At the end of the monsoon season I visited 4 locations in eastern Java: Baluran NP, Ijen Nature reserve, Alas Purwo NP and Meru Betiri NP.

The first two locations are rather well known and regular features of birdwatching tours by Birdquest and others. Independent birders also visit the area, and I have used the information kindly provided in their reports by John Gregory and Gregory Smith. Alas Purwo, at the south-eastern tip of Java, is less visited (Greg Smith’s report is the only I found about this location), and Meru Betiri, about 30km further west on the South coast, seems completely off the birding map, although some information is provided in the Birding Indonesia guidebook by P. Jepson.

Monsoon is an unusual time to visit those places as weather conditions are reputedly rather unfavorable to birding, but this was also an opportunity to look for winter visitors that are absent at the dry season. On the whole I was rather lucky, with only a few light showers, mostly at night, and generally clear skies. Heat at coastal locations was very bearable at night, and only mosquitoes (especially around Bama camp in Baluran NP) and a few leeches at Ijen were filling the annoyance column, in addition to bed bugs at Alas Purwo (but this seems to be a year-round condition).

This period is also well advanced into the breeding season, and birds seemed pretty busy attending to their nests, with some feeding frenzy around fruiting trees.

Playback was generally rather ineffective, and night birds were almost completely silent. Nevertheless most of the target birds were found with the notable exception of the White-faced partridge at Ijen. This location was teeming with flycatchers, some of them visiting for the winter, including a rare (first in Java?) Narcissus Flycatcher. A good surprise was the number of sightings of Javan Hawk-eagle in Ijen (3 sightings), Alas Purwo and Meru Betiri, an indication that this endangered raptor does rather well in the area.

For upcoming visitors on a tighter schedule allowing only 2 locations, I would advise to pick Ijen and Alas Purwo, both easily accessible from Ketapang/Bali. With more time in hand I would definitely recommend to explore Meru Betiri as well.

Logistics, etc...

I made things very simple in asking a local bird guide, Hery Kusamanagera who is based in Gilimanuk and works at Bali Barat NP, to arrange transport and accommodations for me. The price per day for a 4WD with driver came at 550 kIDR, including petrol and also park entrance fees, using Sekarayu Tours (harisekarayu@yahoo.com +62333417197). There are several other tour companies based in Ketapang/Banyuwangi that can be contacted by Internet beforehand, or simply by turning up at Ketapang and asking for transport around the ferry pier.

Basic accommodations (as well as food) are available inside Baluran, Alas Purwo and Meru Betiri NP, from 100 kIDR to 250 kIDR for the “deluxe/VIP” rooms. For Ijen you can either stay at Banyuwangi where options are plentiful, or on the other side of the volcano at Arabica homestay (150kIDR-250kIDR per night, with WIFI internet!). More basic homestays are usually available around Pos Paltuding, at the start of the Crater trail, but they were closed (as well as the trail) during my visit due to high volcanic activity.
One can of course do without but I do recommend hiring a local guide such as Hery (and I recommend him in particular!), who will not only be of great help finding the target species, but also will help arrange all the travel details for you.

**Baluran NP**

Baluran NP is located at the North-east end of Java, facing Bali Barat NP across the Bali strait. The entrance of the park is only 1h drive away from Ketapang on the Surabaya road, then an unsealed road inside the park will take you first to the Bekol grasslands after 12km, then to Bama on the coast after a further 4km where we spent the 2 nights. Birding around Bekol, a mostly savannah/grassland area, easily yields Green Peafowl and Junglefowl, together with a number of open country birds. We saw a pair of Black-winged Starling, a formerly common species on its way to complete extirpation by bird trappers (no more than 8 birds remain in Baluran now). Other notable sightings in the area included several Changeable Hawk-eagles and Crested Serpent-eagles, Sunda Cuckoo-shrike, Slender-billed Crow, a Rhinoceros Hornbill and a pair of Red-breasted Parakeets, another major target of bird trappers. At night hundreds of Savannah Nightjars hunt for insects, and we also found a Barn Owl.

Around Bama, several trails allow you to explore good birding habitat, although most of them were badly overgrown by Lantana and other shrubs. The “mangrove trail” starts from the road just before the camp and leads to the sea through a dense mangrove forest habitat. There we easily found Grey-cheeked Tit-babbler and Horsfield’s Babbler, as well as a pair of Hill Blue Flycatchers and a flock of Olive-winged Bulbuls. We heard several woodpeckers but only Greater Flameback and Sunda Woodpecker came into view. Asian Pied Hornbills are also abundant around Bama. At night we looked for Buffy Fish-owl, only to find a roosting Crested Serpent-eagle.

But the best sighting in Baluran was in the mammal category, with a pack of 10 Asiatic Wild Dogs (Cuon alpinus) in the early morning on the road 300m from the camp. Leopards (Panthera pardus) are also present in Baluran, and apparently a Surabaya based photographer could get a rare picture of the big cat a few months before.

From Bekol it is possible to trek the dormant Mt Baluran and explore the nice primary forest habitat there, but it’s said to be a strenuous full day hike through dense jungle. Javan Hawk-eagle does occur on the slopes of the volcano.

Birding Baluran was relaxed and pleasant, and during the monsoon the grasslands are a nice lush green. But the overall number of species is rather limited compared to more forested locations visited afterwards.
Mt Ijen, an active volcano, rises just above the far-east Java hub of Banyuwangi, and is quickly accessed by a road that first meanders through farmland and plantation before reaching the start of the montane forest at elevation 1000m (pos 1). Going higher into the forest the road condition deteriorates considerably, and it does take a 4 WD vehicle to reach Pos Paltuding, the highest point of the road at elevation 1800m, and the start of the trail that goes to the edge of the crater. Due to high volcanic activity, including possible emission of poisonous gases, the crater trail was forbidden to access. The bad part of it is that we couldn’t get to the higher area where Scaly Thrush is usually found, and despite spending a couple of hours looking for it at Pos Paltuding we missed the bird. The good part is that the road was unusually quiet, as the sulphur mining activity that takes place inside the crater was also shut down.

Besides the thrush, our main target was the endemic and range restricted White-faced Partridge which is mostly found around 1300-1400m elevation. Yet another miss, despite hearing several birds calling, some very close to us, and spending over 8 hours trying all sorts of strategies to get the bird into view... Now the good news : we had 3 sightings of the endangered Javan Hawk-eagle, a pair soaring over the forest at around 1600m, a perched adult bird at 1150m and a juvenile on a low branch just at the edge of the forest, 50m from the road at Pos 1. In all birds we noticed that the rufous color of the underparts described in guidebooks, probably found on Central Java birds, was replaced by medium brown for the adults, and very pale cream for the juvenile bird. Other raptors included Black Eagle seen twice below Pos Paltuding, and a rather interesting “flock” of over 20 Oriental Honey Buzzards, both dark and pale phases mixed together, soaring over the forest after sunrise. Most probably a pre-migration gathering.

Rather common species included Dark-backed Imperial Pigeon, Sunda and Orange-spotted Bulbuls, Sunda and Russet Bush-Warblers (both common below Pos Paltuding but the latter is a true skulker), Indigo, Pale Blue, Grey-headed, Asian pied and Snowy-browed Flycatchers, White-bellied Fantail (mostly above 1300m), Horsfield’s, Crescent-chested and Chestnut-backed Scimitar Babblers (all elevations), Lesser Shortwing (another skulker, heard at all elevations but seen once only), White-flanked Sunbird (above 1300m).

Other notable sightings included good looks at a pair of Checker-throated Woodpeckers, a bird that until recently was not supposed to occur in East java, a pair of
Orange-breasted Trogons, White-crowned Forktail, Sunda Whistling-thrush and Striated Grassbird at Pos Paltuding, Mountain and Olive-backed Tailorbird, winter visitors Mugimaki and, unexpectedly, a fine 1st winter Narcissus Flycatcher (nominate form) which possibly is a first record for Java. Like in almost all other locations, night birds were nowhere to be seen nor heard.

Ijen Nature reserve, which might soon become a National Park according to Hery, proved to be a worthwhile location to visit, with many mountain species that are otherwise hard to find in this part of Java.
Orange-breasted Trogon

Sunda Bush Warbler

Indigo Flycatcher
Alas Purwo NP

It is located at the South-eastern tip of Java, a 3h drive from Ketapang. The park is surrounded by a large Teak plantation, acting as a buffer against encroaching farmers. The lowland forest there has been logged in the past, but in some patches, especially around Sadengan feeding ground, a good number of large trees have remained. The peninsula at the south-east is rather inaccessible, and in the west the park is bordered by a large river estuary surrounded by mangrove.

From the park entrance, the main road will take you to Triangulasi camp, where accommodation is generally available, but this time it was swarmed by over 100 school kids on a field trip, so the only option left was the ranger camp at Sadengan, 3km from Triangulasi, where we found the best accessible birding habitat. From the entrance, there is another road heading west toward the Bedul camp, but the forest there has almost no large trees remaining, hence birding is not as good.

Sandengan feeding ground is a large grassland patch that has been cleared to allow the local race of wild cattle, the Banteng (Bos javanicus), to come and graze in full view, with a supporting cast of Timor Deers. The watchtower near the ranger station is an excellent viewpoint to the grassland and the backdrop of hilly primary forest. Green Peafowls are plentiful, Javan Mynas and a good number of Black-winged Starlings (we counted up to 20) hang around the grazers, and other notable birds included up to 3 White-bellied Sea-eagles, a lone Lesser Adjutant, and a noisy flock of Rhinoceros Hornbills in the distant ficus trees.

Forest birding is easily done following the road from the Sadengan station to the junction with the Triangulasi road (around 1km), or following the birdwatching trail that starts halfway to the left coming from the station. The trail goes through fairly dense forest with a number of clearings allowing good views of the many large ficus trees in the area. After about 2.5 km it rejoins a secondary road near to the sea, and you can either retrace back or follow the road back to Triangulasi road, then fork again toward Sadengan (total around 5km).

Birding was generally excellent, and probably almost all East Java lowland forest birds can be found in that area. There we got Banded Pitta (the density for this bird is as high as it gets, but seeing it remains a challenge), Fulvous-breasted, White-bellied, Grey-and-buff and Laced Woodpeckers, Black-banded, Blue-eared and Coppersmith Barbets (all abundant), Red-billed Malkoha, Racket-tailed Treepie, Javan, Rufous-backed and Collared Kingfishers, Yellow-throated Hanging-parrot, Dollarbird (a winter visitor), Blue-winged Leafbird (still common despite becoming a major target of bird trappers), Black-headed, Black-crested, Olive-winged and Cream-vented Bulbuls, Temminck's, Horsfield's and Crescent-chested Babblers, Grey-cheeked Tit-babbler, Eye-browed Wren-babbler, Yellow-bellied Warbler, Hill Blue Flycatcher. But the best sighting was stunning views of a juvenile Javan Hawk-eagle, perched on a low branch, then flying toward us to sit right above for a while, sending surrounding squirrels into panic mode. Night birds however were desperately silent, barring a sporadically calling Collared Scops-owl.

On the mammal side of things, besides Banteng and Timor deers we saw or heard quite a few Muntjacks (barking deers, or kijiang in indonesian) and a pair of Javan Mouse Deers. Long-tailed macaques and Black leaf monkeys were abundant, as in all four locations.

Alas Purwo turned out to be a fairly productive location, and probably a better alternative than Baluran for lowland forest birds in the region.
Bull banteng and juvenile White-bellied Sea-eagle at Sadengan

Black-banded Barbet

Banded Pitta nest
Meru Betiri NP

Located on the south coast, roughly 50km west of Alas Purwo, Meru Betiri is the largest National Park in Java, with close to 500 sq km of coastal and hill forests, and is the place where the last Javan Tigers survived until the 1980s. The subspecies is now thought to be extinct, but after a few Kreteks some rangers will tell you of the pugmarks, scats and other marks they found in the very recent past...

For sure it is a remote place, and as I write these lines my back still remembers the dreadful last 30km of broken road (don't think of going without a 4WD, or a truck) before arriving at Sukamade camp, a truly beautiful spot at the bottom of forested hills, overlooking a large sandy beach where sea turtles come laying eggs at night. It all takes more than 5h from Banyuwangi. The accommodation at the camp is surprisingly decent, and meals are provided as well. Before reaching Sukamade, the road enters the park at Sarongan, then climbs up to around 250m with great sea views over “Blue cove”, goes down again to reach the cultivation and plantation area of Sukamade village, fords several streams and rivers (impassable after heavy rains) before reaching the village itself, and meanders another 5km to the camp.

We birded the trail that leads to “Goa Jepang” (a WW2 souvenir), which starts just before the Blue cove viewpoint (about 2km return), the road itself from the viewpoint to the start of cultivation area (about 5km), and around Sukamade where 2 trails lead to the beach (the full loop is around 3km). Forest around the camp and the road is clearly disturbed, but many large trees and thick undergrowth provide a nice birding habitat. Not surprisingly, the bird mix is pretty similar to Alas Purwo, but it was nice to get a second chance at the many species we had missed there.

Around the camp the 3 Hornbills are present and the 3 lowland Barbets are amazingly abundant, especially blue-eared and coppersmith. Horsfield’s, Crescent-chested Babblers and Grey-cheeked Tit-babblers are fairly easily found in the bamboo groves around the camp. Otherwise we also found Changeable Hawk-eagle and Crested Serpent Eagle, a pair of Javan Hawk-eagles soaring over the hills, Besra, Black-thighed Falconet, Chestnut-bellied Malkoha (several times), Orange-breasted Trogon, the full suite of East java lowland Bulbuls, Maroon-breasted Philentoma, Long-billed and Grey-breasted Spiderhunters.

Birding apart, we also had fun at night watching turtles come and lay their eggs, and 3 large Green turtles landed in just 2 hours. There is a hatchery at the camp, and young turtles are being released into the sea every morning, usually attracting a pair of White-bellied Sea Eagles...

Meru Betiri single-handedly won the prize of the most scenic location of the trip, and it is longing for more birders to come and visit. For the more intrepid, it is possible to cross the park from North to South, a 3 to 4 days trek. Who knows what can be found in the heart of the jungle there...
Meru Betiri’s “Blue Cove”

The “turtle beach” near Sukamade camp

Trip Bird List

MB : Meru Betiri, AP : Alas Purwo, IJ : Ijen, BL : Baluran
When a bird has been seen in several locations and when relevant, the “best” location for this bird appears in bold character.

1. Purple Heron                     MB
2. Cattle Egret                     AP
3. Pacific Reef Egret               MB
4. Little Egret                     AP
5. Lesser Adjutant
6. Oriental Honey Buzzard
7. White-bellied Sea Eagle
8. Besra
9. Crested Serpent Eagle
10. Black Eagle
11. Changeable Hawk Eagle
12. Javan Hawk Eagle
13. Black-thighed Falconet
14. Spotted Kestrel
15. White-faced Partridge
16. Blue-breasted Quail
17. Green Peafowl
18. Red Junglefowl
19. Green Junglefowl
20. Rufous Woodcock
21. Pomarine Skua (?)
22. Black-naped Tern
23. Bridled Tern
24. Lesser Crested Tern
25. Grey-cheeked Green Pigeon
26. Orange-breasted Green Pigeon
27. Green Imperial Pigeon
28. Dark-backed Imperial Pigeon
29. Barred Cuckoo-dove
30. Ruddy Cuckoo-dove
31. Little Cuckoo-dove
32. Island Collared Dove
33. Spotted Dove
34. Zebra Dove
35. Emerald Dove
36. Red-breasted Parakeet
37. Yellow-throated Hanging Parrot
38. Oriental(Sunda) Cuckoo
39. Plaintive Cuckoo
40. Little Bronzed Cuckoo
41. Chestnut-bellied Malkoha
42. Red-billed Malkoha
43. Greater Coucal
44. Lesser Coucal
45. Barn Owl
46. Collared Scops-Owl
47. Savanna Nightjar
48. Edible-nest Swiftlet
49. Cave Swiftlet
50. Fork-tailed Swift
51. Grey-rumped Treeswift
52. Orange-breasted Trogon
53. Small Blue Kingfisher
54. Rufous-backed Kingfisher
55. Javan Kingfisher
56. Collared Kingfisher

AP
IJ/AP
AP (3 around Sadengan)
MB
MB/AP/BL (seen in various parts of BL)
IJ (2 birds, maybe same, seen before PP)
MB/BL (several ind. dark morph + juv)
MB/AP/IJ (3 sightings in Ijen)
MB (good views of a bird atop a dead tree)
MB
IJ (heard, heard and heard again)
AP
BL (most around Bekol)/AP (Sadengan)
MB/AP/IJ
MB/AP/IJ/BL
IJ (1 at dawn near PP)
Ferry (2 skuas seen afar)
Ferry
Ferry (1)
Ferry (large flocks)
MB/AP
BL (1 flock flying across)
AP/BL (several large flocks)
IJ (common)
IJ (1 flying overhead)
IJ (1 perched, often heard)
IJ (heard only)
AP/BL (common in BL)
MB/AP/BL
BL (common)
MB/AP
BL (a pair found near Bama)
MB/AP/IJ (seen flying, often heard)
IJ (commonly heard)
MB/BL (heard only)
IJ (heard just above Pos 1)
MB
AP
MB (heard only)
AP/BL (common on grassland)
BL (1 in Bekol savannah)
AP (heard)
AP/BL (100s in Bekol)
MB/BL (common in Bekol)
MB/AP/IJ/BL (common everywhere)
MB (at Green Bay viewpoint)
MB/AP
MB/IJ (good views of 1 pair @1350m in IJ)
BL (1 in Bama)
MB/AP
MB/AP
MB/AP/BL (common)
57. Chestnut-headed Bee Eater
58. Dollarbird
59. Wreathed Hornbill
60. Oriental-pied Hornbill
61. Rhinoceros Hornbill
62. Black-banded Barbet
63. Orange-fronted Barbet
64. Blue-eared Barbet
65. Coppersmith Barbet
66. White-bellied Woodpecker
67. Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker
68. Sunda Woodpecker
69. Grey-and-buff Woodpecker
70. Laced Woodpecker
71. Checker-throated Woodpecker
72. Greater Flameback
73. Banded Pitta
74. Barn Swallow
75. Pacific Swallow
76. Black-winged Flycatcher Shrike
77. Large Woodshrike
78. Sunda Cuckooshrike
79. Lesser Cuckooshrike
80. Pied Triller
81. White-shouldered Triller
82. Small Minivet
83. Sunda Minivet
84. Scarlet Minivet
85. Common Iora
86. Blue-winged Leafbird
87. Black-headed Bulbul
88. Black-crested Bulbul
89. Sooty-headed Bulbul
90. Yellow-vented Bulbul
91. Orange-spotted Bulbul
92. Olive-winged Bulbul
93. Cream-vented Bulbul
94. Sunda Bulbul
95. Black Drongo
96. Ashy Drongo
97. Hair-crested Drongo
98. Greater Racket-tailed Drongo
99. Crested Jay
100. Racket-tailed Treepie
101. Slender-billed Crow
102. Great Tit
103. Velvet-fronted Nuthatch
104. Blue Nuthatch
105. Lesser Shortwing
106. Temminck’s Babbler
107. Horsfield’s Babbler
108. Chestnut-backed Scimitar Babbler

MB/BL (common)
MB/BL (common)
MB/BL (common)
MB/BL (common)
MB/BL (common)
MB/BL (common)
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MB/BL (common)
MB/BL (common)
MB/BL (common)
109. Eye-browed Wren-babbler
110. Crescent-chested Babbler
111. Grey-cheeked Tit Babbler
112. White-crowned Forktail
113. Pied Bushchat
114. Sunda Whistling Thrush
115. Sunda Warbler
116. Yellow-bellied Warbler
117. Mountain Leaf Warbler
118. Striated Grassbird
119. Zitting Cisticola
120. Sunda Bush-warbler
121. Russet Bush-warbler
122. Ashy Tailorbird
123. Olive-backed Tailorbird
124. Mountain Tailorbird
125. Yellow-bellied Prinia
126. Bar-winged Prinia
127. Indigo Flycatcher
128. Narcissus Flycatcher
129. Mugimaki Flycatcher
130. Snowy-browed Flycatcher
131. Little Pied Flycatcher
132. Grey-headed Flycatcher
133. Pale Blue Flycatcher
134. Hill Blue Flycatcher
135. White-bellied Fantail
136. Pied Fantail
137. Black naped Monarch
138. Maroon-breasted Philentoma
139. Mangrove Whistler
140. Long-tailed Shrike
141. Paddyfield Pipit
142. Asian Glossy Starling
143. Black-winged Starling (pair near Bama)
144. Javan Myna
145. Brown-throated Sunbird
146. Ruby-cheeked Sunbird
147. Olive-backed Sunbird
148. White-flanked Sunbird
149. Long-billed Spiderhunter
150. Grey-breasted Spiderhunter
151. Plain Flowerpecker
152. Mountain White-eye
153. Javan Grey-throated White-eye
154. Javan Mynia
155. Scaly-breasted Munia
156. White-headed Munia

156 species (8 heard only): 70 MB, 73 AP, 53 IJ, 46 BL