

Nicobar Pigeon and Beach Thick-Knee in Thailand

January 5-8 January 2011

by

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The majority of birders that go after the Nicobar pigeon as part of the Thailand birding itinerary try for the Similian Islands. There is a good alternative in the Surin Islands National Park - with a couple of benefits:

- Best (only?) place in Thailand for Beach Thick-knee that you can not see on Similian
- Some of the best snorkeling in Thailand with good chance of reef-sharks, sea-turtles etc
- Remote location with controlled number of tourists

And some disadvantages:

- Only one option for accommodation that is government controlled – tents can be brought or rented. Too far away for a one day trip...
- Expensive speed boat required to get from Kura Buri to these remote islands

In January 2011 I went to Mu Ko Surin with family (wife and three kids age 7, 7 and 10) to explore these beautiful Islands, do some snorkeling and of course add two lifers to the list. This was just a small detour on a month long visit to this fantastic country. We had arranged for accommodation via the government controlled website <http://www.thaiforestbooking.com>. The process of booking the bungalow was not straightforward as the website and administration leave room for improvement. In addition to this, the few available bungalows require you to book on the day when they are released, in 2011 exactly 3 month in advance. Arranging speed boat was straightforward and easy. If you are prepared to camp your planning will be easy, but I think you need a reservation. There are two restaurants on the islands that do serve food (at certain times) and have some snacks for sale but there is no beer or alcohol.

Well on the islands there are ample longtail boats available that can be rented (with driver/guide) to go anywhere you want (2500/1500 Baht for full/half day). A boat is needed in order to see the Thick knee and do snorkeling but not for the pigeon as there is one (1) track on the main island between the two campsites. Quite a few guides had seen the Thick-knee but had no idea of where to find it... As for the pigeon only a few people I met on this Island had actually seen it...

If you want to top up on the snorkeling once the birds are accounted for there are also two group excursions each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon at a reasonable price. The guides know everything about marine life and managed to show us numerous sharks and turtles at close range for the family to enjoy.

Birding on the islands is rather dull and quickly accomplished once the key species are accounted for. White-Bellied Sea-Eagle is common as well as a few other species of pigeon, i.e. Large Green Pigeon, Pied Imperial pigeon, Green Imperial Pigeon and Orange-Breasted Green Pigeon, and a few other species like Hill Myna, Brahminy Kite. That basically sums it up, if you have been to the mainland for more than a few days...

When I researched and planned this excursion I also came across a few notes that indicate that Great Billed Heron can be (has been?) spotted. The site would be the Ko Stork Island (NNE of the main Island, see Fig 6) which is really small with rocky shores and no mangrove. I circled the Island a few times but with no trace of this good bird. However the snorkeling just off Ko Stork is really good so you are likely to want to go here anyway.

Fig. 1: Immature Nicobar Pigeon, note dark tail and no neck hackles. Should be strong evidence that the Nicobar Pigeon actually breed here.

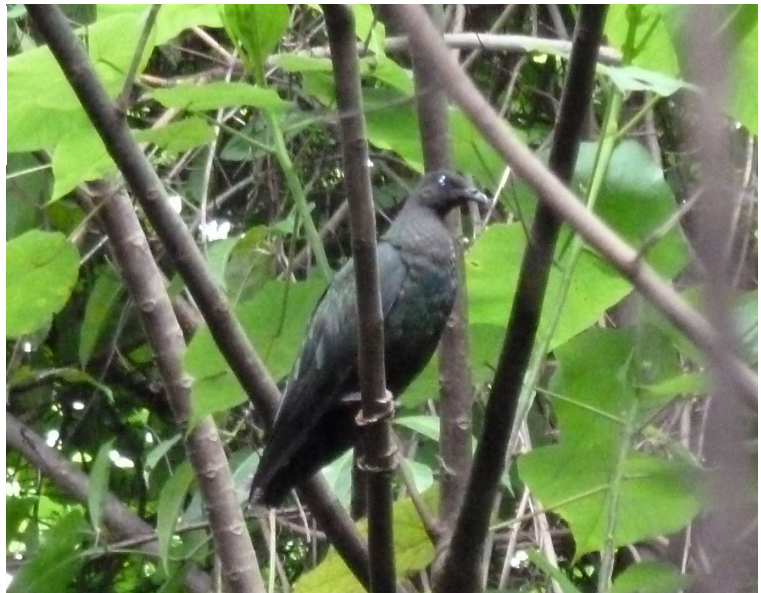


Fig. 2: Adult Nicobar Pigeon, stunning bird at close range. Photo taken with my Lumix compact camera...



Fig. 3: Pigeon stake-out. This is the trail from the camp site at Ao Mai Ngam to the boat landing beach (a 250 meter walk). Behind me to the left is the "staff only" area (clearly sign-posted) and 30 meters ahead is the little concrete bridge over the swamp (you see it on the photo). The birds were seen by me (and apparently by locals) 10 meters into the forest on the left, and I am sure they would have been possible to see from the trail itself, or for that matter from the staff buildings which are really close. Both birds spend most time on the ground, tossing leaves. The information I gathered indicate that afternoons is the best time of the day but this should be challenged



Fig. 4: Lifer! One of two (a pair) birds seen. Photographed through telescope. At times the birds move from the sand into the leaf litter and gravel further up to on the beach and can be harder to spot, I also had the birds perch on the rocks.



Fig. 4: Lukas 10 years, on our long tail boat. The thick-Knee beach is right in front of us, hence, a fairly small beach squeezed in between rocky shores and the pristine (but not accessible) forest.





Fig. 6: Surin Islands. The bungalows are at the headquarter at the very center of the map. The one track on the island leads from the headquarter to the Ao Mai Ngam campsite/beach. The pigeons are found within the red circle at Ao Mai Ngam, see Fig. 7. In order to see the Thick-knee you need to rent a boat and go to Ao Mae Yai and visit as many small beaches as possible, I found two birds on the first beach we visited, Circled in red, see Fig. 7. This should be considered a lucky strike as I did not see any more birds despite quite extensive travel on the Islands. If I should not have found them here I would absolutely have scanned the North and East side of the Island that I did not visit this time.

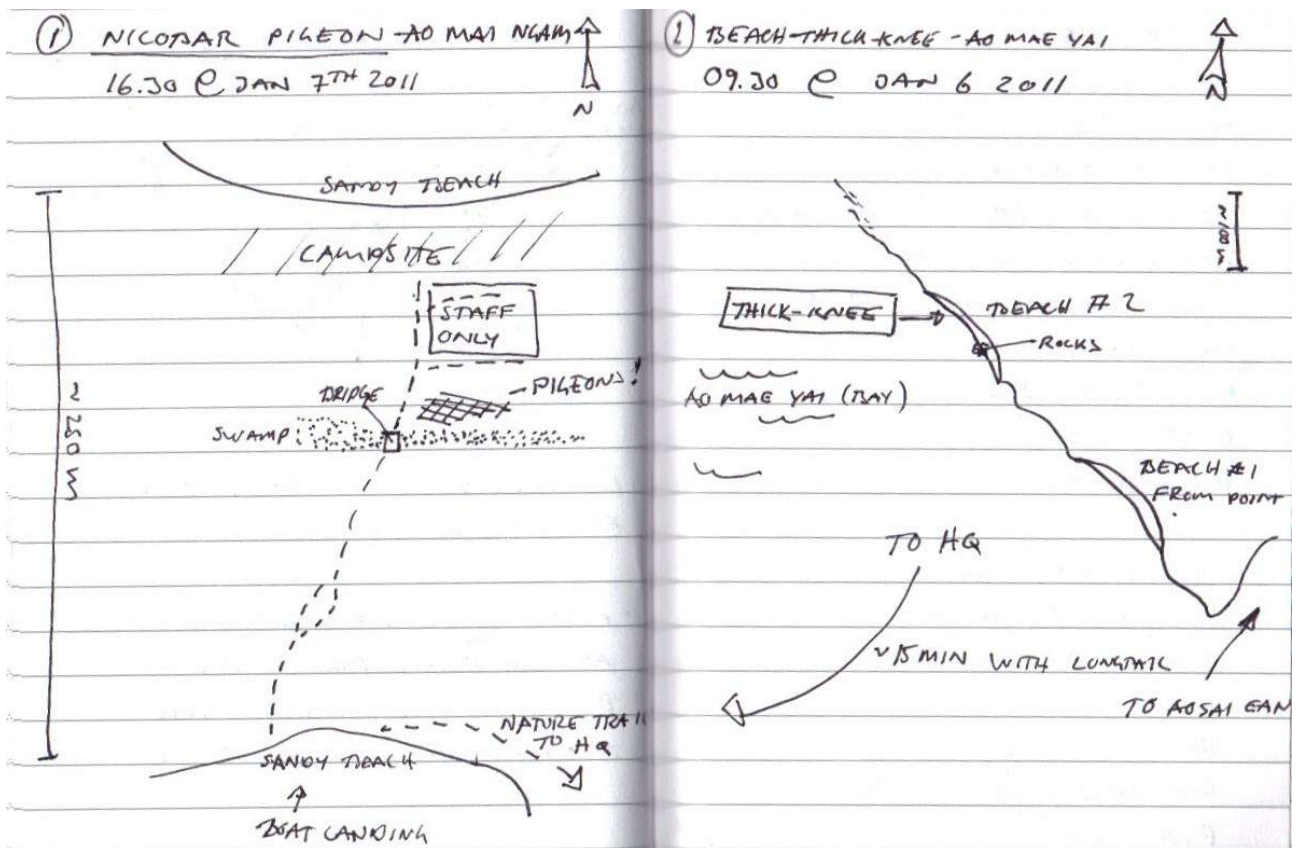


Fig. 7: Notes from my diary. #1 is the site for the pigeons, please see red circle on Fig. 6 for context. There are three way to get here from the Headquarter (1) walk the track as indicated on the map. This is one of the most poorly maintained tracks I have ever walked on and can not be recommended at dusk or dawn – if at all. (2) walk on the beach at low tide (3) rent a boat and get off at the landing site facing the headquarter at the other side of the bay (you can see the landing place from the headquarter and it is not very far). The Thick-Knee site is a peninsula at Ao Mae Yai Bay about 15 minutes by boat from the headquarter, I had read that this particular bay was a good site to search for the birds but there are quite a few beaches scattered between rocky shores and mangroves. There are also mentioning of Thick-Knee sightings on the other island across the straight from the main island, here the beaches are larger but I guess also regularly visited by tourists and the local sea gypsies. I did travel along these beaches but did not find any birds. At the small beaches in Ao Mae Yai bay there were NO people at all.

Good luck with these two good birds at this fantastic location.

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