

99 Hours Birding with the Boys

A fast moving human figure caught the corner of my eye as I sat getting out my notes for the meeting place. A quick shout: "Frank!" Already 30 meters away, the head turned and we made contact at 1:30 am. The next 99 hours would be non-stop birding with the boys. Frank Clayton and Mick Greene had arrived 4 days earlier. Frank, a birder, dancer and sometimes doctor, is the common thread between us. Mick, a retired country doctor from Kentucky, was the ringleader for this adventure. Mark Houston, a wheat farmer from eastern Washington, was the fourth American. Our contact was Peter Ericsson, a Swedish missionary based in Bangkok. In exchange for a donation to Peter's mission, he would drive us to the best birding spots in his van. Furthermore, he would provide camping equipment and could speak Thai. He had agreed to spend 10 days with us, and could probably be talked into a couple of more. It was a great deal for us.

Lesser Whistling Ducks at Beong Boraphet Marsh



I was planning on 6 days with the boys, but there had been a change in plans. No surprise, except that I would be allowed 2 hours of sleep. The boys had just finished four days of birding in central Thailand, near Bangkok, and had decided to spend the rest of their trip in northern Thailand, and not try to visit southern Thailand. Our first birding spot would be just a couple of hours north of Bangkok, and so we wouldn't have to drive through the night to be there at dawn. Thus, Frank and I took a taxi to Peter's house, arriving at about 2:15 am. I was given a pad on the floor of the guesthouse. Wakeup would be at 4:20 am; we would be leaving at 4:30. I needed to spend a bit of time organizing my equipment: bird book, spotting scope, cameras, GPS receiver, and then I tried to sleep, although not too successfully.



The docks at Beong Boraphet

It was still dark at 4:30 am. Instead of being put in the back, where I might have been able to doze, I was given the navigator seat next to Peter. Of course, I wasn't prepared to navigate, but Peter didn't need my help getting out of Bangkok. However,

the first maneuver after leaving Bangkok was to miss the turnoff for the main highway going north. This caused a 20 km detour as I became familiar with the maps and my GPS receiver figured out that it was in Thailand. We drove north to Nahkon Sawan, and then looked for the entrance to the wildlife area at **Beong Boraphet**, a large shallow lake and marsh. Peter had only been there once before, and remembered an entrance to the southeast, but we ended up at a dock on the north side of the lake. It was 7:30; we were the first visitors for the day; the boatmen were just beginning to stir. **Sand Martins** and **Barn Swallows** were flying overhead and a **Peaceful Dove** graced the lawn.



A Purple Swampphen bursting over the marsh

We hired a pontoon boat with a guide for the morning. Thousands of **Lesser Whistling Ducks** burst upward as we approached the first marshy island, and **Purple Swampphens** were common. We were very pleased to discover a **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**. Another good bird was a **Yellow Bittern**. While I was trying to verify that bird, the others called out “Black Bittern flying.” My head was turned and I missed it: Drat! Bitterns are always hard to see. After circling a couple of islands, the guide was ready to head home, but not us. Peter said that there were observation towers on the southeast shore, and so we ordered the pontoon boat into open water heading southeast. The maximum speed was 5 knots. My GPS receiver kept close track of our position and bearing. Fish traps dotted the shallow lake and pond lilies were beginning to bloom. The observation tower came into view. We had to land some distance from it and hike through brush to reach it. A **Striated Grassbird** grabbed our attention. From the tower I spied several **Cotton Pygmy Geese**. A mixed flock of **White-shouldered** and **Chestnut-tailed Starlings** swirled about and then disappeared into a nearby tree. Peter was excited to see a whole flock. Apparently starlings in Asia are thought of differently than starlings in North America. After a long discussion about a potential **Asian Golden Weaver**, we headed back to the dock. It was about noon when we got in.

Local fisherman on Beong Boraphet

Lunch was next. What would happen? Frank and Mick are not known for their interest in cuisine. We didn’t want to drive into **Nakon Suwan** and so we watched for a



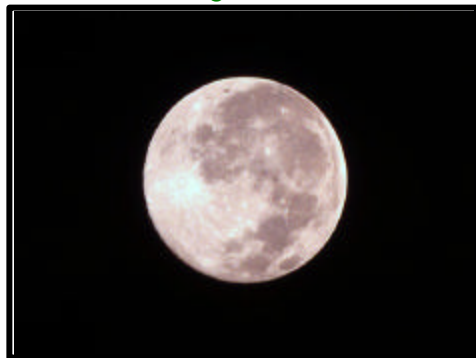
restaurant along the main road. Peter spotted one – the Lotus Restaurant – offering “Muslim food.” I wanted Thai food. However, a second option wasn’t apparent – oh, ok. Peter checked the menu and ordered for us, sensing our individual desires. I got Tom Yum Blaa – a soup – and Khao Mok Chai (yellow rice with chicken). It was excellent and cheap. Portraits of Thai royalty gazed down upon us. Good food is not a problem in Thailand.



*Thai campers at Chong Yen,
Mae Wong National Park*

The afternoon was occupied with a long steady drive to **Mae Wong National Park**, and then a long slow drive up through the park to a campground at ChongYen, the site of a former hill tribe village. The campground was

crowded with tents, including several groups. We were allowed to put our tents up at the edge of the campground, above most of the other campers. Chong Yen is at a gap (pass) in the Tharon Thongchai Mtns at 1315 m elevation. The air temperature was very pleasant. We had time for a short walk and were challenged by a **Blyth's Leaf Warbler**, the first of a very- difficult-to-identify-to-species group of little grey-green birds with varying degrees of white wing bars and head stripes. Dinner was simple – boiled noodles, smoked salmon (from Seattle), beer and peanut brittle for dessert. The Thais started to party and the sound of drums and music carried into the night. At 2:30 am I was awake and decided to get up to photograph the bright full moon through BigEye, my telescope. With the camera attached to BigEye, I couldn't find the moon in the viewfinder. I tried and tried; sometimes it is a bit touchy, but usually I can make it work. Finally, I put the regular eyepiece back on BigEye and looked again. Still no moon. Aha! The lens cap on the other end of the telescope hadn't been removed. I got my photo. A **Collared Owlet** was calling, and something else made a loud squawking sound at about 3:30 am, but nobody identified the caller.



Full moon at Mae Wong

We were up at 5:30 am. A quick breakfast, but we'll leave the tents up until later. I started with BigEye down the road on the eastside of the gap. We didn't stay together, as we each have a different bird watching pace. Two other birdwatchers joined us – David and Wayne. One of these guys was "known" to Peter, but Peter had never met him in person and he was curious to know how competent he was as a birder. Apparently he reports a lot of "sightings" to the Thai birding community. Babblers teased us from the undergrowth; bulbuls were fairly easy to see in the mid-levels of the forest, while barbets called from the tips of the canopy. Finally, we congregated where a **Bay Woodpecker** was positively identified by its call, but we couldn't see it. (I do identify birds by sound alone, but it is also fun to see them.) We took the van back to the gap and then started walking down the trail on the west side. This was the primary bird walk for the morning. The "target birds" were three types of scimitar-babblers, sneaky undergrowth birds. Again, our different styles spread the group out. Frank goes fast and far. I go slowly, often stopping for many minutes at a time. Eventually I was alone at the back of the pack. This deprives me of the quick

identifications by the more experienced birders, and forces me to learn the local birds myself, which is ultimately more satisfying. I did find some birds that the others did not see, and vice versa.

My favorite birds of the morning were a

Streaked Spiderhunter



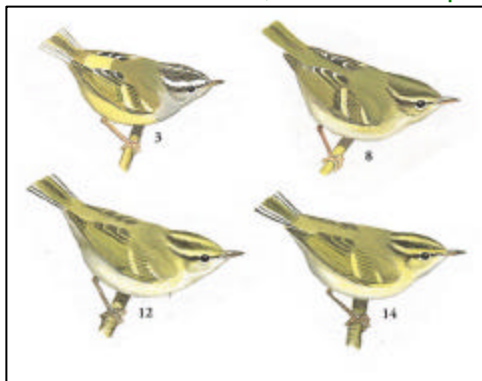
with a long heavy curved bill, *Orange-bellied Leafbird* with bright greens and oranges, and two *Long-tailed Sibilias* not seen by the others. Nobody spotted any scimitar-babblers. We got back to the tents at 10:30, struck camp and headed down the hill. Lunch was at a restaurant near the visitor center for the park. It was hot out and no birds distracted us from the simple, but quite good food.

Forest at Mae Wong National Park



Peter now drove hard and fairly steadily to try to get us to Mae Ping National Park in time to do some significant birding there before dark.

Apparently there is a relatively rare type of woodpecker that is easiest to see at Mae Ping. If we found it quickly, we could drive on to the next stop, or we could camp at Mae Ping. The decision became moot when Peter realized that we had driven 27 km beyond the turnoff (I wasn't navigating this day), and that it was getting too late (about 4:30 pm). So instead of turning back to the park, we stopped at a promising side road and walked around a local farm and over to a nearby quarry next to a river. We then continued on to Chom Thong, where Peter picked out a hotel near the turnoff to Doi Inthanon National Park. I wanted to delay dinner for an hour, but Frank wanted to eat immediately as he doesn't like to sleep with a full stomach. We ate at the **Ban Auchara Restaurant**, across the street from the hotel. Again, Peter ordered for all of us and did a good job choosing a variety of dishes. We shared fish patties (Tord Man), Thai omelet (Kai Chio), mixed vegetables, green curry soup (Gang Keo Wa) and a steamed fish. It was very inexpensive. This was the first night that the others had been at a hotel since arriving in Thailand. Frank and Mick shared one room; Peter and I another, while Mark splurged on a single room. Peter snored into the night, exhausted by all of the driving that he was doing.



The leaf-warblers are all alike: Ash-throated (3), Yellow-browed (8), Blyth's (12) and White-tailed (14) Leaf-Warblers.

We were up at 6:20, so that we could get to the top of **Doi Inthanon**, the highest mountain in Thailand, at sunrise. It was relatively cold at the top of the mountain; the birds were not singing, and the snack bar had cheap, bad coffee. In short, there was no need to be there at

dawn. In fact, the best birding spot is a nature trail through the “bog”, just below the summit of the mountain on the west side. Birding in this forest copse isn’t good until the sun begins to warm it, and so we waited an hour before descending into the “bog”. The tops of the highest mountains in northern Thailand are the southeastern extremes of the ranges of many Asian montane species. Many birds found here would not be present elsewhere in Thailand. The others began to call out names: “minla”, “fulvetta”, “sibia.” These names didn’t mean anything to me. What was that one? Where? There were too many, too fast. I was “ticking”, not learning. STOP! I let the others go ahead and waited quietly at a clearing, with the bird book open, and studied the birds carefully. I figured out the [Chestnut-tailed Minla](#), the [Rufous-winged Fulvetta](#), the difference between a [Green-tailed](#) and a [Mrs Gould’s Sunbird](#), and even spotted the elusive [White-browed Shortwing](#). On the other hand, those damned Leaf-warblers are all alike (dinky, grey-green with wing bars and head stripes). Frank passed by a couple of times; he had also hiked down the main road a ways. He asked, “How many times have you circled the nature loop?” I replied, “I’m still on my first circuit.” It was sunny and warm, and I was enjoying the morning immensely. I was the last one to be ready to leave.



[Chestnut-tailed Minla](#)

We stopped at [Mahathat](#) temple, with two marble chedis (stupas), on the way down. There was a restaurant there and the others thought that I would enjoy exploring the chedis while they ate. This would be my “cultural fix” for the day. They were very modern, built by the present King, with formal gardens and a great view. I got my fix, and even a bit of food, although I had to eat quickly. We continued down to the Park Headquarters and inquired about a bungalow. But alas, the Queen was scheduled to visit on Thursday (two days hence) and no bungalows were available. Everything was being cleaned, including the grounds around the facilities, in anticipation of her visit. We were given permission to camp, beyond the hill tribe village of Ya Mo, at the edge of a pine forest. We chose a spot on a terrace, next to a small stream. I was a bit concerned about the possibility of mosquitoes, but at least we would not have loud camping neighbors. We returned to the main road and drove back up to several birding spots. At one side road, I found a flock of [Black-throated Parrotbills](#) (nice looking small bird) in a large tree. Mick was pleased with this sighting, but Frank had hiked too far too quickly and the birds were gone by the time he returned. The end of the afternoon was spent walking along a part of the road with a large gallery forest on the east side illuminated by the afternoon sun. I was using BigEye to examine the birds in the tops of the trees as best I could. The challenging birds were Minivets – brilliantly colored red and black birds somewhat similar to our orioles.



[Long-tailed \(7\)](#), [Short-billed \(11\)](#) and [Small \(17\)](#) Minivets

The different species have subtle changes in the length and shape of the wing bars, and several species were possible. Mark worked on a green pigeon, and finally narrowed down the possibilities to [Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon](#). There were a few barbets calling and, again, I was at the mercy of the others quick identification of these birds as they were high and far away, but making distinctive calls. The other boys had seen most of

the Thai barbets earlier and weren't that interested in them. Mick made one final excellent sighting for the day – a [Spectacled Barwing](#). It was in some high grass below the side of the road. I managed to see it before it dropped out of sight. It is fairly large with strong black bars on its back, and stands out in the bird book as well as in real life.



Peter, Mick, Frank and Mark reviewing the day's work

Our dinner was at a restaurant near the park headquarters. We studied our books while waiting for the food to arrive. Peter had ordered for us once again. We shared a

coconut milk-based soup, some mixed vegetable dishes and a delicious deep-fried fish.

Dinner!



Back at camp, another tent had appeared, with Thai campers, next to our tents. But they were quiet, unlike the campers at Mae Wong. Mark and I shared one of the tents. An [Asian Barred Owl](#) called during the night. I woke up early, about 4:30, and decided to get up, wrap myself in my sleeping bag, and quietly watch the dawn come, while nibbling on some espresso cookies that I had made and brought with me to Thailand. But as I settled into my position, the others were suddenly up and ready to go. I had to scramble to pack and get into the van. We left the tents up to dry. A screaming [Slaty-backed Forktail](#) buzzed the campsite, and was identified by Peter, not me. I hadn't seen it very well, but the call agreed with the description in the bird book.

The first destination of the day was down near the park entrance. We would work back up towards the park headquarters and the campsite. We hiked up a ridgeline road through a pine forest watching for nuthatches and a falcon that should have been perching in the trees across the valley. Nothing. We tried walking along the river to find a particular type of redstart (small bird). Still nothing. The previous day an older Swedish couple had reported a flowering tree with birds at one of the big waterfalls near

the road. We drove into the site, and quickly found the tree, because of the birds. We had to strain our necks to look directly up into the tree, as it was on the edge of the overlook for the waterfall. The birds in that tree were good, including [Black-headed](#), [Black-crested](#) and [White-headed Bulbuls](#), but there wasn't much else around. I did glance at the waterfall, although I don't think that the others did so. Still no redstart, and I missed the sighting of a [Greater Racket-tailed Drongo](#). Drat. Frank wanted to find the parrotbill that he had missed the previous day. While he and Mark searched for it (no luck), Peter, Mickey and I went back to the gallery forest. I stopped at a sunny clearing where I spotted a [Giant Squirrel](#), a beautiful HUGE squirrel with a blue-grey back and cream-colored underparts. And there were three [Wedge-tailed Green Pigeons](#) sitting quietly back in the trees. And then two [Silver-eared Mesias](#) (very colorful medium-sized birds) were detected sneaking around in a shrub next to the road. It was a perfect hour.



[Silver-eared Mesias](#)

We also stopped at a small restaurant run by a man who also hires himself out as a bird watching guide. Peter got some tips on where to find the Redstart, but then said that the food was better at the restaurant that we had eaten at the previous night. I wanted to share the fancy boxed smoked salmon that I had carried from Seattle, but we decided to eat at the restaurant once again. Of course, the food was excellent and the salmon could wait, but not much longer. I had decided to explore other aspects of Thailand (besides birds). I wasn't sure exactly when I would abandon the boys, but the next birding destinations required that we drive through Chiang Mai, a well-known cultural center for northern Thailand.

After lunch, the others struck the tents while I took pictures of the hill village near the campground. We stopped at the trailhead ABOVE the waterfall and finally spotted the [Plumbeous Redstart](#)! Actually, it is a plain grey bird, and we couldn't get close as it was on the water's edge down in the canyon above the waterfall. But it was the bird that was being sought. The road to Chiang Mai was through developed farmland and small urban developments. We stopped at the airport to buy airplane tickets back to Bangkok. I got mine for Friday; the others would stay in the north until the night before their flights back to the USA, spending their last night in Thailand at the airport. Peter would be driving back to Bangkok by himself on Saturday. Ticket buying was fairly quick and so we still had a couple of hours of daylight. We stopped at a government agricultural station to look for a special type of swallow, but saw only [Barn Swallows](#) and a very nice [Green Bee-eater](#).

Next, we decided to try for wild [Green Peafowl](#) reportedly roosting nightly at a small zoo in a park 24 km east of Chiang Mai. We got there an hour before dark.



[Green Peafowl](#)

The place was nearly deserted. We walked into the zoo area alone, carefully looking for "visitors". Peter and Mark were ahead, and suddenly pointed to the left. There was a huge flock of maybe 200 peafowl walking through the undergrowth. They

spooked when they saw us, and with a rush of pounding wing beats, they flew up and across the lake surrounding the zoo. It was a very exciting scene. **Green Peafowl** are very large and very colorful. As we quickly explored the zoo, a few other peafowl were detected, including a magnificent Peacock with a full tail, although he wasn't displaying.

We returned to **Chiang Mai** just after dark and decided to stay at the Prince Hotel. This would provide quick exit from Chiang Mai in the morning, and yet was near enough to the town center that we could see some of the famous nightlife of the city. We hired two tuk-tuks, open-air 3-wheel taxis, to take us to the tourist night market. It was hopping with tourists and had shops of handicrafts and other tourist-oriented things to buy. The prices were pretty good, but none of us were in shopping mode. Peter directed us to an open-air restaurant and once again ordered an excellent meal for us. Except this time, the others didn't want to share their orders, and so Peter and I split a coconut milk-based curry and another fried fish. We returned to the hotel where Mark, Peter and I shared one room, while Mick and Frank plotted our next days of birding in another room. Wake-up would be at 4:15am. This would allow time to get to the mountains near Fang, on the Burmese border, for sunrise birdwatching.

But Chiang Mai is a major tourist destination. And there are other things to see in Thailand besides birds. I could switch from watching birds to watching Buddhas, monks and magical stone creatures at temples. If I go to Fang, the morning would be bird watching, but the rest of the day would be spent getting back to Chiang Mai by public buses. I got up at 4:15 am, however at 4:25 am, I decided that my time with the boys was over, and at 4:30 am, exactly 99 hours after greeting Frank at the airport, I said goodbye and good luck to Mick and Mark. Frank was already at the van. And since there is no point in looking for Buddhas at temples before dawn, I went back to bed.



Frank, Jeff, Peter, Mickey and Mark at dinner in the Chiang Mai night market