Eagle-Eye Tours



Borneo: Bristleheads & Orangutans (September 7 – 21, 2017)

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With Paul Prior & Lee Kok Chung Borneo, at last! It's been four years since Eagle-Eye's previous visit to this fabled island. An Island that has so much to offer to anyone that has an interest in practically any aspect of natural history. Even though we were only going to be traveling within the Malaysian state of Sabah (sitting at the extreme north-east end of the third largest island on Earth) we would visit a wonderful mixture of habitats, allowing us to get to grips with over 250 species of birds, many of them endemic to the island, and over 30 species of mammals. Eagle-Eye's trip to Borneo in 2017 got off to rather a late start as Cathay Malaysia decided (presumably due to poor ticket sales) to cancel our mid afternoon flight out of Kuala Lumpur and push the five of us onto a later flight. This meant that our sixth crew member, who'd been enjoying some local snorkeling around Kota Kinabalu, had to wait until the 8th to meet up with us. One thing led to another (engine issues, shuttle non-appearance) and we didn't reach our hotel until late in the evening. **Day 2** And so, having had just a couple of hours to enjoy the hospitality of the "Shangri-La", we took an early breakfast and drove back over to the airport in the dark. This was very definitely a travel-day but even so there are always opportunities to see new sights in new lands. We took off into clear skies and were immediately afforded great views of Mount Kinabalu looming above everything else. To our right were the hills stretching into Kalamantan, still looking well-forested, but difficult to tell from such altitude. Certainly, as we descended to Lahan Datu, the seemingly green hills turned out to be endless miles of oil palms. We were picked up by a driver from the Danum Valley Rainforest (DVR) Reserve, and were whisked away to the head-office where we underwent various admin' procedures until, finally, we were introduced to another driver and we set off on the 60km drive to the DVRLodge. The first half of the drive was along a highway out of Lahan Datu where we passed

White-breasted Wood-Swallows and Collared Kingfishers perched on roadside wires, and then the road turned to gravel and we broke into extensive forest. We disturbed small flocks of Dusky Munias from the road as we drove along, but we were more impressed by the piles of elephant dung! Stopping at the Reserve HQ for a rest-stop we were greeted by a whole new symphony of forest sounds, and some of us were on hand to see the trip's only Rufous-bellied Eagle drifting over very high. We pushed on and then finally reached the gated track leading to the Lodge. Greeted with ice-cold facecloths, and garlanded with oddly aromatic pandan leaf leis, we were shown upstairs to the bar and restaurant while our various rooms were prep'd. Here we were presented with refreshments and given a brief chat on the running of the lodge; then we were directed to our cabins, along the network of raised boardwalks. The "gardens" attracted an assortment of brilliant butterflies – Black-and-white Helen, Greater Mormon – and over the next few days afforded us looks at many non-avian forest critters: Flying Lizards, Paradise Flying Snake, Plain Pygmy Squirrel, Prevost's Squirrel, Bearded Pig! We truly were right in the thick of it! Lee arranged for us all to meet at 3pm – together with our very able local guide, Hendry – to make our first foray along the entrance road. Hardly the best time of day to introduce ourselves to the joys of rainforest birding, but it hinted at what was to come. Not far out of the lodge compound we all got onto a Blue Flycatcher which was initially identified as Long-billed but careful inspection of photographs has subsequently revealed it to be Bornean Blue Flycatcher. Heading over the first ridge, we scoped a distant blob in a leafless canopy tree which turned out to be our first Green Imperial Pigeon. We walked as far as the entrance to the famous canopy walkway but refrained from immediately embarking on this and instead waited with Lee as he played patiently through a series of pitta calls. Understanding that we really only had three days in which to set eyes on these fabled "jewel thrushes", Lee was keen to make an early start. Unfortunately, this first attempt was fruitless, but the effort steeled us for the next few days. Meanwhile, we were amply compensated by numerous fly-by Hornbills: Rhinoceros, Wreathed and Helmeted, and then after a considerable amount of searching, Hendry tracked down a female Banded Kingfisher sitting quietly, but highly scopeable, in the canopy. Continuing a short way further along the road, on the next ridge we were able to set scopes up to view a large "nest" in a distant roadside tree. And there lounging and lazily grooming her large youngster was a female Orangutan! It was not the best look one could hope for, but at this distance the animals were completely unconcerned and we were able to watch them for a prolonged period, simply doing what they wanted to … which was not a lot! Occasionally she would glance our way, but otherwise she simply lounged, stretched, and stroked her youngster, who seemed even more oblivious to everything (much like other teens that I know). We headed back to the lodge, reconvened for an excellent supper, and then part of the group embarked on a night-drive with the Lodge's resident naturalists (Hendry) and some fellow tourists. Early into the drive we encountered a Colugo – what used to be known incorrectly as the "Flying Lemur" – clamped tightly to the trunk of a roadside tree. Several Sambar were caught in the spotlights and then somewhat farther back from the road we got looks at one of the medium-sized flying squirrels: Thomas's Flying Squirrel. One of the spotters caught sight of a Western Tarsier in the shrubs close to the roadside but only one of us was quick enough to glimpse it as it disappeared into the gloom. We stopped in the darkness to allow Lee the opportunity to call for Sunda Frogmouth; he got a pretty good response, one bird approaching fairly close, but it remained invisible. So we drove on a little farther and spotted eye-shine high on a tall tree in a partial clearing. Spotlights revealed a beautiful Giant Red Flying Squirrel sitting on a bole on the higher part of the trunk; and then it launched itself the full 50 metres or so between trees and serendipity had the trajectory passing right in front of a large luminous full moon! Wow! Everyone saw the sight, everyone responded with cheers … and nobody caught it on camera. But it was a truly magical sight. The fun was not yet over. As we drove the last 100 metres back to the lodge, passing a small roadside pond, somebody shouted "owl", and sure enough, once the truck ground to a halt, there was a **Buffy Fish-Owl** sitting on the railing around the pond, watching us watching him but otherwise completely unphased by his audience. A great end to a wonderful night-drive. I later returned to the same pond and joined the owl in its frogwatching: there were File-eared Frogs and

Harlequin Flying Frogs.



Buffy Fish-)wl at night © Paul Prior

Day 3 Up for an early breakfast and then we all met for the start of what was to be a long and productive morning hike. Things started well as we waited outside the lodge and were treated to views of a Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher. We headed along the side-track towards the staff accommodation where earlier Lee had seen a Fireback; unfortunately this bird had moved on so we made do instead with a couple of Scaly-crowned Babblers and then encountered a small troupe of delightful Red Leaf Monkeys. We rejoined the main entrance road where a Maroon-breasted Philentoma gave excellent views as he perched right in the open. We continued along the road, making a detour on a short boardwalk where we found Horsefield's Babbler. At about the 700 metre mark, Lee and Hendry gave each other a knowing glance: they'd heard the crazy cooing of Danum's star bird! Lee began to broadcast in response, and the bird came closer … and closer, and then it was in the tall canopy trees along the road. Borneo Bristlehead!! Not great looks initially but absolutely unmistakable. It was sitting deep in the canopy foliage and so the group spread along the road attempting to find the best view through leafy windows. And then it flew back along the road, and perched close to where Lee and a couple of others were setting up the scope. Embarrassingly, this is when I decided to do precisely what one should not do when birding: I ran back along the gravel road, downhill, and of course went arse-over-tit, but thankfully managed to shield my optics from crashing to the ground. Pride hurt more than anything, I regained my composure and walked the few extra metres to where Lee and company were scoping the mega bird! This very cool bird subsequently stayed with us for quite a long time, giving at times amazing looks as it perched variously on exposed branches and among deep foliage. Difficult to see how we could have managed a much better encounter without having it at a feeder! Elated (and one of us a little bruised) we continued along the road, stopping for Black-and-yellow Broadbill (a ubiquitous bird by its distinctive song, but very rarely seen on this trip) and a busy flock of Fluffy-backed Tit-Babblers, actively foraging in the roadside shrubs. We reached the ridge at the canopy walkway entrance where, again, we stood patiently with Lee as he played for Blue-headed Pitta. There was an immediate response, but as is so often the case, this was just an overture to an interminable back and forth between Lee and the bird. Slowly he coaxed it into view on one side of the boardwalk, and then magically it

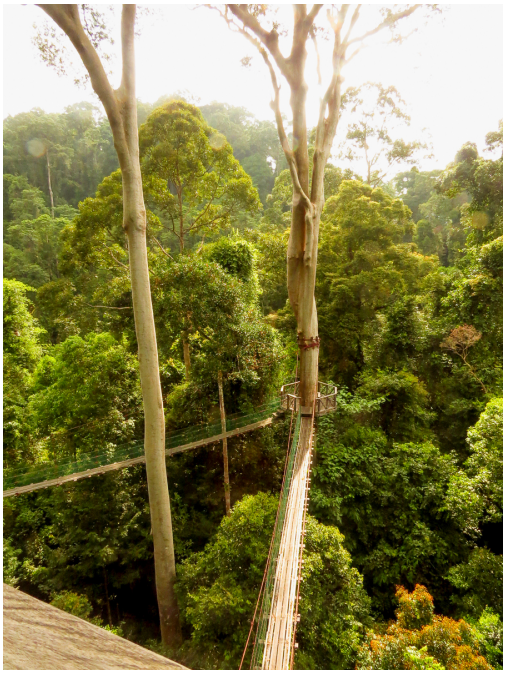
moved to the other side of the same board walk, up-slope from us. There was the usual excited jostle to catch a glimpse of this spectacular bird and all but one of us managed just that. Duly noted by Lee and Hendry, we headed up the opposite trail (Hornbill Trail) in search of another opportunity and more goodies. As we moved gingerly along the leach-infested trail, picking the prospecting little suckers off each other's clothes as we went, Lee continued playing his medley of forest bird songs – pittas and wrenbabblers. Then just as we'd moved past a particularly thick patch of understory shrubs, a quick movement caught our attention and there, suddenly, was a Black-throated Wren-Babbler. It sat quite motionless other than occasionally throwing back its head to whistle a response to Lee's recording, and this combined with the density of the vegetation made it extremely difficult to get everyone onto the bird. Again, Lee and Hendry's scope work amazed us, and everyone was happy. Onwards. Next was Bornean Wren-Babbler, again an initially rather frustrating skulker, but eventually this bird hopped along an exposed log affording great looks. Then, finally, just as we'd decided to turn back, Hendry called everyone's attention to another Blue-headed Pitta that perched conveniently but briefly in the open so that at last everyone had managed a view of this not-to-be-missed beauty. Back at the main road a male Orangutan had discovered the fruit in the canopy above the trailhead, but although we were really very close to the animal, the thick foliage precluded any views better than those the scope had afforded us the day before. And so, we hailed a truck and headed back, leaches and all, to the lodge and lunch. Our intention was to return to the same trailhead later in the afternoon after a siesta, and to explore the canopy walkway, but we hadn't taken into account the heavy rain that hit us just as we boarded the truck. The plan was aborted and we sheltered for a while at the lodge, watching **Whiskered Tree-swifts** enjoying the shower.



Whiskered Tree-Swift © Paul Prior

A Lesser Fish Eagle along the river was a bonus, as were Yellow-breasted Flowerpecker and Bornean Spiderhunter in the garden. As the rain eased we met again for a short hike downstream to the foot-bridge where we crossed the river and tried our luck on the far side. Unfortunately, cloud cover was still very low and thick, and spotting anything in the gloom was next to impossible.
We headed back to the footbridge and here we managed to scope our first and only White-crowned Hornbill. As we ambled back to the lodge, Lee suggested that we try again for the Crested Fireback along the short trail to the staff accommodation. This time we were in luck, though in order for all of

us to see the bird, Lee and Hendry had to arrange a little “pincer movement strategy” to herd the birds into view at the forest edge. So, even though the afternoon hike had been a bust, we had still managed two excellent species! After supper we joined Lee and Hendry for a short night-hike covering the same local area that we’d visited in the late afternoon. Almost as soon as we reached the staff lodgings, Lee spotted a Slow Loris in tall shrubs at the edge of the clearing. Some selective use of the broadcast unit then brought in a Brown Wood-Owl which sat with his back to us in protest. We moved around to the frog pond where the Fish-Owl had been the night before, but this time there was a different predator lurking: a beautiful Redsided Keelback. Finally, as we were about to turn back we were rejoined by the Brown Wood-Owl which this time deigned to sit and face his audience. Day 4 After another fine breakfast we headed out again along the now familiar entrance road. There was plenty of early morning activity in the first couple of hundred metres with Chestnut-rumped and Rufous-crowned Babblers, but thereafter it was relatively quiet as we made for the canopy walkway trailhead. Here we tried again for partridges and pittas. No luck with the latter but Lee coaxed a Chestnut-necklaced Partridge into a relatively clear patch of forest as we watched from the board-walk. Excellent! Now we turned our attention to the canopy walkway. This was a really impressive structure, easily accommodating the seven of us. It wasn’t especially birdy this morning, but the view across the forest was spectacular. I learned a new favourite tree: Koompassia excelsa - the Tualang or Mengaris - an immense super-canopy species.

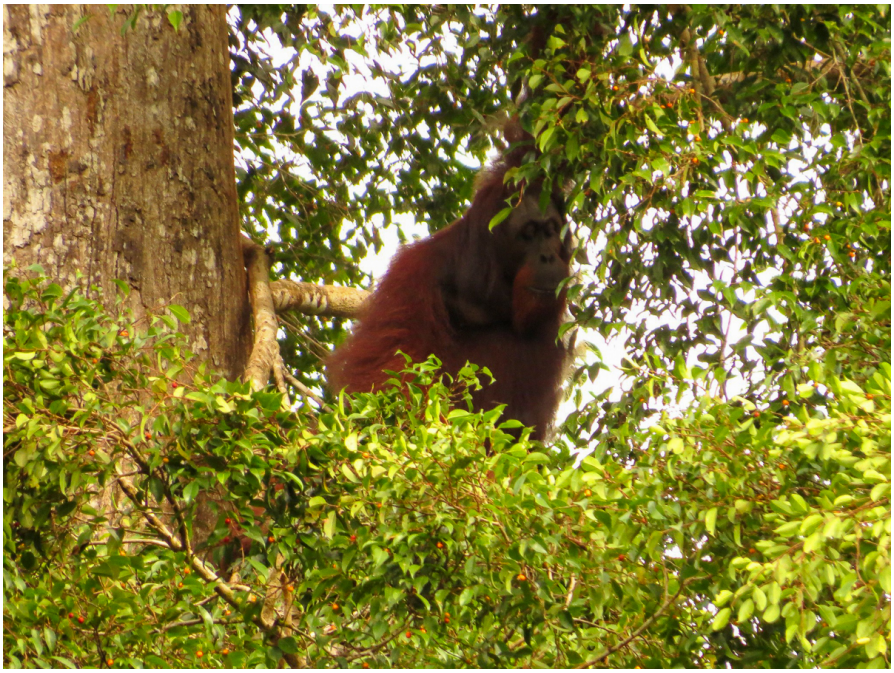


Canopy Walk © Paul Prior



Canopy walk, Danum Valley © Paul Prior

From the first platform Lee spotted our one and only Asian Brown Flycatcher, and we scoped a rather distant Dark-throated Oriole. Brown Barbets foraged in a nearby canopy, but the real star was viewed from the next platform. A splendid male Orangutan was feeding in a heavily fruiting tree, the platform affording us eye-level views of this wonderful animal as he delicately picked off the tiny yellow berries.



Orangutan © Paul Prior

The tree had attracted several other foragers, including a large male Pigtailed Macaque, which

would have impressed us with his size had he not been upstaged by the bigger, bright orange guy. A pair of Asian Fairy Bluebirds also joined the feast. We moved down to the lower platform and set the scope up on a Blue-banded kingfisher sitting motionless above a small stream. Back at ground level Lee proposed a trek along a side-trail (Ginger Trail) in search of the bird that we could now hear occasionally booming in the distance: Bornean Ground Cuckoo! Expectations for a view of this bird were appropriately rather low, but Lee had managed some unexpected successes over the past few days. We headed off at speed, brushing past countless leaches, waving at us from their trailside perches as we passed. Then once we'd reached a potential vantage point we sat, with the leaches, and waited. We repeated this whole process at a couple more spots, and each time the bird obviously came considerably closer … but not quite close enough. This trail, other than taking us through beautiful rain-forest habitat, also afforded us our first looks at Rufous-winged Philentoma. Thankfully, Hendry had arranged a truck-ride back, and we took lunch in our usual spot. From our verandah table we were able to watch a few extra songbirds feeding in the garden: a couple of Lesser Green Leafbirds and a fine Borneo Spiderhunter. The afternoon made good on its promise of more rain; this was to be a fairly constant theme for the whole Borneo trip (apparently this is not always the case), and hence Lee's decision to make the most of every morning. On this afternoon most people decided to extend their siesta-time - dealing with the aftermath of the morning's leach encounters – and so only Ted joined Lee and I for a stroll in the light rain around the garden where we found Yellow-bellied Prinia, various Flowerpeckers and were entertained by a fearless Plain Pygmy Squirrel. **Day 5** Our last morning's birding along the Lodge entrance road proved to be our most productive. The first few hundred metres produced Ferruginous and Sooty-capped Babblers, and a few people got onto a White-crowned Shama, serenading us from the deep, dark undergrowth. We stood for quite some time watching the canopy of some fruiting trees set back from the roadway where Black-winged Flycatcher- Shrike and Black-naped Monarch were feeding. Another bout of fairly intense broadcasting from Lee worked like a dream when he pulled in the last of the local wren-babblers – Striped Wren-Babbler. This little beauty performed wonderfully for us, singing as he foraged across a relatively uncluttered forest floor. A little further along, alerted by some busy tapping, we were treated to prolonged looks at a Rufous Piculet. Then Lee pulled us back for some mammal watching: the fruiting fig canopy hanging over the road held a Binturong, a very good sighting by any measure. The lighting was not great, but the animal was in view almost continuously as it gorged on the fruit. He was joined in the same tree by several Thick-billed Green Pigeons; again initially lousy viewing gave way to good scope views as the sun lit different parts of the canopy. We noticed that we in turn were being watched by another mammal: a Bearded Pig scrutinized our little group from a safe distance up the road. We moved along to the canopy trail and stood on the boardwalk. A Chestnut-winged Babbler gave good views as he foraged in the low canopy above; this was joined first by a noisy Chestnut-backed Scimitar Babbler, which remained invisible, and then by a much more cooperative Maroon Woodpecker. Crossing the road we embarked once again on the first section of the Hornbill Trail which had been so productive on the previous visit. Lee began playing for Black-headed Pitta; we trudged uphill, the now familiar calls ringing back and forth until Lee and Hendry stopped and indicated that the bird appeared to be getting closer. Eyes peeled, alert to any motion; finally the bird showed but just partial views to just part of the group. Lee persisted - and one by one we each of us managed views of the bird as it changed songperches; at one point it sat high on a leafless arching vine. Quite a morning! Add to all this the occasional Rhinoceros Hornbill and Diard's Trogon among others and it really was a case of finishing our Danum Valley visit on a high note. We returned to the Lodge for an excellent lunch, and then loaded into the van for our departure. Half a km along the entrance road, we stopped suddenly for an Oriental Whip Snake crossing the dirt road. Then a half hour along the main gravel road our driver made another sudden stop, this time for a couple of Asian Elephants that he'd spotted lurking at the edge of the forest – rather obscured looks but always very special to see. We drove on out of the Reserve and, having made a brief visit to Lahan Datu, we sped on through endless oil palms toward Gomantong Caves. It was quite a race against the clock, and we barely won! As we reached the Caves' car park

we could see a dark stream of smoke, high in the sky – thousands of bats (Wrinkle-lipped we were told) were departing for the evening; meanwhile, as we scanned the dense stream of bats there was a much less concentrated movement in the opposite direction as swiftlets headed back to the cave for their night roost. Lee hurried us along the boardwalk to the cave itself where we waited for a guided group to vacate the cave, everyone draped in plastic rain-capes, some even wearing hard-hats and face-masks. While we waited Lee suggested we keep an eye on the bats and swiftlets in the sky above; no sooner had he said this than a Bat Hawk came into view and snatched one or the other from the air! We filed into the gaping maw of the huge cave, along the guano-slick board-walk, refraining from using the hand-rail due to all the guano, and then due to what was feeding on the guano: teeming masses of cockroaches and the occasional more sinister looking Cave Centipede (Thereuopoda longicornis). We stopped at one rock face as Lee scanned for any remaining swiftlet nests; the harvest had already occurred and only very few nests were left. He indicated where the various species' nests had been and from that he deduced that the large numbers of swiftlets arriving to roost in the vicinity of those missing nest clusters were indeed the various species: Black-nest, White-nest, and Mossy-nest Swiftlets. At the far end of the cave, a second opening still lit by the setting sun was spilling bats into the sky. We started back along the boardwalk into the dark, Rod and I sharing a single flashlight as we stepped carefully past a busy cast of Hallowe'en characters: bats, rats 'n' roaches. At the mouth of the cave, Lee pointed out a large Tokay Gecko, and a couple of Four-lined Tree-frogs were getting active along the boardwalk back to the carpark. We boarded the bus and were driven the half hour or so in the dark to our accommodation at the Myne Resort on the bank of the Kinabatangan River. This was a minor deviation from the original itinerary; presumably the Borneo River Lodge had double-booked us and the Myne Resort was the closest alternative. Certainly the accommodation was not quite up to the standards of the rest of the trip, but it was adequate and the greeting party of about a dozen Bearded Pigs, lounging on the grounds, was an amusing bonus.



Bearded Pig © Paul Prior

Day 6 We were up good and early for a pre-breakfast boat-trip on the Kinabatangan, but even at this early hour we were not going to be alone on our cruise. Ecotourism is obviously pretty big along the river; perhaps this explains the overbooking at the lodge. As we walked down to the dock we were

delayed by a very confiding Wallace’s Hawk- Eagle sat in a small tree over the river bank.



Kinabatangan River boat ride © Paul Prior



Wallace's Hawk-Eagle © Paul Prior

Birding from a boat, especially on such a wide river, you can pretty much forget about small songbirds – babblers and bulbuls – and concentrate on larger fare. The first for us was a lone Storm’s Stork which flapped lazily overhead, and was then spotted again, standing atop a riverside

snag. **Crested Serpent-Eagles** were also up and about nice and early. Most of the birds at this hour were either flying across the river, or perched up high catching some early sun: Green Imperial Pigeons, Black and Bushy-crested Hornbills, and lots of Oriental Pied Hornbills.



Crested Serpent-Eagle © Paul Prior

We saw our first **Dollarbirds** for Borneo, and then were treated to great looks at a couple of Blue-throated Beeeaters, sat on leafless branches above the river bank , and a superb **Stork-billed Kingfisher**.



Stork-billed Kingfisher © Paul Prior

We boated back to the Myne Resort for a simple breakfast, and then birded around the lodge and along a muddy loop trail, made all the muddier due to the recent visit from elephants. This explained all the “gunshots” that we’d heard overnight – firecrackers to scare off the elephants! In a flowering tree adjacent to the main resort building we were treated to great looks at a Blue-eared Barbet, and then a gorgeous Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker. This same tree provided our first and only opportunity to at last see the wonderful Common Tree Nymph settled and photographable. As we started along the trail, a noisy group of foraging Bold-striped Tit- Babblers made themselves highly visible. The trail itself was almost completely birdless and so Rod and I spent time marveling at the lovely selection of butterflies: Emerald Peacock, Clipper and Great Mormons were particularly dazzling. We stopped at one point to read a large and wordy sign that told of the plight of some local village girls during WW2, who, to avoid the attentions of marauding Japanese soldiers, had retreated to this forest patch and hidden in the indicated hollowed-out tree. Perhaps the local birds had followed suit in avoiding this marauding group of birders. The only bird of any note was heard not seen: a Rail Babbler whistled softly not too far away, but this species continued as just about the only species able to resist Lee’s broadcasts. Back at the Myne Resort we made ready to transfer to our proper accommodation at the Borneo Nature Lodge; it was a relatively short boat ride along the river to Sukau, but it did afford us our first looks at **Proboscis Monkey** and a close encounter with a very patient Lesser Fish-Eagle.



Proboscis Monkey © Paul Prior



Lesser Fish-Eagle © Paul Prior

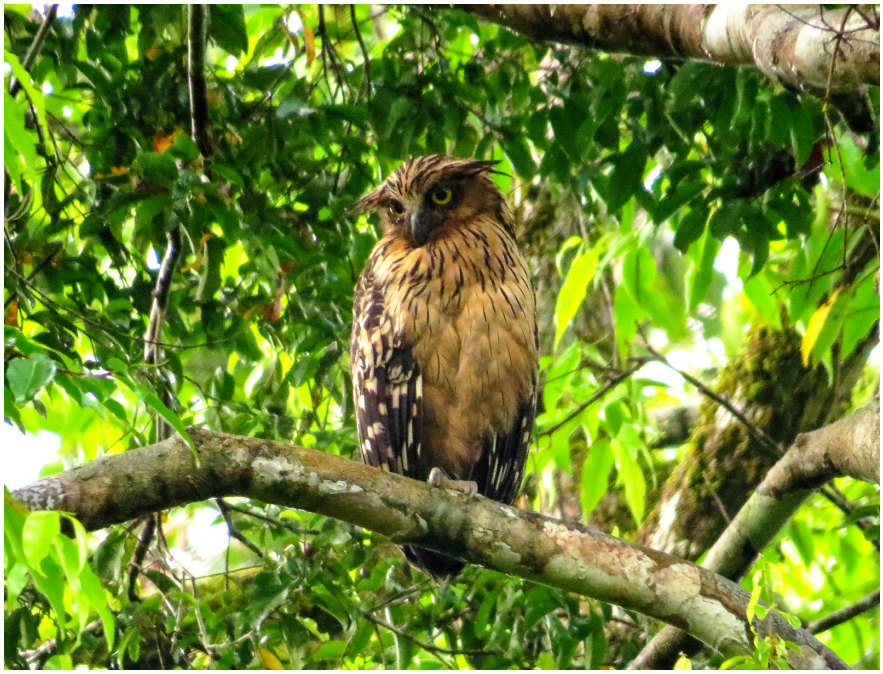
We arrived in good time for lunch and then after the usual siesta, we rejoined our friendly boatman and motored on down river once again. Unfortunately the daily habit of an afternoon of rain had followed us down from Danum Valley and we had time only to find a large troupe of Proboscis Monkeys, sitting, like strange giant fruits, in a couple of riverside trees, looking rather disheartened in the rain.



Proboscis Monkey roost © Paul Prior

We sympathized and decided to return to the lodge, but not before a trio of Wrinkled Hornbills – the

last of the 8 hornbills possible in Borneo - flew overhead, across the wide river. **Day 7** Sure enough, Lee had us back at the boat by 6am, and we headed straight over to a small side-channel. Here, in a narrower opening, we could expect a few smaller birds; our boatman deftly moved the small craft along the channel, responding to hand signals and head-nods from Lee at the bow. Proboscis Monkeys and Pig-tailed Macaques were up nice and early. Low in the streamside vegetation White-chested Babblers shouted out their distinctive songs, while the occasional Malaysian Blue Flycatcher dazzled us, foraging a little higher up. We stopped to check out a pair of White-fronted Falconets, conducting their morning ablutions atop a streamside snag, and then Lee started playing for pittas and such. First however, our boatman spotted a Buffy Fish-Owl sat a little ways back into the riparian forest, watching intently as we glided by.



Buffy Fish-owl © Paul Prior

It wasn't too long before Lee's broadcast got a response: this time a Hooded Pitta which proved so much "easier " than the birds at Danum giving excellent looks for everybody. In short order this cracker was followed by a stunning Scarlet-rumped Trogon which sat scolding us from a nearby perch. Lee then managed to amaze us all again by pulling in a manic trio of Great Slaty Woodpeckers from what sounded like a half a kilometer away! These three clowns flew onto a nearby snag and proceeded to pose and show-off frantically.



Great Slaty Woodpecker © Paul Prior

We turned back for breakfast, but not before we were treated to some absolutely unbeatable looks at a pair of gorgeous Black-and-red Broadbills.



Black-and-red Broadbill © Paul Prior

After breakfast, we resumed our boat-trip along another quiet channel and spent quite a long time patiently hoping for some cooperation from a Bornean Ground Cuckoo. Lee managed to get the bird's attention and gradually it moved closer and closer – it must have been just 20 metres away at one stage - but still it remained invisible. We even disembarked and tried picking our way through

the bush to get a view. Finally, we retreated to the opposite bank and sat on muddy sumps waiting: Lee spotted the bird emerging from the gloom, right down on the bank, but unfortunately our movement spooked it and the best looks we could get were some glimpses of its rear-end as it ran back into the “jungle”. We boated back along the tributary past a snag decorated with a noisy band of Long-tailed Parakeets and then across the Kinabatangan to the Lodge for lunch. As we walked up the boardwalk we had one last avian treat for the morning: a splendid Eastern Crimson Sunbird was feeding in the ornamental shrubs around the buildings. Siestas over, we headed out again with our trusty boatman along another channel past Wallace’s Hawk Eagle and Blue-eared Kingfishers, but this time the stream opened very soon into a large open lagoon. A Storm’s Stork stood sentry atop a high snag overlooking the lagoon, while a nearby troupe of Proboscis Monkeys allowed our closest approach yet. The big male seemed content to sit at the back and top of the group, perhaps just too embarrassed by his bulbous nasal appendage, but the females, many with infants, and younger males, fed, groomed and quarreled closer to us.



Storm's Stork © Paul Prior

Lee was a little more excited by another primate just a little further along: a troupe of Silvery Lutung held several individuals of the beautiful reddish morph. When you see the local guide taking out his camera it’s generally a good sign that something rather special or unusual is being seen (or it might just be a good photo opp!).



Rufous morph Silvered Langur © Paul Prior

As we sat being entertained by our distant cousins, the most annoying bird of the entire trip turned up. Yaffling incessantly in the waterside canopy, a Rufous Woodpecker teased us, repeatedly flying out into the open only to retreat behind yet another wall of impenetrable foliage. This went on for many minutes, to the extent that we actually didn't bother trying any longer and simply turned our attention back to the monkeys, or the Purple Heron that sat considerably more dignified in the tall lagoon-side vegetation. Mind you, even though the Rufous Woodpecker continued in his irritating game it did seem in the end that his persistent noise brought in a couple of much more cooperative White-bellied Woodpeckers that perched right out in the open as the sun sank towards the trees. There was still enough light to enjoy the Oriental Darters and Purple Heron perched in a dead tree as we motored slowly back to the channel taking us out to the main river. Along the Kinabatangan a handful of Lesser Adjutants had taken up their night positions atop riverside palm trees , while several Brahminy Kites flapped off to roost. **Day 8** We rose early to make a pre-breakfast boat-trip to another nearby side-channel where, again, White-chested Babbler was the main component of the dawn chorus. Flights of Long-tailed Parakeets chattered excitedly overhead and we soon found ourselves in the company of more Proboscis Monkeys. Further looks at the always-stunning Black-and-red Broadbills were more than welcome, and we spent some time getting looks at smaller birds in a stream-side feeding flock: Pied Fantail and Dark-throated Orioles, a brief look at a Red-throated Barbet, and an even more fleeting glimpse of a Grey-and-buff Woodpecker. Below this same flock we also managed a look at one of the trip's very few Greater Coucals which was quickly lost in the deep foliage. Our boatman, however, pulled out the best bird of the morning when he drew our attention to a gorgeous Ruddy Kingfisher sitting quietly at eye-level in the tangled shrub overhanging the stream.



Ruddy Kingfisher © Paul Prior

And one should not forget to mention the two Orangutans that were spotted moving through the stream-side canopy – the fourth sighting in seven days! We returned to the lodge for breakfast and then, having packed the luggage, we boated one last time across the Kinabatangan to the landing at Sukau where our new driver, David, waited to load us into the van for what was going to be the rather long drive north to Sepilok. And so we settled in knowing that much of the drive was going to take us through a monoculture of oil palms.



Oil Palm plantations, Sabah Borneo

Lee and David remained alert at the front (glad to say since David was driving ...) and we made a few stops to check out some roadside birds. In this manner we found the trip's only Little Grebe, sitting on its nest on what was presumably an irrigation lagoon for the palms, and a pair of Wandering Whistling Ducks sat in the shade at the back of another lagoon. As we neared Sepilok we took time out to grab lunch in a very busy Chinese eatery, which was actually surprisingly good considering the hustle and bustle of the establishment - or perhaps such a crowd was in fact a sign of the quality of the eats! We proceeded to the Sepilok Jungle Resort and people retired to their rooms for the habitual siesta. At 4pm we met up again and took a leisurely stroll along the grassy trail behind the hotel where our best find was a small foraging flock of Green Iora. We back-tracked to the front gate and then walked along the main road. Lee and Ted flushed a sandpiper of some sort from the roadside ditch, but the bird could not be relocated, perhaps a Common Sandpiper. We turned our attention instead to the rough ground opposite the entrance. We found foraging Dusky Munia and our first Brown-capped (or Sunda) Woodpecker. We disturbed a couple of Green Paddy Frogs from the ditch and spent time watching the enormous Tropical Carpenter Bee (Xylocopa latipes) visiting a host of large inflorescences by the roadside - one of the largest bees in the world and an important pollinator of passion-fruit flowers. Continuing along to the main road we encountered our first large numbers of Asiatic Glossy Starlings and several Yellow-vented Bulbuls. But other than a flyover White-bellied Sea-Eagle, the late afternoon walk was most worthwhile for our spontaneous visit to the shack on the corner (Mama Wati's) which was selling fresh coconuts, the tops macheteed off to provide long sweet drafts of coconut water. Very refreshing. **Day 9** Up early, we headed over to a wet-meadow along the main road to the town of Sepilok. Here we managed to spot a couple of White-breasted Waterhens, and two White-bellied Munias mixed in with the Chestnuts; Lee also managed to call in an eventually very obliging Plaintive Cuckoo. Meanwhile, Ian continued insisting that he definitely did not want to see any of the Yellow-vented Bulbuls, several of which perched along overhead wires. We returned to the Jungle Resort restaurant for breakfast and then continued on over to the Rainforest Discovery Centre for a visit to the canopy walkway. In the Centre's car-park we scoped a distant tree which was loaded with Pink-necked Green Pigeons while, closer to hand, a heavily fruiting tree was providing breakfast for a busy selection of smaller birds: Olive-winged and Red-eyed Bulbuls, Black-and-red Broadbills and also a couple of Thick-billed Green Pigeons. Once the park gates were open we started out along the canopy walkway, another impressive array of stable walkways linking the various towers. We were not really at upper-canopy level, but certainly far enough up alongside the trunks of giants such as our old friend Koompassia excelsa to facilitate clear views across the bulk of the smaller forest trees. We stopped to scan some giant trees in the middle distance, the walkway being stable enough to allow the use of scopes. A pair of Velvet-fronted Nuthatches were foraging high in one of the super-canopy trees, and then David drew our attention to a distant pigeon which even Lee had to consider for some time before confirming: Cinnamon-headed Pigeon. Fortunately, the bird moved into better viewing and we all got satisfactory looks through the scopes. A group of spectacularly coloured Fiery Minivets started off as teasingly distant blobs of colour but made their way straight to our walkway, affording fantastic looks at this dazzling little bird. Not so little were the pair of **Black Hornbills** that flew into a nearby canopy and then dropped down to a lower leaning trunk, festooned with vines, and began feeding on fruits produced by said vine.



Black Hornbill © Paul Prior

Then, at the end of the walkway we looked down on a Diard's Trogon sitting in the shorter trees below. We about-turned and retraced our steps along the walkway but were halted in our tracks by the very best Orangutan encounter of the entire trip: a mother and youngster were slowly and unconcernedly swinging through the canopy at eye-level, stopping occasionally to check out fruits, and even seemed to be browsing on a few ants or bugs of some sort. They were probably only alongside us for a couple of minutes, but it seemed far longer, we were so captivated. They went on their way and around the next corner as we began the dissent from the canopy walkway we came across a handsome Sunda Giant Squirrel.

The plan now was to wander the trails below the canopy walkway. We spent the first little while checking out several Flying Lizards which were displaying from trunks and vines on all sides; at least two species: Horned and Common. It was also here that we found our first Lesser Treeshrews. Lee had a couple of very specific targets in mind and broadcast calls as we moved deeper into the trail system; meanwhile we were kept busy with Grey-cheeked Bulbul and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos. We arrived at a small stream where we hoped to perhaps to encounter one of Lee's targets. But no, we made do with great looks at a Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher and a smart looking Black-winged Flycatcher-Shrike. Round the next corner we were greeted by a sweetly singing Black-naped Monarch, a species we'd seen a few times already on the trip, but this individual responded very well to whistled imitations of its song. Sadly the targets evaded us and we had run out of time; we headed back to the van, taking in a beautiful Copper-throated Sunbird busy nectaring along an ornamental hedgerow.



Copper-throated Sunbird © Paul Prior

Votes were cast to head back to the same Chinese restaurant as the previous day, then after another satisfying meal we returned to the Resort for the early part of the afternoon. By 3 pm we were ready again to take to the trails in the Discovery Centre. The hike began very well when Lee pointed out a Colugo roosting on the trunk of a trailside tree, affording excellent day time views of this strange mammal. The trails were a little quieter than in the morning but somehow we managed to find those two target birds. First the Rufous-collared Kingfisher sitting deep in the forest, another scope view through layers of understory foliage, but great looks nevertheless. Then, as we headed a little higher and came to a dead-end on the trail, a Red-naped Trogon appeared at the forest edge and showed well. We stuck around in this part of the forest for a while longer and were joined first by a couple of Fluffy-backed Tit-Babblers and then by a female Olive-backed Woodpecker. As we strolled back along the trail a large hawk that was perched up on a snag in a somewhat more open stretch of the forest proved to be a Changeable Hawk-eagle (or at least, that's what it was when we looked at it …), another first for the trip. It had been a very productive day, and since Rod and I had opted to join the Centre's night-hike it was not yet over. David and Lee taxied everyone else back to The Jungle Resort, fetched Rod (who had taken a longer siesta this afternoon), and returned in good time to allow Rod and I to join the official hike. There were a good 10 or so people on the walk and so our expectations were a little limited. But the guide worked hard and by the evening's end it was quite clear that the forest was every bit as busy after dark. First we waited on the canopy walkway and watched spellbound as a Giant Red Flying-squirrel emerged from his day roost, climbed up to the canopy, and launched across the clearing. Not quite as dramatic as the Danum version but thrilling enough to have Rod cheer excitedly! Retreating to the forest floor we were presented with spotlight views of a Slow Loris and then - while the guide recc'ied ahead - we were visited briefly by a Temminck's Flying-squirrel. Further along we came across an assortment of roosting critters: a White-lipped Frog, a couple of Horned Flying Lizards and a Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher. As the hike came to an end we were treated to great looks at the marvellously named Yoshi's Bent-toed Gecko. David and Lee were waiting for us in the car park, and whisked us back to the resort, where Rod and I headed over to the restaurant for a rather late but very welcome supper. Halfway through the meal a commotion on the steps of the restaurant caught our attention and we followed a couple of staff down to the car park where dogs were barking at something making a rather strangled

screeching in the tree above the parked cars: a Barred Eagle-Owl had retreated to the tree with its still very much alive prey - a large chicken! I think the audience rather put the owl off because the struggling meal got away, plummeted to the ground and ran under the cars, leaving the hungry owl to flap off into the night. **Day 10** Before departing the resort and embarking on the long drive north to Mount Kinabalu, Lee took us for a stroll along the trail behind the resort obviously with yet another target in mind. Only a couple of hundred metres along the trail his playback paid off but unfortunately only with the briefest of glimpses of the Bornean Black Magpie. We headed back to the hotel, packed the van, and were off, ready for the long drive to Mount Kinabalu, but decided to make another brief stop at the wet meadow we'd had such success at the previous day. Brief as it was we still managed to see several Baya Weavers mixed in with the Chestnut Munias in the long grass, and a quick look at a flyover White-bellied Sea-Eagle. And then we were off for real, the long drive broken only by the occasional stop for roadside raptors: mostly Crested Serpent Eagles but one excellent look at a Crested Goshawk circling low overhead. As we approached Kinabalu we pulled into the car park of what appeared to be a large warehouse, but in fact was a busy food court! The food was great and we continued on our way past strange statues of assorted vegetables as we climbed higher into the foothills around the tallest peak between the Himalayas and Papua New Guinea! It now being the afternoon it was raining of course, but we resolved to meet up once we were each properly accommodated. On the grounds of the Pine Resort we were searching for one particular small and rather unimpressive looking bird: the Pygmy White-eye or Bornean Ibon; we found them very quickly, but actually getting a satisfactory look proved very difficult. The best views were of a pair behind the resort restaurant, although later exploration revealed about eight or nine of the little blighters hanging out in a flowering tree just across the block. The drizzle continued into the evening, curtailing any plans to bird, and so we resolved to make the most of the next morning. **Day 11** Lee had arranged for us to take an early breakfast allowing us to make it into the park shortly after dawn. We left David with the van in a convenient parking spot, the intention, I think, being for him to come and fetch us further up the road, or was it farther up the road? The six of us trudged uphill and came to a sharp bend in the road from where Lee could hear one of the target birds singing and calling in the distance. First, however, there was another bird calling very close to the roadside: a partridge, which of course meant we were in for a challenge. But by now we were old hands and so we dug in for the dual between Lee and the bird, and yet again, the bird - a Crimson-headed Partridge - gradually revealed itself as it crossed small gaps in the forest-floor vegetation. Lee now turned his attention back to the distant singers, which must have started out a couple of hundred metres away. It wasn't long until these Mountain Wren-Babblers were foraging and singing right in close to the forest edge, eventually affording fantastic views to everyone. Lee took a phone call and suddenly plans changed. There's a group of birds which is considered the mark of birding success at Kinabalu: Whitehead's Trio. Something to aspire to but an unlikely achievement. Anyway, David had just called to get the ball rolling; he had bumped into a photographer snapping away at the most difficult of the trio. Lee set off at a pace, the rest of us trying to keep up. As it turned out, once we got to where David and his fellow photographers were, the bird, a handsome male Whitehead's Trogon stuck around for many minutes, right out in the open at eye-level! Couldn't be better.



Whitehead's Trogon © Paul Prior

Lee’s local knowledge now came into play; he recalled there had been a Broadbill nest along the narrow trail heading into the shallow valley below, and furthermore, he could hear one of the Broadbills calling in the distance. So we trudged back up the hill and turned off on to what seemed more like a dry creek bed then a trail. Less than 100 m down here, Lee suddenly became quietly animated and gestured for us to look in the low canopy over head: ! And it simply sat there looking brilliant! Wow. What crazy good luck!



Whiteheads Broadbill © Paul Prior

We headed back up to the main road and started downhill, birding as we went. It wasn't long before a raucous mob of slightly larger birds caught our attention, but actually gaining unobstructed looks at these birds as they worked through the canopy was not easy. We stuck to it and one by one the birds showed: the noisiest in the crowd seemed to be the Short-tailed Magpies, while the most obvious were the Bornean Treepies; mixed in with these, and keeping somewhat more mobile were three species of Laughing-Thrush: mainly Chestnut-hooded, but with a couple of Sunda Laughing-Thrushes, and finally the band was joined by a couple of larger Bare-headed Laughing -Thrushes. As if this wasn't enough, while we were trying to sort through all of this action, a Checker-throated Woodpecker swooped in … and all the while a small party of Yellow-breasted Warblers darted here and there low down, right on the edge of the forest! One didn't know where to look! Once this mob had moved on up the hill, we turned down slope and continued, but at this point early rain was threatening. Lee then heard the third of the trio calling from the gardens of the chalets on the slope above us. But the only way to get to the location was to head farther downhill and double-back onto the property. Unfortunately, by the time we had gone down and up, the only view we got of the Whitehead's Spiderhunter was of its flight silhouette as it flew high and away. Well, two out of three ain't bad. We decided to wait near to the flowering tree where the spiderhunter had been nectaring, and then the rain drove us to shelter under a convenient gazebo. As the rain eased, a Bornean Whistling-Thrush emerged and started foraging in the open, right up against the chalets. The sun attempted to shine through and small songbirds started to climb to the tops of trees and shrubs to catch some rays. We set the scope up on one of the smaller birds, and were delighted to get good looks at a Black-sided Flowerpecker. There seemed now to be more and more activity and we moved down the lane, closer to the action. The first ornamental shrub we came to was being explored by quite a flock: Little Pied Flycatchers, Black-capped White-eyes, Mountain Warblers. We headed into a rather unpromising looking cul-de-sac where houses were still under construction; at the dead end we came across more small bird activity. Yellowbreasted Warblers were being their delightful selves, foraging right out in the open; Greychinned Minivets sat higher in the forest edge and a splendid Indigo Flycatcher sallied for bugs as the vegetation dried.



Indigo Flycatcher © Paul Prior

Sneaking between the unfinished houses we found yet another small flock, this time with Mountain

Tailorbird, a couple of Whitethroated Fantails, more Mountain Warblers, and a couple of spectacular Temminck's Sunbirds. It looked now that the rain was done so we ventured back along the mountain road, Lee trawling for more highland goodies. A small flycatcher at the roadside proved to be Snowy-browed Flycatcher, another new bird, but it seemed we birders were beginning to flag as lunch called. It had been a long and crazily productive morning. But Lee persisted with one song, and sure enough the last goodie came right out and performed wonderfully: Bornean Stubtail, what a cool little bird! David arrived to taxi us off to lunch; there was very much a celebratory mood as we piled into a small roadside restaurant called "89 Station", boasting an extremely interesting chalkboard menu. We arrived just in time as the rain returned in earnest, and we settled down for a very good meal. Satisfied we headed back to the Pine Resort past the same assorted vegetable statues and retired for the early part of the afternoon waiting for the rain to stop. It eased off a little by about 4pm and so we made a dash for higher ground, stopping briefly to ogle a roadside Long-tailed Shrike. The stop was fortuitous in as much as it gave the weather time to really make up its mind - it started raining in earnest. And so we retreated to the hotel and decided the amazing morning would suffice. **Day 12** After another early breakfast, David drove us up towards the top of Mount Kinabalu. We were pretty much the first vehicle on the road and as such we were in good time to see the occasional forest bird foraging at the roadside. Our first stop, just inside the park entrance presented us with good looks at an Eye-browed Jungle-Flycatcher, while in a nearby creek a Bornean Forktail foraged among the boulders. We drove a little higher and flushed a Red-breasted Partridge from the curb; David pulled into a parking spot in the hopes that we could relocate the bird but we had to make-do instead with better looks at a Bornean Treepie. Rick spotted a Bornean Whistling-Thrush further down the slope, and then as we returned to the vehicle we encountered a small flock of birds foraging in low trees at the edge of the parking spot: Sunda Cuckoo-Shrikes, Chestnut-hooded Laughing-Thrush, and then at the roadside verge, a Mountain Treeshrew. We drove a little farther along the road to an opening in the forest which provided a spectacular view across the valley to the peak of Mount Kinabalu. David explained the topography of what we were looking at: the sheer cliff that was such a huge feature towards the peak had not existed two years before. It was the result of the earthquake that had struck the region in summer of 2015. Sobering indeed. We turned our attention back to the roadside vegetation where the pleasing song of Sunda Bush-Warbler had alerted us to another highland speciality. It took a little while but eventually the bird came right out into the open along the bank by the road. Finally we reached the trailhead for the ascent to the peak. By now the area was rapidly filling with scores of excited hikers all about to embark on their treks up the mountain. Mixed with the tourists were many locals who were carrying boards that they intended strapping to their backs to facilitate the backpacking of various hardware items up to the base-camp shelter. One individual had even strapped a toilet-bowl to his board! Apparently these enterprising individuals could make a good wage, paid by the kilogram. Ignoring the constant hullabaloo of all the tourists we watched a small group of songbirds working the low trees by the entrance; a bright yellow Bornean Whistler, a couple of Little Pied Flycatchers, Mountain Warbler, and then a larger bird was spotted foraging in the foliage above the entrance sign: a Golden-naped Barbet. This bird was then joined by a small feeding party of Chestnut-crested Yuhinas, not quite as exciting as the name might suggest. We left the mass of imminent hikers and visited the platform above the actual trail-gate. Here we were a little higher in the trees which made viewing any passing feeding flocks easier. Lee had one particular bird in mind but while we waited we were well entertained by a couple of the local Bornean Black-banded Squirrels which were quite obviously highly habituated to people and were intent on looking for food in every opening, paying particularly close attention to David's camera and lens. At last small birds were spotted moving through the adjacent canopy: Mountain Blackeyes! The trailhead was getting very crowded now (the crowds were perhaps due to it being the Monday after Malaysia Day, a Federal holiday in Sabah) and so we quickly made our way back to the main road and walked back towards the van, past more views of Sunda Bush-Warbler. David taxied us back down toward the halfway resort where we'd had so much luck the previous day; sure enough the Whitehead's Spiderhunter was in the same

flowering tree, but did not appear to be feeding. Unfortunately we had barely climbed out of the van and were busy setting scopes up on the bird when it flew. Slightly better looks than the previous day but not much. We moved down to the road below the resort, looking this time to lure in a White-browed Shortwing; we could hear one whistling sweetly from the undergrowth but for once we could not get any views of the skulker. And so we opted to head back down-hill for lunch, revisiting "89 Station". After the usual allotted siesta we met at the van, eyeing the grey sky nervously. The plan was to head to Poring Hot Springs, about a half hour drive down the hill. By the time we reached the front gates of the park it was raining quite heavily. Having driven so far we opted to wait the weather out in a nearby roadside café where we sat sipping honey-and-ginger tea and coffee - watching the rain get heavier and heavier, wondering whether we might have to make use of the assorted inflatable pool-toys for sale in the neighbouring store. Sadly the afternoon was a complete washout, but it was (to my mind at least) better than sitting in the hotel watching television! **Day 13** We decided to head straight back to Poring Hot Springs. The weather looked good so we ambled slowly across the open playing field where the surrounding trees held Gold-whiskered and Blue-eared Barbets, and also a surprisingly low elevation Bornean Treepie. Alongside the gardens we checked the ornamentals for various sunbirds and flowerpeckers but best of all was the Thick-billed Spiderhunter which posed for pictures among the blooms.



Thick-billed Spiderhunter © Paul Prior

Moving on up the trail, Rod and I came across a particularly busy treetop where an almost constant procession of various bulbuls was snatching fruit. Most obvious were the several Black-headed Bulbuls, but over the course of the next half hour these were joined by Red-eyed, Grey-cheeked, Streaked and a lone Buff-vented Bulbul. Also making the most of the tree-top buffet were a couple of Prevost's Squirrels, and a Plain Pygmy Squirrel - although the latter may have been finding other foods up there. As we stood struggling with the various bulbuls, Lee indicated that a Malay Hawk-Cuckoo was calling from the canopy below the fruiting tree. The bird flew back and forth a few times, but only ever landed in deep cover-not. But in following this bird down slope into the grove of Giant Bamboo (David informed me that this was good cobra country…) we came across another new bird: a Fulvous-chested Jungle-Flycatcher was feeding along the small creek. We headed back towards the open area at the bottom of the hill, but first a scan of tree tops at the edge of the playing

field revealed another canopy busy with bulbuls. This time, the star was a Scaly-breasted Bulbul, a little distant at first, but eventually good views proved that this striking bird was definitely not in the "boring bulbul" category. We called in at the park reception to make use of the facilities and were greeted by an enormous Rhinoceros Beetle which we harassed mercilessly into posing for pictures (but at least we didn't put a pin through it and display it in a living room somewhere! Actually a pin wouldn't have worked with this monster - a nail-gun might've done the trick!). From here we headed into the grounds of the spa, the path winding through all manner of refreshing rejuvenation, and then back into the forest en route to "the falls". The hike was really rather birdless but once we were at the falls Lee embarked on his quest for Crested Jay. At first nothing, then a distant call and response; gradually the bird came closer, but remained tight in the canopy, certainly not the inyour-face response typical of Jay's back home! However, once the bird had come in, it stayed with us and eventually gave very good views, moving about in the canopy among the mossy boughs. These birds are an important mystical spirit bird for the native Iban people, and I have to admit I thought our encounter was pretty cool! We turned back, retracing the route through the recently unproductive forest habitat, but this time we were in luck. At one particular spot in quick succession we were presented with Moustached Babbler, Grey-cheeked Bulbul, a couple of Banded Broadbills, Green Broadbill, Olive-backed Woodpecker, and an extremely confiding White-crowned Shama which Lee engaged in a lovely whistled duet.



White-crowned Shama © Paul Prior

It was almost too much to take in, but quite a lesson in managing expectations. So many forest birding situations present the same extremes: in the space of half an hour this one birdless spot had become a busy avian hub as a roaming foraging flock passed through. Right place, right time! Elated we moved on, back through the spa playground where Rick drew our attention to a spectacularly patterned butterfly that David informed us was a Malaysian Lacewing. Shortly after that we encountered another beautiful insect: the Five-bar Swordtail. But now for lunch; David took us back over to the same food court, celebratory beers, and another excellent meal. It rained throughout the siesta. Nevertheless, there were still a couple of us who were up for another attempt for better looks at the spiderhunter, but as we drove up the mountain it became apparent that the rain was not going to let up. We pulled into a nearby hotel restaurant to wait out the weather; Lee and Rick heading

straight to the veranda for tea and cake, leaving me to wrestle with the biggest meanest cricket I'll ever see! Of course, I assumed it was vegetarian and was therefore rather shocked when upon attempting to reposition it for a decent photo, it took a chunk out of the end of my finger! Turns out the monster, a Bulldog Raspy-Cricket (Sia ferox), is a carnivore, regularly tackling tarantulas and giant cockroaches. Ted and Rick were not impressed by my bug-wrangling and preferred to watch Sundi Laughing-Thrush and Indigo Flycatcher from the veranda over beverages. The weather showed no sign of improving but Lee suggested we try for one last additional goodie on the way back to the Pine Resort. We stopped along the main road next to an open grassy hill side, overlooking the valley, views of Kinabalu obscured by low gloomy clouds. We were here for our only chance at Striated Grassbird, but after a good 10 minutes of broadcasting it became apparent that they were not at home. Ted spotted a distant Ashy Drongo way up on the slope and there was a Longtailed Shrike equally distant, but effectively our Kinabalu birding adventure was over. **Day 14** Another early breakfast from the Pine Resort saw us on our way before dawn, the van fully loaded for the drive to the Crocker Range, A good two hours drive from Mount Kinabalu. We motored through beautiful hill country, not much to see in the way of birds from the moving bus except for the occasional Ashy Drongo, and so we were glad to arrive at our destination and the opportunity to make the most of the morning's birding. Mind you, today would turn out to be pretty much the only day of the trip when we didn't get rained out by the afternoon. We birded the main road in the vicinity of the Rafflesia Centre entrance, as ever with a select few targets very much on the Lee's mind. For a while we stood by the van watching a swirling flock of very different looking swifts. We suspected they were Brown Needletails and sure enough, Lee's photos proved conclusively that this was indeed what they were - the graduated spiny tail-tips very evident. We turned our attention to the roadside forest. The first two targets were a couple of Barbets and sure enough we could hear at least one of them hooting from the canopy further up the road. Lee's broadcast initially didn't seem to interest them but unbeknownst to us, one of them had slipped across the road and was working low through the nearby trees. We finally twigged and got some good looks at our first Mountain Barbet. The bird was joined by Ochraceous and Ashy Bulbuls, and then as the flock crossed the highway they in turn were joined by a Checker-throated Woodpecker. We walked up the road a few hundred metres and were stopped by the song of a Dark Hawk-Cuckoo which took some locating in a tall tree on the far side of the road. There was a brief spell of confusion trying to direct people on to the bird as it sat calling, but then we realized that there were actually two birds sat just 5 m apart in the same tree! One of them responded particularly well to whistled imitations of the song, flying straight across the road and landing close by. A Little Cuckoo-Dove also sat quietly in a tree alongside the road; we'd seen several earlier on the trip but only in flight, nevertheless there was some lobbying of Lee to turn this bird into a Ruddy Cuckoo-Dove but Lee was immovable. We about turned and ambled down the road to where David had parked the van although before we could all pile in there was a little flurry of excitement as a large flock of Chestnut-crested Yuhinas flew low across the canopy. We drove back down to the Rafflesia Centre entrance and here we were able to finally get some good looks at a few Borneo Bulbuls. A construction crew had arrived and started working on the road and some slope stabilization. I'm sure they were quite perplexed by the strange bunch of dudes training binoculars onto the tops of nearby trees, particularly when we all rushed to Lee's scope to check out the Bornean Barbet that perched all too briefly at the top of some huge bamboo. Lee was now relentless on his mission to find the one remaining local endemic, the Bornean Leafbird. He played the bird song out across the valley and on two occasions he managed to persuade individuals to land in the dense canopy of roadside trees, but unfortunately these were far too flighty, and no sooner had one or two of us managed to work out where the bird was sitting and it would fly further back out of view. Back at the Rafflesia Centre car-park people's attention had wandered to spiders and various bugs, so it seemed about the right time to move on out. It was our last day of Borneo birding and I think people, somewhat exhausted from a busy fortnight, were more than happy to give their binoculars a rest. And so, David drove us to the Gunung Alab restaurant where yet another Borneo endemic awaited us. First we checked out the many Glossy Swiftlets

nesting along the underside of the eaves at the front of the restaurant - the best looks we'd had of any swiftlet - and then positioned ourselves for one last broadcast from Lee's speaker, this time attempting to pull in a Flavescent Bulbul. It really didn't take very long and this being a bulbul there was no skulking involved; the bird simply flew up to a wire and sat in plain sight. Almost too easy.



Glossy Swiftlets © Paul Prior

We sauntered back over to the Alab restaurant and ordered a slap-up Chinese meal and a burger. It was now a relatively short drive down to Kota Kinabalu and David made it in very good time. Everyone seemed now to have had a new burst of energy; people were keen to bird although almost the whole van drew the line at stopping as we passed an extensive sewage farm where hundreds of egrets could be seen foraging. Instead we drove on to the coast where we somehow arrived at a near perfect time - the high tide turning and beginning to reveal the coastal flats. David pulled off the A2 Highway (Jalon Putatan) and scopes were set up to scan through the few dozen shorebirds feeding close at hand. Not a huge number but the variety was excellent. First to catch our collective attention was the Terek Sandpiper feeding close to the water's edge, while the vast majority of the shorebirds running about on the already exposed sandy shoal were Greater Sandplovers. There were a few Lesser Sandplovers mixed in, and the occasional Pacific Golden Plover, RuddyTurnstone and Whimbrel. Along a nearby creek Striated Heron and Collared Kingfisher waited patiently at their shoreline perches, and at the mouth of the creek were a couple of Common Sandpipers. A small plover appeared on the close beach, and after some consultation and improving views, it was agreed that this was a Malaysian Plover. Finally on the far side of the mudflat, wading in the shallows, were a couple of Pacific Reef-herons. Not a bad haul for a somewhat spontaneous stop. We returned to the van and David drove us back towards the city, stopping on the outskirts on a street that bordered a row of stilt houses right on the water's edge. Lee led the way, the rest of us being rather concerned about the invasion of privacy, but it appears that none of the locals were in the least bit surprised at this crew of binocular and camera toting people peering between the shacks to view a couple of Rufous Night-herons at roost. From here it was just another short drive across to the beach at Tanjung Aru, busy with tourists and what seemed to be some sort of photoshoot for a giggling entourage of models. We were here for our final dose of Borneo birding, searching specifically for a local parrot. The park around the private beach provided opportunities to better view birds that we'd

seen earlier in the trip such as Brown-capped Woodpecker, but also an unexpected Pied Triller. Lee led us along the beach boardwalk and set his scope up on a nest-cavity, the Blue-naped Parrot tenant sitting there overseeing the beach party. Next we headed back through the park and out along a laneway that looped around the landward side of the park, past numerous White-breasted Woodswallows, a couple of Common Iora and a lone Dollarbird, and then back in on the south west boundary where we came across a host of Pink-necked Green Pigeons flocking to a fruiting tree.



Dollarbird © Paul Prior

Finally we cut back through the park for views of more Blue-naped Parrots, some Green Imperial Pigeons and lily pond full of Green Paddy Frogs. And that was that! David taxied us back over to the airport hotel, we unloaded, refreshed and then headed downtown for one last meal. There really should've been more of a fanfare marking our last supper, the end of an amazing 14 days of pretty hard but always rewarding birding. I think everyone had seen all they'd hoped for and so much more. Personally, I hadn't even expected a single Orangutan sighting – we'd seen them on 5 different dates without even trying! A few birds we'd seen had left us wanting somewhat better looks, but the majority had presented high-quality views allowing plenty of photographic opportunities. I think it would be true to say that by the last evening we were all pretty exhausted; even so, Ian was heading out for another few weeks of crazy birding through the Indonesian Archipelago! Rod and Rick were planning to stick around Kota K for a couple more days, while Ted and I were about to put ourselves in the capable hands of Cathay Pacific for the next 20 hours or so. Lee was finally heading back to his family after months of continuous guiding; this guy was unstoppable, with incredible field-birding skills. I know that I learned an enormous amount from watching him track down all the wonderful birds that he presented to us. I didn't get a chance to ask David what his plans were but I know we were all enormously grateful to him for his attentiveness to the group's every need - the best "driver" (in quotes because he did so much more) that I've ever travelled with. Thank you to them – our hosts – and to all of you for helping to make this such a memorable trip. I'll be back!