

## Home and away

This occasional *Birding World* feature highlights interesting reports from Britain, Europe and beyond. To contribute to future editions of this column, please contact the editor. Photographs, illustrations and sketch maps are welcomed.

### Spoon-billed Sandpiper and more in Vietnam

Vietnam is a popular country to visit for many tourists from Britain, and it is now possible to fly direct to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) from London with Vietnamese Airlines. On a trip to Vietnam in November 2012, my wife and I travelled through much of the country, with the aim of seeing as many species of birds as possible. We arranged our itinerary with Wildtour, a travel company based in Saigon ([www.birdwatchingvietnam.net](http://www.birdwatchingvietnam.net)), and our excellent main guide was Bao Nguyen.

After arrival in Saigon, we took an internal flight to Da Nang, in the north, and from there we drove south over the next two and a half weeks, visiting many different environments, reserves and national parks, before finishing back in Saigon.

Generally speaking, our birding took place during the cooler times of the day, from around dawn until about 11.00am, and again from mid afternoon until dusk. This allowed time for cultural excursions in the middle of the day. If you are a birder travelling with a non-birding companion, this strategy really enhances one's

experience of visiting a country and we have adopted it on many trips before.

We were able to see a good variety of the birds of this fascinating country, including such species as Bar-bellied and Blue-rumped Pittas, Dusky and Black-and-red Broadbills, Scarlet and Small Minivets, the beautiful Black-headed Woodpecker, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Green Peafowl, and both Great Eared and Large-tailed Nightjars. Other birds included Mekong Wagtail, White-rumped Pygmy Falcon, Orange-breasted Trogon and Mugimaki Flycatcher.

I am a keen bird photographer and always accept that there is a trade-off between seeing the maximum number of species and obtaining good images. The combination of the heat and humidity, and the fact that the birds were often shy and difficult to get close to proved very challenging at times, but our guides were excellent and well experienced in the field. This made things considerably easier than they would have been if we had been travelling independently. In the three weeks (which included a couple of days visiting the easily accessible Angkor Watt in nextdoor Cambodia),

Female???????? Mugimaki Flycatcher *Ficedula mugimaki*, Da Lat, Vietnam, November 2012 (Kevin Elsby).





Ashy Drongo *Dicurus leucophaeus*, Yok Dom, Da Lat, Vietnam, November 2012 (Kevin Elsby).



Male Burmese Shrike *Lanius collurioides*, Da Lat, Vietnam, November 2012 (Kevin Elsby).

Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostra*, Cat Tien, Vietnam, November 2012 (Kevin Elsby).

Male Orange-breasted Trogon *Harpactes oreskios*, Cat Tien, Vietnam, November 2012 (Kevin Elsby).





Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*, Mekong Delta, Vietnam, November 2012 (Kevin Elsby).

I saw just over 250 species. It should be possible to exceed 300 species with a little more effort and less photography.

We timed our trip at the end of the rainy season – November. One of the main reasons for this was the possibility of seeing the critically-endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper. This charismatic and sought-after species winters on the coastal marshes of Vietnam in very small numbers. I had read that our guide, Bao, and a team of Russian scientists, had found five of these birds after a great deal of searching on the Mekong Delta near Saigon in the winter of 2011/12. We therefore arranged

Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*, Mekong Delta, Vietnam, November 2012 (Kevin Elsby).



our itinerary so that we visited the delta at the end of our holiday, to maximise our chances of seeing this bird on its wintering grounds.

The site for Spoon-billed Sandpiper is about a two hour drive from Saigon (at approximately 10.2080°N, 106.7722°E). Arriving at low tide, we had to walk out about 1km from the shore, in knee-deep mud much of the time, to where waders were feeding and roosting. After a couple of hours searching, I found a single Spoon-billed Sandpiper. There was a good selection of other waders present too, including Nordman's Greenshanks, 'White-faced Plovers', Red-necked Stints and Terek Sandpipers. Two days earlier, Bao had seen two Spoon-billed Sandpipers in the same area. For me, this was the highlight of the trip, as I had wanted to see this species for over 30 years. Hopefully, the current conservation efforts will increase the numbers of these birds in the wild again, and save it from extinction.

We finished our holiday with a relaxing overnight cruise in the spectacular scenery of Halong Bay, in the north of Vietnam, which is another not to be missed experience – and one which could be used to entice a non-birding spouse to visit this fascinating country. For the non-birder, Vietnam has much to offer. There is a rich and fascinating culture, the scenery can be spectacular, and the people are universally friendly. Add to this the generally excellent food, and Vietnam becomes even more attractive as a birding destination.

Kevin Elsby, Norfolk.