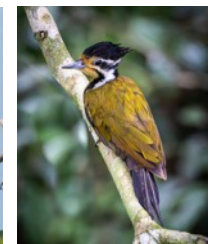
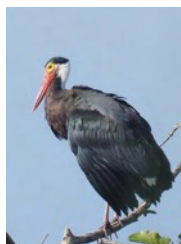
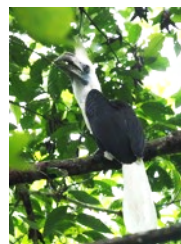
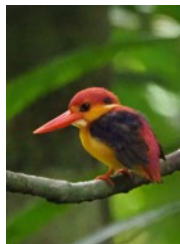
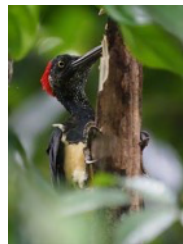
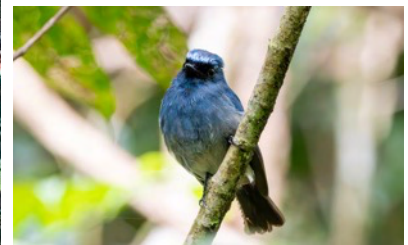


Wild Borneo: Endemic Birding & Nature

Sept. 9 – 23, 2023 | Trip Report | by Steve Shunk



With guides Mirwan Mustapha and Steve Shunk, and participants:
Delsa, Donna, Maggie, Chris, and Don



Welcome to the 'Land Beneath the Wind'. Just mention Borneo to your friends and it conjures images of head hunters, leeches, and jungle fever. Most of them will ask, "Where is Borneo, anyway?" We ventured out to Earth's third-largest island in search of answers—and adventures—and we got plenty of both. I invite you to take this virtual journey with us, and then join us next year in Wild Borneo.

Most of the group weren't exactly sure what to expect. We were headed to southeastern Asia, somewhere between China and Australia. We knew we would be within a few kilometers of the Equator, where the weather is typically hot and humid. We knew that Borneo is one of the most biodiverse places in the world, where endemism reigns and wildlife abounds. We expected to be eating Asian food, and we expected plenty of 'local color'. But we really couldn't get beyond the mystery of how our journey would unfold and what a magnificent place Borneo would be.



Below are the highlights of our inaugural two-week tour (this guide's fifth trip to the island). We started and finished in Kota Kinabalu (KK), the coastal capital of the Malaysian state of Sabah. In between, we visited the highest mountain in Southeast Asia; the world's oldest rainforest; and the second longest river in Malaysia. We saw 18 primate species and 235 birds. We visited sanctuaries dedicated to the conservation and study of the Bornean Sun Bear and the Bornean orangutan. And we immersed ourselves in the eclectic culture of this Asian melting pot, encountering people from all across this corner of the globe. Here are some stories from our spectacular journey.

The Beginning—KK and the Crocker Range

We met the first evening in KK for orientation and dinner. Mirwan and Steve laid out their rough plan for the trip, and we enjoyed fresh local seafood with some traditional Bornean dance demonstrations. The next morning, we headed into Crocker Range National Park, first birding along the Gunung Alab signal tower road. During the peak of the Covid period, local birders got creative and started developing some special bird viewing and feeding stations, locally called 'hides' but also known as viewing blinds. One of these sits just off the G. Alab road, just 30 meters down a narrow muddy path. When we arrived, a few birders were already seated behind the camouflage netting, so we stationed ourselves at various spots in view of the moss-covered rocks and logs. The sounds of a couple local partridges were broadcast through a small speaker, in hopes of attracting a couple of much sought-after species that are often heard but rarely seen in the dense jungle.

A couple of endemic Bornean ground-squirrels helped themselves to the seed that was scattered on the ground, and a few interesting birds made their way through the low canopy, including an endemic Bornean Treepie. After a short while, we heard partridges responding from lower on the slope, and all the birders got quiet. Soon, a pair of endemic Red-breasted Partridges approached the station and tucked themselves neatly below the brush and between a couple of trees. We all saw the birds—with their barred backs, bold white spots on the sides, and rusty heads and necks—but the wary birds never came into full view. While we craned for better looks at the partridges, a couple of Sunda Laughingthrushes made their way across the 'stage' in front of the blind.

Just as we started getting a little tired of standing, a bright adult Crimson-headed Partridge sauntered up the hill and across one of the seeded logs, coming within a few feet of the blind. It fed and wandered through the rock and log features for several minutes, as our jaws hung down and our cameras clicked away. What a spectacular bird!



With the morning warming up, we headed to the open road to catch some more of the local avifauna. In the Tropics, we often anticipate the movement of ‘bird waves’, or mixed flocks that move through the trees in feeding frenzies, sometimes coming and going within matters of minutes. We sought the same at G. Alab, and we weren’t disappointed. In fact, despite our best-laid plan to walk along the road, we keep getting drawn back to a single tree, through which we watched multiple waves of birds pass like commuters transiting a train station. Just a few of the highlights included our first Temminck’s Sunbird and Mountain Leaf-Warbler, a pair of White-browed Shrike-Babblers, and at least five Gray-chinned Minivets. We also enjoyed great looks at endemic Bornean Whistler and Bornean Leafbirds, while repeated flocks passed through the magical tree. As a bonus, we watched a small flock of Plume-toed Swiftlets that returned repeatedly to nests under the eaves of the nearby building.

A bit exhausted from the frenzy of new birds, we headed for lunch at a casual café along the highway. The food was great, but the highlight of our lunch spot was another colony of Plume-toed Swiftlets nesting beneath the roof. We were continually distracted from eating as the birds went about their flight forays, returning occasionally to rejoin the communal roosting and nesting scene.

It started raining while we ate, and we weren’t quite sure what to expect for the afternoon. Fingers crossed, we drove over the pass and headed for the Tambunan Rafflesia Interpretive Center. Upon our arrival, the rain had ceased, so we unloaded and geared up for some birding around the property.

We enjoyed several species of orchids in the well-maintained gardens, while we walked down the path past the interpretive center. In the surrounding canopy, we found a few Bornean endemics, including Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Black-sided Flowerpecker, and Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush. We also enjoyed good looks at the Bornean endemic subspecies of the Black-and-Crimson Oriole. Soon, the sound of the Mountain Barbet rang from the trees above. After carefully scanning for this rather non-descript and well-camouflaged green bird, we found not one but two barbets, and it happened to be a mated pair. This species is endemic to the north-central mountains of Borneo, and they are sexually monochromatic, i.e. the male and female sport the same plumage. So, how did we know they were mates? Well, as we watched them, the two repeatedly copulated on the low branches of the tree, seemingly unaware of our presence. It was a great experience for us—and certainly an important one for the birds!

We continued to wander the grounds and the fronting roadway, enjoying a couple of Cinereous Bulbuls and Little Cuckoo Doves before heading back to KK. But the day wasn’t over yet. We left Crocker Ranger National



Park and headed down the mountain. Most of us were just resting—with great memories of the day—but Mirwan and our driver Andy still had their radars on. Suddenly, the bus ‘screched’ to a halt (safely, and as fast a bus is able to halt). We turned around and drove a short distance back up the highway to a large turnout. We exited the van and looked across the road, where a pair of endemic White-fronted Falconets perched in a small snag. This tiny raptor is not only endemic, but it is the world’s smallest diurnal raptor! Nice icing on the Crocker Range cake on our first day in Borneo.

On these productive first outings of the tour, we racked up an impressive 13 endemic bird species, nearly a quarter of all the endemics on the island.

Exploring Kinabalu National Park

Our second full day would take us up the western flank of Sabah’s towering monolith, 4,095-m (13,435-ft.) Mt. Kinabalu, with the summit at Low’s Peak being the highest in Southeast Asia. The two-hour drive took us through several small villages, and we made an obligatory bathroom stop in the town of Nabalu. But this wasn’t your ordinary bathroom stop. Lining the roadside was a succession of busy fruit stands, among several selling other local foods and crafts. We enjoyed a cup of coffee in a small café and did our best to avoid the putrid smell of durian fruits (though Delsa purchased some of the fleshy pulp and shared it with those who were willing to taste!). Local color absorbed, we continued upslope to the main entrance of Kinabalu National Park.

We arrived too early to check in, so we parked the vehicles and set out for a little birding. We quickly ran into several of our friends from the prior day, including Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Bornean Whistler, and Bornean Treepie. Our casual walk took us about a kilometer up the main park road, known as the Timpohon Gate Road (TGR). The montane canopy here isn’t very high, so we were easily able to pick up several new forest birds before lunch. We enjoyed our first looks at the endemic Bornean Green-Magpie and the threatened Check-throated Woodpecker. Our only Mountain Imperial-Pigeons of the trip flew past, above the canopy.

After lunch, we continued farther up the road and added a few more birds to the daily discovery, including Black-capped White-eye and Indigo Flycatcher. Shortly after checking into the Nepenthes Suites, the sky decided it was time for a shower, putting a damper, so to speak, on further afternoon birding. The rain waned to a mist, and we still had a certain objective that needed to be addressed. We often shape our daily itineraries around general nature experiences, including opportunities to view a broad diversity of bird species, rather than dedicated quests for single birds. At Kinabalu Park, however, there is one special bird that requires certain



circumstances. In order to see the elusive Everett's Thrush, you need to be birding at dawn and/or dusk along certain stretches of the TGR. It's actually a rather unremarkable bird, but the quest somehow makes it worth the effort. So, on our first evening, we walked between the lower gate and the 1.5-km marker looking for this one little thrush. The bird did not appear on this first evening, but we enjoyed a quiet walk along the mountain road and added Hair-crested Drongo and the endemic Penan Bulbul to our first day on Mt. Kinabalu.

Early the next morning, we once again searched for the thrush, to no avail, so we headed to breakfast, just as it started to rain. Not wanting to spend the day birding under umbrellas, we decided to head for the lower elevation park unit at Poring Hot Springs. Poring offers a good mix of habitats, including park-like gardens at the edge of primary submontane forest. Our main goal inside the park was to experience our first canopy walkway. The route to the canopy trail produced a few new species for us, including Crimson Sunbird and the endemic White-crowned Shama. We headed up the steep trail—which was mostly stairs—surrounded by massive dipterocarp trees. We reached the start of the walkway and began our elevated excursion through the canopy. This particular walk reaches up to 40 m (131 ft.) above ground, and the suspended bridges between the platforms are the least rigid of the three canopy walks we would experience during the tour. Because of this, all of our actual birding occurred from the very stable tree-mounted platforms.

We worked hard for a few songbirds in the canopy, including Gray-chested Jungle-Flycatcher, but the highlight of the walk was the quality time we spent with a female Olive-backed Woodpecker. This species is the most scarce of four Bornean woodpeckers that are formally listed at some level of conservation threat. After initially getting excellent looks at the bird, we followed her on her route through several trees, watching her from multiple platforms.

After lunch at the on-site restaurant, we birded around the Poring gardens for a while, picking up a couple of fun new bird species, like Rufous-tailed Tailorbird and a nesting Brown-throated Sunbird. We then drove to a small private property just a few minutes from the park in search of a very special flower.

One of Borneo's many claims to fame is the opportunity to view one of the largest flowers in the world, the *Rafflesia*. The species that grows here, *Rafflesia keithii*, measures up to three feet across. Several properties in the Poring region offer the very strict growing conditions that support these amazing parasitic flowers. After taking months to bloom from their ball-shaped buds, they only last about a week before rotting into a gooey black mess. But when they are blooming, the landowners advertise the occasion and charge a small fee for



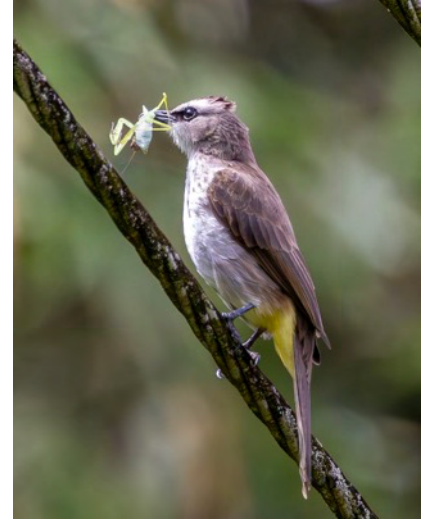
tourists to enjoy the experience. And we did just that, with a golden opportunity to view all stages of the flower's lifecycle in one spot. After flower-watching under partly sunny skies, we drove back into the cloud forest at park headquarters. It was typically misty at this elevation, but after a short break, we decided to give it another go for the Everett's Thrush. And, once again, the bird did not appear. Feeling a little dejected, we chose to celebrate our productive day at Poring and call it a night.

The following morning gave us one more chance for the thrush, so we were up early to walk the TGR. It would turn out to be our last hurrah and our last failure to find the bird, but this particular morning gave us one of the big highlights of the trip.

We wandered along the road, finding several new birds, including the Gray-throated Babbler and a pair of endemic Bornean Forktails. It was getting close to breakfast time, so we started working our way back toward the Liwagu Restaurant. Suddenly, Mirwan saw a ghost in the forest and got our attention. It turned out not to be a ghost at all, but the much sought-after endemic Whitehead's Trogon! This was a really important bird for us to see, since it only occurs in the mountains, and the rest of our trip would be at low elevations. We all found sufficient windows through the trees to enjoy good looks at the male trogon, when—out of the mist—we spotted the female, giving us a great experience with a pair of these gorgeous birds.

And perhaps it wasn't special enough for us to have seen the trogons. Just when we had good scope views of the female, another special bird called from nearby; another bird we needed to find in the mountains before heading downslope. We turned just 90 degrees to the right and watched an endemic Whitehead's Broadbill fly in! One of the three 'green' broadbills, this emerald-colored bird perched in the open for us, just as its mate flew in. A pair of Whitehead's Trogons and a pair of Whitehead's Broadbills. What synchronicity. And this was all before breakfast!

After taking in our breakfast fuel, we took a leisurely stroll through the park's botanical gardens. Orchids and Nepenthes pitcher plants were the big highlights here, though a few birds kept us busy. We heard a couple of Bornean Treepies and got some of our best looks at the endemic Penan Bulbul. We also fought off the distraction from a flock of 12 Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrushes. Along the paved trail, we saw more than a dozen orchid species, including a couple of slipper orchids and specimens of the genera *Dendrobium*, *Liparis*, *Coelogyne*, *Calanthe*, and the regional specialty, *Lobelia borneensis*.



We still had some time before lunch, so we birded around the park entrance for a bit, where we saw more Penan Bulbuls and several Temminck's Sunbirds. We also watched a White-throated Fantail carrying food to either nestlings or fledglings nearby. After lunch, we headed to the Timponon Gate, at 1,866 m (6,122 ft.), where the hike begins for those wishing to summit Low's Peak. This would be the highest elevation of the tour, and we still had a few species we hoped to see at this altitude.

Upon reaching the gate, we found a small group of folks that had set up at the forest edge for some fancy videography. We chatted with them a bit, and they explained that they were seeking footage of the endemic mountain treeshrew coming to a staged *Nepenthes rajah* pitcher plant. The spectacular modified leaf structure—the 'pitcher'—of this Bornean endemic makes it the world's largest carnivorous plant, growing up to 41 cm long (16 in.) and capable of holding 3.5 l (118 oz.) of water! We watched the scene for a just a few minutes, and sure enough, in came the treeshrew to feed on the plant's nectar. This 'trick' played on the treeshrew attracts the animal, which itself then defecates into the voluminous pitcher, thereby providing the plant's necessary nitrogen.

We explored the gate area a bit, hearing the endemic Crimson-headed Partridge and Fruit-hunter calling from deep in the forest. We made our way down along the road and had excellent looks at our only endemic Golden-naped Barbet and Bornean Shortwings of the tour. We saw the striking Yellow-breasted Warbler carrying nesting material, and a mixed flock included our last Bornean Whistler and Chestnut-crested Yuhinas of the trip, both montane endemics. A little farther down the road, we made our final stop and found a Little Cuckoo-Dove and at least seven endemic Bornean Treepies. One final Mt. Kinabalu highlight came just as we started to enter the vans. We heard the distinctive calls of Bornean Green-Magpies from right over our heads, and we chased two birds around for 10 minutes until most of the group had good looks at another beautiful Bornean endemic. We were just on the third day of the tour, and we had already found 22 of Borneo's endemic bird species, more than one-third of the island's endemic list. We headed down out of the cloud forest and into KK to rest up before the next phase of the trip: the Danum Valley.

The Danum Valley Hill Forest

On the western side of Sabah, the Danum Valley offers the ultimate equatorial rainforest experience, complete with torrential rains! Our early-morning flight had us at the KK airport before 7 a.m. We tried to relax as we waited to board, but a few of us were compelled to search for birds on the tarmac. Besides the very common starling, tree sparrow, and Zebra Dove, we did pick up a couple of 'trip birds' while peering through the big windows. Purple Heron and Great Egret were seen easily in the grass between runways, and our first Brahminy



Kite flew past at the back of the same fields. Our best birds here, though, were a couple of Paddyfield Pipits, which we would not see later on the tour.

After our one-hour flight from KK to Lahad Datu, we convened at the office of Danum’s Borneo Rainforest Lodge for welcome and briefing. We were shortly on the road for the three-hour drive into the jungle. Along the route, we made a bathroom stop at the nursery managed by the Sabah Forestry Department. As often occurs at bathroom stops, we had a fun bird encounter here watching a flock of swifts and Pacific Swallows hawking for insects low over the buildings; the swifts included House Swift, Asian Palm Swift, and Gray-rumped Treeswift. A little farther down the road, a female Diard’s Trogon flew in front of one of the vehicles, and before reaching the entrance to the Danum Valley Conservation Area, someone in the lead vehicle saw the trees moving across a field. We all stopped and enjoyed our only visuals of the trip of the North Bornean Gibbon. As a bonus, we also had great scope views of the beautiful Whiskered Treeswift.

We arrived at the Borneo Rainforest Lodge in time for lunch, which would be our first meal of many at their eclectic gourmet buffet. Three fun endemics were among the birds that distracted us from lunch, including our second White-crowned Shama and our first Dusky Munia and Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker. After checking into our rooms, we took a short walk along one of the nearby boardwalk-trails. Nine of the 19 species we found went down as “heard only”, but we enjoyed some fun encounters and several new birds for the trip. Babblers included our first endemic Gray-hooded Babbler and a couple of Bornean Black-capped Babblers. We also watched a pair of Striped Wren-Babblers allopreening on a horizontal branch. They bounced over each other a couple of times during this courtship display, similar to behavior seen among manakins in the Neotropics. Once we stepped off the boardwalk and onto the muddy trail, we encountered our first leeches of the trip—Danum Valley would be the only location where we would deal with these harmless blood-suckers. We heard two endemic pittas from the trail—the Blue-headed and the Black-crowned—and we *heard* four different barbets, which would become a common theme for barbets throughout the trip.

After dinner, we enjoyed our first night-walk around the outskirts of the lodge. At the small pond, we found several frogs—both file-eared and harlequin frogs—and a few keel-backed water snakes. We saw a very thick stick insect (Borneo hosts several endemic stick insects, including a few that are considered some of the world’s longest insects) and several moths and spiders. Perhaps the highlight of the evening was our encounter with a Buffy Fish-Owl that was hunting from the goal post in the football field. We also found the super-tiny lesser mousedeer skulking around in the understory.

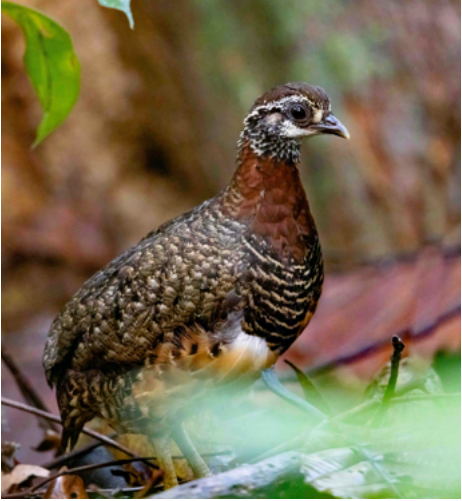


We spent the next two full days exploring this amazing primary rainforest. Our mornings typically started with the canopy walkway and towers. On the first morning we found 39 species, and on the second 58 species—including our travels to and from the elevated boardwalk. We commandeered one of the lodge’s electric buggies to maximize our time on the boardwalk itself. On one morning, a Bornean Crested Fireback walked across the road right in front of the buggy. Another morning gave us seven bulbul species and eight different babblers. We saw Raffles’s and Chestnut-breasted Malkohas, and we found four different woodpecker species, including close looks at a pair of Rufous Woodpeckers from the canopy walk. Along the entry road, we also saw our only pairs of Green Broadbill and Diard’s Trogon.

Other highlights in the canopy included a very active family of endemic Black Magpies. On both mornings, we saw Chestnut-naped Forktail on the river below the walkway and a couple of White-crowned Forktails feeding along the road. A few species echoed from deep in the forest but eluded visual contact, including Great Argus, Sabah Partridge, and Crested Jayshrike.

Mornings in Danum Valley also produced our first hornbills of the trip. Rhinoceros Hornbills were heard-only, but we saw a Wrinkled Hornbill and had excellent looks at a pair of White-crowned Hornbills that flew low in front of us as we walked back to the lodge on the second morning. That same morning, we heard the maniacal call of the Helmeted Hornbill, one of the most iconic sounds of Borneo’s rainforest. And, on our final morning, as we walked back to the lodge along the main road, we again heard the Helmeted Hornbill. After considerable time trying to triangulate the location of the call, we found not one but a pair of birds high in the canopy. We had spent earlier days in the montane cloud forest, but our second day at Danum gave us our first real taste of the rainforest. We departed for an afternoon outing to the sound of thunder, and within 15 minutes, the downpour had begun. We made it back to the lodge under umbrellas and spent the next couple of hours watching the torrential shower from inside the open-air lodge. We saw a few bird species from the deck as we watched the lightning, but a major trip highlight came in the middle of that storm. As we left the main lodge area, we heard some chaos from the back of the lodge. We went to check out the scene, and an adult female orangutan was feeding just a few meters from the lodge entrance. Amazing! This would be our best look at an orangutan away from the Sepilok rehab center. Besides our orangutan encounter, we also spent some quality time with an endemic Maroon Leaf Monkey that was feeding low in the trees near the entrance road.

Our final morning in Danum Valley took us all the way down the entrance road—we took the buggy to the actual entrance and walked most of the way back. Besides the Helmeted Hornbills described above, highlights on the walk included our best looks at a pair of Green Broadbills plus Black-bellied Malkoha and several babblers. We



also saw three Wrinkled and four Rhinoceros Hornbills, plus a busy flock of five Fluffy-backed Tit-Babblers. Barbets—of four different species—seemed to be calling everywhere, and we had good looks at Hairy-backed Bulbul and Bornean Spiderhunter, plus our first look at the fairly common Crested Serpent-Eagle.

Transfer Day—The Middle of the Trip

After lunch on our last day at Danum, we headed back to Lahad Datu; it was just the first part of our longest driving day. We made a quick stop in town to get some snacks and beverages, and as often happens to attentive birders, we stumbled upon a very interesting collection of birds in the trees across the street. Besides our only Large Green Pigeons of the trip, we saw five Green Imperial Pigeons plus five Nankeen Night-Herons, four Black-crowned Night-Herons, and a half-dozen Great Egrets, some of which were carrying nesting material. We arrived in the village of Sukau just as it was getting dark, followed by a short boat ride to Sukau Rainforest Lodge. After a brief orientation from the lodge concierge, we enjoyed our first dinner there, with great anticipation of the days ahead.

Sukau and the Kinabatangan River

The Kinabatangan River (K River) is the longest in Borneo and the second longest in Malaysia, at 560 km (350 mi.), with a drainage area of 16,800 km² (about 6,500 mi²), or about the size of Connecticut. The busy river serves as a major thoroughfare for goods, fuel, forest products, and public transportation. Every day, we watched barges and ferries moving up and down the river, along with small tourist boats that serve the popular lodges along the Lower Kinabatangan Sanctuary (LKS) and its amazing array of wildlife.

Picture yourself waking up to the loud chatter of Bushy-crested Hornbills in the jungle. Over hot coffee, you await your morning boat ride, watching swifts and swallows over the quiet river. A distant Bornean Ground-Cuckoo ushers its haunting call while you board your boat, and two Straw-headed Bulbuls watch as you pull away from the dock. This is the K River.

Over the next couple of days we explored the main stem of the river, as well as a large oxbow lake and two small tributaries: the Menanggul and Tenegang Rivers. We took two boat rides a day—typically 2 to 3 hours each—with one just after sunrise and another before sunset. Between water outings, we had plenty of time to explore the lodge boardwalk and grounds, with breaks for lunch and relaxation. One of the wildlife-watching advantages of the LKS is that the forest here is secondary, or successional growth after previously being logged. This meant that the canopy was not near as high as the primary forest in the Danum Valley, and we could easily see birds and primates from the boat and boardwalk.



Our first morning took us into the oxbow ‘lake’ just a bit upstream from the lodge, and the ride brought us a couple of great trip highlights. As we approached the mouth, we ran into a two Oriental Pied-Hornbills; we only had quick looks before they flew into the forest around the corner. We tracked them down, and they turned out to be a pair of adults and one recently fledged young! The K River days would be the only ones for this species, though we saw them in abundance, finding at least 20 individuals on both the K and Tenegang Rivers. Other hornbills on the outing included Black, Wrinkled, and Bushy-crested. Another big highlight of the oxbow was a pair of Bat Hawks at a nest site. We typically see this specialized raptor in the evening near bat caves, so it was nice to find this pair perched in the morning light.

Raptors are always a highlight on the river, and this year was no exception. We found a total of eight diurnal raptor species plus two owls, and several of the raptors were only seen during our river days. Besides the Bat Hawks, these included: Crested Goshawk, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Lesser Fish-Eagle, and Gray-headed Fish-Eagle. The Brown Wood-Owl turned out to be a major trip highlight for all of us. We had heard the Bornean endemic *vaga* subspecies during a night walk at Danum Valley, but the Sukau boardwalk had a surprise. During an afternoon outing behind the lodge, one of the local guides reported wood-owls on the other side of the path. We headed there, and his directions were perfect. We easily found a pair of adults and a white fluffy ‘brancher’ and enjoyed extended looks at these beauties.

The river also gave us several sightings of a very special bird. Owing to habitat loss across its very limited range, the Storm’s Stork holds the unpropitious title of world’s rarest stork. One of its greatest strongholds is inside the Aabatangan Sanctuary. We typically feel lucky to see one or two, but this trip was exceptional, for we found an amazing *nine* individuals along the K river and its tributaries. Collectively, this was one of the biggest highlights of the tour.

Rivers are also good for kingfishers, and our various outings brought us four different species. The best encounter was finding a pair of glowing Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfishers on the Sukau boardwalk. They repeatedly flew to the ground from their low perch on a conspicuous vine. Other river highlights included big flocks Pink-necked Green-Pigeons and endemic Brown Barbets. Our rarest bird of the trip came on the Tenegang, with a vagrant Rainbow Bee-eater. We saw many Long-tailed Macaques and endemic Proboscis Monkeys on our boat rides, and we got lucky on the boardwalk with repeated looks at the ‘rufous morph’ of the Silvered Leaf Monkey—with a baby in tow. Rounding out the mammal highlights was our up-close-and-personal look at an endemic Pale Giant Squirrel, also from the boardwalk.



We left Sukau Rainforest Lodge on the final morning and headed down the river on our private speedboat—destination Sandakan. We didn't get far before we saw our first Lesser Adjutant of the trip, followed by two more farther downstream. But the big moment came later, when a Helmeted Hornbill flew low across the river right in front of the boat! We expect to hear or see this species in the virgin rainforest, but it was a real surprise to find this one in the secondary forest of the KRS. It was even more amazing considering that there are only estimated to be about *five* individuals of this species in the sanctuary!

Sepilok Sanctuaries and the Rainforest Discovery Center

After winding through the mangrove channels of the lower K River, we arrived at the dock in Sandakan just in time for lunch, followed by the short drive to Sepilok, where we would spend the last few days of the tour. Before checking into our lodging, we enjoyed the afternoon at the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Center. Sun Bears are the world's smallest, most arboreal, and least-studied bear, and the Sepilok conservation center is the only one in the world dedicated to the study, rehabilitation, and release of this vulnerable species. We had great looks a couple of the bears while they roamed through their forested enclosures. Bird highlights included a couple of Gray-rumped Treeswifts and an adult Olive-winged Bulbul with three fledglings. We also suffered through the painful task of separating the Greater and Lesser Green Leafbirds!

After checking into MY Nature Resort (a catchy name with a play on the abbreviation for Malaysia—MY), we wandered the grounds and picked up a Fiery Minivet and Yellow-vented Flowerpecker before heading next door to the renowned Rainforest Discovery Center (RDC). The RDC protects a stand of virgin forest that is nearly surrounded by development, although it offers a perfect sanctuary and wildlife corridor at the edge of the Kabil-Sepilok Forest Reserve. Our first outing here took us onto the impressive canopy walkway—our third of the trip and the most robust of the three. As we entered the property, we spied a Stork-billed Kingfisher perched above the small lake. We enjoyed our best looks yet at Raffles's Malkoha and our first look at an Oriental Honey-Buzzard. From the canopy walkway, we saw two pairs of Black Hornbills and a Cream-vented Bulbul while we waited to the evening's main event.

We stood on the walkway enjoying the setting sun, with our eyes closely peeled to a series of 'nest' boxes mounted high on the trunks of some massive dipterocarp trees. We anxiously awaited the emergence of the red giant flying squirrels. And right on cue—as the sun dipped below the horizon—the squirrels started to peek out of their roost sites. Each individual slowly exited its box and proceeded to climb higher in its respective tree. And then it happened. In what first appeared to be a suicide mission, the squirrels each leapt from the tree surface and then glided across the broad forest opening to the next tree. What a scene! We watched at least four individuals as they 'flew' from tree to tree until the darkness made viewing impossible.



The ensuing night walk around the RDC trails gave us a couple of fun bonus sightings. First, our local guide spotted a sleeping Arctic Warbler—a paleotropical migrant that had recently arrived to overwinter in Borneo. This was the first of the season for several local birders. Then, as we walked along the paved trail, someone spotted a small pair of eyes reflecting in the flashlight and zipping around the trunk of a nearby tree. We finally got great looks at what turned out to be an endemic and extremely rare Hose’s Pygmy Flying Squirrel. The next few days at Sepilok were loaded with major, end-of-the-tour highlights. Our resort sits right at the edge of the RDC property, with its own trails and boardwalk and open viewing of the neighboring multi-layer canopy. We enjoyed a couple of productive early-morning walks around the resort. The flowering gardens were constantly abuzz with songbirds, and we had excellent looks at Crimson and Brown-throated Sunbirds and Thick-billed, Yellow-eared, and Spectacled Spiderhunters. The first morning produced pairs of Banded and White-bellied Woodpeckers, plus a pair of endemic White-fronted Falconets visiting a probably nest site. Buff-rumped Woodpecker also made an appearance, along with pairs of Black and Rhinoceros Hornbills and three Ventriloquial Orioles. Our departing morning included a drumming pair of Buff-necked Woodpeckers and drop-dead looks at the tiny Rufous Piculet. That final morning ended with a bold troupe of Southern Pig-tailed Macaques.

After breakfast on our first morning we headed for the Sepilok orangutan rehabilitation center. This was our best chance to get close to orangutans while they attended their morning feeding. We saw many individuals, including a full-grown female with a baby. Despite the crowded viewing areas, we all enjoyed the experience of seeing these amazing endemic primates at both the feeding platform and the nearby nursery. The major bird highlight at the rehab center was our discovery of a pair of handsome Bornean Bristleheads feeding uncharacteristically low in the canopy. Eventually, we all got good looks at Borneo’s most unique and iconic bird species, which is the only representative of this endemic Bornean family.

After lunch and a break on our first full day in Sepilok, we headed toward the coast, where the Sepilok Forest Reserve gives way to the expansive mangroves at the edge of Labuk Bay. Our visit here was timed for the afternoon feeding at the Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary. We had seen many of these bizarre primates in the K River sanctuary—with their big round bellies and flopping noses—but this was a chance to have them prowling around right in front of us. All ages came to the afternoon feeding, including several big adult males and mothers with babies. Surrounding the monkey frenzy, we enjoyed a few key bird sightings. We found our only pair of Velvet-fronted Nuthatches of the trip in a snag near the end of the viewing walkway, and we saw our first Oriental Magpie-Robin. As we left the sanctuary, we also ran into a very gregarious group of eight



Collared Kingfishers. This is a forest-dwelling kingfisher that feeds mainly on arthropods and crustaceans; its favorite mangrove prey items include the strange fish called the mudskipper, of which we saw many. Our last full day of the tour was dedicated to the RDC, and we enjoyed three different outings. Our early-morning walk produced a couple more big trip highlights. After tracking down their calls and practicing lots of patience, we got amazing looks at two key Bornean endemics: the Sabah Partridge and Black-crowned Pitta. Still reeling from incredible looks at this duo, we also found our last hornbill species of the trip, when a male Wreathed Hornbill flew into the top of the canopy, giving everyone great scope views. This capped off our hornbill quest, with all eight Bornean species under our belts. We also had great looks at two Maroon Woodpeckers, while Buff-necked and Rufous Woodpecker drummed from deep in the forest.

Later that morning, after breakfast at the resort, we returned to the canopy walkway and trails inside the RDC. The walkway gave us our best looks at Purple-naped Spiderhunter, as we watched a bird bathing in a water-filled, cup-like tree hole. Down on the trails, we ran into a massive White-bellied Woodpecker—one of the world's largest woodpeckers—foraging at eye level and just a few meters off the trail. And around the corner, we had great looks at our first and only Red-bearded Bee-eater. Our last RDC hurrah took us back to the trails in the afternoon, and the amazing experiences just kept on coming. We found Raffles's and Chestnut-breasted Malkohas, Wallace's and Changeable Hawk-Eagles, and four different bulbuls, including our only Streaked Bulbul of the trip. Two Greater Coucals and three Greater Racket-tailed Drongos would be our last of these two species.

On our final morning, we spent a couple of hours birding the grounds of the resort before packing up and heading to Sandakan airport for the flight back to Kota Kinabalu. We had made the rounds in Sabah and were left with many incredible Borneo memories. We found 235 bird species—well over a third of the birds on the island—including 39 of Borneo's 60 endemics and 59 endemic subspecies. We saw 18 different mammals, 10 of which are endemic. We saw the world's smallest orchid and the world's largest flower. A Paradise Flying Tree Snake slithered past our feet at Sukau, and the stunning Rajah Brooke's Birdwing butterfly fluttered along the Danum Valley canopy walkway. It was truly the adventure of a lifetime.

One of my favorite birding mottos goes like this: Go the extra mile and you will be rewarded. Borneo is a few extra miles away, but its rewards are rich and abundant. The state of Sabah supports the best protected habitats on the island, and they are all within reach. Join me on our next trip to Borneo, and give yourself a nature experience like no other on Earth.

Photos: Danum Valley Canopy Walkway (Steve Shunk - SS), Crimson-headed Partridge (SS), Mating Mountain Barbets (SS), Indigo Flycatcher (Delsa Anderl - DA), Olive-backed Woodpecker (DA), Storm's Stork (SS), Male Proboscis Monkey (SS), White-crowned Hornbill (SS), Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher (SS), White-bellied Woodpecker (SS), Whitehead's Trogon (SS), Rajah Brooke's Birdwing (SS), Bornean Forest Dragon (SS), Group Birding (SS), Blue-banded Peacock (SS), Whitehead's Broadbill (DA), Canopy Walkway (SS), Wallace's Hawk-Eagle (DA), Forest Scene (DA), Paradise Tree Snake (DA), Birding the botanical gardens (SS), Yellow-vented Bulbul (DA), Great Mormon (DA), Lesser Green Leafbird (DA), Group (SS), Buffy Fish-Owl (DA), Sabah Partridge (DA), Rhinoceros Hornbill (DA), Proboscis Monkey (Donna Hogge - DH), River scenic (DA), White-bellied Sea-Eagle (DA), Oriental-pied Hornbill (DH), Orangutan (DH), Pigtail Macaque (DH), Group Birding (Mirwan Mustapha)