

Kinabatangan River & Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

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Björn Anderson



Bornean Ground-Cuckoo

General

This trip was intended primarily as a week-long family holiday during the Chinese National Day. Having been to Sabah once before, in 1991, I also had the ambition to fill some gaps from that trip. We opted for staying at an all-facilities resort near Kota Kinabalu, i.e. Nexus Resort in Karambunai.

Apart from some general birding near Nexus Resort, the main birding took place at Kinabatangan River as well as briefly at Manukan Island off Kota Kinabalu. For Kinabatangan we booked a guide called Robert Chong, who perfectly arranged all the logistics for our two nights/three days stay, including taking us to see some good birds and mammals. To go with Robert can be highly recommended, as he is very familiar with the area and the key birds/mammals.

Highlights

No doubt the highlight of this trip was seeing the Bornean Ground-Cuckoos so well. This endemic has so far been seen by very few birders ever. Second best was one of the world's rarest storks, the Storm's Stork that was also seen incredibly well at a couple of occasions. Naturally there were of course two other very memorable species seen well, namely Orang Utan and Proboscis Monkey. All in all I managed to pick-up 12 lifers, not bad for a family holiday.



Adult male Proboscis Monkey

Itinerary

30/9-1/10

We flew from Beijing to Hong Kong on the Thursday evening, staying at the pricey Regal Airport Hotel overnight. Early the next morning we caught the 2.5 hours flight across the water to Kota Kinabalu on Borneo. The rest of the first day was spent at Nexus Resort where we enjoyed the pool-life.

2/10

Apart from a morning walk around the hotel grounds, the whole day was spent in the resort area.

3/10

Early morning taxi departure from the hotel to Kota Kinabalu airport in order to catch the 8.00 flight to Sandakan. The flight gave some amazing views of Gunung Kinabalu and the river systems near Sandakan. Depressingly it also gave views of the vast tracts of oil palm plantations covering most of the lowlands. According to our guide, it has only taken 20 years or so to change pristine lowland rainforest to virtually fauna-less plantations. The only primary forest that remains, seems to be in small pockets of still protected reserves.

At Sandakan airport we were met by Robert Chong, who was our guide for the three days we would spend at Kinabatangan River. We swiftly boarded his 4WD and set off for Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Center, which was only 20-30 minutes away. The reason for visiting this site was to guarantee the kids to see Orang Utans. More than ten of these fantastic creatures came in from the forest for the 10-clock feeding. Even though the set-up is very zooish, it has to be said that it was much enjoyed by us all.

We soon hit the road again, now bound for Sukau, a small settlement at the Kinabatangan River. The drive took us through endless of oil palm plantations for the next two hours. At the jetty at Kinabatangan River we got into a small boat that ferried us half a kilometer up the river to Proboscis Lodge. After lunch we again boarded a small boat and birded up-river for a couple of kilometers. We were treated to some very nice encounters with Proboscis Monkeys, one of the real highlights of the trip, much enjoyed by the kids as well. We also motored through a small stretch of the old river that led to an oxbow lake, until we eventually returned to the lodge at dusk. Some close views of a small flock of Bornean Elephants feeding in the reeds was much appreciated.

4/10

Up early for a quick bite before boarding the boat at 6.00, now heading up a smaller side-river called Manangu River. Very birdy place and we spent the full morning along this river. Pride of the place goes to the fantastic views of calling Bornean Ground-Cuckoos.

After a late breakfast at the lodge we relaxed around the lodge for a few hours. I took one of the kids for a forest walk and found a nice mixed-species flock and also spent some time looking for raptors at the jetty. In the mid afternoon, we went for another boat-trip up Manangu River and stayed out there until dusk, when we returned to the lodge for dinner. An evening boat-trip up the very same river yielded some nice views of Buffy Fish-Owl. The water level was unfortunately very high so spotting mammals was very difficult.

5/10

Same procedure as the morning before. Alas there was not a sniff of the much wanted Bristlehead and Giant Pitta, so had to be content with some nice views of Hooded Pittas and Diard's Trogons. A highlight was of course our first and only real wild Orang Utan that fed leisurely in the canopy.

After a late breakfast, we packed up and took the boat back to the main jetty and started the return drive to Sandakan. At midday we spent some time at Gomantong Caves and watched the bats, cockroaches and swiftlets.

Back in Sandakan at 15.00, well in time for the 17.30 flight to Kota Kinabalu. Arrived Nexus Resort at 19.30 and had dinner.

6/10

All day spent at Nexus Resort with some sun & fun.

7/10

Left the resort with a taxi at 7.00 heading for the Kota Kinabalu ferry terminal in order to take a boat to Manukan Island. Manukan is one of five island in the TBD National Park. It is famous among birders for being a reliable site for Tabon Scrubfowl. My target birds were not the scrubfowl, but Mangrove Blue-Flycatcher and Mangrove Whistler and I managed to get both in two fairly short walks along the jogging trail through the forest. In between we also had some good snorkeling. We returned to Kota Kinabalu in the early afternoon and spent the rest of the day at Nexus Resort. Me doing some birding on the grounds and the others staying by the pool-side.

8/10

Basically a traveling day back to Beijing via Hong Kong.

Weather

Despite the timing during the monsoon season, the weather was fairly good. Often overcast and not too hot. Several afternoons there were build-ups of thunderstorms and then it rained for several hours at a time. At Kinabatangan River, the weather was very pleasant with very little rain, but still semi-overcast.

Site descriptions

Nexus Resort

There are nowadays several hotels and resorts available, both in Kota Kinabalu and also further north along the coast. Nexus is located at a 6 km long beach, a 45 minutes drive from town/airport. It also has some mangrove areas and secondary forest nearby.

Kinabatangan River and Gomantong Caves

This large river system holds some very good gallery forest that still has lots of raptors, hornbills and primates, not a common thing for a lowland forest in this part of the world. There are currently five lodges within close proximity to the small village of Sukau. We stayed at Proboscis Lodge which was perfectly ok for our purpose, whether the other lodges are better or worse, I have no idea of. As mentioned initially, we booked everything as a package from Robert Chong, who runs a B&B near Sandakan. Robert is a very good birder and can be contacted at: labukbb@yahoo.com

The area is famous as a reliable site (the only one?) for Storm's Stork and most birders seem to get it. Recently Robert has also managed to sometimes turn up Bornean Ground-Cuckoo, a real mega-bird that no doubt will be a major reason to visit this area. Other goodies that are seen fairly regularly include Wallace's Hawk-Eagle, Jerdon's Baza, Wrinkled Hornbill, Buffy Fish-Owl, Giant, Black-headed, Hooded and Blue-headed Pittas and Bornean Bristlehead. The area is also famous for the ten species of primates, with Proboscis Monkey virtually guaranteed and good chances for Orang Utan. Bornean Elephants roam the area and are often seen close to the villages, much to the frustration of the villagers who see their banana plantations damaged.

Not far away from Sukau is Gomantong Caves, which is a good site to see four species of swiftlets at their nests, as well as Bat Hawk.



Storm's Stork at Kinabatangan River

Manukan Island

One of five islands in the Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park. From the ferry terminal in Kota Kinabalu it is a mere 20 minutes boat ride. The boats normally take 8 people and cost 8x14 MYR return trip, but if you are willing to put up with the extra cost it is possible to charter the boat and do your own schedule. Snorkeling gear could be rented at the ferry terminal (or on the island). The best birding is along the 1.5 km long jogging trail. I walked it briefly twice, once in the mid morning and once after lunch. I saw Mangrove Blue-Flycatcher on both walks and Mangrove Whistler came in to the tape on the second walk. I did not see any scrubfowls, but met another birder who did. There has been sighting(s?) of Nicobar Pigeon on this island, so would be worth looking for.



Bornean Elephants

Birds

Subspecies are essentially attributed based on literature rather than actual sub-specific identification. Lots of certainly common birds were not recorded as the primary reason for the trip was not birding.

Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*

One near Sukau.

Darter, *Anhinga melanogaster*

20+ at Kinabatangan River.



Darter

Lesser Frigatebird, *Fregata ariel ariel*

One female off Nexus Resort.

Purple Heron, *Ardea purpurea manilensis*

One at Nexus Resort. Two at Kinabatangan River.

Great Egret, *Ardea alba modestus*

Common around Kota Kinabalu and Kinabatangan River.

Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta* ssp

A few around Kota Kinabalu.

Pacific Reef-Heron, *Egretta sacra sacra*

Two near Kota Kinabalu and two on Manukan Island.

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis coromanda*

Common.

Striated Heron, *Butorides striatus javanica*

Two at Kinabatangan River.

Storm's Stork, *Ciconia stormi*

A pair seen perched in a dead tree not far from Sukau, a single bird also perched in a dead tree at the oxbow lake upriver from Proboscis Lodge at Kinabatangan River and a nice close encounter of a single bird perched, again in a dead tree, at Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.

Lesser Adjutant, *Leptoptilos javanicus*

Three together near Sukau, two plus one at Kinabatangan River and one on the way back to Sandakan.

Oriental Honey-buzzard, *Pernis ptilorhynchus torquatus*
One near Sukau.



Oriental Honey-Buzzard

Bat Hawk, *Macheiramphus alcinus alcinus*
One perched at Kinabatangan River.

Black-shouldered Kite, *Elanus caeruleus hypoleucus*
One at Kota Kinabalu.

Brahminy Kite, *Haliastur Indus intermedius*
Several seen around Kota Kinabalu and Kinabatangan River.

White-bellied Sea-Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucogaster*
Two at Nexus Resort, one at Kinabatangan River, one at Sandakan airport and one near Manukan Island.

Gray-headed Fish-Eagle, *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Crested Serpent-Eagle, *Spilornis cheela pallidus*
Several at Kinabatangan River, Gomantong Caves and along the road back to Sandakan.

Crested Goshawk, *Accipiter trivirgatus microstictus*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Black Eagle, *Ictinaetus malayensis malayensis*
One near Sepilok and a pair at Kinabatangan River.

Rufous-bellied Eagle, *Aquila kienerii formosus*
One adult and one juvenile at Kinabatangan River.

Blyth's Hawk-Eagle, *Spizaetus alboniger*
One adult near Sukau.

Wallace's Hawk-Eagle, *Spizaetus nanus nanus*
One adult along the road between Sandakan and Sukau.

White-fronted Falconet, *Microhierax latifrons*
One perched at the oxbow lake at Kinabatangan River.

Oriental Hobby, *Falco severus severus*
One at Manukan Island.

Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus ernesti*
One perched for several hours opposite Proboscis Lodge at Kinabatangan River.

Chestnut-necklaced Partridge, *Arborophila charltonii graydoni*
Heard near Proboscis Lodge at Kinabatangan River.

White-breasted Waterhen, *Amaurornis phoenicurus phoenicurus*
A few around Nexus Resort.

Little Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius jerdoni*
Three near Nexus Resort.

Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*
Several at Nexus Resort.

Whiskered Tern, *Chlidonias hybridus javanicus*
Common off Nexus Resort and Kota Kinabalu.

White-winged Tern, *Chlidonias leucopterus*
 One off Kota Kinabalu.
 Spotted Dove, *Streptopelia chinensis tigrina*
 Common.
 Emerald Dove, *Chalcophaps indica indica*
 Two at Kinabatangan River.
 Zebra Dove, *Geopelia striata*
 Common at Nexus Resort.
 Little Green-Pigeon, *Treron olax*
 A few at Kinabatangan River.
 Pink-necked Pigeon, *Treron vernans griseicapilla*
 Many seen around Nexus Resort.
 Green Imperial-Pigeon, *Ducula aenea polia*
 20+ at Kinabatangan River.
 Blue-crowned Hanging-Parrot, *Loriculus galgulus*
 Four at Kinabatangan River.
 Plaintive Cuckoo, *Cacomantis merulinus threnodes*
 One at Nexus Resort.
 Violet Cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchos xanthorhynchos*
 About five at Kinabatangan River.
 Chestnut-breasted Malkoha, *Phaenicophaeus curvirostris borneensis*
 One at Kinabatangan River.
 Bornean Ground-Cuckoo, *Carpococcyx radiatus*
 Two, or probably three, birds seen up the Manangu River at Kinabatangan River. We first heard one bird calling and shortly afterwards another bird responded from behind us on the other side of the river. Both birds were calling continuously and were certainly coming closer to the respective riverbank. We soon located one of them slowly walking on the rather open forest floor and could enjoy fantastic views only about ten meters away. Actually it seemed to be two birds on that side, although they were not seen simultaneously. We then shifted to the other side of the river and I was then able to video-tape one bird when it walked around in the open. Several times the birds were seen calling from branches about a meter of the ground and then suddenly jumping down to the ground and walking to a new perch. Cosmic!
 Greater Coucal, *Centropus sinensis bubutus*
 One seen and one heard at Kinabatangan River.
 Buffy Fish-Owl, *Ketupa ketupu pageli*
 One flushed during daytime along the river at Kinabatangan River and one or two spotlighted at the same place in the evening.



Buffy Fish-Owl

Glossy Swiftlet, *Collocalia esculenta cyanoptila*
 Common at Kinabatangan River and Gomantong Caves.
 Mossy-nest Swiftlet, *Aerodramus salangana natunae*
 One bird that flew in towards the typical nest at Gomantong Caves was probably as fun as it gets.
 Black-nest Swiftlet, *Aerodramus maximus lowi*
 Common at Gomantong Caves.
 Edible-nest Swiftlet, *Aerodramus fuciphagus vestitus*
 Not really identified, but presumably common at Gomantong Caves.

Brown-backed Needletail, *Hirundapus giganteus giganteus*
10+ at Kinabatangan River.

Diard's Trogan, *Harpactes diardii diardii*
A pair called in, but only the female seen by me at Manangu River at Kinabatangan River. Later further up the river I saw a nice male.

Scarlet-rumped Trogan, *Harpactes duvaucelii*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Blue-eared Kingfisher, *Alcedo meninting verreauxii*
10+ at Kinabatangan River.

Black-backed Kingfisher, *Ceyx erithacus motleyi*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Stork-billed Kingfisher, *Pelargopsis capensis cyanopteryx*
One at Nexus Resort and two at Kinabatangan River.



Stork-billed Kingfisher

Black-capped Kingfisher, *Halcyon pileata*
One between Sandakan and Sukau.

Collared Kingfisher, *Todiramphus chloris laubmannianus*
Three at Nexus Resort and one at Manukan Island.



Collared Kingfisher

Blue-throated Bee-eater, *Merops viridis viridis*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Dollarbird, *Eurystomus orientalis orientalis*
Several at Kinabatangan River and along the way back to Sandakan.

Oriental Pied-Hornbill, *Anthracoceros albirostris convexus*
Two seen and others heard at Kinabatangan River. Also one on the way back to Sandakan.

Rhinoceros Hornbill, *Buceros rhinoceros borneonensis*
One seen nicely at Kinabatangan River simultaneously as the first Proboscis Monkeys.

[White-crowned Hornbill, *Aceros comatus*
Pointed out calling distantly by Robert at Kinabatangan River.]

Wrinkled Hornbill, *Aceros corrugatus*
A pair flew briefly across the river at Kinabatangan River and later in the afternoon we found a perched bird showing off nicely.

Wreathed Hornbill, *Aceros undulatus aequabilis*
One flew past us at Gomantong Caves.

Blue-eared Barbet, *Megalaima australis duvaucelii*
Several heard calling at Kinabatangan River. Several unidentified barbets seen at Kinabatangan River.

Brown Barbet, *Caloramphus fuliginosus tertius*
Two at Kinabatangan River.

White-bellied Woodpecker, *Dryocopus javensis javensis*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Common Flameback, *Dinopium javanense javanense*
One at Nexus Resort.

Maroon Woodpecker, *Blythipicus rubiginosus parvus*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Dusky Broadbill, *Corydon sumatranus brunnescens*
A pair seen and a few heard at Kinabatangan River.

Black-and-red Broadbill, *Cymbirhynchus macrorhynchos macrorhynchos*
Close up views of a pair at Kinabatangan River.



Black-and-red Broadbill

Black-and-yellow Broadbill, *Eurylaimus ochromalus kalamantan*
Several seen and heard at Kinabatangan River.

Blue-headed Pitta, *Pitta baudii*
One heard along the main river at Kinabatangan River and two heard along Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.

Hooded Pitta, *Pitta sordida muelleri*
Two calling males seen simultaneously and a further three heard along Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.

Black-headed Pitta, *Pitta ussheri*
Two heard along Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*
Common.

Pacific Swallow, *Hirundo tahitica javanica*
Common.

Striated Swallow, *Hirundo striolata striolata*
One between Sandakan and Sukau.

Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava* ssp
One near Sukau and a few at Nexus Resort.

Oriental Pipit, *Anthus rufulus malayensis*
One at Nexus Resort.



Oriental Pipit

Pied Triller, *Lalage nigra chilensis*
Several at Nexus Resort.

Black-headed Bulbul, *Pycnonotus atriceps atriceps*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Yellow-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus goiavier*
Common.

Olive-winged Bulbul, *Pycnonotus plumosus hutzi*
Several on Manukan Island.

Yellow-bellied Bulbul, *Alophoixus phaeocephalus gourdini*
Several at Kinabatangan River.

Ashy Tailorbird, *Orthotomus ruficeps borneoensis*
Common at Kinabatangan River.

Arctic Warbler, *Phylloscopus borealis* ssp
One at Nexus Resort and several on Manukan Island.

Asian Brown Flycatcher, *Muscicapa dauurica dauurica*
Several on Manukan Island.

Brown-streaked Flycatcher, *Muscicapa williamsoni umbrosa*
One at Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.

Verditer Flycatcher, *Eumyias thalassina thalassoides*
One at Gomantong Caves.

Malaysian Blue-Flycatcher, *Cyornis turcosus turcosus*
A pair and a single female at Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.

Mangrove Blue-Flycatcher, *Cyornis rufigastra rufigastra*
Three on Manukan Island.

Siberian Blue Robin, *Luscinia cyane* ssp
Male and female at Nexus Resort and a femal-type on Manukan Island.

Oriental Magpie-Robin, *Copsychus saularis adamsi*
Common.

White-crowned Shama, *Copsychus stricklandii stricklandii*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Pied Fantail, *Rhipidura javanica longicauda*
Several at Kinabatangan River and two on Manukan Island.

Black-naped Monarch, *Hypothymis azurea prophata*
Several at Kinabatangan River.

Mangrove Whistler, *Pachycephala grisola grisola*
A responsive pair on Manukan Island.

White-chested Babbler, *Trichastoma rostratum macropterum*
About five along Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.

Sooty-capped Babbler, *Malacopteron affine phoeniceum*
Common at Kinabatangan River.

Striped Wren-Babbler, *Kenopia striata*
Two near Proboscis lodge at Kinabatangan River.

Chestnut-winged Babbler, *Stachyris erythroptera bicolor*
Two near Proboscis Lodge at Kinabatangan River.

Striped Tit-Babbler, *Macronous gularis montanus*
Two near Proboscis Lodge at Kinabatangan River.

Ruby-cheeked Sunbird, *Chalcoparia singalensis borneana*
One at Gomantong Caves.

Purple-naped Sunbird, *Hypogramma hypogrammicum hypogrammicum*
One female at Gomantong Caves.

Olive-backed Sunbird, *Cinnyris jugularis ornata*
Common at Nexus Resort and a few at Kinabatangan River.

Little Spiderhunter, *Arachnothera longirostra buettikoferi*
One at Kinabatangan River.

Asian Fairy-bluebird, *Irena puella crinigera*
Two at Kinabatangan River.

Brown Shrike, *Lanius cristatus ssp*
One at Nexus Resort.

White-breasted Woodswallow, *Artamus leucorynchus leucorynchus*
Common at Nexus Resort and a few at Kinabatangan River.



White-breasted Woodswallows

Black Magpie, *Platysmurus leucopterus aterrimus*
Two at Kinabatangan River.

Slender-billed Crow, *Corvus enca compilator*
Several at Kinabatangan River.

Asian Glossy Starling, *Aplonis panayensis eustathis*
Common.

Hill Myna, *Gracula religiosa religiosa*
Several at Kinabatangan River.

Common Myna, *Acridotheres tristis ssp*
Several between Sandakan and Sukau.

Dusky Munia, *Lonchura fuscans*
Common.

Mammals

Pig-tailed Macaque, *Macaca nemestrina*

Several in Sepilok.

Long-tailed Macaque, *Macaca fascicularis*

Several in Sepilok and Kinabatangan River.

Orang Utan, *Pongo pygmaeus*

Apart from the rehabs at Sepilok, we heard Orang Utan at Kinabatangan River and also saw one at Manangu River at Kinabatangan River.



Orang Utans at Sepilok rehabilitation center

Bornean Gibbon, *Hylobates muelleri*

Heard several times at Kinabatangan River.

Proboscis Monkey, *Nasalis larvatus*

Many encounters at Kinabatangan River. One of the highlights for the whole family. The old males looking like a big- and red-nosed, pot-bellied drunk and laid-back man with a Russian-style fur-hat.

Silver Leaf-Monkey, *Presbytis cristata*

A few encounters of small groups at Kinabatangan River.

Bornean Elephant

A small herd near the village opposite Proboscis Lodge at Kinabatangan River. Best was the large herd that we followed along Manangu River in the late afternoon.

+ various rats, bats and others



Green Pit-Viper at Sepilok