

Trip Report: Mt Makiling and Mt Palay-Palay, Luzon, Philippines, May 31- June 3, 2007

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Introduction

Arrangements for the trip was made through the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines or WBCP (website: www.birdwatch.ph), a new bird club formed just four years ago and mostly metro Manila-based. Transport and accomodation were arranged by WBCP members. We wanted to do an accessible bird area near Manila and elected to do Mount Makiling for the first two days and Mount Palay-Palay on the last day. Accompanying me on this trip were Doreen Ang (DA) and Jimmy Chew (JC). WBCP members also accompanied us on our trip and they included Jonas Rune, Alex, Adrian, Prof Jerry and Mike Lu (ML).

Day One (May 31, 2007)

We arrive on SQ912 landing at Manila airport at 4.55 pm local time (same time zone as Singapore). We cleared customs much faster than expected, coming out in about half an hour! Our host at the airport was the bubbly Ixi Mapau, a WBCP member. We arrived at TREES hostel within the University of the Philippines campus at Los Banos, in Laguna Province, at about 8.30 pm, after clearing a bad traffic jam in Manila and stopping at Alabang for dinner. The hostel was basic and has air-condition, hot shower (which we didn't need and didn't work) and costs 600 pesos per room per night.

Day Two (June 1, 2007)

Overslept and got out of bed only at 4.30 am. Met Jonas and a Swiss couple at 5.10 am outside TREES and started climb in darkness. Reached nursery around 8 am, stopped for rest and then proceeded up the summit trail only to be deterred by sudden downpour. We took a jeepney ride down to TREES for 500 pesos and was joined by an American birder named David who said he saw Luzon Bleeding Heart around the junction to the mudsprings. Jonas took us to the Botanical Gardens (10 pesos per person) from 11 am to 1 pm. Looked for Indigo-banded Kingfisher in vain despite walking down the pebbly stream. Proceeded to Los Banos for KFC lunch. From 2 pm to 4 pm, we birded in open country at the University's Agricultural Division. Spotted Button-quail was the highlight and then retired to TREES around 4.15 pm. Said good-bye to Jonas and spent an hour watching the famous dead tree at TREES. Rewarded by a pair of Coppersmith Barbet, 2 Stripe-headed Rhabdornises and at 5 pm, a single Philippine Falconet. Rain came shortly after but stopped after a while. Walked and then hitched a ride to town for KFC dinner. Took a jeepney (whose driver took us on a wild merry-go-round) back for 50 pesos.

The highlight of the morning on the summit trail to Mount Makiling was a Philippine Hawk Owl perched up close. Unfortunately, I wasted too much time fiddling with the scope to get a scope view and in the end, didn't even get a decent look at the bird. Later in the morning, a female Spotted Wood-Kingfisher made up for the "owler" with great close-up views through the scope which for once didn't give any problem. Other endemics seen on our first day at Mount Makiling included the ubiquitous Philippine Bulbul, Balicassiao, Black-and-white Triller, Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Whistler, the strange-looking Scale-feathered Malkoha, several views of White-eared Brown-Dove, an obliging White-browed Shama trio by the trail and several Stripe-headed Rhabdornises. The stopover at the nursery produced a few Pygmy Swiftlets mixing with the commoner Glossy Swiftlets. Also seen above the nursery were two Purple Needletails which JC also photographed, and a Yellowish White-eye. Endemics heard but not seen included Luzon Hornbill, Yellow-breasted Fruit-dove, Yellow-wattled Bulbul, Grey-backed Tailorbird and Elegant Tit.

Back at TREES in the afternoon, we saw a circling Osprey before Jonas brought us over to the Botanical Gardens to try for the Indigo-banded Kingfisher. I saw Red-keeled Flowerpecker, another endemic, at the entrance but spent the next hour or so walking painfully over the rocky banks of the stream that flowed

through the Gardens. Despite there being few people, we never saw the kingfisher. Perhaps the water level was too low.

Lunch was next on the agenda. I opted to go for my meal in air-conditioned comfort at KFC and was pleased to add Lowland White-eye to my list of endemic lifers.

At 2 pm, we were in the open country-farmland of the UPLB Agriculture Division. We saw Yellow-vented Bulbul here, which look dirtier and sounded rougher than the Singapore birds. Scanning the dirt track eagerly, it wasn't long before we spotted Buttonquails in the distance. These were indeed Spotted Buttonquails! We saw at least three, possibly five birds. We didn't get very good looks due to distance and the heat wave but were able to see the distinctive orange band around the breast. A surprise endemic seen in the open country terrain was a Red-crested Malkoha cavorting with two Balicassiaos. Also seen in the vicinity were a dark-breasted White-throated Kingfisher, Coppersmith Barbet, two Guaiaberos, a fly-by Philippine Coucal. Non-endemics seen here included Bright-capped Cisticola, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Large-billed Crow and lots of Striated Grassbird. JC photographed a Tawny Grassbird which the rest of us missed.

Back at TREES, I spent almost an hour staring at the famous dead tree and saw a pair of Coppersmith Barbets, two Stripe-headed Rhabdornises and, just before rain came, a smart Philippine Falconet. Also nice was a Philippine Hawk-cuckoo which flew just in front of me. What a great day!

In total, we recorded 51 species at Mt Makiling and UPLB, including 26 endemics (21 seen) and two near-endemics (Black-chinned Fruit-dove heard and Purple Needletail seen).

Day Three (June 2, 2007)

Woke up on time and met Alex, Adrian and the Swiss couple outside TREES. We walked a bit up the trail, saw 6 Guaiaberos well before taking a four-wheel drive up to the nursery. We decided to bird the mudsprings trail which took us most of the early morning, seeing Luzon Hornbill, Philippine Serpent-eagle, Red-bellied Pitta and Lovely Sunbird. JC also saw Hooded Pitta here. Returned to the junction with the summit trail at 9.30 am and then headed up the summit trail until 10 am when we turned back. Met WBCP members shortly after turning back and followed Prof Jerry back down the trail to TREES. Missed two Luzon Bleeding Hearts which Prof flushed from a gully but best bird of the day was a stunning male Philippine Trogon on the way down. Heard the Swiss couple got an Ashy Thrush in a gully in the morning. Reached TREES at 2.45 pm.

The strategy this morning was different. We walked a bit up the summit trail and had great views of six Guaiaberos feeding on a tall tree above us. Then we decided to take Alex's car up to the nursery. We wanted to try our luck with the Luzon Bleeding Heart which the American birder saw around the mudsprings trail. The four-wheel drive saved us some hard walking and we were able to start where we left off on Day One by walking to the mudsprings trail. The trail went downhill for nearly 700 metres ending where a big brown mudpool could be seen besides a rocky stream. Here we bumped into our first Luzon Hornbills, a perched Philippine Serpent-eagle, Red-bellied Pitta and Flaming Sunbird. Back at the summit trail, we saw both malkohas well, an immature Philippine Malkoha, several Yellow-bellied Whistlers, our first Colasisi and the Luzon subspecies of the Purple-throated Sunbird, and a Buzzing Flowerpecker.

Downhill, we pretty much missed our bird of the trip when Prof Jerry flushed not one but two Luzon Bleeding Hearts about an hour past the nursery and "sarabat stall". All of us missed them as we were more than a step behind. Ouch! Our consolation was the beautiful Lovely Sunbird and a male Philippine Trogon, perched in typical trogon fashion for tantalizing views before it flew away too soon.

In total, I recorded 30 species, including 7 endemics (22 seen) and one stunning non-endemic, the gorgeous Red-bellied Pitta.

Had a quick shower before checking out of TREES by 3.30 pm and headed for Manila in Prof Jerry's car. Jam in Manila was a pain on our butts and we got to the dinner place where WBCP had gathered only at 6.30 pm, some 90 minutes late! I gave a talk on "Surprising Singapore", and then mingled with members

till 10.30 pm when we headed for Orchid Hotel in Mike Lu's car. JC, ML and I chatted till 12.30 am before sleeping.

Day Four (June 3, 2007)

Woke up late at 4.30 am and managed to get ready only after 5 am. Mike drove us out of downtown Manila to Mount Palay-Palay in Cavite. Reached the birding spot at 6.45 am and it was easier to bird due to the more open area. Finished at around 11 am and headed down to the resort at Cavite where we tried for but failed to find Philippine Duck. Lunch here till 1.30 pm. Birded a bit more till 2 pm when we headed back to Manila for our flight back to Singapore.

Our first stop, Mount Palay-Palay, was a scenic forested area with great vistas of rolling hills and ridges. It is supposed to be a protected area but we saw squatters and quarries at a few places. We got started at 6.45 am and were encouraged by the raucous bird sounds coming from the forest. Philippine Bulbuls, Red-keeled Flowerpecker and Balicassiao were all active and we soon saw our first new bird, several Blackish Cuckoo-shrike lounging on a tall tree to be followed by a neat-looking male singing Elegant Tit. A group of about ten Brahminy Kites then distracted us by floating above the hills in the morning thermals. I heard Grey-backed Tailorbirds close by and fell back to try and see them. After some waiting, a pair perched for some time displaying their rufous head, grey back and olive wings for me to study before they too disappeared into the bushes. Further down the trail, we saw four Philippine Falconets on a dead tree and then a pair of Luzon Hornbills close by. We also bumped into three poachers who had their quarry – Red Junglefowls – on them. Walking back in the heat, I was glad to finally see the Coletos well after two earlier fleeting views. It was at the top of a tall tree and soon flew off, to be joined by its mate. A Philippine Serpent-eagle circling in slow motion was a good way to end the morning birding at Palay-Palay. We recorded 23 species here, including 4 new endemics.

Next, we headed for the beach resort downhill at Cavite and spent about an hour or so birding from 11.30 am onwards. It was a typical beach resort but with few people. We walked the open country, scrub and mangrove that bordered the resort. We recorded 26 species here but no endemic species other than Philippine Woodpecker, Philippine Coucal (mobbed by both Yellow-vented and Philippine Bulbuls), a very close Coletos and Lowland White-eye. We tried for but failed to find Philippine Duck in the small mangrove river.

We got to the airport by 4.00 pm and arrived at Changi Singapore via SQ919 by 9.15 pm.

Birding Highlights

The intent of a four-day trip to Luzon was two-fold. One, to see the Philippine endemics for the first time and see as many as possible in the short time we had. Second, to establish contact with Mike Lu and members of the WBCP for future projects. Both were achieved easily.

In total, I recorded 76 species during this trip, including 32 Philippine endemics and 1 near-endemic. See below for full checklist. In addition, DA recorded Philippine Fairy-bluebird and Pygmy Flowerpecker, and JC recorded Sooty Woodpecker and Tawny Grassbird. Furthermore, Luzon Bleeding Heart was noted on both days we were at Makiling but we didn't see them. We also missed the Sulphur or Yellow-billed Nuthatch, which Prof Jerry saw and an Ashy Thrush which the Swiss couple saw. We also saw Common Pigeon in and around Manila but this species is not listed in Kennedy *et al* 2000.

My overall impression of Philippine avifauna based on this short visit is of low diversity and density, somewhat offset by the high endemism. The species total for a morning birding is about the same as that for Singapore forest birding but far below Malaysian forest birding. Furthermore, the birds seemed pretty nervous. Most birds were seen only briefly and far away.

Other Wildlife

Non-bird wildlife was not very obvious other than the butterflies, damselflies and spiders. In particular we noted the dearth of mammals. Reptiles recorded included Tokay Gecko, a species of *Draco*, another brown *Calotes* lizard, two types of skink and a small snake – all at Makiling. We also saw a small troop of Long-tailed Macaque at Palay-Palay. I was stung by a bee at Palay-Palay while sampling the local *Muntingia calabara*. Mossies were a bit of a hassle on first morning at Makiling but fine after that.

Costs

Flight and airport tax is S\$500. Accommodation took up another S\$100. Meals were an additional S\$100. Total is about S\$700. Transportation was taken care off by WBCP members for which we are extremely grateful.

Complete Species List

(Nomenclature and systematics follow Kennedy *et al* 2000 with some exceptions. Endemics are referred to in capitals. Abbreviations: Mt Makiling – MM; University of the Philippines – UPLB; Mount Palay-Palay - MPP)

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Some 20 birds seen over open fields at Cavite on June 3.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

One seen circling the dead tree at TREES on June 1.

Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*

Over ten circling in morning over Mt Palay-Palay on June 3.

PHILIPPINE SERPENT EAGLE *Spilornis holospilus*

One seen perched on a tree at the Mudsprings trail and then flying over summit trail at MM on June 2 and also good views of one circling over MPP and also one perched on a pole by roadside on way down from MPP on June 3. Kennedy et al 2000 considers this a subspecies of *S. cheela*.

PHILIPPINE FALCONET *Microhierax erythrogenys*

One at TREES dead tree on June 2, and one on way to MPP and four (family group) at MPP on June 3.

Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*

Heard daily at MM and MPP. Encountered three poachers with male birds at MPP. Subspecies *philippensis* is endemic to the Philippines.

SPOTTED BUTTONQUAIL *Turnix ocellata*

Three seen on dirt track at UPLB Agriculture Department on June 1. Subspecies *ocellata* is confined to southern and central Luzon.

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*

One seen in open country at UBLP Agriculture Department on June 1 evening.

WHITE-EARED BROWN-DOVE *Phapitreron leucotis*

At least five seen at MM on June 1, one here on June 2 and another at MPP on June 3.

YELLOW-BREASTED FRUIT-DOVE *Ptilinopus occipitalis*

Heard both days at MM and also at MPP but none seen.

Black-chinned Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus leclancheri*

Heard at MM on June 1. Near endemic also found in Lanyu Island of Taiwan.

Zebra Dove *Geopelia striata*

A number seen at Cavite Resort on June 3.

Common Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*

One probable at MM on June 2. One at MPP on June 3.

GUAIABERO *Bolbopsittacus lunulatus*

6 seen at MM on June 2 feeding on a tree on the summit trail on June 2 and also two at MPP on June 3.

COLASISI *Loriculus philippensis*

One seen at MM on June 2 and several at MPP on June 3.

PHILIPPINE HAWK CUCKOO *Cuculus pectoralis*

One seen at TREES on June 1. Heard daily at MM and MPP. Kennedy *et al* 2000 considers this as Hodgson's Hawk-cuckoo. Scientific name is more appropriately *Hierococcyx pectoralis*.

Common Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*

Heard daily at MM and MPP.

SCALE-FEATHERED MALKOHA *Phaenicophaeus cumingi*

Seen daily at MM, with better and closer views on June 2. Has very interesting bursting high-pitched call.

RED-CRESTED MALKOHA *Phaenicophaeus superciliosus*

Seen daily at MM and MPP.

Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis*

Heard at UPLB on June 1.

PHILIPPINE COUCAL *Centropus viridis*

Seen and heard daily at MM and MPP.

PHILIPPINE HAWK OWL *Ninox philippensis*

One seen in pre-dawn at MM on summit trail.

Glossy Swiftlet *Collocalia esculenta*

Common and widespread at all sites visited.

PYGMY SWIFTLET *Collocalia troglodytes*

Seen both days at MM.

Purple Needletail *Hirundapus celebensis*

Two seen above the nursery at MM on June 1. Near-endemic also found in Sulawesi.

Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*

Seen at TREES and Makiling Botanical Gardens on June 1-2.

Whiskered Treeswift *Hemiprocne comata*

A number seen perched on wire near Cavite Beach Resort on June 3. Subspecies is *major*, endemic to the Philippines.

PHILIPPINE TROGON *Harpactes ardens*

A male perched briefly off the summit trail at MM on June 2.

White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*

One at UPLB on June 2 and two at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3. The distinctive subspecies *gularis* is endemic to the Philippines.

White-collared Kingfisher *Todirhamphus chloris*

One seen at mangrove river at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

SPOTTED WOOD-KINGFISHER *Actenoides lindsayi*

One female seen and scoped on summit trail at MM on June 1.

Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus*

Several in open country around UPLB on June 1.

LUZON HORNBILL *Penelopides manillae*

Heard daily at MM but only seen at mudsprings trail on June 2. Also a pair at MPP on June 3. Considered by Kennedy *et al* 2000 as Tarictic Honbill *P. pannini*.

Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*

Heard and seen daily. Subspecies in Luzon is nominate *haemacephala*.

PHILIPPINE PYGMY WOODPECKER *Dendrocopus maculatus*

Seen and heard daily at MM and MPP.

Red-bellied Pitta *Pitta erythrogaster*

One seen hopping on ground near the end of the mudsprings trail at MM on June 2. Subspecies is nominate *erythrogaster*. Also occurs in Sulawesi east to north-east Australia.

Pacific Swallow *Hirundo tahitica*

Seen at UPLB on June 1 and at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*

A few seen in the evening at UPLB on June 1.

Bar-bellied Cuckoo Shrike *Coracina striata*

Two seen at MM on June 1 and one at MPP on June 3.

BLACKISH CUCKOO-SHRIKE *Coracina coerulescens*

Several seen at MPP on June 3.

BLACK-AND-WHITE TRILLER *Lalage melanoleuca*

At least two seen on a tall tree at MM on June 1.

Pied Triller *Lalage nigra*

One seen at UPLB on June 1 and one heard at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus goiavier*

Common in open country at UPLB on June 1 and at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3. Subspecies *goiavier*.

YELLOW-WATTLED BULBUL *Pycnonotus urostictus*

Heard at MM on June 1 but never seen.

PHILIPPINE BULBUL *Hypsipetes philippinus*

The common forest bulbul in the Philippines. Seen daily at MM and MPP.

BALICASSIAO *Dicrurus balicassius*

Seen daily at MM and MPP.

Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis*

A number seen at Cavite Beach Resort. One male seen sitting in a nest in a riverine *Avicennia* about 5 metres up the tree. Subspecies *chinensis* is one of three endemic Philippine subspecies.

Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

One seen at UPLB on June 1.

ELEGANT TIT *Parus elegans*

Heard at MM on June 1 and one male seen at MPP on June 3.

STRIPE-HEADED RHABDORNIS *Rhabdornis mystacalis*

Seen daily at MM and MPP. Behaves like nuthatches with chirping calls, tends to be high up trees.

Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis*

Heard at UPLB on June 1 and Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

WHITE-BROWED SHAMA *Copsychus luzoniensis*

Two males and one female seen on summit trail at MM on June 1, one seen here on June 2 and one heard at MPP on June 3.

Pied Bush Chat *Saxicola caprata*

A few seen in the Cavite area.

Golden-bellied Flyeater *Gerygone sulphurea*

Heard at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

Striated Grassbird *Megalurus palustris*

At least 20 seen at UPLB on June 1 evening.

GREY-BACKED TAILORBIRD *Orthotomus derbianus*

Heard daily at MM and a pair seen well at MPP on June 3.

Bright-capped Cisticola *Cisticola exilis*

Two seen at UPLB on June 1.

Pied Fantail *Rhipidura javanica*

One heard at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

Black-naped Monarch *Hypothymis azurea*

Heard daily at MM and a female seen here on June 2. Two fledglings were also seen at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

YELLOW-BELLIED WHISTLER *Pachycephala philippinensis*

One glimpsed at MM on June 1. At least 4 seen at MM on June 2.

White-breasted Wood Swallow *Artamus leucorhynchus*

Several seen perched on wires at Cavite area on June 3.

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*

A few seen in grassland at UPLB on June 1. Subspecies is *nasutus*.

Asian Glossy Starling *Aplonis panayensis*

Several around Manila and at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3.

COLETO *Sarcops calvus*

After two glimpses, one bird stayed long enough on a tree at MPP on June 3 to afford a good look. Another individual at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3 was even closer and better!

Plain-throated Sunbird *Anthreptes malacensis*

One pair at MM near the nursery on June 2. Subspecies is *birgatae*.

Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis*

A few at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3. Subspecies is nominate *jugularis*.

Purple-throated Sunbird *Nectarinia sperata*

One male seen at summit trail on MM on June 2. Subspecies is *sperata*.

FLAMING SUNBIRD *Aethopyga flagrans*

Two males seen at separate locations at MM on June 2.

LOVELY SUNBIRD *Aethopyga shelleyi*

Two females with an unseen male feeding on low flowers by the side of the summit trail at MM on June 2.

RED-KEELED FLOWERPECKER *Dicaeum australe*

Seen daily at MM and MPP.

BUZZING FLOWERPECKER *Dicaeum hypoleucum*

One seen at MM on June 2.

Orange-bellied Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trigonostigma*

One seen on summit trail at MM on June 2. Subspecies is *xanthopygium*.

LOWLAND WHITE-EYE *Zosterops meyeri*

Seen both days at UPLB. Considered by some authors as a subspecies of Japanese White-eye *Z. japonica*.

YELLOWISH WHITE-EYE *Zosterops nigrorum*

One seen well at the nursery at MM on June 1.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Several at UPLB Agriculture Department area and at Cavite Beach Resort.

Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*

Two seen at Cavite Beach Resort on June 3. Subspecies is *cabanisi*.