

On the WING

Kate Dicks discovers that the scenic national parks of Thailand provide a feast for birdwatchers and wildlife enthusiasts.



Yellow-rumped flycatcher



Hoopoe



Elephants playing

Thailand has over 100 national parks, each rich with an abundance of flora and fauna to be found amongst impressive and diverse landscapes. With topography ranging from towering limestone cliffs, immense areas of wetland and bamboo groves to mixed deciduous forest and dense jungle, these natural habitats are home to a spectacular variety of birdlife. Around 978 bird species are found in Thailand enticing ornithologists from all over the world to come in search of many rare and eminent breeds such as the spoonbilled sandpiper, Gurney's pitta, Nordmann's greenshank and a variety of hornbill species. The country is steadily proving to be a flourishing birdwatching destination offering many tours to prime (yet quiet) spotting habitats, where opportunities to view mammals and other wildlife are also plentiful.

On my last research trip to Thailand, I visited the Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, a four hour drive from Bangkok on the upper coast of the Southern Gulf and only an hour from the resort of Hua Hin, to observe some of the 296 migratory and resident bird species that have been recorded here in the country's largest area of protected freshwater marshland. The marshes are frequented by painted storks, grey herons, great and small egrets, purple herons, white-bellied sea eagles and a small number of spotted and imperial eagles, while the sandy beaches of the park, flanked by dramatic limestone mountains, provide habitat for nesting Malaysian plovers and little terns.

The day had been arranged by a locally-run company specialising in wildlife and nature tours

of Thailand's national parks which directly contribute to a range of conservation efforts. As this was my first birdwatching experience, I appreciated having an expert on hand and I couldn't have asked for a more qualified and enthusiastic guide. With thirty years experience in identifying over 5,000 bird species and an award from the tourism authority, I was accompanied by one of Thailand's top ornithologists.

Khao Sam Roi Yot is undoubtedly a bird-lover's paradise, not only for the outstanding birdwatching opportunities but for its backdrop of impressive coastal scenery. Many tours will include a visit here but the country also boasts a wealth of other birdwatching gems.

Kaeng Krachan National Park, a three-hour drive from Bangkok, sits alongside the border with Myanmar and is the country's largest national park. With some of the most intact evergreen forest in the country, Kaeng Krachan has at least 418 confirmed species of birds. The park is home to the indigenous ratchet-tailed treepie, silver oriole, yellow-vented pigeon, plain-pouched hornbill and the black and red broadbill. In addition to a wide variety of beautiful birds, the park is also home to much other wildlife, including wild elephants, tigers and gibbons.

Khao Yai is Thailand's oldest national park and includes one of the largest areas of intact monsoon forest in mainland Asia. Open grassland provides good opportunities to observe those birds that visit the forest's periphery and canopy-dwelling species that are often difficult to see from the interior.



Green-tailed sunbird



Great hornbill



Chestnut-tailed minla



Asian barred owl



Yellow-browed tits

Silver and Siamese fireback pheasants, imperial pigeons, Hodgson's hawl cuckoo, spot-bellied owls, orange-breasted and red-headed trogons, banded kingfisher, the blue-bearded bee-eater and four variants of hornbill (great, wreathed, brown and pied) are just a few of the species that can be seen here. Wild elephants are sometimes spotted, as are gibbons and the Asiatic black bear. The park attracts wildlife enthusiasts and walkers alike, and offers some varied accommodation options including campsites and the luxurious Kirimaya resort.



Green-eared barbet



Spoon-billed sandpiper



Langurs

Thailand's highest peak (2,565 metres) is found in the Doi Inthanon National Park, an hour from the northern capital of Chiang Mai, and is famous for the variety of mountain birds reported here. The deciduous forests of the lower slopes give way to mountain evergreen forest and pine found at the higher elevations. With at least 400 species of birds, including the black eagle, rufous-bellied eagle and mountain hawk eagle, and high elevation species such as the chestnut-tailed minla, white-browed shortwing, green-tailed sunbird and pygmy wren-babbler, Doi Inthanon is a highlight on any birdwatching trip. Whether you are a keen 'birder' or a general wildlife enthusiast I can thoroughly recommend a trip to Thailand's national parks.

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FACT FILE

A 16 day tour of Thailand including return flights and visits to the country's top national parks accompanied by an experienced ornithologist costs from £2,650 per person. Please call Charlie, Nick, Sarah, James or Simon on 01993 838 115 for details.



Birdwatching, Khao Sam Roi Yot