

Birding Snippets

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No. 4 • March 2008

Birding Borneo Part 3 : Mount Kinabalu – Montane Birding Haven



**Mount Kinabalu's
granite massif**

Mount Kinabalu is the highest peak between the mountains of Myanmar and New Guinea. The national park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site famed for its endemic biodiversity. The 4095m peak dominates northern Sabah for miles around.

The park HQ is located at 1500m above sea level (ASL), making for nice cool daytime conditions for birders. A 4.5km tarred road leads to the Timpohon Gate at 1866m ASL, where climbers begin their ascent to the summit. Between the park HQ and the Timpohon Gate, there is a system of well marked trails through the montane forest.

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



Map by Tan Gim Cheong

The northern section of Silau-Silau Trail

**Day 1
(Afternoon)**
**Weather: Cloudy,
some Drizzle,
Windy**

We arrived after lunch and promptly dumped our baggage in the hostel. After a short walk from the hostel, we started to bird the northern section of the Silau-Silau Trail. The trail was wet, luckily for me, my boots were waterproof. The trail runs along a stream and we saw 2 **White-crowned Forktails** (lifer) feeding along the stream. We had 2 rather tame **Indigo Flycatchers**, an **endemic Eye-browed Jungle-Flycatcher** (lifer) and a **Mountain Leaf-Warbler** before we exited the short trail.

White-crowned Forktail
Enicurus leschenaulti
**feeding along a
mountain stream**





Yellow-breasted Warbler

Siecercus montis

**a common component
species of bird waves**

We flagged down an empty bus and got the driver to bring us up to the Timpohon gate for RM2 each. Grey sky accompanied us as we walked down the road, meeting Sam Woods along the way. Later, the grey skies culminated into a drizzle. The weather and windy conditions must have put a dampener on bird activity for we saw absolutely nothing!

Re-entering the Silau-Silau Trail from the northern end, we encountered a mini bird wave with **Grey-throated Babblers, Yellow-breasted Warblers** and **White-throated Fantail**. These 3 species would turn out to be the most regular component species of all bird waves on Mount Kinabalu.

In the coolness of the night, we had a satisfying warm dinner at the restaurant just outside the entrance to the park and met Peter Ericsson, who was with a friend.

1st Owling Session

**Day 1
(Night)**

**Weather: Rather Cool
and Windy**



Mountain Scops Owl

Otus spilocephalus

a 'sleepy' individual !

It was already 9pm when we got back to the hostel but Felix and I decided to try for the Mountain Scops Owl at Bingwen's stake-out, while the others settled in for the night. Arriving at the spot, it was all quiet. After a while, a Sunda Frogmouth called from the thick foliage of the trees, but it was not to be located. Then a Mountain Scops Owl started to respond. A birder couple from New Zealand also heard the owl and joined in our search. We walked up and down, following the bird's call as it changed locations. We came really close to the source of the calls many times but just couldn't locate the bird. After a frustrating wild goose chase of almost 1.5 hours in rather chilly and windy conditions, the New Zealand couple decided to call it a night. Not willing to concede defeat, Felix and I persevered on. After another 10 minutes, we finally managed to locate and see the **Mountain Scops Owl** (lifer), perched below eye-level! A wonderful round-up for our first day of birding on Mount Kinabalu, I say!



Bukit Ular Trail in the Morning

We managed to get one of the park's drivers to pick us up from the hostel and drive us to the Timpohon Gate each morning at 5.45am, for a fee. Without this service, we would have to start off at least 1 hour earlier for the 4km uphill walk. We splitted into different groups at various points to search for our own target birds.

Day 2
Weather: Good
but Windy



Bornean Whistling Thrush
Myophonus borneensis
(endemic)

I started with a walk up the Bukit Ular Trail in pre-dawn conditions. We walked slowly, looking for signs of movement. We were surprised when we saw Sam Woods already on the trail and overtook him. Farther on, we would encounter our first bird for the morning, Ding Li's target bird no less – the shy, **endemic Everett's Thrush** (lifer), at first light!

Near the top of the trail, we stopped to listen and look for activity. While we remained stationary, a **Bornean Whistling Thrush (endemic)** appeared barely 2 metres behind us, fanning its tail while checking us out!



Flavescent Bulbul
Pycnonotus flavescens

Birding around Timpohon Gate

The Bukit Ular Trail leads to the Timpohon Gate and there, we saw **endemic Bornean Treepies**, **Sunda Laughingthrushes** and **endemic Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrushes** (a recent split from the Chestnut-capped Laughingthrush of Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra which is now known as the Spectacled Laughingthrush). We also saw **Bornean Whistler (endemic)**, **Indigo Flycatcher**, a female and a juvenile **Little Pied Flycatcher**. A **Flavescent Bulbul** remained perched on a tree for quite some time, and **Ashy Drongo** (Bornean race) appeared on the fence. We also had the 3 usual bird wave birds – Yellow-breasted Warbler, Grey-throated Babbler and White-throated Fantail.

**Chestnut-hooded
Laughingthrush**
Rhinocichla treacheri
(endemic)



Back onto Bukit Ular Trail!



Mountain Blackeye
Chlorocharis emiliae
(endemic)

Sam Woods emerged from the Bukit Ular Trail and told us about a Fruithunter he saw. We went straightaway to the spot but the bird was already gone. Instead, we were rewarded with a small party of the **endemic Mountain Blackeyes** (lifer) – despite being mainly green and black in colour, this species struck me as a most beautiful bird, its beauty has to be seen to be appreciated!

I carried on down Bukit Ular Trail. Reaching the bottom of the trail, I would walk up and down one more time. I quite enjoyed listening for the high pitched call of the **endemic Bornean Stubtail** (lifer) and the sight of this little ground bird moving about the undergrowth.

Bornean Stubtail
Urosphena whiteheadi
(endemic)





Ashy Drongo
Dicrurus leucophaeus
(Bornean *stigmatops* race)

**Snowy-browed
Flycatcher**
Ficedula hyperythra

A **Mountain Tailorbird**, and both the male and female of the rather tame **Snowy-browed Flycatcher** (lifer) were seen. The usual 3 bird wave birds as well as Sunda and Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrushes were seen. Both the Red-breasted and Crimson-headed Partridges were heard along this trail, sometimes really close, but only Bingwen was lucky enough to see 3 **Crimson-headed Partridges** crossing the trail when he split up and was alone. **Endemic Mountain Wren-Babblers** (lifer) moved along the trail in small parties and gave fantastic views at close range. In fact, I had to lean back to take a picture as the birds came closer than the minimum focusing distance of my lens (2.5m)!



Chestnut-crested Yuhina
Yuhina everetti
(endemic)

Birding along the Road

Exiting the bottom of the Bukit Ular Trail, I walked down the road towards the Silau-Silau Trail. Along the road, I managed very good views of the **Sunda Bush Warbler** as it foraged at the roadside. A male **Wreathed Hornbill** flew overhead and its wingbeats could be heard! A small flock of the **endemic Chestnut-crested Yuhinas** was encountered as they foraged noisily. Golden-naped Barbets could be heard, but were not seen. Other common birds encountered on the way down included Indigo Flycatchers, Bornean Whistler, Yellow-breasted Warbler and White-throated Fantail.

Sunda Bush Warbler
Cettia vulcania



The Silau-Silau Trail

I entered the Silau-Silau Trail from its top end. Apart from the Eye-browed Jungle Flycatcher and the 3 usual bird wave birds, the only new bird was an **Ochraceous Bulbul**.



Black-capped White-eye
Zosterops atricapilla



Eye-browed Jungle Flycatcher *Rhynomyias gularis* (endemic)

I exited the Silau-Silau Trail near the Nepenthes Lodges and walked the short distance back to the hostel, encountering a flock of **Black-capped White-eyes** along the way.



Indigo Flycatcher
Eumyias indigo

Back at the Hostel

It was only 2pm, but I had returned to charge the batteries for my camera, flash, handphone, etc. I had to do it in the common room as there were no electrical outlets in the hostel's sleeping rooms. I also helped the others to charge their handphone batteries and kept an eye on all our equipment during the process. From the common room, I could see some of the more common birds foraging among the trees outside. They included Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Bornean Whistler, Black-capped White-Eye and Indigo Flycatcher. It started to drizzle and by 5.30pm everyone was back.

2nd Owling Session

Day 2 During dinner, Peter Ericsson and Sam Woods
(Night) related their separate sightings of the endemic
Weather: Windy Whitehead's Trogon, both on the Liwagu Trail. They in turn had heard about Felix and I seeing the Mountain Scops Owl.

It is always exciting to see night birds and after dinner, we all set out to search for the owl and this time we did not take long to locate the bird and everyone was rewarded with good views of it perching on a low branch.

Mountain Scops Owl
Otus spilocephalus



Final Morning on Mount Kinabalu

Day 3
Morning
Weather: Good

We had the same early start as the morning before. I checked out the top 200m of the Bukit Ular Trail and saw Bornean Whistling Thrush, Ashy Drongo, Indigo Flycatcher and Bornean Treepie – nothing new for the trip. There were no new birds at the Timpohon Gate and nearby rubbish dump, but it was still nice to see the Mountain Blackeyes. We also had the Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrushes, Ashy Drongo, Yellow-breasted Warbler, White-throated Fantail, Black-capped White-eye and at least 6 Sunda Laughingthrushes that kept returning to the rubbish dump.



Bornean Treepie
Dendrocitta cinerascens
 (endemic)

Sunda Laughingthrush
Garrulax palliatus



Walking down the Liwagu Trail

The Liwagu Trail is 4.5km long but it wasn't difficult as we started from the top and most of the time we were walking downhill. We were here for Whitehead's Trogon and Whitehead's Broadbill. A **Tawny-breasted Parrotfinch** (lifer) was encountered. Farther on, **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** (lifer), **Black-and-Crimson Oriole** and **Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush** were seen in a bird wave with the 3 usual birdwave species. Ambling on, **Checker-throated Woodpecker** (lifer), **Maroon Woodpecker**, **Little Cuckoo-Dove**, **Grey-chinned Minivet** and Ochraceous Bulbul were seen. Good, close views of 5 Mountain Wren-Babblers and Sunda Bush-Warbler were obtained here.

Mountain Wren-Babbler
Napothera crassa
 (endemic)



Hair-crested Drongo
Dicurus hottentottus

In another bird wave, apart from the commoner birds, an **endemic Bare-headed Laughingthrush** (lifer) – a split from the Black Laughingthrush – was encountered; as were a few **Hair-crested Drongos** (lifer). A beautiful pair of the **endemic Whitehead's Trogon** (lifer) was finally encountered near the 1500m mark. Moving on, a **Crimson-headed Partridge (endemic)** was seen just a few metres in front of us, right on the trail. The trail comes next to a small stream and we picked up a White-crowned Forktail once again. Before leaving the trail, an **endemic Black-sided Flowerpecker** (lifer) was seen foraging on a tree.

On we go

We went back to the hostel to pack up and bade goodbye to Mount Kinabalu. We had lunch at the town of Ranau, enroute to our next destination.....