

Bali to Komodo – In Search of the Dragon!

Naturetrek Tour Report

9th – 23rd September 2023



Green Junglefowl



Komodo Dragon



Whale Shark



Coral Reef

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Summary

This wonderful 10-day cruise from Bali to Komodo explored many sites of Komodo National Park, spoiling us with fabulous tropical snorkelling, forest hikes, deck watches and sunset walks, all of which sought out the best wildlife this region has to offer. Every day, we snorkelled over kaleidoscopic reefs teeming with life, allowing us to admire a dazzling feast of colourful fish and corals, as well as turtles, reef sharks, cuttlefish, octopus and lobster. The undoubted snorkelling highlight for all was an unexpected morning swim (or kayak) with a group of six Whale Sharks! Swimming alongside these seven metre gentle giants was a true privilege and is something none of us will ever forget. A subsequent morning snorkel with several huge Manta Rays was the icing on the cake!

Cruising each day on our 5-star motor yacht, we enjoyed a good variety of cetaceans at sea including Melon-headed Whales and Spinner, Spotted, Fraser's and Rough-toothed Dolphins. Walks on land yielded plenty of birds including the resplendent Green Junglefowl, Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Olive-backed Sunbird, Blue-tailed Bee Eaters, Collared Kingfishers, Black-naped Oriole, a variety of drongos, the critically-endangered Yellow-crested Cockatoo and much more! Of course, the land highlight for many was coming face-to-face with the formidable Komodo Dragons, of which we saw several on both Komodo and Rinca.

Those joining the extension to Bali Barat National Park enjoyed an additional two full days of birding, the highlight being the critically endangered Bali Myna, plus barbets, flowerpeckers, kingfishers and a huge amount more, all rounded off by relaxing on beautiful white sandy beaches with a coconut! It was with great reluctance we had to return home, having enjoyed a marvellous wildlife cruise in the tropics.

Day 1

Saturday 9th September

London to Bali

Most of the group met this morning at Heathrow for the 11am flight to Bali, via Kuala Lumpur. We would spend the day travelling, arriving the following day.

Day 2

Sunday 10th September

Bali

We landed in Bali at 1pm and, following a half hour transfer, checked into our lovely hotel at around 2:30pm, also meeting three other members of the group who had flown out early. We had the rest of the afternoon at leisure to explore the marvellous hotel grounds, dotted with shrines and colourful plants, and acclimatise to the humid tropical air we now found ourselves in!

We reconvened at reception at 6:45pm, where Sara gave a briefing for the trip ahead and then guided the group down to a restaurant on the beach for 7pm where she had booked a table for dinner. We all chatted and got to know one another over beers, and were delighted to discover that one couple in the group were here on their honeymoon – we all agreed that a cruise in paradise with fabulous wildlife to be seen on a daily basis wasn't a bad choice! We left at 9pm and headed for bed to recover from jetlag.

Day 3

Monday 11th September

Bali – sailing east

This morning was spent at leisure, with the group enjoying breakfast around the pool. Sara offered a practice snorkel in the pool at 10am and several joined her to get used to using their gear before we'd be doing it 'for real' on a daily basis! We were picked up at 12:30pm for our short transfer to the boat, and drove down to Benoa port where we were greeted by the friendly crew of the Mermaid I. We then took our shoes off (we wouldn't be needing those anymore – the boat is a shoe-free zone!) and boarded our home for the next 9 days.

Folk got settled into their cabin and we had lunch at 2pm. We then sailed at 3pm, standing out on the forward deck to admire the view and birds (Great Egrets and lots of Little Terns). At 3:30pm, Urik, the guide on board, gave everyone a safety briefing and we had a (highly unnecessary, but readily demolished) snack 4:30pm. Those sitting at the front also saw Great Crested and Bridled Terns.

Sara ran through the checklist at 6:15pm, also highlighting the significance of where we were – we were in the Lombok Strait, home to the famous Line of Wallacea! (An imaginary boundary marking the end of Asia and the start of Australasia, discovered by Alfred Russel Wallace). The line follows subterranean fault lines from the southern reaches of Bali/Lombok all the way up to the deep Makassar straits that split Sulawesi and Borneo. In the 1850s, Wallace spent eight years zig zagging what was then known as the Malay archipelago exploring the habitats and wildlife here. It was when crossing Lombok Strait that he had a lightbulb moment that went down in history; stepping onto a Lombok beach he expected to hear the sounds of woodpeckers, fruit thrushes and oriental barbets he had heard so often in Malaysia, Borneo and Bali. However, instead, he heard the piercing calls of the Helmeted Friarbird which is an Australian honeyeater. The forests called with honeysuckers, brush turkeys and Australian cockatoos. He was perplexed as to how birds could change so rapidly over just 25km, until he realised that during last ice age, sea levels were at least 100 metres lower as so much water was locked in ice. So the whole arm of the Malay Archipelago was one bit of land and the deep trench of 800-1000m depth between Bali and Lombok never went away. This not only caused Wallace to realise continental drift and plate tectonics, but also realise the process of evolution by natural selection, at the same time as Charles Darwin.

We then had dinner at 6:30pm and all headed to bed for an early night.

Day 4

Tuesday 12th September

Bali to Sumbawa

We sailed through the night and woke up sailing along the north coast of Lombok. At 11am Sara spotted a single dolphin off the port side of the boat – we turned and continued in the direction of said dolphin, and came across a pod of Melon-headed Whales! Although called 'whales', these are indeed dolphins and are members of the blackfish family which also includes Pilot Whales, False Killer Whales and Orca (again, all dolphins). The numbers of Melon-headed Whales kept growing in number with more and more of them appearing around us – we estimated there were 80 of them. A small group of Fraser's Dolphins were with them too.

We spent an hour watching them, the boat bobbing gently in the waves as we photographed and admired them all. We then tucked into a lovely lunch and, just as we were finishing, we saw a big group of Spotted Dolphins which swam around our boat, leaping and riding on the bow. Just as we were leaving, we saw Spinner Dolphins mixed in with the pod – yay! THEN, as we were continuing, a group of ~20 Rough-toothed Dolphins appeared! These dolphins are very reptilian-like, their long toothy snouts making them rather distinctive looking. We watched

them for 20 minutes, one of them jumped several times giving us good views of it clearing the water. What a start to the trip!

Then we continued towards the small island of Moyo (just off the coast of Sumbawa) and we had our first snorkel, with one of the guests going for a kayak with Nico. There was a fabulous variety of fish to be seen here – at least four Tassled Scorpionfish, the incredible vertical-swimming Razorfish, an Octopus, several Lionfish, a group of about 20 Blackbelly Triggerfish, pipefish and an abundance of other beautiful fish and corals.

We got out after an hour and, after showering and changing, Sara did checklist at 6:45pm and Chas gave a talk at 7pm on the dolphins of Indonesia before we had dinner at 8pm.

Day 5

Wednesday 13th September

Sumbawa to Satonda

We woke up this morning in Teluk Saleh (a huge bay in north west Sumbawa) and, rumour had it there were Whale Sharks in the area... so we were in contact with local boats and continued sailing under their guidance in hope that we would reach an area where one was present. To our delight, a Whale Shark was swimming alongside a fishing boat and, at 7am, we hopped into the water (the more eager members of the group throwing themselves in!) and couldn't believe our eyes when, in fact, we saw FOUR enormous Whale Sharks beneath the waves. It later transpired there were actually six in total, which was staggering. John joined by kayaking, watching them from the surface and getting superb views too. We swam with them for at least an hour, abiding by the strict briefing Urik had given us about staying four metres away from them at all times and not swimming above/below or in front of them. The sharks didn't seem to even notice we were there as they continued busily feeding on plankton.

We then (reluctantly!) got back on board for breakfast, absolutely staggered by what we had just experienced – and how unexpected it was. We spent the rest of the morning slowly moving north west back out of the bay. As we were exiting the bay, we saw a pod of Spinner Dolphins which leapt and spun, much to our delight! Then we emerged out into open water and slowly made our way to the small island of Satonda, a sunken volcano. Dropping anchor, we had a snorkel briefing at 2:30pm then a snorkel at 3pm in the calm bay, seeing a great variety of species including lionfish, butterflyfish and some of the group also saw two Green Turtles and a Hawksbill Turtle. We could also see coral being grown on metal grids to help restore the reef, but the undoubted highlight was watching a cuttlefish pair, (each about 1.5 feet long), the female laying her eggs into the coral while the male stood (well, floated) guard next to her. It was lovely to witness such a tender moment between a beautiful, yet sometimes underappreciated, species on these reefs.

After an hour we got back onboard for quick shower and a cup of tea and then the dinghies ran us over to Satonda at 5pm for a late afternoon walk. When walking along the jetty we saw a juvenile Banded Sea-snake slithering amongst the coral in the shallows. On shore, we saw our first Orange-footed Scrubfowl and Long-tailed Macaques in addition to some beautiful butterflies, some yellow, some bright blue. Chas pointed out hundreds of Sunda Fruit Bats roosting in the trees across the shore on the other side of the lake. Most of the group then went for a walk with Chas up a path formed by the ridge of the caldera, whilst Sara took three of the group straight down to the lake where we saw three Little Grebes and a dead (and mummified to a crisp!) Sunda Fruit Bat hanging on a low branch at the bottom of a tree, so, of course curiosity got the better of us and we had a good look, admiring its delicate claws and fox-like head.

We then boarded the boat at 6pm, quickly moving into position a couple of hundred metres away to see the Fruit Bats leave their roosts for the night and head over to Sumbawa to feed. They roost on Satonda, away from the

dangers of feral dogs and humans, but must travel to Sumbawa each night to feed. We didn't see them in great numbers, but handfuls of them silently flew over our heads as the sky quickly fell inky black.

Shortly afterwards, Sara ran through the checklist at 6:45pm, which Chas followed with a talk on more cetaceans of Indonesia. We stayed anchored off Satonda for the night and enjoyed chatting about the day's fantastic experiences (did we mention we swam with Whale Sharks?) over dinner.

After dinner, Rowena put out a plankton net which she had thoughtfully brought with her, and we collected a bucket load of plankton which included a tiny lobster and a crab larvae – each smaller than our little finger nails. Just fantastic!

Day 6

Thursday 14th September

Sumbawa – sailing east

This morning, we moved the boat a couple of hundred metres across the channel to the shore of Sumbawa and had a pre-breakfast snorkel at a site called "Sumbawa Wall". Highlights here included a Blue Ribbon Eel, a big group of Cornetfish and an octopus (amongst the stunning coral and zillions of other fish!).

We got back on board for 8:15am and then started sailing east while we tucked into breakfast. Shortly after we'd eaten, Sara found a group of Spinner Dolphins which came to play with us briefly (and performed some spins!) but, as they were heading west and us east, we let them be and continued on our way. Shortly after leaving the dolphins, the wind picked up and the sea became quite rough, making it difficult to spot wildlife amongst the white caps. Spray was coming over the front of the boat and so we retreated to watch from the chairs at the stern until after lunch when it gradually became calmer again. We saw a group of Spotted Dolphins, but they didn't stay with us for long.

Unfortunately, before dinner, Alex slipped on the wet deck and hurt her wrist, so Urik and Sara looked after her. The sea had calmed considerably, but there was still a slight swell and so Chas didn't give a talk to allow people to rest and stay out on deck. We made a slight change of plan to sail through the night so that we could take Alex to hospital the next day (which fortunately was en route)! We enjoyed another delicious dinner and several folk sat identifying fish from their cameras, with the help of Sara, Chas and the dive team.

Day 7

Friday 15th September

Komodo National Park – Labuan Bajo

This morning the group went for a snorkel in a bay on the west side of Bidadari Island at 7am (whilst Sara and Urik took Alex to the hospital at Labuan Bajo). There were volcanic boulders and walls underwater, richly adorned with hard corals, soft corals and whip corals, plus an excellent diversity of reef fishes and also both Whitetip and Blacktip Reef Sharks and a Blue-spotted Stingray.

We sailed after breakfast, first searching for wildlife around the islands and reefs to the south of Labuan Bajo before heading west towards our afternoon snorkel site. There were several active tuna schools, attracting good numbers of seabirds, including Black-naped, Great Crested and Little Terns. The group also saw Bulwer's Petrels, Lesser Frigatebird and close views of White-bellied Sea-eagle (a first for the trip) plus one Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphin.

The afternoon snorkel was at a reef on south side of Sabayor Kecil. This was a superb reef, with at least 90% coverage of live corals. There were hundreds of thriving table corals on the reef top, giving way to acres of foliaceous corals on the gentle reef slope. There was a particularly good diversity of butterflyfish and angelfish, plus a huge Green Turtle seen! Whilst we were in the water, John and Liz, who had remained on board, spotted a Green Turtle and a rare Leatherback Turtle surfacing near the boat.

Once back on board and suitably refreshed with steaming mugs of delicious ginger tea, we cruised north and then eastwards back towards Labuan Bajo, during which we had two encounters with Spinner Dolphins. We then anchored outside Labuan Bajo at sunset. Chas ran through the checklist and gave a talk about corals and coral reefs.

Sara, Alex and Urik arrived back at 11pm (when everyone had gone to bed). Unfortunately Alex had broken her wrist and would be flying home the next day, which Sara and the Naturetrek office had arranged. We were extremely sorry that she would be leaving prematurely, but very grateful she'd received such comprehensive immediate care.

Day 8

Saturday 16th September

Komodo National Park – Rinca Island

In the night we upped anchor and made our way to Loh Buya, a bay from which we would explore the island of Rinca and see our first Komodo Dragons. We woke up surrounded by beautiful mangroves and tranquil turquoise waters – we had the bay all to ourselves, a privilege we had become so accustomed to in all other areas we'd visited too so far; paradise! We hopped off the boat onto the dinghies at 6:45am, landing on the pier barely a minute later. We saw a Brahminy Kite fly overhead, a Pacific Reef Heron amongst the mangroves and Chas pointed out a group of Archerfish swimming underneath the pier as we walked on shore.

Here, we were met by a ranger and given a welcome to the island (an Osprey flying overhead as he did so, not that we weren't paying full attention to the briefing of course...!). We walked along the sturdy boardwalk which formed a raised platform three metres or so above ground. Stopping en route we saw several Barred Doves and an Olive-backed Sunbird, plus our first Komodo Dragon! It lounged in the shade and slowly moved into the sun for us to see. It was medium size, but impressive nonetheless.

We continued to the ranger station for another briefing, where we stood behind a black metal fence looking at several Long-tailed Macaques playing in the shade. After our safety briefing, the ranger opened a gate in said fence and guided us into the open forest where we would take a walk through the dry woodland and up to a view point. We'd only been walking for 10 minutes when we got to a bridge and found that we were unable to cross – as here be a dragon sitting on it! Dragons have right of way on the islands (and why not) and this one looked fairly resolute with its chosen shady position. We therefore diverted down the bank and hopped over a tiny stream and back up the other side to continue our walk.

We reached a view point looking over the bay – and our boat – and stood marvelling at the view. There were Spotted Doves in the bushes nearby, along with a Zitting Cisticola. Upon returning from to the ranger station (about 45 minutes later) we visited the newly-opened museum, full of fascinating information, not only about the Komodo Dragons but also covering the park's general natural history – both on land and marine – and the formation of the islands. When walking back to the boat we had a fabulous view of a White-bellied Fish Eagle

flying just below a Brahminy Kite – as the two can be confused in poor light it was wonderful to be able to see both of them in the same binocular view as one another, and in brilliant light!

Once back on board at 9am, many chose to have a cooling shower before tucking into breakfast as we set sail. Then, at around 11am we had a truly FANTASTIC snorkel at Tatawa Besar – this is a site with abundant and wonderful soft corals, and therefore a great diversity of fishes. The undoubted highlight from this was watching several Hawksbill Turtles feeding on the soft corals and sponges and the large number of fish (mainly angelfish and wrasses) that benefitted from it. The turtles used their flippers to prise aside corals they didn't want to get to the tasty things underneath and the fish frantically swam around the turtle hoovering up the freed-up food.

Once back on board, we lunched while sailing back to Labuan Bajo to drop Alex off for her flight – we were all very sorry to see her go but happy she would be home fairly quickly.

We then had a late afternoon snorkel at Sabolon Kecil, highlights of which were a Banded Sea Snake, fabulous coral, pufferfish, a barracuda and a Harlequin Filefish – only found in areas where coral is abundant, so this was particularly pleasing to see.

Sara ran through the checklist at 6:45pm followed by an hour-long documentary on the Komodo Dragon. We anchored at Komodo at around 9pm, ready for more dragons the next day!

Day 9

Sunday 17th September

Komodo National Park – Komodo Island

This morning we woke up in Loh Liang, one of the main bays off the coast of Komodo, and left the boat at 6:45am to go on shore. We were immediately greeted off the boat by a ranger, who was carefully helping us keep our distance from a Komodo Dragon that was 50 metres or so away on the beach! We went to the main starting point of a walk, where there was a large board showing us various trail options and a ranger to give us a short briefing before we headed off. We immediately saw a Collared Kingfisher posing in a tree next to us, pleasing the photographers amongst the group. We then walked past, and stopped to photograph, two Komodo Dragons which were on the beach. Some of the group also saw a Flame-breasted Sunbird and there two Wallacean Drongos (Flores Spangled Drongos) showing well in the tree next to us and also a Timor Deer further along the path and our first Green Junglefowl.

We then split into two groups – a 'hiking group' (which would go up a hill to a view point, looking for dragons and birds) and a 'leisurely group' which would do the same, but a shorter route on the flat paths in the shade of the forest. Both groups saw lots of birds – highlights included Black-naped Orioles, a Variable Goshawk, Green Junglefowl, Orange-footed Scrubfowl, and (a highlight) the endemic, and Critically Endangered, Yellow-crested Cockatoos.

Once back on board, we had cooling showers and a hearty breakfast as we sailed towards Takat Makassar. This is a good spot to see Manta Rays and we hopped in the open water at 11am, the reef varying between 5 – 10 metres below us, to look for them. For the first 25 minutes we didn't see any, but admired the occasional Titan Triggerfish which were surveying their territories on the sea bed far below. Then, the cry that we'd all been hoping for came: "MANTA! Look down!!" shouted one of the dive guides at the front of the group. We bobbed in the water, straining our eyes, scanning around ahead and below to see where the Manta Ray was, and sure enough after a minute or so, an enormous dark shape came out of the plankton-rich depths and slowly swam beneath us. We saw one after another – about six in total, and all of them were of the black variety. They glided through the water like

black capes, moving beneath us incredibly slowly (but it took us a reasonable effort to stay above them in the gentle current). Fantastic!

We then upped anchor and sailed to Padar, dropping anchor at around 3:30pm. James and Chas went for a dive on a nearby reef and Sara took Sandy and Pam kayaking with Nico around the bay. At 5pm we went for a walk on Padar, most of the group opting to walk to the top to watch the sunset, which was absolutely beautiful. We came back down just after 6pm and back on board in the dark by 6:20pm. Sara then did the checklist (and pointed out that today, was in fact ‘World Manta Day’ – what a day to have found them!) followed by a talk on her work surveying cetaceans in the North Sea and in Scotland, plus marine conservation issues both in the UK and worldwide.

After dinner we did another plankton net session, the highlight of which was a tiny octopus and a squid, each barely bigger than a fingernail and fascinating to observe – particularly the squid which was already able to change colour as it swam around the bowl!

Day 10

Monday 18th September

Sailing Rinca – Flores

Today we had a leisurely start to the morning; we had lifted anchor early morning to sail south from Padar to Horseshoe Bay on Rinca. Those up before breakfast saw Spinner Dolphins and Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins. We then arrived into Horseshoe Bay around 8am and slowly made our way to the east side of the bay whilst having breakfast. We could see three Komodo Dragons on the beaches; a large one on its own on one beach, and two medium sized ones on another beach, one chasing the other. We also saw a couple of Brahminy Kites and a Whimbrel.

Once we'd digested, we went for a snorkel at 10:15am at a site called “Yellow Wall”. This was fabulous (if a bit chillier than previous snorkels, due to the cooler currents of the Indian Ocean sweeping northwards). Here there were beautiful feather stars (crinoids) of all sorts of colours which were dotted along the wall and reef. There was a huge amount to see here and a pleasing variety of colour!

We got back on board for 11:15am and, after having a quick shower and a cup of tea and biscuit we went on a dinghy ride at 11:50am to the beach to look for dragons! We found one quickly and turned the engines off to sit bobbing close to the shore as it contemplated us, and us it. Another dragon quickly appeared along the right hand side of the beach and made its way towards us, and sat behind the other dragon. After admiring them for 20 minutes we then cruised along the shoreline for other wildlife of interest, and noted two White-bellied Fish Eagles in the dead trees, scanning the bay from their vantage point. There was also a Eurasian Whimbrel on the shore, plus at least four Timor Deer standing in the shade of a leafy green bush.

We got back on board for 12:45pm and started to make our way out of the bay. As we did so, several of the group saw an Ocean Manta Ray! These huge animals get up to seven metres – it was hard to tell the size of this one before it went down from the surface, but it was certainly big. We then had a lovely lunch as we made our way slowly north. It was a quiet afternoon sightings-wise, but later in the day we had two Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins come and ride on the bow for 5-10 minutes. They twisted and turned, looking up at us through the clear water before shooting off again as quickly as they'd appeared!

By late afternoon we were sailing north between Komodo and Padar when a group of energetic Spinner Dolphins came to play by the boat. There were several small calves amongst the pod, swimming very closely to their mothers.

Some of the adults leaped and did lots of spinning, to whoops and cheers from the group. There was also a small youngster leaping too, not quite doing spins, but it certainly looked as though it was trying very hard! The water was mirror-calm and the sun was setting behind Komodo, bathing a beautiful peach light across the channel and surrounding islands – just idyllic.

Sara ran through the checklist at 6:45pm before Chas gave a fascinating talk on volcanoes and how they have formed the islands we were now sailing around. We had dinner at 8pm and continued sailing into the night, going east along the north coast of Flores to get some more miles under our belt.

Day 11

Tuesday 19th September

Sailing east along Flores

For those out on deck with a coffee and croissant, a group of Risso's Dolphins were seen at 7:15am. They weren't interested in the boat and didn't want to play, so we didn't get fabulous views but stopped the boat for five minutes and could clearly see their distinctive blunt heads, white scratches and big dorsal fins.

We continued sailing east and stopped for a snorkel at 11am in a bay on the north coast of Flores – this site was abundant with colourful sea squirts, several pipefish and some lovely cowry shells. We (reluctantly!) got back on board for 12:30pm and had lunch, after which we all anchored ourselves out at the front of the boat with Chas and Sara for an afternoon of sea watching. We didn't see any cetaceans, but it wasn't for a lack of looking! We did, however, see Bridled, Black-naped and Greater Crested Terns, a large Sailfish jumping, a Wilson's Storm Petrel, lots of Red-necked Phalaropes and a first for the trip; an Abbot's Booby. These birds only breed on Christmas Island, so it was great to chance upon one as it flew close to the boat.

At 6:45pm Sara ran through the checklist, also showing some slides on Risso's Dolphins to enhance our understanding of them a little and also went over our departure details for the following day. Chas then gave a fabulous talk – firstly 10 minutes on dragonflies (for Pam, a dragonfly expert whom had been pointing them out on our daily walks) – then half an hour on Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer of the process of evolution by natural selection.

Today was Pam's birthday, and so the chef had baked a cake, and we all sang Happy Birthday to her before enjoying a slice! Several of us then stayed chatting in the saloon, whilst others went to finish packing.

Day 11

Wednesday 20th September

Flores – Bali

This morning we had breakfast at 7:30am and met the whole crew (all 15 of them!) who had looked after us so well during the trip. We then had our bags packed outside our cabins for 8:30am and, by 9am, were saying our goodbyes to the crew on the dock before getting into our taxi transfers to Maumere airport for our 11:50am flight back to Bali, via Labuan Bajo.

Those going home or joining Naturetrek holiday in Borneo returned to the Mercure hotel for a night before onward travel the next day, whilst those doing the extension continued their journey onto the opulent Menjangan Resort at Bali Barat National Park. It was a long journey (5.5 hours) by comfortable private transfer and we arrived at 9:15pm. We were greeted by the wonderful, ever-helpful staff and given tea and cold towels to refresh ourselves. We then climbed up the Bali Tower to have a lovely (albeit late!) 3 course meal before heading to bed at 11pm.

Day 12

Thursday 21st September

Bali Barat National Park

This morning we met our local guide, Alit, at 6:30am for our first birding walk. The undoubted highlight of which was visiting the Bali Starling sanctuary. The Bali Starling (Myna) is critically endangered as the species are highly sought-after for the pet trade, and by the early 1990s the wild population had diminished to around only 30 birds. The continuance of extreme poaching meant that 10 years later there were only two or three breeding pairs left in the national park. Following a captive breeding and release programme run at this centre, the numbers have increased, and wild-born starlings are now once again breeding in the park. Seeing these bright-white birds fly overhead and, on a couple of occasions, perched at the tops of trees near us, was a wonderful sight!

Other highlights included the resplendent Green Junglefowl, Coppersmith Barbets, Yellow-throated Hanging Parrots and Small Minivets. The group returned to our wonderful lodge at 8:40am and had time to quickly freshen up before heading to the Bali Tower for a delicious 3-course breakfast at 9:15am.

We were then at leisure until 3:30pm – some relaxed by the pool, others went for a snorkel off the jetty on the beach, had lunch at the beach restaurant or went for a stroll to photograph dragonflies and other insects. We explored the grounds on foot again for the afternoon, the undoubted highlight being stonking views of the Javan Banded Pitta, barely 100 metres from our rooms! It was a female and she was bouncing around the dry leaf litter, as pittas do, in the brush just a couple of metres off the road. We stooped to strain and see, and kept moving positions to get a good view as she hopped about inconsiderately, not seeming to give any thought for those of us in the group trying to get a clear shot to photograph her! Nonetheless, we did get great views – she even flew across the road in front of us and started eagerly bouncing about on the other side before we lost sight of her. Fabulous!

We continued exploring along the dry, dusty woodland trails for another 1.5 hours, finding such gems as Pink-necked Green Pigeon, Collared and Sacred Kingfishers, Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker and Olive-backed Sunbird. We then returned to our lodge for 5:30pm and had a quick turnaround before heading back down to the Bali Tower for 6pm to watch the sunset from the fourth floor at the top. We got drinks and completed our checklist while admiring the view over the dry forest – what a day! At 6:40pm Sara called one of the lodge buggies to take us down to the beach for a lovely 3 course dinner. We returned to our rooms at 9:30pm and headed to bed.

Day 13

Friday 22nd September

Bali Barat National Park and Pejarakan

We met Alit at 6:30am once again and went out in a different direction exploring the forest trails. Much of what we saw was the same species we'd seen yesterday – the Bali Myna, Coppersmith Barbet, White-shouldered Triller and Black-naped Monarch to name a few – which was handy for us to continue to 'get our eye in'. The unexpected highlight for some, however, was the prompt arrival of a Boschma's Gliding Lizard, which landed delicately onto a tree trunk next to us, displaying with its dewlap (its yellow neck flap).

We got back at 8:30am and had another delicious breakfast in the Bali tower. We would be at leisure until 3pm, the group choosing to either snorkel or relax on the beach. When we met again, Alit and Sara had arranged for private cars and drivers to take us out of the Menjangan Reserve and down to the salt flats of Pejarakan – here we had a whole new habitat, and with it, a whole new suite of birds! We didn't need to move far, standing still scanning

with binoculars we found plenty to keep us entertained – Javan Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Javan Pond Heron, Little and Great Egrets, Scaly-breasted Munia and a Malaysian Pied Fantail to name a few. We then moved a half a kilometre or so further along the salt flats and mangroves and saw a Cerulean Kingfisher, Terek Sandpiper, a group of Knot, a probable White-faced Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Red-necked Stint, Common Redshank and more.

At 6pm we headed back and had a half an hour to quickly shower and change before heading down to the beach for our final dinner. What a day! We did the checklist in between courses, and Jenny and Keith, who were on their honeymoon, had a special dessert with candles to celebrate their recent marriage, and we all raised a toast.

As we were signing our bills, Sara pointed out a Tokay Gecko which was clinging to the ceiling of the restaurant. It was about a foot long, and as we had a torch with us, we stood marvelling at it for 15 minutes or so, along with the three other (much smaller!) geckos next to it which stayed stock still, bar the occasional sudden movement to snaffle up an unsuspecting fly. We headed back to the Monsoon Lodge, and as we arrived, we found another Tokay Gecko in the lobby, as well as two bats which were hanging from the rafters. We stood marvelling at them and photographing them for a short while before retiring to our rooms to pack.

Day 14

Saturday 23rd September

Bali – London

This morning we met at 7:15am to go down to have a final tropical breakfast and checkout. Our bags were taken for us and packed into our transfer vehicle, so all we needed to do was walk (or rather roll) down to our car and climb in. We had a very comfortable 5 hour journey back to Denpasar airport where we checked in for our flight back to London.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		September 2023												
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Orange-footed Scrubfowl	<i>Megapodius reinwardt</i>				✓				✓					
Green Junglefowl	<i>Gallus varius</i>								✓				✓	✓
Tenggara Swiftlet	<i>Collocalia sumbawae</i>			✓	Prob			Prob	Prob					
Cave Swiftlet - E	<i>Collocalia linchi</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓							✓	✓
House Swift	<i>Apus nipalensis</i>		✓											
Sunda Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia bitorquata</i>												✓	✓
Spotted Dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>	✓	✓					✓	✓					
Barred Dove	<i>Geopelia maugeus</i>				H			✓	✓					
Pink-necked Green Pigeon	<i>Treron vernans</i>												✓	
Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>								✓					
Pied Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula bicolor</i>								✓					
Zebra Dove	<i>Geopelia striata</i>												✓	✓
Tricolored Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus tricolor</i>				3									
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓									
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>													✓
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓							✓				
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>													✓
Red-necked Stint	<i>Calidris ruficollis</i>													✓
Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>													✓
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓			
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>								✓					✓
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>													Prob
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>													✓
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>													✓
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>													✓
Terek Sandpiper	<i>Xenus cinereus</i>													✓
Javan Plover	<i>Charadrius javanicus</i>													✓

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		September 2023												
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
White-faced Plover	<i>Charadrius dealbatus</i>													✓
Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		80				✓							✓
Bridled Tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			
Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>						✓				✓			
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>					✓							✓	
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			Prob							Poss			
Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>		✓	✓										
Unidentified Skua						✓					✓			
White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>			✓										
Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>					✓					✓			
Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>		Poss		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Abbott's Booby	<i>Papasula abbotti</i>										✓			
Red-footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>			✓		✓	✓							
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>			✓						✓	✓			
Little Pied Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo melanoleucos</i>		✓											
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>									✓			✓	✓
Javan Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola speciosa</i>													✓
Great-billed Heron	<i>Ardea sumatrana</i>													✓
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	✓	✓						✓					
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓											✓
White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>								✓					
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>										✓			✓
Pacific Reef Heron	<i>Egretta sacra</i>							✓		✓				
Intermediate Egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>													✓
Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>			✓	poss			✓						
White-bellied Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>						✓	✓	✓	✓				
Variable Goshawk	<i>Accipiter hiogaster</i>								✓					
Collared Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus chloris</i>	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓				
Sacred Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus sanctus</i>												✓	✓

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		September 2023												
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Cerulean Kingfisher - E	<i>Alcedo coerulescens</i>													✓
Blue-tailed Bee-eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>							Prob	✓					
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>												✓	✓
Lineated Barbet	<i>Megalaima lineata</i>												✓	
Coppersmith Barbet	<i>Psilopogon haemacephalus</i>												✓	✓
Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus moluccensis</i>							✓						
Freckle-breasted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos analis</i>												✓	✓
Yellow-crested Cockatoo	<i>Cacatua sulphurea</i>								✓					
Yellow-throated Hanging Parrot	<i>Loriculus pusillus</i>												✓	✓
Javan Banded Pitta	<i>Hydromis guajanus</i>												✓	✓
Helmeted Friarbird	<i>Philemon buceroides</i>							✓	✓					
White-breasted Woodswallow	<i>Artamus leucorhynchus</i>							✓	✓		✓			
Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>		✓										✓	✓
Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>								✓				✓	
Javan Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina javensis</i>												✓	
White-shouldered Triller - N	<i>Lalage sueurii</i>												✓	✓
Long-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>												✓	✓
Black-winged Flycatcher Shrike	<i>Hemipus hirundinaceus</i>													✓
Black-naped Oriole	<i>Oriolus chinensis</i>								✓					
Wallacean Drongo - N	<i>Dicrurus densus</i>				✓				✓					
Ashy Drongo	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>												✓	✓
Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocerus</i>												✓	✓
Hair-crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus hottentottus</i>												✓	✓
Malaysian Pied Fantail	<i>Rhipidura javanica</i>													✓
Black-naped Monarch	<i>Hypothymis azurea</i>												✓	✓
Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓						✓	✓					
Chestnut-headed Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus curvirostris</i>												✓	
Racket-tailed Treepie	<i>Crypsirina temia</i>													✓
Oriental Magpie	<i>Pica serica</i>												✓	
Cinereous Tit	<i>Parus cinereus</i>													✓
Yellow-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus goiavier</i>	✓	✓											✓

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic		September 2023												
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Sooty-headed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus aurigaster</i>												✓	✓
Pacific Swallow	<i>Hirundo tahitica</i>							✓	✓	✓				
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>											✓		
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>					✓			✓					
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>							✓						
Warbler sp								✓						
Olive-backed Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sepium</i>												✓	H
Yellow-ringed White-eye	<i>Heleia wallacei</i>								✓					
Lemon-bellied White-eye	<i>Zosterops chloris</i>							✓						
Bali Myna	<i>Leucopsar rothschildi</i>												✓	✓
Fulvous-chested Jungle Flycatcher	<i>Cyornis olivaceus</i>													✓
Oriental Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>												✓	
Pied Bush Chat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>							✓						
Black-fronted Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum igniferum</i>								✓					
Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum trochileum</i>												✓	
Plain Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum minullum</i>													✓
Brown-throated Sunbird	<i>Anthreptes malacensis</i>		✓											
Olive-backed Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris jugularis</i>							✓	Poss				✓	✓
Flame-breasted Sunbird - E	<i>Cinnyris solaris</i>								✓					
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓					✓				✓		
Javan Munia - E	<i>Lonchura leucogastroides</i>											✓		
Scaly-breasted Munia	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>		✓											✓

Cetaceans

Common name	Scientific name	September 2023												
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>			✓		✓								
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				
Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>				✓		✓	✓		✓				
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>										✓			
Fraser's Dolphin	<i>Lagenodolphis hosei</i>			~10										
Rough-toothed Dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>			~20										
Melon-headed Whale	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>			~80										

Other mammals

Common name	Scientific name	September 2023												
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Javan Rusa	<i>Rusa timorensis</i>								✓	✓				
Crab-eating Macaque	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>				✓	✓		✓		✓				
Sunda Flying Fox	<i>Acerodon mackloti</i>				✓									
Plantain Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus notatus</i>		✓											
Black Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa bicolor</i>												✓	✓
Feral Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>							✓						
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>								✓					
Indian Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>												✓	
Fruit Bat Sp													✓	

Reptiles and Amphibians

Common name	Scientific name	September 2023												
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Komodo Dragon	<i>Varanus komodoensis</i>							✓	✓	✓				
Two-striped Water Monitor	<i>Varanus salvator bivittatus</i>													
Banded Sea-snake	<i>Colubrina laticauda</i>				✓			✓						
Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>				2		✓	✓	✓	Prob	✓			
Hawksbill Turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>				1			✓	✓					
Olive-Ridley Turtle	<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>													
Common Spiny Lizard	<i>Coletes versicolor</i>													
House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus sp.</i>	✓			1									
Gliding Lizard	<i>Draco sumatranus</i>													
Indonesian Rat Snake	<i>Coelognathus subradiatus</i>								✓					
Leatherback Turtle	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>						✓							
Turtle (unidentified)			✓											
Skink sp									✓					

Fish

Common name	Scientific name	September 2023												
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
White-tip Reef Shark	<i>Triaenodon obesus</i>						✓		✓					
Black-tip Reef Shark	<i>Carcharhinus melanopterus</i>						✓	✓	✓					
Grey Reef Shark	<i>Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos</i>													
Bamboo Shark	<i>Chiloscyllium sp.</i>													
Nurse Shark	<i>Ginglymostoma cirratum</i>													
Reef Manta	<i>Manta alfredi</i>								✓					
Oceanic Manta	<i>Manta birostris</i>									✓				
Mobula Ray	<i>Mobula sp.</i>													
Blue-spotted Mask Ray	<i>Dasyatis kuhlii</i>													
Blue-spotted Stingray	<i>Taeniura lymma</i>			✓			✓			✓				

Spotted Eagle Ray	<i>Aetobatus narinari</i>								✓					
Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>													
Giant Moray Eel	<i>Gymnothorax javanicus</i>													
Tassled Scorpionfish	<i>Scorpaenopsis oxycephala</i>			✓										
Whale Shark	<i>Rhincodon typus</i>				6									
Ribbon Eel	<i>Rhinomuraena quaesita</i>					✓								
Giant Trevally	<i>Caranx ignobilis</i>								✓					
Unicornfish	<i>Naso brevirostris</i>								✓					
Needlefish	<i>Belonidae sp.</i>								✓	✓				
Clown Triggerfish	<i>Balistoides conspicillum</i>									✓				
Two-toned dartfish	<i>Ptereleotris evides</i>										✓			
Razorfish sp				6										
Scorpionfish sp						✓								
Moray Eel sp						✓								
Lobster sp.											✓			

Odonata

		September 2023													
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
Red Percher	<i>Neurothemis ramburii</i>	✓	✓										✓	✓	
Marsh Bluetail	<i>Ischnura senegalensis</i>	✓													
Slender Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum sabina</i>		✓												
Wandering Glider	<i>Pantala flavescens</i>							✓							
Spine-tufted Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum chrysis</i>								✓						
Scarlet basker	<i>Urothemis signata</i>												✓	✓	
Chalky Percher	<i>Diplacodes trivialis</i>												✓	✓	
Indigo Dropwing	<i>Trithemis festiva</i>													✓	