**CHIANG SAEN, NORTHERN THAILAND: 1–6 FEBRUARY 2019**

**Introduction**

I flew from Hong Kong to Chiang Rai via Bangkok on 31 January 2019. The idea was to pick up a hire-care and drive to Chiang Saen Lake, where I had booked accommodation for six nights, before dark. Unfortunately, there was a delay at Hong Kong and I didn’t make my booked connection, so I had to overnight in Chiang Rai. I drove to Chiang Saen the following morning for what was now a five-night stay.

Most serious birders would not stay nearly a week at Chiang Saen; they usually spend a night, maybe two, there on a concentrated tour of key birding sites in northern Thailand. However, my intention was for a relaxed, hassle-free holiday far from the madding crowd, involving some (relatively) slow-paced birding and bird-photography.

**Weather**

Winter is the dry season in northern Thailand. The weather while I was there was cool in the morning (14 -16⁰C just after dawn) rising to a hot 30+⁰C in mid-afternoon. The skies were clear and blue. (Note that it can get a lot colder here at night in December and January.)

**Accommodation**

I stayed at the Viang Yonok Hotel on the shore of the northeastern corner of Chiang Saen Lake. This small hotel is run by a very considerate Thai-British couple who are keen to ensure that your stay is a carefree one. It has seven chalets; from my balcony I could watch hundreds of Lesser Whistling Ducks coming and going, and plentiful Grey-headed Swamphens feeding in the lakeside vegetation. This is one of the pleasantest places I’ve stayed in on my travels and is highly recommended. See [www.viangyonok.com](http://www.viangyonok.com) .

**Birding Information**

Key information and maps can be found at two excellent websites. One is Nick Upton’s Thai Birding site: see <http://www.thaibirding.com/locations/north/chiangsaen.htm> . The other is at <http://norththailandbirding.com/pages/localities/chiang_saen.html> . This website is called North Thailand Birding and, among other things, has an indispensable map of most of the main birding sites at Chiang Saen with distances marked. I drew extensively on these two when working out where to go and how to get there during my stay.

Another source of useful information with regard to recent sightings is the ebird page for Chiang Rai: see <https://ebird.org/canada/subnational1/TH-57/activity> .

I also came across a couple of trip reports which were of interest (and I’m sure there are others out there that I failed to connect with). See

<http://www.caligata.com/tripreports/en/thaimaa-chiang-mai-chiang-rai-18-2-3-3-2018> and

<https://www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport/repository/TALLON_Thailand_0102_2018.pdf> .

**Field Guides**

Birds of Thailand by Uthai Treesucon & Wich’yanan Limparungpatthanakij. Lynx editions, 2018.

Birds of Thailand by Craig Robson. Princeton University Press, 2002.

**Checklist**

A link to a checklist of Chiang Saen birds can be found on the blog. Taxonomy & nomenclature follows IOC World List 2018.2.

**The Sites**

The sites in the area that I visited are:

*Chiang Saen Lake*

This is one of the foremost sites for waterfowl in the country. Lesser Whistling Ducks are abundant and Indian Spot-billed Ducks are common. It used to be a reliable place for Baer’s Pochard but, as at other birding sites where this species used to occur regularly, this is no longer the case.

I spent a lot of time in the vicinity of the hotel in the northeast and east section of the lake. This section of the lake is usually (especially on ebird) referred to as *Nong Bok Khai Non-hunting Area* and I have referred to it as such in my trip list later on.

There are good views over the water from here in the early morning, although a scope is necessary to observe the ducks out in the middle of the lake – notably Ferruginous Duck amongst a flock of Eurasian Coot. A road runs south beside the lake from the hotel and I often just walked a kilometre down the road before heading back to the hotel. On the 5th, however, I explored the area 2 -3 kilometres down the road which is more wooded and is good for such birds as Long-tailed Minivet and Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher.

I also visited the northern section of the lake at *Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam*. In particular, the road leading to the temple climbs a hillside, offering good scopeable views over the lake in the afternoon. Hundreds of Asian Openbills and ducks were visible from here.

*Wat Phrathasiyonok*

This temple is south of Chiang Saen Lake (but accessed by the eastern section of the lake as described above). It lies on the eastern side of a small deep-sided lake (but there are birds in the edges and on an island at the western end). West of the temple is the Yonok wetlands, the main roosting site for two to three hundred wintering harriers – best viewed from Wat Bamanko a little to the west.

*Wat Bamanko*

Accessed from Route 1016, 14.7 kilometres west of Chiang Saen town. One of the key birding sites in the area because of the Pied and Eastern Marsh Harriers that come into roost between here and Wat Phrathasiyonok at dusk. Reports suggest the ratio is 2:1 with recently up to 200 Pied, 100 Eastern Marsh, and the odd Western Marsh and Hen Harrier being seen.

*Nam Kham Nature Reserve*

A small, private wetland area with tall grasses. This reserve, an oasis amongst the surrounding agricultural fields, is a vestige of what this area would have been like in the past. Regular wintering birds include Siberian Rubythroat and Baikal Bush Warbler, and the reserve has a number of rarities to its credit, including Firethroat and Large-billed Leaf Warbler. A male Jerdon’s Bushchat was regular here this winter but I had no luck finding it.

However, the grassland habitat is difficult to work and much of the knowledge gained here has derived from mist-netting. There are a few small photographic blinds; the Cettia hide in particular has produced a number of good sightings in the past, but recently seems rather hit-and-miss. (Two hours in total in the Cettia hide gave me a brief view of a Dusky Warbler and nothing else.) Still, it’s a great place and well worth spending some time exploring.

*Mekong River from Rim Khong Restaurant*

There is a sandbank in the river here, still good for Small Pratincole. It used to be much more productive, but times have changed. Nowadays, it seems you have to head 40 km to the south along the Mekong to see some of the old specialities.

*Yonok reedbeds and paddies*

This is a small site c. 3 kilometres from the Viang Yonok hotel, just north of Route1016. There is a sandy river, a small area of grassland and a few rice fields set in an agricultural landscape. A Jerdon’s Bushchat was seen here in November 2018. I came upon this site on the Chiang Rai ebird site: <https://ebird.org/canada/hotspot/L3557141?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec> .

**Itinerary**

31 January: Hong Kong to Chiang Rai. Overnight Chiang Rai.

1 February: a.m. Chiang Rai to Chiang Saen.

 Nong Bok Khai Non-hunting Area.

 p.m. Nam Kham Nature Reserve.

 Nong Bok Khai Non-hunting Area.

2 February: a.m. Nong Bok Khai Non-hunting Area.

 p.m. Wat Phrathasiyonok.

 Wat Bamanko (recce).

3 February: a.m. Nong Bok Khai Non-hunting Area

 p.m. Rhim Kong Restaurant.

 Wat Bamanko.

4 February: a.m. Nam Kham Nature Reserve.

 p.m. Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam.

5 February: a.m. Nong Bok Khai Non-hunting Area.

 p.m. Yonok reedbeds and paddies.

6 February: Chiang Saen to Chiang Rai. Return to Hong Kong.

**Trip List**

|  |
| --- |
| BIRD LIST - CHIANG SAEN, THAILAND - FEBRUARY 1 - 6 2019 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Lesser Whistling Duck | *Dendrocygna javanica* | R, W | Abundant in all wetland areas. 900++ near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Garganey | *Spatula querquedula* | W | 500 near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Indian Spot-billed Duck | *Anas poecilorhyncha* | R, W | Common. 320+ near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Northern Pintail | *Anas acuta* | W | 27+ at Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Eurasian Teal | *Anas crecca* | W | One or two with Garganey near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Ferruginous Duck | *Aythya nyoca* | W | Daily at Nong Bong Khai NHA, where 37 counted on 2nd. Also 18 at Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Chinese Francolin | *Francolinus pintadeanus* | R | One heard & seen at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd. |
| Little Grebe | *Tachybaptus ruficollis* | R,W | Common. |
| Asian Openbill | *Anastomus oscitans* | R | Ones and twos regular at Nong Bong Khai NHA. 340 near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Yellow Bittern | *Ixobrychus sinensis* | R,W | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. |
| Chinese Pond Heron | *Ardeola bacchus* | W | Common. |
| Eastern Cattle Egret | *Bubulcus coromandus* | R,W | A few at Wat Bamakno on 2nd & 3rd. |
| Grey Heron | *Ardea cinerea* | W | Noted in small numbers. 13 at Wat Phrathasiyonok on 2nd. |
| Purple Heron | *Ardea purpurea* | R,W | Singles noted at most wetland sites. |
| Great Egret | *Ardea alba modesta* | R,W | Noted daily in small numbers. |
| Intermediate Egret | *Ardea intermedia* | R,W | Noted daily in small numbers. |
| Little Egret | *Egretta garzetta* | R,W | Noted daily in small numbers. |
| Black-winged Kite | *Elanus caeruleus* | R | One at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th. |
| Shikra | *Accipiter badius* | R | One at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Eastern Marsh Harrier | *Circus spilonotus* | W | c.50 at Wat Bamakno roost on 3rd. Two Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Pied Harrier | *Circus melanoleucos* | W | c.50 at Wat Bamakno roost on 3rd.  |
| Buzzard sp. | *Buteo sp.*  | W | Two at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| White-breasted Waterhen | *Amaurornis phoenicurus* | R,W | Fairly common. |
| Grey-headed Swamphen | *Porphio poliocephalus* | R | Very common. 72 near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th, plus 24 at Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Common Moorhen | *Gallinula chloropus* | R,W | Common. |
| Eurasian Coot | *Fulica atra* | W | Common. 400 at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 1st.  |
| Black-winged Stilt | *Himantopus himantopus* | R,W | Common. 50 at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 3rd. |
| Grey-headed Lapwing | *Vanellus cinereus* | W | 13 at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 1st. 7 at Wat Phrathasiyonok on 2nd. |
| Red-wattled Lapwing | *Vanellus indicus* | R | 5 at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th |
| Little Ringed Plover | *Charadrius dubius* | R,W | One at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Pheasant-tailed Jacana | *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* | R,W | Noted daily in ones and twos at Nong Bong Khai NHA. Also 2+ Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Pin-tailed Snipe | *Gallinago stenura* | W | Noted daily at Nong Bong Khai NHA; five together there on 5th. |
| Common Snipe | *Gallinago gallinago* | W | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 3rd. One at Wat Bamakno on 3rd. One near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Green Sandpiper | *Tringa ochropus* | W | One heard at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 1st. |
| Wood Sandpiper | *Tringa glareola* | W | One at Wat Phrathasiyonok on 2nd. |
| Spotted Redshank | *Tringa erythropus* | W | One near Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Small Pratincole | *Glareola lactea* | R,W | 9 at Mekong River (Rim Khong restaurant) on 3rd. |
| Feral Pigeon | *Columba livia* | R | A few at Mekong River (Rim Khong restaurant) on 3rd and Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Red Turtle Dove | *Streptopelia tranquebarica* | R,W | Fairly common. 35 at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th. 20+ at Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. |
| Spotted Dove | *Spilopelia chinensis* | R | Common. |
| Zebra Dove | *Geopelia striata* | R | Common. One sitting on nest in hotel garden. |
| Greater Coucal | *Centropus sinensis* | R | Common. |
| Lesser Coucal | *Centropus bengalensis* | R | One at Wat Bamakno on 3rd. |
| Asian Koel | *Eudynamys scolopaceus* | R,W | Common.  |
| Collared Scops Owl | *Otus lettia* | R | One heard fom hotel before dawn on 5th. |
| Asian Barred Owlet | *Glaucidium cuculoides* | R | One heard from hotel after dark on 3rd. |
| Large-tailed Nightjar | *Caprimulgus macrurus* | R | Calling nightly at hotel. |
| Himalayan Swiftlet | *Aerodramus brevirostris* | W | Ten at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. Race *innominatus*?  |
| Asian Palm Swift | *Cypsiurus balasiensis* | R | Two at Wat Bamakno on 2nd. One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. 50 at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| House Swift | *Apus nipalensis* | R | Two at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. |
| White-throated Kingfisher | *Halcyon smyrnensis* | R | Noted daily in ones and twos. |
| Common Kingfisher | *Alcedo atthis* | W | Noted daily in ones and twos. |
| Pied Kingfisher | *Ceryle rudis* | R | One heard at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 1st. One at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Green Bee-eater | *Merops orientalis* | R | Up to 3 at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 2nd & 4th. Two at Wat Bamakno on 3rd. Two at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. |
| Eurasian Hoopoe | *Upupa epops* | R,W | Up to 2 at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd & 3rd.  |
| Lineated Barbet | *Psilopogon lineatus* | R | Commonly singing.  |
| Coppersmith Barbet | *Psilopogon haemacephalus* | R | Commonly singing.  |
| Common Kestrel | *Falco tinnunculus* | W | One at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th. |
| Ashy Woodswallow | *Artamus fuscus* | R | Several daily perched on overhead wires at Nong Bong Khai NHA. One at Yonok reebeds on 5th. 150 together on wires at Mae Chan on 6th. |
| Common Iora | *Aegithina tiphia* | R | Common.  |
| Long-tailed Minivet | *Pericrcotus ethologus* | R,W | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd. 8 at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. 12 at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Brown Shrike | *Lanius cristatus* | W | One daily near hotel. One Wat Phrathasiyonok on 2nd.  |
| Burmese Shrike | *Lanius collurioides* | R,W | One daily Nong Bong Khai NHA. One Wat Bamakno on 2nd. One Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th. One right outside airport building at Chiang Rai on 6th. |
| Long-tailed Shrike | *Lanius schach tricolor* | R | Singles at Wat Phrathasiyonok on 2nd, Wat Bamakno on 2nd, Mekong River (Rim Khong restaurant) on 3rd, Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Black Drongo | *Dicrurus macrocercus* | R,W | Noted daily in ones and twos. |
| Ashy Drongo | *Dicrurus leucophaeus* | R,W | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd. Two at Wat Bamakno on 2nd & 3rd. Dark birds although subspecies not determined - hopwoodi? |
| Racket-tailed Treepie | *Crypsirina temia* | R | Ones and twos at Nong Bong Khai NHA and Nam Kham Nature Reserve.  |
| Black-headed Bulbul | *Pycnonotus atriceps* | R | Two at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 1st. |
| Black-crested Bulbul | *Pycnonotus flaviventris* | R | Two at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 3rd. |
| Sooty-headed Bulbul | *Pycnonotus aurigaster* | R | Very common. |
| Streak-eared Bulbul | *Pycnonotus conradi* | R | Common. |
| Grey-throated Martin | *Riparia chinensis* | R | Four at Yonok reebeds on 5th. One seen to enter hole in sand bank. |
| Barn Swallow | *Hirundo rustica* | W | Common. 450 at Yonok reebeds on 5th. One rufous-bellied bird at Wat Bamakno on 2nd.  |
| Striated Swallow | *Cecropis striolata* | R | Up to 8 at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd & 3rd.  |
| Yellow-browed Warbler | *Phylloscopus inornatus* | W | Common. |
| Dusky Warbler | *Phylloscopus fuscatus* | W | Common. |
| Two-barred Warbler | *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus* | W | Ones and twos regular at Nong Bong Khai NHA.  |
| Black-browed Reed Warbler | *Acrocephalus bistrigiceps* | W | One heard at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 3rd. |
| Thick-billed Warbler | *Arundinax aedon* | W | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd. Two at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 2nd, with 3 there on 4th. |
| Baikal Bush Warbler | *Locustella davidi* | W | One at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th. |
| Grey-breasted Prinia | *Prinia hodgsonii* | R | Two at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th. Two at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th |
| Yellow-bellied Prinia | *Prinia flaviventris* | R | Two + at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 1st & 4th, Mekong River (Rim Khong restaurant) on 3rd and Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Plain Prinia | *Prinia inornata* | R | Singles at Wat Bamakno on 2nd, Mekong River (Rim Khong restaurant) on 3rd and Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Common Tailorbird | *Orthotomus sutorius* | R | Common.  |
| Japanese White-eye | *Zosterops japonicus* | W | Several at Nong Bong Khai NHA.  |
| Great Myna | *Acridotheres grandis* | R | Very common. |
| Common Myna | *Acridotheres tristis* | R | Common. |
| Black-collared Starling | *Gracupica nigricollis* | R | Common. |
| Pied Myna | *Gracupica contra* | R | One at Wat Bamakno on 2nd. Two at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th. Two at Wat Phrathatsiwiangkam on 4th.  |
| Chestnut-tailed Starling | *Sturnia malabarica* | R, W | Common.  |
| Oriental Magpie-Robin | *Copsychus saularis* | R | Common. |
| White-rumped Shama | *Copsychus malabarica* | R | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. |
| Tickell's Blue Flycatcher | *Cyornis tickelliae* | R | A male at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th, with another bird heard close by. |
| Siberian Rubythroat | *Calliope calliope* | W | At least 3 at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th inc. one seen. |
| Taiga Flycatcher | *Ficedula albicilla* | W | Common. |
| Stejneger's Stonechat | *Saxicola stejnegeri* | W | Two at Wat Bamakno on 2nd, with one there on 3rd. Singles at Nam Kham Nature Reserve on 4th, Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th and Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Pied Bush Chat | *Saxicola caprata* | R | Singles at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd and 5th (different birds), and at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker | *Dicaeum cruentatum* | R | Fairly common.  |
| Purple Sunbird | *Cinnyris asiaticus* | R | Fairly common. |
| Eurasian Tree Sparrow | *Passer montanus* | R | A few seen en route to Chiang Rai on 6th. |
| White-rumped Munia | *Lonchura striata* | R | Three at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 3rd, with 7 there on 5th |
| Scaly-breasted Munia | *Lonchura punctulata* | R | Twenty at Mekong River (Rim Khong restaurant) on 3rd. Two at Yonok reebeds on 5th. |
| Citrine Wagtail | *Motacilla citreola* | W | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 2nd & 3rd. |
| White Wagtail | *Motacilla alba* | W | Ones and twos of the race *leucopsis* seen regularly at Nong Bong Khai NHA. |
| Olive-backed Pipit | *Anthus hodgsoni* | W | One at Nong Bong Khai NHA on 5th. |

R = Resident W= Winter Visitor

© David Diskin, February 2019.