatus)
- Blyth’s Frogmouth (Batrachostomus affinis affinis)

### GRUIFORMES: Railidae
- Amaurornis phoenicurus

### CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae
- Red-wattled Lapwing (Vanellus indicus)

### CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae
- Common Sandpiper (Actitis hypoleucos)

### CICONIIFORMES: Ardeidae
- Eastern Cattle Egret (Ardea coromandus)
- Grey Heron (Ardea cinerea)

### ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae
- White-bellied Fish Eagle (Ichthyophaga leucogaster)
- Lesser Fish Eagle (Ichthyophaga humilis)
- Grey-headed Fish Eagle (Ichthyophaga ichthyaeetus)
- Rufous-bellied Eagle (Lophotriorchis kienerii)
- Changeable Hawk Eagle (Nisaetus limnaeetus)

### STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae
- Otus rufescens malayensis
- Otus bakkamoena lempiji
- Heard only

### BUCEROTIFORMES: Bucerotidae
- Oriental Pied Hornbill (Anthracoceros albirostris convexus)
- Rhinoceros Hornbill (Buceros rhinoceros rhinoceros)
- Plain-pouched Hornbill (Rhyticeros subruficollis)

### PICIFORMES: Megalaimidae
- Gold-whiskered Barbet (Psilopogon chrysopogon laeta)
- Red-throated Barbet (Psilopogon m. mystacophanos)
- Yellow-crowned Barbet (Psilopogon henricii)
- Red-crowned Barbet (Psilopogon rafflesii)
- Blue-eared Barbet (Psilopogon duvaucellii duvaucellii)

### PICIFORMES: Picidae
- White-bellied Woodpecker (Dryocopus javensis javensis)
- Banded Yellownape (Chrysophlegma miniaceum malaccensis)
- Great Slaty Woodpecker (Mulleripicus pulverulentus)
- Heard only
CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae
Stork-billed Kingfisher  
White-throated Kingfisher  

FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae
Black-thighed Falconet  

PSITTACIFORMES: Psittacidae
Blue-crowned Hanging-Parrot  

PASSERIFORMES: Calyptomenidae
Green Broadbill  

PASSERIFORMES: Eurylaimidae
Black-and-red Broadbill  

PASSERIFORMES: Pittidae
Hooded Pitta  

PASSERIFORMES: Vireonidae
Erpornis  

PASSERIFORMES: Dicruridae
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo  

PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae
House Crow  
Southern Jungle Crow  

PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae
Pacific Swallow  

PASSERIFORMES: Pycnonotidae
Spectacled Bulbul  

PASSERIFORMES: Timaliidae
Chestnut-winged Babbler  
Chestnut-rumped Babbler  
Black-throated Babbler  

PASSERIFORMES: Pellegrineidae
Puff-throated Babbler  
Rufous-crowned Babbler  
Black-capped Babbler  

PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae
Common Hill Myna  
Javan Myna  

PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae
Oriental Magpie Robin  
White-rumped Shama  

PASSERIFORMES: Chloropseidae
Blue-winged Leafbird  

PASSERIFORMES: Irenidae
Asian Fairy-bluebird  

PASSERIFORMES: Nectariniidae
Plain Sunbird  
Purple-naped Spiderhunter  

PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae
Grey Wagtail  

PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae
Eurasian Tree Sparrow  

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