

Birds of Agape

Title Was it a workshop cum birdwatching or birdwatching cum workshop? It happened last week at Agape Springs in Silang Cavite, a 10-hectare property crisscrossed by streams, owned by Dr. Gloria Caccam, a Haribon member. We hurriedly placed our bags in our rooms and then checked out the place. It was surrounded by plants and trees and immediately, we spied upon several kinds of colorful butterflies of varying sizes hovering on a flowering tree that we couldn't identify. Around us, we could hear the birds. There were bird calls that we could identify: a kingfisher, an oriole, a dove. We have 572 species of birds and about 172 are endemic or unique to the Philippines. (Kennedy et al. 2000) No, we didn't forget our binoculars. But neither could our workshop facilitator forget that we were there to discuss more important matters. "Your attention please!" was what she always said. Our meeting venue was perfect (for birdwatching). We were surrounded by windows that gave us a fantastic view of trees and smaller plants. In the middle of a discussion, a Philippine Coucal (*Centropus viridis*) suddenly glided and disappeared into the bushes. Shortly thereafter, another one followed. Later, one of them nimbly perched on a branch of the narra tree where we enjoyed viewing it. According to Kennedy et al., it is endemic and is shy and difficult to see. Its whole body and tail is black glossed with green while its wings are dark chestnut and it measures approximately 16-17 inches. It can be found throughout the country except in Palawan, in grasslands to forests up to 2000m. During our afternoon break, we went out and surveyed the place and found a huge kamagong tree laden with fruits. Kamagong or "mabolo" is an endemic fruit tree the wood of which is extremely dense and hard and famous for its dark color. It is one of our several hardwoods belonging to the ebony family (genus *Diospyros*). The word mabolo is Filipino for hairy and describes the fruit's hairy exterior. We spent the entire break gathering the mabolo fruits which were felled by Typhoon Basyang's strong winds. We ate the fruit and more importantly saved the seeds that we will germinate in our native tree nursery in Caliraya. The following day, we were up by 5 am ready for our early morning encounter. We were not disappointed as we saw a Philippine Pygmy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus maculatus*), the smallest among Philippine woodpeckers measuring only 5.5 inches. Another endemic species! Because the light wasn't too good, initially, we couldn't determine whether it was the *fulvifasciatus* or the *validirostris* species. We referred to the Kennedy book but because the distinction between the two species was the size of the white streaks on the bird's body, we were thankful that the tiny bird was steady on the branch until we all agreed that it was the *validirostris* species. We walked toward the other side of the property where we saw the ultimate show-off, a White-throated Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) perched on a naked branch basking in the sun. It has a dark chestnut body with bright blue wings, back and tail and a tiny white patch on its throat that distinguishes it from other kingfishers. It is usually solitary or in pairs in clearings or along larger streams and rivers in open country and adjacent to the forest. It stayed put and provided us with pure enjoyment for almost half an hour. By mid morning, we have had our fill of white eyes, sunbirds and bulbuls but another tiny bird caught our eye. It was quick in its movements that made it difficult for us to identify it. It was an Elegant Tit (*Parus elegans*). The last time I saw one was in

Tagaytay a couple of years ago. Endemic and found throughout the Philippines, the diminutive 4.5-inch yellow and black bird was with two others. Another unexpected find was the Oriental Magpie-Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) which is about three inches larger than the Elegant Tit. It is uncommon in all levels of second growth, cultivated areas and bamboo thickets in the lowlands. We had to refer to Kennedy again to validate that the bird we saw was male. Its upper parts are dark grayish-blue, its throat and breast are grey and tail, black. Its wing is black with a white wing patch extending to the edges. The female's white wing patch is larger. Come October, Agape will be the venue of our World Bird Festival event that will be open to both birdwatchers or people who just appreciate nature. And yes, in spite of our frequent bird distractions, our workshop was a success. by Anabelle Plantilla Image credit: Lip Kee; flickr.com