

Birding Borneo – The Best of Sabah

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 12 October 2019



Changeable Hawk-eagle by Peter Rendle



Zebra Dove by Peter Rendle



Whitehead's Trogon by Alan Fieldus



Storm's Stork by John Haynes

Report kindly compiled by client Peter Rendle
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Tour participants: Lister Jones (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Tuesday 1st October

We left Heathrow in the morning and after changing planes at Kuala Lumpur, we arrived at Sandakan in Sabah, Borneo, the following lunchtime.

Day 2

Wednesday 2nd October

We were met by our guide for the trip, Lister Jones, and were soon on the short drive to our first lodge at Sepilok. After checking into our rooms, we were excited to explore our new surroundings and see our first birds. We were not disappointed as we found a fruiting fig-tree which was attracting several species including Black Hornbill - the first of 7 species of Hornbill we saw on the trip, Blue-eared Barbet, Crimson Sunbird and Yellow-vented Bulbuls.

We met for dinner later, overlooking a lake with Silver-rumped Spinetails hawking over it, and Lister outlined the exciting days that lay ahead.

Day 3

Thursday 3rd October

The next morning we met at 6am for some pre-breakfast birding in the grounds of the lodge and it was good to familiarise ourselves with some of the more common species. There were lots of Glossy Swiftlets flying overhead and we soon saw the first spiderhunter of the trip, a Thick-billed Spiderhunter with a long down-curved bill, feeding on nectar. Other birds we saw included Dollarbird, Pink-necked Pigeon, Van Hasselt's Sunbird and the amazing-looking Rhinoceros Hornbill.

After breakfast we walked to the nearby Sepilok Orang-utan Sanctuary where we watched the Orang-utans playing and feeding. These are either orphaned or captive animals that will eventually be released into the wild. In the afternoon we went to the Rainforest Discovery Centre where we walked along a raised walkway which allowed views at canopy height. We were soon seeing birds – Blue-throated Bee-eater, Brown Fulvetta, Black-winged Flycatcher-shrike – but then the heavens opened and we had to take shelter under a handily-placed roofed area. The rain soon eased and we continued the walk, seeing a group of six Streaked Bulbuls, Lesser Green Leafbird, Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers, Wreathed Hornbill, a rather bedraggled Wallace's Hawk-eagle and an unusual view from above of a Buff-necked Woodpecker. We then waited for dusk and, right on cue, a Red Giant Flying Squirrel emerged from its nest hole and glided over our heads to land on a distant tree – a truly amazing sight.

Day 4

Friday 4th October

The following morning, we returned to the canopy walkway and saw several new bird species including Little Spiderhunter, Bushy-crested Hornbill, Bornean Brown Barbet, Raffles 'Malkoha, Bornean Black Magpie, Green Iora and Chestnut-winged Babbler.

After breakfast we visited the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre where we had a male Bornean Pit Viper pointed out to us. We were told that if bitten we may have 20 minutes to live and that the nearest hospital was over an hour away. Needless to say, we all kept well clear!! After watching a White-bellied Sea-eagle fly past we spent the next 30 minutes enjoying the antics of half-a-dozen Sun Bears that were using their fantastic sense of smell to search for food that had been thrown into their large enclosure.

Then it was time to leave Sepilok and do the two-and-a-half hour drive to our next lodge by the Kinabatangan River. After a tasty lunch of chicken and prawns we went on a boat ride and we had to quickly don the plastic ponchos we had been given as the rain started to fall. Alan and Margaret showed us a photo they had taken of a raptor that had landed in front of them to drink from a puddle of water. It was a Jerdon's Baza which was a great bird to see and one that we were destined not to see during the rest of the trip. We spent the next two-and-a-half hours cruising along the river and now and again going up small side-channels. We saw many birds including Little Green Pigeons, Lesser Fish Eagles, Whiskered Terns and a Bat Hawk as well as some Proboscis Monkeys and both Pig-tailed and Long-tailed Macaques.

Later, after dinner, we went out on a night boat trip with the guides using spot-lamps and we saw no less than five Buffy Fish Owls, a Blue-eared Kingfisher, a Stork-billed Kingfisher, a Leopard Cat, a Malay Civet and a Crocodile. Another highlight today was a Borneo Elephant, smallest in size of Asian elephant subspecies, which we watched feeding by the river.

Day 5

Saturday 5th October

The next day we had a cup of tea and some toast at 05.30 and set off in the boat again at 06.00. We soon saw a Crested Serpent Eagle – the most common raptor – as well as Greater Coucal, two Lesser Adjutant Storks, and the local dark form, “*ernesti*”, of Peregrine Falcon, and a Black-and-red Broadbill as well as many other birds. Down a narrow side-channel which was overhung with vegetation the boat driver pointed out a low tree in which there were three Mangrove snakes. They were quite large snakes, perhaps four or five feet in length and quite fat. Further down the channel we saw yet another Crested Serpent Eagle and then we had wonderful views of a Storm's Stork which was perched close-by.

That afternoon we took the boat and then transferred to the van for the 30 minute journey to the Gomantong Caves. First we birded around the carpark where we saw an Arctic Warbler and then on the path leading to the caves where we saw a Spotted Fantail, a Lesser Mouse Deer and a Pygmy Squirrel. We then heard a loud crashing in the trees nearby and watched two male Orang-utans chasing each other and making loud calls. Lister thought that one of the males had entered the other's territory and that this had caused the fight. At the entrance to the cave we found a Black-nest Swiftlet that was clinging onto a wooden post just a few inches off the ground and that was obviously the worse for wear. The main cave was awe-inspiring. It was immense and full of millions of roosting Bats and Swiftlets. There was a powerful smell of ammonia and the ground was covered in guano which itself was covered in cockroaches, small white crabs and long-legged centipedes. At dusk we situated ourselves in the carpark to watch the spectacle of millions of Bats leaving the cave and to watch the Bat Hawks that prey on them. It was like watching a murmuration of Starlings as the bats wheeled and banked in the sky, making beautiful shapes.

Later, after dinner, some of us went out on a night-walk through the jungle. The tree-roots and dense vegetation made it quite hard going but we were rewarded as we got to see a Large Frogmouth, a roosting Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher, a Malay Civet and a Western Tarsier that jumped horizontally from tree to tree.

Day 6

Sunday 6th October

The following morning, we left our lodge by the river at 06.15 to go to our next port of call, Tabin, with a short stop to buy some beer! Upon arrival we were met by our local guide, Rafael, who took us for a short walk in the grounds before lunch. Almost immediately he was showing us three Great Slaty Woodpeckers and then a beautiful male Asian Fairy Bluebird, a Spectacled Bulbul, an Oriental (Crested) Honey Buzzard and a Bornean North Grey Gibbon.

There was torrential rain during the afternoon, and it wasn't until 5pm that we left for the 1st night drive of our stay. Whilst it was still light we saw a flock of Chestnut Munias feeding in some long grasses, the endemic White-fronted Falconet which is one of the smallest raptors in the world, and a Changeable Hawk-eagle which was perched on a nearby post. As the light faded Rafael and Lister started to use the flashlights. We saw a couple of Buffy Fish Owls and a roosting Yellow-bellied Prinia, a Bearded Pig and then a beautiful Leopard Cat, about the size of a domestic cat but spotted like a leopard.

Day 7

Monday 7th October

The next day after an early breakfast, we left by 06.00 for a long drive through the forest. When we stopped at the end of the track we got out and started to walk back, birding as we went. There was plenty of birdlife and we saw, amongst other species, Emerald Dove, Bronzed Drongo, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher, Hairy-backed Bulbul, Olive-backed Woodpecker, a beautiful Green Broadbill and a Dusky Munia building a nest in an overhanging tree. After a stop for some much-needed water, we continued the walk, seeing a Flying Lizard, a Lesser Tree Shrew, Fiery Minivet, Gold-whiskered Barbet, Rufous Piculet, White-crowned Shama, and a Red-naped Trogon. We then heard the sound of a group of birds mobbing something in a tree. The birds consisted of Grey-cheeked Bulbuls, Asian Paradise Flycatcher and Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker. Eventually we saw the cause of their alarm – a long, thin snake called a Grey-tailed Racer that was winding its way through the upper branches of the tree.

On the way back to have lunch, we saw a Chestnut-backed Scimitar-babbler, a Black Eagle and a sow Bearded Pig with her five piglets.

That afternoon we had another night-drive. Before dark, we saw our first parrots of the trip, Blue-crowned Hanging-parrots and Blue-rumped Parrots as well as two Grey-rumped Treeswifts and a Yellow-eared Spiderhunter. At dusk Rafael started to call a Sunda Frogmouth and within what seemed like a few seconds the bird duly arrived and perched right in front of us, giving us spectacular views. Later Rafael pointed out a large female Bornean Pit Viper coiled up in a trackside bush and then a Slow Loris in a nearby tree. Although they are nocturnal they are one of the few mammals whose eyes do not reflect light so are very difficult to find. Today many of the group took the opportunity to see the last remaining Sumatran Rhino in Malaysia, a female, Iman. There is no other place in the world to see a Sumatran Rhino (the world's smallest rhino species) in a natural forest setting like this and by doing so we supported Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA) who are working to try and

prevent the extinction of this species across its range, being tragically close to extinction with only around 100 individuals left.

Day 8

Tuesday 8th October

Today we had a lie-in as breakfast wasn't until 06.00! From a small hide overlooking a pond we saw Oriental Darter, and both Great and Little Egrets. Walking along a different track, we saw a good selection of birds including Ferruginous Babbler, Maroon-breasted Philentoma, Chestnut-breasted Malkoha, and a lovely Blue-headed Pitta which we heard calling and tracked down by going off the path and into the jungle proper. After Lister, John and Alan had left us to go to see the Sumatran Rhinoceros, the rest of us continued the walk with Rafael. He soon found a lovely female Orange-backed Woodpecker and our first and only Red-billed Malkoha. Turning a corner in the track we then saw something that we were not expecting to see in the forest – two Storm's Storks perched in a tree! We were told that there are only 500 of them left and now we had seen three of them!

At 16.00 we left for our final night-drive and were soon seeing birds – Blue-crowned Hanging-parrot, Wreathed Hornbill, Whiskered Treeswift, Crimson-winged Woodpecker, and the fourth Storm's Stork of the trip. As darkness was falling and the cicadas were getting into full voice, we heard and then saw four magnificent White-crowned Hornbills, a bird that we had almost given-up on seeing. Then, using the spotlights, we saw our first owl of the evening – a lovely Brown Wood Owl. Then we stopped next to some bushes and Rafael started to play a recording of a frogmouth. At first it didn't respond but he persevered and at long last it paid dividends when he spotted a Blyth's Frogmouth sitting on a low branch inside a bush and we all had good views.

Lastly, on the way back for dinner we saw another Buffy Fish Owl, two Leopard Cats and an Island Palm Civet.

Day 9

Wednesday 9th October

This was our last morning at Tabin, and we were up early to start birding at 0615. We started with a new bird for the trip, a Horsfield's Babbler, and then had great views of a pair of White-fronted Falconets in the early-morning sunshine. We heard a Black-crowned Pitta calling rather distantly and had fleeting glimpses of a Moustached Hawk-cuckoo that would not come out into the open. We then followed Rafael into the jungle to track down a Black-crowned Pitta and eventually had good views of this beautiful-looking bird as it hopped among the tangled roots and branches. On the way back to the lodge we saw a Banded Broadbill and a female Scarlet-rumped Trogon and then had plenty of time to pack our bags before leaving for Lahad Datu airport for our flight across northern Borneo to Kota Kinabalu.

We arrived at our final destination, the Mountain Valley Hotel, after dark so had no idea of the wonderful views that were in store for us the following morning.

Day 10

Thursday 10th October

We left the hotel at 06.00 to drive up Mount Kinabalu as far as the Timphohon Gate which is at 1800 metres above sea-level. This is the entrance to the mountain climbing trail and is as far as we were allowed to go. We birded the area around the gate and then slowly worked our way back down the road. At the top we saw Ashy

Drongo, Bornean Whistling Thrush, Chestnut-hooded Laughing-thrush, Blyth's Shrike-babbler, Golden-naped Barbet and Grey-chinned Minivet as well as several Large Tree Shrews. As we started to walk down the road we saw two Bornean Green Magpies, Ochraceous Bulbul, Sunda Bush Warbler, Bornean Treepie, Indigo Flycatcher, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Sunda Laughingthrush, Little Cuckoo-dove and Sunda Cuckoo-shrike.

After having breakfast in a lay-by where there were lovely views of the mountains, we continued with our descent, seeing Bornean Swiftlets, Fruithunter, Checker-throated Woodpecker, Bornean Whistler, Temminck's Sunbird and the much sought-after Whitehead's Broadbill – a stunning-looking luminous-green bird with black markings. After lunch we continued birding and, along with many other species, saw White-throated Fantail, Yellow-breasted Warbler and Pale-blue Flycatcher.

Day 11

Friday 11th October

On the last morning of the trip we left the hotel at 06.00 and went back to the Timpohon Gate. We retraced our steps of yesterday, getting the chance to have a second view of some of the species we saw yesterday. We then saw a bird that we had searched for the day before but without success – Whitehead's Trogon. In fact we saw five in all, two pairs and another male. This bird was a fitting climax to our tour and we went for a celebratory breakfast at a Chinese café!

We left the hotel at 10.30 for Kota Kinabalu airport and took a flight to K.L. and then another back to the UK.

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Species Lists

Birds

Storm's Stork	Raffle's Malkoha
Lesser Adjutant	Red-Billed Malkoha
Striated Heron	Chestnut- Breasted Malkoha
Eastern Cattle Egret	Moustached Hawk-Cuckoo
Purple Heron	Barred Eagle-Owl
Great Egret	Buffy Fish Owl
Little Egret	Brown Wood Owl
Oriental Darter	Large Frogmouth
Crested Honey Buzzard	Blyth's Frogmouth
Crested Serpent Eagle	Sunda Frogmouth
Bat Hawk	Grey-Rumped Treeswift
Changeable Hawk-Eagle	Whiskered Treeswift
Wallace's Hawk-Eagle	Glossy Swiftlet
Black Eagle	Bornean Swiftlet
Brahminy Kite	Black-Nest Swiftlet
White-Bellied Sea-Eagle	Silver-Rumped Spinetail
Lesser Fish Eagle	Asian Palm Swift
White-Breasted Waterhen	Red-Naped Trogon
Common Sandpiper	Whitehead's Trogon
Whiskered Tern	Scarlet-Rumped Trogon
Little Cuckoo-Dove	Oriental Dollarbird
Common Emerald Dove	Stork-Billed Kingfisher
Zebra Dove	Collared Kingfisher
Little Green Pigeon	Blue-Eared Kingfisher
Pink-Necked Green Pigeon	Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher
Green Imperial Pigeon	Blue-Throated Bee-Eater
Mountain Imperial Pigeon	White-Crowned Hornbill
Greater Coucal	Rhinoceros Hornbill
Oriental Pied Hornbill	Rufous-Winged Philentoma
Black Hornbill	Maroon-Breasted Philentoma
Bushy-Crested Hornbill	Green Iora
Wreathed Hornbill	Sunda Cuckooshrike
Wrinkled Hornbill	Lesser Cuckooshrike
Golden-Whiskered Barbet	Fiery Minivet
Golden-Naped Barbet	Grey-Chinned Minivet
Blue-Eared Barbet	Bornean Whistler
Brown Barbet	Blyth's Shrike-Babbler
Rufous Piculet	Dark-Throated Oriole
Checker-Throated Woodpecker	Ashy Drongo
Crimson-Winged Woodpecker	Bronzed Drongo
Olive-Backed Woodpecker	Greater Racket-Tailed Drongo
Orange-Backed Woodpecker	White-Throated Fantail
Buff-Rumped Woodpecker	Malaysian Pied Fantail
Buff-Necked Woodpecker	Spotted Fantail
Great Slaty Woodpecker	Black-Naped Monarch
White-Fronted Falconet	Asian Paradise Flycatcher
Peregrine Falcon	Black Magpie

Blue-Rumped Parrot	Bornean Green Magpie
Blue-Crowned Hanging Parrot	Bornean Treepie
Green Broadbill	House Crow
Whitehead's Broadbill	Slender-Billed Crow
Black-And-Red Broadbill	Grey-Headed Canary-Flycatcher
Banded Broadbill	Black-Headed Bulbul
Black-And-Yellow Broadbill	Yellow-Vented Bulbul
Blue-Headed Pitta	Olive-Winged Bulbul
Black-Crowned Pitta	Cream-Vented Bulbul
Bar-Winged Flycatcher-Shrike	Asian Red-Eyed Bulbul
Black-Winged Flycatcher-Shrike	Spectacled Bulbul
Large Woodshrike	Ochraceous Bulbul
Grey-Cheeked Bulbul	Javan Myna
Hairy-Backed Bulbul	Fruithunter
Buff-Vented Bulbul	White-Crowned Shama
Streaked Bulbul	Dark-Sided Flycatcher
Barn Swallow	Pale Blue Flycatcher
Pacific Swallow	Verditer Flycatcher
Sunda Bush Warbler	Indigo Flycatcher
Arctic Warbler	Bornean Whistling Thrush
Mountain Leaf Warbler	Little Pied Flycatcher
Yellow-Breasted Warbler	Greater Green Leafbird
Yellow-Bellied Prinia	Lesser Green Leafbird
Dark-Necked Tailorbird	Yellow-Rumped Flowerpecker
Rufous-Tailed Tailorbird	Orange-Bellied Flowerpecker
Ashy Tailorbird	Ruby-Cheeked Sunbird
Chestnut-Backed Scimitar-Babbler	Plain Sunbird
Grey-Throated Babbler	Brown-Throated Sunbird
Chestnut-Rumped Babbler	Purple-Naped Sunbird
Chestnut-Winged Babbler	Van Hasselt's Sunbird
Rufous-Fronted Babbler	Olive-Backed Sunbird
Brown Fulvetta	Crimson Sunbird
Horsfield's Babbler	Temminck's Sunbird
Sooty-Capped Babbler	Little Spiderhunter
Rufous-Crowned Babbler	Thick-Billed Spiderhunter
Ferruginous Babbler	Yellow-Eared Spiderhunter
Sunda Laughingthrush	Eurasian Tree Sparrow
Chestnut-Hooded Laughingthrush	Dusky Munia
Black-Capped White-Eye	White-Bellied Munia
Asian Fairy-Bluebird	Chestnut Munia
Velvet-Fronted Nuthatch	Grey Wagtail
Asian Glossy Starling	Grey-Streaked Flycatcher
Common Hill Myna	Ferruginous Flycatcher

Mammals

Pygmy Elephant	Lesser Treeshrew
Mountain Treeshrew	Smooth-Tailed Treeshrew
Wrinkle-Lipped Bat	Bornean Slow Loris
Western Tarsier	Maroon Langur
Silvered Langur	Proboscis Monkey

Long-Tailed Macaque
East Bornean Grey Gibbon
Giant Squirrel
Prevost's Squirrel
Plantain Squirrel
Plain Pygmy Squirrel
Sun Bear
Malay Civet
Leopard Cat
Lesser Mouse-Deer

Sunda Pig-Tailed Macaque
Bornean Orangutan
Kinabalu Squirrel
Bornean Black-Banded Squirrel
Whitehead's Pygmy Squirrel
Red Giant Flying Squirrel
Yellow-Throated Marten
Small-Toothed Palm Civet
Bearded Pig

Reptiles

Saltwater Crocodile
Green-Eyed Gecko
Water Monitor
Grey-Tailed Racer
Anura Sp.

Crested Green Lizard
Asian House Gecko
Mangrove Snake
Bornean Keeled Pit Viper



Pygmy Elephant by Peter Rendle



Bornean Pit Viper by Peter Rendle



Proboscis by John Haynes



Lesser Fish Eagle by John Haynes