

Rare Bird Club Trip report ?

Cambodia 2010 by Jane Fenton

Title It was with some trepidation that I joined this braveheart expedition into the wilds of Cambodia to discover five Critically Endangered birds: White-shouldered and Giant Ibis, along with White-rumped, Slender-billed and Red-headed Vulture. We started in comfort at the Raffles Royal Hotel in Phnom Penh as guests of honour of Cambodia's Minister of Forestry. But this was the calm before the storm, and we spent the next day driving north-east along increasingly rural roads - stopping to experience deep fried Giant Spiders at Skun Market (only for the intrepid!) and to drink coconut milk. I shall never forget my first sight of the mighty Mekong River reflecting the blue of the sky with giant fishing nets stretched across it between the fishing boats. We stopped to photograph the threatened Irrawaddy River Dolphins from small boats before following the river's course. That evening we were hosted by the Provincial Governor in his lovely house at Stung Treng which overlooked the river. The next morning we exchanged our vehicles for two wooden boats which were to take us up to our final destination of Siem Pang. The river was low and the skill of our two helmsmen powering around hidden rocks never ceased to fascinate while we birdwatched. The small fishing village of Siem Pang is home to BirdLife's Cambodia Programme office. The villagers were excited by our arrival, greeting us warmly with local Khmer food. The following morning our search started in earnest. We were led by local guides together with Hugh Wright, a PhD student from England studying White-shouldered Ibis. He had taken the trouble to learn the local language and was obviously much respected and liked by the local community. We were rewarded with good views of White-shouldered Ibis, White-rumped and Slender-billed Vulture. Later we enjoyed celebrating with traditional Khmer indigenous tribe dancing to drums around a fire. A few of us joined in, which they loved, although we were less sure about sharing their bewitched wine. The next morning was our last opportunity to find the Giant Ibis. With only 200 individual birds left in the world ? and declining ? we were all anxious as we silently followed the talented local tracker Mem Mai. Befriended by BirdLife, Mem Mai used to be a hunter but is now a committed guardian of the birds. We were incredibly lucky. Not only did one huge bird fly past us, but it actually turned round and settled in a tall tree facing the sun for twenty minutes, allowing everyone a magnificent view for cameras and telescopes. The memories of the long journeys, the hot slogging and weary limbs all vanished in an instant. It was a never-to-be-forgotten experience for those of us who went. Together we shared hardship, fun and friendship in equal measure. Our reward for those who could stay longer was a visit to the extraordinary 12th century temples at Angkor Wat followed by a memorable boat trip on the largest freshwater lake in South East Asia. I would not have missed it for the world, nor everything else we encountered in Cambodia, and sincerely hope that BirdLife

continues to be successful. I also hope that our visit will help to encourage the authorities to provide better protection for these beautiful birds on the very edge of extinction. This article is from BirdLife's Rare Bird Club newsletter. To find out more, please click the [logo below](#).

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