



birdtourASIA

specialists in asian birding tours

Sabah, Borneo custom tour

5th – 10th May 2008

Leader: Frank Rheindt

Participants: John and Delia Taylor

This report details a customised tour we put together for a couple that wanted to take in the best Sabah sites for birds, mammals and general fauna and flora within the short time that was available to them. Our quick 5-day stint included a brief look around the canopy walk at Sepilok, followed by an evening excursion to the fascinating Gomantong Caves, a full day and a morning along the enchanting Kinabatangan River as well as two full days and a morning in some of the richest rainforest on earth in the Danum Valley.

After a 50-minute flight from Kota Kinabalu across the Crocker Range to Sandakan, we arrived at Sepilok in the late morning and headed straight to the brand-new and recently opened canopy walk for a brief look around the tree tops. Although morning activity had long subsided, we managed to start off the tour with a number of great bird sightings during our 2 hours on this impressive steel construction. A Wallace's Hawk Eagle perched closely and was seen in the scope, while a number of individuals of the commoner but no less impressive Crested Serpent Eagle soared overhead. A Greater Racket-tailed Drongo was spotted on its improbable nest construction in the fragile fork of a spindly narrow tree. Soon after, a beautiful male Crimson Sunbird was posing for the scope and stole the show for other canopy birds that provided great views, such as Green Imperial Pigeon, Lesser Green Leafbird, Black-winged Flycatcher Shrike, Plain Sunbird, Slender-billed Crow and the common Ashy Tailorbird.

Descending from the lofty heights of the canopy, we headed to the other side of the artificial reservoir where we had spotted a small fruiting tree from the tower. Time was running out, so we could only afford a quick 10-minute wait around the tree. Despite the briefness of our time investment, we were amply rewarded with great close-up views of a number of common bulbuls (Olive-winged, Cream-vented, Red-eyed, Yellow-vented, Black-headed), Asian Glossy Starling, the distinctive Bornean race of Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker and – best of all – gripping views of a male Grey-and-buff Woodpecker that almost came to within grabbing distance.

On our way back to the entrance at high noon, the forest was generally quiet but we lucked out with superb looks at White-crowned Shama, Pied Fantail, Silver-rumped Needletail and a confiding group of *Erpornis* that approached closely. We likened this snazzy little bird to a titmouse, and while this uncanny resemblance can be attributed to convergence, its relationship to another North American genus (the vireos) has indeed been confirmed only recently, ending decades of erroneous classification with the Asian yuhinas (as the "White-bellied Yuhina").

Soon it was time for a filling lunch and a 2-hour drive to the Kinabatangan area, where we were going to spend the next 36 hours. The drive through hundreds of square kilometres of oil palm plantations was generally eventless, though we did add a number of common birds to our tally, such as Intermediate Egret, Brahminy Kite, Collared Kingfisher, Grey-rumped Treeswift, White-breasted Wood-Swallow and Black-headed Munia.

We arrived in Gomantong with enough day-light left to make a brief excursion into the caves to see hundreds of breeding swiftlets at their nest. South-east Asian echo-locating *Aerodramus* swiftlets present

birders with the unique difficulty of being virtually unidentifiable unless seen at their distinct nest constructions. Our foray into the cave took us past the entrance, where a couple of hundred of non-echo-locating Glossy Swiftlets (of the genus *Collocalia*) had set up their tiny cup nests. Eventually, we followed the boardwalk into the stench coming out of the dark cave interior, eager not to slip off the planks into the muddy molasses of swiftlet and bat guano that fills out the cave's floor. Inside the cave, hundreds of Black-nest Swiftlets could be seen far overhead in their distinct darkish nests built vertically along the walls and ceilings of the cave's dome. More searching was required to find a handful of the horizontally-built platform nest constructions of the Mossy-nest Swiftlet in the rear corners of the cave, with only one bird attending. Unfortunately, nests of the edible kind were missing, since our visit came just a short time after a major nest harvest by the workers living in the adjacent company quarters.

It was already very late by the time we hit the boardwalk leading back to the parking lot, but in the last few minutes of daylight activity we managed to find a tame Malaysian Blue Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Tailorbird, Black-naped Monarch, Buff-vented and Yellow-bellied Bulbul, Plaintive Cuckoo and – best of all – a Sooty-capped and two Grey-headed Babblers. Outside around the parking lot at dusk, we witnessed the emergence of hundreds of thousands of bats from the cave, and were privy to astonishing observations of four Bat Hawks as they picked their prey from endless chiropteran bands dispersing into the night sky. It was now time to proceed to Bilit Village, where a quick boat ride took us downriver to our comfortable lodge along the shores of the Kinabatangan, the place we would stay for the ensuing two nights.

The next morning, we were all eager to hit the river in search of one of the holy grails of Sabah's rainforest, the Bornean Ground Cuckoo. In the past, this bird eluded ornithologists for decades and has only recently become somewhat reliable (but still very unpredictable) along the Kinabatangan River. On the way to our target location, we spotted our first common river birds in the form of Oriental Darter, Purple Heron, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Blue-eared and Stork-billed Kingfishers, Dollarbird, Yellow-bellied Prinia and Common Iora, but we also had nice views of a Jerdon's Baza, the arguably best raptor of the trip.

Listening to the sounds of nature while quietly floating down the river, we eventually heard a distant ground-cuckoo vocalisation and followed it to its source. As we approached the shores whence the sound emanated, we tried our best to get close to the bird in order to obtain views, but the forest habitat was too thick, and I only ended up getting a quick glimpse of the bird while the others unfortunately missed out. To our great surprise, two other individuals suddenly started calling from the opposite bank, and we decided to pursue them instead, since the forest on that side looked more conducive to wildlife viewing. Here again, we ended up getting very close to the second calling bird, but glimpses were only obtained by some of us. Exhausted from more than an hour of trying to view these birds, we were close to giving up and contenting ourselves with the brief glimpses obtained, when the third individual finally gave in and granted several views of up to 5 minutes. Initially only showing certain parts of its body through the thick foliage, it finally emerged onto the shores and showed itself off in full splendor. What a bird, everyone agreed.

Before hitting the river again for a second boat ride in the late afternoon, we birded in the forest adjacent to the lodge, where our best find was possibly a family party of the awesome Black-throated Babbler. We also added our first Black-and-yellow Broadbills, Bold-striped Tit Babblers and Chestnut-winged Babblers to the trip tally. Then, our afternoon boat excursion finally broke the primate spell we had encountered in the morning, with excellent observations of four species, including an eerily human Orang-utan lady feasting on tree fruit, a funky Red Leaf Monkey, inquisitive family groups of Long-tailed Macaque and congregations of Proboscis Monkeys that qualify for the attribute "hordes". A pair of impossibly clown-like White-crowned Hornbills started to follow our boat, hitching from tree to tree and erecting their flamboyant crests intermittently, thus qualifying for the title "best bird of the trip" for some of us. Later, about half an hour before dusk, we were privileged to experience an unusual spike in bird activity with three raucous Great Slaty Woodpeckers, tape-responsive Banded Bay, Violet and Drongo Cuckoos, a showy pair of Black Hornbills not far from our first Rhinoceros Hornbill of the trip and a pair of Hill Myna all around the same spot.

A night cruise on that evening was quite successful in providing torch-light views of three Buffy Fish Owls, two Black-crowned Night Herons, and a cute family of 5 Black-and-red Broadbills all tucked in together on a horizontal branch. Relieved from the pressures of the preceding day, our leisurely boat ride on the following morning provided us with excellent views of a majestic Grey-headed Fish Eagle, a second Crested Goshawk (after more distant views the day before) and half a dozen endangered Storm's Storks circling overhead in a flock mixed in with a pair of Rufous-bellied Eagles and a dark morph Changeable

Hawk Eagle. We also spotted a couple of no less impressive Lesser Adjutants and a late Whiskered Tern. Crested Argus was heard only in the distance, while Brown-backed Needletail was seen swooshing by in the skies and Pink-necked Green Pigeon, Red-throated Sunbird, two Brown Barbets and a flock of Fiery Minivets were spotted perched on riverside trees. The best bird this morning may have been a Hooded Pitta that took some stealthy boating skills to approach closely and to see well through the root tangles.

This afternoon, we bade our farewell to the Kinabatangan and made our long way to the Danum Valley where we arrived in the evening, delighted to find out that we were treated to the lodge's deluxe rooms usually reserved for higher dignitaries. During the following two days, we had an incredible time checking out the recently expanded and greatly improved canopy walkway as well as the trail system around the Bornean Rainforest Lodge. The canopy walk was often quiet but also provided some impressive bursts of bird activity in the morning, when we enjoyed scope views of playful Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots in the tree tops, both Raffles's and Chestnut-breasted Malkohas as well as perched Whiskered Treeswifts and Blue-throated Bee-eaters. Some birds were only heard distantly, with no chance of finding them in the scope, such as Helmeted Hornbill, Crested Jay, Banded Broadbill, while others were eventually spotted, including Blue-eared Barbet. A female Lesser Cuckooshrike was observed for minutes as it struggled to kill a caterpillar by hitting it against the bark with its beak. Other remarkable bird sightings along the canopy walkway included Green Iora, Greater Green Leafbird, Brown Fulvetta, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Ruby-cheeked Sunbird, Everett's White-eye, Large Woodshrike and Maroon-breasted Philentoma.

The lodge clearing itself as well as the road leading into it occasionally provided some great bird activity, with easy views of Dusky Munia, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Dark-necked Tailorbird, three species of spiderhunter (Spectacled, Little and Grey-breasted), Yellow-breasted and Yellow-rumped Flowerpeckers and less straightforward views of Purple-naped Sunbird and Orange-bellied Flowerpecker. A group of 7 Bushy-crested Hornbills and a Greater Coucal were seen close to the lodge, but the latter's much scarcer cousin, the Short-toed Coucal, was only heard distantly. Our trogon tally was not bad at all considering the briefness of our stay, with fantastic looks at male, female and juvenile Red-naped Trogons, a male Scarlet-rumped Trogon and a male Diard's Trogon. Black-backed Dwarf Kingfisher was seen well perched in the scope on three occasions. Woodpeckers were dominated by 7 Buff-necked sightings, while two Maroon Woodpeckers and a Rufous Piculet also showed nicely. A single Buff-rumped and an Orange-backed Woodpecker, in contrast, did not stay around for everyone to see.

Black-crowned Pitta was never heard close-by and always seemed too far out of reach along the forest trails, while we had two very close vocal encounters with Blue-headed Pitta which almost resulted in a sighting. This slight disappointment was more than made up for by a formidable view of a male Bornean Banded Pitta that put up a 30-minute battle to withstand our own whistled imitations of its call before finally giving in and showing itself off to everyone in a most appreciated fashion. The dark forest floor was often silent throughout the day, and some of the lower-stratum birds such as Grey-cheeked and Hairy-backed Bulbuls took lengthy stalking through the jungle to connect with. However, our walks along the lodge's trail system finally paid off when we started to encounter a male Crested Fireback, a closely confiding Chestnut-necklaced Partridge and rich bursts of activity involving Large-billed Blue Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Shama, Spotted Fantail, Dark-throated Oriole and a host of babblers (Ferruginous, Short-tailed, Black-capped, Moustached, Scaly-crowned, Rufous-crowned and Chestnut-rumped). At first reluctant to reveal themselves, Chestnut-backed Scimitar Babblers finally decided to grant us some wonderful looks, while singing Rufous-fronted Babblers and Fluffy-backed Tit-Babblers could not be persuaded into view. A Bornean Wren-Babbler that initially showed well to the leader but then required hard work for everyone to get a look was most pleasing. A night drive around Danum's road system made for some memorable mammal sightings, including a pair of Sunda Slow Loris, a Red Giant Flying Squirrel, Common Palm Civet, Greater Mouse Deer, Sambar Deer and a Bearded Pig by the lodge.

After only two full days at Danum, we had to retrace our footsteps to Lahad Datu and fly back to Kota Kinabalu, thereby concluding a beautiful excursion into Sabah's treasure house of nature under the flying silhouettes of Little Swifts at the Kota Kinabalu airport terminal.

Systematic List

Oriental Darter – Kinabatangan and Danum
Purple Heron – Kinabatangan
Intermediate Egret – common
Cattle Egret – occasional
Black-crowned Night-Heron – 2 Kinabatangan

Storm's Stork – ½ dozen along Kinabatangan
Lesser Adjutant – 1+1 along Kinabatangan
Jerdon's Baza – 1 Kinabatangan
Bat Hawk – 4 Gomantong
Brahminy Kite – en route
Grey-headed Fish Eagle – 1 Kinabatangan
Crested Serpent Eagle – common
Crested Goshawk – 1+1 Kinabatangan
Rufous-bellied Eagle – 1+2 Kinabatangan
Changeable Hawk Eagle – 1 Kinabatangan
Wallace's Hawk Eagle – 1 Sepilok, 1+1 Kinabatangan, 1 Danum
[Great Argus – heard only at Kinabatangan and Danum]
Chestnut-necklaced Partridge – 1 seen Danum, more heard
Crested Fireback – 1 male Danum
Whiskered Tern – 1 Kinabatangan
Spotted Dove – occasional
Pink-necked Green Pigeon – Kinabatangan
Green Imperial Pigeon – common
Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot – Kinabatangan and Danum
Banded Bay Cuckoo – Kinabatangan (also heard only in Danum)
Plaintive Cuckoo – Gomantong (also heard only in Kinabatangan and Danum)
Violet Cuckoo – Kinabatangan (also heard only in Sepilok and Danum)
Drongo Cuckoo – Kinabatangan (also heard only Danum)
Raffles's Malkoha – 1 female Danum
Chestnut-breasted Malkoha – 1+1 Danum
Bornean Ground Cuckoo – 3 seen along Kinabatangan
[Short-toed Coucal – heard only at Danum]
Greater Coucal – Danum (also heard only elsewhere)
Buffy Fish Owl – 3 along Kinabatangan
Glossy Swiftlet – occasional, including c. 200 at nests in Gomantong Cave
Mossy-nest Swiftlet – 1 identified at nest in Gomantong Cave
Black-nest Swiftlet – more than 500 identified at nest in Gomantong Cave
Silver-rumped Needletail – 2-3 Sepilok, several Danum
Brown-backed Needletail – Kinabatangan
House Swift – common Kota Kinabalu
Grey-rumped Treeswift – 1 en route
Whiskered Treeswift – 1+1 Danum
Red-naped Trogon – 3 Danum
Diard's Trogon – 1 male Danum (also heard only along Kinabatangan)
Scarlet-rumped Trogon – 1 male Danum
Blue-eared Kingfisher – 1+1 Kinabatangan
Black-backed Dwarf Kingfisher – 1 Sepilok, 1+1+1 Danum
Stork-billed Kingfisher – 2+1 Kinabatangan, 1 Danum
Collared Kingfisher – common en route
Blue-throated Bee-eater – 1 Danum
Dollarbird – Kinabatangan
Oriental Pied Hornbill – Kinabatangan
Black Hornbill – 2+1 Kinabatangan
Rhinoceros Hornbill – 1 Kinabatangan, common Danum
[Helmeted Hornbill – heard only at Danum]
Bushy-crested Hornbill – 7 Danum
White-crowned Hornbill – 2 pairs at Kinabatangan
[Gold-whiskered Barbet – heard only at Danum]
[Yellow-crowned Barbet – heard only at Danum]
Blue-eared Barnet – Danum (also heard only elsewhere)
Brown Barbet – 2 Kinabatangan, 2+1 Danum
Rufous Piculet – 1 Danum
Maroon Woodpecker – 1 Gomantong, 2 Danum
Orange-backed Woodpecker – 1 Danum
Buff-rumped Woodpecker – 1 Danum
Buff-necked Woodpecker – 1 Kinabatangan, 7 Danum
Grey-and-buff Woodpecker – 1 Sepilok, 1 Kinabatangan, 1 Danum

Grea Slaty Woodpecker – 3 Kinabatangan
Black-and-red Broadbill – 5 Kinabatangan
[Banded Broadbill – heard only at Danum]
Black-and-yellow Broadbill – Kinabatangan and Danum
Banded Pitta – 1 male Danum
[Blue-headed Pitta – heard only Danum]
Hooded Pitta – 1 Kinabatangan
[Black-crowned Pitta – heard only at Danum]
Pacific Swallow – common
Lesser Cuckooshrike – 2 Danum
Fiery Minivet – Kinabatangan and Danum
Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike – Danum
Black-winged Flycatcher-Shrike – Sepilok and Danum
Black-headed Bulbul – Sepilok and Kinabatangan
Yellow-vented Bulbul – common
Olive-winged Bulbul – Sepilok
Cream-vented Bulbul – Sepilok and Danum
Red-eyed Bulbul – Sepilok and Kinabatangan
Spectacled Bulbul – Danum
Grey-cheeked Bulbul – Danum
Yellow-bellied Bulbul – Gomantong
Hairy-backed Bulbul – 1 Danum
Buff-vented Bulbul – Gomantong
Greater Green Leafbird – Danum
Lesser Green Leafbird – Sepilok, Kinabatangan, Danum
Common Iora – Kinabatangan
Green Iora – Sepilok and Danum
Yellow-bellied Prinia – Kinabatangan, Danum
Dark-necked Tailorbird – Danum (also heard elsewhere)
Rufous-tailed Tailorbird – Danum, Sepilok
Ashy Tailorbird – common
Large-billed Blue Flycatcher – 2+1 Danum
Malaysian Blue Flycatcher – Gomantong, Danum, Kinabatangan
Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher – Danum
Oriental Magpie Robin – Danum and en route
White-crowned Shama – Kinabatangan, Sepilok
Rufous-tailed Shama – Danum
Pied Fantail – common
Spotted Fantail – Danum
Black-naped Monarch – common
Asian Paradise-Flycatcher – Danum
Ferruginous Babbler – Danum
Short-tailed Babbler – Danum
Black-capped Babbler – Danum
Moustached Babbler – Danum
Sooty-capped Babbler – Gomantong, Danum
Scaly-crowned Babbler – Danum
Rufous-crowned Babbler – Danum
Chestnut-backed Scimitar-Babbler – Danum
Bornean Wren-Babbler – 1 Danum
Striped Wren-Babbler – 1 Danum
[Rufous-fronted Babbler – heard only at Danum]
Grey-headed Babbler – 2 Gomantong
Black-throated Babbler – Kinabatangan
Chestnut-rumped Babbler – Danum
Chestnut-winged Babbler – Kinabatangan, Danum
Bold-striped Tit-Babbler – Kinabatangan, Danum
[Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler – heard only at Danum]
Brown Fulvetta – Danum
Erpornis – Sepilok
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch – Danum
Ruby-cheeked Sunbird – Danum

Plain Sunbird – Danum, Sepilok
Red-throated Sunbird – Sepilok, Kinabatangan, Danum
Purple-naped Sunbird – Danum
Crimson Sunbird – Kinabatangan, Danum, Sepilok
Spectacled Spiderhunter – Danum
Little Spiderhunter – Sepilok, Danum
Grey-breasted Spiderhunter – Danum
Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker – Danum
Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker – Danum
Orange-bellied Flowerpecker – Danum
Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker – Sepilok
Everett's White-eye – Danum
Dark-throated Oriole – Danum
Large Woodshrike – Danum
Maroon-breasted Philentoma – Danum
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo – Sepilok, Kinabatangan
White-breasted Woodswallow – en route
[Crested Jay – heard only at Danum]
Slender-billed Crow – common
Asian Glossy Starling – en route
Hill Myna – Kinabatangan
Crested Myna – en route
Dusky Munia – Danum
Black-headed Munia – en route
Tree Sparrow – en route

Mammals:

Sunda Slow Loris – 2 Danum
Red Leaf Monkey – 1 Kinabatangan
Proboscis Monkey – common along Kinabatangan
Long-tailed Macaque – Kinabatangan and Danum
Sunda Pig-tailed Macaque – 2 Danum
[Bornean Gibbon – heard only at Danum]
Orang-utan – 1 female along Kinabatangan
Prevost's Squirrel – common
Plain Pygmy Squirrel – common
Red Giant Flying Squirrel – 1-3 Danum
Common Palm Civet – 2 Danum
Bearded Pig – 1 Danum
Greater Mouse Deer – 3 singles at Danum
Sambar Deer – 1 Danum

For information regarding our tours to Borneo please click [here](#). Alternatively please contact us via [e-mail](#) regarding organising a custom tour to this wonderful island.