

Birding The Philippines

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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| Day 1 | Depart UK on overnight flight to Manila |
| Day 2 | Overnight Manila |
| Day 3 | Manila to Bohol |
| Day 4/5 | Rajah Sikatuna & Tarsier Sanctuary |
| Day 6 | Ferry Bohol to Cebu |
| Day 7 | EDC & Twin Lakes |
| Day 8 | Flight to Manila & transfer to Los Banos |
| Day 9 | Mt Makiling & transfer to Infanta Road |
| Day 10 | Infanta Road, La View |
| Day 11 | La View to Palo Alto |
| Day 12 | Subic |
| Day 13 | Morning Subic then flight to Palawan |
| Day 14 | Birdwing Hide |
| Day 15 | Underground River NP |
| Day 16 | Flight to Manila; overnight to UK |
| Day 17 | Arrive UK |

Departs

January

Focus

Birds, Mammals and Herpetofauna

Grading

A/B. A moderate level of fitness is required, with time spent on foot in humid conditions. Early starts and late finishes encouraged. Please see detailed notes at the end of the itinerary.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PHL01)



Palawan Peacock-Pheasant, Palawan Flowerpecker, Raffles Malkoha (Courtesy Shutterstock)



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Introduction

Scattered across the western Pacific, the Philippines comprise more than 7,000 volcanic islands between the South China Sea and the Philippine Sea. Together they create a world of astonishing natural diversity – a landscape where remnant rainforest persists in mountain ranges, coral reefs survive beneath turquoise waters, and rice terraces cling to mountainsides sculpted by generations of farmers. For the naturalist, this is one of Asia's most interesting destinations: an archipelago shaped by fire and sea, home to an extraordinary number of endemic species.

Geographically, the Philippines occupy a unique crossroads between Asia and Australasia. Each island group (Luzon in the north, the Visayas at the centre, and Mindanao and Palawan in the south) retains its own distinct character, both cultural and ecological. Tectonic forces have created a fragmented landscape of mountains and deep ocean trenches, isolating populations of plants and animals for millennia. This process of isolation has been a powerful engine of evolution, producing over 200 endemic bird species alongside endemic mammals, reptiles and amphibians in remarkable variety. The country lies within the global Coral Triangle, meaning its surrounding seas are equally rich, supporting coral gardens and shoals of tropical fish, as well as whales, dolphins and sea turtles.

The climate is predominantly tropical, with a marked wet season that brings life-giving monsoon rains to the forests. These forests, once covering nearly all of the islands, still persist in impressive tracts on mountains and protected reserves. Towering dipterocarp trees dominate the remnant lowland forests, while the highlands are clothed in mossy oak-laurel forests alive with the calls of hornbills, cuckoo-shrikes and babblers. In mangrove swamps and coastal wetlands, egrets, herons and kingfishers thrive, while offshore, white-sand islets host colonies of terns and frigatebirds. This ecological range makes the Philippines a microcosm of tropical diversity and a most rewarding destination for birders and wildlife enthusiasts alike.

Human history here is equally rich and layered. The islands were first settled tens of thousands of years ago by Austronesian peoples whose descendants still inhabit the uplands and coasts today. Later centuries brought waves of traders and colonisers – Chinese, Malay, Spanish and American – each leaving their imprint on the country's culture and architecture. Spanish rule, which lasted more than 300 years, introduced Christianity and European influence while preserving a deep sense of local identity rooted in community and landscape. Today, traditional rice terraces in the Cordilleras stand as a testament to centuries of human habitation, while the islands' vibrant towns and fishing villages reflect a blend of Asian warmth and Western influence.

For travellers, the Philippines offer an engaging mix of natural beauty and Asian Pacific culture. The landscapes are dramatic yet welcoming; the wildlife rare and diverse. Whether listening for the soft call of an Ashy Thrush in Luzon's forests, admiring the radiant plumage of a Palawan Peacock-Pheasant, or watching fruit bats wheel against a tropical sunset, each day here reveals a new facet of this remarkable archipelago. The Philippines are more than a collection of islands; they are a living laboratory of human and natural life in all its vivid diversity.



Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Depart UK for Manila

Depart London Heathrow on an overnight flight to Manila.

Day 2

Arrive Manila, Philippines

Guests arrive in Manila and transfer to the conveniently located hotel, close to the international airport. The afternoon is free to rest and recover from the long journey before we gather in the evening for a welcome dinner and briefing. Here we meet our local guide and tour leader and review the schedule for the days ahead.

Day 3

Manila to Bohol

An early start sees the group walking to NAIA Terminal 3 for the flight to Tagbilaran, Bohol. Upon arrival, a short transfer brings us to the Loboc River Resort for lunch and check-in. By mid-afternoon, we continue for a brief excursion to Rajah Sikatuna National Park, where lowland limestone forest, dense undergrowth, and forest edge provide a first introduction to Bohol's endemics. The morning and afternoon light reveal flocks of Wattled Broadbills flitting among the trees, while Azure-breasted Pittas move silently in the leaf litter. Mixed flocks of bulbuls, babblers, and flowerpeckers enliven the forest, and the gentle calls of Philippine Fairy-bluebirds echo through the canopy. As the sun sets, the forest comes alive with nocturnal calls, and our first glimpse of the tropical richness of Bohol sets a high expectation for the days ahead.



Azure-breasted Pitta

Day 4

Rajah Sikatuna



Visayan Wattled Broadbill

We dedicate the day to exploring the forest trails of Rajah Sikatuna National Park. Early morning in the forest is a delight as the calls of Black-faced Coucals and Yellow-breasted Tailorbirds rise through the canopy. Rufous-colored Kingfishers perch quietly in shaded areas, while the brilliant plumage of Wattled Broadbills flashes among the foliage. Forest edge trails host the melodious trills of Streaked Ground

Babblers and the lively activity of Brown Tit-Babblers. Around midday, we break for lunch near the Chocolate Hills complex, where the surrounding open habitats occasionally attract flyover species, including the local endemics such as Philippine Bulbul. The afternoon returns us to Rajah Sikatuna, with further opportunities to observe the island's rich assemblage of endemics, including the elusive Philippine Trogon.

Day 5

Rajah Sikatuna & Tarsier Sanctuary

The morning is spent exploring quieter forest trails within Rajah Sikatuna, aiming to locate species that may have eluded us on the previous day. The forest is alive with the movement of Streaked Ground Babblers on the leaf litter, while the canopy hums with the activity of Flame-crowned Flowerpeckers and Blue-headed Fantails. In the afternoon, we visit the Philippine Tarsier Sanctuary, a protected area that allows observation of these tiny primates in their natural habitat. Here, forest edge and secondary growth also attract a range of birds, including small flocks of



Philippine Frogmouth

Visayan Hornbills and foraging Rufous Coucals, creating an enriching combination of bird and mammal encounters.

Day 6

Bohol to Cebu

After optional early-morning birding, we transfer to Tagbilaran port for the ferry to Dumaguete, Negros, crossing tranquil seas lined with coconut palms. Upon arrival, lunch and hotel check-in at Hotel Essencia are followed by a late afternoon visit to Casa Roro, a local reserve that supports Negros endemics in remnant forest patches. As evening approaches, we undertake optional owling for the rare Negros Scops Owl, listening for its haunting call among the trees. Negros' forests, though fragmented, provide critical habitat for island-specialist species that are often elusive, making these first encounters particularly rewarding.

Day 7

EDC & Twin Lakes

The morning begins at EDC, a small forested reserve known for its diversity of endemic and near-endemic birds. Here, Negros Striped Babblers and Visayan Hornbills are regularly seen, while fruiting trees attract flowerpeckers and bulbuls. After lunch, we explore the scenic Twin Lakes where freshwater habitats and surrounding forests support species such as Negros Leaf Warblers and occasional flyovers by raptors. The combination of aquatic and forest habitats provides contrasting birding experiences, and the day concludes with spectacular views over the rolling hills of Negros.

Day 8

Flight to Manila & transfer to Los Banos

Early morning birding allows for any last sightings before our transfer to Dumaguete Airport for the flight to Manila. Upon arrival, a scenic drive of approximately 1.5 hours brings us to Los Baños on the campus of the University of the Philippines. Late afternoon birding is gentle, offering the chance to observe Olive-backed Sunbirds and forest-edge species such as Asian Brown Flycatcher and Philippine Drongos. This transition between islands highlights the subtle differences in habitat structure and avian composition.



Sulphur-bellied Nuthatch

Day 9

Mount Makiling & Infanta Road

We begin the morning exploring the slopes of Mount Makiling, a volcanic ridge cloaked in montane and lowland forest. Here, Luzon Hornbills, Rufous Coucals, and skulking Ashy Thrushes provide a diverse start to the day. Following an early lunch, we transfer to Infanta Road, dropping off luggage before heading into afternoon birding along this forested corridor. Mixed flocks of bulbuls, flycatchers, and drongos move actively along the roadside, providing ample photographic opportunities.



Ashy Thrush

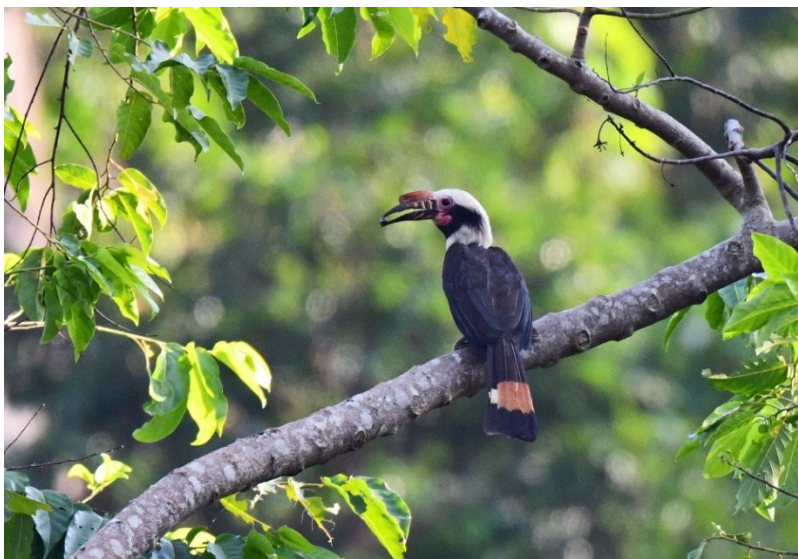
Day 10

Infanta Road, La View

A full day along Infanta Road allows us to explore primary and secondary lowland forest, riparian zones, and roadside edge habitats. The morning is alive with Blue-headed Fantails, Green-backed Whistlers, and the elusive Ashy Thrush, while raptors such as Philippine Serpent-Eagle patrol the skies. Bird activity peaks at dawn and again in the late afternoon, with mixed flocks moving through the canopy and undergrowth, offering sightings of forest specialists and common lowland species alike.

Day 11

La View to Palo Alto



Luzon Hornbill

Early departures take us from La View to Palo Alto, with a possible midday stop at La Mesa Eco Park to observe lowland forest species. From there, we continue to Subic via Candaba Marsh, where wetland birds, including Philippine Swamphen and various egrets and waders, enliven the landscape. Afternoon birding and owling in Subic may produce sightings of Green Racket-tail Parrots, hornbills, and nightbirds.

Day 12

Subic Bay



Spotted Wood Kingfisher

A full day is dedicated to birding the forested areas of Subic Bay. Early mornings are spent along forest trails seeking Luzon Hornbills, Balicassiao, and Tarictic Hornbills, while forest edge flocks contain Blue-naped Parrots, Guaiaberos, and White-lored Orioles. Afternoon sessions explore quieter roads and riverine areas, with opportunities to encounter Rufous Coucals, Blackish Cuckooshrikes, and the occasional Philippine Falconet.

Day 13

Subic to Palawan

A final early morning in Subic provides last-minute birding before check-out. We transfer to Manila for the flight to Puerto Princesa, Palawan, followed by late afternoon birding, including the Philippine Cockatoo roost and optional evening trip to Cana Island for the rare Mantanani Scops Owl.

Day 14

Birdwing Hide & Irawan

The morning is spent at the Birdwing Hide, providing close access to the stunning Palawan Peacock-Pheasant. Forest trails and riverine edges host Palawan Flycatchers, Spot-throated Flamebacks, and Ashy-headed Babblers. Afternoon birding in the Irawan area continues, with owling opportunities in the evening for nocturnal species.

Day 15

Underground River National Park

We spend the morning at Underground River National Park, exploring its mangrove channels and limestone cliffs. The forest is alive with Palawan Hornbills, Palawan Drongos, and, with patience, the elusive Palawan Peacock-Pheasant. Afternoon birding near Puerto Princesa concludes the day with species such as Blue Paradise Flycatchers and White-vented Shamans.



Underground National Park

Day 16

Transfer to Manila, depart for UK



Philippine Cockatoo

A final morning of birding in Puerto Princesa provides an opportunity to revisit favourite species and habitats. After lunch and hotel check-out, we transfer to the airport for the return flight to Manila, bringing our 15-day journey across the Philippines to a close. Throughout the tour, we have experienced a remarkable diversity of landscapes and wildlife, from the montane forests of Luzon to the island endemics of Bohol, Negros, and Palawan, creating memories that will endure long after the trip

concludes.

Day 17

Arrive UK

After an outstanding birding trip to these diverse islands, we arrive back in the UK.

Tour Grading

This is an escorted natural history holiday suitable for most people with moderate fitness levels and mobility. Although, you should be prepared for humid, hot, and occasionally muddy conditions, as well as some unpaved roads, uneven trails, biting insects, and a few slopes. The majority of our time will be spent observing wildlife on foot.

To fully enjoy the tour, anticipate full days with early starts and late finishes. These extended hours are essential for maximising wildlife-viewing opportunities. Please be aware of this before committing to the tour. While there will be opportunities for relaxation, it's important to note that daily itineraries are full. However, keep in mind that all activities are optional, and you can choose to unwind at the hotel, where practical, if desired.

Expect clean and comfortable accommodation during the tour.

Tour Focus

This tour offers a broad focus. While there will always be an emphasis on birding, you will also dedicate time to finding mammals and herpetofauna. With this in mind, you will be accompanied by an expert local naturalist/birding guide for daytime excursions. In addition, for your evening walks, you will encounter nocturnal birds and mammals. Please note that this tour may involve

encounters with reptiles including snakes. You can also expect to see a diverse range of butterflies and insects.

If your main interest is birds, you are likely to enjoy this tour. However, if you are interested in only one of these aspects, such as mammals, and do not wish to engage in searching for birds and herpetofauna (or vice versa), this tour may not be for you. Please consider this before committing.

Please note that mammals, in particular, tend to be shy, retiring, and present in low densities in forest habitats, often exhibiting crepuscular or nocturnal behaviour. As with birding, increasing our chances of spotting the more elusive forest dwellers requires moving slowly and quietly. Your guide may utilise specialist equipment to further aid our efforts, but it's important to maintain patience and accept whatever encounters come our way. While specific wildlife sightings can never be guaranteed, the opportunity to explore untouched rainforests is a rare privilege. Anticipation for what we might encounter each day is part of what makes this trip truly exciting!

Please do not hesitate to talk to the Operations Manager, Dan Lay (dan@naturetrek.co.uk or 01962 733051), if you have any additional questions regarding this holiday.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

January is a great time to visit the Philippines as it's part of the dry season with warm temperatures averaging 23°C in the highlands to a humid 31°C in the lowlands and at the coast. While the chance of rain is generally low, when it does occur, it often comes in short, heavy bursts.

Please inspect the separate clothing list contained within the pre-departure information, of which a copy will be sent to you upon booking. Binoculars are, of course, essential for this holiday.

Luggage Allowance

Standard airline international baggage regulations apply to international flights.

What's Included

All accommodation, meals and drinking water are included. Snacks, soft/alcoholic drinks and items of a personal nature are not included in the price of the tour.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements and your interest in an extension at the time of booking.

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Palawan