Sarawak, Sulawesi and Seram

30th September – 8th October 2012

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Black Oriole, Sarawak © James Eaton/Birdtour Asia

This short custom tour targeted some of the Asia’s least-known endemics, many of which are not possible on standard tours while others were species missed on previous tours when they were less known, lumped within other species or not yet discovered! We started in Borneo, heading well off the beaten-trail in search of one of the islands least-known endemics, Black Oriole. We saw this easily (well, easy to see, hard to get to!), along with 3 other key targets; Bornean Leafbird, Bornean Bulbul and the rarely-seen Bornean Frogmouth. En-route to the airport we also picked-up two little-known regional endemics; Hook-billed Bulbul and Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker. Next up, after a solid 30 hours travel was the eastern Indonesian island of Seram, with a clean-up of hoped-for species including magnificent views of Salmon-crested Cockatoo and the rare Purple-naped Lory. Finally, a day’s birding at Lore Lindu, in central Sulawesi produced 7 of our 8 targets, including the fabulous Purple-bearded Bee-eater and two endemic boobooks.

The tour started in Borneo, concentrating our time in Sarawak to find the odd species which are rarely seen in the Malaysian province of Sabah. Following a flight to the thriving oil-and-gas town of Miri we took a short internal flight to Lawas, in easternmost Sarawak and headed inland in our 4wd vehicle along, dusty logging roads. Driving through the endless lines of Oil Palm and forest-cum-scrub, passing fully-loaded logging trucks was a depressing sight, though in the distance we could see plenty of relatively intact forest on the hillsides – our final destination. Having picked-up our four man crew we drove up a disused logging track as far as we could before our walk into the ‘heart-of-Borneo’ would begin. It was quite a trek, especially as it was in the heat of the day, as we walked from 700m up to 1200m. The birds were active, although we ignored many of the calls in our keenness to get as high as fast as possible and into the range of a very special bird - Black Oriole - 3 other targets. On the way up
several bulbuls were conspicuous, including Scaly-breasted and pleasingly the fluty song of the increasingly rare Straw-headed – obviously the bird-trappers had not been here yet. Surprisingly, at 900m we encountered a group of endemic Black-throated Wren Babblers by the trail (our first of 3 groups), usually a low-density lowland species. Reaching 950m we heard our first oriole, though distantly, and a troop of Hose’s Leaf Monkey fed by the trail, fleeing the moment they cast eyes on us. With the habitat noticeably becoming more submontane finally we hit gold, as a male Black Oriole appeared in the canopy, singing his sweet song, producing a variety of different song-types before being joined by his mate where they both dropped to the sub-canopy to quietly feed close by and giving outstanding views, moving in a roving feeding-flock that contained target number two, a group of Bornean Leafbird!

Grinning from ear-to-ear, handshakes all-round at the sight of the oriole, a species known only from a series of specimens taken from a select few mountains in Sarawak with no concrete evidence of sightings since, until the bird was discovered in this area just two years ago. Not only was it a new bird for Hans, but also for James, who now has just two endemics to go, as he seeks to be the first person to see all of Borneo’s 50+ endemics. With the light beginning to disappear but with camp in sight, a male Rufous-chested Flycatcher appeared at trackside, Rhinoceros and Wreathed Hornbills passed by, while Ferruginous Partridges duetted in the distance – a species with few records in the whole of the island. Settling into our camp, as the porters cooked our dinner we checked out the immediate vicinity and instantly got a response from a Bornean Frogmouth – a species seen by a select few birders in recent history. Although rain was starting to fall it didn’t deter the frogmouth which promptly perched out in clear view for us for 30 seconds before disappearing back into the forest, then the heavens opened and we sheltered under our dry area and a surprisingly warm night’s sleep.

Next morning the sun rose early, and we were woken by the noisy dawn-chorus of Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrushes, Red-breasted and Crimson-headed Partridges, Ashy Drongos, Bock’s Hawk Cuckoo and Temminck’s Babblers, oh, and Black Oriole again! Taking it easy, birding around the camp was great, as several feeding flocks pushed through, hosting more Bornean Leafbirds, another pair of orioles, Scarlet Minivet, Temminck’s Babblers, Sunda Cuckoo-shrike, Bornean and Mountain Barbet, Temminck’s Sunbird and a single Whitehead’s Spiderhunter. Eventually our final target, Bornean Bulbul showed up and we would eventually see double figures of these. Flushed with success we decided to finish early and head back to Lawas for a much-needed wash and clean, so back down we went, what birding we did included a singing female Hill Blue Flycatcher – the endemic race here clearly different from races elsewhere, Helmeted and Bushy-crested Hornbill, Pygmy White-eye and a vocal Mountain Serpent Eagle.

As we were back a day early, en route to Kota Kinabalu, across the border in Sabah, we stopped off at one of the few remaining areas of tall peat swamp forest left in the area. A female Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker soon appeared next to us on the forest edge, then inside the forest it was surprising how vocal and straight forward the highly sought after but seldom searched for Hook-billed Bulbul was, a species restricted to this forest-type in Borneo and Sumatra. Red-crowned Barbet, Grey-and-buff Woodpecker, Fluffy-backed and Bold-striped Tit Babblers, Chestnut-bellied and Red-billed Malkoha and Green Iora made for an exciting supporting cast before we reached Kota Kinabalu airport for our flight to Jakarta, in Indonesia.

Not wanting to waste any time, we opted to forgo a night’s sleep and take the overnight flight to Ambon, the gateway of Maluku. As usual the flight was late, but fortunately the ferry to Seram was equally late! This meant that our full afternoons birding was restricted to a mere hour or so, but during this time we still managed Seram Mountain Pigeon, Slender-billed Cuckoo Dove, Moluccan Scops Owl and Seram Boobook (both in the daytime!), and pleasingly a pair of Long-crested Myna calling from bare-branches at the roadside. We were now very much looking forward to a good night’s rest, though during our dinner on the sea-front a rather bizarre experience involved a Swinhoe’s Storm Petrel being drawn into the lights and landing on the spare seat at our table!
Eventually we managed to persuade it head back out to sea after confirming the id – the first record in Indonesia east of Java!

We had just a day and a half, the aim was simple, to see Salmon-crested Cockatoo and as many endemics as possible in the time. We starting our day at a designated ‘parrot flyway’, Eclectus, Great-billed and Red-cheeked Parrots noisy went over in numbers, Moluccan Red Lory and Rainbow Lorikeet were pleasingly numerous, and another raucous species entered the fray; a pair of Channel-billed Cuckoo which flew around, and then eventually the noise we’d been waiting for, from a Salmon-crested Cockatoo emanated from further along the road. It was a nail-biting 5 minutes before it was in the scope, quietly knawing away on a tree stump – this species was still abundant 20 years ago but numbers have been decimated by capture for the bird-trade, leaving a tinge of sadness to such an exciting encounter. With our main reason for coming here now secured, we could concentrate on the islands other endemic and near-endemics. All bar a couple being possible along the Trans-Seram highway that cuts through the fabulously thick-forested Manusula National Park, but with around 15 to find in just over a day we had our work cut out. With a brief time in the mid-elevation, frustratingly only hearing the hardest endemic possible, Purple-naped Lory, we did pull out Seram Golden Bulbul, Seram Oriole, Seram Friarbird, Ashy Flowerpecker, and one of most important, a pair of Lazuli Kingfisher. With the heat rising, we opted for a spell along the upper-reaches of the road, greeted by a singing Wakolo Myzomela, and after some time waiting we pulled out Seram and Drab Honeyeaters, Streaky-breasted Fantail, ‘Seram’ Drongo, ‘Seram’ Leaf Warbler, and Seram White-eye. After lunch we returned to the higher parts in search of feeding flocks, and though quiet for the first hour or so we eventually hit a rich vein of form. In quick succession a flock of foliage-gleaning Rufescent Dark-eye, then a lone Cinnamon-chested Flycatcher, Spectacled Monarch, more Long-crested Myna, Moluccan Cuckooshrike, plenty of Grey-streaked Flycatcher, and though Purple-naped Lory frustrated us with birds calling either side of the road they were just beyond reach. Compensation was met with a flock of canopy-dwelling Grey-hooded Dark-eye, and more low-feeding Rufescent Dark-eye before the parrots went silent and we called it a day.

With just a morning left, we had our work cut-out – 3 target birds remaining, and still a small offshore island to visit. Heading straight out to a particularly productive parrot area we soon notched up Seram Imperial Pigeon calling in the scope, then a pair of Pale Cicadabird appeared overhead. Some manic screeching up the road led us to the moment of the trip as a pair of Salmon-crested Cockatoo were above the road, inspecting a potential nest-hole currently being occupied by a female Eclectus Parrot, which promptly started to flap around, mobbing the cockatoos, bringing about some ear-piercing noises! We had to leave the parrots as yet again Purple-naped Lory’s called in the distance, and leading us a merry dance for some time before eventually one bird gave us some precious seconds in clear view before disappearing from the road once more – success! With our clean-up now complete by mid-morning we went back down to the coast to head over on our small boat to a tiny speck of an island just offshore for a true small-island specialist, Olive Honeyeater, which was typically plentiful once we landed, and a pair of Beach Kingfisher was an extra bonus. Happy and content with our 100% hit-list we headed back across the island for the night, ready for another long travel day, involving a ferry, two long airport waits in Ambon and Makassar, two flights and a very late arrival into our hotel in Palu, central Sulawesi.

Our final destination was Lore Lindu National Park in central Sulawesi for a very few key species. We had 26 hours on-site, and during this time managed 7 of the 8 targets, including the most important; Purple-bearded Bee-eater. After a 3-hour sleep in Palu, we departed pre-dawn to arrive at Lore Lindu just as the dawn-chorus was subsiding; flocks of Fiery-browed Myna were heading to their feeding areas, as were numbers of Slender-billed Cuckoo Doves. A Barred Rail fed along the roadside as a flock of Malia headed towards us, with the sweet, short song of a Sulawesi Thrush right on their tail, and our first target of the day was soon under the belt. With the sun starting to...
rise we headed up the Anaso track – the last time James and Hans were here (8 and 19 years respectively!) it was still possible to drive up! Anyway, not to worry as after an hour we were standing opposite a bee-eater nest-hole with a pair of Purple-bearded Bee-eaters busy sallying from their favoured perches, making the most of the early morning heat. A juvenile Hylcocitrea fed close-by, as did several Streak-headed Dark-eye and Mountain White-eye, though we failed to hear any Sombre Pigeons. Heading a little further up we failed to locate any roosting Diabolical Nightjars, though sadly found lots of crumpled vegetation and a broken egg-shell where a pair had been roosting daily for several months – seems some locals had beaten us to it earlier in the week, very sad to see, especially as a nearby bee-eater nest appeared to have been deserted. With the clouds beginning to darken we headed down, not quite making it without getting a little wet – our luck had finally caught up with us.

After lunch by Lake Tambing and some birding in the immediate vicinity turning up a target, a pair of Sulawesi Myzomela, we spent the afternoon in the open countryside, enjoying several close views of the recently-split Sulawesi Swiftlet (target #4), and a celebensis Tawny Grassbird, thus far only known from this valley. With dusk approaching we got into position at a clearing, although failing in finding any nightjars, a ninox flew in just metres from us. We were startled by the sight a Speckled Boobook, as we had been listening to a Cinnabar Boobook! Fortunately, as this was our next target on the agenda, we were able to retire to bed earlier than expected.

With two nightbirds remaining, we headed out pre-dawn to a different spot, a good move, as a Cinnabar Boobook was already calling and it was soon sat in the spotlight, allowing us to see the mottled belly of this undescribed subspecies currently known only from Lore Lindu. Moving on a little way, to a different clearing James was virtually attacked by a less than impressed Diabolical Nightjar as it swooped down on him forcing him to drop to the ground! The nightjar was soon located calling from its song-post and giving outstanding looks as dawn approached. As we still had an hour over breakfast, we sat back and enjoyed the numerous feeding flocks around us, including another Hylcocitrea and a troop of Tonkean Macaque before it was time to head to the airport to connect with our flights back home, and a well-deserved rest for us both!
Red-crowned Barbet, Sabah and Lazuli Kingfisher, Seram
Cinnamon-chested Flycatcher and Moluccan Cuckoo, Seram
Olive Honeyeater and Seram White-eye, Seram
Streak-breasted Fantail and Wakolo Myzomela, Seram
Swinhoe’s Storm Petrel and Salmon-crested Cockatoo, Seram
Red-eared Fruit Dove and Sulawesi Swiftlet, Sulawesi
Cinnabar Boobook and Hylocitrea, Sulawesi

In search of Black Oriole, Sarawak © James Eaton/Birdtour Asia

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