

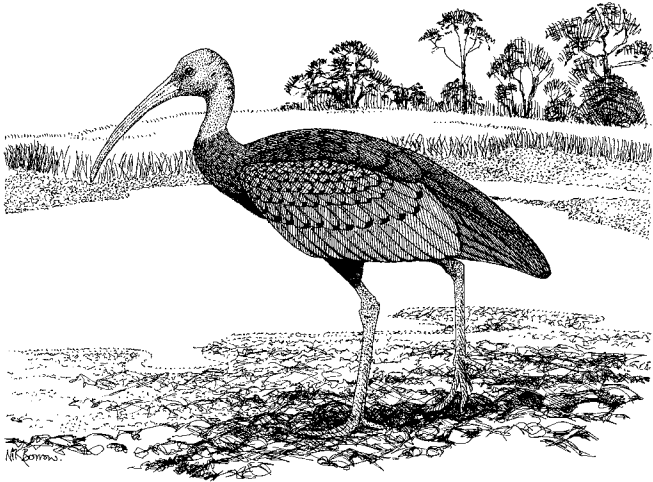
## CAMBODIA

**Sunday 6th March – Friday 18th March 2011 (13 days)**

**Leader: Dave Farrow**

**Group Size Limit: 9**

**Tour Category: Easy at times, but mostly Moderate**



*Giant Ibis (Nik Borrow)*

After decades of war, terror and isolation, Cambodia is now once again accessible to the outside world. This little-known and seldom-visited country, characterized by ancient temples, mighty rivers and remote forests, plays host to some avian delights which are nowhere else found so easily. Ancient Cambodians lived, very much as many of them still do today, in houses on stilts, existing on a diet of fish and rice.

After centuries of wars with the Thais and later the Spanish and Portuguese, the French arrived in 1863 and virtually turned the nation into one of their colonies until eventually, under the guidance of King Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia regained her independence in 1953. Following the unsuccessful US bombing of suspected communist base camps in 1969 and subsequent invasion, the Khmer Rouge emerged victorious in 1975 when Phnom Penh fell to Pol Pot's regime and the country entered its most violent and disastrous period of history. Pol Pot's men systematically

killed more than two million Cambodians, targeting the educated in particular, in their brutal attempt to turn Cambodia into a Maoist, peasant-dominated agrarian cooperative. Currency was abolished, postal services halted and the population became a work force of slave labourers, effectively cut off from the outside world. In 1978 the Vietnamese invaded, forcing the Khmer Rouge to flee to the jungles along the Thai border from where they sporadically fought the new Vietnamese-backed government. They were eventually outlawed and effectively lost any remaining power with Pol Pot's death in 1998 (his death was greeted with anger in Cambodia and elsewhere as he was never brought to trial). Hun Sen now leads the nation and this one-eyed strong man has proved to be a stabilizing force for a country with such a tortured history.

Fortunately, throughout the troubles, much of Cambodia's natural and cultural heritage remained intact, although logging

(a much needed source of income for the cash-strapped government) is continuing at an alarming rate. Now that travel is safe and easy, this fascinating country already receives a good deal of attention from backpackers and cultural tourists, eager to visit the amazing temples of Angkor Wat.

Happily for us, conservationists have also been hard at work in the last decade and have recently made some unexpected discoveries. The most exciting of these was the discovery of a good population of the legendary Giant Ibis and a new species of wagtail, the Mekong Wagtail. Straddled between Thailand and Vietnam, Cambodia shares much of its avifauna with those countries, so this is a tour for the more adventurous birding traveller that is specifically designed to look for the specialities that either do not occur in these neighbouring countries or which are rarely seen in them.

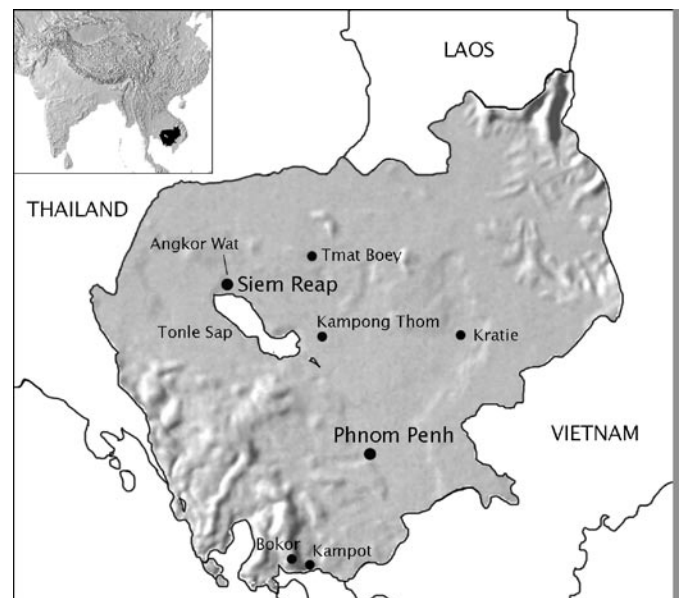
We will begin our adventure by flying to Siem Reap in the northwest of the country. Here we will search for the endangered *sharpei* subspecies of Sarus Crane and visit the waterbird colonies of Tonle Sap (home to breeding Lesser and Greater Adjutants, Milky Storks and Spot-billed

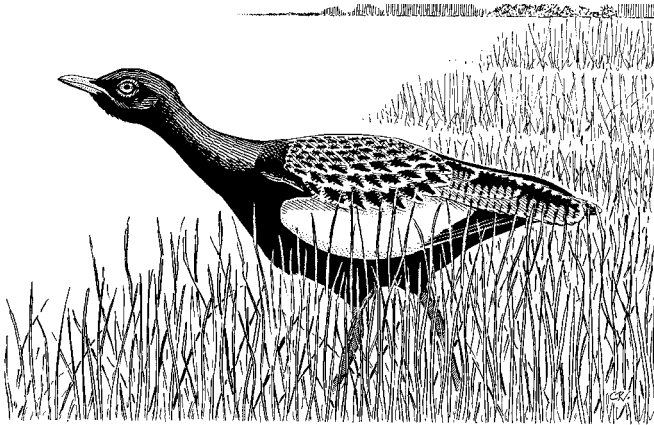
Pelicans). We will also visit the incomparable Angkor Wat temple complex. The 100 or so remaining temples here are the sacred remains of what was once a much larger administrative and religious centre and are one of the world's cultural wonders.

We will then make an expedition in four-wheel-drive vehicles to the remote north of the country where we will look at a series of forest pools where we have an excellent chance of finding the incredible Giant Ibis, the rare White-shouldered Ibis, the spectacular Black-headed Woodpecker and the seldom-seen Swinhoe's Minivet.

After exploring some grasslands in the centre of the country, where we will hope to find the spectacular Bengal Florican and the more subtly interesting and little-known Manchurian Reed Warbler, we will drive east to Kratie and take an exciting boat trip on the mighty Mekong River where we will see the recently-described Mekong Wagtail and the fascinating Irrawaddy River Dolphin.

We will finish our journey in the cool hill forests at Bokor where, amongst a host of interesting forest species including the spectacular Great Hornbill, we will hope to find the rare and seldom-seen, near-endemic Chestnut-





Bengal Florican (Craig Robson)

headed Partridge before we make our way to the coast and then Phnom Penh for our flight home.

Birdquest has operated tours to Cambodia since 2003.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins in the late morning at Siem Reap in northwestern Cambodia, where we will stay for three nights. Having checked in to our hotel, we will have our first opportunity to visit the amazing ruins of Angkor Wat (and the adjacent temples), one of the worlds most awesome cultural spectacles. The sacred remains here comprise around 100 temples and are only a small part of what was once a much larger religious and administrative centre. The complex was built between the 9th and 13th centuries AD to glorify a succession of Khmer kings. Most of Angkor was abandoned in the 15th century and the temples were gradually cloaked by forest. However, after renewed interest in the site in the late 19th century, the forest that threatened to completely engulf the temples was cut back and restoration work continues to this day. Although it will be hard to tear ourselves away from these amazing cultural treasures, it will be impossible not to notice a

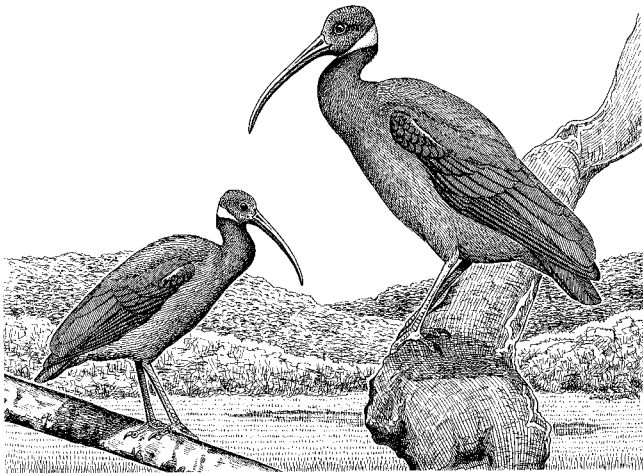
few birds in the impressive forest surrounding the temples and amongst the common and widespread species that we may well encounter are the impressive Black Baza, Shikra, Spotted Dove, the colourful Red-breasted Parakeet, Asian Barred Owllet, Brown-backed Needletail, House Swift, Asian Palm-Swift, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Indian Roller, Coppersmith Barbet, Barn Swallow, Ashy Minivet, Black-headed, Yellow-vented and Streak-eared Bulbuls, Oriental Magpie Robin, Blue Rock Thrush (mostly of the migrant rufous-bellied race *philippensis*), Common Tailorbird, Hainan Blue and Asian Brown Flycatchers, Pied Fantail, Black-naped Oriole, Black and Hair-crested Drongos, Common and White-vented Mynas, and Eurasian Tree Sparrow.

**Days 2-3** Our stay at Siem Reap will give us the opportunity to visit two wetlands of international importance and during our first full day we will make an excursion by boat out onto the vast inland lake of Tonle Sap, to the huge waterbird colonies at Prek Toal. Tonle Sap is a huge fishery (and, in addition, up to a million water snakes are harvested here annually!) which provides a significant proportion of the Cambodian people's entire

protein intake. As a result, the fisheries are strictly protected and a by-product of this is that the waterbirds have been shielded from illegal poaching, resulting in the best remaining large waterbird colonies in South-East Asia (if not the whole of Asia!). Setting off from the shore of this vast lake, we will first pass a floating village before crossing the lake, accompanied by hundreds of Whiskered Terns and occasionally a few Brown-headed Gulls. Once near to the colonies we will switch to smaller pirogues and be punted up small side channels to some observation platforms where we will soon be amazed by the sheer quantity of birds, as literally thousands of cormorants, storks and herons are constantly in view! Huge numbers of Indian Cormorants are joined by smaller numbers of Little and Great Cormorants and Oriental Darters. Black-backed Swampheens (split from Purple) adorn the waterside vegetation and mixed flocks of Little, Cattle, Great and Intermediate Egrets are joined by dozens of Grey and Purple Herons, Chinese Pond Herons (which can sometimes be compared side-by-side with Javan Pond Heron) and smaller numbers of Striated (or Little) Herons and Black-crowned Night Herons. Asian Openbill is the commonest stork species, but these are joined by good numbers of Painted Storks and in the frequent 'kettles' of storks overhead we will look carefully for Lesser Adjutant and the very rare and impressive Greater Adjutant, both of which have good populations here. Spot-billed Pelicans (here at their only colony in Southeast Asia) are delightfully numerous and we will get many opportunities to watch the antics of these impressive beasts. Smaller numbers of Black-headed Ibises are mixed in with the colonies and, if we are lucky, we will encounter the rare Milky Stork at its only known freshwater breeding colony in the world. Raptors are also

in evidence: Ospreys can sometimes be seen perching on the bamboo poles used by the fisherman, Brahminy Kites wheel overhead and the stately Grey-headed Fish Eagle is frequently encountered. Common Kingfishers and attractive Black-capped Kingfishers are occasionally seen along the channels and in the waterside vegetation we may encounter species such as Greater Coucal (always heard more often than seen!), Green-billed Malkoha, Black-browed and Oriental Reed Warblers, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler (very common by voice but as usual hard to see!), Yellow-bellied Prinia, Olive-backed Sunbird and Eastern Jungle Crow (split from Large-billed). We may also encounter one or two of the scarcer species of the area such as Yellow Bittern, Glossy Ibis, Ruddy-breasted Crake or Red-necked Phalarope.

The reserve of Ang Tropaeng Thmor lies to the northwest of Siem Reap, towards the Thai border, and is famous for its large population of wintering Sarus Cranes of the rare southeast Asian subspecies, *sharpei*. During our visit to this remarkable wetland we should see good numbers of this majestic species, along with many Comb Ducks, here at their last known South-East Asian stronghold. The rich mosaic of habitats here, comprising scrub, open fields, rice paddies and marshes, is home to a rich variety of species, two of which, House Sparrow and Peaceful Dove, have recently colonized the area from Thailand. In the drier areas numerous Eastern Marsh Harriers and smaller numbers of Black Kites and stunning Pied Harriers quarter fields that house many Red-throated and Paddyfield Pipits and Yellow-breasted Buntings as well as a few Oriental Pratincoles, Pacific Golden Plovers and Australasian Bushlarks. Scrubby areas are home to Sooty-headed Bulbul, Siberian Stonechat, Brown Shrike, Black-collared



*White-shouldered Ibises (Craig Robson)*

Starling and the attractive Plain-backed Sparrow, whilst roadside pools and ditches have a good variety of waders including Little Ringed Plover, Pintail Snipe, Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank, and Wood and Green Sandpipers, as well as numerous Yellow Wagtails. The latter are mostly of the form *macronyx*, known as Eastern Grey-headed Wagtail, although in 2003 we found Cambodia's first *taivana* (Green-headed Wagtail) here, as well as the first Eurasian Spoonbill – showing just how much there is to learn about this ornithologically little-known country! The marshy pools and lotus ponds hold numerous Little Grebes, diminutive Cotton Pygmy Geese, Common Moorhens, Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Black-winged Stilts, Common Snipes and Pied Kingfishers, whilst Lanceolated Warblers, Plain Prinias and Zitting Cisticolas skulk around the edges. In the more open rice paddies, large numbers of Lesser Whistling Ducks congregate, along with smaller numbers of Garganeys. We may also be lucky enough to find one or two of the scarcer species that inhabit the area such as Black-necked Stork, Small Buttonquail, Greater Painted-

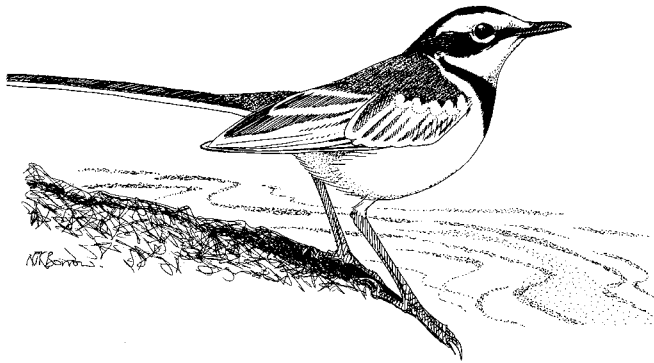
Snipe or White-shouldered Starling.

**Day 4** After another chance to admire the cultural wonders of Angkor Wat and its associated temples we will begin our three nights expedition to look for the incomparable Giant Ibis by driving north to the village of Tmat Boey in Preah Vihear province in north-central Cambodia. Although only a relatively short distance away, the roads are poor and progress will be slow in our four-wheel-drive vehicles. During the journey we should encounter a few new species including the localized Rufous-winged Buzzard, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, and Alexandrine and Blossom-headed Parakeets.

**Days 5-6** The area in which the Giant Ibis has been found is part of the low-lying, extended floodplain of the Mekong River in the northern part of Preah Vihear province, adjacent to southern Laos. Flooded for much of the year, the area is only accessible to motor vehicles for a few months during the dry season! The area consists of large open plains interspersed with extensive tracts of dry, open, deciduous forest, with areas of denser evergreen forest

close to watercourses. As the floodwaters recede through the dry season (and the heat increases!), the available wetland habitats become gradually fewer until just a relatively few small forest pools remain. These pools, known locally as 'trapeang', concentrate the waterbirds, and in particular the Giant and White-shouldered Ibises. Our visit is timed to be late in the dry season and we will be concentrating our efforts on a number of these 'trapeangs' for our quarry. Birds are shy here due to decades of hunting (although the ibises are not specifically targeted) and as we walk through the open woodland from one trapeang to the next, the first sign of the ibises is likely to be bore holes in the muddy edge of one of the pools, indicating where they have been feeding, or we may hear their strange crane-like bugling. Eventually, with some careful stalking through the forest and with some luck, we will hopefully obtain good views of these near-mythical species. The search could well be quite arduous due to the heat, but hopefully our efforts will be richly rewarded. Other species attracted to the pools may well include Woolly-necked Stork and White-breasted Waterhen. It is the deciduous dry-dipterocarp forests, however, that hold the bulk of the species inhabiting the area and, although they go very quiet in the heat of the day, we should encounter many species including Crested Serpent Eagle, the attractive though elusive Chinese Francolin, Red Junglefowl (more often heard than seen for obvious reasons!), Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Green Imperial Pigeon, Large Hawk-Cuckoo, Indian, Drongo and Banded Bay Cuckoos, Vernal Hanging Parrot, Crested Treeswift, the intriguing Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Lineated Barbet, Oriental Pied Hornbill, a rich variety of woodpeckers (including the prehistoric looking Great Slaty Woodpecker,

the beautiful Black-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-crowned, Grey-capped, Rufous-bellied, White-bellied and Grey-headed Woodpeckers, Lesser Yellownappe and Common and Greater Flamebacks), Olive-backed Pipit, colourful Blue-winged and Golden-fronted Leafbirds, Large and Indochinese Cuckooshrikes, Scarlet and Small Minivets, the scarce Swinhoe's Minivet, Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, Common and Large Woodshrikes, Common Iora, White-rumped Shama, the localized Brown and Rufescent Prinias, Dark-necked Tailorbird, Yellow-browed, Two-barred (split from Greenish) and Radde's Warblers, Red-throated (or Taiga, split from Red-breasted) and Tickell's Blue Flycatchers, White-browed Fantail, Black-naped Monarch, the comical White-crested Laughingthrush (and with luck the scarce Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush), Striped Tit-Babbler, Puff-throated and Chestnut-capped Babbler, the attractive Burmese Shrike, Ashy, Bronzed and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, Red-billed Blue Magpie, Rufous and Racket-tailed Treepies, Black-hooded Oriole, Chestnut-tailed Starling, the localized Vinous-breasted Starling, Common Hill Myna, Neglected Nuthatch (split from Chestnut-bellied), Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Grey Tit (split from Great), Indochinese Bushlark (one of the products of the splitting of the Rufous-winged Bushlark complex) and Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker. Several species of owls and nightjars are present and with luck we will encounter some of these. Possibilities include Brown Fish, Oriental Scops and Collared Scops Owls, Spotted Wood Owl, Brown Boobook (or Brown Hawk-Owl) and Large-tailed, Savanna and Indian Nightjars. Other open country species found here include Red Collared Dove, Asian Koel, vivid Green and Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters, Common Hoopoe, Olive-



*Mekong Wagtail (Nik Borrow)*

backed and Purple Sunbirds, and Scaly-breasted and White-rumped Munias. With luck we will also encounter one or two of the rarer inhabitants of this fascinating area such as the smart little Collared Falconet, the furtive Yellow-legged Buttonquail, the rare and highly nomadic Pale-capped Pigeon, Asian Emerald Cuckoo or White's Thrush. Whilst mammals are not conspicuous in this habitat, we should encounter the attractive Finlayson's Squirrel and the ground-loving Berdmore's Squirrel.

**Day 7** After a final morning in Preah Vihear province we will head for the relative comfort of Kampong Thom for an overnight stay.

**Day 8** Kampong Thom lies near the eastern end of Tonle Sap and here we will visit an area of seasonally flooded grassland that is rich in waterbirds. Top priority for us here will be the impressive and rare Bengal Florican and we have an excellent chance of finding this handsome bustard. We will also have a very good chance of finding the restricted-range and seldom-seen Manchurian Reed Warbler, but we will doubtless have to spend some time scrutinizing the commoner Black-browed Reed Warblers in order

to track down our quarry (fortunately the Manchurians seem to prefer the drier areas). In areas of shorter grassland we will, if we are in luck, flush Blue-breasted Quail and Barred Buttonquail, and if we are very fortunate we will find some migrant Oriental Plovers which may include dapper white-headed males. Indeed, it is likely that the vast Tonle Sap floodplain is an important stopover site for this poorly-known species. Raptors are also a feature of the area and among those we are unlikely to have already encountered are Black-shouldered Kite and Greater Spotted Eagle. We will also come across a number of widespread open country species such as Red-wattled Lapwing, Lesser Coucal, White-throated Kingfisher, Oriental Skylark, Sand Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Richard's Pipit, Pied Bushchat, Bluethroat, Dusky Warbler, Striated Grassbird, Asian Pied Starling and the declining Red Avadavat. If we are fortunate we will come across one or two of the more elusive inhabitants of this area such as Cinnamon Bittern or Siberian Rubythroat. Later we will drive south and then east to Kratie, situated on the banks of the mighty Mekong, for an overnight stay.

**Day 9** This morning we will visit an area of deep water pools in the Mekong where we can expect to find the recently described and extremely localized Mekong Wagtail (it is very distinctive, looking like an African Pied Wagtail). We should also see some endearing Irrawaddy River Dolphins. This cetacean is now endangered in the Mekong, with numbers in the river down to around 70. We will also be looking out for the rare and declining Asian Golden Weaver which can still sometimes be found in this area alongside Streaked Weaver. We may also see large numbers of waterbirds at Kratie, among which may be Black Bittern, Indian (or Burmese) Spot-billed Duck, the diminutive Small Pratincole, Common Sandpiper and Temminck's Stint. Later we will embark upon the long drive to Kampot, on the southwest coast, for an overnight stay.

**Day 10** Kampot is no more than a launching pad from which we will reach the nearby hill station of Bokor. However, before we set off, we will have an opportunity to look at the Germain's Swiftlets fluttering overhead. In 2004, the Birdquest group found the swiftlets nesting in Kampot and this not only helped to clarify which species they were (as they had white, 'edible-type' nests), but was also the first documented breeding of any swiftlet species in Cambodia! After breakfast we will drive the relatively short distance to the former French hill station of Bokor for a two nights stay. As we climb up through the evergreen forest we will soon start to notice new species and by the time we reach the top of the escarpment we will be in refreshingly cool, stunted montane forest, a welcome relief from the steamy-hot lowlands we have left behind. Formerly a haunt of weekend gamblers, the hill station now largely comprises derelict and run down buildings (a

setting that has been used for more than one film), though some are maintained for the national park and one of these will accommodate us. Once settled in, we will begin our exploration of this fascinating area.

**Day 11** Our main quarry at Bokor is a tough one to track down. The beautiful and near-endemic Chestnut-headed Partridge ranges through the largely inaccessible Cardamom and Elephant Mountains and reaches the southern edge of its range at Bokor. As with all Asian forest partridges it is shy and difficult to find, but we will give it our best shot! The partridge mostly occurs in the stunted forest on the plateau and whilst exploring this area and the access road which traverses taller forest we should encounter many other new species. Noisy Lesser Racket-tailed Drongos and White-browed Scimitar Babblers are likely to be a prominent feature, whilst a number of confusing warblers occur including Pale-legged Leaf and White-tailed Leaf Warblers and the retiring Plain-tailed Warbler (a product of the splitting of the 'Golden-spectacled Warbler' complex). In areas of taller forest, noisy wing-beats are likely to draw our attention to Wreathed Hornbills and spectacular Great Hornbills, whilst colourful Red-headed and Orange-breasted Trogons and Long-tailed Broadbills somehow remain inconspicuous in the mid-storey below. Other species we may encounter include Rufous-bellied Eagle, Thick-billed and Wedge-tailed Green Pigeons, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Barred Cuckoo Dove, Vernal Hanging Parrot, Green-billed Malkoha, the localized Green-eared and Moustached Barbets, Blue-eared Barbet, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, Great Iora, Black-crested, Stripe-throated, Grey-eyed and Ochraceous Bulbuls, Dark-necked Tailorbird,

Striped Tit-Babbler, the shy Mugimaki Flycatcher, Verditer Flycatcher, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Large Scimitar Babbler, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, White-bellied Yuhina, Little Spiderhunter, Ruby-cheeked and Crimson Sunbirds, Black-throated Sunbird (here of the endemic subspecies *cambodiana*), Thick-billed and Yellow-vented Flowerpeckers, Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers of the near-endemic form *cambodianum* (which lacks fire on its breast!) and Oriental White-eye. If we are lucky we will come across one or two of the scarcer or shyer inhabitants of the forest such as the secretive Scaly-breasted Partridge, the diminutive Collared Owlet (easy to hear, but not to see!), Dollarbird, the beautiful Blue Pitta, Siberian Blue Robin or

Streaked Wren-Babbler. We might also come across one or two northbound migrants such as Grey-faced Buzzard, Forest Wagtail, Eyebrowed Thrush or Arctic Warbler.

**Day 12** We will spend much of the day enjoying Bokor's forests before heading back to Kampot for an overnight stay.

**Day 13** This morning we will explore some nearby salt pans where we will find numerous migrant shorebirds, including Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers, Kentish Plover, Red-necked and Long-toed Stints, and Broad-billed, Curlew and Marsh Sandpipers, as well as Caspian and Gull-billed Terns. If we are lucky we will also encounter the scarce Malaysian Plover. This is a little-known area and so

we shall be on the lookout for any migrant surprises. In the surrounding mangroves we should find Collared Kingfisher and Golden-bellied Gerygone (the latter a species only recently discovered in Cambodia and an indicator of how underwatched this coast is). After lunch we will drive to Phnom Penh and catch an early evening flight to Bangkok where we connect with our onward flight to London.

**Day 15** Morning arrival at London.

#### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** At Siem Reap and Bokor the hotels are of normal Birdquest standard. At Kampong Thom, Kampot and Kratie the hotels are rather simple but perfectly adequate

and all rooms have private bathrooms. At Tmat Boey in Preah Vihear province we will be staying for three nights in a basic guesthouse accommodation in the village. Road transport is by minibus and by 4x4 vehicles and roads are very variable in quality (ranging from good highways to rough tracks).

**Walking:** The walking effort is easy to moderate (including some long walks in flat terrain).

**Climate:** Mostly hot (occasionally very hot) though cooler at Bokor. Generally 'dry' heat though occasionally it can be fairly humid. Sunny weather may be interspersed by occasional cloudy periods and showers.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities are worthwhile.