

Birding in Borneo – The Best of Sabah

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1 Fly London to Kuala Lumpur

Day 2 Tambunan

Day 3 - 5 Kota Kinabalu NP

Day 6 - 7 Sepilok Forest Reserve

Day 8 - 9 Kinabatangan River

Day 10-12 Danum Valley

Day 13 Depart Borneo

Day 14 Arrive London

Departs

September/October

Focus

Birds & Mammals

Grading

A/B. Day walks only.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code MYS01) or brochure

Highlights

- Varied and colourful birdlife in pristine montane and lowland rainforests
- Up to eight hornbill species, Pittas, Bornean Bristlehead and many other endemics
- Orangutan, Proboscis Monkey, Pygmy Elephant and other mammals
- A dusk visit to the Gomantong Caves
- Hides may produce Bornean Ground Cuckoo, Bulwer's Pheasant and Bornean Banded Pitta
- Expertly guided by a Malaysian ornithologist



Bornean Bristlehead, Rhinoceros Hornbill and Pygmy Elephant



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Introduction

Sabah is widely recognised as one of the most productive birding destinations in South-East Asia and boasts an amazing avifauna which includes such mouth-watering possibilities as Bornean Bristlehead (in its own endemic family), sumptuous Pittas (including the endemic Blue-headed and Black-crowned), several species of Broadbills and Trogons, the endangered Storm's Stork (at one of its few remaining strongholds), amazing Rhinoceros Hornbills (and up to seven other hornbill species), raptors such as Wallace's Hawk Eagle and endemic White-fronted Falconet, plus Buffy Fish Owl and a wealth of other rainforest birds.

At the amazing Gomantong Caves, dusk unveils the spectacular exodus of millions of bats (eight or more species roost in the caves). Bat Hawks and Peregrine Falcons will utilise this amazing exodus too, exploiting this abundant food supply. Blue-headed Pitta, Wreathed or Bushy-crested Hornbills, and even an Orangutan are often found in the surrounding reserve.

This semi-autonomous region in the north-east corner of Borneo is familiar territory for Naturetrek and we have been operating wildlife tours to Sabah for over 20 years. This highly varied tour will cover the very best habitats of Sabah, focusing on finding a great many of the region's birds; we can hope to find around 200 bird species, while also finding many key mammal species including wild Orangutans.



Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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

In Flight

We depart London on a direct scheduled flight to Kuala Lumpur.

Day 2

Kota Kinabalu

In the early hours of this morning we will arrive in Kuala Lumpur, the ultra-modern and rapidly expanding capital of Malaysia. We will soon board our onward flight to Kota Kinabalu in Sabah and we should arrive in the early afternoon. We will then board a minibus and drive for around 2 hours to the town of Tambunan. Tambunan is a small town a short distance from Trusmadi Park and it means we only have a short drive of around 30 minutes the following morning for our planned hide session. On arrival it will be time to settle into our rooms and relax until dinner and for those who wish, there will be an evening/night walk to look for Bornean Frogmouth and other nocturnal birds and small mammals of the area.

Day 3

Trusmadi & Kota Kinabalu National Park

This morning we will visit the Trusmadi Birdstation, which is a drive of around 25 minutes. Located on the slopes of Malaysia's second highest mountain, Mount Trusmadi, this collection of bird hides offers an extraordinary chance to watch a range of very special birds at close range. Located just a 3-minute drive from Trusmadi's main gate, the hide we shall visit is set up for the rare Bulwer's Pheasant with many other species too. These shy pheasants are daily visitors to the hide along with up to 30 Crested Partridges and a number of other elusive ground birds including the much-sought-after Bornean Banded Pitta. We may also enjoy Orange-headed Thrush, Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush, Indigo Flycatcher and possibly Whitehead's Trogon amongst a range of other exciting species.

These purpose-built photography and observation hides are equipped with a basic bathroom as well as a small kitchen. Chairs are simple but cushions are available. We will aim to arrive here at around 0700, so as to make the most of the peak activity. After what will surely be a wonderful time witnessing some beautiful birds, we will depart around mid-afternoon to continue on to the Kinabalu National Park.



The Kinabalu National Park is Malaysia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site. The national park is officially recognised as one of the most important biological sites in the world with more than 4,500 species of flora and fauna, including 326 bird species, 100 mammals and over 110 land snail species! There is also a wonderful flora with a great range of different pitcher plant species of particular interest.

At 4,101 metres (13,455 feet), the park's namesake, Mount Kinabalu, is the highest mountain between the eastern Himalaya and New Guinea. Many visitors wish to trek to the summit to witness the spectacular sunrise over the surrounding lush Bornean hills but we will be focusing our attentions on the lower elevations to find a fantastic range of species. For the next three nights we will be based at the national park, and depending on our arrival time today, we will explore the surroundings of our accommodation soon after arrival to see our first species of this area.

Days 4 - 5

Kinabalu National Park

For the next two full days we will enjoy a flexible, relaxed schedule to see as much as we can in this special habitat. We will typically start with an early morning excursion before breakfast, followed by exploring the excellent network of trails that radiate out into the montane evergreen mossy forest.

This habitat is a complete contrast to the lowland rainforest we will experience later on the tour, with a high-altitude moss- and lichen-covered forest providing a habitat for a whole host of endemic species. Eighteen Bornean endemics can be found here and just some of the species we may encounter will be Mountain Black-eye, Mountain Blackbird, Bornean Treepie, Kinabalu Serpent Eagle, Red-breasted Wood Partridge, Bornean Mountain Whistler, Orange-headed Thrush, Everett's Thrush and Eyebrowed Thrush to name but a few.

In the mixed feeding flocks that rove the forest we will find many of the commoner species such as Chestnut-hooded and Sunda Laughingthrushes, Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Mountain Leaf-warbler and Yellow-breasted Warbler, White-throated Fantail, Grey-throated Babbler, Black-capped White-eye, Temminck's Sunbird, Ashy and Spangled Drongos, Black and Crimson Orioles, Bornean Green Magpie and Bornean Treepie. Amongst these we will also search for some of the harder-to-find species including Crimson-headed Partridge, Temminck's Babbler, Black-breasted Fruithunter, Eyebrowed Jungle Flycatcher, Bornean Stubtail and, of course, the legendary Whitehead's trio: Whitehead's Trogon, Spiderhunter and Broadbill. While there is not the diversity of large mammals



Whitehead's Trogon (Male)



Whitehead's Broadbill

here, there is a host of squirrels and treeshrews to look for, including the delightful Whitehead's Pygmy Squirrel, which we will look out for. We are sure to encounter a range of mammals as we seek the birds throughout the tour. Some of the trails here vary in elevation on narrow paths but most of the walks will be along the road here, as this is the best tactic for finding the greatest number of species. Usually, we would start in the early morning up at Timpohon Gate at 1800 metres above sea level (this is the entrance to the mountain climbing trail) and bird here for 1-2 hours. Activity is excellent here and a lot of the endemics can be found. Then it will be a case of slowly working back along the road heading downhill in search of fruiting/flowering trees and mixed flocks passing across the road.

This will be an excellent full two days of birding within the national park with the intention of finding as many of the park's special birds as we can, while seeing the various squirrels and tree shrews as we go!

Day 6

Kinabalu to Sepilok Forest Reserve

After a wonderful time at higher elevation, today we will continue our journey and next head into the humid lowland primary rainforest reserve of Sepilok. The Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve covers an area of 4,294 ha (10,610 acres), much of which is virgin rainforest. This special reserve is a designated Important Bird Area by BirdLife International and holds over 300 species, as well as 60 to 80 Orangutans living free in the reserve here.



Bornean Bristlehead

We will leave Kinabalu National Park at around 9am and it will take us around 5 hours to reach Sepilok, making stops en route as we need. We plan to make a short stop at a new hide on the way, where we have the chance to observe Hooded Pitta, White-crowned Shama, Pink-necked Green-Pigeon, Indian Cuckoo and various flowerpeckers and sunbirds. It is just a short 2-3 minute walk from the car park and we can spend a short time at this basic hide to break the journey and see some more species. For the following two nights we will be based at the Sepilok Nature Lodge. Arriving in the mid-late afternoon, we will settle into our rooms before visiting the Rainforest Discovery Centre, with its impressive (solid) canopy walkway and excellent forest trails. Highlights on a visit here might include the endemic and striking Bornean Bristlehead, Blue-headed Pitta, Rufous-collared Kingfisher, Blue-throated Bee-eater, up to eight species of hornbill, Red-naped and Scarlet-rumped Trogons, White-bellied, Buff-rumped and Buff-necked Woodpeckers, Black-and-red and Black-and-yellow Broadbills, Rufous-bellied Eagle, Grey-rumped Treeswift and Silver-rumped Spinetail, to name just a small selection. Although we will be concentrating on the birdlife we will also make an effort to find mammals such as Orangutans, which are sometimes seen here,

while a range of other mammals are also possible, including Red Giant Flying Squirrels which emerge from their nest boxes at dusk.

Day 7

Sepilok Forest Reserve

Today we will have a full day to explore the Sepilok area, birding around the lodge grounds, and we will again return to the Rainforest Discovery Centre to try and find any species which may have eluded us the previous day. We will be trying to find such targets as Black-crowned Pitta, Red-naped Trogon, Diard's Trogon, White-crowned Shama, Black-and-red, Black-and-yellow and Brown Broadbills, with a range of other wildlife, of course. At some point today we will also visit the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre. The centre was established in 1964 to help once-captive or displaced Orangutans learn how to fend for themselves in the wild once more. This endearing ape has suffered badly over the past decades with deforestation and capture as pets and the staff at Sepilok do invaluable work helping the animals return to their rainforest home, as well as studying wild Orangutans in the surrounding forests. Semi-rehabilitated animals live in the surrounding forests but make their way back to the Centre twice a day for the free meals on offer, although attendance at meal times may be affected by the counter-attraction of ripening fruits in the forest! Since the sanctuary is located on the edge of Kabili Sepilok Forest Reserve and we are walking through excellent habitat, it is also a superb area in which to find a range of birds and other wildlife and our visit supports the wonderful work they do. We will also be able to make a short visit to the nearby Sun Bear sanctuary while we are here to support the excellent work that they do in helping this species.

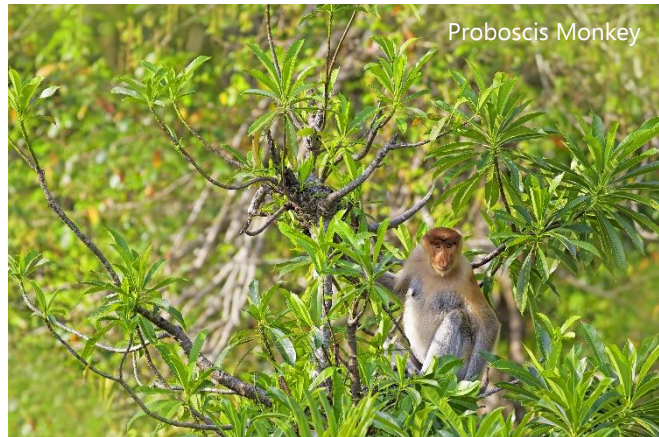
In the evening, we will make sure we are on the canopy walkway of the Rainforest Discovery Centre at dusk in order to see Red Giant Flying Squirrels emerge from their nests. These squirrels can 'fly' up to 500 feet between trees, which is a wonderful sight to see, and nest boxes have been put up for them here. We will again return for dinner at the lodge, and for those who wish, we will then head out for a night walk to search for nocturnal wildlife once more. A Colugo or Slow Loris may be picked out in the spotlight, or even a sleeping Hooded Pitta or Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher! Exploring at night is always exciting.

Day 8

Sepilok to Kinabatangan River

Again, before breakfast there will be an optional birding outing from the lodge itself where we may find Crimson and Van Hasselt's Sunbirds, Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker, Asian Fairy Bluebird and much more. At around 1100 we will begin our journey to the Kinabatangan River, which will take around 2 hours. We will stay on the Kinabatangan River for two nights.

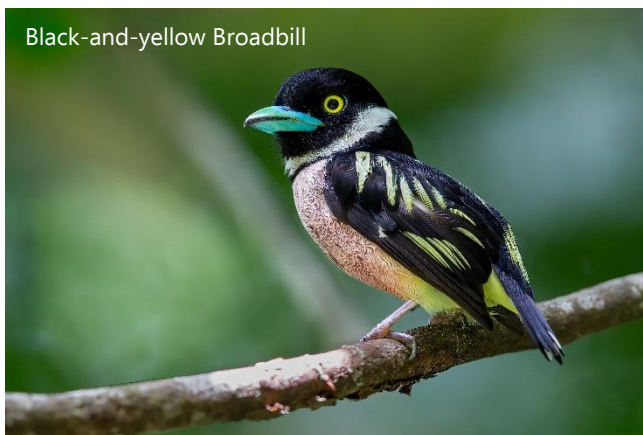
The Kinabatangan River is home to one of the highest concentrations of wildlife in all of Borneo. A wonderful corridor of protected forest awaits us and on arrival, we shall settle into our lodge before taking a cruise in the mid-afternoon. We will look for Orangutans and Pygmy Elephants, which are two mammal targets here, as we enjoy the excellent birding in this rich riverine habitat.



This is also the very best place to find troops of Proboscis Monkeys. These endemic primates feed in large family groups of up to 30 or more individuals in the riverside trees. These will be mainly females and young animals with a dominant male.

Birding in the Kinabatangan is rather easy and we will be birding largely from a boat for the majority of our time along the waterways here. Kingfishers, raptors, hornbills, and much more reside in abundance in this region. We may enjoy Changeable Hawk Eagle, Wreathed, Wrinkled, Asian Black and White-crowned Hornbills and we will aim for the very rare and range-restricted Storm's Stork. Stork-billed, Collared and Blue-eared Kingfishers will be targets and just some of the special birds we will enjoy.

Back at the lodge we will enjoy dinner and head out on a night walk for those who wish. Nocturnal



wildlife such as Slow Loris, Western Tarsier, Civet, Great Mouse Deer and more can be found. The lodge has excellent trails and boardwalks for searching for wildlife around the property. Orangutans and Silver Leaf Langurs are often on the property and the birding is excellent with the chance of Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Rufous Woodpecker, Lesser Cuckoo-Shrike and Dark-throated Oriole to name just a few.

Day 9

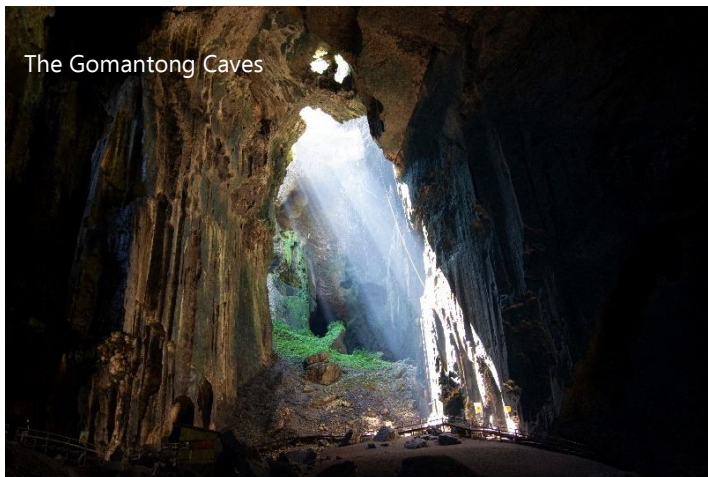
Kinabatangan River & Gomantong Caves

Today we will watch the sunrise on an early morning river cruise on the Kinabatangan River. The floodplain of the Lower Kinabatangan River is a low-lying wilderness covered by a patchwork of natural rainforest and a corridor of protected forest from oil-palm plantations. The whole area is dotted with oxbow lakes and limestone outcrops, providing a wonderful habitat.



The Kinabatangan River

We will search again for species including Storm's Stork (this area represents one of the most reliable sites for this endangered species anywhere), while White-fronted Falconet may be found, and Wallace's Hawk-eagle, White-bellied Sea Eagle and Lesser Fish Eagle are all possible. Hooded and Black-headed Pittas (with an outside chance of Giant Pitta), Diard's Trogon, Stork-billed, Blue-eared and Oriental Dwarf Kingfishers, Moustached Hawk-cuckoo, Bat Hawk, Buffy Fish Owl, Whiskered Treeswift, up to four species of malkoha and all eight hornbill species have been recorded here. Of course there are many smaller birds as well. The river also provides an opportunity to find Pygmy Elephants and our guides will know if a herd is in the area, and we shall try to see them! Luck is of course needed, however. After a wonderful start to the day on the river we will return to our lodge to relax or explore around the grounds before lunch. Many birds can be seen from the lodge with various babblers, bulbuls and flycatchers to keep us entertained! It's also a great place for photographing dragonflies and butterflies.



The Gomantong Caves

After lunch, we will take a short boat ride and overland transfer of around 15 minutes to the world-famous Gomantong Caves. We will spend the afternoon walking in the reserve and also explore inside the caves themselves for those who wish. We will take our time to enjoy the spectacle provided by these awesome caverns. Here there are two massive cathedral-like cave systems that penetrate deep inside two huge limestone outcrops

concealed amongst an area of lowland rainforest not far from the Kinabatangan River. The caves tower to staggering heights of 100 metres or more and are home to literally millions of bats and, seasonally, swiftlets. It is here that every 3-4 months local people come, for a week at a time, to gather the nests that are used to make 'bird's nest soup'. The way in which these people reach the heights of these caves on precarious, locally made ropes and bamboo ladders is terrifying and

incredible. It is still of such economic value to the local people here, that each of the cave entrances is guarded day and night throughout the year.

Four species of swiftlet nest inside the caves: Black-nest, Mossy-nest, Edible-nest and Glossy Swiftlet. The Black-nest Swiftlet is by far the most abundant, and its nests (which are black because they are lined both inside and out with body feathers) form the bulk of the harvest. However, it is the Edible-nest Swiftlets' white nests, made entirely of saliva, that fetch the highest prices as the greatest delicacy of all. To ensure minimum disturbance, the nests that are taken are strictly those that are empty, and judging from the numbers of swiftlets, this harvest, which has been going on for centuries, is not doing too much harm!

As well as visiting one of the main caves, we will look for wildlife in the rich rainforest along the entrance road, perhaps finding a Blue-headed Pitta, Wreathed or Bushy-crested Hornbills, or even an Orangutan which are frequently seen here. Towards dusk we will wait outside the caves to observe the spectacular exodus of millions of bats (eight or more species roost in the caves) and to watch the Bat Hawks and Peregrines which exploit the abundant food supply. After a special afternoon we will return the short distance to the lodge for dinner. After dinner we will set out for a night cruise on the river in search of nocturnal wildlife on the riverbanks and in the trees lining the river and smaller tributaries. It can be a good time to find Saltwater Crocodiles and nocturnal mammals.

Day 10

Kinabatangan to the Danum Valley

This morning we will leave the river and travel to our final location – the incredible lowland rainforest of the Danum Valley Conservation Area. Here we will stay at the Langom Research Station for three nights. It will be an early start this morning as we look to leave the lodge at around 5.30am in order to reach a very special hide on the way. After a drive of around 2.5 hours we will arrive at the hide, and here we hope to see the highly sought-after



Bornean Ground Cuckoo

Bornean Ground Cuckoo. This wonderfully iridescent bird is incredibly difficult to see if you don't visit a specialist hide, and here we indeed have an excellent chance of success. Typically confined to primary and tall mature secondary forest, the species runs and jumps along the forest floor in search of insects, large beetles and ants. We will be stationed in this purpose-built hide for the majority of the morning, depending on our luck with seeing the bird. The hide is basic but with a flushing toilet, a fan, and chairs we will be comfortable as we wait and hope to see this special endemic species.

Having hopefully been successful with our quest to see the Bornean Ground Cuckoo, we will then drive on to the wonderful Danum Valley Conservation Area. This will be a drive of around 2 hours. Having 438 square kilometres of undisturbed lowland rainforest, the Danum Valley was only opened as recently as 1986 and is managed jointly by the Sabah Foundation, the Sabah Forest Department, the Sabah campus of the National University and the Royal Society of London. A number of international scientists are based at the Danum Valley Field Centre, conducting a variety of research projects. Within the Danum Valley Conservation Area, 275 species of birds, 110 mammals, 72 reptiles, 56 amphibians and 37 fish species have been recorded so far. We will do our best to see a good selection of these, particularly the birds and mammals, though it is most important to appreciate that, despite incredible species variety in primary rainforests, the density of each species is often extremely low. Rainforest birding and mammal-viewing, therefore, demand stealth and patience (silence and minimal movement when we stop to listen and wait) and a great degree of persistence. Neutral-coloured clothing is also an advantage.

We will arrive at our lodge in the mid-late afternoon and settle into our simple but comfortable rooms here surrounded by the forest, ensuring we are right in the heart of the birding action for our visit. There will be time for some relaxed birding around the grounds and after dinner we will head out for a night drive for those who wish, spotlighting in search of mammals and birds. The night drives can be very productive



Sunda Leopard Cat

here with Leopard Cat a very regular sight, and Malay, Island Palm and Bornean-striped Civets all being possible. Black Giant Flying Squirrels are often found and Slow Loris too. Although extremely rare, there have been sightings of Sunda Clouded Leopard and Marbled Cat here also. Buffy Fish Owl is quite common, and we will also hope for Barred Eagle Owl, Brown Wood Owl and Sunda Frogmouth.

Days 11 -12

The Danum Valley

For the next two full days, the schedule will be relaxed birding walks, dictated by the fruiting and flowering trees, weather and the most up-to-date sightings. We will walk from the lodge along the tracks that lead in and out of the area and also take some drives. Depending on which trees are fruiting, it will be walking and driving along the access roads and walking the trails.

There will typically be around 4 hours of vehicle safaris each day, stopping and starting for wildlife, and the rest will be walking on tracks and trails from the lodge. The programme will be kept flexible with the aim of seeing a fantastic range of species.

Highlights during our time here are many and include Rhinoceros, Wreathed and Helmeted Hornbills, Great Argus and Crested Fireback Pheasants, Great-billed Heron, Large Green, Thick-billed and Little Green Pigeons, Blue-headed and Black-headed Pittas, leafbirds, malkohas and trogons, Brown Wood Owl, Great Slaty, Crimson-winged and Olive-backed Woodpeckers, Blue-banded Kingfisher and White-fronted Falconet, along with various spiderhunters and sunbirds, bulbuls and babblers! The list of possibilities goes on and members of many different bird families can be seen. With various trails and tracks to choose from, we will use our time to ensure that we maximise our birdwatching opportunities in this delightful area of forest.



Again, after dinner there will be the opportunity for a night drive or walk as we head out with the spotlight in search of wildlife.

Day 13

Transfer to Airport

Today we will have some final early morning birding and a last chance to search for species we may have previously missed as we enjoy this wonderful habitat one last time. We will then be transferring to Lahad Datu Airport, which takes around 2.5 hours, before taking a flight to Kota Kinabalu and then onwards to Kuala Lumpur and then Heathrow.

Day 14

London

After the change of aircraft at Kuala Lumpur and an overnight flight, we are due to arrive back in London in the early morning.

Tour Grading & Focus

A/B. There is not a great deal of walking on the tour and a lot of the time we do have our minibus or 4x4 on hand to limit walking when necessary and to maximise our time. Most of the trails are good, although some can be narrow and slippery after rain. Whilst the walks should not be strenuous, the heat and humidity can be tiring at times.

Some trails at Kinabalu National Park are a little steep in places but while walking along the road section, our vehicle will be on standby so if anybody has any trouble, it's no problem to be picked up or dropped off. They are all good paths, often with rails and we will be moving very slowly as we search for birds and wildlife. The night walk at Langom is quite narrow and downhill, while others

are largely flat. A lot of the birding will be done with the 4WD and we can get on and off as we wish.

This birding tour aims to find as many of Sabah's wonderful bird species as we can while also trying to see the star mammals along the way. As we are birding, we will be aiming for the mammals too and key species such as Orangutan, Proboscis Monkey and Elephant will be targeted, while spotlighting sessions will reveal many more mammals. A wonderful cross-section of Sabah's wildlife can be expected on this holiday with all major habitat types covered.

Hides

We will be visiting two hides during the tour.

The Trusmadi Birdhide CP Song and its basic amenities are shown below: There is a basic bathroom as well as a small kitchen. Chairs are simple but cushions are available.



The Bornean Ground Cuckoo Hide: The walk is less than 100m to the hide on flat ground though it can get quite muddy after rain. The hide is basic but with a flushing toilet, a fan, and chairs we will be as comfortable as possible.



Weather, Clothing & Equipment

Malaysia has a typical tropical climate. It is hot and humid all year round. The temperature rarely drops below 20C and usually climbs to 30C or more during the day. The wet season in Sabah is generally considered to run from June to December (November and December being the wettest). However, being a tropical country, it can rain at any time, frequently and heavily. When not raining, however, it is usually sunny! Recently locals have begun to deny any pattern to the weather, saying that relying on wet and dry seasons is a thing of the past. You can reasonably expect plenty of sun, plenty of rain and hot temperatures. In Kinabalu National Park it will be noticeably cooler and mornings can be chilly with more wind possible here. Binoculars are, of course, essential for this holiday, and a telescope will be useful if you have one.

What's Included

All food is included, as well as water which is provided throughout and snacks which are provided on our longer transfers in vehicles. The Bornean government has implemented a tourist tax to be paid upon checking in/out of hotels, at the cost of MYR10 per room per night (about £2). Please be aware that this cost needs to be covered by yourself personally at each lodge and hotel throughout your holiday. It seems sometimes they ask for this/added it to a final check out invoice but other times they do not.

At Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, any camera with a zoom lens from 100 to 400mm, video camera or other video recording equipment for personal use is chargeable at RM10.00 per unit (around £2). Any camera (**fixed lens** - 400mm and above) or any film-making equipment is chargeable at RM1,000.00 per unit (around £200). The mode of payment is cash only. Please note that group members often carry long lenses and no one has ever paid £200. This is really only for film-making equipment and your local guide makes sure no one is paying the high amount. So please do not worry about that.

Extending Your Holiday

Extensions are possible on this itinerary and a popular option is to extend to Gaya Island Resort which is just offshore of Kota Kinabalu. This is the ideal extension for those wishing to relax, with a lovely beach and snorkelling possible, and there is also some great intact forest on the island so birding is also possible.

If you wished to attempt to see the Bornean Peacock Pheasant, there is a hide to view this special bird and an extension can be arranged if you wish. Please enquire if this is of interest.

Please speak to operations manager Tom Mabbett if you would like further details.

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 at the time of booking.

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