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Petchaburi Rice Fields (Tung Bang Jak & Nong Pla Lai)

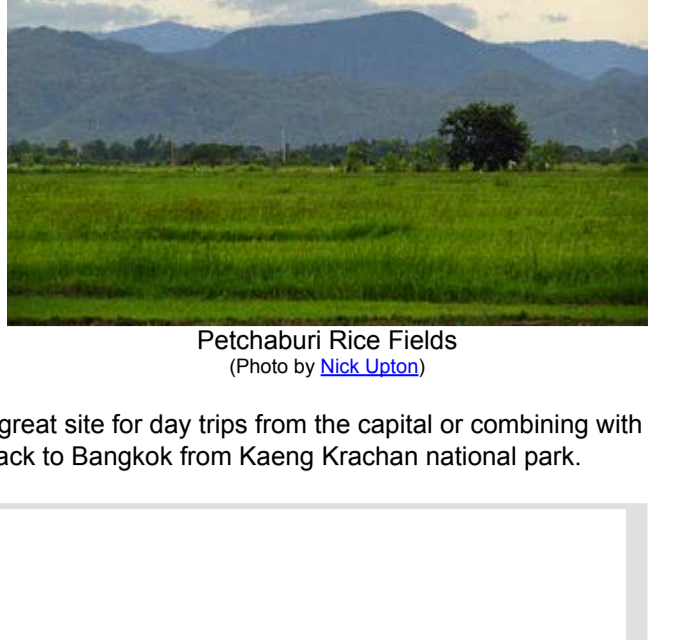
(Updated 17/09/13)

Introduction

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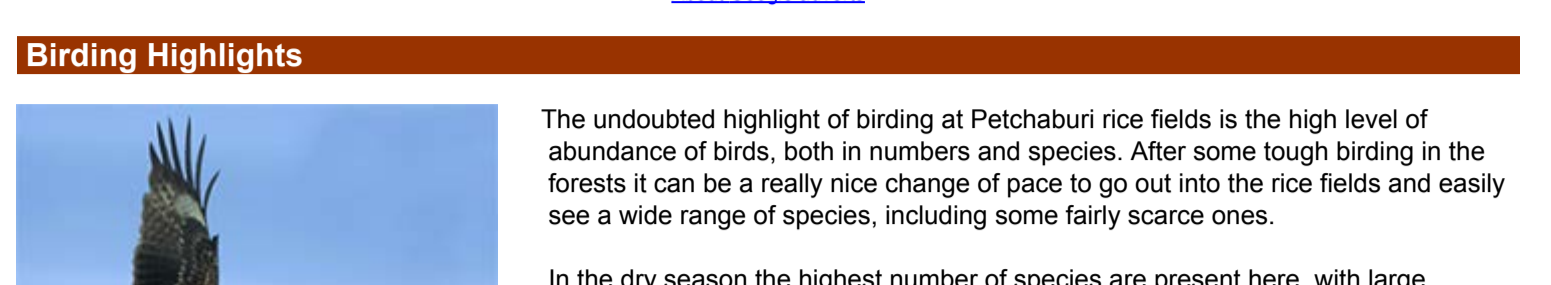
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Petchaburi Rice Fields is an area of farmland slightly north of the provincial capital of Petchaburi which is predominantly under agriculture for rice but which also contains areas of fish ponds, gardens and uncultivated *Typha* beds; small numbers of cattle are also kept here and ducks are farmed among the rice fields. The mixed farming at this site and the relatively small plots results in a mosaic of habitats and consequently high biodiversity which means that large numbers of birds can be found here throughout the year.



These rice fields are privately owned and there is no level of protection afforded to them with the result that in recent years farming methods have begun to intensify and many rough patches have disappeared. However, currently, bird abundance has not noticeably changed and this remains an excellent location to see a high number of open-country and wetland species in a short space of time; indeed, in the early morning bird abundance can be spectacular.

Petchaburi rice fields is less than a 2 hour drive from Bangkok making it a great site for day trips from the capital or combining with a visit to Laem Pak Bia/Pak Thale and it makes a great stop on the way back to Bangkok from Kaeng Krachan national park.



Birding Highlights

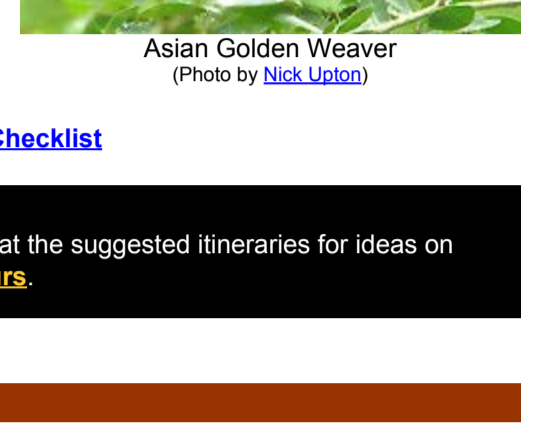


The undoubted highlight of birding at Petchaburi rice fields is the high level of abundance of birds, both in numbers and species. After some tough birding in the forests it can be a really nice change of pace to go out into the rice fields and easily see a wide range of species, including some fairly scarce ones.

In the dry season the highest number of species are present here, with large numbers of migrants, and for those who like raptors, this is one of the best sites in Thailand; a great place to catch up with Greater Spotted Eagle if you have missed it elsewhere. Although they are not common at this site, a male Pied Harrier is an undoubted highlight of a visit to the rice fields for lucky birders; other species include Eastern Imperial Eagle, Booted Eagle, Eastern Marsh Harrier and Steppe Eagle.

Freshwater wetland species are also an attraction here and some of those elusive bitterns can be found here; Yellow Bittern is common and Cinnamon is fairly abundant. In the wet season Black Bittern is common too and occasionally Great Bittern is found amongst the *Typha*.

Although waterbirds and raptors are the obvious highlights here, there are a lot of other species in the rice fields that are perhaps not rare but not that frequently encountered on birding tours of Thailand. Pink-necked Green Pigeon, Black-browed Reed Warbler, Yellow-bellied Prinia, Plain-backed Sparrow and Freckle-breasted Woodpecker can all be regularly seen here.



Most birders visit Thailand in the dry season but this area holds attractions through the wet season that are not seen in the dry. All three Thai species of weaver are very abundant in the wet season, making their nests next to the roads and Javan Pond Heron in breeding plumage is a very splendid bird. Oriental Pratincoles can be seen in these months too and if you want to see a male Watercock in breeding plumage the wet season is the time to visit. Spot-billed Pelican is a species that is becoming increasingly common as a wet season visitor to this part of Thailand and fields with many hundreds can be seen in flight.

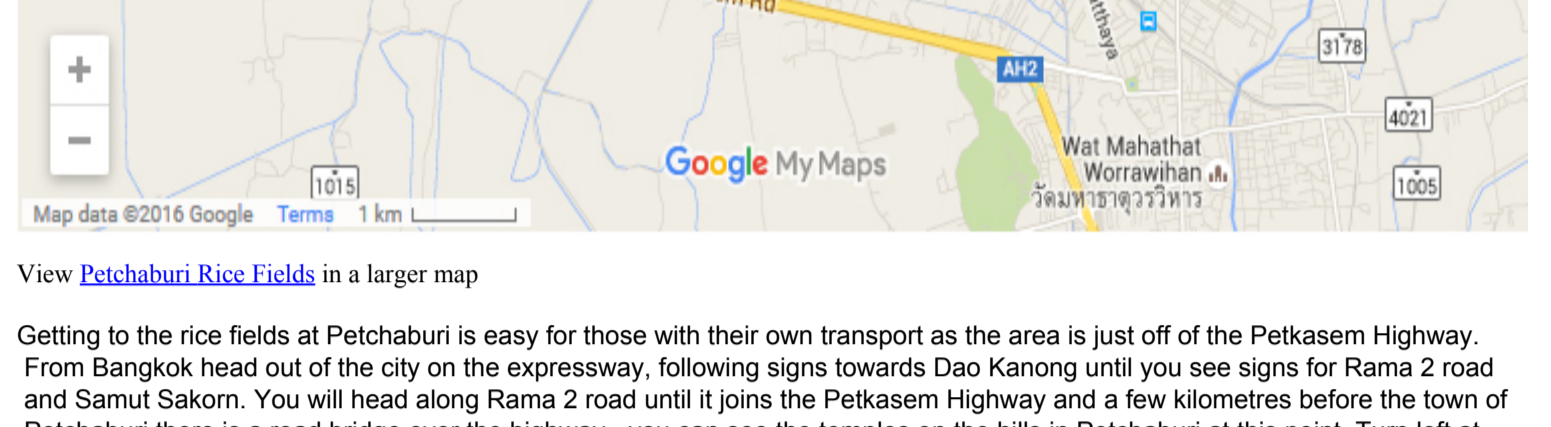
Whatever the time of year, there are always many birds to be found at this site.

A checklist of the birds for this location can be found here - [Petchaburi Rice Fields Checklist](#)

Bird Watching Trips: If you need help organizing a bird watching trip to Thailand, take a look at the suggested itineraries for ideas on creating a tailor-made trip and contact me for advice: [Thailand bird tours](#).

Travel Information

Use the interactive map below to plan your route to Nong Pla Lai Raptor Watch Point and Tung Bang Jak Rice Fields. The blue line shows the route from the Petkasem highway a little north of Petchaburi city (green marker) to Nong Pla Lai Raptor Watch Point (blue marker) and Tung Bang Jak Railway Crossing (red marker).



Getting to the rice fields at Petchaburi is easy for those with their own transport as the area is just off the Petkasem Highway. From Bangkok head out of the city on the expressway, following signs towards Dao Kanong until you see signs for Rama 2 road and Samut Sakorn. You will head along Rama 2 road until it joins the Petkasem Highway and a few kilometres before the town of Petchaburi there is a road bridge over the highway - you can see the temples on the hills in Petchaburi at this point. Turn left at the bridge and the rice fields begin.

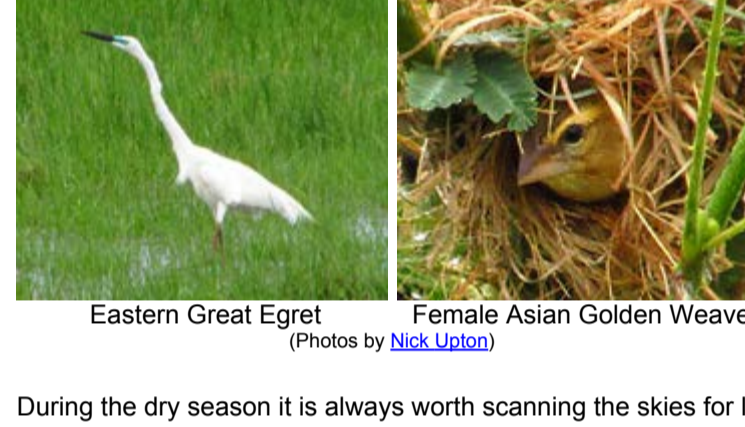
For those using public transport it is easy to take a bus from the southern bus terminal in Bangkok to Petchaburi; any bus heading to a southern province will stop there. However, the rice fields cover a very large area and transport is essential so a hiring a vehicle in nearby Cha Am or Hua Hin would be necessary.

Finding Birds

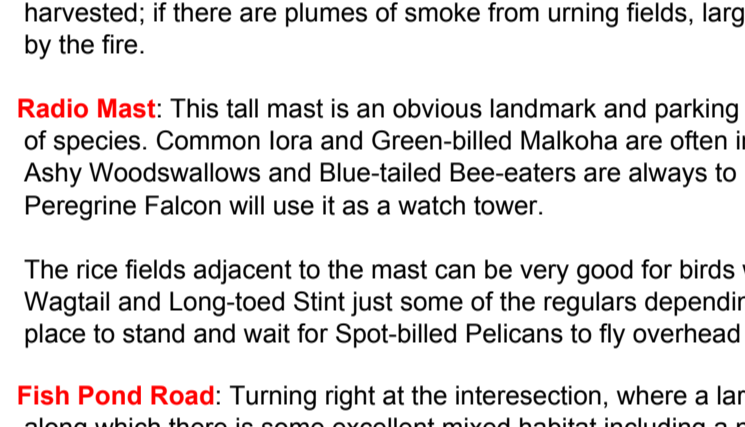
These rice fields cover a large area and a large number of the species to be found here can be seen over much of the site. However, there are a few hotspots for birders and places that are suitable for stopping and birding.



Irrigation Canal Road: Birders will find themselves on this straight road through the rice fields after turning off of the Petkasem highway. It runs for a several kilometres with an irrigation canal adjacent to its north side and a large number of species can be seen in the vegetation in this canal as well as the rice fields either side of the road and the trees that line it.



As soon as birders turn off the highway birding can begin but beware of the traffic, particularly fast-moving trucks that sometimes drive along here; make sure you park carefully. Along this first stretch of road many of the commoner birds of the site can be seen - Red-wattled Lapwing, Egrets, Pond Herons, Asian Openbill and others will be in evidence and the numbers of birds along here can be very impressive first thing in the morning. As well as the commoner species a few Indochinese Bushlarks can be found along the drier verges and Freckle-breasted Woodpecker is in small numbers in the hedgerows while in the undergrowth a very few Siberian Rubythroats may be found in the dry season, although they are much easier to find in northern Thailand.



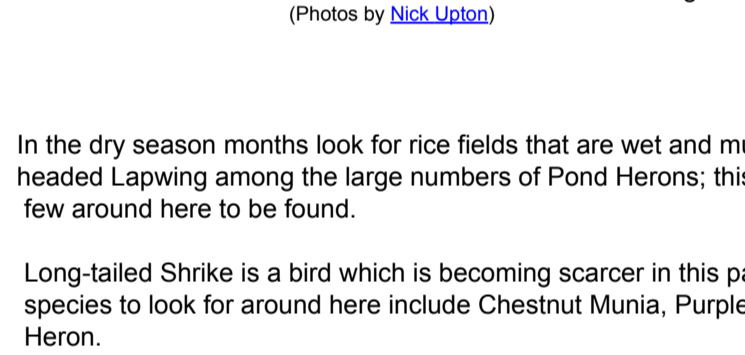
The irrigation canal that runs alongside this road often contains fringing *Typha* in which Yellow Bittern can be numerous and between March and July Asian Golden and Streaked Weavers will be found nesting here. In fact waiting at a suitable spot alongside this canal will probably reveal a number of skulking birds such as Oriental Reed Warbler, Yellow-bellied Prinia and Black-browed Reed Warbler and perhaps something rarer, particularly when birds are migrating in autumn or spring.

During the dry season it is always worth scanning the skies for large raptors that will frequent the area when the rice is being harvested; if there are plumes of smoke from burning fields, large raptors are often close by feeding on the small animals stirred up by the fire.

Radio Mast: This tall mast is an obvious landmark and parking here and hanging around a cuckoo can turn up a surprising number of species. Common Lora and Green-billed Malkoha are often in the trees here and Plaintive Cuckoo seems to favour this spot. Ashy Woodswallows and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters are always to be seen sitting on the support wires and quite frequently a Peregrine Falcon will use it as a watch tower.

The rice fields adjacent to the mast can be very good for birds with Cotton Pygmy Goose, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Eastern Yellow Wagtail and Long-toed Stint just some of the regulars depending on the water levels. In the wet season this is also an excellent place to stand and wait for Spot-billed Pelicans to fly overhead and also to observe a fantastic Baya Weaver colony.

Fish Pond Road: Turning right at the intersection, where a large red and white metal tower stands, leads birders onto a road along which there is some excellent mixed habitat including a number of fish ponds. Rice fields, *Typha* beds, tall hedgerows and copses add to the patchwork of habitats here and contain a number of species that are not easily seen over the rest of the site.



The fishponds themselves attract a variety of waterbirds including both Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged Jacanas in the dry season but usually only the latter in the wet season. Little Grebes (both resident and migratory races) can be seen in the water of these ponds and sometimes large congregations of Cotton Pygmy Goose occur alongside smaller numbers of Lesser Whistling Ducks and Garganey in the dry season months. The fishponds are probably also the best places to look for Ruddy-breasted Crake being fairly common and Slaty-breasted Rail resident but scarce; a small number of White-browed Crakes exist in these ponds too and occasionally Ballon's Crake turns up.



The *Typha* in the ditches along this road is an excellent place to look for weavers and from March to August all three Thai species can be found nesting along here - this is a good place to find Streaked Weaver and Asian Golden Weaver.

The taller hedgerows and copses here hold small numbers of Pink-necked Green Pigeons, a very colourful bird which is best found early in the morning or late in the afternoon; Freckle-breasted Woodpecker, Brown-throated Sunbird and Yellow-vented Bulbul are all resident in this habitat too.

In the dry season months look for rice fields that are wet and muddy, before planting, and there is a good chance of finding Grey-headed Lapwing among the large numbers of Pond Herons; this migratory species is scarce this far south but there are always a few around here to be found.

Long-tailed Shrike is a bird which is becoming scarcer in this part of Thailand, but a few can be found in this area; other resident species to look for around here include Chestnut Munia, Purple Swamphen, Plaintive Cuckoo, Plain-backed Sparrow and Purple Heron.

Bird Watching Trips Petchaburi Rice Fields: If you have just a day or two for birding from Bangkok, Laem Pak Bia/Pak Thale is a great place to visit, and if you are visiting Thailand to twitch Spoon-billed Sandpiper before it becomes extinct, then visiting this site is a must. Laem Pak Bia and Pak Thale are at their best between late October and early April and they are also a must visit locations for any longer birding trip.

What is Typha? *Typha angustifolia* commonly grows in ditches and uncultivated wetlands all over Thailand and is one of the plants widely known as cattails in the US and bullrushes in UK. In the absence of reeds many birds use *Typha* as an alternative habitat to skulk around in.

Nong Pla Lai Raptor Watch Point: A road running parallel to the Petkasem Highway overlooks a large area of rice fields that are the favourite haunt of watching raptors. This area has become very famous in the Thai birding community and there is an annual raptor watch festival held here, early each year. Several signs featuring illustrations of the regularly occurring species are placed at some of the best watch points along the road and if the rice is being harvested the number of individual birds can be amazing.



The most common large raptor to be found here is Black-eared Kite (*Milvus lineatus*), which is still treated as a subspecies of Black Kite by some. During migration numbers of this species can be in the hundreds but throughout the dry season flocks of them can be frequently found. Searching the skies will almost always result in a sighting of Greater Spotted Eagle too and in most years there are usually small numbers of Eastern Imperial Eagle and Steppe Eagle to be spotted too.

Brahminy Kites usually join the soaring birds here and the juveniles can cause confusion so be careful! Harriers are more easily distinguished from other species but some plumages of Eastern Marsh Harrier and Pied Harrier can be tough to identify. Males of either species are more easily diagnosed and male Pied Harrier must be one of the most spectacular raptors in the world, although most of the Pied Harriers seen at this site are juveniles.

Booted Eagle often occurs here too but at distance can look remarkably like Black-eared Kites. Nearly all the Booted Eagles seen here are dark morph so look out for the diagnostic "landing lights" to identify this species.

Other frequently seen raptors here include Black-shouldered Kite, Common Kestrel and Peregrine Falcon but during autumn migration flocks of Black Baza, Grey-faced Buzzard and Oriental Honey-buzzard are likely too.

Other large birds in flight can often cause confusion and soaring Asian Openbills are likely to repeatedly draw raptor-watchers eyes towards them; Purple Heron and the occasional Spot-billed Pelican can also be a distraction at times too.

Narrow Track: A track divides from the main one close to the railway crossing here and runs through the rice fields towards some fish ponds. This area can be excellent for smaller birds such as Weavers, Chestnut Munia, Reed Warblers and it is a Bluethroat hotspot in the dry season. This is also another good place to scan for raptors, particularly Harriers and Red-throated Pipits and Grey-headed Lapwings can usually be found between December and March when the fields are damp or dry. This location is also the only place I have seen Yellow-breasted Bunting in this part of the country in recent years - keep an eye open for this ever-declining winter visitor.

Facilities

Book a Bangkok hotel through thaibirding.com

In the rice fields themselves there are not really any facilities at all, although there are some small shops farther down the road from the radio mast. There are a couple of tiny food stalls which are sometimes open and the food is actually pretty good, safe and very cheap. However, the town of Petchaburi is only a few minutes drive away where all sorts of facilities are available from local markets to a large super market, bars, banks and cinema.

There are a number of hotels in the town and I often stay at the [Sun Hotel](#) or [Royal Diamond Hotel](#) which are both close to the Petkasem highway, at the foot of the railway up the hill. Both of these hotels have breakfast buffets that allow birders to get out fairly early.

This location is not a national park and you will not be charged to go birding here. Please do not forget that this is private land and birders are tolerated by the locals. Please do not do anything to create conflict between the local land owners and bird watchers.



Some Useful Books

Raptors of the World Order Now@ amazon

BIRDS OF THAILAND Order Now@ amazon

Pipits & Wagtails Order Now@ amazon

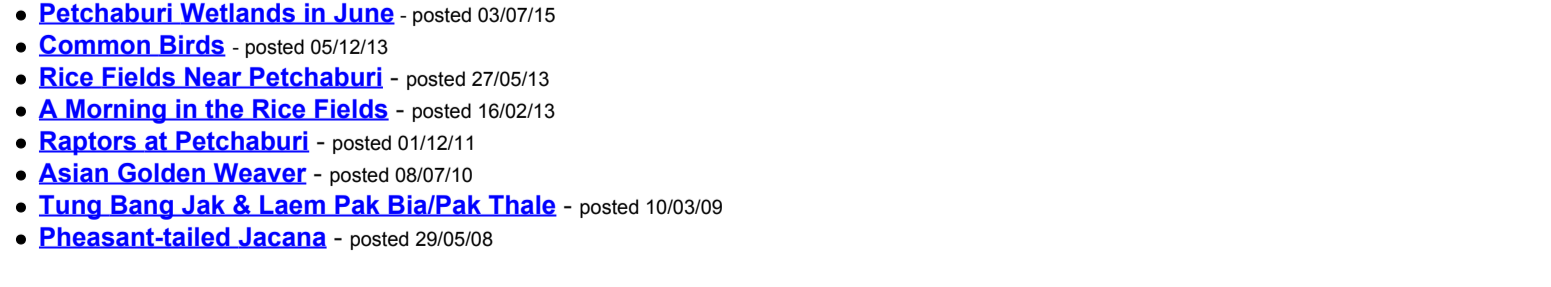
BIRDS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA Order Now@ amazon

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- [Petchaburi Rice Fields Checklist](#)
- [Bird Watching Day Trips](#)
- [Other Central Thailand Birding Locations](#)
- [The Birds of the Bangkok Area](#)

Photo Galleries

Select the thumbnail photos to see larger images.



Bird Watching Trips: The rice fields around Petchaburi always have some interesting birds to see and is a great site to add to any Thailand birdwatching tour. With large raptors in the dry season and breeding weavers and visiting Spot-billed Pelicans in the wet season this makes a good site to visit throughout the year.

Look at some suggested itineraries, [Thailand bird tours](#), or contact me for more information: nickupton@thaibirding.com.

Trip Reports

- [Photography Day Tour Around Petchaburi, 25th May 2013](#) by Nick Upton
- [Bird Photography Tour of Thailand, 7-20th March 2013](#) by Nick Upton
- [Chumpon Raptor Watch & Petchaburi Wetlands, 21-25th October 2011](#) by Nick Upton

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- [A Morning in the Rice Fields](#) - posted 16/02/13
- [Raptors at Petchaburi](#) - posted 01/12/11
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