Outline itinerary

Day 1  Depart London
Day 3  Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre & Sun Bear Conservation Centre. Transfer Kinabatangan River.
Days 4-5  Kinabatangan River
Days 6-11  Tabin Wildlife Reserve
Day 12  Depart Lahad Datu
Day 13  Arrive London
Departs  April

Focus
Borneo’s nocturnal wildlife

Grading
Grade B. A mix of walks, boat rides and long night-drives.

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code MYS06) or brochure

Highlights:
- Wild Orang-utans, Proboscis Monkeys and other primates
- Possibilities of rare mammals including: Asian Elephants, Clouded Leopard and Bornean Gibbon
- Boat excursions along the Kinabatangan River

Images from top: Western Tarsier, Slow Loris & Buffy Fish Owl
Introduction

As the sun sets and the light of the day surrenders to the darkness of night, many creatures of the rainforest, withdrawn from view during daylight, stir from their slumber and set out to patrol their territories and search for food. Concealed by the darkness to the naked eye, these animals often pass unnoticed, unseen by naturalists. Yet with the aid of a spotlight, the shine from their reflective eyes is revealed and a little-known world of night wildlife is unveiled.

Unlike most nature tours, which operate by day with occasional night sorties, on this new tour we have turned the whole model on its head. We ourselves become largely nocturnal and, spotlight in hand, we undertake lengthy night safaris, affording us excellent chances of seeing many beautiful night animals of the Bornean forest.

Our tour begins with a night in Sepilok, in the northeast of Borneo, in the Malaysian state of Sabah. Sepilok is famous for its Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre where more than 700 animals have been returned to the forest and the centre offers a chance to see and photograph these wonderful animals at close quarters. Next door is the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre which holds many rescued animals in large naturalistic enclosures and, in addition to advocating the species’ conservation, is beginning to release carefully selected bears into the wild.

From Sepilok we move to the beautiful Kinabatangan River, for a 3 night stay at the delightful Sukau Rainforest Lodge. It is here that our nocturnal safaris truly begin and we will enjoy cruising the river and its tributary creeks at night. Here, in a world of mud and tidal forest, we will search for the distinctive eye-shine of such charismatic animals as Reticulated Pythons, Saltwater Crocodiles and the rare Flat-headed Cat. We will also take day cruises along the river in the hope of seeing Storm’s Stork, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Long-tailed Macaque, Bornean Pygmy Elephant, Proboscis Monkey, Rhinoceros and Wrinkled Hornbills, and the beautiful Silvered Langur.

From Sukau we travel by land to Tabin, via the dramatic Gomantong Caves, where we are able to enjoy the spectacle of thousands of nesting swiftlets and several million roosting bats. The area is also excellent for wild Bornean Orang-utans and the lovely Maroon Langur, both of which we will search for before continuing our journey to Tabin Wildlife Resort, our base for the next six nights of nocturnal exploration.
Tabin is unique in that it has, in the core of the reserve, virgin rainforest, surrounded by regenerating secondary forest, which itself is surrounded by plantations of oil palm. Though oil palm is a serious problem in Borneo, with huge areas of native forest destroyed for its cultivation, in Tabin it counterintuitively makes many mammal species easier to observe. Oil palm plantations have a year-round supply of food for small mammals which cross from the secondary forest to feed by night. This in turn means that many predators patrol the roads between the forest and plantations, leading to quite remarkable mammal-watching for those prepared to patrol Tabin’s roads for long hours by night.

On the entrance road to the resort, between forest and plantation, we have an excellent chance of encountering a fabulous array of species. The yellow-white eye shine of both Common Palm and Malay Civets is very commonly seen in the road ahead, while Bearded Pigs bolt at our vehicle’s approach. The bright green eyes of Red Giant Flying and Black Flying-Squirrels are often found in the forest edge and with luck we will see them plane over the road into the plantations. Leopard cats, hunting in the verge, turn to stare at us with their great moon-like eyes. Delving further in to the forest our spotlights may fall on the enormous eyes of a Bornean Slow Loris, the tiny light in a Western Tarsier’s eyes, or perhaps the ungainly form of a Colugo wrapping a tree in its great dermal flap. With very good luck our efforts might be repaid with a sighting of a Sunda Clouded Leopard or a Marbled Cat. As dawn begins to break and we return to our comfortable lodge we shall listen for the beautiful sobbing call of the Bornean Gibbon and will stop at sites for both Helmeted Hornbill and Hose’s Langur.

This is not a normal, gently-paced Naturetrek tour. It involves very long night drives from our main base at Tabin Wildlife Reserve, where mammal-watching is typically superb. Night drives may start late in the night, after road traffic has died down and may last until dawn, depending on what our local guides decide. Days may therefore be spent recovering and recharging batteries (literal and metaphorical), rather than exploring the forest as would be typical on a Naturetrek tour. While we will also hope to see a range of other wildlife, it should be stressed that this is not the tour for people wanting a gentle introduction to Borneo’s wonderful wildlife. This is a tour for people with a passion for mammals and the desire to spend long hours looking for them by night.
Day 1

We will depart around midday from London Heathrow on board a scheduled flight to Kuala Lumpur.

Day 2

In the early hours of this morning we will arrive in Kuala Lumpur. After a wait in transit we will board an onward flight to Sandakan in Sabah, and then drive 30 minutes to the Sepilok Nature Resort.

This afternoon we stay close to Sepilok, visiting a habituated group of Proboscis Monkeys in nearby mangroves. This beautiful monkey is endemic to Borneo and, while it is common along the Kinabatangan River, our best photographic opportunities should be here.

We will spend tonight at the attractive Sepilok Nature Resort located on the edge of Kabili Sepilok Forest Reserve, close to the Orang-utan sanctuary.

Day 3

Sepilok was established in 1964 to return orphaned Bornean Orang-utans to the wild. This endearing ape has suffered badly over the past few decades due to ongoing deforestation and illegal capture for the pet trade. Staff at Sepilok undertake invaluable work helping the animals return to their rainforest home, as well as studying wild Orang-utans in the surrounding forests. Since the sanctuary is located on the edge of the 43 square kilometre Kabili Sepilok Forest Reserve, it is an excellent area in which to look for mammals and other wildlife.

After breakfast at the resort, we will take a short walk to the Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre where we will spend part of the morning visiting the centre and exploring the surrounding forests. Sepilok is a fascinating place to begin our tour and learn about Orang-utan ecology. 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 consisting of banana and milk, although attendance at meal times may be affected by the counter attraction of ripening fruits in the forest! Here we will not only hope to see Orang-utan, but wild visitors may include: Plantain Squirrel, Prevost’s Squirrel, Giant Squirrel, Maroon Langur, Bornean Gibbon, Pig-tailed, and Long-tailed Macaques.
For those interested in birds, we will look out for such species as the spectacular Black-and-Red-Broadbill, Scarlet-rumped Trogon, the endemic Bornean Bristlehead and various species of barbet, sunbird, flycatcher and spiderhunter in the surrounding forest reserve. Those interested in insects are sure to be amazed by the staggering diversity of butterflies which will include several species of spectacular bird-wing butterfly.

Next we will visit the Sun Bear Conservation Centre. This relatively new centre, established in 2008, provides care and rehabilitation for orphaned and captive Malay Sun Bears, with the goal of releasing them to the wild and raising awareness of their plight. The Malay Sun Bear is the smallest bear and is found only in south-east Asia. Like the Orang-utan, it is threatened by ongoing deforestation, and is also hunted illegally for medicine and captured for the pet trade.

At lunchtime we move to the town of Sandakan where, after lunch, we will take a boat upstream on the Kinabatangan River to Sukau Rainforest Lodge where we will spend the next three nights. The Kinabatangan River is the second longest river in Malaysia, and is dotted with oxbow lakes, sandstone hills and limestone outcrops. The surrounding floodplains consist of low-lying wilderness covered by a patchwork of natural rainforest and ever-encroaching palm oil plantations, and is the home to a wealth of wildlife. It is here that we have the opportunity to see our first truly wild Orang-utans, and the remarkable Proboscis Monkey. Along the way we are also likely to see White-bellied Sea-Eagles, Brahminy Kites, Long-tailed Macaques and several species of hornbill.

In the evening we will take our first night cruise, on the river and along its creeks, in search of civets, Reticulated Pythons, Saltwater Crocodiles and the rare Flat-headed Cat.

Days 4 & 5

While staying at the Sukau Rainforest Lodge, our days will consist of early morning and mid-afternoon boat trips along the river and into the tributaries and oxbow lakes. Once off the main river channel the boatman of our motorised canoe will turn off the noisy diesel engine and switch on the low-powered and silent electric motor, enabling us to appreciate the sights and sounds of this rich wilderness. Here we will hope to see wild Orang-utans making their way slowly through the riverside canopy or, in the late afternoon, watch them making their night-time nests. Amongst the sounds of the rainforest, we will be sure to hear the distinctive ‘whoop whoop’ vocalisation from
the Bornean Gibbon, echoing through the forest. These vigorous calls and displays are a way in which these charismatic primates defend their strict territories. We will scan the canopy in search of this energetic species; however catching a glimpse may be a challenge as they are the world’s fastest moving primate, swinging through the trees at an impressive 34mph! The Kinabatangan River is also an excellent place to watch troupes of the bizarre Proboscis Monkey crashing through the branches and jumping across the flooded channels. These comical creatures will often sit in the trees and watch us float by, hands resting beside their huge pot-bellies, with the males displaying their extraordinary floppy noses.

Whilst travelling along the river, we have a chance of encountering a herd of Pygmy Elephants, feeding on the riverside vegetation or bathing in the shallows. Weather permitting, our evenings will be spent cruising the river, spotlighting in search of the more elusive nocturnal species of the Bornean rainforest. With a little luck we can hope to encounter a Slow Loris foraging amongst the trees, or a Leopard Cat or Flat-headed Cat moving stealthily across the forest floor. Fruiting trees are likely to attract the attention of Civets, and very occasionally we may even come across the smallest of Borneo’s primates, the Western Tarsier, or the tiny Temminck’s Flying Squirrel.

In addition to an impressive array of mammals we also hope to see some of Borneo’s magnificent avifauna including Rhinoceros, Helmeted, Black, Oriental, Pied, Bushy-crested, Wreathed and Wrinkled Hornbills, Blue-eared and Stork-billed Kingfishers, Jerdon’s Baza, Blyth’s Hawk-Eagle, Black-and-Red and Black-and-Yellow Broadbills, and if we are very lucky perhaps a pair of the endangered Storm’s Storks.

We will also take time to wander very gently along the short trails into the secondary forest just around our lodge where, with patience, a great variety of birds can be found, with more chances for wild Orang-utan. Many mammals and birds can also be seen from the lodge veranda, while we
can relax with a cold drink, especially if one or two of the adjacent trees are fruiting. It is also a great place for photographing dragonflies and butterflies.

**Days 6 to 11**

This morning we will take a short boat ride to the village of Sukau and then a short drive to the spectacular Gomantong Caves. Here, there are two complex cave systems that penetrate deep inside the largest limestone outcrop, known as Gomantong Hill. The caves are located in a protected area, surrounded by lowland rainforest, and are inhabited by wild Orang-utans and other primates, not far from the Kinabatangan River. The two intricate cave systems are divided into the Simud Hitam, meaning Black Cave, which is the accessible cave we will be visiting, and Simud Putih, meaning White Cave, which lies above. The cave systems tower to staggering heights of 100 metres or more and are home to literally millions of bats and swiftlets. It is here that every 3-4 months local tribesmen come, for a week at a time, to gather the nests that are harvested to make ‘birds-nest soup’. This ancient tradition is a high risk job, and the way in which these people reach the heights of these caves on precarious, locally-made ropes and bamboo ladders is terrifying and incredible. Standing at the bottom it is almost impossible to see the tiny specks of these fearless men clinging and climbing along the crevices in the roof of the caves. Although the middle men take most of the money it is still of such economic value to the tribesmen that each of the cave entrances are 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, found in the Sumid Putih, which 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 to judge from the numbers of swiftlets, this harvest which has been going on for centuries is not doing too much harm! In addition, the edible birds’ nests are protected under the Birds’ Nest Ordinance and the Forest Enactment of 1968 and locals must have a license for collecting the nests. As well as going inside one of the main caves on a wooden walkway, we will look for wildlife in the adjacent rainforest, perhaps finding a Blue-headed Pitta, Wreathed or Bushy-crested Hornbills, or even another Orang-utan.
From the Gomantong Caves we will drive to Tabin, where will spend the next six nights, exploring the reserve. This is a far longer stay at the reserve than most tours make, and reflects our strong focus on seeing the wonderful array of nocturnal wildlife to be found here.

Tabin Wildlife Reserve embraces mature secondary and primary lowland rainforest, and is home to many of Borneo’s larger iconic mammal species including Sunda Clouded Leopard, Malay Sun Bear, Orang-utan, Bornean Gibbon, Pygmy Elephant, and the Tembadau (Banteng). The 112,000 hectare reserve is an important area for conservation as it is one of the last remaining areas of Sabah’s original lowland forest. Here, ironically, the surrounding palm oil plantations make observing wildlife easier, as the plantations provide an alternative source of food, and also act as a hunting ground for many species. Diverse mammals are seen on the road between the wildlife reserve and the oil palms. Pygmy elephants are sometimes found crossing the road into the plantations in search of palm shoots to feed upon.

We will take extensive drives every night, often until late into the night, or starting in the middle of the night, in the hope of seeing the forest’s charismatic wildlife. Leopard Cats, Bearded Pigs, Common Palm Civets, Malay Civets and Red Giant Flying-Squirrels are likely to be quite common on our night safaris. In addition, especially on forays further into the forest, we may encounter Banded and Small-toothed Palm Civets, Colugo, Moonrat, Bornean Slow Loris, Western Tarsier, Yellow-throated Marten or Black Flying-Squirrel. With great good luck we might see a Sunda Clouded Leopard or a Marbled Cat, both of which are very occasionally seen here.

This superb area is not only a great place for mammals, but also for birds and boasts a reserve list of over 250 species; with luck it is possible to see 70 or 80 species in a day including many Borneo specialties. Given our long stay at Tabin we should have time to explore some of the forest here, though it is important to be aware that the search for night wildlife will be our overriding priority. Highlights of the birding at Tabin might include Great Argus and Crested Fireback Pheasants, Great-
billed Heron, Large Green, Thick-billed and Little Green Pigeons, Blue-headed and Black-headed Pittas, White-fronted Falconet, leafbirds, hornbills, malkohas and trogons. We will be accommodated in the Tabin Nature Resort in ideally situated tourist cabins, with a private balcony for views either into the forest, or across the Lipad River, ensuring we are right in the heart of the forest.

**Day 12**

We will spend as much time as possible wildlife-watching in the Tabin Reserve but later in the morning we must retrace our steps to Lahad Datu to catch a domestic flight to Kota Kinabalu where we connect with onward services to Kuala Lumpur and London.

**Day 13**

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

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**Focus & Tour grading**

The principle focus of our holiday will be seeing Bornean night mammals, though we will also be keen to see as much other Bornean wildlife as possible. Most of this tour is graded B – with a range of walks from our lodges. Most of the trails at Sepilok, Tabin and those from Sukau Rainforest Lodge are good, although some become a little more difficult if the season is very wet. Whilst the walks should not be strenuous, the heat and humidity can be tiring at times. Please note that the unusual nature of this tour means that long hours will be spent in vehicles at night searching forest roads for mammals.

**Weather**

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.
Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour, except for meals taken in transit at the airports.

Flights

For our holidays to Borneo we generally use Malaysia Airlines which fly to Sandakan from Kuala Lumpur on Peninsular Malaysia. Final flight timings will be sent to you with your final joining instructions, two weeks or so before your departure. Other carriers may also be used on occasions if MAS services are not available.

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, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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