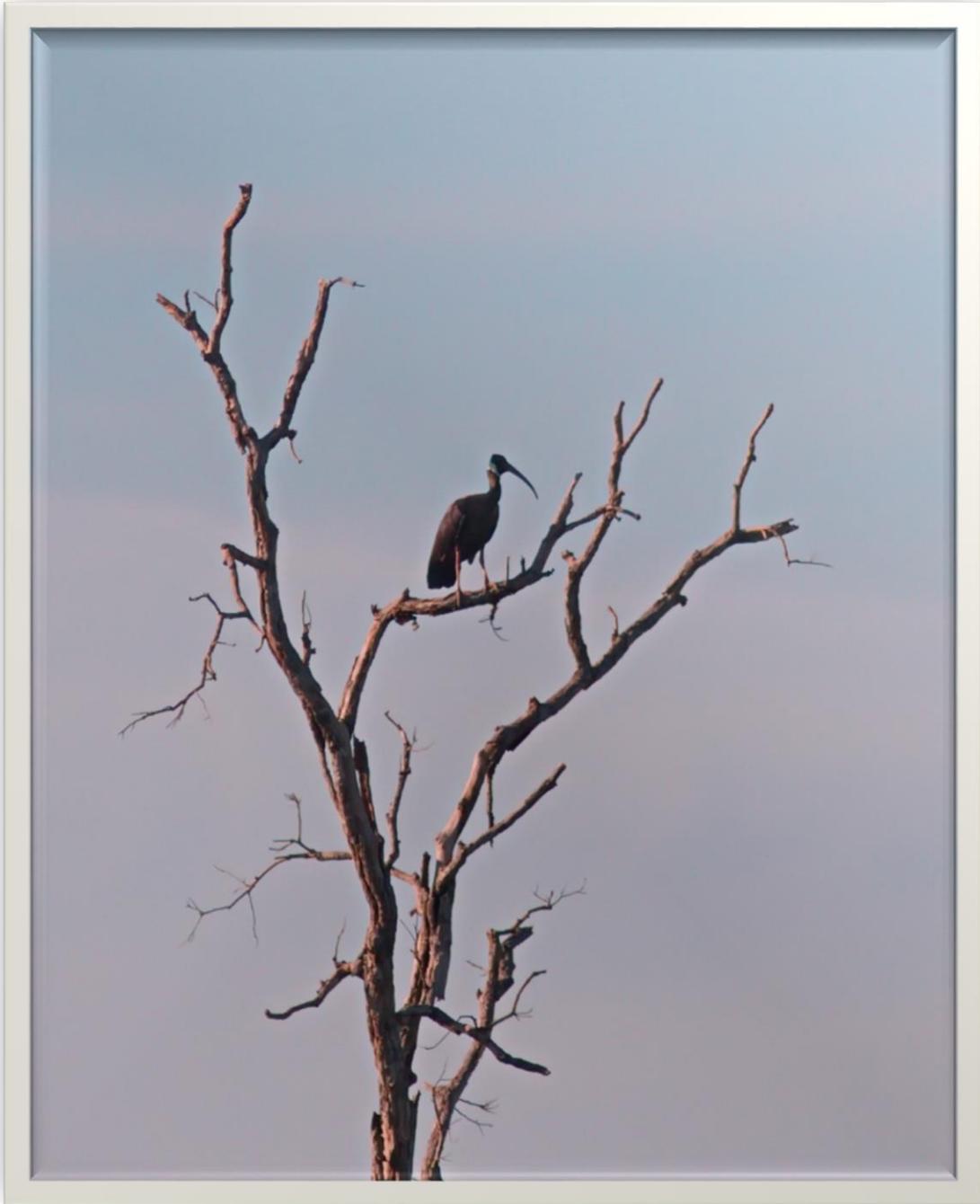


Cambodia

November 29 – December 05, 2015



Participants:

Olof Biström
Gun Biström
Ipo Hanski
Matti Varulainen
Allki Alanen
Erkki Virolainen
Bengt Legnell

(who made the preparations and also wrote this short summary. Photos; Bengt)

Forewords.

First of all I would like to say a hearty “Thank You” to Olof and the rest of the group for letting me come along. It was a great trip.

Cambodia is a country that until very recently was untouched by the developing “brand new world”. Wars, poverty and a lack of interest from former colonial powers (France) had pretty much frozen the country-side in time. Life and environment looked almost the same as 1000 years ago, when the great Khmer empire stretched from Vietnam in the east, throughout central Thailand towards the Burmese border in the west.

When the great Khmer empire vanquished after a few hundred years the huge deciduous forest that once covered the land sat root again, hiding the famous Khmer temple-towns of Ankor, Preah Vihear, Beng Male and a number of others, both in Cambodia and Thailand, under a canopy of splendid greenery.

It is said this deciduous forest stretched from Saigon to Bangkok only 150 years ago. When French Jesuit Priests first came to Cambodia in the 17:th century they never discovered Ankor, hidden under the forest canopy. What they did see however, was many 1000 Cattle, Deer and Elephants grazing, just like on an African savanna, by the shores of Tonle Sap, South-East Asia’s largest lake. This is according to their own report.

This forest is in large parts gone, both in Thailand and Vietnam and so are most of the wildlife that once could find shelter there. Only in the northern part of Cambodia (as well as the southernmost part of Laos and the Jok Don area in Vietnam) this forest remain.





Even though the great Khmer empire is long gone and the forest once again gained control of the land it still plays a very vital role in the preservation of the very rare Cambodian avifauna. The small scale forest rice-farming, the “trapaengs” - small dams for cattle during dry season - from those by-gone days still exist and so do this collaboration between man and bird-life. The left-over rice after harvest, the water (and frogs etc. living there) in the trapaengs during dry season still generate food for Alexandrine Parakeets, Giant & White-shouldered Ibises, Lesser Adjutant, Black-necked & Wolly-necked Storks, Western Saurus Cranes, White-winged Ducks & Green Peafowls. High up in the air one still can see White-rumped, Slender-billed & Red-headed Vultures. Close to the small forest farms there still are White-rumped Pigmy Falcons and Collared Falconets sitting in a dead tree. All on the red-list, many labeled “Critically Endangered”. Once wide-spread, they can hardly be found anywhere else in South-East Asia any more, or, indeed, the World.

November 29. Just before lunch, Olof and team arrived to Siem Reap after a long journey from Helsinki via HK. When given the choice to rest, lay by the hotel-pool or go birding around Ankor the answer was as from one voice, so we spent the afternoon around the 1000 years old temple complex only 20 minutes away from our hotel



Hainan Blue Flycatcher.

There are nesting-colonies of both Red-breasted & Alexandrine Parakeets inside the temple-complex and we often saw them flying around the temple-ruins in small flocks. The first migrant birds had just arrived. We could hear the Yellow-browed Warbler almost everywhere, there were Barn-swallows over the tree-tops and the characteristic soft rattling sound from the Taiga Flycatcher was often heard. Since parts of the temple complex still has thick forest we drove to a remote part, played the call of Hainan Blue Flycatcher and to our surprise we got responses all around us. It seems like these birds arrive in thick “waves” and later spread out throughout the land. Unfortunately we missed Forest Wagtail that often spend the winter behind the ticket-office. Maybe they had not yet arrived?

November 30. An early morning start. The goal today was the bird-sanctuary outside the floating village Prek Toal on the north-western shores of Tonle Sap, the largest lake in South-East Asia – SEA -. The targets were the rare and endangered Great Adjutant and Milky Storks – the only place in SEA to see them. After having crossed the lake and arrived at Prek Toal village, we changed into small



Everything floats in Prek Toal fishing Village, shops, restaurants, churches, schools, office-buildings...

motorized canoes. Through thick reeds we then approached the breeding colony of Open-billed & Painted Storks. Many Great, Indian & Little Cormorants as well as red-listed Oriental Darters & Spot-billed Pelicans breed here as well.



Blue-tailed Bee-eater

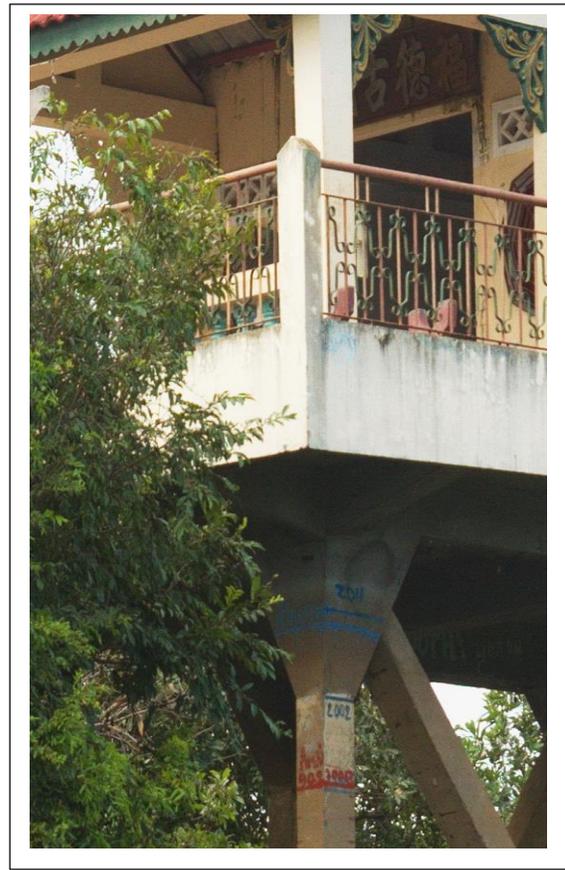
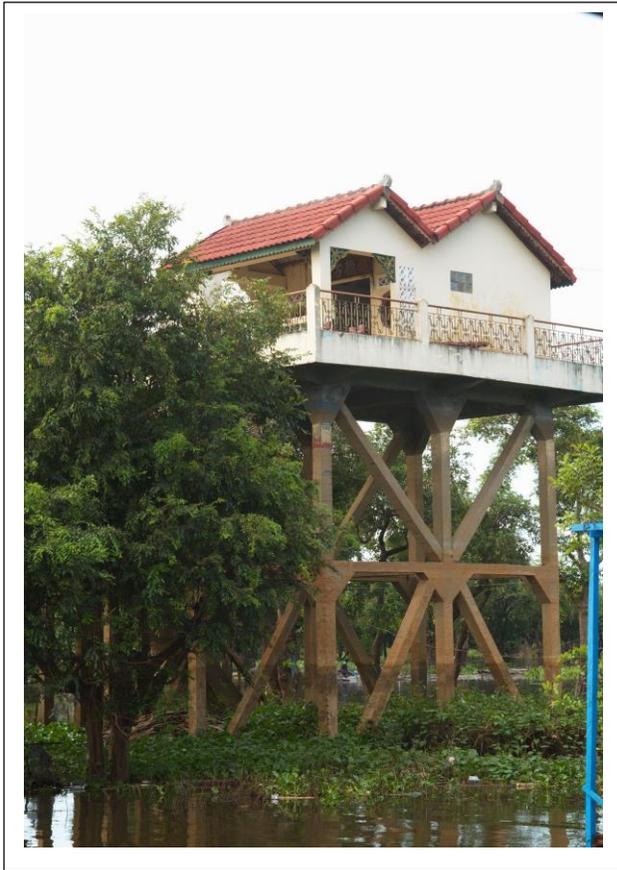


Spot-billed Pelican

Prek Toal is the most important wetland in SEA, a Ramsar site. Here tenth of thousands of Storks breed. Since the conservation program started 1999, egg collection has stopped and the birds prosper. According to Birdlife, about 75 pairs of Great Adjutants nest here, almost ½ of the world population (the other half in India) SEA's only breeding colonies of Milky Stork and Spot-billed Pelican can be found here, both Red-listed, Milky Stork is Endangered – about 20 nesting pairs are found here, about 1000 on Sumatra – Altogether 10 Red-listed species are found here .

This wet-land paradise is under great threat and so is Tonle Sap Lake itself. During wet season the water in the Lake is fed by the mighty Mekong River, expanding the size of the lake over 30%, raising water-level 10-14 meter. During dry season the water flows the opposite direction, from the lake into the Mekong.

Now the Chinese have started to exploit the Mekong River and is building huge dams for hydroelectricity & irrigation in Yunnan threatening not only the eco-system and bird-life around the lake, but also the hugely important fishing-industry in the lake itself, one of Cambodia's main source of protein come from Tonle Sap fishery.



The water-level in Tonle Sap Lake change, sometimes more than 10m, between wet & dry season. The tree-species around the lake has evolved in accordance with this yearly flooding and there is great concern, both for this special swamp forest and the colonies of birds nesting in them, – SEA's most important breeding-ground for water-fowls, according to Birdlife – if someone tamper with the Mekong River.

When we visited, most birds had not started to breed yet, but still there was an impressive sight of Open-billed Storks sitting in the trees, Painted Storks, Oriental Darters & Spot-billed Pelicans flying high above, on their way to feed in inundated rice-fields. We saw 2 Grey-headed Fish-Eagles on our way. These Eagles still nest around Tonle Sap.

During the crossing over the lake we saw many thousand Whiskered Terns, sometimes there were so many they almost darkened the rising morning-sun. They must just have arrived from their breeding grounds in China.



After a few hours journey we arrived to a small platform, built into a tree, on the outskirts of the colony. From here we got a better view of the colonies of birds. In the distance we found 4-5 Great Adjutants. A few Lesser Adjutants flew over our heads and a Grey-headed Fish Eagle sat in a dead tree nearby, waiting to catch a fish.

Unfortunately this was a little too early in the year to see Milky Storks. They tend to scatter out among flooded rice-fields in the province this time of the year, some even fly all the way to Laem Pak Bia in Thailand, often joining up with similar Painted Storks – there is a problem with hybrids between the two, both here and among a reintroduced group in Malaysia -



A Greater Adjutant sitting in a colony of Great Cormorants...maybe waiting for an egg-breakfast?
Photo from a previous visit

December 01. Early in the morning we drove to Ang Trapaeng Thmor, about 50km west of Siem Reap. We stopped by some flooded rice-fields to survey groups of Painted & Open-billed Storks feeding on Apple-snails etc. In the distance we could see small flocks of Lesser Whistling Ducks, Cotton Pygmy-Geese, Indian Spot-billed Ducks, Garganeys, even a small group of Comb Ducks flying from night-feeding in the fields back to the day-roost.

A little further down the road the “smacking” call of a skulking Ruby-throat was heard from some thick bushes. In spite of trying “play-back” the bird only showed a tail or a feather or two. A few Eastern Wagtails (now a “split” from our Western dito) and Red-

throated Pipits had found their way from China or Siberia to spend the winter here. On the electric wires beside the road there were quite a few Plain-backed Sparrows sitting together with 10 White-shouldered Starlings. To our surprise even a Wryneck suddenly popped up on the wire for a few short seconds, maybe just arrived from Siberia?!



Spotted Owlets



Male Pied Harrier

When the air warmed up a little in the morning, the horizon over the rice-fields soon got dotted with Pied Harriers, Eastern March Harriers, Black-Shouldered & Black-Eared Kite. In the wet-land Pied, Black-Capped & White-breasted Kingfishers could be seen. A Cinnamon Bittern as well as Little Herons and a few Purple Herons took shelter among the reeds. In a rice-field finally we found 2 Milky Storks in a group of Painted Storks



We saw at least 2 Milky Storks together with a distant group of Painted Storks – one possibly a hybrid -

December 02. Yet another early morning in order to reach the grassland of Kampong Thum, a good hours drive east of Siem Reap. The target this morning was the critically endangered Bengal Florican.

Farmers from a nearby village had gone out scouting the day before, so they easily could guide us to the right spot. There still was a lot of water in the fields – rainy season ended late this year – so we were unable to enter the grassland itself. We walked on small trails among new rice-fields that slowly eat up the habitat of the Floricans. Their breeding grounds in the grassland further out towards Tonle Sap Lake is protected but their winter-quarters in this area is getting smaller and the population in Cambodia is now decreasing again, after a few good years.



We saw at least 3 males and 2 females Bengal Floricans. In all about 150-200 pairs are estimated to occupy these grasslands. The largest population in the world. Field studies suggest a 44% decrease here since surveys started in 2005, mainly due to habitat loss - big scale rice-farming is spreading - There also are a few smaller, scattered, mostly decreasing populations in Nepal and Northern India. World population: Less than 1000 mature birds according to Birdlife

The photo, a male Florican, is from a previous visit.

After the visit to Kampong Thum, our journey continued northward, towards the Thai border. Now we finally started to see these great deciduous forests I mentioned earlier in this report. Our goal was the village Tmatboey about 30km south of the Lao border. On the way we stopped by a small farm, looking for White-rumped Pygmy-Falcons. We saw 2 pairs in all and the Falcons seem to still be doing OK here. This bird is almost gone from the rest of SEA.

After this stop we went on to the village Tmatboey in Preah Vihear province...now it was time for big time birding, that is Giant Ibis and White-shouldered Ibis, the main targets on this trip.

We arrived in the late afternoon and after having checked in at the lodge about a kilometer outside the village we went to the main roost for White-shouldered Ibis and



Male White-rumped Pigmy-Falcon



Collared Falconet, one of the smallest Falcons

settled down in the grass, waiting for the first of these shy birds to arrive. Just before sunset the first bird flew by, scouting out the area to see if it was safe to settle in a couple of big, old, dead trees. Then quiet until the sun had settled under the horizon. One by one or in small groups the Ibises arrived, gently settling on the branches. In all, 25 Ibises arrived. That is about half of the population of White-shouldered Ibis in the Tmatboey area.



White-shouldered Ibis has been a success-story in Tmatboey. A survey-conservation project started in 2002. Then there were 3 breeding pairs in the forest around the village. Now there are about 20 pairs, possibly the highest density of this species. The villagers are also benefiting through collecting conservation-fees as well as job-opportunities at the lodge or as guides. Recently Wildlife Conservation Society – WCS – started a “Ibis Rice” program, to protect the forest and Ibises in the entire north – more about this later in this report!

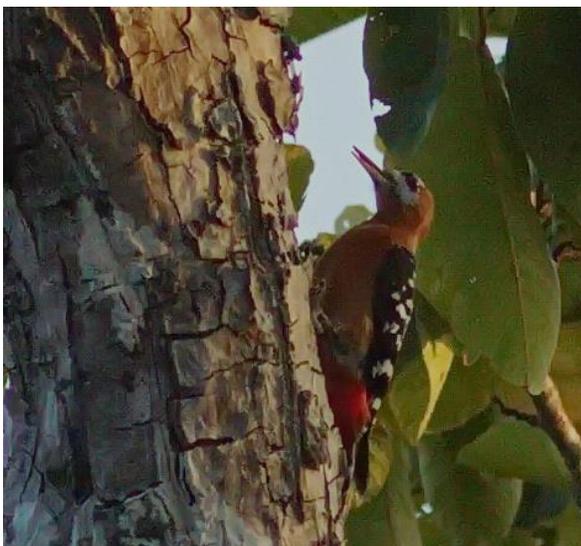
December 03 – 05. We spent 2 full days in Tmatboey...and as it turned out, we needed that in order to find our other target, the much shyer and difficult to find Giant Ibis. But, as the saying goes; it is not the goal that counts, it is the journey to reach it... and there were a lot of other birds that caught our fancy these two days. The Woodpeckers, 10 species in all. (see the bird-list) My personal favorite was the sap-sucking Rufous-bellied Woodpecker. I have seen it ones in Thailand and when I saw the cork-screw patterned holes in quite a few tree-trunks I knew we got it – they are extremely territorial and can stay and suck sap from the same trees for years. Olof got his hearts desire met just as we were to return to Siem Reap. Our excellent guide during our stay, Nara, suddenly heard the call of a White-bellied Woodpecker and brought Olof to see it just B4 getting seated in our three 4x4 cars.



Spot-theoatde Woodpecker (female)



Black-headed Woodpecker



Rufous-bellied Woodpecker (Male)



White-bellied Woodpecker

Not only Woodpeckers came our way during the visit. This forest, with many old dead trees, is also rich in Owls. Oriental Scops Owl was fairly common, as was Collared Scops Owl. We also saw Brown Fish Owl and Spotted Wood owl.



Giant Ibis

Photo: Christer Sundström, previous visit



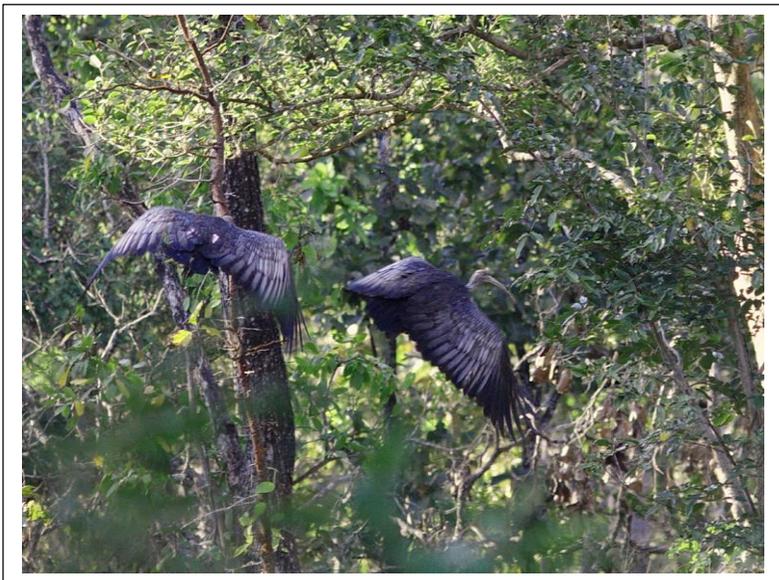
Giant & White-shouldered Ibis.

About the only place in the world to see these enigmatic birds are in the dry, deciduous forest of northern Cambodia.

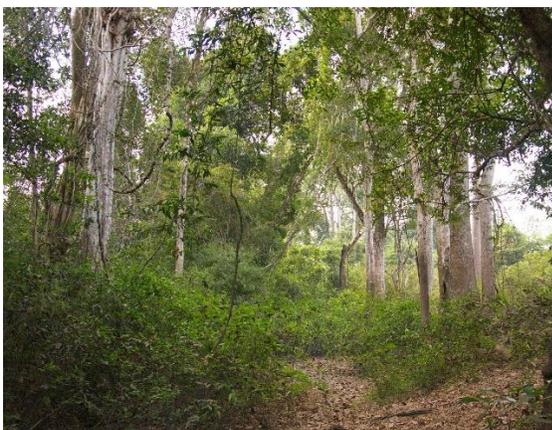
A newly found population of Giants in the Cardamom Mountains in southwest Cambodia and a small, declining population of White-shouldered in eastern Kalimantan, Borneo indicate that this species once must have been widespread...but that is it...

Giant Ibis: World population; about 250 (Birdlife 2012) Only 3 recorded nests in Tmatboey 2015. 2 failed, one got 1 chick. No recorded nest-sites outside Cambodia.

White-shouldered Ibis: World population; About 1200, whereof 973 in Cambodia, the rest in Kalimantan (Birdlife 2013) Over 20 nests in Tmatbouy 2015 (up from 3 in 2002)



Well, we got our Giant Ibis at last, 4 in fact, in the morning the same day we were to leave Tmatboey. We first heard their magic morning song – I would best describe it as a mix between a Whooper Swan and a Common Crane – It is a very special song indeed! This made a worthy ending to some great birding in a very special country. To an ornitologist it is like a time-travel, to how this part of the world looked like 150-200 years ago.



A couple of images of this deciduous (tree-species shed their leaves during dry season) forest. There are many Dipterocarp species as well as some evergreen along rivers (left). The black burnt holes in the tree-trunks on the right photo, are from villagers extracting resin from the trees. They carefully set a fire in the hole, thus causing resin to flow into the cavity. Apparently, if done in moderation, it does not kill the trees.

Illegal logging is rampant in this northern forest...and it is the big trees that are cut – the nest trees for the Ibises!
When I first visited Cambodia in 2008, the Preah Vihear temple conflict with Thailand just broke out. A dispute over land-rights. Subsequently, the Cambodian government started huge road-constructions, created big Rubber-plantations and moved many 1000 of poor to the sparsely populated Preah Vihear province with offers of free land. All to counter the threat from Thailand ...and all need timber for housing, farming, and a bit of extra cash...





When traveling through Seima Protected forest last year, I was met by this sight! 100's of cars in a scrap-yard...in the middle of a protected forest!!?? Expensive 4x4's and Toyota Corona's. I got very curious and got ahold of a forest-official who explained to me that these cars were confiscated after their drivers had been caught red-handed bringing out illegal timber from the forest! This is only one area...and only count for the illegal logging...Cambodia Plywood co. owns the concession for the central 1/3 of this Northern Forest, the home of a large number of critically endangered birds and mammals. Some are already extinct, like the Kouprey, a large, wild forest ox, discovered here only 80 years ago.

Maybe it is a little unusual to end a birding report with a plea, but I think it is both timely and appropriate. Cambodia and the northern forest is a great place to go birding and I believe birders have done and hopefully will do a difference when they visit places like Tmatboey. Villagers there get an incentive to save the forest and the Ibises by money generated to them through birding – fees, work & guiding opportunities. Even local and national authorities are affected by the visits from international birders like you and me. So, looking for a place to go birding? Maybe this is the place!

I met Ross Sinclair, the Country Director of Wildlife Conservation Society – WCS - (the biggest international organization working with conservation issues in Cambodia - It is WCS that originally made it possible for birders to come here and see the Ibises -) up at Tmatboey on this December 2015 trip. He told me of a very interesting program they started up in Cambodia a few years back. It is called “Ibis Rice” and I believe this project may turn the tide for this forest and its wildlife, even more so than us birders...Please, if anyone feel they can be a part of this project, maybe an importer or whole-seller, let me know...or contact WCS in Cambodia. SO HERE IT IS!

That there is a close relationship between traditional rice-cultivation and the Ibises in Preah Vihear & Stung Treng Provinces (the main habitat for both species) is well documented. The small, natural rice-fields spread around in the forest & adjacent water-ponds – trapaengs – provide food for Ibises and Storks during dry season.

WCS started a program buying Organic Jasmin Rice grown on these small, scattered forest-patches directly from the farmers, who sign a contract with WCS promising to grow it organically, not engage in illegal hunting and logging, as well as have a masterplan of what part of the forest should be left alone and on what part rice-fields are present. This contract is signed on a village level. The farmers who fulfill this contract gets a far better price than selling it to local middlemen. This rice, labeled “Ibis-rice”, is sold in most super-markets & high-end hotels all over Cambodia. Now production has reached a level making it possible to export to Europe.

If you are interested in this program, pls. contact WCS, Cambodia.