

Wild Borneo: Endemic Birding & Nature | Sept. 30 – Oct. 14, 2025 | Trip Report by Lizzy Martinez



With guides Mirwan Mustapha and Steve Shunk, and clients: Andrew, Bob, Gene, Judy, Ken, Lise, and Steve



Sept. 30 Arrivals

We arrived in Malaysian Borneo, in the state of Sabah and its capital city of Kota Kinabalu. We gathered at the Grandis Hotel, where we will spent our first few nights intermittently. On the morning of our start day, Steve met with his lead guide Mirwan for breakfast to discuss the details of the trip, preparing everything to welcome



the travelers, planning the best strategy for the fullest enjoyment of the experience of traveling with Naturalist Journeys.

Later that evening, the entire group met at the hotel's piano bar, with the aim of getting to know each other. Some have met before, have traveled with Stephen Shunk, or have attended one of his talks, which is why they decided to embark on this trip with him. After brief introductions and sharing our inspirations for coming to Borneo, Mirwan, better known as "Wan," clearly explained how the trip will unfold, and he shared the sites we will visit during these 14 days together on the third largest island in the world.

After our orientation, we enjoyed a very pleasant welcome dinner at the Kampung Nelayan restaurant, which greets us with a variety of dishes in the center of the table, allowing each of us to taste the local seafood according to our own palates. In addition to its delicious culinary offerings, the place also delights us with music, costumes, and traditional dances of the region. The highlight was when some of our folks went to the stage and participated in the dances and rituals that we all enjoyed as a part of this rich cultural experience. And now, time to rest, because the adventure begins tomorrow!

Oct. 1 Mountain Introduction in the Crocker Range

We boarded our vans early, at 6:00 a.m., with cameras, binoculars, and raincoats in hand. After crossing the city and winding up the curvy road with beautiful views of the mountains, we arrived at the junction of the Gunung Alab substation road and the restaurant where we would later have lunch. But this place is now much more than a restaurant. In the last year, a local birder has transformed the area to attract the birds of the mountain region. His knowledge of the local plants, combined with gardening and a love for birds, has made this place one of the key hotspots to visit in Sabah, giving visiting birders a chance to learn about the local birds and capture their beauty in photos and videos.

The family that runs the viewing station continuously announced the different birds as they arrived. It was a morning of exercise, as we moved from one end of the station to the other so as not to miss any of these winged beauties. At one end, the endemic Golden-naped Barbet, perched on a tree eating tiny red fruits while our cameras clicked away. At the other end, a group of endemic Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrushes made us run to watch them feed on the grubs that were placed in the stumps and branches. Next to this group, a pair of Indigo Flycatchers appeared, the male showing off his intense blue and the female delighting us with her calls. On the other side of the small path, near the fountain, an Eyebrowed Jungle Flycatcher perched on a trunk while slowly taking some mealworms. Hidden among the branches, a male Bornean Flowerpecker flitted about, and while we enjoyed the abundance of birds, the locals treated us to coffee and cookies.



Dragging us away from the feeding station, Mirwan invited us to visit a spot where we might possibly observe two endemic partridges. We headed up the hill to the Taman Banjaran Crocker Sub-Station. When we arrived, the fog and a light drizzle surprised us, making it a little difficult to see. However, that didn't stop us, and we walked along a narrow trail that led us to an area where we patiently waited for the arrival of a family of Red-breasted Partridge. They called from low on the mountain slope, and eventually worked their way up to the viewing area. They put on quite a show, scurrying around the logs and stumps while they fed on the snacks we had placed for them. At one point, from out of nowhere, we were surprised by a beautiful orange bird with bluish wings—an Orange-headed Thrush, a life-bird for Steve. In the background, we heard the distant vocalization of a Crimson-headed Partridge, but it never made an appearance. Among the antics of the Red-breasteds, we also enjoyed a Bornean mountain ground squirrel—another Bornean endemic—taking advantage of the commotion.

After the partridge show, we walked down the main road, admiring ferns, fungi, and insects, and we found a beautiful cluster of carnivorous plants from the genus *Nepenthes*. It was time for lunch, so we headed back down to the restaurant, which offered a wide variety of typical Malaysian dishes, accompanied by delicious coffee and tea. Throughout lunch, we were able to observe a large community of Plume-toed Swiftlets under the eaves of the restaurant.

Since it was the hottest time of day, we decided to return to the shaded viewing station behind the restaurant to continue enjoying the presence of the birds, get better photos, and simply admire the landscape and the sounds of nature. Just as we were about to say goodbye, we were surprised by the presence of a Bornean Treepie and a Black-throated Wren Babbler—a great way to end the visit with 30 bird species, 13 of which were endemic!

Our journey back to town felt long after a storm triggered a series of landslides on the road; nothing like a little excitement in the rainforest. Back at the hotel, a rest awaited before we met again for the first checklist review of the trip and another delicious dinner.

Oct. 2 Journey to Mount Kinabalu

We left the hotel at a very civilized 7:45 a.m. to begin the journey to Mount Kinabalu. The long drive featured beautiful panoramic views, and then suddenly the impressive sight of the mountain—reaching 4,095 meters above sea level—with its bluish tones and rocky peaks. We stopped at the village of Nabalu, which featured a lively local market plus an amazing viewpoint to better appreciate the view of such an impressive World Heritage Site, designated in 2002.



We arrived at Kinabalu Park, with weather alternating between sun and clouds, prepared in case we were caught by the rain. Along our first hike, we came across mushrooms, flowers of all sizes, tiny bromeliads, strange shapes among trunks and vines, and a family of macaques gathering fruits and eating leaves among the trees.

It was time to go eat, so we headed to Liwagu restaurant. After a pleasant break in the cushy den, we continued beyond the parking area in search of the Whitehead's Spiderhunter. We watched the tops of the flowering trees that attract this elusive species, and then we heard it approaching. And before we could get our binoculars on the bird, we watched it fly away into the jungle! Despite our fleeting glimpse at the spiderhunter, we got excellent looks at a host of Bornean endemics: Mountain Black-eye, a male Black-sided Flowerpecker, four Pygmy Heleias, and several Penan Bulbuls.

Later that afternoon, we spotted a Common Buzzard overhead, before the rain and fog made us run to take shelter under a palapa. While we waited out the rain, Steve showed us a leech that was on his shoe, and while he played with it, we got to have a nice teaching moment about these oft misunderstood Clitellates. Birding in the mist, a few of the group got cryptic looks at two super-secretive endemics, the Bornean Stubtail and Bornean Shortwing. With time running out, we returned to the hotel in Kundasang for a short break and dinner. Right after dinner, Wan invited us onto the deck of the hotel to see a beautiful Barred Eagle-Owl sitting peacefully in the pine trees, with all of us going crazy watching it through the telescope, taking photos, and celebrating the discovery.

Oct. 3 Kinabalu Park | Timpohon Gate

The next morning gave us a beautiful sunrise with reddish and golden hues, and in the background, we could hear birds singing as we admired a bed of clouds in the valley that made it seem like we were floating on the sea. This is how we began our day before heading to Kinabalu Park. After the short drive, we arrived back on the mountain, and when we popped out of the vans, we quickly spotted a Bornean Green Magpie and a lively group of Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrushes, both very colorful Bornean endemics. A mixed flock moved through and included several Orange-breasted and Mountain Leaf Warblers, plus a few Gray-throated Babblers and Penan Bulbuls.

We headed to the end of the mountain road at the Timpohon Gate, the entry point for those who venture to trek up to the summit of Mount Kinabalu. From the raised viewing platform, we admired the beautiful view of the valley, the mountain, and flocks of birds moving around us at eye level. Just a few of the highlights included a very close flock of Mountain Black-eyes, a flashy pair of Gray-chinned Minivets, two Hair-crested Drongos, and



two White-throated Fantails. A group of White-breasted Woodswallows began to gather on the wiring in front of us, a sighting not typically reported for this elevation.

While we birded around the gate, it was very impressive to see the local porters carrying boxes of food, gallons of water, and structures to set up the camps, among other things—on their backs ... wow! Difficult and arduous work. Continuing on our way, we stopped for breakfast at a viewpoint where there is a tribute honoring those who died in the earthquake on June 5, 2015, when a section of rock broke off causing the death of 18 people, including guides and climbers. A sad story that reminds us of how unpredictable nature can be.

We started birding around the viewpoint and found a Yellow-vented Bubul, and further ahead a woodpecker caught our attention—a stunning Crimson-winged Woodpecker. Down the road a ways, a tiny ball of feathers with striking eyes gave us a very enjoyable moment, when we admired and photographed a Colored Owlet. An adult macaque emerged from the vegetation, walking in front of us, and we had great looks at Prevost's Squirrels.

We returned to the Liwagu after a very busy morning, and after eating and recharging our energy, we went back to the Timpohon Gate Road to a targeted spot where hoped to find the endemic Whitehead's Trogan. Amid the overwhelming calm in the forest, we admired large tree and bird's nest ferns, small orchids, large termite mounds, and patches of mushrooms, while the mist began to settle and the light grew darker. We were about to give up, when a pair of Whitehead's Trogons appeared right in front of us, partially hidden among the vegetation, and we all started looking for the best view. We found tiny windows here and there for everyone to get a look, a male and female, standing stoically among the quietness of the forest. It was a beautiful experience that was worth the wait for such a pleasant reward, a beautiful and exciting moment of photos and admiration of such an elegant bird. And just as we were sure that everyone had a special trogon encounter, the sky burst into a massive downpour. Happy and wet, we headed back to the hotel. After a break and the checklist was done, we enjoyed another delicious dinner, followed by a well-deserved rest.

Oct. 4 Poring Hot Springs | Back to KK

We headed down towards Poring Hot Springs in Kinabalu Park, and upon arriving at the parking lot, we found a flock of Gray-rumped Treeswifts. A White-breasted Waterhen sauntered alongside the road, and our first snake was a road-killed Banded Flying Snake. Right at the entrance of the park, walking along the bridge that crosses the Poring River, we found a group of Black and Red Broadbills, beautiful scarlet birds that stand out with their silvery-blue bills. A White-crowned Shama hopped from branch to branch near the café where we had breakfast.



On some nearby heliconias, a Brown-throated Sunbird was feeding, and in the distance, a pair of Oriental Magpie-Robins were singing incessantly. When we started the walk, we reached a children's village where a Rufous Piculet was catching small insects on a window, a very fun moment watching it jump from one side to the other. Barbets proved to be elusive, as always, and we had a tricky moment trying to photograph one that landed behind a cluster of fruits. Only small parts of its body were showing, until a photo of its cheeks confirmed that it was a Red-throated Barbet. At that same spot, we also found a Bornean Treepie.

We next hiked the short trail to the Kipungit Waterfall. Some of us splashed our faces with the cool water and we all enjoyed capturing photos of the falls. As we gathered by the trail, an endemic Least Pygmy Squirrel appeared suddenly—so tiny that it could barely be seen on the tree as it zipped up and down the trunk. This patch of primary hill forest featured giant trees and many tree ferns, making for a wonderful visit.

Our next adventure took us to a private property near the hot springs in search of the magnificent Raflesia flower. The ecological conditions in this village are perfect for this strange flower, and different properties advertise when they have flowers in bloom. We found one such home, and the family ushered us onto the property to see the blossoms. While enjoying the flower, we were able to observe the large vines that serve as the host plant for these amazing parasitic plants. In a small patch of woodland some flowers were just budding out, others were already open, and some were already in the decomposition stage. Upon leaving, the owners of the property ensured that we visited their tables where they sell small souvenirs. But the souvenirs were quickly passed aside when Wan noticed that they were also selling durian fruit. Wan decided we all needed to have a durian experience. He showed us the difficult process of breaking into the fruit, which then reveals the pulp covering its large seeds. With gloves on, some of us ventured to try this interesting fruit, so famous for its extremely strong smell, spiky appearance, and sweet taste with a viscous consistency.

After lunch back at Liwagu Restaurant, near Kinabalu park headquarters, it started to rain, which put a damper, so to speak, on our early afternoon birding. We returned to KK, checked into the hotel, and met for the checklist. After dinner, we celebrated Gene's birthday with a delicious chocolate cake, thus ending a long and enjoyable day.

Oct. 5 KK | Lahad Datu | Tabin

Phase two of the trip ensued this morning with a very early flight from KK to Lahad Datu on the eastern side of Sabah. After arriving, we took a long van ride through endless oil-palm plantations toward Tabin Wildlife Reserve. After leaving the highway, we traveled down a long dirt road, stopping at a checkpoint near the



entrance to the reserve. While we were waiting for the passage of the vans to be authorized, we watched several raptors that included Crested Serpent-Eagles and Wallace's Hawk-Eagles, both perched and flying. Along the road, we also found our first Storm's Storks—quite unexpected since we were a long way from their normal riverine habitat.

We arrived at the lodge and were struck by the beautiful jungle and garden vegetation. Our cabins were connected by wooden paths and they backed up to the Tabin River, which, over the next couple of days, would provide us with some spectacular moments observing nature: gibbon families, hornbills, otters, fish, lizards, geckos, bats and many birds, all using the river corridor. We met Rafael, our local guide, and one of his first instructions was to NOT make eye contact with the macaques, especially not with the babies, because once you are in front of a baby macaque, the whole family surrounds you.

After lunch, a rain shower produced some strong winds, and a family of gibbons moved quickly through the compound, hanging and jumping from tree to tree to escape the rain. The family consisted of a mother with her baby, who clung tightly to her as she swung between the branches, and behind her were three juveniles. During the storm, we relaxed in the dining room and enjoyed afternoon tea and snacks—a daily treat here at the lodge.

The rain ended and it was time for some afternoon road birding. We all boarded the big truck, with benches in the open bed, offering excellent views of the jungle. Among the tall trees, we found five hornbill species. Some birds were perched, others flying, and several of them were calling out; all incredible birds that looked beautiful in flight. On the edge of palm plantation, Blue-throated Bee-eaters lined the fence rows—our conservative tally reached 19 birds—and we repeatedly flushed flocks of Dusky and Chestnut Munias from the grassy patches along the road. We saw both Bronzed and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, plus a flock of 10 tiny Blue-crowned Hanging-Parrots. In just 90 minutes of the remaining daylight, we found 32 bird species, just a taste of what was yet to come at Tabin.

As night began to fall, we saw enjoyed some sleeping macaques, and then we found a favored local spot where we hoped to find the Blyth's Frogmouth. Once it was dark, and right on cue, the frogmouth arrived on the very branch that Rafael had predicted. This was a beautiful nocturnal bird with amazingly cryptic plumage. On the way back to the lodge, we found a gorgeous Sunda Leopard Cat—the endemic Bornean subspecies—walking through the vegetation, as well as huge flying foxes—an endangered species, also represented here by an endemic Borneo subspecies. A Large-tailed Nightjar rounded out the night drive. We returned tired but excited by what this place showed us in just a few hours. We reviewed the checklist, had dinner, and hit the cabins for the night.



Oct. 6 Tabin Wildlife Reserve

Breakfast started very early, and at 6:30 we loaded into the vans to head for the trail through the Tabin jungle. It was our first taste of the impressive primary forest. The difference between secondary and primary forest is striking, with immense Dipterocarp trees rising towards the sky with a firm posture, the wind barely caressing some branches. These trees tell the natural history of this place. We continued along the road, soon arriving at the spot where we waited to see the Blue-Headed Pitta. Rafael did it again. After scattering a few grubs, this stunning endemic pitta gave us a delightful time as it hopped among the downed logs and ground vegetation. A little farther down the road, Rafael showed us some immense bee hives, high in the dipterocarp trees, and he taught us about the natural history of these forest-dwelling honeybees.

This amazing morning brought us—by far—our biggest bird checklist of the trip, with 68 species tallied (the next-longest list was 36 species at Tabin the following morning). We again had five hornbill species, delighting in the amazing maniacal call of the Helmeted Hornbill. We found Raffles's and Chestnut-breasted Malkohas; Oriental Dwarf- and Malaysian Blue-banded Kingfishers; and Maroon and Gray-and-buff Woodpeckers. Among five bulbul species were the endemic Charlotte's and Cream-eyed. Seven babblers included endemic Gray-hooded and Bornean Black-capped. Still more endemics included the haunting call of the Sabah Partridge from deep in the jungle and nice looks at Bornean Black Magpie. And one of the best behavioral observations of the trip was our discovery of an active nest of the Banded Broadbill, where we watched the adult repeatedly bring food to nestlings.

When we returned for lunch behind the cabins by the river, a family of small-clawed otters gave us some very fun moments as we watched them swim, chase, groom, and play among the rocks, with several young pups present. We also watched an extraordinary Great Flying Dragon 'fly' to the bark of a large tree; this rare lizard occurs only in Borneo, Sumatra, and Peninsular Malaysia. Later that night, Judy saw something large fly outside the restaurant. Our guide immediately turned on his flashlight and found a Buffy Fish-Owl perched low among the branches—what a wonder!

After dinner, we ventured out again for another night drive. We again enjoyed the large flying fox and the Sunda leopard cat, plus the Philippine Palm Civet and the Bornean subspecies of the Malay Civet. But the big highlight of the night—indeed one of the highlights of the trip—was our encounter a giant white rat-looking thing running along a fencerow. Since there are no giant white rats, it could only have been one thing: a Moonrat! A close cousin of the hedgehogs, this bizarre mammal is rarely seen, despite its white pelage. Borneo hosts two



subspecies, both of which are white; the nominate subspecies on Sumatra and the mainland is typically dark. Happy and tired, we returned once again to our cabins for the night.

Oct. 7 Tabin Wildlife Reserve

Up for an early breakfast and off to the vans, we headed out to explore more corners of the Tabin Wildlife Reserve. Our first objective today was a visit to the Lipad Mud Volcano, a 120-m-diameter mound of bubbling mud and gasses pushed to the surface by geologic pressure from deep underground. We drove to the trailhead and headed out for some adventure. Early bird highlights of the jungle trek included a pair of Maroon Woodpeckers and excellent looks at our first and only a Scarlet-rumped Trogan seen on the tour. We continued down the very muddy trail, keeping an eye out for leech on our clothes or skin. Rafael was happy to show us a tiger leech he had on his cheek. Another great educational moment. As we continued, the path had all the signs of a family of elephants having passed through, with big muddy tracks of adults and young, fallen branches everywhere, and large fresh piles of elephant dung.

We arrived at the volcano and Rafael and Wan told us about its formation and the wealth of minerals that animals use to clean their bodies, taking mud baths and using the rich mud as a repellent for parasites. Right in the middle of the mound, while we were watching bubbles of gas escaping, we heard aloud elephant trumpet followed by the cracking of branches. Immediately the guides asked us to gather and leave the site, in total silence and as quickly as possible. From the call, he determined that this was an adult male, and Tabin safety protocol dictates that all persons nearby must immediately get to safety to avoid any danger. We missed the visual, but it was a thrilling experience to hear that trumpeting sound from the jungle.

We quickly made our way back down the trail, and just before reaching the vans, we came across a small pond with some mating white-lipped frogs. We headed back to the lodge, a bit muddy and a bit sweaty, but very happy. During a short break at the resort, we watched a family of macaques displaying some very entertaining behaviors, jumping from branch to branch, playing with objects, chasing each other, and leaping on the roofs of the cabins.

After lunch, the weather allowed us to head out for the afternoon, and we went in search of woodpeckers. Our first stop produced a handsome adult Racket-tailed Drongo showing off its beautiful and striking racket-shaped tail feathers. Wow! Nearby, a beautiful Whiskered Treeswift was flycatching and perching in front of us, a great opportunity for photographs. We succeeded on our woodpecker quest when we first found a Buff-necked



Woodpecker along the road. And a few minutes later, we heard the distant call of the world's largest woodpecker, the Great Slaty. We looked up to the sky, and three massive woodpeckers flew over the road. They perched together in a stand of trees and performed impressive spread-wing displays; it almost seemed as if they were dancing!

Thrilled from the Great Slaty experience, we climbed back into the vans and started working our way back to the lodge. The daylight was fading, but right in front of us we found a red giant flying squirrel climbing a large tree. We waited and watched as the squirrel seemed to be measuring distances; gauging the thrust force; determining the necessary speed; and calculating the flight parabola; and finally, zoom ... it leapt from the tree, spread its patagia, and showed us its beautiful, colorful figure gliding to the other side of the road and landing on another big tree ... Wooooooow! We all cheered in awe at the display of amazing nature. We came back very happy, commenting on every detail that excited us during the afternoon. After the checklist and dinner, we walked around lodge looking for owls, but all we could find was a Velvet-fronted Nuthatch sleeping inside the pipe that served as the entrance gate to the lodge. In all, it was an amazing day.

Oct. 8 Tabin | Sukau

On our last morning at Tabin, we took a walk around the resort grounds. Our first discovery brought us a pair of Malaysian Blue Flycatchers, our first of the trip. A Crested Serpent-Eagle and a Crested Goshawk—both perched close by—gave us nice scope looks. Right over the entrance driveway, we found our first and only Chestnut-Bellied Malkoha of the trip. A Crimson Sunbird and Little Spiderhunter continued to be conspicuous right around the dining room, and a couple of near-endemic Bold-striped Tit-Babblers were our first of the trip.

After breakfast, we said goodbye to the place and to our amazing guide Rafael, who could effortlessly find mammals and reptiles, and spectacularly imitate bird calls; thank you so much, Tabin! We packed our bags and off we went. The long bus ride back to Lahad Datu took us to lunch at a Chinese restaurant. We had several Chinese meals on the trip for which Mirwan ordered in advance, making several dishes ready quickly and distributed around the big lazy Susan. We had another long drive ahead, with an important stop along the way—the Gomantong Cave.

After reaching the cave parking lot, we headed out on the long boardwalk toward the cave entrance. It was a cloudy afternoon, and this combined with the dense vegetation made it quite dark in the jungle, but this didn't stop us from finding one of the highlight birds of the trip: a pair of Rufous-collared Kingfishers. It was next to



impossible to get photos, but they were quite close, so we enjoyed excellent scope views of these beautiful kingfishers. We continued along boardwalk to an open area where we saw the steep cliff and the cave entrance. Perched right at the mouth was a Crested Serpent Eagle looking like the guardian of the cave, though it also appeared perplexed as thousands of swiftlets fluttered around its head as they flew in and out of the cave. The swifts were just a distraction, however, because the eagle was waiting for the bats.

We entered the pungent cavern and found an abundant collection of rustic climbing equipment surrounding a mountain of bat and swift guano, the obvious source of the cave's aroma. The sounds of bats' screeches and swifts' whistles were overwhelming. Mirwan shined his light on the ceiling, and among the roosting bats were hundreds of active swiftlet nests—including one or two tiny white ones—each waiting its turn to be collected for the lucrative trade. The nests are collected by local climbers after the young have fledged, and then they are exported—mostly to China—to satisfy the demand for bird's nest soup.

On the rocky walls next to the boardwalk, we saw a group of long-legged centipedes, and cockroaches were everywhere. After making it just 100 meters down the path, most of the group had had enough of the smell and the crawling walls, so they turned around and headed back to entrance. A few of us ventured to walk the entire loop around the cave. At the back of the cavern, we saw two large openings in the ceiling, creating a breathtaking view that temporarily overshadowed the humidity and odor. We watched thousands of Wrinkle-lipped Bats streaming out of the cave where the outside light beamed in, allowing us to truly appreciate the grandeur of this amazing natural spectacle.

The birds in the cave represent three species: the Mossy-nest, Black-nest, and White-nest Swiftlets. This particular site is mostly a Black-nest cave, which we witnessed by their abundance on the ceiling. The three swiftlet species are so similar in appearance that they are impossible to identify in flight, hence our efforts to locate the active white nests and allow us to confirm that at least these two species were present. Besides the swiftlets, bats, centipedes, and cockroaches, the cave, of course, also supports the lives of the humans who make a living collecting nests. As we departed, the rain began, and we watched a group of Bushy-crested Hornbills gather on big vines hanging across the mouth of the cave; a beautiful end to an amazing experience.

We returned to the bus for the remainder of the drive, and the rain got progressively harder. By the time we reached the village of Sukau, the rain was torrential. It was time to board our shuttle boat at the small jetty, but the scene outside was threatening, to say the least. After Steve reassured us of the plan for our quick transfer, we exited the bus and dashed to the little covered porch by the store, still 50 meters from the jetty. The rain slowed enough for the lodge staff and bus driver to get our bags to the boats, and we ran down to the covered dock. We braved the wet, five-minute, uncovered boat ride across the Kinabatangan River to the Sukau



Rainforest Lodge. When we arrived at the lodge dock, a group of young staff were waiting to tend to our every need. After a brief orientation—and a change of clothes—we enjoyed the luxurious dinner buffet before a good night's sleep.

The first outing of our first day on this beautiful river gave us wonderful surprise. After an early snack and coffee, we departed at 6:00 a.m. Immediately, our local guides rushed us downstream. The fact that we weren't stopping for birds made us curious. Was there an undisclosed purpose for our swift departure? Well, the guides in the region are in close contact with radios, and there is one very big (so to speak) wildlife goal for any visit to the K River: the Bornean Pygmy Elephants. We had heard the word that two elephants were feeding on the bank downstream. We arrived at the site, and there they were: a couple of majestic pachyderms, eating, drinking, and playing among the puddles, branches, and grass around them. A gigantic experience!

On our route back toward the lodge, we found an amazing 30 bird species. Green Imperial- and Little Green-Pigeons coursed over the river, and two White-bellied Sea-Eagles perched at the shoreline forest edge. We picked up Blue-eared and Stork-billed Kingfishers, as well as Brown and Blue-eared Barbets. Three hornbill species—Oriental Pied, Rhinoceros, and Bushy-crested—were the start of our Sukau hornbill extravaganza. In the fog, before we bolted for the elephants, we also got our only visual of the sought-after Straw-headed Bulbul.

We enjoyed a full breakfast and headed back toward our rooms, but then we heard six loud booms on the lodge gong—the alert that means 'orangutan in sight'! Everyone made their way to a huge fruiting *Ficus* tree behind the lodge, where a mother orangutan was resting. Just a few meters away, a juvenile was making its bed from branches, and a baby was calmly dangling from a branch plucking and eating leaves. What a beautiful family scene!

We walked as a group along the lodge's boardwalk, admiring the families of long-tailed macaques and the silvered langur, as well as the curious black-backed, orange-bellied Prevost's squirrels. Then, among the vegetation we were surprised by the adorable Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher. We returned for lunch, and afterward, everyone enjoyed some free time to rest, have a coffee, look for some souvenirs, or enjoy the pool. We boarded the boats for our afternoon cruise and had a lot of fun watching the antics of the bizarre proboscis monkeys. Fantastic! The birds of prey also treated us to beautiful poses and flights.



Dinner time arrived and then we went out for a night boat trip. We found birds sleeping with their heads tucked under their wings and some, like statues, included the kingfisher and waterhen, plus hornbills and macaques. But the prize of the night was the Large Frogmouth. We came back excited, just in time to sleep.

Oct 10 Kinabatangan River and Tributaries

We awoke for another early boat tour. Right away, on the grassy bank, we saw a mammal moving through the grass. On closer inspection, we discovered a very territorial Smooth-coated Otter. After it growled at us a bit, we knew it was time to move along. We found a roost tree full of Oriental Darters, and later a couple of Purple Herons. Four kinds of eagles perched along the shore gave us a nice show: Crested Serpent-Eagle, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Wallace's Hawk-Eagle, and Gray-headed Fish-Eagle. Other highlights of the morning cruise included excellent looks at a Diard's Tropicbird, three Stork-billed Kingfishers, and a pair of Wrinkled Hornbills.

We headed back for our full breakfast and enjoyed the rest of the morning on our own around the lodge to fully enjoy the place. After lunch, we went to a great lecture about orangutan natural history and conservation. Following a refreshing rain, we headed to the boats and see what other things this river and its natural wealth would have in store for us. Towards the shore, we came across a Siamese Crocodile, which we admired quietly. Further along, we stopped in front of a family of proboscis monkeys. We experienced a moment of contemplation watching the little ones, some jumping and others sleeping on their mothers' chests. We continued along the river and found a very active Blue-eared Kingfisher.

We returned to the lodge and had a short break before dinner, followed by a night walk at the lodge boardwalk. We saw many bats, strange snails, tree frogs, and other small creatures, as well as several sleeping hornbills.

Oct. 11 Sukau to Sepilok

We enjoyed a final outing on the Sukau boardwalk, with about 45 minutes to enjoy the orangutans and hornbills feeding in the fruiting *Ficus*. After breakfast, we packed our bags and, with warm thanks, said goodbye to the staff at Sukau. We boarded the speedboat for our long cruise from Sukau to the city of Sandakan. We stopped for good looks at Lesser Adjutants and several sandpipers on the mud flats. Many Whiskered Terns flew around the boat, and we found another large crocodile.

We arrived in Sandakan and went straight for a Chinese buffet lunch—with milkshakes. After getting settled at our final lodging site of the trip, we left for the Rainforest Discovery Center (RDC) and enjoyed a walk in this primary rainforest. The highlight was the massive walkway through the canopy—600 meters long with towers 30



meters high. We waited for nightfall and watched the emergence and ‘flights’ of the red giant flying squirrels. After hearing a few owls, we had amazing looks at a slow loris and western tarsier, as well as a couple of large scorpions.

We headed back for dinner and the checklist. Interrupting our sleep was an impressive nighttime storm that made it seem like giants were coming out from the trees!

Oct. 12 Sepilok Sanctuaries | Rainforest Discovery Center

We enjoyed early coffee and headed for a hike at the RDC. We learned about big poisonous fruits and giant trees for honeybees. We returned for breakfast and visited the orangutan sanctuary, where we were distracted by the Bornean Bristlehead. We found a group of about six birdswith its beautiful colors,—when we saw one, another would jump, more appeared flying, and we had stiff necks but were happy. The other visitors were amazed seeing the birds, thinking we were spotting orangutans. This path also had snakes.

We continued to the hotel and had a free, relaxing afternoon. In a pond, there were huge fish. At night, we went to the mangroves to see proboscis monkeys, which did not show themselves, but we still enjoyed a very good birdwatching session, seeing a pink and orange kingfisher, a cuckoo, and woodpeckers. On the way back... Stop! We saw common sandpipers. We returned for dinner and sleep.

Oct. 13 Sepilok | Rainforest Discovery Center

Last morning with the whole group, and we headed to RCS to walk through the undergrowth, at ground level, among giants that rise spectacularly to the sky with beautiful roots protecting the life that grows on them. We reached the point where a Patrich came out from behind us very confidently to feed right in front of us while we captured the moment.

Flying squirrel very close to us, drongos and a blue bird. We continued towards the Malayan bear sanctuary... a reserve that safeguards the lives of animals that have been rescued, an effort to preserve this species that is unfortunately used for human consumption or as pets.

We walked through the hotel adding the last 3 species to complete 251 bird species on a 15-day tour, meeting new people, sharing affinities, and discovering new species of plants, birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and more. Another great experience in the lands of Malaysia, led by guides Mayone and Steve Shunk... traveling in the Natural Journeys style.

Photos by Steve Shunk