

Birding Snippets

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Birding Borneo Part 1 : Sungei Kinabatangan - Lowland Riverine Forest



The Kinabatangan is arguably the best place to see the endangered Storm's Stork *Ciconia stormi*

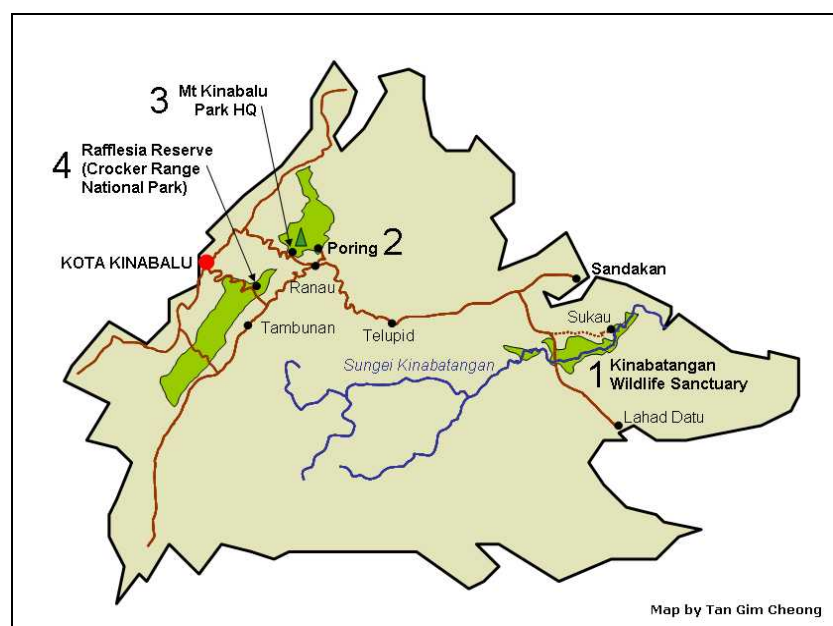
Borneo is the third largest island in the world. Comprising various habitats in the equatorial zone, the island is a hotspot for avian biodiversity.

Close to 600 species of birds have been recorded on Borneo. Of these, around 400 species are resident and more than 40 species are endemic to the island. Another 120 species of migrants and 50 species of vagrants account for its rich avifauna.

The East Malaysian state of Sabah was the obvious destination to enjoy the avifauna of Borneo as the topography within the state ranges from the humid lowlands to the highest peak on the island, Mount Kinabalu. The birding sites are not too far apart, making it easy to cover the lowlands and montane areas within a short period of time.

Map of Sabah, located at the northern part of the island of Borneo.

The places visited are numbered in sequence.





Wooden jetty by Sungei Kinabatangan, the launching point of the boat ride to the Kinabatangan Jungle Camp.

Forests adjoins the Sungei Kinabatangan

For the 1st part of our trip, we headed to the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. It is located on the lower reaches of Sungei Kinabatangan, which, at 560km in length, is Sabah's longest river. Our group of 5 consisted of Yong Ding Li, who led the trip, Low Bingwen, Tai Ping Ling, Felix Wong and me.



Arriving at Sandakan Airport, Felix and I were picked up by a driver sent by our host. Before stopping at a nearby supermarket for groceries, Felix spotted a **Cinnamon Bittern** among the vegetation in a ditch along the roadside. The land journey to the Kinabatangan Jungle Camp run by Robert Chong would take 2.5hr. Common birds seen from the vehicle included **Eurasian Tree Sparrows, Spotted Doves, Asian Glossy Starlings, Yellow-vented Bulbuls** and **Pacific Swallows**. Leaving the tarred Sandakan-Lahad Datu trunk road at the 'Sukau junction', the rest of the journey was on unpaved vehicular tracks with oil palm plantation flanking both sides much of the way.

Small flocks of **Black-headed Munias** were the first birds we encountered along this unpaved road. **Collared Kingfishers** perched on the wires along the roadside. Quite suddenly, our sharp-eyed driver stopped the vehicle and pointed out a **Jerdon's Baza** (lifer) perched on the power lines next to the road! It allowed a few moments view before taking off, disappearing. Farther on, a pair

of **Rhinoceros Hornbills** (lifer) gave mesmerizing views at close range as we stopped to gaze upon them when they flew across the track. Unfortunately, my camera was still in the luggage!

Turning into a smaller dirt track, a single **Intermediate Egret** was sighted at a small stream before we arrived at a wooden jetty. The final part of the journey included a 10 minute boat ride on the muddy Sungei Kinabatangan. Near the jetty, a female **Brown-throated Sunbird** flitted from tree to tree and the song of a Yellow-bellied Prinia could be heard.



White-crowned Shama
Copsychus stricklandii
(endemic)

Arriving at the Jungle Camp at around 6pm, we were greeted by the song of the camp's resident – a White-crowned Shama (endemic) – which I ignored initially as I was tired and eager to settle in after a long day of travelling from Singapore. We settled in and then went out to look for the shama. While doing so, Ding Li, Bingwen and Ping Ling, who had arrived a few days before us, returned from birding and quickly made the 2 late-comers expectant for sightings of Storm's Stork, White-crowned Hornbill, Maroon-breasted Philentoma, and Bornean Ground-Cuckoo, among others.

Black-naped Monarch
Hypothymis azurea at nest



A quick look around the river's edge immediately bagged another lifer for me – a **Green Imperial Pigeon** on a tall tree on the opposite bank. This was followed by small flocks of **Slender-billed Crows** (another lifer) with their characteristic

shallow wingbeats, apparently returning to roost. The early birders showed us the nest of a pair of **Black-naped Monarchs** right above the footpath leading from the river's edge to the Camp.

Night Birding on the Kinabatangan

Day 1
(Night)
Weather: good

Dinner at the Camp consisted of steamed rice with servings of vegetables and meat, and was consumed on wooden picnic tables, a rather comfortable proposition in the jungle!



Buffy Fish Owl
Ketupa ketupu

As it got really dark, we eagerly boarded the boat for some night birding. We soon came face to face with our first night bird - a **Buffy Fish Owl** (lifer), perched on an open branch overlooking the river, awaiting its next meal. Next up was a **Stork-billed Kingfisher** roosting on a branch overhanging the river. Farther on, a beautiful little jewel in the form of a **Blue-eared Kingfisher** allowed the boat to approach for some really fantastic views. By the end of the night's birding, we had seen a few more Stork-billed and Blue-eared Kingfishers and at least 10 Buffy Fish Owls!

The Blue-eared Kingfisher
Alcedo meninting at night.

The Kinabatangan must be one of the best, if not the best, place to see this beautiful jewel



The First Morning on the Kinabatangan

Day 2
Weather: Misty

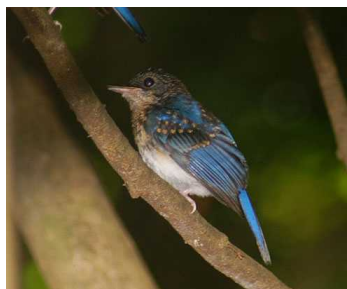
Setting off just after 7am, we cruised on the misty river. A number of **Great Egrets** were already out and about. Blue-eared Kingfishers darted across

the river banks.

**Morning on the
Kinabatangan**



Arriving at Sungei Tenanggan, a tributary of Sungei Kinabatangan, the boatman switch off the engine and took out the paddle. Drifting silently, we heard the **Striped Wren-Babbler** (lifer), after a while the bird flew up from the ground, onto a perch around 1 metre above the ground and gave everyone good views. **Rufous-tailed Tailorbird**, **Ashy Tailorbird** and **Chestnut-winged Babbler** were sighted. My next lifer would be a **Bold-striped Tit-Babbler** (endemic), a recent split from the Striped Tit-Babbler (now called Pin-striped Tit-Babbler). The distinctive calls of the Black-and-Yellow Broadbills reverberated in the morning air. Daytime views of Stork-billed Kingfishers were then obtained.



**Malaysian Blue
Flycatcher**
Cyornis turcosus
juvenile

Back on the Kinabatangan, a **White-bellied Sea Eagle** flew by. Two **Oriental Darters** (lifer) were seen in flight while another three individuals perched on a tree. A pair of **Oriental Pied Hornbills** plus an immature perched by the riverside before flying majestically across the river. We spotted a **Black-and-Red Broadbill** flying from its nest which dangled from an open branch overhanging the river. A flock of **Long-tailed Parakeets** gathered on a tree next to the river bank, a **Dollarbird** perched on a bare branch and a single **Storm's Stork** (lifer) was spied perching on a tree about 150m in from the riverside.

Sungei Menanggol

Farther downstream, we cruised into Sungei Menanggol. **White-chested Babblers** (lifer) were soon sighted, singing as they foraged right at the river's edge. A few Blue-eared Kingfishers flew across the waterway. One individual continued to perch on the branches at the riverside scanning for fishes despite our presence.

Sungei Menanggol is a narrow waterway with healthy vegetation on both sides

It is a good place to bird as the birds can be seen on both sides of the river and the trees provide shade from the sun



An Oriental Darter appeared from the muddy waters and stood on a dead tree trunk less than 10 metres away from our boat! **Malaysian Blue Flycatchers** (lifer), including both male and female as well as a juvenile, perched by the riverside. Slender-billed Crows flew overhead. A **Moustached Hawk-Cuckoo** called persistently but only gave brief views as it flew across the river.

A Black-and-Red Broadbill showed up for Felix as he missed the one on the main river. My next lifer would be a male **Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker** (endemic). Three **Emerald Doves** and a **Black-headed Bulbul** were also seen.

Fluffy-backed Tit-Babblers were heard and a Hooded Pitta called for a short while but did not show.

Cruising back to the camp for lunch, we saw more Oriental Darters drying their wings in the sun.

Oriental Darter
Anhinga melanogaster
just out from the river

**Their webbed feet
enables them to swim
well**

**How do they fish in such
muddy, zero visibility
conditions?**



Lunch Break around the Jungle Camp

Day 2 We spent the time before and after lunch
Weather: sunny surveying the forest surrounding the camp. A **Cinnamon-rumped Trogon** called in the distance. **Yellow-breasted Flowerpeckers, Pied Fantail** and Bold-striped Tit Babblers foraged amongst the trees. A small party of birds skulked in the shadows of the lower storey, Ding Li caught up and readily identified them as **Black-throated Babblers**, another lifer for me! The Black-naped Monarchs were seen changing shifts on the nest, apparently still incubating their eggs. Spotting a pair of **Rufous-winged Philentomas**, which included a blue morph male, I followed them as they circumnavigated half way round the camp.

Afternoon Cruise

Day 2 The afternoon cruise started at 3.15pm. Leaving
Weather: sunny the comfort and safety of the boat for the tiger-leech and mosquito infested jungle, we set out to look for our number one target bird for the Kinabatangan. Tracing the source of its call, the others went ahead while Ping Ling and myself stationed at a more open area in the dense vegetation, hoping to see the bird coming our way. As we waited, a Blue-eared Barbet called nearby. After a while, our patience paid off when we saw a rather large, pheasant-like bird moving quickly across the forest floor – it was the enigmatic

Bornean Ground-Cuckoo (endemic), and that added another lifer for me! Moments later, the others came back and announced that they had also seen the bird farther up – a 100% score!

Back on the river, a **Wallace's Hawk Eagle** (lifer) perched on a tall tree by the river. Farther upriver, a Rhinoceros Hornbill was sighted on another tall tree. A **Blue-tailed Bee-eater** was seen and a Banded Bay Cuckoo heard.

Evening at the Jungle Camp

Day 2 Black-and-Yellow Broadbills continued to fill the air with their distinctive trilling calls as we disembarked from the boat. The **White-crowned Shama** appeared at its usual place near the dining area. A tame Storm's Stork paid a visit to the camp. Robert had rescued this individual when it was still little and took care of it. Now grown up, it would fly away for days and return for short periods, feeding from Robert's hand. This presented opportunities for close up views of this globally threatened (endangered) species.

Weather: sunny

Storm's Stork
Ciconia stormi
at the Kinabatangan
Jungle Camp



Morning Pitta Hunt

Day 3 This morning we set out to find one of the endemic pittas. Whilst listening out for its monotone whistle, we sighted more Blue-eared Kingfishers,

Weather: sunny



Black-headed Pitta
Pitta ussheri

Great Egrets, Ashy Tailorbird and Yellow-bellied Prinia, before our guide zoomed in on the opposite riverbank and told us it was time to disembark and face the mosquitoes and leeches! We moved quietly and searched the ground, trying to pinpoint the location of the call. Soon, our experience guide pointed out the source of the call, a **Black-headed Pitta** (endemic), perched 3m up on a tree, mostly blocked by leaves. We persevered and finally managed to get full body views of this brilliant gem – another lifer for me.

Cruise on the Tenanggan



Lesser Fish Eagle
Ichthyophaga humilis
surveying the waterways

We entered Sungei Tenanggan and proceeded much farther upstream than previously. A **Lesser Fish Eagle** (lifer) flew away from the boat repeatedly, keeping to the riverside, as we cruised upstream. More Oriental Darters and Great Egrets were sighted. A Great Argus called and its characteristic booming call became louder and louder as it approached but never showed. A **Blue-eared Barbet** was seen and we had more White-chested Babbler, Emerald Dove, Oriental Pied Hornbill and Stork-billed Kingfisher. We were surprised with the sighting of a **Great-billed Heron** (lifer), a species usually associated with coastal areas.

Great-billed Heron
Ardea sumatrana
on the river bank



On the more open areas on one side of the tributary, we saw **Black-winged Kite**, **Crested Serpent-Eagle**, Dollarbird, Blue-tailed Bee-eater and Pacific Swallows.

Cruising back for lunch, we sighted a soaring **Lesser Adjutant**.

An
Oriental Pied Hornbill
Anthracoceros albirostris
in flight



After lunch, we bade goodbye to this rich riverscape and got on our way to our next destination.....

Non Avian Sightings

Apart from birds, we also had some nice mammal sightings. These included the endemic Proboscis Monkeys, Bearded Pig, Pygmy Squirrels, Lesser Treeshrews and Long-tailed Macaque. At night, we sighted a secretive Flat-headed Cat by the riverside and a Civet Cat up in the trees.

Reptiles included 2 pythons stalking the river's edge at night and a number of estuarine crocodiles, mostly less than 2 m in length except for one individual which I estimate to be around 2.5m long. A few endemic Treeskins were found at the camp area.