

Adventure to Borneo

Off the Beaten Tracks

Subir Chatterjee



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please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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About the author

The author has been passionate about wildlife since he was young. Growing up, he showed a deep fascination with animals and spent much of his free time exploring nature. He developed a strong love for the natural world and a curiosity about how animals behave in different environments. This interest grew during his student years, where he often studied animal habits and habitats in his free time. His fascination led him to pursue a career as an animal physician, where he focuses on caring for animals and understanding their needs. His profession allows him to combine his love for animals with his desire to learn more about them.

Since 2011, the author has actively engaged in wildlife and bird photography. He has dedicated countless hours capturing images of animals in their natural surroundings. Over the years, his work has been recognised with several awards at both national and international levels. His photographs have been displayed in renowned places, including the prestigious Glasgow Art Gallery.

These exhibitions showcase his ability to capture the beauty and behaviour of wildlife, helping the world see animals through his eyes.

The author has travelled extensively to visit different national parks in India and abroad. His journeys include visits to famous destinations like Ranthambore, Bandhavgarh, Kanha, Jim Corbett etc in India, as well as parks in other countries, including Masaimara, Amboseli, Lake

Nakuru etc. Through these trips, he has observed a wide range of species and ecosystems. His aim is to share his experiences through writing, providing detailed descriptions of the wildlife and biodiversity he has encountered. This book is his way of documenting the rich variety of life found within the Bornean rainforest, one of the most biologically diverse places on Earth.

All the photographs included in this book are his own. He has carefully clicked and selected each image to showcase the beauty of the rainforest and its inhabitants. His intent is to give readers a visual journey into this unique ecosystem. Along with the photos and descriptions, he hopes to inspire others to join in eco-tourism efforts in Borneo. He believes that experiencing nature responsibly can help protect these fragile habitats. His ultimate goal is to raise awareness about Borneo's rich biodiversity and encourage more people to explore and conserve its natural treasures.

To give readers a true sense of being in the heart of the Borneo rainforest, the author included a wide range of digital video clips throughout this book. All these videos are recorded by the author himself. These clips show scenes like dense foliage, colourful birds, and even slow-moving streams winding through thick trees. When readers scan the QR codes of these videos, they are carried straight into the rainforest. It's almost like having a personal window into this lush environment. These videos go beyond words, making the scenes feel alive and real. You can hear the calls of distant monkeys or the rustling of leaves in the wind. The author carefully selected clips that capture the variety of life and the constant activity in the rainforest. For example, one clip might show a family of orangutans swinging through trees, while another features vibrant Pitta resting on perch. These visual tools help readers not only imagine the sights but also the sounds and feeling of being there. This immersive

approach turns a simple reading experience into a sensory journey. With a quick scan of a QR code, readers can feel as though they are walking through a jungle path or witnessing a rain shower from beneath the canopy. By combining text with these visual aids, the author creates a vivid, real-time feeling of the rainforest's atmosphere. This makes the story more engaging and memorable, helping people connect more deeply with Borneo's rich biodiversity. The inclusion of such clips shows how technology can make entertaining books more interactive and captivating, especially for those who might never have the chance to visit in person. It's a wise way to bring remote natural wonders into the reader's living room, making their experience more vivid and meaningful.

Preface

Borneo's untamed wilderness is unlike anything most travelers experience. It's wild, raw, and full of surprises. This book is for those who want to move beyond the usual tourist spots and step into the heart of real adventure. Prepare yourself to discover dense jungles and secretive rivers.

You might encounter rare creatures and plants that only few get to see. Imagine spotting an orangutan swinging through the trees. Picture yourself gliding along the Kinabatangan River, spying proboscis monkeys, or walking through the skywalk at the Rainforest Discovery Centre. Yes, this is where you'll find yourself—right in the middle of it all.

And if you're someone who finds joy behind the lens, Sabah offers some of the most rewarding bird photography experiences. Whether it was tracking Bornean

peacock-pheasants through the quiet trails of Telupid, or catching the vibrant flash of a Whitehead's Broadbill on Mount Kinabalu, the thrill of these encounters stayed with me long after the moment passed.

It's surprising how little is spoken about Borneo, considering the wonders it holds. Through this book, I hope to shed light on Borneo's beauty and inspire others to explore its wild spaces—with respect for the land, its wildlife, and the people who call it home.

What you'll read here are real experiences—close calls in the jungle, quiet river moments, breath-catching sightings—and the small lessons I picked up along the way. This isn't a checklist.

It's a journey. And if you're planning one of your own, you might find a few helpful suggestions tucked in too.

There's still so much of Borneo I haven't seen. And I know I'll return again—to go deeper, to discover more, and to better understand this incredible ecosystem.

Let this be the start of your own Borneo story.

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Chapter 1

Introducing into Borneo

Borneo, a land of ancient allure, was once known by so many other names. The Indians, drawn to its riches, called it Suvarnabhumi, the country of gold. Borneo was also known as Karpuradvipa, Camphor Island, for its fragrant forests. The Javanese, equally captivated, named it Puradvipa, meaning Diamond Island. These names hint at Borneo's historical abundance.

Archaeological finds in Sarawak show Borneo's central role in early trade. From the sixth century to around 1300, the Sarawak river delta thrived. It became a bustling hub connecting India and China. Ships laden with goods passed through, leaving their mark. This era cemented Borneo's place on ancient trade routes.

Today, Borneo is divided between three nations. Indonesia holds the largest share, about 73% of the island. The East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak make up roughly 26% in the north. The sovereign state of Brunei, also in the north, controls 1% of the land. This division reflects Borneo's complex history and diverse cultures.

Sabah, a captivating Malaysian state, graces the northern reaches of Borneo. It lures adventurers and nature lovers alike. Its crown jewel is the majestic Mount Kinabalu. The mountain is Malaysia's highest point, soaring to 4,095 metres. Its granite spires create a dramatic skyline. Below the heights, Sabah unfolds with stunning beaches and lush rainforests. The vibrant

coral reefs teem with life. Protected parks and reserves safeguard Sabah's rich wildlife. Here, orangutans swing through the trees and proboscis monkeys roam. Offshore, the islands of Sipadan and Mabul beckon divers. These underwater havens boast incredible biodiversity. They promise unforgettable encounters with marine wonders. Sabah offers an escape into nature's embrace. It's a place where adventure and wonder meet.

Borneo reigns as the world's third biggest island. Only Greenland and New Guinea outsize it. Borneo is the island in the extreme southwestern Pacific Ocean. East Malaysia claims the Malaysian part of this colossal island. This zone holds Malaysia's two biggest states: Sabah and Sarawak. Sabah, known as "Land Below the Wind", teems with diverse ecosystems. Sarawak, "Land of the Hornbills", boasts rich cultural heritage. The east Malaysian island, Borneo, shows its natural marvels and cultural mosaic.



Borneo is situated directly on the equator. This location shapes its weather and environment. The island stretches 1,336 kilometers. This distance goes from its northeast tip to its southwest corner. Borneo has an equatorial climate. This means it experiences two main seasons. The wet season, called "landas", brings heavy monsoon rains. It lasts from October to March. Imagine, days of constant rain and higher humidity. The rest of the year is "tedoh". This drier, calmer summer lasts the rest of the year. Expect more sunshine then. The island still sees rain. But the downpours are shorter and less frequent.

Borneo, a land cloaked in vast rainforests, pulses with life. A vibrant tapestry of flora and fauna thrive in this emerald world. Towering teak trees reach for the sky. Oak and conifers stand tall among them. These giants create a cathedral of green. Hardwoods from the Dipterocarpaceae family are also abundant. These trees provide valuable timber and support diverse ecosystems. The forests hold unique treasures, hidden from the casual observer. Epiphytes flourish, clinging to branches high above the ground. These air plants add another layer of complexity to the forest. The Monster bloom appears, a fleeting spectacle. This *Rafflesia arnoldii* is the world's largest flower, a parasitic marvel. Its putrid scent attracts pollinators from miles away.

Borneo shelters the elusive clouded leopard. This master of camouflage stalks prey through thick vegetation. The proboscis monkey is also unique to this island. Its comical, oversized nose sets it apart. Orangutans, gibbons, and pygmy elephants freely roam Borneo's forests. These iconic animals are vital for seed dispersal. Sadly, the Sumatran rhino is now extinct on Borneo. This extinction is a stark warning about habitat loss. Countless birds sing from the trees. Insects buzz within the undergrowth, and fish fill the rivers.

Their complex interactions create a fragile balance. Borneo's rainforests are essential for our planet's health. They regulate rainfall and store carbon, which helps fight climate change. The island's rich animal life relies on these ancient forests. Protecting Borneo means protecting a vital part of our world. We must save these precious habitats for future generations.

About 48% of Sabah's land area is covered with forests, which are carefully managed by the Sabah Forest Department. These forests are a vital part of the state's natural resources, providing habitat for many species of plants and animals. The department works hard to protect and preserve these forests, ensuring they stay healthy and sustainable for future generations.

The total area of forest that is officially designated as permanent forest estate amounts to about 54% of Sabah's land. This means over half of the state is legally set aside as forest that should remain untouched or minimally disturbed. These large forest reserves help maintain biodiversity, serve as carbon sinks, and support the livelihood of local communities through sustainable activities. They also provide clean air, water, and other essential ecosystem services that benefit everyone.

A significant portion of Sabah's land is used for agriculture, especially oil palm plantations. Currently, around 22% of the state's land area is covered with oil palm trees. Most of these plantations are found along the east coast, where the terrain is generally flatter and easier to transform into plantations. The expansion of oil palm has played a big role in Sabah's economy but raises questions about environmental impact and land use balance.

Sabah also draws global attention for its efforts to protect nature. About 26% of the state's land has been officially gazetted as fully protected areas, including national parks, wildlife reserves,

and marine parks. These areas are closed to most forms of development or resource extraction, allowing ecosystems to thrive. The government plans to increase this protected land to 30% by the end of 2025. This move aims to strengthen conservation efforts, safeguard endangered species, and maintain Sabah's rich diversity of flora and fauna.

Overall, Sabah's land use reflects a delicate balance. Forests and protected areas are preserved as vital natural assets. Meanwhile, parts of the landscape are used for agriculture and development. The ongoing efforts to expand protected regions show a strong commitment to conserving Sabah's unique natural environment for the future.

Bird photography is soaring in popularity as birdwatching takes flight. Sabah is a treasure trove for those keen to capture birds on camera. Across Sabah, numerous spots offer photographers chances to snap amazing, local birds. Kinabalu National Park is home to many mountain species. The Kinabatangan River teems with wetland birds. Danum Valley Conservation Area provides glimpses of rare rainforest dwellers. These locations present varied experiences. Some offer safari tours. Others have well-equipped, cosy birdwatching hides.

These hides shield photographers from the elements, letting them observe birds up close. Shutterbugs are truly spoilt for choice when it comes to photographing Sabah's vibrant birdlife. From majestic raptors to tiny sunbirds, the options are endless. The Bornean Bristlehead, Whitehead's Trogon and Giant Pitta are among the sought-after species. Sabah beckons both seasoned pros and budding enthusiasts to frame its avian wonders.

In June 2025, Chandramouli Ganguli, the main person at Birding 365, had a plan. He wanted to run a Sabah bird photo

trip. The visitors often don't have lots of time or money. This means choices matter.

We thought hard about where to go. We checked listed certain birds. Keeping costs down was also key. We picked two spots as bases: Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan. Near Kota Kinabalu, the high peaks called Kinabalu Park, Trusmadi, and Gunung Alab held bird treasures.



Around Sandakan, wild places beckoned. Telupid, the Rainforest Discovery Centre, and Kinabatangan are prime spots. Roads and planes made moving between these places easy. Careful planning of Mr. Ganguli let us spot greatest and rarest of birds, without going beyond our budget.

The simplest way to reach Sabah is by air. We'll be aiming for Kota Kinabalu International Airport. Think of it as Sabah's aerial gateway. Flights from India don't go direct. Instead, expect a stopover in Kuala Lumpur, the usual changeover point. The total flight duration clocks in around 7.5 to 8 hours. This includes a layover of roughly 2 hours in Kuala Lumpur's busy airport.

Don't forget your travel documents. Passports are essential for entering Malaysia. Visas may also be required, depending on your nationality. Keep your passport handy when travelling within Malaysia too. This includes trips within Sabah itself and to Sarawak. Internal travel still requires these important documents.

From January 2024, every visitor to Malaysia from other countries must fill out the Malaysia Digital Arrival Card. Indian passport holders will no longer need a tourist visa to visit Malaysia for stays of up to 30 days. This new policy makes travel easier and quicker, removing the time-consuming process of applying for a visa beforehand. It allows travellers to plan shorter visits without the hassle of visa paperwork. However, certain rules still apply to ensure smooth entry into Malaysia.

Travellers must have a confirmed return or onward ticket that is valid within 30 days of their arrival. This means you should have a ticket booked to leave Malaysia within that time frame, either back home or to another destination. This requirement helps border officials verify your intention to leave and prevents overstaying. For example, if you arrive on December 10, your return or onward journey must be scheduled no later than January 9.

When entering Malaysia, travellers must carry enough cash to support their stay. The minimum amount suggested is 50 USD per day for each day of stay. If you plan to stay 10 days, you should have at least 500 USD available. This money can be in cash, traveler's cheques, or other easily accessible forms. Authorities may ask to see proof of funds during your entry process to verify you have enough money to cover your expenses.

Additionally, proof of hotel booking is required. You must present confirmation of a fully paid hotel reservation for the days

you plan to stay. This document acts as a clear plan of where you will stay during your visit and confirms your accommodation arrangements. For example, if you booked a hotel for 7 nights, show the hotel confirmation with payment details. Your stay will be approved for a maximum of 30 days or until your ticketed return or onward journey. The government aims to encourage short, meaningful visits, and the maximum stay period is strictly 30 days unless otherwise authorised.

This simplified entry process aims to boost tourism by making travel more accessible for Indian travellers. It also aligns Malaysia with other countries easing visa restrictions for short visits. Still, travellers should prepare all required documents and meet cash and ticketing requirements to avoid delays or issues at the border. Overall, this change makes visiting Malaysia easier for Indian tourists seeking a quick getaway or a short holiday.

We booked our flights with Malaysian Airlines, choosing this airline for its reputation of good service and comfortable seating. Our journey began in Kolkata, a busy city known for its vibrant culture and rich history. From there, we boarded a flight bound for Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. The flight duration between Kolkata and Kuala Lumpur was about four hours, providing a reasonable travel time given the distance involved. During the flight, passengers could enjoy in-flight entertainment, meals, and the chance to relax before arriving in Malaysia's bustling capital city.

Kuala Lumpur is located in a region where the local time is ahead of India's time zone by two and a half hours. This means that when it is midday in Kolkata, it's already around 2:30 in the afternoon in Kuala Lumpur. Adjusting to this time difference is important for planning activities and managing jet lag.

Once we landed in Kuala Lumpur and cleared customs, we had a short layover that lasted about two hours. During this break, we took the opportunity to stretch our legs, grab a quick snack, and prepare for the next leg of our journey. In Kuala Lumpur's airport, there were plenty of duty-free shops, cafes, and lounges where travellers could relax and recharge before their on going flights.

After this brief stop, we boarded our flight to Kota Kinabalu, a city situated on the island of Borneo. The flight from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Kinabalu was approximately two hours and forty minutes long. The airline staff provided safety instructions and refreshments during the flight. The scenery outside the window started to change as we approached Borneo, revealing lush forests, mountains, and the shimmering South China Sea.

This segment of the journey was key because Kota Kinabalu is known for its natural beauty and serves as a gateway for exploring Borneo's rainforests, wildlife, and mountains. The entire trip was smooth and well-organized, helping us move comfortably from one airport to the next. Overall, the flight plan allowed us to efficiently cover the distance across Malaysia, with enough time for brief stops and rest along the way.

From the aircraft window, Borneo looked like paradise from thousands of feet up. Yet, gazing down at that rich green carpet, it was not quite the unspoilt Garden of Eden we expected. The neat, precise corduroy stripes weren't the island's old, native forest.

Instead, row upon row of oil palms stretched out below.

Borneo's forest heartland has been greatly reduced. It started with logging for hardwoods. Next came rubber plantations. Lately, it has been oil palms. The oil from these trees' fruit ends

up almost everywhere. It's in our shower gel, our snack bars, and even our cars.

Vast swathes of native forest have vanished. They've been replaced by these unnatural plantations. They might be rich in oil, but they are poor in wildlife.

Borneo's old forests and unique lowland creatures are now mostly in protected zones. Often, these areas are too tricky for commercial farming. Imagine what it means for a clouded leopard. Its home now shrinks a little more each day. Consider the orangutans. Their habitat turns into a sea of green monotony. This is a world where profits often come before preservation. The demand for cheap oil has a high price. It is paid in lost ecosystems and vanishing species.

Chapter 2

Birding at Gunung Alab

The island of Borneo offer a unique glimpse into one of Southeast Asia's most vibrant and diverse natural habitats. Among the many adventures that await, the bird-watching trip at Gunung Alab stands out as a highlight for keen travellers and bird enthusiasts alike. Situated in the heart of Borneo, Gunung Alab is a towering mountain covered in lush rainforest blended with rugged terrain.

Its name is known among bird watchers as a place where the forest hums with life, especially during the early mornings when countless birds sing from their perches.

The forest at Gunung Alab is home to hundreds of bird species, some of which can be found nowhere else in the world. Spotting these birds requires patience, a keen eye, and a good pair of binoculars. The thrill of seeing a rare Hornbilled or a gliding Kingfisher, darting between the trees, makes every moment worth the wait. Birders often spend hours scouring the canopy, listening carefully to calls that echo through the forest. Each bird has a unique song, and learning to distinguish these calls is an art in itself.

For many visitors, the journey to Gunung Alab is a full-day adventure. They trek into the depths of the forest with local guides who know the terrain and birdlife intimately. These guides are experts at spotting subtle signs of various species — a flash of colour in the trees or a sudden burst of wings breaking the silence. Their knowledge helps visitors see the elusive and

often shy birds that hide among the thick foliage. Along the way, tourists also enjoy the chance to learn about the forest's ecosystem and its importance for local communities.

The significance of a bird-watching trip at Gunung Alab goes beyond just ticking off species from a list. It provides a deeper understanding of how vital forests are for the survival of numerous bird species. It also highlights the importance of preserving this wild landscape. Birdwatchers leave with not only memories of rare sightings but also a greater appreciation of Borneo's rich natural heritage.

This experience here is more than just a hobby. It's a window into a world where every call, flutter, and flight tells a story of adaptation and survival. The mountain's elevation and diverse habitats create a perfect environment for birds to thrive. During the early hours, the forest comes alive with melodies, as if nature itself is celebrating the dawn. Visitors often remark on feeling an almost spiritual connection to the wildness around them.

In short, the bird quest at Gunung Alab is a must-do for those seeking a deeper connection with nature. It's a journey into the heart of Borneo's rich biodiversity. With each sighting, visitors gain a new understanding of how vital these forests are for countless species and for the health of our planet. It's a reminder of the beauty that exists right in the wild and the urgent need to protect it for future generations.

Borneo teems with unique animals and birds, especially in Sabah. But to truly grasp Borneo's wild heart, move to its mountains.

Close to Kota Kinabalu sits the Crocker Range. The drive is only 50 minutes. Yet, this mountain range shelters a host of native creatures. These include birds, animals, and plants that

you cannot find anywhere else. Deforestation from farming poses a serious threat. Still, this area thrives. Here, the iconic *Rafflesia* blooms. This giant flower amazes visitors. The mountains offer a rich experience. They reveal Borneo's amazing natural wealth.

Gunung Alab is a famed hotspot within the Crocker Range National Park. Keen twitchers flock here for a chance to spot rare species. The location is handy; it sits roughly 60 kilometres from Kota Kinabalu. Sabah's capital buzzes with life, yet the park offers tranquillity. Birdwatchers often escape the city's noise. They seek the serenity and rich birdlife of Gunung Alab. The majestic Crocker Range Park promises an unforgettable experience for nature lovers.



Kota Kinabalu is blessed with many nearby places to watch avian species. A prime example is the Gunung Alab substation. Gunung means mountain in Malay. At the substation, birdwatchers can easily spot montane species. Crocker Range

Park surrounds the substation. It is a truly untouched area. This gives birders a great chance to see birds found only in Borneo. For example, you might see the Bornean whistler, or perhaps the Whitehead's broadbill.

The park's high elevation and lush forests make it a haven for these rare endemic birds. The cool mountain air adds to the pleasure of birding here. Gunung Alab substation became a memorable site for our current Bornean wildlife trip.

We had heard plenty about Gunung Alab, a mountain nestled within the lush Crocker Range National Park in Sabah. It's known among birdwatchers as a top spot for spotting a wide variety of avian species. The mountain's rich habitats attract many bird lovers eager to catch glimpses of rare and beautiful birds. The park itself covers over half a million hectares of forest, including dense rainforests and highland terrains perfect for birding adventures. Gunung Alab sits just about 50 kilometres from Kota Kinabalu, the lively capital of Sabah, making it a convenient destination for those eager to escape the city's hustle.

Knowing this, we decided to make Gunung Alab the starting point for our Sabah birding trip. It felt like the perfect first stop, right at the border where urban life ends and wild nature begins. The short drive from Kota Kinabalu gave us a chance to leave the city behind and immerse ourselves immediately into the rainforest that is teeming with birdlife. The area is renowned for its biodiversity, hosting over 300 bird species, from colourful hornbills to swift swifts and tiny sunbirds. Many bird guides consider Gunung Alab a must-visit for both beginners and seasoned birdwatchers. It's a haven where the sounds of bird calls fill the air at dawn, creating a lively soundtrack that signals the start of a busy day.

The journey from Kota Kinabalu to Gunung Alab is a memorable adventure that takes you deep into the heart of Sabah's lush landscapes. Starting in Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah, visitors often feel the buzz of the city—its markets, street foods, and vibrant culture. From there, the trip heads north or inland, depending on the route chosen, and begins a gradual ascent into the mountains. The whole journey covers a distance of approximately 80 kilometres, but the real distance is measured in elevation and experience.

Traveling by car or bus, the drive weaves through small towns and rural villages, revealing glimpses of local life. The scenery shifts suddenly from coastal views to dense rainforest. As the road winds upward, the air cools, and the jungle thickens. Drivers and hikers often stop at viewpoints crafted along the way to admire the rolling hills or catch a glimpse of the distant city lights.

Reaching Gunung Alab, one of Sabah's highest peaks at 2,642 meters, feels like crossing into a different world. The climb is more than just a physical challenge; it's a journey into nature's untouched beauty. The trail through the mountain's rainforest canopy is rich with exotic plants and bird calls. For hikers, this trek offers a chance to experience elusive wildlife and to witness trees towering over 50 metres tall.

Many explorers see this trip as a chance to understand Sabah's diverse ecosystems. The landscape changes constantly—from moss-covered trees to open clearings with wildflowers. Guides often share insights about the mountain's importance to local communities and its ecological significance. The ascent can take several hours, depending on your pace, and some hikers spend a night in the mountain's base camp to prepare for the final push in the early morning calm.

The journey from Kota Kinabalu to Gunung Alab is not just about reaching the peak; it's about the stories, sights, and sounds experienced along the way. Every turn offers new surprises and a step closer to nature's raw beauty. This route attracts adventurers and nature lovers eager to see Sabah's wild side and challenge themselves amid stunning scenery.

Travelers often come here to not only see the birds but also to experience the serenity and beauty of Sabah's forested hills. The terrain is a blend of moss-covered trees, flowering plants, and rocky outcrops that create perfect perching spots for various birds. The cooler mountain air adds to the appeal, making it a refreshing start to our journey. We knew that this spot could offer us a taste of Sabah's bird diversity right from the first moment, setting the tone for what we hoped would be a memorable exploration of the region's natural wonders. With high-end camera in hand and eager eyes, we stepped into the woodland, ready for the colourful spectacle that awaits.

Nestled high in the mountains, around 2,000 metres up, lies a captivating montane woodland. The air is fresh and cool. The temperate climate brings regular mists and rain. This constant moisture creates a lush, green paradise. It is the perfect haven for many bird species. The woodland is a crucial habitat for birds. It shelters some of Borneo's most unique bird species. These feathered gems can be hard to find elsewhere in Sabah. Imagine spotting a Whitehead's Broadbill or a Fruithunter in their natural habitat. This special place offers that chance. It is a sanctuary where rare birds thrive amidst the vibrant foliage. The woodland's elevation and climate combine to form a vital refuge.

Perched high near Gunung Alab's peak lies a hidden gem. A bumpy road winds its way up to Gunung Alab Substation.

Here, park rangers diligently guard a spectacular orchid garden. Visitor lodging is also available. The road pushes on to a power station crowned with two huge antennae. This spot is a haven for keen birdwatchers. It's famed for sightings of mountain birds. These rare species prove elusive in better-known locations. Even the vast slopes of Mount Kinabalu offer less frequent glimpses. The area's altitude and undisturbed habitat make it special. Birders seek out the Bornean whistler. The Whitehead's broadbill is another prize sighting. Both thrive in this unique environment.

Our Borneo birding tour took us to the Gunung Alab substation. This was a true highlight. Day one of our adventure saw us amidst stunning scenery. The air buzzed with the calls of unfamiliar birds. This section offers a sneak peek into our Gunung Alab visit. Think of it as a birder's primer. Any birding enthusiast planning a trip here may find it an avian paradise. This part of the book will help you imagine the beauty and plan your visit. Gunung Alab is a must-see for Borneo birders. Its unique ecosystem provides countless bird watching chances. Prepare to be amazed by the wildlife and views.

Our birdwatching trip to Gunung Alab substation proved a real treat. Mr. Ganguly, our team leader, organised the excursion. The well-known local birder, Mr. Denis Degullacion, also joined us. We approached Gunung Alab from Kota Kinabalu airport early after lunch. The drive took us through winding roads to reach the substation at around 14:30 local time. We had a quick lunch on the way.

Our arrival was greeted by cloud and thick mist. This gloomy weather matched the area's reputation. We drove the winding road to Gunung Alab Substation.

Gunung Alab is accessible from the main Penampang to Tambunan road (State Route 500). While Kinabalu Park is also in Sabah, it's a separate location known for Mount Kinabalu and its own set of trails. To get from Kinabalu Park to Gunung Alab, you would need to travel by road. Cars parked along the roadside marked the trailhead. The leisurely kilometre-long walk to the telecom tower began. A light drizzle dampened our spirits initially. This made spotting birds trickier. As the morning wore on, the rain stopped. Sunlight broke through the clouds, lifting our mood. The forest canopy, previously obscured, began to reveal its secrets.

We hoped the improving weather would bring the birds out.

The weather smiled upon us soon. A pure blue sky stretched overhead. The sun shone brightly. The elevation made the air feel refreshingly chilly. Birdsongs quickly filled our ears. They signalled the birds' presence all around. Soon we started spotting and naming different species. The forest came alive with vibrant life.

Mr. Denice's expertise proved invaluable. He helped us identify birds with ease. It was a thrilling experience.

Birdsong echoed from the thick roadside foliage. The cheerful calls of Aberrant Bush Warblers filled the air along the winding road. These tiny birds announced their presence every few metres. They played an endless game of hide-and-seek with us. The warblers stubbornly refused to show themselves. We strained our eyes, hoping for a glimpse. Hours passed as we peered into the dense bushes. Finally, a single bird emerged. It was just a fleeting moment before it darted back. The warbler disappeared into its leafy refuge. Their olive-green plumage provides superb camouflage. This makes spotting them a real challenge. The brief sighting only deepened our fascination. We

longed to observe these secretive songsters. Their elusiveness only added to their charm.

As we pushed further along the highland trail, we encountered more of Borneo's delightful avian residents. The Chestnut-hooded laughingthrush showed its warm colours.



We spotted the most elusive mountain wren babbler. We need not to work hard to spot the rare beauty. The Mountain Wren Babbler is a tiny bird that looks somewhat like a mouse in size, making it quite challenging to spot. It prefers to live in dense, tangled parts of the montane forest, especially in ravines, gullies, and streams where heavy shade covers the ground. These birds blend seamlessly with the thick foliage and undergrowth, their brown feathers helping them stay hidden from predators and humans alike. To truly find one, listening is more useful than looking. Its song is a series of high, clear piping whistles that sound like "hi- hee-hu-huh-hi" or close variations. These calls echo softly through the forest, acting as a secret signal to others of its kind. The bird can sometimes be quite inquisitive, approaching closely enough to be seen clearly even in its dense habitat, especially if it senses no threat. When

spotted, it appears as a small, chunky brown bird with striking pale eyebrows. Its body overall is a lovely shade of brown with strong streaks running down its sides, giving it a somewhat rugged look. The bird also has a contrasting pale throat, which helps in identifying it from other species.

While the Mountain Wren Babbler's range overlaps slightly with the Eyebrowed Wren-Babbler, they tend to prefer slightly different heights in the mountains. The Wren-Babbler prefers a marginally lower elevation, often found closer to the forest's middle layers, whereas the Mountain Wren Babbler thrives higher up in the cooler, shadier parts of the forest. The Eyebrowed Wren-Babbler can be distinguished by white spots on its wings and a different, more varied song. These distinctions are important for birdwatchers trying to tell the two species apart amid their overlapping territories. Understanding these subtle differences offers a clearer picture of how these small birds carve out their niches in challenging environments. Their songs, in particular, serve as important indicators for birders seeking to identify the species at a distance, especially since visual spotting remains tricky in such dense habitats.



Adding to this, experts note that these birds are more approachable than many others in the dense forest, often allowing careful observers to get within a few feet before darting away. Their behaviour hints at a certain curiosity and seeming lack of fear, possibly due to their small size and quick reflexes. For bird enthusiasts, this makes them a prized find—if only they could be seen clearly amidst the thick undergrowth. Many birdwatchers rely on the distinct sound of their whistles, which stand out in the otherwise quiet forest. This call acts like a beacon, guiding observers closer even if the bird remains hidden. Researchers studying montane forest ecosystems highlight how these small birds play a role in the delicate balance of life, helping control insect populations and serving as indicators of forest health. Their presence signals a healthy, thriving environment rich in biodiversity. Recognising the subtle cues—both visual and auditory—can be rewarding, offering insights into this lush, complex world high in the mountains.

The Sunda laughing thrush is a small, lively bird known for its cheerful calls and striking appearance. It is commonly found in the lush, forested regions of Gunung Alab, a mountain that forms part of the rich biodiversity of this area. The bird's presence in Gunung Alab is significant because it highlights the health of the forest ecosystem there. These birds are generally seen darting through dense trees, flitting from branch to branch, often singing their distinctive, melodious calls that sound almost like laughter. It can be quite a sight to witness a flock of Sunda laughing thrushes as they move through the canopy, filling the air with their lively voices.



Gunung Alab provides the perfect habitat for these birds, with its thick undergrowth and high canopy creating ideal shelter and feeding grounds. The birds tend to prefer areas with plenty of insects—one of their main food sources—and they are often spotted near flowering plants that attract bugs. Their vibrant plumage, with gains of soft browns, greys, and hints of brighter colours, makes them easy to spot when they pause on a branch. Many birdwatchers visit Gunung Alab specifically to catch a glimpse of these charming creatures, which are both an indicator of a healthy environment and a delight to observe.

Scientists and conservationists take an active interest in the Sunda laughing thrush because it helps indicate the overall condition of the forest. When these birds are abundant, it generally means the forest is in good shape, rich in insects and free from excessive logging or deforestation. However, if their numbers drop, it could signal trouble in the local ecosystem.

Protecting the habitat of the Sunda laughing thrush not only benefits this vibrant bird but also safeguards the myriad of other species that thrive in Gunung Alab's forests.

In addition to their ecological importance, these birds have become a symbol for local conservation efforts. They remind us how fragile these ecosystems can be and the need to preserve them for future generations. Bird enthusiasts often record their calls and share sightings to raise awareness about the importance of maintaining Gunung Alab's natural beauty. Their cheerful calls, echoing between the trees, serve as a gentle reminder of nature's simple joys, and of the importance of protecting these precious habitats from harm.

While the Teminck's Sunbird added a flash of red colour colour, the Bornean treepie and Bornean Whistling thrush serenaded us. These birds are typical of Borneo's mountains. Yet, each sighting felt special. I was thrilled to see these lovely birds in their natural home. It's a privilege to witness such beauty.



There is a beautiful feeding station at the end. This is great for taking photographs. We saw a lot of birds here. They were very close to us. Mr. Roger said that these birds visit here regularly. Many birds like this spot.



The indigo flycatcher at Gunung Alab feeding station is a sight that captures the attention of birdwatchers and nature lovers alike. This small, vibrant bird is known for its striking deep blue plumage that shimmers in the sunlight, making it one of the most eye-catching species in the area. Found mainly in the dense forests surrounding Gunung Alab, this bird has become a popular subject of observation due to its active feeding habits. At the feeding station, it can often be seen darting swiftly through the branches, stopping briefly to catch insects and other tiny prey with quick, precise movements.



This particular site provides a safe and accessible spot for bird enthusiasts to spot rare species like the indigo flycatcher up close. The station is carefully maintained with a variety of natural food sources, encouraging different birds to come into view.

Visitors often remark on the bird's agility and bright colour, which contrast beautifully against the lush greenery. Watching the indigo flycatcher flit from branch to branch offers a glimpse into its busy life as a insect hunter, catching its prey mid-air or snatching it from the leaves.



The presence of this bird at Gunung Alab also serves as an important indicator of the health of the local ecosystem. The dense forests are critical habitats for many species, and seeing the indigo flycatcher thriving here hints at a well-preserved environment. Birdwatchers sometimes spend hours waiting for sightings, hoping to capture a clear photo or simply enjoy the bird's lively presence. Conservationists highlight this area as vital for protecting such species from habitat loss, as they depend on the forest's health for survival.



In the grand scheme, the indigo flycatcher's visit to the feeding station is more than a fleeting moment of beauty. It's a reminder of the rich diversity nestled within Gunung Alab's forests. The bird's behaviour, vibrant colours, and lively movements make it a standout among the many species found here. Its role in the ecosystem as an insect predator helps control pest populations.

Watching it soar and hunt offers insights into the fragile web of life that sustains this forested area, making it a priority for conservation efforts. Such moments of birdwatching deepen our understanding and appreciation for the natural world.

The eye-browed jungle flycatcher, a small and lively bird, was spotted at the feeding station near Gunung Alab. This bird, with its distinctive eye-brow markings that run above its eyes, stands out among the many species found in the rainforest canopy. Its presence at the station is a notable sight for bird watchers, as this species is known for its quick movements and sharp, curious stare. The flycatcher is often seen darting from

branch to branch in search of insects, quite agile and focused on catching its prey.

The feeding station at Gunung Alab offers a rare opportunity for visitors to observe these birds up close, as they gather food and interact with other rainforest residents.

The eye-browed jungle flycatcher is an important part of the local ecosystem. It plays a key role in controlling insect populations, helping to keep the forest balanced. Seeing it feeding allows scientists and bird enthusiasts to better understand its habits and behaviour. Its discovery at the Gunung Alab feeding station highlights the richness of the region's birdlife, a mix of common and rare species that travellers have come to see. This particular species is often shy, making sightings like this a real highlight for those passionate about rainforest birds. The bird's quick flicks of its tail and swift glances make it exciting to watch, especially for bird-watchers eager to tick off a rare sighting. Its lively behaviour reminds us of the complex web of nature, with each species playing a vital part in the story of the rainforest.

As mentioned, the walkway ended at a sheltered bird feeding station. It promised sanctuary for both birds and watchers. The hide's weathered wood blended into the natural surroundings. Here, feathered residents found a safe haven, and nature lovers could observe them undisturbed. Reaching the hide, we found the bushes alive. It was a vibrant spectacle of avian activity. Wings fluttered, tiny bodies darted, and a chorus of chirps filled the air. I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of movement. It was a dizzying display, and focus proved impossible. Every direction offered a new flash of colour, a new song. I struggled to fix my attention on any single bird. The scene was too captivating, too full of life.

The White-browed Shrike Babbler, a small bird with a striking appearance, is often seen around the Gunung Alab area. This vibrant bird has distinctive white eyebrows that stand out against its darker feathers, making it easy to identify. It prefers to live in forests and dense jungles, often perched high on trees as it scans the ground below for food. One of the best places to observe these birds is at the local feeding station in Gunung Alab, where enthusiasts gather to see a variety of bird species.

The feeding station provides a safe spot for these birds to find nourishment, especially during times when natural food sources are scarce. Here, they peck at nuts, insects, and small fruits placed on feeders, showing their adaptability to human-provided food sources. Observers often watch as groups of White-browed Shrike Babblers flutter from branch to branch, their bright eyes and energetic movements catching the eye. They are known for their loud calls, which can often be heard echoing through the forest, especially during dawn and dusk.



Many bird watchers visit Gunung Alab specifically to catch a glimpse of this curious species. Its presence indicates a healthy

forest environment, as it depends on dense vegetation for shelter and feeding. The station also serves as an important spot for researchers studying these birds' behaviour and patterns. In fact, sightings here help scientists monitor the populations and health of the species across the region.

A Bornean leafbird appeared all on a sudden. This gem had completely eluded me. I was filled with joy. This bird looked a lot similar to other leafbirds I'd seen. They're mostly green with bright faces. The Bornean leafbird only lives in north-central Borneo's highlands. Then, amongst the leaves, a Mountain Black-eye showed itself, a first for me. I was ecstatic! The Black-eye, unique to Borneo, favours the highest mountains. Though more common at Kinabalu's higher reaches, seeing one lower down is rare. The thick mountain forests are its perfect home. Its dark eyes stand out against its olive body. They like berries, insects, and the cool mountain air.



Gunung Alab is a brilliant spot for other Bornean highland birds. The Red-breasted partridge thrives here. We plan to spot

the bird later in our hiding season. The Golden-naped barbet is another stunning sight. This trip marked my first time exploring Gunung Alab. I definitely plan a return here. I hope to document more of its wildlife. Next time, a longer stay will be planned for better chances.

The Gunung Alab substation boasts decent accessibility. It sits along the main Penampang to Tambunan Road. It is about 60 kilometres away from Kota Kinabalu's busy city centre. The winding road climbs steadily. The drive typically takes about two hours from Kota kinabalu. Mountain views accompany drivers. The road surface is generally acceptable. Potholes do exist, though.

Local buses and minivans offer public transport. These serve communities along the route. However, renting a car is the only sensible option. This is especially true for birdwatchers. They often carry bulky equipment. A private taxi could be chartered. This can be costly from Kota Kinabalu. The freedom to explore remote birding spots is worth it. The substation serves as a key landmark. Birders use it as a staging point.

Perched high among the clouds, the Gunung Alab substation sits between 1850 and 2000 metres. This puts it in Crocker Range Park's embrace. The park is a vast, protected area. It guards the rugged Crocker Range south of Kota Kinabalu. Imagine a green ribbon stretching from Tenom in the south all the way to Gunung Alab up north.

Birdwatching on Gunung Alab is wonderfully straightforward. A single, well-defined path stretches from the entrance right up to the telecom tower. The route makes it hard to stray. You won't find yourself lost amongst the trees. The trail rises gently. It is just a slight uphill push near the end. The birding route measures about 1 kilometre. This makes it easy to manage, even

for novice birders. Towering upper-montane forests flank the track. They follow the mountain crest. The trees create a stunning green corridor. Cool air adds to the experience. It helps create a peaceful setting. The weather is perfect for wandering. You can listen to the calls of the birds. The whole setting makes for a truly tranquil birdwatching adventure.

The trail offers glimpses of birdlife. Bird sightings were more frequent near the entry points. The telecom tower also seemed to be a bird hotspot during our trip. Flocks gathered around these areas, maybe drawn to the open spaces or structures. We saw robins flitting among the trees at the entrance. We also noticed magpies perched high on the telecom tower. It is worth noting that bird activity can change. The time of year greatly affects numbers and types. What we saw on our visit may not mirror your own experience.

My Sabah trip was about birds, and Gunung Alab beckoned. I still kept half an eye out for insects, especially butterflies. The wind played havoc though. It battered the slopes and buffeted everything. This made getting a decent photo almost impossible. Butterflies struggled to hold on. My invertebrate hunt narrowed to a few hardy souls. I spotted a couple of cricket species first. They chirped away, clinging to grass stems. A mating pair of beetles caught my eye next. They clung to a leaf, battling the gales. Then I saw an unidentified tractor millipede. It slowly trundled across the leaf litter. The real stars, though, were the Black-striped orchard spiders. Huge numbers of them filled the undergrowth.

Their webs, usually neat, were a mess of windblown silk. Still, they patiently waited for prey.

The mountains demand respect. Weather shifts without warning. One moment sunshine warms the skin. The next,

clouds spill over peaks. Mist wraps around you, cold and damp. Rain can begin in a flash. It's why preparation is key. We never head uphill unprepared. Waterproof jackets and trousers are vital. They shield us from sudden downpours. Camera gear needs protection too. A waterproof bag keeps lenses dry. Warm layers are just as important. Even summer days turn chilly fast. Hats and gloves earn their space. Mountain weather waits for no one.

Within the area's stunning gardens, native plants explode with life. Ferns offer plant lovers a wide, dizzying array. Mosses create soft carpets in damp, shaded corners. Exotic nepenthes, also called pitcher plants, thrive here. Orchids show off their beauty in complex shapes and colours. Towering trees stand tall next to humble shrubs. Each plays its part in this rich, green world. A short 7km trip takes you to the Rafflesia Information Centre.

The centre shares details on the giant Rafflesia flower. This bloom is truly unforgettable. It's one of the world's largest flowers. Its size is something you won't soon forget. The Rafflesia can grow to be nearly a metre across. Imagine seeing a flower as big as a table! These rare blooms need specific conditions to grow. The centre helps people learn about these amazing plants. The sight of a Rafflesia in full bloom is special. It is a highlight for any nature lover visiting the area.

A jungle path winds towards a hidden waterfall. This route is for those seeking a bolder adventure. It stretches about 1.5 km through the dense undergrowth. Before you set off, pop into the ranger office. Let them know your plans for the trek. The rangers can provide essential safety advice. They also have the latest trail conditions to share. The waterfall rewards those who dare to explore. Its cascading waters offer a refreshing escape.

It's a perfect spot for a wild swim. Remember to respect the jungle environment. Leave no trace of your visit.

Gunung Alab is a magnet for tourists. They come for its stunning scenery. The air is clean and fresh. Its temperate climate offers a welcome escape. Spend time here appreciating its natural treasures. The mountain teems with unique biodiversity. Take it all in and savour the experience. Exploring Gunung Alab is worth the trip. The area is home to many plant and animal species. These create a rich tapestry of life. Spotting a rare orchid or a colourful bird is possible. It's a reminder of nature's beauty. I long to return to its slopes. I hope to deepen my knowledge of its ecosystems.

Perhaps I'll spot another Bornean mountain endemic. Adding to my lifer list would be a thrill.

After finishing our birding adventures in Gunung Alab, we made our way to Tambunan, a peaceful town nestled among hills and sprawling rice paddies. Just a short drive from the town centre, the Paddy view resthouse stood out as a welcoming spot for tired travellers like us. It offers a simple yet comfortable place to stay at a reasonable price. The resthouse features 11 spacious rooms, each offering a cozy retreat after long hour of journey followed by birdig.

Surrounded by lush green rice paddies and the gentle sounds of village life, the resort creates a calming atmosphere that made us feel far from the hectic world. The rooms are surprisingly big and kept clean, providing enough space to relax comfortably. The quiet environment and picturesque scenery make it a perfect place to unwind. The location is especially convenient, with walking distance to Tambunan town, allowing easy access to shops, eateries, and local markets.



Each room is thoughtfully equipped with basic amenities. Guests can enjoy cable TV, perfect for catching up on local channels or relaxing with a movie after dinner. A coffee-making machine is provided, allowing visitors to start their day with a hot brew while taking in the views. Although the curtains could use some upgrading—particularly in the ground-floor rooms that let in a little too much sunlight—they do block out enough light for a good night's sleep. Offering soft pillows would definitely enhance comfort and help guests rest more peacefully. A small addition that would make a noticeable difference is installing exhaust fans in the bathrooms to help vent moisture and reduce humidity, especially important in a humid tropical climate.

Overall, we found our stay to be quite comfortable. We checked in for two nights in the family room, which provided ample space for our group. The rooms feature twin beds that are both wide and inviting, perfect for families or groups sharing. The air conditioning unit worked reliably, keeping the room cool and comfortable during the day and night. The staff were attentive and cautious, always ready to assist with any questions or

requests, creating a friendly atmosphere that made us feel welcomed from the moment we arrived.



On the first floor, there is a charming terrace that offers a lovely spot to sit and enjoy the morning sun. It's an ideal place for a quiet breakfast, especially if you bring your own supplies.

Watching the village wake up with the roosters crowing and farmers heading to their fields adds a special touch to the start of the day. You can soak in the peaceful landscape while sipping coffee and planning your day ahead.

Staying here feels like a blend of comfort and local charm. It might not be a luxury resort, but it provides everything needed for a pleasant, restful stay. The spacious rooms, friendly staff, and scenic surroundings make it a good choice for anyone visiting Tambunan, whether on a birding trip or just looking to relax in a quiet place away from busy towns. The overall experience left us feeling relaxed and well-rested, ready to explore more of what this beautiful region has to offer.

Chapter 3

Birding at Mount Trusmadi

Trusmadi in Sabah is a well-known hotspot for bird lovers. It's one of the top spots in the region where you can see and photograph some of Borneo's most unique and colourful bird species. The area attracts birdwatchers from all over, eager to catch a glimpse of the rare and beautiful Bornean birds that live there. Many visitors come armed with binoculars and cameras, ready to record stunning shots of their favourite species. This place is especially popular because of the variety of birds that can be seen here, many of which are difficult to spot elsewhere.

If you are passionate about birdwatching, Trusmadi offers an incredible chance to add new species to your life list. Birdwatchers often refer to these sightings as "lifers" — the first time they see a bird that they've never spotted before. Some of the species you might encounter include the Bornean banded pitta, the Bulwers pheasant, or the crimson headed partridge etc. These species are not only rare but also hard to find in other parts of Borneo, making Trusmadi a true treasure for bird enthusiasts.

The landscape here plays a big role in the habitat of these birds. Thick forested areas, gentle slopes, and cool mountain air create an ideal home for many species. Birdwatching here can be a quiet, almost meditative experience. Early mornings are best, when the air is crisp and the forest is alive with activity. Listening to bird calls and trying to identify different songs adds to the excitement. Many birders spend hours patient and still,

waiting for that perfect moment when a colourful or exotic bird reveals itself.

With a good number of bird species present, Trusmadi has become a sought-after destination. Statistics show that birdwatchers visiting this region have recorded over 300 species of birds, a significant number of which are endemic to Borneo. Endemic birds are species found only in this part of the world, making each sighting a special achievement. It's common for enthusiastic birders to leave with dozens of photos and unforgettable memories.

The KK Lee Trusmadi bird hide in Sabah stands out as one of the top spots for birdwatching in the region. It draws in both local visitors and international birding enthusiasts eager to catch a glimpse of rare and beautiful species. The hide is managed by Mr. KK Lee, a dedicated and passionate birder who has spent years studying the local rainforest and its avian inhabitants. His love for the natural world shows in the care he puts into maintaining the hide and ensuring visitors have the best chance to see elusive birds.

This bird hide offers a prime spot in the lush rainforest, where some of Malaysia's rarest birds can be seen. Visitors have reported spotting exotic pheasants and colourful partridges that are rarely seen elsewhere. Many of these birds are shy and tend to stay hidden deep within the forest shadows. But from the hide's vantage point, birders can observe these shy creatures with relative ease, thanks to its strategic location and the quiet patience encouraged by Mr. Lee.

The rainforest here is particularly rich in birdlife, with over 300 species recorded in the area. Among them are some of Southeast Asia's most spectacular rainforest birds. Birdwatchers often come early in the morning or late afternoon when the

forest is most alive with bird activity. Many enthusiasts leave the hide with stunning photographs of bright, vibrant feathers and intricate patterns on the wings of these birds.

Mr. Lee often shares insights about the different species, helping visitors identify the birds they see. His knowledge helps tailor each visit, making it more than just a chance to see birds—it becomes an educational experience. He can tell you about each bird's behaviour, call, and role in the rainforest ecosystem.

The Trusmadi area itself holds great significance for birdwatchers. It is part of Mount Trusmadi, Malaysia's second-highest mountain, known for its pristine forests and diverse habitats. This makes the bird hide a vital spot for spotting some of Sabah's rarest rainforest species, some of which are found only in this part of Borneo. The rainforest here is a sanctuary for birds that are often on the brink of conservation concern, making each sighting especially valuable.

With a reputation that grows among birdwatchers worldwide, the KKLee Trusmadi bird hide continues to attract visitors from many different countries. It's a place where adventure, patience, and a love of nature come together. Every visit promises the chance to see new birds and deepen your appreciation for Sabah's wild beauty.

The hide in Sabah stands out as one of the finest birding sites in the region. It offers a carefully managed environment that attracts birdwatchers and photographers from all over. The place is designed to give visitors the best chance to see and photograph rare and beautiful birds in their natural habitat. Over the years, the hide has become more than just a simple shelter; it is a hub where nature lovers can immerse themselves in Sabah's rich birdlife. Many have visited repeatedly, drawn by

the chance to catch glimpses of elusive species like the Bornean ground cuckoo or the rare Bornean green magpie.

The popularity of this site isn't just a coincidence. Its strategic location and well-maintained facilities make it ideal for birding. Visitors often spend hours quietly observing the skies and trees, waiting for a flash of colour or a sudden movement. This is the place where dedicated birders find joy in every sighting, and photographers capture striking images that show Sabah's diverse avian species. The environment is peaceful yet exciting, encouraging people to connect deeply with nature.

During a visit in June 2024, Birding 365 — a well-respected organisation that shares the joy of birdwatching — explored this hide. Guided by the expert Chandramouli Ganguly, the team spent a full day experiencing the site's many attractions. They praised the hide's thoughtful layout and how it blends seamlessly into the surroundings. The team also highlighted the warm welcome they received from Mr. KK Lee, the owner of the hide. His friendly attitude and passion for birding added to the overall experience, making visitors feel at home.

Many birders say the sense of community is part of what makes this spot so special. Whether it's a first-time visitor or a seasoned birder, everyone feels comfortable and inspired. The location's reputation grows each year as more enthusiasts discover its charm.

Photographers, in particular, appreciate the hide's strategic design that allows for close-up shots without disturbing the birds. The site embodies a balance of natural beauty and careful management, ensuring that the environment remains pristine for future visitors.

In short, this hide isn't just a place to see birds. It's a space where people forge a deeper bond with nature, supported by

capable management and friendly hosts. For anyone eager to explore Sabah's rich birdlife, this spot remains a must-visit destination that promises both adventure and discovery.

We left the Guesthouse at 05:00hr to drive the 30-40 minutes up to a very nice bird hide in the hills. Originally set up to view the mythical Bulwer's Pheasant, the seed, worms and fruit now attract a whole host of wonderful birds.

We arrived at the hidden spot just after dawn, around 5:30 in the morning. The sky was still cloaked in darkness, with only the faintest hint of light just beginning to seep over the horizon. Our team was the only group there at this early hour, making the place feel quiet and almost untouched by others. We carefully carried our gear— tripods, cameras, and binoculars— and positioned each piece in its ideal spot, ensuring everything was ready for the morning's wildlife activity. Before settling in, we had a brief moment to meet Mr. Lee, a fellow birdwatcher and seasoned guide. We exchanged a few words, shared a quick smile, and enjoyed warm sips of coffee to shake off the chill. The comforting warmth of the hot beverage helped calm our nerves as we settled into the silence, waiting for the day to unfold.



As the darkness gradually lifted, we began to notice the subtle sounds of early morning—birds fluttering, leaves rustling, and distant calls that hinted at the busy day ahead. The surrounding forest and grasslands suddenly came alive with activity. Birds, which had been resting all night, started to wake up and move

around, eager to search for food. We hurried to take our seats, eager not to miss a moment of the action. The light was still too dim for clear, crisp shots, so we made a collective decision to wait patiently until the sun's rays grew stronger. We knew that better, softer daylight would bring out the true colours and details of the birds and their surroundings.

While waiting for the right lighting conditions, our attention was drawn to a small group of crested partridges. They appeared both male and female, moving cautiously through the undergrowth, their distinctive crests bouncing with each step. Every few moments, a white-crowned Shama would quietly slide into view, its sleek body contrasting sharply with the grass. We quickly snapped a few record shots just to capture these fleeting moments, even though we knew the images wouldn't be perfect. The graininess and noise that often come from early morning shots, especially in less-than-ideal light, seemed to strip away some of the clarity we hoped for. Still, seeing these birds always lifted our spirits, knowing that patience would pay off later in the day.

Despite our efforts, the images we captured this early morning lacked the sharpness and detail we strive for. The low light made everything appear softer but also more challenging for our cameras. The images were marred by graininess and digital noise, with the grains blotting out some finer details and creating a distracted, fuzzy background.

The overall quality of the shots didn't meet our expectations, but each moment of exposure was a step closer to capturing those perfect frames. We knew that as the sun rose higher, the light would improve significantly, allowing us to get clearer, more vibrant pictures. For now, it was a wait-and-see game, with nature offering glimpses into its quiet, waking world.

The hide area is surprisingly spacious. It comfortably fits about twelve people at once, giving everyone enough room to settle in and enjoy the view. The structure is well-designed with plenty of space for onlookers and photographers alike, making it both comfortable and practical for groups big or small. When sitting in the hide, you get a great sense of being immersed in nature without feeling crowded or cramped.

The location of the birds is also quite ideal. They are not too far away, usually within 3 to 5 meters from the hide, making it easier to observe their behaviour closely. This proximity allows for detailed photos without needing highly specialised gear. You can see the feathers and subtle expressions clearly. This range hits the sweet spot where you don't need an extremely powerful zoom but still get sharp, detailed shots.

A lens in the 400 to 600mm range is generally enough for most bird photography needs here. With this setup, you can get close-up images even while maintaining a safe and respectful distance from the birds. Such focal lengths are commonly used by photographers when focusing on wildlife from a reasonable distance. For those who use bridge cameras, like the Nikon P1000, this is equally simple.

These cameras come with built-in super-zoom lenses capable of reaching similar focal lengths without requiring complex attachments or heavy gear. This makes wildlife photography accessible and hassle-free, especially for amateurs or casual shooters.

Some of my best shots in this area were taken with a smartphone, proving that you don't always need expensive equipment. Modern smartphones now pack impressive camera tech, with multiple lenses and digital zoom capabilities that help capture moments clearly.

Using my phone, I was able to quickly snap a series of images without lugging around heavy gear, and the results still turned out well. This flexibility shows that whether you rely on a high-quality zoom lens or a simple smartphone, you can still achieve great photos here. It's a welcoming setup for all types of wildlife enthusiasts.

All of these factors make this hide spot a fantastic choice for bird lovers. It combines enough space for comfort, a close vantage point for good photography, and gear options for many levels of expertise. From dedicated photographers with long lenses to casual users with smartphones, everyone has the chance to enjoy and capture the beauty of the birds in this environment.

The chairs you'll find in this space aren't fancy or unusual. They are the typical plastic chairs often seen in coffee shops. These chairs are simple but practical, designed for easy use and quick setup. However, for those who want to sit comfortably for longer periods, the chairs are also offered with cushions at the back. These cushions add extra comfort, offering a softer surface to lean against after a long day or just a relaxing break. Whether you prefer the basic plastic feel or some added support, there's an option for everyone.

Each bird pod, which is essentially a cozy little enclosed space, has been thoughtfully fitted with a plug point. This means visitors can easily charge their smartphones, tablets, or camera batteries. Imagine catching up on photos from a recent trip or keeping your device alive during a busy work session. There's no need to worry about running out of battery life with these plug points in reach. They are conveniently placed so you can keep your device charged without hassle or searching for an outlet elsewhere. Whether you're snacking and browsing on your

phone, working on a project, or catching up on social media, your device can stay fully powered. It makes the space more user-friendly and enhances your overall experience.



The setup doesn't stop at just plugs. You can also bring along a portable fan — at least one that has a plug or USB connection. If you need a little extra cooling on a hot day, simply plug in your compact fan and enjoy some relief. It's a thoughtful feature for those who tend to get warm easily or want to stay comfortable while sitting for long stretches. These small touches make the environment not only functional but also tailored to meet a variety of needs.

Overall, the chairs and bird pods are equipped with features aimed at making visitors feel both comfortable and connected. Whether you're settling in with a cushion for extra support or charging your device in a quiet, dedicated spot, the space is designed to keep your needs front and centre. It's about creating a more convenient, welcoming environment where you can relax, work, or recharge at your pace.

Trusmadi is about a two-hour drive from the bustling city of Kota Kinabalu, making it accessible for those willing to start their day early. The journey often begins at dawn when the air is crisp and the roads are quiet. It is advisable to leave before sunrise to get the most out of this trip, especially if birdwatching is your main goal. The early morning is when the forest stirs to life here, with birds becoming active as early as 6:00 AM. During this time, the forest is filled with the gentle calls of various species and the flutter of wings, creating a lively symphony that is both soothing and invigorating.

We came to Trusmadi from the Trusmadi Paddyview Resort, a popular place to stay for visitors wanting to explore the area. The drive from the resort to the birdwatching site took about 30 minutes, winding through lush greenery and quiet rural roads. The scenery is something to behold, with tall trees stretching skyward and the occasional glimpse of wildlife along the way.

Once we arrived, our attention was drawn to a clear sign on the left side of the road. It marked the entrance to the bird hide, which sits just beside the main road. Unlike many birding locations that require hikers to trek deep into the forest, this hide is conveniently placed for easy viewing. It is just a few steps off the road, making it accessible to visitors of all ages and fitness levels. The pathway leading down to the hide is well-maintained, featuring a set of sturdy steps and a fully covered walkway to shield visitors from rain and sun.

The bird hide itself is located about 50 metres from the main road. Its position is ideal for observing a variety of bird species without disturbing their natural habits. The structure is designed for comfort and easy access, allowing visitors to settle in and watch the forest canopy or the undergrowth for hours.

From this vantage point, spotting colourful flycatchers, tiny sunbirds, and the occasional hornbill is a common treat. The hide's design also helps minimise noise, making it easier to detect distant bird calls.

In essence, Trusmadi's birdwatching site offers a simple yet rewarding experience for nature lovers. Its close proximity to the main road means there's no need for long treks or complicated routes. Visitors can easily enjoy the quiet beauty of the forest while waiting for the perfect moment to glimpse the vibrant wildlife that awakens so early. Whether you are a seasoned birder or a casual observer, this location provides a rare chance to connect with nature in its purest form.

Until last year, the bird station was quite simple. It had only one fixed hide where bird watchers could sit and wait quietly for the feathered visitors. That one hide was situated at a convenient spot that offered a good view of the surrounding trees and shrubs, giving observers a decent chance of spotting various birds. However, it became clear that this setup was limiting. Birds tended to stay in specific areas, and with only one hide, it was difficult to see all the different species visiting the site.

This year, Mr Lee decided to add something new. He built a second hide, and rather than placing it nearby, he chose a spot several hundred steps downhill from the original. The new hide was situated in a different part of the area, with a clear line of sight into a lush, open space where several species appeared more regularly. Mr Lee pointed out that this new hide has already started to attract some exciting visitors like Bulwer's pheasants and partridges. These birds seem more comfortable coming into this area, perhaps because it offers better cover or

more natural food sources. It's a positive sign that the new location is working well for observing these birds.

At the same time, the upper area where the original hide is located continues to attract smaller, more delicate species. Pitta birds, known for their striking colours and shy nature, often dart through the dense foliage in the mornings. Flycatchers, with their quick fluttering wings and sharp calls, are also regularly seen flitting from branch to branch higher up in the trees. These smaller birds are often harder to spot, but they bring a different kind of beauty and activity to the station.

During our visit, we decided to settle into the downstairs hide. It was quiet, shaded, and the perfect spot to observe both the larger, ground-loving birds and get a quick look at those elusive smaller species that prefer the upper parts of the trees. The contrast in bird activity between the upper and lower areas makes this place especially interesting. It gives us a fuller picture of the diversity in the local bird population, and we appreciate the effort Mr Lee has made to create multiple viewing points. The new hide has already proven valuable in expanding what we can see and experience here, making each visit more rewarding.

The Trusmadi bird hide, run by KK Lee, offers more than just a place to watch birds. It is designed to keep visitors comfortable during long birding sessions. Inside, visitors will find modern amenities that make their stay enjoyable. The restrooms are clean and well-maintained, providing a sense of ease for those needing a quick refresh or a comfortable place to freshen up after a walk. There is a cosy lounge area where birdwatchers can sit quietly, share stories, or plan their next round of sightings. Adjacent to this is a dining space and a fully equipped kitchen, perfect for those who want to enjoy light meals without leaving the hide. When hunger strikes, visitors can quickly grab a snack

or a hot drink, making it easier to stay out in the field for longer periods.

Mr Lee has gone a step further to ensure connectivity, recognising that often in remote areas network coverage can be patchy or non-existent. That's why he offers free Wi-Fi within the bird hide, allowing birders to upload photos, check recent sightings, or stay connected with friends and family. This small touch can make a big difference, especially for serious birders who rely on instant updates and community sharing. For those who plan to spend the entire day, there is a selection of snacks—such as biscuits—to keep spirits high, and quick meals like cup noodles, which are easy to prepare or consume on the spot. All these provisions are included in the fee paid to access the hide, making it a convenient and all-inclusive experience. Visitors are also welcome to bring their own preferred snacks or meals if they have specific dietary needs or favourites. Mr Lee does not provide a personal chef, but who knows? Maybe one day, a birding chef might be part of the service.

For longer stays, Mr Lee has thoughtfully set aside a small sleeping area inside a tent, offering a comfortable space for birders who want to rest now and then. This is especially handy for those coming from farther away or those who want to spend multiple days exploring the area. After a long morning of birdwatching, the appropriately equipped washroom facilities provide complete convenience. There are two units, one of which doubles as a shower area, allowing visitors to rinse off and refresh before heading back into the wild. The facilities are reputable, clean, and maintained regularly, ensuring good hygiene and comfort for everyone.

Every detail in the bird hide has been thought through to prioritise comfort and convenience for visitors. From the

modern amenities and reliable Wi-Fi to the simple essentials of good restrooms and a quiet lounge, it encourages birdwatchers to linger longer and enjoy their experience without distraction or discomfort. By creating this welcoming environment, KK Lee has built a little haven where bird lovers can relax and truly immerse themselves in the natural beauty around them. This thoughtful setup makes a significant difference, turning a simple visit into a memorable adventure, whether you plan to stay just an hour or spend the whole day in tranquil comfort.

While waiting patiently for the light to improve and illuminate the arena, something completely unexpected suddenly unfolded. Out of nowhere, two bright yellow throated martins darted into the hide, catching everyone off guard. These birds are known for their fierce hunting skills, and their sudden appearance brought a wave of surprise and alarm. The noise and swift movements they made stirred up chaos among the birds nearby and those already in the hide. All the other birds, whether small woodland songbirds or frenzied flocks, scattered in panic. Their shuffling wings and alarmed calls echoed through the area, creating a sudden burst of noise that shattered the calm atmosphere. The arrival of the martins was so sudden that it left little room for reaction, and their aggressive nature only added to the tension.

Throughout this chaos, no other bird dared to show itself in the hide, apart from a few babblers that remained retrained and quiet. The entire scene left us feeling deeply frustrated; what we hoped would be a peaceful morning of birdwatching turned into a stressful chase. We had been waiting for the right moment when light would finally brighten the arena, revealing the richness of the birdlife in the area.

Instead, we faced this unexpected disturbance. The delay was already testing our patience, and now the silence inside the hide was broken only by the distant calls and frantic waves of the fleeing birds.

By around 8:30AM, the almost eerie quiet settled back in. The sudden storm of activity had faded, but no new birds appeared in the hide, leaving us disappointed and annoyed. We looked at each other, exchanging glances that spoke of our growing frustration. It felt as if the elusive, vibrant birdlife we came to see was deliberately hiding from us. The early morning's excitement had evaporated into a quiet stillness, broken only by the faint rustling of leaves and the occasional distant cry. We decided that staying in this same spot longer would only lead to more frustration. Without any signs of new arrivals or interesting sightings, we agreed to move. We made the decision to shift towards the upstairs hide, hoping the higher vantage point would give us a better chance to see the birds that were clearly still around but staying hidden from view.

Shift of place could become rewarding for us. The show started with white crowned Shama and Pennan bulbul. The grand exhibition commenced with Banded Pitta. Malayan Banded Pitta is a striking small bird, known for its vivid colouring and shy behaviour. Its broad red-orange eyestripe glows like molten lava, adding a fiery streak across its face. This makes the bird look almost jewel-like, shining through the dense green of the forest floor. Its cautious movements help it avoid predators, as



it spends much of its time hiding in thick vegetation. The bird's appearance is even more remarkable when seen closely—a flash of bright blue on the underside stands out sharply against its more muted back and wings. The male pitta boasts deep blue

underparts and is decorated with thin tiger-like stripes along the sides of his chest, which seem to ripple as he moves. These fine lines give him a sleek, almost armored look. The female, on the other hand, has a paler belly with delicate dark barring that helps her blend into the shadows of the forest floor.



This bird is primarily a ground-forager, quietly moving around on the soft leaf litter and moss-covered roots of dense lowland forests. Its gentle behaviour means it rarely makes much noise—only soft calls echo through the trees. When it does call, the most common sounds are a quiet, roaring call that can sound like a low rumble. Sometimes, it produces a short, descending series of notes that go “pr-r-r-r-r,” a signal that may serve to communicate with others or claim its territory. These calls tend to carry softly through the forest, a gentle reminder of the bird’s presence rather than a loud announcement.

Its behaviour and colours tell a story of survival in a quiet, lush world. The bird’s secretive tendencies help it stay safe while



foraging, especially in the thick foliage and leaf litter that cover the forest floor. Despite its shy nature, the Malayan Banded Pitta plays an important role in its ecosystem, helping control insect populations and spreading seeds as it searches for food. Scientists and bird watchers treasure these moments when they spot one of these jewel-like creatures, knowing it's a glimpse into a hidden, delicate part of rainforest life. Their distinct calls and unique plumage make them a favourite among those who study or simply admire tropical forest birds, even if they are rarely seen outside their lush, silent habitat.

We could spot several other birds here including rare birds like Red breasted partridge, Checker-throated woodpecker, Bornean black- capped babbler, Sunda Schimitar babbler, Dayak blue flycatchers, Rufos breasted flycatchers and also Bulwers pheasant (female).

We made a couple forays out to the back side of the hide where we got point blank views of the Bornean Whistler and White-throated Fantail. A Buff-rumped Woodpecker was excavating a hole nearby.

At KK Lee Bird Hide in Trusmadi, an exciting sighting took place in the afternoon - a Red Crested Partridge was spotted. This sighting is special because the Red Crested Partridge is a rare bird, seldom seen in the wild. The bird's striking red crest stands out brightly against its brown and speckled feathers. Such moments are treasured by birdwatchers, who visit places like KK



Lee for a chance to witness these elusive creatures. The bird hide, a small shelter set up along a trail, provides the perfect vantage point for observing birds quietly and without disturbance.

This particular bird was seen for a few moments, peering from the underbrush, its head occasionally turning as if curious about its surroundings. It moved swiftly, blending into the dense foliage, making it a challenge for even seasoned bird watchers to spot.



These birds tend to stay low, darting through the undergrowth, which is why a place like KK Lee is so well-suited for seeing them. The sighting highlights how important these bird hides are for wildlife observation; they allow us to watch animals in their natural habitat without disturbing them.

The Red Crested Partridge is known to inhabit the forests of Borneo, where Trusmadi is located. It is part of the larger family of terrestrial birds, often seen scratching the ground for insects or small seeds.

Despite their shy nature, they occasionally venture into open areas, under the cover of thick vegetation. Seeing this bird was a real highlight for bird enthusiasts visiting the area, especially since it can be quite difficult to find in the wild.

Experts note that sightings like this aren't just lucky moments. They are the result of careful observation and patience, qualities that every birdwatcher needs when exploring remote forests. The experience reminds everyone of how special the rainforest habitat is, home to many birds that are rarely seen. It also underscores the importance of maintaining these natural habitats, which support rare species like the Red Crested Partridge. Seeing such a bird underscores the beauty and richness of the Trusmadi rainforest and encourages more efforts to protect these vital ecosystems.



Overall, the sighting at KK Lee Bird Hide reminds us why birdwatching is such a rewarding activity. It's about peace, patience, and a close connection to nature. Moments like these inspire a deeper appreciation for the wildlife that lives in challenging environments. The Red Crested Partridge, with its vibrant crest and shy nature, remains a symbol of how much there is still to discover in these forests. It also shows why places like KK Lee are essential for anyone wanting to see the true beauty of Borneo's wilderness.

We waited at the hide till dusk. But we were not completely satisfied since the star bird, Bulwers Pheasant male didn't arrive in the hide.

Definitely the bird got afraid due to yellow throated martin.

Trusmadi's combination of lush scenery, rich biodiversity, and the thrill of discovering new birds makes it a must-visit for anyone serious about birdwatching. Whether it's your first trip or your hundredth, the chance to spot and photograph Bornean birds in their natural habitat keeps bringing visitors back year after year.

We changed our plan a little. Earlier, we planned to move to Kota Kinabalu national park directly from here. Since we had to take another chance to spot the male Bulwers pheasant, we planned to visit another hide at Trusmadi in the next morning followed by journey to Kota Kinabalu National park. We returned back to the Padi View Guesthouse and another delicious dinner in Tambunan (the food on this trip was truly delightful!).

The next day, we proceed to Trusmadi Bird Station. Our aim was male Bulwar's pheasant, Red breasred partridge, Crimson headed partridge and Red crested partridge.

C P Song's Trusmadi Bird Station is a vital hub for birdwatchers and researchers visiting the Trusmadi area. Located on the slopes of the second-highest mountain in Malaysia, this station offers a prime spot to observe rare and unique bird species. The station is nestled within a rich forest that forms part of the nearby mountain range, providing a natural home for birds that are not found in many other places.

Many visitors come here seeking to see endemic species like the Bornean and Malaysian birds that thrive in this specific habitat.



The station is equipped with basic facilities to support both scientific work and eco-tourism. Visitors often stay in simple accommodations nearby, making it a popular base for exploring the mountain's diverse ecosystems. The area sees a wide variety of bird species, including many that are listed as threatened or endangered. Birdwatchers come equipped with binoculars and cameras, eagerly scanning the trees and sky for movements and calls. Local guides, familiar with the birdlife here, help visitors

spot elusive species such as the Bornean ground cuckoo or the Mountain serpent-eagle.

Research from the station has contributed to vital studies on local bird populations and forest conservation. It plays an important role in protecting habitat for these species and raising awareness about the importance of preserving Trusmadi's natural environment. Many bird surveys are conducted here, providing valuable data that helps wildlife organisations understand species distribution and behaviour in this remote region.



The station's strategic location allows for easy access to different altitudes on Trusmadi, each hosting different bird communities.

This provides a chance for a full bird checklist, from lowland forest species to those found only at higher elevations. Experts often recommend visiting during early mornings or late afternoons when bird activity peaks. The station becomes especially lively during the migration seasons when certain species pass through or briefly settle in the area.

Like KK Lee's hide, this hide is also designed perfectly for photographers. You need not to use your tripod even. There is facility for keeping your camera on appropriate desk, nicely cushioned. All basic facility including snacks, water electrical points for charging mobile phone and camera are properly maintained.

Bulwar's pheasant is one of the many rare and vibrant species that can be found at Trusmadi Bird Station. Located deep within the lush rainforest of Malaysia, Trusmadi Bird Station is a popular spot for birdwatchers and nature lovers. The station acts as a sanctuary for many native bird species, including the elusive bulwar's pheasant. This bird is known for its distinctive colours and shy nature, making it a challenging but rewarding species to observe. Its striking feathers feature a mix of bright blues and greens with subtle hints of gold, helping it blend into the dense foliage of the forest. Seeing this bird in the wild is considered a special experience for those who explore the station.

The bulwar's pheasant is not just another bird; it is a symbol of the rich biodiversity found in Trusmadi. According to some experts, spotting this bird requires patience and an understanding of its behaviour. It tends to stay hidden during the day, only venturing out early in the morning or late in the afternoon when the forest is quieter. Birdwatchers often use gentle calls or mimic the bird's natural sounds to get a glimpse of it. When lucky, visitors might see the bird slowly walking along

the forest floor, carefully searching for food or resting in a low tree branch.

Many visitors come to Trusmadi Bird Station hoping to catch a glimpse of the bulwar's pheasant. They often spend hours in shaded hides or walking along trails that wind through the dense greenery.

We took our places in the hide at 05:30hr early morning. We had an unbelievable wait of near 11 hours. The showstopper, male bulwar's pheasant arrived in the arena at around 16:30 afternoon.

Uncommon, medium-sized pheasant. Male is almost unbelievable- looking; an immense fan of a snow-white tail sticks out of a rotund, coal-black body. All-rufous-brown female is more normal-looking; her tail is shorter and narrower. Both sexes have sky-blue facial skin, but the male's extends into wattles, which he erects during display. Found in hilly areas in foothill and montane forest; sometimes nomadic, seeking out fruiting trees.



Overall, the sight of the bulwars pheasant at Trusmadi Bird Station is a reminder of the fragile beauty of nature. Each sighting offers a glimpse into the complex web of life within the rainforest. The station not only provides an opportunity for adventure but also raises



awareness about conservation issues. The bird's presence underscores the importance of preserving habitats and respecting wildlife. Finding and observing the Bulwars pheasant leaves a lasting impression on anyone who values the natural world. It inspires a deeper appreciation for the diverse creatures that call this lush environment home.

My Borneo trip had one main goal: spotting the striking Crimson-headed partridge. This partridge is special, found only in northern Borneo's mountain forests. The birds are sexually dimorphic; males and females have distinct looks. They are unafraid of people in protected areas. Despite this, getting a good photo is tough. These birds rarely step out into the open.

The wait felt like forever. Three hours passed slowly. I sat in the cold. Annoying wasps buzzed around my head. I batted them away. Finally, my patience paid off! My main goal was within reach. A pair of Crimson-headed partridges wandered into view. They came to check the area for food. We watched them for almost 30 minutes. We had clear views of both birds. The male bird has bright, eye-catching colours. His feathers are a mix of red, brown, and grey. The female is duller overall. She has beautiful red tail feathers that stand out. I was lucky enough to hear the male call nearby. I was shocked by how loud it was! The call was a sharp, piercing sound. It echoed through the trees. It was much louder than I expected from a bird of that size.



This black partridge with its bright red head is one of Borneo's most striking and easily recognizable birds. Its bold colours have earned it the nickname "Bloodhead," a name that hints at its vivid appearance. The bird's body is a deep, solid black, which makes the fiery red of its head stand out even more. This colour combination creates a powerful visual impression, serving as a warning to potential predators or a signal to other birds in its territory.

The Bloodhead partridge calls Bornean forests home, particularly the montane forests that grow on the mountain slopes of the island.

These forests are found at elevations roughly between 1000 and 1700 metres, where the cool, damp conditions support a rich variety of plant and animal life. Within these lush, layered forests, the partridge can often be seen foraging on the leaf litter or quietly slipping between the dense trees and shrubs. Despite

its typical altitude preference, it can occasionally be spotted outside this range, especially in areas where suitable habitat persists or during particular seasons when it might venture to lower or higher elevations.

This bird's voice adds to its charm. It produces a loud, ringing call that sounds almost metallic. The call is distinctive, often described as a rapid, repeating "ring-YING, ring-YING, ring-YING." It echoes through the forest, serving as a natural alarm or a call to attract mates. Birdwatchers and researchers who listen for this unique sound can often detect the partridge's presence even when they haven't caught sight of it. The sound cuts through the dense canopy and thick undergrowth, making it a useful marker for identifying the bird's whereabouts.

Understanding the Bloodhead partridge's habitat and behaviour is important for conservation efforts. Its preferred montane forest environment is increasingly threatened by deforestation, logging, and habitat fragmentation. Despite its striking appearance, the bird remains elusive and not well studied, which makes every sighting and recording of its call valuable to scientists. Its loud call not only marks its territory but serves as a reminder of the rich biodiversity hidden in Borneo's mountain forests.

The Bloodhead's vivid colours, unique call, and habitat preferences all contribute to its reputation as a symbol of the wild, untouched corners of Borneo. Its presence or absence can tell us much about the health of these montane ecosystems. As one of many species that rely on these forests, the partridge's story highlights the importance of preserving these remaining pockets of habitat for future generations.

At the Trusmadi Bird Station, a small but vital part of the rainforest's rich ecosystem, a rare sight draws the attention of

bird watchers and naturalists alike. There, amidst the dense foliage and tangled vines, a red-breasted partridge pauses quietly on a moss-covered branch. Its colourful plumage stands out sharply against the greenery, with fiery red chest feathers blending into a subtle brown body. This bird, often shy and hard to spot, is a treasure for those lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. The Trusmadi Bird Station is known for its diverse species, but the sighting of a red-breasted partridge remains a highlight. It sparks curiosity among visitors, who pause to take photographs and listen to its soft call echoing through the forest. The bird's presence hints at the health of the habitat, as the red-breasted partridge depends on lush, undisturbed rainforest.

Experts see these birds as vital indicators of the forest's condition because they cannot survive in degraded or heavily disturbed areas. Viewing such a vibrant bird in its natural environment deepens appreciation for the fragile balance of life in Trusmadi. This area becomes a window into nature's beauty and resilience, reminding everyone how important it is to protect these forests. Every sighting adds a new layer of understanding about the complex web of species that call Trusmadi home.

The crested partridge is a small, captivating bird that often blends into the quiet shadows of its favourite wet forest habitat. Its soft, subtle movements on the forest floor make it hard to spot, even when it's nearby. It spends much of its time quietly foraging, searching for insects and tiny seeds among fallen leaves and dense undergrowth. Its charming appearance and shy nature add to its secretive lifestyle, making sightings a special occasion for birdwatchers. Often, it remains hidden until it suddenly appears after a period of silence, adding an element of surprise to those lucky enough to observe it.

The male crested partridge sports a glossy black body that gleams in the dim light filtering through the trees. Atop its head sits a distinctive, bristly reddish pompom crest, which it often raises and fans out, especially when alert or excited. This crest, along with its shiny body, acts as a visual signal during displays or territorial interactions. The female, on the other hand, displays more muted colours, primarily moss-green with warm cinnamon-brown wings.

These camouflaged tones help her stay hidden while nesting or caring for chicks, keeping her safe from predators. Both sexes, however, share a bright red ring around their eyes, which makes their faces striking and expressive — a feature that can sometimes hint at their mood or readiness to call.



Listening for the crested partridge reveals one of its most enchanting features: its song. Its call is a series of sharp, trembling whistles that pierce through the forest sounds. These whistles can carry through the thick foliage over a good distance and serve multiple purposes.

They act as signals to other birds, marking territory or calling to flock members. Birdwatchers often recognise the sequence of these trembling whistles as a clue to the bird's presence. They tend to sing these calls at dawn and dusk, times when the forest comes alive with sound. It's an intimate reminder of the bird's secretive yet lively nature.



The crested partridge has a peculiar visiting pattern. Birdwatchers within the hide have observed that the birds do not appear randomly. Instead, they arrive after a certain interval, almost as if they follow a silent schedule. When they do show up, it's usually in groups — males, females, and their chicks all together, sticking close in the safety of the dense foliage. These flocks move silently, stopping occasionally to forage or communicate with gentle calls. The presence of chicks is always evidence of recent nesting, a time when the adults become more vigilant and protective. Watching a flock assemble is like witnessing a small, lively family group, united in their quiet routine.



In many ways, the crested partridge embodies the quiet beauty of the forest. It offers fleeting glimpses of life and fleeting sounds that fill the air with subtle melodies. For nature lovers and bird enthusiasts, spotting this bird provides a thrilling moment, a glimpse into a peaceful but complex world. Its behaviour, appearance, and songs all tell a story of survival and harmony in a quiet, wet rainforest corner.

These birds remind us of the rich, often unnoticed life thriving beneath the canopy and beneath our everyday awareness.

The day before, we visited KK Lee's hide, a well-known spot for birdwatchers in Borneo. As the late afternoon settled in, our eyes caught a glimpse of the elusive Red-breasted partridge. The birds were nearby, but the fading ambient light made capturing a perfect photograph difficult. The low light washed out many details, leaving us with blurry and grainy images and incomplete views. Still, we felt lucky to see this rare Bornean endemic in its natural habitat, even if the quality of the photos wasn't ideal.

Today, at CP Song's hide, as the sun rose brighter, the conditions improved. With better illumination, the Red-breasted partridge came into view more clearly. We could see its vibrant colours and distinct markings more sharply. The bright sunlight made every detail stand out, creating a vivid picture against the lush greenery of the forest.

This brightly marked bird is a true treasure of Borneo's central mountains. The striking contrast of black and white side scales and the warm orange hue on its head and breast makes it easy to identify. Its appearance is quite unique among forest gamebirds. The bold patterns and warm colours make it stand out against the thick foliage where it lives.

Like many other birds in the *Arborophila* genus, the Red-breasted partridge prefers to forage in dense undergrowth. It searches for seeds, insects, and small plants on the forest floor, pushing through thick leaves and tangled brush. These birds are often hard to see visually. They tend to stay hidden by remaining low in the undergrowth, darting into cover at the slightest movement. However, their presence is more often hinted at by their call than by sight.



This species is best described as more vocal than visible. Its loud, repetitive song often echoes through the forest. The calls consist of a series of short, high-pitched whistles, usually performed as duets by pairs or groups. It can be almost impossible to spot these birds comfortably in the dense habitat, but the sounds signal their active presence. Birdwatchers especially rely on hearing these calls to locate them, particularly during early mornings or late afternoons when their vocal activity peaks.

Understanding the behaviour of the Red-breasted partridge helps explain why sightings are so prized. Despite their vibrant appearance and loud calls, they blend seamlessly into the forest environment.

Their preference for thick cover means you have to be both patient and attentive to catch a glimpse. Spotting these birds becomes a rewarding challenge for experienced birders and nature lovers alike, who value the thrill of observing a creature so well adapted to its remote mountain home.

In the end, seeing this bird during our visits provides a special moment, highlighting Borneo's rich birdlife and the importance of preserving these lush forests. Whether through sight or sound, the Red-breasted partridge remains one of the region's unforgettable symbols of wild beauty.

In summary, C P Song Trusmadi Bird Station acts as a key point for enjoying and studying the rich birdlife of the mountain. It serves both as a sanctuary for rare species and a place where visitors can connect closely with nature. Whether for research or simple awe, this station captures the essence of Trusmadi's vibrant ecosystem. It underscores the importance of protecting these forests for future generations of both birds and humans.

Chapter 4

Birding at Kinabalu Park HQ

The journey from Trusmadi to Kinabalu National Park is more than just a drive; it is a voyage through some of Sabah's most stunning landscapes. As the car rolls out of Trusmadi's quiet villages, the road winds through lush forests and rolling hills that seem to stretch endlessly. You can feel the cool mountain air and hear the distant call of birds in the canopy. This stretch of road cuts right through the heart of Sabah's jungle, revealing bursts of green so vibrant they seem almost surreal.

The route to Kinabalu National Park begins as a narrow, winding road that climbs gradually uphill. Drivers often encounter sharp bends and sudden turns, each revealing a new view of the mountains ahead. The mountains seem to grow larger with every mile, their peaks shrouded in mist early in the morning or glowing in the late afternoon sun.

Along the way, small villages decorated with colourful houses and simple shrines remind travellers of the local way of life. The cool climate makes the drive refreshing, in stark contrast to the heat below.

This road has historical significance too. It's part of a route used by explorers and locals for generations. It provides vital access to the park, which is home to Mount Kinabalu, one of Southeast Asia's highest peaks. The journey offers a sense of adventure, a feeling that you are moving deeper into untouched nature. Along the route, you might see local farmers tending to their crops or

children playing by the roadside, adding a touch of everyday life to the scenic backdrop.

Travelers often comment on how this drive feels like a transition from the chaos of city life into a natural sanctuary. The road's flaws — occasional potholes and patches needing repair — do little to dampen the experience. Instead, they remind visitors that the journey is real, raw, and part of the adventure. As you get closer to Kinabalu National Park, the landscape changes once again. The trees become denser, and the air grows cooler and fresher.

The entire drive showcases the rich biodiversity Sabah has to offer. Birds dart overhead, and insects buzz in the thick foliage. The route itself is a corridor to a region teeming with life. It's a vital link that connects the outside world to one of Malaysia's most treasured natural sites. Visitors who take this road often say it's more than just a means to an end; it's a memorable part of the experience. The scenery, the small towns, the sense of history—each element combines to create a journey that is both beautiful and meaningful.

Hotel J Residence offers perhaps the closest lodging to the majestic Mount Kinabalu National Park. It sits a convenient 90 km drive from Kota Kinabalu International Airport. A mere 300 metres stroll will take you from its doorstep to the Kinabalu Park Headquarters entrance.

We secured our booking at J Residence. Its unbeatable nearness to Kinabalu Park made it the obvious choice. Kundasang, the area's burgeoning resort town, lies close by Kinabalu park.

Kundasang steadily blossoms into a sought-after Sabah escape. Its crisp, cool air is a welcome change. Stunning vistas unfold at every turn. Mount Kinabalu dominates the horizon. These draws prove magnetic for locals and tourists alike. Imagine waking to

the sight of that iconic peak. Cabins and chalets dot the hillsides. Lodges and homestays offer cosy retreats. Hotels and resorts provide luxury.

Weekends often see them filled to capacity. Booking ahead is vital to secure your place in this mountain paradise.

For tourists seeking simple, nature-bound stays near Kinabalu Park HQ, J Residence beckons. Developed in 2010, it offers an escape from city life. Trees and plants partly hide the lodge from the road. This creates a sense of peace. From J Residence, you see the Bundu Tuhan village and its farms. Behind the lodge stand tall, old pine trees. The air is cooler here. J Residence offers relief from Sabah's tropical heat. The lodge has basic rooms. These are perfect for trekkers and nature lovers. Expect quiet nights and fresh mountain air. Wake up to the sounds of birds. Explore Kinabalu Park with ease. J Residence is a great base for adventures.

Upon arrival, the air in Kinabalu Park feels different. The climate shifts cooler with very little dampness. The air is crisp. When the sun shines, the daytime temperature sits at a comfy 24 degrees. The park has diverse plant life. Many kinds of birds live there. The Rafflesia flower, one of the world's largest, sometimes blooms here. This event attracts even more nature fans. Trails wind through the park, for all levels. Some trails are short and easy. Other trails are tough climbs. Each path provides stunning views. The higher we step, the better the views.

Kinabalu Park, a jewel of Sabah, earned its status as a World Heritage Site. This vast, protected area spans 754 square kilometres. It became a gazetted national park in 1964. The Royal Society Kinabalu Scientific Expedition, between 1962 and 1964, helped create it.

Professor Corner led this vital expedition. Kinabalu Park is Sabah's first National Park. It showcases Borneo's natural wonders.

The park teems with diverse rainforest environments. Tropical lowland forests thrive at lower altitudes. Hill forests climb the slopes. Montane forests cloak the higher reaches. These forests shelter a wealth of flora and fauna. Many species exist nowhere else on Earth except this place. These unique creatures make Kinabalu Park a biodiversity hotspot. The park's 75,370 hectares include varied habitats.

Mount Kinabalu dominates the landscape. Its peak soars to 4095.2 metres. It is the tallest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea. The mountain shapes the park's climate and ecosystems. Its presence is felt throughout the region. Kinabalu Park is a natural treasure. It is a vital sanctuary for Borneo's wildlife.

Kinabalu Park stands tall. It is a plant diversity hotspot in Southeast Asia. Over 4,500 plant and animal species thrive within its borders. This vibrant mix includes orchids, rhododendrons and pitcher plants. These plants splash colour across the scenery. Rafflesia, one of the world's largest flowers, also calls this park home.

The park's four different climate zones create a rare setting. They range from humid lowlands to frosty mountain peaks. This change makes a huge collection of biodiversity. At lower elevations, the air is hot and wet, allowing rainforest trees to grow very big. Higher up, near the summit of Mount Kinabalu, things get cooler. Here, small shrubs and hardy plants cling to the rocks. This amazing park protects a vast store of life on Earth.

Kinabalu Park bursts with life. It safeguards over 326 bird species. The majestic Mountain Serpent-Eagle soars overhead. It hunts amongst the rainforest canopy. The elusive Whitehead's Broadbill hides in the dense forest undergrowth. Its vibrant colours remain unseen by most visitors. Around 100 mammal species also call Kinabalu Park home.

Orangutans swing effortlessly through the trees. Their reddish fur blends with the leaves. Slow, shy clouded leopards stalk silently through the shadows. They are masters of camouflage. Over 110 land snail species creep through the damp undergrowth. Each has a unique shell. Some 600 butterfly species flutter in the sunlight. Rajah Brooke's birdwing dances on the breeze. Its emerald wings catch the eye. Dominating the landscape is Mount Kinabalu. It is the park's main attraction. Its granite peaks reach for the sky. They offer breathtaking views.

Kinabalu Park lures birdwatchers far and wide; its avian diversity is world-renowned. Inside the park's boundaries, 326 bird species have been recorded, a truly impressive figure. The vast majority, 262 species, are year-round residents, calling the park home. Of even greater importance is the presence of 23 Bornean endemic species. These feathered jewels exist nowhere else on Earth. Kinabalu Park stands as East Malaysia's most vital Important Bird Area (IBA). The park's significance is amplified for montane birds. These birds have adapted to the unique high-altitude environment. The striking Mountain Serpent-eagle is one such endemic. Watch it soar effortlessly on the thermal winds above. The Mountain Serpent-eagle is a prized sight for any birding enthusiast.

The park teems with wildlife. Watch out for deer, bearded pigs, and agile gibbons. Keep an eye out for the elusive honey bears and playful orangutans. Squirrels dart among the trees. The

park draws birdwatchers from afar. It boasts a huge range of bird species. The Kadazan-Dusun and Bajau people call this park home. The Park Headquarters is how most folk access the site. It sits along the Kota Kinabalu-east coast road. It's perched high at 1520 metres. The cooler climate is a magnet for travellers. The mountain garden awaits exploration. It's open daily, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Guests can wander at their leisure. Each visit is a chance to connect with nature.

The first two kilometres of the park, starting from the gate, are a photographer's dream. Whitehead's Trogon and the elusive Broadbill are often seen here. These birds can be spotted sitting on branches close to the road. The Broadbill builds its nest in plain sight. This offers photographers exceptional opportunities. Timpohon Gate holds great importance. It allows access to photograph high-altitude species. These are rarely seen near the park's headquarters. Lighting can be poor, especially in the early morning. This presents a challenge to photographers. A tripod or monopod becomes essential. Fast lenses are needed to capture images in these low light conditions. Kinabalu Park does not offer bird hides. There are also no feeding stations. This means photographers must rely on their skills and patience. They must find the birds in their natural habitat.

Kinabalu Park Headquarters is ideal for a quick birdwatching trip. Many local birders often visit for a day. Yet, to soak in the park's true magnificence, a longer visit is suggested. We came for two full days of birding at Kinabalu Park Headquarters. Our extended stay will let us delve deeper into its riches. This gave us a better chance to spot some rare birds. Imagine the Chestnut-crested Yuhina darting through the trees! We planed to explore the jungle paths slowly. We listened for the Mountain Wren-Babbler's call. The longer we spent, the more we discovered. It was bound to be worth the time. Kinabalu Park boasts over 300

bird species. More time increased our chances of spotting many of them.

Most birders in Kinabalu Park stop at Timpohon Gate. Some, however, feel drawn to scale the majestic peak. A hike to the summit offers glimpses of bird species absent near the park headquarters.

These birds include the elusive Island thrush, the secretive Friendly bush warbler, and the striking Mountain black-eye. Birders often miss these gems in the lower areas. The summit trail, though challenging, rewards the persistent with unique avian encounters.



The Mountain black-eye frequents Gunung Alab substation. Later, we visited that hotspot to seek out this special bird. Keep in mind that the Kinabalu Park Headquarters operates from 6:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Entrance after sunset is not permitted unless you're staying inside the park. Joining a tour group or hiring a guide also grants after-hours access. Plan your visit wisely to avoid disappointment and maximise birding



The park headquarters extends a warm welcome with practical facilities. Parking is easily found right at the entrance, next to the Kinabalu Hall. Clean and well-maintained public restrooms are conveniently placed. Find them near Kinabalu Hall and also at the Timpohon Gate. For Muslim visitors, dedicated prayer rooms are thoughtfully provided near the reception area.

One of the first sights to capture your attention is the Mount Kinabalu viewpoint. It is located very close to the main entrance. From this spot, the views of the majestic mountain are simply breathtaking. On clear days, the summit reveals itself in all its glory. It is a perfect photo opportunity.



Venture along the Silau-Silau route to discover the botanical garden. This living collection showcases the amazing variety of plants native to the

area. Wandering through, you will see orchids, rhododendrons and pitcher plants. A separate entry fee applies to the garden. This helps with its upkeep and conservation efforts.

When hunger strikes, several dining options are available. The Liwagu Restaurant is located within the main visitor centre. Here, you can enjoy a proper meal with lovely views. For a lighter bite, a small cafe and gift shop sits near the Kinabalu Hall. It provides snacks, drinks and souvenirs.

Restoran Tahubang is a well-known restaurant. It sits just outside the main entrance to Kinabalu Park. The restaurant opens early, from 7:00 a.m., and closes at 8:00 p.m. Many visitors find themselves waiting outside this popular eatery. They are waiting for the bus back to Kota Kinabalu.



The Kinabalu Conservation Centre lies near the park's entry area.

This small gallery shows off the geology and wildlife of Kinabalu Park. Exhibits include rocks, plant life, and details on the area's

diverse species. Note that there is a separate admission fee to enter the gallery. It is worth a visit before trekking into the park's wonders.

Kinabalu National Park is a sprawling sanctuary, a haven shielding Mount Kinabalu and its vibrant surroundings. The park boasts multiple entry points. However, for those seeking feathered wonders, Kinabalu Park Headquarters, leading up to Timpohon Gate, Poring Hot Springs, and the remote Sayap Substation are key. These areas offer diverse habitats, perfect for spotting unique Bornean birds. Our adventure began at Kinabalu Park Headquarters. From there, we eagerly ascended towards the famed Timpohon Gate. The air grew cooler, the vegetation lush, and the anticipation of encountering rare bird species heightened with every step.

Kinabalu Park stands as one of Malaysia's oldest national parks. The park earned recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site back in 2000. This honour acknowledged its unique biodiversity and ecological importance. Kinabalu Park forms a key part of the greater Kinabalu Geopark. The Geopark gained UNESCO Global Geopark status in May 2023. This newer designation highlights the region's outstanding geological heritage. Dominating the landscape is the majestic Mount Kinabalu. The mountain anchors the park and the wider Geopark. Kinabalu Park sits at the northern end of the Crocker Range. The Range provides a stunning backdrop to the area.

Kinabalu Park Headquarters acts as the main gateway to this natural wonderland. The Headquarters sits at a cool altitude of roughly 1500 meters. This elevation gifts the area with a refreshingly cold climate which is an attraction in itself. A large number of visitors are keen birdwatchers hoping to spot rare species. Others flock to Kinabalu Park to soak up its stunning

beauty. The park's diverse wildlife is a major draw, with many unique plants and animals. The Park offers a tranquil escape.

Birds are usually seen alone, in pairs, or small groups. Yet, we often saw mixed-species flocks. These are known as "bird waves". A huge bird wave can be exciting. We would try to spot as many types as possible. Birds zoom all around us. The Hair-crested Drongo is a frequent participant. The Bornean Treepie, Bornean Green Magpie, and Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush join in. Even the Sunda Laughingthrush often joins the bird waves. We watched these waves carefully. Some might hide rare birds like the bare-headed laughingthrush. Spotting one would be a real treat. The forest would suddenly burst into life. It's a chaotic, feathered tornado. These bird waves teach us about forest life. Each bird plays its part.

The best times to spot birds at Kinabalu Park Headquarters are early morning and mid-morning, also the afternoon can be quite fruitful. I've found 1PM to 3PM. the least lively, but your experiences might vary. We used this quieter period for lunch and a bit of a rest. Sun arrives early in Kinabalu Park, usually around 6:00AM, giving the birds a head start. As you plan your birdwatching day, remember there aren't any bird feeding stations around the Kinabalu Park Headquarters area. Many keen birders arrive just after dawn when the forest is waking up. The air is cooler, and the birds are most active as they search for their morning meal. Others prefer the late afternoon when the light softens and the birds prepare to roost for the night. Remember that the specific bird activity may depend on the season. Certain species might be more common at different times of the year.

Birdwatching along the Power Station Road offers an easy ramble. The route presents few steep climbs or drops as long as

one sticks to the tarmac. A short steeper section exists roughly halfway to Timpohon Gate, but it remains easily manageable. Venturing along the park roads is often enough for most birders to spot many Kinabalu Park Headquarters (KPHQ) species. The 1.5-kilometre stretch of main road from Liwagu Restaurant up toward Timpohon Gate is a particularly promising location. Keen eyes might spot the vibrant Whitehead's Trogon or the elusive Whitehead's Broadbill in this area. At the end of this 1.5-kilometre walk lies a gazebo called Silau-Silau. Here, trails like Silau-Silau and Kiau branch out, providing further opportunities for exploration. The Silau-Silau trail can be accessed at this point.



We also had to keep a keen eye on road traffic. Birding alongside the roads held unexpected dangers. The main road experiences a surprising amount of traffic activity. This was no quiet country lane, mind you. Instead, tourist trucks constantly whizzed past. Shuttle vans, packed with eager folk, were also commonplace. These vehicles transport ferry climbers from the park entrance. Their destination is usually the Timpohon gate, the start of their ascent. The constant stream of vehicles demanded our full attention. A misplaced step could have serious consequences. So,

we balanced our love of birdwatching. We also had to think about our own safety. The road, while useful, posed a significant hazard.

For those keen on a bit more of a jungle escapade, the area boasts a network of trails. These routes offer immersive experiences. You will find they are marked with signs. The trails are also reasonably well- maintained, ensuring a safer passage. It's wise to avoid going solo; venturing with a companion is a smart move. The most straightforward and well-trodden path is the Silau-Silau trail. This popular route stretches about 3km. It follows a course parallel to the power station road. Along the way, the Silau-Silau creek criss-crosses the trail many times. This adds a touch of charm to the hike. The Silau-Silau trail is a birdwatcher's dream. It is one of the prime spots for birding at Kinabalu Park Headquarters (KPHQ). For an easier trek, walk along the main road for about 1.5 kilometres. You will find the Silau-Silau gazebo and trail entry point. From there, loop back to headquarters via the trail. This way you will be going downhill, which is a lot less tiring than heading up. The descent offers a gentle conclusion to your jungle exploration.



Some other trails at KPHQ:

Liwagu trail (the longest, around 5.6km). Kiau view trail (has some steep sections). Pandanus trail.

Bukit Ular trail (near Timpohon gate. One of the best trails for the Everett's Thrush).

While none of the walking routes are truly arduous, some boast steep climbs and descents. The Layang-Layang trail is a fine example. It's notorious for its relentless uphill sections. Therefore, ensure you're in sound physical shape before tackling the tougher treks. A brisk daily walk in the weeks leading up is advisable. Grab a trail map from the park office near the entrance before you set off. It highlights key landmarks and emergency points. Or, try a smartphone navigation app such as Komoot. It uses GPS to track your location, even without a phone signal.

Mountain weather shifts swiftly. Mist and rain clouds can materialise quickly. This can happen even on seemingly bright, clear days. Always pack waterproofs and layers. Temperatures at Kinabalu Park HQ (KPHQ) usually range from 15 to 24 degrees Celsius. Be prepared for these temperature swings. Kinabalu Park is famous for its diverse birdlife. This includes many native species. Keep an eye out for the Kinabalu friendly warbler. It is found nowhere else on Earth. The birds species we looked for are:

Whitehead's Trogon, Whitehead's Broadbill, Whitehead's Spiderhunter (These three are collectively called Whitehead's Trio). Everett's Thrush,

Fruithunter, Red-breasted partridge,

Crimson-headed partridge, Bornean treepie, Bornean green-magpie, Pale-faced bulbul, Bornean-bulbul, Penan bulbul, Mountain serpent Eagle, Besra

Little pied flycatcher, Pygmy flycatcher, Snow-browed flycatcher, Indigo flycatcher, Jungle flycatcher,

Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush,

Sunda Laughingthrush, Bare-headed Laughingthrush, Collared fantail, Temmink babbler, Yellow-breasted warbler, Bornean whistler etc.

Many birds grace Mount Kinabalu, a good number are distinctly unique. The Whitehead's trio holds a special place for birdwatchers. This is mostly because of their beauty, endemism to Borneo, and rarity. The Whitehead's trio is made up of the Whitehead's Trogon, Whitehead's Broadbill and Whitehead's Spiderhunter. These birds are named to honour John Whitehead. He was a British explorer who first found samples of Borneo's native species. Whitehead also made the first recorded climb to Kinabalu's highest point.

Whitehead's Trogon is often called Malaysia's most beautiful trogon. It is the star bird to see in Kinabalu Park. These trogons often sit still for long spells. This gives birders great views and photo chances. The Whitehead's trogon is the easiest of the trio to spot. Its crimson belly and blue head make it stand out. The Whitehead's Broadbill, with its muted green and blue feathers, is harder to locate. Its behaviour can be shy.

The Whitehead's Spiderhunter, a small bird with a long curved bill, is also a tricky spot. It darts fast through the forest canopy. Spotting any of the Whitehead's trio is a treat. It highlights the special birdlife of Mount Kinabalu. The Whitehead's broadbill is only found in north- central Borneo's highland areas. It lives at Kinabalu Park Headquarters. Birdwatchers can spot it there very often. This is especially true when it is breeding season. The Whitehead's spiderhunter from the Whitehead trio is the hardest to spot. It is known for being shy. This bird spends its

time high up in the trees, searching for food. Even when the bird is nearby, getting a good look is still a challenge. Its life in the canopy makes observation difficult, testing the skills of even experienced birders. Patience is key when trying to glimpse this elusive member of Borneo's birdlife.

As soon as we stepped into the lush confines of the park, our eyes caught sight of two striking birds. First, we noticed the bright maroon flash of the Maroon woodpecker, its bold colours standing out against the green backdrop. Close by, the vibrant green feathers of the Bornean Green magpie shimmered in the sunlight, their sleek bodies darting through the trees. We eagerly pulled out our cameras to capture these beautiful creatures, snapping quick photos before moving on. The thrill of spotting such rare birds made the early part of our walk truly exciting. We continued our search, eyes sharp and focused, hoping to find the elusive trio that our guide had told us about.

Jimmy, our knowledgeable guide, leaned in slightly and shared some helpful tips. He told us that outside the park gate, near a cluster of flowering plants, a rare bird called Whitehead's Spiderhunter was often seen. His eyes twinkled with excitement as he explained that this species is considered the hardest among the three to find. Unlike the vibrant woodpecker and magpie, the Spiderhunter is a shy bird that prefers to stay hidden among dense foliage. Jimmy suggested that we pay close attention to the blooming plants, as they are regular haunts for this species. It was clear we were on a long shot, but his confidence made us eager to try.

As we approached the flowering plants, we kept our eyes peeled for any signs of movement or unusual activity. We waited in silence, our hearts pounding with anticipation. Just after a few minutes, our patience was rewarded. We suddenly spotted a

small, slender bird with a delicate, narrow bill, slowly emerging from behind a bloom. It was the Whitehead's Spiderhunter! Its rich, metallic green feathers sparkled as it deftly moved between the flowers. Its tiny, precise movements seemed almost too delicate to believe, but there it was, collecting nectar from the blossoms.



We felt pure joy at this unexpected sighting. We managed to click both still photos and record a video of the bird feeding. Watching it balance on the flower, nose deep in the nectar, was a hypnotic sight. The bird's feeding style was fascinating; it used its slender bill with agility, darting quickly from flower to flower. Its behaviour was perfectly adapted for this task, and observing this up close felt like a rare gift. The entire experience was awe-inspiring. We couldn't take our eyes off it, totally captivated by its grace. The natural beauty of the scene, combined with the rarity of the moment, left us feeling deeply connected to the wild world around us.

Seeing this tiny bird feed on nectar, surrounded by vibrant blooms, heightened our appreciation for how life succeeds in such small, delicate ways. It was a lesson in patience and perseverance, as well as a reminder of nature's endless surprises. That morning, the park gifted us a fleeting glimpse of a unique creature, something that many bird watchers never get to see. The experience stayed with us long after, a vivid memory of peaceful, precise beauty in the wild.

On day 2, we set out early to find the rare Bornean stub tail, a bird known for its elusive nature. It is considered very hard to spot because it rarely stays in one place for long. The bird is so uncommon that many birdwatchers go years without ever seeing one. Its small size and quick movements make it a true challenge. We knew we needed patience and sharp eyes to catch a glimpse of this bird. Our local guide, Jimmy, who has spent many years exploring these forests, quietly leaned in and whispered, "Keep your camera ready." His tone made it clear how important this moment could be. We stayed still, watching the bushes with eager eyes. Suddenly, within just a few seconds, the bird darted out from the thick greenery. It was stunning—small, restless, a streak of color darting through the trees. Its body was

sleek, and it had a vibrant look that made it stand out despite its quick movements. The moment was so brief that the bird only stayed on sight for a few seconds before disappearing again into the foliage. Our cameras instantly clicked, capturing the fleeting sight. The rush of excitement was immense because many birdwatchers never get such a close look at this rare bird. When the image was secured, we knew our mission was a success. Seeing the Bornean stub tail in its natural habitat, even for a moment, was a milestone for us. It reminded us how rare and precious this bird really is and how valuable our patience and careful watchfulness can be in helping us witness such natural wonders.



We stepped into the highland section of Kinabalu National Park Headquarters. It felt like entering a woodland wonderland. This special place shelters some truly unique species. The land here is too steep to farm. The area earned recognition as both a national park and a World Heritage Site. This is thanks to its incredible biodiversity. The park bursts with life. A visit here is simply breathtaking. Your birdwatching adventure starts high up, around 6000 feet. The air is thin. If the altitude doesn't leave you gasping, the birds certainly will. Imagine seeing a crimson-headed partridge or a Whitehead's broadbill. These rare birds flit among the trees. Their vibrant colours pop against the green backdrop. The park offers a sanctuary. It is a safe haven for plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth.

Avian enthusiasts flock to this region, hoping for a glimpse of the 'Whiteheads'. Perhaps the most elusive of three Whitehead's is the Whitehead's Spiderhunter. Spotting this tricky species is a real challenge. It sports heavy streaks and an impressive decurved bill. This special bill helps it probe deep into flowers. It seeks nectar and any hidden insects inside. But, we were already pleased with this beautiful winged nectar feeder.

Out of nowhere, a clear whistling call echoed. It was the sound of a rare trogon, one we had hoped to find. Our target bird was nearby, close enough to touch, maybe. Yet, its exact location remained a frustrating puzzle. We scanned the jumbled mess of tree trunks all around. Each of us strained to spot any movement. We crouched low, we twisted, peering into the deep shadows of the undergrowth.

Anything could give away its position. Then, a sudden whirl of wings broke the silence. A burst of deep crimson erupted into my view. The flash marked the exact moment a Whitehead's Trogon landed. It was right there. Adrenaline surged through my veins

like a shot. My heart hammered against my ribs. I found myself unable to speak a single word. This is the unique power of seeing a new, spectacular bird for the very first time. It's a feeling unlike any other. It transcends the simple act of observation. No matter the many species you've ticked off before, each new encounter is special. It's an experience completely different from all the rest. A sharp hiss escaped my lips. It was a subtle signal to the others. I didn't want to spook the bird. They hurried over, eyes wide with anticipation. A magnificent male Whitehead's Trogon perched just in front of us.



It was at head height, on a slender branch. The bird glowed with vibrant colours. Bright red blended into rich ginger. Dense black contrasted with pale grey. It was a sight to behold. The trogon remained still, an avian statue. Only his head moved. He swivelled it slowly from side to side. It was an owl-like motion. He observed his domain. He took in every sound and movement.

He sought out danger, ready to flee. Then, with no warning, he was gone. He plummeted off his branch in a flash. He vanished into the dense foliage. A crimson comet trail remained in my memory. It was time to breathe again. My first Whitehead's Trogon had left a deep impression. I felt incredibly lucky. These birds are special, hard to see. I already dreamed of seeing the Whitehead's trio. I also pictured in my mind the other trogon species that live only on this amazing island.

For the keen birdwatchers, the alluring Timpohon Gate beckons. It sits 4.5 km from Kinabalu Park's main entrance. The elevation here is around 1800 metres. Walking uphill takes time, so plan for the return accordingly. A steep road section waits about halfway. This climb can be tiring! Timpohon Gate marks the final zone for birding fans.

Beyond the gate's fence lies strictly climber territory. Only those attempting Mount Kinabalu's ascent are permitted past this point. Park staff, of course, are the exception. No more winged sightings await those who wander further afield.

We spent two full days trying to find and see Whitehead's Broadbill, but our efforts all ended in disappointment. Despite our careful searches and patient waiting, the elusive bird refused to appear. On the second morning, we were fortunate enough to catch a fleeting glimpse of it. It swooped into view for just a second, giving us a quick splash of its vibrant colours and elegant posture, but we weren't quick enough to capture any photos. By the time we grabbed our cameras and pressed the shutters, it was gone, flying away into the thick canopy. Our guide, Jimmy, explained that Whitehead's Broadbill is one of the most elusive birds in the region. He said it's notoriously shy and highly selective about when it comes out. He mentioned it

prefers low light conditions, typically staying hidden deep in shaded forests, making it even harder to spot and photograph.

Later that afternoon, around 4:30 pm, we found ourselves sitting on makeshift folding stools along the road, waiting patiently for another bird — the Everates Thrush. Like the Broadbill, the thrush too favours shade and low light. The mood was peaceful, almost meditative, as we stared into the fading daylight. Suddenly, out of nowhere, our cab driver, Andy, whispered sharply, “Broadbill!” We froze in surprise and turned our heads quickly. Our hearts raced with excitement. We knew we had to be extremely gentle and move slowly or risk scaring the bird away. It could appear or disappear in a flash, especially in low light. We kept silent and carefully played recordings of Whitehead’s Broadbill calls on a small recorder. We hoped the sound would attract it closer. For several minutes, we kept the calls going, our eyes darting back and forth, scanning the trees and shadows. Then, suddenly, like a jewel emerging from the darkness, the emerald beauty appeared just in front of us.



It was breathtaking. The bird looked even more splendid than we imagined, with a vibrant emerald green covering its body and a sleek, distinctive shape. Its bright sheen shimmered under the dim light, making it look almost otherworldly. We felt stunned into silence as we watched this rare sight. With trembling hands, we rapidly pressed the camera shutters, capturing as many shots as possible in quick succession. It was a frenzy of shutter clicks, a last effort to preserve the moment. We knew the chance was fleeting. The bird stood there for just a few seconds, then suddenly lifted its wings and was gone, flying away into the darkening forest. The entire experience was so intense and surreal that words couldn't quite do it justice. It left us all feeling a deep sense of awe, mixed with a small pang of longing that we might not see such a miracle again. The memory of those few seconds, the vivid colours, and the quiet grace of the bird stayed with us long after. It was a rare, magical moment that became the highlight of our trip, a perfect reminder of how challenging and beautiful birdwatching can be — especially when the subjects are as mystery-shrouded as Whitehead's Broadbill.

Chapter 5

Bornean Peacock pheasant expedition

Our Kinabalu Park HQ birding stint had ended after two glorious days. We were ready for fresh avian adventures in Telupid. Darkness still clung to the sky when we rose at J Residence in Kinabalu Park. I poured hot coffee into my flask. Bags were hastily checked as dawn's first light crept in. Telupid beckoned with a special prize. The Bornean peacock pheasant awaited, a bird whispered about in hushed tones.

This elusive creature was the star of our next expedition. Its beauty and rarity made our hearts pound with anticipation. We hoped to catch a glimpse of its shimmering plumage. The drive itself promised sights unseen. We were eager to see what Telupid had to offer.

The Bornean peacock pheasant is very elusive. It's been tough for bird watchers to spot this ground-dwelling bird. But, recently, there have been regular sightings near Telupid in Sabah. This area now offers a glimmer of hope. The key to these sightings is a pre-paid bird hide. This hide is located not far from Telupid.

Khairul Ikhwan had the vision to build the hide. He established it a few years ago. His goal was to give visitors a chance to glimpse this endangered bird. Imagine the thrill of seeing such a rare creature!

The hide's operation then transferred to Bestaria eco tourism. Bestaria is a co-operative. Local residents of Kampung Bestaria

created it. Kampung Bestaria's ecotourism is a model of responsible travel that combines nature-based activities with community engagement and sustainability, aiming to benefit both visitors and the local environment.

The bird hide is now open to the public. It took years to get the birds comfortable around people. This involved patient training and habituation. Bestaria eco tourism manages two other hides close by. One allows viewing of the straw-headed bulbul. The other targets the blue-banded Pitta. These hides boost local ecotourism, offering more chances to see Borneo's endemic birds.

The Bornean Peacock-Pheasant is shrouded in mystery. It is almost a mythological bird. Ornithologists and birders have only seen it a few times. These rare glimpses mostly happened in remote parts of Kalimantan, Indonesia. Several years ago, something amazing occurred. Locals from Kampung Bestaria spotted these pheasants.

Kampung Bestaria is a small village close to Telupid. The birds were in the nearby forested hills. Khairul Ikhwan, a villager, built a hide in the forest. Incredibly, the shy pheasants started getting used to it. This was a game changer for the village. Bestaria Eco-Tourism now manages the hide. The village cooperative saw enormous tourism opportunity. Birders and photographers reach Kampung Bestaria from everywhere. They all hope to catch a glimpse of this beautiful pheasant. The species' size adds to its allure. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience for many. The hide offers a unique chance to observe this elusive bird; otherwise next to impossible to spot this species in normal forest birding trails.

The Telupid hide is a magnet for many other bird species. Birdwatchers can spot the Bornean crested fireback and the shy short-tailed babbler. The ferruginous babbler and grey-hooded

babbler also visit. The Bornean black-capped babbler, a local gem, can be seen. The grey-chested jungle flycatcher darts among the trees. The white-crowned shama, with its beautiful song, often makes an appearance. Right now, the hide offers a very good chance to see the Bornean Peacock Pheasant. These birds, while drawn to the food, remain wild. Like with any wildlife encounter, there's always a chance that they might not show. The forest is untamed. The birds are free to roam.

The first hint of dawn painted the sky as we pulled into Telupid. The small town was just starting to stir. We found Elfean waiting for us at a simple, open-air restaurant. It was the only place open that early.

We sat down, ready for a quick bite. Soon, a steaming plate of fried noodles arrived. A perfectly cooked egg sat on top. It was the perfect fuel for the journey ahead. Our destination was Kampung Bestaria, a village nestled deeper in the heart of Sabah. After we had finished, we paid the bill and readied ourselves. Kampung Bestaria was our next stop, and we were keen to get there.

Nestled near Sabah's heart, Telupid is a small town. It acts as a gateway to Borneo's wild interior. Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan provide access. Kota Kinabalu is 4.5 hours away, while Sandakan is a shorter 2.5-hour drive. Both cities have airports with frequent flights. This makes reaching Telupid fairly straightforward. Our journey started from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah's bustling capital. We travelled across winding roads, through lush landscapes. An early arrival is key to spotting the elusive Bornean peacock-pheasant. These birds are shy, and dawn offers the best viewing chance. In Telupid, we were greeted by a friendly face from Bestaria Eco-tourism. They are a local organisation dedicated to conservation. We enjoyed a quick

breakfast of local fare, fueling up for the day. A sturdy 4x4 car then carried us towards Kampung Bestaria. The rough terrain demanded a reliable vehicle. Kampung Bestaria is a village that serves as a base for exploring the nearby jungle.



We loved the wind rushing through our hair. The coming climb would test our fitness. Soon, we'd be sweating buckets on a harsh, uphill trek. Leaving the sturdy truck, the hide seemed far away. A 30 to 40- minute walk awaited, all of it uphill. The path became a steep challenge in places. Rain could turn the ground into a muddy mess.

Before the dirt track, we passed an oil palm farm. Then, a small river marked the start of our walk.

That forty-minute hike tested our resolve. At one point, the creek forced us to remove our boots. Cool water rushed over our feet as we crossed. At other times, the water shrinks back, allowing dry crossings. Then, boots stay firmly on, saving our soles from sharp stones.

The trail narrowed. Before the forest, looming stalks of bamboo surrounded us. These green giants formed a natural barrier. Each bamboo stand had a small opening. Someone had hacked through the dense growth, creating a rough entrance. Machetes were used. The footpaths were just big enough for a person to squeeze through. It was clear: nature was powerful. Humans had to carve their way forward. The bamboo towered above. It felt like stepping into a secret, green world.



We finally arrived at the higher-quality part of the woodland. The path continued its gradual ascent. Soon, we spotted the bird hide in the distance. It promised respite and observation. The walk itself wasn't overly taxing for us. However, its gentle incline and uneven terrain could prove tricky. Those less fit or with mobility issues might find it a struggle.

The hide offers two distinct seating areas. The original section is the larger of the two. It is capable of squeezing in around twenty

keen birdwatchers. This part stands slightly uphill, granting a good view. It overlooks the dedicated bird-feeding area below. A newer extension sits on a small rise. This is right next to the main structure. The extension is more intimate. It comfortably accommodates six or seven people. Its elevated position provides truly excellent perspectives. From here, the views stretch out across the landscape. You can watch the birds with clarity and ease.

The bird hide provides complete shelter. It's protection from sun and rain. Even so, the structure is basic. Trusmadi's hides are far more advanced. Note these points for your comfort. There's no toilet here. Plan accordingly for calls of nature. Food and drink aren't supplied.

Bring enough for your viewing session. The floor is bare earth, often dusty. You might find it gritty underfoot. The ground can be uneven. This makes tripod setup tricky. Careful positioning is key for steady shots. Also, insects thrive in this environment. Insect repellent is vital. Mosquitoes and other bugs are common. Protect yourself from their bites.



We settled down in the hide. We waited patiently for the pheasants to appear. Soon, the first few birds began to wander into view.

Several noisy Ferruginous Babblers hopped about, too. They went straight for the pile of tasty mealworms. This hide is known to attract more than just birds. A real variety of creatures come to feed here.



Several species of squirrels were scurrying around. Agile treeshrews darted in and out. We even spotted a shy Bornean Forest Dragon. It cautiously approached, keen to snatch a mealworm or two, and may be a grain of rice. The area was a flurry of activity. Everyone was eager to grab a bite. It was a fantastic sight to behold.

Our wait wasn't long. About thirty minutes after settling into the hide, a call echoed up the slope. It was a Bornean Peacock-Pheasant!

Excitement bubbled inside me. Minutes ticked by. Then, a tiny chick appeared at the forest's edge, with its mother close behind. A Bornean Peacock-Pheasant chick! Incredible. Next, the male stepped into view. He swaggered into the clearing, an air of utter foolishness about him. He pranced and preened before his family, a comical display. I was speechless, captivated by the scene unfolding. Words fail me. I can only offer the images I captured. The chance to photograph these elusive birds filled me with pure joy. The hours spent waiting suddenly felt worthwhile. I finally had the photographs I'd dreamed of.





The male Bornean peacock pheasant is a colourful and striking bird that catches the eye from a distance. Its iridescent pale blue crest stands tall and shimmering, waving slightly in the forest breeze. This crest shines with a light that seems to change colour depending on the angle, giving the bird a unique and almost magical look.

Alongside this, a bright orange patch of skin appears on its face, adding a bold splash of colour that makes it instantly recognisable. Its wings and broad fan-shaped tail are decorated with luminous blue spots, which stand out vividly against the darker feathers. These features are not just for show; they play a role in attracting mates and establishing dominance among other males. When seen well in its natural habitat, the male Bornean peacock pheasant's distinctive appearance makes it impossible to forget.

The female of the species presents a very different appearance. She blends quietly into her surroundings with a warm brown tone that covers her entire body. Her feathers are marked with

smaller, darker spots, giving her a more understated look compared to the male.

Unlike her flamboyant partner, she relies on her colouration for camouflage, helping her stay hidden while nesting or caring for her young. This contrast between male and female appearances is common among many bird species, serving different roles in social and reproductive life.



The Bornean peacock-pheasant male performs elaborate courtship displays to attract a mate, including **fanning its tail feathers, which are adorned with blue-green ocelli (eye-spots)**. These displays often involve soft calling and can be observed in cleared forest areas, where males maintain display arenas. The males also engage in ritualized preening movements and may offer food gifts to the female.

Here's a more detailed breakdown:

- **Tail Display:** The male Bornean peacock-pheasant has 20 tail feathers decorated with blue-green ocelli. He fans these feathers out in a display to attract a female.
- **Vocalizations:** The male uses soft calls to further attract the female during his display.
- **Arena Creation:** Males clear areas in the forest, creating display sites or "arenas" where they can be seen by females.
- **Ritualized Behaviors:** Beyond the tail fanning, males engage in other ritualized behaviors, such as flagging (a form of preening that involves vigorously wagging the plumage).
- **Potential for Mutual Displays:** While not fully described in all peacock-pheasant species, the Bornean peacock-pheasant may participate in mutual male-female displays, and the female's behavior influences the male's display.
- **Possible Food Gifts:** In some instances, the male may offer the female an insect as a food gift.

This pheasant species prefers to live in primary lowland and hill forests across Borneo. They are often found along ridges and elevated areas, where the forest is thickest and most intact. These habitats provide cover and food in the form of berries, seeds, and insects. The birds tend to avoid disturbed or heavily logged forests, favouring untouched woodland. While they are generally quiet and unobtrusive, male peacock pheasants are known to occasionally produce loud, harsh calls. These calls might sound like a series of sharp squawks or honks, echoing through the trees and serving to mark territory or attract females.

Watching or hearing one of these calls can reveal a lot about the bird's behaviour and presence in the forest.

Their behaviour tends to be more gentle than loud or aggressive, keeping to quiet perches while feeding or resting. However, when threatened or in the midst of courtship displays, they can become quite vocal. The loud calls serve as important signals in the dense forest, where visual contact can be difficult. They effectively communicate their presence, warn rivals, and help maintain social bonds even in quiet spots deep in the forest.

Overall, the male Bornean peacock pheasant's bright and elaborate plumage marks him as a dazzling feature of Borneo's forests. While he stands out with his shimmering colours and bold patterns, the female's more subdued hues make her a master of hiding when needed. Together, they are a reminder of how evolution shapes species for both survival and display. Their preferences for particular forest types highlight their need for dense, undisturbed woodland areas, which are getting scarcer as human activities expand.

Understanding these birds better can help protect their habitats and ensure future generations can enjoy their vivid, colourful presence in Borneo's lush landscape.

The star sighting made the visit a roaring success. Any other birds seen at the hide would be a bonus. Birding proved slow outside of that special visit. Most other birds ignored the scattered mealworms. A mixed flock did pass. This group included a Short-tailed Babbler and a Chestnut-rumped Babbler. A Maroon-breasted Philentoma also joined them. A Raffle's Malkoha flitted past. A Malaysian Pied-Fantail danced around. Several bulbuls added to the colourful mix.

Photographing from the hide presents a unique set of challenges. Light levels inside are often severely limited. This makes sharp

images tricky to capture. A sturdy tripod is vital to combat camera shake.

Even the slightest movement can blur your shot. A robust support system becomes your best friend. Lens choice is just as critical. You'll likely need a long focal length to reach distant subjects. Think in the 400-600mm range as a good starting point. A lens with a wide maximum aperture is highly desirable. A "fast" lens lets in more light. This allows for faster shutter speeds. Without a fast lens, cranking up the ISO may be needed. But beware, high ISO settings often introduce unwanted noise. This can degrade image quality and detail.

The Bornean peacock pheasant, a jewel of the forest floor, has grown more used to human presence. They still remain wild creatures at heart. Too much disturbance will send them fleeing into the dense undergrowth. To ensure the best viewing experience, some simple principles make all the difference. Keep voices hushed. Even a normal speaking volume can carry far in the still air of the forest. Consider switching mobile phones to silent mode. Notifications and ringtones will shatter the peace. The whirring of a camera shutter can also prove disruptive. Cameras with silent shutters offer a great advantage. Try to keep movements to a minimum, too. Quick actions will startle the birds, sending them running for cover. Excessive movement will also irritate other people using the hide. They have come to see the pheasant in peace, as well. By following these simple guidelines, everyone can share in the magic of witnessing this stunning bird in its natural habitat.

The Bornean peacock pheasant lives only on the island of Borneo. These birds might live all over the island. They could be in the lowlands or the lower montane forests. Spotting them, though, is not always easy. At one time, Sungai Wain, near

Balikpapan in Kalimantan, was the best place to see them. Birdwatchers flocked there. Sadly, sightings became less common over time. Now, a small forest reserve close to Telupid in Sabah offers a better chance. This is the simplest way for birdwatchers to see this unique bird. The reserve protects the pheasant's habitat. This helps to ensure the species' survival. Observing these elusive birds in their natural habitat remains a special experience.

Little is known about this bird's habits in the wild. Sadly, Borneo's forests keep shrinking. Huge areas get cleared for timber, palm oil, and mining. The bird's home vanishes bit by bit. Experts think their numbers will fall a lot. The IUCN and Birdlife International are very concerned. They list the species as Endangered (EN). This means it's at high risk of extinction.

Habitat loss is the main threat. Borneo's rainforests are precious. Like forests all over the world, they face destruction. Every year, large chunks disappear forever. This wipes out homes for the bird and countless other creatures. Add in the bird's already small population. Its long-term survival looks grim. The future of this bird hangs in the balance. Without quick action, we may lose it forever.

As evening crept in, we found ourselves back at the familiar trailhead. The sturdy truck patiently waited to ferry us back. Our journey would take us across the swiftly flowing river, back to the welcoming embrace of Kampung Bestaria. Warm farewells were exchanged with Jolis and Elfean. Their smiles and waves lingered as we started our journey. We were leaving behind the day's adventures. The vibrant memories of the jungle still danced in our minds. What an utterly amazing day it had been! A tapestry woven with sights, sounds and experiences. Each moment etched

into our memories. It was a day that would be treasured for a lifetime.

The Telupid Bornean Peacock-Pheasant Hide is special. It is the only place to reliably see this endangered bird. The hide itself is simple. It does its job well. You can easily see and photograph the birds from there. Many birdwatchers journey to Borneo. They dream of seeing the Bornean Peacock-Pheasant. These birds are truly magnificent. A trip to Borneo is worth it just for them. They strut and display in their natural habitat. This is a sight you won't soon forget. The feathers shimmer with iridescent blues and greens. The males perform elaborate dances. They hope to attract a mate. It is a privilege to witness this rare spectacle.

Telupid's Bornean peacock pheasant is the main attraction now. This rare bird is a treasure. The future is uncertain for this endangered species. Numbers are sadly going down. So, see this amazing bird now at the hide. It is a truly special sight. The hide is unique, just like the pheasant.

The Telupid hide shows real promise. It could prove that protecting this pheasant makes economic sense. Local communities benefit from tourism. This success could help save these birds. It could ensure Bornean peacock pheasants thrive. They deserve a future in Sabah and Borneo. Imagine a world without these birds. We must act to protect them.

The IPS Rest House in Telupid is an important facility for travelers and workers in the region. Located in the heart of Telupid, this rest house offers a clean and comfortable place for people to relax during long journeys or work trips. It is well-known among locals and visitors for its friendly atmosphere and helpful staff. The rest house provides basic amenities such as comfortable beds, clean bathrooms, and a simple dining area.

Many travelers stop here to rest after a long drive through the rugged landscape of Sabah.



Telupid is a rural district in the Malaysian state of Sabah, and it serves as a key stopover point for travelers heading toward the interior of Borneo. The IPS Rest House supports the local community by providing a safe place to sleep and refresh. It also helps travelers avoid the risks of staying in less regulated areas, especially after dark. Its location makes it an ideal rest stop for those traveling between Kota Kinabalu and the eastern parts of the island.



The rest house is open to everyone, including truck drivers, tourists, and workers involved in logging or plantation work. Its affordability and accessibility make it a popular option for many. Guides and travel agencies often recommend staying at the IPS Rest House to ensure a safe and comfortable experience. For locals, it offers a familiar space where people can meet and catch up.

This facility plays an important role in supporting the transportation and tourism sectors of Telupid. It is essential in providing a needed break for those who spend hours on the road. The managers regularly maintain the building and ensure that the environment stays clean and welcoming. In recent years, they have added small improvements like faster Wi-Fi and better food options to serve guests better.



Overall, the IPS Rest House in Telupid stands as a reliable spot for rest and recovery while traveling across Sabah. Its strategic location, good service, and friendly environment make it a key part of the local travel scene. For many, it is more than just a resting place; it is a pause point that helps travelers feel safe and comfortable before continuing their journey into the jungles and villages of Borneo.

Chapter 6

Kinabatangan River cruise

Nestled deep within the lush landscape of Sabah on the island of Borneo, the Kinabatangan River stands as one of the region's most prized natural wonders. This mighty river stretches for more than 560 kilometres, making it the longest in Sabah and a vital part of the island's wilderness. The river flows through a network of dense rainforests, expansive wetlands, and quiet tributaries, creating an environment that is rich in life. It is a vital corridor for wildlife, supporting a wide array of plants and animals that thrive in its waters and along its banks.

In 1881, William Pryer, who founded Sandakan and became the first British Resident in the region, made a significant journey to the Kinabatangan River. His journal records from that time paint a vivid picture of a lush, vibrant wilderness. He described seeing bright blue kingfishers darting over the water and colourful hornbills soaring high above the trees. These descriptions reveal just how rich and alive the river's wildlife was over a century ago. Today, the scene hasn't changed much. The river remains a hub of life, teeming with the same striking birds that Pryer noticed all those years ago. Visitors during popular morning or evening river cruises still spot kingfishers with their electric blue feathers and hornbills with their large, curved beaks. The sight of these birds is so common now that many tourists consider it a special but predictable part of the experience. It speaks to the health and resilience of the river's ecosystem, which has somehow endured through years of change. The presence of

these birds continues to remind visitors of the true beauty and richness of the rainforest and river environment. Despite around 150 years passing, the wildlife, especially the colourful kingfishers and hornbills, remains a vital part of the river's charm. Their continued sighting makes each cruise a special chance to see a piece of history come alive right before your eyes. The fact that such vibrant creatures are still so common highlights the importance of preserving this unique habitat for future generations to enjoy.

The Kinabatangan River is known for its high level of biodiversity. It is one of the best places in Borneo to see some of the world's most iconic and endangered species. Visitors often spot orangutans swinging through the trees, proboscis monkeys with their distinctive large noses, and pygmy elephants roaming along the riverbanks.

Crocodiles and freshwater monitor lizards sunbathe on sandy beaches or hide in the mangroves. The river is also a birdwatcher's paradise, with over 300 bird species recorded in the region. Large water birds like storks, kingfishers and hornbills often glide above the water, searching for fish or insects.

The Lower-Kinabatangan River is a major waterway that runs through the heart of Borneo's rich rainforest. This river creates a natural hub for countless plants and animals. Its waters support a diverse web of life, from tiny fish to large mammals. Because of this, the river is considered one of the most vital ecosystems on earth.

This region is the first to be recognised as a RAMSAR site in Sabah and the largest in Malaysia. RAMSAR sites are wetlands protected for their importance to wildlife and people. The Lower Kinabatangan is a shining example of the unique treasures found in these wetlands. It offers a safe home to many rare and

endangered species. These include the orangutan, the proboscis monkey, and many others. The orangutan, often called the ‘man of the forest’, is a gentle giant that spends most of its time in the trees. The proboscis monkey is known for its large nose and amusing face, often spotted lounging on branches.

The Kinabatangan River stands out as Malaysia’s second-longest river, stretching an impressive 560 kilometres from its source high in the hills of southwestern Sabah. This vast waterway winds through rugged jungle, dense mangroves, and floodplains before reaching its final destination at the Sulu Sea on the island’s east coast. Its course supports a wide array of wildlife and fosters rich ecosystems along its banks. The river acts as a vital lifeline for local communities, providing water for farming, fishing, and transportation. Many towns and villages are built close to its shores, relying heavily on its flow for everyday life.

The river’s significance extends beyond local use. It plays a key role in maintaining the region’s biodiversity. Recognising this, authorities have set aside large sections of the river’s surrounding land for conservation. A total of 26,000 hectares were officially designated as the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary under the State’s Wildlife Conservation Enactment of 1997. This protected area covers critical habitat, including wetlands, forests, and floodplains, where numerous species thrive. The sanctuary is home to iconic wildlife, such as pygmy elephants, Proboscis monkeys, orangutans, freshwater crocodiles, and rare birds. Several organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, work tirelessly to preserve these habitats.

The sanctuary's establishment was driven by the need to safeguard the delicate balance of this ecosystem. It helps

prevent illegal logging, poaching, and habitat destruction. This protected area also offers a sanctuary for many endangered species and helps sustain the health of the entire river system. Visitors to the sanctuary can embark on river cruises, watch wildlife in its natural habitat, and learn about efforts to conserve this important environment. Overall, the Kinabatangan River and its surrounding sanctuary form a vital natural asset. They are central to local life and efforts to keep Sabah's rich wildlife safe for future generations.

The forests surrounding the river are filled with lively sounds and busy creatures. These forests are also one of only two places in the world where you can find ten different primate species living close together. These primates include gibbons, muppets, langurs, and macaques. Each species has its own way of living and finding food. Some are shy and keep to the canopy's top, while others venture closer to the ground. This incredible variety makes the area a hotspot for wildlife lovers and scientists alike.

The river's accessibility makes it a favourite for many visitors. Several eco-tourism lodges and boat safaris operate along its length, offering close-up experiences with the wildlife. These guided tours give visitors the chance to observe animals in their natural environment without disturbing them. Long, quiet boat rides along the river allow for moments of quiet awe and perfect photo opportunities. Many experts praise the region for how it offers a stunning window into Borneo's unique ecosystem, which is hard to find anywhere else.

The importance of the Kinabatangan River extends beyond its beauty. It plays a crucial role in supporting local communities and maintaining the health of the surrounding forests. Protecting this ecosystem helps preserve countless species and keeps the region biologically balanced. Conservation initiatives

led by local groups, environmentalists and the Malaysian government aim to conserve this treasure for future generations.

For anyone who loves nature, wildlife, or simply the peaceful sound of flowing water, the Kinabatangan River offers an experience that is both educational and inspiring. Whether you are a keen birdwatcher searching for elusive species or a photographer eager to capture the perfect shot, the river promises memorable encounters with nature. It remains a shining example of Borneo's wild heart and a place where the extraordinary becomes everyday.

The Kinabatangan River stretches through the landscape as more than just a waterway; it forms the lifeline for many local communities. For villages scattered along its banks, the river is often the only practical way to travel or carry goods, since roads are limited or non-existent. In many of these small villages, boats are a common sight, used daily to move people, supplies, and even livestock. Without the river, these communities might face isolation, making access to essential services like health care or markets extremely difficult.

Fishing is deeply woven into their way of life. Many families depend on fishing for their meals and income. Small boats are pushed out into the river at dawn, as locals cast their nets or set traps, hoping for a good catch. Fish from the river, including prawns and catfish, serve as the main source of protein and are often sold at local markets. For those living here, fishing isn't just work; it's part of their culture and history. It provides food on their tables and money to send children to school and pay for basic needs.

Tourism has started to grow in the region, bringing a new source of income. Visitors come to see the rich flora and fauna, such as orangutans, proboscis monkeys, and colourful kingfishers. Many

villages now offer guided tours, boat rides, and lodging for travellers. This new industry offers jobs and encourages sustainable practices, helping local people protect their environment. Local guides take visitors on safaris into the jungle, sharing stories about the animals and plants they see. These interactions help villagers earn extra income while showing respect for nature.

When tourists visit the Kinabatangan River, they help more than just local businesses. They support community projects that improve living conditions and promote conservation. Money spent on accommodation, tours, and souvenirs directly benefits residents and their families. It encourages villagers to keep protecting their forest and wildlife, rather than exploiting these resources unsustainably.

Overall, the Kinabatangan River plays a vital role in the lives of these communities. It fuels their economy, shapes their culture, and connects them to the wider world. Every visit helps strengthen their future, giving help where it's needed most. Supporting responsible tourism here is more than just seeing wildlife—it's a way to ensure these villages can thrive while preserving the natural beauty that surrounds them.

The importance of this ecosystem goes beyond its beauty. It offers a crucial habitat that keeps the balance of nature in check. The forest helps filter the water, prevent floods, and store carbon. The river provides a steady source of food for local communities and wildlife.

Protecting this area ensures that future generations can enjoy its rich diversity.

Many experts say the Lower-Kinabatangan River is a vital sanctuary. Its unique mix of habitats attracts birds, reptiles, insects, and aquatic creatures. It is a living laboratory where

scientists study how species co-exist. The success of conservation efforts here has become a model for other wetland projects across the world. With ongoing protection, this fragile environment can continue to thrive, giving life to some of the planet's most precious creatures.

The Kinabatangan river basin in Malaysia is one of the most rich and diverse ecosystems on Earth. It stretches through lush, green landscapes and teeming wetlands, creating a home for countless species of plants and animals. From the thick mangrove swamps along the coast to the tranquil oxbow lakes further inland, every part of the river supports a web of life that is both vibrant and intricate.

These habitats are vital for many creatures, providing food, shelter, and breeding grounds.

The dense forests surrounding the river act as a natural passageway for wildlife. They serve as corridors that link different patches of land, helping animals to move safely from one area to another. This is especially important for species that are endangered or have very specific habitat needs. Without these forest connections, many animals could become trapped in isolated patches, making it harder for them to survive. The Kinabatangan region is home to many threatened species, including orangutans, pygmy elephants, and clouded leopards. Their survival depends on the health of these corridors and the continuous forest cover.

Protection efforts are underway to keep this fragile environment intact. Conservation groups work tirelessly to prevent illegal logging, deforestation, and habitat loss. They focus on creating protected areas and special wildlife zones to give animals a safe space to thrive. These projects also involve local communities, helping them understand the value of preserving nature while

supporting sustainable living. Conservation experts stress that once lost, these habitats are extremely hard to restore. Every effort counts to preserve the ecological balance that has been built over thousands of years.

Responsible tourism has also become a key part of these efforts. Visitors who come to see the rainforest and its wildlife can help by following strict guidelines. They learn about the environment and its importance, while supporting local economies. Responsible tourism ensures that the natural beauty and biodiversity are protected for future generations. It also raises awareness about the need to safeguard this rare and complex ecosystem. In this way, both nature and local communities benefit from sustainable visits that respect the land and its creatures.

The Kinabatangan's richness is not just in the number of species, but in the vital roles each plays in the ecosystem. Protecting this environment means saving a treasure trove of life. It also means ensuring that future generations can experience the splendour of this unique place. The region reminds us how closely linked we are to nature and the importance of showing respect and care for our planet's delicate natural wonders.

The Kinabatangan River stands out as the top place in Borneo for spotting wild animals. Its wide, winding waters and thick jungle grow right up to the river's edge, creating a perfect home for many species. These creatures thrive in this lush, lively environment. Visitors often come here to catch glimpses of some of the world's most fascinating wildlife. Taking a river cruise during dawn or dusk offers one of the best chances to see wildlife in its natural element. The early morning light or the fading evening glow brings wildlife activity to life along the

riverbanks. It's a magical time when animals become more active after resting in the shade during the heat of the day.

Among the most famous are the Borneo Pygmy Elephants. These are the tiniest elephants on Earth, known for their gentle nature and impressive grace. You might see them grazing peacefully along the riverbanks during early mornings or sunlight hours. Their relatively small size makes them easy to spot in the dense greenery. These tiny elephants are a rare sight and an important symbol of conservation efforts in the region. Watching them move gently along the riverbank is a moment few will forget.

The river is also one of the best spots to see orangutans. These critically endangered primates are mostly found here in their natural habitat. They are incredible to watch, swinging through the trees with great skill. Orphaned or injured orangutans are often rescued and cared for, but many still live free among the high branches. People often say seeing an orangutan in the wild is a special, almost magical experience. It reminds us of the importance of protecting their fragile homes. Orangutans are shy and solitary animals, making their sightings a true highlight. They tend to stay high in the trees, moving carefully with slow, deliberate motions. Watching one in its natural habitat gives a sense of its intelligence and gentle nature.

The area is also home to the quirky proboscis monkeys, which are unique to Borneo. These monkeys have very distinctive long noses, especially the males. It's fun to watch them leap and bounce from tree to tree with agility and ease. Their funny faces and curious eyes make them a favourite among visitors. Because they live high above the ground, spotting them requires patience but is always worth the wait. Their acrobatic jumps and howls create a lively scene at dusk.

Sometimes, you can spot them swinging effortlessly through the branches, feeding on fruit or resting in the trees after a busy day. These monkeys enjoy the peaceful river life, often feeding on leaves or resting in the shade.

Bird lovers are also in for a treat. The area is home to eight different types of hornbills. These large, striking birds have remarkable beaks and colourful feathers. Watching a hornbill swoop through the trees in flight is impressive. Their loud calls fill the air, turning the jungle into a lively symphony. Birdwatchers flock here to see these magnificent creatures, taking notes on their bright plumage and swift movements.

Reptiles are also often seen along the river. Crocodiles, especially saltwater crocodiles, frequently make themselves visible lounging on the riverbanks or floating just beneath the surface of the water. Their rough, armored bodies are perfectly camouflaged for ambush. When the light hits just right, you may notice their eyes peering above the waterline, their slit pupils watching silently for prey. These predators are fierce and highly adapted to their environment.

Seeing these crocodiles so close to the boat adds a sense of danger and excitement to the cruise. Spotting their eyes protruding just above the water's surface feels like peering into the predator's world. It's a reminder of the raw power and vibrant life that exists along this river. This scene often leaves visitors with a mix of awe and respect for the wild creatures living just beyond view.

Overall, dawn and dusk are the most peaceful and active times on the river. During these hours, sighting a diverse group of animals becomes more likely. This natural dance of life along the shoreline provides an unforgettable experience, capturing the true essence of the region's wildlife. Each moment offers a new

chance to see a rare animal or witness wildlife behaviour that might never be repeated.

It's like catching a glimpse of the wild as nature intended.

Overall, the Kinabatangan River offers a rare chance to see some of Borneo's most remarkable animals. Each species plays an important role in the rich tapestry of life here. Whether you're lucky enough to see an elephant, orangutan or proboscis monkey, every moment reminds us just how special this place really is. It's a vital part of Borneo's wild heart, a place where nature still thrives vibrantly.

Borneo's forests and riverbanks host a wide array of bird species, making the area a true paradise for bird lovers. Experts estimate that the Lower-Kinabatangan area alone has more than 300 bird species. This diversity is so special that conservation groups have designated it an Important Bird Area (IBA). This status helps protect the habitats of many rare and endangered birds, including the hornbills. It also highlights the importance of the region's bird life on a global level.

Birdwatchers from all over the world are drawn to Borneo. Many plan special birding trips to see its famous hornbills and other species.

Travel agencies that focus on birding tours offer carefully designed packages. These trips often take visitors deep into forests and along riverbanks where hornbills and other rare birds thrive. Guides are experts in identifying different calls and spotting birds hidden high in trees. They often share interesting facts about each species, making the experience even richer.

For those passionate about birds, these tours are more than just sightseeing. They provide a chance to connect with nature and see some of the rarest and most beautiful birds alive today. The

sight of a Rhinoceros Hornbill soaring overhead or the sight of a group of Oriental Pied Hornbills eating fruit can be unforgettable moments. As a result, Borneo has built a reputation as one of Southeast Asia's best bird-watching destinations.

All eight species of hornbills found in Borneo call this lush island their home. These birds are a vital part of Borneo's vibrant ecosystem. The most common hornbills you are likely to see are the Rhinoceros Hornbill and the Oriental Pied Hornbill. The Rhinoceros Hornbill, with its striking yellow casque on its beak, is often considered a symbol of the island's wildlife. Meanwhile, the Oriental Pied Hornbill stands out with its bold black and white feathers and distinctive calls. These two species are just a small part of the rich diversity found in this part of Malaysia.

The variety of hornbill species and other birds in Borneo shows the importance of preserving this wilderness. Their presence highlights the rich biodiversity that the island offers. These birds not only add beauty to the landscape but also help maintain healthy ecosystems. That is why many birders travel long distances to experience Borneo's incredible birdlife firsthand. Their efforts help raise awareness about the need to protect this vital habitat for generations to come.

While the wildlife on the Kinabatangan River often captures the most attention, there is much more to this waterway than just animal sightings. The calmness of the river during sunrise or sunset creates a peaceful atmosphere that calms the mind and lifts the spirit. As the sun rises, soft golden light reflects off the water, turning it into a mirror of the sky's changing colours. At sunset, warm hues paint the sky, transforming the entire landscape into a scene straight from a painting. The rainforest

along the banks bursts with vibrant colours— bright greens of new leaves, the deep reds and oranges of flowering trees, and the striking patterns of orchids and birds. The air often fills with a symphony of sounds, from the gentle ripple of water to the calls of hornbills, cicadas, and gibbons echoing through the trees.

This constant soundtrack creates an environment that feels both enchanting and alive.

The Kinabatangan River is a vibrant and diverse natural corridor that attracts visitors with its rich wildlife and tranquil surroundings. Its surrounding area is dotted with a variety of nature lodges, each located in key sections along the river. These lodges offer different experiences, making it possible to tailor your visit to your interests and pace. In total, the area is divided into three main zones: Sukau, Abai, and Bilit. Each has its own character, set against the backdrop of lush rainforest and winding waterways.

Sukau is one of the most well-known regions along the river. It is famous for its top-rated wildlife tours and eco-friendly lodges.

Visitors often choose Sukau as their base because it provides easy access to daily boat safaris and jungle walks. The lodges in Sukau focus heavily on sustainability. Many adopt eco-conscious practices, from solar power to waste reduction, helping protect this fragile environment. Staying here allows guests to experience the thrill of spotting orangutans, pygmy elephants, and crocodiles right from the doorstep. Notable lodges such as the Sukau Rainforest Lodge provide guided tours that take visitors deep into the heart of the rainforest. These safaris are led by expert guides who share insights about the animals and plants that thrive along the river.

Abai is located closer to where the river meets the sea. It offers a quieter, more peaceful experience, perfect for visitors wanting to

escape the crowds. The village of Abai remains largely untouched by tourism's heavy footprint. Its lodges are smaller and more private, creating a calm atmosphere for relaxation. The area's landscape gently transitions from dense forest to open water, revealing breathtaking views at every turn. Staying in Abai means having more time to simply enjoy the natural surroundings. It's an ideal place for those who want a break from busy travel routines. Many lodges here organise boat rides that explore the mangroves and lesser-known parts of the river, giving a sense of seclusion and serenity.

Bilit is a haven particularly suited for birdwatchers and wildlife lovers. Nestled in a patch of pristine rainforest, Bilit is surrounded by thick greenery and teeming with life. The lodges here are designed to blend seamlessly into their environment, often constructed from natural materials. Bird enthusiasts flock to Bilit because it's a prime spot to see a wide array of tropical species, from hornbills to kingfishers. Besides birdwatching, visitors can observe monkeys swinging through trees or spot lingering wildlife at dawn or dusk.

Many lodges offer guided jungle treks that dive deep into the rainforest's secret corridors. These walks reveal fascinating plants, insects, and animals hidden within the dense canopy. Staying in Bilit offers a full immersion into the jungle, making it a favourite for those eager to discover the wild side of Sabah.

Whether you choose Sukau, Abai, or Bilit, each area provides a range of lodges that balance comfort with eco-awareness. Guests can choose from rustic retreats with simple, comfortable rooms to boutique eco-lodges equipped with modern amenities. All aim to reduce their environmental impact while providing a memorable experience. The region's lodges often include guided river safaris, camera-strewn mornings, and jungle treks to

enhance your adventure. These activities allow you to get up close to the unique wildlife and plants that call this stretch of the river home. The variety of accommodation and experiences ensures that you can plan a trip tuned to your preferred pace and interests.

The Kinabatangan River's lodges provide a perfect gateway into Sabah's untouched wilderness. They give visitors an authentic chance to connect with nature, understand its riches, and enjoy the tranquillity of an environment brimming with life. Every stay offers a chance to witness moments of wildlife beauty and natural wonder that create memories to last a lifetime.

Beyond the natural beauty, engaging in river cruises allows visitors to glide quietly through the water, getting close enough to see wildlife without disturbing it. These cruises are often led by guides who know where to find everything from rare orangutans to elusive freshwater crocodiles. For those seeking more adventure, guided night walks reveal a different side of the jungle. At night, eyes shine in the darkness as nocturnal creatures like civets, slow lorises, and gliding frogs come to life. These walks reveal a hidden world of creatures that are rarely seen awake during the day, deepening the connection to nature.

Interacting with local communities adds another layer to the journey. Many villages along the river offer cultural exchange opportunities, where visitors can learn about traditional crafts, local cuisine, and everyday life. These moments provide insights into the customs and stories that have shaped the area for generations. Local guides often share fascinating tales about the rainforest's history and show visitors how different plants are used in medicine and cooking. Such exchanges turn a simple visit into a meaningful experience that enriches understanding and appreciation of the region.

All these activities, combined with the natural beauty and cultural richness, create a journey that goes beyond just spotting wildlife. Every moment on the river becomes a chance to connect more deeply with nature and local traditions. Whether gazing at a breathtaking sunset, listening to the jungle's sounds, or sharing a meal with villagers, each discovery adds to the wonder of the adventure. This combination of sights, sounds, and stories makes visiting the Kinabatangan River an experience that will stay in mind long after the trip ends. Visitors leave feeling refreshed, inspired, and with a greater respect for this unique and lively part of Malaysia.

For many visitors, stepping onto the banks of the Kinabatangan is a chance to connect with something larger than themselves. It's not just a sight but an experience that opens your eyes to the importance of protecting our environment. Every animal, every plant in this vibrant rainforest plays a role in keeping the river alive. Seeing these creatures in their natural home brings an emotional understanding of how fragile this balance is.

Planning a journey to the Kinabatangan lets you enjoy boat safaris and guided walks that reveal hidden corners of the rainforest. Expert guides help spot wildlife and share stories about their habits and lives. They explain the importance of protecting this area for future generations. Each trip supports efforts to preserve this vital habitat and its creatures.

You may want to consider experiencing the well-established homestay programme known as MESCOT KOPEL, which is available in several surrounding villages. This programme offers visitors a unique chance to immerse themselves fully in the daily lives of the Orang Sungai, an indigenous community known for their rich culture and traditions. Staying in one of these homestays means more than just sleeping overnight; it gives you

an authentic window into their world. You can join locals in traditional activities, learn about their customs, and observe their way of life up close. Many visitors find it rewarding to participate in local farming practices, such as planting rice, harvesting crops, or tending to livestock. Some homestays even organise traditional cooking sessions, allowing guests to learn how to prepare local dishes with fresh ingredients. These activities help visitors gain a deeper appreciation of how the Orang Sungai live and maintain their cultural heritage in a changing world.

Being part of their daily routines gives visitors a chance to ask questions and hear stories from elders about their history and beliefs. For many, this experience becomes a highlight of their trip, offering insights that no guidebook could provide. It also provides a way to support local communities directly, helping sustain their way of life.

Visitors often leave with a better understanding of the importance of preserving indigenous cultures and the challenges faced in the modern age.

While exploring the Kinabatangan region, don't miss the opportunity to visit the famous Gomantong Cave. It's the largest cave in the area and one of Sabah's most important sources of edible bird's nests. These nests are made by swiftlets and are highly prized in traditional medicine and for making bird's nest soup, a delicacy enjoyed by many. The cave itself is a fascinating natural wonder, with intricate limestone formations and thousands of swiftlets flitting about, creating a musical backdrop of chirps and calls. Going inside offers a glimpse into a unique ecosystem that has been forming for centuries, where human activity has woven into the natural landscape for generations.

Another remarkable site worth visiting is the Agop Batu Tulug Cave. Its name means “Coffins of the Tree Log” and ties into the area’s long history of burial practices. The cave contains ancient wooden coffins, some dating back hundreds of years. These relics provide a rare insight into the burial traditions of the local communities, reflecting their respect for ancestors and religious beliefs. Both caves are not only natural wonders but also cultural treasures that tell the story of the region’s history. Visiting these sites helps deepen your understanding of Sabah’s diverse heritage and the importance placed on preserving it. They make for unforgettable stops as you explore this rich and vibrant part of Borneo.

While it is possible to plan an overnight trip to Kinabatangan, staying for at least three days is much more beneficial. A shorter visit limits your chances of seeing the diverse wildlife that inhabits this area.

With more days, visitors have a better chance to spot animals like orangutans, pygmy elephants, crocodiles, and the colourful hornbills. These creatures are often shy and spend time away from main paths, making them harder to see in just one night.

Spending more time allows you to join multiple guided tours or river cruises, which are the best way to observe wildlife. Each cruise offers different sightings depending on the time of day and weather conditions. If you stay longer, your guides can lead you to hidden spots, increasing your chances of spotting rare animals.

Wildlife in Kinabatangan is most active early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Staying for multiple days means you are more likely to be around during these prime times. One day might only give you a brief glimpse, but three or more days can turn sightings into a memorable experience.

Experts agree that these longer stays improve your chances of seeing the area's animals in their natural environment. Wildlife is unpredictable and often shy, so patience and time are key. Spending extra days also allows you to relax and enjoy the natural beauty of the jungle without feeling rushed.

In short, while a quick overnight trip is possible, dedicating at least three days to the Kinabatangan River greatly enhances your opportunity to see and enjoy its rich wildlife. The extra time pays off with more chances for unforgettable encounters with nature.

A visit here is more than just sightseeing. It's a step toward learning about and caring for our planet. When you see the beauty of the rainforest, you will want to do your part to keep it safe. The Kinabatangan stands as a living reminder of nature's strength and the need for ongoing protection. If you want to include an adventure in this special place, plan an experience that stays with you forever, one that honours the wild and wonderful spirit of Borneo.

We were ready for another exciting birding season. This time, our base would be the famed Kinabatangan river. Kinabalu park's high- altitude forests held many treasures. However, Kinabatangan promised a different set of avian wonders in the lowland rainforest. The river cruise offered us experiencing various birds and endemic animals . We hoped to spot many species, including Bornean Bristlehead and colourful kingfishers. Our adventure continued, chasing new birds in a new habitat.

Bird watching cruises on the Kinabatangan River are an exciting way to see the area's rich wildlife. The morning cruises start early at 6 AM, giving passengers a chance to catch active birds just as the day begins. The afternoon trips run at 3 PM, providing yet another opportunity to spot different species. Some resorts add night cruises for an extra fee. These night adventures are perfect

for spotting nocturnal animals and listening to the sounds of the jungle at night. During these cruises, a knowledgeable guide assists in spotting birds and animals that might be hard to see on your own. The boat driver will often slow down or stop if they spot any good photographic chances, allowing visitors to take pictures of wildlife like birds or monkeys in their natural habitat.



Most bird sightings involve birds perched on riverbank trees or flying overhead. The guide points out the different species, and passengers can relax, enjoy the surroundings, and look out for wildlife while the boat gently moves along the river. Between the morning and afternoon cruises, visitors often have time to rest, enjoy a hearty lunch, or explore their resort surroundings for more birding opportunities. Some resorts are located near jungle trails or small nature paths, perfect for solo birdwatching walks. This flexibility allows visitors to get the most out of their time in the area, whether they want guided tours or quiet immersions in nature.



The Kinabatangan River's lush environment makes it one of the best places in Borneo for birdwatching. Over 200 bird species have been recorded here, including some critically endangered ones. Among the most notable are the endangered Storm's Stork, a striking bird with long legs and a large bill that often wades through floodplains. Bird lovers can also look out for various hornbills, with their impressive casque (the hollow structure on their beak), and raptors such as Wallace's



Hawk Eagle, known for its powerful wings and hunting skills. Jerdon's Baza and the White-fronted Falconet are Bornean endemics found only on this island. Kingfishers are common along the riverbanks, especially the bright blue and orange Stork-billed Kingfishers, which are easy to spot near the water. Oriental darters, similar to small herons, are also seen swimming or resting on trees.



Night walks offer a different view of the forest's birds and animals. You might catch sight of rare pittas, shy ground-dwelling birds that hide in dense undergrowth. If luck is on your side, you could glimpse the elusive Bornean Ground Cuckoo, a rare bird that excites passionate birders worldwide. Night time life on the river can be full of surprises, with creatures like owls, nightjars, and civet cats also active after dark.

Most visitors reach Kinabatangan via Sandakan, the main city on Sabah's east coast. Sandakan has a busy airport with multiple flights each day from Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, making it accessible from other parts of Malaysia. Many tourists take a

short drive or bus from Kota Kinabalu to reach Sandakan. From there, it takes about two to two and a half hours to drive to the small villages of Bilit or Sukau, popular gateway points for river tours and wildlife adventures.

We stayed at Ulumalapi bed & breakfast at Sukau because it offers convenient access to river trips and guide services.



These villages are small but connect visitors to the heart of the rainforest. Food options in Sukau are limited, with few convenience stores or restaurants. There are no ATMs in the area, so it's wise to stock up on essentials before arriving. Basic facilities include a small health clinic and police station, in case of emergencies. The climate here is warm and humid, with sudden rain showers possible at any time. Dress accordingly with waterproof gear for cruises and a wide-brimmed hat to shield from the sun. The river boats are usually uncovered, making sun protection essential.

In the lush forests of Kinabatangan, a long tail macaque can often be seen moving swiftly through the dense canopy. These monkeys, scientifically known as *Macaca fascicularis*, are well known for their long, vigorous tails which help them balance as

they leap from branch to branch. The sight of a sizeable macaque amidst the greenery offers a glimpse into the rich diversity of this rainforest.

These primates are social animals, living in groups that can range from a few members to over twenty individuals, working together to find food and watch for danger.

Kinabatangan is home to some of the most vibrant and varied wildlife in Borneo, where the long tail macaque holds its place as a prominent species. They are particularly active during the early morning and late afternoon, when they venture out to forage for fruits, seeds, and small insects. The macaques' keen eyes and quick movements are always on alert, scanning the treetops for predators or rival groups. Their adaptability is remarkable; they can thrive in both forested areas and nearby plantations, often becoming a familiar sight to nearby villagers and tourists alike.



Observations reveal that these macaques play a vital role in maintaining the health of their ecosystem. By eating a variety of

fruits and spreading seeds through their droppings, they help plants grow and forests flourish. Their large size compared to other monkeys in the region makes them easier for researchers to study, and their behaviour offers valuable insights into primate social structures.

Experts say that sightings like these are more than just an interesting view; they are a reminder of the delicate balance in Borneo's rainforest. The presence of such healthy, active macaques indicates a healthy habitat, which is crucial as rainforests face increasing threats from deforestation and human activity.

Long tailed macaques are also called crab-eating macaque. The name refers to the animals being seen foraging beaches for crabs.

Another name for this monkey, most often used in laboratory settings, is the cynomolgus monkey. Beyond its intriguing name and diet, the crab-eating macaques are also good swimmers. They are one of few species of monkeys who don't fear swimming.

The crab-eating macaque's native range encompasses most of mainland Southeast Asia, through the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, the Maritime Southeast Asia islands of Sumatra, Java, and Borneo, offshore islands, the islands of the Philippines, and the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. This primate is a rare example of a terrestrial mammal that violates the Wallace line, being found out across the Lesser Sunda Islands. It lives in a wide variety of habitats, including primary lowland rainforests, disturbed and secondary rainforests, shrubland, and riverine and coastal forests of nipa palm and mangrove.

Researchers have been raising alarms about crab-eating macaque population decline at least since 1986. Many authors cite a 40% decline in the entire crab-eating macaque population between

1980 and 2006. This comes from a population estimate of 5 million in the 1980s-90s to a population estimate of 3 million in 2006. It is unclear how the 3 million estimate was reached.

The crab-eating macaque has been categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List; it is threatened by habitat loss due to rapid land use changes in the landscapes of Southeast Asia and the surging demand by the medical industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2008 review of population trends suggested a need for better monitoring of populations due to increased wild trade and rising levels of human-macaque conflict, which continue to decrease overall population levels despite the species' wide distribution.

The crab-eating macaque is one of the most widely traded species of mammal listed on the CITES appendices. The international trade in crab-eating macaques is a multibillion-dollar industry. Crab-eating macaques are sold for up to \$20,000 to \$24,000, and prices rise when supply reduces. International crab-eating macaque trade does not appear to follow a particular trend but continues to change over time. Although peak exports often correlate with declarations of public health emergencies.

Crab-eating macaques are one of the most popular species used for scientific research. Crab-eating macaques are used primarily by the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry in the evaluation of pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, efficacy, and safety of new biologics and drugs, they are also used in infectious disease, TB, HIV/AIDS, and neuroscience studies. They played a major role in Covid 19 vaccine research in different countries.

Our next target was Proboscis monkeys, a bornean endemic. The proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*) is a fascinating primate

endemic to the island of Borneo. Here are some interesting facts about them:

They are easily recognized by the long, pendulous nose of the adult males. This nose can grow quite large and is thought to play a role in attracting females and amplifying their calls. Females also have a noticeable nose, but it is much smaller and more upturned.

They have a striking coloration with reddish-brown fur on their back and shoulders, and pale underparts. Their arms, legs, and tail are grey. Infants are born with a blue face that darkens to grey as they mature.

Males are significantly larger than females, weighing between 16 and 22 kg and reaching up to 70 cm in length, while females weigh 7 to 12 kg and are around 60 cm long. Males also have a permanently erect red penis and a black scrotum.

Proboscis monkeys are found throughout Borneo, which is politically divided among Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

They are primarily found in lowland habitats near water, such as mangrove forests, riverine forests, and swampy areas. They are almost always found within 600 meters of a river.

Their diet mainly consists of leaves, unripe fruits, and young shoots. They also occasionally eat seeds, flowers, and even insects like caterpillars.

They have a specialized digestive system with a large, multi-chambered stomach containing bacteria that helps them to ferment the tough cellulose in leaves and detoxify certain plant compounds. This gives them a somewhat pot-bellied appearance.

Proboscis monkeys are arboreal and move quadrupedally through the trees. However, they are also surprisingly good

swimmers, capable of swimming underwater for up to 20 meters. They will leap into the water to cross rivers or escape predators. They have partially webbed feet which aids in swimming.

They live in social groups that can be either unimale groups (one adult male with several females and their offspring) or all-male bachelor groups. Several of these groups may gather in the evening to sleep in large groups called bands, typically near the riverbank.

The proboscis monkey is listed as Endangered by the IUCN. Their populations have declined significantly due to habitat loss from deforestation for logging and oil palm plantations, as well as hunting. Interesting Facts:

Local people in Borneo sometimes call them the "Dutch monkey" due to their large noses and bellies, which were perceived to resemble early Dutch settlers.

The large nose of the male is thought to enhance their vocalizations, allowing them to produce louder and deeper calls that can attract females and assert dominance.

They are protected by law in all three countries of Borneo and are listed on Appendix I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).



The proboscis monkey, known for its distinctive large nose, can be seen lounging in the trees along the Kinabatangan River. These unique primates are a sight to behold, with their long, narrow faces and big, floppy noses that hang down over their mouths. They spend most of their time high in the mangrove forests, using their strong limbs to swing from branch to branch. The vivid green canopy provides a lush backdrop for these striking animals, making them a highlight for visitors exploring this part of Borneo.



Kinabatangan's river habitat is perfectly suited to the proboscis monkey's lifestyle. During the day, these monkeys gather in tight groups and feast on leaves, flowers, and fruits found in the trees. Watching them, you notice how they groom each other, a vital part of their social life. These monkeys are highly social, living in groups that can include up to 30 members. This social bond helps them stay safe from predators and keep their tiny troop organized.

Their large noses are more than just odd features—they, the play a role in attracting mates. Males with bigger noses tend to be more dominant, which gives them an advantage during mating season. The males often compete through loud calls, resonating through the forest, asserting their strength and attracting females. It's fascinating to see how these traits have evolved to support their survival and reproduction in the wild.¹



Unfortunately, proboscis monkeys are listed as endangered. Deforestation and habitat loss from palm oil plantations and logging threaten their homes. The forest they depend on is shrinking year by year. Conservation efforts now focus on protecting the mangrove forests along the Kinabatangan River. Local guides and wildlife experts regularly observe these monkeys thriving in protected areas, reminding us of their importance.



Seeing a proboscis monkey in its natural environment offers a rare glimpse into the wilds of Borneo. Their distinctive appearance and social habits provide valuable insights into primate behaviour. It's a vivid reminder of nature's diversity and the urgent need to preserve these remarkable animals and their habitat for future generations.

It's truly a unique and captivating primate facing serious threats in its natural habitat. We could spot well number of this primate. A family with male, female and baby could be spotted in playful mood. I was fascinated by their coat colour. A unique combination of beige and golden yellow colour was shining in the afternoon light. After clicking a lot of photographs, our team was willing to move forward to search other wildlifes in the river, but I was still in a mood to look at those unique creature of Borneo. I was quiet sure that I will never come across these animals again in my life time.

Hornbills are a fascinating group of birds known for their distinctive bills, which resemble a cow's horn—long, curved, and often quite striking. Their beaks aren't just for show; they serve important roles in feeding, communication, and even courtship displays. Many hornbills display bright colours on their bills, which make them stand out against the green foliage of their habitats. These colours can include vivid reds, blues, oranges, and yellows, and they often signal health and vitality to potential mates.

In Sabah, a state in Malaysian Borneo known for its rich biodiversity, there are eight different types of these beautiful birds. These are: Rhinoceros hornbill, White-crowned Hornbill, Oriental pied hornbill, Bushy chested hornbill, Black hornbill, Helmetted hornbill, wrinkled hornbill, wreathed hornbill. Each species varies in size, colour, and behaviour, making them a

diverse and captivating part of the local wildlife. Some hornbills have larger, more elaborate bills that look almost like wearing a helmet, while others are smaller but equally eye-catching with colourful markings. They are a vital part of the rainforest ecosystem, helping to spread seeds and control insect populations.



While exploring the Kinabatangan River, which is famous for its lush jungle and abundant wildlife, we were lucky to spot seven of these eight species. This area offers a rare chance to observe these extraordinary birds in their natural habitat. Tourists and birdwatchers alike are often amazed at how easy it can be to spot these birds perched high in the trees or gliding quietly across the canopy. Their loud calls and distinctive appearance make them some of the most memorable sights on a jungle safari. Seeing such a variety of hornbills in a single location highlights the incredible diversity found in Sabah's rainforests.



Hornbills are not just beautiful creatures but vital to the health of their environment. Their large, colourful bills are easily recognised symbols of Sabah's vibrant wildlife, and spotting multiple species offers a glimpse into the importance of conserving these forests. The presence of seven different hornbill species in Kinabatangan is not just a testament to the richness of the area but also a reminder of the need to protect these birds and their habitats for future generations to enjoy.



A large flock of hornbills creating a commotion in the forest is a sight to see. Their calls echo loudly through the trees, filling the air with a wild, lively sound. Each hornbill species has its own

special call, a unique voice that sets it apart from the others. For those who love birdwatching, these sounds can actually be enough to tell one species from another. Expert bird watchers, who have spent years listening to these birds, can often identify the exact species just from hearing the calls.



Some hornbills, like the Great Hornbill, have a deep, resonant call that sounds like a loud echo bouncing through the canopy. Others, such as the Wrinkled Hornbill, emit a series of quick, sharp squeaks that can be mistaken for a chatter or a squeal. When these birds gather in large numbers, the forest becomes a natural symphony of sound. This collective noise can make it hard to focus on one call, but seasoned bird watchers learn to tune in. They listen for the distinct pitch, rhythm, and tone that is different for each species.

Hornbill calls aren't just noise. They serve important purposes in the wild. Some calls are used to mark territory, warning other birds to stay away. Others are a way to communicate with mates or to alert the flock to danger. During breeding season, the calls

can become even more noticeable and lively, as males and females try to attract each other with vocal displays.



In many rainforests, hornbills are considered a sign of a healthy ecosystem. Their loud calls remind us how lively and active the forest really is. For bird enthusiasts, the sounds of a hornbill flock can be like a familiar tune, one that they can recognise and connect with. Experienced bird watchers often carry recordings of hornbill calls, so they can compare what they hear in the field with their reference library.

The noisy gatherings of hornbills in the forest reveal much about these birds' behaviour and the environment they live in. Their calls tell stories of their daily lives, their bonds, and their battles for food and space. For those who pay close attention, each call opens a window into the vibrant world of the rainforest's most charismatic birds.



Hornbills are remarkable birds that have a unique way of raising their young. Depending on the species, they can lay anywhere from one to as many as eight eggs at a time. The eggs are always a bright, pure white, and they have an elongated oval shape that makes them easily distinguishable. The number of eggs laid varies greatly among different types of hornbills, with smaller species tending to lay fewer eggs, sometimes just one, while larger species can produce up to eight eggs in a single clutch. These eggs are incubated for a period that ranges from about 21 days for the smaller hornbill species to as much as 42 days for the larger ones. The longer incubation period in bigger hornbills reflects the greater size and complexity of their eggs and young.

Some hornbill species have a special way of sharing the task of raising their offspring. Two such species, the bushy-crested and the white-crowned hornbills, are known as co-operative breeders. This means that not just the parents, but other members of their family group, contribute to caring for the young. These family members take turns helping to feed the female who is incubating the eggs, as well as feeding the hatched chicks once they arrive.

This teamwork offers the chicks a better chance of survival and helps the parents cope with the demanding task of raising their young.

In sets of other hornbill species, the role of feeding is mostly carried out solely by the male. The male hornbill is responsible for bringing food to the female during incubation and later to the chick-rearing female. It's a high-stakes role because if the male does not provide enough food, or if he dies unexpectedly, it can spell disaster. Without the male to bring food, the female and her chicks face starvation. If the male disappears or dies, the female cannot easily leave her nest to search for food, and the entire family's survival is at risk. In such cases, the female and her young might perish simply because there's no one left to bring in nourishment.

The process of nesting is quite dramatic and unique among birds. When a female hornbill is ready to lay her eggs, she enters a hollow in a tall tree, often choosing a large cavity that provides safety from predators. Once she is inside, the male plays his role by sealing off this entry point. He uses soil or mud to block the nest opening, leaving only a narrow, vertical slit. This slit is carefully just wide enough for the male hornbill to insert his beak and pass food through to the female and her developing chicks. The sealing process acts as a protective barrier, shielding the nest from predators and harsh weather while allowing food to reach the young.

During the incubation period, which can last from 21 to 42 days depending on the size of the species, the female remains entirely inside the nest. She's sealed off from the outside world, her body pressed into the nesting cavity. In some species, like the forest-dwelling hornbills, the female loses all her wing feathers during this time. She stays almost completely

featherless, clutching her eggs tightly and staying hidden. This feather loss is a defence strategy, making her less visible and easier for the male to care for and defend while she's vulnerable. This period can last for several weeks, and the female's only contact with the outside world is through the narrow slit, where the male occasionally passes food.

Once the chicks hatch, they are small and helpless. They depend entirely on their parents for warmth, food, and protection, and they won't leave the nest until they are strong enough to fly. This means that the female remains in the nest till her young are ready to take to the air. In some species, she might stay for many weeks without ever leaving the cavity, sometimes losing all her flight feathers during her stay. When the chicks are finally ready, the female begins to tear away her own feathers to free herself from the nest. The same pair of hornbills return year after year to use the same nesting site, revisiting familiar trees that have become their nesting landmarks.

This nesting behaviour combines remarkable instincts with cooperation and sacrifice. Hornbills invest tremendous effort into raising their young, often at great cost to themselves. Their nesting habits, especially the sealed tree holes and the period of complete isolation for the female, highlight their unique place in the bird kingdom and their special adaptations to survive in challenging environments.

The Kinabatangan riverside is a true haven for birdwatchers. It teems with hundreds of different bird species, making it one of the most vibrant spots for wildlife in the region. During our two-day river cruise, we were lucky enough to spot a wide variety of these incredible birds. Each day brought new surprises and photo opportunities as we watched them dart across the water or perch quietly in the trees.

One of the highlights was catching sight of the striking Blue-eared kingfisher. Its vivid blue and orange feathers made it stand out sharply against the green backdrop.



We also managed to get close enough to capture images of the Buffy fish owl, a bird with a large, fluffy face and keen eyes, prominent horns, known for its elusive nature.



The Western hooded pitta was another beautiful find — its bright colours and energetic movements kept us captivated as it hopped through the undergrowth.

We also saw the Bornean brown barbet, a small bird with a colourful, patterned head that seemed to be constantly chattering. The Black and red broadbill added splashes of colour to the scene, with its bold, contrasting plumage. Swallows flitted effortlessly through the air, their swift movements giving us fleeting glimpses but plenty of chances for photos. The Plume-toed swiftlets darted overhead, their sleek bodies cutting quickly through the sky.



In addition to these, we observed the Green heron standing quietly at the water's edge, patiently waiting for fish. The Purple heron, taller and more stately, stalked the waters with grace. The variety of birds was staggering, with each species contributing its own unique charm to the lush rainforest surroundings. We saw birds of all sizes, shapes, and colours, all living in harmony along the river.

This rich diversity highlights how important the Kinabatangan riverside is for birdlife. Many of these species are hard to spot elsewhere in Malaysia, and their presence speaks to the healthy, vibrant ecosystem that sustains them. For bird lovers and nature explorers, every moment on this river is packed with wonder and beauty. Every day, new bird sightings added layers to our understanding of this complex, thriving habitat, reminding us why conservation efforts here matter so much.

Overall, a trip to Kinabatangan River offers an unforgettable experience for nature lovers. Its scenic, forested banks and abundant wildlife create a captivating backdrop for any birdwatcher or casual observer alike. Watching for birds and animals along the gently flowing river leaves guests with memories of a rare, captivating wilderness that remains one of Borneo's most treasured natural wonders.

As we floated quietly along the river in the afternoon light, the sights and sounds of nature around us grew more vivid. The river Kinabatangan is home to many fascinating creatures. We caught brief glimpses of water monitor lizards sunbathing on rocks and along the muddy banks. They are large, robust reptiles, often over two meters long, with rough, scaled skin that helps them blend into the river's rocky edges. Watching one slide into the water was a reminder of their powerful, stealthy movements. We also saw glimpses of crocodiles lazily resting on the far banks or

submerged just beneath the surface. Their tough, rugged bodies and sharp eyes made it clear they are skilled predators, silently lurking in the shadows of the river.



The wildlife sightings made the evening cruise even more special. As we prepared to head back to the boat, a surprising sight caught our attention. Sitting comfortably on a branch just over the water was a civet. It was busy munching on ripe, fallen fruits from nearby trees— perhaps rambutan or durian, common in the area. The civet's sleek, greyish coat and bright eyes made it look alert and curious as it moved from one bunch of fruit to another. Its behaviour showed how clever and adaptable these small creatures are, quickly taking advantage of the abundance around them.

This encounter with the civet felt almost like a secret reward at the end of a day filled with wonder. It's easy to forget how vibrant and full of life this river ecosystem is. For hours, we had watched birds, insects, and larger animals in their natural habitats, all living in delicate balance. The civet's peaceful

presence, quietly eating in the trees, was a reminder of how rich and interconnected this environment truly is. Every moment spent on the river revealed something new, something unexpected—making this journey through Kinabatangan an unforgettable experience.

Chapter 7

Tungog rainforest bird hide

After a memorable expedition in Kinabatangan River by boat and capturing stunning photographs of the lush surroundings, we prepared for the next leg of our journey. Our final destination was the Rainforest Discovery Centre in Sepilok, a renowned hub for rainforest research and wildlife viewing. We left Ulu Malapi early, eager to make the most of the day ahead. The drive was scenic, winding through thick green foliage and small villages along the way.

Our plan was to stop briefly at Tungog Rainforest, a promising spot known for its rich birdlife, in search of the elusive Giant Pitta — a rare and vibrant bird that many birdwatchers hope to see. The distance from Ulu Malapi to Tungog Rainforest was about 50 kilometres, a manageable drive that promised exciting wildlife sightings along the route. We kept our eyes open for any signs of the Pitta, knowing that spotting one would be a highlight of the trip.

By around 6:30 in the morning, we reached the designated bird hide in Tungog Rainforest. This hide is a small shelter built on stilts, allowing birdwatchers to observe wildlife without disturbing the natural environment. The morning was cool, and the air was thick with anticipation. The terrain leading up to the hide involves a short but challenging trek—initially downhill, then climbing back uphill.

It's a route that requires some effort, especially with camera and other gears in hand.

Fortunately, the weather was in our favour. It hadn't rained recently, which meant the trail remained dry and firm. This was a stroke of luck because, had the track been muddy and slippery from previous rains, reaching the hide would have been much more difficult. Molded by the recent dry spell, the path was clear and easy to walk.

For the journey to the hide, we were fortunate to have a sturdy Toyota 4x4 pickup. The vehicle's high clearance and rugged tyres allowed us to traverse the rocky and uneven ground comfortably. Without it, we would have had to trek on foot, which could be fairly strenuous given the steep inclines and uneven terrain. The distance might not seem long, but carrying heavy gear and navigating the muddy trail would have made the journey more tiring.

The choice to use the 4x4 combined with the favourable weather meant we could conserve energy for the main purpose: birdwatching. It's believed that the best chances of spotting rare birds like the Giant Pitta are early in the morning when they are most active. Our location and timing placed us right in the prime window for sightings. The clear morning allowed us to prepare our equipment, scan the trees carefully, and remain patient for that rare glimpse of this vibrant bird.

The entire experience highlighted how weather and terrain can impact wildlife excursions. Being prepared with the right vehicle and timing can turn what might seem like a simple walk into a rewarding adventure. It also underscored the importance of choosing days with no recent rainfall, especially when reaching remote rainforest spots. Each element, from the weather to timing and transportation, plays a key role in making wildlife exploration both feasible and enjoyable.

At Tungog, our main goal was to spot a few rare and beautiful birds. Among the birds we hoped to see were the Giant Pitta, Black-crowned Pitta, Blue-winged Pitta, and Bornean Crested Fireback.

These species are highly sought after by birdwatchers because they are so unique and not easy to find. To do this, we set up a hide in the middle of the forest, which was as simple as possible. It was just a basic shelter made of local materials, designed to blend into the natural surroundings and not scare the birds away. This hide allowed us to observe the birds closely without disturbing them, which is crucial for successful birdwatching.

The shelter was surrounded by lush greenery, broken only by patches of sunlight filtering through the dense canopy. It was situated so that we had a clear view of the most frequent bird activity, making it easier to spot those elusive species. Inside the hide, we had all the essentials to make our experience comfortable. There was a water bottle to stay hydrated during long hours of waiting. Snacks and biscuits were available to keep our energy levels up, especially during early mornings and late evenings when bird activity is at its peak.

These small comforts made a noticeable difference, helping us stay alert without feeling too hungry or thirsty.

However, the facilities were quite basic overall. No covered toilets were available nearby, so we had to make do with simple outdoor options. This meant planning ahead for personal needs during long hours in the forest, which was manageable but not ideal. The outpost was spacious enough to accommodate around 12 to 15 people comfortably. This allowed group members to sit or stand with plenty of room to move around without feeling crowded. The open area around the hide provided better chances

of observing other wildlife, like small mammals or insects, which added to the excitement of the experience.

Spending time in this natural setting allowed us to immerse ourselves fully in the environment. We could listen to the sounds of distant bird calls, the rustling of leaves, and the gentle hum of the forest. It created a peaceful, almost meditative atmosphere that made every moment memorable. The simplicity of the hide meant it was a no-frills experience, but that was part of its charm. It put us right in the heart of nature, making every sighting more meaningful. This setup was perfect for bird enthusiasts eager to witness rare species in their natural habitat, creating an authentic wild experience that felt both adventurous and rewarding.

The Giant pitta has been a long-standing dream bird of ours. It's a species that feels almost mythical because of how rare and difficult it is to see in the wild. We've heard about its striking size and vibrant colours, and it has always been at the top of our wish list. For years, this bird has seemed almost unreachable, living deep within dense rainforests where many others have failed to find it. Every time we talked about the Giant pitta, it was with a mix of admiration and frustration. Seeing one in the wild seemed like an impossible goal, a bird that might forever remain just out of reach.

Then everything changed when we learned about the Tungog rainforest. This remote area is known for its rich biodiversity and many lowland forest species, but we also discovered it's one of the best places to spot pittas. Research revealed Tungog is an ideal habitat for many of these small, elusive birds, especially the rare types like the Giant pitta. It sits within a lush, untouched part of the forest that has hardly been disturbed by human activity. This made it even more appealing, as habitat loss and

deforestation have pushed many pittas closer to the brink of extinction.

The more we looked into Tungog, the more excited we became. We read reports from ornithologists and birdwatchers who had visited the area, many of whom had recorded sightings of various pittas, including the Giant pitta in specific pockets of the forest. Some described the forests as teeming with life, where brightly coloured birds darted through the trees and you could hear their calls echoing through the canopy. These accounts made the dream seem more real, a real chance to finally catch a glimpse of this elusive bird.

Often, the challenge with finding rare birds like the Giant pitta is their keen hearing and shy behaviour. They tend to stay hidden most of the time, darting into thick foliage at the slightest sound. That's why Tungog's thick, mature forest is such a perfect habitat. It provides ample cover and feeding grounds, increasing the likelihood of a sighting. We learned that Pittas in general prefer dense, lowland forests with plenty of leaf litter and small undergrowth, which support their diet and nesting needs. Tungog's environment ticks all those boxes, making it one of the most promising spots for this dream encounter.



Our fascination with the Giant pitta and the chance to explore Tungog fit together in a perfect way. For us, this was a rare opportunity to see a bird that is often hidden from view, in a place that feels untouched and full of life. It became more than just a birdwatching trip; it was a chance to witness one of nature's most elusive treasures. We knew that if we were lucky enough to

visit Tungog and keep our eyes open, we might just be able to turn that long-held dream into a real memory.

As the day began, only a few common birds and squirrels started their morning routines. The sky was still dim, casting a soft, shadowy glow over the forest floor. Suddenly, a couple of partridges appeared, moving swiftly into view. The light wasn't strong enough yet for clear, bright pictures in our camera, but we managed to catch sight of this rare moment. One of the most striking was the Sabah partridge, a bird with intricate patterns that blended seamlessly into the lush greenery. This bird is a true jewel of the tropical lowland rainforest, yet it's becoming harder to find. Its populations have been shrinking across its entire range, making sightings like this all the more special.



The Sabah partridge is a medium-sized bird with a mix of colours that help it stay hidden in the dense forest. Its feathers are mostly brown with buff-coloured scaling, giving it a speckled appearance. It has a rusty bib on its chest, which stands out against the more subdued tones. Its head features a stippled

black-and-white pattern that seems almost like a natural camouflage. The bird's pale throat adds a delicate touch of colour, offering a subtle contrast to its darker markings. This bird forages mainly on the forest floor, moving in small flocks as it searches for insects, seeds, and small invertebrates among the leaves and undergrowth.

Unlike some other partridges that prefer higher elevations, the Sabah partridge is often found at lower altitudes. Its habitat lies right at the base of mountains and within the rainforest's thick undergrowth. It is easily told apart from others in its family by its pale ear patch — a small area behind its eye that is lighter in colour. It also lacks the rufous or reddish tones on its head that many other partridges display. These features make it quite distinctive, even in a habitat brimming with similar birds.

The bird's song is a key part of its identity. Its call is a loud, tremulous whistle, often delivered as a duet between two birds. The sound travels through the quiet, humid air of the forest morning. It is followed by a series of notes that go up and down in pitch, sounding like “weep! churrrrr...!” This song echoes through the trees and helps the birds communicate, especially when they are scattered in small groups. The duets strengthen pairs and keep flocks together, making communication important in the thick rainforest where visibility is limited.

Seeing this elusive bird made us think about how vulnerable it is. Its declining numbers serve as a reminder of the changing health



of its habitat. The Sabah partridge's rarity underscores the need to protect the rainforest that provides it with everything it needs to survive. With each glimpse, we gained a small window into the secret lives of these birds—an experience that enriches our

understanding of the delicate balance of this lush ecosystem.

As the dawn begins, the low light of the forest gradually shifts. At first, it is a soft, ambient glow, slowly gaining strength. The shadows recede as the morning sun's rays filter in, illuminating the dense canopy of Borneo's lowland dipterocarp forests. The air remains thick with anticipation, a quiet stillness hanging before the burst of activity that marks the start of a new day. Suddenly, this calm is broken by a flash of colour. Out of the shadows emerges a striking bird — a Black-crowned pitta, one of the rarest inhabitants of this lush landscape. It appears suddenly and with purpose, as if arriving from an unseen world, its presence announcing itself with a burst of vivid beauty.

This bird's appearance is nothing short of spectacular. Its feathers shine with midnight blue on top, contrasting sharply with its blazing scarlet underside. Its head is dark, nearly black, giving it a striking mask that frames its bright, alert eyes. The wings are adorned with startling blue coverts that catch the light with every movement, adding to its dazzling display. A narrow, glowing silver line tracks backwards behind each eye, emphasizing its sharp gaze and giving it a mysterious, almost enchanted look. These vibrant colours make the Black-crowned pitta a true jewel of the forest, admired for its striking palette that seems to glow in the early light.



However, despite such radiant colours, spotting this bird is no simple task. It is often hidden in the dense undergrowth, darting quickly between leafy shadows. Its preferred hunting grounds are well- shaded gullies and gorges, where thick vegetation offers cover from view. It spends much of its time foraging silently, weaving through tangled vines and leafy shrubs. Its colours are meant to dazzle, but it remains expertly camouflaged amidst the shadows, making it easy to overlook even when it is right nearby. Observers often have to rely on clues beyond sight—listening carefully for its song.

The Black-crowned pitta's call is distinct and piercing. It emits a pure, ascending whistle that climbs steadily in pitch. The note rises steadily, then ends abruptly, leaving a sudden, sharp silence. This song can carry across the forest, serving as a sign of the bird's presence even when it remains hidden. Birdwatchers learn to recognise this call because it offers a vital hint of where to look. Many have described this sound as almost musical, lifting through the dense canopy like a clear note of hope on an otherwise quiet morning.

In the narrow overlap of its range with similar species, the Garnet Pitta is a close relative and bears many similarities. The Garnet Pitta is a little larger, with a bright red crown that stands out even more.

Their ranges barely overlap, making encounters with each species quite rare. To the untrained eye, they might seem nearly identical, but their crowns tell them apart. While the Black-crowned pitta sports a dark head and striking blue accents, the Garnet Pitta's eye-catching red crown provides a quick way to tell them apart once you know what to look for.

The beauty of the Black-crowned pitta is not just in its colours or its striking appearance, but also in the secret life it leads. It must remain hidden most of the time, darting through the undergrowth before the break of dawn. Its vibrant colours essential for attracting mates and signalling territory, yet they also make it vulnerable to predators. Despite this, it thrives in the complex, layered worlds deep within Borneo's forests, a living testament to the richness and diversity of the tropical landscape. Recognising and understanding this bird enhances appreciation of forest ecosystems, where every creature plays a role



in maintaining the delicate balance of life.

As the black-crowned pitta hopped around in the arena, a striking pair of Bornean crested firebacks arrived. They moved with a confident alertness, their presence impossible to miss. These birds are among the most impressive in the rainforest, standing out against the lush green backdrop with their size and vivid colours. They are a special sight in the dense tropical lowland and lower montane rainforests, which stretch across parts of Borneo. The firebacks are known for their striking appearance that quickly catches the eye of any birdwatcher.

The male Bornean crested fireback boasts a sleek, shiny blue-black plumage that gleams in the dappled sunlight filtering through the trees. Its tufted crest adds to its regal look, fanning out from the top of its head. The female, in contrast, wears a warm chocolate brown colour that blends better into the forest floor, offering her some protection from predators. Both birds have distinctive electric blue skin on their faces, which is especially noticeable when they perk up or feel threatened. Their legs are a pale, whitish colour, providing a subtle contrast to their darker feathers.

These birds are often compared to Bulwer's pheasant because of their similar shape and stature. However, the Bornean crested fireback has unique features that set it apart. The male sport a bright orange belly that stands out loudly against its dark body, while the tail feathers have a yellowish tint. The female, on the other hand, has feathers on her underparts with pale edges, giving her a more subdued but still beautiful appearance.



Firebacks are not shy birds, rather they are very aggressive. They tend to forage alone or in small groups, carefully searching the forest floor for food. They eat fruits, small insects, and seeds, scratching the ground with quick, precise movements. They have become easier to spot in certain areas where they have grown used to humans and birdwatchers.

Their calls are a mix of guttural “chuckit!” sounds and soft “weep” notes, which they utter in different situations. The males are particularly active during display times and often give a wing-whirring dance to attract females or assert dominance. These shows of flair are a rare treat for anyone lucky enough to witness

them, as they highlight the bird's striking presence and behaviour.

Seeing the Bornean crested fireback in action offers a glimpse into the complex dance of rainforest life. The richness of their colours and sounds reminds us of why these forests are so vital for so many unique species. They are a symbol of Borneo's incredible biodiversity and a testament to the wonder still hiding deep within its rainforests.

While waiting patiently for sight of the Giant pitta, a small yet striking bird caught my eye. Sitting quietly on a dry, low perch nearby was a rufous-collared kingfisher. Its vivid colours seemed almost to glow against the dull backdrop of the forest floor, making it impossible to miss. The bird's bright blue back and wings shimmered in the dappled light that filtered through the trees. Its underside was a bold orange, contrasting sharply with its green cap. This burst of colour gave the kingfisher an almost jewel-like appearance, bright and eye-catching in the gloom of the dense forest.

The rufous-collared kingfisher is a creature easy to admire but hard to find. Its vibrant hues make it stand out in theory, but the bird's preferred habit of perched low in shaded areas often keeps it hidden in the shadows. When it does reveal itself clearly, it's usually sitting very still, quietly observing its surroundings. It's a bird that relies on its quick, striking colours to ward off predators, while its habit of hiding in the undergrowth keeps it safe from larger threats.



The male kingfisher is especially notable for its bright blue upper parts, which shimmer in sunlight and are visible from afar. Its orange belly and throat add to its bold appearance, and a distinctive green cap crowns its head. Its face is marked with broad black, blue, and orange stripes that stretch across the face and over the eyes—these stripes make the species easily distinguishable from other kingfishers found in the region. The pattern acts like a signature, helping bird watchers and experts to identify it without confusion.

The female, on the other hand, shares the same striking features but swaps the male's vivid blue for a softer, more muted green that is sprinkled with cream spots. This colour variation helps differentiate gender at a quick glance and adds a touch of subtlety to an otherwise bright bird. Despite these distinctions, both males and females are known for their loud, persistent whistles. Their calls are cheerful and can often be heard even from a distance, especially when the bird is perched low on a branch or a rock close to the forest floor.

The kingfisher often chooses shaded, quiet spots high above streams or ponds, but it's common to find it perched low in the undergrowth, seemingly lost in concentration. Its calls are frequent, a pleasant whistle that repeats and echoes through the trees. The bird's constant noise adds a lively soundtrack to the forest, even as it stays hidden in the gloom, alert and watchful. Its persistent whistling continues, often during moments of stillness when it doesn't seem to be hunting or alerting others but simply enjoying its space.

In the thick canopy or near streams, the rufous-collared kingfisher plays a vital role in the local ecosystem. It helps control populations of small fish and insects, acting as a key predator. Despite its brilliance, this bird is often elusive, a puzzle for birdwatchers eager to catch a clear view. Yet, its calls and flashes of colour remind all who see it that beauty can thrive even in the darkest corners of the forest.

We had almost finished our lunch when a sudden, sharp call sliced through the quiet air. It was brief but clear, completely unmistakable, and it sounded like a giant pitta's call—deep, resonant, and a little frantic. Instinctively, we froze and looked toward the trees, trying to spot the source of the noise. The call grew louder as it seemed to draw nearer, echoing through the thick foliage. Every second felt tense as we strained our eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive bird. But just as suddenly as it had started, the call stopped.

The silence was even more deafening. There was no sign of the giant pitta, no flash of colour or movement among the dense leaves. We waited and looked around, but the bird had slipped away without us seeing it.

The weather that afternoon was far from ideal. The sky was heavy with thick, grey clouds that seemed to press down over the

landscape. It was a dull and gloomy day, with a dark, overcast sky that made everything look muted and shadowy. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbled softly, rolling across the hills and adding to the sense of stillness and tension. The rain had probably started a little earlier, leaving the ground damp and slippery underfoot.

Despite these less-than-perfect conditions, the search for the giant pitta was still on. We knew the bird was nearby—its distinctive call had hinted at its presence—but finding it would require patience and a little luck, especially with the weather working against us.

This unexpected interruption added an extra layer of challenge to our bird-watching efforts. Usually, spotting a giant pitta requires careful listening and quick eyes because they blend so well into the environment. Their bold, colourful plumage — often a bright contrast against the dark greens of the forest— makes them easier to identify once they are in view. But today's conditions made sighting even harder. The thick clouds dimmed the already limited light, and the gloomy atmosphere made the vibrant colours of the bird less noticeable. Still, we kept our hopes up. We knew the call meant the bird was close, close enough to be heard clearly, and that meant we hadn't missed our chance entirely. If we remained patient, we might catch another sound or even see the bird before it disappeared once again into the shadows of the forest.

The moment reminded us how unpredictable nature can be, especially when tracking elusive species like the giant pitta. While the day wasn't ideal for wildlife spotting, it was a reminder that perseverance is key. We were aware that in



bird watching, ignoring bad weather simply isn't an option. Many experts in the field have said that rain, gloom, and distant thunder can make it much harder to detect and locate certain species. Yet, experienced birders accept that every challenge presents an opportunity to learn and sharpen their skills. Today, despite the dull sky and cloudy outlook, we understood that nature's secrets often reveal themselves unexpectedly, and the real thrill lies in the chase itself. We stayed attentive, listening carefully to every sound and watching the rustling leaves, knowing that the giant pitta might reappear at any moment.

In our search for the elusive giant pitta, we faced many challenges. This striking bird, known for its vibrant colours and territorial displays, proved very difficult to locate. Despite hours of patient scanning through the dense foliage, the smallest movement or sound from the bird remained hidden. The giant pitta's secretive nature and preference for thick, tangled forests often make sightings rare, even for experienced bird-watchers. It's a reminder of how much there is still to discover in the wild and how elusive some of nature's most beautiful creatures can be.

However, as if to reward our patience, fate suddenly shifted. Out of nowhere, just as our hopes were dipping, a Banded broadbill perched right outside our hide windows. Its colours caught our eyes instantly. The deep purplish-red of the broadbill's broad, rounded body contrasted vividly against the greenery used as camouflage, making it impossible to miss. The bird sat calmly on a thin branch, giving us an almost perfect view. Its bold yellow patches on the wings and tail created a bright splash of colour, like a painter's bold strokes on a canvas. The broad-based bill, thick and powerful, was especially striking, as were the bird's bright blue irises, which seemed to gleam in the shifting light.

This species is not rare in such habitats, but it remains a delight to encounter. Males and females look slightly different— the female is a touch duller in colour and lacks the distinctive black line running across the male's chest. Both birds prefer thick, riparian forests, which grow along rivers and streams, from the lowland areas up into the mountains. They thrive in wet forests and are often found in places where the forest edges meet clearings, gardens, or parks.

These birds do not stay on one perch for long. Instead, they tend to forage high in the canopy, flying swiftly from one branch to another as they hunt for insects and fruit hidden among the leaves. They are quite active during their feeding, darting from their perch with great agility.



Compared to the Black-and-yellow Broadbill, this species is more vocal. Their calls fill the forest with a mix of long, drawn-out whistles that resemble a slow flute, combined with buzzing trills that ripple through the trees. Their calls are easily distinguishable if you become familiar with them, and they often

strike up their songs well before sunrise or late in the afternoon. This vocal behaviour helps the birds communicate with each other amid the dense foliage, alerting the group to danger or marking territory.

Seeing such a vibrant and lively bird in its natural habitat highlights the diversity and beauty of this forest ecosystem. Each encounter makes clear how important it is to preserve these habitats, not only for the birds but for the larger web of life they support. While the giant pitta might have remained just out of reach this time, the discovery of the broadbill gave us a vivid reminder of why such moments of wild beauty are worth waiting for.

Our quest to spot the elusive giant pitta ended without success, but the entire experience left a lasting impression. We had been eager to catch a glimpse of this rare bird, known for its vibrant colours and shy nature, but the jungle had kept it hidden. Even so, the thrill of trying, the quiet anticipation, and the moments spent scanning the dense canopy made the day memorable. We returned to our vehicle with a mix of disappointment and satisfaction. The journey to Sepilok awaited us, stretching over another two and a half hours through winding roads and lush scenery.

As we set off, the landscape around us changed. We passed through thick forests and small villages, each offering glimpses into local life. The air grew warmer, filled with sounds of chirping insects and distant calls of birds. Memories of the pitta attempt lingered, but the sense of adventure kept us going. We kept our spirits high, knowing the next part of our trip would surely bring new sights and experiences. The drive gave us time to relax and gather ourselves for what was ahead.

When we finally arrived at Sepilok, we were greeted by the sight of the luxurious Sepilok Jungle Resort. It wasn't just any place to stay; it was a five-star property renowned for its comfort and charm. The resort's lush gardens and inviting lounge areas gave it a sense of calm after a long day. Our rooms were spacious, with large windows overlooking the jungle, promising restful nights ahead. The staff greeted us warmly, eager to make our stay memorable. We knew this was a special place — a peaceful retreat nestled within the natural beauty of Borneo.



Being at Sepilok Jungle Resort meant we were close to some of the area's most famous attractions, including the orangutan rehabilitative centre nearby. The cheerful, intelligent orangutans had become a symbol of conservation efforts in the region. Relaxing at the resort after a day of wildlife pursuits, we looked forward to exploring more of what this incredible region had to offer. The luxury of the hotel made the journey even more worthwhile, giving us a haven to unwind and prepare for the adventures that lay ahead.

Chapter 8

Rainforest Discovery Centre

Sepilok is situated just about 20 miles from the town of Sandakan, making it an easy trip for visitors exploring Sabah's rich wildlife. The area is well known among tourists for two main attractions. The first is the Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre, where orphaned and injured orangutans are cared for before being reintroduced into the wild. Visitors often watch these gentle primates as they swing through trees and learn about conservation efforts aimed at protecting this endangered species. The second major highlight is the Rainforest Discovery Centre, often called RDC, which captures the interest of many nature lovers and bird enthusiasts.

Sepilok is a very small town in Sabah, Malaysia, located on the northeastern coast of Borneo. Though modest in size, it plays an important role in conserving the island's incredible wildlife and rich natural environment. Sabah itself is known as a true natural playground. Its lush rainforests and diverse landscapes attract explorers from all over the world. Visitors often come to see the mighty Kinabatangan River, which winds through the jungle and is home to orangutans, elephants, crocodiles, and many bird species.

The Danum Valley offers miles of untouched rainforest teeming with wildlife, while Mount Kinabalu stands tall at 4,095 meters, drawing climbers eager to reach the summit.

In this picture-perfect setting, the Bornean Rainforest Discovery Centre is a key attraction, sitting in the heart of Sepilok. The centre is a gateway for visitors to learn about and explore the rainforest. It offers walking trails, canopy walks, and educational displays about the complex ecosystem. The surrounding area is a mix of dense rainforest and nearby palm oil plantations, which highlights the ongoing balance between conservation and agriculture in Borneo.

The town remains one of the last strongholds for efforts to protect the environment. The rainforest here is rich with rare plants and animals, many of which are endangered and rely on these protected areas for survival.

There are two main ways to reach Sepilok. The first option involves catching a domestic flight to Sandakan, which is closer to Sepilok. This flight usually takes about 45 minutes from Kotakinabalu, making it a quick and convenient choice for travellers with tight schedules.

The cost for this flight can be surprisingly affordable, starting at around £25, depending on the time of booking and airline. Many travel websites regularly offer cheap fares on this route, making it accessible for budget-conscious visitors. Flying reduces travel time significantly compared to land journeys, allowing you to spend more time exploring rather than sitting in transit.

Once in Sandakan, the journey to Sepilok continues with a short transfer. You can hire a private car, which offers the comfort of direct travel, or take a bus for a more economical option. Both modes of transportation are straightforward and well-organised, with buses operating regularly from Sandakan town to Sepilok. The ride is not long; it usually lasts around 30 minutes to an hour, depending on traffic and the specific pickup point. Detailed information about these transport options can be found

in the section below. Considering costs and convenience, choosing to fly might seem expensive initially. But, it is a smart choice for those wanting to save time and reduce travel fatigue. For travellers with limited days or

tight schedules, the internal flight provides a quick escape from hours of bus or car travel. The flight's shorter duration makes a significant difference, especially if the itinerary is packed.

While the flight option costs a bit more, it is often worth the extra expense. It allows visitors to arrive fresh and ready to enjoy what Sepilok has to offer. Those who prefer to save money and have more flexibility can opt for the land routes, but they should prepare for a longer journey. Whether you choose a swift flight or a scenic land route, each method has its benefits. Planning ahead and booking early can secure the best prices, making this crucial step on your Sabah trip smoother and more enjoyable.

The second option we considered, and ultimately decided upon, was to travel from Kota Kinabalu to Sepilok by road. We stopped at different destinations for birdwatching and photography. This journey took us through some of Sabah's most striking landscapes, including the towering peaks of Trusmadi and Gunung Alab. We chose this route because it offered us a chance to see the region's rich birdlife along the way. The journey itself was an adventure, winding through lush forests, patchwork rice fields, and small villages that seemed untouched by time. As we drove, we kept a keen eye out for birds, knowing this route is favourite among birdwatchers for its diverse species. Sabah is home to hundreds of bird species, with many colourful and rare varieties found in these forested hills.

The route offers more than just a scenic drive. It presents opportunities to spot some of Sabah's most sought-after birds, like the hornbills, kingfishers, and broadbills. Bird photographers

often stop along the way to capture shots of these fleeting creatures. The landscape also changes dramatically, from jungle-clad slopes to open clearings, making each segment of the journey different from the last. For birders, it's like a moving wildlife sanctuary.

Travelling by road from Kota Kinabalu to Sepilok is an experience that combines the thrill of bird watching with the enjoyment of a scenic drive. It allows visitors to connect with Sabah's wild beauty in a direct way. The route over Trusmadi and Gunung Alab is not just a means of getting there, but part of the adventure itself. It's ideal for those who want to immerse themselves in nature while on their way to a famous orangutan sanctuary. This approach reflects a true appreciation of Sabah's expansive landscapes and vibrant bird life.

In 2009, RDC was recognized internationally as Important Bird Area (IBA) and will often be a stopover point for birding tours in Sandakan.

The RDC is particularly famous for its canopy walkways. These elevated bridges stretch high above the rainforest floor, 27 meter at its highest point, giving visitors a bird's eye view of the treetops. It is here that the elusive and endemic Bornean Bristlehead has earned its reputation as one of the best places to see this rare bird in the wild. The Bristlehead, with its striking appearance and unique behaviours, is a rare sight for ornithologists and birdwatchers. The canopy walk allows visitors to observe this bird in its natural habitat, making it a truly special experience.



The site also offers a wealth of other opportunities to spot lowland rainforest species. Bird lovers can enjoy sightings of Diard's Trogons with their bright colours and distinctive calls, the Red-naped Trogon with its vibrant red nape, and the Scarlet-rumped Trogon, known for its striking plumage. Elegant Banded Kingfishers and the Rufous-collared Kingfisher are also frequently seen, along with the colourful Ruddy Kingfisher. The RDC's varied forest ecosystem is home to many bird species, each adding to the vibrant tapestry of life high in the trees.



Additional bird species such as the Hooded Pitta and the Black-and-Crimson Pitta also inhabit the area. These birds are known for their bold colours and lively behaviour. Their presence highlights how rich and diverse Borneo's rainforest is. The RDC is not only a popular spot for casual visitors but also a vital site for researchers studying the region's rare wildlife. Many species found here are difficult to see elsewhere, making this site a true jewel for birdwatchers and nature explorers alike. We spotted a Black and Yellow Broadbill from hornbill tower of RDC skywalk, perched very close to us.



Beyond the birds, the Rainforest Discovery Centre offers various trails and educational programmes. Visitors can learn about the importance of rainforest conservation and discover the complex relationships that sustain this ecosystem. The site's well-maintained trails are often filled with new sights and sounds, creating an immersive rainforest experience. With its combination of accessible viewing platforms, expert-guided tours, and the chance to observe rare and endemic species, it

remains a key destination for anyone interested in Borneo's unique flora and fauna.

While the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre competes for attention, the Rainforest Discovery Centre stands out for its vibrant birdlife and scenic canopy walkways. It offers a rare opportunity to connect with Borneo's rich biodiversity from a unique vantage point high above. Whether you are a bird enthusiast, a conservation supporter, or simply seeking a peaceful walk through lush rainforest, RDC provides the perfect setting to witness the magic of Borneo's wild side.

The Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) in Sepilok stands as a vital link between human life and one of Borneo's most precious environments. It acts as a bridge that connects visitors with the lush, vibrant heart of the Bornean jungle, home to some of the last wild orangutans on Earth. This centre is not just a place for observation; it is a sanctuary where nature's wonder is on full display and where people can learn about the importance of conserving these forests.

As we explored, we noticed that the RDC offers a rare chance to witness the jungle from a height that few get to experience. A specially designed skywalk runs through the middle of the reserve, allowing visitors to walk on a path that is level with the treetops. This elevated walkway takes you above the forest floor, into the emergent layer of the rainforest, where the tallest trees rise above everything else. Walking here, we felt truly immersed



in the jungle, almost as if we are part of the treetops. It is a surreal sight, seeing the lush green canopy spread out below you, alive with the sounds of birds and insects. Many visitors say this is one of the best ways to see the rainforest without disturbing it. The

skywalk offers stunning views of the forest, revealing different layers and revealing a complexity that is hard to imagine from the ground.

Besides the skywalk, several observation towers stand tall above the trees, giving an even wider view of the canopy. From these high points, you can scan the horizon and spot a variety of Bornean Hornbills. These large, colourful birds are easily recognised by their impressive beaks and distinctive calls. Watching them fly from perch to perch provides a glimpse into their busy lives, which depend on the lush foliage for food and shelter. The RDC has become a popular spot for bird watchers and nature lovers eager to see these rare and striking birds in their natural habitat. Early morning is the best time to visit, as the forest wakes up and animals become active. From sunrise until late afternoon, the wildlife is lively, and the forest's sounds are loud and full of life. The quiet mornings mean fewer visitors, so you get a more peaceful experience while spotting wildlife. Many experts agree that visiting during these early hours increases your chances of observing the rainforest in its most natural, undisturbed state.

The RDC offers an invaluable look into the vital role rainforests play in sustaining life on Borneo. It serves as both a sanctuary and an educational centre, teaching visitors about the importance of protecting this fragile ecosystem. With its breathtaking views, rich biodiversity, and peaceful atmosphere, the Rainforest Discovery Centre offers a window into a world most people never see. It reminds us why conserving these forests matters so much. For anyone travelling to Borneo, a visit to the RDC is not just recommended; it is essential. Seeing the canopy from above and watching the wild orangutans and hornbills in their natural home makes a lasting impression. It is

an experience that connects people with the environment and inspires a deeper appreciation for nature's wonders.

Orangutans and hornbills are just the start of what we could see in this lush rainforest. These animals are among the most famous residents, but a deeper exploration reveals many more fascinating creatures. If luck is on your side, you might encounter the playful long-tailed macaques climbing through the trees, or hear the distant call of gibbons swinging gracefully from branch to branch. These lively animals keep the forest alive with their sounds and movement. You may also spot large monitor lizards basking on rocks or hiding in the undergrowth, watching the area with alert eyes. The skies are filled with a variety of colourful and interesting birds, each adding its own song to the jungle chorus. Among them, vibrant hornbills with their large, distinctive beaks stand out as true characters of the forest.

One creature to watch out for is the pig-tail macaque. Known for their strong protective instincts, these monkeys can behave aggressively if they feel threatened. They often defend their territory fiercely, especially when warning others of possible danger. Visitors should always maintain a respectful distance to avoid provoking these tiny but feisty animals. The rainforest is teeming with life and every encounter holds a surprise.

To add to the adventure, visitors get the chance to take part in a special night walk organised by the Rainforest Discovery Centre. This magical experience allows to see aspects of the jungle that go unseen during the day. As twilight falls, the rainforest awakens in a different way. You might spot glow-in-the-dark insects dancing in the air, watch amphibians like frogs leap suddenly from their hiding spots, or observe tiny spiders and arachnids in their web-building.

Night walks reveal the jungle's hidden world—an ecosystem filled with creatures that thrive under cover of darkness. Glowing insects light up the path, and the sounds of chirping frogs fill the air. Some animals not active during daylight emerge to hunt or explore in the cool night. This experience offers a rare glimpse into the rainforest's

secret life, making it a must-do for any lover of nature or adventure. Such encounters deepen your understanding of the rich diversity that makes the rainforest the most vibrant and complex wild space on Earth.

The forest at RDC is part of the larger Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve, a protected area known for its rich plant and animal diversity. The centre itself only occupies a small section of this vast forest. Despite its size, it offers visitors a chance to explore the jungle's natural beauty. There are trails winding deep into the forest, allowing people to experience the actual wilderness firsthand. These paths can take you past towering trees, thick vines, and hidden clearings. However, venturing far into the jungle isn't easy or safe without proper permission. Visitors must obtain a special permit before accessing the deeper trails. This permit helps park officials manage the flow of visitors and protect the forest environment. It also ensures that those exploring do so with an understanding of the rules and safety guidelines.

The trails serve as a gateway for nature enthusiasts, researchers, and adventure seekers interested in exploring unspoiled parts of the forest. By moving deeper into the jungle, visitors can observe unique plant species and catch a glimpse of rare wildlife, such as certain bird or insect species that thrive in this habitat. These trails are carefully maintained to lessen human impact while still allowing a close-up experience of the forest's vibrant life. They

also offer opportunities for guided tours led by experts who can point out important ecological features and explain the significance of this protected area.



The Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve itself plays an essential role in conserving Sabah's natural heritage. It covers thousands of hectares and acts as a home to many endangered species, including the famous orangutans that reside there. The RDC centre, although small, contributes to this larger conservation effort by providing a controlled way for visitors to understand

the importance of protecting such areas. Only a limited number of people can access the most remote parts of the forest at a time, ensuring that the delicate ecosystem remains undisturbed.

Most visitors are drawn to Sepilok for its famous orangutan rehabilitation centre. Since its opening in 1964, the centre has helped rescue, rehabilitate, and release orangutans back into the wild. It's one of the best places on the island to see these intelligent creatures in their natural habitat. The centre also educates the public on the importance of forest conservation and sustainable practices. With efforts like these, Sepilok continues to hold its tiny share of Borneo's vast wilderness, serving as a crucial reminder of nature's fragility and resilience. It remains a peaceful haven for those seeking to connect with nature's true beauty while supporting vital conservation work.

For anyone interested in plants and nature, exploration here can be truly fascinating. If you're an aspiring botanist, this place is a treasure chest of unusual and intriguing flora. Many exotic plants and trees can be found here that aren't often seen elsewhere. One of my favourites is the Sepilok giant, a colossal tree that rises high above the surrounding rainforest. Its massive trunk and expansive canopy create a striking silhouette against the sky. Walking among such giants gives you a sense of the ancient power of nature. It's like stepping back in time, witnessing plants that have stood for hundreds or even thousands of years.

The park itself offers an extensive network of walking paths. These trails wind through the lush greenery, making it easy to spend hours exploring at your own pace. From dense, shady jungle corridors to open clearings, each turn reveals a new plant or bird species. It's a place where every step brings a new discovery. Visitors often lose track of time, chasing the sound of

exotic bird calls or searching for hidden orchids growing on tree trunks.

One of the park's main attractions is the Rainforest Discovery Centre Skywalk. This impressive structure stretches over 620 metres long and includes several towers at different heights. These towers lift visitors into the branches of the trees, giving an incredible perspective of the rainforest from above. It's like walking in the treetops, where you can see the lush canopy, hear the busy life of birds and insects, and even spot orangutans swinging through the branches. These animals and many colourful birds seem so close you can almost reach out and touch them. The Skywalk offers a rare glimpse into the world above eye level, a view not possible from the ground.



Standing on the towers, you can observe how the forest functions as a self-sustaining community. The floating canopy teems with life, hosting a variety of animals and plants adapted to this elevated environment. Many experts say that experiencing the canopy is key to understanding the rainforest's true complexity. It's a chance to appreciate how the tallest trees

provide habitat for countless creatures and how they shape the entire ecosystem.



All these features make the park a perfect spot for anyone eager to learn more about plant life and wildlife. With so much to see and do, you could spend a whole day wandering through its trails and exploring the skywalk. Every visitor leaves with a deeper respect for nature's diversity and beauty.

Birdwatchers will find plenty to see in the park, but the most popular spot for spotting birds is the Skywalk. This raised walkway gives visitors a wider view of the trees, water, and open spaces where birds like to gather. From here, you can often see different species soaring above or perched silently on branches. The Skywalk acts like a mini observatory in the air, providing a great opportunity to notice details that might get missed from the ground.

One of the most popular features is the canopy walkway. This elevated bridge runs through the tall trees, providing a perfect vantage point for spotting birds. The canopy is especially lively early in the morning when sunlight filters through the leaves. As

the day begins, birds become more active and vocal, making this a prime time for birdwatchers.

The park offers several well-maintained trails, each leading to different habitats and birding spots. Most bird enthusiasts like to start their mornings on the trails. Around mid-morning, bird calls tend to increase in intensity. This is a good time to explore the trails. Some may walk a few loops, checking different spots where birds have been calling or seen earlier.

The park is well-known for its diverse birdlife. Visitors often come for the chance to see the Blue-naped Parrot, which has become a symbol of the area. Over the years, these parrots have successfully colonised the park and are now easy to spot. They are lively, noisy birds that flock in small groups. Their bright green plumage and loud calls make them impossible to miss. These parrots have adapted well, partly because the park's constant upkeep has created a suitable environment.

At the rainforest skywalk, team RDC took action to help the red giant flying squirrels, a species vulnerable due to habitat loss. They built special nest boxes to replace the homes these creatures lost when the branches they used to cling to snapped off. These squirrels are nocturnal animals, meaning they are active only after sunset, floating through the darkness in search of food. Their eyes are specially adapted to see well on moonless nights, giving them an advantage in navigating the dense forest under the cover of night. As the evening progresses, visitors often have a chance to witness these remarkable creatures in flight. On clear days, late in the evening, it is not uncommon to spot three or four glides as these squirrels leap from tree to tree, their silhouettes darting through the darkness.

The red giant flying squirrel ranks among the largest of its kind. It is also one of the longest squirrels in the world. Some of the

larger individuals measure up to 1.2 meters from head to tail tip. They can weigh as much as 3.2 kilograms, a hefty size compared to other flying squirrels. Interestingly, males are sometimes lighter than females, likely due to differences in body structure or reproductive needs.

These creatures require a vast home range to find enough food and survive. It is estimated that a group of about five squirrels needs around 50 acres of forest to thrive comfortably. They spend their nights searching for food, expertly gliding through the air to reach their meals.

Their diet mostly consists of young leaves, which they find high in nutrients. But their menu is quite varied. They also eat shoots emerging from plants, tender flowers, ripe fruits, nuts, and seeds. Occasionally, they nibble on lichen, moss, or small twigs. Bark also features in their diet, giving them a rich variety to supplement their nutrition. This diverse diet helps them find enough energy to sustain their active lifestyle.

The flying squirrels are impressive gliders. They can cover distances of up to 150 meters in a single glide. However, most glides are shorter, usually no more than 50 meters. When they leap from the tree, they land well below their launch point. Their glide angle typically falls between 14 and 22 degrees, allowing for precise control. The ability to glide so far helps them move quickly and avoid predators, like large owls or cats, that hunt at night. Forests with trees spaced less than 150 meters apart suit them well. If the trees are too far apart, they may struggle to get around, especially when the forest is disturbed or begins to recover from logging.

These gliding skills, combined with their ability to navigate the thick canopy at night, make the red giant flying squirrel a true master of its environment. Their survival depends on the

availability of tall, closely spaced trees and a healthy supply of food. When forests are logged or degraded, their chances of thriving diminish. Yet, by creating and protecting habitat features like nest boxes, conservation groups help ensure these amazing creatures continue to grace the rainforest, gliding silently through the night sky.

In summary, RDC offers a rewarding wildlife experience. Starting early at the canopy walkway allows visitors to enjoy a lively display of bird activity. The trails provide opportunities to see rare species like the Blue-naped Parrot. Protecting this species remains vital, as their numbers in the wild continue to decline. RDC stands as a key refuge and an excellent place to observe some of Sabah's most captivating birdlife.

Beyond the Skywalk, the park offers several hidden spots known as hides. These are small, enclosed shelters designed specifically for birdwatching. Located towards the back of the park, these hides help visitors observe birds up close without disturbing them. People often find that most birds are active early in the morning, just as the sun rises, making that the best time to visit these hiding spots. In the late afternoon or even at night, some nocturnal species become more visible, adding an exciting element for those seeking rare sightings.

The designated hides at the back of the park are set up to blend into the natural surroundings. They are usually made of wood or other quiet materials, allowing guests to observe quietly and without scaring the birds away. These areas are often less crowded, which means more peace and a better chance to see shy or shy birds like warblers, owls, and woodpeckers.

Birdwatching at dawn provides the quietest atmosphere, when most birds are starting their day. During this time, the air is usually calm and still, making it easier to hear the calls and

chirps that give away the presence of different species. The late evening can also be rewarding, especially as some birds begin to settle for the night, making it a perfect time for observation.

We woke up very early, stepping into the Rainforest Discovery Centre while it was still dark outside. It was almost pitch black as we approached the entrance, showing a guard our pre-booked tickets for the day. The sky was just beginning to lighten when we headed straight toward the Hornbill Tower. We started climbing the tower as faint light crept over the trees, but heavy rain was falling, making it a good decision to pause inside the shelter and listen to the muted sounds of the dawn chorus. The birds' calls were half-hearted, probably discouraged by the downpour, but it was still exciting to be up high and so close to the rainforest canopy.

Once the rain eased, we spent the next few hours exploring different parts of the centre. We saw a broad range of bird species, each one more interesting than the last. Highlights included the Asian Brown Flycatcher with its quick, flicking tail, and the Black-winged Flycatcher-shrike, a striking and active bird. We also spotted a Raffle's Malkoha, a long-tailed cuckoo with an elega kont shape, and a Lesser Green Leafbird, whose bright lime-green feathers stood out in the greenery. The Green Iora, with its delicate, vibrant plumage, flitted through the trees alongside a Changeable Hawk-eagle soaring high above. We caught sight of the impressive White-bellied Woodpecker drilling into a trunk and the fiery-coloured Minivet darting between branches. A Ruby-cheeked Sunbird showed flashes of bright red and blue, and the majestic Rhinoceros Hornbill, with its enormous, curved bill and casque, flew in silent circles overhead. Each sighting felt like a small victory in this rich, lively rainforest environment.

As the clouds parted and the sun finally broke through the thick canopy, we decided to take a walk along one of the trails that wound deep into the forest. We knew it would take several hours to fully explore, and it did. The forest was alive with sounds and movement. One of the best finds was a Lesser Mouse Deer, a tiny, shy creature that rarely shows itself. It darted through the undergrowth, and we managed to catch a brief glimpse before it slipped into the dense foliage again. Birding inside this lush habitat was rewarding, with surprises like a Black-crowned Pitta quietly hopping on the forest floor and a Black-naped Monarch perched high in a tree, watching us calmly. But as the morning heat increased, the forest quieted down considerably, and bird activity slowed. The temperature climbed, making it harder for the birds to be active and leaving us with a moment of quiet, warm contemplation.

Back at the base camp, we took a short break, resting and rehydrating before heading out again. In the afternoon, we returned to one of the towers, eager to spot the elusive Bornean Bristlehead. Our hopes were high, but again, the morning's luck had not returned. Instead, we saw some familiar species we had already encountered, such as Plain Sunbirds and Lesser Cuckooshrikes. Still, the afternoon was not without its moments of wonder. We were treated to a sighting of Black-and-yellow Broadbills, their colourful plumage making them stand out like floating jewels. Their striking appearance was a true highlight, and many of us couldn't stop staring.

As daylight faded, we made our way slowly back to the reception area, feeling the cool evening air set in. We waited for our group and guide to arrive for an evening walk that promised to be special. The guides were well known for knowing exactly where to look for shy and nocturnal creatures. Once everyone was assembled, we headed onto the canopy walkway, high above the

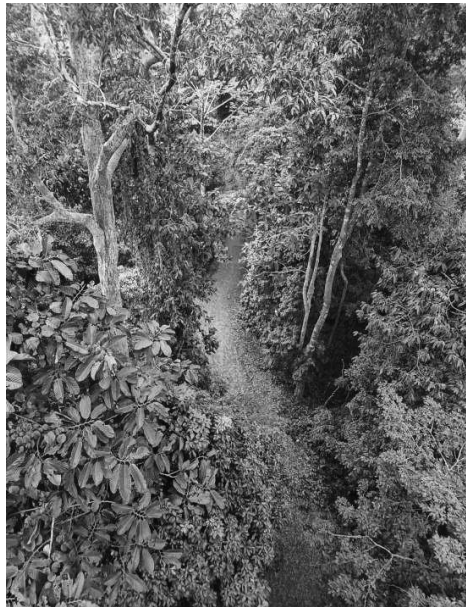
forest floor. Our first big moment happened when we saw a stunning Red Giant Flying Squirrel emerge from its daytime roost. Two of these squirrels took turns crossing the night sky, their fluffy bodies silhouetted against the moonlit canopy, moving gracefully through the darkness.

Understanding these best times and places helps birdwatchers plan their visits better. Whether it's from the elevated view of the Skywalk or through the concealed hides in the back of the park, each location offers a unique experience. Both spots uncover a rich tapestry of bird life and show why this park is such a treasured habitat for feathered visitors.

If the heat outside feels overwhelming, step into the exhibition hall where cool air from air conditioning offers relief. The hall is filled with display boards that present detailed information about various creatures. These boards are packed with facts and photos that help visitors understand the animals better, from their habits to their environments. As I moved through the exhibits, I was truly surprised to learn that orangutans can use sign language to share their feelings. It isn't just about simple gestures but complex signs that express a range of emotions. Seeing these intelligent primates communicate in a way that resembles human language was startling. Experts have shown that orangutans can learn hundreds of signs, and they often use them to tell caretakers about their needs or even their moods. Such discoveries highlight how close some animals are to humans and how much they can express if given the chance. This makes the exhibit more than just interesting; it reveals the deep connection between humans and animals. It also challenges what we believe about communication, showing that animals are more aware and expressive than many think. Learning this made me see orangutans in a new light, knowing they use sign language not just as a tool but as a genuine way to share their inner feelings. This point alone makes the visit worth a while,

emphasising how much more there is to discover about the creatures that share our world.

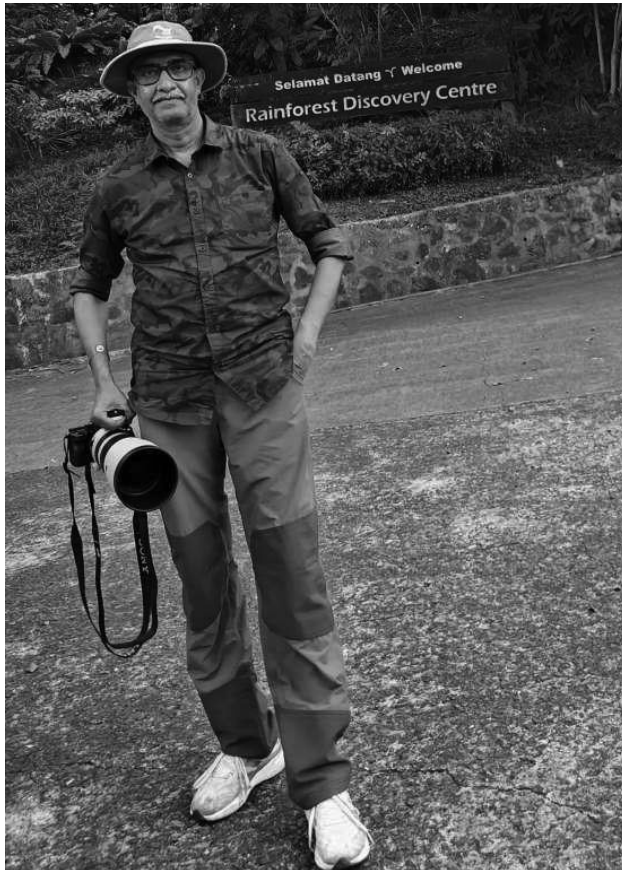
Walking through this park feels like stepping into a living, breathing jungle documentary. One of the highlights is the Skywalk — a sturdy trail that runs high above the forest floor. As you walk among the treetops, you get a panoramic view of the canopy, where giant trees tower over you, dwarfed by the forest's largest residents. The Skywalk offers a rare chance to observe animals in their natural habitat from above, spotting hornbills or even a glimpse of a flying fox. When you reach the giant, known locally as the 'Sepilok giant', you stand in awe of the towering tree that looms over the forest. It's a reminder of how grand and ancient this jungle truly is.



The RDC (Rainforest Discovery Centre) is more than just a park; it's a full-day adventure. It combines wildlife encounters, scenic walks, and engaging exhibitions. Whether you want to witness orangutans being cared for or just experience the magic of the rainforest, this spot offers a rich, memorable day out. It's

perfect for nature lovers of all ages eager to connect with one of the world's most extraordinary forests.

The Sepilok and Sandakan area offers a truly exceptional park where visitors can immerse themselves in Borneo's rich wildlife and lush plant life. This spot should be at the very top of your travel plans when exploring this part of Borneo. It is one of the few places anywhere.



The Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) serves as a welcoming gateway for visitors eager to understand the true magic of Borneo's lush rainforests. It offers an excellent starting point for anyone interested in exploring the rich biodiversity that makes

this region so special. As you step inside the centre, you are immediately surrounded by the sights and sounds of nature. The RDC encourages visitors to look closely at the vibrant plants and unusual animals that thrive here. You might catch a glimpse of bright orchids, towering trees covered in moss, or colourful butterflies flitting through the air.

This area is famous for its wide variety of plant and animal species. Large green trees stretch towards the sky, forming a thick canopy that shelters countless creatures beneath. Among these are the orangutans that swing through the branches, rare hornbills with their striking beaks, and the tiny insects that help pollinate flowers. The rainforest is home to thousands of species, many of which are still being discovered by scientists.

The RDC provides more than just a nature walk. It offers the chance to learn about the environmental importance of rainforests. These forests play a crucial role in balancing the Earth's climate. They absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen, helping to keep the planet healthy. Visiting here helps visitors understand how this green lung is vital for future generations.

The centre is equipped with information boards, guided tours, and well-placed observation decks. These features allow visitors to get a closer look and learn about the ecosystem's delicate balance. If you look around, you will see the impressive variety of flora and fauna that make Borneo's rainforests extraordinary. Every tree, leaf, and creature tells a story about survival and adaptation in these unique forests.

The RDC is situated in a very low-lying part of the rainforest, which means it is often very hot and humid. Visitors should expect warm temperatures most of the year, with the possibility of sudden rain showers. These showers can happen at any time,

so it's wise to be prepared for wet weather even when the sky looks clear. The high humidity and warmth can make outdoor activities more challenging, especially during the middle of the day when the sun is strongest. To stay comfortable, it is important to pack light, breathable clothing that allows your skin to breathe and keeps you cool. Lightweight shirts, shorts, or skirts made from natural fabrics are best.

Sun protection also becomes a necessity, especially if you plan to spend time on the skywalk. Sun hats, sunglasses, and a good layer of sunscreen will help protect your skin from harmful rays. When walking along the skywalk, it can get bright and sunny, so gear up accordingly. Bring along waterproof gear not only for yourself but also to protect your camera and other electronics. Rainproof covers or small ponchos will come in handy if rain starts unexpectedly, keeping your equipment dry and safe.

While insects are present, mosquitoes and leeches are not usually a big issue in this area. Still, using insect repellent is a good idea, especially in the early mornings and late afternoons. Applying it can prevent bites from mosquitoes and keep all types of insects at bay. If you are sensitive or just want to be cautious, wearing long sleeves and trousers can add extra protection. Nonetheless, the presence of mosquitoes and leeches is less problematic here compared to other rainforest spots, but it's always better to be safe.

Bird watching in the RDC is generally straightforward and accessible for most visitors. The easy-to-walk skywalk, stretching over 620 metres, allows bird enthusiasts to observe from above easily. The jungle trails are flat, straight, and clearly marked, making navigation simple. You won't find steep hills or tricky climbs here; just walk along the trails and keep your eyes and ears open. Listening carefully can reveal bird calls, which often

lead to exciting sightings. Carry enough drinking water with you, especially on warm days, to stay hydrated during your hike.

The best times to go birdwatching are early mornings and late afternoons. During these periods, bird activity is at its peak, and you are more likely to see a variety of species. The middle of the day can be extremely hot, making wildlife less active as most birds seek shade or stay hidden to escape the sun's heat. This means fewer sightings and a less rewarding experience if you only visit during mid-day hours.

The RDC has a strict policy against bird feeding and using calling back techniques. There are no designated feeding stations within the park, and visitors are encouraged not to feed or disturb the natural behaviour of the birds. The species here are mostly resident lowland rainforest birds, which means they are accustomed to their environment. During the northern winter, migratory birds arrive, adding to the already impressive collection of local species. This seasonal influx creates a dynamic and diverse bird population that simplifies spotting rare and colourful birds.

The rainforest skywalk is a highlight, spanning 620 metres on solidly constructed metal beams high above the ground. It offers visitors a panoramic view of the lush canopy and a chance to see birds from a unique vantage point. The walkway is sturdy, safe, and broad enough to accommodate tripods and photography gear. This makes it one of the best spots for bird photography, especially for capturing shots from above the forest floor.

Along the skywalk are three observation towers, each named after a key bird species: the Bristlehead Tower, the Trogon Tower, and the Hornbill Tower. These towers extend even higher than the walkway, giving visitors an elevated platform to observe distant birds and wildlife with greater clarity. They are perfect

for spotting birds like hornbills flying overhead or raptors soaring in the sky. From these vantage points, common sightings include Bornean Bristlehead, various species of hornbills, raptors, broadbills with striking black and yellow markings, Charlotte's bulbul, cream-eyed bulbul, Bornean black magpie, and a range of flycatchers.

The RDC also features several well-kept jungle trails that criss-cross through the forest. These trails give access to different parts of the rainforest, especially the wetter areas near small streams. Streams attract many bird species, making these trails ideal for seeing understory birds that might not be visible from the skywalk. Along these paths, you might encounter pittas, partridges, babblers, white-crowned shamas, trogons, kingfishers, woodpeckers, and other birdlife. The trails are flat and easy to walk, welcoming photographers and birdwatchers of all skill levels.

Mammals can also be seen in the RDC, adding more excitement to the trip. You might catch sight of orangutans swinging gracefully through the trees, or glimpse the swift movements of Prevost's squirrels and the large, cream-coloured giant squirrel. Red giant flying squirrels glide silently through the canopy at night, while pig-tailed macaques are often spotted along the trails or near the skywalk. If you encounter a macaque blocking your path, it's best to find another route to avoid any aggressive behaviour. Male macaques in particular can be territorial and confrontational if they feel threatened.

Wildlife safety is crucial, as the rainforest still contains some dangers. Pit vipers are a rare sight but must be respected; occasionally, they can be seen coiled around the metal railings of the skywalk, blending perfectly with the surroundings. It's essential to stay alert and avoid disturbing any animals you see.

Respect the environment and observe quietly to ensure your visit remains safe and enjoyable.

This environment offers a rich tapestry of life, waiting for visitors who come prepared and eager to explore. From the broad canopy views on the skywalk to the intimate trails through the undergrowth, each part of the RDC reveals something new. It is a true sanctuary for bird lovers and wildlife enthusiasts alike, providing a chance to see some of Borneo's most iconic species in their natural habitat.

The RDC is equipped with a wide range of high-quality facilities that are conveniently located within its grounds, making it easy for visitors to access everything they need during their stay. Visitors can find multiple public toilets scattered throughout the park, ensuring convenience no matter where they are exploring. These restrooms are well-maintained and kept clean, providing a comfortable stop for families, bird watchers, and nature lovers alike.

The Keruing café is situated near the start of the scenic skywalk, making it an ideal spot to take a break. This popular restaurant offers a relaxing environment where visitors can enjoy a meal or a refreshing drink after exploring the park's many attractions. It's especially welcoming during the quiet periods between birding seasons, giving visitors a chance to unwind and rejuvenate before their next adventure.

Throughout the park, visitors will notice several gazebos and shelters strategically placed along walking paths and picnic areas. These structures provide welcome shade from the sun during hot days and protection from sudden rain showers. They are perfect spots for families to gather for picnics or for groups to rest after a long walk through the lush surroundings.

Inside the new visitors centre, a souvenir shop offers a variety of keepsakes, from colourful postcards and local crafts to nature-themed souvenirs. It is a good place to pick up gifts and mementos that capture the beauty of the park, allowing visitors to take a piece of the experience home with them.

The Kabili theatre is a compact venue designed for educational talks and presentations about the park's wildlife and conservation efforts. It features comfortable seating and visual displays that make learning engaging for all ages. For larger events or more extensive exhibitions, the rainforest hall within the visitors centre serves as an expansive space to host seminars, workshops, or community gatherings.

The visitors centre also caters to spiritual needs, with dedicated Muslim prayer rooms available for visitors of faith. These rooms provide a quiet and private space for prayer, allowing visitors to observe their religious practices comfortably during their park visit.

Clear, well-designed signage is found throughout the park, helping visitors navigate easily. These signs point out key attractions, walking trails, facilities, and safety information, greatly reducing the chances of anyone getting lost amid the beautiful natural scenery. They include simple maps and directions, making exploration straightforward and enjoyable for all, from first-time visitors to those familiar with the park.

Near the entrance, the plant discovery garden offers a rich display of diverse plant species. This garden is especially popular with plant lovers and botanists, showcasing native and exotic plants that thrive in the region. It provides an educational experience as visitors can learn about different types of flora and their importance to the ecosystem. The garden's layout

encourages curiosity and discovery, making it an engaging start to the visit.

For thrill-seekers and adventure lovers, the flying squirrel zipline is situated at the main lake. This exciting attraction lets visitors experience a rush of adrenaline as they glide over the water and treetops. It offers a unique perspective of the park's natural beauty, combining excitement with breathtaking views. The zipline is carefully maintained to ensure safety and offers an unforgettable experience for those seeking a true outdoor adventure.

In summary, the RDC combines practical facilities and engaging attractions to create a welcoming environment for all visitors. From comfortable eateries and shaded shelters to educational centres and adrenaline-pumping activities, everything is designed to enhance the experience. The park's thoughtful layout and well-maintained amenities make it a top destination for nature lovers, families, and adventure seekers alike.

The night walk at the Rainforest Discovery Center (RDC) is an essential experience for anyone exploring the biodiversity of the Reserve. As the sun dips below the horizon, the rich rainforest transforms into a vibrant, noisy world filled with life. The forest at night has a rhythm all its own, waking up a different set of animals that go quiet during the day. This special two-hour guided adventure allows visitors to witness this hidden world in detail. Led by experienced park rangers who know each sound and shadow, these walks are safety-guided, educational, and captivating.

During the night trek, you might stumble upon rare and unusual animals such as the Western trairer, a small, fast-moving mammal that scurries through the undergrowth. Mousedeers, tiny deer with large eyes, can often be seen quietly nibbling on

leaves. The Sunda stink-badger, a shy nocturnal creature with a pungent scent, may cross your path. Also, keep an eye out for the moonrat, a mysterious nocturnal mammal that feeds on insects and small animals. Slow lorises, with their large, doleful eyes, are slow-moving primates that cling softly to tree branches. Insects abound—glittering fireflies, glow-worms, and a multitude of beetles sparkle under the guide's torchlight. Frogs with bright colours and strange calls fill the night air, while reptiles like snakes and lizards curl in the shadows, waiting silently.

Bird lovers also have a chance to spot some of Borneo's nocturnal avian residents. The haunting calls of the Sunda scopes owl, the steady hoots of the Brown boobook, and the gentle, melodic sounds of the Oriental bay owl fill the night sky, making it a true delight for birdwatchers. These owls are masters of stealth, often perching silently high in the canopy, scanning the darkness below.

This special time in the rainforest showcases nature's cycles. The jungle comes alive twice daily: at dawn and at dusk. The RDC's evening walk, starting at 6pm, captures the magic of the dusk shift. As the last light fades, the sounds and sights of wildlife multiply. The silence of the forest is broken by the energetic chorus of frogs, the melodious calls of exotic birds, and the buzz and chirp of countless insects and invertebrates. My senses were overwhelmed by the richness of the sounds and sights—I could almost taste the humid air filled with life.

Participants are usually divided into small groups of about seven, each with a knowledgeable local guide. These guides are true experts, with a deep understanding of the forest's creatures. Their skill at spotting camouflaged animals is impressive. Without them, many animals would be missed entirely. They carry powerful torches to help point out insects, reptiles, and

small mammals hiding in trees and bushes, revealing details that might go unnoticed to untrained eyes.

One innovative feature of these walks is the use of red light, a tactic preferred by ecologists. Red light helps preserve the natural night vision of both the guides and visitors. It reduces disturbance to the animals, enabling more natural behaviour. Unlike traditional white torches, red light illuminates the forest while staying gentle on the delicate balance of nocturnal life. When the guide points their torch at a branch, the scene unfolds: a leaf unravelling revealing a camouflaged insect, a lizard sunning itself on a branch, or a hidden frog darting into the shadows.

As the sky darkens, the forest's ceiling becomes a stage for spectacular displays. While one eye stays trained on the canopy, catching glimpses of red giant flying squirrels becomes possible. These impressive mammals are not true "fliers" but glide through the air with remarkable grace. Suddenly, two enormous flying squirrels swooped above us, their wide gliding membranes catching the faint light. They launched from large trees, soaring across the dark sky, their movements smooth and silent. It looked like a scene from a wild documentary, leaving me spellbound.

Many people are surprised to learn that flying squirrels don't actually fly. Instead, they glide—using a flap of skin stretched between their front and back legs. This "gliding membrane" acts like a parachute, allowing them to move from tree to tree with ease. Borneo hosts 14 species of flying squirrel, with two of the largest, the black and red flying squirrels, seen regularly at RDC. Their size, agility, and silent passage add a sense of wonder to the night.

After the canopy walk, our guide Rosli led us on a walk along the forest floor. He is a seasoned expert, having guided night safaris

for many years. His quick, confident movements with his bright yellow torch revealed a surprising number of creatures. We saw our first sleeping Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher, its tiny body tucked into a tree branch. We encountered beautifully decorated moths, with wings patterned like stained glass. Small, adorable tree frogs sat quietly, their bright colours standing out in the dark. The night was alive with insects—spiders, beetles, and shimmering fireflies—that danced around us like tiny stars.

The night's climax was spotting two Philippine slow lorises high in the trees. These mysterious animals displayed courtship behaviour, their big eyes shining with curiosity. These slow-moving primates are rare and vulnerable, with a toxic bite that can deter predators. Sadly, their numbers are falling, largely due to the pet trade. Watching these gentle creatures in their natural habitat underscored how much of Borneo's rainforest remains a hidden world, full of wonder and risk.

Walking through the rainforest at night leaves a deep impression. The darkness feels heavy, filled with unexplored secrets. It leaves a sense that much remains unknown about this lush, vibrant world. Every sound, shadow, and movement hints at the vast complexity of life hidden beneath the canopy. Such nights reveal the magic—and mystery—of Borneo's tropical forest.

The Nature Experience program at the RDC offers visitors a special chance to get closer to the natural world around them. It is designed to give people a real feel for the environment by including a wide variety of activities. These activities take place both indoors and outdoors, allowing visitors to experience different aspects of nature firsthand. For example, participants can go on a guided walk through the plant discovery garden, where they learn about a variety of local and exotic plants. The

garden is full of colourful flowers, strange trees, and interesting shrubs, all of which tell unique stories about the local ecosystem. Visitors are encouraged to pause and observe the details—like the shape of a leaf or the pattern on a flower—and learn how plants grow and thrive.

In addition to the garden, the program also offers a rainforest walk. This path takes visitors into a lush, dense environment that mimics a real rainforest. They can hear the sounds of insects, see tall trees towering overhead, and spot animals that thrive in such habitats.

Walking through this scene gives people a better understanding of the importance of rainforests and the unique animals and plants that call them home. The guides share interesting facts about these ecosystems, helping visitors grasp their complexity and beauty.

As the day winds down and the sun begins to set, the atmosphere shifts. When twilight approaches, most visitors gather around to witness a special event. They watch eagerly as the Red Giant flying squirrel emerges from its hiding place. This rare sight often excites everyone, as the squirrel's graceful flight and striking red fur are a true highlight of the experience. Many find it calming and awe-inspiring to see this creature come out after a day of exploring. It offers a glimpse into the secret life of nocturnal animals and connects visitors to nature's silent rhythms.

The program's mix of outdoor exploration and quiet observation helps foster a genuine connection with nature. Visitors leave with a deeper appreciation for the environment and a better understanding of the ecosystems that surround them. The experience encourages curiosity and respect for the wild, making each visit memorable. It combines education,

adventure, and moments of peaceful reflection—creating an authentic and meaningful journey into the natural world.

By exploring the RDC, visitors gain insight into the importance of protecting these forests from threats like deforestation and climate change. It highlights the urgent need for conservation efforts to preserve this natural treasure. The rainforest's beauty and complexity quickly become clear, making it a must-visit spot for nature lovers and curious travellers alike. The RDC is not just a place to see plants and animals; it is a window into one of the richest and most vital ecosystems on Earth. Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, Sepilok (Sabah), Borneo

Chapter 9

Bornean Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre.

The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, located in the heart of Sabah in Malaysian Borneo, is a place where hope comes alive for rescued orangutans. This centre is more than just a rescue shelter; it is a vital sanctuary where these great apes are given a second chance to survive in the wild. Established in 1964, it was one of the first projects of its kind, aiming to protect the rapidly declining orangutan population caused by deforestation, illegal pet trade, and palm oil plantations encroaching on their natural habitat. Visitors to this centre often find themselves drawn into a story of survival and renewal as they watch young orangutans learn vital skills from experienced caretakers.



The centre spans over 43 square kilometres of lush rainforest, mimicking the orangutans' natural environment. Here, highly trained staff and volunteers work tirelessly to rehabilitate orangutans that have been rescued from captivity, injury, or habitat destruction. Many of these orangutans arrive traumatised or malnourished, having been taken from their mothers or caught as babies. Over time, the centre provides medical care, nutrition, and behavioural training to prepare them for life back in the wild. This process can take months or even years, but it is crucial for their chances to thrive outside the enclosure.



One striking aspect of the centre is the “flying foxes,” a series of high wooden platforms and ropes where the young apes practice climbing, swinging, and moving through the canopy. These activities help develop their strength and agility, essential skills for survival.

Visitors often get the chance to see orangutans grooming each other or enjoying their natural diet of fruits, leaves, and insects. The centre also runs educational programmes that inspire

visitors to protect orangutans and their habitat, spreading awareness about their plight.

The work done at Sepilok has made a tangible difference. Since opening, the centre has successfully released hundreds of orangutans back into protected forest areas. Experts estimate that thousands of orangutans in Borneo face threats today; the centre plays a key role in efforts to prevent their extinction. It also partners with other conservation initiatives to stop illegal poaching and logging, which continue to reduce their forest homes.

Visitors often leave with a sense of connection, understanding how much work goes into saving these gentle giants. Watching an orangutan swing freely in the trees or seeing one receive care after a tough start in life reminds guests of the importance of protecting this species. The centre turns what could be a sad story into a hopeful one, showing the resilience of nature and the efforts of dedicated people to ensure a future where orangutans can thrive once more.



At the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, staff provide the same food to the orangutans every single day. This might seem simple, but it's a well-thought-out plan. The main goal is to help the orangutans regain their natural instincts. When they are used to a fixed diet, they are less likely to become dependent on human-provided food for survival in the wild.

The regular feeding routine includes high-quality fruits, specially prepared vegetables, and sometimes nutritional supplements to ensure they get all the vitamins they need. These meals are carefully chosen to match what orangutans would normally eat in the wild. By feeding them the same food daily, staff create a stable environment that reduces confusion. It also encourages them to explore their surroundings for other food sources, just like they would in their natural habitat.



The reason for maintaining this consistency is tied to the orangutans' natural behaviour. In the wild, they spend hours each day searching for food. If they only get the same meal every day, they might lose this instinct and become too dependent on humans for meals. When they become bored with the same food, they start looking for other options, which helps keep their skills

sharp. This natural search behaviour is crucial for their chances of survival once they are released back into the wild.



For example, if an orangutan gets bored of bananas or papayas, it might try eating different leaves or harder-to-reach nuts. This mimics the real hunting and foraging experience in the forest. The staff observe these changes closely. If an orangutan begins to look for food beyond what's provided, it's a sign they are starting to act more like wild orangutans.



This method of feeding also encourages physical activity. When orangutans are motivated to find other food sources, they climb, swing, and move around more. All this exercise is vital for developing strength and agility. It keeps their muscles active and prepares them for life back in the wild, where they will need to hunt or forage for themselves.



Another reason for the daily diet is consistency. The staff have years of experience and know that predictable meals are good for the orangutans' health. Sudden changes in diet could upset their digestion or make them less willing to eat. Having a set routine helps ensure they stay healthy and strong during their rehabilitation.



It's a careful balance. Too much reliance on provided food might be bad, but a stable diet supports health and natural behaviour. The orangutans are watched very closely, and staff have learned how to adjust their care based on each individual's response. It's about giving them the best chance to not just survive, but to thrive once they are out in the wild again.

This approach shows that even a simple routine, like giving the same food every day, plays a huge part in the orangutans' journey back to independence. It's a dedicated effort by the staff to prepare these great apes for life beyond captivity. It's a key step in helping them regain their natural skills, ensuring they are ready when the time comes to release them into their forest home.



During certain times of the year, especially when it is the fruiting season, the number of orangutans seen in the wild drops significantly. Sometimes, only a handful of orangutans can be spotted, and in some cases, none are visible at all. This pattern is not random. It reflects the natural behaviour of orangutans, who tend to gather in larger groups or remain visible when food is scarce or when they are actively searching for new feeding areas. When the trees come alive with ripe fruit, orangutans are often less noticeable because they are busy feeding high up in the canopy. They tend to stay hidden or spread out to avoid competition for food.

This seasonal shift is actually a good sign for the orangutans' recovery. It shows that their population is healthy enough to move freely across different parts of the forest, instead of being confined to limited areas. Experts view this as a marker of successful rehabilitation. When orangutans are able to roam and find food naturally, it indicates they have adapted well to their environment. It also suggests their numbers have grown and that they are no longer dependent on human care or intervention.



The absence of orangutans during peak fruiting times might seem strange at first glance, but it's a positive sign of a thriving, wild population. It's evidence that these primates are living in a more natural state, free to follow seasonal food sources and avoid human disturbances. This pattern of movement and feeding behaviour can be seen in conservation efforts around the world where orangutans have been introduced back into protected forests. Wildlife managers use this seasonal behaviour to gauge the health of the population and the success of the rehabilitation programs. In some reports, wildlife officials note that during harvest times, orangutans are rarely seen, yet their presence is indirectly confirmed through footprints or nesting sites high in the trees. All this adds up to a clear picture: the orangutans are no longer struggling to survive; they are managing well in their natural habitat and stretching their limbs freely across the forested landscape.

Chapter 10

Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC)

A sun bear can be observed in the Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre, a well-known sanctuary dedicated to rescuing and caring for orphaned and injured orangutans and other rainforest creatures. However, besides the main focus on orangutans, the centre also houses a variety of local wildlife, including the rare and fascinating sun bears. These bears are often called honey bears because of their love of honey and their long, curved claws, which help them extract honey from beehives. Visiting the centre gives visitors a rare chance to see these shy creatures up close in a safe environment and learn about their behaviour and habits.

The sun bears in Sepilok are part of an active conservation effort. Many of them are rescued from illegal wildlife trade or incidents where humans have harmed them. Once brought to the centre, they receive medical treatment and are cared for with the goal of eventually returning them to the wild. Some, however, may stay longer if they cannot survive independently, fulfilling an important role in both education and research. The centre's work helps raise awareness about the threats these animals face, such as deforestation and illegal hunting, which continue to endanger their populations.



Visitors to Sepilok have the chance to witness these bears in enclosures designed thoughtfully to mimic their natural habitat. Each bear is given the space to roam, climb, and forage, encouraging natural behaviours. Their presence highlights the importance of protecting Sabah's rainforests, which are home to a diverse range of wildlife besides the bears. The centre actively involves visitors through educational talks and guided tours, explaining the significance of protecting these mammals and their habitat.

Seeing a sun bear in Sepilok is more than just a passing moment; it's an eye-opener to the urgent need for wildlife conservation in Borneo. It reminds visitors that they can make a difference by supporting efforts to preserve rainforests, which are vital to maintaining global ecological balance. The experience often leaves guests with a deeper appreciation for the unique wildlife of this region and a greater understanding of the complex issues that threaten these incredible animals.

Rehabilitated Sun bears that are strong, healthy, and ready to return to the wild are carefully selected for release. These bears have been through months, sometimes years, of rehabilitation where they regain their physical strength, learn essential survival skills, and rebuild their natural instincts. They are checked closely to confirm they are in top condition, with good muscle tone, healthy fur, and the ability to move freely without injury or weakness.

A key part of their rehabilitation is ensuring they instinctively avoid humans. Wild bears tend to keep their distance, and if a rehabilitated bear shows any signs of tameness or curiosity toward people, it might be kept in captivity for safety reasons. But those that demonstrate a natural wariness are considered ready for the next stage: living on their own in the wild. For example, they are observed from a distance to see if they avoid human observers, which indicates they have retained their natural behaviours. This instinct helps protect them from dangers like poachers or conflicts with humans that might occur if they approach settlements.

Another important factor is their ability to forage and hunt for food. Wild Sun bears gather their sustenance from a variety of sources such as fruits, insects, and young shoots. Rehabilitation teams assess how well the bears can search for and recognise food, encouraging them to exercise these skills naturally. This helps ensure they won't become dependent on humans for food once released. They are given opportunities to climb trees, a vital skill for escape and safety, by building their strength through supervised exercise. They also learn and practice nest-building, which is crucial for resting securely in their natural habitat.



Releasing bears into protected nature reserves is a carefully planned process. These reserves act as safe havens where the bears can roam freely and live naturally without the threat of habitat destruction or illegal hunting. The bears are released in areas similar to their original homes, where food sources and shelter are abundant, giving them the best chance to thrive once again in the wild.

This process gives these bears a second chance at life. Instead of living in captivity or facing the threat of extinction, they are given the opportunity to reclaim their role as wild animals. They can spend their days exploring forests, climbing trees, scavenging for food, and raising their young, just as they would in the wild. It's a chance for them to live the life they deserve—free and in harmony with nature.

The importance of this work extends beyond the individual. Wild Sun bears play a vital role in their ecosystems, helping to disperse seeds and balance the environment. When they are successfully released, it supports the health and diversity of their

habitat. This effort also raises awareness about conservation issues facing Sun bears, highlighting the need to protect their forest homes from illegal trade and deforestation.

In the end, the ultimate goal is to see these once-captive animals flourish as truly wild bears. Their journey from rehabilitation to release is a reminder of nature's ability to recover when supported by dedicated care and protection. They are not just animals, but symbols of hope for future generations to come.

Not every Sun bear can be saved and released back into the wild. Some bears face injuries or health issues so severe that they can no longer survive outside captivity. They might have been hurt by poachers, had accidents in the forest, or suffered from illnesses that left lasting damage. Their survival skills, such as finding food or avoiding danger, become deeply ingrained habits that they simply cannot relearn. For these bears, the chance to return to the dense rainforests they once called home disappears. Instead, they become permanent residents of a sanctuary like the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC).

At the BSBCC, these bears find safety and care. The centre offers them a space where they can live out their days in as natural an environment as possible. They are provided with the right food, medical attention, and enrichment activities to keep them healthy and engaged. Though they may never be able to thrive in the wild again, they are kept safe from threats like poaching, habitat destruction, and disease. This sanctuary becomes a refuge, a final home where they can live with dignity, surrounded by others who have faced similar struggles.



Many of these bears are victims of human activities. For example, some have been rescued after being kept illegally as pets, losing their natural fear of humans and their instinct to hunt and forage. Others have suffered injuries from traps set by poachers, or have become sick after ingesting toxic substances. Their ability to survive relies on instinct and learned behaviour—traits that, once lost, cannot simply be replaced with training. These animals are examples of how human actions can devastate wildlife, and why dedicated centres like the BSBCC are vital.

Understanding that some bears cannot return to the wild is important. It highlights the need for long-term care for those animals that are too broken to be released. The centre's role extends beyond rescue; it becomes a sanctuary where bears can live out their lives in peace. These animals serve as living reminders of the ongoing conservation challenges and the urgent need to protect their forest habitat. By caring for those who cannot survive on their own, the BSBCC ensures that every bear,

regardless of state, receives the respect and protection they deserve.

Most Sun bears at BSBCC return to the bear house by night. This shelter provides a safe space where they can rest securely after a day of exploring or foraging. But not all bears choose to stay inside the same way. Some prefer the outdoors, finding the perfect spot high up in the trees. They build nests made of leaves, twigs, and soft materials, carefully shaping a cozy bed just like they would in the wild. These bears often settle in their nests early in the evening and stay there until morning.

Watching these bears is a reminder of how they still cling to important survival skills. In their natural habitat, Sun bears spend most of their nights in trees. Sleeping high above the ground keeps them safe from predators like larger cats or wild dogs. It also helps them stay close to fruit trees and other food sources. By building nests in the trees, these bears practice their natural instincts and keep their skills sharp, even while in captivity.

The practice of building nests is more than just a resting spot. It also offers comfort and security. For the bears, being able to sleep outdoors simulates their wild environment. It gives them a sense of normalcy and helps reduce stress. Each bear has its own style, some creating simple nests, while others construct more elaborate bedding. This behaviour shows how adaptable they are, able to make the best of their surroundings.

Maintaining these natural habits is very important. It allows the bears to stay physically and mentally healthy. It also boosts their chances of survival if they ever need to live in the wild again. The team at BSBCC monitors the bears closely, ensuring they keep these key skills. They understand how vital it is for the bears' overall well-being to keep their natural behaviours alive.



In all, observing Sun bears returning to their nests or sleeping in the trees highlights their resilience. It reminds us that, even in captivity, they are still part of the wild world. These acts of rooting in their natural tendencies speak to their strength and adaptability. Each night, as they settle into their chosen resting spot, they reaffirm their connection to the natural life they were born into.

At the BSBCC, not all bears are on display for visitors. The centre carefully chooses which bears can be seen and which need to stay out of sight. Bears that may be released back into the wild are kept away from daytime visitors. These animals are usually the ones that are still getting used to their surroundings or might become scared or stressed if they see too many people. Keeping them in private areas helps them recover better and reduces the risk of them losing their natural instincts.

Some bears are kept behind the scenes because they are good candidates for release. They might have taken steps to regain their independence or learned to forage for food on their own. These bears may look healthy and seem ready for the wild, but

they need privacy to continue adjusting. Visitors generally won't see these bears, but their safety and future freedom are the main priorities.

Bears that are overly friendly or too attached to humans are not considered suitable for release. This often happens when bears have had frequent contact with people, sometimes because they were raised in captivity or because they approached humans for food.

Such bears can lose their natural fear of humans, and that can create dangerous situations if they are released.

For example, a bear that has become accustomed to receiving food from humans might struggle to find food in the wild or may approach people seeking food. This can lead to conflicts, and in some cases, a bear might have to be rehoused or even euthanised if it becomes a threat. The centre carefully assesses each bear's behaviour before deciding whether it can return to the wild or needs to stay in their care.

The goal is to prepare bears for life back in the wild, but not all bears are suitable candidates. The safety of both the bears and the public is the main concern guiding these decisions. Keeping some bears out of sight ensures they won't be distressed by humans and allows them to re-learn their natural behaviours. It also prevents them from becoming dependent on humans for food or comfort, which could ruin their chances of successful release.

In summary, the BSBCC prioritises the wellbeing and future independence of each bear. While visitors can see some of these animals, others remain hidden behind the scenes. Their placement depends on their behaviour, health, and readiness to return to the wild. This careful management helps protect the

bears' natural instincts and supports their chances of living freely once they are ready.

At BSBCC, visitors have the chance to see sun bears up close from the observation platform. These bears, often rescued from poor conditions, sometimes still act out behaviours linked to past trauma. Many pace around in circles, a way of coping with anxiety or stress. Others spend hours grooming themselves repeatedly, trying to soothe unsettled feelings. Some even suckle, a behaviour usually seen in young bears, which indicates deep emotional scars. These actions can be a sign that the bears are struggling emotionally, even after being rescued and brought to the sanctuary.

The team at BSBCC works hard to improve the lives of these rescued sun bears. They understand that providing a safe and stimulating environment can help reduce these harmful behaviours. To do this, they create habitats filled with natural features like trees, rocks and pools, which mimic the bears' natural jungle homes. These environments are carefully designed to keep the bears curious, active and comfortable.

The sanctuary also offers a variety of foods to complement the bears' diets. This includes fruits, vegetables, honey and specially prepared treats, which make feeding time more interesting. Using puzzle feeders is another key part of the program. These are devices that hide food inside and require the bears to work out how to get it out. When bears use their brains to find food, it helps reduce boredom and calms anxiety.

Bears are also given more chances to forage naturally, encouraging their instincts. Instead of simply handing them food, keepers scatter portions around the enclosure, forcing the bears to search and hunt. This simulates their wild behaviour and keeps them engaged. Social interactions among the bears are

also promoted whenever possible. Group activities and shared spaces help prevent loneliness and reduce repetitive actions linked to stress.

All these efforts are part of a bigger plan to give rescued bears a better quality of life. By creating environments that are enriching and stimulating, BSBCC helps them move forward from their traumatic pasts. The goal is to support their mental and physical health, allowing them to live more relaxed, natural lives. The hope is that, with time, these behavioural signs of trauma will fade as the bears become more at ease in their surroundings.

Sun bears have a well-deserved nickname: honey bears or Beruang Madu, as they are called in Malay. Honey is their favourite treat, and they go to great lengths to find it. These small bears are skilled diggers and climbers, capable of crushing beeswax and honey-filled combs deep inside trees. Their mouths are equipped with large, sharp canines that are unusually big for a bear of their size. These teeth help them bite through tough materials, allowing them to break into bee hives or extract honeycombs with ease. Their strong jaws generate a powerful bite that can crush eggs, hard nutshells, or even small bones if necessary.

Sun bears also sport incredibly long, heavy claws that grow throughout their lives. These claws aren't just for show—they are essential tools for their survival. They use their claws to rip open trees and dig into the wood. A single swipe or scratch can create a hole big enough for the bear to reach into during its search for honey. These claws can extend over 10cm in length, making them formidable tools for tearing into the tough bark of hardwood trees. The strength behind these claws means they can remove large chunks of wood, exposing nests of bees or honeycombs hidden inside.

When sun bears attack a tree, their powerful jaws work in tandem with their claws to make quick work of their target. They often chew through the hard wood, creating extensive holes and cavities in the process. These cavities are not just used by the bears; they also become home to many other animals. Tree holes opened by sun bears often turn into nesting sites for smaller creatures like birds, squirrels, or insects. The bears' search for honey can sometimes cause extensive damage to trees, weakening them or even killing them in extreme cases. Yet, this behaviour plays a vital role in their rainforest habitat, helping to shape the ecosystem.

The intelligence behind their methods of honey hunting is clear. A sun bear might climb up a tree to reach a hive but will use its sharp claws and powerful jaws to open it. Once bitten into the hive, the bear carefully pulls out the honeycombs. The thick sweetness is irresistible, especially after a long day of foraging. Some experts believe their tool use is a sign of their adaptability to life in dense forests, where food sources like honey are plentiful but hidden deep inside trees.

In summary, the sun bear's physical features like their large canines, strong jaws, and long claws are perfectly suited to their honey-loving lifestyle. These adaptations not only help them gather the sweet reward but also influence their environment, carving new homes into the forest's trees. Their skillful hunting methods leave behind holes that many small animals depend on, making the sun bear both a vital part of the forest and a master of survival.

Sun bears are the most arboreal of all bear species. This means they spend most of their time in the trees rather than on the ground. Their long, curved claws and strong limbs make them excellent climbers.

These traits allow them to move easily among the branches, seeking food or shelter. At BSBCC, the forest pens are filled with tall trees, creating a perfect environment for these playful and agile bears. The trees stretch high into the sky, giving them plenty of space to climb, jump, and explore.

Climbing is a vital skill for sun bears. In the wild, they rely on their ability to navigate the forest canopy to find fruit, insects, and honey.

It also helps them escape danger from ground predators. The forest pens at BSBCC are designed to mimic these natural conditions, giving the bears a chance to practice and strengthen their climbing skills.

Regular climbing helps them stay physically fit and mentally sharp. It keeps their muscles strong and sharpens their instincts for survival.

For the bears, climbing is more than just play. It's a way to stay connected to their natural behaviour. When they scramble up the branches, it reminds them of life in the wild. This helps them regain skills they might lose if kept only on the ground. In captivity, providing opportunities to climb is crucial. It encourages natural behaviour, reduces stress, and improves their overall well-being.

In the wild, sun bears may spend several hours each day foraging in the treetops. Keeping these skills alive in captivity requires dedicated effort. The tall trees in the forest pens give them a chance to climb and stretch their limbs fully. Watching a bear hoist itself into a branch or use its claws to grab a fruit is a reminder of how skilled and adaptable these animals truly are. Training them to climb regularly ensures they stay active and sharp, just as they would in the wild.

The forest setup at BSBCC is meticulously designed. Every tall tree serves as a platform, a climbing post, or a resting spot. It creates a complex network of branches suited to their natural behaviour. This environment not only promotes physical health but also sparks curiosity and activity. When a sun bear feels confident climbing and exploring, it builds a stronger connection to its natural instincts. This, in turn, helps prepare them for a return to the wild if that is ever possible.

Climbing is not just a pastime. It is a crucial part of their daily life that supports their survival skills. These trees provide endless opportunities for activity, exploration, and mental engagement. The more they climb, the better they are at using their natural talents. It keeps them agile and alert, ready for whatever challenges they might face in the wild.

In summarising, the tall trees at BSBCC serve a bigger purpose than just scenery. They are a key part of the bears' daily routine and essential for their health. By encouraging climbing, staff help the bears maintain their strength, agility, and independence. This environment gives them a chance to practice and preserve the skills that make the sun bear one of the most remarkable animals in the forest canopy.

When newly rescued sun bears arrive at BSBCC, their first step is a detailed health check. This isn't just a quick glance; it involves a team of experienced vets carefully examining each animal from nose to tail. They check for signs of illness, injuries, or any long-term issues caused by past trapping or habitat loss. These health exams are vital. They help catch hidden problems early, so bears get the care they need before concerns become serious.

BSBCC has become a leader in this kind of medical care for bears. They use modern equipment and techniques, some of

which are rare in the region. This makes sure every bear receives the best chance at a healthy life. The medical team doesn't only look for immediate problems. They also gather information about each bear's overall health. That way, they can plan personalised treatment if needed. For example, if a bear has a parasite or a minor wound, they treat it right away. If more complex health issues are found, they develop a treatment plan with ongoing recovery in mind.

The hospital-like medical centre at BSBCC is a hub of activity. It is well-stocked with medicines, bandages, and diagnostic tools. Each bear receives a full blood test, a physical check, and an assessment of their teeth, eyes, and claws. Sometimes X-rays are needed to spot broken bones or internal injuries. The goal is to make sure each animal is stable and ready for the next stage of recovery.

Once they clear these health checks, the bears are not immediately released back into the wild. Instead, they spend time in a dedicated quarantine area. This phase typically lasts a few weeks. During this period, staff continue monitoring the bears closely. They watch for signs of infection or other hidden health issues. Quarantine also helps prevent any illnesses from spreading to other animals. It's a safe space for the bears to settle in, wash off the stress of their journey, and begin the process of recovery.

After the quarantine, the bears move into the indoor enclosure. This space is designed to give them room to relax and start rehabilitating. The indoor environment allows staff to keep a close eye on how the bears are adjusting. It's also where they start their behavioural training — helping bears rebuild trust and learn to forage naturally.

This step is a crucial part of their journey back to independence.

Each of these steps is vital. They ensure the bears are healthy, both physically and mentally, before any attempt at release. This careful approach increases the chances of the bears thriving once they return to the wild. It also reflects BSBCC's dedication to providing the best care possible. Their work saves many lives and sets a standard for wildlife rehabilitation.

Conclusion

After spending twelve days immersed in the wild beauty of Sabah, Borneo, we packed our baggage and got ready for the journey home. The trip had been full of surprises and unforgettable moments. We had explored dense rainforests with towering trees, watched exotic wildlife in their natural habitat, and captured stunning photographs of nature's untouched beauty. It was more than just a trip; it was a journey into a place I had read about many times, yet discovering it in person was far richer than I had imagined. Borneo's landscapes seemed like a masterpiece painted by the hands of a divine artist—vivid green colors bursting across vast forests, the air filled with the scent of damp earth and blooming flowers. Everywhere I looked, I saw nature in its purest form: vibrant, alive, and unspoiled. The landscape was so pristine and captivating it felt like stepping into a dream. I couldn't help but pray silently, asking for another chance to visit this incredible place, to breathe in its fresh air again, and to witness nature in its fullest glory once more.

When it was time to head back home, we decided to book our flight with Air Asia. It's known as a decent low-cost airline that offers affordable travel options for budget-conscious travellers. The booking process was straightforward, and we were pleased to find that the airline provided a smooth experience from start to finish. We opted to pre-book our meals ahead of time since in-flight food options can often be limited on budget airlines, and buying food on the plane might not always be the best choice. Our pre-ordered meal arrived hot, fresh, and well-packaged,

which made a big difference on a long journey. The food was tasty, satisfying, and exactly what we needed to keep our energy up during the flight. It's worth noting that pre-booking in-flight meals not only saves time but often prevents disappointment. Many passengers have found that ordering in advance ensures they get a proper warm meal instead of the sometimes cold or overcooked options served on board. The experience with Air Asia reminded us that even budget airlines aim to make flying more comfortable and convenient for travellers who want to stick to a budget but still enjoy a smooth trip. We appreciated the good value, friendly service, and the comfort of knowing that our food was taken care of before reaching our destination.

Our journey back began at Sandakan International Airport, a small but lively gateway to this part of Malaysia. Sandakan is merely half an hour from Sepilok. From there, we boarded our flight to Kolkata, with a long layover in Kuala Lumpur stretching across eight hours. The wait tired us out; we felt the weight of travel on our shoulders after days spent exploring, photographing, and experiencing Borneo's wild side. We strolled through the busy airport lounges, watched planes take off and land, and tried to stay awake amid the jet lag. Despite the fatigue, the memories kept us awake with anticipation. When at last we landed in Kolkata, a wave of relief washed over us. The journey had been long, but the reward was priceless.

We carried home not just our luggage but a treasure trove of memories — images of orangutans swinging in the trees, the lush canopy stretching endlessly above us, and the sounds of distant wildlife echoing in our minds. These moments would stay with us forever, reminding us of the untouched beauty of Borneo's rainforests and the unique wildlife of Southeast Asia. The trip was a reminder of how incredible Earth's natural wonders can

be, and how important it is to see and protect them for future generations.

Finally, I want to take a moment to honestly praise Mr. Chandramouli Ganguli, our tour planner and guide, for the exceptional work he did in organising and guiding us through our trip to Borneo. From the start, it was clear that every detail had been carefully considered, making the entire journey smooth and comfortable. His ability to anticipate our needs and arrange everything perfectly set this trip apart from others we have taken. Whether it was the smooth transfers between locations or the thoughtfully chosen accommodations, his hands were visible in every aspect of the planning.

Chandramouli's wealth of experience in wildlife and birding truly elevated the expedition. Having visited many remote and wild places around the world, he brought a depth of knowledge that added real richness to our trip. His keen eye for spotting rare birds and exotic animals amazed us all. His stories and insights about the local flora and fauna turned an ordinary tour into a fascinating learning experience. For example, during a quiet morning, he pointed out a hidden bird species that most guides might overlook, making us feel like true explorers rather than just tourists.

His understanding of the local environment, culture, and ecosystems made every sighting meaningful. He knew exactly when to move for the best light or how to get us closer without disturbing the wildlife. His patience and passion inspired us, and it became clear that guiding is more than just a job for him — it's a true calling. The way he explained complex ecological relationships in simple terms helped us appreciate the harmony of nature in a new way.

This trip was not only well-organised but also filled with enriching experiences, thanks mainly to Chandramouli's expertise. His cheerful attitude and willingness to answer all our questions created a warm and welcoming atmosphere. It felt like travelling with a knowledgeable friend who genuinely cares about sharing what he loves. We now look forward to more trips with him in the future because we know that each adventure will be just as well-planned and memorable.

His dedication to his work and his deep connection with the environment made this trip special. We are grateful for his guidance, which made Borneo feel alive and accessible. It's rare to meet someone with his level of skill, experience, and kindness—all of which combined to give us an unforgettable journey. We all hope to explore more wild corners of the world with him guiding the way, knowing that every trip will be in capable hands.