

Vietnam Trip Report

March 3-20, 2017

Notes:

1. All photos used in this report are available online at <https://goo.gl/photos/K5x8S6XDkEDyFDVU6>
2. This report follows the Cambodia Trip, which is reported separately at <https://goo.gl/HJJjZZ>

March 3, 2017: Fly from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City

In one of our easiest travel arrangements, we flew from Cambodia to Vietnam. After spending a relaxing day in a fine hotel in Cambodia, we hopped on a one hour flight to Vietnam. The flight took only about 30 minutes.

We were happy to see two men holding a sign with our names on it. My query, “Mr. Nguyen?” elicited the reply, “Wait here; I get the car.” OK. That worked. We drove thru the traffic in Ho Chi Minh City — formerly, and still to many residents — Saigon. Like traffic in Cambodia, motorcycles were everywhere. In Vietnam, they were much more numerous than cars. They even had their own lane on some of the streets, especially the freeway.

HCMC, as it’s known, is a large city with an estimated 8.5 million inhabitants.

I was struck immediately by the differences between the two countries. Perhaps only Mexico and the USA are more different while sharing a border. It wasn’t simply the fact that Cambodians are darker skinned, though that is the most obvious difference. The language and the script it is written in are vastly different.

In Cambodia, the script is an inscrutable swirl without any spaces. Fortunately, whenever it is important, the signs include an English translation, for example, “Angkor Wat Temple →” at a road fork. In Vietnam, by contrast, the language is written in common Latin alphabet characters with a bewildering array of accents. One of the few words I know in any Asian languages is “gai,” which means “chicken.” It isn’t always pronounced the same way, but usually gets the message across.

In Vietnam, the word is written gà and the “g” sound is somewhere between G and an H. English appears only on direct borrowings, such as *Wi-Fi*, *Photocopy*, and *Diesel*. As a result, signs in Vietnam are mostly useless for foreigners.



Here we are in front of a HUGE (or it is YUGE?) tree

The city was lit up like a *Tet tree*. Fabulous LED lighting displays were common. We loved it. Unable to take photos ourselves, we cribbed one from the web.



Light Displays in HCMC

Our hotel was more than adequate, but definitely a step down from the last one in Cambodia. We settled into our room and thought about trying the tapas bar on the top floor, which had the intriguing name, “OMG.” As we got ready to leave, the phone rang. Other members of our party were downstairs in the dining area. So, we joined them.

As it turned out, only some were there. We met our guide, Nguyen Bao; another Californian, Mike Brady; Simon Mair, from England; and Peder Weibull from Sweden. Two others, Elizabeth Mansen and husband Jonas, were delayed arriving from Sweden due to a bomb threat on the plane in Stockholm. That turned out to be a hoax, but the flight was canceled. Bao, Simon, Mike and Peder had spent the afternoon birding on the coast.



Nguyen Bao in a Playful Mood

Communism in Action

Vietnam is nominally a Communist country, but there seemed to be plenty of capitalism left. Small shops are the norm, and they are everywhere. The only sign of the Party is the ubiquitous government buildings that dot the landscape: Soviet-inspired architecture painted the colors of the Vietnam flag. The result? A plethora of ugly concrete blocks with red roofs and sides the color of French's mustard.

Approach to Agriculture

The two countries differ significantly on the way agriculture is handled. Cambodia, at least the arable land, is a patchwork of small plots that looked like family or village workings. In Vietnam, everything seemed to be done on an industrial scale. This was particularly apparent one evening as we returned along a winding hillside road to Da Lat. Everywhere we looked we saw greenhouses, all lit up by lights that shone with an eerie greenish color. On the other side of the valley, we could see tiers of plastic-sided buildings built on terraces where rice paddies would be expected. Instead, we saw hothouses devoted to out of season vegetables. Seems like a good idea.

March 4-6: Cat Tien National Park

After a leisurely breakfast at 6:00, we departed for Cat Tien National Park, the premier national park in all of Vietnam. As our itinerary put it, the area "escaped most of the impact of the war." That means that it wasn't defoliated. Today, it is a preserve for several endangered mammals as well as birds, etc. One of our main targets was the bird shown below. Formerly called a Scaly-breasted Partridge, but now, thanks to an unusual lumping decision, considered to be a subspecies of the **Green-legged Partridge**.



Green-legged (Scaly-breasted) Partridge

Obviously, we managed to catch a glimpse of the bird, after several visits to the blind. Another annoying bird, the **Bar-bellied Pitta**, proved to be a *half bird*. When the bird finally showed itself, Linda, alas, was in the blind, unable to see anything. I was standing outside, and had a good, but brief, view. Sigh!



White-browed Piculet

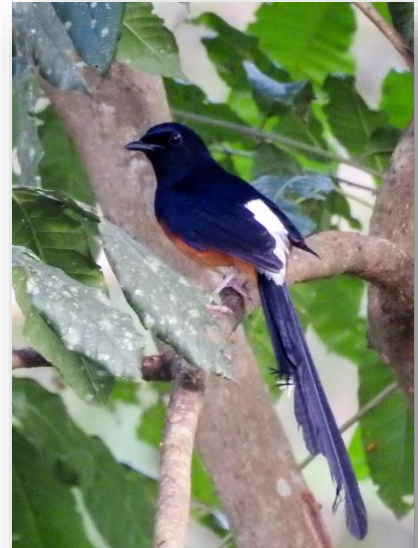


In front of a modestly big tree

As a consolation prize, we had surprisingly good looks at a **White-browed Piculet**, a tiny woodpecker that specializes in the thin branches of a tree when foraging. We didn't expect much in the way of a photo as the area was dark, and a flash would do no good.

Fortunately, we were able to bring out the colors and detail by post-processing the image.

We found a big tree suitable for a photo, which is below. As you probably guessed from the signature photo at the top of the report, we found an even bigger one later in the trip.



White-rumped Shama

We, along with many other people, like the **White-rumped Shama**, a popular cage bird. It not only looks pretty, but has a wonderful repertoire of songs. One showed up at the hide while we were waiting for some rarer species.

Without too many birds available for photos, we focused on butterflies. Here are two examples. The second is tiny. We have not yet identified either of these.



Perhaps the best sighting of our stay in the park was the family of **Buffy-cheeked Gibbons** that called from a tree near our cabin every morning. Stupidly, I don't seem to have taken any video of them *brachiating* thru the tree. I did, however, capture the amazing sound on my cell phone. The recording is online at <https://www.hargrove.org/2017/Sounds/ShortGibbon.mp3>. Try to ignore the human voices in the background.

We were relaxing in the cabin in the afternoon when I heard this outside. I rushed out and found three Gibbons in the tree, calling. Linda meanwhile had her earphones on and was missing the entire episode. I

rushed back to the cabin, tripped on a small step and fell loudly into the door, jamming my left ring finger, which still hurts as I type this. Managed to get Linda to come see and hear(!) these amazing apes.

We did, of course, see several birds well enough for photos while at the park. We have a much better shot of OPH, the Oriental Pied Hornbill, than the picture we got in Cambodia. Ditto for the Thick-billed Green Pigeon.



Oriental Pied Hornbill (OPH)



Thick-billed Green Pigeon
Note the large green eye ring

March 7, 2017: One nighter in Di Linh

We left Cat Tien after a final morning birding and drove to the small city of Di Linh, which is near a pass where we hoped to find some shy and scarce birds.

We didn't get any decent photos today, except for a road sign we had never encountered before. The meaning is clear despite its unfamiliarity:



March 8-10: Da Lat area

We tried again for birds in the pass, after an early morning breakfast of fried rice and boiled eggs at a roadside shop. Then we proceeded to the resort area of Da Lat. Located at a higher elevation, the stay provided a welcome respite from the hot weather we had experienced elsewhere. Set around a large fresh water lake, the area sports many resorts. We stayed at one of these, *Hoang Anh Gia Lai Resort*, a very nice hotel with excellent meals.

We explored several areas around this plateau. The forests, although supplemented by some pine plantations, are mostly covered in native trees. We had a chance to pick up some endemic species, such as this **Vietnamese Greenfinch**, which resembles Lesser Goldfinches in the USA.



Vietnamese Greenfinch



Cambodian Striped Squirrel

A **Cambodian Striped Squirrel** (*Tamiops rodolphii*), which looks like our chipmunks, but is in a different genus, allowed us to get a photo when it stopped its incessant running around. Note the little white tufts on its ears. Worn short on this individual, they are often long and easy to see. Despite its name, this squirrel was common in Vietnam as well as Cambodia. The genus *Tamiops* is common in Asia, and always fun to watch.

We spent hours searching for scarce and shy Laughingthrushes. Vietnam boasts 10 species of



Collared Laughingthrush



Da Lat Shrike-babbler

Laughingthrushes. Bao's company offers a tour that concentrates on finding all of these. Fortunately, we were on a different itinerary.

We did get a great look at one, **Collared Laughingthrush**, thanks to two visits to the area. One the second visit, we used a blind that gave us an excellent view of a fallen log they liked to visit. We also saw an endemic **Da Lat Shrike-babbler** named for the area.

March 12, 2017: Lak Lake and on to Ban Me Thuot



White-throated Kingfisher

We spent some time around a large lake, actually a reservoir for the farms in the area. This produced a much better photo of a **White-throated Kingfisher** than the one we got in Cambodia. We saw many of these during our trip.

March 13, 2017: Yok Don National Park

Up early, we drove to Yok Don National Park for some early morning birding. This area was much drier than other areas we visited, with some different species expected. My favorite: a fabulous look at a pair of **Crested Tree-swifts**. The female, on the right in the photo, had just finished *allopreeening* the male when I took this picture. This is one of my favorite photos from the trip despite cutting off part of the tail feathers.

March 14, 2017: Mang Canh, Searching for the Chestnut-eared Laughingthrush

A new species of Laughingthrush, **Chestnut-eared Laughingthrush** (*Garrulax konkakinhensis*) was discovered in 2001 or so in a small area of Kon Ka Kinh National Park. Our guide, Bao, was one of the discoverers and took what is considered to be the best photo of the bird. So, naturally, he wanted to show the bird to us.



Pair of Crested Tree-swifts following allopreeening



Accordingly, we drove to the small area where the bird can be found and set about trying to locate it. Of course, there were plenty of other birds to be found in the area. Such as this **Banded Bay Cuckoo**, a bird we have seen before, but not this well.

Soon, though, it was time to get serious. After a light lunch in the field, we tried a location Bao thought promising. He heard the Laughingthrush almost immediately and tried playing a recording of the call. We all heard it that time, but it stayed hidden.

The call grew louder. We could tell that the bird was hiding in the tall foliage at the edge of the path. Oops! It was now on the opposite side. I had not seen anything fly across, so it finally dawned

on me that there might be a pair. Wait! There's one. Zipping over the trail to the other side. We waited. At the edge we could barely detect the shape of a largish bird. Zip! There is went again.

This continued for several minutes. We were into double digits counting the number of quick looks when Bao decided it was time for the nuclear option. He walked down the path and deposited mealworms on a stump. One the next pass, our target snatched a mealworm on his way over the trail.

We waited.

Finally, on the next traversal, he stopped for about 10 seconds to feast on the mealworms.

Success! High fives all around.

No photos, though.

March 15, 2017: Mang Canh and on to Bach Ma

We spent this day traveling to Bach Ma, which in the past was a *hill station* used by the French when they controlled Vietnam. Located at a somewhat higher elevation, but not as high as Da Lat, this property is being developed as a national park.

However, that is the end of the day. We started early to try to find **Black-crowned Barwings**, another critically endangered species. We arrived at Lo So pass, the spot where Bao had seen them in the past before breakfast and spent two hours *trolling* with recordings of their calls. When Bao saw them first, some years ago, the forest came near the road. Now, the forest has been cleared in favor of agriculture. No Barwings.

We ate breakfast at yet another roadside shop. A **Black-throated Laughingthrush** sang beautifully from a small cage hanging near the table where we ate, showing why these birds are now hard to find in the wild.



Black-crowned Barwings. The male on the left is displaying for the female.

After brekkie, we moved to another area to continue our search. Almost immediately, we heard their calls. A group of three showed up, with the male displaying continuously in response to the recording. I managed to remember to take a photo, maybe the best of the trip. The male is on the left, with his crest raised. The object of his affection waits patiently on the right.



Displaying Male Black-crowned Barwing

Here's another photo of the male a bit closer.

We ate a fabulous lunch at Lang Co Beach Resort near Da Nang, overlooking the ocean from the top of a cliff. Afterward, we strolled around the area where we heard but did not see **Masked Laughingthrush** before heading to Bang Ma.

We arrived at Bang Ma early enough in the afternoon for a desultory walk up the road to the lodge, which produced some nice sightings and photos.

We had seen **Gray-cheeked Warbler** earlier in the trip, but this time we had an opportunity for a good photo as one sang and foraged by the side of the road.



Gray-cheeked Warbler

This big moth was about to draw its last breath while perching on the steps near our room. Without something to give the scale it isn't as impressive as we thought at the time.



Big Moth by our Room

March 16, 2017: Birding at Bach Ma

We spent most of the day birding in the cool climate of Bach Ma. We saw a couple of what looks like some species of Clubtail dragonflies. Here are two photos:



Clubtail (?) Dragonfly



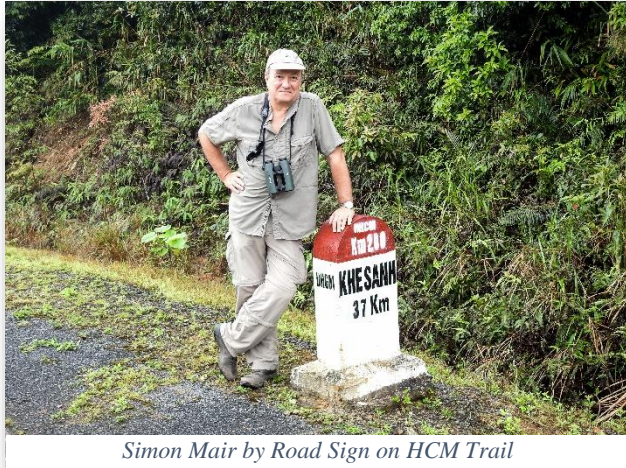
Besides the dragonflies, the rest of the day resulted in another *heard only* Laughingthrush, **Masked Laughingthrush**, and several possible endemics that failed to show themselves. We did finally see the Masked Laughingthrush later, when one flew across the road.

In the afternoon, we drove to Dong Ha, Bao's home town, arriving a short while before an unexpected deluge that made us glad to be inside. Bao reported that another group, on a Bird Quest Tour he had arranged, were caught outside in the downpour.

We had the afternoon off. Linda booked a massage while I worked on photos and watched tennis players from the hotel window. Of course, the rain put a stop to that.

Bao left us to visit family, but not before arranging a sumptuous dinner in the hotel. Then we had a rare chance to catch up on sleep.

March 17, 2017: Shamu Pass on the Ho Chi Minh Trail



Simon Mair by Road Sign on HCM Trail

We got up early for a drive north along the famous Ho Chi Min Trail. Actually, Bao told us, the original trail veered over into Laos where we were, but the highway was still labeled as part of the trail.

Simon Mair posed by a road sign showing that we were near the scene of one of the [most important events](#) of what we learned is called *The American War*. The letters on the side, “DHCM” mean Dang (or something like that) Ho Chi Minh, that is, Ho Chi Minh Trail.

We saw these amazing butterflies, *Lamproptera meges*, **Green Dragontail**, in a ditch by the side of the road. The antennae look like those of *Skipper* butterflies, but most of those are small, which these are definitely not. We also saw another dragonfly that looks like a Whitetail, a common dragonfly in the USA.



Green Dragontail butterflies



Male Whitetail (?) Dragonfly

March 18, 2017: Phong Nha – Ke Bang national park

As we neared the end of our tour, we visited a new National Park, Ke Bang. The park’s main attraction is an extensive cave system. Of course, the entrance to the park was much lower than the cave opening. Most visitors opted for a short tram ride to the top. We naturally preferred to walk up, thereby enhancing our chance of seeing some interesting wildlife.

Our main target for the day was the **Sooty Babbler**, like most of its tribe a difficult bird to see. We had a spectacular view (5*) during our walk, but couldn't manage a photo due to the poor lighting and rapid movement of the bird. Still, worth the effort to walk up.

It didn't take Linda and me long to conclude that a brief look at the cave sufficed. After walking down a boardwalk to the first overlook point, we saw an enormous cavern with stairs and walkways resembling an Escher drawing. We took a few cellphone photos, which we threw away later, and hightailed it back to the coffee bar.

While sipping coffee and eating popsicles, a lizard treated us to a closeup by basking for a long time in the sunlight on the side of the deck. Linda got the best shot. Notice the crest on its neck.

Outside the park, we tried birding along the road, which provide an opportunity for some good bug photos. Mike Brady pointed out a large bug which we photographed. I commented, "It looks like a giant pill bug." Mike proceeded to pick it up, revealing its true nature.



Some more shots from that spot:



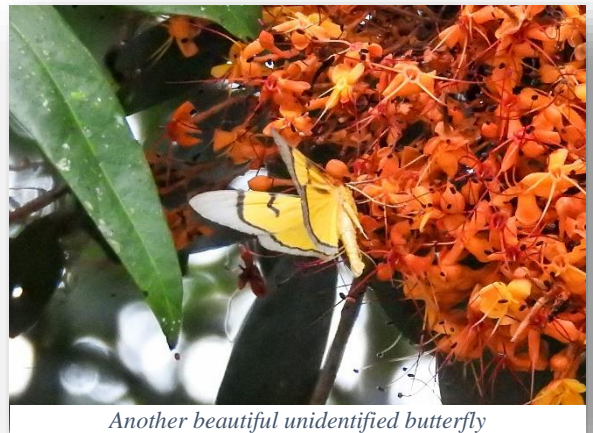
Tiny Skipper-like Butterfly



Lovely Ladybug on Jonas's Arm



Worn Butterfly on its last wing



Another beautiful unidentified butterfly



Bao found a spot in a bunch of Elephant Leaves for a quick photo. Linda insisted that I pose in the same spot. I adopted this as my latest head shot for Facebook.

We did photograph one bird that afternoon, a Greater Iora, a common bird, though not as common as the Lesser Iora.



Greater Iora

March 19, 2017: Morning Birding and Return to HCMC

This was nominally a travel day, but we had time for a short, final birding morning before heading for the airport in Dong Hoi, a provincial capital, thus avoiding a longer drive to Hue. We did have a new bird on this last morning, **Crimson Sunbird**. I was lucky enough to capture a photo when his gorget lit up beautifully in full sunlight.

Simon Mair accompanied Linda and me on the trip back to Ho Chi Minh City while the rest of the group continued to what used to be North Vietnam. (Actually, we had strayed just across the 17th parallel, the unofficial boundary between South and North Vietnam before the unification of the country.) We were ready to go home. My body had begun to complain and we were both getting tired.



Crimson Sunbird, the final bird of the trip

March 20, 2017: Co Chi Tunnel Complex and travel home

Our flight home didn't leave until the afternoon, so we spent the morning with Simon Mair at the Co Chi Tunnel Complex, which has been preserved from the "American War."

As our driver wandered back roads, clearly deviating from the route suggested by the GPS unit displayed on the dashboard, I wondered if we had made a mistake. No, the journey thru the outskirts of HCMC was worth it.

Our visit began with a viewing of a propaganda file from the 1960's extolling the courage and resourcefulness of the local heroes. Prior to the war, the area had been a small village devoted to apple growing. With the coming of hostilities, the villagers dug tunnels for safety and shelter from the bombs

What ingenuity! I am glad the area has been preserved. Today, the tunnels are populated only by animatronics reminiscent of Disneyland. One tunnel was available for tourist curious about the experience of living in them. Crawling thru the tunnels and managing to bump my head, I marveled that anyone, even someone smaller than myself, could actually live down there.

The site showed all manner of activities, including a medical clinic complete with underground operating table. I found the foundry exhibit the most fascinating. Shrapnel collected from the surface was melted down and reformed into land mines. I rusting Americantank on the site was alleged to have been disabled by just such a mine.

One exhibit that impressed Linda was this replica of a trap used in "The American War." Imagine falling



Replica of Trap with Spikes from the American War

through a disguised trap onto these!

I doubt I am the first American to come away from the place thinking, "No wonder we lost."

Linda felt guilty the entire trip because of the terrible destruction and loss of life our American superpower inflicted on the small nation, but the local citizens did not seem to hold onto any anger and were unfailingly polite and friendly.

We traveled back to San Francisco with a stopover in Guangzhou. We had a pleasant surprise. An airline representative met the plane with a sign reading "Los Angeles and San Francisco." We followed him as he shepherded us thru the formalities of changing planes before depositing us in the VIP lounge to wait for departure. Nice touch, China Airlines.

Summary:

Vietnam is hard birding. Most of our target birds were shy and difficult. Bao was an excellent guide and we were glad we added Vietnam to our trip. If you're considering a visit to the country, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the cost, which is reasonable. And, don't miss the fantastic coffee available at many small shops, especially when dripped into condensed milk. Amazingly good. The iced version was especially refreshing in the hot climate.

Having spent time in several Southeast Asian countries, we plan to focus our attention on other parts of the globe. So many birds, so little time!! We are blessed to be able to travel with the leadership of talented, friendly guides who show us marvelous wildlife!