

Cambodia Tour: February 15-March 3, 2017

February 15-17: Traveling to Cambodia and February 18: Lounging around the resort

Note: All the photos in this report are available online at <https://goo.gl/photos/Le9g4f955poi5z5w9>



Here is our signature Big Tree photo. We had several Big Trees on this trip, but I like this picture the best.

Our first Cambodian bird, a Eurasian Tree Sparrow, greeted us at the Siem Reap airport almost exactly 24 hours after we left home. The acrid smell of smoke from burning vegetation hung in the air, a scent I always associate with the third world. We had arrived.

Our route from the airport took us past a row of new hotels. We learned that Siem Reap is something of a boom town due to the influx of tourists visiting Angkor Wat. The place certainly didn't have the appearance of a typical third world city. After passing Hotel Row, we turned left onto another major thoroughfare, then made a U-turn onto a gravel road and shortly arrived at the Angkor Village Resort, a wonderful place quite unlike all the other hotels we had passed. Our luxurious room, looked out on a sinuous canal that ran thru the property before reaching the main swimming pool. A large bush near the front door was home to a family of Common Tailorbirds, one of whom spent most of the time begging food from the two harried adults. Sunbirds visited a red flowering tree repeatedly.

After our long trip getting there, we were happy to spend time just wandering the grounds and swimming in the canal. Linda went to the local market. I sat

around. We had a full day to unwind before meeting the rest of our group:

- Linda and me
- Jenny and Terry Cloudman, our frequent traveling companions on these trips
- George and Terry Pagos, a couple from Seattle
- Barbara Murphy and Jessica Jenner, two ladies who travel together often. Barbara lives in MA, while Jessica is from CO.
- Dion Hobcroft from Australia was the leader. We have traveled with him before and like him.
- Kunthea, a lovely and intelligent Cambodian woman, was the second leader. Her keen eyesight quickly earned her the sobriquet *Eagle Eyes*.

The extra day gave us some time to practice with the new camera, taking photos of a nice butterfly and a Zebra Dove that was to prove a jinx bird for Jenny, as well as a source of controversy over the pronunciation.



General observations on Cambodia

This country is still recovering from the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot. Most of the population is young, under 40, many others gone.

Motor bikes are everywhere, vastly outnumbering the trucks and autos on the streets. The rules of the road, more suggestions than rules, give right of way to the biggest and baddest, or fastest. Passing is hazardous, usually accomplished with traffic looming in your lane. If you don't have enough room, the oncoming vehicle flashes the headlights, which seems to mean, "No, me first." Motor bikes frequently take to the shoulder in self-defense.

Although the country is poor, we did not see any beggars on the streets. In Siem Reap especially, everyone seems to be thriving. The rural countryside is much worse off.

Agriculture is still dominant outside the cities. This appears to be mainly in the form of small family or village rice fields and quite a bit of cattle raising. The contrast with Vietnam, which we visited after Cambodia, was striking. More on that in the Vietnam report. Cambodia has a wet season and a dry season, each lasting six months. We visited during the dry season.

February 19: Angkor Wat, Tomb Raider Temple Ruins

Today, we visited the famous World Heritage site, Angkor Wat. Linda and I were underwhelmed, for several reasons:

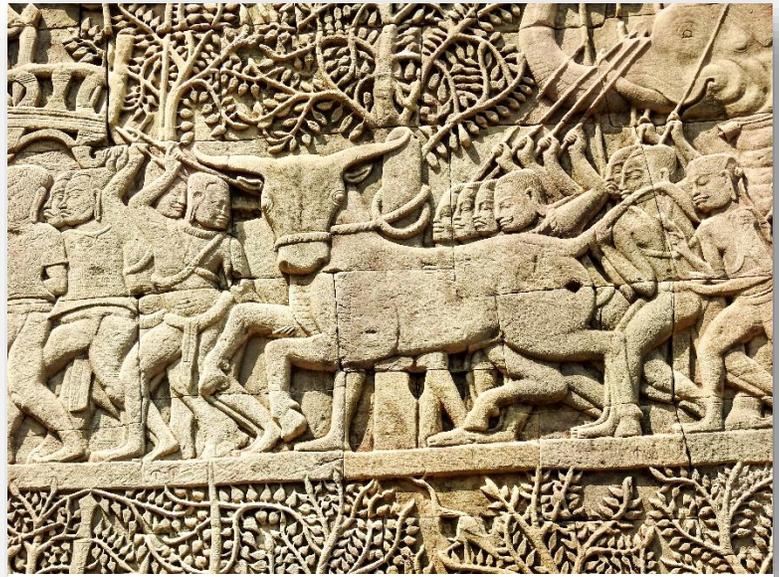
- Our *cultural guide* had a idiosyncratic notion of English syntax, coupled with an encyclopedic knowledge of Khmer royal succession. We learned that King FooBar VII (not his real name, which has about 20 syllables) conquered everyone with 70,000 troops and built Angkor Wat. Later, we learned that many other Kings were involved. I tuned this out.
- The famous carvings, which are remarkably well preserved, depict a lot of battles together with scenes of ordinary life. Too many battles; not enough ordinary life.
- The hype surrounding Angkor Wat led to unrealistic expectations.
- The heat and crowds didn't help.
- However, after editing our photos, we must admit the ruins are very impressive.

That said, we did find some interesting birds before hitting the temples with the rest of the hoards of tourists. Forest Wagtail and Black Baza were both lifers, our first of the trip. We also had excellent views of the Black-capped Kingfisher, a common kingfisher in Asia that we had seen before, but which is a nice one to see again. We had no decent photos of wildlife for the day, but many shots of the carvings.

We also visited another site with a name no one remembers because everyone calls it the Tomb Raider Temple after the movie starring a young Angelina Jolie wearing an amazing silver lamé jumpsuit. The movie catapulted her (pun intended) to the top of the action genre. We took two "big tree" photos at temple ruins. Neither of these were selected for our signature photo, but here they are anyway:



In front of a "sprung" tree at the Tomb Raider Temple



Carving at Angkor Wat showing a bull about to be slaughtered for a victory feast.

February 20: Tonle Sap

Today, we left before dawn to drive to Tonle Sap, a large lake formed by the Mekong River. Most tourists go to the lake to visit one of the many floating restaurants located there. We skipped all that in favor of a chance to see one of the most critically endangered bird species in the world, Milky Stork.

At the lake, we boarded a large boat for a ride to the bird sanctuary. We were treated to a magnificent sunrise over the lake. The photo doesn't really do justice to the clouds and sun.

We transferred to three smaller boats for the rest of our journey. Our boatman was inept and ran into obstructions at every opportunity. The propeller clogged often, as shown.



Another big tree. We titled this photo "Nature bats last."



Sunrise over Tonle Sap



A frequent reason for stopping the boat.

There were lots of great birds to distract us, including hundreds of Painted Storks. These compete with the Milky Stork for nesting space, food, etc. They must be better at it because there we saw tons of them and only three Milky Storks. Our target species used to nest near the canal we were on, but a recent fire destroyed their nest trees. Now, the nearest trees were several hundred meters away across a treacherous soft gravel plain. Linda fell three times, but plowed on bruised and embarrassed, but still plucky, she soldiered on. We did finally see Milky Storks in the telescope and flying overhead. The Painted Storks and Greater Adjutant proved to be easier to photograph.

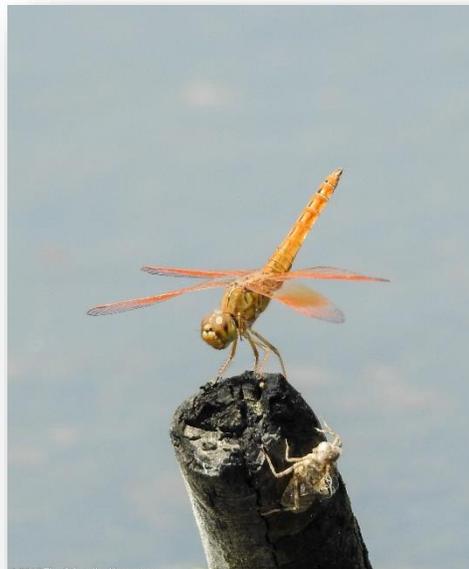


A few Painted Storks feeding in a wetland near Tonle Sap



Greater Adjutant stork on a nest tree near Tonle Sap

We also managed to get a good shot of an orange dragonfly. One highlight of the day was seeing at least 10 Black Bitterns. This was a *half bird*, seen by only one of us. I had seen one well in Thailand while Linda was occupied studying a gull. So, she caught up on that one.



Dragonfly on a post near Tonle Sap

February 21-23: Tmatboey

Today, we drove to Tmatboey, a place with a name none of us knew how to pronounce. Most English speakers opted for something that sounded like T-Mat-Booee. While the Cambodians rendered it as something akin to Mat-Bway. The T, although probably there, was lost to people not used to hearing it. If you start to say something beginning with a T and then switch to Mat, I *think* you'll be close.

The place, among the most rustic we encountered on this trip, was established a few years ago to help preserve the area for the *Giant Ibis*. That bird, thought to be extinct, was rediscovered in an automatic camera. Now, the villagers are paid about \$5/day to locate the few birds remaining. They got an additional \$5 if they could lead birders to see the bird. That changed things around dramatically.

The facilities are basic, but did include electricity and hot water, as well as some nice food.

Despite the forlorn look of the area, bone dry at the time, with only a few cattle roaming around, it produced quite a few new species to add to the list, including several rarities.



White-throated Rock Thrush. The white throat is small and insignificant.

On the drive up, we stopped for breakfast by yet another temple ruin, where we added the White-throated Rock Thrush, a handsome bird, much less common than its cousin the Blue Rock Thrush, which we have seen in many places.

We headed steadily north, eventually finding our way to the dry dipterocarp forest. The name means *two-winged seed*, although we didn't see many seeds at this season.

We stopped briefly at a nest of White-rumped Pygmy Falcon, a

new species for everyone. The male obligingly perched on a branch for a photo; the female peeked out of the nest hole.

We saw many excellent species on our two plus days at Tmatboey.

Here are some of the best photos from our stay there:



Male White-rumped Pygmy Falcon. The female stayed in the nest hole.



Burmese Shrike



Black-headed Woodpecker taking off. This was a lucky shot. I had the camera set on continuous shooting and got this photo plus several shots of an empty perch.



Chinese Francolin. Another lucky shot of a species more often heard than seen.



Chestnut-headed Bee Eater



Red-breasted Parakeet, a fairly common parakeet, but always fun to see well.



Savannah Nightjar. This bird is sitting on a nest note the eggs. It was easier to see in this photo than real life.

One morning, as we crossed a dry rice paddy, we came upon a snake skin shed by a King Cobra. Dion, who once worked as a herpetologist at the Sydney zoo, showed us how to identify it as a cobra from the skin. That clearly showed the hood around the eyes. We estimated the skin to be about 2.5 meters long, a big snake. King Cobras prey on other snakes, so they are not considered dangerous to humans. Primarily nocturnal, they live in holes around rice paddies. We searched the area, but didn't find a likely hole.



Dion holds King Cobra skin showing the area around the head with eye holes and an indication of the hood.



Distant White-throated Kingfisher



Fulvous Forest Skimmer Dragonfly. Note the lovely color of the wings, opaque red with transparent tips.

On our final morning in this interesting area, we hiked to a spot overlooking a river, where we saw many interesting birds, but had few chances for photos. One exception was this photo of an Oriental Pied Hornbill, the common Hornbill in Southeast Asia, frequently abbreviated to OPH. This is a distant photo. We have a much better one from Vietnam. Another distant bird, White-throated Kingfisher, posed in a tree near the OPH. We took this photo of a common bird, but got a much better one later in Vietnam.



OPH

Linda spotted a fabulous Dragonfly and got me to take a photo. We have seen similar dragonflies in the past and called them Forest Rangers. Terry Pagos identified this one as a Fulvous Forest Skimmer.

After our morning, we returned to Siem Reap and the delightful luxury of Angkor Village Resort.

February 24: ATT

We left before breakfast again for a drive to Ang Trapeang Thmor Wildlife Preserve, better known as ATT. The preserve has been set aside for Sarus Cranes, a species that occurs from Australia thru southern Asia. We did see Sarus Cranes, several of them, as well as two lifers, Comb Duck and Red-throated Pipit in breeding plumage, the latter surprising considering how much time we have spent where we could have seen them.

However, the highlight of the day was seeing three separate species of owls in the space of three minutes. First up was a Spotted Owlet, a small owl of the genus *Athene*, a model for the owls that appear on the Rice University seal. While we watched the owlet, a Barn Owl flew over. This is one of the few six continent birds left after all the species splitting of the past several years. No doubt it will be split soon.

Then, we saw a Spotted Wood Owl, which I nominated as my favorite bird of the trip. We had spectacular views of this bird, and even managed good photos:



Spotted Wood Owl on daytime roost

About Breakfast in the Field

We ate breakfast in the field often during the trip. This typically consisted of fried rice, a hard-boiled egg, some fruit, coffee or tea.

One fruit we liked was [mangosteen](#), something we hadn't seen before. Here's a picture of Linda holding the fruit before and after opening it.

You eat the white parts. The center one has a seed in it, but the others are pure fruit. Kunthea told us that it was good

for older people, something reflected in the [Wikipedia article](#) on the fruit. We told her that if we ran into any old people, we would pass the information along.

It's been a while since we had a spider photo. Here's one we saw on the floor of our hotel. And a dragonfly for good measure.



Spotted Owlet. The head is turned to the left; it isn't missing one eye.





Lovely Wolf Spider seen on the floor



Paddyfield Parasol (Neurothemis intermedia) at ATT

February 25: Bengal Florican Grasslands near Kumpong Thom



Dion Heads out over the Florican Grasslands, scope at the ready, searching for the Bengal Florican and Button Quail.

After our final night at the fabulous Angkor Village Resort, we set off to look for the Bengal Florican, a type of Bustard, critically endangered, with a very restricted range, just what birders love. I would like to show photos of the bird, but we were unable to get anything useful. [The web has many](#). Here's what the area looks like, which gives you an idea of why it was hard to get a photo.



After spending the day searching the grasslands we drove to the town of Kumpong Thom, where we spent one night at the aptly named Glorious Hotel. We found this Mantis right outside the front door.

February 26: Krahm

Today, we drove north along the Mekong river toward the town of Kratie where we planned a boat trip on the river for the 27th. We stopped off at a wetland area called Krahm, where we added a number of water species to our list. Lifers were Watercock, which we viewed in the scope by watching the reeds until the wind blew the leaves out of the way. Not the best look, but satisfactory. White-shouldered Starlings visiting from China for the winter, were seen better. Two non-lifers seen at breakfast provided the best photos of the day:



Wood Sandpiper, a common bird, but hard to photograph

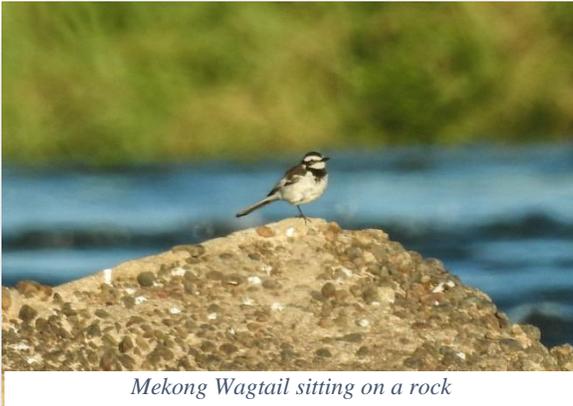


Little Ringed Plover, a close relative of our Semipalmated Plover

February 27: Kampi, Aromis

After spending the night in the town of Kratie, at a decidedly non-luxurious hotel, we set off for a boat trip on the Mekong. We hoped to see the Mekong Wagtail, a bird found only on small islands in the river. We were also looking for the Irrawaddy Dolphins, river dolphins restricted to a few rivers in Southeast Asia.

We didn't have to wait long for both of them to show up. Here's a somewhat distant view of the wagtail, which looks like most wagtails. The dolphins were impossible to photograph as the boat was moving at the time we saw them. We had as many as six at a time swimming in front of us. A Little Ringed Plover seen on the beach was in full breeding plumage, showing a bright yellow eye-ring missing from the other one we photographed.



Mekong Wagtail sitting on a rock



*Little Ringed Plover on a beach along the Mekong.
Note the bright yellow eye ring*

After checking into our hotel for the next two nights, we drove a short distance to a place called Aromis, a small resort consisting of a few cabins and a coffee bar. It was windy and impossible to see any birds. Linda suggested that we adjourn to the coffee bar and sample what they had to offer. Everyone thought that a good idea. Fortified with coffee, some of the best of the trip, we gazed out over the trees from the balcony. To our surprise, the area was full of birds. We wound up with 19 species seen from the coffee bar. This was so astounding that I announced to the group that I was glad I had come up with such a good idea — to general laughter.

February 28-March 1: Seima

We spent two days and a morning exploring the Seima Wildlife Preserve, an area that VENT added to the tour in 2012. We ate breakfast in a covered porch where we saw the ancestor of all the chickens in the world. (Actually, according to [Wikipedia](#), chickens were domesticated multiple times, only one of which was in Southeast Asia.) A male and female Red Junglefowl paraded past our location showing off their fine feathers. Notice the white patch on the cheek. This feature distinguishes the ancestral subspecies, *Gallus gallus gallus*, from the domestic variety, *Gallus gallus domesticus*. This Asian Giant Squirrel was interesting. Others we have seen were entirely dark brown or black. This variety is two-toned.



*Male and Female Red Junglefowl
Gallus gallus gallus*



Cambodian Variety of Asian Giant Squirrel



Centipede on the floor of the hotel

This centipede on the floor of the hotel the next morning caused quite a commotion. We returned to Seima and followed a different track off the main road. We had two Green-pigeons that required careful study to identify them. Here are the photos:



*Thick-billed Green-pigeon, told by the two-toned bill and
the pale green eye ring.*



Pintail Green-pigeon, told by the obvious long tail

March 2: On to Phnom Penh

Our journey was almost at an end. We had one day left, during which we drove to Phnom Penh. First, though, we stopped at a spot where Green Peafowl had been seen in the past. We heard them, but construction activity in the area seems to have driven the birds deeper into the forest for their evening roost.

A Funnel web spider along one track provided a rare opportunity to photograph one in the web. Some Long-tailed Macaques showed up for a photo op. We thought this was a mother grooming a young monkey, but it turned out to be a male grooming a female. We just missed a shot of them showing us what the grooming was really leading up to.



Funnel Web Spider in the funnel web



Male and female Long-tailed Macaques

We had one last stop to make before braving the incredible PP traffic. On the outskirts of the city, we saw the Cambodian Tailorbird, found so far as we know only at that very spot. A very cooperative male responded to a playback of the calls and came very close. Although it looks much like other Tailorbirds, the calls were very distinctive, and the plumage is different from the Common and Dark-necked Tailorbirds we saw earlier in the trip. A nice way to end our visit to this interesting country.



Cambodian Tailorbird, a true Cambodian endemic