

Bali to Komodo – In Search of the Dragon!

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 14 October 2016



Komodo Dragon



Baby Komodo Dragon.



Black-naped Oriole



Green Jungle Fowl

Report compiled by Nick Acheson
Images courtesy of Frank White



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Chas Anderson & Nick Acheson (leaders) with 12 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Sunday 2nd October

Left Heathrow, London to Kuala Lumpur on overnight flight

Day 2

Monday 3rd October

Change at Kuala Lumpur for connection to Denpasar

At the end of long flights from the UK, most of us reached the very comfortable Mercure Hotel in Sanur this evening, and promptly collapsed into our beds (to the sound of Savannah Nightjars outside if you were awake enough to hear them).

Day 3

Tuesday 4th October

This morning was relaxed for most of us, spent around the hotel or on its beautiful beach. One or two ventured further afield in search of birds in nearby mangroves. Even for those who stayed at the hotel there were Olive-backed Tailorbirds, Yellow-vented Bulbuls, a Plantain Squirrel and plenty of Eurasian Tree Sparrows to be seen.

At lunchtime we boarded the M.V. Mermaid at Benoa Dock and were immediately impressed both by how spacious and attractive she was and by the charming and helpful crew. Next we were served a delicious lunch and a clear, informative briefing by Albert on the voyage ahead. And so began ten days of bliss aboard a lovely vessel, exploring beautiful reefs and islands, eating excellent food, in the company of friendly people. It's a terrible life.

At 1400 we sailed northeast from Bali and continued sailing overnight to Medang Island. One or two of us had glimpses of distant dolphins but otherwise it was our only day of the cruise without cetaceans. There were plenty of seabirds, however, including Bridled, Whiskered and White-winged Terns, Brown Boobies and a couple of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

Day 4

Wednesday 5th October

This morning we snorkelled for the first time, just to get ourselves wet and used to Chas' snorkel drill. It was billed as only a practice snorkel site, with nothing remarkable to see, but we were enchanted by the beauty of the coral and the sheer diversity of fish and other species inhabiting the reef. It was the first of many snorkels, each in a place of great beauty and, for the fish lovers especially, a place of endless fascination.

We then sailed through the middle of the day, past the famous Tambora Volcano, reaching Satonda Island at 16:10. Unlike yesterday, our journey was full of cetacean activity, after a brief show by some Spinner Dolphins we had a superb encounter with bow-riding Common Bottlenose Dolphins. With them was a Fraser's Dolphin and soon we met the group of Fraser's from which it had joined them. Soon thereafter there were more Common Bottlenose. However the real cetacean highlights of the day were two large groups of Melon-headed Whales. The first was with Fraser's, Spinner and Pantropical Spotted Dolphins and the second with Fraser's and

Spinners. Being night-feeders Melon-headed Whales are placid at the surface during the day, in stark contrast to the exuberant, high-finned Pantropical Spotted Dolphins with them on both occasions.

At Satonda we went ashore and walked the very short distance to the island's crater lake (a handful of Little Grebes here) and up a short way towards the rim, with Wallacean Drongos, Green Imperial Pigeons and Yellow-rimmed White-eyes in the dry forest around us and one brief appearance by a Metallic Pigeon.

We stayed at our anchorage off Satonda tonight and in the dusk we were amazed by the tens of thousands of Sunda Flying Foxes (it's assumed they are this species) pouring from their roost on the island to feed overnight on the vast island of Sumbawa.

Day 5

Thursday 6th October

This morning (between our first and second breakfasts, naturally) we snorkelled on the lovely reef off Satonda Island. At 09:15 we set sail and didn't reach our anchorage at Sangeang until 21:10, long after sunset.

Early on our journey we had a thrilling encounter with a large group of False Killer Whales. Spread out in a great line and moving purposefully they were clearly on the hunt for dolphins. We followed, amazed by the power and beauty of these animals, for a long way (in the wrong direction) before rejoining our route. The next cetacean, which only a couple of us saw, was but a glimpse of an unidentified beaked whale. Soon, though we were in the company of Pantropical Spotted and Spinner Dolphins. In the afternoon we had yet another privileged encounter: this time with Risso's Dolphins which we saw, among other things, giving their signature inverted move, waving their tails above the surface with their noses pointing down to the depths.

As every day, there were also many seabirds. Today's haul included both Greater and Lesser Frigatebirds, both Brown and Red-footed Boobies, Bulwer's Petrel, Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Red-necked Phalarope, Great Crested Tern and both Pomarine and Arctic Skuas. Among such fine cetaceans it is easy to forget that this is also a superb stretch for warm-water seabirding.

Day 6

Friday 7th October

This morning we moved along the coast of Sangeang to our snorkel site, which is known as Hot Rocks, where volcanic vents send up bubbles from the black sand. The soft corals around the line of rocks through which we swam (with some quite challenging currents) were breathtaking, as were the fish among them.

After snorkelling and second breakfast we sailed past Komodo to the little island of Gili Lawa Darat where we dropped anchor at 15.40 and snorkelled, again at a reef with stunning coral. Though there was plenty of Spinner Dolphin action today, the cetacean highlight was undoubtedly a close encounter with a group of Short-finned Pilot Whales. These large, bulbous-nosed animals were seen at a distance but continued their course towards us, giving us excellent views.

At 17:30 we sailed for Rinca, reaching our anchorage after dark.

Day 7

Saturday 8th October

This morning, having sailed into the bay to our mooring off Rinca, we had our first meeting with the quite remarkable Komodo Dragon. We walked from the shore to the ranger station protected by rangers (and our own crewmember Sam) with long, forked, dragon-wrangling poles. Along our way a couple of Komodo Dragons lounged in the mud, though no dragon-wrangling skills were required, thank goodness. After a briefing on the park and its wildlife, we walked through dry stream-bed woodland, passing a female Dragon guarding her nest, and up through grassy hills. From the top we had a magnificent view of the bay and the M.V. Mermaid at anchor. Around the ranger station were lots of Barred Doves (and some Rusa) while up on the grassy slopes we saw Blue-tailed Bee-Eater, Pied Bushchat, Zitting Cisticola and a distant feral Water Buffalo.

By 9.15 it was already punishingly hot and we were soaked in sweat, so, over second breakfast we lifted anchor and set sail for the far south of Komodo. Any thoughts of a quiet journey were swiftly smashed by the appearance of a group of Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins and by the exquisite presence of Black-naped Terns. At 12:12 we reached the aptly named Manta Alley off the south of Komodo. This is a remarkable site where Reef Manta Rays feed. Today, conditions were not ideal, the current strong and the water cloudy, so seeing the Mantas was tough. Nonetheless we found a couple of these remarkable giant fish.

At 14.35 we raised anchor and sailed for Pink Beach. In the night most of us snorkelled here, seeing many wonderful things including two stunning nudibranchs: *Pleurobranchus forskalii* and *Hexabranabus sanguineus*.

Day 8

Sunday 9th October

This morning we walked on Komodo itself and were amused at the lengths to which the rangers went to convince us that the Komodo Dragons here were bigger and better than the ones we had seen the day before on Rinca. They seemed gravely offended that we had already seen their Dragons somewhere else. There was plenty to delight us here, beside the Dragons, including Black-naped Orioles, Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Spotted Kestrel, Helmeted Friarbird, Flame-breasted Sunbird, Rusa and a number of very rare Yellow-crested Cockatoos. Perhaps the most interesting Dragon we saw was a spotted juvenile, looking much like a more standard species of monitor, high in a tree, keeping safe from predatory relatives.

Leaving the landing site we sailed around Padar Island, travelling deep into a bay in the (fruitless but enjoyable) hope of finding Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins. From here we sailed to Horseshoe Bay on the south of Rinca. Along our journeys around Komodo and Rinca we had several encounters with typically shore-hugging Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins, in addition to White-bellied Sea-Eagles which were constant companions along coastlines wherever we sailed. At Horseshoe Bay a group of highly habituated Komodo Dragons, including one with a crooked leg and a nasty temper, is easily found on a beach and readily approached in the safety of the RIBs. Late in the afternoon some went snorkelling here, while others made a second photographic visit to the enormous reptiles on the beach.

In the evening Chas gave us a fascinating, off-the-cuff talk on Alfred Russell Wallace and the biogeographic significance of Wallacea.

Day 9

Monday 10th October

We had anchored overnight at Horseshoe Bay. On the beach in the morning we could see both Komodo Dragons and a Wild Boar here. As we left we saw Spinner Dolphins but, surprisingly given how super the cetacean-watching was throughout our trip, there were no more cetaceans during our crossing back to Komodo. We had come back to Komodo to make a second attempt at the Mantas of Manta Alley. This time the sea was much calmer and the Mantas delighted us all with their stately swim-pasts. Next we sailed up the west of Komodo to Banta Island, passing hundreds of Red-necked Phalaropes and around 200 Pantropical Spotted Dolphins.

We anchored off the north of Komodo, at Banta Island, and took an afternoon snorkel over its beautiful reef. In the evening Chas talked us through the charts covering the land and sea we had visited.

Day 10

Tuesday 11th October

This morning we sailed from Banta to Sangeang and snorkelled at a site known as Bubbles. The rest of the day we sailed the long distance back to Satonda, with the vast island of Sumbawa to the south of us the whole time. Our journey was punctuated by many, many cetaceans, including a group of Common Bottlenose Dolphins, a large aggregation of four species (Melon-headed Whales, Pantropical Spotted Dolphins, Spinner Dolphins and Fraser's Dolphins) and — to our great delight — four Sperm Whales. At last, after countless hours of scanning the ocean and the distant horizon, we had seen large whales! We spent perhaps an hour in the company of these vast placid animals as they logged and breathed in the surface of the ocean. Simply wonderful.

In the evening Chas gave us a talk on the tuna industry and its impact on cetaceans and, in particular, the dolphin-friendly fishing methods practised in the Maldives.

Day 11

Wednesday 12th October

We set sail at 5am today, in order to make the very long journey back to port at Sanur. We stopped only to snorkel in the morning off Mojo and to admire a selection of farewell cetaceans including more Melon-headed Whales

In the evening Sonja showed us the beautiful video she had made of our voyage.

Day 12

Thursday 13th October

Today we returned to the Denpasar Airport from the dock at Sanur, bidding very fond farewells to Chas and to the wonderful crew of the M.V. Mermaid as we went. This was a splendid cruise and its success was in large part due to these talented, dedicated and charming people. We heartily thank them all.

Day 14

Friday 14th October

Arrive back in the UK aft overnight flight via Kuala Lumpur.

Species Lists

Reptiles & Amphibians (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	October								
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Komodo Dragon	<i>Varanus komodoensis</i>					✓	✓	✓		
2	Banded Sea-snake	<i>Colubrina laticauda</i>				✓					
3	Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>					✓				
4	Hawksbill Turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>					✓		✓		
5	House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus</i> sp.					✓				

Mammals

1	Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
2	Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
3	Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>					✓	✓			
4	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓						✓	
5	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>			✓						
6	Fraser's Dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>		✓						✓	✓
7	Melon-headed Whale	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>		✓						✓	✓
8	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>				✓					
9	False Killer Whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>			✓						
10	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>								✓	
11	Beaked Whale sp.	<i>Ziphiidae</i> sp.			✓						
12	Timor (=Javan) Deer	<i>Rusa timorensis</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓		
13	Feral Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>					✓	✓			
14	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				✓		✓	✓		
15	Long-tailed (=Crab-eating) Macaque	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
16	Plantain Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus notates</i>	✓								
17	Sunda Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus</i> sp.		✓	✓						

Birds (h = heard only)

1	Orange-footed Scrubfowl	<i>Megapodius reinwardt</i>			✓			✓			
2	Green Junglefowl	<i>Gallus varius</i>				✓		✓			
3	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
5	Streaked Shearwater	<i>Calonectris leucomelas</i>	✓								
6	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna pacifica</i>	✓								
7	Tahiti Petrel	<i>Pterodroma heraldica</i>			✓				✓		
8	Tricolored (Little) Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus tricolor</i>		✓	✓						
9	Great-billed Heron	<i>Ardea sumatrana</i>							✓		
10	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	✓					✓			
11	Pacific Reef Heron	<i>Egretta sacra</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓		
12	Javan Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola speciosa</i>					✓				
13	Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striatus</i>					✓				
14	Great Frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>		✓	✓					✓	
15	Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>			✓	✓	✓				
16	Red-footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
17	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				✓	✓				
19	Sparrowhawk sp.	<i>Accipiter</i> sp.					✓				
20	Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>				✓	✓	✓			
21	White-bellied Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	October									
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
22	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>							✓	✓		
23	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>							✓	✓		
24	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>							✓			
26	Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>	✓							✓		
28	Bridled Tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Sooty Tern	<i>Onychoprion fuscatus</i>			✓							
30	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>								✓		
31	Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>					✓					
32	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓			✓		✓			
33	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		
34	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	✓									
35	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>		✓	✓	✓						
36	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓		✓					
37	Metallic Pigeon	<i>Columba vitiensis</i>		✓								
38	Spotted Dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>	✓									
39	Barred Dove	<i>Geopelia maugeus</i>			✓		✓	✓				
40	Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓				
41	Pacific Swift	<i>Apus pacificus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓				
42	Collared Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus chloris</i>		✓				✓				
43	Sacred Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus sanctus</i>				✓						
44	Blue-tailed Bee-Eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>					✓		✓			
45	Spotted Kestrel	<i>Falco moluccensis</i>						✓				
46	Yellow-crested Cockatoo	<i>Cacatua sulphurea</i>						✓				
47	Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos nanus</i>		✓								
48	Helmeted Friarbird	<i>Philemon buceroides</i>						✓				
49	Black-naped Oriole	<i>Oriolus chinensis</i>						✓				
50	Wallacean Drongo	<i>Dicrurus densus</i>			✓			✓				
51	Black-naped Monarch	<i>Hypothymis azurea</i>					h	✓				
52	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>					✓	✓				
53	Cinereous Tit	<i>Parus cinereus</i>		✓			✓					
54	Yellow-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus goiavier</i>	✓	✓	✓							
55	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
56	Pacific Swallow	<i>Hirundo tahitica</i>						✓				
57	Lemon-bellied White-Eye	<i>Zosterops chloris</i>					✓					
58	Yellow-ringed White-Eye	<i>Zosterops wallacei</i>		✓	✓							
59	Pied Bush Chat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>				✓	✓					
60	Brown-throated Sunbird	<i>Antheptes malacensis</i>		✓	✓							
61	Olive-backed Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris jugularis</i>	✓				✓					
62	Flame-breasted Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris solaris</i>						✓				
63	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓									
64	Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>					✓					
65	Olive-backed Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sepium</i>	✓									
66	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>					✓					

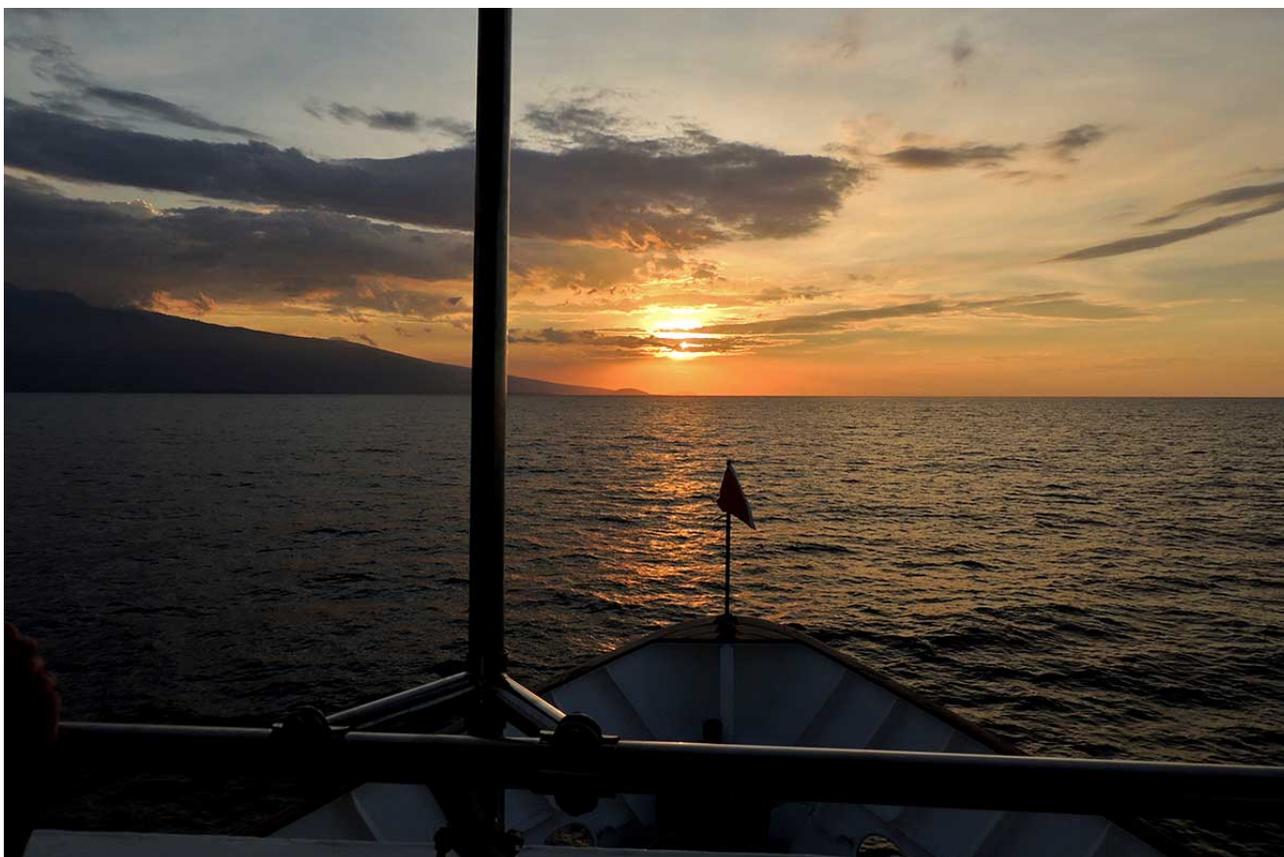
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Sunset on way back to Bali