

A Birdwatching Trip to Myanmar

2nd – 17th February 2013

John & Anne Wilson, Dave Bush, Clive Ellis

It was my good friend David Bush who came up with the idea of a trip to Myanmar, having read about this fascinating country in a newspaper mag, and the fact that it is now opening up to tourism. Some research on the web ensued and he discovered SST Tourism Myanmar, who amongst other things, arrange tours specifically aimed at birding. Hence we made initial contact with them by e-mail asking details of their 16 day, 15 night itinerary. A suggested route and timings were soon forthcoming with some approximate prices, and gave us something to consider. Meanwhile David also made contact with three birders who had previously been on birding trips arranged by SST, and who had written trip reports for their web site. The feedback was positive and encouraging, and the name of one particular guide, [and you must have a guide on visits there, whether for birding or general sightseeing], came to the fore – Lay Win. Many, many e-mails ensued [the initial contact and planning had begun in September 2011] and we eventually had a confirmed itinerary. Our contact was their general manager, Mr. Soe Min Aye, who was consistently helpful and a pleasure to deal with. They arranged all our transport, hotels and internal flights and airport pickups at the start and finish. With a confirmed itinerary we were able to book our flights. After some research I opted for Qatar Airways because firstly they were a bit cheaper than Singapore or Malaysian, and secondly because the flights go via Doha in Qatar and split the journey into 2 flights of equal duration. There are no direct flights to the capital, Yangon [was Rangoon]. The other carriers go to say Singapore or Bangkok, so you then have a long flight and a short one.

For the trip, SST had given us prices for a group of 4 or a group of 8. In the event we could muster only the four of us but it was still excellent value at a cost of \$2899 each [our international flights were £678 each on top of this]. International banking & credit cards are only just becoming established in Myanmar so our payment of the deposit for the trip was a little problematical. Everything had to be paid in US Dollars and we were required to transfer the deposit to their bank account, which was in Singapore. My first attempt at doing an international transfer was via the Post Office free service but I made the mistake of indicating during my registration for the service that the transfer was for the purpose of a vacation deposit for a holiday in Myanmar. I was told that this would not be possible as Myanmar was a 'no pay' country! I also got this response from another online international transfer company. In the end I went to our own high street bank and asked them to do an international transfer to the specified Singapore bank without mentioning what it was for – no problem [except it cost £25, and after SST had received the money, we discovered that an unspecified intermediate bank had also taken a fee of \$27!]. The balance for the trip we actually took with us in crisp US Dollar 'readies' – about \$2500 each including our 'spending money', but there was no problem taking this into the country. It should be noted that dollars can be freely used, at least in cities, but the notes need to be new or in pristine condition. If you are likely to spend money out in the small villages, then it would be wise to change some dollars for Kyats [pronounced "chats"]. We were able to do this in our hotel in Yangon, at a good rate of exchange [something like 850 Kyats to the Dollar]. You're not supposed to take Kyats out of the country and we changed those we had left back to Dollars in the same hotel, again at a reasonable rate. Whilst out there we learned that international banking and transfers etc. are now beginning to become established, so the payment problem we experienced will probably become history. Of course we had arranged a private, independent trip. There are tour operators that run birding tours there – Birdquest and Bird Holidays in the UK, Victor Emmanuel Tours in the USA and the South Africa based Rockjumper Tours, and Naturetrek now have one in their brochure. One assumes they have more organized banking arrangements with whoever their Myanmar contacts are.

Visas are necessary and cost £14, and can be obtained from the Myanmar Embassy in London. This can be done by post but they do need your original passport. I actually travelled up to London on the Megabus with the necessary forms and all our passports and left them there, with a 1st class recorded delivery envelope for them to return them. They were turned round in 5 days. There now seems to be a 'visa on arrival' facility at Yangon airport, which will probably obviate the need to use the Embassy in future. We were recommended to take anti-malarial prophylactics [Anne, Dave & I took Doxycycline] although these are 1 a day and have to be continued for 4 weeks after you return. Clive took Larium. In the event I don't think we need have bothered as February was in the dry season and we barely saw any biting insects at all. Saying that I did get a very nasty bite from something that got up my trouser leg in the forest, and which produced a nasty red swelling, which necessitated taking some Piriton tablets which Clive had in his medical kit! They worked a treat.

Lots of preliminaries, but some useful info there I think. So to the trip itself –

We flew out of LHR at 8 a.m. on 1st Feb and arrived at Doha at 17:40 local time. We were due to depart for Yangon at 21:00 but there was a bit of a delay due to thick mist at Yangon. We ultimately landed at Yangon

at 9 a.m. on **2nd Feb**, 2½ hours late, so not too bad. We were met by our guide, Lay Win, who we immediately warmed to, and were taken to the Panorama Hotel in downtown Yangon. This was a very nice comfy hotel with aircon and internet, but not exactly panoramic as there was an ageing flyover immediately opposite the entrance! We were left to our own devices to recover from the flights, had a nap and then took a walk to view a gold-plated Buddhist pagoda in the middle of a roundabout, and a small park, where we found our first birds, including Grey-backed Shrike, Common Tailorbird, House Crow, Spotted Dove, Red Collared-dove, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Oriental Magpie-robin, Common Mynah, Vinous-breasted Starling, Baya Weaver and Thick-billed Warbler. A Black Kite and Common Kestrel circled overhead. The whole city buzzes with activity, with street vendors, mopeds everywhere, and some shops seemingly open 24/7. It was very hot and humid [30+ deg C and 70-80%]. Back at the hotel, we found a pair of Coppersmith Barbets with a nest in a tree we could see from our rooms. Asian Palm Swifts and House Swifts circled over the city. In the afternoon Mr. Soe Min Aye came to the hotel to say hello and we handed over our large wad of US Dollars to pay the balance! He was a typical Burmese, very friendly, happy and smiling and a pleasure to meet.

Habitat at Hlawgaw >>>



3rd February – we were picked up from the hotel by our guide and driver at around 6 a.m., in a comfortable Toyota Hi-Ace minibus, and headed off for an all-day birding visit to Hlawgaw Park, a reserve some 20 miles north of the city. We stopped somewhere en route in the outskirts to have breakfast at a café that was heaving with people – very nice coffee, and a selection of eats. Don't expect a 'normal' breakfast away from hotels. There's a lot of hot savoury stuff, rice, noodles etc., but also nice breads and such like. One speciality is 'half-fried egg'! This is not as bizarre as it sounds - basically it's a fried egg as most Brits prefer, with the yolk runny, and the egg not turned 'easy over'. We eventually arrived at Hlawgaw where we spent the best part of the day visiting various areas, including fairly densely vegetated tracts, a marshy lake, drier areas and a decorative lake where we had lunch. We got some of our first water birds here with Oriental Darter, Little Cormorant, Eastern Cattle Egret, Indian Pondheron, Asian Openbill [a stork], Lesser Whistling Duck, and Cotton Pygmy-goose. On the raptor front we had Osprey, Black Baza, Oriental Honey-buzzard [which was to prove quite common throughout], and Shikra. Red-wattled Lapwing was alongside the more familiar Common Sandpiper. More exotic species included Yellow-footed Green-pigeon, Blossom-headed Parakeet, Plaintive Cuckoo, Asian Koel, Lesser Coucal, White-throated Kingfisher, Little Green Bee-eater, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, the Asian race of White Wagtail, then some bulbuls – Black-headed, Black-crested, Red-whiskered, Red-vented, Stripe-throated, and Streak-eared! Smaller birds included the bright yellow Common Iora, Brown Shrike, Yellow-eyed Babbler, White-crested Laughingthrush [probably the easiest to see – the others are notoriously skulky for large birds]. Warblers successfully ID'd included Arctic, Greenish, and Two-barred, and flycatchers comprised the beautiful blue Black-naped Monarch, and Taiga Flycatcher. The area was really rich in birds – others included Ashy Drongo, Black Drongo, Spangled Drongo, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Ashy Woodswallow, Racket-tailed Treepie, Black-naped and Black-hooded Orioles, Asian Pied Starling and Common & Jungle Mynahs.

Birded out, we returned to Yangon late afternoon and were taken to the famous Shwedagon Pagoda in the centre of the city. This is a huge Buddhist temple with an enormous gold plated stupa which is 99 metres high. The gold plating on the stupa alone apparently weighs 60 tons! We had to enter barefoot and wandered around the large site for about an hour, in awe of the various smaller temples within the complex where devout Buddhists were offering gifts to the various icons. This is the most sacred of all Buddhist pagodas for the Burmese, who all have the aspiration of visiting it at least once in their lifetime. Due to its importance, dress code requires no bare legs and no footwear. The former required Clive to don a traditional Burmese men's 'skirt' or longyi, as he was wearing shorts above the knee, and very elegant he looked too! Walking on marble paving that had been in the 35 degree heat all day was an interesting experience! It has relics of the last four Buddhas enshrined within it. What an amazing place, and heaving with tourists – this is where we realized that tourism has really taken off. A surprise bird here was an Oriental Magpie-robin sitting on one of the temples. Once done, we were taken to a lovely lakeside restaurant nearby for an excellent evening meal. [All our food was included in what we paid – just drinks in addition to water at lunch and dinner we had to pay for]. We then returned to our hotel to



prepare for another early start.

4th February – we were picked up this morning [6 a.m. again I think] and drove to Yangon domestic airport, where we were to catch an internal flight to the town of Bagan, roughly in the centre of Myanmar. The airport was surprisingly busy [there are a lot of internal flights], and we eventually boarded a fairly old small turboprop aircraft of Asian Airways for the 2 hr flight to Bagan. On landing we simply walked across the tarmac into a small building where we waited for ‘porters’ to manually carry the luggage from the aircraft and bring it into the building to be claimed. We were then soon ensconced in another air-conditioned HiAce and proceeded to our hotel, the Sky Palace in New Bagan. This was a very pleasant 2 storey hotel set off the main street – I say main street, it was a dirt street like one in an old western movie. Bagan lies by the Ayeyarwaddy River [prev known as the Irrawaddy], but the surrounding area is very sandy, semi desert with scattered trees and bushes, and some cultivation. It is a World Heritage site, due to the 2000 or so brick built Buddhist stupas scattered across the countryside, some not more than about 3-4 metres high and others as large as pyramids. An incredible sight, the large number of tourist coaches providing evidence of its heritage status. We birded the dry areas for the remainder of the morning, were then taken for lunch in a very attractive restaurant overlooking the river, which provided some comfy birding opportunities, and then had a siesta. It was pretty hot here although there was a little breeze. We then birded again later in the afternoon, and finally had dinner in a lovely old restaurant in Old Bagan town.



5th February - today day we birded a different area where there was some cultivation by virtue of irrigation ditches taking water from the river, and had lunch in a different and equally superb riverside restaurant. After lunch we went down to the river and boarded a narrow boat, which had been chartered just for us. We travelled along the river for about half an hour spotting what we could on the way, then disembarked on the sandy shore of a large island in the river and birded from there. It is worth mentioning the highlights of this stop at this juncture. The top bird for me here was a superb male Pied Harrier, which flew around twice whilst we were there. Imagine a highly patterned male Hen Harrier. On the beach were a few Small Pratincoles, quite a number of Sand Larks, various Yellow Wagtails, Citrine Wagtail, Lesser Sandplovers,



River Lapwing, Spotted Redshank, Red-throated Pipits, lots of little Ringed Plovers, all the egrets including Intermediate, Ruddy Shelduck, Indian Spot-billed Ducks on the river, a few Temminck's Stint, Pied Kingfisher, Grey-throated Martin, and an Indian Spotted Eagle flew by. We also got on to a White-tailed Stonechat sitting on reeds behind the beach. We chugged back down the river as the sun set, and went back into Bagan for another superb dinner.

Highlights of the birds seen in the cultivated and dry areas on both days, were firstly, the endemic Hooded Treepie [often difficult to find as it is quite wary, but we saw 3 birds], and also the endemic Jerdon's Minivet. We had a superb close encounter with a Black-shouldered Kite, and saw 3 Laggar

Falcons perched up on the stupas, and another Shikra. The irrigated area gave us flushed Pintail Snipe, but Lay couldn't find us the hoped-for Rain Quail. Others worthy of mention are Oriental Turtle-dove, Spotted Owlet, Indian Nightjar, Indian Roller, Hoopoe, Wryneck, the endemic Burmese Bushlark including 1 very confiding individual that fed around our feet!, Wire-tailed Swallow, Richard's Pipit, Burmese-, Brown-, and Long-tailed Shrikes, Scaly-breasted Munia, Plain-backed Sparrow, Purple Sunbird, Dusky Warbler, Tickell's Leaf-warbler, Pied Bushchat, Brown-, and Grey-breasted Prinias, a nice flock of White-throated Babblers running around on the ground in typical babbler fashion, and a male Black-headed Bunting one of a small number that had been found the previous week, a new record for Myanmar!

6th February - it was an early start again today for the drive from Bagan to Mount Victoria. For this we were provided with a pair of Mitsubishi Pajero 4x4 vehicles. We had opted for these at extra cost, as the standard option was open jeeps, and it was a wise choice as the tracks up the mountain were very dusty, and we met a couple up there who had opted for a jeep – everything they had with them each day got covered in dust. The distance from Bagan to the lodge was around 100 miles, but the journey took 11 hours, on dirt roads! We did however stop for breakfast, coffee, lunch and birding. Highlights of birds en route comprised Crested Serpent-eagle, Red Junglefowl, Red-breasted Parakeet, Greater Coucal, Grey-capped Pygmy-woodpecker, Bluethroat, Grey Bushchat, Yellow-eyed Babbler, Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush, Blyth's Reed-warbler, Yellow-bellied Warbler, Pale Blue Flycatcher, Blue-throated Flycatcher, and Rufous Treepie. We arrived at

Mountain Oasis Resort late afternoon in time to unpack, take a leisurely walk up the mountain track and do some birding, and return and have dinner.

7th – 12th February - the next 5 full days were spent birding on Mount Victoria, or Natmataung, to give it its proper name. This is the highest mountain [3109 m] in Chin state, and lies west of the Ayeyarwaddy river and Bagan. It is a designated national park and visiting groups require a permit [this was obtained for us by SST Travel and included in the overall cost]. Mountain Oasis Resort is an 'eco lodge' and the main place to stay, although we did notice a much smaller establishment further up the hill. Mountain Oasis is located a few km from the hill village of Kanpetlet, at around 1500m. It is very pleasant and comprises a number of detached 'chalets' made of local materials with thatched roofs and built on stilts as are all residences, due to the monsoon season. Meals are taken in a central building and the whole thing is run by a team of young Burmese lads who were a delight and very attentive to all our needs. The food was excellent too. All chalets have hot water for showers in the morning and evening. The heating arrangement is interesting. A central brick structure in the open between the chalets has a tank mounted upon it, and to heat the water a wood fire is lit in the base of the structure underneath the tank. Pipes lead from the tank to each chalet and deliver the water by gravity – it worked very well. Also, there is only electricity between 6 and 10 p.m. each evening and for a short period in the morning if your group is starting whilst it is still dark [as we were every day!]. There were no coffee or tea making facilities in the chalets, but when we returned after the first day out we asked for a flask of hot water and 4 mugs so we could make our own with the supply of tea & coffee we had brought. Thereafter the lads remembered, and our flask was ready when we returned after each arduous day's birding.

The idea here was to bird at different elevations to try and ensure seeing as many species as possible. We birded up to about 2500m. The mountain is heavily forested with some more open areas at the 2500m level,



all levels being accessed by a single tortuous, and at places very bumpy and rocky dirt track, which is the main road over the mountain. The first morning was quite interesting – the lead vehicle with Anne & I, was an automatic and was struggling on some of the very steep gradients, and eventually refused to climb. Disembarking and looking back down the track a trail of oil could be seen! Inspection underneath by our driver revealed a leak of automatic transmission fluid. A pipe was tightened, some spare fluid was found but it was not enough and eventually a park ranger who also accompanied us, produced a bottle of cooking oil, which was also dispensed to top up the system – it worked! The second vehicle with Dave & Clive also refused to climb unless they got out, and it was a manual. We managed to get up to the planned lower elevation

however, but for the following day a replacement was arranged. Another interesting episode was when we went to the highest elevation. This involved a 5:30 a.m. start and a chilly alfresco breakfast at around 2000m! Approaching the higher parts we came across a landslide where young kids were clearing the road [this was quite common wherever road repairs were being done]. A team of young girls [and we're talking early to late teens] was manually scooping up rock and soil in small wicker baskets and chucking it down the hillside. After about an hour of this they moved to one side and some young boys up above the road armed with crowbars and hammers, hacked off more rock to try and create a more stable side to the hill. Eventually a way was cleared for us and we progressed upwards. On our return later the same day, the road was blocked again and would take some time to clear. We decided to walk on whilst the driver and the vehicle waited for a route through to be cleared. We had walked for around 1½ hrs, and Anne & I had gone on ahead. A loud diesel was heard and a large blue truck hove into view, full of rock in the back, with Dave, and Clive in the cab with the driver. Much gesticulating by him made it clear that Anne & I were invited to climb up into the back on top of the load of rock, for a lift! This was achieved – not an easy task as it was a big truck and the top of the load was around 10-15ft off the ground! We sat up there with a young lad who was looking after our guide's 'scope and bumped along quite a steep section of the track until eventually our 4x4 vehicle caught up with us. Scrambling down off the back of the truck was quite entertaining! In the pic is our blue truck 'lift' and the 4x4 on the far side of the blockage. So, highlights of these 5 full days were: Grey-faced Buzzard [I'm not wholly confident about this record], Oriental Hobby, Great Barbet, Stripe-breasted-, Rufous-bellied-, Bay-, and Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers, lots of Olive-backed Pipits, Large Cuckooshrike, Grey-chinned Minivet, Short-billed Minivet, Long-tailed Minivet, Crested Finchbill, various Bulbuls, Blue-fronted Redstart, White-browed Scimitar-babbler, Brown-capped Laughingthrush, Assam Laughingthrush, Silver-eared Mesia, Rusty-fronted Barwing, Blue-winged and Red-tailed Minlas, Grey Sibia, a number of leaf type warblers, Verditer Flycatcher, Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher, Little Pied Flycatcher, Hill Blue-flycatcher, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher, Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, Bar-tailed and Brown-throated [Hume's] Treecreepers, Asian Black Eagle, Mountain Imperial-pigeon, Grey Nightjar, Grey-sided-, Plain-backed-, and Eyebrowed Thrushes, Himalayan Bluetail, White-tailed Rubythroat, Rufous-winged-, and White-browed Fulvettas, Whiskered Yuhina, Gould's-, Fire-tailed-, and Green-tailed Sunbirds, and Maroon Oriole to mention just a few!! Top birds included the endemic White-browed Nuthatch. This endangered species only

occurs on Natmataung between 2000 and 2500 metres and is usually found in the local species of oak found there – some endemism! We were lucky and saw several birds. Another species now considered endemic is Burmese Tit split from Black-browed Tit and a member of the same family [Aegathalos] as our Long-tailed Tit. Another split which we were lucky to get good views of [it is a very skulking species] was Mt Victoria Babax, which is split from Chinese Babax.

It was my birthday whilst we were stationed at the lodge and they even managed to produce a birthday cake for me, and I was serenaded on the evening of the 11th by the team of lads, with the chef on guitar, singing a traditional Chin State song! Video clip is on my Facebook page!

12th February – our departure day when we drove back to Bagan with some birding and refreshment stops on the way. New birds on the way included Alexandrine Parakeet, Grey-headed Parakeet, Besra, Indian Roller, Common Flameback [a spectacular woodpecker], and a small foraging flock of Greater Necklaced Laughingthrushes [individuals of this group are quite large as thrushes go, but they are notoriously skulking, feeding on the ground in dense cover, but if located can be seen well with patience]. On reaching Bagan we were taken to one of the biggest stupas where you could climb to the top up steep steps, to watch the sunset. It was heaving with tourists but the view were amazing. We had dinner in a fabulous large restaurant in Bagan where they staged impressive marionette shows, then retired to the Sky Palace Hotel again.

13th February - today was originally planned to involve a further internal flight to Heho airport near the old colonial hill station of Kalaw in the mid-east, but in the event SST found there was no availability, so we drove in a very comfortable air conditioned minibus. In a way this was preferable as we were able to stop at various places en route to bird, and also take a leisurely walk behind Kalaw town on arrival. Also on the way we stopped not far from Bagan to see a 'workshop' where they produced a local spirit or 'palm wine' from the sap a species of palm tree. Dave was the only one to brave a taste! It is sometimes known as Palm Toddy – is this where the expression 'hot toddy' comes from? Apparently palm wine produced in this way is quite common in many parts of Asia. Birds seen on the way included Himalayan Buzzard, Blyth's Swift [a split from Fork-tailed Swift, which includes Pacific Swift], Hoopoe, Long-tailed Shrike, Daurian Redstart, White-browed Laughingthrush, White-throated Fantail, Cinereous Tit, Ashy Drongo, and Slender-billed Oriole, amongst others.

14th February - today involved a very long walk up through mainly deciduous forest, and then down into a small valley with cultivation including paddies. Transport to the beginning of the walk comprised sitting on plastic stools in a trailer drawn behind a motorcycle 'trike' power unit. Halfway point of this walk was at the so-called 'Big Dam', which is actually quite small, by a small reservoir where we had a picnic lunch. Highlight at this spot was a male White-capped Water-redstart, a stunning bird. We had some good species on the walk including Emerald Dove heard, Large Hawk-cuckoo, Crested Goshawk, Himalayan Swiftlet, White-throated Kingfisher, Speckled Piculet, Scarlet Minivet, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, Brown-breasted Bulbul, Asian Black Bulbul [looks like a miniature Chough!], Blue Whistling-thrush, White-crowned Forktail [typical v brief view and heard calling], Orange-bellied Leafbird, Dark-backed Sibia, Striated Grassbird, Blyth's Leaf-warbler, Grey-crowned Warbler, Yellow-cheeked Tit, the beautiful Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Plain-, and Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers, Black-throated Sunbird, Oriental White-eye, Bronzed Drongo, Black-collared Starling, Crested Bunting, and Black-headed Greenfinch. In Kalaw we stayed at Nature Land Hotel just above the town. This was very pleasant with detached cabins, although the food they provided on the first evening was pretty poor. At other times we ate out.

15th February - we left today in our comfy minibus for the relatively short drive to our last hotel at Inle Lake. Inle lake is a very large shallow lake [no more than 3m deep at any point], located 875m above sea level, 22km long and 11km wide at its widest. It is famed for its floating villages and farmland, and its leg-rowing fishermen. It is often referred to as the 'Venice of the East'. The leg rowing fishermen go out in long shallow boats, traditionally carved from a single tree-trunk. They stand on the very back and row using a single oar around which they curl their leg, and row in a sculling motion that is difficult to describe. Their hands are



thus free to manipulate their fishing nets, which they cast into the water. It is an intriguing area, where the lake villages comprise houses all built from reed and bamboo, some quite large with several floors, and all located in the water and built on strong bamboo stilts. They are all arranged in streets with 'canals' running between. The cultivated land is also floating and effectively comprises a series of islands [I'm not sure how this developed] and many crops are grown. The whole area is a mass of vertical bamboo poles reaching about 10ft into the air. These are actually poles driven down through the floating land-masses into the bed of the lake to anchor them in position. We arrived at our superb hotel, the Hupin Hotel at the northern end, mid morning, in time to unpack the necessities and have a coffee. Walking to the main building

for our coffee, our guide had spotted an Asian Barred Owlet sitting in a tree, offering good views. We were then taken on a narrow boat, with a loud single cylinder four-stroke engine which turned over at around 2 revs per second [bang bang bang bang etc!], and went out onto the lake to spend some time on an observation tower out in a marshy area overlooking reed beds and open water. Numerous Black-headed Gulls and Brown-headed Gulls took off as we chugged out, the latter looking a lot like the familiar Black-headed variety except when they flew, when the very distinctive wing pattern was obvious – from memory it reminded me in some ways, of Franklin's Gull, except for the pale grey coverts rather than the Franklin's more slaty grey. A lot of Spot-billed Ducks and Little Cormorants were in evidence too. We arrived at the observation tower, a 2 storey building on stilts, with a surrounding verandah. The building itself was locked so we had to satisfy ourselves with the lower verandah, which was adequate. A number of more familiar birds seen from here boosted our list – about 8 Garganey, and a similar number of Ferruginous Ducks, a pair of Gadwall, Shoveler, 30 Ruddy Shelduck, and also Cotton Pygmy-goose. The usual set of Egrets was present, and we had a couple of good views of Eastern Marsh-harrier quartering the reeds – this is a different species [*Circus spinolotus*], from the one with which we are familiar. Moorhen and Coot were also present, plus a few Grey-headed Swamphen, considered by some to be conspecific with Purple Swamphen, found in Portugal and Spain for example. A lot of Greater Coucals were seen giving their low calls from the tops of reeds. We spent a good couple of hours here watching the activity. It was then time to re-embark on our long narrow craft, and we set off down the length of the lake. It was fascinating travelling past the various areas of floating cultivation, seeing the local people at work tending their various crops, and passing the leg-rowing fishermen. Eventually we turned into a narrow 'canal' between rows of houses on stilts and after a few minutes we passed a wonderful ornate collection of Buddhist stupas by the shoreline and moored up at a landing stage. We had arrived at our lunch venue – a large elevated and very busy restaurant and we had another really enjoyable lunch. An intriguing item in the 'mains' section of the menu was "Coot in season"! [there was a very large population of Common Coot on the lake]. After a suitable period we embarked yet again and set off cruising the narrow canals between the houses and areas of cultivation. Here we saw numerous Oriental Reed-warblers singing from reed tops – these are about the size of a Great Reed-warbler, with a similar song, although not quite so raucous or grating. We also had Plaintive Cuckoo, White-throated Kingfisher, Indian Roller, and I got on to a cracking male Pallid Harrier. Barn- and Wire-tailed Swallows were numerous and the reed tops and bamboo poles also provided perches for various Drongos, Mynahs, Starlings and Bulbuls, and a Striated Grassbird. We eventually moored up on the opposite side of the lake to our hotel, by another similar hotel, which had an elevated walkway over the water leading to a small village.

Here, we watched intrigued as a house move was in progress. The house was floating on its own foundations, at the front of which sat a large JCB type excavator. This latter was gouging out mud and silt, and parts of the bank of the narrow canal in which the house was situated, and in doing so was gradually pulling the house forwards along the canal. It was difficult to figure out exactly where they were intending to relocate! Anyway, thus distracted we continued on for a short distance to where our raised path overlooked paddyfields on either side. We spent a good hour here with plenty to see. Common and Pintail Snipe were feeding quite close by, and we saw another Common Sandpiper. As it was late afternoon, huge numbers of Glossy Ibis, Asian Openbills and all the egret species were coming in to roost in low trees, as were Little Cormorants and a few Grey Heron. One paddy held about 200 Black-winged Stilts. Other good birds here were feeding on tilled ground. First, two new birds for the list – a few White-vented Mynah, and then another Mynah which puzzled me until I pointed it out to our guide Lay - a Collared Mynah, a scarce bird and one he had been hoping to find for us. These were mixed in with Common Mynah, Vinous-breasted Starling, Black-collared Starling, Asian Pied Starling, and Chestnut-tailed Starling. Also in the same field was a Richard's Pipit, a number of Yellow Wagtails and a few Citrine Wagtails including some nice males. Lay and Dave had wandered down the path a little and saw a Zitting Cisticola but it had gone by the time the rest of us caught up. Time was now marching on, so we made our way back to the boat and set off back to our hotel, arriving just as the sun was setting. The entrance into the hotel area was quite impressive as the boat had to pass under a very ornate arch into a kind of harbour along each side of which were some of the accommodations comprising chalets on stilts in the water, surrounded by water lilies. We returned to our chalets, and changed for dinner. This was taken in the huge dining hall, which was absolutely heaving with groups that had arrived during the day, mostly Chinese it seemed, but also at least one French group. The whole hall was busy and about to tuck in to their respective meals when the whole place was plunged into darkness as the electricity supply failed. Lots of "oohs" and "aaahs" and laughing ensued, and eventually candles were set on the tables and not long after that, the emergency generators kicked in and we could see what we were eating – which was excellent again. We retired to our rooms and after freshening



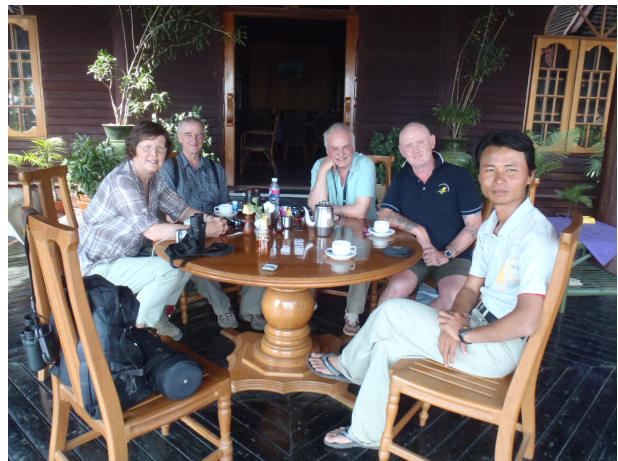
up, met in one or the other's allotted room to do the list for the day [this had been a daily task, normally by ourselves, although on a few occasions we did do it in the company of Lay]. This was our last night so some packing was in order. However our return flight to Yangon was not until the following afternoon, so we had the morning free – hence scopes had to be kept to hand.

16th February – After breakfast we set off again in our boat to have one last session at the observation tower and to find another endemic. The search involved slowly cruising along some water channels between reed beds, and very soon we had our quarry – Jerdon's Bushchat, sitting atop a reed. In all we saw 3 or 4. During the course of this canal cruising we also added another new bird in the form of a Plain Prinia. Finally we chugged out to the observation tower, and Clive spotted what was probably an Oriental Cuckoo sitting on a reed stem. It was difficult in the boat as the engine was very loud, making it very difficult to make oneself heard to call anything. I missed a fly-by Bronze-winged Jacana on the way back as a result.

Once at the observation tower we found it was unlocked and fully accessible, so we went to the higher verandah, where a friend of Lay was present with a client. The latter turned out to be a Sri Lankan gentleman and his wife, whom we had met briefly on Mt Victoria [this was the couple who had opted for the open jeep and got covered in dust!]. He had recently retired and they were on a round Asia trip. We boosted the list again with some more familiar birds – Wigeon, Teal, Pintail, [Western] Marsh-harrier, and Purple Heron. Another male Pied Harrier also performed. Despite a lot of careful scanning, none of the possible exotic Bitterns, nor Watercock, could be found, but we were rewarded with nice views of several Pheasant-tailed Jacanas strutting around on lily pads. Finally satiated and birded out we set off back in the boat, in time for lunch, which we took out on a verandah overlooking the lake. It was then time to pack properly to prepare for the transfer to Heho airport for our afternoon flight back to Yangon. A last
coffee at Inle Lake, Hupin Hotel

The small airport was very busy and it appeared that a whole batch of internal flights was timed to arrive and depart during a fairly short window in the afternoon. The flight announcement system was quite amusing – a young guy would wander up and down by the doors on to the airstrip yelling through a hand-held loud hailer!. It's a good job Lay was flying back with us! This flight was with Bagan Airways in another old turboprop aircraft, and our flight went via Mandalay.

On arrival back at Yangon we were transferred straight to the Panorama Hotel once more, for a single night before our early flight to Doha the following morning. Once checked in, a manager from SST Travel came to the hotel to greet us. Unfortunately our original contact, Mr. Soe Min Aye was away with some clients at Mt Victoria. We were then taken out



for a very enjoyable meal in what was quite a posh restaurant on the 20th floor of a nearby building. At the end of the meal we were surprised to be given gifts each by the SST man [I think his name sounded like 'Soh']. These comprised a box of special tamarind toffees each, and a woven article. Anne got a nice scarf and I got a colourful woven shoulder bag of traditional design – indeed Lay had used one throughout the trip to carry his field guide. Back at the hotel we had a brief chat in the reception area with the SST manager and also thanked Lay for his expert guidance and company and gave him his well-earned tip.

17th February – we had a very early start, as our Qatar flight to Doha was due to leave at 8 a.m. We arrived in good time and bade our farewells to Lay, and wished him a good journey back to his home village in the north, where he was going to see his family. This involved a two day bus journey and eventually a 3 hour walk up into the hills to the village! Check-in went without a hitch and we were soon on our way. We arrived at Doha at 11:45 local time, and then there was a 5hr 35min stop over. The airport was relatively quiet and we passed the time easily enough. I charged up my iPod at a free 'station' and caught up with e-mails and news, which we had missed due to the lack of internet for most of the trip. The final flight left at 17:20 local time and arrived at LHR at 22:00 GMT when we were then faced with the dreaded drive back to Cardiff – coffee on the way was a necessity. Having left Yangon and 35 deg C, arriving at LHR to be greeted by 3 deg C was a bit of a shock to the system!

So ended an absolutely fantastic trip in a wonderful friendly country, with a delightful guide who was a typical Burmese – genteel and warm and a delight to be with.

Total species logged was 304, and my personal tally was 291 – as always not everyone saw everything.

There are 7 Burmese endemics, all of which we saw: Hooded Treepie, Jerdon's Minivet, White-throated Babbler, and Burmese Bushlark in the dry areas, and White-browed Nuthatch, Mt. Victoria Babax, and Burmese Bushtit at Mt. Victoria in the Chin Hills. There are also a number of localised or near-endemics including Black-bibbed Tit, Brown-capped and Assam Laughingthrushes, and Collared Mynah on our list.

The complete list follows:

Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus
Oriental Darter	Anhinga melanogaster	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	Lesser Sand Plover	Charadrius mongolus
Little Cormorant	Phalacrocorax niger	Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	Greenshank	Tringa nebularia
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea	Common Sandpiper	Tringa hypoleucos
Eastern Cattle Egret	Bubulcus coromandus	Pintail Snipe	Gallinago stenura
Great White Egret	Egretta alba	Snipe	Gallinago gallinago
Intermediate Egret	Egretta intermedia	Temmincks Stint	Calidris temminckii
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	Brown-headed Gull	Larus brunnicephalus
Indian Pond-heron	Ardeola grayii	Black-headed Gull	Larus ridibundus
Asian Openbill	Anastomus oscitans	Feral Pigeon	Columba livia 'feral'
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus	Oriental Turtle-dove	Streptopelia orientalis
Lesser Whistling-duck	Dendrocygna javanica	Collared-dove	Streptopelia decaocto
Ruddy Shelduck	Tadorna ferruginea	Red Collared-dove	Streptopelia tranquebarica
Cotton Pygmy-goose	Nettapus coromandelianus	Spotted Dove	Stigmatopelia chinensis
Wigeon	Anas penelope	Emerald Dove	Chalcophaps indica
Gadwall	Anas strepera	Yellow-footed Green-pigeon	Treron phoenicopterus
Teal	Anas crecca	Mountain Imperial-pigeon	Ducula badia
Spot-billed Duck	Anas poecilorhyncha	Alexandrine Parakeet	Psittacula eupatria
Pintail	Anas acuta	Rose-ringed Parakeet	Psittacula krameri
Garganey	Anas querquedula	Grey-headed Parakeet	Psittacula finschii
Shoveler	Anas clypeata	Blossom-headed Parakeet	Psittacula roseata
Ferruginous Duck	Aythya nyroca	Red-breasted Parakeet	Psittacula alexandri
Osprey	Pandion haliaetus	Large Hawk-cuckoo	Cuculus sparverioides
Black Baza	Aviceda leuphotes	Plaintive Cuckoo	Cacomantis merulinus
Oriental Honey-buzzard	Pernis ptilorhyncus	Asian Koel	Eudynamys scolopaceus
Black-shouldered Kite	Elanus caeruleus	Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis
Black Kite	Milvus migrans	Lesser Coucal	Centropus bengalensis
Crested Serpent-eagle	Spilornis cheela	Collared Scops-owl	Otus bakkamoena
Grey-faced Buzzard	Butastur indicus	Asian Barred Owlet	Glaucidium cuculoides
Pallid Harrier	Circus macrourus	Spotted Owlet	Athene brama
Pied Harrier	Circus melanoleucos	Grey Nightjar	Caprimulgus indicus
[Western] Marsh-harrier	Circus aeruginosus	Indian Nightjar	Caprimulgus asiaticus
Eastern Marsh-harrier	Circus spilonotus	Himalayan Swiftlet	Aerodramus brevirostris
Shikra	Accipiter badius	Asian Palm-swift	Cypsiurus balasiensis
Crested Goshawk	Accipiter trivirgatus	Blyth's Swift	Apus leuconyx
Besra	Accipiter virgatus	House Swift	Apus nipalensis
Himalayan Buzzard	Buteo relictus	Pied Kingfisher	Ceryle rudis
Asian Black Eagle	Ictinaetus malayensis	Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis
Indian Spotted Eagle	Aquila hastata	White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis
Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni	Green Bee-eater	Merops orientalis
Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	Merops philippinus
Oriental Hobby	Falco severus	Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	Merops leschenaulti
Laggar Falcon	Falco jugger	Indian Roller	Coracias benghalensis
Hill Partridge	Arborophila torqueola	Hoopoe	Upupa epops
Red Junglefowl	Gallus gallus	Great Barbet	Megalaima virens
Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	Lineated Barbet	Megalaima lineata
Grey-headed Swamphen	Porphyrio p. caspius	Golden-throated Barbet	Megalaima franklinii
Coot	Fulica atra	Coppersmith Barbet	Megalaima haemacephala
Pheasant-tailed Jacana	Hydrophasianus chirurgus	Wryneck	Jynx torquilla
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	Speckled Piculet	Picumnus innominatus
Small Pratincole	Glareola lactea	Grey-capped [Pygmy] W'pecker	Dendrocopos canicapillus
River Lapwing	Vanellus duvaucelii	Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos macei

Stripe-breasted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos atratus	White-crowned Forktail	Enicurus leschenaulti
Rufous-bellied Woodpecker	Dendrocopos hyperythrus	Stonechat	Saxicola torquata
Common Flameback	Dinopium javanense	White-tailed Stonechat	Saxicola leucurus
Bay Woodpecker	Blythipicus pyrrhotis	Pied Bushchat	Saxicola caprata
Burmese Bushlark	Mirafra microptera	Jerdons Bushchat	Saxicola jerdoni
Sand Lark	Calandrella ryalal	Grey Bushchat	Saxicola ferreus
Grey-throated Martin	Riparia chinensis	White-browed Scimitar-babbler	Pomatorhinus schisticeps
Dusky Crag-martin	Hirundo concolor	Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler	Pomatorhinus ruficollis
Swallow	Hirundo rustica	Golden Babbler	Stachyris chrysaea
Wire-tailed Swallow	Hirundo smithii	Yellow-eyed Babbler	Chrysomma sinense
Asian House-martin	Delichon dasypus	White-throated Babbler	Turdoides gularis
Nepal House-martin	Delichon nipalense	Mt Victoria Babax	Babax lanceolatus woodi
Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava flavissima	White-crested Laughingthrush	Garrulax leucolophus
Citrine Wagtail	Motacilla citreola	Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush	Garrulax monileger
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea	Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush	Garrulax pectoralis
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba alba	White-browed Laughingthrush	Garrulax sannio
Richard's Pipit	Anthus richardi	Brown-capped Laughingthrush	Garrulax austeni
Olive-backed Pipit	Anthus hodgsoni	Assam Laughingthrush	Garrulax chrysopterus
Red-throated Pipit	Anthus cervinus	Silver-eared Mesia	Leiothrix argentauris
Large Cuckooshrike	Coracina macei	White-browed Shrike-babbler	Pteruthius flaviscapis
Jerdon's Minivet	Pericrocotus albifrons	Green Shrike-babbler	Pteruthius xanthochlorus
Grey-chinned Minivet	Pericrocotus solaris	Rusty-fronted Barwing	Actinodura egeroni
Long-tailed Minivet	Pericrocotus ethologus	Spectacled Barwing	Actinodura ramsayi
Short-billed Minivet	Pericrocotus brevirostris	Blue-winged Minla	Minla cyanouroptera
Scarlet Minivet	Pericrocotus flammeus	Bar-throated Minla	Minla strigula
Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike	Hemipus picatus	Red-tailed Minla	Minla ignotincta
Crested Finchbill	Spizixos canifrons	Rufous-winged Fulvetta	Alcippe castaneiceps
Striated Bulbul	Pycnonotus striatus	White-browed Fulvetta	Alcippe vinipectus
Black-headed Bulbul	Pycnonotus atriceps	Grey Sibia	Heterophasia gracilis
Black-crested Bulbul	Pycnonotus melanicterus	Dark-backed Sibia	Heterophasia melanoleuca
Red-whiskered Bulbul	Pycnonotus jocosus	Whiskered Yuhina	Yuhina flavicollis
Brown-breasted Bulbul	Pycnonotus xanthorrhous	Stripe-throated Yuhina	Yuhina gularis
Red-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus cafer	Striated Prinia	Prinia crinigera
Stripe-throated Bulbul	Pycnonotus finlaysoni	Brown Prinia	Prinia polychroa
Flavescent Bulbul	Pycnonotus flavescent	Grey-breasted Prinia	Prinia hodgsonii
Streak-eared Bulbul	Pycnonotus blanfordi	Plain Prinia	Prinia inornata
Common Iora	Aegithina tiphia	Chestnut-headed Tesia	Tesia castaneocoronata
Ashy Bulbul	Hemixos flavala	Striated Grassbird	Megalurus palustris
Asian Black Bulbul	Hypsipetes leucocephalus	Blyths Reed-warbler	Acrocephalus dumetorum
Brown Shrike	Lanius cristatus	Oriental Reed-warbler	Acrocephalus orientalis
Burmese Shrike	Lanius collurioides	Thick-billed Warbler	Acrocephalus aedon
Long-tailed Shrike	Lanius schach	Common Tailorbird	Orthotomus sutorius
Grey-backed Shrike	Lanius tephronotus	Dusky Warbler	Phylloscopus fuscatus
Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrush	Monticola rufiventris	Tickells Leaf-warbler	Phylloscopus affinis
Blue Rock-thrush	Monticola solitarius	Yellow-streaked Warbler	Phylloscopus armandii
Blue Whistling-thrush	Myophonus caeruleus	Buff-barred Warbler	Phylloscopus pulcher
Plain-backed Thrush	Zoothera mollissima	Yellow-browed Warbler	Phylloscopus inornatus
Grey-sided Thrush	Turdus feae	Arctic Warbler	Phylloscopus borealis
White-tailed Rubythroat	Luscinia pectoralis	Greenish Warbler	Phylloscopus trochiloides
Bluethroat	Luscinia svecica	Two-barred Warbler	Grey-legged Leaf-warbler
Himalayan Bluetail	Tarsiger rufilatus	Pale-legged Leaf-warbler	Phylloscopus tenellipes
Oriental Magpie-robin	Copsychus saularis	Blyths Leaf-warbler	Phylloscopus reguloides
Blue-fronted Redstart	Phoenicurus frontalis	Grey-hooded Warbler	Phylloscopus xanthoschistos
Daurian Redstart	Phoenicurus aureoreus	Grey-crowned Warbler	Seicercus tephrocephalus
White-capped Water-redstart	Chaimarrornis leucocephalus	Broad-billed Warbler	Tickellia hodgsoni

Black-faced Warbler	Abroscopus schisticeps	Jay	Garrulus glandarius
Yellow-bellied Warbler	Abroscopus superciliosus	Red-billed Blue Magpie	Urocissa erythrorhynchos
Dark-sided Flycatcher	Muscicapa sibirica	Rufous Treepie	Dendrocitta vagabunda
Verditer Flycatcher	Eumyias thalassinus	Racket-tailed Treepie	Crypsirina temia
Slaty-backed Flycatcher	Ficedula hodgsonii	Hooded Treepie	Crypsirina cucullata
Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher	Ficedula strophilata	House Crow	Corvus splendens
Taiga Flycatcher	Ficedula albicilla	Jungle Crow	Corvus leucomelas
Little Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula westermanni	Black-naped Oriole	Oriolus chinensis
Pale Blue-flycatcher	Cyornis unicolor	Slender-billed Oriole	Oriolus tenuirostris
Blue-throated Flycatcher	Cyornis rubeculoides	Black-hooded Oriole	Oriolus xanthornus
Hill Blue-flycatcher	Cyornis banyumas	Maroon Oriole	Oriolus traillii
Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher	Culicicapa ceylonensis	Chestnut-tailed Starling	Sturnus malabaricus
Black-naped Monarch	Hypothymis azurea	Asian Pied Starling	Sturnus contra
Yellow-bellied Fantail	Rhipidura hypoxantha	Black-collared Starling	Sturnus nigricollis
White-throated Fantail	Rhipidura albicollis	Vinous-breasted Starling	Sturnus burmannicus
Black-throated Tit	Aegithalos concinnus	Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis
Burmese Tit	Aegithalos sharpei	Jungle Myna	Acridotheres fuscus
Black-bibbed Tit	Parus hypermelaenus	White-vented Myna	Acridotheres grandis
Cinereous Tit	Parus cinereus	Collared Myna	Acridotheres albocinctus
Green-backed Tit	Parus monticolus	Crested Bunting	Melophis lathami
Yellow-cheeked Tit	Parus spilonotus	Little Bunting	Emberiza pusilla
Yellow-browed Tit	Sylviparus modestus	Black-headed Bunting	Emberiza melanocephala
Chestnut-vented Nuthatch	Sitta nagaensis	Black-headed Greenfinch	Carduelis ambigua
White-browed Nuthatch	Sitta victoriae	Common Rosefinch	Carpodacus erythrinus
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch	Sitta frontalis	Scaly-breasted Munia	Lonchura punctulata
Bar-tailed Treecreeper	Certhia himalayana	Baya Weaver	Ploceus philippinus
Brown-throated Treecreeper	Certhia discolor	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus
Plain Flowerpecker	Dicaeum concolor	Plain-backed Sparrow	Passer flaveolus
Fire-breasted Flowerpecker	Dicaeum ignipectus	Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus
Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker	Dicaeum cruentatum	<i>The following are species I didn't see/hear myself</i>	
Purple Sunbird	Nectarinia asiatica	Bronze-winged Jacana	Metopidius indicus
Olive-backed Sunbird	Nectarinia jugularis	Orange-bellied Leafbird	Chloropsis hardwickii
Gould's Sunbird	Aethopyga gouldiae	Oriental Cuckoo	Cuculus saturatus
Green-tailed Sunbird	Aethopyga nipalensis	Red-rumped Swallow	Hirundo daurica
Black-throated Sunbird	Aethopyga saturata	Japanese White-eye	Zosterops japonicus
Fire-tailed Sunbird	Aethopyga ignicauda	Blyth's Tragopan	Tragopan blythii
Chestnut-flanked White-eye	Zosterops erythropleurus	Oriental Hobby	Falco severus
Oriental White-eye	Zosterops palpebrosus	Lemon-rumped Warbler	Phylloscopus chloronotus
Black Drongo	Dicrurus macrocercus	Brown Bush-warbler	Bradypterus luteoventris
Ashy Drongo	Dicrurus leucophaeus	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis
Bronzed Drongo	Dicrurus aeneus	Russet Sparrow	Passer rutilans
Spangled Drongo	Dicrurus bracteatus	Black-eared Shrike-babbler	Pteruthius melanotis
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	Dicrurus paradiseus	Grey Treepie	Dendrocitta formosae
Ashy Woodswallow	Artamus fuscus		

Agents in Myanmar - SST Tourism Company Ltd, Room No. (S-6), Second Floor, North Wing of Aung San Stadium, Mingalar Taung Township, Yangon, Myanmar. !!! Tel: 00951 255536; Fax: 00951 393086 [0095 is Myanmar, 1 is Yangon]. E-mail marketing@sstmyanmar.com; Web: www.sstmyanmar.com [the web site is in the process of being revamped]. For the birding section visit <http://birding.sstmyanmar.com>. You will see that they do run trips specifically for Spoon-billed Sandpiper. We did consider this possibility but time constraints and cost meant that it wasn't really feasible. One of the main areas was in the west near the border with Bangladesh but the logistics of getting there were too complex within our time restraints and budget. However it appears that there is the possibility of seeing the species in the Gulf of Mataban south of Yangon. This is certainly an easier area to access. The one in the west is extremely isolated and involves rough camping on an island, and the Foreign Office still advises against visits there due to unrest.

SST stands for "Supreme Services Team". Googling will show that there are now quite a number of independent tourism agents in Myanmar although many of them are only concerned with 'cultural' tours. SST's web site does contain a number of testimonials and trip reports.

John Wilson – March 2013