Borneo’s Mammals - Deramakot Forest Reserve

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

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Departs
All year

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code MYS07) or brochure

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

Focus
Borneo’s mammals, birds and other wildlife

Highlights
- Wild Orang-utans, Proboscis Monkeys and other primates
- Boat excursions along the Kinabatangan River
- Possibilities of rare mammals including: Bornean Pygmy Elephants, Clouded Leopard and Sun Bear (all seen in 2017 and 2018)
- Bornean Bristlehead, Giant Pitta and Ground Cuckoo possible.

Images from top: Sunda Clouded Leopard (Chris Still), Whiskered Treeswift (Chris Still), Orang-utan (Tom Mabbett), all photos were taken whilst on the tour.
Introduction

In the past year, Borneo’s Deramakot Forest Reserve has created quite a stir amongst the mammal-watching community, with numerous tales of South-east Asia’s most sought-after species being seen on a regular basis, including the rare and elusive Sunda Clouded Leopard. Deramakot is clothed in a mix of primary and secondary growth rainforest and is a flagship reserve for the Sabah Forestry Department; indeed it is the only ‘Forest Stewardship Council’ certified concession in the whole of South-east Asia. On account of an ongoing programme of selective logging, and without the luxurious accommodation so often found in Bornean eco-lodges, this reserve has remained largely off the tourist trail and, therefore, free from the rules and regulations that often impinge upon wildlife-watching elsewhere in Asia. With no structured programmes, visitors are free to explore at will and it is perhaps this fact above any other that has made Deramakot such an exceptional location for rare mammal sightings. Indeed, on a recent 4-night/5-day recce, we recorded no fewer than 30 species, including Sunda Clouded Leopard, Sun Bear, Binturong, Bornean Pygmy Elephant and Bornean Orang-utan. Other notable recent sightings have included Marbled Cat, Otter Civet, Banteng, Sunda Skunk and Pentailed Tree Shrew, and the reserve also offers some superb birding with Bornean Falconet, Bornean Bristlehead, Bornean Ground Cuckoo and Giant Pitta amongst many special species. Sunda Clouded Leopard has now been seen in 2017 and 2018 with excellent views of this extremely elusive species.

This exciting new 14-day holiday begins with a night in Sepilok where we will have the opportunity to visit the Orang-utan and Sun Bear rehabilitation centres. We shall then proceed overland, via the Gomantong Caves, to Deramakot Forest Reserve for a 7-night stay; our daily programme will be dictated by the latest sightings and will involve a lot of nocturnal drives and spotlighting.

We shall then transfer to the beautiful Kinabatangan River for a 3-night stay at the delightful Kinabatangan Wetlands Lodge. Taking to the water, we will enjoy a mixed programme of walks and boat trips in search of Bornean Pygmy Elephant, Proboscis Monkey and Flat-headed Cat. It will then be time for us to depart and return back to the UK, but should you wish to explore Borneo further then extensions to areas such as Kinabalu National Park, Tabin or Danum Valley can be arranged upon request.
Itinerary

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

Day 1

Depart UK

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

Day 2

Land Kuala Lumpur, fly Sandakan and transfer to Sepilok

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 45 minutes to the Sepilok Nature Resort.

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.

We will take a short walk to the Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre where we will spend the afternoon 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, 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.

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  
Sun Bear Conservation Centre & transfer Deramakot Forest

After breakfast at the resort, 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.

Following the visit we shall leave and after an approximate 4 hours transfer over land we will arrive at Deramakot Forest Reserve, where will spend the next seven nights exploring the reserve through a mix of walks and drives. 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 with spotlighting sessions planned for each evening for those who wish.

Days 4 – 9  
Explore Deramakot Forest Reserve

Deramakot 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 55,000 hectare reserve (along with its similar sized neighbor) is an important area for conservation as it is one of the last remaining areas of Sabah’s original lowland forest. Here, the network of access roads makes observing wildlife easier and without the rules and regulations so frequently found elsewhere in Asia, we are free to explore at our own pace.

We will undertake 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 all likely to be quite common on our night safaris. On longer forays into the depths of 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 and although far from guaranteed, Deramakot currently offers the best chance of seeing Sunda Clouded Leopard anywhere on the planet. With 7 nights to explore this outstanding reserve, we have an excellent chance of encountering some of Asia’s rarest mammals, including Malay Sun Bear, Marbled Cat, Otter Civet, Sunda Skunk and Pentailed Tree Shrew.

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 Deramakot we should have time to explore some of the forest here, although it is important to be aware that the search for night wildlife will be our overriding priority. Highlights of the birding variety might include Great Argus and Crested Fireback Pheasants, Great-billed Heron, Large Green, Thick-billed and Little Green Pigeons, Giant, Banded, Blue-headed and Black-headed Pittas, White-fronted Falconet, leafbirds, hornbills, malkohas and trogons. We will be accommodated in simple air-conditioned tourist chalets, with private bathrooms and shared communal areas, often with private balconies affording views either into the forest, or across the nearby Lipad River.

Day 10

Transfer to Wetlands Lodge, Kinabatangan River

We have time for a final dawn walk or drive and breakfast, before leaving the reserve and heading back to the main road and the outside world. It will now be time to continue onwards to the Wetlands Lodge, located on the Kinabatangan River. On the way 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.

Days 11 – 12

Explore Kinabatangan River

While staying at the Wetlands 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.

Day 13  
Fly Kuala Lumpur and take connecting flight to UK

A leisurely start to the day will see us enjoy a buffet breakfast before making our way back to Sandakan for a flight to Kuala Lumpur, before boarding our connecting flight to London.

Day 14  
Land UK

We are due to arrive back in London in the early morning.

Tour Grading

Grade B. The principle focus of our holiday will be trying to see some of Borneo’s most elusive mammal species, particularly during our time at Deramakot Forest Reserve. As we visit some of the most magnificent rainforests on Earth, we will be entering the domain of many wonderful birds, reptiles and insects. Most of this tour is graded B – with a range walks from our lodges. Most of
the trails at 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 20°C, and usually climbs to 30°C 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

Accommodation during our time in Sepilok and on the Kinabatnagan River will be in comfortable and well situated eco-lodges, typically offering twin-bedded rooms with private facilities. During our time in Deramakot Forest Reserve we will be staying in simple air-conditioned tourist chalets with private bathrooms. Each chalet typically has two bedrooms with a shared communal area.

All food is included in the price of the tour, except snacks or meals eaten at airports in transit. During our time at Deramakot Forest Reserve our meals will be prepared by our expedition chef and meals will be eaten in very informal dining room.

As of September 2017, 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. Please be aware that this cost will need to be covered by yourself at each lodge and hotel throughout your holiday.

Flights

For our holidays to Borneo we generally use Malaysia Airlines which fly to Sandakan from Kuala Lumpur located 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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From top left to clockwise: Long-tailed Macaque, Blue-eared Kingfisher, Bearded Pig, Common Palm Civet, Rhinoceros Hornbill and Western Tarsier. All of these photos were taken by Tom Mabbett on the tour.