

# NSS Birdwatching Trip to Pulau Semakau, 10 October 2009

Text and photos by Tan Gim Cheong



*Dr. Ho briefing the participants about Pulau Semakau.*

Dr. Ho Hua Chew led more than 20 of us, mostly first timers, to this landfill island. During the 30 minute boat ride, we were treated to a rainbow which arced over Pulau Bukom. After reaching Pulau Semakau, we had a short briefing on the function of the island and a look at the Pulau Semakau map to get our bearings. We had cloudy conditions which made our walk in the open rather pleasant. At one point, we could feel a sudden, refreshing coolness in the air as the winds brought the smell of rain. Fortunately, the small patch of rain graciously skirted off the eastern coast of the island!

As we started our walk, we could see several **Eurasian Tree Sparrows** at the fencing near the visitor's building. As we moved on, 2 **Common Mynas** were seen on a lamp post some distance away. Joey, a sharp-eyed participant, noticed a kingfisher perched motionless on a tree near the mynas and the scope revealed its identity - a **White-throated Kingfisher**. In the same patch of sky, a greyish-coloured raptor appeared. It was a **Black-winged Kite** (also known as Black-shouldered Kite). Through the scope, we could see its attractive red eyes. The bird was seen bringing a stick into one of the isolated trees, an indication of nest building. A **Spotted Dove** flew over the scrub and landed on top of a shrub making it easy to scope. The calls of the White-breasted Waterhen could be heard but the bird itself would not come out from the long grass.

A **Yellow-vented Bulbul** also made an appearance. Someone asked about the swiftlets flying about and after some attention was given to these fast flyers, a single **Fork-tailed Swift** could be made out, plus a few pale-rumped **Black/Edible Nest Swiftlets** (these can't be discerned in the field). There were also some **Barn Swallows** and **Pacific Swallows**. Then 3 **Brahminy Kites** burst into the skies, 2 of them 'fighting'. Soon after, another 2 kites gathered round making a total of 5 Brahminy Kites in the skies! 2 **Grey Herons** flew in from the north and across to the southeast, flapping their large wings slowly.

Dr. Ho turned his attention to the rocky shore and noticed a plover standing quietly, making small movements only. It was a **Mongolian Plover** (also known as Lesser Sand Plover) in

winter plumage. Just a little farther, he finally found a pair of **Malaysian Plovers** – one of the star birds of Pulau Semakau. The male looked smart with his black breast band which also extends toward the back of the neck as a black collar; and white forehead becoming black, then orangy towards the back of the head. The female was also rather attractive with her orangy facial features despite lacking the black collar. They are residents and the male was seen chasing away the bigger-sized Mongolian Plover a few times! Twittering calls farther up the coast drew our attention to a flock of 5 **Whimbrels** as they flew low over the sea. Soon after, another pair of Malaysian Plovers showed up near the first pair, making a total of 4 of these stars.



*A pair of Pulau Semakau's star birds: Malaysian Plovers – male (left) and female (right)*

Moving on, small flocks of munias were found feeding in the long grass. **Scaly-breasted Munias**, **Black-headed Munias** and **White-headed Munias** were all around. After some discussion of what is grassland, scrubland, woodland and forest and a lull in sightings, we saw 3 conspicuous **Black-naped Orioles** which flew about and called melodiously. A **Large-billed Crow** was heard and seen flying about. A sunbird flew quickly amongst the mangroves but it was too fast to identify. Then, a few of us were treated to views of a **Collared Kingfisher** which had caught a crab. A lone shorebird nearby turned out to be a **Terek Sandpiper**. This was followed up with 2 Brahminy Kites which decided to come nearby, making some of us go 'wow'. A tail-bobbing **Common Sandpiper** drew attention back to the water's edge.



*A small flock of Whimbrels*

At the breakwaters along the western coast, we saw a **White-bellied Sea Eagle** flying about. The raptor later caught a fish and flew into the mangroves to feed. On the way back, we found another of Pulau Semakau's star birds, the **Great-billed Heron**. We also saw a **Little Heron** at the water's edge and a **Brown Shrike** flying from shrub to shrub. Small flocks of Black-headed Munias were seen again and a **Paddyfield Pipit** as well as a few **Peaceful Doves** were seen amongst the ground vegetation. We readied ourselves with varying amounts of insect repellent and made our way through the forest to the western sandy shore. Some participants saw a kingfisher while the Ashy Tailorbird could be heard, but not seen. A flight feather which looked like it belonged to a Barn Owl was found here.

Back at the visitors' centre. Dr. Ho made a concise summary of the day's trip and we left the island on time at 1pm, arriving at West Coast Pier at 1.30pm. The cloudy conditions may have put a bit of a dampener on bird activity, but the trip list was comparable to some previous ones. We clocked 2 out of 3 of Pulau Semakau's star birds. Only the Pacific Reef Egret was a no show, perhaps providing a reason for some of us to revisit in the future?



*Birdwatching on Pulau Semakau: with scrubland on left and rocky shore on right.*

### Bird list

1. Eurasian Tree Sparrow, several
2. Common Myna, 2
3. White-throated Kingfisher, 1
4. Black-winged Kite, 1
5. Spotted Dove, several
6. Yellow-vented Bulbul, 2
7. Fork-tailed Swift, 1
8. Black/Edible-nest Swiftlet spp, several
9. Barn Swallow, a few
10. Pacific Swallow, a few
11. Brahminy Kite, 5
12. Grey Heron, 5
13. Mongolian Plover, 3
14. Malaysian Plover, 2 pairs
15. Whimbrel, a small flock of 5
16. Scaly-breasted Munia, small flock
17. Black-headed Munia, small flocks
18. White-headed Munia, small flock
19. Black-naped Oriole, 3
20. Large-billed Crow, 1
21. Collared Kingfisher, 2
22. Terek Sandpiper, 1
23. Common Sandpiper, 4
24. White-bellied Sea Eagle, 1
25. Great-billed Heron, 1
26. Little Heron, 1
27. Brown Shrike, 1
28. Paddyfield Pipit, 2
29. Peaceful Dove, a few
30. Sunbird sp (brief flight views of 1)
31. White-breasted Waterhen (heard only)
32. Ashy Tailorbird (heard only)